

Brekken

Chapter 1: Unexpected Fireworks

It was all familiar now. The sensation of being everywhere at once and nowhere at all at the same time had lost its thrill. Too many lives were lost for this he thought. Too many of my soldiers...and all in vain. Warp space travel no longer thrilled him, no longer mystified him. Only one thought dominated his mind now. I must get home, I must warn them...

Beep!!Beep!!Beep!!

What the?! Those are battle sirens! But we can't be attacked in warp space... A sudden jolt. All was still. Then all hell broke loose.

Captain to the bridge! Captain to the bridge! Enemy fighters at marks eight niner zero, captain to the bridge!

Better hustle, if its not too late already... He could no longer be their leader. Running through the passages of his command ship, seeing the expressions of puzzlement, confusion, and sheer terror on his crewmen's faces, he could do nothing but mirror them. For he had no idea how this had happened either. He remembered clearly the battle. How, out of nowhere, at the moment of victory, the enemy fleet had warped out, and a new one warped in. But this one was different. This one, there was no hope. Even his command ship could not hope to destroy this fleet, not with million fighters. He remembered the static, the bursts of crying over the close range communications network, knowing that with each one another one of his men had been destroyed. They tried to filter out the fighters' speech in the heat of battle, and did it well, except for when the fighter was destroyed and a burst of energy swept through its comms array. 5 more spikes. 5 more of my men down, my men...my men whom I promised would return home, home to wife and children. Children...My son! All this flashed through his head as he made his way to the bridge.

"Captain, 3 squads of fighters have lost contact, and the enemy fleet is that which we were fleeing from!"

"How did they pull us out of warp?"

"I don't know sir. All I know is that...that..."

"SAY IT!"

"Our warp engines are gone sir."

"Gone?!?!?! What do you mean gone?!?!?"

"They're...just that sir, gone..."

"Then we can't go back to warp?"

"No, sir."

"Open a patch to the homeworld."

"Yes sir."

His crew looked at him in puzzlement. Surely he knew that by the time the homeworld received and acknowledged the transmission they would all be dead. He looked at them and nodded. Then they understood. They all were dead. The static came over the radio again, but this time it was an empty noise, no shadows of dead men's screams.

"Homeworld, this is Admiral Khanir. We have encountered massive enemy forces, and by the time you hear this, we will already be dead. They have devised some system of pulling ships out of warp space..."

And the lone admiral continued, saying goodbye to his family, apologizing

to the world, all the while the enemy flagship appeared from warp, and received and decoded their transmission. And they began to understand their enemy for the first time...

At the same moment, his son was playing on their secret farm on a world that was not the homeworld. No, the homeworld was too risky for the family of the leader of the People father had said. And then the sky grew dark as a cloud passed over the blue sun of this world. The child looked up in puzzlement, and recognized not a cloud, but a shimmer, a shimmer that looked like the sun, but cast a shadow, blocking the sun. Terrified, he ran home in fear. But when he returned, his home was no longer there. A blinding flash, and he could see the clouds scatter, and the mushroom cloud they had learned so much about in class appear on the horizon. The child knew then that something was terribly wrong. This was no fireworks. Though they had been used before in fireworks, nuclear weapons in show had always been announced beforehand. This was different.

As the captain of the lone ship finished his speech, he told the homeworld to find his son, and keep him safe. The enemy heard this. But the enemy already thought that they had destroyed the child. And the lone captain ended his transmission, the static stopped. No longer were the screams of ghosts on the airwaves. The radar was nearly empty, empty of all allies. He looked out the viewscreen, and in final defiance shouted

"Come and get me!!!!!!!!!! Fire all weapons at will! Come and get me you sorry b-"

And the lone admiral became another ghost on the airwaves, another flash in space, along with the 50,000 crew men on his flagship. And the child on the world of the blue sun looked at the horizon in puzzlement as the soft breeze that he knew was from the explosion tickled his forehead and hair. And he wondered what could be the cause of these unexpected fireworks...

Chapter 2: Infestation

"Computer, access the ships database."

"Query?"

"I want to see the logs we took from the Enemy."

"Access restricted. Please confirm authorization."

"Captain Tarik Khanir."

"Authorizing; Please wait...Authorization: Granted"

The soft feminine voice of the ships main computer comforted him, he who had seen so much in so little time, as did the now familiar blinking green glow of confirmed authorization. He had to understand what he had done. He had to know why. Only recently had the rank of captain been granted to him. He remembered the battles fought, fought so long ago that they were mere footnotes in class to the new Generation, and yet they remained as vivid as the screen blinking green before him. Even more vivid they seemed in dream, but he could never be sure anymore what was dream and what was real. He never ruled a dream out as being reality, and he never ruled reality out as being a dream. He treated both the same.

"Access the log files on the Enemy. The ones we pulled from their computers."

"Accessing...Please wa-"

"Computer, audio off."

Command Acknowledged the screen said. Good, he thought, it may be comforting at times, but at other times it can be just plain annoying. Unfortunately, the ship was old. As thus, its computer could only handle one command from any one person at a given time. He liked the old ships, despite their setbacks. He had seen the guns of this ship, fired them in battle. He could recall when he took orders, so long ago, oh so long ago...He snapped back to attention, remembering the task at hand.

"Computer, access the decrypted Enemy log files."

Accessing...Please wait.

File accessed.

“Show me the first one we pulled from their ships on this screen.”

He chuckled quietly to himself, reminiscing at the memory of when the computer went haywire and whenever you asked for the computer to display something on screen it would display it on the other side of the ship unless you specified this screen. Even since they had fixed the problem, the habit stuck, as it did with many other members of the crew. At last, he thought as the computer began to read the file from the database.

Decrypted data accessed.

Requesting translation application from fleet computer.

Requested access approved.

Translating data.

The council has ended. We have reached a decision concerning the Foreigners. We shall bide our time and see what they do with our worlds. If they corrupt them, we shall destroy them. It is because of this that the utmost secrecy is required, and Command is instigating the old laws. Never be seen. Never be heard. No thought is sacred, no thought is safe. Let not a whisper of your existence be known to any race that you do not intend to destroy, or are not already destroying. We waited. We watched. Some of us grew restless, watching them spread from world to world. Watching as those worlds we purified were corrupted anew. We cannot continue, the murmur ran through the ranks. No world can take three purifications. And no world can take more than one final purification. Ever since the flaw was discovered, it was left. We will succeed in purifying the universe. At least those galaxies we watch over. We had masters once, great and powerful. We never saw them take physical form until they attacked us. Out of nowhere, a fleet. A myriad of warships as diverse as there were worlds. We deemed it impossible that they could have been constructed by the same race, the same people. Soon we found out that those ships were people. But they saw something in us that we did not see, or had lost sight of. They saw that we had dying-greed. We would not continue to conquer worlds endlessly. We would conquer, but rebuild and restore those worlds we conquered. We were sure not to harm them, unless they housed a dangerous race. Dangerous. Back then, that word meant harmful to us. Now it means something different. Now it means creatures that as a vile infestation, like those we watch now. They find worlds, and change them, leaving their mark upon them. We used to reign over billion worlds, watching them. We would guard them, take care of them. But no, that is the stories told by our Leaders now, not the stories told by our Elders. Our Elders say that we consumed worlds as a fire consumes hydrogen. Violently and ravenously. Insatiable was our greed. For a time. But the phase passed. Unfortunately, it only passed when over 89% of our population had been wiped out by our Teachers. They took physical form that day, trying to communicate with us however they did. For a

while, we simply fought them. Until the troops were diminished. We lost our fight, our power. Our Teachers had drained us of all our energy. They would whisper to us. Whisper into parts of our hearing we had forgotten how to use since before time. Soon, the whispers grew to soft speech, and eventually, seeing that we no longer fought them, it became true, audible speech. Then, when one of us wondered, how am I hearing this? the others heard his thought. Our Teachers taught us how to speak without using the cumbersome elemental world for frequency or medium. And since that day, we were never the same.

Apologies captain, log was impartial. The computer was damaged by the defense systems in the short battle to take the ship.

“But wasn’t this log on other ships as well? It seems...religious...a side to the enemy I never would have expected to have even seen.”

No, captain, log was not found. Salvage operations continue however, and hopes are high that we may soon learn more about the Enemy than ever before.

The captain then walked to the bridge, and requested from Space Dock Command permission to leave and command of the ship for non-mission purposes.

A few days later, permission was granted. The old ship then set sail among the stars for the place at which the captain hoped would give him more answers. As the ship entered warp space, everything froze, and the captain smiled inwardly, exhilarating in the thrill of being paralyzed and able to move at the same time, of being everywhere imaginable, and nowhere at all. Then the feeling faded, and he knew that he was on his way. And he began to reminisce, wondering what he would tell his son...

Chapter 3: Child

Growing up without having parents, or even knowing who your parents were, was not uncommon on the world of the blue sun. The children who lost their parents on the day of the unexpected fireworks found each other, and formed a special bond. There were fifteen of them. No one knew who had launched those twenty-five nuclear missiles. Not a ship had appeared on radar, and nothing but heat shimmer had been seen in the sky. As thus, it was accounted for as the result of a blue solar flare* shorting out the circuits and causing the missiles to detonate. These fifteen children, as a result, have no idea who they were. Little did they, or the entire planet, know that among them was Tarik Khanir, son of the Military Leader of the People, and one of the most well-known and successful admirals in combat in all of history. Others amongst these fifteen were also Charles Lindifrine, son of the Councilmen David Lindifrine, one of the men who led the People, not

the army, known for his ability to, over fourteen lunches in two weeks with a person change their view to conform to his own. So successful was he, that no one ran in opposition, or did so for long before withdrawing. Others include Karla Vikovsky, Mitchel Vender, Samuel Nehronis*, and Simon Bond. All, though they did not know, were the children of some of the greatest political and military leaders of their day. But amongst themselves, they gave themselves their own names. Tarik was the only one who lived on a farm, and was known as Farmboy because of it. Karla was Queen, for the manner in which she conducted business, not knowing of course that her mother had been queen over a small planet for a while before becoming involved in the politics of the People. There was Shrink, Pie, Music, Sweetness, Jane (an abbreviation for the expression Shrink remembered from his early childhood, G.I. Jane), and Pita. Pita refused to be called by any nickname whatsoever, and chose his own name. These were the leaders of the group, the survivors. It is a tragedy that, a mere 6 years after the unexpected fireworks, when most of those 15 were at the age of ten, that their number had now dwindled to a mere seven, those named above. None of them would ever say what happened to the other eight, though not for lack of trying. These seven formed a tight-knit group, a family you could call it, and eventually found their way into a school. In this school, they were Processed. In other words, they were turned from innocent twelve to fourteen year old children and adolescents and turned into soldiers, pilots, and every other military use for a person you can think of. They all would have died had it not been for their teacher. Faurin was his name, and he noticed striking resemblances between some of them and some very important people he knew of. Among these, the most apparent was the jaw line and brow of the one they called Farmboy. He looks just like Khanir! Faurin thought. So, acting on this hunch, he had the child tested. The results were positive. The boy tested positive on all of the few rare genes that Khanir had. Its still up to debate as to why the blood flow and brain activity was increased in the Khanir family. But it is known, that for twelve generations, every Khanir male went on to serve in the military, all of them obtaining at least the rank of Captain. After finding out that this "Farmboy" was very probably the son of Admiral Khanir, Faurin decided to have the other students of this family group tested. All came back positive for relation to many people who had been influential in their day, and had helped to steer the path of the People. He told this to Command, and the Seven were taken from the world of the blue sun to the fleet command school, where they would learn fleet tactics and combat skills.

*:Blue solar flare – Most suns have solar flares, but blue stars are notorious for having very dangerous flares. On one noted occasion, as the result of a blue solar flare, the planet Tyrinia XII is said to have suffered a global blackout, which resulted in mass starvation. Because of this experience, no world with a blue sun has been allowed to obtain the class C9 rank, or fully independent of planet resources resource acquirement.

*Samuel Nehronis a.k.a Samuel "Sweetness" Nehronis

Author's Note:It may not seem relevant now, but trust me, in a future column (don't even think about asking me how far ahead in the future) it will become relevant.

Chapter 4: Assignment

"I'll do what I darn well please!"

"But sir, with all due respect, he is the son of Admiral Khanir."

"I am a member of the Board of the High Command! And that isn't proven yet! I am giving this...this...'Farmboy' 20 fighters! isn't that enough for a first assignment?!?!?!"

"Yes...sir"

The messenger was nervous. He had never delivered a fleet assignment before. He knocked lightly on the door.

"Come in."

Opening the door, he saw a young man. He swore had seen that face before, but he couldn't place exactly where. This man was far too young to be given a fleet, even if it was a mere twenty fighters. And yet, he could not find the courage to turn away. The man was regarding him. He had a high cheekbone, wide nose, defined chin, and eyes that could make a Senator nervous. When he looked at you, you felt as though you were being regarded as a potential enemy, and then dismissed in a second. The messenger got the feeling that, despite the fact that, according to rumor, this man, Farmboy, had gotten the highest scores ever in everything in Fleet Command School, he hadn't tried. He had a feeling that this sharp-eyed man had never tried in his life. And yet, you could still sense that there was a lot more going on behind that piercing gaze than he let on.

"Uh, sir, ummmm...you've been assigned to a small fleet of twenty fighters."

"What rank, my good fellow?"

"Captain, sir."

At this, the man pounded his fist on the wall behind his bunk, shouting

"SWEETNESSSSSSSSSSS!!!!!!!!!!!! GET IN HERE!!!!!! WHAT KIND OF SICK PRANK ARE YOU TRYING TO PULL????*"

Moments later, a small man who also had the look of never having had tried in his life appeared, though he seemed much dreamier than this Farmboy character.

"Whachutalkinbou?"

"Don't pull yo' slang wit me broda!"

“Alright Farmboy, what do you want me for? And how many times will maintenance be called down here for repairs on that wall before you finally remember that you have a room ringer one foot to the right of your bed?”

“Oh. Oooooooooops.”

“Well, what did you want?”

“Sweetness, you ever seen this man before?”

“No, though I bet he’s a messenger.”

“Alright. And you didn’t get paid to deliver this message to me?”

At this he gazed at the messenger.

“No, uh, no sir, no more than the usual command payment.”

“Sweetness, round up the others. And you, messenger, where’s my troop list?”

“Right here sir.”

At this, the messenger handed Farmboy the list of all those serving in this small, twenty fighter fleet. This puzzled him. Under captain, the name Tarik Khanir appeared, despite the fact that the messenger had told him that he was captain. But before that thought even finished, he knew. He realized, and all of his life up to that point suddenly made sense.

*: Sweetness was known as the joker of the group. He would often play practical jokes on the others of the Seven. He once paid a messenger 500 creds to tell Queen that she had been assigned to her own planet. The next day, he reported to school with a black eye, his left rear molar missing, and a fractured jaw.

Chapter 5: The Khanir Discovery

“Alright folks, lets show ‘em some team work!”

“Roger that Tarik”

His first battle alone. They were outnumbered nearly two to one, but this wasn’t a problem. He had already analyzed the enemy fighters.

“Remember, aim for the top of the frontal shield, its weak there, and don’t forget, unit two, you are our saviors.”

He had unit two, five of his twenty fighters, assigned out of sight. It was time to play chicken with the Enemy. He gave the order, and his line of fighters wove in and out, up and down, spinning so fast that it was impossible to get a lock on as they rocketed towards the enemy, firing all weapons as fast as they could, hitting nothing, but still causing havoc among the enemy fighters. The fighters neared. His estimated time till impact with enemy fighter...10 seconds.

“Time for a little help from god. Full reverse!”

As this, unit two picked up their key and flew at full speed towards the enemy from the side.

“Fire at will!”

His fighters opened fire from the front, and unit two broadsided the enemy ships. Two to one, and now one to zero. The battle had lasted less than a minute.

“Cleanup!” he shouted into the mike. They all knew what this meant. They broke up into five squads of four to hunt down any survivors. They had rehearsed this in the sims a million times. It was old news. He submitted his battle report.

Squad Captain Tarik Khanir;

Battle summary: At 29.30.67B, 42 enemy fighters were encountered. After battle time-1 minute-enemy losses: total; our losses: none.

End Battle summary.

Now, it had been several months. This trend had continued, earning it the name of the Khanir discrepancy. His first fight had been against a fleet more than twice the size of his. He had suffered no casualties. His second had been against a fleet three times his fleets size. His next battles continued, though he did occasionally get help from a patrolling frigate or fighter squad. He received his next mission. But there was something wrong here, the messenger must have made a mistake. The Admiral couldn’t assign them, a mere twenty fighters to battle with six frigates and a hundred fifty fighters! It was absurd! A suicide mission! So, this is what I get for overtime pay, huh? he thought. Better suit up. He called together his squad. He used the old nicknames with the seven, despite the fact that they now knew who they were.

“Alright, Queen, you lead unit two this time. Folks, we are against ridiculous odds, but I’ve got a plan.....”

They had just arrived at the location where the enemy fleet was supposed to be when Tarik noticed that there were no enemy ships on radar. The heat of battle, he thought: Never thought it would be this cold, he thought.

"Alright, all units, listen up. I got a hunch here, and we all know what happens when I play a hunch, right?"

"Nobody dies but them!" his fleet cheered over the radio.

"Alright folks, unit two, head to 23.56.9A vector 3.12.B. Everyone else, cavalry formation."

His fighters lined up in a straight line. They were ready, hanging on their captains every word.

"Unit two, status."

"In position and awaiting your orders"

"Alright, minimize movement. I don't want any rotation, understand? Once you have done that, shut down all non-vital systems. Alright people, that's everything but life support and the computer that turns everything else back on. Maintain radio silence on my command. Holy..."

As he finished his commands, he saw the black. It was the signature. Every fighter pilot saw it, and knew it for what it was. At first all the Board of Command dismissed it as paranoia, that it was just the Enemies' warp drive, it allowed it to stop much more suddenly. But then even they admitted it. The enemy could harness a singularity. They could mold and wrap it around themselves, blotting out light, and also forming an impenetrable shield. However, his father had discovered that though this shield could not be penetrated by their weapons, it couldn't be penetrated by the enemies' weapons either. If they fired even a single shot, the black hole would encompass them before it faded. They had no idea how they generated enough energy to maintain these singularities, but they knew that they had them.

"Alright people, we got black, and lots of it. I think that estimate was wrong. I can make out at least a dozen frigate class ships there, and I think that one hundred and fifty fighters was a very bad underguesstimate. I see three hundred there. Silence commences now."

The black shifted. It shattered. It was one of the most beautiful things known in the universe, to see an enemy black shield lower. The shimmering colors, the shining light. Because the black hole absorbed all light, when it was closed, or shattered, all of the light escaped again, radiating every color that that ship had encountered. Some pilots who lost all but their torso said it was worth it, and they would gladly go back into battle to see it again. But it only lasted a second. Then, hundreds of fighters were upon them, swarming around them. However, they were avoiding them, not as an evasive maneuver, but as they would maneuver around debris. His plan was working perfectly. then, the rumble and vibration began that let him know that the frigates were coming near. He had noticed, however, that the fighters lacked any sort of radar whatsoever. They would have to rely on vision and infrared now.

"10ks to frigates...9...8...7...6...5...4...3...2...1...0..."

His ship was vibrating so violently he almost blacked out. He heard complaints from other people in his fleet as well.

“What’s the matter Sweetness, never been this close to a frigates engines before?”

“Like you have? Come on Farmboy, we know you haven’t.”

“Oh yeah, but I’ve read about it. You know, you might be surprised to learn that the database on a cruiser is actually relatively...full.”

Chuckles from the others greeted his ears. Good, he had cheered them up. No doubt they too had seen the black, the swarms of fighters, dozens of times more than what they had expected.

“Alright, power up. Set lasers to overcharge, and aim for the frigates engines.”

“Uh, Farmboy, I don’t know about you, but this thing ain’t no tractor, and those things aren’t no cattle. They got shielding round their engines, eh compodre?”

“Tisk tisk tisk, Shrink. You can never carry a southern accent far enough to wash your backside with. Of course I know they have shielding on their engines.”

“Then why are we wasting valuable energy on overcharging blasts when we cou-“Shrink, shut up and watch.”

At this, his laser charged. 70...80...90...95...97...99...100%. At this, he maneuvered his fighter so that everyone could see he wasn’t actually aiming for the frigates’ engines. They began to murmur their puzzlement. He fired his beam, and a wave of flame greeted his eyes, traveling towards the frigate, closer, closer, inside the frigate. A rattle and a shockwave greeted him, and he knew they understood.

“I should have remembered that enemy frigate exhaust is flammable...” he heard Shrink mutter under his breath. They all followed his example, and then they suddenly had a wall of derelict and damaged incapacitated frigates between them and the enemy fighters.\

“Take cover among the frigates until they get here, but when they do, try and lure them close to the frigates”

So they waited, as the enemy fighters came towards them. He sat there silently, charging his beam, as his compatriots shouted at him “What are you trying to do, play chicken with them?!?!?”.

“Unit two, clean back sweep. Everyone else, get away from the frigates!”

Shrink had remembered that enemy exhaust was flammable. He hadn’t yet figured out, however, that that could be exploited against almost every enemy ship in existence. His laser reached 100%, and he waited as the swarm engulfed him. Aiming carefully, he fired his laser at the exposed engine of one of the smashed frigates. It hadn’t been hit by a laser, so its engine was intact, still spewing exhaust. Exhaust that the Enemy was wallowing and creating. The fire trail became a road, then byway, then a highway, and finally an intergalactic trade route of fire. “Engines full reverse!” he shouted at the computer. It complied, and he shot away from the growing fireball.

“Alright everyone, stop gaping at the fireworks and lets do some cleanup. But they couldn’t help it. It was hilarious. Laughter greeted him from the radio. He chuckled to himself, admiring his handy work. The enemy fighters were rapidly fleeing the growing fireball, all the while the flame traveled up their exhaust trails and caught them, resulting in burst exactly like fireworks. Only a few fighters had enough time to think to turn off their engines and stop the exhaust flow, but these were still damaged, and easily disposed of. Finally, he thought, some expected fireworks.

One week later, the High Command Board Member received a memo about something that warranted his attention. 3 hours later, an interpreter of facts* was seated at his desk.

“Sir, by the old standards, Tarik Khanir’s leadership capability, ingenuity, and creativity are off the charts. You’ve thrown fleets at him to combat that fleets with cruisers couldn’t handle without fewer casualties.”

“What do you mean?”

“Sir, the original twenty fighters in Tarik Khanir’s squadron are still there, and he has not suffered a single damaged ship or injured pilot. And, as of his battle last week, if he attempted to tally the number of fighters his fleet has destroyed, he would need more fighters. To date, he and his squadron have destroyed 39 frigates, three hundred and seventy two bombers, and over 2 thousand fighters. This phenomenon has, at least throughout the rumor channel, been named the K-“

“The Khanir Discrepancy. I know. Give him promotion and never bother me again.”

I hate it when the children of my old adversaries do well. Particularly when those adversaries are old friends, he thought as he stared into the endless void of space.

*: Interpreter of facts - A messenger to the Board of High Command who has high math skills and is able to generate 95% accurate guesses at percentages of casualties and other such battle statistics on the spot.

Chapter 6: Anguish

They had gone too far. Far too far. They had pushed and pushed until by all rights he should have been dead, and yet he and his squad survived. Until recently. Someone had had it out for them since the beginning, but that was no reason to waste materials and manpower. Their fights had always been difficult, biased in the enemies favor, but they had always been able to use their minds and their instincts to win. But then something changed. The person giving battle

assignments flipped, cracked, had a mental breakdown or something. They sent his 20 fighter squadron against cruiser class enemy ships. Everyone knew that a ship with cruiser class was designed to take out smaller ships like his fighters. Still, somehow they survived the battle and destroyed the cruiser. But in that battle they lost someone. It wasn't one of the Seven, but it hurt still. And, worse still, they didn't replace them. His squadron was brought down to 19 fighters. Next battle he lost his faith in the military. He remembered distinctly his friends and allies, dying one by one in a hopeless, inescapable battle. Either that, or someone mixed up the battle assignments. He doubted that, particularly being as never in the history of military assignment had there been such a mix-up. He was assigned to fight three cruisers with his small nineteen fighter squad. When he arrived, he found he had been betrayed by the High Command. There were three cruisers, yes, but in addition there was also a battleship and hundreds of frigates. He remembered as they swarmed his small fleet as they tried to escape, the calls of his allies ringing in his ears, and finally, after all of his allies were gone, his friends. First to go was Shrink. Then Queen. Pita. All lost for all he could tell. He hadn't heard them since. He alone escaped that battle through ways he still wasn't sure of. But instead of heading back to the command ship, he set his coordinates for a random star and put his engines on full. He was still sitting in his cockpit, even now as the star was in sight. He hadn't known that there were hospitable planets in the system, but his computer soon told him so. He also found that there was life on all but one of them. He even found that there was signs of modern technology on a different one, even though the computer said that it was an uninhabited world. He plotted his course for the telltale energy signatures and prepared for the jarring descent into the atmosphere. He had time now. Time to think. Time to plan. He also now had something he hadn't known yet in his life. Hate. Hate and anguish. I'll save those for when I need them he thought, descending into the planets atmosphere.

Chapter 7: Corruption

Not long after the expansion of mankind to worlds beyond the Earth it was deemed that a new order would be necessary. The home world, Earth, had had quite a few of its own problems with many governments, let alone many planets under their control. So, it was deemed necessary to consolidate the governments of Earth into a ruling body capable of seeing over all the worlds that mankind touched. Many countries that were members of the United Nations merged to form a body known as the Protectorate of Earth. Already having control over many of the first colonies, the Protectorate was in a relatively good position for global conquest, a thing, and term, that would soon become a part of the past. Seeing the might of the protectorate, many third-world countries applied for membership, all being accepted. Only a few renegade countries held out. These the Protectorate exterminated. On the colonization of the of one hundredth world beyond the Earth, the senators of the Protectorate deemed that in the event that hostile alien life was encountered (several species of docile single-cell microbes were found deep under the surface of mars, but showed no hostility to human colonization) a strong military space force would be needed. Believing that the entire system would need to be reworked, they set to work on creating a militaristic democracy: a government in which the citizens elected their leaders unless they were at war, in which case members of the High Command, and then, in smaller areas and amounts, Fleet

Command, would become the rulers. Soon, with the first encountering of a hostile species on the one hundred and first world, a state of war was declared that has not yet been ended. The enemy long since forgotten until the true Enemy appeared, corruption's seeds were sown on that fateful day when a single member of species X3987, commonly known as the Binuvian Attack Vine, launched several of its three-foot long spines into the chest of an explorer. The species was then contained, and after having its DNA catalogued, recorded, and preserved and one single organism put into a state of cold-induced stasis that was then transported back to the Fleet Command Bio Station, the species was exterminated. The plant, reacting on its natural instincts, was deemed hostile. High Command declared a state of war. There has not been an election since. Now, nearly 3,420 years later, members of the High Command are chosen by their predecessors. They can have whatever they want, and members of Fleet Command are rarely disobeyed. This is the world Tarik Discovered through hacking into Fleet Command's main database. And then he decided to do what he felt he must.

Chapter 8: Descent

The ride into the planet's atmosphere was bumpy, as was to be expected when descending in a small, one-man fighter. He remembered with anger the days when he was aboard the massive fleet training vessels, how they would land and take off from planets without anyone ever knowing unless they were told. SMACK! That'll leave a nice mark in my forehead Tarik thought. Close contact with a window strong enough to resist the vacuum and pressures of space was never pleasant. To make things worse, he had overshot his landing goal, and instead of heading towards the island where the telltale energy signatures that gave away a little advanced technology were, he was now plummeting towards the ocean surrounding it about 100 miles to the north. Thinking quickly, he punched the reverse afterburners and slowed his descent down just enough so that his ship would not shatter on impact with the water. After this he switched the engines from interstellar to planetary drives and prepared for the autopilot to expire. Curbing in, he rounded his flight path and made another attempt for the island. That smoke wasn't there before he thought before BOOOOOOM!!!! the anti-aircraft missile exploded a hundred feet to the left of his fighter. They're hostile!?!?!?!?!?!?!?! he thought. Suddenly, his controls stopped responding, no matter how hard he tried. Looking above him through the near bubble dome fighter window, he realized that his problems had just gone from being a lone fighter pilot stranded on a supposedly deserted planet to being a lone fighter pilot stranded on a supposedly deserted planet being tractor beamed into a cloaked vessel. After that, he started to form a train of thought in his head that went something like this: Shoot! I'm being tractor-beamed into an unidentified vessel...a cloaked unidentified vessel...who do I know with cloak-capable ships...FLEET! and...the Enemy...but that doesn't make any sense...fleet wouldn't have both a tractor and a cloaking device on the same ship...and what the hell is THAT...BUZZING!!!. After this thought had run its course, he hardly had a chance to begin formulating his next thought before he became unconscious. When he awoke, he was strapped to a chair in a room lit by only a single thermalight*. Captured! he thought. "I suppose my plans for revenge aren't going quite as well as I had hoped" he muttered to himself.

"So, you are from Fleet?" a voice from the darkness inquired.

"Who are you and what do you want?" Tarik replied.

"Who we are is not important and what we want is information."

"So there are more than one of you?"

Very observant, for a fighter pilot, said a voice in his head.

His mind reeled in shock from the possibilities. There were almost no known life-forms in the universe that could communicate telepathically, and on the very short list was the Enemy!

"Show yourself! I don't want to be forced to look for you when I am killing you." Saying this, he focused his mind on his arms, using some of the advanced defense class techniques he had learned in Fleet Academy.

"You think you can escape? Surely you can't be ser-"

At this, Tarik finished concentrating his focus and strength and proceeded to break the cords that were holding him as though they were paper**.

"Impressive..." two dozen guns appeared from the shadows - ", most impressive." All of them pointing at Tarik.

"Sit. Down. Now. But, of course, only if you value your life. Move a muscle beyond that and you will be fired upon."

Geez, Tarik thought, I never thought I would actually have to use those classes. Well, here goes. He sat down, very slowly. It was an exercise designed to focus one's self, being as it required concentrating on every millimeter of movement in the muscles. More focus. I haven't focused this much since Academy, and I have fought hundreds of fighters at a time! Preparing his mind for one of the feats that was taught to the Academy students in the optional advanced defense and escape classes, Tarik sat down. But when his butt hit the seat, it didn't stop there. Instead, he flipped the chair on its back and where most other people who go through the same motion land on their backs and hit their heads, Tarik pulled a backwards hand flip, landing him behind the shoulder of one of the people behind one of the guns. In an instant, it was in his hands. "Now, put your weapons down slowly." Finally, he thought, in control. I like being in con-a cold metal knife blade pressed against his throat-trol.

"I see then that you are talented. Very well, we shall let you live." The knife disappeared once more into the darkness.

"I am Haladhim, leader of this band of Space Pirates, salvagers, and thieves that you see before you. We are all from a tribe of a long forgotten world that was taken from us by the Enemy. Evidently, the Enemy also did experiments of some kind on us, as many of us have somehow inherited their telepathic abilities. It is from that that I know that you were very puzzled about our

display of both tractor and cloak technology. The answer is simple. The cloak was salvaged from an Enemy frigate and the tractor from the other enemy's frigate, both of them for our command ship. What is your name, young one?"

"The other enemy? Who are they?"

"You would call them 'Fleet', and I believe that I have asked you a question."

"So you have. My name is Tarik Khanir, and it would appear that we both share the same enemies. The Fleet has murdered all of my friends***. The Enemy is the enemy of us all."

"Welcome to our pirate ship, Tarik Khanir. I trust you shall enjoy your stay."

Several months passed, each passing month signifying Tarik's having passed another one of the Space Pirates' tests. Over time, he became higher and higher ranked in the space pirate regime until he became a member of the Tenth Council. This was the main governing body in that band of Space Pirates, essentially consisting of the top ten ranked officials in their organization. Tarik now had not only the means to his end, but he had friends to help him there.

*Thermalight – often used in outposts on low-yield systems, thermalights are designed for gathering and storing thermal energy (the energy from living organisms' bodies) and changing it to radiant energy. In essence, the only power it needs is living organisms, making it very efficient.

**For comparison purposes only, paper had been out of use for several thousand years before Tarik was even born.

***This footnote will be modified later on when Chapter 13: Nehronis is released. True footnote that will remain: See Chapters 3 and 13.

Chapter 9: The Waltz

It was the annual ball. Every single commander from both fleet and Fleet Command would be at this ball, in addition to dozens upon dozens of "honored guests". Tarik had heard of this annual ball, and he knew that his father had attended it. He had even heard the rumor of how this annual gala event got its name from his father. The event was called the Waltz. The story went something like this. His father, being not only a fleet command officer but also a renowned war veteran and hero, he was more than honored and honorable enough to attend. The story says that one Waltz,

Tarik's father arrived late because of a warp space shift that had caused a need for a course readjustment in mid-flight. His father's favorite type of dance had been a waltz, and it just so happened that as he walked in, a waltz was beginning. Exclaiming "Ahhh, the Waltz!" he began to, excellent showman and party guest that he was, dance with himself. Before long he had danced with virtually every woman in the room, and when the waltz that was playing stopped, he did not. So, feeling the awkwardness of the moment, the orchestra's conductor had the orchestra repeat the song again. This was repeated throughout the entire evening, in effect making it so that after Admiral Khanir arrived, the entire event was one long, continuous waltz. So, after that occurrence, all those who attended called it the Waltz afterwards, and the name stuck. Even less willing to abandon the nickname after admiral Khanir's death at the hands of the enemy, the Waltz had become symbolic of the might and determination of the Fleet military and the Fleet Command's leadership. And so Tarik decided to pay High Fleet Commander Mishkin** a visit.

"Excuse me, Commander Mishkin?"

"Yes my Lady of Enixin? You look simply gorgeous tonight"

"Oh, well, thank you. I must say I do apologize for my husbands tardiness, but governing a world is quite a full and hectic job, wouldn't you say?"

"Well, of course, m'lady, but this is indeed the Waltz after all."

Glancing about, looking for an escape from the Lady Of Enixin, the wife of the current governor of the Enixin system, something caught his eye. He dismissed it at first, instead focusing on the woman before him. She was short, had flaming, chaotic red hair, and looked like she had just been going through warp space outside of a shuttle. At least, he imagined that the winds in warp space would do that to one's hair, but he didn't have much of a true idea, being as it was impossible for anyone to survive in warp space. Then it caught his eye again. It ... can't be. No, I must keep my focus up. The recent battle report ran through his head: Enemy forces: unknown (computer overload while attempting to calculate); Our Forces: 20 fighters – After battle time 4 minutes: Enemy forces: no calculable change (due to unknown start amount); Our Forces: 0 fighters. He had never felt a guilt like this before, and he knew that he couldn't let it get to him. He also knew that – there!! There he is again! I would swear that that's...but no, it just...can't...be...knew that if he let it get to him, he would no longer be able to lead as well as he had been for the past 14 years since Khanir had died. It was known only to those who had been the top ranked officials and commanders at the time, but thankfully the public never knew. Admiral Khanir had actually been Lead Admiral High Fleet Commander Khanir, the top rank. He had been the complete and utter controller of the military, or at least he could have been if he had only chosen to. But that was the main difference between him and Khanir. He, Mishkin, would take his power when he got it, no matter the cost. Khanir, on the other hand, even when he was handed the key to becoming the ruler of all of mankind, delegated the power out to virtually everyone but himself. But he was a coward, afraid to rule...a coward...a dead coward...but, that looks just like him...He knew it must have been some old memory surfacing. But he still swore that he saw Khanir as he had been when he first met him, young, about twenty, or at least in his early twenties. And he there, staring at

him, from the crowd of the Waltz. He turned to see that the Lady of Enixin had gone, and wondered if this would affect his reputation. He looked again, and saw no-one. Looking to one of the corners of the grand ballroom, he saw the same figure there, staring at him. He had never seen Khanir's son, but this was how he imagined he would have looked like if he had reached the age. But he was killed in that battle...no fighters remained... He knew it wasn't possible, but there was no way that the man who was...who was...no longer in the corner...I must be going crazy! thought Mishkin. And then a whisper passed through him, and it shook him to his very marrow. I know what you did...you killed the only son of the admiral Khanir...you knew that you would only pale in comparison to him...so you eliminated him...Of course he thought in return, once more going through his guilt ridding cycle. If he had come of true age, he surely would have proven to be a better leader than me. Of course I couldn't let it happen. And then he saw a vision from his nightmares, or at least the few he had. There was a customary uniform of the Lead Admiral High Fleet Commander. It was a tight fitting black shirt. Formal black pants, black belt. On top of this, there was a mantle that signified the rank, that essentially turned the typical human form into something a bit more commanding and monstrous. It added upturned curving spikes to the shoulders, and a certain point about the elbows and knees that was unnatural. After that set, there was a cloak that was draped over this, adding a hood. Then there was a knee-length black cape. In essence, if the Lead Admiral High Fleet Commander actually wore the full uniform, and he walked at a brisk pace, he had the appearance of becoming like liquid, living, breathing black flame. Smoke given shape and will. The embodiment of a power that was shadow capable of encompassing and striking down any force imaginable. The day that Lead Admiral High Fleet Commander Khanir had left for the mission that would not bring him home was the first, and only time that he had attended a High Fleet Command meeting and not worn the customary uniform. He had had it hidden away somewhere for his son, for when his son grew up, almost as if he had known that he wouldn't return. And then there was the look. The look that the senior Khanir had given him right before he boarded the Blue Sun, his command ship. It was a look of sadness, but not of regret. It was not sadness because he was once again leaving his wife and child again to go to the front lines, but it was almost as if he knew what was going to happen, but could not prevent it. And the look had been aimed directly at Mishkin. It had said something else, too, but Mishkin knew he could not reminisce in that, for it would stir up too much guilt. But the figure was still there. The young Khanir, robed in the Lead Admiral High Fleet Commander uniform, walked into the Waltz. It was a full minute before he looked real, before the shadow of the robes around him stopped moving. And then Mishkin realized something. He realized that he was not the only one staring at the figure. IT was not a vision, IT couldn't be. IT WAS REAL! And the orchestra stopped, and all those dancing did as well. The figure looked at Mishkin mouthing something that looked disturbingly like what Mishkin had been hearing in his head. And when all was silent, the figure called out into the calm. "I am coming for you, Mishkin, in the name of all those that you have killed!". The sound of the harsh, young voice echoed time and time again, and Mishkin felt the eyes of all present on him. The figure then began to waltz. Waltzing in the silence. All that were present then saw Mishkin's jaw drop. But only he saw what he saw. The figure had begun to waltz, and, as with all movement in the Lead Admiral High Fleet Commander, had turned into a shimmering ethereal form of liquid shadow. But, whereas whenever he had seen this uniform before and there could be substance attributed to this shadow, the figure had simply disappeared.

And one of the gifted mind readers and telepaths of the Space Pirates watched on through a window from a balcony window nearly a mile away, thoroughly exhausted by his efforts.

*All people who commanded massive armadas or even small armadas such as Tarik's father did were awarded Fleet Command positions. Fleet commanders were those such as captains, lieutenants, generals, and the occasional unworthy (unconnected) admiral.

**Reference the mysterious fleet command officer from chapter 5

Chapter 10: The Establishing of Tyrnok

Long before Tarik could dispatch one of the best of the Space Pirates' psychics to publicly humiliate and greatly disturb High Command Officer Mishkin, he had to get in a position high enough in the Space Pirate leadership to do so. He had worked his way to the bottom of the Council of Ten by showing great prowess in the fields of military tactics, strategy, and fleet combat. So much so that many of those who were in league with the Space Pirates (synonymous with members of the Space Pirate military, but as being a pirate is a rather covert business, it is not the type of thing that one would be very open about displaying or revealing) openly expressed that they would feel much more secure with Tarik partaking in the daily doings of their leadership than having him be at risk in the "field". Tarik, on the other hand, had different plans. He had only planned to use the Space Pirates as a means of survival until he could find a better way of surviving. But many of the Space Pirates who had seen him in action (being almost all of them) argued and contested this, saying that he had the best all around skills (meaning not the best general skills, but the best in all of the skills) of anyone they had ever seen. This was true, of course, but Tarik was reluctant all the same, for the main thing on his mind at that time was exacting his revenge. But, he eventually acceded to becoming the lowest ranked member of their governing body. Many of his actions and strategies became almost as legends, among such battles as the skirmish at Faland III. Tarik remembered it in a very different way than any of the Space Pirates he was commanding, or, for that matter, different from the way he was sure his enemy (at that time and in that battle, a high capacity freighter fully loaded with supplies and guarded by a battle fleet, not just an escort. In the beginning, all of his (the space pirates') ships had been cloaked using the technology he himself had experienced and that they had stolen from the Enemy. They had waited, drifting as invisible space debris until the moment came. He had given precise instructions to each separate individual ship in his entire fleet, so that they were in a formation such as the enemy Fleet had never seen

before. When the Fleet ships had passed through their formation, dodging what they at the time had thought was space debris, Tarik ordered an instant decloak, and what his enemy saw terrified them, exactly as Tarik knew it would. From the enemies perspective, an entire enemy fleet, in perfect formation around each one of their vessels and targeted, had appeared out of nowhere. A moment later, the order was given. "Fire." More than half of the Fleet battle fleet was now a cloud of space debris, hit from nearly all directions at once by a fleet that they had seen simply materialize from nothing. The battle at first became a mere report, which was then later spread and bragged about by those who had carried it out. Before long, it was almost legendary. The entire high-capacity freighter was theirs. On it they found enough supplies to fuel the entire space Pirate operation for a month. After briefly reminiscing in this, Tarik left the Council room. He needed solace. He was certain that he was the only one of the entire space pirate fighting corps (meaning all of the space pirates except for their children) that still felt guilt at the senseless killing that they still had to do to survive. It greatly puzzled him, however, that the space pirates could be based on a world such as the one they were on and still not manage to survive or even appreciate its beauty. The world had been named Tyrnok by the first space pirate settlers who had come there, looking for a more permanent home. The word, when translated into the original Space pirate tongue, now nearly forgotten since most of them had become more or less proficient at being telepathic, had meant "jungle". For that was what most of Tyrnok was. A large, expansive jungle world, very much like earth only without the humans. Here, however, evolution had taken a radically different path. This much was visible just by stepping out the door of the Space pirate compound. As Tarik did this, he saw something that struck a pang of regret deep within his memory. He had seen something like this only moments after the unexpected fireworks: a slight breeze tickled and played with his hair, now beginning to grow long for a fleet pilot, who usually kept their hair styled within the strict requirements of no hair being permitted to be more than four centimeters in length. As the breeze tickled his forehead and played with his hair, an iridescent butterfly came to rest on a yellow flower about three feet away from him. In his memory, the butterfly glistened green, a combination of the blue light from the blue sun of the world he remembered, and the golden yellow color on its wings. He saw something much like this now, excepting that the butterfly was actually green instead of yellow. Here, however, in a violent motion, he was reminded of just how very far he was from Inira*, the world of the blue sun. The yellow flower made a sharp, sudden motion, showing that it was indeed not a flower, but a carnivorous plant. He could still hear the crushing of the butterfly's exoskeleton for a moment. Such beauty is truly hard to come by, and even less likely to be around for long in such a universe as this, Tarik thought. Standing outside of the door that led to the deep underground artificial caverns that housed the space pirate civilization, if you could call it that, it looked much as though Tarik were actually standing outside some sort of ancient bunker. His friend, and the first space pirate he had ever spoken to, Haladhim, who was also the leader of the Council of Ten, emerged from this door soon after.

"Tarik, what is wrong? Something is troubling your mind, we all can sense it, but we cannot sense what it is. Enlighten me."

So, Haladhim himself has noticed it then, Tarik thought. "I know what it is that is troubling me, my friend, but I fear to say it."

"You know that there are no secrets from us, and we will not harm you for what you say, only what you do," Haladhim replied.

"If you truly wish to know what is on my mind, then prepare yours." Tarik said cryptically.

"Ah, Tarik, now I know something is truly very, very wrong. Never before have you spoken in riddles, " he chuckled, "but whatever it is you wish to tell me, my mind is ready for it."

"What is troubling my mind is what was just going on in there. You plan, and you plot, and you devise ways of defeating your enemies and building a better life for all of you, and yet your entire civilization depends on raids and sporadic energy and food sources. This planet here, the one you call 'jungle', it is abundant with life, water, food, and energy from its brilliant sun. How can you hope to defeat an enemy as large or as vast as the Fleet and yet still not take the time and effort to truly establish a home for yourselves. It seems almost as though you are walking on a knife in your existence, and yet you are willing to fall simply because you do not take the precautions against it."

"You have spoken well, Tarik. This very thought has troubled us for some time. We even proposed it to the people once, but their argument against it was that a leader would be needed to lead this establishing of a, our, true home, and that all of our leaders were needed on the battlefield. And so, that very thought that now troubles you has troubled us for some time, but without some sort of a leader to argue the peoples defense with, we could not even begin to proceed."

"Leader? I am no leader. But I am an officer of fleet, and I am more than capable of being a...a...'leader'," Tarik said this last word with a sneer, "and if you so desire, you being the council of ten, I shall lead your people into this 'true home' you speak of."

"Let it be done," Haladhim replied, returning into the bunker, and down to the room where the council of ten met. Tarik, however, remained on the surface, waiting. After about twenty minutes, Haladhim reappeared.

"They have agreed. Your plan has been approved. You shall lead us in the establishing of Tyrnok."

One planet at a time, one planet at a time... Tarik thought. However, he said this: "Alright. What type of leadership powers do I possess? Can I find those suitable to be explorers and essentially draft them, or must I go through the proper channels, and what are those channels? Your plans for dominion at the Fleet's expense cannot be fulfilled in the least bit until you have a home, and that is what my mission is. Also, Haladhim, I will need full access to your scientists and your technology. This world, your civilization, it must be able to fade away at a moments notice, evading all detection. I do not know if you have the necessary technology for that, but there is indeed only one way to find out."

"You shall have all that you need, Tarik," Haladhim responded.

The first task Tarik set about doing was grouping the tasks that he would need performed, and then finding space pirates suitable to those tasks. First, he found the explorers, next the builders, the researchers, the cataloguers, the craftsmen, and the finishers. The explorers would explore Tyrnok, the cataloguers record and preserve any wildlife that they found that they believed could, in theory, be wiped out by their short encroachment of building their home. The craftsmen would design the buildings, the builders build them, the researchers research and develop the necessary technology to be fitted into the buildings, and then, finally, the finishers, the people who would add any 'final touches' onto the buildings. Tarik himself would lead each phase of the establishing, there being several that he had planned. In the first stage, Tarik would lead many teams of Space Pirates to explore the surrounding areas until they had a very good understanding of the terrain around them and the wildlife that inhabited that terrain. The second stage would be the phase that he thought he would like most. In the second phase, the researchers would develop and adapt the cloaking technology that the space pirates already had in their possession to work around buildings, and then they would also develop heat maskers, to mask the biothermal signatures that people naturally give off. In the next phase, the craftsmen would do the actual developing of the building plans, under close supervision by Tarik. After that phase, the building phase would begin, and in it the builders would actually construct the buildings under supervision by the researchers, to make certain that the technologies that they had worked so hard to develop were implemented correctly and functioned properly, and the craftsmen, who would make certain that their building plans were followed as closely as was possible. Finally, in a short stage that would be the final stage, the finishers would go through and add the final touches, completing the buildings and testing all of the cloaking equipment. Tarik planned to oversee each of the individual phases personally, insuring that no shortcuts were taken. And so, roughly two and a half months after the plan for the establishing of Tyrnok was completed, it was begun. Tarik personally oversaw the exploration phase, and here it was that a small idea began to grow in his mind. It started when he saw the armor serpents, large snake-like reptiles with scales harder than any armor the space pirates had ever developed**. Then, there was the flame tongue, a creature that they would never have discovered if it had not been for Tarik's plan. The flame tongue was a small bird that had a very peculiar metabolism which created a gas in its lungs that reacted negatively and violently with nitrogen in an explosion that made it appear as though the flame tongue were breathing fire! Quite the peculiar adaptation, that thought Tarik. And so it came to pass that the area around the massive artificial caverns that were the Space Pirates' current home was explored for six hundred kilometers in radius. Tarik concluded the exploration phase, and decided to move on, on to his favorite phase, Research. It was in this phase that he first started the experiments that would yield the greatest weapon that the space pirate army would ever have, or wield. And so it was that one day he went down to his private research bunker, shielded by a defensive shield of his own devising, and he eyed his creation. What is your name? he thought, I need to know, what is your name? He asked himself. Simeon!!!. He quickly jotted down the name, and then proceeded to go back to where his team of researchers were working diligently on perfecting the building cloaking system. It would take several weeks, but eventually they perfected it, and that meant that any Space Pirate building engineered with this technology could become invisible to any sensor, excepting thermal sensors***, in the broadest of daylight. He knew that they would have to develop some sort of precision controlled heating coil network throughout the buildings that they constructed, because if they did not, the buildings would appear as very cold portions on a thermal sensor's readout in a surrounding very warm spot. Thus, the buildings would need to be heated so that they would match the surrounding area and also not appear as the same heat signature all the

time, nor the same heat signature all around. Eventually all of the research was completed, and the next phase could begin. Tarik had a large amount of input into the final designs of the Space Pirate living complex, as their home base on Tyrnok came to be dubbed, and he was satisfied with all of the progress that they had made so far. In the fourth stage, construction began, as did the trouble. Men began disappearing into the jungle and no one would ever see them again. And so, Tarik decided to inspire his worker army by taking his still small, but still very formidable ally out for a quick journey. He could hear the space pirates muttering in bewilderment to themselves as he and Simeon moved quickly by.

“That can’t be a...” “Of course it isn’t, but what is it...” “Working hard, gentlemen?” Tarik interrupted. “Y-Y-Yes sir.”

His plan worked. He did also place military patrols to guard the workers, and only a few more were lost, and those were in building accidents. During this whole process, Tarik kept most of the rest of the Space Pirate population out of the loop. The Council of Ten understood the reasoning behind this. He wanted to surprise them, tell them that they no longer had to live in those caverns of theirs, that he had built them a new home, grander than anything they could imagine. So, when the final phase drew to a close, he announced to the Council, who had not seen him in several weeks, that the construction was complete.

He led them through their quarters and had them summon the rest of the Space Pirate civilization. He prepared a speech for them, and when all were present and in awe as to why they had been called up onto the surface, something that they did not frequently do except for going up onto their launch pads, he chuckled inwardly, for he knew that behind him lay the most technologically advanced cloaking system and one of the grandest housing complexes known to human civilization, yet his cloaking system worked so well that not a one of them could see it. Looking down, he saw the grins of anticipation present in all of the faces of those who had worked with him. He saw that they knew what was coming, and that they knew that it would awe even them, to see their new home just simply materialize apparently out of thin air. He saw the looks of satisfaction on their faces, because they knew that they had helped in building what would be the home of their civilization for many years to come. And so, with all of the Space Pirate civilization that was not out on raids or pirating goods present, Tarik began his speech.

“Fellow pirates, bringers of the destruction of the Fleet, welcome.” He paused to allow the applause at his calling them the bringers of the destruction of the Fleet die down. “When I came to you, I was a member of that Fleet. But I never fought anyone like you. I had to use some of the skills they taught me for the first time in your custody. You are like no other people I have ever seen, or even heard of. When I came here, when you took me in, I was puzzled by your ways. You were afraid to let me get too close, thinking that I could have been some sort of a spy from your enemy.” He saw the slight nods on many of their faces. He had, after all, been the first person to impress a space pirate commander enough to live more than twenty minutes after waking up in their custody. “But then, you took a chance. I thank you for that chance now. You let me live, and you let me join you on one of your raids. I followed my training, you followed your instincts and your training. The next raid, I was leading. It was the highest yield ever in terms of goods per casualties. You saw my talents. You let me grow them, unlike my ‘allies’” he said this with a sneer “at fleet. You grew to respect me, and demanded that I be placed on your leadership council. I prospered there as well,

but not too long ago, I grew disgusted. I felt that you could not possibly hope to overcome your enemies if you still lived in a non permanent shelter. I was given permission by your true leader, Haladhim, my friend and original captor, to build you this settlement. This...home...for yourselves. And now, I give it to you freely, the product of fifteen months' labor. Behold, your new home." The building decloaked. Almost all of the space Pirates' jaws dropped. Never before had they seen anything even anywhere near remotely as grand as this. It had the look of a palace, but they knew that it also must have extended far, far underground. Its exterior was made all of a type of metal that had been created in the process of developing the cloaking technology. This metal, when caught a ray of the sun, even when the cloaking technology wasn't engaged, seemed to shimmer and disappear right before your very eyes. It looked like solid black water, shimmering and becoming translucent and opaque more times than you could possibly hope to count. It was nearly a kilometer tall, with a large spire being its highest point. They knew that from this spire their leaders would look out over them, and they suspected correctly that in this circular spire there was a council room with ten thrones. This was...a fortress. It had concealed gun turrets on nearly every semispherical corner, and they could tell. It was their home now, and they accepted it in the spirit in which it was given. A great emigration began as the entire Space Pirate population who had been living for years in the darkness and artificial light of their underground caverns walked into the sun, and then into the Sunlit Fortress. This entire move took nearly a month, which was remarkably fast, but Tarik realized, one day during that month, that the space pirates had never ceased to amaze him, and probably never would. He was watching, that day, from one of the towers at the main gate, this one over a hundred meters tall, seeing the teeming masses, all of them anxious to go into their new homes. And so, Tarik Khanir became known as the Establisher of Tyrnok, and the establishment of Tyrnok that Tarik had supervised the construction of through every phase of its development, became known as the Sunlit Fortress. And Tarik thought quietly to himself, so that none of the Space Pirates down below would be able to sense his thought,

Now...Now they will follow me anywhere...

* Pronounced E near uh, the E sounding just like you would say it in the English alphabet

** They may have had stolen and modified the Enemy's cloaking technology, but not the Enemy's shield technology.

*** Thermal sensors were hardest to hide from because buildings, as opposed to registering heat, they register the cold of the building which would stick out and be instantly flagged for further inspection by any type of decent scanning technology.

Chapter 11a: Incoming!

Alright. I apologize because 1)this is very, very incomplete, 2)its not what I planned for ch.11 (well, maybe it was ch.12, not sure, but anyway), 3)it is jumping time again (sorry if that annoys some of you), 4)I have no idea really what to do with this. Its something that is not going to be waht I want ch.11 to be, but couldn't logically be added on to any already existing column. So, I shall give it an alternative name (as an example, the unreleased and unfinished/undeveloped ch6A:Backwater post). In this instance, the name shall be ch.11A: Raid; Written/Edited on May 1st: Dang it. I missed my deadline. Anyway, I can only give excuses. 1)I am still in school, and homework bites majorly. 2)Last night was free scoop night (free ice cream at a certain store). Finally, I just want to say sorry in general. I will promise you a full fledged column by the end of this weekend, but I don't know if I can get a semi column (i.e. 11a) up by the end of the day. But I'll try, I'll really, really try. Written May 2nd: ALrighty. Sorry again everyone, but I have school, what can I say? French just piling up (odd coincidence, eh pendragon? Oh, and in answer to your question, Unless I devote some time and serious thought [Procrastinators unite!...Tomorrow!], which is quite frankly not likely, because I would need to work everything out that would take place up until he [Tarik] meets Morkei, and that would take some planning. Which I most likely won't do. There is still a bit to come before Tarik meets Morkei. So I hope that answered your question) But anyway, I finally, after roughly two days now, have become tired of procrastinating (actually, I just feel kind of too lazy to come up with more excuses, too lazy to be lazy anymore). So, as for the edited title, there is a new column appearing on here shortly, as in I will be writing it as soon as I am done writing this, I shall begin writing the column. Not sure how it will turn out, but as I think I said before, a bit more backtracking. Well, here we go.

Chapter 11: Raid

Star-date 11.25.6478.09

Time: 19:34

It was mess hour. On a nearly empty freighter except for its cargo. Normally, on a fleet ship, mess hour is basically the equivalent to the type of recess that was still given to the children on the homeworld during their first five years of education. But on a freighter with a skeleton crew, it was not nearly as fun. Especially when the cargo was not even known. All that the crew of the Aris knew was that they had stopped by one of the exporting planets for the main Fleet Command Research center, picked up a cargo, and were now on their way to a pickup planet for the Fleet Construction Corps. There was hardly a soul on board the ship that knew the contents of this shipment, or why there was a small to medium sized battle fleet escorting them. Of course, there had been rumors. Rumors of the Space Pirates, once merely an annoyance, stealing energy packs, food supplies, medical supplies, and the occasional military supplies, now were becoming a threat. In a matter of months, the rumors said, the efficiency in the Pirate operations had increased nearly a hundred

fold, and they were beginning to suffer fewer and fewer casualties. This trend puzzled all those who had heard the rumors, but no one knew for sure because – there began to be the sound of a low hisssssssss coming from somewhere outside the ship, but very, very near – fleet had never deemed it necessary to release the official statements. In an instant, all hell broke loose, and the Aris found itself in the midst of one of the battles for which the Space Pirates were becoming known for. As the crew onboard the Aris began to panic, wondering what was going on, why there were red alert lights flashing, a space battle began to rage outside.

Star-date 11.25.6478.09

Time: 19:37

It had been routine, an escort of a freighter through known pirate patrolled territories. Even those people in control of the ships guarding this freighter knew not why they were guarding it, or what was inside its bowels. It had been going fine until they realized that there was something hideously wrong outside the window. Black. But not the Enemy's Black. This was different, improved in some way. And then all hell broke loose as a small fleet of their own ships materialized from space. A buzzing began in all who were present's heads, and they knew then that they were in trouble. The tactics were different from any other recorded space pirate battle, in fact, they were not even identifiable as anywhere near the same tactics. But it soon became clear what the Space Pirates' goal was. It became evident as soon as the first readouts of the enemy's statistics came to the fighters, cruiser, and frigates that were guarding this freighter. Every Fleet fighter was surrounded by four pirate fighters, all of them aimed at the Fleet fighter's engine. This tactic was rarely used in human battles, because some of the codes of battle from the ancient times had been revived, such as avoiding unnecessary casualties whenever possible. It was a well known fact that fleet fighters could be disabled, and it was a as well known fact that destroying the engine on most Fleet ships would result in an explosion that would destroy all but the largest of the capital ships entirely. In addition, each one of the two and a half dozen frigates that were patrolling noticed that pirate bombers had already laid mines on their ships, even while they were cloaked. It was by far the largest space pirate fleet ever assembled, or at least ever seen. In a moment, they were hailed, and it was at that moment that the captain of the single cruiser realized his position. There were eight Fleet destroyers parked by his cruiser, in escort formation, only he knew that they weren't escorting his ship, they were planning on destroying it. He received the hail, only to find that he was looking at a nearly entirely black screen.

"Dim the lights!"

His command was obeyed immediately as the lights were dimmed on the bridge so that he could see this shadowy figure better. He realized, after his eyes adjusted, that he was seeing what appeared to be the cockpit of a fighter, only much more massive. He could even see the stars, behind this pilot's head.

"Who are you?" demanded the captain of the cruiser.

"My name is of no consequence to you," the captain could have sworn he had heard that voice before, "but if you must have a name to call me by, then call me Nameless."

"Very well...Nameless. What do you want? What are you planning to do?" he inquired.

"For starters, I plan on showing you that we mean business." All of the pirate fighters aligned surrounding the Fleet fighters fired in a single burst of light and flame, and afterwards, not a single Fleet fighter could be found.

"You...You...murderer! Those men had nothing to do with this! Why did-"

"Oh but they did. You see, This is going to be quite the gain for us...and quite the loss for you."

"What do you mean? What do you want?"

"To that, my answer is simple. For one, we are very low on frigate class ships. Second, we have no cruiser class ships. Third, the contents of that freighter are very important to us."

"What do you mean? How do you know what is on that freighter? Barely any of us know!"

"I do not reveal more than I desire to reveal, and as such, you do not know more than I desire you to know. Now, your men will be permitted to be prisoners of us, and in time, they may come to be of some use."

"What are your terms?"

The buzzing faded to a nearly inaudible level, and then one voice from the buzz stood out in the captain's mind.

You really are quite slow, aren't you? I want all of your remaining ships, including that freighter. And your surrender, of course. I think that you see your position.

"Never! I'll nev-" the captain was thrown from his feet as the shockwave from the frigates' explosions rolled his ship, and just as he was preparing to get back up, he thrown again to the side as he realized that now his cruiser was being pummeled by the Pirate fighters. Warning shots, he realized.

"Well, I think you have had long enough to make your decision. Time's up."

---Star-date 11.25.6478.09---Time: 19:43---Auto-Signal---Destruction of Cruiser: Shendo Confirmed
While on Mission: Escort of Aris---End Auto-Signal

Star-date 11.25.6478.09

The hissing grew louder aboard the Aris. In an instant, all aboard knew what was happening. They were being hijacked. Their cargo would be stolen, unless they, combined with the auto-defense drones, could stop the space pirates. It was a long, long shot, but they had to risk it. They used the ship's topical sensors to locate the area of the most pressure on board of the ship, and moved as close as they could through the long, white hallways that characterized large Fleet ships. They arrived a moment too late as they saw that a hole had been made in the side of the ship, a small stairway dropped down, and Space Pirate warriors pouring into the small hallway. They drew their lasers, but they soon realized that they would be useless against this enemy. The lasers fell to the floor as nearly a third of those present from the Aris fainted where they stood. There were people on board their ship alright, and they were pretty sure that they were Space Pirates. But they moved faster than anything they had ever seen. Shadows flicked down the hallway toward them, bounding off of the sides of the corridor to make more room for more to enter through the middle of the hallway. There was a shining as they could see pale, metal blades being drawn, and then all but a few of those standing had their throats cut. After being swept by the shadows, there were only two Aris crew members left standing. They had no idea why they had been spared, but they did know that they hadn't dodged the Pirates, but that they had, in fact, been spared. In a moment they would come to realize why, as the shadows that appeared to be flitting about the hallway came to a sudden stop, and it was apparent that there had only been maybe a dozen Space Pirates that had boarded the ship. They stood along the sides of the hall, in an almost ceremonial formation. They saw the cloak before they saw the man.

Greetings, a voice said in their heads. And welcome, welcome to the beginning of my domain. You have been spared merely so that you can inform your superiors of the success of this raid, and so that they might come to fear us. For when they are afraid is when they are strongest. Cornered beasts always fight fiercest, and they will need to be fierce in order to withstand us for long.

The figure had emerged. Liquid shadow, smoke solidified. Spikes on shoulders, and pointed knees and elbows, it was a form that would haunt their nightmares for the rest of their lives. Walking down the hallway, Tarik knew that his bid had paid off. Donning the uniform of his father, acquired only a month or so before he himself had joined the Pirates when they had made a mistake and instead of intercepting a supply ship, had intercepted an antique ship. They had found it, and kept it, somehow knowing that it would come to be of use later on. Tarik knew that the men of the Aris who were standing before him would be so terrified that they would probably not be able to speak for months after they were recovered by Fleet. And he knew that when they did, the only thing that they would be able to say to describe what they saw would be

"Shadows...Monster..."

Tarik also knew that his plans for the construction of the Sunlit Fortress were proceeding perfectly, and that this raid had obtained for him the base of the metal that they would need to alter slightly

to form the cloak-able, shimmering exterior to the Sunlit Fortress that would make it capable of becoming invisible to nearly all forms of sensors. And the words that he was imprinting on the terrified crewmen's minds ran through his head...

"Shadows...Monster..."

Chapter 12: Back on the Homeworld

It was nighttime at the landing pad where he landed. It had been almost 30 years since Fleet Commander Mishkin had set foot on Earth, the homeworld. Last time, however, he was leaving for fleet command, and this time, this time he was here on business. Apparently, someone in fleet had leaked out that the son of Admiral Khanir had been found, and so, people pried. This had taught fleet two things: first: never trust anyone in a position to leak information; and second: get better main computer security. Over three hundred hackers had been able to break into the Fleet Command's main computer, searching for any reference to the name Khanir that was not associated with Georges (the more famous Admiral Khanir's first name). What they found startled the world. The now-famous son of Khanir had been sent against odds that even his father had not been able to beat, and won, right up until he was sent to the last known coordinates of the fleet that destroyed his father. Outrage came up from the populace at Mishkin, the one whom they had thought would be an excellent leader. But they needed evidence that had not been obtained illegally, and for that, they went to a husband and wife team that had never been beaten. Their names were Martha and Frank Greneline, and they had a small son, named Espen, barely four years old, who had already tested high on any aptitude test given him, hence sealing his future as a fleet officer. It was because of these people that Mishkin had returned to the homeworld. They could not be bribed, or cheated, and they had nothing with which he could ever hope to blackmail them with. He had already tried using some of his special ops to take their child, but his special ops had been stopped dead in their tracks by the Grenelines' bodyguards, whom they had picked up on a small, previously thought uninhabited world where, little did they know, the object of their investigation, Tarik Khanir, whom they thought dead, was living now. The special ops had been hospitalized later for their mad ravings of dragons, and of a shadow that could not be defeated, but although Mishkin knew that there was something peculiar about the Grenelines' bodyguards, he again did not know enough. He did know, however, that there was one way to get rid of them. Even in the year 5435, there were still rebel groups on the homeworld, although getting them to act was a large problem, it could still be done. The Grenelines were preparing to make their speech on Mishkin's wrongdoings as the rebels, paid off by Mishkin, prepared to kill them. Mishkin was smiling to himself as Frank Greneline walked up to the podium. Looking, surveying, analyzing. It was their way. But one thing that Frank Greneline had not counted on would be seeing a satisfied smile on the face of Mishkin. Meanwhile, Mishkin was mentally preparing himself to be surprised, and to make a speech on the podium that seemed spur of the moment, but he knew that this day would end well for him. The rebels would be caught, he had made sure of that, so there would be no

doubt about that. He had already killed the translator, and so there was no longer anyone in the world, or off it, most likely, who could translate their language into the now-standard English. Frank Greneline began his speech, as his wife, Martha, came up and stood behind him. He had only just begun when two beams of light flashed through the area from hundreds of yards away, and the populace became shocked and became full of panic as both Frank and Martha Greneline sank to the floor, both with a smoking hole in their head. Their child, Espen, whom they had never been seen at anything before without, saw the entire thing from five feet away. He just stood there, calling their names, as Mishkin grinned. The boy called Espen looked up at Mishkin, and was afraid. Mishkin got up and rushed to the podium, beginning his speech. But before he did, he took one last look at Espen before forming a plan. He nodded to one of his other officers, and they scooped the boy into his arms. This boy was now almost exactly Tarik: parents killed at an early age, exceedingly intelligent, and having all of the makings of a great commander. The difference here would be that whereas Tarik grew up on the world of the blue sun, Espen would be trained from the age of four. A perfect match to fight Tarik. Now all that was needed was time.

Chapter 13: Nehronis

Date: 3/17/5431* Time: 02:37

Darkness...all-consuming darkness...

In and out

In and out

Conscious, unconscious

How could I tell the difference?

Who am I?

Date: 3/16/5431* Time: 14:29

Ah, shoot! They're everywhere! How could fleet have been so wrong? There must be...millions!

"Holy crud..." came the radioed voice of Pita, echoed soon after by the other members of the squadron.

Tarik gave orders, which were obeyed numbly, and without thought: the squadron had long since learned to trust his judgment, and they knew that if anyone could get them all out of this alive, it

was Tarik. Now that they had moved into position, the only thing left to do was to wait for his order to begin the attack.

“Commence!” came Tarik’s voice over the radio, and most of the squadron, though nearly paralyzed with fear themselves, did not hear what the other six members of the Seven from the world of the blue sun did. They heard fear, for the first time in their lives, true, downright pure fear, oozing out of that one word. They’d never heard Tarik so worried before, but they knew that he had more than enough reason to be. Their remaining 18 fighters, aside from Tarik’s, swarmed in their practiced formations. Flowing, merging and reforming around the enemy cruisers, they drew the enemy’s fire onto its own ships, but with little to no avail. Then it became clear that very few, if any, of them would leave alive. The second time that the squadron heard a ghost**, they knew it was over. Only one other member of their small, elite 20-fighter squadron had been killed before this. And everyone, even everything, for a moment, seemed to freeze. In the previous instance, they had been able to recover the fighter of the downed squadron member, and examine it. A part of his engine had been hit, slowing him down. He had been one of the most agile, close to even Tarik, whilst handling a fighter. He could, if he wanted, fly circles around enemy frigates, fast enough that they guns couldn’t hit him, all the while, pummeling at the frigate’s sides, and all the while, relying on speed to survive. Then everything unfroze, and there were four more ghosts, in rapid succession, and the remaining fighters saw the heat shimmering from one of the cruisers’ massive cannons. Voices started shrieking inside their heads, making it almost impossible to think. There were then two more ghosts, and about half a minute later, they were followed by three more. None of the Seven had died yet, and they all started to talk at once.

“Tarik, we’ve got to shut down, they can’t see us that way, this is hopeless, we’ve got to-“, Shrink was saying as another ghost was heard. There was only silence. And the remaining six knew that he would never finish that sentence. But Sweetness agreed, and began to shut down his systems, as he was almost sure the others were doing. Tarik hadn’t said anything since the beginning of the battle, and his silence was beginning to scare them when they heard another ghost, or at least, what seemed what a ghost, but this time, it came from Queen. Almost immediately afterwards, the same thing happened to Pita, then Music, and finally Jane. Sweetness was about to say something when a blinding flash forced him to cry out, before being thrown into the bulkhead of his fighter by the concussive waves emanating from the engines of the cruiser that was flying right above him. As he passed out of consciousness and everything turned black, he heard the computer: “Inactive Stealth Mode, initiated: non-vital systems, shut down; vital systems power reduction, complete.” Finally, as his last shred of ability to remain awake faded, he saw the clock: Date: 3/16/5431* Time: 14:33; this had all happened in just under five minutes.

Date: 3/18/5431* Time: 19:20

BEEP! BEEP!

“Warning! Approaching gravity field of system 93B170.3 Warning! No Fleet Presence Detected!” the computer shouted.

Fleet? What's fleet? I'm sooo hungry...But sleep is better...but I can't live on sleep alone, now can I?

"Request Permission to initiate emergency landing procedures; Pilot needs to give permission" it shouted at the young man who had almost no memory left, who had, only days before, been known as Sweetness.

"Wha...? D-...D-...D-I mean, umm...sure, yeah, I guess..." he said, brushing his dirty blonde hair out of his eyes. I'm going to go back to sleep...And he did, sleeping through the crash landing, that week, and partway through the next***.

When he awoke, he was on a soft, cloth bed, in a small, wooden hut, surrounded by people of a kind of motley skin color...this was common for human colonies between the ages of 400 and 500 years old: the at first ethnically diverse group of colonists blended more and more until eventually, they all become a certain skin color, which varies from planet to planet, but there is a certain predictable period at which point the inhabitants' skin becomes mottled, but this typically disappears by the next generation. How he knew this, he did not know, but he knew it. A woman, who evidently had been taking care of him, told him to rest, lie back down, and he did****. Over time, he grew attached to the people, and aided them in many things. Comparatively to him, the strongest person amongst them was weak, because he, though he did not know it, had been trained for many years to nearly his peak of physical and mental ability. They used him for things such as carrying heavy loads of wood for repairs after some of their tropical storms, and other such manual labor tasks. Throughout a period of about eight months, the man, whom they came to call "Nameless", was content, and slowly, he became curious about who he was. The structure of the colony, at first as rigid as Fleet school, had broken down over the centuries, into a now almost tribal organization. It was such that Chief Narakeen took Nameless to a clearing with a strangely shaped hut.

"Nameless, you may think you are, but you are not."

"I'm not? I mean, who am I?"

"It is time for you to leave us, Nameless. You do not belong here."

By now, they were both inside the hut, and Nameless could see an object, covered by a camouflage tarp.

"Now, it is time for you to remember...Remember your past!" Saying this, Chief Narakeen tore the tarp from the object it was covering, revealing a beat up fighter, which had the look of being repaired exactly where it had been: the wilderness.

"Speak to it, Samuel."

"What?"

The ship hummed to life. "Captain Samuel 'Sweetness' Nehronis, welcome back."

Flashes of battles appeared in his head, and he remembered everything. His head, throbbing once more from the pain of his concussion that had made him forget, despite its pain, realized that he had been here too long. Inspecting the ship, Samuel "Sweetness" Nehronis once more, he saw that the Chief had done a miraculously good job of repairing it, given the more primitive culture of this colony.

"How...How were you able to do all of this?" Sweetness asked, bursting with curiosity.

"I know that we seem primitive, but that is because this is our rest home. We built here to forsake technology, and return to the ancient Earthen ways. Just because we live in wood does not mean that we cannot weld and repair Thistrinium fighters in no time! Now, go, return to where you belong!"

Sweetness looked out, and saw that the whole village had gathered outside the hut.

"Thank you all! Thank you...for your kindness, your care, and most importantly of all," at this he tapped his still slightly throbbing head, "my memory."

Date: 1/1/5432 Time: 9:07

New beginnings for a new year, how quaint. He was returning to fleet, and was currently in warp space. He had been able to find a fleet that was warp capable, and, after explaining his situation, was returning to his home, Fleet Command.

Date: 1/4/5432

Humming the tune to a long forgotten song, Sweetness stepped out of his fighter for the first time in days...and was instantly bombarded by military officers, most of them telling him, forcing him, asking him, demanding of him that he go to the Fleet Dispatcher immediately. It was later that day, in Mishkin's office, that Sweetness noticed something. There was a squadron...wait, no, a fleet...assignment on his desk.

"Sir?" asked Sweetness temeritively.

"Yes?" replied Mishkin.

"Sir, may I ask why you called me here?"

"Why do you think?"

Because you're a pompous bast-no, mustn't think like that Sweetness chastised himself mid-thought, before replying "You want a report on the last battle of my old squadron?"

"Close, but not quite. Listen, Samuel, I wa-"

"Call me Sweetness, please, sir"

"As I was saying, Samuel, I want to make you an admiral. I feel no one is better qualified. You see, it seems that someone from your squadron has defected to the pirates, or was a pirate all along, because, you see, they've even been using and improvising some of your old squadron's maneuvers. I want for you to eliminate the current, and growing, Space Pirate threat. I feel that as you are the only survivor of the son of Khanir's squadron, I feel that you are probably best suited towards dealing with these pirates. That is why I am making you the leader of the armada that I have assembled in your absence, an armada of state-of-the-art ships, all hunters, and all for hunting down these pirates. You will lead them. Do I make myself clear?"

Grudgingly, for he did not want to lead anybody, he really just wanted to know what had happened with the assignment of his last battle, he replied "Yes, sir."

"And I'm going to make you a Grand Captain, am I clear?"

"Grand...Captain? Sir, I've never heard of that rank, sir."

"That's because you're going to be the first. It is going to be the rank immediately below admiral, and you haven't answered me yet. I said 'I'm going to make you Grand Captain, am I clear?'"

Thrilled with the promotion, Sweetness replied "Yesss sir!"

Date: 2/19/5432 Time: 13:01

Excellent: Right on schedule, thought Grand Captain Nehronis to himself from the bridge of his command ship, a battleship that had been modified to fleet specifications for a hunting ship, and then, with a small request of Mishkin, modified according to the Grand Captain's specifications himself! He gazed out upon the appearing enemy forces, pirates, some of them piloting stolen Fleet fighters, and even one Fleet frigate. "Commence." He called out into the fleet communications node, and the battle began at once. The pirates used some of the maneuvers that the old squadron had used indeed, but there were strange, new twists on them. Still, through careful commanding, Sweetness was able to guide and outmaneuver his opponents. The day ended with a gratifying explosion.

BATTLE REPORT RECEIVED 2/19/5432 AT 13:29

After battle time: 28 minutes enemy forces remaining were: 0 and friendly losses were: 0.

Mishkin reflected upon this latest battle report, and was pleased.

* Author's Note: I haven't figured out/cross-referenced my star-dating system from prior chapters, and as hence, the date is currently in mm/dd/yyyy and running on a 24 hour clock (sorry America, figure it out). This could, and probably will, change. Though not soon...

** Ghost: the nickname for the energy wave that sweeps through a communications array at the time it is destroyed in Fleet fighters, spiking energy at a high frequency so that it sounds like a shrill shriek, as that of a ghost.

*** Yes, another Author's Note: At this point, I think that I will stop doing the date for a while, and merely mention the date again when it becomes important.

**** Hey, if you don't like that I got carried away with authors' notes on this column, then mention it in your comments, but otherwise...Author's Note: At this point, I'll be merrily skipping along about 8 months, and planet 93b170.3 is a moderate planet, meaning that its temperature and weather stays about the same all year round. Author's note this is because I just want to mention that as of now, I'm way too lazy to bother to fill in that time between where this footnote is, and eight months from then. Back to the story now...

Chapter 14: Applied Genetics

It was time. He had waited long enough. He had seen what they were capable of, or at least, what they thought were their limits, although he knew that they were in fact not. So far his other experiment, his other dive into the field of genetic modification and splicing had succeeded perfectly, for Simeon, his creation, his creation that would create for him armies, was growing and progressing rapidly.

Long ago, a rogue Enemy fighter had drifted into Fleet space. At first, all guns were pointed at it, but it continued to drift. And drift. And drift. Finally, a science team was dispatched. Inside it, they found the remains of one of the enemy. Remains only, because, although the fighter remained completely intact, the creature inside was quite clearly dead. He was crushed, almost to the point of mush by some kind of trauma that they could not yet fathom. They would not know why for centuries to come. The creature was, by then-current measurement standards, the imperial system of measurement having long since been abandoned, metric now ruled. The creature was estimated

to be about 2.2 meters tall, and around 300 kilograms in weight. It's structure seemed like some kind of bizarre cross between a human and a spider, with a defined pelvis, and defined bones. There were however, four legs, in a diamond pattern, and roughly six arm-like structures attached to the upper torso. One of the first realizations that came to the human scientists was that this could easily be why the enemy could so easily out maneuver them, being so much more adept at controlling a vast number of controls. The skin was an almost mottled grayish-green color, and the face had eyes that had yet another unknown organism inside of them, this one still living. The organism appeared to feed, when it was later tested, off of nitrogen, and somehow, they reasoned, this was beneficial to the Enemy's physiology. It took a crazed scientist to realize the truth however, when he applied methinotriscin A, a highly experimental drug that Fleet was perfecting for the growth, or regrowth, of human nerve's, to some dead human nerve cell's taken from a recent pilot's cadaver*. This had been shown to work even on dead nerve cell's, reactivating them, causing the synapses to fire again. As soon as a single spark of bio-electricity hit the foreign bacteria found in the enemy's eyes, it glowed a brilliant orange, and they knew that this was the bacteria's benefit in this relationship. Not much else could be determined from this Enemy cadaver, for these were the primarily distinguishable parts, its insides and most everything else having been crushed into an unstudiable form from whatever trauma had killed the creature. Another major find, however, that did come from this cadaver was the discovery that, although there may have been two dozen different nucleotides in the Enemy, the Enemy was still based on DNA.

Through some experiments with the data he had been able to steal from a passing science vessel one time on Tyrnok, he had obtained the Enemy's genetic code, and had found that all applicable genes, meaning all those based upon the mere (comparatively) four nucleotides found in human DNA had been spliced, and could now also be found in Space Pirate DNA. He was prepared for the risks, and had run dozens of simulations on his computer, for it was evident that the Enemy held a respect, of sorts, for life that humans lacked. They had not tampered with the human genetic code through manipulation, but instead, somehow, through breeding. He had no idea how this had been accomplished, and was sure that it would not be wise, even as high though of as he was, to ask if there were any stories that the pirates could tell of how this had worked. Regardless, he himself had tampered with the genes, perfecting them. He was prepared now, having completed his serum only hours before, a gene therapy that would make him not identical, but superior to a space pirate in telepathic abilities, and, he hoped, perhaps even grant him some of the rumored abilities of the enemy that one could still find trace hints of in Space Pirate legends, telling of a veiled figure in black, with burning eyes, capable of moving things without touching them, by simply gesturing. This being, known in Space Pirate legends as the Wise One, was one of the Enemy, Tarik had guessed. He was hoping his serum would grant him this ability, psychokinesis, as well.

"Well, all's well that ends well, so lets hope that I survive, eh, Simeon?"

He drank the small vile and felt no change. However, several days later, he began to feel nauseous, and fell ill, almost to the point of death. When asked if he had been poisoned, his only reply was "its for the best, its for the best, its..."

His condition continued, and many of the pirates became afraid. Meanwhilst, over the roughly two month long period for which he was ill, the Fleet noticed a sudden halt in any and all Space Pirate attacks and raids, and was glad for it, hoping that whatever type of base they could have had been attacked or destroyed by something.

After two months, Tarik began to recover, eventually becoming physically well again, although he now often suffered from delusions, some of which so violent that he would be found on the floor of his chamber in the mornings some times, convulsing, and muttering nothings to himself. He was going from sanity to insanity, something which is never good on any mind, much less one like his, as stressed as it already was. He could hear voices in his head, and thought them delusions. It was only after another month of his delusions that a realization dawned upon him. He wasn't thinking he was hearing voices. He was hearing thoughts. He snapped. For two weeks he did not eat or drink anything, and was entirely unresponsive to any kind of prompting or contact, sitting up in his bed.

"Haladhim, he is hopeless. The people are saying...the people are saying that he did this to himself, Haladhim. Perhaps we should leave him out in the wilderness. Perhaps it would be better to let him die now, perhaps--"

"Don't you ever speak like that! He will pull through for us now, just as he has done before!"

Whispers grew, and the opinion stated by Haladhim's friend came upon the surface, so it was no longer shameful or even in the minority to think this. Haladhim himself was beginning to wonder, if maybe, maybe they were right, or if maybe he was going insane himself. He wondered this last thing because he heard movement above him, for ever since Tarik had fallen ill Haladhim had taken up residence in Tarik's tower lab, which was immediately below his primary chamber. There was a crowd, surging around the Sunlit fortress, as always, for it had now become a place of a kind of worship, for people had once come, before Tarik fell ill, here for leadership, for guidance. Now, though the open squares and main entrance causeway still thronged with people, it was because it had turned into a kind of marketplace, a place who's formality had been stripped away by the disease of its originator**. It was a beautiful morning, as it often was, as the sun refracted and reflected off of the Fortress, Haladhim heard noises again, and decided to check. The door to Tarik's bedroom had been open for quick and ready access ever since this disease had become exceedingly acute. Upon arrival at the door, Haladhim's heart leapt with joy, for the door was closed. This meant that unless someone had managed to reach the height of nearly a mile to Tarik's window and balcony, their leader was moving around again, an improvement, at the least. He opened the door to the what was nearly the shock of his life:

A figure, shrouded in black, eyes burning in orange with a kind of inner fury, a power of some kind, Haladhim could not help but remember the legends. Next, he did get the shock of his life: He was being flown across the room, and nothing had touched him, until he was hovering, midair, mere inches away from the figure's face, and he recognized it to be Tarik.

"Why have you let them become this way, Haladhim?" he said, but Haladhim could hardly tear himself away from the eyes burning inside the head and face of the one who he knew to be Tarik, so that his only response was "Tarik, what...how...what have you done to yourself? How have you done it?"

The eyes replied "I have made myself one of you, realized in full. This day I feel that the limit of human potential is within my grasp, and those masses down there...they dare to call themselves Space Pirates?!?!"

"But Tarik," Haladhim managed to whimper, "how have you done it?"

"Oh. That's simple: Applied genetics."

"What? What the-" was all that could be heard from Tarik's balcony, for Haladhim had now found himself flung outside of the tower, and enjoying a mile long fall to the ground.

The scream reached the crowd beneath only moments before they could see its source: a man, a man had fallen from the balcony of their old leader, the one who was now incapable by some evil of his own, before they saw a hole appear in the crowd where the man had fallen as the people recoiled. It took them only a moment to see, however, that the man had not yet hit the ground, but that his nose was, in fact, hovering, on the level with most of the rest of his body, mere centimeters above the ground. They were all stunned into silence, but not for a long, for a voice roared in their heads You dare to call yourselves Space Pirates?!? You think that I am not watching?!?!? They could not determine the source, but knew that no one had spoken, for in a space like that that they were in, a voice loud enough to be heard by all would have echoed many times before finally fading from memory. It was only a child who saw, and then showed it to his mother, who, in shocked horror, pointed to the sky, to the two burning orange orbs wreathed in what appeared to be a living shadow, descending from the balcony of Tarik. First hovering, then dropping like a stone, the figure landed on the ground, an incredible feat, although they did not know that Tarik had in fact stopped himself most of the part an centimeter or so above the ground, and was now letting his father's robes and garment cloak him. It was in the midst of the delusions that he had himself seen the Wise One. A figure, emanating with blue light, and yet wreathed in shadow as he was now telepathically projecting himself to be now with eyes the same color as those that he was making them think he had. The figure had spoken to him, in a voice that made no sound, and it had said to him: "Arise, Khanir. I have watched you for some time now. Many have tried to reach me, to face me, to kill me, but you are the first worthy adversary in all of history. You cannot die. Not now. Not until I am the one to kill you. Arise, Tarik, Nameless One, the human who has met his potential and grasped it, only to be thrust into madness from its power. Arise, and

show your people your strength.” It was then that he had realized that his serum, despite the side effects of the first two months, had worked better than he had expected. He was sure that the figure was the Wise One of legend, and that he was one of the Enemy. It was not that he rose himself from out his bed, and opened his closet, only to realize moments later that he had not yet moved his legs. He was, he found, in fact, hovering, centimeters above the ground. With some effort, he was able to release this psychokinetic way of movement, and descend back to the usage of his legs, and the ground. He had dressed himself without using his hands, or feet, or appendages, but only his mind, and had found that doing so like this he could dress much faster than usual, so that when Haladhim barged in upon him, he was so surprised that he first put up his old attitude, the one of strength, the one his people followed, he regained his composure, and he only moments later realized again, that he had used his newfound abilities by two things: first, that Haladhim was goggling at him, and secondly that Haladhim was floating inches from his face, suspended about a meter above the ground. He remembered this as he enjoyed the aura of shock and fear that spread throughout the crowd. He let down his mental projection of himself, and the people closest to him relaxed. They could see that it was their leader, and that he had changed. Immediately, he demanded of them How many fleet fighters have you taken in my absence?. They somehow understood to reply vocally, as opposed to challenge him in the field that he had taught them, for the most part, to respond in, the telepathic field, somehow knowing that right now, it would anger him. “None” was the word echoed throughout the crowd.

“As I thought,” he said.

“Now,” he shouted, although he also augmented this with a telepathic mimicry for those who could not hear his voice for they were too far away from him, despite the echoes in the square that was twenty square kilometers large,

“Lets get back to business!”

Author’s note: So, what do you all think? I thought that perhaps you wondered how exactly it was that Tarik did his niftiness in Chapter 11, and here it is. Also, as a side dish, more tantalizing, taunting in regards to Simeon. Just wait until chapter 20, which bears his name and reveals, at last, how he came into being, what, and who he is, as well as the role he shall come to play (he’s a decently large character, despite being introduced roughly one fifth of the way through the first segment [yes, the first portion of this story I have planned to make roughly one hundred chapters long, so get ready for the long haul people, but in the meantime, enjoy everything I’ve written so far, and get as many people as you can to read my story, cause I’d like to be able to google search

for my name and not just find real people and my darkgalaxy column listed, but someplace else as well...oh well, I suppose that that is actually just a little power trip of mine . Until next chapter, adieu!

*When someone is sent to fleet, they are unknowingly placed on a list for donation to science, so that in the event of death of a mysterious cause, or an unknown alien bacteria or disease, their body can be dissected and examined to discover the cause, without permission from the victim's family.

** Just wanted to clarify this: the disease of its originator refers to Tarik's disease, Tarik being the originator of the place's formality.

Chapter 15: Reunion

"Grand Captain Nehronis to the bridge, Grand Captain - "

"I heard you the first time." Sweetness interjected to the communications officer from the bridge of the Redemption, his flagship, a space-pirate hunting machine, perfectly designed, built, and manned to its task. As the commander of a capital ship, he had received an intercom badge, allowing him to communicate with anyone anywhere on the ship by simply tapping the badge then stating either the name of the person or the room that he wanted his voice to be heard on. Or he could tap it to respond to someone's page of himself, which he did most often. He still had not adjusted to the size of his captain's quarters, which were more than five times as large as his old fighter pilot quarter's on the cruiser upon which he used to be stationed. He prepared to leave the recreation level, upon which he had been exercising and head to the bridge. Upon arriving, he was startled into alertness. There was commander Mishkin's face: wall size.

"Um...hello. Sir. Hello, sir. What does Fleet command?"

"Fleet commands nothing, Grand Captain. We do, however, have information that we think will be of use to you. We have found a small fleet of hybrid fighters."

"Um...hybrid...fighters? Excuse me sir, but...what are those?"

"The kind most often used by the Space Pirates, Grand Captain Nehronis, the kind most often used by the Space Pirates. Surely you remember that little tidbit of data from your logged briefing, do you not?"

Shoot...I knew I should've read that Sweetness thought to himself. He was still adapting to this whole being a leader thing, and as of yet, had not really taken the time to read any of the material that he had been given as the leader of this Space Pirate hunting squad.

“Oh, Samuel, Samuel, Samuel...when will you learn? Your old friend and leader Tarik is dead, you must take some responsibility on your own. The hybrid fighters are called such because they are somehow combinations of both Enemy fighters and Enemy technology and our fighters. This combination normally makes them slightly more powerful or slightly faster than our fighters, but less powerful than Enemy fighters in most respects. Now, Samuel, go...hunt them down and eliminate them. Every last one.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Sweetness had already encountered some of the Space Pirate ships, and had defeated every one, so he went into his next battle not thinking what he would face and merely expecting to win. He told his navigational officer to punch in the coordinates that Mishkin had transmitted and to move the fleet there as soon as possible. The hunt is on he thought, as he returned to his cabin. Time to kill us some Space Pirates.

Meanwhile, Tarik was preparing himself. He had deliberately left some fighters uncloaked and within range of a Fleet enemy-scanner*. All is ready. They are coming. He had told the fighters to be prepared for Fleet ships to arrive any time, even though his newfound abilities enabled him to read even minds in hyperspace if he felt like trying hard enough, and he hence knew that he fifteen minutes or so to launch the remainder of his fleet from the ground. They had taken their fleet of modified Enemy and Fleet ships, and a handful of ships that they had built themselves that had been designed by Tarik. They were preparing for the invasions that were needed. Tarik had told them his plan, that his method of revenge upon Fleet would be to rob them of all power that they once had, which meant that they would need to conquer worlds. As it was, he knew that he should not begin the actual ground invasions until Simeon was mature, but that time was approaching with increasing speed. They were, however, on the ground of the planet over which the Fleet Enemy-Scanner was orbiting, and there their small armada was preparing to launch. HE had constructed a makeshift launching platform, upon which the Phoenix, his own fighter, was now resting. It had been both designed and built by him, primarily in his own laboratory. It was black, and glistened, for its outer hull was of an armored version of the cloaking sheets that were used on the Sunlit Fortress. The Phoenix had a wide, domed cockpit, in which he could either stand or sit, per his design, and it was as capable of commanding a fleet as a Fleet battleship, whilst dozens of times smaller. The weaponry was red, eight blasters on each pointed, curved wing of the Phoenix. It was balanced perfectly, and its communications array completed its image by being formed like that of a beak. Birdlike though it seemed, it was menacing, and could not be mistaken for anything less than what it was: A killing machine designed by the man who was at that time, although very few would have said so, the best pilot in the near galaxies. No-one had told him of the pirate legends, those ancient tales told by some person whose name had long since been lost. These tales told of a leader, who could take the form of the Wise, and would ride upon wings and bring victory the land, but would scar it in the process. It was said that the way to salvation after the

blackening was to rise from the ashes, reborn. The pirates saw Tarik fulfilling these legends, and knew that there was no way he could know it, for they knew that anyone whose mind was being read knew exactly what knowledge was being read from it, and none of them had ever thought about it, or discussed it, or had it read in his presence. The fact remained, he had designed and built a ship modeled after a mythical creature after his own heart, one that could be shot down, only to be reborn from the ashes, much as he had. He prepped the Phoenix for launch, and then rose himself into it, giving the signal to all of the others: Launch, for our victory begins today!

Three minutes until we are there, thought Sweetness. He did not know it, but he was not only rapidly approaching a trap, but his old best friend as well. To him it was just a routine mission in his fleet, the elimination of a few Space Pirate ships. He returned to the bridge, getting his mind into the mode that it needed to be in in order to command dozens upon dozens of individual ships into a greater, swarming, massive, destructive whole. By the time he reached the bridge, there were forty-five seconds remaining. Thinking of a new strategy that would eliminate the possibility of their being led into a trap, he gave the navigational commander explicit orders. "Listen, at fifteen seconds, put hyperspace inducers to full, then bring us out with normal engines at overdrive, and repeat the process until we reach location. Make certain to take careful readings every time we reenter normal space. I don't want any surprises." Lets see how they like this he thought, grinning on what he imagined his maneuver would look like.

Dash nigatz garundl. The Enemy commander who had been ordered by the elders to stop the destruction of the two who would both need to survive in order to redeem the worlds and their people commanded. Gasisnatz dash ni lak griul. Their hyperspace eliminating generators hummed to life. Getting into mindset that would be necessary to communicate telepathically so that the lesser humans could understand them, he thought, now in the lesser mind tongue We shall tear them from out of our realm. Hyperspace is ours, and they are intruding. Let us see if that shall not stop them. Activate the inducers!

As the Enemy fleet activated its anti-hyperspace inducers, Sweetness's fleet began its maneuver, and this surprised Tarik. When a ship was in hyperspace, it was invisible from normal space, whereas whilst in hyperspace, normal space merely seemed distorted. And so, from far off, as the Phoenix and the rest of the Space Pirate fleet exited the atmosphere above the planet upon which they were staging this trap, it appeared as though there were two fleets, exactly the same, only in two different places at one, one nearer the other, and by the time the other faded, another one was closer. It appeared to Tarik as though whomever the commander of this fleet was had figured out how to do with ships the kind of flitting shadow movement that Tarik had figured out how to create with his infantry ground troops. And then they were all united. The first shot fired came from the Redemption. It looked like a cross between an angel, a capital ship, and a bat. The wings were those of an angel, with all feathers plucked from its wings, revealing a bat like bone structure flipped upside down, mounted on a wedge shaped ship with massive engines. Tarik had never seen anything like it before, although he instantly knew what it was designed for. Space pirate ships were well-renowned for being fast, almost impossible to hit. These ships, some of which mimicked the design of the Redemption had been designed to launch as much weaponry and laser fire as possible in as little time as possible, in the hopes of hitting the Space Pirate ships. Fleet had decided to hunt the space pirates as opposed to fight them. And Tarik didn't like this. He didn't have time however to communicate this to the uncloaked fighters, and so many of them were destroyed. Another hail-fire of lasers greeted them, and ordered his ships to uncloak, and aim for the junctions of the massive wings and bodies, for he could see that most of the weaponry was mounted on these wings. Bring down the wings, incapacitate the ship. He relayed this to his fleet, and they all began dodging lasers. It was interstellar dodgeball, only where the stakes were that of life and death. Mayhem it was, utter mayhem. From the Redemption came swarms upon swarms of Fleet fighters. The Redemption and the other six smaller ships that mimicked its design ceased their hail-fire, and began with shooting at the Space Pirate ships. Meanwhile, on the bridge of the Redemption, Sweetness was becoming uneasy. He had not heard a single bit of radio chatter on any channel, and yet the Space Pirate fleets were moving almost like the enemy, but nonetheless, in strategic maneuvers that made them look like flocks of birds, swerving in and out of laser fire, making strategic runs towards the accompanying frigates. The fighters swarmed, and then the leader of this space Pirate rabble fleet became apparent. It looked like a demonic bird, risen from some dark place of fire. And then it was on top of them, lasers blazing faster than any ship had ever done before.

Tarik was piloting his ship, relaying commands. Unit two, sweep now! He commanded. Instantly, his second unit began sweeping the tailing fighters. He was the most obvious target, as his was the ship that posed the most threat, and he was hence luring fighters to be swept by his other squads. Alright, now, that frigate! And he projected a telepathic marker upon the frigate he had chosen, and it appeared to all those in his fleet and those within a certain range of his ship as though a red haze had enveloped the frigate. Attack! Now, squads five and six, prepare to cloak and move away from the battle, tis time to pull a cleanup trick. His squads did as he said. He intended this to fool

his enemy, whoever he was, but something strange was going on here...

Sweetness saw a maneuver he had not seen for a long time from the bridge of the Redemption. He saw some pirate fighters prepare to leave the battle, then cloak. He didn't know how, but he next directed his weapons officer, "Aim for the right side of the frigate nearest us at eight o'clock and fire all weapons on my command." He waited a moment, watching, playing his hunch. "fire!" he shouted, and the thousands of laser batteries that were on the Redemption fired towards the frigate's right side, but instead of passing by it, explosions greeted his eyes.

Impossible! Tarik thought, enraged. That's units five and six down, but they were cloaked! How?!?!? Enraged, he began to unlock the Phoenix in ways only he could or knew how. He had designed it such. There were controls that could not be reached physically, but with his abilities, could be. Instantly, the Phoenix's speed increased tenfold, and the weapons fired twice as fast. He charged the enemy's flagship, blazing guns. He hardly penetrated its shield, but he still felt a little bit better. It was now that some strange thoughts began to form in his head, thoughts that suddenly took shape as he realized that some of the Fleet fighters were performing his maneuvers. Maneuvers he made. Maneuvers only his squadron had known, but he knew that that could not be, and vindicated himself as soon as he realized that they were in fact, not the same, but different, and then, with shock, realized something else. The maneuvers were better. They were faster, and more efficiently executed. Now he knew something was wrong. And then he noticed something else...there were Enemy capital ships on the outer edge of the battle...he realized this at about the same time as Sweetness. He dimmed the lights on his bridge, and prepared to hail the Fleet's flagship.

Sweetness saw the Enemy capital ships at about the same time as Tarik and knew then that this battle would be hopeless. And then a hail came across the screen. "Grand Captain, we are being hailed by the lead enemy fighter."

"Put it on the main screen."

"Yes sir."

A darkened area with a figure with eyes that seemed to glow appeared on the screen, although not the kind of glow that Tarik psychically projected, but rather the reflected glow and sparkle from thousands of beams of light being shot all the time around him.

"Who are you?"

"I have many names."

"Are you the leader of these Space Pirate fighters?"

"I am"

"I take it you see the Enemy fleet?"

"Yes."

"Neither of our fleets alone stands a chance against the Enemy."

"This is true."

"For now, a truce until we defeat them?"

"Yes. Until we defeat them."

Sweetness relayed his orders over the airwaves to his fighters, to strike the Enemy capital ships, and then ordered the navigational officer to move the Redemption towards them and fire at will.

Tarik, on the other hand, relayed his orders psychically, and within moments the entire Space Pirate fleet, including some of their minor capital ships which had been cloaked behind the planet in case they needed to be used emerged and decloaked. Approaching from the planet's shadow, both Fleet and Pirates converged upon the Enemy.

They are overwhelming us! The Enemy captain exclaimed. But the cries of his shipmates and his subordinate pilots responded Impossible! We are lords over this universe! But the truth was

undeniable. The combined might of the strange ships that looked like a cross between their ships and that of the Human ships was the more dangerous of the two, they could tell that, simply by the way in which their leader commanded. He led from a ship shaped like a bird, and it was not before long that his identity became known to them. The other fleet, however, was formidable none the less. Their lead ship commanded respect by its arsenal, a practice that the Enemy disdained. Their leaders were chosen by skill in leadership, not by how strong they were or how large their guns were. And then the pivotal event happened. As Tarik realized, then learned, then applied knowledge, the Enemy fleet ceased to move.

I can drown out their thoughts with my mind! They can't communicate! Tarik realized as he began to hear some of the Enemy's thoughts. He forced his mind upon them all, an exhausting effort, but one which resulted in the results he had hoped: The Enemy fighters ceased moving, as he had planned, for they could no longer concentrate enough to pilot their own ships. And so it was that whomever was commanding the Fleet ship proceeded to decimate the Enemy fleet with the weapons that had been meant for Tarik's pirates. In only a few short minutes, Tarik had led his Space Pirates back to near where they had started, and the Fleet vessels had finished off the Enemy fighters. Tarik began to command his fleet to leave, when he was hailed by the bat-winged fleet ship. He instantly began projecting his image of yellow eyes upon the commander, only to realize that what had felt so strange at the beginning of the battle was that he somehow felt that the commander of this oddly shaped fleet vessel was familiar somehow. The captain's voice appeared before he let his image be seen. It sounded very, very familiar.

"I thought we agreed to set aside our differences for the Enemy, and then to resume battle."

"So we did."

"Then the Pirates do not keep their word."

"They survive."

"Show your face."

Show yours Tarik commanded telepathically, intending to perturb or intimidate the Fleet commander.

"You first."

"Very well," he ceased his mental projection and let his image be broadcast. He heard a gasp from the other side. And then the Fleet captain's face appeared on his screen. His face was older, more aged, and definitely more conditioned than when he had last seen it, but the captain was unmistakably Sweetness.

"Sweetness..." he gasped under his breath, whilst his words were echoed

“Tarik...” gasped Sweetness.

After a momentary connection of old friendships, they realized their positions, and the lives they had cost each other. Old friends finish each other’s sentences they say...

“You-“ Sweetness said in unison with Tarik.

*Fleet Enemy Scanner – Roaming satellites used by Fleet to patrol known enemy areas to gather intel. Very adept and efficient at this job. Enemy black shield and space pirate cloaking technology(though this was unknown to fleet at the time) are the only two known forms of evasion of its scanners.

Author’s Note: Well, y’all, here it is. If this column stinks (I’m writing this author’s note in advance) my excuse is that I was listening to the Beatles and talking on the phone (with someone who reads the column and is a close friend and was eating dinner, but nonetheless, beatles have enough of an influence on their own) whilst writing this, so...well, here goes. (Just have to save this: in the first sentence, I misspelled “Nehronis” as “Nehgronis...as in neh-groan-is”)...okay, now its about three or fours days later, and I am going to get serious now...Now having finished it, I must apologize if it is bad in parts, its because it was written over several sessions, finally being finished during Hurricane Isabel

Chapter 16: Alternative Methods

For a brief history, please see the Author’s Note.

“Excuse me, sir...you summoned me?”

“Yes, Captain Nehronis, I did.”

Mishkin sat behind his desk, inwardly fuming. He raged with himself, barely constraining his anger. Sweetness could tell, even though Mishkin couldn't, because his face was near purple with rage. If the situation weren't so serious, Sweetness would have been busting at the seams with laughter. But by the look on his face, and not the color, Sweetness knew that this was a most serious situation.

"May I ask why, sir?"

"Explain to me your most recent battle."

"Well...sir, I, uh...well, you see, I-"

"You retreated. You fled. You chickened out. I want to know why."

"But sir, I said why in report..."

"No, you said that you discovered that the commander of this small, miniscule fleet of Space Pirates was Tarik Khanir. That's not a reason for failure."

"But sir, that meant that we were up against much more than we wanted to be at that time. We had already suffered some casualties at the hands of the Enemy..."

"Do you think I CARE WHO'S IN CHARGE OF THEIR SHIPS? DO YOU?!?!?"

"Well, sir, given by what you've said...no...but sir, this explains much more and is much more useful than you are making it sound."

"USEFUL?!? HOW IS THIS USEFUL? WHAT WOULD HAVE BEEN USEFUL WOULD HAVE BEEN IF YOU HAD JUST SIMPLY DESTROYED THEM IN THE FIRST PLACE!"

"Sir, with all due respect...I think that we should try some other means of dealing with the pirates...something more...discrete, less costly...you know, in terms of lives, I mean."

"An assassin?"

"Well, yes. Or a bounty hunter."

"But bounty hunters only hunt for bounties, and I don't plan on offering one."

"Oh, its quite simple sir...we say there is a bounty, and when they come to collect on it, we kill them."

"You know, captain...you're starting to remind me a bit of me...so be it."

So it came to be that a being known only as Telanor went on a short trip to the Fleet command. He, being who he was, a bounty hunter who was infamous for precision, intended to collect on the bounty...without doing any work. He was still slightly tired from his last kill, and was not quite ready or willing to work for his keep this time around. He knew that he could survive almost anything, and so he was not the least bit afraid of Fleet. He docked his ship, or rather, his most recent kill's method of transportation, without waiting for access. Hence, it only followed that, though he did not realize this, he was about to be met by two dozen fleet soldiers as soon as he walked out the door.

The door opened with a depressurizing hisssss and he was greeted by weapons fire. Instantly, eh dropped to the floor as the ozone smoke around him cleared. He made his move now. Leaping from the floor via a backwards handspring, he impaled one of his attackers and soon captured a second, and held him hostage. The smoke had not yet cleared. When it had cleared, the Fleet soldiers saw something that they had never seen before, and would most likely never see again. Telanor was a relic, and should have been dead hundreds of years ago, but for what exactly he was. In the era of the early third millennium A.D., genetic engineering was rampant, and rivaling factions on varying planets were fighting. This was because whilst it had in fact been Fleet that colonized all the thousands of worlds that the human race was now spread upon, at the end of the second millennium, in a revolt that shall never be forgotten, many of these worlds shook off Fleet control. IT took Fleet a little over a thousand years to regain control, and once it did, it held an iron grip over all of them.

Rivaling factions fought for territory, bringing a resurgence of something that had not happened for nearly a millennia: fighting for land. Those factions with the better technology won. Some factions, however, sought not to fight with other factions, but to provide the tools to other factions, be they military troops, technology, weaponry, or even supplies sometimes. It was from one of these factions that Telanor was spawned. In an effort to create the perfect hunter killer, a being which they later did succeed in creating, they created Telanor. To them, the perfect hunter killer would be a being with mechanical precision, and cybernetic enhancements. And so when they made their perfect hunter killer, it was indeed, cybernetically enhanced, and without emotion, as they had desired. The problem was, that was the rendition of the genetic line they had been working on after Telanor. He was the version of their hunter killer before their perfect killer. And the problem with him was this: Whenever they would attempt to perform the surgeries necessary to graft the cybernetic implants onto and into him, a defense mechanism that they had stumbled upon by accident and unintentionally would arise: blades would emerge from his elbows, knees, shoulders, and shoulder blades. In addition to this, impenetrable (or at least, as far as they could tell) scales would emerge from underneath his skin, forming a suit of armor that they could not pierce. However, the damage to the human psyche was done. They had genetically removed the pieces of the brain for kindness, love, and other such emotions. Now, instead of gaining pleasure from things that other people would, Telanor was reduced (as they said, elevated as he would say) to only deriving pleasure from hunting, killing, and inflicting pain. He only accepted bounties in which he could kill the person whom he was hunting. Another genetic modification: he had added genes that enabled his DNA to constantly repair itself; as a result, he had not aged a day past twenty in his nearly twenty five hundred year lifespan, and he had not a scar on his body. HE hunted to torture,

tortured to gain pleasure: money was only a side bonus. He was notorious. Well known. Even outside of the “scum” circles, the bounty hunters and thieves. There had been cases where his reputation had preceded him so much so that he cornered his quarry in a building, and upon arriving, found that his quarry had killed themselves rather than endure him.

As for the perfect hunter killer: it wasn't perfect. Telanor made it his first kill when he discovered it existed. He still had its blood in a jar, its head on his mantelpiece, and the remains of its cybernetics in a box (he had smashed them into small pieces, nearly dust). This was the man who had come to Fleet, seeking the bounty on Tarik. And, as such, the moment that gunfire had registered in his brain, Telanor's blades and scales had emerged, and it was such that he, to his great irritation, now had a fleet soldier impaled through the stomach hanging off of his back. It was of his own doing, however, that he had another fleet officer held, with his elbow blade at his throat.

“Lower your weapons,” he growled in a voice that had the note of a hiss in it. There was something almost reptilian in his voice when he was covered in scales, and he hadn't quite figured out why. Of course, this wasn't because he wasn't intelligent. It was just quite frankly because he was typically not concerned with these things.

The Fleet soldiers complied, and he released the man from his grasp, and retracted his scales and blades. He had found that he could not control when they emerged, but he could control when they retracted. It was a skill that took him the first twenty years of his life to learn, the next hundred and fifty to become proficient at, and another three hundred to master. But as old as he was, these were amounts of time that meant nothing. Unfortunately, he could already tell, he was not going to be able to collect on the bounty on Tarik easily, if at all, without having actually killed him.

It was because of these events that Fleet Commander Mishkin first met Telanor in the following condition: escorted by a two dozen Fleet soldiers, a medical team (carrying the soldier that he had accidentally impaled, which was surrounded by six of the twenty-four soldiers because immediately after the initial conflict had been resolved, Telanor had asked if he could drink some of the blood of the unwary soldier). At a harsh glare from Telanor the soldiers stayed at the door to Mishkin's office.

“I am here to collect the bounty on Tarik Khanir.”

“I desire proof.”

“Would you like me to vomit his remains here, on your desk, or somewhere else?”

“Nowhere, thank you very much. You don't make a very good liar, you know. It's a skill that comes with age.”

Signaling to his soldiers to fire and terminate the bounty hunter who so obviously was trying to play him for a fool, Mishkin was met with cautious looks from his soldiers. He repeated the signal, and they drew their weapons and fired. Now Mishkin was greeted by a man who had the appearance of a bladed serpent. And the next moment, the back of this man was in front of Mishkin, and blades were pressing his body closer to the now apparent blades on the back of the creature that had at first appeared a man.

"Release me!" Mishkin roared.

"Send them away" came the hissed reply.

"And if I don't?"

The blades pressed harder, now beginning to draw blood from the regions on Mishkin's chest where his hearts* were.

"Point taken." Mishkin motioned to his guards to leave and then shut the door. To his great relief, the blades and scales retracted, also much to his amazement.

"What are you?" he inquired of the bounty hunter.

"I am a bounty hunter. The perfect bounty hunter. And I am here to collect upon the bounty on Tarik Khanir's head."

"So you've killed him, then?"

"Yes."

"Can you give me any proof?"

"Yes."

"Then do so."

"Very well; would you like me to vomit his remains here, on your chair, on your desk, or at what other location that you will specify?"

That phrase did it. Mishkin, although he had many faults, did have a few good qualities, and one of these was the ability to tell when someone was lying. Of course, this was really just an acquired skill amongst politicians of the age, but it still came in handy.

"That won't be necessary. Besides: you're not a very good liar anyway."

"Excuse me?"

"I said 'you're not a very good liar'. And its true. I know that you haven't killed Tarik Khanir."

"And how do you know that?"

"Oh, quite simple really. First of all, you would have dealt with our entire Space Pirate problem if you had been able to eat his remains after killing him, he has so many bodyguards. Secondly, a man of your stature, that is of course, if you are indeed a man, would have a much larger bulge around the midsection that you do if there was either anything there to vomit or anything still recognizable."

"I see. Very well, then I shall kill him for you...I merely demand an added bonus to the bounty."

"And what would that be?"

"A ship. A good ship. Top-of-the-line. State-of-the-art. The best you've got. And I want it now."

"Very well."

"Are we in agreement upon the terms?"

"Yes."

"Then I shall be seeing you."

"Hopefully not too soon."

Mishkin was pleased with himself. After all, he had had a fairly busy day. He had survived a threat on his life, recruited an evidently very skilled bounty hunter to deal with this Khanir problem, and had obtained a high score in his favorite videogame. All was going well in the life of Fleet Commander Mishkin.

Except for that space Pirate problem...

*: Sometimes higher ranking officials have an additional cybernetic or bionic heart implanted, so that in the event that an assassination attempt is made on them, they can have a failsafe or backup method of pumping blood.

Author's Note: Alright folks, I know that if you read this right away, it won't make much sense, but oh well...okay, now look, admittedly, Telanor is a character from a D&D; game I played once, and I role-played him, and I liked him a lot (hey, everyone's got a sadistic side, right? Well, Telanor just doesn't exactly have any other sides, so...well, you get the idea.) So, brief history regarding his creation (if you haven't read the column yet, you will have no idea how a person can be created, but if you have, you'll just be dying to know.). Now, I don't know if I've mentioned this before, but its around the 55th century (the early-middle 55th century, that is). So its around the year 5430. Not 5430, mind you, just around that time. Now, according to my history of the world, or rather, the history of the world that I've created, in the earlier days of the world, genetic engineering ran rampant. This would be in the early 3000's, late 2000's, you get the idea. Telanor is the result of a

faction-sponsored project to make...well, I think you can figure out what they were trying to make.

Chapter 17: Good Friends Are Always There

“You.”

It was a greeting not to be argued with. A meeting of two old friends had occurred, their paths had once more become intertwined in the fabric of time, two strands, together at one point to make a blended color, apart at others to form their own tapestries, now rejoined to reconnect in the greater web.

“I thought you were dead, mi amigo.”

Casting away all attempts at secrecy and harshness, Tarik Khanir, the one who had been betrayed by those who his dearest friend was now allied with, whom he, himself, had once worked for, he tried to regain that old sense of kinship that was so prevalent within the Seven, that sense of kinship that he realized, regrettably, would never exist again. For alas, the Seven had now been reduced to two. It was such that Sweetness replied:

“As did I.”

It was a mutual recognition of their shared grief passed between the two whose fates it was to affect the universe so profoundly. It was apparent that they were both trying their hardest to retain their friendship, even whilst their subordinates were wondering why in the name of their homeworld they were conversing like friends, these two who should be like mortal enemies.

“How did you survive?”

It was quite clear that both of them wanted the other’s side of the story, so that they could determine which one of them was right for being on their respective sides of the battle. Tarik

simply made the first move in finding out what had transpired upon that day.

“Me? Oh, me, I had the presence of mind to shut down all non-essential systems after everyone else was killed. I was propelled by the wake of one of their frigates, and then my head hit the overhead control block. After that I just kind of lost my memory for about 8 months. And you? Have you been keepin’ it real, like we discussed?”

“Heh, heh...no, Sweetness, no...I’ve been living in an altered reality since we last parted. Want to see?”

“No, not especially Farmboy, not especially. I know well enough what where the buffalo roam looks like.

“You never change, do you?”

“Oh, yes I do. See?”

At this point Sweetness held his Grand Captain badge into the view of the camera, pointing his finger at it.

“Shiny, no?”

“Not changed a bit.”

“So, what did happen to you, Tarik?”

“I left the battle at probably about the same time that you shut down, which would explain why I didn’t see you.”

“Well, I think that we can both agree that the best way not to get seen by the Enemy is not to be seen by them.”

I chuckle, for the fools do not know that we let them live, that we could sense them all the time.

“Still, how on Earth did you end up where you are now?” Tarik inquired.

“I was about to ask you the same thing...although it doesn’t surprise me to find you in this situation.”

“No?” Tarik was a little bit curious as to why not.

“No.”

“Why?”

“I knew that battle was something you would never grow disinterested in.”

Tarik chuckled, but then replied "Well, yes, but why...or rather, how is it that you are now in command of a capital ship?"

"Let's just say that instead of climbing the proverbial ladder or moving higher up the links on the proverbial chain, let's say that I just used the proverbial escalator."

"So, you still enjoy seeing how many times you can work one particular word that shouldn't be used as much as you do use it into a sentence?"

"Oh yes. Very much. Yes, yes, yes, very very very much much much, Tarik, I do."

"Well now, isn't this just picture perfect: two best friends, now enemies...why don't we just take a picture and put it in a frame right now?"

"Because it's the fifty-fifth century, Tarik: frames haven't existed for three-thousand years."

"Ah...good point...but what th--"

A hundred more Enemy fighters had just broken their black shields. But this was merely an exclamation of surprise, not concern.

"But...honestly, Tarik, I mean, the Space Pirates? Come on! You could've done a lot better for yourself."

"Unlike Fleet, the Pirates I lead--"

"Oh ho! So you lead them now, do you?"

"Are not anywhere near as greedy as Fleet."

"Oh, touched a sore spot did I? Oh come on, Tarik, lighten up! We surely must be making history here, I mean surely. Two best friends and all that jazz..."

"I said no slang. But yes, you're right...it is just picture perfect..."

"Kinda makes you want to wonder if there is a higher being guiding us all, doesn't it? To ponder the existence of God, you know."

"I've done that."

"And? What was your conclusion?"

"I said I did that. I stopped when my head started to hurt."

Sweetness laughed a laugh of mirth, and sadly realized it was something he had not done since the last time he had seen Tarik in a casual setting, although this was nothing like a casual setting.

“But as I was saying, Sweetness...well, lets just carry on with this, shall we? We already know that only the best of the two-“

“Three. And Tarik, stop being so irrational. This is serious boys, and you’re sitting there joking.”

It was a voice that had changed greatly since they had last heard it...it had...grown...matured...become wiser, and more in tune with itself and the world around it...more at peace...but it was still, unmistakably,

Queen.

“Queen!”

The exultation of joy that came from the two simultaneously spoke more than monologues could have ever done for the two petty humans. Our servant replied, much to our distaste

“Surprised to see me, no?”

“I’m even more surprised to see that you are not allied with either of our two forces,” Said Tarik.

“I have been known to juggle my alliances since you last saw me. You might notice that I am now allied with the one that you two call the Enemy.”

“The fact was not lost on me,” Tarik replied.

“Or me.”

Sweetness had almost been in shock since he first heard Queen’s voice. He had had a small crush on her the entire time, but the kind that he accepted, knowing it would never go anywhere. Now he knew why it never could.

“My, Sweetness...how you’ve grown. I can tell that you’ve matured a lot since the last time we saw each other.”

“Queen, I am sorry, but I have been explicitly ordered to terminate all opposition in this sector, be it human or otherwise, and you have probably already noticed that your fleet is smaller than either of ours.”

Over one million more enemy fighters had just broken their black shields. They had just warped in out of sight, behind the planet, and then cloaked, and only just now decloaked.

"Oh, you have grown, haven't you, Queen? When I knew you, you were just a highly intelligent, very militarily gifted young woman with a small inferiority complex. And now, in addition to all that, you've discovered how manipulative you can be too, haven't you?"

"Hardly. Neither of you are meant to die here. I am here to, oh, how was it? 'To give to airy nothing a local habitation and a name?' That's how Shakespeare put it, wasn't it? I am here to tell you how narrow the ways out of this situation here are. I am here to tell you that you should be fighting me, and the Enemy: not each other."

"Fighting the Enemy is much easier than fighting Sweetness over here, Queen. Want me to prove it?"

"No, not yet."

"Ha! This will be as easy as making the oyster go extinct!"

"But aren't there only three or four of those left?"

"Exactly."

"Well fine then, now is your chance to prove it."

I instructed her, attempted to hurt her, but her talents too had grown far faster than we had anticipated, and she was able to ignore my prodding.

"Very well. Prepare your forces Queen...and prepare them well...for an onslaught like nothing they have ever felt before!"

Exerting his powers to their limits, exhausting though it was, Tarik had already discovered, had its advantages. The Enemy fighters retreated first, then, when he had stopped his psychic assault, returned to their black shield mode, and then it was seen that they warped away.

"There: that takes care of that...now, tell me, what did you feel, Sweetness?"

"I actually had the most distinct sensation that I was eating a pineapple, which is quite queer, considering I've only had a pineapple once before."

"Oh, very funny. I think I'll go about quintupling my odds of victory now."

"Quintupling? Are you sure? I mean, perhaps double, now that I can imagine without difficulty, and triple I don't have to stretch for, but quadruple is about as good as my odds of becoming the leader of Fleet. I recommend that you change your estimate."

"I don't think so. Remember all of your other ships?"

"Yes."

“Well, say goodnight to everyone aboard them.”

It takes far less exertion to master and overwhelm a hundred average human mind than it does to do so to one of the Enemy’s minds, and such, exhausted though he was, Tarik was able to knock unconscious all of the crew on all of the Fleet ships, except Sweetness.

Sweetness had one response to this: “Fine. So you are most definitely now a significant foe, as well as a noteworthy enemy.”

“I must apologize, Sweetness, but now, seeing as your fleet is highly incapacitated due to the fact that you are alone in consciousness within it, I think that it is time for me to tear myself from the engagement. Fare well, old friend, until we meet again...”

The Pirate ships were commanded to pull out and warp back to Tyrnok, no questions asked. And so, in part to himself, and in part to Tarik, Sweetness mused

“Yes...until we meet again...”

And I, the Wise One, wait and watch them both from afar...

Author’s note: Alright, here it is, the explanation for stuff like oysters, amigo, quintuple, etc. is that when it was originally written (in class,) it was an exercise in adaptability, and the professor would literally go to random words in the dictionary, and then you would have to use them. So that’s why some stuff is kinda weird...I hope you all liked it...

Chapter 18: The Shaman

I have failed them...the Sun Child is now in the hands of the shadow...I have FAILED them!

Three years ago, I, Mabus, the Shaman of the Jungle, came to find the Sun Child’s parents. I myself have lived here for hundreds of years, my ancestry being mixed...friend and foe, ally and enemy, Pirate and Enemy...I am a half-breed...neither here nor there, neither human nor of the Enemy...I

have a home with neither. I inherited the humans' form, the Enemy's long life and mental capacities...I was nearly insane for most of my first hundred years of existence...

I came, then, upon a flower. It spoke to me of many things...Next I came upon a small bird: it, too, was an exile, for with its every breath it spewed destruction and flame. Soon I came upon a great serpent, with scales capable of withstanding the bird's fiery exhalations. The bird thanked me by offering itself in my service. Whenever I passed by people, I had these teams, this fiery bird and hard-scaled serpent with me, and I could sense that I had come to be known as the Shaman.

I was in a wandering state such as this when I found a small landing party...my second sight revealed a bright, shining, nearly blinding light in their camp. I saw that this light was a child, whose name was in the Enemy's tongue, though he did not know it. I myself only knew it from what my father had told me, that Enemy of all: bristhishnath esprengranaliethen darunglar; go! Be away! Wander, and bring peace to the tortured creatures of this land: such is your place!

I obeyed, and when the Sun Child's parents returned, I offered my services in his protection. They took me away from the Jungle, to their home. I served them for nearly three years, protecting their Sun Child. I even cast about myself the image of my father, whilst I commanded my beasts and serpents and flame birds in the defense of the Sun Child, the peace-bringer, even against others of his own kind who sought to take him from his parents. But they, seeing me and my beasts, whom I provided for, did not allow me to accompany them in their public showings, and it was because of this that they were killed, and the Sun Child taken from me.

That day I hunted, for the first time in two centuries, but I hunted no beast. I mounted one of my three teams of bird and serpent, and rode, feeling that their vengeance was worth revealing myself in public; I hunted others that shared half my blood...humans. I found them, and in a fit of rage I had them burned, burned until nothing was left. I then somehow found my way back to the Jungle, though in this raging haze I know not how. In the time I had been away, the Jungle had changed much.

It was now occupied on the surface by Pirates, and their leader was one whom I never thought existed: he was like me, but of his own choice! He seemed a half breed as well, for his powers far surpassed mine. For two and a half months I could feel and sense his pain as he was weaving in and out of sanity as I did for a hundred years; I could also sense that he would emerge victorious from this trial, that he would emerge stronger, whereas I had emerged weaker.

This young one* is the Moon child, but his name is not familiar to me...my father told me as I was barely alive, only a year or two old, yet still cursed with consciousness, that one day both the sun and moon, universal in their rules on life, would send their children to our plane, where they would battle. All worlds that have life upon them have at least one sun, and at least one moon, or so father said. In a tower of the Sun did I find the Moon Child, whose light pales in comparison with the Sun Childs, but is still bright in and of its own. I saw that the Sun Child was dying, and that an ordinary human adolescent was taking his place: his origins were fading. But the Moon child was a different story.

He had started out human, and had become the Moon Child through age and long journeys through the depths of the void of eternal darkness. I saw that he would win this conflict, for the Moon Child's purity remained intact, if not becoming more and more pure by the day, whereas the Sun Child was becoming corrupted. I waited for the Moon Child to come to me, for I knew that one day he would, and told my teams of bird and serpent to kill those who were not the Moon Child, for they would not be able to kill the Moon Child when he came. Many men came to me, but none were the Moon Child.

I saw, one day to soon come, the Moon Child in my presence. It happened several days later: a serpent came to me, accompanied by a man. My bird-serpent teams came to my defense, I, the nameless shadow of guilt, the Shaman, Mabus, but they were defeated. I began to fear the man, but he let down his mortal veil, blessing me with his presence. I could see his orange eyes of fury, his image of strength, and I fell to my knees.

"So you are the one who has been killing my men all this time, then?" said the Moon Child.

"Only to see if they were you" I replied.

"Well, please stop"

"Yes, Moon Child...I am yours to command"

The Moon Child was deeply moved by this, and I felt him inside my mind. He soothed me, and tore from me my raging haze. In my mind he told me that I was forgiven for being the great abomination, the combination of the two poles, and told me that I need not feel the urge to repay some sin that I did not know any longer. He left me there, in that jungle on Jungle, and returned to his people, to prepare their new home.

*This is comparative, because bear in mind that the whole passage is written in first-person from the point of view of the Shaman, who, being a half breed, is several hundred years old, whereas Tarik is merely in his twenties

Chapter 19: The Serpent

Final breath / Before silent death

Last sunset / Final moonrise

I come as shadow: / It is my disguise

In darkness born / In darkness dwelling

All throughout this universe swelling

We shall come / In the culling

Darkest storm / Of blackest night

Take wing / Stormcrow

On your final, / Everlasting flight

~~Space Pirate Infantry Division Mantra

It had come from a dream that Tarik had had. It had been more of a nightmare, though Tarik would never admit to having nightmares.

It was mid-day, and Tarik was troubled. He had not pondered his encounter with the Shaman that had happened so long ago until now. He entered his chamber, high above the crowds, and approached its center. Since becoming leader of the Space Pirates, Tarik had started to practice meditation phases, although sparingly, to help clear his mind so that he could concentrate on the tasks he had before him. He had only truly made them a habit after he had gained his abilities from his gene-altering serum. As a way to maintain his focus, he had also made it habitual to, while meditating, hover about three feet above the ground, cross-legged.

As soon as he began his meditation phase, he began to have a waking dream: his nightmares began playing themselves out for him all over again.

There it was, in his dream: world of blue sun, black cloud and red sky. The first world they would take, though he did not know where it was, for he was sure that it was not Inira, the world where he grew up*. There was a colossal storm, blue flashes on black clouds with red sky between them. The world had been darkened over. It was an unnatural night, and he could feel the terror of this planet's people. So he dreamed it about two times a week, somehow knowing that all of this fear and horror was his fault. The dream continued, beyond the point at which he normally woke himself up.

A flame came in the sky, and a figure dropped to the ground from many miles' height. A crash, and upon rolling hills of verdant grass there was now a crater, and from it arose a figure in black. He could hear a hiss, a slithering, and jets of flame, and the silhouettes of dark beasts appeared on the hilltops, facing an army of infantry and artillery troops...Fleet troops. This was an invasion...his invasion! Two things happened then that he could neither foresee nor understand.

The first was the rapid shift of the location of the dream, and he could tell by the brown sky that he was on the Homeworld, Earth**. This, however, was not what mattered to nor what surprised Tarik, for he could feel his powers being counteracted. They were being neutralized, canceled somehow, and the source was at the same time obvious and impossible: a sixteen year old girl, who stood, hovering, opposing him, with tears in her eyes and her hand on his cold, hard face. He could feel a sense of kindred with this girl whose apparent ability to counter his abilities infuriated him so much, but he was aroused from this reverie by a hiss calling his name. He knew that the countermeasures Sweetness had warned Tarik he would suggest to Mishkin had arrived.

"Come out, Tarik Khhhhhanirrr! Come and meet your death!"

The massive square below him was emptied for hundreds of feet around this figure, this serpent man known only as Telanor.

How did you get here? Tarik asked Telanor telepathically.

"Coward! Your cheap tricks will not work on me! Come and meet your demise!"

Let him be: I'll handle this Tarik told his guards in regards to the snake man.

He leaped from his balcony, plummeting towards the ground, slowing himself rapidly when he was within fifty feet of it, to come to a soft landing several meters from Telanor.

"Greetings, Telanor...welcome to my home. Might I enquire as to how you got here?"

"I came on my ship. I don't chitchat. DIE FOOL!" hissed the serpent.

Telanor leapt at Tarik with such speed that even Tarik was surprised. Knocked off his feet, Tarik was still regaining his composure as Telanor leapt off him and landed on his feet, his blades emerging, and charged Tarik. Tarik lay one hand on the ground and used a combination of his own

physical strength (which he had been refining) and his psychokinetic abilities to pivot on his one hand into a kick that sent Telanor flying and left Tarik standing.

Go, quick, my soldiers, fetch the others: there is a lesson to be learned here! he instructed some recruits nearby.

Telanor recovered, and flipped himself into a standing position. They circled each other, serpent and shadow, both forms of man embracing artificiality, both projections, not showing what truly lay underneath, yet simultaneously quintessifying*** their own true natures. Telanor charged Tarik, and Tarik fired a blast of his psychic energy at him, intending to fling Telanor back, but to the great surprise of all those present, Telanor did a one handed somersault to the side, dodging the blast, and continuing to charge, coming into contact with Tarik's jaw fractions of a second later, sending him flying. Instantly the crowd could see that Tarik was angry. His eyes were blazing orange, with intensity they had not yet seen, nor even imagined, as his whole physical self seemed to disappear into his shadow form, the psychic image he seemed to instinctually project to all those around him when he was fighting, making it almost impossible to track his motions, or define his shape with clear outlines. Tarik was...pissed.

Telanor could smell something...something he'd not smelled since he had allowed that Fleet soldier to be peeled from his back.

"You're bleeeeeeeding!" he hissed

Shocked by the exclamation, Tarik's shadow projection dropped for a moment, and they could see that he was hovering about two meters up and three or four meters away from Telanor. They could also see the line of blood dripping down his chin, seeming to come from nowhere at all, and at the same time from the entire right side of his face. He did not know it, but Telanor's scales were razor edged, sharp enough to emerge cleanly from beneath his skin every time, whilst leaving little to no room for anything to get inside his body to cause an infection. So, without knowing it, Tarik had not only received a blunt impact wound from Telanor when he had charged Tarik, but also hundreds of tiny cuts, small, but deep. In an instant, the shadow Tarik reemerged, and the fight continued. It raged for nearly half an hour, back and forth, Telanor somehow managing to defend against Tarik's psychic onslaught, Tarik somehow managing to survive the many wounds he was beginning to accumulate. He had more than three times tried his mental onslaught that seemed to incapacitate the Enemy, but it seemed to have no effect on Telanor.

"Foolish," remarked Telanor as they again circled each other, the difference being that they were now much closer. Tarik was ten feet elevated from Telanor, and they had somehow managed to, without noticing for being so involved in their fight, enter into the main hall of the Sunlit fortress, where there were now rays of sunlight streaming in, per its design.

“What?”

“I said that it is foolish of you, Tarik Khanir, to try and invade my mind in order to drown out my consciousness, to debilitate me. I have no weaknesses: I am Telanor; I hunt; I survive. I have for two and a half millennia, and you are not the first to try to beat me. You will not be the last, either: I am not going to lose.”

“Don’t bet on it, Hunter.”

“I don’t bet. But I will win. Now be quiet.”

“I disagree. I think that we could go on like this for quite a long time. It seems to me as though its pretty much anyone’s fight.”

He dropped four or five feet closer to the ground, and was looking around, surveying the masses gathered to make certain that they were far enough away that Telanor could not harm them when he realized his mistake: he had diverted his attention from the fight, something he should’ve known Telanor would never do.

Time itself seemed to slow down, and Tarik became aware of the serpent charging him, one of his blades extended and headed straight for Tarik’s belly. He put up a telekinetic shield, and time sped back to normal rate. Telanor’s blade broke upon the shield.

“What?!?!? My blades CAN’T break!” Telanor shrieked.

“Well, it would appear as though one just did.” Tarik replied, realizing that his victory seemed assured, now that Telanor was partially disabled. Tarik lowered himself to the floor, planning to continue fighting the debilitated Telanor on the ground. He stopped dead at an unearthly, chilling sound that sent shivers up his spine.

Telanor was laughing. It was a hiss that was so full of malice, evil, and hatred that it seemed to chill the very blood in your veins. No one could see what Telanor had to laugh about, for his broken blade was oozing a green fluid.

“Why do you laugh, snake?”

“Because...I am perfect. And you...are a worthy adversary.” Telanor held up his arm...and ripped the remainder of the blade right out of his elbow, which began to gush blood all over the floor of the Sunlit Fortress. His laughing intensified, leaving Tarik uneasy and horrified.

“Pitiful human with your emotions” Telanor sneered, “I don’t need them.”

“What’s your point, bounty...hunt...” Tarik’s voice slowed, then stopped, as he gaped at what he was seeing. Telanor’s elbow, the same elbow that had had a blade a minute or two before, and had been gushing blood mere moments ago, was now completely healed human flesh. The scales emerged over it again, and the laughing continued, becoming more vile and sinister.

"I don't need that blade...I heal fast!"

Another blade shot out of Telanor's elbow, identical to the one that Tarik had broken only minutes ago.

How can I beat an enemy who can heal themselves that quickly?!?! thought Tarik. Then Tarik decided it was time. He had stored his hatred, his rage, his anger, from the desertion and treason of Fleet against him. He had kept it inside, saving it for what he deemed would be a time that was right to use it. Inside him, unexpressed, contained, it had festered, and grown. Now he decided it was time to unleash a little bit of that rage.

"Behold! My pirates, behold! This is your leader's true fury!" bellowed Tarik.

The shadow reemerged. The eyes glowed red, not orange as usual. Tarik's voice became distorted and deafening, and it seemed as though the very sun itself had ran away to hide. The room, the main gathering hall of the Sunlit Fortress itself seemed to darken, and the area around the living Shadow that was Tarik seemed to become as dark as the void of space, absorbing light. Every footstep of Tarik's became as a thunderclap, every breath a mighty wind. Telanor had begun to inch slowly back throughout this, as Tarik walked menacingly forward.

"WHO FEARS WHOM NOW, SERPENT?!?"

"I do not fear you!"

"WE...SHALL SEE." The shadow whispered.

There came then what seemed to be a crackling blue bolt to the shadow's hand as he extended it, and with a mere flick of the wrist, Telanor was flung to the wall: the fortress itself shook.

"NOW DO YOU SEE WHY THE PIRATES CANNOT BE BEATEN?"

"They can be beaten."

The shadow pressed harder against Telanor, beginning to crush the wall.

"Tarik," whimpered Haladhim, "you're starting to destroy the Fortress."

"WHO DARES TO DISTURB ME?!?" the shadow roared, and its gaze settled on Haladhim. With one hand still extended, seeming to hold Telanor in place, the other hand swept forward, and Haladhim himself went flying across the room. The shadow disappeared, and Telanor fell to the floor as Tarik realized he had almost lost himself to his rage, and he ran to his friend's aid.

"Oh! Haladhim! I'm so sorry! I...I almost lost myself I-"

Tarik realized he had made the same mistake twice: he dropped his guard...again. This time, however, it cost him. He only knew that he had made a mistake by the fact that he felt a sharp sting to his back, and, looking down, saw one of Telanor's blades sticking through his gut. The

blade retracted, and Tarik fell to his knees. He could feel Telanor on top of him, doing something to his midsection...drinking. Tarik passed out, and all the world seemed to him as white.

It was not a known fact, but Telanor was a master healer. It was how he managed to keep his victims alive so long to torture them. He would give them grievous injuries, heal them, and then open up the same wounds, time and time again, each time gaining more pleasure from it. This was not one of those occasions, however. He was not in it for pleasure: he had met a worthy adversary. For the first time in his two and a half thousand year long lifespan, he had met a worthy opponent. Not even the supposedly “perfect” bounty hunter that he had made his first kill had come even remotely close to the challenge that this little human had put up. Even though in the end Telanor had won, he was still in awe at having found an opponent with whom the thrill was not just in the hunt, but also in the kill: the fight, the battle to bring him down. Tarik only knew that Telanor was a master healer because Tarik woke up about a month later in the care of the Shaman Mabus, who told him what had happened. After Tarik’s collapse, Telanor had drunk for about a minute from Tarik’s wound, and then he had begun to heal him. Telanor had left a message for Tarik with the instructions that only Tarik read it, and that he read it as soon as he woke up. As soon as Tarik woke up and had heard the story, he read the note.

“Quarry...you are my first worthy adversary. Fleet wants proof that you died...I have your blood in my belly...you taste slightly of rabbit, but more of a fine wine, I having had one or two in my time. I healed you not because I care, but because I’d like to do this again real soon. But not too soon. Your intestines were ruptured, so lay off the spicy foods for a while. Looking forward to hunting and/or killing you again”

Tarik smiled, for he realized that though Telanor was ruthless, brutal, and savage, he seemed to have some kind of sense of honor and morals, even though they were grossly twisted.

In Mabus the Shaman’s care, Tarik recovered faster than could ever have been expected, especially as even those at Fleet would have expected him to die. Telanor returned to Fleet, went into Mishkin’s office, and promptly vomited some of the blood that he had ingested from Tarik on Mishkin’s desk.

“There,” he hissed, even though he was in his human form, sans scales, “DNA test to match with Khanir...you’ll see it’s the same.”

He collected on the bounty when the tests returned positive, for the blood was Khanir's, and he collected the bounty and departed for a place in the universe that none but he knew, to contemplate, for the first time, his place in the ever expanding universe, and his first ever worthy adversary.

After his recovery, Tarik saw that Simeon had been mature for nearly a month, and decided that the time for the invasion of Fleet had come. He never knew why, exactly, but his powers had nearly tripled that day, even though he could not remember much after being impaled through the gut. The night before the revealing of Simeon to the Space Pirates, he had a dream:

In his dream there was the girl, the sixteen year old hovering girl, with tears in her eyes. He could see she had hair almost so blonde as to appear white, and skin almost as pale as the moon of the Homeworld. Her eyes, however, were what caught him most. There were no pupils in them: she was blind.

That same night on a world that has only ever been seen by one human being, the Enemy's Homeworld, a human child was born, albino, and blind. Her name was Harmony.

Simeon awoke. For the first time, he truly awoke. His consciousness passed into full being, full maturity, and he became aware. His eyes glowed red, and he knew that his time had come. The time of his kind was at hand, and he knew it. Given all this, he smiled, or at least as much as an individual of his species could smile.

*Grew up does not mean physically: he had to mature to a mental maturity of around age 15 or more at the age of seven in order to lead the other six of the Seven just to survive on a world that had experienced a near nuclear holocaust.

**See Appendix 3A

***Yes, I know that quintessifying is technically not a word, but it means making the quintessence of, just as quintessify means to make the quintessence of. So there. Now, you English majors and teachers: go deal with it.

Chapter 20: Simeon

The time had come: Simeon was to be revealed to the Space Pirates. He was the product of months of hard labor and research on the part of Tarik, his creator. Simeon was a living, breathing creature, and he would be the harbinger of the destruction of Fleet. He was designed and engineered to be the ultimate foot soldier, capable of being a mount due to his size, and more than capable of being a warrior in and of his own right. His story had started many months before, however, and at the dawn of the day on which he was to be revealed, Tarik remembered Simeon's story.

It had been during the construction of the Sunlit Fortress that Tarik had first seen the potential for the creation of an animal to aid his quest from the native species on Tyrnok. He had first noticed the firebird, with its peculiar ability to breathe fire, both inhale it fine and exhale it fine. He had first thought of harnessing these creatures somehow when he next came upon the diamondback serpent. These were immense beasts with scales at least as hard, if not harder, it would seem, than diamonds. This did it for Tarik: he saw the makings of a mythical beast. He scoured the planet in search of more diverse species to aid him, but in the end settled for a genome comprised primarily of those three species: firebird, diamondback serpent, and his own DNA, though not yet altered to allow for the psychic abilities he had given himself.

Diamondback lizards were large, subterranean reptiles usually between thirteen and eighteen feet long. Firebirds were much smaller, but their fire-breathing attribute nonetheless made them just as deadly. The Shaman had harnessed these two beasts by using them in tandem, but Tarik was going to combine them through the marvels of genetic engineering. Unsuccessful at first, Tarik's creations died hours after their creation. Finally, however, Tarik decided to punch in random

combinations, for he was despairing. He filled rows of test tubes with hundreds of different variations on the genome that had resulted from the combination of the three species. He needed the diamondback's scales and size, the firebird's wings and fire-breathing capabilities, and human intellect. He set the computer to continue to manipulate the genes in random variations, and as he expected, all of the specimens died after only several hours. He finally came, however, upon a specimen that lasted several days. He was so excited, but it died. He decided to pursue this one strain, to perfect it to the point at which it would at least survive until he could see basic skeletal structure. He refined this strain, and, eventually, he could see the structure: there was a serpentine body, but with four legs, and...wings! He had begun on his quest to refine this strain...little did he know that this was the strain. The specimen did not die: it grew and grew, needing to be put into a new, larger, holding vat every few days.

He took this being out when it was only a few months old, and he took it with him into the jungle on Tyrnok to confront what he did not know was the Shaman. His builders saw this beast of his, this being he had christened Simeon after an ancient Earthen king, and they were awed. He made them think that it was a dream, but he knew they would never truly believe that. Simeon survived, and when they returned to Tarik's lab, Simeon began to become partially aware, and so Tarik gave him a sedative. Over the next few weeks, Tarik performed innumerable tests to make certain that all was progressing, and he developed and administered many different gene-altering serums to Simeon, to insure that he turned out to be exactly what Tarik wanted.

In the end, Simeon became fully aware whilst Tarik was recovering from being impaled through the gut. The computers in Tarik's lab had been preprogrammed to educate Simeon in case this happened and Tarik could not do it himself. The computers told Simeon his purpose, that the time of his kind was at hand, and that his master would be along shortly. Tarik did come the next day, and he and Simeon spoke. Exactly what they talked about, Tarik could not remember: he had been under powerful painkillers at the time, but he did know that he had realized that day that he had not just made a powerful weapon, but also a sentient being that would become a good friend and adviser.

Reminiscing in all of this, Tarik almost forgot that the time had come. He stepped out onto the balcony that was used to address the Space Pirates, and told them that a new age was coming.

"The time of our oppression is great, but the time until we can begin to take back from fleet not just what is ours, but everything they ever had, is short. Today I introduce to you the weapon of the pirates, our weapon...today I introduce you to Simeon...my creation...I designed him from the beginning...he will be here long after I am gone, and you are to always listen to him...he is Simeon, Father of the Dragon Legions of the Space Pirates!"

At this Simeon emerged upon the balcony: he was about six meters long, and a full eight meters long if he dropped his neck. He kept his wings close to his sides, for when they were fully extended they had a nearly twenty meter wingspan. Tarik had engineered, created, and perfected, through modern science, the mythical beast: the dragon. And it fought for the Space Pirates. For lack of a better term to describe it, Tarik felt something in his heart: As for Fleet...it was ass-whopping time.

Simeon may have been male, but he was self-replicating: Tarik had made dragons an asexual species. What this meant was that all that was needed was time for Simeon to begin laying several eggs, and for those beasts to mature. All in all, Tarik knew it would probably be about a year before the first divisions of his dragon legions had matured, but he also knew that it would be well worth the wait. As a result of this kind of reproduction, Tarik knew that typically the offspring were essentially identical to the parent. He, however, had made it so that there was still room for genetic diversity: he had not wanted to create merely a genome, but rather, a new species, of which Simeon would be the head. Tarik had used the smidge of Space Pirate DNA that came directly from the Enemy to try and grant long life to the dragon legions, but that was something that he knew only time would tell.

So it was that Simeon smiled to himself...or at least as much as a dragon could smile.

Chapter 21: The Calm

Two years after the revealing of Simeon, father of the Dragon Legions...

Tarik had just finished his daily meditation. He had found that his frustrations with the space pirates, coupled with his abilities, necessitated a period of time to relax, to reflect, and to regain control. It was not that he wasn't thankful to the pirates – he was. It was merely that they were moving too slow for him, for his tastes. It has been nearly three years that he had been with him. Under his leadership, they could have begun the offensive nearly eighteen months ago. Yet they had not.

Things had been progressing in unforeseen ways: Tarik didn't know how successful he had been with his serum, for he did not know anywhere near enough about the Enemy to know that. The fact was that, just like the Enemy, his powers were growing with time. The older he became, the more his abilities developed. But because humans have a lifespan less than a sixth of that of the average specimen of the Enemy (assuming that they weren't killed in battle, which was, generally, a fairly safe assumption), his abilities were developing at a much more rapid rate. He was finding it took more and more control to do the same tasks without exerting too much force. He was now prepared to, as he had planned, give an ultimatum to the other nine members of the Council of Ten.

It had been a most difficult thing to arrange, this meeting. It was not often that humans and those of the Enemy were alive very long when in close proximity to each other. This, however, was

different. They were here to serve him, for he had summoned them. Discovered on a newly colonized planet Fleet had found a kind of Rosetta stone, only in technology. It was allowing them to interpret some of the data from Enemy ships that they had salvaged. And, in a temple of sorts nearby, it had allowed them to read inscriptions of a sort upon its surface. They were instructions. Instructions for calling to a certain location the most lethal band of mercenaries in the known universe: The Seven. They were amongst the most ancient of the Enemy, each being over four thousand years old. Their powers over the three-dimensional realm were as formidable as could be expected. They were warriors, exiled from the ranks of the Enemy for disobeying the Code – The set of laws by which the Enemy fought. They had been too brutal in battle, and now had to use their abilities to pass themselves off as humans in this now infested universe. As such, they needed money to survive. They were mercenaries, and they had all been summoned, via their own technology, to the temple at which the runes had been found. In silence, with, by most human standards, more money than God, Mishkin awaited the arrival of the Seven. He had had enough: nearly three years had gone by since he thought he had gotten that Khanir brat out of the way, and yet still, still he continued to be a problem. The most potent bounty hunter in the galaxy had tricked him – and out of a lot of cash, too. He would not let Telanor's trickery go unpunished, but for now, for now he would summon these Seven, for he knew that they had their own code. This code as well was inscribed on the interior of the temple, and, having used this new found translator, he had read it. He knew that lying in regards to the status of a kill was impermissible, and, being as the Seven were the creators of this code, he knew they would follow it. The instructions had said for the person who was to give the task to come alone, and so he had. He was waiting in the inner sanctum, where a dome like room, decorated with seven statues of robed figures stood. He began to feel a tingling on his spine. They'd come. With a sizzling of lightning, characteristic of sub-atmospheric warp exits, he saw the roof of the room open, and a single Enemy fighter descend. It vanished once it had touched the floor. All went dark for Mishkin, and then, when he opened his eyes, in place of seven statues of robed figures, there were seven robed figures, their orange eyes glowing bright. It was the first time a human being had ever seen an actual Enemy before in the flesh, but Mishkin was not surprised.

"You summoned us," said a voice in his head.

"Yes."

"Name your kill. We name our price."

"I refuse to offer any more than I have brought here."

"We will decide when you have named your kill: name your kill"

"Tarik Khanir," Mishkin replied.

Next, he could hear a peculiar noise in his head, almost like insects buzzing through concrete, and he realized they must have been whispering telepathically amongst themselves.

“We shall take all that you have here. It is enough.”

They vanished, in much the same fashion as they had arrived.

“It’s about dang time you did something about ol’ Tarik,” said Sweetness, coming down the hallway, “though I must admit I’m a bit offended you didn’t consult me first.”

“No. Leave. It is done...they will do what you could not.”

“Will they?”

“I most certainly do hope so.”

Tarik stormed into the Council room, as he had planned (for effect).

“What is wrong, Tarik?” inquired one of the council members.

“We aren’t doing anything, that’s what’s wrong.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“We could’ve started the offensive on fleet months ago, yet here we have waited, always on the defensive. I have a score to settle, in case you forget.”

“We have not forgotten the conditions of your arrival here, Tarik, but we still do not feel we are ready.”

“Just because you don’t feel you are doesn’t mean you aren’t. I can lead them to victory, but you won’t let me!”

“Are numbers simply are not enough yet to launch a full-scale offensive.”

“I am not talking about a full-scale offensive, I am referring to guerrilla tactics, ways to hurt fleet, but focused on a single planet, in addition to our other efforts. Once we have worn them down, then we can make a quick, clean sweep and take over. It will more than double our populace, and it will also more than double our food stores.”

“Tarik, what is it? Something has been wearing at you for months, and I suspect that this is a result of it. What is it, my friend?”

“It’s this!” Tarik shouted, pointing his hand towards a window, which shattered, fell several feet, and then, with variegated hand motions from Tarik, reassembled itself perfectly, right in front of their eyes.

“How did you do that?” they asked in awe.

“My powers are growing...I can't stop it, trust me, I've tried. I feel as though if I don't get some of this energy festering inside of me that I will simply explode!”

“And you would be willing to sacrifice hundreds, thousands, maybe even millions of lives for your own comfort?”

“No! Of course not...Agh! Look, this is getting nowhere. I give you an ultimatum, here and now. Either you go to war with me, or I go to war alone. First, I want you to promise me, however, that should you not go with me, and should I return, that you will aid me in my efforts unquestioningly from that point forth.”

“Tarik, I don't think this is a wise deci-“

“Answer! Yes, or no?”

“Yes...if you return, we will help you. But we cannot condone an offensive of this sort...not yet...not until the Dragon Legions are mature.”

“But that won't be for another two years! Listen...you've given me your answer...I want for you to let Simeon take over control of the Dragon Legions, and I want you to treat him as though he were me, in terms of following his advice and his orders. His intellect is keener than the average persons...and be careful what you think around him...his telepathy is a tiny bit oversensitive. Now, I depart...and when I return...if I return...the Space Pirates have given me their word: they will go to war.”

“Yes. Now, please, for the last time, reconsider,” said one of the councilors, but Tarik was already gone. He was almost giddy at the prospect of being able to finally not have to hold back in the usage of his powers, but he then remembered that there was still the possibility that he might not return. But if he died, another would take his place...

He decided on where to begin.

“Ah! Perfect! Xetherin*...its not too crowded, but it has a fair amount of defenses and military...an excellent place to begin, to set an example...”

He thought with relish: Look out Mishkin, cause your numbers just been called.

And the Seven, having foreseen this encounter, took their places around the city where Tarik's assault was to begin, and, via telepathy, informed the Xetherian forces to prepare. They had never failed on a job such as this. They weren't going to begin now.

*Xetherin-pronounced zeh'-thur-in

Chapter 22: The Beginning

The Phoenix streaked, a red line, through space. In a flash, it was gone-Tarik had left the old Tyrnok behind, and, should he return, the world would change.

He had gathered intel on all the fleets that could hamper his conquest of Xetherin, and he planned to disable them. He had upgraded the Phoenix as his powers grew*, and it now could travel nearly twice as fast as well as warp on its own self-designed warp generator.

10 seconds until his first stop – he was preparing himself mentally and physically.

A red blur emerged in the midst of an already occurring space battle – unexpected, but not a problem. Using the ship in the way in which only he knew how**, Tarik engaged Enemy and Fleet alike.

The Fleet ships, already preoccupied with the Enemy fleet, paid little attention to this new, miniscule ship: that is, at least until they realized that it was engaging both the Enemy and Fleet itself – and winning.

Tarik could hear and understand all of their thoughts, allowing him to anticipate their maneuvers. He could sense the Enemy fleet first, and then the human Fleet, realize that he was a major threat. “Bout damn time,” he muttered to himself.

The conflict between the two rivaling forces continued, but to a lesser degree now that they were both engaging this small, one-man fighter that was wreaking havoc on both parties. The Fleet admiral was in the middle of his sentence, issuing another order to his troops, when he realized that he was staring at the ship. Hovering in front of the main view screen of the bridge, he had no time to even shout for the defenses, before the Phoenix turned into ashes something that would not rise again from them.

Tarik could feel the admiral's fear...he reveled in it, loving it. He saw his own ship, from the admiral's point of view, hovering, twenty*** laser cannons glowing bright red against the semi-

transparent hull of the ship, silhouetted against the blackness of space. The phoenix looked more like a demon, he thought. He had no more time to continue the thought further.

At the disabling of the commander's ship of the human Fleet, all the rest of the Fleet began actively engaging the red streak. It wove in and out of their fire, sometimes seeming to disappear completely, only to be behind a fighter, which was promptly destroyed. The Enemy was not faring much better either.

Tarik disabled a few more of the Fleet ships before deciding that they were no longer a threat, and then began to engage the Enemy more. Activating the warp in a technique he had theorized, and only put into practice this battle, his ship, over such short distances, seemed to teleport instantly to where he wanted it to go. It was hovering at the main window of the Enemy fleet's command ship.

He's here, the Enemy fleet's commander told her soldiers, but he will not fire.

Tarik sensed something coming from this ship, something in the bridge that did not feel right. He prodded, and then warped away to the next fleet that he was going to engage, for what he sensed there terrified him.

Whilst on his way to the next fleet, he became angry at his flight—he was Tarik Khanir, and he had just disabled an entire Fleet fleet: what did he have to fear? He was still angry, and became aware that he had to fly more carefully, for his anger tended to make him more free with his abilities, which, on a delicate machine like the phoenix, could cause serious damage should he over press something.

He encountered the next fleet. There was one more to go after this one. It was not alone either. It was strange, he thought, for it seemed almost as though the Enemy were intentionally helping him. He dismissed, for it did not matter at the moment what the Enemy's motives were: they would still die.

Here, he had no sooner engaged the opposing fleets than he realized whom he was facing.

“Hail, Tarik. What brings you here?” the Grand Captain greeted him.

“Leave,” Queen simultaneously told him from her place on the Enemy command ship.

“How dare you both! You shall both pay for this!” he roared at the screen.

“Ah, ah, ah, Tarik...I wouldn't want you to waste your energy on us when it should be saved for the Xetherians,” Queen chided, only infuriating Tarik more.

“So you know that my powers have grown, do you Queen?”

“Yes...that is known to the Enemy, and, as such, me. Now, Tarik, run along, and let me finish this unfinished business of the Enemy.”

The Phoenix burned...it whole hull began to glow red, until the red began to soften, and eventually dull. Tarik was angry...possibly the angriest he had ever been. He concentrated, and focused this anger into energy, into strength. He felt the opposing fleets with his mind, and, after feeling where many of the guns and turrets were on both sides, promptly crushed them. The opposing fleets fired, but all that happened was that their cannons were destroyed by backfire.

“How about you run along now, Tarik...you've proved your point: don't make me prove mine.” At Queen's words, Tarik began to feel cold, and then he began to feel the same presence that terrified him before. He stood his ground defiantly for a few seconds more, before a he gave in and began the final leg of his journey.

Xetherin

A red streak enters the planet's orbit. Then the planet's atmosphere. The Phoenix's hull glowed red from the heat of the entry. Tarik stationed in the high atmosphere, then, using his psychokinesis, stabilized a bubble of pressurized air around him, then opened the hatch of the phoenix, and jumped. As he fell, he prepared himself for the beginning of the war-his war-a war for all humanity. It was the same war that had been fought since the dawn of time-the war of hate and revenge.

A highly populated planet, Xetherin had a superb orbital defense that Tarik had only managed to bypass by using the Phoenix's cloaking technology. Their ground defenses around their several metropolis' were superb, however, and it was these that Tarik was targeting. The citizens of the first metropolis saw a red fireball slam into the ground a few miles outside their city. The Xetherian militia was immediately dispatched to investigate, for any space-born debris, like an asteroid or a meteorite, would have been eliminated by the planetary defense systems. The Xetherians knew of

the war with the Space Pirates, but they, like the rest of humanity, never had even dared to imagine that the Pirates would go on the offensive so much as to invade a planet.

The first militiamen to reach the impact crater saw a black hole...a crater, but with no light. In its center, they saw a figure in black rise from its knees to a standing position. Its eyes were glowing orange-the militiamen were frozen with fear. They heard a voice in their heads: Go back to your city and tell them to surrender now, or face the wrath of the nameless one, the living shadow. One of them, unfrozen by the voice, radioed this information back to the city, and received a near instantaneous nugatory reply.

"Umm...they said no..."

Very well...they have chosen the path of darkness...

The impenetrable dark of the crater seemed to be solid now, and it was flying towards the sky in ribbons. Only the black figure remained.

Tarik was exerting his full force: he had so much pent up energy, he felt glad that he could finally truly test the limits of his powers.

The clouds of Xetherin congregated, moving at thousands of miles an hour, over the metropolis. The sun was blotted out, although light could still be seen. The Militiamen were terrified, and calling frantically for backup. The solid black ribbons that had previously filled the crater touched the clouds, and spread. The sky around the metropolis seemed to become a dome of impenetrable blackness, but there was still a dim light. The citizens of the city were all in a state of terrified panic. The ground troops of Xetherin were being deployed from the city...advanced versions of the tanks from thousands of years before. The militiamen had left the crater, and the Seven had arrived to a nearly cloudless planet, and knew that they were too late-their contractor would be furious. But they would defeat the upstart human eventually...or so they thought. They returned to their temple, to prepare more fully and gather more intel, and, finally, to wait for the next strike.

Tarik walked from the crater to a black city. It was a bustling metropolis, that now had an eerie stillness as all those within its limits were terrified into stillness by the blotting out of the planet's sun. There were rolling hills of green grass, transferred here from earth to prevent it from going extinct. The living shadow moved over the ground effortlessly, half walking, half hovering. The first shot was fired-it was a matter based shot, not a laser beam as was used in the space battles that defined the current age. The shadow extended an arm in front of itself, and, as the shot neared it, flung the arm skyward: the shot flew off into the sky at an angle. It was lost from sight once it entered the blackness surrounding the city. More volleys were fired, all deflected in the same manner. Next, the ground troops that were controlling these mobile fortresses filed out, preparing for battle.

The shadow moved with a speed never before seen to them, and, as it neared, its eyes dulled, and it became a man once again. Tarik needed more concentration on his battle than on his appearance. In an instant, he was upon them. A blur because of his uniform, he was a living kick, a breathing punch, and a pulsing bomb. What he couldn't amplify with his powers for his hand-to-hand combat, which he had refined over the years, he made up for by pulverizing the troops that he could not reach with his psychokinesis. He was surrounded by beaten bodies, most merely knocked unconscious, not dead. He raised himself above the surrounding bodies as more troops closed in on him. He became shadow once again, and his eyes glowed with the intensity of his anger. He could feel the presence on the outskirts of his shadowshield...the blackness with which he had surrounded the city. It angered him. The ground beneath him quaked, and a fizzing sound filled the air, followed by the smell of ozone****. He held in his hands a staff, as long as he was tall, as a proper staff should be. He was now ready to begin this fight for real. He melted in and out of the troops, a slaughtering staff, a devastating punch, a decimating kick, a pulsating shadow...he had become what he was...the Moon Child showed the darker half of its face for the first time.

The troops decimated, Tarik launched himself towards the city's command center. He blew out the window and entered into the office of the city's leader. He dropped his image, becoming Tarik Khanir once again, only now more tired, having exhausted a large amount of his store of pent-up energy. He stood now, leaning slightly on his new diamond staff*****, and stared straight into the eyes of the city's leader. Tarik had chosen this city because it was the largest, and this city's leader was essentially the leader of the planet, for he commanded the other leaders of the other cities.

"Will you serve me?"

"Why would I?"

"Because if you do, I shall show your people mercy."

"Show them mercy now, as a gesture of goodwill, first."

"So be it," Tarik said. The shadowshield disappeared, and he could feel his other half waiting...it terrified him, this presence...it was unnatural...it did not belong here, nor did it belong anywhere...it shouldn't have even existed...and yet there it was, scaring the shit out of him. He shoved his terror aside for them moment, focusing more on the current discussions.

"Fair enough," the city's leader stated, "but what will you do if I give you my allegiance? Can you defend me from fleet? Who are you?"

"If you give me your allegiance, I shall make certain that no more harm comes to your people. You shall not be oppressed," Tarik could feel what the man was thinking, "unlike you have been under Fleet. You may have to suffer a small amount at first, but that is because you are the first planet I have conquered. I fight for the Pirates...for they fight Fleet. Fleet is my enemy, and the Enemy of all is my enemy as well. I fight for justice, for I have been wronged...I fight to right that wrong, and

to end the tyranny of Fleet. I am the nameless one, the hidden commander of the Space Pirates that was thought to be only a rumor...I am the living shadow...I am Tarik Khanir, and I will be the downfall of Fleet."

"Very well. If you can provide us protection, as well as sanctuary from your assaults, we shall submit to you."

"I shall do all that and more."

"Then the forces of Xetherin are yours to command, son of the Grand Admiral Khanir. May they be of use."

Four weeks later, in the Great Hall of the sunlit fortress, Haladhim, as messenger to the people for the council of Ten, was starting his speech. It was to inform the Space Pirates of the conditions under which Tarik left, and what he had told them. He, unlike the rest of the council, did not believe fully that Tarik was dead, but it did not matter, for there was a majority consensus, and, as such, the People had to be told.

"Friends, soldiers, and Space Pirates of all ages, I regret to inform you that the reason why we have gathered here is a most grievous one. Our beloved Tarik left us a month ago in a blind rage, claiming that he would conquer a planet single-handedly because we would not aid him in this war yet, for we felt, and do still feel, that we are as of yet unprepared to fight a full on war with fleet. We told him that should he return alive, having conquered the planet, we would give him our aid. He told us that if he did not return within a month, he was dead. MY dear friends, it, sadly, has been a month now, and he has not returned."

"We must tell you that we believe that he is dead."

The whole of the Space Pirate populace began muttering and whispering, and grieving for their fallen leader, but they stopped as they heard a rumbling coming from beyond the fortress.

The doors to the great hall, which were normally opened via machinery because of their massive size, opened of their own accord, allowing the sunlight of the planet to stream in. A figure, silhouetted against this blinding light, walked forward. The only thing visible for a distance because of the light, the robed figure entered into the dimmer light of the Great Hall, and began to shimmer and pulsate. It continued forward, and the sounds of heavy, myriad footsteps could be heard behind it. The people had an idea of what was coming, for they had long awaited the day when they would be found by Fleet and eliminated.

Footsoldiers in Fleet uniforms marched into the great hall by the hundreds, a continual procession that stopped when the robed figure leading them halted near the podium of the hall, which was surrounded by intricately designed echoing horns and chambers, so as to amplify the sound of the speaker hundreds of times without the usage of technology.

"I have returned, Haladhim..." the figure called, raising its head so that its face was visible for the first time. The whole of the Pirates were shocked, and whispers of a betrayal by Tarik were growing.

"To you, Space Pirates, I bring the Xetherian Army. They are mine to command, and they will do whatever I tell them. The planet of Xetherin is under my control and will become the first planet to be controlled by the Space Pirates outside of Tyrnok as soon as you agree to assist me in this war, as we agreed at my departure, Haladhim."

The council of Ten whispered amongst themselves, then one of them nodded to Haladhim.

"We accept."

It has begun... thought Tarik.

The terrifying presence awaited the day when she would meet her opposite quietly in a small corner of her room aboard an Enemy command ship.

"ach...men! When will they ever learn?" she muttered.

*-The phoenix is designed so that only Tarik can pilot it to maximum efficiency. It has hundreds of thousands of controls and instrument panels that are beneath solid bulkheads, for this way only Tarik can use them via his psychokinesis. This is what is meant by "piloting it in the way only he can"

** -see the first footnote

***-The Phoenix has been upgraded to now have twenty laser cannons.

****-Related to the last footnote (see below)

*****-Because Tarik has gained such mastery of his powers, he can break bonds at the molecular level. The ground trembling was Tarik separating as much of the carbon as he could from it, and the ozone came from the breaking down of so much carbon dioxide in the air that there was so much excess oxygen that ozone formed; the diamond staff comes from him taking that carbon and then compressing it with his mind to form his staff out of diamond, so that it would be unbreakable.

Appendices

Introduction to the Appendices

The numbering system corresponds to the order they were written and the appendix on the topic. Hence, all appendices pertaining to the Space Pirates will be numbered 1, followed by the letter of the alphabet that corresponds to what appendix on the Space pirates that is. Hence, all appendices on the universe of the story shall be numbered 2, because appendix B was the second appendix written.

Appendix A: Space Pirates

Space Pirates are, for the most part, human. They were one of the most expeditious and exploratory groups of colonists to set forth from the Homeworld, not accelerating beyond light speed to increase travel speed between systems, but instead existing and traveling in massive colony ships, leaving off small colonies of people on the worlds that they colonized, instead of the entire vessel. As such, though the facts concerning them were erased when they became enemies to Fleet, it is unknown how many countless worlds they brought human civilization to. However, at one point, they encountered the Enemy. They were actually the first human beings to encounter the Enemy, but this fact was never reported to Fleet. The Space Pirates saw in the Enemy a race far superior in technology and wisdom to the humans, and sought to learn from them. The Enemy sought to learn of them. As such, the Enemy divided these humans into ten test groups, and began to experiment upon them, splicing genes into them from the Enemy's own genome. Each of these ten test groups later became a tribe, after the Enemy had abandoned their experiments upon the Space Pirates. Lost, not knowing what they had become, the ten tribes of Space Pirates set out from the barren testing world that the Enemy had used as a staging point for their research. For several hundred years, the Space Pirates kept their ten tribes relatively separate, desiring to keep their respective abilities pure and strong. Eventually, this broke down, and interbreeding began, making the purebred abilities become intermixed, eventually evening out most of the Space Pirates.

However, there were groups of purebreds still surviving, and still keeping themselves purebred. However, contrary to what one could infer, there was no looking down upon or formation of an aristocracy-like class. Instead, the mixed Pirates looked to the purebreds for leadership, hence creating the Council of Ten (reference chapter 10). Eventually, as the Pirate population grew, the council of Ten grew to be more than just ten people, and eventually it was separated into two parts: The council of Ten, and the Tenth Tribunal. The Tenth Tribunal was the original Council of

Ten, ten representatives from each of the remaining purebred ten tribes. The council of ten grew to be more of a leading military body, with ranks. It is into this and because of this that Tarik was able to insinuate himself into it.

Appendix B: The Universe

Multi-dimensional

There. Summed up in one word. Now when I say multi-dimensional, I do not mean as in Sliders multi-dimensional or as in parallel universe multi-dimensional. This is a multi-dimensional universe, not a multi-versal one. What I mean is that...well, here.

We know of four dimensions: width, depth, height, and time. In the universe, however, there are many more dimensions than this, and there are multidimensional beings. As an example, the Shadow from Chapter 19. People are five or six dimensional beings (I haven't decided yet/am not sure). The fifth dimension would be the one after time, and this is the one through which Tarik can influence the three ones we primarily dwell in, being width, depth, and height. The fifth dimension is where the mind, the consciousness, the "soul", if you will, of a human being lurks: it is the medium through which thoughts are telepathically communicated and through which a will (desire to do something) is used to move a four-(or three, pending on how you look at it)dimensional object, or, in other words, telekinesis / psychokinesis. Now, this does not necessarily mean that all beings that are multidimensional have to fill in all of the dimensions: there could be, for example, a being that dwelt in the sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth dimensions, instead of the first four, like we do. It could, in theory, interpret and receive sensory input from the first four, but, existing outside of them, would appear invisible, but actually wouldn't because in order to be invisible there has to be something there that would otherwise be visible, and, not existing in the dimensions we know and can interpret, would not even seem to exist. Yes, this also allows for the existence of divine forces, beings that can influence the other dimensions whilst being outside of them and, hence, imperceptible to them. And, for the record, warp space is a paradox that the Enemy understands and utilizes correctly, whilst mankind does not understand and merely stumbled onto it, and, because of this, great quantities of mass are required for the initial jump into warp space for mankind, whereas enemy fighters are capable of doing it solo. Warp space is a combination of the first (width), second (depth), third (height), and sixth (anyone's guess) dimensions. This is why entities, be they living or not, are capable of traveling great distances in warp space: it is outside of the three physical dimensions and can as hence insert things into those dimensions anywhere in those dimensions.

Appendix C: The Homeworld (Earth)

Early in mankind's existence (between 1000 and 2500 A.D.), man had not been wise in respect to preservation. Pollutants and toxins filled the upper atmosphere, and eventually, by the time the technology came about to prevent these toxins from being created, it was too late for Earth to remain unscarred. The sky the whole world over had been turned into a shade of pale greenish brown, and, though things still lived and managed to survive, their numbers were greatly reduced. It was this that spurred the massive worldwide collaboration that resulted in the colonization of the first world by humanity in 2557 A.D.

Remember folks, still keep posting for more chapters under the announcement post, not this one...feel free to comment and ask questions here, though.

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