

*It had been over three thousand years since men had first reached into the stars. Civilizations, creeds, empires—all had come and gone. All the while, men had hoped to find some life other than their own. But what they had hoped to find in the future, they finally found in the past, and the whole of the cosmos would never be the same...*

*A beginning is merely an illusion. What we know of the past is no more reliable than what we know of the future. That is because, in reality, neither of these temporal abstractions exist. There is only the ceaseless “now.”*

- Lord Iqwiloespa

THE two young men stood across from each other on the platform, locked in a stare. The statuesque figures stood as two bearded relics of another age, standing in their dark tunics framed by black cloaks hanging from their shoulders in the shadows. The narrow bridge upon which they stood spanned the artificial chasm, and ran parallel to another narrow bridge within the great circular pathway. When viewed from above, it formed the very symbol for death.

The dark interior of the temple was dimly lit by candlelight, glinting off rolling mists of smoke from unseen incense. A low quiet rumble seemed to reach up from below in the strangely quiet dark. Silence stood between the men for some time, before Shaolu finally spoke.

“Lok, ayes qwo susqwo?” Shaolu asked, the question almost sounding like a plea. Yet Qwedo knew Shaolu would do what was necessary. *Death, it is to be?*

Qwedo let out a small, almost nervous, laugh. “Qwo aye lak shaom fa fabe lamo shum Lokla?” *Are we not in the very temple of*

*Lokla?*

“Ayi lak shumoqwe shaom Lokla. Esumala qwo san kebe umaqwod,” Shaolu responded, his eyes still locked with intent. *I do not believe in Lokla. Esumala is a worthless religion.*

“Always the one to dash away others' beliefs. You self-righteous kakai. You deserve to die.”

“I don't judge, brother. Not even you.”

“Well I do... *cousin.*”

Realizing the import of Qwedo's words, Shaolu simply nodded his head. Qwedo gave the signal to the monks, and the fight began. Qwedo lunged at Shaolu with his staff, and Shaolu simply dodged the attack, still seemingly reluctant to fight.

Shaolu blocked the second attack with his staff, and then finally fought back. Quickly building up to a rapid pace, the two Saktages warriors engaged each other in a deadly dance. Every swing was blocked and countered. A game of constant peril, where one wrong move would mean bruises, shattered bones, or worse. The clang of the metal staffs resonated through the open chamber, accompanied only by the occasional beat of the large drum the Esumala monks played as part of the ritual.

Shaolu stood across from Qwedo, both of them panting from the exertion, their long cloaks dangling from their shoulders in the slight breeze of the large hall. Eyes locked with intent, they challenged each other silently. Then, as though they knew each others' thoughts, they attacked simultaneously. The dance continued.

In the dark open temple, the two fought with ferocity, as the monks idly observed. Death was in the air, and it was an acrid smell indeed. The carcasses of fallen warriors, all in differing stages of decay, lain in the pit below. It was rumored that the chasm below was lined with spikes, but one could not see to the bottom through the dim fog of the temple. In any case, the fall itself was enough to kill a man.

“No!” a woman screamed, as she ran into the temple.

“Lomaies?” Shaolu said as he looked back to his sister. With his guard briefly down, Qwedo took the opportunity to swing his rod against Shaolu's side, shattering a rib. Shaolu fell to the floor and cried out in pain. When Qwedo came closer, Shaolu swung his rod against Qwedo's calves, sweeping him to the ground.

“Stop this at once!” Lomaies commanded.

“Go home girl! This is none of your concern,” Qwedo shouted, his eyes still locked on Shaolu's, as they now slowly circled one another.

Shaolu remained silent. He would no longer allow anything to distract his focus. Qwedo was a formidable opponent. They had practiced together as children, and they were always an even match. This was different, however. In this dance of death there was no holding back, but Shaolu could not do this... not with his *brother*.

Shaolu and Qwedo fought with blazing speed. A swing and a block, and then a counter swing. A high kick of opportunity, and a quick dodge. Continually they fought on without ever actually hitting each other's bodies. With the augmented physicality attained through Saktagres training, some of their more keenly planned thrusts seemed faster than light. Yet, with each well planned attack, came an immediate defense.

Finally, after much fighting, Shaolu was able to disarm Qwedo; his rod falling into the chasm. Shaolu then knocked Qwedo to the ground, and pointed the tip of his rod towards Qwedo's face.

“It is over brother.”

Qwedo's eyes teared up in rage, and in knowing what he was about to do. “No...” he whispered.

Qwedo raised his arm. In an instant, his right forearm seemed to come apart. A cavity formed in the middle of his arm, as a chrome cylinder rose into position. A cybernetic weapon. Before Shaolu

could understand what he was seeing exactly, the weapon instantly discharged, firing deadly pellets in a bright flash.

Shaolu fell to his knees, and stared at his hands. Damp with blood, he realized it was from his chest. He slowly gazed behind him in shock and spied Qwedo in the distance. A distant shadow amidst a growing blur, Qwedo was quickly fleeing the scene. As the world faded to black, he saw his sister standing over him, sobbing uncontrollably.



“Kakai!” he yelled as he realized his pistol was jammed. The transfer coil was overheating, and this was not the best time to attempt a repair. The barrage of light beams now stopped, as his pursuers realized they couldn't get a clear shot.

“Better you should give over, *val?*” the militiaman called out, his Ayis clearly needing some work.

“Vi trina kath, shu frikit!” Saktefya replied defiantly in Thanas. *I think not, you kakai.*

As could probably be expected, the soldiers weren't exactly pleased with Saktefya's reply. This was made manifest in the volley of blasts accompanying several insults hurled Saktefya's way. Of course, it was futile, as Saktefya was still shielded from the beams. Apparently, the guards felt it necessary to make their verbal points (including several involving Saktefya's mother) more clear.

Saktefya was only a few meters from his craft. Unfortunately, there were no more containers in the hangar to use for convenient shielding. Without his firearm in working order, a mad dash to his ship was out of the question. It was now down to a tenuous stalemate, maintained primarily by the men's ignorance of Saktefya's pistol problem.

Saktefya had to think fast. After all the *resistance* he had given

to the militia, they probably wouldn't accept his surrender. The Colonial Militia had a habit of not investigating such matters too heavily, especially when the given citizen had provided *armed* resistance. The worst that would probably happen is the militiaman would be cited with "negligent discharge", and no murder charges would be pressed. Of course, in the unlikely event that they did accept his surrender, Saktefya wasn't exactly looking forward to imprisonment for what he was facing.

Suddenly, Saktefya realized he still had his ship communicator. He frantically searched his pockets for the small oval shaped device. Once he found it, he depressed the button, "Sao, can you hear me?"

The pleasant, but monotone, female voice replied "Yes, sir."

"Great. I need your help."

"How may I be of assistance to you, sir?"

"I have a pistol lying on my seat. I need you to send it out to me."

"Anything else, sir?"

"Yes. I need you to start your engines once you transfer the pistol out here. Sound good?"

"I will do as you ask."

After ending the transmission, a small portal opened on the hull of the ship. As the militiamen slowly moved in, a faint blue light field appeared as a column from the ship's hull to the ground beside Saktefya. Beside him his pistol materialized.

In a stroke of good luck, Saktefya's original pistol now displayed a working status. While the militiamen became temporarily distracted with the ship's engines powering up, Saktefya immediately jumped to his feet, unloading a series of blasts from his dual-wielded pistols in the direction of the militiamen. One soldier dodged the blasts, jumping to one side, as another's shoulder was torn apart by the intense beam of light.

Before they could really fire back, Saktefya was inside his ship, while the ship's cargo bay ramp lifted. Outside the ship, the soldiers continued to fire against the ship's hull in vain. Saktefya rushed to the cockpit.

“Sao, start the thrusters!”

“The bay doors are still closed, sir.”

“Then open them!”

“I'm afraid I can't do that.”

“Why not?!” Saktefya shouted as he jumped into his seat. Outside the soldiers were now attending to their comrades' wounds.

“I do not have the proper clearance, sir. The bay doors have been sealed.”

Saktefya's eyes shot back and forth as he tried to quickly think of how to get out of this mess. There was no turning back at this point. Wounding a militiaman wasn't exactly excusable in any imaginable way by the Colonial Federation. There was only one solution, other than suicide (and the solution he had in mind was close enough anyhow).

“Sao...”

“Yes, sir?”

“Fasten your seat belts.”

“I can not occupy a seat.”

“If we don't make it through this, you might be able to...”

“Sir?”

With that, Saktefya targeted the ship's blasters onto the cargo bay doors, and fired. The security system was immediately activated. He continued to fire away through the thick doors. The resulting vacuum started to pull the ship forward along with everything else which was being sucked through the expanding hole.

Just as the cargo bay missile turrets raised into position, Saktefya slammed the throttle forward, speeding the ship through the gap, seconds before the containment fields engaged to seal off the

vacuum.

“Damage report.”

“Minor lacerations to the outer hull. All critical ship systems are performing within standard parameters.”

Saktefya simply nodded, and now breathed a sigh of relief. He had narrowly escaped, as he had many times in the past. This time, however, his enemy would not soon forget. He still needed to get out of Federation space as quickly as possible. With his ship swiftly running low on fuel, that would be easier said than done...



“The whole freighter? You're just going to destroy it like that?” the young woman asked, raising herself on her elbows from the bed.

Lying beside her, the young emperor continued to coldly gaze into space, his arms folded across his chest purposefully. His face remained motionless—and emotionless—as he replied, “I trust my spy master. He reports the entire ship is largely comprised of *D'hinajat*.” This last saekbolm word he pronounced perfectly. It was a harsh familiarity he'd rather not have.

“*Largely?*”

He now turned his head staring sharply into his concubines eyes, “Sacrifices must be made for security and stability.” He then looked away and muttered “And the rest are Saekbolm anyhow...”

“You can't mean that. You don't really blame the whole of the people do you?”

Staring off into space again he replied, “I suppose not.” Looking back into her deep eyes the young emperor continued. “We live in harsh times. A man's choices can not always be so idealistic...”

“Shouldn't ideals at least be strived for?”

“Everyone's an idealist when ethics are convenient...”

“Yes, but isn't that precisely why ethics should be valued? For the vigilance it takes in maintaining them?”

“*Vigilance* is precisely what I'm trying to maintain. In the end, I believe it justifies the means.”

“Are you sure that's the truth?”

“Truth is a subjective thing. As the Great Lord Iqwiloespa once said ‘The truth of Umafe is illusive.’”

The young woman now scowled at him facetiously. “I think you took that out of context. Besides, when have you bought into all this Saktam stuff?”

His eyebrows now raised, a smirk crept across his face as the young man replied, “Well, I *am* the chief of council.” With that the young woman laughed, for they both knew how entirely nominal the relationship between the Dora and the Saktam Council was.

Before they could continue their conversation, the sharp beeps of the room's communicator sounded. The mood became solemn once more as the young emperor dressed quickly.

He activated the monitor to answer the call. Appearing before him on the screen was one of his countless imperial guards. The man was somewhat nervous, as this was only the second time he had spoken with the Dora—a meeting the young emperor had never committed to memory himself. After seeing the young emperor not fully dressed, and the bed chamber lights still dimmed, the guard started by asking, “Am I interrupting, ida?”

The Dora coldly replied, “Yes. Say what you have to say.”

The young guard, not much older than the 17 year old Dora himself, became even more timid at the emperor's reply, and after briefly hesitating he replied, “Uh, yes, sire. I was.. uh.. told that your presence is re-requested in the assembly hall.”

“I will be there shortly.”

“Uh yes, sir. I will inform my—” The Dora deactivated the communicator while the guard was yet speaking and then continued to dress.

While he was fastening his cape, looking again off into space, the young emperor explained, “My presence is requested in the assembly hall. It should not be long.”

He then started to walk toward the chamber doors, and as they slid open, his royal concubine then spoke up. “Yoshuru?”

“Yes?”

“I love you.”

The young emperor simply nodded. “I shall be back shortly, Swisan.” He then walked out into the hall, the doors sliding shut behind him. He was all business now.

In many ways he tried to keep best hid, Yoshuru was a typical youth, with all the impetuous longings and insecurities that came with his age. In other ways, however, his maturity seemed even greater than his 19 year old concubine, Swisan. As wise as she was, Swisan still had not dealt with the harsh realities of life that Yoshuru had faced. As an heir to the throne, Yoshuru was trained intensely for the burdensome duties awaiting him. When his parents were both killed one year earlier by D'hinajat terrorists, he had only his advisers, few of whom he really trusted. He was introduced to Swisan shortly after, during a banquet for the governor of Sanos Se. Swisan Jasvakia was the daughter of the governor, and was honored to have her in the Dora's “service” several days later. Although he questioned her motives at first, Yoshuru's lust soon bested him, and in return Swisan did truly love him. Through his cold, often distant, exterior, she could see a boy in pain, struggling to do his best with an overwhelming responsibility.

Responsibility now called the young emperor. He walked purposefully to the assembly hall to carry out a decision he already had made. As he entered the large circular room, his advisers were

already seated. The far wall was displaying the image of a large transport ship seemingly motionless in space.

The Dora took his seat at the head of the curved table. Terrible silence filled the room. Cutting through the somber air was the Dora's Minister of Defense. The Minister's face appeared holographically above the middle of the table. Suspended in air, the Minister's shimmering disembodied head addressed his young master.

“Preparations are in the works, Ida. We now have a ship approaching the transport vessel.”

On the wall screen a large imperial carrier ship slowly advanced toward the old rusted vessel before coming to a full stop. Over the room's audio system, the ship's captain was now heard.

“Transport Freight 519, this is the Imperial Border Guard. Please stop your course, and prepare to be boarded.”

After a brief moment the transport ship's captain replied, “This is an independent cargo ship, and we are in neutral space. You have no jurisdiction here.”

“In accordance with Galactic Peace Treaty resolution 71a, we have the right to conduct a public health and safety inspection of your vessel.”

“We come from the planet-state system of Fadlan, which has never agreed to the Galactic Peace Treaty.”

The Dora's Minister now spoke up, “They're stalling for time.”

An alarm sounded on the Border Guard ship's sensor system. The Guard ship addressed the Minister over his private channel, “They've engaged their weapon systems. I would suggest we go to our secondary plan, sire.”

The Minister addressed the Dora, “Shall we engage, Ida?”

The Dora hesitated momentarily, realizing the import of this action. With one swift word, the ship would be destroyed. In a single instant, he would send a mass of people to their deaths unwittingly.

As much hatred as he fostered in his heart, deep within a beauty wrestled for an instant of time. However, like a fire burning his soul, his hatred quickly consumed any such notions.

“Engage.”

Everyone watched silently as a small imperial fighter craft exited a portal on the exterior of the carrier ship. It approached the transport ship with blinding speed, simultaneously opening fire on the ship violently. Although they could not audibly perceive the blasts through the vacuum of space, the images of destruction were too loud not to be heard. The violence and ferocity with which the ship was destroyed resonated in Yoshuru's mind. He could almost hear the screams of the people. Men, women, and children crying out in the void, before being silenced.

Blast after blast quickly tore through the ship with cold efficiency, tearing through steel, tearing through space, tearing through flesh, bone, and blood. The destruction was so complete, that only small particles could barely be seen floating through space. All that was left now were whispers in the minds of those that had witnessed the operation.

*Justification is often confused with pragmatic rationalization.*

- Lord Iqwiloespa

**A** WAKENING in a daze, the world around him appeared as a dream. Colors and shapes circled around, finally taking form into more lucid perceptions. Standing over his bed was a young woman. Her long flowing hair was lit by some unseen light source, and her face had a sullen expression. For a moment, she appeared to him like Arian, the ancient Ayis folk spirit that was thought to watch over lonely travelers.

After opening his eyes, and adjusting his focus, Shaolu could now see his sister standing over him. Lomaies was not alone. Beside her stood their aunt, Roshuna.

Shaolu closed his eyes, feeling at peace now. He focused within as to feel without, a Saktam exercise. Breathing deeply, and consciously slowing his heart, he now floated within his mental space, and soaked in the essence of his family's presence.

Sensing their pain and fear, Shaolu suddenly realized why. He recalled sinking down into darkness. He had nearly died.

“Shaolu?” his aunt hesitantly called.

“Mother...” Shaolu uttered instinctively.

With that the two women mutually let out a sigh. Shaolu had survived, but just barely. He lied in his bed, stoically motionless, as the two women anxiously chatted in hushed voices. Shaolu's

thoughts remained focused on Qwedo now. His anger boiled up inside, but he closed his eyes and let it pass—for now...

Shaolu returned to his meditation. He let his consciousness wander through his body, assessing its condition. He listened to his heart beat, and felt its vitality. With that he suddenly came to a realization.

“My heart,” Shaolu said, his eyes immediately thrust open.

“You... you know?” Lomaies asked hesitantly.

Just then, a medical technician entered the room. Two beady eyes stared out from a dark red visor. The tall man appeared menacing in his all encompassing head gear.

The technician depressed a small switch on the side of his mask, immediately causing the gear to retract into his suit. His face now revealed, the man ran his fingers through his hair. He was clearly exhausted.

“You replaced my heart,” Shaolu said sternly, his eyes fixed in a cold stare on the technician.

“That we did,” the man replied. “Unfortunately, it's not much better than the old one. Your family saw to that...”

Shaolu breathed a sigh of relief, and closed his eyes, again searching through his inner awareness. He reached in and touched his heart, explored its energy. It pulsed with fluid power that could only be organic.

“My job would have been a lot easier with cybernetic implantation. As it is you almost didn't make it,” The technician explained to Shaolu, with a look of disdain. Shaolu's eyes remained closed as he continued to rest.

“How long will it be before he can check out?” Roshuna asked with concern.

“Well...” the technician said while he reviewed his display tablet.

“Right now,” Shaolu stated as he opened his eyes widely and

immediately sat up from his bed.

“I’m afraid we can’t—”

“I must see Governor Gremoni.”

“You still need time to recuperate. We’ve only—”

The technician let out a series of exasperated half-verbal sounds, as Shaolu strained to pull himself to his feet. A zeal burned in his eyes as he looked about the room, planning his next actions. There was no stopping him. His mind was fixed now on what needed to be done.

Yashuma was waiting quietly in the clinic’s lobby when Shaolu stormed out, quickly dressing. Yashuma rose to his feet immediately at the sight of his brother. He wasn’t quite sure what Shaolu was planning, but he could see the determination in his eyes and knew it was urgent.

“We need to see the governor at once,” Shaolu explained, wasting no time for pleasantries.

Yashuma nodded, understanding that he must have had something specific in mind. Without another word, Yashuma followed. Roshuna and Lomaies pleaded with Shaolu as he briskly walked away. Yashuma reassured the women he would look out for his brother, and continued following him. The two then stayed behind to settle accounts, while Shaolu quickly made his way outside the facility, masking his pain and exhaustion with apparent ease.

Once the two brothers made it to their personal transport, Shaolu collapsed onto the large seat inside. He threw aside his cloak and winced in pain. The black cushions seemed to envelop him and his dark cloak. His bright bearded face shone like a painful beacon against the pure black backdrop of his seat.

“Are you certain you’ve made a full recovery just yet?” Yashuma asked with concern.

Shaolu nodded softly, his eyes still closed. “I’ll be fine. We need to procure transport off-planet as soon as possible.”

Yashuma nodded knowingly. He understood that if there was any chance to retrieve the relic, time was certainly of the essence. Of course it would do little good if they managed to track Qwedo down but were unable to wrest the relic from his hands.

After Yashuma had set the coordinates in the transport's system, the smooth black craft quickly accelerated vertically and then started its flight forward. The transport made its way south along the coast of Mova to Nasad's capital city, Shraladun.

If circumstances were different, Shaolu would secure passage at any of the planet's numerous private spaceports. Unfortunately, on Nasad every spaceport was owned and operated by the Corporate Alliance. With the ongoing trade embargo between the Alliance and the Ayis Empire over the past several months, the spaceports were open to Alliance members only. Shaolu, like many on Nasad had never bothered to acquire this kind of pseudo-citizenship and all the commitment that entailed.

The only way off the planet was with government transport now. Qwedo had his connections in the Colonial Federation. Shaolu would have to rely upon the Empire via the Governor.

Shaolu activated his view screen and gazed out at the sea, as he stroked his short trimmed beard thoughtfully. The trees along the shore rushed by in a green blur, but the expanse of the sea and its large blocks of ice remained steady. As he watched Nasad's sun set, its light glinting off the large drifting glaciers, he let his mind wander in thought.

Shaolu thought back to his uncle's memorial service. It was twilight then too. As the light faded into the cold dusk of night, the service had ended. Idishad, a family friend that had worked with Grafe as a guard, gave the last words and lowered his hood.

When Shaolu arose with everyone, he looked over to Qwedo

several seats across from him. Qwedo had insisted on sitting across the aisle from the rest of the family that day. His jaw clinched and spasmed as he returned a cold look to Shaolu, his sharp fixed eyes penetrated him with undeniable malice.

Everyone had joined in song, as was the tradition. Half way through the dirge, Shaolu could sense his aunt's unbearable grief and pain starting to overwhelm her. He opened his eyes and saw his aunt's tears flow through her closed lids as she struggled to sing. He unclasped his hands and reached across her back. With that she collapsed into him and they remained standing in silence, as everyone continued the dirge around them.

Roshuna sobbed into Shaolu's chest, and as she did he slowly glanced over to Qwedo. Qwedo was already staring back, his eyes burning hotly as ever, even as they welled up with tears. Qwedo turned his head and stared toward the remaining brightness on the horizon, his eyes trapping the light in an inescapable void. That was the last day Shaolu would see his cousin for quite some time. When he eventually returned for the relic, his eyes had grown colder, but still just as dark.

Shaolu returned now to the present. Out across the sea, the sun finally faded beyond the horizon, its light fading with it. As the stars started to creep into the sky, he was once again reminded of the future. Out amongst those celestial bodies, Qwedo was planning his departure into Federation space.

Shaolu couldn't let him escape with the relic. Grafe had entrusted Shaolu with its custodianship and made him swear a solemn vow that he would protect it at all costs. In truth, he was not entirely sure what the relic's significance was. All he knew for a certainty was that it had been passed down to him through countless generations. Always to a Sakatagres. Always with somber ceremony. And always with the confirmed commitment to its safe keeping.

Tapping the corner of the screen, Shaolu brought up an interface overlay and selected an option from the menu for the local news stream. A translucent image appeared, floating above the view outside. Two men sat across from each other, the one interviewing the other.

*“What you have to understand is that the Corporate Alliance is not just some novel economic superstructure within the Empire. The reality is that it is really its own society. We are an anarcho-capitalist co-operative that lives side by side with the Empire. Our commerce centers may reside on land under the sovereignty of the Dora and his administration, but that is simply a claim we as of yet have not bothered to refute.”*

*“So you see this Declaration of Autonomy as—?”*

*“A long time coming. I mean, look, we’ve long tolerated this kind of oversight and regulation, but there has to be mutual respect and recognition. With the Dora completely disrupting 300 years of unmolested commerce throughout the galaxy—”*

*“You’re referring to the Edict of Non-Intercession.”*

*“Yes, that’s precisely what I’m talking about here. The Dora has made it clear he will continue his operations on and around Jeegkhut. The Alliance has been almost unanimous in condemning these actions. And really the Declaration of Autonomy is a formalization of what we have all already believed as Alliance members for some time now.”*

When Shaolu and Yashuma arrived in the city of Shraladun, it was night. However, descending into the city's sea of lights, that fact might easily be overlooked. Looking up through the towering structures, the stars were drowned in a dark purple haze.

Due to local regulations, the brothers' craft was commandeered remotely by Shraladun's transit authority. The small dark transport thus made its way toward a tower bay queue. The massive honey-

comb building appeared all the larger as the craft decelerated. The craft approached its assigned storage cell slowly, the large cell door rising silently in the night to reveal a well-lit interior.

After the long quiet of their travel, Yashuma broke the silence with a question. "How do you plan to convince him?"

"The governor will not so quickly forget our family, and its rights yet to be asserted," Shaolu replied, as he sat upright from his gaze.

"Perhaps you forget that this man is not the steward of old. He is a politician. The first of the people, but *second* to administrate, *second* in service term, and *second removed* from our family and its tenuous claim of tradition."

"I have forgotten little, brother. However, I am certain Lord Gremoni will keep close in mind that his favor is waning on this world. Besides our near status as heir-apparent with regards to the Council, I am also certain the governor will remember our place of birth. We are of Nasad. All things considered, I have little doubt that he will do anything other than grant this small favor."

"You speak as though you would take hold of our family's claim in a short while."

"And that is exactly what we must bring to the forefront of the governor's mind. If he takes the notion seriously, he'll be more than glad to have us as far away from this planet as possible."

"That's cunning. Are you sure you're not considering public office for yourself?" Yashuma said with a smirk as he turned to Shaolu.

Shaolu let out a laugh, outwardly discarding the notion. Within, however, his father's desire dwelt, resting and restrained but remaining. He quieted his feelings and quickly returned his thoughts to the matter at hand.

The two brothers sat in silence as the craft then secured its place in the cell. After paying for storage dues, they descended through

the building via lift and exited out onto the city streets. Sifting through the massive foot traffic of Shraladun's broad paths, they made their way to the governor's palace.

The crowd parted slightly as they walked along, for it was not often that one would see saktagres on the city streets. Their dark dangling cloaks and stern serious expressions conveyed a commanding presence. Although Saktam was still a common practice in the Ayis empire, at least in name, the order's traditional representatives were few in number. On border planets such as Nasad, they were practically non-existent.

The citizenry in Shraladun was almost entirely Thanashun, and like most people on Nasad (or the whole of the galaxy for that matter), they conformed to contemporary standards and cultural norms. Walking amidst the crowd, the two saktagres were conspicuously Ayis and seemingly anachronistic. Despite their alien presence, interest quickly faded and the masses yielded little.

Shaolu and Yashuma finally arrived at the governor's palace. As much as the two saktagres stood out from the crowds of the city, the governor's palace stood out from the city itself even more. Amidst the jungle of towers and lights, the palace was hidden behind a wall of tall trees at the edge of the palace grounds.

As they entered the main structure of the palace itself, the two suddenly felt lighter. "Graviton inversion plating," Yashuma quietly commented to his brother. Shaolu simply nodded as the two made their way through the massive and ornate abode.

Governor Seda Gremoni was born and raised on Ayis Se. The Gremoni family was a well known and respected family in the Council of Lords. It was largely due to family name recognition that the relatively inexperienced Seda was elected planetary governor on Nasad. When he was, he had not even finished moving to

the planet.

As Shaolu and Yashuma walked through the palatial dwelling of the governor, they quietly took note of their surroundings. The governor had his palace lavishly furnished with relics of his home planet, anything and everything to immerse himself in the ambiance of familiarity.

“Ah, Master Shaolu. I was not expecting such a wonderful surprise as this,” The governor said in greeting as Shaolu and Yashuma entered the governor's throne room.

“Yes...” Shaolu simply responded, probing the governor's eyes as he felt for the man's thoughts.

“And... Yashuma is it?” The governor asked as he turned to Shaolu's brother.

Yashuma nodded and everyone then exchanged bows. As the governor sat back down in his throne, he closed his eyes and shuddered a bit as he felt for Shaolu's mental probe. Once he found it, Shaolu withdrew himself from the man's mind and the governor smiled.

“You have me at a bit of a disadvantage, I'm afraid. However, I am a *bit* familiar with your... techniques... Shaolu.”

“I apologize, ida. Skills of a second nature become habitual,” Shaolu responded bowing once again respectfully. Shaolu would have to rely solely on external factors for his observations now.

“I hope the environment here has not been too disorienting to you two. I have still not grown accustomed to the local gravity here.”

“Perhaps if you spent more time outside, our planet would not be so *burdensome* to you...” Shaolu responded as he stared sharply into the governor's eyes.

The governor grew irritated slightly at his statement and the implied remark therein. He quickly regained control of himself and let out a slight laugh and a smirk. “So tell me Shaolu... What brings me the honor of your presence now? Family problems per-

haps? I've heard your cousin came to visit, but has since left *my* planet with much haste.”

Shaolu narrowed his eyes and smiled as he penetrated the governor's eyes with his stare. As the two men danced in each others' eyes silently, Yashuma glanced back and forth between the two and then finally spoke up.

“We have a favor to ask of you, *ida*...” Yashuma suddenly burst out, “As members of the Nibasuma family we humbly request your assistance in securing transport from your planet, *ida*.”

Shaolu clenched his jaw and looked back to his brother sharply. He then let out a sigh and returned his gaze to the governor. The governor simply smiled, being well pleased with Yashuma's demeanor.

“So, it is a family affair after all, is it?” The governor asked.

Shaolu lowered his eyes. “Yes, that is the crux of it, *ida*.” He then lifted his eyes and continued, “We plan to be off planet for an indefinite amount of time...”

The governor raised his brow and smirked. As Shaolu had hoped, the governor was indeed anxious to get as much of the Nibasuma family as he could as far away from his planet as possible.

Governor Gremoni looked down to a nearby glass of wine resting on an end table next to his throne and fondled it as he spoke. “Let's see what we can arrange then, shall we?”



Standing on the raised platform, Qwedo looked out to stars. He didn't see the stars, however. He saw nothing but a vast expanse of darkness, broken only by trivial pinpricks of light.

The interior of the large ship was dimly lit. The minimal lighting conserved energy and provided just enough illumination for the crew to work. Toiling away in their cramped workstations, the op-

erators worked silently in front of their various screens.

Qwedo towered above the operators, observing their work from the elevated path between the two rows of workstations. Enveloped in black, he stood aloof, watching the crew closely from afar. In many ways, he was above it all, or so he would have liked to think.

In his short time with the Colonial Militia, Qwedo had quickly risen through the ranks over the past year and a half. He now had command of his own small fleet of carrier crafts. Each carrier was captained by one of his dark elite monks.

“How much longer, captain?” Qwedo asked the man beside him on the platform.

The stout stern monk looked out from his dark hood with cold eyes. “It may be a several days, master.”

“We don't have days.”

“I understand, master. These communication issues are holding us back. It seems the nearest relay station is in disrepair.”

Qwedo let out a frustrated sigh and looked back out into space. “Yet another level of incompetence,” he muttered under his breath.

For all the power Qwedo had, there was still nothing he could do about the quantum fluctuations inherent to the nether regions of extra-dimensional space. Although such fluctuations were easily filtered with working equipment, a single faulty relay station could effectively disrupt all interstellar communication. Lying outside the Colonial Federation's border, one relay station is all his fleet had.

Qwedo turned again to his monk. “I shall retire to my chambers now, captain. Carry on.”

“Yes, master,” the monk said and bowed, as Qwedo then walked away without another word.

Qwedo's footsteps on the metal grated pathway resonated throughout the large open space of the deck hall. Each step clanged in the chamber like the ominous toll of a bell. Some of the opera-

tors' heads perched up as he passed. He simply gave each of them a dark glance, and they quickly returned to work.

Qwedo passed through the crowded narrow hallways of the sparse utilitarian interior of the vessel. The ship's crew parted quickly as Qwedo passed, making room for the cloaked figure. A cold passing shadow which most would rather avoid.

The small trivial trinket Qwedo held now in his hands seemed so incredibly insignificant. He turned the small strange sphere about with his fingers, inspecting it with quickly passing curiosity. Other than its unusually high density, the device (if it was truly a device as suspected) seemed rather unremarkable.

Qwedo didn't bother to turn on the light when he entered his room. In the blackest of spaces, he lied upon his bed awake, painfully aware of himself. His thoughts turned to Shaolu, whom he thought must surely be dead. He still could feel little else but hate for his brother now, but Shaolu's destruction brought him no joy. It left him only with the void.



Sitting in his large comfortable chair, Saktefya closed his eyes and relaxed. In the cool dark of space, his sleek craft slowly—comparatively speaking—made its way to the system jump gate. Inside the craft, soft blue light shone against Saktefya's face from several display panels.

Saktefya kept his eyes closed as he downed a small glass of sakaimva. The warm orange liquid burned his throat slightly, like cleansing—yet somehow refreshing—acid. Immediately his senses started to numb, as the intoxicant made its way through his body. A little dribbled down his stubbly chin like orange drool as he leaned back with his mouth agape.

He couldn't help but turn his thoughts to his plight. If he did

make it to the system jump gate and somehow pass without incident, he still would need to refuel yet again once on the other side. He wasn't entirely sure how many credits he had in his account, but he knew it wasn't much. Fortunately, his connections allowed him to store funds outside the government's control. Hopefully, he would be able to covertly exchange currency once he crossed the intragalactic border.

He thought about suicide, but only briefly. He figured if he drowned himself in sakaimva, perhaps he could just die a little. A little death is all he really needed. Like the calm vacuum outside, he swept away his problems into the void.

Saktefya wasn't a particularly spiritual man, but he often wondered if anyone truly was. Esumala, Saktam, Nasradhu. They all equated to pretty much the same thing to him: human constructs grasping at some highly debatable transcendent and ineffable reality of which much profound insight was nevertheless claimed. Saktam was perhaps different, but despite Saktefya's obsession with his Ayis roots, he never bothered to give it much thought.

"What do you think about the death question, Sao?" Saktefya asked, as he sipped another small glass of sakaimva.

"I do not understand the nature of the query, sir."

"Do you think death is just the end? Or is there something more?"

"I think death can be synonymous with 'end', sir."

Saktefya let out a sigh. Sao didn't really think. The "I", just like "sir", was nothing more than a polite word used by the system's engineers to emulate a conscious entity. Alone in the emptiness of space, Saktefya would sometimes let himself forget, and get caught up in the anthropomorphic fantasy.

In the nearly 2,000 years of the Ayis empire, no one had yet to create an artificial system capable of passing the Ubqwed test. It was truly remarkable that in the ancient times of the Galactic Con-

federacy, the first mechoid was created. It was a feat that could not be duplicated ever after. All mechoids since sprung forth from this first being's virtual loins.

Sufficiently inebriated, Saktefya was now bored. He therefore decided to watch the latest news on his crude receiver. If it wasn't entertaining, the propaganda would at least be good for a laugh.

“Sao, find the news for me would ya?”

“Which stream would you prefer, sir?”

“I don't care, just pick one.”

Sao then connected to the nearest intragalactic relay transponders and displayed the stream out to the main view panel. The vast view out to the sea of stars was immediately replaced with the large image of a woman's head.

*“Tensions continue to rise as the Congress of Vendors convened today to discuss the Corporate Alliance's official stance toward imperial oversight of Jeegkhut planetary affairs. Some people say the Dora's recent military operations in Alliance territory may violate the Edict of Commercial Non-Intercession...”*

“Heh. ‘Some people say...’” Saktefya muttered under his breath. The phrase was a common one on State-sanctioned broadcasts and was a subtly deceptive way for the station to express its own commentary on current events under the facade of vaguely citing anonymous sources.

*“...The Minister of State Affairs for the Ayis Empire is expected to meet with the President of the Corporate Alliance later today. Depending upon the outcome of this meeting, the entire future of interstellar commerce could be drastically affected.”*

Saktefya raised his brow for a moment, before closing his eyes and letting out a chuckle as he downed another shot of sakaimva.

“Choose your words wisely...” the young man said sharply as he glared into the gray-haired Minister's eyes. Inside, Yoshuru's anger flared as much as his nostrils, each breath bringing in more fuel for the fire.

“My words...? Forgive me... *ida*... but...”

“Don't patronize me, old man. We both know how you feel about your Emperor.”

The Minister clenched his jaw. He was incensed by the pointed remark, but it was not one to which he could easily respond, so he bit his tongue and glared at the young man in silence. This was not the first time he had encountered the Dora's hot-tempered displeasure.

“You have no more words. Your words have *failed* me. The time for words... is *over*.” The Dora's own words were sharp and directed. He flung them at the Minister like darts, penetrating in their scathing rebuke. He held his gaze at the minister, stabbing away with his eyes. And then, he turned his back to the old man. In a cold quiet whisper, he spoke again. “You are dismissed.”

The Minister was shocked. Later he would reflect that ultimately it was inevitable, but for now the Dora's dismissal came as an assaulting surprise. It was unprecedented for the Minister of State Affairs to be dismissed in the middle of negotiations—especially negotiations as important as these. What was the Dora thinking?

The shocked old man looked to the Chancellor of the Treasury on the other side of the table. The Chancellor averted his eyes to the floor and let out a sigh. The Minister's mouth agape, he turned back to the Dora who stood stoically, back turned, cape fluttering ever so slightly in the silence.

The Dora calmly grasped a small glass of water upon the table and sipped, his back still turned. With quiet resignation, the Minister of State Affairs left the room. Yoshuru continued to drink in silence as the doors to the conference room slipped shut.

The Dora turned to the Chancellor, and gazed for a moment. The Chancellor raised his eyebrows slightly in quiet anxiety, and then averted his eyes. In this way he let the young Emperor know he would give the Dora no challenge, despite however much he may have privately questioned the dismissal. Yoshuru turned to the large view screen and took another sip from the glass in his hand. “Put him back on.”

“Yes, ida.”

After a moment, an image of a board room appeared upon the screen. A dozen chairs surrounded a large marble table. Around the table there were men and women dressed in formal—but contemporary—tunics. The standard business attire within the Corporate Alliance.

At the head of the table was a confused conspicuously bald man. With furrowed brow, he gazed back at the young man now before his eyes. Moments ago he had been speaking to the Minister of State Affairs and this sudden change came as a shock.

“Dora... Yoshuru?” the President asked tentatively.

“President Busasda, I presume.”

“We were just speaking with the Right Honorable Lan—”

“Yes, and you’re speaking with me now. Any business you wished to conduct with my Minister you can now conduct with me.”

“Well, it is certainly an honor to speak with you, sire. This is an unexpected pleasure.”

“You may dispense with the pleasantries, Master President. I’m here to move this discussion along.”

There was silence for a moment as the President coughed nervously and several fidgeted in their chairs. The Emperor gazed with half-open displeased eyes. After a long cold pause, the negotiations began...

Nearly an hour had passed, and the discussion had not been fruitful. Amidst numerous groans, moans, and exasperated sighs, the President and board members could not hold back from expressing their frustration at the Dora's unyielding obstinance.

"Look, with all due respect, that's simply not the way things are done."

"Are you taking issue with *procedure*?"

"Ida, I'm simply saying that it's unprecedented."

"I am the Dora. I *set* precedent."

The President closed his eyes and issued no reply. The strain of having to deal with this brash youngster was getting to him. He rubbed his temples and wished it could be over somehow. If only he could talk with one of the Dora's ministers again.

Yoshuru himself was extremely irritated. He felt disrespected at every turn, and he would have ended the conversation nearly as soon as it started, but he knew better. As much as he hated it, he needed these insolent men to end the embargo.

The Dora was walking a fine line. On the one hand making too many concessions would establish a posture of weakness. On the other, he needed their cooperation, and the Alliance had the upper hand economically. In truth, he was in a little over his head at this point, but who could he trust?

The President finally spoke up, "Gentlemen, perhaps if we all recessed for th--" Before he finished his thought, a woman tapped him on the shoulder, having recently entered the board room. She paused momentarily before whispering something in his ear and handing him a display tablet.

The President furrowed his brow as he quickly read over something on the screen. His face relaxed and his pupils ever so slightly enlarged, and his mouth slowly opened. Concern? Awe? The Dora was desperate to read his face.

Yoshuru narrowed his eyes. “Master President...?”

The President concealed a smirk with his hand, and then coughed, before once again furrowing his brow. “Ah, yes, as I was saying, it may be best to recess for the time being—In fact, perhaps we should reconvene... uh... next week? Yes, perhaps some time would afford us some clarity of thought.”

Yoshuru was in a panic now. The Alliance should have been just as anxious to get this matter out of the way as he was. A week? No... Something was not right. What was on that blasted tablet? Was he bluffing? That face. It was too genuine, brief as it was. Indeed, the man had no respect for the young emperor’s powers of observation. He was definitely hiding something. But what?

The Dora longed now for the insight of a Saktagres. He knew stories of their purported powers when it came to truthsaying and reading the minds of others. Even if such stories were true (and he had his doubts), the Saktam Council kept its secrets—even from the Emperor. He would have to seek counsel elsewhere.

The Dora did his best to simply lift his brow and nod in agreement. “Let us arrange for a time then. Meanwhile, if you all will excuse my absence, I will return momentarily...”

The President smiled and nodded before the Dora calmly placed the picture feed on hold.

“Get me my spymaster! Now!”

The Treasury Chancellor nodded fervently and immediately arose from his seat in haste. As soon as he opened the door, a dark figure already stood on the other side. Like a quiet shadow the figure glided into the room swiftly.

Yoshuru breathed a sigh of relief. “Karreth.”

From beneath a dark hood, the Dora’s spymaster spoke in a dark voice, “The Alliance is lying to you.”

“So you’ve been watching?”

“What? No. I have reports from men in the field. The Alliance

has been amassing resources, stockpiling weapons, and reinforcing infrastructure. All of their cities. Across all territories. Shadow operations outside our surveillance for months. They're preparing for something. Likely war..."

"That tablet..."

"Ida?"

The Dora shook his head before continuing. "How could they be doing all this for so long? The amount of capital alone..."

Karreth waited for the young emperor to put two and two together.

"They're not doing this alone are they?"

Karreth simply nodded.

"Treasonous bastards! Who is it? Swingali? D'hinajat?"

"I cannot say for certain at this time, ida, but if I were to venture to guess I would suggest a more well-established power. Something large enough and powerful enough to evade our detection for this long, while covertly funneling the kind of vast amount of resources we're seeing..."

"The Federation..."

"It bears its scar. I know it well." Karreth pointed to the sharp scar over his right eye. He never had it treated; he never wanted to forget.

Yoshuru nodded solemnly and thought for a while. "If that's what they want, that's what they'll get." The Dora then turned to the Chancellor, "Get them back on the screen, would you?"

When the President appeared on screen again, he was smiling. "Have we a time then, Ida?"

"I'm afraid your time is up, Busura."

"Excuse me?"

"You will be hunted. Your cities will be leveled. Your storehouses raided. Henceforth, your petty Alliance is no more. All that was yours is now the Empire's and your lives are forfeit! We do

not negotiate with terrorists, insurrectionists, and worthless scum such as yourself.”

The board was dead silent. The President quietly scowled and gritted his teeth. Yoshuru stared the man down in return, and slowly smiled before continuing: “Oh yes, *this* is how things will be done.”

With that, the Dora killed the transmission. With that, the war had begun...



When the alarm had sounded, Grashaomo took immediate action and leapt into the air. Engaging his epidermal cloaking system, he was nearly invisible. He was now a thin outline of spectral distortion high above the floor, easily unnoticed as he clung to the ceiling of the massive commerce center.

Crowds by the thousands were rushed away, this way and that. Visitors were escorted outside the gates of the center, while resident members were moved indoors. Those who were fortunate enough to be close enough to their domiciles when the alarm sounded simply made their way inside to their homes. Others were forced into emergency shelters on the subterranean levels.

The immense multi-tiered interior of the facility stretched on for miles, and could easily be considered an enclosed city. Shops, living quarters, exhibits, transit stations, all and more were contained within that shimmering edifice of glass and steel. For all intents and purposes it operated autonomously as well. For over 300 years now, commerce center grounds were considered the exclusive sovereign territory of the Corporate Alliance, and the Empire had not involved itself in any of its operations.

Entering the complex unimpeded required Alliance membership. Non-members, regardless of class or station, could only enter

through a limited set of visitor gates scattered along the perimeter every mile or so. The Empire had quite literally never set foot anywhere inside. But that was all about to change...

The thunder of a thousand boots trembled through the walls, reaching up to the ceiling. Hundreds of men scrambled on every level of the center, while hundreds of other men made their steady progressive march toward the large doors of one of the center's perimeter gates. Their scrambling slowly faded, as they found their positions and made themselves ready, weapons in hand. Now, there was just the persistent beat of the march outside the thick metal enclosures barricading the glass doors.

The steady thump of the marching Imperial troops reached to a roar, as the Alliance Security men waited in fearful expectation of the imminent battle before them. High above in the steel rafters, Grashaomo looked on in quiet cold apathy. He surveyed the landscape beneath him. Polished walkways, tranquil plants, water features. He counted the number of the men, recorded their physical features and bio-readings, and tabulated the information together and stored it away for future reference within his built-in memory.

The roar was abruptly silenced. The men inside continued to hold their positions anxiously. It would not be long now before the troops would inevitably blast away the outer barriers and make their way inside.

In the midst of the silence, a quiet cry suddenly went up. A small tiomo—a furry creature commonly kept as a pet—slinked past the line of men. It cautiously approached the glass doors, sniffing as it went oblivious to its immediate peril.

Several men quietly snickered to themselves as they watched the little beast waltz right up to the barrier doors. It perked up its ears for a moment as it listened to the distant shuffle of several men on the other side of the doors planting the charges.

Grashaomo was generally disgusted by human beings. He found

nothing particularly redeemable about them. He hated the crude “name” they had given him—a series of sounds produced by spit-filled fleshy face holes which was then used to identify him—and he hated the facade of humanity he was forced to use in his endeavors as a spy and assassin for the Mechoid Collective.

Yes, Grashaomo was a mechoid. An artificial lifeform born of a race of artificial lifeforms who had long since separated themselves from the affairs of men—Ayis and Thanas alike. His real name was a completely abstract thought incomprehensible to men that could not be expressed in words. Mechoids had moved beyond the use of traditional language.

The little beast still sniffing at the doors was in precarious position of being blown into pieces once the troops outside had managed to secure the explosives and detonate them. How long would that take? If Grashaomo’s estimate was right—and he usually was about such things—it would be another 12 seconds. Factoring in the distance, estimated performance level based on recorded averages for Alliance Security field operatives, as well as the inhibiting factor of body armor, it would take one of the troops below approximately 17 seconds to successfully retrieve the animal. This was all assuming that one of these humans would actually bother in the first place. Suffice it to say, Grashaomo was quite certain the little creature was more than likely going to die shortly in the explosion. That is unless...

Grashaomo let out a sigh—a human expression which had become a habit of his own despite not having to breathe—and reluctantly released his grip upon the ceiling. After quickly falling halfway to the floor, he then extended a towline from the inside of his palm back toward the ceiling at a 45 degree angle. 2 seconds. He then swung toward the tiomo, still cloaked. 4 seconds. Reaching the point of contact, he then released the line and grabbed it. 2 seconds. The hapless creature now wildly screeching as the confused

Security troops looked on yards away, Grashaomo fired his line back to its starting location. 4 seconds. 12 seconds in total. The screeching beast was now clinging to his back, burying its tiny claws in his invisible shoulders.

A second passed.

"Hmm..." he uttered to himself.

Boom!

Metal and glass exploded down the polished corridor of the entry way into the complex in a maelstrom of flame and debris. The creature dug its claws deeper and let out a cry of confusion and fear. Grashaomo remained unphased as he continued to gaze on at the scene below.

He watched the ensuing battle for several moments more as the Imperial troops rushed down the corridor and engaged Alliance Security in a firefight. The hail of laser blasts, pellet discharges, and explosions stirred the little tiomo on his back into a frenzy. Out of sheer anxiety and panic, it leapt from his back and attempted to grapple on to the ceiling itself. Grashaomo immediately snapped his arm out to grab the little beast, and held onto it by the scruff of its furry neck.

The battle quickly ended, with most of the Security forces dead. Several men broke ranks and retreated, as the Imperial troops killed all who remained and made their advance farther into the complex.

Seeing all that he wished to see, Grashaomo secured his tow line to the ceiling and glided down to the floor of the complex. Amidst the flaming ruins with no one in sight, he disengaged his cloak. The shivering tiomo turned its head and glanced at Grashaomo, who was now looking down at the furry bundle of a beast with his cold gray eyes. While holding the creature to his breast, the creature sniffed his hand and then proceeded to lick it. Grashaomo tilted his head ever so slightly, before returning his attention to his

surroundings. He then proceeded to walk forward through the wreckage and the flames and the mangled corpses. He casually sauntered through the complex, delicately stroking the little creature in his arms as he went.

*The wise, when faced with old enemies, make new friends.*

- A Thanashun Aphorism

**T**HE massive metal ring loomed large in the small anterior window of the craft. Shaolu and Yashuma had been traveling for hours in the tiny craft through the starry expanse. Were it not for the lighted display on the small ship's piloting controls, they wouldn't have known if they were moving at all. One could look out the rear portal to see the local star slowly receding amidst a great bright blackness, but even that slow retreat was undetectable to the human eye.

Now that they were nearing the system jump gate, the craft slowed its progress as it made its approach. The ring grew larger, but incrementally so. While still some distance away, it occupied their whole view until they could no longer see it all at once.

"Over 2000 years and we still don't know precisely how these things work. Fortunately, the gates were so incredibly well built that they practically maintain themselves. I suppose one could argue that the seemingly indefinite usefulness of the gates has impeded any serious effort in understanding and/or improving upon them. Of course, to me that seems rather short-sighted, considering it only stands to reason that these gates can't withstand entropy forever. Regardless of any automation, at some point we absolutely need to understand the technology to the point of complete replica-

tion and then move beyond that. Imagine: new jump gates throughout unexplored sectors of the galaxy...”

Shaolu nodded in reply, only paying half attention. He was looking over the display panels, estimating how soon they would dock. Yashuma had been rambling on like this for well over an hour now.

“But do you know the real reason all of the necessary research hasn’t been done yet?”

“Uh...” Shaolu replied, realizing he was being asked some kind of question, but having missed its content in the midst of his preoccupation. Fortunately Yashuma continued without missing a beat.

“Bureaucracy. Plain and simple bureaucratic inefficiency. The Empire has far too many levels of hierarchy to concern itself with actually useful endeavors. Instead, the Dora’s administration has been too preoccupied with political posturing and the like, rather than things like *infrastructure*. And this has been the case going back hundreds of years—even across whole dynasties. Of course, the Dora isn’t alone. We can’t forget how the Council of Lords factors into—”

Shaolu held up his hand, gesturing for silence. “We’re being signaled,” Shaolu explained.

With furrowed brow, Shaolu read over something on the console and then proceeded to tap away on its interface. Yashuma waited quietly and used the opportunity to compose his thoughts. Once he latched onto a peculiar thoughtline, he was always anxious to continue. His thesis wasn’t always clearly expressed, as he tended to explore this or that tangent, but it was always clear in his mind.

Shaolu finalized his folding point request and transmitted it back to the gate AI system. In the midst of sending the request, Shaolu became intuitively aware that Yashuma was waiting on him. He turned to his brother and displayed a small gentle smile. “It will just be a moment, and they’ll send back a flight path.”

Yashuma nodded in return, suddenly feeling silly. Like many times before, here he was talking of the trivial and abstract when practical matters awaited them. Shaolu usually managed to indulge him in this eccentricity, but Yashuma still felt somewhat of a boy in Shaolu's presence. He admired his brother's resolve, his seriousness, his energy, and commitment. In return, Shaolu had buried away in his psyche a quiet respect and even envy for Yashuma's talent for broadminded analysis and philosophic synthesis—even if he felt that Yashuma could nonetheless benefit from spending a little more time outside his head.

The craft continued its slow voyage, gracefully gliding along its path through the quiet sea of space toward the circle of the massive gate. Mere meters away now, a door opened silently, and progressively flooded the void with light. The little vessel was bathed in its brightness as it reached the docking portal. Without pause, the small ship floated through the rising doors in one fluid motion.

“There will be grav plating in the dock, but once we enter the main corridor, the only thing keeping us to the ‘ground’ (so to speak) will be centripetal force in relation to inertia, as we are spun around in the constantly rotating ring.”

Shaolu replied with a nod.

“The gate's spin rate is calibrated to simulate a gravitational force on par with Ayis San, so it will be a little lighter than we're used to. The bigger concern, however, will be the noticeable impact on the fluid of our inner ears.”

“Good to know.” And Shaolu meant it. Neither of them had boarded a system jump gate before. Of course now Shaolu already had other concerns on his mind...

If he were to have any chance of retrieving the relic, Shaolu would need help. Qwedo was deeply embedded in the Colonial

Militia. He was also sure that, while Qwedo had returned to Nasad alone, he wasn't truly working alone.

To say that he was confident that day would be an understatement. His excited eyes hung over a smug smirk when Shaolu first saw him. "I will have it, one way *or another*," Qwedo had said. His countenance had betrayed conceit, and his words concealed something more than simple self-assurance.

His was no rogue mission, of that Shaolu was sure. Nasad was part of the Ayis Empire, and the Colonial Federation could not simply confiscate the property of an Ayis citizen within Imperial space. That would cause too many political problems, especially with the Nibasuma family still retaining some measure of respect within the Council of Lords.

It would only make sense that they would send Qwedo alone. Regardless of the outcome, sending Qwedo would give the Militia plausible deniability. This kind of covert approach was completely routine for the Federation.

Then there was the question of why Qwedo would return at all. He had never before expressed any interest in the artifact. When he left Nasad, he vowed never to return. Why return two years later and demand Shaolu hand over the orb Grafe had entrusted to him?

Even at the time, Shaolu deduced that Qwedo wanted the relic for a deeper reason than petty possessiveness on account of his birthright. There *was* a good measure of envy and bitterness over Shaolu's favored status with Grafe, despite being Grafe's nephew, and Qwedo the firstborn. Nevertheless, Qwedo could have easily insisted on having the orb for himself when Grafe commended it to Shaolu upon his deathbed. He never bothered, because what little interest Qwedo had in the object amounted to nothing more than a passing fancy.

The cybernetic arm came as a complete shock. Shaolu lamented not noticing it. Implanted weaponry was illegal throughout both

the Empire and the Federation. Of course, Qwedo was part of the Militia, for whom exemptions were occasionally made, but Shaolu had not expected Qwedo to forsake his Saktagres heritage so soundly.

Qwedo had hidden his thoughts well. Nevertheless, Shaolu felt blinded by sentiment. Then again, what would he have done differently? If Qwedo was working with the Federation as Shaolu now suspected, he would have taken the orb “one way or another” just as he had said. There was something more to the artifact. The Federation would have risked military action if necessary. Shaolu had no doubt of that.

So now the question at hand was how to track Qwedo’s present location and wrest the relic from Federation control. That was, of course, presuming that Qwedo even still had the orb himself. In any case, it was no small task, and he was going to need help...

Yashuma marveled at the artificial sky above as they made their way along the giant corridor. When he turned his gaze back toward the pathway, he was suddenly disoriented for a moment and had to regain his composure.

“I don’t know if I’m ever going to get used to all this,” Yashuma remarked.

“Just keep your head forward, and you’ll fair better,” Shaolu said in reply, as he walked briskly along the massive corridor, his eyes scanning the crowd and the buildings to either side as they walked along.

“How much time do we have before our gate time?”

“Long enough, hopefully.”

“Eh?”

Shaolu spotted something in the distance, and changed course. Yashuma followed along dutifully, as Shaolu approached an infor-

mation terminal. The machine was old and worn. A thin but noticeable layer of dust covered its screen. Terminals like these largely went unused on account of the prevalence of ocular implants. It was also ubiquitous for individuals without implants to at least use visors for external augmented reality displays.

Shaolu tapped away on the dusty weathered screen, as Yashuma waited nearby inspecting the surroundings some more. The hustle and bustle of foot traffic continued steadily, with occasional glances from the crowd. The two saktagres remained somewhat of a curiosity wherever they went, but most of the masses making their way through the large aisle ignored the robed adepts.

“Here’s something...” Shaolu half-muttered aloud.

[Under Construction]



Golden rays shone through the violet veil of clouds, casting both shadow and light upon a crystal shoreline. The young Yoshuru gazed upon the glimmering sea with quiet solemnity. He stood statuesque amongst the stones of crumbling ruins. The flutter of his cape and the delicate dance of the grass beneath his feet were all that moved in the light breeze of a slowly approaching twilight.

Yoshuru closed his eyes and let out a sigh. He let the light of the sun bathe his face in its warmth, as a cool wind tousled his hair. A sweet smell of perfume wafted in the air and mixed with the cool scent of an ocean breeze. With the aroma came the rustling sounds of steps on the grassy terrain of rocks behind.

“Swisan,” Yoshuru whispered. His eyes remained closed as she continued towards him.

He felt delicate fingers glide against the back of his hand and find their way back in to his palm. He gripped the hand with care, turned his head and raised his eyes to the figure standing by his

side. He was greeted with cool green eyes and a warm olive smile, framed by long flowing locks of rich umber.

## **Appendix I – Galactic History (Opening Timeline)**

C.C – Common Calendar A.E – Ayis Empire B.A.E – Before Ayis Empire

- a. 4120 B.A.E - Maerglish\* Civilization
- b. 3850 B.A.E – Maerglish Civilization Falls
- a. 2700 B.A.E – Rise of Shuntali Civilization
- c. 1890 B.A.E – T'nirsa Council Founded
- c. 1810 B.A.E – First Colony on Laqwat
- a. 1400 B.A.E – The Great Plague
- c. 1005 B.A.E – Galactic Confederacy Founded
- 321 B.A.E – Oomtam Holy War
- 216 B.A.E – Ootam Theocracy Founded
- c.210 B.A.E – Thanas Migration
- 42 B.A.E – Lord Iqwilespa[Eqwiloe'spaka] born
- 16 B.A.E – Saktagres Rebellion
- 0 A.E - First Year of Ayis[N'Ayis]\*\* Empire
- 10 A.E – Oomtam-Saktam Planetary Governance Conversion
- 95 A.E – Mechoid Collective Founded
- 529 A.E – Tanasais Federation of Planetary Colonies Founded
- 589 A.E – Saktam-Secular Planetary Governance Conversion
- 957 A.E – Imperial Declaration of Interplanetary Trade
- 1432 A.E - Corporate Alliance Founded
- 0 C.C [1433 A.E]
- 126 C.C – Pilot's Guild Founded
- 202 C.C – Guild/Alliance Dispute
- 215 C.C – Imperial Declaration of Non-Intercession
- 536 C.C – Lord Shaolu born
- 564 C.C – The Great Civil War

\* The Maerglish civilization is so ancient, that little is known about the culture, its language, or history. Only a small remnant of structures exist on Ayis San, and nearly all known writings from the Maerglish are carved in stone.

\*\*Although the Ayis culture has existed for some time in one form or another, its language (like its culture) has evolved over time. This linguistic fact also applies to the name the Ayis have used for themselves. The name Ayis was originally N'Ayis, which evolved from N'Ayish, which was shortened from N'Ayishat. There are writings in existence today which confirm this, but anything prior to the N'Ayishat period is very scarce, and of ambiguous origin. Some have claimed that the earliest name was Nishath, suggesting a Tanasais phonetic construction. While it is generally agreed that Ayis and Tanas once shared a common dialect, any linguistic reconstruction is pure speculation.

*Some dates are approximate. The symbol a. means “after”, b. “before”, and c. “circa” (or “about”)*

## **Appendix II – Famous Nobles of the Ayis Empire (selected excerpts)**

### **Badshadrum, Yoshuru (547- )**

The young master Yoshuru became Dora in 561 after his parents were killed by terrorists. His subsequent reign was within turbulent times, starting only three short years before the Great Civil War.

**Place of Birth:** *San Ume, Ayis San*

[...]

### **Nibasuma, Dakbe (505-541)**

Ada of Nasad from 531 to 541. Father of Lord Shaolu. Ada Dakbe was assassinated when Lord Shaolu was only five years of age. Shaolu and his sister, Lomaies, were accordingly raised by Dakbe's brother, Grafe.

**Place of Birth:** *Moiya, Nasad*

### **Nibasuma, Grafe (501-560)**

Experienced officer in the Dora's Imperial Guard. Uncle, and adoptive father of Lord Shaolu. Sir Grafe apparently died from a contracted disease, due to biological warfare in service to Governor Radshao.

**Place of Birth:** *Moiya, Nasad*

### **Nibasuma, Yashuma (539- )**

Yashuma was a loyal follower and biographer of Lord Shaolu throughout the Great Civil War. Cousin to Lord Shaolu, and raised as a brother by Sir Grafe. It is due to Yashuma that we know so

much of Lord Shaolu's many deeds.

**Place of Birth:** *Mova, Nasad*

**Nibasuma, Qwedo** (535-567)

Head of an elite covert army of monks and others trained in the dark arts of Oomtam. Cousin to Lord Shaolu, and raised as a brother by Sir Grafe. Also known as Qwedo the Forsaken.

**Place of Birth:** *Mova, Nasad*

[...]

**Jasvakia, Swisan** (545- )

The royal concubine of Dora Yoshuru Badshadrum.

**Place of Birth:** *Umeshja, Sanos Se*

## Appendix III – Glossary of Terms

**Ada (ᐱᐱ-ᐱ):** The title of a nobleman with some regional authority, usually over a planet, although sometimes less and sometimes more. It is roughly translated “Lord,” although the term specifically applies to an individual currently in power. When referring to a member of a noble family who is not currently in power, the term “Sanda” (ᐱᐱᐅᐱ-ᐱ) is instead preferred.

**Ayis (ᐱᐱ-ᐱ):** The name of a people, language, and empire. In the Ayis language, “Ayis” itself originally meant something akin to “people” in a first-person sense. This is related to the third-person suffix for people “-ais” as seen in “Tanasais.”

**Ayis San (ᐱᐱ-ᐱ ᐱ):** The capital planet of the Ayis Empire. Ayis San is also known as the ancestral homeworld of all human beings, with ancient ruins predating the Galactic Confederacy.

**Ayis Se (ᐱᐱ-ᐱ ᐱ):** The second inhabited planet in the Ayis stellar system. In ancient times prior to the Galactic Confederacy, this planet’s name was Laqwat—a curious, albeit trivial, fact that survived the ravages of time.

**Corporate Alliance (ᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱ-ᐱ ᐱᐱ ᐱ-ᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱ):**

**Council of Lords (ᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱ-ᐱ ᐱᐱᐱ ᐱᐱ-ᐱᐱ):** The chief legislative body of the Ayis Empire. The Council is comprised of an assorted number of noble houses throughout the galaxy.

**D’hinajat:** A Saekbolm terrorist group. Dora Yoshuru waged a militant campaign for over a decade against these violent activists.

**Dora (ᐱ-ᐱᐱᐱ):** The official title of the Ayis Emperor. The word roughly means “Proclaimed One” as the Dora was historically chosen and empowered by the Saktam council.

**Esumala** (ἘϺϸἸϰἸ): An animistic religion, popular on frontier worlds on the outlying border between the Ayis Empire and the Colonial Federation. Some of its practices—such as ritual sacrifice and ceremonial blood duels—are illegal in both the Federation and the Empire, but they are often overlooked and/or tolerated on outlying planets.

**Ida** (ἸἸ): An Ayis expression roughly meaning “m’lord” although it is typically only used for actively ruling political leaders, and not non-administrative nobles.

**Mechoid** (ἸϰἸϺϺἸ): Electro-mechanical software-based beings who make up the Mechoid Collective. Mechoids mostly keep to themselves, and their origins are shrouded in mystery. All that is known is that the first Mechoid came into being in the golden age of the Galactic Confederacy.

**Jeegkhut**: A barren inhospitable planet on the outskirts of the Ayis Empire. “Jeegkhut” is a Saekbolm curse. It was so named by the Saekbolm slaves who were forced to work in its unbearably hot mines by the Corporate Alliance. Slaves were employed to save on equipment costs.

**Kakai** (ἸἸἸἸ): An Ayis curse. It literally refers to excrement, but it is used more loosely as an interjection.

**Nasad** (ἸἸἸἸ): A forest world on the outer frontier of the Ayis Empire, on its border with the Colonial Federation. Homeworld of the House of Nibasuma (Nibasuma).

**Nasadru**: Predominant religion of the Colonial Federation in terms of self-profession. (Unlike the Ayis Empire, the Federation does not have an official religious establishment).

**Oomtam** (ἸἸἸἸ): Either an ancient sect of Saktam or a rival sect of a more ancient tradition of which Saktam was a part (a point for

debate by religious historians). A militant movement within Oomt-am was responsible for violently overthrowing the Galactic Confederacy and instituting the Oomt-am Theocracy in its place. The Theocracy lasted for over 200 years before it was finally itself overturned by the Saktagres rebellion which later instituted the galactic State that would become the Ayis Empire.

**Saekbolm:** A minority people group within the Ayis Empire. The Saekbolm were notably oppressed by the Corporate Alliance, with many Saekbolm being used as slave labor on Jeegkhut.

**Saktam (Ἰἶἶἶἶἶἶ):** The official religion of the Ayis Empire (although in practice the Empire was quite secular governmentally). “Saktam” roughly means “way of the divided eye” referring to the tradition’s principle of united co-awareness of the subjective inner world and the objective outer world, as well as the distinctive union between individual and collective consciousness—a union which nonetheless exists as an analytic dichotomy, in contrast with Oomt-am with its more pansophist understanding.

**Saktam Council (Ἰἶἶἶἶἶἶ— ἶἶἶ Ἰἶἶἶἶἶ):** The ancient religious body that once served as the highest deliberative body of the Ayis Empire. When Lord Iqwilespa’s heir was lost to obscurity, the council became a largely ceremonial body presided over by the Dora as steward. The Dora gained supreme judicial interpretive power in the process.

**Saktagres (Ἰἶἶἶἶἶἶἶἶ):** Warrior adepts of Saktam. These acolytes have tremendous powers of mind and body granted to them through strict adherence to the principles and secrets of Saktam, allowing them to perform dazzling physical feats, as well as read and influence the minds of others.

**Sanos Se (Ἰἶἶἶἶἶ ስ):** The home world of the House of Jasvakia, including Swisan, the Dora’s royal concubine. It is the second inhab-

itable planet in the Sanos stellar system.

**Tanasais (Ἐπὶ Ἄϊσι):** See *Thanas*.

**Thanas:** The primary people group of the Colonial Federation. The adjectival form of the word is “Thanashun,” and the “Thanas” are known to the Ayis as the “Tanasais.”

**Thanashun:** See *Thanas*.

**Tiomo (Ἐπιθητό):** A small furry quadruped, often kept as a pet throughout the Empire. More recently domesticated and less well-trained than other animals, it nevertheless is mostly docile. First discovered on Filainas San, these creatures were originally used by early colonists to catch small pests in lieu of traps or poison.

**Umafe (Ἐπιθεός):** In Ayis, Umafe literally means “great god” where “uma” means “god.” Umafe should not, however, be understood to be on par with the simple anthropomorphic deities of Esumala or Nasadru. Umafe is thought to be the source of Reason in the universe, and the organizing principle that brought all things into being.

**Appendix IV – Pronunciation Guide**

Ayis Character	Transliteration	Pronunciation
⋈	A	“ah” as in “father” or “bother”
⋆	E	“eh” as in “day” or “braid”
–	I	“ee” as in “feet” or “beat”
⊓	B	b
⊔	K	k
⊕	D	d (only at start of words), dh (like “this” or “clothe”)
ϕ	L	l
ϑ	M	m
ϒ	N	n
ϣ	F	f
χ	P	p
ϕ	G	g
⊗	R	r
⊘	S	s
↷	W	w
⋈	V	v
⊖	Y	y
∇	Q	kw
⊕	T	t

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C	H	h
V	Z	z
V	U,OO	“oo” as “shoe” or “two”
T	O	“oh” as in “low” or “foe”
ϕ	J	j
F	SH	sh