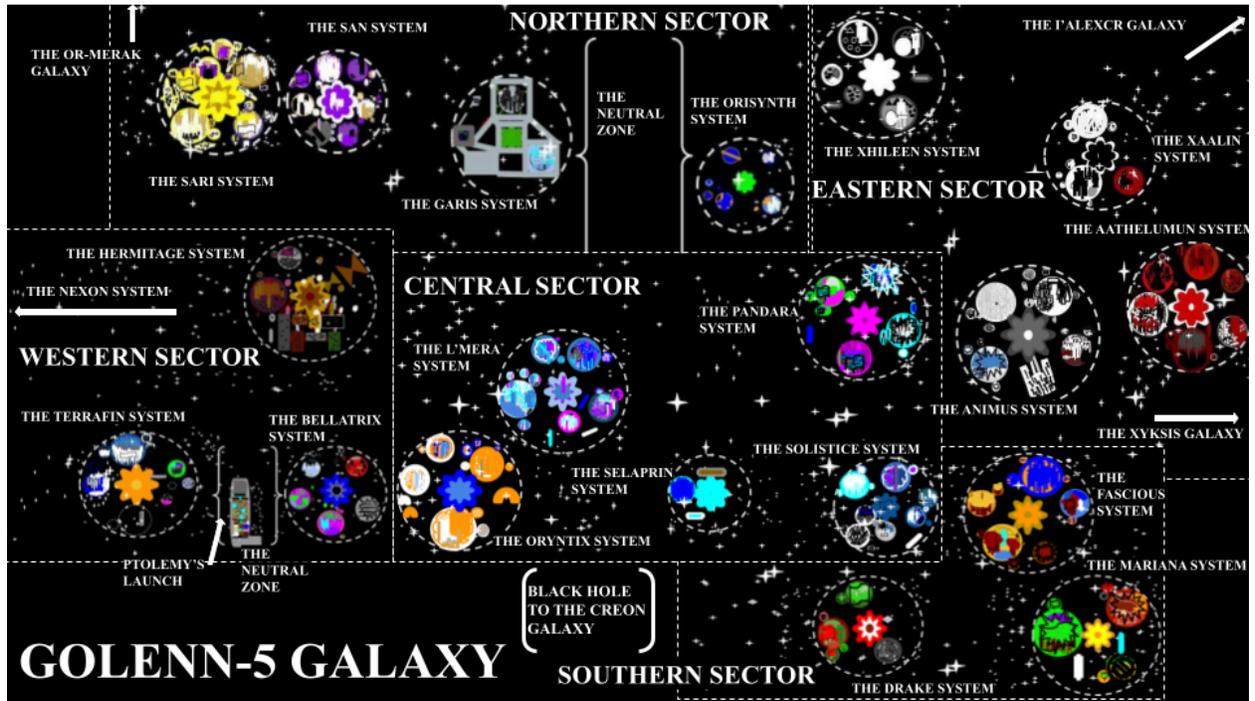




Golenn



95.554

Chapter 1

Jeruth

Jeruth woke up to total darkness in his cell, red flood lights rushed back and forth high above him in a fractured circle, highlighting the vortices in passing clouds of black smoke and transparent tubes of liquid behind it, *so I'm on a ship*. Sweat and soot filled the air, the faint stench of nylium burning throughout the engines below deck. He reached in front of himself cautiously to find where his cell began and reached a wall almost right when the chain around his wrist ran out of slack. *Ironfur*, he thought, placing his hand against the cool metal reverently - it was familiar, at least - *An Inixian craft, then. All there is left is to wait*.

So he sat in his cell, confident in his eventual freedom, unable to put the next pieces of his mission together by design. This was how all jobs with this outfit began; a man made contact with him, told him the pay, they threw him on a ship, usually with less than desirable accommodations, and kept the rest of the details above his pay grade until he was safely at his destination - so, if faced with interrogations, he would have nothing to admit to - at which point another man would make contact with him, and so on, ad infinitum. His mission was a mystery; all Jeruth knew was that he was on one, and that *someone* would be awaiting his arrival *somewhere* and offer him an opportunity to do *something*.

Ptolemy's Launch; twelve-thousand square kilometers of New Human innovation - suspended like the gaping wound right in the center of the neutral zone between The Bellatrix Star System and The Terrafin Star System. What was built as a jumping off point for the New Humans of the Consortium when they first began sending Astronomers to the Terrafin System some five-thousand light years ago, has since transitioned into a neutral trading station, wherein merchants from all over the universe pay an unreasonable amount of selenite to pettle

overpriced consumer products to a captive audience of inter-system travelers who only landed on the station because they were in need of fuel.

When the New Human Consortium first claimed jurisdiction over Rhamus and the dwarf stars of the Terrafin System in the year of light 90.2, Inix, the imperial power in the Bellatrix System and, at the time, the Terrafin System, graciously ceded control of the territory in an effort to gain an ally in their ongoing wars against the native populations of the four planets of Eastern Terrafin. By the year of light 91, Consortium citizens were settling the stars of Rhydon's Helmet and Rhamus, had opened mining operations on the star Archurus, and had been sending Astronomers to the system's Northern Rim.

After millenia of increasingly hostile interactions, border skirmishes, proxy wars, and territorial encroachments between the Inixian Empire and The New Human Consortium began to define the landscape of both empires. Finally, in 94.4, just over a thousand years of light ago, The New Human Consortium decided to provoke the inevitable by landing a-hundred-thousand Avionic Gunners on the Inixian planet of Xunar, flanking Inix from the back while it was busy squashing a handful of petty uprisings across their colonies in the Terrafin System. When Inix became aware of New Human Gunners landing on Xunar, they recalled all of their Warlocks and Nequis Soldiers and War-Masters from the Terrafin System's East Rim to protect their ancient vassal, abandoning their twenty-thousand-year-plus crusade across the Terrafin System, even if they didn't realize it then. For the New Humans, settling the Terrafin System was assured the moment they got rid of the double opposition of the native populations *and* of the Inixian War-Masters, or worse yet, their savage Warlock Evokers, who would create apparitions or even doubles of their enemy if they were powerful Evokers. The New Human Consortium moved in and fully assumed control of the four planets of Terrafin's East Rim within days of the Inixian soldier withdrawal, enslaving the native populations in most cases, slaughtering them indiscriminately in others.

Year over year, the eventual end results of their ongoing war on Xunar became increasingly crucial to the continued survival of either empire after they

both entered such a major conflict so haphazardly, so full of delusioning pride which did nothing but respond. The Xunar War, as it would later be called, ended with the total, and likely irreparable, destruction of Xunar, the displacement of an estimated fifteen-billion Xunare, with likely just as many having been killed in the war, the bankruptcy of the Inixian Empire, and the New Human Consortium gaining confirmed jurisdiction over all of the Terrafin System.

Now, in the year of light 95.554, ambassadors from both empires, as well as Justices from the larger umbrella government that they all fell under and had to stay in the graces of, the PSC, remain permanently assembled on Ptolemy's Launch to discuss the future of the Golenn-5 Galaxy in the wake of the ceasefire. *M'Dalla's Agreement*, a treaty formulated between the New Human Consortium and The Inixian Empire, signed under precarious conditions after Inix lost all of it's leverage following the kidnapping of the princess of Inix; it essentially defined their respective borders, which were divided by the neutral zone, and disallowed either empire from entering the other's territories - all the Consortium had to give up was their war on Xunar and Ptolemy's Launch, and in return, they gained definite jurisdiction over the Eastern Rim, finally establishing the New Human Consortium as the empirical power in the Terrafin System after four thousand years of colonization efforts.

Jeruth felt the ship land, and he could feel them walk down the hallway towards his cell, massive footfall after massive footfall. The ironfur wall dropped down in front of him, revealing two guards, both standing at a readied position in case it was needed, outfitted in the customary yellow mech suits of the Inixian Royal Masters, the highest skilled soldiers in the Inixian military, with war belts made of selenite and ironfur and gold and cilirian draped over their left shoulders; *six each*, Jeruth thought *these two must have done a lot of special things in the war*. They stood silent.

Jeruth looked up at the two giant machines, presumably guided by Inixians, though there was no way to be sure.

One of the guards pointed outside of his cell with a slight movement of his helmet, meaning they wanted him to follow. Jeruth held his cuffs up for the

guards to see, which chained his wrists to the ground, forcing him into a cross-legged position that he had been sitting in for only the star knows how long. One of the Royal Masters pulled out his *katan* - which was technically a *royal katan* because of its size - in a precise swivel of his wrist, and sliced through the chains on either side of Jeruth in one motion. He, however, left Jeruth's wrists bound, which is what the other guard used to lift him up onto his feet by and out of his cell.

His captors led him down a seemingly endless number of black ironfur hallways that circled out from his cell, guided by the purple ambient lights overhead which turned on at your approach and shut off at your descent, and did so at a pace that was to be expected under the weight of Jeruth's chains. He heard the painful squalls of machinery coming from the floors, rhythmically beating against the walls in time with the flashing red lights of internal machinery which stood exposed and fragile everywhere you looked. Jeruth felt the neurologic neutralizer his contact gave him; his head swam and memories flashed in front of as if they were being projected on the ironfur - memories of Inixian spacecraft, friends from his time as an Avionic Gunner for the Consortium on Trinitus, past lovers whose voices came through more vivid than their faces, *Mawrē*, Jeruth thought, then, faulted over his chains.

The guard behind Jeruth picked him up and growled at him in a broken attempt at the common language worse than he had ever known an Inixian to be capable of, salted in a thick Inixian accent and statically cut through the filter in his helmet mechanically, "Keep up, Astronomer, almost home."

When they arrived at the translucent airlock chamber, Jeruth immediately knew they were on the Launch - he would've known the Launch from six parsecs out if his cell had a window. Ptolemy's Launch was composed of row after row of shoddily welded together metal-slabs-turned-skyscrapers, both stretching above the launch and below it, covered in holographic neon advertisements that would spring up in front of you even in your most private moments, for everything from Rhaman soil fertilizer to sex slaves from Pandara, and in such incessant quantities that space travelers used the combined light pollution that formed over the space

station to guide them through the Western and Center Sectors of Golenn-5 - from an equidistant the Launch burned brighter than Terrafin's star Archurus.

Jeruth was of the belief that, if the Launch wasn't a strategic trading outpost, it would have been labeled a slum by PSC standards a thousand years ago. The top-side of the Launch functions as an Executor officescape, a shopping center, and a semi-permanent home to a rotating cast of roughly five-million settlers; merchants who worked for corporations, merchants who worked for themselves, factory workers, PSC officials and Keepers and Bridgers, Consortium Watchers and Avionic Gunners and Astronomers, Inixian Warlocks and historians and Battle Masters, Knife-Runners, aspiring politicians, thieves, tripheads, tidrant huffers and drivers, saints and demons, day-old androids and hundred-year-old humans. Those who weren't lucky enough to live on the Launch for an imperial assignment with the PSC, or their three largest member-states, the Consortium, Inix, and the Lancers, have historically found life on the Launch difficult; prices were too expensive, nights were too cold, crime was rampant among the lower classes and wage slavery among the upper classes. And then there was the Lower Station. Below, on the underside - the bleeding gash on the Launch's stomach - silent and foreboding at the mind's distance, both as great and as horrible as anything could become.

The Lower Station, colloquially referred to as *Ptolemy's Toilet*, was separated into two halves; one for technical workers and mechanics, welders and labor droids, wherein the spacestation's systems are relegated - *Ptolemy's Guts*; the other half an open air prison for Consortium prisoners from the newly settled planets of the Eastern Rim - until M'Dallas Agreement. When The Consortium ceded control of the Launch to the PSC the *Settled Correctional City* was deemed irresponsible, that the PSC wasn't involved in wars or their criminals, so it was turned into a second residential district, except the only change they made after 'liberating' the prison was unlocking the fence around it - the prison gangs still fought, except now there was no higher authority to keep the killings to a minimum; ancient rivalries between the Asczentari and Trinita political prisoners defined the landscape of the Free City. The last time Jeruth was on the Launch, all

of the neon billboards of the Commercial District blinked a warning from the PSC every few minutes religiously, “*AIDING ASCZENTARI OR TRINITY CRIMINALS FROM THE FREE CITY IS A CRIME PUNISHABLE BY UP TO 15 YEARS OF LABOR*”. While Ptolemy’s Launch wasn’t exactly home to Jeruth, it was as familiar as anywhere else in the universe was.

The guard who spoke to him, the one Jeruth decided he liked better, walked forward and scanned the holopanel in his eye socket, opened the airlock, and gestured him outward with a sarcastically formal hand movement. Jeruth studied the ship he arrived on at the bottom of its gangway; a trading vessel outfitted with both missiles and phasers, used for transporting specially made weapons and other dangerous tools or important cargo far distances across space; obviously of Inixian make, the exterior ironfur coat, whose hairs seemed to blow around as if being struck by wind, even in zero gravity. Inixian crafts gave him the impression of being alive themselves. Even animals, with all of their olfactory acuity, would take a wide berth around Inixian aircrafts when they stumbled upon one in the wild.

“Come, astronomer,” the once silent guard insisted with begrudging familiarity before he cloaked the vessel.

Jeruth followed one Inixian up the tarmac to the Launch’s entrance while being followed by the other Inixian. Even from a distance, Jeruth could see the line of admissions worming down the causeway, corralled on all sides by PSC Keepers and their holopanel, walking to and fro, lazy and bored, fat with contentment, having never imagined anything greater than a dead end assignment at the far corner of the galaxy.

They didn’t stand in line, instead going through an entrance to the left only accessible to those on official business from one of the PSC member governments. The Keepers standing at the blast door were an older female who gave the impression of union membership, and a young boy, no older than twenty, First Humans like all PSC Keepers.

“Prisoner exchange,” Jeruth’s mech friend informed them.

“Sure,” the woman said, “I need identification first, though, gentlemen.”

They each flashed her a badge from their holopanel

“And I’ll need weapons permits for those katars.”

The left guard’s holopanel switched to a weapon’s permit.

“Who’s he?” The young boy asked.

“You heard of Len Macy?”

“No.”

“He Astronomer. Do you know what Astronomer is, child?”

The young boy shook his head again.

“Architects of war and oppression for Consortium; they smart, so they kill more than all New Humans. Len Macy responsible for *Heritage Campaign* on Xunar. This New Human, he destroy capital city Xinhardda - kill thirty millions Xunare in just one ten-date.”

“And this is who you used to barter with? What do you get in exchange? A *voider* hole?”

“Not me. I just walk him.”

“If I was you, I would push him out to space,” the youth remarked, suddenly all courage.

“Hey, what’d I do to you, panel jockey?” Jeruth began to take offense for the man he was impersonating.

“You not me. You *better* than me. You PSC!”

“Looks like everything’s right, gentlemen,” the woman turned to a panel in the wall, “I’d say welcome, but..” looking at Jeruth scrutinously inside of his Len Macy suit.

His Inixian Royal Masters escorted him into the city through the double set of blast doors which led into the back of the PSC consulate and through a hallway that separated the visitors from the workers between a length of blue-tinted selenite glass; inside of which PSC Keepers and accountants and receptionists and Bridgers walked to and fro in the quiet serenity of well worn bureaucracy, all so insulated from the worst of the poverty inflicting the rest of Ptolemy’s Launch - the death inflicting the rest of Golenn-5. His Inixian guards led him out of the building and into the Executor District of the Launch, whose

borders were defined by nearby embassies and administrative buildings, some of which were alien even to Jeruth. They walked Jeruth through the square, cutting directly down the middle, yet still inconspicuous in the colorful crowd of tourists and residents despite the bright yellow mechs of the Inixians. They passed the giant selenite statue of the PSC's High Justice, and one of their four Founders, Yarbrow Minton, towards the Consortium embassy right off of the main strip. When they rounded the square, however, a crowd of reporters in front of the embassy had suddenly materialized into the visible spectrum, in such large numbers that they stretched all the way to the House of Asczentar at the far corner. One of the reporters caught sight of Jeruth's entourage, an effect which dominoed through the rest of the crowd, who then swarmed Jeruth and the Inixians on all sides.

"Mr. Macy, do you feel any remorse for the Xunar War?"

"Mr. Macy, how were your conditions on Inix?"

"Len, what's your confirmed death count?"

"Len Macy, what do you have to say to Xunare refugees?"

"Mr. Macy, do you know the whereabouts of fellow Astronomer Ralph Engold?"

"Len, do you believe in the renewal?"

"Move," the silent guard insisted, shoving a Lancer reporter into his First Human cameraman, hulking over the crowd of journalists in his yellow mech. *Probably just another young boy underneath it, though*, Jeruth thought.

They eventually pushed their way through the crowd and into the outside gates of the Consortium Embassy. Immediately, as if they pulled a tripwire, Jeruth's escort was flanked by Consortium Avionic Gunners, their *voiders* drawn, shouting them down with conflicting orders. Jeruth thought, lifting up his hands, *more young men, born after the war, yet into the world the war built. Hell, there were plenty of them in the war, too*. Then, just before the situation reached its apex, a berobed figure, under long, jet-black hair pressed down in place by the modest black crown of a Consortium Astronomer, strolled between two soldiers with a swinging gait into the circle of voiders, all of which were immediately lowered. The man raised one hand and the Avionic Gunners dispersed as if

operated by a button in his palm. The presumed leader of the Gunners stayed back and at attention, “Astronomer General, sir.”

“Commander, I trust you haven’t scared our guests too greatly?” More of a question, pointed towards Jeruth.

“Not yet.”

“Good. Follow me, gentlemen,” he announced to the trio with a pivot of his body, accented by a flick of his robes, “the Princess awaits.”

“Come in, Mr. Macy, you have a lot of catching up to do, there’s been many developments since your time in incarceration,” the Astronomer General ushered Jeruth into his solar, then turned to the Consortium Gunner posted at his door, “Be sure that we aren’t disturbed, however I wish to be informed when the princess and her Royal Masters depart the Launch, make sure they have a company of guards to see them off safely, and I *mean safely*.”

“Yes, sir, Astronomer General.”

He nodded at his guard then shut the heavy metal door behind him in one swift motion, turning to Jeruth.

“Please, take a seat,” the Astronomer gestured towards a ten meter tall set of bay windows opposite the door, positioned so that, from this high up, one could see the entirety of the Launch’s Executor District below them, while he set to making them each a drink, “Would you care for a ke’ Aar root?”

“Got any gin?”

The Astronomer smiled to himself, and it seemed a forced gesture to Jeruth, his slender silhouette projected across the wall behind him like a giant praying mantis, “Sorry, personally, I can’t stand the stuff. If I’m being honest, I don’t have much of a taste for human alcohol in general these days. But of course, that’s no excuse, I’ve studied your file extensively, so I knew, before you arrived - I *knew* - that I should have got gin, because Jeruth Howard *only* drinks gin.”

Jeruth twisted his face, which wasn't his face, but was still Len Macy's, "Ahh, so you're my debriefer? Strange, that."

Jankovic looked as if he tried to find the strangeness in it, and asked, "How so?"

"It's just, what's an Astronomer, let alone an Astronomer *General* doing working for some small-time crime syndicate like the outfit I'm involved in?"

"Same as you, I would imagine. With the end of the Xunar War and the final conquering of Eastern Terrafin, this stand-still with Inix, I find myself without much purpose. I suppose I could help colonization efforts on Forside or Rhamus, but, that too, I don't have much of a taste for anymore."

"You're the Astronomer General to the Neutral Zone. That would be enough for most men I know."

"But you and I, we're not like most men, are we Jeruth? When the Consortium war machine began slowing its engines, for most of our comrades, a pension and a heartfelt commendation from a superior officer was all the closure they needed. But not me, and not for the likes of you either, we were born out of war, freedom is suffocating, struggle is comfort, and without it, we're lost." The bay windows set a coagulation of neon light against the Astronomer, highlighting half of his face, leaving the other half cast in darkness, "We yearn for the tension, a burden to overcome, except the Consortium seems to be slowly contenting itself with its conquests."

"So you're bored? Or looking for a higher position? Creating trouble so you can sweep in and solve it?"

Jankovic swirled the ke'Aar root around in his glass and took the rest of it down in one silent gulp, then refilled his cup, "When our ancestors had the foresight to finally leave their dying Earth some 90,000 years ago, did they do it to gain material wealth? A position at the table?" He took another drink and shook his head in response to his own question, "They did it to gain their livelihoods, to live outside of the constraints that they were born under. When Consortium Astronomers first traversed the Creon-to-Golenn-5 black hole some eight-thousand years of light ago, were they looking for a promotion? Or were

they desperate to get out of the Creon Galaxy? I am not bored, nor am I interested in yet another petty and meaningless job title, at least not anymore. I am uncomfortable in this universe that we've built for ourselves."

"And you're capable of changing that?"

"The operation is not as small as our hierarchy makes us seem. Tell me, honestly, Howard, an Avionic Gunner of your merit, are you happy in Golenn-5? Does anywhere feel safe to you? Do you enjoy feeling the weight of both the Consortium and PSC governments looming over you at night? The anxiety of being under a master that changes in shape yet speaks with the same voice?"

"I haven't felt at home anywhere, but you know that - you know I drink gin then you know I grew up in a Consortium Assignment Center. Hell, I'm sure whatever dataset of mine you read already told you that I'm unhappy and it probably even gave you a score for reference, but I'm not a revolutionary. I served the Consortium, and with that I'm at least owed the right to exist in their space, which is more than millions have gotten out of the Consortium, more than what the Xunare got out of the Consortium, so I'm going to take my chips and cash out."

"Howard, you've just aided in the exchange of the Princess of Inix by putting on the face of a Consortium war criminal, and you think that isn't a revolutionary act?"

"Speaking of which, you mind..." Jeruth gestured to his body broadly, Len Macy's body, presently.

"Of course," The Astronomer General vanished with a swish of his robe and returned moments later with an inoculation gun, "This shouldn't hurt too bad."

Jeruth grimaced as the transmutation antidote coursed through his veins, grabbing each cell they passed which in turn grabbed the next, turning his long blonde hair back to its cropped greying-brunette, lengthening his torso and his legs, drawing scars back onto his face that were not so easily gotten rid of, he looked at himself to make sure he was all there.

"I think I lost some weight."

“It’s not the antidote, that’s what happens when you get taken prisoner.”

Jeruth flexed his hands, hoping his memory of them was correct and that this was the appropriate amount of wear around his knuckles, “Look, I have no love for the Consortium, you’ve seen my file, you’ve seen what they’ve asked of me, even still, I consider myself lucky compared to a lot of the Goleen-5 Galaxy. I could’ve been born Xunare, I could be a Trinita slave mining a hole through Ratar Mons.”

“My point precisely, Howard; Xunare, Trinita, Pandarans, you’ve spent extensive periods of time with all of them, do they deserve their fates? Has anything changed for them since the signing of the ceasefire? Trinita, Asczentari, the Telosi, going from the Inixian Empirical monarchy to the New Human Consortium Empirical authoritarianism, all the while supposedly under the diplomatic umbrella of the PSC, which simultaneously allows and disallows them to be oppressed while disabling them from doing anything about it? What’s to be done for them?”

“I’ve been Consortium property my whole life, Astronomer, the time I spent with the Xunare and the Trinita wasn’t anthropological in nature - I killed them - why would you ask *me* to help liberate them?”

Jankovic took another pensive swill of his ke’Aar root, then filled a third glass, “Before I was Astronomer General to the Neutral Zone,” Jankovic started, talking to Jeruth over his shoulder, “before M’Dalla’s Agreement, I was one of the chief architects of the Asczentari Assimilation campaign; now it’s considered our most *humanely* incorporated settlements, but I promise you, it was anything but. Twelve entire Asczentari tribes were wiped off the planet under my guidance, I called for the grazing of ten percent of the planet’s wilds and only *five percent* of the planet was under my jurisdiction. I’ve represented rapists within my ranks and have been the reason they kept their assignments. I have read your file, Howard, I’m still your ranking officer, and if you have blood on your hands, then I’ve painted my body in it, and still, I feel I can be repurposed. You’re not irredeemable.”

“Well, you *are* my contact, technically, I already work for you, what’s my next assignment?”

“For now, you can just wait, you’ve helped us set the stage and now we have to let events play out.”

“And, what happens when the Consortium realizes they don’t actually *have* Len Macy? Where *is* the real Len Macy for that matter?”

“Sadly, I cannot predict the future, Howard, your guess is as good as my own.”

Then came a bang on the solar door, “Astronomer General Jankovic, sir.”

The Astronomer swept across the room, his long hair moving in time with his robe, he opened the door just enough to keep his guard from seeing Jeruth, “Yes?”

“My men are reporting that the Inixian ship just pushed off from the Launch with the Princess Ounella.”

“Excellent. Thank you, Commander.” Jankovic waited at the door until the guard was a sufficient enough distance from his solar, then turned his attention back to Jeruth, “I’m sure you’re familiar with the vents of Ptolemy’s Guts?”

“You mean I can’t just walk out the front?”

“If you want to remain inconspicuous, you’ll have to take the vents out. I’m sorry your send off couldn’t be more ceremonious.”

“I know the vents fine.”

Jankovic walked to a corner of his office behind Jeruth and uncovered a large vent hidden behind a comm table, “One last thing; if you wish to be of assistance in this matter, stay on the Launch until the next phase of the plan is complete.”

“How will I know what the next phase is if I don’t know the mission?”

“You’ll know, it will happen here on the Launch, come back into my solar through this opening and I’ll leave a message to point you to your debriefer. I hope you decide to help us, Jeruth,” Jankovic lended Jeruth his elbow to lower him into the vent. “You should have the path uploaded into your positioning system, head northward and right, you should find a dead end that opens outside

of the Dorian Suites, there's a room for you, even if you don't want the assignment. And if you decide you don't want the assignment, then it was nice to meet you, Jeruth Howard," from Jeruth's angle he thought he noticed a hint of anxiety in the Astronomer's face, the half that wasn't covered in shadow.

Chapter 2

Xiamara

She was back on Xunar again, she knew because she could smell the nylium burning, the smoke hung above the city like a blanket. She was in her childhood room in the industrial nationcity of Xinhardda, one bed, meaning Xena hadn't been born yet. She could barely see out of her window, but could see enough to know it was night, meaning father was still at work. She took a step out of her bed and then was immediately in the common room, her mother drinking an imported ke'Aar root, she was dressed in the blue on black wrap around robe of a Consortium Astronomer. Now they were both atop a balcony she couldn't recognize, her mother looking out over it, Xiamara was in a xatan, royal silver and purple, and when Xiamara approached her mother, she saw that they had to have been more than two-hundred stories high, she could see all of Xinhardda, the Zelix Nylium Processing Plant was on fire, behind came a blindingly blue spotlight that always managed to catch you in its glow, one of the chimneys crumbled, it seemed like it took hours for it to hit the ground, and when it finally hit it made a thunderous roar that she heard from above her, and she saw her mother smiling.

"What's going to happen to us?"

"That is none of my concern." It wasn't her mother's voice, but a man's, whose voice was that?

"Who are you?"

"I am an astronomer, Ounella."

"That isn't my name."

But then, before her mother could answer, the balcony cracked and they both were thrown off of their feet, she slid to the end of the balcony, and the balcony snapped off of the building, which adorned a giant 'PSC' at the top, and they fell, her in her traditional Xunare xatan, her mother in a Consortium Astronomer's robe.

It was middle night in the center of Brax when Xiamara woke up, covered in sweat, blanketed by a sky of stars. In Brax's Sinsi region, above the megamountain Boristil Mons, she was closer to space than she could ever hope to have gotten anywhere on Xunar, which was flat even before the bombing. Xiamara stirred, waited until she was sure there were no unseen visitors before she sat up, brushed the red sand off of her tunic, stretched, then turned to wake up Xena, who would in turn wake up Beurak, who was supposed to have been on guard duty.

Beurak woke up immediately, pretending to have been awake or merely resting his eyes. He set to prostrating, his complete lack of movement juxtaposed with his sheer enormity gave Xiamara the he could camouflage himself in plain sight while he prayed. Whenever Beurak concentrated the silver of his skin seemed to flow like liquid in multiple, extremely slow spinning vortices. His outravenous system burned a bright-orange from its usual dull-red. Xiamara enjoyed listening to Beurak pray, the Braxian tongue when they petitioned their god was always much softer, nearly angelic, than their natural speaking voice, their prayers had a cadence that one could easily have mistaken for a song.

Xena and Xiamara sat there quiet in the cool, late-night-early-morning mountain air, nestled snugly in the valley between two relatively uninteresting chasms of Boristil Mons, still acquainting themselves to the waking world; Xiamara acquainting herself to reality. *I am Xiamara, I am on Brax, not Xunar, Xunar is dead. My mother is dead, too many members of my extended family to count, are dead, my father is missing, or dead, we are on the run and, Xiamara pulled a piece of zinar trim from her sack, it's been forty days since we left New Xunar....but, thank her light, that Xena is still alive.*

Xiamara and her nine-year-old sister Xena, had spent the last five years of their lives on Brax. The sisters were among the first Xunare refugees to be sent to the newly apportioned city of Melphor, an uncharacteristically sparsely populated city on the western half of Brax built around their nylum mining industry; they

were two out of what would become three-hundred million Xunare refugees living on Brax. When they first arrived on Brax, the ships of Xunare seemed endless, there were one to three ships dropping into Melphor every day. Having only ever experienced war, the Xunare in Melphor quickly erected a budding community that felt like what their version of a life had been before the war, only it was built on red sand instead of grey. The Xunare migrants traded with local merchants, planted Xunare crops, and made a deal with the local nylum miners to trade fuel for labor. The settlement of Melphor grew, and for the first time in six-hundred years, so did the Xunare. They elected their own government, led by a Xunare ex-military general named Xrishman. Eventually, Xiamara found that she had relaxed, that at some moment wherein she didn't recognize at the time, she had allowed the anxieties of war to be forgotten, and was enjoying her existence in New Xunar. She spent two years volunteering at the local hospital, taking care of mining injuries and dust burns, dehydration and food sickness the Xunare would experience from Braxian cuisine.

For three hundred years, Brax had been led by the Braxian Mining and Labor party, a democratic semi-autonomous governmental system which sought to give power back to the nylum miners whose product accounted for ninety-percent of Brax's domestic exports. Then, in Her Light's Year of 95.550, the Braxians held their elections to decide which political party would lead Brax for the next hundred years, and, thanks to an extensive propaganda campaign aimed at the citizens of Barath and Branson and the inability of immigrants to vote in elections on Brax, the ultra-globalist, far-right, Braxian Burgess Party won the vote. The new Counselor of Brax, Borithil Glick, held rallies across the country wherein he had seemed to find new enemies daily.

He gained support early by advocating for a heavy-handed solution to the border issues between the native Braxians and their undomesticated relatives, the mountain marauders, whose land constituted a large oval directly in the center of Brax. Then, he began going on tirades at length concerning the Inixian Empire and their "*empire's empire*" the PSC.

What really won him the election, however, was his messaging against the growing Xunare population, blaming them for dust storms, for the increase in Mount Gol'Yen's volcanic gas eruptions, for taking nylium mining jobs from natural-born Braxian citizens, even for the downfall of the Inixian empire and the weak constitution of Premier Ounahxin. Anti-Xunare fervor swept across Brax, finally making it all the way to New Xunar, starting with Xunare laborers getting fired from their mining jobs, the once unpreventably friendly Braxian merchants began setting different prices for Xunare and for Braxians, and, instead of the regulatory auditors that would visit New Xunar to ensure Xunare citizens weren't being taken advantage of, Braxian Enforcers and government surveyors began to visit the city at an ever-increasing rate.

Military presence in New Xunar began with the odd surface craft sighting in the outskirts of the city, then with Enforcers patrolling the major community sections of town in increasing numbers, and later, in Her Light's Year 95.552, the erection of a barrier around the city. The order came down from Borithil Glick himself; Xunare were not allowed to leave New Xunar, and only members of the Braxian military were allowed in. Food and personal hygiene products became scarce in New Xunar in a matter of weeks, the city quickly devolved into a hotbed for petty crime and violence between the Xunare and the Braxian military, as well as amongst the Xunare themselves. The tensions between the Xunare and their military state imprisonment came to its boiling point on 95.552.87, when a Braxian Enforcer shot a Xunare child at point black range in the middle of the town's square, right by a statue the Xunare erected of Princess Xena. Resulting in an immediate reaction riot and a swift squashing of said riot, as was their plan all along; to force the Xunare to witness enough depraved subjugation to *force* them into violence, knowing that, under such a schizophrenically unpredictable system, there were no other alternatives. The riot and the Enforcer's response took the lives of twenty-two Enforcers to three-thousand-plus Xunare. After the revolt, the military took an even tighter leash in policing the citizens of New Xunar; only those with work visas could leave their homes, and, even with a visa, Xunare were not free from the harassment and violence of Enforcers anytime they asked

to see their papers, or when they crossed the street, or, even, just could be seen inside their homes from the street.

Xiamara only left her home at night, a habit she had learned to follow from her time on Xunar. One night, on her way to trade medical supplies to an older neighbor of her's for a couple bags of food, she was stopped by an Enforcer she had never seen before; a young Braxian, no more than thirty years of light, vibrating under his hulking frame as he put his hand on his *beimar*. Xiamara put her hands up to let the Enforcer know that she was not a threat to him.

“What are you doing out past curfew?”

“My sister is at home and she hasn't eaten in three days. I'm just on my way to get food and give an old woman medicine, that's all,” Xiamara explained while taking a step back.

The Enforcer followed her movement, ignoring her “You know that all Xunare must stay inside their homes between light hours.” he explained as if reading directly from his manual.

“I know, but, my sister sh-she's only nine, she *needs to eat something*.”

Just then the Enforcers telecom rang in, “Enforcer Gole, what's the situation in the southern quarter?”

The Enforcer touched his telecom, but before he could reply, he looked at Xiamara for the first time in their interaction, seeing an actual real life living being who he was currently scaring into paralysis, seeing what had happened and was happening to this woman, younger than him, healthy compositionally but sickly from hunger, willing to risk her life to give medicine and food to those she cared about, while he wasn't willing to risk a reprimand, or, even greater, wasn't willing to risk ostracization by not playing this part in this systemic oppression of people who had so many of his features. He saw the fear in her almond eyes, her blue chest heaving rapidly under her ragged tunic, worn for however many consecutive days, and responded finally, “Quiet as ever, no blueskins to be found.”

“Great. Shift change in one hour. We'll see you back at the precinct.”

Xiamara was as still as a board, “What’s your name?” The Enforcer asked her.

“Xiamara.”

“And your sister’s name?”

“Xena,” She replied, wincing at the idea of a Braxian Enforcer asking about her sister.

The Enforcer looked around, then took Xiamara by the arm and ducked into an alleyway, “Look, Xiamara, we don’t have much time. I know it’s going to be hard, but I *need* you to trust me, and listen to what I tell you on the way, I may be able to get you and your sister out of New Xunar,” he pulled out a pair of handcuffs and held them up to her, “do you trust me?”

“Do I trust the Braxian Enforcer who was a second away from pointing a *beimar* at my head?”

“All I heard is that if I wanted to hurt you, I had my chance. *Please*. Let me help you.”

Xiamara turned her back to the Enforcer begrudgingly and allowed him to slip the handcuffs around her wrists, “It’s just a precaution. If we pass other Enforcers they’ll assume you’re just my prisoner. Take me to your sister.”

Xiamara guided her captor to her domed-pit where they found Xena awake in a corner of it’s single room.

“It’s okay, Xena, he’s here to help us,” she explained.

“But we don’t have much time. The next shift of Enforcers will be coming into the city at any moment now,” reminding them from the pit’s entrance, “We must go.”

Xena obliged and the Enforcer put her in handcuffs with a surgeon's light touch, and strolled out inconspicuous in his confident posture.

“You never told us your name,” Xiamara whispered.

“Quiet. If anyone sees you speaking to me it’ll arouse suspicions,” Enforcer Gole commanded, sterner than intended, but still enough to fit the role, “Gole. My name is Buerak Gole.” Enforcer Gole led them down main streets, as

to not seem suspicious, when finally they made it to the southern entrance of New Xunar.

“Who’s there?” A guard called out from behind a blinding flood light.

“Enforcer Gole. Shield number 856243. Got two prisoners here for transport out of New Xunar.”

“I never got a notice about any prisoner transports.”

“I’m sorry, what’s your shield number?”

“Enforcer Wont, shield number 263449.”

“You never got a notice because it’s above your level.”

“I’ll have to call precinct.”

“I am your senior officer, Enforcer Wont, and you are impeding a level 6 prisoner transport. If you don’t stand aside, I’ll be forced to tell your commanding officer that his insubordinate two-six is obstructing a governmental interrogation of the utmost importance.”

The guard stuttered in his movements, going through the chain of command in his head, when his holopanel display opened across his face. With lightspeed quickness, Buerak Gole pulled his *beimar* out of its holster and fired twice into the chest that held the his own *beimar*; Enforcer Wont jumped back with each shot, spent seconds on his feet, suspended in agony, then dropped into a pile of black uniform and orange blood.

“Quick,” Enforcer Gole demanded, “when Wont doesn’t answer the next report from precinct this place will be swarming with Enforcers,” Buerak ripped the badge off of the lifeless corpse of Enforcer Wont and held it up to a panel on the wall. The door shuttered with hydraulic tension, then creaked open, and they stole out into the night.

“I’m hungry,” Xena announced, breaking the serenity of the silence they had been sharing.

“I know, Xena.”

“How much further is it, Buerak?”

“I don’t know, Xena. And it’s hard to pray when you keep asking me questions.”

Xiamara and Xena grew accustomed to hunger in the slums of New Xunar, and before on Xunar proper, sometimes going entire days without any food, Buerak, despite his prideful and stubborn refusal to admit it, was less familiar with hunger. They had spent the last forty solar dates on the run, unsure even if they were being chased, if anyone even cared about the death of Enforcer Wont or if it was just filed under breakage, then she suspected some innocent Xunare refugee was tried and punished for Enforcer Wont’s death in their stead.

“Then quit praying,” Xiamara offered, gathering her equipment, “we should get a move on anyway, planets aren’t going to traverse themselves.”

“If only that were the case,” Buerak opined, as if that was at one point an option.

They set out across the valley in a tight procession with Xiamara at the front and Buerak taking up the rear, sticking close to either chasma to keep them shadowed under the nurturing cover of Boristil Mons. They had spent the last three days trekking through the mountain’s valleys, during the daytime the sun Ixlil weighed down on them, and at night they had to watch out for mountain marauders, who were infamous on Brax for their violent sacrifices to the warrior God Gorimon. The air on Brax was cool between the mountain peaks, the constant wind erosion swept through the mountains and rained red sand down over them.

“Buerak, will you tell me about the Preceptor again?”

“Xena, he’s already told you all there is to tell.”

“But I want to hear it again!” Xena protested, petulant as only a child can be.

“It’s okay, Xiamara. The Preceptor came to Brax unannounced, unaccompanied, yet some say his spirit has lived on Brax for millenia. He made his home in the desert, so deep inside the dust storms that no sensor can penetrate his domain. He’s a soothsayer, a magician, a healer, a pyrokinetic, and an

iconoclast; it's said that he took on ten Enforcers at one time and walked away without a wound. The Burgess Party say he isn't real, some crazy clan leader most likely, yet they're enamored with him. They spend more resources to find the Preceptor than they spend on all of New Xunar. It's claimed that he's building an army on Brax of dissidents and Xunare, that he's united the tribes of the mountain marauders; they believe him to be the last incarnation of Gorimon, that he is the infinite beacon of the light of the world."

Xena was staring at Buerak open mouthed, so interested in knowing that this person, like the ones from her stories and the histories, actually existed at the same moment as her, in the same country as her, "And how do you know he's in the mountains?"

"Because that's what they say."

"And what do you say, Buerak?" Xiamara asked over her shoulder, herself not fully believing in whatever this *Preceptor* had to offer them, and actually, not really believing that he existed.

"I'd say that we better find him soon."

"Buerak, if the mountain *marders* believe in Gorimon too, why do they want to kill you?" Xena sounded nervous to ask.

"*Marauders*, Xena, and they don't want to kill me, they *have* to kill me to get to Elysium; *our God is that of steel*. Gorimon was the original king of Brax, formerly a warlord of the Bellem Badlands to the south, until he defeated the lords of the other badland tribes and united all of them under one banner, eventually his influence spread across the planet. He believed in Braxian supremacy, in the natural superiority of Brax, he led battalions all across Bellatrix and **Oryntix**, and at the time, Brax was one of the most powerful militaries in the galaxy. After his death, the people of Brax deified Gorimon, making a religion out of his warrior mentality and strength in unity. In the old days, Braxians would consider it a holy act to defeat an enemy on the field, a petition to the lord to slaughter a nonbeliever. Now, praying to Gorimon is simply a prayer for strength and bravery, or good fortune in many case now. That is why the marauders kill, they follow the old interpretations, they believe that modern Braxians are

blasphemers, that we are *weak*, even before we became Enforcers, so our death will serve as a petition to Gorimon.”

“And Xunare?”

“We fought Xunar in the old times, too.”

“Then why would they agree to unite with the Xunare under this Preceptor?”

“You have a common enemy - *we* have a common enemy, now, an enemy much greater than a 60,000 year rivalry.”

Chapter 3

Jericho

“And so I said, ‘if you don’t like it, you can fuckin’ blow it into space for all I care!’”

“And then what happened?”

“What do you think happened? He called in some favors with his higher-up pals, and got me reassigned to this shit detail on Telos, so now, I’m forced to hang around you losers, freezin’ my balls off on this fuckin’ rock. Hell, at least if I got sent to Trinitus, I’d have somethin’ to look at!”

“Well, what did you expect, Steiner? You told Astronomer General Jankovic to fuck himself, you’re lucky he didn’t assign you to the southern rim.”

“Hell, right now, I’d take Dreet over this shit, anyday.”

“I don’t know, Telos really isn’t so bad, it’s quiet, at least.”

“It’s fuckin’ desolate is what it is. I don’t know why the Consortium settled it in the first place. Like they don’t have enough selenite. Any of you ever been to Rhamus?”

Jericho and Daniels shook their heads.

“Well, I have. Spent a couple years in Rhamus City back in 95.54. I’m tellin’ you, *that’s* fuckin’ beautiful country. The stars of Rhydon’s Helmet sit *so close*, that at night, you can actually see Consortium outposts on the surface.”

“Wow,” Daniels said, actually amazed at the idea.

“It’s fuckin’ beautiful. And no natives, is the best part.”

“What, you don’t like the Telosi? What about, uh, what’s his name, Ghostface over there?”

“I would beat Ghostface with how own son. How could I like ‘em? They don’t fuckin’ do anything. They’re the living dead. The PSC finally did somethin’ right when they classified ‘em as unintelligents. Truly fuckin’ mindless.”

“They’re good miners, though,” Jericho offered, not so much interested in talking to Steiner, but, when you spend a half a day in a hole with someone everyday, inevitably you will respond to them.

“Yeah, like you need a fuckin’ brain to mine selenite.”

“I mean, you need something. They know how to find it, more than I could.”

“Yeah, that’s why *you’re* on guard detail, Jericho. I ain’t gonna be a Telosi babysitter for the rest of my life. I’m gettin’ a new assignment next year, the MA said so. Asczentar, probably. Bunch of savages, but it beats lookin’ at these apes all day.”

“You wouldn’t last a week on Asczentar. I bet you fall into a poison swamp your first day.”

“Yeah, well I bet **you get eaten alive by one of these Telosi.** Just wait. You ever actually *see* the way they look at us? Past that dead, lifeless stare, **there’s something back there, a rage.** They outnumber us ten to one. Easy. You look. Here. Look at ‘em.” Steiner blew his horn, “Alright, line up you, bring your buckets, come on, get in line, this isn’t your first time,” Steiner bellowed up and down the length of the mineshaft, and by the time he got back to where Jericho and Daniels stood watch over the entrance, the Telosi miners had formed a shambling, dilated line.

Steiner leaned into Jericho’s ear, “Now, you look at em Jericho.”

Kai Jericho had spent the last four years of his life on Telos, living with ten other Consortium employees inside of Outpost #1120. Aside from the truckers that delivered their rations and the ever-so-odd visits from Astronomer General Kerwyn or some other member of the Consortium bureaucracy, the only people Kai had seen for the last four years were his fellow Outpost #1120 assignees - and the Telosi; a species of off-white, nearly blind, vaguely humanoid, cave-dwellers. When Consortium Astronomers and Watchers initially moved in on the planets of the eastern rim, they had believed Telos to be a barren and uninhabited rock like it’s neighbor Tyson, until they began conducting scans of the *Thames Cave System*.

The very first analytical expedition into the *Thames*, led by Grand Astronomer Dochswin, began at the future site of Outpost #116; they had hardly stepped past the cave’s entrance before the faint sounds of lazy scratching and a

subsequent crumbling reached the hairs on the back of their necks. Astronomer Dochswin stepped apprehensively ahead, bronze cozier in hand, readied to strike, and, just past the first bend in the tunnel, Dochswin came upon a giant wraith - he almost walked right by it, the bone white of it's skin blended perfectly with the bone white of the planet's sediment layer - it was an almost inaudible tumbling of gravel that brushed the Astronomer's boot which finally brought the Telosi to his attention, all at once, startling him enough to alert and immediately repress his fight or flight response.

The wraith didn't notice him, so Dochswin kept perfectly still, if his position relative to this creature were positions on a khessen board, he would be cornered; dealing with the compounded unease that came not just from the unsurety of making first contact with an unfamiliar race of life, but having to do so without coming in with that expectation. It took a few seconds before he could minimize his adrenaline and was actually able to examine the creature before him, its face buried in the depression of the impromptu column it was currently digging out with its hands. This creature was multiple feet taller than Astronomer Dochswin, its limbs moved in an absurdly backward fashion compared to the Astronomer, it was spindly and hairless and nude, if that mattered. The Grand Astronomer tried to introduce himself, but the pale shadow made no indication that he had heard, or that he was even aware of the Astronomer standing just behind him. Then, after finally breaking away from the distractingly malformed apparition, Dochswin saw, amongst the rubble of miniscule pieces of shale and soot and sandstone, the light from his brazier reflecting back at him in brilliant points of alic blue glimmer. Dochswin scooped a handful of debris into his glove and there, under and above a hundred small rocks, were five teardrops of pure selenite.

Immediately after the discovery of selenite on Telos by the Grand Astronomer Dochswin in Her Light's Year of 94.704, the planet became the Consortium's focal point inside of the Terrafin System. A quarter of all graduates from the Consortium Assignment Centers were sent to Telos to build the fifteen-hundred Outposts the Consortium deemed necessary and to excavate their

own, respective entrances into the Thames Cave System, supplemented with a couple ships worth of “free” laborers from Trinitus. In the time it took to build the planet’s Outposts a rotating cast of Consortium Astronomers were stationed on Telos to study the natives; what they found was, without outside interference, the *Telosi* would mine for upwards of eighteen hours a day, they needed little sleep and little nutrition, sustained themselves entirely on cave bugs and moss and were likely blind, but, maybe strangest of all, was their connection to the Thames Cave System.

It didn’t take long, once the terraformation of Telos began, for those on the project to notice that, though the *Telosi* were numerous to the point of overpopulation, nobody had seen one outside of the Thames Cave System. *Telosi* could be seen walking in their lethargic shuffle towards a cave mouth, taking a direct line of travel from across the cavern only to stop short of the surface, turn around, and walk away, as if they had been repelled by a forcefield that they weren’t aware of or were even able to comprehend or care to. No Astronomer or member of the scientific community so much as bothered to develop a theory as to why they never left the Thames - it was decided that, if the *Telosi* *never* left work, then that was all the better. It had been understood early into terraforming the planet that the *Telosi*, with a little bit of organization, would be used as “free” labor on Telos, allowing the Consortium to, instead of assigning thirty excavators to an outpost, assign six Watchers to oversee the *Telosi*. And, after years of practice, and immediate reprisals from their Watcher guards, the *Telosi* *did* become a dependable slave labor force for the Consortium, the only real obstacle being how to get intricate commands through to them.

In solar year 94.708, the Consortium had finished construction of the *Telosi* Outposts and, after learning how little supervision the *Telosi* needed to reach their quota, the Consortium revoked ninety-nine percent of the resources they had been spending on Telos, instead redirecting them to Rhamus and Terrabellum; the former only just becoming suitable for New Humans to begin settling. The steady decrease of ration shipments and the quality and utility thereof compounded year after year; the first few Watcher tours on Telos had the

highest pensions in the Consortium and ate borrick's steaks for every meal - now, Kai was lucky if he could go half-a-date without eating protein paste.

Kai Jericho studied the line of Telosi in front of him now, swaying aimlessly down the mineshaft like a giant, white worm, their mouths open, toothless, some drooling, some grunting, some were naked, others wore the uniform of a Telosi Watcher, themselves handed down from a Rhamus Watcher, so old and tattered that they were simply black tunics - the more ridiculous looking wore bright, yellow hardhats with a spotlight on top, useless to the nocturnal creature underneath, who only wore the hat for the sake of the Watcher's, who more-often-than-not took great pleasure in humiliating the Telosi. Their eyes burned white, even in comparison to their skin, but past the whites there was the shade of a pale iris, barely perceptible, a slightly darker shade of white, and inside that, Kai had noticed, wasn't whatever kind of hatred or rage that Steiner had seen, but anxiety and fear; they were abused animals. *The only reason they line up*, Kai knew, *was that they trained themselves to stand near one another anytime a guard made a loud noise; it was the only movement that didn't get them hit.*

Kai couldn't stand the look on the Telosi's faces any longer and turned away.

"Yeah, look away kid, 'cause that's your maker, right there. C'mon, help me with their selenite."

Daniels and Steiner walked down the line picking up one bucket of debris after another. One of the miners held onto his bucket slightly longer than Steiner would have liked, out of a general lag of basic motor functions, and got hit in the temple with the butt of Steiner's *voider*; the Telosi let out a high pitched screech then fell silent, crouched in the fetal position with his long bony arms wrapped around his head in agony, his legs twisting together.

Jericho walked out of the mines into the flat, open surface of Telos; silver and grey and black Telos, and in the sky he saw Asczentar, green and purple and yellow and red and blue, and he found that he couldn't remember if it had been four years since he took the assignment on Telos, or if it had been five years.

When Amanda Reynolds approached Jericho she found him staring into the sky, wherein the other three planets of the Eastern Rim loomed nightly in their infinite coexistence.

“Hey, I was-

“Looking at Asczentar? Twelve hours of sunlight there? Lucky us, huh?”

He shook his head at Telos, “Your shift about to start?”

“Nah, I’m thinking about diving; no human has ever explored all of the *Thames Cave System*, you know?”

Kai Jericho laughed, “You sound just like my assignment counselor. Think you can start a few minutes early? I can’t go back in there tonight. That new guy drives me crazy.”

“Me too, but I wouldn’t worry about it too much, he *swears* he’ll be getting a new assignment any moment now.”

“Hopefully it’s as Outpost #1120’s maintenance man, I’d rather have old Rand in the mines with me, at least he’s funny, and hell, maybe Steiner’d be pretty good at cleaning the waste.”

“I’ll ask him if he’s got any experience in that field when I get down there, you should talk to Officer Slynt about it.”

“Yeah, I just might. You like working the night shift now?”

“I guess. It really doesn’t make much of a difference when there’s no day.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I’ll go ahead and get down there. See you next off day?”

Kai smiled and rode the flush in his body, letting it strike his confidence which he showed on his face, “Hopefully before then.”

“We’ll see. Make it back safe, watch out for, uh, you know, the rocks.”

The wind whipped around the back of Kai’s Consortium Watchers insulated spacesuit, blue on black, a hand-me-down from the Watchers on Rhamus, he knew, because it was too heavily layered for life on Telos during any

period outside of deep night, plus, it didn't quite fit his size specifications. It was a kilometer exactly back to the outpost, 3,167 steps at Jericho's stride - he had counted many times. Telos was so flat and dark that the light from the Outpost traveled all the way to the #1120 cave entrance, he could already see it in the distance. Telosi Outposts were wide eggshell ovals that looked as if they were squashed on the top and welded together in the middle, studded in dark blue light boxes and standing on thirty foot stilts which gave them the appearance of an insect rearing to pounce - 10,000 square meters on the inside, but the ceilings were so low on three of the four stories it felt half the size.

When Kai made it to the gangway, he noticed their singular rover, a *Hammond Surface Tosser*, parked next to their singular shuttle, a *Hammond High Grav*, was running with its lights thrown across the unceasing gray horizon. Kai saw the legs of their outpost tech sticking out from under the machine, some presumably unnecessary components strewn across the ground.

"What seems to be the problem with her, Marty?" Jericho asked ironically, indulging Marty in the conversation even if the answer was sure to be gibberish to Kai's ears.

Marty the tech slid out from under the surface craft, obviously waiting for someone to voice his grievances to, "Damn mobility system needs recalibration. I've been telling Slynt she needs to order a damn new one already. The Mach-6 been out for two years now, hell, this thing's been here since before I even took this assignment."

"You think you can fix it?"

"I don't know, but I think I'm done trying tonight. Maybe if I drag my feet Slynt will call for the six, and finally put in for that order of orysal I've been beggin' her for. Just, you might be stuck at the post for a bit is all."

"I've been stuck at the post for four years and counting, Mart."

Marty took off his hat and used it to mop up his brow sweat, "I hear ya, bud."

Kai knew it to be the Consortium's Golenn-5 Galactic Prison just by the unique beige of the flooring in combination with the black walls. This time, he was inside of a cell instead of outside.

"Will anyone talk to me? I'm not supposed to be here. I'm an innocent man."

He kept repeating his pleas for mercy until a guard appeared.

Prisoner Kai Jericho looked at his nametag, "Please, Watcher Jericho, you have to believe me, they were going to kill her, I had to help."

"Look, man, I'm sorry, but I just work here, I couldn't let you go if you were my brother."

"But, you know me? You /know/ me!"

"Look, I have to keep walking, man, they get notified anytime I stand still for more than ten seconds."

"No, wait, you have to warn them."

Watcher Jericho racked his breaker against the obsidian bars of the prison cell, "Keep your hands inside your cell."

And then Watcher Jericho disappeared off stage right. All prisoner Kai Jericho was left with was beige tile over beige tile and four obsidian blasted walls. His fingernails had to have been twenty centimeters long by now, he sat down against the back of his cell and started tapping against the black wall with his thumb.

Tap, tap, tap. Tap, tap, tap.

He was on Archurus.

Tap, tap, tap. Tap, tap, tap.

His Stellar Project spacesuit fit his form perfectly, smooth rubbery to the touch, but it didn't burn, even at four-hundred-thousand kelvins with flames licking at his boots, popping flames from the stars surface that came shooting at the visor of his suit, just reflected, blinding him only for a few seconds - he took the outer layer of his glove off and wiped at the visor. Off to his right, really only

a few meters away, but completely enshrouded by a crop of fire, one of his outfit was tapping away with his excavator.

“How much longer until we have to go back?”

“I still have fifty percent of my oxygen left.”

“Well, I only have fifteen percent.”

“Fifteen percent? You need to check your valve right now.”

Kai reached for the back of what would be his head were there not a helmet there and touched at what would have been his valve were there not a hand covering it.

“What are you doing?” Kai asked the hand on his valve.

“I’m opening your valve,” he answered without passion, it was also the voice of Kai Jericho.

Kai Jericho opened the valve to Kai’s spacesuit and before he could fully take his hand away Kai was engulfed in flames that entered into the suit through the one millimeter wide hole the valve left in its place, devouring him alive, licking at his flesh from one cell to the next, leaving behind only a spacesuit of ash where once was a man, without a single identifying mark to remember him by.

Tap, tap, tap. Tap, tap, tap.

Mr. Jericho.

Tap, tap, tap. Tap, tap, tap.

Instructor Heinrich threw a book at his head. Kai woke up to the entire class at the assignment center looking at him.

“If you cannot stay awake during my class, then maybe you aren’t fit for a Consortium assignment after all. I’ll be sure to keep an eye out for you in the sex dungeons next time I visit Humarus.”

The whole class laughed at him. Kai looked back at instructor Heinrich, but Heinrich must have been replaced with Kai Jericho in his Rhamus Watcher spacesuit, who was looking at him with the same assortment of confusion, pity, and conspiracy that he had used to study the Telosi. Kai stood up and walked out of the classroom. He thought he’d spent his whole life on Rengali but when he left the Assignment Center he had the sensation that every building was foreign to

him, of a different design, more closely to that of Lancer civilization's infrastructure. He walked back to his mother and father's house but instead of finding his parents, in their separate chairs, it was a couch, but it was more like a bush, and on it was a beautiful woman made entirely of leaves, she had red flowers on long flowing vines where Kai had hair. The woman was reclined with her chin on her hand, and when she noticed Kai she smiled at him easily before going back to knitting a crown of vines, being careful to not pull too hard this way or that way so as not to break them. Kai approached the woman and gently laid down by her bottom half, his head nuzzled in her stomach.

"Ohh, sweet child, were you expecting your parents?"

Kai nodded his head.

"Honey, don't you remember? They had to leave. They're on a very important assignment. The most important in the /whole/ Consortium!"

Kai nodded his head again. The lady made out of leaves went back to knitting her crown, every few seconds little bits of leaves would crumble off of her hands and out of her hair and would get caught in the crown so she would have to hit it against the couch to clean it off.

Tap, tap, tap. Tap, tap, tap.

95.554.06

Tap, tap, tap. Tap, tap, tap.

"Jericho, you decent in there?"

Kai Jericho awoke with a jerk, nearly hitting his head on the top of his pod. It took him a few long moments to get reacquainted with his surroundings until he ran his hand along the sleek porcelain siding of his bed. His cube was littered in clothing and food, bottles of orysal and ke'Aar root, zorish smokers from Asczentar, as well as the smell they left behind.

"Jericho, I'm coming in."

Kai scrambled to cover up his lower half with whatever cloth was closest to him just as Officer Slynt opened the door to his cube. She took each step

precisely, her close cropped hair tight around her face in a sweeping motion that framed it like an oval, her thigh high officer's boots added just enough height to keep her eye level with Jericho when he was upright.

Kai gave his best impression of someone that wasn't caught off guard, "What brings you to the guardhall, Officer?"

"Jesus, Jericho, where's the wild torcet that did this to your cube?" She stood in exaggerated disbelief.

"I happened to do it all by myself. You impressed?"

"I'll say. I've never known a man could smoke," she counted the smoker ends in the tray, "ten zorish in one sitting."

"There's a reason I keep staring up at Asczentar, I'm thinking, '*Where's that damn supply ship at already?*'"

"You missed your evaluation," Slynt invited herself to sit in a chair opposite Jericho's pod, swiftly moving the conversation away from the late supply shipments.

"Oh, yeah, shit, sorry bossman. What were you gonna tell me?"

"The usual. Ask you about Amanda, tell you to lay off the root, talk to your psych."

"You mean your psych?"

"*And yours.*"

"I'll try to remember. It's just, Mandesaghn isn't exactly a psych, Slynt."

"And you aren't exactly a Watcher, Jericho. But we're all any of us got out here, so we're gonna have to make due. Wake up, sober up, make your way to medical, Mandesaghn's at least got to do a physical, you're overdue." Officer Slynt stomped out of the room confidently, her high leather boots rubbing against each other, squeaking with every step, and Jericho thought, *She looks out of place in a guardhall*. Slynt's predictably fixed appearance gave Jericho the same sterile impression that the outpost itself gave him, the brightness of the phosfluorescent light, that something so well maintained couldn't also be what it seemed on the surface.

“Hey, Slynt!” Jericho called after her, running to the doorway only to notice she was just outside it. “What do you think about Rand and Steiner switching places? Rand could be down there with us, and Steiner can be back here at the outpost, cleaning up our shit?”

“Get dressed, get to med bay,” she turned away from him then turned back, “You think I want to be stuck with Steiner all day?”

It took Jericho an hour to fully sober to the white fluorescent reality of being back inside of Outpost #1120, get dressed, and make his way to the medical bay, which was more of a greenhouse than a hospital, run by a man who was more a biologist than a doctor. When Jericho buzzed through the sliding glass doorway he was immediately hit with the pungent coagulation of a variety of smells so wide that they registered as a single smell. From above him sprinklers rained down a symphony of hisses and various colored liquid nutrients over their respective plants. *I wonder if the other outpost docs pay this much attention to their cultivation*, Jericho wondered, *this may just be the most colorful room on this entire planet*. He felt bullish walking down the rows of intricately placed vegetation in his bulky Consortium Watcher’s uniform, his voider slapping against his thigh at every movement, his combat boots ringing against the linoleum tiling.

Jericho found Doctor Mandesaghn near the back of his cultivator scraping the bark off of, what seemed to Kai a rather small, xylar tree, he wore goggles that stuck half a foot out from his face, obscuring it.

“Kai Jericho,” Mandesaghn greeted Kai without turning away from the xylar, “so, Slynt finally reminded you of your physical? I can’t say she picked the most opportune time, but then again I’m sure it was more the doing of some computer program than her own.”

“What’re you doing there?”

“You see, xylar seeds are found inside of it’s bark, and not only is removing the bark physically the best method for propagation, it grows quicker without it, too, but once you start, it’s best to remove it all at once so it doesn’t warp later in life.”

“If you’re too busy, I can just come back later.”

“No, of course not, we should go ahead and get the easy stuff out of the way.” Dr. Mandesaghn sealed the bag of xylar bark with intention and removed his gloves in the same manner. “So, how do you feel?” Mandesaghn asked down the barrel of his goggles.

“Uh, do those things read humans too, or just plants?”

“Its ability to analyze more complex lifeforms is a little wanting, but I do see some things. For instance, your lungs seem to be scarred.”

“Well, I’m about out of zorish smokers, for the time being, anyway.”

“No, I don’t think it’s from smokers, this type of scarrage is most typically caused by prolonged exposure to extreme heat, likely either from your time on the Stellar Project, or the swamps of Asczentar.”

“I always wore inhalators on the Stellar Project, but not so much on Asczentar.”

“Let’s see, uh, your spine seems to be slightly curved along the lower two vertebrae, do you always carry your voider on your right hand side?”

“Should I be worried about it?” Jericho asked awkwardly, feeling the predictability of Officer Slynt.

“I wouldn’t. It’s not much to replace it. What else, your knee implant is still going strong, a seven year old Larson joint socket, should last you until you retire.”

“Yeah, but by that time I’ll have to replace the other knee and one of my elbows, I’m sure.”

“Kai, aside from the scar tissue in your lungs you seem to be in extremely good shape, how old are you again?”

“Thirty-three, I think, it gets hard to remember on Telos.”

“You’re still a young man, there’s no need to accelerate your age in your head.”

“That’s funny. You’re the first person that ever told me I acted too *old* for my age.”

“Seriously, Kai,” Mandesaghn took his goggles off, finally allowing Jericho to look into his eyes which were tilted down at the outer sides giving him a permanent look of exhaustion, “So many young people in the universe get stuck on an assignment they don’t like for a few years and then become complacent, they age a lifetime in years. They leave the Assignment Center, blink, and their life is over.”

Chapter 4

Arwyck

“I want to know what you plan to do about the damned Xunare!” Executor Grant Lancaster’s face was so red it looked swollen, a ridiculous composition when paired with the pearl white of his spacesuit, which managed to undermine everything he was yelling about. He had been continuing in this manner since he had teleported into Arwyck’s office, yet, his physical composure remained straight and stately; not a single blonde, helmet-worn smooth hair on his head had moved from its spot within the deceptively messy, but what was actually carefully shaped mop. “They have become a plague on the Oryntix System ever since that damned war, it seems like every time I have my men sweep through a settlement, two more pop up in its place! Helena’s lights! They’re even starting to pop up in Orisynt space! You have to send men, or an envoy to Inix. The Lancers *are* the PSC, you owe your very *existence* to us!”

“Look, Grant, you have to have some appreciation for their situation. They have nowhere to go. Xunar is destroyed, and the rest of the planets of Bellatrix are either filled to capacity with refugees or are openly hostile to them. Every planet in Golenn-5 has seen an influx of Xunare refugees, it’s not like they’re *invading*. What would you have me do, throw them in an incinerator? Inix was a founding system too, Grant, Olana the Unifier was right beside Helena and Minton at the creation of the PSC.”

“I don’t want them dead, I want them *out* of Orisynt, *off* of Lancaster’s moons. If anything, it’s the Consortium who should be footing the bill for Xunare!”

“You’re right, why don’t you go ask M’Dalla Drake for 200,000 tons of selenite to rebuild Xunar? The Consortium is famed for its charitability in the Western Sector! Besides, you know as well as I do that rebuilding is a, *uhuhm*, *pivotal* role of the PSC,” Arwyck let out an involuntary chuckle at the idea, knowing how unconvincing the idea was on its face.

“Of course, I’ll be sure to hold my breath.”

To the outside observer, a First Human and a Lancer could be mistaken for being the same race, but most inside of the Golenn-5 Galaxy knew the tell-tale signs and were able to immediately distinguish between the two races, as well as the New Humans. Lancers were often leaner and, often, quite healthy compared to the rest of the humans in Golenn, muscularly gaunt whereas First Humans were so often large from years of opulence. First Humans were often content with their bodies failing and becoming atrophied with old age, whereas Lancer culture precluded the use of Larson body modifications and specialized medical treatments from Olympia to combat the effects of aging. Lancers were by-and-large physically homogeneous, orange-yellow-white haired and light-blue eyes as a reflection of the old Earth civilization they descend from; as opposed to the First Humans and the New Humans, the former a descending mixture of the races of Earth, and the latter being a descending mixture of the races of Earth, the Creon Galaxy, and the Bor-Eeal Galaxy before that.

Nearly twenty-thousand years before the rest of humanity, a million settlers and explorers from an isolated country in the north left Earth's surface in search of a more hospitable host planet aboard thousands of ships, *The Lancer Expeditionary Fleet*.

The humans who would eventually evolve and become the Lancers spent millenia searching, and in that time their fleet dwindled immensely; sometimes settlers became too comfortable on a planet the rest of the fleet found unsatisfactory, sometimes a ship would fail and fall directly down mid-jump, tipping forever away in the deep infinite, and every now and then they would come upon raider fleets or hostile governments who kept their airspace open to create a justification for scrapping a vessel.

By the time the remaining humans of the Lancer fleet had reached the Fascious System they had gone from a million expeditioners to two-hundred-thousand but, it didn't matter anymore, those two-hundred-thousand had finally made it exactly where they needed to be; the one voyage was over, and they were beginning a new one. The planets which would later be named Lancer and Bas-ssil, together met every one of the settlers needs. Lancer was flat and

empty, it was a clean space to build a civilization on top of. Bas-ssil was rugged and alien, a resource rich planet that had kept them from mining their own into collapse.

By the time the rest of humanity had left Earth, the Lancers had lived within the Fascious System for over ten millenia. When one of the thousands of fleets that left Earth in its final years had inexplicably landed in the Solistice System, the fleet carrying those who would become known as The First Humans, they were astonished to discover that their neighbor system to the south had also been settled by, while no longer strictly a *human* species, were fellow Earthlings, nonetheless. The allyship between the First Human's of the Solistice System and the Lancer's of the Fascious System empowered the, then foreign to this part of space, Earthlings to exponentially grow in both population and prosperity, becoming what widely considered to be the earliest examples of successful human civilizations outside of the Sol System. The Lancers and First Humans, in their affluence, expanded to fully colonize their respective star systems in the matter of a few millenia, and, just as their societies had neared the point of galactic expansion becoming a necessity, their progress was suspended indefinitely. In Her Light's Year 5.672, the Mariana System's Administrative Directorate declared themselves the rulers of the Southern Sector and, by proxy, the Solistice and Fascious Systems - dissolving the Directorate and creating what would be the Galaxy's largest empirical governance for the next thirty-thousand years - The Mari-Had Empire.

"I'll admit, the allocation of funds seems to be, uh, stuck in limbo, but I'm hoping to get that resolved at the Planetary Exchange Summit. Which, as I'm sure, you will be in attendance."

"Of course I will," Grant's Lancaster spacesuit was the top of its line, as befit the Executor of Lancaster Suit and Mech, a porcelain white so pristine that you immediately knew it had never seen battle, covered in enough dials and switches to make anyone standing outside of it feel vulnerable, anxious about what the suit was actually capable of.

"And, that will give you the proper, uh, panel, to settle your grievances."

The Lancer stared at Justice Arwyck, tall and clean in his white spacesuit, then gave a tight nod of his head, “Lancaster can wait until the summit, not after.”

“Grant, you have my word. Now, how do you like the TX-L12’s?”

Grant’s attitude changed noticeably at the mention of the Oryan Corporation’s new line of labor droids, “They’re fantastic.” *How else do you misdirect a Lancer if not getting them onto talking about their tech?*

After the fall of the Mari-Had, the Lancers made a name for themselves across the universe thanks to their technical inclinations and the lifting of the embargo the Mari-Had had levied on their equipment; they cornered the market in everything from alcohol to spaceships, eventually expanding to claim total domain over the Oryntix System, and, when the Earthlings were finally allowed to expand, the Orisynt System. After years in the free-market, the most pivotal corporations monopolized their individual industries, consuming the smaller enterprises until only the seven most powerful remained to combine into a union of shared interests. The *Oryan Corp* and *Lancaster Suit and Mech* constituted two of the seven sibling corporations, and after years of deliberations, incorporated together in light’s year 42.411, shifting from seven separate companies who led their civilization from shadowy capitalist obscurity and bureaucratic anonymity, into the proven operational legitimacy that came from corporate oligarchism.

The Oryan Corp provided close to the entire universe with their supply of androids, and had for millenia; the founder of the company, and ancestor of its current executor, created the first positronic brain in a single room dome-hab, the same positronic brain that every android in existence had subsequently been modeled after. Arwyck had yet to be briefed on the Oryan Corp’s latest model of labor droids, the *TX-L12*, something he thought he’d remind Grant of, considering they would be shipped to every corner of PSC space.

“They’re spectacular so far,” Grant relaxed his shoulders, leaping from screaming into congeniality, “they perform 12,000.12e computations a second. They can leap vertically up to 300 meters with more than 1,000 kgs of carry weight. Honestly, they’re incredible,” Grant gestured broadly with one of his hands, throwing a point away, then shook his head.

“What is it?”

“It’s just- listen, Arwyck, I was there for a lot of the final before-market tests, spent a ten-date on Oryan Beta, and these things- I mean, if they didn’t have the **nameplate on their arm**, anyone of them would pass for a Lancer, or a New Human, or even a Pandaran - whatever model. These things are *smart*, Arwyck. They’re funny. I spent five days with one in particular, Ronan-7 was his name; I volunteered to let him fly me home and help me with some work on my domicile. We were done in a day, with renovations that should have taken twenty. He helped me fix my composter, too, and now, you know what? I miss the guy. I wish I’d bought him. Really do. But, after he left, I transported back to Oryan Beta, and I pulled Ryyn aside, I said, ‘*Why the hell do you keep giving these things MORE personality? I want him to build me a biosphere, not be my pal.*’ she told me I wasn’t the target audience.”

“Well, you don’t necessarily make your feelings towards the androids a secret, what, with everything going on in the Neutral Zone and all that.”

“Don’t start on me about Garis.”

“I’m not going to start. You’re going to *tell* me.”

“Look, it wasn’t anything that could’ve been accounted for, we’ve changed a couple policies in the fleet, bylaws, and that’s all that can be done.”

“An *Elloi Vanguard* ship out of Lancaster shot down a Garis transport vessel, Grant. We’ve only just recently been able to convince them to accept our membership invitation, and now, one of our founding nations, *their* former master nation, kills twelve of their droids and all you have to say is ‘*we changed procedures*’?”

“*Destroyed*, not killed, they aren’t alive,” he corrected with the relaxed air of one confidently and inconsequentially resigned to their ideals. “Look, the Vanguard had their territory points inside the Neutral Zone wrong. The ensign responsible was fired. Garis is always changing their ships, anyway, how could my men have known it was a transport? Between the pirates and the raiding Exhalted from the Or-Merak Galaxy, the Northern Sector’s getting antsy,” and when he said that, the corner of his mouth trembled, unable or unwilling to fully

hide his pleasure in breaking the terms of the ceasefire between Orisynt and Garis. *So many of our galactic leaders, children; demanding constant recompense and simultaneously unwilling to accept any accountability themselves - especially so with the successful civilizations.*

“It needs to be addressed at, *if not before*, the summit. How can I demand reparations from the Consortium when one of our founding members is engaged in thousand year old hostilities?”

“I’ll talk to the other Executors when I get back to Lancaster. I don’t care either way, Arwyck, those damn sweepers were never my enemy. Will the “*old man*” be making an appearance at the summit?”

Arwyck turned away from Grant and pretended to be busy with his computer interface, “I have matters other than Lancaster to deal with, you know?”

Grant Lancaster typed return coordinates into his suit and smirked, “Remind Minton the 300th that his people are gonna have to see him eventually, or they’ll forget whose people they are,” then left, transporting out of the PSC Headquarters without even so much as a flash of light or a sound.

“I hate the Lancers,” Arwyck opined to himself. He stood up, feeling the weight of his gut on his back and his cheeks on his skull when he moved, and telecommed his bookkeeper.

“Janice, I’m leaving the office for the day. No need to make up any excuses.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Ted.” In her usual tone, peppered with contempt and familiarity.

“See you tomorrow.”

“It was in the Solar Year 49.834, ten-thousand years to the date after the fall of the Mari-Had, when founders Yarbrow Minton of The First Humans, Helena Larasense of The Lancers, Olana the Unifier, Premier of the Inixian Empire, and Supreme Wahrnak of the Hermitagi Board of Supreme Directorate first

incorporated their empires into one single empirical entity, creating what would form the basis for the Planetary Science Cooperative. Founders Minton and Larasense had one mission in mind; to organize the central and outlying star systems into one aligned cooperative, a single, united front, unraveling the mysteries of the universe under the blue banner of the PSC. In the 50,000 years since, The PSC has expanded to include eighty-two member systems, a hundred-and-fifty embassies, and seventy-four space stations, with over a hundred different races and species constituting their rank and file.” A young Pandaran woman, dressed in the pressed nylon pantsuit of a PSC clerk, her hair bound on the top of her head in an intricate amalgamation of loops and twists, her skin shining light blue with the distinctive glimmer that allows the layman to differentiate between the Pandaran and Inixian skin-tones, guiding a group of young Selapriini students, some wide-eyed, others disinterested, most just excited to get a day off from their studies. Theodore Arwyck made it to the lobby of the PSC main office just in time to catch another youth outreach seminar; just after the L’Meran history portion, and just before the incorporation of Bellatrix. He tried to sneak past the clerk and her court, and was overcome by a coughing fit.

“Mr. Arwyck! Kids, *this*, is Justice Theodore Arwyck! Justice Arwyck is the leading authority in the universe on star composition and planetary cartography, senior member of both the Immigration and the Planetary Affairs Counsel, Treasurer of the Cooperative, Magistrate of the Center Sector of known space, and Second Justice of the entire PSC, ranking second amongst the entire Cooperative, the highest authority throughout all of PSC space, second only to High Justice Minton. Now, does anyone have any questions they’d like to ask Vice Justice Arwyck?”

Arwyck knew there wouldn’t be any questions, there never were; they were intimidated by his list of titles, all meaningless to them as of yet, instead staring up at him past his bulbous gut.

“Well, do you have anything you want to tell our leaders of tomorrow, Justice Arwyck?”

“Never lose the wonder, that I see in *each* of your eyes,” Arwyck gave the same answer he always gave and made a graceful escape.

Arwyck always instinctively took a reverent look at the PSC Headquarters from street level when leaving work; 1,567 stories, and him on floor 1,566, not to mention his offices on floors 206 and 954 for his duties as Treasurer and Central Sector Magistrate respectively. The largest skyscraper in space, and it took a millisecond to descend to ground level. Like all buildings in Selaprin, the PSC Headquarters was made floor to crest out of selenite, a shining marvel, magnificent when the sun goes down. Selaprin, the jewel of the universe, soon to be celebrating its fiftieth anniversary on the day of the Planetary Exchange Summit, on Her Light’s Year 95.555.

Justice Arwyck chose to walk through downtown Selaprin instead of summoning a ship. Anywhere else in the universe he would have been hounded by pedestrians but, on Selaprin, the citizenry were all his coworkers; politicians, diplomats, entrepreneurs, he was simply another piece of the PSC machine - no one would be accosting him on the streets unless they knew it would be mutually beneficial for them. For blocks ahead there would be nothing but embassies and corporate headquarters. Arwyck took a shy glance at the star Selsani and to either side of it, in an anxious attempt to make sure Selaprin’s two starbirds were still there, twinkling in the not so far distance, one nearly too blue to make out against the midday sky, the other an ugly beige that, if it were only a few kilometers closer, would ruin Selaprin’s skyline from whatever angle you were looking at it from.

The Helix Hospitality Suites and The Yarbrow Minton Research and Discovery Center, the two satellites in an artificial orbit around the artificial world of Selaprin, which orbited the artificial star Selsani. Helix, as it is known colloquially, is the first destination for every King and CEO, for every backroom conference between two hopeful transactors, or twenty confident members of the elite. It boasted one thousand executive suites, one of which belonged, unused, to Arwyck, twenty dining halls, a casino, a garden, a theater, a parliamentary conference hall and, at the center of it all *The Helena Larasense Grand Hall*, a

regal and expansive museum centered around the history of the Golenn-5 Galaxy as a tribute to Founder Minton's long-since-dead wife - and where Selaprin holds its bi-yearly Planetary Exchange Summit. It is also the permanent residence of High Justice Yarbro Minton.

Then, in complete juxtaposition to Helix, the much more ominously colloquialized, *Center*. Beige and square, like a transport vessel for ships, nearly a quarter of the size of Selaprin, and one tenth the size of Selsani, The Center was, to all but the highest members of the PSC and the staff, a complete mystery. Some theorized it was a prison, or a Selenite factory, or a human research facility; the truth was, every guess one could make about the Center was correct. The highest level PSC prisoners were brought to the Center's bottom floor, and right above it housed the PSC's only selenite refinement plant - one floor was entirely lined with the galaxy's highest powered telescopes and a handful of PSC clerks, another floor comprised of housing units for the Cloaked Keepers and Minton's other pet aliens. The Center was the PSC's most valuable resource, being home to the most confidential components of the Empire and, as such, was potentially the most heavily guarded structure in the universe - even Arwyck, who had jurisdiction to practically the entire station, felt anxious even looking at it; he knew what it was capable of.

Arwyck left Selaprin's business district and took a hard right onto South 246th Street. Arwyck ducked into the corner building, a short, unassuming drab fare made of weathered selenite which juxtaposed every other building on the planet, almost a rust-orange even at night; he looked over his shoulder one last time to make sure he didn't see any of his colleagues on the street. When one would enter the House of Asczentar, they were immediately ambushed with plants growing from the walls and vines hanging from the ceiling, all native to Asczentar; plants which should not be able to grow anywhere outside of Asczentar, somehow grew in abundance inside the House of Asczentar. The floors and the interior walls were even made of the same terrain as Asczentar, a red moss-like substance they call *carn*. Arwyck made his way to the anteroom, brushing weeping lilies and arodiums aside as gently as possible, where Zentail

sat reading, her bladed body draped across a cushion made of flowers nearly identical to the flowers on her head which served as an Asczentari's hair to the layman, only, Zentail had explained to Arwyck that it wasn't strictly the case, as their flowers were never replaced; they were more like a crown which was never taken off, a lesson in history and a reminder of a life lived.

"Well, hello, darling Theo," Zentail snapped her book shut, noticing Arwyck's specific footfalls likely as soon as he walked in, feeling their vibrations all the way from the first speck of carn along the entrance to her seat in the anteroom.

"What were you reading?"

"Asin Lo's study on the healing properties of folandrum seeds. He theorizes that in enough time, they might evolve to prevent death by freezing, or even reverse it. Right now, though, they just feel warm in your stomach. Are you going to sit?"

Arwyck nodded sympathetically and shambled over to the nearest flower bed, the furthest from Zentail, making labor out of sitting down, the gesture itself being an indication that he was not only here to pick up his medication, but also to work through his thoughts with the Asczentari *Atikum*.

"You seem more troubled than usual."

"The Planetary Exchange Summit. Two-hundred pseudo-empires under my roof, and they all hate each other, they all want each other's food. And I won't be able to make a decision for any of them."

"But you've known about the summit since four summits ago."

Arwyck shook his head, *she's supernatural*, he thought, *obviously she wasn't going to buy that. Why would you come here for therapy if you're just going to lie?* He sighed, physically straining while trying to find the appropriate words, "It's- us. Our empire. I can't even tell what our mission is anymore. What we stand for. Or if we stand for anything or if we ever did, what are we trying," he trailed off, shrugging his shoulders.

"What are we trying to.." Zentail repeated, trying to help Arwyck find his thoughts.

Arwyck struggled against the pressure of openly voicing his opinion on the PSC, “Just, what are we trying? Just in general? What do we ever risk? Yarbrow and Helena formed the PSC to make life better *everywhere*, to learn universal truths, to recreate the Draxal through our enterprise to form the mightiest alliance ever seen with every known life form and to aim that alliance like an arrow at any problem that might arise. What problems do we solve?”

“Those are important questions that you should keep asking yourself, everyday, and if you can’t find the answers you need, ask yourself every minute,” Zentail saw that her words had fallen on deaf ears, and continued, “You only come to my House for therapy when you can’t justify your politics.”

“You don’t have anything for that, do you?”

“Hmm, nothing that comes to mind. I do, however, have this. Lay back.” Zentail arose from her bed of flowers in one slow, singular movement, seemingly being reinforced by her seat then disengaging from it once on her feet, and disappeared into the garden, returning only a moment later, dropping small leaflets in a trail behind her, “Open up.”

“What is it?” Arwyck asked, already on his back.

Zentail gave him a stern look and Arwyck obediently opened his mouth.

“Don’t talk until it melts.”

Arwyck nodded his head, and before the last speck of the plant melted away with his saliva, he was asleep.

Chapter 5

Orlak

Orlak found Premier Ouhnaxsin in the back of his throne room, standing pensive just inside the balcony, looking out over the rolling hills of the Royal Xylar Meadow, looking out over his country - his family's empire. *He looks thinner*, Orlak noticed. The Premier had not been taking visitors since the princess's kidnapping; Orlak knew he was getting sick of the sympathetic looks from his lessers, of the constant reminders of what he had lost. He was draped in a traditional Inixian xatan, his war belts hung in deceptive-carelessness over his left shoulder; he would never allow himself to be seen without wearing a xatan as a subtle statement reaffirming his commitment to the culture and history of Inix, the dress blew in every direction from the wind. Orlak approached his ruler cautiously, stepping loudly and steadily so as to not startle him, and startling him anyway.

"Orlak," Premier Ounahxsin relaxed his shoulders, "please, join me. I was just looking over our country. I couldn't sleep with all of this light-blinding waiting."

Orlak took a single step forward, "I do love the view from your balcony, Premier, only, there is much more to see, no matter how grand the Xylar Meadow grows this year."

"Don't speak in poetics, Orlak, you know how I hate it."

"Inix is the center of our empire, but it is not the empire, my King."

"I know my empire, Cardinal," the King corrected his Cardinal reactively, then, to turn the conversation, asked after the position of his Royal Masters.

"Our prisoner should be landing on Ptolemy's Launch at any moment."

Premier Ouhnaxsin did not respond at first, then said, "I hope Inix understands."

"They will. Princess Ounella is loved by all of Inix, from the highest born to the most humble. Any of your subjects would sacrifice *themselves*, let alone the likes of disgraced Astronomer Len Macy, for her return."

The Premier gave a solemn nod of his head by way of response, then after a few moments, “Terrafin,” he said finally, more to himself, or something outside of either himself or Orlak, as if he had whispered it to the Xylar beneath him, which hummed back through the voice of the million beating wings of the dew flyers.

“My liege?”

“All of this,” he gestured broadly across the Xylar Meadow, “all of our empire; Xunar, my *wife*, bless her memory, my daughter, all of this. For the Terrafin System. How could our predecessors have been so near-sighted? Tyson, Trinitus, Asczentar, and Telos. Three out of four of them are rocks. Why were we not content with what we had? Dominion over Prisalys, all of Bellatrix and Xhileen. Yet, we continued westward. And all we had wrought was death.” He shook his head and leaned out over his balcony, his country, the beautiful purple hills of the Xylar Meadow descended away from Olana’s Palace, the ancestral dwelling of countless Inixian Emperors dating back further than even the First Human’s Primordial Age, and at the far end opposite the palace, the golden city of Xateel, tall and bright and obviously alive, yet far enough in the distance that one could still see the night sky from beneath the Xylar trees; Ptolemy was still in the south flashing green and red and blue, Farax and Norixin still held ever vigilant to their orbit around Inix, loyal as their namesakes, loyal as any traditional Inixian.

Recently, Orlak found that he could never quite find the right response for his King. In the two years since Princess Ounella’s kidnapping, Premier Ounahxsin had become increasingly despondent, not even making so much as a public address on Inix since the signing of the ceasefire. Presently, it had been over fifty days since he’d left the royal palace, the King spent the majority of his time inside Iximon’s Atheneum reading over history - of Bellatrix, of the Inixian Empire, the Inixian crusades across Brax and Telix, of the Golenn-5 Galaxy, of Terrafin and of Nexon, of the Inixian crusades across Terrafin, of the human’s Emancipatory Age, of the creation of the PSC, of Rengali - the Consortium’s first foothold in Golenn-5, of the Asczentar/Trinitus ancient blood feud - what the Premier was looking for in Iximon’s library was unclear, and it had started to

become a point of contention and gossip among everyone inside of Olana's Royal Palace.

Orlak despised the rumors; whispers and petty gossip were beneath Inixians, especially those chosen few who work directly under the Empire, he was quick to remind anyone he'd catch spreading rumors at the King's expense or the expense of Inix, whose customs dictated loyalty to the Empire, pride in their history and honor in the face of adversity. There once was a time when no Inixian would allow themselves to be heard commenting on the state of the empire in public for fear of losing face, dishonoring themselves or their loved ones. Yet in the years between being appointed to the position of High Cardinal in 95.529 and the present day, Orlak couldn't help but mark a noticeable shift from tradition across Inix and their satellites; the pervasively intentional slouching away from faith had been an ever-increasing trend year-after-year.

And well before that, Orlak remembered. This lack of conviction across Bellatrix was an issue before my birth, it has persisted my whole life, and it will surely outlive me. It was Xunar. The moment Inix had to abandon its positions across The Terrafin System, that was the moment the seeds of doubt were sown, and the Xunar War was like its fertilizer. In a thousand years of war, there will be plenty of opportunities to become demoralized, but, what finally broke the empire was the Heritage Campaign. When the Consortium, against the terms of the Xorin Treaty, dropped that- thing, in the middle of the nation-city of Xinharrda, leveling the final remains of the once brilliant megalopolis into just more broken ground, extinguishing one of the brightest stars in Inixian space, the universe watched - our vassals. If Xinharrda could be ripped apart like a zinar trimming, what could happen to their little village?

The Inixian Empire was in a state of disarray, had been for centuries; Xunar, Inix's right hand and what was formerly their strongest resource and their most historically significant vassal, was decimated, uninhabitable; there will be C-Class Nequis Soldiers and PSC Keepers picking through the rubble for their entire lives. Brax remains an unruly vassal after their latest election wherein an ultranationalist authoritarian Braxian Burgess Party was voted into power off of

promises of seceding from Inix and accelerating encroachments into marauder territory, while blaspheming the Premier Ouhnaxsin and bolstering anti-Xunare fervor among the native Braxians. Telix is nearly filled to capacity, having accepted over four billion Xunare refugees and counting, and no one inside Olana's Palace has heard from the Xintari ambassador in well over a year. The Premier's attitude only served to compound the insecurities among their fiefdom. *How could I reprimand one of my masters or the warlocks for theorizing on the downfall of the Inixian empire when the Premier speaks with the exact same insecurities?*

"Your Majesty, there is another matter; Lancaster sent us a casting, they said for us to expect one of their fleets on Inix. They'll be carrying an estimated two-hundred thousand Xunare refugees. They had been living on one of Lancaster's moons until a recent land dispute with a local laborer erupted in violence."

"When do they arrive?"

"They are set to arrive on Solar Date 95.554.36."

Ounahxsin raised himself up from the balcony's palisades, "Xunar," he whispered, "my broken leg. Generations of Xunare, all any of them have ever experienced is war and hunger." After much inner-deliberation, the King continued, accepting the necessary in a defeated tone, "We will find a space for them on Inix. Telix just took in another three-million, and Brax is no longer to be trusted- we have to keep relations with the BBP as minimal as possible."

"That is another point, Your Eminence, we -"

"As for Brax," Ouhnaxsin cut Orlak off, answering his question before it was asked, "and that upstart Borithil Glick, I would like to slit his throat in his sleep. We can't have one of our satellites oppressing Xunare, but I am wary of the prospect of going to war within our system. I'm loathe to risk the majority of our nylium reserves by provoking the BBP, I wouldn't put it past them to set it all aflame just so long as it hurt Inix," the Premier shook his head, "and, this is the first time Bellatrix has known peace since the incorporation of Xintari. Our

people are sick of war, and mayhem, our nequis soldiers and battle masters are traumatized, those that we still have.

“I’ve been in the library, I know you know that. I’ve been reading on the Inixian Outreach Age, when Inix decided to open relations with the Lancers and First Humans after their arrival on this side of the galaxy. I know you know your histories, Orlak - I saw something, though, that stuck out to me in the agreement between Inix and the First Humans, when Yarbrow Minton had granted Premier Olana the Terrafin System, in return for her good faith and allegiance to L’Mera and the greater Golenn-5 Galaxy; there was an addendum that also granted Olana domain over the Nexon System, so long as she survey the system and allow the PSC access to the scans. Do you know about this?”

“No, my King, I was unaware of any domain, only that Nexon was our tributary.”

“*Was* our tributary. There are none to collect tribute from. There’s a dataset I came upon in the Atheneum, a conversation between Premier Olana The Unifier and her daughter Xena near the end of Olana’s life where she described for her daughter their domain over Nexon.

“After Olana agreed to the terms of PSC incorporation, she personally took a trip across Nexon and Terrafin. When she returned to Inix, she disembarked off of one ship, and climbed onto another, set for L’Mera, wherein she demanded an audience with Founder Minton. Do you know what she told him, Orlak? She said ‘*You gave me Nexon, a dead system, and Terrafin, a dying system, and now, more than I want retribution, I want to know, is Bellatrix next?*’ That was solar date 49.839. In exchange for Nexon and Terrafin, PSC granted Inix settlement and governance rights to the Xhileen System and Prisalys of the Pandara System. I’ve only been able to find the one dataset mentioning Olana’s conversation with Minton so far. None of the texts say whether Olana ever got an answer to her question or not. The way history is playing out, though. I wonder what Olana the Unifier would make of her empire now.”

The King is in more despair than even the most cynical of us believed, Orlak thought, and then again, he was lost for words.

“I have a lot to consider now, my King, if I may have your leave, I’ll have one of my men assist you in your search for an additional dataset if you’d like.”

“Orlak.”

“Yes, My Premier?”

“Contact Larak and Finxir as soon as they come back online. I need to know Ounella is safe.”

“Of course.”

“Thank you, Orlak.”

“The kingdom will rejoice once it’s made public that the princess is back on Inix. Her presence will be a much needed boost to morale.”

Orlak thought back to that night, it was late the same night he had last spoken to the Premier, early the next morning. The *Xynex Corp Specialized Transporter* materialized all at once out of the purple Inixian night, immediately descending and landing as quickly as it had appeared. Orlak knew that here, in the Premier’s private airstrip, there was no real need for an escort under normal circumstances, but no one knew for sure what would be returning from Ptolemy’s Launch. The ship made no noise whether in the air or idled, yet Orlak knew when the machinery was off, he could see the subtle vibration of life from the ship and he could see when it stopped. He stared at the side of the ship, waiting for the gangway to descend, half flinching at the possibilities inside, when finally the side popped open and lowered, a cloud of vapor from the pistons expelled from around the airlock chamber, obscuring it then melting away, the entire freighter shuttered like a wounded animal. From behind the shadowy insides of the airlock chamber came the bright yellow of a Royal Master, and behind him a second, and between them, Orlak noticed only once they walked under the light, the little princess Ounella, staring at her feet, walking with her arms out to the side as if trying to keep her balance. Orlak allowed himself a slight moment of relief at the sight of the princess, at first glance unscathed. When the Princess

noticed Orlak among the other half dozen Inixian Royal Masters, she broke into a full sprint, outrunning both Finxir and Larak, wrapping herself around his slender waist.

“None more than my own.” Orlak felt a fraction of the love he felt for the Princess, just remembering, after spending two years in her absence, that she was now back behind the smooth teek walls of the Royal Palace, “After a ten-date of intensive study, it seems our little princess has been returned to us untouched,” Orlak addressed the Inixian Table of Constables and Ambassadors, all of whom were in attendance for this year’s Table, save Irices, their ambassador to Xintari, and Premier Ouhnaxsin.

“All the scans came back perfect,” Torvent, the Constable of Scientific Affairs, assured the table, “she even continued to grow at the expected rate; no sign of malnourishment.”

“The Jewel of Bellatrix, back behind the royal glass,” Gwinnit, the Constable of Galactic Affairs announced aristocratically, “somehow more beautiful than the day she left.”

“Yes, it warms my heart to once again hear the princess running through the halls of Olana’s Palace; I do, however, fear the consequences of relinquishing *our* prisoner,” The sternly dissenting voice came from Mrax, The Constable of Military Affairs, a title that has gone to a Xunare military general since the start of the Xunar War.

“The Consortium fears the PSC; they wouldn’t dare be caught giving Macy back his freedom,” the green hued holographic cast of the Ambassador from Prisalys, Dole’Ren, challenged Mrax’s implication immediately. The Pandaran ambassador was a tough and principled woman with a soft spot only for the Princess Ounella, and vice versa; any time Dole’Ren visited Olana’s Palace the Princess stayed glued to her side. *A mutually beneficial pairing*, Orlak always thought when he saw the two together, *Ounella having lost her mother, Dole’Ren her daughter.*

“I wouldn’t be so confident in my expectations of good faith from the Consortium.”

“We traded Macy for Ounella, now we have Ounella; no matter what they do with Macy it would be worth the safe return of the Princess. The exchange has come to pass - if you had any contentions, Mrax, you should have voiced them at the last Parties Table,” Orlak announced in a tone that warranted no further discussion of the topic. “Obviously, Ambassador Irices of Xintari will not be joining this year’s Table.”

“I haven’t heard from Irices since two tables ago,” Norince, the Ambassador from Telix, herself a casting as well, offered as if she had just remembered.

“Daratris, have you spoken to Irices recently? Can you tell us *anything* about what is happening on Xintari?”

“Since the last constable’s table, I’ve spoken to Irices once, and it was to ask if he would be attending tonight’s table,” Daratris, the Ambassador from the Gole Satellites answered defensively, she shook her head at her fellow Ambassador. The Gole Satellites were five, overly-inhabited moons of Xintari who shared, or, rather, were forced to share a common culture with Xintari, the bulk of their population coming from natural-born Xintari who fled the planet to escape it’s opulence, instead turning it’s moons into more of the same. In the absence of the Xintari Ambassador, their Gole Ambassador was forced to deal with its moons and now the planet itself.

When Xintari first went silent, the Constables inside of Inix had taken to relying on Daratris for information from the planet, but soon, their inquiries became implications - implications that Daratris responded to by landing on Inix and confronting the Constables in person, rather than sending a casting of herself, telling them to imprison her then and there if they suspected her of treason. Since then Daratris had spent the majority of her time on Inix, as she, too, had begun to find the Gole Satellites increasingly less familiar to her.

“What was his excuse?” Mrax asked, scoffing at the Xintari Ambassador. Irices was Mrax’s polar opposite, something that Mrax had never been able to forgive him for. Irices, in addition to being an Ambassador to the Inixian Empire, was one of five members on the board of the *Xynex Engines Co.*, a position his

father had held before him. Irices, with all of his insulating wealth and self-aware pomp, was nothing more than a ridiculously base creature to Mrax, who, after a lifetime of military service, embodied a much more *traditional* kind of Inixian ideology.

“He just said he was busy with his duties on the Xynex board, the same thing he always says. No matter how much time Irices spends at work though, it doesn’t seem to have much of an impact on Xynex’s market value.”

“But, nothing else to report?” Orlak asked, soothing his voice so as to make the question sound as little like an accusation as possible.

“I don’t know. Maybe? He’s just been out of it lately, and short in our conversations.”

“But, only Irices? What about Xintari?”

Daratrix shook her head again while she searched her understanding of the planet’s state of affairs, “Xintari’s fine, of course, as she always is. The Xyer Tree repopulation is running better than expected. Oh, and Counselor Zaneth asked me to send you all his regards after learning Irices would be skipping the table *again*.”

Orlak smiled at the mention of the leader of Xintari. Zaneth was one of the few higher-level members of the Inixian Empire’s planetary governances that Orlak trusted entirely; he nodded pleasantly in response to the Counselor’s regards, “I suppose we should start at the first order of business, then.”

“Yes. In less than thirty solar dates, a Lancer shipping fleet will be touching down on Inix, they’ll have thirty ships, all filled with Xunare refugees, nearly a quarter million. Now, are we sure Inix is prepared to deal with this sudden influx of Xunare?” The Telixi Ambassador asked the table. The Telixi were a sibling race to the Telosi and, while all Telixi were on a spectrum between being Inixian or Telosi in their appearance, Gwinnit representing the truest middle between them, Norince had been born without any Inixian blood - she was pale as the Xunare sands, skinny and awkwardly lengthened, yet, thankfully, much more intelligent than her twin race - something that could be learned just by looking into her cunning eyes.

“Yes. I have spoken of this matter personally with the King, he is prepared to offer however much of Inix the Xunare need. If we don’t take care of our satellite states, we are no different than Consortium dogs. The Xunare have suffered enough, and you and Telix have already done so much for not only the Xunare, but our empire as a whole with your generosity towards them. The least Inix can do is follow your example and accept as many Xunare as can fit on the surface. The two-hundred-thousand will live near Intarix, in a sister city that we’ll have built for them before they arrive. Gwinnit, I’d like to ask for your personal help in the endeavor, since you were so integral to the acclamation of Xunare in Gimin and Tarzek.”

Gwinnit was obviously making some calculations in her mind, “Of course, we’ll have to get some details out of the way, let my contractors know and give them the time to fly to Inix, but whatever my King asks I shall fulfill.”

Orlak nodded, “We’ll get the finer points ironed out in the coming days. Dole’Ren,” Orlak physically shifted his attention to the Ambassador from Prisolys, “How’s the Pandara System?”

“Well, we’re still fighting for land rights to Selapor and Selaprin i, but I know the arbitrations are of little interest to Inix,” the conversation surrounding Pandaran land rights even made someone as righteously composed as Dole’Ren physically uncomfortable.

Those inside the Pandara System have been fighting for the rights to Selapor and Selaprin i since before the formation of the PSC, back when the First Human settlers from Solistice on their way to L’Mera were simply ‘The Humans’, and were riding the high from the destruction of the Mari-Had. Once The First Humans were emancipated from their oppressors, they went out into the greater Golenn-5 Galaxy haphazardly in search of a civilization they could in turn lord over, when they found Pandara. When First Human settlers first discovered the Pandara System and found that two of the system's four planets were composed entirely of selenite, they immediately set to excavating and abandoned all mining operations on Selenus, the Solistice System’s own selenite giant. What followed was a twenty-thousand year long campaign of subjugation on Pandara and

Prisalys, and complete ethnic-cleansing and displacement of the Selapori and Selapri. When the PSC was formed, and under the advice of Helena Larasense, The First Humans decided they would no longer actively wage war, it became counterproductive to murder those under the PSC umbrella. By the time PSC policy changed, however, the damage to Selapor and Selapri had already been dealt; the native Selapori and Selapri only accounted for ten percent of the population on their respective planets and, though the PSC made it a point to not pick up a selgun against a Pandaran, it didn't keep them from showing up with their grinders.

The formation of the PSC supposedly meant the end of colonization in Golenn-5 for its member states, proclaiming to be too advanced for enslavement and subjugation, except that wasn't how the galaxy developed in practice. Today, there are about two million Selapri and less than a million ethnic Selapori left in the Golenn-5 Galaxy, and their planets are still being mined through by the PSC. The issue of Pandaran sovereignty is still hung up on 40,000 years of red-tape bureaucracy, and the PSC still claims to hold true to its code of non-combat. This was the essential issue with the PSC; in all legislative and judicial matters the PSC acted as the adjudicator, even those in which they were also the plaintiff or defendant. It was impossible for the PSC to be unbiased in situations wherein their own, for-profit ventures were at stake - especially those which accounted for fifty percent of their selenite output - and, as the largest planetary cooperative in this quadrant of the known universe, there was nobody capable of excusing them at times of interest conflicts. Then, there was the issue of the Yarbros, who could change drastically from one clone to the next; the newest Minton would pass laws that would totally contradict the last Minton's laws, while still leaving the old laws in place, effectively obfuscating the law of the Galaxy so that they were the only entity to *truly* know what was legal.

Then, too, there was the problem of Prisalys, the sole planet inside the Pandara System under the Inixian Empirical umbrella. While Inixian presence on Prisalys was never a violent colonization effort, and they, along with a smaller population of Xhileeni, cohabitate the planet with absolutely no tensions, it was

an inevitability that anytime the land rights of Selapor or Selaprin i were brought up, so too were the rights of Prisalys.

“It is of importance to Inix, Prisalys *is* Inix, as much as it is Pandara. Even if it weren’t of interest to Inix, though, it is of interest to me; why don’t you indulge us?” Orlak offered politely after a few moments of silence, during which Mrax was especially silent, “Anything that serves to better the conditions of the Pandara System serves to better Inix. How have the deliberations been going?”

“Practically non-existent. The adjudicator is an old-school type First Human, huge PSC proponent, obviously, so the arbitration process slowed to practically nothing, he keeps extending our dates. The way it’s looking, Selapor and Selaprin i landback is going to be held up until the arbitrator dies and we get a new one, hopefully someone more sympathetic.”

“Knowing the PSC they’ll just continue to install party loyalists.”

“Well, obviously Prisalys is open to any Selapori or Selaprin i,” Orlak reminded Dole’Ren

“It’s not even about the space, there’s plenty of room for them in Pandara, how few they are now. First Humans and Lancers have practically mined Selapor and The i out of existence. They used our planets to build themselves a new system, a whole new star, *the shining marble of corporate murder*, while over a hundred thousand Pandarans die of hunger every year. Pandara has more natural selenite than the rest of the galaxy combined, yet fifty percent of my people in the Pandaran System live in abject poverty. The issue *totally* is a lack of selenite; food shipments cost selenite, it costs selenite to build housing units, it costs selenite to create jobs, it costs selenite for power in court, and, were Pandaran selenite miners to see even one percent of the profits the PSC make on their labor, we’d be able to afford everything our citizenry desire, hell, if they had two percent of the profit, Pandaran quality of life would triple, even for those outside of mining.”

“You know, Inix also has selenite mining operations on Prisalys,” Mrax put in.

“That is spent entirely inside of Prisalys. The Zelix Corp *could* institute a profit-sharing initiative for their miners on Prisalys, but then, Prisalys isn’t my

main concern. Inixians have been worthy wardens - The PSC has physically stolen the ancestral home of the Selapori and the Selaprini, crumbled it, molded it into their own, blasphemed mechanation, and transported it a galaxy over. I'm sorry to get worked up, it's just, all I can think about anymore it seems. They're criminals," Dole'Ren made a sharp turn in her chair away from the rest of the assembly, *hiding a tear*, Orlak thought, *unnecessarily, we all mourn for her oppressed as if they were ours. Who among the Table has she not seen cry over Xunar?*

"I'm sorry, 'Ren, the Empire will continue to help Pandara monetarily, as much as it can afford to, anyway, and I'll be sure the representative from Inix petitions the PSC on behalf of Pandara at the Planetary Exchange Summit. Which leads us to another order of business, who do we propose to send as our representative?"

The members of the assembly all passed one another confused, if not slightly amused, glances.

Torvent spoke up, "I assumed it would be you, Orlak."

"You *are* the Voice of the King," Gwinnit reminded him.

Orlak knew it would be him, he had been the petitioner for Inix at the last four Planetary Exchange Summits, "No one else wants to volunteer?"

"No, Orlak, I think you were made for this role."

"Then what will we petition for this year?"

"Additional funds for the reconstruction of Xunar, foremost," Norince offered.

"Additional troops to take back Brax," Mrax reminded the court, "The BBP holds the majority of our fuel reserves, don't think that Glick will just forget about the ocean of nylum under his feet."

"I fear we'll have to deal with Brax diplomatically," Orlak sighed, "I've spoken to the King about Brax as well; he doesn't want to go to war within our own system, and I'm inclined to agree with him. We *must* attempt a diplomatic resolution. We can't afford to turn Brax into a barren wasteland." *A barren*

wasteland, like Xunar; Orlak thought to himself, then figured the others heard it as well, and that it needn't be said.

Mrax huffed, "You must not have been to Brax recently, Orlak, it was a barren wasteland a century ago, now it's an open-air prison inside a wasteland."

"An open air prison with over three-hundred million Xunare that are now essentially hostages; as a Xunare yourself, Mrax, I'm sure you can appreciate our need for caution. The King has sent a summons to Borithil Glick and the BBP, requesting an envoy to discuss the future of the Inixian Empire, and Brax's place within it. We will find a way to deal with the insurrectionist Glick and in a way that doesn't endanger the migrants."

Mrax considered this possibility, "You're the diplomat, Orlak, and maybe there is wisdom in caution. It just disgusts me; the enemy, in our own system, positing themselves so openly against Inix - against Xunar, even after everything else. I know Xunare that immigrated to Brax; light's death, *Ambassador Xaron*, he and what's left of his family live in Barath, at least last I heard, and now it's a detention center-" Mrax trailed off, and instead of continuing his thought he just shook his head at the idea of the former Xunare Ambassador to Inix, the most respected mathematician in the Galaxy, probably begging some child of an Enforcer for food for his daughters.

"There's no point in stewing over their fate now, Mrax." Gwinnit patted the general's arm nurturingly.

"What else..", Orlak said out loud to himself, "Jilil, you've been awfully quiet, how are things in the Xhileen System?"

The casting of the Xhileen Ambassador, in the awkward, bent up position in which his chair forced him to sit in, leaned forward pensively, seemingly having trouble gathering his thoughts - Jilil had this compulsive habit of touching his tongue to each of his ten serrated teeth in the same sequence when he was deep in thought, "The Mariana System, that is the Consortium's, latest endeavor, correct?" He asked with a sibilating hiss between every few syllables.

"So they say, I hear they've begun erecting housing units on Forside, they've also reportedly been sending Astronomers to survey Hartsden, and

petitioning the PSC to allow their scientists admittance to Kyet. The fools they are; first they go to war for a dying star system, now they're wasting even more resources on those desolate wastelands overrun by the savage descendents of the Mari-Had, not to mention their planet-eater."

"Before tonight's table, I visited the Premier, casting into, Iximon's Atheneum," the standard language was so foreign to the Xhileen tongue that they labored over every word, "and Premier Ouhnaxsin, he asked, me if I had ever, been to the Mariana System. I told him no, he said, I should before it's, taken away from me."

"What does that mean?" Torvent asked incredulously, apparently having expected a larger payoff after listening to Jilil so intently.

"I did not know, what he meant at, the time, but then something, occurred to me," Jilil's reptilian features not only accentuated his accent, but also the sinister undertones in his speech, "I think the King, in his present state, had confused me for, High Cleric Xannig, from the Xaalini, System.

"As I am sure, you all know, the Xhileen and Xaalini, bare a striking, resemblance to one, another. Myself and Xannig, especially look, alike so I have, been told. When I considered what, the Premier, said to me, through the perspective of, Cleric Xannig, I was reminded, of a book on, historical land holdings in, The Eastern Sector, that I had read. Specifically the, Fascious Independence Wars of, solar year thirty-four, wherein the First, Humans and the Lancers, in an effort to, free themselves from, under the yolk, of the Mari-Had Empire, leveled every planet, in the system. Later after the, formation of the, PSC, the Lancers and First, Humans chose to, apportion the Mariana, System, giving one, planet to each of, the three systems of, The Triangle, in an effort to gain, their membership. They declined the, offer forty-thousand, years ago but, thanks to a, recording error, the rights to the, Mariana System were, never transferred, back from The Triangle. At the time, none outside of, the Eastern Sector had, open relations with, The Triangle since the, Independence Wars, but they've been, PSC members for, the last few thousand, years, and, according to Xannig, the systems of the, Triangle, will soon be, abandoning their policy, of religious solitude. If I

remember, correctly, Kyet belonged to, Animus, Hartsden to, Athelemun and Forside, to Xaalin. I may search for, later title transfers, but as everyone, besides New Humans know, Mariana has remained, mostly untouched since, the Independence Wars, assuming Kyet's Beast, of the Plains has, kept dormant. The Triangle may, not even know of, Consortium settlements in, Mariana considering, their isolation."

Orlak felt weightless for a moment, the others at the Table also seemed to understand the implications of Jilil's discovery; Mrax aimed a sinister, spreading grin at Orlak.

"There's also the possibility that The Triangle aren't even aware of their land rights to the System," *If The Triangle were to abandon their millenias of religious prostration and meet the Consortium on the battlefield it would change the landscape of the galaxy*, Orlak thought, *and an opportune time to break the terms of the ceasefire, now that the princess is home*. "Jilil, could you send a communication to Cleric Xannig? I'd like you to be there for the conversation I plan on having with him."

"If it can wait, until the morning, Cardinal Orlak, I fear it is, getting late on, Lirolae-Platinum."

"Of course Jilil, we will conclude the Parties Table," Orlak stood up ceremoniously, "my fellow Constables and Ambassadors, thank you as always. It seems we may have a lot to look forward to."

The Braxian Burgess Party arrived unannounced inside of a single *Gaksen O-Lift*, a spacecraft designed for travel inside of Bellatrix that didn't have a single weapons system, a point which the BBP's chosen representative and Brax's Let-Counselor had stressed when he and his company were surrounded by Battle-Masters on the private airstrip of Olana's Palace.

"Gentlemen! We were invited! Please! Put your katars down!" Let-Counselor Morwin Dak had his hands in the air and had ordered his entourage

of Enforcers to do the same, this was how Orlak and Torvent found them once they were alerted to their arrival. “You must be Cardinal Orlak!” Morwin Dak announced when he saw Orlak from across the sea of Battle-Master helms, his voice proper and high pitched in juxtaposition to the silver column of a body that produced it, “Your reputation precedes you, Cardinal, would you mind calling off your battlers?”

“Hold positions,” Orlak responded coldly, “We never received a response to our summons, why would you show up like this, unannounced, with a crew of Enforcers, if not to catch us off guard?”

“Cardinal, we surely would not have if we had expected to be greeted with such a hostile show of force, I mean, we *are* still Inixian, are we not?”

“That remains to be seen,” Orlak eyed the retinue, obscured by Inixians and katars. *Ten Enforcers, and only the Let-Counselor after we summoned Borithil Glick, his not being here in itself is a show of disrespect,* “Morwin, you will come with us, the rest of your Enforcers will remain *on* the airstrip, *inside* of the *O-Lift*, or these proceedings end here.”

“Cardinal! I will leave my Enforcers on ship, but you would not dishonor the great Ambassador, Doctor Xaron by disallowing him inside of Olana’s Palace, would you?”

Just then from inside the sea of silver-skinned Enforcers, surrounded by a wall of blue-skinned battlers, a Xunare walked into view, previously obscured, the blue of his face blending with the Inixian Battlers around them.

“...Physicist Xaron?” Torvent half-asked, half-exclaimed. The Xunare professor had relocated to Brax a few years ago, near the beginning of the Xunare mass-immigration to Brax following the Hermitage Campaign, and, before their situation on the planet had flipped, he had been the face of the migration campaign which aimed to convince Xunare to relocate to Brax, the work being so important that he had asked for leave from his duties as Ambassador to Inix. From the reports Orlak had heard, Xaron was making even more of a name for himself on Brax than he had from his background as a physicist. Until today, however, there had not been any word on the physicist’s whereabouts since the succession

of the Braxian Burgess Party and, as with most Xunare on Brax, had been assumed dead or near-enough. Yet here he was, an apparition, him in full traditional Xunare wear, his xatan unscathed and himself healthy, and guarded by Braxian Enforcers.

“Hello, Orlak,” Xaron greeted Orlak congenially in spite of the katar in his face.

“Hello, Xaron.”

“Why, for Olana’s blessing, would you not respond? And where is Borithil Glick? The Premier *specifically* summoned Glick, without your leader, how can we make any meaningful progress in this?” They were inside Olana’s War Room, Orlak intentionally leading them to the ancient map room wherein Olana planned her conquest of Brax instead of the keep beside the Atheneum where Party Tables were held, hoping the profundity of the room’s history would send the right implication to the Let-Counselor. The cool, purple stone bounced with the flare from the braziers which set a sort of constant-moving intensity to the meeting.

“Again, Cardinal Orlak, we surely *would* have responded if we knew the welcoming which we were to receive,” the pampered counselor shook his head in ironic disbelief, still playing the victimized child, hiding a rock behind his back, though Orlak could tell by the flow of his outravenous system which could only be seen on his face from under his warsuit that he was anything but hurt by the encounter, “nonetheless, Counselor Glick is becoming busier by the day, he sends his apologies, as well as myself, who speaks with Borithil’s voice when necessary.”

“And you, Xaron?” Mrax butted in, full of a confused and pained animosity he had been struck with from the moment Orlak summoned him to the war room and told him the Xunare Physicist had attended with the Braxians, “Whose voice uses you?”

“It is good to see you, too, Mrax, and in good health. When did we last run into each other?”

“When Xunar still existed, the scientific trades convention, likely.”

Xaron nodded his head eagerly, “That’s it! That was the convention that Asin-Lo made a plea for Asczentari sovereignty and made a fool of himself in front of everyone.”

Mrax scoffed, “*A fool?* For me my eyes were finally opened to the plight of the Asczentari, our situations similar as they were.”

“You undermine the Xunare by comparing them to a plant.”

“*You* undermine the Xunare by aligning with their oppressors!”

“And that, too, what is your role within the Braxian Burgess Party, exactly?” Orlak asked, trying to tie the conversation back to something of substance.

“Resettling. Population study.”

“Professor Xaron plays a pivotal role in the party, as the representative of the Xunare on Brax his support to both his people and the party keeps relations on-planet peaceful,” Morwin Dak answered with perfect faux-diplomacy.

“So you’re a propagandist?” Mrax fired back.

“I’m a realist. All of Goleen-5 depends on Brax for its nylum, if their population is to drastically change in number it’s necessary that it keeps in line with the resources we have.”

“And when the population increases too much you put them into detention camps.”

“Cardinal, I understand how the lack of imperial presence on Brax can lead some within the empire to immediately imagine the worst, however, the situation on Brax is far from anything like that. We simply have to ensure the future stability of Brax.”

Orlak was getting bored of the judicious half-statements of Morwin Dak, *he says everything and nothing at once*, something Orlak was all too familiar and increasingly becoming impatient with, “Let-Counselor Dak, since Borithil Glick has decided to ignore his King’s summons, I see no reason to be democratic in our

proceedings. The King does not recognize Glick's authority to subjugate the Xunare. It is not his planet, only his planetary governance, it is the King's star system, the King's empire, and those are our people, they are not some resource in need of thinning. The Xunare are a finite and precious commodity to us, even if they aren't to you," he pointed his gaze at Physicist Xaron.

"Well, Cardinal, I'm glad to hear how important the Xunare are, in fact, it's perfect how much you care. If they're so precious to his Majesty, then he will understand the increase in price of exports to the empire."

Orlak did not quite understand what Morwin had said, momentarily distracted by his impudence, and when it finally registered, Orlak laughed out loud, "So, Glick came with his own terms. Pray, how much does he intend to raise the price of nylium?"

"An additional three-thousand selenite per kL, though the true price will indeed be more dynamic, as is the situation in cities with large populations of Xunare."

"Three-thousand selenite?" Mrax laughed this time, "That's more than double what the nylium's worth! That upstart, he's going to tank Brax's only industry! Is he really that narrow-sighted?"

"As Inix only accounts for about a tenth of our nylium exports, we believe that we can endure the loss, should you decline his generous offer." Morwin waited for a response, then feigned understanding, "Oh, the price hike is only intended to apply to the *Inixian* Empire. Counselor Glick is under the belief that Inix, and Inix alone, should bare the full brunt of the cost of the Xunare on Brax, and we came to the decision that an increase in the cost of nylium would be the most efficient way to calculate that cost. We've been calling it the *Xunar Tax*," Morwin Dak smiled, full of self-righteous indignation, this politician, taking such delight in his newly acquired position which he felt afforded him the ability to be iniquitous.

Orlak didn't waiver in his expression or his voice, "And if we decide to land on Brax and appropriate your nylium industry?"

Morwin Dak laughed affluently, "You cannot."

Orlak and Mrax shared a look of unbelieving delight at the incredulity of this fourth-party-novelty, and Orlak leaned in to ensure he was heard, “And what if we were to appropriate Borithil Glick’s Let-Counselor, and his Minister of Propaganda, order the ship they arrived on be sealed and destroyed with their men inside of it, then nationalize *all* of Brax’s industries?”

“I wonder what we could get from Glick in exchange for his second,” Mrax was salivating.

“The culling of three-hundred million,” Morwin Dak dropped his smile to exhale slowly, then, with a deathly and hideous expression of plague, of famine, of the culmination of all the evil everyone was capable of, responded, towards Mrax first, “The culling of three-hundred million,” then to Orlak, to ensure it was understood. He produced a palm of zinar from inside his warsuit oafishly, presumably dropping all sarcastically delivered pretense of hostile diplomacy, then began trimming it down to a sheet with his fingers. “They are invaluable, of course. Surely Premier Ouhnaxsin wouldn’t risk the safety of three-hundred million Xunare for a measly three-thousand selenite.

“And, of course, our Enforcers; the party has plenty of anxious young men to shield ourselves with.”