

CAPTAIN ERIC OLAFSON

By Vanessa Ravencroft

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Author: Vanessa Ravencroft

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Chapter 1: Chapter 1

Galactic Chronicles Book I

CAPTAIN ERIC OLAFSON

FIRST JOURNEYS

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CHAPTER 1 “ Nilfeheim-

Outside the bitter cold winds of Longnight howled around the thick duro-crete walls of the Burg, but here in mother's drawing room it was warm and cozy. The soak-stones glowed warm with Tyranno Oil fire in the oven. Somehow I always thought her room was just a bit warmer than all the other rooms and halls. The walls were not gray duro-crete. Velvet curtains and wall carpets depicting the great clan wars hid most of it. I was lying on my favorite spot, nestled among the incredible soft copper and white colored Nubhir furs spread out on mother's divan. Her fur blankets were lined with smooth, luxurious shimmering ivory satin. Ever since I could remember loved to feel them. My blankets were made of the coarse hair of Fangsnappers and not lined at all and had a strong musky odor. Here everything smelled wonderful.

She was sitting across in her favorite chair, the thick book of legends on her lap and she was reading to me about another fantastic adventure of Thor the thunder god. Her long blonde hair glistened like gold in

the warm light of the reading light. The old book resting on the maroon colored skirt of her velvet dress, the one with the golden seams I liked so much.

She was a great reader and could bring the characters of the story come alive and she gestured with her slender hand and began to read:

"One morning Thor, the mighty God of Thunder, awoke from a deep slumber; he reached for his hammer as he was wont to do first thing every morning. Alas, on this day, his fist formed around thin air -- the hammer had disappeared."

Her hand was searching the thin air next to her chair and I was no longer lying down. I never had heard this story before and had to sit up straight. Thor's hammer gone!

She glanced at me, gave me a deep smile and kept on reading. Her voice increased in intensity and she managed to speak with a deeper voice. "Thor was beside himself. His rage was immense and would probably have been quite destructive, but without his hammer, all he could do was rant and rave. What good was the God of Thunder without his mighty weapon?"

I could only imagine. Thor without his hammer!"

Mother's voice became a quieter and her face had a quizzing look "Of course he had his suspicion as to the identity of the thief ... it could only have been those pesky Giants! But no matter, he needed his hammer back, and quickly! First thing though, he had to find out where the Giants might have hidden it. Who better than Loki, the wily one, to make inquiries. Not to lose any time, Loki went to Freya and asked her for the loan of her feather-dress, the famed falcon-cloak, so he might quickly fly to the land where the Giants dwell. When Freya heard what the cloak was needed for, she was more than willing to help.

So Loki went on his way and it wasn't long before he happened upon Thrym, one of the princes of the Giant clan. Thrym feigned surprise and inquired what could possibly be so wrong in Asgard, or perhaps Elfland, that Loki dared enter the realm of the Giants on his own.

Loki told him of his mission, to find the hammer of Thor. Whereupon the Giant threw back his huge, ugly head, shook with thunderous laughter, and then told Loki that the hammer was well out of the reach of the Aseir ... safely buried, some eight fathoms beneath the earth's surface. And it would never again be swung by Thor ... lest Freya herself be brought to him as his bride. As Freya was the bride of Odin and the most beautiful of all the Aseir."

I knew Freya would have looked exactly like my mother, for who could be more beautiful than her? "You should have a cloak of feathers too!" I said. So you could look lovely and I could borrow it to fly around!" She laughed. "Oh that would be grand indeed. However I doubt Freya would want to share her cloak with a mere mortal, but I too wondered how that cloak would look like, especially when my father told me this story when I was a little girl. "

"What did Freya say when she heard about that?"

"Let me read you more of that story and let us find out." She turned the page and once again she read. "Loki hurried back to Asgard, to inform Freya that she needed to ready herself to become the bride of the Giant Thrym. For the good of Asgard, of course!

Freya's outrage became the stuff of legend in the halls of Asgard -- the idea, she, the beautiful, wild, free-spirited Freya, the bride of that mangy dog!

But something had to be done. Finally, Heimdall, the wise one, advised Thor that there was no other solution than that he, Thor, dress up in women's bridal frocks and pretend to be Freya. To say that Thor was less than taken with this idea would be an understatement. No way was he going to risk the ridicule of all Asgard. There had to be a better way!

But nobody could come up with a better plan. Everyone knew that the Giants had long had their eye on Asgard, and with the help of the hammer, they might even accomplish this goal. And that would simply not do! Especially since Odin was in his sleep and could not be woken for 100 years..

Loki even offered to accompany Thor, decked out as his handmaiden and soon, the great rams were ready to draw Thor's wagon across the heavens. Mountains split open, forests burst into flames, and the rumble from the mighty wagon could be heard from a long way off. Thrym believed it to herald the arrival of his bride. He bade his hall to be decked and the tables readied for a great feast.

"As night fell, the great meal had begun. Thor alone ate a whole roasted oxen, eight salmon, and every bit of the sweetmeats that had been served for the women; all this he washed down with three barrels of mead. Thrym thought this just a bit odd, but Loki whispered to him that Freya had not eaten for eight days, too overcome with longing for the Giant Prince. Now that was more to the brute's liking, and he felt a desire to kiss his betrothed. But as he lifted "her" veil, he pulled back in shock ... the eyes he encountered glittered as with madness. Again, Loki explained that Freya had not slept for many nights, from longing for her groom.

Then the giant's oldest sister came forth and bade "Freya" take her golden bracelets from her arms; with these she would insure the old giantess' favor and good will.

Meanwhile Thrym, impatient with the ways of women, called for the hammer to be brought and laid in his bride's lap. Thus would their union be sealed before the Gods.

Those words were music to Thor's ears. No sooner did he hold his hammer in his hand than that he sprang from his chair ... the first blow killed Thrym outright.

None of the clan of the giants survived that night, not even the old women who had asked for his bracelets in return for her favor. He paid her in blood instead of trinkets."

She closed the book with a loud thud that brought me back to reality. "And it was thus that the God of Thunder reclaimed his hammer."

"What is an oxen?" I asked.

**"It is a huge animal with horns, twice the size of the biggest Fangsnapper you ever going to see."
"Not even Uncle Ragnar could eat an entire Fangsnapper!"**

She laughed." No I am sure even your huge Uncle Ragnar could do that." She put the book aside, got up and brushed over her skirt."And now it is time for my little warrior to go to sleep."

"He could not have done it without the help of Loki and the wise Heimdall." I concluded and she nodded." This is very true, Eric and that is the message in this story. It means not all problems can be solved with raw strength and weapons. Of course Thor being Thor he ended the story his way and made sure no one would ever again get the idea and steal his hammer."

Father who had entered the room, his eyes glassy made a growling sound from his massive chest." Loki is a trickster and he deceived Thor many times after. No Neo Viking should ever listen to this particular story. "

Mother pursed her lips and said." But he is one of the gods and half brother to Thor and he did help the Thunderer to get his hammer back!"

He glared at me." This is no place for a warrior born. Look at you lying on furs in the boudoir of a woman. You are too old now to be in your mother's dressing room. All this warmth will make you soft like a woman. You are to go outside right now and keep watch on the tower. The cold wind will clear your mind of all that soft rubbish and steel you to be a man!"

Mother protested."Isegrim he is five years old what is wrong with me reading him the legends of the Gods? He is not going out on that freezing tower in the middle of Longnight. There hasn't been a guard up there for 500 years! He is no warrior yet, he is a little boy!"

Father uncoiled his ever present whip; he carried on a sling attached to his wrist. The whip was made of a length of steel cable. He bellowed loudly and angry:" Know your place woman! It is not proper for you or anyone to question my decisions!" I could smell the mead on him as he rushed by me towards mother.

She stood there not moving an inch and holding her chin high. "You do not scare me with your whip! You are drunk. Now leave my rooms! My Father will hear of this if you do not leave now!"

Father screamed:" No one gives me commands in my Burg, you are but a woman and your only duty is to please me! He slashed the cable across the face of my mother, blood was everywhere!and I woke up, bolting upright in my bed. That night had burned itself into my mind and I knew it would be with me for the rest of my life. My mother died that night. A night that happened now six years ago. He had killed her and he had beaten me after it as well. I almost died that night and more often than not I wished I had died with my mother that night. Death was nothing but a word for me before, but I knew very well what it meant now. There was no rest for me in a night like this. I could not go back to sleep without seeing the lifeless bloody heap that had been my mother. I could see it even right now, but being awake was better.

Isegrim had married again and now I had two brothers. Lothar and Tyr. My stepmother was a kind woman I did not hate her, but she was of simple mind and would rarely speak at all and if she did, it was to praise the manhood and strength of my father. Lothar was two years younger than me, but father treated him like his heir, even though I was the firstborn and according to our laws heir to all. I had but one goal in life, to grow old and strong enough to kill my father for what he had done to my mother. Oh I feared him, a footstep or a noise that announced his coming send shivers down my spine. He would not leave any opportunity to kick or hit me. If I was lucky he was done after just one or two strokes and lost interest in me. Then I had been banished from the main house by my father and had to stay in an unheated room in the old tower. My step brother now had my old room with all my things and Lothar from early on learned that he had a special position and he too never let a chance pass to let me know. All this I got used to. The best day in my life happened when I turned seven and I could go to Union School. Away from the Burg and away from my father.

At basic school I learned that Nilfeheim was the third planet in the Solken System. That Nilfeheim was a Water-World and that we all originally came from a Planet named Earth and settled Nilfeheim a long time ago. Our teacher was an Off-worlder, a person that was not born on Nilfeheim and didn't even have a beard. Solken System was only one of many Solar Systems that belonged to the United Stars of the Galaxy, usually only referred to as the Union. Humans and Nonhuman species belonged to it and space ships travelled between all those worlds. One morning he told us that every Union Citizen had rights and was bound by a higher law. Higher than that of the Elders and the Traditions on Nilfeheim, laws my father broke as he killed another Union Citizen.

This was the first Shortsummer I experienced, the period our planet was on the short end of its elliptical orbit around our sun and it would last three standard years. The other period we called Longnight and it lasted for seven standard years. During Longnight the sun would barely appear across the horizon and temperatures plunged to minus sixty degrees. Now during Shortsummer temperatures could climb all the way to 15 degrees and most of the planet wide ocean was ice free.

I stepped to the small window and looked outside. Our Burg had been built on a large rock above the churning waves of the ocean; actually it was the peak of an underwater mountain. The rock was known as Ragnarsson Isle and had been the traditional home of the Ragnarsson Clan ever since Nilfeheim was settled by Terran Colonists in 2166. Now during Shortsummer and on a clear day I could normally see the Oseberg Island where the Oseberg's had their burg, but not tonight, a strong storm coming from the south, pushing the waves to crash even more violent and higher against the rocks of the isle than usual and reach all the way to the lower walls of the burg. The Oseberg's were the mortal enemies of the Ragnarsson Clan and until about 500 years ago there was open war between these clans. Although open clan wars were no longer practiced or permitted, it was still forbidden to even speak the name Oseberg within these walls.

It was still very early and there would be another two hours before the burg came to life and the servants and the clan would get ready for the hunt. So I was very surprised when I heard steps, my door was

opened without a knock or announcing my visitor. Only one person in the Burg would do this, my father. Isegrim was a big man, even for Neo Viking Standards. He wore his fur lined housecoat and his long black hair not yet braided. His face framed by a full beard of the same black color. He stared at me from his cold blue eyes and barked at me." Your Grandfather is here! He wants to see you!"

At first I wondered why he did not send his servant Harkun or one of my brothers and came himself to summon me, but he made his reason clear with his very next sentence." If you mention anything about what happened to your mother. I will kill you on the spot. Do you understand?"

"I understand that my mighty father is afraid that it comes to light he murdered his wife. The wife that provided him with a Burg and wealth. Wealth her father can take away from you. You need to kill me now, father. For I will not stay silent and the day will come I will revenge my mother!"

His whip uncoiling was his answer. I knew he would do just that and kill me right there and then and part of me wanted just that.

There was no escape from the lashing cable. The room was small and the only escape was the door in which he stood. The first lash burned across my chest, ripping my night shirt and splitting skin. I already expected the second, but it never came. An ever taller and more massive man held my father by the wrist. It was Uncle Ragnar, my father's brother." I have remained silent before, I will not this time. Kill your son and I shall go to the Elders, after breaking every bone in your evil body, brother!"

Father howled almost like a Fangsnapper." This is my Burg, this is my house. You are but a guest here. How I choose to raise my son is not yours to decide. If I choose to kill this failure then this is my decision too. These are our traditions!"

Ragnar smiled." Do you want to make the old man wait; if he waits to long this might not be your burg after all."

Father said nothing more but glared at his brother and I saw pure death and hatred.

But I followed them to the house and into the family hall. I had never seen my Grandfather before as he was off planet, representing Nilfeheim and the Solken System at Pluribus the Planet of the Union.

Erik Gustaf, the patriarch of the Ragnarsson clan sat there in a chair by the long dinner table with a tankard of Ale next to him. He was not only one of the richest men; he also was one of the Elders in the Circle of Elders, the highest authority on Nilfeheim. Both his hair and beard was gray and braided the traditional way. His right hand prodded on a black and silver walking cane he looked at me and then my

father. "I know what happened to my daughter. I know you have beaten her to death. I know you treat your own son like an outcast because he might have seen your deed." His tone of voice was matter of fact and vibrated with great authority. "As a father I would like to kill you, take my revenge on you. As Union citizen I want to simply have you arrested and hung for murder. But I am also the last of the Ragnarsson Clan and I am an Elder. We do not call the Off Worlders and we stay true to our laws and the traditions. My beloved wife could not give me a son before she died and Eric is the last that carries Ragnarsson blood. When you married my daughter, I was content that the Ragnarsson Clan would cease and continue in the Olafson clan. Your Clan is of the old lineage and I looked forward to the merging of our families."

He sighed deeply and continued." As I said I am also an Elder and must uphold our traditions. While it is without honor to beat a woman to death and you are guilty of murder by the laws of the Union there are now ancient laws that you have broken. As much as it pains me, you are the master of this house and by our traditions, the sole authority on this rock."

Father's face changed to a cold smile." This is so and yes I have beaten your daughter, my wife and on many occasions as she did not adhere to our traditions and rebelled often against my will and word. It is your fault not to raise her properly and accepting the rule of man."

The old man nodded."This might be the case. I did put the love to my daughter above my dedication to the traditions on occasion. However I will keep a very close eye on you, so you do adhere to our traditions. Since you choose to hide behind them, I will make sure you live by them. Fail to live by our traditions even the slightest, and the Elders will cast you out.

The Old man pointed at me." By our traditions he is your firstborn and not Lothar. While you have the right to choose anyone as your heir in your home, he shall be the heir to all that is still Ragnarsson!"

Father kept his grin and said." He is my son and until he becomes a man by our laws, all that is his is mine."

"This is why I make Ragnar the guardian of his inheritance. "The old man got up." I shall leave now as I must return to Pluribus. Be assured even in the case of my death. You will be watched and while the death of a woman by the hands of her husband is not punished by our laws. The death of a male and healthy son will be!"

He walked over to me and said."You have your mother's eyes and her hair. I can see much of her in you. This pleases me." He put his hand on my shoulders and then looked to Isegrim. "I must leave Nilfeheim again to represent our world, but I swear by Odin I will find you if he comes to a sudden death!"

Father crossed his massive arms."You had your say old man. I humored your presence till now. This was your Burg after all, before it became mine, but my Burg it is. I care little of your threats and soon you are dead and I will be an Elder. Now it is time for you to leave. Go play with your off world friends. The Union has no meaning on Nilfeheim and you know that. Once I am the Elder I will see that all this bad influence is swept away and we return to our old ways."

"You will fall before this happens." The old man however did leave with these words.

Chapter 2: Chapter 2

CHAPTER 2

Things did improve after that night however, simply because Father ignored me for the most of the time and that in my opinion was a very good thing, besides I spend the mornings of the weekdays at Basic School like every other kid in the Union, Nilfeheim traditions or not. Basic school was in its own right a very old tradition all by itself as there was a Union school on Nilfeheim ever since we joined the Union, and that more than 2000 years ago. After school and after fight class I usually would go to Uncle Ragnar instead of going straight back to the Burg. Uncle Ragnar had an Inn, he and his wife Aunt Freydis owned. Aunt Freydis also was a midwife. On Nilfeheim babies still came the old fashioned way and no Arti Wombs or anything like that. She was a very kind woman and mothered me whenever she was there. She took her midwife duties very serious and was always in great demand and she was gone more often than not to help some woman somewhere to deliver.

Uncle Ragnar was my Fathers brother and traditions and the Old ways were as important to him as any other Neo Viking, he was stronger and bigger than Father and perhaps one of the strongest men of our world. I was almost certain of that as I had never seen anyone taller or bigger than him. I often seen him arm wrestle other men and he always won with ease. On occasion he would even wrestle two at once. Once a week the cargo floater from the exchange would deliver barrels of ale, beer and mead along with other supplies, his helpers and the delivery men would struggle with the big and heavy barrels but he would lift them as if they were empty. I knew other Inns often had one or two strong men employed to keep order and to throw out those men who had to much to drink and became rowdy. It was a well known fact that no one would really get that drunk to try Uncle Ragnar. I had seen him throw grown and strong men out with the same ease I carried a tame kitten. When I came home after school he would usually sit down with me at one of the wooden tables, since the Inn was not very busy during that time and teach me about our history or show me in his backyard how to use our traditional weapons or to throw an axe. Even though we had fighting classes were everyone was instructed in the usage of sword, harpoon , shield and axe, Ragnar was one of the best.

"Uncle Ragnar," I started a question after we had thrown hand axes on a swinging wood target." Why is it we Neo Vikings use such archaic weapons. I mean we live in the 50th century and I heard you could

order a Energy blaster right from GalNet."

He sat down on the wooden bench next to the back door and made a gesture toward the swinging target." You keep throwing and while you do that I will tell you!"

So I went to the target, about ten or twelve meters away and retrieved the small throwing axes, he bellowed with his mighty voice inside the house after one of the servants and ordered himself a tankard of Mead. He motioned me to throw, nodded and smiled as both axes hit true." First of all we are not Neo Vikings. That is a Term the Off- worlders gave us after we joined the Union. We are Norse. The word Viking means nothing more than traveler in the old language. They would say we go Viking and that meant to go on a trip. Either to pillage or on a trip to trade wares."

He got his tankard with Mead and took a long draught then wiped his beard, belched in such a manner that I was sure Odin would be jealous, got up kicked my feet a few inches apart."This is how I told you to stand! It gives you a better position. Throwing an axe into a wooden target is easy. If that target is a man who tries to do the same to you, that's an entire different story. However to be prepared for exactly that , is the reason for all these exercises. Don't be stiff as frozen fur in the Darkwind, relax and be light on your feet. Now go through the movements. Count with your breath to three, and get it into the rhythm of the swinging target and then throw."

"I hit it before!"

"I want you to hit it every time and all the time. No misses, no two out of three. In battle there are no second chances or do-it-over. There are no scores and points given. You hit first and you live, you don't and you're dead. That is the old way, that is Olafson tradition and that is how you will learn it from me!"

Again I threw and the axe smacked with a cracking sound into the wooden plank. He nodded again."Now I want to see that again. Same spot!"

He took the other axe and a honing stone and began to carefully sharpen the gleaming blade." As you know we originally came from a planet called Earth now better known as Terra. The original settlers that came here and took their lore and culture to this new and harsh world. Life was hard especially when they started out."

I threw the axe again and retrieved it."I know about that part, Leif Leikson gathered his people and all the worshippers of the Aseir as they were not welcome on Earth and came here to live true to the traditions and free of alien influences and all the things that made mankind soft."

He tossed me the honing stone." Sit down and take care of your axe while I answer your original question." He put his axe back in the leather bag and tied the strings." Yes Leif did that, but the nature of this world was more unforgiving and than expected and it has little to give in the long time of Longnight. Especially to a culture that rejects all modern technology. Each clan started to have their own idea just what the traditions should be and who should be allowed to live on the rocks in the Burgs and who had to live on the ice up north. When a Contact ship from Earth came a few clans banded together captured it, and with it started to pillage other colonies around this neighborhood of space. Other clans refused to use this modern technology and called the others traitors to the true spirit of Leif Leikson, who had already been long dead by that time."

He stopped his narration to take the stone away from me, dip it in honing oil and giving it back." As you can imagine the other human colonies did not really like to be pillaged, robbed and killed. So they called the Union Navy for help. Battleships came and made a swift end to our planets short space pirate career. They gave us a choice after they destroyed our few pirate boats. Be forever isolated on our planet without any contact to the other worlds or to join the Union and accept Union law and with it Union help. It took the Elders back then very little time to choose the second option and Nilfeheim became a Union world.

However the Elders back then did not speak for all clans as they do today. Other clans who didn't like the idea of using modern technology to go Off-world to pillage an pirate others in the first place also didn't like the idea that Nilfeheim now was a Union world. Not that they had anything against the piracy and pillage part but the way it was done, was against the old traditions, meaning the rejection of machinery and technology of course. Every clan had their own idea how much technology was good. Being on a new world new traditions formed as well and clashed with the old ideas and as you know our kind we are not the best diplomats and arguments usually ended up in fights."

I simply nodded and kept pulling the stone over the edge of the axe in the way he had shown me.

He actually got up and said," Wait here!" then he disappeared inside the house only to reappear with a green metal box and out of it he took a modern weapon. I hade never seen one in real but I knew them out of the Virtu Shows in our theatre and of course from school. He said."This is an old Directed Energy blaster. Legal on many planets to own." He aimed the weapon and a bright bolt of light crackled through the air and the heavy wooden target we had used to throw our axes had a huge burning hole in it and the massive rock wall that enclosed the back yard had a large red glowing crater as well. I was quite stunned by the damage the weapon had done. He said."That was not even the highest setting. It takes little skill to use one of these. Physical strength and agility make no difference. Can you imagine what would have happened if the Clan wars would have been fought with weapons like these?"

I understood."I think no one would be around today."

"That is exactly right. The clans that went to space and were no forced to stay on this world, had plenty

of these and used them to force their will on the other clans. Quite a few of the real old clans completely vanished in that time and new Clans arose that haven't been of the old lineage. It was Gardar Svavarsson of the Svavarsson Clan who went to the Union post and complained about it and a Union Court took the case and decided that the Elders voting for Union Membership indeed did not speak for the entire Planet but if Nilfeheim would leave the Union no help could be rendered at all, they would only make sure we would not leave our planet. Long story short Gardar assembled all Clan leaders to a big meeting and even the most thickheaded chief knew no one would survive another long night with all the fighting and no outside help at all. So a new Circle of Elders was elected and a long document of rules, The Nilfeheim Laws of Tradition was produced. It tightly regulates how Clan differences should be fought and what is and what is not tradition. First rule was to fight only with the ancient weapons. No guns or blasters are allowed as any distance weapon is to be considered less "honorable" than a hand weapon. According to our custom, all free men are required to own weapons, as well as permitted to carry them at all times. These arms also indicative our social status: The Great Clan, like ours will have a complete ensemble of helmet, shield, chainmail shirt, and sword. Those not born to the old families are the BÃ³ndi as you know. All the men of lesser clans small families. They will have at least a harpoon, an axe and shield, and everyone carries the Seax , our Skinner Knife."

He glanced in his empty tankard. " I don't think ever talked that much on a single tankard."

"Can I shoot the Blaster? Just once?"

He nodded." Yes but not here. These things are terribly dangerous and we are in the middle of town. Those bolts easily go through walls and we could hurt someone. Tomorrow at the beach I let you lose a few bolts."

It was my 12th birthday when he surprised me with a present, a fancy wrapped package from my grandfather. It had arrived via Post Ship all the way from Pluribus and it was a real Virtu Immerge Simulator, along with seven Virtu Discs. Virtu Simulations were not unknown to me as we had them at school and used them to go on field trips all around the Galaxy, and there was a Virtu Show House in town as well. However none of my friends and school comrades had one at home. Of course I would not take it home, knowing father would smash it to pieces but I was allowed to use it in the small room Ragnar had given me in his inn where I could study, do homework and use the Virtu Simulator. Six of the discs were just common Games, one of them however was called "Starship Captain" and in it you would become the Captain of any number of space ships and if you played long enough you got a Battle ship. The simulated crew and the ship became almost more real to me than the outside world. I spend any free moment inside Virtu to leave Nilfeheim, roam the stars aboard my Battle ship completing missions I could download from GalNet.

Grandfather died during that year and it was a big affair with many off world dignitaries. The body of my grandfather had been dressed in traditional Neo Viking clothing and he was holding an axe and a Harpoon. Like this he was placed aboard a wooden boat with a single sail. The boat was set on fire by torches the Eldest threw and then pushed it out to the sea. The wind or perhaps the heat of the fire filled the sail and the boat was gaining speed. Everyone was standing at the pier in complete silence till the boat was burned to the waterline and the rest disappeared below. I had seen a warrior funeral once before, but it was the first time I met and seen off worlders close up. Even two non Humanoids were there but I only had eyes for the black uniformed Fleet officer with his shielded cap and golden rings at his sleeves. He was greeted by the Elders and I heard him introduce himself as Captain Reynolds. He was as neither as tall nor as massive as most of the Neo Viking men around him, but he still had a commanding presence and a flair of great authority. He even moved in a different way than all the others, nothing I could have described or put in words, it was simply different. After the burning the dignitaries started to talk to each other, shaking hands and since our planet rarely if ever had official visitors, the Eldest invited the Off worlders to join them at a banquet in honor of my grandfather as it was tradition after a warriors funeral to eat and drink, just as the departed would as he was now sitting at the banquet table of the Aseir. Tables were brought right to the shore and placed into a big circle, fires started and barrels opened.

Uncle Ragnar appeared wearing his apron to supervise the grilling of Fish and Tyranno Shanks. The air soon filled with the savory scent of fresh grilled fish. The Speaker of the Eldest placed himself in the middle of the great table round and held his tankard high." A toast to Erik Gustaf Ragnarsson who has returned home and now sits with Thor and the Gods. Let us do the same and celebrate his journey and remember his life. We are an inward looking people and isolate ourselves as much as we can from the rest of the Union, but we know we would not be here today if it wasn't for the Union. We do business with them and their Credits are welcome. Erik Gustaf was both! A stalwart defender and guardian of the traditions we hold so sacred and at the same time he looked outward and worked on our behalf as representative. I see many faces here that are not Neo Viking, yet all came to pay respect to Erik Gustaf. We do not have all that many visitors, but let no one say we are bad hosts, so drink and eat there is plenty."

It was not allowed for me to sit on the table with the adults, but the Eldest told me that it was the express wish of my Grandfather that I was here to represent the last link to the Ragnarsson Clan, which had officially ceased to exist with the death of my Grandfather. I was sitting with the other non adults at a table behind the adults. It happened the Union Fleet Officer was sitting not too far from me at the adult table and I could hear him talk with a civilian next to him. The Civilian spoke in a quite manner but I still could hear him."... is their traditions. They claim to be Vikings, settlers that came from Sweden and Norway on Earth but their culture has very little to do with the original Vikings."

The Officer responded in the same low tone." They do not? I am no expert on Ancient pre Astro Terran History but their customs seem very archaic, just look how they treat their women."

"This is just it, Captain. Leif Leikson who founded the Neo Viking movement still on Earth and all the

way back in 2120 had little knowledge of the historical Vikings and based his entire religion and movement on the romantic fantasy versions popular in the media of that time of what Vikings supposed to be. What he didn't know he invented. The historical Vikings of Earth had quite a different culture and women much more equal."

The Captain shrugged." Well you seem to know a lot about that, but we are now in the 50th century, more than 2800 years have passed since then and that makes the Neo Vikings culture genuine, old and as real as those other Vikings you told me about."

." You are correct, of course the period of the real Vikings hardly lasted that long but I am glad I was able to take this chance and come here and study them. It's what we History Sociology Scientists do."

"I am sure it is a fascinating field and I am certain the knowledge won for the Science Corps is invaluable for some or the other reason."

There was a hint of sarcasm I could clearly sense and what the Off-worlders were thinking about us was of great interest to me. Not that I actually understood exactly what they meant.

The festivities continued and the games began. Warriors would demonstrate their skills with axe, spear and harpoon throwing. For this, we kids were allowed to sit on the ground before the tables and see the spectacle close up. It was then when I met Sif for the first time. She was the granddaughter of another Elder and she was the prettiest girl I ever seen, the thin veil she wore before her face did little to hide her beauty and somehow even enhanced it. Not that I had paid much attention to girls before. She had long golden colored braids and wore the traditional dress that fit her quite nicely, that her dress was maroon and had golden seams, however caused me much pain. During the ceremony when we sent Grandpa on his final journey she was standing next to me and gave me a shy smile. It was then I learned that a girl could smile and show she did even wearing a veil. Now she managed to sit down in a graceful manner and watch the competition. Again she smiled at me for a moment and then actually spoke to me as she said." I love the watching the men compete. One day a warrior will throw his axe to cut my braids."

Her comment was overheard by the very Offworlder who had talked tom the Union captain and he said." Is that an actual ritual or just a saying?"

I turned to answer." She will not be allowed to answer you, Sir unless her father has given her permission to speak to a stranger." Then I said." She was refereeing to our courting ritual at the night of the wedding where the future husband will show his skills by throwing an axe to cut one of the woman's braids which is fastened to a wooden target for this."

"This is not dangerous for the woman?"

I shrugged. "I suppose it is dangerous, especially if they do that ritual late at night when much beer and meat influences the accuracy of the thrower."

An adult Viking with his massive arms crossed before his chest said. "The youngster is right, and there have been rare cases where the bride to be got hurt or killed, but that is as dangerous to the thrower as it is to the woman."

"Why would that be dangerous to the one throwing the axe?" The Captain wanted to know.

"Because if he misses the target he most likely gets challenged by the brothers or the father of the bride and such a challenge usually ends up with one being dead."

The Union captain simply nodded.

I didn't know the local he was talking to, but the man pointed at me. "It rarely happens; even our youngsters learn to use our traditional weapons and can throw axes from early on."

The girl said to me. "I wonder how good you already are."

I had not noticed him being close, as I paid attention to the Off-world Captain, but my father bellowed right behind me. "My son has been challenged by a maid!"

Other boys and youngsters immediately challenged me. I was not afraid or very concerned as I considered myself a decent thrower. Father pushed Lothar into the circle and said. "My best son will of course compete as well."

Uncle Ragnar who had been my teacher for most of my weapon training handed me his very own axe and patted my shoulder. "Forget the others, forget Lothar and Isegrim. All that matters is the target." I glanced towards the girl and her lips barely visible under that translucent veil parted for another smile.

I was not certain if it was Ragnar's words or the smile the girl gave me but I never threw better and every throw was true. There were few things Neo Vikings loved more than these challenges and the men started chanting, raising mugs every time an axe hit the target. There were nine others who competed with me and every one managed to hit the target. But when the target was moved further away three guys failed much to the disappointment of their fathers and I felt sorry for them. Finally only three of us were left, Lothar, Sven Swenson and me.

Now the target was put into a swinging motion. Again she smiled and my axe hit with a resounding thud into the center of the swinging target.

Sven's axe chipped the rim and as Lothar missed my father's angry bellow made me shiver. I knew what would happen to Lothar after we went home. On the other hand him getting his due for once and not me was actually a quite satisfying thought.

One of the Elders said. "You trained your sons well, both showed fine skills and your firstborn won!"

"I do not accept failure!" He glared in Lothar's direction.

The girl's father approached me and said. "Fine display of skill, young Olafson. You become a man and I will allow you to court my daughter, you are of good blood and old stock but not until then!"

I was completely surprised by that. I never seen her before and did not spend any thought on girls and now he was talking about courting! I knew enough of our customs and traditions to know he was quite serious and now he was talking to my father!

Still stunned by this totally unexpected development it was my father who surprised me even more by pound his big hand on my shoulder and smiling." Seems you did the first right thing in your life! Sif is of a very influential and wealthy family and her grandfather is an Elder of the Circle. After you become a man you are going to marry her. Her father agreed! It will raise the house of Olafson to great status."

As stunned as I was. I wondered how Sif felt about this. Knowing well my father saw himself already elevated into the Circle of Elders.

I did not see the Union Captain anywhere and someone said that most off worlders had left.

Chapter 3: Chapter 3

CHAPTER 3

The eating and drinking, mostly the drinking went on well into the early morning hours. School had been canceled because our teacher was one of the few Off-worlders who had stayed till the end. I was certain he was just as drunk and hung over as the rest. Not so Uncle Ragnar, him and me as well as his two helpers Jan and Hein gathered empty mugs and tankards, picked up plates and knives, put tables and benches away. I knew he had emptied more than a few tankards but he appeared as fresh and good

spirited as always. He never ceased to amaze me with his enormous strength as he carried two of the heavy stone wood tables, each one on a shoulder. His helpers were not small or weak by any standard and both of them struggled with the weight of one of the tables. I was barely able to lift one of the benches and I said." One day I want to be as strong as you!"

He bellowed a laughter and set down the tables in the storage shed and said." I guess I am strong, but strength means little without control. Do you remember that off worlder, that Starship Captain?"

"Of course Uncle, he is what I want to be!"

"Don't let your father hear that. Despite the fact he despises his first born. He expects you to marry that pretty Sif of yours."

"You are not against me leaving Nilfeheim and become a Starship Captain?"

"No Eric I have nothing against it. I think every man should find his own destiny, be it on a planet or out there in space."

He turned at the door of the shed."Don't just stand there and listen to my stories. We can talk while we work. There are still lots of tankards to wash and then we got to sweep the whole place and gather and burn the garbage."

Duty full I followed him, eager to hear more. He did mention the star ship captain."What about the Off-worlder, Uncle Ragnar?"

"I would not dare to go against him. I am probably three times as strong as he is, and yet he could kill me with his bare hands not losing a drop of sweat and I arrive in Valhalla totally surprised and unable to say how it happened."

"I seen you fight five men at once, trained warriors and you cleaned house."

"Because as much as we Norse pride ourselves of our strength and fighting skills, we are just brawlers. These Space fleet officers are trained in the Academy with the fighting techniques of a thousand cultures. There aren't any Non Humanoids on Nilfeheim, but the Union has many non humanoid species. Some of them like the Nul are many times stronger as the strongest human being ever could be. The Shiss are just as fierce and those men are trained to take on such aliens and if it has to be in unarmed combat. Even more dangerous and deadly are the Space Marines, a single one of them could go against twenty of us armed to the teeth and the marine naked and bare handed. Still we are dead."

Of course I heard and learned about the non humanoid species and Galactic History in School and I had seen Virtu Images of the Nul Nul and the Shiss and many others, but I still was highly skeptical." Even armed with swords and axes?"

"I told you, strength is rarely a deciding factor in a real fight, even here on Nilfeheim. It is skill and technique. What good is the best and sharpest axe in the hands of a man who never wielded one?"

I gathered plates placed them in the wheel barrow." Even under water? In fight school, Gustav Eikson offered to train me now and he says no one could beat a Neo Viking under water in a fight."

He stopped and wiped his hands on his apron." Gustav is training you. That is indeed something special. He trains a very old and almost secretive style of underwater fighting. He and his Clan are very protective about it." He rubbed his chin." Well he could be right of course. I mean no matter how good an Off Worlder is, he would have to come up for air. We don't we have gills."

Then he grabbed the handlebars of the full wheelbarrow." It would be interesting to find out if the Ult have some kind of underwater fighting. As you know they evolved from a fish actually and are as we amphibious. Mother nature has adapted their bodies to the Water and not some Genetic tailors. I bet an Ult could give Gustav a lesson or two."

I grabbed a basket of mugs and it was heavier than I thought. I barely managed to lift it of the ground and staggered with my load behind him."

"It is a good trait for a Norse to be more stubborn than a heavy load, but it is actually quite stupid if you think of it..." He said, taking the basket and putting it on top of the load of dishes." You see a guy less strong but smarter invented the wheel. Someone added a box and long handlebars that act as a lever and a weak man can move a load even a very strong man could not." He grinned. "It is always about technique, but you right especially here on Nilfeheim it does not hurt to have arms like these."

"Do you think I could be as strong as you one day?"

"Well there are plenty of genetic options, syntho muscle implants and other cybernetic enhancements to guarantee you could be stronger, much stronger than me, but honestly I doubt you will become as big as I am. You have much from your mother's clan and they do not grow as massive as the Olafsons but look at their history. They have been the smarter ones. I would not so much think about how strong and big you can become, but instead how good you can be with what you have. There is always someone stronger than you so it is better to use your brain than your brawn."

We had worked for most of the day but finally the last dish had been washed and put away.

Uncle Ragnar untied his apron. "Well I must say you certainly earned your keep today. That was quite some work you put in."

I shrugged. "It was something to do and it kept me away from the Burg."

Well sit down and I fry us a Blue Finner or two and you can have all the Sparkle Fizz you can drink."

I loved Sparke Flizz Soda and of course it was forbidden in the Burg as "Off Worlder Garbage". Uncle Ragnar was not as strict and usually allowed one can a day. He placed an ice cold one right before me and disappeared in the kitchen. The guest room of the Inn was deserted. Most men were either out fishing or working. And it was a Monday and that no Miners from Balder either. Occasionally miners and workers from the neighbor planet would come over the weekend, mostly to drink and eat. They weren't really off worlders but Neo Vikings with no families or otherwise not as traditional as most of the rest. The Mining Company even had an office in town so I heard and was jointly owned by two or three of the younger clans.

I enjoyed the sweet and sour taste of the sparkling soda pop as a man walked in the door. He was deeply shrouded in a Hooded Fangsnapper-fur coat and despite the thick coat appeared thin. He walked supported by a walking stick and his entire body was bending forward. I did not see much of his face but a few whisks of gray hair and a sharply hooked nose that stock past the furred brim of his hood. It was still Short Summer so I wondered why anyone would dress in a fur coat like at this time of year. He looked around and noticed me. Now I could see his face. It was the face of an old man deeply wrinkled, his chin covered by a thin ragged looking beard of a gray yellowish shade. His eyes had almost no color and had an enormous intensity to them.

I got up and said. "Uncle Ragnar will be out of the Kitchen soon. Can I bring you anything in the meantime?"

He walked towards the table usually reserved for Ragnar and the family and sat down. "Yes young warrior. A nice strong tea be nice, with lots of honey and a good helping of Vodka."

"I will tell my Uncle. I don't even know if we have tea."

"Oh you do, you do!" Was his answer.

Before I could make it to the kitchen door, Uncle Ragnar came out holding two steaming plates. He saw

the strange guest and said." Odin's blood. Egill Skallagr msson is that really you?"

The old man pushed the hood back." Of course it is me."

"I bring you some special tea right away. You still drink tea right?"

"I still do. Even at my age I still manage to hold a cup and drink tea."

"How old are you now anyway?" Uncle Ragnar asked as he opened a locked cabinet under the counter and revealed a modern Serv-Matic and rows of spirit bottles, most clearly not of our world. The machine produced a steaming cup of tea in no time and my uncle poured a more than generous helping of a clear spirit in it and served it to the strange visitor.

"I am not entirely sure but I think I am well into the second half of my second century."

It was not entirely proper for me to simply burst out but I said." You are over 250 years old then?"

He croaked a dry laugh."Indeed young whelp. This is not so unusual nowadays as I understand."

Ragnar said."Eric, this is Egill Skallagr msson. He lives all by himself on a small rock in the Northern Strom Sea, and for a very long time."

Egill declined his head."This is so. Some call me a Hermit. The Clan of Elders calls me the Holy One and some say I have mystic powers. Myself I am not really sure what I am other than an old man living all by himself with a few peculiar traits and opinions." He sipped his tea and then unfastened a stained and dirty looking little leather bag from his belt, nestled with the string closure and emptied what it contained on the table. Perhaps a dozen or so ivory colored rectangular things.

"Ah yes, you are the Son of Isegrim and the lovely Fiona Ragnarsson." He nodded forlorn in thought and I wondered how he knew. His long, spidery fingers pushed the ivory cubes around and sighed." It is such a shame what he had done to her."

I wanted to say something. I wanted to ask what was going on and why this old man was talking that way, but Uncle Ragnar gave me a stern look and placed his index finger on his lips, then shook his head. So I remained quiet and the old man kept pushing the little pieces around. "I never saw anything like this. We must talk young Eric Olafson. We must talk indeed and I need to throw the rune stones again for you!"

He brushed the pieces back into the leather bag and then drank more of his tea. Into the silence Uncle Ragnar finally said." What about me, Old Seer. Have you seen a son of my own in your runes?"

"I told you before that you need to take your wife and go with her to a doctor. You will never get a son or any children if you do not both go there. Once you done that I see a house full of children, sons and daughters too!"

I never seen Uncle Ragnar blush before but my giant uncle seemed embarrassed."It's something we Norse rather not do, talk to an off Worlder stranger about such things."

"I expected you to be a little more open minded, after all you have been off world for quite a spell before you returned and got married."

This surprised me; Uncle Ragnar had been off planet! I kept quiet for now but I promised myself to ask him about it.

Ragnar spread his humongous hands."It's not so much me. I find it difficult to talk to her about that."

"She is a Midwife for Odin's sake. She knows more about these things than even perhaps the local doctor. Take her off world and go somewhere else to a clinic, no one on Niflheim will ever know."

"I will follow your advice, Old man."

"No you most likely will not. I am certain you will ask me the same thing when I return in a few years. But surprise me, proof me wrong."

The Old Man got up started to go to the door and turned." What are you waiting for young Eric, are you not coming?"

Ragnar nodded."Go with the Old Wizard. It is a great honor and privilege!"

A bit surprised by this I followed the Old Man outside. Despite his advanced age he was actually quite fast on his feet and headed for the harbor. I had to run to catch up with him."Why am I going with you and would you explain to me why you know all this about my family? Are you really a Wizard?"

"You need to learn to ask one question at a time, young Eric. Once you receive an answer you might ask another."

"I don't have to follow you either, Old Man. I might as well go back to the Inn. It is you who seems to want something from me."

He actually stopped and turned."You do have the mind of your mother. She always was a very free spirit." He wiped his nose with his sleeve," I know about your family as I know about almost all families on Nilfeheim. I knew your mother, her mother and her Grandmother. I know the Olafson Clan all the way back to Lothar Ironfist Olafson. I am not a Wizard mostly because I have no idea what a Wizard is supposed to do or know. What is important that I am the Eldest and other Neo Vikings usually follow my command and advice. Even though I do not interfere with the Circle of Elder business on a daily basis."

I gasped and then closed my mouth. Of course if he was as old as he said he was he had to be the Eldest, I remembered hearing about the Eldest of the Elder but I could not remember when or where. He was certainly not the subject of daily conversation. Since Uncle Ragnar knew him I was certain he was who he said he was.

We had reached the boat slip at the fishermen's terminal. Only a sub was tied there at the moment. I couldn't identify the type and that was strange, like any other boy of my age I knew every Sub type and could identify them.

He laughed." Yes I can see it in your face, young Olafson. You can't identify her."

"No I sure can't. I never saw a sub with a tower that far back, and it has no harpoon turrets either."

"This sub is even older than me, but don't let that scare you. It is well maintained and has some surprising features. It has no harpoon turrets, because I hunt Tyrannos the old way and this is what I am going to teach you. How to use the old Slayer Harpoon and go for the mark."

I followed him aboard the old submarine. "If I learn how to slay a Tyranno the Ancient way. Then I will be a man according to our traditions!"

"Indeed, Young Olafson. No Viking will ever be able to challenge your status after that, unless they have done the same. It will give you a voice in the Circle of Elders, regardless of your physical age and your word is all the evidence ever needed before our Court."

Every part of me was wide awake and I barely noted that my hands cramped into fists. "And then I can challenge Father Isegrim and make him pay for what he had done!"

The old man nodded."That was the plan and the idea of your Grandfather and he asked me to keep an

eye over you. He wanted me to teach you the old ways and that is what will do. He wanted you to grow and learn our sacred old ways and slay your evil Father in order to revenge his daughter. I shall teach you as I promised it to him, but I see your path will take a different direction. A path that will lead you far away from Nilfeheim."

So it came, that I had to visit the Old Man's isle once every week and he taught me how to use the old Hand Harpoon, how to swim and behave under water not to become the prey of Tyrannos but be the hunter.

It was harder than anything I ever did before in my life. The Old man was merciless and relentless in his instructions and exercises. One evening I was so exhausted I wanted to quit and forget the whole Idea. It was pure insanity to go outside and hunt a fish that was faster, so many times bigger than me and so dangerous. He did not say anything as I told him decided to quit, but he handed me an old Image Print of my mother. All tiredness left me and my hatred and my wish for revenge was like a fire burning away any doubt. The biggest Tyranno was tame compared to the Horror my father represented to me.

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Another year had passed and Nilfeheim soon would enter into another Longnight. The ice was already growing around the islands and the temperatures dropped a little more every day and much of my day was taken by school, weapon and fight training to prepare me for the day I would have to take the Ancient Challenge, after that I would work in Uncle Ragnar's kitchen and helping out in the Inn. Even then I found some time to slip into Virtu and feel free. I had made up my mind. I would leave Nilfeheim as soon as I could and join the Union Fleet to become a Star Ship captain. Then I would land with my big ship and take Sif with me, leaving my hateful and evil father behind or have him arrested under Union law for murder on my mother. These dreams helped me fight the nightmares I had seeing my mother die. But one evening my Virtu Machine was gone! It was no longer in the little room behind the kitchen.

Uncle Ragnar told me, that one of his guests, an Off-worlders wanted a Virtu machine in his room and offered to pay a nice sum extra, so he borrowed it. I felt angry and cheated by him for doing that without asking me. But to him I was not a man and while he was different from my dad he still was a Neo Viking and my opinion and rights meant little. But the worst happened after he told me; the off worlders had not given the machine back after he checked out. According to Uncle Ragnar, he was a miner of Balder, the other occupied planet in our system and he probably took it on purpose to pass the time. This was all the explanation I got. Uncle Ragnar never offered to replace it and Aunt Freydis was very sorry but thought it was a good thing since I had spent too much time with it anyway. After this I did not spend as much time at the Inn and after school, training and doing my chores for Uncle Ragnar, I went straight back to the Burg.

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It was Union Week and the school was closed during that time.

Father, my brothers and the men of the Clan were gone with the Family Sub to hunt Tyranno Fins and they went to the Uhim Grounds, almost 2000 clicks from the burg and would be gone for most of the month. Union school He never took me along and I was actually glad he did not. Pinned up in the small boat with my father for weeks on end was not something I looked forward too. I used the time without any chores to take long dives. When humans settled this planet they received some genetic tailoring before they left Earth and like everyone I too had a set of gills and could breath under water and had a second set of eyelids normal Terrans had not allowing me to see well while I was diving. Not many Neo Vikings went diving anymore, and it was said our gills would dry out and maybe even disappear in a few more generations. I used them every chance I got. Down here in the cold water I felt free. The cold water rushing through my gills always invigorated me and I wished I could stay submerged forever, but while a neo Viking could stay under water for a very long time, the loss of body heat even through the insulated dive suit limited the time I could stay submerged. Nilfeheim's oceans teamed with life and there were quite a few life forms down here, dangerous to an unprotected diver, but nothing was as dangerous as a Tyranno Fin. The largest known predatory fish growing up to sixty meters. Our teacher said they are bigger and faster than even the biggest Whales on Terra and as aggressive as Sharks. We did have a fish we called Sharks too, and Rock Sharks as we called them were fast and could be dangerous to a diver, they weren't anything like the Tyranno's.

The Ragnarsson rock was in a region of ocean where Tyrannos could be found only during the first month of Shortsummer. They would migrate past our rock and there was a slim chance I would encounter one. They migrated all to the southern half of our planet where it stayed warm the longest. I finally had to get back out, as my legs and arms started to go numb. I knew it was high time. I swam through the tunnel that connected our Sub Pen with the ocean. The Sub Pen had enough room for five boats, but currently we had only three. Hunting Subs were expensive and many Clans had perhaps one, or even used the cheaper surface vessels. Besides not all clans went Tyranno Hunting. Others were fishing or operating Fish or Snapper Farms, but the Tyranno Hunters were considered to be the elite. Almost fifty families belonged now to the Olafson Clan, after the Ragnarsson Clan ceased to exist and they all lived here on the burg. But the main house was of course reserved for the Clan leader's family and the house was eerie silent. While the burg had a central heating system, father preferred the old fashioned Tyranno Oil ovens and fire places. While he was gone the servants kept the fires on a minimum. Why I ended up in my mother's drawing room I could not really say. It was unused ever since the night he had killed her. His new wife did not use it and stayed most of the time in his room or in the upper salon, where she was busy with her needle crafts.

The old book was still lying on her dresser. My mother's closet door was not closed entirely and I went to close it, but instead I opened it. Her dresses and things were still there. My hands touching the soft fabrics and I could smell her wonderful perfume. I suddenly could almost hear her voice, no words or anything just the tone of her voice. I missed her so much!

Before I really knew it held one of her dresses in my hands and then held it before me and remembered the story of Thor dressing up as Freya to fool the Giants. Following a strange impulse I put on the dress. It fit me and it felt so soft. I opened my braided hair and somehow I could see my mother in my own reflection in the large mirror. It was and I could not say it any other way like a religious mysterious experience. Eric the looser and the unwanted son had disappeared and a blonde Viking woman stood there before me in the mirror. She wore a beautiful gown and I was certain I could feel my mother's presence.

That day my life had changed forever and whenever I could I sneaked into my mother's room and put on one of her dresses. I even started to wear the female undergarments and sat down reading in the old book. I knew it was wrong somehow, but Thor had done it at least once and more so I felt connected to her. She was there just out of sight, but she was there.

Chapter 4: Chapter 4

Chapter 4

I would turn fifteen in two days and this Longnight would be over in two more years and I was invited to the Burg of the Arnske Clan. The Clan the girl Sif belonged to. As it was tradition I would be allowed to spend a night with the girl under the watchful eyes of her parents of course. I haven't seen her much since my Grandfathers funeral and only on official events and festivities. Even though girls had to go to Union school as well, here on Nilfeheim they had to go to separated classes. I did not know much about her, but Father and Uncle Ragnar made sure I knew the history of the Arnske Clan as this would certainly be what her father would talk about.

I did feel a little nervous about the entire affair, decked out in traditional garb. It looked ridiculous anachronistic especially after we learned about other planets and civilizations. I even carried the sword of the Ragnarsson clan and the hasps that held my woolen cape bore the Olafson wolf seal. The fabrics were rough and itchy as I was not allowed to wear leathers yet; something only a man was allowed to do.

Sif and her family greeted me formally as Uncle Ragnar dropped me off at their burg and I was led into the main hall. Sif looked especially lovely in a long dark blue velvet dress with long white sleeves, girded with a golden belt that matched the golden hair band she wore keeping her long blonde hair and kept a whisk of translucent veil before her face. She curtsied in a demur way, lowering her eyes in a very feminine fashion. Her mother may have been as lovely as Sif once but she obviously liked food and sweetmeats a lot, I was almost certain she was as big as Ragnar but only half his height. Never the less she had a friendly face and smiled at me as paid my respect to her and the Head of the house.

For the next two hours only he would talk and ask me questions about the family business, our hunting subs, how many Tyrannos my family had caught in the last period and how the Ragnarsson Fish farms

faired. He only paused to let me answer his questions and then he started to tell me the history of the Arnske clan. He nodded pleased as I was able to tell him dates and names of fights and achievements his clan contributed to the history of Nilfeheim. "Your father has prepared you well and strict to our traditions so it appears, but then I expected nothing less from such an esteemed house. Once you completed the Ancient Challenge and our houses are joined through your bond with my daughter your Clan will be among the most influential on all Nilfeheim."

After this food was served and I was sitting next to Sif who barley looked at me during the entire time.

After dinner I was given a tour of the Burg that concluded in the Trophy Hall. Every Burg and Clan had one and it was here were treasures and trophies of fights and old battles were displayed. I had to look at each piece and listen to the story how it ended up here. I did what was expected and feigned deep interest and asked the expected questions. I had arrived at four and it was now close to midnight. Finally her father retired, left his wife in charge and went to bed.

The fat mother giggled."Now that the official part is over. I think you kids need to get to know each other a little better. It appears you are going to be part of the family in a few years time. I was not much older than Sif when my beloved threw his axe at my braids."

"Of all the wonders and accomplishments of the Arnske Clan. I still can't believe you are Sif's mother. I thought at most you be a slightly older sister."

The fat woman blushed and giggled very pleased." I see you have a silver tongue. You seem to carry much of your famous grandfather's traits. He too was known to be loved by the women."

She too got up and winked her eyes." I will leave you for a while. Sif will show you to your room when it is time. I am certain I can trust you."

I was alone with the girl who had said nothing at all until now. She now gazed at me. Her eyes above the veil and finally she talked." I guess I will be your wife one day."

I nodded." It appears they made this decision for us."

She actually sighed and said."It is the tradition."

"So it is."

There was again a moment of silence. Then she said." Are you very traditional?"

"I have to. Everyone has to."

She looked around as if to make sure we were alone and then she said."I despise these traditions. It treats women like dirt."

She then said."I would love to just run away, but it would bring shame on my family, by not marrying you. But I dream of going away from Nilfeheim."

"I do too!"

She actually got up and sat a little closer."You do?"

"Yes I want to leave and join the Union Fleet and become a Starship captain."

I could see the outlines of her mouth and she was smiling." I will leave too. I think you are a very handsome guy and one day I might think about marrying and he would have to be much like you, but it won't be you." She suddenly realized what she had said and looked afraid."Will you tell this to my parents?"

"No my lips are sealed. I will not tell but maybe I will see you one day off planet. What will you do?"

"I got very good grades and our Teacher said I could go to a good College and study. I think I could become a doctor. I am not entirely sure yet and I am a bit afraid of leaving and disappointing my parents."

"I don't care about my family. My father murdered my mother!"

She nodded."I know of that rumor and also that there is little that can be done because of the old traditions. Will you tell me what happened? Have you seen it happen?"

So I told her and after I was done her hand rested on my knees and her eyes filled with tears. "I am so sorry. I am sorry I had you tell it. She handed me a delicate kerchief and her voice was soft. "Don't be ashamed of your tears. My mother will have fallen asleep in the kitchen after having another snack and my father really went to bed and never gets up for nothing before the sun comes up."

I hastily wiped my tears I had not even noticed. "Sometimes I wish I was a girl then I could cry and my mother would still be alive."

"It was not your fault." She then said. "I want to be your friend, Eric and we could meet much more often."

"I don't think it would be allowed."

"I can have girls over all the time. My parents do not check on those and you could be a girl for that time and perhaps even cry a little."

"You are not serious are you?"

"Why not? The gods think nothing of it and no one will recognize you with a veil like this, so there is no danger."

Chapter 5: Chapter 5

Chapter 5

I was supposed to meet Sif two days later at the Space Port and I was nervous. I never actually had gone to the Space Port that was only a few clicks outside of Freikstat. Sif was right it was nearly completely deserted and would only be a busy when the Post ship came or the monthly space bus arrived. There was a Swine and Dine and a Mc Donald's and a small shopping mall. The space port was different from any place I had been before. I almost felt as if I had left Nilfeheim already. It was well lit, had shiny gleaming floors. Floating Advertising signs and I saw my first real robot outside of Virtu, a humanoid shaped machine pushing a floor cleaning machine across the already spotless floor. There were only a few Neo Vikings and even Off Worlders. I however saw women of almost every age.

From a row of floor length windows on the other side of the Concourse I could look outside on the large landing field. It was a huge smooth Duro-crete area, completely snow free. A huge gray shape stood at the far end on landing struts, it stood next to the freight transfer center. Out there were more robots and they loaded that ship with containers. Sif found me there and also looked outside." That is a freighter, they loading it with fish, Fanger Furs and ice."

"It's a Meteor Type VI Freighter." I said. " 800 meters by 400 meters. Accelerates to 120 kilometers per second to the square. Manufactured by De Noir Ships."

She laughed brightly. "I never figured you to be a tech geek. You sure know space ships it seems."

"I used to have a Virtu and played Starship Captain. One day I want to command a ship and fly all across the Galaxy." I turned and was very surprised. She wore a black mini skirt, a clingy blouse that showed her perky little breasts quite clearly and over it a short fur jacket. Her hair was combed straight back into a single tail on her back. I only recognized her because of her eyes. She giggled even more as I was standing there staring at her. "Do you like what you see?"

"Very much so! How come you are dressed that way? Will you not get in trouble?"

She still smiled. "I doubt my father would even recognize me this way. After all proper girls wear veils once they turn 15 and only drop it when they get married." She made a gesture that incorporated the space port. "This is where most of the girls after school hang out, drink coffee, and go shopping. Wear the latest fashions of the Galaxy and gossip. Not all women and girls are as tradition minded as the men believe we are. It is an open secret right under the noses. Most men know about it, of course none of the old traditionalists. When they do come here, they think we are Off-worlders."

To say I was totally floored by that was an understatement. "I never knew."

"Let's go to the Space Bus lobby. It is completely deserted and no one will be there and we can get you in a dress. Having a male Viking hang out would rise to many flags and we are in deep trouble."

The Space bus lobby had automatic doors and she swiped a little card over it and they parted. "The lobby of course is only for passengers. This is an old ticket but the door doesn't know that."

"You sure know your way around here."

She was still smiling. "I come here whenever I can, and so do others who are not as tradition minded. Especially those who are less favored by the old traditions, namely women."

The lobby consisted of rows of conformatic chairs, a few Serv matics and a robot attended ticket counter. The robot greeted us. "Welcome to Gray Lines Space Bus Services. Can I be of assistance?"

Sif shook her head. "No robot. We are waiting for inbound passengers."

"Very well, Ma'am." With that the robot lost interest and powered down again.

Next to the passenger bath rooms were two big shopping bags and she took them opened the door to the Washroom and said. "Human Females."

A voice responded. " Human Females acknowledged. Bathroom facilities adjusted to selected species."

She motioned me to follow her and inside handed me the bags. "Here is a dress and the other little things we use. If you need help just call me I am in the lobby. In added a wig and some artificial boobies to define your chest area the proper way."

I blushed a little, she giggled some more and left.

It was a traditional dress in a dark brown velvet, white bodice and matching over coat. Along with it the frilly things women wore underneath. To it a chestnut colored wig, matching sandal shoes and a brown shaded veil that was held in place by a golden circlet.

Seeing myself so dressed made me feel strangely elated. With a pounding heart I stepped out into the lobby, she herself had changed as well and was once more a proper dressed Neo Viking. "You look better than I thought you might. I think we even could hang out together at the port, but not before you learn to walk differently."

Chapter 6: Chapter 6

Chapter 6

It was a happy time I would at least once a week meet with Sif at the Space Port or even go to her Burg, right under the eyes of her father and Sif became my first best friend. We shared everything and our friendship after a while did become more.

For almost a year I became Freya Malmborg at the weekends. I choose that last name after clan that lived far south whose members would rarely venture so far up and known to have many daughters. Our ventures became more risky the more I became adjusted to my secret identity. On an early evening we sat in her room close together on her bed and listened to modern music. I could not say when I had my arm around her shoulder and she had her head on my shoulder. Her hair smelled heavenly and the next thing knew I was kissing her. It had not been planned and sort of just happened. It was wonderful and exciting. I felt aroused and electrified. She tasted wonderful. I was not sure what would have happened next, as her mother called and we managed to untangle ourselves barley in time before she entered the room. For a moment the corpulent woman looked at us almost suspicious and then she said. "I was thinking since you became such a good friend to Freya we should invite her family, what do you think?"

"I will convey that proposal but I doubt my family would want to inconvenience you." As I spoke something strange happened. My voice I was able to keep in a higher octave suddenly changed for a mere moment without any warning.

I coughed and Sif said." Frey was on her way home. She isn't feeling too well."

Her mother's face changed back to the suspicious tone and said." You know it is not really necessary to wear your veil behind closed doors."

"She is on her way out, mother. She really doesn't feel well."

"Well make sure she gets home well, but I think I want to have a talk to Freya's mother."

I left with the Rental skimmer I always used when coming here. With an ominous feeling that this was the last time I was with Sif. The worst was however yet to come. I returned the floater to the rental company an hour later at the space port and wanted to go to the Space bus lobby to change back. When a big shape blocked my way, my father!

Before I could even realize that it was really him, his whip slashed clear across my face, ripping veil and wig. He screamed my name and called me an abomination and that I had now proven that I was not a man and nothing but a disease. While his whip mercilessly stripped clothing and skin of my body he laughed. "You handed me your inheritance on a silver platter. Dressing in women's clothing. You are not my son. You cannot be my son! Nothing so despicable could come out of my line!"

It came all so sudden and so unexpected the very shock to be so brutally exposed by my father shocked me as much as the pain of the steel cable. I felt my left arm break under the heavy impact of the steel cable. I could no longer see clearly, freely flowing blood clouded my sight and I knew he would now kill me and this was maybe the best.

I barley was conscious when I heard him." Renting a floater using your Cred strip so often and I am getting the account statement made me suspicious. I had it watched and you running around with Sif was all it took for me to put things together." The whip or his boot or something else hit me hard in the side. Something cracked and new pain flashed above all the pain I already felt. The last thing I really saw was him pulling his Skinner knife. I also imagined seeing flashing blue lights and then I remembered nothing.

Chapter 7: Chapter 7

Chapter 7

Mr. Flensburger was a little late as usual. He came into the classroom dressed like a Harpooner in the middle of Long night.

He wore a heavy hooded Fangsnapper fur coat, over a padded Iso-Tex Jacket an under the fur brimmed hood a heated wind mask, but that was far from all. Underneath all that a Fleet Issue extreme suit with active heating, a thick scarf wrapped around his neck and padded thick gloves. He was dressed like that despite the fact it was almost spring now and Longnight was long over and he had to walk less than 1500 meters in the open. It was only ten below zero and only a light north wind, bare chest weather as my Uncle Ragnar would say.

It was the same ritual every morning and it would take our teacher long moments to get undressed and I was certain the pile of clothing next to his desk grew just a little bigger every day.

"It is exceptionally cold this morning, class," he greeted us and twenty two Neo-Vikings would say:"Good morning Mr. Flensburger."

I couldn't help myself and said, "You have been on Nilfeheim now for over thirty years, Mr. Flensburger. Haven't you gotten used to our weather by now?" He took off his cold mask, revealing his slate ice gray eyes and his long pointed nose and looked at me, and then shook his head. "Mr. Olafson, it took me all this time to get used to the barbaric customs of you Neo Vikings. I had no time to get used to the weather yet." That caused the class to laugh.

He walked to the windows and looked over the churning waves of the ocean. "It is a beautiful planet this world of yours. Lots of cold water, teaming with an abundance of life, blue oceans and very, very long winters you got here on Nilfeheim. As some of you might remember I come from New Algiers, almost no open water. Deserts as far as you can see. You have winds bringing ice crystals, snow and rain. Our storms bring dust, lots of it, but the temperature never drops below 30 and is usually at 48."

I tried to imagine how it would be, to live in bread oven conditions like that. I glanced at my I-Board and checked on New Algiers.

Our teacher turned to face the class. "It is your final year and some of you might actually leave this world and you will also be my last class. Thirty years teaching you Neo Vikings about the rest of the Universe was a challenge to say the least." His eyes became dreamy and he smiled." First I am going to Para-Para and simply sit on the beach for maybe a year or so. I believe it will take at least that long for my bones to thaw."

Leif Swenkjard sitting across the aisle from me waved his hand."I've been to Para-Para actually. It was when my Father had to go there for a Seafood tradeshow and he took me along. They don't even have a

little snow anywhere " He placed his hands about fifty centimeters apart, " their largest fish is about the size of a Surface Finner. What really pissed me off was that on Para-Para there are no weapons allowed. I had to even give up my knife and if you use your fist to make an argument stick you get in trouble and arrested. No one wears much clothing and all they do is smile all the time."

Ygral Anders next to him drew the outlines of a woman into the air."How about the girls, do they wear little?"

"You could bunch up what they wear in your single fist and nothing showing."

Ygral now grinned from one ear to the other."I think I go there for a visit too!"

"You wouldn't like it. Because the guys don't wear much either and you barely see any blonde tall girls with braids anywhere. Those girls can't cook a decent meal, won't clean up after you and want to be equal to men and sit at the same table!"

Flensburger shook his head putting his right hand before his eyes."You are hopeless."

Then he sat down on the edge of his desk and he stared at me."You look different today, Eric. What are you wearing on your head?"

"It is the Helmet of the Hunt; I received it this morning from the Eldest."

"I am somewhat familiar with it. I was under the impression only someone completing the hunt was allowed to wear one."

Leif turned and gave me a hateful envious look." Eric killed two Tyranno Fins this morning completing the ancient challenge. I can't understand why someone like him is such a good hunter."

Flensburger got up and came closer."Just consider me an ignorant Off-worlder for now, but would you explain that to me again? I thought The Ancient Challenge was considered too dangerous even by your standards and no longer required." Leif felt he was still addressed answered."In order for a Viking to be accepted as a man he must complete three tasks. Only by completing these three tasks, closely observed by the Circle of the Eldest, one may sit on the table with the warriors, drink mead and wear a helmet. The three challenges are: to walk the Tunnel of Skill where your fighting skills are tested, recite the entire Poem of Odin without faltering, and to slay a Tyranno Fin. To slay a Tyranno Fin even in a modern Sub is no easy task, but to do it the old way by diving and using a Hand harpoon is almost suicide and because so many sons died that way the Ancient Challenge is no longer required. However anyone can still do it

the old way and that is the highest honor and test of skill."

"And you killed two of them this morning?" Flensburger asked visibly astounded.

"Yes Sir. I had not planned on killing two. I was stalking a young Twi Halfer and when I speared it into the mark its brother or father showed up and it was a Six Double I think, I had to kill it or it would have done so with me."

"I heard the Eldest say it was an Eight Tri," Ygral interrupted." And no Eight Tri has been slain by hand in over 200 years. It is all over the radios this morning too."

Flensburger shook his head once again."You are one crazy species of humans. Going against the biggest and fastest Predator fish in the Galaxy armed with a toothpick and hope to kill it by hitting a fist size target behind their eyes."

I made a circle with my hands. "The Mark was about that big on the Eight Tri, not fist size."

He rolled his eyes and sighed. "Right, that makes it so much easier. Now I wonder does it not make you a man even in the eyes of your family and most certainly among your class mates. Would this not fix things between you and your father?"

I lowered my head. "No it won't and I'd rather not talk about it!"

"Very well then."He turned to the class and said, "Have you ever wondered why we have school? Why we have classes? Why we don't simply use neural uploading for everything, like we do for language and general knowledge?"

There was silence. He pointed at Sven. "You questioned the need for schooling many times before. Would you not rather have all what you need uploaded in your brain and be done with it?"

Sven shook his long red hair. "No I don't see the need for all this off world garbage in my head in the first place. I am going to be a harpooner like my Father and my brothers and my son will be a harpooner too. I will be a very good harpooner and one day, if Odin wills it, I start my own boat and have a clan of my own. What do I need to know about the rest of the Galaxy?"

"I know you think that way. Many Neo Viking's coming to school think that way. But you are members of the Union and you do business with the Union. What good is a harpooner without a Harpoon? Or what

good is a Hunt boat that can't sell its catch?"

Sven was still not convinced and crossed his big forearms across his barrel chest. "We make our own Harpoons and we can eat our own catch."

Mr. Flensburger sighed. "Your skull is as dense as the ice out there. What is your harpoon made off? What do you use to propel your boats and hunting subs?"

Sven was not so sure about himself anymore and his voice changed as he answered: "Harpoons are made of Ultronit, and we use Zero point cubes to power the boats."

I could see Sven was suddenly thinking. We all knew Sven wasn't the sharpest harpoon on the boat.

"And where does the Ultronit and the power cubes come from?"

He responded to the question, saying, "My father orders metals, knives and boat parts on GalNet."

"How does he pay for it?" Mr. Flensburger asked.

"With Union Creds of course."

"How does he get Union Creds?"

"We're selling Tyranno meat, Flasher fish and lots of Fanger Fur to the Exchange in town."

Even Sven realized what he was saying and nodded. "Alright we do need the Off-worlders. You made your point, Mr. Flensburger, but why do we have to learn it this way?"

The skinny teacher sat down on the edge of his desk. His favorite position when he was about to explain something to us. "Our Union is a little over 3000 years old and we have over 4,500 member civilizations. There are millions of settled planets and locations. There are non humanoids, methane breathers, insectoids, and even a non corporal species. There are a very few things that are common to all. One of those things most societies have in common is the need to educate the young, to prepare them for the world. There are only a few species we know of who do not need to educate their offspring. The Klack for example, those Insectoid friends of ours have a collective mind they share all experiences, a Klack hatches with all knowledge he needs. But even the Klack send their young to Union schools mostly to prepare us to interact with them. "Mr. Flensburger folded his hands. "For most civilizations however schooling is

necessary and after many millennia of experience and experimenting with all those various other education techniques it turned out that the old way of class interaction resulted in the best education."

Again he looked across the class and pointed at Peter. "Why do you think these old methods might be superior?"

Peter Tennyfour, the son of a Fish merchant and one of the few who would leave Nilfleheim after graduation for college answered after a short moment of thought. "I believe even the smartest computronic can't answer a real question by analyzing the reason for the question in relationship to the environment and background of the student. Only a real teacher can do that."

"Not bad at all, Peter. I would give you a straight A for that answer. Except that this is the textbook answer you just read. But finding the right answer so fast and skillfully hiding your E-Pad under your sleeve I still give you a B." He nodded more to himself than to anyone in particular. "It is the environment in which we learn that makes the difference. Uploaded knowledge and implanted memories can supply you with all the data you need. While you won't find a Data head here on Nilfleheim, having your mind direct linked to GalNet is not uncommon elsewhere. So knowledge isn't the reason for schools and teachers but the environment in which you take it in to give you the tools to use the information your mind processes."

He stabbed his finger at me. "Mr. Olafson, what happens when you graduate?"

"We become citizens, Sir!"

"Very good, now regardless of your grades that determine your further career and education options, everyone becomes a Citizen after graduating Basic school. This is why you are here; this is why your parents want you here to become full citizens. Only as a citizen can you freely travel, open a bank account, transfer UnionCredits, use GalNet, vote, get free health care and most of all, get the full protection of the law! "

Sven still wasn't convinced, "I still don't see why an Off-worlder like you has to come and teach us all that. My father told me that before we were forced to join the Union we would learn all that we needed from our Clan Elder."

"So you think you were forced to join?"

"What else do you call a fleet of Battleships with Planet-Buster bombs ready to vaporize our planet in orbit?"

"Before we go into that and since it seems you are quite the history expert, do you know the reason why the United Stars send Battleships in the first place?"

"Yes of course! Our glorious forefathers caused mayhem and terror by raiding other colonies and spaceships for everything we needed. "He laughed loudly. " Neo Vikings were feared in this sector!"

"Indeed. Your glorious forefathers realized they would not survive another decade without things the outside world could supply. So they hijacked a freighter and a few Gunboats and resorted to piracy."

Sven shrugged. "We just were stronger and better warriors and so we had the right to take it."

"Well since the Union Fleet was stronger than your pirate boats and arguing entirely by your logic, they had the right to bomb you. But your forefathers where given a choice, no one forced them to join. The choice was cease all pirate activity and remain isolated on this planet of yours with no contact with others at all, or to join the United Stars and accept Federal Law. Your forefathers didn't even debate one hour and filed for membership."

As he turned to the window Sven leaned over to Peter. "One of these days I'll stuff his face with my fist. That arrogant Off-worlder, such a wimp has no right to teach us anything!"

Flensburger turned. "So you want to stuff my face and you think I am a wimp. I accept your challenge."

Sven looked around as if he wanted to make sure everyone heard the same. "You can't be serious. A tap of me would kill you."

I said, "I would not do it, Sven. He's from New Algiers."

Sven snorted in my direction. "When I am done with him,you're going to be next. Your father kicked you out of his clan; you are not worthy to even breathe the same air as I do."

Leif sitting next to Sven Yelled, "He might have a strange disease I don't understand, but by our laws and traditions Eric was pronounced a warrior born and a man by the Eldest today! I will not sit idle while you insult a Viking Warrior. Even if I don't like him, I will kill you!"

Sven got up, showing everybody his muscles and then stepped forward towards the teacher. "I am going to rip your head off, Mr Flensburger. Then I will take care of a few others around here!"

"Then do it Sven and don't talk too much!" our teacher said. " You challenged me and all you do is boast and talk."

Sven literally flew forward and swung his huge fist. Mr. Flensburger caught Sven's wrist and stopped the punch right before his nose, then twisted it fast and in such a fashion that Sven had to go to his knees. The smaller teacher held the massive arm of Sven with no effort and said to the class, "You see Sven, on New Algiers we have a gravitation of 3.6 that means my muscles are 3.6 times denser than yours and before I became a teacher, I served the Fleet and received intensive combat training. It does not have to be an Off-worlder that teaches you, but every teacher in Basic School has to be a Citizen with a service record. No Neo Viking ever served in the fleet. Now I could break every bone in your body without losing a drop of sweat." He twisted Sven's arm even more and Sven groaned. "I am going to kill you!"

"It is unwise to make threats to someone holding your arm in such a fashion." Mr. Flensburger twisted a little more and this time Sven yelled in pain. The teacher let him go. Sven immediately lunged forward but the teacher stepped aside in a swift, elegant move and grabbed Sven by the shoulders, added to the momentum and made him crash into the wall. Sven shook his head dazed, got up on shaky legs and turned raging with anger, pulling his Harpooner Knife.

I jumped up and so did almost everybody. Peter yelled. "This is not honorable. He beat you fair and square, put your knife away!"

Sven's face was deep red and he pointed the wicked knife at Peter. "I will slice you like Tyranno-bait, after I am done with that Off-worlder!"

I jumped forward holding my chair like a shield. "Mr. Flensburger get back!"

Sven laughed. "Splendid! Your Father will reward me if I kill you. He'll give me a boat for sure!"

Flensburger was completely calm. "I appreciate your assistance Eric , but let me finish this. I ask you all to sit back down. I also give you Sven a chance to sit down as well and we will continue with our discussion. Do that and I will forget all this, keep it up and I am forced to take that knife from you and expel you from school."

"No one takes my knife and I could care less if I fail your stupid class."

"I didn't say you would fail class. I said you will be expelled."

Sven attacked and again Flensburger moved fast. He got hold of Sven's wrist again, just like before and

with his other hand he grabbed Sven by the throat. Sven gargled, the knife fell and Mr. Flensburger lifted Sven off his feet holding the heavy teenager by the throat without any effort. "You had your choice and you made it. Now I have no other choice. You are expelled! Do you know that this means you will not become a Citizen? Now I give you a second and final choice: Yield and surrender or die!"

Sven now turned purple struggled and gargled. "I give in. I surrender!"

The teacher let him go and said. "You are to leave school immediately. You got your wish; there won't be any school for you anymore."

Sven grabbed his knife and stumbled to the exit. "Who needs to be a stupid citizen anyway? I am a Neo Viking!" With those words he left.

Mr. Flensburger sat back down on his desk as if nothing happened and said, "Dial your E-Pads to Blank page and write me a one page report about what Citizenship means to you."

It was in the second hour, as Mr. Flensburger was reading the first reports when the class room door opened and Sven's father Elik Swenson stepped in. Elik was known for his foul temper and it was said he had smashed more than a few skulls, but he appeared with his harpooner's helmet in hands. "Mr. Flensburger, I apologize for the interruption, but it is true that you expelled my son?"

"Indeed. He had made his choice. I gladly show you the visuals of the incident. So you can see how it came to this."

" would you please reconsider. Sven will behave I promise. Can we not talk about this?"

The teacher nodded."Of course we can." He turned to us and said, "While I discuss these matters with Mr. Swenson you can take a break."

The school was built on a rock that stuck out the ocean about 25 clicks from the Main Island. The courtyard was half exposed to the open and ended at one side into a piled up tumble of huge rocks and below those rocks was the ocean. Sven was right of course; father would have given him a boat or money if Sven killed me. Since I didn't have friends among my classmates and it usually ended with a fight if I stayed in the courtyard I climbed to my accustomed spot up the rocks and stared out into the seemingly endless ocean, thinking about my situation. This morning I did complete the ancient challenge and by all our customs I was a man, but of course not to Father. He had almost killed me back then, but Uncle Ragnar and Space Port Security pulled him away in the very last moment. He used this however to declare me unfit to be a real Viking and the Circle of Elders agreed with him

I never heard of Sif again and her Father forbade me to contact her in any way shape of form. Peter the son of the fish merchant who was the only one in class who was not of a Nilfeheim Clan handed me a note a month after the incident. It was from Sif and in it she told me it would be better if we never saw each other again and she wished me all the best, that was was Uncle Ragnar who took me to the hospital and I stayed with him at the inn, no longer allowed to set food on the Burg. It mattered little anymore what my father did or what my family concerned. In less than two weeks I would graduate and then nothing would hold me on this planet. I had already seen the Fleet recruiter many times and during my last visit I and I would travel to Arsenal II to try out for the Union Fleet Academy.

My thoughts were suddenly interrupted as I saw Mr. Flensburger and Mr. Swenson come out of the classroom, both smiling and shaking hands and Sven appearing between the rocks holding a Harpoon Gun aiming it at Mr. Flensburger. He was less than 5 meters below me and ready to squeeze the trigger. I yelled a warning against the howling wind and jumped burring both my heels in Sven's back. The harpoon gun fired, I didn't see where the explosive tipped steel dart went, because I had picked a fight with the strongest kid in school, almost twice my size. Fighting was second nature to us Neo Vikings and I could not have counted the times I had to fight with other class mates or with my own brothers.

Instead of hitting me, Sven pulled the reload lever on the harpoon and that gave me a chance to hammer my fist as hard as I could against his chin, before he could. At the same moment slamming my knee in his groin, he sank to his knees.

I could not let him recover. He was much stronger than me and if I would give him an opening I know I would have been done for, so I kicked him hard against the temple and kept pounding him with both fists.

"Stop it for Christ's sake!" Flensburger yelled, angrier than I ever heard him before. You are going to kill him!"

I turned still kneeling on top of Sven. Mr. Flensburger and his father had crossed the yard. Elik said. "Go ahead kill him! He brought shame on the clan. "I noticed Elik bleeding from a shoulder wound, the harpoon must have scraped him instead of hitting our teacher." Kill him! I said. Crush this failure! He is no longer my son! "

"If you kill him now, Olafson you will be guilty of murder! Nilfeheim laws or not" The teacher interjected with a warning voice."Kill him and you will not be able to leave!"

I looked at my bloody fist and at the bloody mess I made of Sven's face. He wasn't moving at all. Ashamed of my own savage act and got up.

Mr. Flensburger pointed at me."You will report to the principal's office now. I'll deal with the rest here."

I had been sent to the principal's office before but not lately and didn't look forward to what he had to say. I truly hoped it would not cause me to fail graduation. I needed to leave Nilfleheim!

He already expected me holding open his door and motioned me to take a seat across his desk. His name was Lothar Valthim and while he was not from Nilfleheim, he certainly looked like a Neo Viking, he even braided his dark hair the same way we did. "Take a seat, Mr. Olafson. I just finished watching the events of this day and I was impressed by your heroic acts. I know of your particular story and why your father disowned you. Down here on Nilfleheim it is a very bad affliction indeed, out there it is nothing at all and would not raise as much as an eyebrow."

"I would appreciate it if you do not mention my problem, Sir. It is something I have to work out myself somehow. I certainly don't want to talk about it!"

"I understand. However you did save a life today. That harpoon would not have missed and would have killed without a doubt. So I decided to graduate you today. You are as of today a full citizen of the United Stars with all the privileges and rights that come with that status."

I was completely perplexed as he pointed to a very official looking machine at the corner of his office. It had the Federal Seal on it and several bright red labels, warning anyone from unauthorized use.

He got up and walked to the machine. "Here will you get you CITI, your Citizen Implant. This is actually quite a solemn affair and there are millions of beings who would kill for a chance to get one. Normally this is done in a great ceremony with your friends and family present." He sighed. "I know in your case no one would be there, so here and now it will happen."

He motioned me to put my arm upon the machine. A light came on bathing my arm and the Hymn of the United Stars played. A voice from the machine said, " On this day the 5th May, 5007 Eric Olafson of Nilfleheim becomes a full registered citizen with all rights and privileges of said status. DNA, Brainwave pattern and biometric data have been stored at the central Citizen registry."

He shook my hand."Welcome Citizen."

I looked at my arm, nothing looked different, but I knew a CITI had been implanted (Citizen Tag Identifier)."Thank you."

"So what are your plans exactly? Your grades are above average and you have a few choices."

"I spoke with the Fleet Recruiting Office. I hope they accept me at the Academy."

"There will be a long way ahead of you then, but I can't think of a more rewarding career. I did 12 years myself."

Chapter 8: Chapter 8

Chapter 8: Arsenal Gate

I woke from a dreamless sleep. That meant the sleep inducer of my seat had been turned off. So I swung the seat in its upright position and deactivated the opaque privacy bubble. I saw other passengers of the Space bus do the same. One of the flight attendant robots floated down the middle aisle and started to announce: "Dear passengers we are approaching Arsenal Gate. We will dock at the station in 25 minutes. All passengers with destinations beyond Arsenal system are asked to remain in the lounge area. The space station is a military installation and is off limits to non military personnel. Passengers with destination Arsenal System please gather your personal belongings and prepare for debarking. Gray Lines Incorporated cannot be held responsible for items left behind."

The robot had reached the end of the aisle of this passenger compartment, turned around in a fluid motion and continued. "Arsenal Gate maintains a nitrogen oxygen atmosphere and living conditions suitable for oxygen breathing carbon life forms. Non humanoid life forms with special needs are asked to remain in their protective suits or keep their life support devices' active.

"This space bus will remain docked for three hours and resume its journey to the next destination. Our next destination will be the Barrows System and we will reach Moon base Nome in seven standard days."

The attendant robot repeated his message. I rubbed my eyes and dialed for a drink of water at the Serv-matic installed in front of me. Moments later and half a credit poorer I sipped the cold water. Thirty eight days ago I had boarded a Space Bus leaving Nilfeheim and after changing buses several times I would soon be there and begin a new chapter of my life. Everything I knew lay behind me, whatever was to come better worked out as there was nothing for me back home.

"You're getting off at Arsenal as well?" asked a male humanoid sitting next to me?"

"Yes!" I answered, putting the film cup into the waste recycler.

He was about my age so I guessed, had almost white blond short cropped hair. His skin had a rosy shine and his face was covered with freckles. "I am Derek Simmons from Harvest 12."

"I am Eric Olafson and I am from Nilfleheim."

"I am guessing you never heard of Harvest 12, but then I wouldn't blame you, no one ever has."

"Nope I never heard of Harvest 12, but then I don't think you know about Nilfleheim."

He smiled. "Actually I do. I saw a National Galactic show about it on Gal Net not that long ago. Isn't that the planet where they have those really big fish?"

"Yep, sure enough that's Nilfleheim, we call them Tyranno Fins .

Why don't you tell me about Harvest 12?"

He sighed." We don't have anything exciting on Harvest 12. It's a boring planet, entirely dedicated to raise and grow agricultural products. The planet is owned by SII Agra Corp and completely terra formed. If there ever was any native life in the past, there isn't any now. Our entire planet was sterilized, homogenized, leveled and plowed over a thousand times. We have no seasons, weather control and collector mirrors see to that. The weather is always just perfect for the crops and we have wheat fields as big as continents and that's about all there is to Harvest 12, Identical cookie cutter world to Harvest 1 through 56." He sounded cynical, sighed and he continued:" My father is an Agra Bot technician, my Grandfather was an Agra Bot technician and so was his father. I simply had to get away or I would have ended up doing the same thing."

"Nilfleheim isn't all that exciting either. We have really long winters, lots of snow and lots of water. All we export is ice and fish."

He smiled. "So are you going to apply for the Academy or are you going to enlist?"

"I am going to apply at the Academy"

"So am I! I want to become an Engineer! One day I will have my own Engine Room on a battle ship!"

"That is a tall goal! "said a dark skinned being, leaning over the back of his seat. " But that's what I am dreaming about as well!"

The being was humanoid proportioned, had two arms and three fingered hands, but his eyes were huge and his ears looked like dinner plates glued to the side of his head.

The lower jaw was pronounced and he had rows of sharp looking teeth."I am Mix." He introduced

himself." And I am from ThreeOz."

"I never meet a Threeozian. "Said Derek." Where is your planet?"

"I am from across the Bridge. I come from the Andromeda Galaxy. My race is one of the newest members and I am the first of my species trying to become a Cadet!"

"You come from M32?" I repeated. "That's sure a long way from home!"

He looked at me for at least a minute without any reaction and then nodded. "Yes it is a long way indeed. I am also sorry for my delayed answer. I had to remember that nodding your head means yes to most humanoids."

"Oh don't worry about that. Almost everything is just as alien to me and I am human. What gesture do you use in your culture for saying yes?"

"Like this!" His dinner plate shaped ears spread away from his head like opening hatches.

"I doubt I could move my ears that far away from my head, even with a lot of practice."

Derek made a giggling sound. "I have an uncle who could say yes the Threeoz way just fine." He placed his hands to his ears and so simulated larger ears.

The dark colored alien chirped."That actually would be a good way for humans to say yes! Gestures with a meaning are even harder to understand than language. The first time a Terran smiled at me and I thought he was angry at me and wanted to eat me!"

"Eat you?" I asked with a surprised tone in my voice.

"The display of teeth is a sign of extreme hostility where I come from and usually means I am so angry at you I will eat you!"

"Does that happen? I mean do folks eat each other where you come from?"

"Not anymore but in the old days it sure did. It is against the law to eat anyone now."

"I am sure glad they outlawed it. Otherwise I might smile at a ThreeOz and end up on his dinner table." I said with a smile.

"No worries Human. Your kind doesn't taste all that goodâ€!"

Our attention was diverted by someone a few seats ahead pointing at the big view screen that provided passengers with a view of the space ahead of the ship. "I can see the station now. I'm sure glad we're through that darn corridor."

" A space bus would be an easy target for any GC raider!" Derek added with a gloomy undertone.

A passenger across the aisle, looking older than most of the other passengers turned. "There haven't been any GC incidents in the corridor for as long time. I live on Nome Moon in the Barrow System, that's even closer to GC than Arsenal and much less protected and we don't worry too much. They haven't forgotten that we almost wiped them out twice."

Derek was not so convinced and answered. "Maybe that should be even more reason to be at least a little worried."

"You forget we still have Admiral Stahl and the Devastator. Whatever else might fail, the Kermac sure don't want to mess with him!" The man crossed his arms and looked pretty confident.

Evoking the name of this mystical immortal Admiral made Derek smile." You are right of course! The Galactic Community would not want to make him angry!"

"Who is this?" Asked the ThreeOz.

Derek almost glowed as he said. "He is one of the 200 Immortals. A man picked by the Guardian over 3000 years ago! He is the greatest warrior of all time. They even once chased him away, didn't heed his warnings and he left for centuries but when everything looked lost and it seemed we would lose to the Y'All he returned with a huge battleship of unknown origin and incredible powerful weapons and saved us all."

"I am sorry for my ignorance. We ThreeOz have joined only recently and we do come from another Galaxy. How can it be that he is 3000 years old?"

The Older man across the aisle smiled. "We always welcome new members in our Union. No need to be

sorry. As for the Immortals, that is an old story and no one knows the details anymore, except of course the Immortals, but it was at a time when Earth was still isolated and Terrans had not discovered faster than light travel. A very hostile species called the Xunx awoke from its 3000 year sleep cycle to once more conquer and destroy. One of the planets that would have been attacked was Earth. But a godlike machine left behind on Earth by an entity we only know as the Friends awoke and guided humankind to the stars. To do so this machine chose 200 Terrans and each of them a special task. In order to complete that task those 200 were made Immortal and received also special gifts, superhuman powers if you will. Of those 200 Immortals only Admiral Stahl, Admiral Mc Elligott and a few others remained in the public eye. Who the others were I don't know and where they went I don't know either."

"It's all just myth and story!" someone behind us grunted. "There are no Immortals, no mystic Gods or Entities. It's propaganda and made up stories. I think Stahl and the others are clones and reproduced whenever they are needed."

"But Encyclopedia Galactica confirms what the man just said. "complained yet another passenger.

Meanwhile the space station visible on the view screen was getting bigger by the moment. It was a gigantic elongated spherical construct with a thick ring around its equator. Huge illuminated letters in Standard lingo identified it as: ARSENAL GATE.

The actual Arsenal system was still one light year away, but no civilian vessel was allowed to approach the system and all non military traffic had to go through Arsenal Gate. Arsenal was one of the major Space fleet systems and considered to be the best guarded and defended system in the known universe.

The space bus approached an enormous docking gate, probably able to accommodate a full size Ultra battle ship, and slipped through the shimmering energy membrane that separated the inside of the dock from space.

The robot repeated its announcement once again and added, "thank you for choosing Grey Lines as your transportation service provider. Please consider us again. A Ticket kiosk and booking agent can be found at the Civilian Accessible Gray Line docking area."

I debarked with at least 300 beings from all over Union Space to stand in line before the Station access doors. A four armed, non humanoid giant wearing Fleet uniform and two heavily armed Space Marines in bulking Destroyer suits checked everyone before they let them pass.

"That is a Petharian." said Mix. "He too comes from Andromeda but they have been members for a long time. They are as mean and strong as your Galaxies Nul-Nul."

"Is it true what I heard, that they are related to the Y'All?" asked Derek.

Mix wiggled his ears back and forth. "That's the rumor, but not according to the Encyclopedia Galactica. They do look similar to Y'All that is for sure."

I too had learned about the Y'All in Gal History and Xeno Class, but I never heard of the Petharian or that rumor. "How come you know so much about other species and such?" I asked Derek.

"I have a subscription to the Galactic Geographic Magazine. There is nothing I'd read or watch. I have collected every issue since 3300 and my brother sends me even older downloads whenever he finds one. He works at the Harvest 12 public library."

I felt suddenly a little ashamed for never even going to the public library we had on Nilfleheim.

Derek raised an eyebrow; probably guessing what I was thinking and said: "I didn't mean to sound like a geek, but going to the library and going on Virtu Expeditions with the GGM was a wonderful escape for me, when I was a kid. I am no Data head or anything like that."

I grinned back. "I know what you mean. I spend any free moment aboard Virtu Ships."

It took the better part of an hour before it was my turn. The Petharian Fleet officer eyed me up and down with glowing yellow eyes, and it had six of them. Its skin looked like the surface of a barnacle and the voice sounded like it was coming from the bottom of a steel barrel. "State your name and your home planet. Expose your Citizen ID implant for scanning!"

While I swiped my right wrist where my CIDI was implanted across the reader sensor I answered," Eric Olafson, Nilfleheim."

It seemed to look at something beyond me, it probably had the data read out projected straight to one of its eyes." Olafson, Eric. Nilfleheim. Citizen ship confirmed. Your reason for visiting Arsenal gate?

"I want to apply at the Academy!"

"Academy applicants are to follow the red line and proceed to the red waiting room. You will wait there until receiving further instructions. Be advised that if you are found outside red marked areas you might get shot." After saying that the being no longer paid any attention to me and barked, " Next!"

The red line was a lighted band in the floor and it lead to a red door revealing a waiting lounge with rows of bio-netic chairs. To the left large windows allowing a view into deep space and the brisk traffic of small and large space craft, another wall was occupied by a row of Serv-Matic Vending machines. The wall facing the entrance had recruiting posters, one for the Fleet and one for the United Stars Marine Corps. There also was a small podium and a lectern. The room started to fill with humanoid and non humanoid beings. I walked over to the view ports and gazed outside. Just then a wedge shaped battle ship of the new Uni design emerged from the station dwarfing a heavy destroyer nearby as it gained speed and disappeared.

"That was the USS Melbourne!" It was Derek who had stepped next to me. "Have you ever seen a real battle ship?"

"No, I haven't"

"I wonder what mission they have, perhaps patrolling the Nul-Nul border, or hunting pirates!"

Mix joined us as well and he said, "My people fought a long war with the Briaaad and we were about to be conquered. You cannot imagine our wonder and awe as we saw an entire squadron of those Ultra battle ships appear in our system, blasting through the Briaaad invasion fleet like a Nastooh wind through a Nolch forest." Mix eyes became even bigger, " We joined the United Stars the very next day and one day I will be aboard one of those ships visiting other worlds. Repaying with my service what you all have done for us."

A fish-faced Ult overheard Mix and said, "The Briaaad made one big and fatal mistake; they fired on a Terran Explorer ship and made Terrans angry. Everyone in this galaxy knows you don't make Terrans angry!"

Before anyone else could say anything, a humanoid female in black uniform stepped behind the lectern and her voice was obviously field amplified as she said: "Welcome aboard Arsenal Gate, Academy applicants. I would like to thank you all for coming this far and considering a career in the United Stars Fleet. By doing so you showed your willingness to serve and protect this federation of civilizations and do your share to make it work. Some have come here after visiting a Recruiting office. Some of you might have simply boarded the space bus to Arsenal Gate to see what will happen.

"Here you are all equal. Before we ship you to Arsenal we need to test you . it is to find out if you meet the qualification requirements. Those requirements are of physical and mental nature. Some of the tests we have to perform are to make sure that no agent of a hostile civilization gains access to the Academy or Arsenal.

"Once you step through that door next to me you are Fleet personnel. You have no ranks yet but you are subject to all Fleet rules and regulations. Civilian laws and rights have no meaning. You must follow orders and do what you have been told. Failure to comply can result in punishment."

She made a pause and looked from one end of the lobby to the other. I am not here to discourage you. We welcome you and the Fleet needs Officers and Personnel. But we don't want anyone who has doubts or isn't here to fully commit to this choice of career.

Now is the time to think about it. If you feel you made the wrong decision coming here, simply remain in this room and you will receive free passage back to your home world or any other place in the United Stars territory you choose.

"You will be compensated for your troubles and receive 500 credits and a free dinner. No civilian record will be kept of this decision and it will not affect your Citizen status."

A man dressed in some sort of transparent purple plastic film suit and not much else raised his hand:" Excuse me; did you say we get free passage to anywhere and 500 credits?"

The woman sighed and nodded. "Yes Sir, that is correct!"

The strangely dressed man got up. "That's sounds good to me! I am out of here!"

To my surprise seven more decided to take the money and leave.

I wondered why anyone would make this trip just to get 500 credits.

Max answered me. "There are some individuals doing that every 3 months. They travel from Academy to Academy get their ticket and the 500 and go on. They have no intention to join. That man in the plastic garment did that several hundred times."

I gasped. "And the Fleet doesn't keep records on that and let them get away with it?"

"I don't know but I am sure the Fleet keeps records and they know about it, but what are a few thousand credits to the Fleet? They spend ten times as much every micro second just for floor polish"

"How do you know all this?"

"I read their minds!"

"You are a telepath?"

He nodded. "Not as good as the Saresii but my Heidelberg Psionic Index is at 130."

"Don't get caught. It's against the law to read other folks minds."

"No it's not. It is illegal to pry into it but I can't help to overhear what they transmit. It would be same as to make overhearing a conversation illegal to any being that has ears."

"You hear everyone's thoughts all the time?"

"No not everyone. I met beings I can't receive all the time. For example that female fleet officer or those Marines behind her. There is nothing I detect, but then they are most likely shielded .Your thoughts on the other hand are pretty clear and quite loud in a Psionic sort of sense." .

I didn't feel quite right someone else hearing what I was thinking. I knew about Telepaths but this was the first I ever actually encountered.

The female officer resumed her speech: "All those who still plan to apply at the academy are to pass through that door. You will be asked to take off all your clothing and relinquish all your personal belongings. They will be returned to you after you completed your training or you decide to quit

You will be scanned for cybernetic and genetic enhancements, bio weapons and microbes. We will evaluate your Psionic abilities and give you a physical check up before we leave to Arsenal II."

She smiled. "We have a lot of applicants today so this process might take a while, please be patient and wait your turn. The Vent-Matics are provided for your convenience and do not require credit payments"

She ended her speech and was joined by four more officers and they handed out little plastic cards with numbers, mine was 239.

After a while it looked like they called 10 applicants at about every 20 minutes and from the looks of things I was among the last. Max and Derek went among the first and even the repeating visuals of the recruiting posters became boring.

The Vent-O-Matics were well programmed and provided brand name snacks and drinks for every taste. I was just at my third trip to the Vent-matics, as I heard my number.

Hastily I put the candy-bar in my pocket and went through the door. Behind it was a corridor with ten doors and over one door I saw my number and name displayed in bright illuminated letters.

I looked for a door chime or buzzer but found none, so I knocked and the door opened immediately.

A uniformed humanoid being sat behind a desk, the room was sparsely lit and the walls, floors and everything were colored in a dark gray with dark red accents.

The being was about human size had two arms, a torso and a head on a neck, but there was no visible mouth or nose, and the eyes seemed just darker areas in the beings otherwise gray and smooth skin.

It extended a hand and said. "Have a seat applicant. I am Specialist Yda."

I sat down and said." I am Eric Olafson from Nilfeheim.

"Nice to meet you Eric and I would like to say thank you that you consider a career in the United Stars Fleet."

He moved one of his hands over a dimly lit contact area of his desk. "Yes you are Eric Olafson, you are from Nilfeheim and you are a lawful citizen. I see you spoke with a Fleet recruiter every year for over 9 years."

I was a little surprised to see they kept records of this, especially the calls I made when I was basically a kid." I just liked to get as much information about the Fleet as I could, Sir."

The being nodded gracefully."It tells me that your decision was certainly not spur of the moment but you planned this for a long time." The being folded its hands and its long spidery hands and they had several more joints than regular human fingers. I got almost dizzy just watching and wondered if his kind ever made knots they could not get apart. The being suddenly vibrated and made a humming sound. "Yes actually we do. When I was young I often got so tangled up that my Sip-Sap had to help me get my hands appart."

"You can hear my thoughts as well?" I really didn't like that seemingly every other person I ran into could read thoughts.

"Yes Applicant I can, and as your new friend Mix told you, your thoughts are quite loud. "It leaned forward. "What is your reason for wanting to join?"

"To serve and protect, to do my share to keep this Unionâ€!"

It interrupted. "Not the poster reason, why did you decide to join and be frank and truthful"

"I needed to get away from Nilfeheim. I had no future there but ever since I could think I had no other plans no alternative ideas what I wanted to do with my life. I always wanted to join the Fleet."

"What is it that attracts you?"

"It's the only place where I eventually could become a Star Ship captain."

The being made a series of whispering sounds and then it said. "I think you are indeed at the right place then."He unfolded his hands in what must have been a mental challenge. "You have a long way ahead of you before you reach that goal, but there are millions of ships and all have Captains. Others have done it before you and perhaps you too will do that one day.

" Once you leave my office you will be further tested, and scanned. From now on everything that happens will be a test and part of an old evaluation process, keep that in mind!"

The being was not kidding. After a dozen more interviews, medical exams and scans. I felt as if I was turned inside out and every last molecule and thought of mine had been examined, dissected and recorded.

At one point they had me undress and bathe in a milky white liquid that had a metallic odor to it. A technician explained it was to make sure no bio weapons or nanites were transported to Arsenal II.

After that bath they gave me a bright orange jumpsuit with my last name stenciled across my chest and the word applicant on my back.

My personal belongings so I was told would be returned to me when I left the academy, either accepted or rejected.

Since I had also to give up my Multi Com, I did not know what time it was or how long all this took. It seemed to me at least 20 hours had passed since I walked through the red door.

They herded us aboard a Leyland Military Shuttle, everyone wearing that bright orange colored jumpsuit. I was tired and thirsty. They used every test and every sensor known to science on me, at least that's how I felt. I had been bathed, sterilized inside and out. Filled out forms and questionnaires and then was probed and measured and scanned some more.

"They are treating us more like penal colony prisoners than Academy aspirants!" complained Derek. He managed to get a seat next to me.

Max who also made it wiggled his big ears."To become an officer on one of those magnificent ships, I'd endure much worse."

"I wonder why they do it that way!" I said." I mean would it hurt to show a little more respect?"

Max answered again: "It wasn't so bad. They need to make sure no spies make it to Arsenal. Do you know how many times the Kermac and others have tried to find out just what Terrans really found on Arsenal III?"

I shook my head. "Aren't we at peace with the GC? Would they risk sending spies and anger the Fleet?"

Derek answered this one. "Peace is a relative thing my friend. The GC does not like the Union and they didn't like losing this star system to the Union, especially since everyone knows we found something there, something very important. I would be very angry to lose my own front yard to a hated neighbor only to hear that this neighbor found a treasure in it."

Derek shrugged. "I think it is a ruse, there is nothing there. The real treasure was found in the Lighthouse system and all this is to throw the GC off course and it worked for the last 2000 years!"

"And you read that in your galactic National Magazines?"

Derek gave me a broad grin. "Sure have, but that's not the only thing I watch or read."

"So what did they find then?" I asked

"No one that knows ever talked, but rumors persisted a very long time that they found a Celtest city or ship yard and completely intact, with the entire Tech level 11 stuff ready for the taking! The famous alien ship, brought back by Admiral Stahl during the last Y'All Invasion is supposedly a Celtest battleship, maybe it was here were he found it."

**"They found that I think in 2516." I said smiling back .Showing Derek I was not completely ignorant."
Why haven't we have reached Tech Level 11 yet?"**

"2516 was when the war ended and the System was signed to us almost five years later. " Derek corrected me and Max said: "It takes the average Civilization between 3- 5000 years to reach tech level 3 and over 15,000 to reach Tech level 7. Look at the Kermac. They have been around for almost a million years and have not advanced past tech Level 7. Some of Saresii technology is considered to be Tech level 9 and they reached Tech level three over a Million years ago. The Union in general is at Tech level 7 but many consider Terran technology already well past Tech 8. Now the Terrans are still one of the youngest and newest galactic civilizations. When my people heard of the speed the Terrans achieved this, we called it the Terran Miracle."

He wiggled his ears in excitement. "It takes many millennia of dedicated research to even fundamentally understand the principles of any Tech level higher than yours. It can be quite dangerous too, if you are not very careful. I bet they found just what the rumor said and that is why Terrans and the Union advance so fast."

Derek nodded."Imagine a Stone age man trying to figure out the function of a blaster weapon. This stone age man would have to make a lot of discoveries and inventions on his own to even understand the rudimentary workings of that blaster and during that long process might even shoot himself before he ever figures it out."

While we talked our shuttle left Arsenal Gate, went super luminal and we reached Arsenal II only 2 hours later.

Chapter 9: Chapter 9

Chapter 9: Arsenal II

Arsenal System was an OII Main sequence star with 11 planets. Each planet was heavily developed by the Fleet. The United Stars Fleet was one of the biggest organizations in the known universe. There must have been Trillions of beings serving active all over the Galaxy and beyond. Millions of ship and bases needed maintenance, upgrades, and supplies. Even the three gas giants in the system and their moons had some installations on them.

A Dyson Sphere that would eventually replace Arsenal system was under construction but it would take many centuries before it was complete.

Arsenal System was also the most heavily protected and defended system. A cocoon of weapon platforms and space forts surrounded the system in addition to the many war ships and deep space fighters on constant stand by. Sensor installations tracked everything that moved within 100 light years.

Arsenal II was a very hot water less planet with a toxic acid atmosphere, too close to its sun to develop native life and in many ways similar to the Sol system Venus. Despite the inhospitality of Arsenal II over 5 million beings lived and worked here at all times. Most of the installations were underground, except for the huge landing fields and the Academy complex.

The United Stars Military Academy had many branches all over the galaxy, but here on Arsenal II was Academy headquarters.

All this information I got from a vidi-brochure that was playing over and over again on the passenger compartment main screen.

The constant vibration of the ship changed and that most likely indicated that we had dropped into Real Space and approached our destination. The vidi brochure on the main screen disappeared and was replaced by a mustard yellow ball and it soon filled the screen. Thick clouds whirled in its atmosphere and prohibited any view of the actual planet surface. Without swinging into an orbit first, our transport ship immediately descended into that thick pea soup atmosphere and the view screen showed nothing but unhealthy shades of sulfur yellow.

Moments later we had passed through this planet wide cloud and the ship was floating across a lifeless inhospitable looking environment. Rough rugged looking mountains, huge fissures of canyon size zigzagging across the umbra colored surface. The transport descended further and a collection of buildings centered on a tall cone shaped tower was the obvious target of our trip. Lush green parks with perfectly groomed grass, large trees and small ponds surrounded the compound and a transparent energy-field reinforced dura steel dome encased it all. As we passed directly over Academy compound it looked strangely surreal and out of place. Green parks, trees and buildings surrounded by that lifeless rugged landscape with rough looking boulders, and sulfuric clouds, an environment unfit for most life forms.

The transport landed on a duro crete field and a slide-way inside a transparent pipe rose from the ground and attached itself to the airlock. The doors opened and a voice told us to get up, two seat rows at a time and single file in an orderly manner to the exit. The slide belt inside the transparent tunnel transported us across the landing field and inside that dome we had seen from space.

We were greeted by two black uniformed humanoids welcoming us at the Academy on Arsenal II. The slide belt had ended right behind the Ultronit base of the transparent dome. I estimated the apex of this dome to be at least 500 meters above us. There we joined a line of perhaps a thousand more identically orange dressed beings, already waiting on a broad alley made of smooth dark red colored duro crete that

ended at the base of that cone shaped tower in the center. That alley was perhaps 20 meters wide and if I had to guess a 1000 meters long. A flight of stairs led from where we stood down to that alley. From this elevated observation point I noticed five more such alleys like spokes of a wheel and I was almost certain there were at least three more spokes on the other side but blocked by that tall building. Each alley had a line of applicants like this one. That meant between eight and ten thousand applicants stood in line and waited to be accepted into the Academy just like me.

The space between the spokes was well groomed green grass, small trees.

A humanoid union officer floated down from somewhere and hovered a few feet away from us and he addressed us." This is your first actual order you receive as Union Fleet personnel. This order I will give you now is meant to test your ability and willingness to accept instructions that might cause discomfort or make no sense to you. Since this is your first official order it will be explained to you. Be prepared that this might have been the last time anyone explained the reason for an order to you. All this is new to you of course, but those who remain will soon get used to it."

The officer made a gesture encompassing the area before us and then he gestured in a linear motion to describe the Duro-crete alley before us. "To your back from where you just came on the top of the stairs is the entrance lobby. There are wash rooms, vent o matics and even GalNet Access booths. The tall building in the middle is the Academy administration building in which your final application process will be completed. The paved, red colored surface connecting these two points we call it Applicant Road. There are nine of these and you are on number six.

That concludes the explanation, now here are your orders and you are to follow them to the tee:

You are to remain in your spot of the cue. You are not allowed to leave the red area, sit on, or even touch the grass. Under no circumstance will you leave your place in the line to advance past others before you. Should you go back for whatever reason, be it to use the toilets, the washrooms or make a Call or for any other 1possible reason. It will be seen by us as your decision not to complete the application process. Should you choose to go back you will receive a space bus ticket to any destination of your choice and 1000 credits. No one will ask you why you decided to walk back. There is no appeal process as you will not be able to reapply for the Academy ever again. It was decided to make such finite and drastic conditions to make sure you know the seriousness of these instructions."

The officer paused for a second then nodded. "These are simple orders and you should be able to comply."

The officer saluted and said." I wish you all success and hopefully will see you one day in Navy Black." He left by floating away and into the direction of another Applicant road. As my eyes followed him, I saw another Transport pass over the academy preparing to land.

The long line of beings didn't move, even after four hours or so I roughly estimated I had not moved more than perhaps 2 meters. Nothing seemed to happen at all.

The fish faced Ult, I was certain was the same who had talked to me back on Arsenal Gate, as I recognized the pattern of darker spots on his greenish fish skin was standing before me. He even smelt faintly like fish, complained: "I hope this line is moving soon. The water in my suit is getting bad."

"Water in your suit?" I asked

He turned to answer: "I am an Ult. This orange jump suit they gave me is supposed to sustain me just as a real Ult Moisture Suit would. You see Ult are amphibious. I can survive on land but I must return to water periodically to regenerate. In dry environments like this we wear moisture suits"

The Ult was two heads taller than me, and really looked like a Blue Streamer fish that had been crossed with a human being and a large frog. He had large watery eyes, a lipless mouth filled with rows of very small but sharp looking teeth. His skin had a greenish shimmer and the outlines of a back fin under his yellow suit. He did have two hands and two legs. The legs were out of proportion to the rest of the body, as if belonging to a much larger being.

"I am amphibious too." I said and pointed at the gill slits at the base of my neck. "I can understand your love for water." Then I asked. "are you in any form of danger or harm because of that suit you wear?"

"My own suit recycles the water much more efficient than this one. It appears to be malfunctioning. You see I need to exchange body waste materials through the skin, and replenish my cells with fresh water. If I am not able to do that soon, I might suffocate and perish.

"How long do you think you have?"

As alien as his face was, he looked uncomfortable. "I am not sure, but not very much longer. I can feel the water clogging my pores!"

I looked around and saw a marine not too far away standing to my left just by the grass and approached her. "Ma'am that Ult received a defective environmental suit and needs help his water supply is contaminated."

The Marine lowered her immense gun and pointed it at me. "Applicant return into the line! Feeding and refreshment intervals will be given. Until then remain where you are. You heard the received your orders. It is the Ult's problem not yours. If he wants to quit all he has to do is walk back. You heard your

orders and mine are to make sure you comply. "

"Ma'am I don't think I made myself clear. The Ult is in perhaps life threatening peril and needs help!"

The Marine woman barked "One more word out of you and I will shoot you!" then she said in a less threatening tone." What you all do at your spot in the line is up to you! But no help will be called, until he reaches the building or the refreshment interval is ordered. If he wants to quit all he has to do is turn around and walk back. There are toilets; there are washrooms and he gets a ride home, but if he turns around no matter for what reason he forfeits his chance to apply to the academy."

I wanted to voice my anger about this extremely unfair situation, but the expression on the Marines face and the shimmering energy field at the gun muzzle told me that she wasn't kidding.

The Ult and the other applicants nearby had heard the interchange and looked as helpless as I felt. The Ult's skin now had yellowish hue and he didn't look to good. Derek cursed:" What a bunch of ass holes! I mean they can't let him die. We got to do something."

I looked around. We were still far back. The line before us I estimated was at last 600 beings The line behind us was fifty beings or less and it reached up the stairs and all the way to the Airlock door with the bath rooms and a water fountain, but if anyone went back he or she would get a ride back and forfeit the chance to apply. Then I got an idea. With some effort I ripped of the sleeves of my suit, tied a knot in one end and said to Max behind me." Pass those sleeves back and tell the being behind you to pass it on until it reaches those who are still next to the water fountain. Have them fill it and pass it back."

Max ears wiggled fast." What a great idea!"

The being behind him, a human female agreed. Even the female Marine watching us nodded approvingly.

Derek who stood before the Ult turned and said." If I only had some tools, I probably could fix that Enviro-suit."

"What do you need?" I asked.

"Well I would need to access the Diagnostic panel first."

The Ult looked visibly weak and was about to collapse. I reached out and with Derek's help eased him to the ground and said:" Just do it. See what you can do."

The first sleeve came back. Derek found the drain on the suit and he fashioned a make shift funnel out of a sleeve of his suit. Once everyone behind us understood what was happening the water arrived much faster and Derek was able to exchange the entire water supply in no time. We also doused the exposed skin of the Ult and gave him to drink. His skin lost the yellow hue and returned to the healthy greenish shine. His eyes became clearer and he looked at us." I don't know how I could thank you all!"

"Don't worry. I bet you would do the same." I said and turned to Derek who was looking at the tiny 2D read out of the diagnostic panel hidden behind a Velcro fabric flap on the Ult's arm."What's wrong with the thing?"

"One of the filters is clogged and the e - cell is nearly empty. There is not enough power for the self cleaning cycle!"

I turned to Max." Tell those behind you that the Ult is alright. Convey them our thanks."

Max made a rattling sound and I realized he laughed." Great news! I convey at once!"

A brownish furred being with tentacles for arms, three spaces ahead of us said:" I am wearing an environment assisting suit also. I am a methane breather, but I can go without taking a breath for days. The Ult can have my energy cell. I won't be able to speak however!"

Derek looked up." I need that cell only for a moment. I think I can drain enough energy into the Ult's empty one to make it work for a few days and leave enough in the Garbini's cell."

Derek succeeded and both beings had enough energy to run their suits for a while.

The Ult had completely recovered and he told us about his home planet and culture. His species was the first non humanoid member of the United Stars. It was also a very old culture. The Ult had been members of the First Galactic Council and traveled space when Terrans lived in caves and competed with the Neanderthal for the dominant species spot. The Ult once ruled a gigantic empire and were considered to be among the most brutal and aggressive species but some kind of religious event over 5000 years ago changed their behavior and they gave up their aggressive expansion.

Then he asked:" You are amphibious too?"

I nodded." All Neo-Vikings are. Nilfleheim is a water world we have only a few small islands. The rest of the surface is covered in deep oceans. When Nilfleheim was settled, the colonists got some genetic tailoring."

"So you can actually breathe under water?" Max asked.

"Yes I have gills that allow me to stay submerged for a long time."

"Why did you decide to join the Fleet?" Derek wanted to know.

"Ever since I can think I wanted to be a Star ship captain!"

The Ult's name was Webb and he said:" You seem quite serious but you realize that is a long and hard journey and you might spend half a life time serving before they ever offer you a command seat. There isn't a more difficult selection process in the Universe."

I shrugged."Actually I have no real expectations as what awaits me, I am not sure I will ever succeed, but by Odin I'll try. At least that was the plan. I am less certain about it now. I am appealed by the inhuman treatment. I can't help but wonder why they treat applicants like dirt."

"I guess they have their reasons." The Ult said

He reached for my hand:" Humans, I learned long ago like to wish other beings luck. While there is no word or concept for luck in Ulta, I wish you luck with your quest."

"Thanks Webb."

Max then educated us about his species and time seemed to pass much faster. I t was fascinating to learn about the origin and cultures of other beings.

The Marines guarding us announced a refreshment period and a hover cart came down the line with robots handing out water and food rations. From the ground rose cubical structures, bath room facilities for anyone who needed it. The Marines urged us to hurry, but everyone needing to go had a chance to do so.

The line now had moved quite a bit and only about 60 beings where still in front of me. I estimated about 5 hours had passed since we got the refreshments and bathroom break and I was certain it was over ten hours since we arrived here. I had counted forty-eight beings so far that had given up and returned to the rear. I needed to go to the bathroom again very soon. The water I drank had made its way through the system and pushed for a release.

Arsenal, the local sun had long set and the transparent dome shielding us from the toxic and scorching hot environment outside was lit by flood lights now. When I finally reached the entrance door I was really tired, quite hungry and thirsty and in dire need to relieve myself. A uniformed human sat behind a desk next to the door and looked me over." What happened to your uniform?"

"I fashioned water bags out of the sleeves because my Ult friend needed water!"

He snarled." You damaged government issued property. This is a serious offense! Are you aware of that?"

"Sir, with all due respect, a life was at stake and I believe my action is justifiable!"

"Are you taking full responsibility for that?"

"Yes Sir! I have no problems taking responsibility for helping a fellow being in distress"

The officer made a notation on his desk screen and said." You might as well kiss your chances of becoming a cadet good bye! The Commandant himself wants to see you! That almost never happens! Go through that door. Take the first IBT. It will drop you off at the correct location!"

I was angry and tried to keep my emotions under control as I stepped past the transparent doors into the cool marble and brass lobby to find the Inter base transport. Everything was so different from how I pictured it would be. The Vid-Shows on GalNet always portrayed Fleet officers as noble, honorable and gallant. Everything I knew about the Fleet seemed wrong. There were no larger than life heroes, no Officers who kept their cool. Instead I met only angry, bored and indifferent members of that organization. I wasn't sure anymore if I really wanted to be a part of it. Going back to Nilfleheim was not an option. What else was there for me? I had only 4000 credits left to my name. That wasn't very much to start a career in some other field. And I never thought beyond this day. I never thought about what else I might want to do if the Fleet didn't work out.

Not being sure about anything I stepped into a quiet lobby. I felt angrier by the moment and I decided to let that Commander know what I was thinking about all of this. A woman was sitting behind a sweeping desk. Behind her, huge murals showing spectacular images of deep space nebulae. She seemed to be human, had bright orange hair and half her face was covered with a contour shaped mirror thing." The Commandant is expecting you, Applicant!" She said as she noticed me." Go right in!"

A pair of wooden doors swung open and I walked into a large office with deep blue soft carpet. The ceiling simulated a star field and the transparent view ports behind the large desk allowed a bird's eye

view over the academy grounds and the stark landscape beyond the dome. The desk was a transparent surface floating without visible support before a white haired woman sitting in a large arm chair. She wore a tight fitting black velvet suit with a plunging v shaped neckline revealing much of her cleavage. I would be hard pressed to guess at her age. She could have been anything between 20 and 200.

Her long straight snow white hair was cut with bangs reaching her eyes and framed a beautiful immaculate face with large dark eyes and an arrogant impression. Her suit was bare of any rank insignia, except for 3 golden rings on her sleeves. The woman had her legs crossed and her fingers stapled. Her eyes looked me over and then she said: "What is your name?"

"Eric Olafson, Ma'am."

"Why are you here?"

"I was told to report to you Ma'am! And here I am. I was told my chances to join the Fleet are nil so I don't give a hoot why you want me here!"

I was quite angry and aggravated and I let her know it." I might be just some hick from a backwater planet, but that is not how you treat people that decided to serve this Union. I am sure there are other ways to test the resolve and dedication than to treat applicants like dirt. Not providing water and defective gear, not having the courtesy of providing bath rooms and endangering the very life of a sentient being. That is not only uncivilized that is barbaric. Ever since I was a boy I dreamed of this day, but now I am not so sure if I want to be part of this. All nice and honor on the surface and rotten, bored and indifferent at the core! "

"Are you through?" She asked quietly?"

"No I am not. That Uniform you and everyone else around here wears makes you servants of the United Stars, not dictators. I don't know what I am going to do after I walk out of here, but one thing is sure. I am going to let everyone know what a rotten and lousy place this Fleet of ours is underneath all that glamour."

"Are you angry because you are hungry and thirsty and need to go to the bath room? A future officer might face much worse conditions and has to keep his cool." She said still quietly.

"Lady I come from a very harsh planet where kids from very early on learn what real hunger and thirst means. Don't talk to me about personal comforts. I can handle much worse. It's the attitude of the so called officers. I realize we are new to all this but what would it hurt to be a little more courteous? Is it

not the foremost duty of this Fleet to represent us in a favorable light with other civilizations? There is a being down there from the Andromeda Galaxy, what impression will he take home. What will he tell others?"

I turned." I know my way out!"

She said a little louder:" Hold it right there. I am not through with you!"

I turned and looked at her and she asked: "Why did you come to Arsenal?"

"I intended to join the Fleet and become an officer."

"And what are you going to do now?"

"I don't know for sure but that should be of no concern to you"

"Would you do the same thing you did down there, knowing it cost you your chance to become an officer?"

"No Ma'am. I would get the water myself."

She kept looking at me and then a barely noticeable smile crept in her eyes but didn't reach her lips. "I see! You may leave now. Take the elevator back down and get your dorm assigned. You are accepted in the Academy."

"I am?" I was totally surprised.

From the side Webb the Ult stepped into my field of sight. "Yes Eric, you passed a very important test. A test I personally conduct once in a while." The Ult no longer wore a yellow jumpsuit but a black uniform." Welcome to the United Stars Naval Academy, Cadet Olafson. I am Admiral Webb Stokes and I am the commanding officer of this place."

He surrounded the floating desk and the woman got up and exchanged places with Webb.

"A test?" Was all that came to my mind?

Stokes fish-like face had no skin muscles to convey emotions like humans, but I was sure he felt amused." Yes Cadet a test. You did well indeed. Now get registered. They also going to feed you and give you some rest. Everything you experience will be some form of a test. Once every so often we do exactly this routine we call the "Inmate Routine" and yes we treat you like penal colony prisoners in that scenario. We observe every applicant very closely and we can learn a lot from his or her reaction to those scenarios. Don't judge the Fleet to harsh, we doing this for over 3000 years now and we have our reasons. Now go get to the bath room or you might ruin my carpet."

"Thank you Sir!" I said and walked to the door. I heard the Admirals voice as the door opened." When I wished you luck earlier, I meant that."

Chapter 10: Chapter 10

Chapter 10

The orange haired woman took the mirror thing from her face as I left the Admirals office and she leaned forward over her desk." There is a washroom right over there."

I gave her a thankful smile. After I had freshened up I asked her." How did you know I needed to go?"

She smiled." I am from Phantas." She said that as if it would explain everything. Her eyes blinked and she added." Phantas is an old terran Colony, much like Nilfeheim and we all have Psionic abilities, including telepathy."

I groaned."Can everyone do that but me?"

She laughed."No , Cadet. It really only appears that way to you at the moment. You have been accepted to the Academy and if you graduate successfully you will know a whole lot more about psionics and how to defend yourself against it too."

"That would be a good thing. I still can't believe I actually got accepted and the whole affair with the Ult was just a staged thing."

She got up and pointed at an elegant looking serv-matic. "Its about my coffee time. Would you want some too?"

I nodded."Yes I a quite thirsty actually."

She was actually quite attractive to look at. She had a very nice body, and she wore a short black skirt that reminded me of Sif's outfit when I saw her at the Space port and something shiny with a hint of black encased her legs. Her blouse was also black, and void of any rank insignia, but her actually quite large breasts underneath made up for the lack of military decoration and was quite effective to catch an eye, at least mine. Her behind looked nice and round in that skirt as she worked on the serve-matic. Not knowing where it really came from I suddenly thought how that skirt would look on me. I was surprised at my own thought and tried to push the memories and strange idea back.

She turned and handed me a cup."These are called stockings." She slid a hand over her knee and said."They are from Terra and are once again real big in fashion." The she said." I am glad you like what you see."

The door opened and the silver haired woman came out of the Admirals office." Cadet Olafson what are you still doing here. I thought you be already processed."

The orange haired woman said." General, I offered the Cadet a cup of coffee. It was not his fault."

The silver haired woman who seemed to be a General was incredibly beautiful. Quite different from the girlish secretary in an almost angelic non human way, looked at me for a moment and I noticed she had purple eyes then she said with a barley noticeable smile on her lips." Carry on then, but I suggest you don't delay your processing to long." Then she shook her and walked of." Barley a day in the navy and already flirting with the Civilian personnel. Mr. Olafson I think you found your calling indeed."

The secretary waited till the woman had disappeared in one of the IBT's and said."That was General Alyca Lichfangh. She is the Commanding officer of the mighty PSI Corps, and it is said that she is the most powerful Psionic talented Saresii ever."

I sighed."I just realized just how much I really have to learn." Then I drained the cup in one gulp and put it down."Thanks for the coffee. I better go."

"Your welcome Cadet Olafson. I am known around here as Cheeka. I do not have a military rank, I am just the big guys executive assistant. Maybe when you come back from basic we can have a cup of coffee again."

I smiled/"That would be nice indeed."

Cheeka pointed at the IBT." Tell the IBT to drop you off at the Quarter master processing level 6"

I thanked her waved once more and told the Inter Base Transport to drop me off at said location. There in a curving corridor another long line of orange dressed applicants. A bright yellow skinned being that reminded me of a bird crossed with a lemon and no taller than maybe 40 centimeters jumped before me, wearing a black uniform and with a high pitched voice ordered me to take a spot between two other beings.

I wondered how Derek and Mix fared and how far they had come in this process. I wanted to tell them about the Ult who was actually the Commandant. The chances they were here in the same line were slim.

A humanoid shaped being wearing a completely enclosed orange jump suit stood before me. His suit had an attached hood that was drawn closely around his head and as he turned there was a mirrored face plate instead of a face. While others had their names stenciled across the chest, he only had a number, 3452-991.

I asked. " May I ask why you got a number instead of a name?"

Its voice actually came from a speaker unit in his shoulder and it sounded exactly like the female voice almost every Computronic had." I do not mind. I am a Non Corp. We did not develop the same as most of the corporal beings. We had no need for names for one as we recognize each other in a different way. However when interacting with other Union species outside our natural environment it is helpful to have an individual designation and this number comes very close to what we see when we identify one of us."

I wished I could have talked to the non Corp a little more but the line was moving quite rapidly and we had reached a door where two officers, one human and one Insectoid Klack split us up. To the Non corp the human officer said." Non Corp Cadet to the right and through that corridor." And the Klack send me into the other. Corridor behind the two. It turned out to be a short slide belt that conveyed me into a large Auto Dresser unit and I emerged on the other side and moments later wearing an actual uniform, it was deep green and completely void of rank insignia, but on the sleeve was the Union Flag. I did not know if it was the same or a different Klack who greeted me at the other side." Welcome Cadet Olafson you have now been officially accepted and processed. Please do not ask any questions at this point, as there is no time. Follow the others to the next station where you receive your ribbon display, your Military Id Imprint and your Code Key surgery."

I really wanted to ask what a Code key surgery entailed, as I in general did not like the idea of surgeries and doctors all too much, but the Klack ignored me and addressed the next person behind me in the exact same manner.

The next room had two long counters on each side. Robots and beings behind the counter handed out large bags. A project sign flashed with my name and guided me to a spot at the left counter. A bearded man chewing on something said." Cadet Olafson?"

"Yes Sir."

A robot next to him snarled." Identity verified. Race specifications and measurement scan complete. Basic Gear assembled and ready."

The man pointed at a large E pad screen installed into the counter. Sign your name here. With your signature you verify you have received all your basic gear, complete and in good condition."

"Should I not check it first before I sign it?"

"Yes technically you all need to take the print out and check every item, but your gear has been assembled by robots."

I sighed and signed it.

After this we got a blank flex screen attached to our uniform. The man putting it there said."This is your ribbon display. It will show all your military specializations and qualifications and of course any citations you earn. Yours will most likely remain pretty empty until you graduate, but it is required to be worn on all uniforms. It is linked to you and cannot be give to another person or altered in any way or form. That is a serious offense."

Code Key surgery was a big auto dresser type device that used micro nanite surgery to make a little skin pocket somewhere on the body. Its location so I was told was choosen randomly so it would not be always at the same place. During the procedure a voice explained." All officers and non commisioned officers of all branches of the United Stars services receive a code key pocket. It is a small 2 centimeter by 1 centimeter cavity and a few millimeters deep. A bio plastic key made of the same cell material as the body could be placed in it. No normal scan will reveal it. It is used as an extra security measure to access restricted areas or information. You and all Cadets accepted have the security clearance Blue. That is the lowest security clearance and sufficient for all Academy tasks and procedures. How, when and why you need that key will be explained to you in the appropriate training class.

This was the final entry level procedure and you are now Cadet Eric Olafson of the United Stars of the Galaxy Fleet.

Along with others I entered an immense mess hall. I guessed at least 500 beings were sitting or in the process of sitting at long rows of tables.

I didn't see Derek or Max, but I saw the methane breather and it waved at me with one of its tentacles."

Over here, Eric human."

I took the free seat next to him and the being said." I never thought we finally end up here. I felt like a product in a factory."

"I know I felt the same way. Seeing the scope of things I start to realize just how big an organization Space Fleet actually is."

"Now that you say it I realize it too. I heard there are ten mess halls like this right here and this isn't the only Academy branch in the Galaxy. There are several more!"

The tables were set with fine china and glasses. Then an officer in black uniform, somewhat humanoid but with horns and a face that made him look like a ram addressed us all while floating in mid air, so everyone could see him. Again I was sure his voice was amplified as he did not talk very loud but I could clearly hear him." This will be your first real meal as Cadets. It will also be your first lesson.

"An Officer of the United Stars Fleet will always display the finest table manners. We will use napkins and eating utensils whenever possible. We will learn to use the Eating utensils of other cultures. Enlisted men can eat a sandwich while walking through a corridor, an officer may not. An enlisted man may yawn, scratch himself or do those many little things beings do without really thinking, often perhaps insulting or revolting to others. Officer will not do that.

However as officers you also have certain privileges, you do not stand in line for food at the chow line, like enlisted personnel. You will be served whenever possible. The food will be served now, but don't eat until I say so. Until the most senior officer is served and has given the toast, you will not touch the food."

He clapped his gloved hands together and white dressed beings started to serve plates with food.

The Officer raised a glass." Welcome Citizens of the Union and Welcome new Cadets, may this be the first meal you partaking in the company of fellow officers and I sincerely hope it will not be the last. May the day come in many years from now that you remember this first meal as a very special occasion and important marker in your lives. I wish all of you success and hope to see each of you one day in Fleet black!"

He raised the glass he was holding." In the name of the Admiral of the Fleet I welcome you all. Now enjoy your meal."

During the meal instructors walked down the table isles and gave pointers as how to eat correctly. To my

Methane breathing friend one of them said:" A Garbini Officer folds his unused tentacles on his back in the Naglag position. Fulran morsels are to be dipped only once and with the right eating tentacle only. Don't let me see you using your left and dipping twice again!"

"Yes Sir." The Garbini uttered even though he was quite alien I could sense its surprise that a small furry being in black Uniform knew so much about Garbini proper eating etiquette."He just sounds like my father!"

I was not spared either. The same being barked at me:" Dap your lips with the napkin before you reach for the glass. Cut only what you intended to eat right away, don't cut everything, drop the knife and shovel it like a barbarian."

I wanted to argue and tell him Neo Vikings are the very definition of what barbarians are and they didn't use forks at all, but I thought better and said:"Yes Sir."

After the meal we went to a big dorm, with conformatic beds that adjusted to the body needs and sizes of any known being. Still I saw neither Mix nor Derek anywhere, but there were several dorms like that, each with hundreds of cadets. The instructors where everywhere and the same ram horned Officer that addressed us at the meal spoke again: "Being an officer is not a job it is a profession. Being an officer is a status, a mindset that does not end with you taking off your uniform, or go sleep. You are an Officer even when you are naked, hung by your toes or equivalent body part over a boiling pot of oil. You are an officer and expected to act with certain restrains in any possible situation. You will maintain a perfect state of dignity and unquestionable conduct at all times. Almost all sentient life forms we encountered have some form of body hygiene procedures. The Fleet has standardized these procedures to accommodate all beings and none of you will die or get harmed when touched by soap and water or a sonic shower. I want you to be on top of your species hygiene procedures at all times. No one will order you to be clean and well groomed but it is expected. Tomorrow morning will be the only time in your entire Academy career where you get a dedicated time period to do so. After that you must use your free time and schedule it correctly to be groomed well. This includes your uniforms and personal equipment. It has to be clean, spot less, in good repair and put on correctly according to Fleet regulations. "

He took a breather." Well that is all for now, sleep well!"

Chapter 11: Chapter 11

Chapter 11

I felt I just went to bed as they woke us and gave us what I felt way too little time to get bathed and groomed.

But Neo Vikings were early risers and having warmed almost hot water for shower and hygiene was actually a new experience for me. Even though the shower stalls had privacy screens, seeing human girls with nothing more than a towel entering the hygiene cells was quite something.

"Cadet Olafson don't just stand there and stare, there are others that need to use that cell!" One of the even here present Instructors barked at me. I nodded and was glad he wasn't a telepath.

He then added."I am Olafson, almost all Instructors are. "

I cursed and felt the blood rush to my head. He no longer paid attention to me and reprimanded a gorgeous girl with copper colored skin and dark green hair." The timer said eight minutes shower time, not eleven, get moving!"

After a breakfast conducted with the same formality as the dinner the day before we received class room instructions.

It was almost like being back in Basic School, only on a much bigger scale. The class room had room for at least 200 beings and it filled up to the last seat. The students tables were arranged in a half circle fashion on rows of tiers, much like in a theatre. My table neighbor was the Non Corp. He now wore like everyone else, a dark green uniform; his was completely sealed and before the tight fitting hood the golden mirrored face plate.

Before us in the center was a lectern and behind it a large view screen. It showed an animated image of the flag of the United Stars of the Galaxy: the stylized white spiral arm galaxy on a dark blue oval field and four red and three white vertical stripes. I knew the three white stripes symbolized the three founding species Terrans, Saran and Pan Saran. The four red stripes represented the four civilizations that have joined in the first decade of its existence namely the Ult, the Saresii, the Vantax and the Garbini.

A repeating text message ordered us to find a seat and remain quiet until the instructor would come at 0700 hours. There were still eight minutes to go.

I was amazed by the diversity of beings and all in green uniforms. Even though humanoids were in the majority, there were no blocks. Humanoids and non humanoids shared tables.

The female computronic voice of the Non Corp said." You are the human asking me about my name in the line before the Auto Dressers are you not?"

I nodded."Yes that was me!"

I am still learning to differentiate human shapes and facial features."You are human and you are a male, right?"

"Yes I am human and I am male. You are female I gather?"

"No I am not. My species has no gender. I wonder why everyone thinks I am female."

"It is your voice, it sounds female."

"Oh that would explain it. These containment suits come with the voice modulators built in. Since I am non corporal I don't have ears."

"So you really live on the surface of a star?"

"My kind does, yes. I also came to be on our star. But my family moved to Bright Shine Station to be more integrated Union citizens as it is very important to us to our do our share."

"I wonder how it would be to live on a star."

"We don't so much live on the star as with the star. It is complicated to explain but there are several books written both by Non Corps and humans that are much better explaining it. I think there is even a Virtu Experience allowing corporal beings to experience it themselves, I am not exactly a scholar and could not put it in adequate terms, besides its not all that great I personally prefer to live on a station or a planet. I like having things you know. One can't have anything on a star."

An officer stepped behind the lectern and began." I am Lt. Tentwor and I am an instructor on the academy for nine years now and I believe I might just have the best job in the Galaxy. He smiled and made a gesture that incorporated the class room." It is a special privilege to be among the first to educate you. I see two hundred beings before me, you all have managed to pass the first hurdles, tests and obstacles. Beings from all across the Union, from the most diverse backgrounds and civilizations are here to do their share to assure the safety of everyone else. Be assured you have my deepest respect for that. "He changes his stance and saluted us and said." Your journey will be a hard one and you might find conditions inhuman, unfair or impossible to endure, but it is done to prepare you for what lies ahead. As hard and demanding your training and education might appear to you, consider that millions have done it before you."

The auditorium's lights dimmed and a top view of our galaxy appeared in all its magnificent glory before us. The bright glowing center, the Nucleus in the center from where the spiral arms reached into space.

We only heard his voice as the Instructor continued talking. This is our Galaxy, a SBbc type Barred Spiral Arm. It has a diameter of 100,000 light years and is almost exactly 1000 light years thick. According to our latest data it contains 390 billion stars. Not counting the globular clusters that technically belong to this galaxy as well."

His voice paused for a moment and then he continued." Those are numbers that help us to understand but I doubt that any of you including me can really fathom what those numbers represent, with the exception of perhaps the Narth."

A deep voice from somewhere else in the auditorium said." I shall attempt then to assist you doing that, Sir."

The instructor's voice sighed." Your offer is duly noted Cadet Narth, but right now I need to continue this class."

I wondered who this Cadet was, but Lt. Tentwor resumed his lecture and the image of the Galaxy became smaller and other Galaxies came into view." Our Galaxy is , as you all know part of what is known the local group, thirty two galaxies with its gravitational center located pretty much exactly between our Galaxy and M 31, the Andromeda Galaxy and as you can easily attest by simply looking around this very auditorium our Galaxy and certainly the others too, are teeming with life. Life so it appears can manifest in the most unusual places and when life becomes sentient and is capable of starting a civilization they leave their place of origin behind and start to explore and expand. A civilization that leaves its cradle and discovers faster than light technology they ascent, raise so to speak from out their gravity well and step on the galactic stage.

"Once a civilization has ascended sooner or later they find out they are not the only ones who have done the exact same thing. This revelation that there are others often is a great shock to those meeting another culture for the first time. Some cultures are much longer at it than others and the civilization that had just stepped on the Galactic stage suddenly find out that space as boundless and endless it seems has borders and restricted areas, Space claimed by another civilization."

The view once more centered on our Spiral Arm Galaxy and four lines appeared. Dividing the image vertically and the other horizontally through the center. "Our Galaxy we refer to as M-0 has four quadrants. On the upper left is Upward, below left Coreward. On the right upper side is Spinward and below right Downward.

A spherical blue field appeared inside the Upward Sector. The field was not a smooth sphere but bulged and dented all over.

"Most of Union space is in the Upward Quadrant."

Three blue dots appeared.

"The dots that you see now in the upward section of the Orion Arm represent the locations of Earth, Saran and Pan Saran, the three civilizations that came together and founded the United Stars of the Galaxy."

More and more dots appeared and in an increasing speed.

"Since then we added 4,523 civilizations spread over almost 400,000 Star systems and about three million planets. As you can see a blue sphere has appeared Coreward. This is the Klack Empire that has joined the Union a little over two hundred years ago.

"Around that time we also completed the construction of the Bridge connecting this Galaxy with M31, Andromeda. Seven civilizations have joined our union there. "

The Image of a second spiral galaxy came into view and in it a small blue area.

"Just the day before yesterday, the Arlboro Hegemony applied for membership at Pluribus Unum. I am sure some of you heard the news on GalNet. The Arlboro are as advanced as we are and add their space to ours. The Arlboro globular cluster contains many million stars and over 20,000 stars systems of it are settled or claimed by the Arlboro that are as of today officially Union Territory. I believe there are several Arlboro Cadets already among us."

A voice in the dark confirmed that." There are 700 of us here at Arsenal, Lieutenant."

"This is what I meant when I said that I have the best job in the Galaxy. It is always a pleasure and a special honor to greet new members. I am certain we will learn a great deal from each other in the years and decades to come. The time it takes to fully integrate a new member into the union."

On the projected image of the Galaxy spheres of other colors appeared and the Instructor returned to the subject." There have been empires and galaxy spawning cultures and civilizations before the Union in this Galaxy some rose to great power and spawned the entire spiral. We know of quite a few but we are certain there have been many more. The oldest Star in our Galaxy is a little over 17 billion years old and during that time many civilizations have risen and fallen. However our union differs from all those we know about, as we are not an empire but a Union. Not ruled or dominated by one culture but jointly occupied by all united under common rules that apply equally to all. Of course in terms of Galactic

Civilizations we are still at the very beginning. Three thousand standard years is not a very long time by any standard measuring the progress of civilizations, but we are not new at it anymore and begin to mature. The Union is strong but as you can see even 400,000 star systems are next to nothing to a volume of 390 billion star. The Union has friends out there as well as enemies. We had to fight several big and violent wars and there have been a large number of smaller conflicts.

The Shiss, the Nul Nul and the Galactic Community ruled by the Kermac are currently our biggest adversaries, even though we currently enjoy a period of peace, there are reports of fights and battles along the Nul border almost daily. It is not really a war we have no contact to the Nul and neither side really tries to advance into the other side's territory, but real war could break out at any moment. The Shiss are in open war against the Nul for over a thousand years. The Shiss are also hostile to us, but during our last open war against the Shiss we won much ground and the Shiss lost much of their original might and influence in this part of the Galaxy, partly due to their long war against the Nul.

Our most dangerous known adversary is the Galactic Council. We fought three all out galactic wars against the Kermac and their slave species, each time we won and during the last war the GC signed a Cease Fire and there have been no open hostilities in almost 300 years, but tensions between our governments are high. Then there is Free Space, a huge area of our Galaxy protected by treaties signed by the big four: Union, Shiss, Nul and GC. Free space is home to thousands of independent planets and small empires that are not associated to any of the Big Four.

The largest portion of the Galaxy remains unexplored and chances are high other civilizations live there as well.

Since the Union exists the Galaxy has been attacked twice by Civilizations not native to ours. The Y'All and the Piostla."

Images of the four armed Y'All and the plantlike Piostla and their ships appeared replacing the projection of the Spiral Galaxy

The Y'All so it appears return every 5000 years and always with an incredible large armada of highly advanced space ships with the sole purpose to of killing and destruction. Last time they returned they were met by our new Union and beaten for the very first time.

The Piostla caused much havoc and death during their invasion but we managed to beat them as well and chase them back from wherever they came from. Since it happened before it is quite possible that it will happen again.

To all this add the space roaming Dai Thaan Pirate Clans and the regular criminal pirates raiding the

fringes of our Union.

So you see the Universe is a dangerous place and dangerous to even a strong union like ours. It is our job to prepare you to face these dangers. As future officers you will lead others to face these dangers and the great unknown, to protect Union citizens and interests and uphold the law."

The lights came on and the holo images faded away.

After his lecture we learned to recite the Fleet song and the Galactic Anthem.

There was a short lunch break and then instructions continued. Another Instructor taught us about rank insignia and the various branches of the Union Military, a Non Corp officer looking exactly like the one sitting next to me, except his Uniform was black and after he had explained to us how to read Rank insignia I knew he was a Lieutenant." Our Union's executive branch is in charge of the Union Military. There is the Union Fleet, the branch you are now serving. We are the ones with the space ships and the black uniforms. The United Stars Marine Corps is an independent branch but closely associated with us. They do the planetary assaults, provide internal security to the Union and can be found wherever the Navy needs guards. The Union Army is the smallest of the branches and in charge of defending planets with planetary defense forts and has ceremonial duties. It is the Army that provides the security and defense of Pluribus Unum. Part of the Army is the PSI Corps, a special task force using Psionics. And finally a completely separate branch is the SCI-Corps, it answers to the Science Council of our Government and is in charge of the Explorer Fleet and the Medical Branch and all government research. We work closely together with all branches and you will often find Fleet personnel aboard Exploration and Science Vessels. Medical and science personnel aboard our vessels are technically Sci-Corps even though we train Science and Med officers' right here at the Academy."

Almost to the end of the day the instructors called names, mine was called right away and I was sent into a nondescript unfurnished waiting room. I still didn't did not see Derek or Max and I even lost sight of the Garbini. A gray skinned Shaill, a semi rigid intelligent mollusk from a Star system far in the Core ward sector wearing its version of a black Fleet Uniform floated in on a Varigrav disc and said:" Listen up, Cadets. This group is complete now. You are going to board transport 342 to be shipped out to Camp Idyllic."

"Camp Idyllic?" A greenish skinned bald humanoid next to me asked.

I shrugged:"I have no clue. But it does sound nice"

A humanoid completely shrouded in a green monk like garment spoke with a deep voice:" Camp Idyllic is one of the basic training camps the Fleet operates. It is located in the Nardir System, one hundred and

twelve light years from here on a garden world called Green Eden."

"Oh boy!" A massive looking human two heads taller than me grunted with a deep voice." I heard of Camp Idyllic. My brother went to Camp Allure last year. He said it was pure hell and he heard that Camp Idyllic is supposed to be the worst."

An hour later we boarded the military version of a space bus and left Arsenal System.

The shrouded man now sat next to me in the starboard seat row. His garment had an attached hood and he wore it pulled over his head obscuring him completely, except for two eyeholes. The massive humanoid sat in the seat on my other side.

The deck plates vibrated slightly as the Leyland's ISAH drive kicked the ship past the trans-luminal threshold. We now traveled in quasi-space a thin layer between the Planck Universe and the Hawkins Omniverse.

The muscular strong guy leaned forward glanced past me at the hooded being." Why are you hiding your face under that hood?"

"Because I am Narth."

" I never heard of Narths. Are you ashamed of your face or something?"

The green skinned Cadet spoke from across the Isle:" Limbur let him be! He is a Narth. You don't want to mess with a Narth!"

Limbur pointed at his massive arms." Do you think someone with guns like these is afraid of a goon in a hood?"

The green Cadet seemed to know Limbur raised his hands." Physical strength doesn't mean much when you're dealing with a Narth. Trust me on that! Now relax and come with me. I found out this ship actually has a refreshment bar on the lower deck! I'm buying!"

Limbur readily agreed and the two left towards the back.

The hooded being said in his dry cold voice." Disappointment will be their reward when they do reach the lower deck. For the refreshment bar is nothing more than a water dispenser and a Serv-Matic

vending Nutro-Bars."

I was quite tired but I turned to the hooded being:" What is a Narth?"

He didn't move his shrouded head as he spoke with that deep voice." It is very complicated to answer your question in terms you would understand. I am Narth. We are a very old species and to many beings our true nature can be unsettling or even harmful. This is why we choose to cover ourselves."

I wasn't sure if I said anything to him after that, since I fell asleep even without the sleep inducer.

Chapter 12: Chapter 12

Chapter 12

Green Eden

Green Eden appeared to be a beautiful green, white and blue sphere. From space it looked as inviting as any garden world. The transport descended through moderate clouds and approached a heavy forested land mass.

We landed on a simple dirt field that had been cleared in the jungle. At the edge of the dirt field I saw a collection of primitive looking buildings made of wood!

There were no machines, no robots, no ships or vehicles.

Someone from the flight deck addressed us via the com system:" Welcome to Camp Idyllic. Grab your gear and debark through the rear air lock. Hurry up; I have a Schedule to keep and two more transports to make. Wait here! Someone will be with you shortly."

Everyone debarked and just as the last cadet stepped of the ramp, the Airlock closed and the transport ship climbed back into space.

It was very humid and hot. The air was pungent with the stench of rotten plants. Strange sounds came from the surrounding jungle. Small insects buzzed all around us. The exposed dirt on the landing field was reddish in color and very moist. It stuck to the soles of my boots.

I counted 150 cadets and everyone was standing there waiting for something to happen, but even after an hour no one showed up to tell us what to do.

The crowd of cadets became a little restless.

Limbur scratched his polished scalp." Now what? Are we supposed to do something? Isn't anyone coming?"

His green skinned friend, his name I had learned was Wintsun appeared to like the environment judging by the smile on his face, but the smile vanished as he replied to his friend." I don't sense or hear any sentient being in the vicinity. While I am not a full telepath, I am usually able to detect sentient minds. I feel nothing and I begin to wonder myself!"

The Narth who was standing next to me agreed:" I cannot sense any sentient or coherent thoughts either, but there are life forms out there considering us for food right now."

The group became quite worried after he said that and the word spread.

Three more hours passed and still nothing.

I picked up the Fleet issue garment bag that held my spare uniforms and personal gear, shouldered it and started walking towards the buildings at the other end of the landing field. The Narth did the same and followed me.

"Where do you think you're going?" Asked Limbur.

"I decided to inspect those buildings and then wait there. It seems to be a better place to wait than here in the open. I expect the sun to set sometime soon."

Narth didn't turn:" The Neo Viking's plan of action is logical. I shall follow his lead."

Wintsun took his bag and said:" Can I come along?"

I shrugged." Sure you can. I am not in charge here."

"Actually according to regulations, someone has to be in charge and since you are doing something it

seems you're it!"

Limbur followed us too.

A cadet with bluish skin and coppery almost metallic shimmering red hair objected: "You can't leave! We were ordered to remain here and wait!"

"Wonderful. Why don't you wait and let me do my thing? "I said and kept on walking

About two clicks away from the point where we landed, at the long end of the crude landing field we reached the three buildings I had seen from the air. The jungles edge was about 500 meters further away and the cleared area packed with the same red claylike dirt. I did not see any recent tracks, neither of machines, humans or animals for that matter. Anyone not flying would have to make tracks.

"What is so interesting about that dirt?" Limbur wanted to know as I squatted down and touched the dirt.

"Tracks I am looking for tracks. If you look behind you can see the ones we made. Around here there are no fresh ones and the ones I see are not fresh."

Narth also knelt down. "Interesting observation, by evaluating the surface you can actually deduct the presence or the past presence of ground effect movement. It is quite logical."

Wintsun shrugged. "Of course everything leaves tracks. Did you never go hunting?"

Limbur smacked Wintsun in a friendly manner. "Of course not, you know where I am from. Nothing ever leaves tracks in a big city on duro crete and slide ways."

Wintsun rubbed his side." Yes I know your world. Three times the regular gravitation. "

Narth said to me. "Will you explain to me how you interpret those tracks?"

"Yes gladly but maybe we should check out the buildings first."

"I agree with your assessment of our situation and will look forward when you do further my education."

A weathered sign above the entrance read, " Camp Idyllic"

I surrounded the buildings first, and they kept following me. Two of the buildings looked like storage sheds and the middle building was a two story deal made of manufactured wood.

There was a roofed porch surrounding the main structure. It had rectangular windows and a solid looking entrance door. "Anyone here?" I yelled as loud as I could."Hello?"

Narth shook his hooded head." I sense no thoughts or brain activity."

"Well there are life forms immune to Psionics or able to shield their presence, at least so I was told."

Narth nodded."Again you speak quite logical!"

"You keep saying that and I start to believe I actually can do that."

Everything looked solid, weathered but in good condition. The door wasn't locked so I went in. No furniture, no machinery just a flight of stairs leading up and four doors.

Wintsun behind me said." I wonder what purpose these buildings serve. They are certainly not big enough to house all cadets."

I shrugged." Maybe just for the instructors, maybe we have to build our own or sleep in tents or so." To Narth I said:" Do you sense anything now?"

He shook his shrouded head." No conscious thoughts here, but back on the landing field things are going bad. There is confusion and some of it will soon lead to violence. The situation is quite unstable."

"It's not our problem. Let that Admiral Kid deal with it." Wintsun snorted at that and then looked at me."What do you want us to do?"

"Let's check out the rest of this house and then look at the other two buildings."

The entire building was empty. But it had a working plumbing with fresh water and the lights worked as well, meaning there had to be a power supply somewhere.

We opened the last door of the ground floor and Narth said:" What matter of place is this?"

"It's a kitchen." I responded happily." a kitchen with a wood stove, sink and freezer unit."

"How do you know this?"

"Many families on Nilfleheim prefer this old fashioned traditional way of preparing meals over Serv-Matics."

"Fossil heat, raw fish and meat; the images you transmit are, exceptionally primitive!" Narth said, slowly shaking his head.

"I truly appreciate your abilities and I think you are a very nice person. I just wish every third person I run into can hear my thoughts!"

"Narth do not communicate verbally at all, we do not use our vocal voices and I am not used to be among humans. I am very sorry if I offended you."

His usually emotionless voice had a faint note of sadness and I felt sorry for snapping at him. So I put my hand on his shoulder." Narth I think we are going to be friends. I will never again be offended or bothered if you know my thoughts. I am sorry I barked at you." I held out my hand." Friends?"

Narth didn't make a sound or move for almost a minute then he slowly took my hand into his gloved one. It felt cold even through the leather like fabric." Yes Eric, I shall be your friend!"

"So you're welcome to read my thoughts anytime. Nothing to hide really, I just need to get used to all those Psionics."

"We can change that, you know. Narth can make you so that no one can ever read you again!"

"That's something I will consider, but for now let's check out this kitchen and see what is there."

The freezer unit was stuffed with labeled packages and the pantry held Vac-packs of vegetables, meat, fish and rice and other packs with food items I could not identify right away. There was enough to feed an army over an extended period of time!"

In a drawer I found all sorts of kitchen utensils including knives. I armed myself with a large mono filament knife. It had a convenient butchers sheath as well that easily attached to my belt.

"Why the knife?" Wintsun asked, looking over my shoulder into the drawer.

"I feel better with some sort of weapon especially after Narth told us that there might be life forms that consider us prey. Besides a knife is a tool and could come in handy."

Wintsun followed my example right away and took a knife as well."How about you, Spooky?"

Narth turned on the spot as if he stood on a mechanical turntable. Wintsun took several steps back startled by the sudden and strange move. "Am I correct in the assumption that you addressed me?" He then snapped his gloved finger." I believe I understand you exercised the human habit of titling me with a Nickname!"

"Uh, yes exactly! That is what I did!"

"I shall research that more! As for your initial question: No I do not need a weapon."

I padded him on the shoulder."It's what humans do. In a potential hostile environment you are better off with a weapon than without one."

One of the knives floated all by itself out of the drawer and Narth took it and put it under his long sleeve. He then moved his hooded head to look at us both."Simple telekinetics!"

"Maybe Psionics are quite useful!" I managed to say."And don't cut yourself."

"Your concern for my wellbeing is duly noted, I shall not cut myself. Even though it might be an interesting experiment."

"I sure don't know anything about your society my new friend, but cutting yourself with a Mono blade is anything but interesting."

Limbur grinned." It is quite messy."

"I yield to your expertise. We do not use Knives on Narth Prime."

"How do you cut your food, then?" Limbur wanted to know.

"We do not consume food that needs to be cut."

"Quite a time saver, I imagine." Wintsun shrugged and handed Limbur a big meat cleaver. "That thing has Limbur written all over it."

Narth leaned forward. "I do not see the word Limbur on this tool at all. I believe the words read: NSF â€“ stainless."

While Wintsun tried to explain to Narth what he meant, I left the Kitchen and out to the back and checked on the other two buildings placed next to each other behind the main structure.

They were storage huts and locked with simple padlocks but the monofilament knife cut through the wood frame like butter.

"Do you think it is wise to break in?" Asked Limbur, while I was cutting around the lock plate.

"Well nobody said we can't. This is a Fleet installation and in lieu of any higher authority we represent the Fleet and should be authorized."

This storage building held pallets stacked with self erecting tents, emergency food rations, construction tools and several power cubes.

The other building was stacked with even more food rations, spare uniforms, water containers and stacks of boxes and crates with other stuff.

A bright yellow and red painted dura steel locker with ID lock caught my eye.

On it a sign in bold letters read: "Armory! Authorized Personnel Only".

Narth approached me: "A fight broke out at the landing field. Someone got hurt."

"Let them fight! We got all the food we need!" Limbur made an old but still popular and vulgar hand gesture into the direction of the landing field. "It's not our problem."

"Does it not strike you odd, that no one showed up to instruct us? Maybe the camp personnel was attacked and killed by something in the Jungle!" Speculated Wintsun with a worried look on his face and gazing towards the dark green wall of vegetation." I come from a Jungle World and we have colonized it for a long time and still we discover new and often dangerous life forms.

I shook my head." This seems unlikely to me. We would have found some evidence of occupancy in the main building. All this stuff is stored and locked away. No one left here in a hurry or unexpected."

Wintsun rubbed his chin." Makes sense to me but where are they? "

I shrugged:" I don't know why no one has shown up to give us any instructions. Maybe the ship with the instructors was delayed somehow, or we got dropped off at the wrong planet."

Limbur rolled his eyes." That just could be our luck, some clerk filed the wrong flight papers and the shuttle pilot has long forgotten about us. It may take weeks till they know we're missing."

I examined the lock at the Armory. It was a state of the art ID lock. Then I looked over my shoulder and said:" Maybe this is simply another test to see how we react. Until we know for sure we cannot completely eliminate your first speculation either. We should make the best out of the situation. It's not like we are completely screwed. We got all this stuff! I think we should go back and tell them what we found and then see if we can find something in here that can be used to send a Trans Dim message."

So we went back to the landing field.

As we reached the others we found one of the cadets lying on the ground not moving, bleeding from a head wound and another one was sitting, pressing his hand over also a bleeding wound at his neck. There was a hushed silence and everyone looked at us.

The blue skinned guy stood before them holding a wooden stick like a club. His other fist prodded against his hip and barked at me:" Cadet you have left this area unauthorized. I am placing you under arrest until superior officers arrive! Resist me and I will deal with you as I have dealt with those deserters."

I gasped and said:" You are doing what? "

"I am Swybin, Son of Admiral Swybar. I assumed command. I know everything about the Fleet and its regulations. You will call me Commandant and you will follow my every order. Anything less will result in severe punishment."

The Narth shook his head." Relationship to a ranking officer does not give you command authority. Rank is not inherited but earned by completing the process we all have started by joining the Academy. You have no authority to place anyone under arrest or assume command. "

Wintsun stood straight with a serious face, and said with loud voice holding an I Pad before him in blinking record mode:" United Stars Fleet General Orders Section One, paragraph 35 In the absence of higher command authority and during situations where only equal ranking officers are present, the first officer taking charge in said situation is by default of his action commanding officer with full authority to issue orders.

The first cadet taking action was Eric Olafson and I hereby evoke said General Order. You Eric are to take charge of post and all government property in control reach. Until such time he is relieved of command by proper identified command authority. "

Put on record on this day and this hour, by Cadet Alsher Wintsun. Service number 4523232-W-23234. It became quiet.

Narth nodded." He is correct that is the text of that general order and by evoking it and putting it on record it has been made official and legal, he now is our commanding officer."

Swybin didn't like that and it was clear that he wished he had thought of that." I am the son of Admiral Swybar and I am the logical choice here. When the Instructors come they will listen to me alone because a single word of mine can cost their career! You records will mean nothing. Be warned I will report you all as deserters if you do not listen to me!"

A female cadet held up her handbook." What Wintsun said is correct. It states it right here."

Swybin actually raised his wooden club to strike the female."Silence!"

I would not allow anyone beating an unarmed woman in my presence ever again, but he was too far away for me to reach him in time to prevent the first strike."At the same moment his club stopped in midair as if he hit something very hard. It splintered and Swybin yelped in pain. The pieces of the wooden club flew in a high arc away. Narth eye slits glowed visibly with a dark red light."You act in a highly illogical matter and your mind is clouded with self delusion of imagined importance."

Swybin held his hand in pain and growled in open hatred." My father will have you hanged for this. No one disobeys an Admiral!"

"Enough of this!" I yelled! "One thing is certain you are not an Admiral. You are a cadet like me and everyone else here. One thing I promise you if you ever raise your hand in violence against an unarmed and weaker person that you I will break every bone in your body! I frankly don't know much about regulations or Fleet orders yet, heck I didn't even know we have handbooks! I am in this Fleet only since the day before yesterday."

I pointed at the wounded."We are now getting the injured cadets into the buildings and see what we can do to help them. There are self erecting emergency tents and there is food and water. It makes no sense to wait here on the landing field. If someone comes they surly will be smart enough to look for us at the buildings over there!"

Swybin fumed:" Anyone disregarding my orders will be court-martialed and I assure you my dad will listen to me! We were ordered to wait here!"

"This is getting us nowhere. I am going back to those buildings and I will take those wounded cadets along. I am taking full responsibility for my actions and you are welcome to report whatever I did to anyone you like. Anyone that wants to come along is welcome!"

Wintsun barked loud and with a stern face."Cadets follow us!"

About 20 did remain with Swybin, the rest followed us.

I knelt down to the bleeding cadet and said:" Can you walk?"

"I think so!"

"Alright then, go lean against me I get you to the building." To Limbur I said:" Can you help me with the other one?"

Limbur grinned: I don't need help with that!"

He lifted the unconscious man like a weightless toy from the ground and carried him away.

Chapter 13: Chapter 13

â€“""--

By night fall we had enough tents erected for everyone. I had them arranged in a circle around the main building as close together as possible. In the building we arranged one room as mess hall and another as an infirmary. One of the Cadets, a girl with skin so black it had a bluish shimmer was a certified EMT, before she joined the Fleet. Her name N'Buga and she found first aid supplies in one of the storage buildings. The one with the head wound seemed alright after N'Buga, the EMT treated him, but the other one was still unconscious.

N'Buga bunched the towel she was holding and grinded her teeth." He most likely got traumatic head injury from that first blow Swybin struck and I don't have the scanners or tools to check for bleeding or fractures. We must assume the worse and there isn't much I can do. He needs medical attention as soon as possible!"

I smiled at her." I know you do your best. We're trying to find some way to call for help."

"If I could put him in a stasis field, which would be the best solution for now."

"I check the supplies maybe they have space suits." Wintsun said who was standing next to us, rubbing his chin and looking like he had an idea.

"What would a Space suit do? " I asked.

"All Fleet space suits have an auto doc unit and are Cryostasis capable in case someone get lost in space and needs to conserve energy and life support."

"Well let's tear those storage sheds apart and see what we can find!"

Almost an hour later opening countless shipping containers one cadet held up a sealed package and said." Not a space suit but the Cryostasis replacement module for one, complete with Auto Doc."

Two cadets with engineering skills rigged a make shift space suit out of repair tape and tent skin, we placed the injured cadet inside and N'Buga activated the Cryostasis unit. Her face relaxed as the indicator lights went green." Well that should stabilize him better than anything else we can do until help arrives."

I was standing at the door to our improvised infirmary when Narth approached me, he didn't make any sound when he moved." The tents are all up. Wintsun passed out ration food bars and water. I posted the guards as you asked. Two are on the roof and the other two on each side of the camp. Now what do you want the rest to do?"

"Are you sure no one resents me giving orders and all that?"

Narh put his hand on my shoulder." No Eric, the mood on our side has drastically improved. Be assured I do whatever you order!"

I looked around to collect my thoughts. "We should inventory the items in the storage buildings. Ration the food, water seems to be no problem, but until we know how long we have to be here or know what native resources are consumable. I think we should ration the food. We post double guards at both storage places. No one is to help themselves to food outside of meal times."

"A wise precaution indeed, I shall convey your orders! I also suggest we open the armory case and supply the guards with better weapons than clubs and knives. Only a few are trained in any sort of combat and I foresee we might need real weapons before the night is over!"

"Alright but I am going to open it myself, in case we get in trouble for it, it's only me they can punish!"

"This is quite noble, but I will share this responsibility with you!"

â€“”--

The lock and the armory would not yield to a simple knife so I pushed my thumb on the lock and a voice said." Biometric data not on file. Access denied."

"I am Cadet Eric Olafson. I am in Command as per General Orders. Access to the weapons is vital."

"ID chip information recorded. Command authority accepted. Access granted." The lock snapped open.

The box held ten brand new military issue Directed Energy Blasters. With Narh's help I picked eight cadets with the most prior experience handling such weapons and armed them with DEB's , located them strategically so they could rest and eat yet rush to the site of any alarm in short time. Two guns I kept in reserve, just in case.

Then I had them break out the Construction tools and equipped the rest with Power saws and similar tools that could be used as makeshift weapons. I myself armed myself with a vibro blade axe. I never shot a blaster other than once at the beach with my Uncle, but this was a weapon I understood.

The two cadets with engineering skills had rigged an air conditioning system for the infirmary from parts

they found in the store room and they were quite proud as they showed off their handy work. Both were human. The taller one of the pair had black hair and it stuck so tight to his skull it looked almost as if it was painted. He had big eyes and a small mouth, his name was Alberts. The exposed skin of the other guy was covered with colorful tattoos in bright blues and blacks. His hair was red almost orange and his eyes were the greenest I ever saw, he listened to the name of Shawn. It was Shawn who proudly demonstrated the workings of the Air Conditioning system and explained to me." Al rigged it with four tent units and I tied it into the building energy supply box. We can keep the place warm or cold. "

"That's a good job you did." Was all that came to my mind? It surprised me that my comment caused proud smiles. Albert didn't say much, but he had fashioned himself a tool belt and stuffed with all sorts of tools.

Shaun asked "What do you want us to do next?" He looked eager to do something and so did his friend Al.

"We need some sort of central watchtower. An elevated place we can see everything and if you could rig something like a Trans Dim Radio anything that might be used to send a message that be good."

Shawn shook his head." Can't do, Sir, None of the spare parts have transdim spools and without them nothing goes past the LI thresh hold."

Albert said something to Shawn in a language I never heard and Shawn nodded." Aye we could try that."

"What did he say?"

Shawn punched the other." Don't speak that old German-Irish gibberish he doesn't understand the old Engineering Language!"

Albert grinned sheepishly." Sorry Captain. I am just so happy that I found Shawn who speaks the old engineering language that we started to use it."

I had no idea what he was talking about but nodded anyway." That's fine. Can you make a Trans Dim Radio?"

"Not exactly, but if we can take one of the DE rifles apart and use the containment field modulator and use the computronic of the ID Lock from the Armory, I am sure we could make a Morse code transmitter. No voice no images and we couldn't receive but anyone with a Trans Dim Set in range could hear us. The Containment field is transdim bases you see and by modulating it we would have a crude

transmitter."

"Why do I get the feeling you all know more about this than I do? Have you done this before?"

Albert shrugged. "I haven't. I was raised on a ship and haven't been much dirt side, but I think I know pretty much all non classified tech inside and out. That's important, especially if your family space ship is a rust bucket about to fall apart. You learn to jury rig and improvise from early on!"

Shawn explained. "Morse code is truly ancient and comes from Earth pre Astro time. But its simplicity and usefulness made it an almost universal thing. Every Com Officer aboard any ship military or civilian knows Morse code. Besides any computronic will recognize it as artificial transmission and can translate it." Then he added. "It's my first time in the Academy for sure, but I was born on Kikenny and being an Engineer is more than a tradition to us, it's a religion."

"Then you should try doing what Al suggested."

The dark haired cadet rubbed his hands. "I am all over it and tomorrow we are going to install a high energy fence around the place."

Shawn was as excited. "After that we build a€!"

A cadet I had not seen before handed me an e board. "Here is the inventory of the food items, Sir. Kaila, Ivax and I are now tackling the other storage locker."

"Thank you, Cadet." That was all that I could think off. I took the board and glanced at it. She smiled warmly. "Wintsun was right picking you!" She turned and left with a light spring in her step.

Night and darkness finally came after a long sunset. Narth was confident he could calculate the duration of a local day after tomorrow.

We then found out nights on Idyllic where very dark, there was no moon to reflect any sunlight. The stars however where spectacular!

And soon we learned that night fall caused a sharp drop in temperatures and it was getting colder by the minute. The tents had heating elements and we found plenty of blankets and padded uniform jackets and I was certain we would be just fine.

Narth told me the situation on the landing field was getting worse by the minute. The handful of cadets that remained with Swybin were cold, hungry and confused aggression and fear tensed to a breaking point. He also sensed aggressive emotions from beings in the jungle and that there was more of that activity now than during the day.

So I had the guards equipped with hand held search lights and we worked out a guard schedule.

I was just inspecting the tents and talked to a Cadet from Earth when Wintsun came down the steps of the main building and said " Everything looks fine, everyone is content. Sure everyone is wondering what happened to the Instructors, but there isn't any fear." He pounded my shoulder." I hand it to you, Viking you know your stuff!"

"Wintsun, I know nothing and the more I talk to other the more I realize that."

He said nothing just smiled at me and wiped on his feet and I was about to return to talk to the girl from Terra when he said." What do we do now?"

"We wait, keep our guard up and see what happens."

"There are plenty of idle cadets with nothing to do. They want to help and do something! They are eager to do whatever you tell them."

"Alright, let's run this place Fleet like! I don't know much about it yet, and all I was instructed about was food and appearance. So I want the hallway made into a mess hall. Find chairs and tables make them out of shipping crates or something and get a group on heating ready meals. Everyone not on guard post will attend, perfectly groomed and dressed. Guard posts are to be relieved half way through dinner and also need to groom and bathe before they attend. I want all rooms scrubbed and cleaned and the kitchen sparkling clean."

I smiled." That will keep them busy!"

To my surprise she and Wintsun smiled from one ear to the other and almost yelled. "Yes Sir that it will!"

I too put on a clean uniform, trimmed my beard and combed my long blonde hair, braided it as it was tradition and then went with Narth to the storage sheds and we looked over the food supply list and calculated we could serve three meals to everyone for about twelve days, and then still have emergency bars for another month.

"Let's not hope we will be here for that long." I said.

Narth shook his hooded head."It is highly unlikely we will be."

"Still I think we should keep the guard and household with what we got."

"The situation dictates such precautions and is logical."

"You really think I am that logical?"

"I am unable to make a conclusive analysis of your logical capabilities as my exposure to you is limited to relative short time span, but all instructions you have given and all actions taken or indicated clearly indicate that you follow a clear defined path when it comes to approach challenges as the one we are currently faced with."

"You always talk like that?"

"Certainly not. We Narth do not converse using acoustic verbal means and I only talk to you or others if the situation requires it. Therefore I do not always talk. It would be illogical to do so if there is no one to listen for example."

"You made my point." I smiled at Narth. "I am sure the day comes you and I actually really understand what the other means."

"I share your vision of this future."

Wintsun joined us."Ah here you are. We have prepared the west facing room in the upper level for you and Spooky. So you have a place to sleep and work. You should also see what the crew had done to the hall."

"You don't think I should use a tent like the others?"

"You are in command and according to the handbook it is preferable to find separate accommodations for the CO when the situation permits it."

I sighed." Let's check out what they have done and then you should tell me why you know that handbook

so well."

Wintsun shrugged. "I downloaded a copy from GalNet before I applied and read much of it. I like to read and I thought the Academy Handbook would be a good thing read since I was going there."

Narth pointed at Wintsun. "This was a perfect example of logical reasoning, Eric."

I actually agreed with Narth and I wondered why I had not thought of doing the very same thing.

The empty hallway had transformed rather nicely into a make shift mess hall with two rows of tables with bed sheets as table cloth. Field mess kits had been arranged in place settings and someone found a Union flag and hung it from the far end wall.

And almost every seat was taken. Wintsun pointed at the crate at the short end and I felt awkward taking this obviously prominent spot, and uncomfortable because every eye was on me. Wintsun leaned over. "Since we don't have servers, the food is already placed but we waited on you."

I cleared my throat, took the water bottle and raised it. "Unknown is what lies ahead, let us face it like Fleet officers. I know still know little about the ways, regulations and traditions of the fleet. I did not ask to be in this leadership position, but for as I am in that position you can rest assure I will do my very best. Tomorrow is a new day, we are deep in Union space, and we have plenty of food, weapons, and a great pool of talents, good shelter and lots of work. Our instructors will show up sooner or later. Until then I raise my glass and drink to you and all of us. To the Fleet, to tomorrow."

I drank and sat down and began to eat looking sheepishly around. Not one face of those I could read showed amusement, but I could almost sense the collective pride.

A frail looking Cadet who almost looked like a skeleton bowed his bony head and blinked his sunken eyes. "This was a good toast, Sir."

During the sixth hour of darkness, after I had few hours of sleep, I climbed on the roof, where we had installed our makeshift Watchtower, to take my post and my turn of the watch. The temperature had dropped below freezing now. I just made it half way when a bright light finger suddenly stabbed into the darkness from the left guard position below me and then came the shouts of alarm!"

It was too far for me to climb back down in time. So I crawled the last meters to the actual post. Someone had taped a tent tarp between four posts and used the heating unit as blower making it not a bad spot at all.

I didn't know the names of the cadets sitting there, but they were humanoid and one asked me in a hushed voice." Mr. Olafson, what is going on?"

"I don't know, Cadet. But we are going to find out!"

I took his spot light and pointed it into the same direction as the first one. Something large with green scaled skin and six legs was caught in the strong bright light beams. It was so big I could see its teeth gleaming from up here. The beast was confused by the sudden light and had stopped its advance. It was at least 20 meters long and perhaps 5 tall, I estimated.

I shouted." Two gun men to the northern guard post. Others remain where they are! "

The beast overcame its hesitation and started to advance towards the camp. I waited for the cadets with rifles to be in position and then I yelled:"Fire at will!" Two sun bright bolts of energy lashed out, caught the beast and the sharp crack of super heated air vibrated in the area. The beast was hit by pure energy plasma, millions of degrees hot; half the animal's head was instantly incinerated.

We repelled and killed two more within the same hour and then it became quiet. I could smell the burnt flesh and saw the dimly glowing remains of whatever was left of the animals

Narth who was my watch partner had literally floated up to our position without moving a limb, a few moments after I had arrived:" The beasts of the jungle fear this place of lightning and thunder and won't bother us anymore for a while."

"What about those on the landing field?"

"If I would be human I wager there won't be as many left tomorrow."

"We can't let this happen! We have to convince them to come here or at least protect them!"

"Why? The son of the Admiral thinks very bad thoughts about you and it was their free choice!"

"We have to go! " I said while climbing down. Narth floated effortlessly next to me and without making any sound.

"You got some grav device under that cloak of yours?" I asked.

"No I levitate myself using telekinesis. It is quite simple and I am not all that heavy! I can levitate you too, if you care"

"I think I should learn more about the Narth."

"I shall teach you more of my culture and people."

"At another time though! We need to hurry! I have a bad feeling about this!"

â€“””--

I took two of our armed cadets along and we reached the landing field and the other cadets some moments later. We had to fire right away as four of the scaled beasts where about to attack. A fifth of the lizard like beasts had a humanoid form between his claws and the two Cadets armed with the Blasters hesitated to shoot. Without really thinking I hefted the axe with both hands and attacked. Axe fighting was drilled into every Neo Viking from early on and I charged the confused animal. The blinding light and the loud hissing crack of the blasters, hitting the other animals, had been enough to scare the others away but this one was not about to let his dinner go. The humming axe blade vibrated in a very high frequency. It would slice through nearly anything without much effort. I swiped it across the lowering head of the beast as it snapped after me, the axe sliced through its jaw and showering me with scales, blood and broken teeth. The animal roared high pitched and in obvious pain and after my second swing slicing a big chunk out of his left claw, the animal backed up. The wounded cadet floated all by itself away. Without turning I knew Narth had used his incredible telekinetic powers to rescue the mauled man. Two sun bright beams lashed out and finished the beast before I had to do anything else.

Cold wind blew unrestricted and the wind chill made it feel even colder than it actually was, but I felt warm and alive. The rest of the Cadets were huddled close and looked hungry, frightened and exhausted. Two seemed delirious and another one was badly wounded. He was the one caught by the beast. Much of his left arm was gone.

Swybin stood in the middle, wearing several uniforms in layers against the cold and hissed:" It is too late to ask to come back, Viking. The Instructors will come and you will face a court-martial and I will personally watch your execution!"

"Oh shut up. You are repeating yourself."

Another cadet pointed into the dark." Olafson, Sir! Some of the huge beasts dragged Morthil away!"

Still facing the admirals son I said:" Save your poison Swybin. You may court martial me or have me dragged before your father, I don't care. But right now the lives of your friends are in serious jeopardy. Take them to the camp. There is food and warmth. You can blame me for everything and put it all on me, but for Odin's sake go now."

To the two cadets that had come with me I said:" Get that wounded guy as fast as you can inside and wake N'Buga so she can take care of him."

I turned to Narth." Escort them back and see that they all get food and a place to sleep. "

"Where are you going?" Asked Swybin a little less hostile sounding before Narth could answer me.

"I am trying to find that beast and see if we can do anything for the Cadet dragged away. If not he deserves a decent burial so he can enter Valhalla!"

Narth said." I shall accompany you. I can sense him. He is still alive."

"Cadet Holstin hand Narth your blaster and take the others back." I said.

Narth refused." I am unfamiliar with these weapons and would not use it correctly. I am by no means defenseless. However I relayed your orders to Wintsun and he is up and will coordinate. Limbur is on his way to help guide them back."

"Since everything here is taken care of, Mr. Narth point the way then, I am sure the guy hasn't all too much time left!"

I ran alongside Narth whose feet hovered just a few inches above the ground towards the jungles edge. I glanced at him." You are sure a spooky sight! Floating and dressed like that, you look like a real ghost."

"I wasn't aware there are unreal ghosts!" His answer gave me the chills. I suddenly thought that if Narth believed in ghosts that there might be indeed such entities.

I promised myself to ask him about ghosts sometimes later, but now we reached the Jungles edge and at first the foliage looked like a solid black wall and I wondered how we could advance, when Narth pointed to a smashed path, made by the large beast.

As we followed the path, I found out I didn't have to use the flash light, despite the fact that no starlight

penetrated the forest roof. Eerie glowing tree trunks illuminated the surroundings with a faint bluish light. My eyes were adapted to the dark depths of Nilfleheim oceans so I could see just fine.

Narth asked: "Many of the others experience an emotion called fright. Aren't you afraid? You charged this animal armed with nothing more than a primitive axe"

"I am afraid all the time, but it doesn't affect me much as long as there is something I can do about it. I was raised hunting huge carnivorous fish in a very dangerous environment. This is scary I tell you, but really fear my father more than anything so I am used to fear I guess. Besides a Vibro Axe isn't exactly all that primitive."

We penetrated the jungle deeper, I was trying to catch my breath and still keep up with the effortless floating Narth and I estimated we already went more than a click, when Narth grabbed my shoulder and jerked me back with force. Just then something broke through the jungle floor in an explosion of leaves and wet dirt. A large maw filled with sharp fangs missed my head by less than a centimeter. I swung the axe before I really knew I was doing it, blood sprayed me for the second time this night and I had cut the thing in half. A large centipede like thing with its head intact and six small eyes still fixed on me. I took a deep breath: "that was close! Thank you Narth!"

"No mention is necessary. The being caught me by surprise as well. It had no detectable thoughts until we stepped almost over it."

I wiped sweat, blood and pieces of foliage of my face and gasped. "Well let's keep going. He might be still alive but not if the beast decides to slow down and eat."

After only a few hundred meters Narth stopped and pointed between two bushes. "The Cadet is out of danger! We no longer need to pursue him!"

"How can this be? Is he dead?"

Bright lights suddenly flooded the scene. I dropped to the ground and yelled "Narth, take cover!"

A new voice out of the lights said. "No need Cadet Olafson. I am Commander Letsgo. Cadet Morthil is safe and so are the others. You may lower your axe!"

I got to my feet and I saw a Fleet Officer and six Marines in Heavy Battle armor step into the light. "This exercise is over."

Chapter 14: Chapter 14

Chapter 14

The real Camp Idyllic so it turned out was about ten kilometers away from the landing field and the wooden houses. A collection of buildings in the middle of the Jungle covered with soil and foliage, undetectable from above.

The installation extended far underground and we all were assembled in a large hall, with green carpets and windows that allowed a view of the jungle and a lake that shimmered in the distance between tall trees and thick underbrush.

After Narth and I met Commander Letsgo we followed them aboard a floater that brought us here.

The other cadets were already here and standing in the reception hall.

All eyes turned to us as we entered, but no one spoke. Narth and I took a spot at the rear and waited for the things to come.

Commander Letsgo looked less human than he did during the brief encounter in the dark jungle. His skin had a metallic dull color and he had neither ears nor a real nose. His head was completely hairless and the eyes looked like cybernetic implants.

"He is a Stellaris." I could hear Narth's whisper as if his lips were direct next to me, but he had not moved." Bionetic engineered of Terran origin, to survive with minimal protection in deep space."

The Commander stepped behind a lectern and he was flanked by a dark fur covered being to his left and a Pan Saran Officer to the right. He began:" Good morning Cadets. I am Commander Letsgo and I am in command of this training facility. To my left is Commander Propeel. Some of you may recognize her to be a Nu-Uit she is my Executive Officer. To my right you see Lieutenant Aurellius your Chief Instructor.

"You will spend the next 6 standard months on and around Camp Idyllic in Basic training. As the name suggests it is where you learn all the basics you need to know as members of this Fleet.

"You learn to be soldiers and officers. It is our job to educate, train, and inspire you the Corps of Cadets so that those who complete this graduate as commissioned leaders of character committed to the values of Duty, Honor, Union and prepared for a career of professional excellence and service to the Nation as an

officer in the United Stars Fleet. That means we must make sure that you are indeed officer material.

"The United Stars Fleet is unlike any other organization you might be familiar with. We are not a Corporation, not a Church or whatever civilian organizations there might be. The United Stars Fleet is the military arm of our union with many missions. We explore space, make sure the Union is safe from outside threats and even though we enjoy a period of relative peace. Conflict and war is a real possibility and you need to be prepared for all this.

"You are here to aspire to be more than soldiers. We want you to be scientists, diplomats, explorers and above all we want you to be officers. Perhaps you are sick and tired to hear us say and stress this world so much, because we want to drive it home to you that it is not a word by a condition, a state of being and a way of life.

"As you probably noticed at Arsenal, many thousands apply every quarter at 164 Academy satellites to become Fleet Officers. Of all those applicants only about 20 percent make it to the final year and graduate.

"As I mentioned before Instructing and teaching you are only a small part of what this Basic training camp is all about. We test character, abilities and personal values. Knowledge can be learned, skills can be taught but there are aspects to each personality already there, aspects that make each of you a distinguishable individual. The Fleet looks back at 3000 years of history and tradition. Many ways of finding good personnel and officers have been tried, using the combined experience and knowledge of all member species. Neural Uploads, Genetic engineering, mental prenatal conditioning, robots, cyborgs, androids and combinations of all these, none of these methods yielded the same results as the training and selection program we are using now.

"Officers even more than Enlisted are ambassadors, representatives of these traditions and values and we developed a complicated but proven process to weed out those unfit to wear this uniform."

He paused for a moment and scanned the room from left to right:" When you were and left alone on the landing field, it was a staged scenario in order for us to see how you adapt to new situations that have not been anticipated.

"You see, as an Officer it is very likely you come across an unexpected situation in the course of your career. A situation not trained for, not covered in any regulation and still the Fleet expects you to make the right decisions. It doesn't matter how much training one has or what regulations he or she knows. When it comes to the unknown it is just that, unknown and unprecedented.

"You had basically two options last night. Remain on the landing field or occupy the buildings. And both

choices have been made. One group went to the buildings, broke locks, liberated equipment and damaged Fleet property, but they were warm, safe had food and shelter. The other group remained where they had been dropped off, sticking to the order exactly as given by the Shuttle pilot. That group was cold, suffered a severe brake down in morale and had casualties. One leader used physical violence and verbal threats to gain obedience. The other simply took the initiative and was chosen. I am asking you which were the better solutions to the given situation?"

The commander pointed a finger at Swybin. "Why don't you answer me that question, Cadet?"

Swybin straightened his stance and said: "The loss of personnel can be expected in hostile environment and a few dead men should not change the objectives their leader demands to be reached.

Just like a real commanding officer I expected casualties. Of course I was raised by an Admiral, my father. This is why only I was qualified to be in command. These are soldiers after all. It is imperative that any soldier or service person carries out orders exactly as given. The common soldier cannot base his or her decision to follow and order on potential danger, even deadly threat. He or she must remain at post. It is not important if that soldier is warm and well fed, out of harm's way or safe. It is however important that he keeps his post and obeys every order given by a Superior and thus assures said officer's safety! The average foot soldier is expendable and that is what they are for. A person of my background is of course much more valuable, than a common as dirt average Joe cadet. I fully expect you will ask me to forgo much of this basic training and to join the ranks of Command staff and instructors right away."

He crossed his arms and looked very self assured into the room."I told you they would listen to me. It is too late to ask for any leniency."

Turning his attention back to Letsgo he concluded. "So without question my decisions were the correct ones. I am fully prepared to be a witness at the court-martial proceedings of this imbecile brutish Neo Viking Olafson, Sir!"

The Commanders artificial looking face did not change its expression as he looked around and pointed at me." Cadet Swybin made his statement and answered my question. "Now answer my question as well."

"Sir, the pilot said: Wait here and he did not specify where exactly we had to wait. Here could mean the entire planet for all I know, he was a shuttle pilot after all As far as I knew it wasn't even a real order, just instructions. The Pilot did not identify himself with rank or name either by the way. In any case there were buildings only two clicks away. After no one came for hours, those buildings looked like the logical waiting place to me. Since I didn't know what delayed you, our instructors.

So in my opinion it was necessary to make the best of the situation. The buildings provided us with that

option. Anyone looking for us would certainly look in those buildings, besides I posted guards that would have seen any approaching ship or search party.

It all really started when another Cadet started to quote regulations and hand books and general orders and all that. So he said I was in charge according to those regulations."

I sighed and said." That matters little however as I accepted command and therefore I take full responsibility for the break in and the use of Fleet property. All the others acted under my instructions and orders, Sir!"

"So you are willing to accept all responsibility for everything?"

"Yes Sir."

Swybin laughed with a snorting sound:"Wonderful, have Olafson arrested Sir! He has confessed and accepted his guilt! I believe a nice flogging is in order. Floggings are still on the books I believe!" He laughed pleased and added." Of course I will convey to my father how diligent you execute your post! I am sure the word of an Admiral has much weight when your next promotion will be discussed."

The Commander glanced at Swybin:" How nice of you. So if I have that Cadet arrested and punished you make sure I get a promotion?"

Swybin looked around to make sure everyone saw how important he was." Arrangements can be made most certainly, Commander, My father is Rear Admiral Upper half Swybar, you have heard of him of course. There are few of more importance in this fleet of ours and of course he listens to my recommendations!"

Again he looked around to make sure all eyes were on him." I accompanied my father to every important posting. I am on first name basis with much of the Echelon of this fleet. From early on I was called the little Admiral and I am sure in no time at all I am going to join Fleet Command."

"You are not a commanding officer. Your father's position and rank makes no difference to your performance, conduct or status. Yes you were correct, we expect our soldiers, service personnel and spacemen to follow orders and execute them regardless of possible danger or personal comforts but an officer is not only responsible to achieve the objectives of an order given but is also responsible for each and every being under his or her command." The commander shook. "I have never seen such a severe case of egocentric, self importance and I cannot understand how you managed to pass the Psych Exams and tests."

The metallic faced commander turned to us: If we wanted blind obedience we could send robots and not beings. We want officers that are able to think and question orders. Every time you receive an order you must evaluate it and decide if you follow it or not. In the far distant past horrible crimes were committed and those committing them refused to accept responsibility because they were ordered to do so.

When you leave this auditorium, stop a moment and look at the Academy Flag and read the motto underneath our logo: It is an ancient quote from pre Astro earth: Quiz custodiet ipsos custodes? And it means translated who will guard the Guards. We are not the Marines, who are trained to prize unquestioning loyalty and bravery as the highest ideals. We want thinking beings knowing when to follow an order and when not. It is often difficult to decide which orders to interpret and which ones follow by the letter or even refuse to execute. Don't understand this wrong. Mutiny is a serious crime, disobedience is severely punished. It is very complicated but we expect each officer to walk this line every day and that is why robots cannot replace us."

He paused and slowly shook his head as he continued:" I experienced a lot, Cadet Swybin, but that is a first. Trying to bribe me right out in the open. I am not impressed by your fathers rank, nor am I impressed by your conduct out there. Assuring obedience by violence is despicable."

If you would be an officer I had you court marshaled and charged with the attempted murder of Cadet Owar and a host of other charges, none the least trying to bribe me! Let me assure you however there will be a full investigation as how you managed to even get this far."

Swybin was obviously caught off guard by this and started to protest:" I have your head for this! I am a Swybin!"

Letsgo gestured to a marine standing by the doors." Get this civilian of this Installation at once!"

The Commander returned his attention to me while Swybin was escorted outside." I commend you for your performance and actions. I especially liked the Dinner and your acts of bravery to save fellow officers. However you failed the test as well. Do you know why you failed?"

I pressed my teeth together and nodded. "Yes Sir, I think I know."

Letsgo pointed at Wintsun." You seem to know the regulation handbook by heart. Do you know why he failed?"

Wintsun was caught off guard and shrugged." Sir, I memorized the General Orders because my brother said they always come up in tests. It does not make me an expert in evaluating another cadet's action, but

I think Eric did a great job, Sir."

"Mr. Olafson. Why do you think you failed?"

"I feel responsible for the wounded cadets, Sir. I should have done something much earlier."

"And responsible you are! Just like Cadet Wintson put on record. You are in charge of the post and all government property within control reach. The second you accepted command you assumed responsibility over all personnel in your unit. If you would have arrested Swybin, took all cadets to the houses you would have scored the perfect for this test.

You also broke into the Armory locker. It was clearly off limits and marked Authorized Personnel only! Do you have anything to say for your defense?"

"Yes Sir! I did not break the lock it accepted my authority and thus made me Authorized."

"Slick answer I give you that. But why did you open it?"

"Sir we did not know what happened to you. We speculated and quite aware that this could have been a test, but you also could have been delayed or killed by a hostile force either native or foreign to this world. Later events made me glad I did open that gun cabinet."

He whispered to the furry Lt Commander and then said. "I will announce your punishment later. Now I am going to dismiss you so you can clean up, unless someone else has something to add."

Narth floated just a little off the floor making him quite visible." Sir, I am sharing his punishment."

To my surprise Limbur stepped forward." I will share it as well!"

The black skinned girl stepped next to Limbur." So will I, Sir."

More and more cadets did the same!

The Cadet that had been unconscious said:" Sir, his actions saved my life. I will gladly take the punishment for him."

And yet another said. "I was dragged through the jungle, half dead. I held to Swybin at first, but Olafson went after me. Not even my friends did that. I volunteer to take whatever punishment you have for him." Morthil gave me a thankful look and thumbs up.

The Commander crossed his arms looked us over." We will take this in consideration. Now you are dismissed. You will be assigned to dorms and allowed an eight hour resting period."

â€“”â€”

The dormitories where simple, with beds that had to be made up manually.

Nine Cadets to a dorm room so it came that I shared my dorm with: Narth, Owar, Wintsun, Limbur, Naxwax, Azey, Galmy and Olia.

Azey actually was called Azey Azey Azeytytalitonitusiviy and he was from Oromarl. Almost everyone had problems saying his name, even the instructors called him as we did Az-Az. Oromals had humanoid characteristics but due to their gray greenish skin, pronounced lower jaws and usually massive and muscular bodies, Terrans nick named them Orcs. Naxwax came from Oromal as well, but he belonged to a subspecies similar but even more brutish looking in appearance and almost twice the size of Azey and of course Terrans called them Ogers.

Needless to say that his name was a similar word monster so Naxwax was all anyone remembered.

Galmy was a female from Maltyr. She was looked quite human, had really long black hair, black eyes and her skin was white as deep frost snow. Her body was extremely thin and fragile looking and she appeared to be no older than maybe a 15 year old teenager, despite the fact she was almost 60 standard years. She was even quieter than Narth. Owar was a sickly looking human from a Terran colony called Sheel at the galactic outer rim area. He was quite intelligent but I wondered why they let him into the Fleet or why he wasn't treated for his conditions. Not that he displayed any real symptoms I could see. His skin had a pasty whitish color, his eyes always sunken deeply with large dark shadows underneath and it appeared as if he hadn't anything to eat in month.

Wintsun's home world was one of the earliest planets Terrans migrated to, after the Galactic Awakening of Earth. Local conditions and genetic alternations with plant DNA made their skin green and allowed them to absorb light and turn it into nourishment via photosynthesis. Limbur came from a world with triple the standard gravitation. His muscles and bones where denser and made him quite strong under one gee conditions.

Olia came from Europa a moon in the Sol system and had the typical arrogant attitude of Terrans (All planet and moon colonies in the sol system considered themselves to be Terran, except by real Terrans from Earth of course). She wore her hair short and used holo-dye making it sparkle and change color depending on the light source. But not for long as Lt. Aurelius confiscated her bottle. I learned that Narth didn't have an individual name because everyone in his culture was telepathic and names were not needed.

I was still as tired as a sleeper fish during Longnight when the lights came on and a voice barked via the PA system: " 0400 hours Cadets rise and shine! 0430 is Breakfast. At 0500 you will receive your first class in the Elbhard Auditorium."

And we found ourselves in said Auditorium at that time an hour later. Clean, fed and still tired. Again I tried to find a place in the back, so I could perhaps close my eyes for few moments.

The Pan Saran Officer was already there. "Good Morning Class!"

We saluted and he ordered us to sit down.

"I am Lt Aurelius. As you can see I am human of the civilization, called the Pan Sarans. We are native to the Upward sector in the M-O Galaxy. Like most humanoid species of this Galaxy we share ancestry with the Terrans, Saresii and Sarans and a few others.

Why the Pan Saran Empire split form the Saran Empire and why we Pan Sarans dress in this somewhat anachronistic fashion is your assignment to find out by tomorrow."He obviously referred to that polished brass chest plate he wore.

"If one does not have to find out but knows the reason. Shall I share this now?" Narth asked.

"No Cadet Narth, you too will write a report and I shall review it like all the others. Now please do not interrupt me again. I will tell you when it is alright to speak or share your knowledge." Aurelius then addressed us all again:" Once you are established officers you are allowed to display one or two things on your standard uniform that shows and links you to your heritage as long as it not interferes with your regulation equipment . Mr. Olafson that means you have to cut that hair and shave for now. You may wear braids and beard if and when you are an officer.

I blinked as I had almost dosed off and was startled by his sudden calling of my name.

I struggled to my feet wanted to argue but instead just mumbled a grumpy." Yes Sir"

He picked a few others and told them to change their appearance or grooming habits.

Only then he began the actual class: "You will be instructed and drilled to stand, march, run and respond to orders in an unquestioning manner. Drilling performs a psychological function, by inculcating the response to commands and training; you will act unhesitatingly in the face of real combat or danger situations. It can also serve a role in leadership training. Combat situations include not only commands to engage and put one's life in danger, but also commands to disengage when military necessity so demands. This conditioning is essential for military function, because without it a military unit would likely disintegrate under the stress of combat and degenerate into a mere armed mob."

I felt a strong invisible force pulling my head up. Before I could yelp, Narth who sat next to me whispered .You where about to fall over!"

Aurelius continued his lecture unaware of my almost predicament.

"You will be subjected to rigorous physical training, both to prepare for the demands of combat and to weed out the less able or insufficiently motivated. That means all of you regardless of species or origin; you must be on peak of your species physical development. You are trained in basic marksmanship with standard and exotic guns, maintenance of weapons, bladed and non distance weapons. Unarmed combat and martial arts, first aid, protective equipment usage, and basic survival techniques in every environment you might end up. Deserts, Ice planets, Jungle worlds, deep space and everything in between. Further training will focus on basic spaceman ship, and skills such as firefighting, damage control basic engineering, and signals."

He took a deep breath and kept on listing: "To top it all off you will have classes in Astro navigation, propulsion physics, Xeno linguistics, Xeno biology, Xeno technology, diplomacy, strategy and tactics, geophysics and a host of other classes."

He took a drink of water." Simply listing this is a tiresome and exhausting exercise, but everything is exactly planned out and millions have done it before you, so you know it can be done!

After you finished basic you're almost over the hill and the rest won't feel as demanding because you get used to it.

It is my sincere wish that just once everyone currently present will also be in this auditorium six month from now. Sadly however not all of you will make the entire journey, therefore I challenge you to proof me wrong. Show me you are the class that can do it!"

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We had to get up at 0400 standard and went to bed lights out at 2200 every night. The time between was planned for us down to the minute. Physical training, small arms training, hand to hand combat. Classes on Xeno biology, military history, tech and science.

After the third month of the original two hundred who had arrived with us only 121 Cadets remained. Both Naxwax and Alzey left, but it was because they had to attend the funeral of their king and would be allowed to return with the next cycle.

I couldn't count the times I considered to simply stay in bed sleep in and then quit. Every time I was tempted I pictured the face of my father when I had to return home and his laughter and delight at my failure and it propelled me out of bed as if there was a hungry Fenris-Eel under my covers.

We learned to survive with only the bare essentials in almost any environment. Snow and ice, Mountains, Jungles, Ocean world, Forests and every extreme one could think of. I was surprised how many cadets had never seen open fire or knew how to make it. While I too learned new ways of making fire at least it was not strange or new to me.

We learned about bobby traps and hunting for survival. Every one physically able learned how to ski, swim and dive and fight in mid air using flight belts. The instructors yelled at us, insulted us and did not let up but they treated us all the same way and no matter what they asked us to do, they did it as well and always seemingly without efforts at all.

The number of cadets every morning at breakfast was a little smaller each day.

I hated dancing and culture class most of all. Why was it necessary that we knew how to dance, play chess or play a musical instrument? Why did I have to know how to sculpt in clay or draw a picture with coal on primitive paper?

I rather went on another survival training mission and spend a week knee deep in mud and dirt than sit in that class room and listen to samples of music from hundreds of cultures and discuss the nuances and highlights.

But it was required so I did my best.

Chapter 15: Chapter 15

Chapter 15

Four month had passed since our arrival at Camp Idyllic, but it felt like a life time. The number of cadets no longer dropped and it seemed those who were still here would make it to the end. Before I joined the Fleet time had little meaning to me. Time does not mean much to a civilian. What was the difference if you slept in a minute or took a little longer to eat your meal?

To a Cadet at the Academy, a minute had sixty seconds and each second counted. Instead of getting up at 0400, getting up at 0348 was a much better idea. In ten minutes you could shave, bathe, polish your boots and have time for mending a rip on your uniform. And still you had two minutes to spare if something else had to be done.

One morning, we were all sitting on the floor in the hallway of our dorm building mending uniforms. A cadet voiced his anger about the futility of using primitive tools like needle and thread, when we could use auto dressers and Nanite factories able to make an entire uniform in less time it took us to sew on a button.

Aurellius heard it and said." Mr. Wintsun do you agree with Cadet Applegate's complaint, do you think this a waste of training time?"

Wintsun bolted upright dropped his jacket he was working on and snapped in attention." Sir this Cadet will perform repair tasks as requested but I must say I also do not see the reason why we have to know this. I fail to understand why our uniforms are made of primitive fabrics and have stupid buttons that come off all the time. Why can't we have Uniforms made of Memo-Fab. It doesn't rip, doesn't get dirty, it closes securely without the need of buttons and it is around for at least a thousand years."

"Mr. Olafson. I noticed you are quite handy with needle and thread and it looks like you did that before you came here. Tell me why?"

Like Wintsun I jumped to my feet." Sir the culture I was raised in finds value in such activities. A Neo Viking sews his first pants out of Tyranno fin leather and then is allowed to sit at the men's table and eat with the warriors. The leather has to come from his first kill."

"So your skills are born out of tradition and your native culture.

If you would be stranded on a planet, you could make a net to fish, fashion you perhaps protective garments or even a tent."

"I imagine I could, Sir!"

Aurelius motioned us to sit down." Yes we have Nanite factories and auto dressers and it would be no problem supplying you all with new uniforms every day made out of the most advanced Intelli-Fab like the regular uniforms, have auto-beds that make themselves and why not a modern Colgate Complete Body Hygiene Center for each Cadet that does all the shaving and grooming for you?"

Applegate smiled at that."I sure would like that Sir!"

Even Aurelius had to grin." To be stranded on an uninhabited planet might never happen to any of you but you need to know what to do if it does happen.

"We expect you to be officers of the Fleet and be as well groomed as possible. Even if you never get rescued and you are on that planet for the rest of your life, should we finally find your dried out corpse decades later, it better shows signs of proper grooming."

Applegate nodded and mumbled." Or else! I can see it now! Instructor Aurelius punishing a corpse for a bad haircut. Yeah it sure is going to be in trouble for that one."

"I was trying to make a point." Aurelius so it became evident did have fine hearing and gave Applegate a stern look. He continued. "Such basic skills will help you find solutions to problems as shelter, food, survival and defense. The simple skill of sewing can be combined with other skills to manufacture weapons, traps and find solutions to obstacles and problems.

"Next week you will learn basic carpentry skills, how bricks are laid, how a pot can be made out of clay and how metal can be cast in the most primitive conditions. You get to know basic engineering skills with all sorts of tools and materials.

All those skills might never be needed, but if you do you are glad you know how to use an old fashioned hammer."

He picked up a hammer." Even at our advanced Tech Level, you will find a hammer in every engineer's toolbox. Mankind's oldest tool is still with us and there are no real high tech solutions to replace it!"

Narth shook his hooded head barely noticeable, Aurellius saw it anyway." You don't agree Mr. Narth. Don't they have hammers where you're from?"

"No Sir. We do not have hammers. I shall however take one along once I return so we do have at least one!"

"You are spending way too much time with Mr. Olafson. You even developed a sense of humor."

Narth raised his head."I did? Fascinating!" He gestured with his gloved hand and one of the sewing needles started to float and hissed like a projectile across the room and buried itself deep in a door frame." That is how we used to do it on Narth, but we will finally have a hammer!"

"Impressive display of Psionics, but what do you do if you are unable to use them. The Saresii for example have developed methods of suppressing Psionic powers and I am certain the Kermac have as well. This entire complex is shielded and not even you were able to detect it when you first came here."

Narth was about to say something but Aurelius shook his finger." This is not open for debate, Mr. Narth. You too will learn how to use primitive tools. After hours you and Mr. Olafson will repair the old compound fence by using Hammer Wire, Nails. I was told there are three clicks of fence and it is in bad shape."

I protested, " Sir, what have I done?"

"I just wanted to teach you two my kind of humor!"

He grinned and looked quite satisfied and then kept explaining." Let's say you are on a planetary survey mission. You are the Officer in charge of the survey party and you come across a primitive civilization. You don't speak their language and the linguistic translators still have problems translating. But you see a group of natives mending nets.

Instead of being totally clueless you could join them, take up a tool and sit down with the locals and help mend nets.

"Actions like these break down barriers faster than any display of superior tech that might frighten them or make them hostile towards you. In the process you might pick up phrases and Names and you begin to understand them faster than the Lingu-Processor of your Translator. Situations like this did happen many times before and might happen again."

He sighed and went on." When you see a Battle ship you think all the Fleet does is parade around in known space, patrol shipping corridors and fight wars. This is of course part what we do, but only a small part. Space is so vast and there is still plenty of unknown space even inside the boundaries of Union territory. This means there are endless combinations of situations you might have to face. We can't

prepare you for all possible situations and problems, but we can give you all a working base that covers as much about our civilizations combined knowledge as we can cram into you.

"Mr. Appletree's I want you to take the afternoon off and go to the library. There you will research how many times the skill of sewing came in handy to an officer. You have access to every report and log entry Fleet personnel made in the last 3000 years. Tomorrow I want you to give us a lecture on that."

I was surprised as much as the rest when Appletree read us his report the next day and concluded that he found over 15,000 log entries mentioning the skill of sewing being helpful in various situations.

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Weapon training was my favorite subject. It was fascinating to learn just how many different weapons all the known species had come up with .Narth said it didn't surprise him that Terrans where the unchallenged champions I that field. Remembering the lecture on sewing no one questioned the reason why we had to learn how to use clubs, spears and swords among many other primitive weapons.

I had learned how to throw an axe or a harpoon from as soon as I could walk and the instructor for primitive weaponry was very pleased with my results and even let me show others how to fight with axe and harpoon.

Lieutenant De la Lupe was our fencing teacher.

This morning, after we went through the usual exercises he made us interrupt our training and sit down. His face was stern and it was clear something of serious nature was on his mind." Class I am very pleased with your general progress. Since you are quite good, let's take a break and answer me this question: Do you know why we stress this kind of fighting so much?"

Applegate answered quickly." Because a Monofilament Saber is still one of the best weapons in close quarter fighting such as boarding actions either in attacking or defending."

Olia said." Sabers and swords are still used by many cultures and it is good we know how to use them."

Wintsun swiped his rapier through the air." Probably the same reason why we have to use needle and thread and repair stuff."

De la Lupe smiled briefly." And these are indeed important reasons. There is another reason however."

He looked down the length of his rapier, but his eyes saw something else." Officers of this Fleet live by strict discipline and an equally strict honor code. You all know the official words: United Stars Officers will not lie, cheat, or steal, or tolerate those who do"

It was totally quiet. None of the usual whispered comments or someone trying to catch a few winks of sleep in the back, everyone was listening. Lupe had always treated us differently as the other instructors did. He never ridiculed anyone, never resorted to punishments. He managed to show us without saying it, that he respected us and valued our opinions. This was the reason he also was the most liked Instructor of them all.

I felt he was about to open a little known chapter of Fleet knowledge that was never the less very important.

"Honor is exactly what determines a person's character: whether or not the person reflects honesty, respect, integrity, or fairness."

Lupe stopped playing with his sword and put it on the table behind him." This is the official side of the Honor Code, but there is another other side to it as well. It is neither publicized and some academy branches don't ever mention it. As a matter of fact some academies do not require classes in fencing and only offer them on voluntary basis. Commander Letsgo on the other hand as well as many other Academy Commanders requires it to be on the curriculum.

"Because as Officers there is the chance that one day you may come into a situation where another person or even another officer challenges your honor or claims to be insulted and his honor injured."

Narth landed over to me and whispered." There is nothing more illogical than humans in this entire Universe."

Lupe grinned as he heard Narth." What is it you find illogical?"

"Honor is nothing but a philosophical concept, how can a concept be insulted or injured?"

"Let me explain that in an Example. Captain A accuses Commander B of lying. Now it could be that A was indeed lying and by doing so offended B, or A did not lie and therefore the accusation is an insult of his honor and integrity."

Narth raised both his hands. "It is easier to understand the physics inside a black hole than to follow this logic." Narth actually sighed. I padded his shoulder." I feel for you my friend. This sounds very much

like Neo Viking logic."

Lupe nodded knowingly."Yes it is quite antiquated but this situation I described could still lead to a duel. Duels are rare, officially not sanctioned but also not illegal. Quite the contrary and without it being a written rule it is expected you deal with such an insult in this manner. It is expected of you to react in such a situation according to traditions and always as an officer and Gentleperson."

"So does that hold true to Cadets? Can someone challenge me?" Asked Olia, she was one of the finest rapier fencers in our group.

"That is a tough question as there is no official rule to this effect. We want you to act, think and react like full officers as soon as possible but without really giving you any of the privileges. One could argue that you are not officers yet and besides it cannot be used while on duty or for official matters only in private affairs. You cannot challenge or be challenged while on duty."

Olia sighed and smiled." That rules out Cadets anyway. We are on duty 24/7 no spare time for us."

Lupe bowed slightly before her and when he did it looked elegant and full of style." This is a good thing, lovely Olia for you are quite a fencer already."

Applegate snorted."I don't think it even counts for women."

Lupe shook his head." Ever since the Service Equality act of 3812 it counts for all officers. Regardless of sex, race or origin. A woman's honor can be insulted just as that of a man." He declined his head again towards Olia." I for one would think twice before insulting her."

She blushed and we could see that she deeply enjoyed his courtesy." I am not that good, Sir. Not the best by far. Wintsun and Appletree are just as good and Narth and Eric are the best!"

"It behooves a fighter never to overestimate him or herself. Before you begin a fight you must always assume this could be your last fight and your opponent could be better than you, stronger, more experienced or has some other advantage."

It was Applegate who shook his head now."And I was making fun of Eric and his planet, seems like the fleet is just as antiquated and ruled by ancient traditions as Eric's Nilfeheim."

"Traditions do not have to be a bad thing, as they give us a connection to the past and by observing them

it connects future generations with us.' Lupe said. "It gives us a sense of belonging to something greater than us, something that endures the flow of time even if we as individuals cannot."

Narth slowly nodded." This does make sense. It might even be considered logical in a sociological sense applied to a wider view of human society."

Lupe laughed."You said it, Mr. Narth."

Nogador, a Vantax and friend of Applegate spread his wing like arms." How does dueling fit into Federal Law. Since you say it is a private matter, is it then not also subject to Union law?"

"This is a very good question and a difficult one to answer; even most duels are fought to first blood only, and not to death. A duel could result in one of the dueling parties fatally wounded."

Lupe shifted his position a bit before he continued." If a duel is fought between two consenting and legally adult parties and there are witnesses and records that both parties agreed on the conditions of the duel, it is a legal and private affair. However in case of a fatal outcome, police investigations are not unlikely. In addition to that there might be local laws that prohibit fighting, violence, the use of weapons and so forth. Duels do not happen often and are quite rare but if you are involved, make sure you do everything by the book. Meaning you know where the duel will be fought, local laws considered and always having adjutants, seconds and an impartial. "

Then he took up his rapier once more."I am proud of the entire class this year."

With a glance on his multi come he checked the time and said."I am going to dismiss you now that should give you two hours. So you have at least some free time. Please do not start any duels and remain out of the other instructor's eyes, as they surely find something to occupy you with!"

This was a fine example of how he was different from the other instructors and why we liked him.

As we filed out the training hall he said."Mr. Olafson and Mr. Narth would you please remain for a moment?"

He watched the last one leave and said." I know you two would have earned some leisure time as well, but Olia was quite right. You are both very talented fencers and I would like to train you in more advanced techniques and furthermore would like to ask a special favor of you."

Narth bowed slightly." I greatly enjoy the physical aspect of this fencing activity. I find the methods of moving, attacking and defending actually quite mathematical and fascinating. I am eager to learn more of it."

"I see myself to be a swashbuckling ruffian at best, Sir." I said, and then added. "I would be deeply grateful for advanced lessons and of course you may ask any favor of us, Sir."

I didn't even realize that I included Narth but we really begun to understand each other on that unexplainable friendship level.

Lupe put his hands on our shoulders and said." A cartel was delivered to me and I must answer it. A cartel being a hand delivered written notice of challenge describing the cause of the offence."

"Who would challenge you?" I asked perplexed." You are exactly how I always imagined an officer should be!"

Narth agreed. "Indeed, my friend is quite correct. I still learn much about how humans act and live but your way of educating us appeals to me."

"Your comments make prouder than you might realize. I would like you to accompany me to that duel. He stopped us with a motion of his hand." Before you agree let me tell you exactly what it means and what you will have to do. I also need to tell you why and where the duel will take place."

I simply nodded and Narth was listening as well.

"Let us not talk here. Such things can only be discussed in private and not while on duty. We will go into the officers' lounge and have a drink and there I will fill you in. Only then I would like you to answer me and make your decision."

"Are we allowed in the officer's lounge?" His invitation there was the most incredible development to me.

"Yes I am inviting you and with this invitation you are allowed to be there. I am not asking you anything illegal or against regulations, I want this to be perfectly understood. However it is best if you do not talk to anyone about it before it is over. I did discuss this with Commander Letsgo as well."

"I never tried to imply that, Sir. I was merely surprised."

"Of course as I would be in your place. Now get cleaned up and get dressed in off duty civilian clothing and meet me at the Officers lounge at 1900 hrs."

With that he left us standing and walked out.

"I do not have anything civilian. All my effects were taken at Academy entry."

"I can give you one of my robes." Narth offered.

"Why did they let you keep your robes anyway?"

"My robe is more than just a garment to me Eric. It protects all Non Narth from our true form. Humans cannot look upon us without getting mentally injured, weaker minds often cease to function and die. I am the first Narth ever to join the Fleet and nothing could be found that gives an equal amount of protection. The Fleet however insisted that I would wear a Robe in Cadet Green, instead of my usual black"

"Is that why you eye slits glow and there are no real eyes behind them?"

"I would say my eyes are real, just quite different from yours. However you are correct the glow of my eyes is part of my Psionic aura .The light my eyes emit is not visible light at all. It is seen by your mind not your eyes."

"So a robot would not see that glow?"

"No a machine without bio-neuro components would not register it."

"That eye light isn't as harmful as the rest?"

"It is the same but thanks to the fabric of this garment and the small openings of much lesser intensity. However I do require those eye holes otherwise I would not be able to see out!"

"One of these days I still like to see how you really look."

"One of these days I shall take you with me to Narth. The Eternal is eager to meet you. He will find a way so you can see me as I am."

"I look forward to it. Meeting your folks and your planet and see how you live."

"You will be welcome."

We had reached the showers and we disappeared moments later each in a shower stall. I realized how honored and touched I felt by Narth's invitation and I promised myself to learn everything about the Narth so I would not make a fool of myself and embarrass my best friend."

Narth was already done and out of the showers by the time I was done. However he had changed from his dark green into a black robe. The eerie glow behind his eye slits, due to the deep black appeared even more intense.

He handed me a dark red colored robe." Here, I choose this color so they can tell us apart."

"I doubt anyone would mistake me for a Narth."

"All you have to do is do the spooky thing and let your eyes glow!"

I laughed as I slipped into the robe."You know what Aurelius is right; you did develop a sense of humor! Do the spooky thing. That does not sound like you at all."

"No perhaps not but Olia is saying it all the time."

The robe material felt almost like liquid metal. It felt smooth and not at all like a fabric. It was also cool and that I thought was quite comfortable, on a humid and hot world like this. A darker metal like belt appeared all by itself and girded the garment around the waist. In the same fashion tight boots formed themselves around my feet.

"Hey that isn't bad at all I could get used to it."

"One is pleased that it is so!"

I laughed at him."Now that's how you supposed to sound."

He handed me a pair of gloves."Not that I think you need these. It does however complete the garment."

I put them on and I liked the feel of them quite a bit. I could barely feel wearing gloves at all. I thought how practical they would be in a fight, when you never get sweaty hands and always keep a good grip.

"You are welcome to keep them, of course!" Narth answered to my train of thought. I was so used to him answering to my unspoken thoughts that I didn't even bother to ask my next question out loud, because I wondered where he kept all those things. Since he, like everybody else had only a small locker. It was forbidden to store anything in them except issued standard items.

"I utilize a subspace pocket inside my left sleeve. I can store any number of items there, only limited by the size that fits through the subspace hole."

"Wow! That sounds quite practical. I doubt Starfleet has anything like it."

"I am certain they do not. It requires a different tech level as Humans would say."

I somehow knew he didn't want me to tell anyone about it and he only told me because I was his friend."

He simply nodded and changed the subject. "The entire affair with Lt. De La Lupe makes me wonder though. It does not appear unusual to you?"

"Not really. I think it is simply another test. I am almost sure of it. Whenever something seemingly odd happens it ends up being a test. Besides I think the Lieutenant is trustworthy if he thinks we can do it, let's make him proud and do our best."

As we left the showers Narth said." I believe you are quite correct. It does sound logical."

We stopped at the next Inter Base Transport Unit and stepped into the transport cabin. "Officers Lounge, please." I said to the voice pick up.

"Identity scanned. Cadets are not allowed to access."

Narth said." I can sense him. Let's go the other way!"

The IBT cabin suddenly vanished and the world changed before my eyes as if someone switched a holo-program. We suddenly stood in a room with low ceiling and dimmed lights, comfortable looking seat groups around small tables on one side of the room. There was a bar on the other side. Amuse-matics lined up next to the bar along with a few GalNet booths. The most striking feature was the large

transparent wall across the room, showing a greenish underwater landscape, submerged Tree roots and plants. We saw a scaled lizard swimming past, of the same huge kind that greeted us on our first night and we had seen so many times since then hiking and marching through the local jungles. The officer's lounge so it became apparent was under the nearby lake.

Letsgo and Lt De la Lupe jumped out of their seats, even more startled than I was, because of our sudden appearance.

"Holy mother of God!" The Lieutenants' hand darted to his sidearm, but stopped before pulling it."You need to warn others before teleporting like that, especially looking like that!"

I elbowed Narth into the side and grunted." That includes me!"

But Narth acted as if he didn't notice. Despite the fact that I just knew he was grinning behind his hood if Narth could grin that is. He snapped in attention and I followed his example an eye blink later." Cadet Narth and Olafson report as ordered at 1900 hrs at the Officers Lounge wearing as requested civilian attire. Cadet Olafson had no civilian attire of his own and this is why he is wearing a Narth robe, Sirs"

Several officers most of them Instructors we knew but also faces and beings I had not seen so far turned and some looked as if they disapproved of our presence but then continued with whatever they were doing.

Letsgo pointed at the seats across the table. "Have a seat Cadets. As you can see most of the officers present are not in uniform and neither are you or I."

We sat down and so did the two officers.

The Commander leaned forward." This is no reprimand, just information for further reference. It is quite dangerous to teleport inside a Military Installation and appear out of thin air and unannounced. This could result in intruder alerts. Trigger automatic defense measures or could be seen as attempted espionage. Teleporting into an area that is supposed to be Psi shielded and safe could get you shot!"

"I understand, Sir." Narth answered," The psi shielding of this place however is quite inadequate. I was able to locate Lt De la Lupe without any difficulties, Sir."

"It seems we need to improve on that.

"Anyway you where not ordered here, you where invited. This is your first time in an officer's lounge but after you graduate it won't be your last. You do not salute when you are out of uniform. You do not need

to snap into attention even if the Admiral of the Fleet happens to be present. You know I am the Commander of this base, but I am wearing no uniform and no Rank insignia therefore I am simply Mister Letsgo."

"Yes Sir." Narth and I said almost simultaneously.

He waved to a wait-bot and said."Order what you like, the tap goes to me. You are welcome order tox as well"

To the Bot I said."Got any Aquavit or Absolut Vodka?"

"We carry a selection of Aquavits, currently no genuine Absolut. However we have the Molecu-Scan on file and can replicate."

I scanned over the list of Aquavits scrolling over is belly and switched to beers and with happy anticipation ordered." I take a tankard of Halverson's Dark warmed up a bit and double shot of very cold Alborg Aquavit."

Narth said."I have the same!"

Commander Letsgo held up his hand. "Bring me the same robot, so I can say I drank with a real Neo Viking. De La Lupe motioned the robot that this was his choice as well and said."As impressive this might be, No one is going to believe you, that you have shared drinks with a Narth!"

It was quite strange to see the instructor and the Commander act that way. I still was convinced it was some sort of test but I could not figure out what the goal of it was.

The drinks came.

They looked at me to show them how it was done. With a quick tilt of my head I downed the Aquavit and enjoyed the cold fire shooting down my throat, smacked my tongue to get the aftertaste. Then I lifted the mug. Its size would had made any Viking laugh, and took a long draft, leaving nothing but clinging foam in the liter glass. Narth did the same putting the glasses under the loose cloth of his hood, both glasses appeared empty.

Letsgo shook his head with a smile." Comets and Quasars you two can drink! If we had a drinking class you would be instructors for sure!"

They both repeated my example and De La Lupe praised the Aquavit. "This liquor is quite enjoyable and has a smooth character. The Ale however requires a stronger palate than mine."

Narth didn't say anything but I saw him wave at the Bot ordering more. So I asked "Would you be so kind and tell us what this is about? So far I am unable to determine what the goal of this test is."

Letsgo leaned forward." How you react in this situation is not part of your overall evaluation even though it will find its way into your personal files but this is no test and has nothing to do with the Academy or part of Cadet Training."

Letsgo nodded to Lupe who then started to explain:" The Edged Weapons Instructor of the Newport Elite Academy, Lieutenant Commander Milieu claimed in a recent article about sword fencing and dueling published in Squadron News Magazine that his students where the best fencers bar none, and that it would be foolish to ever challenge any of his students in a duel and it be best to claim satisfaction or to submit before it came to a fight."

Letsgo interrupted, putting his glass down." You know about the Naval Academies all over the United Stars. There are 164 of them; you for example came from Arsenal. Your friend Narth was accepted at Annapolis Academy Earth. I graduated from Quallstone in the Spin ward Sector. "

I only half registered Narth ordering a third time because I paid close attention to what the officers had to say.

Letsgo was not done."One of these Academy branches is Newport. Over the last 100 years Newport developed into the Elite Academy. Only the brightest and best prospects are to be sent there, and for the last 20 years or so it became even more elitism oriented, due to Admiral Dent who commands the place since that time.

"Now the Squadron News is the oldest and most read officers' magazine in the Fleet."

De La Lupe played with his empty shot glass." I wrote a reply in the readers comment section and stated that other Academies educated good fencers as well and that it would be not very honorable to claim satisfaction or submit just on the reputation of a fighters teacher. Further I questioned his claim to be the best instructor as I know plenty of Instructors that would be at least equal to his skills."

Letsgo pushed an E-board across the table entitled Squadron News. "There you can have this copy."

Our Fencing instructor took a piece of paper out of his pocket along with a single glove." I received this

cartel and this glove was thrown this morning. I am challenged to a duel because I offended Milieu's honor. I am to face him in a duel and part of the stipulation is that two of my best students are to face two of his best students. We do have the choice of weapons but since it is about fencing it should be edged weapons, preferably in the sword or saber variety."

The Commander said." To make it absolutely clear you cannot be ordered to participate and I assure you if you decline it will have no negative effects on your evaluation whatsoever. It is truly a matter of private affairs."

"We don't even have to think about that one, Sir. Of course will we participate, right Narth?"

"Right Eric!" Narth's voice was somehow different. As if he tried to actually sing the words!

Letsgo smiled proudly." I will give you officially seven days R&R so you do not have to participate in the routine classes. For this time you going to stay in the landing field buildings, the ones you know from your first time here. There you will have three days to further train and rest and the rest will be needed to travel and for the actual duel. The duel is fought to first blood. Meaning even the smallest wound will be accepted as satisfaction."

De la Lupe saluted us with his glass." For these days you will not be Cadets and I will not be a Lieutenant. We will be comrades in arms. I thank you!"

He drank and Narth did too!

Narth placed the glass rather hard on the table surface." Eric?"

"Yes Narth?"

"Did you know that these beverages have a component that influences ones thoughts and behavior, even perception?"

"Yes it is alcohol."

"Ah yes, an organic compound in which a hy... I mean a hydâ€¦ excuse me a hydroxyl group is bound to a carbon atom., Eric I feel quite strange!" I knew we were in trouble when he started to giggle! Several tables began to float! Aurelius our Chief Instructor sitting on another table was showered with beer out of his own glass which was suddenly floating above his head and Narth giggled even more!"Did you see

that...he hehe...Eric I think I need to sleep!

Narth slumped over his head banging on the table!"

The floating things around the room fell as if invisible wires had been cut.

"Your friend had a tad too much to drink." De La Lupe said."We better get him to Sickbay. Before he wakes up and teleports all of us halfway across the planet or something like that!"

Chapter 16: Interlude 1

INTERLUDE 1: COMMANDER EBOR LETSGO'S OFFICE

The commander stood at the window of his spacious office overlooking the lake and jungle with his hands clasped behind his back watching a group of cadets far below struggling with a heavy wooden log they had to carry over an obstacle course. Only by working together as a team could this task be achieved. This ancient time tested exercise promoted team work, group coordination and leadership.

This exercise had been used by Fleet trainers even before the Galactic Ascent on good old Earth.

Of course it didn't work as well for some non humanoid life forms. But Humanoids and non humanoid life forms where part of the Fleet and both had to learn to work together. Sometimes the cadets found surprising solutions to this exercise utilizing the natural abilities of their group members.

Letsgo was humanoid himself. His base DNA was human Terran and deep down every Stellaris considered himself to be Terran human and was very proud of that fact. Something no Stellaris would openly admit to others of course.

After Earth's Galactic Ascent in 2112, Terrans tried to colonize everything, not just Garden worlds. Humans colonized Venus, Mars, Pluto and every moon in the Sol system before they went beyond. Terran Corporations and government labs used genetic tailoring and started a virtual race to manipulate Terran life forms to live in environments unfit for normal humans.

During the 21st until the late 24th century, a fierce competition dominated the bioengineering labs of every major corporation as to who could come up with the "better" human. This led to the "Super soldier crisis" of 2442, a Corporation Clone Revolt that culminated in the Enroe Civil War 2443, were corporation owned sentient beings revolted and demanded human rights and freedom. Some of the

experiments ended up in horrible results, as not all experiments were successful.

The Stellaris originally were a quite successful cyborg/DNA clone project of Honda-Benz-Quon Jan Corp. and were declared a sentient independent species (Along with a host of other Clone types) after the Enroe Civil war ended and full rights and independence were given to previously corporate owned life forms.

HBQ had tried to create a human worker able to perform tasks as unprotected as possible in deep space unhindered by space suits and crude equipment and still able to go planet side or inside space stations with normal gravitation and interact with their creators. The goal could not be achieved with biological DNA engineering alone and so cybernetic parts were added, for example the nano-tube flex skin with metallic radiation shielding that covered every Stellaris from head to toe. To this day Stellaris came to be in birth factories, after two parents came together and decide to have offspring. There in the birth-factory a newborn Stellaris would be fitted with their cybernetic parts and would return there seven times until reaching adult hood and receiving the final set of adult cybernetics.

Commander Letsgo and every other Stellaris could work and survive in deep space without additional protection for many days and they still had legs, arms, the necessary muscle and skeleton to work and interact on planets.

Every so often he thought how lucky the Stellaris were, compared to the Head-Arms of Enroe Corp. Designed to do the same, work in deep space, based on human DNA but with six arms and no legs, Torso's with heads integrated. There were few Head-Arms left nowadays.

Letsgo was dedicated to his work and was very proud of his posting but often missed deep space. He never really felt at home dirt-side. He preferred a space station or space ship over a planet anytime.

On his desk was a holo of Harman's Village, a small deep space colony a light year away from Midway Station deep in Trans galactic space. The idea of living out there half way between the two Galaxies appealed to him. He had purchased a large condo there and planned to move to Harman's Village for good as soon as he retired. His third wife, who wasn't a Stellaris but Saresii, had signed a lasting marriage contract with him also loved that new home to be, however she was currently aboard an Explorer ship and on an five year survey mission deep into the completely uncharted downward sector and she wasn't expected to return for another two years.

Maybe when she came back he would put in his retirement request.

Deep down he knew when the time finally came to make that decision he would find an excuse to continue, like he had done twice before and he silently chuckled, maybe he had gotten used to Dirt Side more than he wanted to admit.

He didn't hear the door. Stellaris did not have very good hearing, since they lacked outer ears. He was completely surprised as someone suddenly spoke:" What do you find so amusing, old friend?"

He spun around and was pleasantly surprised. "Admiral Stahl!" Letsgo snapped automatically into attention even though it was not necessary. "I was thinking about retirement, Sir."

The man who had entered his office was tall. The body under the black uniform appeared to be in peak athletic condition, muscular arms, and a rippled abdomen attested to that. The Uniform itself was immaculate, no wrinkle, not a speck of dust. From the mirror shine polished calf boots to the mirrored sunglasses. The white blonde hair was trimmed into a short buzz cut that would have passed Space marine hair cut regulations without any problems. The strong jaw line and the long silvery half moon shaped scar on his left cheek. Every detail of this man's appearance was well known to almost anyone in the known Universe, by friends and foes alike. A living legend if there ever was one. He belonged to the fabled Mentors, the mysterious 200 picked by an even more mysterious entity so long ago. Stahl was immortal; he had not aged since he met the Guardian. He was born on Earth in 2067, even before the Galactic Ascent. He along with the other 200 Mentors had guided mankind from a feeble one planet society to perhaps the most powerful union in the Galaxy. He was over 3500 years old and it was said he had many superhuman abilities. Most of it was legend and no one really knew what was true and, but it all simply added to the overall presence and mystery of this man. Officially he was a 5 star and second only to the Admiral of the Fleet (also an Immortal) but his real position in the Union fleet and especially Terra was closer to deity than anything measureable human.

Commander Letsgo had met this living demigod, about 25 years ago and they actually became almost like friends. As much as mortal being could be friends with someone like him at least. This friendship with an Immortal made Letsgo feel somehow privileged and elevated every time they met.

The immortal officer grinned:" Sorry If I startled you. Your adjutant let me in right away."

"He probably is still paralyzed and mortified actually meeting such a legend in person."

Stahl sighed:" I do have that effect sometimes.

"I tell you the idea to quit and finally retire crossed my mind more often these days." He sighed. "I am at this business of ours longer than anyone should be."

"You can't retire! Not you!"

"Humankind has grown up, Ebor. They don't need us Mentors anymore. Our job is done. Of the 200

called by the Guardian so long ago, only 60 remained."

"I thought you are all immortal?"

"Impervious to age and disease, but some of us still could get shot, wounded or atomized. Heck I could break my neck in an accident and be gone like that, I think."

Letsgo digested this information without further getting into it. "Have a seat old friend. I still have some Terran beer, your favorite brand in the cooler."

Stahl sat into the visitors chair, leaned back while Letsgo went to a hidden cabinet and retrieved two brown glass bottles handed one to the Admiral and said:" Have you come here to tell me you going to retire? "

"No that is more a wishful thought than a conclusion. You should talk; you wanted to go that place of yours on the bridge five years ago!"

"Well yes, but I am not in a hurry either and Helen is on her way to the Aspar Nebula and won't be back for at least 24 month."

"Helen loves her work, just as you do and I must say I am glad you stay for a little while longer, good Academy Commanders are hard to replace and with you it will be almost impossible."

If a Stellaris could blush he might have done so, a compliment from Stahl was just like a medal." So why have you come?"

"The usual reason."

Every so often the admiral would come and talk about the new cadets with Letsgo.

The Commander opened the bottle took a sip.

Stahl drained half the bottle and smacked his lips." Ahh! That hit the spot!"

"Don't tell me you don't have ample supply of that stuff aboard your big ship."

The Admiral put the bottle down. "I got a complete brewery aboard, but good beer is still good beer. Got anything I might be interested in?"

Letsgo grinned as much as a Stellaris could and leaned back." We got a Narth."

Stahl's left eyebrow rose." You are kidding me, right?"

"No I am not. When Annapolis called me that they sending a Narth I was as surprised as you."

"I wonder why I wasn't informed about that. This is truly historical. What do you know about the Narth?"

Ebor leaned back." Not much, to be honest with. The Encyclopedia Galactica hasn't much on them and most of the Narth's file is classified, even for me. I know they are a very mysterious species and they are very old."

Stahl put the bottle down and leaned forward, very animated and excited "The Saresii think they have been around even before the Uni ruled most of the galaxy over 10 million years ago. The Narth never expanded or colonized other planets as far as we know and no one ever found out where their home system was until we fought the Y'All.

"The Narth never involved themselves in galactic politics or associated themselves with the first Council but they had been there as observers. During the first Y' all war The Narth did not fight with large battle fleets, so the Saresii tell us. They contributed only one ship and that one ship that made all the difference and not the Wurgus Super Nova."

Ebor leaned forward to make sure he heard every word the Immortal Admiral spoke. Stahl swirled the rest of beer in his bottle." As the Y'All came back 500 years ago and we fought them with great losses, a battle occurred near the Narth solar system without anyone knowing that it was there, because Narth cloaked their entire system behind a very advanced shield. Dr. Isah once tried to explain it to me by saying the Narth removed their entire Solar system 1 minute into the future and left Impenetrable no time space in its place.

The Y'ALL slammed in it quite by accident in the heat of that battle. The Y'All simply forgot about us and went berserk against that shield.

That was our chance to do emergency repairs, reboot shields and restock munitions.

We attacked them again while the Y'All kept pounding that impenetrable field with everything they had."

Commander Letsgo listened to the account of the Admiral about an event that happened hundreds of years ago. A war that to him was nothing more than distant history. He knew Stahl was immortal, but to actually realize it was a different matter. Stahl had been there from the first moment. Three thousand years! How could he still be called human? The experience and knowledge gathered over such a time removed the Admiral from any normal human understanding.

Stahl continued:" To give you an idea of the magnitude, imagine a fleet of 50 Million Ships. All the size of the largest battleships we have today. All armed to the teeth with weapons that take out our ships with one single hit and shields that takes the combined firepower of 3 battleships on our side to show damage. That was the size of the Y'All Invasion! No contact, no demands, no requests to surrender. They simply attack and attack anything and everything in their path."

"Was it not that time when you came back from your mysterious Exile bringing along that gigantic ship of yours and the secret of translocator cannons?"

"Indeed I came back a few months prior to that space battle near the Narth System I am telling you about. Yes I did bring the secret of that weapon back and the Devastator. That ship is incredible and after all this time it is still the most powerful ship we have, but it was only one ship armed with Translocators back then. One against millions! The secret I brought back was in forms of construction instructions and blue prints, not ready to be used hardware and it took us month to start manufacturing Translocators in mass quantities and many years to equip every ship with it. What would I have given back then for just ten of our new Ultras equipped with those long range TLG-Gatlings. We would have swept those Y'All out of our Galaxy in weeks not years!"

He drained the rest of his beer." I am getting away from the actual story about the Narth. As I told you the Y'All were attacking that shield. All of their ships firing everything they had. You could snuff out stars with the firepower they poured into that shield while we could destroy ship by ship of theirs, without receiving fire. That went on for almost a month! We had convoys of civilian ships going to bring ammunition and fuel.

Then there after 4 weeks of relentless fighting, there is suddenly a crack in that spherical shield of star system size, and a perfectly spherical ship appears. No visible propulsion, no antennas, nothing, as perfectly round as a cue ball. Attacking Y'All ships simply exploded before they came into firing range of their own weapons. No measurable energies or weapon fire from the Narth ship and for the first time in this horrible Invasion war, the Y'All retreat! We did finally destroy the last of them 2 years later, while they were still on the run but that's another story. The sphere contacted us. Identifying them as the Narth. They tell us how impressed they were of us trying to defend Narth. Even after I explained to them that we had no idea about them and their hidden system they insisted on thanking us for our efforts and

sacrifices protecting their system. They joined the United Stars with the expressed clause to remain isolated. The space around their system is to this day off limits to all Star ship traffic within 2 light years. The only contact we have with them is via their representative in the Assembly who rarely if ever speaks. We know virtually nothing about their culture, physiology or history. Narth citizen rarely travel and if they do they simply appear. No one seen them use ships since that time I saw that sphere. Their Citizen ID data is classified. We know they have vast Psionic powers far superior even to Saresii standards and the Saresii claim the Narth mastered some sort of magic."

Letsgo snorted:" Magic! Nothing like magic exists. I am surprised to hear the intellectual and rational Saresii even pay any heed to such claims."

"I wouldn't be so fast dismissing legend and magic. I am a man of science myself, but long ago when I was a kid, the idea of traveling faster than light was considered impossible. Terrans of my time laughed at the idea there could be intelligent life on other planets. Since then I crossed this Galaxy from end to end more than a few times and went well beyond it. I have seen and experienced events I still can't understand or explain. To this day Psionics are like magic to me to be honest, even though I am well aware of them and know how they work.

One day perhaps we advance far enough and there will be no distinction between technology, science and what we define as magic."

Letsgo digested that last statement but he still didn't believe in anything like that. For everything there was a scientific explanation.

The immortal admiral lit a little smoking stick. It was a rare but not totally uncommon habit and Letsgo noticed especially Terrans and Colonial Terrans smoked. The Commander neither had a nose nor the necessary lips to make it work. His oxygen supply came from oxy cassettes he inserted into his chest every 10 days, so it didn't bother him at all. "Tell me, Commander how is that Narth interacting with the others?"

"The Narth is very quiet and not social at all, but is best friends with one particular human and they are basically inseparable. He displayed limited Telepathic powers so far. Enormous telekinetic abilities and he can teleport into areas shielded by the finest Saresii Anti Psi tech. if he has other Psionic abilities I can't say. We tested his Heidelberg Psi rating and he is simply off the scale. The best Saresii talent ever to be recorded is Alyia Lichfangh and she scored 4200."

The immortal officer nodded. "I know her of course. She is the Chief of the PSI Corps. It is said she was once able to move an entire moon with her telekinetic abilities."

Letsgo pulled Narth's training and test results up on his screen and said." Narth's suggested HPR could be around 17,000 as a very conservative estimate, according to our Psi Tech at least."

Stahl almost fell out of his chair and jumped to his feet." Did you say Seventeen thousand?"

"Yes Sir."

"I can't believe I wasn't informed."

"His test results are highly classified. Admiral Mc Elligott ordered me to treat the Narth like any other Cadet."

"I will have a word with my old friend about that! Now tell me about the other one, his human friend."

"His name is Olafson. He is a Neo Viking from Nilfleheim. Webb ran into him as he did his malfunction suit test in the application line. Olafson took charge to save the Ult from drying out. He again took charge during the "No one showed up Scenario".

Stahl leaned forward." How did he do? "

"A long time experienced Officer could not have done much better. He charged one of the Scale Prowlers; you know the big carnivorous lizards we got here, with an axe, to save a fellow Cadet."

Letsgo gave the admiral a detailed account of the events, played him the recordings of the hidden visual sensors.

Stahl grinned broadly." I think I found another one! Where are they now? Call them!"

Letsgo suddenly didn't look to happy. "They are not exactly here."

"They are not? Where are they?"

"They went to Maritime."

"Please don't let me ask every detail just tell me!"

"I gave them officially 7 days R & R so they can accompany one of my instructors on a private gentleman's affair. The Narth got terribly drunk and was out for an entire day. We had him in sickbay but where contacted by Narth Prime not to interfere and simply let him sleep. They trained some more and this morning left for Maritime for a Duel."

"You allowed the very first Narth in Starfleet, a Psi Talent as powerful as the entire PSI Corps together to go and fight a Duel? Beside the fact that both of them are first year cadets and not allowed to fight duels. Nor should they even know about such things until they graduate!"

"They are very good fighters. The Neo Viking is perhaps not the most elegant fighter but he fights like a Dai, you seen the visuals as he charged that Scale Prowler with an axe, Sir! The Narth is the fastest fighter you ever going to see. They are with Lt De la Lupe and I trust this man!"

"De la Lupe? The old Grandmaster who wrote that wonderful reply to that report about that arrogant bastard Milieu â€" Stahl paused." Oh I get the picture." Stahl's left eyebrow went up." Milieu of course threw the glove after Lupe posted that reply; De La Lupe had to respond. Milieu is of French descent and De la Lupe of Spanish origin. Neither of them where born on Earth but things like that are in their blood. Makes all sense now! Why did he take Cadets along?"

"That was part of the Challenge. Milieus' protÃ©gÃ©es against Lupe's pupils in a test of skill. It's only first blood, Sir!"

Stahl leaned forward "That is between you and me of course, but I hope one of Dents lackeys, gets a little humble pie and Lupe wins."

"Why do you let Admiral Dent do what he does? No one likes him. You are the one who could do something about that!"

Stahl shook his head. "Not even I can simply fire Dent and I tell you I would love to beat the guy up physically with my bare fists, every time I see his snug face and his arrogant behavior. Frankly he is a slick bastard."

Stahl raised his hands."However as long as he runs his academy without breaking the rules and delivers good officers I am unable to do much. I am more so than others bound by our rules. Because of what I am must never ever be above the law! I am aware of my status and I know I could tomorrow declare myself sole Emperor of the Galaxy and a sizeable portion of the Fleet would follow my lead. Power corrupts Old friend and I have lots of power. To prevent even the slightest chance I might become corrupt without knowing, I live by our rules as strict and as diligent as a third year cadet."

Letsgo respected the ancient Admiral a great deal more after hearing that." I never really thought of that, but I am very glad you do think that way."

Stahl tapped his nose."Don't you worry. This old snout tells me that Admiral Dent made many mistakes

and has many skeletons in his closet and that they will come to light sooner than later and because he put himself on such a high pedestal his fall will be that much harder."

"I am inclined to trust your nose as well, Sir. We did have an incident not so long ago right here on camp idyllic and I frankly hope the other Admiral is placing that much restraint onto himself as you do."

"Tell me about it!"

Letsgo told Stahl about Swybin and Admiral Swybar and said after completing the story." I never heard anything more of this. I expected some sort of report or official message explaining to me how Swybin could circumvent the Psych Evaluation in the first place and what happened to him. Frankly speaking I think it was swept under the carpet."

The old Admiral had a serious look on his face. "It is the first time I hear about it. I will personally check on that and make sure you do get a closing report on this."

"I do believe in our Fleet, our rules and the system. I am only a Commander, my experience might be nothing compared to yours, but I seen and experienced injustice, Officers abusing their power and I have seen the workings of the Worm more than once."

"So have I, old friend. This is one of the reasons why I have not retired yet. Now tell me again were this duel takes place. I think I am going to watch."

Chapter 17: Chapter 17

Chapter 17

Narth was very quiet since he recovered from his drinking binge.

We both sat in the Freight bay of a small transport ship on our way to Maritime. De La Lupe was with us for the most time, but he had left the bay to organize something to eat and speak to the Transport ship captain. Commander Letsgo had organized the trip on this civilian freighter, since this was a private affair and to dedicate fleet resources would have been illegal.

"Did I do anything to offend you?" I asked Narth

"No Eric. I was just very much occupied over the last days relaying my experience to all Narth. It was an extreme unpleasant experience and quite fascinating. All of Narth is sharing it now!"

"You are telling me that all Narth feel what you felt?"

"Indeed I am relaying all my experiences. This is my real mission if you will. Narth wants to learn more about humans and other civilizations. We found that mere observation from a distance is quite inadequate."

"I should have warned you about the ill effects of Alcohol. I just I never know what you know and what not. You are the best friend I ever had but I still know precious little."

"You are my best friend as well, Eric. You have no fault and could not warn me. Much of the human condition I don't understand and to be in a corporal body is something I am still getting accustomed too."

" I know it is illegal for telepaths to pry into other minds but what if I expressly allow you to go as deep in my mind as you need? To learn all the things I simply can't explain. I am human all my life and maybe through my memories, my experience and emotions it will help you to understand better without putting you so much at risk."

Narth looked at me directly and didn't say a word. I couldn't even feel him for a moment. The light behind his eye slits became dimmer and then even brighter then before." You are giving me the greatest gift possible. Narth supreme was stunned and surprised by your offer as I just relayed it and it is the first time in a very long time anything surprised Narth supreme.

" You see to Narth nothing is more sacred than what we call the Innermost Shell. It is the area of a beings self that defines the very core and nature of a person. It is the most private and most intimate region. No Narth ever touched the Inner Shell of any being outside of Narth. There is no deception possible anything is laid open."

He paused."Do you really offer this and are you certain you want this?"

"Narth you know the answer."

"It has never been done to a being not Narth. Therefore I do not know if there are any risks for you."

I shrugged." Diving after a Tyranno Fin is risky. Getting out of bed might get you killed. If it helps you get your mission done I am all for it. Besides what risk could there be, you knowing my deepest secrets? I would tell them to you anyway if you asked. "

Narth eyes glowed even brighter and suddenly so bright I didn't really see anything. For a brief moment it was as if I was brushed by something immense. It was as if you would float in the ocean in complete darkness and touch a Tyranno Fin with just with your fingertips. You would never know how big the thing was you just touched but somehow and by other means of feeling you knew you touched something very, very big. Then it was over. I was still sitting on the floor leaning against a Shipping container. It lasted perhaps five minutes at the most so I guessed and Narth was floating across me his legs folded underneath his robe, hands on his lap.

"That was it?"

Narth nodded his head very slowly. "It is magnificent! Primitive and incredibly complex at the same time. Your mind and how you think is so completely different from Narth. Chaos and confusion without end and yet there is a clear direction and purpose to it all. I cannot express adequately you how thankful Narth is."

"No need. At least now I know how I look from the inside. The Chaos and confusion part needs a little work I guess. I didn't expect visitors and forgot to tidy the place a little!"

"I believe you will in time do just that after all you are now the first human mind connected to the Narth."

He handed me a piece of dark red cloth.

"What is this?"

"A hood like mine, your eyes and face radiate Narth. It will last only for a little while of course."

"Are you saying my eyes glow like yours?"

"Not just your eyes, Eric."

"Cool! Now we can both do the spooky thing and freak out Galmy and Olia!"

"I doubt the glow will last very long, but yes you can do the spooky thing."

I pulled the cool hood over my face and head and it was quite comfortable." How do I look?"
"Like a Neo Viking wearing a Narth Hood!"

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