

The Three Rings of Abur
(Book I of the Planetary League Series)

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Also available through Kindle/Amazon or Vella

Continue the series

Book 1 The Three Rings of Abur Illustrated Edition (Illustrated by the author)

Book 2 The Hidden Worlds

Book 2 The Hidden Worlds Illustrated Edition (55 works illustrated by the author, star charts, illustrated ship classification and an extended glossary)

Book 3 The Hill of Weeping (only available on Vella coming soon to Kindle)

Book 3 The Hill of Weeping (Illustrated Edition in progress due in 2023)

Book 4 Out of the Bixa (coming soon maybe 2024)

Prologue

*Twisted and formed,
The lines of battle die
Arise reborn,
Waves of bodies,
Washed in hot blood,
Dreams of lives unlived,
From youth torn.*

*Storm the breach,
Slings and arrows fly,
Hammers of war,
Pull free because you must,
Clash of swords,
Victory or scatter,
Your ashes to the stars,
your dust unto the dust.*

(From the Song of War, Uzha Schoka Baxius 3rd Age)

The Beginning and the End

Archers in little tents upon the backs of three hundred thousand gleaming beasts, took deadly aim filling the skies with their poisonous arrows. Fire, smoke, ruins of a city wall littered the scene. In the middle of the melee, a golden figure sat a sword across his lap nonchalantly eating a piece of fruit, untroubled. The walls breached, the enemy crushed under a hundred thousand feet, the last of the resistance was snuffed out, a mere candlelight against the vast dark. So began the first empire, the Baxion.

(Unknown Ancient Chronicler taken from Tales of Baxius, Daler Gutua, Earth Descendents addition, Volume I Leading to an Empire. Editor's notes: To Earth descendents the three hundred thousand creatures would resemble armor wearing elephants. The Empire would later be called the Draxion empire by the fanatic Draxius, the first empire when it existed never bore that name, it was a product of political myth

making centuries later. Every ruler that has ever lived since Baxius the Great has tried to evoke him, tie their rule to him.)

Planetary League Archive Entry 100,501

The Abur Incident, the Shadow Base and Fleet, the Third Draxion Empire, events surrounding the Regal Fleet and the rise of the Three Rings. Compiled from ships logs, firsthand accounts (in debriefing), journals, and limited memory extraction. See glossary and appendices for further historical or technical details and timelines.

All the Many Threads

A Mystery

Row after row of the most advanced warships the galaxy had seen began their maiden voyage. Pulling out of the top secret base in a tight formation, their elegant lines and graceful curves promised a new age of wonder. Weapons, tools of destruction, but from creatures of superior thinking, that hinted at a new order, a peace. The engineers were giddy, aglow with excitement and joy as their efforts drifted out into the system toward greatness, destiny. Some boasted and strutted about, proud to be taking the fight directly to the enemy. A few tears were shed, in anticipation of the coming fight and the inevitable end of the lumbering war, surely nothing could last long against such a fleet, they assumed.

There were rumors that two other similar bases held their secrets close to them and likewise waited to unleash vessels of a new era, yet no one really knew the truth.

Basking in the light of hope and glory the All Fleets Commander sat in his chair the swirling cosmos out in front of him. He imagined the entry in the history books of that fateful day when the hidden fleet began its mission and how he guided the league to victory.

Sometime later the reconnaissance reports and sensor readings were conveyed in states of panic, the data they had didn't match any known physics. A pure chaos of warning lights and alarms, yelling voices and frightened cries had taken over the bridge.

A formula or pattern began to be discernible and within it troubling information. Some sort of event horizon was cutting across their path, a swirling maelstrom of time and space, a point that defied all notion of both, a vortex. The realization they were trapped in the pull of the mysterious thing, only became apparent when it was too late, everything seemed to blur, fade.

Uzha and Shega

Uzha and Shega the emperor and his brother held a feast, as usual the emperor was the center of attention, his massive frame dressed in a gilded robe and jewel encrusted crown. Shega in contrast sat far from his brother at a table reserved for the very least important of the gathering. They never appeared together, it allowed the little lump of a person to gather information, to remain unnoticed. Uzha laughed loudly, slapped his hand on the table to add dramatic effect, hearts stopping each time he did. A wide sneer was stretched across his skull like face, the shade of purple attributed to Draxion royalty. His skin was truly more bluish so he wore stage powder to appear more regal. The guests were writers, leaders, politicians and artists. The brothers knew they were all traitors, snakes in disguise. A quartet played soothing old tunes, that wreaked of class and finery. All attending wore elegant gowns and fine tailored suits of the latest courtly fashion. Food was piled high, arranged as sculptures of mythical creatures and works of architecture.

All seated at the place of honor, the imperial table, were schemers and critiques of the brothers. They had recently been involved in a planned rebellion. Turning down the invitation might be an admittance of guilt, fleeing would surely be. Uzha sipped his wine leisurely, staring down each of his captives, inhaling the scent of fear in the room like some narcotic.

So they all sat pretending to be calm unconcerned knowing full well what any imperial gathering might entail. A final course was brought and placed in the center of the grand lavish table. As a long cloth was removed, it was realized in truth to be a burial shroud for beneath rest a slow baked man. Garnished and adorned by the finest culinary artist the empire had to offer, into a grisly work of beauty.

“Your rebel leader, please join me in partaking of him,” ordered the emperor in his baritone growl that only vaguely resembled a voice. Servants heaped portions of the succulent partisan onto the guest’s plates. Looks of horror spread around the table. “Eat, eat!,” yelled the tyrant.

Foss

She heard crunching footsteps in the snow somewhere very close behind her. In contrast she turned slightly but made no sound. There was a whistle of bitter wind. Foss was lost in a snowy Japanese village. She had crossed the local shogun, and his assassins moved like shadows surrounding her, their forms flickering in and out of view through gently falling snow. She held a long sword graceful and thin, and a short one stout and thick. She inhaled, closed her eyes and could sense the presence of her attackers without needing to see them, she exhaled steam poured from her thin lips. Metal stars flew, arrows, a spear landed at her feet. She dispatched the first group and ran for cover as arrows from a tower filled the air. In a dark alley she felt her sword make contact, again and again. Escaping to a tiny courtyard she spun in fluid movements, hot blood splattering the pristine white ground. Then all was quiet, the strange silence of deep winter. Concentrating a gurgling brook could be heard off in the distance. A mild gust rose up filling the air with ice crystals like pixie dust. It was mesmerizing and beautiful, she smiled briefly. She soaked in the moment, the feel of the cold which thrilled her as if it stirred some ancient memory.

The sound of reinforcements clambering somewhere in the town became audible, their armor rattling told her it was time to leave, *those are soldiers, too much armor for sell swords*. She reached a tiny bridge by a stream, and a holographic message appeared before her, “Simulation complete, objective achieved, rest period recommended.” She pulled a star from her shoulder *off to the medical bay again*.

Existing the simulator she panted for breath, the cuts and bruises she had were real though the world she was in was not. Sometimes she went to medical to have them tended to, often she endured the small wounds imagining it was making her stronger. She pressed a cloth onto her open shoulder, from the nearby ship gym. The wound was

bleeding badly enough to warrant attention, she swore to herself a little embarrassed, with a small amount of anger.

Her icy blue eyes had earned her the nickname wolf but it was more than that she had a fierceness about her. So no one called her wolf to her face. Few ventured near her, the simulators were her only solace. Her snow white skin and tiny frame stood out even on a battleship with thousands she ignored their jibes and stares. *A warrior doesn't let such things reach her*, she told herself.

Nahdur

Sneaking and slinking about it was what he did it seemed. Everyone had their role to play in the secret war that the duke of Abur waged, Nahdur was a knife in the dark of night, the silent spy, the invisible saboteur.

Nahdur hacked and cut his way through the steaming jungle, his bulk of purple muscles gleamed, his tangle of wild green hair had grown slick with sweat. His battle helmet hung on his back pestering him like a bad habit. It rattled against his sword and armor Nahdur imagined he must have sounded like a lost peddler roaming the wild hoping to find a village to sell his junk to. The hum and buzz of thousands of things out in the brush, swamps and trees formed a constant cacophony. Gritting his teeth he pulled his leg free of thick black mire and rose up to a little hill. *Air finally air*, he thought, feeling a humid wind cover him like a chill. *There it is at last*. A huge destroyer lay on its side vines and moss covering it, animals living in its shade. Abandoned from a war seventy-five years ago.

A laser bolt shot past Nahdur and he plunged back into the mud and mire. Pulling his rifle free, he turned it on to charge, while sliding his helmet back on. Two more shots whizzed past into the brush from a different angle. On one side of the ship he spotted a group in animal hides with braided hair. Beads and bobbles for magical luck and power hanging around their necks, *pirates*. On the other side of the ship in modern combat gear, shielded body armor, helmets and wielding high powered laser rifles, Mercenaries. Not mere sell swords or guns for hire, an organization, with its own fleet of warships, a secret home base, and shady hidden ties to the Draxion and Hadrian. Their armor made a rifle pointless, but his sword was equipped to pierce such force fields and

plating, the only problem was proximity. Creeping through the brush he shot over his head at the pirates, they crouched and began returning fire, but in the direction of the Mercenaries. A firefight broke out in earnest. All for a ship left from another time when factories and industries still existed.

Coming up behind the first of the Mercenaries he counted fifteen, *manageable*. A pirate lobbed a shield penetrating grenade, *ten*. While the energy field was still having an effect the pirates got a few good shots in, *eight*. Nahdur stabbed a Mercenary in the back then slit the throat of another, *six*. Two Mercenaries noticed Nahdur and raised their weapons to fire on him, he slashed them both in one swipe, *four*. The Mercenaries were busy setting up an enormous laser cannon on to a stand, it was charged, ready, they began mowing down the pirates. Desperate, the last of the pirates charged the Mercenaries, they were wiped out in rapid succession, it was briefly quiet. Nahdur stabbed the two on the cannon and then slashed the last two standing nearby. Ricketty thrown together craft began to descend, *my allies come to tow the destroyer away and get me off this stinking bog of a world*

Tyler

Ships seemed to be exploding all around, the cockpit was bathed in a fiery glow. Debris pelted the vessel, which suddenly felt pitifully small. The sound of pulverized material raining down on the craft made the captain and crew's stomach churn.

Tyler was green he knew he was green he was shaking as a destroyer exploded near his ships, rattling his cruiser, sending it careening off course. Alarms and warnings sounded as his charge was pelted by more wreckage, fire and parts of once mighty warships. Their shells were spent, their shields nearly gone. Power was so critical they couldn't fire any of their guns either, and they needed time to repair. They had fought in mad dogfights once reserved for fighters, they had been attacked by tiny marauder craft and massive battleships too, they were all exhausted. It was a strange feeling to be so vulnerable, no way to engage the enemy and if they did they would join the rest of the heaps of junk scattered through the stars.

Adams the fleet commander ordered, "Pull up Tyler, get your people out of there, regroup with the battleships."

“Aye,” sir he returned happy to get away from the chaos and destruction, perhaps be shielded by stronger allies. Tyler’s copilot Drew plotted in the course and they rocketed forward. The other cruisers in his formation followed him. She wore a troubled look on her half Thai, half French face, that made her seem to be a stone figure. Clearly the two of them were overwhelmed by the vision unfolding before them. A long line of massive battleships stretched out in front of them firing a mighty barrage at the Draxion fleet that looked like suns exploding. From a distance thousands of missiles heading towards thousands of missiles just seemed like some wasteful madness, and of course it was. Mighty crafts like floating cities ruptured and shattered, split into unwholesome pieces. “Like autumn leaves exploding into color and then they were no more and upon the wind drift away,” returned the quote from the Song of War to Tyler’s panicked mind and he absentmindedly uttered it aloud. Drew whispered the rest, “ So is the last burst of courage and hope that will not see the light of day.”

Any hint of a cold war, hope for diplomacy was vanishing in front of him. He wouldn’t get the chance to train more, or grow a bit older, this was his time, his war and he had somehow survived his first major battle. Many of the other cruiser crews weren’t as lucky.

Alexandria

Her attachment had barely made it back in time for the big attack that had erupted, what they had learned though important would have to wait. None of it made any sense, it was all out of place and beyond disturbing. The flagship shook with impacts from some heavy cannons, it rattled and vibrated evidence of a drastic course change.

Alexandria pulled her helmet off revealing a spike of white gold hair. She swapped it for an undamaged helmet, ran checks on it and placed it on her head. She was enormous and like most Gorgon towered over the ship techs that ran about preparing for battle or reacting to the force returning to the ship.

Her teams of Gorgon the elite commandos under her charge expertly reloaded traded out damaged gear without her having to say a word. In a flash they were ready to deploy just in time to receive a distress call, from of all places the bridge of the flagship. They quickly moved out.

While in transit Alexandria's mind returned to their most recent mission. They had received intel of a secret base, a kind of holy site. The reports that came in on it were troubling and confusing. The evidence suggested ancient ritualistic practices the Planetary League had yet to encounter, very dark stuff. There were rumors of such things but no one really wanted to believe them, especially not so close to a relatively safe area.

They arrived on the craggy rock of a world, hidden deep in a canyon. Drop ships unloaded and Gorgon silently crept out seeming to disappear as their normally cold blue armor mimicked the surrounding rocks. Alexandria led her team up the canyon towards a cluster of metal buildings. The rear guard had heavy rifles, the forward troops light smaller weapons to help the commandos stay agile. Heavy artillery and other weapons was for the army proper Gorgons tended to get in and out often before being noticed. Laser fire seemed to rain down from all sides in brilliant flashes and lightning charges of energy. Then the wild swordsmen and a few that seemed to be women descended hacking and slicing at the troops to little avail. Skull-like masks with tubes for oxygen covered the attackers faces, made them seem more monstrous than mere guards. Crazed headdresses or perhaps their hair waved about like a lion's mane. Their swords did little damage to the heavy battle gear of the Gorgon but it was slow going getting through them. Once all of the guards lay dead the lasers began to fire anew. Looking up from behind a boulder Alexandria spotted guns pointing out of the metal buildings that might have been operated remotely, or were a robotic system. *What are they guarding?* she wondered, gritting her teeth in annoyance.

After a time two commandos ran to the guns and placed explosives near and on them, neutralizing them and freeing the path to the secret base. They blasted the doors and poured in like water through cracks in rocks. A hideous gory temple opened up before them, numerous sacrifices lay strewn about. Prisoners of various alien races and one fleet human were the mutilated victims. Every step they took was in a puddle of blood, bodily fluids or atop the soft squish of an organ. Under closer scrutiny each of the bodies was wired with bombs, particularly the human, *the whole thing is a trap, meant for the Gorgon*, Alexandria surmised, *someone knows the fleet quite well, we have a*

spy in our midst. "Nobody touch anything," she whispered. *What other traps might be lurking about.* She spotted trip wires, a few laser sensors, and something that looked like a mine. *We are supposed to be so distracted by the horror that we blow ourselves up, slip on intentials and into an explosive charge,* she concluded.

Horrible messages and symbols were scrawled on walls on altars. Only one commando knew enough Draxion to read them, he read out aloud what seemed a spell, "We consumed these lives to magnify our own, we drink this blood to put fire in our veins, we sharpen our blades for the glory of the emperor."

"Folks this is why we fight, this is what we are up against," Alexandria offered, her voice remorseful and far away.

Alexandria was satisfied that the holy site had served its purpose whoever had used it was gone but perhaps in the neighborhood, that thought startled her, *this sort of thing was only reported deep in the empire. It shouldn't be here at all,* she reasoned. "Back to the drop ships now!" Something big was about to happen, she was sure of it. Just as the commandos returned the alert went up signaling an attack, they weren't able to change anything with their knowledge and the gory details would have to wait, *if they were needed at all.* Yet the feeling that the temple was an elaborate trap to knock out her and Gorgon, so marauders could take the flagship was hard to shake. *The Draxion were changing tactics growing even more dastardly in their approach,* she reasoned and not happily.

First they had to defend the ship, if they could survive that then they would share their terrible tale.

Trula

The metal beasts crawled across the plane of Hakat, like a thousand giant beetles. Most of the planet was covered in water, a vast ocean, marsh and swamps, the plane began as savanna and ended in a bleak desert. A basalt ridge of mountains and crags trapped the cooling rains and a vast desert stretched out from them, one that was sadly growing. The world of Hakat was enormous, in ancient times many different groups of nomadic people traveled following the seasons and harvesting what was provided. Some followed beasts on their mating journeys, when one stumbled they caught it and used

each part of it to provide for the clan. Others tended to wild orchids which allowed them to survive and be a little less wild. Foraging for wood for tents and homes cleaned some of the forest of debris and hunting the mighty Haka for its flesh, oils and hide removed the weak from their herds. They tended the planet little by little so lightly that from a distance it seemed they did nothing. The world was in balance and the people on it too. Centuries passed.

Then the Miladic people arrived and stole their land or tried to imprison or enslave them, they resisted, they held on. Some grew to respect the Trulak, sought to learn from their ancients ways, record their history.

Later came the Draxion Empire, they were far worse. When the Draxion claimed they were savages of an impure and naturally lazy race the Trulak laughed at first, when it was decided they should be removed or completely wiped out the laughing ceased. Nomadic races without a fixed allegiance could eventually be found throughout the systems of Darka, Abur and in Trulak small numbers. Foragers, hunters, and sometimes raiders. Some of the Trulak sided with the Draxion and acted as their marauders, reasoning it was keeping the warrior way and at least remaining in motion. Some went into hiding on various worlds, and still others tried to continue to roam following their nomadic paths from centuries ago on their ancestral world, with limited success.

The Darka spies sat on a ridge overlooking an unfolding battle through high powered binoculars, one spy Tudu was explaining to another spy Hidu what he was witnessing. “The current emperor waged a war of extermination against the race, leading to some ironically joining his forces and helping to wipe out their own people. It is unfortunate that some were enamored by the emperor’s appearance of strength. There were initially so many ancient clans that often had long standing feuds and grudges that it was easy for the imperial forces to exploit these perceived grievances and pit one group against another. The Trulak themselves have no understanding of the idea that they are Trulak it was imposed on them, they might have been from Trulak but referred to themselves based on their families, clans and mythical or actually connections.

“For example, the babu or bear people, have a very dark blue skin, sometimes almost black other times similar to Darka. They may only marry other bear people. The ut people or goat people the most likely to settle and raise goats, may only marry other ut

folks. What resulted were separate groups that outsiders called the same thing, Trulak but internally were not at all related.

“But that means they created races,” Hidu stated.

Tudu nodded and continued, “True and it fit into the Draxion notions of racial purity, they could use those ideas to turn one against the other. If you look at a group of people and can not see something in common with them, terrible things can happen.”

Artillery was being placed row after row enormous cannons raised their barrels into the green blue skies. The tanks continued to advance, the Trulak remained fixed stone, opposite the wall of Draxion military.

Tudu continued, “The chief of the Haka Trulak people (named after a kind of fierce seal creature) Trula has waged an open war against the Draxion and encouraged his nomadic raiders to resist the empire. None of the green skinned Haka therefore joined the leagues of the Draxion marauders. They held out and fought on their original home world of Hakat and raided all over the systems.

In ancient times they merely followed the seasons of the planet and roamed but in modern times some took to trading and hunting on other worlds. During the closing of the gates or dark age, some of the nomads were stuck for nearly a century on other worlds they either settled or tried to continue their nomadic ways on their new found worlds.”

Battle craft blurry in mirage haze came slowly into view on the horizon. Hundreds of cruisers, tiny blitzer marauder craft, a few frigates and much further back a couple of destroyers, hovered like birds of prey.

“Wow they really want to try and end this here it seems,” Hidu noted, it was clearly an gargantuan force being brought down on the Trulak. The spies stepped back into their tiny spacecraft and fired up their shields before any shots were fired. They were a great distance from the fight but that would not matter once battleships, tanks and artillery let fly.

“Why is this important to us, why have you brought me here?” asked Hidu not sure he was ready to watch such a scene of carnage unfold. His people were in hiding living a meager existence but living. He was not content but understood sometimes to survive it was necessary to compromise, grovel or take what scraps could be found. He thought

of his people gleaning the market in the evening for things that had fallen through the cracks of the stalls from a hasty transaction. *How had his people gotten so low, would they ever rise up again?*

Tudu seemed surprised that it wasn't clear to Hidu. He sighed and stated, "This a resistance that has been growing, it might be their last stand, it might be the beginning of a new war. I have to believe what transpires here will be key to our struggle, the Darka struggle. The Haka Trulak won't take sides, they won't join the Draxion or the Planetary League they fight as free agents. There are stirrings on other worlds, it might be time for open revolt."

To the left of the plane were the basalt crags, razor sharp that punished even the strongest of boots, behind a system of caves. To the right an expanse of rugged desert stretching for days and growing each year. Ancient villages and towns once fertile fields and orchards year after year consumed by the sand. The planet was no longer in balance, hunger, anger and suffering spread.

The dry desert was in the middle ever filling with tanks and troops and implements of destruction. The army if it could be called that of that Haka Trulak was not on the floor of the desert but on the rocky shelf that bordered it. Iron, copper and galena wove their way through the stone in veins and threads, the Draxion said it was evidence of the Trulak's backward nature. *Why would they leave such metal riches unused? The means to make machines, cannons, guns and spacecraft, beneath their primitive feet.*

Trula observed the growing storm unflinchingly, his blue green skin almost glowed in the blistering sun of the waste. He seemed to welcome his death. His Haka warriors held shields of seal hide in front of them and had erected several barriers that seemed to be of found objects, gathered stones and driftwood.

Draxius the XIV the fearless tank commander laughed out loud when he saw their attempts at defenses. On all channels he mocked them and asked, "Do they think us children pretending to build forts? What do they hope those stones will stop? This metal rich region they could build rows of cannons and battle craft, oh but they would rather chase deer and seal, wait for fruit to fall from a tree." The legions were encouraged and laughed heartily.

Boza was from the Trulak but was ashamed of his own people, in truth he didn't see them as his people but sad, lost animals of a dying world. He led his grisly warriors to join the Draxion, "We will be on the winning side, a part of a mighty empire."

Secretly the emperor and his agent already had genocidal plans in place for the end of the war that would purge the ranks of any and all Trulak.

Trula did not need to guess at such a plan he trusted no one, but his own people. He could have continued to fight little skirmishes in the swamps and on the water, but instead he seemed to camp on the edge of the desert, helpless and wide open to attack, the Draxion could not resist the chance to wipe out his people it seemed.

Boza's marauders were nearly in range to fire on the Haka on the ridge. He was growing impatient, when suddenly the Haka were gone, they had vanished. There was an enormous cloud of dust and sand being churned up by the advancing army, a wave of said passed and then every warrior on the ridge seemed to disappear.

Boza's blood ran cold he pulled his craft back, he could spot a trap. He remembered that the old name for the Trulak translated to the Ghost Warriors. They terrified many kingdoms, their fierceness was legendary when pushed to war, but their understanding of the land and how to use it made them seem supernatural. Like ghosts they could appear and disappear at will.

The first row of tanks collapsed into a giant hidden trench at full speed, like toys on a beach wave after wave of tanks and artillery simply collided and tumbled into the most basic form of warfare, the digging of holes. Massive impressive holes granted, that seemed to swallow hundreds of speeding armoured machines. Branches and palm leaves were used to cover the mighty mote and then it was buried with a thin layer of sand. With the wind and some scattered material the snare was unseen.

The sounds of shock and panic flooded the coms only adding to the confusion. "Halt!" yelled General Draxius, "Full halt!" but the thousands of weapons in motion could not quickly stop, sliding on the glassy sands and tiny bits of basalt. They careened and smashed into each other as if some bit of comedy in a play. Then the first tank ignited, its shells loaded exploding in a turret. Fuel lit up from another crushed vehicle and spread to a pile of toppled tanks and on it spread as if fire were a charging army that leapt onto the Draxion. Ships in the air were consumed or flung wildly off course.

Safe from the caves on the basalt ridge the Haka launched burning bundles, baskets with straw and desert dried wood into the middle of the battle field, using something like ancient catapults. The catapults also caught fire and were useless after one launch of material it didn't seem to matter the warriors then retreated back into the caves. The middle of the field erupted with billows of gas and oil that shot into the air covering the soldiers, the tanks and vehicles. The fire continued to spread and reached the troops smeared in the oil churned up by the Haka, pools that lay hidden just beneath the sand. The air was suddenly foul as jets of sulphur smelling gas spewed into the sky, and also caught fire. Some fled to the crags and cut themselves on the razor sharp volcanic glass, terror spreading over them as they realised they were perfectly pinned in.

The Draxion thought the Trulak lazy but they knew the whole plane was a giant bomb waiting to go off and should be left entirely alone. Even the smallest spark threatened to set off the gas and oil pools that infected the region. Now the Draxion had learned the secret of the desert as well, as they fled what seemed Haka sorcery. The emperor would be furious he would not grab and crush the planet and its people so easily, and news of the first open rebellion would spread like the flames of the lost battle.

Hidu and Tadu were also leaving the planet, but with something like a flicker of hope within them. They flew in silence for a time trying to understand all of the implications of such a defeat. Finally Tadu spoke, "Well that was something. The old name for the region was the fire field but the word also meant suffering or forbidden depending on how it was used as if to say forbidden or you will suffer like a warning." They pondered his words in silence for time, with a new understanding washing over them. Then Tadu added, "We must spread word of it, I have some allies that will be interested in what we have seen."

Hidu nodded in agreement, "And I must speak to my people, things have changed today."

Adur

Chanting could be heard somewhere out in the temple. More distant screams of terror and agony. The frantic clicking sound of an imprisoned creature echoed around a Dithta, of that bug-like race. They were being harvested for their internal fluids, once

ingested by humans the effects were like a strong drug. Adur sprung from a corner of the grisly lab of a prison and slew the priests extracting the creature's "life essence." It sickened and angered her, *they are intelligent creatures it has to stop*, she thought, wiping blood from her blade and freeing the victims. She crept back into the shadows, *more to do, further to go.*

Adur slid down a snug secret passage. Her deep green hair and light purple skin occasionally shone out as light filtered through the hidden places, where she crawled or crept. Her long black boots covered in soft pads made no sound on the stone floor, her black robe helped conceal her. Beneath she wore a light armor, flexible but strong, her black gloves reached to her elbows, helping her grip, protecting her further. Deep in the nightmare temple of Draxius, one time fanatic self professed holy man and the founder of the Draxion death cult. The drinkers of blood, eaters of young, sick torturers and mad zealots at the heart of the Draxion Empire. They believed to be bathed in the blood of the weak made one strong, drink the life of another and add it to one's life energy. They took life and inflicted pain for pleasure. On the battlefield such daft practitioners would rather explode their own ship than surrender.

All imperial architecture was propaganda, the design of power and might, with one clear message, don't mess with us. Carved messages on altars and walls read, "We are mighty, we are cold as stone and hard as iron," it made Adur's stomach churn. Waste, blood, incense and sacred herbs mixed into an intense stench that seemed to smack her in the face. Dissected bodies, rest on cold stone altars, the remnants of some horrible ceremony. The anointing of some fighter pilot, an admiral, a general. *How does one reason with such monsters?*

She placed explosive charges at the main supports of the morbid temple, carved to resemble massive robed figures holding the hearts of enemies to be ritualistically eaten. She knew most Draxion were not wrapped up in such hysteria and mania, but for the imperial elite this death cult drove them, shaped their views, guided their actions. *How many Draxion building ships in Phedria merely occupied by the empire even knew of these ghastly chambers and temples?*

Out of the shadows, of several blood red pillars came some of the elite, the Uztat, the imperial guard. Armored from head to toe and coated in the force field of their suits,

nothing but a shield piercing sword would do anything to them. Adur drew such swords a thin graceful one then another broad shorter one, and waited for them to make the first move. Adur controlled her breathing, she pondered existence, nonexistence, infinity and the focus between, she was clear at peace. They sensed her control and stillness and it angered the killers. They sprang on her like hungry beasts, with Uztat it might be that they actually did desire to devour her. They believed it gave them supernatural strength to eat a beautiful woman or a strong man. She danced a graceful dance macabre, two swords melting through the fanatics like so much soft snow. She wasted not a breath or movement on them. She barely moved at all, instead she invited them to leap upon her blades and they obliged.

Pulling a grate from the center of the temple the sound of a rushing river was audible. The elite were strewn in a mortal ring, she fastened her swords, drew up a hood and dropped into the river, the charges she had planted ignited seconds later, destroying the ancient death temple.

Vasca

Spinning through the air, she landed a kick on a massive neck. Leaping backwards, she tried to pin her opponent with her muscular thighs, he flipped out of the way in time and was suddenly on her back. Vasca yelled, "I yield!" she had lost to Traynor again. The giant helmsman was a one time barroom fighter. He fought for extra money to send to his family. He was a street fighter. Vasca had studied tactics, maneuvers, strategies, fighting styles, she was very skilled but she lacked that spark, that element of danger. Traynor always beat her, "In a real fight you have to imagine your opponent as a snarling dog, a beast doesn't think of honor or fairness, it thinks of the soft parts of your throat. Until you learn to fight dirty you will always end up losing."

Vasca offered him a drink, he turned it down, sometimes he didn't. She showered and sat in her captain's quarters thinking about Traynor and his broad chest and huge muscles, she found herself aroused. She pulled up a historic account of an ancient battle while nursing a drink, wrapped in her bathrobe. Her mind wandered again, she unlike many of her companions had been born on Earth. She lived in a little village on the Mediterranean and played in the sand or warm waters as a child, her skin growing

deep brown. Sometimes her body cried out for the sun, the rocking of the waves, the smell of salt in the air. At night they would build a fire, sing and dance on the beach barefooted, wearing little or nothing. The hum of the ship, the clean air of the ventilation system, seemed contrary to her nature. She stiffened and forced herself to get through the account and studied every aspect of the battle.

Falat

The vessel was a storehouse of knowledge waiting to be unlocked, but locked it remained. Technology and contraptions, fascinating forms and designs for certain, but ever a mystery. The junk of a far flung and old war, dragged out of a swamp to be examined.

Falat had been crawling in and out of the vast warship for days, forgetting to eat, barely sleeping. He still understood so little of it, that irked and perplexed him. Components he had removed and analyzed and then replaced one after another, yielded only clues. At the moment of fatigue, maddening frustration, he placed an electronic element back into the wall of the vessel reconnecting several wires, and then hung his head in despair. A whirling sound was suddenly heard, "System restart initiated....complete, ships diagnostics available, please state your name and rank," the machine requested, Falat grinned. "Falat Royal Scientist," he told the computer. The vast ship's library was suddenly at his fingers, his heart raced. He was raised speaking the Miladic tongue, the ship spoke something else, but it was a simpler language, comprised of many from the old Earth, the language of the League of Planets. Holographic images of ships, history, stories, mathematics, physics and philosophy danced before his bewildered eyes, now he could unlock the ancient technologies scattered about his star system.

Derrick

Rows of warships faced rows of enemy warships, but not a shot was fired, usually. If a mining or trade world was classified as neutral then the war was put on hold, while other activities went on. Giant towers of mining and milling machinery loomed in the distance like metal giants. Trade and transport ships lifted out of dock, hoppers dumped ore and refineries spewed their filth. Slow moving barges loaded with materials drifted in or out

of the world, pushed by storied tuggers and even harder pilots. Spies exchanged information, whores sought clients, smugglers moved products, pirates took a break from plundering and all of it under the leary eye of the fleet. Freeports had their purpose, they were rough, dangerous even, but it wasn't the position of the Planetary League to police unless they were attacked. As soon as pirates were met in open space that was another story. People that might be trying to kill each other in a few hours or days could be sitting at the same grimey bar or rolling dice. Ships refueled, took on supplies and crew members, well that was their business as long as they made it back to their ship in one piece, most did.

Derrick threw his cards down and swung a punch at one of his opponents. The table cracked and collapsed, the cards flew through the air, drinks and coins cascaded down to the filthy mining town floor. A thing like a monkey jumped out of the way, something else like a dog growled and snapped. The two rolled and clawed at each other, in the broken glass and the spilt drinks, the miner's mud and the animal droppings. Derrick's face was scratched by his opponent's metal claw that stood in for a lost hand. The freighters, miners, whores, smugglers, other gamblers, fleet sailors and soldiers all watched the brawl with an alcohol and drug induced numbness that only allowed for mild amusement. It was not an uncommon scene and not really a spectacular fight. Sometime later Derrick was collected from a holding cell, by his pathetic pal Captain Frank. The bald, dough faced loser followed Derrick around like a pet, it annoyed Derrick, but in the end Frank was the closest thing he had to a friend.

Some drunk had vomited on Derrick while he slept, it smelt worse than it looked. Derrick noticed both simultaneously along with the fact that no matter how he moved his head it didn't stop pounding.

"Is Crane recommending discipline?", Derrick asked, a cold gel pack on his eye. "No, he a, he sent me a note to give to you it reads that he, "figures a night in a nasty mining camp cell, scratched face, busted lip and black eye were punishment enough, not to mention your pride at an ass whooping and getting cheated out of wages, by someone more clever than you."

"That bastard, he said all that?", Derrick asked, snatching the note. *Frank had actually toned it down, Crane could lay it on thick when he wanted to.* "More clever than an ass

hat like you," was the exact quote, *nice he thought, got to remember that one.* "Getting an ass whooping in front of his favorite whores," was the rest of the quote, *he knows me too well that William Crane*, he crumbled the note, and boarded the shuttle back to his battleship.

The Jenkins and Haley

It still stunned Doris to see a thousand ships stretched across the inky black. She took it in for a moment, blinking lights and glowing portals, spires of antenna and numerous cannons, shuttles darting back and forth, a grand caravan.

"Bomber squadron returning to base, you coming husband," Doris Jenkins called out. Shay Jenkins, replied, "One more mock run for us, they had a little trouble on the last one, but soon."

"Okay we can't be late for story time, Davey would get upset," Doris reminded.

"Roger that plenty of time, see you soon," Shay assured, spinning his fighter around to set up an attack formation. The other fighters formed up behind him and dove beneath a battleship and out of view.

Later the Jenkins family played in the kids pool, blue Darka children and Earth descendants splashed and giggled with glee. *A moment to be a normal family* Doris thought. Doris, leader of a bomber squadron based from the flagship Regal, her husband in charge of a fighter squadron and their son a powder monkey on the flagship. Not in the cannon area or engine room where it could really be dangerous but in the command area. Fleet commander Crane kept a watchful eye on the lad. Now he wasn't a sailor, he was just a boy playing with other boys. The blue boys were refugees of the Draxion wars and purges, given asylum on the Regal by Crane, they were scattered throughout his fleet. Whole families lived on the ships. *Wouldn't it be something if we could put all this behind us and talk about those days long ago, when we did our part in the war? What would I do? What would my boy or husband do given a choice?* She tried to hang onto the fleeting moment, just a family, just swimming and laughing, deep within a massive warship.

Later the logistic officer Haley, sat with a small group of children and read through a storybook. An old book of Darka and Miladic legends illustrated and relayed simply, that children always seemed to enjoy. A book she had known since she was a child. The Darka women that raised her Ladu had read it to her and gave it to her, when she had to leave their ship and go on some classified mission. "To remind you of your people," she had said bidding her farewell alongside her son Andu. Andu was nearly a brother, they had shared the same sleeping mat in the same refugee area as children. He kissed and hugged Andu, "Take care Badu," her nickname for him, a kind of mythical bear creature of Darka fables that was always creating mischief.

It was a chance for Darka children raised on a warship to hear their language, for a handful of human kids to learn the ancient tongue and for a few Darka parents to be reminded of their childhood and maybe better times. Sadly most in the fleet had no interest in the language and culture of the refugees that Haley found rich and beautiful. The Jenkins were the only family unit trying to gather a bit of the tongue together. Andu and his family never missed a session, sometimes they brought the story books that Haley read from. Commander Crane often attended having learned the language as a child, he said it kept it fresh in mind. A kid from the cannon crew Harold Blake usually made it out, though he never introduced himself and was largely unnoticed. She was glad to have a tiny gang of regulars that tried to follow along and the Darka that hung on every word.

It was story time after swimming and playing Haley's favorite time of the week. A Darka girl sat on one of her legs and a human lad on the other. Haley soaked up the tenderness and they welcomed hers, as the group huddled around to see the pictures and get close to her. The parents smiled, amazed that she was so good with the kids, how they flocked around her.

Turning a page an image of a red haired creature with snow white skin, emerging from a swirling vortex was seen. The Darka girl pointed at the picture and said, "It is you Ms Haley."

A few chuckled and Haley seemed embarrassed in truth it could have been her portrait. Haley tried to clarify, "Yes it does look a little like me but that is the Triabeck, angel of peace bringer of gifts, risen from her vortex," squeezing the girls cheek, she whispered,

“Except I’m afraid I didn’t bring any gifts and I haven’t learned to fly.” A few more giggled.

“Ah but your stories are a gift, and the time you take to read them too,” said a Darka mother smiling sitting nearby. Haley nodded agreeing with her logic and acknowledging the praise.

The young girl offered, “But maybe one day you will learn to fly.” The Darka parents didn’t seem like they thought it was funny, they looked at her with a weird reverence.

Haley was a little nervous, *surely it is just a story.*

“Let’s hear about Badu!” exclaimed a little girl from the crowd. “Badu!” the others yelled. Haley eagerly flipped through the book to begin one of his stories, with a big grin on her face.

The warriors clashed,
With measured blows,
Swift swipes,
Or brutally bashed,
It mattered not in the end,
The field was theirs,
Victory the only story,
That would be told.

The enemy vanquished,
A sorrow spread,
A tragic loss,
Generals clever,
Soldiers strong,
The archer skilled,
The swordsman bold.

Wasted, scattered, torn asunder,

Like autumn leaves,
Exploding into color,
Then they were no more,
and upon the wind drift away,
Brilliant red and gold.

(Excerpt from the *Song of War*, Baxius 3rd Age Earth descendent addition.)

Chapter 1 In the Thick of It

Explosions lit up the bridge, both on a large overhead viewing screen and on the main command deck. Fire, repair and medical crews scrambled to drag personnel to safety, put out small blazes and hold the command center together. Smoke, sparks, flickering computer screens and holographic projections all increased the chaos. The ship rumbled and shuddered from massive impacts mid turn trying to avoid complete destruction.

They came out of nowhere, it looked like two hundred ships but suddenly there were five hundred. How? What new trick is this? thought the commander.

“Shield breach, we’ve got blitzers making contact,” logistics officer Haley yelled above the many frantic intercom voices and those actually on the bridge. Spraying hissing sounds added to the mix of noises, as fire suppression systems fought small blazes. Alarms beeped and buzzed, lights flickered or pulsated. Another explosion rocked the bridge. *They knew exactly how to hit us and create the most damage*, Crane thought emergency backup lighting blinking on.

“Alert commander Alexandria, get her commandos ready for boarding parties,” ordered Crane.

“They are on the way,” shouted Haley from somewhere in the haze.

“Haley, Vasca, Traynor, Foss, suit up, Simms you have the ship,” the named officers jumped up from their stations mere shadows and silhouettes, hidden beneath smoke, cascading flying sparks, and a few small burning areas. Crane joined them, entering the tiny armory putting on battle gear. *Pretty bold to directly attack the command deck and bridge, like cutting off the head of the snake. If I weren’t about to die and lose all of my crew and ship I might be impressed*, he thought, securing his blue gray chest plate.

Replacement officers manned the command deck stations, cleanup and fire crews continued to try and get the normally pristine and gleaming white bridge in order. All of the replacement officers wore body armor, sidearms and helmets. A hull breach was expected in any second, so the officers secured themselves to their seats and began drawing oxygen from their pressurised suits. With all of the fires the air would be cleaner in their protective garb and they could get on with the task of defending and piloting the titanic ship, in the middle of a massive battle, whilst being attacked person to person. The officers didn't expect to have to defend their own bridge. Blitzers super fast jump ships, that were able to pop across a solar system in a blink, had gotten through the ships defences and one was melting a hole in the bridge. Often the blitzer crews would pierce a hole in a battleship's shield, rip open a portion of hull and send in commandos. If successful they might ignite a ship's fuel system, destroy a hangar full of crafts or plant explosives and leave again.

Draxion marauders were fierce and effective, if fighters and ship defenses were unable to stop the blitzers they might wreak havoc on numerous ships, before quickly rejoining their fleet. *Hitting a command deck was new, the marauders usually preferred areas of less resistance and risk, a bomb in the life support system crippled the ship but the system wasn't going to fight back*, mused Crane. It was common to just poke a hole in the hull and retreat that could cause loss of life and pandemonium, distractions were enough to shift a battle, lose a ship.

"Gorgon, on deck," offered Foss her icy blue eyes alert through the glass of her helmet. The elite commandos were normally deployed to secure planetary targets, seldom boarded other ships, it wasn't something the Planetary League Fleet often did. Heavily armed, extremely well trained the Gorgon were already fanning out to help secure the bridge. Based on where the blitzer was attached and a glowing portion of hull it was clear where the enemy planned to breach the ship.

Gorgon leader Alexandria took up a defensive position between Traynor and Crane. A burst of metal and fire erupted as a bridge support beam was blasted open. Through the hole grizzly armored warriors poured in like black clad beast, the Gorgon and other officers opened fire. In the smoky half light the marauders were a nightmarish blur of purple skin and wild glowing green manes, black hides and magical baubles flashing

swords and improvised rifles. One officer ducked beneath their control console and fired blindly with a sidearm while typing out logistics commands with their free hand.

Alexandria and a marauder wrestled for a bit, several little fire fights broke out, Traynor and a marauder rolled around on the deck, and Foss stabbed a few Draxion with an armor piercing sword, spinning and leaping through the air with an uncanny grace.

The bridge was suddenly clear of attackers, live ones at least.

Gorgon approached the hole on the bridge firing their way onto the Draxion ship.

Traynor and Haley rested laser rifles onto the bridge control center between screens, officers and panels. As the Gorgon returned from the craft an emergency repair crew sealed the gaping hole on the bridge and the Draxion ship exploded. The commandos had run on board and dropped explosive rounds and then exited. The tiny blitzer exploded, ending the fight or so it seemed. Sadly, in the confusion of the brief but brutal firefights, no one noticed the grenade that had been tossed at their feet. Crane dove to cover the device and then everything went black.

He woke in the medical bay, his ears ringing, the worst headache he had ever experienced and throbbing little pains all over. His battle armor was gone, he had some sort of medical gown on. He sat up, the ship once again shuddered, it all came back to him in a rush. *A turn hard to port*, the commander thought, recognizing the feel of the particular vibrations the ship was experiencing.

He reached for the nearest intercom panel and hailed the bridge.

“Commander Crane here, what is our status?” A nurse came running a look of alarm on his face. A robotic medical unit spun round and rolled towards the commander, on its rubber wheels, both clearly upset that he was out of bed. His whole body aching Crane wasn’t happy about leaving the bed either.

An examination appendage reached the commander first. The hum of a deep scan was heard and the buzz of healing waves being sent through the captain’s body emanated from another arm. Pulses that would reduce swelling, increase natural pain combatants in the body and reduce infection beamed out from one of the medical unit’s many arms. A mere silver cylinder with numerous spindly appendages and with no attempt at making it look like a person. Someone had nonetheless scrawled a silly smiley face

onto one side of the robotic doctor, which made Crane grin when he noticed it. *You can put people out in space, in a giant metal can but they still stay people, they still need humor, I need to remember that.* The commander's hand rose to his forehead absently, he could feel a new gash there. *That is gonna leave a scar he thought, earned in battle blah blah he mused.* Despite "being wounded," his pride was hurt worse he felt silly, *either I am dead or I should be on the bridge he reasoned.*

"Minor concussion, numerous bruises, rejoined opening above eyebrow healing.

Recommend liquids and rest," Uttered the medical unit.

Not dead, not dying, Crane thought, again embarrassed.

"If we don't get out of this fight we will all get rest, a lot of rest," Crane suggested aloud to anyone about to tell him to get back in bed.

Pushing a few buttons on a wall panel, holographic data projected out while the medical unit continued to scan the commander. *Something wasn't right there were too many ships, how?*

"Sir glad you are okay, we have repaired the damage to the bridge, workhorse units have sent over replacement parts, and we have held off several other boarding parties and the larger attack," announced Captain Vasca via intercom.

With a deep sigh, he reached for the intercom again, "Make for the gate at the Phedrian wormhole it is our only hope of getting through this," he ordered flatly.

"Aye commander, my thoughts as well. That was the last hard turn to port, we are already in motion and heading to the portal," replied Vasca directly. The commander grinned, she did usually think like him, either guess his next move or have the same thought at the same moment.

From the look of it the fleet was in formation and retreating. Losses were not high, but damage was prevalent throughout the fleet. *No one escaped unscratched, especially not me and then there were those extra enemy ships like a phantom fleet appearing out of nowhere.* What should have been a routine rendezvous and patrol had turned into a major engagement. Further the fleet they were to meet up with were nowhere to be found.

The nearest nurse held several shots at the ready, a glowing white light at their tip indicated the laser was ready for the incision. From past experiences, he knew that the

left hand syringe was to wake up and get back to the bridge. The other was the opposite, it would put him out and he would try to recover in his quarters. A wheelchair robot was ready to transport him if he took the knockout shot.

"Vasca the fleet is yours for a bit, doc says I need to rest off my injuries, call me in my quarters if things get suddenly...." he paused trying to think of how to word it without sounding like they were battered and defeated, which of course they were. "If anything else unusual happens," he finished. *Like another phantom fleet appearing to pummel us to bits.*

He caught a transport pod to his main cabin barely conscious and replaying the battle in a kind of fever dream state. In dire situations there was a shared emergency officer's quarters directly behind the command deck. Merely a place to lay flat for a few minutes vent frustration or anxiety away from the eyes of the crew. He was in the main medical bay which meant he was a long way from the bridge and closer to his actual quarters. He took his shot and slept like the dead.

Sometime later he woke and returned to the bridge more in a ceremonial way than for any purpose or task. It was important to show his face, encourage the crew, to seem he was standing tall, *while running away*. Most of the damage had been repaired, no one else of the main command circle had been injured, which only made him feel more embarrassed.

Though they were being pursued nothing was in range to do any damage. They were on alert but no longer at battle stations. Above the command deck a huge viewing screen hung above it a dome of stars was visible. A feeling of calm prevailed in the area, secondary officers ran the ship while the primary officers slept rested or in his case recovered. The exception being Vasca surrounded by a gaggle of techs and officers. She sat in his commander's chair, *holding down the fort as usual*, he thought with a grin. She nodded to acknowledge his presence but said nothing, busy addressing numerous issues all at once in calm whispered tones. *Whenever she or he whispered things were usually pretty bad*, he thought.

Crane visited the main hangar, a firefight there had done a bit of damage. In particular a cruiser was dry docked for repairs and had been shot accidentally, luckily an explosive device had been neutralized before doing more damage. He was not surprised to spot

helmsman Traynor, *probably couldn't sleep after a fire fight or two*. The giant was of Hungarian and Czech descent, had a pair of piercing black eyes and olive skin. His face could be best described as square, his head a thick block that matched his broad shoulders and barrel of a chest. *Somewhere in there, there should be a neck* but it always appeared to Crane that it was missing. When he was first enlisted he was an illegal fighter. He never got caught, but he showed a spooky head for mathematics that landed him on an officers track and away from the bar fighting. He still sparred often with Vasca and Gorgon leader Alexandria to keep limber. Alexandria and Traynor were nearly an even match. He was pretty sure Vasca was jealous of Alexandria, but never pried or teased her about it. Traynor secretly wanted to join the Gorgon, but he was too good a pilot, and it took incredible skill to navigate a floating city.

Traynor and Alexandria had stripped down to their undershirts and were loading up Gorgon rifles, grenades and body armor onto various carts. It was definitely busy work and beneath either of them, Crane found it curious that they would perform such a task. Not noticing he was there he watched them for a bit, the giant brahman bull Traynor grinned like a kid, and the equally massive Alexandria her shock of platinum blonde hair standing straight up like angry feathers. The two were grimy and sweaty, the battles had been hours before they must have been exhausted, they looked perfectly content, chatting and loading, staking and flirting. Occasionally they would jostle into each other rubbing sweaty arms or hands. Crane didn't want to interrupt them, clearly there was more going on than a menial cleanup, so he started to sneak away.

"Ah commander Crane," yelled Alexandria. *Caught*, he now had to speak with them after all.

"Alexandria, Traynor, hope you are both well," Crane offered, hesitantly walking closer. Wiping her hands on her wet and greasy undershirt, she looked Crane over. "Well you don't look so bad, surprised to see you up and about I must admit. When we scrapped you off the deck we thought you were a goner," noted Alexandria cautiously. Traynor nodded in agreement and spoke, "Looked pretty bad. Crazy move jumping on a grenade, yikes, glad you are okay, sir."

"The difference between heroic and crazy is usually hard to determine," suggested Alexandria with a sly grin. "I suppose if it helps, it is heroic, if it just gets you killed it is

crazy," laughed Alexandria, her laugh sounded rich and strangely warm for a trained killer. "When you deal in death you try to live fully, you take what pleasure comes your way. You never know how much time you have, I guess no one really does. We all talk brave but really we just want to get back to our bunk to sleep the madness off. Your crew is lucky, some commanders might say they would die for them, you just proved it." She grasped his hand in her impressive grip. "I thank you, my legs that are still attached thank you, as do the other Gorgons that you spared injury or worse."

"Yes I definitely thank you that her legs are still attached," added Traynor, bordering on obscene. Alexandria smiled and slugged him hard in the ribs.

"Sorry, I think," suggested Traynor, trying to pull in air but also half laughing.

"Oh it wasn't all that noble I hoped the chest plate would shield me and it did,"

"Ah but hope and certainty, therein is your courage commander," suggested Traynor also offering a hand. "I would go visit Alexandria in the medical bay but would rather see her unharmed," he added. Alexandria gave him a slightly surprised look, but then grinned.

"Well Traynor and I thought you just wanted to help clean up," Alexandria teased. Crane suddenly felt happy for them, *they already seemed like an old married couple*, he thought. "Well I am still a bit weary and am heading back to my quarters. Thanks for your efforts, both of you, glad the damage was not worse. I bid you goodnight."

"Good night commander, rest up, the Gorgon owe you a round of drinks," Alexandria suggested.

"See you soon sir," Traynor said, patting Crane on the shoulder.

He returned to his cabin. Though his head and whole body still throbbed and ached he tried to work out how they were going to survive the long journey back to the safe space of the Planetary League. The crumbling League, a small group of planets and nations that included the descendants of Earth.

How much longer can the League last? Something new has to happen, it was becoming a war of slow attrition. But eventually there will be no one left. He was hurt, weary, they were forced to run away to save the fleet, it was all pushing down on him, he had to concentrate on the many problems at hand and try to not to sink into outright despair. *Just get through one battle at a time Crane*, he told himself.

The enemy fleet was gaining on them and they still had several hours before they reached the portal to the wormhole. The trip through the wormhole would take months and they could, working diligently, finish many minor and some major repairs, replenish most supplies, let the crews rest up, the wounded recover, be ready for the next engagement when it came. *Everything depends on prioritizing getting the workhorses to function in perfect concert with the needs of the fleet.*

Workhorses were manufacturing, repair, medical, and transport ships. Capable of defending themselves with gunner crews and shields but also needing escorts and fighter craft to help protect their operations. All ships in the fleet possessed small medical bays and transport shuttles, but the larger workhorses could free up crews and resources needed to win battles, and sustain a fleet on a lengthy journey, campaign or seige. The principle of all large ships was self-sufficiency, if a single battle ship were lost it could in theory produce and provide anything it needed to survive on its own, away from the fleet. The workhorse units provided materials in mass when present in a fleet. It would take every organizational skill he had ever acquired and that of his officers. He labored and planned and directed members of the fleet until fatigue took him.

“Draxion battle group exiting fold space moving into attack formation sir,” cried a reconnaissance officer from somewhere on the command deck. He lifted his head, it hurt less his neck as well, *some progress I suppose.*

“Battle stations, go to boomerang formation immediately,” stated Commander Crane calmly. Alarms rang out, systems began to run checks, send out warnings on every screen and holographic projection in his chamber, but also throughout the ship and the fleet.

Crane rose out of bed and began to quickly dress. He looked in the mirror, rubbed a laser shaver over his pale face, splashed a bit of water after, *that will have to do I suppose.* He tried to tame his close cropped gun metal gray hair with more water. The giant circles beneath his soft brown eyes told the truth, it was four in the morning. The swollen black eye, healing wound above his eyebrow told another tale. All of Crane’s planning and scheming had kept him up until two am he had honestly just nodded off when the remote detection alarms had begun to ring out, and eventually the bridge

called. He buttoned the last golden button of his navy blue jacket adorned with a few brass trinkets and ribbons, he *earned mostly for surviving more than something heroic*. He wore his rank and his medals with a mild disdain, both pinned to him against his will not through some underlying ambition. *The heroic ones didn't really need their medals*, he thought grimly, turning to head to the bridge.

Exiting his quarters he felt like a salmon trying to get up stream. Immediately met by dozens of meek half hearted salutes. Some looked away because the commander appeared to have been beaten and they did not want to seem to notice and add to the injury.

The commander made his way up the corridor toward the nearest transport pod. The nervousness was thick in the air, they were already running from a sound whipping and might be about to receive another, no one was happy about it. Finally sitting in the small compartment a door began to close to his right. "The bridge commander?" the pod asked.

"Affirmative," he answered and the vehicle bolted forward, blurring past the racing crew members, the supply and repair trucks and carts all buzzing through the main artery of the command ship, *rush hour* Crane thought remembering an old earth city he had seen a photo of once. A tangle of trolleys, wagons and ancient earth cars filled the streets, while trains buzzed overhead and skyscrapers rose to the clouds. With that last thought, the pod emerged from a long tunnel into an open hangar area or carrier deck, where fighter craft, shuttles and drop ships hung from supports or were propped on repair stations. In the heat of battle the shuttles were cleared off and craft blasted off from the area, refueled, took on more munitions and shot back out again. Bombers, fighters, were being readied again a building intensity could be seen, *they would be ready for the next fight*, Crane thought, sensing their diligence.

Sparks flew here and there, the smells of welding and smelting filled the air. From the higher vantage point he could also look down and see the larger tram systems, trains that could shuttle hundreds throughout the ship or piles of supplies, some people drove vehicles below that on various suspended roads and highways, *rush hour indeed*. Just as quickly as it had appeared the hanger disappeared again as the pod entered a shaft and shot straight up toward the command deck like an old rocket, *a ha emergency*

mode things are bad, Crane surmised getting his teeth against the G force pressing down on him. The vehicle arrived in the middle of the dark support deck, suddenly the lights fluttered and went out, *damage to the upper areas wouldn't allow it to go further*. Lights flickered on and off sporadically. A cluster of consoles, power relays, massive information, data, and power cables stretched out in every direction like some den of giant snakes. Adding to the image the whole area was slick from fire suppression units that left the cables and pipes slick and small puddles about. More sparks flew as final frantic repairs were being completed, an unwholesome chemical smell hung in the air mixed with ozone, fire retardant, burnt metal and some sort of carbon lubricant. The repair crews continued on pretending to not notice the captain, perhaps both parties not wanting to know if the ship was ready for battle or not. The one officer nodded to Crane with a grim expression that suggested things were bad, he disappeared back into his underworld of giant processors and blinking indicator lights.

Having made his way through the snake pit he reached a pool of light and a giant spiral staircase. It encircled the support decks and made its way up towards the command deck. He climbed the steps, passing through the lower technical level a mix of data processors, robotic units, crew members, sensors, relays. The robotic units buzzed back and forth, forming links between various systems as needed, transferring new data, and even correcting minor errors in the massive ship's computer system. Like the robotic medical units, they were clearly not human, just metal rectangles with some appendages on a set of wheels. In the current state of things frugal, spartan design was favored over something of beauty, a thought that troubled the commander. Everything on the dark deck seemed to flash and blink the light of a thousand indicator lights. *"Lit up like Vegas on a Saturday Night,"* he thought, a faint smile crossing his face. Old man Admiral Fulton that trained and mentored Crane as a young man would always say that. *I really should try to find out what that meant*, he thought to himself still grinning. He knew when every light was flashing they were heading into trouble but what a Vegas was he wasn't sure of. He enjoyed studying ancient Earth things but in a century of conflict much was lost, and in truth his whole life had been tied to the current war.

He began on a ship as a powder monkey, a mere boy. Smaller and more nimble powder monkeys would climb into the cables and wires between relays and repair them in the middle of a battle. They were constantly running about doing similar jobs. They might be conscripted by medics or repair crews, they often brought coffee, tea, water, and rations to the crews, locked into their battle stations. They also moved shells, and provided emergency coolant to the gun crews. Their name originally came from carrying buckets of powder for cannons long ago. In their down time they would get a little schooling in whatever they seem to have an aptitude for but the real schools were the ship and the war. If a powder monkey lived long enough to tell about it they would know every tiny aspect of a ship, what every piece of equipment did and how it could be repaired, rebuilt or bypassed if needed. Inside Crane's mind was a massive schematic of the command ship etched into his brain. Hour after hour bit by bit for years leading to a vast knowledge of his ship, what each crew was up to, what every malfunction warning really meant. Added to the understanding of the vessel he also had an uncanny ability to remember the names of crew members from the command and logistics decks down to the mess and cleaning crews. Further he could seem to remember small things about them from what planet they veered, what they did on the ship, even some details of their lives. In the dining hall this caused amusement and dismay in equal measures, crew knew they couldn't just disappear into the floating city and be unknown, screw up and not be noticed.

Standing in the lower technical deck surrounded by buzzing and whirling machinery, lights and status screens there was often the feeling of being in some mechanical underworld. Crane nodded to Andu, who was surrounded by robotic units and busy with some sort of involved project. The technical deck was just below the bridge and the last part of his journey. Rising to the command deck a faint hum and the calm demeanor of officers greeted the captain. Surrounding the command deck was a sort of catwalk, the logistics crew's haunt. In the center of the catwalk was a large viewing screen which provided enhanced images of enemy fleets, planetary systems and crew members linking up for two way communications.

Reaching the final curve of the stairs which narrowed and rose directly to the commander's chair, Crane inhaled deeply attempting to collect himself and tried to

steady the nervous feeling of too little sleep. A powder monkey was waiting with a coffee and piece of bread. Crane smiled at him, taking the life saving supplies, returned the boy's salute, whispering, "A proper salute Jenkins, thank you and stay safe out there." The boy smiled back but looked nervous. Crane remembered being trapped in tiny crawl spaces, nearly burned to death, suffocated from smoke in the heat of battle more times than he could remember. *Small but brave, read the uniform insignia of every powder monkey's uniform, they had to be, Crane thought, no time to be a child during a total war. As soon as you could walk you were sent to battle somewhere some way. Just like every scrap of metal would be turned into a weapon. Would that future children might know something else,* but the idea seemed too alien to ever be reality. Almost no one now alive could remember a time before war.

What was worse was that Jenkin's mom headed up a bomber squadron, his father a fighter squadron. The joke was combined, they were one lethal family. He didn't want to face his parents if something happened to the lad on his watch. *The command deck was supposed to be the safest place for him,* Crane thought.

"Fleet Commander on deck," came the call from Vasca standing to leave the commander's chair with a perfect salute. As she neared Crane he whispered, "How are you holding up?"

She stiffened to put on a show of having more energy than she could possibly really have. "I'm fine sir," she replied also in a whisper. Okay that was settled she wouldn't be leaving the command deck to rest or recover from days of battle and retreating. *Tough as nails* Vasca he thought with the pride of a big brother in his little sister. Vasca sat at her captain's console spinning her chair to engage all of her controls.

The commander sat in his large chair, jokingly called the throne, surrounded by numerous screens and a large control panel. Just below three smaller chairs with subsequent consoles and screens seemed to grow and extend out of the throne, where Haley, Traynor and Simms sat.

The flagship Regal was in its own class of ships, *fortress class*, it provided all aspects of the fleet. Like a keep of old it was designed to be a point to fall back to, a rock in the turbulent sea of space warfare. Internally it was capable of manufacturing armaments, spare or replacement parts, and even grow and process food, from stores of proteins

and plant samples. A massive floating city, it was actually large enough to dry dock destroyers and cruisers for long term repairs. As Crane had observed earlier, there was one of each being repaired at the moment both heavily damaged in the recent sneak attack. The Regal's weaponry consisted of hundreds of enormous impulse cannons, able to fire lasers, particle, magnetic and acceleration beams. The last two could cause matter to break apart at a molecular level. As well there were large and small traditional flak or shell firing cannons capable of piercing shields and eventually hulls of ships. The shells had to be manufactured but required less power than the energy beam cannons and could contribute melee in a battle situation, throwing off sensors and therefore missiles and torpedoes.

Sufficiently settled in, Crane took a deep breath and asked, "Status?", sure he would get a barrage of information.

The three commanding officers sat slightly below the captain each with their own array of switches, holographic virtual keyboards, dials, indicators and even a few levers for specific actions. Beginning from starboard to port sat Simms defense officer, Traynor, helmsman, and Haley logistics. The three defended, piloted and powered the ship. Aft of the commander and to port sat the communications officer Foss. Vital to helping coordinate the movements and concerns of the entire fleet, one thousand ships strong. With angular features and very high cheekbones she often appeared to be scowling or angry even when she wasn't, which sometimes scared and usually intimidated people. Her earth descendants were Danish and Norwegian, and she always wore a small pendant with an image of the supreme goddess Hulda. Her hair was a startling white gold, her eyes the blue of a wolf. Like all of the immediate crew she was also into the history of warfare, always researching, reading something from ancient Rome, China, or her favorite subject, the Samurai.

Crane's fleet had become a dumping ground for unwanted alien, female and older officers, the result was a fleet with more experience and skill, versus brute force and aggression. Crane assembled a fleet of the brightest regardless of sex, race, or age. With regard to race he also had the highest density of alien allies aboard, again something some in the fleet wanted to curb or put an end to entirely. As a result Crane was seen as a trouble maker or rebel to some as a fair even handed hero to others.

Second in command, the captain of the flagship manned a station attached to the throne's starboard side. In this case the officer was Vasca whose ancient descendants came from Portugal and North Africa. She had wide shoulders from hours of fight training and kickboxing, deep brown skin, gray Berber eyes. She preferred her jet black hair clean shaven at the sides with a mere spike of survivors of the laser razor atop her head. She had captained a destroyer which was annihilated. Though she acted wisely and bravely she lost her command for a time. Vasca tended to be bitter about the loss of the ship and the costly war until her move to the command ship, which Crane requested. Crane did as much as he could to let her run the ship, acting as fleet commander and the day-to-day stuff was left to Vasca.

Vasca handed Crane a data clip, it was a small cylinder of clear glassy material it could be inserted into the command console and would include information from the other commanders of the fleet. Crane placed it into the console and glanced at the data that appeared to hover before his face through a secret holographic system. It was not visible to anyone else but the captain, tiny electronic adjustments to his eyes allowed him to see classified and sensitive information on his own wavelength, all officers underwent such surgeries.

The three command deck officers turned in the chairs slightly to meet the captain's view. Haley of Celtic and Norse descent, tiny feisty and very animated, she was by far the best storyteller of the group, possessed a keen wit, quick tongue and kind heart. The sole survivor of some science expedition, she was raised with the other refugees on various ships, learning Darka and Miladic languages as a child. Her short cropped red hair was always a little wild giving it the appearance of little dancing flames. There was a weird mix of beauty and sadness in her cat green eyes. Clearing her throat she spoke first in her smokey, raspy voice. "The early reconnaissance detachment has detected a sizable fleet entering disputed militarized space. They are in battle formation so it is assumed they mean to engage with us. Some indication is that they are a minor fleet of the Draxion empire, perhaps a mere patrol, maybe reinforcements for some other incident somewhere yet unknown to us. As we get closer we can try to intercept their communications and find out what they are up to. They haven't responded to Foss's hails. Fuel and supplies are in good order throughout the fleet manufacturing and other

workhorse units have gone offline to defend themselves. Medical units report readiness and likewise have taken a defensive posture. Still no sign of Liberty or Justice fleets,” Crane said nothing but gave a nod and turned to eye Traynor.

Traynor sensed it was his turn and began, “All ships report readiness and are in battle formation. All our flight systems are at maximum as are energy and communication systems.”

Crane nodded to acknowledge the report and turned to face Simms, a light brown skinned brown eyed man whose ancestors were from Kenya and England. He possessed a look of keen intelligence and was one of the only officers that didn’t like to physically spar but preferred chess, cards, and discussing history. An avid reader, he traded books often with Crane, Foss, Haley and Fulton which was how those four connected socially. There were many late night book discussions over wine, coffee or a meal. Though often passionate about subjects he had almost no facial expressions in most interactions and never spoke with his hands preferring a closed physical appearance. *Stiff as a missile but an exceptional officer*, mused Crane regarding him. Clearing his throat Simms offered, “We have had enough time to restock, troubleshoot and otherwise prepare our weapons systems but we still have repairs to complete, and the loss of valuable experienced crew members, to injuries to counteract. It is my recommendation that if we engage this fleet we hit them fast and hard and run through their line for the wormhole and out of here.”

“Duly noted,” answered Crane, scratching his chin. He looked over the casualty list again there were many injured, some seriously and a scattering of fatalities throughout the fleet confirming Simm’s assessment they were at a loss of experience and know-how but not so weakened as to be helpless. He found a simmering anger at the thought of the losses, rising up in him which he attempted to fight down.

Taking a deep breath and exhaling it Crane commanded, “Haley get scanning and sensor teams searching toward the Phedrian gate. That way we can make sure to know as soon as possible if more ships emerge. If they should appear we will be vastly outnumbered. As it is, we will be forced to defend our rear and front if we don’t move through them and get bogged down at the entrance to the wormhole. Further, if another fleet makes it through the far wormhole they will be able to re-enforce both groups of

ships, not something we can withstand. Make sure the wounded that can be moved to the medical frigate or merely to quarters are. We need to make sure that medical bays of each ship are free for the newly wounded.”

“Aye commander,” answered Haley, turning back to her console to organize the teams needed to fulfill the commander’s orders. There were two wormholes Nextos and Phedria in the immediate area which allowed for a lot of traffic in the region. They had come from Neuman system on a routine patrol, intent on a rendezvous with Liberty and Justice fleets. The areas were always contested and occasionally flared up into open hostility. The current war with the empire began as they sought to conquer and spread through Neuman. Ship building industry and mining operations were the lifeline of the League and had to be defended. A third wormhole led to restricted Hadrian space and was several weeks away. That path led to dead space, an area without anything useful, no life, no bases or cities, no one it was believed could survive for long in that zone. The Phedrian wormhole, the one they were speeding towards, in contrast was an hour away. Both were lit up by giant portals that sustained a gravity well and kept the entrance to the wormhole visible and easy to access. *A lot can happen in an hour,* thought Crane.

The stations on the wormholes were neutral territory maintained by a secretive planetary guild that existed supposedly for that purpose alone, the Hadrian Order. Part of the conflict between the Earth descendants and the Draxion was over these gates. All of the portals had been destroyed in the early years of the war, isolating planets and bringing about a dark age. As the neutral order was established the wormhole stations were gradually rebuilt. Sadly it accelerated the rekindled war between the planetary league and the Draxion empire taking the fight across multiple star systems as if the dark age had never happened. Both parties threw all of their resources toward an all out war trying to make up for lost time. The two factions fed their citizens propaganda that insisted that the war was winnable and victory would soon be theirs. Twenty-five years later the war efforts had only grown more desperate, both sides more cruel and the hate sucked in thousands like a blackhole.

Crane turned to Vasca, “Anything to report?”

Vasca, pointed at a screen and stated, “This is odd to me. I noticed it before the last attack and now here it is again.”

Crane pushed some holograms out of the way until he saw a three dimensional view of the area Vasca was referring to plus all of the new data. “Could this be how they pulled off the last sneak attack?” Crane whispered. “We thought there were two hundred ships and now somehow there are nearly a thousand and we took out more than a hundred. It doesn’t add up, ships can’t appear out of nothing. If the Draxion have some new invisibility method, we are going to take a beating. Every fleet in the league will be vulnerable.”

Vasca continued, “Our long range sensors seem confused by it and I don’t recognize the phenomenon, kind of like a mirage, it seems to be a wavering point near the station at the wormhole. It makes me wonder if they have already exited the wormhole and have found some way to hide from our sensors.”

A chill ran across Crane, *hiding? Hiding how many ships? Are we speeding towards a trap? Some sort of new trickery from the bastards of the Draxion empire?*

Haley looked up suddenly, “Can you run these numbers Captain Vasca?” She sent data directly to the main control console at Vasca’s and Crane’s stations. Everyone typed madly on their holographic keyboards, scrolled through maps screens, graphs and data. “Fleet full stop!” shouted Crane. Every ship threw reverse propulsion into high gear to comply, shaking, rattling with the massive effort to stop floating cities suddenly. Soon a thousand ships were frozen awaiting the next order.

Punching a communication line Crane ordered, “Admiral Fulton, you are now fleet commander of your division, all ships in divisions one and two. Divisions one and two boomerang formation on your new flagship.” Fulton’s ship the Endeavor would be the center of the new fleet from which all five hundred ships would pivot.

“Divisions three and four form up in spear point formation.” Confused looks went round the command deck, the thunderous rumbling of the massive ship suddenly returning to full speed was heard. Recognition spread across the officers faces, *he is forming up two battle lines*, thought Simms. As soon as the thought reached it’s path the other much larger Draxion fleet became visible.

“And there they are,” hissed Vasca, her hands forming tight fists as if she wanted to spar with the ships directly. Rows of grisly spikes machines that seemed more like viscous sea creatures than ships. Planetary league vessels were graceful with smooth lines and curves, Draxion craft looked more like angry animals puffing up and sticking out their quills. The remnants of red and black painted on top of rusted bolts and crude sheets of metal, the colors of the empire, and like the regime worn and faded. Word was that most in the empire were imprisoned or starving, forced into labor and conscripted onto ships. Further evidence of their crumbling rule was an increased reliance on Mercenary forces.

Dividing the fleet was risky, it would greatly weaken any attack but there was no other way to attack two fleets at once. Further without a sound barricade the rear of the fleet would be exposed. He knew old man Fulton would offer to be sacrificed for the fleet, to guard its exit from the system. He also knew if anyone could survive such a rash attack it would be Fulton and his ships, *with any luck they would blast a hole through their line and spin round to join us, but luck hasn't exactly been with us*, surmised Crane bleakly. “Launch all fighter craft, bombers and escorts, make all forward batteries ready in all respects,” stated Vasca. All of the ships in the fleet, now nearly five hundred, would be doing the same, charging shields and cannons.

“All medical bays report ready sir,” announced Haley.

“Forward batteries ready in all respects sir, shields at maximum strength.” stated Simms.

“All ships in spearhead formation sir,” Traynor relayed.

“Full speed ahead! Drop the fleet to these bearings and then pivot the fleet at a standard rate,” ordered Crane. The fleet dove slightly leveled off and then began to slowly rotate around the flagship making them moving targets that moved forward, but also upward and downward, allowing damaged ships to get out of the fray if needed and creating a constant barrage of weapons. It was Crane’s creation and very effective at such high speeds.

Letting some of the ships be seen formed the illusion of an easily conquered foe as bait and the larger fleet dangerously closed the trap. Crane on the other hand stopped the fleet on instinct somehow, perhaps it was that the enemy ships seemed to be waiting for

something or that they appeared little concerned, during a war that is automatically suspicious.

Chapter 2 The Towers of Zatura

Nahdur woke soggy and chilled to the bone in a drainage pipe beneath the ancient city wall. The rain had continued through the night and it would surely soon be morning. The drips and splashes of drops added to his restlessness, confused his ears. He was never sure if the patter of water came from steps or drops bouncing off of a wall. He reached out of the pipe and rinsed a hand, it wasn't a horrible cut, but it stung both his pride and body. He was exhausted and had barely slept. He extended his arm out further to clean his forearm. *My blood someone else's?*

They landed in the dead of night. Four black winged creatures seemed to circle the jagged towers of Zatura. Using only gliders they reached the highest tower of the fortress. Just four, but a very lethal four. He did not know the names of the other three, it was part of the plan, each had a task, each was expected to escape to their pickup point and wait. Even if it meant sleeping in a rain filled drain, and nearly freezing to death.

The sixteen towers of Zatura, one of the last Draxion strongholds left in the Abur system. The emperor's cousin was made a puppet duke and he ruled with cruelty, barbarism and fear. The symbol of his harsh reign were the towers of his perilous castle. Not a place of royal balls or elegant halls, of tapestries or mosaics, a place of suffering, disease, torture and slow death. There were few places that were more feared, perhaps the Hesch stronghold of the Twins and of course the Hill of Weeping. The massive sprawling home of the emperor Uzha. In comparison Zatura was a tiny crude copy, created by an unimportant figure. Whereas the Hill of Weeping was wide and spread across a rocky shelf and crowned by a bleak citadel, Zatura shot straight up like an obscene gesture.

One figure piloted the glider off into the cloudy sky, lined in silvery moonlight and the glow of the Abur Nebula. Then the rain began, the shimmering moon and clouds vanished like hope on a battlefield when the tide was clearly turning. Assassins liked

even preferred the dark, and tonight Nahdur had to be one. It wasn't a role he relished but everyone had their part to play and he was loyal to his father and his people.

Nahdur was broad, his arms and chest like big stones, his height and cruel stare defied his few years. All of his muscles strained to hang onto the grim tower of carved rock and forged iron. A guard stirred half in a slumber, *he heard something*, imagined Nahdur. Silently he pulled a tiny blade from his waist belt. The guard peered near Nahdur, close enough for him to slit his throat with a flick. Mounting the wall he threw the guard's corpse over it. It would thud and crash and distract from him. They would scramble below looking for an intruder on the ground instead of somewhere in the clouds. A brazier glowed in the tiny guardhouse of the tower, used to send messages but mostly to keep the lazy sentries warm. Nahdur placed a small package in the fire, it lit up his purple skin briefly. He lifted the small iron tripod and threw it in another direction. *Wait for it, wait*, a blast came as the package caught fire and exploded. The other three intruders slung arrows from their towers down into the growing confusion. A fire burned despite the rain, a bloody body perplexed and random arrows found targets, sending them collapsing into the mud and puddles of courtyards and ramparts.

Nahdur began to climb down the tedious cramped spiral staircase. Cheaply built and all for show a good kick could dislodge stones, a few strange men might bring the whole place down. He stopped, lit a fuse on another package and continued leaping down the miniature stairs. Finally reaching the main rampart at the base of the ludicrous towers he dispatched two more guards with his small blade, taking their swords. He kicked open a door at the end of the slender wall. Turning left he headed down into the main keep. Servants ran from the sight of this huge soaking wet beast wielding a sword in each hand.

A gaggle of half naked women ran from a room, candle light flickered from within. Striding into the room he noticed two bodies tied and hanging from metal posts. From the slashes on their bodies he knew they were objects of the duke's perverse pleasure, sport. He cut them down, they crumpled to the floor like wet rags. A third victim was tied to the bed belly down, he was pouring hot wax on her back, though gagged he could tell she was trying to scream in pain. Nahdur had seen enough he leapt onto the bed. The duke turned a look of horror and realisation in his eyes for a flash before his head fell to

the cold stone floor. He cut the woman free, found her a robe, motioned for her to leave. Explosions from several packages scattered by assassins throughout the bleak place were heard.

Fighting more guards on the way Nahdur reached the rampart again. His hand was bleeding, he wasn't sure why. Securing a hook to the flimsy construction, he threw one sword down then repelled over the wall into the dark.

Nearly reaching a slick ledge his hook gave out, having destroyed a portion of the wall with his weight. He slid down the cliff, tumbled, rolled and finally was able to grip at a slippery boulder. He spotted the drainage pipe he was to use to sneak into the lower levels of the citadel. He pulled the rusted grate from the pipe easily. Ducking his head he began to walk along the drain stepping on rat-like creatures as he went. A dull light glowed somewhere in front of him, illuminating the water in the pipe making it shimmer. Side stepping around a cascade of water that flowed from the citadel above him he continued down the pipe. He struggled to make his steps quiet, as every sound echoed and bounced about against the stone. Voices became apparent, faint at first then gradually more distinct. "The duke is dead, we should leave," someone said, "We should see if we can grab his riches," another said. "What do we do with them?" a third said. "Kill them and let's get out of here," said one voice. Through another grate shadowy figures became visible in the half light of the dungeon. A torch flickered somewhere, a small fire crackled in an iron stove. One of the shadows stood and fumbled with keys. Nahdur kicked the rusted grate in front of him, sending it into the four shadows with a crash. He jumped from the drain and onto the grate. Before any of them could react he had already stabbed them through the grate, blood and guts and pitiful cries were all that was offered.

Prying the keys from a dead jailer's hand he opened a cell. Twenty half starved men stared fearfully out at Nahdur, soaked, covered in mud, rust and blood.

"Good evening my father thanks you for your loyalty, and hopes you will return to your lands as partners in a new union, the Union of Abur."

Then he escaped again to wait for his retrieval. The men he had freed raised small bands and fighting began between those in the town still loyal to the emperor and those wanting free of him. He was not to be involved in that fighting, he had other more

important tasks ahead. Sometime in the morning as dawn struggled to break through the rain and clouds, a glider slid up and Nahdur drifted away again, over perilous cliffs and crags, struggling to stay awake long enough to get back to safety.

Chapter 3 Point of the Spear

Reformed up, both fleets were accelerating to attack speed. The plan was for Crane's ships to punch a hole in the fleet guarding the wormhole, and escape through it. The second fleet commanded by Fulton, would merely create a defensive barrier against the Draxion fleet that had attacked earlier while protecting the rear of Crane's fleet. At speeds beyond light the far enemy fleet did not yet know it was about to be engaged. The surprise and wide attack formation would confuse and debilitate the enemy ships. It would give the smaller already battered fleet a tiny advantage, it was hoped that would be enough to let them win the fight. Whatever was left of the fleet would follow Crane's spearhead formation and head into the portal.

With any luck they would reform the whole fleet in a few months after traveling through the wormhole.

Crane had played out so many simulations and was constantly studying past battles he was able to formulate the scheme in a few seconds. The many hours that went into filling his head with such things went unseen and created the illusion of some sort of genius able to consider all factors in the blink of an eye.

The slender spearhead formation gave little for the opposing fleet to strike at and turning about to strike would cause them to fire into each other. As well, one side of each ship would be protected by the interior ships in the fleet as they rotated around like spokes on a wheel, no one ship was in range for long.

"Ready to engage sir," called out Traynor.

"Drop down forty degrees, all ships," ordered Crane. Down meaning below the front line of the enemy fleet. The Draxion flag ship was a fierce battleship a fraction of the size of the Regal, still they wouldn't engage it but instead dove away from it, looking for a weak spot in the fleet. Draxion fleets favored fast, lighter attack ships and had less regard for battleships. It was an opposite philosophy in the fleet of the League. Battleships were the foundation, a fortress class ship the bedrock, all of the other vessels could always

fall back if they needed to, even retreat into the flagship if in serious danger. Draxion fought as if all losses were acceptable, even expected, retreat brought shame and smacked of cowardice. Most fleet attacks were intended to lure enemy ships toward their battleships so they might crush them with their heavy firepower.

“Status,” asked Crane.

“All crews ready in all respects,” replied Vasca.

“Let fly,” stated Crane.

With the last phrase Regal let loose its full armory, everything in its arsenal. Missiles and torpedoes tore into battleships and carriers, lasers knocked out supply and support craft. Fighters fought ship to ship in spectacular dog fights covering fire being provided by cruisers. Bombers sought holes provided by mines and flak and dropped more explosives into damaged areas and weak shields. Battleships explode like supernovas, panic and terror spread through the Draxion fleet, leading to more mistakes and more losses. The forward ships in Crane’s fleet were nearly free of the enemy fleet.

Crews scrambled to support the effort all over the ship, people were manning stations, racing supplies and teams to be ready for whatever might happen. Below the command deck ships were launched, torpedoes fired, with more being readied, forward lasers and missile arrays sprang to life slamming into a wall of ships, rattling shields wiping out smaller crafts entirely. Regal crowned by a ring of battleships would open the hole for the spearhead to plunge into, the other four hundred ninety-some ships would form the shaft of the spear. Once the initial hole was pierced, Regal would fall silent waiting for a strike within the center of the enemy fleet and then would be out of the fight. Damaged ships could dock with Regal or be towed out of the battle as needed, but the idea of the spear was to pierce, pass through and keep moving at full speed.

The Regal’s heavy cannons fired, followed by missiles, then light fighter craft would look for weak spots and fire cannons or missiles as needed. Finally bombers would move through with heavy fighter escorts. The bombers and heavy fighters would rain down a massive barrage of laser, cannon, and missile fire, to cover themselves, weaken defenses for their payloads of shield piercing bombs. The whole process would repeat if needed but often one successful pass would be enough to wipe out a destroyer,

certainly a cruiser. Multiple passes and heavier fire were needed to knock out battleships.

Enemy fighters would try to inject themselves into the bomber runs or draw fighters away and into fierce dogfights. The Draxion didn't use bombers at all and used their cruisers, and frigates like fighters. Instead of neat formation the cruisers, frigates and destroyers repeatedly attacked in wild aggressive lunges. It isolated them from the support of battleships and made the bomber run tactic all the more effective. It only broke down when allied destroyers and cruisers followed the Draxion chaotic approach, and numerous Planetary League fleets had been wiped out through such carelessness. Draxion commanders lacked imagination, their oppressive society didn't encourage free thought. There was also a lot of infighting between officers each trying to top the other and no one wanted to challenge the cruiser captains and pull them back in line. As well Draxion culture demanded that their warriors fight to the death or face dishonor and shame. It was better, a Draxion felt, to throw your head on the block willingly for the Empire then disgrace your ancestors with a hint of weakness. The Draxion knew one formation and always attacked in the same way, shield formation. The flag ship in the center, crowned by a ring of destroyers, a ring of battleships and then extended out the furthest, their cruisers. The effect was that of an ancient circular shield. The lighter ships would then dive in like teeth closing in on a prey. They would sell their lives cheaply to gain glory for the empire, their families and their ancestors. The giant battleships would then punish anything coming near them, again closing in like jaws devouring. The destroyers would push ahead trying to drive holes in the line. Their fighters were equally suicidal with no concept of supporting crafts, merely death with honor, noble sacrifice as demanded. *Rather hard to end a war with people that have no concepts or words for surrender or defeat* thought Crane watching the carnage begin.

“*Victory or scatter your ashes to the stars, your dust unto the dust,*” Traynor uttered to the room. Quoting something the greatest commander of the Draxion, Baxius, once said.

“That green haired purple skinned fanical bastard might have said it but he sure as hell didn't have to live it,” commented Vasca. She was right, Baxius lived and died in a distant past, an age of swords and archers long before space travel. He was the first

ruler of a short lived kingdom that imploded around him. He had conquered his whole planet then called Trulak. Later by Draxius it was called an empire, but Baxius himself was a mystery and the subject of much scholarly debate. The war that they were waging was with the third attempt at an empire. Though there was an older war with the kingdom of Draxion, that led to a dark age, the war Regal fleet fought was twenty-five years old.

Fulton's fleet had reached the other enemy group of ships and was decimating them. The element of surprise, the change of formation before missiles could lock on and the skill of the gunnery, all combined to give Fulton's fleet massive destructive power. The other enemy fleet had not yet formed a battle line, they were still merely in pursuit mode, each ship striving to achieve glory by being the first to draw blood.

"A complete disarray even for the Draxion," commented Simms viewing both battles together. He was right, it seemed neither fleet anticipated that Crane would divide the ships or that he would take the formation he had, they responded slowly and in a clumsy way.

"If I had to guess," offered Haley, "I would say they were overconfident, as if we would see we were outnumbered and panic or give up." Draxions not understanding surrender seldom took prisoners, surrender was a death sentence. Luckily the maneuvers were working.

Vasca was balancing Crane's fleet while Crane himself tried to consider both fights together, sending out commands to individual ships as needed but usually trusting that they knew what they were doing. It was calm, quiet on the bridge commands went out quietly so there was a constant murmur of low voices, computers processed information and energy buzzed through the ship creating a faint hum.

Below the command deck, fighter craft landed for repairs or to reload. The Jenkins passed each other in the hanger. They squeezed each other's hands as they ran in opposite directions, a brief moment of contact that expressed and suppressed their worries and concerns. They climbed back into their respective crafts to return to the madness.

Some secondary craft, refueled or repaired fighters, took off blasting out of the main hangar. Throughout the ship crew members ran to and from stations, repair crews scrambled, trams raced supplies and staff here and there. The stress, the noise, grit and sweat and violence, on the command deck register as a mild alarm or flashing light. Gunner teams loaded and maintained batteries of cannons. Burning hot shells flew through the air clattering on the ground, missile launch tubes fell out of bays glowing with chemicals and heat. All the crews wore protective suits in case of a hull breach or silo explosion. The suits kept the crews cool against the intense heat of the cannons and launch silos, prevented chemical and steam burns and guarded against noxious fumes.

Grime, condensation and oil made the gunnery deck slick and tricky to negotiate, corporal Blake fell as the ship took a powerful hit causing the deck to vibrate. Gathering his footing he climbed above the spent shells and other debris and resumed his run to a blinking panel. A system was overheating and needed to be re-routed, ten minutes ago. From the sneak attack they were still a little short handed as some crew was mending in the medical bay. In the thick of the battle there were too many things to consider and this one area had reached a critical point. *In seconds the whole area would explode, if it were left untouched.* Throwing an enormous lever, the emergency coolant flooded the chamber, saving the bay of cannons from destruction. Blake ran to the next flashing screen, powder monkeys and cannoneers jostled about from gun to gun, station to station. Another warning light began to flash, *one fire after and another*, Blake thought in despair.

Outside meanwhile, the spearpoint of Crane's ships ripped through the sluggish Draxion fleet. Missiles, laser blasts, wreckage, explosions collided and swirled like a violent malstrom of destruction, in complete opposition to the cool collected command crew that dealt that damage. The brilliant idea behind formation spearhead was that one side of each ship would let loose an incredible barrage of weaponry, flak and mines. Laser cannons blasted small fighters but also targeted the large battleships and destroyers hard and fast. The other side of each ship faced inward toward the rest of the fleet meaning those shields and that weaponry were in reserve unused. A full on attack might

involve the entire ship risking damage throughout, overall, draining power and wearing out crews. Spearhead simply sliced through usually before the enemy had time to react and in this case it seemed even more true, they were colliding with each other firing on their own crafts, barrelling into flak and mines, it was a very sloppy affair.

Andu had devised a way to boost the speed of the fleet, it was a simple series of calculations but somehow had never occurred to the human techs. The effort landed him a promotion making him the only Darka officer in the fleet. It also meant that Draxion targeting had trouble tracking the Regal fleet as the slight increase in speed threw off their sensors. Crane had the most skilled fleet capable of maneuvers none of the other fleets had dreamt up but also sat aboard the fastest fleet in the League, both were surprising and overwhelming the Draxion, *we just might get through this then on to a worse fight in Phedria. Heavily fortified and populated Phedria. They had built much of the Draxion fleet in Phedria, they need only build more ships to replace whatever we might sink*, Crane thought with a bit of anxiety but also noticing the irony of the situation. Added to the imbalance of the engagement, Crane had detected a destroyer wavering by analyzing its flight path. If a trace line left the ship straight as an arrow that was a ship you didn't want to mess with. If in contrast an inconsistent trace could be seen that was a poor crew or helmsman. When plotting where the head of the spear would aim he spotted a destroyer, *clumsy green and unsure, wavering like a sailor on shore leave*. All of the officers watched a holographic simulation of the battles sitting at their stations. As needed they would punch in commands, if they noticed some weak point, some problem area, they might punch in those commands frantically.

Regal was preparing its second assault in the middle of the formation. A line of massive battleships extended out in front and behind it, it was mere seconds away from contact. They had battered and eliminated numerous fighters, cruisers and destroyers but the smaller craft were out front of the formation and out of range, *it was only massive battleships from here on out*, thought Crane.

Chapter 4 Race for Phedrian Portal

Fulton had passed through the Draxion chaos and spun around to face the wormhole and Crane's fleet. Once all units reported in, they reformed into spearhead formation,

with the intent of making another deadly pass and then bolt for the wormhole. Fulton noticed a heavily damaged battleship and decided to aim the spear point toward it. "You have your bearing let's take out that battleship port side," the flagship was positioned to lead the charge, being a smaller, more nimble craft than the behemoth Regal it could turn about engage and still return to formation easily. The enemy battleship listed and buckled from many internal explosions as more missiles and laser fire collided with it. It seemed to erupt from the inside a blaze of fire and debris that possessed a morbid beauty. A cheer went up in the lower decks, though the command deck remained quiet. *At least morale will be up for the next scrap in Phedria*, thought Fulton. Unlike Crane he was uninjured, had plenty of rest and his ship had little damage from the surprise attack. *Crane would have noticed all of that in a flash, because well he was Crane*, thought Fulton grinning to himself. He felt honored to be picked as flagship nonetheless not something that had ever happened to him in his long career. He was a slender white haired stick of a man that leaned on a cane at times, the aftermath of several war wounds. In a normal navy in peace time he would have retired long ago or taken up a teaching or training position somewhere, bouncing a grand kid on his knee now and then. His wife and son were killed a while back, so sadly there would be no grandkids. The idea that if he did have any they would be somewhere at war in the fleet made him shake his head in dismay. He was the oldest officer still in charge of a ship, the crews therefore referred to him as the old man. Being rare to reach an old age, he was proud of his title and that he was still highly functioning. Crane thought of Fulton as his second in command in the fleet. He always consulted with him, having mentored him in his youth from powder monkey on up. Brought out of retirement when the war escalated he was thrown at Crane. No one else in the fleet wanted him, no one respected his knowledge and abilities, he was regarded as too old fashioned. The vogue of the day was a fighting style that almost matched the Draxion for its recklessness. "Too many hot heads and hucklebucks, especially that captain Derrick," declared Fulton once watching a battle descend into chaos. When Crane became fleet commander he hand picked his captains and admirals, always running each idea by Fulton. Often Fulton's words would pop back into Crane's head either to guide him or to merely make him smile.

Now both fleets were in spear formation piercing their way towards the gate. Regal would occasionally shudder from a massive hit from a battleship. Marauders had boarded in a few places and were fought off by the Gorgon, but they weren't so foolish as to try and attack the bridge again.

"Gorgon report all decks secured," stated Foss.

No more surprises, Crane thought, looking at the portal to the wormhole, half expecting more ships to magically appear. If ships passed through the wormhole now they would undoubtedly collide with them.

Speaking of surprises, thought Crane looking at the image of Fulton's fleet. Fulton always had tricks up his sleeve, Crane detected a faint array of signatures scattered across the battlespace. Heading into the battle and back out of it Fulton had had his ships cast a barrage of flak but also whatever waste or debris they had on board. Usually such material would be recycled and put to use but when being pursued it was understandable that it would be jettisoned to lighten all craft. Mixed with flak it would make for a confusing flickering reading on scanners, as if thousands of missiles might be in transit. The debris would then cause a panic and waste energy and time as the ship's crews tried to figure out what was dangerous or garbage. The debris would still collide and have a similar effect as the flak but the flak would actually momentarily drain shields, confuse sensors and some would attach itself to ships and later explode piercing crafts. Sometimes the damage could be severe especially combined with the thousands of tiny mines that Fulton had unleashed. In tight spear formation the fleet dove well beneath their own trickery but as the ramshackle remnants of the Draxion fleet tried to form up into their shield pattern they collided in mass with a wall of flak, debris and mines. Fulton was a master at this technique knowing exactly how to time it to get the most of the chaos. Ships were exploding, veering wildly, colliding, panic and confusion now guiding the Draxion fleet.

"A hundred Fultons and this war would be won," stated Simms. Everyone on deck grinned it was a clean elegant retreat and the mines would hold the fleet back from pursuit.

"Hey old man I hope you saved some mines for friends on this end," joked Crane.

"You know I did in fact and if you wouldn't mind dropping some of your debris we can really befuddle them."

Crane chuckled and replied, "Of course, and the workshorses had switched to mine production right after the last battle, they are launching them as we speak. You will need to stay right behind us to avoid them but I suspect it will be a larger path by the time you arrive." Throughout the Draxion fleet ships collided with mines swerved in confusion sometimes colliding with their own ships.

Regal went silent as it passed out of the fleet, with no one in pursuit.

Crane noticed a Destroyer and workhorse ship boarding the Regal, *heavily damaged but not lost at least*. Medical units were scrambling towards the new arrivals. A moment later one of the medical frigates sensing it was also needed, docked with the Regal. The destroyer Corsair, that had been dry docked for extensive repairs, miraculously left the Regal to join the fight. Crane scratched his chin and glanced at Vasca. She leaned in and whispered, "That is commander Olma he wouldn't do anything rash, if he thinks they are ready then they are."

"Good enough for me," replied Crane. It was perfect timing the Corsair's exit left space for the new arrivals.

He watched the Corsair dive right into the middle of the battle squaring off with a Draxion destroyer that was punishing a League cruiser, the Potomac. It was smaller, with a less experienced crew and might have been the only ship lost in the skirmish. Admiral Olma must have been watching the battle closely. He launched everything the Corsair had including support ships at the Draxion destroyer, Haidid. The high speed surprise attack overwhelmed it despite it having a sound crew and little damage. An impulse device usually used for bombarding a planet landed right across the bow of the Haidid. It was a bold move and would never have worked without the support bombers, light fighters and heavy lasers breaking holes in the destroyer's shields and defenses. In the hail of fire, missiles, lasers, shells, the bomb spiraled into the ship completely undetected by the Haidid. The impact and explosion were massive, throwing numerous ships off course and briefly knocking out their power, including the Potomac. Everyone on the bridge took a collective breath. It would have been tragic and foolish to unleash

ground assault ordinance recklessly, destroying the ship that was intended to be rescued.

“Tractor beam on the Potomac,” ordered Crane. A robotic unit wheeled to the controls and quickly locked onto the cruiser stabilizing it and keeping it from colliding with anything. The power on the Potomac flickered back on, the ship fired up, its thrusters. “Release the tractor beam, they are fine,” stated Crane. Everyone released their held breath.

The Haidid continued to explode in blasts of multi-colored flame, a shimmering rain of debris and vaporized metal filling the black of space. The final chunk of the massive ship erupted into chaos and something never before seen happened. Escape pods began to fill the area the support ships moved on to other targets. A chill passed over the crew as it was noticed that the Draxion fleet began to fire on it's own escape pods. “Draxion target practice,” stated Traynor bleakly.

“Everyone was expected to die for the empire but apparently some thought it shouldn't be today,” offered Haley with a weird sound of remorse in her voice.

“The tractor beam is still up and ready, grab some of those pods,” ordered Crane. Looks of shock passed around the bridge. Draxion prisoners were unheard of, they never abandoned ship, they never surrendered. Crane of course noticed the looks but stayed firm.

“Haley get security and medical attachments to the main dock, we will put them in there for now and see if they need medical assistance. Ready staging area eight, we can convert it into a triage and shelter.”

“Aye commander,” replied Haley with obvious hesitation.

“Tell me you mean to interrogate them,” whispered Vasca.

“It hadn't occurred to me, I have never had to deal with Draxion prisoners. I have never heard of Draxion prisoners. Interrogate no, question yes. They have some new secret device that makes them invisible, allows them to hide, maybe we can find out something about it. But I am merely trying to turn a page in this sad chapter of this endless war. They are being fired on by their own people, if they want to live, I want to help them.” The pods were being pulled into the Regal, the Potomac provided cover as did the Corsair. Both followed Crane's example and took on pods.

"Waste of time, resources and effort, commander Crane," came a familiar voice that always rattled his nerves. Rival cruiser captains, then rival destroyer captains and eventually Crane was picked as fleet commander and Derrick was passed up, he was too oft insubordinate, rash, hot headed and had nearly cost then captain Fulton his ship. Derrick added, "Go soft on the enemy and they will sense your weakness."

"Captain Derrick, your opinion has been noted," replied Crane.

Vasca leaned in to whisper, "Commander you know I hate everything about Derrick, and would just as soon punch his golden smug face as say anything to captain California but not everyone is going to love you for this move," noted Vasca. "They wouldn't hesitate to murder any of us."

Crane sighed, then also whispered, "And we should be better than our enemies, not more like them, or else we might as well surrender and join them." Vasca raised her hands in mock surrender.

The captain turned to Foss, her icy eyes met his, they both sensed a flicker of danger in the situation. Were they to be prisoners, hostages?

"Foss, make sure it is made abundantly clear that our guests are not to be harassed, tortured, or interrogated. Especially if Derrick takes on pods. Get them medical assistance where needed, food and bedding. We will treat them with the same respect any crew member deserves," issued Crane.

"Aye captain, I have pulled up the ancient protocol for prisoners and have sent it to the teams on the other ships and to our crews," explained Foss firmly.

"Perfect, I knew I could count on you," Crane added.

"Maybe the rank and file Draxion are as sick of this war as us, maybe we can use this as a counter propaganda," offered Vasca, suddenly thinking of a strategic use for the prisoners. Rear batteries ceased firing, there was nothing in range of the Regal, a strange quiet hung in the air.

The crackle of an intercom was heard and the voice of Fulton announced, "War makes monsters of men, wastelands of fertile lands, we need to reclaim our humanity when and where ever possible. We think the Draxion cruel. Are we less cruel than them today? Have we made a step towards peace? I hope so." The admiral had broadcast fleet wide on all channels meaning the Draxion were also listening. Everyone had to

chew on that for a moment, all were a little proud of the recent sound victory but suddenly thinking of the death they had dealt and that the Draxion wanted as desperately to live as the League fighters, tainted the triumph. The contemplation was thick in the room, some looked emotional.

Crane broke the silence, "Traynor we are free of the Draxion fleet boost our thrusters push the ship as hard as you can. If that wreck of a Draxion fleet manages to regroup we will be pursued once again. Redirect power where needed, get us to the gate."

Chapter 5 The Farmer and the Boy

The castles on fire. The last stronghold has fallen and with it our chances of surviving.

The night sky was a glow with brilliant flames that rose mocking the resistance and spelling out their doom in grim words. Shouts of horror, rape, death and pain echoed across the cliffs into the valley, like spectral voices from the great beyond.

The castle is burning. The young man in his tattered armor had been thrown from a wagon when the enemy's cannons had fired shells and energy beams, that seemed like some sort of sorcery to his simple primitive eyes. *How can we win against such trickery,* thought the young knight as he gathered himself and found his balance. The thought of torture and enslavement spurred him to a run, his feet pounded the gravel and dirt that the locals called a road. The young man's people had weapons, some cannons, mostly spears and swords, catapults and simple gliders.

He had learned all there was to know about all of these, raised as a boy to be a warrior.

The castle is in flames. At that moment, which he would replay most nights in his dreams, he could never get up the hill in time to make a difference. As he reached the enemy marauders he would be struck with the hilt of a friendly sword. The act of mercy humiliated him but also saved his life.

With the burning fortress the war was over, *why throw away a life that might win another fight another day.* In reality the young man would wake in the back of a wagon his liege, Finau, sitting beside him a handful of filthy young knights and squires riding in silence and into hiding. In his dreams he would sometimes succeed, sometimes fall to the enemy's magic. Most nights he would wake covered in sweat, in a distant shack on a far away world and tell himself, *it was just a dream, the same dream. I'm just a farmer now.*

The usual smells of the meager stable drifted into the nose of the boy. The sounds of cattle stirring in their stalls meant it must be morning. So trained to eat at the same time each day the herd rustled and jostled towards the troth, where food would soon appear. The lad neatly rolled up his rag that substituted for a blanket and stashed it in a hole in a crumbling wall, his only place in the world. His body still ached from the abuse he had suffered at the hands of his owner. He had two wives and a few mistresses but he still felt the urge to touch the boy's body. The boy had stopped resisting and merely imagined he was far away.

The boy Falat, had discovered a stream near the farm and he would wash himself and his tattered clothes and then begin feeding the animals. Stroking their moist noses he had named each, he would whisper a kind word to them as he went down the line of stalls. To descendants of the Earth the creatures might seem like oxen others like large pigs. Recently, the animals needed moving and he was able to coax them with gentle words when the farmer's harsh stick could not, he filed the information away.

In a far area fish were grown in a large lake. The owner alone was allowed to eat these fish, they were the symbol of his royal family. The crest of the family was on all things even Falat, being branded the day he was purchased. Falat's owner the Duke Hakgib claimed he was a personal friend of the Emperor, and ruled his stolen kingdom with the knowledge that no one would dare oppose him. He did as he pleased and tortured and killed for sport or to silence his enemies.

The farmer Dua woke, made his way to the barn. Rounding a corner he regarded the boy with a mix of sorrow and warmth. *He has completed all his tasks and has found something else to do, all before I left my bed. The boy is a wonder,* thought Dua.

“Good morning Falat, come to the house for breakfast,” Dua smiling gently beckoned. The two walked in silence, he knew from the way Falat walked that the Duke had visited, and he knew what a visit from the Duke meant. He gritted his teeth in anger and helplessness. *How can such men rule our land, where are our ancestors, where are the men of courage and strength that would take back our home? Perhaps I am the only one with courage perhaps it is up to me?*

As a boy Dua had been in the Draxion Order, a skilled fighter, a trained pilot, later a smuggler and thief. When the kingdom and royal family of Draxion, collapsed the leaders of the order were assassinated, imprisoned or went into hiding. The Draxion Order became an underground secret society of saboteurs and spies. Dua hid in plain view right beneath the nose of the wicked Duke, posing as a simple farmer he created a fictitious story of his origins based on the life of his half brother, that had been a lifelong farmer, and died of fever. His brother's widow Natua, feared losing her farm, as women could not inherit, she kept her husband's death secret. Taking his name, his home and even appearing to take his wife, he had a cover for his espionage and an alibi for his time in the civil war. The hunted guerilla fighter seemed to disappear into thin air frustrating his hunters. In truth his half brother's widow did grow to love him and they had two children and a margin of happiness, all under the shadow of the evil empire and the wicked duke. He was always in danger of being discovered, of those he loved being murdered or enslaved.

The boy Falat sat awkwardly and Natua's wife gave a pained knowing look toward him then Dua. She shoveled hot food onto his plate more than normal, it was poor compensation but all she could do. They ate and chatted and the mood was light. Their children old enough to live on their own, Falat kept them from missing having children around. They didn't need to treat a slave with kindness but they welcomed Falat into their home. A feeling of family of cozy happiness was as much joy as the three would know most days. Falat never complained, never seemed downtrodden, he took his meals with gratitude and his punishment silently. *What a mystery this boy is*, thought Natua, *better than either of my own children for certain and my children though a little wild were still good*. They basked for a moment in the freedom hidden in the cracks between the drudgery of slavery and serfdom.

There was a knock on the rough hewn door of the farmhouse. Startled looks were exchanged. Visitors were always loaded with the possibility of discovery. Dua rose to answer the door, throwing his shirt over a dagger he had hidden in the belt of his pants. Opening the door he was surprised to look down on a hunkered over monk. "Dear people I am Fatah," began the monk as if he might begin a sermon. "The duke Hakgib

has fallen quite ill, the lands and titles will return to the Duke of Abur. He is in need of a scribe and we understand that you have a boy here who knows his letters."

Relief spread over Dua and his manners returned.

"I apologize dear monk, come sup with us," Dua motioned for the monk and his novice to enter. Dua's wife jumped up to fill cups with hot herbal drink, bring bread, fruit and cheese, and with such good news even a little smoked meat that she saved for special occasions.

After a few sips and bites and compliments on the fine cheese and bread the monk continued. "The boy will no longer be a slave. The Duke abhors slavery and will not tolerate it in any of his lands. Falat will be a servant of the duke. We understand from the other serfs that the boy is hard working, cleanly, gently in nature, in truth all in the village seem to regard him as a wonder," there was an odd pause. It was as if his prayers to his ancestors had immediately been answered. The table was suddenly full of conversation, laughter, and merriment that the family hadn't known for some time. "The duke of Abur is Miladic is he not," questioned Dua, cautiously. There was a small pause and concerned looks were exchanged. The Miladic like the Darka had been enslaved, exterminated or were in open rebellion. Only those that were able to hide or pose as something else were spared. "How will the Emperor take it that these lands are to revert back to a Miladic duke?" queried Dua.

Sipping a bit of herbal brew and then gently wiping his mouth with a simple cloth napkin, he quietly answered. "The Duke of Abur has consolidated his lands and the larger Darka and Miladic kingdoms. He has raised an army, a fleet of ships. He is prepared to defend his holdings." The answer sounded like a large weight thudding to the floor. Civil war, rebellion, the Duke's palace as a last stronghold.

"There is more," the monk continued, stirring a bit of jam and spreading it onto a piece of hot bread, a tiny wisp of steam rising from it. "The Duke of Abur knows who you are, who you really are. He asks if you want to remain a farmer or if you want to join his generals?" Natua smiled proudly, beaming over at Dua. Dua seemed taken aback, it was a lot to digest and all of it thrown out so quickly.

"It is your decision he understands either way, likewise if the boy would remain he may, but if he would prefer to use his letters the duke would be grateful. You will all be

subjects of the Duke of Abur. A displaced poor family will take this farm over a much improved situation for them and for you all." The monk let that hang in the air. Dua regarded him as if it were all some trap. He took in his deep purple skin, wrinkled with age, his worn old hands picking at a bit of cheese. *I don't know anything about these people, it all seems too convenient, designed to encourage me to incriminate myself, reveal my identity,* thought Dua, a wave of paranoia spreading over him. Perhaps sensing as much the monk wiped his hands of bread crumbs and cheese particles and reached within his cloak. He pulled a letter out.

"Here is the formal request and document freeing the boy, and an invitation to you and your wife to join the duke's court," stated the monk flatly.

Dua took the letter, Natua moved in closer and joined him. The royal seal was unbroken, no more fish crest, a simple ring with the title *House Abur* within it. It looked real enough they both thought as they opened it. Natua read better than Dua, he hadn't much schooling being a soldier from an early age. Natua was always buried in a book, sitting by the fire she had read aloud to the children, her melodious voice filling the room like the scent of her fine bread. The order had it's scholars, Dua was not one of them. His head was full of strategies and intrigues but none of that required much literacy. The monk sized this up, "Well Dua we must correct this, we will find a tutor for you, you can not be an advisor to the duke and poor of letters."

Dua looked sheepish, he gave a questioning look to his wife who gently nodded that the letter confirmed what the monk had said.

Such a grim place a horrid sight,
Wreckage and blood a field scarred scored,
The war is lost and fading is the light,
How shall we proceed my lord?
Over the bodies of the fallen or the raging water white?
Though we now have no coin, a ferry to board.*
What of the skies full of carrion in bleak flight?
Master of palaces, treasures once did you horde.
My king with no kingdom or roof against the cold night.

*Song of War Baxius editor's note: Though Baxius lost few battles and never lost a war, he was reportedly haunted by nightmares of such failures. It has been suggested that he was so afraid of losing his empire, that he simply preemptively left everything to live out his days as a hermit in a cave with only a cooking pot and sleeping mat.*The possible double meaning of the coin for a ferry and a coin for the ferry to make a passage to the land of the dead, has led some to speculate that the subjects in the verse are ghosts and therefore fell in the battle.*

Chapter 6 Wreckage and Ruin

Tyler was young, sixteen when he received his own Cruiser command but so was his whole crew. It wasn't unusual, "The whole of Justice and Liberty Fleets were still wiping their mother's milk from their mouths," Fulton once said. "It is going to come back on us one day too many hot heads and huckle-bucks," he declared after perhaps one too many drinks. What Tyler saw stretched out in front of him near Neuman, aged him instantly beyond his mere eighteen years.

At the proposed rendezvous point with Liberty Fleet, trillions of specks of metallic dust floated in ghostly clouds and filled in the spaces between huge chunks of what were once spacecraft. Some pieces were large enough to make out what class of ships they had been, half a destroyer there, a large portion of a battleship here. Occasionally bodies would drift past or parts of them, twisting the knife in Tyler's guts anew. The Willamette, a mighty river somewhere on a planet he had never seen, seemed his toy boat to Tyler as they dodged massive ruined vessels and shattered equipment. The metallic dust, a remnant of vast explosive force, that had resulted in pulverized and vaporized metal. A sickening feeling spread over Tyler and certainly his other crew members as they cautiously led the Justice Fleet through the grisly mire. The vanguard in case mines or marauder ships were hidden in the debris somewhere waiting to strike again. Put another way expendable foot soldiers that beat down a path for the carriers, battleships and other more valuable vessels.

Tyler a middle size young man with jet black hair and light brown skinned half his ancestors veered from the Inuit of British Columbia. They had been seafarers and

traders of the First Nations and the other half seafarers and traders of the British settlers. He discovered those folks were in fact Danish and German that plundered a place called Cornwall. When Tyler daydreamed it was of tall ships and coastal towns, the smell of the sea. Time spent on the flagship in simulators was all he had to go on but it seemed so real to him that he often returned to such port towns in his mind. He hoped he might see the Earth one day and such places and experiences for real. Few made the trip, it took years, was expensive and full of hazards, wars, pirates, raiders, disease, unknown dangerous space phenomenon, known space phenomenon. His first position on a ship came when he was a child and a solar flare destroyed the group of settlers he was traveling with. The wormholes were open again and there was a rush of people from one area to the next. Long convoys and caravans of ships stretched in every direction in the blink of an eye between the new portals and the war. Some in a panic to get back to safe space, back to Earth or on to new worlds. Prospectors, traders, criminals, treasure hunters, would be soldiers and sailors, broken people hoping for a better life and better people hoping to break someone's life. His family sought their fortunes in mining and ship building at Neuman. Neuman was contested space, a border area near a wormhole that the Draxion had fought over for some time. A fire fight broke out there and traveled to neighboring Nextos and the war was back after a seventy year pause. Most of Tyler's people heard neither hide nor hare of it, they were consumed by a solar eruption as were several space stations, and battle sentries.

Recovered with his family in a life pod by a Planetary League vessel they all went to work on the ship. Tyler's father had set out to build vessels and did so on a fleet workhorse on the go. His skills were welcome and surprised his hosts. So like many he grew up on a ship crisscrossing the various known systems joined by wormholes and protected by various ground based guns and space based fleets.

At first he helped his father by pulling new craft out of drydock with a thing not unlike an old earth tugboat. It could also drag a derelict or crippled vessel and get it somewhere to be repaired. He was piloting at a young age and when there was an intense battle they threw young Tyler in a Frigate. His gun crews were experienced, his missile team flawless. Tyler being used to a clunky tugger ran circles around the enemy, all aboard

insisted on him becoming permanent. His mother and sister cried, his father looked as if he were throwing dirt on him and he was already in the grave.

He had some training and soon moved up to his cruiser the Willamette, he was fifteen. He took the crews he trusted with him. Cruisers were gunships, speed and agility that packed a punch. Two swiveling gun turrets at the front and rear protected the ship from blitzers and fighters. A main cannon crew fired missiles and shells out the sides of the long vessel, twenty cannons or ten to a side, five missile launchers per side. Two forward battery techs fired laser cannons, more missiles and defensive counter charges. Tyler piloted Thai Drew co-piloted. To Tyler's port side sat, Laita a large round Samoan, that ran logistics for the ship and other cruisers when needed. Off to Drew's starboard elbow sat Kivi, a petite icy blond who was actually born in Finland and the rarest of creatures Earth born. Kivi handled shields and weapons systems throughout the craft and monitored enemy movements. The command team sat packed in with narrow windows and a huge control panel. Drew and Tyler also had emergency guns on the tops of their wheel but they were a weak laser pulse and nearly symbolic of a weapon. In the short time Tyler and his crew had been in the war it had already evolved. While the wormholes were lost, the Draxion empire conquered all of the worlds within its reach, they were busy learning how to make war before Tyler and his crew were even born. Once the portals reopened seasoned warriors descended on outdated League fleets forced to assemble ships as quickly as possible. In recent days Draxion fought with more marauder ships, blitzers, used cruisers like fighters and favored loose formations with aggressive smaller ships to walls of ships in tight formation. The switch had proved disastrous to the younger captains and crews of the League, they had barely learned formations and now they were expected to pilot a large cruiser like a fighter. Few captains had risen to the task and fleet losses were steadily growing as were panic and despair. Looking over the graveyard with the wreckage and ruin of Liberty Fleet it was not hard to despair. *How many fleets were left?* Tyler wondered.

Chapter 7 Unexpected Guests

The first of the fleet reached the portal to the wormhole, a glowing ring, a massive city projecting a magnetic field that caused a unique singularity. The event would allow for

the wormhole to be opened and the warships to pass into a limbo of hyperspace. Once there were hundreds of ships passing through this particular opening, but it had only recently been rebuilt. It was originally much smaller than the present space station and now thousands of ships could potentially pass through if the war ever ended if civilizations were allowed to survive and flourish, both uncertain.

"Planetary League Fleet Regal requesting permission to pass through the Hadrian controlled Phedrian gate and fleet link up," announced Foss. It was a mere routine but it was possible that the Hadrian might shift allegiance and align with the Draxion. *If they did close the gate we would survive*, thought Crane, *but at what cost and for how long?* "Permission granted," came a flat voice in reply and the area inside the ring began to shimmer and change to a starless void. Further transforming it appeared to be a kind of malstrom of swirling purple blues and flashing grays. Ancient fear as if diving off a cliff or deep into the murky depths always passed over the crew as the bow of the ship entered the cosmic whirlpool. *It is no wonder so much of space literature was full of horror, there are a lot of terrifying things out in the inky black*, thought Crane gritting his teeth and tensing his body. The openings had been lost for nearly a century, it was then a new sensation to enter fold space, to travel the length of a wormhole. A casualty of the war, all of the stations had been destroyed, closing off distant travel until the last twenty years or so, when they were rebuilt by the Hadrian Order. Titan gate was the last to be rebuilt and reopened, the Draxion renamed Phedrian after the system they occupied. Regal fleet would be the first to pass through it and only by accident.

The requested fleet link up, would be a classified (at least it was hoped) update from the other League fleets, the status of the home worlds and the war in general. The information would also include any political decisions that might impact the actions of the fleet. The longer the war went on the further towards a conservative regime the League traveled. There were factions in the League government that wanted to impose a sort of dictatorship under the blanket of war acts and the guise of security. It would take a few hours for the update to be decoded and processed.

Fulton's marauders cut through the second Draxion fleet in a neat spear formation. The battleship Endeavor engaged the Draxion flagship. Crippled and wavering it was the weak link in the Draxion chain. The shield formation had crumbled, more escape pods

had been spotted, more taken on board by the league fleet but also many more shot to dust by the Draxion fleet.

Do they have too much information to be captured? wondered Fulton. *Information about this new mirage mode they had discovered.* Several thousand pods were recovered, a historic event for both sides.

“There was no known moment in the war of it’s equal,” stated Simms.

“Fulton the oldest in the fleet said he remembered early on some might surrender but most took their lives or collided with other craft to avoid capture,” noted Haley.

“Maybe things aren’t going to plan within the empire,” suggested Vasca.

“A collapse from the inside is still a collapse,” said Traynor.

Then something equally startling happened, about a hundred and twenty Draxion ships stood down refusing to engage with the League fleet. Clearing a path and turning to fire on their own imperial ships, they drew every destroyer to them. Traitors, mutineers were clearly punished swiftly. Fulton’s destroyers apparently saw the exchange and gave cover to the rebel ships. The battleship Noble, swung to the edge of the spear formation and battered the attacking destroyers and a more distant Draxion battleship. The action provided a sizable gap in the Draxion line, which meant Fulton’s fleet would have little contact on its way to the wormhole. The defectors sent out a distress code, took their weapons offline and spun round to join Fulton’s fleet.

“Well, well,” said Vasca, “never thought I would witness that. Thoughts commander?”

“Less Draxion ships to destroy and more ships for our fleet,” he replied.

“But can we trust them?” quizzed Simms.

“As long as their weapons are down they really need to trust us more I think,” answered Haley. Crane knew there were some in other fleets, maybe even his own, that were so bitter that they would have fired on the Draxion ships while their defenses were down. Despite the fact that long ago such actions were considered war crimes. Both sides in the last few years had chosen to ignore such codes of action. It angered Crane, *we have to be better than our enemy to defeat them not stoop to their barbarism.*

“I am going down to talk with our guests,” Crane announced, “Haley with me you have studied their culture. Vasca you have the com.”

Haley stood with an eagerness that showed more enthusiasm than anyone might have expected for meeting the deadly enemy. "I have never met a Draxion face to face," Haley almost sang out.

After the commander and Haley reached the elevator, in operation again, Vasca muttered, "I prefer to kill them from a safe distance, it is less personal that way." Simms laughed lightly, "And you do that quite well, captain."

The elevator shot down to the hangar level and then sprang out horizontally towards the life pods in the shadow of a battered destroyer. There was a lot of confusion in the hangar, crews tried to repair or assess damaged ships, and get them ready to return to the fight if needed. Crew members were being moved from vessels and onto the medical bay, and then there were numerous bewildered aliens and their escape pods. Medical crews were examining some, treating others, a few on both sides wore looks of disgust. The visitor's hair seemed to glow their skin as well. Bright blinding yellow green manes and luminescent unearthly purple skin they were shocking to look at as they emerged from their pods. Like Darka their features and bodies were similar to humans but there was something vaguely reptilian to them. Especially their eyes, they were larger and shaped differently than those of humans.

Haley got slightly delayed behind numerous supply transport vehicles and the commander was briefly on his own. He cast a glance around the loading dock, he had forgotten that at one time there were kingdoms all usurped, annexed and or eradicated by the empire as it rose to power. *Were these people of various races?* He noticed some had Draxion military uniforms and some wore something like prison garb. He also noticed on closer examination some were deep blue like Darka, some bright purple like Draxion.

"I am fleet commander Crane, does anyone speak our language?" Crane uttered, seeming at a loss to do anything else. Haley arrived and glanced about at the chaotic scene. In perfect Miladic she welcomed everyone and asked that those with injuries please move toward the medical crews. They seemed amazed by her grasp of the language.

A very wrinkled slightly hunched over creature approached the commander, with something like a smile.

Haley looked at the alien with concern and in Miladic blurted, "Are you hurt?" The creature laughed, "No just old as hell," he replied in English, to which all of the nearby medics laughed. *Just like that we are all laughing together*, thought Crane, a weird stir of emotions churning up in him. *Maybe we can have peace if we can laugh together*. Haley laughed hysterically, a bubbly effervescent sound of relief and sheer joy. The medics all stared at her for a moment. *It happened often*, Crane thought. She was strikingly beautiful in an unpretentious way, possessed a lust for life that made her intoxicating to be around. *I imagine half the crew have a painful crush on her the other half haven't met her yet*, Crane thought smiling to himself.

The old Milladic reached up to Haley's wild red hair and tousled it like a child might. Both laughed nervously. "I did not know your species had such fire hair, I am Ulua Nonuck of the Miladic people." Haley brightened even further which no one present thought possible. She flushed a little, her excitement being unbridled, "Oh my really," she gushed her hands moving to her face. "It is an honor to meet you, may you walk long in focus she uttered" she blurted out, obviously overwhelmed.

"A ha it is a fair translation but Earth words always seem to fail at Miladic concepts, nonetheless, may you also walk long in the focus," Ulua offered in return with a slight bow.

Crane had no idea what they were talking about and felt confused and embarrassed. Ulua seemed to notice Crane's suffering and returned to the physical world from the esoteric.

"Thank you for not shooting us, and I hope you will not torture any of us," he stated flatly to Crane and Haley. He said it as if it might happen and he understood if it did, but he would prefer it didn't happen. Ulua seemed to be prepared for the indignity and suffering prisoners and slaves received. It was part of his training to detach himself from such physical trauma.

Haley generally looked concerned but wasn't sure what would happen to them. Crane looked at her, his eyebrows raised, hoping it clearly stated his confusion. Haley leaned in toward Crane and said, "They aren't Draxion sir but Milladic, a related race that the empire tried to wipe out along with the Dithta, Nithta and Darka. Those folks over there in the uniforms are Draxion. It is possible that they are part Darka or Milladic,

why they surrendered is a mystery. Nonuck is a kind of spiritual leader, like an ancient shaman, a holy warrior of the Miladic. There aren't supposed to be any left, the empire slaughtered them all, curious."

Crane didn't feel any less confused, her statements only raised more questions and exposed, the great gulf of ignorance that existed between the two warring groups. *But that wasn't really true was it*, pondered Crane. *If they don't see themselves as part of the empire and are also oppressed, controlled, have even been exterminated by the empire. How these people saw themselves was distinct, they were enemies of the empire*. A flame of an idea flickered in Crane's mind.

The other survivors (or were they prisoners) looked nervous, some seemed near tears. *Who knows what their empire says about us, they look terrified*, thought Crane.

Haley seemed to notice it as well. She approached another nearby guest and took his hand. She helped him tousle her fire hair, they both giggled like children. Others suddenly disarmed approached and tousled her hair, touched her snow white cheek. Some marveled at her tiny hands and their smattering of freckles.

"Ah ha," proclaimed Ulua, "You are like the Triabek, the mythical creature touched by the vortex." A few of the others gasped and uttered Triabek as if chanting.

"Ah yes I have heard that before, that I look like her. I have only read of her in a children's book of tales, the ghostly white creature, the bringer of gifts and messenger of peace," stated Haley as if reciting some paper for school. A look of sudden realisation passed over her face, *messenger of peace*, she thought, *do they think me part of a prophecy? Was it wise to use a prophecy to achieve a goal, and therefore fulfill that prophecy?* She pondered all of the implications in a state of quiet panic.

Now all the guests stared at her with new wonder. *Of all the people I could have chosen to join me I picked the mythical creature*, thought Crane wondering if they were going to begin bowing to her, kiss her feet, offer her gifts. Haley shot an awkward glance towards Crane unsure what she should do.

A young sandy haired crew member arrived in the middle of the adoration and announced in the Draxion language, "Honored guests of the Regal fleet, I am corporal Blake. Please accept our humble hospitality. We have prepared a space for you, you will be fed and can rest." Ulua translated for Crane and Haley noting that his aspect and

pronunciation were perfect, but sadly that of the empire and not his people. No one moved, they all looked toward Haley, sensing the pause she motioned towards the staging area where they would be quartered and everyone began to finally move. *Well Blake and Haley seem to be my ambassadors to the survivors*, thought Crane, impressed and surprised.

“Let us sup together angel of peace, we have an incredible tale to convey,” said Ulua, taking Haley by her trembling arm and beginning to walk from the hangar. Haley gave Blake and Crane a helpless expression that seemed to say, *rescue me they think I am an angel.*

Crane turned to view Blake face to face, the corporal jumped to attention and gave a stiff salute, as if he only then realized in the confusion, haze and half light of the dock that the fleet commander was standing before him. For an instant looking at Blake, Crane thought of an old picture of a classic surfer boy. He grinned under different circumstances he might have filed Blake away as golden surfer boy but instead he would think of him as liaison to the alien races.

“At ease son,” offered Crane softly, patting him on the shoulder. “Blake, thanks for the help. How did you learn the language of the empire?” quizzed Crane.

“Ah I was studying to be a diplomat a few years after the portals were rebuilt and the war escalated,” answered Blake with little inflection seeming to be afraid of saying too much or the wrong thing.

“I don’t think anyone expected the war to turn so brutal so fast,” inserted Crane, hinting that he wasn’t one of the fanatics.

“When talks collapsed and both sides thought that victory would be easy and fast, I was demoted and thrown to the cannon crew. I had to learn what to do from the powder monkeys but I learned fast. My CO, Lieutenant Davis said, “Hey Blake they got some Draxion prisoners go give ‘em hell! You speak their gibberish don’t you. Go help torture and interrogate those bastards and see if you can find out about their invisibility device.” So I got down here on his orders as fast as I could. The shooting was done, there was nothing to do but clean up after the battle. I hope I haven’t overstepped my station, sir.” Crane grinned, “On the contrary you are promoted to sergeant, and I am making you fleet envoy to the Miladic and Draxion guests. I want you and Haley to head to the other

ships, make sure the other guests aren't being treated poorly. Make certain the other crews know, I will hear about. I am considering them Miladic refugees, we might be able to drive a wedge between the empire and the races they have oppressed. It is a long shot but anything that breaks the stalemate in this pointless war I will risk. Oh and keep an eye out for Haley, this prophet angel stuff scares me a little, hero worship can get out of control, zealots even more so."

"Aye commander I would be honored," replied Blake, clearly overjoyed by the prospect. "Give em hell," Crane offered, "All we have known is killing the monsters known as Draxion but they aren't the monsters the empire is. Hell most of them aren't even Draxion, we are going to need to re-educate the fleet. I hope you and Haley can help with that."

"Of course it has been a lifelong pursuit and interest of mine, sir. It will be amazing to go from theoretical to practical use of my studies." replied Blake as if suddenly feeling a little of the weight of the task ahead of him.

Hot drink, a simple soup and bread were laid out for the guests by visibly nervous cooking staff. Numerous emergency bed rolls were aligned in the large staging area, the three hundred Miladic and a few Draxion, would have enough space but just barely. The guests sat on the floor and ate relieved and appreciative of the nourishment. Observing their reactions Crane wondered, *It seems things are worse than we thought if this simple fare thrills them. How desperate has the empire become?* As if on cue several jittery powder monkeys entered carrying canisters of soup and tea. *Ah how desperate are we with our children soldiers,* thought Crane gritting his teeth.

The Miladic viewed them with curiosity having certainly never seen a human child. A little dark blue Darka child entered too, carrying bread. The guest looked even more surprised by this. Perhaps the idea that other races and civilizations fought alongside the humans was not something the empire's propaganda mentioned. Several of the guests openly marveled at the boy and began to speak to him.

Blake drew close to Crane and whispered, "The Darka once shared a common history, some of the Miladic were blue in fact. Their language was the same in antiquity and they shared the same territory peacefully for millennia. The empire divided them began to destroy Darka lands and tried to pit the Draxion races against the Darka."

“They were successful sadly,” remembered Crane. Their home worlds were destroyed, their race scattered. The few that survived lived within the Planetary League fleets and worlds, the once hunted, then protected refugees, now remnants of another lost time. Several other Darka arrived and nearly ran to the Miladic, some embraced, others grasped hands. Some bowed to Ulua. All conversed frantically it looked like some sort of family reunion.

Blake struggled to keep up with the discourse in a Darka dialect. Ulua finally separated himself from the glow of remembrance and walked to Crane, Blake and Haley. “It is truly a wondrous day. These people are our people. They are cousins and uncles to us. We all lived on the same stretch of land for many years, my grandmother was Darka, my grandfather Miladic, before the Draxion forbade such marriages. When I was sent to a camp I was told my mere existence was a crime. A blue, purple child of sin and a broken order.” Ulua suddenly looked as if he were far away, remembering horrible things.

“We should sit,” Blake suggested and motioned to a few chairs on the other side of the soup table and the army of bedrolls.

Sitting Ulua sipped some tea, seemed to organize his thoughts, drew in a breath, closed his eyes and began to speak. “There is too much to convey and it is difficult to know where to begin, being that it is an ancient story. My people were crushed, locked in camps, used as forced labor, raped, murdered and tortured. Same as the Darka. The races of the Draxion empire, are the Draxion, Bleka, Schoka, Darka and Miladic. The Draxion are the ruling class, Bleka, Schoka, lesser but not enslaved. Schoka mostly inhabit Phedria, Bleka serve the Draxion all over. Darka and Miladic being viewed as unclean parasites of mixed blood and culture, needed to be purged from the glorious empire. Earth and its descendants did help us at first and certainly took and saved a few of the Darka as did you it seems. But as things began to grow more desperate in this new war and the conflicts edged toward total war, refugees, crimes of conscious, abstract things like war crimes were less important. Purple or blue people versus green people versus Earth people, it grew difficult to tell the difference between the races of the Draxion as the hate blinded more and more. We Miladic could more easily hide but our speech and culture gave us away. Those that helped or harbored the Darka or

Miladic faced the same death camps and forced labor as traitors to the empire.” Haley and Blake hung on every word seeming to barely breath. Crane knew some of the information but grew impatient, wanting to keep the other Miladic safe and deploy his ambassadors to help with this to the other ships. Fulton would treat his guests with dignity and humanity but the other captains, he was unsure of. There was a lot of hate and bigotry and for good reason. He took a deep breath trying to focus hoping there was something important at the end of the history lesson that he needed to hear as commander.

Ulua seemed to read his thoughts and stated, “Forgive me fleet commander Crane, I know you are a busy man and I agree Haley and Blake should go with me to the other ships, as soon as possible but this part of the tale you must hear. We were enroute to the mines of Tousu, I led an uprising and commandeered the craft I was aboard. Then led attacks on the other three ships and took them too. We threw the crew into the escape pods of one ship and turned the other craft towards the old Titan portal.”

Confused looks were exchanged, *that had to be nearly seventy-five years ago*, they collectively computed.

“As Nonuck I was viewed as a spiritual leader, a holy warrior in your terms. I performed a sacred ritual invoking the powers of my ancestors and we entered the old Titan wormhole, we were going to find a new homeland away from the Draxion. While we were in the fold of space, the portals on both ends were destroyed. We were passing through the Triabeck vortex and got caught, we were trapped frozen in time and space for seventy-five years. When the gates were rebuilt we encountered a Draxion scouting party. Intending to pass through the wormhole they instead reversed us using some sort of tractor beam and towed us out of the new Phedrian gate. We were brought back into the present not a day older than when we left. Our prison transport ships were seized and we were imprisoned on the destroyer Haidid and two other ships. When the ship seemed lost the officers began to take their lives or were killed in the fight leaving us able to escape. Our ship, junk that it was, was further damaged in the fight by you I suppose. At any rate, we had only the life pods to escape in, from our old prison ships. New Draxion ships no longer feature lifepods, fight and win or fight and die is emblazoned on their uniforms in the imperial script. More than an idea it is the primary

world view of those fanatics. I sent word to the other prisoners before we were taken by the Draxion, escape, disrupt, hinder, evade, die if you must.”

“The rebel code,” offered Haley in her raspy whisper. Ulua’s eyes went wide with surprise.

“Triabeck, you do truly know our ways,” Ulua gave a little bow to Haley and continued. “Yes, our code of resistance. When I could I broadcasted it from our ship on all channels. Hidden Miladic joined our cause and some of the other races too. Only the Draxion have full privileges and comfort and they are a small portion of the empire. Like a huge beast that is whipped by a small man until it forgets its true strength. There is one more detail you must know, when we were lost in the void between the space of the living a legend around us grew, it was prophesied long long ago one would be lost and when he returned he would rule.” Ulua motioned to the Miladic in the staging area, “The people in this room would follow me anywhere I am their Nonuck. But the others that joined us joined us because of the prophecy.” Crane felt a little fear suddenly of this gentle old creature. Ambition is usually dangerous. Would he have to put down some sort of religious rebellion at some point he wondered? It was a lot to take in but there were many other things to consider while in the wormhole things that would mean their survival or their destruction.

Crane grinned trying to not show any of his inner concerns, “You are all guests of Regal fleet, anything you need let me know. I must return to the bridge but will see to it that you are comfortable.”

The shaman laughed warmly, “We are ascetics sir, we need little, a mat to sleep on, some broth to warm us but I appreciate your kindness and if there is any way we can be of service please let me know. If you are fighting the evil empire then we are more than willing allies I assure you.”

A thought flashed through Crane’s mind as he made his way back to the bridge, they looked like the enemy, would anyone attack them. He arranged for security teams to watch over them not as prisoners but to keep some hot head from going after them. Blake, Haley and Ulua, traveled to the other ships and smoothed over kinks in the arrangements, spoke for the fleet or for the oppressed and seemed to coalesce a state of understanding. Everywhere Haley went she was treated as a mythical creature and

Ulua a prophet. They all whispered Triabek and Nonuck as they gazed upon them as if witnessing a miracle a prophecy fulfilled. Blake and Haley combed the fleet's files and put together a team of anyone with knowledge of Darka or Milladic people as well as the larger Draxion cultures and worlds. They were surprised to find a few hundred that were immediately assigned as interpreters, liaisons, or diplomats to the guests. Both parties were overjoyed, surprised, even thrilled to have a chance to communicate with members of their respective races.

The whole fleet had entered the wormhole including Fulton's ships that had suffered only minor damage. Crane's ships had major damage from the sneak attack but little from the escape from the system. The Draxion were no match for Regal fleet, even when seriously outnumbered, in a fair fight. Despite some critically wounded crew members there were few deaths, three cruisers, six fighters, one destroyer and four frigates lost though some of their crews were rescued. Still two hundred sailors lost a small number compared to the thousands in the fleet but hard nonetheless. Some others were wounded badly enough that they would need to leave the service, take up odd jobs on the ship. *It could have all gone much worse*, thought Crane bleakly. *Almost none escaped without some minor injury, a burn, bruises, a few stitches, but the crews held fast.*

A chain of events was put in motion the outcome of which was open to speculation. First off, Regal fleet was due to rendezvous with two other league fleets, Liberty and later Justice, it would not make either of those meetings. If either group were in trouble, needed assistance, Regal would not be providing that help. Not following normal protocol might lead to a panic, assuming the worst the fleets might react in drastic ways. The final problem was that Regal fleet was heading to Phedria, an imperial stronghold, they would need to fight their way across and escape again, to a safer system. They might have heavy losses in the flight. Escaping was just the delaying of a far harder situation.

Another thought chilled Crane, *maybe they forced us to go to Phedria to wipe us out. Being led by your enemy was never ideal. Our next move had to somehow regain the upper hand surprise. But what or how?*

Workhorse units began producing replacement parts, mines, missiles and shells. The Regal and workhorse units took on new crafts in their dry dock areas and teams worked around the clock to get the fleet repaired and operating at its fullest capacity. To everyone's surprise some of the Miladic were skilled mechanics and electrical repair technicians. Ulua explained that their worlds were always poorer and if technology existed it had to be repaired not replaced. The new recruits were put to work speeding up the process a little and perhaps building a path of trust within the crews.

Titan wormhole, of course everything centered around Titan. There were few places in the known universe with more myths, legends and plain crazy stories. The lost and found prison ships would add to the list of legends, Crane mused. Now they have joined us expecting us to end the empire. Saving this fleet might prove hard enough, surviving until we can get to some safe system will be difficult beyond anything ever pulled off, but to somehow turn surviving into a victor. How?

Parable of the Focus

The king sat in his tent a huge pile of pillows surrounded a fire pit. Giant pitchers of wine, trays of fruits, cheeses, numerous baked items, and sliced meats filled several tables. A beast slowly turned over a fire by a slave. A gleaming pot caught its fat and another slave occasionally ladled the liquid over the rotating creature. A pop and crackle of sizzling meat and steady fire were the only sounds. The campaign was over, there was only a feast to be held, looting, plundering, and enslavement and the final kingdom would belong to the king.

“So what else?” came a small voice the king was not sure if he had heard it, or thought it. He searched for the source of the sound and found a hunched over frail monk. The clouds on his eyes suggested he was blind or nearly.

“Would you say your focus is war, therefore fire, rape, and destruction?” asked the monk.

The king was outraged, but even for a king it was a crime to harm a monk, doubly so one of such a fragile frame. What of the riches and glory that came from war, he thought anger firing him.

He tried to calm himself and answered. “I would not say war is my focus, good monk, I would not claim to know my ultimate goal.”

The monk gave a low bow and spoke, “Forgive me I smelt your roasting meat and pastries, heard the musicians tuning up and the wine being poured and I said I must meet this great man who has such things. He must be a man of profound wisdom and learning. Surely he has obtained his focus, for all good things follow a clear and sharp mind, it is said.”

The king was stunned, he did have many things but they were not his goal. He fought and planned well but it was not his focus to wield a sword or ride a beast well. It wasn’t his focus to lead men or nations of men, yet he did, and sought to. The feast seemed suddenly empty, the smell of the food soured, his robe felt odd and heavy, his crown seemed to pierce his head, way down his mind.

“Forgive me monk for I do not have a focus, I have not spent time considering what one might be,” replied the bewildered king.

“It is considered a worthy life, the one that is spent in the contemplation of the focus,” answered the monk and then he wandered out into the night.

(Attributed to Baxius, from The Tales of the King, probably 3rd Age)

Chapter 8 The Three Rings of Abur

Natua, Dua and Falat settled into life in the citadel. The servants reported that the boy at first slept on his ratty matte and not in his bed (something he would return to throughout his life it is said). Natua was a fine tutor of the Duke’s children and her husband. They were formerly married by Fatah in a secret ceremony, had a little party and rode out into the country to celebrate. Despite being rather old, a new child would appear the next year from the trip to the country.

It turned out that Falat despite his age had more understanding and greater scholarship than anyone in the citadel. Dua and Natua had numerous books and Falat had read them all. Yet it was clear he had been tutored received an education somewhere else before being a slave but he would not say anything about it. Once in the citadel he poured through the duke’s vast library into the small hours of the morning. He had read and digested more and on a greater array of subjects than even the older monks. He

continued to amaze. Despite what might make someone arrogant or proud Falat continued to treat everyone with respect and seemed prone to silent contemplation. The servants, the officials and the royal family all reported that he was kind, wise, and ever thoughtful.

In a laboratory of his creation, Falat gathered ancient junk from the great wars and began to rebuild and repair what he could. Always tinkering, inventing, designing what seemed, mad things, many people wondered when or if he slept. He constructed a copy of a printing device he claimed to have once seen. It increased the efficiency of the royal household and the larger union of kingdoms, which the duke of Abur ruled, protected or was aligned with. The first time it came to life the servants and other observers declared it magic. What was also interesting was the principle of the machine was borrowed by others for hundreds of other machines, powered by water, wind or eventually electricity. Following Falat's example, old Draxion junk was examined, repaired and reemployed, the union began to move into a new age, a time of machines. Soon the tiny bits of technology helped Falat unlock much longer pieces and eventually crashed or abandoned spacecraft from forgotten wars of the past were again in use. Eventually unlocking the library and information systems of vast planetary league and Draxion battleships Falat's knowledge grew exponentially. Being that so many children were raised on ships there were extensive training programs for all ages available. Everything from flying a craft to repairing propulsion systems was somewhere in the vast planetary league library. Accessing ship computers allowed for a new detailed understanding of very advanced technologies a few years before beyond their imagination. In rapid succession the Union of Abur became a planetary organization, as they entered yet another era, of space travel.

He raised up a team of scientists, engineers and scribes from farm children and citadel children alike. Natua with Falat and the guidance of the duke began schools throughout the land. The idea proved so useful and popular that their model eventually spread throughout the Union of Abur.

Falat replaced Natua as the tutor to the royal family, the duke's son and daughter both having been previously educated were beyond what Natua had knowledge of. Natua became a minister of education overseeing her schools and the union's efforts to

provide for them. Falat helped begin the academy, a place for the students that excelled and seemed destined to be scholars or ministers to the union or the duke. Through the academy titles were awarded, a legal document that organized the ideas of the union of Abur was created and a standard for ministers put down. Falat had the strange distinction of having created a title which he then gave to himself. Natua was its first official graduate, followed by the duke's son, Nahdur who was a few years older than Falat.

Finau and Fatah trained Nahdur, Natua, Dua, Falat and Adur in the philosophy, mysticism and esoteric knowledge of the Miladic, Darka, and the Draxion. Chief of these being the concept of the focus. Whole schools of philosophy were dedicated to the focus and monks spent their lives in contemplation of it. "It is not possible to define or explain it through any known words, it had to be experienced," the warrior Fatah had stated. "Understanding the universe, through the understanding or mastery of one element of the universe, is the focus," master Finau proclaimed. It became a guiding force for the students. Dua and Nahdur learned martial arts, the focus of the warrior first, all else followed. Natua, Falat and Adur tried to understand the nature of knowledge itself. Since all were to become targets of the emperor and the fanatics of the Draxion they were also taught to defend, evade and kill.

Natua the educator, Falat the scientist, and Adur the wordsmith attempted to both convey and process knowledge. Allowing for their skills and working to lessen their weaknesses they all grew in strength and wisdom.

Nahdur joined with Dua to settle disputes across the planet, later on other worlds, fight

rebellious minor royal figures and the occasional band of pirates and bandits. Dua

instilled the teachings of his order at each step and eventually knighted the three.

Nahdur was immediately skilled in understanding tactics and strategies in a way that

startled Dua. Book knowledge, philosophy and history he received from Falat or Fatah

while Dua taught the three to fight, fly (using the ancient black winged gliders) and

gather information. Dua instilled the idea that they should be able to defend themselves

with any weapon available, under any condition, for an assassin might strike at any

moment.

The duke's daughter Adur had an incredible talent for words, both spoken and written making her a natural diplomat for the duke. Her breathtaking beauty would awe the royals or figures of state, and then she would lure them to submission with her rhetoric. An incredible head for numbers, figures and dates as well, she wrote and read poetry as if it were some sort of drug. She possessed a graceful frightening skill with a sword or knife and was a fair pilot, her grasp of words was unmatched.

Falat secretly compiled and had illustrated some of the poems of Adur, a collection entitled, "The Wind in the Tall Trees," and presented to the bewildered young lady on her birthday. A feast was held for Adur's birthday, all in the citadel and the farmland surrounding it were invited. Many a young boy and girl would strain to get a glimpse of the radiant Adur. Poems, songs and plays would be written of her beauty, cunning, and many acts of kindness. Adventure tales would tell of her spying and exploits. Her poems would become the first literature of the Union of Abur.

Approaching her table piled high with food, flowers, gifts and candles, he bowed to her and presented the large intricately bound volume with as much humility as he was capable of. Adur took the book, a look of shock and wonder on her face. She ran a graceful finger over the embossed titled. "How did you know that *Wind in the Tall Trees* was always my favorite?" she asked, her voice choking with emotion.

"Ah I sensed in it your very being, it seemed to hint at all of your inner beauty and potential," replied Falat with little embellishment. It was his way, *it might be a bit of great wisdom but dramatics were for lies, the truth should be spoken with quiet strength*, he had once lectured the two children of the duke years ago, a sentiment borrowed from Finau. They had all three grown to young adulthood together in the citadel.

Adur opened the volume, she read the dedication, "For Adur may she walk long in focus." She glanced over the many selections in wonder. Slowly tears welled up as she glanced through the beautifully printed pages. "How can you know me so well?" she gushed half crying half laughing. Wiping her eyes she fell speechless as if reliving the moment she had written each poem or seeing and feeling the inspiration that had long ago moved her. More copies were brought forward, a slightly different cover for each of the honored guests at the table, all were mesmerized by Adur's emotional reaction. In

the citadel she was someone that was so loved or admired that when she wept all around felt they must also weep and her father, Nutur's eyes were glassy, near tears. If Falat had proposed marriage to the duke's daughter at that moment both the duke and his daughter would have accepted. Instead he walked away into the crowd of the party leaving all at the table stunned. Everytime they thought they couldn't be dumbfounded anew, Falat would awe them somehow, some new device, some ancient story, some theory or concept that promised to change life altogether. Adur held the book to her chest embracing it tenderly, a far away look in her eyes.

Shortly after on the neighboring world of Shatook, imperial forces had landed intent on reclaiming the world. The stronghold of Shaz was heavily shielded thanks to Falat, Dua and Nahdur and their efforts to modernize the kingdoms of Abur. Each of the worlds and kingdoms within possessed spacecraft, various energy cannons and limited planetary shields. Falat had salvaged equipment from old battlefields, space battles, and abandoned worlds. Sometimes the junk was unusable, sometimes it contained a component or two that could be employed, in a few cases whole airfields full of spacecraft were discovered and commandeered. When the portals to the wormholes began to collapse people fled from many systems or starved in place. Planets that relied entirely on trade for power, food, water and fuel were skeleton littered ghost worlds within a few years, as residents died out. Planets that could become self-sufficient thrived without the constant demand of war, some of these rose up to be the worlds of the Union of Abur.

The process of figuring out the technology had begun long ago in Falat's lab, having studied tiny portions of devices he learned a detailed understanding of the whole. In a short time with the support of the Duke, many of the union worlds went from primitive settlements and with animal powered devices to factories and workshops and a handful of very modern cities. So the Draxion forces were quite surprised to find what had been a crude stone castle shielded with a mighty energy field. That they were met with beams and powerful cannons equally perplexed the troops, pilots, and mercenaries. It was the first test for the Union and truly Falat, *was he a mad genius or just mad?* thought Dua watching the fortress Shaz repel its attackers. *Where are those two?* fretted Dua,

gritting his teeth. Falat could be reckless he had learned, *sometimes his experiments proved dangerous, sometimes his adventures bordered on misadventures. This boy from the stables now an advisor, scientist on a world that had been farming with stone tools not long ago. But it would be these weapons and defenses that would keep us free from the empire and ships would bring us trade in a time of peace, if there could be one, one day. If those two don't get back soon Adur will kill me with her graceful hands. If I lost both of them the Duke would have my head too, come on lads.*

A barrage of raged salvaged cannons ripped through the gloom of night and found purchase in the side of a Draxion marauder craft. As its wings spun wildly from the craft it sparkled and shimmered in the light of numerous explosions. Laser of mismatched and desperate materials blasted into a heavy troop carrier, sending it colliding with several light fighter craft and eventually a top a division of mercenary troops staged and ready to attack.

“Come on Falat,” urged Nahdur nervously but not wanting to seem nervous in front of Falat. It was one of those strange situations of rival brothers, a little respect and a little competition. Falat had been his teacher though he was several years younger. *The things he knows astounds me*, Nahdur thought. *If anything happened to me my sister would weep, if something bad happened to Falat his sister would kill me with her graceful hands.* “Speed it up, there junior. If we don’t make it out of this who will figure out all your gadgets and contraptions, back in the castle?” He joked but his heart pounded and the thought of Falat suffering really made him sad for a flickering instance. He felt that Falat was his older brother, some sort of old man in a young man’s body. But all he could hold over him was that he was a better sword fighter, a few years older, and was of a much larger build, so he teased him about all three when he could. Falat over thought sword fighting trying to find a strategy, a weakness Nahdar had learned from Dua, “Just punch him in the face while he is doing all that scheming,” he had once said and it usually worked. Yet in a longer fight Falat prevailed his scheming could compensate for fatigue or exploit it in his opponent. Natua had said, “you need both to win battles and even more so to win wars. A clean swipe of a sword shows skill, an economy of movement but a blunt stone will also do.”

Falat finally emerged from a hole in the rock. He hurried up the ridge on the hidden siege path they traversed, surrounded by boulders and crags. He flung himself at Nahdur shocking him and throwing him down the next ridge. They rolled in the stones and dust the sky flickering with weapon fire and explosions. The two had never scrapped really, they never got so mad at each other that sparring became brawling. Perhaps it was understood that it would be unwise for Falat to truly fight Nahdur, having been on secret missions already as a teen. *What in the world* flashed through Nahdurs mind, *did that last junior jibe set him off?* Nahdur tasted blood, his head was spinning, he had landed badly and struck his head on a large rock. Anger swelled up in him, *sister or not I am gonna kill him*, he thought his mouth full of blood his ears ringing. He couldn't figure out at first why it was dark. Then the ground shook violently and the two bounced to the next ridge into a muddy slope. Then it dawned on Nahdur, Falat's cloak was covering him, *he was protecting me*. Falat gave out a little cry as burning cinders and ash landed on his back. Where they had been standing a moment before was full of flaming wreckage. Falat had saved his life by throwing him from the path and into the slippery soil, and been burned doing it. Wreckage from a troop transport had crashed and lit up the night. Confusion and relief washed over the lads in equal measure. Falat stood and offered Nahdur his hand to help him up. They slipped and slid their way back to the siege path, painfully aware of how their once secret trail was now lit up by the flashes and explosions of the battle all around them. They broke into a run and nearly collided with guards waiting at the siege door. "That was cutting it too close boys, if you weren't the duke's son I would thrash you, and your friend" spat a guard. He then saw Falat his expression changed with recognition and he eyed him with the same reverence most people did. The guard composed himself, "Lord Falat I did not know you were here," he offered apologetically.

"It is just Falat, I am a former slave and stable hand I do not have a title. We set a trap for the troops and to do so we had to get very close to them," replied Falat with a mischievous look in his eye.

"This way," motioned another guard looking at the two muddy and bloody royal figures pretending to not notice their state of disarray.

Climbing through the siege tunnel they emerged into the fight proper, cannons to the left laser beams to the right all firing and holding off the enemy together. Copies of cannons were being made in crude factories but there wasn't time to get them to Shaz. The emperor's spies had intercepted panicked messages about how *Shaz was the weakest of the fortresses, to send reinforcements it would not hold if attacked*. Adur had come up with that plan and even composed the messages giggling to herself with the kind of giddy joy of playing a prank. She was a mild mannered poet most of the time, espionage and intrigue were like playing a new adventurous game with her words, one that made her heart race. It probably should have stopped with mere words but Adur insisted on a larger role. She was silently envious of Nahdur and his exploits and wished she could join him.

Some distance away across a valley from Shaz an insignificant royal so and so was holding a feast. It was insinuated that it was in honor of Adur. Truth be told, all many of the minor figures were secretly in league with the emperor. The small manor was a den of spies, saboteurs and smugglers, the duke knew it and also knew that the royal nobody was seeking a wife to raise his standing. Hints were dropped, rumors spread that Adur was somehow interested in the fool. She sat illuminating the room as she always did, guests and servants alike fussing nervously about her. The banquet hall was suddenly rocked by the sound of an explosion. All of the guests ran to a nearby balcony to try and discover what had caused the sound. Looking across the valley they spotted Shaz lit up with cannon fire and flaming falling debris. Ships seemed to be helplessly toppling from the sky, the crags and nearby fields were aflame panicked troops scattered in a wild frenzy.

"See what my father can do!" shouted Adur above the roar of the battle. Frightened faces of imperial loyalists stared out at the destruction across the valley, silently pondering their fates. "It is time for all of you to decide, who will you serve in the coming war with the empire," Adur offered.

"How dare you," some shouted, "You will pay for this," others insisted. A line of swordsmen approached Adur out of the shadows in the flickering light of the battle. The royal guests all ran for safety inside of the manor. Adur bent over pretending to fiddle with her dress, grabbing a small knife from her leg, she threw it into the chest of

one of the swordsmen. Pulling a slight short sword from one sheath and a long graceful sword from another, cleverly hidden in the many folds of her flowing dress, she was a blur dispatching two swordsmen before they could even realize what was happening. Pulling her knife from the first to fall she threw it again connecting with the throat of another guard, spinning one final time she finished the last of the swordsmen with two clean swipes. Sheathing her swords she lunged over the balcony using the rope she had hidden there.

The example was made, the points clear, things were about to change, sides were being drawn up, the Duke was not in any way weak, and neither was Shaz.

Shaz, was in fact the only fortress that might survive an imperial attack of any size, the others would hold for a few days but would crumble, something that Falat was working furiously to rectify. *How long before the emperor closes in on us? If he believed our ruse that we considered Shaz to be the weakest of our forts, he would be afraid to strike again. That might buy us a little time, enough to strengthen even our most vulnerable forts. If he saw through it, and assumed we had sprung a trap upon him, he would likely attack with haste.* Falat felt a shiver pass over him with the thought that he was staring the emperor down, he was openly challenging him. As if walking willingly into the cage of an angry beast, he was inviting an attack.

The sky was full of madness, dog fights between light craft, transport ships evading or being struck, debris, smoke, enemy fire replying to that of the fortress. Though the mismatched cannons and lasers looked rough and less than sound, they were in fact a breakthrough, more powerful than anything they had encountered from the old wars or currently in use by the imperial forces.

The empire was cruel, oppressive, enslaving and destructive, Falat, Adur, and Nahdur were free to explore their minds, design, create and imagine. Falat might read a poem from Adur and have a new invention pop into his mind. He might explain the intent of a device to Nahdur and he might think of a way to improve it, or find a use for it that Falat overlooked. All this began as children playing and dreaming, but soon turned to real scheming and creating. Falat never dismissed Adur and Nahdur's ideas as child's play. He instead tried to encourage and cultivate their minds, knowing they would one day rule the kingdom and as these things went that could be thrust on them at any moment.

His role in it was not important to him, he only wanted to prop them up and support their father. He admired their father, felt guilt and a debt to him for saving him from his old life, he was intent on paying it back.

“Reaching critical stage!” yelled Nahdur above the cannon’s roar and the sound of colliding and crashing ships.

Dua turned from his enclosure in the fortress wall to see the lads on the rampart, clearly stunned by the spectacle of destruction, and seemingly unaware of the danger they were in standing in the open. Dua tensed and then ran to the youths grabbing them roughly by their arms and into the enclosure, a kind of stone bunker. Through a slit in the stone they could still watch the fight but were less likely to be crushed by falling wreckage. Dua looked them up and down, “Rough night?” The two looked down at their clothing.

“It looks worse than it is,” explained Nahdar, “Falat saved my life again, but he had to throw me into the ground to do it.” Dua looked suddenly proud of both of them. The anger and fear he had for them passed quickly, *they were alright, that was what was important and had acted bravely.*

“If anything had happened to either of you Adur would have murdered me with her lovely hands,” offered Dua. The two looked at each other sheepishly, having already thought the same. “But I am proud of you, *like two pillars that support your father and form a strong city wall, you two.*” It was from one of Adur’s poems about family being a fortress, *the siblings the mighty walls, the parents the safe keep.* The two youth grinned in recognition, “Always stand with your brother Falat, one day he might rescue you.” A weird nervous emotion simmered in the two boys, now nearly men, *brothers, yes they were, weren’t they and Adur was like a sister.*

“Is the trap ready?” asked Dua. They merely nodded. A silhouette of a general was seen in the entrance of the bunker. Dua nodded to him and he was gone. The enemy had a staging area on the other side of a craggy ridge, hidden from the fortress by a large cliff wall. Not fearing the fortress they set up a haphazard camp for a brief siege, they imagined. Gambling, drinking, eating and lounging in equal measures, the Mercenary camp was a shambles. Imperial supplies and ordnance strewn about in no real order, they clearly thought things were going to go easily. The few imperial forces in

the camp sought to gain control of the Mercenary rabble but could not, instead they set up a second camp inside a large cave believing it more secure. Posting pickets, lining up logs and stones at the entrance of the cave, the imperials behaved as if the situation were more dire. It never occurred to the mercenaries that perhaps they were called in because imperial forces had been suffering numerous losses. The information the imperial generals had received was clearly faulty, what they saw made them believe they were facing a well organized and powerful foe. The Abur worlds and forces were harassing more frequently and to greater effect.

As the imperial and mercenary ships began to fall from the sky the Mercenaries finally became concerned, their reconnaissance was poor, they shouldn't have spacecraft, or such cannons, something was amiss they began to realize. A blinding light and deafening roar were suddenly heard. As the thought to organize, regroup, perhaps even flee the planet started to form, the entire nearby rocky cliff came tumbling down. The caves that imperials had occupied in a flash collapsed or their entrances were buried by huge boulders and stones.

Having made their way into the old mine Nahdur and Falat had planted a powerful explosive device as close to the mercenary camp as possible. They didn't realise they had placed it directly on top of the imperial camp hidden below in the mine. The imperials, thinking the opening a natural cave, they did not suspect that the ridge was riddled with interwoven tunnels and shafts. The old mine had hidden adit allowing ancient metal workers direct access to ore. The ore was transported through secret siege passages and immediately smelted. Falat had read an account of a historic battle at the fortress and realized he might have the metal and smelting site he needed to build up the cannons of Abur. He organized the quick extraction of all the remaining ore from the mountain. Further, he envisioned exploiting the mine and fortress to make a decisive move on the empire.

Several troop transports had made it to the ground and were about to unload as the explosion rocked the ridge. The ships were either buried or slid into the canyon below and exploded and were then buried. The rocks falling from greater distances did even more damage to the ships, six in total were wiped out and the supply train and camps of the ground forces with them. There would be no siege, the fight was won. The

mercenaries and the emperor would be furious there would be repercussions. Dua watched from the bunker as the enemy's ordnance pile exploded sending even more stones flying colliding with enemy ships, creating even greater chaos and confusion. Without supplies and heavily damaged it was doubtful any of the broken attack force would make it back to imperial space, to report the massacre, hence the need for the banquet. The imperial lackeys would report directly to the emperor what they had seen, probably making it sound much worse than it was. *Well we can hope they won't make it back*, thought Dua grimly but with a small flicker of victory flaming up in him. *Now it is a matter of time. But how much? Can we be ready?*

The year after Falat had presented the book of poems, the duke Nutur had Falat, Adur and Nahdur sit on a kind of throne set upon a raised stage in a field where all could see. He announced it would be a new feast and festival, "Each year the people of the Union of Abur will commemorate this joyous day." Nutur had rings forged, each with a different stone, five rings in total, somehow that was forgotten and people only spoke of the three rings. It is often so that in legends there is a grain of truth but much is omitted. He presented each ring one at a time. "One ring for my beautiful, poetic, and astounding daughter Adur. A ring for my sword and shield, my son the warrior, Nahdur. A ring for my wife, Treala, the wisest and strongest of women. A ring for my finger, so that we are all joined on this day. Finally, a ring to the boy that has grown to be a man in my care, that if I could make it so I would count him as a son, Falat. My greatest advisor, teacher, historian, inventory, and friend. The three rings that will guard and lead our Union, the three rings of Abur. With this ceremony I further invoke the law of the citadel, and take up the title that has been handed to me by the Union, King of Abur." A cheer rose up, hearts raced and as the silence returned a chill spread. All present knew that by doing such a thing he finally had declared open war with the emperor. With the victory at Shaz, the Abur worlds were nearly free of imperial forces and they had shown the emperor they could hold their territory. When and how the emperor would react was the question that kept everyone awake at night.

Chapter 9 The Breaking of Bread

While within the wormhole communication was limited and often interrupted by unknown disturbances. It was possible to take a shuttle craft and travel from ship to ship. Crane put together some of his diplomatic team, food, and an emergency medical crew and went personally to speak with the captains of the Draxion defectors. He left Haley and Ulua feeling they might be the target of assassins and were too valuable to lose in transit. Wormhole fold space was tricky, unpredictable, there was little known about it though people had used it for centuries. It was very difficult to perform experiments while travelling in fold space so it was hard to gain knowledge of its nature. The only modification or understanding of it came in the form of the portals which merely opened them to travel in a more regular way, mostly marking their locations and making them more visible. They did nothing to their nature or use any particular property of the rift in space. Perhaps for fear of causing panic, information about disasters in fold space were hidden, classified, therefore largely unknown, but a few strange tales slipped out becoming space legends or tall tales.

While in flight Blake asked, "What do you hope to learn commander?" "What the sense of the war is? Are they losing? Do they feel we are losing? Why surrender now?" replied Crane. The two sat in silence after that brief exchange both contemplating what a mass uprising could mean. The shuttle shuddered as if it were hitting some sort of strong wind, the pilot Dawson seemed unrattled and stabilized the craft quickly. The shuttle docked everyone boarded the Draxion craft nervously, *it could still all be a very elaborate trick*, thought Crane. Though Haley, Blake and Ulua all seemed to think that the Draxion lacked the imagination to come up with such a scheme.

They had called a meeting on one of the hundred surviving ships, twenty or so had been destroyed in the battle. The shuttle docked and the small diplomatic crew passed onto one of the destroyers, the Haifur. It was possible to use a mix of ship computers and interpreters to communicate. The link up at Hadrian had been decoded and Crane was able to combine that information with that of the defectors.

Blake was fluent in the Draxion of the lost kingdom, to the officers present it was like listening to someone from an ancient age, both formal and quaint. During the dark ages

after the portals were shut contact was lost, if someone studied Draxion culture or language it was all based on very old information. As the war grew more cruel and desperate the idea of diplomacy faded along with the hope of ever reconciling, therefore studying a hated culture and language was further suppressed. In close to a hundred years, with societal and cultural purges the language had evolved into something new, a conservative imperial language.

The picture that emerged was bleak and hopeful at the same time. To be able to inform all of the other officers in the fleet a summary had to be distilled. There was a successful new uprising joining the largest collection of planets in union against the empire, the Union of Abur. Though it had been growing for some years, recent victories gave the Union a small amount of autonomy and the ability to control the engagement in their system. Some of their statements hinted that perhaps they knew something about the Hadrian order that the Planetary league did not and their invisibility shield. Using their secret device and some other secret weapon that they did not personally know of, the Draxion had wiped out two of the planetary league fleets, Liberty and Justice. The news hit like a blow to the gut, nearly two thousand plus ships lost. They knew exactly which fleets to strike, as those were the two least experienced most chaotic fleets in the service. As well they were merely passing through a non hostile nearly empty system when attacked, they had no reason to expect a threat.

Two other fleets, Noble and Union, were nearly lost, when some of the Union of Abur ships came to their aid. Doing so they further declared their open rebellion and crossed a line by showing their willingness to join the league in defeating the empire. The two League fleets so decimated were combined into one ragged fleet of about seven hundred ships. We are told they are aiding the Abur union but to what end we have no details. "So you would arrive to hopefully find some allies," stated one white haired ancient looking admiral, named Ukto to Crane. He surprised all present with his perfect League speech. "There is strength in numbers," suggested Ukto as if trying to persuade Crane to journey to Abur.

The Draxion ships that surrendered wished to aid the union forces somehow. The Draxion commanders seemed to feel this was a critical time for the new rebellion. Ukto continued, "If the uprising can survive they could then take the fight directly to the

emperor. The war had drained all of the Draxion worlds of resources, they didn't see how they could continue to produce the materials needed to wage war. Civilians were starving, anyone that tried to rebel against the cruelty of the empire found themselves deep in a bleak mine or sacrificed to the Draxion death cult. Without the supplies and resources of the rebellious worlds the war effort was even more hampered. "Having to fight two foes on two fronts at once never works," stated Ukto, to Crane. The admiral continued, "My people are on some of those worlds of the Abur Union, if I have to decide then I will defend my home. I have nothing to gain from the empire. I am not of one of the preferred races, and will always be viewed with suspicion." His words went round the room, some nodded in agreement, others looked nervous, as if they did not know whom to trust. *Treason, mutiny, rebellion were always hard to speak of, unless you were sure they were bringing victory and an end to tyranny*, mused Blake.

Ukto leaned in and in, "Many of us have been silently waiting for a substantial rebellion, one that seemed well organized and with a chance of survival. I would ask you to aid us, our few ships might make a small difference but your thousand ships might turn the tide of this endless war. Others will join us rather than watch their children starve and their homeworlds bombarded."

Everyone sat in silence, there was a lot to consider and the potential of what had been said hung in the room, the teasing scent of hope. Crane looked to Blake, Blake merely raised his eyebrows and spread his hands as if to say please don't ask me what to do. "Have you anything to ask or add, Blake?" Crane finally said.

Blake shuffled his feet, moved in his seat as if trying to solve a riddle but struggling to do so. Clearing his nervous throat, he spoke in Draxion language one of the admirals leaned in toward Crane to translate. Blake asked, "If you are speaking of the Abur system how do you intend to reach them from our current path? No one from the planetary league has been able to travel through the Phedrian system. We are told it is the main ship building and mining backbone of the empire. Vital, so we assumed heavily fortified. We do not have knowledge of how it connects to the other systems in detail but were hoping to cut across it and out the distant Darka wormhole."

Ukto looked a little surprised but began to explain, "Ahh you are correct, normal travel would take us on the path you have indicated. But in a weeks time we will encounter the

Triabek Vortex. Passing into the vortex is usually discouraged without the ancient knowledge of surviving it. I am ancient enough to have this knowledge," he said with a sly grin. "The Nonuck is also very knowledgeable of the vortex, like me he is from Shaz on the world of Shatook. Undoubtedly he was taking the prison ships toward the vortex when he was trapped. There have been tales of ships entering the vortex and leaving it before the time that it originally entered the wormhole. Its properties are unknown, it is for sure how they were locked in time without aging. There is even a tale of ship exiting so far back in time that when it returned home all of the crew were burned as witches. There ship was discovered a thousand years later by archaeologist." Everyone gave Ukto blank looks that suggested they thought he might be kidding, but he certainly was not warming them up to the vortex.

Sensing their apprehension and that he had strayed off topic he regrouped. "It is said when the Triabek joins the lost one, and Shaz is reclaimed, a new age will begin. You can see now why your Haley and the strange return of the Nonuck Ulua has caused such a stir."

Crane and Blake were both surprised, *how had they heard of Haley?* they wondered. "And Shaz?" asked Blake, seeming to be at a loss of breath.

"Shaz was reclaimed by the king of Abur sometime ago now, but news of it only just arrived. It is possible to guard the Miladic worlds and hold them if one controls Shaz on the planet Shatook. It was a major Draxion defeat years ago now but the knowledge was suppressed and hidden, to help create the illusion that the rebellion was in hand. Everything has converged at a fortuitous moment. We had heard that you Crane were a fair man, not prone to cruelty or acts of barbarism that some of your fleets commit.

When we saw you saving the life pods and defending them even, we thought here is the one man we might break bread with." He gave a doubtful look perhaps afraid of being misunderstood and questioned, "Sorry do you have this expression, when a defeated person is welcomed into a camp the chief would offer the captives bread. Symbolic of trust and hospitality but also that even an enemy should be treated as a friend once they have surrendered. It is the same when negotiating a truce."

Blake answered, "Yes we have a similar meaning in our languages." *Hmm but it is nice to know a new expression that I can use since I have found myself of late, a diplomat to*

our greatest enemies, mused Blake. Suddenly he felt the weight of what he was tasked with anew, *bringing about a new alliance, peace even, if my words do not fail.*

“Skirt the vortex successfully and you enter a second wormhole, a kind of split in the path. Negotiate it poorly and one might be trapped or disintegrate or both. Speed on and you reach Abur. Stay on course ignoring the vortex and you reach Phedria,” finished Ukto his thoughts back on track again.

Crane jumped into the tiny gap in conversation, “I will consider what you have said, I will need to consult with the other captains and admirals. Forming a new alliance with a rebel group is beyond what a fleet commander is usually allowed to decide. We will get you all you need to go to war in the Abur system. You will be treated as guests and allies not as prisoners. We will break bread with you,” he added smiling. The mood was suddenly easy and light all seemed pleased as the translation spread through the room. “Let us know what repairs we can help with what supplies you need, we will take care of these things.”

“Medical supplies first if not access to your medical frigates. We took many hard hits defecting,” stated Ukto flatly, perhaps understating the situation. Crane felt a little anger with himself, *there might be wounded in dire need but he was so afraid of setting off some incident he prated on for a long while. Should have thought of that first*, Blake looked a little embarrassed too apparently having the same notion.

“Right away,” answered Crane, turning to leave. “The medical and diplomatic teams will remain here until you deem them unnecessary if you need more just let me know. I will send over more supplies once we have established what is needed.” The diplomatic teams introduced themselves and went with some officers to the medical bay to help sort the situation out.

“We thank you commander, you are the descent ally we have hoped for,” said Ukto with a little bow.

“When you get settled I would like it if you could join me for dinner on the flag ship,” added Crane.

“Yes we should break bread, properly,” he said with a relaxed smile.

Returning to the Regal, Crane wanted to hold a fleet wide meeting to explain what they had learned. Normally in a meeting room the other captains would appear as holograms

or merely on various screens. Unfortunately in fold space communication was limited and transmission would be garbled and intermittent at best. With a thousand ships it would be impossible for everyone to attend without using a huge hangar on the Regal and taking the unnecessary risk of ship to ship travel. There was a lot to consider and at times there were heated debates. He opted to send out messages, wait for replies, gain a consensus, and invite a handful of admirals to chat on the Regal. The process took a while but eventually they sat down. The ships would send out simple messages to the larger fleet live and include comments and questions so the whole fleet could take part. Defying Crane's wishes, more captains arrived at the Regal than what he had asked for, he made note of the insubordination but decided against discipline for the moment. Derrick came to pick a fight, the same fight that he and Crane had been having since they were teens. His views ranged from slaughter all the Draxion and Miladic, to interrogate them to death. Others suggested what an age of wonder they had entered. Crane noted which officers held the most extreme views and made sure in future engagements that they didn't take on prisoners. Finally, as the initial shock, frustration, fear and old bitter anger subsided the question surfaced the only real question, "How do we end this war?" It was debated and furiously for some time then it was abandoned and smaller questions taken up. How best to serve the rebellion? How to defend our home worlds if several fleets were lost? Did this vortex really exist or was it some mumbo jumbo or even a clever trap? What of the hidden wormhole? Would it be possible to defend ourselves and aid the rebellion? The questions went on and on into the morning. It was finally decided that no one was in their proper state of mind to solve any of the issues on the table and that those that could should sleep on it. The meeting was adjourned with nothing settled.

Chapter 10 Dinner with the Purple and Blue

The journey through the wormhole under way, everyone accounted for, under normal conditions it would nearly be a kind of shore leave. Crane was usually concerned with trying to keep the boredom of a month or more in hyperspace from turning to anger or mischief. In the current situation there was a lot to do to get ready for a fight in Phedria

system. Repairs and organizing supplies needed to be like a giant clock's workings but the crew was also rattled and needed to be allowed to get their courage back.

The Regal had a little of everything and it was understood that while on a long journey the closest anyone came to shore leave was taking a shuttle to the flagship. All of the other ships had fewer creature comforts or the sense of space one had on Regal. A tiny cruiser had no rec area, barely a dining hall, crews on those ships devoured books, played cards, dominoes and chess with little else to do. If they were lucky they were dry docked on a workhorse for repairs and could bunk on ships based on availability. Subs and frigates had a bit more entertainment possibilities, battleships and carriers much more. Destroyers were somewhere in between, but it was understood that all crew members were welcomed on the flagship to relax a bit, get a change of scenery, in some cases form or keep clandestine love affairs alive.

Sadly in fold space it was deemed too dangerous to make frequent trips so crew members always volunteered to make special deliveries or required missions to the Regal to get a chance to stretch out, make use of what it had to offer. Ships also joined via airlocks and ports, risky as sensors often went haywire unexpectedly but safer than sending shuttles back and forth.

On a routine basis, many crew members turned to sparring to blow off steam, stay in shape and if ever required, be ready for combat on some level. It was especially true of the elite commandos stationed on the Regal, Gorgon Group. A secret society and its own subculture they kept to themselves and stayed out of the way of the normal chain of command, they sparred constantly in their own facility. Anyone that wanted their advance training could apply to workout with them, though most were turned down after a trial. Foss, Vasca, and Crane did on occasion, earning them respect within the crew and with the other Gorgon. Traynor practically lived with the Gorgon he was kind of an honorary member, he spent so much time with them.

One could spar with others or with a holographic simulator. Pilots did the same training in a mockup of a cockpit earning badges for hours of flight time logged, playing out various scenarios. Simms, Crane, Vasca and Fulton sat for hours playing out tactical simulations and could recall every moment of hundreds of documented battles, Traynor was sharp but didn't have the disposition for such tedium or purely mental sparring.

For those so inclined, there was work in the greenhouses, helping sort, plant or harvest produce. As well there was lab space for experiments if a crew member was interested in taking up a project from a long list of fleet needs or demands or had invented a research thread. As a result the fleets were floating, fighting libraries or universities, aid and medical supply dispensers, that attempted to keep some sort of peace.

Despite all of this there often still seemed to be vast amounts of time, which could lead to mischief or a dip in outlook. Crew members were being evaluated formally and informally often, sometimes without their knowledge. Computer voice analysis, facial expression interpretation, and actual visits to counselors and physicians were all compiled with the hope that a problem could be found before it grew. Stress and trauma from combat were always present, though they lurked beneath the surface it didn't mean they weren't having an effect.

The Regal had a library system, it was discovered long ago that staring at a computer and holographic screens for hours on end, produced a unique type of fatigue. Printed words, old fashioned books seemed to relieve that weariness for some. The different type of concentration also relaxed the brain, fired other parts of the mind. The ship also allowed for all manner of pastimes and hobbies, from drawing, painting, and designing, to chess, dance and music. There were numerous terrible bands throughout the fleet and they would play for parties, the birth of a child, an engagement, a birthday deemed important and various holidays.

Despite the wormholes, greater than light travel, the cosmos was huge and still took massive amounts of time to cross. Settlement and colonization patterns followed resources but also sought to minimize distances, dead systems where places without resources or with too great a distance between wormholes. It was no good to run out of fuel, air or food before crossing a system, in times of war, ammo and shield power also had to be considered. Campaigning often was discussed in terms of months and years not weeks or days. As a result a large concern for the fleet was staying sharp, advancing skills, training, and creating the feeling of being productive. Despite the recent damage, the flight from the Draxion fleet, and the intensifying of the war over the last ten years, frivolous diversion was still encouraged. Keeping spirits high was important but also keeping a grip on humanity, the creative drive and expression,

through music, art, or play. At least that was the case in Crane's fleet. Observe someone that only sparred, ran battle simulations or worked out physically and chances were they were burning with anger and hate from the war, not a healthy state to be in for long.

Not surprisingly much was made of meal time, when not at battlestations. For one, it often felt a luxury to leave a station in the thick of a conflict. So when the fighting stopped, crew relished a chance to sit down, chat, relax, and catch up with other crew members. For the commanding officers, it could be a time to reassure frightened younger crew, dispel harmful rumors and lift sagging morale.

Crane liked to make a show of having a meal, to present a relaxed demeanor and gather the general tenor of the crew. Besides the Regal was in possession of a fantastic kitchen team, both for enlisted and commissioned service members. For special occasions or upon request the officers could set up a private dining situation, which thrilled the kitchen crew, they would always try to outdo themselves, creating plates that resembled modern art, combining flavors that defied description.

Wanting to help in the re-education process Crane, Blake, Haley, Ulua, Simms, Vasca, Andu and the Draxion defector Utko, all traveled to the dining room together. Flanked by the fleet officers, the possibility of slurs or some incident between crew and guests was eliminated. In contrast to the commander's fears, some stared and whispered, some pretended to not stare, but many went out their way to greet the new arrivals.

Occasionally with a simple nod and "welcome," others actually greeted the guests and shook their hands. It seemed a novelty to meet the foreign guests, and word had gotten round that Ulua was a wizard or shaman or some kind of otherworldly creature so perhaps they were further intrigued, that such things might exist. That Haley had been described as a mythical creature surprised everyone too. Crane didn't know how to handle that situation, *use it to the fleet's advantage or shut it down for Haley's sake.*

Settling on a long table, blue, purple, brown and white people all sat side by side. The alien guests marveled at the dining hall, the good cheer of the crew and abundance of fine food. "We have a sloppy spoon of gruel, maybe a bland broth, but never a choice. Sometimes you have to wonder if the food is doing you more harm than good," suggested the Draxion Utko, with a laugh.

“Life isn’t easy on the ship, but it is good,” offered the Darka logistics Andu officer. “My family lives with me on the ship, we all work but have evenings together. It is dangerous, yes, we are at war, but the idea of my family somewhere maybe in peril would make me less secure. I would rather have the time I have with them, even if we all must die together. Having witnessed the destruction of worlds, everyday I have of life, seems a gift.”

To that Crane raised his glass in a toast, the others following suit, “Here here!” Crane and Ulua both noticed that Vasca looked uneasy. She had perhaps seen more slaughter and death than anyone should and to be captain at nineteen was unheard of unless it was a matter of desperation. She assumed command of a ship that was nearly lost, saved her crew and dragged the battered craft to safety. She was certainly someone that needed to give up some hatred and move forward into a new era, often difficult to do. Which was exactly why Crane insisted on her coming to the dinner. Haley looked a little emotional and sounded choked up when she said, “See it is such thoughts that have always impressed me and that I admire about Milladic and Darka cultures. They have ancient wisdom to share with us. It is such a shame that we are all so blinded by hatred to not be able to learn from each other.” Vasca again stirred a little, averting her eyes.

“And there are some that would marvel at us all sitting at this table together,” laughed Andu.

Blake picked up the thread beaming at Andu and Haley, “Descendents of Earth have been out in the stars for a few hundred years, our cultures and civilizations go back thousands of years but almost none of them continuously. But the Miladic and Darka had civilizations, continuous cultures, for twenty thousand years. Some of them have been engaged in space flight for ten thousand years, certainly we have a lot to learn from them.”

Ulua looked a little nervous and began to respond, “It is kind what you have both said and true to some degree. Triabek, I hope we can learn from each other’s mistakes.”

Crane winced to hear the name of the mythical creature used for one of his officers, but said nothing. Ulua spoke further, “Blake it is more complicated than it seems. We have four major systems, Phedria occupied forced to produce for the empire, Abur home of

the planetary union, Trulak traditional home of the Draxion kingdom, now of the empire, and Sadur mostly Darka and a handful of Miladic worlds, and a few that are so mixed it is hard to say what they are,” the aliens all laughed about this as if it warmed their hearts to think of the good old days. They were also not subtly, mocking the racial purity notions of the Draxion fanatics.

Ulua continued, “Sadur bordered the Draxion and yes, had space flight and many very advanced things. When the Draxion began to conquer the Darka suffered first, becoming the slaves of the Draxion. Blue skin became a symbol of that slavery and later of slaughter. It is impossible to convey all the Milladic kingdoms accomplished before they called themselves Draxion,” he said with a melancholic tone.

“Yet there have been twenty periods that might be regarded as dark ages, complete collapses. People went from space flight to stone plows and hammers over night and stayed that way in some instances for hundreds of years. Then there is Abur, very distant from Draxion and only reachable by several dubious and dangerous wormholes, which remained isolated. My former Draxion officers have helped me get up to date on my lost seventy-five years and much has changed rather quickly it seems. As well as commander Crane in his wisdom, accessing the Draxion fleet computers through the surrendered ships and the escape pods, their information is now on your ship’s computer.” Ulua took a few bites, grinned, washed it down with some steaming tea the others ate and drank a little too. All eyes were still fixed on Ulua waiting for him to continue.

Ulua wiped his mouth with a napkin, cleared his throat and continued, “I have also been reading of your Earth’s history and it seems until the last twenty years, Abur was in a period like the Earth’s Middle Ages. Books were rare, castles and forts, armor and swords determined if you were free or enslaved. Something like serfs worked the land and fell back to a keep in times of trouble. Machines were simple, computers were a bag of stones for calculating, if you needed to count higher than a hundred something was wrong clearly.” Ulua, Ukto and Andu laughed.

“What changed?” asked Simms. Any discussion of the middle ages or ancient warfare would have sparked Vasca and Simm’s interest. Ulua turned to answer Simms, seeming to notice him for the first time.

"Ah the three rings, though there are really five in total it is the three rings that hold the future of the Union," answered Ulua.

Andu continued, "The duke of Abur reclaimed conquered worlds of the Abur system, with a ramshackle fleet and courage alone, he is one ring. He renamed himself the king of the Union of Abur and continued to harass the Draxion and consolidate the union's control of their system."

Ulua then went on, "The son of the king is a hulk of a man, a fierce yet clever warrior, he is another ring. The queen, Treala is another ring, shrewd and elegant diplomat, and financial officer of the kingdom. The princess Adur is said to be of enchanting grace and beauty yet a deadly and intelligent assassin, she wears another ring."

"I like her," admitted Vasca, a sly look in her eye, Haley nodded in agreement.

"She is famous for her poetry," offered Andu, to several surprised looks. Picking up the thread he ventured deeper, "And then there is a mysterious boy that became part of the royal family. He is said to have invented, created, repaired, re-invented and conceived of countless things, many while still a child, kicking the union worlds into the modern age, almost single-handedly."

Ulua spoke, a strange look on his face, "No one is sure where he came from or who he is, but he wears a ring, and is said to be a wonder, genius, though an enigma."

"Sounds like my kind of family," added Haley.

Ulua regarded Haley with his usual fondness. A serious look then took his expression and he asked, "Forgive my ignorance of the Earth's history but were there times when blue and purple could not sit together?"

Simms nodded, "Yes indeed the color of one's skin at times in Earth's history mattered a great deal. It might mean the difference between safety and comfort or even genocide and slavery."

"None of you now share a skin tone," noted Ulua. "And certainly not with your Darka crew. Does it still matter to some?"

Vasca answered, "Yes sadly to some and more so with alien races."

Ulua and Andu seemed to ponder this for a time.

"Not on my ship," answered Crane, "I won't tolerate such notions of race, color, belief or gender," he announced loudly, noticing that most of the neighboring tables were

straining to listen. "People with extremist views in my charge will find their lives difficult and their chances for promotion gone." Crew members nearby busied themselves with their food, ducked their heads to avoid being seen.

"Vasca and I believe a person should be judged by their skills, knowledge and willingness to improve both." Vasca sat up a little more at attention, as if proud to be mentioned as a tolerant commanding officer or perhaps at all. "And I am proud of all of my crew and officers alike," Crane offered, gesturing to the whole dining hall, to which a cheer went up and a round of applause. Some raised glasses, others gave a wave of support.

The conversation turned lighter, the mood as well. Having stepped into other worlds and cultures briefly, the ship seemed bigger somehow the war a greater waste. Everyone had to question what they thought they knew of their enemy and the nature of the conflict. The diverse party at the table tried to ponder all of the information while finishing their meals or drinks and then all returned to their duties.

Chapter 11 Mere Gilded Gravel

The imperial planet Uzha was only recently renamed after the emperor. To use the old name was punishable by death, but a great many things were punishable by death and more it seemed each day. Declare the war a waste, death, call the emperor an idiot, death, mention that the emperor had no real claim to the Draxion royal family or order, slow death. Get caught wearing a pendant with the old flag of the kingdom of Draxia, pain and death.

Uzha, was a giant among others of his race, his shoulders and chest were broad. His brow was heavy making his eyes seem tiny fierce slits in a head of granite. He appeared to be chiseled entirely from stone, his body was bulky but fit. It was easy for Uzha to intimidate anyone in his presence either sitting on his throne or staring subjects down. His body language always suggested a threat of violence, even his hunter eyes seemed lethal.

Uzha's older brother, the prince Shega, was a lump of a man, small and round, with fat little fingers and a slug of mouth that seemed to droop. The actual heir to the family but a drunkard, chaser of whores, and oft ill wretch, not able to lead himself much less a

stolen kingdom. Uzha was poorly educated, though quick witted and with a sharp tongue, his mind was a lumpy form unlike his body. Shega on the other hand was devious and always able to read each situation and discern how it might benefit him. Shega had more schooling than anyone should, sickly unable to engage in physical activities he poured through books, drove his tutors mad with questions and at an early age began to create the blueprint for an empire.

The two had their roles, Uzha instilled confidence in his men, fear into his subjects, Shega schemed in the shadows. Though Uzha held the title, Shega ruled the empire. In their once grand audience hall, a mere stage prop really, quickly and cheaply built with a faux veneer of fine stone and precious metals, Shega sat hidden in a small room with a screen for viewing. Through the lacey fabric he could watch the proceedings and advise the emperor. In the many boring hours sitting he often employed a series of whores to stroke his shriveled snail of a member or pleasure it with their reluctant mouth. Like everything about Shega, people dreaded to touch him for fear there might be some contagion upon it. He existed in the dark, secret places where he was all but invisible, no one to loathe his appearance. The local whores prefered him none-the-less to Uzha who would like it rough, was cruel for his own amusement and left many women bloodied and bruised, some he left cold and dead. For what Shega thought was copulating felt more like rubbing fumbling with a wet finish, easy money they named him.

Both Uzha and Shega left much work to their teams of advisers and generals. Capable and conniving men, that lined their own pockets with riches gambling with their very lives. As long as money flowed into the imperial bank, they hoped a few missed coins would remain unnoticed. Uzha preferred hours, days, years of parlour games and decadent leisure. Lavish parties, orgies, gambling, cruel games that minor royals were forced to endure or lose the emperor's favor, kept the vain calling. Hunts, both of animals and slaves, torture, public humiliation, violation and rape were common in the palace. Shega drank, whored, consumed various substances that altered his mind and was cruel but always in private, he was never seen even in his own torture chambers. He liked for whores to perform for him while he viewed them through a screen or hidden

window he oft employed blindfolds. Private or public their reign of pleasure and terror was effective, every subject was compliant, all grovelled to please them.

The fanatics of the Draxion death cult added a blind allegiance, a fetish for blood and cruelty that, both the brothers could equally embrace. The nightmares it instilled, spawned were worth any support the empire could give the cult. Warriors refusing to surrender, fighting till their grisly death made portions of the Draxion forces unstoppable and horrified their enemies, who somehow wished to live. The cult became the philosophy of the empire and a link to the mad warrior monk of antiquity. Anything that lent history to the brother's reign legitimate or not was nurtured. An empire built on a history of half truths, myths, legends, wishful thinking and outright lies was made stone in the chambers of suffering engineered by the death cult.

Gobbling up the riches of the Trulak worlds, exploiting its people and controlling all business through fear, the empire did make money. That its people were poorly educated, if at all, starving in their hovels and refugee camps, and dying in mass in mines, factories and battlefields seemed to trouble no one. Shega reasoned, "Somewhere out there is someone with the courage to rise up against us, if he is murdered in battle, starves on his feet, is buried in a mine, then he won't be any trouble to us." The answer to any problem that might arise was always, conquer more, consume more lands, their people, their wealth and their wills.

In the clumsy brutal conquest of the once grand Draxion kingdom, they managed to destroy most of the remarkable buildings of the kingdom. The vast immaculate city razed, the people starved, died from disease or were mowed down even as fleeing refugees, the brothers inherited a kingdom of ash and dust, a palace of rubble. Shega was painfully aware of the power of appearances and had a new palace hastily constructed. With no money in their coffers, and all of the great artisans dead, fled or dying, the building that resulted could be leveled by a strong child. Likewise, Shega felt the need to fabricate a family line that justified their rule in Draxia. A fake ancient document was produced, Shega and Uzha were married to royal figures, against the will of their brides, and they had history books and historians burned in the town center. To speak of any of these things meant certain death, and the new history books and historians said only what the brothers wanted said. Songs, poems, speaking of the old

glory of the once great kingdom were forbidden and new ones proclaiming the potency of Uzha, his prowess in battle, and the riches of the empire were created. Further a narrative that suggested that Uzha and Uzha alone could hold the empire together and save his battered people emerged. It was never mentioned that it was the empire that battered the people, all was blamed on the cursed Planetary League and impure races allowed to fester and flourish in their noble land. Plays and works of amusement spoke of the glory of dying for the holy empire as the highest of honors. Monuments to the Uzha, the fallen war heroes, and the empire itself were quickly erected far and wide, of straw and plaster with a thin veneer of real stone or gold.

Uzha, despite his many wives and concubines, had failed to produce a male heir and his daughters died as infants or as children. For a sacred kingdom it did not seem that the ancestors blessed it, but to say as much meant death. That the empire was based upon forged documents and false claims, didn't matter as long anyone who spoke the truth was quickly silenced. The effort to conquer and build an empire began some hundred and thirty years back a series of battles, conquests, and thievery brought many kingdoms under imperial rule. In backrooms and in the market no one at first really feared or worried that such a pair of buffoons would ever achieve much, little by little the whispers changed. The lumbering wasteful system had still worked for fifty years. The last twenty years saw the empire stretch across numerous systems and the ability to wage a devastating war with the Planetary League.

Miladic, Draxion and Darka races live long lives compared to humans, it was not unheard of for someone to live to be three hundred years of age. Two hundred years of age was common, one hundred and fifty typical. When one factored in constant warring it brought the average life expectancy way down as a great many children died from siege starvation, disease or the random atrocities of war.

The years had not been kind to Uzha, his face looked meaner, skin more drawn and skull like. Shega at nearly two hundred was more blobbish as if the years had dissolved whatever bones he had possessed.

A sheepish messenger had arrived at the shabby tarnished throne room. The gilded appearance had peeled away with gravity and time, though construction of a more permanent lasting monument had been attempted, it languished half complete for years.

Instead the twisted labyrinth of terror the Hill of Weeping was constructed, a bleak impenetrable and demented fortress.

A thrown goblet had chipped a chunk of veneer from a painted pilaster years before, no one had bothered to repair it, the messenger glanced at it as he approached.

Throughout the once grand room there were many similar stories, resulting in the flimsy material beneath the facade being exposed here and there. The dim light of the narrow hall and some sort of dust that seemed to hang in the air, made the messenger think of an attic and the worn furniture and figures forgotten and unkept, in some unused space.

He seemed somewhat startled when the emperor finally moved, half believing him a giant statue and that the actual mighty emperor of his school books would surely arrive soon. Having sipped from his goblet he returned it to the tarnished arm of his throne.

A stirring to the side of the throne drew the messenger's attention to a tiny window with a kind of screen over it. *Is that the emperor in there, to whom do I bow and speak*, he wondered nervously. He bowed to the skull faced relic on the throne as it seemed to hold nothing but malice and made his skin crawl. A chill ran across him looking into the eyes of the figure in the chair in front of him.

"My lord, I bring a message for the emperor," the boy offered clearly.

"Speak," the emperor commanded with a voice half cackle, half mumble, taking another sip from his goblet.

"Yes my lord," he handed a letter to the emperor, crowned with the field general's seal. A sudden eagerness to leave the room sent perspiration into his armpits, his heart was racing, despite the cellar cold of the hall. The meager light dimmed as the sun was obscured by a cloud, the dread upon the boy deepened. A rattling sound was heard. It took some time for the messenger to realize it was the letter in the hand of the emperor shaking feverishly. He hurled his goblet over the head of the youth. Wine splattered the floor, the messenger, a wall as if a beast had been slaughtered. The messenger began to quake, his sweat ran like rivers, his eyes bulged as Uzha rose and drove a knife through his pounding heart. The boy whimpered, and held back tears, falling to the floor like so much wet laundry. The remains of the pilaster crumbled beneath the strike of the goblet, not structural, not holding anything up but an illusion of grandeur, it littered the chamber floor mere gilded gravel in a pool of hot blood.

The battered remnants of the legion,

Wandered in the dark,

The enemy too close,

For a camp,

To build a fire,

That might bring,

Warmth or cheer,

Tales of better days,

Real or imagined victories

and a tent against the damp,

Hearts heavy, thoughts like pitch,

They entered the haunted valley,

A place all travelers did dread.

For a great battle once raged there,

And the soldiers spirits there remained,

Or at least some said.

With a loathing, caution,

They did softly there tread.

It was a dark dreary winter's night,

When the ghost horsemen arrived,

Comrades of arms long ago fallen,

Their eyes like deep wells,

Easily ensnaring,

With faces gaunt and worn,

Showing the signs of their mortal wounds,

They stared out of the fog and gloom,

Morning light not yet forming.

But its soft flicker, hinting, warning.

The two forces pondered one another,
In the silence of the grave,
None moved,
scarcely a breath escaped their lips,
To rise a cloud,
Evidence of their life.

In contrast to the rows of dead,
That seemed an endless stream,
As if all restless soldiers,
Did there dwell,
From ancient times,
To current strife.

A chill ran through those that did witness,
The spectral steeds and ghastly riders,
Archers, spearman, the high, the low,
All with a strange light,
They did glow.

A raged creature examined the hosts,
rode slightly forward and asked,
“For what did we fall?”
His voice was like scrapping thin ice,
That would soon,
Send one into a
Frozen lake,
To move no more,
It made the tattered army quiver, shake.

Petrified no one dared answer,

Save one,
Whose lord had fallen,
And he had no one to further serve,
The bells of his hat,
Once amused his tiny body too,
He had no dance for the vanquished,
Or the survivors,
With a bow he approached.

“For the Kings gold and land,
And other men’s fortune,” offered the court jester,
“Yet will you call me the fool?”

(Excerpt from The Song of War, Baxius)

Chapter 12 A Collision in Time

A destroyer collided with a gigantic red rock tower, it seemed it would survive the impact but not the mighty blast that hit it squarely causing it to erupt into an enormous ball of flame. The distraction of the bizarre terrain was adding to the fleet’s confusion.

Another ship down, we can’t keep this up, we shouldn’t even be here, thought Crane bleakly. “Cruisers on me,” he ordered, seeing that the lead ship was down, and he was next in line.

Crane’s small group of cruisers dove into the perilous orange canyon, in part for cover, but also to see if they might spot the hidden cannons there. Out in the open flying above the plateau they were being massacred in the ravine they might get picked off by the alleged base there, there was no scenario that was certain. The enemy fire seemed to have come from the area but it was really more a hunch, a desperate act.

The cruiser’s forward turrets spun wildly searching, guarding, the side cannon crews sat at the ready. In the shadow of the rock walls the lights of the control panel seemed to suddenly glow more brightly. Crane tried to read them, see if there were clues that might aid him in the flashing and blinky colors. *Some sort of energy up ahead.*

The fleet commander had been warned, advised against such a mission, the enemy’s ships were of a far greater number than expected, they were quickly slaughtered.

Fractured into separate bands of survivors Crane rallied his cruisers to him. A suicide mission up the canyon was their only hope of escaping the planet at all. The fire began, blasts surrounded them sizzled and charged against the small ship's shields. Crane held his craft steady, thunder claps of energy echoing about in the jagged passage. He felt a tiny flicker of hope, *they are guarding something down here*, he surmised. All of the forward batteries returned fire frantically, with little precision. They seemed to hit targets accidentally. Rocks broke loose and a random cannon or base building exploded, adding to the chaos, forcing Crane to dodge and swerve in the narrow space, not always successfully. They slammed into the canyon wall and bounced into the opposite side. A row of cannons broke free of the cruiser.

They took a serious direct hit.

"Shields at forty percent," announced an officer. The ship shuddered, quaked from another massive hit, *Aha the real guns*, Crane mused, *he was right*.

"Twenty percent, we can't take another one of those," someone announced.

A tangle of small cannons and fortifications gave way to the massive planet defence guns, the ones that were wiping out or had knocked out much of the fleet. "There they are," Crane whispered. "You ready down there?" he quierred, almost afraid of the answer.

"Ready!" came the reply from the cannon crew below. They would have only one chance at it and if they failed they would not have enough shields left to last more than a few minutes. "Now!" Crane yelled.

The cannon crew dropped all of their shells through a maintenance and loading hatch, as if pretending to be a bomber. The load or ordinance landed directly on the complex of planetary guns, protected by the landscape hidden in a rocky recess. A massive energy field guarded the planet from bombardment, even battleships could do little to stop the guns, but a pile of shield penetrating shells at ridiculously close range worked perfectly. It was in hindsight a very reckless venture Crane recalled later. He remembered that passing into the dark of that canyon had filled him with dread, it was the moment that he replayed in his mind for years, the risk, the chance. Was it arrogance? Was it courage? The move was a great success, it saved the fleet that shouldn't have been there in the first place. It didn't ultimately save the fleet from the zeal and drive of the fleet

commander, he would plunge them into disastrous defeat, after horrible, hopeless endeavor, again and again.

That was the message he took with him when he found himself commander, to avoid such arrogance, to minimize chance and move with certainty and strength. Had he failed the cruiser would have been greatly weakened and without a single shell and half its cannons, he would have doomed himself and his crew.

Crane had many such memories that haunted his dreams but that memory seemed to return when he sensed he was moving into shadow. He had returned to his cabin, chased a few hours of fitful sleep, that left him more tired. Strange dreams of vortexes and a mythical warrior woman that seemed to be comprised of fire, filled his restless slumber. He saw a fortress, no, a citadel, a great battle there, and two young Miladic men rejoicing in victory. None of it made any sense and he was honestly relieved when his alarm woke him.

He made it to the command area, the odd visions and the new concepts that the Draxion defectors and Miladic had presented still swirling around in his head. Still a few days from the fork in the road, Crane was yet undecided as to which path to take. *Attack Phedria, fight their way across it or aid the Abur union? Both options seemed hazardous, unsure.*

Vasca had command and had successfully organized repairs to the bridge. A few problems still needed sorting out in the data relay areas below the command deck. Taking the small spiral staircase he entered the nether world of the support deck. Standing in the lower technical area surrounded by buzzing and whirling machinery, blinking indicator lights and status screens there was often the feeling of being in some mechanical underbelly.

He worked for several hours with Andu, robotic units and repair crews alike, until it seemed everything was back online. The other techs seemed surprised to see the commander wedge himself into a tiny space or crawl into a filthy machine, often where they were loathed to venture. Extracting himself from the churning equipment, he closed up the metal housings, covers and access points. He leaned against a data unit briefly to catch his breath, feeling the hours of labor. The stygian depths stunk of oil, burnt

rubber, plastic, and sweat. He wiped the moisture from his brow, glad he had stripped down to his under shirt, he was drenched covered in machine grease and grime. *All these years and I am still a powder monkey sometimes*, Crane thought, grinning. There was a comfort in fixing something small, especially while surrounded by uncertainty and vast oceans of unsolvable problems. He began to wipe his hands with a rag, *a futile effort at best*, when the ship suddenly jolted and shuddered. It was a sensation he did not immediately recognize.

“Commander, we have collided with something?” cried out Foss. Flashing alarms, warning sirens wailed, a general pandemonium took over the bridge, and therefore the fleet. Crane struggled to get to the command deck, the tiny flight of stairs suddenly seemed impossibly far away. Rising to the command deck a faint hum and the calm demeanor of officers, greeted the captain. Crane stood for a moment fumbling to put his commander’s jacket back on. He stared at the main screen trying to make some sense of what might be happening.

Haley spoke clearly uncertain of her own words, “The vanguard of the fleet has bumped shields, they bounced off of another group of ships it seems.”

From starboard to port sat Simms, and Haley as usual. Traynor sat in the command seat or throne, but stood as the commander arrived. Aft of the throne and to port sat Foss. She wore a new shiner covering her right eye and brow from a recent fight. Crane noticed her black eye, she grinned and offered, “You should see the other three guys.” “The way of the warrior,” joked Crane half questioning.

Vasca arrived, also with a few bruises about her face. Vasca grinned and took her place, Traynor returned to his. *It will have to wait*, thought Crane.

“Fleet assume defensive posture,” Crane ordered an absurd order in a wormhole but the only thing that made sense. Reaching his throne he was inundated with, graphs on screens, some hovering holograms depicting the fleet and the Regal. Closing what seemed irrelevant the captain began to make sense of what was seemingly ludicrous. Traveling through a wormhole and encountering something was rare, colliding with something nearly impossible. Time and space being folded around the fleet allowing for greater than light speed travel, gave the impression of being surrounded by fast moving clouds that flickered and flashed in ways beyond description. It gave one the sense of

being out of bounds, out of reality and in truth little was normal in the fold. Some crew members complained of anxiety, high stress levels, odd tingling sensations none of which were consistent from crew member to crew member or explainable by any known science. Strangely enough the objects they had discovered were suddenly moving in sync with the fleet.

"Battle stations, formation Rama," Crane whispered to Vasca.

"All hands, all ships to battle stations, formation Rama," ordered Vasca. Holograms showed the ships changing formation into a cylinder, the flagship Regal at the center. Like spokes of a giant wheel, battleships in the center, then destroyers, then cruisers, spiraled out from the Regal. Mixed in were arrays of carriers, heavy escorts, light gunships and workhorses.

"All ships report in position, all ships battle ready in all aspects, sir," declared Foss.

"What are they and what are they up to?" hissed Crane.

Two cylinders mirrored each other, both in the exact same formation both moving in perfect consort.

"Brace forward shields make all batteries ready in all respects," ordered Vasca, noticing the mimicking move of the other objects. Sensors didn't really work well in the fold, communication from ship to ship was possible but spotty and for something that had been used for space travel for nearly two centuries the nature of fold space was still a mystery.

"It is another fleet why else would they go into formation, perhaps they are trying to communicate in the only way they can," offered Haley with a questioning tone in her voice.

"Fine they are ships somehow locked in the same fold of time and space with us," commented the helmsman Traynor with an unsure tone, as if wanting to see if there were any other parts to this new theory.

"Yes, another fleet that like us went to standard battle formation, not very reassuring," came the voice of the defense officer Simms.

"The entire fleet is being seriously scanned sir," called out Andu from the lower deck.

"Every aspect, every technical spec all being called up by this phantom fleet."

Great they already have a nickname, thought Crane.

“Can you scramble our systems to stop the breach?” asked Crane.

“Already bypassed sir, whoever they are, they have much more advanced equipment than we have seen,” stated Haley sounding flabbergasted.

An eerie calm passed over the bridge as if everyone was collectively holding their breath.

“We are being hailed, sir.” stated Foss sounding doubtful of her own words.

“Punch them through,” Crane stated flatly.

“Fleet Commander Crane this is Fleet Commander Hubbel you can stand your fleet down we are on the same side,” *not quite an order maybe more a suggestion*, thought Crane confused.

Suddenly all of the specs and information on the mystery fleet appeared on the ship’s screens and projected holograms. They resembled planetary league ships but were not exactly like any they had ever seen in truth they seemed far advanced.

A blur of red hair was seen as Haley’s head shot upward clearly startled. “This isn’t possible sir. Captain Hubbel went missing seventy-five years ago along with his fleet but this is the fleet, the ships match the limited knowledge we have of the Shadow Fleet seven five zero. I wrote a paper on them during my training, I was intrigued by them but found there was very little information available. When I did find something, me and my paper were seized. I was promptly removed from my ship. I finished my schooling on the far side of the galaxy at a top secret lab, where the ships had been produced all those years ago, the fabled Shadow Base. Then the war broke out and I was put back on a ship, my research put on hold.”

“I have written some bad papers, never been locked up for one,” added Traynor.

“Could this really be the Shadow Fleet sir?” quizzed Vasca to the room.

“We know so little about fold space, the theory I had heard was they were lost when the Draxion closed off the wormhole they were traveling in. It was presumed that would vaporize them, but perhaps they were simply trapped in a fold of time and space,” suggested Crane.

“Andu get Ulua, or like our guests were caught in the vortex,” Crane beckoned. Andu ran for the elevator.

Simms scratched his chin, looked up and spoke. “Don’t suppose it’s a new tactic from the Draxion? Some sort of trap to get us to lower our defenses.”

“That would be creative,” offered Traynor.

“A little too creative I would think,” suggested Haley.

Simms chimed in again, “Without targeting or sensor ability we would be firing blind the missiles wouldn’t know what to aim for it would be a rather one sided battle if these advanced ships have those abilities.”

A chill ran around the room at that distressing thought.

“No one has ever tried to fight in a wormhole, it isn’t even known if shields will really accurately work,” suggested Vasca.

Foss turned from her console to face the others on the command deck. “Why don’t we ask them who they are, sir? I mean try to ask them something that verifies who they really are.”

“Can we trust them to tell the truth?” suggested Simms.

“Ask Haley, she is the expert,” suggested Traynor.

“Hardly, one paper years ago that I didn’t get to review because it was classified, doesn’t make me an expert,” defended Haley half laughing.

“Why would they confiscate it then, if you didn’t discover something of value?” offered Crane.

“Ulua and the others were locked in time and space due to the vortex, what’s the likelihood of it happening twice on the same day?” asked Simms.

Crane cut in, “But of course we know it is possible because of the prison ships.”

Ulua arrived and looked at the data on the hologram before him, “This seems the same to me, look at the dates of the log they are seventy-five years ago. And the fuel reading, the composition, no one uses it anymore, not for years, the process though infinitely more effective was lost in the dark ages.”

“He’s right, our computer can’t even make sense of it,” offered Andu.

Traynor chimed in, “There has to be a way of verifying who they are.”

“Haley, is there some detail, anything that you can recall that only the real Hubbel would know?” asked Crane.

Exhaling Haley leaned back in her seat, she scratched at the close shaved back of her head, tousled a bit of her fiery hair. “Wait! They had a cat on the flagship against regulation, it became a kind of mascot, they named him,” more head scratching more mixing up fiery hair, she stomped a foot as if it might help dislodge her thought or memory. “Morris, his name was Morris!” she stated confidently.

“Okay, put me through Foss,” requested Crane. “Greetings fleet commander Hubbel, it is a bit of surprise to find you in this way sir. How is your fleet fairing?” he queried, taking cautious steps.

“It is strange and wonderful on our end as well. We have been able to monitor you for a bit of time, about an hour but were unable to communicate at first. It seems your shields collided with us, at least the energy produced by them and have dislodged us from the vortex. When we tried to communicate we had trouble with our old codes getting through. From your ship’s computer we have discovered that we have become a kind of ghost story, films, books on the “Phantom Fleet.” But more troubling was to notice the star date. It is likely everyone we left on the planetary league worlds are long dead and worse to learn that the war continues but with the new Draxion Empire. I am sure we have much to learn from each other. I can prepare a shuttle and talk with you in person if you like or we can have a hologram conference if you would prefer. I realize that both of those scenarios are unreliable for you with your current technology but we have sent the data to your ships to allow them to upgrade their systems. A fleet conference will be clear and normal with your upgrades and ship to ship travel safe and easy.”

“Logistics?” Crane asked, closing the channel from the throne control switch.

“Yes captain they have sent thousands of tiny and some large modifications the entire fleet is processing them currently. As well, the workhorses are producing a wide range of new munitions and parts the likes of which we have never seen,” answered Haley sounding perplexed by the revelation.

“So they have broken into our computers, and are modifying our systems all without asking,” stated Simms, obviously annoyed. Nervous looks were exchanged around the command deck, something had invaded the ship.

“How is that even possible?” asked Traynor.

Haley was punching keys, modifying holograms in mid air and scanning multiple screens in a fury. "They are significant improvements and they were able to do them because they possess the fleet codes necessary, old ones but still fleet encrypted. Meaning they are either very good spies and saboteurs or they are who they say they are. Hubbel's insignia is interesting, he is listed as, all fleets commander, that is the highest rank possible, sir." It was all a bit troubling and the implications if they were enemies was too terrible to ponder.

Crane offered, "Surely they would have just lowered our shields and struck us with everything they have, knowing we wouldn't be able to do anything against it if they meant to destroy us."

Simms nodded, "I think you are right, if they could so invade us and had ill intent they would have used that ability."

Crane opened the channel, "sorry for the delay on our end trying to sort some things we had a rather nasty attack recently." It was a lie but a plausible one.

"No problem, yes we are reviewing the log presently," came Hubble with a dryness to his tone, that sounded like judgment.

"While we are waiting, how is that cat of yours?" queried Crane trying to sound casual. A soft chuckle was heard on the other end of the communications line, "Don't tell me Morris is part of the ghost story too? What is he some sort of undead vampire feline in the stories?" Hubbel joked. "Morris is fine like all of us exactly the same as we were seventy-five years ago."

"Glad to hear it, I will ready shuttles, if you will prepare a conference room on your flagship I will inform the other commanding officers that we will be holding a meeting shortly," said Crane, glancing about the room. Everyone sat for a bit in stunned silence.

"Traveling in a wormhole has never been so eventful," suggested Vasca.

"Or so perplexing," added Simms.

Chapter 13 Catching Up

Perhaps the strangest occurrence in connection to the vortex and the recovered crew. No one liked to say rescue though Andu theorized it was the small bump of shields that freed the group of ships from the vortex. Hubble himself suggested it first as well but

then seemed to retract his statement. It was impossible to prove and the Shadow fleet folks were too proud to admit needing help it seemed, which troubled Fulton and Crane. Arrogance usually got folks killed, but they didn't fully realize the extent of the problem until the fleet meeting.

Crane wandered into the main mess hall, to show a positive face and wish his crew well but also to get his mind off of all the strange new things he had recently encountered, his effort failed immediately.

Sitting at one of the long tables of the hall, was Fulton, a very old man, a young man, Simms and a large man about the size and age of Traynor named Brett and another named Reynolds. Reynolds and Brett he was informed were super agents, spies, reconnaissance, assassins when needed to be, and would have been part of a special secret unit of the Shadow Fleet. They piloted experimental stealth craft and had advanced combat training beyond the Gorgon level of skills. They seemed mild, even kind fellows for having such a background which surprised Crane. He was informed there was another pilot assigned to Blink and that Reynolds was essentially on the bench, Brett piloting Shadow. Crane filed the information away, he found it strange to have someone like Reynolds doing nothing. *Or was he to spy on Regal fleet and report back to the Shadow base command?*

Crane's mentor and friend Admiral Arthur Fulton was sixty-five, old for the fleet not for civilians necessarily. He had a sadness about him, his wife and a child were lost in an attack, he never talked about it.

The man that sat with him was eighty-five Crane already knew and Fulton's father Charles. They greeted each with the warmth old friends exchanged. He was one of the greatest minds in engineering of the age and worked with the power systems of the flagship. In his free time he trained, lectured on theoretical physics, sharp, with fire in his eyes that didn't fit his age. He was a vital asset to the fleet that had lost his wife years back and stayed very busy to keep his loneliness and depression away. He was one of those rare persons that was never jealous of youth but always amazed and encouraged by it. It was a trait he had passed onto his son and endeared him to many. Andu, Traynor and Simms spent as much time as they could picking his incredible brain, and attending his talks.

The young man seemed familiar but was a new face. He and Simms seemed to have hit it off and were friendly in an almost flirty way. His name he was told was Marshal aged twenty-five. Improbable as it would seem he was the grandfather of Arthur and the father of Charles. Trapped in the vortex for seventy-five years he was younger than both of them, though in truth he was a hundred. No one knew his whereabouts as Shadow base didn't exist, it was top secret.

"Being stationed there meant you were off the grid so to speak, you couldn't have contact with anyone outside of the base," Marshal explained.

Brett laughed, "We both trained together and Reynolds and I were picked for the elite force Marshal the fighter squadron. The elite force was ever really tested or developed, maybe it will be soon. Then again nobody from the Shadow Fleet and none of the ships have been through the trial of fire that is war." The statement hung in the air for an uncomfortable moment. Brett tried to make light of the situation and with bravado and theatrics stated, "Everyone in experimental prototype craft, heading off to bring a swift end to the war. Now it seems that party is long over and we are twenty-five years late to a different one." One could almost hear a marching band behind his narration, as the boys sailed off in unproven craft with green crews.

The empire was far worse in all ways than the old Draxion kingdom. They ruled their regions and planets but were often mired in petty royal squabbles which limited the kingdom's reach. After the gates opened and the empire spread they gobbled up more areas and lorded over the ones they had with an iron fist. The kingdom wanted to contain the Earth colonists, the empire wanted to eliminate them, wipe them from the galaxy. Wars with the kingdom were limited, over trade and territory with the emperor it was a total war of genocide. Further, the empire brought back the death cult, and the extremists of the Draxion, with their myths of racial purity and desire to separate from all other Miladic folks. Crane wondered how much the vortex folk knew of the new situation.

After a lull in the conversation Charles stated, "Marshal was reported as lost in a training exercise, nothing more." So the other two Fulton's thought he was dead for the last seventy-five years like so many others in the wars.

They tried to be positive about the odd situation noting that no one got to see their sons and grandsons as old men. Crane couldn't help think, *that was a spin, it surely would have been better to have seventy-five years together*, but said nothing. *There were no guarantees of that anyway I suppose, he would have been ninety-five.* Looking Charles over and thinking of his energy *he certainly might have made it that age mind intact*, Crane surmised.

Marshal was reportedly a crack shot pilot better than even Shae Jenkin's and well versed in the new experimental craft of the Shadow fleet. They had already been talking and training a bit together.

It made Crane's head spin thinking of it. The three sat having the strangest family reunion that had ever been organized. Crane left again wishing he had never stepped foot in the mess hall. He returned to his throne and sat stewing in a mild shock. *Too much weirdness for a lifetime in the last month* he thought.

In order to sort things out between the two fleets and the possibilities presented by having new superior ships, a conference was to be held. Using Ulua and Utka's knowledge of the Triabek vortex they entered a sort of spiral loop. Orbiting the point of singularity without engaging it required a unique set of skills. There was a bit of uneasiness as former Draxion, Miladic, and even Darka crew members took the helms of some ships to help stir them away from getting caught in the enigma. It was important to remain in a holding pattern until it was decided how to proceed from the fork in the path. Staying in the fold space heading toward Abur would mean backtracking, to get to Phedria, a journey of several months one way.

Resilience would host the meeting, a bit of foreshadowing of things to come, that they did not ask anyone Hubbel simply said it was so. Pulling into the hangar of the flagship, it was clear it was in its own league. It looked to be hundreds of years advanced to the Regal. Anything that looked crude or raw on the Regal looked polished on Resilience and there were more than a thousand other ships other ships, not including fighters, bombers, and other light craft. Crane felt dizzy trying to ponder all of it.

"Welcome aboard commander Crane," greeted Hubbel at the hangar returning Crane's salute and offering a hand. Crane's eyes traveled over Hubbel's shoulder to an odd rounded craft in dry dock. Hubbel noticed and turned to face it.

"The Blink and beyond it the Shadow," noted Haley in an awed whisper, her eyes with a weird hunger about them.

Hubbel looked surprised, "Ha ha well done Triabek, no one is supposed to know of their existence, nice to finally meet you in person. You keep coming up and I have read all of your reports both new and old," noted Hubbel. Crane tensed hearing Haley's name once again replaced with some superstition. "Crane the Triabek brings new knowledge, it is said and we have been sleeping for nearly a century. Her reports have helped us greatly to get up to date, though we still have much to consider."

She saluted and ignored the title. "I worked briefly at base Seven Five Zero, the Shadow Base hence my specific knowledge. Though Miladic, Darka and Draxion cultures have been a lifelong fascination, so things I have more information on, I am glad I was of use," offered Haley.

Like most people looking at Haley, Hubbel seemed fascinated by her, as if trying to decide if she was real or not. "Ah ha I am amazed Shadow Base still exists in some form, I read of the dark age that the systems went through," spoke Hubbel after regaining his composure.

"Well the old crews starved or froze to death, but the base was still intact like you locked in time. I wrote a paper on you and your fleet and they sent me to Shadow base to try and help thaw it out, unlock what secrets it might hold. It took far too long the computing and security associated with it, were way beyond our then barely post dark age tech.

Many people were living in very primitive ways and trying to rebuild a fleet was impossible without resources and something like industry. We got close to finding something useful out and all resources were diverted to the shipyards at Neuman. It seems we were in a race against time to either get the old ship facility up and running, and rebuild old ships or get the experimental shipyard up and running and build new ships that no one had any knowledge of, and the old facility won the race."

"One can see the logic," offered Ulua. "Just throw sharp sticks if it is all you have around," he offered a hand and a grin to Hubbel, who returned both.

Laughing Hubbel blurted out, "Both of the mythical creatures are here at once, but as we get into our meeting you may be alarmed to see how close we actually are to the prophecy."

A staggering amount of officers took the invite or maybe the chance to see the legendary ghost ship. So many in fact that the large hangar was the only place big enough to hold everyone, so chairs, tables for refreshments, and a podium were placed on a small raised platform just beneath the unusual craft Blink. A row of chairs were reserved for speakers on a raised platform, Crane wasn't invited to speak, Rocky was even invited to attend.

Even with a brief look at Resilience it was clearly way beyond the Regal in every way possible, it was as if every daydream any sailor ever had about wouldn't it be amazing if the Regal could do such and such or so on and so forth. It could do a great many things that no one had dreamt up as well. All of the ships could accomplish tasks that amazed. Before the dark ages the planetary league was on a path of advancement and technological wonder that was shocking to contemplate, so much had been lost when the portals were closed.

For all of the younger crew, the alien guests, and for the sake of clarity, Alder was asked to present the history of the Planetary League and its war with the Draxion Kingdom. Despite being present, Ulua wasn't asked to present histories of the Miladic, Darka, and Draxion people. Instead only a brief, muddled and largely negative presentation of their ancient cultures was presented. Crane feared it did little to prop up the bridge he attempted to build between the various cultures involved in the current lengthy conflict.

Ulua shot Crane a look that suggested he had read his thoughts and felt the same.

More troubling, the shadow fleet was composed of only Earth descendents.

The lengthy tale was therefore summarized by the speakers and outlined. The early origins of the war were defined as the usual, cultures, egos, and ideas clashing.

Sometimes out of fear, often over resources. Both sides saw the other as inferior and aggressive. Factions of the Draxion kingdom were warlike, of a warrior culture this was true, but the same could be said of Earthlings and their thousands of years of warring. Disputes over who should control the access to wormholes ironically led to the crude stations being destroyed. It was always intended that they would be rebuilt and

controlled by the parties that rebuilt them. However, once destroyed in some cases it was impossible to find and re-access them, meaning supplies and support wouldn't reach some systems, people would starve or freeze without fuel or power. So it began, a crumbling of a vast, complex trade, communication and defense system, little by little at the edges. Major battles then erupted, destroying thousands of lives, wasting precious and increasingly finite commodities. Both sides began throwing all of their resources and citizens at the war effort, again meaning some would starve some would freeze, denied life supporting materials. There were occasional treaties and limits to the aggression usually after some major massacre or another. The planetary league began a secret organization, the Shadow Faction and built a few top secret hidden research bases. They found the brightest and the most innovative, they encouraged creative solutions to an enormous array of problems. The result was the Shadow Fleet, not the next generation of warships, three or four generations into the future, not a few modifications that might change the outcome of the war but thousands. Things so advanced that after the dark age no one could understand even a little of them, but the dark age did come.

The fleet was deployed and would have gone directly to the backwater Phedrian system then onto the Draxion stronghold and the enemy would have been easily broken. The Shadow Fleet was so far beyond anything that then was fighting it would have flown circles around a bewildered Draxion kingdom, and the beginnings of the empire. The planetary league did not then realize that it was no longer at war with the Draxion Kingdom but a fledgling group of tyrants and usurpers hoping to form an empire. Most of the Draxion Empire was at that time unconquered and therefore free worlds. The pretenders of the would-be empire saw isolation as a chance to consolidate and destroyed the final wormhole portals, not realizing they would submerge themselves into a dark age along with everyone else. Famine, petty feuds, civil wars, bandits, pirates, and the imperial forces decimated worlds, whole systems. Being cut off from other systems millions more died, with them centuries of accumulated knowledge, labor, and production.

It varied from system to system, some were still in the dark ages but the worlds began to rebuild and recover after about fifty years. Sadly as soon as some of the wormholes

were rebuilt the first thing to occur was an intensification of the old simmering war. Having consolidated its power through brutal siege and slow attrition, the empire sought new worlds, new systems and most of all to end the Planetary League at all costs. In ten years both super powers had recreated massive fleets, fired up industry, mining, between the carnage, intersystem trade.

The Draxion, having fought their own people, were more decimated according to the Draxion defectors and had relied on the new group of players, the Mercenaries. That Adler made no mention of them troubled Crane, *whatever forces the Draxion had could be greatly reinforced with Mercenary units and ships, throwing off any estimate the League had of them. They didn't exist in the time before the Shadow Fleet was lost, were they completely ignorant of them?* The discussion of the final twenty some odd years leading to Titan gate being reopened and ships freeing themselves from the Triabek Vortex, seemed odd, ill informed, half baked. Even calling the Phedrian portal Titan gate wasn't accurate.

Strangely enough just after the mention of the Triabek the one called that, took the podium to explain a few things. She outlined the race to get into the war which led the League forces to repair, and salvage old battle craft, fire up abandoned shipyards and essentially rebuild hundred year old ships. Strangely enough it seemed that the Draxion had done the same. Haley had learned in conversations with Draxion defectors, that the empire had wiped out all the technology, scientists and engineers that might have advanced the art of war, in their brutal bludgeoning of the kingdom. The Draxion commanders estimated that much of the fleet was pieced together or merely found.

“So few people knew of the fleet and the people who designed and built the ships were on the ships. It was a risky venture, it was to be the fleet’s maiden voyage and an attempt to end the war in the same campaign. Crews were running checks and tests as they traveled hoping to troubleshoot any issues before seeing heavy combat in the Trulak system. They would reach the Phedrian system, raid for raw materials, harass the few settlers living there at the time as a kind of practice run and move on ready to fight. Of course the ships were trapped in the Triabek vortex and the wormhole was closed by the fledgling Draxion Empire against the wishes of the Draxion Kingdom. When the fleet disappeared there was no knowledge of how to rebuild the shadow

fleet," explained Haley. "Because of my access to the Shadow Base I have been able to link up with the base system. I was encouraged to continue to try and unlock a portion of the system, and it was placed in a lab on the Regal, with the arrival of crews from the Shadow Fleet I was finally able to fully unlock the system. It turns out it was a simulation system. It had data for each component of the Shadow Fleet and was running mock travel, battles and a thousand scenarios. It never stopped running."

Adler continued, "That was eighty-five years ago."

A murmur of shock traveled through the hangar.

Haley raised a hand and finished, "We have added the billions of simulations to the Shadow Fleet's computers. Support on Resilience said it was like getting a whole new fleet, there were so many fixes and upgrades possible. As well we have integrated it into the Regal fleet systems. Adding a vast library of knowledge that could only be gathered with the most advanced computers that the human race had yet created and over an eighty-five year period. When Shadow Fleet and base were conceived of and built the Planetary League was on the verge of the biggest technological leap in human history."

Adler added, "It will take all of our crews sometime to make sense of all of it, eighty-five years of little changes adds up to a lot. The Triabek has been most helpful," he offered with a sly grin. Some grinned, some frowned, some laughed at the mention of the mythical creature. A roar of conversation erupted as everyone pondered the implications for an already very advanced fleet.

Then captain Adler of the Shadow Fleet, perhaps sensing he couldn't hope to rein in the crowd, stood and announced that there would be a break for food and drink and they would reconvene to talk about the fleet in specific.

Crane turned to Ulua while eating a little something, "Is she, do you think? Has this gone too far?" looking a little angry.

Ulua answered, "It remains to be seen, there are signs, several parts to the prophecy and the legend of the creature besides. "She will pass through the land of shadows," it says. She is associated with shadow through the shadow base and fleet. She is indeed white as snow and with hair like fire. Obviously she is strong, intelligent, and of a good heart, all Triabek qualities. I have seen her interaction and she behaves as if every child

is her child, all people her old friend, she possesses an incredible tendency towards kindness despite being a fierce warrior. The Triabek is said to be a stubborn protector, a mighty defender. In artwork and story books she is always depicted as flying somehow. It seems a stretch to say that because she is on a starship that she can fly so that part of the story doesn't yet fit with our dear Haley.

“She will know the Miladic ways as her own,” she wasn’t born with that knowledge she gathered it, but she does know our ways as if she were born to them.

In contrast, I adore Blake, he is a wonderful lad, but he is stiff and formal and behaves as a tourist in our culture, a bystander looking in, fascinated, studied, but not soaked in the culture or stinking of its cooking fires. I have conversed with her for weeks now and many hours, sometimes every hour of the day, going ship to ship as your diplomats. I have only given her a different perspective on things she already knew in her studies and contact. Which shows a serious depth of knowledge and one must ask. What led her to the studies? What drove her interest? How much of a prophecy is wanting something to happen and making it happen, how much is fate? Finally, how many times is something attributed after the fact? *“We won the battle as it was foretold,”* he laughed. It is said, *“She will bring an end to this war, find the true heir of Draxion, unite the kingdoms and worlds under one banner,”* that is a lot for one young lady no matter how bright to accomplish.” Crane had to agree and glancing over at her surrounded by gobsmacked admirals, he suddenly felt protective of her. *Some fanatic might think it their duty to eliminate the Triabek, whether she is or isn’t that thing.*

“The prophecy says she will be tested, and that she will arrive to aid the defeated,” between bites of some sea creature smeared on bread. “What defeat? Where? Whose defeat? It is the part that worries me most. There is a fable of blind people wandering near a volcano, and townspeople tell them, “don’t go so close to the volcano,” and they would not listen. Then soldiers arrive and try to stop them but they would not listen, nearer they wandered. Finally wisemen arrive and they still would not they would not heed the warnings. When they are finally trapped surrounded by lava the angel Triabek lifts them to safety and their sight is restored. When we find some that are obviously blind then will we know who is to be defeated and in need of rescue.”

Chapter 14 Taunting an Angry Beast

After the disastrous defeat on Hakat the Draxion needed time to rebuild their tanks and forces. They lacked the means to fully and once again needed the aid of the Mercenaries.

General Draxius XIV grit his teeth in anger thinking of it, *we are building a new empire that we or someone else will have to fight, we give too much to the Mercenaries and rely on them too often, he mused ruefully.*

The emperor wanted action, he couldn't wait for ore to be found and refined and ships and tanks to be made he needed vengeance immediately. A sinking feeling weighed on Draxius, *we lack the materials yet no one wants to suggest it. Trying to fight in Abur, Nextos, Neuman, Darka and still hold Trulak against these primitives seemed ludicrous, we are stretched too far and wide.*

Haka Trulak returned to their fishing villages, their coastal towns and some to the mud and stone hamlets near the desert, but they were cautious. No one assumed that they had finally beaten back the empire, they knew reprisals were due, overdue. Trula, regrouped his people, he convinced some other warriors to ally with the Haka, having seen that Trula was clever, some flocked to him. He wondered, How long could he remain clever?

The main village of the Haka Trulak was deep in a ghastly swamp. A thousand different things could kill the fool that wandered into the zone, venom, sharp teeth, and deadly claws were on everything that lived there. The Haka ingested teas and mixtures that aided in building resistance to illness and a hundred different poisons. A constant roar of jungle sounds was ever heard, a heavy pungent air always hung over the village. That the same people could follow an ancient seasonal path ending in the desert and live there too was remarkable, at each step a hundred little adaptations learned and passed on through trial and error were employed. Their songs, dances and stories held the information needed to survive on the world, but fewer were learning their ways.

Trula worried for his people, we need to cast off this empire if we are to have a future, he had argued to the deaf ears of the elders.

A watery barrier of deep animal infested bodies, a thick fog filled swamp hid the Haka well. Barely visible were a series of buildings suspended on stilts and occasionally built into large trees. Hanging walkways let people walk from village to village high above the many things that might eat them. Trula wasn't so foolish as to think that despite all of that they were safe, he feared he had merely taunted an angry beast. It would soon snap at him, he needed to be ready.

Bixa imagined he was a warrior carved from the same stone as Baxius. He thought as an ace pilot that he could master any kind of warfare. Brutal with guns, crafty with swords and invincible in the air his snow white fighter even had a name Sky Terror. His name translated to white dragon and he always wore white to make sure no one missed the connection.

It had taken some convincing and later some doing but the Draxion engineers unveiled a series of attack subs including his own fighter. Sleek compacted and for underwater fighting fast and agile. Of course it too had to be white, despite everyone crying it will be too visible, "Of course and it should strike terror in hearts when it is seen!" he countered.

Generations of Trulak being hunted had instilled in them a keen sense of paranoia, an natural ability to take up a defensive posture and above all what seemed supernatural ability to survive. Driven nearly to extinction for centuries, the seemed to all but vanish into thin air, go deep into hiding and then somehow strike back when it was least probable. Trula had study his elders movements, stories tactics, while Earth children played ball. He had begun to fight at a very early age and found he was good at but also a fair but firm leader. He set up a sort of HQ in a high tree beyond the swamp and lake villages, it proved the perfect vantage point from which he could unravel the imperial invaders. He leaned over a map with a few of his warriors and generals, and spotted a messenger braving a rickety rope bridge.

The Messenger seemed nervous and out of breath from climbing, running at it appeared even swimming. He dripped on the thatch floor and bowed in salute to all present.

"Yes?" asked a general. There had been assassins there would no doubt be more Trula tried to hide that he was in charge when possible, his warriors shielded him as the figure scanned the scene. He seemed unsure who to speak to so he addressed the general.

"Sir we have movement at the edge of the lake, several vessels have landed in the savanna," came the first report.

"Okay proceed as we have planned, get everyone moving," Trula ordered calmly. Looks were exchanged, the map folded up and the group dispersed. Only Trula and two others remained.

Some of the Draxion subs were huge and immediately became stuck on sandbars, tangles of roots and occasional boulders loaded in the river and lake bottoms. One struck a stone so hard it had to be abandoned as it sunk in the blink of an eye. Few of the sailors escaped with their lives. Some did only to be dragged into some hollowed out lair deep in the black lake, their last moments filled with unspeakable pain and horror. The lucky ones drowned before being eaten.

The stones and tree trunks were not random, they were in fact planted and unseen warriors wielded ropes and lines to move them into the submersibles and boats.

Brought down on vessels strategically with skill and cunning.

A thousand troops in hundreds of flat boats surrounded the cluster of villages, slowly they moved in to attack. They grew nervous when they spotted subs snared here and there, some on their sides lifeless. Sub crews waved from uncertain shores for help, others died from venom and still more floated about half eaten. Then the misty air was full of poison darts and arrows. Hundreds fell overboard and were snared by veracious creatures, as if a feast had been announced. Soon the flat boats drifted empty or sunk to the murky depths.

Bixa cruised at a steady pace in his gleaming white target. He was unaware that the large ships were hindered or that a hundred traps had pinned down the other small attack subs, he was soon alone. Visibility was horrid, scanners and sensors seemed spotty at best useless at worst. His pristine white dragon was besmeared with mud, silt

and more and more, blood. When he noticed the last detail a little flame of panic started to flicker in him.

None of the boats filled with troops made it to the village and the other ships dared not enter without support.

General Draxius fumed, his fist clenched listening to the confused communication, panicked voices and then silence. Pounding his desk in frustration he looked at his map in disbelief, nothing was going to plan. He spun his hand in the air in a circle, a few hundred dropships lifted into the air. Troops were to land by water and then by air, the waterways were to be guarded and controlled to make way for larger craft. A series of fireballs let Draxius know the larger craft were under attack, some were exploding. The massive eruptions sent the drop ships colliding into each other or crashing into the water, other ships and the last of the boats of troops still trying to land.

Bixa fled, abandoning his silly white ship narrowly escaping the mouth of a large beast. He reached the shore and ran to the nearest shuttle to get off that cursed world, soaked, frazzled and panting.

A wave of poison darts and arrows passed around and over the general he cowered beneath his desk. One arrow struck near his head and he noticed something was tied to it. As screams of agony and shock rang out he pulled a tiny note from the poison arrow. He read it, his hands beginning to tremble with anger, "How long do you think you can keep your head Draxius?" Signed your friend Trula.

Chapter 15 Trouble on Draul

Nahdur woke in a hospital bed, a gentle breeze wafted over him from an open window. His sister Adur sat beside him, his friend Falat dosed on the floor of the room.

They have kept vigil must have been pretty bad, Nahdur surmised, still uncertain of where he was. Adur smiled a weary tearful smile, not the normal look of sun breaking through clouds, more of hopeless optimism. She was still strangely radiant though her face was a bit bruised and an arm was banaged. Falat looked worse, an eye swollen shut and cuts all over his hands. A hint of smoke drifted towards his nose. Turning his head he saw his shattered body armor, his burnt tunic and bloody sword resting in a

corner like some derelict creature that once was a man. He began to grow annoyed that he couldn't remember how he got in the bed, or why, what planet or town they were on, he rustled in his bed. That proved a bad idea, he felt pain jolt him, course through his whole body like an unwholesome current. His head began to spin, Adur held him down, her graceful hands stronger than they looked. Falat had risen too, a look of concern mixed with pain scattered across his battered face. He too held Nahdur down, "Rest brother, rest," he whispered soothingly. Adur wept and then cradled Nahdur's aching face. He passed out with the strange sensation of being held by the two most important people in his life. The two he admired and loved more than all others, he felt waves of peace and calm washing over him as drifted off into an exhausted sleep.

There were missions that could be pulled off with little risk or harm, then there were others. Some could be entrusted to the knights of the Abur order. Then there were actions that held so much danger or were of such complexity that to hand them to some subject was a death sentence. It wasn't a matter of arrogance to note that the three rings possessed traits, skills and abilities that few could comprehend.

The mountain bridge of Hesch, was impossibly high, heavily fortified on both ends and treacherous in the middle. It was also the only way to move supplies, troops and information across the Twin range, so many kingdoms in the past had fought for control of the bridge. Control the bridge and one could control any engagement in the region. Legend said the two peaks had been two rival giants that for their wickedness were frozen in place turned to stone, the stone towers looked vaguely like two crumpled old men. Hollowed out into bleak fortresses they were each filled with devices and constructions of unmatched cunning and deception. All paths leading to the bridge were sketchy all sides guarded by hundreds of tiny murder holes.

The span itself was at times barely visible cut from a massive vug of crystal. Clear, smooth and incredibly strong it was nearly a bridge of diamond. The kingdom of Hesch was the last holdout of the planet Draul. Loyal followers of the Draxion death cult, they were known for their cruelty and strength. Children kept their blankets tight, their parents whispering, "Be good or the Hesch will come for you in the night." Sadly they often did, no one was safe from their bloodlust. Backwards, impoverished, oppressed,

and hopeless the subjects of the Hesch merely waited their turn to be led to the slaughter. The nobles would arrive and violate their subjects publicly but that was mercy compared to their chambers of suffering.

The king of Abur couldn't let the stain of those wicked kingdoms remain on his new star chart. Hesch was an isolated kingdom on a massive barren world, but as a symbol of tyranny it was monumental, legendary.

Hesch had existed in its sadistic state for centuries, a firm iron grip on their domains. Massive walls cut across the rocky valleys like a grim serpent suffocating its prey. Forts, towers, and an occasional citadel dotted the mountainous region, evidence of a paranoid and militaristic mindset. A series of fish farms and crops sustained the people, though most of their efforts went to the nobles who grew fat while the farmers collapsed from hunger. Raids into the far kingdoms and villages on the other side of the world began with the aid of space travel, and soon mining and farming colonies on other worlds fell to Hesch privateering. The larger Abur union protested at the general assembly. A fiery Darka ambassador stood and said, "This festering wound will soon take the whole arm!"

Deep within the rocky land tunnels and passages had been carved out for centuries. No one knew how many nobles there truly were. The drab surface of the world was reserved for the subjects or serfs, while pleasure palaces were hidden in the living stone. How to conquer people so well hidden and of unknown numbers was complicated. To make matters worse the world was dangerously close to a perplexing and vexing nebula that fried shields and other ship systems. The Hesch knew the secrets of the nebula and would wait undetected in ambush if threatened. The far edge of the Abur asteroid field also seemed to guard the errant world.

Nahdur slammed his hand on the star chart in anger and spat, "Even if you get to the world which is not really certain, the kingdom itself has a strange magnetic field. It is the result of some natural reaction from the stone of the twins. Once within the atmosphere of the world, targeting, shields and communication are all hindered and or useless. Further they have developed a series of relays, dishes that amplify the natural occurrence allowing them to direct it towards an invading force." The war room was silent except for an old style radio that crackled somewhere. A few generals shuffled

their feet but no one had anything at all to say. Perhaps it was the fear that if something was suggested that person would be essentially volunteering to go to that awful place and act out their suggestion.

Falat finally stood and gripped the opposite side of the table in the dim light of the top secret room. Adur fidgeted nervously, nearly calling out to Falat to sit down, *let someone else take this on*. Her heart began to race, she knew it was a challenge and that Falat loved a challenge almost as much as her. *Not this one my love please not this one*, she thought, in a silent panic. Children across the Abur system grew up with stories from that place that curdled the blood. There was only one place that Milladic and Darka children feared more, the imperial citadel, the Hill of Weeping. Sitting around a campfire trying to terrify each other they would recount or even imagine being dragged deep into the recesses of the Hesch fortress to be picked apart and eaten by mad devotees. Every version of each tale grew and darker until full of unspeakable horror and anguish. In time the word Hesch itself became a curse, whispered in fear or anger.

Nahdur had been there, he seemed changed after returning older, harder. What he hinted at was bad enough though he spoke little of his trip there. A noble had launched a plan to blockade the path from the Abur wormhole with the intent of taking Prutah and the other neighboring worlds, eventually controlling the nearby wormhole as well. Nahdur snuck in, made it to the noble and murdered him in his bath.

The plan was merely on hold it seemed, with Shatook taken they felt secure that Abur system was under control. With some fledgling raiders growing to be a regional force the evil weeds needed uprooting. Controlling the wormhole would prevent fleet or Darka aid from elsewhere and hem in the Abur Union.

Everything had to happen fast and the royal forces were strained and stretched to capacity. It was rumored a Planetary fleet might be in route to aid Abur and would pass through that exact region and directly into their blockade.

“We haven’t the forces to crush whatever kind of blockade they are planning but we can perhaps rid the planet of their overlords,” suggested Falat.

Nervous looks were exchanged Falat failed to note them and continued, "Half the world is free despises the Hesch for what they do and stand for. What if we aided that half and convinced them to fight with us to end the tyranny of the other half?"

"The magnetic anomaly is only focused on the Twin peaks, it isn't planet wide," suggested Nahdur picking up Falat's thread. "We could land in a safe zone on the far side of the world, rally some forces, assess what support we might have, tell them of the victory at Shatook." Less nervous looks appeared even a few hopeful ones.

Adur cleared her throat and spoke, "Yes but the snake will still be able to strike unless you can lop off its head. Someone somehow will have to get to the nobles hidden in that rock. We don't know how many, or how well defended they are. With thousands of skilled assassins we might not be able to pull something like that off."

A lean figure in a planetary league uniform stood and walked into the pool of light cast by a single hanging lantern. "My league ships are at your disposal."

Another figure also stood, the unmistakable sleek blue uniform of an elite commando came into view. "And my Gorgon."

Chapter 16 The Shadow Fleet

Reassembled and fresh, with the tiniest view of Resilience, Shadow and Blink to fire their imagination Adler took the podium. "One thousand and five large ships, including workhorses, medical and armored transport ships. Five hundred super fighters, half with bomb payloads the other half with advanced guided missiles. Three hundred giant bombers, faster more heavily armored than anything yet invented, with heavy smart bombs that pierce and track targets. Of the larger ships Resilience and Endurance are both of a new class, citadel class. Both larger than anything ever built, with more fire power, a full carrier deck, able to house bombers and fighters, a massive manufacturing and food processing system. One fortress class battleship Persistence, greatly modernized version of that class of ships. One hundred support ships. Fifty workhorse craft, refined, and capable of both rapid production, manufacturing, and repair, and defense. Twenty-five medical units, able to perform extremely complicated medical procedures and with heavier armor and gun crews to free up their required escorts and allow them to be more self-sustaining. Twenty heavily armored Gorgon commando

transport ships and five light armored. As well as Gorgon in greatly modernized armor and with far advanced guns. Two hundred battleships, larger, faster with consolidated power systems to allow for stronger cannons, shields and propulsion. Capable of greater maneuverability but with more fire power, quicker recharge of lasers and shields, and a design with lighter but tougher material. Two hundred destroyers, also with greater strength, fire power, shielding and maneuverability. One hundred cruisers with much greater strength than the Regal fleet's current destroyers, and with exceptional speed and agility. One hundred fortress class carriers, unlike current carriers, they have the firepower of a destroyer, limited manufacturing and repair capability and house three times the aircraft including jumbo bombers and large fighter craft. One hundred subs all with massive ground bombardment missiles and ordnance and limited sensor evasion, rendering them nearly invisible. One hundred heavy missile frigates, able to outrun anything the Draxion have and launch some of the most clever and powerful missiles ever devised. One hundred light energy beam frigates, fast light heavily shielded and with an ultra-powerful energy beam a pulse that could rip a hole in a battleship. Two new experimental spy and reconnaissance crafts Shadow and Blink, both capable of invisibility. Blink super fast invisible craft, capable of attacking or breaking through blockades or to gather information and return to the fleet undetected. Shadow is an ultra-surveillance and communications link. It is completely invisible and can send coded messages over vast distances that are impossible to be intercepted. And that my fine allies sums up the fleet," finished Adler. There was a thick silence, no one seemed to breathe only the hum of power generation, and life support on the enormous ship.

"Hubbel will address the current state of the League," Adler said sitting. Hubbel strode to the stage head held high, soaking up the attention. He seemed to relish being the closing act, the final word. He could read the stunned and impressed expressions but returned them with a look that seemed to take credit for creating the fleet with his own hands, which of course he hadn't. Crane's stomach lurched suddenly, he had seen that kind of arrogance get a lot of young people killed, *super fleet or not pride blinded, overconfidence, led to disasters*. Ulua again looked to Crane as if reading his thoughts.

Hubbel began, "It is clear with our new allies in Abur, and here with us now," he motioned to the alien delegation in the front row with Crane. "We have entered a new turning point in a hundred year festering conflict. In my time the war exploded into a wider struggle, but now you have children on the front lines, in factories and mines, on both sides. Clearly things have grown more desperate. The imperial servants grow fat while the oppressed starve, it must end. En route to the imperial planets I vow to liberate the prison miners at Tousa." Suddenly he sounded like a politician seeking election, pandering to the alien delegates, but also making the statement that the Draxion were cruel and should be stopped on moral grounds. *Definitely in the style of the propaganda of seventy years ago, that got us in all this trouble all those years ago.* He blustered on, "That we sit aboard a ship nearly eighty-five years old that is far beyond the dizziest daydream of an engineer today, says to me we had crawled back to the caves again, only now are we starting to leave them. Patching ancient garbage back together to call it a ship and throw it at another ship to make it trash again, this can't go on, we need to break the cycle, we can break the cycle. Ten years ago twenty-two fleets fought thirty-five fleets, now just seven fleets fight twenty, when not running away."

Ah ha so there it is, Crane thought, they think me a coward for saving the fleet from overwhelming odds. That is why I was never asked to speak and am only mentioned with a jibe in passing. Haley flushed with anger and motioned to stand, Crane gave a slight calming wave of his hand, subtle but enough to say, *don't it is okay.*

A fierce debate boiled up over how best to use the new fleet, the current fleet or both. Whether to send it directly to the emperor, aid the Abur Union, send them back to Planetary League systems to defend the lost fleets there, or some combination of all of the above. Members of the Shadow Fleet continued to imply that Crane lacked bravery, was unfit to lead, and at worst was a traitor. They seemed bothered by how many aliens and women Crane's fleet employed, which stung both present at the meeting. Members of the Regal fleet defended Crane, as did the alien contingency. Anyone that didn't trust the aliens, or had an old gripe with Crane or his crew, ranging from not being promoted, some past disciplinary action, to thinking there were too many women in the officer pool, sided with the Shadow Fleet. Haley shook her head not believing what she was hearing, *The turncoats tilted the scales in favor of the Shadow Fleet and lobbied hard for greater*

roles in the coming fight. The major decisions will be made by Hubbel and Adler, Crane would be relegated to something deemed unimportant, thought Haley summing up the tenor of the discourse.

Of course captain Derrick Crane's old rival would side with Hubbel and Alder bucking for a promotion acting the long lost friend. Vasca tensed like she might actually get violent and Crane had to hold her back. Then it was Foss and then Traynor, he appreciated the loyalty but really didn't want to make his case worse with an altercation.

Derrick droned on and on about all his skills and qualities, and how lucky everyone was to be in the presence of both him and the Shadow Fleet. He built up Hubbel and Alder suggesting that nothing in the known universe could stop the Shadow Fleet with "the right brave men to aid it." He threw in yet another jibe about how Crane was a coward and he was not suggesting that of course he was one of those brave men.

A bold plan was proposed, with the new fleet at its center. The fleet would split, with Shadow Fleet exiting the Vortex and heading on to the Phedrian systems, seventy-five years late but as originally planned. Workhorses using modifications and new technology from the Shadow Fleet, would be rebuilt first. The increased output would help in combat scenarios, but en route to the fight would produce incredible major upgrades to the Regal Fleet, creating a sort of hybrid fleet. Once completed they and the Shadow Fleet workhorses would build entirely new ships based on the new designs, starting with destroyers, then cruisers, and finally frigates and fighters. They bragged that the new workhorses could handle this and that the modified Regal workhorses almost could. It would be required that the Draxion, and Miladic take up crew positions on the new ships, as well as some of the commandos that normally did other things would be asked to man a ship. Crews would be further augmented with numerous androids that Shadow Fleet had in reserve and could activate out of storage and create along the way.

Arriving at the shipyards and mines of Phedria after the three month long journey, they would easily commandeer them and begin building yet another Shadow Fleet. That fleet would remain in Phedria and patrol it, hold it, keep the Draxion from rebuilding their fleet or gaining new raw materials. The prisoners at Tousu would be liberated, nursed back to health if needed and round out the crews.

The designers and builders of the fleet were scattered amongst the various prototypes. Some would help with the production of the new ships and eventually take up crew positions. All of the Regal crews would undergo massive retraining to learn the new technologies, equipment, and how to use it. Some would be required to man entirely new ships, that were not yet built.

Regal fleet would continue on to Abur aid the Union there, help restore and add to the remnants of the Planetary League Fleet, the defector Draxion Fleet and secure the system as needed. It was spoken of as if it were an easy, thankless task, a cleanup project. It was implied that it was the only thing Regal Fleet could handle, or be trusted with. Tempers rose and looks were exchanged, but no one said anything, they quietly simmered. From Abur the fleet would split, some returning to the high command of the Planetary League to replace the ships lost there, some would remain to patrol Abur, and the rest would head on to Phedria, merely to relieve the ships there. The ships present would then be free to patrol elsewhere, the war being over and the emperor no more. Once Shadow Fleet had restocked its stores of raw materials, crushed the forces of that system they would move on to the Trulak portal and enter the wormhole. One month later they would arrive to crush the first of the Draxion worlds, knocking out all in a series and finally taking the Imperial planet and the emperor himself.

Cheers and applause went up, the sound of the ecstatic group was a roar. Crane noted that half of the voices were raised in debate, his people, Regal fleet's seasoned crews. Derrick became a spokesperson somehow sounding like some sort of zealot, fanatic. "We can break the Draxion, we can take the fight to them!" he shouted at one point, Hubbel and Alder nodded approvingly, they had found their man. Like many tyrants of the past they were already surrounding themselves with people that curried favor or said exactly what they wanted to hear.

Vasca whispered to Haley, "Thank you captain California," a nickname they had for him that came from his long wavy blonde hair and ever suntanned look. They had often joked that instead of spending time in a simulator learning to do his job better he was in some sort of tanning machine. To Regal's crew that pretty well summed Derrick up all show and no substance.

The din broke and it was possible for Crane to speak. When he suggested that the plan was highly optimistic but perhaps not realistic, it was again suggested he was faint of heart and lacked courage. When the Draxion officers said that Hubbel's intelligence on Phedria was outdated and incorrect, it was implied that they were spies and not trustworthy. Simms mentioned a possible Mercenary presence, they laughed and answered him as if he were speaking like a child and moved on to other themes. Fulton stated, "Your numbers don't add up, you won't have nearly enough crew to do what you purpose." He noted that running a fleet on so few crew members would exhaust them and be hazardous, they retorted that the androids, the building crews and engineers from Shadow Base, liberated prisoners (prisoners that they did not have or no of how many existed, or their state of health, ability or willingness to fight) would fill in the gaps. Noting that engineers, designers and prisoners might not have the knowledge and certainly weren't experienced enough to run battleships it was suggested that Fulton was essentially a worthless old man. Crane and his crew fought hard to hold their tongues as their blood boiled. Fulton merely grinned and took the abuse.

Leaning in towards the Regal crew and Ulua, Fulton whispered, "Problem is I am old enough to remember the war that these people knew. It is a different fight than seventy-five years ago, they do not see that. It is no use, they have made up their minds that they are invincible. Nothing we say can sway them, they must go there and learn for themselves."

Ukto stood (the only one still sitting as the bickering raged and all had taken to their feet in anger) and raised his hands in the air to quiet the roar of arguments, insults and impassioned debates. "Please I beg of you as someone who has been to Phedrian in the last twenty years, take more if not all of Regal fleet do not go there expecting an easy fight," he was silenced immediately.

"Of course he doesn't want us to end the war!" Derrick yelled, "He wants us to abandon Abur so they will be defeated!" screamed someone else. "Who let him come to this meeting in the first place!" another declared. Haley threw an arm around him and gave him an embarrassed and apologetic look.

Fulton took one of the old admiral's hands and in a calming tone offered, "We have tried, but *the young must learn what makes men old, what keeps them awake at night, replaying their mistakes, the folly of youth.*"

"*All passion and no patience, all bravado without balance, it is why in times of war fathers bitterly bury sons,*" Utko finished, a teary gleam in his eye. Crane had chills, two old men of war quoting Baxius from his poem *the Song of War*. Haley did cry and wiped her tears with defiance and resolve while still supporting Utko. Blake and Simms looked as if the wind were knocked out of them.

Ulua saw it and pulled in close and offered discreetly, "*Sweet angel of peace though you now weep, your time will come, but mistakes must be made, failures endured and pride crushed first,* it is all in the prophecy." She looked stun for a moment realizing that he was correct, he had quoted from the scripture word for word. Then Ulua turned to Crane, gripping his shoulder in a reassuring way, "We have found our blind my friend, we must be ready to rescue them."

The Weight of Knowledge

The mountaintop monastery was impossible to reach most of the year. When it was possible to cross the river, scale the cliffs, negotiate the rocks, avoid the wild beasts, climb the endless steps and rickety rope ladders, a monk's focus was greatly challenged. Once in the cell there was little for the novice or the master. An iron bowl, a mat to sleep on and a few drafty walls against the brutal elements. Most monks lived in a village or monastery, had interactions, supported the sick or dying, provided some sort of skill or craft. Perfecting such a skill or craft was often the path to their focus.

The way to the mountaintop cells was so deadly and uncertain that only the most devout and dedicated attempted such an existence. Sometimes the monks were in fact the most troubled, had the most to overcome from their pasts. It was joked it was good that the Milladic live in peace or those monks might have to actually learn to do something.

A few in the mountaintop shrines chased the most extreme, the most, esoteric of study, the pursuit of the nature of the focus. Arriving they sat in silent solitary contemplation, a bag of grains was raised up on a system of pulleys too flimsy for a person. Bundles of

plants and some that were grown might augment the monk's diet. Rainwater and snowmelt broiled to make tea provided the only other amenity to be had. One monk clearly nearly mad wrote of the wine of the focus. His lengthy poem about the rainwater that sustained him was discovered when the grains were not lifted up to his cell one year. Another young monk braved the path to his abode to find he had starved to death or being a dry year had died of thirst.

When the young monk returned to the ground and his monastery, he informed his superior over a bowl of hot broth that the mountaintop monk had passed.

After a few nods and spoonfuls the superior monk merely stated, "I suppose the focus was not his focus."

(Miladic parable, From the Dangers of Knowledge, various authors, 1st age)

Chapter 17 Within Sleeping Giants

The lost Planetary Fleet battled fiercely against the Hesch pirates. They had been too isolated and their equipment too eccentric to be called Draxion proper. At their foundation their bloody cult made them feel a connection to the old lunatic monk Draxious but they were clearly on all other levels a rogue state. Privateering in the name and for the benefit of the Draxion empire but without approval from that empire made them mere pirates. Their bizarre heretical practice and interpretation of the Draxion cult would have shocked the priests of the cult. *That a group could actually take very bad and make it even worse*, terrified Admiral Shen of the battleship Challenger.

A lean but fit man of Chinese descent, his short buzz cut of silver hair seemed to gleam in the flashing explosions and blinking lights visible from the throne. The fortress class flagships and all of the battleships had been destroyed in the series of fights that landed him in Abur. Fleeing utter destruction they took a chance and moved further into Abur system, completely unknown to the fleet. What was left of Union and Noble fleets happened upon a ragged fleet of the Union of Abur. Together they fought off the remaining Draxion ships, a major victory for the Union, a sound defeat for the fleet. They struggled to communicate at first but eventually found enough people between them that could either speak Milladic, Darka or the Fleet language to learn from each other, appreciate what each party had to offer. It was unsettling to work with purple

people as that color was associated with the enemy. Crane's fleet had many Darka, fear and prejudice had kept them out of the other fleets, something Shen regretted.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am proud to serve with you. Let it be known that at the heart of this kingdom is a cruel fantical bloodlust. In this far flung place the Draxion disease has grown darker and more severe. We have to believe that if we do not end this cancer more systems and races will fall to it. We fight to end but also to preserve humanity, reason, kindness and love. Let's make our Abur allies proud." It was days ago that Shen made his proclamations to his ragtag fleet on the eve of battle it seemed a lifetime ago. The losses had been great, just five hundred ships remained and few fighters and bombers still existed that could fight. Without the necessary raw materials, workhorse units were offline, unable to make replacement parts, create fuel or ammunition. Soon ships would go dark, be forced to retreat, unable to power basic systems and certainly too weak to fight. Two fleets of a thousand ships each reduced to seven hundred, then five hundred, they were losing the war for Abur. The Milladic would see no point in joining the planetary league, *if the war ever ended. Would their bravery, sacrifice and death be enough to instill some lasting impression on the Abur Union?*

Ambushed on the edge of the Draul Nebula the fighting was immediately of a savage and aggressive nature that no one in the fleet had witnessed or experienced. Cruisers and destroyers had adapted quickly to the brutal new tactics and had begun to hold their ground.

Crippled ships self detonated, others collided intentionally and then detonated, *these are some devoted adherents to the death cult*, Shen thought. *Who would fight a war not caring to one day live in peace? Whatever we can achieve here increases the chances for the Abur rebels that came to our aid and the surviving fleets should they arrive. We need to keep them tied up here and away from their home world for as long as we can.*

On Draul Nahdur had made contact with a rumored guerilla fighter and a sympathetic group on the border of the Hesch kingdom. Generations of their children stolen, their wives lost and tales of cruelty, too many to recall, any hope of ending the Hesch rule was eagerly seized upon. Meeting in an ancient ruin of a fort, remnants of an arch and

stone walls towered above them. A spooky wind drifted over the scene causing torches and fires to flicker, cast ominous shadows in what was once a grand hall.

The guerilla fighter Toshu stood to speak, his Darka blue skin seemed to glow in the firelight. "We are gathered in a hall of a once grand kingdom, a kingdom that can be born again. The time is upon us to end this pitiful tale and begin a new one." There were no cheers, mere nods in agreement and heavy looks of anger and concentration.

Toshu was tiny compared to Nahdur but built of a solid scrapper frame. Falat moved in the shadows, never trusting anyone at first. Adur also kept her distance sizing up the gathered crowd with the hood of her robe hiding her face.

A small group huddled around a quickly drawn map of the twins. What looked to be a deranged rabbit warren or centuries of drunken mining appeared on the found paper. A loose plan was discussed and Nahdur felt he should say something, "We have struggled to leave our dark ages and enter a new time of space travel and scientific wonder. But right now we just need to put pointy things in bellies." A few people chuckled, it was by design, Nahdur wanted to encourage, not terrify, it was in part why his fellow soldiers would follow him anywhere.

His face grew stern, *there was no way to sweeten it*, he thought. He continued, "I have been inside those sleeping giants and to say they are mad is to only scratch the surface of their nature. Madness for centuries has produced a labyrinth of such complexity and paranoia that you will all spend the rest of your days either trying to figure out what you saw or hoping to forget. We have our plan but concentration will fade once entering those tunnels and halls, keep together, block out their power, resist it as best you can." Toshu nodded his oddly round head in a nervous acquiescence. Falat and Adur listened and paced uneasily, *power they thought, he speaks as if there is some magic in those passages, a curse, or perhaps they have a will of their own.*

Assassin black winged gliders took Falat and Adur to the top of the giant towers, they landed soundlessly letting go of the metal bar they had moments before hung onto for dear life. Adur looked strangely jubilant, she loved the feeling of flying. Falat in contrast looked like he might soon be sick. They crouched between stones nervous as a strong wind whipped up giving them the sensation they might be blown from the peak. A

primordial fear of falling passed through the ever brave Adur and the occasionally brave Falat. They shivered and waited for their courage to rebound, gripping the stone giants until their hands cramped. The wind finally dying and their bearings returning, they glanced at each and as one moved towards the secret entrance Toshu had told them of. Sure enough there was a tiny ring on nondescript rock, as they fiddled with it they soon detected a locking mechanism. Spinning it slowly a click was heard a faint outline became visible as they pulled the ring towards them then finally a tiny opening could be seen. Barely big enough for an adult to crawl into, Falat lowered himself into the dark gap. Adur felt the horrible sensation of watching a loved one sink into certain danger, emotion and fear welled up in her.

Breathing deeply and concentrating to steady her fear she followed her lover into the abyss of her childhood nightmares.

The Gorgon crept through the rocky waste outside the walls of the kingdom. Their armor went into chameleon mode and blended into the rocks and gravel around, they seemed to nearly vanish from view. Weapons at the ready battle helmets secure, they appeared mere shadows in the windy night. If guards were waiting and watching they would think them tricks of the eye, branches or bushes rustling in the light of the nebula. They reached the wall without incident, began to place explosives upon it then hunkered down for cover. A massive series of explosions shattered the gloom, the gigantic storied wall crumbled here and there, centuries of tiny cracks and fissures giving way instead of creating holes in the defenses, the walls collapsed entirely in portions. Gorgon poured through the breaches, recruited militia followed. Setting up massive guns on the portions of wall that remained, the Gorgon provided cover to the civilian fighters as they ran towards the peaks and deeper into the kingdom. Hesch fighter craft soon appeared on the horizon, *the point of the mission, draw them away from the twins and assess their strength*, the Gorgon commander reminded himself. The heavy gorgon guns took down several fighters easily and others were struck and destroyed from the ground. Drop ships should have landed soldiers and guards but they too were wiped out. Planetary league transports landed near the once grand walls unloading reinforcements.

Nahdur and Toshu entered the twins from a smugglers passage at their base.

Contraband of all kinds had passed through the narrow tunnels for centuries, Toshu had been a smuggler but could no longer tolerate what he saw inside the twins and became a saboteur instead.

Exiting the smugglers' way, they were in the underground towns of the twins.

Immediately they were under attack from guards, soldiers and angry nobles. Luckily the years of leisure outweighed the skill and training of most of the nobles and they were easily vanquished. The guards and soldiers fought with a resignation to their fate as if it were easier to simply take a blade then go on living for their monster masters. The two reached a major throughway elaborate figures of grisly detail and appearance lined the passages growing more complex the further they went. All of it from floor to stone ceiling was covered in bloody hand prints and splatters. Occasionally a head, an arm, even a full body were witnessed, attached to a wall hanging in a rusted cage or scattered about on the ground like so much waste. The smell of excrement and rot hung thick in the dense unwholesome air. The deeper they went heavier the sense of being surrounded by rock and trapped in a maze was. They felt the pressure of the mountain pushing on them somehow, they felt short of breath, anxious.

Turning a corner a massive detachment of seasoned elite troops appeared before them in rows that seemed to go on and on for a great distance. Nahdur and Toshu braced for an impossible fight. Suddenly the ground shook and a concussion rocked them, it all but pushed the air from their lungs. Gasping for air they opened their eyes to see some of the elite troops buried alive, others on the ground, all covered in dust and debris. In the confusion Nahdur and Toshu cut through the troops and raced on.

Reaching an alcove they drank from a cantine and gathered their breath peering out from the recess in the stone they observed what appeared to be hundreds of troops racing away from them armed and frantic. The Gorgon attack was underway and it was working, the enemy was speeding toward the presumed invasion.

His plan, the one he had saved for years, was simple. Deep in the den of dread there was a massive chamber, a kind of hollowed out hall. He had to fight his way to the place of horror and doom.

Shen felt his ship buckle and shake in ways it probably shouldn't. They were up against smaller more agile destroyers and cruisers the rogue kingdom lacked grand craft, *or were they elsewhere?* Shen wondered nervously. *We're they already at the blockade?* Challenger dove directly through a crippled destroyer ripping it in two a cheer went up on the bridge, Shen suddenly remembered where he was lost in thought imagining a massive fleet of Draxion, Heschian and Mercenaries lurking about.

"Sir we have picked up readings from an old unmanned sentry from the last war, it is one of ours." He glanced down at Finn, he looked a mere Irish lad to his eyes.

"Captain Marcus are you seeing this thing," Shen asked.

"Yes sir, I am now it is massive," Marcus replied, sounding stunned. It was drifting near the edge of the asteroid belt, the battle had been pushed toward it and away from the nebula. It was the Heschian commanders plan, push the fleet into the confusion of the asteroid field, small ships might be lost and like the nebula the field gave off interference which didn't allow ships to function fully. *We need to press the enemy and get from this field,* Shen thought. Though with their losses they were barely holding any ground.

Shen sat up as if receiving an electric charge.

"Finn pull up file eight nine zero!" Shen barked.

Finn typed madly trying to convey. Curious looks went round the command deck, logistic officers on the catwalk of the ring were already pulling up the files accessing the information and codes of eight nine zero.

"Finn, is it requesting a commander override code?" Shen asked seeming frantic.

"Yes sir it is," Finn answered confused and unsure of what was happening.

"Logistics, give me the code," Shen ordered.

They sent it and typing in air on his, invisible to the crew, holographic screen he entered the code.

"Finn, you are now linked to that sentry, use it wisely. I need a replacement officer for Finn, he is going to be busy," Shen said to the air, almost laughing.

A titanic energy beam shot forth from the sentry blasting through several enemy ships at once.

“Noble fleet new rally point, move into place now!” The coordinates were sent out fleet wide, to consolidate the remaining fleet behind the sentry which was powered up and moving out of the asteroid field, energy beam blazing as it went.

The Gorgon held the walls of the city, peasants fled and gathered on the other side of the defenses. The fleet found they were in poor shape not from the battle but from hunger and illness. Some of the fleet set up a triage and began feeding and aiding the peasants, neglected maliciously for centuries. They acted as if a hot meal and warm blanket were the greatest of treasures. Medical crews began treating minor and major maladies and set up tents and enclosures, the fleet was trained for rescue relief missions but didn’t expect one.

With fleet troopers and security in place the Gorgon pushed into the twins.

Falat had found the main central nervous system of the underground towns of the Twins. He was able to ascertain how many nobles were present, how many off world, pirating, fighting and gathering for some massive attack planned for in the not so distant future. *Interesting, how to use this information?*

Adur had snuck into several chambers randomly killing nobles freeing servants and slaves, and set explosives here and there.

“Do you have what you need? We should be leaving my love,” she whispered in Falat’s ear, embracing him from behind while he worked at a computer.

“Yes, let’s get out of here, this place gives me the creeps,” Falat answered, squeezing her back. He turned and kissed her, she gave a delirious look, something about danger made her more passionate. Wild thoughts raced through their minds, they beat them down with a sigh and turned to flee.

Adur placed the last of her charges on the computer stepping over a dead technician that was once employed manning the Twins systems. Heading back out into a narrow spiral staircase they began the claustrophobic journey to the top of the Twins. It was a little amusing that the head of one figure was the brain of the fortress, the other an empty storage area, full of dust and old things. It was a strange statement, perhaps intended as a decoy, maybe a critique of the two giants of the legend, one was said to

be clever the other dull. Opening the hatch two gliders spun round the colossal stone head, *right on time* Adur thought grinning. Falat was actually eager to be in flight and away from that cramped heavy place.

A blast of an energy beam blew a glider apart, sending it spinning downward in flames. The empty head from across the diamond bridge was firing on them. Through an opening in what looked like an eye of one of the giants a huge gun was targeting them. The other glider swung wide and away to safety as the canon sent blasts through the air. A huge chunk of rock was pulverized, Adur nearly slid from the tower Falat grabbed at her hand, narrowly gripping her sleeve. She fumbled and flailed about to try and hold onto the curved rock creature. Falat gripped a boulder with his legs and finally made contact with Adur's other hand, grabbing it with urgency. She gave him a broken terrified look as laser bolts flew just above them, a battle raged down below and a wicked wind whipped about them. Yanking hard he pulled his lover to him, into a desperate embrace. She was shaking her heart pounding through her light armor and cloak, it hammered. "Thought that was it my love," Adur purred very near Falat's face, as they slithered on the ground avoiding the cannon fire from across the span of the Twins. He squeezed her hand in reply. They had no other option but to go back down into that dread place, that they had only recently filled with explosives. Getting to the hidden door was another matter.

"The Call of Blood," Toshu repeated, as they crept into the great hall. Towering carved figures, held hearts in their hands and formed a sort of ring around a blood splattered altar. In the center of two of the sculptures was a giant gleaming gong. Toshu reached for a mallet that hung nearby and pounded the gong three times.

"Three times is the Call of Blood, no matter what the nobles are doing they must answer," Toshu explained. Walking across the hall he set up a tripod and placed a small laser cannon on top of it, hidden behind a curtain in a priest's alcove. They had dragged a noble woman from her chamber she had attacked with such ferocity being trained in the dark Draxion fighting arts she nearly killed them both. Using nothing but tiny iron pins she flew through the air like some mythical creature. Nahdur was stabbed and that wasn't easy to do. His chest was bleeding but she didn't get deep enough to really do

damage. Toshu was scratched across his neck and face a tiny bit in either direction and he would have lost an eye or bled to death. He and Nahdur were leaving a trail of blood with each step. They propped a dead guard up near the altar to look like the attending priest that beat the gong. They covered him in a rob they had found.

Soon they appeared from out of the gloom like apartions in the flickering light of braziers and torches. An eerie glow was cast from hundred blood red candles, a hundred black, a hundred for each of the evil twins. The temple was dedicated to the Twins giants that followed the teachings of Draxious, so wicked, so horrible, that they were encased forever in stone. In what would have been the giant heart of the clever brother, the temple was erected. The faithful filed in eager for the ritual feasting on flesh the drinking of hot blood.

As the nobles spread into the circular room Toshu opened fire, first at the entrance where they were moving in a neat ceremonial row, then spread the laser fire throughout the room he mowed the others down, with a look of glee on his face. Nahdur was growing dizzy from fatigue, carnage and unfortunately the poison he had taken in from the noble woman's pin. *Of course Nahdur thought the Draxion assassins long ago used poison pins jabbed into a spine from behind, but really any little scratch would do. It would take hours but it would happen.* Nahdur felt a jolt through his barrel of a chest, *it was working.* Toshu had wiped them out but was panting and looked clammy.

"I know poison pin, but it is done whatever nobles were here they would have to answer the blood call. The rest must have fallen to your brother and sister." The last words stung *where were they? Did they make it out?* he wondered, he wasn't going to last much longer.

Lasers lit up the room but from Gorgon as they fired at the giant figures not sure if they were alive or not. Nahdur fell to his knees, the room spinning, his body stiffening as if he were becoming paralysed by the venom. The enormous figures seemed to look down on him mocking him, watching him die. In the torch light they appeared to move or perhaps it was the poison making him hallucinate the figures seemed to stride toward him, then all we black.

Adur and Falat had made maybe three steps towards the secret door, the firing from the other giant was too intense to do anything else. Suddenly the other twin from across the way erupted into fireballs as explosions ripped through it. The head of the figure seemed to slowly sink as the stone beneath gave way. They watch the attackers disappear into a cloud of chaos, smoke and debris. Right on cue the final glider swung out of a cloud of fire and smoke. The two leapt to their feet with an adrenaline charge that overcame their weariness, and by instinct alone flung themselves at the glider. Not really made for three passengers and wings shot full of holes, it was a rough ride. They crashed into a portion of the city walls with a horrible thud.

Shen looked at the endless list of repairs, wounded, and supply needs, and he wanted to weep. His head ached he was responsible for so many deaths, injuries, hundreds of ships lost on his watch, *this battle will haunt me for years*, he mused in his chamber. *Just four hundred ships left* he could barely breath thinking about it.

The sentry had turned the tide, it ripped ships from the sky, crippled and finished off the remainder of the Heschian ships. They even targeted ships fighting with the ground forces and troops on the march on the planet below.

“Proximity alert, something is entering our zone,” came Finn.

“On screen,” commanded Shen and a holographic projection appeared before him hovering above his desk. “Draxion?”

Finn answered, “They are calling themselves free Milladic, they have broken with the empire, they have supplies for us, raw materials from the mining colony at Pretah. They say they are sorry, they missed out on the fight.” *It is a trick they will self detonate as soon as they get near enough to do real damage*, Shen thought.

“Their shields are down, they have sent their command read-outs, they indicate that their cores are normal, not being charged to detonate,” Finn offered. They thought of everything.

“Their shields are down, scan them to verify, they could falsify read-outs,” Shen ordered. Finn quickly replied, “Already did sir, and they have sent a shuttle with ambassadors, medical teams to the planet and unarmed freighters to our workhorse ships.”

There is no way it is a trick, they have no way to attack us, Shen reasoned. Unarmed freighters can't self-detonate not in a way that would hurt anyone, medical crews, supplies, is this what the rebellion has brought about?

"I am on my way to meet the ambassadors," Shen finished feeling stunned.

Nahdur woke again a few days later, he felt a little better. He looked down and saw a big gash in his chest, *another one of those for the collection, at this point I will need to mate with a blind woman or someone with a scar fetish*, he decided to himself, starting to chuckle but it hurt when he did. "Ahh ha," he blurted out trying to sit up. "How did my ribs get broken?"

Falat grinned, his bruised eye was hard to look at and his face was covered in little cuts and scratches, Adur looked the same.

Falat cleared his throat and answered, "Well some Gorgon dragged you and Toshu, out of that horrid temple but then all our charges went off. Everyone was thrown through the air like those paper dolls we used to make. We were up on a portion of wall, in sad shape having crash landed there and the concussion threw us off the wall. So we were suddenly in worse shape," everyone started to laugh lightly but stopped because it hurt too much which made them giggle at their pitiful state. Falat then finished, "And the giants came down and made a big pile of rubble. The diamond bridge miraculously remained in one piece, we moved it to a nearby lake now people can walk across the water on it. It is a wonder and will help the villagers get around more easily, instead of being a symbol of dread."

Nahdur was afraid to ask, "And did Toshu survive?"

Adur lit up to that question, "Oh yes, the Darka have some ancient antidote for the poison, it didn't work so well on you so you were in and out throughout the night which worried us. He bounced right back, arm in a sling, some nasty bruises but they want him to be their leader. He is off meeting with all parties the free Milladic, the Planetary league, hidden Darka refugees and some of our Abur folks. He is a very brave and charismatic figure, he will rally the survivors and rebuild this broken land."

"Where are we now?" quizzed Nahdur as if trying to take all of it in.

“Newly organized hospital, in a former slave trading building. You know they never had one, a hospital not for the peasants,” offered Adur. “We are trying to get them what they need, the fleet has offered some equipment and some Draxion surrendered and brought some supplies from Pretah.”

Nahdur gave a truly shocked look to that, “Surrendered, not the Hesch thugs, Draxion?” “That’s right, call themselves free Milladic, want to help father,” replied Adur with a smile that seemed to reach beyond all of their pain at the moment, the look of hope. Her look seemed like light breaking through the trees down on him, he felt it had warmed him to his bones.

Chapter 18 Onward and Inward

The Shadow Fleet was calling the shots and silencing, demoting or humiliating anyone who challenged their rule. To Fulton and Ukto they sounded like the zealots of seventy years ago, sure of easy victory, confident of their moral high ground, all of the pitfalls of logic and belief that led to the incredibly destructive war, the war no one of Shadow Fleet had truly experienced. In the last twenty years the desperation, the hatred, the lack of materials and resources created a mixture for a more cruel and brutal war, prisoners didn’t exist, surrender didn’t happen, civilians were often just collateral damage. The Shadow folks did not know their allies or their enemy anymore, but marched ahead deep in a fog of war.

The arrangements were made, the two fleets split. Some of the new workhorses were added to Regal Fleet, some of the hybrid ones added to Shadow Fleet. The reasoning being that the outdated Regal fleet would need more support. Shadow Fleet would soon take the ship yards at Phedria anyway and the war was practically won besides. Blink or Shadow would cross the system in a fraction of the time the fleets would need, pass through the wormholes, send word of the victory to the fleet in Abur and further advise at that time.

One of the citadel class ships, the Endurance would become the new flagship of the Regal fleet under commander Drake. Crane would be demoted to admiral of the Regal, a ship that Hubbel and Adler regarded as a dinosaur. Several battleships, destroyers

and cruisers were thoroughly dismantled and rebuilt to resemble the newer ships, at one point it was thought it would be more useful to cannibalize the Regal for material and parts, rather than try to upgrade it. It was instead modernized but would defend the rear of the fleet and support ships. Crane and his people took it all with their chin up, no one grumbled, but all thought to themselves, *wait until they get a bloody load of modern death cult Draxion fury, they will come down a notch. The fighters of the old kingdom still had notions of chivalry, honor and defending their homes and way of life. The imperial forces valued death above life, they thought it better to self detonate rather than surrender.*

To Crane's surprise several cruisers and destroyers refused to go with Crane and were allowed to go on to Phedria. They were replaced by Shadow Fleet cruisers and destroyers, which were far more advanced vessels, Crane couldn't see how it was a bad thing really. Perhaps as a consolation prize Hubbel threw in ten of the fortress class carriers adding them to the former Regal fleet, Shadow Fleet would travel with ninety. When Crane and Vasca chatted about it, they discovered that they were all problem captains, the ones that had to be kept on a short leash. Regal fleet would still, therefore, arrive with a thousand crafts, and the new ships built along the way would be added to their number, though the issue of crews was still not really solved. Crane went behind the back of fleet commander Drake and spoke privately with the workhorse commander Admiral Rockwell. He convinced him to keep them docked or tow them until crews were available and Regal took on several. Hubbel, Drake and Adler wanted them put in commission, half crewed, a dangerous proposition. Drake, seeming to be overwhelmed with his first ship, didn't notice the move. Rockwell or Rocky, an absolute miracle worker would have the ships ready and more, the Shadow folks didn't even hint at wanting his help or to take him along to Phedria, such was their arrogance and blindness. Miladic guests, powder monkeys, kitchen, cleaning crews and androids would be taken from ships throughout the fleet to try and man ships. Extra robotic units would be produced to fill in where possible. None of the Draxion or Miladic were allowed onto the new ships en route to Phedria, something that obviously smacked of racism and mistrust.

As if to add insult to injury the Regal crew was thoroughly trained in all aspects of the new ships, the ones they would not serve on, in particular the citadel class of ships. Many of the crew did random chores in the greenhouses to relieve stress, like ancient monks striving towards pious humility. Most however, took to rigid, strenuous workout and sparring routines. The immediate command crew was on a peak of physical perfection that none of them had known, their frustration made them efficient and deadly. What should have been a reprimand gave them a chance to be stronger. The Gorgon commandos were very angry about being assigned to small duties on the various ships and reacted by training themselves and others harshly with a severe hand. Sadly the Gorgon commandos took on as many new students as they could, it was rumored that they wanted help in a possible mutiny. The result was that a far larger swath of personnel received an intense combat training. Crane calmed them down by making sure they were trained on and had all of the new weaponry Shadow Base had developed. He even had the Shadow base techs work directly with the Gorgon team. Added to the mix was the wisdom of Utka and Ulua both masters of the mystical arts of the Miladic, they passed their esoteric knowledge onto the curious. The Gorgon teams ate it up and processed the new fighting styles with scary efficiency, as did Traynor, Foss, Haley, Blake, Vasca and Crane.

Alexandria, Gorgon leader *cut from granite and iron*, caught Traynor, looking over at her. He had an infatuation with her, she knew, but did nothing about it. They had had a few moments together here and there, but it was oddly innocent. He tried to mask it, to not stare, well not for long at least, he hoped. It took a certain set of eyes to find her beautiful, most were scared like little children in her commanding presence. Traynor had a thing for powerful confident women, he realized that Vasca had made overtures toward him which he largely mocked, but she was still in his thoughts now and then, they were in truth similar. The random glance she gave him showed her curiosity and a flicker of interest might exist somewhere in that stubborn creature. Officially, it was frowned upon to have such relationships, but that in recent years it was beginning to seem like the human species was in danger of extinction, any kind of activity that might result in breeding was encouraged. There were some officers with families, Andu for one, his wife worked in the kitchens with their children. As long as no one was having a

lovers quarrel on the command deck or instead of loading cannons and it remained in the crew's freetime, it was overlooked.

Alexandria though was a minor obsession for Traynor. Gorgon were all like statues to some idea of noble fighting. When not deployed for something their job was to be in training and to train others. The extra long journey to Abur, allowed for plenty of both. Traynor relished the sparring sessions, tactical and weapons training, and most of all assault scenario work. In a holographic simulation room, teams or individuals would put on full body armor, set weapons to stun, be given some often outlandish mission, they would try to achieve a set of goals. It was the most exciting passtime going on the ship. Many officers and crew members were hooked on the missions, enjoyed the lifelike adrenalin hiking challenges. They would be debriefed and the student's weaknesses worked on.

A series of sessions were proposed that were to be unique in the history of the fleet, they would be taught by a Miladic monk. Various departments created a simulation based on ancient parables, teachings, and writings on the focus. Andu, Ukto and Ulua would suggest scenarios and infused the experience with their esoteric understanding. Ulua from a background of purely knowledge based training, had to learn to be a pilot, smuggler and warrior to help his people, leaving behind his monk ways. Ukto was trained as a child in Miladic concepts but as a young man in the Draxion military learned the mechanics of warfare, strategy and weaponry. Later in life he began to apply his childhood teachings to his profession and to great success. His Draxion leaders praised his competency and ability while secretly they were guided by outlawed teaching of a race being exterminated. Ulua and Ukto finally met as old men, they were stunned to realize they had reached a similar understanding of the nature of things through radically different paths.

Twenty-five students stood in the training room, a wide open area that could be used for exercise, sparring, sword or other weapons work. Along a wall there were towels and water containers and numerous consoles to log a workout. The far wall featured the holographic booths where fight simulations took place. Up to twenty-five individuals could be in the booths at once, or for team training five or six booths were combined. "First lesson, what is focus or the focus?" queried Ulua to the group.

Haley knew the traditional answer, "Master it is unknowable."

"Good," replied Ukto enthusiastically.

Traynor whispered to Alexandria, "Well that was a short class," she chuckled lightly, his heart fluttered a bit.

Ulua, having seen the exchange, approached the two, "Are you a master of this vessel," asked Ulua.

Traynor looked proud for a moment, "Of course master Ulua," he answered.

"Then that is your focus. Was there a moment when you felt the ship was under your control, that your fear and understanding had met and no distraction might rattle you?" asked Ukto.

Traynor seemed to think about it and then as if the memory of the moment appeared to him, he stated, "Yes masters, I do recall such a moment."

The two aliens wore a face of astonishment and reached for Traynor's hands, "Well done my son, may you walk long in focus." For some reason the class applauded.

People patted him on the back, cheered him and Alexandria gave a smile like a newborn star that melted Traynor.

Ulua spoke again after a moment, "It is that simple, it is that complex. One can stumble on such moments, one can search for their whole life and understand only on their deathbed. It is as important that Traynor can recall the moment as it is that he had the moment. It is the blind and numb that will wander through a life without meaning." He let that hang in the room for a minute as people visibly tried to process all he had said.

Ukto picked up the thread, "You are all brave warriors in your way. Some of you are great in solving technical problems, some are good in a hand to hand fight, some of you have the gift of words, others the love of knowledge, all are noble pursuits. We will not be able to say what your focus is or when or how you might achieve it. It is not magic or superstition, it is merely a sense of awareness, using your senses not yielding to them, honing your mind not allowing it to hold you back. All we can hope to accomplish in such a short time is to help you increase your awareness, using the ancient methods passed down from generation to generation in our worlds. You are at a disadvantage in that your language can not easily describe the focus. We have been fed its concepts with our mothers milk and even, as I did, we might shun them or try to lose them, they

often reappear to guide us. But the experience is beyond words so do not let them hinder or discourage you. As the Triabeck stated it is unknowable, it must wash over you like pure water, or like sunlight. Listen for its whisper in a pure sound, like wind in the tall trees, waves on the shore, the laughter of a lover. She said, "may you walk long in the focus," that means to walk with purpose and intent but also in beauty and wisdom. Knowing your focus means living more fully, observation brings the grandeur of details both lead to richer life." He let his words sink in for a time.

"Lesson two join the simulation," stated Ulua. All of the students entered the mythical world the wisemen had created, each simulation specific to each student. They encountered their fears, they fought fierce enemies including themselves, they struggled to gain understanding, they stumbled from rocks and waded through bleak mire, and each left the game with a grain of something, a hint of the focus. The machine was designed to notice the reactions of the students and rearrange, devise, and cater each experience to the progress or failures of the student.

While Alexandria was in the simulation Traynor exited and stood panting, sweaty, a mad look in his eyes. He recovered quickly, dried himself with a towel that he took from a nearby rack. Ulua and Ukto stood nodding approvingly, Traynor felt an odd feeling as if the old gents were in his mind somehow, *impossible* he thought and pushed the sensation away.

Traynor approached them sheepishly. "Masters, did you mean what you said that I had achieved the focus?"

Ulua and Ukto smiled, glancing back and forth at each other with a knowing look. "Ah a very big question, truth be told. Is it worse to believe you have the focus in error or to not have it all?" offered Ulua.

Now they are playing games with me, Traynor thought.

Ukto laughed, "Ha ha you might have, you might not have, if you had a moment of supreme awareness then that is something to be cherished, if you move on bravely believing you have focus, that my student is also a grand and an invaluable thing, but you must decide in the end what the truth is. There is a state we call the novice gem. It is based on a parable of a young person that believes they found a beautiful precious stone. They forge ahead in life with their secret riches hidden in their pocket. They

achieve great things, confident if they were to fail they could always sell their gem. Late in life they find their stone again having never needed it, upon closer examination it is learned that it was merely a worthless rock, pretty, inspiring but junk. Sometimes not knowing that mountains can not be moved lets us move them.”

Ulua grasped Traynors massive hands and pulled him near, he whispered, “One need not focus to see that you are dumbfounded by the mighty Alexandria, in our worlds she would be a warrior queen, she is a fine specimen of your kind of creature. Did you see how impressed she was by you, seize the moment, find the courage to talk to her.”

“You mean you said those things to help me snare a lady?” asked Traynor, gobsmacked.

“Yes, yes my boy, there are many paths to the focus and none so fulfilling as love, there are some that say it is the true focus, the true lifeforce. I know that it is the most honest and pure focus. Do not wait, you guide a floating fortress daily, you safely shepherd thousands, talk to the warrior women while you can.”

Traynor’s head was spinning, he felt used, he was confused, they had said some incredible things, but it felt like a prank by a couple of dirty old men. He was unsure of what to think.

As if summoned, Alexandria appeared out of the simulation, gasping for breath, her bare muscular arms shiny with sweat, tiny dew drops hanging from the golden hairs of her arms. He filled his eyes with her beauty, he couldn’t take in enough of her.

Recovering from his stunned state he handed her a towel and some water. To his surprise she hugged him out of nowhere. Not a safe friendly hug but one that melded her whole body to his. Still struggling to breath she uttered, “That was amazing and for you,” it immediately felt and sounded like a discussion of another nature. They stayed in the embrace for a moment, the two teachers like magicians had somehow vanished. He noted that all of the simulators read, “empty ready for simulation.” *Those crafty old men had contrived to have them be alone in the training room, oh they are good*, he smiled to himself.

“We should shower,” Alexandria purred in Traynor’s ear.

While some of the crew took turns applying Miladic warrior philosophy, Simms meanwhile became a quick study of the history and traditions of the Miladic and Draxion cultures. He rapidly became enamored by the new line of study as if a world had opened up to him. He also taught the old men how to play chess, which they became obsessed with, they were soon beating Simms, which was near impossible.

Ulua and Utka clearly admired and respected Simms and his vast erudition, but there was also a feeling watching them chat that he was their lost grandson, a real affection was obvious.

Ulua and Utka became unofficial goodwill ambassadors for the fleet wherever they went spirits rose a bit with words of encouragement and ancient truths. The two old sages offered the crews a glimpse into a larger battle between good and evil, that everyone must fight internally, the daily battles of perseverance and the struggle to be a better person.

Baxius and the Trulak

It is said that Baxius longed for his campaigning years, life on the move of tents and supply trains, new sights and flavors daily.

Sitting on his cold stone throne he, “longed for a pile of pillows and courtesans to match. He missed the night air of the Trulak desert, salt taste in the air of the distant coast. The struggle was over, there were no new lands to subdue, no points on the map to fill in. Whining, braying bureaucrats petting bickering nobles, surrounded like a murder of crows, picking at his rancid carcass.” (From The Lost Writings of Baxius)

It was then not surprising when a treasure trove of lost writings were discovered (that had survived the flames of Draxius and his mad obsession with his own legacy) that depicted Baxius as restless and oft amongst the wild Trulak. The image didn’t sit well with Draxius centuries later still trying to wipe out the nomads.

Draxius was the first emperor true, and the first to conquer whole systems, he had eclipsed Baxius in that regard but not in the collective memory of the people that would become the Draxion. He set entire libraries ablaze, he melted down statues, blasted buildings and towns that glorified others, there could only be Draxius. To rename a planet from Trulak to Draxion, to try and purge the language of Darka and Trulak words,

were bold moves but he could not rest until the memory of ancient warriors and places were erased as well.

The irony in deciphering texts from another age that depicted Baxius and his loathing for rule, his boredom and disdain with his crown and worse a love and respect for the nearly vanished nomadic races, the Trulak, was not lost upon scholars. Every Draxion had tried to extinguish the Trulak yet Baxius was not Draxion he was something else. Revisionists sought to make Baxius Draxion to add to his story and take out chapters as it suited them and then the lost writings were found. The amendments and edits rang instantly false, a new image drifted out of the fog of genocide, war, and time.

“Let my hair be set in Trulak braids and my chest be bare in the blazing sun,” read one verse. “I mount the fierce Trulak lover and then she mounts me, we claw and grab and drink wine from mouth to mouth,” declared another provocative song.

“There is a freedom in a siege tent, a lust in the motion of the nomad, a thrill in the simple peasant pleasures and songs, that no throne room could hope to replace,” observed Baxius in yet another work. He gives such detail of Trulak life that the assumption has been made that before becoming a hermit he roamed with the nomads. Later finds confirmed the thesis and it is commonly thought to be the missing episode of the fabled leader's life. Trulak have songs like, *The Thousand Children of Longhair*, (one of the Trulak names for Baxius) which jokes that he fathered that many children amongst them. Or *The Wild Dance of Warbird* that some scholars believe refers to Baxius. Being that Trulak were deemed inferior for centuries and their songs crude savage sounds no one paid enough attention to them, and the Baxius connection was only recently noticed. Darka who were also hunted and despised uncovered much as they did not view the Trulak as beasts but people in the same fight for survival. The cash of lost writings finally blew the door off the vault and the Darka scholars melted it down.

It is clear Baxius was captivated by the first people of Trulak when he wrote,
“Noble, clever, generous to a fault,
Cruel and devious,
gentle and flowing like wind,
Water, waves.

How can the Trulak be all these things?

Lost in the soul dance,

That spins round the fire,

Pounding drums moving battered feet,

Helpless to a desert trance,

Slave to an ancient beat.

Voices cry out in song, lovemaking,

A mix of scents and savory flavors,

Salty skin, perfumed limbs,

A simple drink or game of chance,

The fluttering tents, wild romance."

(From the Lost Songs of the Trulak, from Baxius)

Chapter 19 Lost in Wild

Shadow Fleet crew struggled to grapple with the seventy-five years they had lost, though overworked they attempted to catch up to the present, to little avail. Little by little the Shadow Fleet crews gained a bit of respect for the Regal fleet as stories of their many victories and long hardships that they had overcome and endured became known, including being humiliated by Hubbel and Adler. The situation did not change to any great extent. However, the crew members studying the war of recent years began to think Crane and Utko were right, they should have attacked as one Fleet, or instead gone to the aid of Abur. They decided they were painfully unaware of the subtleties of the current war.

Shadow Fleet morale began to sink a bit, fear and lack of confidence in their commanding officers crept in. Being pushed to produce new crafts, working very long shifts and other activities related to having too few crew meant discomfort and exhaustion were also slipping into the daily routine. As a result the accidents began first minor, then a few crew members were lost, from fatigue and not having enough crew members monitoring the ship systems.

Too few logistics staff and too many clunky robotic units, led to a few ship wide failures. Robotic units were an act of desperation from the recent conflict, they were to be

replaced with infinitely more elaborate androids. The new androids took too much time to create, proving a problem. When robotic units needed repairing they lacked the parts or primitive knowledge of how to fix or replace them.

The fleet was beginning to show prolonged strain. As more injuries and fatalities accumulated, the workload further increased, officers merely yelled more, lost their tempers and patience more often, morale sunk lower.

Two destroyers were placed in dry dock on a fortress class ship to debug them, so many glitches and failures had occurred on them. A battleship was docked with the flagship for the same reasons. After a month a full hundred ships were barely or not operational, some being towed others in dry dock. Modifications to the old Regal fleet ships failed, causing one ship to explode killing all of its crew, a second was damaged and taken out of commission.

Two months into the journey to Phedria half the ships in the once proud Shadow Fleet were experiencing major errors and system failures, or were out of service entirely. Crews originally stretched too thin now found themselves fighting over places to sleep. Fights began, bickering, the medical bays were overrun with minor and major injuries. Production of the new ships was halted with only two destroyers and three cruisers being finished, a third of what was planned. The overcrowded ships emptied onto the new ships to try to break them in, troubleshoot them, in time for their arrival in the Phedrian system. Shadow Fleet was rattled, spooked, and completely unsure of its abilities, but worse was to come.

When a soldier doubts his leaders he only half fights,

When he doubts himself he is already lost.

Legions wandered on,

Through barren wastes,

Leveled towns,

Burnt bare trees,

And rotting wheat,

On battered legs,

And blistered feet,

In wagons for wounded,
A few horses for the elite.

Ever the stone of doubt,
Like a weight pulling one down,
Into murky waters,
Vision lost,
Clatter of armor,
The only sound,
The ghostly passing,
Of campaigning host.

And on comes winter,
It whispers on the chill wind,
That no one will survive long,
Once it has embraced,
Like so many battles,
The new falling snow,
Will bury any trace.

(Excerpt Song of War, Baxius)

Chapter 20 Arrival In Abur System

With the successful modifications and the mostly seasoned and efficient crews of the Regal Fleet, the ships arrived ahead of schedule. The three month journey was accomplished in two and a half months.

“First of the fleet approaching Abur Station,” called Foss.

“Shields up to maximum, charge forward batteries,” ordered Vasca.

“All forward batteries report ready in all respects, mam,” offered Simms.

“Crews and systems in perfect working order, shall we beat to quarters,” asked Haley.

“Nope we are the tail of this beast, the head hasn’t ordered us to go to full readiness or battlestations,” answered Vasca, obviously insulted by being led by a fool.

“Drake couldn’t find his..” started Traynor.

“That will do Traynor, we still have a chain of command to respect whether it is earned or not,” replied Vasca, through gritted teeth. The flagship was the only vessel in the fleet to have major technical issues, crews from other ships were sent to it to sort things out. Including Foss, Traynor, Haley and Simms, Crane was not allowed to visit though he consulted with numerous techs and crew members whenever they needed him, earning him respect amongst the Endurance crew.

“Those cocky kids on the citadel are so green I wonder if they have ever gone to battle stations,” offered Foss.

“I bet you terrified their communications team,” laughed Haley.

“Oh she did,” said Traynor with a sneer. “You think we have a lot of nicknames for Foss, wow, they are inventive.”

“Like what?” asked Vasca.

Traynor and Simms gave full belly laughs. “Should I? Or do you want to?” asked Traynor.

“No go ahead,” laughed Simms.

“The White Demon, the Pale Wolf, Devil Eyes, Blue Eyed Witch,” began Traynor with an exaggerated theatrical voice.

“Okay, okay, sorry I asked,” uttered Vasca breathlessly.

“There are many more,” suggested Traynor, sounding disappointed.

“No, that was quite enough,” demanded Vasca.

“Sorry Foss, I think you are beautiful,” soothed Haley, Crane chuckled.

“Command deck! No flirting on my command deck!” shouted Vasca. Haley and Foss both looked embarrassed.

“Switch to scanning,” ordered Vasca.

“The flagship hasn’t switched to scanning or battlestations,” noted Andu.

“Can you punch me through to Drake,” asked Crane.

“No he has his comm down,” answered Foss, concern in her voice. “I personally fixed that, I explained how to keep it fixed, did they break it again?” Foss blurted clearly exasperated.

“Put me through on priority level,” ordered Crane, frustration apparent in his tone.

"No good sir, it seems like Drake himself has blocked contact," answered Foss with a frustrated sigh, as if serious anger was boiling up in her. She looked a little flushed as she slammed a hand down on her control panel. "What good is all this new tech in the hands of children, who.." blurred Foss emotion in her voice.

"That is enough Foss, pull it together," chided Vasca.

Crane sat up suddenly tense. Everyone on the deck gasped. The flagship and several ships were about to exit the wormhole, none were in formation. The flagship hadn't ordered one. The support ships and crafts closer to Regal were in a standard formation, tight and orderly. Midway through the fleet it fell apart into a half baked version of a standard formation. The Shadow Fleet ships towards the front raced about, seemed to be jockeying to leave the wormhole first. Fulton sent a secret code to the ships in his area, they suddenly lined up into neat formation around his ship, their shields went up, meaning the only rabble were the new ships and the supposed flagship. Any more interference with the chain of command and he would be court martialed. He had to hope the officers complying with his orders wouldn't submit a formal complaint, he was taking a big risk.

"All mid and rear fleet brace for exit," ordered Crane through the secret message system. Ships slowed, the tight formation grew even more so, defensive posture was assumed for mines. Impact alarms sounded, many of the first of the Fleet were colliding into a huge minefield.

"Full stop!" ordered Crane. The new crews and ships dissolved into chaos crashing into each other, exploding from mine impacts. Impulse beams began to attack the craft, at the wormhole portal, meaning a fleet was waiting for them forming a blockade.

"Haley Foss alert," they began to make the adjustments.

"Ready sir," replied Haley.

Crane reached for his emergency control panel, he punched his command code and then ordered, "Foss, punch me through fleet wide," Foss gave a shocked look but complied.

"Ready sir," replied Foss.

"I am assuming protocol alpha. All ships battlestations, make shields and forward batteries ready in all respects. Subs sweep and advance through that minefield, cruisers and destroyers follow the subs. Battleships, formation delta, now!"

Alpha was a provision that stated if the wolf pack is in danger then a new alpha wolf should be named. It was established that uttering anything to do with Code Alpha could be seen as mutiny so the nickname for it on the ship was Code Foss, since she was known as the wolf. The flagship Endurance, was crippled, it hadn't even raised its shields to exit the portal or made its batteries ready in case of an attack. Whole decks were visibly exploding.

A holographic image of Ulua's face appeared next to Crane's control.

"Are you taking control of this mess?" he asked from one of the newly manufactured cruisers, the Tsunami.

Crane returned, "Sorry Captain Ulua, that is what alpha means, yes. Follow the subs out, they have anti-mine shielding, charges and impulse fields that will detonate a large area of mines. Stay tight with the subs, don't haver."

"Haver sir?" asked Ulua.

"Sorry, Scottish expression, don't stray or wander, stay right behind them, have scanning crews watching for mines as well but stay on the path the subs have cleared," explained Crane.

"Aye sir," replied Ulua and his face disappeared.

"Vasca get us out front we have to run cover for the Shadow Fleet craft that are listing and or crippled, especially the Endurance." Crane suddenly found the name ironic, *more than seventy years old, but it might not endure its first battle.*

Two of the Shadow Fleet destroyers and cruisers were lost, two of the hybrid ships disintegrated and numerous ships of the first column were badly damaged.

Vasca blasted to the front of the carnage sending a massive energy field out into the minefield, her own little innovation, firing every weapon they could. Two other ships from the Regal fleet did the same, the fleet was emerging from the wormhole around the damaged ships and the flagship, guns blazing. Hundreds of missiles and laser blasts leapt from the wormhole seconds before the Regal fleet did. Regal being so massive it would provide cover for many smaller ships to escape unschaved.

Get word for as many of the damaged ships that can to get onboard, we can repair them but they are going to get picked off in this chaos," Crane ordered.

"Aye, sir," replied Foss, sending out messages to numerous ships, and a general retreat signal which would encourage confused captains to get behind the Regal.

An enormous fleet of Mercenary and Draxion ships had perfectly positioned itself to pick anything off that tried to exit the portal.

"Estimates?" asked Crane.

"Some seven hundred and fifty ships, not counting little pirate marauders and fighters, sir," replied Simms.

Missiles began to find purchase, fighters subs and cruisers bolted after smaller targets. The chaos was receding, the Regal fleet was taking a severe battering but their shields could handle it for a while. The mines were supposed to have soften the fleet's shields, cripple the craft, making every shot have greater impact. It wasn't working, Vasca and the subs had dealt with the mines, and were now landing blows in return.

"Haley get workhorse crews on the Endurance and other wounded craft. Deploy frigates and heavy fighters to support disabled ships," ordered Crane.

"Aye, commander," returned Haley, her hands frantically punching keys, buttons and moving holographic images around.

In the exchange from the splitting of the fleets Regal did manage to acquire ten of the fortress class carriers. Looking at the wall of ships not in any real formation just holding and firing like mad, Crane noticed that it was not at all defensive it was all offensive shoot, batter, destroy but the ships were all wide open.

"Foss call up all carrier crews on the priority signal,"

"I have them sir," returned Foss quickly.

"Carrier commanders make all fighters and bomber immediately ready to deploy,"

All of the carriers one by one sent a green flashing badge which signified order received and affirmative. Red would be a refusal which given the change in command might happen, as it might all come down to a future court martial, if anyone survived the incident. Yellow badge would mean unable to comply due to damage, malfunctions or insufficient crews or supplies, all ships were still in good shape.

"Doris Jenkins here, commander ready to deploy," came a call.

"Roger that, as soon as your husband is ready to cover you, head out," replied Crane.

"Affirmative," came her husband's voice.

"Marshal Fulton, here experimental fighter unit ready to deploy, sir."

"Roger that run your own patterns they might draw attention from the main squadrons," ordered Crane.

"Gladly," came the reply as they pushed out in front of the exiting fleet and directly into madness of missiles and explosions, laser blasts and wreckage.

"Foss, call up all of the battleship commanders, also priority signal," ordered Crane.

"Ready sir," Foss replied.

"All battleships, the subs and destroyers have cleared a path, head out of the wormhole and form up sections one to fifty port side of the gate, sections fifty-one to one hundred starboard side of the portal. All other battleships spearpoint formation on Fulton, send badges to confirm." The ships could be seen already in motion, some heading to port others to starboard, they were trying to comply, running checks, to see if they were in condition to form up. The green badges then began to beam in. Two yellows, Valor and Spirit, both damaged in the earlier confusion.

"Valor and Spirit received, form up to guard the support ships as they leave the wormhole," confirmed Crane.

Green badges back.

Regal burst out of the wormhole, everything in its arsenal firing at what seemed a mercenary flagship. A massive cobbled together fortress class ship, that appeared to be three different battleships that had begun to mate but stopped halfway through the act.

"What sort of unholy garbage, is that?" Traynor asked, referring to the mutant.

"Deadly and ugly," answered Simms. "It is composed of the gunnery of three ships without the rest of the ships. Pure fire power, no comfort."

Fulton was pushing through in spearpoint formation Endeavor leading the other ships out and into the fray. A wall of battleships were beginning to form up slowly advancing on the ragtag Mercenary ships and the battleworn Draxion vessels. The barrier that would shield the carriers and support ships.

"Yes, the intel made it sound like this was a secure system, little to worry about," said Traynor in a sing-songy mocking voice.

“Carriers move out,” ordered Crane. Foss sent the order.

“Shields holding, batteries in good condition, all systems up,” offered Andu from the dark support deck below. Robotic units blurred about, *like mad villains from a B horror film*, thought Andu his hobby being old earth horror and sci fi films. Having grown up with so much horror he was amazed people would create fictional horror. To get around he had painted glow in the dark bats and a Frankenstein’s monster, he was amazed no one had ever seemed to notice them, not even Crane. Beneath a group of bats and skinny black cat he manned what he called *Halloween station*, all of the lights on it were orange and yellow against the black. He could tell from the flashing what was happening deep within the ship like the hum of a machine. Too frantic and there was trouble somewhere, too slow and systems were not online, also trouble. Looking at the red green buttons of *circus station*, he was perplexed. The pulse indicated a huge energy field was forming somewhere nearby. Andu’s heart sank, he had seen that last when the sneak attack happened, near the Phedrian gate. Vasca came to the same conclusion at the same time. Both yelled in unison, “Commander another sneak attack!” It was too late Fulton’s ships were blowing a hole in the middle of the line of enemy ships but heading right into another unseen fleet, already in perfect shield formation. Massive impacts were flaring up, he had dropped a staggering amount of mines while passing through the enemy ships. Crane had to wonder if the poor formation was a trap to look wide open to attack, and *I fell for it*.

“A thousand ships out of nowhere just as things were starting to look up,” commented Traynor.

“What were you saying about the intel on this system,” Simms suddenly looked to Traynor, “If it is going this badly for us, what is waiting for Shadow Fleet?”

“Pain and suffering,” suggested Vasca, “Phedria, is a major Draxion stronghold they are waltzing into, with green crews and faulty ships. This war is far from over.”

Fulton let fly a clever and lethal barrage, missiles, fighters, bombers and energy beams. His grandfather Marshal saw what was happening and raced his new fighters to aid his grandson. The Shadow fleet ships cut a dazzling path through the lighter ships and wiped out the fighters and marauders. Everyone on Regal was amazed to see how they handled.

The Shadow Base techs had souped up all of the fleet's weaponry in big and little ways, the lasers and energy beams were more powerful and could recharge more quickly.

They even added new rows of cannons onto most of the fleet's ships and new power generation systems to aid them. Sizing up the sneak attack Fulton the grandson dove beneath the Draxion flagship and into the lighter cruisers and frigates, shifting his firing from forward to starboard meaning they wouldn't get clear shots in but as the ship passed at full speed, a hail of shells and laser blasts would strike the heavy battleships along their length. Mines were again tossed out liberally. Fulton launched numerous ground bombardment units, targeting battleships and destroyers. It was risky because the impacts would be so great it could throw Endeavor off course as well. A blast of Fulton's thrusters sent the ship well out of range as the blue energy fields wiped out an entire section of ships.

Crane and Vasca looked at each other briefly. Despite Fulton's success they were seriously outnumbered, outgunned, and they had lost ships in the minefield needlessly. We stick to the current plan he seemed to say to Vasca with a nod.

"Carriers in position, battleships still advancing," called Haley.

Crane commanded, "Destroyers and cruisers form up spear point after Fulton, watch for his mines. Regal lets stay on that mutant flagship. Get us below it Vasca and Traynor" "Engage," ordered Simms.

"Contact," stated Haley meaning that fighters and bombers were deployed.

The Regal dove as a ridiculous array of weaponry issued forth from the patchwork Mercenary flagship. Nothing succeeded in landing or connecting with Regal.

"We are faster than they are expecting, they have incorrectly calculated our speed and rang, sir," observed Traynor sounding a little hopeful.

"The boosts from the new tech and the other upgrades means all of our ships are a little faster than their targeting system are used to, they are wasting shot and energy," noted Simms.

"Bombers and fighters beginning their runs on the wall of ships, sir," declared Foss.

"Go get em Dory," she whispered. With the additional carriers, new fighters and bombers, the same situation was playing out, faster stronger equipment that the Draxion and Mercenary crews had never encountered. The super fighters launched dive

bomb attacks deploying their missiles and bombs with precision. The older fighters flew support or found holes from mines and missiles to exploit. The battleships were nearly squaring off with the original row or wall of enemy ships, it looked like suns exploding as they fired full capacity at each other.

Bombers were diving from above the fighters weaving in and out of range as they tactfully dropped their loads. A thousand wild dogfights spun and circled darted and attacked, across the inky black. It was like watching a finely tuned machine, no bomb was wasted, no bomber strayed too long into danger, no escort wandered from their liege.

Foss broke the spell and noted, "All support ships through the portal, they are towing Endurance and the other wounded vessels. Heavy frigates flying escort, requesting to engage the enemy."

"Permission granted, two battleships should be enough to discourage an attack on the workhorses," stated Crane.

"Both battleships reporting readiness, should they engage?" asked Foss.

"Nope tell them to stay with the support ships they are of greater use there," stated Crane while viewing the large holographic image of the battle in progress.

Regal was swooping beneath the mercenary flagship,

"Simms send them a ground bombardment package, as we pass, and boost are rear shields," requested Crane. "Traynor, push our thrusters, sling us up and around that ghastly beast."

"Aye commander," replied Simms and Traynor both grinning.

A glowing blue impulse bomb used for destroying planetary shields and ground bases was thrown at the mercenary ship from underneath it. As Traynor took the Regal to never before reached speeds, throwing off targeting systems and making the ship seem to disappear momentarily. The hideous mercenary ship exploded, seeming to be consumed by a giant luminous blue ball of energy. The explosion blasted six vessels on either side of the energy field and drove ships into each other causing confusion in the Draxion ranks. It was exactly the hole in the defenses the Regal fleet needed to pour into, turning the tide slowly.

"Get us through to Fulton, Vasca," Crane commanded. She smiled eyeing the gap in the fierce line of enemy ships steadily growing.

"With pleasure Commander," replied Vasca.

The heavy, frigates, fighter escorts began to pummel ships from starboard to port, while the bombers and fighters dispatched from the numerous super carriers worked from port to starboard. Meeting in the middle of the fleet where flaming rubble and spinning sparking debris were the only remnants of the once colossal Mercenary flagship.

Fanning out they all began another run heading back to where they came from.

"Gorgons reacting to a hull breach and boarding parties at the edge of the engine room," reported Foss.

"Yikes we are covered in blitzers, it is a swarm of them," reported Simms.

"Sidearms at the ready," ordered Crane.

Alexandria and her detachment strode onto the bridge, winking at Traynor as she passed. They began setting up heavy cannons and taking up positions to guard the bridge. She put her helmet on and heated up an enormous impulse rapid fire rifle. She braced it on the control panel between Haley and Traynor. Sure enough a portion of the bridge was starting to glow.

Vasca yelled, "Suit up switch to auxiliary stations," meaning officers and technicians elsewhere on the lower support decks would operate the ship behind heavy blast doors and remotely. Andu vanished as his area was closed off by emergency shield doors. The command crew ran to the changing area beneath the throne, and began putting on body armor.

Checking heavy weapons and taking up defensive postures around the bridge the catwalk above the command deck was evacuated as more shielding slid into place about the ring of panels and indicator banks.

Side by side with a few Gorgon the command crew waited to be boarded in the middle of a massive battle. With a shudder a portion of the bridge blew open the crew were hooked to safety lines to keep them from being sucked out into space. The emergency mode had essentially made a giant airlock out of the bridge, all other levels of the ship would be unaffected by the pressure change. All new protocols developed and trained after the first marauder attack on the bridge.

Lasers flew through the air into the chest of Gorgon, bouncing off an emergency shield and ricocheting around the bridge a blast hit Simms in the back sending him to the ground. Vasca grabbed one of the Draxion marauders and wrestled with him, smashing his helmet open and depriving him of oxygen. Foss leapt through the air with a laser blade in one hand and shield piercing sword in the other. She slit through the neck of one raider cut into the gut of another. Crane fired into the blitzer without any targets hoping to keep Draxion from further boarding. Haley using a side arm took the head off a marauder and then ducked below her workstation to dodge shots. Vasca and Alexandria stormed the blitzer followed by Foss and Traynor.

Repair and medical crews signal they were just outside of the bridge ready to enter. Crane sent a quick emergency code saying the bridge was not yet secured. Squeezed between several Gorgons Crane leaned onto his rifle and waited hoping his valuable crew would soon return from the parasitic craft, *like a tick latched onto his ship* he thought. Traynor leapt from the enemy ship followed by the others, Foss was covered in green Draxion guts and purple bits of flesh that also hung from her knife and sword, *wolf indeed*, thought Crane.

Alexandria helped shove an emergency barrier over the hole that had been blown into the bridge. The marauder ship exploded. Pressure returned the repair crews scrambled about. Emergency shielded started retracting, smoke began to lift from the air, the normal hum of the bridge returned slowly. Crane helped Simms to his feet. A medical crew tended to a Gorgon leading him from the bridge. They were still covered in blitzers, marauders were wreaking havoc throughout the lower decks of the ship.

“While you have replacements go with the Gorgon to help secure the ship,” ordered Crane. Replacement officers sat at Traynor and Foss’s workstation as those two departed the bridge with the Gorgon to deal with other breaches, other boarding parties. Crane wasn’t happy about it, but as well as being the best suited for their command jobs they were also the best suited to aid the Gorgon in killing Draxion. All of the extra fight training the crew had had was immediately put to use, throughout the Regal. Crane looked about to find Vasca returning to her seat not invited to the murder party, she actually looked a little dejected. Pulling up status and report screens, they tried to return to the other fight, the one their ship should have been leading.

Fulton had pushed through the first row of ships blockading the wormhole, and then encountered the second fleet coming out of hiding. Ripping a hole in their shield formation he was spinning around to knock out the Draxion flagship. Battleship to battleship would normally be an intense fight but Fulton's modified ship featured extra cannons. Some of its structure had been altered making it lighter, more agile and innovations in propulsion were employed. The fierce vessel spun round to fire, defying its size and surprised the enemy ship with a brutal attack. The enemy battleship erupted into fantastic colors, a shower of debris and wreckage spiraling out like a star being born.

Fulton wasn't finished, he was turning about again to lead another pass, the other battleships, destroyers and cruisers ripping a bigger hole into the Draxion shield. Ulua from his ship broadcast on all channels in Miladic his message of resistance. Several ships moved out of formation, a few others turned and fired on the Mercenaries. Utko then copied Ulua saying something to the effect that liberation was at hand the emperor was under attack, a bluff but it seemed to have the desired results. A handful of Draxion vessels stood down, moved out of formation, or fired on Mercenary forces. No one seemed ready to fire on other Draxions yet. It was something but didn't turn the tide of the fight.

A huge fire fight had erupted in the main hangar of the Regal. Alexandria, Traynor and Foss were near collapsing having been fighting deck to deck section by section. They had cornered and corralled the last of the Hesch fighters into the hangar but they were still fighting on with ferocity.

"Who are these savage bastards?" asked Traynor in frustration. The Hesch had left a path of horror, ritualistic killing was observed all over the ship. They had taken the time to leave bloody hand prints here and there, draw strange symbols in blood, all of which terrified the Darka, who clearly knew their meaning.

What is this stuff? Foss asked, pointing at some of the grisly scrawling.

Alexandria answered, "They seem to be following the Draxion death cult, ran into it a while back way back in Neuman system. We have a tiny bit of intel on it, it is so perplexing and frightening that it has been kept quiet. Some of the fanatics of the

empire believe in sacrificing beings of various alien races and humans when possible. They believe it gives them some supernatural magical power."

"They do seem to have unnatural endurance, we have been at it for hours. I am really sick of these guys," spat Traynor. Spent rifle charges encircled the three of them in their improvised fox hole, constructed of cargo bins and some sort of pallet. Soon they would have drained weapons and be pinned down in their crude defense.

"I am going below through the crawl space in the flight deck, I am small enough to fit and will pop up behind them," announced Foss. Alexandria and Traynor thought to convince her otherwise but she was already in motion. Like fast moving liquid she poured through the floor and out of view, taking several grenades with. They gave each other a questioning look, shrugged and lobbed a grenade each at the nearest group of Hesch fighters. Screams and yells were heard as the explosion went off. In the confusion Foss sprang from the floor a blur of blades and kicks, stabs and flips. Alexandria whispered, "She is formidable, if she weren't so tiny she might make a good Gorgon. As it is she wouldn't fit in the body armor."

Haley was reading reports of slaughter on other ships from Hesch marauders which were flowing in. The time spent training for combat that once seemed overkill was now seeming like time well spent. Concepts that the crews struggled with while sparring or listening to Ulua and others suddenly came into sharp focus. A month before the marauders would have devastated the crews but instead were being held off across the fleet. She still worried for her friends, Traynor, Alexandria, and most of all Foss. Haley found she was strangely attracted to the strength and sadness Foss seemed to possess.

Hours passed, it was an even fight after a time, the fleet was faster and better organized, the Mercenaries and Draxion had greater numbers and fought with wild aggression. A small contingency was said to have veered from Draul, they seemed particularly suicidal in odd thrown together craft.

Crews needed to rest, refuel, restock ammunition, they couldn't simply push the attack endlessly. After the initial gains by the bomber teams and fighters and the sure maneuvers of the planetary league, things sort of levelled off into a stalemate.

Something has to change, we are eventually going to collapse with exhaustion, Crane worried.

Traynor, Alexandria and Foss returned to the bridge looking ragged, dripping sweat blood and guts, they looked horrid, grisly. Traynor and Foss sat at their station as if nothing had happened, smearing blood on their controls. Vasca and Simms looked horrified.

Simms looked over at Simms as his replacement officer fled in terror and asked, "Rough night?"

Alexandria answered, "You have no idea." From an emergency station she was scrolling through data related to her Gorgon concern on her face.

Both the returning officers looked dismal once the situation was assessed, as if they expected the larger mess to be in hand. Foss looked over at Vasca, she gave an expression that said *yeah it is that bad.* Traynor and Simms had a similar exchange.

The battle was by no means won, it was a sort of stalemate.

"Sir I am picking up fleet codes and signatures," announced Haley.

Glancing about and enhancing an area on the edge of the battle some three hundred ships were coming into view. Signatures read Union and Noble fleets.

"That is a welcomed surprise," suggested Simms.

"Indeed," offered Crane. Though it troubled him to note how few there were, from fleets that once numbered in the thousands.

"They seem to be traveling with some Draxion ships," offered Haley. "The ships in question have changed their signatures to Miladic." Haley was beaming, the implication was that more Draxion had broken with the empire, the enemy was collapsing from within.

The new arrivals flanked the Hesch ships with a fierceness that hinted at some old grudge. They poured through their ranks, the surrendered ships Draxion suddenly joined the fight, also changing their ship signatures to Miladic, some to the Union of Abur. A few ships simply bore a signature of three rings, unmistakable in its meaning.

"It is happening, the Miladic are rising up against the empire," suggested Simms.

"But not under one banner," noted Vasca.

"One problem at a time," suggested Simms.

Minutes before Crane was trying to figure out how to pull his forces back, afraid of depleting his ships, but now it seemed high time to press the attack. He had rotated crews and pulled up reserve fighters and bombers, as best as was possible. He ordered the two battleships on guard duty into the fight and set up all, for a spear point attack. "This is the moment we needed, form up, let's finish this," Vasca stated, sending out the attack formation orders.

Fulton had already changed formation and dove at the far flank of Draxion and Mercenary dredges, on the opposite end of the new arrivals. Vasca made ready to dive into the middle of enemy ships. Ahead of their arrival, Regal launched a barrage of ground ordinance with devastating effect. The fringes of the enemy fleet were in a disarray, panic and confusion seemed to be causing a break in formation. The solid conservative wall of ships was dissolving into a free for all of aggressive attacks with diminished results.

The tide had turned with some three hundred defectors, four hundred ships of the fleet and Abur Union arriving and the skill and diligence of the combined Shadow and Regal fleets. The once grand blockade and the shield of the sneak attack ships, were crumbling or already neutralized.

Ukto, Ulua and Crane begged the remaining commanders to surrender, that they would be treated fairly and not harmed. One hundred of the distressed ships self-detonated, the massive blast pushing cruisers wildly out of control and disintegrating some bombers and fighters. The Union and Noble fleets took the brunt of the damage, losing some hundred ships in reckless attacks. Sadly amongst the fighters leading the charge was Marshal Fulton. Simms sat silent when he saw the message flash before him, a single tear drifted down his cheek. Crane rested a hand on his shoulder and gave him a little squeeze. He had suspected that Simms and Fulton were more than friends and the tear confirmed it. He wondered how the old man Fulton would take it. So strange to survive for seventy-five years and die in a pointless ambush. Pointless because the field was theirs the fleet was secure the empire gained nothing from the fanatics suicide. One hundred other ships signaled they would stand down. The remaining vessels were wiped out fighting to the death. *Such a waste* Crane mused, *this is all going to end one day. I would rather meet in peace as old men than wipe these people out.*

Crane sighed, his body relaxed in his chair, the wave of released tension spread through the deck. "Foss patch me through to Ulua and Utko, please," the fatigue in his voice apparent.

"Utko and Ulua put together a team to talk with the surrendered ships and the neutral ones, see if they need anything medical or repair wise, confirm," Crane ordered.

"Confirmed, may we have Blake and the Triabek for our diplomatic teams?" asked Utko. Crane glanced down at Haley who had turned to meet his gaze, she looked weary, her wild red hair even crazier than normal from the battle helmet she had worn during the boarding fight. They were all exhausted, soaked through with sweat from the body armor, the tension and hand to hand combat. "Up to you Haley, if you need to rest I will say you are not available," Crane offered. She seemed to contemplate the offer for an instant, but sat up a little taller.

"Let me shower get a coffee, I will be good as new," she suggested, putting on her best brave face. She stood to leave shedding bits of armor quickly and handing it to a tech that appeared to return it to the armory. A cleaning crew appeared to mop up debris and blood, human Draxion, sweat and pulverized metal from the blast.

"Blake is with me but in the medical bay we took a nasty hit, he got knocked out," stated Ulua. "Wait, he is calling from the medical bay saying he wants to help, up to you sir," finished Ulua.

"If Blake thinks he can handle it then I believe him. Haley is on the way to Utko's ship, it is less damaged. Get your ship to a workhorse for repairs, it looks pretty severe from here," he was looking at a holographic model with a long list of flashing warning messages. *Was Ulua reckless, not used to his new ship? That thing is beat up at least he is okay can't have our legendary holy man blown to bits.*

Crane had tried to hide Ulua in the vast flagship with a guard around him, he thought him too valuable a symbol in the coming fight. The Nonuck would have none of it, he said as if chanting, "I go to fight maybe die for my people, until we hold the heads of the wicked brothers, the empire is no more. My path leads all the way to the imperial citadel, to the Hill of Weeping." It seemed an oath or pledge, Crane wouldn't hold him to it but didn't think he would have to such was his zeal. So he gave him a ship and crew,

some from the prison and vortex, some from Regal fleet. Blake promised to look out for him but got himself blown up. He too was important to the mission of changing minds.

“Yes sir, we lost a few good people. They all acted bravely. Strange to survive for seventy-five years and die in this way, so close to liberation,” observed Ulua.

“Well I hope you are right about the liberation but these two surprise attacks make me believe we are in for a rough ride,” finished Crane. *It could have been much worse*, he thought, rubbing his tired eyes. *Glad it wasn’t*.

He descended the stairs to Andu’s dark lair of flashing indicator lights and buzzing, whirling robotic links and units. He could barely make out the brilliant mad scientist in the dull light.

“How are you holding up Andu?” Crane asked, needing a favor but not wanting to abuse the good nature of his blue friend.

“Commander, I am fine weary but feeling lucky I wasn’t under Drake’s charge,” answered Andu. *It was an attempt at humor, but too dark and too soon, or perhaps it was a weird form of praise*, Crane mused.

“Yes that would have been unfortunate though you might have had the ability to save them from the damage,” Crane replied, intending to compliment him.

Andu seemed to ponder that and said, “It did seem strange that their shields suddenly went down, and coms too.”

Crane looked stunned, he had believed they didn’t raise their shields, their coming down meant sabotage. The idea truly frightened Crane but it made sense in a way. “Yes, look into that, see what you can find out when you have time,” he suggested.

Squeezing Andu’s shoulder in support, Crane offered, “Great job as always, I am lucky to have such solid people that I can depend on. I need you to get with Foss when she returns from her hunting party and eventually organize two away teams. Figure out who is in good shape physically, mentally and sustained little damage or losses might have some specific knowledge or usefulness for such a dangerous mission. Things are never what they seem and without a way to assess what the Three Rings might need we will simply send them what we can.” Crane ordered. Andu sensed the urgency in what the commander was saying and began right away.

Within an hour a small contingency of ships were stocked and sent off at full speed directly to the planet Abur and another group to aid at Shatook. He had learned of its historic importance and reasoned if there was a fight brewing or in progress Shaz might be key to it. It was imagined that if the three rings were pinned down they might be in need of immediate assistance.

They sent a swath of vessels including medical and workhorse crafts, all loaded with extra provisions and supplies. It was of course a risk to break up the fleet, if they met a much larger fleet they would be in trouble, if the whole fleet waited until it was repaired the rebellion might be crushed. The fleet was sitting on a few new ships, was in alright shape supply wise and the workhorse units could grind out more materials along the way. Crane honestly had trouble sleeping at night, worrying about the three rings. He hoped the ships might arrive in time to make a difference.

They jeered and mocked us from the citadel walls.

We froze in the ice,

but our hearts were much colder,

The animals died,

some men too,

Sickness spread through the siege camp,

Tent to tent, whore's lap to whore's lap.

The food grew meager and rancid,

The mood dire,

as dry peasant bread.

(The Siege of Namur, From the Lost Writings of Baxius, 10th edition)

Chapter 21 Run to Ground

It isn't that far to the wormhole with any luck the forces might stop firing long enough for a little of the fleet to escape. They came out of nowhere it seemed, a routine patrol suddenly a full onslaught. Tyler kept playing the moment over in his mind while he struggled to try and sleep a little. It proved hopeless and he returned to the command deck, his first mate Drew was also there she looked to be in daze. She finally noticed

him and gave him a weary smile. He returned it but doubted it had the same effect on her that it had on him.

How had so much happened so quickly? Tyler pondered the recent events and felt a hundred years older. He collapsed into his chair, and stared out into the velvet of space. Captain Tyler had been restless and had his crews practicing numerous scenarios, advance of the battleships and destroyers. He had heard of a trick from a captain Vasca, of Regal fleet, the claw formation. She was said to be fierce, young and quite the innovator. He had his team of cruisers and frigates drop into the odd formation that in the end resembled an oval disc with point ships at either end, guard ships on either side and the frigates in the middle. At the appointed moment the forward portion would collapse, becoming a four pronged claw. A cruiser at the center would then be lead, cruisers above and below port and starboard would strike in like pincers. The frigates lighter, faster could pummel a large ship before it could react. Key was for the formation to be done perfectly and of course for the ships to act like one weapon. *Hotheads and loose cannons and the whole thing was no good full of vulnerable spots.*

They were also practicing shield shifting, moving shields from the front of the vessel to the belly then to aft of the craft. The faster a crew could do this the less energy a ship expended and the smaller the risk of exposing a weak spot in a ship's energy field. In extended engagements both were of great importance.

The goal of the trip through the area was to rendezvous with Liberty fleet on their way towards Nextos. They found a graveyard instead of debris and lost ships. What was worse, they were scheduled to pass Regal fleet in the contested region of Neuman and they were also not present. A fleet moving about for years at a time across vast areas might find itself isolated without a hint of the larger war. The idea of being the last Planetary League fleet sent a chill through any crew member that dreamt of it.

When the flagship Justice suddenly exploded with a thousand direct hits from completely unseen craft, terror spread over the fleet. With a shift in the scanning his cruiser was using and they could determine where the ships were and fire at them, but visually they still weren't there. Lieutenant Cassidy proposed a large round usually used for ground bombardment, he reconfigured it to set off a magnetic field before exploding. The bomb would have the ability to pierce shields with such a field, he theorised it would

expose the craft. The massive explosion that followed knocked out the Draxion flagship and a few other destroyers, and sure enough, there they were. About seven hundred ships, far too many to engage after the immediate losses that the Justice fleet had suffered and the disarray the fleet was in. No one seemed to be in charge, most of the battleships and destroyers were lost because of Tyler's training exercise a large group of cruisers and frigates were spared the carnage. Tyler was nowhere near the rank to take charge of the fleet but someone had to.

"Cruisers and frigates back into claw formation, let's cover the remaining battleships," ordered Tyler desperately.

"Aye sir." came the reply.

As they moved in a group of bombers and fighters approached they had been training as well. "We can help cover you," offered the fighter commander. The fighters split some stayed on the bombers that dove towards the closest Draxion destroyer and the others remained with Tyler's cruiser group. Vasca's formation worked well, the fleet battleships were able to turn about, get back into formation and finally return fire. The bombers moved on from a battleship and then another destroyer, the claw formation continued to be effective, fast and not something these Draxions knew how to respond to.

Aboard the battleship Solidarity, admiral Ford, gave the order to form up around him as the new flagship and to make for the wormhole leading to Hadrian space. Hadrian space was restricted, it was only possible to pass on a very narrow path and out again. The whole system was closed off and secretive. It would be a desperate act to flee towards the portal, a retreat but there seemed little other choice. The fleet was only a patrol in friendly waters, six battleships, ten destroyers, and thirty cruisers, four workhorse units, two medical, one carrier and two subs. Only one battleship, one destroyer, the carrier and the twenty-five of the cruisers remained, everything else had been lost. Judging from the way the battleship was being surrounded it would soon be gone as well. The final destroyer and the carrier were torn apart leaving bombers and fighters with nowhere to return to. The battleship split down the middle as its core erupted, knocking out a few friendly bombers and fighters but also a Draxion destroyer. Some of the remaining fighters and bombers seeing they were lost turned in on the Draxion ships on suicide runs, slowing their advance and putting holes in the Draxion

line. Scattered frigates and cruisers, no back bone of battleships, no experienced officers to shepherd them they passed into restricted Hadrian space, some thirty desperate vessels.

Chapter 22 A Hard Lesson

Derrick of the battleship Nemesis, was always an outspoken critic of commander Crane. He usually felt he knew better than him, could do better than him and was sore about being passed over for fleet commander. He didn't care about being considered insubordinate in fact it was kind of a hobby. Crane never pressed for disciplinary action, or demotion, he would mostly just crack wise in return. There had been instances of straying out of formation, or attacking before ordered to, that came out in the wash, but another commander would have said something or done something. Crane would make a snide remark in the dining hall as they passed, "Still learning to fly that thing I see," or "Fall asleep at the wheel?" Derrick would reply "Yes commander asshat," or "Quite right commander dickhole," just low enough that Crane would have to ask, "What was that?" "Oh nothing," he would reply. This would force Crane to make a scene to insist he heard Derrick say something which he would then deny saying, so Crane never took the bait he just grinned and kept walking. Sometimes playing the same game just out of reach, "Nice one golden boy," or "Jumped up peacock." Crane's remarks would boil his blood, then it passed and he would begin to think of how to rile him next, it was fun he actually missed it.

They had nearly been friends as kids, both powder monkeys, but found they were fighting for the same scraps as war orphans raised by the fleet and soon became rivals. They fought over a girl long ago, had numerous misadventures, had gotten in trouble together, out of trouble together, it was a long winding story. Then disputes over card games or while in training together, but there was also a matter of style and approach. Short cropped black hair long ago Irish and English Crane, square jawed and solidly built, was never flashy about anything. Wavy blond hair, suntanned (from a machine) tall and handsome Northern Italian Derrick, tried to do everything with style. He bragged, dropped names, exaggerated, all of it a cover, everything a big show. A mining camp whore chaser with perhaps a drinking problem, for sure a gambling problem and

definitely a rash of complexes. He rose slowly in the ranks. Despite believing himself to be brilliant and boasting of his own greatness. He was once a promising pilot but couldn't get along with a squadron, any squadron. Yet the war mowed people down and many less than worthy young men found themselves in positions they would never be ready for.

Derrick waited for the other officers in an empty conference room *for yet another mind numbing meeting. Had he already pushed his new leaders too far?* he wondered. *Was this to be a rebuke? Not their usual approach,* he thought. When he had a chance to sit alone with his thoughts he grew desperate, he needed the attention, an audience to feel important. Just sitting in the dark room he knew he was a sham, that no one really liked him, those that he might call friends drank with him out of a sense of obligation, especially groveling captain Frank. If he were wounded like Crane had been would anyone worry for him he doubted it. The worst feeling was he found himself often asking, "How would Crane handle this problem?" and it ate him up.

Little by little as he had to make increasingly difficult choices and watch other leaders make poor decisions, he gained some respect for Crane. Crane held a rare meeting, Hubbel and Adler constantly held them, seemingly to hear themselves talk. They chided publicly to the point of humiliation, they spoke down to everyone, and they grew isolated as the fleet began to doubt their leadership.

Most of their ideas turned out to be at best, failures, at worst, disastrous. People had died from their poor judgement, how many more would have to die for them to act wisely, think things through, ask for advice. The knowledge of the fleet had gone with Crane, Fulton, Andu and as much as he hated to admit it Vasca. Only a handful of seasoned officers traveled with the Shadow Fleet, including Derrick. More and more, he had begun to think in Crane's terms, follow his example.

Alder and Hubbel arrived with Frank, another captain that had left the Regal fleet. There was no greeting or niceties they dove right in, the fleet was a mess, they were heading towards a disaster in the imperial system, a potential problem in Phedria if they encountered a fleet there. Then they said it, "What would Crane do, do you think?" He was grinning on the inside though his guts knotted up too. Crane had been right, he should be leading this fleet and they had just admitted as much. They were perhaps

beginning to believe the Draxion and Regal fleet's suggestions that Phedria would be a bloodbath. A maiden voyage of one ship would be fraught with uncertainty, a maiden voyage of a thousand experimental ships, all at once was ludicrous. They left the vortex full of fire and zeal and only realized they had pushed the ships too far with too few crew to monitor them and a hundred other little blunders that led to one great big one.

"Crane would turn us all around and return to the vortex. He would put us in a holding pattern until the crews were ready. He would train formations, his formations that he or Vasca dreamt up, he would get workhorse units processing and troubleshooting. He would dry dock ships that didn't have enough crews. He would eat dinner with his crews, joke with them, make them feel confident, even the knuckleheads." It was all true and the opposite of what was being and had been done. Crane never boasted or strutted about certainly never chided in public in some egotistical meeting.

Frank grinned for a flash and then returned to his dry look. His white bald head was shiny as if he had polished it for the occasion, his thick cheeks sagging, worry showed in his eyes. Ole Cue Ball the men called him to his back, *what did they call me? Derrick wondered.*

"I guess you have been laying awake thinking the same thoughts as me," offered Frank. He seemed eager to be in some way compared to him, though physically and mentally the opposite. A dim witted cruiser captain, that would always be a cruiser captain, not worthy of something else. He sort of followed Derrick around like a puppy, never picking up on that Derrick didn't really want him tagging along. Secretly Frank was happy to see Derrick suffering a bit, he had never seen him admit weakness or failure.

The statements hung in the air, like rancid passed gas, everyone looked pained in response and no one wanted to comment on the embarrassing stink. An awkward silence followed.

"That is why Crane is unfit to lead," stated Hubbel, his bravado returning. Even Alder looked concerned, as if the Fleet Commander was leading everyone to their doom. Derrick wondered how long Drake lasted in Abur. His information suggested that was going to be a brutal fight, but he never revealed his information for fear they would insist upon him going there instead. Mostly he wanted the new ship, the state of the art battleship had turned out to be a half baked prototype, that maybe should have

remained at the secret base, until it was ready. The ruse was up, they needed to hear what he knew but they still were not impressed and refused to believe his secret account of Phedria, Derrick had the feeling of sinking into a deep bog. They would not listen, they would not be deterred, glory awaited.

Derrick snuck off to the main hangar packed with ships in dry dock. Blink, it's melted looking lines and weird curves never quite looked like a ship to him more like a microscopic creature. He boarded it from its lowered ramp, the crew were busy running checks, trouble shooting the craft. Test pilots to him always had the aire of people already resigned to death, unaffected by much. They viewed Derick with distaste, even dred. Especially captain of the Shadow Brett, a one time Gorgon, he towered over most people, had the bulk of Traynor and Alexandria, but a very keen eye. He put on a serious skeptical look. He was usually good natured and easy going, except with cards and he knew Derrick as a braggart and cheat and was still sore about the money he lost to the peacock of a man.

Derrick smiled trying to disarm Brett hoping he might see beyond his past grievance. He approached with caution and pleaded, "Listen I haven't really the authority exactly, but remember that info you gave me about Phedria? They aren't going to heed it, I need you to get to Crane in the Abur system, it is our only hope. Not ours really the Planetary League and what is left of it. Besides if he has made contact with the rebels there then we might be able to survive a bit longer." He felt the familiar flicker of insubordination flare up in him and found he was happy for the first time in a long while.

Brett pondered his words and realized he was right, things were serious. He scratched his chin and offered a compromise, "I need to gather intel on the Imperial Planet and Darka system, those are my current missions. The leadership here believes we will slide into Trulak and immediately attack the imperial world, I do not believe them. I will head to Abur after surveying Darka. I can send my intel via up link if there is a fleet left to report to." The image made Derrick's blood run cold and he clearly didn't say in jest. He needed to double his efforts, he needed to know as much as he could for what was coming.

Chapter 23 Deep in a Lair

Another sorceress lay dying on the floor. Uzha stood over her, his anger tensing his whole body, his hands balled into fists. The chamber was octagonal, supporting pillars were carved to resemble giant figures that held sacred items, the heart of offering, an amulet of power. Flickering in the light of pyres and candles they seemed to move than tower they appeared to move.

The ceremony had not worked, the spell was nothing but words. He had been promised new abilities, strength and clairvoyance none were granted.

The newly slain priestess of the Draxion Death Cult was the twelfth the sacred number, he was sure she would prove successful. Her pure blood flowed into the grisly designs on the temple floor and right up to his boots. The lesser agents of the order froze and said nothing barely seeming to even breathe struck with terror as if cast into stone.

High above the Draxion plane the rocky precipice rose. Atop a grisly citadel was built a tangle of walls and towers of iron and stone. Twelve thorns seemed to crown the hill with a diamond in the middle that loomed like a cruel guard over the poor town. The final complex was said to ever echo with shrieks and was named the Hill of Weeping. The fabled diamond shaped keep the final of twelve towers, the lair of the monsters Uzha and Shega.

His secretive brother the toad Shega remained even deeper beneath in damp dungeons and places of suffering. His extensive chambers, the stuff of nightmares, were filled with grotesque creatures that croaked and slithered. A rank reptilian stench crept from the rock hewn pockets like festering wounds.

Through a veil in a secret room, he watched Uzha try the magic rites that proved fruitless. Shega was not one to try such supernatural trickery, he preferred base political conniving and espionage, *of those efforts you could rely. Greed, lust, craving power or position, those were things that could always be exploited.*

He soaked up the last minutes of the beautiful sorceress sensing her life drifting out of her flawless body, it aroused him, he stroked his tiny member watching her die. Cruelty was an aphrodisiac for both brothers though the temple whores and other prisoners only feared being used by the giant Uzha.

Uzha howled like a wounded beast, he drew a giant golden sword and swung it wildly about the room. Raging and spinning about like some delirious dance. Temple attendants fell, candelabrum, statues, tapestries were torn asunder and the priestess was run through. Elegant golden chairs were splattered with hot blood. Finally the emperor ceased, threw his sword to the ground, stood fuming and panting. Failure all around him, in Trulak, in Abur, all of his spies, assassins and ships, his uneasy alliance with the Mercenaries and Hadrian, all of it brought him only defeat. Calming himself, Uzha approached Shega's secret chamber. He whispered his lips very near the veil, "It is time for the final plan, make everything ready."

Chapter 24 How Now to Proceed?

Abur system held three major solar systems, two minor, a nebula and one dead zone. The planet Abur orbited one sun, months from the wormhole at Nithta, Darka or from the vortex. It had a few moons, an asteroid belt, several gas giants that were uninhabitable and the planet Miladic in its solar system. Gutah and Tuktah orbited a second sun much closer to the vortex wormhole and in a system with Pretah, Draul and Qualtah.

The Abur Nebula formed another natural barrier hiding Miladic and Abur. Thousands of light years across it swirled with impossible purples and blues. It is said the royal blue stone is symbolic of the nebula regarded as a distant creature in ancient times that haunted the night sky. So massive that it was visible from many worlds and always present in the distance. Very little of the nebula was explored as it played games with navigational computers, shields and sensors. It was assumed anyone that ventured there would soon be hopelessly lost and not venture out again.

In between a barren rock spun on its own not attracted to any solar system Shatook. Home of the fortress Shaz and somehow key to the Abur Union. It was fought over time and time again. It is said that even in ancient times a poet once wrote, "its inhabitants built, wall after wall and keep after keep and no bit of sand or stone has been spared blood shed."

The dead zone was vast and formed a barrier that allowed the Darka to survive unnoticed for some centuries. A few barren rocks, and icy asteroids were all that the

system held and the journey across it was long. The discovery of a wormhole near the barren system meant it could be skipped altogether and the Darka were suddenly found. They fell victim to the Draxion aggression, factions that craved the empires of old, newly born, and spreading across many worlds.

Darka became the slaves of the slaves, they were wiped out for sport, they were the punch line most jokes. Those that survived did so with great cunning, fleeing, hiding or in rare cases fighting back. A wormhole from Nitha led directly to Planetary League space. The Nitha system had been controlled by the Nitha and Dithta, two related races of creatures somewhere between lizards and insects. The first allies of the Earth descendants their world destroyed by solar flares. They wandered and fled, turned away by planets and races of people, hunted and eaten by others. Stumbling upon a group of Earth explorers they were studied and communication began. The Earth descendants rescued the Dithta and Nitha helped them settle in a barren uninhabited solar system, which they renamed the Nitha system. Many light years distant from the wormhole that leads back to the Milky Way. Giving them the materials needed to colonize the worlds of the sector, they thrived and shared their advanced technological ideas with the Earth people. As they began to rebuild industry and cities from the memory of their lost worlds, the Earth descendants also prospered. The first charter of the Planetary League was formed, the Darka arrived soon after. The Nitha, Dithta and the Earth folk aided the new refugees.

It was learned that the Abur system was a safe haven for Darka and that many distant ancient relatives lived there. A joint Nitha, Dithta and Darka mission was launched. Though distant, from the wormholes at least but closer to the sun, the worlds of Gutah and Tuktah were settled by the three races equally along with some Earth descendants and Trulak. When the portals were destroyed and the wormholes lost, these worlds were isolated and strangely enough thrived. With a large amount of time and no contact there was little knowledge of what was going on on those planets. The fleet would get a chance to gain new information on them, perhaps pick up new allies, or of course enemies. Exploration always involved risks, what unknown dangers and hazards awaited them it was impossible to say.

The route through the vortex was little known and the two worlds still remained hidden. Another wormhole led back to Phedria conquered by the Draxion, it was hostile territory and ever a threat. At one point the Draxion ventured into the region and set up a mining operation on the world of Pretah and several other large asteroids. When the war broke out and portals were being closed the operations were thought to be abandoned. Through the operations on Draul the colonies became known as Free Milladic and aided the Union of Abur and Planetary League with raw materials and greenhouse grown food.

The Planetary Fleet sent out reconnaissance craft to look for signs of the Mercenaries or the Draxion on other abandoned mining worlds and asteroids. The rest of the fleet and surrendered Draxion would orbit Pretah on high alert, for fear of further sneak attacks. Crane set out pickets, small squads of ships to guard the fleet from further orbit. A fleet wide ceremony was held for the fallen and to console the various crews and officers grieving and in shock. The medical units were at capacity, the workhorses were bursting at the seams with repair orders, every ship was damaged, every crew a little rattled. The threat of a surprise attack from an invisible fleet kept everyone understandably on edge.

A meeting was called through a holographic conference room on the Regal to assess the situation and get thoughts on moving ahead. The various holographic images began to appear in the meeting room, Haley, Vasca, Foss and Simms attended in person sitting next to Crane.

“Two shadow fleet destroyers, two shadow fleet cruisers lost, two carriers and one battleship lost. Two hybrid modified ships from Regal fleet lost, one a cruiser, the other a frigate. Numerous ships majorly impacted including Endurance, all ships report injuries and some damage twenty bombers and sixteen fighters lost. Many ships lost personnel from marauding parties. We were boarded seventy-five times in the many hours the battle lasted. It is clear we need new strategies in dealing with blitzers and boarding parties, beginning with more combat training, weapons training for rank and file crew and staying tight, those of you who already had that training. But I am open to any suggestions or ideas that might help the fleet out with the growing problem.”

Crane paused, the weight of the task growing heavier, "We recovered an incredible amount of escape pods from most of the lost ships, the butcher bill sits at twenty thousand souls lost." The virtual officers all shuffled their feet, fidgeted nervously, Haley hung her head briefly.

The reconnaissance data arrived during the melancholic pause.

Haley spoke up, "We have replacement ships in dry dock produced in fold space but no way to replace the battleships and the carrier. We will shuffle crews as needed and begin building new fighters and bombers once repairs are finished. We sent out dredging crews to sweep the area of the battle and bring back wreckage that might be reused and have obtained a large amount of resources."

Crane interjected, "The mining operations on Pretah and the asteroids are old, outdated, but functional. We are working with the free Miladic and other Draxion defectors to upgrade and improve the old equipment. A small detachment of Gorgon commandos has landed and deemed some of the asteroids and other planetoids safe. They are still in the process of searching others, there are many, it will take a bit of time. Seeing how awful the Hesch fanatics from Draul were, we don't want to take any chances. If there are pockets of the mad folks we need to root them out." More nervous fidgets and a few head nods of agreement went round.

We are sending down workhorse engineers and some from the Shadow Base to get the ore that is present sent up immediately and to see about extracting what we need to build spare parts, munitions and on one of the asteroids, process raw materials into fuel. The liberal assessment is that we should be able to replenish our stores completely. An enormous warehouse of proteins was also uncovered on a space station, and will be shipped up to the kitchens for food supplies. A massive chunk of ice has been discovered and was dragged to the area for the mining operation's water supply, we will convert it for our needs. Fortunately many of the surrendered Draxion are familiar with such operations and have requested to work with the Free Milladic already present, which I have allowed. Any comments or questions so far?" Crane asked.

"The rest of the surrendered ships, what is going on with them?" asked Olma of the Corsair who was actually en route to Shatook.

“A mixture of things is happening, some have joined the remains of the Noble fleet, all of the Union ships having been lost. Others are patrolling Pretah and the mining operations, or joined with the Abur rebels. We are all ultimately in the same current fight. If peace should one day be achieved it might get strange but for now I do not see a conflict in letting ships join the Abur or stand alone to patrol newly acquired operations as Milladic instead of Draxion. Some of the Miladic among them have requested crew spots on our new ships, which helps. Those who are sympathetic to the Miladic have also requested that some of the surrendered ships be crewed by them and only them. Which is happening, we are reassigning folks so that there are designated Free Milladic ships and all the Miladic ships are ready to fight. As the ships are being repaired, they will appear to be more like League craft to avoid confusion in battle.”

“Sir, what is the status of Endurance?” asked Blake.

“We have numerous crews detailed to Endurance. About three hundred people including commander Drake and his command team were lost, but the ship is nearly operational repairs were begun during the battle, hoping to save lives and get the thing back into the flight. We have an incredible support team.”

“Here here,” came the group knocking on desks and tables in a show of support and gratitude.

Simms jumped in, “As well some of the Shadow Base engineers and builders that worked on it, are eager to rebuild it with some improvements, they claim,” a few snickered at the after comment. “Going through some of the logs we have determined there was a lot of user error, the green crews overlooked a great many potentially hazardous issues. Yes It was glitchy, problem plagued and they want a chance to iron those issues out. Having seen battle for the first time many of the engineers are rethinking a great many things, the next batch of ships will reflect their new understanding,” stated Simms.

“Will you be moving to the flagship once it is safe to,” asked Utko.

“I hadn’t really considered it but it would make sense in some regards, I will have to talk it over with my crew and command team,” offered Crane.

Vasca cut in, “Ah sir, we already discussed the possibility and everyone on the command team is eager to move to the vessel. In our down time we have continued our

training on the new ships especially the citadel class ships. You need to be the fleet commander from the most powerful ship.”

“Oh about that,” Crane hesitated, “We should take a vote, alpha order is only binding in a crisis, we need to decide who should be the permanent Fleet Commander. Does anyone want the job or have a candidate for the job,” Crane finished. Everyone was grinning, some even laughing. Then it was realized that he was serious, following the actual protocol all of the commanding officers were eligible and could throw their hat in as a possible replacement.

“I nominate admiral Crane to be fleet commander,” offered Vasca, unsure if that was what she should say.

Leaning in close to Vasca he whispered, “I appreciate the loyalty but sorry I can’t be nominated by anyone from my own ship that would seem like a coup or mutiny against the fleet.”

“Ah sorry didn’t realize,” she gave a cute little embarrassed look not at all in character for Vasca.

Fulton then cleared his throat and said, “I nominate Admiral Crane to the position of fleet commander.”

“Any objections?” asked Simms, who knew the procedure but had never witnessed a field nomination first hand. He was busy documenting it for fleet records as it was happening.

“Does anyone second the nomination?” asked Fulton.

Ulua said, “I second the nomination.”

Olma of German descent was an older balding man but with a strong broad build. He fidgeted a little and looked concerned, “Is that legal?” he asked.

“Oh yeah Ulua is an official commissioned officer and battle proven,” clarified Vasca.

“Here Here,” a few cheered.

“Ah I guess I missed that,” said Olma sheepishly.

“No, we only made it official right before the battle. He also has diplomatic status which allows him voting rights as well, a Miladic representative,” explained Simms.

“Ah ha and Utka too?” asked Captain Greeves of the Potomac, his light brown hair and deep set eyes, left to him by his Austrian ancestors.

"That's right," offered Crane, "Diplomat to the Free Draxion People and a commissioned officer as well. It is a new era, exciting things never before seen happen every moment," joked Crane, a few snickered in response.

"Okay then, any final objections or concerns?" Simms looked about to see if anyone wanted to comment or had any further questions. "If there are no objections we'll vote. I have an objection stated Crane. People laughed, thought he was kidding or playing a prank but a brief flicker of a nervous look passed over his face and they realized he was being serious. He rubbed his chin as he sometimes did while trying to form a diplomatic phrasing or at least less incriminating. "Before I was acting fleet commander," he began. "Well there is no easy way to say it. We didn't know what had become of Union, Justice and Liberty fleets. We were scheduled to meet up on our normal patrol path but got diverted into the Phedria wormhole etc.. nearly a year ago. That was too long for me to go without information. The Shadow Base command thought the war was soon over and didn't take my concerns seriously. I thought we needed to know what was left. We had escaped a sneak attack had the others? Logically we need every ship and soldier we could muster to storm Trulak and take the imperial world. What size force could we bring to the fight? To me this seemed the most important information we might gather. Besides, did the survivors of the other fleets need our help? We had Lt. Reynolds aboard, the Shadow fleet technicians, and the miracle worker that is Rocky."

"Here here," a few added.

Crane started up again, "Reynolds had been trained on Blink and Shadow but had no equivalent ship. His skills of spying and scouting were being wasted as was his ability to train someone else on those advanced ships. It was in clear conflict with my position and orders but I had Rocky secretly create two versions of Shadow and Blink. Two I launched as soon as the battle was over and they are now our scout ships in Abur. The others, I sent through the vortex and back out towards Neuman and Nextos to gather information, see if they could find survivors of the remaining fleets. We have some information now but at the time we were completely in the dark, the Shadow Base in their arrogance thought our fleets didn't matter, only the Shadow Fleet mattered, it was one that would end the war and make all else irrelevant." To the last thought some shook their heads in agreement and disbelief or exhaled deep sighs. It saddened all

present to think that those lost were of so little value to the command and that no effort was to be made to recover them. Crane continued, "If I weren't fleet commander and these actions were discovered I might be subject to a reprimand. As it is I can hardly punish myself but confess my actions now publicly. I was doing what I thought best served the fleet and the planetary league but am aware there is a chain of command and each of us has a mandate and I went beyond both." There was a little silence, it would or might be serious, charges might normally be drawn up, but perhaps not in a time of combat. Commissioning a ship, dispatching reconnaissance, creating covert missions, all without the authority to do so could definitely be seen as a kind of mutiny. "If you can live with this information I will accept the nomination, if not I will nominate Fulton."

Fulton smiled and shouted, "All in favor of Admiral Crane becoming Endurance fleet commander Crane, say aye."

A hearty, "Aye!" rang out.

"I would say that is settled," suggested Fulton, smiling widely, "Congratulations again, I would gladly move to the Regal," added Fulton.

Crane was hesitant the new ship was very different to what he had known, it was quite a risk. Could he have enough knowledge of the behemoth to be ready for the next incident? He wondered. He knew the Regal like a second skin, he had been on it since he was a child. *But if this war is to be won, ended, I should take all the possible advantages afforded.* "Okay if you are all in agreement then we move, anyone from the Regal that wants to remain, should that is fine. The Endurance was running short handed, we will fill all the remaining slots with Regal folks. I am sure Fulton will not mind. I have been informed that the Union fleet survivors need stations too so we can fill up the ships we built on the way and all of our current craft."

"No I do not mind and really want to bring some of my people to the Regal, we will sort it out. We now have just enough crew having lost a few ships, the folks from the escape pods will be reassigned, etc." laughed Fulton. A light murmur rose up.

"Okay so what is next?" asked Blake.

Crane took a swig of coffee and motioned to speak, "We will stay put, repair, stock food, fuel, and munitions. Give all our crews a chance to recover from injuries, wounds or

fatigue. Take on as much raw material as our vessels can hold for the long journey ahead. The asteroids and planetary mines have everything we need, either left in an old depot for passing fleets or in the mines. We were also in pretty good shape as far as our supplies were concerned now we will certainly be ready.

A contingent from the Abur Union have met with us, some fought alongside us, many were lost. Some of the Abur forces are bogged down on Draul, a planet they only recently secured from the nasty Hesch that made such a mess in the last conflict. I am told their home base was destroyed and was a place of legendarily bad events for centuries. There is concern that something else is brewing at Shatook so the fabled three rings have split up to be ready for an attack there. They at least know we are heading their way, are in their system to aid them which will hopefully give them hope if not courage. Besides perhaps our presence will draw forces away from them giving them time to work on their defenses. To that end I have sent Olma to aid them should they need our help with supplies and materials to break a siege or recover from one. We also have our scout ships sweeping huge areas in all directions. Our protective picket is also scanning for communication or any movement. Until we have contact with Draxion or Mercenary forces in the system we do not really know what to expect or in which directions we should travel. For now we will follow fleet procedure planet hop secure and assess the whole system. Hopefully this will free up resources for the Abur union, uncover any brewing threats and allow us time to repair our equipment."

Andu entered the conference room, "Ah Andu please present to everyone your findings," requested Simms.

The Darka seemed nervous but took a seat next to Simms. "Ahmm, well I have determined a method for detecting the Draxion fleet's that appear hidden." Andu typed in mid air on a holographic keyboard that only he could see. The information passed to all of the officers on all of the ships throughout the fleet. "With this parameter while scanning, it will no longer read as a void or some sort of anomaly, it will start to define the size of the fleet, and begin to decode their mirage system. Within a few minutes it should be able to define the individual crafts and have a more precise estimate of the size of the fleet."

Utko looked stunned, "You broke the code of the system?"

"Yes I suppose we did," laughed Andu.

"Who is we?" asked Olma.

"Haley, Vasca, Crane, Traynor, Simms and myself," Andu answered, as if struggling to remember everyone involved. "Utko and Ulua offered some suggestions as well," he finished. He launched into a ridiculously technical diatribe of how he discovered the signs of the system, he described as more of a mirage, than an invisibility tool. Depicted how he isolated the data and then reversed it, created definition based upon the negative space that was visible. From the silence and blank stares, it was clear no one understood much of what he had said.

Fulton beamed, "Well done son! Well done all of you, you have robbed them of their secret weapon."

"Here here," came a few more accompanied with desk and table drumming.

"Wait a minute?" asked Simms, "If you comprehend it, can you imitate it?"

A murmur of understanding and speculation went round the virtual conference.

"Yes, I believe I can do that, I will get right on it," replied Andu, already back in his perplexing mind, trying to solve the new problem.

Crane stood, "Alright if there is nothing else, we have a bit of time and are well positioned if attacked. Until we receive word from our guys in Phedria or the Abur that we are needed for something specific, we just need to relax. Make sure your crews get some rest and all of you. Everyone fought hard and bravely and you all normally work with diligence and for this I salute you. There is plenty to do but you just need to keep everyone busy not drive them to breaking. We can get everything done we need done in this system working steadily, not in a frenzy, we don't need that, it leads to accidents, a dip in morale and unneeded fatigue. Good luck to you all with your efforts, of restocking and repairs." Crane saluted and the holograms saluted back and then disappeared.

"Waiting, how I hate waiting," grumbled Vasca with a deep sigh.

Foss patted her on the shoulder, "Come on you can take it out on me, I still owe you a black eye," and off they went to spar.

Crane sat for a moment in contemplation, his crew wandered off returning to stations or taking a rest. It was as if a mighty load were on his weary shoulders, but he dare not show the strain. He enjoyed the hum of the ship, its massive engines, coursing power,

and white noise of life support. He had known the sound his whole life, it put his mind at ease briefly. He took a deep breath, put on a strong calm face and stood.

He left the conference room at the very top of the massive flagship. Stepping out onto the bridge a swirling cosmos seemed to greet him. No longer at battlestations the giant dome exposed a canopy of celestial bodies. The fleet stretched out in front for great distance, shuttles and repair craft darted about, bombers and fighters drilled. A distant but massive nebula, the uncharted blue cloud of Abur could be seen. Worlds spun out there some that humans had never visited or few. He knew there were countless new creatures and races of people, cultures, histories that the Planetary League only had a vague notion of that he would soon encounter. A year before the league seemed near death, the possibility of gaining new allies meant it might go on and be stronger than before. He wished they were exploring for the sake of knowledge instead of patrolling and aiding in a sprawling galactic war.

He felt a strange tingle as if the emperor were standing just behind him, a dagger in his hand. He imagined the Draxion plane said to be a rocky barren waste, the city and its walls and far above the imperial citadel, crowned with the twelve towers of the Hill of Weeping. They would need a plan, an incredible team, to breach the walls of that dread place and thousands of ships and soldiers to even get near it. He contemplated the masses of troops, guns and craft spread out as far as the eye could see and a chill ran across him, *perhaps I should get some real sleep*, he mused.

He partially shook off the feeling, *they were heading away from the imperial system and the lair of that monster*, as a supposed punishment for his alleged cowardice. He grinned thinking he would get to discover incredible things in Abur and that it was not much of a rebuke. Someday soon they would regroup, *they would find and define the battlefield, command the engagement, but much had to happen before that could play out. They would certainly draw the mad emperor's forces like flies to a carcass, yeah need that sleep, my thoughts are dark.*

They survived against very bleak odds and needed to go on doing so, but he took a little comfort in the knowledge that there were some friendly waters out ahead, and somewhere the three rings of Abur.

End Book I

The Journey continues in Book 2

The Hidden Worlds

And Book 3 The Hill of Weeping

Glossary of Characters

Caution items listed as Spoilers! Give away plot details present later in the narrative.

Adams-Captain of the battleship Allegiance. Mentor to captain Tyler and his crew.

Adler-Admiral of the Shadow Fleet citadel class ship second in command to Hubbel.

Adur-Princess Adur, poet, daughter and adviser to the king of Abur (formerly the duke of Abur) sister of Nahdur. Becomes a spy and assassin. One of the fabled Three Rings of Abur.

Andu-Darka logistics officer in particular data processing and relay, grew up with Haley as a refugee, they see each other as nearly brother and sister. It is in part why Haley knows Darka, Miladic culture so well. Uncanny ability to see through the data to spot patterns and hidden information, a bit of a mad scientist, odd eccentric appearance and behavior. Some of his strangeness was from being raised on various warships as a sort of refugee half in the Darka/Miladic world half in the world of the fleet and Planetary League. Crucial adviser and assistant to commander Crane and his introduction to the rich Darka culture. Through Andu he learns a unique appreciation for Darka people and seeks to protect and promote them in his fleet.

The same could be said of Captain Derrick, they were also lifelong friends, Andu being one of the only people alive to see worth in the egomaniac Derrick. In truth the only redeeming quality and the only thing Crane Derrick could agree on was the need to preserve and protect Darka people.

Alexandria-Commander of the Gorgon commando combat unit. Trained in covert, ground assault and landing party tactics. Statuesque platinum blonde woman of striking features and athletic build.

Spoilers!

Takes on advanced students, at first a rival of Vasca for Traynor's affections, but wins out becoming Traynor's lover and best friend. The only female Gorgon Commander, promoted by Crane after being rejected by every other fleet. Proved to be brilliant, an

innovator and willing to take on the extra task of training a larger amount of crew in combat and self defense techniques.

Baxius(the Conqueror)- Full name Uzha Schoka Baxius the Great or Baxius the Conqueror Legendary Miladic military leader from antiquity 3rd Age. Conquered and unified the kingdoms of then Trulak (later renamed Draxion) which was later named the first Empire, with himself as emperor. Miladic/Darka/Draxion can live as long as five hundred years, but three hundred years of age is more typical, it is believed Baxius reached about five hundred years of age. His reign was therefore the longest at three hundred fifty years.

As his empire imploded he disappeared and became a hermit living in a cave where it is believed (but is unconfirmed) he wrote his great works found a century after his death by accident. He disappears from imperial records but why is unknown. There are many opposing historical theories about the life, disappearance and death of Baxius. One theory is that the hermit was not Baxius at all but a mere mad mystic. Some of his court writings, journals, and accounts of his language lead most scholars to believe the hermit was in fact Baxius. The style of his writing, the depictions of actions and battles he was known to have taken part in, the timing of his disappearance and the evidence of the hermit, all point to Baxius the former emperor.

Quoted and evoked by the fanatical and warriors that pushed for the first war with the Planetary League, and the destruction leading to the dark age. Lived and fought centuries before and fought with swords and arrows long before space travel. Earth historians have said of him “Part Constantine, part Charlemange, part Genghis Khan. It is unknown how much that is attributed to him actually came from him or was fabricated to justify actions much later. It is said that after him, no soldier would go to war without reeking of the words and images of Baxius.”

It should be noted that so key was Baxius to the mythic image of Miladic people that every leader since his time tried to evoke him. In the time of Draxius much was amended and redacted from the record of Baxius to serve the goals of Draxius. The idea of the first empire arrived at that time as he sought to form an interplanetary empire. The notions of racial purity that proved so dire to the Trulak and Darka first formed through Draxius and the much was renamed including the planet Trulak (to the

Draxion). The death cult or blood cult became the state religion and foundation for the warrior class of Draxion. The language of Miladic people split into Darka, Miladic and high imperial Draxion as did the cultural identities. Purges, relocations, camps, prisons, genocidal campaigns and war enforced the concept of the Draxion as a separate race of people. The image of Baxius was twisted to advance the fictitious claim that he would have wanted to create such an empire.

The usurpers Shega and Uzha, rebuilt and moved into a later copy of the Baxius fortress, hoping to claim his history but also because they so decimated Draxion while conquering it. Uzha also changed his name from Thega to sound more like a historic emperor, the first and greatest in history.

He was in old age a chronicler and poet. His greatest work was the epic poem the Song of War of which no complete copy exist and some things that have been attributed to Baxius are debated amongst scholars and possibly from later writers.

For more see below

Excerpts Song of War appendix I

Excerpts from Baxius appendix II

Blake- Harold Blake, young sandy haired corporal raised to sergeant by Crane. One time student of the imperial language and Draxion culture trained to be a diplomat to the empire became a gunner instead. Becomes an interpreter and a sort of diplomat to the Draxion and Miladic.

Bixa-name of a Draxion ace pilot. The word means white dragon his fighter was named the Sky Terror. The name for the galaxy which is home to the Miladic, Nithta and Dithta people.

Brett-Sammuel Brett stealth agent of the ship Shadow, spy reconnaissance and commando. Enormous, muscular and very tall, an impressive and imposing figure but with a very kind reserved look in his eye.

Spoilers!

Recovered from a vortex where he was locked in time and space in a kind of suspended animation. Actually therefore more than a hundred years old.

Cassidy-Lieutenant Cassidy of the cruiser Willamette cannon crew.

Commander Crane- William fleet commander icy blue eyes metal gray and black hair, muscular square jawed fit but not bulky. Fulton was his lifelong confidant and mentor. Grew up on ships as a war orphan. Invented and created many tactics, and combat innovations that have made him successful in naval warfare but unpopular with conservative officers.

Lieutenant Davis- Cannon crew one time superior officer to Blake.

Derrick -Captain of the Battleship Nemesis. Rival of Cranes thought he should be fleet commander.

Spoilers!

Left the Regal fleet to travel with the Shadow Fleet intent on taking the fight directly to the imperial system of Trulak. Becomes fleet commander when things go very badly en route.

Drake- Fleet commander of the Endurance.

Spoiler!

Died entering the Abur system, leaving his citadel class flagship severely damaged and leads to Crane taking over the fleet.

Draxius I- Founder of the first Draxion Empire and Draxion death cult. In the time of Draxius much was amended and redacted from the record of Baxius to serve the goals of Draxius. The idea of the first empire arrived at that time as he sought to form an interplanetary empire. The notions of racial purity that proved so dire to the Trulak and Darka first formed through Draxius and the much was renamed including the planet Trulak (to the Draxion). The death cult or blood cult became the state religion and foundation for the warrior class of Draxion. The language of Miladic people split into Darka, Miladic and high imperial Draxion as did the cultural identities. Purges, relocations, camps, prisons, genocidal campaigns and war enforced the concept of the Draxion as a separate race of people. The image of Baxius was twisted to advance the fictitious claim that he would have wanted to create such an empire and many chapters were destroyed or suppressed related to the mythic leader. Draxius was obsessed with putting himself in the center and as the most important figure in history.

Draxius XIV- General Draxius, the fanatical leader of the ground forces, royal guard and assassins, and the newly created tanks. His hair white with age, his light purple skin

carved with crevices and canyons. His eyes were still keen and his presence ever strong despite his late age. A very skilled and able general though cruel and willing to sacrifice many lives for the glory of the empire.

Drew-Thai Drew co-pilot of the cruiser Willamette.

Dua- Knight of the Draxion order, one time smuggler, spy and assassin hiding disguised as a peasant farmer. Becomes a general to the King of Abur. Unknowingly watches over the true heir to the Draxion kingdom.

Spoiler!

Joins and leads a revolt against the empire becoming a trusted advisor to the three rings of Abur.

Falat - Slave boy, stable hand that mysteriously has exceptional knowledge, reading and writing ability. Owned by the cruel Duke Hagib.

Spoilers!

Becomes a scribe to the Duke of Abur, eventually a tutor to his children Nahdur and Adur. Half Darka and Miladic heir to the throne of Draxion. Kidnapped and sold into slavery. Rises to power through the duke of Abur. Becomes one of the five rings, one of the three rings. Proves to be an adept scientist, inventor and innovator, pushes Abur out of the dark ages, Middle Ages and into the early stages of a modern era. After marrying Adur has claim to the Abur throne and his blood right of Draxion, making him potentially very powerful and poised to unite the system under one banner.

Fatah-Monk and advisor to the Duke of Abur, advance tutor of the Nahdur, Falat and Adur.

Finau- Master knight of the Draxion order teacher and mentor of Dua. Tutor to the three rings.

Foss-(Sigrún). The name Sigrún is traditionally a female name meaning "victory rune". Sigrún was a valkyrie of Norse mythology.) Vossdóttir (translates to daughter of the waterfall) communications officer vital to helping coordinate the movements and concerns of the entire fleet, one thousand ships strong. With angular features and very high cheekbones she often appeared to be scowling or angry even when she wasn't. Her earth descendants were Danish and Norwegian that settled in Iceland. She always wore a small pendant with a norse god on it, Holle. Her hair was a startling white gold,

her eyes the blue of a wolf, which led to her nickname “wolf.” Like all of the immediate crew she was a student of ancient warfare and history and an intense sparring partner. Like most of the women in the fleet, she was fierce, cunning, and exacting.

Spoilers!

Is found to be the most capable with a blade, and an assassin of incredible talent. Is taken under the wing of Ukto and Ulua and trained to be a super warrior.

Frank- Captain critical of Crane left to join the Shadow fleet mission sidekick of Derrick, follows him around like an adoring fan. Awkward and eager for attention but seemed to be lacking the skills to become a commander of merit.

Fulton-Admiral Arthur Fulton mentor of Crane “the old man” oldest active officer though he looked old as a young man already since his hair went white early. Thin walks with a cane from several war injuries. Full of colorful expressions and humor. Brilliant tactician and strategist he was really second in command of the fleet. Thinking he might one day retire but for certain would die he placed Crane in charge of the fleet hoping it would have a future with someone younger. Admiral of the battleship Endeavor.

Spoilers!

Becomes admiral of the Regal. His father Charles works in the engineering area and his grandfather Marshal was recovered from the vortex at the age of twenty-five.

Greeves- Captain of the Potomac his light brown hair and deep set eyes, left to him by his Austrian ancestors.

Spoilers!

Promoted to Olma’s Corsair, Olma promoted to the battleship, Pioneer. Former spy, lifelong friend of Olma, tried and failed to smuggle Falat to safety as a boy.

Gutua-Daler Gutua a historian of some notoriety.

Duke Hakgib- Henchman of the Draxion Emperor. Imperial names end in gib and feature hard sounds hak or hat. It is an artificial naming convention designed to create a greater distinction between Miladic/Darka cultures and the ideal fabricated culture of Draxion.

Haley -Logistics, Joyce Elle Haley of Celtic and Norse descent had skin so white it often looked as if she were glowing. A light smattering of freckles could be detected on her in the right light. Tiny feisty and very animated, she was by far the best storyteller of the

group and possessed a keen wit and sharp tongue. Her short cropped red hair was always a little wild like her green eyes. raspy voice. Also the most supportive of her friends and fellow officers.

Spoilers!

Grew up in a Miladic Darka refugee community, learned Miladi and Darka as a child, along with many of their tales, legends, and history.

Becomes known as the Triabeck, based on a legendary or mythological creature but also because she was in fact born in the Triabeck vortex. The creature was said to have hair of fire but skin of snow. She is associated with peace and the bringing of gifts. A prophecy spoke of a lost Nonuck (or Miladic holy man) returning from the vortex with the creature of the vortex the Triabeck (literally one born of the vortex) to lead the blind to the correct path and bringing about peace.

Hidu- Darka spy, black marketeer and sometimes smuggler.

Hubbel-

Spoilers! All Fleets Commander of the Phantom Fleet. Lost for 75 years in a vortex.

Jenkins Family-Davey a powder monkey, Doris leader of a bomber squadron and Shay leader of a fighter squadron.

Kivi- Off to Drew's starboard elbow sat Kivi, a petite icy blond who was actually born in Finland and the rarest of creatures Earth born. Kivi handled shields and weapons systems throughout the craft as well as monitoring enemy movements.

Ladu- Andu's mother, surrogate mother to orphaned Haley. Instilled a reverence for both Darka and Milladic culture and language in Haley.

Laita-To Tyler's port side sat Fatu Laita round Samoan, that ran logistics for the ship and other cruisers when needed.

Myers- Older admiral, wiry thin older conservative commander, often critical of Crane and his innovations and new ideas. Very bigoted against Miladic and Darka folks.

Natua- Wife of Dua, one time surrogate guardian of Falat. Becomes tutor to the royal family and the creator of the Abur educational system. In history is regarded as the Mother of Abur education.

Nahdur-(prince of Abur)- Warrior, spy, student and friend of Falat whom he sees as his brother. Becomes a crucial military leader for the Abur rebellion.

Heir to the throne of Abur.

Nutur- King of Abur (former Duke of Abur) father of Nahdur and Adur. Usurper that takes over Abur worlds and unifies them into the Union of Abur. Names himself king without a real basis or justification except to provoke war with the emperor.

Olma-from the destroyer Corsair Admiral Olma an older balding man of German descent and a strong broad build.

Spoilers!

Tried while a spy to watch over Falat as a child. Failed but attempted to smuggle Falat and the royal family to safety, lifelong friend of Greeves.

Reynolds-Spoilers! Lieutenant Archibald Reynolds spy, reconnaissance and covert agent of the Shadow Fleet trained with Brett and Fulton senior but was left out of the planning and without a spy craft. Crane deploys him, defying his orders and sensing the need to have more information.

Rockwell- Admiral Rockwell or Rocky, head of the workhorse fleet. Brilliant, inventive and a great innovator, Crane's ace in the hole, secret weapon. Developed defensive aspects that allow the manufacturing and medical units under his charge to be able to defend themselves. He also found ways to make them more agile and efficient therefore less of liabilities in a battle. Previously ships loaded with ore for refining, for raw materials and fuel were slow lumber beasts that the fleet spent too much time defending. With gun turrets, lighter faster vessels the workhorse units took part in a fight rather than needing to be shielded during one. Over time helped Crane's Regal/Endurance fleet become the fastest, strongest, and most advanced of the PLS fleets. His son Oscar was stationed on the cruiser Willamette.

Shen- Admiral of the Challenger. Of Chinese descent.

Spoilers!

First to make contact with Three Rings of Abur and the union for which they fought. His fleet decimated, he regrouped and aided Abur without sanction but he decided out of necessity.

Simms- Defense officer, Simms a light brown skinned man whose ancestors were from Kenya and England, possessed a look of keen intelligence though he had almost no facial expressions in most interactions and never spoke with his hands preferring a

closed physical appearance. *Stiff as a missile but an exceptional officer*, chess player, reader and equal history enthusiast was one of the only officers that didn't like to physically spar but preferred chess, cards, and discussing history. Avid reader he traded books often with Crane, Haley and Fulton which was how those three connected socially. There were many late night book discussions over wine, coffee or a meal. Though often passionate about a variety of subjects his mannerism never showed it.

Shega-Uzha's brother, the so-called prince Shega, was a lump of a man, small and round, with fat little fingers and a slug of mouth that seemed to droop. The real brains behind the empire, preferring to operate in hiding behind the scenes than be seen as the leader of the operation.

Tadu- Darka spy and raider.

Treala-Queen of Abur, wife of Nutur, mother of Nahdur and Adur. Practical side of the kingdom of Abur runs the financial end of things behind the scenes and well. Has a firm understanding of the diplomatic and legal language needed to present, interpret and pass laws. Crucial to the construction of the Abur Carta, the legal document that binds the Union and its member planets and nations.

Traynor-Helmsman, Traynor of Hungarian and Czech descent, had a pair of piercing black eyes and olive skin. His face could be best described as square, his head a thick block that matched his broad shoulders and barrel of a chest. *Somewhere in there, there should be a neck* but it always appeared to Crane that it was missing. When he was first enlisted he was an illegal fighter. He never got caught, but he showed a spooky head for mathematics that landed him on an officer's track and away from the bar fighting. He still sparred with Vasca and others to keep limber, but she could never get the hang of his dirty street fighting and always lost to him. "There is no honor or grace in a real fight," he would remind Vasca.

Spoilers!

Has a crush on both Vasca and Alexandria but becomes the laters lover, long term partner.

Trula- Leader of the Haka Trulak. Of the blue green race of seal people original nomadic inhabitants of the planet Hakat.

Tyler-Captain of the cruiser Willamette, part of the Justice fleet.

Ukto- *Spoilers!* Former Draxion admiral that defected to the Regal fleet. From the border of the Abur system a world recaptured by the Abur union. Becomes a chief advisor to the fleet and Crane in particular. Helps train the fleet on fighting the Draxion.

Ulua- *Spoilers!* Nonuck or spiritual leader shaman of the Miladic, rescued by the fleet. Seen by some as a holy man or messiah returned to end the empire. Was lost in the Triabeck vortex for seventy-five years. The subject of several prophecies he becomes a sort of ambassador to the Miladic/Darka peoples and introduces the fleet to Miladic mysticism.

Uzha- Emperor of the Draxion empire named Thega changed his name to Uzha to copy the first Draxion emperor. Was a giant among others of his race, his shoulders and chest were broad. He was also modified in unnatural ways to be made even larger, gain abilities and appear more fierce. His brow was heavy making his eyes seem tiny fierce slits in a head of granite. He appeared to be chiseled entirely from stone, his body was bulky but fit. It was easy for Uzha to intimidate anyone in his presence either sitting on his throne or staring subjects down. His body language always suggested a threat of violence, even his hunter eyes seemed lethal. The figurehead of the empire the brains being his brother Shega.

Uztat-The imperial guard. Armored from head to toe in red and gold plating and coated in the force field of the suit, nothing but a shield piercing sword would do anything to them.

Vasca-Captain of the flagship Regal. Vasca whose ancient descendants came from Portugal and North Africa. She had wide shoulders from hours of fight training and kickboxing, deep brown skin, gray Berber eyes. She preferred her jet black hair clean shaven at the sides with a mere spike of survivors of the laser razor atop her large head. She had captained a destroyer which was annihilated. Though she acted wisely and bravely she lost her command for a time. Vasca tended to be bitter about the loss of the ship and the costly war until her move to the command ship, which Crane requested. Crane did as much as he could to let her run the ship, acting as fleet commander and the day to day stuff was left to Vasca. He tried to lift her up, make her feel valued and remind her that she had actually been promoted. As the chain of command went, the flagship out ranked everything else and normally one would be

promoted from destroyer, to carrier, then to battleship then to the flagship and only if you proved exemplary.

Spoiler!

Had a crush on Traynor and felt she was a rival for his affection with Alexandria.

Glossary of things, places and concepts

Abur- A planet in the Abur system capitol of the union of Abur. Home of the the royal family of Abur.

Abur System- A planetary system including mostly Milladic and Darka worlds.

Badu,” Haley’s nickname for Andu, a kind of mythical bear creature of Darka and Trulak myth. The bear was mischievous but very clever. At one point dressing as a man and becoming king. The stories of Badu openly mocked the Draxion kings and fanatics.

Bixa-The Bixa being a mythical bird/dragon creature sometimes able to speak and of great intelligence, also depicted as a treacherous fierce creature and at other times a mere stead for some mythic hero.

Bixa- The name given to the Nithta/Dithta galaxy. Said to have been created by a fiery mythical creature.

Bixa- Draxion ace fighter pilot that had the arrogance to name himself after the dragon-like creature.

Blink - *Spoilers!* Top secret super fast craft from the Shadow fleet, capable of invisibility. Piloted by Captain Samuel Brett.

Blitzer-Draxion super fast or jump craft, especially built for raiding, saboteur, or landing parties. No union or league equivalent.

Challenger- Battleship of the Noble fleet commanded by admiral Shen. *Spoiler!* Becomes flagship of the few survivors that are saved by Abur forces.

Corsair- Destroyer commanded by Admiral Olma

Darka-Blue race nearly driven to extinction by the Draxion empire. Interrelated to the Miladic but their traits and unique culture were attacked by the Draxion.

Darka the world- Glowing green world near the Darka wormhole and portal. Mostly a watery world with enormous seas of glowing green algae. Three continents and

thousands of island exist, as well massive underground cities and towns. Neighboring planets became Draxion mining outpost and industrial areas. Original home world of the Darka but they spread to the entire Abur system and interbreed with Miladic forming a race that was both.

Dithta A race of creatures somewhere between lizards and insects. First allies of the Earth descendants along with similar interrelated race Nithta. Hunted and nearly wiped out in the second age. Once hunted for their blood, which is used for limited telepathic ability and as an aphrodisiac. Communicate telepathically and occasionally make clicking chirping noises, it was thought originally that they possessed no language. A human inventor created the first telepathic translator and Nithta and Dithta could finally easily communicate with the members of the planetary league.

Dithta system Controlled by Dithta a race of creatures somewhere between lizards and insects. Other side of the planetary league wormhole and system.

Draul- Rocky planet in the Abur system.

Draul Nebula- Nebula on the edge of the planet Draul. Entry into it was advised against as it tended to cause all manner of electrical problems for spacecraft.

Draxion Order-Based around the royal house of Draxion. Knights and monks serving loyally for centuries were betrayed and slaughtered to create the Draxion Empire. Order originated in antiquity and predates any of the current kingdoms and the first empire. Began as a warrior code, and then was associated with several religious orders and later royal figures. Eventually kings surrounded themselves with knights and the warrior code became a secret knowledge which only knights were privy to. Becomes the Abur Order.

Draxion empire- Oppressive cruel empire comprised of five Milladic/Darka races (Miladic, Darka, Bleka, Schoka, Draxion) with purple or blue skin and green hair. Originally a kingdom, later a federation, several warlords took control and formed the empire. As a federation they were once allies of the Earth descendants and a member of the planetary League, but fought to control both and a hundred year war ensued. Ruled by the two brothers Shega and Uzha. They created fake heraldry and royal lineage to justify their rule when forming the third empire. The first dates back to antiquity with Baxius the Conqueror. Draxion culture over time attempted to become a

distinct race of people and purge “unclean races” from its ranks. Dithta, Nithta were slaughtered and not recognised as higher beings but some sort of animal species. Darka were nearly wiped out and their blue skin became a symbol of impurity and undesirable races. Draxion therefore became a rally point for fanatics seeking to harken back to an imaginary time. An imperial dialect evolved, mythic origins of the empire were invariably tied to Baxius, though he himself was Darka and Miladic. They nonetheless inhabited worlds stolen from other races and either enslaved or wiped out the original inhabitants. A reasoned peace would occasionally break out and Darka and Miladic people would resume living in harmony, until the next Draxion fanatic rose up to start the hate machine again.

Endeavor- Battleship commanded by Admiral Fulton.

Endurance- *Spoiler!* Citadel class battleship largest class of ship developed at Shadow Base.

Fatuk-oasis of and small village of shepherds and tenders of orchids in the region on the edge of the Draxion desert and mountains.

Five Rings of Abur- Nutur, Falat, Adur, Treala and Nahdur. Later there was more talk of the three rings Falat, Adur and Nahdur.

Focus- (the focus)- Miladic mystical concept. Earth words fail to translate the guiding philosophy of the Milladic, Draxion and Darka master warrior. Whole schools of philosophy have existed to try to explain, or at least discuss the idea. “It is considered a worthy life, the one that is spent in the contemplation of the Focus,” attributed to a wandering monk in the poem song of war. It is said that Baxius gave up his empire to study the Focus. It is often described as a moment of supreme understanding even if only a flash or glimpse. To live in a state of Focus is to obtain a very high level of physical mastery in the arts, sports, or writing. Focus therefore is often translated as mastery but also as supreme bliss or understanding. “Understanding the universe, through the understanding or mastery of one element of the universe,” master Finau once wrote.

Gorgon Group-The elite commandos stationed on the Regal and other battleships.

Used for small landing parties for reconnaissance or security to make sure an alien

world was safe to explore. Combined they can be used as a major combat force but are best employed as shock troops in support of an existing army.

They employ an ingenious body armor that mimics its surroundings allowing the troops to blend in with their environment. Tending toward heavy rifles and light cannons that won't slow them down they avoid artillery tanks or heavier equipment in favor of getting in and out quickly.

Hadrian Order-Order of knights originally from the planet and system of Hadrian. The stations on the wormholes were neutral territory maintained by a secretive planetary order that existed for that purpose alone, the Hadrian Order. Part of the conflict between the Earth descendants and the Draxion was over these gates. Several had been destroyed in the early years of the war isolating planets and bringing about a near dark age. As the neutral order was established the wormhole stations were gradually rebuilt. Sadly it accelerated the building war between the planetary league and the Draxion empire taking the fight across multiple star systems as if the dark age never happened. Both parties threw all of their resources toward an all out war trying to make up for lost time. Both parties fed propaganda that insisted that war was winnable and victory would soon be theirs. Twenty-five years later the war efforts had only grown more desperate, both sides more cruel and the hate sucked in thousands like blackhole.

Haifur -Draxion destroyer.

Spoiler!

Surrendered along with two cruisers and two more destroyers.

Haidid- Draxion destroyer.

Hakat- watery world of the Haka Trulak a nomadic group that having been hunted either went into hiding or fled to other worlds.

Haka-the creature, a kind of ferocious seal, amphibious creature from the world of the same name.

Haka Trulak- Nomadic race of blue green people named for the ferocious seal creature of the water world of Hakat. Led by Trula Haka Trulak in open warfare and resistance against the Draxion, it is his rebellion that inspired others to push back at the empire including the Darka and Milladic in the Abur system.

Hesch- Cruel oppression mountain top kingdom of the planet Draul. Their stronghold was in the two peaks known as the Twins. They vaguely resemble two hunkered over men and there was a tale that said the rocks were once living giants, transformed into stone. The place was associated with wickedness, evil, dark deeds and nightmares. First the two infamous giants punished by being made stone, later battles being fought over control of the twins, later its bridge, then the hollowed out fortress that resulted became the subject of horror tales around the campfire late at night. The fortress was said to house a particularly ghastly version of the Draxion death cult and was full sadistic places of suffering.

Justice and Liberty Spoiler! Two fleets lost to the Draxion due to their sneak attacks.

Liberty Spoilers! and Justice two fleets lost to the Draxion.

Miladic- The race of creatures, civilisation and culture of the Abur system.

Mercenaries- An organization of fortresses soldiers and ships for hire.

Spoilers! Rumored to be connected to the Hadrian Order. Have been aiding the Draxion but their true motive if any remains unknown.

Namur-Ancient citadel and walled city once the grandest kingdom in existence. Fell to Baxius and became mere ruins. Often the subject of ghost stories or featured in plays and novels that include spectral legions. Baxius himself wrote of the city often as a motif for something beautiful that was cruelly crushed. He referred to once as “that fantastic fragile Bixa that fell to a brute war hammer.” The Bixa being a mythical bird/dragon creature sometimes able to speak and of great intelligence, also depicted as a treacherous fierce creature and at other times a mere stead for some mythic hero.

Neuman-Ship building facility

Nextos-Battleground for the war between the Draxion empire and the Planetary League. Neighbors the Triabeck vortex Hadrian system and Draxion systems.

Nithta- Race of bug like people nearly wiped out, hunted for their blood, which was used for limited telepathic ability and as an aphrodisiac. Communicate telepathically and occasionally make clicking chirping noises, it was thought originally that they possessed no language. A human inventor created the first telepathic translator and Nithta and Dithta could finally easily communicate with the members of the planetary league.

Noble- Battleship.

Phedrian system- Heavily fortified mostly mining, ship building but a short hop to the next portal and within reach of the imperial planets connected to the Darka system and Nextos by wormholes. Comprised of fifty worlds, three solar systems, numerous artificial battle stations and sentries.

Planetary League- League, or group of planets and nations that included the descendants of Earth, Darka, Nithta, Dithta.

Potomac- Cruiser Captained by Greeves lifelong friend of Olma, of German descent.

Pretah-A mineral rich world on the fringe of Abur system home of an abandoned Draxion mining operation.

Resilience- Spoiler! Flagship of the Shadow fleet.

Shadow- Spoiler! Top secret craft from the shadow fleet. Capable of incredible speeds and limited invisibility. Captained by Sam Brett.

Shadow base-Spoiler! Top secret research center, Seven Five Zero, sometimes called the Shadow base.

Shadow Fleet- Spoilers! Top secret fleet lost in the Triabeck vortex for seventy-five years.

Shatook- Fortified planet of the union of Abur with the largest planetary defences in the system.

Shaz-Fortress on Shatook.

Spearhead formation-The slender spearhead formation gave little for the opposing fleet to strike at and turning about to strike would cause them to fire into each. As well, one side of each ship would be protected by the interior ships in the fleet as they rotated around no one ship was in range for long.

Stargate Titan-The Hadrian controlled access point to the Phedrian wormhole rebuilt after being lost in the Draxion war.

Three Rings of Abur-Falat, Adur, Nahdur.

Tohtuk- home world of Uzha and Shega the first that they had conquered.

Tousu- Prison planet penal mine colony in the Phedrian system.

The Triabek-The mythical creature touched by the sun, the ghostly white creature the bringer of gifts and messenger of peace part of a Miladic prophecy, said to live in the center of a vortex.

Spoilers!

Logistics officer Joyce Haley becomes known as the Triabeck. Based on a legendary or mythological creature but also because she was in fact born in the Triabeck vortex. The creature was said to have hair of fire but skin of snow. She is associated with peace and the bringing of gifts. A prophecy spoke of a lost Nonuck (or Miladic holy man) returning from the vortex with the creature of the vortex the Triabeck (literally one born of the vortex) to lead the blind to the correct path and bringing about peace.

Trulak the people- Nomadic race without a fixed allegiance found throughout the systems of Darka, Abur, Trulak, Neuman and Nextos in small numbers. Foragers, hunters, and sometimes raiders. Some of the Trulak sided with the Draxion and act as their marauders. Some went into hiding on various worlds, and still others continue to roam following their nomadic paths from centuries ago. The current emperor waged a war of extermination against the race, leading to some ironically joining his forces and helping to wipe out their own people. There were initially so many ancient clans that often had long standing feuds and grudges that it was easy for the imperial forces to exploit these perceived grievances and pit one group against another. The Trulak have no understanding of the idea that they are Trulak it was imposed on them, they might have been from Trulak but refer to themselves based on their families, clans and mythical or actually connections. For example, the babu or bear people, have a very dark blue skin similar to Darka and may only marry other bear people. The ut people or goat people the most likely to settle and raise goats, may only marry other ut folks. What resulted was separate groups that outsiders called the same thing Trulak but internally were not at all related. The chief of the Haka Trulak people (named after a kind of fierce seal creature) Trula waged an open war against the Draxion and encouraged his nomadic raiders to resist the empire. None of the green skinned Haka therefore joined the leagues of the Draxion marauders. They held out and fought on their original home world of Hakat. In ancient times they merely followed the seasons of the planet and roamed but in modern times some took trading and hunting on other worlds. During the closing of the gates or dark age, some of the nomads were stuck for nearly a century on other worlds they either settled or tried to continue their nomadic ways on their new found worlds.

Trulak the Planet- Large world in the Trulak system, an imperial stronghold.

Trulak system-Home of the Draxion empire, three solar systems, numerous worlds, including Draxion the planet, Utbecka, Tohtuk, Gruzha, Hakat and Trulak

The Triabek Vortex- Accessible through the Phedrian, Abur or Titan Gates and wormholes. Seems to be a place that defies the normal laws of space and time.

Tsunami-Spoiler! Ulua's cruiser, built while in the Abur wormhole.

Twins- Two peaks said to have been wicked giants transformed into stone. Eventually the stronghold of the Hesch kingdom was tunnelled out within the mountains. Becomes a place of legends and tales of terror. Milladic and Darka children grow up hearing fearful things about the place.

Union of Abur- Planetary league centered around Milladic and Darka worlds and races.

Uztat- Elite imperial guard. Armoured from head to toe and coated in a force field of the suit, nothing but a shield piercing sword would do anything to them.

Zatura- Fortress of a minor puppet leader. Famous for its many gorey towers and oppressive battlements.

Planetary and star systems Three systems of the Milladic, Darka and Draxion peoples. Abur home of the union Milladic, Trulak home of the Draxion empire, and Sadur Darka worlds.

Ship naming conventions and fleet specs(in order by size)

Fighters- Range from single pilot fast craft, to multi piloted heavy missile fighters.

Bombers- Multi-piloted craft capable of dropping energy pulses, acceleration devices and or traditional ordnance. Gunner crews and anti-missile systems onboard.

!Spoilers!

Cavern Base Alpha bombers faster, capable of invisibility and with strong more intelligent weaponry, prototypes that never went into wide production.

Drop ships- Used for deploying troops, engineers, Gorgon commandos, weaponry or supplies. Lightly armed, fast often open to the elements.

Spy Craft-Capable of extreme speeds and near of complete invisibility. Some of the most advanced vessels ever created two prototype craft exist from the Shadow fleet.

Light frigate- Small gunship with little capacity or crew.

Cruisers- Named after bodies of water. Potomac, Superior, Rhine. Fastest, light weaponry but able to strike fast and evade repercussions. Shield support ships, and battleships. Long but only five decks deep a typical cruiser was spare in what it had for crews, unlike a flagship or destroyer that was a roving city, cruisers had a few cramped bunks and tiny dining hall. When possible cruiser crews did shore leave on anything larger in the fleet.

Heavy Frigate- Larger gun and cannon ships not as agile as a cruiser able to house small crews.

Subs- Given fighting names Nemesis, Menace, Sudden Death. Missile and torpedo ships capable of massive ground barrage, and destroying flagships and battleships. Very limited self defense capability, usually need escorts or to be used in combination with destroyers and cruisers. Main tactical advantage is their design and shielding are effective in clearing mines and avoiding detection.

Workhorse class-Fabrication, mineral, and raw material refining and production ships. Capable of repairing, producing replacement parts. When not producing they have some defenses including very heavy shielding. Possess incredible propulsion so their heavy payloads do not slow them down.

Destroyers-After famous fighter craft such as spitfire, corsair, hellfire. Fast, heavily armed and capable of numerous types of assaults. Provide support to the heavier craft including battleships and carriers.

Battleships- Ideas or noble virtues, Endeavor, Constitution. Floating cities, largest most powerful guns, missiles, and cannons. Ground barrage material self contained with medical, production and repair capability on a small scale. A bit slower with less maneuverability but the backbone of the fleet. Imperial forces do not value or properly utilize battleships and do not have as powerful battleships as the league.

Carriers-After famous people. Repair and transport fighters, bombers, troop transport ships. Able to defend themselves but not attack craft.

Flagships (Fortress Battleship Class)-Named after noble notions Regal, Noble, Perseverance. Self contained fleet, dry dock medical production and ground barrage capable. Battles have been won by a flag ship alone. Doesn't exist in the imperial fleet, they rally around a normal class battleship as they emphasize attack over defense.

Citadel class (largest flagship)

!Spoiler! Introduced by the Shadow Fleet larger slicker version of a fortress class ship

Timeline

2000 yrs back Time of Baxius

1300 yrs back Wormhole travel begins

1200 years back Contact and Planetary League form, Earth descendants Darka, Dithta, Nithta are the first members.

300 years back war begins but is always resolved. Different races of the Draxion kingdom co-exist with only occasional violence. Milladic worlds still remained somewhat isolated.

75 years back, war escalated to all out war between the Draxion Empire and the Planetary League. The various races of the old kingdom still survive. Gates are destroyed, the war is paused as systems become isolated by light years without wormhole travel.

50 years back isolation, dark age. Planetary league nearly collapses, chaos, hunger, petty fighting erupts. Draxion imperial forces begin to wipe out various kingdoms and races.

Genocide and atrocities.

30 years Planetary League reforms. Draxion Empire continues to spread. The Hadrian Order begins to seize wormholes and claim them as neutral territory under the guise of claiming to want to safe keep them. Gates reopen wider galactic travel resumes. As does the old war. The empire emerges as the main player in the war, the other kingdoms remain neutral or in conflict with the empire.

12 years back The final fortress of the true Draxion Kingdom falls to the empire, eight year old heir to the throne is kidnapped and sold as a slave to a wicked duke. Sent to a newly conquered far away world he lives as a slave for a few years.

4 years back Kingdom of Abur was declared, bringing open warfare between the empire and the Abur worlds. Rise of the three rings. The true king is a trusted and important adviser to the king of Abur and his family but his identity is still unknown.

Present Staryear 3500 The planetary league is weak and struggling to keep from being defeated by the stronger larger forces of the Draxion empire bolstered by the

Mercenaries. Worlds that once supported Earth descendants and the league were aligned with the Hadrian Order, other allies have been wiped out or lack the ability to join the fight. The planetary league seemed to be in its last days.

appendix I
Writings of Baxius

When a soldier doubts his leaders he only half fights,
When he doubts himself he is already lost.
Legions wandered on,
Through barren wastes,
Leveled towns,
Burnt bare trees,
And rotting wheat,
On battered legs,
And blistered feet,
In wagons for wounded,
A few horses for the elite.

Ever the stone of doubt,
Like a weight pulling one down,
Into murky waters,
Vision lost,
Clatter of armor,
The only sound,
The ghostly passing,
Of campaigning host.

And on comes winter,
It whispers on the chill wind,
That no one will survive long,

Once it has embraced,
Like so many battles,
The new falling snow,
Will bury any trace.

(Excerpt Song of War, Baxius)

The warriors clashed,
With measured blows,
Swift swipes,
Or brutally bashed,
It mattered not in the end,
The field was theirs,
Victory the only story,
That would be told.

The enemy vanquished,
A sorrow spread,
A tragic loss,
Generals clever,
Soldiers strong,
The archer skilled,
The swordsman bold.

Wasted, scattered, torn asunder,
Like autumn leaves,
Exploding into color,
Then they were no more,
and upon the wind drift away,
Brilliant red and gold.

(Excerpt from the *Song of War*, Baxius 3rd Age Earth descendent addition.)

A Song of War

*Twisted and formed,
The lines of battle die
Arise reborn,
Waves of bodies,
Washed in hot blood,
Dreams of lives unlived
From youth torn.*

Also from the Song of War

*The young must learn what makes men old, what keeps them awake at night, replaying
their mistakes, the folly of youth."*

*"All passion and no patience, all bravado without balance, it is why in times of war
fathers bitterly bury sons,*

"Victory or scatter your ashes to the stars, your dust unto the dust,
For we are all like a besieged city that is consumed by the fires of war,
Like autumn leaves exploding into color and then they were no more
Upon the wind they drift away,
So is the last burst of courage and hope that will not see the light of day."

It is clear Baxius was captivated by the first people of Trulak when he wrote,

"Noble, clever, generous to a fault,
Cruel and devious,
gentle and flowing like wind,
Water, waves.

How can the Trulak be all these things?

Lost in the soul dance,
That spins round the fire,
Pounding drums moving battered feet,

Helpless to a desert trance,
Slave to an ancient beat.
Voices cry out in song, lovemaking,
A mix of scents and savory flavors,
Salty skin, perfumed limbs,
A simple drink or game of chance,
The fluttering tents, wild romance."

(From the Lost Songs of the Trulak, from Baxius)

The Beggar at the Gate Will One Day Wear a Crown.

The King's entourage spread in all directions for a day,
like a gilded writhing serpent,
Through valleys over hills,
Through woods across rivers,
But alas the king's gilded carriage was stuck in the mud,
There at the gates of the near town sat a beggar,
He wore but a simple robe and held an iron bowl,
He would take grain,
He would take water,
He would take coins,
Soup stew or porridge
and with each sip or bite,
The iron taste of humility.
The king sat impatiently,
From bored he grew angry,
He had noticed the beggar,
But truly thought him of little importance,
For of course he was.
Finally as laborers struggled,
to pull the carriage free to no avail,
he noticed the beggar anew.

“It seems we are both stuck on this road,”
Declared the beggar smiling,
“I hope to earn enough to eat,
Or something to eat directly,
And you hope others might repair your problems as well.”

The king already angry fumed for a moment,
How dare he address me as a common person,
How can he compare us even?

“Ha,” the king said, “but I will leave this road,
And sleep in a giant feather bed,
Caressed by beautiful women.

Wine upon their lips,
And pleasure radiating from their bodies,
A fatted calf awaits me and a hot bath,
To wash this dusty road from my memory,
And you will hold your iron bowl like a badge of shame.”

The beggar merely smiled and offered,
“I have not known hunger for long,
And oft have I tasted the sweet fruit,
Newly fallen from the tree for free,
When I was briefly cold I was warm again
As the sun did greet me.”

“When thirsty I had my thirst quenched,
And the water tasted like wine.”

So my good king,
I have wanted little,
And feel I have had much,
I could wish for the moon,
But would or could it fill me,
Bring me joy to have it?”

He stared for moment at the beggar,

Something gathered as if through a fog,
His face it was familiar,
He was once the king of this land,
He had thrown him out onto the street,
It was in his feather bed that he went to sleep,
The beggar notice the recollection,
"Ah good king strange that the beggar has worn the crown,
That now rests upon your head,
But for how long?
When will someone steal it from you?"
The king moved on but could not sleep,
Haunted by the face of the king turned beggar,
He resolved to ride out again,
and take his tongue from his mouth,
Silence the filthy ragged man,
That had so robbed him of his sleep,
He arrived at the same town,
But when his carriage door was opened,
And he stepped down,
He slid in the same mud,
that had so ensnared him,
He fell hard and did not move,
His crown rolled to the beggar's feet,
The townspeople gathered,
They marveled at the fallen king,
As if waking from a dream,
They saw the crown at the beggars feet,
And remembered their lord of not long ago,
"Our king," they shouted, and lifted him,
Placing the crown upon his head,
they helped him board his carriage.

(Song of War, Baxius)

Archers in little tents upon the backs of three hundred thousand beasts took deadly aim filling the skies with their poisonous arrows. Fire, smoke, ruins of a city wall littered the scene.

In the middle of the malay, a golden figure sat a sword across his lap nonchalantly eating a piece of fruit, untroubled. The walls breached, the enemy crushed under a hundred thousand feet, the last of the resistance was snuffed out, a mere candlelight against the vast dark. So began the first Draxion Empire.

Editors note: To Earth descendants the three hundred thousand creatures would resemble armor wearing elephants.

In the final campaign of Baxius before naming himself emperor he arrived at the worthless lands of the Draxion desert and mountains. Red stone mounds and bleak wastes, not thought of until all else of value had been conquered. In those days his entourage had grown circus-like. His once frugal tents and supply train, replaced by lavish golden structures, fine foods and wines from across the globe. Sampling's of his conquered lands, both a reminder of his victories and a growing extravagance. The once lightning king now moved like a giant gilded snail across the plane, through lush valleys and across mountain passes, increasingly less practical with each step.

They arrived at the oasis of Fatuk, a small village of shepherds and tenders of orchids lived in the region. They had nothing to plunder or steal so they merely watched the tent city rise with amusement and mild curiosity. A contingent of elders and merchants presented amphorae of water, oil, local wine and baskets of fruit at the king's feet, a traditional show of hospitality and welcome.

"I thank you and you people for such a greeting," declared Baxius with a haughty flourish of his bejeweled hand. Your palm wine is exceptional and your fruit succulent and rich, please join me, we have roasted a fat calf."

They feasted while dancers whirled and jugglers performed, a story teller recited, and servants hurried here and there.

The evening stars began to appear but the sun still linger in the valley somewhere like a reticent old spirit.

The guests full on wine, food, song and dance made their way to leave, not wanting to overstay.

For people of the desert water had a sacred status, all life, knowledge and prosperity was in some way equated to water. A king was therefore seen as a spring, a well and their song to the king rang out with such images. The chief elder, a kind of mayor, bowed low and began the formal speech of thanks, "Many thanks, many years, may many good things flow from you, oh king of kings."

"Ha king of kings," came a mocking cry from the shadows.

The next elder began again, trying to ignore the interruption, "May your children be many, and your riches overflow, oh king of kings."

"Ha ha king of kings, yes king of kings," came the squawk from somewhere hidden.

The king tensed once he would let pass but this second time brought him to a mild anger. The elders and merchants fled knowing a king riled could do much damage. There was still one verse to ancient ritual and it was left to the youngest merchant to dumb to retreat to utter.

Struggling to remember he began the last verse, stammered and fumbled, "Many thanks and warm tidings, may your wisdom like an ancient river flow, oh king of kings."

"Ha ha yes yes king of kings!" Came the voice again laughing a mad laugh, that echoed through the valley like the cry of a wild beast.

The king looked visibly enraged, "Who is it that cries? Find the one that makes this noise," the king demanded.

"It is nothing your highness an old mad fool, pay him no mind," insisted the young merchant.

"Take me to him!" ordered the king in a simmering rage.

They bowed and reluctantly took the king toward a cluster of crags, beneath a step like formation of red stone. A top the rocky mound, danced a slim figure in rags and animal pelts thrown together seemingly at random.

“Sir he is harmless, he tells stories around the fire and we feed him for this, sometimes he sings, sometimes he dances, he is a simple creature. I beg you to have pity on him, our children would miss his tales,” pleaded the young merchant.

“You let your children be instructed by the likes of him?” The king blustered.

“My lord, sometimes there is wisdom buried within even the strangest looking of books. We do not know why he knows what he knows but it is as if the knowledge flows through him like an unwanted guest,” explained the merchant. The king began to climb the natural steps worn by water and wind and time. He drew closer to the odd being examining him as he went.

With a low bow the weird creature offered, “Yes, yes ah yes yes king of kings.”

The king returned the bow as if the thing were some diplomat and accorded a morsel of respect. “Come come, king of kings, yes king of kings.” The slim hermit or wanderer or madman beckoned the king to follow. The king place a hand on the hilt of his jewel encrusted knife and was lead higher up the eroded steps.

“What are you called?” Asked the king gently.

“No name but some call me cruel, merciless time.” The king wondered if he was beginning a game of riddles and managed a smirk.

“Oh time you have been around a while I suppose,” the king quipped.

The hermit laughed a full belly laugh, “Yes time been around, very good, very clever. Come come king of kings.”

“I hear you enjoy telling stories?” The king asked, trying to figure out the slim thing in mismatched clothing, with eyes wild and hair like a riot.

“No no highness, king of kings, stories speak through me, I tell them nothing.”

The king laughed, noticing it was a strange turn of phrase.

A wicked wind whipped up and the king pulled his fine cloak tight against it. He shivered but as if a spirit had passed near him not from the cold. He felt his hair was on end, the tiny hairs on his neck crept upward. As giant towers seemed to appear before him, not towers, figures. Some standing, some sitting, some fallen onto their sides, others mere piles of shattered stone, a chunk of head here, a foot there.

“What is this place, tale weaver?”, he asked, suddenly fearing its name.

“Mound of the kings, oh king of kings, all ruins all rubble, all king of kings everyone,” replied the king’s guide gesturing toward the vast rock ledge, covered in the remnants of monuments.

The mad figure laughed his perplexing laugh and shouted, “Time battered crumbling statues, all forgotten, all vanishing, and so shall you be.”

The king turned to strike the impudent wretch but found he was gone, like the desert wind.

(From *Tales of Baxius*, Daler Gutua, Earth Descendents addition, Volume I Leading to an Empire.)

(Historic note: Evidence would suggest that in a vain rage or for other reasons known only to Baxius he built his grand palace and placed the capital of his kingdom upon the Mound of Kings. By building and using the statues of the previous kings he erased them from history. Some military analysts and historians have suggested that the mound provided water in time of siege and formed an impenetrable citadel of living rock. Some historians have suggested that the story was not really about Baxius the king though he is often listed as the king, but Baxius the mad hermit and storyteller of his later years.

This has been suggested as it fits descriptions of the former emperor and that no archaeological copy of the story exists that dates to the time of the empire. It has been suggested that the figure of Draxius was the king and Baxius the hermit. Draxius then forming the first Draxion empire at the same site.

Another and also plausible suggestion is that the fool or mad character of the tale inspired Baxius to become such a hermit towards the end of his life. A final theory has been proposed inferring that the king suffered from a mental illness that caused him to repeatedly hallucinate such characters, a sign of a kind of split personality. When the king crosses over to become a hermit the altered imagined ego then came to fore. Given the many similar stories, it seems at least likely that some of the figures were created for the tales or were figments of the emperor’s troubled mind either way dreamt up.)

The battered remnants of the legion,
Wandered in the dark,

The enemy too close,
For a camp,
To build a fire,
That might bring,
Warmth or cheer,
Tales of better days,
Real or imagined victories
and a tent against the damp,

Hearts heavy, thoughts like pitch,
They entered the haunted valley,
A place all travelers did dread.
For a great battle once raged there,
And the soldiers spirits there remained,
Or at least some said.
With a loathing, caution,
They did softly there tread.

It was a dark dreary winter's night,
When the ghost horsemen arrived,
Comrades of arms long ago fallen,
Their eyes like deep wells,
Easily ensnaring,
With faces gaunt and worn,
Showing the signs of their mortal wounds,
They stared out of the fog and gloom,
Morning light not yet forming.
But its soft flicker, hinting, warning.

The two forces pondered one another,
In the silence of the grave,

None moved,
scarcely a breath escaped their lips,
To rise a cloud,
Evidence of their life.

In contrast to the rows of dead,
That seemed an endless stream,
As if all restless soldiers,
Did there dwell,
From ancient times,
To current strife.

A chill ran through those that did witness,
The spectral steeds and ghastly riders,
Archers, spearman, the high, the low,
All with a strange light,
They did glow.

A raged creature examined the hosts,
rode slightly forward and asked,
“For what did we fall?”
His voice was like scrapping thin ice,
That would soon,
Send one into a
Frozen lake,
To move no more,
It made the tattered army quiver, shake.

Petrified no one dared answer,
Save one,
Whose lord had fallen,

And he had no one to further serve,
The bells of his hat,
Once amused his tiny body too,
He had no dance for the vanquished,
Or the survivors,
With a bow he approached.
“For the kings gold and land,
And other men’s fortune,” offered the court jester,
“Yet will you call me the fool?”
(Excerpt from The Song of War, Baxius)

There was once a king that dreamt of having the grandest palace that ever was. A place of wonder, that would inspire and be spoken of far and wide. He hired a team of architects, builders, craftsmen, and laborers all the most proficient in their fields. The finest stone would be procured no expense spared no, no flourish or ornamentation refused. First rose the mighty walls finished with towers and crenellations. In the middle the grand gate house its own mighty stronghold. Then the procession way lined with remnants of conquered lands and monuments to the kings’ glory. One crossed a bridge over a shimmering pond and into the inner sanctum. Rich gardens spread and fountains murmured in resplendent courtyards. Entering the main gilded greeting hall the visitor felt as if looking into a warm oven. The finest furniture, tapestries, paintings, sculptures and instruments adorn the vast space. Beyond one climbed an enormous flight of stairs into the chambers and salons of the palace. Each room with a different exotic theme, a play land for the royal, prosperous or powerful. Leaving the guest rooms one would enter the final portion of the giant edifice. The kings chambers. A towering library, galleries, a lake size bath and pools with cascading waterfalls and nymph filled fountains all for the king’s private enjoyment. Bedroom after bedroom, study after study, dining halls upon dining halls each more ornate than the

last. Above it all the king's master bedroom with a massive covered bed with the finest fabric festooned. Looking out from his sprawling balcony he could survey all of his kingdom.

The project went on for years and years just when the builder dreamt they were done the king would come up with some new design, some fantastic idea or flight of fancy. "A salon for butterflies," he ordered. "A forest with animals that I might hunt where I might ride enclosed so the weather won't worry me," he requested. "A private theatre complete with props and players, a riding track with portraits of my horses," and on and on, each desire more extravagant than the last. Years and years more went by.

The people grew hungry, restless for some hope or progress, he fought wars regarding a map in his titanic map room, but never ventured forth to see who he was fighting. His builders fell from scaffolding, were crushed beneath stones, even drown in his many pools and ponds. The king cared not a small price to pay for his profound vision.

The original head architect was long gone, replaced several times in the long epoch. A new architect arrived he was lean and grim to the eye, he dressed in mourner's black. The king had another scheme, some new plan, and the new designer said, "My lord we have already completed that come see." The king was surprised, a bit worried that perhaps his mind was going. He took up his goblet shouting, "Of course I know it is done show it to me!"

The black clad man led him through the secret servant passages, that the king had never seen. Skinny children nursed from diseased women, pox and sores on their faces, his many bastards languishing in the shadows. Weak old men and women tried to carry trays of rancid food and drink thinking they heard a bell somewhere in the palace, but would stop suddenly lost in thought. Step after step they descended down, down, down, into the dark spaces.

Young servants fornicated in hidden corners, drank stolen bottles from the king's vast cellars and laughed while speaking of the old fool. The king was outraged and demanded they be turned out, the architect said, "Yes of course your highness here let us show them the way." Open yet another hidden door they entered a dark stone chamber. A maze the king thought, as I requested years ago, he was intrigued and wandered into it distracted, forgetting his purpose, he stepped further in.

They say he never found his way out or up to his room again or out to the sun but wandered from room to room lost and confused, half remembering asking they be created, half discovering them perplexed, having their concept long ago forgotten. The land thrived and the king was forgotten, lost in his crumbling monument until it was regarded, a haunted old ruin.

(Attributed to Baxius, from The Tales of the King, probably 3rd Age)

The king sat in his tent, a huge pile of pillows surrounded a fire pit. Giant pitchers of wine, trays of fruits, cheeses, numerous baked items, and sliced meats filled several tables. A beast slowly turned over a fire by a slave. A gleaming pot caught its fat and another slave occasionally ladled the liquid over the rotating creature. A pop and crackle of sizzling meat and steady fire were the only sounds. The campaign was over, there was only a feast to be held, looting, plundering, and enslavement and the final kingdom would belong to the king.

“So what else?” came a small voice the king was not sure if he had heard it, or thought it. He searched for the source of the sound and found a hunched over frail monk. The clouds on his eyes suggested he was blind or nearly.

The king was outraged, but even for a king it was a crime to harm a monk, doubly so one of such a fragile frame. What of the riches and glory that came from war, he thought anger firing him.

He tried to calm himself and answered. “I would not say war is my focus, good monk, I would not claim to know my ultimate goal.”

The monk gave a low bow and spoke, “Forgive me I smelt your roasting meat and pastries, heard the musicians tuning up and the wine being poured and I said I must meet this great man who has such things. He must be a man of profound wisdom and learning. Surely he has obtained his focus, for all good things follow a clear and sharp mind, it is said.”

The king was stunned, he did have many things but they were not his goal. He fought and planned well but it was not his focus to wield a sword or ride a beast well. It wasn’t his focus to lead men or nations of men, yet he did, and sought to. The feast seemed

suddenly empty, the smell of the food soured, his robe felt odd and heavy, his crown seemed to pierce his head, way down his mind.

“Forgive me monk for I do not have a focus, I have not spent time considering what one might be,” replied the bewildered king.

“It is considered a worthy life, the one that is spent in the contemplation of the focus,” answered the monk and he wandered out into the night.

(Attributed to Baxius, from The Tales of the King, probably 3rd Age)

The Weight of Knowledge

The mountaintop monastery was impossible to reach most of the year. When it was possible to cross the river, scale the cliffs, negotiate the rocks, avoid the wild beasts, climb the endless steps and rickety rope ladders, a monk's focus was greatly challenged. Once in the cell there was little for the novice or the master. An iron bowl, a mat to sleep on and a few drafty walls against the brutal elements. Most monks lived in a village or monastery, had interactions, supported the sick or dying, provided some sort of skill or craft. Perfecting such a skill or craft was often the path to their focus.

The way to the mountaintop cells was so deadly and uncertain that only the most devout and dedicated attempted such an existence. Sometimes the monks were in fact the most troubled, had the most to overcome from their pasts. It was joked it was good that the Milladic live in peace or those monks might have to actually learn to do something.

A few in the mountaintop shrines chased the most extreme, the most, esoteric of study, the pursuit of the nature of the focus. Arriving they sat in silent solitary contemplation, a bag of grains was raised up on a system of pulleys too flimsy for a person. Bundles of plants and some that were grown might augment the monk's diet. Rainwater and snowmelt broiled to make tea provided the only other amenity to be had. One monk clearly nearly mad wrote of the wine of the focus. His lengthy poem about the rainwater that sustained him was discovered when the grains were not lifted up to his cell one year. Another young monk braved the path to his abode to find he had starved to death or being a dry year had died of thirst.

When the young monk returned to the ground and his monastery, he informed his superior over a bowl of hot broth that the mountaintop monk had passed.

After a few nods and spoonfuls the superior monk merely stated, "I suppose the focus was not his focus."

(Miladic parable, From the Dangers of Knowledge, various authors, 1st age)

