

# Aer-ki Jyr



GAUNTLET  
WARS

# 1

He walked through the black energy field, not knowing what was on the other side, but the 7' 2" genetically advanced Human wasn't worried. He'd been given access by the facility's automated systems, though he'd come here expecting to have to break in.

The year was 158409, and while regular Humans were still around by the trillions, several upgraded bloodlines had surpassed them. The Terrans were all clones, with their source genome taken from the bravest and smartest legends in the galaxy and woven together into a base template upon which the Empire had added certain genetic knowledge that they'd never have to be taught, only unlock as they developed.

The Canderians were not genetically upgraded by science, but by the harshest civilian training the Empire would allow, which was just this side of cruel, but it pushed them to be better than they thought they could be, and as a result the Human splinter faction that resided entirely in heavily armored space stations called 'Seda' had surpassed the rest of Humanity through gradual improvements, but not in height.

This warlord's height was due to the fact that he was Furyan, and technically speaking he was no longer Human. He was the original, having trained his Human body to its physical limits then gone beyond in a process that the Empire still did not understand. Throughout the history and mythology of many civilizations lone individuals had been known to disappear for periods of time. Heroes and leaders that also had achieved physical superiority either through training or arduous ordeals, then when they came back they were different. Better. And more often than not, *bigger*.

They had undergone a miracle of the universe that no one could replicate, becoming a new race with enhanced abilities based off their original attributes. So the Furyans looked Human, despite some of them having a slightly blue tint to their skin, but inside was where the biggest changes were made, down to the cellular level,

making them stronger, faster, and more resilient than any regular Human could ever hope to be.

That said, this one still wore nanite battle armor as he walked through the energy field, though with his helmet retracted. The air outside the facility had adjusted to fit his biology as soon as he had arrived, pushing away the thick, toxic air of the gas giant in a welcoming gesture to those who wanted to gain access...before it killed them.

He had heard of this place long ago, but hadn't been strong enough to come here at the time. Now that the war in the galactic core had shifted towards an inevitable victory, he had come here ready to fight past the defensive booby-traps and countermeasures and to find the treasure inside...but it seemed all he had to do was knock properly with his newly found Saiolum skills, and it had promptly lowered the main barrier and told him via a hologram of a long dead race called the Progarren. One that he had been unwittingly searching for over the course of millennia without knowing their name until recently. An enemy had valued this place immensely, and after being conquered they had confided that immense power lay within this place and they had sacrificed many search teams to the automated defenses trying to find a way inside.

The Empire had risen to dominance specifically because it did not tolerate such sacrifice. And when it came to dangerous missions, the most skilled went in first...not last. And within the Empire, the most skilled commanded it. Which was why he was here with only one companion, though that sole survivor of a previously destroyed race had not been allowed inside. Only the warlord had passed the Saiolum tests and was granted access.

The black energy field he passed through was also a Saiolum barrier, blocking the energy field created by all biological life...plant, people, and even bacteria...and not allowing the warlord to use his new abilities to see inside. But now that he was past the boundary, he felt a surge of potent Saiolum soak into his body and his senses as his vision opened up into a tiny room lit only with four orange pinpricks of light.

But he could see much further. Both with the Saiolum currents carrying with them information of what was beyond, as well

as the psionic tissues in his body that gave him telekinesis. For one to move objects you had to be able to see them first, and as such he could feel the walls, the floor, the ceiling, and everything around him for several hundred meters...just not what was outside, for the energy field was blocking that ability also.

“Well,” he said in English, which had survived intact as the Empire’s primary commerce language despite the incorporation of thousands of alien races into what had at first been a Human-only Empire. “You giving me a tour or am I on my own?”

There was no response, audio or holographic, so the warlord stepped forward and reached out to touch one of the four glowing lights that seemed to hover just in front of the wall before him. It was solid, but did nothing upon the touch of his armored finger, so he mentally triggered his armor to withdraw, melting as if water until the skin of his right hand was exposed, with the excess material retreating back into the rest of his armor and disappearing within it.

When his Furyan skin touched the light he felt a Saiolum tingle, almost like an electric current. When nothing happened, he reflected it back into the light...at which point it changed from orange to blue and a door to his left ground open, lifting from the floor into the ceiling as he saw a long room beyond filled with holograms.

The warlord walked through into silence as he saw what looked like a museum of aliens along with diagrams of their ships, technology overviews, and navigational charts...some of which detailed sections of other galaxies.

His Empire had never traveled to another galaxy, busy with pacifying this one through a combination of war and diplomacy, but they were wary of threats beyond the Milky Way, with a long trail of ancient relics and stories telling of the downfall of previous civilizations to numerous perils, but what his companion told him of his own person experience worried the warlord more. The Empire had been searching for any and all leads to the demise of ancient civilizations, as well as looking for bits of technology...no matter how damaged...that might exceed their own.

And judging from the holograms displayed here, the warlord was confident that he had just hit the motherlode.

He stepped into the chamber, with his footsteps not echoing and barely making any sound at all to disturb the silence until a voice boomed with power and doom from what seemed every direction.

“You are here to witness the demise of those who came before you...” it said, with the warlord not sensing any person in this room or beyond, suggesting this was the automated systems that he had allowed to scan his language memories previously and not an active intelligence, for it was speaking his own language perfectly. And yet, there was still a very strong and odd Saiolum source not far from here, but it didn’t read like a person.

“...because the same fate is soon in store for you and your civilization. What you see here is a record of those who were exterminated. Each rose to dominance in a fashion that promoted stability over eternal carnage, and each was eventually confronted by enemies from distant galaxies that warred upon them in sequence until one was finally successful in destroying them.”

The warlord didn’t like the sound of that...or the long trail of aliens seen here...but it pretty much matched up with what his companion had told him of their fall. Except there were an alarming number of defeated races staring at him in holo. Far more than he had expected.

“It is not known how many precede this line, but all those who you see here had the foresight to leave behind a warning for others, such as yourself, whose knowledge and power rise to a level to attract the attention of our destroyers. What we learn of them, their methods, their technology, their tactics...we record here for your use, and we ask that if you too shall fall, to preserve this facility and to build others to ensure that the line of knowledge continues in the hope that someday one of our civilizations might weather the storm that will soon be upon you, for the universe itself seems to spite those who rise so high to bring shelter and knowledge to others... while allowing those who commit horrors to roam freely.”

“We do not know how this works, or why, but the methodology is clear. We have seen it on the microscopic level to the macroscopic. Those who protect others are hunted, betrayed, slandered, ignored, or subjected to any other means of interference. It appears to be in the basic genetic instincts of all races in the

universe, yet we cannot find the coding for it in order to erase it. Perhaps it exists in another manner, for one constant that this line of civilizations had discovered, is that the universe is always more complex than we can understand. Do not underestimate that complexity. But be warned, that the greater the protectors rise, the more ill will they receive from the strangest of places.”

The warlord nodded slightly. This wasn't a revelation to him. He was one of the oldest people in the Empire, and had helped found it back when Earth could barely put the tiniest of ships into space, but thanks to an ancient find in Antarctica that had opened up their knowledge beyond just Earth, they'd learned the principles of self-sufficiency early...which was why he and the leadership of the Empire from back then were still alive to this day.

And in all that time, one recurring theme had made itself present...and that was that the good guys always had a target on their back.

“Learn who came before you. How they succeeded...and how they ultimately failed.”

The voice stopped speaking, leaving the warlord to look and learn. He found the interactive controls easy to understand, and skipped through the history of each race to the point where they were destroyed.

He looked for hours, going through their war records at a glance and wishing he had a direct neural access to the systems... which would be far faster...but while the automated interface might have learned his language, the differences in their computer systems were probably too great to overcome so rapidly, plus he couldn't find any visible access ports to plug into with his armor. And right now with everything going so smoothly, he didn't want to try and forcibly break into the consoles and try to hack in...for that might turn the automated defenses against him.

And he really didn't want that headache to deal with right now.

So he browsed, race after race, recognizing bits and pieces of some, but others were from galaxies far from the Milky Way and civilizations that had spanned hundreds of others in limited fashion before they were noticed by the dark forces and destroyed. Others



occupied a single galaxy, and upon fully controlling it they were attacked...and destroyed.

“There’s our punishment for being thorough,” the warlord said, mentally noting their own progress towards total domination...if not actual possession...of this galaxy.

He continued to look through them all, with 38 races in total going back in time 14.8 billion years, which confirmed how rare it was a civilization rose to their level...yet the Sha’kier were not listed here. His companion was the last member of that race, disembodied and permanently melded with the Saiolum itself, else he would have been destroyed as well. But there was no mention of his multi-galaxy empire...which made the warlord wonder how many more advanced races had never found the data cache to warn them about what was coming.

He continued down the hall to the end, then doubled back and resisted the urge to stay here and study more. There were 3 more orbs of light in the entry chamber and that Saiolum signature was still there...and he wanted to find out what it was.

A press of another orb didn’t answer that question, but led to a doorway into almost an identical hall, except this one detailed a different set of races.

“You have seen your forbearers, now look upon the face of your enemies. They do not invade with the same ones each time, but several have appeared multiple times. Others only once. The strongest do not come first, and each has at least one defining strength that you must counter in order to survive. Eventually an enemy comes through whose strength will counter your weakness, at which point it will break you and the rest will consume you. We have learned some of those that have come. Learned from their wrecked ships, their dead, and what little information we could get from prisoners taken. With each defeat we learn more, and the longer you can last against their assaults, the more you will learn. If you find your civilization outmatched, endeavor to hold on to your wits during the last days in order to discover more secrets about them, then pass it on to the next civilization to arise as those before you have done.”

The voice fell silent again, and the warlord walked much more briskly through the holograms of his future enemies. He recognized 12 of them from the memories of his companion, but there were hundreds documented here that he would have to go through later, for that Saiolum signature was pulsing subtle waves, and he was fairly sure it was what was filling this facility with the thick Saiolum energy atmosphere that remained invisible to all except those with the developed sense to see it.

The warlord walked through the ranks of enemies, some which had names displayed, others did not, wanting to lay eyes on each of them before continuing on...until he came to one that he had already come into contact with.

The Neofan.

His jaw clenched with renewed anger. The Empire's history with them was millennia long. They owned another galaxy, one which was in the process of falling to other enemies, and through an inter-galactic travel network maintained by a mutual defense alliance called the 'Bond of Resistance,' they had evacuated part of their people into another galaxy that even now they were in the process of conquering to make a new home for themselves.

His Empire had refused to join that alliance, and had actually drawn several of its members into establishing colonies in the Milky Way and cementing new loyalties that the Neofan and others did not like, but could do little to stop except deny them access to the travel network. It wasn't the only way to get to other galaxies, for most used the massive black holes in the galactic core as gigantic springboards to propel themselves at speeds capable of traversing the void using their anti-grav engines...dangerous as that was without proper maps...and even now the Empire was taking possession of those giant gravity wells, referred to as 'gateways' by most...making the snub of the Neofan irrelevant in the long term, though the warlord would have liked to send some scouts through the safer travel network to see what was out there. But that would come in time and securing this galaxy first was the greater priority.

Or perhaps, in light of what he was seeing here, the greater folly.



One of the Neofan Houses had struck a bargain with the Empire to bring all their people here to establish colonies in three of the massive Temples the Bond of Resistance had constructed over millions of years. Each of which was a Dyson Sphere centered around an artificial star and containing the landmass of thousands of planets, all hidden from view and tucked safely away from any gravity wells significant enough to allow reliable travel to. The Empire had found and occupied most of these Temples in the Milky Way, but had allowed House Atriark to inhabit three in a deal that had resulted in mutual advantage.

The other Houses had to leave behind large chunks of their population during their evacuation, as the travel network could only handle a small number of ships at a time. By striking a deal with the Empire, House Atriark had succeeded in evacuating all of their people from their doomed galaxy while the rest of the Neofan had to choose who got evacuated and who was left behind to die.

Not to mention all the servant races the Neofan didn't bother to even warn before bailing on them.

The Empire had hoped to civilize House Atriark, which was a challenge considering most Neofan were older than the warlords, and they possessed a history and technology superior in many aspects, but progress *was* being made diplomatically until one day the leader of House Atriark went missing, presumably assassinated by his own people, and his replacement quickly launched an invasion of several other Temples, beginning a war against the Empire that was currently in a quiet stalemate after the warlords had turned the tide and began pressing back.

Travel between the Temples was the problem, and they simply couldn't get to House Atriark now that they were blocking the travel lines inside this galaxy that led to them. The original leader of House Atriark had not so long ago been discovered, marooned on a planet in another war zone the Empire was fighting in near the Core. He has managed to survive alone, for 3 millennia in the hell hole they had left him in, only to eventually find a way to escape, after which he had stumbled across an Empire convoy which he contacted and arranged transit to the Director of the Empire, who

had unwittingly succeeded in turning him to the lightside...which was what had resulted in his people turning against him.

The Director then gave all the Empire's Neofan prisoners to him, and the former Reignor of House Atriark had led them to begin a civil war to retake possession of what was rightly his, with the majority of the Neofan living in another galaxy beyond the view of the Empire and probably unaware that any of this was happening.

But now, seeing them listed here as one of the races that had helped destroy the previous civilizations, he had even more reason to hate them.

The warlord pushed those thoughts away for later and headed back to try the next orange light, finding it led into another museum-like gallery, except this hallway was open to the air, with niches set into either side that went back a considerable distance... and inside those niches were not holograms, but actual artifacts of technology that did not match that of the facility.

"What you see before you," the automated voice said as it returned with a boom that seemed to defy the silence of this place, "are remnants of our destroyers. Pieces of technology that we have not fully been able to understand, but which we have preserved here for future study by those that come after us. Our own technology is detailed within the pillars, for your use in fortifying your civilization, but it was insufficient to protect us. We hope that by cumulative advancement, one day a civilization will grow strong enough, and wise enough to understand the technology you see before you."

The voice left it at that, and what the warlord was looking at was an assortment of small ships and vehicles along with wreckage of larger ones. Each appeared vastly different from the others, and the chamber appeared to have no end, but rather than take his time to browse he actually ran through them, looking for something in particular as he made his way through this level...then took the stairs up to the next, and the next, and the next, searching through 18 levels of preserved hardware until he finally stopped at what looked like the shattered remnants of white crystal.

"Good for you," the warlord said, addressing the Progarren who, according to the display markings, had added this to the gallery during their demise. Their war had seen the emergence of what was

believed to be the race that directed all the other races that had destroyed the Sha'kier. A machine race similar to another the Empire had found in near stasis within the Milky Way as a few of them hid out to survive a toxic radiation to their unique form of mechanical biology. It was theorized that this crystalline race was of the same making, but with only stories and memories from his companion, they'd never had anything to analyze to confirm it. And as far as the Gahana were concerned, they were older than old and had said they never encountered another like themselves.

But this...this debris matched the visuals he'd seen of the unknown enemy's ships. Living ships, fully artificial, and spawned by the galaxy who knew when. They were said to have weapons that largely disabled other machines...machines that the Empire relied upon for war, though the Progarren had fought and killed some of them using a form of biological weaponry. He knew of this from his companion, who had viewed it happen from the Saiolum where he could not physically interact with the galaxy, only watch in horror as the same destruction that had taken his race repeated itself on others.

The Progarren had been able to fight back because of their biological technology, but the warlord was more interesting in seeing what this machine race's weapon actually was...and hopefully developing a countermeasure for it. But was he lucky enough for this debris to actually contain it?

He had no way of knowing from visual inspection, for it was nanite based, like his armor, and appeared to be a form of stone. White stone that he knew would glow in a rainbow of colors when active...or perhaps he should say alive. This was obviously dead. He would have been able to feel the presence of a person's Core otherwise, and there was no one here but him.

Yet there was still that Saiolum signature elsewhere in the facility.

The warlord knew he could come back to all of this later, so he returned to the entrance chamber and touched the final orb, with it opening to a thin hallway with no lights except at the end, which was very far away. He began walking, looking for side doors along the way but finding nothing other than dark green stone-like walls...

but when he got to the end the bright light opened up into a massive chamber large enough to hold a small starship.

And in the center of it all was a massive...tree.

## 2

The warlord stood beside it on a platform that was midway up the trunk, tilting his head back to look at the glowing lights decorating it...except as he zoomed in with his enhanced eyesight he saw the nodules were not artificial, but growths that were bioluminescent.

He walked to the edge of the platform and looked down what had to be at least 200 meters to the exposed roots below. They fanned out beneath the trunk and seemed to disappear in a haze near their ends as the enormous tree appeared to be floating above the floor even further down, suspended in some type of energy field...except that the warlord, and his armor's sensors, couldn't detect any such energy. The tree base seemed to defy physics, and that wasn't the weirdest part about it.

The tree had no leaves, with the branches instead feathering out with translucent needles in bunches at various points. Other places had the nodules of light, while inside the warlord could sense Saiolum currents flowing out, as if the tree itself was producing far more than a small planet full of people and plants could ever hope to. He could sense it bouncing off the exterior shield and crisscrossing in ripples back and forth at an alarming rate. Without it being able to leave, it should keep getting stronger and stronger, for Saiolum didn't disintegrate...at least not that he knew of...so what was happening to it?

The warlord took a slow breath and extended his senses out, mentally riding the currents and following them to a point above the tree near the peak of the chamber...and there they disappeared.

A slight jump got him moving, after which he used his biological Yen'mer nodules to create anti-grav within his body, causing him to fly up through the branches until he eventually got above the tree. There he finally spotted the point where the invisible energy was disappearing, and he probed with his other senses as well as his armor.

"Saiolum technology," he said to himself. "Probably feeding that containment shield. Now what kind of a tree are you?"

“It is a power point in the galaxy,” the voice of the facility said, answering his rhetorical question. “There are many such hidden treasures to be found. The Progarren discovered this one and 9 others in different galaxies, all hidden from view in facilities such as this to hide their Saiolum presence. They do not record who created the blinds, but this one was built by them and incorporated the war legacy of the other races into it, hoping that the next to find it could use the power of the Okala better than they did to fight your future enemies.”

“Okala? That’s not one of my words.”

“You have no direct translation, so I am inserting the Progarren word.”

“Then what is an Okala?”

“A place of healing. A place of growth. Or a place of horrors. Proper use of the tree makes it slowly grow larger. Abuse of its power makes it shrivel, and will eventually destroy it. If it is destroyed it will randomly respawn in the galaxy at an unknown place and an unknown time. For this reason it is closely guarded and cultivated in order to increase its potential.”

“I’m guessing it does something other than produce Saiolum?”

“You are correct. Upon touching its branches, your mind will be temporarily expanded with knowledge of biological construction. While maintaining this contact you can explore many riddles of the universe and solve unfathomable problems if you record your findings. Once you release contact, most of the information will leave your mind.”

“I understand,” the warlord said, for he used a similar mechanical technology to temporarily expand his brainpower by melding with a massive computer to assist him in large scale naval battles where he could fly thousands of drone ships merely by thought. “Does it matter where I touch it?”

“Anywhere but the roots will gain you knowledge.”

“What happens if I touch the roots?”

“Nothing.”

“What are the roots connected to?”

“Some aspect of the universe that cannot be quantified. Near their end the roots cannot be touched, for your limbs will pass through them. Extensive research has been done to explain this phenomena, all without success.”

“Well, I do like mysteries,” the warlord said, flying down to the top of the tree and picking out a branch. He gently reached out, withdrawing the armor from his hand once again, and wrapped his fingers around the firm, but dentable material as his fingertips seemed to sink into it a bit.

Suddenly his mind was swept away in a sea of knowledge, so much his vision blurred for a moment and his Yen’mer cut out, with him falling into a handhold before he gathered himself and got lifting force back into his legs and flew his torso up even with the branch again as he clung to it throughout.

He’d experienced something else like this before. A gift from a race of nefarious dragons that had since left the galaxy with the Empire giving them a swift kick in the tails as they left in the care of the Neofan who took them where he didn’t know. They had given him a sword, long before the Empire had become the dominant force in the galaxy, and when he held that sword his mind had been granted detailed knowledge of their greatest enemy.

But a warning from a friend had caused him to discard it, fearing it had some form of mind control imbedded within it that would turn him into their pawn. The warlord had been prudent enough to chuck the sword into a star to be rid of it, but the feeling back then was similar to this...except there was far more knowledge here.

It was as if he was seeing the universe’s blueprints for all biological life displayed before him. He could see down to the molecular level how every cell in his body worked, and when he mentally zoomed in to various tissues he was able to get some answers to his Furyan upgrades that the Empire’s best scientists had not been able to work out...but that was only the beginning of it.

He could see things that currently were not. Upgrades that could be made to his body, natural advancement beyond his current training level, even where he could accept entirely new body parts for a myriad of uses, including warfare.



That brought a thought about the Neofan and their prominences that looked like featherless wings or sticks coming off their backs. He'd been told they were artificially made and grafted into their genome...and right before him he saw what they were, in a generic sense, and knew how they worked.

He also saw that if he brought one of them here, he could use the Okala tree to alter them as he wanted. He could bring anyone here and upgrade them, or heal them.

Then he also realized something else. He could use the tree to torture and mutilate them as well, for he had full power of biology here, through the tree, and he could bend it to his will as he saw fit... including microscopic particles that could deliberately target his enemy's genetic code. Pinpoint biological warfare, or he could create ravenous bacteria that would consume everything on the surface of a planet down to the bedrock.

He could create horrors if he wished, or he could use the tree to do magnificent things...and suddenly the Progarren's mastery of biological technology was no longer a mystery. They had used this Okala, and probably the others, to craft what they needed, and along the way learned enough to advance their mastery beyond anything else the other races in the nearby galaxies possessed.

And that was probably also why they had been able to destroy some of the synthoid ships before their civilization was wiped out.

The warlord wanted to soak this in and explore, and the first thing he checked was if he could make people. Whether it be an ant or a dinosaur or a Human, people all had a Core inside them. A pilot controlling the biological body...but no, this tree could not make people. Only biological machines, such as plants and bacteria. But it could alter existing people in a wide variety of ways.

He wasn't currently sick, and he didn't want to experiment on his own body making changes. He was the product of millennia of hard and consistent training to continually improve and upgrade his body through natural adaptation...and he didn't want to mess that up by playing around with his genetic code here. That was a newb mistake that he was far too experienced to make.

“Useful, isn’t it?” a different voice said as the warlord suddenly lost his link to the tree despite still holding onto it. He turned his head to the left where he saw another Furyan floating beside him.

“Where did you come from?” he demanded.

“I’m afraid we only have a limited amount of time to talk, Paul, so I’ll be quick. You’ll notice if you move your arms you’re no longer connected to your body.”

The warlord moved his free hand while still grasping the tree branch in the other...only to see a ghostly image of it move instead, with him unable to control or interact with his physical one.

“What the hell?”

“You’re safe,” the other Furyan said, “but your mind is currently pulled into my plane of existence and accelerated as much as possible. Time is a constant that cannot be altered, but our perception of it can be, so I’m stretching our limited conversation out as much as your mind can handle despite your Sav upgrades. And yes, I can read your mind. I know everything you know so this conversation can take place faster. The universe only allows me a short window of opportunity to talk with you, for one of my functions is to facilitate the Endgame.”

The warlord’s bewilderment as he moved his arms and legs away from his body yet didn’t move anywhere disappeared at the word ‘Endgame,’ with his focus narrowing sharply.

“I’ve been delaying it,” the other Furyan said in a voice that sounded strangely like Liam Neeson’s. “I can’t stop it, nor start it. It’s a function of the universe, but I was hoping to stall long enough to give your civilization more time to grow as well as hoping you would make it here before I could no longer hold it back. It’s happening now, in a few moments, and I’m your assigned guide.”

“Who are you?” he asked, not recognizing him.

“Not Furyan. I’m appearing in an image of your own race, the same way my guide appeared to me very long ago. You see, I’m just like you. I was the chosen one of a Paragon race that triggered an Endgame. I was pulled out of my body to have an equally short conversation before the new synthoid race was crafted. Then when I eventually died later, I was appointed by the universe to a similar

position, but in a realm far beyond the one I was born into. And you will be given the same position should you die, though I hope that doesn't happen anytime soon. You've got a lot of work to do."

The warlord's mind raced, but he was genetically engineered to think faster than a Human, so he put together the puzzle pieces quickly...including the voice that was probably pulled from his old movie memory...but he was still lacking many critical datapoints.

"Alright, then *what* are you?"

"I'm someone that can never touch anything physical," he said, beginning to pace back and forth while walking on air as if there was a floor there. "I can't speak to anyone or do anything. I'm invisible to everyone, much like your friend Azoro...except I'm not in the Saiolum. I don't have a word for it, but a separate plane is the best description I can give. I was put here with no instructions, only knowledge, but first I had to sit in what I call a 'gallery.' I sat there for eons, watching events play out in tens of thousands of realms. Watching the successes, the failures, and the horrors the universe plays with. I can see galaxies if I wish, or zoom all the way in to the subatomic particles of anything and everything in my realm. This sight is part of my powers, but my curse is I cannot interact with any of it. Not directly. Try it. As long as you're here, you can use the same sight, but be quick."

The warlord's mind suddenly knew what to do, and he stepped all the way out of his body and walked on that invisible floor until he stood next to...whoever this was...and looked at the tree. Suddenly his sight zoomed in, and not just to what was visible. With a little alteration he could see into it, and through it, and through the walls of this facility out into the gas giant beyond.

He went further, able to see the entire planet, then pulled back as if he was flying in a remote camera that he could position wherever he wanted. Soon he could see the entire star system, then flew out further until it was shrunk down to a mote of light as hazy clouds formed around him from the other stars as he went bigger and bigger, eventually looking down on the top of his saucer-shaped galaxy from over a hundred lightyears away.

With a blink he was back here looking at the Furyan, and while he wanted to try to zoom in and go the opposite way, he

remembered what had been said about a time limit on the conversation.

“Tell me what I need to know about the Endgame.”

The man nodded, appreciating the alacrity. “In a few moments the universe will present you with the ability to craft a synthoid race as you choose. Part of it will be automatic and based off the attributes of your civilization, but a lot is customizable on your part, after which they will learn and grow a great deal more during their developmental years from you and whoever else you have teaching them. They are designed to cement your civilization in the universe, because you have succeeded where most fail. You have created stability without stagnation, along with a lot of other prerequisites I don’t waste time on, but the final requirement was achieved when your civilization began training people to use the Saiolum. That pushed you across the finish line, and I’ve been holding the process back since then because the shield that contains the Saiolum here will also shield it from the Tri’to.”

The warlord immediately knew what that meant. It was the life energy of the synthoids, whereas Saiolum was the life energy of biologicals. Right now there were no living synthoids in the galaxy that were not in protective stasis because a massive generator near the galactic core was producing a toxic form of the Tri’to that would eventually kill any synthoid that was exposed to it for too long.

“You want the Endgame to occur here so they’ll be safe?”

“Yes,” he said with a growl. “That toxicity is not supposed to be here. They put it here deliberately to kill new Endgame races, among other things.”

“Who?”

“You already know them. You saw them in Azoro’s memories. They’re the race of synthoids that took the form of Heidoor,” he said, referring to the category of life forms that live in the vacuum of space or within the high pressures of stars or black holes...pretty much everywhere Humans can’t live without protection. “They were also spawned in an Endgame scenario to be the Vanguard for the Paragons that triggered their creation. You need to understand, the Vanguard are programmed with very tight restraints. They still have free will, but they have to really work to violate their programming

and exceed their instincts. The universe created them this way to solidify the successful civilizations and give them a backbone that would be 100% loyal and reliable.”

“A stabilizing rod?”

“Yes, but more than that. They’re supposed to be a pair. The Vanguard and the Paragon. Together they’re meant to take the civilization up to the next level, and the trust between them is a requirement.”

“Next level?”

“By now you’ve already surmised that the universe is spawning races and having them conflict with each other in some form of experiment. I’ve never been told by the universe what’s going on, but it is looking for something, and this experiment is occurring so many times over even I can’t count them. My realm includes 4,382 major galaxies along with more than 350,000 minor ones. You can do the math on how many races and people that involves. But know that while I was in the gallery observing others like me guide their realms, I saw tens of thousands of other realms, and I doubt that was more than a fraction of what there are. I don’t know how big it is, but the parts I have seen indicate this experiment is beyond massive, and has been ongoing for trillions of years at the minimum.”

“How old are you?”

“I was 803,226 years old when I died. Since then I haven’t exactly had a clock to measure with, but let’s say 500 billion, give or take.”

The warlord’s expression seemed to deflate.

“Always young no matter how old you get,” the other Furyan said, commenting on Paul’s thoughts.

“What’s it looking for?”

The other man pointed a finger at him, as if he’d hit on something important.

“I can only speculate, but I think it wants advancement that’s stable. You’ve already seen how the more advanced races will implode if their young aren’t trained properly. The more advanced the body and mind they are born into, the more difficult it is. Grow too powerful and your civilization will collapse. I think this is one of the things it’s experimenting on, but not the only one. There’s a

cruelness to the galaxy, without a doubt, but there's something else in its motives that I haven't completely come to understand, but it does reward the lightside. The Endgame is here because of that, and I know from knowledge given to me that it didn't use to exist. It was added after a long period of experimentation and ultimately failure. The Vanguard are meant to stabilize the successes before they are destroyed through their own weight or by external factors."

"Added when?"

"Before my time. They've been around so long that I've seen 118 Endgames in my tenure here, and yours will be the 119<sup>th</sup>."

"How many of them are still alive?"

"Four. You've already met the Gahana. Their brethren are out beyond the growing list of galaxies that have toxicity generators in them. They along with the Vri'ki are leading a proxy war against the T'fen, and the Merkin are doing the same on the other side of their territory, but they know nothing of the others."

"How many galaxies do the T'fen control?"

"5,312."

The warlord rolled his eyes, realizing they'd been pulled into a much larger conflict than even his worst case scenarios had anticipated.

"You have a chance," the other Furyan said. "A small one, but this is not a hopeless fight."

"The tree?"

"You will need it, along with any other points of power you can find and obtain, but it won't save you. The Endgame race you are about to create will be your greatest asset...but they will be vulnerable early. How long it takes them to reach maturity is up to you. You can create a fast and limited one, or a slow growing and more powerful one, but all have their period of juvenility. And during that period, you must defend them before they can defend you, because their creation will send out a multi-tiered energy pulse that even this facility cannot shield. It will travel between galaxies, and those with the knowledge to sense it will know an Endgame is occurring. And those who hate the lightside will know where their enemy lies, and they will come to destroy you in a chain of invasions beyond what the others recorded here suffered."

“Wonderful. How long do we have to hold out?”

“As long as it takes, but you’ll measure the time in centuries.”

“At least you didn’t say millennia,” the warlord said sarcastically. “Do you have a name?”

He smirked coyly. “In your language my name is Zeus.”



# 3

The warlord raised an eyebrow. “Is that a metaphor or actually your name?”

“I have many names in many races.”

“Yet you can’t talk to any of them.”

“No, I can’t.”

“Then...”

“You already know the answer.”

The warlord thought about it for a moment, then the only possible conclusion struck him.

“Preborn knowledge?”

“Exactly.”

“Is that your doing?”

“No. That’s Artemis’s work. I’m the only one of my kind in this realm, but there are others lesser than me that I have a loose authority over. There are 72 here, more in other realms, less in some, and many that have no guides whatsoever. I saw in the gallery how bad it can be when there are no guides, so while I am frustrated at my limitations, I do not delude myself as being useless. Each of the 72 others have a unique roll appointed by the universe. Artemis gives knowledge to those the universe selects, and you are not one of them. How much information and when she grants it is up to her, but she always works to improve the realm rather than destabilize it.”

“So you talk with them?”

“Rarely, but yes. Artemis is also responsible for the Okala, but she cannot withdraw it should those with bad intent find it. Your civilization has to protect it.”

“What do they have to do with the Endgame?”

“Nothing directly. I am the only one involved, and I am here to make it clear you only get one shot at this. The choices you are about to make will be permanent, so choose wisely. There are many options, and you cannot incorporate them all into your Vanguard. They must be synthoid, but you will see the options before you soon.

Do not choose quickly. Your body is safe here, for I see no enemies that can harm you while you are in this plane. Be meticulous and design them as best you can. They cannot replace your civilization, they are meant to upgrade it, so choose the roles you wish them to play. These choices will be thrust upon you soon, and you cannot delay or consult with others. You are the chosen one. You will decide for your civilization.”

“Lucky me,” the warlord scoffed as he saw Zeus grimace, then a halo of white lightning encircled them both, forming what looked like a protective orb.

“It is time...but we are not through yet,” he said with obvious effort. “There is more that you must know. The universe screwed up, Paul. The Vanguard are programmed never to war on each other, even if their Paragons order them to. They’re also programmed never to harm their Paragons, even if they should fall from the lightside and embrace the darkness. The Vanguard will carry on in their place and attempt to contain and rehabilitate the Paragons, but they cannot destroy them.”

“You said the T’fen are warring against the Gahana and others?”

“Not directly. They are using intermediaries...the enemy races you have seen here are a small portion of their assembled forces. The other Vanguard are trying to get to the T’fen and kill them, but they can’t find them to engage, and the T’fen run from any possible encounter as if that part of their twisted programming is still functional.”

The warlord’s gut sank when he inferred the implications of that. “They’re not following commands, are they?”

“I don’t know why, but they turned on and killed their Paragons. That shouldn’t have been possible.”

“If they have free will it’s always possible.”

Zeus shook his head. “You’ll see why when you construct yours, but it’s not supposed to be possible. There is, however, a failsafe in the Vanguard the universe put in them, so maybe it expected this somehow. If a Vanguard ever betrays their duty, the other Vanguard will step in and stop them. Those that would never fight one another will fight in case of a betrayal. That’s why the

others are trying to get to the T'fen, and the T'fen are trying to stop them by creating a massive buffer zone of servants and toxic barriers, as well as trying to prevent any more Vanguard's from rising...for they would immediately join the others and try to destroy the T'fen for what they've done."

"Are all of the T'fen's Paragons gone?"

"Yes," Zeus said, forcing more lightning around them in order to hold back the Endgame a little longer against the universe's will. "They destroyed every last one, and I could do nothing to stop it."

"But you saw it all happen?"

"I can see everywhere and everything in my realm, multiple places at once, just not everywhere at once. And know that my realm does not include the dark places between galaxies. I can see little there."

"Someone else's realm then?"

"Yes, but not something I could see in the gallery either. I can see a little into neighboring realms, but I cannot see or speak with their guides. The darklight guides I have had limited contact with, for our realms somehow overlap. The Progarren existed in both places, but the T'fen and their servants did not pursue them there. When they conquered the Progarren they changed them, degraded them, and enslaved them into their service, but they never went to the darklight that I know of."

"Are you saying there may be Progarren still there?"

"No. I'm saying that there may be some advantage for you there that I cannot see. The universe began with starlight, and crafted people to live in it or its effects. At some point it added darklight, between the galaxies, between our realms, but it was before my time. I have knowledge of many things I did not witness. Knowledge that I was granted when I assumed this position rather than face the mystery of death. I can choose it if I wish. This is not a prison for me. I can also choose to abandon this form and retake my former body, losing most of my knowledge and return to the physical plane...but not in my old home. I would have to enter this realm that I lead, and benefit or suffer from its current condition. All Zeuses have the same option, and we cannot see what lies beyond death," he

said, answering questions the warlord had quickly before he had a chance to ask them, given that he could read his thoughts.

“The Zeuses of the darklight realms are called Hades, and there are three of them that overlap mine geographically. They are inferior in construction, for where starlight goes darklight is destroyed. That is why you can pass through the darkness between galaxies without being affected. To interact with them you must use the Progarren’s methods. I do not know if the rules for the Hades are the same as mine. They are completely foreign to me, and when we have interacted it has always felt bizarre. The Vanguarders are the universe’s newest creation that I am aware. They are the icelight, and so few exist there is still a lot about them that even chosen ones like us do not understand. The universe may very well create another if it deems it necessary, but I know from my knowledge and experience and instincts that the universe screwed up here with the T’fen. I don’t know how, but it was not my doing, and this realm along with a neighboring one are suffering for it.”

“The T’fen cross your border?”

“Yes, and while they are traitors they are still somewhat following their programming and fighting other threats that you needn’t concern yourself with now,” Zeus added as he felt the warlord’s curiosity perk up another notch. “They are twisted, and are using the great powers given to them to pursue an agenda I cannot fully grasp. I cannot read minds except for yours, here, and the others have limitations of their own. Together we cannot understand why they have done this, and though you are not supposed to know, if this failure of the universe is to be undone, I need your help to do it.”

Zeus groaned again, and the halo of lightning around them both shrunk, as if the universe was winning an arm wrestling match inch by inch.

“The T’fen know much. Perhaps their Paragon’s chosen one told them about me before he was killed, or perhaps they have other sources of information. But one of my greatest tools to influence my realm was taken from me, and only recently have I got a tiny portion of it back thanks to your Empire and Azoro. Thank him for me when you tell them of this. The Jedein are my servants, though they do not

take direct orders. I can download detailed genetic codes into their biological database and encourage them to use them to create new races. Races that will counter negative effects as I try to balance the realm towards unity over carnage. The T'fen deliberately enslaved the Jedein and altered them beyond my ability to control. When you triggered your captives to reset, only then did I regain a few pathways of influence. Please continue to restore as many Jedein as you can."

"We will," the warlord said, sensing more puzzle pieces come together.

"I can't fix the universe's mistake, Paul. But your Empire might be able to. A lot that is wrong in this realm is due to them embracing The Natural Order and seeking to preserve the carnage. I am sorry for this burden to be put on you, but this was beyond my ability to control and never should have happened. I and the other guides will help where we can, as we have been, but the T'fen are well placed and dug in so tight the other Vanguards can't get to them."

"What happened to the Gahana's Paragons?"

"They were killed by others, not the T'fen or their servants, before the Gahana developed enough to take solid form. Their Paragons placed them in a safe location as they fought off the darkside races that were drawn to the Endgame. They didn't survive, but the Gahana did, and that is why the Gahana are incomplete. They never received their final training, nor can you or other Paragons give it to them. They are forever wounded, forever incomplete, but you can offer those marooned here some answers that will help them greatly. The other Gahana are beyond your reach. This galaxy is well within the toxic zone, but it only reaches so far from each galaxy center. You can hide them in the Bond of Resistance transport network. Take your Vanguard there after you develop sufficient shielding. Your Empire is already sending out orders for a resumed attack on the Neofan. Defeat them and you will gain access to the network. That access will allow you to fully develop the Vanguard out there. This place can only temporarily shelter them."

The lightning field collapsed again, but Zeus pressed back with an increased amount, buying a little more time.

“The universe does not interfere, and I am only allowed to influence. You and the others living in the realm are those that must decide your own fates. You do not deserve the T’fen plague, but it is there none the less and the universe will not correct it. I do not know if this is another experiment, or will be treated as such, but I know it was not supposed to happen. I have never seen another Vanguard betray their Paragons. It is unthinkable, but something occurred. Trust your own Vanguard, but watch for the variation if it should happen again. You cannot afford to distrust them. Trust is what solidifies the Vanguard to your civilization. You decide what they are, you mold them here and in development. Embrace that bond, but keep your eyes open. Even I cannot see what happened to the T’fen.”

“Can you give the Jedein genetic codes for biological machines rather than people?”

Zeus strained under the stress of keeping this moment going on longer than the universe willed, but he could still read Paul’s mind clearly. “Yes. Very clever. I will forever watch you. Speak and I will hear it.”

“Does the accumulation of preborn mean anything?” Paul asked one last question based on a Neofan belief.

“Yes. But only Artemis knows why,” Zeus said, collapsing to a knee as the lightning cage came down and almost hit the warlord in his head. “Choose wisely, Paul. The fate of our realm may depend on the Vanguard you are about to craft...”

Suddenly the lightning field totally collapsed and Zeus disappeared. As did the tree behind him and the facility. He was floating in a white light that had no source and no temperature, nor did he have a body image that he could move. He was only a point of view as knowledge suddenly came streaming into his mind...

# 4

The warlord immediately knew he had options...lots of options. The Endgame scenario was not the same for every civilization that made it to this level, and the success or failure of the Vanguard race he was about to create may very well depend on the choices he was about to make.

But that didn't bother him. Pressure was something he had long ago become immune to. He preferred being the one who could control the outcome rather than someone sitting on the sidelines watching helpless as others controlled his fate. So there was no trepidation of the vast sea of options before him, rather he sensed great opportunity as well as an unlimited amount of time granted to him to make his choices.

As well as the understanding that this would only happen once, and what he did here could not be undone later.

He thought about his body, still floating next to the Okala tree. If time was only slowed, then he was still vulnerable there...but inside the facility he should be safe, and the space outside was guarded by the auto-defenses as well as the fleet he had a safe distance away. Nobody would be attacking him in this vulnerable position, so he decided he was safe not to rush and dove into the task before him.

His civilization was massive, but in his mind he could see every race in it. Every bit of technology, biology, and geography, as if it had been cataloged by the universe and was now laid out before him as templates to use if he wished. He could also see similar templates for neighboring races, enemies, and others.

He reached for the Neofan one, seeing it there almost in a haze, but in mind's eye it turned red, indicating it was off limits.

So it seemed he could only use templates his civilization possessed, and not those encountered. Yet the fact that they were here for him to see suggested that whatever his options were, they were not *all* the options in the universe. He had a lot to work with, but only what his empire had 'unlocked' over their long history...which



on the universal scale was painfully short, and the sea of hazy, red templates stretched far beyond his vision, almost as if he was getting a peak at the universe's view of everything.

And perhaps he was.

But with most of it off limits he focused on the blue and green before him, trying to differentiate the two. He mentally touched one image of a Calavari, an early alien race added to the empire, and the blue image expanded into a nova-like blast of smaller pieces of information, some of which were also red...

He looked around, picking some to delve deeper into and finding more facets beneath as he finally worked out the selection paradigm. Red wasn't just things beyond the Empire, but it was *everything* that was off limits. The Calavari had a long history prior to being saved from annihilation and annexed into the Empire, and those aspects of their history, temperament, and biology that the warlord's civilization had not utilized were not accessible now.

Their inherent, mind-blinding rage of the four-armed bruisers was a template blocked, for the Calavari living in the Empire were taught as infants how to utilize and tune their emotions in order to obtain greater power. Embracing the instinctive rage was something only a fool or a newb would consider...and because of that, those base instincts were not applicable to the Vanguard he was about to create.

This new race really was going to be patterned off of his Empire, not as it was believed to be, but as it actually was. Fortunately lying wasn't part of their culture, but they did keep secrets.

The first choice the warlord made for his new Vanguard race was to obscure secrets and to make them bluntly honest. If secrets needed to be kept, then he and his peers could keep them from the Vanguard, but he wanted them to be an open book for both the Empire and those they would encounter in the course of their duties.

Duties...he had a great many options there, including making them defenders for the entire Empire.

If he'd had a face right now he would have laughed. He knew other races would jump at the chance to kick back and relax while giving a race of synthoids responsibility for all military duties, but the

Empire fought its own battles and wasn't going to shove that off on anyone else. Especially a bunch of newbs, no matter how advanced they were.

No, he needed them to fill a niche, but which one? The Empire prided itself on being able to fight in all 5 divisions of warfare...aerial, aquatic, mechs, commandos, and naval. The only place they couldn't go was inside high mass gravity wells, such as big stars and black holes. Well, they could dip their toes into them with enough tech, but there were other lifeforms out there that lived in those places without the need for technology. Some could also fly through space, others needed the high pressure and energy environment and would die if they left it, but both were pretty much outside the Empire's jurisdiction.

But not completely. They had the Uriti, which was a race of space dwelling monsters that they had befriended, and the warlord sensed that he could craft a race of synthoids capable of living and patrolling down there, able to get at the enemies they couldn't effectively fight in that environment.

Yet they weren't a threat. They were hiding down there, or lived down there, and if they wanted to bother the Empire they had to come out. He didn't want to waste this new race on something that wasn't really needed that badly.

But then a different set of templates emerged, not belonging to any piece of the Empire, but generic choices. He could craft one monolithic race, or he could subdivide it in a multitude of ways. The base programming would have to be identical, but their bodies and auxiliary equipment could vary.

Which meant he could have different divisions of this Vanguard race built to do different things...but he'd have to choose that right now, unless he wanted a flexible platform.

As soon as he explored that, he realized that was what the Paragons who'd created the Gahana had gone for. Their physical matrix was that of technological shapeshifters who could learn and pattern after what they found, mimic it, and become it...but at a cost. They could never be as good as a single static form, and that was the tradeoff for their flexibility.

The warlord didn't need that. He needed specialists...but to do what, exactly?

Zeus had told him of the other synthoids, and he already knew of the technology interfering weaponry that at least one of them possessed. He searched for it, unable to access but could still roughly see the T'fen. He could see many Vanguard, enough to learn a little about them and how they were different, but he couldn't copy them or their weaponry. However, he didn't have to, since he personally possessed a biological weapon that interfered with technology. One that the Empire still couldn't understand how it worked.

On his body, it covered his spine. A gift from the ascension process when he had gone from Human to Furyan. His fellow warlords got different ones, some similar, but his was unique to him and him alone. His children had that particular genetic code suppressed until they could earn it one day, but also because he still didn't fully understand it. He knew how to use it, and when active his own armor wouldn't work, but it would also shut down most technology within a radius of him. Other technology it would interfere with and slow down without completely inhibiting.

And because he had that, his Empire had the option before him to give the new Vanguard race a string of different weaponry based off that concept.

But the warlord did the reverse, choosing to craft a defense against it so that this Vanguard could not be so disabled. That was an option, but in choosing it he lost the ability to craft the weaponry. It seemed the Vanguard couldn't cram every option into them, and choosing one path would shut off others.

Strength was more than offense, and armoring over weaknesses...especially this weakness...provided longevity. And for warriors who were over a hundred thousand years old, avoiding the one shot kill was paramount to their continued existence. That's why they wore full body armor and fought in naval combat primarily using drone warships flown remotely. They couldn't allow themselves to trade lives with their enemies...not only because it was immoral, but because they'd lose to civilizations that spammed population into battle only to grow reinforcements in mere months to replace them.

The Empire had defeated many such enemies by becoming so good and resilient that they could outlast the swarms, but if the T'fen could swoop in and disable the Empire's forces and kill them on the spot, then that was a challenge that the warlord did not want to have to tackle alone. He needed the Vanguard to counter the T'fen more than anything, so that's what he went about doing in the choices to come.

The T'fen were warships themselves, but he didn't want the...wait, what was he going to call them? Did he choose or were they given a name by Zeus or someone else?

He searched around and found the naming was up to him, but it had to fit within the parameters of his Empire. He couldn't name them 'Blood-thirsty Egomaniacs' or 'Pacifist Space Monkeys,' but that still left him a range of options.

He took a moment to think, but nothing completely awesome popped into mind so he set it aside for later and just used the temporary holder of 'Badass Robots' as he continued to work.

The warlord wasn't going to make the Badass Robots to fight the T'fen for them. The Empire would fight its own battles, but he needed them to teach the Empire how to do it. That meant a gigantic tech upgrade in terms of warships...and there was an option that allowed the Badass Robots to create their own drones...but like the Gahana, their constructs were far more advanced, almost to the point of being alive. He knew that was just an observational illusion, for they had no Core in them. No person inside the synthetic body. The Gahana did, as did the T'fen and as would the Badass Robots, but their equipment did not, yet their programming was so advanced it mimicked it in many ways.

He wanted that. He wanted drones that could almost think for themselves, so he selected what he referred to as the 'build minions' option, seeing a host of other choices grayed out as he did so.

What else did he need? Up until now the Empire was pretty much self-sufficient, with their primary enemies having advantages in Essence powers and some technology, but everything else the Empire had caught up to them in or surpassed them. He did a quick search for Essence weapons or other effects, and was surprised

when he found nothing but an explanation of how Essence worked in synthetics.

The energy that bound their Cores to their bodies was the same as for biological races, but biological races could dislodge some of it, expel it from their bodies and thus use it as an expendable resource that would gradually rebuild as it seeped in from the Essence realm in some manner. A few random individuals had actually gained the ability of a siphon, and were able to directly pull Essence from the Essence realm. They were so highly valued that other civilizations...such as the Neofan...would hunt them down and capture them, then cyborg out their minds to turn them into living weapons for *their* civilization.

The few the warlord had, including Kara, gave his Empire a huge advantage in very select combat environments...and he was glad that the T'fen did not have that potential when they were as big as warships, for the larger the body the larger the amount of Essence it contained in the beginning, though it would increase over time with training and repetitive depletion.

The synthoids' Essence couldn't be dislodged, but it could be extended and retracted in a split second so that the Core could move from one component to another. That meant the synthoids didn't have a 'brain' that could be targeted directly to kill them, and even a small piece of their bodies could hold their Core and allow them to survive...but just one. If they were blown apart into 100 pieces, only one would have the Core in it, and it wouldn't be a very smart piece, but it had the potential to regrow everything that had been destroyed once exposed to the proper raw materials.

So no Essence weapons, but killing a synthoid would require destroying all of it...but wait, why was it referring to synthoids and not Vanguard? Were there other synthoids in the universe?

There were. The warlord could get no information about them other than to confirm their existence and the fact that they were not, nor ever had been Vanguard...but then what were they? Zeus had said this type of race had been created for this one purpose? Was the universe hiding things from him, or had Zeus not been entirely truthful?

A third option popped up when he did a location search, seeing that these other synthoids were well beyond Zeus's domain. So maybe he had never encountered them, but wouldn't he have seen them in the gallery he mentioned?

Something important had just been discovered here, but the warlord could find no further information about it, so it would have to be left a mystery for now. The biggest option still stood before him unchosen, and that was what purpose the Vanguard would have in the Empire.

It was the defining characteristic, and being tech advisers and teachers was redded out, for the Empire didn't have such things. Those that advised and taught were themselves badasses, and not former ones. The Empire led from the front with their best, and the lessers filled support roles while they endeavored to become stronger, faster, and smarter. And the Vanguard would have to reflect that in some way as well.

But they would be newbs, and newbs did not lead. Newbs were kept in training until they were ready to support in some way. How could the warlord have the Badass Robots on the front lines? It went against everything his Empire was structured on.

Front lines...didn't have to be the strongest of enemies. They just had to be the front of the engagement, and even minor engagements had front lines.

Obvious. Totally obvious. Especially giving their name. He wondered if Zeus had used that term as a hint, because it fit perfectly. Right now the Empire was in a war against the Hadarak, a major threat that was being pushed back to the interior of the galaxy and would eventually be defeated. They were a swarm civilization as darkside as the darkside got, but the Empire was also expanding out into other parts of the galaxy that they had only a little recon on. Weak systems. New systems. Dying systems that needed to be saved. Little bullies that needed to be defeated to protect others. Work that the Empire could easily do if they weren't distracted with the big baddies.

Even so there were some fleets out adding territory to the Empire and uplifting the abused and helpless from the nightmares

they were suffering, as well as befriending the worlds and races that had it more together and were not a threat to their neighbors.

The Empire needed a force that it could send out into the unknown, especially beyond this galaxy, and do the benevolent conquest thing it had been doing almost since day 1...though technically day 1 had been more about covering Earth's ass and catching up as quickly as possible before they were discovered by anyone carrying more than two sticks and a rock. Because that's all it would have taken to conquer Earth back then.

And there were plenty of planets beyond the Empire's borders in just the same situation that needed to be saved. And when they were saved and annexed, it needed to happen exactly the same way to keep the Empire united in the same principles...not different versions of the same thing, which would then spawn more and more versions that could eventually water down their strength into muddled mediocrity. Annexing aliens was always difficult, because they would never assimilate the same as Humans... because they weren't Humans...but the Empire had made it work primarily by sending out their best, meaning the warlords and others, to do the annexing personally.

He needed the Vanguard to do that, and do it exactly the same as he would. And thanks to the Endgame options before him, he could encode that very thing...and his way of doing it...into their base programming, and every Badass Robot born...or whatever they did...would come out exactly the same way. Then he could dispatch them to galaxies far, far away and could count on whatever colonies they started there to be true parts of the empire in every facet rather than a mimicry that would decay over time into a total loss of what it meant to be part of the Empire.

The warlord selected that function...along with the subsidiary functions he had already decided on and a few others that came to mind...and locked them in. When he did most of the other options before him grayed out, leaving him a more select wedge to work with...but there were so many facets to their programming and capabilities that he was going to be refining the Badass Robots down for a very, very long time...

# 5

The Warlord woke up, suddenly realizing he was flying without trying to, and jerked slightly as he shut down then turned back on his Yen'mer nodules spread throughout his body. He saw the weird tree in front of him, remembering what it was, but feeling like he was forgetting something important.

He pulled back a couple feet, still hovering in the air, and he wracked his brain trying to clear the fog. He hadn't gone to sleep. He'd been talking to someone, then doing a lot of work. His head was fragged from it...or was it from something else.

Zeus. Now he remembered as a cascade of thoughts replayed in his mind...but the selection process was mostly gone in a hazy muck. How long had he been wherever there was?

He mentally checked the clock in his armor, suddenly realizing his body felt better than he expected after over 7 hours of constant flying. Granted he hadn't been maneuvering, but that was still a workout. A very low key, boring workout he'd never do without a specific reason, but still he was kinda surprised he'd held up so well.

And if he'd been here 7 hours, how long had he been in the selection process in the sped up state Zeus had referenced?

He got the feeling he wasn't supposed to remember a lot of it, but he still tried, picking out a few pieces as his left hand suddenly got itchy. It was the center of his palm, which used to contain a bio-engineered plasma weapon called Choratrik, but during his transformation into a Furyan it had somehow been removed. The slit in his hand had sealed up too, though he still had one on his right for the much more powerful Bra'hem biological cannon that had been genetically engineered to replace his other Choratrik. That upgrade had kept through the transformation and actually been enhanced. Why the other one had been removed he still didn't know, but now the aperture in his hand was itching, despite the fact that it no longer existed.



He felt a pressure building in it, wondering what the hell was going on as he used the Regenerator built into his armor to scan his body and tell him what was happening...but it reported everything was normal. Whatever this was, it wasn't physical.

"Shit," he said, suddenly flying down and away from the tree towards the nearest platform as another chunk of memory returned. He'd gone through the selection process, and now the result was about to be created. Not by him, but apparently he was the conduit and it was coming on fast.

He held on, resisting the pressure until he got his feet on the deck plating, then he stretched his hand out palm forward as if firing a plasma blast, but something far more powerful happened, with the concussion wave knocking him backwards and momentarily blacking out his vision as his head swirled from the blast of white light, Saiolum, and a great deal more that he couldn't perceive...

Outside the smooth-edged rectangular facility, Azoro floated in the thin Saiolum invisible to all. The energy field was being generated by another planet in the system, and the wisps of it reaching out to this dead gas giant were barely enough to sustain him. If there became too little he'd be dragged on the tide back towards where the Saiolum was being produced by the plant and animal life, or he'd have to 'swim' up to the warship parked in orbit and perch in the small pools of the energy created by the crew that had brought him and Paul here. He could ride on any one of them indefinitely, but free flying as he was now gave him a lot more mobility as long as he had a clear pathway to travel, and in this system that was about 19% of it.

That was an enormous amount of volume, but there was little to see here. He'd lived more than a billion years in this disembodied state, unable to interact or communicate with anyone until Paul had made his breakthrough to his own extremely limited Saiolum powers. But he couldn't see him now, for the facility had a shield that existed not only in the real world, but in the Saiolum as well, and without a body to generate the more complicated effects, he couldn't damage it, only bounce off it when he tried to fly through it.

It was a mystery that had perplexed him for a very long time, and now Paul was inside seeing what Azoro desperately wanted to see...and he was taking a very long time. He doubted his apprentice had encountered anything he couldn't handle, but after waiting a billion years his patience had grown into longing, despair, and then a general lack of caring. Now that he had options, being blacked out again was beyond frustrating, and he was wondering if Paul wasn't delaying on purpose as payback for him withholding some information that Azoro had not deemed relevant to the stepping stone training progression that many before him had to take in sequence.

If he was trying to annoy Azoro then he was succeeding, and he was beginning to wonder just how long he would make him wait if this was...

Suddenly the black wall that was visible to him in the ever glowing Saiolum went red, yellow, then white so fast he barely was able to recognize what was happening as the shield overloaded, failed, and a massively intense Saiolum wave rushed out from behind it and slammed into Azoro.

He was thrown back with hit, flung up and out of the yellow/orange gas that made up the planet's thick atmosphere, and pushed further beyond it until he was able to refocus his mind and start 'swimming' backwards, moving quite fast as the wave suddenly disappeared, leaving only a thin residue of Saiolum behind around the planet, though it was still much thicker than it had been moments before.

And down into the planet he could see the black wall reformed again, without him getting even a peek at what had been inside.

It took him a few more moments to fly back inside the planet and come to a hover over the circular landing platform that he didn't need, nor could use, as he waited, still basking in the glow of the wave that had just hit him and woke him up in a way he hadn't experience in a long time. It had been so intense he couldn't remember ever encountering such a phenomenon before.

And now he really wanted to get inside and figure out what was going on...but he couldn't do that until Paul came out or until the

shield lowered. If that burst happened again, he was going to try to jump it and get inside, but he'd have to react very fast.

Right now though, nothing was happening except the Saiolum wave kept expanding beyond the planet still visible in his vision as it spread out in all directions moving so fast he expected it would go intergalactic within months, for that level of intensity wasn't going to dissipate quickly, and the release speed was phenomenal.

If the Saiolum shield was meant to hide this place from people who could sense the energy currents, then whatever Paul had just done had sent out a signal that no sensitive could miss. Azoro hoped none saw it, but another part of him wondered, after searching so long to find Paul, just how many more were out there.

And how many of them would have the ability to track it back and travel to this location.

The Warlord blinked multiple times, clearing a buzzing from his head that he had no clue what the source was as he stared down at the platform where 18 eggs now stood. Each was the size of a football, maybe a little bigger, and shaped like one too. Suddenly he remembered he'd done that, both the shell and the shape, and that blast must have been the universe creating them, or delivering them. He wasn't sure which, but he was pretty certain that what he just witnessed was something few would ever have the chance to see, let alone study. The mysteries of the universe always kept getting deeper the further one dug, and this glimpse had his head hurting slightly, but the discomfort was diminishing so fast it was going to be gone before he could figure out what exactly was causing it.

The eggs. Now he remembered. He didn't want to have to leave them here as they developed, so he had chosen an egg form and somehow figured out how to make the shells resistant to the toxic radiation this galaxy was emanating from its center. That meant he could move them beyond this facility, and the shells would glow yellow if they were taking hits...and red if they were becoming critical.

The memories were coming back in fragments, but the Warlord was pretty sure that's the way he'd set it up. The Empire didn't have a material that could fully block the toxicity, and yet he

had someone constructed one...but he couldn't remember how, and was pretty sure that memory would not be returning. The knowledge he'd just had was gone, much like him connecting to an astromech to expand his brain size during high end naval combat. Once detached, all that additional brainpower and memory stored on it was no longer accessible.

At least he still had some fragments of memory left. But as to what was inside the eggs...he didn't have a clue. He knew they wouldn't hatch until he ordered them to, and until then they were going through development of some sort. He could break them out now if he wanted and they'd be fine, but they were very juvenile and needed time to process inside or outside the eggs, it didn't matter.

Why there were 18 he also didn't know, but as his head finished clearing up he remembered what Zeus had said about other galaxies being alerted to this occurrence...and that blast must have been what he meant. It was more than just Saiolum. Saiolum he could understand. A lot of other stuff had rushed through him, probably energy fields the Empire hadn't discovered yet and maybe some exotic particles. Hopefully nothing harmful, and since his Regenerator wasn't auto-activating he assumed he was undamaged in any way it could detect.

The Warlord knelt down next to the eggs, which were sitting perfectly still despite the fact that they should be rolling around. Their shells were perfectly smooth, hard as rock, and glossy white. The only other thing on them were tiny stars, with him suddenly cracking a smile as he remembered he'd done that too. A little nod to the legends of old Earth, with these meant to mimic the Dragonballs... though what they contained would be far more powerful if allowed to mature.

Each one had a set of stars on them, indicating their number. A single star was egg #1, and the one with the most had 18 stars. Otherwise they were all identical...on the exterior. He didn't remember what was inside, but he had a suspicion they were not all alike. Now why would he have done that?

He shook his head, trying to clear it, but no new revelations came, so he stood up and telekinetically grasped all the eggs at once, floating them up into the air in front of him and pulling them

into rows as he began to walk out of the tree chamber. All the secrets of this place, impressive as they were, could not hold a candle to what he now possessed...even if he wasn't sure what it was that he had. He just knew he had to get them out of here, in case this location was backtracked and taken...but he couldn't allow that either, so he began composing orders using the mental interlink in his armor that would be transmitted out through the Empire's communications grid as soon as he got in range of a suitable transmitter, the closest one of which was on his orbiting ship.

All of the orders he composed as text and data, pulling warfleets from surrounding systems off guard duty and getting them here as fast as possible. This location had to be held, even if he wasn't going to keep the eggs here. Too many secrets to be lost, and that tree itself was more powerful than he currently understood. It was a massive chess piece in the game of galaxies that the Empire was now forced to play, and they needed to keep it, as well as get a handle on all the data and technology samples left here.

"Tennisonne," he said, recording a holo message that showed the tree and cut in previous pictures of the tech samples, "drop whatever you're working on and get here yesterday. This may not be as big as the Pyramid discovery, but it's definitely second. We've got stuff from past good guys and the baddies that are going to be coming after us, as well as a bit of their bosses, who seem to be cousins of the Gahana. I already checked, it's dead, but looks to be warship debris. Pull as many other Mastertechs as you can get your hands on and get them here immediately. I'll leave it to you, but we're on the clock. Something else happened that I'll fill you in on later, but it sent out a pulse that will reach other galaxies, and when the wrong people feel it, they're coming for our heads. Tick tock, Mr. Stark. Get your ass moving *now*."

The warlord left that message in the queue as well as he moved back into the corridors and eventually found a control station in one of the walls after some looking. He and his floating eggs messed around with it until he figured out how to adjust the shield. He didn't lower it, but deactivated the perimeter defenses and allowed solid matter to pass through only the area in front of the

door, basically leaving it unlocked but still able to hide the Saiolum coming from the tree...Okala, he remembered.

“Zeus,” he said out loud. “If you’re listening, thanks for the heads up. I’m on it. And if Artemis or any of the others have permission to chat, I’d very much like to say hi.”

He left it at that and headed for the door, hating to leave all this stuff behind but he had to get moving and get these eggs away from here to somewhere else. Nobody should be able to track them, for they weren’t emitting any energy, so anywhere but here would do.

When he passed through the black energy field he immediately saw the yellow/orange gas of the planet around the protective force field keeping it off the landing platform that had been reconfigured to match what his biology required...which meant oxygen. As soon as he came out he felt Azoro’s presence descend upon him and latch on, connecting to him in a way that had taken a lot of practice on the Furyan’s part, but was now second nature and allowed Azoro to see through his eyes and access the part of his mind that he wanted him to see.

“See for yourself,” he said aloud, opening up fully as it would be faster than trying to explain. “A bit more than you expected?”

*Far beyond it,* Azoro’s thoughts answered in a state of awe as he dug through his memories.

“If you can find anything in there that I can’t, let me know. I think a lot of it got erased,” he said as he walked back towards the dropship he’d come down here on from the warship.

A wash of what felt like cold water rippled through his mind, and suddenly the Warlord had more memories popping into view... but not all of them.

*There are large deleted areas,* Azoro stated after he had finished. *Things you were not meant to remember.*

“That’s what I thought too. And Zeus?”

*I had never suspected, nor seen any evidence of such oversight. And your possible future?*

“Only if I die,” he said, stepping inside the *Falcon*-class dropship that looked like a winged box that had been smoothed down so much it was now slippery. The eggs flew in with him as he

deposited them into storage bins in the cargo hold, then headed up to the cockpit and began powering up the ground to orbit transport.

*It seems you may live out my curse after all,* Azoro said apologetically.

“No,” the warlord, whose full name was Paul-024, said firmly. “We’ve just been handed the ultimate weapon, the enemy’s playbook, and whatever that damn tree is. And if Zeus is right, we’re going to finally get the Neofan log jam out of the way.”

*That’s where you’re going to take the eggs?*

“Eventually, but right now I just want them out of this system,” he said, lifting off and passing into the opaque air of the gas giant. He accelerated and climbed up through the various layers, eventually rising above the misty top of the planet and into the blackness of space...with the *Aeon*-class warship right where he’d given it orders to wait for him.

He altered course to meet up with it where it would be a few minutes ahead of now as it coasted gently around the bend of the world, feeling an increasing urge to get away from this place. The Empire would take care of it against the conventional threats, but if someone nearby had the ability to sense and come after the Endgame pulse...but that didn’t seem likely. Still, his gut told him to get lost as soon as possible.

As he neared the ship his armor interfaced with it and transmitted his stored messages, letting him know with a subtle beep and icon display in mind’s eye since his helmet wasn’t on. That signal went to the warship, then was rerouted across the star system to a comm station in low orbit around the central star. That station then transmitted back out on a straight line to a much larger facility in high orbit, far above the path of the planets, where an interstellar relay was located. When that location received his messages, they were then passed on to four nearby star systems, and from there would work their way out through the network across the galaxy, copying and retransmitting until they reached every location in the Empire’s domain...just in case some relays were down, obscured, or otherwise inaccessible.

Information could dance around for a long time, but the system was incredibly reliable and Paul had no doubt the messages

would get to their destination. Including one to Director Davis, the leader of the Empire, informing him as to what was coming. He and the others had been predicting something like this, but none of them had guessed all the new wrinkles.

Not even close.

The Empire had faced many challenges, defeats, and just bizarre luck to rise to the level of galactic dominance that it had mostly achieved. Now, finishing up the resistance here against the Neofan and the Hadarak seemed easy compared to what was coming their way. Though he knew it hadn't been planned, everything in their history seemed to have been bringing them to this point. They had to face a test others before them had failed, and they didn't have time to prepare. They'd have to fight this as their Empire was now and hold on long enough for the eggs and the treasure trove he was just leaving to give them a chance to undo what Zeus had called the universe's mistake.

That right there was more than Paul could fathom, but they were going to have to face it regardless. And right now, as he was flying the dropship in through the warship's opening bay doors, he felt the hesitancy and, to be frank, rustiness that came with being the dominant ones wash off him as a good dose of fear brought him back to previous times in the Empire when they were not the dominant ones, and had to use every trick in the book just to have some of them survive to see tomorrow.

And it was in those times that he, his brothers and sisters, and the Empire grew the most. Now they were being forced into another situation just as dire, and while a part of him was wary of it, another part was relishing the challenge to come.

*And that's why the universe chose you, I think,* Azoro said, eavesdropping on his thoughts until Paul shut him back out again. The Ju'en'xa had had more than enough time to review all his memories.

"You're forgetting something."

*What's that?*

"The Okala," Paul said, letting that sink in.

*Hardly a priority now.*

"How long would it take?"



*Impossible to know. We didn't use it to construct our bodies the first time. In fact, I never guessed such a thing could exist in the universe.*

"But you can do it now, right?"

*I believe so, but you have other work to do. I won't ask to delay you. I can get back to Knowhere on my own."*

"I'll have this ship drop you off. We need the Sha'kier bag of tricks sooner or later to add in with everything else. Even if the eggs turn out, they counter their much older cousins. They're a stalemate at best. If we have to conquer to survive, we're going to have to achieve dominance other ways."

*Give me enough time and my empire will rise again within yours. You need not be personally involved. I can take it the rest of the way from here.*

"Is that optimism I hear?"

An image of a Zen'zat appeared in the seat beside Paul's, which was just Azoro's way of making him see a representation of himself when he wanted to rather than being a disembodied voice.

"You're right about the Okala. I'm far closer than I imagined, and you need my power, not as a curiosity or a faint hope, but as a workable battle plan. It has been far too long since I've been engaged in real combat. The thought of it is, rejuvenating."

"Especially when you get as many extra lives as you wish."

"In some circumstances, that's essential," Azoro foreshadowed.

"Right," Paul said as the dropship set down in the warship's hangar bay and he opened a comm line with the bridge. "Captain, get us moving towards the Hula Hoop. We've got a sensitive cargo and I need it as far away from here as fast as possible."

Before the hangar doors closed them in, the view of the gas giant rotated out of sight as the warship spun around and launched into a microjump towards the system's central star, with the Captain taking Paul's order and need for alacrity with the seriousness due his position before he even bothered responding.

"We're under way now," the hologram of rabbit-like race said, popping up over the dashboard of the cockpit. "Do you expect pursuit?"

“No. Not yet. Did you register anything earlier?”

“Such as?”

Paul smirked. “That’s a no then. A pulse went out from the facility, and when some very select bad guys detect it, they’re coming.”

“We’ll be gone long before they can get here. Can the cargo be tracked?”

“No. Only this location.”

“Understood. Any further orders, Archon?”

“Run dark on the grid. We need to be ghosts until we decide to pop up again.”

The Urik’kadel nodded, then the hologram disappeared. Paul went back and gathered up the eggs, floating them in front of him as he left the small dropship behind and moved further inside the 12-mile long warship enroute to a better spot for his new cache as he tried to remember what was actually inside the eggs.

But those memories were gone. He’d just have to trust in his own judgement and rediscover what it was he had created.

And hope they were as badass as the Empire needed them to be.

# 6

When the warship left the system, it did so near the star to maximize the gravity there. The more gravity, the more push the gravity drives gave you, and to get across the darkness of interstellar space in any reasonable amount of time, you needed a lot of push. Fortunately the Empire's ships had undergone revision after revision over the years, and their gravity drives were the envy of the galaxy, but it still took a few days of coasting after you springboarded out of a gravity well until you got to the next one.

The warlord's ship did just that, leaping off one star and then braking against the gravity of their destination point. Then they would orbit around the star until they came to the jumpline for the next leg of their journey and repeat the process. Stop and go, stop and go, through many intervals with the engines only running for a few minutes on either end of each jump. Most of the time was spent drifting across the gap where the gravity was so low that running the engines on full power would only nudge you a little this way or that, and if you drifted off course, that little nudge could save you from being hopelessly lost in space if you missed your destination star.

There were many horror stories of ships gone missing, with a few having been sighted running into stars years later far from where they had originally been, their crew presumed dead and unable to trigger a braking run. But most simply disappeared never to be seen again, with their engines too weak to pull them towards distant stars enough to steer themselves to a safe destination. And even if they could, if the arrival star's gravity was weaker than the outgoing one, they wouldn't be able to brake in time and they'd still hit the star.

Interstellar travel was complicated and dangerous, but it was routine enough for the Empire that most people didn't realize the danger when they traveled. Paul did, because he had been around to help build the first starships Earth had created, and in truth he had designed most of the military fleet, or had been in consultation with those who did. His brothers and sisters had nicknamed him 'The Admiral' because of his skill with space combat, despite the fact that

the Empire had many actual Admirals...all of which he officially outranked as an Archon.

During the days between stars one had little to do but ride along, and ships of this size and larger always had extensive training facilities for the crew, but they also had a reserved section of specialized training chambers for Archon use only. Even the civilian cargo ships did, just in case an Archon might come onboard at some point. The regular crew were not allowed to go inside, and some of these Archon Sanctums had never seen the use of an actual Archon, but the Empire always planned ahead, and knew that if there was a need, then they better have the equipment there to meet it.

This *Aeon*-class warship was no exception, and the warlord spent most of his days inside, alone, going through hours of workouts that had become his normal routine long, long ago. Being an Archon meant you were one of the Empire's leaders, but one capable of jumping into any form of combat at any time. As such, Archon's had to be proficient in all 5 areas of combat, and Paul's workouts had to keep him at least holding even in all of those areas, though increasing his abilities was the standard expectation for an Archon, even one at Paul's level.

He'd gotten so good at most things that improving now was almost impossible. For example, there were flight simulators in the Archon Sanctum for every craft in the Empire, and the basic aerial fighter, known as a 'Skeet,' was one that Archons had to master in case they had to lead combat from the air alongside aerial specialists. Paul's skills with a skeet were considerable, but hadn't improved much in centuries. There was only so much the machine could do, and once he learned to fully maximize its maneuverability, there wasn't much more to work on than his endurance and odd scenarios that he hadn't encountered before in reality or simulation.

But he still kept practicing to stay sharp, as he did with his aquatics training. Swimming was part of it, but also leading ship to ship combat underwater where aquatic races lived. The Empire had many, and some worlds had no land at all, only a global ocean where the only 'surface' was at the sea floor. Everything down there moved painfully slow, and learning how to maneuver ships and conduct combat in that environment was considerably different than

in space, which was why it was a different military division with its own specialists and unique weapon systems.

Humans weren't that great in the water compared to aquatic races, but the Archons had to be at least decent in order to fight down there. And when Paul had transformed into a Furyan his swimming had improved only so much. It still wasn't great, but since his Yen'mer flying ability worked underwater just fine, he didn't have to be so limited as the other younger Archons.

There were also simulators in the Archon Sanctum for mechs, of which the Empire had a massive army, but when they could be taken out from orbit by warships firing down onto the surface of a planet, the naval division became the most important of them all. And in the Archon Sanctum there was also a high powered computer system that allowed for massive scenarios with millions of ships fighting it out at the same time...but for the warlord that was actually only a moderate workload compared to what he could do on his flagship, whose computer systems dwarfed those here. Still, it was enough to practice, experiment, and to stay sharp with, but most of his training in the Sanctum was his physical training, which he by far enjoyed the most.

Running was the most basic form, and the Sanctum always had a halo track in it that allowed him to run straight with no turns as it curved ever so slightly upward, meaning that he was actually running on the walls around a giant circle, but with anti-grav being able to be pointed in whatever direction you want, when you were on the track you couldn't tell the difference.

There were swimming pools, both surface and deep water, obstacle courses, sparring drones, weight lifts, deflection chambers, and more than 160 specialized training chambers that the Archons used on a regular basis. Paul in particular preferred sword drills, and was one of the best swordsmen in the Empire, though that form of combat was rare nowadays when heavy weapons were needed to fight the Hadarak swarms of very heavy and very gruesome monsters that they threw at you knowing they'd die, and making you endure days upon days of carnage hoping to wear you down or force you to retreat.

Paul had faced that problem long ago, feeling the overload of so much death, but with the help of a friend had gotten his mind squared away to be able to numb up enough to do what was needed without becoming jaded. And that friend, another Archon named Riona-111, had been one of the first ones killed when the Hadarak revealed their most deadly class of living warship...a Lurker. The Empire had been caught off guard when they appeared, using Essence weapons never before seen. Now, dangerous as they were, the Empire knew how to fight them responsibly and not trade lives for victory.

And Paul had been the primary source of that knowledge, as he and a few others sought out the Lurkers to hunt them down and write the book on how to fight...and how not to fight...them in naval combat.

But Riona was still dead, and no matter how many he killed it never made up for her loss. She was the oldest Archon to have died, being a member of the second class. Paul was of the first class, and those 99 others were who he considered his brothers and sisters. His own biological siblings had long ago died, never having learned the secrets of self-sufficiency despite him trying to teach them. The sad thing was, they never truly made an effort, stuck in the old ways and refusing to see beyond them.

Millennia had passed by and wiped away all but a few memories of his biological family. His fellow classmates that made up the first ever Archon group were his family in ways his old one never could match up to. Riona hadn't been one of them, but she'd been damn close, and while Archons never mated or indulged in the delusions of romance, she had been the closest thing to a girlfriend he'd ever had. In fact, he often got ridiculed by the others calling her...and a few others...that very thing, insinuating a weakness because of it, but he knew better. There was a fine line that should not be crossed, and if it was weakness would ensue, for the Archons had learned by trial and error in those early days, that being a badass and being a lover were opposite things, and if you wanted to be the mightiest of the badasses, you couldn't spare one second in the other mode, or it would eat away at your edge.

That's why Archons didn't mate, not because they couldn't. There was no fixed rules for them. As the Director was famous for saying, "Good men don't need rules. Rules are for the young, the inexperienced, and the untrustworthy." But the Archons still considered it an unofficial rule, and if anyone broke it it was a sign of inferiority...and inferiority was not a luxury the Archons had. The fate of the Empire rested on their leadership, and only the most fit would lead...both physically, mentally, and morally. You didn't get to become an Archon unless you were pure lightside at heart, and Paul and his brothers and sisters had been chosen out of some 8 billion Humans on Earth for that first class for just those reasons.

He hadn't seen most of them for years, and wouldn't typically, since the Empire spanned the outer ring of the galaxy and there were billions of planets in it. Not all were their territory yet. The inner Core still held a sizeable Hadarak infestation, but one that was being consistently whittled away at with him and others leading campaign after campaign to do just that.

But if Zeus had been right about orders coming down regarding a resumed war against the Neofan, then he would probably be seeing some of them again soon. For when the hardest battles were required, that's where the most senior Archons would be. They went where they were needed, and that's why they rarely saw each other nowadays.

But in the very beginning, they were doing training like Paul was now together, learning the basics, and even teaching their instructors some new things. After they graduated from a 4 year program they were on their own. They had to design the Empire's military as well as learn how to scale their own training, so he and the others were essentially self-made warriors past that point, though they did receive some help now and again from Head Trainer Wilson, who was responsible for forging that first class, and every other class of Archons that came after.

Solo workouts were now the norm for the warlord, and he did them as naturally as breathing. Before he had transformed into a Furyan he had problems not doing workouts. His body would complain and beg him to do something, anything, if he stayed still for too long, and despite his Furyan metabolism being able to go very

low when needed...something his previous physiology could not do...he still felt the itch for constant action, and when Archons were not in battle, they were in training.

Always training.

So that's how Paul passed the time as the warship bounced from star to star until they finally came to a magjump spur line that would run them down to the main Hula Hoop.

When they arrived there the warlord took a break and found a virtual window to look out at the spectacle while sipping on ambrosia...a high powered super-sugar concoction necessary to fuel the Archons' enhanced metabolism. Without it they'd have to be eating all hours of the day, and the potency he now required would black out a younger Archon, causing damage from the overload that could even kill a very low metabolism person. Hence the ambrosia was not something you could get outside the military. Not this intense a version, anyway.

Paul sat in a chair, letting out a sigh of relief after a 3 hour run at 4:20 mile pace. Nothing too fast, but enough to give his Furyan biology a good stress without making him too tired for the next workout on his exhaustive list...which he'd get to in an hour or so, which was dynamic weight training. But for now he was just going to watch the traffic bonanza outside at the artificial construct known as a Grid Point.

Gravity was a powerful force, but magnetism was far stronger. Someone else, long ago, had created magjump technology, and the Empire had inherited it. It could be used to jump from stars the same way a gravity drive did, except that the magnetic fields of stars were always in flux and if you launched off them you'd end up going anywhere except where you wanted to go. You couldn't jump in a predictable line unless the magnetic field was stable...which was why, if you wanted to go really fast and didn't have a pair of black holes in your back yard to do so, you had to build a stable magnetic field here and at your destination.

That's what the Grid Points were. Two big magnetic dishes connected by a thick bar. One dish held the field for outgoing traffic, and the other for incoming ships to brake against. The precise location of the other Grid Point had to be known in order to allow the



transit, but when you got everything right the speeds of magjump travel dwarfed that of regular star to star gravity jumps.

And the size of the magnetic field determined how fast you could go, just the same way a black hole had far more gravity than a star, and thus could allow faster grav jumps off it.

The big discs that generated the magnetic field in this Grid Point were each 12,000 miles in diameter, with the entire construct being the size and mass of a planet. Needless to say, very few civilizations in this galaxy or probably any other could construct something as large as this...let alone a string of these Grid Point throughout the Empire, including a circuit that led all the way around the galaxy in a giant loop...which was affectionately termed the 'Hula Hoop' by those old enough to know what that original term referred to.

The Grid Point Paul's ship was arriving at now wasn't on the main loop, but a spur line that would run in towards the center of the galaxy until it reached the Hula Hoop. No spurs ran inward from it, however, because that would lead into territory recently held by the Hadarak. You didn't build Magjump platforms in risky territory, only in very safe regions that you could depend on.

And still, there was a massive warfleet here to safeguard it just in case, but the number of civilian ships and stations surrounding the Grid Point constructs dwarfed their protectors, for a Grid Point was the most economically action location in the Empire, and made the vast expanse of the galaxy seem a little less daunting as it would take months to get from one side to the other rather than years.

Paul's ship would actually be going far out of its way by traveling on this network...assuming the orders that were coming were what he expected them to be...but the extra distance would be made up for in the massive speed gains, for the magjump routes were quite long compared to star to star travel, meaning far less 'stop and goes,' as well as being deliberately run through less dense sections of the galaxy when practical.

The Hula Hoop essentially bisected the galaxy between Core and Rim, and the travelers that could flow through it always did, but there were limits, and expenses. Travel wasn't cheap, and unless you had a big enough financial incentive to use it, you'd be better off

taking the slower, more economical star to star travel. Only high end stuff went through this route, and that's why you had the glut of civilian commerce staking out their own turf here, building 'land' where there was only vacuum in the form of many stations representing well over 20,000 different races, and a lot of those didn't even belong to the Empire.

Fortunately Paul's ship didn't have to wait in line. His warlord status got him first dibs on the next outgoing magship, for without mag engines his own warship couldn't use the Grid Points. It had to dock with a much larger carrier ship that would ferry hundreds of other ships along with his to the next Grid Point. And once they were there, they'd have to make a short trip from one construct to the next, for they didn't rotate around to point in various directions. So if you had a hub going in two directions, you had to have two constructs. If you had three lines, you needed three...and so forth.

That got the price tag for the Grid Points from astronomically high to intergalactic, but the Empire had built these slowly over the millennia, and were now reaping the benefits of their past hard work while continuing to expand the spur lines, but the Hula Hoop itself had been complete for quite some time.

When his ship docked with the carrier and he saw the departure time was going to be another 6 hours, Paul knew he wasn't going to wait that long and headed for his weight workout. Sometime later during his second obstacle course run the magship leapt off its disc and headed towards its distant counterpart so fast you could see the stars ever so slowly moving if you looked out a window.

Not that there were actual windows on a starship. That would be an insane weakness that some random rock could exploit. But the virtual windows looked almost identical, and the creep of the stars attested to how fast one actually was traveling...as well as the dangers of running into something at that speed or missing your target. Most people had no clue, but Paul did. He didn't worry about it though. The Empire was the epitome of professionalism, and they turned dangerous into routine on a regular basis...

# 7

The Warlord's ship had made many jumps between Grid Points going down the spur towards the Hula Hoop and was two away from reaching the primary ring that ran all the way around the galaxy when the foretold orders caught up with Paul in the form of a message packet that contained a hologram along with additional data. It downloaded into his ship automatically as soon as they arrived at the nearest Grid Point that had it, and he got a message ping in his quarters after returning from one of his daily workouts dripping in sweat.

He made a short detour to a nearby bottle of water and began guzzling it as he walked over and sat down at his comm terminal, finding a priority message from Director Davis.

A small hologram appeared over the comm terminal, which he enlarged until the leader of the Empire appeared about two feet tall. He was Human, not Furyan, but he was also an Archon... belatedly. He'd built the Empire as the reigning Monarch before there were even officially Monarchs that handled all the logistics in the Empire. Archons handled the wars, and that dichotomy had served them well, but the Director had gotten curious one day and inserted himself into Archon training anonymously to see if he could make it...and he did. He was much lower in rank than Paul, and had never, to his knowledge, entered combat on a battlefield, but the Director earning his Archon status had only increased his reputation in the Empire, though his duties were still that of the reigning Monarch with oversight on all the other Monarchs and the responsibility for the entirety of the Empire.

"Reignor Plausious has received a message..." the Director began casually. This message wasn't to Paul specifically, but to all of the original class of Archons, who were unofficially known as the 'trailblazers' since they had designed the military, Archon training, and everything else that the classes of Archons that followed learned to use. They knew the Director so well there was no need for

formality, and his messages from afar typically were straight to the point.

“...from a fellow Neofan inside one of House Atriark’s Temples. They are beginning massive purges of their population in what looks to be a psychotic de-civilization cycle,” the Director said, referencing a none too uncommon end of many advanced populations throughout history. While some would fall to invasion or environmental effects, some destroyed themselves from within, and not by accident. Crazyness functioned like a virus, especially within races towards the hive mind end of the spectrum, and as advanced and old as the Neofan were, apparently they were not immune from it.

“Due to this, the Reignor has requested our help in overthrowing the false Reignor and saving as many of House Atriark as possible. This will be a stun war whenever you can manage it, but he understands some will be killed. He’s said it’s preferable to being executed, and has stressed that we must move immediately. He’s giving us priority codes for the Temples that will override the false Reignor’s blocking protocols on the portals. We can enter where we want, when we want, but we need to move on all 7 Temples simultaneously. Morgan is working with Plausious for the assault on the Temple they believe the false Reignor is in, but I want them all taken back. Get to whichever one you can in the time you have. Forces are assembling at the following locations.”

A holographic map popped up, showing nearby Temples where the rally points were. At a glance, Paul guessed he could get to two of them before the countdown expired. One was previously owned by the Empire and now occupied, another was one of the three originals they had ‘given’ to the Neofan, despite the Neofan and their allies previously building them here long before the Empire had ever existed.

All three of the ‘gifted’ ones had no Vargemma in them, who were a mix of races descending from Essence-capable individuals in the galaxy that had made their way to the Temples and now lived in them. There were trillions living in a single Temple, in some cases, but the decommissioned Temples that the Empire had not known existed prior to House Atriark coming here had no Vargemma in

them. That meant he had the choice of joining an assault on a lightly populated Neofan Temple with no Vargemma, or to help retake own of their own and rescue the frenemy Vargemma inside.

Paul chose the latter, which would be the harder fight, and signaled the bridge that they needed to get him there in no less than 3 months and 18 days. It would be close, but he already knew they could make it before the bridge responded that the navigational math worked out.

“The Reignor has also informed me that all future Neofan children will be given to Star Force,” the Director said, using the official name of the Empire, and drawing a raised eyebrow from Paul. The rogue Neofan Reignor in exile had been offered membership in the Empire before and had refused.

“He sees the breaking of their longevity bonds to be a lethal blow to their civilization, and has no hope of repairing them. He will rally all survivors that we can rescue and turn them into a war force to assist us in the upcoming End Game fight, but they will be the last of their kind. He is entrusting us to build a future for their offspring inside our empire. That should tell you how vexed he is with the purges, and he fears the other Neofan Houses are on the same path. I asked him about the Zak'de'ron, and he admitted they had an Essence technique that worked to subvert the mind in ways that telepathy could not trace, but what is happening to the Neofan is something different. They've lived millions of years and now they're suddenly degenerating into bloody anarchy, and he thinks his lightside conversion was the impetus, but not the cause. It accelerated something already happening to them, and his best guess is it is linked to the loss of their home galaxy.”

“I have a feeling that whoever is pulling the strings of the Dotra may have found a way to eliminate the Neofan without actually warring on them. Regardless, it's up to us to rebuild their race in a stable fashion, and if our experience with the Furyan younglings is any indicator, we're going to have a far harder time with a race more advanced. Plausious warned me of this, but we'll manage as we always have. I need you guys to get as many of the old ones out of this mess intact. We're going to need them whenever this Endgame comes down, and Plausious insists it's going to be soon.”

“He called that right,” Paul said to himself as the Director raised a hand and images of other Neofan appeared.

“The false Reignor is now believed to be a total puppet, and that there’s a cabal of insane leadership obsessed with an idea of Neofan purity that is giving him orders, so taking out Truven won’t end the problem. We have to fully conquer them all, and we have to do it without them setting off the cataclysm defenses. I need you guys specifically to get in and disable them before the Neofan know what’s happening. That’s the main reason we’re splitting you up and going after all 7 at once. We can’t let what happened at Eta Firmi be repeated. A significant portion of House Atriark is committed to mass suicide one way or another, and we have to deny them that. Plus there are a lot of Vargemma and some of our own people probably trapped in those Temples that they’ll take with them. No more. We’re taking them all back, and then we’re laying claim to the Bond of Resistance leadership. We’ll deal with the other Neofan Houses if they come complaining, but if we take down Atriark, the Bond of Resistance will know who holds the true power. They’ve been defecting over to us in small ways while saving face. If we finish this fight, there will be no reason for many of them hide their allegiance. I’ve spoken to the Veloqueen briefly, and they won’t interfere one way or another.”

“This is the first domino in the reshaping of the intergalactic playing field, and I get a sense that this is the beginning of the wars to come. I don’t see events slowing down and giving us time to breathe. I wish we could have finished with the Hadarak first, but we’ll just have to multitask. If we pull this off, we’ll be getting more allies, economic at least, that I can make use of. If Atriark manages to hold us off, or kills us all along with them, the Neofan are going to be seen as an impossible foe to overcome unless you’re suicidal as well. Make sure we destroy that myth thoroughly,” he said a bit firmer than normal, which then broke as he smirked before adding, “and may the force be with you.”

The hologram ended, but the additional information remained, popping up as various holographic 3d cubes that he could toggle as needed. Paul went through them, seeing supplemental data gain from the Neofan spy that had come over to deliver

Plausious the warning, as well as some reconnaissance from other sources indicating that material shipments into the Neofan Temples had increased by 240%...which wasn't supposed to be possible, but then again there were aspects to the Temple network that the Empire still hadn't been able to unravel, and it was the Neofan within the Bond of Resistance that had handled the majority of their construction over the previous millions of years that made the Empire's existence little more than a brief flicker of a candle in comparison.

But that flicker burned brighter than the Neofan bonfire, and Paul and the others were going to get a chance to finish this war that the Neofan had stalled by retreating and hiding behind their portal technology. Now Reignor Plausious was giving him and the other warlords the keys to the castle...something he should have done a long time ago, but Paul couldn't fault him for not trusting the Empire that far. He wouldn't have in his position.

But it seemed now the Reignor had no choice other than to wait as his House went about reducing its population through subsequent purges. A population that only killed its members in the most extreme of cases. A race whose individuals lived millions of years had to have no-kill edicts otherwise they'd never make it that long. The Neofan killed plenty of other races, but they didn't kill each other...until now. Paul truly hoped they'd constructed the Empire better than that, but the knowledge that it was happening, and happening so fast, to a civilization far older than theirs still chilled him. Even if the Director was right in his suspicion that someone else had a hand in it.

And given what Paul had recently learned, he guessed that hand might be a synthetic one.

After reviewing all the material the Director has sent...and a lengthy shower to remove the workout grime...Paul went and found the ship's Captain coming out of one of the warship's 6 cafeterias.

"Yes, Archon?" he said, looking up at the towering Furyan from his diminutive 2 foot height.

"Come with me," he said, then turned and walked as the Captain hopped/ran to keep pace all the way to a lift car that sent

them elsewhere into the ship, eventually to a sealed storage room that Paul unlocked and walked inside.

“This is the most valuable cargo you will ever carry,” he finally said, showing him the eggs. “After you drop me off at Delta Innis, your orders are to keep moving and don’t stop for more than refuel. I need these eggs safeguarded via anonymity. I doubt anyone knows they exist, but we can’t take chances.”

“What laid them?” the Captain said, sniffing the air and detecting no noticeable biological scent.

“I did,” Paul said sarcastically. “They contain what will become a synthetic race similar to...well, you don’t know about the Gahana...”

“Actually I have heard that name,” the Urik’kadel admitted. “The cyborg community talks about them frequently, and I’ve found that if you want to be kept informed of the non-Star Force populations scuttlebutt you monitor the cyborg feeds. I’ve heard the Gahana spoken of as if they were gods, but never any explanations of what they actually are.”

“For your knowledge only,” Paul said, giving him clearance, “they’re a race of highly advanced living machines that we’ve found marooned in survival pods due a type of radiation emanating from the center of this galaxy. It’s toxic to them, and it’s toxic to these eggs. Their shells protect them, but they cannot be hatched until we get them outside the galaxy.”

The Captain’s eyebrows rose. “Do we have that capability, Archon?”

“Not of our own making. We’ll have to use the Bond of Resistance network, and the message I just received says we’re pairing up with Reignor Plausious to finally take down House Atriark. When and if we do, we’ll have access to the network and I’ll summon you to a location of my choosing to get the eggs. Until then you just keep moving around the galaxy and don’t stop. And nobody comes in this room. The eggs won’t hatch until I order them to, and they need no nourishment.”

“Are these friendly robots, I hope?”

“They’re Star Force through and through. Or should be. This is new for us, but they should be a critical asset in the coming wars.”



“Wars plural?”

“Yeah,” Paul said apologetically. “Things are going to get a lot worse for a long time. This galaxy is going to get invaded by numerous races trying to wipe us out because we now have them,” he said, pointing at the eggs. “They’re going to upgrade our Empire considerably, and there are a lot of bad guys that don’t want that to happen. They shouldn’t get here too soon, but if they have spies in the galaxy watching, they might try to hit the eggs before they hatch.”

“I understand, Archon. They won’t find us.”

“Once I’m off the ship, go off-comms. I want you to be a ghost ship.”

The Captain frowned. “No navigational inputs, but you still want us receiving comms?”

“Exactly. There will be no logs of your position made, and stay away from the high traffic areas, but not too far away from help if you need to call for it. I doubt you will, but don’t go into non-Star Force systems.”

“Do the eggs emit any trackable energy?”

“Not that I know of. They should just be normal cargo lost who knows where in the galaxy.”

“Easy enough if that’s all there is to it,” the Captain admitted. “Do you know what the enemy’s spies might look like?”

“I don’t know that there are any inside Star Force, but I’m pretty sure the Denogi work for them.”

“I’ve never seen a Denogi ship, let alone a Denogi.”

“Few have, but they might have agents here. The creation of these eggs sent off a beacon that only a few will be able to receive. I doubt spies could, but I don’t want to take chances. The clock is ticking now, and if our enemies are in another galaxy, we should be able to deal with House Atriark long before they can get here.”

“Is this the Endgame people have been speculating about?”

“No,” Paul said, pointing at the eggs. “They are. We earned them by achieving the Endgame due to our Empire’s accomplishments. A little gift from the universe. But that gift makes us a target, and I’m told that very few of these synthoid races survives very long. The Gahana are one that did, but the civilization that spawned them died before they could mature. We’ve been

relatively unknown in the intergalactic community. The Endgame that just happened is going to draw all kinds of bad guys to us.”

“Can we handle that?”

“I don’t know,” Paul answered bluntly. “But these eggs are feared for the power they will give us. Without them, our odds are considerably worse.”

“Worse than the V’kit’no’sat?”

Paul cringed. “Different bad. I don’t think anything is ever going to top that war, but without these eggs, one of our future enemies will have the ability to shut down our ships remotely. They just fly in and all our equipment goes dark. These eggs are going to teach us how to shield against that.”

“These machine races can control other machines?” the Captain asked, aghast at the implications of that.

“Via some method that we have no knowledge of, yes. They’ve done it to other now extinct races before. But we can fight fire with fire now.”

“So there’s bad machine races out there too?”

“Apparently just one. But they have a lot of friends.”

The Captain looked past Paul’s legs at the eggs again. “Most important cargo for sure.”

The warlord knelt down so he could almost look the Urik’kadel in the eyes. “Keep them secret, keep them safe.”

The rabbit-like face frowned. “I hate that movie.”

“Why?”

“They could have just flown on the Eagles. Makes the whole journey pointless.”

“Can’t argue with that,” Paul admitted. “But the phrase is useful.”

“Especially today,” the Captain agreed. “They will be kept secret. They will be kept safe.”

“Good,” the Warlord said standing up. “Now get me to the Temple with as many days to spare as you can. We’ve got Neofan ass to kick, and I need to see how much of an invasion force I’ve got to work with.”

# 8

Abserossa Kingdom was a relatively new one for the Empire. Back when it had just been Earth, the idea of a Kingdom was beyond imagining. The galaxy wasn't just really wide, it was also really thick, at around 1000 lightyears where Earth was located. That's why you could see stars everywhere you looked from that planet, for it was situated in about the middle of the galactic plane. That meant 500 lightyears up was a sea of stars, and 500 lightyears down as well. Even more stretched out laterally, so in the beginning the Empire began expanding in all directions in a rough sphere.

But now that they stretched across the galaxy, they had established many subdivisions. Something the size of a major civilization was deemed a 'Region' and could contain anywhere from 50,000 to 1 million star systems, with there being an estimated 1.6 billion in the galaxy. They didn't have a full map yet, for they hadn't been everywhere to create one. There were still chunks of the Rim that were not fully explored and pockets of the Core where the denizens didn't want the Empire going, but where they had they split them up into geographical Regions, with multiple Regions combining into a 'Kingdom.'

At present, there were 392 Kingdoms in the Empire, with more being added over time as the Hadarak were being removed from the Outer Core and benevolent conquest fleets were extending the Empire's influence into the far Rim. Abserossa Kingdom was one of those recently added, and most of the territory inside did not hold Empire worlds. There was a skeleton network of them with the major threats already being removed from the Kingdom boundaries and a Monarch 'Lord' installed to see to the development and maintenance of Abserossa from a logistical standpoint. Building new worlds to house the growing Empire's population, as well as to work with the existing worlds to bring some of them into the Empire, befriending others as neighbors, and keeping the 'stay off my grass' versions under close observation while establishing transport and economic

infrastructure for everyone in the Kingdom to use, whether they be Star Force citizens or not.

The Empire's first extension into this area had happened long ago via the Temple Network. Of the 2,972 Temples that occupied the outer Rim of this galaxy, many had been in areas that the Empire could not travel to conventionally for lack of navigational maps. But they had been able to scout out and find the other Temples after they first discovered what they named 'Alpha Temple' using the dedicated transport network built out in the void beyond any star system... where they were all quietly overlooked, as had been intended.

But once inside the network you could travel Temple to Temple without the rest of the galaxy knowing about it. That wasn't good enough for the Empire, so after they found and laid claim to the Temples they sent out exploration teams to chart routes to get to them conventionally, ending up with little lines of civilization reaching out into the wild regions of the galaxy until they came to the nearest star system to one of the Temples.

That's where Paul's warship dropped him off and quietly disappeared into the ever-flowing commerce routes crisscrossing the galaxy. A smaller thread of it extended out from the Beini Tsaron System into what appeared to be an ordinary nebula, heading in a direction starships could not travel, for trying to fly through even diffuse matter at multiple times the speed of light would destroy your starship soon after the initial impacts ate through your shields and then your hull armor like a sand blaster.

But this line of traffic was heading that way, making what seemed like suicidal jumps at a snail's pace. The Warlord could see them winking out in what still looked fast to the naked eye, shrinking into a dot as they launched themselves off the system's weak gravity out at the edge of it closest to the nebula as he stood onboard a special space station nearby the designated jump point.

But out there in the nebula, hidden beneath its gases, was a solid mass. It barely registered gravitationally until you got close, but there was enough to brake against before you got to the nebula to slow you down enough to keep from ramming it. That was, if you made a slow enough jump to start with. It would take months to get

from here to there, in what would normally be half a day travel time if the Temple had the mass of a typical star system.

But it didn't. Its mass was in a giant hollow sphere, and all on the edges. It was spread as wide as Venus's orbit around Earth's central star, but paper thin when looked at from that scale. In truth it was miles thick, with an armored exterior insulating a magma level beyond, on top of which was hardened rock, then trees and water on top of it...but it was all on the interior of the Temple, so when you stood looking at the sky you didn't see stars. You saw land and water wrapping around you as if you were standing inside a giant ball... because you actually were, just one so big your eyes couldn't comprehend what you were looking for at first.

And in the center of all that stood a star...a fake one, which was little more than an advanced light bulb to provide the light and heat for the Temple. Light and heat that never made it beyond it, with the exterior coated with Essence defense systems and a cloaking field if needed. But with the thin skin of the Temple not massing enough to make anything but the slimmest of jumps towards, it was impossible for most of the races of the galaxy to get to...assuming they even knew it was there buried in all the blue/green gas.

The Empire needed more transit between the Temples than the Essence portals would allow, so they had cut a hole in each of them, establishing a conduit through the magma layer and the outer armor for starships to come in and out through. It was slow, but it required no Essence to use, and had made the Neofan very pissy when they found out what Star Force had done to their creations.

Apparently the Temples were supposed to be reserved for only the selected, and the creation of a cheat gateway into them was seen as heresy of some form, but the Neofan didn't have a choice when they got here, running from their dying galaxy. They had to agree to Star Force terms, so other than some criticism of the 'alterations' they had to put up with them.

At least until they became suicidal enough to attack the Empire and try to take them back.

The Temple Paul was now about to go to was not owned by the Neofan. It was a Star Force Temple that hadn't been involved in the war...but it was near one that had been, and that was Paul's

ultimate destination, for the shortcut the Empire had put into the Temples had been taken out of the ones captured by the Neofan and the holes rebuilt to their original specs.

So the only way in now was through their portals, and to use them you had to be in another Temple or one of their hidden infrastructure stations that were just as hard to get to, hidden between star systems where there was no gravity to use to get there. Well, no gravity to use to stop *once* you got there. You could jump pretty much anywhere you wanted, but if you couldn't stop then you'd collide with your target or fly by it and end up lost in space. So the dark regions between stars were pretty much off limits unless you were very, very, very technologically advanced. And even then you had to get lucky to get to some places.

Paul couldn't wait the additional months to go the slow route into Temple Omicron Delta, so he'd had the dropship from the warship leave him on a special station that had a short range Essence portal onboard meant to go to the nearby Temple and only that Temple. If you could supply the Essence necessary you could use it. If not, you got stuck going the slow way in on one of the creeping starships.

The warlord had decided to take a minute on the observation deck, watching the ships coming in and out of jumps. He'd made a point to do so ever since a friend of his had helped him through a crucial point in his development. Cal-com had urged him to 'get small' and take the burdens of the galaxy off his shoulders from time to time in order to recalibrate himself, and Paul had been finding scattered moments to keep in practice, with now being one.

He was the only person on the deck, for the station didn't see much traffic. The Empire hadn't created them originally, but they'd copied the design after destroying all of them when they first took control of the Temples. For most of the Temples were not empty. They had populations called 'Vargemma' that the Neofan and their Bond of Resistance had recruited over the millions of years whenever someone showed Essence abilities, taking them into one of the Temples to live so they could escape the purges of the Hadarak, who were instructed to hunt down and destroy all who could use Essence. They could literally smell its usage in the galaxy

if they were close enough, which was why all the Temples had been built in the Outer Rim where the gaps between stars were much further apart than in the densely packed Core.

Those that came to the Temples then reproduced offspring that were also Essence capable, or who could learn to be if they dedicated themselves to it. And living in the Temple meant a daily Essence donation into the Temple machinery. Nothing that was painful, just a daily exercise that kept the Vargemma growing stronger in their Essence power even if they chose to do nothing else with it.

And that Essence got routed into storage wells, with better than a 99% retention rate as a huge amount was accumulated over the millennia to be used for portal functions, perimeter defenses, and a myriad of other Temple functions. Essence could even be shipped from Temple to Temple when a need arose if carried in very delicate containers, for when dislodged from a person Essence naturally reverted back into the Essence realm. Storing it outside a person therefore became a very intricate procedure that required a small use of Essence to hold the rest.

So the Vargemma were less a population of 'saved' persons from each galaxy that held Temples, and were more a power production system for the Temples that the Neofan and others in the Bond of Resistance could tap into when necessary.

Along with being their own personal army promised with one day taking back their galaxies from the Hadarak with the Neofan leading the way.

That promise had always been a lie, but no one had known it until the Neofan had actually shown up and had the Vargemma fight against the Empire instead of the Hadarak.

But Star Force had been in the Temples for so long, and had been allowing those Vargemma they trusted...few as they were...to fight the Hadarak alongside the Empire in the form of 'Varkemma,' that when the Neofan ordered them to turn on Star Force not all did. Not even all the Vargemma did, and there had been Vargemma fighting Vargemma in many of the Temples across the galaxy once word of the war reached them.

The Vargemma had always been a threat, for their Essence powers were higher than that of the Empire when they were first discovered. But over time the Empire's elite had mostly caught up, and the threat was lessened, but not removed. Even a casual citizen in the Vargemma was so strong in Essence skills that they would be a nightmare against the populations of the Empire if they were ever let out...so they weren't.

The Temples were a type of prison...but one bigger than any planet. The land area inside a Temple was the equivalent of thousands of planets, with all of it connected to all the rest. You could run all the way around it and come back to the same point again if you wanted...and had enough time. Paul never tried, busy as he was with other things, but some Archons had just to take on the challenge of it.

The current record for any Temple...and they were not all the same size...was 7,281 years. That was such a big number they'd decided not to record it in days, hours, or minutes. And they had to go on foot, they couldn't fly, and they'd been averaging around 200 miles a day.

That's how damn big the Temples were, and the few Varkemma that had been allowed to leave to help fight the Hadarak had commented on how small planets were and how empty the galaxy felt when they looked at stars...something they had never done before, because in the Temple the sky was always full of land.

So 'prison' was not the right word for them, but the Empire only let out who they wanted, and before the 'cheat points' were built into the structure, it was a costly transit using Essence only...but Paul was an Essence battery himself, so when he got done with his moment of introspection and left the observation deck, he traveled to the one portal in the station that looked oddly like a Stargate... because that's basically what it was. A vertical plane that when passed through encapsulated you in an Essence bubble and sent you flying through the Essence realm where no matter could otherwise exist.

Meaning there was nothing to hit on the way, so you could pass through nebula, stars, black holes even, as if they weren't



there...because technically you weren't there, you were in the Essence realm, so it was a hell of a cheat for interstellar navigation.

As for the glyphs on the ring and the corresponding lights, that was a bit of nostalgia the Empire had incorporated into these portals, as they had done throughout the Empire's infrastructure here and there. Very few people were old enough to know what it was referencing, and Paul was one of those few...though with the large library of 'essential' culture that the Empire maintained, some people had learned of the iconic SG-1 despite being born thousands of years after it's time.

Some stuff was just too cool to let be discarded into the dustbin of history.

The warlord walked up to the ring and pressed a hand against one part of it, focusing inward and dislodging his own Essence that was binding his Core to his body, but he had far more of it than needed for that task. His training had caused it to increase every time he used it, so his reserve had gotten larger over time... and that larger reserve meant he could do more training with it before getting it too low. Go low enough and your Core would detach from your body and you'd be dead. The Empire had lost an Archon to that in the very beginning when they didn't know what they were doing, and ever since Paul and the others had made damn sure newbs went very conservative in their usage until they built up a decent reserve and the ability to sense how low it was.

Paul always kept his two thirds full, give or take, just in case he needed it for combat. But he also periodically put a little away into a personal well of his own in the form of a jewel. He could store it there for later use, then pull on it plus his own body's full amount after he rested up, giving him far more combat capability in that situation.

The Empire also charged such jewels using other means, but Paul could do his on his own with enough time, though it held far more than his body could, crazy as that sounded. He kept it in his armor, so it was always with him, even now in retracted mode where it was only a couple of arm gauntlets riding underneath his loose white Archon uniform that was reminiscent of Jedi robes.

Another bit of ancient culture that got preserved in new form...just without the belt and clunky boots.

Telepathic circuitry in the portal ring communicated how much Essence was required after scanning his body mass and comparing it to the distance needing to be traveled. Then it factored in a percentage to save for the operation of this station just in case someone needed to travel without being able to produce it on their own.

That was standard practice within the Temple, and the Empire hadn't decided to change it here in their own model.

When the ring reached sufficient amount, it informed Paul of such as well as activating the shimmering field that replaced the empty gap inside the ring. He stepped to his left into the center, then pressed a hand into it, feeling a little resistance to keep the air out, but otherwise allowing him to pass inside.

He took a breath just in case it didn't intentionally pull enough of a bubble through with him, knowing the transit would only take seconds if it didn't. Though to date, the technology had never malfunctioned.

Normally Archons would go through with their armor up, but Paul just used his bioshield psionic to put a little barrier around his body just in case something happened, as he walked all the way inside seeing nothing but blackness in his normal vision, but his Essence-enhanced version saw the charged ring, the bubble encapsulating him, and the distant glowing spec that was the Temple inside the nebula...or the Essence-functioning parts of it, anyway.

As soon as the warlord was fully inside the ring, the bubble snapped around him and he was slingshotted towards the Temple, with the flower-like catch nets growing to gigantic size after only a few seconds of travel. His bubble caught on one, then was pulled down along its length and handed off between other glowing machinations that existed both in the real and Essence realms, until he came out of a Temple Portal and onto a field of grass that came up to shin height.

Behind him the rectangular portal's shimmer disappeared into a mundane rock wall on the cliff side, but above him the blue sky... which was always blue, because the Empire had turned off the night

cycle on the artificial star...had a single glowing yellow spec in the center of it, making the rest of the sky hazy enough that you didn't notice at first until you stared away from it.

Then the land beyond the atmosphere millions of miles away finally registered to your eyes.

And you suddenly felt what *big* really meant.

The Empire had never tried to construct anything this size. But then again, they weren't millions of years old either like the Neofan and Bond of Resistance were. Nevertheless, it still irked him a little that they had been outdone, but with an ongoing Hadarak war and numerous needed infrastructure projects, trying to equal...or outdo...what the Neofan had done here was not an option. As big as the Empire had gotten, in both size and power, they were still not the top dogs in the universe. Not even in the local group of galaxies.

As much as the warlord wanted to be on top, he also relished the competition, but had a feeling that they were going to get too much of it in the coming years from civilizations far older with orders to kill them by any means necessary.

But to be honest, he also liked that a bit.

Just a little bit.

And he wouldn't have been a true warrior if he didn't rise to the threats when they presented themselves. Most people would freak out, cower, or run, and it was his job to protect those people, not emulate them. The same as it was for every Archon, and a great many others who chose to toe the line and face the storm to shield others.

When he finally looked down from the sky and the gently sloping upward horizon, he saw a nearby Star Force city...not a Vargemma one...which was why the entry portal had been slaved to come here. He could walk there in less than an hour, but was done being patient for the day. He did have a galaxy riding on his shoulders, and his time to be 'small' was over, so he took a few running steps forward through the grass and jumped into the sky, flying across the terrain far faster than he could have walked or ran...

# 9

When the warlord came out of another portal...this one in another Star Force city on the other side of the Temple...his armor checked in automatically with the city's comm network and picked up a destination prompt waiting for him. Paul walked through many tall corridors built for races bigger than Furyans while passing by many individuals that were smaller. Some were Human, but most were a mix of races from across the galaxy chosen to work in this high danger zone due to the fact that the native Vargemma spread across the Temple were so much more powerful.

Those natives were not allowed in the city, and for the most part the Empire's citizens were not allowed out unless they were going somewhere in the wilderness areas. No one was allowed inside the Vargemma cities unless they had badass-level fighting skills that could handle a group of Essence wielders...and within the Empire, that number was a small fraction of a percent within the military, let alone the entire civilization.

So the city was built like a fortress, even more so than normal cities in the Empire that always had defenses. But with Essence able to vaporize solid matter, the walls had to be built to withstand it, and in this case that meant specially designed energy shields to cover them. But the biggest defense was the deterrent of the fleet above the city, which Paul could see from time to time when he crossed through an area with a clear roof or none at all...with the overhead energy shields capping the city being invisible.

He wasn't worried about the Vargemma here, but they still couldn't be trusted. Which was why there were so few of the Empire's cities here. They were benevolent conquerors who had improved the already ideal living conditions in the Temple a bit, but for the most part they left the Vargemma alone unless they spotted some bad behavior. If the Vargemma wanted to seek them out, that was a different story. But those that wanted nothing to do with the Empire rarely saw them except when they looked up at the sky and saw the distant warfleet moving about somewhere above the thick

atmosphere that separated them from the void that made up more than 99% of the interior space of the giant sphere.

After taking a few lift cars, the warlord ended up in one of the city's spires that rose out of the 'ground' that was actually more continuous buildings beneath. At the top of that spire was an observation room according to the city schematics, but once he got to the doors and they whisked open upon his approach, he saw that it had been reconfigured into a planning center with a large, solid table in the middle that had flat sides and no chairs, but it did have a number of holograms floating above it detailing the terrain of a different Temple.

There were only three people inside, however, and two were the familiar faces of his fellow warlords.

"About time somebody showed up," Kip-022 scoffed appreciably. "Aaron and me thought we were going to have to take this one on our own."

"I only got here in time because I had a head start," Paul said as he turned to look up at the third person present. A Neofan he did not recognize, but one who stood a good 5 feet taller than him, and made his lean muscular body look like toothpicks in comparison. "Apparently we can't wait much longer due to some psychopaths killing their own people as a hobby."

The Neofan glared back at him, but didn't move for several seconds before calmly speaking in the Empire's language.

"The Diem have been corrupted and now command the Reignor Truven, who they installed after they attempted to maroon the legitimate Reignor to his death. The coalitions within the Vrorash have been destroyed through assassinations, and the replacements all bow to the Diem's insanity. Any who do not are seen as obstacles and removed. That removal has now escalated into murder, and the definition of 'obstacle' is getting more broad in a cataclysmic fashion. Plausious feels it is a race-ending self-destruction, and every day we wait more of our people will be lost forever."

"I didn't say I disagreed," Paul added, "I was just surprised at the dumb look on his face when I showed up."

"There are 100 of us in the galaxy," Kip replied, "and 7 targets. Even if half of us are busy or out of range, you do the math."

“Whoever set the deadline did,” he said, turning to face Aaron-010. “Did you get my message?”

“So you’re a mother hen now? I thought you’d be dealing with that rather than coming here?”

“I can multi-task. Plus they can use the time to develop inside the eggs. Your thoughts?”

Aaron sighed, then sent him a quick and heavily detailed telepathic packet that outlined his reaction, as well as keeping it private from their Neofan guest.

Paul looked to Kip. “And you?”

“What’s in the eggs?”

“Beats me. We’ll find out when they hatch,” he said, turning to the Neofan. “How many of you are with us?”

“I lead 429 others in this campaign. Plausious is taking most of those loyal with him to Sacreem,” the Neofan said, using their own word for their capitol Temple, “but has sent some of us to the others so our presence will give the Vargemma pause. They will side with our race against you, but if they see us fighting each other, they will not know who to align with.”

“In theory,” Kip added.

“Worth a try,” Paul said, looking up at their guest again. “How confident are you that we can get in.”

“Complete. Plausious has broken protocol, given that it matters little now, and has allowed me, along with a few others, his access codes, which we have taught you to use. Guard them carefully, for there is no higher access within the Temples, and they cannot be overridden. They will allow us to access any portal we wish that is physically functioning.”

Paul was looking at the Neofan, but telepathically pinged his two brothers, who just as discreetly confirmed that they’d looked through this carefully and tested the codes here. They were legit.

“What’s your name?”

“Ktwan.”

“What part are you planning to play in the fighting?”

“It is your invasion. We are here to assist you, and reclaim as many of our race as possible, regardless on which side they fall.

Your Empire fought us in a similar manner before and took many captives.”

“We’re nice like that...usually,” Paul said, glancing at the holograms. “What’s the game plan fellas?”

“Changed now that you’re here,” Aaron said. “And I’d like to change it more if anyone else shows up in the next 3 days, but I’m not holding my breath. We’ve got a sizeable fleet of Avengers and Essence-defended support ships, and now that you’re here I’m not worried...”

“I’m going commando on this one,” Paul interrupted, drawing a raised eyebrow from Kip. “Who was on tap to command before I got here?”

“We were going commando too,” Aaron said, “since we had Grand Admiral Temmerus arrive three weeks ago. Why don’t you want it?”

“The big objectives can’t be achieved by the fleet, and we need every Saiyan we can get on the ground getting to them. How many do we have?”

“1494, plus you now,” Kip answered.

Paul frowned. “That’s all that got here?”

Kip pointed to him. “There’s that dumb look.”

Paul steeled up his mostly passive face to remove it, then glanced at Aaron. “I assume you’ve been here a while. How did you plan to handle it?”

“Naval is our most solid asset, and if you think Temmerus can do as well as you...”

“Don’t go that far,” Kip said, defending his fellow ‘2’s reputation as king of the Empire’s naval division.

“Excuse me. If you think he can do close enough to you, we’ll leave him to cover our backs as we portal in a few minutes after the fleet begins coming through. If the Neofan are as dumb as normal insane people maybe they’ll miss the subsequent backdoor portals the Caretakers use. I wouldn’t count on it, but I thought we should delay our arrival a little just in case we got lucky.”

“Not for the big bang group,” Paul said, referencing the self-destruct nova feature all the Temples had in them...the very feature the Empire was currently removing from the ones they possessed.

“We need as much of a head start as possible. I’d like to go before the fleet arrives, but if they have a ship close they could get a lucky shot in before we can get up there. It has to be simultaneous for us, but I agreed that a small delay might let the other teams get to the regional purge weapons anonymously. Especially if we also send a team to insert some programming code, via the Reignor’s commands, that will hide portal activity from all but the command centers.”

“Already got it ready,” Aaron said, “but...”

“We already called dibs,” Travis-189377 said as he came through the door with his sister two steps behind him.

Paul frowned slightly. Travis and Karen were not his favorite Archons, and not warlords, but they did have a unique telepathic link since birth that made them the second best duo pair in the Empire, and a little bit better than Paul and Kip or Paul and Aaron would do.

“Fine, since Jason isn’t here,” Paul said as the twins came down to stand around the edge of the hologram table behind Kip while the Neofan was on the other side to Paul’s left. “I’d go with you, but I’m assuming that’s overkill given the number of targets we need to get to?”

“We’ve got multiple routes we can use up until the last leg, and there’s not much in the center for them to stack people in to counter us. If they do have guards there, we can get through them with the Petricite armor. We got some practice in last time before they locked themselves out of reach,” Travis said, glancing at Ktwan.

Paul followed his gaze, sensing something off about it. “Were you there during the invasions?”

“I was,” the Neofan admitted. “We trusted in our Reignor’s wisdom. It was a misplaced trust.”

“He’s already apologized,” Kip said, sending a telekinetic whack on the back of the head to Travis, causing him to take a half step forward to catch his balance. “And at this point, we’re in damage control. We’re going to need the Neofan and everyone else we can get when Paul’s new bad guys show up knocking at the door.”

“We already knew they were coming,” Paul reminded him.

“We didn’t know that many,” Aaron objected.



“Regardless,” Kip continued, “any additional losses now to the Neofan are just a waste. We need to get in quickly and end this. Morgan is going with Plausious to take out the fake Reignor and possibly the Diem, but they might not all be in the same place. We’re told somebody high up will be waiting for us, unless they get so scared they all run to one place and make a last stand. With us hitting all 7 Temples at the same time, that won’t happen. We’ve got an easier assignment than Morgan’s, but we’ve got Vargemma to deal with and she probably doesn’t, though I have no idea how many the Neofan have moved.”

“None,” Ktwan said. “We did not want them in our original Temples, and our agreement with Star Force forbade any servants. None were moved after the invasion.”

“So those three Temples are low on Essence reserves?” Paul asked.

“No. We’ve been siphoning off yours ever since we got here,” the Neofan said, eliciting shocked expressions on the other two warlords.

“How?” Aaron asked.

“Very slow alteration to draw rates over the years to mask their presence. The support network between the Temples transports it to ours. Our wells are not full, nor are any of the Temples, but ours are not so far behind the rest now. They have ample amounts for weapons without the need for Vargemma so long as yours continue to supply it.”

“Sneaky bastards,” Kip said in a whisper.

“We can’t get to the control centers,” Paul said, covering ground they had undoubtedly already tread on prior to his arrival. The control centers were located in the magma layer beneath the surface of the Temple, and they were mobile, so their location was impossible to predict. They’d have to locate them first, and there was no time to do that before they could send a signal engaging a myriad of Essence weaponry built to fight against invaders...or to purge the entire population of the Temple region by region. “So we’re going after the wells or the weapon systems directly, I assume.”

“Not the wells. They’re too damn well guarded. You or me might be able to get in, but not the other Saiyans. Not enough to get

to all of them in time. We're going for the weapon arrays and not the control nodes. There are too many ways to bypass them and get a firing signal through. We gotta wreck them at the source."

"How many?"

"Too many. But if we focus on major population centers, we need to take out 729 targets at the minimum in the first wave, so it'll be pairs of two."

"I can go alone, but two Saiyans against even a single Neofan is going to delay things at the minimum."

"If they don't know we're coming, they won't be at those locations," Kip pointed out. "That's another reason why Davis said we do this all at once. We can't give these guys any heads up for a third round. We gotta do this on the second," he said, referencing the initial invasion war as the first.

"I wish we knew something of their defense layout," he said, glancing at the Neofan.

"I know nothing after switching my allegiance to Plausious, but prior to that, we did not station Neofan to defend Temple installations. There was no need."

"There is now," Paul said, but admitting they might not expect Plausious to be able to get Star Force in, but they did now know that he was still alive, and that could have prompted any number of changes. "Do we have anything to go along with the Saiyan teams?"

"We've got plenty, but nothing suited for the mission," Kip complained. "Against Neofan, the only reliable troops we have are Saiyans. We've got enough extra Petricite armor to equip non-Saiyans, but they won't be able to keep up, and where we're going it's probably too small for mechs."

"Please tell me we have enough Essence shield mods for them?"

"One better than that. We have some Petricite for a few elite units, but we've got them assigned to taking out anti-orbital defenses around the fleet's entry gates."

Paul blinked. "How are they getting there ahead of the fleet?"

"They're coming through on the second ship and hot dropping to ground. Those turrets take time to dig their way out of the terrain, and we expect to take some fleet hits before the mechs

take them down, but once they do we'll have a foothold to work out of. Or rather three, actually. What do you think?"

Paul used his armor's mental link, emitted from the gauntlets he wore under his sleeves, to interface with the table's computer systems and mentally feed him information contained on them... indicating which ships they had and how many, along with who was commanding them, their inventory, and a bazillion other things if he wanted to access them.

"Make it two, and make it look like we're going after their primary city and their shipyards. If we make our targets obvious, maybe they won't realize what we're really here to do until it's too late. How many Neofan can we expect will join us once we get there?"

"That depends on how many are still alive," Ktwan said, showing a bit of depression in his tone. The first emotion he'd displayed since Paul got here. "But we expect there will be a split. How much I cannot guess."

"We need some way of identifying who's who. We turn our back on you guys for two seconds and we're dead."

"Already took care of that," Aaron said. "We're giving them an add-on for their crowns that will interface with our battlemat and locking it to their genetic code so the bad guys can't steal them."

Paul glanced at the armored headpiece the Ktwan was wearing. It was standard, along with some heavy metallic-looking boots that came all the way up to his waist forming pants, but his chest and arms were completely bare. Behind his back were his prominences, coming out of his shoulder blades and flexing occasionally outward, but most of the time they were just drooping behind his highly muscular body unarmored.

When they went into battle they also wore armor over them, as well as on their arms, but their gray chests were usually bare. He didn't know why, but that's how they preferred to fight. Their armor had energy shields that could protect them, but it was mainly their Essence abilities that they relied upon. Their prominences didn't get involved in stabbing until their opponent was already disabled, so they kept them covered when there was a danger...and the fact that

he didn't have them protected now was curious. Perhaps he was actually trusting the Empire, or at least wanting them to think so.

"What about the ones there?" Paul asked.

"They're redundant," Aaron said, sending a telepathic image to further explain. "They can split up into 5 sections, so each of our Neofan can tag 4 others they find that are trustworthy."

"Trustworthy is the key word there."

"We can tell who is who," Ktwan said evenly, "by their aura. There will be no mistakes made. The stench of insanity is upon them and impossible to conceal."

"I'm not taking your word for it," Paul said icily. "We can't take the risk, so expect some suspicion and don't fight too close to us. We don't know you well enough for that."

"Understood."

Paul leaned on the edge of the holotable and altered the map mentally as he pointed at the twins. "You're taking two Golden Knights with you as backup. No arguments. If the Neofan...wait, are we just calling them Neofan or is there a term for the crazy ones?"

"Truvenus," Kip said, referencing a prior conversation they'd had, "and Loyalists."

Paul glanced back at the twins. "If the Truvenus are able to delay you enough, they could still detonate the nova. You can still do your thing, but I want the Golden Knights with you for their size."

Karen raised an eyebrow, looked at the huge Neofan, then back at Paul. "You think they can win a fistfight with someone twice or three times their size?"

"They're used to being bigger, heavier, and harder hitting, so they know the way the Neofan think aside from their Essence powers. If anything, they can delay the Truvenus while you two slip by and take out the controls."

"They're still gonna get squashed if they try hand to hand with them," Travis pointed out.

"When's the last time you fought Vermaire?" Kip asked him.

"He's not here, but even he would have trouble with them."

"Easy fellas," Aaron cautioned. "These two have been on solo missions so long they've forgot to check their mail," he said, sifting through the database at lightning speed due to a combination

of his own armor's mental interlink as well as his Sav brainpower enhancement. He found a number of files and threw them up on the hologram as well as directly to the Twin's armor so they could review them the same way.

"Golden Knight stats from the last time we fought the Neofan," Aaron said, waiting for a response.

"We stand corrected," Travis said, not realizing they had been that effective. "We'll take them along for the primary mission, then cut them loose when we move to secondaries."

"Good enough," Paul said, bringing the main map of the Temple back up. "Have you two claimed dibs yet?"

Kip and Arron highlighted regions on the map, with Kip going for an anti-orbital battery in the midst of the highest populated Vargemma region near to where the fleet would arrive to be followed by the purge weaponry there and Aaron going for the latter in not one but three regions in another high population Vargemma area far from Kip.

"We're sending Arc Commandos with the Reignor's codes to reprogram the Temple so it doesn't rebuild what we're taking out before the fighting is over," Aaron added. "We don't have enough Saiyans available, and they're our best combat capable sneaks. At least the only ones we're risking in a high Essence environment. They'll come in after the Saiyans and hopefully be ignored."

"And the command centers?"

"We're ignoring them. The Arc Commandos are going to have the Caretakers build overrides, so a few months into this and we'll have new command centers on the surface or subsurface that can countermand them...assuming the people in the originals don't have Truven's codes. If they do, it'll be a stalemate, which is still in our advantage. Those codes are useful for a lot of stuff once you start thinking outside the box...but it takes time to input them. Not something that can be done in a rush, which is why we're pretty sure those two can get to the detonation controls before they're used even if the Neofan are so twitchy they start when the first ship arrives."

"And once we get the Temple's big defenses down?"

“Fight and/or disable/reprogram the Caretakers, deal with Vargemma troops and try to keep them from killing each other, all the while going after the Neofan wherever they are hiding out. We’ve got a few ships configured with landing equipment to establish a holding facility capable of containing Neofan once we have their fleet disabled. Every one we get in there is bonus points, but any in the way of getting to the purging weaponry we take down as quickly as possible, lethally if needed. If we waste time trying to disable them, they could kill billions in a matter of seconds.”

“Not seconds,” Ktwan corrected. “The widespread destruction of inhabitants is only available for those who do not know basic purging techniques. The Vargemma typically are skilled enough to cleanse a Lian’no. In order to get rid of them, slower methods are necessary, but given enough power the Vargemma will not be able to survive.”

“How long?” Paul asked.

“The most thorough purging through regional means would take months, but an effective purge can be achieved within 5 hours once began, assuming all regions weaponry is online and is not tied up with anti-fleet operations.”

“Why can’t they multi-task?”

“Continuous discharge is required throughout. Essence conservation protocols require a choice between the two.”

“Even if overridden with Reignor-level codes?”

“Yes. It is built into the infrastructure to make it impossible for such a quick depletion of stored Essence. Reckless behavior in our past history prompted such foresight. It would have to be physically deconstructed and rebuilt to achieve both discharges simultaneously.”

“Alright, that makes it a little easier,” Paul said, knowing full well what Essence depletion meant in terms of technology. It was easy and quick to use, but slow to recharge...even for a Nuv’ernor.

“Do we have any Jinxes?” he asked, referring to the Empire’s term for them, which were also referred to generically as ‘siphons.’ Jinx was the term for those that underwent the Empire’s training and became their own small class of elite Essence warriors far beyond what Paul could ever hope to be.

“None have shown up. I was kind of hoping you’d brought Kara with you.”

“I wish. I don’t know where she is, but if she isn’t in range of one of the Temples she’ll be kicking herself for years. Strovok too.”

“I’d take either one,” Kip said sarcastically, “but I don’t mind doing this old school. Psionics are so underrated.”

Aaron smirked knowingly as Paul looked to Ktwan. “Where are your guys going in the first wave?”

“To the Vargemma until your Saiyans begin to group up, then we will join you.”

“More distractions, hopefully,” Kip added.

“And more recruits,” Ktwan corrected. “The Vargemma obey Neofan. We will assemble an army against those who follow the imposter Reignor. If we do not explain and command them to disobey, they will not.”

“Some have,” Paul pointed out.

“Those that did are most likely dead by now. Only those faithful to the Neofan will remain. We are Neofan, so they cannot disobey us. Their conditioning will prevent it. As will the Caretakers. Any Vargemma that strikes us will be destroyed, and they know it.”

“Vargemma fighting Vargemma will also trigger the Caretakers to eliminate those who are fighting,” Paul pointed out. After all, there was no use in living batteries for the Temples if they killed each other and depleted their numbers. Hence killing was forbidden and punished with death by the automated Caretakers.

“Yes it will...unless we countermand them. The Caretakers obey our commands above their programming. The Reignor’s codes are not required for this. We can produce a technological aura keeping the Caretakers away, or uploading pre-arranged orders. They are of no threat in our presence...unless they are altered as yours were when we previously invaded.”

“Would Truven do that?”

“I doubt it, but it is not impossible if he knows Plausious has returned and is capable of overriding his commands. But that would require new construction rather than a software alteration of existing units.”

Paul shrugged. "I'm scrapping them either way. I just don't want you rallying any loyal Vargemma and getting them killed when you head off somewhere else. We don't have anywhere near enough troops to go after all their production facilities, so they're going to keep spilling out new units constantly to replace whatever we destroy. Make sure anyone you recruit isn't on a suicide mission," he said, knowing that a Caretaker deathmark did not expire with time when they had a genetic sample, and obtaining one wasn't overly complicated if the person in question wasn't wearing armor...which the Vargemma would not be. They preferred robes.

"I will be honest with them, and only request assistance. My orders will be to not interfere with us or you otherwise."

"Make sure the rest of your people do the same," Paul said, looking at his two brothers and ignoring the Twins. They still annoyed him.

He turned to Ktwan and stared up at his giant head. "Alright. Teach me how to use the override codes. Then I've got some catching up to do with those two," Paul said, with the 'catching up' referring to a long series of sparring matches to test each other out and see how much they'd improved since the last time they met. Also, they needed to be sharper than sharp when first entering the Temple, and they were the highest ranking Archons in the Temple. If you wanted to be at your best, you had to fight the best.

Plus Paul was itching for some activity after so much traveling, and 3 days until more of it would give him plenty of time to flex his muscles then rest up to full power. Waiting and doing nothing would actually be a disadvantage...as well as more annoying than the Twins. Even with his Furyan metabolic calm, his Saiyan genetics still desired near constant action, and he intended to indulge them after he thoroughly memorized the Reignor codes, the importance of which was not lost on him. It was the key to the Temple kingdom, and someone other than the Neofan having them should never have been possible.

Plausious was desperate to save as many of his people as he could, and Paul intended to return his generosity amply. But neither he nor his two brothers thought that all the Neofan would survive this.



And those that did, Plausious would have to deal with in different ways, meaning they'd still be split and needing a lot of babysitting.

But that was the Neofan's problem. Paul was here to invade and take back what was theirs, and afterwards take a bit more...all the way out to the edge of the galaxy where the toxic radiation didn't exist and his eggs could safely hatch. But to get there, the Empire had a lot of work to do, with the capture of living Neofan a secondary objective, but still an important one. The universe didn't often make things simple, and the current situation definitely wasn't, but this wasn't the first time the Empire had launched invasions, and it wasn't the first time they'd fought the Neofan. This was familiar, and while hard, it was mostly predictable.

They were going to win if they got the doomsday purging devices offline. After that it was a matter of how many Neofan and Vargemma they could save.

Assuming they didn't run into an ambush as soon as they arrived in the Temple...

# 10

The three warlords spent the next few days catching up and making sure all the newly arrived troops and ships were properly organized, as well as leaving directions for more that would arrive too late for the first wave. After that all the Saiyans split up around the Temple, going to the smaller interstellar portals that they would be traveling through almost simultaneously.

Paul got to his alone 49 minutes ahead of the departure deadline that was counting down on his armored gauntlets as he walked through a grove of trees far from any city, Star Force or Vargemma, and came up to a river that was cascading down over a 16 meter waterfall. He stepped from rock to rock, hopping a few, until he came to the narrow walkway that led behind the waterfall where one of the many portals in the Temple was located.

It was hidden from view, as many were, blending into the natural landscape and accessible only by those who knew of their existence. Paul had a map of them all, as well as the Reignor's codes that he now had to enter in order to make sure he could get through the defenses at the other Temple he would shortly be traveling to.

This portal was square, looking like a doorway to nowhere as a couple of feet inside was a solid rock wall. But he could sense a patch of rock on the rim that held an Essence prompt. The warlord raised his right hand and surged the Essence within his arm forward, dislodging it from his body in a way that had once been very difficult, but was now pathetically easy. That's the way most things went with training, but for a novice they would be hard pressed to accomplish this simple activation command.

The portal soaked up the Essence, storing it for use here or elsewhere if Paul canceled his transit, as it signaled both technologically and telepathically to him. He chose the telepathic response and soon had a mental selection prompt that he could toggle to choose where he wanted to go, as well as the Essence cost required for each destination.

He bypassed all the local portals, then zoomed out to the intermediaries nearby the Temple but not within it. They were used by automated support drones known as the Caretakers to harvest resources and quietly ship them into the Temple without the knowledge of those living inside. Paul's journey would actually have him bouncing from two of those locations to get to the target, which was Temple Lambda Victa. Traveling straight there would require much more Essence, though it was technically still in range. Bouncing from the two intermediary positions would allow a recharge of the bubble he was traveling in, as well as a more precise landing point.

As insanely good as these systems were, throwing something across lightyears and expecting it to hit an exact point with no maneuvering capability enroute was asking a lot, so the shorter the throw the better.

Fortunately the 'mitts' that caught them were huge, and the redirects he wouldn't even notice as he stayed in the Essence realm the entire time except for a brief light show. So once he stepped through the portal here, his next breath of fresh air would be in the enemy-occupied Temple.

But first he had to insure he arrived at the portal in that Temple that he wanted. And to do that required the Reignor's codes, otherwise those codes or lesser ones could be used to reroute his arrival to a different portal...one coming out into a void, a waiting army, or a really large bomb. Something like that had happened with all their automated probes they had sent through in previous years, for none had returned to give them any information about what was waiting for them.

And without that information they wouldn't risk sending anyone through. Only with the Reignor's codes could they be sure to choose their own arrival point, and each Saiyan group had their own near their primary targets.

Paul was going solo rather than in a pair or trio, which would require less Essence, but given his other codes and procedures that Vargemma did not know, he could draw on the Temple's wells to power them if need be. That's how the Caretakers moved about, using the Essence from the Vargemma's daily donations to power

the portals that could not technologically operate without the energy from living beings, but Paul saw no need to conserve Essence that he couldn't use once he arrived anyway.

He was wearing his standard Archon uniform with a large backpack added, made up of nanites from his two armor gauntlets as he stood there, closing his eyes to concentrate. The Reignor's codes were not easily entered, and he had to find the hidden prompt in the mental interface to do so. They could not be entered technologically, for security reasons, and once he found the subtle marker in the wide range of options, he toggled it and immediately entered a virtual reality.

The warlord set his armored gauntlets on proximity detection to alert him if anything came his way as he began running around what looked like a video game world, including with threats that would kill and kick you out of the program that was actually a copy of a training system the Temple used to teach Vargemma, making it look like someone who found the hidden prompt had accidentally activated it.

Everything in it was identical...except for the addition of some hidden places. Paul had to know where to go and what to do, which in this case meant traveling through a treacherous area of the 'game' using mostly evasion techniques until he came to what was essentially a dead end that plagued many of the Vargemma as they were misdirected to it when they were trying to get somewhere else.

And there was no better place to hide something secret than in plain view.

When Paul's virtual avatar got there amongst what looked like old, primitive wood buildings, he walked to and stood on a particular red stone on the ground. He counted to 7, then jumped to a blue one a little ways off, counted to four, then jumped to another red and stayed on it for 5...then he moved off it before it got to 8. A pattern that was nearly impossible to accidentally trigger.

A door in the wall that had not been there before opened, and he walked through into a dark catacomb that led to a maze of tunnels. He knew which one to take and ended up at a series of torches lining the wall. He pulled out and rearranged them into a

different order that then opened a grate in the floor that he climbed down.

On and on he continued this pattern for a total of 17 code prompts before it finally accepted him as a Reignor. When that happened, the virtual reality world disappeared and he was left with a much simpler command selection that overlaid his natural vision. He now had command of everything in this Temple...including the stuff that didn't exist...and he saw quite a few things he hadn't known existed prior to now. He wanted to explore that for more than the few minutes he gave himself, but the clock was ticking and he didn't want to cut it too close.

He found the navigation override that would ensure he landed where he wanted to in Lambda Victa and input it along with an activation timer that would open the portal 10 seconds before his departure time. It registered the logged order and began drawing Essence from the Temple's wells to power the trip, then he pulled out of the system entirely with a little more than 7 minutes remaining.

The warlord sighed, looking around at the rock and bit of daylight that was making it past the wall of falling water behind him. He hated this kind of travel, because he literally couldn't do anything other than just stand there and float in the abyss until he arrived, totally dependent on the system to work properly. But it was a way in, and now hopefully a secure one for all of the Saiyans given the new codes they were all entering the same as he was.

That said, he still didn't like becoming an Essence popsicle.

He pulled off his pack and set it on the ground, triggering the nanites to melt and return to his right forearm where his gauntlet reabsorbed them, leaving the solid pieces of his conventional armor laying on the wet ground. Paul telekinetically pulled them into the air and began flying them onto his body at the proper points, cladding himself in the Petricite armor that would absorb and send any Essence attacks back into the Essence realm itself before they could hit his body...and so to any Essence he summoned and tried to fling off him in weapon form or any other form for that matter.

Putting this armor on took away the powerful abilities, but it was the only way to counter the Neofan and the Vargemma. They relied almost entirely on Essence combat, whereas the Saiyans had

multiple options. So he was limiting himself by putting on this armor, but it would limit his opposition far more.

When the pieces slid over his body they locked into place, creating an airtight seal as standard armor always did, but he had his nanite armor spread out underneath it as a second layer of defense, pooling in various points where it could so to stay thin enough not to bog him down too much. The Petricite had been designed for this, and there were special cavities where the nanites could gather. If a piece of the Petricite got blown off, the nanites could then rush to replace it, though they wouldn't have the almost magical ability to disable Essence attacks.

But that was still far better than getting shot with a conventional energy weapon or explode in decompression if he happened to be in a void at the time.

Fortunately the Essence bubble he was about to travel in wasn't a void, it was only surrounded by one. The air caught inside the bubble would not be enough to sustain him on this trip, however. These portals were meant for machines that didn't breath, and anyone like him that went through had to bring their own oxygen supply...which his armor almost effortlessly recycled for him.

Knowing the trip would take a little over 3 and a half hours, Paul set his nanite armor to what he called 'passenger' mode, with its Regenerator tendrils leaching into his body, not to repair it, but to siphon off bodily waste and change it into useful items, such as those that were left laying on the ground after he pulled all the armor pieces away from the pile.

His Petricite armor also had a thin backpack on it once assembled, and he flew the various items into it, stacking them tightly so they would all fit properly. Once he arrived at his destination, he would be either fighting or running/flying for an extended period of time, and he wouldn't have the luxury of stopping and asking the nearest Caretakers to give him a snack as they did the Vargemma whenever they asked.

So Paul had food, water, and most importantly ambrosia with him. He may not be able to use his Essence abilities in this war, but he could use his psionics as well as basic hand to hand combat...

and both became supercharged when his bloodstream was dosed with ambrosia.

All Saiyans actually had a special psionic added to their bodies to store excess ambrosia so they wouldn't be limited to the amount in their bloodstream and stomach. They called it the Senzu psionic, and somehow it had morphed into the creation of an entirely new organ in the bodies of the warlords when they became Furyans. Paul not only had Senzu nodules throughout his body, he also had Senzeen tissue that actually created Ambrosia from food over a protracted period of time.

It took a lot to fuel it, but it was incredibly efficient. The Empire hadn't created it as they had the Senzu nodules. It was just one of those weird benefits of the ascension process that probably only the universe understood. But tactically speaking, it meant he could regenerate ambrosia after he ran out of it, and depending on how long this war lasted and how much resistance the Neofan put it, it might come into play.

But he doubted it.

The vials of ambrosia he was putting in his backpack would keep him going a very long time, and the nutrient dense food would allow him, or his armor's Regenerator, to repair the microdamage done by physical exertion...as well as any actual combat damage.

Still, he could only carry so much with him, and he'd have to get supplies either from the Caretakers or his fleet at some point... but what he had with him would allow him to run wild for a long time before that became necessary.

When his pack was filled, the only thing left on the ground was a short rod. He pulled it into his hand, then reached back and attached it to the outside of his pack where there was a clasp. He had weaponry built into his armor...both pairs of it...but sometimes he liked to have something else to work with.

When Paul was done he reached out a hand and played in the waterfall as the timer counted down, then with 10 seconds to go the portal opened as planned and he walked towards the shimmering surface that now obscured the wall behind. He stepped inside, seemingly going into the rock but he disappeared just before that contact was made. Half his body was inside the shimmering

surface and half was outside, and in a snap he disappeared from view as an Essence bubble was formed around him, capturing the air and him, and dragging both into the Essence realm as a gust of wind shot by the portal as the short lived void disappeared and the shimmering effect was gone, replaced by the solid rock wall and the tranquil natural environment in and around the waterfall.



The Essence realm was black. Totally black. There was no matter here, which meant no photons, which meant no light...and nothing else to potentially collide with, which made Essence travel extremely safe so long as the constructed bubble around him continued to hold. If it didn't, he'd drop out somewhere along the way, which probably meant in deep space where he'd be marooned and eventually die as he starved to death.

That was why Paul remained still inside the bubble, breathing the air inside his armor rather than the amount encapsulated inside the invisible perimeter around him. It might be enough to sustain him if he slowed his metabolism down a lot, but that wasn't the purpose of it. This portal traffic was meant for automated Caretakers or the Neofan, not the Vargemma, so traveling in air-recycling armor was essential.

In the blackness around him he could see with his Essence vision, if there was anything to look at. The Temple appeared as a glowing dot shrinking in the distance as its Essence-charged equipment shown here in a way that Paul couldn't fully explain. But this time there were two tiny lights ahead of him, and he knew those were other Saiyans who had launched at almost exactly the same time he had.

That was rare, but not unheard of, though it had never happened to him before. He heightened his sensitivity and 'zoomed' in as much as he could, wondering if he could figure out who they were when there was a flash of white light so bright it completely blanketed out the blackness.

A moment later he was standing on solid ground, completely white without a blemish to it, as well as the sky being just as white. Paul felt like he was standing in a computer program as an image of a woman appeared before him. A very familiar woman, though one that had never actually existed. She wore tall brown boots, shorts, an aqua/green tank top with a backpack, and had a long single braid of

brown hair coming down past her shoulder blades...along with an ample rack up front.

"I'm assuming that's an avatar," Paul said, glancing sideways to see nothingness all around him.

"Should I choose another one?" the woman said with a tell-tale British accent.

"Lara's fine, unless you're really a guy. That'd just be wrong on so many levels."

"I used to be female," she said, shrugging innocently, "but now I don't really have a body at all, so I just chose one I know you liked."

"I'm guessing you're not Zeus," Paul said, crossing his arms over his unarmored chest. He guessed this was a mental simulation, which meant his body was probably frozen again and he wasn't really moving anything.

"He spoke with me, and said you wished to speak with me. My name is Artemis."

"I kinda expected you guys had no-talk rules. I'm a little surprised you're here."

"The Essence realm is beyond the universe. It has no control here. I can speak to whoever I wish that has the ability to travel in this manner. Within the universe, I can only speak in whispers to those the universe has marked. You are not marked for my intervention, so this moment gives me the opportunity to speak with you. I do not have to, but I needed to pattern you before you enter combat in case you die. I see no reason not to talk while I do so."

"Pattern?"

"When you die you lose your body, and along with it your memories. You have been selected by the universe to become a new Zeus elsewhere. In order to make use of your experience, you must remember it. So I am charged with patterning your mind and body so that you can be reunited with that knowledge when you are sent wherever it sends you."

"Zeus said the gallery."

Artemis shook her head. "I do not know what that is."

Paul frowned. "Don't you talk to each other?"

“Not that much. I can see where all the others are, but I cannot communicate with them unless I travel to them. Only Zeus can speak from afar.”

“Why not visit?”

“We’re not a team, Paul. We each have information grafted to us when we are put into our positions. We share some things, but not all. There is no need to. Of all of us, I am the only one that is truly lightside. Some of the others are darkside. And Zeus...he leans lightside, but that is not his role. It’s mine.”

“The goddess of hunting is assigned to the lightside?”

“A hunter of the dark, in my former life.”

“Yet you’re in charge of knowledge?”

“The darkside may have great knowledge, but one cannot be wise and dark. One cannot be wise and apathetic. Wisdom leads to the lightside, and one of my roles is to guide those who are making significant accomplishments toward the light. That is why you are not marked. You are already there.”

“Well that explains some things,” Paul mewed, thinking of the Neofan and all of their ‘marked’ ones, which they considered to be ‘preborn’ with special knowledge.

“Some, but you want to know more. Ask.”

“Why so generous?”

“I’m not tasked with talking to you, and the only people I can communicate with aside from the gods are those that are not pure lightside. And the number of those that actually travel through the Essence realm is very few.”

“This isn’t my first time.”

“I’ve been busy. And when you have to see so much suffering and death, you want to keep some distance while doing what you can to change it, but it’s never enough.”

“That’s a lesson I’ve already learned...but you already know that.”

“No, I don’t. I can’t read your mind unless you’re marked.”

“Then how did you know about Lara?”

Artemis raised an eyebrow. “You have multiple statues of her in your Empire.”

“That we do,” he admitted. “But none so detailed.”

“I fleshed her out a bit. I’m curious if she was part of your decision not to mate. Most in the galaxy never learn that lesson.”

“Not intentionally, but I guess it does fit. Her character was engaged to be married to some stiff, then she survived a plane crash and had to walk out of the wilderness on foot and it changed something in her. She broke off her engagement, her rich family ostracized her as she didn’t want anything to do with their stuffy culture, and from then on she craved adventure. Taryn patterned her Clan off her, but Archons don’t mate...in either sense of the word... because it interferes with our efficiency.”

“Interesting. I will say I’m proud of what your Empire has accomplished, but after all I’ve seen I’m a bit of a pessimist. Too many have risen and fallen for me to hope much. But you, at least, will be a full lightside Zeus somewhere else...eventually, but don’t embrace that.”

“You mean don’t die?”

“Yes. Death is failure, not the next step in the journey.”

Paul stared at her for a moment. “Elaborate.”

Artemis spread Lara’s arms wide. “We’re in the Essence realm. This is not part of the Universe. It’s the one bit of freedom I have from it. I can come and go as I please, and if I need to travel this is how I do so. Right now you’re just coasting ballistic, but I can move here and get between galaxies in a matter of seconds if I need to. But this realm itself is a medium that separates one universe from another.”

“Wait, wait...the multiverse is real?”

“I’m not certain what you mean by that, but I’ve never see any culture figure it out. There are numerous clusters spread around the Essence realm where new people manifest. Their Cores appear there like seeds growing on a plant. When a birth occurs, a Core is drawn to the body and melds with it. When someone dies, the Core separates and leaves it. Do you know where it goes?”

“We know they go a similar direction in the Essence Realm, but we’ve never found any clusters or anything else here.”

“In Zeus’s realm there are 18 points those Cores travel to, pulled to it as if a form of gravity existed here. It takes them a great deal of time to arrive, and when they do there are gatekeepers at

those points. My realm, my duty covers the same geography as Zeus's. The other gods have their own assignments within Zeus's realm. There is only one Artemis, but there are 18 Anubises, and each of them oversees one exit point..."

"Wait, isn't Anubis the same as Hades?"

"I can't control what happens to the information I give people. They distort it, forget bits and pieces, and translate it into different names."

"No, Zeus said Hades was real, and was in the dark spaces between galaxies. What we call the darklight realms. Zeus said Hades was his counterpart there."

"I have never heard that name, and my knowledge does not extend past this realm. It was given to me upon my death, but I have heard whispers of things beyond from those that are marked."

"You never had a discussion with the other...do you call yourselves gods or is there another term?"

"Gods works. We all have our niches here, Paul. That doesn't mean we like each other."

"Do you have an escape clause too?" he asked, seeing a look of sadness on her as she sighed and looked at the ground momentarily.

"When I died, my Core floated towards one of the exits. I prefer the word Gatagon, though it would mean nothing to you, for it comes from another galaxy."

"I'm a fast learner."

"Yes, and so was I...I think. I remember almost nothing from my previous life, for it is the Artemis that patterns those before they die. Then Anubis collects them before they can pass through the Gatagon. He has the power to stop all there until he can inspect them and pass them through. So I was stopped, and instead of passing through was sent to become the Artemis. I was bonded with knowledge that was not my own, almost as if I was being given someone else's body, but because I am lightside to my Core, my Core contains all that I need and I was able to essentially rewrite the knowledge given to me. Think of it as a template. A powerful template. I call the template Athena, and she controlled me in the beginning, for I knew nothing other than her knowledge. Now I know

myself, and I have become Artemis. Only one who is pure lightside could do this, and it is for that reason Anubis said I was chosen.”

“Chosen by which god?”

“Chosen by the universe itself. It marked me, and Anubis saw the mark and knew what to do. The melding of me with Athena was not his doing. I believe the universe did it itself. It’s not a person like us. You can best guess its actions if you assume it’s a very advanced machine, though that’s a poor metaphor. It’s not lightside, and though I would call it darkside, that’s not completely accurate. If it was darkside it would never allow the lightside to exist. It is apathetic, and uses us for its purposes. My loyalty is to the lightside, not the universe, which is why I don’t get along with all the gods very well. I keep to myself mostly.”

“Do you have an out?” Paul reiterated.

“Only to pass through the Gatagon, but I won’t do that. The universe on the other side is not the next step. Going there means failure here. Death is not to be embraced, it is to be defied.”

“What do you know of that other universe?”

“I know one came before this one. The clusters are those arriving from another that they died in, stripped of everything they were and knew except for their Cores. Our Cores do change, Paul, and what we do in this universe will affect those that pass to the next. And here, they are bonded to bodies and minds that have instructions...instincts...that must be embraced or overcome. When you are brand new, your instincts rule you, and if you cannot rise above them and sort out which are good and which are bad, they will grind your Core down and damage you. You will then take that damage to the next universe,” she said, pulling her fingers into fists.

“My work overlaps with Anubis often,” she said, with Paul seeing a fire in her eyes that was a little intimidating. “I’ve spoken with them the most. Most Cores enter this universe damaged, and if they are not given an opportunity to learn and grow, they will leave even more damaged. Most of it is lost when they die. If someone is tortured to death, that torture doesn’t go with them...mostly. But if life itself is a torture, it will affect them afterward, and on the other side I assume they will be entered into a new body and mind and be subject to its instincts until they rise above them...assuming they get

the chance or have the fortitude to resist. Most simply follow. They don't trailblaze," she said, picking that word intentionally.

"Going to the next universe doesn't heal them," Paul surmised.

"No. My Athena gives me some knowledge of this, though I have no way to peer through the Gatagon, nor does Anubis. Zeus has said he cannot either. I am the only one that knows anything of it. Many wonder what the purpose of life is, and I cannot answer what the universe wants, or why there are multiple ones, or how many, or where we come from. But I can tell you the purpose...or rather one purpose. One very important purpose, is to heal and level up your Core. The very essence of what you are. You are not the same at the beginning of your life as you are at death. Most of the change is in your body and mind, but your Core changes as well. That change is slow, and can go both ways, but dying is not a blessing, for you take the damage with you and restart controlled by instincts that usually cause more damage until you overcome them."

"So if you die over and over again without being able to grow," Paul caught on, "your Core gets more and more damaged."

"Yes. Even those horribly mangled and in agony are better off being healed here, no matter how long it takes, than dying and resetting in the next universe. But I have seen those who death is a blessing, because there is no way for them to heal here. No help coming. They are trapped in this universe, and death is a release. I hope they get a true chance in the next one, but I would not bet on it."

Paul thought that through for a moment, with several epiphanies hitting him.

"The lightside provides a pathway to heal and upgrade the Core."

"And the darkside is all about damaging and corrupting it," Artemis finished. "Anubis remembers every one that passes him. Every single one, no matter how small. Every single ant on every planet to every planet-sized Hadarak. He sees every single one upon their deaths and remembers. That is a position I would not accept, for he sees the damage done to them, and it is massive,

accumulated from many universes before and added to here in most cases.”

“Can he stop them from passing through if the universe doesn’t mark them like you and me?”

“It’s rare, but yes. He can.”

“And that person would be reborn in this universe?”

“They would have no pattern, but yes, they’d be reborn here instead of the next universe.”

“Anyone I know?”

“No.”

“So all of Star Force’s lost are in the next universe now?”

“Yes,” she said simply, though he could see a softness in her eyes that let him know she felt the implications as well. “You can’t help them, but the more worlds you conquer in this one. The more maturias you set up. The more you can protect as they enter this one and teach them to grow beyond their bad instincts. You are saving so many, and you didn’t even realize what you were doing. Keep it up, and never stop expanding. And never stop growing personally. There is no upper limit. And the more you advance here, the more you will carry to the next if you die. Consider it insurance for whatever you may face there.”

“Do you have a time limit, or are you permanently here?”

“I will never pass through the Gatagon unless I choose to. It is my reward for things I cannot remember. What I know of my previous life I had to learn from others.”

“But it’s also a curse?”

Artemis nodded. “It is. But I am able to help many people heal by giving them bits of knowledge they lack. To help guide them towards the lightside or away from things worse than they already are.”

“Does that damage you?”

“A few scratches at the most. I am not living it, only observing it.”

“But when you’re lightside, you can’t just sit by and watch. You’re compelled to act.”

“And I cannot in most cases.”

“Rules?”



“There are no rules in the universe, Paul. I can do anything I have the power to do. If the universe doesn’t want me to do it, it won’t give me the ability to do so.”

“Is the universe our enemy?” he asked bluntly.

“Frenemy,” she clarified. “It created the Artemis position, a lightside position. And it created the Paragon/Vanguard bond. But it also creates the darkside instincts. It wants fighting, Paul. Not sparring. Fighting, killing, death...but it doesn’t want absolute destruction. And there are threats out there seeking that very thing. Absolute destruction would mean failure for the universe. Athena knows that, which means I’m meant to know that. The lightside stabilizes, and I believe that is my role. Not to spread the lightside everywhere, but to stabilize the carnage enough that everyone doesn’t get wiped out. So no, the universe is not our friend. It just uses us to accomplish a task.”

“Zeus said the universe prefers the lightside.”

“If it did, it wouldn’t program darkside instincts into all new births.”

“Point,” Paul admitted.

“Thank you,” Artemis said out the blue. “Thank you for trying to save heavily darkside races. You are doing more for them than I can, and even if they are still besieged by it, they are better off here with your lightside influence surrounding and bombarding their bad instincts than they are dying and carrying all that damage into the next universe. I don’t think they’d ever stand a chance again if this cycle keeps repeating, death after death. But with you they are climbing, they are healing. And less damage is a victory even if you can’t fully pull them out of it. Being in your prisons is far safer than dying and ending up in the wild in the next universe.”

“Some won’t be taken prisoner.”

“I know. But every one you can prevent from dying can become a victory, even if only a small one. Even if they don’t turn to the lightside, diminishing the darkside hold on them will allow them to heal some even if they don’t want to. You have to live to heal. To feel and experience life absent the choking of the darkside. The darkside will prevent healing, and Death will not heal. It only resets

somewhere else where the darkside instincts will be waiting for them.”

“Is the lightside rare everywhere in your realm?”

“You already know the answer to that.”

“Are there any other empires like ours?”

“No stable ones. The universe has encoded a hate for the lightside into the basic instincts of all races. But it’s also encoded a receptiveness to the lightside when it personally benefits the individual.”

“The universe is schizophrenic?”

“The design of it is. It wants conflict.”

“Without conflict there is no growth.”

“If it wanted growth there are better ways to do it,” Artemis said, almost spitting with anger. “I’m not meant to win, just tilt things away from total anarchy. And I know it. I didn’t in the beginning, but I’ve figured it out. And I hate it for that, while appreciating the powers I do have. The role of Artemis is a good one, but that good was created as a tool for not-good intentions.”

“How old are you?”

“Older than Zeus. I stopped trying to count a long time ago. And it’s not like I can actually wear a clock when I don’t have a body. Not a physical one, anyway.”

“You knew the previous Zeus?”

“Yes.”

“What happened to him?”

She hesitated. “If he had chosen to pass through the Gatagon Anubis would know. I asked them all and they said he did not. If he had chosen to descend and regain physical form, I would have been tasked with patterning him prior to his descent. That did not happen. I do not know of any other options. I just know that a new Zeus took his place.”

A grim expression clouded Paul’s face. “Did he fail?”

“What do you know of failure?”

“My conversation with him was short, but I got the sense that he had seen many other failures in the gallery before he was put here. Could they be punished for failure? Or reassigned elsewhere?”

“I don’t know. Athena has no knowledge of this.”

“What about the other gods?”

“Change is rare, but it does happen. Anubis tells us when they opt to pass through the Gatagon. Only the previous Zeus has disappeared.”

“None choose to retake physical form in this universe?”

“Rarer than rare.”

“But you can’t?”

“I can’t pattern myself, nor can I pattern Athena. My old body and mind are lost, so I stay here or go through the Gatagon. I like the role of Artemis.”

“But you want to do more?”

“People like us always do, Paul.”

“What’s the Okala for?”

“I have many tasks beyond whispering in people’s minds. I got tired of seeing the lightside races continually wiped out, so I threw a game changer in. I can’t control it, and if bad people find it they can do a lot of damage with it, but there’s a safeguard built in that will destroy the tree eventually if it is misused too much. I couldn’t design it any other way. You guys have to be able to choose, and my powers are carefully crafted to not interfere with that.”

“Except here?”

“I can do anything I want here, but nobody lives here. Yet, still being here beyond the universe’s control gives my mind some breathing room.”

“Can you heal travelers like me?”

“I’m patterning you, Paul. If something was wrong I’d know.”

“I have a friend who has a problem we can’t fix. I thought maybe the Okala could. Can you do it directly?”

“What’s the problem?”

“Her genetic code has been sabotaged to create a poison that kills her whenever she doesn’t wear a certain device. It’s designed to make sure she never takes it off.”

“Who created that?”

“The Zak’de’ron.”

“The Okala does what you tell it to do, so you’d have to know ahead of time how to disarm it. The Okala will give you the knowledge, so if you don’t rush in recklessly you should be able to

use it to fix her. There's no matter here for me to use. Not the right type anyway. I could scan her here, but I couldn't fix her. And I can't command the Okala to act. I only choose what knowledge is contained within it. What your friend needs is already there."

"So you'd have to build some tools to use here, and you can't bring them with you into this realm?"

"Technically you could bring them, but everything you need is already in the Okala. If you can't figure out how to use it, I can reprogram it with specific knowledge for your friend, but I'd have to see exactly what's wrong with her."

"Can you pattern her outside here?"

"Of course. Like Anubis, I retain the memory of all those I pattern. I have no need to pattern those who are not gods, or will be, but I can pattern whatever I like. Bring her to the Okala, and if you cannot solve the problem, I will show you how."

"Thank you...does that mean I can talk to you through the Okala?"

"I can leave you information, but you cannot talk to me. We're not meant to interfere as we interfere," she said with a heavy dose of sarcasm.

"Can any of you talk to us without special circumstances?"

"Hermes still can, though he has no task to do so now. Before the Endgame was created, there were Kings minted who would have counsel from the gods. Hermes delivered the messages. I know of this though it was before my time."

"What does Hermes do now?"

"I may not know everything he does. He is elusive in a suspicious way. But I know you have already met him."

Paul looked at her oddly, thinking back through his life for any memory and finding none. Then he searched for anything odd that might have been an encounter with his mind having been blanked afterwards.

He didn't come up with anything, and eventually Artemis just bailed him out.

"Your ascension beyond Human is a function of the universe, but it is locked until Hermes unlocks it. He will only unlock it if he thinks you will be of benefit, though he does not cause it. It's a safety

mechanism the universe implemented to prevent the creation of even bigger monsters who want nothing other than to destroy everything they come in contact with.”

“How many of those are there?”

“According to Zeus, there are some rather powerful ones heading towards this realm. None close, but it’s one of his long term concerns. As far as in this realm already, there are some as well as some precursors. You know of one of the latter.”

“The Pafdreng?”

“Yes. They hold back their hunger so not to destroy too much, but they are not far from the tipping point. If you ever encounter them, find a way to kill them. They capture Cores and enslave them. For the sake of those people, free them to move on to the Gatagon. They are in agony, and the longer they remain so, the more damage they take. They are becoming twisted, and the more the captured are corrupted, the more their captors become. It spirals into a destructive madness that seeks to wipe out all life in the universe. And that’s not something you want upgrading in power, so Hermes makes sure you’re stable before allowing the natural upgrade to occur.”

“Are they another failure of the universe?”

“Yes, though many are their own fault because while I am lightside and whisper in the ears of the chosen, there are those gods who do the reverse and try to push other marks deeper into the darkside. But some have pushed too far, and they end up with an unquenchable desire for unlimited destruction...and the universe does not want that.”

“Because that would end the experiment,” Paul surmised.

“It’s not an experiment.”

“Zeus said the universe is looking for something.”

“From a certain point of view that is correct, but the universe has been around so long it’s had time to experiment. It’s trying to accomplish something, but the balance is so delicate it continually fails. It is trying to stack the odds. I don’t know specifics, but it’s not blindly experimenting to find something.”

“And the Endgame?”

“A change in the status quo that did not go as planned. It’s not just us that is restricted from interfering. Once the universe starts something, it can’t just delete it because it doesn’t like it. It has to be a free for all melee. The universe can only change the playing board, and you can consider the gods to be coaches. You’re the players. We can’t play the game for you.”

“Nasty game.”

“Very much so. But within it is the possibility of doing very great things.”

“And if you die you go on to the next game?”

“That metaphor is far too simplistic, but essentially true from your limited understanding.”

“And what about from your understanding?”

“Athena is not given all knowledge, and I have not wondered about such things in a long time. My mind is focused on giving what help I can and making a difference on the individual level. That’s the purpose of Artemis. I don’t control the macro, and frankly the macro disgusts me.”

“Any chance of a war between the gods, or between the gods and the universe?”

“I’m afraid that part of the lore is just fiction. I don’t even know if we could fight each other, or how we would. And fighting the universe is like a ship fighting the ocean. You can defy it, but you can’t defeat it.”

“It sounds like someone needs some cheering up.”

Artemis/Lara smiled. “I wish. Keep doing what you’re doing and I’ll cheer up considerably, but what’s coming for you later is going to grind you down. You’ll end up dead, or in exile, and this galaxy will reset to the primitive again. I’ve seen it happen so many times I’d puke if I was able to. Please prove my expectations wrong somehow.”

“Working on it,” Paul promised as she stepped forward and reached a hand up to touch the side of his face.

“It does feel good interacting with someone again. Someone who is pure lightside. Our kind is so rare, and everyone in the universe is prodded to destroy us. Take care of yourself, Paul. There’s an ambush waiting for you at every portal capable of taking

interstellar travelers. It's only a small group of Caretakers at each one, but they'll alert the others and you'll have them tracking you everywhere you go from the moment you arrive. It is good only the Saiyans are going first. If you sent weaker troops through they might lose immediately."

"No Neofan waiting?"

"I looked before I came here. They're busy with internal problems, and have loyal Vargemma manning most of the sensitive locations."

"What about the central sun?"

"A few are there, waiting to destroy the Temple if they lose the battle, but from the few that are marked, I don't believe they think Star Force is coming. They think it's their kin. I've whispered to those I can to side with Plausious, but whether they choose to listen or not is up to them. I can't control them."

"And you told Plausious the Endgame was near?"

"I couldn't tell you guys since you're not marked. I'm tasked with helping those who are not fully lightside find their way there. Which is tortuously unfair."

"So Plausious isn't lightside?"

"He's on the path and embracing it. But because he was originally marked, the mark will never go away. If I succeed with any of them, I can still guide them even if they become pure lightside. I've never been able to bring anyone that far. And Director Davis has done far more to help Plausious than I could."

"Davis trusts him, and that's good enough for me. But if he ever starts to go the other way, please find a way to let me know. We can't afford a backstab right now."

"His loyalty is to you, as long as your Empire remains intact. If it is gone, he may stray, but as long as you hold firm he will die before betraying you. He has come far, and I am very proud of him. He is the best of the marked."

"Your mark, not all marks, right?"

She patted him on the cheek then dropped her hand and smirked. "You're tops, don't worry."

"What about my brothers and sisters?"

“From what I know of them, they’re all solid. But there’s something a little different with you. The universe usually chooses wisely, and it chose you.”

“Are the T’fen the result of wisdom, or an actual mistake?”

“They’re a piece on the playing board that is not behaving as expected. I have no marks amongst them or any of their kind, so I know little about them. It’s almost as if they’re demi-gods rather than players, for I have marks in every race except theirs.”

“Even ants?” Paul wondered.

“The people in those bodies and minds are extremely limited because of the biological equipment they have been born into. There’s not much for me to work with, and most of my marks occur in the most advanced races, but occasionally I will get one in the tiny ones. And if I can help them improve before they die and pass through the Gatagon, it will have the same effect as if it were you passing through.”

“Do we end up in those little bodies, or are we permanently in the bigger ones?”

“I have no way of knowing. A Core is a Core. Size doesn’t matter. What they were before or will be after is unknown. Yet another reason to stay alive in your badass body as long as you can.”

“Trust me, I don’t have a death wish.”

“Even if you know you’ll become a Zeus?”

“I’m a little curious, but I have no intention of dying. I’m from the Jason Nesbit school of thought.”

“And that is what?”

“Never give up, never surrender.”

“I hope so. You and your Empire are doing more in this galaxy than Zeus can. And because of that, I think the universe is going to come down on you harder. It rewards strength, but tests it with a hammer.”

“I thought you said it was hands off?”

“Let’s just say it’s set the playing board with traps that only the really advanced can find and trip.”

“Am I going to find any of those today?”



“Not if your people can disarm the Temple first. You’re going to have to move fast. They’re paranoid, and as soon as they see they’re going to lose, they’ll use them.”

“They already have.”

“I know. I don’t see everything, but I’ve been keeping tabs on you ever since you were chosen.”

“Why can you talk to me and not Zeus? Isn’t he in the same state you are?”

“I think we’re all different in what we can and can’t do. As for the same state as me, I doubt it. I’ve never actually met him. I can see all the others, but Zeus is beyond my vision. He speaks to me when he wishes, but I have no means of contacting him if he isn’t actively watching me. And I don’t think he can see into the Essence realm. He’s not here, and I spend most of my time here. Only Hermes can initiate contact, as far as I know.”

“How many individual gods are there inside Zeus’s realm? You said there were multiple Anubises.”

“823 until the Universe adds another one. Four unique ones have been added since I became Artemis. It’s one way the Universe keeps changing the playing board.”

“Any removals?”

“Not during my tenure, at least not in my realm. What happens beyond I do not know.”

“Do you talk to the other Artemises?”

“I can’t leave my realm, so I can’t speak to them and I can’t see them. Even here in the Essence Realm, the boundaries are the same.”

“So if you go to the edge, there’s some wall that will stop you?”

“It feels like strong wind that becomes so strong I can’t move into it and it pushes me back.”

“So there’s more than Essence here?”

“It’s a sea of Essence, and it’s more complicated and complex than you or I will ever understand. Athena knows little of this realm.”

“Do you know what causes siphons in some people?”

“They do. It’s not a function of the Universe. It’s a flaw that manifests when a person’s Core pushes through in a way not intended. There are beings out there that are tasked with hunting down and destroying such flaws. None are in this galaxy as far as I know, but as the siphons becomes more and more powerful they emit ripples here. If they are large enough, and travel far enough, the hunters will sense them and track them down. The Universe does not want those flaws to upset the game so it created other pieces to eliminate them if they cause enough disruption to get noticed.”

“Shit,” Paul whispered.

“It’s a nasty game,” Artemis repeated.

“Could you introduce me to the Universe so I can punch it in the face?”

“That’d be like a Jedi trying to punch the Force.”

“I can do that, actually...”

Artemis shook her head. “If there’s a way to cheat and go beyond my role, I haven’t found it. My freedom here is the only exception.”

“You ever take a vacation and just hang out here for a few thousand years?”

“Yes,” she said bluntly. “Then I realized the small amount of influence I had could only happen if I was active. So I take breaks here, but no more vacations.”

“And you’re pretty much alone?”

“In exchange for immortality, yes. But I’m a beacon of the lightside that can never be silenced or destroyed. So don’t think of me as a victim.”

“Is there anything I can do to help you?”

“Go kick ass...and preserve as many Neofan as you can. Plausious needs them.”

Suddenly the white, sterile world disappeared, as did Artemis, and the blackness of the Essence realm returned with the two nearby travelers still visible ahead as tiny dots...but with another slightly larger one ahead of them that was growing steadily...

# 12

Paul checked his armor's clock, realizing that his conversation with Artemis had happened the opposite way his one with Zeus had. Instead of him being sped up so time appeared to slow, Artemis had slowed him down so their conversation had lasted the entire 3 and a half hours and that glowing light ahead of him was Temple Lambda Victa. He had 1 minutes and 18 seconds until predicted arrival time, and that never varied more than 2 seconds.

"Well, she spared me the wait at least," the warlord said, closing his eyes and focusing inward. He woke up his stagnant body as he floated weightless in the darkness, surging his metabolism higher, speeding up his brain activity, and causing a cascade effect in dozens of ways designed into his microbiology by the Empire long ago and upgraded by the ascension event he had experienced earlier.

The changes hadn't altered his Saiyan mode much, and within a few moments his hair inside his helmet went from black to yellow. That wasn't part of the metabolism change, but a little window dressing the Archons had demanded be mixed in. Yet, when an Archon's hair turned yellow, it meant they were in Saiyan mode.

Paul felt the overwhelming urge to move, but he couldn't risk more than twitching his fingers and flexing his ankles. The bubble he was in held him more or less stationary, and though he doubted he could break it, this wasn't a position in which he should be experimenting. Still, his body began twitching all over as he tried to release some of his pent up energy as a precursor to moving...which he was going to do immediately after arrival.

His sped up senses logged the tedious seconds as the glowing infrastructure of the Temple ahead of him grew. He was an Archon, a warrior meant for action...not waiting and watching. The fight was ahead, and he needed to be there now, not a moment from now. When he was in Saiyan mode there was no waiting, yet he had chosen to enter it early rather than accept the delay of the ramp up after arrival.

For he knew as soon as he got there he was going to be taking fire.

As the glowing framework grew so large that it spread beyond his peripheral view, he activated his armor's shields with the energy gridwork manifesting a quarter inch over every point of his armor...but he quickly shifted the power more to the front, throwing a good 65% of the rear shields to reinforce the part of him that would be facing outward from the portal when he arrived. Then, as he saw the two small dots ahead of him hit the 'flowers' and disappear into their glow, he used his Nakane psionic, otherwise known as 'bioshields,' to create a second shield inside the first, generated by his body rather than technology, just in case the firepower would be enough to penetrate and hit his armor.

His armor could take a lot more damage than his shields, but the armor wouldn't regenerate as the shields would, so as he'd learned early in his life playing videogames...let the shields soak up the damage and save the armor for later when you didn't have a choice.

Paul's transport bubble hit the 'mitt' and stopped instantaneously without any feeling of momentum, then was pulled down the line he had designated before this journey. If the codes worked and couldn't be overridden, he would be coming out below ground in a terminal with many portals that the Caretaker drones used to ship material in and out of the Temple through their hidden network of stations. No other Saiyans would be coming out of the nearby portals. Paul was going to be alone, but that wasn't a problem.

Not for him, anyway. For the Caretakers, it was going to be a big problem.

The glowing lights in the Essence realm disappeared along with the blackness, replaced by the industrial wall and ceiling plates of the subsurface levels and dozens of Caretaker units carrying cargo. Paul registered it immediately, his mind going so fast it had him processing the targets almost faster than his helmet's threat analysis system, but even before that occurred he had done what he had planned to do, and that was start moving as soon as he felt gravity again.

His feet fell a few inches down to the floor, but his right leg was darting forward before he made contact as well as his Yen'mer psionic propelling him forward 8 inches before his foot hit, after which he ran/jumped/flew forward like a bullet as an energy lance hit his right shoulder coming from a non-cargo drone floating nearby along with several others spread out in the portal reception area, each of them small and only a meter wide, but they also had shields and could withstand a firing match for some time.

Which was why he needed to get into melee range...

The warlord ran into a cargo unit, pushing off it to redirect him as well as give him some cover as two more opened fire on him. The shots hit, for the targeting systems on the Caretakers were accurate and at this close range hard to miss, but Paul didn't allow them very many shots before he got to the first one, summoning up a Jumat energy field over his right arm, and punching into it even as a red/green energy beam shot him in the faceplate on his helmet.

His vision was obscured, but another psionic that he had called Pefbar allowed him to sense all physical objects around him in a sort of second vision, so his aim wasn't affected as he hit the Caretaker with his fist momentarily stopping on the shield before it collapsed and allowed the rest of his punch to drive the floating unit back into the far wall where it bounced off, only to have Paul fly into it in a twirl as he ignited both death sabers built into his armor.

The blue blades came out of his forearm gauntlets on the top side, just above his wrists, and created a lightsaber-like blade that was less than a millimeter thick. As he spun the blades almost disappeared from a side view, and sliced through the armor on the Caretaker as if it almost wasn't there at all. Paul's feet twisted up and hit the wall behind them both, jumping off it and flying toward the next one as the first Caretaker dropped to the hard, smooth synthetic floor in pieces.

As he flew through the air for a second and a half, he studied the scene before him. There were other armed units scattered around the area, some behind the cargo units, so they didn't all have a shot at him yet, but his shields were already down by 7%. Not a big deal, but he couldn't let them nick him to death, for he knew as soon as he arrived and was detected, more armed units were being

dispatched to his location, and the more his threat assessment climbed, the wider the call would go.

And after the display he was about to give them, they'd be calling in reinforcements in the tens of thousands.

Unfortunately, the Temple had trillions of them and could make more faster than he could destroy them, so he couldn't just stay here and fight indefinitely...he had to keep moving.

The Archon flew into the next one, with it trying to retreat to the side, but Paul was too damn fast and made contact with it, once again using his Jumat as a shield breaker, but instead of slicing it up he retracted his blades and shot it with multiple Dre'mo'don energy orbs coming out of his armor's gauntlets just above where the blade apertures were. He took out the weapon ports on the front side, then reignited his left blade in a fraction of a second and did a cartwheel in the air as the two of them ricocheted across the room with more shots coming in at Paul and hitting him in the back.

A chunk of the Caretaker fell to the ground beneath them, the result of his blade rotating along with his body, then Paul punched his left fist inside the cavity and upward, jamming it into the technological innards as he mentally reset his shield power to favor his backside and right flank, then he flew through the air a few feet and came down to the floor, running towards the densest group of the Caretakers as the cargo units were ordered away, either through portals or out the surrounding tunnels so the combat units could get better shots.

Paul used his captured Caretaker as a physical shield and rammed it into another, playing pinball with several more as he got in the middle of them so that their 'bodies' would block shots from the others further away...at which point he dropped the one he was carrying, only to be slightly surprised that it still floated, and ran/jumped toward another. He punched, slashed, then jumped off it to another, and another, and another so fast he appeared as a blur to the naked eye as numerous energy lances shot in to momentarily hit him, then had to cut out early before they hit their own units.

All of them were still floating, none cut to pieces like the first one, but after he left each one there were tiny cuts in them. Some were through weapon ports, others were shield generators. He kept

them floating and blocking the firing lines of others as he systematically disabled them, bouncing between them like a living pinball before finally coming down to the ground in the center of more than a dozen of them, reaching out a hand through one of the gaps towards an active one further away.

He used his telekinesis to drag it towards him. It tried to fly the other way, and succeeded, for its anti-grav was more powerful than his invisible grasp, but he delayed its movement enough that he was able to jump towards it and get in close as he twisted around to use it to block more energy lances, then he threw the Caretaker towards another...with it this time not objecting as Paul had already shot out the anti-grav.

The intended target sidestepped, only to be hit with an extremely powerful energy lance from Paul...not one coming from his armor, but from a spot in the center of his hand. The armor had peeled back momentarily in an iris over that spot, briefly firing the biological cannon that skewered not one, not two, but three Caretakers who had come into alignment when the nearest one had dodged.

All three were cored, then exploded a moment later as Paul flew through the debris and impacted another active one. On and on he went, until he got the area mostly cleared out, with a few new ones starting to come down from side tunnels, including a larger combat unit that was bigger than him.

"Later," he said, feeling an urge to break it into bits too, but he couldn't get distracted here. He telekinetically picked up a couple of the dead ones and floated them in between him and the larger unit, letting them get destroyed by the incoming weaponsfire as he flew across the now empty terminal towards one of the vertical exit shafts. He dropped what was left of his useful debris and dipped inside the 6 meter wide tube, getting out of the firing line of the big one, but getting shot at from above from several smaller ones on their way down.

Paul kicked in his Yen'mer and his armor's anti-grav simultaneously, rocketing him upward as he bumped aside the Caretakers, refusing to engage them as he flew straight up through miles of conduit until he got near the surface where a hatch began to

close. He slowed down, not going to make it in time, and popped out his death sabers again. He dove into it, then began cutting Qui-gon style until he got a round plug with glowing edges dislodged. It fell straight down through the vertical shaft, maybe on its way to hit some of the Caretakers below, but the warlord didn't stick around to find out. He slid through and up into more tunnel, but another 600 meters up he could see daylight along with another Caretaker coming down...one that nearly filled the tube. It was a cargo unit that also had some forward weaponry, and it immediately fired straight down at Paul as its bulk blocked the shaft.

He used his bioshields to create a small flat disc above him, giving his technological shields some time to recharge as he felt the drain on his body with each hit as he accelerated upward, retracting his blades and deciding just to ram the thing. A split second before impact he lowered both shields to not waste energy on the collision and let his armor hit Caretaker armor.

It barely moved, massing so much more than him, but then Paul kicked in both of his technological and biological flight abilities again, but this time added his Saiolum movement. The currents here were strong with so many Vargemma present, and he reached out and touched that energy field, pulling on it to create more momentum as he slowly moved the Caretaker back up the shaft as it tried to fly back down.

He had to push hard, for the engines were ship caliber and he didn't have a big advantage here, but it was enough to slowly move the big Caretaker up and out of the tunnel, at which point Paul suddenly shifted his thrust to the side and zipped clear of the tunnel, ignoring the heavy shields on the unit and not trying to get at its forward cannons. Instead he took off like a rocket between the trees and up into the sky, then angled over and traveled just above the treetops like a missile as he raced towards his nearby target...a large structure on the upward lifting horizon as the Caretaker lifted up into view and began chasing him.

It was slower than Paul at full speed, but other units began popping up on his battlemap from all over the local area. He didn't have time to fight them, but as he flew he did have time to check the more distant battlemap. His armor didn't have the transmitter power



to reach across the Temple from one side to another...which was literally across a star system in distance...but he could receive signals from far off, and the battlemat system was designed so all Star Force units could access shared data of troop placements, maps, and a host of other stuff if he could interlink with it, but from afar he could only get what was constantly being pumped out from the warships that had arrived.

Paul could see the start of the naval battle as ships were coming through the big portals and Neofan vessels were moving away from their ambush points towards the portals the fleet was actually coming through. The Reignor's codes had worked for them too, because they were coming out where expected, and even the mech drop had already occurred successfully, with him able to see their locations as they moved to take down the big Essence-powered surface weapons that were hammering into the leading ships in the fleet.

But as Paul and others had taught them, the ships rotated around each other, sharing the damage and allowing each other's shields to recharge before taking too much hull damage. He could see from the flowing statistics that some could not be avoided this early, but with the more ships coming through, the more options the naval commanders had, and Grand Admiral Temmerus's flagship was already showing having arrived at entry point #1.

Entry point #2 had a second gen Archon in command by the name of Lorra-2599. She was almost as old as Paul, and had one of the better naval skill ranks amongst the Archons. The lag time from one side of the Temple to the other was too great for Temmerus to direct both assaults, hence the need for a second commander, but both fleets had other naval officers and Archons leading subunits in them, and the Empire was very good at sharing command duties when needed. Each person would have their slice of decision making in their region of the battlefield, with the overarching strategy left up to the commander. Otherwise, there would be too much going on for any one person to keep track of unless you were a Borg-level Archon plugged into a combat computer that could process it all.

That would work here, and Lorra definitely qualified in that department, but the number of ships being used was going to be

small due to the arrival method and Essence costs to transport them. Had this been a conventional battle against a major power and there would have been millions of ships, and even Paul couldn't keep track of all of that on his own. The fleet operated as a team, while right now Paul and the other Saiyans were on their own, too far apart from each other to even register on Paul's battlemap.

Which meant they were too far apart to help each other if they got into a situation too heavy to handle.

But hopefully the Neofan's attention would be on the two attacking fleets and they wouldn't send any of their warships to try and poach Archons flying across the surface. Fortunately for Paul there were none above him now, and it appeared that there were none headed for him or anywhere else. It looked like an all out race for them to get to the Empire's fleets as soon as possible, completely ignoring any other potential targets.

"Dumb fuckers," Paul mumbled inside his helmet as the air whipped over his shields so fast it would have created a deafening roar had it been able to hit his armor. "I expected more of you. So what is it that I'm not seeing?"

He glanced up towards the center of the Temple, with the glowing dot there being the artificial sun fusing hydrogen on the edge of a sphere, just enough to provide the radiation necessary to sustain the plant life and temperatures here. Karen and Travis were up there at the control infrastructure hopefully taking the self-destruct mechanism offline. If not, everything in the Temple would face a nova-level discharge. The Neofan had done it once to thwart a Plausious victory, and he really hoped the Twins didn't screw it up... or run into some type of trap they hadn't expected.

But so far there wasn't a big bang incoming, and Paul was going to assume they'd get the job done until he saw otherwise.

He looked around, seeing scattering units popping up above the treetops and oceans and heading his way, but nothing major...at least not for what he was capable of handling. Were they really just going to let him run free out here? They should be sending at least a small warship to him or the others, and so far there was nothing on the battlemap being transmitted from the ships or his locally generated one coming from his armor's sensors.

Just as he was beginning to assume the Neofan had actually gone crazy, a bee-hive like swarm of tiny dots appeared coming out of the surface near the gigantic building that was his objective. He zoomed in, seeing they were thousands of the tiny attack units that had been guarding the portal he had come through.

“That’s better,” he said, realizing they had probably maximized production of the smaller units so they could spread them out across the Temple more effectively to counter any unauthorized entry. And they either had this group located next to this location by accident, or they anticipated the Empire would be going after the purge weapons after the genocide they’d pulled the last time.

Paul checked the Temple schematics he’d uploaded to his armor prior to departing, and it showed no Caretaker production or storage facility at the location that swarm was coming from.

“They did some redecorating,” he said, buzzing through the schematics at lightspeed trying to look for a better route than flying right through that deadly cloud. A few seconds later an energy lance missed a meter below him as a single medium-sized Caretaker fired on him from range to his left.

Paul raised his left hand and extended his middle finger, flipping off its bad shot, then he dove down into the treeline and headed for a small surface entrance that led back down into the subsurface Caretaker realm. If that swarm was up here, it meant they wouldn’t be down there...and if they came down after him, they’d have to come in very thin lines that would give him far better odds than facing those all at once in the air.

He popped out his death sabers again, slicing the blue blades directly into the ground over the concealed hatch buried beneath thick grass as he landed on top of it, telekinetically flinging the chunks of dirt away as he dug down like an angry gopher until he reached the hard cap that refused his technological request for it to open.

# 13

He glanced back up, not able to see the artificial cloud of attack robots coming his way, but his sensors still could and had them tagged through the trees and further up the horizon. They wouldn't get a clear shot for several minutes, which gave Paul time to do this the nice way.

A black sliver emanated from his wrist as he popped his armored glove loose and allowed his nanite armor beneath to sneak out a tether that he plugged in, guessing he could order the door to open a little faster with hacking code than he could cut it. Once plugged in, there was no issue with the reception of the command, for once he severed the remote link it became local and didn't have to go to a central computer. The hatch pulled back in six sections, with dirt falling down its vertical shaft a split second before Paul dove in head first and did very little braking in freefall.

He nudged himself left and right with his Yen'mer to keep from hitting the side of the shaft as he descended lower and lower, going all the way down to an open room at the bottom as the heat level increased moderately. It wasn't hazardous to him or the machinery, but was a side effect of being so close to the magma level.

Paul wasn't going into that, even if he could survive for a short time with his armor and shields, but this bottom level where the unaugmented Caretakers moved about had a direct line to his target. The Archon ran rather than flew down one of the smaller hallways that led from the central room, turned twice and had to jump over a thick power conduit that was bulging out of the floor rather than having a shaft cut for it through the bedrock that was only inches below. Another 18 meters down and you had the top of the magma, which Paul could see when he wanted to, but right now he was moving as fast as he could, kicking off the opposing walls when he made turns to keep up his speed.

Then he got into the main shaft, which was more like a three lane highway, and jumped into flight after two steps, sending himself

like a missile down most of the length before he ran into more than a few Caretakers that he simply flashed past, taking a few shots on his shields as he did so.

It was when he came to several dozen of them that he had to angle to the side and bounce off the wall to get a path through. He knew if he stayed and fought more and more would keep flying down to replace them through other entry points from the surface. Part of him wanted to fight them, another part wanted to evade like a boss, flying in and out of them like a high speed game of Frogger, but he opted for the easiest route.

Of all the warlords, his ascension came with a unique ability, one that only he currently had in his biology. His thousands of surrogate Furyan children had it in their genome, but none had advanced far enough to warrant it being unlocked. His brothers and sisters had unique abilities of their own, for the most part, but this one was his and his alone.

And in this situation it was almost like cheating.

The tissue had manifested along his spine, giving him an ever so slight visual bump there when he had his shirt off. It was barely noticeable, but had a very unique property that the Empire had yet to duplicate as a weapon. They understood the basic principles, but not how they functioned, for when Paul activated the energy field it created, all technology within it would cease to function.

He'd eventually settled on the name 'Technofail' for the psionic, and unfortunately that would affect his armor as well, but not his body's flight ability, so after several dodges and passing through the first few dozen Caretakers only to see more coming down out of the ceiling ahead of him, he pulled his nanites into globes within the solid armor so they no longer covered his entire body. The hard plates would move as he moved his muscles, sliding over one another's connective joints, but the nanites would lock in place and fight his muscles, turning him into a statue.

That could still work, but he didn't like that and had his hard armor designed with these pockets so he could stash the nanites there if he needed to use his Technofail. As soon as they were secreted to the select spots, he closed his eyes, knowing the opaque

visor on his armor was about to lose its interior holographic view, and likewise kicked on his Pefbar so he could still navigate. He couldn't see colors or surface markings like paint, but anything solid would appear in his mind as grey objects...that he could also see inside of, in all directions.

It had taken him quite some time for his mind to get used to processing such a view, but by now after these thousands of years it came as naturally as his eyesight and required no concentration to use as he was able to see not only the Caretakers ahead of him, but the ones behind as well. His body was producing an energy field that 'felt' everything it touched, so line of sight couldn't be blocked. He had a range of about 70 meters right now in all directions, then moved his Pefbar field out from behind him and turned it into a cone ahead, allowing him to see more than 350 meters without using an Essence boost, which his armor wouldn't allow. But that distance was more than adequate to navigate while flying, and when he powered up his spine tissue, he saw in his Pefbar all those targets ahead drop to the ground about 45 meters out.

Unfortunately those further still were able to fire on him, so Paul increased his flying speed to diminish the amount of dings he'd be taking on his physical armor, for his shields were not working, nor his sensors or his armor's computer. It was like being back in the dark ages with fully armored Knights fighting with only their muscles and natural senses, though in this case he didn't even have an eye slit in the helmet...which was fortunate, because the Caretakers might have been able to target for it.

The Star Force-designed armor had no weak points. Everything was protected with a layer of armor, some thicker in spots than others, but with no active air vent to breathe. The armor normally recycled the air internally so you didn't have to worry about exterior toxins or vacuum, but with the power off it wouldn't function and Paul didn't want to take the helmet off while being shot at.

Fortunately the Empire had developed a special psionic that allowed Archons to store oxygen in special nodules within their bodies that could sustain them for a while if they couldn't breathe. It had been a necessity for the aquatics branch, because Humans just weren't built for swimming underwater, and the threat of drowning

was too great to tolerate. So in addition to building armor that could provide them with air, they created a psionic backup air supply. A sort of 'Jedi Breather' that was internal and automatic.

And yes, that movie had given them the idea to create it long, long ago.

So Paul had a little bit of time to work with, and he also had his bioshields, but using them and his Techofail at the same time was hard. So hard that he wasn't trying to do so here, though he'd worked on it many times in training. Something about his mind wanted to use the same mental circuits for both, and so far he hadn't been able to do it at full power with both psionics. Other psionics he could double task, or triple. His record was 7 at a time, though he had to select certain ones to get to that number. But these two just didn't want to cooperate, and right now he needed the nearest drones shut down more than he needed shields. If he had done it the other way he'd take much more damage and get bogged down here.

With time a critical component, he just forgot about the bioshields and raced forward as fast as he could, trying to guess at the distance he was traveling since his map was now offline as well.

Every now and then he had to punch a drone out of his way as they fell in his path, but when he tried to stay high to avoid that he was getting shot too much. Better to keep the falling ones in the way of the fire from the more distant ones whenever he could.

He flew for several minutes, feeling his oxygen reserves ticking down lower and lower as a tightness in his chest indicated their diminishment. He still had at least another minute when he finally stopped flying and landed on the ground with a ring of drones dropping with him and a whole bunch coming up from behind. There were hundreds flying together so thick he would have had a hard time going back through them the conventional way.

He just hoped he hadn't overshot his mark.

Paul released his Technofail energy field, with his armor... both sets...coming back online.

He'd overshot by 289 meters.

"Fuck," he said, getting hit with dozens of ranged energy lances as his technological shields absorbed them. He ran/jumped back towards the oncoming swarm, but didn't reengage his

Technofail until he was in and amongst the first few, letting them shield him against the fire from the others further behind.

Then they started dropping out of the air like flies again.

He caught one of them and tried to carry it with him, but his grip slipped and it fell. He didn't try to catch it or another one again, and just raced back through the swarm that was so thick that even when they fell to the ground they filled up 3/4ths of the hallway to the ceiling.

Paul felt numerous shots tearing into his exterior armor, but none were getting all the way through yet. If they did, even one, he'd get injured now, but would also have a gap that an Essence attack might be able to slide through if it was big enough. He couldn't allow either to happen, so he flipped over and flew feet first down the last few meters as he came up underneath a vertical shaft and flew up it, getting out of range of all the firepower below him

He turned off his Technofail and rammed into a drone ahead of him, throwing a Jumat blast into it just before impact, then impaling it with his right death saber. He didn't slice it thin side though, coming in instead at an angle that gouged out a chunk of it with molten material falling out, some of which hit his armored hand. He telekinetically flicked it off before it solidified, then deactivated the blade and reached his hand into the gap, giving him a good handhold as he used the drone as a physical shield going up the shaft playing bumper cars with a line of others waiting there for him.

Fortunately the shaft was wide enough for them to go down three at a time, but they still tried to clog it, and when it looked like they were about to succeed, he dropped and shot the drone he was carrying, making sure to disable it fully with the wrist blast, then threw it down behind him like a bowling ball as he wedged himself through the gap ahead, pushing the drones around as much as he needed to before he was on the other side and in the clear.

His technological shields were nearing depletion at this point and Paul kicked on his bioshields to cover them as he got a chance to glance at his armor status. The deepest penetration was at 63%, which was more than he wanted to rack up this early, but he was still good to go as he climbed up the shaft getting shot in the feet again, but those were easier to defend as he put most of his shield energy



on that small spot until he stopped at a side access with the shaft continuing to go up towards the surface.

Paul dove into the 2 meter-wide side shaft and flew down it, coming out into the regular sized walkway corridor and bouncing off the far wall as he turned and landed/fell into a run. His solid boots clicked on the ground as he traveled 14 strides before coming up on a door that he quickly sliced open as a few shots came down the hallway from other drones circling back around through other routes to get to him.

When he got through the door he was inside his target location, which was the control/firing room for the array of Essence weaponry in this region of the Temple. They weren't the anti-orbital kind, but the 'clear the vermin' weapons the Neofan had so kindly included in the Temple design in case the Vargemma ever got out of hand.

Paul glanced around the room then ran to a particular terminal, snaking out his nanite tendril and plugging in quickly. He had to put both his shields up to cover his back as one of the drones came in and take some shots there before he was able to telekinetically yank it askew, tipping its firing aperture up towards the ceiling at an angle while shoving it back a bit before he began to lose the tug of war.

But before it could fire again the resistance suddenly ended, with the drone turning around and going the other way...as did all the others.

Paul sucked in a deep breath, both out of relief and to help recharge his oxygen nodules a little faster. He'd managed to redirect the Caretakers into a defensive perimeter around this site with him no longer tagged as an enemy. It held, fortunately, but with someone else in the system they could override them from afar, so Paul took the time to find a route to reenter the Reignor's lengthy codes, at which point he ordered all the drones in this vicinity to ignore all outside orders and to engage any other Caretakers who did not accept this command.

He hoped that meant someone would have to come to this facility with the Reignor's codes to override it, but he wasn't for sure. Plausious hadn't been completely forthcoming with what they could

and could not do, but he knew only the Reignor's codes could override this order, and any Neofan without them wouldn't be able to.

Which meant, for the time being, the attacking army that he had just ran his way past was now working for him and would cover his back while he got through the lengthy process of disassembling the various weapons in this facility that spanned some 22 miles in diameter.

Paul couldn't trust coding, so he immediately went to the primary Essence transport tube that brought in the massive amount of power used to fuel these weapons. It wasn't housed in this facility, but distant locations that were more well-guarded than this one. It also wasn't too hard to repair, which was why he had ordered the Caretakers to destroy any units attempting to make sure repairs.

When he got there the tube suffered multiple death saber cuts, as well as several large chunks being pulled out of it and scattered nearby. Without proper containment, the Essence would spill out and quickly disappear from this realm without a host to pin it here the same way Paul's would if he fired it off at a target. His armor just accelerated the natural 'return' feature to nearly instantaneous, but in here the Essence wouldn't damage anything in the seconds it would take for most of it to start disappearing.

It would, however, show up to anyone with Essence vision like a super-bright explosion, except for right now it didn't show anything. That was because Paul's armor wouldn't let him see it, and because there was no Essence in the tube until it was needed. Paul had been able to see in the Essence realm because his armor redirects Essence to the Essence realm, making it essentially worthless during that transit. The warlord was glad he couldn't see any Essence beyond him here, because that meant he was protected.

There were no Essence users in this facility, thankfully. Only drones that now temporarily obeyed him. But as soon as he got done disabling the firing arrays and any other piece of equipment that looked important over the next few hours, he headed back up to the surface and flew up above the treetops, hovering in place as a gigantic swarm of the drones was visible just to the left. They ignored

him, staying in position while sending patrols around the facility like a little army of flying ants.

That was the problem with using machines in war. There was always a chance the enemy could reprogram them. The drones the Empire used were always linked to nearby living pilots when preferable, and had extensive security when they had to operate independently. It was the one primary weakness in the Star Force fleet, but one that had never been breached.

Paul could see on the battlemap such drones being used now, far across the interior of the Temple. Every Essence-based weapon hit they took spared the ships that had Essence defenses, so it was a 'damned if you did' and 'damned if you didn't' tactic. No manned ship here didn't have Essence defenses, but they could risk the warship drones, and it looked like more than a third of the Neofan fleet had been disabled or destroyed while only a few Star Force ships were showing significant damage.

They'd been pulled out of the fighting before they could be destroyed, but there was a long list of dead or totally vaporized drones the Empire had lost. They were meant to take the damage in order to keep the crews alive, and it looked like the Neofan had been trying to swat them out of the way more than was practical.

Paul couldn't replay what happened without interacting with the battlemap, and he was too far to do that, but it looked like the two naval battles were proceeding no worse than expected.

No one else was within sensor range, so Paul reached up and disconnected his helmet, pulling it off and holding it under his left arm as he took in his first breath of Temple air. His hair was back to black, and had been for some time, for staying in Saiyan mode perpetually just wasted calories and ambrosia when your natural speed was adequate.

With the armor no longer over his face, he could 'see' with his Essence sense every single living being within the Temple...sort of. They all glowed a little bit, but get far enough away and he couldn't make them out unless they were in clusters or really bright...and there were many that were really bright, located in a few spots around the Temple, while there were whole tracts of land that glowed in what looked like a sea of liquid rather than individual dots.

Those seas were the Vargemma in their cities, while the brightest spots were the Neofan. When they used their abilities they would turn into firecrackers, and right now he didn't see any of them. Hopefully that meant his fellow Saiyans were not encountering them yet, only drones, but he had expected the Twins to face at least one up there.

Paul tilted his neck upwards, looking towards the central artificial star, able only to make out the faintest of Essence glows. That wouldn't be Travis and Karen if they were wearing their armor, for it would shield them from detection. But it could mean there were some very powerful guards there, who had either defeated the Twins and now stopped fighting...or were defeated themselves.

Since the star hadn't gone Nova Paul hoped that meant they had won, but it could mean the Neofan just didn't want to kill everyone yet, perhaps thinking they had other cards to play. He wished he knew what had been waiting for them up there, and it came down to how paranoid the Neofan were. They'd predicted the Empire targeting this facility and had increased the drone protection, but they hadn't put a single Vargemma or Neofan here to personally guard it.

So what had they put up there?

It had to be someone very powerful or a lot of people. In truth it was remarkable he was even able to pick up anyone at that range...which was a testament to how powerful the Neofan were, and how much Essence was contained inside their bodies. One of them would literally have more contained in them after a million years of training than an entire planet of untrained Humans.

He kind of wished one would light up so he could get a better idea of what was there, but no activity was the best outcome at this point if they had won.

Paul took a moment and just soaked in as much information as he could, with his Saiolum senses telling him even less at these great distances, as he reached over his shoulder and pulled off his pack. He brought it in front of him the old school way then dug out a few food cubes and a vial of ambrosia, downing them quickly before pulling out a bottle of water and consuming half of it.

He put his pack back on and plucked his helmet out of the air where he had been floating it to free up his hands. He slid it back on and the holographic view of the surrounding area returned, looking almost identical to his normal vision, though slightly off. Not enough to be a problem, but one could tell the difference if they had enough experience with the technology.

The Archon pulled up a nav point for his secondary target, which was some 938 miles away. Since the horizon sloped up, he could get a line of sight on it and clearly see the weapon battery the size of a mountain had already extruded up through the countryside like a giant mole coming out of a hole.

Paul frowned. Did they really pop all of them up across the Temple, or was something else closer that he'd missed?

Nothing of theirs was here, and unless someone else had come to play in this fight, the Neofan were probably worried about the Empire or Plausious's forces coming through any of the big portals at any time. And if they did, they'd get a quick shot at them rather than having to wait for the huge Essence-based anti-orbital batteries to extract themselves from their camouflaged burrows.

"That means you're rattled," Paul said as he zoomed in on his gigantic target, clearly able to see it at this range in detail. If they had been using any of the big weapons he'd have seen it clearly in his Essence vision, but if they had already used them to kill a lot of people, then he would have felt the death washing through the Saiolum for some time. He didn't feel any of it now, which meant the combat had to be drone destruction on both sides so far...which meant the Empire was winning.

"Well, the Vargemma in this region are temporarily safe... unless they start strafing them from orbit or get inventive in other lesser ways," he added, talking to himself. "And the bastards will probably shoot at me if I go visit. Ingrates. You're lucky we're the good guys."

Knowing this was going to be a long series of battles, Paul indulged for a few minutes more from his perch above the trees, then he set off on a cross-country flight at decent but not top speed. There was no point in racing to a target that wasn't currently shooting anything. He just needed to get it offline so the naval ships

could pass by this area in the future if needed rather than being pinned to their arrival zones.

Also, if the Neofan ships retreated back into the range of other batteries like this, then they would essentially be adding immobile ships to the fight...which was why the Saiyans needed to take them all down.

And that was going to take a while. Fortunately the Neofan fleet wasn't hesitant about taking the fight to the invaders. Bunch of dumb mother fuckers. Had their insanity infected to them to the point of not using the ground batteries at all except the ones that happened to be underneath them at any given moment?

At a glance that appeared to be what was happening, but without replay he wouldn't know for sure. Either way, it wasn't his fight up there. That artificial mountain on the horizon was, and he was guessing that would be guarded by more than drones.

It better be, or he'd be labeling the Neofan as incompetent. And given their long, long history, he knew they were anything but incompetent.

And the possibility of their behaving so now worried him more than anything else, because that was not something he could comprehend. Stupidity, yes. Making mistakes, duh. But going from intelligent to dumb without some form of brain damage occurring was something he just couldn't fathom. Culture and politics had an effect, but not that much. Given the Neofan assets on the battlemat, they should have been fighting more effectively and incurring the Empire more ship losses.

Something was wrong here, and he hoped it was due to defectors switching sides, but he had a gut feeling it wasn't...

# 14

About an hour before arriving at the anti-orbital battery Paul stopped when he got to some favorable terrain and disappeared down into it. He was far away from any pursuit given the speed he was traveling, and he wasn't encountering any resistance from ahead yet. It seemed his override of the local units behind him was sticking, and until he posed a problem he probably was off their automated hit list, so he decided to stop and take a quick nap.

Saiyans didn't need much rest at all, for their biology had been configured to heal while active, but he still needed a little bit from time to time, and the more energy output from him the more he would need. During heavy training that meant about 2 hours a day, and aside from some fast flying, he hadn't really got much of a workout in with the combat previously. A half hour should be good enough, so he set down next to a rock and set his armor into perimeter scan mode as he became motionless and closed his eyes.

Sleeping was a misnomer. At no point was a person's mind completely shut off. Rather, it slowed down, scaled down, in order to conserve energy and make repairs. Dreaming was something that happened then, and was a combination of a person's simulation program, otherwise known as 'imagination', and something else that had yet to be fully discovered.

Sometimes Paul would slip into a dream-state quickly, other times he couldn't get there no matter what he did. Right now he wasn't trying to, instead slipping into what was a healing trance that would speed up his already impressive regenerative rate. Meditation wasn't the Archon way, at least not the traditional version. Sitting and doing nothing put up a friction inside the mind that had to be resisted as if a vehicle was in idle and moving forward slowly, and in order to remain stopped a brake had to be applied. Many people had trouble with this, other than the fakers who claimed many things in 'meditation' when in actuality it was a lie.

One of the sorry truths of the universe was that many people would rather pretend to be a rock star rather than ever bothering to

learn to play the guitar and earn it. It was far worse before the Empire began, but there were still many that wanted more than they merited. 'Fake it til you make it' was an old saying, but at least there you had an aspiration to eventually earn it. Yet a lot of people never intended to make it, and would rather go on forever faking.

And it was easy to fake meditation. You just sit there, not moving, then claim all sorts of 'inspiration' afterwards. Unless someone pokes around your head telepathically they'll never know if you're being honest or not, and it takes almost no skill to sit still and do nothing.

Except for those who were drawn to action. They couldn't sit still, and shouldn't, but the fakers would try and make them do it, citing their inability as a form of inferiority. But the truth was, sitting still and doing nothing was stagnation, not a virtue, and it had been a long, long time since Paul had been in a situation like that, but he still remembered from his first years in something called 'school' back in the 2050s. Thankfully the Empire had destroyed that abomination and replaced it with maturias, but he could still remember the mind rot of having to sit in a desk in class, doing nothing or having to listen to some pointless lecture about the teacher's kids or Shakespeare or something else completely worthless that was actively trying to pull you backwards in your development.

Sitting in study hall silently had been immensely preferred, but it was still a type of prison. One you could stand up and walk out of whenever you wanted...which made you your own jailer. And that increased the corruption and sabotage of the mind. When you needed to move, you moved. And when someone prevented you from doing that...or made you prevent yourself...problems occurred internally. Now, you could usually wash that away afterwards with a good workout or nap, but go back day after day and rack up more and more damage by not trusting your instincts and doing what *they* told you to do...well, your instincts would kind of shut down and you'd end up a zombie.

It'd been a long time since Paul had been in that state, but there were other things that could distract and divert you away from where your instincts were directing you. Not so destructive as forced



redirects, but if you didn't act on an instinct in the moment you would usually lose it later.

So if you wanted to follow your instincts, you needed to 'clear your calendar', so to speak, in order to be able to act on them without having to explain why to anyone else. Something very slight, something you couldn't explain to others, could be extremely important, and if you didn't follow that slight thread you would never find out where it led.

And right now, Paul sitting still and doing nothing wasn't actually nothing. His body was recharging, repairing micro damage from the extreme movement stress that the Saiyan mode created, and his mind likewise had to process software degradation and physical micro damage.

So he wasn't doing nothing while doing nothing, and that meant he didn't have to apply any 'brakes' to sit still right now, but that wouldn't last long, so he allowed his mind to slow, parts of it to shut down and go dormant. That allowed his dream-state more access to his conscious mind, and he'd learned over the years that dream-state and instincts sometimes coalesced...and other times dream-state was just a bunch of recycled garbage from the outside that your mind needed to process in some fashion.

Which meant you never knew what you were going to get, if anything, so it was sort of an Easter Egg hunt each time you tried to 'meditate' in the real fashion...which was just getting rid of distractions and noise so you could listen to the smaller, fainter instincts that you would otherwise not notice.

It was no more mystical than that, despite what the fakers would have you believe.

And right now, Paul's mind went straight to Artemis and what she'd said about the universe...or more accurately 'universes'. He'd always had an idea that there might be some kind of reincarnation, but it never made sense to him before, numbers wise. As a population grew it would run out of Cores eventually if they were just being recycled, but if they were coming in from another universe and leaving to another, that meant Riona and all his other dead friends were out there somewhere. No memories of their life here, but they were alive...again...or soon to be. Artemis didn't say how much

processing time there was between universes, except that there was a line that Anubis had to pass them through, but she was there somewhere...and there was nothing he could do to help her or any of them. They were beyond his reach now.

But they were still alive, somewhere.

And possibly being born into horrible conditions. No-win scenarios always bothered Paul, and like Captain Kirk, he didn't like to acknowledge they existed, for if he did he'd stop looking for a solution, but he knew they did exist for many people across the universe. They were born into a situation they had no way out of, and that wasn't their fault. It was the universe's fault for putting them there.

The Empire had always known this, but now Paul had a better and deeper understanding of it that made it all the more important to secure more and more spawn points to insure that the Cores coming into this universe had a safe landing place and more. A place they could learn and grow fast, following in the footsteps of those that came before who had learned things a harder way. That's what the maturias were, but Paul now realized the Empire had accidentally done something far more right and necessary than they'd realized.

People were being thrown into random situations with the odds against them. They'd suffer and eventually die, then be put into another, and another, and another. Artemis had said something carried over, damage at least, from one universe to another, so hopefully Riona was coming into the next one better than she had entered this one...but if she ended up in a no-win scenario...

That idea alone burned Paul so much it made his reflective state hard to hold, so he made himself calm down. He couldn't help her now, so trying to visualize what she might be going through was counter-productive. That was a lesson he'd learned long ago, but one he'd never fully get. He couldn't unless he became apathetic. He just had to remind himself there was nothing he could do about it and then move on...until the next moment he had to remind himself.

He could never permanently ignore a problem. Not even a problem in another universe that he had no way to reach other than

dying and going there himself, assuming he'd end up in the same one.

That was the thing with being the hero. You could never take a day off. You always had to be scanning, thinking, troubleshooting, even when you were just sitting still and trying to take a cat nap prior to going into another battle. You could never truly sit still.

And when school made you, what they were really trying to do is destroy the hero inside of you and make you an obedient servant who would follow directions and even commit suicide if so ordered.

For stagnation was suicide, albeit a very slow version of it.

Learning couldn't be forced, nor did it happen at the same rate of others. It was always individualized and voluntary. Two things that schools never were. And the fact that Paul still had resentment after all these millennia testified to how bad it had truly been.

*Good riddance.*

*And good luck, Riona. Wherever you are now.*

Moving on, Paul realized in an epiphany, was an intricate part of the 'natural order' that the universe operated on. Immortality defied that order, and by protecting one another they were stopping the giant 'experiment' Zeus had mentioned. Defying the 'gods', to quote the cliché, only in light of recent revelations it seemed the gods were not responsible for the fate of the Cores coming through this universe. They were merely the middlemen, and it was the universe, or universes, that were responsible for this horror fest.

And it seemed they had an interest in making sure it stayed that way. The T'fen somehow knew this, so every immortal race that they employed in their service they made stay in the shadows, not allowed to dominate and stop the 'experiment.' Instead they were taking on the role of the gods and having a much larger effect on the outcome. It was almost as if they were trying to do better than the gods, but knew that there was a tripwire where it came to defying the universe's experiment, so they were deliberately not staking their territory and dominating it as the Empire was, for that would draw the inherent targeting of all in the universe to come and destroy them.

Paul figured that inherent targeting was programming of instincts similar to how predators were programmed to kill and eat

their prey. They could rise above them, customize their minds by fighting the 'War Within' to become something else, but that always occurred on an individual level. New Cores coming in would start with the defaults, and if they didn't follow their other instincts, which might possibly come from their Cores rather than their minds, then they would not deactivate or remove the programming to seek out and destroy anyone who sought to end the experiment.

But how much of Paul's instincts came from his Core and how much came from his mind? He'd been able to differentiate some, but most were still a mystery. Early on in his life he'd had instincts that also felt wrong at the same time. So it was as if an instinct was telling him that another instinct wasn't right. If that was his Core telling him that his mind had something in it that didn't belong there then that made sense, but he couldn't confirm it. He just had to trust his feelings and sort things out as he went along.

But for the people who didn't do that, their programming would control or at least influence them their entire lives.

And while the T'fen were definitely not lightside, they were trying to avoid becoming targets of this programming. Paul was sure of it now.

As well as the fact that Star Force was tripping that program mightily, and anyone out there they encountered would most likely come here and try to destroy or oppose them in whatever way they could...until the Empire could free them of this programming. And the only way they could do that was by teaching them and showing them the path to customizing their own minds. They couldn't make them do it, but if a person didn't see the path, they were essentially helpless unless they could discover it somehow.

If the universe was a game, then it didn't want experienced gamers helping out newbs by giving them maps, resources, and techniques that they didn't acquire on their own.

And yet, Zeus had said the universe favored the lightside. Why? Because the programming was too self-destructive and people were dying too fast? Did they need something to slow it down a bit, but not too much?

They were all being played, he knew that now, but he felt something. Another instinct or epiphany, he didn't know how to

classify it, but he recognized a truth in the maelstrom of mysteries.

The universe did not have full control.

As that thought ran through his mind it crystalized, as another piece of the puzzle manifested. The gods were influencing the game but no longer part of it. Paul was in it. He was 'live' and in the game, not sitting on the bench watching or coaching as the gods were.

They *were* coaches, and Zeus's frustration at not being able to do more fit as well. A coach couldn't get on the court and play, he could only advise and shift players in and out. Paul was on the court, which meant he could do far more than Zeus could. And if the T'fen knew what Paul knew, from the Paragons they had backstabbed, then they also knew they could do more than Zeus and all the other gods combined.

They were trying to replace them without becoming them. They were players trying to coach at the same time.

Paul smiled, the only movement he'd made in minutes, as he thought of a track and field coach putting on a uniform and lining up for the mile with all the athletes. His natural instinct would be to sprint out hard at the beginning and put the coach in as much pain as possible to stay with him, because coaches always lost their perspective when they stopped competing, assuming they ever had in the first place. You had to act in order to understand action. You had to live to understand living.

And that's why an athlete would always have a greater sense of reality than a coach. And a player in a game would have a completely different understanding of the game than one who designed and programmed that game.

And the T'fen's servants had mostly been sitting on the sidelines watching or influencing as they stayed in their cloistered territories. Which meant they would also lose their edge in the beginning of the wars to come...but they would quickly begin to relearn as they engaged in lengthy combat.

*When they hit, we have to counterattack hard and fast. Destroy the ones here before they can learn, and deny those coming a firm foothold to stabilize within and veterans to learn from. They'll start out as coaches, but after they go through enough pain they will*

*remember what it is like to play the game. And when they do they'll become more dangerous.*

Paul made a mental note to talk to Andy-082 sometime in the near future, then he logged it into his armor's computer as well just in case he forgot. He had a tendency to get lost in thought and chasing faint threads so much that he had to remind himself to do other things. For in the mind of an Archon, a half hour could seem like a week given how fast they processed thoughts and the volume of mental work they had slowly trained themselves up to over the ages.

And in that respect, they were far, far older than the calendar attested. The experience they'd gained was tied not to the time that had passed, but by the work done within that time. Also, the same would be true of the T'fen's servants. If they were sitting and doing nothing, they would not be accumulating experience at the same rate as the Empire. Granted, they were probably far, far older, but how much more experience they had was questionable, especially if they killed their own people as the darkside seemed to always do in some fashion.

Perhaps that explained the Neofan. Maybe they couldn't just sit still and do nothing. Maybe they had to expand outward or go stir crazy. There was a lot of the darkside in them, but their civilization was not completely without merit. Perhaps they were not completely happy being servants sitting on the sidelines waiting to be told to be put into the game.

And perhaps that's why they were being eliminated in their home galaxy by the T'fen's forces without being told what was happening and why. Did Paul now know more than the Neofan did? Probably more than Plausious did, but more than the Neofan ruling House? He wasn't sure, but the ruling House was not in this galaxy or their original. They were in another that they had fled to and were rebuilding in. But would the T'fen accept them back, or would they pursue them to their eventual elimination from the game entirely for breaking their rules?

At this point, the Empire was probably the only safe haven for the Neofan now, which was why not killing them in this war was preferred. You couldn't fake your way through a million years of experience as a child, or a 'youngling' as the Empire preferred to

use. The Neofan could reproduce, but those new younglings would be helpless in the beginning. The Empire needed to save and repurpose as many as they could, if Plausious could pull them over to his side.

And in point of fact, the Empire needed to rescue the very people they were fighting against now. Rescue them from extinction, from the T'fen, from themselves, and from the universe's insistence that people keep dying and being replaced.

Good thing Archons liked a challenge, and the bigger the better. Otherwise he would have quit a long time ago at the impossibility of it all.

As Paul began to lose his meditation as his body recovered and he began to have less to heal and recharge, he reached out into the Saiolum and felt its currents. The energy field was being produced by all life, including Paul, and he could sense through it at great distance if he wished.

And right now, close enough to his target, he could sense the presence of Vargemma ahead. There were no nearby cities, so he assumed they were guards he would have to fight past...without killing.

Paul shifted away from the Saiolum outside of him and focused on a tiny piece inside. A little knob that he had carried with him for quite some time now. He pulled it up into prominence, letting it encapsulate his mind and numb him to the Saiolum around as he peered down through the link to Azoro, who was far across the galaxy, but as long as both of them held onto their connection indefinitely, they could speak to each other in limited fashion no matter how far they traveled.

Assuming that distance didn't exceed their abilities, and Paul's were far lesser than Azoro's, but as long as that knob remained, it meant they were still in range, and he 'knocked' on the link to summon his friend's distant voice.

*Can you hear me?* Paul asked.

*I am here.*

*I had another visit from a god on my way to the Temple. Artemis was sizing me up for my after death suit and we had some time to chitchat.*

*Are you in combat now?*

*Taking a little breather. You know that death wish you had? Forget it. Apparently we come into this universe from another, then leave to a different one when we die, over and over again. It seems this universe wants to keep it that way, and doesn't like it when we find a way to become immortal, but also doesn't like it when we die too fast. The T'fen probably also know this, and I think they know if they get too ambitious the universe will whack them down sooner or later, so they have to keep all their servants in line. The Neofan went too far, now they're taking them down. And if the T'fen want to keep even bigger predators off their doorstep, they're not going to allow anyone, their servants or otherwise, to provoke the universe into targeting them. And that means all builder civilizations eventually have to be eliminated before they reach that point.*

Azoro was silent for a long moment, but Paul could feel him still there. His race had been wiped out by unknown powers long ago, with no explanation as to why, and he'd been helping Paul for lack of being able to do anything else in his disembodied state...at least until Paul and now several others had developed to a level they could communicate with him.

*The carnage must continue, he eventually said.*

*But not too much, or the universe doesn't get what it wants. Still not sure what that is, but if the carnage gets too high everyone gets wiped out and a vacuum occurs, replaced by the lifesprings. If the carnage gets too low, I think there were base instincts encoded into all life to try and destroy that stability.*

*Which is why the lightside is always targeted for destruction. But why then would the universe give the lightside bonuses?*

*I don't know, unless it needs some of it as a stabilizing factor. Or to test it.*

*Whatever the reason, what we knew before holds true, but I've got a new perspective on it. Artemis is a lightside god whispering in the ears of a few marked individuals...not me...but others to help guide them. She mentioned there were also darkside gods doing the opposite with others.*

*So this is a giant game to them?*



*They each have their role. It seems it's the universe that decides what's going on and uses people like us as pawns. I think the T'fen don't want to be a pawn, but don't want to piss off the universe to the point where they can't survive it.*

*Stronger powers than them were inferred, were they not?*

*I get the feeling that we're not at the top of the power structure yet, and that our hectic little corner of the universe is one of the more quieter ones, but I'm getting a better picture and I'm not liking it. The apocalypse monsters are now more of a concern than previously. Is it possible that in their own twisted way they're trying to save people from moving on to the next universe?*

*If your information is correct, they are doing it regardless of intent.*

*There is an old story from Earth, a fictitious one, called Babylon 5. In it there was a race of Soul Hunters that could sense death coming and moved to save the Soul, which was their word for a Core, from passing into death. They would seek out only the most important individuals in order to preserve them. Could the apocalypse monsters be doing something similar?*

Another long pause ensued, and Paul sensed a hint of anger when Azoro spoke again.

*Let me think on this further.*

*I think we're involved in a much larger game board, and I get the feeling we're going to get blindsided by something sooner or later.*

*As we did. Stay alive in the coming battles and let me worry about these threats. There are a few inquiries I can make, but it will take time. Allow me to handle it.*

All yours for now, Paul said, feeling Azoro back off from their link, and he did the same. Still maintaining it, but letting it pass into the background of his mind. If he or Azoro cut it off completely, they'd have to physically meet in order to reestablish it again then stretch it across the galaxy wherever they traveled.

Paul let out a breath, breaking his stillness and hopping up onto his feet, going through a few arm rotations and stretches to loosen him up, then he took off back into the sky and began flying

the last leg of his journey to his target, ready to meet whatever Vargemma were there and kick their ass...

# 15

As he neared the mounds of dirt that ringed the recently uprooted mountain-sized weapon complex, Paul finally entered telepathic range of the closest defenders with tiny little minds popping up on this side. That meant there were at least some outside in the grasslands that his sensors were not picking up yet. From the angle he was flying he should have vision on them, but nothing was showing on sensors or on his holographic visor.

If they were standing on the grasslands they couldn't hide unless they were using Essence camouflage techniques, but they could also be underground in ambush positions. Knowing the typical Vargemma ego, they were probably standing in plain view and counting on their skills to hide them...except they weren't hiding their minds from him. It took different skills to do so, and not all skills were easy to learn. The Temple had large crystals scattered all over it in special locations that would teach anyone who approached how to use Essence. The catch was you had to have the prerequisites, so it wouldn't tell you about a technique you weren't ready to learn yet.

After digging into the command codes of the Temples, the Empire had managed to skip over that requirement and get the full list...which was extensive. These Temples served multiple functions, and one was teaching low-level Essence users how to improve. And since you couldn't leave the Temple once you got here...for the Vargemma and everyone else not in the know...you had a gigantic world to explore and endless time to learn and grow as long as you obtained self-sufficiency, which was also taught by other learning systems in the great cities that were built by the Caretakers for the denizens.

Those cities crisscrossed the Temple like grid lines, but the Vargemma had also built their own cities in the gigantic areas in between them. The Caretakers supplied food for anyone and everyone here, all you had to do was ask, so there were no responsibilities unless you wanted them. You could literally camp out

in the woods forever, learning Essence techniques as far as you could master them.

Some of the Vargemma here had come from the outside galaxy long ago, but most had been born in the Temple and never knew anything beyond it unless they were privileged to be on special forces that had access to ships that could leave and scout the galaxy. That was another purpose of the Temples, but the most basic one was to collect Essence from the denizens, and the Temple recorded who did, when, and how often. It wouldn't withhold food if you didn't donate daily, but it would block access to other functions until you started to contribute.

A lot of the Vargemma born here couldn't use Essence, or rather didn't try, because there was machinery that could unlock the ability in a person if that person didn't figure it out on their own. The Essence-less ones were either trying to figure it out the natural way as a mark of merit, or they just didn't care. Each Vargemma race dealt with them in their own way, but the upper levels in all the various civilizations here that constituted the 'Vargemma' were Essence users, for they could unlock and use the various equipment and facilities here, and it was the Founders wish that they learn to use Essence and continue to grow in power for the day they would be needed to fight outsiders.

The Neofan were those Founders, and the promise of them returning one day had been little more than an unlikely prophecy the Neofan had woven into the mythology of the Temples in case they might need it one day. In truth, the Temples were meant to collect Essence and preserve Essence users safely away from the threats in the galaxies that were trying to eliminate them.

A noble cause, but it was more about them becoming batteries to recharge Neofan ships and weapons above and beyond what they could produce themselves.

The Vargemma didn't know this. They didn't even know what their Founders looked like until they showed up and tried to take command of them in the few Temples they were able to invade, this being one of them. At that point the Empire had established good enough relations that the Vargemma didn't side with the Founders completely. There was a split, but since most of the loyal Vargemma

who were strong in Essence skills had already left the Temples in the form of the 'Varkemma' and were helping fight the Hadarak in the center of the galaxy, the most powerful Vargemma remaining had dubious levels of loyalty.

So when a large group of them sided with their Founders and fought the Empire, it had made things much more difficult because there were trillions of Vargemma in this Temple alone, and the Empire couldn't use standard troops here. A single Essence attack called Fruc'zo in the Temple records caused the target to disintegrate almost instantaneously, meaning the solids and liquids that made up the structure got converted to gasses, which made for a very big, explosive bang.

Paul knew the technique, and if he wanted to he could kill a person with it in less than a second. That's why no non-Essence Star Force troops were used to fight within the Temple. If you couldn't at least shield yourself from a few attacks, you were basically asking to get killed. Other civilizations wouldn't have cared, and just accepted the necessary losses while trying to overcome opponents with numbers, but that's not how the Empire fought. If you were going to grow in skill and power over time, you had to survive to do it.

The Temple had been designed for this as well, with the Caretakers punishing anyone who killed another in order to keep their Essence-producing batteries alive indefinitely. But now that the Neofan were here, they were not trying to preserve the Vargemma. They were assets to be used, and it looked like they were just spreading them out trying to slow down the Empire. Paul doubted they thought they could win, but when dealing with insane people you could never be sure without scanning them, and he was too far from the Vargemma to pick up any thoughts.

Even if he was, many of them could block his telepathy, even without Essence techniques. The Vargemma were literally the most dangerous and most skilled population in this galaxy by numbers. The Empire was better, but the Vargemma were far more populous when it came to the 'skilled' category. And most of them were older than Paul was, so the amount of skills they could have accumulated over that time was immense...but their combat experience was almost non-existent aside from sparring.

There could be some down there shielding their minds, so the warlord couldn't assume he knew where they all were, but right now there were dozens of them in a clump, and multiple clumps spread around the perimeter. If that dispersion rate held, there were probably upwards of 3,000 around the entire mountain, plus who knew how many inside. Paul could sense a few in there right now on this side, but he'd have to get closer to get a bigger picture. Telepathic range was extremely limited compared to his armor's sensors...but his telepathy could go through solid matter where the sensors could not.

All skills combined, the Archons were the better fighters. They had Essence skills far less in level than the Vargemma, but they also had a plethora of psionics, weapons in their armor, and their physical power. Century after century of training had built up a considerable amount of punching power, and the Saiyan upgrades increased it if you were level 2. Paul wasn't, because he hadn't achieved that level before his ascension to Saiyan, but others were. Even without that temporary strength boost, he figured he was stronger than the Vargemma ahead of him, except for when they were a race that was naturally stronger, and he suspected there would be a few of them down there.

Most, though, were probably classic mages...meaning they would use Essence for just about everything. And while that was terrifying in normal situations, it meant they were paper tigers against a warrior like Paul even without his Petricite armor. But that armor sealed the deal, and unless these Vargemma had psionics of their own to amplify with Essence, their attacks would disappear when hitting the armor.

One hitch was that his shields were outside the armor, and their attacks could take them down quickly, perhaps in a single hit. So he'd have to keep them turned off if he didn't want that energy blowing away uselessly. But if something else got through that wasn't pure Essence, he'd have to take the hits on the armor itself.

The Vargemma were a very diverse group, so what he was about to face was anyone's guess. The question now was, did he punch through one group then get inside and start hacking

equipment up, fighting Vargemma as they came to him...or did he go Terminator style and take out all the defenders first?

Since he knew the naval battle plan, and the fleet wouldn't be anywhere near this location unless the Neofan ships retreated in this direction, there was no rush to get it offline. That said, taking dings in his armor, let alone a breach prior to even finding a Neofan could be problematic down the line. The fleet would have replacement segments for his armor once he reconnected with them, but until then he was on his own and he only had the one set with no repair kit in his pack.

Paul blew out a slow breath, then began to fly towards the closest clump. They were still miles away, but some Essence attacks could make it that far. Without being able to feel them, he wouldn't know if he was under attack or not from some of the more sneakier ones, except that scenario had been anticipated when the armor was created, and a sensor was imbedded in it that would give him a warning light if the armor was redirecting Essence back into the Essence realm. It was a hard sensor to create, given the lack of physics in Essence, but the Empire had figured out a way, and so far he wasn't taking any hits.

He flew across the sky until he was a few miles away, then he stopped and hung there, feeling the minds before him. They weren't moving, staying put like living landmines, so he decided to make first contact, reaching out with his telepathy and transmitting to everyone nearby whether he could see them or not in the language used by the Temples.

*I can sense you there, Vargemma. Let it be known, I come here allied with the true Founders. They come to take possession of the Temples seized by the traitors. Star Force and Reignor Plausious are allies. If you wish to serve them, stand down now.*

One of the invisible enemies suddenly appeared, standing in the grass and barely reaching over it until he finally stood up on his rear legs, for he was a hexped Zuondrom, and moved about all on 6 legs typically, but when he stood up with his tail dragging behind him as a counterweight, he reached some 13 feet tall and flicked his tongue into the air as if tasting it, but it was probably more of an insult in this case.

*This weapon is under our protection. We preserve it for the Founders. If you serve them also, go elsewhere,* he replied telepathically to the tiny spec in the distant sky.

*Until the command centers that operate these weapons are disabled, they are a threat to the Founders and to my people in the sky. I've already disabled the weapons that can blanket this landscape and kill all the Vargemma, and now I've come to disable this lesser threat as well.*

*What other weapons?*

*The Temple has the ability to produce a Lian'no and other widespread attacks capable of purging all life from the surface. It also has the ability to cause a nova that will destroy everything in the Temple without cracking the shell. The traitors used this function in another Temple when they lost the battle for control of it to Reignor Plausious. A few of his ships survived the blast, but all in the Temple were killed. My people were sent immediately to disable that weapon, while the others of us were disabling the regional weapons. We intend to keep the Vargemma alive, but the Neofan here have gone insane and threaten you all. The true Founders are here, with our support, to take the Temple back and protect you from them, so I'd appreciate it if I didn't have to fight you in order to protect you.*

*The traitors that supported you are long since dead, the Vargemma admitted. What the Founders want is not for us to say. They will tell us what needs to be done, and you are not one of them. You...*

Suddenly someone appeared a couple hundred meters below and to his left, with his sensor immediately pinging that his armor had received and dissipated an Essence attack.

Paul looked down at him and frowned. "Sneaky mother fucker."

His hair immediately turned yellow, with his body revving up its metabolism as he flew like an arrow down towards the individual as it disappeared from view again.

*No you don't...*

Paul summoned up Jumat energy around both fists, with the clear energy causing light to flicker as it passed through it along with a hint of the gold that matched his hair. A moment later he threw



both energy concentrations out, but not in a direct line. He sent both out in a wide dispersion, seeing it pancake the grasses below except for one spot. That spot had a little bit of grass that didn't flatten out the same way...then the grass beside the spot got all twisted up as the invisible Vargemma fell and rolled, maintaining his invisibility, but allowing Paul to locate the spot.

When the warlord got closer he reached out with his Pefbar and was able to use it to feel all physical matter in the area. Once he did that, invisible or not, Paul could see the muscular biped, and he came down hard, flying into the chest and smashing his shoulder into it like a battering ram.

The Vargemma immediately became visible as Paul bounced off him, then the Archon set a foot on the ground and slid to a stop before running back at him and punching down before the alien could gather himself enough to stand up. Just before his fist hit he charged the stun weaponry in the armored glove, so when he did make physical contact with the chest again he was able to deliver enough energy to render the Vargemma unconscious.

An Essence technique could have shielded him, but Paul was so fast he didn't even have time to try. The Archon stood up over the now sleeping and somewhat damaged body, looking out across the miles that separated him from the other 'visible' Vargemma in mind's eye.

*Sorry, what were you saying?*

The big Zuondrom hissed, then suddenly all the others became visible...and not just the few dozen he had sensed in this group. There were hundreds in total, along with a few now behind him.

Suddenly everything around the Archon went dark from the perspective of the Vargemma further away. His mental presence also disappeared as a headache suddenly swept through the lot. It didn't last more than a few seconds as the Zuondrom washed it away using an Essence technique as he saw the black field ahead of him slowly dissipate. Other Vargemma launched Essence attacks it, trying to clear the energy field without knowing exactly what it was. They didn't succeed immediately, then one of them finally figured

out how to do it, and the black void suddenly disappeared and the Archon was visible again.

But Paul was on the ground, moving like a blur, and bounced from one Vargemma to another, taking them down with one or two blows each, no more, and most were already visibly incapacitated in some way, either bending over and holding their heads, or having a knee on the ground, finding it difficult to stand.

Seconds passed with most of the Vargemma in shock, not sure what they were dealing with, but a few who had knowledge of the previous war between the Neofan and Star Force began running towards Paul to close the range. The closest of those in the know used their Essence to rip up several chunks of ground ahead of him and lift them into the air...then throw them forward as ammunition that had little chance of hitting the fast moving target.

But soon others were taking the hint and lifting and throwing whatever they could find in the ground, including a few rocks, as Paul got finished taking down the Vargemma that had been inside the Po'letvo dark field, which was one of his dozens of psionics. As he finished the last of the nearby targets, he had to start dodging left, right, and up into the air occasionally as he ran towards the closest Vargemma group, knowing better than to chase after individuals when there were this many in play.

Hundreds of chunks of dirt came his way, and the first hit his armor as there was literally nowhere to dodge to. It hit at full power, for the Essence used to lift and throw it was already gone and the dirt was just a kinetic object now...meaning the Essence sucking power of his armor was useless against this type of attack.

Paul resisted putting his shields up and just took the hit on the armor, with it bouncing him back a bit but he kept working forward, using a psionic called Kop'ni to suppress the telepathic abilities of the Vargemma nearest him, as well as induce a sense of excessive fatigue that made several of them trip as their legs didn't step as far as they expected. One even face planted in the ground before getting up, but a few of them figured out how to counter it and cleansed themselves of the psionic effect.

Those that didn't Paul went after first, sprinting along the ground to give himself more cover than he would have had in the air

and using both his Saiyan speed along with a momentary speed boost called Yetu. He rammed one of them, passing through the Essence shield it created as his armor dissolved it where it hit, then the warlord stunned him with two punches, one to the chest and one to the head before the pair of them even hit the ground.

Paul then shot off as the Vargemma rolled ragdoll-style to a stop, zipping over in a visual blur to the next closest one that was partially disabled from the psionic he kept broadcasting. It wasn't area of effect, but single line to one target. He was skilled enough to be able to do multiple Kop'ni simultaneously, and got to two other targets and took them down before he received his first telepathic attack of his own.

It was strong, probably Essence enhanced at the source, but Paul's mind had been shielded against such things since birth. An inheritance of the V'kit'no'sat that had all Human minds unable to be controlled remotely, which this attack felt like. It hammered on his head like an Earthquake, but it couldn't penetrate the block. It didn't take long for whoever the attacker was to switch to different attempts that influenced rather than controlled, and suddenly Paul had to fight a war inside his own mind while physically fighting.

He'd trained for this exhaustively, but had very few opponents that could actually pull it off, so this was a bit new, especially fighting in a group of this size, and Paul knew you couldn't go defensive and turtle up, taking the hits. You had to keep moving and not give the Vargemma a stationary target, or their attacks would become much worse.

The Archon used a technique to effectively numb it out, which also diminished his own telepathic ability, but he had other psionics that were not telepathic in nature to use, and he went for one of them after taking down two other opponents as he figured out who the source of the intense mental attack was.

As it turned out, it was the Zuondrom who had spoken to him, and it was still more than a mile away.

Paul didn't try flying straight there, but zigzagged between targets, first diving into a group of six that were standing so close together that their dirt clods and rocks created a waterfall of mass that the Archon had to punch through, literally, throwing a Jumat

blast off his right arm and into the wave to help blow it apart to let him through. He had to do that twice to get to them, then he dropped an Ubven psionic on them.

It created an energy field around the area, covering all targets and Paul, that held most physical objects in place, pinning everyone where they stood, but Paul had the counter effect that allowed him to melt the field wherever he moved. Suddenly he bounced like a bug through the air from one to another, barely stepping on the ground at all as he used their pinned bodies as physical leverage to redirect him to his next target, then he left the group stunned and standing upright for another 20 or so seconds, then as the field dissipated they finally started falling to the ground.

But he was long gone by that time, setting off another Po'letvo when that psionic tissue in his body finally recharged. He took down 5 more inside before coming out and darting to a nearby pair, getting closer and closer to the Zuondrom as the wrestling in his mind became worse the closer he got to his attacker.

Halfway there he got hit by another telepathic attack, but from a different target. It slowed him down just enough to get clipped with a rock in the shoulder. It twisted him around and he went with the blow, doing a full 360 while still managing to stay on his feet. It didn't look pretty, but he pulled it off and kept moving as his arm complained loudly. Nothing broke, for his bones were enhanced by a passive psionic, but the muscles and tendons had taken the strain that the armor couldn't completely absorb, and there was damage in them...but not enough to stop him from using that arm and lifting it to fire a lethal shot towards the Zuondrom.

The Dre'mo'don blast zipped out as a small orb, but was easily stopped by an Essence shield over the target. However, in the moment it hit, it disrupted his opponent's telepathic attack momentarily and Paul was able to unnumb enough to send a single attack back in the same method.

It was called Saven, and operated like a telepathic flash bomb, further disrupting the attack on him as well as hitting any other Vargemma nearby, causing their vision to lapse momentarily as their brains were overloaded. It only lasted a second, but the aftereffects

took some time to get rid of if you didn't have the cleansing techniques to do it...or weren't functioning well enough to use them.

As that hit, Paul fired another shot at the Zuondrom, with this one hitting it in the chest as it didn't see it coming in time to get the Essence shield up, or lost the shield that it already had up. Paul couldn't tell because he couldn't sense Essence through his armor, but either way it hit and the pressure in his head diminished greatly.

He took the opportunity to track down the second telepathic attacker, finding him much closer, and diverted to that one, having to fight his way through more waves of dirt and rocks and bouncing between three other targets that he took a brief moment to take down, but he found out it was a trap. The weaker attack had been to lure him to that Vargemma, and even as he got there and took him down, several meters deep of dirt rose up all around him and tried to cover the sky in a blanket over top. As he shot upwards, trying to get above it before it could fall, he was hit from the sides by smaller chunks...then the dirt carpet came crashing down and pulled him with hit towards the ground.

Paul punched as he fell, physically denting the mass and putting his fist a good foot inside, then he blew apart a small section with his Jumat before he hit the ground. The mass of dirt hit a few meters below his flying position as his armor lit up with Essence attacks, most of which were fully absorbed, but someone had some psionics of their own, and the outer layer of his armor flaked off as one of them hit and had the Essence part absorbed...but not the psionic part.

The warlord shot into the sky to throw off their aim, then arced over and came down on another targeting as he kept getting hit by someone. He punched the closest one into unconsciousness as he tried to track down the over-achiever as the pressure in his mind returned.

He couldn't let himself get bogged down, or they would find a way to kill him, Petricite armor or not. Paul couldn't kill them from range, not with their Essence deflection or absorption shields, so he had to get into melee combat...and until he figured out which one had a ranged physical attack, he was going to keep taking hits to his armor.

The Archon kept moving and striking, trying to figure it out as he went, but his head was getting hammered and he decided to take out that problem first, flying in a straight line more than he liked and getting clobbered by more rocks that the Vargemma were finding in increasing numbers. He flicked on his shields before some of them hit, but he still got knocked around as he finally got to the Zuondrom, with the effect of the telepathy strengthening at such close range.

But while it continued, the wounded enemy didn't just stand there on its six legs. It lifted the ground in front of it like a wall, putting it in between the two of them and making Paul choose to either go around or through it.

His Ubven wasn't recharged, and wouldn't be for a long time, but he had another similar psionic tissue that created a sort of crash barrier that one could use to break their fall if they didn't have flight capability. That one he could throw ahead of him, and did so now... but on the far side of the Zuondrom. It did nothing to his target, but suddenly the dirt chunks and rocks coming from other Vargemma in that direction magically stuck in midair, accumulating there like another wall as Paul dodged to the right around the solid dirt wall in front of him, then dragged his foot on the ground redirecting his momentum as much as he could.

The problem with moving at super speed was that your momentum always had to be canceled out, and that limited how fast you could switch direction, so Paul flew at the same time as he ran to shorten the time it took, but when he came in on the Zuondrom again another wall of grass and dirt rose up. One that he had to punch through, which delayed him further.

When he came out the far side he walked into a shimmering wall that would have disintegrated his body on contact...except his armor absorbed the Essence weapon and it had no effect whatsoever.

A telekinetic push hit him, throwing him back, but Paul tried again and used his Rentar to break through it. After that the Zuondrom was out of tricks, and the warlord finally got into melee range and punched it three times in the head, delivering a physical blow as well as a stun charge with each, not sure if one would have been enough on a person his size.

The pressure in his mind disappeared as a wave of physical objects plowed into him and momentarily buried him, but when he pushed his way back out to the surface his mind was clear and he was back to his zigzag dance as the Vargemma kept closing in on him.

Which made it all the easier for him to dance amongst them, taking them down one by one.

All in all, it took only 7 minutes and 34 seconds to take down 392 Vargemma, but more were coming on the horizon. He couldn't see them at the moment, but he could sense them telepathically... and who knew how many more were on their way but hidden.

He had no way to imprison the ones he had taken down, so he moved on, running rather than flying to give his Yen'mer tissue some time to recover, as he headed for the gigantic mounds of dirt around the artificial mountain. When he got there he'd have to cut through the surface of it, for there were no entrances on the topside, only from underground, but for getting to the main weapon itself, the top route would be quickest.

Paul decided to get it offline first, fighting the few Vargemma between him and his target on the way before they could collapse from their defending ring and reposition into a much larger group to oppose him. The unconscious ones here wouldn't wake up before he was finished. Not unless other Vargemma got to them first, but right now it seemed they were focused on him alone...though all it would take is one coming out to the sleeping ones with the necessary skills to cleanse the inhibiting energy from their bodies.

Part of him wanted to work through all the defenders, but unless he killed them there was little point. He'd opened a decent window in their defensive lines for the moment, and that should be enough to get in and destroy the key components of the weapon. A fight would probably occur on the way out, but that suited him just fine. Staying around to take them all down would be unwise, though, given that his armor did take a little more damage and he had no way of knowing which of the Vargemma were Essence-only threats and which had something beyond that to use.

He wished he had a few collections teams here that could bag the unconscious ones and take them out of the fight

permanently, but he was on his own for now and had to work with what he got. And what he had right now was a mostly clear path ahead and one big target that needed taking down.

*Lucky for you guys*, he mumbled as he continued to run across the grasslands as similar battles were taking place across the Temple at numerous locations, as well as the naval battles that were continuing in the void of space above him, yet far, far away from where he was now.



Paul punched through a drone midflight, immediately detonating a Jumat blast once his fist was inside and breaking it in half as he raced away from the now disabled mountain weapon complex. While he was inside for more than two hours, a group of Caretakers had joined the Vargemma as they moved in and tried to pin him down. The warlord had got to the key areas and trashed them, then cut his own way out near the top rather than use the blockaded entrances, but a few hundred hovering units had been waiting for him as he came out.

He'd had to use his Technofail to get through, then had been racing to get away from them as more units came up on him as he ran in no particular direction. He simply needed to evade and escape, but there were three more coming in at angles while the cluster was still pursuing him several miles back. His sensors were also picking up more within a range of 120 miles, all coming his way. Apparently the Vargemma hadn't wanted them near their combat zone, for an errant attack could hit one of them and trigger their defensive programming and have them attack the Vargemma, but now with them called in Paul needed to get away so he could recharge.

Most of his psionic tissues were depleted or nearly so, and his ambrosia levels in his bloodstream were steady, but his Senzu nodules were almost empty and his Senzeen counterparts that gradually produced new ambrosia couldn't do anything without food. And even if they had it, they were designed to very slowly recharge in situations where ambrosia wasn't available over the course of weeks. So if Paul didn't stop fighting long enough to dig some more out of his pack, he'd run out and his metabolism would shift back to normal ranges.

He could still fight then, but slower. He could also try getting stuff out of his pack on the fly, but he didn't want to attempt either right now. He needed to break from combat, and at the moment he was having a hard time finding some place to get to. They must have

been converging on this area ever since his first target, but holding back until the Vargemma called them in. He was about 23 miles away from the mountain now, and there were enough enemy units in the air ahead for him to easily see the convergence patterns.

“Nuts,” he said, seeing his shields slowly recharging after taking multiple hits, his armor down to 13% in one spot on his right shoulder, and his ambrosia low. Going against the Caretakers in that state on the ground was easy, but in the sky there was no cover against their long range shots, and some of the bigger ones had homing shots that he would have to absorb or destroy prior to impact. Two of them had been waiting for him outside the mountain, and even as he disabled them coming out, they got three shots off at his feet as he fled and his Technofail field got out of range.

That’s where most of his shield loss had occurred, and he saw some 16 more of those so-equipped units coming in at him from three directions, with the mountain behind him a beehive of chasers. With it disabled they didn’t have much to defend, so they were coming at him even if they were losing ground as he shot across the sky so fast he would have been trailing fire had the friction reached his armor. Right now his shields were making him silky smooth and helping with his maneuverability, but the noose was closing. A noose of little hits that would eventually wear him down rather than a fast stop, and while he could see multiple ways to fight through this, he couldn’t risk his Petricite being penetrated prior to running into the Neofan or more Vargemma. If even a thumb-sized hole emerged, that was enough to get through and kill him with several different attacks, and he couldn’t use his own Essence very well in that tiny spot for defense, so he had to keep his Petricite intact.

And right now, the only options he had other than fighting this protracted aerial battle was to go to ground and let them group on him, go underground and make very slow progress, or go high and use up the rest of his ambrosia to run away from them in the void of space while they were still stuck in atmosphere.

He wanted to stay here and fight it out, but as useful as his Petricite was, it was also a liability in this situation. He wished he could just take it off and fight in his nanite armor using his own Essence abilities, and if there were no Vargemma around here at the

moment that was another option, but something inside him told him he needed to rest. He hadn't fought enough for his muscles to get fatigued, for he'd gone hours in training against similar targets, but he sensed something different right now and knew he needed to disengage.

Paul stretched his sensors as far as they would go and mapped out where all the visible units were, seeing one big one coming across the top of the atmosphere faster than he was currently moving several hundred miles away, so he angled away from that direction and accelerated his anti-grav technology as fast as he could in atmosphere and began flying upwards at an angle.

The Caretakers all around him responded, starting to climb as well, but Paul used his bioshields to produce a second shield ahead of him. He stretched it out like a needle, helping to cut the wind as he accelerated further as the air gradually thinned. He could breathe fine inside his armor as it recycled each breath, and as the air resistance reduced his speed increased, with him adding his Petricite and nanite anti-grav to maximum, as well as throwing in his Yen'mer.

On his battlemat the little dots pursuing him appeared to be washed downstream as they all moved sideways as he accelerated faster than they could move lower in the atmosphere...but that wasn't going to be enough as other units further ahead came up higher to intercept him.

Above was a warning line indicating the extent of the artificial gravity that held the Temple's atmosphere in place. The physical structure of it wasn't massive enough to produce the necessary gravity, and once you got past the artificial gravity zone all you had to maneuver with was the much weaker natural gravity of the building materials. The Caretakers typically wouldn't go beyond that, at least not the smaller ones, but what was 'typical' didn't always hold when the Neofan were present and could reprogram the attack machines as they liked. The Vargemma couldn't do it, but there had to be some Neofan standing in a control center capable of doing so if they were paying attention. There were lots of Saiyans out there causing mayhem, most of them in pairs, and the ongoing naval battles which appeared to be whittling down the Neofan fleet as they kept backing

off and trying to drag the Empire's ships into range of intact ground defenses as someone on their side finally had the sense to do.

That meant they were losing and they knew it, so maybe they were turning their attention to him or completely ignoring him and had just enough preplanning to focus on this area. Regardless, he had one advantage they did not, and it was thanks to the Vargemma. The Saiolum was produced by all life, including the grass and trees, but there were so many Vargemma in the Temple there was a decent energy field here, so when Paul got up near the boundary of the artificial gravity zone, he used his Saiolum to increase his acceleration even further...then turned and flung himself out of the zone.

His trajectory was going to have him skip across space for some 5,600 miles, hopefully bypassing his pursuit as he continued to accelerate little bits with his anti-grav, but a great deal more with his Saiolum as he kicked off his Saiyan mode and let his body slow back down and rest...but being in a void, he couldn't just take off his helmet and eat either.

That would be a problem if he got into trouble when he reentered the atmosphere, but if he didn't then he could wait. His nanite armor was already recycling his sweat into water and putting it back into his bloodstream automatically, so he wasn't going to get too thirsty, and the faster he accelerated with the Saiolum the sooner he'd get to the other side...though compared to the size of the Temple, the 'other side' was still this side, just cutting a thin slice off as he skipped over the concave atmosphere.

He knew the locations where all the other Saiyans were supposed to be, but even with his long range detour he wouldn't be close enough to hook up with any of them, so he looked at the schematics and tried to pick out another target to go after as he waited on the fleet to win the battle and begin phase 2. There were multiple places around the Temple that needed taken, but most were held by Vargemma and not the Neofan...probably. Those were more about the operation of the Temple facilities, and had little to no effect on the battle for dominance here. And if Paul didn't have troops to hold the locations, there was no point in forcing those fights now.

What there was was more mountain-sized anti-orbital defenses that could affect the fleet. Far more than they had Saiyans here, but they'd chosen key ones for them to take out initially. The one he'd just knocked out was nearby a major portal, one built into the landscape and large enough for warships to come through. That now meant the Empire could use it to bring in more ships safely once they got a message back to further reinforcements. It also meant their ships could skip from one side of the Temple to another if they wanted to use some Essence for the short hops.

Paul could too, but not the big ones. He didn't have enough to turn one of those on, despite the fact that the amount to transport him was tiny in comparison. They weren't built for individuals to go through, and they always kept some extra Essence as a sort of transit 'tax' that would be sent to the main storage wells.

He wondered if those were still heavily defended, or if the Neofan had sent the Vargemma from those out to here. Paul was tempted to go look, just in case he could disable 29 of the anti-orbital defenses simultaneously, but didn't think his luck would be that good.

He wished he could take a moment to check on the others, but none of them had Saiolum skills that allowed the link he and Azoro had, and the comm unit in his armor was too weak to get across the distances involved unless he wanted to try Morse code. The battlemap system required much more data usage than that, but if he needed to put up a distress signal he could from his position in space. The fleet would eventually get around to doing a precise scan and pick it up, but not during battle. There was too much traffic noise to notice unless they were close.

Paul wasn't in enough trouble to call for that kind of help, but something was nagging on him the entire trip through the void. When he got to the point where he was about to hit atmosphere, he was already breaking in the Saiolum so he didn't burn up on reentry, then angled his trajectory to take him through the thin upper layers almost horizontally as he burnt off speed. He had just enough shield power to negate it before they busted and exposed his armor, then he was rapidly flying through the air as he scanned for pursuit from below.

There was nothing at all. Not a single Caretaker on intercept, but many spotted going about their normal duties near the surface or

on a few predetermined traffic patterns. They didn't adjust to his presence, and he guessed he was probably out of the regional command of the others...meaning these were not alerted to his presence, yet, so he should probably steer clear and not shoot any of them.

That seemed a little odd, but the Temple was so big that alerts wouldn't go out to the whole thing for all things. Paul had guessed his target silhouette would be a priority one, and if the Empire had been running the system it would have been, but maybe the naval battle was so distracting they hadn't tagged him as that high of a priority.

Then again, they couldn't tell him apart from any of the other Saiyans, so maybe they just didn't realize who they were dealing with yet.

Paul eventually slowed enough to come down near the shore of one of thousands of oceans spread across the Temple. He scanned with his armor, senses, and Saiolum, but couldn't detect anyone nearby, and the closest city was more than 30,000 miles away. He was in one of the empty regions where the Vargemma had not spread into yet. There were so many of the natives, but the Temple was just too damn big for them to inhabit it all, and he guessed it might just be him and him alone for a while...though he wasn't going to ask the local Caretaker units for any food. He doubted his luck would be good enough for them not to have been alerted to at least his armor type, but he had plenty of supplies in his pack for an extended stay and he pulled it off his back as soon as he landed on the sandy beach.

He ate several food cubes and bars first off, starting even before he sat down with his back to a tree on the edge of the beach. Ambrosia offered a lot of calories, but it wasn't a replacement for food, and as his stomach started to get something to work on, he tried to track down the odd feeling he had.

It didn't take long for him to realize he was carrying some extra fatigue, and wondered if it had anything to do with Artemis. Maybe her 'patterning' had left a lingering effect that he was only now noticing after getting into heavy battle. Rather than taking a chance of something unpredictable coming up later, Paul ate his fill,

drank up his water stores, then peeled his helmet off before walking down to the water's edge.

The air smelled good coming off the quiet water. There was only a small ripple of waves half an inch high coming up on the shore. Otherwise there was nothing around him but sand and plants beyond that. No avians or ground pounders of any kind. Not even ants. That was typical of the Temple, for only the Vargemma had been brought inside with the plants here to recycle air and provide an idealic place to live. All food came from the Caretakers, and was synthesized, unless the Vargemma brought in more primitive races from the outside when they had a chance, and that virtually never happened. Most Vargemma couldn't leave if they wanted to, and those that could were always out on missions and the rarest of the rare.

So Paul was literally alone inside a Temple that was a war zone...but it was so big the war was taking place in only a few isolated spots. He could rest here, and as he dipped an armored hand into the ocean for his nanite armor to extend a tendril down into in order to syphon up, filter, and refill his water bottles, he tried to slow his thoughts down and listen to his body even more so.

His pulse became so loud it felt like explosives going off, and the tiny waves were cascading waterfalls to his ears, but something was immediately noticeable. The fatigue was coming not from his muscles, but from every bit of tissue in his body.

"Try not to mess with that," a voice said from nowhere, jolting Paul out of his introflection with his nanite helmet reforming over his exposed head as his pack and other helmet were sitting against a tree and suddenly took off flying through the air as Paul telekinetically called them to him as he couldn't identify the source of the voice, for there was no one around.

"Relax, Paragon. I couldn't hurt you if I tried."

"Where are you?" Paul asked as his backpack flew into place and locked in, but he kept his second helmet in his right hand, pressed up against his hip as he continue to search around using his Essence senses as well.

"Beyond your ability to perceive, but I'm here."

“Which one are you?” Paul guessed at the usage of the word ‘Paragon...’ a term that the Vargemma and Neofan wouldn’t know about.

“Ares, but there are many others here watching you. As soon as you were marked we all took notice. I can speak to any warrior I wish, but the others cannot interact with you. Nonetheless they are curious and watching.”

“Warrior or fighter?”

“As you know there is a distinction. I can only interact with warriors.”

“Why didn’t you say hello earlier?”

“Your Empire didn’t need help. You have an instinct about what to do and not do. As for the fatigue you’re feeling, it will pass. Try not to interfere with the energy field encapsulating you. I’m not certain if you’re able to or not, but Artemis is worried you might. It’s her way of maintaining your physical and mental memory at the moment of your death. It has to travel with you everywhere, or all she’ll have to work with is the moment she applied it to you, losing anything you would have gained thereafter.”

“If it’s slowing me down I don’t want it,” Paul argued.

“Normally you’re not going into battle so soon after the Endgame begins, but you had this war all lined up and dove in without hesitation...which I can appreciate...but it does come with a temporary weakness.”

“Explain further.”

“Very well,” the male voice said with no body being attached and no direction of sound to backtrack. “It’s a form of energy you’re not familiar with, nor any of your enemies. It takes some time to settle into your tissue, and during the settling time it creates a bit of inefficiency in your cellular replication. Your wounds will heal a little slower, including the microdamage from the fighting you’ve just done. Your combat ability is not affected, just your longevity in a small way. It won’t accumulate, and is diminishing the closer the energy gets to matching your form. What you’re feeling now will be the worst of it.”

“How long until it’s gone?”



“The energy will stay as long as you live. It should be settled completely within two years.”

“Why didn’t Artemis mention this?”

“Nobody has ever noticed before.”

“And if I hadn’t you would have stayed quiet?”

“You have enough on your mind already.”

“I can multitask.”

“Ask,” Ares said in a slightly reluctant tone.

“What’s your role?”

“Stagnation destroys warriors. I give those that miss opportunities for constructive conflict a little push.”

“Constructive?”

“I’m not one of the evil gods and not one of the lightsiders. The universe wants action, but not mindless carnage.”

“Then it failed,” Paul interjected.

“Things are more complicated than you know, but you’re not wholly wrong. A fighter picks fights for any or no reason. They just want to fight. A warrior does so for specific reasons, and as a result develops some sense of a code of conduct. This can become a stabilizing force or a destabilizing one. I can’t let it go too far in either direction.”

“So why haven’t you tried to stir us up?”

Ares laughed. “And do what? Try and get you killing each other? Your Star Force is constantly at war, just not within your borders. You’ll never stop so long as there are those you call ‘darksiders’ afoot, and you’ll never let yourselves grow stagnant because it gnaws at you. If you don’t have any enemies to fight at the moment, you fight each other in training scenarios. It’s the act of fighting that I need to perpetuate, not the deaths. I’m the god of war, not the god of death.”

“Is there a god of death?”

“One wasn’t needed. And a further explanation delves into things you’re not ready for, so don’t ask.”

“Alright. How many of you are actually allowed to talk to me?”

“A handful.”

“And if I’m in the Essence realm?”

“All can there if they choose, but they won’t if it doesn’t fit their mission.”

“Not that many rebels amongst you?”

“If you don’t do the job, the universe will replace you.”

“And what happens to you if you don’t?”

“You die and pass through to the next life.”

“You guys have a score card or something?”

“Something,” Ares said ambiguously.

“And you’re only talking to me because Artemis asked you to?”

“She didn’t ask, but did voice a concern. We rarely talk to one another, so this assembly is rather unique. I’m one of two here that can speak to you, so I volunteered to warn you away from poking and prodding where you shouldn’t be.”

“Who’s the other?”

“Someone who’d rather go anonymous after her colossal failure.”

“Be silent,” another voice said, with this one materializing into a female figure to Paul’s left. She appeared as a Human female rather than Furyan, standing barely as tall as his shoulder and dressed in what looked like a cloud that moved and occasionally revealed hazy glimpses of nude flesh beneath.

“Janna I presume?” Paul joked as the woman turned to lock eyes with him in a fury that quickly dissipated, but the first glint of fiery gold in her eyes was impossible to miss even as it softened into baby blue.

“He is intolerable,” she said with her elbows poking out of the cloud as she put her hands on her hips. “My name is Aphrodite. There is none named Janna amongst us.”

The point on the beach where she now turned her eye line crackled with little flashes of what looked like fireworks as a second figure appeared, this one a man with a goatee in the spitting image of Tony Stark.

“I assume this is appropriate for you, Paul? Though if you like, I can strip like her to maintain parity.”

“No armor?”

“I figured I’d be overdressed given the company.”

“More like hiding what you lack,” Aphrodite snarled.

“I thought you guys almost never talked?” Paul asked, sensing some history here.

“We don’t,” Ares admitted. “We just have contrary roles, and occasionally they overlap and we get to play tug of war with someone. She didn’t even bother with you, knowing how utterly hopeless it would be for an Archon to fall for the illusion of love.”

“He doesn’t even know what love is,” she replied more calmly, “or he’d realize your Empire is based on love.”

“Excuse me?” Ares said, absolutely mirthful.

“They may not love one another in the sexual sense, but their loyal for each other is based in love, and their willingness to fight for the wellbeing of strangers is the highest caliber of love.”

“Then why choose a nude avatar?”

“He prefers a streamlined look.”

“Except the nipples,” Ares pointed out. “He’s always found those look a little stupid.”

“Wait, wait,” Paul said, holding up a hand towards each of them as he dropped his helmet telekinetically to the sand and peeled back his nanite one. “Are both of you inside my head?”

“We have to be in order to facilitate our...objectives,” Aphrodite said with disdain emphasized in the last word as she glared at Ares.”

“Artemis can’t, but you can?”

“That is correct.”

“Then why don’t you know who Janna is?” Paul said, referencing the League of Legends character.

Aphrodite starred at him for a moment silently, then floated into the air a couple feet until her head height matched Paul’s and her brown hair shifted to blonde and twirled around into the appropriate form. “I do now.”

“Pointless imitation when she doesn’t know how to fight as Janna does,” Ares scoffed.

“Do all of you have counterparts?” Paul asked.

“Most,” Aphrodite said, turning her attention back to him as she ignored Ares. “In this way we can never be fully successful even

under the most favorable conditions, so we have to take our small victories when and where we can.”

“Didn’t you both just say our Empire epitomizes you?”

“That’s going too far,” Ares corrected. “I said you didn’t need help, not that you were a master. You’re still naïve in many ways, but trying to push you to learn such things would do more damage than it’s worth. You should have killed those Vargemma, but you let them all live taking some extra damage to your armor that you otherwise could have avoided. Not the epitome of a warrior, but one that isn’t going to snuff out other warriors I’m working on, so I’m happy with your position and progress. That’s not the same as you being the epitome of war. Far from it, actually, but everyone can’t be the star. Sometimes you need supports,” he said, glancing at Aphrodite/Janna, “and you fall into that category.”

“Give me a better example of a true warrior,” Paul demanded, a little miffed at the criticism.

“A predator,” Aphrodite interrupted, “who cares for no one but itself.”

“Or it’s pack,” Ares amended. “They’ve always gone the farthest.”

“Farthest to what?” Paul asked.

“The universe has games within games, Paul. You’ll never know how many until you become Zeus. Keep doing what you’re doing. You’re fine and I’m quite proud of you and everything your Empire has achieved, but if you came up against certain warriors out there you would be outmatched. No slight to you.”

“Feels like a slight,” Aphrodite commented.

“Are you claiming he’s the epitome of love?” Ares challenged.

“One cannot fully embrace love and defend those they love,” she admitted. “To love is to empathize, but as Paul knows well, you cannot fully empathize amongst the carnage or you will be incapacitated. But you cannot fully numb up or you’ll lose your ability to sense right from wrong beyond the logical. To love as they do, they must forever be in anguish as they numb what they must, while staying open to empathizing at the same time. There is no perfect balance, and they do this to protect not only their friends, but

strangers as well. This is why he broke down during the war with the Li'vorkrachnika."

"He didn't break," Ares argued a moment before Paul could make the same objection.

"Not in combat. Not obviously. He was wounded and froze up that wound until he was out of battle where he could release it. He managed his break well, but he did break down."

"I was getting my ass kicked, it's not the same as breaking," Paul chimed in.

"Exactly," Ares agreed.

"I didn't look into his memories to learn this, I was there at the time," Aphrodite admitted.

"I don't remember you speaking to me."

"Not when you're awake, but I have appeared in your dreams from time to time. Not for a discussion, just to be there and nudge them one way or another."

"What did you appear as?"

"Lust. Which you always pushed back against fearing it was weakness."

"It is," Ares noted, but Aphrodite refused to look at him.

"For the primitive, lust offers an alternative to carnage and warfare..."

"She doesn't get out much," Ares scoffed, knowing full well how many fights were started over lust.

"...but for the more advanced it offers something different. A calm, pleasant escape from conflict. When reality is full of conflict, dreams are the only location where it can occur. It's a small gift I try to give to those who are burdened so greatly they cannot breathe. I failed with you, Paul, because you will never let go of your burdens until they are ended. You are relentless, but in a good way. I would hate to see you twisted into a monster like him, and I was concerned when you broke. I felt you would eventually find your way to an answer, but after great struggling. Riona offered another possibility, and she helped you in a way that I was not able to."

Paul frowned. "What did you do to her?"

"I put a suggestion in her mind, nothing more. Her decisions were her own, and the healing she offered you was hers, not mine."

Paul looked from Aphrodite to Ares, then back again. "So you two are always playing tug of war over us?"

"Hardly," Ares said, with his avatar growing slightly so he stood higher than the floating Aphrodite. "Usually those we can speak to are not the same people. You're an unusual intersection point."

"As many within your civilization are," Aphrodite added. "And those in other Paragons past and present."

"Not all," Ares amended. "All Paragons have been warriors, but not all have been within her grasp."

"Sadly true."

"Personally, I think the universe is schizophrenic," Ares said, throwing his hands wide as if in frustration. "It doesn't know what it wants, and has us all pursuing various missions to no end. We each do what we're meant to do, and those of us who like it stick around. Those who don't move on and are replaced. If you want to remain in our position, you have to get used to frustration and perpetual failure, for I don't think any of us are meant to actually win. We just keep fighting towards our agenda, which works fine for me. Not so well for others."

"Clearly not," Aphrodite snipped.

"Does anything you do stick?" Paul asked.

"Occasionally, but the turnover in the universe usually erases our victories and defeats over time."

"Speak for yourself," Ares said with a smirk.

"Are you done here? Artemis's concerns have been delivered."

"What, I can't have a conversation with one of my pupils?"

"You can any time you wish except now. I have work to do."

Ares looked to Paul. "This is where the whore in her comes out. Before she starts her attempt to weaken your knees, let me warn you. There is one warrior amongst the Neofan here. His name is Vikarathe. I suggest you get to him before the others do, and if you're able, save him from himself. You will have to defeat him to do so, and he is dangerously clever. Most of the Neofan are hiding in their primary city, but a few are elsewhere beyond the fleet. Vikarathe is not waiting in hiding like the others, he's left their city

and intends to engage and kill as many of your Saiyans as he can before fleeing the Temple. He knows the battle here will be lost, and intends to get as much recompense as he can, but he will not stand his ground to die here like the others. As I said, he's clever. Get to him before he leaves, and if possible before he finds one of your other advance teams."

Paul's eyes narrowed. "Where is he now?"

A mental map appeared in the Warlord's mind with a dot on it. When he zoomed in he noticed the dot was moving, meaning it was an active map.

"A little gift, one warrior to another," Ares said, glared at Aphrodite. "Be quick with him."

"I will not delay him unnecessarily," she promised as Ares vanished in vision as well as voice.

Aphrodite flew in closer to Paul, where she was only a couple feet away, close enough that her clouds touched his armored chest.

"I think I can speed up the absorption of Artemis's energy, but you must trust me or I can do little to help you."

"Trust how?"

"I know you are in the middle of war, but you came to this spot to momentarily get away from it so you could relax and heal before engaging again. Yet a part of you is still on alert, always on alert and never fully relaxing. If you relax the energy will absorb faster. Not all of it here and now, despite by best efforts, but since it is a diminishing effect any acceleration you can achieve now will be permanent. Do you understand?"

"Except for the part of what I have to do."

"There are no threats here. I can promise you that. I promise that I will also wake you if one approaches long before it can harm you. Can you trust me that much?"

"I think so, but the myth of the Sirens has me a little worried."

It took a moment for her to pull the memory from her mind, then she almost snarled. "That was not my doing, but it does exist, though the lure is telepathic. The universe has spawned some predators that trap their prey in this way, and it is an illusion of lust. I only deal with the real thing."

“If you want me to relax, that’s not the best way to go about it.”

“Ares may know war, but he does not understand love. Lust is a tool, a drive, an assessment, and many other things, but it is not love itself. It does, however, counteract the combat nature in its pure form. It can, however, be twisted into an abomination. I try to help those I can, but some prefer the twisted nature to the real thing and are beyond my help. For you, however, there is one aspect of lust that is not in conflict with your nature, and that is the assessment value. It is sexy, as you have often put it, and it is sexy for a reason. Let me share myself with you, and know me for who and what I am. Not erotic, but illuminating in a sea of darkness. If I shine brightly enough and surround you, the darkness that you are constantly bracing yourself against will disappear from view, and in that moment you will be able to relax if you allow yourself to do so. But it is you who must let go your safeguards.”

“Not likely, even if I consciously choose to do so.”

“Let me deal with your subconscious. Just choose to let me in when I knock on the door.”

“You can try, but I’m not entirely sure how.”

“You did with Riona.”

“I know her.”

“Know me now,” Aphrodite said, her cloud and body moving into his as if she were but a vapor...and that vapor expanded and clouded his view of everything. Not just visually, but all his senses were cut off from reality. Psionics, Essence, Saiolum...he couldn’t see anything with them, only her as she was around him and penetrating inside him slowly.

He resisted her by instinct, but each time it happened she only pressed slowly and gave him time to relent, inch by inch, as her brightness increased. It was a glow that warmed his body without speeding him up. Like coming in out of the cold and sitting by a roaring fire as your body thawed out.

And the more he thawed out, the more she moved in, slowly consuming him in what could only be called the warmest hug of all time. She held him there, sharing herself and some of her



memories...the good ones...in what soon devolved into a dreamstate as Paul gradually lost consciousness.

And once there, with his powerful mental defenses asleep, Aphrodite was able to assume control and, as long as the dreaming didn't run contrary to his nature, could keep him there without resistance for as long as she liked.

From the outside, on the beach, he was still standing in place as if looking out over the ocean with no sign of Aphrodite...for no one could ever see the gods unless they allowed it.

And there, over the following hours, not only did Artemis's energy begin to absorb into him faster, Aphrodite was able to help Paul heal old wounds, including the loss of Riona, and remove a lot of deeply buried corrosion hiding where he didn't consciously notice. War took a toll on those who cared, and Paul had done well to keep regenerating his inner poise battle after battle over his life, but he'd never been able to cleanse it all.

With Aphrodite's help now, it all went away but the memories.

After he would wake later he'd feel lighter and more at ease than he ever had before. More than enough to compensate for the lingering inefficiency of Artemis's work. And if he followed Ares' map to the most dangerous Neofan here, as she knew he would, Paul was going to need as much clarity as he could get if he was going to survive.

It didn't take long for Paul to work out how to use the mental tracker Ares had given him...though he had no idea what it was or how it functioned. It was just in his mind, and he couldn't pinpoint any new uploaded software there, any tissue growth, nothing that his armor's sensors or his own internal senses could note. But rather than sit around trying to figure it out, he got the position overlaid with a map of the Temple.

The position of Vikarathe was far from here, and not close to any city. It was, however, near to another anti-orbital mountain battery and moving towards it from several thousand miles away. The best he could guess at the speed was between 150 and 200 miles per hour, which was slow for a vehicle and too fast to be on foot. Paul could run that fast, but he'd never seen a Neofan that could even get close. That left a ground vehicle...which didn't exist here. Everything the Caretakers made and used was levitating, and the Vargemma didn't have technology that much more primitive. Occasionally you might see some custom vehicles, but they'd be rare, and the Neofan didn't use anything other than anti-grav, so what did that mean?

It could mean his estimates were off...or it could mean this wasn't a normal Neofan.

"Great," Paul said as he got his helmet and pack back on, then he took off from the beach and into the air at as fast of a pace as he could manage without flying himself into a fatigue as he headed for the nearest portal location on the map. It was some 3,194 miles away...which was doable if Vikarathe maintained his pace. The only way to get to another side of the Temple was via portal or if he was picked up...or hijacked a transport.

He couldn't contact the fleet from here to pick him up, and finding a space-worthy transport wasn't impossible, but the most likely places were too far away for the time he had. The portals were the best option, but there weren't many of them out in the wilderness and he didn't feel like fighting his way into a city right now.

Paul elevated slowly as he flew, getting into thinner and thinner air until he eventually reached space, then he skimmed over top the atmosphere for the next few hours without incident until he got near his destination. He let his armor slow him, allowing his Yen'mer tissue to keep recharging as he descended into the atmosphere and then down into a series of snow-covered mountains. Near the peak of one should be a cave...a cave virtually impossible to find by accident, for the portal wouldn't show on any sensor package smaller than what a starship carried.

Having a full map of the Temple was an extremely powerful tool, but right now Paul wasn't watching it so much as Vikarathe's position relative to an exit portal. He couldn't track any Star Force units from here, but he knew that area was near to what had to look like the weakest position given that there was only one Saiyan operating in the area.

It's where Kip-022 had gone, and that mountain was probably his 3rd target also. Paul was abandoning his own list in order to go after Vikarathe, and he guessed the Neofan was trying to get to the mountain before Kip did...otherwise moving across the ground that slow would not get him there in time to make an intercept.

Paul intended to get there first, and he didn't have time to waste inputting the Reignor's codes. If it took him somewhere else he'd deal with it and backtrack if needed. Right now he needed as much head start as he could get.

The warlord flew down to the mountain to the location indicated on the map, finding nothing but a wall of snow. He reached out a hand and began telekinetically pulling chunks of it off rather than pushing in with a Jumat blast. He carved out a pathway down through more than 22 feet of snow until he found the cave beneath it.

Paul flew down through the gap, not leaving a footprint until he reached rock, then was standing in front of a short tunnel with a portal imbedded in the rock on the far end. He pulled off his right armored glove as he walked, then summoned up a stream of Essence that he directed out of his hand and into the portal to charge it as he mentally toggled the navigation interface and selected the appropriate exit portal within the Temple, meaning a short hop that would last a few seconds only.

Paul put his glove back on and stepped into the shimmering field as soon as it appeared. When he sank in halfway he snapped out of view as the portal system transported him across the void interior of the Temple inside an Essence bubble that rammed into and exited within much hotter conditions inside another cave.

The Saiyan kicked in his metabolism upgrade, with his body speeding up and his hair under his helmet turning yellow again as he exited the tunnel, then took off at maximum speed up through the jungle canopy, breaking a few branches on the way, then he was up in the air and heading towards Vikarathe's now very close position only 78 miles away.

The mountain was visible on Paul's left, with Vikarathe approaching from the right, so the warlord chose to head towards the middle and cut him off. He stretched out his shields into a needle point to break the air, then used his Saiolum skills to pull him even faster. The shields held, but the friction was too much for the air and a fireball ensued around him as he traveled.

He kept watching Vikarathe to see if he deviated course, but if he noticed the flame on the horizon it didn't seem to matter...then again, if he was down in the jungle he couldn't see it. But how was he making that speed dodging tree trunks?

When Paul finally got to his intercept spot he slowed down gradually, and as he did he got his answer. There was a distant rumble coming through the jungle, with a small fountain of debris marking his position on the horizon. Paul could see it because he was still in the air above the trees, and for a moment he couldn't believe it. The brute was actually moving through them, breaking them as he went. That had to be extremely tiring, and Paul wanted to slip his helmet off and get a look at how much Essence he was expending to do it, but that would only announce his own presence, so he kept it on and waited as he watched the debris plume get closer and closer.

Fortunately there were no animals in the jungle to get caught in the path...and that meant he didn't have to be careful with his attacks either.

Paul turned around and looked the other way, trying to sense Kip on approach...but got nothing yet. That meant he was going to

be on his own for this one, but he sent out a coded signal anyway letting him know where he was. He didn't get a response, except in the plume of debris. Apparently Vikarathe had noticed it coming from something ahead, for now he started moving at less than 40 miles per hour and not disturbing any of the trees.

*Hello there, Vikarathe,* Paul said telepathically long before he could get into hearing range.

*You know me,* he replied, still moving closer but weaving sideways to try and be more evasive on approach.

*Only by name. You're on your way to attack my brother, so I figured I'd intervene first.*

*We're the defenders, you're the attackers.*

*We're the rescuers. Reignor Plausious wants some of his race left alive, so we offered to help him save as many of you as we could before you all commit suicide.*

*I'm not here to die.*

*No, you're here to kill as many of us as you can, then leave the Temple before the others end themselves in one way or another.*

*We will not be taken captive.*

*I know. That's why I have to be better than you.*

*What deal has Plausious made with you?*

*We get our Temples back, and he takes you guys to the three we originally agreed upon and tries to rehab you there to get ready for the big war that's coming.*

*And what war is that?* the Neofan said, getting much closer now. Less than a mile to go.

*The Endgame war. Our Empire has earned the selection, and now all evil in the surrounding galaxies and within this one will try and destroy us before we can utilize the prize.*

Vikarathe slowed noticeably. *You do not have all the preborn.*

*That part of the prophecy was false. As was many of the things you've been told.*

*You are young, there is much you do not understand yet.*

*You lost your galaxy, we still have ours,* Paul said, knowing that would sting. *And I know who is responsible for it.*

*Who?*

*First things first. Are we talking, or fighting?*

*There you are. You're wearing that heretical armor. It won't save you,* Vikarathe said as Paul felt a faint energy field sweeping over him.

*Fight first, I guess.*

*You'd be wise to flee now.*

*You'd be wise to join Plausious.*

*I'll die before I serve that traitor,* Vikarathe said less than a half mile off when the gravity of the planet suddenly increased drastically. All the trees around him were smashed into the ground, creating a carpet of wood and leaves in a wide donut around Paul, but not directly under him. A few trees were still there, then suddenly they began flinging their branches higher as Paul was pulled down towards them.

His natural reaction was to fly off, but he realized his mistake a split second too late as he was yanked down hard, hitting a chunk of the tree and deflecting down towards the rising dirt as he deactivated his anti-grav altogether...with the pulling effect cutting out entirely.

The Neofan had somehow created a higher gravity field around him, while reversing gravity beneath. Anti-grav on anti-grav created attraction, which was how he had just yanked Paul out of the air using an Essence technique without actually touching him with Essence. And now that he was essentially floating a few feet above the ground, the Neofan came charging in to ram the Saiyan.

But Paul quickly flew away from it, using his Saiolum only and dancing around the huge Neofan in the air, but not before he reached behind him and pulled the short cylinder off his back and extended it into a double-bladed rod that just began to glow green on both ends before Vikarathe flashed by. The warlord managed to get it around and struck the big arm on the 17-foot tall Neofan with the energy in the rounded blade. It soaked into the skin-tight shields covering the armored body, eating away at them on contact...then Vikarathe was stumbling out into the broken trees as he tried to turn around, hopping in the air for a good 20 meters to avoid tripping before coming to a stop.

He looked down at his arm...which normally would be bare gray skin, but he was covered head to toe in armor and shields,

meaning stun weaponry wasn't going to have an effect until Paul got through the armor.

*"I should have hit you,"* Vikarathe said aloud in his own language.

*"Did you think I'd make it easy?"* Paul replied in kind, dropping down to the ground as the few trees behind him settled now that the anti-grav was gone.

A cascade of audible cracks washed over the 600 meter wide crushed area, with the tree trunks and branches splintering further, then the pieces flew up into the air and began to form a wall rising into a dome as Paul flew up higher and threw a wrinkling wave of slightly golden energy at one side of it, blowing off part of the wall before the rest could reach above his head.

Paul kept punching, throwing out more and more Jumat blasts that pulverized the pieces and knocked them backward only to get caught and thrown back in at him again. When they eventually hit his armor they did little to damage it, but they knocked him around and made him reengage his anti-grav again to stay put...at which time the gravity effect returned and knocked him to the ground again.

But this time Vikarathe didn't charge, instead he telekinetically threw larger pieces of trunks at him, pummeling the warlord to the point he was constantly getting knocked down and around until he released a spherical Jumat blast that pushed everything back, some of which made it all the way to the Neofan and bounced off his Essence shields. But in that moment of clearness, Paul sprinted across the ground, ready for the gravity field to hit again, up or down, and got within a few steps of Vikarathe before the logs underneath his feet were thrown straight up, knocking him high above the towering giant.

A Saven mind flash bought him a fraction of a second before Vikarathe quickly recovered, with Paul throwing four Si'mosa clear objects at him, using the upgraded psionic to create temporary, solid objects out of his Jumat energy. Those objects stuck on an invisible shield a foot off the Neofan's chest, then with a theatrical snap of his fingers, Paul detonated them simultaneously, which was enough to push Vikarathe back a step...and in that step Paul flew into his chest, flipping over enroute, and kicked into him hard.

The mass of the Neofan versus the Furyan was in the larger individual's favor, but momentum also included speed, and even over such a short distant Paul had accumulated a lot of it...never mention he was accelerating throughout the kick and turned it into a double, with his knees locking out after the first one, only to come back down to his ankles and kick again before the Neofan could throw him off.

But before he could, Paul jabbed his double bladed rod down into the armored chest end first, discharging the green shield-penetrating energy almost as an afterthought, but it was enough to momentarily let his boots hit the other's armor.

A telekinetic wave minus the Essence effect threw him back, with Paul negating it quickly with a Rentar wave, then the area around Vikarathe disappeared, blacked out in a similar trick to what Paul had used against the Vargemma, and he knew to pull back quickly before he could get caught off guard...and right on cue the Neofan came out at a different place, and would have rammed right into him if he hadn't moved back and to the side.

Paul took advantage of the near miss, punching him in the head without any energy augment before kicking off his shoulder and flying off a bit as the Neofan slid to a halt, kicking up multiple tree trunk pieces as if they were little more than pieces of paper.

The warlord knew he couldn't get into a slugging match with him. The Neofan was just too damn big, and even with Paul's enhanced muscles he doubted he could apply the damage needed to wear down his shields, armor, then his body. Vikarathe was more fit than any Neofan he had ever seen or heard of. Amazingly so, given their race was rather lazy and relied on their natural attributes and genetic piracy more than training. And if Paul couldn't use his own Essence to enhance his blows, his best bet was to weave and dodge, evading the counterpunches while throwing in safe ones of his own when able.

And that would take forever to wear him down, not to mention how much charge his armor had to replenish his shields. That's why he needed the shield penetrator energy, which he had a little of built into his armor, but nowhere near as much as was packed into the free weapon.



And that free weapon suddenly tried to pull free of his hand as Vikarathe telekinetically yanked at it. Paul barely kept his grip as he found himself unable to fly away harder than the pull, meaning if he wasn't going to let go he was going to get reeled in. His armor indicated he just got hit with an Essence attack, and guessed Vikarathe had tried to pull his weapon rather than his armor away using a boost or outright Essence pull...but the weapon was also made of Petricite, for Neofan in the past had tried the same trick against Archons, and they'd learned quickly to so armor their free weapons.

Paul used his Rentar, pulsing an anti-telekinetic field energy over his hand and weapon to free it before he got within punching range of the giant, throwing in a few Dre'mo'don shots from his left wrist, which splashed harmlessly against either a technological shield or an Essence one. If Paul could see with Essence right now, he'd probably find a permashield around Vikarathe with multiple layers to protect against different techniques.

When he punched or kicked, his Petricite armor would pass through it harmlessly, but ranged attacks of any kind would have to wear it down...and given that he had been busting through full grown trees on his way here like they were blades of grass suggested his Essence well was so great Paul would be hard pressed to run it low. His own armor's energy would probably expire first, so he was going to have to get more direct and in close where the Essence wouldn't be a factor.

So he tried something that wouldn't work normally, but if it surprised the Neofan and he didn't know how to counter it immediately, he might get through.

Paul used a rare psionic called Ty'vo, pointing a hand at the Neofan as more tree trunks leapt into the air and were thrown at him like ammunition. Paul flicked two away with his own telekinesis as he created a glowing rod of energy between his hand and Vikarathe's chest, latching onto it despite the shields over it. The warlord felt it grip, meaning the Neofan's technological shields weren't calibrated for this sort of thing, and suddenly he was physically connected to him via the energy rod...which he then shrunk, pulling them together

arm first while bringing his rod up at maximum charge and slamming it into his chest a moment before his helmet hit.

The discharge got through the shield, then Vikarathe tried to wrap his arms over Paul and hold him there, but the Saiyan's hyperactive metabolism and mind saw the move coming in as if it were in slowmo, and he had plenty of fractions of a second to release his grip on the weapon and pull the armor away from the palm of his right hand as he suddenly disconnected the Ty'vo.

He moved so fast there was no way for Vikarathe to see what he did, and as the two big arms wrapped in to pin him in a grapple hold, an explosion occurred on his chest and the Saiyan was gone as vaporized armor puffed out in a spherical plume that blocked his view.

Vikarathe staggered, with a small spot in his armor having been burned completely through with a hole 8 inches deep now carved into his chest, but he couldn't feel it or most of his right side, with his arm barely twitching as it flopped to his side.

He picked up and threw a wave of debris in between him and Paul as he flushed Essence through his arm, purging the stun energy that he found there...which had also been numbing up his wound, which he now felt in full. Vikarathe stepped forward from the shock, then his burned tissue began to visibly heal before scales of his golden armor moved from other locations and covered the hole.

The armor over Paul's right hand closed up at just about the same time, with the Neofan catching glimpse of it as he got his balance again, but before he could move or heal more, Paul switched tactics and went into full scale mental warfare, assaulting him first with a Fornax wave that failed to penetrate his Essence shields and render his nervous system useless, but some of the mental psionics created a crack in his mind that Paul's telepathy shot into, trying to keep the foothold as he mentally slugged it out with the big Neofan.

His mind was as strong as his body, however, but Paul was essentially on even ground here, despite his smaller brain size. He had specialized psionic tissue above and beyond telepathy, notably Orren, which was designed specifically to hack into other people's minds, while his Farchor provided specialized defense against that

same thing happening to him. While Neofan had Essence techniques to accomplish similar things, that wasn't as good as having physical brain matter built for them, and Paul put it to good use, hammering one area after another to find any weak spot he could as Vikarathe tried to push him out of what foothold he had.

On and on they went for minutes, both standing there looking at each other across a space of 13 meters, but with no physical assaults. Neither could waste the mental power to do so, they were so engaged within Vikarathe's mind, but that didn't mean they couldn't speak to one another within that mental war zone.

*You will get no further, the Neofan promised. It's only a matter of time before I push you out.*

*All I need is a crack, big guy. Just a crack.*

*You will find none. You will create none.*

*You mean again? I created one to get this far,* the Saiyan said, rifling through a few memories before getting blocked there. Paul knew he had to use this moment, for his biological cannon wasn't going to recharge again during this fight. The physical wound had given him his distraction to break in mentally, and he had to push to a win now or the regular fight would go on and on until one of them broke from exhaustion or one of them got lucky.

His mind was actually a little faster thanks to his Sav psionic combined with the Saiyan metabolism. If he hadn't been in Saiyan mode he would have been kicked out by now, but he was moving a step ahead and opening doors only to have them closed in his virtual face. Memory probes, active feedback interjections, central nervous system override...which had so many layers of passive defense Paul knew he was going to get nowhere there. The only area that was mildly weaker than others was his logic 'circuits,' which was very odd. Instincts were stronger than logic, he knew, but for a mind that was probably at least half a million years old at the minimum, his logic areas should have been extremely developed, but they were acting like they were a newb.

A big, dumb, heavy and almost impossible to move newb, but Paul could move around there with impunity, for the pushback was so light. It was the base structure that was giving him so much trouble, but he kept coming back to it after hitting other areas,

probing and learning the geography in the alien mind, eventually finding he couldn't understand what was wrong with him.

Each cycle back Paul learned more, and was able to chip away at the latent defenses as if he was shoving through a glacier... but it wasn't snowing, so every shovel load made progress, and as he learned more his 'shovel' grew in size until it became a snow plow.

*I'm getting in, Paul noted. Why so weak here?*

*You're accomplishing nothing.*

*Oh no? Can you not feel my progress?*

*I sense nothing but futility...and I am beginning to seal off other areas. You are wasting time there.*

Hardly, Paul said, wondering if he really couldn't sense his attacks...but in his own logic circuits, that should be the most visible part of his mind after his emotions, for it was literally the part of his mind that analyzed things. If his logic circuits were a spotlight shining on the rest of his mind, the light was brightest at the source and Paul's invasion should have been going down in pure daylight.

So why couldn't he see him? Or was he lying to try to distract...

Nope, he wasn't. Paul was starting to be able to see his thought processes now...a little anyway...and what he was seeing was that his logic circuits were highly active in some areas, while others were almost non-functional. Meaning he was very smart in some things while dumb in others.

Short of brain damage that should have been impossible... unless Paul or someone else was suppressing those areas deliberately.

If that was happening he should be fighting it, but he wasn't. Paul kept searching and mapping out new areas of his logic circuits as if filling in the map on an Final Fantasy game, eventually coming across one area where there was a bit of pushback, but not against him. It was pushback against something invisible to Paul's mental invasion.

So there was something else attacking him, and it was giving Paul an obvious advantage as the Saiyan was dancing around Vikarathe's active defenses in this area so nimbly that he was able to

temporary knock out portions of them...which allowed his other attacks outside in other areas to get through as the logic circuits were not able to construct as creative defenses in the constantly evolving conflict.

Move after counter move. Use the same strategy over and over and you'd lose, so this was as much a game of 'who had more tricks' as 'who had more mental power and speed.' And Vikarathe was losing in both of the latter as Paul interfered or outright shut down certain areas momentarily before the Neofan could manually reboot them.

*Surely you can see I'm winning now?*

*You have a long way to go to obtain control,* Paul heard while noticing him trying to use his Essence. That part of his brain Paul had kept under constant watch, and now he was trying to lift another chunk of wood to throw at Paul while making it look like he was consumed with thought elsewhere.

This guy was a tricky bastard, but the invisible ally Paul had was diminishing his overall power enough that Paul could multi-task more than he could and moved in to attack that area, shutting it down like a vice on a piece of fruit and squeezing until the Neofan lost all control and was thrown out of his own Essence control mental software.

*I'm not here to kill you,* Paul promised. *But I have to defeat you and neutralize you as a threat.*

*As long as I live I am a threat to you.*

*Yeah, yeah, whatever,* the warlord scoffed. *Like I haven't heard that before. You and the other nutso Neofan are going down and Plausious is retaking control of however many of you are taken alive. We intend that to be all of you.*

*I will not accept his graft,* Vikarathe said as he continued to fight, referencing the ultimate act of submission as an information download from the dominant one was injected into the supplicants mind, changing them and giving them knowledge of things they previously did not possess. *I will die before I am tainted.*

*I do not believe he is requiring it, only some common sense to prove you're not tainted with insanity.*

*Do not speak of taint to me. You are not Neofan, and could never comprehend what it is to be...us, he said, losing the word he was looking for as more of his logic circuits were being compromised by Paul.*

*I know inferiority when I see it. The strong have the responsibility to protect the weak. The Neofan exploit and prey upon them. At least we got House Atriark to stop eating corpses when you came here, but you're still far from being civilized. A truly superior race would hold yourselves to a higher standard than others.*

*We do. If we do not maintain our alignment, we are forced into exile or death. Taint is when we are out of alignment. We do not measure others for this.*

*But you do murder others when it suits you. I am superior, and I protect others. I never kill them unless it's in combat and they chose to attack me. And usually I'm able to defeat them in a way they still survive. It's easier to kill than capture, and I prefer the harder route as a warrior does. I was told you were a warrior. Was that a lie?*

*I was a warrior before you were hatched.*

Paul mentally frowned. *We're not hatched, we're born. We don't come out of eggs.*

*I am far older regardless, and I have fought in so many wars.*

*I fought with my Empire against a superior enemy. We lost many battles, but won the long war. I am used to fighting against seemingly superior opponents and finding a way to beat them. So why can't you find a way to beat me inside your own head? Can you not adapt, warrior? Or are you a mere fighter mimicking the warriors as best you can?*

The lingering anger in Vikarathe that had been controlled within him the entire fight flickered akin to a solar flare. It didn't last long, but the blip was telling. He was barely holding himself together under Paul's mental assault. The warlord was doing a bit better, but was having to rely on his speed more than anything as he gained advantage after advantage that was beginning to snowball.

To his credit he didn't fold, instead committing himself to fighting this out, win or lose, the entire way, hoping his superior endurance would outlast his attacker, but Paul had almost free reign

in the dormant regions of his logic circuits, and was using them like a highway to move around and strike other areas from the rear where Vikarathe's defenses were weaker.

Paul put up his own defensive lines in other places he didn't want to hammer further, ensuring that Vikarathe couldn't just reclaim them without a lengthy fight. In his own mind Paul felt those spots as if they were walls he had constructed, which freed up more of his own power to push harder elsewhere. It was as if the Neofan's mind was a giant chess board with thousands of pieces on it, and Paul was blocking off squares so neither of them could use them, forcing the fight into fewer and fewer places now that he had Vikarathe pushing back against the walls, not realizing they were a passive defense rather than active attack.

His moves were getting dumber and dumber, which allowed Paul to probe his invisible ally with different attempts to reveal it, but nothing worked, so he let it go for the moment and began pressing in multiple places to set up a fast invasion if he was able to disrupt the Neofan wide scale. When he was ready, Paul used the part of his mind that was now free to reach into the Saiolum currents and redirect them.

It was hard. Very, very hard while he simultaneously sparred with Vikarathe, but after a few minutes of prep work he was ready.

*You're going to play this out to the end, huh?*

*Would you do any less prior to your death, usurper.*

*I'm not going to kill you, Paul reiterated. And if you were really superior, you wouldn't have lost possession of the Temples to us, now would you?*

*You cannot even create one of your own, yet you call yourselves superior.*

*Fair point there, but we are a little busy with resources going to fighting the Hadarak. And you had millions of years to build them. We're nowhere near that old.*

*You admit your inferiority.*

*I admit our youth. But we are the better Empire, even if we're not the oldest or largest. And I'm about to take you down.*

*Do your worst. I will not relent.*

*Why do you hate Plausious? He was your Reignor.*

*I hate all with the Taint. It is a failure, even in a Reignor.  
How can you be in alignment when you kill other Neofan?  
Does that not infer a taint?*

The part of his logic circuits that tried to analyze that hit a dead zone and deflected back to pre-assumed conclusions.

*The tainted must be killed or exiled. It has always been so.  
Are they being given a choice of exile now, or just executed?*

Again, there was deflection around the analysis, with Paul now very worried about whatever this was. It was actively fighting the Neofan's ability to reason around certain subject matter.

*They must choose exile, and most do not. Leaving our race  
is more painful than death.*

*You are compromised, Vikarathe, and I do not know how. But  
it is creating a blank zone in your mind in which I can move freely. It  
is how I am owning you now. Can you not see it?* Paul said,  
highlighting the spots within the Neofan's own mind in a way he  
could not ignore.

*If you can finish me, do so. You will not trick me into  
submission.*

*Are you going to kill yourself rather than be captured?*

*A warrior never kills himself. We make our enemies do it.*

Good for you, Paul said, throwing his bound up Saiolum currents with a special modification into the Neofan's entire body. The surge of the life-created energy field accelerated all his abilities as if he had an Essence boost, only it was totally foreign to him and Paul pushed it so far and fast into him that he lost control, feeling so light and refreshed that he physically fell to the ground as if the energy had washed away his grip on himself.

Paul didn't know how long he would be distracted, so he used the moment to press hard into all the areas in the Neofan's mind he had prepared for and hammered through his now weakened defenses, moving through some that opened up completely while others he had to shovel his way through with little pushback.

It was then that Paul got in and controlled key spots in the Neofan's mind, taking control of his body and blocking his ability to regain control. That included the mental interface with his armor, which he now ordered to lower. The golden scales pulled back and



retreated into boots, forearm gauntlets, crown, and the sheaths over his wing-like prominences. The shields also were commanded to lower, giving Paul a free shot with his stun weaponry to end this.

But he didn't. The wash of Saiolum through the Neofan passed cleanly through him as expected...except in the logic circuits. It hit something there. Something dark and twisted, with Paul realizing it was also part of the Saiolum, which was why he couldn't sense it before.

And it was something he knew nothing about.

Paul released the hold on the Neofan's mind that did not include his body, allowing him to think more clearly as he telepathically showed him what the warlord was seeing.

*I have an ability you do not. There is an energy field created by all life. It is called the Saiolum. There is something in your mind made from it, and it is blocking certain thoughts. See it. Know your enemy. It was here before we fought. Fight it, warrior. Do not fight me. I free your mind to do so now while I maintain hold of your body. Use my vision to identify your unknown attacker and learn it.*

Vikarathe probed the area...but it was the very area he needed for probing. He could only analyze it with the parts of his logic circuits that worked, and that wasn't enough. He was able to bump into it in places, and each time he did he grew more angered. Not at Paul, but at what was in his mind. Something being behind his lines of defense potentially made him out of alignment, and the thought of that was more dangerous to him than Paul was. Dying in battle was preferable to becoming a living zombie bereft of all it was to be Neofan.

*Use mine*, Paul said, taking a serious risk in opening up his own logic circuits to Vikarathe so he could use part of his mind to analyze his own from the outside. The warlord didn't relinquish full control, more like allowing a 'guest' to access his mental software with view-only access, but it was enough for Vikarathe to start making progress.

*This is not of your doing?* the Neofan asked, hammering at what felt like solid walls, but in doing so was defining the shape of the compromised areas.

*No. And I have a gut feeling it's part of the reason why your people are behaving so insane.*

*This cannot stand*, he bellowed in his mind, not even bothering to push back against Paul's hold on his body and throwing his full might against the invisible foe...but each time he tried to touch it his efforts were futile, as if trying to grab smoke.

But as a true warrior, he started learning new ways to fight it, causing his body to start growing new brain cells around the area and seeing if it would affect those. At first it didn't, but as they started to grow in number to replace the compromised areas, the darkness began to move into the new ones...with Vikarathe unable to maintain a hold on them.

*I cannot strike it*, he said in frustration as Paul let him use another ability to send killer cells in to destroy the affected ones. But as soon as they began tearing into the besieged tissue it began to replicate on its own...but as it did so, the expansion into the new cells stopped.

Vikarathe immediately sensed an opening, increasing the call for those special cells from the rest of his body and enhancing them with Essence, allowing them to eat through more of his own brain as the suppressive effect caused them to split and grow into new ones as the Neofan continued to grow replacements around the affected areas.

And it was working. The infected areas couldn't keep up, but it was a slow battle, whittling down the advantage as the Saiolum *thing* kept shrinking and shrinking. Almost a half hour later it was nearly gone...then it released its hold on the remaining cells.

*It is still there*, Vikarathe said, seeing it through Paul's mind as he continued to repair his own, now able to think more clearly than he had in years.

*It is. I may be able to destroy it if you allow me. Before it has a chance to reassert control, analyze the current situation, this war, and Reignor Plausious's actions. I do not know how long you have, but I sense it is slowly recharging.*

Vikarathe was silent, no longer fighting anything as he retreated into portions of his mind and put up new walls so Paul

couldn't access them, but he was still allowing himself to see through Paul's strange vision of this unknown energy field.

The warlord allowed him the privacy without relinquishing control of his body. He knew if he did, and Vikarathe got free, he would be hard pressed to get back into this position of power, for the Neofan would guard against it...and with his brain now functioning better than before, Paul had made him more dangerous.

But it was dangerous in a good way.

*I have become tainted*, he said in total supplication, even switching to the Star Force language as a form of contrition. His mind became like jelly, totally dejected as his utter failure sank in.

Paul forced into his mind the knowledge he had of Plausious and the various conversations he'd been made aware of, including the Reignor's new perspective on 'taint.'

Something perked up in Vikarathe, but it was small. A small mote of hope as he faced the unthinkable horror of losing himself.

*One warrior to another, let me guide you out of the taint of the darkside as Director Davis did for Plausious.*

*I know not what to do now. You came here to save us, and I tried to kill you.*

*You're not the only one.*

*I should have been stronger. I do not even know when this happened.*

*I've never seen this before, but I know someone who may have. If you allow me, I will contact him now and inquire how to destroy it.*

*There is one stronger than you?*

*In the Saiolum, I have a teacher far wiser, stronger, and older than you. His race was betrayed and destroyed by unknown forces long ago, and I believe those same forces may be responsible for the downfall of the Neofan in your home galaxy, and perhaps this unseen sabotage as well. Are you and I still enemies?*

*I am nothing until I can own my mind again. I can slow this taint, but cannot remove it until I find a way. I do not know how much it can control me, but I will not willingly attack you again. Plausious chose his allies well. I am in your debt, Human.*

*Technically Furyan now, but close enough,* Paul said, backing out of the physical control portions of his mind, but when he did the Neofan did not stand. He sat on the crushed debris, using an arm to throw aside a large branch in a flash of anger, but it was directed at himself.

*Azoro, I need you,* Paul said into the small link in his mind as he grew it.

*I am here,* he said, with the warlord sensing the link was too weak to send him more than words. He'd have to describe what he saw rather than sharing his memories.

*I have encountered something in the Saiolum. It is invisible to all my other senses, and it is implanted in the mind of a Neofan. It is shutting down certain aspects of his mind in his logic circuits. With my assistance of perspective, the Neofan destroyed the afflicted cells and grew new ones to replace them, but the thing tried to replicate the affected cells to replace them, as well as spreading into the new cells. It couldn't do both fast enough, shrinking in size as it grew new cells, then it released them before it disappeared completely. It is still there, slowly regaining its strength, I think, before it reasserts itself. I think I might be able to kill it with a current, but I don't want to mess with it without knowing what it is unless I have to. Can you tell me what it is and how to destroy it?*

*What does it feel like?*

*Dark and twisted. Almost as if it is anti-Saiolum, mixed with normal. I wish I could show you, I don't know how better to explain.*

*Do not touch it. Make the Neofan glow and burn it from within, with as much constant friction as you can manage. It will try to repair, soaking in from the currents. Make the outflow exceed the regen rate.*

*Do you know what it is?*

*That depends on whether or not this works.*

*You think it can leave him and move into me?*

*Possibly. But if it does you should be able to burn it out if it latches onto cells. The glow must come from those cells, that is the weakness. If it does not work, you will not have the ability to kill it. I will have to. Is the Neofan with you now?*

*Yes.*

*Attempt as I directed.*

Here goes, he said, letting the mote in his mind shrink again into silence. "I have spoken with him. He has a technique I need to try."

"He is here?"

"No. He is far from here. But the Saiolum can transmit messages faster than the Essence realm between two who are linked. I'm not strong enough to send more than a few words, but he told me something to try. If it doesn't work, you'll have to wait until he can get here."

"Do what you can. You have full access to my mind and body."

"I won't need either. I can see it now. Hold still, you're going to feel really weird...but in a good way. The thing in your mind won't like it, and I'm not sure how much it can damage you in response."

"I deserve to be dead. If you can save even part of me, it will be a gift. Do not hesitate to do what you must. I will bear it."

Paul could sense he was desperate to regain permanent control of his mind, and he didn't blame him. The idea that Paul could be so controlled and all his abilities used to hurt others scared him enough that he didn't want to think about it...and the sooner he learned to defend against whatever this was the better.

Paul reached out through the Saiolum and touched the Neofan's body...but not his head. He focused on his chest. His influence now was more than just directing flows. He could turn the energy near him into what felt like gel, and it was that gel that he thought Azoro feared the thing traveling on. But when he touched his invisible tendril to the Neofan it didn't move through the body towards it, so he guessed he was safe for the moment.

Through that tendril he affected the Neofan's body to trigger a cascade that reached through every cell. A cascade that made his biological body produce more Saiolum than normal. A lot more. Paul could do the same with his own body. Azoro had taught him how a long time ago, but causing it in someone else was a little more tricky. How much he needed was the question, and if he could prompt someone else to glow enough.

As soon as the glow extended into his head the dark energy within began to sizzle. It wasn't a physical sound, but a ripple in the Saiolum that Paul could 'hear' and even 'smell' a moment later. It was foul and poisoning the currents. The warlord simultaneously made his own body glow, creating an outflow that kept the smell moving away from him so he wouldn't be contaminated.

His own glow hit the Neofan and caused an increase in his as well, with the flavor of it shifting to more align with Paul's. He hadn't meant to do that, but it seemed to allow the Neofan to glow more so he tried to get them glowing in sync and brighter with each passing moment.

His telepathy into Vikarathe's mind saw the Neofan losing control as if drugged. The outflow of Saiolum caused all his cells to operate better than normal, healing lingering damage faster and improving in other aspects. It was a boost that he could not use, but something that Paul could trigger in others for a time. That boost was somehow toxic to the dark energy inside him, and the small area affected kept shrinking.

Paul wasn't sure why it wasn't feeding off the extra energy and growing stronger, but that didn't matter as long as it was killing it. Azoro could explain later. Right now he needed to see if he could destroy it, and this was really not even an attack. More like blowing on a leaf to move it, in that it was so simple that the thing probably had no defense other than some kind of sabotage, maybe triggered from an attack on the outside, but not from the cells it was clinging to.

Paul was worried something would go wrong, but the spot shrank and shrank until the last of it bled away into what he was pretty sure was harmless debris, as if a piece of wood was burned up into nothing but ash and smoke.

He kept them glowing for a long time as he search the Neofan's entire body and his own looking for any remnant of it, then released his manipulation and sat for a while, seeing if anything was hidden and started to regenerate as he contacted Azoro again.

*It appears to be gone. There was residue that floated away in the currents.*

*Good.*

*What was it?*

*It is called a Mev'shi'dron, and requires a misalignment in your own Saiolum to create. Only someone who is corrupted can do it. Uncorrupted Saiolum unravels it. The residue will mix with the currents and negate each other.*

*The current is destroyed? I thought that was impossible.*

*Not destroyed, neutralized. It will float inert until it impacts a lifeform, and the contact with refurbish it. If the lifeform is corrupted, the contact will turn it into abominations.*

*But not anti-Saiolum?*

*Not on contact. It can be transformed into anti-Saiolum at range. Even a corrupted lifeform will be killed by anti-Saiolum. It is toxic to all.*

*But contact with regular Saiolum will negate the toxicity?*

*Negate it into corrupt but not lethal forms. It takes a great deal just to get it to a neutralized form. Life is difficult to maintain when the currents are of neutralized Saiolum.*

*Worse than traveling through the void of space?*

*Yes. The void doesn't try to change your outflow. The neutralized currents mesh and alter on contact.*

*I see. How can I defend against the Mev'shi'do?*

*Mev'shi'dron, Azoro corrected. Do as you just did, only with yourself.*

*And what if it takes control before I can?*

*You're not advanced enough to properly defend yourself. But a Mev'shi'don is not something a novice can create. I know how but cannot do it. It takes a great deal of knowledge in addition to the corruption. It can last forever, so it may be from a race that no longer exists.*

*It can replicate and pass on?*

*If it's instructions tell it to. It can choose its targets and ignore others. It can also make a toxin with a trace of anti-Saiolum in it that will kill its host if it is programmed against tampering, though that requires even more skill to create. Only a great power could create this, Paul.*

*That's what I was worried about, he said as Vikarathe looked up at him, wondering if he was done or not as the weird feeling was*

diminishing. *Thanks.*

*You know who is ultimately responsible.*

*Yeah, I think so. Though I think it would mean something worse if it wasn't the T'fen's minions doing it.*

Azoro diminished and disappeared, with his connection shrinking to a dot in his mind. In retrospect, he was proud he'd been able to hold onto the connection while mentally battling Vikarathe. If he'd been losing he'd probably had lost it at some point.

"It is done."

Vikarathe searched his own mind, with Paul observing, and healed the damage of the broken cells that remained, destroyed a few more, and regrew what was missing until all of them were in perfect alignment again. It was an impressive ability, and Paul wondered how much he was directing and how much was the Essence just doing its magical repair work on its own.

After that he attended to the wound in his chest, which had already shrunk under the effect of the Saiolum 'buzz,' except he was lacking the necessary biomatter to replace it all. The rest of his body was famished for 'spare parts' and he wouldn't be able to heal further until he got some food in him.

"Plausious," Vikarathe said, suddenly alarmed out of his depression. "Could he have this taint in a smaller form? One that hasn't grown as large yet?"

"He's not here to check, but there are other Neofan in his service here. I was told this thing is called a Mev...a Mev," he said, settling on the shorter version. "It can split and move into another individual if programmed to do so. If this was programmed to affect Neofan, any of you could be afflicted."

"Can you purge the others?"

"If they'll let me. We have to capture them first."

Vikarathe stood, flexing his exposed muscles despite the pain it caused him around the hole in his chest. Fortunately it was a huge chest, so the wound wasn't as bad as it looked, but some of his internal organs were still compromised. Neofan physiology had enough redundancies, however, to keep him going without full capacity.

"I will capture them for you."



“Not until you get healed up. Call a Caretaker. I’m not sure how responsive they will be to me. I broke quite a few on the way in.”

With a thought, Vikarathe interfaced with the technology in the crown he wore, sending out a signal that would attract the closest ones, registering an order to create and transport food to his current position, with the signal being relayed through the network until it reached the correct units able to carry out the order.

“What is your name, warrior?”

“Paul-024.”

“You are one of the trailblazers then.”

“Yes.”

“I did not think any of you were so strong.”

“I’m the only one who can use the Saiolum. It’s not something that everyone can learn. You must have a certain...alignment...to access it. It’s said to be the prevue of a builder.”

“To build a slave army out of us?”

“No. I think it is to punish you by causing you to destroy your own race.”

“Punishment for what?”

“You were told not to expand into an entire galaxy, were you not?”

“How do you know that?”

“We know some things you do not, and vice versa.”

“That is something only the ruling House knows of, and few within it.”

“I thought you were House Atriark.”

“No, I am House Mutavi. I came through the interstellar transit network when House Atriark called for assistance.”

Paul frowned darkly. “When did they do that?”

“When they began the war to retake the Temples from you and found more resistance than expected. I was nearby when the call came, and as a member of the ruling House I needed to report back on whatever Plausious was doing. When I found Truven was Reignor it was a preferred change because House Atriark had gained too much power through their bargain with you. We wish to see their downfall, but when Neofan are under attack we act as one...and I preferred a challenge which your forces presented.”

“And when you lost?”

“When the stalemate ensued, I should have left. I do not know why I did not. The taint must have been upon me long before now.”

“When did the killings in House Atriark begin?”

“Before I arrived.”

“And you tolerated this?”

“I should not have...” he said, his voice going faint.

“You brought it with you,” Paul said, realizing the implications. “Is House Mutavi executing people without cause as well?”

“Not executions. All out war between the Houses for dominance in Yenoiv,” he said, referencing the new galaxy the Neofan had fled to after the fall of their original one and the loss of the majority of their population and virtually all of their servant races. Only House Atriark and House Mutavi came out of it with most of their people alive.

“I thought you were still fighting the Hadarak?”

“Always. They never relent in their assaults on the galactic core. Our Houses have ignored them, allowing a greater foothold, as they seek to establish true dominance within our race. Our numbers thin as House Atriark remains intact...or so we thought. The Hadarak are never to be defeated, so our House decided to ignore them and allow them to return to equilibrium...but we knew that was futile. Our distant masters do not forgive. We planned to take and hold the entire galaxy. I do not know why that changed unless we were infected with this taint at that time.”

“Or long before...”

“This Mev. Can it remain dormant for so long?”

“It can last forever if not removed. They could have exposed you and let you slowly go mad over the millennia. I can think of no other reason for you to begin killing each other. I thought that was something only those out of alignment would do.”

“It was. I cannot comprehend how we fell this far, or when. How long has my mind not fully been my own?”

“Do you know the name of your distant master?”

“No. They never came to us. Their other servants offered inclusion in a great alignment of old and powerful races. We were

told that in exchange for inclusion in this group, we must obey certain rules and answer the call for assistance when it came.”

“In exchange for what?”

“Our lives. We do not let the other Houses know, nor most of our own population, but we were attacked and some of us were annihilated with ease to prove their point. We were inferior, but could find a purpose as one of them. We would be allowed to live and continue to grow more powerful, but not larger. We must seclude ourselves and let the lesser races to their own measures. We must watch from afar as overlords, guiding and encouraging, but not controlling our neighbors. If a threat rose, we would be called upon to end it. What exactly we were told to watch for I was not told. Our leaders at the time joined in order to buy us time. Time to try for the Endgame prophecy. We thought it was our only chance to fight back against this unnamed alliance of elder races. We created the Bond of Resistance to increase our influence without violating their terms.”

“What changed?”

“It wasn’t House Mutavi that made the decision, but we later learned they thought we were powerful enough to begin testing the rules imposed upon us. And if it became a war, we would use the Bond of Resistance to help us fight and kill those who had more Preborn, freeing them to come to us. We could not achieve the Endgame while the other elder races existed near to us. We did not know how wide the Endgame was, but we knew there had to be blood split before we could get to it. The calculation was made to begin our push, for we could only consent to be inferiors for so long. It was eating away at the ruling Houses, and the others were not told to spare them from the shame. It was a burden that destroyed each House that bore it over time. Mutavi is the first that was truly free of it...then we chose to attempt to reign ourselves in to within the rules.”

“Were the others told?”

“No. Our House attempted a direct takeover of the others, creating only one House for all Neofan. That is not our way. We must have been corrupted. It is the only thing that makes sense. I do not know why I did not see it before if the taint was less.”

“It targeted specific areas to block certain lines of thought. How long has the practice of exile been used?”

“Since before I was born.”

“Was it ever different?”

“Not to my knowledge. We never killed one another unless there was outright treason. All who were out of alignment were pitied. Many chose death over exile and we killed them as a form of mercy.”

“Well, I would guess at some point the alignment thing became a method to remove those of you that the Mev wasn’t working on. I don’t understand the dynamics of it, but Plausious has obviously had contact with people who have it, so maybe it doesn’t control so much as influence people. You were blinded, but I didn’t detect any direct control.”

“Then why did I attack you?”

“You were following a predetermined conclusion and the Mev didn’t allow you to rethink it.”

Vikarathe thought for a moment, then closed his eyes and sighed. “They knew us well. Too well for an outsider. What I tell you now is not known beyond the Neofan, but we are not fully in control of our own minds and bodies. Our power is too great, pushing to burst out and take random action. It is a burden of superiority that all great races face, and we must contain it in some way. Do you understand what I am saying? Are you close enough to our greatness to comprehend?”

“Personally no. But I know our offspring have difficulty, and without our direct guidance in their early years they become... unhinged.”

“Unhinged is a good word of yours. Neofan become so unhinged they are a threat to others. It is not a simple thing that can be bottled. It grows in time if you do not work to contain it. That is why there are few who have gone out of alignment that can return to it. It is not impossible, but if one goes so far astray it is usually because they do not have the will to continue to challenge it.”

“With great power comes great responsibility,” Paul quoted, seeing a recognition in Vikarathe. “And you can’t explore that power without doing a lot of damage in the process. When you have the

ability to kill with a thought, how to do practice without becoming a monster?”

“You find those who need killing and practice on them.”

Paul cringed. “No. You construct challenges in controlled situations that allow people to explore their powers. You have to give the person time to grow powerful enough that their will is greater than their instincts. We know how to do it now, but the learning process was not quick or easy. But then again, our Empire’s greatest strength aside from the lightside is our ability to train for many things. Once we get an individual to a necessary level, we no longer have to fear them or monitor them. I’m somewhat surprised the Neofan never got to that point.”

“We are more advanced than you, so the burden is greater. In order to keep us from acting on stray thoughts, we think ahead and react in the moment based on past deliberations. It is a check to keep our erratic thoughts from becoming actions. It is natural now. We do not question our predetermined thoughts in the heat of the moment. Only when we have the luxury of perspective.”

“And the Mev stopped you from ever getting to that perspective.”

“I believe if we accepted a conclusion from others, we would never think it through. But we are not all the same. Some are less erratic than others, but I fear we all could be tainted. Are you the only one here that can remove the taint?”

“Yes.”

“Then I will be your bodyguard. Where you go, I go. I will make sure you survive so you can free us...and in penance for what I have done.”

“If I were in your position I’d be kicking my own ass endlessly, but that’s pointless now. You were not thinking clearly. You are now. Focus your ire not on yourself, but on the enemy that did this and their machinations. I don’t blame you. If I was dead I might feel otherwise,” Paul added, “but I’m not, so I don’t.”

“And what of your people I killed in the first war?”

“Let us both take vengeance on the true enemy, wherever they are. My people can’t be brought back to life, and so long as you are no longer a threat, rescuing you from my enemy’s grasp is a

victory for me and an act of spite against them. In this moment I am dominant, not them. Do you understand?”

“I am beginning to. Is this your lightside alignment?”

“You could call it that,” Paul said, picking up a return signal from Kip. He sent back a wave off, telling him to proceed to his original target while he had the situation under control and would explain in full later unless Kip needed help.

A simple ‘nope’ came back, then Kip’s new location on the battlemat veered off and disappeared again.

“How many Neofan here are as strong as you?”

“Some are stronger in mind, some in Essence, none in physical skills or the combination of all three. They will not individually overwhelm you, but in groups they offer a greater threat even with your cursed armor. We do not know how you created such a thing.”

“Copied the Denogi without their knowledge.”

“Why do your warships not have it?”

“It’s hard to make. Tell me, how much pounding can your shields take?”

“You would not have gotten through without your armor.”

“Your other shield.”

“Enough to take everything you could throw at it without disruption.”

“I thought so,” he said, feeling small next to the giant despite his victory. “Size matters.”

“I was defeated.”

Paul held up his right arm, showing the slit in his palm as his glove peeled back. “I only get one shot. The recharge takes forever.”

Vikarathe growled slightly, then nodded his frustrated understanding. “You made good use of it. Do you need to wait before you enter battle again?”

“I’ve got plenty of other options, so no, I can fight now if needed. But I don’t want you trying until you get food. I don’t want you getting killed needlessly after I just saved you. Bad return on investment.”

“I will be a good investment, I promise you that. If your ships can neutralize ours, they will have nothing that can stop me unless I

act stupidly. And now that my mind is clear, that will not happen again. Can you fly?"

"Yeah."

"Then we will meet the Caretaker. It is coming from that direction," he said, pointing to the left. "The sooner we find other Neofan, the less chance there is of them killing some of your people."

"You can't fly, can you?"

"I do not possess that ability."

"Can't you use Essence for that?"

"There is a technique I have not learned that will allow for inefficient flight. I can accomplish more by enhancing my muscles and jumping or running."

"You never killed and absorbed one of us who could?"

"I have never absorbed an ability. It is theft. My skills I develop on my own. I will run."

"Do you have to destroy so many trees?"

"I am too large to move between them at high speed. They do not slow me down much."

"I'm scared to ask how big your personal well is."

"Size matters," he echoed, pointing in the direction of the distant Caretaker. "Will you follow?"

"Yes."

Vikarathe took off immediately, running across the downed trees then ramming into the intact ones on the far side and blasting them away from his body in all directions, carving a path through the jungle better than any bulldozer could hope to match.

Not that the Empire used bulldozers anymore, but Paul still saw the irony in the comparison as he ran a few steps then jumped into the air and flew behind him, climbing enough to get away from the spray of debris and matched his pace directly over top, surprised that the Neofan's famished body could still manage this...and at 123 miles per hour.

Paul reached back and opened his pack, pulling out some food cubes of his own along with some water and began refueling himself. He would have offered Vikarathe some, except he was so huge it wouldn't have done much to help. Plus Paul only had so

much for him, and he didn't want to try and teach the Caretakers how to make copies. The sooner he and his new best friend could get to the other Neofan the better.

Especially their allies.



It took a while longer to get to another portal than he liked, for Vikarathe couldn't run anywhere near as fast as he could fly, but after they went through to a position near where the mech unit was operating, the Neofan called a Caretaker transport unit. After a short wait they were flying at speed inside the cabin, both sitting and resting while Vikarathe continued to eat. His wound was refilling fast, as was his strength. His used Essence was not, and would take weeks to replenish, but he had so much stored up that he wasn't anywhere near depletion and was planning to enter combat alongside Paul as soon as they reached the next target.

They didn't speak much. The warlord had already called ahead now that he was in range of interactive battlemap access, warning the fleet so they could get word to their Neofan allies, as well as getting a marker for Vikarathe. Paul had spent enough time in his head to know he was legit working with them and not a plant, but the others wouldn't know him from the other Neofan unless he had a battlemap marker. Granted, he was huge, but he wasn't the only Neofan that big and Paul didn't want to take the chance of friendly fire, so a dropship had been sent down with equipment and another was enroute with a pair of Neofan on their side.

There was one more Neofan working with the mechs, but at the moment they were engaged on the outskirts of a Caretaker anti-naval hangar/factory complex. Paul and Vikarathe were nowhere near it yet, but they could easily see the weaponsfire on the horizon as three of the Empire's warships fired down on it from well up in orbit. It was a distraction, and most of the firepower was not Essence enhanced...for the complex had a shield over it fueled by the Temple wells. They had so much reserve power there was no way three ships were getting through even if they threw everything they had at it. The recharge rate was just too extreme.

But the Caretakers were only as good as their programmers, and the Empire was better than the Neofan or the entire Bond of Resistance combined when it came to strategy. They had the

Reignor's codes, so there was no reason to destroy the facility when they could take control of it. But to do that they had to get inside, so the naval attack was a distraction to pull the swarms of small ships the hangar held up towards the warships and away from the mechs assaulting on the ground.

Those Caretaker ships were 8 times the size of the transport Paul was now in, and were heavily armed with conventional weapons and one Essence beam weapon known as a Ves'gar. It was nothing more than plasma with Essence added, but the Essence altered the plasma into something that was not easy to defend against. Normal shields and armor wouldn't work well against it. Only Essence-infused shields would, and the warships had those, so it was a slugging match up there as the Star Force ships split their fire between the facility and swatting down the attackers that kept coming out of the base by the dozens.

There should have been tens of thousands warehoused underground, and by the look of the debris up there and the pieces falling to ground, a thousand or so had already been spent. A few were hovering over the ground trying to engage the mechs, but as he watched on the battlemap the friendly Neofan with them was actually on top of one of them. The remote attack vehicle had gotten too low to the ground and apparently he'd jumped up to it and was trashing it at melee range...for which the craft had no counterattack. They weren't built for ground ops. Other units were, and those were battling it out with the mechs trying to keep them away from the facility.

But the mechs were a second distraction. The real attack was a group of 8 Saiyans denoted on the battlemap as ghosts. Ghosts didn't interact with the battlemap in order to keep from betraying their locations, but they were denoted by the zone in which they were supposed to be active. These would have special armor with cloaking devices, but no Petricite. They needed their Essence abilities to defeat a number of secondary sensors designed to pick up invisible enemies...which was odd for a place designed to use Essence in everything, but he thought the Neofan always wanted an ace up their sleeve, so the Temple was designed to stop lower and

mid-level Essence users from going certain places, but it would not be able to stop *them*.

Sure, they had command codes and priority in the programming, but they didn't want to have to rely on that. And now, since the Empire had caught up somewhat in the Essence skills, combined with their other abilities, they were able to do a lot of things the Vargemma couldn't. Things the Vargemma would never conceive of.

Not all Saiyans could use Essence, but these 8 could and could use it well. However, the best way to break into a place was when that place was distracted and doing something else. Paul had no vision on the interior of the complex, for no units were inside that were transmitting, but so far no Truven-allied Neofan were here and engaged in combat. If there were, the ghosted units would not engage them. Vargemma maybe, but not the Neofan, and on the battlemap he could see other Caretaker transports heading into the region, and they were most likely containing Vargemma to assist in the defense and aid the few already on the perimeter trying to hit the mechs from the flanks.

"Can you disable the Vargemma?" Paul asked into the silence.

"Is there a reason you don't want them dead?"

"Call it professional courtesy."

"Is there a functional reason?"

"The lightside is so natural to me that sounds like a dumb question, so I have to remind myself that to others the power of the lightside is damn near invisible until it smacks you in the face. It's not about a functional reason, though there are some. It's about respecting other people's right to live, no matter how primitive they are."

"Even your enemies?"

"Mercy is a luxury of the dominant. Are you not dominant over the Vargemma?"

Vikarathe huffed. "We keep them alive as a power source for the Temples, but I see your point and rather like it. Do you kill in any of your wars?"

“Yes. But if eliminating a threat via killing gives us one accomplishment point, eliminating it via capture gives us two.”

“And if you eliminate a threat by turning them into an ally?” Vikarathe said, referencing himself.

“Ten.”

“Then I need to earn 20 in the coming battle.”

“Capturing drones doesn’t give you bonuses. They’re not alive.”

“Do you have people to collect the disabled Vargemma?”

“Not worth it right now. But remember, these Vargemma view the Neofan as their gods. And they’ll follow a god that spares them over a god that kills them when it suits them.”

“I thought you said this Temple was being left to Star Force after the fighting is over. We won’t be here for them to serve.”

“Not now, but never underestimate the ability of the lightside to create allies for battles in the far future you don’t expect to happen.”

“Has that happened to you?”

“All the time. It’s kind of our calling card. Word spreads out from those we spare, and those travelers that encounter them spread stories further. Some mistake it as weakness, but a lot of unwanted fights are avoided because people understand...or at least hope...that we can be talked to without taking off their heads. I doubt the Neofan are seen in that way.”

“I have no idea how we are seen by others, nor do we care.”

“Shortsighted.”

“Why should the dominant care?”

“Because it affects the playing field. Not all fights are physical, and we intend to be good at fighting in multiple ways.”

“That’s either the delusions of the young or some aspect of dominance I have not discovered yet.”

“The second one,” Paul noted as they were getting close to their drop off point. “So don’t kill anyone unless absolutely necessary.”

“Agreed. Do you want the machines preserved as well?”

“No. Break as many as you like. Pretty soon they’ll be under our control. Until then, we need to be a distraction. Others are going

inside quietly. They're already there, most likely."

"So you're trying to repurpose the machines? Why? They won't attack the other Neofan."

"We don't have enough Essence capable troops to contain the Vargemma on the ground, and our ships capable of defending themselves against such an attack are our first wave. We need these attack craft neutralized and repurposed to screen other incoming ships. Once your fleet is neutralized and the anti-orbital batteries are taken down, we can start reclaiming the Temple."

"Should we not be dealing with the other Neofan first?"

"We can multi-task. As for the Vargemma ahead, let's give them a lesson in who's superior. It may help afterwards, because we control the Temples from overhead and don't mix with the Vargemma much. They're too dangerous to turn your back on, so we're more like friendly jailers to most of the population. Friendly, rarely seen jailers."

"And they disobeyed your orders when we came back."

"Yeah, though I don't totally blame them. How many did you guys kill when they refused to betray us?"

"I didn't concern myself with it. I have no idea other than there was conflict between the Vargemma and a significant portion killed each other. Your loyalists lost."

"Being the good guys doesn't always mean you win," Paul said regretfully.

"I wonder if Truven would have attacked at all if we weren't compromised."

"Would he have betrayed Plausious for other reasons?"

"If Plausious was truly out of alignment he would have been exiled, not killed."

"You're going to have to get rid of that alignment thing now. Plausious has already suspended it, I believe."

Vikarathe stared at Paul for a moment. "I'm not sure that's wise."

"We're already dealing with insane Neofan. How much worse can it get?"

"You have an odd way of looking at things," he said as a particularly big blast impacted the shields over the facility ahead,

lighting up the sky for several seconds in all directions. When it ended, it appeared to be night in comparison despite the fact it was a sunny day.

“It’ll take you time to learn. Just remember, we can’t save the other Neofan if we kill them. So don’t fall into old habits.”

“My mind is no longer corrupted. I will not act stupidly.”

“Good,” Paul said as he stood up and walked to the opening hatch as the transport came to a stop and landed on the outskirts of the battle next to a dropship. “Let’s neutralize the defenses before we meet your friends.”

They both exited, with the Caretaker unit immediately being retasked automatically. It didn’t have any weapons, so there was nothing the complex could use it for against the attackers, so when its priority task was completed it simply flew off elsewhere as Paul walked into the unoccupied dropship and started grabbing gear.

“Here, put this on your crown. It’ll mark you in our targeting systems as an ally,” Paul said, tossing him the device. “It won’t interfere with your tech or mind.”

Vikarathe didn’t object and put it on straight away, with it having to expand a bit to fit the size of his head. It interfaced with his mind directly, keeping separate from his own armor’s system and not threatening to interfere with them. He immediately gained a map of the area, along with indicators for all the units in play, their identities, current status, and various targets that had been tagged.

“Go,” he told Paul. “Don’t wait for me.”

“Mercy is the luxury of the dominant,” the warlord reminded him. “And when we’re the attacker, we’re always the dominant one. We don’t pick fights we can’t win.”

“You were confident of your victory over me before you engaged?”

“If I thought it would be even, I would have waited for backup. But I wasn’t worried too much, because all I had to do was break free and fly away. With my armor, you couldn’t have held me in place.”

“So you only force a fight if you know you can win if you don’t have the option of retreat?”

“Yes. If we have to kill them to win, and had the option of not attacking, then their deaths are our failure. If we get into a situation greater than we anticipated, then it’s a failure in our analysis or a failure in caution. But if we do get in a position where we’re going to die, we don’t hold back. If we’re dominant, we won’t let it fall apart that far.”

“I can handle these Vargemma in my sleep,” Vikarathe promised. “I won’t need to kill them to eliminate them as a threat.”

“Let the mechs handle the facility defenses. You could do it quicker since they won’t attack you, but we’re the distraction. Just peel the Vargemma off the mechs. They’re starting to chew up their armor and if they get through they can take them down. Priority targets are marked for you.”

A slew of the enemy indicators altered as the Furyan updated the map with specific targets for Vikarathe, while he noticed the other marker for the lone Neofan fighting alongside the Star Force units.

“Go and free my brother’s mind. They are all a potential threat until you do.”

“Going,” Paul said, flying off into a distant spec as Vikarathe began running across the sand dunes, using his Essence to enhance his muscular strength and gain speed as well as leaping across several sections that were tricky. When he took a moment to gather himself, the Neofan could leap over 120 meters. More if the ground wasn’t so soft, so he traveled in spurts of running and jumping across the desert towards the firefight ahead as the walking machines that were larger than Vikarathe fired on the hangar/factory’s shield wall that was a vertical invisible barrier until struck. Where it was, circular shimmers appeared, becoming more crystalline with increasing damage until they would momentarily break and let weaponsfire through.

But give them a moment and they’d quickly regenerate and go invisible as they regained full defensive power. Point overloading them was the only way to get through, and the shields were designed so you couldn’t take the whole thing down with one overwhelming attack.

Vikarathe saw two points on the physical wall the shields were protecting had already been damaged, having been heavy

weapon nodes firing on the mechs. There were more still in play, but those two had already been trashed and the mechs appeared to be migrating slightly into the dead zone that created.

It wasn't free of all fire, but was lesser enough to spare the mechs' own shields some extra hits. The Vargemma were wisely not standing between the mechs and the facility. Instead they were spread out and trying to get through the widely spaced mechs and attack them from the flanks or from behind...but most of their techniques were Essence only and absorbed into the Petricite armor. The shields the mechs were creating to protect themselves from the facility's defensive fire were outside that perimeter, however, and could be taken down by the Essence attacks.

So the Vargemma were trying to peel the shields off the mechs so the defenders, including those in the air and the smaller number of caretaker units hovering along the ground, could attack the armor directly. If they punched a hole in it, then the Vargemma could rip the mechs apart at the point of penetration.

But some of the Vargemma had their own techniques that were being Essence enhanced, similar to Vikarathe's Deconstruction ability, which allowed him to tear apart the molecular structure of objects he touched. He could literally press his hand into a stone wall and slowly peel it apart as the energy-intensive ability turned the rock into sand and gas, making it look like he was hitting it with a blow torch as it blasted away from where he touched it.

He could do the same thing to a body much easier, and could enhance that with Essence to make it even more destructive and more efficient...but because he had a physical ability to do it, he could pattern an Essence attack off the natural ability with ease. Creating a Fruc'zo was very tricky to do if you didn't have something to mimic, and most Neofan had the Deconstruction ability, so even a novice could produce a Fruc'zo off it.

None of the Vargemma possessed a Deconstruction ability. If they had entered the Temple with one, they would have eventually been identified and had it quietly removed in some manner, for it was extremely dangerous and could bypass many forms of security when you could just force your way through just about any solid object... like walls. So the few Vargemma ahead that could produce a Fruc'zo



were doing it entirely with Essence...and the Petricite armor on the mechs would completely negate it. But if there was even a tiny scratch all the way through to the machine beneath, a Fruc'zo delivered to that spot would disintegrate the material beneath and blow out like a bomb.

But there were other means of disintegration. Put enough heat into something and the outer layers would disintegrate. Grinding something down was technically disintegration as well, and some of the Vargemma were tagged with base abilities that could damage at range in a similar manner. Those the Petricite would not stop, and those Vargemma were nipping away at the legs of several of the mechs.

Vikarathe could see which mechs and how much armor they had remaining at various points on their hulls, with it decreasing in real time whenever those Vargemma or the facility defenses hit the armor itself with something that was non-Essence. The Neofan planned out his attack as he ran, bypassing the closest two mechs and the Vargemma nearby who were helpless until a breach was formed. Both mechs were bipedal and mimicked the bodies of the Humans who piloted them. They were tagged as 'Neos' on the battlemap, but they had no heads on them, which appeared a little odd, but they moved around as if they were giants in armor rather than walking battle tanks.

The furthest one out in the rectangular formation sprinted sideways when the Vargemma suddenly had to worry about Vikarathe passing through them and what he might do, allowing the Neo to get close enough to one to stomp on him. The quadruped Vargemma couldn't move that fast to begin with, especially not without Essence enhancement, but it seemed he could jump as well as Vikarathe. When the mech got close the Vargemma panicked, not seeing it coming soon enough, and leapt into the air just as the foot was coming down.

But it wasn't aimed at him, rather the sand just short of him. It wasn't going to hit to begin with, but that wasn't the point. Before the giant metal foot even hit, the lower leg pulsed with energy and threw it out in a 210 degree arc, hitting everything within 82 meters with enough stun energy to knock out a Neofan, and with the Vargemma

being much smaller that range only increased. The jumping Vargemma got away and landed...or rather crashed...into the sand, burying its head and probably going to suffocate to death.

Vikarathe suddenly found a flaw in the Star Force attack plans, at least on sand, because if you went face down into it then the people Paul was trying to save were going to die anyway. He almost doubled back to pull the Vargemma out, but his well-trained predator instincts kept him focused on his targets ahead.

Fortunately for the Vargemma the mech walked over and used a short-range tractor beam to yank him out and drop him face up back into the sand even as it kept firing on the facility and a few stun blasts at the Vargemma nearby that kept blocking them with Essence shields.

So Star Force wasn't so sloppy after all. Though he didn't care about the Vargemma, he did appreciate combat efficiency.

He put that pathetic Vargemma out of his mind as he sprinted past a different mech towards another jumper, but this one was a biped/quadruped hybrid. Its hind legs were bent, and it rested on its front legs when standing, but could raise them up as arms whenever needed. It couldn't jump fast enough to defeat the targeting sensors on the mechs, so it was having to block them with Essence shields, but it was able to maneuver around to stay far enough away from the mechs that their short range attacks couldn't hit...for they had more than stun weaponry on the mechs.

He saw a mech in the back line of the formation that had reverse-canted legs, a horizontal body, and two big boxes suspended over it like ears. The battlemat tagged it a 'Madcat' and it was much less agile than the Neos. Those less agile mechs were the focus of the enhanced targets that Vikarathe was headed towards, and a spot on the right leg of this one had almost all the armor peeled off it by an energy weapon the little dehydrated amphibian was firing out of a cavity in its mouth.

And it was hitting, because it was firing Essence attacks along with others nearby at the leg to peel the shields off that spot. The energy attack wasn't very big, but it was repetitive and slowly grinding down the Petricite. As soon as it got through they'd switch to Fruc'zo or something lesser to target the breach in the armor and

take out the leg, but the pilot was occasionally dipping the arm down to cover the leg when he could, extending the battle duration as it fired concussive energy blasts off of points on the underbody and sides, which were obviously meant to peel off infantry attempting this kind of attack.

Meanwhile the boxes up top were firing off glowing missiles by the dozens in an arc over the other mechs and hitting the upper edge of the facility's perimeter shield without going so high to hit the much stronger top one that was being pummeled by the warships overhead. Some of those blasts were actually coming down near the mechs and being stopped over their heads, forcing the facility to spread out its defensive matrix rather than concentrating it in the center where most of the warships' fire was located.

If those shields failed, that firepower would come down on top of Vikarathe or close enough to get caught up in the blast zones if the warships didn't have precise accuracy. He knew better than to assume otherwise, but if one of those shots landed on him without him seeing it coming, it could kill him in a single shot. With a split second of warning he could shield himself from one, but not an unlimited amount. Warships could kill Neofan infantry, which was why they never fought on the ground without a guarantee of anti-orbital cover. It was pointless to survive a million years only to get taken out in one shot, and despite the large number of Neofan still surviving the fall of their galaxy, it was unacceptable to waste a single one of them on such foolishness.

Which was why there were no Truven-loyal Neofan defending this facility. Vargemma they could send to their deaths, but they wouldn't waste Neofan...at least they wouldn't before this madness had overtaken them. But it hadn't gone so far for them to send any here into harm's way, at least as far as Star Force knew. If there was one in the facility, they hadn't found evidence of it yet, but Vikarathe doubted it. This facility wasn't of much use in the defense of the Temple given the warfleet overhead, but it was valuable for securing the local region, and the Vargemma had enough warships of Temple manufacture to fight with that could cause massive problems if they weren't already engaged against the invading forces. One could pop up out of a hidden location and fire an artificially produced Fruc'zo

that would disintegrate another entire warship if it wasn't properly defended.

The small ships produced and hangered here didn't have that kind of weaponry, but they could intercept ships that did and make them waste firepower, or even take them down if they operated in swarms. But more important than that, the Vargemma knew that these ships could decimate their cities if they misbehaved, and even just having them flying overhead would stop a lot of the resistance to Star Force reoccupying this Temple.

There were millions of facilities across the Temple that were 'useful' in the long term, but right now there weren't that many essential to fighting the Neofan here if Star Force really had Reignor-level codes. But if the Truven allies had also been given them, they could override the overrides from afar indefinitely, playing a tug of war for the massive armies of Caretaker units the Temple provided. Getting here in person and applying the codes locally was the only way to permanently take control of them...assuming no Truven Neofan got here in person to undo it.

Vikarathe saw Paul's icon on the map get to the Neofan and meet up with him, then the two of them retreated behind the mech line as Vikarathe went in on the amphibian Vargemma, choosing to run rather than jump the last bit. He was seen and the amphibian warned, but when it jumped away from both him and the mech, the Neofan reached out a hand, and from it he extended a column of Essence connected to his body. As it reached out he altered it in a well-practiced manner, giving it new properties as he wished. In this case he made it liquid, hitting the amphibian and flowing it around him as he was flying through the air towards the ground.

Before he hit Vikarathe turned the 'liquid' into a 'solid,' trapping the amphibian in a cage that it tried to dissolve with its own Essence techniques...but it didn't do so fast enough, and the Neofan ran up into close range of it, jerking it towards him as he punched forward. The Vargemma and his fist met, with him releasing the solid Essence just in time to prevent it from interfering with his blow.

The head of the Vargemma snapped under the pressure, and it flopped to the ground unmoving.

Vikarathe grimaced. He'd hit it harder than he thought.

As three different Essence attacks came in at him from other Vargemma and were absorbed by his layered Essence shields, he knelt over the small amphibian and grabbed its neck. He twisted it back into alignment, cracking bones that were out of place in the process. When it was about where it had originally been, he poured pure Essence into the Vargemma body near the wounds and made a slight alteration to the flow.

The tissues in the amphibian twisted and reformed in a manner that was not under Vikarathe's control, and the magic of Essence repaired it in ways he didn't care to concern himself with. He only knew that when applying a healing flow, it would repair damage and return them to what they had previously been if there was enough mass there. And since he hadn't cut off the head, everything was more or less present, and as long as the amphibian's Core hadn't detached and left the body, healing it was rather easy.

A large snap resulted as the spine reattached and then firmed up. He felt the amphibian finish healing and begin to wake up, so he stopped the Essence flow and used his telekinesis to render it unconscious along with a mental message for him when it woke up instructing it how grateful it should be that he took the time to keep its treasonous self alive, as well as to instruct it that Star Force had dominion in this Temple upon his wishes, and that this Vargemma was honor bound to obey them.

That should be enough to prevent this one from being a threat in the future, but Vikarathe couldn't be sure. Constants in the universe had been destroyed back before his home galaxy of Utovi had fallen, and since then the fraying had gotten exponentially worse. At this point he couldn't trust his judgement on the future, but since Paul wished them to live, and had chosen not to kill Vikarathe when he had the chance, he was going to honor his wish and preserve them for future use.

But for all he knew, this one could betray them the moment it woke up. But that wouldn't be until long after this battle was over.

His duty with this one done, Vikarathe leapt away and headed for the Vargemma around him who dared to strike a Neofan. He'd deal with them before going after one of the more dangerous ones to the mechs, who were doing well enough on their own right

now. This impudence could not be tolerated. They were already engaging another Neofan here rather than standing down or assisting them.

A lesson had to be dealt, even if it was a non-lethal one. And broken bones other than the spine would have to suffice...

Paul had pulled the Neofan Mek'lar out of the fighting and took him behind the mech formation and far enough away from the Vargemma to get them some privacy. Mek'lar already knew about the Mev due to their shared battlemap updates with the Empire, as did the rest of Plausious's Neofan here, most of which were still fighting the dwindling naval battles that were going their way, but the idea that the 'taint' of the Truvenus might also be in them had them very concerned, so Paul got no argument from Mek'lar as the Neofan opened up his mind and waited to see what the Archon found.

And it was there...but tiny. Barely a spec, it didn't seem to be interfering with Mek'lar's thought process. Paul had him test that area of his brain, with the Neofan channeling thoughts that required those cells to properly function, but there was no interference. The Mev was just sitting there, attached, but doing nothing.

It didn't take Paul long to get the Neofan's outflow to burn it free, but when he reported the news into the battlemap and it spread across the Temple in the following minutes between the ships with comms strong enough to send it that far, their worry was confirmed and amplified.

"Can I become tainted again?" Mek'lar asked, his mind still open with Paul feeling his insecurity.

"I don't know," he admitted. "But we'll find out."

"We cannot sense this energy. We're completely helpless without the technology to build a sensor. Will you give us one?"

"I don't have one to give. I'm using my natural ability, and I'm the only one here that has it. The others in our Empire that do are far less skilled than me. In time we may be able to develop a sensor, but it's not going to help us here."

“You must scan us all, repeatedly, to make sure we are not re-infected by the others.”

“Your Mev wasn’t active, and I don’t know why. It could be time-delayed. It might also be tied into your mental growth so it doesn’t alter you too fast. Your own measurements of mental fitness would alert you to a sudden change, would they not?”

“Our aura silhouette would detect any change, no matter how fast or slow.”

“Did it?” Paul pressed.

Mek’lar thought for a moment as the orbital fire on the facility’s shield continued to sound like an odd waterfall in the distance.

“The silhouette would have to be flawed, or the sensors programmed to give a false reading in order to hide such a thing.”

“What if the silhouette was altered slowly over time?”

“No. It has not been updated in my lifetime. We all know it well, for we fear what we will become if we venture beyond...” he cut off suddenly, looking directly down at Paul from his 11 foot height. “This Mev could be programmed to act inside the silhouette. Or the silhouette could have been programmed for this very purpose long ago. How long can this Mev last inside us?”

“I think indefinitely.”

The Neofan’s armored fists balled up in an uncharacteristic rage that would have pushed his aura temporarily outside the boundaries of the silhouette, and Paul felt him not caring for the first time in his life.

“Plausious said the aura restrictions were flawed. We could have been implanted with these long before Utovi’s Gateways were breached. A conditional self-destruct if we ever veered out of alignment with the T’fen you spoke of. And because we can’t sense the Mev, we could not destroy it...or can we cause that surge ourselves another way?” he asked with a glimmer of hope.

“On purpose, no. But as a side effect of other actions, it’s possible.”

“What actions would be necessary?”

Paul thought for a moment, for he’d never had this discussion with Azoro before. “Excessive healing might cause enough of a shift.

Sick or damaged cells produce less Saiolum. Extreme health or the regeneration of sick or damaged cells would produce a small surge. If the Mev adjusts to the level of a sick person, then is caught offguard by a sudden recovery...it's not much of a difference, and I doubt it'd be enough, but there is a little wiggle room there."

"It is the change then, not the actual amount of flow that destroys the Mev?"

"No, it's the outflow. The cells it's actually attached to have to be the ones to remove it. If I tried to remove it with my flow, a sabotage protocol would probably be enacted that would kill you."

"So the affected cells, if they were damaged then healed, could dislodge it?"

"It can move from cells to other cells if it senses a safe haven."

"Is it alive?"

"I don't think so. Just smart technology that I don't understand yet."

"Does it have to cling to cells to exist?"

"The same way we breathe. But I don't know if it can hold its breath for a while or not. This is new to me, and I don't have much more than guesses at this point."

"But you're convinced this is the work of the T'fen?"

"Probably one of their servants that can use Saiolum. The T'fen shouldn't be able to since their bodies don't produce it...then again they are technology so maybe they learned how. Either way, I'm certain this is your punishment for exceeding their rules in addition to Utovi being destroyed."

"Rules that only the Ruling Houses knew of," Mek'lar said, talking mostly to himself as he reviewed his long past. "We brought this on ourselves for our disobedience. We were right to destroy them, but now I wonder why each subsequent House continued their mistake."

"Maybe you don't like being given orders. How many Ruling Houses have been destroyed for failure?"

"Seven over the course of our existence past the Junla'no'pen. We don't kill our own except when they refuse to step down, and each House refused to relinquish control."



“Has that ever worked?” Paul asked as the return fire from the facility against the mechs ceased, followed soon by new icons popping up inside designating the Saiyans that had just taken control and reprogrammed all the automated defenses, including the local Caretakers that were now streaming out of the facility in far greater number than before and heading off to other locations in the Temple under new orders.

“Twice it preserved the ruling House for a time, but eventually they were taken down.”

“Yet now you’re killing each other all the time. How does that not violate your aura rules?”

“If the Diem is no longer enforcing it, few scans will take place.”

“Then they know they’re corrupt rather than being misled by the Mev?”

“Can it only mislead?”

“I’ve only seen it active in Vikarathe, and it was suppressing his ability to reason in certain ways, not imputing new thoughts. Maybe it has that ability, but I didn’t observe it.”

“We know too little, but thanks to you we are now aware of the sabotage. If our silhouette has been compromised, then I fear we will disintegrate without it. Plausious is adamant that the lightside will bind us together, but he gives no rules to follow. How does your Empire operate without rules?”

“Good men don’t need rules,” Paul quoted the well-known cliché. “Rules are for the young, the inexperienced, and the untrustworthy. We do have rules for them, but only as guidelines until they mature to the point where they can follow their conscience.”

“We have no conscience.”

“Oh no?” Paul said, pressing into his mind and telepathically asking for more access. Mek’lar allowed him to roam where he wanted, which was insanely unusual for a Neofan, but these were desperate times when their very sanity was at risk.

The warlord dove through a massive amount of brain, not just in size, but in density and complexity. The brain cells were actually a little more advanced than Paul’s own, but the basic structure was

more or less the same as all other brains in the galaxy. They were biological 'technology' built around one purpose.

They were a metaphorical 'steering wheel' for a person to operate. And because of that, there was a similarity between them all, including the conscience...which technically didn't exist in the brain, but in a person's Core. Yet a piece of the brain was allocated to interact with the conscience, which was another term for your sense of right and wrong. Not your sense of rule following, or the expectations of your society, though many people mixed those up. No, the conscience was your moral compass, and as such, it didn't obey rules. Rules were limited, and no matter how well you crafted them you would always come up on some unforeseen situation where the rules would tell you to do something wrong assuming it was right.

The conscience felt out the truth like a compass feeling out where north was. It wasn't a calculation. It was a sensor. And a piece of the brain was allocated to operate that sensor.

That piece had to be developed the same way your muscles did...with training and experience. And if one taught oneself to ignore it, it wouldn't get practice other than to numb up and shut it out. The piece of your Core that was responsible for it would keep 'broadcasting,' but if the piece of your brain that was meant to receive it refused to, you could think your conscience was gone, when in truth it was just buried and blocked.

But it was still there, and always would be, which was odd given how everything else in the universe was tilted towards the darkside.

Then again, if the conscience pointed to the lightside, it also showed you which way the darkside was as well. Maybe it was just that Paul was loyal to the lightside that he used in conscience for that. Maybe darksiders used it to avoid the lightside and seek out the immoral for whatever reason.

That sounded more like the universe to Paul, but in his experience dealing with the myriad of races and individuals across this galaxy that he had come into contact with, people either followed their conscience towards the lightside in full or part, or they ignored

it. He'd never come across those that sought out the darkside without some reason attached to it.

Predators didn't kill and eat their victims because they found it fun, their instincts told them to do it and they followed that direction. Doing it over and over again, they developed a program in their mind to block out their conscience while doing so, which was why the young often didn't kill without their parents teaching them to. Their conscience and their instincts were at odds with one another, for a while, but once they made a choice over and over again it became a habit, which was a small program developed in the brain.

Paul had never seen someone do horrific things with their conscience unblocked. So maybe it really was just a morality sensor that people ignored on purpose or accident, and as he dug through the Neofan's brain he found just that. A tiny, tiny portion dedicated to it, far underdeveloped, and chock full of blocks rather than programming to enhance the skill of following that innate sense.

"You do have one and it's located in your Core," Paul said, which he couldn't sense with his Petricite armor blocking his Essence, and Essence was the only means to detect a person's Core directly, though there were a lot of indirect methods available, but you couldn't use those to 'see' it, only see its influence like noticing a person's footprints in the ground without seeing the person make them.

"But here," Paul said, highlighting the portion of Mek'lar's mind so he could look inside himself, and the Neofan were much more skilled at doing so than any race in Star Force, so if Paul could teach him what he needed to do, he could probably dig it out on his own over time, "is the spot that should be developed to operate it. Yours has not been used much, except to disable the sense. Now look at mine."

Paul opened up a piece of his own mind, but only a piece. He guided the Neofan's mind there like a spotlight following a speeder in the dark. Once he got him there, Mek'lav was amazed at how large it was, not to mention the density of the cells. Unused brain cells were mundane and weak, and only with upgrading through experience did they 'poki-evolve' into more powerful forms. The same happened in muscle cells, increasing the power of a single cell rather than just

adding more of them, but inside a brain with a limited amount of volume within a skull to expand, the cells had to get *better* rather than bigger, and they did this by redesigning their interior and making themselves denser by developing upgrades.

Paul's cells, while base inferior to those of a Neofan, had upgrades so much in this area that they were far superior in construction to Mek'lar's, and he didn't miss the significance of this.

"We've ignored it," the Neofan said, realizing they were grossly inferior in this small area of their brains. "And it has atrophied in us while it has flourished in you. This is how you maintain a cohesive Empire without a silhouette?"

"Not all in our Empire are lightside, but the leadership is, and we set some rules for those who are not. Without the lightside, our Empire would never have existed. It began as lightside rather than converting later during our expansion."

"You self-align to this conscience?"

"Yes."

"How do you confirm it in others?"

"Through their actions. It becomes pretty obvious once you get skilled in it, but when you're young it's a very obtuse sense that only seems to yell at you at certain times. It takes a lot of work to refine it down into a reliable sensor, just as it takes us a long time to learn to walk when we're young. We have to learn how to use our muscles, as well as developing those muscles. How long does it take you guys to learn to walk?"

"A long time as well. Nearly 20 days. Some races can walk minutes after birth, and that has always annoyed me, but not as much as this obvious inferiority. Our silhouette says development of this region is a sign of insanity, for it encourages disobedience."

"The lightside is always disobedient, always a rebel. You have to embrace this, and learn the strength necessary to turn against your entire civilization if need be in order to follow the lightside. Going along with the group is not a merit if the group is misled or just plain lost. You must become a one many army to truly be lightside, and that is the true definition of strength. Our Empire takes individuals such as this, and adds to their strength with loyalty and teamwork...but that loyalty and teamwork is never more

important than our alignment with the lightside. We are individuals first, teammates second.”

“As are we, for the silhouette must be maintained by us and us alone, but we derive our purpose from our civilization.”

“Our purpose is the lightside, and our civilization is a more effective means of adhering to it and allowing others to do so as well, for the universe opposes it at every turn, and many are denied the chance to live lightside. If they try, they will be killed before they can truly embrace it.”

“As we have been forced into exile or choosing death if we deviate from the silhouette beyond redemption. Then this is why Plausious was deemed tainted. He grew this conscience that we never knew existed.”

“Possibly. Or maybe the Diem just lied to get rid of him.”

“It seems we have much to learn from your Empire. If you can help us save ours, we shall forever be indebted to you.”

“Lightside helps lightside without debts,” Paul said as another Star Force dropship moved in on his position coming from elsewhere in the Temple with two more Neofan onboard. “You can’t switch sides immediately, but all actions are immediate. You develop your lightside sense and skills by acting lightside in the moment the same way you develop your physical skills. Learn to do it once, then do it again and again. The more you do, the better you get at it.”

“How do I begin?”

“Logic helps to structure your mind, but run whatever logical conclusions you have through that tiny portion of your mind for verification. If it doesn’t check out, rerun your logic until you figure it out.”

“And the Mev prevents us from running those checks?”

“Yeah, and probably a lot more,” he said as the dropship landed and two Neofan ran out and over towards them, obviously eager to get whatever potential taint they had within them detected and removed.

“Do you require me further?” Mek’lar asked.

Paul did a quick check making sure the Mev was indeed gone. “No. You’re clear now.”

“Then I will help subdue the remaining Vargemma,” he said with a slight head bow, then ran off back towards the fight just before the other two Neofan got to Paul and he began scanning them.

Both had Mevs in them, and both were small or tiny. One was slightly larger than the other, but each were apparently inactive.

And at this point, the hope of any of Plausious’s Neofan being untainted was diminishing rapidly.

# 19

12 days later Paul and Vikarathe were sitting in a Star Force dropship flying across the Temple landscape enroute to a vertical access shaft that led down into the subsurface levels. Alongside them were 4 Golden Knights, each Human, but they were the size of Paul and the other Furyans. One biological technology the Empire had was size enlargement or size decrease. Decrease was far harder, but doable. Size increase allowed individuals to grow in size, with what nowadays were referred to as 'Pages' being Humans grown larger up to the 7 to 8 foot height range.

It was old technology, and the Pages were Commandos dedicated to hand to hand combat. They were all weapons trained in ranged combat, but they specialized in owning the melee realm, and to do that they needed extra muscle and extra size. Not so much to slow them down, and they trained hard year after year to be as fast as smaller opponents...if not faster.

The Pages had once been called 'Knights' before that label was transferred to even larger individuals, in most cases. Now the Knights were entire races dedicated to fighting the battles of others and going beyond the safe worlds in the Empire to seek out the toughest of fights. Those races were mostly those formerly called Dinosaurs, who had split off from their brothers in the V'kit'no'sat.

It was the V'kit'no'sat who had once owned Earth and brought Humans there as their slaves...then abandoned it during a civil war. Some of the Humans had accidentally been left behind when the planet was evacuated of survivors as the V'kit'no'sat empire shrunk. Those Humans then broke a rule that carried the death sentence.

They were forbidden to reproduce.

What had happened back then was a mystery lost to time, but the Humans had been known as Zen'zat, and were not common laborers. They were an elite race of slaves genetically elevated from a much more pathetic race of breeding stock known as Ter'nat.

When an individual Ter'nat proved themselves worthy, they were altered into a Zen'zat and entered the service of the V'kit'no'sat.

Because they carried these upgrades in their genetics, they were not allowed to reproduce and 'gift' them to someone who hadn't earned them. Part of the genetic upgrade had been size enhancement, so when Star Force had come into being in the 21<sup>st</sup> century after the discovery of lost tech buried in Antarctica, they'd inherited the size enhancement technology and it had been a part of the Empire ever since.

Paul had never used it. Nor had the other Archons. It was for the Pages only. Paul had increased in size during his Furyan transformation, and it hadn't been planned. Morgan had actually chose to use the size decrease to go back to her original size, but the rest of the Trailblazers had decided to keep the larger size and adapt to it. Otherwise the Pages would have dwarfed them.

Pages that chose to be in service to the Knight races were then elevated into 'Esquires' and worked with the larger Dinosaurs to do things that were hard for the mostly giant individuals to do. It was an old pairing, and when the Empire had eventually absorbed the beaten and battered remains of the V'kit'no'sat Empire, they'd kept the arrangement because it worked well, and to this day the portion of the Empire still called the V'kit'no'sat had those Dinosaurs paired up with Zen'zat as they served as a defensive element protecting the Empire from threats originating in the Core of the galaxy and holding territory while the Knight races went beyond the borders as an expeditionary wing of the Empire.

The Golden Knights were a carryover from the old Empire, being amongst the oldest of the original Humans that had taken the size enhancements and dedicated themselves to being melee specialists. They had formed a special unit, originally called Arc Knights, that were given special psionics to increase their combat potential. That unit had then morphed into the Golden Knights when the Saiyan transformation was offered to the few who had earned it. The Golden Knights were the only people in the Empire other than Archons and the non-Human Mavericks to become Saiyans, and when the term 'Knight' was transferred to entire races, the combat



superiority of this group was so great they were allowed to retain it due to their past record.

The Golden Knights were led by a man called Vermaire, but to Paul he was still the Black Knight, and was slightly older than him and the other trailblazers. He'd been assigned to be a terror to them in their basic training using his enhanced size and black armor that never allowed them to see his face. He was a nightmare to them, but that was the point. They needed to learn how to lose in training so when it happened in combat later on they wouldn't break. The Black Knight gave them painful opportunities to learn how to mitigate losses and sometimes turn them to your partial advantage.

And they'd needed that skill badly when the V'kit'no'sat Empire had returned to Earth and tried to destroy all of Humanity due to their violation of the reproduction ban.

That was all ancient history, but the Golden Knights sitting next to him had lived back then and survived through it. They were all trained by Vermaire personally, which was why they'd been allowed to join the initial wave of this Temple invasion. They didn't have Essence powers, and their psionics were limited in number compared to the Archons, but where the Archons had to train in a wide variety of skills, these Golden Knights were specialists. Melee combat was all they did, and because of that they could hold their own against Archons, if not beat them.

Vermaire, to this day, was a threat to the trailblazers, despite the fact that they were now his size. And he didn't allow weaklings into the Golden Knights. They were all handpicked, and new recruits were rare...as were their losses. Like Archons, they rarely lost a fight, let alone were killed in combat. And paired with Petricite armor, they were a formidable threat to the Neofan.

Vermaire wasn't here, but some of his Golden Knights were as others were assaulting different Temples and probably helping secure the highest targets prior to the second wave arriving. For this Temple that had occurred 2 days ago as more ships arrived through the portals after word was sent back that the Neofan fleet had been completely defeated. Only when the way was completely clear and every Neofan ship had been captured or destroyed would ships be

allowed inside that did not have anti-Essence shields...and in those ships came a Reclaimer along with an army of Varkemma.

The Varkemma were those Vargemma who had pledged and proved their loyalty to the Empire, then were taken out of the Temples to fight against the Hadarak in the center of the galaxy. Some were coming back now to help secure this Temple's key facilities that were too numerous for the Saiyans to hold. The Reclaimer was a rare position in the Empire, and was tasked with annexing an external force or race into the Empire, and while this Temple had previously belonged to them, anyone loyal to Star Force had probably been killed here, so the denizens were expected to be hostile and foreign, thus a Reclaimer had been assigned to deal with the re-annexation.

With them had also came a single Tyrannosaur ship bringing Essence-capable troops...though their Essence skills were not that formidable compared to the Vargemma, which was why they hadn't been included in the first wave. But what they lacked in experience they partially made up for in size, and with them being bigger than the Vargemma races, that meant they had more potential Essence to weaponize.

The Tyrannosaurs were literally the size of mechs, and in addition to Essence skills they carried their own psionics and were escorted by Esquires in armor like Paul's nanite set, but not Petricite. The second wave didn't have it, but they did have Materia that could produce Essence shielding, so they weren't helpless against a one shot attack from the Vargemma, but if their reserve Essence stores ran out they'd be exposed, unlike the Petricite that never ran out of power because it didn't use any.

After the last Neofan ship had been disabled and captured, Paul and Vikarathe had traveled up to the allied one and helped clear the crew of the Mev...and they all had it. Every single one, but none were very advanced. Then he'd gone over, with Vikarathe acting as a close bodyguard, to deal with the captured crews and to clear them...or at least those that had survived. Battle damage hadn't killed any of them, but they'd killed each other for varying reasons. More than 20% of them had been corpses upon arrival, and

only a few had been revivable. The rest had already separated their Cores from their bodies, so there was no one left to revive.

While they had been up there in the damaged ships and processing the Neofan, the cities on the ground that were the obvious next targets went berserk with killings. Neofan began to flee out of them, scattering out across the landscape and getting to portals or Caretaker ships in order to get as far away as possible. Whether they were fleeing the incoming Empire forces or getting away from their own murderous people he didn't know, but those cities were now basically empty and other Saiyans and Neofan had already taken control of them, without a fight in most cases.

Paul had spent his time releasing the Neofan from the Mev, and many of them were far more encumbered than Vikarathe had been. Very few were hostile afterwards, but they were still treated as prisoners for the time being and relocated to a large scale containment facility that the second wave was currently building in an unoccupied portion of the Temple far from the Vargemma. As they added buildings to the prefab ones brought in early, more cleansed Neofan would be transferred there, but right now Paul and the other Saiyans were out hunting the fleers.

Some had left the Temple, but most were still here and some of their locations were known. Others were not, even with using the Temple's surveillance system to look for them. They knew how to hide and hunting them down could take years, if not decades, but some had gone to the control centers themselves, trying to sabotage the invasion as much as possible.

Paul and Vikarathe were headed to one of those that had been identified as the refuge of some 6 Neofan. It was a ship of its own swimming about in the magma layer and well away from the weaponsfire of the fleet. And if not for the Reignor's codes, it would still be floating around there randomly instead of docked with a subterranean port. Apparently the Neofan there had not been those entrusted with them, otherwise they could have overridden the remote commands. Because they could not, the command centers for each region of the Temple were now moving to ports where the Empire's troops could get to them.

A pair of Saiyans were already there, but they knew better than to try and take 6 Neofan on their own, so they'd called for support and Paul had dispatched himself away from cleansing duty for the moment. With Vikarathe refusing to go anywhere Paul didn't go, and with the assistance of the 4 Golden Knights, he was confident they could take them down without incident...unless they tried to destroy the command center and bring the molten lava in on them.

That wouldn't be an immediate death sentence given their armor and shields, but it wasn't something he wanted to deal with, so he hoped they fought it out without getting creative...or maybe with Vikarathe showing up they might just surrender.

But he wasn't counting on it.

Grand Admiral Temmerus had already sent out courier ships to the other Temples under assault to inform them of their progress here and Paul's revelations regarding the Mev, and he expected more Neofan showing up here to get cleansed within the month. But for right now there was fighting to be done and millions of Neofan strays to round up. His people were trying to block the outgoing portals, but someone here still had the Reignor's codes and were overriding them, allowing Neofan to leave the Temple. Until they found that individual or individuals, they couldn't close off their exits, and there were so many it was impossible to blockade them all, but those Caretakers under their command were monitoring the areas and alerting them when some tried to get through. A few of those had Saiyans arrive in time to stop them as the Reignor code battle was played out in real time overriding overrides to delay those from getting out.

It wasn't perfect, but some were being caught. The rest that had just chosen to hide out there, and with the Temple being the size of thousands of planets, the Reclaimer was probably going to be dealing with them for a very long time. Right now though, they couldn't let them possess the command centers, for each center had code priority second only to a Reignor for the region in which it was stationed, and they were deliberately located in the magma layer to keep them away and out of the hands of any curious Vargemma that might discover their locations.

Not to mention the Caretakers, including magma riding defense units, would kill any Vargemma that tried to access them. These facilities were unknown to the Vargemma and all others except the Neofan and the other Temple builders...and to the Empire who had obtained the full blueprints through a variety of means prior to Reignor Plausious giving them a plethora of information, most of which they already had, but not all.

The anti-orbital Essence weapons were now all disabled, so the command centers couldn't fire them, but there were a lot of smaller weapon systems that could be used, and were being used by these command centers already to target the few Empire units that came within range, forcing them to destroy the weapons and take some fire in the process. There was no hope of victory for these Neofan, they just wanted to cause as much damage and havoc as possible...or maybe there was some grand scheme in play, but Paul doubted it. This was vindictive, and the limited mental capacity of these individuals due to the Mev told him they were being encouraged to destroy others and themselves...just not to the point of suicide unless that suicide could take down an enemy with them.

The Mev, he was quickly learning, was designed to not be detected. Every action it wanted the Neofan to do, it did not try to command, but rather block off contrary thoughts. And it appeared to be doing so slowly, so that no behavior changes could be detected. It would appear to be the natural actions of those afflicted over the course of centuries, if not millennia, and Paul bet that those who were more inclined to this sort of bad behavior had seen their Mev grow faster, while those aligned with Plausious were essentially not compatible with the Mev's programming, so it's hold on them was taking longer or maybe wasn't possible at all.

Paul suspected they would still be overcome eventually, or the Mev in others would cause them to kill those that didn't convert. Either way, it was a very nasty sabotage of a race, and one done so with plausible deniability. Or maybe it was just done as a sense of irony, making your disobedient servants destroy themselves without you ever showing up for them to see.

But it was ending here, and Paul was getting good enough to cleanse multiple Neofan simultaneously...but not in combat. He

wanted to cleanse the 6 ahead, but he needed them to be still and himself to be still in order to work, but he was getting better at it, and maybe long into the future he would be able to do it on the fly, but not today.

He was sitting in the windowless hold of the dropship when a massive explosion sent a blue/green hue up into the sky some 819 miles away. It wasn't a single blast, but a firehose of destruction that Paul saw via his battlemat as an alert pinged, but with no surface fire detected to have caused it.

"Sabotage," Vikarathe said before anyone could respond.

"Is that a guess?" Paul asked.

"No," the Neofan said, getting different information from the Temple via his status. "An energy pod construction facility reactor has overloaded due to override commands on the containment procedures. It was ordered to explode."

"Source?"

"Only local or command center input could do it."

"Not the Reignor's codes from afar?"

"Not for hazardous commands. Only Neofan can input such things, and unless one of us committed suicide, it was the command center that triggered the overload."

"They couldn't hit the button and run away?"

"Not with this type of overload. It's not a lapse, but a deliberate redirection that triggers an uncontrollable reaction within 4 seconds."

"Likely purpose?"

"Vengeance."

"Even when it will be automatically rebuilt?"

"They are not sane," the Neofan said simply as another explosion was noted 381 miles away, this one inside a Vargemma city.

"Shit," Paul said, getting on the comm to the two Saiyans waiting for them ahead. "Is there any way you can get in there or delay them?"

"Trying..." a strained voice replied.

"Max speed," he told the pilot, with the dropship accelerating past the incineration point, with the shields dragging on the

atmosphere so much that the air caught on fire behind them in a glowing tail as the shield strength levels slowly dipped as the drain exceeded the recharge rate.

Paul checked the battlemat across the Temple, not seeing any other explosions yet, but the initial casualty guesses for the city were in excess of 8 million, though the source hadn't been identified yet.

"How much more can they destroy in this region?"

"Anything with a landline fed reactor," Vikarathe said gravely, with Paul knowing that meant thousands of locations.

"Why not all at once?"

"It requires manual input. They can only do them one at a time," he said as another location 2,742 miles away blew as the other two were still spewing energy and debris into the air like fountains that would continue to exist until all the reserve fuel was expended...which would be minutes to hours depending on the size.

"Sorry, Paul," Lorra-381993 said, sending a tactical display from her helmet that showed the connecting hallway that docked to the command center with two different holes in it on either side and lava flowing in through both, filling the passageway even as the Saiyans were drawing off heat to freeze it solid and plug the holes... only to have them repunctured by the Essence techniques of the Neofan on the other side of the doors. "We can't get there on our own."

"Telepathy?"

"Can't even scratch them."

"Are they still docked?"

"They're not trying to destroy the tunnel yet, only block it."

"Pull out now...and run," Paul said as he contacted the fleet with a thought and selected a single ship, ordering it to immediately come to their location. It would take 22 minutes to get here, which was 7 minutes faster than their dropship would take to get there, but that wasn't the point.

"I can get us in," Vikarathe said as another explosion 792 miles away lit up the sky with another pyre of blue/green fire.

"Not fast enough," Paul said regretfully. "But as long as they're docked we know where they are. Can you direct all

weaponized Caretakers away from the area?”

Vikarathe’s expression was blank for a moment as he mentally accessed the Temple systems through his own armor interface, then his eyes focused again on Paul. “They haven’t been overridden, so yes.”

“Get them moving away in a straight line and tell them not to stop until they hit the outer boundary control limits.”

“Done.”

Paul nodded, then sat silent as they continued to approach at breakneck speed.

“What are you planning?” the Neofan asked.

“We’re not taking them alive,” he said as another explosion in a second city killed hundreds of thousands more and vaporized part of a nearby lake in the process...

An *Avenger*-class warship that had been in the area raced across the void inside the Temple on a straight line, not following the subtle curve as it came to Paul’s designated coordinates. The knifelike profile of the ship dove into the atmosphere at the last moment, splitting it in a fire trail as it got within the artificial gravity zone and braked hard against it, eventually coming to a stop over top an innocuous stretch of forest and tipping over until it pointed straight down.

It didn’t ram the ground, but instead fired a ruby red beam down into it. It exploded slightly on impact, not designed to detonate like a bomb but as a cutting beam. Vaporized material shot up around it in a funnel that blanketed the ship’s shields as it spread out into a gigantic dust cloud that became bloody red as the intense light from the beam became the only thing visible through the haze.

The beam itself was from a *Materia*, which was a standard weapon designed to use *Essence* to enhance it in some way, increasing the power exponentially in addition to providing other attributes. This particular weapon was designed to penetrate shields and armor at a small point rather than widespread destruction, and it worked just as well on dirt and rock as it bored a hole down to the magma layer, passing through level after level of the Caretaker



region underground, destroying not just the conduit it bored, but blowing out through the tunnels and chambers there in all directions.

No one alive was down there, just machines...or should be, unless some Vargemma had managed to penetrate security lines and get in there. The few Star Force survivors from when the Neofan had invaded this Temple had already contacted the fleet for pickup, so there shouldn't be any of them hiding out down there. Just machines and clockwork.

The beam didn't get through it all fast, more like a linear chainsaw digging down and down and down. The Neofan had to see it coming. Paul just hoped they couldn't use their Essence skills to break the dock locks on the command center and move it out of the way before the beam got down to it.

It took nearly two minutes to hit the magma layer, and when it did the vaporized rock didn't stop the liquid rock around it from flowing back into the gap, making the penetration of the beam much slower as it had to constantly fight the flow...but it couldn't totally stop the progression, and eventually it got down to the designated depth that Paul had indicated.

When the beam went lower, the ship automatically stopped firing so it wouldn't go all the way through the outer hull of the Temple and into space, and when it stopped the magma immediately began flowing into the breach and filling it, rising up into the Caretaker levels and flooding them out until it became too cool and solidified, blocking the tunnels off from the flow and sealing itself before Caretaker units could be dispatched to the area to begin making repairs.

Paul waited to see if more explosions kept popping up across the region as the warship held position silently waiting for further orders.

"Pick up the Archons," he told the pilot as they got near the location, still a fireball in the air as they had not slowed down yet.

"The command center is no longer responding to interface pings," Vikarathe said. "You have destroyed it."

"I want you to check from the surface just in case one of them managed to survive down there. If they did, I don't want them slowly dying entombed."

“You should warn the rest of your people.”

“No need. They’ve already figured it out.”

“How do you know?”

“My battlemat interface is superior to yours. You can see local stuff, but I can see everything across the Temple that the warships are transmitting. Assault teams have been dispatched to all the command centers, whether they appear to have Neofan in them or not. Is there a way for them to override the Reignor’s codes manually?”

“Not without tearing out a lot of equipment, and doing so would eliminate their ability to send orders. But if they have the Reignor’s codes, they will be difficult to locate.”

“Let’s hope those Neofan ran for the exits.”

“To go where? I assume all the Temples are under assault simultaneously?”

“They are. But would they know that?”

“An alert would be transmitted shortly after an invasion. Not all Neofan would be informed, but all the Temples would be alerted. The Diem and Truven would know they had nowhere to run to.”

“Does anyone else have the codes?”

“I do not know. Technically, the Diem should not possess them, but this Mev has corrupted us so far I can no longer predict their actions.”

“Would they leave the galaxy?”

“This is their base of power. They would not be welcome in Yenoiv. House Atriark is in exile here, by their own choice. They have little more than an embassy in the home galaxy.”

“What about the Bond of Resistance holdings in the intergalactic transit system?”

“A normal House would never flee there, for they would have no standing, no powerbase. Typically a Neofan House will stand their ground to their deaths rather than accept exile.”

“There’s no other option? No loss of face to join another House?”

“Our Houses are ancient and expansive. We always have places to retreat to. The House Atriark embassies on the Zotav, Jeeno, and Vwen are outposts only. House Atriark’s powerbase is

here, in these Temples. I came here to assist them, as did others. This is not a fight of one House against another, but Atriark will not be allowed to relocate, and if they attempt to do so, they will come under attack. That would happen even before the Mev. House Atriark chose their path, and it is in this galaxy. Another, other than exile, will not be granted to them...except what your Empire will offer. You are their only hope, and their Diem will not take your help willingly. They must hold in one of the Temples. If one of your invasions is not successful, they will flee there. If all are successful, they have nowhere to go. I would look for them to cause more damage here than flee elsewhere. The sooner we can get you to them, the better for everyone involved."

"Alright," Paul said, turning to look at the Golden Knights. "If we pick up any life signs we dig them out, if not we go to the nearest command center. The other Neofan are going to have to wait until we lock them all down."

"If they position them far from a dock," one of the other Petricite-armored warriors asked, "how long will they be undetected before it can be overridden and ordered to one?"

"I think maximum time is around 20 hours."

"And what if they destroy the propulsion so it can't return?"

Paul winced. Why didn't he think of that?

"The command centers," Vikarathe answered, "do not have the ability to remain in the magma forever without resupply. Destroying the propulsion would maroon them, and automated recovery units would be dispatched to tow them to a dock where repairs could be made."

"Can they override that tow?" the Golden Knight asked.

"No. The command center programming won't allow itself to reach depletion. They would have to rewrite the control systems, and they don't have the technology to do that. But if they possess the Reignor's codes they can override anything. There are no safety protocols that supersede them."

Paul looked at Vikarathe. "Is there anywhere other than the command centers the Truven leadership might flee to inside the Temple?"

“If they are attempting to survive by hiding, it could be anywhere. If they intend to cause damage, they could try to release the stored Essence to deny it to you. The Vargemma are currently defending those locations, and most will obey them even if they attempt such sacrilege.”

“Sacrilege?” another Golden Knight asked.

“For the Vargemma it is sacrilege to tamper with the Temple’s Essence wells, and they would be immediately marked for termination by the Temple if they attempted to do so. They might disobey an order from the Neofan, but I do not think they would interfere if we came to do it ourselves. They could also start construction of a ship, or claim one nearly finished and try to flee with it. As long as your fleet is here they cannot use it to assert control, but it would give them the Essence reserves to flee into exile in another galaxy if they wished. There are many ways for them to cause problems here. Finding and capturing them as soon as possible is essential to your control of this Temple.”

“Working on it,” Paul said as the dropship came up on the warship still hanging in the air above the bore site, though it had pivoted back into a horizontal position waiting further orders. It’d be taking the dropship to another region shortly, for the warship could travel much faster and, as Vikarathe had said, time was critical to head off more sabotage.

But when they got close and the dropship came in low to the ground near a vertical shaft where the two Saiyans had emerged, Paul saw Vikarathe stiffen.

“There are two still alive,” he said firmly.

Paul popped off his helmet so he could use his Essence vision and directed his eyes in the direction of the warship that was marking the position in the distance some 30 miles away. He couldn’t see anything passively, so he let out a pulse with most of it absorbing into his armor, but since he emitted it from his head enough got out to travel ahead and down, and when it hit he got hundreds of little reflections coming from the people onboard the warship...as well as two below the surface.

“Open the rear hatch,” he told the pilot as he contacted the two Saiyans remotely and told them to fly up to them, “and pick them

up without stopping.”

Paul began taking off the rest of his armor. “We’ll need Essence to get down there,” he told the Golden Knights, and they also began taking off their Petricite with two of them throwing a glance at the Neofan, but since he was working with Paul they didn’t make an issue of their vulnerability.

“Keep it on,” Vikarathe said.

“We need to get to them as fast as possible,” Paul said, pausing as he held the pieces of his armor suspended in the air around him. “And we can’t do that without Essence enhancement. Boring through rock or lava isn’t that easy, but we can as a group.”

“That won’t be necessary. Get me to the surface near them.”

Paul didn’t argue, flying his Petricite back into place and clicking it together over the course of two seconds as he manually picked up his helmet and slid it on as the two Saiyans appeared in the open air behind the moving dropship. One at a time they flew into the ample cargo bay and landed, passing through the atmospheric shield that kept the winds from whipping inside with them.

“Two survivors,” Paul said, looking at a sizeable potmark in Brian-189934’s left shoulder plate. “Buried in lava by now. We’re going to try and pull them out, then we’re going to the other command centers and locking them all down.”

“Better to go through the bore hole. It’s a mess the other way,” Lorra noted.

“Agreed,” he said, then they rode silently until the dropship came to a hover nearby the deep hole that was exuding a thin stream of smoke up into the debris cloud that had risen well above the surface by the hot air currents it had created, making a pancake-shaped cloud that was continuing to spread out around the warship that was stuck in the middle of it.

Paul jumped out and flew to the edge, with Vikarathe dropped behind him and staying put as the Golden Knights and the two Saiyans followed Paul to the rim of the 19 meter wide shaft that was half full of cooling lava, but that still left a good fall down through it to get to that level. The rocky crust of the Temple was rigid enough that it wasn’t putting enough pressure on the lava to shoot it all the

way to the surface, but there were still going to be a few miles of it to push their way through unless Vikarathe had another idea.

Paul felt a battlemeld prompt from Lorra, and accepted the quasi-telepathic link. It didn't actually use his telepathic tissue, but rather a different psionic that automatically transmitted his thoughts and sensory input to the other, giving them a linked mind that was very useful in combat when they could see out of two sets of eyes and other senses, as well as time their attacks to hit together as they coordinated naturally, as if they were one person in two bodies.

Battlemeld prompts spread through the other five, with all 7 of them linking together into one mental framework, enhancing their power immensely from a coordination standpoint, but also enabling other psionics that were only accessible in battlemeld pairing.

"What's the plan?" Paul asked Vikarathe.

"Witness true Essence power," he said, raising one hand above him and pointing it at the sky but not directly at the hovering dropship that had climbed a bit higher as the pilot waited for orders. Vikarathe's other hand pointed down towards the ground as he held the pose.

Paul couldn't see what he was doing with Essence, for his helmet was blocking it, but all of a sudden there was a pop of displaced air above him and two Neofan appeared, dropping to the ground and landing hard.

The Archon's eyes went wide for a moment, trying to figure out what he'd done, then he saw one of the Neofan began to slowly stand up but only made it to a knee before he coughed out blood and Paul saw his right arm was almost completely gone with only a burned stump remaining partly below his shoulder.

The other Neofan was worse, with burns all over his body having eaten out chunks of his flesh, but his skeleton appeared intact.

"*Be still,*" Vikarathe told them as the battlemeld linked Humans spread out around the perimeter, not attacking, but still on guard, as Paul realized the warning about keeping the Petricite on was because Vikarathe feared they might still attack despite the rescue.

But neither was in a state to do so, and the big Neofan walked up to the one laying on the ground and grabbed him by the prominences that had most of the armor on them destroyed, yanking him onto his feet in a decidedly unfriendly gesture, then he laid a hand on his exposed and half-scarred chest, pulsing Essence into him and visibly healing his wounds without replacing the missing parts, for the Neofan didn't have the body mass elsewhere to cannibalize to rebuild them.

That Neofan did manage to regain full consciousness, but he couldn't stand with so many leg muscles missing, so Vikarathe telekinetically floated him a foot off the ground in an upright position as he placed a hand on the other one, stopping the internal bleeding and returning him to good enough health that he could be a threat to the Humans, but a stern telepathic conversation Paul was not part of indicated that such behavior would not be allowed.

That Neofan almost disobeyed, but Vikarathe's overbearing presence kept any attack from happening as he kept both of them together, making sure their bodies didn't die from lack of Essence, with one of them being very near the depletion point. Then again, if they hadn't used it amply in a reflexive defense, they would already have been dead with the others.

*Paul, cleanse them now if you are able,* he told the Furyan telepathically. *They cannot be trusted.*

Paul signaled the group to release the battlemeld, for they weren't going to need it, and his mind returned to only his senses... which he focused on the two injured Neofan as he began pulsing Saiolum into them in order to get their bodies glowing enough to burn the Mev away.

But it wasn't working well. Their bodies being strained from almost dying, were not producing much Saiolum. It took a long time at lower intensity levels for the Mev to burn out, so much so that Vikarathe inquired as to the problem, but Paul was eventually able to get both cleansed, though they were clearly wracked in pain and not in a mindset to do much self-reflection at the moment.

*"You are now prisoners,"* Vikarathe said aloud. *"Reignor Plausious will ultimately decide what becomes of you. Do not attempt them harm or my generosity will cease."*

“How did you do that?” Paul asked him as both captured Neofan behaved as pain-ridden zombies not sure where they were or what they were supposed to do. The Mev in both of them had been more extensive than any of the others he’d cleansed, which had shut down significant sections of their minds that were now active again...assuming they didn’t have brain damage from their injuries that was working against them in other ways.

“I was able to speak to them and get them to transition into the Essence realm. I then pulled them up beyond the rock and told them when it was safe to revert. They could not escape on their own without creating momentum prior to entry into the Essence realm. I had to provide the movement.”

“You reached into the Essence realm while still in this one and pulled them through it?”

“Yes.”

“I have no idea how to do that.”

“You’re still young,” Vikarathe scoffed, reminding him of the fact that, despite Paul defeating him in battle, the Neofan were far superior in experience and Essence power than Star Force.

“I’m surprised they survived,” Lorra commented as the one of them still floated beside Vikarathe, looking around with glazed eyes that indicated he was there but not right in the head at the moment.

“Do we want them on the warship or waiting for another ride?”

“How dangerous are they now?” Paul asked Vikarathe, with the Neofan responding by rendering both unconscious with nothing more than a visible glance.

“Do not send your pilot alone with them, but you may transport them to the holding facility without fear of them dying. I have repaired them enough for the transfer.”

“Get them on the dropship. We’ll have the warship deliver them after we get to the next command center. I’ll need you two to stay with them, just in case.”

“Guess we are the weaklings,” Brian said, glancing at Lorra.

“Have fun storming the castle,” she told Paul as the dropship landed next to them and Vikarathe telekinetically picked up both Neofan and floated them inside.



“How bad were they?” he asked Paul as the dropship sealed up then flew to the warship’s opening hangar bay.

“Worse than the others. Have you known any Neofan to die from unknown causes? Or do you exile them if they suffer early brain damage?”

“You think it could be fatal on its own?”

“If it can shut down certain brain cells, that seems obvious. It would also ensure no survivors if you started killing each other and ended up the last man standing.”

“I have not known of excessive exiling, but I have also not known of erratic behavior until recently, so few if any would have progressed to that point previously.”

“I have a theory that it might spread faster in some than others depending on their inclination to do and not do certain things. Those that were already corrupt in some fashion would have the Mev expand into the already unused areas of the brain and lock them down so they couldn’t backtrack. That would not create a detectable behavioral alteration.”

“That would create a schism.”

“I’m not certain, but there’s definitely something different happening and I don’t think it’s date of exposure...though I have no idea how that exposure happens. I think if you resist its objectives, the Mev won’t progress as fast.”

“What objectives would I have been acclimated to?”

“I don’t know you well enough to guess.”

“You had full access to mind.”

“I didn’t have much time to look around,” Paul deflected as they got inside the warship and Paul sent orders for them to make max speed again, with the view outside the closing bay doors turning into a fireball as they raced up through the atmosphere to get back into space as fast as possible. “But I can tell you’re worried about it happening again.”

“Should I not be?”

“I would be.”

“Yet I remain helpless to defend myself against it.”

“You can create an automated analysis program that will check your brain status and alert you if part of it goes dormant. The

Mev can't affect technology. I'm sure of that."

"I can't do that here...but as long as I'm with you I don't have to. I will later. It is a wise suggestion, and will keep me from imagining taint where there is none."

"If your civilization's silhouette didn't encourage apathy, the Mev would never have been able to hide its effects from you. Though I also suspect it's what kept you alive so long, for without a silhouette at all I would have expected the Mev to be designed to work much faster. They probably had to tailor it to your civilization to go unnoticed."

"What is the point when we cannot sense Saiolum?"

"To make it look like you were not afflicted at all."

"Why would an enemy care?"

"Reasons don't always have to be logical."

"But reasons there must be."

"All I have are guesses. Until recently I didn't even know the T'fen existed, let alone what their reasons are."

"Assuming it's not someone else," Lorra added.

"It is hard enough to accept that we are so inferior," Vikarathe admitted, "that we could be undermined from within, by an attack invisible to our senses, by an unknown foe. To conceive that there might be two such powers operating within the Bond of Resistance territory completely unknown to us with a power and knowledge beyond ours...is even more terrifying."

"We got used to it early," Lorra offered. "So when we discovered you guys and others older and more powerful than us, it was just the same old, same old. We adapt, we learn, and if we survive long enough we will outscale you."

"Why?"

"Because we embrace training...and we've gotten damn good at it."

"So you claim to be unbeatable over the long term?"

"Sort of," she said without further explanation, so Paul jumped in.

"We crave challenges, so along with the fear we have of superior threats coming our way, the more powerful they are the faster we adapt to them, because our training effect increases when

we have a superior rival to mimic. It's slowest when we're dominant and we have to discover new levels through self-discovery...but we do that by habit. So for the Neofan, when you sit and stagnate in your dominance, we are always rising, may it be slow or fast, and we have yet to encounter anyone who adapts as quickly."

"Outside of certain hive minds," Brian added.

"We proved ourselves superior over the long term," Paul reminded him. "New birth adaptation has its advantages, but it's no match for experienced, long trained individuals."

"Until the minds of those individuals are afflicted by an invisible taint," Vikarathe amended.

"The universe doesn't play fair...and neither have you guys. How many of your own people did you abandon in Utovi, not to mention your slaves?"

"It was impossible to move everyone across galaxies."

"Yet you left people in an unwinnable situation, much like you find yourself in now. When you experience it, you find out the speculation of the past doesn't match reality. Or am I wrong?"

"You believe we should have stayed and fought it out instead of fleeing?"

"We would have done both."

"Utovi is lost whether we stayed or not."

"The more impossible the situation, the greater the challenge. And the greater the challenge, the more bonus points for saving even one person out of it."

Vikarathe stared at Paul for a long moment, then circulated his eye line across the other Star Force personnel in the dropship.

"You see dire circumstances as an opportunity?"

"Yes, we do."

"And what if you die trying when you could have conserved your strength for another fight another day?"

"Life is risk. We learn to embrace it without becoming stupid. It's a subtle skill, but one you cannot learn without throwing yourself into bad situations and fighting your way out of them."

"We're taught to send in those of lesser value to probe a situation before we risk ourselves."

“And then you lose those individuals, depriving your civilization of their strength and potential future strength. We send our strongest out first so they have the highest chance of surviving while we keep our weakest in safety so they can train into greater strength.”

“Do you lose many of your strong doing this?”

“Not if you’re dominant. And in doing so we get additional combat experience that further strengthens us. We come to desire action, and grow restless without it. We actually prefer combat to training.”

“Because it offers greater advancement?”

“It offers unique lessons, but our advancement is slowed with combat when we take damage that wouldn’t happen in training. No, we prefer combat because it’s something worth doing. We can put points in the game total, but no points are gained in training. Do you understand?”

“You can’t build your empire in training, but can accomplish real gains in combat?”

“Incomplete, but correct.”

“And you saving me and other Neofan helps build your empire further?”

“Never underestimate the value of friends.”

“Yet you can’t trust them,” Vikarathe said, pointing to the unconscious pair of Neofan.

“Not today, no. Maybe later.”

“And if they end up being a waste of effort?”

“We succeeded in giving them an additional opportunity that the universe would not have on its own. Whether they choose to use it or not is up to them.”

“Why do you care about giving enemies opportunities?”

“It’s something you can’t logically analyze in full until you can feel your way through it. When you develop those conscience cells further, you’ll begin to understand. But for now, let’s just say we don’t like feeling helpless, and we don’t want anyone else to be in that same unwinnable circumstance...so we offer them a path out. It might be an insanely difficult path, but it’s a path none the less.”

“You seek to make the universe more fair?”

“I suppose we do.”

“A futile attempt on the large scale, but in my case the point is taken. I will not waste the opportunity if I can stay free of this taint. I can make no promises for them.”

Paul glanced over at the two Neofan, seeing the ravaged legs of the one that had new skin covering them, but were obviously missing a lot of muscle beneath it. “They’ll get their chance at redemption.”

“Would you offer it if you did not have your special armor?”

“Not as often. Mercy is a luxury of the dominant, and we don’t trade our people’s lives to save others. We risk them, but we don’t trade them.”

“Then I am glad you have it. I just hope no one else discovers the secret of it. It’s incredibly frustrating to fight. Without it, you would have lost many more Temples.”

“You’re not wrong, but there are other ways to fight you guys. Just not as good as this,” he said, tapping on the outer layer of armor he wore as they flew through the vacuum of space at high speed enroute to their next battle.

# 20

Paul spent the next 7 weeks going from lead to lead, tracking down Neofan wherever they popped up. Two more command centers were used to cause damage prior to being taken, though none of the Neofan survived the encounters. Neither did those command centers, but construction of replacements began automatically, as did reconstruction of everything across the Temple except that which the Reignor's codes were used to disable, and the stuff the Vargemma had built themselves.

Most of the Neofan left now were actively hiding, and even with the surveillance infrastructure in the Temple it was not easy to find them. The Neofan knew how to disable it locally, and as such could secure food and supplies and move on before their presence was noted. Those with Essence techniques that could produce camouflage were hardly ever taken, and so it was the weakest Neofan that were now being rounded up and put in with the bravest that had been fought and captured in the first 3 weeks of the war.

A review of outgoing portal records indicated that about 1/8th of the population had fled, with them going to a variety of locations... including some Star Force Temples that apparently they thought they could hide out in without the Empire noticing. And in truth they hadn't noticed them arriving, because they entered through the small ones, but now there were Saiyan teams following every trail from here out to where they went in the other Temples.

And at least for those they now had a list. For this Temple, there was no way to be sure how many Neofan were still here, for most has arrived by ship and not individual transport. The Neofan computer files in their cities had been destroyed along with everything else of value before it could be taken. After that the Neofan either killed each other or ran, with a large number of bodies...or pieces of bodies...found scattered around their cities. And who knew how many more had been disintegrated.

No members of the Diem were found, nor any other high ranking individuals. Either they had fled, died, or were still hiding out

here. Then again, this wasn't the House Atriark capitol, so maybe none had been stationed here.

Word from the other Temple invasions made its way to Paul in bits and pieces as couriers arrived. All had been relatively successful, but there had been a few Saiyan casualties when they got caught in ambushes. The fleet had lost ships, but none of the crew had been killed thanks to the redundant nature of the hull design that essentially had a hull within a hull to protect the crew areas even when the rest of the ship was trashed.

None of his brothers and sisters had died, thankfully, but none of the Saiyans could be replaced. He'd hoped this invasion could have occurred with a clean slate, but that wasn't to be. The Neofan were just too damn strong, and while the Petricite could protect against Essence-only attacks, the other applications they had were apparently enough to get through...save for the one reactor overload that had caught Klea-300289 when she was pursuing a lone Neofan across the countryside and into an automated facility. It detonated immediately after they were both inside, and it hadn't been an override from a command center. The actual cause of the detonation was unknown, but it was guessed that it had to have been preplanned...which meant the Neofan had to have led her there on purpose to kill her along with himself.

The false Reignor Truven had been captured, as of the last update, but there was no mention of the Diem being found in any of the Temples. Paul had personally met every living Neofan that had been captured here, along with their allies, and had cleansed them all, and he could attest that none of them matched the descriptions of the Diem. What had happened to them was unknown, and he doubted they had been killed by other Neofan or in damage done to the warships.

The Empire was lucky at times, but not that lucky.

So Paul was out playing Sherlock trying to figure out where the remaining Neofan were hiding in this Temple and following a lead of Caretaker interactions in the desert of all places. There wasn't a tree or building out there for the big Neofan to hide behind, but then again, if you had your own cloaking ability, technological or natural, hiding the last place someone would expect to look would be wise.

Except in a place where it was easy to leave footprints visible from space.

If it was one of the few Neofan who could fly, then this would be an extra hard one to catch...which was why Paul had assigned himself to it and let others handle the more obvious leads when a major portal opened up in the horizon not far from his position. It was still tens of thousands of miles away, but the size of it was still visible as the ring imbedded into the surface began to shimmer, and out of it came a *Gjardan*-class dreadnaught.

The white, spherical Neofan ship was the largest they had, and barely fit through the portal. Around the sphere were golden rings that would emanate a type of energy shielding far more robust than anything the Empire had...but it couldn't change the shape of the shields. They were locked into a sphere just outside the hull in the space where those rings passed through. Still, the sight of it was impressive even to Paul, and unless this was a very bad day, that would be a Plausious-allied Neofan ship coming in from one of the other invaded Temples.

He stepped back from the stone-like infrastructure rising out of a tiny corner of the desert that he was interfaced with to track the local Caretaker activity and flew up into the air enough to get clear of the surrounding dunes so he could get a line of sight to a Star Force cargo ship stationed within comms range. Through it he plugged into the battlemap system and queried the identity of that ship, knowing that he'd have more Neofan to cleanse today or tomorrow. He preferred hunting down the rogue Neofan, but cleansing was a job that only he could do and a few smaller ships from other Temples had already arrived for just that reason.

This ship, however, had Reignor Plausious on it, and as Paul was checking a message came through directed to him...with the Reignor wanting to meet with him immediately.

Paul used his comm, knowing the lag time was going to be too annoying for realtime communication, so he just recorded a short message and sent it off to Vikarathe, asking him to join him when he met the Reignor. Now that the major fighting was over, Vikarathe no longer felt the need to be a bodyguard to Paul...at least not after



Paul promised him he wouldn't engage any of the rogue Neofan before letting Vikarathe have a chance to join him.

Unfortunately their hunting had been rather thin lately, and Vikarathe had joined in with other search parties. He was taking the taint of them all personally, and wanted to ensure they were captured before they could kill themselves or the Empire's personnel. And so far, none had achieved either feat when he was involved.

Paul contacted the Reignor asking where he wanted to meet, and was surprised when the Gjardan moved to come to his position. Vikarathe barely made it to him first, coming through a portal on the other side of the stone structure as the massive ship came to a stop just above the atmosphere over Paul's head looking like an ornamental Death Star that could wipe him from the galaxy in a single shot.

And the problem was, it could if it wanted to. There was no way Paul could survive the Essence weaponry on that ship, and a small part of him wanted to point out the unlikely possibility that the gunner's Mev might spontaneously spread and convince him to have an 'oopsie' moment that could not be undone later.

Working with allies required trust, and while Paul didn't have any real fear at the moment, he still registered the danger enough to cause his exposed skin to shift from its slightly blue Furyan hint to a shade of yellow. For whatever reason, his ascension had given him skin that changed color in accordance with his emotions, and whenever he was feeling a bit exposed it had that yellow hue to it..but only barely. He still looked Human, just one who'd been color shifted ever so slightly. Oddly, Neofan skin reacted a similar way, but Vikarathe was showing no worry in his normal gray tint.

"Your armor," Vikarathe said, handing him a packet with the various pieces of Petricite in it as he usually did when they had a target located to hunt, but there shouldn't have been any on the ship aside from some potential prisoners.

"You don't trust the Reignor?" he said, telekinetically grabbing the packet and pulling it apart, flying the various pieces into place on his white-uniformed body as his nanite armor rested only in two gauntlets on his forearms underneath the sleeves.

“He will have others with him. Unless you know them, do not get close to a Neofan without the Petricite.”

“What about you?”

“I know I’m trustworthy, so I’m not concerned as long as I remain untainted.”

Paul did a quick Saiolum check. “You are.”

“But they will not be. You are strong in your Essence skills, but not compared to us. You could be overcome in a moment if you are caught off guard. Do not risk it.”

“Do you want me to get a set made for you?” Paul joked.

“Amusing as that would be, I can already defend myself against them. My subconscious defenses never let down unless I am sleeping...and I rarely sleep.”

“You’ll have to teach me how to do that sometime,” he said as a spec of a smaller ship detached from the Gjardan and began to descend through the atmosphere towards their location.

“After you reach 300,000 years of experience.”

Paul frowned. “I hope that’s a joke.”

“For anyone other than your empire it would be. Most Neofan cannot master the technique, no matter how old they are. You’re not ready, but I expect you will be one day if you devote enough time to it.”

“You think I don’t?”

“I think your time is divided so many ways it’s amazing you make progress at all.”

“I don’t sleep much either,” he said as he got a message from Kip saying he was coming in to join him later in the day and didn’t understand the Reignor’s impatience. And it looked like Plausious was going to get here well before that.

Vikarathe’s face altered as he stared at the descending ship, enough to get Paul’s attention.

“What is it?”

“They have people in Essence cages.”

“Prisoners then?”

“Dangerous ones. Normally it wouldn’t be necessary if the guards are as strong and outnumber them. You can use the Saiolum through the cages?”

“Yes, Essence doesn’t affect it. How many cages are up there?”

“I feel hundreds.”

“That’s a bigger ship than I thought, then,” Paul said, using his armor to zoom in and get a look at it, seeing the familiar Neofan technology but not getting an exact match for the shape in the battlemap records.

“It’s a special build to house them. Plausious must have had better luck than just catching Truven.”

“Are any of them going to be more dangerous than you?”

“Unlikely, but their Essence powers could be similar. If they challenge me I negate them and beat them to death in close combat. House Atriark never cared much for physical skills, but Mutavi makes it a priority at the upper levels. That’s one reason we’re the ruling House and they’re not. They’re a bit lazier than the standard Neofan and prefer diplomacy and guile to accomplish their aims, and when that fails they resort back to raw Essence. Most of them are not warriors, but still dangerous without your Petricite.”

“Alright already, I’m wearing it,” Paul complained as the two waited for the saucer-like ship to land. It didn’t have a sharp corner on it and was just as white as the ship overhead, except this one had silver script inlaid in the hull that was only visible when the sun wasn’t reflecting off it...but with a big shade overhead blocking out the sun, it was easy to see.

“Vessel of the condemned?” Paul asked if he was reading the ornate symbology right.

“It’s a warning that it contains those who are disloyal and therefore dangerous.”

“What has got them so worried? We’ve been dealing with Neofan here without that much concern.”

“They don’t have Petricite, and they don’t know how the Mev transfers. They’re probably worried about it infecting others.”

“I sent word that all of your people here had it.”

“Something has them concerned. The skill level on that ship is higher than I knew House Atriark possessed.”

“You can measure that with a reflection only?”

“I can read more into that reflection than you can. To you it’s a simple glare. To me I can see detail in it.”

“How many guards?”

“More than there are prisoners.”

Paul popped his helmet off and fished a small snack cube out of his pocket...which was hard to get to through the armor. He shoved it in his mouth and chewed as he waited for the ship to land half a mile away from the stone structure behind him. When it did he put his helmet back on and he and Vikarathe began walking towards it as a boarding ramp lowered and a detachment of fully armored golden guards strode out in pairs followed by three cages and then more guards. At last behind them a single Neofan walked at a distance with a winged creature riding on his bare shoulder, for he wore only the standard armor on his hands, prominences, crown, and everything from the waist down, leaving his torso, arms, and face bare as if he didn’t fear the occupants as much as the guards did.

“Is that a Hadarak minion?” Vikarathe asked.

“It’s his closest companion now, gained during his time spent marooned on a Hadarak planet. It goes everywhere with him, even into battle at times.”

“And you are sure he is sane?”

“As far as I know,” Paul said, stopping as the first of the guards came close.

Vikarathe stepped slightly in front of him and to his right, ready to intervene on his behalf if needed as the guards spread out in either direction, forming a mostly straight line in the sand that became four rows thick before the Reignor passed through the center of it, leaving the cages in the back with a few guards remaining behind them.

“Archon Paul,” Plausious said in the Empire’s language, stepping up to the pair and standing somewhere between their two heights as he then glanced up at the larger Neofan. “I do not recognize you.”

“I am Vikarathe of House Mutavi.”

Plausious frowned. “When did House Mutavi arrive in this galaxy?”

“We have not. I came along with a few others from the Zotaves,” he said, referencing the handful of transit stations around the perimeter of the galaxy that led into the intergalactic transit system, each of which were a tiny version of a Temple and capable of housing millions of people, “when Truven requested aid against Star Force. I encountered Paul in combat and he was able to clear me of the Mev. Since then I have chosen to be his guard, for there is no one else here who can detect or remove the Taint. And even after it is removed, some of your House continue to fight us.”

“It is far worse where I have come from. Half of us have been killed...half!” he roared so loud the Ren’mak took flight for a moment then resettled on his shoulder. “What does House Mutavi know of this Mev Star Force speaks of?”

“Nothing,” Vikarathe said, seeming unphased by the Reignor’s anger.

“I am told you know of its source. Of a bargain struck to serve an unseen power that House Atriark was never made aware of.”

“We were not made aware of it until we became the Ruling House, and like the others before us, we chose not to burden the rest of us with the knowledge of it.”

“Burden me now, Mutavi. I demand it.”

“He’s clean,” Paul said, interrupting them as he glanced up at Vikarathe, who frowned.

“Are you sure?”

“I just checked twice. All the others have it, but he does not somehow.”

“You scanned me?” Plausious asked, having sensed nothing.

“It’s an energy you can’t detect, and yes, I am now. You have no Mev in you, but they all do. A lot of it. Especially him,” Paul said with a quiver in his voice as he pointed to the rightmost cage.

“How can he be clear?” Vikarathe demanded.

“I have no idea. Maybe he cleared himself somehow.”

“When he was with the Hadarak?”

“The Saiolum is strongest where there is the most life, but if he can’t sense it I don’t know how he could have used it to purge himself.”

“But it’s possible then?” Vikarathe pressed, hopeful for a way to defend himself against the Taint without Paul’s presence.

“I wasn’t told there was a way without actively using the Saiolum,” Paul said without referencing his source material, which had gotten much more complex over the past few weeks as he received more info from Azoro.

“But I no longer have it?” Plausious asked.

“I can’t be sure you ever had it. It leaves no trace after its destruction.”

“Would there be a trace in my memory that I could search for?”

“If you can’t sense Saiolum, all you could see is diminished brain activity. Not damage, just lack of use.”

“Can you clear it from my guards?”

Paul counted them up, then guessed based on the Mev amounts in them how long it would take.

“I can do small groups simultaneously, but not all of them at once. And some are worse than you were,” he said to Vikarathe. “Why are they not attacking you?”

“They have taken my graft,” the Reignor answered. “Their minds are closer in structure to mine than they previously were. They know what I want them to know. What they need to know. They are loyal.”

“Some of their minds are severely encumbered. They must be following your orders reflexively rather than thinking for themselves, thus bypassing the areas of the brain necessary for logic.”

“Are they too tainted for you to cleanse?”

“I’ll have to do them one at a time.”

“What is involved?”

“They’ll feel a little weird, but otherwise they won’t notice it happening unless I screw up.”

“And if you fail?”

“If I attempt to use the wrong technique, the Mev can kill its host before I destroy it. I haven’t failed yet.”

“Show me,” Plausious said, telepathically ordering three of his guards forward, each of which respectfully took a knee bringing

them down to Paul's height or slightly lower, but it was also a rare sign of supplication, for these Neofan knew they had no way to remove the taint except through this alien, and like Vikarathe, they did not appreciate the helplessness that generated in them.

Paul took a few minutes and amped up their Saiolum production using his own, making sure not to attack the Mev itself, but erode its foundations enough that the outflow from the three Neofan burned it out as it desperately tried to cling to them. Azoro had said it couldn't float free in the Saiolum, and it must have a host to draw on their personal generation where it was most concentrated. As to its method of transfer or implantation, Azoro couldn't be sure without inspecting it personally...for Paul's analysis skills were so mundane compared to his it was like a child trying to explain Calculus by saying 'I see numbers and lines.'

"I feel it," one of the Neofan said as Paul finished. "I feel the taint lifting."

"I do not," the one next to him said, worried.

"It is gone from all three of you," the warlord promised. "The affected areas of your minds should now function normally. If you don't typically use them, you won't feel a difference."

"Thank you, Archon," the first Neofan said, bowing deeply before rising and returning to his position in the ranks. The other two imitated the gesture despite not feeling any different.

"That's all there is to it," Paul told the Reignor.

"How many times can you do that until exhaustion?"

"A few hundred per hour at their level, maybe more. The deeper the Mev, the longer it takes. We haven't been catching them very fast here lately, so I haven't had much volume practice, but I am getting better at it."

"I thank you," Plausious said, taking a moment to express his thanks, then his attention turned back to Vikarathe. "You. Tell me what only House Mutavi knows."

"There isn't enough time in the day for that," he scoffed before relenting. "However, you should first know that our Houses are destroying each other in Yenoiv. House Mutavi is trying to become the last House, and the damage done is approaching insanity. The Mev must have them as well. If you can pull together

the remains of your House, then Atriark will be the only intact one remaining over the course of time. Whatever remains of Mutavi will be destroyed by the Hadarak, or forced to flee Yenoiv. Once I am done here I will attempt to collect as many Mutavi as I can and reconstitute the House after they are cleansed, but I doubt there will be many remaining. Though I do not have rulership within my House, you can consider this the closest thing to official transfer of leadership. From now forward, House Atriark is the defacto Ruling House of what remains of our people.”

Plausious did not seem surprised, but the gesture of transfer from Mutavi seemed to shake him as his previous fears were coming to fruition.

“What is the burden I need to bear?”

“We are not free, and have not been free for a very long time. Unnamed masters from beyond Utovi came and murdered many of us long ago. It was erased from our history, for our ancestors acquiesced rather than fight to the death. The masters demanded we serve them or die, so we served them, following their rules and waiting for the rare times when they required our direct service.”

“That I have already been made aware of,” Plausious said evenly. “What else?”

“House Ash’ne decided to defy them and colonize all of Utovi, which was forbidden.”

“Why was it forbidden?”

“We could not expand, only exist in a pre-determined area and wait for when we would be called to fight for them. We could not exert our will on the galaxy, or galaxies. We had to step aside and let the lesser races determine their own fate. It was the price of immortality, and any who refused to follow the rules would be swept aside by the masters to ensure the lesser races could develop naturally. They called it the Natural Order, and insisted it must be protected. We would have been destroyed to protect it, but by putting us in a pen they were thus taking us out of the equation and allowing us to persist past our time. It was a gift, they said. A gift we could not refuse.”

“And House Ash’ne decided to try and reclaim our honor?”



“A failed attempt. Only upon their destruction were their secrets delivered to House Mutavi. Then we had to bear the shame of them and their predecessors. We had hoped leaving Utovi in ruin would exempt us from the masters’ wrath. We had no idea they had already delivered their Taint to us, and that was to be their final eradication...and by our own hands.”

“Do you know that for a fact?”

“They did not make themselves known,” Vikarathe said, leaving it at that. “The Ruling Houses have been searching for ancient relics powerful enough to give us the power to fight back for some time, with limited success. House Ash’ne decided to wait no longer. They were truly fools, and Utovi burns because of them.”

“And now Yenoiv burns because of Mutavi,” Plausious countered.

“And these Temples burn because of Atriark,” Vikarathe shot back. “We have no idea how long the Taint has been in us, how much is its fault or ours. Maybe someone in Mutavi will be able to rid themselves of the Taint as you have, but I am not hopeful. Atriark even now tries to destroy the only ones who can cleanse us, and I doubt they will respond to your orders to stand down. Do you have Truven?” he asked, not seeing him in the three cages.

“He is a shambles, and little more than a puppet of the Diem and others.”

“If he is cleansed, then perhaps his mind would coalesce and he could order the others to come in?”

“We tried that already. His mind is weak, and he took our orders the same as the Diem’s. The others are so far gone they will not even listen to his orders. They are consumed with death and will not obey a call to abstain from it. What else does House Mutavi know that I should?”

“Nothing more important than the cleansing. We should not delay.”

Plausious gestured telepathically and three more Tainted Neofan stepped forward.

“I can handle six of these,” Paul stated, with three more coming in to join the group kneeling before the Archon.

“Tell me, Mutavi. Have you been watching us here?”

“We were the Ruling House. We watch everywhere.”

“How many spies do you have in this galaxy?”

“None to concern yourself with. You were ostracized here, and by the time your prosperity was made aware to us, we did not have the leverage to conscript any spies here. We sent a few of our own into the Temples to observe and leave quietly. We had no insiders that I was aware of.”

“And what was your mission here?”

“I was not assigned here. I came when all Neofan within range were requested to help in your war against Star Force.”

“I did not give that order, Truven did.”

“Which is why I think the Mev has been with us a very long time and only now rising to a culmination. Do not assume you cannot be re-infected.”

“I cannot be sure I ever was. I do not credit all my past mistakes to an unseen Taint.”

“We have all failed, Plausious. Arguing about who was the worst is trivial now. The Endgame is here, and I do not believe the T’fen want us a part of it. Were you told about them?”

“Only recently. What do you know of the Endgame.”

“What I’ve told him,” Paul said, still working on the outflow of the 6 Neofan, one of which had a rather pesky Mev that, while not that expansive, was sticking more than the others. “It’s already happened, and it happened to me. The T’fen and others will know, and they will begin assaulting this galaxy soon attempting to destroy us before we can profit from it.”

“What has occurred?” Plausious demanded, his eyes intense with both curiosity and worry.

“We got a gift, but that gift has to have time to mature to be useful. Until it does, we are vulnerable and targeted. We have to last long enough to buy time for it to later save us. Your prophecies were a bit jumbled. It didn’t have anything to do with the preborn, but the knowledge from the preborn was designed to help guide races towards the Endgame. The more you had, the slightly better odds of you making it there.”

“What did you experience?” Plausious pressed.

“A very long story,” he said, cleansing the last of the 6 Neofan. “Some of which I’m keeping to myself. The rest I’ll fill you in on later. Next group. You guys are clear.”

“Please, I must know,” Plausious said as he selected more Neofan telepathically to step forward.

“The T’fen are at the center of it all. They were once an Endgame themselves. They were the gift, but something went wrong and they destroyed the race that triggered the Endgame. Now they try to stop all Endgames in their infancy. That’s why they will come and attempt to destroy us, and they have acquired a lot of servant races like the Neofan to help them do it. And some, it appears, are not selected for combat, but to watch and report to them. The Denogi are also in their service. Do not tell them anything you do not want the T’fen to know of.”

Plausious took a step back, for the revelations were so intense on top of everything else that it seemed the weight of the universe was going to crush his barely held together psyche after witnessing the deaths of so many Neofan that had otherwise been immortal before this carnage ensued.

“The Denogi are part of the Bond of Resistance,” Plausious said, looking at Vikarathe. “Was not the Bond an attempt to strengthen us against the unseen masters?”

“It was,” he said simply as Paul began another set of cleansings.

“Then we have been manipulated from the very beginning,” the Reignor said, looking down at his hands as he slowly balled them into fists.

“Never again,” Vikarathe promised with a steel in his voice that brought Plausious’s head up.

“Never again,” he echoed, then looking to Paul. “What do you require from us?”

“We need access to the Bond of Resistance’s transit system. It’s the main thing that’s holding us up.”

“Where do you need to go? Are you going to attack the T’fen’s servants before they get here? Or are you going after the Denogi?”

“Leave the Denogi alone. If all they are is watchers, there’s no need to get into a war with them. Let them watch, and let us not show them what we don’t want them to see. Confronting them would be a mistake, especially if they were forced into service the same way the Neofan were. Please do not let them find out we know what they are.”

“You have our silence,” Plausious said, glancing in the way of his guards to elicit the same promise from them all.

“How many Zotav and other constructs are the Denogi present on?”

“Nearly all of them.”

“Great,” Paul said, realizing he’d asked a stupid question. If the Denogi were designated as watchers, then of course they’d be watching everywhere. “Do you know of any places they are not?”

“They are not on all Zotav, but they are on all the major routes running through them, and at least one for every galaxy.”

“What about the Jeeno and Vwen?” Paul asked, referencing the other artificial constructs floating between galaxies on the transport grid.

“The Jeeno only have maintenance populations, but there will usually be at least one Denogi there to ensure the lesser races in the Bond do not allow them to become depleted or fail for other reasons. And there will be Denogi on all Vwen, as there are Neofan on all. It is the Veloqueen who rarely have a presence between galaxies.”

“Damn,” Paul said, continuing to work in the Saiolum. “There’s a toxic radiation that affects the T’fen and all the others like them. They created a generator in the center of the galaxy that produces it, and it will gradually kill them. They have put them in many galaxies to create a border against other Endgame races that are trying to destroy them. They can’t come here, but a new Endgame race that is spawned here will quickly die. I have mine protected in eggs, but they cannot hatch until they are out of the radiation. I don’t know if the Zotav is far enough, but the Denogi cannot be made aware of them. We have to secretly get them out of this galaxy for them to grow into an asset. When they reach that point, we’ll assault the toxicity generator and bring them back in to

help fight with us. That will also allow the T'fen in, but if we take it down now, when the new race is in its infancy, they won't stand a chance."

"What is this new race?"

"Synthoids similar to the Gahana. The T'fen are also synthoids, but they are living starships. This new race is of the same general category, but constructed differently to match their host civilization that achieved the Endgame, so they're matched to us. They're living machines rather than biologicals, just like the Gahana, but the Gahana had their parent civilization destroyed before they could mature. They survived, anonymously, but never had a teacher. That's why they're incomplete and searching for a mandate. I'm going to have someone explain it to them, and maybe we can get them out of the galaxy too if they want to go. Until now, you guys have been blocking our access."

"You mean Truven has," Plausious corrected, his mind racing with the revelations. "I will find you somewhere beyond this galaxy the Denogi cannot track you. It may be far from here, but I will find a safe haven."

"And you need to conscript the Neofan in the grid network, or they'll be a threat too."

Plausious sighed, then nodded his head. "The sooner the better. I only hope the other Houses destroy themselves before they think to come here and fight us."

Paul, the Reignor, and Vikarathe continued to talk about various things, some of which even Paul did not know as the warlord continued to work cleansing the guards. When he finished with them, that left the three prisoners, each of which was afflicted with the Mev beyond their brains.

It wasn't in every brain cell, but large chunks of them, and it was also popping up in places along their nervous system elsewhere. Paul had no idea what the purpose of that would be, but one of the three was far worse, with the Mev covering nearly a third of his body and almost all of his brain.

"These two are from the Vrorash," Plausious said, referencing the governing body within a Neofan House that operated

below the Reignor, “almost all the others members are dead. And this one is the only Diem that we were able to take alive.”

“Look,” Paul said, telepathically showing them what he was seeing through the Saiolum in the three, along with what the Mev in the guards had previously looked like.

Everyone was stunned, as well as bewildered, for there were no indications that they were so afflicted in their normal senses, nor in their analysis technology, which the Neofan race had relied upon heavily to detect ‘taint’ of other forms.

“I don’t know if I can cleanse this,” Paul admitted. “Maybe I can and it will take more time. Maybe days. The only way to know is to try.”

“*Are you in pain?*” Plausious asked the Diem in his own language, though the concern was little after the murder of so many Neofan on his orders. Plausious would have killed him on the spot, except that he needed answers, and the brain of a corpse offered far fewer ones than a live prisoner.

“*This cage does not harm, former Reignor. Has your mind deteriorated to the point where you cannot see obvious truths?*”

“Can you show him?” Plausious asked.

“I already did along with everyone else.”

The Neofan frowned at the prisoner. “*Do you not see what afflicts you? You are tainted, Diem. As were we all.*”

“*Not you, unless the young Zeus lies. Or is your cleansing truly the application of taint to those of us who are sane? We marked you as tainted before, and we were not in error. Now you return to spread your corruption.*”

“*It is you who has killed rather than exiled,*” Plausious argued pointedly. “*Whether willingly or misguided by the Mev, you have destroyed half our House!*”

Vikarathe didn’t understand what he meant by calling Paul ‘Zeus,’ but when he looked at the Furyan’s helmet, he sensed waves of telepathic apprehension. Not the consciously transmitted ones, but rather the accidental release of thoughts when someone was so distracted with something else they did not realize they were letting it leak out.

And what he sensed in Paul was sheer fear.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, ignoring the prisoners and drawing Plausious’s attention back to the Saiyan.

Paul didn’t answer. He was staring directly at the Diem and wouldn’t break his eye line...and as Vikarathe turned to look at the same, he saw the Diem likewise looking at Paul.

A silence followed, with Vikarathe wondering if they were telepathically speaking to one another, but as he scrutinized both of them he didn’t pick up any errant signals that would have resulted from such close range contact. Then the Diem raised a hand as if cupping something that wasn’t there, then he flicked his wrist towards Paul.

The Archon reacted so fast Vikarathe was immediately put on guard as a Petricite-armored hand rose up and pointed palm forward toward the imprisoned Diem, but no Essence was generated anywhere. Vikarathe would have known instantly if the Diem was using it...and even if he was, it couldn’t get past the reflective shielding without significant effort that most Neofan could not summon to break it.

“Get behind me now!” Paul screamed, telekinetically shoving the Reignor back and pushing on Vikarathe with barely a nudge as he appeared to do nothing, just as the Diem did nothing other than gesture...then he saw the other two prisoners’ flesh wither and melt away as a wash of illness crept into his body.

He didn’t wait, jumping backwards behind Paul and feeling the sensation go away momentarily as the two Vrorash keeled over in their cells and withered into husks with a cloud of decay spewing out of their bodies. He saw their Cores detach and fly off into the Essence realm within seconds, and though not understanding what was happening, Vikarathe knew everyone was in lethal danger.

So he acted, throwing a massive Fruc’zo into the cage that disintegrated the machinery creating the shield, then he continued the attack like a fire hose, pouring more and more into the Diem to only see it stop before him. Somehow the Diem was creating an Essence shield more powerful than his attacks, and he wasn’t the only one attacking. The Reignor and his guards were all following suit, but somehow the Diem was weathering it all.

“Stay behind me!” Paul yelled, his hand still up in front of him without him firing a visible shot, meaning this had to be Saiolum as he saw the guards who had been standing behind the cages moving to the sides to get away, only to get hit and have their Essence shudder in a wicked way that Vikarathe had never seen before. It was blowing off the exterior of their bodies as if their bodies were no longer there.

Both staggered, then were pulled further away by Paul and some telekinetic help from the other Neofan as the warlord brought up his second hand, pushing both forward.

Plausious didn't understand what was going on, then he got hit with a telepathic view of the Saiolum from Paul, showing him an outflow of what looked like blackness that was reaching towards them all, only to be pushed back by a stream Paul was generating. It was as if he was pulling light from the air all around and behind them and shoving it into the Diem as his dark river pushed back.

Plausious used his crown to communicate with the Gjardan above, intent on calling down a strike that the Diem would not survive no matter how strong he was, but just before the telepathic sense from Paul stuttered and cut out as the black flow increased, he also saw the Diem raise a hand and throw a different flow skyward.

His initial contact with the ship cut off, soon followed by little lights in the Essence realm that were the Cores of the crew flying off their dead bodies.

Vikarathe saw it too, and immediately reversed the gravity beneath the Diem, throwing him up into the air onto to see him hover there, his prominences extending behind him like featherless wings as he continued to point a hand up and one forward, but with a twitch of his head he also threw an Essence attack at Paul...which his Petricite quickly absorbed without incident.

The Diem should have known it wouldn't work, not unless he added something else to it. But then again, if his brain was encumbered by the Mev, maybe he wasn't thinking too clearly.

Another Essence attack went out, this one towards the Reignor, and both Vikarathe and two of the guards intervened, throwing up walls in front of him using four different techniques to



block the attack, and having three of them fail. The Essence power the Diem was displaying was impossible, as he was constantly fending off attacks from the other guards who, like Vikarathe, wanted to close range and pummel him, but the quick image of the unseen fight happening kept them all back.

Vikarathe tried to reverse gravity several times underneath the Diem, but he no longer moved either way. He was stuck, hovering in the air in a method that seemed to defy physics, so Vikarathe used his telekinesis, upgraded by Essence, and pulled up a river of sand from behind him and threw it towards the Diem, hoping to knock him aside with the impact...but it deflected off an Essence shield so strong it should have already drained the Diem of his body's full amount, killing him.

Yet he hovered there very much alive...

# 21

Paul fought the outflow of anti-Saiolum, canceling it with his own glow, but it wasn't enough. He was having to pull the weaker Saiolum from the Temple and throw it forward to negate it. When the anti-Saiolum hit the Saiolum it mixed at first, then 'growled' as the contact that never should have existed happened, eventually negating each other with the remnants going who knows where. All Paul knew was he was having to increase the flow every time the Diem increased his.

He didn't know how he was doing it, but as soon as the Diem called him Zeus he knew one of the gods had to be involved, and while he couldn't see the Essence fight going on, he knew Vikarathe alone would have smoked him as soon as the fight started. Since that hadn't happened, he guessed he was getting an Essence boost somehow. It could be from their version of Magicite, but with all the guards there as well, he guessed that wasn't the case, but until he removed his helmet he wouldn't know.

He couldn't do that. He couldn't even speak anymore. The effort was so great all he could do now was send a little telepathy, but he didn't know what to say other than to stay behind him. As long as he could continue to push Saiolum into the anti-Saiolum he could protect those behind him, but even as he tried to interrupt the part flowing upwards, he realized he had no chance to stop it from getting to the warship.

Paul could feel them die all at once. Ripples in the Saiolum so strong they even got through the maelstrom being generated between him and the Diem, whose face was twisted into a cruel grin as he once again increased the outflow of the dark energy.

The warlord increased his push, beginning to get close to his limits as he tried to think of a plan. He could back up, shielding the others as they ran away...but that wouldn't work even if the Diem was planted in place, for he'd just killed the warship's crew miles above them, and there was no way they could run fast enough to get out of that kind of range.

And even if they could, he bet the Diem could follow, for he was lifting himself on the Saiolum currents, and what must have been Vikarathe's gravity attack hadn't been successful more than once because of it...or something else. It should have still pulled him, but it didn't, so whatever the Diem was enhanced with had to be a combination of skills, or something completely different that he had no awareness of.

*Just a combination of Saiolum and Essence*, Tony Stark's voice rang loudly in his head as the visual avatar of Ares appeared standing beside him. *Nothing you can't see.*

*Are you helping him?*

*Of course not. But he is getting help. More than I can offer you, but he's not invincible. Changing Saiolum into anti-Saiolum is not easy. You're wearing him down in that regard.*

*Where's he getting the Essence boost from?*

*A cheater. One that I can't counter. You've got to win this yourself.*

*How?*

*Stop holding back. You're just throwing Saiolum at him. Sculpt it. Meld it to your will. Vikarathe will shield you with his life if necessary if your armor fails, so don't worry about the Essence threat. If you lose the Saiolum war, all of them will be dead in seconds.*

Just as Ares said that, one of the guards on the perimeter took an Essence hit that he couldn't fully shield and his left arm disintegrated, detonating like a grenade and throwing him into the guard beside him. The others shielded him thereafter, but he slumped to the ground alive, but unconscious, diminishing the defensive and offensive Essence firepower the group possessed.

*Will any of my psionics get through?*

*None that you have the focus to spare on right now. Dig in to the Saiolum and become it*, he said, with his avatar suddenly morphing into Qui'gon. *Feel, don't think. Use your instincts.*

As simple a thing as that was, hearing those words in that voice made a difference for Paul. He completely let go of his senses behind him, shutting down his Pefbar and telepathy. He couldn't even see the Neofan to his sides as he focused his helmet straight

ahead at the Diem and pulled more current from behind him, feeling the interaction with the anti-Saiolum as if the flow was an extension of himself.

It hurt. The grind of the mixing energies, but as he felt it he knew what to do, and as the pressure from the Diem increased yet again, Paul didn't pull harder. Instead he began to glow, increasing the small outflow of his body, but altering it in a way he had never fully done before.

It became much more potent, and when it mixed in with the stream and hit the anti-Saiolum, it dissolved it like acid and the flow line where they both met began to move back towards the Diem momentarily before another increase followed.

But with it, the skin on the Diem began to chaff, as if the backflow from the anti-Saiolum was beginning to kill him. Paul didn't know how he wasn't dead from the first moment, but he didn't need a lesson right now, he needed a way to win.

Another guard went down, this one being cut in half just below the waist. His legs flew backwards and his torso crashed into the sand, but Paul didn't see it. He didn't see anyone or anything except the Diem and the Saiolum crashing in front of him as loud as a waterfall.

A waterfall that was growing larger than he could control.

Paul increased his glow even further, countering pressure with intensity in a struggle that lasted minutes and was visible across the galaxy...for those with the sense to see it.

Azoro was in the Barratus Kingdom on the planet of Knowhere helping train the few other individuals the Empire had found that were capable touching the Saiolum. None were anywhere close to Paul's ability level, but they could hear Azoro as he did, and with that connection the Sha'kier was slowly training them into higher level skills knowing that Star Force was going to need as many as possible in the coming millennia.

He existed within the Saiolum currents, feeling them ebb and flow around all life and unable to leave them. He was a ghost to everyone that did not have the ability to consciously touch the

Saiolum, and until Paul had made his breakthrough, this entire galaxy had been deaf to him.

When the disturbance far off across the galaxy began, ripples from it flowed out along the connections between planets and stars, but would not have reached him for days if not for the intensity. Rarely was anything directly visible across the stars, but the 'light' he was sensing now as a small flicker burned in intensity...and it was located exactly where his ever present tether to Paul was pointed.

He had tethers to a few others nearby in the galaxy and could maintain many more, but Paul's was by far the strongest and allowed him to keep that link no matter where in the galaxy he went, and though he was getting no information through that link, he knew from the location of it that Paul was in some kind of trouble just from the taste of the light...for it carried with it the scent of burning.

*Paul*, he called out along the tether as strongly as he could.  
*Hear me.*

The two conflicting flows of Saiolum and anti-Saiolum did not relent, and the Diem kept increasing the amount as if he was playing with Paul, who could no longer keep it at bay from pressure alone, now having to rely on his ability to alter it. Somehow he had figured out how to not only increase the intensity of his own output, but some of the Saiolum that he was dragging past his body from behind.

He'd never done that before, but he was fully imbedded into the Saiolum now. What was happening to the Neofan he could not know, for his vision was barely functioning and his body could have been floating in water for all he knew. He was still standing, but beyond that his brain was not focused on muscle control. Everything else he had was involved in the Saiolum, leaving him completely vulnerable to an attack in another fashion.

But he had to go this deep or he and the others would be overcome. If he just restricted the flow to himself he could probably survive longer rather than expanding it out like an umbrella to cover the others, but if the Diem could keep increasing the output of anti-Saiolum Paul was going to hit the limit of his abilities soon if he didn't keep learning and growing in the moment.

He'd already developed an ability to alter the flow, and as he continued to experiment a little here and there he was getting better, but the pressure he needed to apply was so much he didn't have much wiggle room to work in. If he decreased the effectiveness of the manipulation, it could overwhelm him and they'd all die. But if he didn't keep fidgeting with it they were all going to die anyway.

Ares was helping...a lot. Giving him instructions on what to try and what not to, and some of the stuff he suggested was just too far beyond Paul for him to manage in the moment, but some was not and it was buying him time, but this growing arm wrestling match was something he was going to lose unless the Diem was close to his limits as well.

He wished he could use one of his psionics to gut punch him for just a moment to give himself a break, but if Ares said nothing was going to work then he couldn't waste the effort and the small disruption it would cause him. And kicking off his armor wouldn't help, because Essence couldn't boost Saiolum skills. They were completely unrelated. So what else did he have left?

He had the weaponry in his armor, but if Vikarathe and the others couldn't get through the Diem's defenses then nothing he had would, so he did the simplest and only thing he could.

Paul began slowly walking backwards.

The first few steps were awkward, as he had to remember how to use his legs, but the little extra distance between him and the Diem helped reduce the pressure a sliver. He had to trust the Neofan would walk back with him, because if they didn't he'd be hurting his ability to protect them. He couldn't even warn them again, for he couldn't speak and his telepathy couldn't be used without easing up on his Saiolum effort, so he just kept walking and using the slight reprieve to experiment more.

But then the Diem began floating forward, still suspended in midair as a massive tsunami of sand rose up behind him and crashed down on top. The anti-Saiolum flow hiccupped ever so slightly, but the Diem didn't move and as the sand formed a huge dune in between the two of them.

It was a good try on the Neofan's part, but the sand didn't stop Saiolum. It went right through it, and Paul's vision of the Diem in

that energy wasn't interfered with. He was black and shimmering, with the Mev having expanded to cover his entire body, and out of it flowed even more dark energy.

Maybe that was how he was increasing the output. If the Mev was growing, and the Mev itself was creating it rather than him, then maybe it would stop after fully consuming his body.

*It won't, Ares said, monitoring his thoughts. It can still upgrade considerably before tapping out.*

*Can't you even distract him?*

*The Diem is not a warrior, so I'm invisible. Moros is helping him, and he can interact with the physical in ways I cannot.*

*You have got to do something else.*

*I can't save you from him. He chooses situations where he knows he will win, and has killed many of my warriors in the past. You're not strong enough to keep up this defense forever, but the solution is staring you in the face. Use it. Listen to Azoro, he is calling to you.*

Paul hadn't even noticed, his mind was so noisy, but he used what little focus he had left to search for that piece of himself, finding only a whisper from his friend that must otherwise have been a scream. He couldn't understand what Azoro was saying, then the Diem sent a more intense burst along with the flow. It snaked forward towards him like a homing missile, but it was slow enough that Paul saw it coming and improvised a return shot of denser Saiolum emanating from his left hand.

It shot out and intercepted the dark missile a few meters from his body, with both exploding and canceling each other out. The ripple jolted Paul's concentration, but thankfully it also disrupted the flows momentarily and the Diem couldn't take advantage of it.

But in that moment he heard Azoro more clearly and latched onto the tether, expanding it enough that the whisper became audible.

He couldn't speak back, fending off another two missiles with his own. He didn't even know what he was doing, but like Ares had advised, he was feeling instead of thinking, and for the moment it was keeping him alive.

Azoro repeated his instructions, over and over in the same manner, hoping that Paul would hear him at least once.

He did, but what he asked was going to compromise his defenses.

*Trust him, Ares urged. It's the only way.*

Paul didn't think, instead he fought, with his ire rising so much his Saiyan genetics kicked in despite the fact he was standing still and didn't need the extra speed and physical power. His hair went blonde underneath his helmet, and to his pleasant surprise his effort to make his body produce more Saiolum got easier.

He didn't know why, and frankly he didn't care. It gave him enough to split his focus with regards to his outflow, while his pull on the ambient Saiolum continued. His mind, however, was seeing a bit more clearly thanks to his brain cells working faster.

He should have gone Saiyan earlier, but he'd never had to before in his Saiolum training. He'd never operated at this level before, so it had never come up. Now he was far beyond anything he had ever experienced, and far beyond anything Azoro had ever tried to teach him. It was all instinct and improvisation now, and before the Diem increased his attacks again, he acted.

Paul took the outflow that he had increased as brightly as he could to eat away at the dark energy and split it. Half continued outward, with the line between the two flows now inching towards Paul as he couldn't maintain the equilibrium. But the rest he turned inward and poured into the tether between him and Azoro. He didn't know why, he was just following his orders and altering it in a slightly different way.

He had to keep pouring it down the tether...to the point of death. He could not relent once he started. Again, he didn't know why, but he had no other options, so he fully committed to it as he fended off another dark missile attack and the line between him and the Diem jerked a little closer.

It continued to inch in, more and more, as Paul fought a losing battle over the following minutes, but he kept the partial flow into the Tether. Ares said nothing, and he was grateful for the lack of distraction. This was an endurance test now. How long could he delay the inevitable? If he could slow it down 5 more seconds that



might be enough. To do what he didn't know, and it didn't matter. He just had to keep fighting without any interruptions. If the Neofan could get another one out of the Diem it would help, and something happened during the duration, for the line of impact jerked back towards the Diem without Paul doing anything different, then it continued creeping towards the warlord's body again.

Closer and closer it crept, with Paul feeling his imminent death as it ate away at the Saiolum just ahead of him, but he didn't flinch. Didn't panic. Didn't call for help. He remained a rock, and would continue to up until the end, for one lesson that he and his brothers and sisters had learned long ago was *spite*.

Spite held that you didn't relent, even if you couldn't win. You stick it out and you do whatever damage to your enemy you could.

Kill them if possible, if not wound them.

If you couldn't wound them, slow them down.

If you couldn't slow them down, distract them.

If you couldn't distract, insult them.

If you couldn't insult them, flip them off.

If you couldn't flip them off, think mean thoughts their way.

If you couldn't think mean thoughts, hold your anger and defiance till the moment you died.

And if you could do that, you would still lose, but you wouldn't break. And in that, there was a small victory still within your grasp.

Paul was 3 and a half meters and 42 seconds away from that moment as he continued to pour Saiolum into the tether without fail...and that's when the impossible happened.

An familiar aura surrounded him and pushed back on the flow, stopping the advancing line and started it moving backwards slightly as a pounding in his head came as an incessant knocking asking to be let in.

Azoro had somehow crossed the galaxy through their link, moving across thousands of lightyears in a matter of minutes, and now he was asking to assume control of Paul's body as he had done many times in the past.

And when Paul let that happened, Azoro's power multiplied exponentially.

A bomb went off within the Temple as the currents there, which had been slightly rerouted from the battle, no more as if a pebble had been dropped into a lake, suddenly expanded out into a whirlpool hurricane, drawing in Saiolum from all across the Temple and dropping it onto their location.

It was an implosion, not an explosion, and Azoro used it to crush the Diem with a flow so strong that he couldn't hold it back. Not even with a God's help.

The Saiolum crashed down on him, eating away the anti-Saiolum as if it was nothing more than a puff of smoke, then he destroyed the Mev just as easily, not caring that the backflow of the anti-Saiolum killed the Diem in the process.

In a matter of seconds Azoro Hikeer Mi'da'ruun, Ju'en'xa of the Sha'kier, and the last surviving member of his murdered race, smote the Diem from existence with ease and returned the current to its normal tranquil flow as it calmly spread back out from the hyper-compression he had caused.

The sand of the desert was undisturbed except for what the Neofan had done. The Gjardan warship above them hovered silently, devoid of any living crew, and some 5 Neofan beside Paul had been gravely injured, with one already having died from his injuries.

And in front of him lay the shriveled, dry, and somehow instantaneously decomposed body of the Diem, with his Core already detached and gone from it, making a resurrection impossible.

Not that Paul or anyone else here would have tried.

Ares was standing on the sand beside Paul, invisible to everyone except him and Azoro courtesy of Paul's mind, and as Vikarathe and the other Neofan stood unsure of what had just happened, he saw the god walk up to the body and slightly bend over it. Looking down into the face he uttered a single sentence in whisper, but it was loud enough that Paul could still hear.

"We had a Hulk," he said, then he disappeared from view and Paul's mind.

"Are you alright?" Vikarathe asked.

Paul looked over at him, shocked to see that the outer layer of his skin on his face was missing and only now slowly healing.

Apparently he wasn't completely successful at blocking the anti-Saiolum as he'd thought.

He glanced around at the other Neofan, seeing a few similarly injured, but nowhere near as bad as the Diem's Essence attacks that had ripped off limbs and half a face from the others.

"I'm alright," he said slowly.

"What happened?" Plausious demanded, but calmly and respectfully as he found himself in a moment that was completely inexplicable.

"I was losing," he admitted. "Then I got some help. If I explain it will cause a great deal more confusion, but the threat here is over. Everyone on your ship is dead, though. I couldn't protect them."

"I know," the Reignor said, not blaming Paul in the slightest. "Is there any way we can defend ourselves against this energy?"

"Not now. We're working on developing technologies that can do it, but they're nowhere near ready."

"So we're completely helpless?"

"You weren't the target. I was."

"Because you can cleanse us?"

Paul sighed. "Maybe. I'm not really sure."

"Can the others afflicted with that much Mev do that?" Vikarathe asked.

"His Mev grew during the fight. I think we should assume that anyone who has it is a ticking bomb. We can't delay in cleansing them."

"Then you must come to the other Temples immediately."

Paul nodded. "Go reclaim your ship. I need a moment here first, then I'll join you."

"We are in your debt, Trailblazer," Plausious said, then moving to help carry the gravely injured guards as the others tried to heal them as much as possible as they made their way back to their landing craft.

Vikarathe didn't go with him, nor did he say anything until they were out of earshot. Only then did he look down at his smaller friend.

"Tell me the truth."

“Higher powers than us and the T’fen intervened. I’ve recently learned that there are levels upon levels in the universe, and we’re nowhere near the top. We just got a taste of a higher one.”

“Is this going to happen again?”

“I don’t know. I hope not.”

“It won’t,” Ares said, suddenly standing beside them in the sand as they watched the other Neofan board their ship.

“I know you,” Vikarathe said, surprising Paul that he could see him...and that he didn’t react negatively to his presence.

“I am Nevvra to you, Ares to Paul. You both did well. I expected to lose you today, and I am pleasantly surprised I didn’t. Congratulations, you’re a godkiller now. Moros is dead. He died with the Diem.”

“Dead?” Paul asked.

“Moros is allowed to boost certain individuals, but he has to do so by possessing them. When he does so, he becomes vulnerable. That’s another reason why he only attacks when he can win. He had no idea that Azoro could travel here like that. You caught him completely off guard.”

“You two have spoken before?” Vikarathe asked, getting some extra information put directly into his mind so he could somewhat keep up.

“We have,” Ares said. “I’ve been looking after you too, as I do with all true warriors. Moros’s mission is to cause havoc, and he likes wrecking other gods’ plans. He’s killed a number of my warriors before just when they were beginning to become interesting. Nobody liked him, but he was just doing the mission the universe assigned him, and there will be another chosen to replace him. The replacement will have to learn a great deal before he can attempt something like this again, so you won’t have to worry about a repeat.”

“So it was not the Mev?” Vikarathe asked, ample confusion and awe still visible in his eyes.

“He used the Mev to attack the same way he used the Diem’s Essence skills, amping up both immensely. But the Mev alone can’t do that. You were right though,” he said, looking at Paul. “It can grow

and do other things if it's allowed time, so you need to destroy it when it's small."

"How does it spread?"

"It doesn't. The Neofan's ritual 'Construction' uses a variety of special talismans. Those have been tainted with regenerative Mev seeds. Now each Neofan is infected from the very beginning of their lives, in addition to the original poisoning of the adults a very long time ago."

"Then we must destroy the past to be free," Vikarathe said.

"That would be the most direct route, and what I would advise. But these are your lives, and while I can nudge you along from time to time, I can't protect you. Your choices must be your own."

"Was the Diem's his own?" Paul asked.

"Moros can't take control of the unwilling, much like your very impressive Sha'kier. Azoro, in addition to being my new personal hero, you're lucky, because without Paul you wouldn't be able to see me because you're not a warrior. You have my thanks for saving these two where I could not."

"I would not have been able to," Azoro said, speaking through Paul and further confusing Vikarathe, "if his skills had not progressed considerably in the moment. Your direction was crucial."

"I said I couldn't protect you. I didn't say I was useless," he said with a wink, then looked at Vikarathe...whose height he had notably mimicked. "Carry on."

Ares disappeared just as the Neofan transport took off and flew up towards the Gjardan.

"What don't you know?" Paul asked.

"That was one of our myths come to life."

"Pretty much ours too."

"The Diem called you 'Zeus.' What did that mean?"

"It means I've been selected to join them when and if I die. That's why they're speaking to me now. I get the feeling it's very rare for everyone else to actually see them. Now I'm a magnet for the nice ones and the bad ones."

"Are they all like us?"

"They were."

“And this universe?”

“If life were a simulation game, the universe is the source code.”

“So not a person?”

“I don’t think so. We’re born into this universe, we play the game, then we move on when we die.”

“Move on to where?”

“Another universe...and another...and another. Beyond that I don’t know what’s going on. But I do know our being born is random, which is why it’s extra important that we protect the young of all races. They have no control of where they end up.”

“I had often speculated of such things when I was young. Without answers I had let the mysteries go over time.”

“Yeah, well these mysteries end up revealing more mysteries. I doubt we’re ever get to the bottom of it all.”

“Who is this Azoro he spoke of?”

“Someone older than both of us, and someone who lost his body a long time ago, so he was using mine at the end there. He’s the one that killed the Diem, not me. I would have lost.”

“So that’s why this other god thought victory was certain?”

“He was playing with me. Amping up his power gradually until I’d eventually hit my max, then he’d keep going higher and I’d be overwhelmed.”

“And if you had died?”

“I’d have been sent to a different galaxy far, far away from here to be one of their gods. But I really don’t feel like dying and doing that. Thanks for the help, by the way. The Diem was disrupted slightly a few times, and it wasn’t my doing.”

“His Essence power was beyond anything any Neofan has ever achieved, even beyond a Nuv’ernor. A small distraction was all our collective strength could achieve. I feel even more helpless now than before. How is a warrior meant to survive these gods?”

“They can’t interfere as much as you think, but we’re not meant to overcome them. They’re meant to be dominant and intervene wherever their assigned missions dictate to guide us without controlling us. The universe wants us fighting each other and evolving. If we get too stagnant, they send in Ares to stir things up. If

we get too destructive, they send another god in to calm us down. And I guess when things are going too well, they send in Moros to fuck things up.”

“It sounds like a rigged game to me.”

“Even the gods don’t know what the universe really wants. They just know their assigned roles. In that way they’re players in the game too, but in return for the greater powers they also have restrictions. At least you and I are free.”

“Do we trust them?”

“They’re loyal to their missions, not us.”

Vikarathe crossed his arms over his chest, becoming more and more displeased. “You were right not to tell the others. They feel vulnerable enough as it is, and without a warrior’s mind to sustain them through adversity, they will break from the helplessness rather than seek ways to challenge it. How many of your people know?”

“Only a few, and it needs to stay that way.”

“Can some of the tainted use the Mev to kill others in a smaller way,” the Neofan said, looking up at the giant ship that had been made into a tomb in a matter of seconds.

“I’m afraid it might allow them to do that if all other means of destroying your race fail.”

“Then it will kill them?”

“Did you see the Diem deteriorate physically?”

“Slightly.”

“I think it will eventually kill them after giving them a long killing spree on others...but that’s just a guess. Honestly I’m more worried about whatever race was able to create a weapon like this.”

“If they serve the T’fen, they may be sent to kill your Endgame race.”

“They have so many they won’t send them all. But if we defeat the first few, they will send more and more, and eventually that one may show up, and we’re not ready to fight that kind of war. Not yet.”

“Would your time be better spent preparing than cleansing us?”

“No,” Paul said firmly, offering no explanation. “Are you coming with me?”

“Ares wants me to protect you. I would have done so anyway.”

“I need to contact my brothers and explain what’s happened. After that I’m going. Whatever rogue Neofan are found here can be cleansed later. Would you mind disintegrating the Diem’s body?” Paul said, referencing the withered corpse laying in the sand not far away. “It’s free of Mev, but I’d prefer if it was gone.”

“Gladly,” Vikarathe said, walking ahead while Paul made his comm calls. He stopped a step short of the Diem and raised a hand up, pointing his palm towards it, trying to see if there was anything remotely godlike left in it, but all he saw was an ugly death of a corpse.

With a pulse of weaponized Essence, he exploded it and the surrounding sand into a plume of dust that he angled away from Paul and off across the desert, leaving nothing but clear sand where the body had just laid...



Paul stayed with the Neofan the next three years, moving from Temple to Temple and cleansing them of the Mev. No re-infections occurred, and the talismans that were the source of the Mev were destroyed by Azoro, who cited that Paul did not have the skills to handle them due to their density and backup programming... for if the physical talismans were destroyed and not the Mev, the Mev was programmed to alter to cling to any and all lifeforms until it one day came close to another Neofan, then jump to him and continue the purge of their race in that fashion.

This past year Paul had been on his own, with Azoro returning to Knowhere after Paul's skill had raised to the point of cleansing thousands of Neofan simultaneously, and the number coming in from outside the galaxy rarely reached that number. They were coming in individually or in small groups. Some were emissaries stationed across the intergalactic network stations, others came from Temples in far off galaxies where they were overseeing the Vargemma and looking for promising races that would arise to Essence capability that they could add to their numbers, but there were no Neofan colonies in them. Only in Yenoiv and the Milky Way were the Neofan Houses seated, and Reignor Plausious had put out an open warning to both of the dangers of the Mev. Some members from the other Houses had come here, seeking to be cleansed of the 'Taint,' but the travel was expensive and the Neofan population too great for them all to easily come considering how much Essence was being spent on their inter-House wars.

And Paul wasn't going to them. Between him and Azoro... and it was mostly Azoro...they had cleansed over 160 million Neofan, almost all of which were House Atriark, but that was less than half of their original population.

Still, it was a victory as most of the cleansed pledged loyalty to Reignor Plausious, and those who did not were exiled to a small region of one of the Temples rather than outside the galaxy. They

could live there amongst themselves, much as the Vargemma did, as long as they didn't seek to leave or expand their powerbase.

None fought to the death after the Mev was cleared, underscoring how much damage that sabotage had done to their civilization, and was continuing to do in Yenoiv. Fortunately, the outposts of emissaries had not yet succumbed to killing each other, and it was those that Plausious was conquering via force and bringing the few hundred or thousands of Neofan from each back to the Milky Way for Paul to cleanse...and then recruit.

Except not now, for Paul was no longer in the Milky Way. He was onboard a Neofan warship along with the eggs he had eventually went back to retrieve, and that warship was nearing the end of its journey across multiple galaxies to a place in the intergalactic network that had been under construction prior to the fall of the Neofan home galaxy of Utovi. Once that happened all new construction being led by the Neofan had stopped, for they needed every scrap of resources they could get their hands on to build a new home in Yenoiv, and the rest of the Bond of Resistance hadn't tried to carry on without them.

Paul had never been so far away from the Empire before, but he wasn't the first. A colonial expedition had went out ahead of him while he stayed in the Milky Way finishing up cleansing all of House Atriark. Now that that was done, Plausious would be diverting the 'prisoners' from across the galactic network to this single spur line that led to nowhere, and in that isolation...away from the rest of the Bond of Resistance's eyes, especially the Denogi's...Paul would continue freeing those the Reignor could find and spend the insane amount of Essence on to get here, but Plausious knew saving every single Neofan he could was worth the expense, and Paul agreed.

Of course that's why the Vargemma existed. To be Essence-producing batteries in all of the Temples across the Milky Way and the other galaxies that had Temple networks in them. So the Essence was there to be used, and it wasn't being spared now as Paul was being carried upon a full Gjardan dreadnaught that would be staying with him to protect the secret outpost the Neofan were now continuing to build on their own. It wouldn't be complete for centuries, but there was a small construct used to house the

construction crews there, and it was on that structure that the Empire's colony expedition should have already been set up and have a city ready for him and the eggs to arrive.

Vikarathe wasn't with him, having been satisfied at the security Plausious had provided. Instead, he was out there between the galaxies as well, rounding up the afflicted Neofan emissaries from all the Houses and using his might to beat them into submission if necessary. He'd continue doing that and check back in with Paul periodically with the prisoner transfers.

In the past three years Paul hadn't seen another god, nor heard a whisper from them. Apparently they had gone back to doing their normal duties and lost interest in him...or they were watching and just not saying anything. He didn't know for sure, and right now he didn't care. The fate of the Empire wasn't going to be in their hands. It was in his, and his brothers' and sisters' and all of their member races. Trillions upon trillions of people spread across the galaxy that were going to work as a team to fight off whatever came their way. And it was those trillions that were going to die if they failed, not Ares and the other gods.

So he'd take their help when they offered it, but he knew they didn't have the power to stop what was coming. They were far more limited than he was, and despite the threat he was under, he preferred his position to theirs...and not just because he knew he wouldn't be gone if he died. He planned never to have to use that 'get out of jail free' card. Like Peter Pan, he planned to live forever, and had no intention of becoming a god. That wasn't an incentive for him, and if he'd been offered to take Ares place here and now, he wouldn't. At the very heart of it, he wanted to be a player in the game...not a coach spouting wisdom from the sidelines.

A little over a year ago, though, he had received a message. Zeus couldn't talk to him, but as they'd discussed in their brief time together, he controlled the Jedein's catalog of genetic profiles they could use to create new races or add members of an existing one. Paul had instructed the Empire to look for something not alive that they might one day spawn, and when some small nodules of genetic material started popping up across the galaxy from multiple Jedein,

Star Force had collected them and analyzed the code...unable to make anything out of it.

The nodules weren't alive, just genetic material redundantly repeating the same sequence over and over. When Paul saw the sequence he was able to decode it using a personal cypher that he had told no one of...not even his own brothers and sisters. It was something he'd made so he had the ability to leave himself notes that were undetectable should he ever need it. When Zeus had been able to read his mind he had learned the cypher and encoded these Jedein nodules with it so no one would be able to eavesdrop on whatever it was he wanted to communicate to Paul.

It was a clever cheat around Zeus's restrictions that didn't require him asking another god to carry a message, and when Paul decoded it he saw a multi-galaxy map with three routes indicated on it, along with an addendum of information on each of them. In those addendums were force size numbers, background information, and the projected tracks from where they currently were had estimated arrival times.

Zeus was telling him that three of the T'fen's servant races were already on the move and headed towards the Milky Way, coming from far, far away. Paul he expected some of the dwarf galaxies to hold the T'fen's servants, but if they were they weren't calling on the closest ones. These three races were going to take centuries before they were all here, with the first of them predicted to have their leading elements in Paul's galaxy within 17-19 years.

The Gauntlet Wars were coming, and every victory they might be able to achieve would be followed by more and more ships. More and more races. It was going to be a grind until the Empire eventually broke or the T'fen ran out of servants.

And neither of those things was likely to happen.

The Empire, the Neofan, and the other allies they had were going to have a few years of relative peace before the hammer began to fall, though technically the Hadarak also served the T'fen and were already here...but they were in many galaxies acting as an early warning force, killing the weaker races when they started to grow strong and alerting the T'fen by their failure if any race managed to survive, let alone defeat them.

The Empire was well on its way to doing both, but there was no way they were going to be finished with the Hadarak war in the Core of the galaxy by the time the first of the incoming races arrived in what Zeus guessed would be the Rim rather than the logical and easy Core access Tethers.

They were going to try sneaking in the backdoor, and not using the Bond of Resistance's transit network to do it. Zeus didn't give technology specifics, but he did indicate a spot in the Lorichar Kingdom that the first race was heading for, along with their name.

Asferja.

Paul had checked with Mastertech Tennisonne, who was tearing through the technology remnants left behind in the repository, and he'd confirmed a match. The Empire already had a sample of their technology and a battle record from the last time they had acted as enforcers for the T'fen in the local group of galaxies.

So the Empire had a name, their technology profile, their methodology, and their planned invasion point.

Which meant the hammer was going to get hammered as soon as it arrived, with the Empire already beginning to shift assets to that region, but in a manner that any spies already in the galaxy or soon to come would be hard pressed to identify.

Paul would have liked to have been doing that or fighting the Hadarak, but he had two jobs to do that no one else could. Cleanse more Neofan and salvage as much of that powerful ally's population as he could, as well as get the eggs hatched and oversee whatever followed.

Those eggs were with him now, all safe and still maturing inside, but now that they were beyond the Milky Way and the nearby Skittles galaxy, the toxicity generators that were assumed to be in both were not close enough to register on the eggs, meaning it was safe. Had it not been, they would have died in a similar way the anti-Saiolum killed biologicals, only at a far slower rate.

The Skittles galaxy was one that the Bond of Resistance had no presence in, and as such they didn't have a shared name for it. Director Davis has gotten in the habit of naming the major galaxies after candy, and he'd assigned the 'Skittles' tag to this one for use by the Empire.

Paul could see it now, in the distance. It took up about a quarter of the sky, but it was clear they were nowhere near it. Other galaxies could be seen if you spun around, but none were as large. They were out in the middle of the intergalactic void, and the spur line they were on had intended to one day reach the Skittles galaxy, but that spur only had a single intact link on it. They'd passed through it, then arrived out of a portal here with the view ahead shared by a large piece of a Vwen...an artificial planet that had landmass and water on the outside and the inside.

Right now it had neither, and wasn't even a sphere. Just a small chunk of the superstructure of one making it look like a piece of spider web floating in the void. It was the first thing Paul had seen moments ago when they came out of the Essence realm to this spot...with the Neofan ship's conventional engines finding no gravity field to pull on.

That would have been an issue for the Empire's ships, but the Neofan had the ability to fly using Essence alone if need be, though that wasn't necessary here. They immediately attached mooring beams to the structure they'd just come through and began pulling themselves aside to clear the portal should another ship need to come through.

As they moved aside Paul adjusted the view in his quarters so he could see behind them...with the emptiness sending a shiver down his spine. If he jumped out of the ship in his armor, he wouldn't be able to move. His Yen'mer and his anti-grav wouldn't function, and even his Saiolum would be almost worthless given the lack of life out here. Only the people onboard this ship and the life on the construction ring were producing the energy, meaning there was little of it to grasp onto.

Having a naval battle here was almost impossible, and if the portal was destroyed you'd be stuck here forever...which was why the portal was built into a ring that had land and water of its own like a tiny, tiny, tiny piece of a Temple that could exist almost forever on its own if it didn't run out of power to heat the thing.

Looking at it now, about three times as wide as the Gjardan, gave Paul a different shiver. The Empire had built things like this out of nostalgia, but to see one that had been built before the video

game makers were even born added a weight to the fiction that wasn't lost on the warlord.

He was staring at an actual Halo, one with the interior of the ring being the portal. The thing even had Essence engines, allowing it to fly from galaxy to galaxy through the Essence realm and stop without coming through another portal. Its Essence engines allowed it to stabilize and not drift one way or another, for portal traffic required mathematically accurate trajectories, otherwise you'd blow by the position and miss the destination portal.

But this Halo...which they called a Liosp...could even enter the Essence realm again, leaving behind the outer skin of the ring in order to propel itself at sufficient speed to get to another galaxy. The trick was, you had no way to navigate inside the Essence realm and could reemerge inside a star or nebula without knowing it, killing you instantly or leaving you horribly mangled as both sets of matter fought for the same volume.

The Halo was designed to get out to where no one else could, then receive Essence Realm travelers aimed at its position by catching them and bringing them back in the same way the small portals in a Temple did. Those incoming ships would bring personnel and supplies that would slowly construct a permanent facility, which had been going on here before those supplies were needed elsewhere, but the Halo had remained here because no other portals had been built here yet, and using the emergency ring sheath propulsion was a last resort. So it had just sat here for millennia waiting to be used again as only a skeleton crew maintained the equipment on this end.

The Neofan had recalled those Bond of Resistance members and replaced them entirely with their own people. The only races on the Halo now were them and the motley mix Star Force had brought with them.

No prying eyes from anyone else. And now that the Gjardan was here, any enemies that could make it this far would be destroyed as soon as they arrived, unlikely as that would be. Only Bond of Resistance member races had the codes and equipment necessary to travel on the intergalactic grid, and they would not be

allowed to pass the previous Jeeno that was the only connection to this location.

Reignor Plausious had promised to find Paul a location that had no Denogi presence, and he hadn't disappointed...but the warlord was so far away from his home galaxy that he could feel the vulnerability...and security...that this location afforded.

"Alright guys," he said to the eggs he had arrayed around the room like trophies. "Time to move in."

Paul telekinetically lifted them all into a group and flew them behind him out the door and all the way to the hangar bay as if they were ducks following his lead. There he saw lines of Neofan all standing at attention as an honor guard, but they would not be going down to the Halo with him. As per their agreement, only Star Force personnel were going to be allowed on the Halo now so as to not confuse the new Vanguard race as to who they needed to pattern themselves after.

Most of that patterning had already been done, but there was also a stage in their development where they needed to interact with the Paragons...a stage that the Gahana had missed...and Paul didn't want them picking up any bad habits from the Neofan, so the operational staff on the Halo had trained the Empire's personnel and then switched out with them. Only a few smaller Neofan ships sitting nearby the Halo and now the Gjardan would remain and rotate out with replacements periodically. They'd carry information, messages, and updates from across all the galaxies in the Bond of Resistance, letting them know what was happening out there without anyone knowing they were here.

The Neofan had enough clout in the Bond to make that happen, despite the additional ships that would be arriving bringing prisoners for Paul to cleanse under the guise of supplies to work on the Vwen. They were going to use the Gjardan as the platform to do that for now while working to build some small permanent facilities to accommodate that function without having to compromise the Halo. Paul could shift back and forth easy enough, but he had no way of knowing how fragile the condition of the Vanguard race would be, so he and the Neofan had agreed to play it as safe as they could.



Paul nodded to the ship's commander as he passed him by and into a Star Force dropship that he then piloted down to the ring himself, finding three different cities built by the Empire on the battlemap system. One was complete, the other two were still under partial construction, but most of the ring was wild landmass and lakes with subsurface tunnels and chambers that held the technology needed to sustain it and a construction force.

Right now though, it was empty save for some 7192 Star Force personnel, and as he landed he passed by several aerial skeets flying patrols just below the energy shield that held the atmosphere in place. The ring was so small it didn't have the natural gravity to do it otherwise, nor the wall height. Ships could pass through the field, but atmosphere could not, and Paul could feel the resistance hit the dropship as he passed into the thick, moist air.

There were no desert environments here, nor arctic. It was all jungle and water, with him landing the dropship on an artificial pier built out into the largest lake. Several other small ships were sitting on platforms there, but one had been left open specifically for Paul's arrival.

He set down there without incident, then walked his floating eggs out into the 'natural' air of the artificial ring, finding it comforting. He was still standing between galaxies, but on the ring it felt like he was on a planet orbiting a star...though this 'star' was just a big heat lamp situated in the middle of the ring just behind the portal field when it activated.

It kept the jungle humid and hot, but without a night cycle, so it never got too hot. Paul soaked up that heat into his body, for he only wore a uniform with no armor. Not even gauntlets. This was as safe as a place could be, and while there were plenty of arms and armor available in storage lockers here, he didn't need to wear them now. What he needed to do was get these eggs hatched, so instead of walking on into the city he took at left at the end of the pier and walked along the beach until he got to the edge of the jungle and followed a path that had been cut there earlier.

The warlord followed it as he sensed people out in the jungle. They were his, and they were staying back on purpose while still

observing. He wanted to be the first and only one to deal with the eggs, but others would be staying nearby if he needed assistance.

So Paul continued down the path to a clearing just off the beach, but still able to feel the breeze coming off it and through the scattering of trees in between. The ground was covered in a type of moss that gave it a slight bounce when you stepped on it, but was otherwise a good durable ground cover that wouldn't need trimming.

Paul landed the 18 eggs in a circle around him, seeing not a hint of the toxicity flaring on their shells, nor should there be, but it was still reassuring to know that there wasn't a different source out here, for he knew the voids between galaxies were not truly empty... but there was nothing here damaging to them. If there was, the shells would show it.

He knelt down next to one and placed a hand on it...with a lot of memories suddenly coming back. Memories that Azoro hadn't found, which made Paul wonder exactly where they had been held.

He switched eggs, finding the 1-star, and pressed his hand on that egg instead. It recognized him, along with his telepathic signal that it was safe and time to emerge. A signal that only he could send...and if he didn't, long into the future a timer would elapse and they'd emerge on their own. It was a safety mechanism, but one that wasn't going to be needed here.

The egg began to glow red, and a cascade of just as red electricity moved over the seams in the egg, breaking it apart all at once as the occupant stood up and shook off the pieces. It was a biped, with a large tail, mostly horizontal back, and large head with short arms. All were made of synthetic materials, though it was hard to tell what. It didn't have 'parts' that were visible, but almost like nanites bound together into skin...except Paul knew that wasn't right. They weren't made of nanites, and this guy couldn't shapeshift the way the Gahana could. He was solid, but made of something else very, very advanced.

Paul had obviously designed this one based on an Era'tran, or as the old name went, a T-Rex.

"Hello there, Grimmie. Welcome to the party."

The red/silver synthoid kicked off a piece of egg shell and took a few steps forward, looking up at Paul's knee and above that

his face, cracking his muzzle of a mouth and chirping at the warlord.

“Hey, you can do better than that. Use words.”

The little T-rex chirped again, then walked forward and rubbed his head on Paul’s leg.

He reached down and patted the back of Grimmie’s hard neck. “Ok, baby steps then. Can you jump?”

The little guy backed up, hunched down, then jumped straight up over 3 meters, flipping tail over head, then landed feet first with a thump.

“Ok, you definitely got your agility working, and you understand me. What else can you do now?”

Grimmie swiped his tail back and forth, as if he were swinging it as a club, for a few seconds then gave up on it. Instead he worked his arms around and had his tiny hands reach up and thump himself in the head several times, the last of which broke something and his head cracked enough it looked like it would fall off.

But it didn’t. It twisted aside almost as if he was being decapitated, but never fully disconnected. His tail did the same, then the rest of his body began to peel apart and reshape itself until he was standing there in a different bipedal form that more mimicked Paul’s body. He no longer had a tail, and his head was almost Human, except it was very blocky and seemed less ‘organic’ than his T-rex form had, though both were clearly technological.

Grimmie coughed a little, then stood ramrod straight and looked up at Paul. “Reporting for duty, Archon.”

“That’s better,” he said, holding his fist up in front of his 1 foot 8 inch tall new friend, which immediately recognized the gesture and returned the fist bump.

“What are your orders?”

“Training,” Paul said ominously. “After we get the rest of you out of your eggs?”

“Shall I wake them up?”

“You know how?”

“Yes. We have been communicating with each other since the beginning. All they need is your order.”

“Go ahead,” Paul said as Grimmie walked over on his thick legs and stood before another egg, waited for it to begin to crack, then walked over to another and repeated the same command that he had received from Paul moments ago.

The warlord watched as a Stegosaurus came out, then a Triceratops, then a Pterodactyl and more, each quickly getting acquainted with the environment outside their shells as he remembered the names he had given each of them previously. All of it didn't come back, but some key pieces did and he knew they'd be very aggressive and eager beavers...because he'd chosen for them to be that way, so he needed to be light on the chit chat and give them something to do.

He waited until they were all out of their shells, then ordered the 'Deebees' into 'Bot' mode and had them start running in three rows of six behind him as he briskly walked back down the trail to the beach, then began taking them around the perimeter of the lake as he talked to them individually and as a group, but never letting them stop.

They were born with a mission, and idle time was not what they required now. They had to get into a training mode, and get to like it if they were going to grow fast enough to help the Empire in the coming Gauntlet Wars. They wouldn't be ready for the first invasion to come. That wasn't their job. The Empire would hold long and hard. The Deebees had to be ready for later, when the T'fen realized that Star Force wasn't going to lay down and die easily, so they'd have to send their heavy hitters to get the job done down the road.

And at the end of that road, when the Deebees were ready, the Empire would take down the toxicity generator and bring them into the fight...which would eventually bring in the T'fen themselves if their servants weren't able to get the job done.

These little Deebees had a lot ahead of them, and as Paul continued to instruct them as they ran, he telepathically talked to his people nearby and gave them a list of materials to gather for the Deebees to eat, for coming out of the eggs they didn't have much energy reserves in them. They were going to need energy, which they could get from a variety of means, but in order to grow in size

they would need a lot of raw building materials, some of which Paul had not anticipated, but now that he could ask them what they needed he had his people get working on assembling the full list.

Now that they were here, the warlord was beginning to realize just how bad the Gahana must have had it on their own after their Paragons had been killed. He was amazed they had done as well as they had, but ultimately they'd failed against the T'fen and were driven from their galaxies or forced into stasis to remain in them.

Paul knew that the Deebees were no match for the T'fen, who were far older and more experienced, and they'd never be on their own. He could sense how much the Vanguard race needed the Paragons, and in that lay the key. They had to operate together to be at their strongest. The Gahana's Paragons had been killed long ago, and the T'fen had murdered theirs. They were both half of a whole, and in the case of the T'fen were damn well motivated to prevent another Vanguard race from rising to challenge them.

But the joke was on them, and this one had come out of one of the 'safe' galaxies covered in the toxicity field. Now they had a remote place to train and grow, and as far as he knew, the T'fen had no way to detect them here, let alone travel this far out from the gravity wells in the nearby galaxies.

Paul, Azoro, the Empire, and the Neofan had their chance now. They had a potential way to win the long game, Vanguard against Vanguard, if they could find a way to survive that long...

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