

Burning Blue:  
Boy Meets Honoi

Joel S. Williams

## CHAPTER ONE

Trees of red leaves that towered nearly four hundred stories to touch the heavens were the gods of the lands. With massive grey-brown trunks, filled with huge crevices that hid small creatures, and branches that formed a broad cap, the yelm trees cast malicious shadows upon the forest, rejecting it in their own name and becoming monstrous plants that houses even smaller trees.

Joining the yelm trees were the ville trees; more disciples in the following of height. The ville trees were smaller, but none the less a blue-green leaved plant that had become independent from the forest below, with branches forming an elongated dome with a craggy, grey trunk.

Beneath their shadows, hundreds of stories down lurked the Yuxu forest. This verdant landscape of blue, green and yellow colored plants turned on each other in the starving shadow, climbing onto each other with crippling vines and onto the surface of the yelm and ville trees who alone basked in the great rays of sunlight from the orange-yellow sun in the vast blue.

Areas shown some mercy from the growing empire of the shadow of the colossal plants enjoyed their freedom of the sunlight. Beautiful flowers from palm-sized variants to one large enough to consume a grown man nestled quite comfortably. Trees like the le lams—blood-red leaves with brown trunks and branches growing around them, and the pomeg trees with their pink-toned leaves and pink, cocoon looking fruits as large as a man, constituted for most of the local trees in the lower forest.

Here in the early morning, the receding morning mist was evaporating, and lances of sunlight stabbed through the forest, making a show of tiny glowing particles dancing in them. The air stunk of rotting and living plant matter, wet soil and the faint trace of dead animals that had fallen victim to predators or time. Grazing animals stayed in the light between the ville and yelm trees, avoiding their shadows were even the plants had been corrupted to feed on flesh.

Yet, within this thick network of trees, bushes, twisting vines and the cry of animals that saturated the air, something out of place made a place for itself.

A lonely building no more than six stories with a domed top stood in amongst the surrounding sea of plants. The true color of the building was hard to determine, uncertainly amongst dark brown, grey or light brown, as the batter from the weather and the unfriendly neighborhood plants that protested against its presence here by throwing vines all over its surface disfigured its outer appearance. But the homeowners took great care in maintaining the colorful red and yellow windows that glowed with the sunlight that acknowledged their resilience.

The temple got some company from houses; like three huts cramped together with bluish colored roves, scattered at the front of the temple in a small clearing. Slicing through this little village was a brown peach and grey colored cobble stone path leading into the depths of the Yuxu forest.

There was an absence of activity from the people who lived in the Ixian community, as all of them were gathered in the first floor of the temple.

Here the circular room was laced with orange-brown tiles on the walls and larger ones on the floor. Some benches of burgundy colored wood were gathered in small groups near the walls, giving those who would be seated the view of the glorious golden statue of three humanoids standing in the center; one a woman and the other male, all with long ears, slanted eyes and wearing ornate robes.

From the windows red and yellow light casted a spotlights on a group of people in dark blue robes with yellow trim and a sheen of silk.

All these people had the purple skin known of the nycarman species in the solar system. Their skin had various shades based on their race and geographical residence. The Ixian people here in particular had dark purple skin, but were differentiated from each other by a work of creases all over their body like a human finger print.

Their golden and black hair were tied into ponytails or combed over the sides of their heads. Apart from their bright pink eyes that slanted to their noses and ear-shape, they had an eerie resemblance to human.

The Ixians with their thin lips and straight noses would be Caucasian—but such a word didn't exist here, so they identified their race as Uola.

Ixians young and old turned their backs to the statues of the holy trinity that created them, facing a peculiar figure that stood in a path leading through the door into the village.

The sight was a lovely young nycarman woman, close to six feet tall and medium built. The smooth lavender skin on her long face had a nice set of full lips and a small round nose.

What would be African for a human was Outo for her people.

Her radiant gold hair was tied into a rippling ponytail cascading down her lean back. A pink blouse of leaf-shaped materials hugged her skin, as did her dark green leather tights that hung just below her knees.

In a military erect posture, Lezura Hembim looked on expectantly and proudly at the men and women before her. With her little nose she smelt the mixture of emotions and expectations circulating in the air.

My big day! Lezura thought.

From the crowd three Nycarmans stepped forward. Two were men, and one a woman with her thick black hair combed over her head and a sharp nose. All were wrinkled with age.

The man with his gold hair combed over his head had a smile that seemed unrecoverable from his face, said in a subtle voice, "I never thought I would feel such a sense of loss from your departing, Lezura."

"Neither did I, Dunit," said Lezura. "But it is for an important reason."

"Well said, child," said the woman, Murbella, in a strong voice unsuitable for one so old.

"Fortunately Dunit is the only one here that has grown attached to you..."

Dunit grinned nervously and said to Murbella, "Murbella...you do not...have to make it sound like I am about to cry..."

"Have all your preparations been made, Lezura?" said the black-haired man.

"Yes I have, Telkit," said Lezura. "You know I never go anywhere unprepared."

Telkit smiled lightly. "That much is true..." he said.

"Now Lezura," said Murbella with a stern look in her eyes, "I hope you allowed our warnings to be riveted into your head overnight." Lezura nodded, but Murbella continued anyway; "This is not a simple messenger's task like what you have been sent on before. This mission involves direct interaction with the target. And we would all appreciate it if it were executed with as much of your skill as you can offer."

"Yes, Murbella," said Lezura without the bright smile that would otherwise annoy Murbella—especially her braces.

"We cannot be certain if the rumors of Earth are true," said Telkit, "but regardless that is where you will be sent."

"I have accepted this task and will not step down now or fail," said Lezura.

Dunit smiled brightly and said, "That is our girl—ouch!"

A nudge from Murbella in Dunit's ribs silenced him.

Murbella snapped her fingers, and from the crowd a young woman hurriedly emerged, timidly handing Murbella a small box of oak with four, triangular plates on the top in her hand.

She gave it to Lezura, who took it cautiously into her grasp.

"We will hand over Donnowarru to you, Lezura," said Murbella. "Call upon him to open the portal to Earth—"

“But do not try to talk with him much though,” said Dunit in a hushed voice as if the box could hear him, “you know he’s not very friendly—he punched poor old Telkit in the eye once.”

Telkit grimaced and looked away to hide his face. “Ugh...please do not remind me...”

Dunit said brightly, “But on a much happier note”—Dunit produced a silver compass from his sleeve with a single green structure in the black center—“you will finally get to hold this again!”

Lezura’s eyes literally gasped wider. She quickly reached for the compass, but Dunit took it away from her quickly.

“And please,” said Dunit, “Lezura my dear child, do not try to experiment with the key...”

Lezura blushed. “Of course...Dunit,” she said. “I would never!”

The wyassies gave Lezura a slight scowl.

Lezura raise her hand in defeat. “Honestly, I will not!” she said.

But they all knew what was really going to happen. Regardless, they trusted Lezura’s skills enough to deliver the key. Dunit handed it to her.

Lezura cupped the compass and marveled at the key inside; its elegant sword, the cracks of green light in its emerald surface and the striking red stripe along the middle.

She put the compass around her neck by its chain, and put the box in one of the pockets on her utility belt. She ran a hand across the other items on her belt and checked they were there.

“We are counting on you with this task, Lezura, all of us,” said Telkit.

Dunit scratched his chin thoughtfully and said, “I would say the fate of the world rest in your hands, but that would be a bit to clichéd...” Dunit dropped his hand and smiled. “So, I’ll just say good luck!”

Lezura placed a hand across her left breast and bowed slightly. “Of course...”

All the Ixians returned the same gesture.

Lezura strode out of the temple and into the warmth outside. The scent of the surround vegetation mixed with other naturally produced chemical grew in her nostrils. The first time Lezura took in such scents she found it repugnant, but after ten years outside of her usual comfort haven she got used to it.

She made her way through the silent village, towards a small path to east of the temple. She didn’t need to look; she just listened and heard the shuffling of feet as the Ixians filed out of the temple to watch her depart.

The path opened up in a small glade, where huge peach colored stones had been smoothed and packed to make a suitable flat and hard surface for Lezura’s Thwopter to rest on.

The flying vehicle was a glossy black. Lezura would have preferred it pink but the dealer she bought it from said he hadn’t couldn’t bother stealing that one as the police were chasing him.

It looked like an oval nut with half-crescent wings and an open interior with two seats in red cushioning, one behind the other.

Lezura checked the front seat—for the fifth time, waved away a mass of crazy bugs flying in her face. Even though she knew it highly unlikely for something to happen to the bag in the small amount of time she left it there to go and speak to the wyassies, she still gave the contents inside a quick going over.

Satisfied, Lezura sighed. “Okay, now...” she said to herself, and took the Sheikon-box from out of her utility belt and a knife.

Lezura made a long deep cut in the palm of her hand, curling her lip in discomfort. She put the knife back and drained the blood onto the box she put on the stone.

Lezura said the enchantment spell for the summoning;

*Grumpy wizard, sour as a lizard  
Come out and serve me duly,  
I shall kiss your rear and wash your hair,  
So long as you perform your duty*

Lezura was definitely not going to perform the kiss your rear part, and hoped Donnowarru didn't demand it either—or else they would have to find a new Chevalier for the Rakai.

She waited for nearly thirty seconds for the blood to be absorbed into the box. But Lezura knew it shouldn't be taking so long.

Lezura sighed. I hate having to deal with this man... Why do you not come out already?

And wait Lezura did—for five minutes. Just as Lezura was about to lose her cool and strike a box with a dainty, manicured hand the box popped open.

Swirling blue light blasted from the wondrous depths of the box and spiraled into the sky.

Lezura's face took on an annoyed expressive. "But you have the time to be flashy...?" she said.

The light compressed, bulged and contorted like a demon was trying to escape the grasp of the divine and just light. Finally the supposed demon inside lost the fight and the blue energy compressed into the form of a male nycarman in shiny red garbs. He was large built, with a head of long coarse hair, the facial notations of a Uola nycarman, and floated on a bubbling cloud of honoi several meters off the ground.

The man, the Great Wizard Donnowarru, greeted this world with a hideous roar. Lezura's senses instantly picked up the threat and she rolled out the way in time as Donnowarru fired a blast of honoi into the rocky ground.

Lezura rolled into a crouch and shot at Donnowarru, "What the blast is wrong with you man?"

Donnowarru for the first time took in his surroundings; some blue and red bushes there with some colorful flowers in the mix, and tall trees watching it all from above. He spotted Lezura, scowled, and relaxed himself.

"My apologies woman," said Donnowarru without the tone of the actual truth. "I thought you were Dunit. That little prick has been playing tricks on me ever since I met him!"

Lezura cast a glance down at the people at the mouth of the path, and could have sworn she saw Dunit make a quick dash behind Murbella.

The last prank Dunit played on Donnowarru was opening him up from the box in one of the toilets—after he used it.

Lezura got up and said to Donnowarru, who scratched an itch she wondered if a spirit could possibly have, "You can punish Dunit when we return. Right now we have more important business to deal with." Lezura crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow. "That is providing you remember...?"

Donnowarru said, "Do not insult me Outo woman; I clearly remember what we are to do..."

Lezura studied the uncertainty on Donnowarru's face. He was a racist, and also a terrible liar. "You do?" said Lezura testily.

"Yes," said Donnowarru.

"Then what are you supposed to be doing now"—and Lezura made a mocking expression of awe—"O Great Wizard?"

The only thing Donnowarru hated more than people in general where people from other races, Outos, Lalue, and with the new addition of the new species on the world two hundred years ago, he had to rewrite that list now. And this sassy little Outo woman wasn't really the cup of tea of his morning.

"We are supposed to be fetching that Rakai again," Donnowarru said. He built up a strong flow of energy in his hands. "I still do not see why you all have to change trend with the Rakai. The first one was a nycarman—albeit a woman and a Lalue, and she got the job done. The second one was some worthless largaph that died before he even touched the God Titan! What makes you think some little flea from Earth can make a—"

Lezura glowered at Donnowarru and clenched her jaw. "That is enough out of you, O Great Wizard," she said. "Any more of that racist-sexist filth out of your toilet-of-a-mouth and you will see what I am capable of doing to a spirit even if they are already dead."

Donnowarru studied the face of Lezura, and could see some of the fierceness of her ancestral people brimming—the same people that took his life over eleven centuries ago.

He didn't doubt her.

He waved a hand at her and said, "Whatever, silly little girl."

Lezura smiled charmingly and dropped her hands. "Thank you so much."

Donnowarru mumbled and floated higher on his cloud. He savored the air and the majestic scenery around him while he could. The occasions were extremely rare when he got the chance to see his old world again. But now it was tainted with so many people of new species, and he frowned heavily like he smelt something rank.

"Get ready," said Donnowarru to Lezura.

And with that a surge of excitement rippled through Lezura. She hopped into the driver seat of the Thwopter, took the ignition key off her belt and started the engine. It steadily hummed to life, and the antigravity orbs generated a pulsing blue light that pushed the vehicle off the stones.

Donnowarru took in some deep breaths. He channeled pink-red energy, different from honoi, into his fingers until they shone. He felt the air like he was touching something corporeal, and with a smooth ripping motion tore open a vast portal off swirling purple, red and pink.

Lezura dropped on her electronic goggles over her eyes, smiling at the rift the wizard created.

Today, Lezura Hembim would be the first nycarman to enter the rift, legally, into another world.

There were those who had the technology left back after the establishment of the Prestige System to open rifts. A very, very few were successful in entering other worlds and coming back with a pinch of new information about life there. Others were unfortunate enough to have encountered the dimension reapers and get the extraterrestrial stuffing kicked out of them and their equipment confiscated.

Lezura was pleased to know she would keep her ribs.

"Stay close to me," said Donnowarru as he moved off on his cloud. He stopped, reconsidering. He said to Lezura, "You know what, not too close..."

Lezura gave a tired sigh. As soon as Donnowarru floated into the tunnel Lezura followed on her Thwopter, slowing down so she didn't go splat into the wizard. And the thought got her wondering what a ghost's insides looked like.

The portal closed behind them, imploding into a wink and out of sight.

In the tunnel Lezura felt no heat or cold, but the weightlessness of the place. The air was breathable, and with the many thoughts circulating in her head she concluded the dimensional tunnel must have been made by sentient beings to support them while they stayed inside here.

She made a note to herself to jot that down later.

It was some seconds with her tailing behind Donnowarru when she saw him abruptly stop.

She brought her Thwopter to a halt. She leaned forward in her seat and said, "Donnowarru is something wrong?"

"They are coming," said the wizard.

Lezura felt a snake of fear slither up her spine. She had been quite excited about seeing a reaper up close and speaking with it, and now that the opportunity had come she was embarrassed to feel that she was getting cold feet.

Get a hold of yourself, Lezura, she thought. You are going to be the Rakai's Chevalier for goodness sake! You cannot be falling apart now.

Seconds after Donnowarru had spoken five glittery pink lights appeared around the two of them. For a second they just floated there, but they exploded into five humanoid figures. Their bodies temporarily crackled with pink energy.

Lezura swallowed a nervous lump and studied the reapers with her eyes.

They wore close-fitting, silky purple uniform. They had pointed gold boots on their feet, and ornately designed silver armor on their chest, arms and shins. The shoulder pads were gold and

looked like the gaping mouth of a tortured creature. Over their heads they wore a hood which concealed any of their features. And as was with all the reapers, they wore a mask that hid all of their features behind a background of some special body; whether it is a sun, moon, the stars, a planet in the vastness of space or a nebula.

As the energy sparked off their bodies around the nycarmans Lezura studied the faces, wondering what a reaper really looked like; and her attention was drawn to a tall reaper with a lustrous red nebula on its face approaching them.

He had male proportions, and each casual step he took towards Donnowarru was on a pink tile he created under his feet using the strange purplish-pink energy that reapers possessed.

“Yesh shou, nomidi,” said the reaper in Naasi, the universal language of the solar system, and others.

As usual, as Lezura observed, Donnowarru replied with a loud grunt.

“Yesh shou, ir yuh,” said Lezura.

From there there was understanding between the aliens and the conversation went on without a hitch.

The reaper folded his arms and said to Donnowarru, “Geez, Donny, you really need to lighten up once in a while.”

Donnowarru’s placid expression dropped into a frown. “Could we just skip all the pleasantries and get to work, Terriak?” he said. “And stop blasted calling me Donny!”

“Wait!” said Lezura. “You two know each other?”

“Long story,” said the reaper. He gave Lezura his attention, “But I would really like it if you two would explain why you’re here—and why there’s a civilian with you, Donnowarru.”

“We are on a mission regarding the Rakai,” said Lezura promptly, after waiting patiently to speak with a reaper for so long. “Oh! Sorry—I forgot my manners. My name is Lezura Hembim.”

Donnowarru yawned loudly, intentionally to annoy Lezura.

Lezura ignored him and continued, “I am not sure if you know, but our planet underwent dramatic changes in the last ten years.”

“I know...” said Terriak with a slow nod, “the whole planetary revolution thing. But that’s none of our business. Reaper’s aren’t concerned with anything you aliens do unless it’s with the rift.”

“Well it does concern us,” said Lezura.

“Oh?” Terriak said.

At this point Donnowarru had gently floated to one side and crouched on his cloud with his head resting on his fists, quite happy to not have to talk to anyone.

Lezura felt the authority in Terriak’s voice, but it didn’t deter her from continuing. “Our people have need for the Rakai, from the planet Earth.”

Terriak shifted uncomfortably. He unfolded his arms and looked back at the other reapers, one of which had a big, blunt metallic implement in case the nycarmans tried to run, and sensed their alarm as well.

Terriak turned back to Lezura and said, “How do you know about Earth, and what business do you people have there?”

Lezura explained as calmly as she could. “A few years ago, a largaph by the name of Blinchi managed to open a rift into another world. He managed to elude the reapers for months, learning a few things about the planet Earth in the process.”

“I heard about that incident,” said a tall, shapely female reaper with a pattern of stars on her face, named Frost. “That largaph hid for two months on Earth in Los Angeles.” Something like a laugh escaped her throat. “They gave him a really nice beating when they found him, though...”

Lezura scowled at her. “Well that man just so happened to be a dear friend of ours. When he came back to us he told us of a race of people who had a very unique kind of honoi. My people considered their species a candidate for being the key-keeper.”

“Well sorry to burst your shiny little bubble missy, but that’s not happening,” said Terriak. “There’s no way we’re goanna let you go to Earth, cause all kind of hysteria with the people, and bring back one of them here. What makes you think the Rakai will even want to go with you?”

Lezura tightened her hand on the Thwopter's steering wheel. She had been thinking about that possibility herself. Why would another species far from their solar system fight for them? But she had to tuck that doubt to the corner of her mind. Surely the Rakai could be convinced to help.

“That is a risk we will willingly accept by going to Earth to find out,” she said. “I know what we are asking of you is going against the rules of the reapers, but you must also understand that the Rakai is a part of our people’s history, and also a religious figure in some small circles. That in itself is business of the nycarman people, which you cannot interfere in.”

Terriak cocked his head to one side wryly and folded his arms. “Then why not take a spaceship to Earth then...?” But Terriak knew why they couldn’t, but wanted to test this nycarman woman. Something about her seemed familiar—the whole confident demeanor like everyone else was stupid.

“You all know bloody well why we cannot leave the planet,” said Lezura testily. “The Prestige Kingdoms placed an armada around the planet that prevents non-prestige countries from going for help. That leaves them to harvest us and let the orderrans slowly eradicate us! And even if we could leave the planet we know not of where Earth is in the galaxy, and how long it could take to reach there!” Lezura’s tone changed to a more humble one, pleading. “Terriak, sir, please sympathize with us.” Lezura casted her intense glare over the others. “All of you. Innocent people are slowly dying under the system imposed on our planet. I have someone very important to me that I want to save.”

Terriak entertained the idea in his mind for a moment. A human Rakai... That would be quite the thing to see. Then he said to Lezura. “But young lady, there’s another catch. Humans currently have a serious condition that’s very, very dangerous to others. It’s not a disease, per se. But one that arises when humans use their honoi.”

“But I cannot go back empty handed,” said Lezura, “not when so many people have put their trust in me to come back with the Rakai!”

Terriak considered that for a moment. He gestured to the other reapers and they all moved to one side, huddled close as they deliberated amongst themselves—very soft whispers in fact, as they realize that two sharp-eared nycarmans were in the tunnel with them.

“Well, what do you think guys?” said Terriak.

“I do not think we should risk breaking the rules for just one little nycarman,” said the reaper with the weapon, Han.

“But you heard the poor girl,” said Frost. “Their planet is practically being used as some experimental facility. I heard what goes on Sangetsu. That Planet has been through two massive wars in just a little over two hundred years.”

“That’s their load of crap to scoop up,” said Han. “The living doesn’t know how easy they have it. They are free to do whatever they want, and waste it killing each other.” Han patted the club against his thigh lightly. “Sometimes I wish could just go on a planet and do a whacking spree...”

Han had in fact been such a man to do something in his past life, which ended up in his untimely death at age twenty two.

“But that’s no reason to let a planet suffer when there’s chance to save it,” said a male reaper named Eirg; quiet muscular build with a flaring yellow star on his face. “Even though I’m not too one hundred percent on letting these nycarmans go through the rift, I still think we should let this play out.”

“I think that decision is up to you, Terriak,” said the last reaper with a face of stars, Stennen. “You are from Earth, so I guess you have the right to whether or not you want to let them through. But just keep in mind that you will have to answer to the boss eventually. But personally, I say we should not.”

“Here’s what I think,” said Han; “we should let them through to Earth and find there R...Raki—”

“Rakai,” corrected Eirg.



“That blasted thing!” said Han. “And when they do, and they’re coming back”—Han dropped the weapon in his other hand—“we give them a good whacking!”

“Excuse me?” said Lezura’s voice.

Startled, Han looked to Lezura and saw him staring at her with shouldering eyes and folded arms. Han thought she heard him when he raised his voice, though his gesture with the club was self-explanatory enough.

“Nothing to worry about, dearest!” said Frost to her. She lowered her voice and said to Terriak, “So what is the plan Captain?”

“I say we send them back,” said Stennen firmly.

“Whack em—and send them back!” said Han—who was abruptly whacked in the head by Frost.

Frost said, “Captain, think about it for a moment: there are so many squads stationed around this planet, none of which would have even listened this long to the nycarmans. Is it coincidence that they just so happened to open the portal and find you; someone that one of them know? It is a sign. We should help them.”

“Actually,” said Stennen, “Donnowarru can find our portal because he knows Terriak.”

“Quiet, you,” Frost said.

Ultimately Terriak was faced with the proxy vote, for Frost and Eirg were for the mission of this nycarman woman, and Stennen, at least, was against it.

Han on the other hand seemed to just want to hit something. He was crept up close to Donnowarru. The wizard shot him a narrow glance out of the corner of his eye, and Han quickly retreated.

Terriak came to a decision. Once being human, he felt some kind of urge to allow a member of his species to become this Rakai the young woman was talking about. If Terriak played his cards right, and this Rakai to be, things could change for their people, including the little problem they had.

On the other hand it could fail, and his boss would have his hide.

But this woman named Lezura Hembim seemed responsible enough; probably she could retrieve the Rakai from Earth discreetly. And her last name rang a bell in his head.

Finally Terriak said to Lezura, “Okay, Miss Hembim. I’ll grant you passage to Earth—”

Lezura gaped and clasped her hands. “Wonderful!” she said.

Terriak flinched at the sight of the silvery braces with their pink inners. “Yes, it is. But let me lay down a few laws for you first. The human must have no desire to reproduce with any species either by natural means or genetic alteration.”

Natural reproduction with another species—impossible, thought Lezura. But then again, she knew nothings about humans.

“Second,” said Terriak, “the human must not donate blood in any form. This is to prevent the spread of any of the natural bacteria in the human’s body. And third; whether the human had completed the mission or not, I will be retrieving the human to be taken back to Earth, upon his or her death.

“And if the human survives?” said Lezura.

“Back to Earth,” said Terriak.

Lezura heard the grimness in Terriak’s voice and decided against arguing with him. “Understood,” she said.

“Glad we have an agreement,” said Terriak. Terriak opened his palm. In it the purple-pink energy crackled and frizzled until it materialized a small chip the size of a grown man’s thumb. “I assume you have a data-scroll of some sort?”

“I do, actually,” said Lezura.

“Then take this,” said Terriak. He handed the red chip over to her, watching her study it keenly.

“I assume this is a map of the planet Earth,” said Lezura more like a statement.

“Little smart-ass,” Han grumbled.

“Correct,” said Terriak, genuinely impressed. “Don’t think I’m doing you any favors, the sooner you know your way around the planet the faster you can find the Rakai and get off.”

Lezura pocketed the chip in one of the spaces on her belt.

“Oh, and one more thing,” said Terriak. He materialized a reddish-purple bracelet with some red crystals in the inner of it in both hands. He gave them to Lezura. “Put on one of them.”

Lezura put one in her lap and examined the other. It felt a little soft in her hand, and she sniffed it and smelt certain kinds of chemical compounds. As she slipped it over her and she felt the bracelet hug her skin. Before she could react it slipped into her flesh and disappeared.

“Amazing!” she said. “What is it called?”

Terriak said, “I can’t give you the name. But I can tell you it’s nanotechnology that suppresses the worldly energy you carry from your world into another. Slip one onto the Rakai when and if you manage to find him or her. Use an electrical charge on your arm to get it off. I’ll leave the camouflaging to you.”

Lezura understood that by camouflage Terriak meant changing her appearance to that of another species to blend into their environment. “Do not worry,” she said. “I have the necessary equipment.”

“Good,” Terriak said. He turned to a reaper. “Eirg, open it up.”

“Sure thing,” he said.

Eirg held out a white gloved hand and materialized a wonderful scythe. Its blade was lustrous silver that still glittered with energy, and the handle was thin with black shiny reptilian scales on the surface.

Eirg held the scythe purposefully and lifted it—he stopped and turned to Lezura. “I should warn you, though. I can’t plot the exact co-ordinance to the Rakai, because I don’t know who or where the Rakai is. I will try to steer it as far as possible from any water source though.” And Eirg remembered his first days as a reaper when he had opened a portal to another world, only to allow thousands of gallons of water flood over him along with a giant fish that nearly swallowed him.

“That is quite fine,” said Lezura modestly, “I do not know where exactly he is myself. But the key will tell me.”

Eirg nodded. He channeled his energy into the scythe’s blade like mercury rising in a tube, and as it glowed he slashed furiously in the air. He ripped open a portal that spread neatly into a massive circle. Warm, dry air blasted into the tunnel and over Lezura from a great blue sky.

Lezura thought back to the information Blinchi had given her: Earth’s atmosphere was breathable, with only fifteen percent less oxygen. In the case of the common micro-organisms on the planet, Blinchi had already collected samples of them and provide her with a useful vaccine against them; which Lezura had already taken. But he advised her to carry insect repellent for their mosquitos.

Eirg de-materialized his scythe and stepped aside. “There’s Earth.”

A smile sliced across Lezura’s face. Here now was her moment of glory.

Donnowarru stood on his cloud and floated next to the portal.

“Try not to cause any trouble, Donny,” said Terriak with a grin behind his mask.

“I told you to stop calling me that...” Donnowarru said.

Lezura lowered the goggles over her eyes again, feeling some dirt particles irritating them. “Thank you everyone,” she said. She and Donnowarru flew out of the portal.

Frost waved at them. “Good luck!” she said.

Once they were through Eirg snapped his fingers and the portal imploded.

“So you think the troubles on that world will end this time, Willy?” said Frost to Terriak, using his real name now that the civilians were gone.

Terriak shrugged. “I honestly can’t give an answer to that,” he said.

“Highly unlikely,” Stennen said.

Eirg said, “Well this was as much as we could do for them. The rest we will have to leave to them.”

Han scoffed at everyone. “Oh please! You’re sounding so melodramatic.” He dropped the club in his hand. “Everyone knows the best remedy for war is to beat the crap out of it!”

Lezura and Donnowarru ended up in galaxy of sand dunes and ridges, blanketed with a glow of soft gold light from the unrelenting sting of the sun above.

Lezura flew her Thwopter in a wide circle some thirty odd meters in the air, trying to get some grasp of her surroundings as quickly as she could before executing her plans. On the ground Donnowarru studied the environment with less interest. He merely looked around to see if there were any people.

Lezura settled the Thwopter in the sand. She felt the feet sink a few feet and was worried about it being swallowed by the ground. When she found it was steady enough she turned off the engine and rummaged through her bag, taking out the data-scroll and the chip from her belt.

Donnowarru saw a bronze colored lizard dive into the sand next to his feet. Officially bored he went over to Lezura to see what she was up to. He caught her just in time as she slipped the chip into a slit in the top of the white scroll.

Lezura unraveled the scroll at the slim bars at the edges. Instead of paper, a flat, flexible screen was revealed. It winked to life the moment it was turned on, and Lezura played her fingers over it gracefully until she found some files.

There were several planets on a black backdrop, each with the cartooned head of the native alien species. The new chip was registered and showed blue marble with the image of a smiling brown-skinned human male with a buzz-cut.

Lezura tapped the image of Earth once and it filled the screen. At the far corner of the screen Lezura saw the signal bar flickering at the fifth bar as it tried to maintain a connection with one of Earth’s satellites.

Luckily for her the land masses were given their nycarman name next to their English equivalent by Terriak. She saw the image of a human over a continent. Lezura touched the face and held down on it. It opened into a white page to show the cartooned faces of other alien species, some of whose faces were blanked out because Lezura wasn’t supposed to know about them.

She frowned. Terriak still wouldn’t let her know too much.

She found a female nycarman avatar and replaced the human one with it. It even had a gold-haired female like herself—though the ears were a bit exaggerated.

“Well...?” said Donnowarru impatiently.

“It would seem we are on the continent called Africa,” said Lezura as she studied the map behind her goggles. “More specifically we are in Egypt.” She touched the country and information about it sprouted on the screen in a list being held by a purple hand. “Its population is eighty million, seven hundred twenty thousand people. Capital; Cairo. Oh! Its landmarks are the great pyramids. Particularly the ones in Giza, labeled as—”

“Blah-blah-blah!” said Donnowarru. “Now get to the part where we find the Rakai. I cannot stand this heat. It is bad for my skin!”

Lezura glowered at Donnowarru. “But you are already dead, are you not?” she said.

“That does not stop the sun from being hot,” said Donnowarru, fanning the back of his neck.

“Fine...” Lezura said. She closed the map. She took out the compass with the key, and channeled some honoi into it to start a reaction. She thought: what next, is he going to complain about the sand?

Sand blew into Donnowarru’s eyes and he blinked harshly. He said, “And all this blasted sand. If it was living I would kill it.”

Honoi was the combination of mental and spiritual energy, most of which was produced from the brain. Along with the honoi Lezura sent her thoughts into the key. Okay, Fopi, pick your Rakai.

The key spat forth radiant green light that even Donnowarru was captivated by, for a second.

But it didn't just glow in rays. The light formed a kind of dome on top of the compass that tingled Lezura's nerves from ears to toe. Her ears swiveled with the touch of the light, and the dome expanded exponentially in the blink of eye and seemed to engulf the entire desert. It collapsed into a wave and washed over the land with a ghostly hiss. On a larger scale this wave spread to consume the entire planet Earth. The energy travelled through every single human being, searching for a strong heart and an unbendable will of steel. It electrified their senses into frenzy, plunging them into a vortex of colliding sensations.

The animals that were touched with the glorious essence went wild with hysteria. In days to come every single zoo will report animals going berserk, some even developing new abilities. And one in particular would be Nutty the talking the squirrel.

But this was not a wave of chaos. It was searching, and as soon as it had reached every single corner of the globe the wave died, as if being absorbed into the Earth, for it had found its Rakai.

In the months to follow, this worldwide phenomenon would be come to known as The Great Awe!

Back in Cairo Egypt, Lezura's ears relaxed and she dropped her attention on the key. The key was glowing like a hot iron, only green. It swiveled until it stop on a cardinal point.

"West," said Donnowarru.

"But that could either be over the next sand dune or on the other side of the planet," said Lezura.

"Regardless, we better get going," said Donnowarru.

Donnowarru transformed into a blue-tailed skink and slithered onto Lezura's lap.

Lezura shrieked, "Eeeeek!"

"Quiet, woman," said the little skink, bobbing his head on Lezura's thigh in a display of strength. "I have to avoid detection from the eyes of wondering humans. I suggest you do the same."

Lezura quickly regained her composure, her ears lowering, and said, "I certainly will. But first I need to scan a human female."

Lezura flew over the sand dune, and didn't see anyone—not for miles. She took a long drink from her water bottle and followed her map to the nearest settlement.

I wonder what my Rakai will be like? Lezura thought. I hope it is a handsome man. And she giggled.

A mosquito bit her on her elbow.

"Eeeeek!"

Ney York City; five months later:

But Lezura was in for a rude shock, for her Rakai in shining armor was seventeen year old Joey Jackson Sadowski—the most famous homeless hooligan living in the Bronx. Of course Joey Sadowski was not aware of that himself.

As far as he knew he was the everyday homeless teenager trying to make a living.

Years of living on the street had giving his natural peachy-white skin some discoloration from dirt to bruises, most of which were concealed beneath dirtier khaki trousers, and burgundy T-shirt with a picture of Nutty the talking squirrel, whose expression had taken on a human quality with her contemptuous frown. She was famous for her great intellect and her works of literature; such as "While in this Zoo" and "Tigers and Acorns: The biography of Nutty Squirrel". Over all of this he wore a crusty tan colored jacket with a few hidden arsenals, and it was enough to conceal the bat on his back except the handle.

Joey's head was a mess of brown hair like a wild bush. Heavy eyebrows were over bright brown eyes. His face was roundish like his nose, and his chin noticeably angular.

The only clean article of clothing on him was a pair of red and white converse he had mugged off some guy with his silver baseball bat.

The well-dressed guy had been making fun of Joey for his title as the number hooligan and his height, which Joey didn't take too lightly. After a few good whacks to the man's thigh Joey relieved him of his shoes and took off just as crowd of do-gooders were closing in.

His usual height of four-feet nine and three quarter inches for his age gave him many nick-names. But commonly he was known as the Four-foot Slugger.

He liked the Slugger part.

Today Joey had strolled out of his usual hideout; a ramshackle of a hut near Hudson River, to deal with some business.

It was five o' clock. The air was chilly and each breath he took saw it coming out in a misty blanket over his face. The sun tested the sky with a haze of orange light that sliced the taller buildings from the heart of Manhattan. Cold air rushed in off the misty river and gave him the usual morning embrace, but he had gotten use to such greetings.

He stuffed his hands in his pocket to warm them up for the job to come. But not before making sure his bat was firmly locked into the belt and cloth he had tied around his torso as his weapon's holster. Walking near some warehouses that rank of fish he spotted a homeless guy in a thick grey jacket and wearing some mittens to combat the cold. The man was as dirty as he was, but took the usual lifestyle of rummages through the garbage for breakfast.

"Up early again, Tommy?" Joey said to the man.

The man seemed confused for a moment when he heard the voice. He turned to look at Joey with his pale face streaked with dirt and his grey eyebrows just as bushy.

"Oi!" said Tommy in a feeble voice. "How ya doing there, Jacky?"

Joey frowned. "I keep telling my name's damn Joey, you ole coot."

Tommy nodded with a hum in his throat. "Nice to see yah too, John..."

Joey waved at Tommy to end the conversation. He wasn't really that big on manners, but living so close to the old man nearly three years now he thought it fit he showed him a little companionship.

Joey hailed some other guys like himself warming up near burning trashcan, before going onto West 86th Street. Though he was dirty and stunk like an old cloth Joey walked with confidence amongst the early morning rush of people. In fact, before Joey went to sleep last night the city looked just as crowded and noisy.

A concussion of smells from food to synthetic assaulted his nose. He sniffed it out and continued for the heart of Manhattan.

Joey saw a woman approaching him, quickly clutching her bag and stepping out of his way.

"Morning to you to miss..." Joey said dryly as he passed the woman.

Joey ignored the rest of the reactions of a few of the people; most of them were too busy to really give a crap about some homeless guy. Joey figured he was put in the same boat as the common pigeons, rats, cats and stray dogs in the city—a good thing when you were a criminal and wanted to cast attention away from yourself, but bad when the police got a hold on you.

And just as Joey thought about the boys in blue he managed to spot a squad car near a Chinese restaurant across the street.

The officers were posted against the hood of the car, carefully surveying the streets for any unlawful activity that might surface; which was usually a lot.

Joey was grateful for seeing the police. It reminded him that the cops would be on the prowl near his business location and he should keep his bushy head on his shoulders.

Today the young man was planning a heist. Usually something so ambitious wouldn't have been on his everyday agenda. Usually it was just robbing a dude here and there, stealing from the local restaurants to get a meal and pissing off the local cops when he could.

But five months ago, after The Great Awe, something clicked in Joey's head, telling him to step up in life a little. And since then, three months ago he had risk nearly getting shot after robbing a famous

actress who came to visit the Big Apple for the Holidays. He left with her diamond ring, her purse and a stinging left cheek after she managed to slap him.

He had quite the stash now; five thousand five hundred bucks. If he kept it up he could probably make enough money before the year ended to buy his way out of his situation. It was exhilarating, but he didn't plan on being the Four-foot Slugger for the rest of his life.

But first he had a meeting with his scrupulous business partner.

Joey reached an alley between two red-bricked apartment buildings. Concealed from the bright light of the billboards above him; one showing Nutty the talking squirrel and her champagne for president of the Zoo, were hidden by a makeshift clothes line buy some Haitian locals. There was also a dumpster and a few spaces for someone even more suspicious to squeeze in.

As Joey walked near one of these spaces he heard a voice.

"Hey, kid..."

Joey didn't have to guess who it was. He looked around to make sure they were alone. When Joey was near the corner, a tall man in a black jacket, grey trousers and a black cap stepped out. His hands were shoved in his pocket, and bright blue eyes shone against his pale face.

The man, known to Joey only as Swanson, had been the buyer of the priceless items Joey spent his time stealing. Joey heard somewhere that there was some rogue guy who went around buying illegal stuff to sell to the Irish Mob. Joey didn't really have the interest to confirm the mob part; he was only interested in the money the guy paid him.

"You got the goods?" said Swanson.

"You go my money?" Joey shot back instantly.

"You know, I hate playing these games with you kid," said Swanson, taking his hands out of his pocket.

Joey had already had a hand inside his own coat, not that his broken bottle could do much if Swanson took out a gun. But Joey relaxed when Swanson took out a cigarette and lit it.

He blew out a puff of smoke and said with a stern look at Joey, "Don't I always have your money?"

"So?" said Joey. "I still need to see it."

Swanson reached inside his jacket, taking out a fat wad of green. He saw the glint in Joey's eye, and said, "Your turn."

Joey slowly reached into his pocket and took out a sparkling diamond ring.

They both took each other's goods simultaneously. Joey counted the money while Swanson examined the diamond with a magnifying glass from his pocket.

Joey nodded after counting the money and said, "Well this is it; ten grand."

"This is the real deal too," said Swanson, pocketing the diamond and the magnifying glass.

Fifteen grand! Joey thought. I've got fifteen thousand five hundred dollars in my pocket just like that now. I wonder how much a PlayStation costs? Wait—I'll need a TV first, and my hut doesn't have electricity. Dammit! I'll just have to settle for some ice-cream then!

But Swanson's mind was on business. "So can you really pull it off?" he said.

Joey grinned smugly. "Off course I can!" he said. "You obviously don't know who you're taking to. I can get whatever I want done."

Swanson nodded, but Joey could see that the motion had a tinged of contradiction and mockery.

"What?" Joey said.

Swanson pulled out a poster from out of his coat and handed it to Joey.

How many stuff does this guy have under his coat? Joey thought. Does he have candy too? He looked at the poster in his hands, and his face twisted into a grimace.

"What the—"

There was a wanted poster for the Four-foot Slugger, with a sketch of him, poorly done like the man was drunk. The eyebrows were too bushy, his face was too big and his mouth was too wide. But it

was the words that turned off Joey: \$2000 reward for information leading to the arrest of the Four-foot Slugger. He is armed and dangerous, smelly, brown hair, and very short; differentiated from a midget by his baseball bat and loud voice.

Joey savagely tore the poster into shreds that trembled in the wind as they fell.

“I thought that the warrant for me was off already?” said Joey.

“I’m guessing they’re anticipating you stealing the painting today,” said Swanson. “Last week when you stole one of Nutty’s nuts when she was having her meeting in Central Park must have really gotten the cops worked up.”

“They’ll care about a damn talking squirrel than a kid,” said Joey glumly to himself.

“What?”

“Nothing,” said Joey sharply. “Now look, don’t worry about me getting the painting, just make sure that the information you gave me isn’t bogus.”

Swanson took another puff of his cigarette. “Don’t worry,” he said. “The transport crew always stops on 5th Avenue to have coffee and watch the girls doing their morning stretch in the park. Even if those idiots are transporting something important, they’ll make a stop there. Remember, today at twelve o’ clock.”

“I know, I’m not stupid you know,” said Joey.

“How much is one hundred twenty three divided by seven point four?” said Swanson, just to make sure.

“It’s your mother—that’s what it is?” said Joey before turning to leave.

When Joey was gone Swanson pulled out his cell phone and dialed a number. The phone rang with a song by the cast of High School Musical. It stopped.

“Hello?” said a husky voice.

“The kid’s goanna do it,” said Swanson. “I think he can pull it off.”

On the other end of the phone a huge man with short black hair and a black suit that stretched over his frame was smiling. Not because he got good news from Swanson, but because the billboard he was looking at was showing an ad for a kindergarten with some dancing aliens.

“Barney are you listening?” said Swanson.

Barney was snapped away from the cartoon. “Uh? W-what?” he said.

Swanson pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. I’m surrounded by idiots. He said, “Remember the plan Barney!”

“Oh yeah!” said Barney. “The painting...”

“Yeah, the painting, you dumbass,” said Swanson.

“Yeah, yeah I remember now Swanson,” said Barney, “you don’t have to shout in my ear.”

“Just make sure you and the guys are there when the kid takes it,” said Swanson. “Make sure he gets away from the police before you nab it from him.”

“What if he fights back,” said Barney.

“Make sure he doesn’t come back to find us,” said Swanson. “There isn’t any damn way I’m goanna be paying that kid a hundred grand for a pretty picture.”

Though the Sicilian art collector paying me two hundred grand for the painting is a really reasonable guy, thought Swanson.

## CHAPTER TWO

Lezura spent five months in search of the Rakai, and her search finally landed her in Manhattan.

During the course of that time, Lezura had to sneak up on a woman in Cairo, drag her in a corner with the aid of Donnowarru, and copy the woman's appearance with her honoi and paste in on herself.

Now Lezura looked like a black haired human female with delicious chocolate colored skin. Her eyes were in a same beautiful brown, and though her ears were now rounded, she still had her acute hearing.

She had travelled across Egypt, half of Europe, across the Atlantic and ended up in the U.S. She learnt Arabic, Dutch, French and English, all within five months thanks to her great intellect. She had learnt enough of each country's history to properly integrate herself with the population—but that was not to say she didn't have her difficulties.

It wasn't easy travelling the world in alien vehicle without arousing some attention. Most difficult was to get fuel for her Thwopter. She spent some of her time doing some jobs in these countries; changing human races at time to match they society. But she found that the dark skin worked well with the sun, though not well when it came to employment.

When the money wasn't enough, she was forced to gathered kilos of algae and converts them to ethanol fuel for her Thwopter. The flight across the Atlantic was long and tedious, and even required the help of the wizard Donnowarru to carry her and the Thwopter when it ran out of fuel.

So now on this warm day, glowing with the essence of life from animal to plan, Lezura strolled through Central Park to where she had hidden her Thwopter.

She walked across the bow bridge, where the water at her sides sparkled in rippling light. She admired the beauty of the swans floating on the top, and watched some children give offerings of bread crumbs to the bird and the fishes.

The season was fall, triggering the leaves of the trees into their display of warm colors. Lezura passed the bridge and went along the path to a great cluster of bushes a few yards away. She saw a few human males giving her knowing winks and stares.

Wearing a silver silk dress with a white blouse beneath it and in black slippers, she was quite the looker, even with her prescription glasses. Normally a nycarman saw forty meters less than the average human, and had to compensate for it with the aid of lenses. But Lezura knew she would have stood out had she wore her electronic goggles, so she switched to these.

She carried a single-strap bag full of gasoline for her Thwopter. The acrilium battery in the machine could last for up to four years, but that energy could only be used for antigravity orbs.

Lezura walked pass a group of men dressed in kilts and playing bag pipes for passersby and those who stopped to listen. She headed right for a huge cluster of bushes that seemed too dense and tick for any right-minded minded person to venture into. They could walk a few metes into it as Lezura did now, but seeing the rest of the dense growth anyone would have turned back.

But Lezura didn't, because she knew that it was all an illusion. As she walked into it she felt ripples of low static against her skin. Not painful, but it made her ears flex irritatingly, and had she had body hair she would have gotten goose bumps.

She walked out of the illusion and into a small glade, large enough to house her Thwopter. Lezura still didn't underestimate the curiosity of the humans, so she attacked a Fizzer onto her Thwopter. It seemed that nothing was in the space, but closer inspection revealed that the air shimmered like heat.

Lezura took a remote from out of her bag and pressed a few buttons on it. The shimmering slowed until the air wobbled, slowly materializing the Thwopter.

She immediately proceeded to open the fuel port at the left of the front of the Thwopter and empty the gasoline cartons into it.



She noticed a daisy next to her foot, withered and abandoned while the others were strong and prideful like white light bulbs in the sun. Lezura touched the flower, a spark of pink energy appeared on her fingers, and the daisy stood up like a newly crowned knight.

“Where the hell have you been?” said a voice.

Lezura sighed and rolled her eyes. She put down the carton and looked behind her to see a raccoon approaching her. It rose on two feet, shimmered with blue energy. Its body contorted and bulged until it became Donnowarru.

Lezura liked Donnowarru more when he was a cute furry critter.

“I told you I was going to get some fuel, Donnowarru,” said Lezura.

Donnowarru didn’t look too happy for some reason. Well, he never really looked happy at all! But he seemed to be a little grumpier right now.

“Is something wrong?” said Lezura.

“I was just chased by those blasted furry monsters again!” said the wizard.

Lezura tried to stifle a laugh, but considering how rude Donnowarru always is to her she grinned at him. “I told you to avoid those animals,” said Lezura. “By the way, they are called squirrels.”

“I do not care what they are called,” said Donnowarru, “they are bloody monsters! Hurry up and go find the Rakai so I can get off this wretched planet!”

“Do not order me around like your house-girl,” said Lezura. “I have to make sure that everything is in order when I meet the Rakai.”

“You are speaking as if there might even a world to save when you get back,” said the wizard.

Lezura felt her gut wrench like a gronk gripped her. She had been trying to put that thought on the back burner of her mind, replacing it with wondrous things about Earth. She had spent five months here on Earth. Based on what Blinchi had recorded, Earth’s time was a little faster than on Sangetsu. But regardless, at least three months could have past back on her home world.

Each night Lezura wondered how far things could have gone; how far the Prestige System had stretched its tentacles of power in the sea of helpless people.

Would there even be anything to save when I get back? Lezura thought. Of course there is! I have to have faith. I have to be strong for her.

“I have faith that the Rakai will change the world,” said Lezura.

Donnowarru scoffed. The way he saw it, if the second Rakai Conner Wondonder could not stop the invasion, what chance did they have now that the other side had taken over. “You keep telling yourself that, little woman. The only reason I am even here to help you is because those damn wizards cast a squire’s spell on my soul. I have to help you regardless of how I feel.”

“That is fine with me,” said Lezura with a smile. She put the empty cartons in a disposable plastic bag. She got up and took the compass from around her neck and examined it. The key was glowing, wobbling unstably under some magnetic pull. “We have to go to the east now, on 5th Avenue.”

Lezura hid back the compass and searched her back for her valuables. She took out her utility belt, and removed her silk dress to expose her white blouse with the Yankee logo in red on the chest, and blue jeans.

She tied the utility belt around her waist, and dropped her blouse over it, though the things beneath it still bulged. She put on a tight bag-pack, that was actually her combat weapon compacted inside.

It wouldn’t be the best disguise, and she was sure that she would be getting some stares. But it was the best she could do on such short notice. She stepped from her Thwopter and activated the Fizzer. The Thwopter vibrated so fast that the molecules were impossible to see, and the Thwopter vanished into a shimmer.

She turned to Donnowarru, who had transformed into a lizard and leaped onto her shoulder.

“Time to go Rakai hunting,” said Lezura. Lezura considered how dehumanizing the term was. She stepped out of the bush and said, “Let’s go find the Rakai!”

The people and squirrels around her stopped and stared at the woman who had made the outburst. Lezura nervously looked at each of them. She smiled.

On sight of her braces everyone went on their way.

As soon as Joey had left Swanson, he went back home and stashed some of his funds. He had some serious work to put down now. First of all he had to get a bath, and without a soap that just meant stripping naked and diving off into the cold river.

Joey uttered a wail from the sensation, and sent a couple birds nearby flying away. He scrubbed himself down with his hands and hurried back to his hut.

Inside was just a bed of sponge covered by a patchy blue blanket. The sun poked curious beams of light into the dusty interior through the many holes in the wall. The wind lifted a loose part of the tarpaulin that acted as the roof. There was a poster of the popular Killzone video game he stole off the window of a store, along with a couple other posters; including the photograph of an alien.

His few clothes were hung on a rack in a corner. He put on a green top and brown shorts and headed out with a few thousand dollars in his pocket, packed a bag full of his equipment and headed out for central park.

He grabbed six hotdogs on the way for breakfast. When he reached the city it was seven forty. He stashed the bag in the back alley of a Macy's store, and went inside and bought himself nice set clothes to wear.

Joey got rid of his old set and dropped a green cotton shirt with a Lucky Seven Logo and tight burgundy jeans.

Next Joey went to a beauty salon, trying his best to charm the women as they tried to run him out. Once again he got their smiles and approval when he popped out a thousand dollars for their service. Joey got his hair did and his nails and toes cleaned.

He thanked the women and left.

One of the women, a stout figure named Betty, said to one of her friends, "Julie."

"What?" said the other as she moisturized a woman's hair.

"Doesn't that kid seem kinda odd?" she said. "You know—coming in here with a thousand dollars and all."

"...I guess..." said Julie. "Now that you mention it...he does look a little familiar."

It was not until later when Julie was having lunch; which was her usual drink and smoke, that she noticed the wanted poster on the wall.

She choked on the smoke in her windpipe. Now she remembered where she saw the kid from. And now she was about to get two thousand dollars. She took out her cellphone and dialed the number for the police, giving a detailed description of the Four-foot Slugger, and the nice hairstyle she gave him. She also recommended the officer to let his wife stop buy sometime—and inquired about her reward.

Last up Joey went to Central Park just moments before the instructor for the Outdoor Fitness Program began.

The woman was immediately interested in the handsome young man; a bit short, but with some wiry muscles in his arms, bright brown eyes and his rich brown hair combed over his head with the ends in curls—which Joey was counting on.

Joey admired the blonde woman's lean form in her sweat shirt and tights, but got straight to the matter in requesting her help. The woman objected of course, but complied happily when Joey dropped five hundred dollars in her hand, offering to pay another five when the job was done.

Of course Joey didn't plan on giving her a cent more, but the prospect of it would hopefully be enough to gain the woman's trust.

With everything set, Joey took a few minutes to relax at an outdoor café. He sat in his chair waiting on his order of coffee with lots, and lots of sugar. He stared up at the billboards all around him, envisioning his face being on all of them.

Joey Sadowski: Number one rich kid, gamer, and playboy since the turn of the century. Not to mention the sexiest man alive!

Joey didn't really care how he got there; all he needed to know was that he got there. Even if he had to continue being a criminal, that was fine by him so long as he didn't have to kill anyone. But if ever he had to, he figured it wouldn't be his fault.

Joey felt his happiness slipping into the past, and quickly gathered his thoughts and focused on the mission at hand. Through the melody of screaming vehicles, the news broadcasters on a few of the billboards and peoples footsteps, Joey picked up the unmistakable sound of police sirens.

It was enough to jolt his nerves, and Joey had to tell himself to relax.

Joey heard an interesting news report. He lifted his eyes to the billboard in front of his block. There was some energetic looking black-haired guy giving a report on supposed alien aircraft sighted last night coming off the coast. The image was captured on the witness' camera phone; in full detail against the backdrop of the blackness and stars in a spherical shape and a ring of blue-lights around it.

Thirty years ago something like this would have been shocking to the public—only that thirty years ago, the rifts started opening up, and all manner of otherworldly stuff began pouring out.

First it was a supposed alien cargo ship that crashed in Nigeria. It was then that the reapers first appeared. They managed to clear all of the alien material.

Then a year later in Greece there was a spout of three rifts opening up. There was one unfortunate incident where an alien and his mate and child were running from the Greek police, and ended up getting hit by a truck. All three of them died on the spot. The authorities wanted to secure the bodies as soon as possible, but the reapers overwhelmed them and took the bodies; along with the truck.

The most recent one was seven months ago in Los Angeles when it was reported that an alien was running around the place. It took two months for him to be caught by the reapers, and by then he had caused quite a lot of trouble.

Last year alone Hollywood put out seventeen alien movies; most of which revolved around that alien they said was running around the place. Directors had been throwing lawsuits at each other about who was imitation who's work.

So with all this unbelievable stuff happening around the world, there wasn't much hysteria about an alien spacecraft being sighted or a talking squirrel preaching for equal rights for its species.

Joey finished his coffee that would have been sweet enough to give anyone instant diabetes. With the clock slowly ticking away to twelve o' clock Joey took a cab to 5th Avenue.

The sun had risen to the peak in the sky, silhouetting the top of the skyscrapers and stabbing down light onto the people. But even then a few stories down the flashing lights made by men were still resilient against god's sun.

While in the cab he noticed some police cars speeding up the road. He wasn't sure, but he assumed they would be heading his way. He hoped the lady would be on time to play her part in it, the success of his plan counted on her.

He was near 5th avenue and with a little time to spare. So Joey used it wisely. He stopped the cab and came off. He decided to walk the rest of the way to scout out the environment.

You better not screw me over lady! Joey thought.

Across from the business store that Joey walked along side, Barney and two other smaller guys were keeping close eyes on him. All three were wearing sunglasses, but while the other two were plainly dressed, only Barney was in full black.

One of the guys, Mark, in a leather jacket and jean, said, "Yo Barney, I still think you should ditch the suit while we can man. It makes you look like a big gorilla. Plus you're sweating like a pig, man!"

“I love these suits,” Barney said roughly. “Besides, these are what all the mafia guys are wearing...” The other man, Rex, in a jeans jacket and sweat bottoms and a tam, said, “Dude, you’re getting stupider every day...”

Barney glowered at Rex. “Hey, watch it,” he said. “Don’t forget who’s in charge here.”

“Not for long,” muttered Mark.

“You say something?” said Barney.

“That suit makes you look gorgeous,” said Mark with fluttering eyelids.

Rex touched Barney on his big gut. “Hey, you two spouses knock it off, the kid’s making a move on that street.”

They watched Joey turn east. The three men were about to cross the street when they saw a police car slowly drive up and turn on the street Joey went. The men stopped, not wanting to catch the eye of the police. They waited until the car was out of sight before moving on.

Joey’s eyes swept the city for anyone paying too much attention to him. His gaze finally led him to look behind him, and he saw a police car approaching. Joey’s muscles tensed but he didn’t react. He knew only guilty criminals ran—and he hadn’t committed a crime, yet.

Joey pretended as if he stepped in something, stopping to look at his foot and then behind him on the ground. When he did he got a quick glance at the police vehicle. He realized that it was moving too slowly than usual. As if it was stalking.

Joey went on walking. His senses felt the creeping of the police car, and it raised the hairs on the back of his neck.

The vehicle suddenly reached alongside Joey, matching his pace on the edge of the street.

“Hey,” said the officer riding shotgun. “We need to ask you something.”

Joey figured he’d better play it cool. He stopped, so did the car. He turned to the officers and said with a smile, “What you need—directions to the donut shop?”

The officer ignored the cheeky grin on Joey’s face, and said, “You’re a real laugh there, kid. Look—” as the officer spoke the other took the time to try and compare Joey’s features to the sketch of the culprit he had in his lap and the description given by the anonymous caller “—we’re looking for the nearest Pizza Hut. Do you know where we can find it?”

Joey thought: That’s back where they’re coming from. They had to see it. Unless...

Joey saw the eyes of the other officer shift from him to something in his lap.

Is he trying to put the move on me? Joey thought. No, stupid! He’s trying to confirm something. How you look!

Joey said, “I think you fellas passed it. It’s about twelve blocks back where you’re coming from.”

“Thanks,” said the officer, but his eyes clearly didn’t show it.

His partner tapped him on the shoulder for him to look at something. He did, and looked back Joey with a glint in his eyes.

Joey felt a dead weight drop in his bowels. Oh crap!

The officer said, “Hey, look, let me give a few bucks for your help.” And the officer opened the door. Like I’m that stupid! And Joey ran away so fast that the stunned officer could have sworn he saw and after image.

He dropped back in his seat and slammed the door shut. As his partner hit the gas and let the tires screech he said into the radio on his shirt, “This is patrol unit 5 requesting backup! Repeat: this is patrol unit 5 requesting backup! The suspect has been sighted; he’s heading down on 5th avenue! He’s not arm but is still considered dangerous, over!”

The officers didn’t really wait to hear what the voice over the radio had to say, they just wanted to catch the Four-foot Slugger and get that promotion.

Joey weaved through the crowd, nearly knocking over an old lady and a little girl in his wake. He heard the sirens screaming behind him like some terror was about to bring the world to its end.

Why the hell now of all days?

But Joey didn't have time to complain. No. He had to focus. At this rate he could probably reach the drop point before the painting was carried off. And hopefully the instructor was there. He ran through an open mall painted in pink with dazzling lights, and out onto a street where he saw some officers hurrying across the street to greet him.

Joey made a madman's turn, nearly slipping on the pavement, and sprinted down the block. He screamed and waved at people to get out of his way. With a quick glance behind him he saw the two officers closing on his heel.

Damn! These guys are fit. I wonder if it's the change to pizza?

Joey touched his body for his equipment, but bitterly remembered that he left them at his rendezvous spot. His best chance was to lose these potential Olympians. Joey considered; if he stayed in the crowd they couldn't shoot him because civilians were there, but that posed an obstacle for him as well. But if he led them anywhere else where people couldn't see, they would probably shoot him in his little butt.

And that would be the end of it.

But he might be able to lose them.

But there were just too many people in his way.

Joey pushed two people out of his way, heading for the place he thought could work. This spot was an abandoned construction site where they wanted to build a mall, but due to some contract issues the workers had to postpone the construction. Joey didn't know when the work would start back; he just hoped it wasn't now.

He ran through the gate, ducked under the red tapes and into the yard of metal parts and machinery. It was almost as if the work was just being started, as the smell of burnt metal and cement mix was still in the air. Joey saw the skeletal building up ahead; with a patch in the roof on one side and some skin walls here and there.

One of the officers said into his radio, "The suspect is in the closed-off Wenton's Mall, over!"

"Copy that," said a woman's voice, "We're sending backup your way."

Joey went into the building's husk, a mix of dark rooms and those bathed in light. The officers were close on his tail, and suddenly lost him when he turned into a dark room. They took their positions at the door, guns raised and ready. They nodded to each other, and both spun into the room.

"Freeze!" said one officer.

But all they saw was the fluttering of a plastic tarp, and the rectangular light that played against it through a window. There was bucket and paint tins in a corner, and a copy of Flare Magazine on another.

The officer's radio jazzed with static, and a voice said, "Patrol unit one, this is patrol unit three. We are currently in the yard. What's your position, over?"

"The culprit's gone out a window through the back," said the officer. He nodded to his partner and they hurried out of the room. "We are continuing pursuit, over and out!"

When Joey jumped through the window he landed chin first on the concrete.

The dive bomb...only works...in movies...Joey thought as he staggered to his feet. Judging by the bright sunlight he thought he would have landed outside in the dirt, but it was just another room with the roof missing. He swore under his breath and looked for the nearest exit.

He looked way down a corridor and saw a ladder. He ran for it, passing rooms on the way.

"Hold it right there!" Joey heard.

By his conditioned mind Joey went faster when he heard that. The other three officers from patrol unit three were closing in on him from the right. From the left corner of his eye he saw the other two officers on the other side of the building; their torso occasionally exposed through each window.

There was a loud bang. Joey felt a bullet nip him on his thigh. It didn't enter his flesh but it sure stung. Joey nearly tripped but he managed to maintain his balance and continue his stride.

The stairs was just meters away.

"Hold it!" said the officer.

But Joey didn't stop. He touched the ladder and scurried up it like a monkey. An officer reached there in time to see his foot, and he got off a shot. The bullet hit home just beneath Joey's calf, shooting pain right up his leg. Joey uttered a loud wail. The shock and the pain stunned him. But he remembered he had a job to do.

Whimpering all the way he climbed onto the floor.

I have to make it! I have to make it! I have to make it!

He felt his warm blood soak into his pants' foot. He tried standing on the surface. He fell once but he got up and started limping across the floor. Above was the empty roof, crisscrossed with girders and a clear plastic tarp on one side. He hopped to the wall-less end of the room. His heart rate increased with each sound of the officers' steps as they ascended the ladder.

Joey reached the edge, looking into the vast city. He looked down and saw the jutting ledge of the floor below. He could have jumped down easily and made his escape, but with his leg he doubt he would have gotten far.

If only I hadn't gotten shot!

"Freeze!"

And indeed Joey's heart skipped a beat. He felt the strength deplete from him. He lifelessly raised his hands, and limped around to five shiny 9mm pistols staring at him.

"You aren't going anywhere this time," said the nearest officer. "Unless you plan to jump—and that would make it easier for us."

Joey's mind thought about jail—where he definitely would be going now. He had heard all those stories about the awful food, the cramped cells. And worst of all, the big, hairy, sweaty smelling men looking for fresh meat.

He grimaced. "Hey!" said Joey.

"What?" said the first officer, unflinching from his stance with his weapon.

"I'm seventeen," said Joey feebly, "so that means I won't be going to one of those adult prisons, doesn't it. Plus I don't have a criminal record. That has to count for something!"

"Yeah," said the officer, slowly approaching Joey with the others. "It means that when your eighteenth birthday comes you'll be spending it with the big guys."

Joey felt his gut sink even lower. And any lower and he might be pooping out his large intestine right here and now.

"This's It for you, Four-foot Slugger," said the officer.

"I'm not damn short!" Joey blurted. "I'm just not that tall!"

"Excuse me..."

The voice cut through the tension like a heated knife through butter—so casual and clear.

The officers turned around to see a black woman standing at the mouth of the ladder; hands at her side and a pleasant smile on her face.

"Who's the dork?" said Joey as he examined her.

"Shut up," said an officer.

The first officer saw some glittery stuff in the air before his eyes. He blinked it out and said, "Raise your hands slowly. Who are you?"

She lifted her hands up to the height of her head. "My name is Lezura Hembim," she said confidently, her voice a soft tenor without any noticeable accent. "I am an associate of the young man you are pointing—"

Lezura's eyes caught the sight of blood on Joey's leg, and she gasped. "My goodness!" she looked at the officers crossly. "Did you shoot him?"

The first officer lost focus for a moment. The woman seemed to be blurring. "Mam I need you to step aside." He turned one of the officers. His felt slightly weak. And what's with all this sparkly stuff? "Cuff him."

The officer nodded slowly...too slowly. He stepped towards Joey, each step too slow. What the hell's going with me? The air smells nice, though. Like daisies...

With the other guns on Joey the officer put away his weapon and reached for his cuffs. He fumbled with them even though they were right there on his hip.

"You okay, dude?" said Joey with a suspicious stare. The man was moving like he just woke up. "And what's with all the sparkly crap around you? You look like a fairy."

The officer's eyelid fluttered, getting heavy. "Just...keep...quiet...crook...I'm just...a...little..." the officer stopped, and he fell flat on his face "...shhrrreepy..."

Then the other officers followed the trend and fell to the floor. There was a chorus of deep snores.

Joey looked wide around him at the scene. Was it sudden luck, or had there been a divine eye keeping watch over him.

"The hell's this...?" Joey said under his breath.

Up above on a girder, Donnowarru finished sprinkling the last of the snooze-dust from the canister Lezura gave him and sealed it back up.

Joey lifted his eyes to the woman, who was already making her way towards him. She knelt down and lifted the bloody leg of his pants.

"Hey—"

"There is no need to be alarmed," said Lezura. "I am only checking your wound. I have some medical experience."

Joey studied the woman keenly. "Who are you...?"

Lezura looked around the calf of the blood stained leg. She touched the wound to feel the depth of the bullet.

Joey winced. "Hey, watch it!" he said.

"You are lucky," said Lezura, "the bullet is only a centimeter from your tendon." She stood up, looking down at Joey. She saw Joey's frown. "I have most of my medical equipment at my hideout. You can follow me there and—"

"Wait just a damn minute," said Joey. "I'm not going anywhere with you. I've got work to do."

Lezura was thrown off. "But you have just been shot. You need medical attention." She was trying to break the ice with that, instead of just saying "Hey, I am a nycarman sent here to take you back to my world to fight a war".

"What I need is for you to get the hell away from me," said Joey dryly. "I don't know what you did to these blue-boys, but thanks. Anyway, I've got somewhere to be"—Joey limped away from Lezura and made for the stairs—"so I'll see you later, four-eyes!"

Lezura recoiled at the insult. She reached out and grabbed Joey's arm, spinning him around.

Joey's foot stung him. "Ahhh! What the—"

"Now look here young man!" said Lezura with a drip of venom on her tongue. "I have been looking for you for five months now, so the least you can do is listen to what I have to say."

"Bitch what the hell're you blabbering about?" Joey said, his face getting red.

The nerve of this boy! Lezura thought. I cannot grasp this! Is this really the Rakai?

Up above Donnowarru was smiling at Lezura's discomfort, finding the trip worth it after all. But he didn't plan on spending any more time here. Donnowarru leaped off the girder and landed between Joey and Lezura.

Joey screamed and stepped back, falling on his bottom. He looked at the huge purple man with crazed eyes. "Wh—what the—you're an—"

"Alien," said Donnowarru in accented English. "And you are an idiot."

Joey snapped his head around him. "What's going on here? Where are the reapers?"

Donnowarru held up Joey by the collar of his shirt, and slapped his right across the head.

"Ouch! What the hell did you do that for?"

Lezura gasped. "Donnowarru," Lezura said.

Donnowarru dropped Joey on his wobbling feet, looked him straight in the eye and said, "Now look here, you little punk. That woman's sunny disposition might let you get away with certain things. But I will not put up with crap! You are going to listen to what she has to say. Do you understand, boy?"

Joey was processing all of what was happening. The mushy stuff that constituted for his brain started to churn, giving off sparks. He finally grasped the situation.

"Awesome! I'm talking to aliens!"

Joey shrugged Donnowarru's hand off his shirt. He hopped until he balanced himself, and stared at Lezura and Donnowarru. His eyes were bright and his smile dripping with childish glee.

Joey limped towards Lezura and touched her cheek, forcefully pulling on them. "Hey, you don't look like an alien. Are you wearing a disguise?"

Lezura slapped away Joey's hands. "Yes!" Lezura snapped. "And please do not touch me like that."

Joey looked at his hands and rubbed his fingers. Oh yeah! I touched an alien girl.

"Well this one is quite eccentric," said Donnowarru. "Lezura, quickly inform this thing of our purpose here so we can leave." Donnowarru scratched his neck. "I think I am getting its stupid..."

Lezura said, "Young man, may I please have your name?"

I'm actually talking to aliens, Joey thought. I'm supposed to be doing something, but this is way more important. "Um...yeah, sure," he said. "My name is Joey Sadowski..."

Lezura extended her hand. "Lezura Hembim," she said.

Something wasn't right. Joey said, "Aren't you suppose to use an alien greeting?"

Lezura frowned. She obviously realized that this young man had an unusual mindset than the norm. "Would you please not be so annoying?"

Joey raised his hands in a gesture of defeat. "Alright, fine." He studied Donnowarru's features more. The wizard scowled at him and he looked away, back at Lezura. "I still don't get it; what you people want? Are you running from the reapers? Oh! I get it now, you want somewhere to hide!"

"Far from it," said Lezura. "What I am going to tell you will require you to pay close attention."

Joey sat on one of the snoring cops, nodding his head vigorously.

Lezura told Joey the history of the first and second Great War of her home world—the invasion of her solar system by the Exeons; a race of mind controlling beings, and their race of slaves known as the genothroids. When it reached the third Great War, Lezura was saying, "Conner Wondonder did not manage to reach the God Titan. He and his Chevalier, Reiku, stood their ground at the Orphos Pass, defending the people while they escaped. He and his Chevalier defeated five hundred of the orderran soldiers, and seven of their airships, all on their own, until finally they succumbed to their injuries and died. They had sent the key with the Felkremin people who safely delivered it back to the Ixians."

Throughout the entire discussion Lezura watch Joey's expression change from delight to slow confusion and despair. He genuinely looked worried. "But I still don't get what any of that war shit has to do with me?"



Lezura, kneeling before him, said, “Joey, after the war was over, the orderrans had successfully taken over the lesser nations. While the more powerful countries saved their own hides. They came together and formed the Prestige System, a network of the most powerful nations that incorporated only the rich; ninety percent of which are strictly nycarman. They left the rest of the planet to suffer under the wrath of the orderrans, and that world, the Underworld, suffers from crime, disease and despair.”

“And all this was just ten years ago?” Joey said.

“Yes,” said Lezura. “The orderrans are continuing to expand, but recently the knights of the Prestige Kingdoms have been harvesting people from the Underworld. Joey, we believe that something big is happening in the Prestige System, and whatever it is it is not good. So they sent me here to look for the new Rakai—to look for you, Joey Sadowski.”

Joey shook his head slowly. He said to Lezura with a pained expression, his voice low, “Hey, lady, Lezura...you can’t be serious.”

“I spent five months on this planet looking for you, Joey,” said Lezura in an equal tone. “I have endured racial prejudice from your people across three continents while disguised as a human. I left behind the ones dear to me just so I could meet you and try to convince you to help us!”

Joey sprung to his feet, nearly falling over. He said to Lezura, “Look...stop. Okay lady, just stop. I’m not in the mood for any of this shit right now.”

“I am telling you the truth, Joey,” said Lezura.

“Don’t mess with me lady!” Joey said. “What the hell kind of shit is this—coming here; telling me some damn historical shit, and then telling me I’m some damn chosen one?” Joey winced and rubbed his aching head.

Lezura touched Joey on his shoulder. He roughly shrugged her hand off. “Don’t touch me! Don’t come near me, alright? For all I know”—Joey gestured to Donnowarru—“he’s just some damn special effects-camera trick show, and you’re just some dork—all trying to pull a fast on the little homeless kid, eh?”

Lezura was losing her patience. “What must I do to make you believe?”

“Oh—I believe you,” said Joey firmly. “I do. But believe me when I say that I’m not going anywhere with you. I’m supposed to be here, struggling to make a living, getting shot in my ass just to make a little change, and then get up and go world-saving with you crazy-ass people all of a sudden?”

“But the key chose you!” Lezura snapped, making Joey flinch and recoil. Lezura reached for the compass around her neck and gestured it to Joey. “You are the new Rakai!”

Joey saw the lightning storm of emotions in Lezura’s eyes. He looked down at the compass—at the eerie green light that pointed to him. He felt something in his body, a kind of suggestion perhaps. It compelled him to touch the compass. He put his hands on it timidly, and with a surge of overwhelming power it dragged Joey’s mind into a vortex.

Thousands of images flashed before his eyes. There were so many he could barely identify them properly, but he did grasp a few of them. He saw many races of people; skin from purple to snow white to brown and green. He saw a vast field where a war took place; machines, animals and people locked in an endless spilling of blood. Bombs went off and decimated dozens of cities. Streets, homes, schools and hospitals became battlegrounds, littered with corpses. The skies erupted with explosions of energy weapons. Souls ascended to the heavens like serpentine lights. Beyond the worlds spaceships launched massive beams of oblivion at each other.

What is this? I don’t want this!

But even though Joey tried to pull away, the scenes pulled him back.

I don’t want this!

Finally Joey found the strength to break free. He yelled and fell on the floor over the police officer. Lezura came and knelt beside him.

“Joey? Joey are you fine? Joey...?”

Joey’s chest went up and down like something inside wanted out. His breath was a raspy gasp. His tears flowed like the Mississippi.

Oh no, Lezura thought. What have I done?

“Ump, looks like the boy cannot handle it,” said Terriak, now floating on his cloud in a seated position.

Joey forced his eyes to look at the compass in his hand. The light mixed with his teary eyes made him only see green. But he blinked out the last of the tears and the light died. There he could finally see the key, steady as a nail as if it were waiting on him.

No!

Joey threw the compass aside. He sprang to his feet and hurried down the ladder.

“Wait, Joey!” Lezura said.

Before she could even reach after him Joey already made his way down.

Lezura went towards the ladder, and stepped on something unusual. She looked down and moved her foot. There she saw a piece of metal. It was interesting enough for her to pick it up and examine it.

“What is that?” said Donnowarru from above her.

The piece of lead seemed to have been once streamlined. But the front of it was flattened and ugly, like it hit something.

“This is the bullet from Joey’s foot,” said Lezura with a furrowed forehead. “But what is it doing out here?”

“You can research on that later,” said Donnowarru, watching one of the officers below stir. “Right now we must leave this place before these humans wake up from their nap.”

Lezura’s eyes were fixed on the ladder. Of course she wasn’t going to stop here! She had to convince Joey to help them. He was the Rakai. The key proved it. Lezura looked for the compass and took it up. She slung it around her neck and tucked it down her blouse.

“Come, Terriak,” she said.

“Do not order me around, woman...” said Donnowarru before changing into a lizard and falling on Lezura’s shoulder.

And as Joey ran away from the traumatic scene, a faint blue light glowed where his wound was, and it stopped.

## CHAPTER THREE

Joey used all his willpower to suppress the images of death and chaos that were thrown in his face mercilessly. All thanks to those two aliens. Thanks to that little fiasco with the police he suspected he was at least ten minutes late from the drop point.

His mind never crossed on the injury he received. His mind's only focus was to get those legs running to the drop point as soon as possible. He made a quick detour to the alley where he had hid his things. He dropped his coat on and slung the bag's strap over his shoulder.

He was sweating profusely, and his nerves were a wreck. But this thing had to be done. There was no telling when he would get the chance to make a hundred grand in one day like this. The next block he took had him at the mercy of the scorching sun. The color of his jeans matched a little with his blood, so no one really saw it. His mind had calmed down sufficiently enough for him to realize the pain in his leg, but it was just a sting with each step other than the relentless burn it once was.

He reached the street that overlooked a section of Central Park. There were some low buildings there on that street, a coffee shop, an ice-cream shop and other small businesses. They were the perfect fit for a neat quiet place for someone to have a nice view of the park.

The sun shone through the warm colored leaves with glowing aura, making it look like the entire area was on fire. The smell here was mostly of vegetation, untainted with the stink of people, car exhaust and other manmade emissions. Birds sang a nice tenor note, graciously carried by the cool winds. And just for a moment Joey felt a bit fine.

Stupid, crazy alien chic, Joey thought. Talking about come save the world. Ha! It's your world, you go save it. I'm not goanna let anyone play me over.

Joey waited near a pawn shop. He didn't see the truck, and his mind wondered if he had missed the change or the truck hadn't arrived as yet. But he couldn't do anything as yet, so he waited.

A hand touched his shoulder. Joey moved with a jumpy motion. Turning so see a face he didn't want to see.

Joey scowled, gritted his teeth and looked away. "What the hell do you want from me, lady?"

"I need your help," said Lezura calmly. "I will not leave you until you decide to come with me."

"I said I'm not going with you, what part of that don't you understand?" Joey said, trying to keep his voice steady. He looked at her and said, "Do you really think someone's just goanna leave their good life behind and go off to some strange place to die?"

"And what kind of good life involves being chased and shot by the authorities," Lezura folded her arms and said.

Joey couldn't answer.

Lezura said, "Think of the good you would be doing, Joey..."

Joey saw the dark blue truck coming up the street, so he blocked out all of what the woman was saying. The truck slowed to a stop near the coffee shop. He studied the lock at the back of it. It was thin enough to be opened by his bolt cutters, just like Swanson said.

The two occupants left the truck, dressed in light grey uniforms with the logo of the Whitney Museum of Art on the chest. They made a quick walk to the back of the truck, looking around for anything out of the ordinary. They gave the truck a glance and went to the coffee shop.

"Now all I need now is that damn lady," Joey whispered.

Lezura contemplated what other arsenals she had to convince Joey. Unfortunately they were in the public, so she couldn't knock him out and open the portal to her planet here. She understood his point, of course, but she felt that there was something more beneath him that he wasn't revealing.

"May I ask what you are doing now?" Lezura said.

"Work," Joey said.

“What kind?”

“The only one I can do,” he said.

Joey saw a group of people coming from down the street, all of whom were women. He looked and saw the two men coming out of the coffee shop to with their goods. They found themselves seats around a table outside that overlooked that section of the park.

The women were closer now, and Joey could see the instructor at the front.

Nice!

“I think he is planning a robbery,” Donnowarru said in Lezura’s ear.

“I kind of figured that would be the case,” she said. If he really is the Rakai, I cannot let him do something like this!

Lezura touched Joey’s arm. “Joey, you can become a respected hero instead of a common criminal!” she said.

Joey saw the instructor at the front wink at him. He winked back at her with a grin.

The blonde haired woman stopped in front of the block where the coffee shop was. The thought of her involvement in this leading to jail was overwhelmed by the prospect of two thousand dollars. And as far as the women knew this was just their routine workout. Plus the men were already smiling at her.

No harm done, she thought.

“All right ladies!” she said, lifting her slender hands in the air. She turned around to the men, offering up her fine buttocks. “Let’s start!”

The women stretched their arms forward and bent over.

A few men walking with their female companions stopped to have a look. One man was slapped by his woman.

Joey took his cue. He said to Lezura, “Tell you what, when I’m done with this I’ll listen to what you have to say. Right now”—Joey handed the bag to her and took out the bolt cutters—“follow me!”

“Hold on a mo—”

Joey made off, dragging Lezura by her hand before she could protest any further.

They waited until two trucks pass before going over to the one parked.

“I have never stolen anything before,” protested Lezura in a quiet breath. “This is very bad for my reputation.”

“Too late,” said Joey calmly. “Just watch my back and make sure those two men don’t get near me.”

The women effectively blocked the view of the truck door from the men. But Joey suspected that when they saw the truck door move they would be darting out of their seats to have a look. He would have to move fast.

He produced the bolt cutters from under his coat and put them on the lock. He turned to Lezura; saw the flicker of worry in her eyes. He smiled at her and said, “Don’t worry, babes, I got this.”

Joey snapped the bolts on the truck, they dropped like anchors.

Go!

Joey dropped the bolt cutters and flew the doors open. Sunlight washed over many wooden boxes. Luckily they were labeled so Joey knew what to look for. He darted inside and started looking.

The drivers weren’t so engrossed in watching the women that they couldn’t see the top of the truck move. They threw away their coffee; well they still had their donuts in their mouths, and darted through the crowd of women, pushing them aside as they made their way to the truck.

As the men approached Lezura swallowed a nervous lump. She wasn’t incapable of stopping the men, but it was the reason for doing so. She dropped the bag and frown. “You better come with me after this, boy!” she said.

Joey found the crate, marked: Work by Juliet Ashten. He produced a small crowbar, and hooked it under the top of the crate, using all his strength at once to flip the top. It flew into the side of the truck and clattered to the floor. Joey looked inside, and he smiled.

Lezura went in front of the men with her arms splayed open. “Wait, gentlemen maybe we can discuss—”

One of the men produced a Taser. He lunged with it. With cat-like reflexes Lezura twisted her body of the way and grabbed his hand. He bent his elbow with her other hand and shoved the Taser into the man’s neck.

Lezura left his shivering body to fall to the ground, dropping the other man who had drawn his baton with a roundhouse kick to the side of his head.

The women near the truck screamed and scattered like ants, along with everyone else. Lezura was sure that this hysteria would be enough to get the attention of any officers nearby. She went to the truck.

“Joey!”

Joey was crouched in the truck and running out with something clutched under his arm. He dropped out next to Lezura with a big grin on his face. “Come on!” he said to her before running off.

Lezura grabbed the bag off the ground and followed him.

Joey heard a voice near him say, “Hey there!” Joey turned to see the instructor jogging casually along beside him. “Aren’t you forgetting something...?”

Joey figured with the money he was about to make, he could at least spare five hundred dollars. Joey fumbled in his coat pocket and produced a thick coil of cash. He tossed it to the woman who caught it tenderly.

“Thank you!” she said, and jogged off to regroup the women.

Joey and Lezura’s hard run gave the people enough intuition that these two just did something to make the cops after them, and stayed way clear from them.

“I did it!” Joey shouted triumphantly. He leaped in the air, reaching Lezura’s height, and threw a fist in the sky. “I did it!”

“Joey you are a very troublesome boy,” said Lezura bitterly as she navigated between a signpost and a woman. “I still cannot believe you are the Rakai!”

“Whatever lady,” said Joey as he led them across the street. “I’ve got my way out now. I’m goanna go to school; get that degree shit everyone’s talking about. Get the job, the money, the house, the car, girls—I’m goanna make it out, baby!”

Lezura said, “Joey—”

“Don’t worry, lady,” said Joey. “I’m goanna give you a little something for your trouble. That’s if you wanna stay here, that is. Hey, we make a kick-ass team. Bonny and Clyde—Joey and Le...Lez...urm...Lezura—”

Joey’s vision was so blinded by the images of a grandiose life that he didn’t see the police officer in front of him. He bumped right into the cop. The two of them looked at each other for a moment. The officer realized who Joey was, and latched onto his shoulder with a hand and opened the channel on the radio.

As the officer was about to reach for the cuffs, Joey reached inside his coat and took out a glass bottle, striking the officers across the head with it. As the man fell and the crowd gasped and shrieked Joey took off with Lezura behind him.

“Joey that was the most foolish thing you ever did!” said Lezura, who was secretly relieved that the Rakai wasn’t going to jail today.

“I’m the king of New York!” said Joey. “Ha-ha-ha-ha...”

Joey continued laughing until he reached around a corner. When Lezura neared it she saw Joey running back with his hands in the air, wailing, “WHAAAAAAA—”

Lezura saw a five men in uniform; probably the same men who Donnowarru had drugged, but were now on their feet and furious as hell. All had weapons drawn and handkerchiefs over their nose and mouth.

Lezura made a insane U-turn and caught up to Joey. "What should we do?" she said.

"There's a jar in my backpack with some bees," said Joey. "Let them have it!"

Without question Lezura reached inside Joey's bag and took out the jar. She knew enough about bees to know the danger they posed, but all her thoughts were focused on getting the Rakai, so Lezura smashed the jar on the ground and leaped over it. Instantly the air was filled with a maddening buzzing and a plague of bees.

The officers ran right into it, immediately the bees locked on to them and consumed them and the people nearby. The street was plunged into perpetual hysteria that day.

Lezura ran alongside Joey. A part of her wanted to course him, but never since the third Great War had she felt so exhilarated and alive. Joey looked at her and offered her a smile. She unknowingly smiled back at him.

They went down a less populated street and through a back alley. A startled cat shrieked and ran out of the way.

Donnowarru the lizard clutched onto Lezura's shoulder tightly was his claws, while the rest of his body dangled like a piece of cloth in the wind. He heard a steady buzzing behind him and saw a bee pursuing him. He scowled at it, lashing out his tongue and reeling the bee into his jaws.

Barney, Mark and Rex were tailing Joey right when he went into the construction site. Fearing the police they had went back to the spot where the truck was said to stop. They had witness the kid, with his new, sexy accomplice, bring down the guards and escape with the painting.

They continued to follow them then.

Barney was certain that with the running he put down today, he lost at least three pounds in sweat.

"Where the hell is this kid going?" said Rex.

"Maybe we should meet at the exchange spot with Swanson," said Barney.

"You deaf?" said Mark. "The boss said to get him before he reaches there. He doesn't want anything coming back to pin him down."

Barney's body heat created a barrier around him, and the smell. Mark and Rex tried to keep away from him without straying too far ahead.

Then they spotted Lezura and Joey up at the end of the street, legging it across until they were out of sight.

"There they are," said Barney.

"Come on," said Mark. "Let's cut them off."

Lezura and Joey spotted two men coming up from the end of the alley. Joey judged them immediately. Their steady eyes and quick pace indicated these men were after him without a doubt. Joey held out a hand and stopped Lezura.

"Turn back," he said hastily.

When they turned around they saw a huge man in black coming down the alley. His size threatened to block off the path completely.

"Who are these men?" Lezura said to Joey.

Joey took the bag from Lezura and stuffed the painting in it. "I don't know," Joey gave the bag back to Lezura, dropped his coat so the men wouldn't have anything to extra to hold onto, and pulled out his silver bat, "but whatever they want has to be the painting." Joey thought about the people who knew about the heist. Only one man came to mind. He would deal with Swanson later, but now he had

to secure his goods. “Lezura, whatever happens, just make sure you take that bag and get the hell out of here.”

Lezura said without taking her gaze off the two men approaching her, “I will not leave you, Joey. I am your Chevalier, I am to protect you.”

Joey grinned as the huge man pulled out a huge knife from inside his coat. He said, “Look at me; needing help from an alien chic...”

Barney and the other men stopped in front of them. All had weapons ready in hands. And they could practically sense the adrenalin flowing in the veins of each other.

Barney said, “Why don’t you just hand over the painting, and you and your girlfriend can be on your way.”

Lezura turned to Barney with flushed cheeks and said, “I am not his girlfriend!”

“That’s right,” said Joey. He pointed his bat at Barney. “But I will make a bitch out of you if you don’t take your boyband and get the hell out a here.”

Rex and Mark grinned; they spread to the sides of Lezura. Lezura didn’t plan using any of her devices that let them know she was an alien, so she decided to let this play out with just her fists. She lifted her hands in a defensive stance.

Rex grinned. “Look, this little nigga bitch knows some kung fu!”

“Let’s cut her open and see what other surprises she has,” said Mark.

Even though she wasn’t a human, the derogatory term still sliced deep in Lezura, for she had come to appreciate her appearance.

She opened her mouth and said, “You will both—”

“What the hell did you just say?” Joey said as she made after Rex.

Lezura was momentarily stunned by the thoughtless, valiant act of Joey. He dropped himself into the two men, swinging his bat at their heads and feet. But Lezura snapped herself back to the situation, and switched her attention to the larger man.

And not a moment too soon; as Lezura spun around Barney swung the blade. Lezura ducked beneath it, and shot her fist into the base of Barney’s gut. She was aiming after his groin but his huge gut got in the way.

Her hand bounced off Barney, and he grabbed at her flowing hair, yanking out a few strands. Lezura winced; made it a note to cut her hair soon. She dodged another attack and kicked Barney in his knee. The big man wobbled momentarily, giving Lezura the chance to peddle to the side of him and land a chopping blow to the back of his neck. His fat absorbed the blow from reaching his neck bones.

Barney swung around with the knife. Lezura flipped back on her hands beneath the knife, pulled in her feet and uncoiled them like a striking cobra, hitting their mark in Barney’s groin.

The man gulped chokingly. He dropped the knife from his trembling hand, and slowly fell to his knees, the other hand clutching his precious jewels.

Lezura scooped the knife off the ground and turned for Joey, just in time to see him receive a nasty gash on his shoulder.

Joey wailed, more like anger than in pain. He ducked and spun with the bat, hitting Mark in the shin. When Mark fell Joey lifted the bat to drop in his chest—

And Rex sliced Joey across the ribs from behind. The sharp pain seemed to hit all his nerves as Joey arched his back and dropped his bat. He staggered forward clutching his side. He snarled at Rex and ran towards him. Rex stood sideways and set to plunge the knife.

And that plan was canceled when Lezura cut Rex across his calf with the knife, severing the tendon. Rex screamed and fell.

With that done Joey’s mind instantly switched. He said to Lezura, “The bag!”

Lezura froze, remembering that she dropped it. She turned to see Barney limping away like a mountain of flesh with the bag.

“Blast!” Lezura said.

She ran after Barney. Joey casted his injury aside, snatched his bat and ran after Barney too, but the pain in his shoulder with the one in his side triggered a warning shock that stopped Joey. He fell on his hand and knee. He removed his hand to see it dripping with blood.

That bastard cut me deep! Joey thought.

Barney didn't reach far. Five officers barged into the alley and stood at the front. Their faces were swollen to the point where at least one eye wasn't working and a cheek was puffy. One had a swollen lip and one a nose bigger than an acorn.

“Freeze and put your hands in the air!” said Officer Parker with the acorn nose.

Barney screamed and threw his hands in the air. But after all they had been through the cops decided some payback was in order. So he shot Barney right in the shoulder. In his report it would be said that Barney was reaching for something, and no one would believe the word of a thug over five officers.

The sound of the explosion echoing in the alley knocked Lezura's ears. She yelped and clapped her hands over her ears, almost stumbling. She saw the bag fall from Barney's hand as he dropped back like an avalanche hitting the ground.

When Joey saw the cops enter the alley he knew then that things weren't going to go his way unless he got off his butt. Hew gritted his teeth and staggered to his feet, running ahead after Lezura with the bat.

Lezura saw the guns pointed at her and lifted her hands in the air. She stopped a few feet before the bag and Barney.

I wonder if I should act? Donnowarru thought, hiding behind Lezura's shoulder.

“Make one step and I'll put a hole in your head,” said officer Stanson with both cheeks swollen.

“Assaulting an officer—with bees? That's the biggest mistake of your life, missy!”

“Oh dear,” Donnowarru said. “Wait...why do I even care?”

Lezura couldn't move an inch without getting shot. But the next words by the officers were dastardly.

“Put a round in her,” said Officer Parker to Officer Madison with the swollen lips.

Panic spread through Lezura.

“You ssshure?” said Madison.

“Yeah I'm damn sure,” said Parker. He lowered his weapon and turned to Madison with a stern face. He said quietly, “Look here, Rookie; she's a crook, you're a cop. No one's going to believe her over you.”

“Oh my goodness,” Lezura gasped in disbelief. Could this really be the people she was to take the Rakai from? Was he really going to be like this?

The rookie wasn't too sure about the idea. “But—”

“Screw you,” said Parker. He'd had quite enough of the embarrassment for one day. He envisioned the promotion he would be getting for taking out the Four-foot Slugger—and the praises and the money.

Joey ran before Lezura, so fast that Parker was a little startled, and enough excuse for him to shoot. Before the trigger was pulled Lezura grabbed Joey and spun him around. The bullet scored its mark right in her lower back.

Lezura grunted and fell on top of Joey.

“Lezura?” Joey called to her, rolling from underneath her to check up on her.

Donnowarru had had enough. He leaped off Lezura's shoulder, and transformed into his wizard form. The startled officers paused for a heartbeat, then simultaneously opened fire at the wizard. All the bullets ripped through his body without effect, scoring holes of blue light that immediately sealed back up.



Joey checked Lezura's wound. Her blood had already soaked into her shirt; her yellow blood. Joey took off his shirt and pressed it against the wound.

"Oh shit! Shit man!" Joey said, pressing his trembling hand against her back.

Donnowarru released pulsing wave of honoi at the officers, knocking them clear out of the alley and into the street. "This is why I detest people," he said. "I hate having to get involved in their affairs." He turned to Joey and said, "You, boy!" Joey frightfully looked at up him. "Stop being a wuss and pick the woman up!"

Joey put an arm under Lezura and lifted her up to her feet. She wasn't completely unconscious, and she tried to stand on her own.

"Are you okay?" said Joey.

"I am fine," Lezura said slowly in a weak voice.

Donnowarru saw the curious crowd coming up. He turned to the two youngsters and saw that they were up and ready. Donnowarru ripped open a portal before the crowd, ignoring their gasps and screams.

"Inside, quickly," said Donnowarru.

Joey stooped for his bat. His mind was completely off the painting. Well, not fully. He stooped and collected the bag along the way. "What the hell were you thinking, lady? You could've been killed? That was my bullet!"

"I am your protector, Joey," said Lezura.

Joey heard the unshakable conviction in Lezura's voice. Was what she said all true? Was what she showed me all true?

As they neared the rift Joey felt a tug on his bag. He turned and looked down to see Barney holding onto it. Lezura took the bat from Joey and gave Barney a good whack on his arm. Barney growled and dropped his hand.

"That's what you get for messing with my Supergirl," said Joey. They and Donnowarru went into the portal, and it closed, leaving three wounded thugs, a hysterical crowd, five unconscious officers and police sirens screaming.

Some squirrels were observing the huge shimmer in a patch of the woods in central park, when a portal ripped open with a blast of force that sent them running and squeaking. Out staggered Joey and Lezura.

"Put me down here," said Lezura.

Joey lowered her to her knees, and he fell next to her. His wound burnt like with some chili peppers added.

Donnowarru walked out of the portal, clapped his hands and closed it behind him. "Well that went well," he said.

"Screw you, man..." Joey said. He winced and touched his wound gingerly. His red merino was soaked on one side with his blood.

Lezura said to Joey, "Stay still, no questions please."

Lezura put her hand in the leaf-littered ground, closed her eyes and focused on bringing up her honoi into her body. She channeled it down her back to her wound. The energy popped the bullet out, and the light took on a pinkish color as it sealed the wound shut.

Joey, who was looking at the phenomenon, gasped. "No shit..." he said.

Lezura got up. She twisted her back to work out the sting. She knelt next to Joey and touched his wound. Joey felt a ripple of warmth spread over his ribs. He sighed and closed his eyes as he sank in the ecstasy of the healing.

Lezura moved to Joey's shoulder and then his foot. The wound looked a little better from the last time she saw it, but she healed it nonetheless.

“All done,” she said.

Lezura helped Joey to his feet. Joey checked his wound to see a long scar there. “It still stings a little,” he said.

“It was a large wound,” Lezura said. “But it should be healed properly within a day or two. “Now, Joey. Let us skip all the delays...”

“You want me to come with you...” Joey said.

He saw the determined light in Lezura’s eyes that was starting to scare him. “I do not like being blunt Joey. But let me put it to you the best way possible; you can stay here, continue to be a little criminal that is running around without a place for his own, and gets nothing in return. Or, you can help save millions of lives. Which do you decided?”

Joey walked away, rubbing the leaves out of his hair. He thought about it. So far based on what this woman did for him, she had to be telling the truth. She took a bullet for him, and that was some serious stuff. But what was there for him anyway? He didn’t know one squat about her alien planet.

But he would’ve loved to go there! If there was any chance of him getting out of New York, it would be this.

“Okay,” he said, “I will.”

Lezura asked, just to make sure, “You are not thinking that you will die there?”

Joey said, “Weren’t we just being chased by criminals and the police and both got shot? It’s not the first time I’ve stared down the barrel of a gun.”

“Obviously,” said Donnowarru.

Joey looked at him and said, “Hey, go f—”

“Splendid!” said Lezura with clasped hands, showing a huge smile and her braces.

Joey flinched and said, “Whoa there, brace-face, easy with the sunshine!”

Lezura covered her mouth, quickly dropping her hand and scowled at Joey. “You should learn to have some manners, young man.”

Joey scoffed and waved her away.

Lezura took the remote off her utility belt. She deactivated the Fizzer on the Thwopter. Joey sensed the static behind him and turned to see the machine.

“Sweet ride,” he said.

“Get in the back,” said Lezura as she dropped herself in the front seat. Joey took up his bag and laid it across his lap along with the bat.

Once they were ready Donnowarru floated in the air on his cloud, ripped open a portal and led them through it.

Joey stared around the inside of the portal with a face smeared with childish wonder. He rated this a hundred times better than the special effects of Hollywood; because it was actually real. He figured that if this was just the portal, then the planet must be an even bigger piece of work.

The thought made his blood surge with anticipation.

They soon neared the end of the rift, which was a small glowing white point like a star.

“How the hell are we goanna fit through there?” said Joey, looking over Lezura’s shoulder.

“What is that, Donnowarru?” said Lezura, “I have never seen it before? Is it the end of the portal?”

“Yes...” said Donnowarru testily with a throbbing vein on his forehead. “I can sense different portals through the rift network that lead to certain locations. This portal should lead us back to Sangetsu, and back to Ixia. But we first need their permission before it can be opened.”

“Does he mean the reapers?” Joey said to Lezura.

“Obviously,” said Donnowarru.

“You don’t have to be so rude dude?” Joey said.

Donnowarru turned to Lezura, who both smiled. Lezura said back to Joey, “Now you know how it feels.”

Joey scoffed, sat in his seat and folded his arms. “Now you know how it feels...” he mimicked Lezura in a piping voice. “Stupid alien lady...”

Five dots of light appeared that exploded into the reapers. Joey sat up in his seat, almost falling out into the zero-gravity. And realizing how it seemed like he would be floating the moon, Joey unbuckled his seatbelt and let himself float around in the tunnel.

“Joey you little monkey boy, sit back down!” said Lezura with her hands on her hips.

“Quit being so stuck-up Lezura,” laughed Joey. “You should try this! It’s awesome!”

Joey swam around, doing cartwheels, flips and twirls and laughing all the time. He did so without even a glance at the reapers watching him.

Lezura and Donnowarru recognized the face patterns of the reapers as Terriak and his team. Lezura couldn’t tell, but she assumed by their stillness that they were gasping at Joey behind their masks.

Terriak pointed to Joey and said to Lezura, “Miss Hembim this is the Rakai?”

Lezura shrugged. “I am afraid so...” she said.

“Boy!” said Han. “You sure got the raw deal with this one! Look how short he is—”

Joey snapped out of his play and twisted his body wildly to look at Han meters away. “What the hell did you just say, spaceboy?”

Han tightened his grip on his club. “Spaceboy?” he snarled

Joey kicked off in the air and glided for his bat floating in the air. “That’s what I just said, punk—you little asteroid humping spaceboy!”

Han uttered a beastly snarl and charged after Joey. Joey floated towards him with his teeth bared, and both of them exchanged clashes with their weapons.

“Well his mouth sure got things going for him,” said Stennen.

Frost scratched her head and said, “Um...should we stop them?”

“I don’t want to get in the middle of that,” said Eirg, pointing to the sparks bursting between the impacts of their weapons.

Terriak sighed and shook his head. He was hoping for someone a little on the “I have sense” side to represent the human race. But, it looked like this what they wanted.

Joey’s wound sent a flash of pain in his ribs. He arched his back and screamed, “Yeeeeooooouch!”

Han took the chance to whack Joey on the shoulder and kick him away. Joey floated without aim all over the place, whacking angrily at the air.

Frost ducked beneath him.

Terriak grabbed onto Joey by his foot and pulled him down to his level. Just before Terriak held the bat steady Joey whacked Eirg on the shoulder with it. The reaper yelped, hung his head and whimpered.

Terriak flicked Joey’s nose forcibly.

“Oww,” Joey hissed.

“Now look here you little dufus—”

And it was then that Terriak explained the conditions under which Joey was to operate in the other world. Joey pulled away from Terriak with a disapproving shake of his head.

“What the hell, dude! You mean I can’t get laid—plus I have to go back to that dump?” And Joey pointed with a finger behind to indicate where Earth was.

“Indeed, Terriak,” said Lezura. “I do not know about Joey and the sex part, but if he is to save our world it will have to be considered as his home.”

Terriak thought for a moment. Finally he said, “Look, you kids, I went out on a limb trying to help you with this. The least you can all do is cut me some slack. I can let you enter another world, but I have to go back for you. My boss would have my ass.”

“Oh no,” said Joey, “your ass is mine if you come between me and saving the world.” Joey got back in his seat and buckled up. “We can deal with that afterwards; right now I have my new life to start.”

Lezura smiled at Joey’s forwardness. Hopefully he could apply that to help save their skins.

Terriak nodded. “I guess that makes sense. Oh, Lezura...”

“Yes,” he said.

“Make sure to put the bracelet on him,” said Terriak.

Lezura took the bracelet from out of her bag and gave it to Joey. He stretched his hand forward and she strapped it on. Joey watched the object sink into his flesh and disappear.

Nice! Joey thought. I hope they have other cool stuff like this back their world.

Next Lezura produced a small syringe. Joey saw the thing and immediately fought out of his seatbelt.

“What the hell do think you’re doing with that?” Joey said.

“Relax,” said Lezura, twisting off the cap, “it is just a vaccine shot for the most common viral infections on our planet. It will help to build up your immune system to them. See, it is not a needle; it sprays the vaccine in the form of a mist into your pores. It is completely harmless.”

Joey reluctantly settled and stretched out his arm. He tensed to expect the painful prick of a needle, but was relieved to feel only the tingling of the spray.

Lezura put away the vile, produced the Sheikon-box and said to Donnowarru, “Back inside the box, Donny!”

Donnowarru clenched his fist and grimaced. “I said do not call me—”

His body willingly obeyed Lezura’s orders, and Donnowarru broke down into honoi and steamed into the box with a hiss.

As Lezura put it up Joey said, “Stupid old guy.”

Terriak blasted a beam of energy from his finger into the white point. The light quickly expanded into a large portal, where warm air flooded over them like a tsunami over ants. Joey smelt the exotic concussion of plant and fruits in the air, and he could see a vast blue sky with strips of clouds awaiting him.

“Don’t lose now,” said Terriak, and Joey almost here serenity in his voice.

“Good luck!” said Frost.

Eirg waved at them.

Stennen and Han kept quiet, though Stennen nodded.

Lezura made the thrusters roar. “Are sure you do not want to go back, Joey?” said Lezura with a wink at him.

Joey said, “Lady shut up and drive!”

Lezura carried them out of the portal.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The first thing to grab Joey's attention by the throat was the sheer size of the yelm trees they flew over.

"Yo..." he said, "Lezura, you ever climbed one of those?"

Lezura checked her radar to see if they were in the right zone. They were, somewhat, but the Ixian location was a mile away. "Why would I want to climb a yelm tree, Joey?"

Joey saw a flock of green and blue, featherless birds ascended from a ville tree to his right. "Come on! You're telling me you live here and you haven't done that?"

"It never crossed my mind to," said Lezura. Lezura descended below the last yelm tree I sigh, now gently skimming the top of the canopy to see what was below with her goggles. "But I would like to explore the ecosystem of such a plant."

Joey saw more of the birds. This time he noted that they had long necks and beakless mouths. "Lezura, what are those birds called?"

Lezura looked where Joey was pointing. She zoomed in with her goggles for more detail—now being able to see their orange eyes and membranous wings. "Those are lankers," she said.

Joey murmured the name to remember it. Then to west he saw some flying animals.

But these ones were massive!

Joey studied them as best as he could; bright brown, featherless skin, wide head on long necks and a mouth with the yellow beak made into primitive teeth around it. They had pink membranes in their wings and tails, and two membranous frills at the sides of the head over their earholes.

"Tratalies," said Lezura when she gave them a look.

"Do you have anything that gets bigger than that?"

Lezura took a few seconds to answer. She was studying the landscape with her eyes and noticing that the trees were thinning. "Rare creatures called jai'jes," she said. "They live on another continent in the mountains."

Joey sat back, letting all the sites and the information supplied by Lezura fill him up. He wanted to be a part of this new world, and felt certain things of his pass he should drop off. They would be useless here.

Actually he couldn't. He couldn't forget where he came from, the hardships and struggles he had to endure. It was what made him tough, and he would need it to get through this world.

He looked up and saw the twin moons, I'us and S'us, and an idea struck him. He squinted under the sun and put his index finger between the moons, and grinned.

Lezura got closer to the location of Ixia, but something was wrong. There were supposed to be four yelm trees in the Yuxu forest near it. But Lezura didn't see them. An idea as to what it was brewed in the back of her mind, but she didn't want to acknowledge it.

Her radar picked up something. She looked at the screen and studied the icons against the grey background. There were ridges and groves indicating the landscape, each having numbers that indicated their height.

At the top of the screen the icon of a wrench, symbolizing advance civilization, was being displayed from a narrow yellow line.

"Oh no..." Lezura said in a hollow voice.

Joey unfolded his arms from behind his head. He sat forward, turning his head out of the vanilla scented hair of Lezura blowing in his face and said, "What? What's wrong?"

Lezura looked forward in the distance, and saw it. "There!" she pointed.

Joey looked forward and saw it too.

The narrow, silver top of the building was coming up in their sights like a magnificent metal pillar rising out of the land to touch the blue.

“What’s that?” Joey said.

Lezura slowed down the Thwopter, sensing something terrible. “That is not supposed to be there,” she said. “That...that is an orderran construction.”

Joey remembered enough about what Lezura had told him about the orderrans to have an idea, and felt the same pang of fear as Lezura did. They were they guys that invaded the planet and had set up their suppressive colonies.

“Th—then where’s this Ixian place you’re talking about?”

“Do you not understand you dimwit?” Lezura said. “It means that the orderrans from Tartian extended their colonization up this far since I left. Either the Ixians have fled...or...”

Lezura trailed off, something on her radar grabbed her attention.

Joey watched the rest of the tower rise over the distance. The pointed top widened down to a conical roof and splayed into many levels of ring-like bridges around the body. These bridges held light green solar panels on the first level, with windowed rooms going down.

Joey saw others like it popping up—and black flying vehicles going around the area like vultures circling an animal’s carcass. And one seemed to be coming his way!

“Lezura...?”

On the radar Lezura saw the approach of an unidentified aircraft heading their way. She assumed that Joey must have seen it with his own eyes.

I cannot believe this, Lezura thought. I just got here and already I am struck with this. But it will not end here. Not like this.

“Hold on tight, Joey!”

“What—”

Lezura abruptly swerved the Thwopter, the antigravity orbs tilting in their sockets to spin the vehicle. Joey would have been thrown out had it not been for his seatbelt. Lezura stepped on a brace and pushed it in, the thrusters puffed louder into a steady jet, and the Thwopter jetted away, throwing Joey against his seat.

The vehicle pursuing Lezura and her Rakai was a Dawhawk, nearly four times as large as the Thwopter for transporting troops. It was a silver-white, shaped like a nut with two long wings on each side that house an antigravity orb, and two thrusters at the back blazing out red flames. The top was encased by a thick sheet of glass, and at the front were four long-barreled guns grouped in two.

Lezura looked back and saw the Dawhawk catching up with her. Even for a vehicle of its size it was moving pretty fast. Lezura decided the best course of action was to lose it in the trees where her Thwopter could easily navigate.

The Dawhawk fired, flashes of yellow rippled through the air. A few hit the back of the Thwopter. Joey lurched forward and screamed, “Lezura!”

“Shut up, boy!” Lezura said, sizing up a good yelm tree and blocking out Joey’s wailing. She whispered, “There...”

Lezura pulled back on the steering wheel, arching the Thwopter from the base of the colossal yelm tree and into the galaxy of leaves. The wind pulled back the skin on Lezura’s still human cheeks but she kept her frame steady.

The yelm tree’s limbs were so huge that one of them could have easily supported an elephant, Joey noticed as Lezura maneuvered through them. They had deep cracks and crevices with multicolored flowers and large blue mushrooms. Some parts of the branches were completely smothered with blue and green moss; some sections of it moved when the Thwopter came near it or the bullets slapped into it.

Lezura noted that there were even smaller trees growing out on the limbs.

“Fascinating,” she said like she was quietly observing in her garden. She pressed a button on her goggles and snapped a picture of them. “It seems that because of the yelm tree’s sheer size, and the fact that it starves other plants of sunlight, some of the plants have evolved to feed off the yelm tree itself or use it as leverage to get closer to the sun.”

Joey pointed forward over Lezura’s shoulder with a terrified face. “Lezura!” he said.

“What?” Lezura looked ahead of her and saw an imminent limb like a wall closing the distance to them. “EEEEEEK!”

Lezura narrowly swerved out of the way in an upside down flight. Joey held onto his bag and bat, watching insects fly by him, and one into his mouth. He spat it out and shuddered.

Lezura twisted the Thwopter right-side up, still going higher for the smaller branches.

They neared some lankers and sent them flying in an orchestra of squawking, and some hairless, blue-skinned monkeys with long snouts and clawed tails howled chaotically and swung out of the way.

The Dawhawk shot down huge vines in its way and matched the trajectory of the Thwopter with each move it made, but the smaller vehicle was getting a head of them by slipping through the smaller branches.

So the occupants inside decided to use another method.

One of the doors at the side popped up and slid back, revealing a light blue colored interior that was soon flooded with leaves and insects. A robot stepped up at the edge of the door. It was slim built with a barreled chest. Like all orderran-modelled robots it had the black primary color and a white face. Silver wiring peeked from between its joints. Its hands and feet had five digits that were silver. Its shoulders and head had deep brown coloring. Three white crests were on the top of its head, and its mouth was a jagged line all across.

It was the common, standard issue Cyri-bot.

On its back the Cyri had strapped on a set of artificial wings. In its hand was a compact, black segmented rifle.

Two more Cyries came beside it. The first pressed a button on the top of the pack over its shoulder, and antigravity orbs juttied off the sides attached to stalks. It turned to the others and opened its jagged mouth, letting out a high pitched, squealing laugh. It jumped out of the airship and shot forward with the antigravity orbs leaving a trail of fading blue.

The other Cyries followed. So did three more, all laughing manically. And as the rest decided to fall back, the Dawhawk’s right wings hit into a limb, snapping them off like twigs and flipping the Dawhawk around.

As the occupants inside screamed at the top of their artificial vocal cords the momentum gave the airship enough force to spin continuously until it crashed into the trunk of the yelm tree. It didn’t explode right away, but the severed wings were on fire and smoking, and the crushed ship landed between two branches where it was stuck.

“We did it!” Joey said as he saw the demise of the Dawhawk.

They were approaching the top where the sunlight hit the red leaves and bathed everything in a glowing touch of crimson.

“Really?” said Lezura.

The flying Cyries appeared before Joey. One fired off some shots, but Joey ducked just in time to have one of them zip pass Lezura’s ear.

Lezura felt the sensation and her ear twitched, then both ears poised up as she said, “No, Joey—really?”

“No,” he said.

The Cyri laughed at the organisms. It said in its orderran tongue, “Clax ini ebu ach ida!”

Joey scratched his head at the words and said, “What?”

Lezura maneuvered the Thwopter slowly to the right, down back to the forest, and the Cyries were right on her tail. "It said 'prepare to die, meat bag!'" said Lezura.

Joey frowned, saying, "I just got dissed by a robot?"

The Cyries fired at the thrusters, effectively blowing them a part piece by piece.

The Cyri at the front twirled in joy. "I got them!" it shouted in its language amongst its peers, and crashed right into a green-leafed tree like a bug on a windshield.

"I cannot maintain control of the Thwopter's trajectory!" Lezura screamed over the computer's warning wail. "We have to jump!"

"That's crazy, Lezura!" said Joey, with the bag on his back and one hand holding onto the back of Lezura's seat.

"It is the only way!"

The Thwopter was a flying like a crazy jetlighter, leaving a trail of smoke and burning debris as it zigzagged down. Lezura struggled with the controls like a child with a biapta. Sweat poured from her chin onto her wet shirt. Finally the machine submitted to her, and made on a steady path, though a bit wobbly.

"Get ready, Joey," said Lezura.

Joey stood up in his seat, holding onto the seatbelt and his baseball bat. Of all the crazy things I've done in my life, this beats them all!

Lezura unlatched her bag from the floor while still steadying the steering wheel. She saw a large enough limb coming and timed it. When the time came, she shouted, "Jump!"

The human and nycarman leaped out of the Thwopter, letting it crash in a burst of flames way below in the gloom. Lezura and Joey fell several feet onto the limb. The mass of moss provided a little softness for them to land on, but it was still painful.

Joey tried to get to his feet but slipped and fell in the muck. He cautiously got back up this time, turning to see Lezura rummaging through the large bag.

Above them the Cyries weaved through the limbs and vines and approached them with gunfire. Joey ran toward the best source protection, Lezura.

"Any ideas?" he said as he slid next to her.

Lezura spun around with a white, square-shaped object, thick with rounded ends and reddish-pink light coming out from the lowers sides and front. Lezura pressed down on a long button on the top and tossed it. The device landed on three small legs and projected pinkish-red matter from the light ports that formed a six feet high, two meter wide square shield.

Joey followed Lezura's lead and crouched behind it, letting the gunfire from the Cyries rip away at the shield with numerous pulses until the shield started to peel.

In Lezura's other hand she had something like a very fat, bronze maggot with a short blade of gold on the head.

Ewwww, Joey thought.

"When I say go, charge into them and try to steal one of their jetpacks," said Lezura.

Joey's ears were clear this time as he knelt behind Lezura. "Got it," he said.

Eventually the light of the shield-projector died and the shield faded, and the Cyries had to reload.

Lezura shouted, "Go!"

Joey charged from behind her, screaming at the machines with his bat raised. The chubby thing in Lezura's hands gave way under presser when she squeezed it and channeled in some of her honoi, pushing its mass to both ends and stretching its body out into a long spear. She followed behind Joey.

The Cyries dropped their weapons, taking the little time to flick their wrists and produce two blades form hidden ports; known as Flayers. They screamed their battlecry and ran into the fleshy enemies.

Lezura whirled her spear with an artistic grace, parrying repeated attacks from three Cyries at once. She crouched and whirled her spear over her head, cutting off a Cyri's hand.



Lezura fired a burst of honoi on the surface of the limb, stimulating a vine lying there into a writhing frenzy. It wrapped itself around the crying Cyri and hurled it off the limb over yonder.

Joey raised his bat and threw the force of his body behind it, knocking back the Cyries. He used the opening to swing at one's head, but it ducked beneath the bat, countering with a shallow cut on Joey's chest. Joey backpedaled and parried the other Cyri's slash with the handle of his bat, sidestepped and whacked the Cyri in the head.

The other Cyri produced another set of blades from its other hand and thrust it into Joey's shoulder.

Lezura stood still while her calculating eyes followed the movements of the screaming robots around her. She casually flicked the spear at all of them to parry their attacks—then suddenly had to move, snapping her head out the way of the blades of a Cyri; though they still scored bloody marks across her cheek. Lezura took the opening to ram her shoulder into the Cyri, and lifting her body like a whale breaking the ocean surface she threw the Cyri over her shoulder.

Lezura fired a blast of honoi at the other Cyri as it leaped in midair, knocking it out of the sky with a dent in its chest.

Lezura ears flexed painfully at the piercing cry of Joey. She turned to see the Cyri with its blade in his shoulder, and Joey holding off the other hand. She was about to intervene when she saw Joey roll onto his back, put his feet in the Cyri's chest and kicked it over him, yanking its blades out with a spurt of blood.

Lezura's senses screamed at her to look behind. Her ears seemed to swivel in the direction first, and Lezura saw the Cyri coming to attack. She jabbed the spear in the tree, using it as the base to leap and drop the Cyri with a scissor-kick across its head.

She ran to help Joey who was whacking the down robot in the head with his bat. She stopped him and pushed him aside, retracted her spear by pushing together at the center, and searched the robot for a spot to remove the jetpack. She pulled off the straps off the Cyri. She lifted it up and found that it was attached to a cord running down to a mechanism on the foot.

So that is the control, Lezura thought.

Joey spotted the robots reaching for their discarded guns. He turned to Lezura, clutching his shoulder. "They're getting up!" he said.

Lezura put on the pack and put her foot into the steering mechanism. She turned to Joey and said, "Come on!"

Joey ran towards Lezura. A Cyri behind him saw the aliens escaping and activated his wings. It floated up, positioned himself horizontally and kicked off. The remaining two followed.

When Joey reached Lezura at the edge she reached out and clutched him, pressing him against her chest. Joey felt Lezura's warmth and her sweet, nutty-vanilla scent. He blushed, never being so close to a girl—and never knowing they smelt so nice!

The Cyri at the front wailed and stuffed a clip in its weapon from off its waist.

"Hold on," she said.

Joey tightened his grip around Lezura's firm waist.

Lezura touched the switch on the top and felt the push of the antigravity orbs and the air-thruster as she was pushed forward. She twisted her foot to maneuver through the network of branches. She could hear the storm of gunfire slapping in trees behind her. One bullet grazed her left leg; another touched the tip of her ear and made her yelp.

She broke through the yelm tree, feeling the roaring wind wash over her as she descended to the forest, and constantly she moved to deny the Cyries a perfect aim.

Lezura fell from nearly four hundred stories, and with her added speed from the jetpack the distance was rapidly closing. Nearing the canopy Lezura straightened her foot, steadily she lifted herself into a sixty degree descend.

She felt Joey's fingers sinking deeper in her flesh. One of his hands roamed down, and touched her bottom.

"H-Hey?" Lezura said, blushing.

"Sorry!" said Joey. "I just couldn't resist! Lezura you have a nice butt!"

She was just meters from the forest. She said, "We are going to land."

Lezura placed her folded spear before her face and crashed through the trees. Vines and small branches slapped and cut them all the way down. Joey screamed all the way, his heart pumping so fast he felt like it would jump out of his chest and say "Hello".

They fell into a mess of vines, but their momentum still pushed them down, stretching the vines until they snapped like rubber bands. Lezura reached over and turned off the wings. She forcefully pushed Joey off. "Separate or else we will land like a heap of rubbish!"

Joey reluctantly let go of Lezura, reached out and grabbed the nearest vine. He was swung into a sinni tree.

Lezura carefully watched and waited until she felt the tug of the branches no more, and saw the forest floor below. She spun her body to face the ground feet first, and turned on the jetpack once more.

Her descent slowed as she reached the ground, and once she was close enough she turned off the wings. The residual wind from the wings pushed away the leaves as she landed in a crouch. Lezura looked up to see where Joey was, the sunlight glinting off the lens of her goggles.

She found the sinni tree where he had crashed into. "Joey?" she said.

Sinni trees grew to a height of seven stories, with trunks of bright green and natural swirling indentations, feathery purple flowers popping out of their trunks and yellow-green leaves. They were noted for roots that were up to three meters thick and erupted out of the ground to search the land for other sources of water.

Lezura ran up on one of the roots, splayed form beneath the tree with other roots like some woody octopus, and went under the tree.

"Joey?" she said through cupped hands.

She saw some violent thrashing in one section. She zoomed in with the goggles and saw Joey's foot kick out briefly. But before she could call again Joey fell out.

Lezura's first instinctive reaction was to switch on the wings and fly up to meet him, but she noticed that Joey was holding onto a vine. Joey gritted his teeth, but the smile on his face was unmistakable. The vine stopped a few meters off the ground, bouncing him back up like a bungee. When it lowered again Joey let go.

Lezura dropped her weapon and opened her arms. Joey landed in Lezura's waiting arms, the hand with the bat dropping to the ground. Being a nycarman; and with honoi coursing through her body, Lezura was slightly stronger than the average human, and Joey was smaller than the average human teenage male, so the weight wasn't a strain.

Joey and Lezura stared at each other without any immediate thoughts. It wasn't until then when Joey unknowingly lifted the goggles off Lezura's eyes that he saw that her face was so beautiful.

I wonder what her alien body looks like? Joey thought.

And Lezura never knew that Joey had such bright brown eyes, for in the light of the sun they glowed like liquid amber.

And the Cyries burst through the canopy in a ruckus. One spun around uncontrollably and crashed into a tree, landed on the ground and was pushed through the leaves like a stunt car out of control.

But the other two Cyries were focused. They discarded their empty rifles and produced their wrist-blades with an audible cling.

Lezura dropped Joey unceremoniously on his injured shoulder. She ignored Joey's swearing and took up her spear, extending it into its combat form. She lowered her goggles and let it dangle around her neck.

"Joey," she said, "stay put. You cannot continue any further."

Joey looked at her with a grumpy, sweat-slickened face and said, "The hell made you think I was goanna get back up?"

Lezura and the Cyries went forward, running through small trees and tall flowers until they reached. Lezura's gunshot wound in her back still throbbed like a kick from a mynamather, the one on her cheek burned with the sweat that soaked into it, the graze on her thigh was stinging, and her muscles burnt like her blood was lava.

But she couldn't let them have Joey. He had an important role to play. And Lezura had to see her again.

The first Cyri leaped onto a pomeg tree trunk, kicked itself off and nearly cleaved off Lezura's head with a kick. As it went over her head Lezura jabbed the spear up into the other Cyri's jaw, grunted at pushed it further into its CPU. Lezura yanked it out, twirled with the spear and slapped the Cyri across the head.

Satisfied with the deep cut she spun and blocked the other Cyri's blow in time. It produced its other wrist-blades and added to its assault.

This is unusual, Lezura thought as her weapon gashed sparks with the Cyri. Usually mechs do not have this kind of fighting capability. The Cyri dropped on one hand, lifted its body in the air and kicked Lezura in the gut with both feet. She rode the blow and backpedalled out of the way—just as the Cyri flipped in the air and landed screaming with its blade next to a tree near Lezura's head. This one must have had sentient combat techniques installed. She countered another blo, ducked and swiped the Cyri's feet from beneath it with her foot. Intriguing!

Before she landed the tip of the spear in the Cyri's head, the robot pushed off the ground and flicked its feet into Lezura's gut, sending her sliding across the ground. Lezura felt one of her ribs crack.

She tried getting up but the pain stopped her in her tracks. The Cyri was crouched, grinning in a raspy voice. It ran on all fours, leaped in the air above Lezura just as she felt the pain in her lower rib. Lezura saw the glisten of the wrist-blades in the sunlight and squinted.

"As if!"

And Joey flung the bat in the Cyri, knocking it clean out of the air. The Cyri landed, flailing miserably on the ground. It sprang back on its hands and feet to see Joey standing with a big stone in one hand and walking down towards it.

Joey said, "Acting like you're a kung fu Master—jumping all over the damn place, doing all kinds a stunts, and then you're goanna kick my Chandelier in the gut?"

"Chevalier..." Lezura said impatiently.

She knew Joey didn't stand a chance in hell against the robot. But she couldn't find the strength to move. Come on. Joey is in danger. Move Lezura...move!

Joey lifted the stone. "Go eat a bag shit!" he said.

Before Joey even got the stone above his head the Cyri had already crisscrossed on all fours and reached up to Joey, Flayers ready.

Lezura's panic exploded into despair. After two healings with her honoi, she didn't have much left. It could either be used to heal her wound, or save Joey.

She opened her palm at the Cyri, and a sharp beam with a rounded head zapped out. It struck the Cyri in the back, freezing it in its posture. The attack didn't possess its usual strength, but it got the job done.

The Cyri's eyes died to dark hollows, and it stumbled aside.

A startled Joey stood there staring at the fallen machine. He lowered his stone, touched it with a foot, and decided that hitting it in the head with the stone was just as good. After doing so he quickly went over Lezura.

“Can you move?” Joey said.

“Not without support,” said Lezura.

She wrapped an arm around Joey’s shoulder and he helped her up. She braced herself with her spear, and looked around for any signs—

“Look at that dork,” said Joey, pointing at the Cyri darting around the air in an attempt to get control of its wings.

“I do not have any more energy left to shoot it down,” said Lezura.

The Cyri finally stopped, hovering steadily above them. It looked down, shook its fist and threw garbled words at them. Lezura didn’t even bother to translate for Joey. The Cyri flew away, still cursing.

“Where’s it going now?” said Joey.

“Back to get reinforcements,” Lezura said. “Joey, get your bat and your bag. We have to move.”

“Wait, Lezura,” he said, “you’re still injured—can’t you heal it like the last time.”

“Like I just said, I am out of honoi.”

Joey said with confused look, “Is that what that supercool blue stuff you blasted that robot with is?”

“Yes,” she said, “now go and get your items. I will explain more of it to you after I find somewhere to rest.”

“Shouldn’t we get some of those jetpack thingies?” said Joey.

Lezura stopped in mid-thought. She turned to Joey and smiled. “That is not a bad idea,” she said.

Joey smiled back at her, somehow delighted that Lezura approved of something he said.

A shrill cry through the trees made them look up. They didn’t see anything, but the presence of other things was dwelling all around them and they could feel it.

“What the hell was that?” said Joey.

“We should get going,” said Lezura. “Our commotion will attract curious animals. And some of them love to eat creatures like ourselves.”

Joey’s internal tension suddenly rose. “Damn. First it was robots, now I have to worry about things trying to eat me. What a warm reception I’m getting...”

Lezura said, “Welcome to Sangetsu.”

Walking through the omnipresent forest, Joey had discovered some very interesting creatures and plants. One of such was the silkslug, though it looked more like a short, chubby segmented worm than an actual slug. Its pale body had blue eye patterns on its back, and it had a narrow head with four eye stalks. The slug made webs between tree branches. Joey even had the privilege of witnessing its feeding habits. A green bug had flown into the sticky trap and entangled itself. The slug leisurely slithered down its slimy thread, and gaped open its mouth and swallowed the bug whole.

There was also the tapike, something Joey thought resembled a larger than average rat with yellow skin and a rounded head. Its eyes were large and blue and its ears were drooping. It had brown on its ears and feet, and when Joey and Lezura had gotten too close, it hissed, exposing its chisel-teeth, and darted into a nearby bush.

The second largest land animal he saw was when Lezura had stopped him, and they hid behind a tree and observed the timid creature.

It was squat, with yellow skin broken apart by green rings with brown spots in them. Its head and snout were long with green bristles running from the top down to its rump. Its snout was enclosed by large beak, split vertically down the front. It was chewed some hespi berries off a bush a meters from them, opening the beak to expose a four-part mouth.

Lezura called it a karoti, and when it heard the snigger of Joey's remark to its big head, the animal scurried away.

Joey and Lezura didn't travel for long, deciding to take a rest under a sinni tree's root to ease the pressure off their wounds.

They laid out the jetpacks before them in the leafy ground, along with Lezura's spear and Joey's bat. Joey sighed loudly and searched inside his bag for something, and pulled out a packet.

He gestured to Lezura and said, "Want some beef jerky?"

"Yes please," she said.

So they sat down eating jerky under a giant tree's root, looking up at the beams of light falling through the canopy with particles of dust dancing in them like fairies. The wind blew, and the trees spoke in a chorus of rustling leaves.

Birds added to the melody with chirps and tweets. The squawks of lankers ruined the tune at times, however.

"So where're we going from here?" said Joey.

Lezura took the data-scroll from behind her on her waist. She opened it up and quickly accessed the map of Sangetsu and the continent. She decided to make a few modifications—which was adding the face of a light-skinned human male next to the nycarman that represented her.

She pointed and said, "We are here, in the Yuxu highlands." She moved her finger up the map. "If we continue north we should reach a settlement known as Suride Town. It is a place where alien immigrants lived during the relocation of refugees after the first Solar War. It was once govern by nycarman officials, but after the third Great War they left it to be run by the immigrants.

"If we continue further north we will reach the country of Ugatin, where the Ixians and the others will be waiting on us."

"The others?" said Joey.

"Other religious groups working with the Rakai," said Lezura. "After the Prestige Kingdom was established, they labeled all religious groups as rebels, as they never did follow the laws of the state. So they moved to hide within the Underworld."

"And these Prestige guys are still chasing them?" said Joey.

"Yes," said Lezura, "but on this continent there is no Prestige System; only the two countries of Ugatin and Kafinifa to the north, the orderran colony of New Tartian to the south, and Tessian to the east. Countries outside of the Prestige System are usually labeled as Underworlds all together."

"So those countries in the Prestige System," said Joey, "are they entirely a part of it."

Lezura finished chewing a jerky and said, "No. This is because not all countries have pure nycarman citizens. After the first Solar War, the immigrants that fled here were distributed almost all across the planet; so each country, and hence the entire planet, would have to learn to co-exist with the other species."

"That went well," Joey said. He saw a blue colored, hairless, feline thing with big green eyes and a round tail covered in red quills walk up to him. It had a sinew body, taking cautious steps and sniffing the ground. Joey threw a jerky at it. The animal sniffed, twitched its tentacle-like ears, and gobbled it up.

After a thought crossed Joey's mind he said, "Lezura, do you really think I can make a difference on this planet? I mean; the Rakai, Conner Wondonner, he was a bad-ass that fought off five hundred guys with his buddy. I can't even hold off against a stupid robot!"

Joey looked into Lezura eyes. She said, "Joey that is something you have to ask yourself. What do you want out of this?"

Joey said, "Well...to be honest"—and his voice got merry—"I was hoping to be some great hero that saves the world, gets all the alien girls, get my own spaceship and have some giant statue of me on the moon, at least."

After eating the jerky the little pupaki scurried up a tree.

Lezura covered her mouth to hide her wide gape. She silently chuckled. She said after she caught her breath, "Coming from you, Joey that sounds pretty eccentric. But I guess everyone has their reasons."

"That's mine," said Joey. "I've been held back long enough. It's about time I got some shine-time around here. Now...about that honoi thing you were blabbering about..."

Lezura scowled at Joey, her ears flexed back like an angry tigress. She twitched her hand to slap Joey but thought against it. She said, "Hanoi energy is the biotic energy which resides in all living organisms. Most of its compounds are produced by cells in the brain, but there is also an unknown matter which adds to its make-up, which leads to its uniqueness amongst other kinds of energy."

Joey nodded. Lezura was surprised to see him looking so interested.

"Is it like some kind of spiritual energy?" said Joey. "Because that what they usually call it in the Japanese cartoons."

"It...could be called that," said Lezura. "But because its central point of distribution is the brain, scientists say it is merely mental energy manifested into physical form. But because of the percentage of unknown matter, others define honoi energy as the useable part of the soul."

"So how do you use it?" Joey said.

Lezura said shyly, "Joey..."

"Yeah?" he said.

"Do you mind if I give you a lecture on the origins of honoi?"

"Sure," said Joey.

Lezura smiled, finally happy to have someone to talk to about ordinary things. But she was surprised to see Joey interested in what she had to say. She assumed it had to deal with the whole firing supernatural powers from your body and blowing stuff up.

Lezura said, "There were once many covenants on our world in ancient times that sought ways of obtaining control over the supernatural forces. One of such covenants was the Gohengai, located in the island-country of Palagagi, right of the south cost of Barsoon. There was a woman from the covenant named Vu Ra'honoi, who after years of meditation, came in contact with honoi energy in the depths of her mind. From there she thought her fellow covenant members by stimulating their honoi with hers.

"From there the covenant members spread across the planet, forming their own groups who served under them to learn the power of honoi."

"So...you're goanna use your honoi to awaken mine?" said Joey.

Lezura smiled. "You have already awakened your honoi," she said.

Joey stiffened. "What? What do you mean?"

"I can sense the honoi flowing through your body," said Lezura. She placed two fingers on his neck. "It is quite strong too!"

Joey had to admit, it was strange the wound in his leg didn't hurt as much after he met Lezura, even before the healing. And there was this tingling in his body since then. But he had just casted that off as adrenaline in the heat of the moment.

Joey stood, dumbfounded by this information. He said, "But when did that...?" A thought struck Joey, and Lezura could see it on his face.

"You remember now...?" she said.

"The key," Joey said. "That has to be it! When you gave it to me and it showed me those things...it must've activated my honoi that time!"

Joey stepped from Lezura, looking at his hands for any signs. "But, why can't I feel it?"

Lezura stood up and reached for Joey's hand and made him to sit back next to her. She said, "I would say that you just did not acknowledge it at the time."

Lezura took Joey's hands into hers. Her hands felt warm and soft over his, and her fingers were a little longer than the average human woman.

"I will stimulate your honoi with mine," she said softly. "Just relax and close your eyes."

Joey did as she said. Lezura conjured up her honoi, channeled it in her hands, and she squeezed harder as she concentrated even more. Joey felt the cold sensation grip his hands, and like a predator snaring its prey, it pulled him into its bowels where Joey's nerves went on a rollercoaster of sensations. Every inch of his body felt like it was dipped in liquid nitrogen, and then lava.

"Try...to stay steady...Joey," Lezura said as Joey shook and whimpered in front of her.

Joey's honoi was in his body, lying still without much purpose or stimulation since its release. But when Lezura's honoi entered Joey's body, flowing against it, his honoi saw this as a threat, a challenge, and pushed back.

Lezura felt his honoi screaming at hers, and she allowed it its space and dominance in Joey's body.

The end result was a burst of blue sparks between their hands that sent Lezura and Joey flying back off their seats.

Joey quickly scampered to his feet, staggering around like a drunk. He stretched out his arms to balance himself.

Lezura casually got up and dusted herself. She flexed her fingers to get out the last of the sting. Her immediate concern was Joey, and she saw him approaching her with a slight blue glow to his hands.

Joey saw the ghostly film of light around his hands, wisps of blue trailing off like smoke. He looked over all of his body and saw the same thing.

He grinned with long sought delight. After all those years of watching super heroes do all kinds of spectacular feats, it was now possible for him to do such things in real life. He could feel it. He could feel the energy coursing through his body. He felt himself reborn anew.

Joey leaped around; shouting, kicking and punching the air.

Lezura felt satisfied at Joey's happiness, but she couldn't help think that his voice would attract potential predators to them. She went to Joey and tried to hold him down.

"Joey, keep still, would you?" she said.

Joey put his hands on Lezura's shoulder and hopped around her, saying, "Lezura! Ha-ha! No one can stop me now!"

Lezura took drastic measures. She said, "Stop dancing around, short boy."

Joey immediately stopped. He looked up Lezura contemptuously, and said, "Well excuse me miss 'I'm jealous because Joey's got honoi!'"

Lezura frowned at him. "But...I have honoi too Joey—"

Joey put his hand in Lezura's face and looked away. "Oh please," he said, "like your honoi's better than mine." He looked at her and pointed to himself. "You're forgetting that I'm the R...Rar..."

"Rakai," said Lezura.

"Yeah, that damn word," said Joey. "Now when do I get to blow stuff up?"

Lezura felt her gut throb, and she went and took up her spear, extending it to lean her weight on. She gestured for Joey to sit before her on the root. She said, "There are three kinds of honoi users; three types." Joey nodded. "There are projectile types. There are those who specialize in fusing honoi with their martial arts and muscles; called melee type, and those who can manipulate honoi into any shape they desire; called molders.

"The way in which you use honoi will depend on your class."

"So can someone only use one class?" Joey said.

Lezura said, "It is not impossible, but very difficult. One's body might not be used to manipulating honoi in various ways. An example would be a geckoid rapturan; one of the species found in this solar system. They have small bodies, which would mean they are lacking in strength for physical combat against most of the other species. So they would use projectile type honoi to attack enemies at a

distance to avoid close combat. Or, the same person could have a liking for using guns for dealing with distant enemies, and cancel out their weakness in close combat by learning to use melee type honoi techniques. Or the same person could love close combat and learn melee type honoi to add potency to their martial skills.

“But what makes learning two type of honoi technique difficult is that one can only learn one type at a time, and usually the person’s body gets so accustomed to using that type that their body finds it difficult to switch to a new method of honoi use, or the person simple does not have any interest in learning techniques.”

“Well, I wanna learn all of them!” Joey said.

“But as I said,” Lezura said, “you have to start out with one type of honoi skill first.”

Lezura looked around for a proper testing implement. She found it, a moss covered stone near a lucaysha tree. “Follow me, please,” she said, and Joey walked beside her to the rock.

Lezura said, “Now Joey, I want you to build up honoi in your fist and break that rock. If you cannot, then you are not a melee type and we have ruled that out. You should note this before you act though, Joey; melee type distribute honoi into their muscles and along the bone, so focus on fusing your honoi into your muscles first.”

“Okay,” said Joey. Joey shook his limbs. He felt the honoi in his body, and manipulated the flow of it. “Here I go...”

Joey moved the honoi into his right hand, where he felt it tingle over his muscles and bones. Lezura took keen notice of his hand. It didn’t seem enough honoi was there, and she told him to put a little more. Beneath his skin his muscle tissue glowed blue.

“Do not make your hand shake so much, Joey,” Lezura said. “Control it; you are the boss of your honoi and body.”

“Easier said than done,” Joey said.

Once it looked as if Joey had it under control, Lezura said, “Go!”

Joey stepped forward and launched his glowing fist into the rock. He was expecting the thing to shatter into a million pieces in slow motion, but that didn’t happened. His hand crashed against the rock, the honoi shot back up his arm and slapped against his elbow joint.

Joey reeled in anguish and yelled, clutching his arm.

Lezura tried to stifle a laugh but it came out in a giggle.

Joey spun around with a pained face and said, “Cut it out!”

Lezura regained her composure easily. She accessed the situation with a quick thought, and said, “Joey, when you envision yourself as a hero, what powers do you see yourself using?”

Joey didn’t even need to think about it, it just came to mind. “Shooting—”

Shooting, that is it! Lezura thought. “That is it Joey?”

“What is...?” said Joey with a blank face.

“I assumed that one’s mentality and artistic nature influence which class of honoi they used,” said Lezura. “I always speculated that it might be true, but never once thought I would the chance to prove it.” Lezura realized she was trailing off and said, “Joey, I think you might be a projectile class, just like me. The technique I will teach you is called the Blueburst. It is the basic honoi move for types like us.”

Joey shifted and said, “Okay...”

“Here is a demonstration,” Lezura said. Lezura’s honoi hadn’t fully recovered, but she thought she had enough for a Blueburst. Lezura aimed her hand at small rock on the ground, and fired a blast of blue energy that sent the stone and dirt flying away.

Joey went and inspected the damage to the ground. Along with the small stones and leaves being blown away with the rock, the ground there was clean and neat in a foot wide, irregular circle. Joey nodded approvingly.



He turned to Lezura and said, "That's what I'm talking about!"

Lezura said, "The basis of using projectile type honoi is to gather the honoi in your body in a compressed channel within the arms or feet. One could compare these honoi channels to the chamber in a gun, where honoi would be released through."

"So...you're saying the honoi channel has to be a separate thing in your body?" Joey said.

"Precisely," said Lezura. "So begin by creating a honoi channel in your arms. Just feel your honoi within your limbs and try to gather it in one place. Normally the honoi is in small veins, but in that form it is close to useless. Concentrating it in one area makes it more effective."

Joey relaxed and tensed his muscles. For the first ten minutes it was difficult to feel his honoi and manipulate it as Lezura instructed, but as time progressed with much sweating, sore muscles and headaches he was slowly getting the hand of it. And finally it was done.

Joey straightened his body, feeling the full effect of the honoi concentrated in his arms, like a pulsing blood vessel.

"I think I've got it!" Joey said excitedly.

Lezura sighed, flexed her ears once, and said, "Good. Things are going smoothly so far. Now with learning the Blueburst the method is to channel honoi behind the wrist. Once it has reached a certain limit you flex your wrist and release the blast."

And both Lezura and Joey winced and touched the areas where they had been shot, unaware that Lezura's words would bring back such memories.

But it was such memories that gave Joey his resolve to do this technique. He wanted to shoot someone back as soon as he could. So he channeled his honoi in his wrist until he felt his bones shaking. He held his hand steady with the other, lined up the rock—

"Fire!" said Lezura.

Joey flexed his wrist. The blast slapped into the rock the size of his torso, knocking it over like a can and exposing an entire ecosystem of insects underneath it.

"Wonderful!" said Lezura, she wrapped her arm around the spear and gave Joey a small round of applause.

I did it? Joey thought, unsure. When he heard Lezura's cheer he whispered, "I did it." And when he saw the fresh cracks in the rock, he said louder, "I did it!" and hugged Lezura.

Captain Nal led the ground patrol unit into the part of the forest where the Cyri-bot had reported its escape from the encounter with the aliens.

He and his four men were dressed in the standard issue Orderran military uniform; all black with a silky sheen like the jet black of their hair. The suit had colored seams that indicated the military their indigenous military. Covering the uniform were dark grey armor plates, and where each plate met on the body was a swirl of silver. On the left breast was the insignia of their military in a bronze ring—the Keeltionese military.

Their helmets were all black, but electronic and well insulated. Red eyes burned through the lens in the eye ports like hellfire, and the mouth and nose was a designed like an "X" behind a circle with three slits.

The men came in one of their many variety of machinery, and this one in particular could not be described any other way other than a giant black cockroach with six long legs like a spider, and a white head with six red eyes and sharp mouthparts. The back was hollow, were the soldiers sat on benches.

The six eyes of the Droch swiveled in their sockets, scouring every inch of the area as it knitted its way through the trees and under roots with amazing speed and grace.

One eye spotted something on the ground, and all eyes locked onto it. It was metallic, giving off an orange sheen in the setting sun that bathed the land in warm light. The Droch uttered a shrill, mechanical cry like bird singing into a fan.

It lowered out of the sinni tree, scaling down it with ease as the soldiers were firmly strapped in their seats. Once near the object on the ground, the Droch spun around and offered its rear end. A small ramp slid into the ground and the soldiers unbuckled themselves and quickly walked off.

The four soldiers surveyed the area with their VB rifles turning with their heads, while Captain Nal approached the object.

It was in fact one of the Cyri-bots from the aerial patrol unit. It was a bit dented in a few places, but what looked to have killed it was a deep slash in its head that struck its CPU. Probably a blade, just like the spear the Cyri said the nycarman woman carried.

Nal removed the top of his helmet, revealing his short hair and creamy skin that bore a sheen thanks to a special sunblock the species developed. His daunting red eyes had irises twice the ordinary size of a human's. Those along with his flat, straight nose-bridge ending in a pink end were the characteristics of the orderran species. But he had thin grey lips, indicating he was a Uola orderran.

Nal lowered his nose to ground, resting on his hands, and took deep sniffs. He quickly put back on his helmet.

He got up and said, "That's a nycarman female all right."

"What about the other one, captain?" an officer said.

Nal looked ahead of them in the depths of the forest. "I cannot identify the species. It must be a new one. But the presence of testosterone tells me it's a male."

Nal turned and gestured to another soldier. "Private," he said, "radio the Dawhawk from our aerial assistance and have them follow us." Nal looked back in the direction where his nose had followed the scent, and grinned. "Let's catch us some little troublemakers."

## CHAPTER FIVE

Night swiftly approached for Joey and Lezura, and the two decided to make quick use of it to prepare for the cold and stalkers to come.

So Lezura made weapons, mostly for Joey. She gathered some sturdy sticks and sharpened them to points and smoothed their surfaces. She told Joey they were faster and more accurate than his bat, but he was reluctant to toss the weapon away.

For projectile weapons Lezura tried to find any length of stick with a nice curve in it. She smoothed them and turned it into a bow, making the string out of the stretchy vine of the sinni tree by cutting it to a suitable thinness and rubbed it on stones to dry it.

While she made the arrows, Joey walked around a perimeter of six yards, acting as Lezura's protection. With his new found power of honoi he felt he could take on ten of those Cyries on his own. He practiced with the spear, thrusting and swinging it. Though he was making a whole lot of unnecessary sound effects he was actually putting force behind each movement.

Lezura, spotting him, couldn't help but comment on his work.

"Joey, thrusting is not just in the arms. You have to press forward with your torso and push with your feet," she had said.

Joey swung the spear angrily and turned to Lezura in the distance. "Would you get off my back?" said Joey. He went back to his practice, actually taking Lezura's advice. "Geez, you come like my mom—only taller...with those ugly-ass braces."

"I heard that," said Lezura warningly.

Joey flinched and clamped his mouth shut. Stupid alien lady, he thought.

Lezura laid down twenty, smoothed arrows next to the bows before their spot on the sinni tree's root—

Then Lezura heard it, a loud rumbling like thunder with the soggiess of water. She quickly dropped everything, took up the bow and slid an arrow from its spot and readied it. She looked around, trying to find the source of the horrid sound.

"Joey?" she said.

"Hey..."

Joey's voice was weak, and she turned to seem him with his hand rubbing his belly.

"What is the matter—"

She heard the sound again, but this time there was no mistaking the source.

"Lezura can we get something to eat," Joey said. "Those jerkies didn't do a thing..."

Lezura relaxed, and nodded. "Certainly," she said. "This may be the chance for us to test our weapons."

Joey hefted his spear and said, "What—hunting?"

"What else did you think we were going to do?" said Lezura, and before Joey could answer she said dryly, "No Joey, I cannot pull anything out of my butt with my honoi. Remember we had to leave my bag up in the yelm tree when the robots came for us?"

Joey retreated with an innocent grin.

With that settled they took the necessary equipment for the hunt; obviously the spears and bow were the choice, along with Lezura's little knife. They hid the wings under a mass of fallen branches and vines, and took Joey's bag as the storage for the food, if they could get none.

As the sun pulled down into the horizon, the last of its light burnt clouds in the sky. The twin moons had already went to the other side of the planet in their orbit, and soon to approach was the third moon.

But the air of life in the forest hadn't changed, there was still the cry of animals all around them, and the loud bellowing ones put Joey on the edge.

Those are some big dudes, he thought, and they sound hungry and pissed-off.

The air was cool, a bit gloomy around as the sunlight died. And that was when he noticed all the lights like little fireflies and fairies. The mushrooms; some small and some as tall as four feet, displayed little networks of glowing spots and threads.

The giant mushrooms, which Lezura told her were called the "old wise men" of the forest, of chapepuns, had long burgundy caps with patterns lights and white stalks. Each time one of the bugs or birds that were captivated by its light neared it, it gave off a puff of glowing dust on contact.

The same happened when they got near the flowers with their glowing filaments of all sorts.

"What's going on," said Joey as he watched.

"They are pollinating," said Lezura. "They are using light to help their pollinators find their way."

Then Joey suddenly felt like asking, "Lezura?"

"Yes," she said.

"What exactly am I supposed to do with the key and the God Titan?" he said.

Lezura said, "We need the God Titan's power to negotiate with the Prestige System to stop harvesting people, and end the Prestige System and help stop the orderran colonization. If that does not work, most likely they will see the power of God Titan as a threat and attack, and with the orderrans' help that will be a major problem—which is where the God Titan will also come in handy."

"So where's the God Titan?" said Joey.

Lezura sighed heavily, and said, "The thing is Joey, only the Rakai can activate the God Titan, so no one else who desires its power can use it. So the first Rakai, Yefia Illowise, decided to hide it on the island of Maltatabi—"

Lezura stretched her hand before Joey and stopped him. She gestured with her spear at something slithering over a patch of blue grass with dried up leaves. It was long, blue and segmented, its body being carried away by rows upon rows of clawed feet. Its round head had beady yellow eyes and six mandibles around its mouth.

Joey grimace at the thing as thick as his chest, waiting a full two minutes as all its body slithered out of sight, leaving the stickiness of fear on the back of his neck.

"That was a carspi-worm," said Lezura, starting ahead and Joey following. "They eat only small animals like karoties, but they will attack anything that gets too near."

"That thing's too angry," said Joey, looking where the animal had disappeared. "He needs a shrink."

Lezura found herself smiling at that joke, but she continued with her previous point while searching for signs of a karoti or tapike. "And Maltatabi is on the other side of the planet."

Joey stopped and looked at her angrily. "The other side of the planet?" he said. "Lezura how the hell're we goanna get there? I doubt the wings can carry us that far. Wait...can't Donnowarru just open up a portal to that place?"

"No," said Lezura. "Donnowarru cannot open a portal to somewhere he has not seen before. That was why when he came to Earth he requested the help of the reapers to carry us there. It is the same reason why I have not let him bring us to Ugatin. He does not know how that area looks either.

"But he did remember how this region was because the Ixians had him survey the area days before we left. It was luck that it was not completely changed during the months were gone."

Joey scratched his head. "Well that sucks," he looked down at Lezura's belt, "and Donnowarru sucks too!"

Joey leaned forward and cupped his hands around his mouth and said to Lezura's waist, "You hear that, Donnowarru, you're an unreliable wizard!"

A second later a huge fist steaming with honoi shot out from one of the pockets on the belt and into Joey's face, sending him toppling over. The arm withdrew into the pocket, and Lezura could vaguely hear a satisfied chuckle.

When Joey recovered he continued the hunt with Lezura, now wondering how the hell they were going to make it to the other side of this alien world across Prestige and orderran territories. He was expecting to help save a world, but wasn't counting on the long adventurous part. He wasn't too into walking around for long after seeing the creepy looking worm-thing.

Night had eventually come, hideous shadows crawled and lurched with each sway of the trees in the cool wind. But there were a brave few organisms that fought the darkness with their own little weapons of bodily light.

It was bright enough for them to see their way somewhat, but Lezura still turned on the night vision on her goggles for aid.

Joey hugged the spear against his chest and made his body compact, fearing that something would reach out from the shadows and snatch off a limb. Out of the corner of his eyes he saw something move, and it was huge.

Joey turned to look, and saw nothing.

"What was it?" said Lezura, feeling the presence as well.

"I don't know!" said Joey. "Lezura are you sure you don't have any milk in your breasts? Could just use that and the old pack a cocoa I have and brew us some nice tea!"

Lezura whacked Joey in the side of the head with the spear and continued searching, still weary that predators were around.

Finally she spotted it! At last a meal, some fifteen meters a head of them, the unmistakable shape of a karoti.

Lezura touched Joey, looked at him and gestured for them to be quiet. Joey nodded, wincing a little at his still throbbing head. He knew in situations like this he should shut up and let Lezura take control.

The two of them crouched and silently crept up the still grazing animal. Lezura readied her bow, while Joey looked around, still seeing no sign of the source of the huge shadow.

But that was because he wasn't looking up.

The creature stalking them was indeed close by, using the thick limbs of the lucaysha and gopto trees to travel across. The gopto trees were quite short, with dark green leafy trunks, but with brownish-green leaves as large as a skateboard and the largest limbs being as thick as a man's torso.

The animal was a muscularly built quadruped, covered with brown scales; blue and green on the head and back and a white underbelly. Its head was large and its jaws equally big with curved canines sticking out, itching to sink into some flesh. A pink, wide nose sniffed the delicious scent of the prey in the air, and yellow eyes in deep sockets stared down at its unsuspecting quarry.

Its long tail was wrapped around the limb like a harness, and padded feet muffled its footsteps.

Lezura stopped, so did Joey. She hid behind a tree, and Joey followed. The karoti had turned in their direction, sensing something. When it was sure nothing was there, it turned back to stripping the bush of its leaves. Lezura was close enough and aligned her bow with the animal. The light from the environment gave her enough illumination to see the distance between her and her prey.

Then the karoti turned around again sharply, this time its nose wasn't fooled. It had smelt something vile in the air that meant a ghastly death. It ran.

Lezura knew the karoti couldn't have seen her or Joey. It had to be something else. She turned around and the creature leaped from the tree upon them—upon Joey.

Before Joey could react he felt a mountain fall upon him, knocking the breath from his lungs before he could even scream.

Lezura didn't bother to open her mouth, but took the initiative and released the arrow into the creature, right in its left shoulder. It uttered a guttural shriek and leaped away. As it clawed at the arrow Joey sprung to his feet.

"Can you fight?" Lezura said.

Joey lifted his spear with a vexed expression. "As if I'll let that prick get away!" he said.

"It is a cossik," said Lezura as she prepared another arrow.

"No," said Joey. He lifted his spear and charged. "It's dead!"

The cossik picked out the arrow, hearing Joey's roar it turned to the prey. Even though the predator was twice Joey's size it move with amazing agility, sidestepping out of each of Joey's thrusts. Infuriated, Joey fired a Blueburst, knocking the cossik in is ribs and breaking two. A loud grunt escaped the animal's throat.

The cossik leapt on Joey, snarling in anger more than pain. Joey lifted the spear as shield, but the cossik snapped through it with its jaws like a twig. Another arrow from Lezura in the animal's back made it leap on its hind legs and cry miserably.

It ran after Lezura, leaping to the side out of another arrow. Lezura ducked and spun beneath its snapping jaws that rang in her ears.

It landed behind her, spun and charged again.

But Joey fired two consecutive blasts of honoi that knocked the animal over with a guttural whimper. Lezura finished it off with a well-placed arrow in its neck.

Joey punched the air. "Hell yeah!" he said.

Lezura went and inspected the animal, another arrow loaded and ready. She saw its mad yellow eyes stare at her with defiance at death, making her cringe. But its pupils dilated and its eyes rolled into its head.

Lezura put up her bow, turned to Joey and said, "Nice work."

Joey came to her side and checked the animal. He gave it a kick, it didn't move, and he said, "Oh well," he turned to Lezura, "let's eat..."

Lezura and Joey took the meatiest parts of the cossik; the thighs, chest, the tail section near the pelvis, liver and heart, wrapped them up in the leaves of the gopto tree and stored them in Joey's bag. They left the rest to be eaten by the carspi-worm and other scavengers.

It was over half an hour when they got back to their spot under the sinni tree. Lezura started a fire, and made a spit to roast the meat on. The meat had a crispy brown outside, with a soft, white inner that melted in Joey's mouth like hot butter, and it tasted like salmon and nutmeg.

"You think they'll be coming after us?" said Joey, taking another mouthful of meat.

Lezura sat across the fire on a mat of gopto tree leaves, taking mouthful of her meal. She swallowed and said, "Highly likely. The Cyri escaped and undoubtedly reported back its findings to the orderrans."

"So I guess that means we should be on the move..." Joey said.

"Are you not tired?" said Lezura.

"A little bit," said Joey. He shifted his bottom on the grass to a less bumpy spot. "But I don't really feel like sleeping with all these bastards trying a eat me."

"I checked the fuel meter on the jetpacks," Lezura said. "Their acrilium battery has a good lifespan. We could possible fly for a few miles."

"That's good. I could get some sleep on the way," said Joey.

Lezura smiled and took another mouthful.

"Lezura?" said Joey.

"Yes?"

Joey said, "Um...I was wondering..." he scratched his head "...could I see your alien form?"

Lezura looked a little perplexed. “Why so?” she said. “I thought you would feel more comfortable interacting with someone who looks like your own species?”

Joey said, “Hell! My own species doesn’t give shit about me. Why do you think I was living on the streets? Plus...I wanted to know if you’d look as good as a nycarman as you do a human...”

Lezura smiled, placing the small morsel of meat on a leaf before her. “Certainly, Joey...”

Lezura clasped her hands, concentrating to tap into her honoi. Her body glowed bright blue, and the light was sucked all from her body and into her hands.

Joey was now staring at a lavender-skinned woman with oval ears, long golden hair and slanted pink eyes. Her swirl-like creases stopped glowing, letting her skin radiate with the light of the oak smelling flames.

After studying her appearance, Joey said, “Your boobs are still small though...”

Lezura scoffed and threw the piece of meat at Joey. He laughed and caught it, eating it whole at once.

“But seriously, though,” said Joey, “you look beautiful...”

Lezura’s cheeks felt warm all of a sudden; a bit too warm, in fact. She turned her face to hide her smile. Joey himself was smiling at her. Suddenly both of them realized what was happening and casted it off with coughs and clearing throats.

“Wow...” said Joey, taking up his bag. “I wonder what kinda fantastic things I got in this bag?”

“Yes, Joey,” said Lezura. “Please let us find out.”

Joey took out the painting and held it up. “Huh? Well check this out. I still had this...”

Lezura frowned at the painting. “That thing nearly got us both killed,” she said. “What is the painting depicting anyway?”

“Just some alien dude that was running around Los Angeles,” said Joey.

The word struck Lezura into a tentative stare. “That name is familiar to me. Joey, please let me see the painting.” Joey walked around to Lezura, handed the painting to her and sat. He didn’t really get to sit fully when Lezura said, “My goodness!”

“What?” said Joey, looking at the painting expecting to see something spectacular that he missed.

“This is Blinchi!” said Lezura excitedly.

“Who?”

“Blinchi,” Lezura said. She turned to Joey, “He is a member of the Felkremin religious group. His species is the largaph, just as Conner Wondonder!”

The alien in the picture had green-brown colored skin. His appearance was near human, except for his facial features, where the nose was flat, the ears were internal and he had three little horns on each side of his jaw. His head was an ornate work of large bony plates with blue and red patterns. The back of his head wasn’t visible, but Lezura knew those bony plates extended off the back of his head in flat spikes. His eyes were bright brown colored with the sclera a deep yellow.

What made Lezura recognize him was his skin color, the narrow face and the twinkle of excitement in his eyes. But most of all, his bright smile that would spark light even in the gloomiest of rooms. He was sitting with his hands on his knees, wearing a white t-shirt and jeans and a black cat curled up in his lap.

Lezura commended the artist for such magnificent work, reading her name in the lower right, and knew she would have a brilliant career ahead of her.

“You’re telling me you knew this guy?” said Joey.

“Of course,” said Lezura. “He was the first of us to go to Earth.”

So he’s the guy that told Lezura to pick me up, Joey thought. I guess I owe him one. “Where’s he now?” said Joey.

“It is hard to say, really,” Lezura said. She adding to be precise, “Blinchi himself was an adventurer as far as everyone knew him. He was always exploring places no one dared the go. Shortly after he came back from Earth, he went on another voyage off world; though no one got back a message

saying if he made it pass the planet's armada or not." Lezura handed Joey the painting. "Put this back up."

Joey took the painting. Lezura stood and looked down at Joey and said, "I think we have spent enough time here. We should be leaving."

Joey nodded at her.

They finished up their meal and packed up their gear. Lezura handed Joey the compass, which she said was actually a key. Joey suddenly remembered the things the key showed him, and draped it around his neck without a second thought.

His bow and arrows and bat, along with his stolen nut, the painting and a bag of old cocoa and the key were all he had.

With Lezura's help they fashioned his bag to hold the arrows and the bow, while he carried the bat across his back in a sheathe he made without Lezura's help—and got a few nods from her.

Lezura had her box with Donnowarru, the data-scroll, a few medical items and her knife all on her belt. She put the spear behind her on her lower back in a makeshift sling of vines. She took a few pieces of cossik meat with her in a little pouch of leaves and vines across her chest.

She showed Joey to how to work the jetpack. They looked like huge silver bugs with protruding ovals in their backs. When activated these ovals extended to reveal the antigravity orbs. At the base of the wing was a single, orange tinged thruster like a tube that narrow at the opening.

Lezura demonstrated the ways to turn the foot-control in order to maneuver the antigravity orbs. And that kicking your foot increased the thruster's output, while folding that foot decreased it.

"How do you know all this shit?" said Joey and he strapped on the wings. "We just got these?"

"I had a friend in high school that was well versed in electronic and technical equipment," said Lezura.

Joey's mind never crossed on school. Well, at least not since he came here. He remembered that he once wanted to be a video game designer, but wondered if it would even still be possible with the new life he decided to take.

But those were best left afterwards. He had to focus on finding the God Titan to help these people, help Lezura. She had taken a bullet for him; the least he could do is do the same for her.

"Are you ready?" said Lezura with a finger over the start button on the wings.

"You bet," said Joey.

"Go," Lezura said.

Both of them pressed the button, and the antigravity orbs came on with a harmonic hum. They crouched and stepped off into the air with the thrusters propelling them. Joey twisted his angle left to turn right, and vice versa, sewing his way through the trees until he broke the canopy.

He spread his arms like and soared towards the silver-brown moon of Flitin, covered with craters and canyons. Joey arched his foot backward and the wings bent him forward, he straightened his foot and he flew forward over the forest.

Lezura came up beside him. He looked at her and they both smiled knowingly.

Both of them spiraled around in a circle like a vortex. They took each other's hand and spun in a circle of two.

Their laughs echoed through the star speckled night as the two aliens juiced what joy they could out of their situation.

Seven miles later, feeling genuinely exhausted, Joey and Lezura decided to land to get some rest. Lezura brought them down near a shallow stream. They took off their jetpacks and other equipment and laid them down under a gopto tree.

Joey looked up and saw multicolored lights of creaking and chirping insects darting about. Some were still on the surface of the trees, finally finding a mate, and so they turned off their lights.



The stream was bordered by smooth pebbles and purple flowers. A few roots stretched into the water to get a drink, and the massive root of a sinni tree from a way in the distance arched its way into the stream like the coil of a sea serpent breaking the water.

Joey looked at the water, blocking out his reflection, and saw the lights of the critters sparkle like colored stars in the sky.

“Is it safe to drink?” said Joey to Lezura.

Lezura had just finished scanning the water with a wire stemming from her data scroll. Lezura checked the readings and said, “Yes. It has no dangerous microorganisms.”

They both drank and washed their faces.

Lezura lit another fire, a small one, just enough to warm their bodies.

They made a huge bed of fresh gopto tree leaves and lay down with relieved sighs.

“You have to get stronger, Joey,” said Lezura in a weary voice.

Joey stretched, bones cracking audibly. “I’m already strong,” he said. “I can handle myself.”

Lezura raised an eyebrow, but she was looking in the other direction at a patch of pink mushrooms.

“You mean when the Cyri almost kill you? Or when that predator almost made a meal out of you?”

Joey frowned and grumbled.

“I thought so,” said Lezura. She closed her eyes. “Tomorrow I will begin your training.”

Joey looked at her and said, “For what?”

“Do not argue with me, just do what I say,” said Lezura impatiently. When Joey said nothing she said, “We were very fortunate that those robots were not the assault class. And yet we still nearly got killed. It will only get more dangerous from here, Joey; especially when they learn that the Rakai is back.”

Joey had a bored look on his face. “You don’t say.”

He didn’t hear a reply from Lezura, and figured she had already dozed off. Joey took one last look at the key around his neck. He put it up and went off to bed.

The next morning Joey was awakened by Lezura’s voice in his ear. He turned his face from out of the leaves and saw Lezura kneeling over him.

Joey sat up and wiped his eyes. He cleared his throat and said, “Did you make breakfast?”

“No,” said Lezura. She handed him a bundle of wet leaves.

Joey took them and said, “What’s this for?”

“Chew them,” said Lezura, “they will help to get rid of your morning breath.”

Joey grimaced and looked at Lezura out of the corner of his eyes. “Geez, you make sound like I ate crap last night...”

Joey chewed the leaves, shuddering at their bitter taste. He got up and saw Lezura head to one of the jetpacks. She bent down and inspected it.

Joey blinked the sunlight out of his eyes and looked around. They were in a large glade, wide enough to support a house. A sinni tree loomed above the area on a giant up-rise of rock and soil. And with a water source like the stream flowing by, Joey thought it would be nice to have a house here.

When he ran it by Lezura, she remarked to Joey if he thought Terriak would really come back for him. Joey forgot the thought, and said, “Forget it. Just do what you were doing.”

Lezura took up one of the packs, removed the acrilium battery and tossed it on the ground.

“Why did you do that?” said Joey.

Lezura fired three Bluebursts at the jetpack until sparks exploded from it. Joey retreated a few feet, shielding his face with a forearm. He dropped and looked at Lezura’s casual expression in disbelief.

“Why the hell did you do that?” Joey said.

Lezura did the same to the other jetpack. This time the jetpack exploded into three pieces.

Joey was certain that Lezura was a brilliant woman up until now, but doubts were popping up in his head after just seeing all of this.

“Lezura are you nuts?” Joey said. “What the hell are we goanna use to get around now?”

The acrilium batteries were five inches long and three inches in diameter. They had metallic caps on their ends, and shone with a lustrous blue. She pocketed them in her utility belt and said, “I discovered trackers planted inside the wings. I could not remove them without using electricity, and since I did not have that option, I had to destroy them.”

The answer was enough to make Joey forget about them. He scratched his head and looked around. He finally stared at Lezura and said, “Well, what the hell’re we goanna do, walk all the way to Suride Town? That could take days!”

“Four days to be precise,” said Lezura. “But do not worry. While you were asleep I did a little strolling and found a heard of mynamathers moving in the direction that we are headed. I have some experience in domesticating animals, thanks to my friend.” Lezura went for her spear and put it on her waist. She took up the bag of meat and put across her chest and showed Joey a leaf wrapping of some green dust.

“What’s that?” said Joey.

“Nerve-numb powder,” Lezura said, “made from the dried root of a pomeg tree and the hespi bush. It blocks off nerve signals to the body for three to four minutes. In an animal as large as a mynamather it may only be for a few seconds, though.”

Lezura put up the wrap and said, “Plus, now is a good time to get some exercise and begin your training.”

“But what about breakfast?” said Joey, stroking his rumbling stomach.

Lezura lifted a finger and said, “That, Joey, will be your reward for your workout.”

Lezura started their workout with a warm up of stretches and jumping-jacks. She gave Joey the bow and arrows to carry with his baseball bat, and they went off for a brisk jog to where the mynamathers were.

As pissed off as Joey was, he tried not to complain to Lezura. He knew she was doing this for his own good; to prepare him for the dangers ahead. But he couldn’t help but wonder why all of this was necessary when he could use honoi and blow stuff up.

It was over twenty minutes into the jog and Joey was drenched in sweat. His merino that was stained with his blood from his knife wound really was beginning to stink.

While Joey observed his own pitiful state, Lezura was ahead of him maintaining the pace she had started with. She stopped and lifted a fist. Joey halted.

Joey lowered his voice and said, “What?”

Lezura didn’t answer; she only knelt down and looked at the ground. Joey came up behind her, looked over her shoulder, and found Lezura putting her finger in footprint of three toes. Soon Joey took notice of the other footprints around them.

“These track veer off to the west,” said Lezura thoughtfully. She got back up and ran off. “Come, on!”

Joey growled and went after her. “We’re not in the Olympics, Lezura,” he said. “Stop running so damn fast!”

Minutes later Lezura stopped him again, but Joey didn’t have to ask why. They crouched and huddled together. Lezura got flat and crawled forward. Joey reluctantly followed her.

They crept up to a slope of bushes. They carefully peeled away the bush, hearing many footsteps beyond a musky odor.

Joey saw them. They had the body proportion of horses, but were large and more muscled. Their skin was an artwork of green, blue and brown stripes with a pale underbelly. Their four feet ended it

three thick toes. Their short, narrow snouts had two tusks at the end of it. When they turned their heads Joey saw four pink eyes, and on their heads was a bright red frill.

There were so many of them packed together that their color patterns made it almost impossible to tell them apart from the group at times.

“Their big, man,” whispered Joey. “How’ll we get over there without spooking them or getting a tusk rammed up our asses?”

Lezura crawled back, stood up and went back a few feet. She smiled at Joey with a calculating twinkle in her bright pink eyes.

Joey slowly approached and with a curious expression. “I guess you have a plan...?”

Lezura quickly took off all her belongings and gave them to Joey to put in his bag, and got to undressing.

Joey instantly blushed the moment he saw Lezura lift up her blouse. He spun around and looked in the sky. He slowly turned his head to look—

“Do not dare,” Lezura said.

Joey put his eyes back to the sky. Lezura was taking off her shoes and her jeans, now in nothing but her orange set of underwear.

“...Um...Lezura...” Joey said “...I hope you don’t mind me asking—but are you planning on giving those horse-things a lap-dance?”

Lezura shook her head at Joey pitifully. “My goodness, Joey,” Lezura said, “Nothing constructive goes on in that brain of yours, does it?” And Lezura clasped her hands as the focal point of her honoi build up. It spread over her body like a creeping mist. It took on a pink sheen as it enveloped Lezura and pulled leaves from the trees and off the ground towards her.

Joey felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand stiff, and the air around him get warmer. When he turned around he saw Lezura encased in pink light and leaves.

“Whoa...”

Lezura’s body imploded, leaving the after-shape of her body in the faint trace of honoi. But before it faded something small flew out of it. It had fluttering wings like a butterfly, dark pink with green spots in a rim of yellow, and they were attached to a tiny woman with large, pink eyes and clothes made from leaves.

And it was Lezura!

Joey lifted a trembling finger at Lezura while he fumbled for his words. “You’re—you’re—”

“A faery, that is correct,” said Lezura in a piping voice. “But we do not have time to dawdle, Joey. Give me the nerve-numb powder!”

Joey didn’t move.

Lezura flew right into his face, stretching no more than twelve inches tall. She tapped him hard in the forehead and said hastily, “For once, stop being a blockhead Joey and do what you are told!”

Joey took the wrapping out of the small compartment in his bag and gave it to Lezura. She hugged it against her tiny chest. “Now be prepared with the vines, Joey,” she said. “Once I stun the mynamather we need to move quickly.”

“Got it,” said Joey, realizing even at a foot tall Lezura was still bossy.

Lezura flew over to the mynamathers. Joey crept back to his spot at the slope and peered through the bushes at Lezura darting about over the mynamather’s, searching for the perfect one.

To the animals grazing Lezura looked like nothing more than huge bug or bird; some of which the mynamathers welcomed to pick the parasites off their skin. Lezura found the one she was looking for; a large male with a very bright red crest.

Lezura suspected that by the way he strutted through the herd he must be the leader, and if he was out, then the order would break; which meant that they would run instead of stand and fight when Joey came.

Lezura perched on his back like a bird. With graceful strides barefooted she went all the way up to his neck. She stopped, scratched his coarse skin like she was picking at some insects, and moved on up. When she was on the top of his head she scratched again. She unfolded the wrappings.

“Sorry about this,” she whispered.

The mynamather made a grunt the equivalent of a “huh” like he felt something strange was amidst, and that was when Lezura doused his face with the dust. The mynamather inhaled some of it through his wide nostrils. His senses were jolted instantly. He managed to get off a quick whinnying and a step forward before he toppled to the ground like a fallen tree.

The moment he hit the ground the herd went frantic. Joey bolted out of the bushes with the vines in his hands and the puffed up bag bouncing on his back. He didn’t know what he was going to do exactly, but summed it down to tying the vine around the mynamather’s head—

“Whoa!” Joey shouted as he rolled out the way of a charging mynamather.

He got up and timidly went through the animals. Finally he stopped, flailed his arms about and yelled at the animals. They steered from the human, stepping over their fallen leader.

Lezura clutched the crest of the buck as the animals’ feet thundered around her and kicked up dust.

Joey spotted the fallen mynamather. “Lezura?” he shouted.

“I am still here!” she said.

When the herd cleared Joey approached the animal.

“Wrap the vine around the crest!” said Lezura as she flew away.

Joey tied a loop and draped it over the crest. He pulled and tightened it. And the buck suddenly kicked.

“It’s getting back up...!” said Joey.

“Tie another one around its neck,” Lezura said. She saw the two eyes on the side of the mynamather’s head facing her snap open, but they looked around without focus.

Joey gritted his teeth and strained to lift the animal’s head, slipping the loop over the tusks and down its thick neck.

The mynamather’s eyes focused on the fluttering thing before it. It saw the shape and of the body, and the face. It immediately recognized it as one of those purple, tailless itikrat that always tried to enslave its kind to ride on their backs.

It grunted and kicked out. Joey backed away quickly. The buck wiggled and rolled onto its feet. Lezura took action. She dived on the mynamather’s head and held the crest. She shouted at Joey, “Grab the vine!”

Joey saw the rest of the vine. As the buck reared up and peddled its front feet, Joey dove for the vine on the ground. And the beast went off.

Joey was dragged through the bumpy grass, feeling the many chips and cuts that were beginning to take their place amongst the others on his body. Lezura gritted her braced-teeth and hoped the animal slowed down enough. But she knew it wouldn’t, and little Joey would be dragged to his death.

Lezura let go of the crest, using the momentum of the wind pressing against her to roll down the neck of the buck and down onto its back. She dug her little fingers into its skin.

The buck leaped over a large fallen tree. Joey saw it coming and closed his eyes. But he didn’t go splat as he was suspecting. Instead he was dragged right over the log and flew onto the mynamather’s back. The animal started bucking. Luckily Joey hadn’t cut his nails, and used them to dig into the animal’s hide along with his teeth.

Release! Lezura said in her mind, and her body expanded back to its original size with Joey staring right at Lezura’s leaf covered bottom.

Nice!

Lezura grabbed hold of the vine around the animal's head. Joey shot his arms around Lezura's waist. The animal went on its mad, hellish dance for a full ten minutes before it came to a stop. Exhaustion set in and the mynamather just stood there, breathing rumbly and loudly.

Joey's arms released their grip from around Lezura's waist and he fell to the ground. Lezura rubbed her waist where Joey's fingers had sunken. She would be expecting some bruises there. She leaned forward and patted the mynamather on its crest. "There, fellow," she said. "All is well now."

The mynamather grunted.

Joey got up; wincing as he gingerly touched his torn merino at the wounds. He said to Lezura boldly, "I just got dragged near a quarter of a mile, Lezura. I think that earns me breakfast."

## CHAPTER SIX

Lezura and Joey had their meal of fruits and cossik meat. Once the mynamather had rested up, Lezura fashioned a saddle of matted leaves and sticks and tied it around the animal with vines.

Lezura wore a blouse of red and green leaves with the right shoulder matted with the leaves of the gopto tree. Her shorts were also from thick leaves and vines.

So she allowed Joey to discard his merino and put on her blouse. Lezura put on her utility belt along with her spear. Joey wrapped the bag with the bows on the rear side of the mynamather and climbed up to his seat behind Lezura.

Once they had the mynamather in a stroll, Joey bombarded Lezura with questions.

“So are all nycarmans faeries?” he said.

“No,” said Lezura, “only a very few. One obtains the Faery Path depending on the gene they inherited.”

“Gene?” Joey said.

“The innate ability to absorb energy from the surrounding environment,” said Lezura. “It is what you would call nature energy, or mana.”

“So what’s different from a nycarman and a faery?” said Joey, popping in a sweet and sour, yellow hespi berry in his mouth.

Lezura said, “A faery can alter the shape of their body’s appearance, where as a normal nycarman cannot unless using special devices. I can use my honoi to copy the skin color and texture of another sentient species, which is how I transformed into a human. A faery can also manipulate the size of his or her body to shrink. But this can only be done with organic matter.”

“You mean fleshy stuff?” said Joey.

“Yes,” said Lezura, pleased to know Joey wasn’t as stupid as he appeared to be, “which was why I had to shed those clothes. Even my braces are organic.”

“And the healing with the honoi?” said Joey.

“I would not say it is only limited to faeries,” Lezura said, “but faeries can do it easier.”

“What else?” Joey said hastily like he was hurrying to go somewhere.

“We have a lifespan stemming hundreds of years,” said Lezura.

Joey’s expression changed to astonishment. “You’re hundreds of years old?”

“No,” said Lezura, “I am twenty-three, actually...”

“What other powers do you have?”

Lezura turn to Joey and exhaled glittery dust in his face.

Joey unwillingly inhaled the daisy smelling stuff, and found his eyelids were getting heavy and his muscles getting weak. He lifted a hand to touch Lezura, but all of a sudden it felt like weights were tied to it.

“Lezura...” Joey droned, and the last thing he remembered was falling on Lezura’s shoulder before blanking out.

When Joey woke up he was still behind Lezura on the mynamather. His memory was still fresh, and he reckoned he probably just dozed off. But the sudden loss of consciousness was too startling nonetheless.

“What the hell did you just do, Lezura?” Joey said sharply, making Lezura’s ears cringe.

“You do not have to shout, Joey,” Lezura said, her tone lightened when she said; “I can produce a sleep inducing chemical from a gland beneath my tongue.”

It crossed Joey’s mind to make a joke about Lezura’s breath, but let it drop in case Lezura knocked him out again—with her fist. “So how long was I out for?” Joey said.

“About three minutes,” said Lezura.

“Wait,” Joey said, “It just crossed my mind, why didn’t you just use that on our monster-horse in the first place?”

Lezura said, “The ratio of my body determines the amount of sleep glitter and honoi I am able to produce,” she said. “So I collected some of the chemical and wrapped it up in the leaves. Do not confuse it with the one I used to stun the mynamather with the one I use knock out those police officers, though, that—”

Joey giggled.

“What is it,” said Lezura.

“It’s just that,” he said, “first you’re a purple elf, and now you’re a faery. What else do they have on this place, werewolves?”

Lezura kept quiet, thinking maybe it wouldn’t be wise to tell Joey all about the orderrans as yet. She said, “Your species never believed such things existed. Now, you are the first human to ever see one, but I would not be too arrogant about that either?”

“Why?” said Joey.

“The possibility exists that aliens had been using the rift for a long time now,” said Lezura. “It is plausible that during the thousands of years ago in your people’s history, aliens from other worlds might have come to the planet whether accidentally or intentionally through the rift.”

“You could be right,” Joey said. He hugged Lezura. “This is so awesome! I’m talking to an alien faery!”

“Please Joey, do not squeeze me so hard,” she said, “Your fingers gave me bruises.”

“Sorry; my little faery,” Joey said.

“You should not be one to call people ‘little’,” Lezura said, grinning silently at what was next to come.

And as Joey snapped into a hysterical chorus about why he was short and others tall, Lezura’s ears picked up on some unusual sound patterns. She hushed up the human.

“What?” said Joey, “You don’t like the fact that—?”

When Joey saw Lezura give him a smoldering stare hot enough to form diamond from coal, he knew something was serious. He reached on the back of the mynamather for the weapons, handed Lezura the bow and arrow and took out his baseball bat.

The footsteps still continued around her. Lezura got off the mynamather, dropped her goggles over her eyes and readied her bow. Joey got off and followed her. The mynamather became restless, pacing around and grunting.

“What’s near us?” said Joey.

That question was gladly answered by parts of the green bushes breaking off and running at them, exposing themselves to large quadrupeds with long snouts and green and yellow stripes on their bodies. Salivating mouths with large fangs and crazed, yellow eyes of bloodlust were the things about the gufders that stuck out the most about them.

“Gufders!” shouted Lezura, snapping off a shot at one of them right in the chest. The blow flipped the gufder in mid-air and it fell with a heavy thud.

Joey let go of the mynamather’s reigns and yanked the bat off his back, swinging it into the nearest snarling animal. The blow stopped it only momentarily and it came snapping back at him.

Lezura avoided a swipe of a gufder’s four-clawed paw, pivoted on her heel and whacked the animal in the head with her bow. It staggered at the blow, but spun around and leaped at her again, slashing her across the upper-arm.

The mynamather tried to make a run for it but only got a few feet before the gufders surrounded it. The mynamather kept them at bay with its swinging tusks and striking hooves. The predators paced around their large prey. Dark blue quills on their backs and shoulders bristling with excitement like a bunch of college jocks circling a helpless freshman girl.

Lezura contested two gufders, knowing they were taking their time to tire her out with repeated blows until she was exhausted enough for them to finish her off.

She lunged at the nearest one, it side stepped her but Lezura anticipated it and fired a Blueburst into its trunk. As the gufder toppled over with a tight squeal the other one pounced on Lezura. She raised her forearm and the gufder sank its teeth into it. Lezura screamed, tears brimming her eyes. The other gufders saw that one of the preys was wounded sufficiently and switched targets.

Joey smacked away the gufder before him with a blow to the head. The animal's skull cracked and it went limp.

Joey ran in the way of the three gufders heading for Lezura. He threw himself into one of the animals and wrestled it to the ground—which was a very stupid thing. Not only were the gufders now on Joey, but some of the quills from the gufder had stuck into his flesh.

The gufders took point, one snapping onto Joey's trouser foot while the other bit into his ankle. Joey repeatedly slapped the one he had in a chokehold with his bat awkwardly, screaming in rage at his victim and the pain the others inflicted on him.

The other two gufders left the mynamather and went for the easier prey on the ground. Lezura plucked an arrow from the holster on her back and with a fluid, quick motion she slipped it into the gufder's left eye and felt it thud in the back of its skull.

But its fangs were stuck in her flesh, and its dead weight dropped Lezura as well.

Lezura fired a Blueburst at one of the gufder's heading for Joey. It missed. But something else found its mark.

A short arrow skewered the gufder from out of nowhere. It fell into a harsh roll, twisting into a heap of mangled limbs.

The foliage around them erupted with huge beasts, carrying people on their backs in loose green and brown garments. Even in the chaos and near death Lezura noticed that some of them were largaphs and rapturans.

She saw one of them lift a crossbow in green hands at a startled gufder. A barrel in the center of the bow rotated and three arrows slapped out into the gufder's chest, puncturing its heart. It was a circus of thrashing gufder bodies all around Joey as his attackers were made pincushions of.

Lezura took the opportunity to pry the gufder's jaws from off her arm, gritting her teeth as she did. As she got to her feet and hurried over to Joey, they both saw the people on their four-legged beasts encircle them, effectively blocking off the sunlight.

"Besi ni' jipap ade uuch!" said a voice.

Joey yelped as he yanked three quills out of his shoulder. "What?" he said.

"Someone wants them to give us some space," said Lezura.

The group stepped back. Lezura helped up Joey. He kicked a nearby gufder. With his bat firmly clenched he observed the animals breathing around him.

They had some resemblance to mynamathers, only their bodies were more bulky, they were short and their legs narrowed from thick shoulders and thighs to stand on two toes with a the third being some kind of blunt claw. The tail was flat and broad with a pointed end. The animal's neck was short and its snout long, with a blue-beaked tip that went in segments on the edges of the lower jaw. The two eyes on each side were close, dark and beady. There were small tusks on the jaw that pointed outward and membranous feathers on the shoulders and neck with blue and green patterns that glowed in the sunlight. While the animal's body was greyish-blue with green and brown waves and ridges, its underbelly was a cream color.

The people approached the nycarman and the human off their animals. They were of various height, and body builds and species. And in their garbs and their weapons firmly held they exuded an aura of no-nonsense purpose to Joey.



He recognized a few of the largaphs, thanks to the painting Lezura showed him, though some had skin color with more brown or some yellow added with it.

But he also saw blue-skinned people with circular orange eyes, and those with reptilian features; scaly green skin, slit-like pupils in their yellow eyes and snout that was short enough to be a face with a few teeth sticking out the sides. They also had short, bristly red hair.

“Who are they?” Joey whispered, eyes darting at each face, and found them looking at him with equal curiosity.

“I am not sure,” said Lezura, “but they must live in the area. Please, Joey, do not do anything stupid.”

But Joey wasn't going to anyway, as a few of them had crossbows trained at he and his companion.

Joey saw a tall largaph man with a slender face unsheathed a thin, curved sword from his hip. He neared a gufder that stilled squirmed the last of its miserable life on the ground. He flipped the sword in his fingers to an upward position, and brought it down, slicing off the gufder's head.

The man wiped the sword on the animal's hide as he stared at Joey with steady eyes; even as he sheathed the sword he didn't move them.

Joey got a challenging vibe from the man, and eyed him back with an acknowledging lift of his head.

From the crowd a person approached them. Like a few of them she wore a dark brown, crusty trousers and long-sleeved tunic with the ends tightened with strings. Over it she wore a dusty looking cloak with leafy patterns and tattered ends. And on her feet were simple sandals of leather and plant matter.

Even though she was a bronze-skinned largaph, and lacking the hair like Lezura and pointy ears, Joey still found her good looking; lofty with bright brown eyes on her narrow face. Her clothes fitted over her nicely to show those nice curves in her waist.

She stopped and threw the hood back off her head, showing pink patterns on her head plates.

“Ma'yi dua yuh namidi?” she said.

Joey figure she just asked who they were. Lezura even confirmed it when she whispered it to him, and she quickly replied, “Jipap dua woandroi...”

The woman's expressionless face nodded. She turned her eyes to Joey, and when he flinched she smiled just a little bit. “Ma'yi dua-a di dre-dis ishin yuh?” said the woman.

Lezura gestured to Joey and said, “Dis dua-a Joey Sadowski. Dre dua-a human.”

The man with the slender face said, “Dre awike ekeho wan orderran...” And he spat near Joey's feet.

When Joey was about to respond to the obvious insult the woman before him turned to the man and said, “Yuh...Muto!”

The man frowned, and said, “Bia—”

“Muto...” she woman said more sternly.

“That's right, you little b—awww!” Joey was stopped with a stomp on his toe from Lezura.

Lezura and the woman found themselves looking at each other, and realizing what just happened they both smiled and laugh.

The largaph woman said, “Dwont dre michat Jipap igris?”

Lezura shook her head and said, “Ne,” she turned Joey and said in English, “he does not speak our language, yet.”

Lezura looked at the woman and the people around her. She looked back at the woman and said, “Temelo mi besi dre-ta sinting?” and she patted a pocket on her belt.

The woman looked at the men, saw that they were ready to shoot at any sign of trouble, and turned to Lezura and said, “Yuh temelo.”

Lezura took out a translator from her pocket. It was black, oval shaped and with a soft tip and a white cap with a blue half-ring.

“Do you guys mind filling me on what you're all chatting about?” said Joey, touching a quill on his upper arm and considering yanking it out right now.

“I asked her if I could give you this translator,” said Lezura, pressing a button on the device and listening to a soft beep. She put it in Joey’s left ear and said, “There. Now, tell me, what does the word ‘vri’ mean?”

Joey could hear the word in clear English in his ear. “Yes,” he said. “It means ‘yes’!”

“Good,” said Lezura happily.

The woman said to Joey, “Can you understand me, alien?”

“Vri!” said Joey.

“Good,” said the woman. “Now I would kindly like to know what you two are doing out here?”

Joey looked at Lezura, signaling for her to do all the smart-talking. Lezura said calmly, “My friend and I were trying to outrun some orderrans—”

The people around them looked at each other and murmured, but Lezura could hear all of what they were saying.

“They were running from orderrans?” said one.

“That means they must’ve pissed off the orderrans!” said another.

“Who the hell are these people?”

“And what’s up with the short thing next to the pretty lady?”

Lezura heard Joey growl next to her.

The woman lifted a hand and silence followed.

“We should just kill them,” said the tall man.

The woman scowled and said, “I said be quiet, Podge...”

Podge looked away with a defeated face. “Don’t give them my name...”

The woman said to Lezura, “Your story doesn’t really make any sense. You say that alien is a human; how did he get here?”

Obviously through the void! Lezura wanted to say, but she used her manners and said, “My dear lady, please understand that our situation right now is very fragile. We have to maintain some level of secrecy at the moment for our own good. But believe me when I tell you that we are not your enemies.”

“That isn’t the right answer,” said the woman. And with a snap of her fingers more crossbows were lifted and the people took three steps closer.

“Holy f—” Joey waved his arms before him to block the potential arrows. When none didn’t come he said, “Lezura?”

Lezura sighed heavily, staring at the emotionless and steady eyes of the woman. She knew this woman wasn’t about jokes and sneaking around. Lezura said, “Fine, you want the truth, then we shall give it to you...”

Lezura grabbed Joey, lifted the compass from under his shirt and showed it to the people.

Gasps rippled among them, and Joey could have sworn he saw one of the animals put a hoof to its open beak.

“That is the key!” said a bewildered reptilian man with lime green skin. He approached Tylin’s side to get a closer look at the key. Joey became wary of the man’s huge size, a little over six foot and in a suit like Tylin’s, but dark green with brown on the chest and a blue green cloak. “If he possesses it—”

“Then he must be the Rakai,” said Podge, but he didn’t seem as awed as the rest—more irritated actually.

The woman said with a steady voice, “You people need to tell us what exactly is going on. But not here, you’re coming with us back to our camp.”

“What?” Podge said. “Are you crazy? The orderrans are after them. If we bring them back to our camp we will lead the orderrans back to the others!”

“If we do not,” said the rapturan, “then we might have left the Rakai and his Chevalier to die here and we did nothing about it...”

“Okay,” said the woman. “We’ll decide this back at the camp.” She turned to Podge. “That’s final.” Podge looked at her cynically. He turned his eyes on Joey, hissed through his teeth and stepped back.

“Thank you,” said Lezura.

“I didn’t do you any favors,” said the woman. “I’m just trying to get a grip on a situation before it spirals out of control and affects us. I’m not even sure if that’s the real key, and I need someone to confirm it.”

The woman turned around and gestured to someone at the back. He came walking up with the ir mynamather by the reigns.

“Aw man,” said Joey, “I thought Redbolt got away.”

Lezura turned to Joey. She said, “Redbolt?”

“Yeah,” said Joey. “That’s what were goanna call him.”

“Please come with us,” said the woman as she mounted her beast. “Then again, it’s either that or you die here.”

“Lead the way, missy,” said Joey.

The woman twisted her face. “What...?”

Lezura and Joey travelled in the center of the convoy through a grassy path in the forest where a river had dried up years passed. The beasts that surrounded them were what Joey learned they called greshkues.

“What’re those people called?” Joey said with a gesture of his chin to one of the aliens with light blue skin on his face, and darker blue from the cheeks down.

“Lazhinians,” said Lezura. “They have incredible regenerative abilities, which lead to their blood being harness for many medical purposes. And its pink color is the symbol for good health.”

The lazhinian had large, round orange eyes, vertical slits for nostrils and two scale-like organs on the sides of the forehead; called sensory quills. Joey noted the alien had two arrow-tipped fleshy protrusions on each cheek, which were a second set of sensory quills for chemical detection.

“And those guys...?” Joey said, gesturing to the large reptilian man on the greshku in front of him.

“That is a rapturan,” said Lezura. “He is one of three races of rapturans, a dracoid.”

Joey noticed some little spines running down the man’s neck. He turned around to give a brief check-up on them. Joey gave him a nod. The man nodded and turned around. He was riding on the woman’s left, while Podge was on her right.

At least he isn’t a dick like that guy, thought Joey.

After blowing away a pesky bug in his face Joey spotted what looked like a moss infested, giant stone hand with large claws reaching out of the ground.

Joey’s attention wasn’t held by it for long, for he noticed more obelisks scattered around where they were walked.

Most were craggy, carved and battered with weathering, then covered up with a dressing of plants, but Joey could make out one with the painted sculptures of animals and people in some sort of dance. There was another with the sculpture of the torn face of a nycarman in a hood lying on its side. Half of it was covered up with dirt, but the rest had grass and moss growing out of its stone flesh.

They came onto a path through a glade, where the sun washed the ground with splendid light, and large red flowers like roses with pointed petals stuck out the sides of the road like mortars, firing out yellow filaments that hungry bugs eagerly swarmed.

The giant root of a sinni tree touched from off the top of a slope and over their heads to the other side, creating a huge arch where flowery vines hung.

“Our camp is just beyond that hill,” the woman said, pointing in the distance to conical shape beyond an approaching ville tree.

Joey noticed some little stone totems here and there. He saw a few a while back, but the sight of more of them aroused his curiosity.

They were no more than three feet, abused by the elements with blue moss and vines clinging to it like leeches. Some looked like animals; Joey recognized the shape of the head of a mynamather, and the squat figure of a karoti and the wings of a tratali on another. He even saw those that look like people, all nycarman.

“What’re those things for?” Joey said, pointing to the totems.

With a quick glance at them Lezura said, “They are called ven-hachachs, or ‘guardian rocks’. The people from the countries of Ixia and Balion who once lived in this region would place these statues here to gain the favor of the spirits during their journeys from home.”

“I guess that was their place we passed that was torn down?” Joey said.

“Yes,” Lezura said. “It was done mostly by natural disasters. The finishing blow was by centuries of war and finally the orderran invasion.”

A quarter mile later as they neared the hill Joey saw some totems with the shape of rapturans and lazhinians. He could tell by their smooth appearance and the little plant matter gathered on them that they were fresh additions.

On the other side of the hill they came upon a thick network of trees where the path ended for good in a sea of wild grass reaching nearly two feet. The wind blew with a fragrance of flowers and wet soil, swaying the grass into fluid waves.

The convoy split up to navigate the tight network of trees, and they all came upon a path a smooth path that led into a loosely knit group of trees. And there Lezura and Joey saw the camp.

Joey had to admit to himself that so far the planet was looking like some adventure fantasy story with all the people riding animals, the large tents these people now were living in, and the lack of anything fancy technology or machines, apart from the robots he had encountered yesterday. But when he remembered Lezura’s words; that the Prestige System had deprived other countries of any resources to develop machinery and attacked their major power plants, Joey realized that these people weren’t living like elves or dwarves, but were actually living in poverty.

The tents were large enough to house a bed or two, and when they could the people painted them in a variety of colors. People stopped cooking, sweeping around their tents and tending to their animals and weapons to have a look at the new comers.

Lezura figured that they weren’t just surprised to see Joey, but to see a nycarman—the people who had abandoned them to hide in their fancy little Prestige Kingdom.

Lezura felt some guilt about it, but not enough for her to lose her cool.

“Don’t worry,” said the woman to the people in a raised tone. “I have already confirmed that they’re not a threat to us. Neither is the strange alien.”

“My name’s Joey, lady,” said the human.

“Whatever, alien,” the woman said.

“Just keep quiet before you get us killed,” said Lezura.

Joey mimed zipping his mouth. He looked around at all the alien faces, and noticed most of them if not all looked like they were battle-ready. He even noticed a few of the women in their long frocks and skirts with metal spoons, knives and pots drawn. One, a lazhinian woman, even had a battle-axe drawn; so did the little girl lazhinian girl beside her.

“Damn...” Joey said, “And here I thought I was tough...”

The woman stopped, the others followings, when they saw some men approach them. They came off their greshkues and allowed the men to take the animals to their stables. On the woman’s approval

Joey and Lezura got off Redbolt, and a lazhanian took him by the reins and brought him in line with the towed greshkues to a stable in the distance.

“Follow me,” said the woman, leading the way to a tent.

“Where are you taking us?” said Lezura. If things weren’t going to go in their favor, she was prepared to unleash everything she had to protect herself and Joey. And Joey she knew would be eager and ready to fight.

“I’m taking you to our scientist,” she said.

Something exploded inside Lezura and she hurried up to the woman’s side, startling her. “Really?” said Lezura. “What kind of scientist?”

“Um...” the woman didn’t know how to react to this kind of sudden interest “...he’s an alchemist?”

“Wow!” Lezura said, “Amazing! I never got the chance to meet an alchemist in person!”

“What the hell’s an alchemist?” said Joey with a puzzled frown.

Lezura slipped back to Joey’s side. “You will see soon enough,” she said, and further added, “An alchemist is a person who specializes in manipulated the structure of matter to their will using their honoi energy.”

“Okay...” said Joey, still preferring blowing something up. But alchemy it sounded was also interesting.

The dracoid accompanying them said towards the tent, “Clasaan, we have visitors!”

“Oh!” a chirpy voice said, “please, do bring them in.”

Podge pushed away the curtains of the tent. Sunlight shone on numerous wooden and metallic jars on the ground, some scrolls on boxes and made to stand in the corners, a bed with tan colored spread in one side, and a huge figure in a sand brown cloak seated at the top of the room.

The woman entered first, with Lezura and Joey following and then Podge and the dracoid.

Neither Joey nor Lezura could get a clear look at the man, as he was hunched over, too engrossed in whatever he was doing on the table. He was humming a lively tune, and reached out a brown, scaly hand with sharp claws for a powder grinder at the end of the table.

“So,” he said, “who are these travelers you’ve found, Tylin?”

The woman, now known as Tylin, said, “One’s a nycarman, and the other is some strange alien.”

The man spun around on his seat and faced them all; revealing a brown-skinned dracoid. He had shiny yellow eyes, messy short hair and wore a green tunic and grey shorts under his large coat. He didn’t wear anything on his dirty feet that he had plastered in the grass, and in his hands he had a bowl and the powder grinder. Across his forehead were electronic glasses with two lens hoisted above each.

His eyes were immediately fixed on Joey, studying him intensely.

“What’s up?” said Joey, then adding a wave incase Clasaan didn’t understand.

Clasaan waved back, said, “Helloooo...”

Podge stepped in front of them and said, “All right, enough with the pleasantries. Clasaan, these two say that the short alien here is the Rakai.”

“I’m the damn Rakai!” said Joey, with Joey Lezura translating. “And stop calling me short!”

Clasaan straightened in his seat. He said, “Is this so?”

“Yes,” said Lezura. She nodded to Joey, who took the compass from around his neck and gave it Lezura, who gave it to Clasaan.

“Please confirm the truth for us, Clasaan,” said the other dracoid.

“I will certainly, Nartha,” said Clasaan, putting down the items in his hands and cradling the compass in one hand.

Clasaan searched the compass with a claw, found the lock and pricked it open. He took out the key with the chain at the end. He put the casing down, held up the key to a yellow lava lamp in the corner. He pulled down his glasses over his eyes. After a few seconds of looking he pulled down the second

set of lens, increasing the magnification from times-twenty to times-forty. In the surface of the key he saw green energy, but looking in the red strip it also had some kind of pinkish-purple energy.

“Hmmm...” Clastaan replied, nodding to himself.

“What does ‘hmmm’ mean?” said Podge impatiently.

Clastaan lifted his glasses, put the key back in the compass and handed it to Joey. “That is definitely the key,” he said.

Tylin, Podge and Nartha stiffened, all turned to look at Joey. The human directed a cocky smirk at Podge; who rolled his eyes and looked away.

“How could you tell?” said Lezura.

Clastaan placed his hands on his knees and said, “What I and my fellow colleagues in the field of ten sciences once thought was that the key of salvation, as it has been proven, is a power source for machinery. But it is virtually impossible for such a small item to power up a machine as large as the God Titan.”

“So?” said Lezura, urging him to go on.

Clastaan raised a finger, pushed out his chest and said, “I speculated that the key was a portal.”

“A portal?” asked Joey incredulously; checking the translator to make sure it wasn’t malfunctioning, though he didn’t know one squat about how it worked.

Clastaan said, “You see, everyone, the red stripe in the key is actually cosmic energy. For those who do not know, that is the energy that is used to manipulate time and space, opening portals to other locations within the universe or different dimensions. It is the same energy the reapers use, though only they know how to fully use it. That portal in the key leads to wherever the energy for the God Titan is stored.”

Lezura said, while she steadily made down jottings in her data-scroll with a stylus, “But if only the reapers can use cosmic energy, how did the Dielenganns come by it hundreds of years ago?”

“The possibility exists that—”

“Sorry there, Clastaan,” said Tylin, “I do not mean to end your lecture, but we would like to know what we should do with these two. They said that they were running from orderrans when we found them.”

“They could’ve led them right to us,” said Podge.

Clastaan rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Yes. That is a predicament.” He dropped his hand and said with a warm smile. “I guess we will just have to keep them safe.”

“What?” Podge gawked.

“I figured as much,” said Lezura.

“You people got any food up in this place?” said Joey, massaging his stomach. “I’m as hungry as a mother—”

“We cannot just leave them Podge,” said Clastaan. “Yes, I understand that they might cause us trouble, but this is the Rakai we are talking about. His mere presence now must suggest that there might be a turn in the current events of the planet’s condition.”

Podge scoffed, folded his arms, and said, “If a man like Conner Wondonner couldn’t stop the system, what makes you all think this kid can do any better?”

Joey stepped up to Podge and pointed in his face. He said, “Because I’m the new Rakai, asshole! And I’m gonna prove it to everybody that I can get this done.”

Podge slapped away Joey’s finger. “Do not ever put your hand in my face,” Podge said.

Joey put his hand in Podge’s face again. “Or else what?” said Joey.

A solid punch from Podge rocked Joey’s head. Joey stopped himself with a foot behind him, used it to propel himself forward with right hook across Podge’s eye.

And that was how the fight started. It ended up from inside the tent and out into the middle of the camp. People quickly distanced themselves from the fracas. Joey and Podge exchanged blows until Joey struck one of Podge's jaw spikes.

The human yelled and clutched his throbbing fist. And Podge took the opportunity to swing his elbow into Joey's neck and dropped him to the ground.

"Joey!" said Lezura, rushing to his side.

Podge looked down at the fallen human, cracking his knuckles and grinning with a swollen left eye. "That will teach you, you little punk."

Then he felt a vice-grip around his neck. Tylin lowered his head in her arm and rubbed her knuckles between his eyes.

"What the hell's the matter with you Tylin? Let me go!" said Podge.

Tylin rubbed her knuckles harder, feeling the bone beneath Podge's flesh. "What the hell are you doing punching the Rakai you idiot?" Tylin said. "Do I always have to wipe your little ass?"

"I didn't ask you tell help!" Podge squeaked under the pressure. His attempts to pry Tylin's arm from around him were in vain. Finally Tylin let Podge go.

Lezura helped Joey to his feet. Joey rubbed his throbbing neck, the pain from it seemed to dull out the ones from all over his body that Podge inflicted.

"Are you all right, Joey?" said Lezura worriedly.

Joey grimaced and moaned. "I'll be once I kick that guy's ass," he said.

Lezura sighed. "That is good," she said—and punched Joey, sending him flipping sideways and down. The crowd gasped.

Joey rolled onto his back and shouted, "What the hell was that for Lezura?"

Lezura's face smoldered. "What do you mean 'what was it for' you little fool?" Lezura said. In Joey's eyes he was looking at one of those horror movies where the pretty lady turned into some horrid, bloodsucking slime dripping monster. "You just started a fight for no reason whatsoever!"

"He was dissin me," said Joey defensively. Lezura kicked Joey in the ribs. "Oooowwwweee!"

"You are the most ridiculously, stupid Rakai we ever had!"

The crowd around them instantly went berserk with murmurs and questions. Most of what she heard being said was 'Rakai'.

"Oh dear," Lezura said.

While Clastaan and Tylin dealt with explaining the situation to the people about the Rakai, Joey and Lezura were given their own tent to deal with matters amongst themselves.

Lezura and Joey were sitting on their beds of thick brown blankets. Lezura managed to heal the pains Joey had from his brawl with Podge, but some wounds insisted to torment Joey even still.

Joey rubbed his fist where he felt phantom pains from Podge's spikes.

"Note," he said; "never punch a largaph dude in the jaw, or else you'll be the one in a crap-load of pain." Joey smiled at Lezura, seated across him with her bright hair flowing down her shoulders.

"Well, I'd say my first fist-fight with an alien went pretty well!"

"You should be lucky he did not kill," Lezura said.

"Lezura—"

Lezura erected her finger, quickly silencing Joey. "You should also be lucky that Clastaan is a calm and kind man. Had it been other groups of people they would've had you beaten and burnt alive for attacking their own. You should learn to keep a cool head, Joey. Most of the population outside the Prestige System has resorted to stealing and killing for a living, not to mention acts of rape."

Joey honestly was listening and taking in what Lezura had to say, and she could see it in his eyes. But Joey said, "But if that's the case, it's not that different from Earth, now is it? The only difference is that you guys have different species; blue, purple and green people. And the 'power' shit..."

Lezura pounded a fist on her bed. With her naturally slanted eyes added with her frown it seemed her frown threatened to cave in on her nose. “Damn you Joey! This is not a joke!”

“I’m not joking Lezura!” Joey said. “You spent five months on Earth, so obviously you know what it’s like, especially since you disguised yourself as a black woman. You remember what that guy called you? You remember how those cops shot us and those guys tried to kill us? I had to go through that every day! You think any of this shit scares me? It doesn’t, Lezura.” Joey folded his arms and lay on the bed, staring into the circle of sunlight at the top of the tent. “Well...maybe the animals do...and you...”

Lezura chuckled. Joey smiled, relieved that the tension had ended.

Lezura said calmly, almost sweetly, “You might be dumb and annoying Joey, but at least you are not like those men.”

Joey said, “Of course not. I’m the Rakai. I’m the hero here.” A surprised look came over Joey’s face. He got up quickly and said, “By the way, Lezura, what else can you teach me—with the honoi, I mean...?”

Lezura sighed. “I do not know much myself,” she said. “I did not learn how to use my honoi properly until five years ago. All I have under my belt is the Blueburst, the Bluebolt, honoisensory, shrinking and changing my appearance with my honoi.”

“What about that beam thing?” Joey said.

“You mean the Bluebolt?”

“Yeah, whatever,” Joey said. “How does it work?”

Lezura said, “Whereas the Blueburst has pushing power, the Bluebolt uses piercing power. The burst just requires you to build up the honoi and release. The Bluebolt, however, requires that you build up honoi in your forearm. Then you build up honoi in your elbow to push the honoi in your arm out. Basically it is like setting off a bullet—using gunpowder as the ignition. And in the case of the Bluebolt, the ignition is the Blueburst.”

“So I have to do two things?” said Joey, lifting two fingers.

“Yes,” Lezura said. “The Blueburst is quick and easy to use, but the Bluebolt is more powerful. Its only downfall is its massive honoi usage.”

A rapturan girl dressed in black garbs entered their tent. The slim figure placed a wooden tray covered with leaves before each of them. On it was a dugout husk like a coconut with some aromatic juice, and a steaming bowl of yellow stew.

“How’s everyone doing?” the woman said, translated in Joey’s ears.

“Quite fine,” said Lezura.

“Okay,” said Joey, studying the young woman.

She had light green skin, a round head and bushy brows much like his. The spikey hair was tied into a shaggy tail at the top of her head.

“I brought you all lunch,” she said, placing the tray between the two of them. She took a seat right there.

She turned to Joey, looking at him with large golden eyes that shone like Lezura’s hair; her thin lips stretched her mouth into a wide smile. Her face was a little flatter than Nartha’s and the few other dracoids Joey saw, but he wasn’t sure if it was because she was a young female, or one of the three rapturan races Lezura once mentioned.

“So you’re the Rakai, huh?” she said. But before Joey could answer she said, “Oh, wait!” she took out a translator from a pouch and put it in the large protruding scale that was her ear.

“I did not know you had translators here?” said Lezura.

The girl said in her pleasant voice, “Clastaan makes them. He’s really good—he made these from spare parts!”



“Fascinating,” said Lezura as she took up her bowl and ate. Lezura saw that Joey’s eyes were fixed on the young woman. Joey caught Lezura’s stare, and hurriedly took up his bowl and began eating.

“So Rakai,” the woman said, “did you really come to this planet through the armada around it?”

“Um...?” Joey looked to Lezura, who nodded “...Yeah! I did!”

“Really?” the girl said, her skin rippling with yellow and pink briefly, “How?”

Joey’s face was almost red enough to match the color of the young woman’s hair. He felt something prancing about in his gut—not butterflies, but probably a few little elves or squirrels. His lips fumbled silently for his words.

The young woman’s smile lowered slightly, she tilted her head at an awkward angle and said, “Rakai...?”

Lezura picked up the baton, saying, “Excuse me, not to be rude, but could we please have your name?”

“Oh,” the girl said, “my name is S’us.”

“Like the moon?” Joey said, sounding more excited than he should really be.

“Yeah,” said S’us. S’us reached into her pouch. She fumbled around in it for a moment with her forehead wrinkled with concentration and a few inches of her tongue sticking out. Somehow Joey found himself liking it.

Finally S’us took out her hand, and on it was a sock-puppet in a brown tunic and small arms with what seemed like green matter that resembled scales. There was a bottle-cap pendant around its neck, and the large head possess yellow beads for the eyes. A red thread crudely stitched across the face acted as the mouth. The hair seemed real though, which was because S’us had actually used her own hair and tied it in the same style.

“And this is my sister, I’us,” said S’us, wiggling the sock puppet so the arms flailed pointlessly. “Say high to the Rakai and his Chevalier, sister.”

S’us produced the voice for the sock-puppet, which was her own voice. And with her mouth slightly moving her ventriloquist skills weren’t really spectacular, “Hi, everyone! My name is I’us. It is my pleasure to meet you all!”

Joey grinned. He gave the puppet a high five and said, “Yo, what’s up! Aha! Hey S’us, you’re a real comedian.”

“That was really funny,” said Lezura.

But both of them receive a shock when S’us skin tone darkened. She frown at them, and said sharply, “What do you mean by funny? Why are you all laughing at my sister?”

“Oh come, on,” said Joey, “You—”

“Joey...” Lezura said cautiously, giving him a glance before turning back to S’us, who stilled fumed at them with skin as red as her hair “...I do not think she is joking. Rapturans express themselves through their colors...”

Joey felt a lump in his throat and something heavy drop in his gut. He cautiously put his bowl down and said to S’us, “You’re serious?”

The red in S’us’ skin deepened. “Of course I am,” she said; but with the sock-puppet’s mouth moving it was actually I’us speaking. “What, because I’m not made out of flesh I can’t be her sister?”

“No...” Joey said to get on her good side, but he trailed off.

Between Lezura and Joey, this was the weirdest thing the two had yet to witness together.

“We are so sorry,” said Lezura. “We honestly had no idea that you were serious. It just...well...honestly I have never encountered something like this...” But Lezura knew deep in her head something was wrong with S’us upstairs but didn’t have the heart to say it. Or could she really just be playing a prank to get attention from them?

S'us and I'us looked at her each other. S'us even pulled down on the inside of the puppet so I'us would mimic one's frown. Joey and Lezura were left waiting in suspense at another out of the ordinary display.

But I'us said, "We're sorry as well."

"Yes," said S'us with a nervous smile. "We are partly to blame as well. We always expect people to see us as real sisters—"

"But they can never come to accept us," said I'us, finishing for her sister.

"That's fine, really," said Joey.

I'us and S'us looked at him incredulously.

"No, really it's fine!" said Joey. "It's not like you're the only one who has an im-um-I mean sister like that—it's just that you're the first pair we actually met."

"Precisely!" said Lezura with her best smile.

"You have ugly teeth," said I'us.

Lezura recoiled in shock. "Excuse me?" she said.

Joey burst out laughing. "Well," he said, "she's real enough for me if she can point that out."

"I'us!" S'us said to her sister, turning the puppet to look at her and gape. "That was really rude. Apologize to the lady right now!"

S'us lowered her hand along with the puppet. I'us sighed, looked up and said, "Fine. I'm sorry."

"Apology accepted," Lezura said. Then thought: My goodness. Am I really having a conversation with a sock-puppet?

S'us turned to the sock-puppet and said, "I believe we have overstayed our welcome, I'us. Rakai, Lezura, we will be taking our leave."

"It was nice meeting you," said Lezura. "My name is Lezura, by the way."

"I'm Joey!" said the human, flying to his feet and almost spilling the food on the tray. He held out a hand for a handshake, but it wavered with Joey's uncertainty with how to greet the alien.

S'us stuck out her fist, and Joey hesitantly bumped it with his.

"I'll be seeing you later, Joey," S'us said.

"By Joey..." said I'us, waving a tiny arm at him.

The sisters left Joey standing there, blushing and smiling. When he sat down and picked up his food he saw Lezura smirking at him.

Joey frowned at her and said, "What?"

"You are really going to say you do not know?" Lezura said with an incredulous expression.

"Yeah I don't," said Joey.

"You were practically turning red over that girl," said Lezura.

"No," said Joey. "Yeah she looks nice for a lizard girl but—"

Lezura leaned forward and whacked Joey in the head with a fist. "Do not ever say that!" Lezura said silently.

"What?" Joey said.

"'Lizard'," Lezura said; "do not ever refer to the rapturans as that. It is a derogatory term."

Joey slapped a hand on the side of his head. He looked at the entrance to the tent and back to Lezura. "Oh shit..." he said, "Lezura I had no idea!"

"Now you do," said Lezura, "so be careful how you speak around us aliens. But though, the rapturans do not mind being called dragons, as those are very powerful creatures."

Joey momentarily forgot the major slip of his mouth and said, "You got dragons here?"

"Sure," said Lezura. "Actually, dragons are found all over the galaxy, based on what the Galactic Garden told us.

Joey sighed, said, "I almost called S'us a damn lizard—like a real jackass. She wouldn't have shown me her panties then..."

Joey trailed off and looked up at Lezura like a startled deer. Her expression changed into a mocking one.

“Yeah, okay!” said Joey. “I like her, so what? What?”

“I never said there was anything wrong it, Joey,” said a giggling Lezura, stretching out her hand to ward off Joey’s enraged face. She lowered her hand and said, “I think it is great that you can find a woman of another species attractive, actually.”

“Well she is a green alien chick, so…”

Lezura’s high hopes slowly vanished. Please tell me he is not talking about Star Trek, she thought.

“Besides, Lezura,” said Joey, “it’s not like I’m gonna go crazy over a piece of ass and forget all about why I’m here. By the way, what about the rest of my training?”

“Oh, make no mistake. I have not forgotten,” Lezura said with a devious smile to her lips. “As soon as we are finished with this meal will we be continuing; first with your workout, then physical combat and last up your honoi skills.”

“Could I be of any use,” said Tylin as she walked inside.

“How long have you been there listening?” said Lezura.

Tylin took a seat next to Lezura and said, “A few seconds.” She said to Joey, “So, how are you doing so far on our planet, boy?”

“I’ve been here two days now,” Joey said, with Lezura translating. “I’ve been chased by robots, a cossik and a pack of angry green dogs. I’m doing great!”

Tylin smiled. She turned to Lezura and said, “You should really teach him how to speak our language. Not everyone is going to have a translator.”

“I intend to,” said Lezura. “And in regards to you wanting to help with Joeys training, why is this so?”

“It’s simple,” said Tylin, “I want him to get strong to save us when the time comes. Plus if he’s going to be travelling with us, he has to be able to hold his own.”

Lezura turned to Joey, surprised to see that he hadn’t responded. But he was too busy eating. She said to Tylin, “Which aspects of his training do you want to cover?”

“His physical combat,” she said. “Looking at how he fought with my brother a while ago, he won’t last a second if he fought an orderran like that.”

Joey choked on the drink; cream soda with some apple flavored. He took some deep gasps and said to Tylin, “Podge’s your brother?”

When Lezura translated, Tylin said, “Yes. He’s my little brother, to be exact. Did you have any relatives back your homeworld, Rakai?”

“No,” said Joey snappishly.

Tylin wasn’t convinced. She said, “Surely there must be someone—”

Joey threw down the empty cup and got up. He took up his bat and made his way to the tent exit, saying, “Let’s start the training.”

When he left Tylin and Lezura exchanged puzzled looks.

Tylin and Lezura took Joey to a secluded spot. Some of the young children followed them in the concealment of the bushes until Tylin discovered them and threatened them with a scolding for them to be off.

They waved at Joey until they were out of his sights. Seeing the sight of them brought a smile to Joey’s face. And with a smile, he suddenly had a desire to see those kids safe. He tightened his grip on his bat.

Tylin brought Joey into a small clearing surrounded by a few pomeg and tall, straight trees with brown trunk with deep creases and branches that jutted straight into the air with long bright green leaves—called arrow trees.

Tylin ordered Joey to take off his shoes as she did. When Joey did and stepped in the grass he felt a million different things against his skin; some of them alive and crawling. Tylin took off her cloak, beneath which she was wearing a light grey, dirty cotton blouse. She took a translator out of her pocket and fitted it into her ear hole. It had a larger cap in case something happened where it would be pushed further into her ear and touch her delicate eardrum.

Lezura was a couple yards away in a gopoto tree, watching the events from a good distance to offer them privacy. But Lezura wasn't just watching them, she was also working. On her data-scroll she prepared a list of words in Naasi with their English equivalent to teach Joey later on.

Below her she heard heavy, numerous footsteps, and looked down to see Nartha and four others heading out on their greshkues on their patrol.

Tylin took up two swords, tossed one to Joey. He caught it awkwardly by the handle, and when Tylin noticed it she shook her head, wondering how this kid would even be able to save himself.

"Shouldn't we be using dummy swords?" said Joey, checking the inscription like strokes in the length of the blade. The handle was wrapped in brown leather with a bronze cap at the bottom that curved in the opposite direction. It was quite light, and a little over two feet in length.

"No, not in your case," said Tylin, turning her body sideways, and taking a step forward with the sword poised behind her. "A dummy sword will not cut you. But a real one will."

Joey said, "Hey, I've been cut and shot—"

Joey stopped right then when he noticed a huge scar going down Tylin's left arm and another on her neck. Holy shit! Was someone trying to cut her head off?

Tylin said, "Come at me, and make sure you try to take my head off—because I will be trying to do the same."

"What—"

Tylin ran towards Joey so fast Joey barely had enough time to duck. He retreated, realizing that this woman meant business, and attacked her.

Tylin relinquished one hand off her sword, effortlessly parrying Joey's blows. This is disgraceful, she thought. Even the children can do better than this.

Tylin decided Joey would have to be embarrassed before he realized how weak he was and decided to do better. She swung her sword up and parried another meaningless attack. She plowed her elbow into Joey's chest and watched him fall over. As Joey got back up she threw away her sword.

Joey watched it drop near a rock with a dumbfounded expression. He said to Tylin, "What're you doing?"

Tylin lifted her fists. "Kicking your ass," she said.

Tylin snapped back Joey's head with a punch. Joey planted a foot behind him. With blood running from his nose he swung his sword violently at Tylin. "I'm goanna kill you for that you bitch!"

That's more like it, Tylin thought. Each of Joey's strikes was fierce and powerful, but they still lacked precision and he lacked balance. She was easily avoided them and parried them by striking Joey's arm. But before Joey fell in his wild movements Tylin kicked his knee, sending him off balance, she thrust her palm into Joey's chest, finishing him off with an elbow hammered into his chin, knocking the sword from his grasp and sending Joey flipping over.

Did I just get a combo? Joey thought. Sweet!

Tylin stood over Joey's beaten body and said, "I took it easy on you. I didn't aim for any of your vitals. The next person you fight will not be so lenient."

Joey brought himself into a seated position, spat some blood and stared at his feet. It was only after Tylin's words sunk in that he realized she was trying to point out how powerless he was.

And he really was weak!

Up until now Lezura's always been saving my ass, he thought. I'm supposed to be the Rakai, and yet I can't even protect my damn friend when it comes to it. Joey, this isn't how your goanna get all the fame, power, money and the sexy girls like Tylin, Lezura and S'us.

Anger boiled Joey's blood; he gritted his teeth and clutched a fist full of grass. He knew somewhere Lezura was watching him. And she probably was reconsidering going back for another Rakai.

Oh no. That aint goanna happen.

Joey wiped the blood from around his mouth and got back up. Tylin saw a determined look in his eyes and stepped back, feeling the rise in his strength. Joey took up his sword, grinning at Tylin.

"You hit like a girl," he said. He copied the same stance as Tylin had done, "I can do this all day!"

"Very well," said Tylin, and punched Joey in the face.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Two hours later Joey dropped next to Tylin on the grass, his face bruised and one eye puffy and purple. Joey's body ached all over, and he doubted that any of Lezura's healing could get rid of the pain.

Tylin sat with her legs folded underneath her, taking deep breathes to cool down. She hadn't gone completely unscathed. There was a long but shallow cut on her thigh were Joey had gleefully made his mark.

Surprisingly Joey didn't see her sweating that much, but her breath was actually coming out in a shimmer like heat.

"You okay, teach?" Joey said, gesturing to Tylin with a hand at his mouth. "It looks like your goanna breath some fire or something...?"

Tylin smiled, her chuckling sent out more plumes of heat. "I'm fine," she said, "That's just how my body works to conserve water. My people evolved on a world with fifty three percent land, most of which was covered in desert as a result of it being so close to the sun. My body has naturally been programmed to conserve water, so I do not sweat that much..."

"That's neat," Joey said.

Tylin put a finger against Joey's forehead, allowing a droplet of sweat to roll onto it. She held it before Joey's eyes, and he saw the drop of water sink into her flesh.

"What did you just do?" Joey said excitedly, he sat up and forgot all about the pain.

"My skin can absorb small doses of water?" Tylin said, dropping her hand. "It comes in handy when there's no water around but the air is still moist."

Joey's mind was racing with possibilities of what the various species of aliens here could do. With it he wondered what he could do that others here couldn't.

Joey touched Tylin's skin on the upper arm. "No disrespect," Joey said, "but for a woman your skin's really tough."

Tylin said, "It helps against ninety miles an hour sandstorm that could otherwise peel the flesh off the body of other organisms; like you, nycarmans, lazhinians and orderrans."

"Damn," said Joey, "why I don't I have any of this?"

Tylin stifled and laugh and shook her head.

"So how did I do teach?" Joey said, desperate to hear some good news.

"...You did fine, for your first try," said Tylin.

"This sucks," Joey said, "I wanted to try out that Bluebolt today, but I can barely move my body. This is your fault..."

Tylin ignored Joey's complaints, taking the advice from Lezura. She said, "Just rest up for now. Hono'i is not the most important power."

"Then what is?" Joey said, wondering what could be more awesome than blowing stuff up with energy shot out of your hand.

"You are," said Tylin.

Joey pushed himself up onto his knees and looked at Tylin. "Me?"

"One's own inner strength and the ability to learn from past mistakes," said Tylin. "That is what determines whether you are strong or weak."

Joey thought about it. "Nah," he said, "Hono'i's way cooler."

Tylin whacked Joey upside the back of his head.

Joey rubbed his head, and said, "By the way, Tylin, you know anything about a girl named S'us? She dropped off lunch for me and Lezura a while back."

Tylin nodded. "Yeah..." she said, "what about her?"

Joey looked away for a moment. He grimaced to hide his smile, even though his cheeks were flushed. "Are you fine, Joey?" said Tylin, "You look constipated."

"No its nothing," said Joey, "It's just that I find here interesting—with the sock-puppet sister complex and all."

A shadow of gloom passed over the fields of Tylin's features for just the briefest moment. She hung her head briefly before looking in Joey's eyes and saying, "She's not a crazy girl."

"Of course she's not," said Joey, "I use to have an imaginary friend too."

"No, Joey," said Tylin impatiently, "you don't know anything about her. S'us actually had a sister named I'us."

"What happened to her?" said Joey.

"S'us only told us that she lost her sister I'us when they were fleeing from the orderrans from her country," said Tylin.

"Shit..." Joey said, "You mean like, she lost her sister and couldn't get over it, so she made her sister from a sock to because she was in denial?"

"That's how Clastaan puts it," said Tylin.

"A good girl like didn't need to be messed up that way," Joey said.

"Do not feel sorry for her," said Tylin. "She hates when people give her sympathy. She says its lazy, untalented nobodies that want others to pity them."

Joey winced. "Damn," he said. I guess I can't tell her a sob story so she'll sleep with me, he thought.

Joey heard someone approaching, and saw that it was Lezura. She knelt next to Tylin, who stood up and said, "Well, I will be leaving you two now. Keep practicing your slashes, Joey."

"Will do," said Joey.

When Tylin left Lezura said, "She really kicked your bottom, Joey."

Joey said, "So? I get my ass kicked all the time. But I always come back knocking them down. Anyway... about the Bluebolt..."

"We can do that later, Joey," said Lezura. "You need to regain your strength. You must know that some honoi techniques require the user to have a sturdy body—as was when you tried to use the Hiradokou. Plus your Blueburst is not powerful enough."

Joey frowned. "Whatever..."

"And you have to know about honoi-fatigue," Lezura said.

"What's that's?" Joey said, his interest piped.

Lezura said, "Honoï fatigue is when your body stops itself from using too much honoi, usually in the form of a jolt of pain in the head. This is to prevent a person from going over the limit of the amount of honoi they can use, as if they do, they would be seriously hurt, left unconscious, or even die."

Joey winced. "Yikes."

"But toss that out of your mind for now," Lezura said, sniffing Joey, "time to get you freshened up."

So Lezura and Joey went to the nearby stream with a new set of clothes given to them by S'us.

S'us got Joey and Lezura the cleanest clothes that she and the others had made; a silky brown shirt with dark brown hems and ropes tied across the neck to loosen or tighten the collar. And grey trousers.

"You're doing okay, S'us?" Joey said, looking nervously at S'us.

"Yeah..." said S'us as she handed him a scrub-pad made from dried vines a bar of yellow soap. She turned her head and gave him a suspicious look. "Why are you asking?"

"...N-no reason," said Joey. "Um, say, can you use honoi?"

"Not to any extend," S'us said, walking over to Lezura to give her her clothes and bathing implements. She approached Joey and said, "But I can do this..."

S'us took a small scroll off her waist, opened it and exposed a weird inscription in the center of the white parchment. She held it up to Joey, her face tightened with focus as what little honoi he had she channeled into the paper until the symbol sparked orange-red light.

“Release,” S’us said.

And a hose of water blasted from the paper into Joey’s face. Joey dropped his things and retreated, shielding his face and spitting out water.

“What the hell?” Joey said, wiping the water off his face.

“Magnificent!” Lezura said.

“What was that, S’us?” said Joey as he squeezed the water out of his shirt.

The symbol on the scroll vanished and S’us put it away. “That was released water sealing,” she said. Lezura added, “Inscriptions, called runes, are used to store matter in another space separate from where the user exists. S’us, can you also store organic matter?”

“No,” said S’us. She produced the sock puppet, and I’us said, “But I can—at least with plants! I just need to get back my old body.”

Joey’s smile slackened a little, he rebounded by quickly saying, “That was really neat, though. What’s the limit to how much you can seal?”

“It depends on the strength of the honoi user,” said S’us.

“The stronger your honoi, the deeper you are able to make the seal and the more mass you’re able to seal away,” said I’us.

“You’re really cool, S’us,” said Joey.

Lezura’s lips tightened and she glanced at Joey.

I’us said, “Hey, don’t you see me here too, yah big dummy?”

“Y-yeah,” said Joey, “you too, I’us!”

S’us shook her hand. “Sister you really do not have to be so blunt.”

S’us rotated her wrist, the equivalent of I’us rolling her eyes, and I’us said, “Whatever?”

S’us frowned. She put up I’us in her pouch and said, “Well I’ll leave you two. See you back at the camp.”

“Thank, you,” said Lezura, and when S’us was out of sight she turned to Joey and said, “Do you think the others are aware that she might have a mental condition?”

Joey gave Lezura such a horrid scowl that Lezura recoiled slightly.

“She’s not stupid!” Joey snarled. “Not because she’s not some know-it-all means she’s crazy!”

“I never meant it like that, Joey...” Lezura said, “There is no need to get so upset!”

Joey relaxed, and rubbed his messy hair. He said, “Sorry there, Lezura. I... Just kinda lost it.”

So Joey explained to Lezura what Tylin told him.

“Oh dear,” Lezura said, “It must really hard for her to get over it.”

“See, she’s not crazy,” said Joey. “And don’t feel sorry for her either. People like us already have our talent and skill, that’s our ticket to fame. We’re just the same, she and I...”

Lezura examined Joey cynically and said, “Really? You two are just the same?”

“Yeah,” said Joey.

Lezura said, “So that explains why you two are crazier than everyone else?”

Joey went from smiling with his hands on his hips to gritting his teeth and squeezing his fists. “Just go take a bath already you sweaty old lady?”

Lezura chuckled. At least so far Joey wasn’t discriminating against anyone with afflictions such as S’us. She thought it was good that he was able to at least try to understand people.

But he is still crude and ill-mannered, though, she thought.

Lezura walked along the water around a bend. “When you are finish let us meet up at the tent for dinner!” she said.

As Lezura disappeared from his sights Joey wondered how he could woo S’us over. He didn’t want to get close to her with sympathy for her condition; that would just be disrespecting her. Probably he could take the straight-forward approach. Even though S’us didn’t have to huge breasts liked, she had some curvy hips, and she was good looking even for someone not human!



The thought got him giddy, and he started to panic. He didn't know one thing about having a girlfriend!

Joey calmed himself. He took off his clothes and went to stream to have his bath. Once he soaped up with the foamless bar of soap, he scrubbed the muck and grime off his with the pad.

When he was finished he dried himself with a piece of cloth for a towel and dropped on his clothes. He put some leaves over his feet and put on his Converse sneakers so his feet didn't get swellings in the shoe.

Joey took up his baseball bat and made a few swings. He did them as how Tylin had instructed with his sword, and he was pleased with himself that he never left his silver bat back on Earth.

As Joey was about to make his way back to the tent, an idea sparked in his otherwise blank mind. He never saw a naked girl before, and right now there was one bathing just down the stream from him. He grinned and said, "Oh yeah, Lezura. I'm goanna peak on all your little alien goodies."

Joey put the bat in the sheath on his back and snuck around the edge of the stream. Next to him in the shallow water he saw long fish with iridescent red scales constantly shifting their tone in the sunlight. Their size caught Joey's eyes, being six feet long with round silver heads and large orange eyes. He stopped to look at them. Then his brain sparked and he remembered what he was supposed to do and moved on.

He hugged the bushes, gently pulling them away to reveal a wide stretch of the stream. There in the center of the water he saw Lezura. His smile was huge and drooling. Oh yeah! Alien boobies!

Lezura was completely naked, but her back was turned to him and the water rose just above her hips. Her long hair cascaded down her back like a golden waterfall, the sheen so bright it competed with the sun.

But Joey realized she wasn't moving, just standing there. He wondered if she had heard him coming, or if she was in some kind of faery-trance and was connecting with nature. But then he heard something, like soft sobs.

Is she actually crying?

It soon stopped and Lezura moved. She took her hands off her chest and washed herself.

Joey was relieved that the action had started now. He saw Lezura move her hair to scrub her back, and something unnerving met his eyes.

There was a section of flesh in the middle of Lezura's back that was discolored, twisting and netted, consistent with a burn mark.

"Shit, Lezura," he said.

Lezura's ears twitched and she suddenly stopped. Joey held his breath, his guts caved in. Lezura covered her chest and turned around. Her eyes looked even more insane than the gudfers'.

"Joey...?" she said.

"Shit!" Joey said. He turned and ran. He heard the water splashing behind him as Lezura sprang into action.

"You little rascal!" said Lezura.

Joey heard her footsteps behind him. "What the hell!" he said. "This chic is too damn fit, yo!"

Joey whimpered and barged his way through the bushes, sending tapikes and other small creatures scattering.

He took a glance behind him—and saw Lezura right on his tail with the towel drape around her and one of the big fishes in her hand.

"Holly shit Lezura!" Joey said. "How the hell are you carrying that—"

The first whack out of the fish sent Joey staggering forward. "Ouch!"

"How dare you try to peep on your Chevalier while she is taking a bath?" Lezura said, giving Joey another blow.

Joey took out his bat and swung it blindly behind in hopes that it would stop Lezura. He felt the bat hit something. He stopped, turned and saw Lezura holding her forehead.

“Oh crap...” Joey said.

Lezura dropped the flapping fish on the ground, and clenched her fist.

Back at the camp things were flowing as usual—that was until a loud shriek ruptured the stable minds of the people. The fighters drew for their weapons and searched for the source of the horrid noise.

“It came from the stream!” said a man.

S’us heard, and said herself, “Oh no,” she raised her voice; “The Rakai and the nycarman woman are down there!”

The armed men made their way down to the stream.

S’us took up a small dagger from the stump covered in scrolls that she was seated around and followed closely, her childish frame dwarfed by the huge men, and all the way she wondered what terrible things could have befallen Joey and Lezura.

And they go their answer.

They saw Joey blazing towards them with his hands covering his head and his feet moving like a blur. Behind him was Lezura with the bat raised above her head and her feet looking like shimmering heat.

They blazed pass the people with a tailwind that slapped debris all over them. They shielded their eyes and turned around to follow the Rakai and his Chevalier.

S’us was already ahead of them, watching Lezura chase Joey around in a circle until they reached inside their tent; where it bulged and bounced until there was a loud whack and a scream, and everything went still and silent.

The men looked around at each other. They all shrugged and went back to their business. But S’us and I’us were curious as to what happened.

“What were those two doing?” said I’us’ voice in S’us’ head

“That’s what I would like to find out,” said S’us.

She went in the direction of Lezura and Joey’s tent, but she was stopped by a glitter of light in the sky. She looked up and saw a serpentine creature in the air with a white body. Its four wings were like an insects, but with swirls glowing blue. It twisted between two trees, reappeared in the open. S’us saw more of the creatures, slowly looming over the place like ghosts. They disappeared back into the trees.

“Oikumi?” she whispered. “But that means...”

She already knew what the rest of it meant. She ran back to the camp site.

“I’m really sorry Lezura,” said Joey, rubbing a lump on his head. “But you didn’t have to hit me so hard.”

Lezura was seated on her bed in a new set of clothes she got from Tylin. “You should be lucky I did not step in your groin,” she said. “You little pervert.”

“Hey! I aint no perv’,” said Joey. “I was just looking for something I lost...”

“Obviously your sense,” Lezura said.

The curtain to their tent blew open. In rushed S’us. Joey was about to greet her but her expression told she was far from pleasantries. She turned to Lezura and said, “Come here, both of you!”

Lezura and Joey looked at her, and at each other.

“Quickly!” said S’us.

Lezura got up, judging by the tone in her voice it was a dire situation. “What is it?” she said as she put on her sandals and took up her spear. She could hear a rising commotion outside.

“Nartha came back,” said S’us, her feet jittering to go back outside. “He found trouble!”

Joey sprang to his feet and took up his bat. He followed Lezura and S'us outside.

In the middle of the camp they spotted Nartha and some other men, surrounded by the people. Lezura immediately realized that out of the four men that went with Nartha only two came back. Lezura looked for Tylin, but she spotted her first.

Tylin motioned for them to come over and Lezura, S'us and Joey hurried.

They squeezed their way to the front of the circle. Joey saw red blood on Nartha, and what looked like a gunshot wound in his shoulder, though he didn't seem perturbed by it. He also had a small rifle in his hands instead of the crossbow Joey saw him with the first time.

"What happened guys?" Joey said. He had in his translator and was ready to hear the news.

Nartha assumed Joey asked him what happened, and said, "My patrol team and I found orderrans. They killed two of us."

"No shit..." Joey said with a grimace. He felt a gloomy cloud over him. This is it, he thought. This is where shit starts to get serious.

"How many were there?" Lezura said.

Tylin answered, "Nartha saw eight soldiers, including a patrol Dawhawk."

Podge was staring at Joey like he was a leper. Joey caught his gaze and Podge looked away. Joey didn't need anyone to tell him whose fault it was the orderran came here.

Lezura grabbed Joey's hand so suddenly that Joey flinched. He looked into her eyes.

"It is not your fault Joey," she said.

"Of course it is," Joey said. "Two people are dead because of me!"

"No," said Tylin. "The orderrans were bound to come here eventually. They're trying to extend their territory."

"And it is wise we do not be in their way once they come here," said Clastaan, who had been silent and unseen up until now. Apparently for a huge man, he could hide himself quite well. Clastaan stepped in the circle and faced Tylin. "Tylin, how many of your troops can you spare?"

"As much as you need," she said.

"What are you going to do?" Lezura said.

"We are going to hold them off while we let the people escape," said Clastaan. "We need time to get some distance between us."

"I'm going," said Joey. He turned to Lezura and said, "Don't try to talk me out of it. I'm pumped up full of honoi and need to let all out."

Lezura said, "I was going to say that you will need a weapon instead of that ridiculous bat you have there."

They both smiled.

"Lad," said Clastaan, "I think it is wise if you come with the rest of us. It is pointless to die here while you have a much greater role to play."

"My role's saving people," said Joey. "That's what my ass is here for." Joey saw S'us smiling at him, and nodded in her direction.

Lezura wondered if Joey was doing this to impress the people, but her thoughts ended when Nartha said, "We need get moving quickly. They are heading this way as we speak!"

"All right, my good people!" said Clastaan. "Let us leave this place now. Pack up your things and get moving!"

The people dispersed, and after clearing out their belongings pulled down their tents and packed it on their carts with the rest.

Tylin pointed to Lezura and Joey. "You, come with me," she said, and led them to her tent.

While the people loaded their carriages, others went to the stables and secured the greshkues. Inside Tylin's tent she went over to a corner and produced two swords. She tossed it to Joey, who caught it much more smoothly this time.

She handed him and Lezura a dagger and a grassy, leaf covered cloak. Tylin snatched up a pale green, oval refile next to her crossbow and slung it over her shoulder.

It was a rapturan model assault rifle, the Raurus Assault Rifle, or RAR as it had been abbreviated. Its barrel was short and silver, the trigger-guard curved forward. The iron sights bore a resemblance to the plates on the back of a stegosaurus, and the weapon had a round capacity of 44, 11 mm rounds.

Back outside the greshkues were being tied to their respective carriages. Tylin, Joey and Lezura witnessed Clastaan hurrying through the busy place, clutching scrolls against his chest and under his arms, and there was a data-pad hanging out of his mouth.

“Move it, professor!” said Tylin.

Clastaan bumped his toe and nearly fell. He took the data-pad out his mouth with the tip of his claws and said, “I left some equipment back in my tent for you to use!” He turned and ran backward as he spoke to them. “Zap-dust is in the brown jars! Magnet-power is in the slender grey ones—”

Clastaan bumped his foot on a stone and fell with the items crashing upon him.

Nartha came up to Tylin, saying, “I have the twelve men prepped and ready.”

“And my brother?” said Tylin.

“Don’t worry,” said Nartha, putting a hand on her shoulder, “he’s all set.”

Tylin exhaled and her shoulders slackened. She said, “Follow us...”

Inside Clastaan’s tent they found the jars he specified lying in a corner. Lezura pushed herself forward and snatched one of the grey ones up. She opened it and studied the glittery silver-blue dust.

“What does magnet-dust do?” she said.

Tylin handed two of the brown and grey ones to Nartha who left to distribute them. “Mix it with zap-dust and imbued it with your honoi and you have a magnet.”

“Impressive,” said Lezura.

Joey, Lezura and S’us carried out the rest of the jars to the men. By the time they got out there the carriages were already leaving. Tylin gathered everyone around in a circle and began to devise a plan.

“What kind machines did they have, Nartha?” she said.

“They were travelling in a Droch with the eight armed men,” he said. “I can only assume that the Dawhawk will be for support.”

“Okay,” she said. “We will need to take out their machinery first, so we will have to create a rune circle with the magnet-dust and zap-powder. They will follow your path here, so we have to move fast.”

“What should we do?” said Lezura.

“Stay hidden,” said Tylin.

“Ah man...” Joey groaned. “I wanted to be a part of the action.”

“You will be,” Lezura said.

S’us took Joey by the hand and led him into the bushes. “Come!” she said.

Lezura followed them.

“All right people,” said Tylin, “we only have a few minutes, so let’s get to work.”

The Droch followed the trail left by the greshkues onward. The orderrans could still smell the scent of the aliens lingering in the air. They speculated an ambush, due to the escape of the survivors. But captain Nal wasn’t worried, not when he had the support of the Dawhawk above to spot out the potential ambush.

Nal pressed a button in the side of his helmet and said in the speaker, “Captain Nal to scouting-ship, proceed ahead to the location of the enemy.”

“Copy that, Captain,” said a voice. “The scout-ship is now proceeding to the target zone.”

Nal turned off the channel and looked ahead at the path. The Droch climbed into a gopto tree and a sinni and descended back on the path.

The way Nal saw it, these bandits must have encountered the two aliens at some point, and either they killed them or captured them for their own purpose. Either of which didn't matter. He had orders from the Viceroy to find and exterminate any settlers in the forest to make way for expansion.

The Dawhawk flew over a clearing in the forest that seemed large enough for a group of people to settle. One of the two orderran pilots inside zoomed in on the ground, maintaining an eye on the trail of the bandits.

His red eyes studied the path going in a straight direction. When he zoomed out he saw that the direction was in the said clearing up ahead.

"There," he said to the other pilot. "That must be where they headed."

"Yep," the other pilot said, and flew the airship closer.

The first pilot looked back in the Dawhawk. The ten soldiers inside were prepped and ready.

The Dawhawk hovered over the clearing. The push from the antigravity orbs stomped the top of the trees into a submissive bow. It was fourteen stories down, and they couldn't see anything. Thermal wouldn't be of much use here in the sunlight, and—

"What's that?" said the second pilot, leaning forward to point at something on the screen.

The first pilot looked closer. After some thought he said, "It looks like a circle..."

And before any of them could react, the circle shone white; so did the runes and inscription inside it.

The controls and electronics in the airship went haywire. Both pilots checked all the monitors, buttons and switches on the touch screen to try and get things under control, but the persistent whining of the siren in their ears told them things were beyond their control.

"What the hell's going on?" said a soldier from the back.

"The systems are failing!" said the pilot.

They all felt the Dawhawk falling, being pulled against its will by some otherworldly force, and without the systems on to help, they couldn't fight back.

"Can't you fix the damn thing?" said another soldier, sounding agitated.

"No..." said the other pilot. "Brace yourselves—we're going down!"

When they had finished creating the rune circle, Tylin and her troops hid themselves in the bushes. Their leafy cloaks offered some camouflage, but this was only for eyes in the distance, up close anyone could make out that the leaf patterns were fake.

Joey hid with Lezura and S'us. Though Lezura's mind was focused on protecting Joey and the key, she took a moment to study S'us. The young woman was completely alert, not a single ounce of apprehension was visible. While Joey on the other hand, was sweating. His eyes moved with a nervous pace.

But Joey suddenly turned to Lezura and said, "Couldn't we call Donnowarru to help us?"

Lezura said, "He does not like fighting, plus his annoyance would get in the way..."

"That guy's really useless..." Joey said.

"Who?" said S'us.

"Our pet wizard," said Joey.

"Really," said I'us' voice in her sister's head, "they have a pet wizard?"

"Pipe down," whispered S'us.

Lezura scowled. "Who are you talking to?" she said.

S'us glared at Lezura and said, "My sister of course..."

Everyone from their hiding place all saw the Dawhawk hover over their heads.

Tylin gave the signal, a loud whisper. She, along with her brother, Nartha and a Lazhinian man named Tet, could use honoi. And from the circle was a line leading to all four of them. One they got they signal they put their hands on the end of the line before them on the ground, and surged their honoi into it.

Like a lit fuse the blue light changed to white as it reached the circle, so fast that it was lit within seconds.

The light of the circle grew more intense, and shimmering faint beams lanced upward to the airship. The Dawhawk descend in an awkward swaying motion and fell straight down.

“We got em!” Joey said.

But Lezura knew better. These weren't stupid robots screaming at each other. These were flesh and blood orderrans.

When the Dawhawk reached low enough to the shorter trees, the forces on the ground saw the unthinkable. The orderrans leaped out into the trees before it fell. One of the pilots and a soldier didn't made the jump in time, and when the Dawhawk crashed into the circle it was compressed and crushed, resulting in fiery explosion that sent huge chunks of metal flying here, there and yonder.

Lezura and S'us ducked under the heat wave, but Joey was so captivated by the flames that he didn't even realize that a piece of shrapnel had lodged itself into his shoulder. “Cool!” he said.

The orderrans scurried down the three with a grace like an itikrat, dropping to the ground and quickly lifting their rifles. The heat from the flames played tricks with their thermal vision, making them unsure if the shape they saw was the enemy or a burning bush or piece of the ship, so they switched it off.

Tylin took advantage of the opportunity. “Fire!” she said.

Her troop rose above the foliage and opened fire. Yellow light flashed all around them. But though with an attractive fire rate RAR rifles weren't as powerful as the modern, and even with orderrans taking hits their bloodied armor still held long enough for them to drop shield projectors. However one orderran was effectively gun down.

The lieutenant gave the order to deploy shields and fire the moment a bullet lodged in the back of his armor, and turned to where he had heard the voice of the woman. There was a chorus of gunfire and yellow flashes as shots mowed down the bushes and broke apart shields.

Lezura dragged Joey and S'us to their feet and they hauled ass around a tree, just in time to hear bullets tearing off chunks of it. One orderran saw them and pursued the three.

A largaph got shot right in his heart. He lurched backward with bright blue blood streaming from his chest.

Tylin hid behind a tree whose trunk was slowly chewed away by the bullets. She timed everything, waiting until the gunfire ceased when the soldiers had to reload. But she wasn't using her ears.

Lezura tried to sift through the deafening gunfire to hear that precise moment. It was a painstaking task with her ears so sensitive. A nycarman could hear a nail drop in a room with the radio on, but they couldn't decide when to turn their acute hearing off. She made a decision to in addition to cutting her hair she was going to get head phones.

A lazhinian standing up a bit too high above his cover got his head clipped with three shots, sending him flipping back.

Nartha got off a good shot in the back of an orderran's head whose shield had worn out. His limbs suddenly went limp and he collapsed like ragdoll.

Joey felt the splinters from a tree sting his face. Across him S'us had her back hunched up against a tree, looking across at him with a sturdy face.

Joey said to Lezura, with his sword against his chest, “I thought these guys would be using lasers or plasma guns?”

Lezura said, “Lasers are ineffective because the particles disperse too easily from small weapons like a rifle! And plasma rounds are too costly to make and are reserved for use on heavily armored foes or mechs—plus they light up the place and your enemies will”—a bullet chipped off the tree near Lezura's head, stunning her for a second, she kept on—“will know your location! Most video games that use these weapons show—”

Click! Click! Click!

The sound of empty clips echoed in Lezura's ears. She said, "Now!" She spun around the tree with her spear ready—right into an orderran.

Tylin heard Lezura's signal and shouted, "Go!"

She broke from her cover, running right into the orderrans with the others. The orderrans dropped their weapons and pulled out their pistols, similar to a 9mm pistol but black colored with a more rectangular body and tick barrel—an 11mm Whammer handgun, or just Whammer?

One opened fired at Nartha. The rapturan tanked two shots that ripped out chunks of his flesh before firing a huge Blueburst in the soldier's chest that send him flying back.

A soldier shot down a dracoid with a round to the face, spun around and ducked beneath Podge's sword. He lifted his gun to fire again but Podge knocked it aside. Before Podge could behead the orderran he produced his wrists-blades and blocked it. He dropped the blades down on Podge's chest and made two bloody marks. Podge countered with an upward slash of his sword, cutting the orderran under the chin up the face.

The lieutenant didn't use his pistol; instead he extended wrist-blades on each hand and engaged the enemy; Tylin and two others.

He duck and spun beneath the first attacker, a yellow-skinned largaph, cut him across the calf with one wrist-blade, spun up and cut him across the back.

He snapped his head out the way just the gun barrel from the lazhinian next to Tylin lit up, ran into him and cut him across the chest. But that wouldn't kill a lazhinian; the wound was already healing. But before the lieutenant could deliver the fatal blow to the head he was forced to counter an attack from Tylin.

The two of them clashed blades, gashing sparks like tiny explosions, moving on their heels and the balls of their feet for easy twisting in a crazed dance.

The orderran feint a blow to Tylin's head, switched his aim and cut her right across her breast. He kicked her and watched her slide away on her feet. He planted one foot in the ground, tensed his arm and punched the air with a dense, cracking sound, sending a shockwave and a blast of air at Tylin.

Tylin rolled out of the way. The blast of slammed into a tree like a bullet, stripping the bark clean off.

Tylin got to her feet in a flash and channeled her honoi into the groves embedded in her sword. With one forceful swing and a loud grunt Tylin send the honoi flying off the sword in a short arc, lopping off the lieutenant's head, just as he set to punch the air once more. The headless corpse fell in a heap.

Tet the lazhinian stomached three rounds emptied in his chest and chopped the orderran shooting him in the shoulder. Yet the soldier still stood, lifting his pistol to Tet's head—

And that was when Nartha fired a Blueburst into soldier's head. The force so great it snapped his neck. It hung dangling like a broken tree limb.

Tet yanked his sword out of the orderran's corpse and watched him fall. He clutched his burning chest, where pink, threadlike tissue was stitching his wound close.

By the time he turned to Nartha he watched in horror as an orderran's wrist-blade shot through Nartha's neck. The rapturan's eyes flew open. He slowly lifted his trembling hands to touch his neck, but the orderran behind him shoved him in the back with his knee off his blades.

"Nartha!" Tet said in anguish. He fired Bluebursts repeatedly at the orderran.

With some otherworldly life the orderran zigzagged out the way of each of them as he ran up to Tet. The lazhinian was still immobile as his body healed, and without the strength to move he was finished!

But Podge was already at work. He coated his sword with honoi, and with outstanding dexterity swung his blade and sent the honoi flying off, slicing right through the orderran's chest and knocked him over.

The orderran still had a few rounds in his clip, and emptied them at Lezura, but she already rolled out of the way. He heard the click of the empty chamber, tossed away the rifle and produced his Whammer and wrist-blades.

He turned and snapped off a few shots at S'us. S'us leaped high over the orderran's line of fire and down at him with her knife. The soldier parried S'us two strikes and knocked her with the butt of his gun in the head.

Joey fired a Blueburst into the orderran's chest. It was a direct hit, but the orderran rode the blow, flipping over onto his hands and feet like a poised predator. Before Joey could fire off another burst the orderran shot him in the shoulder.

Joey fell, screaming and clutching his shoulder. The soldier heard footsteps behind him and turned to see Lezura. He caught the glow of her hand in time and twisted his body sideways to avoid the Bluebolt. The beam burned a neat hole into a nearby tree. Joey fired a Blueburst and knocked the gun from the orderran's grasp. He immediately went for Lezura with another wrist-blade drawn.

She whirled the spear around and connected it with the wrist-blades, stepped back, sidestepped and thrust with the spear. The orderran easily dodged it, but was unaware of a surge of fire that slammed into him. He was propelled into a bush that quickly caught fire.

Lezura followed the trajectory of the flame to see S'us with a scroll in her hands and red blood similar to a human's running from the huge gash in her head. The smoking rune on the scroll disappeared and the paper tore just as S'us put it up.

Joey rolled onto his knees, taking deep breaths and closed his eyes. He got back up and saw Lezura and S'us coming to his aid.

"How bad is your wound?" Lezura said.

"What the hell do you think Lezura?" Joey said.

Lezura smiled. "That bad, huh?" she said.

S'us said, "We must regroup with the others."

"Yes," Lezura said.

By time they got with the others the fight was already over. They had won this small victory, but with casualties.

Joey was glad to see Tylin, S'us and Lezura in once piece—even Podge. But he didn't see another person he was interested in. "Where's Nartha?" he said.

Tet gravely gestured to where Nartha's body lay. The sight of it hit Joey like the heaviest punch he ever felt to his gut. Nartha lay in a pool of blood, facedown.

Joey stared at the body for a while. Lezura appeared beside Joey and offered a hand on his shoulder. She saw a tear run down his face. When Joey saw Lezura looking he wiped the tear away and walked off.

Joey's mind felt out of touch, blank as if he suddenly couldn't think anymore, but something in the air above caught Joey's attention; some things, actually.

They were the most beautiful things he'd ever lay his eyes on; ghostly white but with a sheen of light from the heavens around their forms. Serpentine bodies with arrow-tipped tails twisted down towards the battlefield with wings of light.

"What the hell are those...?" Joey whispered.

S'us came to his side and offered an answer even though he never directly asked her. "Oikumies," she said, staring at them silently as well, "the Soul Collectors..."

Joey turned to her with an awestruck expression. "Soul Collectors?" he said. He could believe a lot of things, but this just seemed off to him.

Few people waited near the bodies of their fallen comrades. The Oikumies, with their sleek triangular heads and sapphire blue eyes, descended upon the corpses of all the dead, even the orderrans.



Joey watched them phase through the bodies of the people. They then reappeared with a ball of bluish-white light, burning like a tender flame, clutched in their six insect-like legs.

One of them flew close enough to Joey for him to look right into its mesmerizing eyes. It made a harmonic, hissing-chime, flew straight through Joey's chest and out with a small strand of honoi. Joey felt an earthquake of shivers ripple through his body, which ended in soothing warmth that made the death of the others around him a little easier to bear.

He watched the Oikumies ascended to the heavens with the souls in their grasps. They headed east, the sun shining off their bodies like twinkling stars in the day. And they disappeared.

A hand on Joey's shoulder snapped him out of his trance. He turned and saw Podge looking at him. Surprisingly the contempt was still there in his eyes, but his voice was neutral. "We have to leave, kid," he said, and walked off.

Joey saw the people stooping over their dead and retrieving their weapons and their valuable adornments off their bodies.

Tylin said, "Scavenge what weapons you can and let's leave!"

"I can hear the Droch approaching," said Lezura.

Joey was calm enough to get back to his usual self. He found the nearest orderran and fiddled with his helmet.

"What are you doing?" Lezura said.

Joey twisted off the helmet and studied the features of the alien; a mostly humanlike face, except for the flat pink, dog-like nose and creamy skin. "They're whiter than I am," said Joey, "I guess when they say it's the white man's fault they won't mean me."

Joey threw back his head and laughed at his own joke—just him.

The Droch landed from a sinni tree into the middle of the people, crushing one lazhinian and the body of the orderran before Joey.

"Crap!" Podge said. He turned and ran off.

Lezura grabbed Joey by the arm and dragged him. Joey screamed when his wounded shoulder got stretched. He dropped the helmet over his head and went with the others.

"Shoot them!" Nal said.

Tylin and her people took off with gunshots on their heels. Joey got shot, but was lucky enough to only receive a flesh wound.

"CRAAAP!" he screamed, stumbling in the grass. "What am I a bullet magnet?"

Lezura stooped in front of him. "Climb on!" she said.

Joey knew what she was suggesting, but it was just too weird coming from her. "What?"

"I said climb on you pudding-bra in boy!"

Joey crawled onto Lezura's back. She got up with ease, lifted Joey's legs under the thighs and hurried off with him.

Joey pointed a head with his bat. "Go, my noble faery-stead!" he said, and slapped bat against Lezura's thigh.

"Stop that!" Lezura said.

They ran to where they had their animals tied and waiting. Lezura turned around and threw Joey off onto Redbolt's back. Landing on his injured butt he wailed and grabbed it.

"My ass!" he said.

Lezura and the others mounted their animals in a flash and took off. Joey waved at the orderrans with his bat.

"So long, suckers!"

By the time the Droch gave chase the aliens were already too far ahead, and was forced to stop.

Nal, standing in the Droch, watched the bandits escape with clenched fists. Not only had they took out their Dawhawk with some kind of supernatural science, but they had fled the scene like crooks.

Nal took off his helmet, squeezing it so hard that it caved in. He threw it away and said, “Dammit!”

It was night when Tylin brought her party back to regroup with the rest of the travelers. A small funeral service was held for the dead, with their most precious belongings at the circle of the circle, and Clastaan offering a prayer for them.

*Though they split the blood of others in battle,  
It was only for the protection of others.  
So I beg of thee, angels of judgment,  
Condemn them no to the abyss of eternal suffering,  
For they fought with just cause  
And condemn not our enemies either,  
For they too had sons, daughters and wives waiting for their return with open arms  
And let the day come, when all of us who died on the battlefield,  
Will meet in the verdant pastures of paradise,  
Holding hands and taking a stroll with love in our hearts.*

The people around ended the prayer saying, “Thanks be onto the higher order.”

Among the weeping were Nartha’s wife and his small son. Tylin was there, along with Podge, Tet and S’us.

Joey and Lezura stood meters away under a tree and watched the progression of the funeral service. Lezura looked down at Joey sitting on top of the orderran helmet he stole with a bandage-up shoulder.

“You will get stronger, Joey,” she said softly.

“I know,” said Joey sharply, “I just wish everyone would get off my back...” even though Joey said that, it was still a pleasure to him to hear Lezura’s serene voice. Without an accent, it was something almost ethereal.

Later that night they travelled another six miles, settling down when they were sure that the orderrans had given up the chase, for now.

That night in their tent, Lezura gave Joey the data-scroll, and have him begin learning the Naasi language used throughout the solar system by all species. Within the hour Joey could count from one to ten in Naasi; “Sih, si’en, sete, si’ili, sai, toji, desi, casi, srip, tii’ep.”

“Very good,” said Lezura.

“You make it sound like I’m stupid,” Joey said.

Lezura didn’t answer that, pleased to see Joey back to his old self. She said, “Now what is the word for rock?”

“Hachach,” said Joey.

“Water?” said Lezura.

Joey paused to remember, “...Vava.”

“Wind?”

“Megis.”

“Fire?”

“Diech.”

“Tree.”

“Orot.”

“Wood.”

“...Moku.”

Joey and Lezura didn’t really go to great lengths in that night. Both were exhausted from the day’s ordeal. They settled down in their beds in the dark of the night.

Lezura turned away from Joey, but he was staring into her back.

“Lezura...?” he whispered.

“Yes, Joey?” she said.

“Back at the river—”

“Do not worry,” she said, “...I have forgiven you for your troublesome ways.”

“It’s not that,” said Joey. “I saw you crying...”

Lezura tensed visibly, pulling up her feet. “It was nothing...” she said.

Joey had the notion that if he pushed Lezura she would lash out at him, but he just had to know. “Are you sure?”

Lezura turned around and looked at Joey, her eyes gleaming through the dark. “If you must know, Joey, I was crying.”

“Why?”

“Because I am afraid that you—we, will not make it through this,” she said. “I am very scared for you, Joey.”

Joey offered a reassuring smile. “Don’t worry,” he said, “I don’t go down so easily.”

Lezura smiled and turned around, satisfied that Joey gobbled up that lie so easily.

The city which stood where the Ixian kingdom once did, was now the new orderran colony called Reskoth. In addition to the tapering towers it also had streets, small operational buildings and apartments for the native population and even recreational institution from bars, strip-clubs, theme parks and even a Rock-hunting facility, were people were allowed to hunt down big game animals for a fee, using rocks.

The man in charge of this city was Viceroy Bozobo Morg. He was in the central tower, currently seated behind the high back, pink luxurious chair around his desk in his office.

The walls were a mud brown color with large, silky banners hung around the walls of orderran knights wearing ornate ancient armor. The ceiling tapered high to a point, where there were wavy circles where sunlight flooded in from the top to bathe half of the room’s height.

In the far corners of the wall stood huge, black robots with angular, no-nonsense-looking faces. They stood with a regal air in their silky black cape with bronze edges and the military power of their homeworld-nation Keeltio’s emblem emblazoned on their barreled chests. They held long spears erected to the sky with huge, serrated blades that glisten in the light.

A massive red carpet ran from the door right towards viceroy Morg’s desk. There, Morg was hunched over the table, his chin resting on his hand and the other folded across his elbow. He had the full lips of an Outo orderran, trimmed shiny hair and a rounded, angular face. He wore a shiny black coat with silver and brown epaulets, a high collar with silver edges and multiple badges on his chest along with Keeltio’s emblem.

He wore an expression of mock boredom, even adding droopy eyes, as he looked at captain Nal standing at ease before him.

“Hmmm...” Morg said.

Nal remained silent. He didn’t really have much of argument for his troop’s failure and he was sure the viceroy was going to tell him why.

Morg said, “So, let me see if I can comprehend you story here”—Morg pointed a finger at him—“You’re saying that, in short, a bunch of bush people defeated your heavily armed men with arrows and spears—”

“Swords, sir...” said Nal, hoping it could help the argument. “And they had guns—the lower model ones...”

“Yeah...” said Morg “...with arrows, butter knives and their juju magic—and even managed to take out a Dawhawk without projectiles?”

“Yes...sir...” Nal said.

Morg dropped his hands and sat back in his chair. He lifted his feet up and said, “So, basically” — Morg gestured as if the bandits were in front of him—“you’re telling these people they can beat us with dirty underwear, their spit, and used diapers...?”

“Sir,” said Nal, “my troop encountered and unanticipated kind of attack.”

Morg scratched his chin, pointed at Nal and said, “And all that time you spent in training and in your five years in the military, they never thought you to expect the unexpected, huh?”

“Sir—”

Morg lifted a hand and said, “Captain please, spare my anymore crap out of your ass-of-a-mouth and get going,” and fanned away Captain Nal daintily.

Nal swallowed the insult like bitter medicine. He stiffly saluted Morg, turned and strode away with heavy steps.

Morg sighed. “These damn soldiers now-a-days,” he said.

On his computerized table, completely covered by a screen, a section of it became a square tile whose sides lit up. The screen then projected the 3D image of an orderran man’s face in living color.

“Viceroy,” he said, “you have an urgent message from Deskai Gadsa.”

Not him again...Morg thought glumly. He said, “Put him on.”

“Yes sir,” said the young man.

The image instantly flicked to a square-faced, pointy chinned orderran with low hair cut into a Mohawk. He had the thin eyes and spiky hair of a Lalu orderran.

Morg said in a fake pleasant voice, “My dear Gadsa, how good to see you again! You’ve grown so much!”

Deskai Gadsa, the second highest level in an orderran military just below Jinkai, frowned at Viceroy Morg and said snobbishly, “That is Deskai Gadsa, or sir, to you viceroy.”

Morg saw the arrogance of youthful success on Deskai Gadsa’s face. He was years younger than Morg and already held more power than he did. And with the cockiness of some sought over Adonis, Deskai Gadsa was more than a pain in Morg’s heart.

Morg said, “To what do I owe the pleasure of your virtual acquaintance...sir...”

“What is the current nature of the colony’s expansion?” Gadsa said.

“We’re still cleaning up the trees and getting rid of the pesky little people,” said Morg, deliberately not adding the respective title.

Gadsa ignored Morg’s attitude and said, “Viceroy, it has been months since Reskoth was established. We have yet to see any more progress being made with colonizing the Yuxu region. Viceroy Morg, may I remind you that though you have free reign in that territory you are still under orders from our Lord and our Queen?”

Morg spun left to right slightly in his seat with a bored look. “I know that much,” he said. “But do you really expect me to be able to move all those damn giant trees”—Morg snapped his fingers—“just like that?”

“Look here...old...man...” said Gadsa, watching satisfyingly as Morg grimaced “...we do not have time for any of this foolishness with you and your little squaddies you have romping in the forest out there. We want results; that’s what we put you in that big pretty seat for.” When Morg didn’t reply, Gadsa continued. “Our satellites have also picked up the destruction of one of your Dawhawks.”

Morg stopped spinning in his chair. He sat forward with a worried look. “How—”

“I just said we had satellites monitoring the forest, you foolish old man,” said Gadsa, narrowing his already small eyes to mere slits, “Why do you think I am reporting to you? It is certainly not to say hello.”

“Just cut to the point already!” Morg said as his patience ran out.

Gadsa relaxed. "Fine... Whoever took down that Dawhawk is probably sending us a message that they will resist us until the very end. We will not be deterred by such feeble-minded fools."

Morg arched an eyebrow and said, "Your point?"

"They are heading to the closest settlement in the region, called Suride Town," said Gadsa. "I want you to colonize that city under the name of Lord Borros Onn and our Queen. We will send you a satellite mapping of the city's layout."

Morg smiled, happy to have a reason to get out of the office. "You see," he said, "this is what you should all have me do, instead chop down bushes."

Gadsa said, "Just make you don't screw this up..."

Morg saluted him, and said, "Yes, sir!"

## CHAPTER EIGHT

For the next two days of the journey Joey was at the mercy of Tylin and Lezura. Each morning began with a brisk warm up and a jog with Tylin around the spot where the caravan stopped.

Even with Lezura's medical skills his shoulder and butt wound hadn't fully healed. This, however, was helped a little when Tet administered a vial of his blood to Joey, which sped up the healing process dramatically.

But Tylin didn't except that excuse. In fact, she said it was perfect, for in times when Joey would be deep in the heart of war, he would have to endure with even worst injuries.

After the jog there was breakfast, tasty meals done by the cooks with exotic flavors. But Joey didn't eat anything remotely resembling a vegetable. After the meal it was combat practice and then they would be off again on the journey.

In the evenings Lezura would have the rest of him. She went over his Blueburst to ensure he could release them quickly enough and with enough lethal force.

When it came to trying the Bluebolt it took Joey nearly a full minute to prepare the honoi in the right spots in his arm, and instead of a beam he was releasing a drooping stream of honoi. At times Joey would use honoi until he felt dizzy and his head throbbing. Lezura explained that it was honoi fatigue.

At night before bed Joey would hit the virtual books and brush up on his Naasi. He learned a few new words and memorized them well. He could even make his first sentences: "Yesh shou", meaning "Good morning". "Ir ari grato", which meant; "I am hungry", and so on.

On the fifth day since Joey's arrival to Sangetsu the caravan was on its way to Suride Town. They could see the top of the dome in the distance of the bare-road path, with over hanging crispy blue flowers from the vines of sinni and pomeg trees, like a giant, orange moon rising over the horizon. They were less than four hours away, and had even gotten started early in the morning to reach.

After his morning workout with Tylin, Joey was free for the rest of the day until the evening came, but he still felt the pangs of exhaustion lingering in his young muscles like flood water after a hurricane.

He leaned on Lezura's back to get some rest, while she directed Redbolt onward. That really didn't need much work, as the red-soiled path was straight-going, so Lezura was reading up on her data-scroll, researching the internet for unique honoi techniques for projectile type honoi users.

It was good that she could access the internet all way out here, thanks to the orderran satellite she secretly hacked with a program she got for from her friend years back. Unfortunately further hacking into the satellite would be detected, so she couldn't try to get a phone call. Not that she had a cellphone or there were any networks up and running on the continent since the Prestige System was institute anyway.

Joey's rest was thwarted when his energetic mind compelled him to try something. He leaned off Lezura and carefully leaped off Redbolt's back.

"What are you doing?" said Lezura.

"I'm goanna try out my lingugish," he said.

"It is lin-guis-tics, Joey," said Lezura, quite pleased with Joey's idea.

Joey hurried up to the cart being towed along by two greshkues. Crates of fruits, chests of valuables and gardening implements were packed in the back of the cart. Sitting at the edge was S'us, wearing a pink and white head-wrap and dressed in an old black frock with frilly orange straps. Beneath it she wore dusty trousers.

She was busy reading a book with a title on the cover Joey didn't really care about to pronounce. He thought about turning back to not disturb her, but she looked up at him with nice yellow eyes.

"Joey," she said, clapping the book shut.

Joey went ahead with his plan. He sat on the edge of cart next to her. He had the translator in his ear to make communication from her side easier. When S'us was about to put the translator in her ear Joey stopped.

"I wanna try talking to you in Naasi, right now," said Joey.

"Okay...sure," said S'us.

"Yesh shou," said Joey.

"Good morning, too," said S'us.

Joey was blushing but he kept at it. "Owwo...ari yuh?" he said.

S'us touched her book and said, "I am fine, thank you. I was just reading a book on my people's history back on my homeworld. Do you want to have a look?"

"Vri," Joey said, taking the book from S'us.

The book's texture had the feel of one of those ancient works by some famous, long dead writer like Shakespeare. Joey knew this because he went to a library once to try and read one of Shakespeare's works to build his vocabulary and sound smart. When he saw the first paragraph in the book he threw it away and strode out of the library.

Joey skipped the introduction of the book, skipped some more until he found a picture. It was the map of the planet Slyerrick, about six visible continents and some islands scattered around. He didn't see a recognizable Naasi word on the page. Luckily S'us was there to help.

She pointed to an island and said, "That is where my family came from, when they migrated to this planet seventy years ago, Sen-sisio Island."

Something struck Joey, he said, "How old are you?"

"What?" S'us said.

Joey realized he spoke in English and tried to string the right words for the question.

"Owwo...nihic...air yuh?" he said after a while.

"Sixteen," S'us said. "My species can live for up to ninety years. How old are you?"

Shit! Joey thought. How did you say seventeen again...? Joey didn't remember, so he counted on his fingers to show S'us; holding ten fingers up and then seven.

"You are still a child too," said S'us with a charming smile.

"No," Joey said, "I'll be eighteen in two months. That's if your calendar here works like mine."

"Which I strongly believe it does not," S'us said with a grin.

And there was a thunderous roar in the air. Lezura, the only nycarman present, screamed and covered her ears. Joey instinctively leaped off the cart and ran to Lezura's side.

"You okay?" Joey said.

"My blasted ears hurt," Lezura said, placing her fingers inside her ears.

The caravan stopped, carriage by carriage. They looked in the sky and saw the source for the horrendous sound.

Through the trees they could see a long red line in the sky, twitching and stretching. It pulled open some more with another thunderous roar that sent the birds in the trees screaming in their flight.

Joey was familiar with what the thing was, though he only ever saw it twice in his life back on Earth. Once in real life, the other instance on the TV in a liquor store on the CNN news' live coverage of a rift opening in Sicily.

The dimensional rift seemed to actually bulge the air around it, as if something was trying to push its way through.

"You have these things happening too?" said Joey to Lezura, though he figured it should have already been obvious to him long ago.

"We certainly do," said Lezura with her cloaked draped over her ears, "although our circumstances are different."

"Why?" said Joey, leaping onto the huge beast and crawling up behind Lezura.

Lezura said, "My planet, and a few others, had practiced methods of sending convicted prisoners of heinous crimes to other dimensions. This world was known by many names, but the reapers called it Wuharah. That was the first time reapers actually helped civilians outside the rift. They agreed to all create a path to a world where the condemned could be sent to live, instead of executed. We had machines that could open portal to other worlds.

"Ninety years ago, when the Akirmon government was to convict a racial murderer of raizean to Wuharah, the portal accidentally went off its time-space mark and locked onto another world."

The portal was wide enough now for Joey to see the swirling mass of the tunnel inside. The people were watching with sweating anticipation, like a monster was going to burst through in a bloody frenzy.

But small portals slashed open around the giant rift, and out flew reapers on large tiles of cosmic energy. What they did next was something Joey had seen just once but fell in love with completely.

The reapers lined themselves along the rift. They de-materialized their scythes and shot out cosmic energy from their hands. The energy moved in the form of dozens of threads, stitching through the mouth of the portal. The reapers visibly pulled, flying back on their tiles, tightening the portal.

"What happened when it went off its mark?" Joey said.

Lezura said, "The connection to Wuharah was switched to that of Deton, or hell; the world of the Barakies."

Joey turned to her with shocked face. "You mean literal hell?" he said.

"I cannot be certain," said Lezura. "But the creatures that came through there were very destructive and powerful. The reapers called them Barakies, and so we went by that name.

"When the rift was linked to Deton, it caused a chain reaction that allowed connections to both worlds even when the teleporters' connection was severed."

Monsters? Joey thought. They have monsters? Joey didn't know whether to jump around in joy or soil his pants.

An idea hit Joey. "Lezura," he said, "the teleporters—"

"Have been shut down," said Lezura. "After that incident, the UN of Sangetsu decided it was best to end the DMR program."

"DMR.?" Joey said.

"The Dead Man Relocation program," Lezura said. She looked at him squarely and said, "So no; we cannot teleport ourselves to Ugatin or Maltatabi Island. A teleporter is not even there, anyway, or else people would easily access it."

The reapers had managed to close the portal. It shrunk into a thinning red line and subsequently vanished. Once done the reapers simple slashed open portals and disappeared in them.

Now gone, the people breathed a sigh of relief. Joey knew now what they were anticipating. They moved on.

"Well this's a bitch," said Joey, "there're two things on this planet that can teleport us; that stupid wizard and those machines. But none of them can get us to where we wanna go."

Lezura smiled, saying, "I think it would be what they call in those movies a plot-twist that leads us the only option we were first represented with."

"In other words it SUCKS!" Joey said.

They reached Suride Town; a city concealed behind an eight story high wall of dark, metallic brown, covered with a dome that was rotten at some sides to reveal sunlight into its husk. Pieces of the brown lining on the wall had been peeled away by erosions and explosions to reveal slabs of grey metal beneath.

The path leading to the front gates were smoother, of red grey asphalt that sliced through the grassy ground. At the streetside were lamps in the shape of black, vertical twisting vines with five-petal



white flower on an oval bulb in the top. Thin trees with twisting green trunks and large purplish-green leaves; called fan-trees, loomed over the street to observe the caravan approaching the gate.

“Neat...” said Joey as he observed the dome.

“Keep your attention elsewhere, Joey,” said Lezura, gesturing with a hand over Redbolt’s head at the gates.

“Are they really goanna shoot us?” said Joey.

“Not unless they suspect us to be bandits smuggling illegal weapon and drugs into the city,” said Lezura.

The gates to Suride Town were two stories high, a shiny black-grey with ornate silver artwork like flowers in the center and a sign that read “Suride City” above.

The guards at the gate were a tall, slender lazhinian man and a largaph to the right. Both wore sand-brown coats with thick leathery collars. There were green epaulets with yellow dots in the center on the shoulders and right side of the chest. They wore black helmets that completely encased their heads like a shell, and grey uniform beneath with heavy duty, dirt crusted boots.

The lazhinian approached the caravan with his silver rifle raised and one had gesturing for them to halt. When they did Clastaan went to the front and greeted the man, while the largaph slowly strode down the line of travelers to look for anything out of the ordinary.

The largaph, of course, spotted Lezura, a nycarman, with some peachy skinned alien sitting behind her.

The guard’s face flushed with surprise. He gestured with a finger for them to come off their beast.

“Ah man...” said Joey as he descended Redbolt, “I hate the cops.”

“Just keep a cool head,” whispered Lezura to him.

Joey turned to see people from the group looking at him expectantly; S’us and Tylin included. Both women gave him reassuring expressions. So did Tet, but Podge was grinning at Joey like a boy being called to the principal’s office.

The largaph got right to the point. “What are you?” he said to Joey, translated by the device in his ear.

With a go-ahead nod from Lezura, Joey said, “Mi ari wan human.”

“Where did you come from?” said the guard.

Lezura quickly answered, “He is just another immigrant who snuck through the armada around the planet. He came here trying to make a new living, but he did not know the planet was like this.”

The guard wasn’t biting the hook like Lezura wanted. He looked at them long and hard, and said, “Come with me...”

He led them to the front. S’us, Tylin and Tet came off their carriages and silently followed.

Up at the front, Joey and Lezura were just in time to hear lazhinian guard say, “We won’t kill you for it, but if you please give us some medicine and weapons as a sign of good gesture, it would be much appreciated. We are currently short on supplies because the gangs keep on robbing the train coming from Ugatin.”

“Sure,” said Clastaan, “anything we can spare is yours.”

The lazhinian nodded, turned to Lezura and Joey and looked flabbergasted. “Who are they?” he asked the largaph.

“The alien says his species is ooman,” said the guard.

“H-uman,” said Lezura.

In S’us’ mind I’us rolled her eyes and said dryly, “Know-it-all bitch.”

“Quiet,” said S’us.

Tylin pinched S’us’ cheek. She winced and said to Tylin, “What was that for?”

“Quiet,” said Tylin.

“But what about her?” said the lazhinian, “where’re you from, woman?”

Lezura sensed that more hostility was being directed at her than Joey. "I am just a friend of his," she said.

"She might be a spy," said the largaph, "for the orderrans down south to Tartian."

Clastaan waved his hands frantically and said, "No, no, my dear fellows! This young woman is...well..." Clastaan scratched his chin. He turned to Lezura and said, "Where are you from...?"

The lazhinian lifted his gun to Lezura's head. "I don't trust this woman!" he said. "Not even the people travelling with her know where; she's from...?"

Up until now, what Lezura thought of Joey in combat was uncoordinated, unbalanced, and overall unskilled. But that changed the instant she saw the lazhinian's finger pull on the trigger ever so slightly, and a shiny blade appeared at his throat.

"Pull the trigger and I make you have to smoke out of your throat," said Joey.

The second guard raised his gun at Tylin just as she moved forward and put her sword in his face.

Clastaan flailed his arms about madly and said, "All of you stop this foolishness!"

But no one flinched. Not even a breath was heard except for a crying baby in the caravan and the gentle warm winds rattling the leaves.

Clastaan said with the most anger he could muster on his weary face, "Have we all gone suspicious of each other just by skin color and outwardly features, now? Have we all been blinded to see that we are slowly being reduced to nothing by the Prestige System and the orderrans?" Clastaan looked at the guards and Joey and Tylin, no one budged still. "It appears as if you all have gone blind, deaf and dumb. If we are all here right now, it means we are all in the same boat—we are all suffering worse than the gufders and the tapikes."

A tapike looking at the fiasco scurried back in the bushes, almost as if it could understand the rapturan.

Finally Tylin lowered her weapon, knowing very well that Clastaan was right. And if not he would take action himself to end the argument. Joey didn't move until the lazhinian brought down his gun. The largaph was last.

"Now that we have gotten that out of our systems," said Clastaan, "can we please be allowed to go inside."

"Sure," said the largaph, "after you've given us some supplies."

It was more of a demand than what the lazhinian had said, but they all complied. After given them the items, the largaph took a radio from out of his coat and said, "Everything's okay at the front gate, let them in."

Seconds later the front gate pulled inward.

"Thank you, kind sirs," said Clastaan as he led them inside.

When Lezura and Joey were passing the guards, the lazhinian said, "Just who are you people?"

Neither Lezura nor Joey answered. Meters into the city they saw Joey hold up the key of salvation before the gates closed on their shocked faces.

Most of the architecture in the town was angle-less, grey and brown colored buildings of varying heights. Most were circular shaped with domed caps, with bridges and platforms interconnecting them and irrigation pipes.

Joey noticed that most if not all the buildings seemed to have gone through some kind of assault like a dog that ripped up a carpet, but he could also see the attempts made to cover them up with paint and new material added to the wounds.

Nature had gotten its revenge on this city, as wild plants sprouted in unusual places. There were some buildings that had a tree growing beneath it and tilting it at an awkward angle. There were vines crossing overhead, though time had been taken to get them out of the way of the few light wires in the city.

Joey noted a few small buildings being supported on top of sinni and arrow-trees more than once, and instead of trying to cut them down, the people simply integrated them into the building's architecture.

The air smelt of wild flowers mixed with the stink of civilization; things coking, materials burning and the unmistakable stink of a sewer. All together it wasn't unpleasant but weird.

The sections where the dome was missing had even larger trees, and there was a small ville tree that jutted out the top like an alien parasite bursting through its host.

The traffic that Joey, Lezura and the caravan had integrated in was mostly cart-drawn animals. Joey did see a few vehicles, but they looked like they were chewed up and spat out, rusting and moving on wheels. It was mostly the security forces in these vehicles.

"You'd expect a hovercar on an advanced alien planet," said Joey.

"That is if you can afford it," said Lezura. "Plus hover vehicles do not work well in obstacle-riddled terrains like forests."

Joey noticed the weird variety of aliens around him. He saw smaller, nimble looking rapturans than the Dracoid. Their eyes were big and bright, and their heads rounded, yet with distinct features like nose height, chin length and jaw width. They had spectacular varieties of green shades to what of their skin could be seen under their clothing.

"Are those rapturans too?" said Joey to Lezura, gesturing as discreetly as he could to aliens, even though a few were checking him out as well.

"Yes," said Lezura, "they are called geckoids, like S'us. There are actually three breeds of rapturans, the third being the vipoids, but they are rarely seen even on their homeworld."

Redbolt walked past an alien that was nearly as tall as the animal. Joey gave the woman a fixed stare. She was tall, lean and muscular, yet still maintaining feminine grace and quality as she strode past them in white blouse and black frock.

Her skin was a steel-blue, covered in leathery armor-like segments all over. Her face had these plates in patches on the cheek and smaller ones beneath the eyes and chin. Their rectangular nose reached near the middle of the forehead and was also covered in the leathery armoring like a cap, and on the forehead three plates formed a "V" pattern. But despite this her skin had a healthy sheen, and the parts not covered in armor had a lighter shade. Her eyes were almond shaped and brown, her mouth wide, and her leathery head covered in bright red feathers from the top and upper sides.

"Are those some kind of gorilla-bird people?" Joey said.

"No", said Lezura, "her species are the yautgan. Though they have feathers they are mammals; you can tell by the breasts."

Joey saw a group of yautgans, male and female, conversing around a wooden table on the green-stone pavement outside a store. Some of them had skin tinged in pale green and grey.

"Yeah," said Joey, looking at the woman around the table's chest, "some nice huge boobs!"

Lezura nudged Joey from behind. They turned onto another street, lit by a shower of sunlight from a missing piece in the dome.

"What else can you tell me about 'em?" Joey said, swatting a bug from out of his face.

"They are very strong," said Lezura, "stronger than dracoids, and orderrans. Though female orderrans can get nine feet tall, and are much stronger than any sentient species known in the solar system."

"Shit..." Joey said.

Lezura continued, "Yautgans have thick skin that can hardly be penetrated by anything other than metal, even honoi does not affect them that much. Much like the plates on a largaph's head that protects them from head injuries from even swords."

Hearing that made Joey think he really needed to step up the power of his honoi.

"They sound like they're always ready for a fight," Joey said.

The caravan stopped to wait for two security vehicles to cross their path, along with a carriage being towed by heavy-set brown animals.

As they continued Lezura said, "Joey, please do not stereotype a race by their appearance. Those attributes are what their species has to protect themselves, and their body saw no need to get rid of even as technology progressed on their planet."

"Sorry," said Joey with a dull look, "I just didn't really know much about them. That's why I asked you."

"You made the right choice," said Lezura with a smirk. "Not many people care to study other species' culture, but I for one consider myself a scholar in such areas."

Joey rolled his eyes. "Sure..." he said. And upon doing so Joey picked out of the crowd individuals in suits of metallic armor covering every inch except their green heads.

Before Joey could inquire about them movement close to him caught his attention. He looked down and saw small children, running by the caravan to have a look at the new visitors. They waved at them, and Joey waved back.

But among the bliss of childish laughter and smiles, Joey couldn't help but pick out malicious eyes fixed on him and Lezura like their next meal.

Joey nudged Lezura and gestured for her to glance at the people. "You did them something, Lezura...?" Joey said.

Lezura looked at the men leaning against the wall outside a clothing store, from yautgan to geckoid to lazhinian. She looked away with a creeping feeling up her back and said, "I am a nycarman, so they put me in the same boat as orderrans; people who try to oppress the other species."

Joey touched her lightly on the shoulder. "Don't pay 'em any mind, Lezura, you aint like that." Joey looked back at the men and said, "And I'm the Rakai! And I'll kick anyone's ass who tries to touch my friends!"

Minutes later, the caravan arrived at the inn on a narrow street, darkened by the looming buildings and the absence of a sun overhead, though the flower-like lamps provided a warm glow of glittery yellow light. The inn itself was a four-sided building without angles, sand colored and looking like it was going to fall down on them.

It wasn't rare for buildings to be pushed over when the trees sprung up from beneath them, but luckily a network of vines and branches skewered the top of the eight story building and held it in place.

Everyone got off their animals to check their belongings. As Joey did so, he found amongst his bag next to painting of Blinchi something he had forgotten.

"Check it out," he said as he held up an acorn.

Lezura knew what it was, and said, "Why would you be carrying around an acorn?"

Joey grinned, saying, "I stole it from the squirrel. You know, Nutty the talking squirrel!"

He saw Lezura smile, and open her mouth as if she were about to laugh.

"I know," said Joey, "It's funny, right?"

"So you are the moron that stole the squirrel's nut?" said Lezura, adding a light laugh.

"That was cold Lezura," said Joey, "I aint stupid. The real idiots are the people who actually put crap like that on the news."

Lezura nodded, biting her bottom lip.

Joey scowled at her, and said, "Oh please, you're just jealous because my nut looks better than your ugly braces!"

Lezura stopped smiling and instinctively reached a hand to her mouth. She whacked Joey in the head with a fist and said, "Leave my braces out of this!"

Claasaan, S'us and Tylin came up to Joey and Lezura.

"Where are you youngsters heading from here?" said Clasaan.

Lezura said in a low voice, "We are going to rest up in the inn before leaving for Ugatin tomorrow. We both know that the orderrans will not take their defeat lightly. They might send people for us."

"They will send people for us," said Tylin. "It is also best that we try to leave as quickly too, but not before spending a few days here to earn some money and get some supplies."

"Where're you guys going anyway?" said Joey.

Tylin was about to put in her translator when Lezura translated what Joey said. Tylin replied saying, "We are going to Ugatin as well. We want to settle down somewhere. We can't keep up the wondering around like the lost people of Shross forever, you know."

"I wish you the best of luck," said Lezura, giving Tylin a hug.

"Yeah teach..." said Joey as he hugged her. "Ooooo....teach you smell nice..."

Tylin pushed Joey away.

"We'll be seeing you around S'us," said Joey.

S'us reached for her translator and out it in her ear. "What?"

Joey repeated himself, and as he was about to hug her she ruffled his hair and said, "Sure thing Joey. But we won't be in the same inn though."

"Why not?" said Joey.

S'us reflexively reached in her pouch and produced I'us, who said, "Not this one. We will try the other ones around the city. We like to separate the group in a new area so we can get a good layout of it."

Clasaan produced a pouch from his coat. He gave it to Lezura and said, "Take these to pay for your expenses."

Lezura opened the pouch and saw that they were gold coins; they even had the symbol of the old Ixian kingdom on the surface. It was a tragic thing to think, but now that the nation was gone the value of their gold actually would go up. "How did you come by this?" she said.

Clasaan raised his hands, showing them a transmutation circle tattooed in each palm. "They do not call me the Brilliant Alchemist for nothing, you know. I came across an Ixian coin during of journey. I knew that the currency was still used up until thirty three years ago. It might still have some use now."

Lezura and Joey thanked them and went on. They found a stable where people tied their animals when visiting the inn. A young yautgan male was there to take Redbolt. He gave Joey as at least six glances during their time in there.

They entered through the wooden double-doors painted in red. Compared to the outside the inside of the inn was quite lavish, somewhat. The floors were jade with white markings in the tiles, though a bit dirty. On the walls were paintings of forests, lakes, mountains and vast pastures with an ethereal quality.

"Do they have running water?" Joey said.

"They should," said Lezura.

"Good," said Joey, scratching some bugs out of his hair, "Because the last time I took a bath in the river a fish bit me on my you-know-what?"

They reached the foyer, where round, rich red tables and chairs were occupied with people conversing and eating. Oval windows let in warm light that illuminated the inside. Ceiling fans circulated the rich scent of the cooked meal.

But all the sounds of cheers quickly died when Joey and Lezura entered the room. Even the waiters serving the people were staring at them like out of place animals.

Joey's eyes darted from left to right at the aliens fixing their multicolored eyes on him. Joey frowned and shouted, "What the hell are all you bitches looking at?"

A few people looked away, but a few eyes still lingered on them.

A lazinian woman in a yellow apron over her green uniform approached them, smiled warmly and bowed with the required courtesy and said, "Are you two fine people seeking accommodation?"

"Yes we are," Lezura said.

"Please follow me to the inn keeper's desk," the woman said, turning with Lezura and Joey in tow.

Then inn keeper was another alien Joey never saw before. She had bright green skin he never saw on any rapturan. And she was also wearing a suit of armor like what Joey saw in the street; silvery colored with blue in the creases, rounded shoulder pates with three light ports and a set of four black rings around her neck.

It made her body look a bit too large in comparison to her head, not to mention robotic.

She was reading a book held in the four digits of her hand until she saw Joey and Lezura approach the desk and put it down. She stood up and said with a bright smile of fine teeth, "Yen'i yatoi!"

"Marvelous day," Joey heard in his ears. "How can I help you both?"

She had a round head with dark green, horizontal flaps on top. Her eyes were large and seeming entirely bright blue like bulbs. Her nose was small and her chin pointed, and apart from the red freckles on her face she had a network of dull veins running from her head, down her neck and arms to the tip of her fingers.

"What is she?" said Joey to Lezura in her ear.

"I am raizean, yes," said the woman.

Joey gawked at her. "You can understand English?"

"No," the woman said, "I read mind."

"What?" Joey said, clasp his head.

"Lady what do you think you are doing?" Lezura said sharply, stepping up to the woman around the counter.

The inn keeper stepped back with a worried look, her metal boots clanking on the floor. "Sorry," she said. "I have bad a habit. Trying to get rid of it, but I cannot..."

"Boss that's really going to cost us customers," said the waitress. "Your employee shouldn't be telling you this!"

The raizean scratched her neck and grinned nervously. She said to Lezura with a bow, "I so sorry, my dear costumer. Won't happen again, no, no."

Lezura relaxed, dropping her shoulders. "It better not," said Lezura. "Now I demand to know what you read in his mind."

The inn keeper said, "Not much. He thinking about aliens, superpowers, having a giant robotic-suit, candy, getting taller, and the only way Lezura will get a man, is if she loses the braces. And mostly static..."

Lezura slowly turned to give Joey a disgusted look. Joey gave her a toothy smile and stepped away.

At least she didn't learn anything about our ordeal since we came here, Lezura thought.

"May I book you a room?" said the woman. "It will be free for one night. Take it as apology, yes?"

"Okay!" said Joey, making his way to the stairs.

Lezura grabbed Joey and pulled him back. She said to the woman, "That will not be necessary. We have more than enough to pay."

Lezura produced a few coins from her pouch. "Here we are..."

The inn keeper's eyes nearly popped out of her head. She snatched the coins from Lezura's hand faster than she could blink. The woman inspected the coins with one big eye. The veins on her forehead glowed blue, running down to her hand that held the coins."

"They not real thing," she said. "I can detect no trace of the honoi of nycarmans other than brace-faced woman on it." She turned to Lezura, ignoring her ghastly scowl, poised ears and grinding teeth. "But it is still gold! So I will take them, yes! Eight hundred yerks for one coin, yes?"

Lezura took deep breaths and calmed down. She said, “That is fair enough. How much is it for a night’s stay?”

“Usually two hundred for a single,” she said. She pulled away a space on the counter, and pulled up a rusty computer touch-screen. “Let me see if we have room... Ah. Yes! Yes! We have room twenty-one available.”

“Thank you,” said Lezura.

“Would you like meal brought to you?” said the inn keeper.

“Vri!” said Joey. “Vri, vri!”

The woman nodded. She stepped from around the counter with a stick.

“Why are they wearing those suits?” said Joey to Lezura.

Lezura said, “During the time of the first Solar War raizean and lazhinians were among the physically weakest. Whereas the lazhinians had accelerated regeneration as a counter measure, the raizean had none; they could only manage to read minds in battle to calculate the next move of their opponent. However that did not do much to save them from orbital attacks and mechs.

“Since then they started wearing armor suits to protect themselves, even among their own people at times.”

There was a lazhinian man slumped down in a corner, wearing brown garbs under his yellow coat. He snored so loudly that no one sat around the table near to him.

The inn keeper slapped him in the head with the stick. The man flew up screaming. “What—what?”

“Go get to work, Lanly,” she said.

The young man rubbed his throbbing head, clenching a fist as if he were about to give the woman a flooring.

Suddenly the inn keeper winked at him, and Lanly remembered.

He calmed down, saying, “Stop hitting me with the damn stick all the time!”

“Would not have to if you working, no?” she said. She gestured to Lezura and Joey. “Go and take them to room twenty-one before I eat your testicles again.”

Lanly led them up the staircase. The railings were made out of branches vines from the tree that bore through the top across. They came to a corridor where the vines were made to grow along the corners of the ceiling, and the flower-shaped bulbs were disguised with the real flowers.

Joey heard laughter coming from one room, and two people in a heated argument from another. Fortunately their room was at the end of the corridor.

Lanly unlocked the door with a key from his pocket, and open it to a pale purple colored interior with two beds up against the furthest wall, a small, crummy looking TV and a table and a wardrobe. There was a small table with some beautiful pink white flowers that was directly in line with the light shining in from the window.

“Here,” said Lanly, handing Lezura another key to the room. He put down their belongings in the center of the room and left.

Joey quickly threw off his shoes and dropped himself in one of the beds.

“Awwww...” he said. “It’s been a while since I had a bed this nice...”

The white spread was made from cotton and smelt like dandelions and some other sweet stuff Joey couldn’t recognize.

Lezura studied the room to see if there was anything in her opinion that was too nasty for her to sleep soundly in. She knew rooms like these went through at least two hundred different people a year, and not all of them were fans of personal hygiene.

She saw a short corridor with a door at the end. She went there and opened the door to find the bathroom. It had tan colored tiles and the necessary shower, toilet and sink. It wasn’t as clean as Lezura would have liked, but at least it didn’t have any traces of bodily excrement.

“Okay,” she said, coming back around to sit on the bed beside Joey’s. “Once we have our lunch we will head out into the market. We need to gather some supplies.”

The inn keeper had been kind enough to exchange some of the coins for money, which in Upsinodron was a sheet of red paper half the size of a bill on Earth, with the number of yerks it valued, where it was manufactured and the serial number.

Joey rolled onto his back, looking at the bony work of green structures in the ceiling. He looked at Lezura and said, “And then what, we just leave tomorrow?”

“Yes,” said Lezura.

“Can’t we stay two days?” Joey said, “I was just starting to get to know S’us.”

Lezura smiled and said, “It is nice to know that you two are getting along fine, but do not forget why you are here, Joey.”

Joe waved her off. “Yeah, yeah,” he said. “I’m supposed to save the world; I’m the only one who can do it, blah-blah-blah, and all that stuff.”

“Actually,” said Lezura, “anyone who has honoi can activate the key. But it can choose who it response to.”

Joey sat up, took the key from around his neck and studied it. “You saying this thing is alive?”

“Not alive,” said Lezura, folding her bare feet beneath her on the bed and untying her ponytail. “It has a preprogrammed AI—artificial intelligence.”

“I know what AI means, Lezura,” said Joey, “I watched Star Trek.”

Lezura frowned and scoffed. “That ridiculous TV show.”

“Lezura it’s not...rid—ridus—stupid!”

“Ri-di-cu-lous,” said Lezura, “and of course it is! Every alien is stereotyped as having a one tracked mind set on being smugglers, merchants or warriors. And that awful man named Kirk keeps on having sex with anything that stands on two legs and has a vagina. I can only imagine the amount of STDs he has spread or the children born without a father in that galaxy.” She took a comb out of her back and sat to comb her hair.

“Any way, the key responds to honoi. You can channel your honoi into it to activate a response.”

Joey turned to the other side of the bed, trying to get what little privacy he could. He closed his eyes and steadily transferred his honoi into the key. He felt the compass vibrate in his hand, and he opened his eye to see the key glowing.

“We’ve got something here,” said Joey.

Light from the key materialized into the air. Joey leaped out of the bed, and Lezura stopped combing her hair. The light stopped just beneath the ceiling without even touching it. Parts of it changed color and became three dimensional, shaping itself until it became a hologram. In the center of it Joey saw the rounded face of an Outo nycarman with curly yellow hair.

“Why, hello there, Joey,” said the man in English, his voice accented like someone from a Caribbean island.

“Who the hell’re you?” said Joey.

“Would you have some manners, boy?” Lezura said.

The man lifted a green-sleeved hand and waved it. “That is quite fine, Lezura. It is his attitude that I like about him.” He said to Joey, “My name is Fopi. I helped the Dielenganns create the God Titan eleven hundred years ago.”

“Nice,” Joey said. He scratched his chin. He said, “Wait, how can you speak English?”

“I used the key to scan the English dictionary,” Lezura said.

“You can do that?” Joey asked Lezura.

“Yes,” she said.

Fopi’s image sizzled and crackled. His words became distorted.



“What’s going on?” Joey said frantically. “Did I ask the wrong questions and override your system or some shit like that?”

Fopi said through the haze, “No...not...that...honoī...enough—”

The hologram evaporated and the light dropped back into the key. Joey shook the compass in case a bug got lodged inside it and was screwing with the system. He turned to Lezura with a worried look. “What just happened?”

Lezura took a moment to think before she said, “I think he was trying to say that your honoī was not efficient enough.”

Joey recoiled with wide eyes. “What?”

“It is true,” Lezura said. “Joey, you have usually vast amounts of honoī. You just have no idea how to use it.”

Joey put the key back in his shirt. “Then why the hell did you people all bring me here, say I’m the ‘Chosen One’, and then diss me by saying I’m not good enough?”

“Because you have the potential, Joey,” said Lezura, “you just need to access it.”

Joey folded his arms. Trying to find his potential wasn’t really something he thought about. He just saw things as being done or not done. He wasn’t really into the trying and working hard part. It was bad enough with the training and trying to learn a new language—but worse when those efforts weren’t enough. He wondered what—

“You know what, I’ll think about all of that crap after we have lunch,” he said. “I’m hungry enough to eat one of your butt cheeks—”

Joey didn’t get the time to finish the sentence; Lezura had chased him out of the room.

After a hefty lunch and bath, Joey and Lezura headed out into the market. To avoid too much staring and attention, Lezura took measures to disguise Joey’s appearance. She told the inn keeper to get some clothes long enough to conceal his body down to the hands and feet, and also make sure that shirt had a hood.

She got some materials to paint Joey’s face purple. But Joey didn’t feel one hundred percent about the idea.

“You know, what you’re doing is racist Lezura,” Joey had said.

“How so?” said Lezura as she applied the face paint.

“This is what white people did to mock black people, back on Earth. Didn’t you study any of this?”

“Yes,” Lezura said, slowly losing her temper.

“Then why’re you doing it?”

Lezura shot an angry glance at Joey and said, “Because it is the only thing we can do to keep the many eyes off you, Joey.”

“Why can’t you just change my face with your”—Joey wiggled his fingers and waved his hands in an arc—“faery magic!”

Lezura saw the bat close by, a muscle twitched to reach for it but she controlled the rest of her body. She sad through clenched teeth, “Because...Joey...I have not learned how to mainta in the change on other people’s skin.”

“See, this is what I mean by all this learning, trying, practicing crap. It’s all just a bunch of bull’. Why can’t we just do things—”

“For once would you shut up?” Lezura shouted. “Can a moment not pass and you do not say something?”

“No...”

Lezura decided the best option was to stop talking to Joey, which worked. He shut up when there wasn’t an audience to hear him.

So to everyone around her, Lezura was walking with a short nycarman either her little brother or her son. Joey wore a red, hooded sweater with segmented white hems and seams with the logo of a grinning gufder on the back. He wore black trousers and black cotton gloves. Lezura was in a pink blouse with a green stripes across the chest and frill hems, and white tights.

She hid her pouch beneath a single-strap, and as always she was carrying her utility belt. She concealed her spear in the back, but Joey carried his baseball bat in one hand against his shoulder.

The market was cramped, noisy and smelly with all kinds of food on sale. Tents and tarpaulins were what covered most of the stalls, but there were some stores selling goods as well. Outside of the stores were electrical outlets were the vendors outside borrowed power to refrigerate their meat in exchange for fifteen percent of the sales going to the store they borrowed from.

Suride Town was one of the very few places to have electricity. Most secluded societies like this depended on a massive generator to power as much as forty percent of the city. But the lines running Ugatin's capital city all the way to Suride Town were still intact.

"You sure the cops won't slap the bracelets on me for carrying around a bat, Lezura?" Joey said.

Lezura searched some of the stalls for tinned goods. She found a few and bought them from the lazhinian woman.

"I am certain they will not arrest you for carrying a bat," said Lezura. "They know that most of the people here have to hunt for their food if the supply train does not arrive on time. But they do not allow civilians any whatsoever to carry firearms. Even possess them in their own homes. People can have weapons, but the authorities must have more powerful ones. That is what maintains order here at Suride Town."

"Okay..." said Joey, looking around at the people. Some were looking at him, but it was just surprised glances to see a group of nycarmans here.

While Lezura was busy negotiating the price for a pair of boots with a largaph, Joey spotted some interesting animals in cages. He went closer and stooped to observe them properly.

They had pink colored exoskeletons with six legs jointed legs. Their abdomens were yellow and segmented and their heads brown with pointed projections around the mouth. Six beady blue eyes stared back up at Joey. They crawled amongst each other with scraping noises.

He spotted the dracoid woman looking at him with an expectant expression.

"...Ma...um...Ma'wha dua hali...creaha?" said Joey.

"They're gassappers," the woman said.

"Ma'wha?" Joey said in hopes she would give him an explanation.

"Gassappers," the woman said with an irritated expression. When she realized Joey didn't what they were, she said, "They're leftovers from the second Solar War with the exeons. Big bugs that feed on all kinds of fuel; gasoline, petroleum, ethanol... They're real pests. They sense the chemical compounds in fuel and go all the way towards it. Even if it's in a machine they'll gnaw their way until they reach."

Joey was instantly impressed by their nature. "Owwo...um...dammit...pleti iawi ni' jipap?" he said.

The woman heard the nycarman mix up "pleti" with "pleti-ta"; many instead of much. But she understood what he was saying. "I sell by half a dozen; six for six hundred yerks."

Joey held a finger to the woman and quickly ran back to Lezura; who had successfully bargained her boots and was looking for some skin lotion.

"Lez', I need six hundred yerks," said Joey.

"What for?" she said as she reached for her pouch.

"I need to buy some of those gassappers," said Joey, "they look really cool."

Lezura didn't want Joey to squander off their money on foolish things. But it was their money, and she could at least let him enjoy it while he could.

She gave him the money and Joey hurried back to the woman. She took out six of the gassappers and put them in a mesh bag. As she handed it to him she said, "Make sure you don't remove the caps off their mouths unless you intend to use them. Once it's gone they'll bite through anything."

Joey nodded at her and put them in his bag. When he was turning back to Lezura he saw three men turning their heads away, as if they were just looking at him. Joey continued walking, but he was sure the men were up to something. He had recognized the yautgan from when he was just entering the city.

He found Lezura inside a dimly lit clothing store. He walked pass two people and said in Lezura's ear, "We're being followed."

Lezura continued checking the price on the clothes as if she hadn't heard anything. But she said softly, "Who?"

"The fellas that were staring at us when we came in the city," Joey said.

Lezura nodded and smiled like she liked the jeans she was looking at. "I figured they would think that two nycarmans would be coming from the Prestige Kingdom, and that we would have money."

"So...what...?" said Joey.

"We leave now and prepare ourselves for the worst," Lezura said.

Joey built up some honoi in his arm. "Yeah," he said.

As they left the store and made their way out of the market in hurried strides, they were ambushed.

## CHAPTER NINE

Lezura and Joey were walking back when some of the people who had their backs turned to them rushed up to them with knives and clubs. They were eight of them; two yautgans, two geckoids and four largaphs.

Lezura and Joey went back to back, studying the movements of each man as they surrounded them.

“We do not want any trouble,” said Lezura with one hand in her back on her sack of nerve-numb dust. “We have little to give, so let us just be on our way.”

One of the geckoids cackled, dressed in a red sweater with a sleeveless orange jacket and brown trousers; all dirty. “Look here, pretty miss,” he said, “nycarmans always have money. Don’t try to screw with us. You probably thought it would be nice to come visit this city as if it’s a tourist spot. You and you’re pint sized man there!”

Joey felt a nerve in his head snap, but he held his cool until Lezura gave the order.

The geckoid, who Lezura confirmed as the boss, gestured to a yautgan four times his size and said, “Get them.”

As the yautgan approached with his knife ready to deliver the blow Lezura said, “Now!”

Joey ducked and rolled, his shoulder hadn’t fully healed from the gunshot wound and it burnt like a wasp sting. Lezura leaped out of the way of the knife, yanked her hand out of her back and spread the dust in an arc in the air.

It struck the yautgan in the face. It reached one of the largaphs. Both men wobbled on their knees, but the yautgan staggered around like a drunk. Lezura realized the chemicals were slow to reach his brain because of his huge mass, so she charged with a kick into his groin and watch him double over with a comical twisting face.

“Get them!” the boss said.

“Run Joey?” Lezura said.

Joey fired a Blueburst into the yautgan in front of him and darted off with the others chasing him. The yautgan stumbled under the attack, but quickly shrugged it off, turned and followed the boss and a largaph.

Lezura was occupied with the other three thugs. The geckoid nearly sliced her throat in a quick movement, and another quick swipe almost cost Lezura a finger. The swift little geckoid was a hassle enough, but the other two largaphs joined the fight.

Lezura pushed a largaph back with a Blueburst, simultaneously reaching for her spear from her bag. The largaph ducked into the blast and used the spikes on his jaw to maw Lezura. She bit down on her scream, spun and clapped the largaph in the back of the neck with her spear. He fell forward like a confident swimmer entering a pool—only it was the pavement.

As she extended the spear the other largaph kicked, she nimbly blocked the foot aimed at her head. The largaph repeated it with each foot, finally tricking Lezura with a feint, crouched and swept her feet off the ground.

Lezura landed on her back just to see the geckoid pounce on top of her. She moved her head out of the knife that hit the ground. She grabbed the geckoid by the shirt and gave him a loud, cracking head-butt that changed his color to a shocking yellow. He fell aside with rolling eyes.

Lezura fired a Blueburst at the largaph coming for her, right in the chest. It wasn’t enough to kill him, but he stayed down.

Lezura sprung to her feet. She kicked the little geckoid in the ribs to make sure he knew who was boss as she took up her bag and went after Joey.

Joey didn't care where he went so long as he went there fast. He swung his bat to get the crowd moving out of his way. A few officers on foot patrol noticed Joey causing hysteria. They shouted after Joey and the men chasing him.

"Screw you guys!" Joey said as he weaved his way through two yautgans. The gang boss leaped his way onto and over any obstacle in his way. Unlike the larger dracoids, the geckoids was fast and nimble, with thick thigh muscles that enabled them to leap great distances. He easily cleared over the head of a yautgan and over a passing police car.

Joey nearly knocked over a lazhinian woman and her trolley of goods. He bumped into a dracoid woman and was subsequently hit down.

"Watch it!" she said.

"Your ass is too big!" Joey said, springing to his feet and heading for a staircase.

As the yautgan and largaph thug went after him up the stairs, the geckoid boss leaped onto the surface of the wall on all fours, sticking to it he started to scurry up the surface much like gecko.

The staircase was a light green color with grass and flowers rupturing out of the rocky surface. It spiraled up the side between two buildings, where there were intervals of small corridors behind gates leading into the apartment complex.

A raizean was coming through a gate with his little girl. Joey turned sideways and squeezed between the two of them. Startled, the man quickly grabbed his daughter and head back inside just as the two thugs blazed pass them.

The staircase led onto the top of the buildings, where there were some green, featherless birds with tiny yellow spots and large blue eyes on top of their heads. Upon seeing Joey the yewins took off in a chaotic flutter and chirps with white membranous wings.

Joey swatted some of them out of his way with the bat and made it across the dirty craggy roof. He saw a pipeline running across to another building and went for it, but the gang boss leaped his way.

"Hand over the goods, nycar—"

The gang boss stopped midway when he saw that the alien's perspiration had washed off some of the paint on his face onto his shirt, revealing a paler, pinky-cream colored skin. Joey swung the bat into the geckoid but he ducked beneath it. The boss drew his knife and attacked. Joey blocked the knife with his bat and ran.

The geckoid whipped out his pink tongue that was well over twice the length of his body, wrapped it around Joey's foot and tripped him. Joey broke his fall with his arm, rolled over and shot Bluebursts at his attackers. The thugs took cover behind a nearby room leading down into the building and behind the water tank. A hole cracked in the tank and water poured out like an open artery.

Joey ran across the pipeline leading from the tank off the roof. With a quick glance down Joey saw that he was at least twelve stories up. And right there vertigo gripped him.

"Don't look down! Don't look down! Don't look down!" Joey said to himself.

The thugs were already closing in on Joey with the geckoid in lead. He was well in their sights up until he just up and fell out of view.

That was because Joey didn't see that the pipe had a slope, and Joey slipped into a slide.

He screamed and steered himself from on his back, trying not to go off course and fall to his death. He saw the flat of the pipe's straight direction coming up ahead and prepared himself. He stuck his foot out, and as he hit the flat he went into a mad run.

The other thugs did the same, coming up right on his tail.

Joey ran into a dark, desolate building. The only light in the place was from the entrance of the pipe, and inside he saw hundreds of misshapen shadows; old furniture and electronic equipment. He bumped his foot into an old screen, tripped and landed in a heap of dust. He groaned, getting up and limped around for the sight of an exit.

He forced his eyes search the dusty, musty smelling gloom for a door. He found it. When he reached there he found that it had a rusted lock on it. As he was about to blast it open he felt the stagnant sting of fatigue, and the thugs pounced on him.

The yautgan gripped him with one hand on his shoulder and threw him back in the direction of the others. Joey landed on something blunt that sent a jolt of pain in his back. It stunned him long enough for the largaph and the geckoid to start kicking him into submission. He felt a foot kick the bat clean out of his hand. He fired a blast, felt a throb in his head, and heard the horrid cry of the geckoid.

The geckoid fell back with his shoulder torn up. He kicked and screamed on the floor. "Kill that son-of-a-bitch! Kill him!"

Joey punched the largaph, and he punched him back. The yautgan came and held down Joey's arms while the largaph took off his bag and searched inside.

"Lemme go you dicks!" Joey said. "Put down my bag! Drop it you assholes!"

The largaph found only a painting and a mesh-cage of gassappers. He dropped the bag, turned to Joey and searched him.

"Hey! hey! Don't get too touchy!" Joey said, trying to kick the yautgan in the head from an awkward angle.

He couldn't die here. Too much had happened in the last days for him to just get wasted by a bunch of crooks worse than him.

He felt the largaph's hands around his neck, and Joey felt fear fissure through his body. The largaph pulled the compass from around Joey's neck, held it up for the others to see.

Shit! Joey thought. "Give that back you bastard! That's mine—get your friggin' hands off it!"

Joey managed to free one hand and punch the yautgan. The angered man punched Joey in the face, hard. Joey blacked out for a couple of seconds, then awoke to see the geckoid boss standing over him with the largaph, clutching the arm of his bloody shoulder and staring at the compass.

"This looks like it will do nicely," said largaph, grinning.

"What the hell is it?" the yautgan said, now pinning Joey's hands under his knees.

The boss snatched the compass greedily from the largaph and brought it close to his big eyes.

"Give...that...back..." Joey said, but the punch from the yautgan had made him dizzy. He couldn't find the focus to get his muscles to move how he wanted.

After a moment the geckoid said, "You know boys, I think this is—"

The ceiling overhead exploded into rubble. Something rocketed from the dust down like someone pushing behind a grey sheet, and landed a foot in the boss' head, smashing it into the floor.

"Shit!" said the largaph, hurriedly back-pedaling. He wasn't fast enough. A huge, grey-blue hand shot out from the dusty clouded silhouette of a large person and grabbed his throat. The largaph gargled and hawked as he was hoisted off the floor.

The yautgan leaped off Joey's hand, drew his knife and went after the figure. When smoke cleared the true form was revealed; a yautgan woman, wearing a silky pink-white night gown that was strangely beautiful on her lean, healthy frame in the circumstance.

She spotted the thug just as he sprang up and shot her foot into his face. Joey heard the splintering of bone as the yautgan flew back into a table and shattered it.

The woman tightened her grip on the largaph's neck, squeezing harder until he stopped clawing at her arm and his eyes rolled over in his head. The woman hoisted him up like a serve ball, and sent him flying out back through the entrance over the pipeline with a palm in his gut.

Holy crap! Joey thought. He kept as still as possible so he wouldn't end up like the guy who got turned into a baseball.

The woman stepped over Joey, making him see things that made him blush, and went over to the Yautgan kneeling on the ground. He was snarling like a tormented beast. He looked up at the woman; her round face with a narrow chin, soft brown eyes and wide, light blue lips.

He tightened his grip on his knife and lunged, roaring. The woman swatted down his hand, swung her arm like a pendulum and hooked it into his, lifted it and snapped the arm down over her shoulder like a stick. Joey heard the man's horrifying scream, and felt two drops of urine escape his body.

With a smile to the corner of her lips the woman threw her head into the man's bloody nose, shot her elbow up into the man's chin, whirled around and grabbed his head and bashed it into the wall behind him repeatedly. She let him go, turning away as the man fell with a loud groan.

Through the hole in the ceiling men fell into the room, looking around at the scene with a casual demeanor like tourists who were impressed with the sites. They spread out through the room looking at the bodies with grins and nods. Oikumies had already flown inside and perched on the corpses.

"Nice work, boss," said a largaph in a white merino and jeans, showing off his well-muscled torso.

"Just save the praises and get the bodies outta here," said the woman with a calm quality in her voice as she knelt over Joey.

"Sure thing, boss," the largaph said. He turned to the other men and snapped his fingers. "Hey," he gestured to the bodies as the Oikumies left them, "cleans this crap up."

Looking at her face Joey saw that apart from a scar going down her chin she was stunningly beautiful, and when she smiled it was amplified even more. Her head feathers were white, thin, long and in a wild fashion much as how he liked to have his hair at times.

Then the thought came back to Joey. The compass!

Joey spotted it near the crushed remains of the geckoid. With all of his strength focused on the one task, Joey whirled and twisted onto his hands and knees and pounced after the compass. The woman was quicker than him, even though being nearly three times his size. She grabbed the compass just an inch from Joey's reach.

"Give it back you bitch!" Joey said.

He attempted to take it from the woman's hand. She held it above her head. Joey felt like he was looking at the top of Mount Everest.

"Okay, that's just rubbing it in," he said.

The woman knocked out Joey with a chopping blow to his neck. She caught his body before it fell and hefted him over her shoulder like a towel.

"Who's that, boss?" said the largaph.

"That's what I'm going to find out, Tomz," she said. She stopped and gestured to something. "Hand me that silver bat...and that bag."

Tomz found the items and gave them to the woman. She watched to make sure the men carried out the bodies back through the pipeline. They would be taken to the scrapyard where the local scavengers would dispose of them.

She turned to the locked door, and with one kick flew it open, shattering the lock to splinters. She went into the light with her new captive.

## CHAPTER TEN

Joey awoke to find himself tied to a chair in a dark room that stunk of mildew and a tinge of sweaty feet. Dim light flashed from the center of the ceiling and the sudden illumination made Joey squint and hold them tight.

When he opened them he was staring at thugs posted up against the green-brown walls tiled with moist looking stone; from geckoids to dracoids, largaphs, lazhinians and yautgans. They all brandished pistols, knives and one largaph, Tomz, had Joey's silver bat at his side in a firm grip.

The air was humid and uncomfortably thick with the heat of so many people inside, even though the space was quite large. Joey felt trickles of sweat running down his neck, but he managed to find the strength to say to Tomz, "Hey...that's my bat you have there..."

Tomz, with a translator in his ear said, "Yeah. And I really like it." He held it up and watched it reflect a patch of light. "Pure silver," he looked at Joey, "where did you get it?"

Joey was pleased to still find the translator in his ear for him to understand. He tested his bound feet and hands behind him. The ropes were tight and wouldn't budge.

Dammit!

Tomz stepped off the wall and slowly swaggered over to Joey with the bat swaying like a flower in the wind. "I asked you a question, punk?"

Joey heard the genuine maliciousness in the man's voice even in the translator. But it wasn't the first time Joey was ganged up on by men and beaten for things such as his money—yet still the little critter of fear was scratching at his mind to be cautious. He didn't know what the faith of Lezura was, but he could only hope she escaped and was coming after him.

And the key!

"I asked you a question," said Tomz, his voice icy.

"You didn't say pretty-please Mr. Super Great Awesome Joey Sadowski," said Joey.

Tomz grinned at Joey, and slapped him in the thigh with the bat.

"SHIT!" Joey screamed when the pain exploded, he hunched over, groaning.

"Did that get your attention ya little shit?" said Tomz with the bat on shoulder.

Joey shivered, he looked up defiantly and said, "Nope...My nerdy friend hits harder than you!"

Tomz grimaced. He prepared the bat to deal another blow. "You little prick—"

"That's enough Tomz," said a woman's voice, loud but calm.

Tomz hesitated, finally he listened and lowered the bat and retreated back to his space on the wall.

From the shadows Joey saw the huge frame of the yautgan woman emerge. This time she was wearing white jeans with metal studs on the trim, a light green silky blouse and a sleeve-less shiny jacket with the collars wide around her neck like a frill.

"Oh... it's the amazon, lesbian, lady," said Joey.

"And you must be the strange midget alien who's too short to even jump a two-foot hurdle," the woman replied coolly with her hands on her hips.

The whole room erupted in laughter. Some men even fell to the floor; others were slapping their thighs and the wall.

Joey struggled like a beast in his restrains. "Just let me go and you'll see what happens to all you assholes! Just let me get one hand loose and I'll go buck-wild on your asses!"

Most of the men didn't have translators to understand Joey other than the woman, Tomz and five others. But they just took Joey's responses as futile tongue-lashings and continued laughing.

"That's enough already," the woman said with the faint trace of a smile. Once there was silence she said to Joey, "Your little face paint washed off. What kind of alien are you?"



“Human,” Joey said honestly, “a human that came here trying to make a living, and if you don’t give me back my stuff—especially my compass, I’m goanna make a living kicking all your asses!”

“That’s if you can reach our asses,” said a yautgan with a translator, but instead a chorus of laughter all he got was chuckles.

Joey realized that the men really obeyed this woman without question. Some bitch, he thought.

The woman folded her arms and walked to Joey’s right. “My name’s Yeltsa,” she said, “What’s yours, kid?”

“I’m not a kid, and it’s Joey,” he said.

“You know, Joey,” Yeltsa said, “I don’t know or care which planet or solar system you came from, but this’s something you should learn,” she leaned in closer, so that Joey could smell the lemony orange scent of her perfume; “never enter another gang’s territory unless you have a death wish.”

It wasn’t her words that affected Joey, but the smoothness behind them. He mustered up some courage and said, “Oh please, Zena Princess, I’ve had run-ins with gangs before, and they don’t mean crap to me. Now, I want my stuff, and my compass.”

Yeltsa straightened herself and said, “Anything that falls in my territory is mine, kid.”

Joey shouted, “You big bitch, people will die if I don’t get that thing back!”

There was silence in the room, followed by some murmurs. Yeltsa arched a thin, feathery eyebrow in surprise. After studying Joey’s tense muscle composure and the fierceness in his brown eyes like hers, Yeltsa concluded that this kid believed in what he was saying. With a quick decision she said, “Everyone, out!”

Without a question they all left through the discolored wooden door. When they did Yeltsa knelt before Joey, still a few inches over his head.

“Let me tell you something kid,” she said in a stone voice, “in this city my gang’s the biggest, and we run the Underworld here. You remembered what happened to those little dimwits that chased you here? Well that’s what happens to people who cross me. So now that you’re in my world, I demand to know what you’re talking about, now...”

Joey scoffed and said, “I don’t have to tell you anything. My friends and I almost got killed by orderrans a few days ago. You really think you can threaten me with your ‘big and bad’ crap?” Joey’s face took on a dull look as he remembered the people who died. “I got shot a few times too, back then. And that told me that what I’m doing here isn’t any kid’s Saturday morning cartoon. So for my friend’s sake I’m goanna keep my mouth shut!”

Yeltsa took a moment to think upon Joey’s words. She punched him in the gut and watch him hunch over, coughing and spitting.”

“You have a lot a balls kid,” Yeltsa said.

Joey took some deep breathes, said, “Nope...I think...you do...really!”

Yeltsa smiled. She stood up and folded her arms. “I kinda like you, kid.”

“Who wouldn’t?” Joey said in a weak voice, still drawing deep breathes.

“Tell you what,” Yeltsa said, slapping down a hand on Joey’s shoulder that made his bone shake. “You really pissed me off, but I won’t kill you. I won’t be that stupid to see a new alien race and not learn about it. I want to see what you can do, so I’ll let you do some work for me. Then I might just think about giving you back your compass.”

Joey was sure that Lezura was coming but she wasn’t here now. He knew he had to get things done; and right now he had to get out of his restraints and see what this woman was up to. “Alright, we have a deal...”

“Good,” Yeltsa said. She punched Joey across the face lightly, but it still knocked him out. “And don’t ever diss me again, little brat!”

Lezura's data-scroll was seven inches long, two inches thick at the screen and three inches in diameter at the side handles, meaning it had a lot of software and could do a lot of things. One of those things was satellite tracking.

Long ago before she went to Earth, when Lezura was instructed with the key she did a little experimenting on it—which was copying its signal to the data-scroll so it could pick it up on anywhere it was located in the event it got lost. It was a good idea, but the Ixians weren't too pleased with how Lezura abused the key, even though Fopi said it was quite fine.

So tracking down the Rakai by radar, it led Lezura to a part of the city known as Sty Avenue on Bal's Street. From where she stood on Bal's Street, she looked right down into Sty Avenue, and as the last time she was here, it wasn't a heartwarming or hopeful sight.

There were dozens and dozens of ramshackle-houses that made even the tents of the travelers look like ten star hotels. The street was littered with potholes so ghastly Lezura thought they would generate some dark force to suck down even a hovercar. Rusty zinc fences surrounded most of the wooden and broken concrete houses, and the air smelt of animal feces and burning garbage.

Walking down the street Lezura saw some curious people sitting on chairs and tables outside their homes, playing a board game or just chatting with some vulgar additives.

They all stopped when they saw Lezura and fixed their stares on her.

Lezura walked past some men that whistled to her to stop, and when she didn't they offered up some profanity too colorful for her to repeat even in her head. The women who saw her gave her contemptuous looks and made snide remarks with each other. One of them walking down towards Lezura, a lazhianian, deliberately steered off course to bump into Lezura.

"Watch it, pointy-eared bitch!" said the woman, pushing Lezura away.

Lezura had some words in her arsenal she could have let loose at the woman, but that wasn't why she was here. Her objective was to find Joey and the key and leave. Everything else was secondary.

Up ahead Lezura saw someone's pet karoti stoop and drop a fresh pile of dung. Lezura steered into the street to walk away from it, nearly tripping in a pothole.

She checked her map once more, wary that the people here might try to rob her. She stopped, looked around and saw some men just so happening to all steer away from her, and looked back at the map.

On the screen was the three dimensional layout of a huge building that they key seemed to be mapping. She wasn't expecting this, but it was damn useful and a saving grace! Lezura had spotted the only building of such a size in the area.

A couple hundred meters in the distance Lezura saw a twelve story building; an eerie silhouette against one of the artificial lights in the dome's ceiling. It looked hollow and gutted with almost all parts rusted away.

"Hi there, young lady," said a voice.

Lezura looked away from the skeletal remains of the building to a man standing behind a rusty, short mess-fence in his yard.

It was an old yautgan man in a khaki suit with the top unbuttoned to show his long grey tunic. His face was wrinkled, but his feathers were still a resilient pure red.

"Good morning, sir," Lezura said.

"What's a pretty lady like you doing around these parts?" said the man.

Lezura heard no malice in his voice, and decided she could at least answer him. "I am looking for my friend," she said.

"Oh..." the man said. He scratched his face and said, "I don't suppose you mean he went down there, did you?"

The man gestured with his head high in the direction of the building.

Lezura walked closer to the man's gate so their conversation could be more discrete. Even though the man was old and less muscled than a young yautgan, he was still taller and larger than Lezura.

“What do you know about that building?” Lezura said.

The man shook his head. “That’s where the Skull Crusher gang hides,” he said grimly. “Run by that pretty lady named Yeltsa.”

“The gang is being led by a woman?” said Lezura.

The old man nodded. “Yes; was a nice little girl too,” said the man, “but she usually kept to herself. She came here seven years ago, and since then she’s worked her way to being the top gang of the Underworld here; beating up everyone else, robbing, even killing.” The old man sighed again. “She could have been many things, but she chose to have power by going down the path of crime.”

Lezura noted the look of not just shame, but disappointment on the man’s face. “It seems as if you knew of her,” she said.

The man smiled wanly, and said, “I should, I’m her uncle. She moved here to live with me. She wasn’t a bad girl to me, but she wanted power and control.” The man rubbed his neck in reflection, “I think she got it from her father...”

“Um...sir,” Lezura said, hating having to begin with the silly expressing, “I hope you do not mind me prying, but may I ask if she controls this area?”

“Yes,” he said, “she’s the crime lord for this area. She hijacks the supply train and convoys that come here from time to time. She sells the goods back to the people here, and that’s how she maintains power.”

Lezura said, “Not to be rude, kind sir, but why are you telling me this?”

The man said, “Because I believe that whatever you’re after is down there where she is. I think that you at least need to know a little about her.”

Lezura looked around and saw people staring at her. She turned back to the man and said, “Are you not afraid the people here will find you a traitor for telling me this?”

“Now who would be so stupid as to mess with the crime lord’s uncle?” said the man.

Lezura smiled at him. She gestured for him to lower himself and she kissed him on the cheek.

“Thank you so much,” she said.

As Lezura went the man called out, “Why are you here, anyway?”

“To end the Prestige System,” Lezura said.

Later the same day Joey was thrown into a small dirty room with just a stained white bed he refused to sit on, a chair in one corner and a dresser near the door, all illuminated by a flickering bulb that sounded like a buzzing bug.

Joey practiced his honoi techniques even still, the Bluebolt. He hoped the high level honoi attack was enough to take down the boss for this place. She took on three men on her own as if it were just child’s play. He didn’t plan on doing anything stupid too soon, but he had to keep the choice of escaping open.

He never had a doubt that Lezura would be coming for him, but as for when he wasn’t sure. It had slipped into his mind like a little demon that Lezura might have been in danger, that she might not have made it.

No! Cut that shit out. If a loser like you survived this then Lezura must’ve gotten away without a scratch, even if it’s just chance.

The wooden door kicked open with a bang. Joey instantly flew out of his seat, reflexively firing a Blueburst near the door.

The blast hit the wall in the corridor, leaving a ghastly mess of cracks. Tomz’s head appeared at the door and peeked inside. When he was certain Joey wasn’t firing anymore of the blue stuff Tomz looked at the ripped wall and said, “Damn!” He smiled excitedly at Joey. “You can even use honoi too? The boss’s gonna love you...”

Tomz's stepped in, wearing a cleaner white merino and tight, shiny yellow trousers. He pointed a silver rifle at Joey; it has a cylindrical body with a separate section that narrowed to the barrel. It was a lance-rifle, fifty-caliber and held forty rounds.

Joey hadn't seen any amazing alien pew-pew gun since he came here, but he knew that so far he only got shot in the less vital areas. A bullet to his chest or head would surely kill him, so he lifted his hands.

"Step out here," said Tomz.

Joey did as he was told. He turned down the corridor as Tomz instructed, looking at charred, green walls riddled with cracks, peelings and some bullet holes.

Tomz kicked Joey in the butt. "Get moving!"

"You're goanna pay for that?" Joe said.

"Sure..." Tomz said.

Joey was led past a room where he glimpsed men cleaning rifles. Tomz motioned for him to turn and ushered him up the stairs at the end of the hall, where he was led to a small corridor with a huge metal door on the right side with the handle shaped like two serpentine creatures.

"Open it."

Joey pushed the door open, which was quite light on the hinges. Inside, the room looked like it dropped from some other dimension into this one. Unlike the rotted building this was lavish, with furniture of the richest gopto tree wood covered in red velvet. A chandelier like a giant squid with glowing tips at the tentacles hung over head, showering the room with orange light. There were some crossed swords on the dull brown wall at the back, with a shelf holding various ornaments, from bones, silver pendants and jewelry. Joey looked to see if the compass was there, but it wasn't.

Joey stepped onto the mint green carpet forward into the center of the room where the men sat watching him.

There were six in total, a dracoid man, a geckoid, a largaph and two yautgans. And seated on the large couch in front of Joey was Yeltsa, her arms spread across the top and her legs cross. The tight white trouser hugged her thick thighs.

The shirtless dracoid laid back in a couch in just segmented yellow and pink shorts, smoking a cigarette and exhaled green smoke into the light that darkened. The geckoid in the grey-pull over sweater and purple jeans was seated on the carpet Yeltsa's feet, absently bobbing his head to some music on his headphones. His head was concealed by a short blue cap.

The two yautgans were standing at the side of the door in easy positions, both wearing black tops but the one of the left had on white trousers and the other wearing dull grey jeans.

The largaph in the seat opposite of the dracoid was checking something on a small screen held in his hand. He was bare-footed and wearing a simple white top and bottom.

"So why did you want to see me?" Joey said, staring intently at Yeltsa, who only offered the faintest smile.

"I brought you here to introduce you to my main attack force," Yeltsa said. "The dracoid there is Sperks, the little man hear at my feet is Worm. The largaph there is our little computer geek, Node. And those boys behind you are Bonner on the left, and Kane on the right. I'm sure you've been acquainted with my right-hand man, Tomz..."

Tomz walked to the side of Joey and winked at him. He lowered his rifle and went around to the right side of Yeltsa behind the chair.

"You have guys with code names," said Joey, "that's nice. But I'm guessing this isn't why you called me hear."

"We have a job to do," Yeltsa said, "and you're in."

Joey ran at Yeltsa screaming. "I want my damn key, bitch!"

None of the men made any effort to move. Joey leaped in the air and set his feet to land a dropkick.

Yeltsa kicked Joey in the gut and sent him flying back to land right where he was standing. Joey got up and said, "I'm not screwing around with you lady!"

Yeltsa grinned, showing for the first time white shark-like teeth that made Joey flinch. "I really like your spunk, kid," she said. "I don't get that kind of entertainment around here—except when Tomz gets drunk."

There were chuckles in the room. Tomz fumed.

"Okay," said Joey, "what kind of job?"

"A raid," Yeltsa said, "and if you want back your stuff, you'll do what I say."

Joey shrugged and folded his arms. "Fine, whatever..."

"Good," said Yeltsa. "First thing to tomorrow morning we're going to move out to the location and set our ambush there."

Yeltsa slowly got up from her seat and approached Joey, standing three feet higher than he did. Joey felt himself being squashed by her looming shadow.

"In the meantime," she said, "I have a job for you to do...A really important one."

Joey was deployed to the back of the building outside for his most important mission.

In Joey's eyes where he stood was some massive balcony like a section of bright brown earth, bordered by a high mesh fence against metallic frames. It was dusk, and deep orange-red light shone through the cracks in the dome and onto the balcony.

He looked up and could see the last of the sunlight burning the sky and the clouds into a fiery lake. Cool air swept upon him from stories above, piggybacking the scents of the forest with it.

The balcony overlooked sections of the city which were already turning on their lights. There was an apartment complex a few meters away, separated from the older building by a seven meter high wall on the ground and the fifty meter distance between the two.

The great and glorious tasks that Joey had been appointed with, was washing Yeltsa's clothes. He sat on an old crate wearing his grey undershirt and underpants. In front of him were three metal bath-pans. He had scrubbed-washed most of Yeltsa's clothes already with the brush and hung them on the line near the fence.

He was about to do what he was dreading and had put on hold—washing her underwear. He had put them so soak for nearly an hour before touching them, grimacing as he handled the underwear.

"Can't believe I'm actually doing this..." he said. He took up a panty and held it wide. His eyes flew wide when he realized that the thing stretched nearly twice as wide as his chest. Joey took a sniff, and coughed and turned up his nose. "Where the hell's Lezura when you need her, man?"

Joey started to wash the ones he could. The more extreme one he put in the third pan to soak, hopefully he could forget them.

Joey looked at the other building, and saw two lazhinian women pointing and laughing at him through their window.

"Tramps; they're all jealous because I'm not washing their underwear for them..."

A thing with fluttering wings flew near Joey's face. He swatted it away. "Damn bug!"

"Joey that really hurt!" said a familiar tiny voice.

Joey looked and the thing flying in front of his face. It was in fact Lezura, in her faery form and wearing plant wrappings around her chest and waist.

"Where"—Joey stopped and looked around at the door on the wall leading into the building. He saw no one and went back to talk to Lezura—"where the hell've you been?"

"I have been looking all over the place for you," Lezura said with her tiny hands on her tiny hips. "Why did you have to run so far away?"

"Waddya mean 'why I had to run so far away'? Lezura I was being chased by gangbangers who wanted to rip me open!"

Lezura exhaled loudly and said, "Well, I am here now. I hid my clothes at the bottom of the building at the back. Come now; leave all of this and let us get going."

Joey looked away with a sign of guilt in his eyes. He rubbed his neck nervously and said, "I...can't..."

"What do you mean you 'cannot'?" said Lezura.

"I can't leave, yet, Lezura..."

Lezura frowned. "Why not?" she said.

Joey said reluctantly, "I don't have the key," as he watch Lezura gawk in disbelief he added, "A big, sexy scary yautgan chic took it." He gestured energetically to the panties and bras. "And she made me wash her underwear!"

Lezura flew upon Joey, pounding her fists on his face. "You foolish little boy! How could you lose the key? How could you be so reckless?"

Joey grabbed Lezura by the waist and shook her. When he stopped Lezura was slumped over his hand with her eyes spinning. She uttered a long groan as she rose up, gripped her head and closed her eyes to fight the dizziness.

When her world stopped spinning she ran a system's check on her mind to make sure that her brain didn't get damage. She recited the first ten words in the beginning of "W" in the English dictionary, "W, wacky, wad, waddle, wade, wader, wafer, waffle, the second waffle; a small crisp batter cake that is eaten with hot butter or syrup, waft..." she sighed and opened her eyes. "Good..."

"Listen, Lezura," said Joey, "I'll get the damn key back. Tomorrow I'll do a mission for the boss and she'll give it back to me. If she doesn't, I'll blast her head off and take it!"

Joey let Lezura go. She flew onto his shoulder where she sat and said to Joey, "That is highly unlikely. Based on what I gathered about this woman, she will kill you after you have fulfilled your usefulness."

She saw Joey's Adam's bop in a nervous gulp. Joey said, "So what should we do?"

Lezura formulated a plan within seconds. "The supply train is coming tomorrow," she said, "That has to be her target. You stick as close to her as you possibly can, Joey. I will try to break you from their clutches once you have made an attempt to take back the key."

Joey shook his head. "Her boys will just jump me before I do," he said.

"Not unless they are occupied with the train's security personal and the support from the city's police," said Lezura with a smug smirk.

Joey grinned at her, said, "Lezura, you're a real little devil!"

"Do not insult me so, Joey," she said with elegant flick of her foot, "I am just an innocent faery." Something flapping in the wind caught her eye. "Wow, Joey! Did you wash those tights?"

On the clothesline twelve tights of different colors blew on the wind.

"Shuddup Lezura!"

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

The next day, Joey did some exercise on the cliff that overlooked some of the city. Dressed in nothing but his underpants he did abdominal crunches with his foot hooked under blocks for support.

When he was finished doing one hundred of them, he got up, expecting to see rippling abs that Lezura, S'us, Tylin, Yeltsa and the inn keeper would be drooling over. Instead his gut only felt tight and looked flat.

"I guess it doesn't work after one session," Joey said. I guess that's why they say you have to practice this stuff.

Next on his agenda were pushups. After fifteen he fell on his face in the dirt. "Damn," he said, "this stuff is hard man..."

The door to the inside kicked open, slamming into the wall, and out stepped Tomz, wearing his same suit as yesterday.

"Time to go little-man," he said, smiling.

Joey found the strength to stand up just then. He thought of witty remark to say, but he could only find these words; "I'm short, but I make up for it in other places!"

Tomz grimaced, recoiled and turned a sideways glance at Joey, "Oookaaay..." he said, "Just get some clothes on and let's get going..." And Tomz went back down stairs.

Joey quickly rinsed off with some water from the pan, dried himself with one of Yeltsa's tights and put on back his clothes from yesterday. Reaching the stairs he found Tomz waiting for him. The man didn't carry the big mean rifle, instead he settled for a lance-pistol that he kept his hand on. The weapon was nycarman modeled silver blue with and narrow at the front end and grip.

"Try anything stupid behind my back and I'll throwback my spikes in your face," Tomz said.

"Killing you wouldn't get me anywhere," said Joey.

Tomz looked Joey up and down. Joey expected a remark, but Tomz turned down the metallic staircase with Joey following.

Tomz led Joey down the building by another staircase. They came to a dimly lit hallway of brown-green walls that was stained in the corners of the ceiling with holes as well. Insects scurried across Joey's feet as he walked. He idly stepped on some of them with a pleased grin at each crunch.

He saw a bug as big as his head with large mandibles walking by, and reconsidered screwing with it.

Tomz pushed the metal door and a column of light slowly spread over them, increasing as the door got wider. The air didn't smell as clean as it did in the forest, but it sure was a hundred times better than the musk inside.

Outside in the rocky yard, half of it shadowed by a nearby building, Joey saw Yeltsa waiting on him with twelve other men including those from her main attack force.

Some sat on junk scattered through the yard; old vehicle parts and broken down household appliances like refrigerators.

He saw Yeltsa seated on the top of a car rusted until it was completely orange and brown. She was wearing a thicker leather jacket, with a green under shirt and black jeans. She had sleek black glasses over her eyes, and upon seeing Joey coming she lifted them up and grinned at him with flesh-shearing teeth.

She leaped off the car and landed with surprisingly little sound for her huge frame.

Joey fiddled with the translator in his ear and said to Yeltsa, "You better give me my stuff when we're through."

"I don't double-cross people," Yeltsa said.

"Sure," said Joey, "you got this far being an honest hardworking woman, huh?"

"It is hard work," said Yeltsa. She gestured to one of the men, Kane. "Give him his things."

Kane handed Joey his bag and his bat. Joey checked his bag to see that everything was there still there. The painting of Blinchi, his acorn, a packet of cocoa and his cage of gassappers, though they were moving weakly from hunger.”

He checked that no damage was done to his bat, and put on his bag and said, “I’m ready...you?”

Yeltsa smiled, she admired his spunk, but she didn’t let outsiders talk to her like that in front of her men. She dropped her knuckles across Joey’s head. He staggered whimpering. He looked up her with a disgusted face.

“Sure thing,” she said smoothly. She turned and snapped her fingers. The men followed her with Joey in the middle. Joey didn’t have to guess that one of the men had a gun pointed in his back in case he tried any heroics. All the men carried firearms. He noticed that aside from the lancegun and the lance-pistol, one of the men, a lazhinian, carried a jet-black rifle. It was shaped like a loaf of bread with segments on the top with iron-sights at the end of it. The stock of the gun was a little tinged with grey, and the barrel was short and thick.

This was a single fire, high-powered rifle known as the Malcer, holding thirty 40-caliber rounds.

Kane and Bonner led the front, with Yeltsa and Tomz behind them. They led them through the junk where Joey picked up a rancid, rotting scent.

Looking around for the source of the ghastly stench, he saw a skeleton lying in a pile of garbage. Small, like a geckoid, with the bones picked clean and only bugs hovering over the remains. Near the corpse he saw the partially eaten body of a huge alien like a yautgan. Joey felt his stomach bubble and crunch. He clamped down on his mouth and swallowed back his vomit.

The corpse was infested with bright blue maggots, and a small carspi-worm fed on the flesh off the feet.

Joey exhaled in relief when he passed the scene. Now he had a new outlook on this woman named Yeltsa. She might be calm and pretty, but she wasn’t someone to cross on any bright and sunny day.

Joey’s thoughts about kicking her ass were kicked back by a fear for her, and he was hoping that Lezura had her plan ready when he got to the place.

They went up the stairs of another old building and across the roof, taking the pipelines across. Joey stepped out of the center of the crowd to the side where he got a glimpse at the front. They reached a massive, dark tunnel in a structure that led into the ground.

Just a few meters in and the place was stark dark. Cold wind howled in the hollow. Bonner and Kane produced a flashlight and lit their way. Joey could see that large stones provided their footing down the steep path. There were neat hollows in the wall that were once the storage for equipment and machinery. Minutes later they fell down a hole three meters down, one by one, not bothering to use the ladder.

“Where the hell are we?” said Joey.

“Old pipeline,” said Node behind him, “dried up a few years back. The old gangs use to use it to go outside the dome.”

They walked pass a sealed-up section of the pipeline and came upon a huge hole that appeared to have been burnt into it. They went down a steep path, finding themselves in a cave of pinkish-brown soil and scattered rocks. Large bat-like bugs flew over their heads soundlessly, and tiny bugs darted in the air across their faces.

Joey saw bioluminescent mushrooms sprouting up about the place like tiny wonderers into the vast cave. Some of them were attacked by long, fat, slime coated black-blue worms, which assimilated their bioluminescent chemicals to the sides of their body and the end of their tails to make a lure for bigger prey.

The worms lit the cave wall and ceiling with green and blue dots of light. But the further they went they saw the mouth of the cave.



Suddenly the men hurried up to where there were large leathery tents above crates of various sizes and three vehicles.

Careful not to break an ankle over the rocky surface, Joey hurried up to see what they were doing. From the crates he saw them taking out some metallic cylinders of explosives; dark green colored with dull circles at the sides and a red cork at the top. They were seven inches long. As the men tied some of the explosives together Joey heard a loud hum that went up and down into a low, steady sound.

He turned to see the vehicles starting up with drivers already behind the wheel. They looked like jeeps, only with thick slates of silver at the front and a three metal arches over the tops. They had six huge wheels incased in dirt, and the sides of the vehicles had visibly thick sheets of metal. They also had green and blue patterns with a splash of the brown.

Yeltsa said, "Kid!"

"What?" Joey said

"You're riding with me."

Joey went over to her and the drivers pulled the jeeps out of their tents. Probably I'll get to squeeze her boobs and say it was an accident, Joey thought, trying to plot some kind of revenge for the numerous poundings the woman gave him.

A man walked up to Joey and pressed a vest against his chest. Joey took it and studied it. It was a sewing of various metal plates connected by stretchy, pink leather so it could fit over various body sizes.

"You guys sure this thing can work against bullets?" Joey said.

"It's the best we got," Yeltsa said, hopping into the front of the jeep next Tomz behind the wheel. Joey went to the side and climbed into the back between to arch. The inside had only strips of wood at the sides which acted as the seat. He balanced himself on one of the benches and put on his vest. As he did the lazhinian with the Malcer came into the back along with Worm. They sat on the opposite side, each giving Joey snide looks. Joey showed them his middle finger, saw the confusion on their faces and looked away with a satisfied grin.

"Roller one, ready," Tomz said.

"Roller two, ready!" said Bonner in the other jeep, with Node at his side and some others in the back.

"Roller three, ready!" said Sperks, with Node beside him and the last men in the back.

"Alright," said Yeltsa, standing up in her seat and holding onto an arch at the back, "Roll out!"

One by one the jeeps pulled out of the cave speedily and bumpily. Joey nearly fell out of his seat over the side. He gripped one of the arches as the Roller went through a thin forest. Creatures scattered out of the way of the hellish assortments of metal that roared pass. It wasn't long before they saw in the distance the green-blue mountains miles away that curiously poked the sky. They came on a dirt road riddled with stone and small rocks, but the wheels of the Rollers easily overcame them.

They came to a stop, and the thugs casually got out and looked around. Joey followed them, walking forward across the great stretch of bare land that barely nurtured any plants apart from some shrubs. Yeltsa stopped just a few feet from the railway. Joey observed it; it looked much like any other urban railway back in New York, chipped and rusted by the elements a little though, but it still held its place firmly as nature battered its defenses.

The clouds gracefully drifted beneath the sun and blocked out its lights with silver linings. But the twin moons peaked out through the patches with purple-tinge light on the lands. Beyond the railway Joey could see small trees stretching like a green wall all the way down both sides.

Joey looked down both ends and saw nothing.

"What, we're just goanna wait here on the train?" he said.

"Yep," said Yeltsa. She turned to him and smiled before walking away. "Make yourself comfortable."

Outside the dome, Lezura waited on the arrival of the train on Redbolt's back. She was a few yards from the northern entrance to the dome, and had gotten outside with the help of her species. Being a nycarman, she argued that she had the right to travel anywhere on her own planet; that was the argument that she had put forward to the security forces.

They really couldn't argue with that, and had to let her out of the dome on her own free will. It wasn't a ploy that Lezura particularly enjoyed using, but circumstances demanded that extreme measures be taken to secure Joey and the key.

Not only was he amongst gangsters, but the train had its own armed security. And with Joey not being a nycarman, they wouldn't hesitate to kill him along with the others. Either way, if Lezura didn't get Joey, he was going to die today. Not to mention that their key would be lost!

She wore a dark blue tunic with silver flakes on the shoulders and upper arms, and black tights, along with her new black, narrow boots that she bought. She left her data-scroll back in her apartment in case it would get stolen or lost out here, and carried only her combat knife, spear and some of the sleep inducing chemical she powdered into a wrap. Over all of this she wore her leaf-patterned cloak.

Redbolt stood amongst patches of grass and red flowers. The clouds had drifted away with the winds that bobbed the flowers, revealing the sun and its showering light and the twin moons. Though the light was bright, the air still carried the lingering coolness of the early morning. Lezura inhaled the clean, crisp air that revitalized her lungs. She relaxed her muscles and freed her consciousness just a bit to savor the feeling. She felt the energy of the plants, the tiny animals, and the police officers in their cars way down to her right.

Being a natural faery, Lezura was able to sense the life-energy given off by the living organisms around her. She had the ability to gain some power from it, but at her current stage she could only manage to harness a small amount; say, a teaspoon of it from a pool. Lezura had heard of more experienced faeries who could bend and manipulate nature energy to their will, even manipulating the elements to some degree.

Lezura knew a lot of things, but not how to achieve such great tasks as her predecessors have.

But those thoughts soon hit the back of her mind when Lezura heard the train approaching, the sound of the massive engine unmistakable in her sharp ears. She used this advantage to get a head start before the officers.

I hope you are okay, Joey, she thought.

Lezura dropped her goggles over her eyes. She gave Redbolt a kick, said, "Forward!" and rode off.

The train blazed down the track like a hyper-speed snake, its large, narrow front slicing through the air with sharp precision. Its wheels churned over the track in a scream of metal as it went, leaving a trail of black soot from its two chimneys. There was no definite shape to it; some sections were large and more rounded than others, but it had a dark blue-grey color all over except for the silver head and the black of the metal components near the wheels.

Since the Prestige Kingdom and their usual harvest of people, Ugatin had to conserve their fuel for defenses against invasions, and for medical emergency transportation. What fuel they did use on the train was actually coal. As primitive as it may seem, Sangetsu was a planet noted for its massive jungles and forests much like Gammuo. They had more abundant plants than the largaph homeworld of Narz had acrilium mineral. Taking advantage of this, most nycarman nations such as Ugatin used coal as a usual fuel source.

The train bore many scars from the numerous attempts to rob it of its goods, from plasma burns, bullet chips and bomb dents and scorch marks, leading to its nickname Old Chippy.

Yeltsa and her gang waited for Old Chippy to pass near the railway. They had prepared themselves upon hearing the old machine coming down the track. As it blazed passed them Node stuck out an x-ray scanner, sending a wide beam of light that scanned the train from the head down to each segment.

What he was looking for were the sections that housed all the important goods. Old Chippy had seventeen segments, but Node found a few that were their mark.

“We got goods in the seventh, twelfth and fifteenth section this time!” he said.

Sperks; who sat beside Node, took up the radio and repeated this information to the other Rollers. After listening to their findings Yeltsa took the radio from Tomz, opened the channel to the other two Rollers at the front and said, “Then what are you all waiting for?”

Within a moment of saying so all the Rollers started up with a lurching motion and chased their long, segmented, metal quarry. Tires churned dust beneath them as the Rollers picked up speed.

Yeltsa looked back at Joey, saw the nervousness on his face, and said, “Don’t get shot now, kiddo!”

Joey frowned and said, “Don’t worry about me, lady. Just make sure you give me back my damn compass!”

Yeltsa smiled and turned around.

Joey and the men in the back stood and held onto the arches for support. No sense you were sitting down like a lazy lump when the shots started ringing. Growing up in the ghetto had thought Joey that.

Surprisingly, as the vehicles closed in Old Chippy like gufders on a greshku, the thing that knotted up Joey’s guts wasn’t the faces of the nycarmans that suddenly appeared in the open hatches from the sixteenth and fourteenth segments. It wasn’t the lanceguns they poked out and aimed at them. It was the fact that he wouldn’t be able to hold up his end of the bargain. Lezura was counting on him to get the key. But in a situation like how would the find the right moment?

Then make it, jackass!

The train security came right from the military of Ugatin. They wore black, square-shaped caps with flaps at the side that covered the ears. Their uniform was grey leather and incorporated black metallic epaulets and dark purple trim. They had goggles, similar to Lezura’s, with green tinted lens and motion sensors that could zoom in or out or change to night vision depending on how the eyes moved.

The men had been preparing for a raid on Old Chippy. Even though the raids didn’t occur all the time, they were still conditioned to be on high alert.

The captain among the few dozen officers on the train was at the sixteenth section, his upper body looking out the hatch at the top of the section and his weapon trialed on the Roller at the back. He rolled his eyes clockwise once, and the goggles zoomed in on the vehicle.

He spoke into the microphone, “Section fourteen, fire at will on the enemy vehicle at the front, over!”

“Copy that,” said a young man’s voice in his ears.

A cacophony of bullets riddled the Roller driven by Bonner with flashes of sparks all over. Bonner steered the Roller from near the train with roaring tires. A largaph in the back seat got hit in the shoulder before he could open fire.

“Thorno’s hit,” said Kane emotionlessly.

The other two men in the back opened fire at the soldiers. The shots were inaccurate, but it was enough to push the soldiers away from the hatches.

While Bonner was preoccupied with the front, Yeltsa was busy with the gunfire coming from the captain as his four men from the rear. Joey hit the bottom of the Roller as gunshots zipped over his head.

“Crap!” he said. “Please don’t let me get shot again!”

Worm hit the floor with him.

The lazhinian stood up and took aim at the captain. He took a bullet through his metal armor in his gut, but he just grunted loudly, responding with a squeeze of the trigger. The rifle bucked against his small frame, slapping out rounds and popping large holes in the captain’s chest. The captain flew back, dropping his firearm and slid into the train.

“Shoot them, you damn kid!” Yeltsa said.

Joey simply got up, fired two misshapen Bluebursts at the train and dropped back down. One blast whizzed past a soldier's head, startling him enough for him to duck.

The lazhinian fell down in the truck, covered in bullet holes and gasping for breath.

In the center of the caravan Sperks tried to get his Roller close enough to the fifteenth section without getting shot in the process. But his efforts proved futile, as a soldier, cautious of what the Roller was doing, fired from his Malcer repeatedly at the vehicle. The bucking shots thumped up the front of the roller until three rounds popped holes into Sperks' chest. Sperks jerked with each shot and slumped onto the steering wheel. Node and another dracoid in the back quickly pulled Sperks' body off the wheel as the Roller steered near the trees.

Node quickly took back control and steadied the Roller, as the men in the back opened fire at the soldiers, then ducked beneath the counter payload of bullets.

Tomz said, "Sperks is"—a bullet pinged on the door next to him, startling him—"Sperks' dead! Node's driving and can't get it open!"

"Worm!" Yeltsa said.

"On it!" said the geckoid.

Yeltsa stood up in her seat, lifted two lance-pistols from inside her coat and turned to the train. "Closer!"

Tomz inched his way to the train. Joey pointed his hand up above the side of the Roller and fired a blast at the train, hitting the air.

Yeltsa fired two rounds that snapped back a soldier from the port. He uttered a quick yelp before he slouched outside his port lifelessly.

Yeltsa took a round to the chest, but it wasn't deep enough to pierce her skin. She just winced and fired again, sending the nycarmans for cover.

Worm quickly leaped on to the side of the Roller the moment he saw the nycarman's disappear. He leaped onto the train, splaying his hands and feet as he hugged the surface. With astonishing speed he climbed across to the fifteenth section.

A soldier popped out of his port and saw the geckoid. Both of them shrieked in shock instantly, and as the soldier was about to shoot, gunfire from the Roller in the middle silenced him. Worm moved off, reaching to the section's door where he put himself on ground level against the edge of the section. Just one step back and he would fall off to a nasty death; crushed right under Old Chippy.

As he took out a small explosive, Node tried to align his Roller with the section while still trying not to get his head shot off.

"There!" said one of the nycarmans who spotted Worm. Suddenly all the gunfire from the soldiers ceased and they disappeared from sight.

Yeltsa dropped back in her seat. Knowing fully well what they were going to do, but she couldn't turn back now after losing so much men.

"Get a bomb ready, Tomz," she said as she stared expectantly at the section's door.

When the gunfire ceased Joey peeped above his cover. Glancing around him he rose up, holding onto an arch.

"What's going on?" he said to Yeltsa. She didn't answer, and Joey thought that now that she was focused with the job was the time to strike.

A dracoid from Node's Roller leaped onto the side of the section just two feet away from the lock in the center.

And the next few seconds just happened in a blur.

Worm put the bomb on the lock and scurried far from it. The blast was loud, small with flaming debris spewing out like a large firecracker. The dracoid hooked a crowbar in the hot hole and dragged the door into the side of the train while he held onto the top of the doorframe.

And there waiting for him where four crouched soldiers, who instantly opened fire at the dracoid. The bullets practically tore him to mush, pushing him off the train. His bloodied body fell and his foot got caught under the train. And like an angry beast enraged by years of torment, Old Chippy sucked him under and chewed him up, spraying him in tiny pieces all over the place. An Oikumi twisted in all direction in contemplating how to gather the soul from all the body parts.

Joey felt a hot, sticky wet thing slap against his cheek. "Holy—"

The moment the dracoid had pulled open the door Yeltsa twisted the cap on the bomb in her hand and stood. She held it for a few seconds until the explosion was close in time to blow her up, and as one of her men fell to be gobbled up by Old Chippy she threw the bomb at the soldiers.

The timing was good; the bomb exploded but not in the train, and the force was strong enough to knock back the soldiers.

"Go! Go! Go!" Yeltsa said.

In a haze of dust the Rollers tried to huddle together. Worm crawled from the top down into the train. Tomz brought the Roller close to the train. Joey held his breath thinking it was about to collide into great big fiery explosion, but it was only close enough so that's Yeltsa could step closer to the edge, right over Tomz's head. In one bound the huge woman reached into the train.

The moment reminded Joey of a scene in the movie King Kong, and had him wondering if everyone on this planet were doing stunts for a living.

The last man in the back of Node's roller entered as well.

Inside were the green crates of a light metallic material, labeled as medical equipment and stacked on top of each other. Yeltsa knew the soldiers weren't so stupid to put everything in one place, and probably had certain things mixed up with the medical equipment.

One of the soldiers weakly pointed his rifle at her from on his back. Yeltsa rushed over and stepped in his skull, caving it in. "Take crates at random!" she said.

A soldier was already on his feet, Yeltsa moved towards him with her pistol raised. Virtually pissed beyond belief the soldier unsheathed a tempered steel blade from off his chest and twisted out of the path of the bullet. In a downward motion he cut Yeltsa in the soft flesh between her arm and chest, opening it with a gush of reddish-purple blood.

Yeltsa grunted and whirled, grabbed the head of the soldier and used her momentum to slam his face into the wall.

Satisfied with the cracking sound and the two men behind her lifting off crates, she took up the man's body and held it before her, walking down the aisle as the door slid open and two men appeared and opened fire. Using the body as a shield she charged forward into the men.

Startled by the charging alien they ceased fire to retreat, and that was when Yeltsa dropped the body and took a sideways stance.

She augmented her hand with the Hiradokou, and plowed her misty blue fist into the soldier's chest with an explosion of blue. Bones splintered into his heart and killed him instantly, the force of the punch sent the soldier flying back into the other one, breaking a rib or seven and knocking them way down the aisle.

Worm threw the crate into Joey, who took it like a punch to the chest and fell back in the Roller. The lazhinian was still recovering on his back, but Joey just shoved the crate onto him and stood up to catch the other one.

Joey set his arms to catch the crate, but something out of the corner of his eye got his attention. He looked ahead of the Rollers and saw something coming towards them fast.

It was a mynamather.

"Lezura!" he said, and the crate knocked him down.

“Go!” Lezura said, kicking Redbolt to go faster like she was switching gears. She could hear police vehicles coming up behind her, and before she knew it they blazed past her with a cloud of dust swept back at her. Luckily her goggles shielded her eyes from the tiny pebbles that stung her skin.

“Come on...” she said to herself. She had to get Joey from the thugs before the police caught them.

Once the cars, and Lezura, were close enough to incoming train, all of them made a U-turn, now going in the same direction with the other vehicles and slowing down so they could fall in line.

Already she heard the gunfire of three parties that was gaining upon her and Redbolt. With a glance she saw that a police car and a Roller were right on her tail, and that she would end up between them. Behind them she saw Joey struggling with Yeltsa; an alien three times his size.

Lezura gasped. “Bloody Hell!” she said.

“The police are here!” Tomz said into the train.

Worm and a lazhinian froze, then dropped the crates and scurried out.

“Boss the police!” Worm said before scurrying out onto the top and leaping down into the back of the Roller.

Yeltsa turned and ran, with the soldiers coming from the other section with a steady stream of gunfire. Two shots hit Yeltsa in the back, piercing her armor but reduced enough to only lodge in her skin. It was the wound under her arm that was giving her hell.

How ironic that I’m stealing medicine, too, she thought with a grin.

One look outside and she saw the catastrophe. Allied with the soldiers the Suride Town police force was gunning down her gang. The Roller with Bonner and Kane was under heavy fire, and Kane suddenly got a few rounds slapped into his head. Yeltsa bit on her lip, and reached out with her arms to hold onto the top of the door frame and leaped out. She landed perfectly in back of the Roller, the vehicle swerved slightly under her weight.

Worm and the lazhinian were waiting for her. And as Yeltsa’s mind crossed on the small alien, Joey leaped on her back and wrapped his arms around her neck.

“I’ve got you now you bitch!” Joey said, whacking Yeltsa in the head with his bat. “That’s for punching me in the face!”

Yeltsa tripped over the crates and staggered to the edge of the Roller, tilting it onto its side briefly and making Tomz’s eyes widen with fright. Worm dragged up the fallen lazhinian and him to the back and out of the way. Yeltsa flailed with Joey and rocked to the other side, tilting the Roller that way too.

“Cut it out, boss!” Tomz said with a worried face.

“I’m busy here!” was Yeltsa’s curt reply as she reached over and dragged Joey’s hair, ripping out a patch of it by the middle. Joey screamed, slipped his hand down Yeltsa’s blouse and touched her breast.

“What the—”

“Just looking for my compass,” Joey said.

Joey felt his hand brush against it between her breasts. Unfortunately he couldn’t even get his fingers over them; Yeltsa gripped him by his clothes and threw him over. Joey landed into the seat next to Tomz. The largaph’s first instinct was to whip out his pistol and put a round in Joey’s skull, but he pushed it back in order to drive.

“Joey!” said a voice.

Joey looked forward to see the Roller reaching up to Lezura as she ran outside the police car and the Roller shooting at each other. She came beside the Roller, reached out her hand and said, “Come on!”

“The key—”

“Leave it!” Lezura said.

Joey reached out and took Lezura's hand, at the same time he whipped his bat in Tomz's head. The blow seemed to do little more than irritate him.

Lezura used her strength against Joey's smaller size and mid-stride out of his seat to haul him onto Redbolt behind her.

Joey wrapped his arms around her flat stomach and said, "I'm sorry about the key!"

Lezura yanked on Redbolt's reigns, bringing him to a stomping halt. The beast whinnied and spun around.

"That is fine," Lezura said as she rode away from the scene. "We can always get it back."

Lezura made Redbolt stop.

"What the hell are you doing Lezura?" Joey said.

Lezura didn't answer. She waited until the train had gone. The Rollers had switched trajectory and raced down towards them with the police cars behind and the Oikumies. Joey was expecting Lezura to do some wicked honoi technique and snatched the key from Yeltsa. But when the Rollers passed, and Tomz pointed his fingers at them like mimicked guns, Lezura did nothing.

As the dust engulfed them, Joey buried his head in Lezura's coat. They heard tires jarring to a stop, and the sound of rifles cocking. When the dust settled, they found themselves surrounded by a tight circle of vehicles with the police pointing their weapons at them.

"Looks like I'm finally gonna get arrested," said Joey, "well, at least it's by cool aliens. Was this your idea, Lezura—for us to all eat prison food and sleep together with some big sweaty yautgan guy in a cell for the rest of our lives...?"

"No," said Lezura with a wry smirk, "this is my plan to get back the key."

Later that same day, Joey and Lezura, and Redbolt, were taken back to police lock-up, and were each put into separate interrogation rooms and questioned.

Lezura was a room about half the size of her bedroom back at the inn, painted light green with cracked stone walls with an ornate brown ceiling possessing a single fan rusted and spinning slowly above her.

She was seated behind a wooden table and given a glass of water to drink, with two police officers; one a lazhinian woman and one a dracoid male standing at the other side of the table.

"What were you doing at the scene of the crime?" the woman said.

"Well..." and Lezura decided to give them the whole story from the beginning "...I was a part of a religious group known as the Dielengann Path, comprising of the Tyhuny, Felkremin and Xemingi religious group—who serve the will of the Dielenganns. They had instructed me with the task of retrieving the new Rakai for the purpose of overthrowing the Prestige System, so with the help of my wizard friend, I was sent to a filthy little planet called Earth, where I met this young boy who was supposed to be the Rakai," Lezura rolled her eyes, "and boy what a Rakai he is. He is loud, rude, insensitive and not to mention he is no smarter than a carton of milk. But he did have large amounts of honoi in his body, so we decided to go with him. During that, we got chased by the police and criminals and—"

The dracoid looked at his partner with a confused face, gestured to Lezura and said, "What the hell's she blabbering about?"

"She's trying to piss us off with her autobiography!" the woman said, leaning over the table. "Look here lady, I don't care if you're a damn nycarman. Here in this city we make the rules. If you don't give us a straight answer, we'll just charge you with unlawful practice. And since we have no lawyers here," she straightened and folded her arms, "that's instant prison time for you."

That will not work, Lezura thought. She tapped in her honoi and stirred it up. She took deep breaths and focused. Her creases glowed and cool air drifted off to touch the woman, giving her shivers.

"Hey!" she woman said, reaching for her baton.

But the transformation was already done, Lezura's form shrunk, not into that of a faery, but of a little girl. The huge clothes wrapped around her like a blanket, and her big bright eyes blinked vertically at the woman.

"What in the world?" the dracoid said.

Lezura threw back her head and cried out loudly and deliberately.

The two officers gathered around her and tried to shush her. They weren't startled by her power; they had seen enough strange things that honoi users could do. They were more concerned with stopping her shrieking.

"Please, stop!" the woman said.

Lezura didn't falter in her hellish cry.

"Cut it out lady!" the dracoid said. When Lezura didn't stop, he said, "Fine, we'll release you..."

Lezura stopped and looked at him, saying, "Really?"

"No," he said.

Lezura threw back her head and continued.

"Yes, yes we will!" the woman said.

"Yeah!" the man added.

Lezura stopped and said, "Okay." She rubbed her burning throat, and took a drink of her water.

"But you can't leave without giving a statement," the woman said, "whether you stay here and scream until you get throat cancer is up to you..."

Lezura said, "I will tell you everything, but I must speak with my friend to ensure that he safe."

"He's fine," the woman said.

"I need to see that for myself," Lezura said, her tone hard for her little size. She folded her arms.

The two officers conversed with each other silently, which Lezura could totally hear.

"You have a deal," the woman said after they were finished speaking. "But please, revert back to your normal size. The commissioner would have our heads if he found out we arrested a little nycarman girl with no parents."

"Like I'm goanna give you dicks my name," Joey said from behind the table.

"Don't play with us kid," the largaph officer sitting across from him said. "Answer our damns questions or face serious consequences."

He was wearing a translator in his left ear. Even though it was 373 years since the Galactic Garden visited the solar system and introduced the universal language of Naasi, there were still a few groups of people who had just come from the rural areas of their world and into the new society, who still clung to their native tongue. It was no surprise that there were still people who didn't speak Naasi, nor was it that they were looking at a new species right now.

"Like what?" Joey said, folding his arms.

The officer gestured to the other officer in the corner, standing ready with his baton. "Or else my friend there will have to exercise lethal force."

Joey was no stranger to threats, but after just surviving a gun battle between three armed groups, he was exhausted. Still he was sure he had enough honoi for a few attacks. But he wasn't stupid enough to start a fight here for no reason.

"Where's my friend?" he said.

"Worry less about your friend and focus on what you have to say," the officer said, slowly losing his patience.

"I need to see my friend so we can both decide what to say to you guys," Joey said.

The officer slammed his hand on the table, making Joey flinch. His yellowish-brown skin color, three spikes on each jaw and his straight eyes were a mark of his Hanchi race; eastern people of the planet Narz.



He leaned in close with his eyes narrowed at Joey. Joey got a glimpse of a thick silver chain around his neck. The officer said, "Look here you little piece a crap! Nycarman's don't give a damn about us, so it's only a miracle that the ones in Ugatin decided to send us supplies now and again. The people here can barely survive without the electrical equipment and medical supplies they give us, and if these damn thugs keep on stealing it and hogging it themselves to only sell back; what do you think is goanna happen, hmm?"

Joey actually never thought about it, and the information made him realize how blind he really was to what was going on around him. Yeltsa wasn't just some thief, she was a murderer; killing soldiers and police offers to get what she wanted.

The largaph continued, saying, "Let me tell you something kid, right now the Skull Crusher gang is wanted for murder of several military personnel, not the mention the various other charges that are stamped on their asses. I don't know what species you are or which system you come from, but here we don't make exceptions. We will put these charges on you too, unless you give up the location of the gang."

The officer read Joey's expression, watching it slip into one of concern and uncertainty. The officer jumped on it, saying, "This morning after the train dropped off the goods, they made it clear they were not going to come back unless we got rid of the gangs. That means the people here are going to suffer—"

Joey blocked out all of what the police officer said the moment he made it clear that if Yeltsa wasn't stopped people could suffer. "I'll help you," Joey said, cutting off the largaph.

The officer was thrown off track by the sudden decision. "W-what?" he said.

"I'll help you," said Joey.

The only door in the room slid open, and Lezura came bustling through.

"Lez!" Joey said, he was getting to his feet but the movement of the officer standing in the corner stopped him.

Lezura embraced Joey. He got a good whiff of her rose scented perfume mixed with the sweat in her clothes.

Lezura let go of him and said, "Are you fine, Joey?"

"What the hell do you think, I'm in jail!"

Lezura took his tone and expression that he was fine. At the door the lazhinian woman had come in and closed it, standing next to it on the wall. Lezura gave her a quick look, stood beside Joey and faced all of them.

"I will agree to help you with your investigation," she said.

"Yeah, about that," said Joey to Lezura, "I was planning to help them too."

Lezura knelt to Joey's ear and whispered, "That is good. Because we need them to get into the building the don is hiding in and retrieve the key from her."

Then it became clear to Joey why Lezura had let them get arrested. They needed the fire power to plan a raid for the key. And the best way to get such a source was the police—and they were even legal!

The largaph sat back and folded his arms. "I'm listening..." he said.

Lezura said, "It was all accidental how we got mixed up with that woman. My friend and I went into the market to buy some goods, and when we were leaving we were ambushed by thugs. I told my friend to run—"

"And the guys chased me into an old house," said Joey. "Then this big-ass woman fell through the ceiling like hulk, smashed them like tomatoes and killed em. She took my compass, a family heirloom, very valuable, and said that it's hers. She said that if I didn't help her with the raid I wasn't going to get it back." Joey raised his hands above his head. "I didn't kill anyone, believe me! I might have fired a few shots with my honoi but they didn't even hit a ir!"

“I was there to help him escape from them,” Lezura said, “but we were not able to get back the compass. That item is very valuable to us. We must really get it back. We will bring you to her hideout, provided we are allowed to accompany you to retrieve our compass.”

“What’s so special about this compass?” the woman said.

“Are you deaf?” said Joey, “It’s a family heirloom—one of a kind. Plus that woman made me wash her underwear!”

The officers hung their head, sniggering.

“The hell you all laughing at?”

“Oh, nothing!” said the largaph. He regained his professional composure and said, “How can we be sure you two aren’t on their side?”

Lezura spoke as if she was stating the obvious to a bunch of idiots, “Because...she is going to try to kill us if we go there...?”

The officers looked at each other thoughtfully. It was the officer seated before them that said, “We’ll have to run this by the commissioner first.”

“Very well,” Lezura said.

“You guys have any food?” said Joey.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Joey and Lezura were both left in the interrogation room while the officers went to discuss the matter with their superiors. They had been given small bowls of porridge to eat, and the empty bowls lay on the table before them.

Lezura could sense that at least two guards were stationed outside the room, and she didn't have to speculate if they were armed.

"Do you think they're gonna let us go with them?" Joey said, repeatedly lifting his hand and pretending he was shooting a Bluebolt.

"They do not have a choice," said Lezura with her arms folded across the table. "We are the only two who know the location of their gang and the layout of the building to some extent. Joey, how many men does Yeltsa have under her control?"

Joey dropped his hand and said, "I saw seventeen inside the building while I was there. And I think about five or six of them died today. But if she really is the crime lord for the neighborhood, then the people living around the place might be on her side too."

Lezura arched her back in shock. "Are you certain of this?" she said.

Joey raised his eyebrow in surprise. "Not all of them," he said, "but of course some of em gotta be armed. You said that she controlled the neighborhood, right? She can't do that with just that number of guys she had around her. I'm guessing those must be the close bodyguards or something. I thought you would've known all of this since you knew the place, Lezura."

Lezura only visited Suride Town two times, but never had she gotten so deep into it. The fact was that until the Prestige System, Lezura lived a grandiose life far away from crime and violence. But then again, there was her mother.

The thought made Lezura shift uncomfortably in her seat, and her back started to hurt.

"You okay, Lezura?" Joey said.

Lezura forced a smile. "Yes...yes I am fine, Joey," she said.

Joey held her gaze for a moment, contemplating asking her again. But he decided to drop it.

The door to the interrogation room opened, and the lazhinian woman entered. "Okay," she said, "let's get going."

Joey slammed his hands on the table. "Alright!" he said.

"Wait, before we do," said Lezura as she got up, "we need to make a stop at the inn so we can get some equipment."

Yeltsa and her surviving attack force were back at their hideout. All were gathered in a storage room, stacked with similar crates to the ones they got off the train and other boxes. Bright florescent bulbs illuminated the room, showing tattered walls, large iron shelves that supported some of the equipment, and some tables where the items were taken out and examined.

Yeltsa had only manage to get eleven crates; four out of which were dummy crates, as she had expected, revealed by Node's x-ray scan. Two of them had nothing but black gravel, one had in some toys and another had in a dead, rotting tapike with a note that read "We can get down and dirty too!", written and signed by the captain that had been killed on the train.

As it turned out the tapike's flesh was also injected with some nasty bacteria. Bonner was the one who had handled the open crate to get rid of it in the furnace, and luckily was the only one to get infected.

It was a gruesome sight—well, not for Yeltsa. Bonner got welts and sores all over his body, he convulsed on the ground with foam frothing from his mouth and his eyes reddening. His breath came

in ragged, raspy gasps, and finally he stopped moving. During all of this, Yeltsa was silently applauding the soldiers for such a neat trick.

Getting killed from a virus hidden among medicine—what irony! These guys are getting better by the minute!

Three other guys put on protective gear over their hands and faces and threw Bonner's huge frame into the furnace before which he had died.

Yeltsa sat on a table in the corner, observing her men as they examined the real goods they had stolen. Then out of the corner of her eye she saw Tomz, the lazhinian who was in the Roller with Joey, named Sokika, and Worm.

"You know we're in trouble, right?" said Tomz.

Yeltsa didn't seem surprised; she knew what he was talking about. Their little alien recruit got captured by the police, and with enough interrogation, threats and deal making, he would eventually spill the fruit punch.

"Don't worry," she said calmly, "I've already put a few guys on look out at the end of the avenue. They'll let me know when the police are coming."

"That still won't be enough," said Tomz. "We only have thirty or so guys left; the police have over a hundred people in their force. If those guys decide to come down here now with guns-a-blazing we can't do shit against them!"

Yeltsa's cool composure was warming up with annoyance. "I said I got it under control, Tomz. Don't you think I already thought about what would happen if I let that little punk in on what we were doing?"

"Then why did you?" said Sokika. "Why'd you let that kid come with us in the first place?"

Worms saw the glowering look on his boss' face. He turned to Sokika and said, "Hey, you need to take it easy—"

"I think you've gotten soft, Yeltsa!" said Sokika.

Tomz and Worms froze, so did the others in the room. Basically they had just heard the equivalent of someone telling a nycarman they're deaf. No one insulted the boss like that, and on top of it to get familiar with her by calling her by her real name?

Knowing what was coming next Worm and Tomz ran out of the way, just as Yeltsa flew off the table and grabbed Sokika by the throat. She hoisted off his feet and slammed him into the wall. She put her face up to his and said through her menacing teeth, "You don't know shit!"

Yeltsa hooked two fingers in Sokika's jaw and yanked it off. She dropped Sokika and let him search madly for his jaw, making horrid gasping and gargling sounds as his tongue flapped out of his mouth. She turned to the rest of the timid men in the room. "None of you idiots know anything!"

Her voice had the quality of an explosion and made everyone flinch.

Sokika found his jaw and reattached it back to his head. He flexed it with a painful grimace. "Ouch..." he said.

Yeltsa took the compass from around her neck and held it up for them to see. "I bet none of you idiots even know what this is, do you?"

Fear crippled the voice of a few men, but some whispered to themselves with uncertainty.

Yeltsa slowly shook her head. "If you geniuses would read a book once in a while, you would all know that this thing is the damn key to the God Titan!"

The shock of it silenced even the thinking of the men in the room. Then after the force subsided they began to babble about the key.

"Boss," said a largaph, "no disrespect, but are you sure that's the damn key?"

Yeltsa lowered her hand and looked at the man like an idiot just tried to say something smart, making him look like twice the idiot. "Genius," she said with a sarcastic smile. "Think about it; some strange nycarman woman and an alien just happen to waltz in the city from nowhere who can use

hono. The alien kid told me that he needed this thing, or else people would die. He came with us all the way on a dangerous mission just to get this thing back. And I can bet right now he's on his way with the police.

"And you idiots would have known it was the key had you read the reports from two hundred years back about the woman who used it. She was an arrogant tramp that loved to show it off to everyone!"

The men around her resonated with excitement. One said, "Boss, we could sell that thing and live like kings; each and everyone one of us!"

He was backed up by an uproar of approving cheers.

Yeltsa tuned out the noise and looked at the key. Glancing at it showed her two possibilities. She could keep it to herself, sell it to the leaders of the Prestige Kingdom and buy her way into it, achieving fame and glory for the rest of her life.

Or she could give it back to the Rakai, and allow him to do whatever he was do to do with it. Since he was a non-nycarman, it could be possible he was fighting against the Prestige System. If so, he could probably free the other species from the System, making not only her, but others have opportunities for a better life.

She couldn't make the decision yet. Not with this just popping up in her face like this.

And that was when her radio sounded.

"Boss? Boss, come in!" said a man's voice.

Yeltsa said to the others, "Hey! All of you shut up!"

Silence quickly followed. Yeltsa took the radio off her waist and answered it. She had taken the radios back from the Rollers and given one to Tomz and another to her man in the community. "What is it?" she said as the others around her strained to hear.

"The police are on their way!" said the man. "They're coming down the street right towards us!"

Yeltsa said, "Quick, go tell the kids around the front I'm keeping a Candy Treat! Tell them to hurry and get in here or else I'll eat it all! And tell the other lazy-asses to get up here!"

"Got it, boss!" and the channel cut off.

Yeltsa said to the others, "Get ready."

S'us was travelling through the city on a greshku. It was not quite out of place, as there were other people travelling on animals as well. This was normal and accepted, provided that you cleaned up after your animal if they messed up the place. So people, as S'us had done not too long ago, would give their animals some bitter-bush, a plant that worked like a laxative in flushing out the bowels.

S'us was dressed in her best tight, dark blue blouse with bright green spots on in the arms and shiny leather paddings around the collar, along with her thick grey tights and her sandals she had washed clean this morning. She had her head wrapped in red and white bandanna, and her knife sheathed all under her thin cloak.

With permission of her group's leaders, S'us was permitted to visit the Rakai. Today was supposed to be his last day here, and she wanted to bid him farewell herself. She was hoping that it would have been possible to stay with him and learn more about him, but her duty to her clan came first.

Still, it was nice to have gotten to know the Rakai.

Seated on the beast's back, S'us had various small scrolls in her lap. In her hands she wrote down a special rune in the scroll using ink from a canister she had strapped across her upper arm.

Basically, how the rune system worked was by opening a portal to another space using special seals activated by honoi and storing various kinds of matter there. To retrieve what was stored there, the user of the runes had to open it using a seal-release rune. But it was not specific, meaning if you wanted a stick, other things would come pouring out as well.

So special rune symbols are developed which meant a specific thing.

If one wanted to store and retrieve fire, then a fire rune would need to be written onto the surface from which it was being called from. This surface also had to be very durable so the rune didn't easily get erased, so ink and paper were usually effective. Runes could also be carved into surfaces like stone and metal, and a very few people even managed to effectively tattoo and use these runes on their own bodies.

But S'us wasn't educated in how to make runes on the body work, so she settled for creating her runes on scrolls. She wasn't even well versed in the origins of the rune system either. What she did know, was that the practice of using runes had been around on her homeworld several centuries now.

But during the space travels her people made, and interaction with other species outside the solar system, news had been brought back that the rune system was being used elsewhere.

She didn't even bother to think that, if these things were being stored in other dimensions, why didn't the reapers find this trespass interfering with their laws.

"Probably it's because people aren't the ones really going inside that dimension to anywhere else," her sister I'us had once said.

Once again, S'us didn't bother to find out. Not that she was lazy to do so or didn't want to, but because her most determined desire was to find her sister's body.

"So why're you going to visit this Rakai guy?" said I'us in her head.

"There's no special reason," said S'us, finishing the atmospheric rune and putting it in a holster on her belt. She took up another scroll. "I just want to see him off, that's all. I do consider him a friend."

S'us pictured I'us grinning, a face very much like hers. "You know that Joey likes you, right?" she said.

The thought made S'us miss a stroke in the fire rune symbol and ruin it. She put it down and took up a fresh scroll. "Nonsense," said S'us defensively. "I know the kind of like you're thinking about, sister, but that's not it. I like him too, but not that way."

"Stop pretending!" said I'us. "I'm your sister. I'm in your head. I know how you feel about him."

S'us sighed, and said, "No, I'us. You want it to seem that way, so you can see the reaction on Lezura's face."

I'us gritted her teeth. "That stuck up, long-eared tramp!" she said.

"Lezura isn't stuck-up," said S'us. "She's just confident in herself."

"Same as being stuck-up," said I'us.

S'us said sternly, putting down her equipment, "Look, I'us, I really need to concentrate right now. So could you please save this conversation for later?"

I'us scoffed. She folded her arms and said, "Fine!"

And all the while S'us was having the conversation with her sister a few people were staring at the woman; who was talking to herself like she lost her precious marbles. But not once did S'us give them her attention as they pass their remarks. She didn't have time to waste with those who didn't believe that a part of her sister's soul was still with her.

When she arrived at the inn, she found five police vehicles stationed outside and a few worried and curious onlookers glancing at them.

"What's going...?" she whispered.

She got off her beast and pulled it behind her as she approached one of the onlookers, a yautgan man. "Excuse me, sir," she said, the man turned, then looked down at her, "do you know what is happening here?"

The man shrugged. "I couldn't tell you if I tried, little lady," he said. "I just heard that the police went inside with two people. For what, I can't tell."

S'us nodded at him and moved on. Her greshku was too big to move through the crowd, so she found one of the street lights and tied it to it. She picked her way through the crowd, only to be stopped by a police officer.

“You cannot come beyond this point,” the geckoid man said.

“What is happening inside?” S’us said, a bit demandingly.

The officer wouldn’t have normally answered a civilian, but seeing this nice young woman of his own species, he said, “The police are in a joint operation with some supposed fugitives. They can use honoi really well, so we’re taking precautions.”

“May I ask who the culprits are?” said S’us.

“Some nycarman woman and a short alien with brown hair, peachy skin and a big head,” said the officer.

“That’s Joey!” I’us screamed in her head. S’us didn’t dare speak that she knew the aliens in fear of being taken in for questioning. S’us said, “Another alien species, wow!”

“You said, it,” the officer said, “This galaxy really is full of life.”

It was just seconds after the officer’s words that S’us saw Lezura and Joey leaving the building. Joey was wearing the orderran helmet he had stolen, and Lezura was urging him to stop jumping up and down. They entered the back of one of the police cars and the rest of the police officers loaded into the others.

The crowd made way for the police cars to reverse and drive away in a steady line.

S’us quickly went to her beast and untied it. She knew that whatever was happening with Joey and Lezura, if they were being blamed by the police for criminal activities she had to find out what it was. She nudged her beast for it to go, and followed the police vehicles.

Lezura went back for the rest of items for her utility belt, her spear and her data-scroll. Joey went back for his sword and his helmet. Escorted by the police, they entered and left the building with eyes glued on them.

“You better not be leading us into a trap,” said the largaph who’d spoken to Joey earlier, now revealed to be Captain Nesten.

“We will not,” said Lezura as she followed them back to the police car. “We have a good reason to stop that woman too.”

“All for a silly compass?” said Lieutenant Coenter, the lazhinian woman, as she entered the back of the vehicle.

“It’s not some silly compass,” said Joey, pointing the bat at the woman.

Coenter slapped the bat out of her face with her rifle. “Don’t make me have to shoot you in public!”

“You—”

Lezura slapped Joey in the back of his neck and shoved him over and into the vehicle. “Shut up now, man!”

Lezura entered and sat on beside Joey. Both were sandwiched by officers. Coenter sat across from them while Nesten sat in the front beside Corporal Dinon, the dracoid in the interrogation room with Coenter.

In addition to Joey and Lezura, the police jeep held seven people, as did the others, numbering in total to thirty five in the group. All except Joey and Lezura were armed with lanceguns, lance-pistols and Malcers.

“Move out!” said Nesten.

Their vehicle was the first to go, with the others towing behind. Lezura led them to the location using her map and the signal being sent out by the key within little over twenty minutes. The sirens were set on max; a kind of whooping sound that reminded Joey of a monkey.

When they reached the mouth of the avenue they noticed some sudden movement. It wasn’t unusual for people in the ghetto to run when they saw the cops coming, but they had to take this scenario as the enemy anticipating their arrival.

Nesten had a standard radio communicator tied to his wrist. It looked like a thick silver bracelet with an egg-shaped pendant containing a speaker and a built in mic. There was a large dial that changed the channel and a small screen to show it—hence its name a wristphone.

Nesten held to his side of his mouth and said, “Squad Five, I want to you to stay back and provide security for an exit.”

“Understood,” said the other side.

The rare police car stopped meters into the community along the side walk, and the occupants quickly exited the vehicle. They saw a woman approaching on a greshku and stopped her, telling her that the community was now under siege.

People scrambled into their houses, knowing bullets were going to fly from all angles. As they neared the gates of the building, however, they noticed that there was steady activity inside. Lezura looked up with her goggles; she zoomed in, and saw a woman standing at the side of the rocky cliff on the tenth floor. It was silhouetted against the light of the sun, but Lezura could not mistake that it was Yeltsa.

She turned and walked out of sight.

Approaching the rusty, huge old gates to the yard, they all saw women and children having a small party. Sweet treats were being handed out to the mothers who then passed it on to their children.

“What the hell is this?” said Dinon

“She must have known we were coming,” said Nesten with a scowl pasted on his face. “She ordered the women and children in there so they could get in our way.”

“She really is awful...” Lezura said glumly.

“That’s not goanna stop us,” Nesten said, then he said in the wristphone, “Squad Four, stay out here and provide security. Make sure no one enters the premises.”

“Understood, Captain...” came the reply.

The police vehicles stopped and they all exited.

“Showtime!” Joey said as he leaped out with his sword drawn.

“Just keep in mind that we are to just retrieve the key and leave,” said Lezura as she climbed out.

Coenter leaped out and said, “I thought you said it was a compass...?”

“Forget that lieutenant and focus on the job!” said Nesten. He kicked in the gates to the old yard. Most of it was covered with dirt with tufts of blue grass. Nesten pointed his lancegun in the air and fired two rounds. “Everyone leave the premises now! This is a police raid! Get out now! Now!”

Some mothers dragged their children while others lifted them up like bags under their arms and over their shoulders and ran off. But some were heading inside in the building as well as out the gate.

“Dammit, idiots!” Dinon said, fighting the waves of people running into him as he made his way with the others to the doorsteps.

“Stay sharp, people!” Nesten said, lifting his rifle to his eye, crouching and creeping towards the door.

Lezura dragged Joey with her back to the rear of the party. Though they wore Teflon, they didn’t have any guns to counter attack.

“This is so cool!” said Joey. “It’s like that TV show Cops!”

“Lezura snarled. “Would you keep quiet?”

Nesten took position at the left side while Dinon was on the right. His scaly hands Dinon possessed a gun looking like a pale purple cucumber with the front half large and narrowing to a wide black barrel. The clip was inserted just before the trigger guard, and the top was equipped with shock absorbers in the form of squishy orange rings that reduced the recoil of the shotgun. It was popularly known as a Sputty, holding ten rounds in the clip.

“Where’s their boss, nycarman?” Nesten said loudly, so she could hear over the noise inside.

“She is on the ninth floor!” Lezura said.



Joey tightened his grip on his sword.

Nesten nodded to Dinon, who nodded back. Both of them popped inside with guns trailed down the wide corridor.

The people screamed and hit the floor, exposing a man who didn't seem too afraid. As Nesten was about to fire the lazhinian lifted up a small geckoid child in his hands and fired over his shoulder.

The shot hit the wall near Nesten's head. Unfazed, he carefully took his aim just past the crying geckoid boy's ear, and fired.

The bullet hit the man right between the eyes and he fell.

"Go!" Nesten said, taking point. "Squad Three search the rooms!"

The officers in the rear broke up and went into rooms and small corridors. There was enough lighting for them to see their way. Nesten shouted for the people to grab their kids and get out. As they did they glimpsed some armed men going up the staircase from a corridor leading outside.

And officers behind Nesten fired a booming shot from his Malcer that made Lezura's ears flick with pain. She dropped on her earmuffs instantly. The bullet hit the metal railing with a flicker of sparks, and the men kept on going.

As Dinon neared the staircase gunfire rained down on him and forced him back.

He winced. "Crap!" he said.

Nesten saw blood on Dinon's shoulder, but he was moving without hindrance, and Nesten didn't bother to ask.

Dinon aimed with his Sputty up the railing that ascended to the second floor, he waited on the men, slowly going up the stairs, and as one man looked over with his rifle Dinon fired. Most of the pebbles bounced off the railing in sparks, but enough pebbles hit the lazhinian to make him holler and reel back.

Dinon led the way up. They could still hear the screams and of children and figured that the gang boss had even manage to get them where she was.

On the second floor there was a corridor branching off to the rest of the floor on the left and a small portion on the right.

"Go straight down and take a left to the stairs!" Lezura shouted over the heads of the others.

Dinon took the lead with his Sputty, perfect for these fine spaces. His eyes followed the pink droplets of blood to the right corridor, and as his eyes darted there the lazhinian popped out with guns blazing.

Dinon dropped to the floor, the shots hit a largaph corporal behind him and sent him crumpling to the floor in a mess of blue blood. Dinon fired the Sputty twice, the shots ripped open the Lazhinian's chest, and the second blast blew a hole in it, slamming him into the wall. Not even a lazhinian could recover from such trauma.

Squad One hurried into the corridor with Joey and Lezura while Squad Two advanced.

Suddenly children came running out. The officer at the front hesitated, and it was long enough for the small geckoid mixed in with the kids to open fire with his lance-pistol, shooting down him and another officer.

The one behind the two fallen officers fired twice from her Malcer, knocking the geckoid back across the floor. The others hurried to secure the wailing children and ushered them behind them and down the stairs.

As Lieutenant Coenter hurried to the mouth of the left corridor, Worm opened fire at her from two lance-pistols. The shots hit home in Coenter's chest. She gasped and dropped to the ground. But wasn't dead. She lifted her rifle and fired wildly at the Worm. To her disbelief the geckoid was quick enough to slip into the room next to him.

Another officer came to her side and opened fire just as a yautgan was stepping out to shoot. It took nearly ten rounds from his lancegun to fully drop the man.

“Everyone go, now!” Coenter said.

From around the corner Nesten ordered everyone to move. It was a quick motion as they and the other members of Squad Two walked pass Coenter and the officer providing cover fire. Without a moment’s hesitation to the mission they made up to the third floor.

It was a different layout with the corridor snaking around, but Lezura guided them through the place.

Surprisingly they weren’t met with any resistance, but they did see some civilians. A yautgan woman and her young child in her hands ran out of a room and into them. Dinon quickly shot a hand up to her mouth and muffled her scream. She shoved her back into the room and ordered her to close the door. They heard some gunfire from below where Coenter was, but kept on going.

They made it to the fourth floor were they saw three men hurrying around a corner. Dinon took point with Nesten and a lazhinian officer, both carrying lanceguns, peeping from behind. Joey stuck his head out from the group to get a look at the action. Half of him was upset because he wasn’t getting a piece of the action, the other was luckily because he wasn’t getting shot at.

But this isn’t being a hero, he thought.

As Dinon turned into the next corridor he caught movement from the corner of his eye in a room. He spun to the open door, where in the room lit by sunlight through the window were two largaphs. Upon seeing Dinon they tensed. Node was in the room, and subsequently went through the window while the other prepared to shoot.

Both fired simultaneously, two Malcer rounds him Dinon, twisting his body and throwing off his shot. The blast tore apart the hardwood of the door in a jagged whole.

The largaph went to follow up on his success with another shot when a little figure like a kid came in his way. Instinctively he hesitated, then his criminal nature got the better of him and he pulled back on the—

Joey fired a whopping Blueburst that knocked the man back against the window frame like a car crashing into a wall. He fell on his knees. His eyes rolled into his head. His shirt ripped and his chest ghastly bruised. The gun fell from his grip and he fell on his face.

“Joey, stay back!” Lezura said.

“Screw this!” Joey said, unsheathing his sword and running down the corridor. “Where’s that bitch with my compass?”

Joey drew her knife and ran after his disappearing from around the corner.

“Can you stand?” Nesten asked Dinon as the others moved up, slumped against the wall with huge pools of blood soaked in his coat.

“Just go get the damn woman already!” Dinon said with blazed eyes. He lurched forward and spat up blood on the floor.

Nesten reluctantly left Dinon and followed the others.

Joey ran into a largaph girl, spotting the large lollipop in her hand he snatched it from her. “Gimme this you little brat! Bwaa-ha-ha-haaa!”

The girl cried as Joey hauled her off her feet into the nearest room and closed the door. Behind Lezura and the rest of the officers followed him as he navigated the corridors. Joey shoved the lollipop towards his mouth, only to realize he had on his helmet.

“Dammit!”

Lezura spotted ahead of Joey two thugs breaking the corner with their rifles. Sensing the officers behind her would fire Lezura fired a low powered Blueburst at Joey’s foot and tripped him on his back. Lezura hit the deck as well. The hailstorm of bullets from the officers dropped the thugs within a second.

They went pass Lezura and Joey and up to the sixth floor. As Joey got to his feet Lezura quickly pulled out her map and checked the location of Yeltsa. She gasped.

“She is heading this way!” Lezura said.

Joey took a quick glance around him as he went after the others.

But something from the ceiling fell on him. When he was knocked flat on his back it was only then he could look up and identify the culprit as Worm. He was covered in different colored blood, but he didn't seem harmed.

“Yuh na'ni toos plekesk gehuw, бага-untuk!” said Worm as he put the gun to Joey's head.

Joey had lost his translator in the ruckus, now some alien was about to kill him and he had gotten dissed and not even known what he had said.

Joey fired a Blueburst but Worm kicked his hand aside at the last minute, guiding the blast into the wall.

Lezura was alerted to Joey's crash to the ground with a geckoid standing in his chest. She dropped the data-scroll and headed over with her knife just as the geckoid kicked away his hand. She snapped off a Blueburst into his chest, knocking him away from Joey.

She leaped over Joey and headed for Worm with her knife. Worm's armored dulled the blow, but the force was still enough to rupture the skin.

Seeing the enraged Nycarman woman coming Worm flipped onto his feet, gritting his teeth as the pain shot through his chest.

Lezura swatted Worm's gun out of her face. He in turn parried her knife thrust with a blow to her wrist. Worm kicked her in the knee and dropped her onto the other, kicked her in her ribs and pointed the gun to her head. Lezura yanked her head out the way as the gun went off; but not fast enough as the bullet signed a line of scorched flesh on her cheek. She punched Worm in the gut, sprung to her feet and knocked the gun out of Worm's had and uppercut him onto his back.

Worm lashed out his tongue and slapped Lezura across the face. She squealed and staggered back as Worm pulled a knife from out of his sweater and pounced on Lezura. She blocked the arm holding the knife with hers, spat some glitter in Worm's face and sent him back with a knee in his gut. Dazed, Worm's eyes spun around, his skin changed hues form light green to dark to light brown and grey. But Lezura ended the color show with a roundhouse kick that snapped Worm's head and body right around and on his belly.

“Damn Lezura!” said Joey, who had been behind Lezura waiting to fire a blast of honoi.

“Come on!” Lezura said, reaching for her data-scroll and the translator and handing it back to Joey. “Yeltsa is coming this way!”

And they could hear crashes and the horrified scream of the police officers up ahead.

The officers were mostly met with civilians as the progressed through the corridor heavy with the scent of fear and perspiration. The adrenaline could practically be smelt amongst themselves as the lazhinian man led them to the stairs.

His round eyes darted to every single corner of the floor and ceiling. There were some holes in the ceiling that he made sure not to check once in a while. He knew a few geckoids had to be in the Skull Crusher gang, and they were small enough to run about the place like pests.

To his left he took a quick glance at a raizean woman quivering in a corner and clutching her son in her. He gestured for her to close to door, as the officers passed she hurried to her feet and did so.

A song was playing from a radio somewhere, a lively polyphonic tune sung by a popular group of young orderran men known as the Whitey-5.

What annoyed the sergeant more than the fact that it was one of those stupid boy bands that the young girls drooled over was that his daughter was one of them. And right now the song was reminding him of his little girl.

Focus on the mission, dammit, the sergeant told himself.

And a woman broke the corner, a yautgan, crying loudly and holding a snot-nosed dracoid boy in her hands.

“Hold it right there, miss!” said the sergeant.

The woman made their way towards them, crying hysterically, “My baby! Please help my baby!”

“I said hold it!” But his finger wasn’t on the trigger, not wanting to risk getting jumpy and pulling.

An officer behind him, a yautgan, realized that the child she held wasn’t a yautgan. And he sure knew cross-breeding wasn’t possible unless with genetics—which nobody in the city could afford. But before he could even take the breath to speak and warn the sergeant, the woman threw the child at them.

Yeltsa wasn’t going to sit by and just let things go as they were. She knew the police had superior numbers and equipment. She knew that her guys couldn’t be relied on much to succeed in a situation like this on their own.

Most of them weren’t as hardened as she was. They never travelled across the continent on their own like she had. They never faced down Prestige Knights at just thirteen years old while running from tank shells exploding at their feet. They never faced down a carspi with just their fists, never took on a gang of yautgan mercenaries and lived to tell about it—and she had the scars to tell the stories.

She knew that, except for Tomz, who she had recruited when she found out he had slayed an orderran Narcom mech during the orderran colonization of Tartian, the rest of her gang were just a bunch of hungry guys she’d found off the street and gave some weapons to make themselves feel like they were gods.

But the truth was that they couldn’t fight.

She was in her quarters, strapping on her dual-pistols and her knuckle-dusters equipped with a serrated, stainless-steel blade at the end, when Tomz pushed open the door and said, “Hey boss, shits not going down in our favor out there!”

“I know that Tomz,” said Yeltsa irritably. “I’m on my way. What’s the status?”

“Long story short almost everybody on our side’s gone to see where the Oikumies live,” said Tomz. “I don’t know where Node’s gone to—but I guess his genius ass was smart enough to haul it out of here the moment everyone started shooting.”

Yeltsa went into the hall with Tomz. An Oikumi flew through a wall on their right and down the stairs. Carts of ice-cream, candy and cookies were strewn through the corridors with some of it slathered across the wall. The sweet scent mixed perfectly with the decay of the building, gunpowder and the blood to give the air an exotic flavor.

They heard the rat-tat-tat of lanceguns, the bam-bam-bam of Malcers and the pow of Sputties. There was no way the two of them could just waltz into that kind of hell with just two lance-pistols and Tomz’s lancegun. Then Yeltsa got an idea.

She spun on her heels and headed back to the room where she saw boy hiding. She went him and found him crouched behind a wardrobe with his hands covering his head.

Yeltsa slowly knelt before him, smiled warmly, and said, “Hey, there...”

The dracoid boy looked up, but didn’t say anything.

“You want to come to safety with me?” said Yeltsa. “I’m big and strong and can protect you...”

The boy seemed as if he had gone into shock and fled to the dark depths of his mind to escape the chaos. But he nodded slowly.

Yeltsa smiled even wider.

She took the boy into her arms and head out. Tomz saw her with the child in her hands, and knew what she was up to wasn’t too pleasant.

Yeltsa broke the corner with the child held up before her. The police men and women in front of her stopped instantly with guns trailed on her.

“Help! Please help my baby!” she cried as she quickly approached them, building up momentum. “Hold it right there!” the sergeant said.

Yeltsa tossed the boy towards the sergeant, instantly she built up the Hiradokou in her fist and charged. The sergeant dropped his weapon and caught the boy, both falling to the floor as Yeltsa punched a dracoid woman in the chest, sending the force of the honoi out her back. She flew down the corridor threw the wall. Yeltsa swung her forearm into the head of a lazhinian as he got off just one shot in Yeltsa’s chest.

At this close range the rifles of the officers only served the defeatist purpose of slowing them down for Yeltsa to pick them off at leisure.

Tomz approached from around the corner and took aim at the officers and fired, hitting a largaph fighting Yeltsa in the back with a single round from his Malcer.

The sergeant aimed up Tomz from on his back with the child clutched close to him and fired three times. One shot lodged in the wall behind Tomz, one embedded in his armor vest, and the other in his right shoulder. It was a through-and-through, breaking the collar bone as it went right through his body.

Tomz threw the Malcer rifle away as the pain shot through his body like acid being poured in his wound. He slumped against the wall with a silent whimper, and staggered out of sight.

Yeltsa got shot once more in the forearm, the bullet ripped out an ounce of her flesh but she still kept going, pinning the man who shot her against the wall with her elbow. She rammed the knife of her knuckleduster into his gut, and dragged it up, and sliced his intestines to strips.

As she swung the knife around to the head of a largaph woman a bat clapped her right on her shoulder so hard it sent her staggering.

The sergeant rolled out of the way with the boy and onto his feet, using all of his strength to carrying the whimpering, heavy child into a nearby room.

“You think I wouldn’t find you bitch?” Joey said, landing another blow on Yeltsa’s forearm. “You think I wouldn’t come see you?” This time he swung the bat down onto her kneecap, staggering her long enough for Lezura to leap off Joey’s shoulder and plow her foot into Yeltsa’s chest.

The blow stung her gunshot wound and made her grimace. She tripped over one of the bodies and fell on her back.

Lezura whipped the spear off her hip and extended it. She lifted it over Yeltsa to plunge into her. “Where is the compass?” Lezura said.

Yeltsa only answered by striking out with a Hiradokou from her foot.

Tomz scampered up to the tenth floor, pushing equipment out of the way in the corridor until he reached a door at the end. Still clutching his burning wound, he kicked open the door and went up the stairs. There was a door there that was closed by a lock. Frustrated he pulled the lance-pistol from out the back of his pants and shot it off.

He pushed the door open with his head, and was instantly bathed by sunlight from the outside. He was on the cliff, and was staggered his way across to a gate at the far end. It was an emergency escape route that the Skull Crusher gang used in times of serious emergencies.

Tomz wasn’t weak like the others, but he wasn’t stupid, or as strong as Yeltsa. He didn’t know why that woman didn’t just escape when she could, and quite frankly he didn’t care to contemplate her agenda right now.

Screw that bitch, I’m done with this gang stuff!

He reached the gate and pulled out the lock. As he opened it he saw a geckoid woman looking up from the granite steps below into his face. She was small, looking like she was in her mid-teens, and wore a red and white bandana.

“What the—”

Tomz motioned to point the gun at her—

S'us did a backflip, kicking the gun out of the Tomz's hand.

“What the—” Tomz cut his words short and stepped back. He gathered honoi on his left arm, concentrating it to the point where it crystalized like armor over his entire forearm. Over his fingers it extended into five large claws. It was a melee type honoi technique known as the Hiranien.

When her feet touched the ground S'us snatched a scroll off her waist, stretched it open and poured her honoi into it.

“Release!” she said, and a rock the size of a small child shrouded in dust and pebbles blasted from the land seal.

Tomz clawed through the rock with his Hiranien and lounged at S'us headfirst while the rest of his tough skin endured pebbles stinging him.

S'us ducked beneath his claws and swiveled around to Tomz, drawing her knife. Tomz swung back his arms, nearly cleaving off S'us head. She countered with a strike at Tomz's neck, but he blocked it with his armored arm, kicking S'us in her gut and onto her back.

“Little bitch!” Tomz's screamed.

S'us' twisted her flexile neck out the way of Tomz's fist as it plowed into the ground next to her, burying itself nearly five inches deep.

S'us struck out with her legs, slamming Tomz's in the gut and pushing him back. S'us quickly got on her feet and dodged Tomz's swiping claws.

“Hold still ya cunt so I can cut ya!” Tomz's said, pissed that wound was throwing him off his game. Finally Tomz's struck her, slicing her across the chest as she fell back out the way. Luckily her motion made the wounds shallow but they still burnt. S'us fell on her back, grimacing in pain.

Tomz stomped in her chest, and S'us even heard the crack of her rib. She uttered a tight squeal coughing up droplets of blood around her mouth.

“What the hell are you doing? Get up!” I'us said.

“I'm...I'm trying...” S'us said as she tried to push off Tomz's foot.

Tomz grinned down at her and said, “Little girls like you shouldn't be in a place like this, you know...” He lifted his claws above her. “Where ever your family is, I'll be sending you back to them now!”

And S'us remembered. The reason she was here to this day. She glowered at Tomz's and said, “I...don't need your help. I'll find my sister's body no matter how long it takes!”

S'us' tongue whipped out of her mouth, unto her upper arm and grasped the ink canister and doused Tomz in the face with the ink.

Tomz, shocked and angered, cursed and stepped off S'us, wiping his ink-black face.

S'us rolled away and took deep breathes.

Tomz went to retrieve the gun that had fell from his hands; and that was when S'us struck.

She took the water scroll off her waist, opened it and activated it to its fullest. A torrent of water like from a fire hose. It knocked Tomz right off his feet and into a muddy roll.

Tomz coughed up mud and stone as he staggered to his feet, nearly slipping four times in the mud. He shook the mud from his face and opened his smoldering eyes. “You're dead!” said Tomz, opening fire at where S'us was.

Only it was another huge rock, S'us' last, heading his way. Tomz punched the rock and shattered it.

“Don't you learn bitch?” grinned Tomz. But as the dust settled, the geckoid woman was nowhere there. “What—”

His reaction was too late. By the time his eyes looked to the ground, S'us had slid in the mud on her back towards Tomz.

“Oh, I learn!” S'us said.

She exerted all her strength into one motion, rolling onto her hands and kicking up into Tomz's gut simultaneously. Her attack enhanced by her powerful thigh muscles. The blow sent Tomz off his feet and on his back. When he got up, he slipped, again. Only this time he was brought to the gate leading down the steps, and Tomz slipped and tumbled down the staircase and off the side.

S'us only heard the last of Tomz's dying screams. She slowly got up, clutching her bloody chest. Her little chest went up and down like it was going to pop off.

Suddenly a hand reached in her pouch and out came I'us. "Take that you dick!" said I'us.

"Now is not the time..." S'us breathed dryly. She winced and crouched. She tenderly clutched her throbbing chest.

S'us had assumed that she could enter the building by another route when the police had sent her away. She had ridden around the community on her greshku and discovered from ground level some steps near a building that disappeared onto the cliff.

I just hope Joey and Lezura are okay, S'us thought.

The explosion in the dome's ceiling canceled out all of her thoughts. The vibration shook S'us off her feet and onto her face. Quickly rolling back onto her feet and fighting to remain conscious through all the pain, she was greeted with the sight of the center of the ceiling getting another huge hole. Smoke, dust, and huge chunks of debris plummeted to the city, smothering those screaming below like an avalanche of burning dirt.

Through the clearing mountain of dust from the hole, she witnessed the descent of Dawhawks.

"Oh no..." S'us said "...orderrans!"

Taking up her ink canister and checking that she had fresh, blank scrolls, S'us limped towards the door.

Lezura stepped aside out of Yeltsa's honoi-powered kick, but the other foot landed in her gut and sent her sprawling back. Yeltsa flipped onto her feet and charged for Joey with a Hiradokou. The human ducked beneath it, letting it shatter the wall next to him like a bomb, unsheathed his knife and tried to cut Yeltsa. She countered with her knife and kicked Joey into the damaged wall, widening the hole more as he went through.

Nesten ran into the hall and instantly took aim at Yeltsa. "Freeze!" he said.

Yeltsa charged into the wall and tore herself a hole, entering the room that Joey had flown into. Lezura got to her feet and went in after her along with Yeltsa.

Bruised and cut, Joey was backed up through the old bedroom against a window. Even though his head was hurting like a cossik was gnawing on it, he still charged up honoi for an attempt at the Bluebolt. As Yeltsa got closer her face had a stone-cold expression of that of many killers Joey had come across back on Earth. Her steps were calculated and calm. And quick! Joey lifted his hand.

And Yeltsa just stopped.

"That's right bitch!" Joey said, panting. "Come any closer and I'll blow you another hole somewhere on your face!"

Yeltsa's eyes widened with incomprehension. It wasn't possible what she was seeing out through the window. She lowered her weapon, taking her mind off the little alien before her.

Nesten pointed the gun up to the back of Yeltsa's head. "Move and you're dead..." he said. Then out the window something snapped away his attention. It was enough for him to lower the gun slightly off the back of Yeltsa's head, and would have been enough for Yeltsa to spin around and disarm him. But she didn't.

"Joey!" Lezura said as she ran to his side. Her relief was quickly killed when she looked out the window. She lowered her spear and slowly approached Joey.

Seeing all the blank faces, Joey said, "What the hell's going on...?" So he turned around and looked out the window into the city, and his heart skipped a long beat and his stomach wrenched. "Oh shit..."

They watched as Dawhawks descended upon the city through a huge hole in the ceiling. Each of them was shocked to see such a thing had happened in the midst of their confrontation. They all approached the window—even Nesten lowered his weapon and went between Lezura and Joey.

They saw seven Dawhawks, but more and more were coming through until finally there were ten of them flying over the city. They released groups of Cyries with jetpacks that buzzed all over the city, screaming and laughing.

“What the bloody hell are orderrans doing here?” Nesten said with frantic movements of his eyes as he tried to make out the movements of the Cyries and retreating Dawhawks.

“No clue,” Yeltsa said in a low voice, but her usual calm was gone.

Joey didn’t understand enough of what the two just said, he didn’t bother to put the translator back in his ear, but turned to Lezura and said, “What the hell’re we goanna do?”

“We have to leave,” said Lezura. “We have no chance of stopping a force like this...”

Nesten wanted to question Joey and Lezura about how they were associated with this, but he had a duty to do. He let the rifle drop to his side without a worry for the gang boss next to him, walked away and said into his wrist-phone, “All surviving squads, immediately make your way to the center of the city to provide aid to the civilians! I repeat, immediately make your way to the center of the city to provide aid to the civilians, over!”

There was a reply of three “Understood!” Satisfied, Nesten turned to Yeltsa and said, “You...”

Yeltsa turned to the police Captain with an annoyed look. “You want something little man?”

“Done give me that crap now,” said Nesten, “your faith’s in my hands now. Got that?”

Yeltsa didn’t see what arguing could do, so she just kept quiet and listened. “What?”

“How many guns to you have in this place?” said Nesten.

“Twice as many as the people who used them,” Yeltsa said.

“How many of the people around this dump work for you?”

A sly smile lifted the corners of Yeltsa’s mouth. “Are thinking what I think you are...?”

“Yes,” said Nesten, “and if you refuse to help then I’ll just put a bullet in your head and end things now!”

“Wait a minute!” Lezura said to Nesten in Naasi, “you really want to side with this woman after what she did?”

Yeltsa grinned at Lezura and said, “Feeling jealous, little princess?”

“Hey,” Nesten said testily, “she doesn’t have a airship with a particle-beam and a hundred troops,” he pointed out the window, “but they do!” he said to Yeltsa, “Look, you get whosoever you can to hold a weapon and get them on our side.”

“No problem, Captain,” Yeltsa said.

“Hey!” said Joey, “And where the hell do you think you’re going with my damn compass?”

And idea suddenly popped into Lezura’s head. “Wait,” she said, staring intently at Yeltsa, “If you really want to help, keep the compass for a little longer!”

“What?” said Yeltsa.

“What?” said Joey, not understanding much without the translator, and decided to put it in.

Lezura said to Nesten, “We will need to split up their forces. Some will go after the key, and some will go for the Rakai...”

“So that explains who he is...” Nesten said, staring at Joey, “and also why the orderrans are here. Then again...they were bound to come here and kill us anyway...”

A geckoid girl ran into the room, breathing heavily and leaning against the door. “Joey...Lezura...!” she said.

They all turned, Nesten lifting his weapon to bear at her. She flinched and took a step back.

“S’us!” Joey said with a wide smile.

“We must hurry out!” S’us said, “The orderrans are here!”



“We have realized...” Lezura said, dragging Joey by the arm out of the room.

“The key—”

“Forget it for now!” Lezura said. “That cannot help us now, but Donnowarru can.”

They heard a loud groan in the air from somewhere.

“Follow me,” said S’us.

“Wait,” said Nesten. He took a rifle from out of the corridor of bodies, checked that it had a full clip and gave it to Lezura. He gave his pistol to S’us. “Usually I’m against children carrying weapons, but I guess circumstances now can argue against that.”

“Thank you,” said Lezura.

S’us tried taking the lead but her wounds slowed her down. She leaned on Lezura on the way. They reached the balcony, Lezura called upon Donnowarru. The wizard materialized on his floating cloud.

“Amazing...!” S’us said.

“What the hell do you all want now, man?” Donnowarru said, yawning while scratching under his arm.

“We need you to restore our strength and honoi immediately,” Lezura said with a glare that told Donnowarru she wasn’t in the mood for his shenanigans.

Donnowarru puckered his mouth. Catching a glimpse of rapid movement off the balcony, Donnowarru narrowed his eyes and saw the machines flying around the city. He noticed the huge hole in the dome that they were traversing through.

“My,” he said, “that big hole does not seem to belong there!”

“Would you knock it off?” said Lezura. “I am not asking you to fight, Donnowarru!”

“Fine, fine!” said Donnowarru. He spotted S’us, rubbed his chin and said, “You are?”

“My name is S’us,” she said.

“And I’m I’us,” said the puppet, “the better looking out of the two sisters...”

Donnowarru bit down on his lip while smiling, turning his face into childish smirk. He giggled, and said to Lezura, “My goodness, Lezura you sure know how to pick the most extraordinary of people to accompany you!”

“Dude!” said Joey.

Donnowarru waved them away. “You do not have to shout!” Donnowarru got off his cloud. “All of you, stand before me.”

“It will have to be on the way,” said Lezura. “We do not have time!”

“Then let’s get going already people!” Joey said.

He turned and ran, and tripped over a pipe and fell face-first in the pan with Yeltsa’s underwear.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Skymera was a massive airship of orderran design, nearly two hundred yards long and built to house military units, mechs, dropships and ground vehicles.

What could best come close to describing this machine, was a beetle with two sharp ovals so close to its flanks they seemed to be one, and claw like structures curving out of almost all the creases. The proverbial ass of the beetle had four round rockets spewing out orange flames. The ovals had rows of three massive antigravity orbs beneath, thrusters at the back and mounted guns at the front. It was silver-blue colored at the base but bronze colored at the top, with the head being the usual orderran white with red eyes, of course.

And beneath the head, there lurked under the quiet a particle-beam cannon.

Particle-beam technology was something the orderrans developed ninety years ago based on discoveries they made outside the solar system. It had some specifics in its use, being that it could only be used in weapons as large as airship—say one of this size, or cannons that could be only be carried by the strength of a yautgan, female orderran (none of who took part in fighting in their military), or large mechs. It took nearly ten seconds to charge up the cannon, and it also took a scoop out of the ship's shield power.

But it was worth it.

As the massive airship stalked over the dome, the lower particle-beam charged up. It consisted of a series of metallic tubes with a pink central bar that extended to a sphere, then again into the long, narrow barrel.

With a harmonious whistle glowing bits of matter like dust particles in a beam of light were pulled into the pink central tube. The outer ones generated a field of energy that contained the energy once absorbed. It was channeled into the sphere where it was bundled up, then finally released through the barrel with a flash of pinkish-white light.

It hit the dome with a wet slapping sound into a chaotic explosion. Once the hole was blown, the base of the ship's abdomen slowly opened up like a giant mouth ready to consume the prey it just slayed, but first it released its drones to finish off the kill—the Dawhawks.

They swarmed through the mortal wound in the dome like flies to a sore, all ten of them. Following shortly was Viceroy Morg; however his mode of transportation was much different.

He was seated with his skin shiny with sunscreen in a lavish chair, set against a grey surface with the symbol of his military dominating the top. It was like a giant disc with a grey and white base that narrowed to a point. Antigravity orbs went around the rim. There were bulges around the sides where the weapons were kept, and above them were wings with thrusters and a single antigrav sphere at the base of the Tesler.

Morg was listening to a tune from his mp5 player via headphones. He rested his hands on the arms of his chair, with one foot folded, tapping the beat and singing the lyrics, even as the Dawhawks descended in the city around him, creating a circle to seal off some of the panicked civilians from escaping, he was quite immersed in the tune.

*I'm a sexy boy,  
Oh! So sexy boy  
Wanna be your boy-toy,  
Oh! Your boy-toy  
Can you take me to your house?  
Yeah! Inside your house  
I'm goanna sex on the couch,*

*Ooo...on the couch  
Then I lay on the bed,  
Uh, uh, the bed  
I'm goanna run your pussy red,  
Ooo, oh yeah!*

As Morg flew out of his seat and danced to the verse, a dozen or so soldiers deployed just beneath the Tesler formed a parade before the rubble—which had a few mangled limbs sticking out of it.

Some curious civilians still peeped at the orderrans from the crack of their apartment windows and from around corners. More orderrans came to join the parade. This time they had dragged some civilians with them. Most didn't try to escape from the orderrans as they had witnessed the few who resist getting gun-down.

They handed off the civilians to ones at the front and moved to back of the parade. They subdued them into a kneeling position before, making them face their sulking fellow citizens who approached the orderrans voicing their hate, disgust and outrage. But they didn't go beyond fifty meters near the orderrans.

Morg's Tesler sensed the distance between it and the ground and stopped between two apartment complexes. But Morg was still in the tune. He gyrated his waist with his hands on his head. He put his voice in the best seductive tone he could;

*All the ugly girls and, all the pretty girls  
Wanna play with my sugar-stick, they wanna rock my world,  
I can't help it 'cause I got the finest ass in the place,  
They all wanna throw their panties in-my-face they're like—  
Ooo...that boy! Oh yeah, that boy, they're like  
Ooo...that boy! Oh yeah, that—*

Morg stopped in the middle of the song when he noticed from behind his tinted lens the people staring at him, soldiers and civilians alike. Morg quickly put away the mp5 in his coat pocket and accessed the buttons on the arm of his chair.

A tiny disc popped out of the floor, hovered in front of his face and scanned his imaged with a beam of light. It projected his image out the top meters into the air in a large hologram of Morg grinning, showing his large canines.

“Good afternoon, people of Suride Town!” Morg said. His voice was amplified through the disc and into speakers in the Whistler, “I am your handsome, lovely Viceroy, Bozobo Morg. Today I have brought with me soldiers to your wonderfully crappy dwelling, in search of a few bandits who have not only killed some of my soldiers, but made a mockery of the orderran people and rudely insulted the name of New Tartian.” Morg leaned in and wagged a warning finger, saying in a feminine voice, “And you know we don't take crap like that lightly!”

The tension grew amongst the people. The orderrans, Morg included, could smell the chemical chaos of hormones in their bodies, and they relished it.

Morg said, “If those pesky little bandits don't reveal themselves now, I will appoint my soldiers to kill someone every five minutes...”

The people cooed at the soldiers, enthralled with hate and fear.

Out of the raging crowd an elderly geckoid male with long grey hair and bushy eyebrows made his way to the front with the help of a few officers. Among them was the police commissioner, A large yautgan man with a lean face and black feathers on his head; Commissioner Oldam.

The geckoid was dressed in a light brown coat beneath his white, long sleeved sweater, and wore dark brown trousers and simple leather shoes. He had deep green skin and wrinkles around his eyes, cheeks and the corner of his mouth, and his hunched over appearance made him look even shorter.

He was the mayor of the city, Mayor Cassim. He gestured with his slim hand with sharp black finger nails, and the commissioner stooped and gave him a small microphone.

“Viceroy Bozobo Morg,” said the mayor in a low, but assertive tone, “I am Mayor Cassim, the man in charge of this city...”

“Yes...” Morg said with slow nods.

“I speak in the defense of all my people,” the mayor said, “Bandits can come in and out of the city as they wish, so long as they hand over their weapons and do not cause any trouble. Neither you nor I, have any proof that these bandits you’re after are still in the city, so you have no right to harm anyone here. For all we know, the bandits could have come and gone long ago...”

The mayor lowered the microphone and said to Commission Oldam, “Make sure you get your officers in front to face the soldiers. I do not think this Morg will listen to reason.”

“Yes, Mr. Mayor,” said Oldam.

Oldam gestured behind him and more officers slowly crept forward to the front. The eyes of the captives remained apprehensive, but their orderran captors’ expressions were unreadable behind their masks.

In the crowd, Clastaan, Tylin, Tet and Podge watched the soldiers with thinning anticipation.

“They’ll attack us anyway,” said Podge grimly.

“I know,” Tylin said. “Are you sure about this, Clastaan...?”

Beside her Clastaan nodded briskly, his yellow eyes fixed on the mechs. “We must stay and fight to help these people. We are partly responsible for provoking the orderrans and bringing them here. We must provide some means of support.” Clastaan turned to Tet, “Are the men in place, my friend...?”

“Yes,” Tet said, “All nine men are ready to fight. Though, I have to say, I don’t know what good a few bandits and sixty-odd police officers will do against over a hundred heavily armed orderrans and their mechs.”

“As anyone gotten word from the Rakai?” Podge said.

“S’us went to visit him and Lezura,” Tylin said, “I don’t know if they already left or are still here...”

“Think they will take action?” Tet said.

Tylin smiled. “Knowing Joey, he wouldn’t miss this even if Lezura told him to.”

Morg scratched his chin thoughtfully for a moment. “That does make sense,” he said, then his eyes lowered to the people and a tight smile played on his lips. “But I got orders to kill you people anyhow, so...”

As Morg was about to give the order to shoot, a black duffle bag dropped on top of the Tesler. Immediately as it dropped large insects scattered out of it and disappeared over the side.

“What the bloody fuck?” Morg said.

A huge, moist red panty slapped Morg across the face. He involuntary took a breath and chocked. He violently threw the thing off his reddened face. The Tesler had its own generated force fields, but such things only worked against fast moving projectiles such as bullets, arrows and missiles.

Morg kicked off the bag and panty off the Tesler and shouted, “Who the hell did that?”

“Tat-tada-daaaaa—bitch!” said Joey from above.

Morg looked up to his right. On a ledge beneath the top of an apartment building, stood Joey, Lezura and S’us. Lezura had her lancegun and S’us the pistol. Joey preferred to wield his honoi.

Morg studied the alien wearing the helmet of an orderrans soldier. The boldest of it stirred his rage. That could only be from one of the soldiers that had been killed, confirming the bandits were still here in the city, and the audacity to gloat about it.

“So, you finally showed your little shit selves, he?” said Morg with a bitter frown.

The people on the ground looked up to where Morg was speaking, even some of the soldiers dared to do so.

“Told ya,” said Tylin with a cocky grin.

“That ass better not get himself killed,” said Podge.

Clastaan shrieked. “Dear heavens!” Clastaan said, pointing next to Joey, “S’us is with them!”

“You made a big mistake coming where I’m staying, punk!” Joey shouted at Morg.

Morg grinned, shaking his head at Joey. “You’ve just signed your death warrant, you little vermin.”

Joey pointed his sword at Morg two stories below. He said, “I wouldn’t be so sure about that, super-white boy. Unless you didn’t hear, I’m the Rakai, and I’m here a’ save the day!”

Morg threw back his head and laughed. He pointed at Joey and jeered, “You’re the Rakai? Oh please.” Morg ignored the surprise of the crowd below and continued, “How the hell can a stupid alien kid like you, walking around with—”

The sight of Lezura at Joey’s right side captured Morg’s attention and sparked his interest. What the hell’s a nycarman doing all the way out here? Morg knew not all the nycarman people had agreed to the Prestige System, but one amongst an alien claiming to be the Rakai did arouse his suspicion.

“If you are the Rakai,” Morg said, his curiosity piped, “show me the key,” Morg gestured with his open arms to the people below, “Show us all the key!”

Joey dropped his sword, scratched his neck. He said, “Well...um...”

“He doesn’t have it!” said another voice from above.

Morg and everyone else turned to the building on Morg’s left to see a yautgan woman standing at the top with a police officer beside her, and a mixture of armed civilians and officers behind them—a healed Coenter and a wounded but still battle-ready Dinon.

Yeltsa held up the compass and said, “That’s because I have the key!”

Another disc abruptly popped out of the floor of the Tesler and flew up to Yeltsa. It scanned the compass and displayed it on a large hologram projected near Morg’s head in the air.

The civilians below broke out into a chorus of comments.

Morg gritted his teeth on the hologram for everyone to see. “Enough of this!” his voiced boomed through the speakers. “Kill them! Kill them—”

The hostages threw themselves forward and hit the ground the moment the barrage of gunfire and screaming retreat of civilians began. Oldam’s officers didn’t need his order to start shooting; they just waited until the captives made themselves prone.

The orderrans gunned down three of the retreating civilians as they spread out and took cover amongst the corners of the buildings and the rubble. The police did the same, but had trouble getting the hostages who were now scampering to their feet to retreat and the shield of the orderrans.

Tylin and the others dived back with the crowd, but pushed their way through them to get to a better position to attack. From through the windows in some of the building their people unleashed arrows at the orderrans below.

Not only did some of the soldiers have deployed shield-projectors but some also had it on a gauntlet looking piece if wear that projected it in a small circle. Usually this shield was wielded with a pistol for more maneuverability, effectively increasing their defenses from gunfire from the police in front and the clansmen above and lessening the men that fell on their side.

They used this advantage to gun down two officers and one of the clansmen hiding in the building above. His largaph body plummeted out the window onto the battlefield, where the exchange of gunfire occasionally made a new hole in his corpse.

A few of their shields were already down, but any advances the other side could make were kept at bay by the aid of the soldiers’ trusted mechanical comrades.

Five assault-mechs walked down the street to the core of the police force. Police officers had gone around to try and flank the orderrans, but were quickly being overwhelmed by their superior fire power.

The assault-mechs had bodies of jet-black metal plates with joints that exposed some of their red and blue wiring. The pelvis was almost rounded with two distinctly large silver wires stemming to the thighs. Their hands and feet were silver colored, with a white face made into a frown. Their weapons were heavy assault-rifles nearly six feet long, chain-fed from an ammunition packet on their backs.

And they weren't afraid to wield it. With a five round per-second fire-rate they used it to mulch down the cover of the police force, eating the vehicles and food stalls to virtually nothing.

One assault-mech mulched away the edge of a wall until it ripped off the shoulder of a yautgan officer. He wailed on the ground, clutching his torn limb. The mech finished him off his gunfire that reduced him to shreds as it pushed him across the ground.

Another officer, a dracoid, was literal taken off his feet and thrown over Commissioner Oldam's head by the hailstorm of bullets.

"Fall back! Fall back!" Commissioner Oldam said, not even risking a shot as he retreated by turning in an alley with a few others.

This was enough for the soldiers to advance forward. So far they had only lost four of their own, but the three dozen soldiers were quickly pushing their way down the street behind the mechs. Victory seemed sure for them. And would have—had not the great alchemist Clastaan Baryonix been there.

He, Tylin, Podge and Tet and four other clansmen and women had retreated with the crowd, only to get enough distance to set up an ambush. They traversed around a restaurant and around the dark back alley, looking straight down the end into the street where the gunfire of the assault-mechs were coming down like a rain of yellow flashes.

Tet and Podge pushed the dumpster in the way to provide cover.

They could still hear people running down the street behind them, crying out for their loved ones that got lost in the chaos.

A raizean woman running down the alley had Tylin grab her and pushed her back out.

Then they saw the first assault-mech coming down the street.

Clastaan and Tet snuck closer to the front. They crouched, hoping the machine wouldn't notice them.

"Do it, now! Do it!" Tet said to Clastaan.

"No yet, I need to get as many as possible," Clastaan said.

The second mech came into view some meters off the other.

"Now!" said Tet, "Do it!" He tapped Clastaan furiously on the shoulder.

"All right! All right! Cut it out!" Clastaan said.

He sped up to the unsuspecting assault-mechs, all the time trembling all over and with his teeth chattering.

"Dear gods give me courage..."

Clastaan stimulated the transmutation circle in his hands until they shone with honoi. He touched the ground, sending cracks of white light across to the mechs. Picturing the structure in which he wanted to rebuild that part of the ground into, Clastaan send this into the transmutation energy. The result was the ground breaking apart like a mass of clay, then reconstructing into a huge wave of spikes that ran like a train into the two mechs.

Both soldiers and the police dropped their jaws.

The mechs landed in a mangled heap of twisted and dented limbs.

Tylin and the others broke their cover and charged. Tylin kicked Clastaan in the butt and said, "Get going!"

Claasaan nearly fell on his face. He braced himself with his hands and ran into the street. He faced the direction of the soldiers in a sudden turn that nearly made him trip, and repeated the attack once more.

A massive column of spikes nearly a story tall raced into the heart of the soldiers like a tsunami. Some managed to throw themselves out the way, but the spikes impaled three of them in its wake.

Commissioner Oldam's mind quickly went from astonishment to seizing the opportunity presented to them.

"Move forward!" he said to his men. "Move forward and take it to those bastards!"

Like medieval knights spurred into action, the officers charged in a roar fueled with new-found hope.

"Get us over there, Professor!" Tylin said as she took her spot before Clasaan. Podge and Tet came to her side.

Claasaan said, "As you wish my dear lady!"

He hit the ground just behind three with his hands, manipulating the ground into a massive stone hand that cradled the three of them and stretched over the wall of spikes into the broken ranks of the soldiers.

On the way Tylin leaped out of the palm towards a mech. It lifted its line of fire into the air to trace Tylin, but she was already upon it. With a dagger covered all around in grooves that allowed it to be fully cloaked in honoi Tylin descend upon the metal monstrosity's back, holding on painfully with one hand on its hard shoulder and slashing the chain of rounds that fed its hellish weapon.

With the link cut Tylin stabbed the mech in the tendons in its neck twice, dropping off as she severed them and made its right arm go limp. The mech dropped the gun like an anchor to the ground, wheeled around and protruded a long, tapering blade released from its wrist.

With blinding speed, Tylin ducked beneath the machine's swipe, spun on her heels, unsheathed her sword at the same time, parried the second attack with a loud grunt at the force of the impact, and leaped back out of the way of the machine's kick.

The mech came at her with considerable speed, nearly hacking off her head. Tylin dodged with the tip of the blade making a deep cut on her face. Tylin augmented her sword with honoi, snuck her way behind the mech and whirled around with a chop in the back of the mech's knee. It wobbled off balance, giving Tylin the chance to step onto its pelvis and leap in the air.

She augmented her weapon further, turning the bright-blue glow of the honoi to near white. And with one clean slash she beheaded the mech.

The mech stumbled forward with sparks flying out from its neck.

Podge and Tet leaped into the fray of orderrans, quickly unleashing assaults with their weapons and forcing the orderrans into close-quarters combat. The other four clansmen followed over the arm with the officers behind them.

A mech that tried to take aim at them and had the ground beneath it suddenly sink into a crater and toppled over. Clasaan switched from that mech to the one that had just pushed three officers off the bridge with gunfire in a bloody mess.

Claasaan raced across the bridge and leaped off, running up to mech as it was about to focus on him, and touched its metal pelvis. Iron was much harder to breakdown than normal soil, and required more of Clasaan's honoi. But he used it all in that instant, breaking down the mech from the pelvis all the way up to the abdomen into pieces. Clasaan dropped back as its torso hit the ground.

Claasaan watch the soldiers and his clan and the officers brawl it out with swords, knives, and wrist-blades. He would have helped, had his body not become so tired. It wasn't that he was old, Clasaan was just in his late forties. It was just that physical exertion wasn't his forte.

I need to work out more... Clasaan thought, as he laid back and closed his eyes. What are you doing, Clasaan? You used to be a Dragoon for goodness sake! Get up you lazy you bum!

Claasaan clenched his jaw and rose to his feet.

He ran over to help the others, tripping over the body of the mech and landing on his head, knocking himself out cold.

The moment Morg gave the order to kill Yeltsa, Nesten and their troops made a hasty retreat on top of the building and over the roof.

“You sure we can make it out of this?” Yeltsa said as her long legs effortlessly carried her forward.

“Nothing beats trying!” Nesten said as a flock of Cyries shrieked over his head.

The Cyries, congregated like a single noisy entity, opened fire at the people on the roof. The rain of death clipped the calves of one of Nesten’s officers, dropping him and pressing him with bullets like passing steamroller. The Cyries sped up to administer the same treatment to the unwilling patients.

The group headed to the old ruins of the city, with buildings like the ones Yeltsa hid her gang in. They weren’t sure if people were still squatting there, but it was least populated place they could find. And with Yeltsa carrying the key, they were bound to follow her there.

As they traversed the roof tops across pipes, poles and stairs, half the flock of Cyries in a triangular formation sped ahead of them, pivoted around to a steady hover just two buildings away.

A Dawhawk slowly glided over to that building. The side of the vehicle slid open and soldiers and mechs jumped outside, finding what cover they could.

“Dammit” Nesten said.

“Take cover!” Coenter shouted, diving behind the edge of the roof top as the second set of Cyries swooped by with a payload of bullets.

They all managed to move out of the way of that attack, but the first set of Cyries flew by with a storm of gunfire that slew two of Yeltsa’s armed men and another officer.

The roof top was sparsely with only a few bird coops and some shacks for equipment, and with gunfire coming from the other roof, and the two groups of Cyries circled the building like a pack of sharks, they were sure their death was sealed and stamped in their soon to be split blood.

Yeltsa got shot in the leg; a large nice hole in the thigh from a Malcer, just a few inches from the bone. She screamed and doubled over. Fighting for her life she crawled behind the shack next to Coenter and one of her thugs, an armed geckoid.

Gunfire shaved the top of the shack and rained debris down on them.

Yeltsa channeled her honoi into her wound and pushed out the bullet. She used it to effectively slow down the bleeding, but the pain was omnipotent.

Noticing her discomfort, and sensing that this woman would be needed if there were to survive this, Coenter swallowed her pride and said, “How is it?”

Yeltsa said with an irrigated expression, “Just wonderful...”

Coenter lowered her rifle and pulled back the sleeve on her wrist. She put it to Yeltsa’s face and said, “Drink my blood, quickly!”

Momentarily shocked by the offer, Yeltsa hesitated, then being hit by the pain again, she held Coenter’s arm and bit into her wrist. Coenter braced herself and gripped her teeth, closing her eyes as Yeltsa’s teeth sliced into her flesh.

Lazhinian blood not only healed lazhinians, but was also adaptive, mimicking the cells of another organism’s body by fusing with it, replicating itself so it could survive as that new organism. It didn’t try to take over the body; it merely became part of the organism so its white blood cells wouldn’t attack it.

As Yeltsa gulped ounces of blood, one of the flocks of seven Cyries deployed static bomb looking like black eggs with blue lumps at the top and bottom onto the roof.

The blue lumps popped off to expose metallic rods that erupted with electricity. Four on the roof got caught in the field of electricity and convulsed where they stood; tiny rips popped up on their skin and their eyes rolled into their in a death like someone slowly driving a nail into their skulls.



When the field died the Cyries descended on the roof. Most of them were easily gun down, but one of the two remaining flocks landed and countered attacked, screaming maniacally as they dropped organism and Oikumies perched on their corpses.

Coenter yanked her hand from Yeltsa and clutched it. The wounds were slowly healing, as was Yeltsa's body. A Cyri appeared around where they were and shot up the geckoid in the chest before had chance to react.

"Bitch, hahahaha!" the Cyri said.

Coenter immediately hovered over the geckoid's corpses and began eating out his exposed insides. It wasn't some random burst of cannibalism; Coenter simply needed more protein to restore her own cells.

Yeltsa shot the Cyri from her Sputty, sending it staggering back with a horrified squeak. Yeltsa blasted it a second time and ripped open his chest.

This won't work! Yeltsa thought. If I stay here everyone out there will die; and then I'll be outnumbered, and...

Yeltsa sprang into action to support her allies.

With both hands augmented with the Hiradokou, Yeltsa ran into the crowd of Cyries on the roof, pummeling down those in her way to pieces. She switched her attention from the enemy as the officers and her thugs took over and went for one of the assault mechs across the other roof.

She threw her knee into a Cyri-bot running at her, knocking it back as she dove beneath the gunfire of an assault-mech. She came up with an uppercut that knocked the head clean off the mech, and with another Hiradokou she bored a hole into the mech's chest.

Yeltsa lifted the torso of the mech, and with her newly salvaged shield she ran across the pipes to the other roof where the soldiers had taken up their post. A handful of combatants from her side trailed behind her, shielded from the onslaught of bullets that riddled the mechs chest to nothing.

I need armor, were the thoughts racing through Yeltsa's mind. The Hiradokou alone couldn't save her. Her shield was withering away to nothing, and she need to protect herself...and those behind her.

But why? Why do I have to protect them? I'm a criminal, aren't I? Then why do I want to protect them. Then she remembered. Yeah, that's why! I couldn't save mother. She was sick, and I couldn't save her...

Her shield was destroyed, but her body responded to her need. Under the stress her body was force to counter the situation, forcing itself beyond the normal use of its honoi. Yeltsa's honoi seeped out of her skin and all over her body like a film of armor—the Hirabidshi.

With her armor of honoi Yeltsa barged into the assault mech in front of her with her forearms over her face. The bullets tore apart her armor like shards of glass off her skin. But she reached.

With all her strength Yeltsa rammed her shoulder into the mech, at the same time she grabbed it around the waist and hoisted it off the ground, using it as a battering ram to knock down Cyries and orderrans.

"Shit!" Dinon said. Gunfire from the enemy made him dive for cover.

Yeltsa crashed with the assault-mech into the floor, shattering the roof and falling with it into the room below. The lone occupant, a raizean man, screamed and leaped off the bed and went through the room door.

As the gunfight above her escalated, the mech kicked her off, breaking a few of her ribs and the last of her armor. She land on the bed, clutching her chest as the pain seared through her body.

The mech got up and produced two wrist-blades. Yeltsa's mind was telling her to rest with the first throb of the honoi fatigue, but doing so would ensure her death.

Not a chance!

Yeltsa reached for her knuckledusters and parried the first attack while on her back. She rolled out of the way of the second and fell to the floor. The pain hit her again but she pushed beyond it, disassociating her mind from it.

She rolled onto her back and sprang into a punch that knocked back the head of the mech with a wincing crunch. She bobbed beneath the attacks of the mech like a boxer and countered with her bare fists, landing blow after blow to the mech's head, until finally its face dented in and damaged its CPU. The mech fell in the corner of the pink painted room, smashing the TV beneath it.

With the danger gone Yeltsa's body pressed her to rest and she conceded. She fell on her bottom and touched her chest gingerly. She slumped forward and held her head. Taking deep controlled breaths she settled into the silence.

It's silent! The shooting's stopped!

Yeltsa struggled to her feet and bolted for the door. Nesten fell through the roof, landed in a crouch and whipped out his pistol at her.

"Don't...even think about it..." Nesten said, smiling wryly. "You didn't really think I'd let you get off that easy, did you?"

Yeltsa turned around with a cautious smile. "It was worth a shot," she said. "Come on. Aren't my people and yours supposed to be partners? We helped each other during the first Solar War, and we helped each other even now. Why don't you just let me off with one of those warnings, like 'I'll let you go but don't show your face around here again'?"

"You killed my officers," said Nesten, "You're goanna pay for that." He smiled. "Besides, that crap only works in the movies..."

"Kill them! Kill them all!" Morg shouted.

He immediately threw himself into his chair and pressed some buttons on the chair arm to activate the weapons systems of the Tesler. Two control-handles popped up in his grasp, and a visor flipped over from the back over Morg's eyes. The gun ports on the side of the Tesler popped open and he tilted the controls up, gliding it towards Lezura, Joey and S'us.

"Scram!" Joey said, running along the ledge of the floor around the other side.

As the girls followed Lezura slowed just a little to get off some shots at Morg. The kinetic shields around the edge of the Tesler deflected the bullets.

"Little vermin..." Morg said.

He pushed down the triggers on the handles and gunfire erupted in yellow flashes from the silvery barrels, eating away the walls as they trailed after the three companions.

Joey nearly slipped off the edge as he ran, flaying his arms to catch his balance. S'us squeezed pass him, grabbed his arm and dragged him along. Lezura didn't have time to shoot. She could only run, hoping to stretch the time as their plan slowly played out.

"Let's see how you all like this," whispered Morg. He said aloud, "AI, activate the missiles!"

"MISSILES PREPARED FOR LAUNCH," came the reply of a feminine voice layered with computerized synthetics.

At the front of the Tesler's body protruded a dome that split into four parts and shoved out a barrel. Morg pressed the trigger at the end of the left handle, and the barrel bucked with the release of a dark red missile, shaped like a narrow bullet with reptilian creature's head painted around it.

S'us leapt off the edge with a screaming Joey and Lezura. The missile blew apart the building in fire and dust, but the three companions were already falling down the trunk of a sinni tree.

S'us expertly landed on a limb, jumping from one branch to the other all the way down. Joey practically hit every branch on the way.

“Dammit!” Morg said. The Tesler’s single camera eye swiveled above the rocket, searching below until it saw the enemy escaping down the tree. Morg lowered the Tesler down the side between the buildings and continued after them just meters above the streets.

Lezura felt the heat and force of the blast rush over her like a passing jet. She reached out with her honoi and shot it at the sinni tree. Vines suddenly threw themselves at Lezura, creating a net for her as she landed in them and lowered her to the ground. On the way she grabbed Joey’s foot, who got stuck between two limbs, and dragged him down with her.

S’us leaped on the back of her greshku she had waiting next to Redbolt. She waited for Lezura and Joey to hop onto the mynamather and for them to take the lead before moving.

Morg opened fire at them, grumbling all the while with each passing second of the bullets hitting everything but his annoying adversaries.

Lezura and the others made their way through the market. The people who had been hiding were bashed to find that their hiding place wasn’t so safe when they saw the flying machine chasing the two animals through it. They ran and found even smaller corners to hide in as gunshots turned the place upside-down and inside-out.

Morg landed a shot on S’us greshku; the beast howled in anguish and stumbled into a violent roll with S’us.

Hearing the commotion behind him Joey turned and look, his eyes flew wide open in shock.

“S’us!” he said. He saw the Tesler getting closer. “You son-of-a bitch!”

Joey fired repeated Blueburst at the Tesler. Their electrical properties broke through the shields and hit the Tesler, but did little to harm it more that tear off a few small layers of its armor.

Morg laughed. “You can’t hope to even touch me!” he said.

Lezura, focused only on the path ahead of her, weaved her way through the streets, under a bridge connecting two trees that housed shops, until she came amongst a huge mass of fluttering tarpaulins abandoned in the flight.

“We will stop here!” she said.

“But S’us...!” said Joey.

Lezura hopped off, Joey followed shortly.

“She is fine Joey,” said Lezura, slapping Redbolt on the hide. He whinnied and disappeared through the fluttering tarpaulins. Lezura hefted her rifle and said to Joey with a fierce look in her eyes, “Just remember the plan.”

Joey bit on his lip, and nodded firmly. They heard the high-pitched hum of the Tesler approaching and moved.

“Damn...” Morg said upon seeing the bridge between the trees. He flew over it, but he couldn’t find the targets. They were lost in the mess of tarpaulins like guardians spirits were shielding them.

And speaking of which, a few Oikumies flew pass. Morg found them annoying and opened fire at them, quickly scattering the creatures. Being further annoyed, Morg said, “Damn kids!” and fired a rocket.

The blast was a thunderous thud that sent dust and burning debris meters into the air. Morg waited for the dust to settle before searching with the eye of the Tesler for any movements. His visor was electronically linked with the eye, and anything it saw showed up on the lens inside said visor.

Morg bit down on his lip, frowning as his eyes searched for the targets. So far they were proving to be some damnable set of annoying people, even more annoying than the face of Deskai Gadsa.

Damn kids, Morg thought. Acting like their all high and mighty just because they saw some pubic hair on their bodies while in the bathroom. Wait, only orderrans have pubic hair! Weird...

“Ah-hah!” Morg said. There beyond the blast zone, Morg saw them. Joey and Lezura were climbing up vines up the side of a six story brothel called “Pretty Pink Panties”. “You naughty children, don’t you know that you shouldn’t go near such filthy places unless you have money?”

“Lezura my hands are getting tired!” Joey said as he went up the side of the battered wall. The vines were leathery and hard beneath his hands.

“Stop complaining and keep climbing!” Lezura said.

“Can’t you carry me on your back, like the last time?” Joey said.

Lezura shot an infuriated glance down at Joey. She said, “Boy—”

Lezura’s eyes caught something in a window next to her. She looked inside the room and saw a geckoid woman dressed in nothing but her tight, white, loose underwear and her red hair rolled up into a bun. She had a whip in one hand, and was standing on the bed over a yautgan man tied to the corners of the bed with his mouth gagged with a fruit.

Lezura and the two blinked at each other for some seconds. Finally Lezura broke the silence: “You know, there are people in danger in the city. There are orderrans here!”

“Tell them I charge a five hundred yerks by the hour...” the woman said flatly with her hand on her hip.

“LEZURAAAAA!”

Lezura’s attention switched from the woman to Joey below. She saw him pointing and looked in that direction—and nearly lost her grip and fell when she saw the Tesler hovering at the crack between the brothel and the clinic.

“Found you...” Morg said.

Lezura’s and Joey’s hands and feet went into overdrive, moving much like a geckoid scaling a wall as they ascended. Morg toyed with them, firing from beneath Joey, slowly floating up with them and bringing the stream of bullets closer to Joey’s feet. Every now and then Joey farted and got an extra boost up.

“J-Joey, was that you?” Lezura said in shock at the loudness.

“No...” Joey said.

The prostitute hurried to the window, was forced back by the waved of bullets, and came back again once the bullets were gone. She left the man wriggling on the bed to get loose.

The woman stuck her head out the window. She looked up with her large eyes and saw the Tesler going up the side.

“You buying?” she shouted at the machine. She smelt something funny in the air other than the gunpowder and the pulpy matter of torn plants flesh. She sniffed it, and bile surged up into her mouth with her skin getting a purple tinge.

Lezura thought: Come on, S’us. Where are you?

“Run bitches, run!” Morg said.

Morg decided to end things before they got any worse. Playing with these aliens would result in a slip up and their escape. It would have been beneficial to capture the Rakai and study the alien. There could be many things discover about his species.

“I’ll do that once I gather his body parts,” Morg said calmly to himself. He leveled the barrel of the missile launcher at Lezura and Joey. He rested his finger on the trigger. “It was nice playing with you folks, though!”

He pulled the trigger.

And the lights on Morg’s visor flashed red, a shrill beeping sound rung in his ears. The sound and the lights consumed his senses so suddenly that it seemed Morg was lost in a dimension of hysteria.

“What the hell’s going on?” he said.

“WARNING!” said the computer.

“Huh?”

“OPERATING SYSTEMS ARE FAILING DUE TO POWER DEPLETION. UNKNOWN THREAT TO FUEL REPOSITORY DETECTED!”

“What the hell’s this?” Morg tried to get the Tesler to fire, but in the corner of the visor’s screen were texts stating that all manual controls were turned off in order for the

And the explosion beneath the Tesler sent tremors up Morg’s seat, rattling him around in the cockpit. The wave of the blast pushed the wind through the buildings, nearly pushing off Lezura and Joey, luckily both were holding on tight.

The Tesler crashed into the front of the brothel, gouging away the wall as it fell. It hit the ground with the force of a falling truck. It exploded a second time, sending shrapnel in all directions.

The Tesler shot down S’us greshku and flew pass it. As the animal went to fall into a roll S’us leaped off just in time, her powerful legs carried her into the air and onto the side of a shop. There she held on with her hands and feet, pasted against it. She found one of the staircases at the side of the building and ascended it. She ran across the limb of a sinni tree, climbed it like an itikrat and leaped onto the top of a warehouse.

There she saw the Tesler in pursuit of Joey and Lezura.

Continuing across the roof tops, I’us said, “You sure this girl’s plan’s goanna work?”

“We have to trust her, sister!” S’us said, drawing her pistol.

I’us groaned. “I don’t like it,” she said. “Why did you have to stay behind and get shot? You almost died! I’m telling you, the Rakai and that nycarman woman are bad news.”

A scowl ruptured S’us expression, but she still mainta in her concentration and pursuit. “They trust me, I’us,” she said. “I’m an important element for this plan to work.”

I’us scoffed, and said, “Just make sure they can return the favor and help you find my body...”

The Tesler started shooting and S’us’ heart pace quickened. She leaped down onto a bar below the height of the brothel, and just across was the noisy Tesler already beginning to malfunction.

S’us got down on one knee and took aim at the base of the Tesler. The gassappers had chewed their way deep into the fuselage around the side of the Tesler, and had injected their proboscises far enough to feed on the fuel. Now they were swollen like tics, with their bodies having a faint red glow as they processed what nourishment they used from the fuel.

S’us aligned the sights of her lance-pistol with the gassappers. Using her keen eyesight she fixed her aim and fired once. It struck a gassapper, which exploded like a small-scale gas cylinder, causing a chain reaction that made the others go boom as well.

S’us stood up grinning. She held the gun against her shoulder and watch proudly as the Tesler fell from the air in smoke.

“Humph...” said I’us, grinning, “I guess it was a good plan after all. You go, sister!”

S’us gawked. “What the hell?”

“What is it?” said I’us.

Morg was climbing up the brothel like some kind of creature. In her haste S’us got off wild shots at him but not hit home. By the time she was to aim Morg had already reached the top and her ammunition ran out.

“Damn” S’us said. She leaped off the three story roof and landed perfectly on her feet. She ran towards the burning remained of the Tesler and took out an empty scroll.

Lezura pulled Joey onto the roof and dropped back with him. Both were lying beside each other with the tiny stones sticking into their back from the roof. Joey could taste bitterness in his mouth that was the dust he had taking in during the explosion. He swallowed it back.

He looked across at Lezura who had one hand resting on her forehead. He small breasts rose in a steady rhythm as she caught her breath.

“Is this enough action, for you, Joey...?” Lezura said.

His face felt hot, and Joey took off his helmet and was immediately met with relieving cool air. He said to Lezura, "There's no way this—"

A huge cream-colored hand reached over Joey's face and with a powerful yank hurled him off his back. Morg snarled and tossed Joey over to the other side of the roof.

Lezura jumped off her back, unsheathed her knife and attacked. Morg swatted her hand aside, shot his knee up into her gut. Lezura gasped as her intestines crunched together, and Morg grabbed her under her gut and tossed her over to where Joey was scampering to his feet.

Joey unsheathed his sword as Lezura regained herself and stood at Joey's side. They spaced out from each other to give themselves room to attack and evade. Lezura lost her rifle in the escape, but she had some reserve of honoi left in her body. She leaved her spear on her hip and decided to work with her knife.

Joey took a defensive sword stance Tylin taught him, gripping the sword in both sweaty hands.

"What the hell is this guy made of?" Joey said to Lezura. At this point, a super-soldier wasn't far off, though he was hoping to meet one under different circumstances.

Morg laughed at them, taking a casual stance with his hands on his hips. His glasses were gone and his intense red eyes gazed at them like a heat ray. A huge gash on his head leaked blood down the left side of his face. But he seemed undisturbed by it—which made Lezura and Joey worry even more.

Morg spoke, but only Lezura could understand much of it. "Do you know why they chose a fellow like me to be Viceroy?" Morg said with a smile that seemed between insane and humored.

"I could not care less," Lezura said.

"Eat shit!" Joey said.

Morg steadied his body, made it tensed and took three quick deep breaths. He had a pistol on his hip, but what fun would that be?

The skin on his face and hands tightened over his muscles, and dark throbbing veins like wriggling worms appeared under his skin. His muscles grew with guttural gurgles, bulging under his clothes. His eyes burned bright red and his face protruded with cracks as his facial bones broke apart and rearranged themselves.

Joey laid a panicky sideways glance over at his Chevalier. "Lezura...?"

The realization of what was happening hit Lezura like a tide of fear. "Oh no..."

The back of Morg's hand sprouted bristly black hair, as did all around his head except his face which was now a short snout. Pointed ears twitched, his black wet nose sniffed the scent of blood in the air, and saliva ran down from his huge fangs with relish.

Joey gaped and said, "The guy's a frigging werewolf?"

"He is a lycan!" Lezura said.

Morg crouched with his clawed hands touching the ground. From his throat rumbled a guttural grin as he said, "They chose me as viceroy power I can display the power of the orderran race to all!"

Joey freed one hand and fired a Blueburst, at the same time Morg clenched his fist, hot and pink with rushing blood. He punched the air with a cracking sound and sent a distorted image of the air and wind into the Blueburst. Both attacked connected and exploded without harm to either opponent.

Joey lowered his hand with a look of disbelief. "What the f...?"

"That was Wapfu..." Lezura said. Her expression was bitter. "It is the most powerful form of martial arts in this side of the galaxy. It involves channeling all the body's strength into a single limb. It is so strong you can cause shockwaves in the air with a Wap-Diyukan."

"In other words were fucked, right?" said Joey.

With a snarl Morg unleashed repeated Wap-Diyukans like thunder that Lezura and Joey had to repel with constant Bluebursts. One of the blasts hit Joey in his gut. His eyes flew wide open and he doubled over, coughing up blood and spit.

It's like I got hit with a friggin' club!

Morg dashed towards Joey. Lezura intercepted him and stopped his claws with her knife. Morg swiped at Lezura but she dodged it. She kicked him in the gut and stabbed him in the chest.

Morg only winced. He thrust it palm in Lezura's chest and sent her flying onto the floor. The excruciating pain of a broken rib shot through Lezura's chest, but she quickly got back up. She concentrated healing her wound with her honoi; while Joey got up and attacked Morg.

Each of Joey's attacks was parried by Morg easily.

"What's the matter, brat?" Morg said, grinning at Joey and dodging another strike, "that sword too big for your little body?"

Joey roared. He feint a blow at Morg's foot, spun the opposite way and cut Morg across the chest.

Morg howled in anguish and swatted Joey in the head. Joey hit the floor and blacked out.

No! I can't get knocked out and Lezura's still in danger! Joey told himself.

His eyes flew wide open, spotting Morg as he lifted his foot over his head. Joey rolled out of the way, at the same time and cut Morg across his thigh.

Morg swung his fist down and outward, sending a Wap-Diyukan that knocked Joey in the side and sent him off the edge of the roof. Joey lost his grip on his sword and grabbed the edge of the roof with his hands.

His fingers strained to support his weight. His strength was almost at the bottom now, and even staying conscious was a hell of a fight.

Joey dared a glance down and saw that the fall was more than enough to make him go splat.

Morg stepped on Joey's fingers, breaking the bones like glass. A raspy howl surged forth from the depths of Joey's throat.

Morg said, "Next are the other ones..." and he lift his foot over Joey's other hand—

And Lezura whacked Morg in the face with her spear.

Morg staggered, temporarily blinded by the blow. Lezura whirled the spear in the side of Morg's head. But as Lezura expected, the lycan was resilient. He stood his ground, thick hot strands of saliva dripping from his fangs.

"You think you can take me out with weak moves like that, bitch?" Morg said.

"No," said Lezura. She pointed behind Morg. "But that might."

"Wha'?" said Morg. Morg turned around—and S'us released her fire rune. A spout of flame consumed Morg. The viceroy wailed and flailed about. When Morg dropped and rolled on the ground Lezura went to help Joey.

"Do not worry! I have got you!" Lezura said as she pulled Joey up.

Joey made pained groans at the pains in his ribs. Lezura saw him clutching his hands and said. "Let me see..."

"That dog bastard..." Joey said.

"Just hold still," said Lezura as she put her hands on his chest and shoulders and healed him.

But she heard a low explosion behind her that made her ears fly up.

She turned around and saw S'us lying on the floor. Morg's half-burnt body was on his hand and knee. In his hand was a Whammer pistol.

Lezura's ears dropped with her terrified eyes.

"S'us!"

Lezura took up her spear and threw it at Morg. But the viceroy had already spun around and at the sound of Lezura's voice. Even with his face covered in patches of charged flesh like some extremely mangy dog, Morg had the strength to knock the spear aside with his gun.

"Don't move a muscle...you little pointy-eared bitch..." Morg said, limping over to Lezura.

Lezura lifted her trembling hands to her head. With the gun just inches from her face Morg could hear Lezura's rapid breath and smelt the pungent scent of fear in it.

“You know...” Morg said with a ghastly, toothy grin, “I might just have some fun with you before I—”

Lezura’s honoisensory ability detected a massive build-up of honoi from the floor on her left. But before she could even spare a glance there was a bright blue beam of honoi with a rounded head that shot into Morg’s elbow, completely ripping off his forearm with the gun.

Morg’s red eyes went pale. He gasped and swallowed, nearly choking as his speech faltered.

Joey dropped his hand and groaned loudly.

Seizing the moment Lezura shot her knee into Morg’s groin. When he lurched over Lezura ran behind him and gripped his head. With a sickening twist and a cracking sound like a shopper testing the freshness of a carrot Lezura snapped Morg’s neck in a fixed gaze over his shoulder.

Lezura fell along with Morg’s body. She suddenly remembered her wounded comrade, took a deep breath and brought herself over to S’us.

“S’us!” Lezura said as she knelt beside her. “S’us can you hear me?”

S’us was unconscious. A wound in the left of her abdomen was sealed up with honoi, but a lot of blood had poured out in a pool beside her.

Lezura checked S’us’ pulse. It was worryingly low, but steady. Lezura gathered honoi from her head. Her brain throbbed twice but she ignored. She touched S’us’ wound and, clamped her eyes shut as her head hurt like it was about to explode.

While healing S’us Lezura heard Joey say, “Lezura...my fingers hurt...!”

“Shut up...boy!” Lezura said.

Finally Lezura reached her limit and her mind went blank. She fell beside S’us, who was just opening her eyes.

With her awareness back, she heard I’us say, “See...? I told not to trust her!”

Later that night, Joey awoke to find himself lying in his bed in the inn. He remembered everything up until now.

He sat up, expecting to feel stinging pain from his ordeal with the lycan Morg, but to his surprise he felt quite fine and rejuvenated.

“It is about time you got up?” said Lezura across the other bed.

Joey looked at her and found that she was wearing a long, dark blue tunic with red hems and green zigzags all over, along with papery brown trousers. Her hair was let loose over her shoulders, and she had a sweet scent that led Joey to think she just had her bath.

Joey studied the room and found nothing unusual. Looking out the window he saw the streets lights were lit, along with many other lights in the city and the sound of lively music.

“It’s night already?” Joey said.

“Yes,” said Lezura.

“What happened? Where’s everyone else? The orderrans...?”

“The orderrans’ airship left when we allowed the captive soldiers to leave with their wounded,” said Lezura.

Joey smiled. “So we won...?”

“For now,” said Lezura grimly, erasing Joey’s smile. “No doubt the orderrans will return with greater force.”

“Shit...” Joey said. He rubbed his forehead and closed his eyes as he thought. He looked up and said, “How many civilians...?”

“Nineteen non-combatants died in the crossfire,” Lezura said in a low voice. “The police force took a huge blow as well...”

Joey hung his head and shook it. “If only I hadn’t come here...”



“Do not start with that nonsense, Joey,” Lezura said sternly. “No one knew when the orderrans would come, but they always suspected that they would,” her tone changed to a reassuring one, “As a matter of fact, the people are pleased with you for helping to stop the orderrans, and killing one of their commanders!”

Joey offered her a smile, but there was little effort behind it. “Actually, you and S’us killed him,” Joey shot at her.

Joey’s tone perplexed Lezura, but she didn’t ask about it.

“Is S’us okay,” said Joey, a bit shocked he hadn’t asked about the woman that saved his and Lezura’s lives at first.

“She is in the hospital in stable condition,” Lezura said with a smile. “But she is still unconscious. We possible could visit her tomorrow. The rest of the city is celebrating. No one suspected that their city would be able to fend off an orderran attack...”

Not for long, Joey thought.

“Joey,” said Lezura.

“Yeah?”

“Thank you for saving my life,” Lezura said.

Joey blushed. He scoffed at Lezura and said, “It’s no biggie... You’ve saved my life more than I can count.”

Lezura said in her usual manner, “True. And even though you succeeded in using the Bluebolt in that instance, you still have a lot of work to do.”

Joey winced and slowly looked away. “Geez...” Something crossed Joey’s mind, actually ran a train over it, and he shot out of the bed and said, “The key!”

“The officers are questioning Yeltsa down at the station,” said Lezura. She got out of the bed and said, “We should probably head down there now that you are awake. You can take a bath later.”

Joey searched for some clothes in the wardrobe and out them on; a brown tunic knitted with large white threads around the collar and chest and some going down the trim. He put on his sweaty converse and reached for his dagger and put in the back of his pants.

He remembered that he lost his helmet in the fight with the viceroy. He shrugged, though. He figured he could always get another one.

After washing his face he came back to see Lezura at the door. The moment she opened it the sound of music slipped through and filled their ears along with the faint scent of alcohol and something sweet.

When they made their way through the empty corridors and down stairs to the foyer, it was revealed that the celebration extended even in here.

A bounty of food on the tables stained the air with a rich mouthwatering scent, coupled with drinks from huge jugs that had split on the table, floor and the clothes of the people dancing around, to huge barrels in the corner that some dipped their cups in and quenched their thirst.

The music came from a radio in the counter of the receptionist’s desk. When they looked for the inn keeper, they found the woman dancing with her lazhinian boy-a id. There wasn’t any segregation or preference in the dance, all species, raizean, rapturan, largaph, yautgan and lazhinian danced with each other, interchanging between species as the song changed.

Hearty laughs from full stomachs and warm smiles on flushed faces were exchanged with each other as well.

The inn keeper was the first to spot Joey and Lezura. She tossed her dancing companion into the embrace of a yautgan and approached them in armored suit.

“There is our hero, yes!” she said with her smile of fine teeth.

“Vri!” Joey said.

The others noticed, throwing cheers and applauds at Joey.

The human boy threw his hands in the air, stimulating harder cheers from the crowd. Lezura quickly put her headphones around her ears and silently applauded Joey.

A man handed Joey a drink as he made his way through the door and into the street. Joey drank the whole thing down; a bitter-sweet taste of cinnamon sugar, and molasses. Joey shuddered as the chemicals worked on his body.

“Try not to get drunk,” Lezura said in a raised voice over the crowd. “You still have training tomorrow.”

“Would you get off my back, Lezura?” Joey said, yet his tone bore no real animosity. “I’m the Rakai and I can do whatever I want!”

Lezura shook her head. She carefully guided them through the horde of musicians and dancers in the street. He received more praises, and some even threw drinks on him in a gesture of goodwill.

He did manage to see a few people he knew, though. He saw Podge leaning against a street lamp with his arms folded. He just seemed to be relaxing there, and when he saw Joey he simply gave him a heads up which Joey returned.

He saw Clastaan and Tet doing some dance that not only made Joey, but others grin at them. But the two didn’t seem to mind, quite engrossed in enjoying themselves.

Lezura spotted Yeltsa’s uncle dancing with Tylin. For a large man he was quite graceful in how he twirled her around him. Their movements were similar to a ballet, Lezura noted, and she wondered what their previous life was like before they became refugees on this planet.

They reached police station; a two story dome-like building surrounded by a ten feet high mesh fence rimmed with barbed wire. Inside the police yard a few vehicles were removed from their spot at the front as the officers went on patrol through the city.

Even though some of their officers were lost, they still managed to celebrate somewhat. As Joey entered the police premises with a nod from the guards, they could see the silhouettes of laughing and shouting individuals.

But Joey and Lezura didn’t smell any alcohol, guessing that the officers still held some kind of professional decorum.

As they neared the front door Donnowarru floated down in front of them on his cloud.

Joey screamed.

“Stop being a moron...” Donnowarru said with his usual frown. He said to Lezura, “Woman where have you been? You had me waiting here with all these”—Donnowarru gestured around him—“strange beings for hours!”

Lezura arched an eyebrow and said dryly, “Would you have preferred to be in the inn with drunken, dancing, singing strange beings...?”

Donnowarru rubbed his neck for a moment, and said, “Good point...”

“Do they still have the woman in custody?” Lezura said.

Donnowarru nodded. “I still think you two were utterly careless to get the key lost,” he said. “Never has a Rakai lost the key before; not even the largaph!”

Joey beamed. “Really?” said Joey. He turned to Lezura and punched her playfully on her shoulder. “Oh yeah Lezura—we made history!”

Lezura ignored Joey and took the Sheikon-box off her waist and opened. “Thank you for your help, Donny. Now it is time for you to be a good boy and go back in your box.”

“I said not to—”

Donnowarru was sucked into the box before he could finish. Lezura put the box back on her belt and continued to the front door with Joey. There they found Dinon waiting for them.

Lezura realized his clothes were changed, but she speculated he had his bandaged wounds beneath them.

“Well, well...our most famous couple has decided to visit us,” Dinon said with smug smile. “Should I roll out the diamond carpet and bring you both some champagne?”

“Vri,” said Joey.

Dinon’s smile slowly melted into a frown. “And maybe I can bring you some crayons and a stool so you can reach the walls to scribble on.”

Lezura bit down on her lip and sniggered. Joey threw back his head and looked over his nose at Dinon. Joey grumbled, “Damn, frigging tyrannosaurus-rex-looking son—”

“We wish to speak with the gang boss,” said Lezura abruptly. “Is Nesten inside?”

Dinon looked away from Joey and said with a grin, “Sure. Go on in.”

When they entered and inquired for the prisoner, they were led by two officers to the holding cells of the local criminals in the back of the station.

Suride Town didn’t have the resources to support a fully functioning prison. In the case of criminals who committed heinous crimes such as murder and rape, they were either exiled or executed. For crimes such as theft and domestic violence the mayor enforced a law ordering such people to be put to manual labor in the fields growing crops for the local populace.

They walked pass down, miserable and pissed off people in corridor of holding cells. The place was mix of the scent of male musk and mildew, and made Lezura afraid to really open her mouth and speak.

They saw Nesten seated in a chair facing the cell were Yeltsa was being held. Joey called out to him. Nesten raised a hand to acknowledge them but still kept his eyes on Yeltsa. They stood behind him and their escorts left.

Yeltsa sat in the middle of her bed with her feet folded beneath her. She was hunched over and staring at Nesten with a bored expression, until she saw Joey and Lezura and a smiled tugged at the corner of her mouth.

“I was wondering when you would show up, kid,” she said in a smooth voice.

Joey was about to respond but couldn’t bother speaking Naasi. He saw that Yeltsa didn’t have a translator and decided to drop any thought of responding.

But Lezura said, “You know why we are here, so why do you not just save us the trouble and hand it over.”

Yeltsa chuckled.

Nesten said, “That’s what I’ve been trying to get her to do.” He slowly stood and moved the chair away from the cell.

“Hey, dude, what’s goanna happen to her?” Joey said.

Nesten said, “Either exiled or executed.” Nesten stretched, his silver necklace gleaming in the lights. “I’m not sure. It’s up to the mayor to decide that.”

Joey remained silent after studying Nesten’s words.

Lezura said, “Captain, could you please give us some privacy?”

Nesten eyed Yeltsa cautiously, who gave her an innocent smile. But Nesten was well familiar with the kind of deviousness that lurked behind her charming face. “I don’t think that’s such a good idea...”

“If she tries to bust out, we just kick her big ass back inside the cell,” Joey said like it was the obvious answer. “I can do the Bluebolt now, so she can’t do us anything!”

Nesten ignored Joey and turned to Lezura.

“We will be fine,” she said, “trust me.”

Nesten reluctantly said, “You have ten minutes. But my shift’s ending now...so you’ll probably deal with another captain.”

When Nesten left, Yeltsa got off the bed and slowly approached the bars. Her feathers were just inches below the ceiling.

“Please,” said Lezura, “no small talk, just hand over the key.”

“Well aren’t you quite the charmer,” said Yeltsa, “straight to the point. I like that.”

Yeltsa reached around the back of her neck and pulled up the chain of the compass out of her blouse. Lezura stepped back so Yeltsa had to stretch out her entire arm and drop it in Lezura palm.

“Cautious too,” said Yeltsa, “you would’ve been a really nice addition to my gang.”

“Thank goodness I am not,” Lezura said. She inspected the key and found that nothing was out of the ordinary.

Joey was about to take it from her when Lezura pulled it away and said, “Make sure you do not lose it again.”

“Like I’m that stupid,” said Joey, yanking the compass from Lezura’s hand, and dropped it around his neck.

Joey grinned at Yeltsa, stuck out his tongue and pulled down the bottom lid of his eye. “Na-na-ne-na-na, I got my back my compass! And you lost your gang and got stuck in a cramped, smelly jail cell! Joey put his arms on his hips and said, “That’s what you get for messing with the Rakai!”

“I have no idea what you just said,” Yeltsa replied with a shake of her head. “No translator...”

After all of that Joey’s insult didn’t have any effect. He clenched his fists and his jaw and said, “You’re a big stupid shark-bird-gorilla lady!”

Yeltsa took Joey’s senseless blabber as a sign of him trying to insult her, so she said, “Shorty,” and quickly stepped away from the bars as Joey reached inside at and clawed at her, barking like a rabid gufder. Yeltsa crouched at the back of the cell and smiled.

Lezura slammed her fist in Joey’s head and had the satisfaction of hearing him go silent. Lezura fixed her pink eyes on Yeltsa and said, “I want to ask you something.”

Yeltsa shrugged, she said, “Shoot.”

“You knew this was the key to the God Titan all along, did you not?”

Yeltsa leaned back against the wall. “Yeah, so?” she said.

“You could have escaped the city long ago and sold it to anyone working for the Prestige Kingdom,” said Lezura. “You could have become wealthy beyond your wildest dreams. Why did you not do it?”

Yeltsa had thought about that herself. But she had been thinking it over for a while now. But during the fight with the orderrans it had finally come to her what she was about. She said, “My mother always told me that ass-kissing was something she forbids me to do, because in the end it never saved her life. Before she died, I promised her that I would seek power and grasp with my own hands without anyone’s help.

“If I’d sold that thing to the Prestige Kingdom, I could have bought my way in, yes. But then again I would never truly fit in with all those people. In their eyes I would be some violent, strange, unwelcomed alien that would infect their pretty, sparkly little world and turn it all to crap. Plus those nycarmans would probably create some kind of propaganda to take all that money away from me.

“So I decided; why wipe the ass of the king when I can shit in my own toilet?”

Yeltsa smiled in Joey’s direction and saw him stiffen and tighten his lips. Obviously by the look on his face Yeltsa could tell he was hung on her words. “That’s where you come in, Rakai?”

“What?”

Yeltsa said in a drone tone, “I’m counting on you to end the Prestige System, so everyone can get a shot at being on top on this planet and not just nycarmans and orderrans.”

Joey remained silent. He couldn’t comprehend that a murderer like Yeltsa was putting her faith and trust into him.

Is she for real?

Yeltsa got up, stretched and walked over to her bed. She sat down and rested her head on the pillow. “Oh well. I’m tired now. Tell that police boy to bring some food in here on your way out.”

Joey and Lezura walked away without uttering a word.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The next day, bright and early after some brief exercise with Lezura, she and Joey were escorted by officer Coenter to the mayor's office. Most of the city had yet to recover from the slamming of last night's celebration, but a few people, like the inn keeper, were busy cleaning up inside and around the premises. The rest were geckoids and lazhinians.

They had yet to find Redbolt, though the officers promised to look for him, and so they took one of the police vehicles to the mayor's office. It was a single story dome, dark brown colored at the top with a tan base. The compound surrounding it was granite and cobblestone surrounded by a fence, with just two visible vehicles.

Joey and Lezura got out.

"See you later," Coenter said beside the driver.

"You are not coming with us?" Lezura said.

"Have to home and take a nap," Coenter said. "Don't worry. It's not some trap to steal the key from you. Just go right in and the mayor will be there."

The police vehicle went off down the road.

The morning air was chilly, tuning each of their breaths to mist. The city was still dark and few street lamps on the sidewalk and on the compound were lit.

Lezura felt her ears going numb, and she flexed them and dropped on her headphones. She wrapped her ponytail around her neck like a scarf and marched onto the compound with Joey. It made sense now; the compound looked simple enough that anyone would try to attack the mayor thinking it would be as easy as provoking a guffer to bite you, but at least a dozen armed security personnel were on patrol around the compound.

Thanks to their status, Joey and Lezura were being expected and were let through without question.

They entered the building, and were guided through the various corridors by a largaph woman with bright orange brown skin that just whacked Joey in the eyes.

Another thing about her was that unlike Tylin, or even other male largaphs, the ornate spikes that were usually found at the back of their heads crept around to the side of her head like a crown, but the ornate set of groves at the back of the head and neck as with all largaphs was still there.

"She looks different than the other largaphs," Joey whispered to Lezura.

"She is an Ywenti largaph," said Lezura. "They are a breed of largaph that evolved on one of the habitable moons around the gas planet Big-Gassy at the start of the first Solar War."

"Yeah..." Joey said, admiring the woman. Will all these new things popping up, Joey decided that he would have at least read up on the solar systems history to keep up to date with the history around here.

Most of the rooms Joey and Lezura pass had few people, and those there were just working around some old computers organizing data.

They were brought to a metallic door with a few bits of rust. Their escort placed her hand on a palm reader at the side of the door and it slid into the wall with a whoosh.

"Oooo!" Joey said. "Slidy door!"

"Please try not to make a scene when we go inside," said.

The woman stepped away and said with a gesture, and said curtly, "You may enter."

"Thank you," Lezura said as she went into the room with Joey waltzing behind her.

Mayor Cassim was seated behind a wooden table with the texture of birch wood, occupied by a cup of tea, a wrapping of some basurel meat sandwich and a small computer. Behind him the window glowed with a touch of light from the street lamps outside. There were pictures of past mayors on the

wall, along with that of the landscape of another planet, by the vast jungles Lezura thought it was from the lazhinian homeworld of Gammuo.

Lezura focused her attention on the little figure of mayor Cassim. His face wore a worried look that further augmented his already withered features.

He gave them a smile, but it seemed to be forced rather than actual delight. “Good morning, children,” he said.

“Good morning,” Lezura said.

“Wazz’up, Yoda?” Joey said.

Lezura frowned and bit on her lip to suppress a scream, giving Joey a murderous sideways glance.

Mayor Cassim repeated the word “Yoda”, that he heard in his translator, silently to himself, looking perplex. He quietly shrugged it away and said, “I hope I didn’t ask of you to see me out of your precious time.”

“Not at all,” Lezura said—she pointed to Joey warningly as he opened his mouth. He didn’t bother to make a sound.

A genuine chuckle escaped Cassim’s throat. “Please, sit.”

Lezura and Joey sat before Cassim and made themselves comfortable, which in Joey’s case was stretching in the chair.

Mayor Cassim said, “I thank you for your services in helping our city beat the orderrans. Our officers would have been practically annihilated had it not been for your wit and those remarkable civilians with the alchemist. I’m ashamed to say, we even had to ask the hand of criminals for help as well.”

“The main point is that the city is safe for the time being,” said Lezura.

“Time being, you say?” said Cassim, “So I guess you too have realized that the orderrans will be coming back.”

“Well of course,” Lezura said, a bit shocked that the mayor thought no one would, “the orderrans will not take such a defeat lightly. We were lucking they did not bring a real fleet with them. Had they done so they would have reduced this place to rubble within minutes!”

“So what do you think our best option for the safety of these people is?” said Cassim, “because what I and the commissioner were proposing was evacuation.”

“That is the only option,” said Lezura, adding some grimness in her tone to further cement it. “What we should be asking is the means by which to do so?”

“What about the train?” Joey said. “That train’s big enough to hold a lot a people based on what I saw...” then added quickly, “I didn’t rob it! The gangbanger lady made me do it!”

“Old Chippy...?” Cassim rubbed his hand thoughtfully, “Hmmm...that could work?”

Lezura said, “Are you sure it could, Mr. Mayor?”

The made nodded. “I believe so,” he said, “but I will have to notify them first and ask for their approval. The Ugatin government has been willing to help us with supplies, but I am having doubts they well willingly take us into their country. If they do, though, it will take two days for the train to reach here.”

“How many people are in the city?” Lezura said.

“Six hundred thirty,” said Cassim, “counting the loss of the few civilians.”

“It will take about two trips to evacuate that much people,” Lezura said, “and that is with the train lessoning some of its supplies. That means a total of eight days to get everyone out of the city. And anywhere between that timeframe the orderrans can come and demolish the place.”

Cassim rubbed his forehead with a deep sigh. “I wonder how are we going to move all these people at the same time...?”

“I wonder...” Lezura said as she still pondered it “...could we not try to have them leave at the same time?” When Cassim looked at her with his bush grey brows lowered, she added; “the women and

children can take the train, assuming there will be soldiers onboard to provide protection. And the men and the security forces can travel on foot.”

“That is a very risky thing to do,” said the mayor. “The orderrans could come and catch up those people on foot.”

“Well maybe they’ll be some kind of distraction while the others get away,” said Joey, “I think...”

After a moment, Cassim said, “It is the only option we have, so I will discuss it further with the commissioner again and get in his input on it.” Cassim rose to his feet, with Joey and Lezura following short. “Thank you so much for your time. If the commissioner and I come to a mutual agreement, we will notify the city by the middle of the day.”

Joey and Lezura said their goodbyes and left.

They were thinking Coenter was joking, but outside the premises they didn’t see the police car.

“What a little—” Joey held his tongue, and followed Lezura on foot back to the inn.

By the time they reached back the sunlight was beginning to strengthen through the many holes in the dome, and with it came the fresh scent of the world outside. More people had taken to the streets and were getting things back into routine.

At the inn they saw Tylin waiting on them, with Redbolt. Laughing, Joey ran towards her and gave the animal a huge around its wide chest. “Redbolt, you’re back!”

“S’us told me that you lost him around the market area,” said Tylin. “I figured he would be stuck there eating whatever the people left behind.”

“S’us’ fine?” said Joey.

“She’s conscious,” said Tylin, “but the doctors say she still needs a few more days rest.”

Joey breathed a sigh of relief.

“Good morning, Tylin,” said Lezura. “What are you doing here?”

“I came for my class with my pupil,” Tylin said. She turned to Joey who as now looking at her with shock, and grinned. “Come on, boy, we’ve got work to do. S’us said you almost got killed by one measly orderran!”

Joey frowned. “One measly orderran?” Joey said. “The guy was a frigging werewolf—”

“Lycan,” said Lezura, rolling her eyes and her ears.

“DOG-MAN!” Joey said. “I cut him in the gut and it didn’t even make him flinch!”

“That wasn’t a true Lycan,” said Tylin.

“How the hell do you know?” Joey said.

“Because are all three of you are still alive,” Tylin said.

“No shit...?” Joey said with a bewildered look.

Lezura saw the opportunity to share her knowledge and said, “Joey, where as humans have simian origin, orderrans have canine ancestry. A very few of them are able to tap into these genes and stimulate them to take over the body, resulting in a complete anatomical transformation into the animal.”

“So orderrans are dogs?” Joey said.

“A wolf would be the more closely relative term,” Lezura said.

“Then wait, what do nycarmans come from?” Joey said.

Lezura shrugged. “That in itself is a mystery,” she said. “We do not share much genes with the animals on this world.”

Joey turned to Tylin, caught up in the whole science stuff...thing. “What do your people evolve from, teach?”

“Racusha,” Tylin said.

“What the hell’s that?” said Joey.

Lezura leaned in close to Joey, patted Redbolt on his snout, and said, “A racusha is an armor-plated, four legged predator somewhere between a mammal and a reptile, known as a therapsid. It is one of the oldest living species on Tylin’s homeworld, said to be over 4 million years old—”

“Enough with the lecturing stuff,” Tylin said, “biology wasn’t my forte in high school.” Tylin put her arm around Joey. “Now, you and I have a date, Rakai.”

“I don’t kiss on the first date, though.”

“What high school might that be?” said Lezura.

Tylin scowled at Lezura. But the nycarman’s beaming pink eyes told Tylin Lezura wasn’t about to back down.

Tylin sighed. “It was the Sugeya Technical High School.”

Lezura gasped. “Really?” she said. “My goodness! The Sugeya Technical High School is the most prestigious all-girl...no, the most prestigious school on the continent! Not to mention it has been around for thousands of years since it was once the castle of Queen Sugeya—”

Tylin and Joey went to their training with an energized Lezura talking all the way behind them.

Later that morning, while Tylin and Joey took their practice on the roof of a pub beside the inn, Lezura watched them keenly from the top of another building, sitting at the edge of the roof without much consideration for falling off.

She could hear the mayor making his announcement to the city’s populace via a microphone attached to speakers in the back of the police vehicles. He and Commissioner Oldam had come to an agreement on taking the course of action to evacuate the city.

Recently he had radioed the President of Ugatin, who had agreed to provide them with land space in one of the cities so they could find refuge there.

There was the uproar of disapprovals to the mayor’s ridiculous scheme. Lezura could understand that. The people here were free to live how they chose, though under strict rules of the city’s police force. They were virtually a separate community from Ugatin, and could gather food resources from their surroundings outside the dome.

Leaving here and going to Ugatin would put them under the rule of another country where they had no citizenship or freedom of movement and expansion. And not because the government was willing to help them, meant that the people there were all smiles with the idea of immigrants squatting in their country.

When the Prestige System began, some countries, noticeably the powerful ones, took it as an opportunity to exile alien species out of their main cities into the minor ones they dubbed Underworlds. It wouldn’t have been bad had such people been left to themselves, Lezura realized, but with the usual harvests of the people for quite possibly diabolical means, and the lack of any kind of military help against criminals of all sorts, stopped the people from developing a solid society for themselves.

Yet, Lezura couldn’t find this realization bringing her to tears, because she was quite happy her daughter wasn’t in this kind of system. And yet there was another side of sadness to it. Her daughter wasn’t with her. She didn’t have her little girl in her arms. She couldn’t even remember her scent, though she hoped when they finally meet, her daughter would recognize her.

Will she really, Lezura? Or do you just want to tell yourself that.

Lezura decided to push those thoughts in the back of her mind for now. She had a lot ahead of her for the rest of the day.

Hours later, when Joey was finished getting pounded by Tylin and had rested up, he had honoi practice with Lezura right on the same spot on the roof. First going over the Blueburst and then getting more familiar with the Bluebolt.



At one point Joey had released such a blast it bore a hole in the wall of the inn. They quickly got off the roof before they were spotted and charged a handsome fine by the inn keeper, and took their training to the abandoned warehouse where the crime scene was already cleaned up.

They finished up that day with Joey going over his language notes and learning a few new words to add to his vocabulary.

One day, Tylin and Joey were having practice in the cave where Yeltsa once had her jeeps and equipment. But all that had been confiscated by the police and all that was left was a vast hollow where only the small, cautious creatures took residence.

Tylin and Joey were practicing hand to hand combat, moving about on their bare feet and exchanging blows. Most of which were landing on Joey.

Redbolt and Tylin's greshku were tied at the mouth of the cave, feeding on the traces of shrubs around it.

Tylin wasn't expecting Joey to come up to her level just like that overnight, what she expected was for Joey to grasp concepts and constantly work to improve them.

As she instructed, Joey, using his height, tried to land blows on Tylin's lower body. Tylin blocked a blow aimed at her knee, swatter away Joey's other fist and thrust her knee up into his chest. Joey rode on the blow and backed away, feint a move forward and kicked at Tylin's knee.

Tylin grabbed Joey's foot, kicked the other on from beneath him and hurled him onto his back on the stones.

Joey winced, slowly rolled onto his belly and got up. Rubbing his back, he said, "Tylin can we stop now? I think I'm getting bone cancer with just you beating me up."

Tylin sat on the ground and steadied her breath. "What have I told you about your whining?" she said.

Joey sucked in his mouth briefly like he tasted something bitter, and said, "If I have the strength to whine I have the strength to fight. But that's different from when you've actually fought and got your ass kicked. What about weapons training...?"

Tylin stared at Joey sonically. "You lost the sword I gave to you, remember...?" she said.

Joey hung his head and bit down on his smile.

"It won't be funny when you've lost your sword and have your head chopped off, though," said Tylin.

Joey looked up at her, folded his arms and scowled. "Then what the hell do I have honoi for? Not to mention my bat!"

Tylin was about to comment when she paused; an idea popped in her head. "Hey, Joey," she said, "let me see your bat for a second."

"Kay..." said Joey. He got the bat from the pack on Redbolt and brought it back to Tylin. "What you want it for?"

Tylin observed the bat in her hand from the tip of the handle to the head. After a moment she looked at Joey with a playful mirthful smile and said, "Hey, Joey, how would you like to have your bat into a sword?"

As expected, Tylin saw Joey's face reel with joy. She could have even sworn tears were in his eyes and drool dangled at the corner of his mouth.

"REALY?" Joey said, his voice echoing in the cave.

"Shhhh," Tylin said, "not so loud. Yes, I can make it into one. I'm not an A-grade alchemist like Clastaan but he did teach me a few things about matter-molding."

"This's so frickin cool yo!" Joey said. "My sword's goanna be so awesome—like a...like a samurai sword, or one of those big-ass dragon slayer swords those guys use in the rope-playing video games!"

"It's goanna be a shortsword," said Tylin.

Joey's glee disappeared just like that. "Why does it have to be a shortsword...?"

Tylin said, “Because with your size, even though by appearance you can gain more muscle mass than usual, you have to fight battles within your limit—which would be your reach. A shortsword’s lightness allows you to fight with one hand free while the other can be used for honoi attacks. That’s how a projectiles type like you should fight.”

Joey tried to argue a point. He said, “But look what I mean; swords can’t really cut down robots; not to mention a tiny sword like the one you wanna give me. Don’t you think I should be using a bigger sword to do that?”

“That’s what you have honoi and guns for,” said Tylin.

Joey couldn’t argue against that logic. He scratched his head and shrugged. “Okay,” he said, “I’ll see what I can do with your preference for a sword. But one a these day’s I’m goanna get strong enough to wield a big-ass sword like those guy do in the anime.”

Even with her translator Tylin didn’t understand the last word Joey said. “Okay now, enough jabbering.”

Tylin looked around to find some loose dirt. She couldn’t so she went to the mouth of the cave outside. There she drew a transmutation circle with a stick.

“How does that work?” said Joey over her shoulder.

Tylin said, “Clastaan says the ruins in the circle are like coded steps that reform matter. One symbol absorbs your energy and thought. Another breaks down the matters, and another reconstructs the matter according to the shape you suggested.”

“Humph,” Joey said.

Once the circle was drawn Tylin motion Joey beside her. She put the bat by the tip into the circle and put her and Joey’s hand on the top.

“I will use my honoi to activate the circle,” she said, “use yours to sculpt the sword to how you want it.”

“No problem.”

They exerted their honoi, and the circled lit up. Joey closed his eyes and concentrated. His and Tylin’s honoi consumed the bat. It shimmered and dissolved to the ground, bubbled and reconstructed itself from a silver and brown blob into a short sword.

The shiny blade steamed only for a few seconds. It was revealed to have small inscriptions along the blade that read, “RAKAI ON YOU BITCHES” in a wild font. The handle had a clay element mixed into the silver that gave it a shiny brown color. Sculpted in the surface was spiraling rune with a grinning skull. The cross-guards were two silver horns sticking up and curved outward at the tips.

Joey held the sword just beneath the two faces and lifted it, examining it with a gleeful glow in his eyes.

Joey took a few swings and was pleased with the weight.

And without a moment’s thought he turned to Tylin and said, “Thanks,” and kissed her.

Both of them retreated from each other with wide eyes and tight lipped mouths.

“Oh shit!” Joey said. “Oh shit! Umm...s-sorry Tylin—I didn’t know what came over me! I just umm...”

Tylin touched her tingling lips briefly before dropping her hand. Her flushed face had a tinge of blue in contrast to Joey’s red. “No, no. It was an honest mistake,” Tylin said. “You were...just excited...”

“Yeah, that’s it!” said Joey, nervously jittering his foot. “Ahhh—so we’re goanna continue with the training?”

“Certainly,” said Tylin.

When Tylin turned away to get her sword, Joey grinned, screaming in his head, “I just kissed an alien chic, awesome—and she’s my teacher too!”

Two days later, Joey and Lezura were packed with their goods, most of which they had to buy.

“I guess my Rakai status doesn’t really mean anything when it comes to money,” Joey had said. “Indeed,” said the vendor, “now pay up!”

The two towed Redbolt behind them among the crowd of hundreds of men and women; all weighed down with their personal belongings as their animals were. They travelled in a loose convoy out of the city, with security personnel stationed at the sides to monitor them.

Outside, the sun got a hand in the face from the clouds, so no one got a welcome from its bright smile this morning. The dark clouds seemed ready to let loose the rain on them, and the stillness in the cool air further built up on their anticipation.

They reached the train track and were all makeshift camping until the train arrived. It was a cacophony of voices quarrelling, conversing and children screaming and laughing, coupled with a few unruly greshkues and mynamathers.

“I can only imagine what the refugee camp will be like,” Lezura said as she observed the scene around her from her standing spot.

“Do you think they’ll have electricity like here?” said Joey, swinging his arms and clapping them.

“I honestly cannot tell you,” said Lezura, shaking her head. “But I do not plan on staying there for long either. Once we get there, I will send a message to the Dielengann Path to come and meet us.”

“I thought you said you couldn’t reach them by telephone?” Joey said.

Lezura smirked at him, and pointed to the spot on her belt where the Sheikon box was. “Who said anything about a cellular phone?”

Joey grinned, and said, “You’re goanna send a signal with your vagina? Neat!”

Lezura swatted at Joey but he ducked out of the way.

Both of them heard people calling their names, and soon saw Tylin, Clastaan, Podge, Tet and the rest of their clan coming out of the hollow dome. Tylin and Clastaan broke from the convoy and hurried up to Joey and Lezura.

“Yo, teach!” Joey said as Tylin stood before them, “You really punched me hard during class yesterday. I almost lost a tooth.”

Tylin inclined her head to him and winked. “Be lucky you lose all of your teeth,” she said, “Just make sure the next time you meet and orderran he doesn’t hand your behind to you.”

Joey made a contemptuous expression and waved his hand. “Aint goanna happen. With the ass kicking you’ve being giving me the past days, I’m pretty much use it by now.”

Tylin realized the speech between the two of them right now was just trying to get over the little kiss they had. She wasn’t that much older than Lezura, but the thought of kissing a younger male wasn’t sitting well with her. Joey was just two years younger than her little brother for crying out loud!

Joey looked over Tylin’s shoulder and saw S’us coming up behind her. She supported herself with a crutch on her left side.

“S’us, you can move around now?” said Joey.

Joey went to correct himself with speech in Naasi, not knowing if S’us was wearing a translator. But she was, and said, “Yes I can, thank you. But I won’t be able to move freely for another few days.”

“Ask Lezura if she’s going to give you a new greshku for the one that got killed,” said I’us.

S’us frowned.

“Is something wrong?” said Joey.

S’us expression lightened. “Oh, it’s nothing...”

“Still, it is wonderful to see that you are okay,” said Lezura.

“Most of it was thanks to your healing,” said S’us. I’us scoffed in her mind. S’us ignored her sister and said, “Say, that healing ability is quite rare. Not much of the best honoi users can do it either. Where did you learn it?”

Joey said, “Oh, she’s a—”

“I try to discover new ways of using my honoi,” said Lezura, giving Joey a cautious look.

Joey understood and kept quiet.

Lezura's ears swiveled up at the faint sound of screeching metal. She approached the others and said, "The train is coming."

"Good luck to you two youngsters," Clastaan said, hugging each of them and kissing them on the forehead.

Joey grimaced and wiped his forehead, hoping that Tylin would do the same to him.

"Don't get yourselves killed, now," Tylin said, resting a hand on Joey's shoulder. She said to Lezura, "Make sure you take good care of him, now..."

Lezura rolled her eyes. "Do we always not?" she embraced Tylin.

Tylin said, "You do know they won't allow your mynamather onto the train, right?"

"Well... maybe S'us could keep it," Joey said, staring at her. "You did lose yours, didn't you?"

S'us nodded at Joey. She approached Lezura, who handed Redbolt's reigns to her.

The sound of metal being tortured grew louder, and Old Chipping soon rounded the bend. The driver inside hit the brakes and the Old Chippy screeched to a stop. Some yards away. The people quickly gathered their belongings, left their animals with male relatives on orders of the security personnel, and said their goodbyes to their loved one.

"We better get going, Joey!" Lezura said, heaving one of the bags of Redbolt onto her shoulder and taking off with the rest of the crowd.

"Take care, S'us," said Joey.

"Do not worry," S'us said, she winked, "I will return you mynamather to you."

Joey bit back a smile and hurried after Lezura.

"Hurry up, Joey!" Lezura said as she went ahead of the others. "I want to find us a nice spot inside to rest by backside!"

"How about losing a few pounds?" Joey said.

Doors at the side of the train opened and military personnel stepped outside to meet the incoming crowd. One of them, the new captain of the train's security, stepped out after the others with the movements of a man just waking up.

His subordinates made way for him. He burped off the effects of the drink he just had with a wince, and reached for his pistol off his hip.

The captain fired two shots in the air, and with a brief chorus of yelps the crowd went silent before him. The captain waited until the authorities from the city lined themselves in front of the people and held them back and chattering to stop before he gestured to an officer for a very small microphone; it looked like a blue acorn.

He said into it, "Okay..." he blenched again, a ghastly rasping sound that made the people duck and flinch and some babies wake up crying "...listen up, you people. I am not too keen on having a bunch of hairless aliens on my train, and honestly if it were up to me, it would not have come here in the first place..."

"Wait a minute, Lezura and I have hair, you moron!" Joey said from the back.

"Keep blasted quiet," Lezura whispered to Joey.

The captain continued, "But because I am under strict orders from our president to help you all, and I am getting paid too, we are all here. But let me tell you all this; cause any trouble on my train, and I promise you I will personally throw out all the troublemakers through the window...is that clear?"

There wasn't a reply, only angry faces staring at him. Then again, the captain wasn't expecting them to be nice to him either.

Actually, a reply didn't come forward because Lezura had stomped on Joey's foot and shut him up.

Even though the captain clearly stated his dislike for the aliens, his officers were quite calm and professional in their dealings with the women and children as they helped them into the various openings on the train and directed them to spot where they could temporarily call their home.

When being directed inside Lezura got a curious smile from one of the soldiers. Lezura only replied with a quickly turn of the corners of her mouths. And Joey came up in the man's face and stuck out his tongue. He hurried behind Lezura before the man could react.

Amongst the assembly of women and children were a few young men of various species, somewhere between seventeen and twenty-five, cautiously thrown into the mixture as a deterring agent of any of the soldiers trying to extend their curiosity beyond staring at the women's breasts—though rapturans only had small, near vestigial breasts.

Not that the women couldn't hold their own—no one wouldn't dare try to take advantage of a dracoid or yautgan female, but the addition of the young men also made it seem like there were close-knit family groups present.

Most of the train was cargo space, and with those removed all that was left was just huge empty rooms. Joey and Lezura found themselves a spot beneath a window. Lezura laid out two red blankets there and put their belongings one side and she and Joey sat down on them.

Joey tried to settle himself in as the people continued to pour into this cargo area. During which is curious eyes caught something peculiar, amongst some of the largaphs, at least. Before they made they lay down their belongings on a spot, they would produce a handful of dirt from a bag and a bottle of water and through it on the floor.

He heard them whispering something he couldn't make out at first, but a woman and her two sons did the process beside him, and he heard her say, "Lay your blessings here, Zongat..."

Joey turned to Lezura, who was checking up on the items in her bag. After getting her attention with a tap on her shoulder he gestured to the woman just putting the blanket over the split earth and water.

"What's that she's doing?" he whispered.

"What is?" Lezura said.

"Throwing the dirt and water on the floor..." Joey said.

"Oh..." Lezura remembered, "She must be a Xemingi..."

"What's that?"

Lezura closed her bag and turned to Joey. She said, "Xemingi are a nation of religious people stemming from the planet Narz." Lezura and Joey weren't going anywhere quick right now, and she thought a little conversation would help them both relax. "Originally the Xemingi were separate religious groups, until the countries of their continent, Dalt-fat, decided to unite in the name of working together to better the lives of their people, and so denounced all religion that promoted individualistic societies.

"Ironically, it was the anti-religious crusade of the Dalt-fat states that brought these different religious people together to form their own nation; the Xemingi State. Eventually they all agreed upon a single religious view; the belief in the goddess of life and nature, Zongat, that breathed life onto their world. They believe that each planet is the living flesh of Zongat, and though they denounce certain technology, will try to manipulate and live with them with the belief that adding some element of the planet will integrate the blessing of Zongat with their technology to make it pure in her eyes."

"Cool..." Joey said. "Hey...how do you know all of this stuff? Are you some kind of historian-librarian chic?"

Lezura said, "Apart from studying to become a historian, linguist and an anthropologist, I have a friend who happens to be a Xemingi. Hopefully we can both get to see her when we reach Ugatin. In the meantime..." Lezura took the data-scroll off her waist, opened it and accessed the desired program and gave it to Joey "...brush up on your Naasi."

Joey groaned like he took a blow to the gut. "Lezura—"

"Do not even bother with the whining," Lezura said, "just get to it. When you are finished you may use it for other purposes—except pornography and violent movies."

Alien porn? Joey thought. Wait a minute, that means sexy green alien chics with tentacle-nipples!

Joey caught a cynical stare from Lezura and dropped the thought from his mind.

By the time Joey began reading, he wasn't even aware that the train had already taken off. He was engrossed in his studies, just how Lezura wanted it to be. Joey laid his back against the metal wall of the train, vibrating with the ominous hum of the engine and warm with its life.

He had managed to piece together a few more words into sentences, repeating silently to himself as Lezura had instructed him to do. Nearly two hours into what seemed like a nightmare of high school, alien algebra, Joey decided to play hooky and go off onto a more satisfying experience.

He typed in the words "First Solar War" in the mouth of a gufder that was the search bar. As the search engine worked the gufder chewed up his words, and spat the information out on the screen. He skipped all the long paragraphs and looked at the images, deciding to at least read the notes beneath each of them.

There were protests held across the planets, with people voicing their complaint and support for their enemies and military.

In addition to placards, those who could afford holographic projectors had signs that read, "No Rockheads on our world!" or "Chisel down the Rockheads", which were referring to largaphs.

Other slangs against the alien species went on in, "Kill the pointy-eared bastards", "Fuck the Featherheads", "Beat the orderrans to a bloody pulp so they can get some color", "Nycarmans are blind, and we will make them deaf with our cry of victory", and so forth.

Scenes of death, destruction and disaster transfixed his eyes on each image he came across as he explored the webpage. The further it went into the details of the effects of the war, Joey felt a strange feeling, worse than grief, taking over him.

Stop bitching out, he told himself. You better get used to it.

Joey managed to stomach some more of the scenes until he reached the next topic on the "Second Great War".

He saw satellite images of genothroid and exeon spaceships in battle with the forces of Upsinodron. Most of these Exeon-type ships resembled rusty or dark blue asteroids with vehicular sections sticking out of them. The genothroid ships in his eyes were what he simple summed up as flying, brown and green cocoons with a pyramid like front, covered in lights and rockets at the sides and back.

There were blurry and crystal clear images of the battles in space. From the images taken from view from the planet the skies over the worlds looked like massive fireworks and thunder clouds due to slain battleships plummeting to the atmosphere.

Joey's interest was piped in the genothroids, and he typed their name in the searchbar.

The image produced was photograph of a genothroid that appeared to have been captured by some yautgan militants in ashy, heavy armor. All four, jointed arms of the genothroid were bounded. It appeared to be walking with its captors to somewhere out of view.

It was about five feet tall with pink exoskeleton plates. It had some insect-like characteristics; like a mouth with many parts (four) and four long antennae between its eyes; two for picking up sound and the others for chemicals. But it had blue, mammalian eyes on its light brown face, and its body was symmetrical, though a bit ovoid, with an elongated pelvis that made it look like an insect's abdomen.

It was read that this type of genothroid was a "worker". When Joey typed in a warrior class, he grinned at what he saw. It was now explainable why people feared the genothroids so.

The warriors were twice the size of the workers, with shiny bronze colored, sleeker bodies and thicker armor plates on the back; unlike the skin flaps that covered the wings of the workers. The upper arms and thighs were thicker and muscular. Each hand ended in three large claws fabled to be able to slice through the skin of a yautgan.

The one in the picture was a corpse that had died with a blast that ripped open a massive hole in its chest, in addition to the gunshot wound in its head.

Joey winced. "Damn..." he said.

Though lying still on the autopsy table, Joey almost felt as if there was still life left in its round purple eyes.

Another picture showed the examiners of the corpse lifting the head and using pincers to pull out two foot-long mandibles from its mouth. A bar of information beneath the picture read, "Notice the small holes at the end of the mandible through where the acidic substance is secreted".

Scrolling down the page and passing images and real life videos of warriors firing plasma weapons and devouring victims, he saw where there was the small note about genothroid queens. He was about to access that information when he was tapped on the shoulder by Lezura. He looked up and saw an unusual expression of delight on her face.

"Get up and look at this," Lezura said.

Joey got up and found some other people staring out their windows, and some squeezing their heads to glance through his window too. Outside across the walkway the clouds had finally given up their bullying on the sun and allowed it to shine its spending brilliance on the land.

Before Joey's eyes was grassland with a mixture of yellow and green grass, and large, brightly colored flowers. It seemed to stretch on for miles up north, but that was not what had apparently aroused the attention of the people. Joey saw what it was, though.

A herd of massive creatures strode across the grass plains like a herd of elephants would on earth. Only, these creatures were nearly three times their size. Their bulky bodies were supported on four thick legs that narrowed down. They were covered with volcanic-rock looking plates from the joints and shoulders into larger forms like mountains on their backs, with a bony ridge running along to their thick tails; the rest of their body has a pink color. Their heads were massive, with a short snout and four rocky looking horns jutting out the top of their heads like crude impaling ornaments.

Complimenting their formidable weapons was a mouth lined with a beak around the edges in separate plates like teeth.

Amongst the larger beasts were smaller versions of the creatures that Joey identified as the offspring, moving at a livelier pace than the crushing, lumbering steps of their parents.

"They are called gampadons," said Lezura, "the third largest land animal of our planet."

"The third?" Joey murmured, "This thing's bigger than a damn elephant—then what the hell could be bigger than this?"

Joey tried to count the number of the breathtaking creatures in the herd. He counted thirty odd before he stopped. Easily these were the most captivating creatures Joey had seen so far, but based on Lezura's testimony, his mere human eyes, though better than a nycarmans, had yet to see the magnificence this planet had to offer.

Jinkai Borros Onn stood at the massive window that overlooked the city of Rethusta, the capital of now New Tartian. Cylindrical, segment and tapering buildings of colors from black, white, grey and copper towered from two hundred stories up to three.

Traffic within the air of flying vehicles stretched between the buildings in three levels. All bordered by yellow bands of light connected to floating spheres in intervals. Their polyphonic noise, as Onn knew they sounded, were blanked out by the viewing window of Onn's office.

Above the city, under the clouds and the faint image of the twin moons within the vast expanse of the blue sky, was the translucent image of the massive purple bubble that covered the entire city. It wasn't a grand shield of some sort, but a device designed to filter out the harmful UAV rays of the sun.

But in case Onn needed to go outside the protection of the city he, like some orderrans, had injected himself with artificially created skin pigments. They wouldn't work right away, but over the course of a few months Onn's skin would develop a different color. Usually the orderrans used a brown or cream tone, which was perfect for fighting off the sun.

But currently Onn's skin was only dotted with tiny brown spots, giving his skin the illusion of being light brown colored from a afar, but up close he was pale as an ordinary orderran.

Jinkai Onn wore over his uniform an assortment of light brown body armor with silver creases, and a silky bronze cap with the symbol of Keeltio on the back. He stood an impressive six feet four inches tall, with a huge frame, rigid jawline and the features of a Uola orderran. His short, glossy hair was slicked back.

As he gazed out the window he heard the door to his office slide open. Doors built by orderrans were usually ten feet tall to accommodate the females, though some were known to grow even taller. An officer walked inside snapped a salute at Onn's back and stood at attention.

"My Lord," he said.

Onn slowly turned around to the officer's way across his desk at the other end of the room.

"At ease, solider," said Jinkai Onn. "Speak."

"My, Lord," he said with an excited smile, like he smelt a woman, "The beloved Queen of our nation is here to greet us!"

"Beloved my stinking left-foot," Onn murmured with scowl, he lightened up his expression and said, "Why, fantastic! Bring our dear lady in!"

As Onn walked around the table to the front, the soldier stepped outside, and as quickly as he did he hurried back in. He stood at the side of the door facing it, and he bowed as a nine feet tall woman walked into the room.

Queen Palulan was Lalu orderran, slim built but muscled beneath her silky white robe with black trim. The collar of her robe was designed into four large, black petals with pink insides that matched the pink bracelet around her wrist. She wore tight trousers that were only visible at the shin where her robe stopped, and she flaunted her delicately manicured toes her black-crystal slippers. The skin on her face had a natural sheen like Oikumies, and her long black hair was styled in cornrows and into a loose ponytail around her neck.

She stood nearly two feet over Onn, and she didn't shy away from getting up close to him and stare him down like an insect. Her skin was a pale that was almost white, as she was directly from Veheculon.

Onn said in his best ass-kissing tone, "My Queen, how wonderful it is to have you hear—"

"Yes," she said in a staccato voice, "yes it is. Unfortunately I am not here to sit and have a drink with you, Jinkai. So please forgive your dear Queen when she just skips to the chase and ask what's the status on colonizing the rest of the continent?"

Onn lowered his smile, stared at her from beneath his eyebrows. "We are making our approach to Ugatin as we speak."

"You're making or you plan to do so once I leave?" Queen Palulan said.

Onn forgot all courtesy and said, "What, do you think you could do a better job?"

"No," she said, "that is not my responsibility, Jinkai Onn, it is yours. And if you cannot perform your duty I will just as quickly appoint another Jinkai from our homeworld in your place. Now do you have any news for me, or not?"

Onn bit back an insult and said, "We have recently sent Viceroy Morg and a few troops to exterminate a few vermin in a small city."

Queen Palulan frowned. "You sent Morg?"

"... Yes..." Onn said sourly.

After a long pause, Queen Palulan shifted her feet and said, "He's dead, isn't he?"

"What do you expect?" Onn said.

Palulan exhaled loudly, stepped back and put her hands on her hips. She gestured to Onn and said, "You see! This is the kind of shit I'm talking about when you send men to do work!"



The officer behind Palulan frowned. Now that he knew the Queen, who was currently single by the way, looked down on men, he chances of wooing her just dropped drastically.

Onn's forehead became an ugly mess of wrinkles. "Perhaps you should have sent me a more capable Viceroy instead of that wacky-ass clown Morg," Onn said. "He has not been so willing to orders from me either."

"Regardless," said Palulan, "I have no time for complaints. We need to make haste with our work on this planet. The Prestige Kingdom allowed us to pillage the weaker nations, but if ever the Galactic Garden comes here again and asks who's the culprit, I have no doubt that the nycarmans will point the finger at us."

Onn didn't like the stuck-up woman, but when she was right, she was right. It might have seem like a business deal between Sangetsu and Veheculon; where the orderrans would take over the smaller nations and allowed the Prestige Kingdom to harvest the people for some means Onn didn't really give a crap about. But to others it looked like the stronger nations had allied themselves and were pushed into a corner by the invading orderrans.

With that in mind, Jinkai Onn focused on completing the task he was appointed to do.

"I will gather a fleet capable of levelling Ugatin, and proceed as soon as I can," he said.

Palulan folded her arms and said, "Will Ugatin pose a threat to us?"

"They have been starved of resources by the Prestige Kingdom now to the point where they are considered a third world country," said Onn.

Palulan nodded. "Very well, Jinkai Onn," she said, "But please, ensure that in your testosterone-fueled rage, you do not completely destroy the cities. Remember, we are not exterminators, we are colonists. We wouldn't want to have to build our empire in post-nuclear places."

Your empire? Onn thought. A malicious smile twitched the corner of his mouth. You stupid woman; once I take over Ugatin and Kafinifa, I will kill you and take over this continent for myself.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Two days later, Old Chippy arrived in Kreplon City train station; a grandiose looking place, if that was what one could call all the rusty looking colossal metal arches above with their glass roves punctured with holes like a meteor hit not too long ago.

The train station was situated on the outskirts of the city, just a few hundred yards away from the barren, tapering and cylindrical buildings, most of which had their tops and sides blasted off. Huge scorch marks were a testimony to the previous harvests that once took place. The sunlight shone down on their corpse into their vast hollows that were once business offices, entertainment lounges and schools. Any sign of an aerial highway was erased long ago, and only scavenging birds flew about with a lonely caw.

Well, that was just for the top of the buildings, anyway. Way below, were most of the architecture had a four-sided appearance with domed roves, the people were at their daily activities on the streets; all nycarmans.

Unlike Suride Town, most residents here had some vehicles left back from when they had hidden them during the riots and looting that happened in the Third Great War years ago. But with the lack of fuel, most of the rusted relics of once wealthy people had to be broken down to use as carriages for mynamathers and greshkues.

Some motorists, who had the money, could afford ethanol fuel being grown from huge farms of algae from one of the many Green-Puff Houses throughout the city; buildings noted for their circular tapering stone roves and chimneys puffing out greenish-tinge smoke. As a result the air in the city left a bitter taste in one's mouth.

Most efficient hovercars were owned by the police force, or the very rich who could afford large weapons to scare off vandals trying to scrap their precious vehicles for parts with various dealers through the Underworld. Most hovercars had the design of a sleek, oval nut with crescent projection at the upper-side, an ovoid windshield at the front and wing-like doors at the sides. Beneath the projections were antigravity pads that lift the cars ten inches off the ground.

The city was desolated, but not because the people have suddenly up and vanished, but because they had all gone to the train stations to express their opinion of the new arriving aliens into their country—which was hurling projectiles from the platforms at the train.

“What the hell're they doing?” Joey said, peeping through the edge of the window at sea of purple faces twisting in anger and disgust, much like how Joey's face would be if he couldn't get a meal when he was living in the streets.

“Obviously they are trying to kill us!” Lezura said from beside him.

A bottle broke near the window and sent the two of them and three others ducking for cover. They heard another series of broken bottles on the side of the train before seconds passed and it stopped. When they looked back up, they saw the security forces of the train going over the sides to meet the crowd.

In the train the built up tension was held to throat at a stiffening level. A few people had already drawn their small arms, and were hurling back insults at the nycarmans outside.

“All you go eat a bag of shit!” Joey said. “Don't you all know that the Rakai and his Chevalier are inside here?”

“Keep your head down, you...” Lezura said, pushing Joey down from the window. She was certain that anyone inside saw Joey get hit, the Rakai get hit, by a projectile from the protestors that would surely spark a physical confrontation not even the security personnel could stop.

Luckily the captain and his men were already on the initiative. The men went on both sides of the train station where the people had gathered like ants around a crumb of sweet-bread. They fired off a

series of gunshots in the air, scattering people back from the front of the crowd. But the mass of nycarmans had been deterred into a run.

This however, was cured when some of the soldiers produced Hypersonic Screech Cannons; HSC for short. Basically it was a speaker attached to a squat gun, but with noticeable large strings built into the center like some devious cross between a cannon and a violin. It vibrated the strings at a high frequency that produced a searing sound in the ears of ordinary aliens, which caused discomfort, but in a nycarman it was the equivalent of having acid, fire, cold water and stale urine.

With their earmuffs equipped, the HSC holders pulled back on the trigger, and the weapon bucked slightly in their hands and stream of horrendous sound whistled out of the speakers. Immediately the people convulsed and hollered in agony, clamping their hands over their ears in their retreat.

The soldiers on the entrance side to train station, led by the slender-faced captain, formed an advancing wall that pushed the civilians back through the cracked and withered support columns of the building and out the steps.

The captain saw a few people resisting his leniency by tying clothes around their heads and ears and hurling weapons at him. He ducked beneath a stone, pulled out his lance-pistol and fired two shots at them.

A man fell with his two holes in his chest, and the others immediately got the message and took off. The captain groaned, shook his head and holstered his weapon, pissed off such ignorance had to cause the loss of a life.

He looked around and said sharply, "Where the hell is our escort already?"

From the other side the soldiers were hoarding the people like karoties around the train and towards the exit.

"That's right you little pussies!" Joeys said, "Keep your asses—Whaa!"

A blow to his head from Lezura silenced Joey. Lezura lowered her fist and said, "Watch your mouth around me, boy..."

"It just slipped out!" Joey said. "You didn't have to crash a damn truck in my head!"

The copper colored steps leading from the grey and white floor of the train stations' waiting platforms led to streets invested with sprouts of grass and flowers, bordered at the sides by a seven meter high fence with small warehouses, stores and even a few homes on the other side.

Some people went right down the branching streets past the bus stops while others took over the fences, landing awkwardly in the yellow grass.

A convoy of light blue hovertrucks coming down the street with a loud series of hums split the fleeing people in the middle and onto the sidewalk. They had a similar design to the hovercar, only with a rounded front and flat, lower edges near the rear.

With the danger gone the security forces escorted the people from the train in a hurried mash up through the doors. Lezura held onto Joey and pressed him close to her in fear that he might get squashed. Somehow Joey knew what she was doing, and wasn't too happy about it.

With great effort they manage to form something close to resembling a line and led out into the warm air towards the trucks.

"Get moving!" the captain said, looking around the place with an agitated furrow of his forehead. Those people weren't the real danger here...

The immigrants loaded up a short ramp from the rear of the truck into its silvery interior. All the seats were removed to make more space for the people to squat in.

Joey stumbled forward inside, almost getting stomped in the head by a passing yautgan. He tasted oily, sour dirt particles that flew into his mouth and spat them out. He hurried up with Lezura's help and found themselves a spot next to a soldier standing alertly inside.

Once all the trucks were near filling up the captain went to the truck down at the end, which would become the lead as they turned around. He stepped onto a ledge at the side and spoke up to the driver.

“Just head straight to the camp,” he said, “do not stop for anyone or anything. Any Hapchenan that gets too close to the convoy do not hesitate to run them over.”

“Got it, Captain,” said the man.

The captain looked down the line and saw that everyone was inside the trucks. He tapped the driver on his shoulder and said, “Get going.”

The captain stepped away and head back to the train station to his post with the rest of the train security. He wasn't too sad about leaving the immigrants in the hands of the others.

The rear truck neatly spun on its antigravity pads all the way around until it faced the other end of the street and drove off. It kept up a slow pace as the others turned around, and once they were all in line the pace picked up.

With the inside wreaking of sweaty bodies and the peculiar smell of what was once inside the truck, some people fought out of their tight confines amongst each other and stood up.

Following these people, Joey saw the eerie skyscrapers in the distance; with blast holes here and there and the walls peeled off their metallic frames. All the bridge and tube like structure that connect them were severed and blown apart like slashed arteries. Lezura stood beside him and gazed on also in eerie silence as the wind rippled over their faces.

“What happened here...?” Joey said.

“Harvest,” Lezura said emotionlessly. “Judging by the state of the decay here, I would say it stopped about three to four years ago.”

Joey didn't ask any more questions; the images he had seen of the harvests on Lezura's data-scroll were popping up in his head. And as they did, gunshots started to pop up in the air.

He and Lezura stooped as did everyone else.

“What the hell is it now?” Joey said.

“I have no clue—” Lezura stopped herself, remembering the kind of people living around the area.

The officers accompanying the drivers of the truck reached for their radios and hurriedly exchanged information and orders with each other.

There were more hostile gunshots, accompanied with return fire from the security officers in the truck. Gunshots ripped holes in the side of the truck that Joey and Lezura were in, striking a lazhinian woman in the shoulder and a geckoid in the back.

A strenuous movement of limbs rippled through the truck as the people moved to the injured man; even the woman who got shot. Her muscles effectively popped the bullets out of her wound.

“The hell...?” Joey said in disbelief, looking at the bleeding man in the truck. At first it just seemed annoying with the people at the train station, but now they were actually taking up arms against them?

Lezura's ears shifted through the low-decibels of the gunfire and listened for any other signs of the enemy. She heard loud engines that were the common wheeled vehicles most people in the Underworld used, and found that their attackers were close. She felt the truck turn onto another street, and the vehicles still followed.

After waiting for a series of gunfire to stop, Lezura and Joey simultaneously peeped over the top of the truck, and saw bulky, rusted motorcycles riding by the side. They had two wheels at the front and back beside each other, providing stability on the road as the driver zipped back and forth, closer and further from the truck to get a good shot or get out of the line of fire.

Unfortunately this didn't go so well for them, and one bike up at the front had its riders gunned down horrendously, throwing their bodies splashed with yellow in the street and steering the bike into a small shop where it crashed into the metallic wall. Luckily the occupants there had got up and scampered away.

One of the backseat riders in front of Joey and Lezura put away his gun and produced a bottle he subsequently lit. With one clean toss he hurled the Molotov, or as it was popularly called in this side of the galaxy, bottled-boom, at the truck.

Joey said, “Oh—”

Joey and Lezura ducked along with officers. One of the truck securities was already shooting one motorcycle. By the time he had riddled both men with bullet holes the bottled-boom hit the truck, exploding in liquid-fire that splashed everywhere.

One officer got some of the flammable liquid in his face. He yelped and hollered in agony as the flames cooked his flesh. He threw his weapon away and fell back in the truck, clapping at his face to put out the fire.

Lezura quickly lurched towards the man, forcefully pulled away his hand and swept away the fire with a gust of her honoi.

Now, It couldn't be said that it was that particular incident that sparked it, but all Joey knew was that after it happened, some people suddenly got up, started fire honoi if they could use it, hurl heavy items they knew wouldn't miss—and Joey knew he had to join the fun.

With a giddy smile Joey crawled and climbed to the other side of the truck. He popped up his head and felt a bullet nip his cheek. He recoiled and slapped a hand on his face.

“Son-of-a-bitch!” Joey said.

Along with a largaph woman firing from a crude looking crossbow Joey charged up a Bluebolt that whacked into the thigh of the gunner, blasting flesh and blood out of a messy hole.

The man reached after his thigh, and lurched off screaming into the street. The woman beside Joey had a bullet clip off a plate of her skull, steering her aim off a little, but the rapid fire of the crossbow landed two arrows in the shoulder of the driver.

He tilted with the bike, toppling it over onto him. Both skidded in the street, leaving streaks blood.

Joey threw his hands up and screamed in triumph. He embraced the woman beside him and both of them fell on the floor.

The convoy went from a heard of gampadons being picked off by gufders, to gampadons firing weapons from all angles at their cowering would-be killers, sending them scattering across to other streets and between buildings and out of sight.

Just as quickly as they had come, they were sent on their way with a boot of lead up their behinds.

The convoy erupted in a chorus of victorious roar, even though two civilians were dead and three officers.

Joey got off the embarrassed woman and found Lezura. He almost slipped in a pile of mud left by a Xemingi as he pressed through the crowd to embrace Lezura.

The blushing Lezura said, “What—what are you doing?”

“We just kicked their assess!” Joey said, letting go of Lezura to jump amongst the other people.

Lezura sat down in a corner of the truck beside as the unconscious lazhinian who got his faced burned. She had healed the officer's face as best as she could, now she would leave his natural regenerative abilities to do the best.

Apart from severing the head or destroying the brain, fire was one of the few things that could effectively kill a lazhinian. With that thought, Lezura remembered the Great Scorching she had once read in her history class—where millions of lazhinians on their homeworld burnt and ate each other just to reduce their numbers to prevent over population.

She shuddered at the thought, and was graciously happy to replace them with that of the people before her. All of them were aliens that had just killed her people. Yet that was not how she felt about it. In her eyes, these people had just won a very rare victory that the people in Underworld rarely had the chance to meet.

Come to think of it, we have had a good running of luck so far, she thought.

They had survived and attack by orderrans, twice—now they had managed to drive away members of the Hapchenan.

But Lezura remembered, like another side of her telling her to know better. No, we have not won anything! The orderrans will be coming for us, and we have just declared war on the Hapchenan just hours within entering their own country.

And in all of it, she saw how happy Joey had come to be. Lezura wondered if he had come to grasps with taking another's life.

She shook her head, and hung it with a loud sigh. She wondered how much longer this would go on.

Hours later, after driving through the city with a few nycarmans bombarding the convoy with insults in hopes of stirring up fear in the aliens, they reached the camp site.

“Wait a hoot-tootin minute!” Joey said with his forehead wrinkled beyond belief, “This is the camp site?”

Lezura shrugged with her eyebrows. “I guess so...”

“Boy,” said a dracoid male behind them, “I was better off living in my little wooden shack than this dump!”

And he wasn't exaggerating that much either. The convoy drove unto a desolated street with a few soldiers stationed as guards along the side. At the end of it was a twenty meter high, thick gate mesh fence surrounding the camp site for nearly four hundred yards.

Simply put the campsite was piles and mountains of rubble from a skyscraper that had been blasted by means of a particle-beam cannon. Half of its length had fallen to the ground, breaking up into smaller pieces, some of which still had intact rooms. Metallic beams and frames jutted out from the debris like arrows from the hide of a dead greshku, some as long as thirty meters and as thick as a grown nycarman male's body.

“Looks like the gods didn't have a good fanbase here,” a lazhinian in the truck said, getting approving chuckles.

The convoy stopped meters from the heavy metal, dark grey gates. Sunlight glinted off the spikes on top of it. The back of the trucks opened and soldiers on the outside came to help the people out.

Joey told Lezura to wait back, so as the crowd grew less they could see if they left anything behind.

“Really Joey?” she said.

Joey frowned mockingly. “Yeah...really!” he said.

Joey looked around and found a few coins. He took them up and put them in his pocket. He saw a knife and put it in his bag. He spotted a small pistol, smiled, and reached after it, only to find that it was lying in the blue, smears of blue blood left by the dead raizean.

Joey shuddered and decided he could do without it.

“Hey there,” said a soldier at the end of the truck, “get you behinds out already!”

“Come one, Joey,” Lezura said.

She pulled him by the collar for a while before they got out.

Outside was a little cleaner than in the truck, and the skies above clear. But the air had a bitter smell and taste of charcoal and ethanol in Joey's mouth.

The two civilians that died were wrapped up tightly in clothes and carried into the camp. The dead officers were taken out of the truck and carried to the side of the road in a small post.

Escorted by the few police officers from Suride Town, the civilians were led through the huge gates as they pushed open with a creaky hum by electronic mechanisms.

“We should find a nice spot,” Joey said, “you know; so we can look out over the city and stuff.”

“That is actually not a bad idea,” said Lezura.

Joey slapped Lezura on her shoulder. “Race ya—”

Joey ran off through the crowd before Lezura could get a hold of him. She sighed heavily, and said, “Little rascal...”

But in no time she heard Joey calling to her from above, “Hey! Brace-face!”

Lezura looked around, trying to step from the tall heads of the yautgans and dracoids. She spotted a glimmer of light way over to her left, and pulled her goggles over her eyes. She zoomed in the glimmer and found that it was coming off Joey’s sword. He waved it in the air from the open into a torn off part of the building some two stories up.

The path leading up to the opening was a hellish obstacle course of large stones and slabs of broken walls, a few metallic scraps and even some household appliances—leading Lezura to assume it must have been an apartment building.

Lezura was glad she wasn’t a woman with preference for heels, or else she would’ve broken both ankles twenty times already going up the slope.

Reaching the entrance Joey ran back inside. The sunlight was adequate enough for Lezura to identify what was inside, but she still activated the lights on the upper corners of her goggles to see the finer details.

How convenient, Lezura thought, looking at dusty old bed with a few chunks eaten out that Joey was jumping up and down on.

Lezura wanted to tell Joey to stop, that there were harmful bacteria present that could kill him, but she remembered that she already gave him an immunization shot.

Looking around closer Lezura saw a broken flat-screen TV lying on the ground and an overturned wardrobe.

She noticed the broken socket for the light bulb was on the wall next to the bed, and with the position of the door horizontally at the back Lezura realized that they were actually standing on what was the room’s wall. The green painting in the room had been hideously peeled away like it was scraped by the claws of a cossik. Broken glass surrounded the TV, and a broken chair was in another corner.

Joey leaped off the bed and onto the floor with a crunch. “Too bad about the TV though...” he said, kicking it.

Lezura walked to the horizontal door and peered inside. From it ran a corridor into what used to be the living room. It was stark dark inside, and Lezura figured this was where all the living space ended.

She turned to Joey and said, “First off, we should contact my friend.”

“Okay,” said Joey. “How’re we goanna do that again...?”

Lezura placed her bag on the bed and sat down on the edge. She took Sheikon-box from off her waist.

As Joey sat next to her Lezura clenched her hand around the box, and after briefly channeling her honoi inside it the top flipped open and out poured massive amounts of honoi.

When Donnowarru constructed his body, he stretched and yawned. He stared at the two aliens on the bed blankly, and said, “What the hell is it now?”

“I need to contact my friend,” said Lezura, “you can detect honoi across hundreds of miles, and I have a memory of the personality of honoi my friend has.”

Donnowarru crouched on the ground, only giving his surroundings a brief glance before he laid his ignorant eyes on Lezura. “You want me to harmonize with you, I see...”

Their conversation was in Naasi tongue, but Joey could understand with translator.

“What’s harmonizing, Lez?” he said.

Lezura said, “Harmonizing is an advanced technique two honoi users can do to increase the power of their honoi. The two partners send their honoi into each other’s body, but instead of the opposite honoi pushing back each other, they flow together and create a current of strong energy between them

that is passed onto the honoi of the two partners—blast!” Lezura clamped held her head in terror. “Joey, we have not tried harmonizing all of this time!”

“Well, I have no intension of staying here and watch you two do it,” said Donnowarru. “Let us just hurry up with this so I can be on my way.”

Joey laughed lightly. “Dude,” he said, “you’re talking as if you’re going on a trip. You’re going back in the damn box as usual...”

“It is much better than looking at you two assess,” Donnowarru said.

Lezura stood up and said, “That is far enough, you two. Donnowarru please let us begin...”

Donnowarru sighed and slowly rose to his feet. He stood before Lezura, his height just a foot above hers. Both of them slowly placed their hands in front of them and clasped them together.

Joey grinned, rocking back and forth with glee.

“Shut up!” both nycarmans said.

Normally, two people couldn’t just harmonize like that. Not everyone’s honoi current was able to flow with the honoi of another. Donnowarru, however, being a wizard with decades of experience in using honoi, was able to match his honoi flow with that of others.

When he and Lezura shared their honoi, the cool feeling that was usually associated with honoi changed into a warm one. Their skin tingled and their hair shivered by the roots. Whitish-purple light crackled between their hands.

All the while Joey took in this display with a steady focus as great as how Lezura would usually study her books.

After just four seconds they let go of each other, hands still crackling with the supercharged honoi. Lezura approached the mouth of the room, and fired a massive Blueburst into the air that buck her body almost to the point of toppling over.

The arrow was five times the size with a purple tinge and a longer tail. Beaming into the azure above it exploded in a wide shockwave that almost instantly disappeared in twinkling particles. Below the massive popping sound snapped the heads of the civilians and officers into the sky with alarmed and curious whispers.

Those tiny particles, having been enhanced and with Donnowarru’s honoi, would travel for miles across the city to be picked up by anyone with the ability to sense honoi.

“Shit!” Joey said, flying to his feet and staring into the sky. “Lezura we gotta do that!” When he looked at Lezura she was crouched with her hands on her head. “Lezura...?”

Joey knelt beside her. Lezura’s breath was hollow, with her eyes shut and blood running from one nostril down her mouth.

“Crap!” Joey put his hand under his shirt and used it to wipe the blood off. “Lezura can you stand?”

Lezura slowly nodded, and carefully stood and was helped over to the bed by Joey.

“There are some sweets in the small compartment of my bag...” Lezura said.

“Oh yeah...?” Joey said with a surprised tone. He quickly rolled the bag over to find the small compartment Lezura pointed out. “All this time I’ve been craving some sugar and you’ve been hiding out on me? Not that your nice butt wouldn’t do too...”

Lezura managed to chuckle at Joey trying to make light at the situation.

Joey found the sweets and gave them to Lezura in her hand. After eating a few she said to Donnowarru crouched on the ground, “Thank you for your help, Donnowarru. You have really been a savior to us.”

Donnowarru shrugged. “Hand me a sweet and let me go already,” he said.

Lezura tossed one to him and Donnowarru ate it. Lezura opened up the Sheikon-box and called Donnowarru inside. Lezura put the box back on her utility belt and lay back in the dusty old bed. Some little bits of rubble were sticking in her back, but she couldn’t care less as her throbbing head slowly caught onto some peace.



“Now what?” said Joey.

“We wait until my friend finds us,” Lezura said.

But sitting there and waiting wasn't all that the two of them did, or got the chance to do.

An officer from their group came to them and inquired if they had anything to do with the display in the sky. After Lezura admitted to it, the officer warned them to refrain from doing such things while in the camp and when the Kreplon security forces are around, as they were already giving them a hard time in the discussion of providing assistance in protection against the Hapchenan.

With that little finger wagging gone, Joey and Lezura decided to use up what was left of their day wisely. First, Lezura went into the rest of the camp, walking from hollowed out rubble to rubble in search of pots to prepare a meal for her and Joey.

Despite being quite famous, Lezura was still a nycarman amongst aliens, and not many were so willing to share. Luckily she met upon the inn keeper, Tololon, who offered her two bowls of stew to take back to Joey.

“Thank you,” Lezura said.

Tololon covered up back her huge soup pot she had brewing outside her home and said, “No worries, yes. I consider you friends of mine now!” Her eyes narrowed at Lezura, “Expect you to pay for the hole you blasted in my building...”

Lezura fluttered fifty times before she said, “But wait a minute now! How do you know it was even us?”

Tololon said, “I read your mind. Very sorry, yes, yes. But you thinking how you escaped before I see you.”

“I thought you said you were never going to read peoples' minds again!” said Lezura. “And besides, it is not as if you work at the inn anymore.”

“Sorry,” said Tololon, “but not because I small mean you can bully me.” Tololon smiled brightly. “Anyway, enjoy your meal, yes?”

When Lezura turned around she was looking right at Joey. Startled, she jerked back and nearly spilled the stew.

“Which one's mine?” Joey said.

“You have some nerve asking for food like that,” Lezura said.

“Okay,” said Joey. He clasped his hands and pouted, “Please give me some of your food, Lez-Lez?”

“Please do not call me Lez-Lez,” she said, handing a bowl to Joey, “Lezura or Lez is quite fine. I do not wish have my name mutated into some shortcut, backwards word.”

“Whatever,” Joey said. He sat on a nearby stone and began eating.

Lezura followed him, and when the two where finished, Tololon stretched out her hand and said, “That will be fifty yerks!”

“I can't believe the cute little green lady ripped us off so badly,” Joey groaned, swatting a stone with his sword out of his way. “And I can't believe you even paid her, Lezura!”

“We have to try and be on the good side of the people here, Joey,” Lezura said.

“How much money do we have left?” Joey said.

“I have four thousand yerks left,” Lezura said. “So long as no one tries to rip us off it may serve us for a while.”

Walking back to their home, Joey and Lezura were drawn to a large circle of people cheering and eagerly. The ones at the front where hunched over looking down at something, those in the back stood on the balls of their feet to look over into the center—not the yautgans or dracoids though.

“Wanna go have a look?” Joey asked Lezura.

“I suppose we could spare a few minutes before we go back to your training,” she said.

When they reached the circle, they heard all manner remarks clearly:

“Kill him! Kill the little shit!”

“Don’t let me down! Rip that little shit to shreds!”

“I’ve got three hundred yerks running on you, baby—bring it one home for daddy!”

In addition to all manner of garbled alien words, there were shrieks and snarls emanating from the center of the circle.

Joey jumped to try and get a look over the heads of the aliens in front of him, but sadly he wasn’t favored with height from birth. “I can’t see shit!”

Lezura looked around amongst the rubble. She found high ground and pointed to it. “That could possibly be a good vantage point.”

Joey raced pass Lezura and crawled up the huge mound of metal and concrete. He cut his finger on something sharp. He winced and sucked on the wound for a few seconds before settling at the top.

Lezura sat beside him and observed in the center of the crowd.

The men were gambling between two creatures fighting in the ring. Lezura recognized them as crunchems; small, pink bodied creatures with dark green spots all over. Their four feet hand slender claws they used to rake each other, and their large snouts had rows of massive teeth to sheer out chunks of flesh out of the other’s hide. They were scary little critters, with their huge green eyes, ever twitching quill-like ears and tubes leading from their sides directly into their lungs that frothed with hunger.

“Get em! Get em!” Joey said beside her.

Blood and skin were flying from the savage brawl between the two creatures, until finally one of them got the upper hand, biting the other in neck. Half the cheers in the crowd grew stronger, while others hooted in anger and disbelief.

“YEAH!” Joey said.

The crunchem on top chewed into the other’s neck until it came clean off.

Lezura felt something crawl up her spine. “My goodness,” she said.

The twitching body of the dead crunchem was subsequently devoured by the other so quickly that within seconds all that was left were scraps of bone. The men with the winning bets turned to the others to collect their winnings: yerk bills, gold coins and rubies.

The stuffed crunchem fell on its bloated belly, breathing heavily from the tubes in its side. Soon, after this creature had gained nourishment from its meal, it will give birth to a dozen or so individuals, and then die.

“Though that was not my type of entertainment,” Lezura said, “it was quite exhilarating.”

“No shit,” Joey said, “I’ve gotta get me one of those things!”

“Oh no!” Lezura said. “Crunchems are not like gassappers that only feed on fuel. Anything living thing in a swarm of crunchems’ way will be devoured. Obviously these ones are just scavengers lurking around the place after their habitat got destroyed. These men would have never confronted a swarm of them and manage to capture even one.”

“They’re that bad?” Joey said.

“Indeed.”

“Nice!”

Three people walked up the mound towards them, two geckoids and a yautgan. Joey thought to himself if he were an ignorant racist he would have pictured the two smaller aliens to be the children of the larger one.

They stopped below Joey and Lezura and greeted them with nods.

One of the geckoids, a woman, moved her head side to side from Joey and Lezura. Spotting that the Rakai had his translator, she said, “I hope we are not intruding on you two.”

“Ne,” said Joey.

“Not at all,” Lezura said, “Is there something we can help you with?”

“Well,” the woman looked at the others, who gave her approving nods, she looked at Joey, “a few folks, including myself, feel a little uncomfortable here with the extremists running around. In fact I think everyone does, but I guess they’re too afraid to talk about?”

“Really?” Joey said, genuinely shocked. “But didn’t we just chase them away—even killed a few of them?”

“A few of them,” said the yautgan, “I think the rest went back to their hideout and are planning an attack on the camp as we speak.”

“We want to know what you’re going to do about it?” said the other geckoid.

Joey was puzzled. Normally Lezura would make such decisions, but the look she was giving him spoke that he would have to think for himself—and start doing it often.

Rubbing the back of his neck at an imaginary itch Joey said, “I’m not really sure... Can the police handle it?”

Both geckoids’ skin color turned to a wild red that startled Joey into a flinch.

“What the hell do you mean by ‘you don’t know’?” the woman said, her big eyes drilling into him.

“I...” Joey tried to find the right words but his lips were just moving without sense.

Lezura stood by watching, really telling herself not to interfere. Joey has to learn, she thought. But boy, the poor child doesn’t know anything, man!

The woman waited for an answer from this so-called Rakai, but as she did, she realized that unlike the famous Conner Wondonner, this Rakai was looking a little younger, probably a kid even. Damn, she thought, we’re so desperate we want kids now?

Realizing that, the woman calmed down and brought her skin to its original color. She sighed.

“Look,” she said, “the nycarman police don’t really care that much. It’s because they’re getting paid from the government why most of them decided to even help. As a matter of fact, I think some of them are even in the Hapchenan organization. They won’t even provide us or the dozen security officers from Suride Town with arms. So basically we the people have to fend for ourselves, including you, Rakai.”

Joey bit on his lip and closed his eyes as he thought about a possible solution. Finally, he opened them and stared at the woman. “Look,” he said, “If the cops aren’t gonna help us, like you said; we have to do it ourselves. We need to round up some guys, get some ammunition, find where those wannabe Ku Klux Klan bastards live and show that they shouldn’t screw around with us.”

The woman smiled, yellow strips flashed across her skin. “That’s what I was thinking too, she said. “We can’t really sit back and wait for them to attack. The people here don’t have anywhere else to go. We’re gonna have to live here from now on until one day comes when we can move out. And during that time, I don’t want anyone coming around to screw around with my children.”

Lezura smiled at those last words, happy to be speaking to another mother.

“Our main problem,” the yautgan said, “Is that we have no weapons. Almost every man, woman and child living in the camp can fight. But we lack the necessary arms.”

Lezura decided to butt in, saying, “Excuse, mam, but can you use honoi?”

She shook her head. “Not without a Sugarstick,” she said.

Joey’s face lit up in a smile. He grinned. “Wow, lady, I didn’t know you were that kind of girl!”

“Not that kind of sugar-stick, Joey,” Lezura said. “When we say a Sugarstick, we mean a weapon designed to use honoi; developed for persons who cannot properly harness their own honoi. Think of it as how a wizard needs a wand to cast a spell.”

“You actually have people who have honoi and don’t know how to use it?”

“Yes,” Lezura said. “They can learn, but as opposed to you learning how to use it within a few hours, it can take others years to learn any kind of technique. So some people eventually give up on using honoi.”

The other geckoid said, "If you're proposing that we activate everyone's dormant honoi abilities, that won't be efficient enough. We might be able to do it in a day; no doubt, but getting them to learn techniques will take days or weeks, and that's just the ones who can naturally use it. I only saw about two persons with a Sugarstick..."

"What about the key," the woman said, "Isn't it supposed to have a lot of power?"

"It is only effect on machinery," Lezura said, "which none of us here has. It can be used if we do find some, though."

"Well this didn't go out as planned," the yautgan said.

"It is the best we can do on such short notice," Lezura said, rising to her feet to signal that the meeting was over. "The Rakai and I have something to do later on."

"What?" asked the woman.

When Lezura and Joey hesitated, the woman's complexion changed to the same color before, and she said, "Wait a minute here, just who the hell do you two think you are?"

Lezura quickly tried to rectify herself. "Miss, wait! It is not like—"

"What; you both think because don't look enough like you, or know much about your whole little Rakai organization, that we aren't good enough to be a part of your plan? That we're too stupid to understand it? The last time a checked, regardless of who the Rakai is, he or she is in service to all innocent people—no matter their species!"

"Hey lady, chill-out!" Joey said. He stepped up to her, but the woman didn't even budge. Joey lowered his voice and said, "It's not like that. "We're just trying to keep what we're doing here undercover so everyone doesn't stick their nose in it and go blabbering off to people who shouldn't know. You said it yourself that some of the police from the city might even be in the Hep-chin...Happy-chan..."

"Hap-che-nan," the woman said.

"Yeah," Joey said, "that..."

"But if you must know," Lezura said, "we are going to meet the Dielengann Path as soon as they send one of their people in response to our signal we released earlier."

"Aren't those the people responsible for the Rakai?" said the yautgan.

"Yes," Lezura said, not too surprised some people knew about the Dielengann Path, as Conner Wondonner once mentioned it to some reporters a few years ago.

The geckoid woman grinned. "Do you think they will be able to send help?"

"They'll have to when I ask," Joey said. He turned to Lezura, "Won't they?"

"Indeed," said Lezura.

"Good," the woman said. "Make sure you let us know when you are going to leave. By the way, my name is Hanim. You only need to know mine for now."

"Joey Sadowski at your service lil' mamma!" said the human with a salute.

The woman raised a red-haired eyebrow at Joey. "You're calling people little?"

Later, after Joey's brief tussle with Haim and defeat at her hands, Joey and Lezura were behind their home, practicing Joey's Blueburst and Bluebolt.

Lezura and Joey constructed targets out of the rubble lying around. Stones the size of Joey's head were placed up what remained of a room's wall. Wearing just a black merino and shorts, Joey flexed his fingers in preparation for the attack.

Standing behind was Lezura, wearing her goggles when the time for inspection was necessary.

She said, "Ready"—Joey's body tensed, honoi pumped into his arms—"fire!"

In chain succession Joey fired Bluebursts at each of the targets. The blue, pulsing waves knocked each of the rocks meters away.

Lezura quickly jogged around the wall to inspect the damage, while Joey stood where he was. Each stone had huge networks of cracks through them, one even blasted to bits.

While she walked around, Lezura said, "Very good. One, the speed was good enough—one second for each attack. And the multi-surface damage was very extensive."

Joey popped the collar of his merino. "What did you expect Lezura, I'm boss."

Lezura rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Just find some more targets, will you?"

Within seconds they found more stones and put them on the wall. Joey went back to his position and prepared himself.

"Ready... fire!"

This time Joey attacked with the Bluebolt. His elbow bucked painfully with each attack, but not enough to cause much discomfort. Each blast bored a hole in the stone or shattered it apart.

Immediately as Joey destroyed the last stone he felt the first throb of honoi fatigue in his skull. He moaned and rubbed the back of his head.

"Shit..."

Lezura came over with her canteen and let Joey drink from it. "Sorry," she said, "I am all out of sweets."

Joey gave the empty bottle back to her. "You think any of the people outside the camp will sell us any stuff?" Joey said. "That's assuming we can get out, by the way."

Lezura became silent for a moment. She walked up to the slope to their house and climbed up the top. She tried to look around the larger mountains of rubble and see out into the city with her goggles. She could clearly see the huge skyscrapers and the smoke from the many factories throughout the city.

Lezura zoomed out and checked around the perimeters of the camp.

"I can see a hole down at the back near those bushes," said Lezura, "I think we can squeeze our way through." She turned to Joey with a smile. "You definitely can, Joey."

Joey mimicked her with his hand and rolled his eyes. After that he said, "You think we should try to sneak a look around the place, or just wait until your friend comes to see us?"

Lezura walked down and said, "With that signal, they will be able to find me by my honoi anywhere within the city. But there is also the problem of going out into the city with a non-nycarman like you Joey."

"Hey, we could just cover up my face again. And we might need to buy some weapons for the people, just in case of you know what?"

"You have a point there," Lezura said.

And right there in the middle of their conversation, a strange bird darted between them with a chorus of chirping like it was trying to speak.

"The hell's up with that weird chicken-hawk?" Joey said, lifting his hand.

"Do not!" Lezura said, putting his hand down. She whistled at the bird in the air, and it landed on her left shoulder.

It had smooth pink skin with tiny orange spots. Its head was round with large brown eyes and a ridge between with wide nostrils at the sides. Its wings were membranous, with two tubes in each of them. Around its feet were jeweled beads, and the feet was bright blue colored just below the ankles. Its ovoid tail was large and brown, divided into overlapping segments that flexed to reveal orange-yellow inners. Its species was known as a jetlighter.

"It is Flivi," Lezura said, snubbing the pigeon-sized bird under its short mouth. "It belongs to Heliri, which means she must be close by! Quickly, we must go and tell Hanim that we are leaving."

Joey could hear the excitement in Lezura's voice, and realized just how close she was with this Heliri person.

They hurried over to Hanim's tent with Flivi circling over their head. There they found Hanim reading to her two sons from a book about the history of her homeland.

“What time will you be coming back here?” Hanim said.

“We are not certain,” Lezura said, “but it will definitely be before tomorrow.”

“We’ll try to bring back some weapons,” Joey said with the little reptilian children tugging at his arms to go and play with them.

“Hey, you two sit down or else I’ll give you both a spanking!” Hanim said.

Glowing and pouting, they stomped back to their seats on the stones.

“I’m holding you to your word,” Hanim said, turning back to her book. “See you later.”

Lezura turned to Flivi on her shoulder, and said, “Okay, my little friend, lead the way.”

With a chirp Flivi opened his wings, pumped air through the tubes and took off. Slowing down while circling Flivi flew towards the direction where the hole in the fence was.

The sky still had some sunlight left, and was a deep orange-yellow with bits of pink tinged clouds. The twins already were out of the sky to make way for the single moon. The silhouettes of a flock of tratalies and tinier birds made their way across the sky.

Lezura and Joey already got their before going to Hanim, including their weapons. Joey wore a cloak over his head, a piece of cloth wrapped around his mouth, and Lezura’s goggles to conceal his eyes and hence his face as best as they could.

“These goggles are neat, Lezura,” Joey said as they neared the yellow and green bush.

“You should see the ones the military has,” Lezura said.

The bush wasn’t that dense, and by the sight of a few lopped off limbs, she guessed this were some of the men had went to get the crunchems. On this planet, when the people living in a community didn’t do regular plant cutting, say, everyone three months, the vegetation tend to get out of control, much like the environment of the lazhiinian homeworld of Gammuo.

The place they walked through looked like some old forest, but by the sight of a few hollowed out buildings and stone streets ripped apart by vines and tubers, it was evident the place was once a thriving community.

But there were still some folks around, well, a few immigrants anyway. One or two were checking out the inside of the darkened rooms.

One geckoid came out holding a struggling crunchem by its neck and back. The miserable creature swung its head from side to side and snapped its jaws furiously. A few others were picking spiral, purple berries from a mass of vines hanging from a sinni and gopto tree. These were sweet delicacies known as un’un berries, used in a variety of dishes as well as to make a potent drink.

Only about three persons stopped to greet Lezura and Joey.

Lezura kept her eyes fixed on Flivi and its zigzagged around them and reached further away. Lezura hoped the bird didn’t go too far, her eyes weren’t as good as any of the other species here, and Joey had her goggles.

The trek wasn’t long, though. Flivi led them through dense growth that forced them to crawl under roots and between tightknit trees, and even climbed over a house sunken under grassy earth. Lezura had to bend some of the smaller trees out of her way with her faery-nature energy, something Joey never saw her do before.

“I didn’t know you could move trees!” Joey said.

“Not all of them,” Lezura said. “Those ones were saplings small enough to be bent. I am not strong enough to bend larger trees.”

“You’re always cool, Lezura,” Joey said gleefully behind her.

Lezura was happy for the compliment, but wondered if Heliri choose this path because of the amount of growth that concealed it or because she knew that with Lezura’s ability she could traverse it.

Finally after traversing the maze they ended up at the mouth of a dark cave; which was actually a young ville tree that had grown so that its huge roots lifted up a red and brown colored building, tilting it to expose a hollow ten yards across and several meters high.

The yellow-brown grass and pink and white flowers flowed from the small forest and split into the hollow. The sunlight illuminated only the first seven meters inside before it got rocky and led into the dark.

“Who the hell would wanna meet in a place like that?” Joey said.

“Come on,” Lezura said in a low voice. She stopped, turned and took the goggles from Joey. “I thought we would be going into the city, but you have no use for them in here. Your eyes are better than mine.”

Before Lezura could switch on the lights on her goggles, Flivi flew inside. The segments on Flivi’s tail lifted up and emitted fiery light. The light was good enough for a radius of six meters, revealing bright grey, brown and yellow rocks that glittered with rare minerals.

Amongst the grass spotted with dew drops the light off the water glowed like little fireflies. Joey saw some more lights of the glowworms in the ceilings and on the walls.

Lezura turned on her lights to add more illumination. With the increase of the alien brightness little critters scurried under the rocks and grass and out of sight.

Flivi uttered three chirps that echoed throughout the cavern, and it settled on a small stalagmite. Some long legged insects there scurried down further from the searing brightness.

“Why’d it stop?” Joey said as they approached the bird.

Lezura stopped Joey with a hand on his shoulder and did the same.

“I hear something approaching,” she said.

And not a moment too soon the footsteps got louder, and a beast appeared in the light casted by Flivi’s bulb.

It wasn’t some drooling, crazy-eyed growling beast, per se, in fact its approach was quite subtle and it just like some four-legged horse thing in Joey’s eyes, making him wonder about Redbolt and S’us instead of any danger the creature actually posed.

But it was quite large, nearly four meters tall. Its skin was bright blue with thin yellow strips around its long neck and four legs and torso, decked further with tiny green spots. Its small head had a long narrow snout with two nostrils at the end. Its ears were small and fan like. Its head had four dark blue horns in an “X” formation with the two tips going up and down. Along its neck it had three pairs of spindly tentacles. Large, bright brown eyes stared back at them.

“What is that thing?” Joey said, slowly making a step forward.

“It is a nossil,” said Lezura, and when she saw the rider on the animal’s back jump onto the ground she added with an elated smile, “and a friend..”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Lezura!” a largaph woman in a dark green robe shouted as she ran towards Lezura.

“Heliri!” Lezura said as she opened her arms and embraced the woman.

Joey stepped away out of Lezura lifting the shorter woman and spinning her around. Both laughed like two lovers holding hands and running across of field of flowers under the sun.

Lezura put the woman down. Both held each other by the hand.

“My goodness, it has been so long since I last saw you!” Lezura said.

“You too Lezura,” said Heliri, grinning with a smile so wide it seemed to slice across to her ears holes. “I thought you would never come back, until I picked up your honoi across the city.”

Lezura noticed Joey and quickly turned to him. “Oh, where are my manners? Joey...this is Heliri Zuger.” Lezura gestured to Joey, “Heliri, dis dua-a di si’ ili Rakai, Joey Sadowski.”

Heliri was as short as Joey, which made him feel like he finally got get a break. Her bronze skin seemed to have been polished to sheen just like her carapace; which had a green symbol painted on the surface, a custom indigenous to largaphs from the Wynoddi tribe along with their brown skin. Her large eyes with flecks of yellow and silver stared at Joey with such intensity he had to look away for a moment to prevent himself from being drawn into the vortex.

Her Xemingi styled, knee-length robe was tight around the upper arms but loose below the elbows. The dark collar was mint green and segmented closely around her slender neck. Light green trim, frilly hems and a slight down the middle of the chest finished off the robe. She carried a pouch on her hip, and behind her in a sheath Joey could see a blue and brown staff with an end similar in design to Flivi’s tail, but larger.

“Owo dua yuh?” said Joey, waving at her.

Heliri walked up to Joey, held him by the back of the head and put her forehead against him. Her large breasts rubbed against Joey’s chest and gave him shivers all over. “In the Zongat’s name, I greet you, Rakai Joey Sadowski,” she said. Heliri let go of Joey, and studied him with her big eyes. “You seem quite short to be able to fight anybody.”

Lezura gasped. “Heliri,” she said.

Joey’s expression change from happy and calm to outright enraged. “Ma’wha?” he said, “yuh dua koah-in mi didge?”

“My goodness,” Lezura said, “Joey that was the longest sentence you ever said in Naasi!”

“Off course you’re short,” Heliri said, grinning so wide that all her teeth were nearly showing. “I know I’m short too, Rakai. You just have to accept it and get over it!” Heliri’s suddenly looked alarmed. “Wait...” he eyes narrowed at Joey “...is every part of you short...?”

Blushing like a mad, Joey said, “What—the—I—No! Ne!”

“Then show me!” Heliri said.

Lezura found the nearest stone and slammed it in Heliri’s head. It shattered across her carapace into dust. Heliri turned around to her, seeming unfazed, and said, “What, is he your man, Lezura? If he is then that is quite fine—just make sure he doesn’t—”

“Would you stop already?” Lezura said with her fists clenched and trembling. “Goodness. Heliri, could you not have presented a better side of yourself? You just met him for goodness sake!”

Heliri took the staff off her back and poked it into Lezura’s chest with the top. “Oh!” she said. “And I suppose you did a better job when you met him—showing off those ugly braces like they’re accessories?”

Joey burst out laughing, clutched his gut and dropped on the ground.

Lezura bit down on her lip and realized something. My goodness, it is two of them now...May the gods have mercy on my soul.



“Lezura, I’m loving your friend already!” Joey said, getting up and wiping a tear.

Lezura pushed off Heliri’s head with a finger and said, “All right, you have made your entrance, Heliri, now lead us out of this musty old cave.”

“Hey,” Heliri said, “it is not some ‘musty old cave’. I rather like it here.” She turned and walked back to the nossil. “Okay everybody! The nossil express is leaving right now. All aboard!”

They trailed behind Heliri, watching her dirt encrusted bare feet plow into the ground with each step. Flivi flew around them with its tail still glowing.

Heliri expertly climbed up the hind quarters of the animal tree times her height and onto its back behind the head. Joey had trouble climbing up until Heliri lent him a hand and pulled him up. Lezura sat at the back, with Joey sandwiched in the middle.

Heliri reached for the reigns hanging from the creature’s head and slapped on its neck.

“How does she even see pass this thing?” Joey said, tilting his head to long around the animal’s neck.

“All right, Dweep, let’s get going!” said Heliri.

“Dweeeerrrrp…” growled the nossil.

Heliri spun Dweep around and the animal took long strides into the cavern. Apart from Flivi’s light, the nossil had bioluminescent bacteria in sacs on its throat that produced four beams of light that stabbed the darkness. Going further through the cave they came discovered buildings that had sunken into ground, creating small shafts of orange light that shone from above.

Glowing insects flickered all over the place. There were some burning piles of debris that Heliri had previously lit to help guide them through the architectural graveyard.

“Heliri, dear,” said Lezura, “I hope I am not being picky after meeting each other for so long, but could you please speed things up a little?”

Heliri scoffed. “Lezura you’re always picky. But anyway, I’ll grant you request!”

Heliri kicked Dweep once, “Put it in four-gear, Dweep! Hang on tight everyone!”

“Dweeeerrrrp!”

Dweep stopped and placed its three-toed feet together, and in one bound it cleared twenty meters, continuing this quick pace onwards. Dweep went over, under and through broken rooms. After nearly an hour travelling, they came upon a suspicious looking area within the cavern.

So far inside the cave was rocky and nearly dark. But here fluffy blue-green grass grew on the ground, along with large flowers—including cune flowers and red ones that spiraled to a point. There were brown colored trunks of large trees tapering into the ceiling and bored their way through. They had hollow tubes through were they could hear the breath of air rushing from the surface.

“You all made air-vents,” Lezura said in Naasi.

“Yup,” said Heliri.

Joey silently took in the surroundings as well, and noticed that the yellow light source in the place came from many large, lavender colored vines that were strewn all over the place like arteries inside a great beast. They had giant strawberry-looking fruits with a base of a dozen or so bright green leaves, which were the source of the light.

“What kind of plants are those?” Joey said, “Can you eat them?”

When Lezura translated it for Heliri, she said, “Those are norinori vines. They’re filled with microscopic bacteria that cluster together to produce light to warm the plant, as well as attract animals that eat the fruit and spread the seeds. It is amazing what Zongat can do with nature. Yes, you can eat them, if you’re a largaph…”

“Freaking cool,” Joey said.

The plants and stalagmites lessened up ahead, and they saw some arrangement of stone megaliths and pillars with ornate carvings. In the center of it was a large opening like a gateless entrance, which would explain why three nycarmans on mynamathers were riding up to meet them.

Heliri stopped Dweep, patting him gently on the shoulder. The three men, who Lezura identified as Ixians, circled them slowly. Joey noticed their slanted eyes studying him, but didn't react until Lezura gave him the "okay".

They marched their animals in front of them. The one in the center, a black-haired man, said, "Thank Kinu for preserving your lives, and we welcome you back home, Lezura."

"It is my pleasure to be back," Lezura said.

The man turned to Joey and said; his translator translating, "Our three greetings will not be sufficient for the introduction of the Dielengann Path, third Rakai. We will take you to our leaders, who will greet you more formally."

"Okay," Joey said, pleased already that the people here would worship at his feet. Well, not so extreme; but he hoped they would stare at awe in his presence.

The men led Heliri, Joey and Lezura through the gate, where they stumbled into a community of homes carved out of brown, yellow and silver stone and/or wood. Some were even made out of clay and plant matter. Most were oval shaped huts supported on four thick legs, but some looked like a small house having more than one room.

Overhead thousands of norinori plants lit the place almost as if it were day. The air was an amazing mixture of rich, wet soil, plants like leaves were crushed and held directly to the face, and other scents similar to burning coal and cooked food.

The underground pipelines of the city above were broken apart by the destruction of the past wars and harvests, but were mended by the people living here to flow their water from the walls like streams and waterfalls from the ceiling of the cave.

The dark purple faces of nycarmans, the browns of the largaph and greens of a few rapturans slowly enclosed Joey and his companions as they were lead through the community, getting smiles and silent stares.

"Tough crowd...?" Joey said.

"These people are actually the ones who appointed the key to you, Joey," said Lezura with a cheeky smile, "basically they are like yours bosses—well co-workers. The leaders of the various religious groups that make up the Dielengann Path are your superiors."

"That's a blow to the bean-bags," Joey said, pouting, "I thought the Rakai was supposed to be all bad-ass, awesome, gets all the girls, and totally listen to no one?"

They slowed down were a small group of people approached them. The men got off their mynamathers and led them out of the way and stood to the sides. The crowd was closing in like starving crunchems to a piece of meat.

"Only Conner Wondonner ever got the title of the Sexiest Man Alive," Lezura said as she climbed down Dweep.

Heliri simply leaped off. Flivi perched on her shoulder with a happy chirp.

Lezura said, "He was soft spoken and easy to get along with. And Yefia Illowise was already a multi-billionaire who was ever arrogant, confident, and knew how to get what she wanted."

Climbing down Dweep, Joey said, "Conner Wondonder blah-blah-blah! Yefia Illowise blah-blah-blah! Look Lezura, I might not be some rich-bitch, or good looking like some movie star, but I know I have what it takes to be the Rakai. So everyone who doesn't like me can suck my d—"

Joey slipped and fell on his butt. He quickly got up, brushed down himself and reset the bag on his back. He walked up to Lezura and Heliri in the middle, and stood face to face with three robed nycarmans, a largaph woman and dracoid man in a Xemingi robe.

Joey noticed that all of them had translators. And said, "Sup guys? My name's Joey Sadowski..."

The nycarman woman in the center of the two men said, "My name is Murbella."

"My name is Telkit," said one of the nycarman men.

“And I am Dunit!” said the other man with a bright face and smile. He gave Joey a hug and rocked him side to side. “My! Though you are quite small, you have very hard muscles!”

Joey snarled. “Get off me...”

Dunit let go of Joey and scurried back to his spot, giving Murbella and Telkit a sideways grin.

Murbella slowly took her piercing gaze of Joey, and said in her semi alto-tenor voice, “It is with great honor, that we, they wyassies and leader of the Tyhuny people, humble greet you.”

They crossed their right hand across their left breast and bowed their head, the other Tyhunies followed as well.

“DUUUNIIIIIT!” said a voice from Lezura’s belt.

Dunit winced. He said, “Oh dear...”

Hanoi erupted from the Sheikon-box around so violently that it lurched Lezura backwards. Dunit was already into a sprint by the time the honoi formed Donnowarru.

“I have you now you little prick!” Donnowarru said, shooting a blast of honoi at Dunit’s heel.

Dunit yelp and leaped. “Donnowarru...dear friend,” Dunit said in a shaky voice as he ran out of the community, “let us talk this over...!”

“You put me in the blasted toilet!” Donnowarru said, sending another burst that nipped the flesh on Dunit’s shoulder.

The wyassy wailed all the way out of the sight with Donnowarru behind him. Even fifty yards away, they could still hear Dunit’s wails, Donnowarru’s shouts, and the explosions of honoi.

The whole community was silently staring at the exit, until Lezura got up and said, “You know, I am just realizing that I am surrounded by morons...”

The tall largaph woman, with her brownish-green skin of the Zemenchi people, (also characterized with slightly longer necks), said in a sharp voice, “I am the Sekku Jivel Brainberri, who leads the Felkremin people. It is our pleasure to meet you Rakai, as it is Nonshede’s...”

“And to her name be praises!” echoed the voices of the Felkremin around.

The Sekku was slender and graceful. She wore a long, red silky skirt with silver faces around the lower hems and curving patterns on the upper section, with a split in the middle that showed a glimpse of her green tights. Her upper garment had a wide collar which was a trademark of Felkremin designed clothes. The rest of it was red, with the short sleeves tight and large, oink frilly hems. The rest of it was adorned in silver and black spots, and a green sash was tied around her waist—an indicator of her higher rank as Sekku.

The dracoid walked over to Joey, lowered himself a few inches and placed in forehead on Joey’s. “Greetings in name of Zongat,” he said in a subtle voice, “my name is Bensaur. I am the Xemingi’s sub-Nemine for the people here.”

When he let go of Joey, the human said, “Wait, I thought only largaphs were Xemingi?”

Bensaur chuckled and said, “Not so, Rakai. The way of the Xemingi is open to anyone.”

“That’s right,” said Heliri, “Bensaur here completed the ritual journey to the Gebberdon Wastelands back on my homeworld. He had to survive on the harsh land Zongat provided for him for four whole months.”

Murbella cleared her throat loudly. She said, “Forgive us for being blunt, Rakai Joey Sadowski, but we called you here to update you further on your mission—which we assume you have accepted...?”

“Yeah,” Joey said. “But I need your help with medical supplies and weapons for a couple dozen people. We’re staying at an immigrant camp were some stupid racist group’s trying to kill us. I don’t wanna leave the people like that when I leave here.”

“We will provide you with the aid you need,” said Telkit, “but first we must brief you on the location of the God Titan.”

“It’s on the other side of the world,” said Joey. “Isn’t that what you told Lezura?”

“Yes,” said the Sekku, “but you must decide where you will travel from to reach there. You see, Rakai, if you were to view this continent from the perspective of a map, you will see that most of the Prestige Nations are to the west, while the orderran occupied territories are to the east. Without a doubt the Prestige Nations will try to stop if you venture into their territory...”

“But there is a chance that the orderrans might leave you alone,” Murbella said. “They do not wish to get involved in the affairs of our planet other than to gain what profit they can from their territories and trade with the Prestige Kingdom.”

“Wait,” said Joey, “I read that each planet has its own armada around it. Is that why no one can come here to help?”

“Correct,” said Bensaur, “the Prestige Kingdom has total control of the planetary ships entering their world, and permits only those of the orderrans and their lesser known allies that supply them with arms, usually smugglers. Members of the UPN have been trying to get through to this world, but along with the ships of their orderran allies around the planet, their defenses are quite strong.”

“But that can’t really stop, what—five other planets and their ships?” Joey said.

“Actually, Joey,” Lezura said, “It is a treaty the reason why they UPN forces cannot come to this world. Under the UPN treaty, it cannot intervene in the actions taking place on a world unless there are those who ask for their assistance.”

“What the hell?” Joey gaped at her. “And harvesting people and sending werewolf men to kill us doesn’t seem like we need help?”

“Rakai,” said Murbella, “understand that as far as the UPN knows, the conflict took place between two sides; the Planet Sangetsu and the Alliance of Orderran Nations. They did not know the Orderran Alliance was really attacking the weaker nations, while the more powerful ones retreated, and propagated a lie that they were coming to agreements with their enemies.”

“Shit...” Joey said with a pained expression, “So you mean the UPN people don’t really know what the hell’s going on here?”

“I’m afraid so,” said the Sekku, “which is why we cannot allow this to go on as it is, Rakai. We need the God Titan to break free.”

Joey rubbed his head in contemplation, still having thoughts that he wouldn’t have to be responsible for all of this if he had just stayed back on his homeworld. Yeah, and you wouldn’t have live to see the other day, or saw it through a window in a jail cell for the rest of your life! Man up already!

Joey dropped his hand and stared up into the faces of the aliens in front of him. He smirked and said, “You guys don’t need to worry your pretty little heads off. I’m not goanna mess-up like the other Rakai did.”

The corners of the Sekku’s mouth turned in a light smile. Murbella raised an eyebrow and smiled at him.

“Ooooooo...” Heliri said.

“Have you been acquainted with the key?” said Telkit.

“That Fopi dude, yeah,” Joey said. “But,” Joey patted his thigh nervously, “I can’t really...use the key that well...”

“Well you better learn,” Murbella said sharply, making Joey flinch, “time is not a luxury we have. You have to be able to fully harness the power of the key by the time you reach Maltatabi.”

“S-sure,” Joey said.

“Rakai!”

Everyone turned to the entrance to the community to see Dunit running back, but this time he didn’t have Donnowarru behind him hurling death. The wizard gracefully floated on his cloud in tail.

Dunit jogged down the split in the middle of the crowd.

“What is the matter, Dunit?” Telkit said.

“You have a visitor, Rakai,” Dunit said after catching his breath.

“Who is it?” Joey said.

“A woman named Hanim,” said Dunit.

Before anyone could ask Hanim came charging in on a greshku. She leaped off the animal before it even stopped and ran towards Joey. Two nycarmans went to stop the animal.

Her giant eyes told them all of the alarm she carried for them.

“The camp has been attacked!” she said.

“You are joking!” Lezura said, stepping forward.

“Are you being serious?” Joey said.

Hanim caught her breath and said, “Does it look like I came all the way here to say hello to everybody? The Hapchenan attacked the camp about fifteen minutes after you left.”

Lezura turned to Joey and said, “They were practically on her tails...” she turned to Hanim and said, “What of your children?”

“They are with my husband,” she said. Hanim looked at the many faces around her, finally laying her eyes on the ones closest to Joey, and said, “You...” she went closer “...can you help us? Please!”

Joey put a hand on her shoulder and said, “What about the security guys? Didn’t they do anything?”

Hanim said with disgust on her tongue, “Rakai, the attack came from the front gate. They managed to get in and kill seven people. How the hell would they do that if they weren’t let in?”

Appalled expressions popped up within the crowd.

The Sekku stepped forward and said to Hanim, “What do you require of us?”

“Are you really willing to interfere?” said Bensaur quizzically, “we could get ourselves exposed to the Prestige Kingdom!”

“It is much better than lying down here while people die in front of us,” said Murbella, stepping forward as well. “Besides, I am pretty sure I heard the Rakai ask of our assistance.”

“We’re gonna find where these guys are living and kill them, plain and simple,” said Joey.

Lezura whacked him in the head. “Do not be so stupid, Joey. You cannot simply walk into a community and just start killing.”

“Lezura has a point, Joey,” Heliri said, her voice steady and without the usual zest, “I do not believe in the crap that says war doesn’t solve anything. War solves a whole lot. But we have to make certain we don’t become the antagonists in this fiasco. So let’s try to be civil first. And if they refuse”—Heliri hefted her Sugarstick in her hands and grinned—“then we give them what they deserve!”

Heliri turned to Bensaur, “But I cannot go unless you order it so, Bensaur.”

Bensaur ran a claw across his neck thoughtfully. He had a duty to keep the last living Xemingi on the continent from Harm. Even though Zongat stated clearly the spilt blood of an enemy will nourish the land to bring forth new life, he was worried about how many of his own would die.

“Listen,” Bensaur said, “first, let us go to the camp and see the situation.”

“Well said,” said Dunit. “But just in case, I will get the weapons.”

“Crossbows and swords won’t be enough,” Joey said.

Dunit stopped with a few people, turned to Joey and laughed. He said, “Oh my dear Joey Sadowski! I am offended that you think so primitive and backwards of us. Have you ever seen a Plasmapumper?”

Back at the campsite, mounds of burning rubble and tents gently spewed streams of black smoke in the air. Personal belongings were strewn across the ground as a testament to their hurried pace to get themselves out of harm’s way.

Now everyone, the civilians, the dozen police from Suride Town and the nycarman security officers were gathered at the smoking remains of the gate that had been blasted to shreds. The soldiers, including a few nearby civilians native to the city, were on one side, while the immigrants argued their rights, lust for revenge and accusations against the nycarmans from inside the camp.

Between them, three Suride Town police officers waged a verbal war with the captain of the train security, who had been summoned by the ruckus to the camp.

One of the police officers, a yautgan, stared down at the captain and said, “They practically let them inside here!”

“Do you have any proof of this?” the captain asked, with a few suspicious and suspected military personnel who were stationed at the camp cuffed and standing behind him, secured by the captain’s own men. One of them had a swollen eye.

“Then how the hell else would they get to blast down the gates with the guards outside on duty?” the yautgan said. “Did they just happen to fall asleep at the very instant the Hapchenan came?”

The captain unfolded his arms and said with a finger pointed at the yautgan, “Look here, your people killed a few of the Hapchenan that attacked, that is fine with me,” he gestured behind him, “but you attacked members of the Ugatin security force in your bloodlust—now that is something we cannot overlook, regardless if you are all suffering people or not.”

“Sir,” said one of the soldiers that were stationed at the gate.

“What?” the captain said.

“These officers that we arrested were trying to flee from the scene, sir,” he said, “that was enough to make them appear guilty for us to arrest them.”

“And the beating...?” the captain inquired.

“Well...sir...” the officer said, “the refugees got to them before we did.”

“Look! Look!” someone in the camp shouted.

All heads turned inside the premises to see who it was. Those at the back couldn’t as yet, but the remarks of the people said it all.

The Rakai, his nycarman friend, and an entourage of people coming from the hole in the fence at the back everyone had now established as the back entrance.

Joey didn’t get a chance to go far before the people swarmed him with questions about his whereabouts and accusations.

Joey, Lezura and Heliri had come back along with some of the Dielengann Path, and with aliens towering around him his mind was pushing his body into a defensive mode.

His shirt was pulled and yanked by people who wanted to talk to him one on one, and Joey actually had to pry the hands off him.

“Would you people listen?” Joey said. “Just shut up and let me explain!”

A woman came up to his face and said, “Where the hell were you when this was happening?”

“I was—”

“You Rakai, no?” said a raizean dragging him by his arm. “You protect us, no?”

“I went to—”

“He knew the Hapchenan would come here and took off to save his skin!” said a yautgan. “This Rakai is a coward!”

Heliri whacked that yautgan across the head with her Sugarstick, sending him staggering back.

“Watch who you’re disrespecting, moron,” Heliri said. Seizing the opportunity, Heliri whacked a lazhinian woman and another.

Lezura pushed someone away from her and said, “Would you all just listen to us?” She grimaced from the headache from the noise around her.

Hanim tried getting the people back, as well as calling for her husband and child, but the larger people were just pinning her against Joey. The few members of the Dielengann Path that came with them were pushing the crowd back, sparking small brawls here and there.

“What the fuck’s wrong with you people?” Joey said.

“Coward!” said a largaph woman, stepping into Joey and pushing him back.

Lezura saw Joey stumble, and stepped up for him and push back the woman. “Pick on someone your own size!”

And Lezura got a punch in the face from the woman’s husband. Watching Lezura fall flat on her back Joey gritted his teeth and sprang off the ground, seething with rage. He punched the largaph in his crotch and let him crumple to the ground. Heliri had seen her friend fall, and whacked the woman in the neck dropped her.

Lezura wiped her bloody nose and crawled to her feet, only to be pushed back down by a Xemingi and a yautgan fighting.

In the massive brawl, Bensaur tried to break free from the hysteria, clawing at the air for help. “Shit! I knew I shouldn’t have come here!”

After watching the fight from a distance, the captain shook his head and unfolded his arms. He gestured to one of his men. The soldier turned up the frequency on the HSC and let it scream. The frequency affected everyone in camp except the soldiers who had on their headphones.

Satisfied with the wails of pain from the people the captain told the soldier to turn off the weapon. When he did, the captain marched through the crowd still recovering from the auditory assault. He pushed those too slow to move out of his way and found Lezura, Joey and Heliri.

Lezura was checiking her waist to see if anything got stolen. Joey was gingerly touching a lump on his head, and Heliri was waving her Sugarstick threateningly at a group of people.

Bensaur burst his way through a rank of Xemingi behind the three companions and stood next to Lezura. He panted a full minute while the captain projected his voice to the crowd and spoke.

“So...you are telling me that just one little attack on you people and you have all turned into mindless idiots attacking each other. Instead of falling back to reorganize you have all resorted to running around without your heads and bumping into each other, huh?”

The captain’s word hung over the camp like a residual echo. When no one answered, as how the captain liked it, he approached Joey and looked at him log and hard.

Fingering his translator back in his ear, Joey looked at the captain from head to toe and said, “Don’t look at me! I didn’t have anything to do with this!” Joey looked around at people, some of who couldn’t meet his eyes and raised his voice to its grating tone, “I didn’t have a thing to do with any of this shit!”

It was then that Bensaur stepped forward, put a hand on Joey’s shoulder and whispered to him, saying, “Lad, you are going about it the wrong way.”

Joey spun to him. “Then what’s the right way then?”

“Part of being a leader is not blaming your subordinates for the fault, but trying to correct it,” said Bensaur. “Right now, you’re just acting like a little child throwing a tantrum. That’s not the kind of Rakai we want.”

Joey screwed up his face like he was going to respond to Bensaur. But his muscles relaxed and he stopped frowning. He took a deep breath and came to a decision.

“Lezura,” Joey said, “can you translate for me?”

“If I took a punch in the face for you, I can definitely translate for you, Joey,” Lezura said.

With Lezura at his side, and after a reassuring hold of each other’s hands, Joey projected his voice and said, “I’m goanna try and forget that fact that you all attacked my friends and the people I brought here to help you; because I have a duty to save all you people. That’s my job.” Joey gestured to Bensaur. “This guy’s a part of the Dielengann Path, and I brought him here so he could decide how he could help us stop the Hapchenan. That’s why I wasn’t here.” He allowed Lezura to translate that for the crowd before continuing, “And if I didn’t try to do my job as the Rakai with that,” Joey raised his hands in a gesture of surrender, “then please, by all means gun me down right now. Because then I don’t how to help you guys and can’t do shit for you.”

Joey dropped his hands and watched a mixture of emotions play on the faces around him. He said, "I'm sorry that those people had to die. But come on! Since when do we get scared of a few stupid little assholes who can't stand anyone that's not purple? Aren't we the same people that stopped orderrans trying to take over our city?" A few persons realized that fact, and were nodding to themselves and murmuring to their friends. "That's right," Joey continued. He gestured to Lezura, "And if we can stand brace-face here talking to us with her meat-grinders, then we can stand up to anything!"

Lezura was stopped in the middle of her speech by the abruptly laughter around her. She only picked up on what she had just said seconds later, and turned to Joey and whacked him across the head with her fist.

Heliri dropped on her back, laughing uncontrollable with a sound like; "Reeheehee-snort-reeheehee-snort-snort-reeheehee..."

Joey gave Lezura a wink and smiled at her. She realized he didn't just disrespect her, but used it to lighten the mood in the crowd and make the people more susceptible to his words.

Impressive, Lezura thought.

Lezura raised her hand for silence, and once she got it Joey said, "The point is you guys don't need some stupid guy like me coming here to save you. You guys can do that on your own."

"But not all of us have a giant robot at our disposal?" said a nearby yautgan, "or their own fanclub of religious followers."

Bensaur said aloud, "Technically, we're his employers, not his followers..."

"Shuddup!" Joey said, and said to the crowd, "Yeah, that's true. I guess you guys do need my help somewhat. And if you are all really goanna follow me, then the first order of business is to get some guns, find where those bastards live, and spray-paint bullets on their asses!"

Heliri was the first to throw her staff in the air and say, "Hat'taa!"

The crowd second that what approving roars.

"Hell no!" the captain said, squeezing off a few shots in the air to silence everyone.

Heliri lowered her staff, and murmured to herself, "Aww man..."

Joey turned to the captain and said like a child crying after being denied chocolate, "Why not?"

The captain holstered his weapon and said, "As a soldier of this country, I am obligated to protect its citizens from foreign threats, even if they are no good thrash, most of my men will not be willing to attack those people unless it is in self-defense of the camp."

"Bull!" Heliri said.

"Shit!" Joey said. "What the hell kind of logic is that? Not even Mr. Spock is that messed up!"

Hanim stepped forward and said, "If you think we're just going to sit here and let them attack us again, you must be out of your wits! I'm not goanna give them the chance to get my children the next time!"

"Tripitaaaaa!" roared Tololon in the old raizean war cry.

"All right!" the captain said. "Fine," he sighed, "we will permit you a meeting with the Hapchenan."

"Finally you are doing your job," Lezura said. She stepped closer to the captain, staring him in his slanted pink eyes. "Now tell us what you know about the Hapchenan."

The captain tensed. "What are you talking about?"

"Do not play dumb with me," Lezura said in a low voice, "Of course you must be familiar with prominent group such as the Hapchenan."

The captain tried to stare down Lezura, but Lezura's intense eyes repelled any energy of superiority the captain thought he had. Finally conceding, the captain said, "Fine, I shall tell you what I know."

Lezura turned and said, "Bensaur, Joey, Heliri..."

The three of them came to join in the conversation. The captain figured that he could distance himself and his soldiers from the future incident he knew would happen later.



If he got himself involved on the side of immigrants, he would lose the support of the people in the city, making not just the Hapchenan, but all of them his enemies. If he stayed out of it though, and if the Rakai's side won or not, the people would be clamoring for his help, making him still valuable to them without actually helping them fight the Rakai.

He said, "The leader of the Hapchenan is General Stralin."

"General?" Lezura said, "Oh, so he does have some past or present affiliation with the military."

"He was active during the Third Great War," the captain said. "When we lost that war, General Stralin went into seclusion. I do not know the full story of how he became leader of the Hapchenan, but he is."

"Where does he reside now?" Bensaur said.

"In Ussia Town," said the captain. "But do not think you can just go over there and stomp them at will like that. Stralin has weapons of equal power to the ones we have; that means heavy assault lanceguns, plasma and incendiary rounds, explosives and even a few mechsuits. They might even have some foreign weapons, from off world. What kind of weapons do you have?"

Bensaur said, "Nothing that fancy; lanceguns, Sputties, Malcers, and a few plasma rounds."

"It is better than nothing," Lezura said, glad that Bensaur didn't mention the Plasmapumpers in case the captain was actually a traitor going to leak the information to the enemy.

"I guess," the captain said. He looked to Joey, and put a gentle hand on his shoulder. "I hope you know what you are doing, boy."

"I don't, really," Joey said, "but I'm not smart enough to think it over either..."

They spent the rest of evening burying the dead in the small forest at the back entrance. Some of the abandoned buildings were already being cleaned out to be made into the new homes.

With no electricity, the people had to work by the light of lamps and torches.

Lezura, Joey and Heliri, however, went back to the hideout of the Diehengann Path with Bensaur. There, they were led to the end of the community in a large warehouse made of wood and stones. Inside were crates and shelves where the weapons were kept. Light from the norinori vines, a native species of Veheculon, provided illumination to straining eyes.

The four of them didn't need much help organizing the weapons, as Lezura and Bensaur were quite able to handle it.

"Where're the Plasmapumpers you guys were talking about?" Joey said, observing a shelf with a lancegun flecked with bits of discoloration.

"Here," said Bensaur, flipping the lock off one of the battered cases.

The three young ones came to have a look. The image of the weapon seemed to envelop Joey's eyes completely.

"Ooooo," Heliri said, poking the stocky white gun with a finger, "shiny..."

Lezura studied it closely under her goggles. It was shaped like a melon with the sides flattened slightly with an ejection port on the right side, a hollow at the base to insert the clip just in front of the black trigger-guard, and a large hammer that took up almost the entire top of the weapon.

Below the gun in the mold-frame that held it were two, black clips in eighteen segments as the number of rounds it held.

"How did you come by such a unique weapon?" Lezura said.

"The Tyhunies came across a well-rated smuggler," said Bensaur, "it took a lot of persuading to get the dodgy fellow to sell it to them at a reasonable price."

Lezura and slowly looked Bensaur, who smiled back at her.

"Al?" she said.

Bensaur nodded. "Al."

Joey lowered his head over it and sniffed the gun. It smelt like whomever had it kept it in mind condition, as the smell of synthetics was fresh.

“Can I try it out?” Joey said.

Heliri and Bensaur gave Joey and a quizzical look, then look at Lezura for an answer.

“Go ahead,” she said. “Just make sure that Joey does not point it at one anyone or anything valuable.”

“I’m not stupid, Lezura,” Joey said.

Bensaur took the gun out of the case with both hands. He held it by the trigger-guard, and inserted a clip into the empty slot.

“Make sure you hear a click when you put in the clip, in any weapon,” Bensaur said, tapping in the clip the rest of the way with a click sound. “That means it is in properly.”

Joey nodded eagerly, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

Bensaur rest lifted the weapon and put it against his shoulder as he aimed it around. “And if you are planning on taking accurate shots, always look a long the sights.” He lowered the gun and examined it. “Too bad we couldn’t get some scopes with it.”

“Never mind give it here!” Joey said.

“Don’t press the trigger accidentally now,” Bensaur said as he dropped the weapon in Joey’s hands.

“Yeah, yeah,” Joey said. He hefted the cool weapon in his hands. It weight about seven pounds.

There as a horizontal grip between the clip and the trigger-guard with a smooth surface that Joey almost caressed.

He was eager to fire the thing but knew better than to do it in a close room with people and weapons. Who cares!

Joey aimed at a rock on the ground, looking along the iron sights at the end of the top.

Lezura and Heliri quickly backed against the wall.

“Joey wait—”

Bensaur was cut off with a thumping hum from the gun and a blast of green blob. The blast thud into the ground and sent smoking green light and debris flying from a meter wide crater.

The steaming spent shell drop with a cling on the ground, smoke bellowing from the empty husk.

Joey lowered the gun and knelt to inspect the damage. The crater was melted into the rocky ground. Steaming liquid quickly evaporated with a nauseous, oily, bitter smell that made Joey step away. When it fully dried a scorched crater was left.

“Now this is the kind of alien shit I’ve been waiting a see!” Joey said.

Lezura took the gun from Joey and said, “You have had your fun, now let us get things organized.” She clicked the safety on the weapon on and said to Bensaur, “Otherwise from these weapons, how many weapons do we have?”

“Seventy two,” said Bensaur. “If we are going to divide them, half will have to go with the camp and the rest with us.”

“How many plasma weapons do you have?” said Joey. “I want my own.”

“We only have eleven,” said Bensaur. “And again, it will have to be divided into half. But I guess the one extra can belong to you, Joey.”

Joey bit down on his lip and rammed a fist in the air. “Score!” he yanked the weapon Lezura’s grasp. “Gimme this!”

Lezura cut her eyes from Joey, who had Heliri at his side studying the weapon with drooling faces.

“What of armor,” Lezura said.

“We have plenty of acril-iorn armor,” Bensaur said, “In terms of grenades we have in shrapnel and incendiary types.”

Lezura was familiar with acril-iorn armor; titanium plates of armor equipped with veins acrilium to reduce the weight on the user’s body. It could stop all metallic rounds from hand-held firearms. But its downfall was its weakness to plasma that ate through the armor like a hot knife through butter.

The metallic base along with the acrilium veins made the armor an excellent conductor of electricity, so much that only a handful of electric rounds could cause the armor to become a deadly cocoon of lightning that cooked the wearing like a piece of meat.

“You wanna hold it, Heliri?” Joey said.

“Sure,” said Heliri. After she knelt down, took up some dirt and dashed it on the gun she took it from Joey.

“So when do you want to distribute them?” said Bensaur.

“Tonight, if possible,” said Lezura. “I want to leave early tomorrow to go to Ussia Town.”

“All of the Dielengann leaders and few of their people will be coming with you for protection,” Bensaur said.

“That is fine,” said Lezura. “Oh, I just remembered. Heliri...?”

Heliri stopped doing her quick aiming and turned to Lezura. “Yeah?” she said.

Lezura pulled two acrilium batteries out of her utility belt and handed them to Heliri. Heliri gave the gun back to Joey and took the batteries graciously. She inspected them and said, “Thank you so much, Lezura.” she kissed her on the cheek. “I have wanted these things for my Sugarstick for weeks now!”

Heliri took the staff off her back, went over to a table and laid it there. As Joey snuck a peak at what she was doing Heliri twisted above the upper most bulges of the stick and two wings popped out. She put the batteries inside some spaces with the click of a tight fit.

She took it off the table, gripped the center of the staff where some holes were, and channeled her honoi inside it. She twisted the top of the staff again and the wings stuck out. She set the staff horizontally and let go of it. It floated four feet off the ground.

“Yes!” Heliri said. She sat on the staff, putting her hand on another set of holes near the spear shaped head of the staff. When it looked like her weight would bring the staff to touch the floor Heliri adjusted her honoi flow and raised the staff higher again.

Heliri turned to Flivi on her shoulder, and said, “Hey, let’s have a race!”

Flivi uttered a string of melodic chirps, took off her shoulder and circled in the air. Heliri set herself on the staff like she was lying down, her head facing the tip and her feet wrapped around the other end just behind the bulb.

Joey looked puzzled. “What are you—?”

“Ready...” Heliri said, channeling honoi into the staff. “...set...” the tail of the staff lit up in a lustrous yellow glow, so did Flivi’s tail.

Lezura pulled back Joey. “Just watch...”

“Go!”

A jet of flame burst from the tip of Heliri and Flivi’s bulbs like an explosion and sent both of them rocketing out the door. Joey hurried to the door and stared outside. But he only managed to see the yellow trail of light fade out the exit of the community, and Heliri’s maniacal laughter growing dimmer.

“Damn!” Joey said, “Where the hell do all these broads come from?”

Joey and his companions managed to get a bath from one of the makeshift streams running from a broken pipe in an enclosure of wooden walls before they went off back to the camp. The wyassies, the Sekku and Bensaur the Nemine accompanied them with thirty members each of their own sect.

Joey still couldn’t figure out how hundreds of people could be living underground for so long, and even raising animals. It brought back memories of those fairytales stories his mother used to read to him about little creatures living in the nearby woods.

With the group leaders and Joey, Lezura and Heliri at the front they managed to head back to the camp before midnight.

The military officers, now under the leadership of the captain, had set up massive searchlights around the perimeters of the camp, keeping the inside dark to offer the immigrants their privacy. So they were all seen coming through the back entrance, and such were greeted halfway by eager people.

The Dielengann Path offered the animals and took the weapons off. The weapons were distributed in order of trust, seeing as how everyone here had combat experience. First it was by Lezura and Joey, then by Hanim and Tololon, then by Tololon's strongest inn workers, and by Hanim's husband and his friends. Half the weapon's distribution stopped there, and continued with the police of Suride Town handing out the rest to those they chose.

There were also some other smuggled weapons from Suride Town within the camp, so the number of weapons was well over eighty.

But the work that night didn't stop there, the camp was alive with nightmarish groans and flashes of blue light as new honoi users were born. Unfortunately only about thirty percent of those awoken could effectively use honoi on their own. Joey wanted to activate the honoi of a few people himself, but was denied by everyone.

"Screw you guys!"

They manage to get a few hours of sleep before the first hues of sunlight crept over the top of the massacred buildings.

Half the camp, armed and ready, set out with the Dielengann Path. They took through the front entrance and right through the city in a huge, brisk trot. The animals, unlike ordinary steeds on Earth, were large enough to accompany up to three people, so there was virtually no one foot.

All the way to through the city they caused the natives to stop and stare at them in disbelief. Normally such a massive gathering of aliens would have been cursed, stoned and chase out of the city.

But they were not expecting such a huge amount trampling the streets of the city, not to mention the look of organization and the many armed individuals within them. It would seem quite stupid to provoke them, and if any bystander did try to piss them off, he could expect himself alone to face the wrath of the aliens.

The previous night Lezura had opted to scout out the location of the community as a little faery with tinkling wings fluttering over the city, hardly recognizable unless you were hunting large insects or birds.

She described it as, "It is surrounded by thin woods, with small domed houses in a rather vegetated place. Though it seemed rather organized too, as I found there were armed people on patrol outside anticipating an attack."

Murbella, who Lezura was reporting to, smiled tightly. "So we have them up on their toes...? What of their vehicles?"

Lezura said, "They have hangers and warehouse where their weapons and vehicles are stored. They have three Vicekens up and running, but a few more without power in a hanger."

"How many troops do they have?" Murbella said.

"Up to two hundred," Lezura said, "Basically, our combined forces out number them, but they have superior weapons."

"It matters not," said Murbella, "we will put up a fight to the very end if they deny a peaceful solution."

Murbella noticed a troubled look on Lezura's face. "Is something the matter?"

Lezura realized she had flattered in her appearance enough for Murbella to notice. She could not deny it from Murbella so Lezura lied, saying, "I am just worried, that is all..."

Murbella caressed her cheek. "There is no need to worry, my dear child. We will protect you and the others. Please go and get some rest. You look even older than I am."

But Lezura could hardly rest. She kept on lulling off from behind Joey, who wrapped his arms around Heliri's flat, hard stomach.

At one point Joey allowed Lezura to rest her head on his shoulder and take a nap. It was the very least he could do for the woman who got punched in the face defending him.

The sun had risen to its pinnacle at 8: am by the time they reached the town. With a light jerk from Joey Lezura woke up. Her mind was still sharp, and Lezura quickly came around and said in Naasi to those beside her, "Keep on your toes!"

But Dunit was snoring away, seated straight up on the back of his mynamather with his head arched right in the air. In front of him Murbella's face grimaced uncomfortably each time Dunit exhaled. In front of her Telkit was hunched over, sticking his head out as he felt a little claustrophobic.

The Sekku and Nemine were on their right on a greshku.

Dunit gargled saliva in his throat that made Murbella and Telkit flinch. Murbella thrust her elbow in Dunit's rib. The man's eyes flew open and he coughed, lurching forward and spat all over Telkit. Telkit uttered a shrill cry and shuddered.

"Dunit! Murbella!" he said.

"Shut up and keep your eyes on the road," Murbella said. She grunted like an angry bull. "I swear; you two are the worst."

"We are not as bad as Blinchi," Dunit said, rubbing his rib and wiping his eye. "Besides, we are all friends here. Like me and Donnowarru!"

They could see the rows of arrow, gopto and lucaysha trees coming up. Without as much as a whisper the geckoids slipped off the animals and ran into the nearby bushes. Nothing was ever asked about them as they went through the grassy road near the gates of the community.

And up along the smooth, burgundy crossbeam above the gates, they saw two watch towers with the figures of nycarmans in them.

There was the wide belief held that the snipers would be picking them off already, but whether they had orders not to kill anyone, or were waiting on them to get closer, for some reason they didn't shoot.

They moved passed grim-faced nycarmans along the streetside; some sitting around tables drinking and gambling, or checking on weapons that somehow were handled like they were unfamiliar stolen goods. But everyone stopped to look at them.

And Joey saw the most horrid sight he had ever seen since he was born. Well the second, actually.

Hanging from the crossbeam above the gates were what looked like, or at least used to be, bodies of various people. Each seemed to have been skinned, and according to the color of the exposed, sundried and maggot infest corpses, were of different species.

One corpse, missing a right foot, had a protruding snout, the large and red flesh of a dracoid. Another with some carnivorous bird feed from the intestines had reddish-purple flesh, but the flat face indicated it was a yautgan. Another corpse had dark-blue, tattered flesh, a largaph of course, but the broad hips told it was a female. The breasts were cut off.

"My goodness..." Heliri said, tears rolling from her eyes "...may Zongat guide their souls to eternal paradise." She covered her mouth to hide her gape.

"What the hell's this?" Joey said, his voice bubbling with rage. He looked around the nycarmans, his breath quickening and getting louder. Honoi was pumping in his hand even though he was reaching for the gun on his waist. He turned to the wyassies and said, "Hey, I'm not negotiating shit?"

"Stay calm, Joey Sadowski," said Murbella in a slow, cautious voice as she prepared herself, "Let us not get too hasty with this." She looked across at Lezura, who held her hers down on Joey's head. So this is what had her upset that night?

"Are you blind?" Joey said. He gestured to the corpses atop the gate. "Does that look like these're people that want to negotiate?"

"Quiet!" the Sekku Jivel Brainberri said. "This is not the time to lose focus, Rakai!"

"Joey," said Lezura's gentle voice in his ear like the whisper from an angel, "just listen to them, for now. Do it for me..."

The guards, all four of them armed, waltz up to them. One said, "What do you people want?" People in Joey's group at the front and back got off the animals to give ground support, forming a line in front of the guards.

While the leaders spoke, the others brandished their weapons in case things got out of hand. Lezura held Heliri's hand and was patting her head on her shoulder. Joey paced about nervously with the Plasmapumper in his hands.

It was Murbella that said, "We wish to speak with your leader regarding an attack on the refugee camp last night."

Smiles and grins were the immediate reply. Then the black-haired nycarman said again, "Why the hell are you, my fellow people, associating yourselves with filth like that." He lifted the rifle higher and said, "You know, we kill for such foolishness."

"And I'll put a hole in your head!" Joey said, stepping forward.

Lezura reached for Joey and slapped him across his face.

"What?" Joey said.

"Stop it," Lezura said.

"Zongat demands their blood to nourish the land!" Heliri said, sparking some approving hoots from fellow Xemingi.

"Hey!" Bensaur said, pointing at her, "you don't bother with it either. You children keep quiet!"

"The General is coming!" shouted a man from one of the watch towers.

Instantly the guards went back to their posts and the nycarmans at the side formed a narrow line. On the other side of the gates they heard the heavy thud and clang of the locks moving and saw them twisting away on outside.

They pulled inward into the community, and out walked two men close together; one a tall, lean nycarman in a military uniform, and another smaller, black-haired nycarman in a bright yellow and orange sweat-jacket with a red undershirt and tight green jeans. Beside them were four soldiers, one of whom was wearing a tight uniform that looked like it was stolen and not his size. All of them were armed with Heavy Assault lanceguns.

"That's him?" Joey whispered to Lezura, gesturing his chin to the man in the uniform.

"Yes," Lezura said, "That is g  
General Stralin."

General Hrisbatob Stralin was six-foot eight. On his barreled chest were numerous badges he had been decorated with during his performances in the past wars. His uniform was clean and neat, his boots shiny like they were just made. He was a nycarman of true Uola blood, for his lips were thin and straight like his nose. Heavy browed eyes swept across like a flying knife at the aliens in front of him.

All the nycarmans, though dressed like rags and refugees, stood at attention and saluted the general.

Joey decided he would salute the general too; with his middle finger.

General Stralin stopped just in front of Murbella, who he somehow sensed was in command.

"Why have you brought these wretched creatures here to domain to disrupt our peace?" Stralin said a gruff voice.

"Because you have disrupted our peace," said Murbella.

Stralin worked his jaw a little. "How so...?" he said.

Murbella said, "You have attacked a refugee camp where the Rakai was staying; hence you attacked his home. He came to use for assistance in coming to a mutual agreement for you to compensate him and leave the refugees alone."

Stralin chuckled and shook his head. "Foolish woman," said Stralin, his tone went stone cold, "the Hapchenan does not negotiate with shit like you!" his little boyfriends, as Joey had labelled them, approved of Stralin's statement with nods and murmurs. Stralin said, "They are the ones who attacked

first. Invading our planet and taking over our nations.” He stared sideways at Bensaur and Jivel, “Our planet is being overrun by alien filth that wants to take it all for themselves.” He shifted to Murbella, “and you, you fool, are aiding them in their plans to eradicate us from the face of our own damn world. You are the enemy of the Hapchenan as well as they are! And so is this Rakai!”

Joey abruptly stepped forward so suddenly that the men around Stralin aimed at him. Joey produced the compass from under his acrylic armor and showed it to Stralin, but the man didn’t flinch in his stance. “Thanks for calling up my name, bitch!” Joey said, even though Stralin didn’t have a translator, “Now I have a reason to tell you about your little slut momma!”

Lezura and Heliri came up to Joey’s side, so did Telkit and the Sekku.

Stralin contemplated communicating with these aliens, if it was really worth it to lower himself to such a level, or just kill them. He chose the former and put a translator in his ear.

“You, so-called Rakai, what use do you serve on this planet?” said Stralin. “You and the rest of your kind should take the wise choice and leave this world and go back to yours, save yourself the trouble of a humiliating death...”

“I’m just gonna tell you one thing,” Joey said, “you need to put whatever’s bugging you aside and wake up and realize that our real enemy is the Prestige Kingdom. They’re the ones that let this shit happen to your planet in the first place. Every alien on this planet should come together and stop them.”

Stralin’s right hand man, Oleon, who was silent with his arms folded up until now, said, “We barely have enough resources for ourselves. There is no way we can share it with the immigrants. That is why we want them out of our country, at least.”

Oleon got agreeing hoots from his subordinates.

Stralin said, “These damn aliens came to our planet; stole our resources, technology, jobs”—inwardly Joey laughed at that—“and left our people to suffer and die. The same fate should befall of them.”

“Hey, Moron,” said the Sekku, “the second Rakai was from another species, yet he still fought to protect you people from the orderrans!”

“And died,” Stralin added humorously, “Obviously he could not keep up with the first Rakai, and she was even a woman!”

Lezura and Jivel slowly recoiled in shock. Now the man had just added to the list of things that made them want to snap his neck. He had the same mindset as Donnowarru, only a whole lot worse!

Joey pointed in Stralin’s face and said, “You and me aren’t gonna part ways until I mess you up...”

“Are you threatening me, boy...?” Stralin said in a low snarl.

Telkit pushed back Joey and stepped forward, saying, “It seems to me that the problem everyone is having is fuel. That can be solved. We have the Rakai and the key; which can provide you with the energy you need.”

“I can?” said Joey.

Now interested, Oleon said, “Fuel is not our only problem...but it is a start. If everyone is provided with fuel, then we just might allow the aliens to stay here, for a while.”

Oleon got surprised looks even from Stralin himself.

Sekku and Bensaur realized that Oleon seemed more reasonable. The Sekku said, “Is it possible for us to have a look at the machinery you use for energy supply and determine how to make it work?”

Oleon looked at Stralin for an answer. Surprisingly he didn’t even ask a question, but Stralin was thinking about it nonetheless.

Finally, with a pissed-off look and a low grunt, Stralin decided to work with the program, for now. “All right,” he said, “but only the Rakai and his Chevalier can enter.”

“No deal,” said the Sekku immediately.

“That’s fine,” Joey said to her, then stared at Stralin, “if anything happens to use, you can all just go berserk and tear this piece a shit down to the ground.”

“I second that!” said Heliri.

“As do I,” said Dunit with a glint of honoi in his eye.

Smooth streets of pink and grey cobblestone led through the community. Some buildings, as Lezura pointed out, were small factories with chimneys piping out smoke and waste from ethanol production.

Wheeled trucks carried huge mechanical parts to some of the warehouses, and armed men and a few women were strolling by to their businesses, offering Joey and Lezura a few seconds of contemptuous glaring.

“Look at these people,” Joey said, “all of them have a roof over their heads, cars and trucks and some kind of power for their houses—and yet their complaining about the immigrants who don’t even have a damn house, stealing their planet. They’re practically killing these people for nothing! They’re like a bunch of rich kids who’re trying to find an excuse to give trouble and get away with it!”

Lezura had never thought of it like that before, and was equally shocked that it was Joey who had made her realize that.

He is just full of surprises! Lezura thought.

Around them their escort kept silent, only guiding them to a large hanger with multiple wires stemming from a cone in the top and into the roves of other warehouses. Leading them was Oleon, with Stralin a few meters up ahead.

Oleon stopped them to allow a truck to pass, and once it did, Joey was presented with the awesome sight of his first real-life mechsuit.

The torso was black and plated at the sides with an oval section on the front that was the door for the cockpit. The pelvis was silver and black colored, wide, and with two muscular, long legs attached to it. The legs were black and white at the joints, back and toes. The machine walked on the three toes of its feet with the large, wiry tendons and pistons visibly beneath the end of the armor of the calves and heels. The overall design was for speed and jumping ability. The head of the machine was grey with some blue coloring at the back and short neck. It looked like a bug’s head with a single large camera with a blue light in it. The arms were long, stemming from heavy padded shoulders. The larger forearms had long barreled guns attached to them, and fed with ammunition with a metal crate on the back of the upper arm.

With each step the metal clanked on the pavement and Joey and Lezura heard the faint stretch and screech of wires. The mechsuit, a Viceken class by its design and height of 5 meters, moved amongst the people with a fluidity of an actual person. If Joey hadn’t read up on the mechsuit, he would have thought it an actual robot and not someone piloting the machine inside.

Walking past it Joey gazed up at it with lustful eyes. The bug-like head stared at them briefly with its large eye, the lens zooming in with a contracting ring of metal around the light to study Joey’s face. It looked ahead and continued on.

“I’ve gotta get me one of those,” Joey said to Lezura.

Lezura scoffed. “Why do men love machinery so much?” she said.

“It’s every boy’s dream to have a robot suit!” said Joey, “That and being the Pokémon League Champion with Charizard.”

The inside of the hanger had red wooden walls with a nice sheen in the lights above. Four large windows, one on each side, allowed light into the huge room, but it wasn’t enough to illuminate the massive thing that sat in the center of the room on the metallic tiles.

“What the hell’s that?” Joey said, pointing at the monstrous assortment of metal in the center.

“That is our generator,” said Oleon crisply, breaking off from the others to join Stralin’s side near the machine.



In Joey's eyes, the generator looked like a grey, miniature school bus with dark blue glass cylinders in its center, the front, some buttons and levers on one side and black screens next to them. There were visible meter bars, but all were on what Joey thought was zero, and from the top of the machine ran a hellish cluster of large wires and tubes through the ceiling.

Stralin said, "Go on. See what you can do..."

Joey followed Lezura as she slowly paced around the machine, studying it with her intent pink eyes. "Where is the fuel port?" she said.

"Here," said Oleon, motioning them to where he was standing.

Lezura went and inspected it. The port was only able to be fitted with a siphon that pumped the fuel in. About three inches in diameter, too.

"I don't get it," said Joey, "shouldn't a generator be making its own power...?"

Lezura said, "That is not how it works, really. A generator is a source of stored power that can be used the currently available power runs out." Lezura looked a few inches to her right at the power gauge in white with colored markings. She turned to Stralin and said, "How does it work?"

Stralin offered her a blank face; which Lezura took as either he was trying to insult her or was stupid and didn't know anything.

"Oleon, would you care to explain that to these people?" Stralin said.

Oleon said plainly in his toneless voice, "It has workings based on percentage. Obviously it is on empty now, but one it reaches one hundred percent, it can be self-sufficient for up to fifteen years."

An intrigued smile spread Lezura's full lips. "Are you sure it will be able to last that long?" she said, prompting him for further explanation.

Without hesitation, Oleon said, "With the addition of solar panel to produce solar energy, or some other natural-based energy, but in this case solar is the most easily accessible, we can dilute the use of the amount of energy used from the generator; even if we decide to through a massive fuel party every day."

Oleon and Lezura looked both comfortable in their seats discussing this, but Stralin wasn't interested in any of the fancy talk of two grad-students from the University of Sciences.

"Enough of the chatting," he said dryly. He turned to Joey, "you, alien, can you power it up?"

"Of course I can," Joey said, then thought: How the hell is this gonna work?

First off, Joey took out the compass and sent a charge of honoi into it, prompting it to project the hologram of Fopi.

"Ahh!" Fopi said happily, "It has been a long time since I saw you, Joey my boy. How have things been?"

"The usually fighting evil and saving the world stuff," Joey said. "As a matter of fact, that's what I want to talk to you about now."

Joey explained the situation to Fopi about the refugees and the Hapchenan, all the way down to them being in the warehouse right now and trying to power up the generator.

After listening with a look of tragic realization on his face, Fopi said, "But the thing is, Joey, the power of the output of the key is dependent on the strength of the user's honoi. If you are not strong enough, the key will only put out a minimum amount of energy."

"I don't need to hear that!" Joey said, "What I need to know is how I get it to work?"

"Same as you are doing now," said Fopi. "Channel your honoi, and what you desire, into the key. I will try to produce as much as the output I can in turn with the strength of your honoi."

"Got it," said Joey, "get ready..."

"Certainly," said Fopi, and the hologram disappeared.

Joey found the little button at the base of the compass and pushed it. Half the length of the key popped out of the top like an army knife. Everyone stepped back but Stralin, who wanted to learn of the strength of the Rakai.

Joey put the key into the fuel port and sent his honoi into it. In response the key sparked, lighting the hollow with green light. It sparked once more, and nothing happened. Joey tensed his entire body until it hurt and pushed honoi into the key.

Finally the green sparks exploded in a steady beam of energy that poured into the port. Joey could feel his strength leaving with it as well.

The generator made all kinds of sounds like a mechanical zoo until it finally went from a whinnying into a steady hum, like a giant purring feline. The cylinders on the front began to fill up with blue light in an almost liquid state. The fuel gauge raised a green bar to the number of percentages.

Joey pushed until the pain made him close his eyes and clench his teeth. Finally the staggering blow of honoi fatigue set in, slapping his vision into blackness momentarily and knocking him down. Luckily Lezura was there to catch him half way.

Man, Lezura, you're the best!

"Are you feeling all right, Joey?" Lezura said, checking beneath his eyelids.

"...Did...I do it...?" Joey said painfully.

Oleon and Stralin checked the meter. Stralin took the liberty of announcing the results?

"Twenty percent?" he said in disgust. He turned to Joey with his wrinkled face even more sliced up with his scowl. "This can only last a few weeks!" he stepped away from Joey and Lezura and went to the door, speaking like he deliberately wanted the whole community to hear. "As I thought: these aliens are too weak to use the key!" And sure enough some of his dead-brained followers slid into the doorway, mirroring Stralin's outrage. "They are of no use to our planet, they should be rid of!"

Oleon said, "General, please wait!" his voice had some alarm, Lezura noted, assuming that he really wanted the generator to work rather than to kill someone. "The Rakai can still help us," he gestured to the generator, "he got us twenty percent in just one go, If he does it four more times we will have a full generator!"

Stralin folded his arms behind him and said, "Does it look like I plan on having these aliens over here every single day?"

"Then give us five days," said Lezura indignantly, "all we need is four days for Joey to become better apt at his honoi. I guarantee you that he will be able to fill the generator to the brim by then."

"She is right, General," Oleon said. "Just think about it—no one has to die."

No one has to die? Stralin thought in a mock voice. He didn't still hold his title as general to make peace—he was a military man. But now he had to consider the possible outcome. And he slowly hatched a plan.

Stralin said, "Very well." He raised five fingers, "Five days is all you have. If by then you arrive and cannot fill the generator, then I will have no choice but to act accordingly."

Lezura kept a tight lip. She looked down at Joey's slumbering expression. I hope you can do this?

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The same day Joey head back to the camp with his escort. After explaining the situation to the camp, they breathed a sigh of relief that a peaceful resolution could be found, though they still had contingencies in place in case the other side decided to break the contract.

Immediately that day Joey rested up in his home in the camp, was prepared a big meal by Tololon, and began his honoi class with Lezura behind their home on the slope.

“What we need to do is try to increase your honoi output, Joey,” Lezura said, sitting on a rock. “So basically four the next five days you will be doing purely honoi exercise.”

Joey, sitting on the ground before her in leather shorts a yellow shirt, said, “It’s about time we got to the good stuff—eat the icing and leave the cake!”

“Actually,” said Heliri floating around their heads on her Sugarstick, eating a bunch of hespi berries, “the cake is the best part! The icing kinda reminds me of frothy sperm...”

“Anyway...” Lezura said, “Joey, you will have to push the limit of the amount of honoi you use, and we will be learning a new technique called the Novunongen, or Scattershot. Now, I myself do not know how to do it, so I will have to be going by the instructions from my data-scroll.”

“Okay,” Joey said, getting up.

Lezura opened the scroll and read the instructions beneath the diagram. “It says here that the Novunongen is basically firing multiple Bluebursts at once in a compact form, like a shotgun. The user has to have at least six separate streams of honoi channeled into his arm, which must be held steady by the other hand.” Lezura looked up from the scroll and said, “Go on, try it.”

Heliri lowered to the ground and found a seat a few meters away to watch. Flivi perched on her shoulder and nibbled at a bug on her head.

Joey held his right arm behind the wrist and pumped his honoi into it. It felt like his blood was flowing backwards painfully. He had to feel that vein of honoi in his arm, channel another one beside, and another—

And the result was the unstable honoi popping out of his hand and sending him flying back. The force knocked off a chunk of the stone Lezura has been sitting on.

Joey shrieked on his back, clutching his bleeding hand. When Lezura and Heliri hurried over they found that the flesh in Joey’s palm was shredded. Lezura quickly held his hand and healed it with her honoi. She couldn’t blame Joey for this, she was the one that forgot to tell him not to put too much at once, and do it slowly.

Joey hissed, saying, “This shit’s goanna take long...isn’t it...?”

“I am afraid so,” Lezura said. “Perhaps we should try a different technique.”

For the next five days Lezura and Joey were constantly at it, from 6 in the morning to eight in the evening, taking half hour breaks in between and large meals. Lezura too, was trying to push her honoi abilities as well, but tried to spend most of her time teaching Joey. Heliri would help when she could, taking over for Lezura and directing Joey from the data-scroll. She wasn’t as drilling as Lezura, but she got the job done nonetheless.

When Joey’s hand had recovered fully after Lezura’s healing the previous day, she had started Joey with a technique known as the Gunkshot.

“How this technique works,” Lezura had said, “is by mixing honoi with the user’s saliva or mucus. A bit disgusting, I must say...”

“But still cool though,” said Joey.

Lezura said from the scroll, “Honoï is gathered in the mouth along with saliva, compressed and mixed with it, and spat out is a sticky substance that immobilizes the user’s target. It was first invented by rapturans.”

Joey first attempt at the Gunkshot was spitting out a wad of blue saliva at the stone-based target. After several attempts the wad of glowing blue saliva moved up to blob, but it was still mostly water based, and left a bitter taste in Joey’s mouth that made him vomit more than once.

Within two days, Joey went from firing five Bluebursts and three Bluebolts that would usually snap in his honoï fatigue, to eight bursts and four bolts. When it came to executing the Gunkshot, Joey not only found it was very difficult, but also dehydrated him to some extent.

Lezura explained that it was much more difficult than firing regular honoï because the Gunkshot involved mixing other elements into it.

On the third day Joey could release ten Bluebursts and eight Bluebolts. Still the Gunkshot was imperfect.

When Joey checked the diagram in the data-scroll for a demonstration, the demonstrator, a dracoid woman, made a snorting sound like she was sucking mucus down her throat, and spat out not a blob, but a steady stream of glowing blue fluid at the feet of a yautgan helping with the demonstration.

The alien tried in vain to break free from the fluid that had quickly taken on a rubbery quality. Only the assistants nearby could free his feet with fire and cutting into the matter.

After watching the diagram, Joey got a better idea of how to strengthen his Gunkshot. After further attempts it was getting sticky like mucus, but far from the finesse of the true technique.

On the fifth day, Joey stood in front of a line of rocks put up on a sunken wall by Heliri, some yards to the back of the camp. Both his hands were scarred like burns from the many failures and healings during his exertion of the Bluebolt, and even now they still throbbed from the harsh ordeal yesterday.

Forget the pain, Joey, he thought, ‘cause if you screw this up a whole lot more people will be in pain!

Like two mothers watching their son at the soccer game, Lezura and Heliri stood behind Joey, anticipating either failure or success. If Joey could destroy that wall with only three hits of any of his honoï attacks, then sufficient strength has been developed behind them, but that was only the first test.

“Go!” Lezura said.

Joey started off with a Bluebolt. The attack plowed into the wall and sent dust and chips spewing out like bomb. But even with a fist sized hole in the wall it still stood; but cracks were scattered across it. Joey fired one more Bluebolt to the far end, popping another hole and spreading another web of cracks. Finally Joey raised both hands, hooked them together between the thumbs and index fingers and connected the honoï in both hands. The result was a massive burst in the center of the cracks.

The wall was obliterated out the back, leaving the rest in a weak frame that collapsed on itself.

“Hat’taa!” Heliri said.

Joey breathed a sigh of relief. He wanted to grin, but he knew he wasn’t finished yet.

Lezura simple said, “We are moving onto the survival test.”

The test was simple to understand; all Joey had to do was last a full minute firing everything in his arsenal without succumbing to honoï fatigue. His target was anything but Heliri, Lezura or where the people were living. Lezura gave the go, counting away in her mind as Joey unleashed hell on a mountain of rubble. For a whole minute debris plumed into the air around them, creating a thin shade beneath the dying sunlight. When it was over and the dust settled, all that was left were stones in a mound of dust.

Lezura exhaled and dropped in the dirt on her butt. She rested her head on her arm as Heliri and Joey hugged each other and leaped around, both singing songs native to their own planet.

“Please let it work,” Lezura whispered, “I want to live to see my daughter. Please let tomorrow end in peace...”

She felt the weight of Joey and Heliri bring her to the ground in their embrace.

“I can do it, Lezura!” Joey said. “I can full that machine up! I just know it!” he rolled off her and lay on his back, breathing heavily. He thought; I’m goanna stop a war! I’m goanna bring peace for these people! I’m not goanna fail!

The next day they marched back to Ussia Town. This time at the gate, the wyassies, being the only lead nycarmans amongst Joey’s group, were allowed to enter with the community with Joey and Lezura.

Without hesitation they were marched up the warehouse, but Lezura noticed that the activity on the streets wasn’t like the previous time they came here. She fell back from Joey and went amongst the wyassies.

Even with their escorts tight around them, Lezura still said, “I do not like the feeling I am getting from this place.”

“Then we will stay here,” Telkit said.

The wyassies stopped, causing their escorts to pause.

“What the hell is the problem?” Oleon at the front said.

“We want to take in the sights,” said Dunit merrily, “it is our first time here, after all.”

Oleon knew that they were just messing with him, and that they were suspicious of them and their leader. But as far as Oleon knew, if Joey was able to full the generator everything would be fine. They could be cautious if they wanted.

Oleon said to Joey and Lezura, “Come on,” and turned away.

In the warehouse they saw Stralin slowly pacing around in his thoughts. Upon seeing them he stopped and said, “It better work, today...”

Finally, Lezura lost her patience. She stopped and put her hands on her hips, and said, “Listen, you cannot possible defeat all of us here, you stupid old fart. We have hundreds more of use waiting at the camp. I dare you to attack. And even if that does not get you, the orderrans will—who should be arriving any time soon...” Lezura ignored the startled look on Stralin’s and Oleon’s faces patted Joey on the shoulder. “Go ahead, Joey.”

Joey waltzed over to the fuel port of the generator and took out the compass. He called out Fopi and told him to get ready. Once they were set Joey pushed the key inside the port, and with a chain reaction from honoi to the key he pumped the key’s energy inside the generator.

Some seconds in and the gauge was filling up, well beyond fifty. It seemed that Joey was going to pass out at one point, but he gritted his teeth and pushed harder. When Joey hit his limit he stopped and supported himself with hands on his knees.

“How did I do?” Joey said.

Oleon, Stralin and Lezura checked the fuel gauge. It was at one hundred percent.

Lezura suddenly kissed Joey on his cheek, sending ripples of warmth all over his body.

“You did it, Joey!”

Joey finally was able to grin for good reason. He pulled away from Lezura and pointed at Stralin.

“Hah!” he said. “Take that you racist piece of shit! Who can’t compare to the first Rakai now, huh? Hey, you better hold up your end of the deal now!”

“We will,” said Oleon with the tiniest smile of delight on his face as Stralin walked pass him. Oleon patted the generator. “The immigrants can have that part of the city, so long as they do not cause any trouble with us over here. With this loaded we can have energy for years.” He went into contemplation for a brief moment. “Thank you, Rakai...”

Joey nodded at him. Something crossed his mind, and he turned to Lezura and said, “Hey, Lez, do you think we could get a generator for the camp?”

“Now that you mention it...” Lezura rest a hand on her hip and rubbed her chin “...we could ask the captain to deliver a generator for us. He must be able to find a spare in the city...!”

As Oleon watch Lezura and Joey exchange opinions, some hurried movement out of the corner of his eye caught his attention. He turned, and saw Stralin hurriedly typing away at one of the screens.

Alarmed, Oleon stepped to him and said, "What are you—"

"POWER DISTRIBUTION NOW INITIATING," was the words from the computer that cut him off.

"What is he doing?" Lezura said. She looked at Stralin and back at Oleon. "What the devil is he doing?"

Oleon raised his voice and said, "General?"

General Stralin took a radio off his belt, switched it on and said, "This is the general, commence the operation..."

"You piece a shit!" Joey said, reaching for his pistol.

But the general was faster, snatching his off his waist and firing off a round in Joey. The bullet dented Joey's armor underneath his shirt, but the force was enough to knock him back and sting him.

"Dammit!" Oleon said, hurrying into the street.

Oleon thought about where the hell the general could have sent the power. What he could be doing with it now. And why the blasted man would want to start a confrontation after all of this. He was always weary of the general's own ideals, even if they both shared the same dislike for aliens.

But to risk his people in a senseless battle...? Oleon pondered.

The Vicekens!

The realization hit Oleon like a wild punch, sending him off course to the hanger were the mechsuits were kept; were he already saw armed men heading. He saw two of the operational mechs heading to the front gate with the other combatants.

And he saw the wyassies become huge blue giants.

Running inside the hanger, Oleon spotted the men, and found the highest in rank and command. It was a trimmed-haired Outo nycarman, wearing a light grey merino and green trousers. He had a Malcer slung across his back, and was waltzing towards the mechsuits locked down on the ground and against the walls.

Oleon grabbed him and spun him around; looking into the man's scarred face.

"What the hell are you doing lieutenant?" Oleon said.

"Following the general's orders," he said crossly, lifting the Malcer into his hands.

Some men already snapped up the latch at the base of the cockpit, opened the door and entered the suits.

"Are you insane?" Oleon said, "The general wants to start a war at our expense! Think about your kids—"

A blow from the butt of the Malcer to Oleon's head knocked him down. The lieutenant looked down at him and said with distaste on the tip of his teeth, "I am thinking about my children, and I will not have them enslaved to wretched aliens!"

Two mechsuits lumbered pass the Lieutenant, prompting him to board one of them. Once he did he followed the last of the seven Vicekens out of the warehouse. He turned off to go and help the general.

The first thing that prompt the wyassies into action were the shouts from Lezura and Oleon from inside the barn. They saw armed men slipping out of the buildings around, along with the Vicekens, and finally they heard a gunshot.

But they couldn't simply run off into the unknown like that, plus they were already occupied with a few Hapchenan coming their way.

"Boys," Murbella said.

"On it," Dunit and Telkit said.

The three wyassies emitted their honoi which shrouded them completely. Their bodies grew with the continuous output of the honoi, until finally three 7 meter tall blue giants with glowing veins all over

their bodies stood amongst the scattering Hapchenan. Two of them had a definite male anatomical design, as did the one female, with a head of misty energy.

Once the Hapchenan distanced themselves from the giants they unleashed a hailstorm of bullets at them. It did nothing more to cause ripples of popping honoi in the bodies of the Zeromuos.

But damn could the Zeromuos do much worse to them!

Murbella strode forward and stomped a woman flat, splattering yellow fluid from beneath her feet. Before two men could run away she stooped and swung her forearm, sending their broken bodies flying into the roof of a house.

Dunit ran into a group of men and kicked three of them sky-high.

Telkit grabbed two people in his massive hands like he was holding two dolls. He clapped his palms together with a booming thud. Gore splattered between his fingers.

The mechsuits opened fire, 60 cal. rounds ripped chunks off the bodies of the Zeromuos. Dunit shielded his chest where his main body was and charged into the mechs.

One of them managed to hop away, but the other got a clothesline that knocked it across the chest, flipping into onto its back. Before Dunit could stomp the mech in the head it raised its other gun, a large version of the Plasmapumper, and fired two blasts that dissolved off Dunit's right shoulder.

His arm fell off like a broken piece of a statue. The shock was enough to Dunit's real body to send a jolt of pain in his shoulder, and he staggered away.

With feline reflexes the Viceken rolled onto its feet and fired more blasts of plasma at Dunit. One shot knocked Dunit's head clean off, causing his real head to throb violently. But Dunit still had his real eyes to see.

He ducked and fired a Blueburst into the pelvis of the mech. The blast was intercepted by the mech's frontal shield projectors, but it sent a crackling wave of electricity that shorted out the shield. The jolt momentarily sent the mech off balance, giving Dunit the chance to ram his should into it, crashing it into a house.

Before it could get back up Dunit repeatedly stomped the cockpit until it was out of shape. The mech stopped moving, but the use of the Zeromuos also took its toll on Dunit. The honoi fatigue was massive, knocking Dunit unconscious. The blue giant disintegrated and Dunit's body fell in the rubble.

One of the two mechs got pass Telkit and Murbella, leaping over their heads and towards the gates were the others were converged in a fierce gun-battle with the few members of the Dielengann Path and refugees.

The other mechs were quickly filing into the streets outside, pushing the people back with gunfire and stepping on and over their slain victims of aliens and animals.

Between those retreating and those advancing was a firework of bullets, the greens of plasma rounds, yellows of hot lead and the blues of honoi. Amongst the Dielengann Path and the refugees, they had scattered themselves down the street where the woods began, abandoning their animals to take cover. Bensaur and Jivel each commanded their own people, with a man named Halirit leading the Tyhunies.

A greshku running scared through the midst of the gunfire got chewed up by gunfire, its sides ripped open and its guts spilled out. The same was for a lazhinian next to Bensaur. Plasma rounds burned into his chest and cooked him from the inside out.

He fell at Bensaur's feet. Bensaur waited until the gunfire ended before popping around the tree and firing a Blueburst, downing a Hapchenan member.

He saw one of the mechsuits entering the thick woods of thee street, and shouted for those nearby to spread out. The mech unleashed a stream of bullets that ripped up plants and the bodies of those unfortunate to be in the way to bloody shreds.

As they pressed the people back the nycarmans spread out at its sides to try and close in on them.

The mech spotted a Xemingi and refugee just as she shot a nycarman and fired a blast of plasma. The bullet hit the woman, immediately disintegrating her torso to a steaming bloody mess that splashed everywhere. It caught the dracoid next to her on the chest and face, boiling his flesh like acid. He rolled in the grass screaming, and gunfire from approaching nycarmans silenced him.

Bensaur leaped over a mossy rock, crouched behind it, feeling it jerk each time a bullet struck it. Around him were two Xemingi and three civilians from the camp. He made to fire but hearing the gunshots chipping at the rock forced him back down. A blast of dirt and mass slapped in his face and into his mouth. He spat the stuff out.

“Is anyone here a projectile user?” he said.

A female dracoid said after firing some shots with her crossbow and stooping, “I am!”

Bensaur said, “Everyone else, provide some cover for her! Miss I need you to disable the mech’s shield.”

“Yes!” she said.

Once a few plasma blasts went over their head, they popped up with a hailstorm of gunfire at Bensaur’s signal. The nycarmans around the mech took cover while the mech advanced.

The woman snuck around almost the right side of the mech. Once there she fired two Blueburst at the shoulder where the shield projector was. The shield crackled until it evaporated. A nycarman spotted the woman and opened fire. The woman took four rounds with a grunt and wince. They were lead; the nycarmans had run out of plasma rounds rather quickly.

The woman fired two shots at the tree where the nycarman was and waited. Just when the nycarman thought she had stopped and showed his head she fired another round in his head.

Seeing the flashes of electricity Bensaur switched to his Plasmapumper and took aim at the mech before it became stable again. He fired off two shots at the head, completely destroying it. He lowered the gun and fired three more into the cockpit. The first shot softened it and the other two blast their way inside, melting the pilot before he could even scream.

The mech toppled over, exposing the nycarmans behinds it.

“Advance,” said Bensaur. “Keep shooting!” He leaped over and led the charge.

With the nycarmans out of plasma rounds, shots were just pinging off Bensaur’s acril-iron armor.

A Malcer round tore a huge hole in Bensaur’s neck. Bensaur staggered forward with blood streaming form the wound. Feeling himself slowly losing consciousness he pointed at the man who shot him, firing off the last round in his weapon

The round exploded the man’s torso and splatted his friend, distracting him with burns long enough for a Xemingi to pop two rounds from her pistol in his head.

Bensaur pressed his hand against his round, but it did nothing to stop the blood gushing out. Gasping heavily he toppled over. He still had enough strength to lift his Malcer rifle with one hand, and squeezed of stream of bullets at a nycarman coming up behind a Xemingi with a knife. The shots spun him head over heels, and Bensaur’s vision went dark.

The Sekku and Halirit led their people against three mechs in the woods; the projectile honoi users firing at the machines while the gunners behind them took shots when their shields were down.

Some plasma weapons were taken from the slain Hapchenan and were being used to drive back the foot soldiers and damage the mechs, but unfortunately there weren’t enough plasma rounds for either side, and with the Hapchenan hiding behind their mechs they were laid waste to the opposition.

One of the mechs had a large, plasma arc-charger it used to spray a sweeping beam of energy at the aliens, scorching trees and reducing bodies to charcoal covered bones.

The heat from the beam was so intense that Jivel simple brushed against it and the flesh on her shoulder was scorched to a blacken crisp.

“Are you find, Sekku!” said a Tyhuny next to her.



Sekku gritted her teeth and used her honoi to dull the pain. "I am quite dandy!" she said. She fired from her lancegun while retreating down a slope.

"We need to take out those mechs!" shouted Halirit with short, curly golden hair from a gopto tree across her. Some mech-sized bullets slapped into the side of the tree and sent splinters flying. Halirit flinched and withdrew further from the edge.

A raizean running from the assault had his legs clipped from beneath him by the mech's gunfire. He only managed to wail and crawl a few feet before a bullet entered the back of his head.

"I know that!" the Sekku said. "Blast! Where are those damn geckoids already?"

For days now, since they first departed from the group on their first journey to Ussia, Hanim and some two dozen geckoids had been hiding in the woods the whole time, feeding on nothing but little birds, tapikes and insects they whipped raw into their mouths with their long tongues.

They were the contingency plan the allied forces had put in place; stealthy little people not so adept at tight, bloody battles, but excellent when it came to delivering quick decisive strikes.

They had stripped down to nothing but pieces of tree bark and leaves hiding their tender privates from the elements, and even painted their weapons in camouflage colors.

With great leaps they went from the tree to tree, crossing over the unsuspecting Hapchenan and their mechs below. They carried small bags with what little explosives the Dielengann Path could buy from the dealers in town, mostly shrapnel, but it still worked.

Like a passing jet delivering a missile, they leapt over their heads and dispensed the explosives. The explosions cracked apart the shields of the mechs. By the time they could respond gunfire rained down on them, falling nycarmans with riddled bodies.

Two geckoids, both honoi users, stood on a limb over a mech mowing down Tyhunies and Felkremin. One of them was a molder, who produced a blob of honoi in his cupped hands, stretched it until it was a javelin. The other, a melee type, augmented his fist with a Hiranien. On Hanim's signal, with her Plasmapumper ready, they attacked.

The geckoid with the javelin threw it at the mech's shoulder near the core of the shield projector, the shield boomed with static that evaporated. The geckoid with the Hiranien leaped off, landed on the mech's shoulder and socked it in the head. His little fist was powered up with the Hiranien, allowing it to smash into the side of the head and hit the vitals.

The pilot's vision was killed instantly, and immediately before he panicked blew his breath on the sensor screen in front of him and activated the cockpit door ejection. He pressed the yes button and the door popped off with a thud in the dirt, revealing a windshield in front of the pilot.

Hanim opened fire at the mech, ripping off its right arm with three well-placed shots as the geckoid leaped off into a nearby tree.

The mech spun.

When the geckoids started, the Sekku went to work. She dropped her pistol and ran towards a mech at the front, its shield rippling with static that told her it was vulnerable.

"What the hell are you doing?" Halirit said.

"Take out the foot soldiers while I deal with this one!" she said.

She zigzagged to avoid the shots. Some reached her and broke her armor apart, but she got there.

The mech instinctively kicked at Jivel, the swift woman dodged it, but the mech swung its arm around, nearly cleaving off her head. Jivel molded her honoi into a thick sword. She jumped for the mech's foot, slashing the tendons in the knee clean through.

With the mech dragging a dead foot, it was slowed down enough for Jivel to follow up with a thrust to the other knee, punching right inside it. The crippled mech sunk in a squat, unable to move. The torso spun around but couldn't find the Sekku, who was hiding beneath it.

But all its searching ended with a two plasma bullets pumped into the cockpit from Hanim above.

The mech with the one arm spotted the geckoids above. It raised the gun on its other arms and opened fire, sweeping its arm in an arc. The bullets ripped up three geckoids and took them out of the trees. Hanim turned around to the mech and fired a shot in the cockpit.

She had the unsettling sight through the clear windscreen to see the plasma round melt the pilot to a green-yellow pulp in his seat.

A bullet clipped Hanim in her foot and took her out of the tree. She lashed her tongue around the limb. She hung there, bleeding from her leg while the counter attack of the allied forces below pushed on.

Crap! Hanim thought, I'm naked, missing one foot and hanging from a tree by my damn tongue. It's a good thing my boys aren't here to see this.

A bullet clipped Hanim's tongue. She screamed a gargling sound as she fell. An Oikumi was in hot pursuit of her. Hanim watched as it got closer to collect her soul.

No! I can't die! My husband! My boys!

A question sign popped up in her mind when she saw the Oikumi veer off. She fell on a soft surface like a pile of sheets.

But it was actually a blob of honoi in someone's arms that she landed on and squished into a fine mist. She pulled her bleeding tongue into her mouth, and slowly moved her large eyes to look up in the face of someone she recognized from way back at Suride Town.

Commissioner! She wanted to say, but her tongue gave her hell over and over again.

Commissioner Oldam took a vial of lazhiyan blood from out of his coat, carried Hanim behind a lucaysha tree and injected her with it. Hanim shut her eyes and whimpered.

"Don't worry," Oldam said, "help is here..."

Jeeps roared through the woods on the side of the thinning allied forces, scattering them to make way for the mechanical beasts let loose upon the unsuspecting. But they had some control, and quickly turned into a bumpy drift that nearly toppled over a few of them to allow their passengers to jump out while providing a wall of cover.

Nesten, Coenter and Dinon split up with the others, already leading their groups around the last mech and the nycarmans. A shrapnel grenade exploded and sent up clouds of dust, gunfire sparked like twinkling stars in the murkiness, along with shouts, screams and the enraged laughter of one dracoid.

The snipers up at the towers were picked off those who dared to break their cover to attack. One such unfortunate fellow was a yautgan, who had a bullet rip through his neck. The nycarman that shot him grinned with delight. His partner at the other side scored a hit in the head of a Tyhuny, snapping her around and dropping her on her side.

"Yeah!" he said

And he saw something fly through the air, leaving a faint trail of orange light.

"What...?"

Heliri flew past the tower again, tossing in a dirty grenade inside the tower and disappeared all in a split second as the nycarman shot at her and missed. When he looked at the thing the woman threw inside at him, his face went pale—

The bomb went off; the force along with the shrapnel ripping apart his body and tossed him out the room.

His companion looked at the smoke coming out of the other tower, and looked ahead of him to see Heliri flying right towards him. She tilted her staff to the side and kicked the man in his nose. Heliri leaped off the staff, turned off the antigravity and brought the spear of it down in the man's chest.

She yanked it out, scraped some dirt off her foot on the sniper on the floor and took it up.

It was a Stinger Sniper Rifle (SSR). Its body was egged-shaped, yellow, but flat on the sides. The butt-stock was composed of layers of shock-absorbers. The trigger guard was on a grey section just behind the yellow one, and the clip inserted in the side. All these parts combine to make the body which was a foot, long; with a foot long barrel with a spiraling end.

It was the standard issue sniper rifle used by the nycarman militaries, and seeing that general had ties with the military, it was no surprise that these criminals had it.

Heliri checked the tiny screen on the left side and saw that it had five rounds left in the clip out of the usual eight.

Positioning the sniper on the window, Heliri saw men behind the mechs looking up at the towers where the explosion had occurred. She managed to shoot down two of them before one of the mechs turned around and spotted her.

“Yikes!” Heliri said. She tossed the gun aside and leaped out the window on her staff as the mech shot a plasma blast inside the room.

Heliri only managed to get a couple meters way before the shockwave sent her of course into an arrow-tree. She squirmed out of the prickly branches that surrounded her before the mech launched another blast.

Heliri fell on a limb, cracking a rib before she fell on the ground. She gaped and a tight scream escaped her dry throat.

The mech and seven nycarmans made their way through the trees for her.

A bullet plowed in the dirt near Heliri’s head. She scrambled for her Sugarstick and got up. A bullet hit the tree next to her head as she ran off. Another grazed her head and made her swear.

The mech swatted a small tree out of its way and stepped in a—crater?

The mech nearly toppled over but stopped itself with a hand. The crater closed around its foot like a noose, pinning the mech in that position. As it shot at the ground the break it apart, Tylin, Podge and Tet approached the machine from behind.

Tet fired three Bluebursts and disrupted the shield, while Podge aimed his RAR and nearly emptied the clip in the mech’s head. The sparking head spun around and fired a blast of plasma. The three managed to dodge the attack in time.

Tylin raced around the mech and went for the men shooting at Heliri. As she did so Clastaan finished off the men from his position in the bushes.

He sent veins of honoi in the ground towards the machine. They erupted with huge boulder launching out of the ground with explosions of dust and bombarded the mech. It was buried with only one arm sticking out and firing wildly.

Clastaan hurried out of the bushes, fueled by adrenaline and fear with a wrenching twist in his gut. Running to a mechanical arm firing 60 caliber rounds was about the stupidest thing he had ever done—so far.

The arm swung in his direction.

Clastaan screamed, ducked and dove into a slide. He came up to the rubble and crawled on top. He put his hands against it, spread more veins, and with a forceful push and grunt the boulders imploded on the mech, sending it deeper into the ground.

A nycarman spun around in time to see Tylin unsheathe her blade and slice his head off. She ducked beneath a stream of gunfire and swung her sword, disemboweling another man. He stood there, pupils dilating and mouth gaping in disbelief. He slowly reached for his intestines packed with his wife’s delicious baked bread...and collapsed.

Heliri heard the screams behind her and forced herself to peep, reluctantly inching her head from behind the tree. She saw a spectacular performance of a largaph woman reducing the Hapchenan to a panicking group trying to butt her down with their guns—

And the blast from the Sputty ripped the tree near her face to shreds, sending splinters flying her face. Her skin was tough enough to repel most of the debris.

Heliri ran off and whistled a high pitch chirp. The nycarman woman behind her in the speckled frock and red head-tie fired from the Sputty once more. Some of the blasts smashed into a gopto tree, but one got lodged inside Heliri's shoulder. The sensation of molten hot nails hammered into her flesh and bone made her scream like a siren.

She fell forward, rolled onto her back and tried to get a bearing of what was going on. With her good arm she lifted her staff, ready to put up a last fight. She had no problem with her blood being spilt to nourish the land, but life itself was Zongat's greatest gift—never to be wasted.

But on that day, Heliri would remember how Zongat showed her how she had a bigger part to play in everything, for her life was spared that day by Zongat, thanks to Flivi.

The bird, responding to Heliri's call, came out of nowhere and swooped near the woman. His tail lit and wiggled, puffing out huge chunks of cinder that lit the woman on fire. She thrashed about and screamed.

Heliri's eye flew open with new found determination. Now she had the opportunity to nourish the land with her enemy's blood. She pumped her honoi into the staff and lit the bulb and got to her feet, pointed it at the woman and released a fireball that engulfed the woman.

A man ran towards Heliri, his breath loud and his face looking like he just saw a Baraki. Heliri turned to him and prepared herself.

The man suddenly arched his back, splayed his arms and let out a loud gargling howl. A sword protruded from his chest. It was yanked out from the back and the man was kicked forward.

A flick of her sword and Tylin got most of the gold off it. She sheathed it on her back and said, "You, do you happen to know where the Rakai is?"

Heliri exhaled deeply; glad she wouldn't have to face such a foe. "He is in the community...with the boss of these people..."

Tylin grinned, and said, "He's always doing that..."

The bullet hit Joey's acril-iron armor and sent him twisting to the floor. As Oleon was off the gun practically teleported in Lezura's hand to how fast she drew it. She fired off a shot but Stralin dove behind the generator, rolled and came up with his back against it.

Joey got with a pain in his chest, pulled his plasma-pumper around and held it ready.

Stralin popped around the corner, "To hell with you scum!" and squeezed up the trigger.

Lezura and Joey scrambled as the bullets trailed after them. They went to the back of the warehouse where they saw a small door. Lezura shot the lock off; Joey bashed it open with his shoulder. Both found themselves standing in a grassy backyard.

They went to the opposite sides of the door as Stralin rang out more shots.

"Just as I speculated," Lezura said.

"What?" Joey said.

Lezura said with a disgusted look, "This man never intended to come to a truce with us from the start. He joined the Hapchenan not to fight for his people, but to instigate conflicts as a leader so he could nurse his bruised ego after losing in the Third Great War!"

The general stopped to reload, and said at them, "I almost forgot Rakai; thank you for helping out with the generator!"

"Go screw your momma, you sore loser!" Joey said. He turned to shot inside the warehouse but Lezura said:

"Do not, Joey! You might hit the generator!"

Joey went back up against the side of the warehouse and growled in defeat. "Then how're we supposed to kill this sonuva bitch?"

“We have to lure him out!”

“How?”

Stralin fired again as he ran towards the door, breaking off and hugging the wall with his shoulder.

Lezura spotted him out of the corner of her eye and pushed off the wall, just as Stralin shot it.

“On your side, Joey!” Lezura said,

Joey leaned off the wall, wheeled and fired into it. The plasma bullet popped through, grazing Stralin’s hat.

“Grh”—Stralin flicked his hand over his forehead and swatted his hat off before it caught his hair on fire—“Dammit!”

He fired in the smoking hole in the wall, hitting Joey in the chest. Joey fell over, feeling his armor crack. But luckily it still held to stop the bullet, but now it would break at the next hit and he wouldn’t be so lucky.

“Run!” Lezura said, striding across the lawn towards the fence.

Joey ran after her. His chest throbbed and felt like his heart was going to stop. “Why the hell should we run from this guy? It’s just one old geezer!”

The lieutenant in the mech leaped on and off the top of the warehouse, landing with ground shaking force and sprinted after them. Stralin was in hot pursuit of them as well.

Joey’s heart skipped a beat and he almost stumbled. “Holy crap,” he said, and quickened his pace.

Lezura fired two Bluebolt at the fence, while Joey fired two plasma rounds beneath them. Lezura crashed into it and broke the rest of that section down. Joey ran through it and leaped over Lezura. She got up and followed him into a small junk yard down the grassy hill.

Shots from the Viceken rippled all around Joey. He threw his arms around and wailed like he was being ganged by bees.

“Lezura they’re shooting at us!” he said.

“Joey what do you want me to blasted do about it?” Lezura said.

“Use your faery magic and save us!” Joey said.

“There are no trees around!”

“The grass,” Joey said.

“What can that do?”

More shots dug up the ground at Joey’s heels. “Whoa! Lezura!”

“Zigzag,” Lezura said.

“What?”

“Zigzag you pudding-brain!”

Lezura and Joey crisscrossed each other. Each time the mech had a lock on a target another would cross his way, ruining his aim. He waited until they crossed again to get them both in the center, but they somehow managed to feint and move away; the mech only shot between them.

The two aliens scrabbled into the mass of old rusty vehicles, appliances and scattered garbage. The place stunk with the acrid stench of abused metal, animal poop, diapers and old moldy food.

The mech hurried in after them. Joey made an attempt to run over where Lezura was, but the gunfire from the mech repelled him.

He hurried back around a turned over car and crouched there. He peeped up and saw Stralin jogging to a stop alongside the mech. He looked across and saw Lezura waiting with her Plasmapumper ready behind a mound of metallic garbage.

Lezura looked back at him and signaled for him to stay put and quiet.

Stralin bared his teeth. “Where are they?” he said,

Checking his radar, the lieutenant replied through the speaker in the mech’s head, “One’s over that car, the others behind that mound...”

“You take that one,” Stralin said, marching off purposely over to the car.

The lieutenant smiled. He turned to the mound and fired a beam of plasma from his arc-charger. The energy burnt a hole in the mound just above Lezura's head, raining tiny bits of flaming debris on her. Some of it caught her ear and made her yelp.

From his position Joey could see the mech closing in on Lezura. He backed out a little, and shot it with two Bluebursts. With the shield down and the mech still shooting at Lezura Joey completely forgot about Stralin and inched his way closer to the mech to get a precise shot.

He exposed enough of himself for Stralin to see. The general fired a Blueblight at Joey.

The continuously fed, rippling beam clipped the hair on top of Joey's head, sending a sting down his body that made him duck.

The effect of the Blueblight was that all of it was channeled into the target; in this case a refrigerator. The energy spread throughout the entire object like carnivorous vines devouring a weak tree, and once it was full, exploded in blue light.

Joey winced. "Sssssssshit. I have to learn that!"

The mech swung its arm and shattered Lezura's cover. She managed to scurry away with only minimum debris striking her. The mech swept the arc-charger; Lezura was looking behind her to see the slicing arch coming. She ran up to raised debris in the ground, stepped on it and leaped off, flipping over the beam as it left a trail of fiery, molten destruction.

Joey risked firing the Gunkshot. He hoped his effort would make it a little better than the crap he was doing in training. It wasn't the real deal but a massive blob was successfully hurled at the mech's shield-projector and stuck there. The shield was completely disabled.

Stralin fired a beam from his finger into Joey's shoulder. All of it was absorbed, and Joey's armor blew off in a spout of blood and blue. Joey fell on the ground wailing and thrashing.

With the mech's shield down it jittered for a split second, long enough for Lezura to lift her Plasmapumper and fire. The first shot hit the pelvis, the second hit the abdomen and the third hit the knee.

The mech staggered back and crashed. Lezura skipped on top of it and ran over, and witnessed Joey's arm popping off.

"Joey!"

Stralin spun to meet Lezura. She fired continuously from the Plasmapumper, all of which were stopped by a shield of concentrated honoi projected from Stralin's hand. Lezura dropped the Plasmapumper, pulled her spear off her back and extended it.

Each attack she dealt Stralin was blocked by his pistol. Lezura backedpedaled, held the spear at her side and thrust continuously at Stralin. He evaded each blow, and on the third he pulled the knife off his waist and deflected the attack.

Stralin grabbed Lezura's spear behind the blade, pulled it towards along with Lezura and kicked her in the gut. She crumpled over with a loud grunt, and Stralin stepped on the spear and took it out of Lezura's grasp.

Lezura cut Stralin across his chest with her knife into his armor. The superficial blow startled Stralin though, giving Lezura the chance to shoot her knee into his gut and push him off with a Blueburst. Stralin slid away with his armor shattered.

Lezura hurried over to Joey rolling and sobbing. Her eyes were held by the human clutching his stump of a shoulder.

Lezura pried his hand away and rest her hand on the wound. Joey gasped but his scream was stifled by pain. Lezura closed her eyes, took a deep breath and channeled her honoi into Joey's wound. Within seconds the bloody end was covered with dark blue, solidified honoi. With the makeshift scab in place Lezura lifted Joey into her arms.

She turned and walked, then noticed that Joey's arm was on the ground next to her.

It can be reattached, she thought, and stooped to take it up.

And that was when the Blueburst slapped her in the chest, sending her flying and Joey out of her arms. Lezura stopped a few feet away. Her armor was shattered and chips of it were embedded in the flesh of her breast. Not to mention the force that knocked the air from her lungs.

She lay there gasping for air.

Do not die, Lezura! Your daughter needs you! Do not dare die here!

Lezura opened her eyes and glimpsed Joey lumbering to his feet with what minuscule strength he had left and his only arm. In front of Joey was Stralin, bleeding from the wound in his chest, but still standing looking strong and prideful like he always did.

Lezura reached out to Joey. She tried moving her legs but couldn't. She tried calling his name but only a whisper came out.

I wonder if this is it? Joey thought, watching Stralin aim the pistol at him. I wonder what death feels like; if people really see a white light? Joey saw an Oikumi hovering near by, glaring into his eyes. He glared back at the creature and smiled, blood smearing his teeth and running down his chin in strands into the ground. I guess I'll soon find out, huh?

Wait a minute! Joey realized as the shot went off and the bullet ripped a hole in his abdomen. If I die, then Lezura will too...so will everyone else who's counting on me. I can't lose to this old fart! Blood ran down his thigh and his vision got blurry. The feeling in his body slowly slipped away from his mind's grasp. I can't let Tylin's training go to waste! I can't leave everyone hanging.

You promised! A part of his mind said. You promised you wouldn't let some cock-sucker snuff your lights out like they did mom and dad! Remember?

"Yeah..." Joey whispered.

Joey put his foot back, stooped and stopped his fall. He stood up and exerted all of his honoi; a shockwave of blue energy that toppled over Stralin, pushing outwards in a continuous pulse, shaking the ground.

"What the blazes is this!" Stralin said, scrambling to his feet and for his wits to grasp the situation.

"Joey..." Lezura whispered; blue light washing over her in ripples of static.

Joey arched his back. His arm shuddered, pulling the energy swirling around him in his hand.

"Assholes like you make me sick!" Joey said, burning blue eyes of imperious light staring at Stralin beneath heavy brows. "Using your own people's lives just to get a fifteen seconds of fame..."

Stralin fired at Joey, each bullet was deflected by the energy around him.

Joey grinned with bloody teeth, and said, "You wanna a fight? Fine—I'll give you one you'll never forget!"

The honoi in Joey's hand became a sphere, spinning spectacularly with bits of white light sparking off that stirred up the dust around him.

Lezura dug deep and found the strength to stand. She squinted at the dirt flying in her face. She gasped, unable to swallow what she was seeing.

The Starsphere, Lezura thought, but that is a first-class technique!

Stralin roared, said, "Abomination! I would disgrace myself if I were to lose to you!"

General Stralin spread his legs and fired two Blueblights.

Joey pushed his hand, shooting off the Starsphere with a thud like the force of an explosion. The sphere traveled with a tailwind that nearly split the ground. The force of it flew between the two beams and pushed off of course to strike the environment beside Joey.

Lezura ducked and covered her head.

The sphere whizzed over Stralin's shoulder, ripping off the side of an old truck and flying back into the face of the slope. The Starsphere exploded, sending debris skyrocketing.

But Stralin wasn't lucky for long. The tailwind was so powerful that it ripped off the General's ear, the flesh off his neck and the arm off his shoulder, escorting them along with small debris off the ground yards away.

“Dammit!” Joey said. He slapped his face with his hand. “I can’t believe I missed!”

Stralin careened over, screaming and clutching his destroyed shoulder.

Joey felt warm liquid down his pants. He looked down and saw that they were soaked to the knees in his blood.

“Oh...” Joey said, getting dizzier each second, staggered back “...for a second there I thought I pissed my pants...”

Joey fell.

“Joey!”

Lezura caught Joey and brought him down over her lap on her knees. She checked his pulse. It was weak, and slipping. She saw an ashen smile on his tortured face. She placed a hand on his abdomen and healed the wound, but the blood-loss was massive.

She felt his body getting cold at a startling rate.

“Do not dare die on me!” she said, and the first tear rolled down her cheek.

She healed his wound again, knowing fully well it was her futile attempt and last resort. She touched Joey’s neck again, feeling almost no vital signs.

“No...” she said. She touched his cheek. “Joey please...”

“Joey?” a voice said.

Lezura turned and saw someone coming towards down the middle of the chaos. She couldn’t; understand who this geckoid woman was coming on a mynamather, but the closer she got she realized who it was, who made her cry even harder.

“S’us!” Lezura said.

S’us leaped off Redbolt, slid on her knees and bumped into Lezura.

“How is he?” S’us said.

“Not good...”

S’us took the RAR off her shoulder and dropped it. She went into her pack and took out a little bottle of lazhinian blood.

“Open his mouth,” S’us said in.

Lezura pulled Joey’s mouth open and S’us put the bottle to it. Fortunately Joey had enough strength to drink, starting off with little swallows, then huge gulps.

Joey breathed like an aroused beast. A wonderful feeling spread through his veins like liquid ecstasy.

S’us pried the bottle from his mouth. Joey reached after it like a junky fighting for his spoon of crack, but Lezura held his hands down. Joey opened his eyes briefly before closing them, gently drifting off into a deep sleep.

Lezura rubbed the muck off Joey’s cheek and smile at him. She said to S’us, “Thank you...”

“He really is worthless without us...” S’us said.

“Wasn’t that obvious?” I’us said.

Lezura offered a faint smile. “I do not think I can object to that...”

A gunshot plowed into the ground near them, startling Redbolt.

S’us reached for her weapon and got up to meet their attacker.

General Stralin stood with another pistol in his last hand. One half of him was completely soaked in gore. He shivered all over as his body grew cold, but in his eyes burnt with a defiant fire.

Five blue talons burst through Stralin’s chest.

In the grip of the talons was Stralin’s yellow, mucky heart; which he had the rare privilege of seeing being crushed to a pulp right before his eyes. A piece of his left ventricle splattered onto his face.

Behind him Oleon pulled his arm out with thick strands of blood. Stralin took his last two gasps on the way down. His foot twitched twice before he stopped moving.

Oleon looked down at Stralin and said, “If you really wanted to help us you should have gotten us more generators...”



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

When Joey awoke he found himself in his and Lezura's little house in the camp. There was a split between the red curtains hung at the opening that snuck in some light.

But Lezura wasn't in the room. He checked for the key around his neck, found it.

And he yelped.

He was holding the compass with the arm that was supposed to be blown off.

"What the hell?" he said.

He followed his hand all the way up to his shoulder. It was hideously scarred all around, and still throbbing and pulsating with the last of the healing process. Whether by lazhinian blood or Lezura's faery magic, he couldn't tell, but was sure as hell glad he had it back on!

Though a robotic arm that shoots lasers would've been nicer!

He got out of the bed, realizing he was only in his underpants. It crossed his mind as to who might have undressed, and hoped it was one of the women he knew.

He looked around for a new suit of clothes and spotted something on the bed. It was piece of paper, yellow with age. Joey took it up and found some writing in English that had to be Lezura's.

"Meet us outside" it read.

Joey put on a dusty pants and a yellow top with some brown stains he accepted wouldn't come out even if he washed it over and over again.

He didn't bother putting on his shoes, and strode out into the sunlight. His mouth tasted bitter with blood, his head hurt and his shoulder felt like a furnace had been built there.

He found that most of the people were in the center of the camp, with a few individuals moving around without notice for what congregated the others, more interested in their daily chores.

One relief was that they didn't bother to bombard him with the wild, fan-crazed cheers, but with simple "hellos", "hi" and "hey" as they went by.

As Joey reached the crowd he could identify what had gathered the people there.

"A generator...?" he said to himself.

It looked similar to the one back at the Hapchenan community, except a little more rusted, even with a large dent, and with less tubes spilling out of the top.

"Wait, because we're refugees they couldn't give us a better one?" Joey said silently. He shook his head and chuckled. But at least the people here had one now. It was a start, and for that Joey overlooked everything else.

Someone at the back of the crowd spotted Joey and notified everyone else. They made gestures to the generator, some even urging him to fill it up. He was guided through the crowd, where he encountered S'us. He smiled and hugged her.

"You finally came!" he said. He realized S'us didn't have the translator, and settled with just saying hello.

"It's good to see you up and about already," S'us said, "though it's quite astonishing. With that much blood loss I am surprised you didn't die instantly. Oh...!"

S'us clipped her translator. After which Joey said, "That's the Rakai for yah! I doubt even the other ones could survive something like that. By the way"—Joey undulated his injured shoulder—"thanks for snapping on back my arm."

"It was Tet's blood," said S'us, "but Lezura helped as well."

"That tramp and her faery magic didn't do squat," I'us said.

S'us frowned.

Joey said, "Is something wrong?"

S'us went to say "no", but something that she had been pondering for a while now took the front seat of her mind. "Actually, yes," she said, "but I wish to speak to you about if after you're done here, in my abode. Do you mind?"

Joey saw his chance to finally be alone with S'us. He smiled and said, "Sure."

"Thank you," S'us said.

"You know he wants to screw you, right?" I'us said.

"Would you shut up?" S'us said.

Startled Joey said, "What—" he remembered something about S'us sister and paused.

S'us quickly said, "It's nothing—sorry." She rubbed her head. "See you later." And she walked off.

Joey met up with Clastaan and Tylin, who he embraced tightly. He remarked to Tylin about the technique he did back at the fight with the general.

"You seem to be passing out a lot after every confrontation," Tylin had said, "you're still weak..."

After that slicing comment in his hide Joey went to greet Tet; a pleasant mannered man like Clastaan, and thanked him for his blood. Podge he greeted with the usual grunt and nod. Podge didn't mind, for he greeted him the same way.

But the day didn't bring a bounty of good news. Joey was saddened to learn from the Sekku and wyassies that Bensaur hadn't survived the battle. It was like someone snuck a hot pipe in his ribs.

But seeing Heliri she reminded Joey that such was Zongat's will, reassuring him that the blood split in combat would later bring forth new life from the land.

It helped somewhat, but mostly Joey just decided to focus on the people alive.

You have to fight to keep them that way, he thought.

He met up with Nesten, Dinon, Coenter and mayor Cassim; all looking quite okay.

At the front he saw Lezura and the captain.

"How is your arm?" Lezura said.

"It stings a little but its fine otherwise," said Joey. He gestured to the generator, "So I'm guessing you all want me to full this up...?"

"We did not bring it here to scrap for parts..." the captain said, slipping a sip from a bottle of blue liquid.

"Geez..." Joey said, "You know you guys could at least give me a day's break..."

The captain slipped Lezura a glance that aroused his suspicion. Joey looked at Lezura and saw her eyes quickly look away.

Joey slowly put his hands on his hips and shifted his stance. "Okay...what the hell's it now...?"

"Joey," Lezura said with a soft, angelic voice. She placed her hands on his shoulders. "I know you are very tired, and also at a time like this you would be very hungry....but—"

"Skip to the end, brace-face," Joey said.

"The military's radio station picked up a fleet of orderran ships coming our way," said Lezura.

"We all know that they're coming...so...?"

"They are a day away," said the captain, "If not a few hours..."

Joey grimaced, spreading his mouth into a wide smile like he was trying to show someone he was happy despite the agony.

"Is he okay?" said someone nearby.

"Joey?" Lezura said cautiously.

Joey laughed slowly. He said, "So...yesterday I had to deal with giant robots and get my arm ripped off...And a few hours from now, I'll have to deal with giant robots—and werewolves?"

"Lycans," said Lezura.

"AWESOME!" Joey said.

Heliri who was next by threw her arm around Joey and said, "All right! We're goanna kick some more ass!"

“Yeah,” Joey said.

Lezura punched the two of them on their injured shoulders and got their attention. “We need to know what the military is planning first,” said Lezura. “This is not like the last time, Joey. This time the orderrans have brought with them ten airships; I can only assume they have heavy weaponry capable of leaving only particles of us floating around the place.”

“Yeah,” Joey said, realizing the dread of the situation and that people were going to die. Damn! If only this were a video game—we could just revive back everyone!

Lezura said to the captain, “Captain, when will you be in contact with the commander-in-chief and the prime minister?”

The captain took a huge gulp and winced. “Gaah...! As soon as this kid fills the generator we can get them on the channel in one of the trucks,” he said.

And Joey did just that; after which electrical equipment were loaded out of the trucks and brought into the camp, along with tinier generators for the homes. All of these would be supplied with energy from the main generator by wires.

Lezura, Joey and Heliri were escorted out of the camp by the captain to one of their operational vehicles.

Since the immigrants were left at the camp the trucks were fitted back with their seats and computer equipment. The roof was covered up completely, and small blue light illuminated the inside. There was a black-haired nycarman woman sitting by herself, wearing military gear and her hair tied in a bun.

The captain went to her and said, “Private, get me in touch with the prime minister and the commander...”

“Yes sir,” she said.

She switched the channel on the radio, pressed a bottom near it and said into a small mic, “This is Private Syen of the immigration security division. On behalf of Captain Osna I am requesting audience with the commander-in-chief and the honorable prime minister, over...”

Three seconds later the reply came, “Understood, private, please wait a moment while we get in touch the commander and prime minister...”

“They can call the prime minister just like that?” Joey said.

Captain Osna said, “When half the country is decimated, it is easier to keep in touch with the other half, lad...”

Nearly two minutes later, and the large monitor before them split in two. On the left was the prime minister; a Uola nycarman with a square face, cropped black hair in a light blue tunic with a huge white collar.

The commander-in-chief wore a uniform of a dark green, with grey epaulets and his barreled decked in accomplishments; even more than that Stralin fellow, Joey realized. He was an Outo nycarman with a bald head, showing the wavy creases that creped from the sides of his round face and forehead over his skull. His big arms were folded on the table before him like logs.

“This better be a good reason to call me all the way from a meeting,” said the prime minister, wiping some soap from behind his ears.

“Mr. prime minister,” said the captain, “please excuse us for disturbing you, but we need to speak with the you on something extremely important.”

The prime minister arched eyebrow. “We...?”

Lezura, Joey and Heliri smashed their faces together on the screen and said, “Hello!”

The prime minister yelped and pushed himself away, nearly toppling his chair over.

“What the devil is this, captain?” the commander said.

Osna ushered the children from the screen so his superiors could see his face. “Sirs,” he said, “the young alien male you just saw is the new Rakai?”

The commander almost smiled. “Eh, so you are the one who pissed off the orderrans back in Suride Town...”

“That’s me!” Joey said proudly.

The prime minister gawked, pointed at Joey, “Wait a bloody minute—that is the Rakai! He is just a brat!”

“And you’re an old fart!” Joey said, the speakers in the mike translating his words clearly for the other side to here. “Hey, you all stop treating me like a kid already. I took down that stupid racist army dude that was trying to kill us all—no thanks to you guys!” and Joey even scowled at Osna.

“You little punk!” the prime minister said. He punched Joey on his side, which meant he punched his monitor. Everyone could hear his knuckles crack, and they all winced. The prime minister clutched his hand and wailed. “Blast!”

Joey and Heliri ran out of the truck laughing. Joey tripped at the door and landed face-first.

The commissioner slammed his huge fist on the table. “Captain Osna I am not in the mood to deal with little children!” he said. On the other side the prime minister’s aid, a woman in a tight black dress, came and put some bandages on his fist and hurried away. “Whatever you have to say, say it quickly so I can deal with the orderran situation.”

The prime minister gasped. “Orderrans?” he said.

“I am sorry, commander,” Osna said, scowling sideways at Lezura who threw her hands up in a gesture of confusion and innocence. Osna turned his eyes back to the screen. “It is precisely that, sir; will all due respect I hope you realize that we cannot allow them to enter the heart of the country where most of the population is.”

“Why did anyone not tell me about the orderrans?” the prime minister said, his eyes wide and shaky and his creases filled with sweat.

Everyone ignored the prime minister, who had since the Third Great War broken down to a man who could barely make decisions on his own.

“I am well aware of that, captain,” said the commander crisply, “and I hope you are aware that we stand no chance of resisting the orderrans if they really do decide to kill us all. We either run to our neighbor or we stay, fight and all die a glorious death. Personally speaking, I do not think that Kafinifa will be willing to take us in. They do not have the space, and we will just lead the orderrans to their side and make them hate us more.”

“There might be away,” said a voice.

Everyone turned to the door to see Joey and Heliri stepping back inside with watery eyes. But the words didn’t come from their mouths. They made way to reveal mayor Cassim.

“Umm...” the private said “...since when did inside this place become a hotel...?”

“Easy, private,” said Osna. He said to Cassim, “What do you have to bring to the table, old man?”

“Is the commander willing to listen?” Cassim said curtly.

“As long as he can get rid of the orderrans he and I are friends!” said the prime minister, his facing dripping with sweat.

“Go ahead,” said the commander.

Cassim said, “Thank you. First off, I think the orderrans are more interested in getting their revenge on the Rakai than anything else.”

“What?” Joey said.

“I am listening...” the commander said.

Cassim said, “So if we present a force to confront them including their worst enemy, then they will probably not stop until they kill their most hated enemy and all of his companions. Even it is means chasing them to the ends of the continent, as we can all see...”

Heliri’s smile was a huge toothy gape. “I see,” she said, “You want to use the Rakai as bait to lure them from the city.”

“What—bait?” Joey said, scratching his head. When the full meaning of it hit him he said, “Whoa, wait a minute, what do you mean ‘use me as bait?’”

“It could work,” Lezura said, gazing thoughtfully at Joey.

“It could?” Joey said. “That shit actually could?”

“They pretty much hate your guts right now,” said Heliri, “and I can bet they want to rip them right out like good ole’ lycans love to do.”

“Joey,” Lezura said, “remember that our escape route is on the north coast, that is where we would try to lead them. We can make our escape then.”

“I guess,” Joey said.

“It could buy us enough time to come up with another strategy, commander,” Osna said.

“I suppose it could,” said the commander.

“Yes!” said the prime minister, leaning forward so fast droplets of sweat flew from his face onto his monitor. “Do whatever it takes to get them away from the city. This country is already in shambles; no way can we stand another hit.”

“If you are going to be on the front lines, Rakai,” the commander said, “you need to be with us. We will be deploying our forces immediately to the southern plains to intercept them. We will pick you up on the way; in the next four hours or so.”

Joey nodded. “Okay.”

“We should tell the Dielengann Path,” Heliri said, “They’ll want to know when you depart.”

“You’re right,” Joey said.

“I will tell the camp the situation and what we have decided,” Cassim said, leaving the truck.

Joey turned to Lezura and said, “Hey, I wanna do something first.”

Minutes later, Heliri went back to the Dielengann Path’s secret location, to ask them for help if possible. Cassim told everyone at the camp of the plan, and even asked if there was anyone willing to fight in the aid of the Rakai. The volunteers for such a quest were Tylin, Podge and Tet.

“I as well!” S’us said, stepping forward.

“No, S’us,” said Clastaan, “This is too dangerous and you are too young, I cannot allow it.”

“Clastaan I’m not going because it’s something I just decided along with the Rakai” said S’us, “I have my reasons for going. I have to find my sister’s body.”

Clastaan placed a clawed hand on S’us shoulder, said, “S’us, Tylin, Podge and Tet and more skilled fighters than you are, you will only get in the way when troubles surface. Please, just stay here with the rest of us.”

“But—”

“He said stay here, S’us,” Podge said, “You are just a child. Listen when the adults around you speak.”

S’us took a deep breath like she was about to protest again, but it ended in a long sigh. She nodded, and went back to her dwelling.

Meanwhile Joey and Lezura took a trip back to Ussia Town, where they found that the military command from the commander-in-chief had set up posts within and outside the community.

There were people from the religious sect negotiating the release of the bodies of their slain people to be given a proper burial. They strode past these trucks which had the bodies in air-tight plastic bags.

They reached the gate, where upon showing them the pass they got from Captain Osna, were allowed to enter the community.

They got the usual looks from the people like they owned them money, but with their weapons confiscated and the soldiers doing routine walks throughout the community they couldn’t do much but fight with their eyes.

The two aliens made their way to the warehouse where the generator was. They got off Redbolt, tied him to the doorframe and went inside. There they found out that computer terminals had been installed around it, along with work tables and chairs. Including about three civilians, military personnel were at work.

Luck was on their side; Oleon was there speaking with a soldier they assumed was of a high rank. "Hey, racist boy!" Joey said.

Oleon slowly turned to look at Joey approaching him with Lezura. The officer he was speaking to raised a finger to Oleon and went to meet them.

"Is there something I can help you two with?" he said.

"We wish to speak with the Oleon," said Lezura. She showed the soldier the pass-card. "We have been granted permission to question him; on orders from Captain Osna passed down from the commander-in-chief."

"And if that's not enough," Joey took out his compass and almost shoved it in the man's face, "I've this to use on your ass! Whoopaaa!"

The soldier stared at Joey long and hard before dropping the goggles over his eyes and took the pass-card from Lezura. After examining it he gave it back to her.

"Oleon," he said, gesturing to Lezura, "These two want to speak to you..."

Oleon sighed and shook his head. He pointed to the door where Joey and Lezura went to meet him. He folded his arms in his beloved yellow sweater and said, "What do you two want now?"

"Actually," Lezura said, "the Rakai has something to ask of you..."

Oleon took a translator out of his pocket and put it in his ear.

"I want you to fight with me?" said Joey.

Oleon's ears perked back. "Excuuuuuuuse me...?" he said.

"The orderrans are coming here," said Joey, "they're coming from the southern plains. I'm going with the military to draw them away from the heart of the country around to the coast."

"Good luck with that one, kid," Oleon said.

Joey's bushy eyebrows almost completely smothered his eyes. "Hey, you deaf dude? The orderrans are gonna come here and blast this place to the other side of the galaxy if you don't help us."

"Are you blind?" said Oleon, gesturing inside the warehouse and around the town, "The military has taken over control and confiscated our weapons. Even if we wanted to help you, which I very much do not, we would not have the resources to do so!"

Joey folded his arms. He said, "Really? You expect me to believe that you got all your weapons taken away?"

Oleon unfolded his arms. "You two get out of here?" and he walked away.

"Yeah," Joey said loudly and scornfully, "just as I thought, you little bitch!"

Oleon stopped, spun on the spot and said, "What did you just say?"

Joey stepped up into Oleon's face—at least he had wanted to, but Oleon was a foot taller. Joey said like whispering a deep dark secret, "You little rats love to pick on defenseless people like the immigrants, but when the bigger guys turn up you all have to keep your little ass quiet."

Oleon inhaled as if he were going to blow down Joey, which with his size and a little honoi added was possible. A sudden air of tension enveloped around them that even the corporal sensed and inched close to them.

"Stralin was the one who decided to attack the camp, not me," Oleon said in throaty voice. "I hate fighting because I lost my wife to stupidity like that. No matter how much I kill, it will not bring her back..."

Lezura put a hand to her mouth, said, "Oh dear..."

Joey saw Oleon's eyes shimmer, and helped him out of his situation by saying, "Let me fight for you. Let me fight for your people."

Oleon stepped with a slight, puzzled look. “You would really risk your life for us; after what we did to your people?”

“I will now that I see you aren’t a dick like the last guy.”

Oleon frowned at Joey. Lezura wanted to clap Joey for his bravery but was telling herself to get out of the habit. He wasn’t her child. She already had one—who she hoped and prayed would see be reunited with.

Oleon stepped closer and whispered, “Follow me.”

As they walked off the corporal said, “Where are you all going to?”

Lezura turned to him and said, “This gentleman wishes to further discuss matters somewhere where very confidential information will not be leaked to unintentional ears. Now, if you object, I am sure the commander-in-chief will understand why you delayed any information that the Rakai and I specifically were to obtain from this man and bring forth to him.” Lezura added a light smile.

The corporal and others of the military stared wide-eyed at Lezura, shocked by her smooth insertion of her authority over them and her frankness behind it.

The corporal squeezed his hand behind him. He nodded curtly and said, “Very well.”

As they turned and left, Oleon whispered to Joey, “Is she always that scary?”

“This isn’t scary,” said Joey, “you wanna see scary, trying interrupting her when she’s giving a lecture.”

Oleon led them from the community to a small knoll, surround by two ethanol factories and a welding shop. There was a cluster of arrow-trees that Oleon led them through, finally into a small clearing with a litter of leaves ankle deep.

Lezura wanted to point out that obviously beneath would be some secret door leady to a secret entrances, as she sense no root systems from the bushes on top, but she figured everything would go smoothly if she kept silent.

Sure enough Oleon searched the ground and found a small knob. He told Lezura and Joey to back up some more and off the door. He unlocked it. With a strained grunt he lifted the huge door and threw it on the other side with a boom.

The filtered light through the trees fingered into the darkness, touching and revealing crude stone steps that led into the room below.

Joey folded his arms and scowled at Oleon. “Uh-huh; you don’t have any more weapons, you say?”

Oleon turned to Joey and said with playful smile, “What makes you think I have weapons down there?”

“Oh!” said Joey in mock surprise, “I didn’t know you elves took hiding your gold so seriously!”

Oleon took a flashlight off his waist, clicked it on and stepped inside.

The inside was cold and dray, and smelt earthy with a hint of the acrid smell of metal.

At the end of the steps some twenty meters down, Oleon found a large switch on the wall and clicked it on. The florescent, light blue bulbs flickered for three seconds before showering the place with blue light.

Surrounding them were crates upon crates upon crates on the ground flattened with stones and blocks.

“Holy crap!” said Joey, grinning as he looked around, “you guys have enough ammunition to take on an entire army of kids chasing the ice-cream truck!”

“Stralin always liked to be prepared,” Oleon said as he covered his nose and move tarpaulins off some of the crates, “too bad he never got to use them.”

Lezura spotted something that made her body burst with excitement. “Oh my,” she said.

They turned around to see Lezura quickly striding towards a huge machine in the back, lit with a single bulb over it like a sports car on display.

“Cool!” Joey added, hurrying next to Lezura.

He stared in awe at the mechsuit before them, standing on a metallic platform three feet off the ground.

“This is not just some ordinary mechsuit, Joey,” Lezura said.

“This is the Jagger type mechsuit,” said Oleon, strolling to stand next to them.

The mechsuit in front of them, poised like some godly effigy, was six meters tall. It had heavy armor plates of a creamy color with scratches, scars and bits of rust that made it seem like a man wearing body armor. The shoulders were more rounded, were dark green, and with a set of six rim-rimmed barrels on one shoulder and a larger one on the other. One green-black hand held a giant version of the heavy-assault lancegun; the other had a larger rocket launcher—something like a big black tube with a smaller one extending into the barrel and a rounded back-half. Nearly twice as long as Joey’s body.

Lezura turned to Oleon and said curtly, “I wanted to say that!”

“Then say the rest,” said Oleon smugly.

Lezura beamed, she said, “This type of mechsuit was based off the design of the orderran Narcom robot, only it is not an AI as the Narcom, as it requires piloting. As be plainly seen with the Jagger it has stronger armor than the Viceken, is equipped with flares on the right shoulder and shield projector on the left. Both weapons are chain fed from ammunition cases on the back. And the best part—” Lezura climbed onto the platform in front of the mech, she took her spear, extended it and pointed to the left arm of the mech—“it even has a Fizzy-Blade!”

“Fizzy-Blade?” Joey said incredulously.

“A melee weapon, usually a knife, attached to an electronic handle with a machine called a Fizzer that vibrates the blade to incredible speeds that it acts like a high-powered chainsaw,” Lezura said.

“Now that’s some cool stuff!” Joey said. He turned to Oleon and said, “Hey, why didn’t any of the guys use this on us?”

Oleon arched his back and folded his arms. “Well for starters we only had one,” he said, “and mechsuits of this quality are extremely hard to come by. They are the best on the nycarman military.”

“Actually,” said Lezura, “they were first introduced by the United Military Force of Narz; under the name light-jumpers.”

“No!” said Oleon with a sudden surge of energy.

Lezura scowled at Oleon with hands on her hips. “What do you mean ‘no’?” she said.

Oleon said, “The suit you are talking about that was designed by the largaph was supposed to be called jumper-armor. That was because it was designed to be heavy body armor lightened with strategically placed pods of antigravity orbs that increased the wearer’s speed and jumping capabilities while wearing it—in addition to allow the user to lift heavy objects that was have normal given a yautgan lower back pains in the mornings.”

Lezura said, “It was not an armor, it was a suit, you ninny! It covered the entire body much as any mechsuit does. The only difference is that it was much smaller to fit over the body. Besides that fact it was designed exactly like the Jagger—and the nycarman designers admitted to buying the blueprints for one hundred billion yerks from the largaph—who in turn said that the larger design of the Light-Jumper was based on the Narcom!”

“Who are you calling ninny, brace-face?” Oleon shot back. He gestured to two different angles and continued, “There is a difference between a mechsuit, and body armor. Armor is designed to give the wearing protection from damage inflicted by an enemy or the environment. A mechsuit is vehicle that is piloted by someone, not worn.”

“You big ninny,” Lezura said, stomping the ground at the last word. “The light-jumper is a suit! Armor only covers a portion of the body, but a suit covers the entire body...” Lezura tapped the Jagger with her spear “... just like the mechsuit does. The only difference is that a mechsuit is large



enough to be fitted with weapons! That means the Jagger is just a larger version of the light-jumper—which is a suit!”

Oleon grimaced at Lezura. “Are you stupid woman? Armor can cover the entire body as well. Why do you think the Jagger has armor plating over it?”

“Because it is a suit,” said Lezura in a soft voice as if she was speaking to a child, “not armor, dear.”

“You moron,” Oleon said with clenched fists. “How can they both be suits, when the term is applied to a person using any of them, is one is worn and the other is piloted? Obviously one is a suit, and the other is a vehicle!”

“He kinda has a point, Lezura,” Joey said, scratching his chin. “Oh, they’re a few bristles there. I need a shave!”

“What?” Lezura said. “You are siding with this ninny?”

“I am not a ninny?” said Oleon.

Lezura went on, “Ninny! Ninny-ninny-ninny—you need armor to hold in your ninny brain that is leaking all over the place!”

“At least I do not need a blasted guffer-trap to hold up my teeth!” and Oleon bared his white teeth at Lezura.

Joey choked on his spit, clutched his throat and staggered back. Finally he burst out laughing.

Lezura smiled smugly. “Yes you are,” she said in low, seething voice.

Oleon said, “How so?” and folded his arms.

“You said the light-jumper is a suit, and the Jagger is a vehicle,” Lezura said.

Oleon looked around for the big-bang that was supposed to hit him. “So...?”

“You said the light-jumper is a suit—not armor!” Lezura said. She hopped up and down. “Hah! I got you to admit it!” Lezura struck a dainty pose and said to herself. “Oh yes, Lezura Achimi Hembim, they cannot stop even if they had help from the gods.”

Joey placed a hand on Oleon’s shoulder, meeting his smoldering gaze. “Told ya,” he said.

Oleon shoved off Joey’s hand and said, “Look; you two just take the machine and the weapons and leave!”

Joey’s eyes lit up his entire face. He said, “Really; I can keep the Jagger?”

As Joey hopped onto the platform Lezura stepped off and walked over to one of the crates. She touched one with her spear and said, “What kind of weapons and ammunition do you have?”

Oleon went over to a table where there were a clatter of tools. He took up a crowbar and snapped open the nearest crate. Lezura looked inside and saw cases of orange-brown ammunition looking up at her by the hundreds.

“Incendiary rounds,” she said.

“That is not all of it,” said Oleon moving to the other side of the room with Lezura in tow.

Joey climbed onto a pedal hanging from the pelvis of the Jagger, stood on it and examined the cockpit. He found a smooth lever at the side and pulled it.

There were the brief words from the computer inside the mechsuit, “OPENING HATCH,” and the pieces on the chest pulled apart.

Joey didn’t need to move, they spread in a wide way so he could clearly see the inside of the mechsuit. There was a black cushioned, sleek seat with mechanical gloves extended with a metallic frame like a forearm resting just above the chair’s arms.

Monitors went around the seat and were propped up in the ceiling, and in the center was a helmet.

When it has opened Joey saw the lever suddenly fold into the body of the mechsuit. Unknown to the human it was a reset design on the mech; closing the cockpit as if it had never been used, and once a new user was established the lever would fold up so no one on the outside could open it while the pilot was in.

Joey quickly seated himself inside, bouncing.

Oleon opened another create and showed Lezura some shiny bullets.

“Are those...”

“Silver bullets—yes,” Oleon said, “Stralin had them in case he ever had to kill orderrans with the lycan ability. Lower level lycan users can be stopped with silver, incendiary rounds or blow to the head; but the really big ones need silver or plasma under skins.”

“Yes, I remember,” said Lezura, wincing, “silver is like a toxic substance to lycan flesh. When it enters their body it erodes the cells, which go on to infect other cells—like a virus.”

Lezura stepped back; Oleon saw a unnerving look on her face.

“Is something wrong?” said Oleon, puzzled.

“No,” Lezura said, deciding that everyone knowing that faeries were also weak to silver should be known only to her for now, “we should get going...”

Joey had his arms in the gloves and the helmet on his head. All three monitors were on, the centermost and largest one showing him the images of the outside each time he moved his head, at the lower corner of it was a black radar with two white dots. The one to the right was close to his face, showing the vital signs of the mech, the other, equally close to his face, showed the different armaments on the Jagger.

He lifted his arms, prompting the mech to do the same as well with a faint creak of the tendons. Joey had his feet on two pedals like fancy slippers. He kicked out and swung his foot back.

The mech leaped off the platform and landed with a ground shattering thud that forced Lezura and Oleon to crouch to maintain their balance.

“Joey!” Lezura said, “Get out of there this instant!”

“Chill, Lez,” came Joey’s voice from the single-eyed head of the mech with a thin layer of hollow electronic sound, “I’m not goanna break it. I’m checking the manual!”

All the writing was in Naasi. They were in brief sentences in regards to each aspect of the mech, but there were still some words Joey could not make out. Luckily there was the option of voice-command on a small screen to his lower left, the icon for which was identifiable by a mike.

Joey touched it, on the outside the mech tech absently at nothing with its gun.

In the translators in the mech, Joey heard in a smooth feminine voice, “VOICE COMMAND ACTIVATED. PLEASE SELECT ICONS ON THE VARIOUS DISPLAY UNITS, SPEAK THEIR NAME AND ISSUE AN ORDER ABLE TO BE CARRIED OUT BY THAT PART OF THE MECHSUIT.”

“Oh yeah,” Joey said, “sexy alien woman computer voice!”

Joey blew on the icon on the upper left for the mech’s gun.

“MACHINEGUN SELECTED,” said a male’s voice this time, fluent with an accent of almost the King’s English.

On Joey’s right hand he felt a jar and sudden weight.

“Machinegun activate,” said Joey.

“MACHINEGUN’S SAFETY REMOVED,” the voice said.

Joey aimed at the ceiling and squeezed the trigger for a split second.

The rounds popped out of the gun and scored dusty, fist-sized in the ceiling.

“Boy!” Oleon and Lezura both said.

Joey put his hands on his hips, as did the mechsuit awkwardly. “Hey, it’s Rakai,” said Joey, “or call me Joey the Awesomeness Master. Get the name right, will you...?”

One thing they did get right though was that Joey wasn’t going to be piloting the mechsuit again anytime soon.

After disabling the forcefield with honoi and prying Joey out, Oleon and Lezura bound Joey by his hands and feet until they were finished putting a few crates together.

Using the Jagger; detaching its weapons and placing them on its back, Lezura tied ten crates of silver rounds together and carried them out on the mechsuit's shoulders.

Oleon untied Joey to help him carry the incendiary rounds in a trolley, which was more than a hassle to lift up the stairs.

They didn't get any questions once they reached the outside as to where they got the Jagger or the ammunition from. Oleon slipped back into the warehouse. Joey tied the bags of ammunition to Redbolt and he and Lezura left.

Back at the camp the military had not arrive as yet to retrieve them, and they took the time to get everything prepped and ready. Lezura and Joey shared half of the ammunition they had with the camp, keeping the rest, and the Jagger of course, for themselves.

Lezura set the Jagger next to their home and went inside to sort out her things. Next to the mechsuit was Redbolt, chewing a bucket of pink wheat freely.

Joey strode off to S'us' residences—which was an orange, plastic tarp set over three walls with a curtain hanging at the front.

Joey had eaten a meal prepared by Tololon, who along with the worker's from her inn had established a ramshackle restaurant.

He had washed his face and combed his messy hair as best as he could, hoping it would appease S'us. "S'us?" he called at the curtain.

He heard some footsteps inside and something like clothes shuffling.

The curtains pulled away and he found S'us standing there, dressed in a light red cotton dress, silver and gold bangles are her wrists and a beaded chain around her neck.

She smiled and said, "You were gone a very long time?"

Joey saw the translator in her ear, but chose to say in Naasi, "Mi shep gehuw."

"Please, come inside," S'us said.

Her room wasn't lavish except for some orange and blue tapestry. Everything else was strewn about, albeit the clothes were folded and a lancegun and pistol sat in one corner.

S'us pointed to a mat in one corner near a yellow lava lamp bubbling in slow motion. "Sit," she said as she rummaged through her stacked clothes.

Joey sat on a soft mat. S'us sat before him with two small cups and a bottle. She poured two cups and handed Joey one.

Joey took a sip; it was mixed with the sour-sweetness of pomeg fruit and a hespi berry.

S'us drank and said, "I hope you do not have any wild ideas as to why I called you here, Rakai."

Dammit! Joey thought. She knows I wanted to nail her. Joey said, "Well I..."

Joey trailed off when he saw the sock-puppet, I'us, sitting next to S'us on the mat.

S'us caught the direction of Joey's eyes. She looked at her sister and back at Joey and said, "Oh. Do not be alarmed. This conversation concerns her also. But I will be doing most of the talking."

"Can that—can she, get up and walk?" Joey said with a nervous stare at I'us/

"Sometimes," said S'us.

Joey shot her a startled look. "What do you mean 'sometimes'?"

"Only if necessary," said S'us. "Joey, please focus."

"Yeah," said Joey, forcing himself to take his eyes off I'us. He took another sip. "What'd ya wanna ask me?"

S'us said cautiously, "This mission that you and Lezura are embarking on. Are just the two of you going?"

Joey rubbed his neck and said, "It looked like that to me at first, but I think that a few people might be coming along for ride. Some from the Dielengann Path...probably Tylin or whoever..."

"You have no problem with people joining you?" said S'us.

“No,” said Joey. “Actually I wouldn’t mind having more friends around; would make things easier for me.”

S’us opened her mouth but closed it quickly. She saw Joey looking at her expectantly, and she said, “Could-could I come with you, Joey...?”

Joey shifted in his seat and smile. “Sure. But, shouldn’t you stay with Clastaan and the rest of the clan? I mean you’re young and all.”

“So are you,” said S’us, “yet you are going on a mission to save the world.”

Joey shrugged, rolled his eyes and looked aside. “I guess...”

S’us touched his thigh, sending a wave of warm shivers up Joey’s spine. “Listen, Joey,” S’us said, “I am not just planning to tag along with you to go on wild adventures.”

Joey took that as S’us saying she wasn’t going with him because she liked him, and Joey’s mouth wavered in a frown.

“I want to find my sister’s body,” S’us said, her golden eyes were hard-fixed on Joey’s face, “Her real body.”

Thoughts of bedding S’us left Joey’s head and he looked at her with a new profound interest.

“Wait,” Joey said, “I thought...well-you know?” Joey gestured timidly to I’us. “I thought you already had your sister?”

“Moron...” I’us said.

“Quiet,” S’us said to her.

Joey looked at the two of them, thinking a shrink would have a field day with this—but to him it was just thrilling!

S’us sighed and said to Joey, “Sorry about that.”

Joey shook his head. “I don’t wanna get up in your business, S’us, but I’d like to know what really happened with your sister?”

S’us finished her drink and said, “It was during the beginning of the Third Great War. My sister and I were living in a small country called Plorse with our aunt and uncle; our parents were social elites who were always busy to take care of us. When Plorse was sacked by orderrans my family tried to flee to this continent, but only I managed to make it.”

“I’m sorry to—” Joey held his tongue when he saw S’us frown.

“It’s not a sob story,” S’us said. “I told you so you could understand where I’m coming from.”

Joey nodded. “Sure,” he said. “But you’re mentioning your sister’s ‘body’. Is her mind trapped in the puppet or something?”

S’us hand suddenly flew in the sock-puppet, animating it into speech. I’us said, “No stupid! A part of my personality is embedded in this doll. S’us and I made dolls off each other and added a little of our personality so we could be close to each other. You wouldn’t be able to understand me unless S’us spoke for me, because you’re so retarded. But we can understand each other just fine.”

Joey got to his feet with glowering eyes and pointed at I’us. “Okay,” he said, “S’us, your sister’s being a real bitch!”

S’us said to Joey, “Please do not refer to my sister as a bitch, Joey.” she turned to I’us, “and sister, please show some manners.”

I’us said, “You little prick. Calling yourself the Rakai so you can get in my sister’s pants—you think I’m going to let that happen?”

“I’us!” S’us said.

Joey’s face went red. His eyes darted about nervously until he finally laid them on S’us and said, “Um-that’s not true-S’us! I’m not trying to have sex with you! That puppet’s lying!”

“No I’m not,” I’us said. S’us pointed the puppet to herself. I’us said, “S’us look at the front of his pants.”

Before S'us could look Joey turned his body around and said over his shoulder, "S'us stop listening to that damn ugly rag on your hand!"

I'us gasped at S'us and said, "Sister?"

"What?" S'us said.

"You're actually pink?"

Joey turned around to see S'us skin in a light shade of pink. Her color quickly went back to normal.

"What does that mean?" said Joey; "turning pink?"

S'us yanked I'us off her hand and threw her down. S'us said to Joey, "It means I got a little excited about what I'us said."

Joey smiled. "You mean you wanted to—"

"No," said S'us, "It means you weren't really listening to what I was saying, were you?"

Joey gritted his teeth, said, "Of course I was listening! I was until your sister flew in the middle with all that crap!" Joey took a deep breath, exhaled and folded his arms. His tone went more subtle as he sat and said, "Damn, S'us; if your sister's really like this, I wouldn't want to meet her in person. Wait, on second thought I think I would like to meet her—so I can punch her in the face!"

S'us crept closer with sparkling eyes and said, "So does that mean I can accompany you?"

"Sure," said Joey. "It'd be my chance to help a lady out."

"You know he's going to want something in return?" said I'us.

That's it, S'us thought. I've had enough of you nagging me, I'us.

"What?" I'us said.

"I'm really going to piss you off now," said S'us.

Joey said, "Umm, were you talking to your sister?"

"S'us what are you—"

S'us tuned out her sister and said to Joey in a silky voice, "Close your eyes."

"What?" Joey said.

"Close them you moron," S'us said.

Joey did as he was told.

With the silence around them, S'us finally had the chance to observe the Rakai all by herself.

There were certain characteristics of his species she found relatable; the presence of hair, the position of the eyes and mouth in proportion to the face just as hers were, though his nose was more protruding than hers as well as with the ears which seemed a bit on the nycarman side.

But S'us didn't hate nycarmans, and she had no qualms about a male from another species finding her attractive either. So she really didn't see anything that would really turn her off in Joey, except his loudness.

One little kiss wouldn't hurt either, S'us thought.

As S'us leaned in a huge hand clasped around her mouth and pulled her off like a bird snatching a lizard.

Joey waited with his lips puckered for a while. He wondered if S'us was having second thoughts about kissing with him. Back on Earth he was never the type to be asked out by girls, even the ones with acne, braces and huge glasses or the chubby ones.

But all that went away when he felt something touch his lips. It sort of felt like lips; they were two, but clamping down really hard. He guessed that was how reptilian lips were. Joey fought back, slobbering all over the strong lips.

"Do you like it, Shorty?"

The tone of the voice was a low tenor, not like S'us'. Plus S'us never called him shorty.

And the voice was familiar!

Joey's eyes flew open. He was staring at Yeltsa. He traced her strong hand down to his mouth where the thumb and forefinger were folded into fake lips.

“What the f—WHAAAAAA—”

Joey pushed Yeltsa’s hand and away and sprung to his feet. “Lezura!” he said.

He tried to run but he tripped and dropped just feet away from the door. Joey looked back and saw S’us unconscious on the floor.

“S’us!”

Joey pumped honoi into his hand and aimed it at Yeltsa. “What the hell did you do to her?” Joey said, then repeated in Naasi, “Ma’wha es-eil yuh eil ir fele-ta?”

Yeltsa wore a light pink, frilly blouse with leathering stitching around the forearms and sides, along with dark jeans and her usual boots. She had a large bag strapped around her. It was amazing and scary that Joey didn’t hear her come in.

Yeltsa folded her feet beneath hers, took the bottle and uncorked it and drank. She lowered the bottle and said slyly, “You’re Naasi is coming along nicely; though you didn’t have to repeat yourself”, Yeltsa gestured to the translator in her ear. “I just gave her a chokehold until she passed out. She’ll be fine in a few minutes.”

“What’d you want?” said Joey, “Did you come here to kill me? You want the key? You’ll never get it bitch!”

Yeltsa shook her head. “Kid, if I wanted to kill you and get the key I could have done that the moment you were taking my hand’s virginity.” Yeltsa took another swig and shook her head. “No, I’m not here for that. I just came to see you. And put your hand down before you set off that thing.”

“As if,” Joey said, “tell me the real reason why you’re here.”

Yeltsa’s eyes lowered into a slight glower. She put the bottle down and said, “I’m running from the orderrans, just like everyone else. I escaped my execution before the officers got the chance. Well...more like I took them out before they got the chance.”

Joey’s face went pale, but before he could speak Yeltsa said, “I didn’t kill them if that’s what you’re wondering. But they do have a few broken limbs though...”

“So why did you come here?” said Joey, “Why not go somewhere where no one recognizes you and start a new life?”

Yeltsa scoffed. “You think it’s that easy? You think they’re other gangs around? You think there aren’t people out there who don’t want to harvest your organs and sell them?”

“I thought you weren’t afraid of things like that?” Joey said.

“I’m not, actually,” Yeltsa said. “But I have to be smart about it. I can’t go somewhere that’s owned by another gang without backup. The truth is I wouldn’t mind setting up a gang here, now that I heard you kicked the Hapchenan’s butt.” Yeltsa paused, deliberating, “but seeing as how I just got out of a gang that almost killed me, I’m not so ready to start a new one.”

Joey’s hand stopped glowing and he lowered it. “So what’ll you do now?”

“Don’t get me wrong,” Yeltsa said, “I’m still after power; and a lot of it. But I think I’ll have to take another route besides crime now.”

“How about coming with me?” Joey said.

Yeltsa gave a genuine look of surprise. She said, “What? Are you serious about that...?”

Joey smiled, he said “Why not? You helped us back at Suride Town. You can come with me and Lezura...and her kooky little friend, I think. And what’s goanna get you more respect and power than rolling with the Rakai?”

True, thought Yeltsa, this little brat might be a pain in the ass at times, but he does have his perks. I can get away with a few things as well!

Yeltsa rose to her full height of seven foot eight inches. “Rakai, you have yourself a deal,” she said, holding up her fist.

Joey touched hers with his and said, “Just call me Joey.”

S'us stirred on the floor. Yeltsa picked her up and cradled her in her arms. S'us regained consciousness, shook her head, and laid her eyes on Yeltsa.

"You!" she said.

S'us hit Yeltsa in the face and flew out of her arms. She went into the corner for her rifle, snatched it and aimed it at Yeltsa's head.

Joey quickly stepped between them, though with his height the gun was still way over his head.

"S'us, easy!" Joey said. "She's okay with us now!"

"Waste the bitch!" I'us said.

"That woman knocked me out cold and you are siding with her?" S'us said to Joey, looking him square in the eyes before switching them back to a rather unimpressed Yeltsa.

"S'us she was just joking around with us," said Joey, "Come on, do you think we would still be alive if she wanted to kill us?"

The fact was fighting S'us to believe it, playing different emotions on her face, until finally she exhaled loudly and said, "Fine!" S'us lowered her weapon. She pointed at Yeltsa and said "You're lucky the Rakai sided with you."

"No," I'us said, "she's lucky the Rakai wants to get in her pants."

Yeltsa faked a gasp and put her hands on her head.

Joey put his arms around both of them. "Come on," Joey said, smiling nervously, "you two are my girls now. Don't fight over me."

"Excuse me?" Yeltsa said.

Even S'us looked at Joey quizzically and said, "Joey, I find you nice, but not worth dying over."

Joey's smile dropped off and clattered to the floor. He took his hands off them and said, "Well screw you guys then!" he folded his arms and curtly looked away. "At least I have my trusty Chevalier Lezura."

The curtained burst open and Lezura stepped inside; hair tied into a bun at the back with a pink and white cloth, and wearing a cotton white blouse with brown hems and black leathery tights.

"Speak a the devil!" Joey said.

"Joey, they are here. Come one!" she said.

"Oh Lezura," Joey said, he gestured to Yeltsa, "she's—"

"I know," Lezura said, "I saw her coming into the camp and spoke with her. Now hurry up."

Joey gave Yeltsa a cynical look and said, "Yeah, right—as if you could've really killed us."

Yeltsa rolled her eyes.

Joey jogged the door, stopped, turned around and said, "You girls coming?"

Yeltsa fiddled with her strap and went after Joey. S'us yanked her frock and her cap out of a bag and followed them after taking up her rifle and ammunition.

Outside they saw a fleet of massive airships heading towards the camp from the east, casting pressing shadows on the city below.

"Those are Venlier class," Yeltsa said absently, staring at airships.

"Joey, come on!" Lezura urged them from up the camp in the direction of their house.

"Be back with you guys," said Joey as he ran off.

While going to his house Joey stole glances at the ships as they came closer with their engines and motor hissing lowly.

The Venliers eerily resembled an Earth airplane, but squatter looking with a shiny purple color and wings shaped like giant flat ovals with loads of giant antigravity pods beneath them and thrusters at the rear. The face of it was wide like a hammerhead shark's, with four guns beneath it and the viewing port at the top. The rear had a long tail above the back entrance hatch that ended in a circle with bar-like structure, further finished with thrusters on each end.

Each of the five Venlier was a little larger than a Skymera. Amongst them were smaller dropships, hitching close.

By the time Joey went inside, got his things and came back out he saw one of the smaller ships lowering into the street.

Joey looked across and saw Lezura boarding the Jagger. An envious flow of energy shot through Joey's body but was immediately replaced by the pressing aura of the Venliers passing them noisily above.

The whole camp became dark for a few seconds before the sunlight got back its spot on the stage.

Joey put in his things on Redbolt and hopped on. He saw Yeltsa and S'us coming.

"What are you two doing?" said Lezura's voice from out of the Jagger's head, clutching the machinegun in one hand and holding a smaller crate of its ammunition on her shoulder; "you especially, Yeltsa!"

"Didn't the Rakai tell you?" Yeltsa said, "I'm a part of his team now!"

The Jagger turned its head to Redbolt, said, "Joey?"

"Yup!" he said as he helped up S'us in front of him, "S'us is coming with us too." Yeltsa jumped on Redbolt's back behind Joey.

Redbolt grunted.

The Jagger exhaled, and said, "Very well."

Lezura walked the Jagger off with Redbolt following close. On their way they were given farewell cheers by the public. Nesten, Dinon and Coenter saluted them. Tololon and her staff threw herbs at them, and Clastaan blew kisses at them—and was even shedding a few tears—

And he saw S'us and shrieked.

"Young lady where do you think you're going?"

S'us puffed up her chest and said, "I have decided I will leave to find my sister, whether you like it or not, Clastaan."

Clastaan gritted his many sharp teeth and wagged a finger at S'us. "You little rascal," he said, "Do you know what will happen if you go out there?"

"I am fully aware that I can die, Clastaan," S'us said so seriously that Clastaan felt bitter, "But I will be glad to die trying to find my sister. I believe she is still alive out there and is waiting for me to find her."

Clastaan threw his hands in the air and wailed something like a small prayer. He dropped his hands, touched his forehead and shook it. "I spent years taking care of you, S'us. And to see you go like this..."

"I will return, Clastaan..." S'us said.

In the streets they saw a few of the locals at the sides wishing them good luck. It was then Joey realized that war not only put people against each other, but brought them together in the face of common enemy. Unfortunately the first outweighed the latter.

The rear of the dropship faced them on the street, the engines still running and the ramped lowered. Waiting on them were Tylin, Podge, Tet, Heliri with Flivi on her shoulder, the three wyassies and the Sekku.

Above them on the ramp stood armed soldiers wearing dark blue helmets with the visor in the design of three vertical ovals; the center one lower to the mouth.

Between the soldiers stood a medium built Outo nycarman; his uniform was tight on his body and his arms folded behind him.

He walked down the middle of the ramp with two soldiers at his sides to meet Lezura and the others.

Lezura opened the hatch of the Jagger so she could give him proper greeting.

"Nice to meet you all," said the man, "I am General Din; I will be the man leading the assault on the orderrans."



"I'm the Rakai!" Joey said.

"So I have heard," Din said, studying Joey with bright pink eyes that kinda matched his pinkish purple skin. "I take it you are fully aware of the situation...?"

"I can assure you he is, general," said the Sekku, stepping forward. "But please, for the sake of time, let us continue any conversation onboard the ship."

"Good idea," the general said with a curt nod. He went to say something along the lines of follow him inside, but his mouth faltered when he realized something. He pointed at Redbolt and said, "You cannot honestly think that animal can come with us?"

"Why not?" said Joey, "He's a part of the team too..."

"Team?" general Din said in puzzlement.

"Of course!" said Heliri, prancing forward and patting Redbolt on his huge chest. "Not because he doesn't walk on two legs and talk means he's not somebody."

The general shrugged lightly and agreed to it with a wave of his hand.

"And where do you think you're going, S'us?" Tet said.

"Clastaan gave me permission to join," S'us said, "I promised him that I would return. I do not plan to break that promise."

"The ship is waiting everyone," the general said, he turned and walked off with his men in line, "we have a war to take part in."

They silently followed the general inside the dropship, aliens and animals alike. The ramp lifted in place, and once shut the dropship took into the air and away.

A dropship of this size wasn't designed for carrying mechsuits, but the Jagger and Redbolt still found a space to hold in the middle of the wide passage. The Jagger held onto the beam in the ceiling, crouching a little. Everyone else was seated.

Yeltsa, Joey, Heliri and S'us were on one side, while the Sekku, wyassies, Tet, Tylin and Podge were on the other. Only five officers excluding the general were in the dropship standing at the four corners. The general squeezed past Redbolt at the mechsuit.

"Sorry," Lezura said as she moved her foot a little so he could pass.

The general shook his head; this situation was even more crowded than when he had his birthday party in his college dorm room twenty years ago.

He stood at the front behind the pilots and the view port of the clouds and Venliers in the distance and said, "Listen up, everyone. I have been made aware of your plans to escape, and how you plan to lure the orderrans away. For that to work, our best chance would be to expose you all to their ground troops. It would be terrible for everyone one of you to confront them in a single ship that can get shot down."

"So what about ground transport then?" Podge said.

"That will be provided to you from one of the Venliers," the general said. "We have jeeps at our disposal, albe it wheeled-ones."

"Pwaah!" Heliri said, stopping her Sugarstick in the pile of mud before he, "I do not like jeeps, those things tend to explode a lot."

Joey raised his hand.

"Yes...?" the general said.

"Can I get a Jagger?" Joey said.

"No."

Joey pouted and folded his arms.

"Any more sensible questions?" the general said.

"What of escort service," the Sekku said. "It is up to us to be the bait, but that will not work if we are captured and killed within minutes."

"That—"

“General!” came an excited voice from the ship’s com unit.

The general spun hastily and approached one of the pilots.

“Open the channel,” he said. Once done the general said, “This is General Din speaking, over.”

“General, we have contact with the enemy forces five hundred yards off; numbering seven Skymeras, over!”

General Din leaned forward over the pilots shoulder and tapped the touchscreen, opening all the channels. He said, “This is the general to all Venliers. I am ordering all weapons on standby until the enemy in three hundred yards off. Deploy heavy assault ground troops to lead the way. Be on the lookout for the Rakai and his group, they should be easy to spot; over and out.”

There came five replies of, “Copy that, over and out.”

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Across the seven mile plains of yellow and brown grass with strips of green, deep slopes and high hills and bare patches of earth, there stood the ghostly remains of what was the old Sugeya Temple of Worship; broken and scattered beliefs of the first queen of Tartian who's power and tales of greatness were so vast they had extended to even here were she was revered as a deity.

But when the Third Great War sprouted its ugly head, not even hope in Sugeya's ever present soul could save the people, and they abandoned the massive temple just like any forgotten article in a fire.

The marble and granite pillars, floors and statues of the armored woman and her fellow female knights were strewn all over, the scraps left to be devoured by creeping vines and long grass.

Through the grey clouds that drifted over the lands the sun fought them back with thrusts of light through their vast bodies, lending showers of glittery orange to the lands.

Beneath the battle of the sun and the clouds and the decimation of the stones knights and the plants, seven Skymera's and five Venliers slowly closed the distances between each other. Their bases opened like giant mouths, and amongst the two groups of ships spewed dozens of dropships, carrying soldiers, vehicles and mechs alike.

On the side of the orderrans Dawhawk hovered over the ground, dropping off troops, Cyries and assault-mechs.

Between the ranks of scores of militants, larger, darker tones Dawhawk flew by with open sides and rear, dropping off the massive Narcoms that landed in the ground with a shuddering thud, stood up from their crouch and unhinged the massive cannons of their backs; chain-fed with explosive rounds.

The common Narcom was a metal monstrosity five meters tall, bulky looking and armored as the Jagger, but with smooth black armor. Their hands and five-toed feet were white, as their large faces with narrow red eyes and their wide mouth set like the interlocking design of a large zipper.

In their chest was a shield-projector, which covered the machine in a pink layer when struck. One shoulder had an EMP discharger in the form of a cylinder with blue rings.

Narcoms, Cyries and assault mechs led the front basically used as cannon fodder—expendable machines to absorb the brunt of the first wave of the assault while diminishing the mechsuits of the enemy.

Right behind them were the soldiers, with their Drochies between, travelling on the wheels on their undersides like jeeps.

Just like the Narcoms, the nycarman military had the mechsuits leading the front for the same purpose. Most of them were Viceken type with one in every five having a Jagger present. Behind them the jeeps and trucks cautiously crept up.

They were only two hundred yards away when the particle beam from the Skymera struck into the ranks of the nycarman militants; a massive blast of fire and debris that eradicated three mechs and seven soldiers instantly.

And the gunfire started.

Mechs and mechsuits rushed forward, exchanging fire that quickly broke down their shields in small explosions that echoed for miles.

The Narcoms crouched, pointed their shoulders at the mechsuits and fired from their EMP cannons. A blast of electricity rippled into ranks of the mechsuits, breaking down shields and leaving them vulnerable to gunfire from the assault mechs and the screaming Cyries.

Vicekens and Jaggers rattled and rocked with each hit of the high powered weapons. The extremely battered ones collapsed in sparks and flame-cloaked debris.

One Jagger so far was destroyed; its shield reduced to nothing and then its body to a smoking heap of metal with explosive and plasma rounds from the Narcoms; but not before slaying a good deal of soldiers and assault-mechs.

With the fall of the mechsuits the nycarman militants flood through the broken flanks, squeezing off short bursts of gunfire at the enemy as they dashed for cover in the bosom of the stone women's corpses. Not all made it; some got picked off by stray gunfire, snipers and explosions.

The Jaggers and Vicekens used tactics instead of brute force like the mechs. Instead of an equal clash of massive fire power between Narcom and Jagger, the Jaggers focused their fire on the assault-mechs and series, reducing them to scraps while creating an opening in their line of defense for the nycarmans and the remaining Vicekens to squeeze through.

While the foot-soldiers toiled below, the Venliers and Skymeras bombarded each other with ordnance above. The Venliers added the spice plasma-fueled missile charges with their high-powered turrents while the Skymeras preferred to flavor theirs with mightier particle beam cannons.

Even though they had to lower their shields for ten seconds and sustain some damage, the beam compensated with a power that blast through the shields of the Venliers, and even if the damage would be lessened by thirty percent, it was enough to score streaks of carnage on the hides of the Venliers.

In essence each time the particle-beam cannons fired it was a sure hit.

Already one Venlier bled smoke like a down-and-out jalopy way past its time.

A jeep holding the members of Joey's team, along with three others as escort; one with Lezura's Jagger riding on top of it, holding onto the sides over crouching men, drove a couple yards around the battlefield to flank the orderrans. With a group this size they couldn't do much, but could get their attention.

They dove down a dirty slope and came up back with a bump. An explosion above them clapped like thunder. Those who could manage looked up and saw one of the Venliers engulfed in flames.

S'us gasped, hefting her dirty rifle. "My goodness..."

Beside her, holding a lancegun, Joey said glumly, "That would be so cool if it weren't happening to our side..."

Behind them Heliri rode in tow on Redbolt, with Flivi flying in circles overhead, chirping madly and the explosion and falling debris.

"Keep focused," Tylin said, hefting her heavy-assault lancegun, "we are coming up on the enemy!"

Before them they saw the dazzling scene of flashing gunfire and explosion of earth, fire and electricity.

The co-driver of the lead Jeep with Joey's group said into radio to the others, "Okay ladies and gentlemen, let us start our first day of school nice and easy!"

The jeeps slowed and swerved to a stop with their sides facing the enemy some fifty yards off. Everyone jumped out with their rifles clutched—well, not everyone.

The Sekku stayed back, along with Heliri and the wyassies.

Leading the charge was the platoon commanders and captains. Behind them were the officers along with Tylin, Podge and Tet, and behind them were Joey Yeltsa, and S'us.

"What? Is it because I'm short?" Joey said.

"No stupid," Yeltsa said, pacing along beside him, "It's because out of everyone's head that might snatch a bullet it in, yours is the most valuable."

The Jagger charged up to the front through the remains of room and unloaded rounds in a sweeping arc at the enemy that produced more scuttling and diving than death. Lezura kept going forward, pushing the soldiers and Cyries back. She fired a single round from the rocket, scoring two kills and stunning a few others.

Behind her the others spread themselves out along remains of the room, crouching with their backs up against them or going prone.

Within under a second of their arrival they were already receiving heavy gunfire that would have pressed them flat had Lezura and the Jagger hadn't been there to ease them up.

Even with the internal cooling system in the Jagger Lezura still sweated. Her eyes had to pay attention to all screens with stepping out of the stream of heavy fire and laying down her attack. Luckily her attention span was very fast—

“Blast!” she said, seeing the burst of flame from a missile launcher. “Release the flares!”

The right on the Jagger gashed yellow lights and sparks into the air. The two missiles suddenly switch trajectories and rocketed upward, hitting the flares.

Lezura took aim at the assault mech that had fired the missiles and release a spray of bullets that ripped off the mech's torso.

An explosion against Lezura's shield dissipated the last of it in and rocked her back two steps. Now gunfire sparked all over her. She fired a missile, blew apart the ground and sent mangled and torn bodies flying.

Around Lezura the orderrans and Cyries snuck pass her and took shots at the soldiers, deploying shield-projectors as well.

Some Cyries took the approach to charge into the ranks of the soldiers, a tactic that seemed wild but worked to drive the soldiers out of cover.

A Cyries came charging with its gun spraying wildly. It tanked two bursts from S'us Malcer before crashing down in a hail of gunfire from Joey.

They both ducked when another Cyri came running in.

“Are you okay?” Joey asked S'us.

“Keep your eyes around you!” S'us said.

And a gunshot nipping the side of Joey's neck reinforced S'us' words. He ducked.

Two Cyries ran upon four soldiers. One was gunned down, but the other managed to throw a bomb in the center of them. One dove away, the others got up and were subsequently gunned down.

The explosion blasted dust over Tet and Podge. They shook it off their faces and proceeded to return fire to three orderrans.

One hid behind a shield-projector, making the other two easier to pick off as Tet and Podge did.

This orderran, however, was too confident in his shield and stayed there, not bothering to run when he saw Yeltsa, armored like a Narcom with her honoi cloak beneath, charging towards him.

Her armor sparked upon receiving a wave of gunfire, but it held. Yeltsa leaped over the shield and dropped on the orderran, caving in his head order her foot.

She spun on the spot and fired thrice from her Sputty, blasting two orderrans but only managing to kill one.

Behind her an orderran broke his cover behind the head of Sugeya, tossed his helmet to the ground and transformed into a lycan.

The hairy beast pounced on Yeltsa so fast that she only had time to lift her hand in defense. The lycan sunk its teeth through her thick flesh.

Yeltsa braced against the lycan and fired her Sputty into its guts. The animal only snarled, sinking claws and teeth into Yeltsa's flesh deeper.

Yeltsa winced and fired the Sputty in its head, blowing out a chunk and sent the lycan toppling over.

Two more lycans appeared, rushing into the soldiers on all fours.

One swiped the head clean off a soldier's shoulder, spun and slashed the other one that was emptying rounds into its back across the helmet. Its claws dug deep, exiting with gout of blood.

Two soldiers nearby emptied incendiary rounds from their sidearm into the Lycan, dropping it with smoke and flames from its crispy wounds.

Tylin fired silver rounds into the lycan charging at her. She ducked out of the way and let its limp body slide in the dirt. Smoke steamed from its wounds.

Lezura emptied the last of her rocket into a Narcom, blowing away its shield. She dropped her weapons, ducked and rolled like a crashing truck out of the way of the Narcom's EMP cannon's discharge. She came up on one knee with the heavy-machinegun in both hands and opened fire.

The Narcom's head was shot off, then the rest of its torso.

As the machine collapsed a pinkish-white beam blasted from the smoke near the Jagger's foot. The blast sent it flipping on its back.

One soldier took note of the blast and trained his eyes to where it came from. To his horror he saw a Narcom walking grumpily towards them over the remains of its fallen comrades, and in its hands was a miniature version of a particle-beam cannon.

Behind it were three other Narcoms spaced out amongst scores of soldiers and mechs and even a few hoverbikes. All racing towards their direction.

"They are advancing on us!" the Nycarman said over the gunfire.

The commanders saw the horde of red eyes coming.

"Crap!" one said, "We sure got their attention, all right!"

One of their leaders said, "Fall back! Everyone fall back now!"

Jinkai Borros Onn was in the command deck of the center-most Skymera, seated in a bronze and silver construction of a giant beast's gaping mouth.

Around him his subordinates busied themselves with monitoring the advancement of the enemy, the ship's weapons and the damage it was sustaining.

Officers relayed orders to and fro with each other and the other Skymeras. In the center of the dark-blue colored command room, adorned with grim and beastly markings like a monster's lair, was a large table, glowing with a thin layer of white light that projected the huge holographic display of all airships; enemy and friendly alike.

Seated next to Onn was his Deskai, Gadsa, a more slender built orderran compared to the huge frame of his Jinkai.

On the hologram they saw one of the Venliers slipping out of formation to the nothingness that was the ground below.

A tight smile spread like melted sugar across Gadsa's lips. "So foolish of them to think they could stand up to us with such limited forces," he said.

"Foolish or not it is this kind of tenacity that hinders our progress," Onn said. "But then again, it really is foolish. To think they could have simply allowed us to colonize their country, and we could have offered them freedom just as we did the people of Tartian."

And by freedom, Onn meant living under total Keeltionese domination. Back in Tartian the alien population lived in the slums of the worst parts of the cities; basically an even worse Underworld than Ugatin had become.

"Normally they wouldn't have even attempted to oppose us like this; seeing as how they suffered from the harvests," said Gadsa thoughtfully. "I wonder...?"

"It is because of the presence of the Rakai," Onn said crisply like he wanted to spit. "That alien has given them false hope. There is no way in hell, heaven or any of the worlds in the galaxy that bunch of powerless people; not to mention a rag-tag group of kids, can overthrow the Prestige Kingdom and its military might—even if they're not orderran."

"Yes..." Gadsa said "...but there is something about this whole"—Gadsa gestured with a repeated delicate flick of his hand—"resistance, that irks me."

Onn's forehead furrowed. Yes, there is something about this war that's nagging me. Like a switch flicked on he suddenly figured it out. Ah yes...that little piece of shit Rakai and his Chevalier! Those two have really thrown piss in my face. Defeating my men twice!

Onn's hands gripped the arms of his chair with a crackling sound.

Gadsa noticed his Jinkai's displeasure. "My Lord...?"

"My Lord," said the communications officer from their left, "We are getting reports that the Rakai has been sighted near the west side of our ranks by Companies Six and Seven.

Onn's body tensed, he sat forward with lightning speed and said, "Are you certain of this?"

"Yes, my Lord," the officer said, "he has been seen amongst other non-nycarmans—wait—" the officer pressed the headphone against his ears and listened keenly. After nearly twenty seconds that seemed like an eternity of torture for a growling Onn, the officer said, "He is making a retreat—to the northwest. A squad of hoverbikes is in pursuit of them!"

Onn rose out of his seat, yanking his cape by the side. Gadsa rose as well.

Onn said, "Maintain communication with those bikes." He turned to the internal communications officer to his right, "You, upload satellite imagery of all roads leading from here to the northwest to every Dawhawk remaining on this ship. And tell Alpha Pack to get down there on the triple!"

"Yes, my Lord," said the officer.

Onn projected his voice to the pilots, "And you three," the three men turned to their Jinkai, "turn this thing and follow the Rakai's group."

Onn left with Gadsa tailing behind him.

"My Lord," said Gadsa, "what are you planning?"

Onn stopped, jerking Gadsa into a halt. Onn spun and said, "I am going to personally make sure that the Rakai doesn't make a fool out of us a third time. In the meanwhile you stay here and have the Skymera tail us in case they are leading us into an ambush."

Gadsa wasn't too sure about the Lord's plan, but knew better than to question him. He nodded, "Yes, my Lord."

Onn nodded. "Good."

He turned and left through the doors.

They retreated for the jeeps as quickly as the commander gave the orders. Yeltsa, clutching her arm against her chest, already reached with the long strides of her legs, with Joey and S'us right behind her.

The rest filled up the jeeps while Lezura kept up with the rear, stopping to give cover with spasmodic burst of gunfire.

Her Jagger bled sparks from the shoulders, the side of the cockpit and the right thigh, but by the saving grace of some unseen force it still held together.

But she didn't plan to stick around to see how much longer it could.

As the jeeps drove off she ran towards one, stepped onto the sides and held over the heads of Joey and the others.

Heliri kicked Redbolt into action and rode alongside them.

A Droch and three hoverbikes strode from the orderrans after them over the plains.

"Where are we going?" the driver said.

"We are going on the Hollow Highway," the Sekku said, then pointed her gun out the jeep to fire at their pursuers. "We can take it up to the old shipping Port in Noss City!"

The driver felt something crawl up his spine with icepicks. "There?" he said.

"Just do it!" the lieutenant beside him said.

Not far off the plains were a thin patch of woods with arrow and poppi trees. The jeeps navigated their way through them with wild twists and turns that made anyone of them seem ready to career over at any time; especially the one with the Jagger.

The Droch switched from its wheels to its legs, and took off into the trees, stretching and grasping at the tree limbs with phenomenal speed to match the vehicles below.

Two of the bikes opened fire at the Jagger, riddling its back with bullets. Part of it blew apart, and the warning alert inside beeped hellishly in Lezura's ears.

Lezura pointed the gun behind her and fired blind shots. The riders lowered their head as bullets zipped around them.

Tet squeezed his torso out and aimed at one of the bikes. The rider saw him, broke away from the others around a tree and sped towards Tet. Tet put his faith in his regenerative abilities and risked a shot while he aimed up the rider.

Both of them fired; a well-placed shot hit the soldier in the red eye of his helmet, snapping his head back. Shots rippled across Tet's body. The bike swerved out of control and crashed into a tree.

"Tet," Tylin said, pulling the lazhinian inside the vehicles over the wyassies.

Telkit cradled the slim lazhinian and checked him. There were two huge holes in his forehead.

Telkit looked up and saw the face grim look on the faces of the others.

Podge bashed a fist in the side of the jeep. "Dammit!" he said.

Telkit lowered Tet's body in the jeep and held on tightly to Murbella as the jeep made a turn.

It swerved around another tree and sent everyone in the jeep lurching back and forth.

"I think I'm goanna be sick!" S'us said, holding her stomach.

"Throw up in Lezura's face when she comes near you again," said I'us

Redbolt galloped just behind a hoverbike carving up the Jagger. Lezura turned around to fine again, but she saw Heliri behind the bike and stopped.

The bike unleashed another burst of gunfire that ripped out a chunk of the mech. Sparks and smoke spewed from the wound.

"WARNING: THE MECHANICAL SUIT'S CORE STRUCTURE HAS BEEN SEVERELY DAMAGED. PLEASE EJECT NOW BEFORE THE SUIT'S SYSTEMS COLLAPSE," said the computer.

"Blast!" Lezura said. She blew on the screen for the mech's operation system. Once it was up she said, "Disengage the mechsuit's manual control systems."

"UNDERSTOOD; ALL MANULA CONTROL NOW DISENGAGED."

As Lezura unstrapped herself from the mech. Heliri snuck up behind the hoverbike still trailing behind them. She pointed the bulb-end of her Sugarstick at the soldier and fired a fireball into his back.

The blast missed narrowly but scorched a burning patch on the orderran.

Frightened the soldier turned around and spotted Redbolt. Heliri saw him reaching for something off his waist. She yelped and steered Redbolt between two trees and around one just as the soldier opened fire.

The Jagger's chest flew open and Lezura rolled out into the jeep, clutching her back in one hand and a Rapturan rifle in the other.

"Now S'us, now!" said I'us.

S'us swallowed and shuddered. "Shut up, I'us..." she said.

"Push it!" Murbella said, springing to her feet.

The soldier behind them glanced in front of him, steered from a tree and kept realigned with the jeep. Another fireball passed his head and he turned again to Heliri.

He fired shots into Redbolt's shoulder but the animal's thick hide stopped the rounds that were already dulled by its armor.



Heliri was going to shoot again, but saw what was happening up ahead and said, “Yikes!” and got out of the way.

The soldier looked in front of him just in time to see Murbella, Podge and the Sekku push the Jagger off the jeep. The mechsuit landed in the bike and crushed it. They both rolled in a tangled heap of shredding parts before stopping a few yards in.

The Droch strode over one of the jeeps. The men inside opened such a storm of gunfire that within seconds the machine was already smoking and sparking.

But just as it was about to fall, it jumped off two trees, set into a glide in the air that struck awe and fear in the puny hearts of the aliens below.

The Droch spun itself on its back, disposing of the orderrans into the back of the jeep. The jeep suddenly became part of screams and gunfire while lights blazing nonstop.

They landed in and around the jeep. One missed his mark and landed in a rolling heap at the side. Another landed on the hood, snatched the pistol of his waist and fired inside at the driver.

Shots snapped his head back. The soldier riding shotgun lifted a Sputty and blasted the windshield; glass shards and bullets slapped the orderran off the hood. He was run over before he even hit the ground.

The sudden bump and a swerve sent the jeep careening onto its side, sliding with waves of dirt and leaves riding at the sides in a small wave. The dead, dying and still fighting on the back were thrown out.

Yeltsa winced at the sight of the crash. “Damn!” she said.

The commander in their jeep saw the carnage off to his left, grimaced and said, “Dammit!”

As the two remaining jeeps sped on they could still hear the small bursts of gunfire behind them.

The occupants in both jeeps opened fire at the two remaining hoverbikes, driving them off their tail. “Would you people wait?” Heliri said. “Not all of us are in a crappy old vehicle!”

Redbolt foamed at the sides of his mouths, and his breath came in deep rasps.

The other jeep slowed down so Heliri could trail behind it. Lezura and the rest of Heliri’s comrades in the other provided cover fire against the bikes. Soon they were out of sight.

Twenty minutes later, they were all out of the woods and on the Hollow Highway; a ridiculously bumpy road with few blades of grass jutting out. Any metallic remnant of the street had been completely swallowed up by the tan colored ground. Around them curious sinni, gopto, lucaysha and a few young ville trees hung over their heads with a watchful air as the two tiny jeeps cautiously moved beneath.

Their growth was thick and wild that a few roots ran across the street, and the dying sunlight could barely penetrate the dark. Thankfully there wasn’t some eerie, ghostly mist around them, but they still had to use the headlights of the jeeps to navigate their way.

The wyassies were all silently resting. Not sleeping, but merely closed their eyes while their ears were on alert. Beside them the Sekku steeple her fingers in her lap and observed around her.

Yeltsa saw three Oikumies drift over her and got the shivers. She hugged herself, while beside her Joey rested across S’us’ and Lezura’s lap. He like, Dunit, snored like they were two male gersheeps threatening each other.

Tylin and Podge were silent as the covered body of Tet lay before their feet.

Apart from the croaks, squeaks and caws of critters around them, it was only Heliri whose demeanor seemed way out of place.

She sung a lively tune while feeding Redbolt leaves. She had ordered Flivi to stay on her shoulder with his light, mindful of the things that lurked.

Yet her throat was still strong and lively;

*Drifting on the water, floating on the leaves,  
Down in the mud we walk, buried up to our knees.  
Bird's crapping on our shoulders, skins festering with bugs,  
This—is the nature of our planet we love!  
Dirt beneath my fingernails, gunk between my toes,  
Just the stuff I need to make my little bones grow  
I wash my hands with urine, use gufder's tongue as a pad,  
If you don't like my style go shove it up your—*

“Would you shut it?” Yeltsa said, startling everyone.

Joey got up and rolled out of the women's laps. Dunit slurped down his spit and blinked the sleep out of his eyes.

“What is the matter with you?” Podge said.

“Yeah?” Heliri said. She waved her staff at Yeltsa and said, “If you don't like my song, shove it up your butt. If it's not big enough borrow Lezura's!”

There were chuckles amongst the two jeeps; except for Lezura who was scowling.

Joey sat in the seat beside Yeltsa and looked at her. He was surprised by his findings; she seemed a little nervous, completely out of character for a woman who was usually so cool.

“You okay, Yeltsa?” Joey said.

Yeltsa scowled at him out of pure anger, another thing unusual. “Of course I am!” she said. “Do I look like a wimp to you?”

“Maybe it's that time of the month,” Heliri said. “If you want I could lend you my pad—oh, wait—I forgot I'm not wearing any...”

“Heliri!” Murbella said.

“What?” Heliri said, waving her Sugarstick in distain, “You make it sound as if I'm naughty or something.” She pointed to Yeltsa, “She's the one acting all freaked out.”

And it suddenly hit Lezura. She turned to Yeltsa and said, “Yeltsa, are you afraid of dark places?”

“No,” Yeltsa said.

“I understand if you are,” said Dunit, “this place is dark, cold, creepy, and mysterious and has things lurking around you.”

Suddenly everyone looked around them, and saw bright eyes of various sizes in the darkness.

Yeltsa shuddered visibly. Joey saw her and said tauntingly, “You really are afraid of the dark, aren't you?”

“Would you shut up,” Yeltsa said.

Joey grinned and wiggled his fingers beneath his chin.

“Leave her alone, Joey,” S'us said, slowly sliding her tongue behind Yeltsa.

S'us wiggled the tip of her tongue in the back of Yeltsa's neck, and the yautgan woman responded with a holler and flew out of her seat. She stomped the floor and scratched all over body.

Right then and there all the unnerving feeling surrounding them was washed away by a wave of laughter from everyone.

But even that didn't last long.

The driver of the other jeep of only militants yelled to them, “We are here!”

Everyone looked ahead of the jeep. A great darkness approached them with a wide gape to swallow them all. That was the initial assumption at first, but they quickly realized that they were entering the famous Hollow Highway.

Nearly nine stories high and three hundred meters wide, the edge of the near circular tunnel had massive, dried up roots, twisting violently outwards. Amongst them were smaller trees and norinori vines along the edge, dangling at the mouth of the tunnel.

Several more vines inside twinkled with light like distant stars.

There was a sign along the left of the entrance, but the words had eroded away and left only confusing letters and symbols. The rusted remains of an old truck were faintly visible inside, getting clearer as the light of the jeeps crept over its corpse.

Yeltsa lowered her head as the jeep went inside. She shook her head and whispered, "This place has a terrible vibe..."

"But you had your trucks parked in a cave," Joey said.

"Yeah; that was small enough so sunlight could fill it up, not to mention we did regular checks to make sure anything weird didn't sleep in their amongst our equipment. I don't know what's living inside here."

"How did this place come about anyway?" Podge said, looking up at the glowing fruits in the distant ceiling. But they only offered enough illumination for the top, the rest of the place had to rely on the light of the jeeps.

Lezura said, "This tunnel was carved out of a fallen yelm tree fifty five years ago. Even before the Third Great War it was rarely used, so it was left to be a national monument to the work of the engineers."

The road before them had scraps of machines they had to navigate through, but not many.

S'us took her flashlight and shone it around them. Heliri had Flivi still on her shoulder as Redbolt kept up. Lezura put on her goggles and switch to night vision. She didn't see much more than tapikes and pupakies scurrying from the jeeps as they passed.

"What's that?" said Tylin.

There was this suddenly swarm of orange-yellow lights coming up ahead.

Yeltsa readied her weapon, as did Podge and Lezura.

"It's fine!" Heliri said, looking at the lights with a smile.

Just as they came closer, S'us shone the light on them, revealing a flock of jetlighters that silently passed, temporarily showering them with warm light.

Flivi bounced and chirped energetically on Heliri's shoulder. Heliri turned to him and said, "No, silly. That is not your flock; I found you in a nest all by yourself, remember?"

Flivi went quiet after a long trill.

The driver of the other jeep swerved around a large, insect infest boulder, and upon coming around it had something bipedal ran across his jeep, uttering a quick hawking growl as the light touched its skin.

"What?"

The driver stepped on the breaks, stopping the jeep and lurched forward everyone in the back.

"What the blazes was that?" the commander beside him said, dropping his goggles over his eyes and switching to night vision.

The other jeep stopped. Everyone stood and drew their arms.

"What happened?" asked the commander of the Rakai's group.

"Something just ran across the street!" the other driver said, a hand resting on the gun on his waist.

"It was tall and went about like a predator..."

Yeltsa loaded the silver rounds of the Sputty in the clip and then slapped the cartridge in the shotgun. "I don't have any damn time for this..." she murmured. She said aloud, "I am going to see what's up ahead of us!"

She leaped out of the jeep.

"I'm coming with you," said Podge, jumping out as well.

"Be careful," said Tylin.

Podge frowned. "Would you get off my back, sis...?"

Three soldiers from the other jeep searched as well. With lights beneath their guns they scoured around them in a sweeping arc.

Lezura took the Sheikon-box off her waist, held it under her arm and cut herself with a knife. She put up the knife and held her bleeding palm over the box.

While she chanted the words for Donnowarru, a soldier from the other jeep shone his light at his feet on the ground.

There he found a skull in the dirt. He thought it was an itikrat, but on closer inspection with his goggles he saw that it belong to a dracoid, judging by the shape of the teeth and size of the skull. It bore teeth marks all over, and one side of the head appeared to have been bitten out.

“What is it?” said one of his comrades, coming over to inspect the item. “Is that a skull?”

The officer nodded. “It looks—”

A three-clawed hand shot out of the dark, grasping the officer around the throat and crushing his windpipe instantly. The claws sunk deeper and blood spurted from the severed arteries. The arm yanked the dying man into the darkness.

“Tolomat!” his friend shouted.

The two offices stabbed into the dark with their lights and saw an eight feet tall thing with a chitin body hoist Tolomat to its face. Its mouth opened up and two mandibles shot out, latching around the officer’s face and pulling it into the things mouth.

“It is a genothroid!”

They both opened fire, bullets ripped up the limp body of Tolomat, bored holes inside the body of the creature. Phosphorous yellow-brown blood spewed from the wounds of the railing creature. It dropped the body and uttered a guttural shriek.

It took a full clip to drop the creature. Its brown, armor plated body torn to shreds. Its antennae twitched and flicked unpredictably.

And just as suddenly as the creature died there was a ruckus of movement and growls around the jeeps. Redbolt paced hysterically, all the time Heliri tried to comfort it. Flivi obediently stayed on Heliri’s shoulder, knowing the light would save them both.

A genothroid ran in the beam of light towards Yeltsa, screaming as it did. She fired three times, the third time the genothroid’s torso burst open and it fell forward.

Podge emptied a clip in another one coming at him. It fell, but to his horror it was still crawling towards him even though its lower body had been severed clean off. Podge coated his knife with honoi, extended its reach and plunged it in the thing’s head.

And it still pushed against the blade and came.

Of course, Podge remembered, the brain in the chest!

He dropped the knife, reached for his side arm, gingerly stepped around the crawling torso and fired at the base of the genothroid’s neck four times. One bullet found its mark and the torso slumped.

Lezura successfully called out Donnowarru, hoisting the box in the air as he wizard materialized from the mist of honoi.

Before he could even say anything, Lezura said, “I need light, Donnowarru!”

Donnowarru frowned. “A ‘please’ would have been nice with those chips...” he said.

The jeep rocked, knocking a few people of their feet. Murbella held on tight and fired a Bluebolt over the edge, blasting the head off one of the genothroids.

The senseless body ran around and flailed, slashing one of its brethren in the process. The angered genothroid turned on the body and immediately began to devour it from the stump of a he Two others joined in the feast.

A genothroid appeared at the back and grabbed onto Joey’s foot and dragged him, while another dragged out the corpse of Tet.

Telkit held onto Joey’s arm and pulled—S’us held onto Telkit and onto the foot of the bench. But the genothroid’s strength was astounding.

Joey kicked the genothroid in the face, speaking between each kick,

“Get...your...hands...off...my...All Stars!”

The genothroid shook its head and sunk its claws in deep, cutting Joey’s flesh.

Joey screamed, growled and said, “You asked for it!”

Joey hoisted his rifle at the thing.

“Shoot the chest!” Dunit said, firing a Blueburst into the head of chest of genothroid near the driver seat. The blast broke the armor and the driver finished it off with gunfire from his rifle.

Joey pressed the trigger, boring holes in his attacker’s chest and splattering blood on his face until the creature fell.

“Please Donnowarru!” Lezura said.

At this point the jeeps hadn’t taken off because the genothroids had hoisted them off the ground.

The sound of gunfire, clawing metal, snarls and howls filled the tunnel to the brim where it overflowed and seep through every crack and crevice.

Yeltsa and Podge made their way around to the back of the jeep, firing at the feet of the genothroids to slow them down where their armor was weakest. Both of them were covered in scars.

Not even a yautgan’s skin could withstand the claws of a genothroid.

Donnowarru studied the scene around him, and said, “Screw this foolishness!”

He produced an orb of honoi in his hands, lifted it above his head and crushed it. Light spread in a massive ripple around the aliens. The genothroids hollered in agony, shielded their eyes and backed away. All jeeps dropped with a loud thud.

The light revealed the heart wrenching sight of hundreds of genothroids surrounding the convoy.

Yeltsa rammed her shoulder into the side of a genothroid out of her way. Podge fired at the feet of two and leveled their height. They both entered the jeep.

“Why aren’t we driving yet?” Yeltsa said.

On queue the jeeps threaded rubber and they took off in a line. Heliri rode Redbolt as close as she could beside them. Donnowarru floated in front of them and produced another orb, this time he held it in his hands while he traversed on his cloud.

The genothroids didn’t stay stunned for too long; already they recovered and were chasing them down on all six. Above the jeeps on the second level street they could see genothroids crawling out of holes apparently dug and gnawed in the hide of the tunnel.

Some fell in the street to join in the chase, others tried to anticipate the jeep and land on it. In Joey’s jeep everyone scampered for the crates of ammunition under the benches. The guns were reloaded with incendiary rounds.

Heliri fired a blast of honoi from the end of her Sugarstick and knocked a genothroid into another. Both got their feet tangled and fell in a heap.

From the rear jeep someone produced a Plasmapumper and was dropping the genothroids with each shot. At the front Tylin and Murbella were picking the ones out of their way with gunfire and Bluebolts.

Donnowarru was about thirty meters ahead, and everyone followed the path he took. A genothroid dropped on Donnowarru’s cloud, which vaporized beneath its feet and the genothroid fell right through.

There was a massive gully up a head. Judging by the size, Donnowarru didn’t think they could drive over it.

“Quickly!” he said, “Take the left platform to the top street!” and he flew in that direction.

They all rode the rusted and creaking platform all the way to the top street. Here the norinori vines were a little brighter, and the genothroids more plentiful.

One managed to fall in the back of the leading jeep. Yeltsa coated her hand with the Hiranien and punched a hole in its chest with her claws. The genothroid shrieked and flashed its claws, striking Telkit and Joey, though not lethal wounds.

As Yeltsa hefted the beast and threw it over board another one landed on top of the jeep, holding onto the sides with all six limbs. It shot out its mandibles and sprayed a mist of acid. Lezura shielded her face with her hand. The acid melted her flesh.

But her scream didn't match Podge's when the acid splashed in his face. A blood curdling cry punctured the howls and growls of the genothroids. Podge dropped his gun and dropped to the floor, rolling and clutching his face—well, what was left of it.

Something clicked in Tylin's head. She turned and saw Podge screaming on the floor. Her heart skipped a beat. Her dry eyes widened, she gaped.

"Podge!" she said.

The Sekku sculpted a sword and plunged it with all her being into the genothroid's chest. It pierced its armor with a loud crack. She snarled and pushed further, sending the sword sticking out the other end.

Dunit blew its head off with a Blueburst for good measure, and Yeltsa and Lezura pushed it over board with glowing fluid raining down on them.

S'us dropped her weapon and fell on top of Podge. She reached for the bottle of blood she had extracted from Tet's corpse and tried to administer it on Podge's face, but Podge wouldn't move his hand.

Tylin dropped beside Podge, screaming frantically, "Move your hand Podge! Move your hand! Podge!" She pried Podge's hand away, and felt a mountain drop on her heart when she saw only bone on half the side of Podge's face. Tylin trembled like a leaf.

S'us dripped the blood over Podge's face. The blood touched his steaming blue-green flesh, and did nothing.

Joey leaped out of the jeep and landed behind Redbolt on Heliri. His groin throbbed but he didn't complain.

"You just ride!" he told her, and spat a massive wad of Gunkshot at three genothroids that knotted them together, making them trip and fall over each other.

"Turn right!" Donnowarru said as he turned said way.

They all managed to do so just in time, for they would have gone straight off a missing section of the road into the abyss below.

"I can see the light up ahead!" Donnowarru said.

Five genothroids dropped in front of the jeep. Donnowarru scowled at the persistence of such disgusting creatures.

"You little vermin—move!" he said.

The last word of Donnowarru's voice became a shockwave of honoi that blasted them away.

Crossing onto the street, Donnowarru said again, "Turn!"

All the jeeps did, but Heliri didn't.

By the time they saw the hollow coming they were separated from the other side by a long hollow in the rode. Right behind them were the genothroids; mouths dripping and eyes glinting with hunger and excitement.

Joey took a grenade off his belt, snapped the top and threw it behind him. He covered his ears and only heard a thud. Glowing, sticky stuff landed on him and Heliri.

Lezura looked across and saw Joey and Heliri—and genothroids still on their heels and spitting acid.

Lezura saw a vast hollow up ahead on their side, and screamed at them, "Look out!"

Heliri didn't have to be told. She could see the darkness up ahead.

"Crap! Joey...?"

Joey looked over her shoulder at the vast space between them and the other side; and the light at the end.

"We won't make it!" Heliri said.

“Yes we will!” Joey said.

“What?” Heliri said.

Joey pointed to a light at the other side and shouted, “You have to make it because that’s our only way out! Jump this damn horse-thing!”

“Are you insane?” Heliri looked back at him and said.

Joey looked her square in the eye and said, “Hell yeah!”

Heliri studied his face, and smiled.

She fixed her eyes dead ahead and screamed, “Hat’taaaaaa—” which Joey had yet to understand.

As Heliri pulled the reins on Redbolt and kicked him for him to jump, Joey fired two massive Bluebursts into the ground. The extra push sent them all over the seven meters onto the other side. Redbolt landed perfectly and continued running.

Some genothroids were so close to each other that they pushed forward and made the others miss the jump, falling in a dying scream into the darkness. Only a few managed to make it across.

Lezura touched her chest, said, “Oh my goodness...” and fainted.

On the opposite sides of the street the jeeps and the mynamather rode down the sloping roads onto the lower level. The fiery light got brighter, and the genothroids fell back in dissipating growls and howls.

The entrance to the outside had green grass growing plentiful with a lovely sheen. The sky above was a dark orange and purple, and a few dots of stars were visible. Cool winds raced over the aliens.

And the first jeep’s fuel gauge fell on empty.

They only got about two hundred yards when the jeeps ran out of fuel. They parked them on the side of the road. While they checked up on the sudden depletion of vehicles filled right before the battle at the southern plains, Heliri and Joey tied Redbolt on a rock. Heliri gave him the last of her water and let him graze.

“That was the shit!” Joey said as he jogged towards the jeeps. When he neared he got some narrow eyed stares from Lezura, S’us and Murbella that wiped his smile clean off and dabbed the napkin of grief at the corners of his mouth to get any traces of glee left.

“What’s going on?” Joey said.

Heliri came to a stop at his side. They made a way from Joey and Heliri to see.

In the back of the jeep, Tylin lay on top of Podge, embracing him around the neck, and weeping.

“Teach...?” Joey’s voice was almost a whisper. He looked down and saw Podge’s face. He grimaced. “Oh...damn...”

He stepped closer to get a better look to see if it was actually real. In his mind he couldn’t believe that Podge could have come so far to just die like this. He lifted a hand to touch Podge’s face.

Heliri held onto his hand and stopped him. Joey looked at her, and she shook her head at him.

Joey dropped his hand and said, “Tylin, I’m so sorry...”

Tylin stopped sobbing.

“Teach—”

Tylin lunged forward, rocking Joey’s jaw with a punch that dropped him like a he slipped and fell. Before Tylin could have any more of him Yeltsa and Telkit restrained her.

Lezura and S’us helped a stunned Joey to his feet.

“Tylin,” Lezura said, “what the devil do you think you are doing?”

“You son-of-a-bitch,” Tylin said, still kicking and twisting to get out of Telkit and Yeltsa’s grasp, “My brother is dead because he followed you here! My little brother is dead because of you!”

Joey found those words a thousand times more painful than the right hook Tylin just gave him. He gaped at her, eyes watering.

“Woman are you out of your blasted mind?” Murbella said.

“He killed my brother!” Tylin screamed.

“Tylin?” S’us said.

The soldiers made themselves oblivious to what the others were doing, making themselves busy with collecting the gassappers that had snuck their way under the jeeps and fattened themselves with the vehicles’ fuel.

The Sekku slapped Tylin so hard that she stopped and gaped at her. Tylin spat in the Sekku’s face in return.

Dunit gasped. “Did she just do that?” he said.

Heliri grinned. “Oh yes she did!” she said.

Yeltsa threw back Tylin on her dead brother, and snapped her head back with a punch that stunned her more effectively than the slap.

Joey broke free from S’us’ grasp and marched off.

S’us said, “Joey, wait!”

Lezura reached for his arm. Joey yanked it free.

He spun around and said, “You can all go fuck yourselves!”

“Joey, calm down!” Lezura said.

“No,” Joey said with his busted lip, he put his arms on his hips and stepped forward, “I’m not goanna calm down. Not this time! You pieces a shit. You all think I wanted to be here? You all think I wanted to get chased by giant bugs, werewolves, alien-dogs, giant robots and...stuff?”

Lezura nervously folded her fists. Everyone met Joey’s gaze but didn’t provide an answer. In the back of the truck Tylin had sat up. She looked at Joey, slowly looked away and spat out some blood.

Joey glared at all of them with tears rolling down his dirty cheeks. He said in a shaky voice, “You all think just because you found me on the street you can play me like this—like some damn Booboo the fool?”

Dunit grinned. “Heh-heh; Booboo the fool...” he said.

Telkit jarred his elbow in Dunit’s ribs. “Keep quiet before I throw you back in that tunnel with the genothroids.”

“You all think because I aint got not fancy frigging...um...degree shit, I’m not tall enough, good looking, or smart enough I’m a nobody? Well guess what—I’m the fucking greatest; and no one here has a dick as big as mine!”

Joey marched into the trees.

Joey sat on the ground, his arms crossed against his knees, staring up the moon Flitin peeping down on him through the trees.

Above on a branch to Joey’s right was Flivi, silently observing the human. Joey had assumed that Heliri sent the bird there to keep a watchful eye on him, but Joey couldn’t care less if they left him here or not.

I don’t need anyone! No Lezura, no Tylin, no S’us—I don’t need anyone!

It had crossed his mind that he had the key; the most powerful single item on the planet. All the things he could do with it, all that power! As far as he knew it wouldn’t be too difficult to use that power to coax a few ordinary people into doing his biddings. He could find a group of needy people, just like those in the refugee camp, give them a taste of the powers he had, and have them slavering for more.

He could become a god in their eyes! He could have money, power, and women, just like that!

Wait a minute here, he thought, since when do I think like this?

And Joey remembered, that he always wanted to be powerful and famous, but never a tyrant. He would have preferred to do his own damn work, crawl his way to the top and have people recognize



him for the great man he truly is rather than hang a Jagger's gun over their heads and force them to lick his ass.

That way, he thought, he wouldn't have that weighing on his conscience when they'd be licking the crap off his heels and blowing him down.

They saw me being rich and famous, and wanted to do it; I never forced them to! Joey sighed and frowned, and said to himself, "That's a lot a hard work, though..."

He heard footsteps approaching from behind, and turned to see Tylin. He turned away, rolled his eyes and focused them on the flickering, bioluminescent lights around him.

Tylin sat beside him and folded her legs beneath her. She rested her hands on her knees and exhaled, which got her a quick, fuming scowl from Joey.

The two of them sat there in chilly woods, surrounded by passing critters that vocalized a timid symphony in the night.

Finally someone broke the uncomfortable silence; Tylin, actually. "This is actually the first time I've seen you been this quiet..." she said, smiling.

But Joey didn't look.

Joey made a sardonic face. "I can't shout at everything," he said.

"I guess..." said Tylin in a low voice.

Joey said, "If you think we're just goanna kiss and make up with small talk it's not goanna work. You accuse a guy for something he didn't do, punch him in the damn face and think he's goanna just let a few little soft 'I'm sorry' win him over," and Joey turned to look at Tylin. "What the hell was that, Tylin?"

"I was angry and upset, Joey," Tylin said glumly, her hazel eyes staring into his amber brown, "I lost control...I...didn't know what came over me. I saw my brother...my little brother...lying down like that with his face..." Tylin fumbled for her words for a second then closed her mouth. She looked away and closed her eyes, letting the tears spill.

Joey didn't feel he should bash her for something she had no control over (and wondered when the hell did he got so noble). He said, "Look, I understand you were grieving, Tylin. But it wasn't the punch in the face that pissed my off. I've been getting a lot of those since I came here! Tylin you said that I'm the reason he died, girl!"

"I know what I said was wrong," Tylin said, looking at a chubby, red worm undulating at her foot, "at that moment I was thinking about how all this was happening since you came here."

She turned to Joey and saw him recoil and blink in rapid succession at her before stopping. "Not this whole chaos with the wars, Joey; I mean how everywhere we went with you, you always seemed to be getting yourself in trouble, and we would always decide to follow you." She played her finger in the dirt, "The truth is, Joey, It is my fault he's dead..."

Joey frowned, said; "Now that's an even bigger load of bullshit than accusing me. Tylin the people who killed your brother are those geno-buggy things in the highway. You didn't have anything to do with it."

"But I was supposed to protect him!" Tylin said. "When Tartian was invaded by the orderrans our parents were killed. We didn't have anyone to take care of us, and back then Podge was only eleven years old. I had to shelter him from all sorts of danger for years until Clastaan found us and took us into his camp. And even then we still had to fight our own battles..."

Tylin broke down into sobs. Joey pushed himself closer to her and gently enveloped her in his arm. "Tylin, what do you remember about your brother?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" she said, wiping her eyes.

"What kind of guy was he?" Joey said.

Tylin said, "He...was always strong, never afraid of anything...always upset when I tried to fight his battles for him..."

“That means he’s happy now, Tylin,” Joey said light heartedly.

Tylin lifted her head and frowned. “What the hell could be happy about dying?”

“Not that!” Joey said. “I mean...well...you said he never wanted you to look after him. Well now that he’s gone you won’t have to worry about him, anymore. Wherever he is...I’m sure he’s glad to see you able to look after only yourself now...”

Tylin managed to squeeze out a laugh.

“What?” said Joey.

“Joey you look like you’re in pain,” Tylin said, “trying to comfort me with soft words. I can tell you hate using them. It’s all right, now. I’ll have to accept that he’s gone and move on. Thank you anyway, Joey.”

“So I don’t have to keep talking like this?”

Tylin laughed. “No?” she said.

Joey threw his head back and sighed loudly. “Man, thanks. I hate doing this mushy stuff. I prefer to talk to Lezura; where we just insult each other and she gets angry and hits me...How’re the others by the way?”

“Everyone is helping to extract the fuel out of the gassappers,” she said.

“I guess I better go help em out then,” Joey said, taking the compass out of his shirt.

Tylin put a hand on his shoulder and sat him back down. “Why not rest for a while?” she said, “The others do not see anyone coming for us a yet. They would have trouble traversing the Highway, and if they come by airship, we can simply ditch the vehicles and hide in the woods.”

Tylin looked up into the tree and said, “We are fine here, Flivi. You can go back now.”

With a chirp Flivi took off.

Joey sat back down and nodded. “Okay,” he said. Something that had been bugging him since the left the Highway made him say, “Hey, where the hell did all those genothroids come from anyway?”

Tylin shrugged, said, “Lezura’s arguing that they must have been leftovers from the Second Solar War, just like the gassappers. Those were Warriors, by the way.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Joey, when Tylin looked surprised he said, “I’ve been reading up. But I read that only the queen can reproduce, not the Drones. Does that mean there’s a queen out here somewhere?”

“That is what a few of the soldiers are arguing,” Tylin said, “But Lezura is saying that if they really were under the control of a queen. They would have been smart enough not to thrash the vehicles that pass, but confiscate them for use as well as the weapons. She says that those Warriors must have developed the ability to reproduced amongst themselves, and have maintained a small population out here all this time.”

“I guess they probably got this far when the Third Great War happened and everything went down shit-street.” Joey really didn’t want to think about genothroids reproducing on the planet right now—not with so much on his plate. He figured the military could just blow the whole damn highway up and get rid of them.

Tylin turned to Joey and said, “I have something for you.”

“What?” Joey said eagerly.

“Give me your sword.”

Joey handed Tylin the silver sword from off his backpack. Tylin rested it beside her, got up and drew a transmutation circle in the dirt.

Joey got up and said, “What the hell are you gonna do, make it into a big-ass sword?”

“It’s another alchemy skill Clastaan thought me,” said Tylin; “reversion of an object back to its original state. So in a sense it is kind of a reverse transmutation circle.”

Joey nodded.

Tylin put the sword by the tip in the dirt and activated the circle. As the runes lit up the sword melded back into the silver bat.

Joey took the bat. Ripples went up his arm and gave him goose bumps. Joey said, "So...what? Its gonna stay this way forever."

Tylin said, "Look closely here..." she touched the rune symbol on the handle of the bat.

"Oh, I see," said Joey. "What about it?"

"Stimulate it with your honoi," said Tylin.

When Joey did as instructed the bat reverted to its bladed form with crackles of energy across its shiny body.

Joey giggled. "No fricking way!" he turned to the largaph woman. "Tylin you're awesome!"

Tylin smiled and shrugged.

But Joey didn't take his eyes off the woman. He looked at her lips; his eyes went down to her breasts, flat stomach and firm waist. He bit down on his lips and flexed his fingers.

There won't be a better time than now, Joey thought.

He leaned in and kissed Tylin. But it wasn't a mere touch of their lips. Joey pressed hard against Tylin, making her eyes fly wide and warm ripples run from her face to her toes.

Joey pulled away and stared at her with unwavering eyes.

Tylin closed her mouth into tight lips. She rubbed her hand against her thigh, stopped and said, "Was that an accident this time?"

Joey smiled at her, lowered his voice and said, "Only if you want it to be."

Tylin pulled Joey towards her, almost squishing Joey in her embrace as she fell on top of him.

Joey didn't know how, but as he embraced Tylin by her waist and dove deeper in her unyielding warmth he felt a jazz band playing a lively rhythm on his spine.

Tylin's skin was rougher than any woman's he'd felt; by accidentally bumping into them. But inside her was so soft and warm, he wouldn't have mind if he was rewarded like this after all his classes with her.

Tylin pushed Joey off and drew her pistol. She took a defensive stance and looked around her with quick turns.

"What's going on?" Joey said. "Am I a bad kisser?"

Tylin scowled. "No you dimwit," Tylin said with her eyes fixed to the rippling leaves above her, "someone is watching us..."

"Indeed, your senses are sharp..." a voice resonated around them like the ever-present cosmos.

Joey charged his hand with honoi and poised his sword. He took controlled breathes. "Who the hell was that?"

Joey now regretted ever sending Flivi away; Lezura and the others could have known by now.

But maybe they do, Joey thought.

Joey raised his voice and said, "Lezura!"

The voice that caged them made a guttural chuckle. "Don't be so quick to raise an alarm," the voice said, "I merely wish for you two to hear my words."

Tylin frowned, shifting her aim from tree to tree. "Show yourself," she said.

A cluster of branches above them whispered and ruffled, from which a red blur dropped between the two aliens, both of whom spun, retreated and faced the intruder.

A red cloak, rippling like a lake of blood, concealed the identity of the mysterious man; along with a large hood and silver mask with a ridge sliced down the center. The figure turned its head with the least of effort, and gleamed at the largaph and the human with silver eyes behind slits in the mask.

"Who the hell's this guy?" Joey said, inching around to flank the mysterious person.

The intruder was slightly taller than Tylin and Joey, and by the proportions of the body was definitely male.

“Speak,” said Tylin, gesturing with her pistol trained at the man’s shiny face.

His eyes focused on Tylin. She felt shivers run up and down her body.

“Forgive my intrusion,” said the man, his voice more neutral, “I was just wondering the woods, savoring the scent of the night’s air, when my ears happened to stumble upon your quarrel not too long ago...”

“So you’ve been peeping on us you little creep?” Joey said. “Just who the hell are you anyway? What kind a alien are you?”

The masked man chuckled. “My species’ identity is not important here,” he said, “what is important are the possibilities that lie within each of you.”

“Eh?” Joey said, “Dude just talk normal and get the hell outta here or else I’ll blast your head off!”

“You’re quick with rage, human,” said the man. “I’m intrigued that it brought you this far from Suride Town to this leg of your journey.”

Joey lowered his arms. “You...you know about my race?” he said.

“You’ve been following us this whole time?” said Tylin.

“I’ve been around,” the man said, and Joey could hear the amusement in his voice. “But you are right; I should state my reason from keeping my eyes on you all. Let’s just say I am looking for who the victor of this confrontation will be.”

“You know about the Rakai’s mission?” said Tylin.

“As I said, I’ve been keeping an eye on you,” said the man.

“Oh yeah?” Joey said, “Well you should go f-off. Thanks to you I lost my chance at having sex with an alien chic!”

Tylin looked across at Joey, her forehead creasing. “Um, what made you think it would’ve gotten that far, Joey?” she said.

Joey pointed to himself, lifted his chest, and said, “Because no woman can resist the Rakai.” Joey pointed at the masked man and said, “But more importantly, creep, give us your name and what’s your deal?”

The masked man shifted to a position where his side was turned to both Tylin and Joey. He looked up at the sky and said, “There is a massive calamity foreboding the stability of the galaxy. A new Overlord is to be crowned.”

“What do you mean by ‘Overlord’?” said Tylin, “Answer us!”

“Joey...Tylin,” rode Lezura’s voice on the winds through the woods.

Joey turned behind and said, “Lezura?”

“Do not worry,” the masked man said, prompting Joey to switch his attention back to him, “It is much too early for such truths to be exposed, young ones. For now, I will leave you all to reach for your dreams in the distance.”

When the many footsteps came closer, the man said, “I will be seeing you Rakai—if, you manage to last...”

“Wait a sec—”

The masked man went up into the foliage as if he were yanked by an invisible cord, just as Lezura, Heliri and S’us entered the area.

“What happened?” said Lezura. “I heard shouting just a moment ago.”

“Some weirdo showed up just when—”

Joey silenced himself by the cautious look from Tylin. Tylin picked up, saying, “It was a masked man in red. He just fell out of the trees.”

Heliri turned to the bird on her shoulder and said, “Flivi, conduct a search for me, will you?”

Flivi chirped and took off in wide circles around the vicinity.

“What did he say?” S’us said.

“Don’t ask that,” said I’us, “Ask what were Tylin and Joey doing all alone...”

“Something about the crowning of a new Overlord,” said Tylin. “Do you have any idea what he might have been saying, Lezura...?”

Lezura took her hand off her chin and shook her head. “Not the slightest,” she said. Lezura looked at Joey and hesitantly moved her lips, “Are you...fine...Joey?”

Joey smiled lightly, said, “What, do you guys think you broke my little heart?” Joey slapped Tylin on her bottom. “Tylin and eye are fine now. No need to bitch about anything.”

“Did you just see that?” I’us said.

S’us frowned. “Quiet,” she said.

“That’s good to hear”—they turned to where they had come and saw Yeltsa approaching with her arm and chest bandaged up—“we can’t have some little wimp leading us around, you know.”

Joey said, “At least I’m not afraid of the dark,” he pointed at Yeltsa, “scaredy-cat!”

Yeltsa’s smile went tight-lipped as she dropped her hands off her hips. She suddenly darted after Joey.

“Yo, Yeltsa chill!” Joey said as Yeltsa chased him around the trees.

Tylin approached Lezura and said in a low voice, “Lezura, you should know...”

“Yes,” Lezura said.

A slither of guilt went across Yeltsa’s chest when she remembered the kiss she just had with Joey and his relationship with Lezura.

Though there wasn’t anything serious about the Rakai and Chevalier, Tylin shuddered to think how far their little exchange of saliva would have went if the masked-man hadn’t shown up.

“You were saying something, Tylin...?” Lezura said.

“Oh,” Tylin said, “right... That man, he also knew about Joey’s species. He’s been watching us ever since Suride Town up until now.”

Lezura cringed slightly, and raise up her eyes brows for a brief moment. “You are joking, right? Someone has really been this close to us without us even noticing?”

“It looks that way,” said Tylin.

Yeltsa and Joey ran back to where they were all gathered; with Joey’s head locked in her arms and dragging his body off the ground.

Lezura was about to ask Joey what he thought of it, but seeing him and Yeltsa, made her realize it probably wasn’t much.

“Should we tell the others?” said S’us who had been listening on the conversation while Heliri tried to pry Joey from Yeltsa’s grasp.

“I personally don’t think it would do any good,” said Tylin.

“So do I,” said Lezura, and thought: But the fact that there is someone watching us; who we cannot see, is unsettling enough. Lezura looked around her. Great, now I am starting to think every shadow might be someone lurking about.

While Heliri diligently bit into the armor of Yeltsa’s skin Flivi perched on her shoulder with a series of chirps. Heliri got off Yeltsa and acknowledged her comrade.

After listening, Heliri said to everyone, “Flivi hasn’t found any trace of someone around here. Well, except from maybe a few dead bodies. Probably the doing of predators or the genothroids.”

Yeltsa dropped Joey and said, “Well I’m not goanna stick around to find out though.” She lifted a gasping Joey to his feet and patted him on the back, further knocking the air from his lungs and making him choke. “We should head back and see if the men are finished fixing the holes in the fuselages.”

“Good plan,” said S’us.

As they left, Joey took one more glance at the trees. Only the wind whispered back to him, but the deep chuckle of the masked-man still remained in his head.

Upon their return they were met with news that the jeeps were ready to go once more. Tylin gave Podge a private and unfortunately short burial in the woods before their departure.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Half an hour later they reached the city of Noss.

It seemed in the same state of decay as Kreplon, with the same ingenuity put into the everyday lifestyle of the people.

The only noticeable difference to the group as they went was the presence of other alien species amongst the nycarmans, probably why the Die lengann Path chose to put the ship here—a place where they could access it without the interference of racially agitated nycarmans. Most of the buildings here had a dark, brown-red tone, though there were exceptions.

“How much further do we have?” the captain said to the back of the jeep.

“Just another hour’s drive to the Brine Wind Seaport,” said the Sekku.

Joey, his stomach full of the awful tasting rations, leaned on Heliri’s shoulder, longing for a big piece of steak, or the soft, juicy flesh of a cossik. He felt sudden warmth on his chest. He leaned off Heliri, and seeing a green light on his chest reached inside his shirt and took out the compass.

It projected the hologram of Fopi in the air. A worried look was painted on his small face.

“My dear boy,” he said, “I am picking up high levels of electrical and radio activity some distance behind us.”

“What?” Joey said.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw people running into corners and buildings. He looked behind him, and gaped in horror.

“HOLY COW!” Joey said.

Everyone, already puzzled by the hurried movement and panicked voices of the people, looked behind them; the ones in the front jeep stood to look over the heads of those in the rear.

A Skymera was fast approaching, five Dawhawks positioned in front of it like they were dragging the thing behind them.

The particle-beam cannon on the Skymera that had been charging up erupted. The blast smacked into the side of a building, blasting a massive fiery hollow right through and into the next building, and the next.

Then the screams began.

“Heliri, step on the gas!” Joey said.

“This is a mynamather, Joey!” she said.

“Kick him in the nuts!” Joey said.

Heliri slapped the reins on Redbolt and said, “Faster, madel’u!”

Vehicles; rusted old excuses for cars, hovercars and carriages, screeched wheels and careening into each other as they turned away from the orderran ships.”

The Dawhawks flew by them with haste and purpose, and those left behind were gunned down by the heavy cannons of the Skymera.

Once close enough to their targets the Dawhawks opened up fire.

Joey screamed and held Heliri tighter as gunshots riddled the ground around him and the jeeps. Upon seeing the corner the forces of the jeep returned gunfire.

It was ineffective against the Dawhawks; such machinery needed much more inkling to give up their hold on the perfect structure of their hulls. Luckily for Joey’s comrades, such cases could be solved with force, as with one of the soldiers in the rear jeep producing an RPG.

The soldier fired the rocket. The Dawhawk in the lead tried to maneuver out of the way but its left wing got clipped and exploded.

Inside said Dawhawk, Jinkai Borros Onn held onto the grips in the ceiling along with twelve other soldiers surrounding him.

It was his Alpha Pack.

“Gentlemen,” Onn said, oblivious to the nature of the Dawhawk spiraling out of control, “I think it is time we made our departure...”

The Alpha Pack smile; all gleaming red eyes and huge canines wearing metallic plates strapped around them by elastic wires.

“This place was getting stuffy anyway,” said the one of the pilots as he and the other got out of their seats and mixed with the others.

Onn was the first to leap out of the ship, followed by the others. They were ten meters above the ground flying between the buildings, but for lycans that height was just a leap off a log.

Onn landed in a carriage, crushing it and the occupants inside. His men landed around him in street, sending civilians scattering. They faced the jeeps blazing down the streets. Above them the Dawhawk crashed into the side of a building and spewed flame from all its crevices.

Onn said like a simple order, “Fetch them.”

Orderran bodies convulsed and bulge. Their muscles stretched their armor plating, but the wires held them on their grotesquely growing forms. All this was just in a mere two seconds, and Onn was surrounded by massive lycans. The tallest was a lieutenant with a bristly Mohawk, standing eight feet tall at his wide shoulders.

Onn only activated forty percent of his lycan ability, attaining only doubled muscle mass and ragged hair on his body.

Lieutenant Knark got on all fours and barked with spittle flying from his three-inch long fangs, “After them!”

Like jets taking off they went, fluttering Onn’s cape like clothes on a line. Onn crouched, his face a mass of dark veins, and took off with equal speed.

“Oh crap,” a corporal in rear jeep said, “We have doggies coming!”

The lycans raced past the vehicles in the street, shoving those in their way violently aside and leaping over them.

Gunfire from the rear jeep rang out along with the blast from a rocket launcher. The explosion hit in the center of the pack, scoring a hit on one lycan and blowing him sky-high into the night in mass of blood and flesh.

They others dodge the next missile. Onn leaped over it and kept going.

“I will slow them down!” Telkit said, getting out of his seat and already consumed with honoi.

“May the holy trinity be with you,” Dunit said.

Telkit leaped out the side of the jeep into the street, transforming into the Zeromuos.

He only managed to stomp one of the snarling lycans flat while the others went by him.

Telkit switched targets as a Dawhawk came at him, blasting explosives his way. Telkit tanked two explosions before retaliating, leaping into the air and gripping onto the wings of the Dawhawk.

He pulled down on the ship so suddenly that only a handful of lycans managed to leap out before it crashed into the ground. The escapees took the nearby rooftops and resumed the chase from there.

Another blast from a passing Dawhawk rocked Telkit, sending him staggering into a building side. He fired a massive Bluebolt that reduced the Zeromuos to half its size. The blast narrowly missed the Dawhawk.

Infuriated, battered, and reaching his limit, Telkit forced himself into a run after the Dawhawks. But his attempt was cut short from the blast of the Skymera’s particle-beam cannon.

The Zeromuos and Telkit inside it were pushed forward, the intense heat cooked the Zeromuos and made it boil and swell until it exploded in a blast of energy that shattered the windows of the buildings around him.

When the chaos settled only glittering particles were left floating in the air.



“There it is!” the Sekku pointed towards the port some three hundred yards away, visible by the presence of a sixty story tall lookout tower, still intact but discolored with wear.

The jeeps swerved between two buildings and sped down the alley. Redbolt followed, displaying an amazing endurance at keeping up such speed.

Joey, clutched around Heliri’s waist, kept taking glances behind him.

At one point he thought he had lost the lycans, until he went around another street and saw them skidding around it behind him; an army of burning red eyes, glistening teeth and hot misty breaths.

Joey fired off a Bluebolt that did little but hit a lycan in the shoulder and make him miss a stride. He slipped but quickly got back up.

Above him Joey saw the black, shaggy silhouettes against the moon of lycans leaping across the rooftops.

There was the growling hum of the three Dawhawks as one almost materialized from around an old abandoned business building. Two of them flew pass, but another hovered above in front of them, unloading soldiers from its side, some of which became lycans while the other others readied their arms and deployed their shield-projectors.

One of the Dawhawks came around to the right of them with gunfire that blew out the tires of the front jeep. It took a wicked slump and jarred everyone forward, tattering them with throbbing bruises.

Tylin got thrown into Yeltsa and head-butted her on the chin. Secretly Tylin was happy, please for getting her back for the punch she gave her earlier.

The jeep slowed to a stop. The driver of the rear jeep was slowed down sufficiently enough for one of the lycans in pursuit to reach and drag a soldier out of the vehicle by his foot. He was subsequently mauled by the lycan and his companion, his screams filled the night as his guts were ripped out and splattering around him.

“They have us trapped!” S’us said.

“They will not stop us so easily!” Murbella said, leaping out of the jeep.

“Right behind you, my dear!” Dunit said. But upon following her Dunit missed his step and fell.

Both of them transformed into Zeromuos; one of which was rubbing his back and knee.

The others exited out of the jeep, strapped with their weapons and the last of their ammunition belts. Lezura reached out as Redbolt passed and Joey bent down and grabbed her arm. The momentum mixed with Lezura’s leap hoisting her onto Redbolt’s back.

Tylin and Yeltsa took shots at the gunners around them. Yeltsa had switched to a heavy-assault lancegun, and use it to mow down a lycan coming from behind her. She emptied nearly half the clip into its body. The Lycan fell shrouded in smoky steam.

The Sekku had propped up a molded shield she used to ward off bullets aim at her, while the small S’us at her side provided counter fire.

They all followed Redbolt, who was being led by Dunit, tanking the bombardment from the Dawhawk and the soldiers around him.

Dunit kicked a shield-projector and its soldier out of his way and leaped with his tattered body onto the Dawhawk, dropping it in a body slam that shook the ground and sent everyone off their feet.

Lezura and Heliri scurried to bring Redbolt back on his feet.

A bullet slapped Lezura in her armor and just into her flesh. She winced, spun around and drew her gun. She fired a small burst that popped off the Cyri’s head.

Joey fired a Blueburst with both hands in a lycan running towards him.

“Screw you!” Joey said.

The snarling beast shrugged the attack, but the next one staggered him. Heliri spun the bulb off her Sugarstick and fire into the Lycan’s head, blowing the top off.

“Go!” Dunit shouted, already being swarmed by thrashing lycans and gunfire that tore his head off.

The second jeep had already stopped and its occupants left, helping to slow down the advance of the lycans coming from the second Dawhawk.

They were assisted by Murbella who took the rear, firing Bluebursts that blasted away the opposition. The second Dawhawk fired two missiles. Murbella dodged one and blew the other up with a Blueburst.

Around her feet orderrans and nycarman soldiers were gunned down, with lycans adding dismemberment and mauling to the fray.

The Lycan Lieutenant took two soldiers by their heads and slammed them into the ground, jumped in their heads and splattered grey matter in the street. He howled a hollow sound of bloodlust.

The commander of the rear jeep opened fire at him; incendiary rounds burned holes in the lieutenant's back and cut his howl short. He turned to the commander and pounced on him, rammed his claws into his mouth and flicked the top of his head off—

And the lycan was kicked into a building by Murbella.

The Skymera, closing in on the scene, fired a stream of gunfire at Murbella that dropped her. She was swarmed by lycans like a larva attacked by ants. She kept on swatting them off but they continued to gang her.

Redbolt was back on his feet and his riders hopped on. Yeltsa, Tylin, the Sekku and S'us tagged close. They managed to squeeze around the battle scene and onto another street. But they only got thus far before they were in pursuit by the lycans on the roof and a handful of militants on foot.

The Sekku pointed into a street, said, "There is the path to the port!"

And two lycans hopped down off the building before them. One sported a Sputty, and fired it, shattering the Sekku's shield and sending her flipping back with a yelp.

Another lycan fell on top of her. His hot, rank breath just inches from her face and ready to take the bite, but Tylin with blinding speed sliced off its head with her sword.

S'us, Yeltsa and Lezura mowed down one of the lycans with gunfire. The other one hopped around them, and made a lunge towards Redbolt.

The beast was ran over by a bike, sending him sprawling and rolling into a lamp post.

The bike stopped, and Oleon took off his helmet and said, "Do you ladies need a lift?"

"Oleon!" Lezura said, hopping off Redbolt.

"You came," Joey said.

"Who the hell's that?" said the Sekku as she pushed the dead lycan off her.

"No time for questions, get moving!" Yeltsa said, pointing to the third Dawhawk heading their way from the other street.

"Do not worry," said Oleon, "I brought company."

Engines roared, and seven motorcycles came blazing down the street. They slid to a stop, some more stylishly than others. Yeltsa helped the Sekku onto the back of one and handed her a pistol off her waist, then hopped onto the back of another with the rest.

Joey remained on his position behind Heliri, while Lezura seated herself behind Oleon. They sped down the street of moss, blue and green stones and warehouses. The air here was raw with the scent of sea water and fish.

People who had heard the ruckus had already made themselves scarce in their stores and warehouses. Those still towing their fish-carts hurried pushed and pulled them out of the way into corners.

The Dawhawk in pursuit of them, increased its speed, opened its sides and unloaded its occupants. Lycans leapt out with Cyries clinging to the fur on their backs. The Dawhawk sped ahead, dropping off ordinary orderran soldiers into the fish market.

They tried to slow down the bikes with gunfire and shields.

"Hang on!" Oleon said, "We are breaking through these bastards!"

He hit the gas and the bike lurched into a faster pace, smashing through a shield-projector, the soldier leaped over the bike and fired a shot in Oleon's shoulder. Lezura plucked him out of the air with a round to the head.

The orderrans sped out of the way as the motorists broke through, the Lycan's tailing right behind them.

The Dawhawk had switched positions and cruised sideways along the bikes.

Heliri heard Flivi chirping wildly on her shoulder, and looked and saw the Dawhawk's new formation.

"Oh crap!"

She turned from the bikes and went around a stall. A lycan managed to follow them and leaped onto the back of Redbolt, sinking its claws into its hide. As the mynamather wailed in grief the lycan bit into Joey's shoulder.

Joey screamed. "SHIT!" he said as the teeth sank deeper, he reached for his sword off his back and plunged it into the lycan's head. Steam spouted and the beast fell off.

Joey clutched his shoulder and grimaced. "Hey!" he said to Heliri as they came upon the docking bay, cluttered with ships, "Do you think I'll turn into a lycan since he bit me?"

"Not from these low levels," Heliri said as she approached a blue and brown, oval shaped boat with the orange flag of the Felkremin fluttering at the pinnacle.

Joey frowned hard. "Dammit!" Joey said. "Maybe I can get another one to bite me!"

"No time!" Heliri said, "We have to get you to the boat!"

"Wait, what about the others—"

There was a series of explosions behind them that shook the foundation of the docks. They took a quick glance behind them to see the pursuing Dawhawk fire a rocket in front of the bikes, adding to the flame and destruction around them. Joey's vision was engulfed in flames, and he never saw the others again.

"NO!"

Waiting on them near the boat were several Felkremin, readily taking the reins of Redbolt. Heliri and Joey leaped off as they ushered the animal onto the ship.

"We have to go back for them!" Joey said.

One of the Felkremin, a largaph man with his translator already in ear, said, "That is not possible, Rakai! You have a greater duty. The compass will guide you to the God Titan. Hurry up and board the ship..."

He grabbed Joey's arm but Joey broke himself free.

"Joey would you stop being so stubborn!" Heliri said.

"I'm not leaving them behind!" Joey said. He turned and ran towards the flaming market place.

"Rakai!" the man said. He, Heliri and a dozen others gave chase after Joey. Surprisingly they couldn't catch up with him.

Joey prepared honoi in one hand and drew his sword. His vision was blinded by the light of the flames and the heat roaring before him in elemental fury.

Screw the fire! They need me!"

And Joey leaped into the flames that greedily swallowed him.

The Dawhawk fired off four consecutive missiles at the front of the bikes, blowing up the market stalls and shops. The force and the debris crashed into the bikes, knocking their occupants as well as a few lycans over.

The pursued hastily got the bikes off themselves and their comrades and got on the move. Lezura's head bled profusely from the side, but she was still conscious and had enough strength to stand. She helped Oleon from under the bike.

“Is everyone all right?” she said.

There came some weak and strong replies. Lezura looked around and found that by some miracle everyone was still alive, albeit with some bruises and lacerations.

“Where’s Joey?” S’us said.

“Probably on the ship by now,” said the Sekku.

Good, Lezura thought. Wait, that is not good! I should be on that ship too!

Yeltsa looked around her with her pistol; they only gun with ammunition left. “Where are all the orderrans?” she said.

Everyone hung on her words and looked around. They saw that only flames surrounded them. The choking scent of smoke and cooked meat filled their lungs.

Lezura lowered her goggles over her eyes and switched to night vision. It was screwed up by the heat a little, but she could see the faint image of the huge frames of the lycans, waiting outside the flames.

“They are around us,” she said, “but they are just standing there...”

“For what?” said Tylin, drawing her two swords.

They felt the slight tremor of the particle-beam of the Skymera hitting the ground. Probably the others are still alive, Lezura thought.

“Let’s just head for the ships, already,” Oleon said.

And an orderran dropped in the middle of them. Guns, hands gleaming with honoi and swords were aimed at him.

Jinkai Onn slowly rose and looked around at the others. He smiled and said, “So these are the little vermin that have been giving me hell all this time...”

No one answered, but they kept their guards up. Some in the group could tell by the cape that this was a Jinkai and a high level lycan.

“Where is the Rakai?” Onn said.

“He is already on the ship out of here,” Lezura sneered at Onn, “you will never get your hands on him!”

A Blueburst ripped open a hole in the wall of fire and out sprung Joey. He was breathing heavily and his clothes were burnt in a few places. But besides from that he didn’t have any wounds. If anything he seemed rejuvenated.

Joey spotted Lezura gaping at him and said, “What’d I miss?”

Disapproving hoots and murmurs echoed around the group.

“What the hell are you doing here, kid?” Oleon said.

“Joey you blasted buffoon!” Lezura said, “You should be on the ship! Why did you turn back?”

Joey said, “Hey, hey—I came back here to save you guys and this is the thanks I get? Besides, I’m not a baboon; you’ve got the bigger ass, Lezura...”

Heliri flew on her Sugarstick into the middle of everything. She got off and looked around for Joey. She noticed a huge figure beside her, and realized she had landed beside Onn.

Heliri shrieked and hurried over to Yeltsa’s side. From there she spotted Joey looking at her.

Heliri pointed her staff at him and said, “Joey—”

“I know,” said Joey; “I’m stupid, blah-blah-blah, immature, blah-blah-blah, I’m a baboon, blah-blah-blah—what else is new folks?”

“I assume this is all of the cavalry?” Onn said, his alto voice jarring everyone back to their senses.

“This is the cavalry that’s gonna kick your ass, alright!” said Joey. He pointed at Onn and said, “I’m guessing by your fancy cape you’re the big boss for the orderrans?”

“That’s correct,” said Onn with a smile, “and you must be the Rakai?” When Joey pushed out his chest and gave Onn a bow, the Jinkai said, “I have to say, I was expecting something more than a moronic, small child.”

“And I was expecting Darth Vader!” Joey said, “But I guess your bitch-ass will have to do.”

Onn flexed his fingers and said, “I have a proposition for you, Rakai. Hand over yourself and the key, and I will let the others leave with their lives.”

“As if you’re that bad,” Heliri said. “Even my bird is stronger than you!”

Above them, flying in circles, Flivi thrilled.

“The answer’s no, dick-head,” said Joey.

“Then I will have to kill everyone else and take you with me,” said Onn in a steady voice.

“You and what army?” said Tylin.

Onn grinned, the light of the flames glistening on his teeth. He said in a low voice, “Me, myself...and I...”

A massive lycan erupted from Onn’s shredded skin. Its frame exuded aura of primeval malice and dread that nearly crushed everyone to the ground.

“Yo!” Joey screamed, “That’s a lycan?”

“We’re in the shit now...” I’us said as S’us inched away.

Borros Onn stood at twelve feet. His tank of a chest, still wearing armor that had stretched to accommodate his size, was wide enough smother Yeltsa. Huge hands capable of crushing a greshku’s skull hung just below his knees with blade like claws reflecting the flames off it. His snout was long and narrow, eight canines stuck out of them, eager to skin into flesh. Long ears sat on top of his head like noble knights on the lookout.

Onn stepped and turned around to Joey, his ruby eyes hotter than the flames, and Joey could feel them burning through him.

“Tylin...?” Joey whispered.

“Yes?” she said.

“Is this a real lycan?”

“Unfortunately it’s a Lycan Lord,” she said.

Onn pointed a finger at Joey and said in a calm, subtle, almost serene voice, “I’ll save you for last—”

And Onn moved like a blur. Only S’us feet that were blessed with the leg muscles of a geckoid allowed her to get out of the way in time.

Onn ran his hand through the nycarman beside S’us through his gut, hoisted him off his feet and tossed him away. Onn dashed to Yeltsa and kicked her into Jivel. He blocked his face from gunfire with his arm and walked towards another one of Oleon’s men.

They were silver rounds but they didn’t even faze him. Onn yanked the gun from him and bit it in half. They fired a Blueburst into Onn’s chest. Onn narrowed his eyes at the cowering man, lifted one claw and plunged into his head.

Lezura, Oleon and S’us unloaded their weapons in Onn’s back, ripping up his cape and dying it with spots of blood. Onn leaped in the air. He hit the air with his palm with so much force it sent a blast of air that blew them away.

Onn landed and rushed towards Heliri. Joey leaped in the way and fired a Bluebolt into his chest. Onn winced and growled, lifted one hand and swatted Joey aside.

A trembling Heliri released a fireball at Onn. The Lycan Lord blurred out of the way and went for Heliri once more—only to be stopped by a Hiranien in the gut by Yeltsa. She gritted her teeth and snarled, twisting her fist into his gut.

Onn bared his massive teeth at her in a grin. His abdominal muscles gripped her arm, stopping it from going any further.

Onn’s claws were stopped so suddenly it startled him. He looked at his hand and saw his claws clashing with Tylin’s swords. Her entire body was tensed to push against Onn’s arm.

The Sekku morphed a javelin and threw it into Onn's chest. A fireball from Heliri scorched Onn's face. Onn snarled and knocked Yeltsa aside with his other hand, sending her crashing into a smoking stall. Lezura dove upon Heliri and brought her out of the way of Onn's snapping jaws.

Tylin slashed Onn across the back. Onn lashed down at her but Tylin parried them, Onn repeated his assault with Tylin, constantly blocking, finally she was shown some mercy when Oleon, both arms cloaked in the Hiranien and ending in massive claws, slashed Onn repeatedly across the back.

Tylin and Oleon ganged up on Onn, but the massive lycan easily warding off all of their efforts from both sides. Even when Lezura joined in with her expertise in wielding the spear, Onn effectively divided his attention for the three of them; he kicked away Tylin, elbowed Oleon into the ground, and ran his claw into Lezura's shoulder. She screamed and fell to her knees.

Heliri and two other men leaped into Onn's back and pierced his flesh with blades.

Onn howled something out of the depths of hell. "You little pieces of shit!"

Onn exerted his minuscule amount of honoi in a pulse from his body, knocking them all off.

Onn roared and stepped into one of the men's chest like a plastic bottle, sending blood spouting from almost all his orifices. Onn punched the other man in the head and blew it apart.

Joey regained consciousness and charged into Onn with his sword, running it into Onn's calf.

That much silver in one place erupted steam from Onn's flesh like a train's chimney. He howled and kicked Joey away; the force yanked the sword out and sent Joey flying into S'us; who caught Joey by releasing a water rune that dulled the impact.

Oleon cut into Onn's left hand, slicing off two fingers. Onn reached for Oleon, the nycarman ducked beneath the claws, wheeled and cut Onn across the shin.

Onn thrust his palm at Oleon and knocked him off his feet with a gust of wind. Onn reached to Oleon before he dropped and caught him by the throat. Onn bit into Oleon's neck worked his teeth, gnawing his head clean off.

Two swords from the Sekku into Onn's rib made him fall to his knees. Tylin came charging with swords and chopped into Onn's shoulder.

Onn swung his fingers folded together like a sword, slicing the head off the Sekku. Tylin ducked beneath the arm, and attacked.

In that instant Onn got up to his feet and parried the blows. With Onn weakened, Tylin was able to keep pace with Onn, managing to cut him a few times across the gut until Onn knocked away her weapons.

Tylin pulled a long knife from under her armor and continued to oppose the Lycan Lord with gritted teeth.

Lezura and Heliri staggered to their feet, so did Yeltsa, S'us and Joey, all bloodied and limping, all at their limits. An all watched helplessly as Onn ran the three claws left on his other hand into Tylin's chest.

Joey felt a fist drop on his heart.

"No..."

Tylin gaped, eyes wide. She closed her mouth and gritted her teeth. Tears ran down her bloody cheeks. She coated her knife with honoi and extended it into Onn's eye. The Lycan Lord uttered a hellish growl.

"Bitch!" he said.

Onn ran his other hand into Tylin's chest and hoisted her off the ground, twisted his hands with a sickening slurping sound of moving organs and bone, and ripped her in half.

The half with Tylin's head landed at Joey feet, splatting his shoes with blood.

S'us screamed and fell to her knees, holding her cheeks.

Tears absently ran down Joey's face.

Lezura and the others hurried over to Joey and stood between him and Onn.

Onn was trembling visibly, and his calm demeanor had been beaten into a passionate canvas of hatred painted onto his face.

The fire had died to smoking debris around them. Onn's few troops crept on behind him, and the Felkremin man from the ship and the others had come to Joey's side.

"You will not be escaping this, Rakai..." Onn tried to say calmly, but the bitterness was just rolling off his tongue.

Joey tightened his grip on his sword. Without a moment's thought he ran out from the protection of the people around him and confronted Onn.

But as if spurred on by Joey's rage and bravery, without question the others followed him.

Lezura, Yeltsa, Heliri and S'us were right behind him. The soldiers and the Felkremin handled each other.

Joey jumped into Onn, the lycan parried Joey's blow as he passed. Lezura whirled the spear in Onn's side with a searing sting. Onn parried her other blows but a sudden fireball from Heliri in his face blurred his vision, giving S'us the chance to sneak a stab in the inside of Onn's thigh. Before he could reach her Yeltsa came from Onn's blind side and rocked his head with a punch, knocking a few teeth out.

Onn swiped at Yeltsa but the woman snapped her head out of the way. She took advantage of Onn's downed defense and unleashed a series of punches in Onn's gut until the lycan crumpled. Before she could land one in his head, Onn suddenly sprung up and thrust his palm into Yeltsa's chest and sent her sprawling over. Lezura and Heliri tag-teamed the lycan with their long weapons; Lezura distracted the lycan with her longer reached, while Heliri snuck beneath Lezura and plunged the spear in Onn's crotch.

Heliri screamed in delight. "Gotcha!" she said

S'us slipping a cut on the heel of Onn dropped him to one knee, and Lezura and Heliri both gave Onn roundhouse kick that slapped his head to the side, right into an uppercut from Yeltsa.

And right into Joey.

Joey spat the Gunkshot at Onn's chest, bit on the gooey matter still attached to his mouth and lunged with his sword. Onn used the Wap-Diyukan to release a blast of air that sent Joey flying.

But the strand of gunk stopped Joey from going any further, and like a rubber band snapped Joey back like a missile from a sling at a gaping Onn.

The Rakai ran his sword into the Lycan Lord's gaping mouth, exiting the back of his head with a thwack.

Joey twisted it further until his arms brushed against Onn's teeth and ripped his flesh.

Joey spat out his end of the Gunkshot and said, "You just got fucked with the Sadowski Slingshot! This's for all those people you killed, you bitch! Suck on it!"

Onn's eyes blazed with disbelief and defiance. His blood-soaked hands reached from Joey's head, and dropped to the ground. Joey yanked the sword out of Onn's mouth.

The Lycan Lord collapsed.

Joey's first instinct was to rest, but Lezura's hand under his arm pulled him with her.

"We have to go to the ship," Lezura said.

Joey's feet felt like they weren't even his, but somehow they managed to move him. Yeltsa, Heliri and S'us followed through the cinder and smoke surrounding them. Every inch on their body ached, but they couldn't stop.

Yeltsa grabbed Joey from Lezura, seeing him lag behind, and hoisted him into their arms. Joey hugged the sword to his chest, rested his head in Yeltsa's warm breast, listening to the gunfire and popping of honoi attacks getting fainter.

It was then he knew that he was leaving the docks, and was probably in the ship. He made it a point to start training again when he woke up. He couldn't save Tylin, Podge, Oleon, Jivel or the wyassies. But at least he still had the rest of his girls.

Joey drifted off into a warm slumber, with tears rolling down his cheeks.

Tylin...I'm sorry...But I promise I'll fight to keep everyone else alive. I promise.



## HISTORY OF UPSINODRON

Upsinodron is one of the most unique systems in the Sakiuchi Galaxy. It has the large star, Upsinodron, surrounded by eleven planets, one of which is a gas giant the size of Jupiter known as Big-Gassy, with over thirty moons. The planet is so lustrous that it provides its own light for the moons, and also the common gas flares that hit the moons provide them with nutrients. It was enough for some moons to develop a livable atmosphere.

It has seven planets that are inhabited by seven different species. The planet Narz is homed to the largaph, Sangetsu is homed to the nycarmans, Veheculon is homed to the orderrans, Natraun is the home of the yautgan, Slyerrick is the home of the rapturan, Gammuo is where the lazhinians reside, and living on Haturn are the raizean.

The orderrans were the first species to evolve space flight, first making contact with the nycarmans, as they were the second technologically advanced species during that time. The two species formed a partnership with each other that lasted some twenty years. They both secretly watched the other worlds, waiting on the opportunity to make contact with the other races once they had progressed in technology.

The two species had ranked that in third place of technological achievements were the largaph, whose planet had a rich source of acrilium, a mineral that when electrically charged facilitated anti-gravity lift in machinery and other objects.

The largaphs were the first species to create antigravity technology, while the other worlds were still using petroleum fuel at a massive cost, and had very little acrilium to use. The nycarmans and orderrans visited Narz with the hopes of establishing trade with acrilium for new technology with the largaphs. The largaphs agreed in order to learn about new technology for their people.

The nycarmans, orderrans and largaphs then created the N.V.S. treaty (Narz, Veheculon, Sangetsu), where Sangetsu and Veheculon would share technology and biological resources such as new plants for food sources and animal foods with Narz for acrilium.

This lasted for just three years, because feeding the two planets was taking its toll on Narz. So in the solar-years of 144, the same number of years after the first species obtains space flight, the largaph people decided to end the treaty on fair terms with their two partners.

In 146 the largaph had obtain enough knowledge about space flight to create their own ships and were now traversing through space to the other worlds. They went to Big-Gassy, where they discovered the moons there held life. The largaph scientists conducted research that revealed that the biology of the animals on the moon was similar to that of largaph bodies.

This led the largaph to believe that their world, Narz, was once a moon made from Big-Gassy that drifted away from the planet along with debris that made up Narz's moons. At the same time the orderrans and nycarmans were checking out the moons as well. They found that it contained a rich source of acrilium. The largaphs ordered that they stop the mining of acrilium from their moons, as it represents their first homeland, but they were free to harvest it from the non-inhabited worlds.

But the orderrans and nycarmans believed that the largaphs were becoming arrogant and trying to take their claim of the territories. With three new colony worlds under their belt, they could expand their military power well beyond the others.

Eventually this became the first, interstellar war; between the nycarmans and orderrans against the largaph over the four worlds of Tessius, Noax and Ploween and Ki-ung-pa.

But the largaphs didn't have a space fleet like the nycarmans or orderrans, and needed to increase their numbers. So, they went to recruit the yautgans, who were a naturally hardy species but low in technology. They explained to the yautgans fully their situation with the orderrans and nycarmans, and that if they helped they would give them one of the moons as a token of their appreciation. Happy

with the prospect of seizing more power and resources, the yautgans joined the war in 151 under the leadership of the largaphs. Forty thousand yautgans joined the war on the planet-moon Ploween, and the yautgans successfully colonized the moon along with the largaphs.

The orderrans and nycarmans decided to recruit as well. The raizean people were too weak physically to be of much help in a war, but they did have mental capabilities that were interesting. Some nycarmans decided to study the raizean—which meant literally abducting them and dissecting their brains to learn how to bestow their mental capabilities to their own soldiers. In 153, this was known as the *Psych Knight* project. The nycarmans and orderran soldiers recruited to undergo the experiment were given brain-tissue implants from the raizean subjects. They developed the mental capabilities, but at an extreme cost. Some subjects developed brain tumors, memory loss, and neural damage which dropped them into a vegetative state.

Only one percent of the experimental subjects maintained their normal brain activity.

The raizean retaliated by using the failed Psychknights as soldiers, controlling their minds to do their bidding. The rebellion wasn't strong enough, and was quickly put down, but the orderrans and nycarmans did leave the world, though it was devastated.

The orderrans tried to recruit the rapturans; who had amazing physical attributes, but the rapturans declined to get themselves involved. The orderrans took extreme measures, enslaving the people and forced them to fight for them.

In the same year, 154, they went to the planet Gammuo where they discovered that the lazhinian people had a very unique biology that allowed for accelerated healing and reattachment of severed limbs. The oldest living lazhinians were over two thousand years old. Experiments were done to try and get orderran individuals to have the lazhinian cells incorporated into their bodies permanently. Sadly this could not be done, so the orderrans settled for just harvesting their body fluids to use on the battlefield.

The nycarmans had distanced themselves from the events on Slyerrick and Gammuo.

The largaph and yautgans tried to help stop the atrocities on Gammuo and Hatur, but the people didn't have the technology or strength to fight as the rapturans did.

Three years later, in 157, help came in form of another species from a distant solar system known as the Unquan System. They were known as the zell, and said they were members of the Galactic Garden (G.G.). They stated it was the duty of the Galactic Garden to preserve order in the galaxy, and that they would report this to their superiors.

In 158, help came in the form of nearly 250,000 battleships from the Galactic Garden, manned by two species known as the weavike and the cat-like people called the myrangs. They agreed to provide aid for the third-worlds, Gammuo and Hatur, and liberated them from the orderrans and nycarmans.

The two antagonistic races retreated to their homeworld. They faced sanctions from the Galactic Garden, which stated that as compensation, the orderrans and nycarmans, along with the largaphs who were also involved in the war, had to take in some of the native people of the other worlds onto their planet to live.

The orderrans willingly agreed, because now they had the opportunity to study the other species. But the nycarmans were reluctant to do so, fearing that the aliens could take over their planet.

The Galactic Garden spent fifteen years helping to repair the damages done to the worlds, and they placed a restriction on the moons around Big-Gassy so there wouldn't be any more wars over them.

While the largaphs were negotiating with Galactic Garden to free their worlds, there was revenge brewing the blood of the other species who had been victim of the orderran and nycarmans, but they waited for the right time.

In 175, the Galactic Garden ordered representatives from each species to meet with them. After long negotiations it was decided that each planet would form its own Council where they would discuss matters with each other and come to a peaceful resolution on each.

The seven species then decided to share the moons. The largaphs and yautgans inhabited Ploween. The orderrans and nycarmans were given Tessius. The lazhinians were given Noax and the raizean Ki-ung-pa; two whole worlds for them to colonize for themselves. All species were given free rein to mine acrilium from the moons around Big-Gassy.

Twelve years later (187 S.S.F.), the orderrans and raizean developed warp drive technology, and became the first two species to travel outside the solar system. Second was the nycarmans and third were the largaphs, the lazhinians remained on Noax to fully colonize it and developed a very productive ecosystem. The yautgans were fourth and the rapturans fifth. The raizean in 211 S.S.F. colonized a planet named Nakashpu by joint effort with the orderrans, in the solar system of Yel, some 26 light years away, making it the first planet to be colonized outside the solar system. Second was the planet Nessenous, in same system, by the lazhinians and raizean, in the year 250 S.S.F.

With maps given to them by the Galactic Garden, the races of Upsinodron had now a fair idea of the location of their star in the galaxy and those that were habited and uninhabited by sentient species. Later this space exploration would be the source of the Second Solar War.

In 301 S.S.F., The rapturans journeyed to the Vehenni System, an area that the Garden labeled a hazardous zone. They had found a new type organism they named the exeon. These creatures were organisms that could survive without oxygen, and fed by assimilating matter around their bodies and absorbing nutrients.

They brought with them a few genothroid eggs containing queens.

The rapturans were studying the effects of the exeons on breaking down matter and reconstructing it by using their produced energy, and how they controlled the minds of the genothroids. Their experimentations took a vile twist when the exeons took control of the minds of the researchers, and made them set the genothroids loose on the colony planet to attack the rest of the seven thousand people in the city.

The attack was a success thanks to the exeons controlling the minds of the soldiers and their fire power. Once they took over the planet, the genothroids studied the map mapping the location of the Upsinodron starsystem.

Using the technology from the rapturan ships, they built several ships in the span of the six years, and traveled to the Upsinodron solar system.

In 321 S.S.F. the exeons invaded Upsinodron, leading to the second Solar War. They dropped on the planets with the rapturans who they had ordered to breed and increased their numbers, along with the genothroid variant soldiers and the exeon drones.

## BIRTH OF THE SURAVIAN

In 322 S.S.F., the colonized planet of Nessenous, by the raizean and lazhinians, were doing experiments to create a new species of fighters. During the first Solar War, they were the two species who were the most devastated because of their lack of military tactics and strength. But they were going to rectify that mistake.

They used raizean DNA as the basis, breaking it down and moving certain genes from the chromosome and rearranging them. They reconstructed it with Lazhinian DNA, and created embryos grown in tanks of culture fluid. The result was the creation of the suravian species.

They were on average six feet tall, with lean muscle and blue skin. The back of their heads narrowed to a point as their chins did. They had the heat exhaust skin folds at the back of their heads in light blue flaps, and orange eyes set against jet black sclera. They has small nose bridges common with both species, and along with sensory quills in the form of two green sacs on their foreheads, they had very slight regenerative capabilities take from the lazhinians. But most of all they had the ability to deflect mind probing either telepathy or manual means, making them excellent warriors against the exeons.

But fearing their strength could one day overthrow the two species, the raizean and lazhinians only made males, and grew them in labs if their numbers needed to be replenished, and gave them a lifespan of just 50 years.

In 333 S.S.F., in response to a message of help sent by their home worlds and colonized moons, the plant Nessenous deployed 20,000 Suravian troops to their fellow race in Upsinodron. In 339 S.S.F., the suravians effectively aided the other planets and species in pushing the exeons and their genothroid slaves out of the solar system.

But a year later they regrouped and launched another attack. The suravians, allied with other members of the United Planetary Nations Force (UPNF) led the strike on the exeon motherships. The 700,000 thousand troops chased the Exeons back out of the solar system to where they came from. It was said that they followed the exeons to the colonized planet of the rapturans, but there never came a reply from the few soldiers left in the attacking fleet if they were successful or not. All that was known was the exeons never come back.

The remaining suravians in the solar system, for their efforts, were recognized as a new independent species, and awards ships and planets to colonize, and the blueprints for the process of growing more of their kind. They have yet to produce a female to reproduce with, but with their quick growth and good adaptability, they were able to increase their number from just 50,000 to over forty million in the space of the two hundred and ten years since the defeat of the Exeons.

## SANGETSU'S THIRD GREAT WAR

In the year 521 S.S.F., the Exeons were officially exterminated from Upsinodron, and peace and stability settled on the over seventy billion people living in the solar system. But on the planet Sangetsu, there was unrest amongst the population.

It was 363 years since the Galactic Garden last came to Upsinodron. A few governments from top countries gathered at a meeting held by the planets ambassador to the other worlds, Mencho Cheinny, who would be later known as Papa Folklore.

He put it forward that the raizean and lazhiinians created the perfect super soldier race, the Suravians. The rapturans were currently experimenting with the Exeons to gather knowledge from them from other solar systems. The largaphs controlled sixty percent of the acrilium monopoly, and the orderrans have already announced that they have colonized four worlds.

He said that the nycarman species was falling behind at a drastic rate. He put it forward their species, the entire planet, should focus on empowering themselves by trying to create a new system in which nycarmans ruled the planet once more.

He proposed the God Titan and the key, were their only valuable asset, but was in control of the religious groups who had now aligned themselves with the Felkremin religious group from the planet Narz.

When they asked what he wanted to do, Mencho proposed that they create cities in each of their countries that could lock out the other races. Then have the orderrans organize a catastrophe that would bring the religious groups out of hiding, forcing them to play their hand and reveal the key, where they could harness its power and fuel their own army.

It was this plan that formed the Prestige Kingdom, and a decade later, Joey Sadowski was on Sangetsu running up and down.

600 B.S.F. was when the first great war of Sangetsu began.

It is now 373 years since the Galactic Garden visited them; 4,001,000 S.S.F. galactic time.

## LANGUAGE

This is the language that the Galactic Garden thought the inhabitants of Upsinodron as the common tongue of most of the galaxy.

Words like “il” are added to the end of words to show the past tense, words such as “en” are added to the end of words to show the continuous tense, prepositions like “je” are placed before verbs to turn them into adjectives.

### Pronouns:

1. You—yuh
2. He—dre
3. Him—dre-ta
4. She—fele
5. Her—fele-ta
6. We/our—jipap
7. They/Them—ni' jipap
8. I/me—mi
9. This—dis
10. Us—kipap
11. It—tis
12. Man—dre-dis
13. Woman—fele-dis
14. Everyone—nomidi
15. This—hili
16. That—heli
17. Those—huli
18. These—hali
19. Things—creaha

### Preposition:

1. To—ir
2. The—di
3. With—ishin
4. For—iawi
5. Against--is gin
6. By—ik
7. Of—deja
8. After—affa
9. Before—prote
10. Under—nikkio
11. Over—herk
12. Beside—retisto
13. Like—ekeho
14. A—wan
15. But—bia

16. Should—na'ni
17. Could—azp
18. Would—pesh
19. Have—toos
20. Off—ionk
21. On—mipu
22. Towards—ze'taa
23. Above—tflen
24. Until—oos

Verbs:

1. Run—jeshi
2. Hop—pag
3. Are—dua
4. Is—dua-a
5. Was—shep
6. Be—do'ze
7. Call—koah
8. Fly—gligh
9. Swim—glob
10. Walk—str
11. Am—ari
12. Play—rappa
13. Prance—loli
14. Jump—spihe
15. Come—forwa
16. Slam—smakeo
17. Crawl—fraa
18. Go—gianha
19. Not—ne
20. Do—eil
21. Did—es-il
22. Give—besi
23. Take—deplesi
24. Eat—nyam
25. Drink—iajus
26. Roll—akan
27. Still—merah
28. Look—awike
29. Does—dwont
30. Speak—michat
31. Stay—plekesk
32. Away—gehuw
33. Love—heen
34. Hold—bistilos
35. Steal—klefos

Questions :

1. Who—ma'yi
2. Where—ma'whe
3. When—ma'to
4. Why—ma'mek
5. What—ma'wha
6. How—owo
7. Are (as is are you, they, them, we...)—tak
8. May (as in may I, we, yo...) temelo
9. Hello—beppo

Place:

1. School—ern
2. Hospital—mides
3. House—owas
4. City—chike
5. Country--check
6. Town—chike' iwa
7. Cave—corkosh
8. Forest—orot'nani
9. Jungle—orot'pleti
10. Hole—o'enzo
11. Nest—vivep
12. Desert—sheash
13. Island—duish
14. Woods—orot-moku
15. Ocean—owappa'pleti
16. Sea—owappa
17. Mountains—hachacha
18. Kingdom—dynaan
19. Castle—yan
20. Building—skithier
21. Hell—Deton
22. Heaven—Saales
23. Space—uuch (outer space)
24. There—lucu
25. Somewhere—talucu
26. Here—hemhu
27. Everywhere—zenbu-lucu

Things:

1. Tree—orot
2. Grass--kesh
3. Bush—lasosi'pleti
4. Mushroom—ike li



5. Flower—zeur
6. Leaf—lasosi
7. Rock—hachach
8. Stone—hachach'iburi
9. Bolder—bobos
10. Soil—breis
11. Metal—elang
12. Iron—yeeyeh
13. Silver—sleen
14. Water—vava
15. Lake—vavala
16. River—vava'na
17. Bubble—wiwa
18. Sky—erore
19. Wind—megis
20. Cloud—iika
21. Rain—vavarore
22. Fire—diech
23. Lava—diechach
24. Magma—diechach
25. Ice—fiyuki
26. Snow—glaceish
27. Lightning—splazk
28. Stuff—sinting
29. People—namidi
30. Friend—flayo
31. Brother—eela
32. Sister—eemasa
33. Mother—matasa
34. Father—matela
35. Traveler—woandroi
36. Beast—ridon
37. Animal—ririle
38. Soul—eseos
39. Mind—twire
40. Shirt—gwia
41. Pants—daweta
42. Shoes—eppa
43. Sock—koop
44. Hat—nto
45. Cloak—reuge
46. Helmet—civiz
47. Glove—mera
48. Gauntlet—imera
49. Blouse—tuut
50. Skirt—der'es
51. Robe—ranvy
52. Cloak—nien

- 53. Belt—straua
- 54. Wire—iment

Parts of the body and related things :

- 1. Shit—mia'ku
- 2. Piss—piyel
- 3. Finger—inga
- 4. Toe—ticka
- 5. Arm—haam
- 6. Leg—erus
- 7. Head—scolexi
- 8. Chest—visktaka
- 9. Bottom—untuk
- 10. Eye—shari
- 11. Mouth—ka lau
- 12. Ear—wemlelo
- 13. Hand—sepo
- 14. Fist—doku
- 15. Foot—juo
- 16. Penis—chunka
- 17. Vagina—yigig
- 18. Balls/testes—seduau
- 19. Hip—qu'ie
- 20. Skin—bidshi
- 21. Limb—gesso
- 22. Tail—liut
- 23. Brain—reyem
- 24. Heart—neehe
- 25. Bone—brak
- 26. Muscle—gak-na
- 27. Cell—netefed
- 28. Tissue—eflupanak
- 29. Organ—nrag

Descriptions :

- 1. Some—ade
- 2. Few—ikle
- 3. Many—pleti
- 4. Much—pleti-ta
- 5. All—zenbu
- 6. Weak—tapi
- 7. Strong—grongo
- 8. Beautiful—wea
- 9. Ugly—tasheik

10. Intelligent—allis
11. Stupid—baga
12. Short—didge
13. Tall—los les
14. Low—flete
15. High—dihit
16. Quiet—muto
17. Loud—hitetus
18. Hungry—grato
19. Full—ulup
20. Empty—diavoi
21. Happy—biliblis
22. Sad—bhen
23. Angry—warru
24. Terrified—bozeel
25. Bad—iizeel
26. Morning—shou
27. Day—nihic
28. Night—tehien
29. Noon—fiffof
30. Twilight—zededee
31. Dawn—teyeer
32. Dusk—neyeer

## SANGETU'S HISTORY AND IMPORTANT EVENTS

The Beginning: The written records, which told of Sangetsu's history, began 7500 years ago. The first historical records were that of the Calquax Civilization, which lasted around four centuries, before it was conquered by neighboring countries which would then become part of the great Barsoon Nation in the millennia to come.

Historians have been arguing whether Calquax was the very first civilization or not. Famous historian Reboboth Dinkly—born 262 S.S.F., said in an interview with the popular cultural magazine “Where the Roots Come From” in 290 that “I am a Uola man from Atilen who loves his culture and history more than anyone else's, but it would be downright unprofessional of me not to acknowledge that other civilizations had running water centuries ago while my people were still figuring out how to wipe their bottoms”.

And such was true. Archeologists excavating what was once the kingdom of Calquax; which is now a state of Barsoon, found that the people had irrigation systems just a little behind what is used today, which seemed to have been built around 7180 B.S.F., Archeologists also discovered the remnants of old steam engines, and they had found in the Asiseros Mountains in the same state a vehicle of some sorts. The purpose of travel it was used for is still unknown, the people living around the mountains refuse to let the archeologists move it from its resting place, for the people here, they see it as the vessel that had brought the first men and women from the heavens to the world. And have even given it the name “The Vessel of the First Ones”.

This discovery also led to speculate that if they had reached such a technological peak during that time over seven thousand years ago, then probably the history of the people of Calquax was even much older.

Historian Reboboth Dinkly said in his same interview with the historical magazine, “The Calquaxans already had vehicles and engines thousands of years before the rest of the world—which meant they also had electricity! But, as we wonder upon what other marvels this great civilization had conjured up, we have also have to ask how did a civilization like this collapsed in the first place?

“I shall breakdown what we know of the history of Calquax as it involved Barsoon. During the time of Calquax it had seven neighbors, seven countries almost equal in size with Calquax; Widdion, Parslo, Leoj, Vin' lauc'shao, Harpoem, Regilis and Nordham. Based on record found in both Widdion and Leoj were learnt that both countries sacked Calquax. In their records we found that they had heard tales of a great power possessed by the Calquaxans that was bestowed upon them by the gods. We even had records of the Calquaxans using firearms to kill soldiers of both armies.

As news spread about the god-like weapons possessed by the Calquaxans across the continent, each country began to march their soldiers into Calquax to retrieve their power.

“Now, this is where it really gets weird,” Dinkly had said, “once the other nations started molesting Calquax, there was this sudden gap in the history of those confrontations. The last piece of information about the war for Calquax dated around 6980 B.S.F. It did not give us any clear information about the demise of Calquax, only that the ‘The people who wielded the might of the gods somehow took pity on us, for they had ceased wilding their otherworldly might upon us, and we could enter the country at last’, as from a commander in the Widdion army wrote. Then we heard from the king of Leoj, who had visited the Calquax, ‘My wife and I, escorted to the Land of the Gods by our thousands of knights, on behalf of the invitation we received from the god of the land, came upon a race of people as weak as ourselves in tools. There, we also had the pleasure of meeting our rival, the king of Widdion, Cesp. The god of the land, the Emperor Sinith, told us we were spared punishment by our parents, and so we must learn from our mistakes and correct what we did wrong’.

“That only proves that that meeting was the beginning of the first union of countries to form the states of Barsoon in 6900 B.S.F. From there Barsoon went on to conquer the rest of the continent, finally gaining all power over it in 6400 B.S.F., yet there was no more mention of what happened to the awesome weaponry that was mentioned before. It was as if those things just simply up and vanished out of history!”

But another historian that was interviewed by the magazine in the same year, by the name of Zelin Recoda, said that people were trying to look for answers in physical remains of the architecture and not the voices of the people.

She said, “What we are not looking at is the fact that the technology of the Calquaxans might not have even been theirs. The truth is most people do not like to read long things unless it is about what their friends texted them about doing last night, or other people’s personal business.

“If we look at the written records left behind by not just the Widdionians and Leojins, but by the rest of the countries, we will find similarities in their religious beliefs that have a connection to the myths held about Calquax. An example of which is from the Vin'lauc'shaonese people. During the time of the Calquax empire the people of Vin'lauc'shao worshipped deities they said came from thin air with faces of the stars. We know that this is one of the early recorded sightings of reapers, who we have seen sometime throughout history for thousands of years. And reapers only come to our world when they need to rid something from the planet that is not native to it. So it is possible that the Calquaxans were not the ones who developed this technology, but another race, which by some means had lost their technological equipment through the rift and it ended up here. Possibly when they reapers came to retrieve it, as godly figures they ordered the Calquaxans never to speak of it.”

Reboboth Dinkly argued that, “It is too completely farfetched to believe that an entire civilization, not to mention people from other countries, knew about the technology of the Calquaxans and would just keep a tight lip about it for so many years. Then what of the people of the Asiseros Mountains that still have a vehicle of some sort embedded in the mountain side? Why did the reapers not take something that is so obvious?”

But Zelin Recoda said, “If not the reapers, then probably gods did actually descend upon Sangetsu by then—and by gods I mean other alien species. As I said, the reapers themselves are other worldly beings, and it is known that they have been in existence long before nycarman history. The possibility exists that an alien species could have actually come here and helped to build the society of the Calquaxans. Then when the conquest of the continent started, they could have left with their technology so they would not be held accountable for helping to aid a certain people in killing another.

“In regards to the vehicle left in the mountains, obviously if the native people came in contact with the aliens and their machinery, they could have taken some of it to try and learn its secrets, but were not smart enough to decipher it.

“One thing is certain, though; the Calquaxans did not develop their technology all by themselves. They had help from someone not of our world, and I strongly doubt it was the reapers!”

But even without the use of godly tools anymore, the newly formed nation of Barsoon, of Calquax, Widdion and Leoj, launched the conquest of the continent. First they took over Parslo, a nation noted for its export of cold resistant metals and ores. In 6890 B.S.F. Barsoon conquered Parslo, with Queen Ophitil finally submitting to the power of Barsoon, and becoming the bride of one of the emperors, Sinith.

Emperor Sinith and Empress Ophitil had a son and a daughter; their daughter, Princess Opheiry was married off to the eldest son of King of Widdion Cesp, Prince Cesp the 2nd. The king of Leoj and his wife had two daughters, one of which, the youngest at twenty years old named Wo-pon, was engaged to the new born son of Opheiry and Cesp the 2nd, Prince Cesp the 3rd.

This arranged marriage was done so that all of the bloodline of the four states of Barsoon were blended into a single generation.

By the time twenty year old Wo-pon was married off to Prince Cesp the 3rd, the year was 6860, and Emperor Sinith had died of age, as had the king of Leoj. Ophitil and the king of Leoj's wife, Kirthene, had become brides to King Cesp, who was still in rule.

In 6850 King Cesp of Barsoon was assassinated by his daughter, the sister of Prince Cesp the 2nd, so her brother could be put in power along with his wife Opheiry and their son and daughter in law Cesp the 3rd and Wo-pon. During that time Barsoon's path of conquest was being hindered by Vin' lauc'shao, Harpoem, Regilis and Nordham. And in 6870 Barsoon put its conquest on hold.

As the centuries flew by and each country struggled with their own affairs, conquerors from the countries of Zaphix, Imia, Toduml, Dragheim and Rudos were setting sail across the seas to explore Barsoon. There was trade, and of course, there was conflict.

In 6600 B.S.F. the Bubbunis Port was established in the country of Nordham, just off the southern coast. Actually the Nordhamish were not the ones to establish the port, but the people of Dragheim, who were known at that time as the Rulers of the Seas because of their skill in sailing, fighting on water and mental navigation.

Nordham rose to power in 6570 B.S.F., because of the Bubbunis Port's inflow of new merchandise and people. It was even powerful enough to launch raids on Barsoon, but never came close to conquering it.

When the pirate wars began in 6520 B.S.F. the Bubbunis Port was destroyed by pirates from Rudos and Toduml, and the Dragheimese retreated from the continent and Nordham's power fell. For the next twenty years Nordham was at the mercy of its neighbors Vin' lauc'shao, Regilis and Harpoem, who picked what was left of Nordham, until finally the country was split up to be shared by rulers from those three nations.

The ruler of Nordham at that time, King Jixwoquan and his wife and four daughters and five sons, were banished from Nordham, and their country was basically a piece of meat to be cut up for others.

With the resources taken from Nordham, Regilis, Harpoem and Vin' lauc'shao had themselves a splendid time pillaging the country side of Barsoon. During then Queen Shiledi, a descendent of one King Cesp the 3rd and Queen Wo-pon, took it upon herself to try and reason with the ruler of Harpoem. The ruler of Harpoem, Greatchief Canvassa, was said to have fallen in love with Shiledi, and offered her peace if she would marry him and become his queen, while offering Barsoon to him.

Shiledi refused, saying Barsoon would bow to them, and that she was offering a deal so she would not have to kill his people. Angered, Greatchief Canvassa was said to have cast a spell on Shiledi that turned her into his slave, and the Greatchief had made her sire his daughters and sons.

Outraged by this, the queen of Barsoon's son, Prince Onnox (now king), was said to have sought out the powers of the supernatural that could lift the spell Canvassa casted on anyone who came near to him.

In 6470, King Onnox followed rumors of a sorceress living in the old city of Grethondor in the Leoj state. Who he found was Da'coo Riza-bow, one of the members of Vu Ra'honoi's covenant that had traveled to the continent.

King Onnox offered Da'coo a place at his side as his queen, so he could gain her power and knowledge to kill the magician Canvassa. Da'coo refused, and said that Onnox would be breaking his vow to his wife if she were to marry him.

But Onnox, desperate to get revenge for his mother, did the unthinkable by going back to his kingdom, slitting the throat of his wife and son and pushing off a cliff, saying that they had committed suicide. He returned to Da'coo with this news of the death of his wife and son. Da'coo, still suspicious of the king, decided to help him.

In 6465 B.S.F., Da'coo became the queen of Barsoon alongside King Onnox. Da'coo thought his soldiers how to use honoi, and not only did she teach them, but she led them in battle to fight the army

of Harpoem. She had killed the Greatchief of Harpoem after crushing his soldiers, and freed Shiledi and her new sons and daughters.

After conquering Harpoem, Da'coo returned to King Onnox with his mother and brothers and sisters. His mother died shortly after returning, of old age and grief that her daughter-in-law and grandson had committed suicide.

Onnox then fell in love with one of his younger sisters, and desired to marry her. But he was still married to Da'coo, and so had to get rid of her. One night Onnox tried to kill Da'coo with a knife, after poisoning her and leaving her weak and unable to use honoi. Coincidentally it was the same knife he had used to kill his wife and son, and before he could use it to kill Da'coo the knife had taken on a life of its own, and plunged itself into the chest of Onnox, killing him instantly.

The next day Da'coo revealed to the country that King Onnox had killed his own wife and son just to marry her and get her power, and so, that no one could use her again for such deeds, Da'coo handed over leadership of Barsoon to Onnox's younger brother, fathered by Canvassa, Prince Niro Canvassa. Da'coo fled the country with some of her close followers, and an ambitious Niro took the hand of a woman from Harpoem to be his wife, and together they ruled over Barsoon with Niro's brothers and sisters close by his side.

With the new family of Canvassa in rule of Barsoon in 6455 B.S.F., Niro began the conquest of the continent once more. His campaign was a brutal one that saw his slaughter of hundreds of thousands of people, with his brothers Nedo and Neken leading his army. His sisters were married off to the small tribes scattered throughout the country, adding more people to his kingdom.

In 6400 B.S.F., King Niro succeeded in conquering all the countries in Barsoon, and became the first king of the continent. During that time, Niro considered himself supreme god, and ordered massive monuments to be built in his name. He was notorious for embalming the bodies of his enemies and housing them in a shrine named "The Hall of Viigra", where Niro said were his enemies that he had forgiven and offered them fame as his prized possessions. Here in this hall, Niro would have grandiose parties, where he, his brothers and fellow nobles would eat, drink, and have sex with the youngest girls in the country that would be offered to him. It was also in this that conquered rulers would be brought before Niro, and their throats slit and their bodies added to the pillars and walls of corpses.

It didn't take long for the people to realize that Niro was actually playing god, as he had soon renamed the shrine into "The Nest of Niro", where he would conduct ritualistic sacrifices of babies; drinking their blood in order to becoming an immortal being.

Eventually, Niro had succeeded in becoming something not nycarman, and his followers revered him as the link between life and death, heaven and hell, the ethereal and the living world.

For four centuries, The Beast Niro ruled the center of Barsoon this way, while around the country side the states tried to gain independence from Barsoon and destroy the Beast. In 6000 B.S.F. the madness of Niro that was spreading through Barsoon resulted in bitter power struggles in the states throughout, with Nordham being liberated.

During that time in Nordham, the new ruler of the small country, Lord Sjan, led his warriors to the underground world known across the continent as Uxing, where the vradruuks had their empire.

Sjan had offered the queen of the vradruuks the riches of Niro if they could help dig a tunnel for him into the heart of Barsoon, Calquax. The vradruk queen, Boirach, agreed and ordered her people to create the tunnel. It took nearly two years to be dug, but by that time, Lord Sjan had been struck with an illness that prevented him from fighting. But he had bred Boirach, who sired his daughter Sjeen, a giant woman Muo, who led the new troops of nycarmans and vradruuks alike into Calquax.

When they faced Niro, it was Lady Sjeen who slayed the Beast, leaving his corpse in the castle and burning it down to the ground. With Barsoon's capital taken Sjeen seated herself as the new queen of

Barsoon, allowing her vradruuk and nycarman brothers and sisters to take up seats of power throughout the country.

In 5970 B.S.F., Sjeen got married to a fishmonger who had sail all the way from Rudos. Their children grew up to be huge people, and Sjeen and her family went back to Nordham where they lived out the rest of their lives, creating a new race of people, the Muo.

Barsoon was left in the care of the vradruuk queen Boirach, who had a monarchy of vradruuk rulers for hundreds of years. These vradruuks emphasized tilling their own land to farm and grow goods, and with people doing this Barsoon became a quiet nation for some time.

In 5200 B.S.F., the madness of the Beast Niro had left Barsoon broken up for a while, turning cities around Barsoon into their own domains that sought power and independence. They tried to distance themselves from Barsoon but often had to resort to pillaging the countryside to survive or piracy. Nordham was still standing on its own feet, unlike the domains that were being pillaged themselves by Dragheimian pirates and adventurers from other lands.

As the Muoes from Nordham grew in power, they conquered the quarreling tribes around Barsoon, capturing the people to breed with them; skyrocketing the numbers of the Muo race. Nordham came to be known as the Land of Giants, and as proof to the eyes as heard by the ears, the people of Nordham had arms almost as thick as a man's trunk, chests as wide as a gronk's, and stood five meters tall at the shoulders with heads scraping the sky. Truly they were an awesome sight, as they were even larger than their vradruuk for parents.

The Muoes revered the vradruuks and nycarmans of Barsoon as their living ancestors, and offered their services to Barsoon as protectors of the land in exchange for resources for their home country of Nordham.

In 5050 the Nordhamish created the massive wall of Nonshon, in the name of the Nordhamish god of war Shall'shon; during that time they had also resurrected the Bubbunis Port. For nearly two thousand years the wall protected Barsoon from invaders, until an earthquake in 3150 B.S.F., reduced over a hundred square miles of the wall of the east coast to rubble, and allowed the people of what is now called Akirmon to slip their way into Barsoon.

Shortly after Akirmon began to invade Barsoon, other nations; the Ugatinese and Palagagians came to reap the rumored riches of Barsoon, that were believed to have lying in the streets of cities because there was too much to keep in the houses.

The Muo warriors all fled to the east coast, where they stood their ground fighting off all invaders to Barsoon. As their numbers declined, they realized that Barsoon would not send help to them, even though the Muo had promised to be the fighters for Barsoon.

In 3000 B.S.F., the king of Nordham, Apaltouf, ordered his people around Barsoon to withdraw back to Nordham and save themselves. He said that thousands of years of service would mean the death of his people, and he preferred to be enemies with Barsoon than their forever servants.

When Apaltouf left with his fellow Muo, it caused fraction between the vradruuks and nycarmans, the result of which was the nycarmans driving the vradruuks underground in 2977 B.S.F. Since then, the vradruuks swore revenge on the nycarman race, and became a race of people pillaging from the nycarmans from Barsoon to other nations when the news spread.

After Apaltouf withdrew his people back into the now powerful Nordham, Barsoon's new ruler, Great King Mixdrule, led a crusade against the Muo, cursing them for abandoning their people and retreating to mingle with the foreigners at their seaport.

In 2970 B.S.F. Mixdrule led twenty thousand soldiers across Barsoon to Nordham. At this point, king Apaltouf had allied with the Dragheimians, Akirmonians and Palagagians to stand up against Mixdrule. Mixdrule's army was easily crushed, as the might of the honoi-wielding Palagagians, the numbers of the Akirmonians and the sea might of the Dragheimians were too overwhelming for even Barsoon.



In 2960, however, there was a falling out over the control of the port between the Nordhamish, Akirmonians, Palagagians and Dragheimese. The Dragheimese were for allowing the Muos to govern the port, but the Akirmonians and Palagagians were against it. It led to a war between the Dragheimese and Nordhamish against the Akirmonians and Palagagians.

It was then that King Mixdrule took the opportunity to launch an attack against Nordham, finally succeeding in overthrowing the rule of the Muos.

It was said that all the living Muoes, after their country was sacked, retreated across the Northern Artic Sea, to the Machada Islands, Kafinifa, Dragheim and some other small islands. Skeletal records of giant nycarmans have been found in Dragheim and Kafinifa to support these claims in 1700 B.S.F. None have been found on the Machada Islands, but then again, the Machada Islands to the south of the map were never fully explored.

After the conquest of Nordham, the entire continent was under the reign of Barsoon once more. For centuries to come, however, Barsoon would plunge itself into war amongst its states for which should be recognized as the capital. These were the people descended from those who lived in the states when they were once independent countries.

As rulers came and go, only to exploit these conflicts to gain wealth, there was a group of mages from a covenant known as the Ashmirmok, who wielded the power of sealing and soul spells against all who opposed them. The Ashmirmok covenant eradicated the people of the states who were the descendants of the native people, viewing it as the only way to end the conflict in the country. This covenant had over 500,000 people, and, apart from the Bakaan Covenant in Tiuma, was considered the second most powerful covenant in the world.

In 2500 B.S.F., the Mages of Ashmirmok began what was known as the Forefather's Crusade, wiping all groups with ties to the old nations. Eventually they were the ones who came into power in the year 2460 B.S.F., creating a government of purely members of the covenant. In their rule, they acted as the living gods of the country, where the state ministers would all ultimately answer to them. The leader at the time was Mage Iumik.

In 2403 B.S.F., many warriors, soldiers and knights from around Barsoon brought it upon themselves to overthrow the Ashmirmok government. Over a million people went to the capital, which was Harpoem back then. Their attempts were greatly resisted by the Ashmirmok mages for many years, but in 2337 B.S.F., however, a new element in the resistance came from a group of people from the small island of Ishtyr to the south of Barsoon.

These were mages from the covenant of Riza-bow, believed to be the descendants of the sorceress Da'coo Riza-bow thousands of years ago. They wielded honoi so unique it was considered magic, and with aiding the resistance, they managed to overthrow the Ashmirmok covenant in 2335 B.S.F., after many repeated attacks.

However, after the fall of Ashmirmok, it was revealed that the Covenant of Riza-bow wanted the seat of power for themselves, and the people, fearing another reign like that of the Ashmirmok covenant, quickly turned on the Riza-bow covenant, driving them back to the island of Ishtyr. But again the war for supremacy of Barsoon amongst the states continued, and finally the state of Regilis gained total rule over Barsoon in 2200 B.S.F.; the ruler Empress Sensideir Witicka the 3rd.

She was unique in being the first woman to total reign over the continent until her death in 2056 B.S.F., at age 201, for she had usually powers like that of a witch which enable her to have a long lifespan than the usual nycarman.

She was believed to be a descent of the people of the Riza-bow covenant, but never did she oppose a tyrannical system upon her people. It was during this time period the nations across the continents of Twengz; where Faleetia, Rudos, Tiuma and Atileten lie, and Prubu; Toduml, Imia, Shross, Tehnri and the continent-country of Akirmon, were making advances in technology from coal powered machinery to steam engines. Empress Sensideir wanted to put her country at the top of the

technological revolution, and so sought out to find the ancient technology buried beneath the layers of Calquax's.

She launched an exploration in 2169 B.S.F. in the relic cities of Erutobu and Dobikaco, where after weeks of negotiating with the local people, who were surviving descendants of the Calquaxans, they were allowed to mine the plains and mountain sides for these ancient technologies. In 2163 the Empress tasted success, finding a powerful type of engine, different from steam and coal that ran on not these worldly elements, but that of the sun. It was something very extraordinary to find on a continent so close to the North Artic Pole.

These engines ranged from the size of a toaster, to small vehicles, to giant tapering pillars three stories high. There were several dozen of them found, with the maximum of solar pillars numbering six, two of which were kept by the native people. Sensideir used them to establish a city in the state of Regilis known as Nuuktu City (Nuuktu is the old nycarman word for the "sun", and Zo is prefix meaning "of the" or just "of"; literally meaning "City of the Sun") with three of the sun-pillars centered around her castle on the tops of high cathedrals.

From these her people created solar powered machinery. Sensideir changed her name to Empress Zo'Nuuktu; the Empress of the Sun. With the solar energy from the pillars centered on Zo'Nuuktu, she became a living deity in the eyes of her nation.

One of the pillars, along with most of the solar-powered engines, were sent to the northern states of Parslo and Leoj, where the cold that wrecked the land was nullified by the heat absorbed by the pillars in the summer, and spread throughout the lands in massive channels dug across the states, increasing crop production.

As news spread of Zo'Nuuktu's amazing technology, it sparked the curiosity of the ruler of Akirmon of that time, King Zo'Zaphix, who was also launching armies across Prubu and Jonui to pillage small nations.

In 2122 Zo'Zaphix's military invaded Barsoon (by this time they were using rifles and steam-powered vehicles) with 70,000 troops. Due to Barsoon's advantage of being on their own territory they were able to defeat Zo'Zaphix's army. But Zo'Zaphix had realized he made the mistake of attacking Barsoon from its strongest points, and corrected that by attacking off the west coast, with the aid of a few hired pirates and mercenaries from Rudos and Ugatin.

This tactic proved a success only for a limited time and they had to retreat because of Barsoon's overwhelming retaliation, but Zo'Zaphix had succeeded—he had stolen the sun-pillars from Calquax. However upon returning it to Akirmon the pirates were attacked by marines from Atileten, and then by pirates from the south (to this day the location of that pillar is still unknown. But in later history during the first Solar War, the other pillar would be stolen from Akirmon by the largaph and carried to their homeworld).

Infuriated by this thievery Empress Zo'Nuuktu waged war with Akirmon for decades to come; even when Zo'Zaphix passed away and a new ruler came into power over Akirmon.

Finally this ended when the Queen of Akirmon, Zo'Zaphix the 2nd, offered her life to Barsoon in exchange that their two nations ended their conflict. Queen Zaphix went to Zo'Nuuktu's domain in Regilis, knelt before her throne, and slit her own throat with Zo'Nuuktu's knife.

It was the most memorable peace offering in Sangetsu's history, so much that Empress Zo'Nuuktu had no choice but to accept the offer. Since then Barsoon and Akirmon found peace, and were partners with each other for centuries to come.

Until in the 645 B.S.F., when Emperor Riza-bow Dranaki, a wanderer from Ishtyr who had snuck into Barsoon and gain the seat of power through unknown means, launched his crusade against the world to convert it all under the power of him and Barsoon.

He met his demise in the year 630 B.S.F., at the hands of the united forces of Atileten, Tiuma, Toduml and Faleetia, and their leaders the Dielenganns.

The next centuries were ones of relative peace across the world's nations give or take a few government disagreements here and there, and a country's own perils with crime, violence, and corruption.

In 200 the U.N. of Sangetsu was formed, and spaceflight began in the year 7501, or 1 S.S.F.

Offinerdon: He is the god of law and order, and viewed in many nations of the god of the world. He is usually depicted as a handsome Outo nycarman with curly golden hair, wearing a crown of bones from the slain criminals of the court of god, and carries the "Book of Justice" from which he speaks out the crimes they have committed and their punishment.

The Lustelle sisters; Moteti and Kemeti: It is not sure if they were actual women who lived or just a well-known fairytale—but a well-known fairytale it is.

It is said that these two young women were very beautiful, so beautiful that even their father tried to rape them. They kill him by slitting his throat in his sleep, and they fled the house and village together. But soon they were captured by bandits, raped and killed.

Because their souls couldn't find peace, they wandered the land as spirits of vengeance. Moteti would carry around a vase that she said held all the wildest desires of men. When any man looked inside it, he would be sucked into it, where Kemeti would castrate them and leave their souls inside the vase for all eternity.

Phalance the Glorious: Phalance is one of the most famous heroes in nycarman history, born in 4230 B.S.F. in the country of Tiuma. He was the embodiment of male swagger, charm, success, the idol of women, and the envy of other men.

He was a hero hired by great kings and queens all across the planet to carry out great tasks such as slaying beasts, fighting in armies, and defending towns. He was awarded with gold, silver, women, land, and privileges that rivaled that of rulers.

He had a term which he always said "Jinta", which meant "I am Great!"

But the Gods above saw the narcissism in Phalance, and how he was sliding down the path of committing blasphemy against the common people. So one day the devil herself, Keng'yi, decided to punish Phalance by creating a beautiful woman, who if he slept with her, she would steal his manhood and put an eternal shame upon him.

But when Phalance met her, they both fell in love instantly. This woman was named Gesheen, and she became Phalance's first true bride. But jealousy hit the other women, and they later slew Gesheen, and also their two daughters, Panamey and Afris.

Stricken with hate and grief, Phalance went out on a massacre in his city, killing anyone in his sights. Phalance's suffering ended in 4196 B.S.F., when he was killed by the Warriors of the Bakaan Templar. He was given a hero's burial, but nothing great was ever said about him since then.

Great Knight Sugeya: She was one of the most popular figures in ancient history, next to Phalance. She was considered the most skillful knight, and that from a child she would wrestle with the boys just to prove that was stronger than them, but her nature was always modest.

Born in the year 6300 B.S.F., she was said to be the first woman ever in history to be enlisted as a knight in the military of Tartian. At the tournament to determine the best vanguard, Sugeya defeated their best knight with a blow to the groin, saying that this will be the downfall of men.

Sugeya became a part of the vanguard order of Tartian, and was trained in the many ways of the sword. But even after her training from her master, Sugeya would sneak off at night to practice archery. But she always had trouble with her breast getting in the way.

On the night before her final exam as a vanguard, Sugeya got a sharp knife, and she slowly sliced away her right breast. The next day, her master was appalled to see that Sugeya had only one breast. He said that they couldn't continue the exam because of her injury, but Sugeya said that one breast less doesn't make her any less than a woman or a warrior.

The test was for Sugeya to slay a giant vargiok. She cut the creature's tendons in the heels, climbed onto its back, and plunged her sword into its head.

When she was knighted as the vanguard, Sugeya went on numerous missions across the land, fighting for armies, battling deadly creatures, and assassinations. Eventually Sugeya became the symbol of power for women. Sugeya herself, fueled by her desire to prove the strength of women, took on many followers.

She trained them to be warriors, educated them in science and medicine as best as she could, though she didn't know much about them herself.

In the end, Sugeya became the envy and hate of men, for she was making women neglect their duties and leave their husbands. It was said that she was also the first lesbian, as she had sex with many of her followers.

The king at that time, Javeux, decided to end Sugeya's life. He sent her and her followers on a journey to land of Zaphix (what is now Akirmon), where she was to encounter and defeat a gang of vradruuks living in a cave near a city.

Sugeya and her troop of twenty women stumbled upon twelve vradruuks, and once inside Javeux sent his people to close the entrance to the caves with boulders. After losing ten women, Sugeya and the survivors defeated all the vradruuks. But she vowed to get out, and day and night they spent chipping away at the boulders, feasting on the flesh of the vradruuks for nourishment.

After thirty days, Sugeya and her comrades escaped the cave. They journeyed back to Tartian, where Sugeya slayed the king and took over his throne, making her the first queen of Tartian. She was titled Queen Sugeya the Vradruuk Slayer.

She bore three boys for husband, King Corvinthius. Sugeya died at age sixty three after a serious liver infection.

To this day there have been many monuments to her success, such as the Sugeya Technical High School in Tartian's capital city of Mirmirk, an all-girls school founded in 6230 B.S.F. It is not only the top school on the continent, but also the oldest establishment on the planet, and a landmark of the continent.

The story of the yelm trees: The lore behind yelm trees is that they were the first trees on the planet; often called World Trees. It is said that yelm trees then gave birth to other trees from their roots, and then the first animals and people fell off the tree as fruits.

It is why the faery people have a bond with yelm trees so much and call them home.

Another story says that the yelm trees were once Muoes, who after eating people for thousands of years, were punished by the gods by being turned into trees.

Spritestool: After learning the secrets of the faery, the people of Shross migrated to Rudos in 5111 B.S.F., where they took over the old city of Plesis that was laid to waste in a previous war centuries ago.

It was here that first faery queen of Spritestool, Ketiquin, spoke to the seven yelm tree saplings that she wanted to be their friend. They were the only yelm trees in the country, as usually yelm trees didn't grow in cold climates. So Ketiquin nurtured them each day for over one hundred years until she died. When she died, she put her soul into the yelm trees, and protected them from the cold so they could grow to be the massive pillars that support the city.

Reign of the Revenants, a history of Imia: In 4500 B.S.F., before the Oikumi descended upon the lands of Sangetsu, necromancy was widely practiced by sorcerers. Souls that were not quick to ascend to the afterlife were captured and used by the necromancers to do their bidding, often put back into the bodies as ghouls to terrorize the enemies of the necromancers.

Often times living people were killed just for this purpose and this triggered countries to launch massive crusades to hunt down all necromancers and kill them. But it was in the country of Imia that the largest necromancers were gathered. But the greatest necromancer of them all was the Soul Sorcerer Ghulaw. Ghulaw created an army of seventeen thousand revenants, which were commanded by spell-protected generals known as Zomomoes. Led by the eight Zomomoes, the revenants wreaked havoc through the cities of Imia, slaying the innocent and turning them into corrupted slaves for Ghulaw's bidding.

Finally, in 4300 B.S.F, there descended upon the world, the Oikumies; mysterious, otherworldly beings that to this day little is known about, only that they took the souls of the dead to the afterlife so they could never be controlled by the necromancers again.

With this new twist, the army of revenants could be defeated. As such the people of Imia went on the counter attack, and in 4280, Ghulaw's army was crushed, and he and his Zomomoes fled to hide in the shadows.

But years later, Ghulaw returned, using a new kind of Dark Sorcery that allowed him cast a spell on a person or place and prevent their soul from being taken by the Oikumies. Ghulaw began his new reign in the city of Lograve, where he casted his, "Soul Hold" spell around the city. He sent his Zomomoes to kill the people, then trapping their souls in their bodies and turning them into ghouls, while around the city the Oikumies tried to get through the spell.

It was during that time that the Oikumies and the nycarman people worked together. The Oikumies with the help of shamans imbued their souls into weapons, known as "Soul Stealers", or "Vapeseos". A Vapeseos consisted of thousands of Oikumies who, once a body was slain, an Oikumi from the Vapeseos would depart with the soul to the afterlife. One hundred Vapeseos were created and given to one hundred knights.

Tricked into thinking they were just ordinary weapons in the hands of ordinary knights, the Knights of Vapeseos were allowed to enter the city of Lograve through the spell barrier, under the command of Captain Wo'an Thadi. They were able to kill and destroy the revenants in their way, capturing their souls to be escorted to the afterlife.

A lot of them died on the way to Ghulaw, and in the end, Wo'an and his men could only fight for so long and so many, and died after killing only five of Ghulaw's Zomomoes.

Ghulaw's forces were left severely weakened, and with Oikumies still around the city, he was unable to gain anymore souls than those remaining in the city.

Around Imia the activity didn't rest, and immediately after news from the Oikumies of the plight of Knights of Vapeseos, knights, bandits, sorcerers and wonderers were all going to Imia to explore Lograve City, for either to help rid the country of the diseases which was Ghulaw, find treasure and fame, or learn of the secrets of necromancy.

In 4200 B.S.F., Ghulaw's reign ended, the barrier was broken and the souls taken from the revenants, and the last of the surviving people of Lograve were freed.

Rumor had it that the hero who slew Ghulaw was the bandit Snaid of Shross and the Sorceress Lorgeil of Tehnri. Snaid returned to his home country of Shross, taking with him the weapons of the Oikumi and many other artifacts. The sorceress Lorgeil gave the soul of Ghulaw to the Oikumies, and disappeared.

Since then Imia has been labelled as the Land of the Dead, but it was not completely begotten, as a series of ambitious rulers saw to it that the country rose to power again in 3981 B.S.F.

Lorgeil of Tehnri and Daljoth: The sorceress Lorgeil, who along with the bandit Snaid had defeated the sorcerer Ghulaw of Imia in 4200, had traveled to the island of Maltatabi, where, after secretly learning the art of necromancy, created a domain for herself in the Sillion Cave.

There, Lorgeil had found a group of vradruuks, who she placed under her control using mind altering drugs. She ordered them to kidnap the native people and bring them to the cave, where she killed them and brought them back as ghouls.

But she was not trying to make an army of undead. In truth she was trying to bring back her deceased loved ones to life. She tried calling the souls of her husband and two sons from the afterlife into two bodies she had prepared.

In the end, Lorgeil had tampered with the gates to the underworld, and brought forth the soul of the old king of Ugatin, Daljoth the Fifth, and his army of demonic knights that had been imprisoned in a different dimension one thousand years ago.

Daljoth and his minions waged a one sided war with Lorgeil and her ghouls, the outcome of which was Lorgeil's defeat, and was thrown into the servitude of Daljoth as his concubine and sorceress.

In 4190 B.S.F. Daljoth had taken over the island of Maltatabi, and went on to the conquest of the nation of Tiuma. During that time in Tiuma, the order of the Bakaan Templars had risen to high power to become the top soldiers of Tiuma.

They were a force of 6000, who were skilled in the arts of converting their honoi into light and lightning, and under the command of Templar Warchief Gaxusan. Gaxusan led his troops against the army of Daljoth on the east coast of the country, fighting both the demons of Daljoth and the revenants of his wife Lorgeil. The Bakaan Templar was also assisted by the Sekrevias Hunters order from the country of Dragheim. The Sekrevias Hunters, skilled in fighting at sea, helped to drive the army of Daljoth back to Maltatabi Island. And in the chaos that was, Daljoth was killed and his soul taken by the Oikumies.

Lorgeil and her three daughters, Lorelie, Lorhen, and Lorinvere, were taken to Tiuma to pay for their crimes, assisting the Bakaan Templars in casting out the souls from the hiding revenants and help them reach the Maltatabi Island.

They even asked Lorgeil to teach them necromancy, but Lorgeil, having had enough of the war and tormenting souls, would not help them. This enraged the Bakaan Templars, who said that if she didn't teach them, they would take her daughters from her.

Lorgeil, one night, snuck them out of the city of the Templars, and sent them to the coast, where they set sail on a stolen ship.

The next day, learning of Lorgeil's deceit, the Templars slew her and threw her body in the sea. But her body was found by a few of the Maltatabi natives, who recognized her as the famous sorceress of their island. They took her bloated and rotting body back to Maltatabi, where it was buried in a lake along with the corpses of her once ghoulish minions and the demons of Daljoth. The lake was hence called the Lake of Lorgeil, or Lorgeil's Lake.

The fate of the Daughters of the Witch: Lorelie, Lorhen and Lorinvere, after escaping the Templars, set sail back to the Maltatabi Islands. But it was not without consequence.

Their small ship was found by the Sekrevias Hunters, and they were kidnapped and taken back to Dragheim by. But being sorceresses, the three sisters cast a spell on the ship's crew that sent all of them into a deep sleep.

When they reached Dragheim, in 4140 B.S.F., Lorhen escaped to the forest, Lorinvere escaped to the Yeros Mountains, and Lorelie escaped to the caverns on the shore, where they managed to live out the rest of their lives.

Daljoth of the Demons: King Daljoth the Fifth was born in 5100 B.S.F., and lived in Ugatin and ruled as king from 5055 to 5040 B.S.F. He was known as a brutal man who frequently warred with his neighbors Kafinifa, Balion, Ixia and Tessian. Tartian was the only country at the time that could stand up to Ugatin, and often the smaller countries employed hundreds of knights from Tartian to repel the forces of Daljoth.

But Daljoth was not only a terror to other countries. Even in his own nation, Daljoth would impose crippling taxes on the working class, only empowering the nobility that could finance his personal needs, offering them in return certain privileges such as killing peasants without consequence, taking peasant women and children as slaves, and even using them as sacrifices to the Gods of the Dusk River; Quenin and Moboanya, who it was said would offer them more years on their life in exchange for souls.

In fact, Daljoth himself was the leader of the followers of the Dusk River, and sometimes referred to himself as King of the Demons.

Daljoth and his followers even succeeded in opening the portal to the so-called Dusk River, where the demon gods Quenin and Moboanya dwelled, and offered them the souls of the peasants in exchange for demons who would serve him.

These demons came in the form of spirits who possessed the dead bodies of the peasants, not turning them into ghouls, but changing them completely into hideous creatures with heightened physical abilities (later in history scientists would speculate that this transformation was the result of a viral organism known as the *Cackling Creature*, but with physical evidence hard to find, this was never proven).

With his new demon army Daljoth attempted a final takeover of the continent. His success was going in his favor for a few months, until the people of Kafinifa sought out a new power that could slay the demons.

The Kafinifans had turned to the most powerful clan of warriors living in their country, who practiced the art of shapeshifting. They made a pact with animal spirits, offering their protection and servitude of them, and in return gained the ability to use their forms as they pleased.

With this new power, the Kafinifans helped to drive back and crush the demon army, and the few sorcerers from Balion and Tessian were able to open a portal to the realm where the demons came from and send them, along with their leader Daljoth, to the Dusk River.

In 5040 B.S.F. Daljoth's reign came to an end, and two years later, 5038 B.S.F., a new king was elected into power, King Hirrus Plieger, who had a dynasty lasting over three hundred years with nine of his descendants bearing his name, even the two queens.

Though their rule was not the best, at least the peasants had not to worry about being used as test subjects.

Rise of the Itruga Clan, the story of Kafinifa: Even before Kafinifa came to be thousands years ago, people in that region had been worshipping animals. One group of people in particular, were known to have the gift of shapeshifting into an animal of their choice.

Such rumors were not heard of by many ears, and often it was believed to just be folktales, but in reality, a small clan of people, even before the Covenant of Vu Ra'honoi broke up and its followers spread the knowledge of honoi, the Itruga Clan had been communicating with the spirit of animals for thousands of years.

They were a small group of just over two thousand, who lived in the Bestitan Valley. Even with clans conquering and overthrowing each other around them, the Itruga people remain hidden, probably by changing into animals. When all the wars of the clans had finally ended with the Kafinifa Clan coming out on top; in 5900 B.S.F., enough rumors, myths, and folktales had been said about the Bestitan Valley for adventurers and soldiers of the kingdom to launch an investigation.

What they found at the valley were people who had become lithrikes, gufders and diesmers; the three most revered predators on that region, and those who had become a cross between these animals and nycarmans, attacking them and keeping them all from entering the valley. When these animals and beast men were killed, their bodies returned to the nycarmans they once were, and with the stories confirmed, more ventures were made into the Valley.

But the Itruga people had been surviving for so long that they knew the tricks and secrets to trapping the people and escaping them. Some even gained the trust of the animals in the forest and aligned with them to kill the invaders.

Eventually, though, the other world managed to break through the Valley and reach the city of the Itruga, U'ox. The Itruga, now being captured as trophies by hunters and for collection of possessors of strange creatures and artifacts, were forced to abandon their home and scatter throughout the country into even more remote region and thrive in small populations.

They were three; the Clan of Ereduo; who possessed the form of the lithrike, the Clan of Inoxnini; who possessed the form of the diesmer, and the Clan of Beralbadim; who possessed the form of the gufder.

In 5040, these three clans were sought out by the King of Kafinifa to help them fight the evil that was Daljoth. They agreed to help, only after forcing the king to offer them more miles of lands and the right to be left alone. After their success in quelling Daljoth's army of demons, the three clans were offered their lands. In 5010 B.S.F. the people of Kafinifa grew nervous of the rise of the three clans, and urged the king to impose laws to prevent them from growing any stronger.

When the king did this, it was met with full disapproval from the clans, and as the king deployed knights to quell their protests, the clans retaliated with attacks. The clan of diesmers; Inoxnini, were wiped out in the war, but the Ereduo and the Beralbadim survived the carnage and were able to force the knights of the king into a retreat.

With the two clans and the knights now in a deadlock, the leaders of the clans and the empire of Kafinifa came to an agreement in 4999, where the clans would act as soldiers for the king, and for fighting in the name of the kingdom, must be recognized as citizens by the people.

To this day, the Ereduo and Beralbadim clans are still hold their position in the nation of Kafinifa.



