

**Manuscript  
First three Chapters**

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**Songs Of Reason**

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There are billions of suns in our galaxy that are much like our sun.  
There is a high probability that some of the planets around them are like ours.  
There is a chance that intelligent life develops on these planets.  
And a chance for these creatures to develop interstellar travel.

So where are they?

Anyone would know of this vast darkness. The eternal night and its temporal lights.  
Dots lined up and randomly spread. Here they wait to be answered by vision. Stray, out there.

So alone.

Little white lights knowing each other so well. Where the tales have come and gone and lasted for  
billions of lifetimes. Stars at peace, at war, harmony, fear, and no end in sight, no matter how  
convinced their denizens were of the final year coming so very soon.

It never came.

In that maze of lights they encompassed distance without measure. Space beyond time. Fantasy and  
reality.

One light.

They named it A'ro.

That majestic, explosive device of the skies lit the halls of a cage in the dark.

They named that cage A'mian.

## *Day 1*

One so bound with ancestry appeared to sit upon a pale stone, surrounded by the pale mountains under a cloudless, blue sky. On that surface, no matter where A'jura would rest, the eye of A'ro cast down the light of death. Boiling heat overwhelmed every weak a'mian on that arid, lifeless surface of their planet. Apparently A'jura was not one of the weak, nor was the a'mian that slowly approached her through this magical silence. It took a while to get to her; a rite of passage through that scorching valley. The pale mountains. The blue sky. The deadly orange light. The shrine was still a mile away from the dome. Once near, the sturdy a'mian sat down in front of the shrine with legs crossed, right beside A'jura. She could see the black eyes and glimmering white pupils of her kin. A simple writing utensil remained clutched within A'jura's claw.

"A'lekiro seems ready to receive your speech." she said.

A'jura peered up at A'mej, eyes dwelling from the scroll she wrote on.

"Understood."

Her eyes widened and her pupils shrank. She blinked a few times. Some kind of friendly gesture.

"Only relaxing in A'ro's light, at this point." she clarified.

"What did you write?" A'mej asked. "More songs for the ceremony?"

"Just for fun this time," said A'jura. "A song to expand on when I have more time."

She rolled up her scroll.

"It's still a question unanswered, isn't it?"

A'jura raised a brow of scales to her.

"What?"

"If A'ro can turn so few of our kin into A'roocemirtal, why can he not make all of them so?"

"There is surely a scientific explanation for it. Perhaps history could tell us."

"I would rather hear your explanation."

A'jura shook her head, waved a hand in dismissal. Something about A'mej's request felt so silly to her. A'mej went on to give her own answer instead.

"I think that A'ro has no control over whom is born with the gift," she said. "It gifted our ancestors, then shared the gift among us evenly. A'ro gives everyone the chance to be an A'roocemirtal, as long as they try."

"Like those a'mians from tiny, forgotten villages?" said A'jura with a most obvious glance at A'mej.

She stood up with a bunch of scrolls in her black claws. A'mej replicated her every move for she was prone to do so. Once upright A'jura was significantly taller than her a'mian counterpart.

"And the gift fits you well," she said to A'mej with the scrolls held tight. "Come on then. I need to

give something akin to an inspirational speech.”

Their four armoured, flat talons scraped the stone surface at every step. They easily stood out amongst the pale mountains as the only swaying, pale creatures in sight. Coated at the limbs and around the neck with black, reptilian scales. Clothed in leathers of black and red shaped as ritual robes. No wind nor dust kicked up which certainly had left this planet entranced by the cracked ground of stagnation. The I'riscurum was clean and fuelled by the terrible burn of A'ro as A'jura closed her eyes to revel in the heat throughout the entire walk.

The domes of stone that riddled the surface were small in number, but large in size. A'jura and A'mej went through a wide crack in one of the first dome's walls. A small, arched entrance led to the centre dome. In the middle of the bright chamber was a brazier bursting flames against the dome's roof. Around the brazier were stone benches on different levels. Thirty or so a'mians sat on the benches and immediately turned their heads to A'jura once she presented herself. Most of them were very young, no older than fifty. They wore the white garments of the A'roocemirtal novice, but one of the a'mians on the benches wore the black robe of the A'roocemirtal master. He stood up from a carved stool to welcome his guests.

“Ritualist of the palace,” said the master while nearly shouting. “I am delighted to introduce you to the novices of this year.”

“Thank you A'lekiro.” A'jura replied politely.

She began judging every novice on the benches with her authoritarian gaze. Some of them appeared proud to be at the surface of A'mian, others were unnerved. Novices from the capital city looked confident and empowered. Novices from the depths of A'mian seemed much more restrained.

“I welcome you on your first day to let you know what it means to be here.” said A'jura as she stood in front of the burning brazier speaking loudly to the initiates.

“As an A'roocemirtal you will have the ability to protect A'mian from A'shar as the watchers of fire. But you will also be able to thrive. Casting fire is an artform and can be beautiful to witness.”

The dome's inhabitants were silent and subservient, granting A'jura her moment of teaching.

“If you have the will. The ambition. To use the strength that A'ro has given our species, then you will find joy in conquering A'ro's scorching heat. You will want to go outside and see A'ro. You cannot fear the burning eye that is out there. Use A'ro and its flames for our protection; that is your task. That is the gift you have been given to help yourself and A'mian.”

The novices laid their trunks onto their left shoulders in respect.

“There is no technology here to distract you. No a'mians whom would dare interrupt you. Let A'ro become your task until you return home.”

A'lekiro bowed down towards her.

“Well spoken, A'jura.” he said.

He gave her a condescending pat to her side, then turned to the novices. The master took her spot in front of the brazier. A'jura eyed him displeased.

“I would like all of you to follow me into the channelling room.” he suggested.

In turn, the dome slowly emptied and the others let A'jura and A'mej be.

“Well spoken?” A'jura inquired.

“Much better than last year's.” said A'mej, with a slightly cheeky tone.

“I had clogged nosebones. You should not count that one.”

“In all fairness, it was still a twenty-one out of twenty-five.” A'mej commented.

“I can live with that.” A'jura said. A sneaky glance went out to master A'lekiro as he followed his students. A'mej could feel the spite flowing.

The two a'mians walked out of the central dome through a metal door that opened by itself. The hallway they reached was lit by small cracks in the ceiling. It sloped down at first to become a trench moving through the pale landscape and under the heat. Anyone who walked by the walls could avoid touching the burning death coming in from above. The walls were heavily reinforced with beams of powerful metals to prevent this sacred place from collapsing during A'shar. There were names on the walls written in a'mian script. A'jura spotted each of the names and the text behind them. Every piece of text was a statue resembling their form. Hundreds of statues, some more prominent than others. A'jura read every plaque, stopped at every statue and laid her trunk to her left shoulder to revere every immortalized being present.

“A'serovaya. Founder of I'serovaya.

A'henek. Repelled the first attack of the Unoren.

A'debaror. Claimed victory in dozens of battlefields against the Unoren.

A'mokenan. Defeated unoren warlord Mazath.

A'vyrar. Began an interplanetary, technological uprising.

A'ienir. Inspired the A'mian people in times of sorrow.

A'uxo. Assaulted Unorena, retreating after decimating unoren forces.

A'crezim. The most skilled healer known throughout A'mian history.

A'baznej. The I'melaj rider who stopped the unoren counterattack.

A'gina. Reinvigorated A'mian with her incredible manner of speech and wisdom.

A'soonka. Sung the labyrinths of A'mian full with his deafening, beautiful voice.

A'lilian. Created an allegiance between a'mians and the people of Borum.

A'lonzek. Longest active commander of the A'mian space fleet keeping A'mian safe from the Unoren for two centuries.

A'quthen. The strongest A'roocemirtal ever known whom defeated an Unoren army by himself several times.”

All the way at the end of the trench A'jura poked at an empty spot on the wall.

“They could still carve out this rock. Quite a lot of space left.” she said.

“Let us first finish the ceremony,” A'mej replied. “Then we will see what happens.”

“A hunt for the remainders of the ashen cult, of course.”

Though A'jura spoke with great certainty, A'mej seemed keen to hold back on the plan. Right in front of them a tenesteel door opened at the end of the hallway, revealing a chamber made of more metals native to A'mian. Tenesteel was that black, reflective metal that almost every common building was made of. Sopherast was a crudely shaped yellow metal that was used for decorative purposes and technology for its conductive properties. Lastly, anrehar. A light, heat-resistant metal with the colour of oxidized green. This elevator chamber was circular and a tenesteel pad was built into the centre of the hall. It had some anrehar fencing around it, forming a cage as a safety measure. A'ro lit up the surroundings by shining its light through transparent sopherast windows above the pad. The windows could protect the weak from its rays.

“We are done with preparations for tomorrow?” A'jura asked as she opened the fence around the pad and stepped into the cage.

“Only you can know for sure.” A'mej said.

“You can remind me of things I forget to do,” A'jura said. “I need to get the new netclaw from my brother. Perhaps a talk with E'qonag would be useful too.”

A'mej nodded a few times and lifted her claw. The device of sopherast around her wrist came to life when she touched a small black button on top of it. A hologram interface spread itself out across A'mej's pale lower arm. She used it as the surface for a touchscreen with the intent to control her netclaw device. Meanwhile, A'jura took hold of a lever within the cage. She pulled it roughly to activate the elevator pad. Gravity increased at the scaled toes of the two a'mians, forcing them to remain upon the pad. A loud hum sounded through the chamber as within the next second the pad shot downwards at mind-numbing speed. A'jura and A'mej could only feel the I'riscurum rush past their earholes while they dropped right through the crust of their planet. The artificial gravity glued them to the pad with ease.

“A'senai mentions that the prophet is breathing better.” A'mej reported, casually speaking into a tube while achieving impossible velocity. The small tube system on the elevator automatically connected to earholes and nosebones allowing a'mians to talk on these deadly elevators.

“Good,” said A'jura. “No sharpshooters near him today?”

“No. Were there ever any?” A'mej wondered. “Anyway, there's a few other events.”

“Hmhm.”

“Your brother's election for the invention of the year,” A'mej said as she kept tapping onto her lower arm scouting the netclaw for information. “I'm not excluding the possibility that he's the only member of the jury again.”

“As long as he is back at the palace before I am,” A'jura said. “Need him to finish up my new netclaw.”

The pad gradually slowed down in the second half of its course. It placed itself within a new anrehar cage identical to the one high above. A'jura opened the fence to let herself and A'mej out after the increased gravitational pull at their talons had deactivated. They went right through a tenesteel door, opening it up with a touch of the fingernail against the small console beside it. Beyond the door was an enormously lengthy tube heading straight through A'mian's underground realm of blue caves. It had several metal rails meant for specific vehicles. One such vehicle was stationed in front of A'jura and A'mej. It was a fairly simple, round cart with comfy benches and a table in the middle. Its plateau, without walls or roof, hovered above the railing.

“The I'serovaya theatre starts off their new program today,” said A'mej as she continued on with the news. “It's very likely that E'qonag is going to be there.”

“Noted.”

They got onto the cart together. As soon as they sat down, the cart formed a gravity field around itself and set off from the station with the elevator to the surface. The cart went above healthy speeds and made turns with deadly forces. Nonetheless, both a'mians were perfectly safe within the gravity bubble.

“Furthermore,” A'mej said, as she got comfortable on the bench of the cart. “There is a communal prayer on the coast of I'nejpa tonight. It is not an A'roocemirtal who is leading it.”

“I don't like I'nejpa. But it could be a gathering of the ashen cult.”

A'jura adjusted the red leather of her attire at the shoulders.

“I'll have one of our interrogators head there,” A'mej replied. She quickly moved onto her last topic.

“There is another palace meeting you can attend. Your mother and father, their advisor and head technician will certainly be there.”

“It's only about the restoration of the walls,” A'jura said. “They got damaged by that pack of I'melaj



trekking across the city. We will head to the theatre soon.”

She watched the rails as they were rushing through the web of tunnels, passing the many crossroads that connected every surface base on A'mian with the underground.

“And i'd rather not hear what E'kinre has to say about the ceremony of tomorrow.” she continued.

A'mej gave a few blinks in agreement. She turned off her netclaw by pressing the black button a second time. It didn't take too long for the railcart to decrease its speed. It linked itself onto a new station. This one was much more richly decorated with sopherast than the previous. Above the tenesteel door to the station was a plate. The word carved onto it was “I'laienora”.

“Here we are,” A'mej said. “Station seventy-nine.”

Past the next arch the station opened up into a grand hall. A centre for public transport; the only type of transport on A'mian. A'jura and A'mej had finally reached more populated areas. This huge tower of thirty-five floors of tenesteel was built within the endless stone of the planet with many new rail stations to varied locations on the surface. I'laienora; the great crossroads within the earth had a large sopherast statue of the current chieftain standing in the middle of the hall. Most of the statue was lit by a massive, yellow orb glowing bright at the top of the underground tower. Around this statue of chieftain A'vorna was a pool of clear, blue water. A'mians sat at the pool's edge, their backs turned towards it. Each one of them let their trunks slump down from the backs of their heads, lowered into the water so they could drink with ease. A'jura and A'mej each followed the ramps down to the middle where they could enjoy a drink and chat until their next ride would arrive. Sat onto the pool's edge like the others, A'jura dunked the trunk that hung from the back of her head into the water and sucked up the juice of life. A'mej remained standing. She nodded and looked around beneath the gaze of chieftain A'vorna's statue.

“It's very busy,” she said. “I think it might be because of us.”

“Nobody wants to miss out on the events of tomorrow.” said A'jura, as she let out an unnerving puff of smoke from her nosebones.

“The cult would not want to either?” A'mej said very carefully.

A'jura blinked a few times and stood up again. Her wet trunk dripped with the cleansed waters.

“They won't be any trouble if we stay amongst the crowd.” A'mej said.

“They will never be trouble ever again.” A'jura replied with the confidence that would easily soothe A'mej's mind. A drink finished and the two a'mians wandered up through I'laienora. Some automated stairs later and they arrived at the largest door of the station located on the bottom floor where two statues stood vigilantly beside the door. One of which was known as A'serovaya, the chieftain whom founded the capital city. The other was her partner in endeavours, A'cooras. Before

every statue were lines of over a hundred a'mians waiting for the door to open and to subsequently step onto the grand elevator to I'serovaya. When A'jura walked right through the middle of the queues with A'mej in front of her, she was greeted with A'mian trunks going to the left shoulders. Without a doubt she would go first. One of the a'mians positioned at the start of the queue spoke to A'jura with the bass tone of a genetical.

“A'jura,” he greeted. “I look forward to the great ceremony of tomorrow.” His pupils shrunk and his eyes widened brightly.

“It will make history. No doubt.” said A'jura, with the same welcoming spark in her eyes as the bass-toned a'mian. She then raised her voice to speak to the hundreds around her. The attention she was given she mostly imagined. The common a'mians did not look away from their acquaintances or their netclaws.

“I want to thank all of you for travelling to I'serovaya for the ceremony. There will be music, song, prayer, and many other impressive events. None of you shall be left unsated.”

The fifty or so whom did listen bowed their heads and puffed small amounts of smoke from their nosebones. A'mej activated her netclaw and quickly allowed herself control over the great door blocking passage to the capital city elevator. Control that the common A'mian definitely would not have. After just ten seconds the door was opened, and the large elevator stood ready. Although it had the same layout as the previous this massive pad was much closer to the underground city. It had benches installed for a town of a thousand, but A'jura could sit down on the first along with her partner in endeavours. A few hundred talonsteps would follow in their wake once A'mej had taken a seat beside her. No authority was there to manage the crowd as it came through the door, nor was it needed. The a'mians each stepped onto the elevator with care and patiently let the young ones and elders within the group take their time. Several moments later the elevator's gravity pad activated and began the journey further into A'mian's underground realm. One message in A'mian resounded through the tube before the descent began, spoken by a recorded voice:

“Never jump on any gravity pad, or risk death.”

During the immensely quick descent A'jura saw the a'mians on the elevator chatting casually.

Comfy benches, spread out in elaborate, artistic patterns and multi-colour lights to show the walls of the elevator shaft rushing by in a blur. She quietly waited for the end of the ride until a young one walked up to her. The tiny a'mian was at least five times smaller than A'jura. It could not be older than twelve. Its undeveloped nosebones sputtered harmless puffs of smoke in happiness and A'jura gave the child a stroke across its trunk.

“Stay with your guardians,” she said. “And never jump.”

The child blinked several times to show its understanding. It could not talk just yet for the hole

between the nosebones had not grown large enough. Two a'mians nearby watched the young one closely as it moved back to them. Guardians, as they were usually called.

“A'mehom showed off his drumming skills to his teacher last week,” A'mej said when the offspring reminded her of her own. “It is very likely that he will be part of the music someday.”

“Certainly one of the safest passions you can find.” A'jura said with a lack of enthusiasm. She stared forwards while the elevator went down and the topic of young ones devoured her good mood.

“Certainly,” A'mej repeated. “A'ketho never suggested that he would become a musician like him. It seems talent just carries over.”

“Sometimes it does.” A'jura said.

Interest in their conversation had been lost completely, and A'mej recognized it as she silenced herself. There was a roaring sound alike thunder shaking the transport tube, but no reason to be alarmed. Chunks of mountains falling upon the surface occurred multiple times each day. A'jura peeked at the sharp nails on her claws while those colossal rocks struck the crust of the planet far, far above in sight of great and terrifying A'ro. Halfway through the elevator shaft the earth around the elevator disappeared and the sopherast glass showed a perfect view of I'serovaya. Anyone on the cart could see I'akthola; the Palace of Rays in the middle of the capital's colossal cavern, along with all of its surrounding districts. The palace consisted of six towers, formed like slender, taller pyramids. Each of them were connected with giant walls of tenesteel to grant the palace its hexagon shape. Stripes of gold-coloured sopherast showed the lengthy windows in the walls and pyramids. Far in the back was the tallest pyramid with a massive orb at the top. The yellow flames of A'ro were kept inside and basked the palace with sacred, orange light. Within the walls of the hexagon was the great plaza with one sopherast floor at the centre, rising up from the abundance of black tenesteel. On the walls of the palace hung platforms of their own meant for the traditional orchestral accompaniment. The most important feature of the plaza was a hole in the cavern roof's blue rock, of relatively small size, exactly above the centre of the entire palace. It shone very intense orange light that came all the way from the surface and mixed in with the other lights of the city. From all sides the palace and the city were illuminated by sopherast lanterns on the streets and buildings. The lanterns did not bring about their own colour, but the chemical colours of festering algae growing within. The algae in A'mian's lakes liked to shine any colour they felt like using at any given time reaching both ends of the colour spectrum. From one end of the city to the other I'serovaya's cavern lit itself with this incredibly varied light source as tapestry on the blue stone caverns. The theatres, bathing domes, technology labs and educational compounds on the bottom floor of the cavern were products of the best architects. The tenesteel factories and facilities built into the walls were less impressive by design, but more so in size. The homes of a'mians, hanging down from the roof of the

cavern, looked the most humble and those living there had the best view of the city. A'jura mostly focused on the largest theatre on the I'serovaya floor just a short distance away from the palace. Significant masses of a'mians had already gathered on the streets of blue rock around the theatre's balustrade.

“It looks like we could be too late to see every part of this evening's program.” A'jura said.

She had stood up from her bench to stand on the edge of the elevator. She would be the first to step off.

“E'qonag may have more time to talk when he is done for the evening.” said A'mej.

“He does not need to supervise his own events,” A'jura stated. “Anyway. The A'roocemirtal novices reminded me to get an update on the other novices. The singers.”

A'mej blinked a few times. Once the elevator had reached the bottom floor of the gargantuan tunnel that I'serovaya belonged to she used her netclaw to open the station's door and allow the a'mians on the elevator to swarm the city.

“If you want to talk about the singers should I inform E'qonag that you wish to speak with him in his private chambers?” she asked in servile manner.

“Yes. I would like that.”

Outside they immediately found themselves on a crossroads linking every part of the city. A'jura's eyes went past the different pillars with netclaws beside the walkways. All forms of directions were available at the black networking pillars. Maps of A'mian's tunnel system, stuffed with A'mian cities and towns. Maps of A'mian's tunnel-to-surface transport with the railcarts and elevators. They had maps for the linerider tracks as well. A'jura could already see those tracks established against the tunnel walls as black tenesteel rails tied onto pole after pole like randomly twisted bundles of wires going on and on with loops and corkscrews sprinkled in wherever necessary. Some of the tracks dived down or up in spirals to change the direction of the lineriders. The vehicles were spheres with large flameless jets strapped on the back, stuck in between a duo of oversized, magnetic wheels. No matter how rollercoaster-like the wireroads were swirling about, the magnetic force of the wheels made driving as simple as firing up the jet. While A'jura and A'mej were strolling on the street those lineriders soared about eight feet above their heads though not them, nor any of the young a'mians there felt endangered by the seemingly fatal vehicles. The crowd had finally dispersed once only a few buildings were left to pass. Within these homes they could find many species and algae of A'mian to keep or grow, instruments, devices, water tanks or scriptures. Notably they were gifts, not products. Anyone could walk in and take whatever they desired. Nobody complained about stolen goods knowing that the pleasures was in the craft, not the

possession. A little further into the city architecture was rising to immense heights on all sides. Since time was close to the sunless midnight of the underground, a'mians had gathered out here to be entertained professionally and not just in the theatre of music and song. A'jura watched the various shrines of A'ro scattered in the district usually displaying one or two A'roocemirtal performing fire mastery alongside thought-provoking sessions about A'ro and A'mian history. A'jura had organized that last part herself and though the turnout was never that high for lecturing, she looked upon the shows with gladness as she passed. Some did want to listen, as long as there was something to do or discuss. The nearby tech stadium, the bathing houses, the music halls or network centres attracted guests simply because they were varied activities with no sense of competition between it all. Above the tech stadium were strong laser rays in many colours swaying in structured patterns. A'mej got slightly curious, turned on her netclaw, and tapped through a few holographic pages.

“They're having a splicing demonstration,” she said “Algae who make their own lightshows.”

“Sure.” A'jura replied, staring at enthusiastic young ones and their more solemn guardians walking beside them. She recalled lightshows as entertainment for the jolly and spry.

“I need to go there more often with A'mehom,” A'mej continued. “He liked it last time when they had the gravity robotics drawing portraits with flying water. It is an old trick, but the portraits had some fantastic details.”

A'jura silently deactivated her netclaw after reaching the final slope. Whatever A'mej just said went right past her. She looked ahead to the two slender pyramids curving inwards. They stood on each side of E'qonag's grand theatre at the end of this street. The broad heads of two a'mians were drawn on the surface with sopherast. The head at the left was E'qonag's and the head at the right was that of E'kahres; E'qonag's partner in endeavours. The front entrance of the theatre was wide open and rapidly pulled in and poured out guests of the theatre. By the time A'jura and A'mej entered the main hall half of the crowd had already gone home. A'mej instantly took a turn to the left to find E'kahres but A'jura stayed to listen. She could see audience and guides facing one another like soldiers in battle. In these theatres the audience did not sit and watch but rather brought their own skills to the table at every opportunity. As such, the whole hall already relished in song. The guides who worked at the theatre gave way for new melodies and voices to fill the symphony. The audience did so with pride, either by playing their personal instrument or putting one of the square-shaped sopherast microphones in the hole between their nosebones so that all could hear them. A'jura decided to watch. To see the talented a'mians at work. So many anonymous singers and musicians had joined the fray, yet brought perfect unison of sound. Three voices of childbearers and three voices of genebearers resonated through her earholes. They all stood next to each other at the audience rows

with smoke blowing from their nosebones and their body language conveying the words as gently as the lyrics. They kept repeating their chorus.

“E'nivei.  
A'rovana roj I'la.  
A'zimalet roj I'zei.  
A'shar an A'thohen  
E'sisa, E'rowinlen.”

Soft, extended notes were played by the a'mians on instruments, about fifteen in total. Most of them played a huge, black whistle. A heavy type of tenesteel flute with a laid back, dark echo. Some instead played the small green whistle with high, sweet notes made out of anrehar. Three took on the great horns of an I'melaj. They emulated the sound of the scaled lakegrinder's epic, triumphant wailing in five different chromatic scales. One last a'mian stroked at the rough hide of the small I'zegar creature to make the slow, fluent hum that went from note to note without pause. “A'jura,” said the calm voice of a genetical. “I'm glad you can still be amazed.”

A'jura widened her eyes, and shrunk her pupils. She was delighted to hear his voice. Her head turned to the very short, skinny A'mian who stood beside her in a yellow robe with his trunk on his left shoulder.

“E'qonag,” A'jura said in greeting. “I do like it when I see a'mians working together so closely. It's so much better than solo endeavours.”

Her nosebones peacefully sighed out smoke.

“I feel the same way.” he said with a humble look in his eyes. He looked up through the main hall at the many walkways to many more halls. The sound came not only from the main hall but also from the smallest corners of the theatre. It was like the echoing tenesteel walls were singing by themselves.

“You do what you do well,” said A'jura. “I am not here to join in, though. I want to speak in private.”

“So I was told.”

He took his small strides to arrive at the back of the main hall. A'jura followed him to a tenesteel door with a console beside it, placed low enough for tiny E'qonag to reach it. E'qonag tapped a code

using the twelve A'mian number symbols in an unknown order and bowed his head to A'jura. Both went onto a gravity pad elevator behind the door. E'qonag used his netclaw to let the pad ascend.

A'jura stepped into the private space of E'qonag. Such private spaces often housed a single room for conversation, bathing and rest. It had a few comfortable chairs of rugged hides belonging to some of the larger creatures in A'mian's lakes. The chairs varied in size to make sure E'qonag could sit as cosy as a taller A'mian. Not that length was only taken into account, as the chairs also had conveniences like openings for a'mians with bone spikes protruding from the body. A salon table of anrehar stood in the midst of the chamber purely to hold filled cups of water. Netclaw files were projected onto it that displayed the faces of particular a'mians. Holographic pictures hung from the walls of a'mians whom had likely been valuable to E'qonag at some point, some of which A'jura easily recognized as singers and others she recognized as fellow A'roocemirtal. The chairs faced a large sopherast window that viewed the street before the theatre. Behind that street A'jura could see some of the district and the distant west wall of the palace. E'qonag moved to his personal fountain and grabbed two cups with his claws. He filled each cup with clear water and handed the first over to A'jura. They both sat down on the chairs, facing each other. A'jura slid her trunk over her shoulder and into her cup.

“Has E'lanla returned yet from Borum?” she asked.

“She has not.” said E'qonag. “Last I heard from her, a month ago, she said that she needed more time to master the voice.”

A'jura blinked a few times.

“It's fine,” she said. “I am certain that E'lanla is capable. She can take as much time as she needs.”

“It has been many years,” said E'qonag while draining water from his cup. “Many could master the voice much faster.”

“I trust E'lanla with this task and she may continue to try her best,” said A'jura. “But regardless I desire masters of the voice sooner or later. Those cultists will not interrogate themselves. How many singers volunteered for the next ride to Borum?”

E'qonag rubbed the scales around his eyes.

“Six,” he answered. “So, quite a lot.”

“Perfect. I need them after I have unveiled the ashen prophet. There will be arguments and I do not want A'mian divided.”

“Do you actually think that the cultists of A'zi want to fight?” E'qonag asked with dramatized concern. “To convince us that we are in the wrong?”

“It is a possibility. When will you send the next singers?”

“Next month.”

A'jura turned on her netclaw to write it down. She blinked a few times, and looked pensive.

“I've read most of the scriptures in the palace archives multiple times,” she stated. “But this one is a first. I took it from the netclaw of the ashen prophet.”

A thread of yellow light went to E'qonag's netclaw. A'jura had shared a file.

“It seems as if A'zi, as a faith, was first mentioned in this file,” she said. “It is a whole new prayer. I could not find it in the palace archives.”

E'qonag stared towards A'jura before he lowered his gaze. He turned on his netclaw, and brought the prayer up in front of him. He spoke the words out loud.

“A'rones aj.

A'ronesj E'gali.

A'rovanzith roj E'lejunj.

A'rothoz lei E'novaragem.

E'khelera ena E'talera.

A'zi I'zorayon A'rothuo.”

“When A'ro makes its choice.

It never chooses fair.

Nobody will live in its rays.

Everyone will mourn after its wrath.

A star will live like its chosen.

Only equally gifted in ashes.”

E'qonag read the prayer several times over before he upped his head.

“I fail to understand it.” he said, after which A'jura promptly began to explain.

“The prayer talks about the a'mians who are not A'roocemirtal. It says A'ro does not look after them, but wants them destroyed by A'shar. And when they die, they think they see the essence of their life. Not warmth, or light. Just ashes.”

“This seems dire. Perhaps the cult has much bigger plans?”

E'qonag kept his eyes on the words. Despite the explanation he still seemed lost.

“It is likely a product of the rising cult,” said A'jura confidently. “Worshippers of A'zi. The ashes.



The extremes of the faith lived on, somewhere in the desolate caverns of A'mian.”

E'qonag took a deep breath.

“You are worried about this prayer.” he said.

“Because this is one half of the puzzle,” A'jura replied, as she returned to her netclaw. “There is another prayer. This is the prayer I saw in the archives that was most similar.”

E'qonag stared back to A'jura, listening as she read out the second prayer to him.

“A'rones aj.

A'ronesh E'dim.

A'rovana roj E'lejunsh.

A'shar A'rokathegar.

I'arana E'dim aj.

A'zi I'sareyon E'dim.

“When A'ro makes its choice.

It does not choose us.

Not all live from its flames.

The blast undoes its shaping.

And when we are deformed,

we are equally gifted in ashes.”

E'qonag closed his eyes in thought. He spoke softly once he had gathered himself.

“I've heard this one more often, at least.” he said.

“You probably have,” A'jura said. “But the prophet's prayer is so much more aggressive in nature.”

“What would they do to make us all equally gifted?” asked E'qonag. “Not everyone can withstand A'ro's rays and become A'roocemirtal. It is as simple as that.”

“The terrorist attacks of the past few years may have something to do with their plans.”

“Ridiculous.” E'qonag sighed.

A'jura remained silent in thought for a while. She slowly turned her head.

“I am an A'roocemirtal. I can do things you could never do, E'qonag,” she said. “What feeling does that give you?”

E'qonag quietly returned her gaze. His claws trembled. He shook violently. A'jura imagined his great rage for the ashen cult boil deep inside.

"It gives me no feelings at all," he said sternly. "Any A'mian should understand that others have their own strengths. Thinking that they cannot do what you do because you were born gifted makes them lazy."

The last word of his phrase was spoken with clear repugnance.

"A'mians become strong from actions," he continued. "Not genes. We refused all technology that would better our offspring for that very reason. I firmly believe the ashen cult should be stopped by you, A'jura, and if I were you I would chase the prophet's minions to every world."

A'jura blinked many times, and bowed her head. She was in full agreement.

"This cult has a feeling the Unoren have, not me or you," A'jura said. "They call it jealousy."

"Such emotions bring conflict and pain." E'qonag said.

"That is why I aim to take action now," A'jura said. "Tomorrow the ashen prophet surrenders to A'ro's rays. The ceremony's last event. I left it up to you to make sure that everything before it would be a great example, E'qonag. When the ceremony is finished the cult will understand that the order of our society is not to be disturbed by immoral terrorist attacks."

E'qonag stood up, his eyes wide and his pupils shrunk.

"I can assure you that I will bring every civilian I respect to the ceremony," he said. "A'mian cannot persist when the lazy begin to demand compensation for their weakness."

A'jura returned his words with a simple nod.

"I do not want anything more from you, E'qonag," she said. "I will come back here the day after the ceremony. My brother will come too. You need to gather the voices of reason under your control before I arrive so we can start tracking down the cultists. I do not want to start a rebellion of A'zi lunatics. So let us quench it before it has a chance."

"I understand." E'qonag said, as he bowed to her.

"We do not want to hurt anyone," A'jura stated firmly. "We do not want to bring fear or interrupt the lives of a'mians drastically. We just want safety. So we are going to track down every cultist until none remain and use the voice of reason accordingly. Tell that to the others as well."

E'qonag laid his trunk on his left shoulder.

"Of course," he said. "I look forward to tomorrow. If you can, see the guides and the audience in action. Do not wait until the very last moment. It will be awe-inspiring."

A'jura stood up and placed her cup on the table in front of her. She stepped towards the exit of E'qonag's chamber.

"I will want to see it," she said. "But I might be distracted."

“That is fine,” assured E'qonag. “The ceremony will be broadcasted anyway. You can watch it all back later.”

“Yes,” A'jura said as she got onto the elevator pad. “Until we speak again, E'qonag. And give E'kahres my regards.”

“I will. I'maneth A'mian.”

“Anything of note that he talked about?” A'mej asked.

“Soon the voices of reason are to arrive so we can start interrogation.” A'jura said.

She progressed to the palace one step at a time. A'mej obviously walked beside her and would do so until commanded.

“A good sign,” A'jura continued. “I also made clear why a strong performance tomorrow is crucial.”

“So you told him, then.” A'mej said quietly.

“I told him what we were going to do a few weeks ago,” A'jura murmured. “What I did not tell him back then were the possible consequences.”

“So far the cult has not made any moves,” A'mej said uncertainly. “And the prophet's been imprisoned for a month already. How big do you think the backlash is going to be?”

“Difficult to tell. We do not know the size of the cult. No statistics, no investigations to make an estimate but it is a risk we should take. The depths of A'mian could be full of cultists.”

“Agreed.” said A'mej with a few accompanying blinks.

The streets before them branching out into the district were packed, though enough space was left for a stroll. The lineriders were flashing by closely above, blowing winds into the faces of pedestrians, though public transport was no consideration for the path to the palace wasn't long enough for A'jura and A'mej to demand it. Burning away some I'riscurum was never a terrible idea either way, and A'jura could feel that excess of energy draining from her muscles. In between the entertainment district and the palace laid a few miles of garden swamps. The swamps had massive clumps of glowing algae forming on the rough, shallow rivers with some were higher than buildings, shining brighter than starlight. The rivers and the algae housed thousands of invertebrates and most of those creatures had a flashy glow that allowed them to see in any of A'mian's lightless tunnels. Out on the lakeside A'jura watched an I'melaj inspect its kind and trusted masters. The slender, overly lengthy beast lifted itself from the lake to observe the young before it, towering above the gardens to be seen by all. The face was shaped as a spike, alike massive digging claws at its end to make the I'melaj capable of creating new tunnels. The stripes, formed by countless small green eyes, went across its entire body from the tip of the spike to the fin on its tail. Its two fully-scaled front limbs had even bigger claws to dig with. If the I'melaj required a way to scan its

surroundings then the massive fins beyond its head would lift up and reflect sky-blue light against tunnel walls for miles. Just looking at the swampy gardens showed how friendly A'mian's underground wildlife was, and A'mej was least of all a stranger to it. The beasts she loved needed nothing other than water to live and it was everywhere to take freely. Even the gargantuan, serpentine beasts like the I'melaj had not an ounce of aggression hiding in their genes. They showed a sense for symbiosis and altruism like any a'mian would. A'jura could see the monster stroke the a'mian youngling across the nosebones with the flat side of its massive spike-head.

"I wish I walked past here more often," said A'mej. "Too few I'melaj here, these days."

A'jura shrugged. Her thoughts were already inside of the palace right in front of them. Its southern wall faced the entertainment district at the right angle. A'jura and A'mej of course would not find any palace guards or anyone else who was waiting at the walls because A'jura's home was a public space. The chieftain and her palace were idols, not symbols of power or wealth. No anger gathered at the walls of a ruler whom did not have to rule. Nobody desired to destroy that trophy of a throne dedicated to ideals rather than people. A hole in the wall carved in the shape of an arch would let anyone into the plaza that the palace itself surrounded. The plaza where the ceremony were to take place at the coming noon. A'jura led A'mej to a door in the southern wall with a rather ancient console, just a couple of steps away from the arch. She typed in a code to open it to reveal another elevator. Apparently little effort was required to enter the most memorable structure of A'mian, considering it was more difficult to get through the crowds at the theatre. When the gravity pad of the elevator reached the height of the long sopherast windows of the wall it stopped and re-opened. A'jura and A'mej hopped into the corridor that went through the southern wall, linking the pyramid of the head technician with the pyramid of the eldest advisor. The sound of the city had faded into the background and remained behind the sopherast yellow.

"I still have to talk to my brother," said A'jura. "I should be done soon."

A'mej looked through the empty corridor before her eyes focused on A'jura.

"I wonder," she said hesitantly. "Are you sure that your mother should not know?"

A'jura sighed loudly towards A'mej.

"It is hardly any of her concern," she said.

"She is the chieftain, A'jura," A'mej said. "You can show her all the evidence you have. The hacking attempts by the cult, their secret meetings, their prayers. You can even show her the prophet. How can she disagree with you?"

A'jura's eyes trailed up and down along A'mej's robes.

"Because she is a hunter of beasts," said A'jura. "And I am a hunter of people. Our tasks do not align."

She turned away from A'mej and walked towards the technician's pyramid. A'mej watched her partner in endeavours slip away for a while until she rebelliously roused her voice.

“We are also tasked to bring the people together.” she said too late for A'jura to answer her.

Within the high pyramid's four diagonal walls was just one pyramid that remained open to guests at all times. It contained no less than fifty console systems on separate levels. The room had seven sopherast pads in the centre, placed in the shape of a honeycomb and three pads had lifted upwards onto large, hydraulic cranes bringing inventors of the head technician to their personal desks and laboratories. The head technician was always on the machinery floor to tinker with antique robotics in his spare time. A'jura looked up, trying to spot her brother on one of the pads. She hopped onto one of the pads herself to get a better view of the insides of the pyramid. A pole rose from the pad with a console on it. She tapped the name of her brother to let the pad lead her to him. Only a few seconds later she was high up. The pad bent towards the wall where one of the desks had stood in front of a large set of doors. There was a chair behind the desk that faced her, and behind that chair was a lab for robotics testing. At the desk was a tall, gangly a'mian staring at netclaw files around him. He had about as many scales around his eyes as A'jura and an oddly broad trunk. Some brushy quills came from his skin, near the base of the trunk, which were known as the product of a rare gene.

“I may be slightly preoccupied,” he said distantly.

His eyes were on the floating files of his netclaw. A'jura peeked about to make sure no occupied desks were in hearing range.

“A'troz.” she said in greeting.

Right away the A'mian looked up from the files. He ascended from behind the desk and showed his back to A'jura. He lifted his trunk so that A'jura could circle around it with her own. A'jura did so in respect.

“My apologies,” said A'troz. “Focused, there.”

“No problem at all. Focus is good,” A'jura inhaled deeply, before continuing to speak. “I just want to know if you had not forgotten about tomorrow and the day after. Sometimes you get lost in projects and fo-”

“I am fully prepared,” A'troz said sternly as he turned back around to see A'jura. “My own endeavours are moving along swiftly. And alongside them I have achieved what you requested of me.”

He stared towards the netclaw wristband that A'jura wore and reached for it. A'jura took it off and handed it over.

“I won't have to be there, the day after,” he said. “I am going to upgrade your netclaw tonight.”

“Installing that which I asked for?”

“The auto-hack program,” he said, putting the netclaw wristband on his desk. “So first I need to take away a lot of security measures implemented on your device. Otherwise your netclaw initiates permanent shutdown to stop hacks.”

“Can you tell me how I use it?”

“It's extremely simple.”

He sat back down in his chair.

“That would be why I named it auto-hack,” he continued. “It has a regular interface and a download function. You can even take files from the data storages you are hacking without a direct link. Does not work from a substantial distance, though. Just remember to let the program run and do not interfere with it.”

“I sincerely hope that you never spread the word about your invention. Remember, this hacking tool is for me alone to use.”

He pinched his eyes and shook his head. A'jura's netclaw he snuck underneath his desk.

“We have already discussed the ethics, sibling. This system is for me and you,” he said. “We know how not to abuse it.”

A'jura blinked a few times and changed the subject.

“I agree,” she said with widened eyes and pupils shrunk. “Thank you, A'troz. You will be at the ceremony as well?”

A'troz shook his head again.

“My task never ends, luckily,” he said. “I will watch the ceremony on broadcast while I remain busy here.”

“When should I come get my netclaw?” she asked.

“Tomorrow morning, preferably. The usual hour.”

He pressed his nails to his desk several times and spawned a boatload of tools and holographic screens. They popped out from every corner of the desk. A'jura considered that her cue to leave him undisturbed. She went back to the pad that brought her to his desk, then lowered the pad back down to the ground level of the pyramid. She ran the sharp tips of her claw's nails along her wrist. A netclaw device had sat there long enough for the skin to grow sensitive. She watched the desks above and under her brother's while he performed his task once again. The other inventors had much more physical results to show for their efforts, though it was quite hard to discern the purpose of the mishmashes of A'mian metals on their desks. Stepping off the pad, A'jura went westwards through the arch. Her route returned her to the empty corridors within the walls of the palace. A'jura

went through the pyramid of the eldest advisor first, which was nothing like the technician's pyramid. In its single, small hallway on the ground level only two ramps lead elsewhere, curving upwards in a circle. The advisor's meeting room resided at the top decorated with his personal favourites. His gatherings of algae from the deepest lake of A'mian clung to his pyramid to illuminate every corner. A'jura felt some of the algae close to her feet due to the overgrowth, and patiently listened for the sounds of an advisor within his pyramid. Not a moment of his heavy breathing gave the most assuring indication. One arch further was a new corridor that went for the pyramid with the great flaming orb at its tip. An a'mian stood halfway into the corridor, looking out from the sopherast windows to the swamps outside. He was very tall, his digging claws twice the length of A'jura. His eyes were small, his nosebones curved vertically. To any A'mian he obtained an unwelcoming presence. A'jura hurried past him, only to be stopped by his greeting.

“A'jura.” he said.

A'jura halted herself. Her head turned to the A'mian slowly.

“Yes?” she said while crossing her arms.

“I heard that you went to the surface this morning,” said E'kinre. “How was it?”

He walked towards A'jura and presented his trunk to her. A'jura hesitantly returned the favour and circled her trunk around his. She made sure it would not last longer than desired.

“What does it matter?” she asked. “Where were you in the meantime?”

E'kinre lifted his head and turned away. He watched the swamp to the south.

“I have been here,” he said with a calm tone. “Wandering in thoughts. Listening to voices.”

A'jura sighed through her nosebones.

“The palace still lives in silence today, and I will cherish that,” he continued. “When I wake up there will be thousands of a'mians in song, right outside the window of my fountain room.”

“I doubt anything would ever take place here if it were up to you.” A'jura said.

She neurotically played with the front of her robe.

“I'd rather see our people doing their own thing,” he said. “Speaking of, A'mej came by. Does she have something to do within the palace these days?”

“She and I work together.” A'jura stated firmly.

“That I know. But she usually leaves your side before you return to the palace.”

“I am considering to form a partnership with her. We both hunt the cult, after all.”

“I would reconsider that. You do the best planning on your own.”

A'jura blew a frustrated plume of flame out from her nosebones.

“I cannot do what I do alone,” she said. “It would be too much. A'mej keeps track of everything we need to know.”

E'kinre raised his claw up to the window and gazed downwards to the swamplight. The I'melaj were playing with the young ones between the hills of algae. The massive creatures appeared as hungry predators, yet sweetly nudged the cheeks of those who believed in their soft hearts.

“Have you found the proof you needed for your theories?” he asked. “Is that it?”

“These are not theories, father.”

“A'zi has long been a faith living side by side with A'ro.”

“This world is changing because of the cult.”

“No.”

His dark voice grew ever solemn.

“A'mian is changing because of you.”

“Because you never leave the palace someone else has to take action against the terrorists.”

“I know A'mian for I have been elsewhere.”

“And I do not know what you mean when you say that.”

Without hesitation she left E'kinre to stare out the sopherast window. The father seemed wholly indifferent about it.

Flames of the yellow orb beamed down their wealth of light on this pyramid's chamber. Contrary to everything else seen in I'serovaya this chamber had stairs. It lacked technology in all of its countless forms. The stairs lead to balconies going higher and higher. The flames of the yellow orb were randomly caught by the balconies yet tenesteel could not be scorched. A'jura looked out over the sopherast circle carved into the floor, far beneath the orb and set her eyes on the three important statues forged from anrehar placed around the circle. On the first was the statue of the I'melaj, the great lakegrinder, raised high with its reflective fins spread. A'mej stood a few inches in front of it with her head raised to the light from above; a great simulacrum of her deity. Her claws were placed on the front of her neck, and a steady stream of harmless red flames flowed from the nosebones on her cheeks. On the second statue was another arch with a creature. From the arch's apex hung what seemed like two pillars of rock at first sight but upon closer inspection the arms of impenetrable slabs wielded massive animalistic claws. The arms linked to a round body of stone, brightly coloured by algae growing on the entire creature. The big boulder with arms had just one opening at its front that revealed a vague eye with five circles known to be larger than the palace itself. Words below the statue named the conscious boulder I'rothas or Algae Mother. The third statue within the circle was the great eyecatcher. Upon it stood a broad beast with eight legs at its side and the ninth at its back. Its spine and all of its legs were plated with pieces of the pale mountains, grown onto its limbs and every foot had seventeen toes attached at three-hundred and



sixty degrees, clamping onto the sides of the statue's pedestal. The behaviour of the beast was betrayed by its head for it had no eyes, nose or ears, therefore making it an emotionless and vile predator to any a'mian. The skull had three horns curving to the sky, underneath it a pair of jaws and teeth able to chew on rock. Disgusting, horrific and terrifying rows of teeth. Some kind of tongue, longer than the beast itself, swayed around before the beast with an opening at the tip to drain water from any body. They referred to this beast as the Ikemenan or Hunting For Water. In front of the beast's statue, only a step or two away from A'mej was another A'mian. She resembled A'jura in many ways. Slender and frail, she had more spherical eyes and possessed a body with a curved silhouette while the scales around her eyes and neck were partially ripped off. Her claws lacked several fingers. Her clothing was very lacklustre for her status; a sleeveless robe of scaled, brown leathers draped along her figure leaving some of her white, upper torso exposed. Her skin was stained by very small, light brown dots indicative of her age, majestic and scarred and like A'mej her head faced the yellow orb and her claws were on her neck. A'jura dared not approach the a'mians during prayer and instead moved along the edges of the chamber. She walked up the stairs to the lowest balcony. Once up there she took hold of the simple fence on the balcony and closed her eyes. Every minute, at least one or twice, flames of the A'ro mimic reached A'jura and caressed her skin. She inhaled the excessive amounts of I'riscurum in the flames, right through her nosebones. Her lungs sprung to life to convert it to pure energy. Body growing hot, set aflame every piece of her. A'jura's claws began twitching and her arms heated up. Canals in her nosebones widened and let out bursts of yellow flames together with A'jura's palms. An immense heat rose in her core but left her insides unharmed for she was made greatly resistant by forces of providence. After ten minutes of balancing out the flames within, A'jura opened her eyes and peered down from the balcony. A'mej was there by herself while her mother had left. She cautiously walked back to the bottom floor.

“Did she say anything?” A'jura asked, once she came near.

A'mej's meditative stance was forcibly disrupted upon speaking.

“She greeted me,” she said. “Nothing else.”

“I think I should talk to her again.”

“About the ceremony? She did say she was not coming.”

“I know, but I still want her to stand next to me and the prophet,” A'jura said, as she scratched at her nosebones. “She is the chieftain, and a'mians need a reason to look up to their chieftains. The ceremony may be all my doing, but I should not be the only one taking credit for it.”

Yet A'mej stood there next to her never pleading for any credit.

“A'vorna has done enough to earn the praise of our people,” said A'mej. “I do not think she needs

you and I to make true her promises as chieftain.”

“She grows old and she should keep hunting,” A'jura replied swiftly. “She is suffering out here in the palace. She has to keep going.”

A'mej blinked a few times.

“Of course,” she said. “But I doubt she wants to do it in your shadow.”

“I would not want her to do that either,” said A'jura. “I only want to rejuvenate her spirit. She was a hunter of I'kemenan. Fearless. They could truly look up to her again. Respect her.”

“They? The people? The people respect her, A'jura.”

A'jura looked directly into A'mej's eyes.

“They do. But they can only ask for her help when another I'kemenan enters the tunnels.”

“Because your mother knows better than anyone how to deal wi-.”

“The ashen cult is a greater threat,” interrupted A'jura. “I need my mother to realise what I am trying to do.”

“And what are you trying to do?”

A'jura gave A'mej a most astounded look. She raised her arms, spoke without hesitation.

“I am trying to protect the people from themselves. From their own history, their own vapid faith in A'zi. Not from mere beasts.”

Though A'mej knew it all she only had to hear it again to bow her head in compliance.

“The faith of A'zi is a problem, yes.”

“I think we have a ton of work to do after the ceremony,” A'jura said. “But at least we have the prophet captured.”

“I will be there with you,” said A'mej. “We are partners in endeavours.”

“We should make that official.”

A'mej blinked several times.

“When?”

“Tomorrow.”

With the time decided A'mej blinked elated yet unflattering. A'jura saw her glee as strange, unavoidable after everything they had done. Rather than congratulatory she instead imagined fetters on A'mej's wrists invisibly closing. She shook her head, barely understanding her own vision.

“You will speak to your mother now?” A'mej asked.

“Yes.”

A'jura waved a claw in her direction and left. She walked into the chieftain's pyramid by herself while considering the doubt that washed over her. Only one wall away from A'ro's pyramid. The A'mian with the most recognition out of all lived in this very hall, yet its welcome was

unimpressive. It had carpets all around made from soft algae and lanterns on the walls glowing in every possible colour, and on the other side of the room the corridor to the archives pyramid began. A'jura turned her eyes to some regular stairs at her left. She went up to get to the hall that represented the chieftain's position much better. At the top of those stairs she could look upon the extremely tall, tenesteel pillars rising to the top of the pyramid. On every inch of those pillars were A'mian words, telling the tales of chieftains from the last seventy centuries. The walls of the pyramid in this chamber specifically consisted of transparent sopherast through which A'jura could see the capital city in all of its glory no matter where she looked. Right through the yellow hue the rainbows of algae brightened the face of herself and her mother. Exactly in the middle of this chamber was a circle raised higher than the floor with masses of slithering yellow lines running outwards from the circle and unending until they approached the walls. Along the circle's edges paced chieftain A'vorna. She could hear A'jura walking towards her thanks to the magical silence of the palace.

“Mother.” said A'jura. She turned and presented her trunk.

In response, A'vorna circled trunks with A'jura.

“Here I am,” she said calmly. “You seem to want to talk.”

A'jura turned back around to look at her mother.

“I take it that you have some time?” she asked.

“Always.” A'vorna said with a nod.

“I think I want to sit down.”

A'vorna narrowed her eyes and stepped into the circle to sit. A'jura faced A'vorna, crossing her legs after sitting down alongside her. She took a deep breath before speaking.

“What did they tell you when you became chieftain?” she asked.

The chieftain puffed fire from her nosebones.

“I cannot remember. It was many years after the platheum shield went online, after chieftain A'lilian stepped down. Her departure was very sudden so there was little time to prepare. Your father thought I would be the right choice. Advisor E'racel was there too and he vouched for me.”

A'jura grunted loudly.

“If I had not slain the I'kemenan,” A'vorna said. “Then it would not have been possible to install the platheum shield to begin with. So, given that I enabled three centuries of peace it seemed like a natural fit to appoint me.”

“What did they tell you?” A'jura asked. “I know how it went, but what did they tell you to do as chieftain?”

A'vorna casually swiped some dust off of A'jura's leathers.

“They told me I had the same task as before,” she said. “Every chieftain retains the task they always had. Those are their skills and they should continue to use them.”

“Your task was to keep A'mian safe. To finish the platheum shield and stop the war.”

A'vorna squinted. It seemed impolite, unwelcoming to cover one's best mode of expression only halfway.

“No, A'jura. Not at all.”

“But you are A'roocemirtal like me? Our planet meant something to you. You believed you could protect it.”

“No, that is not true.”

A'jura raised her brows in confusion.

“Why not?” She stared at the scales chipped away from her mother's neck.

“All a'mians are the same, A'jura,” she said. “They do what they are good at. It does not matter if there is a greater purpose to their actions. The head technician and his partner invented the platheum shield because they loved that technology and they wanted to see it on a scale that no other planet could match. The A'roocemirtal went to the surface to make the generators because they were skilled technicians already. They liked crafting complicated contraptions. I was there by accident, but at the right time. I was a lone hunter. I culled the population of I'kemenan on the surface. The war was none of my concern. We all just happened to put our heads together, set up the planetary shield and stop the Unoren from continuing the war.”

A'jura frowned slightly and raised her voice.

“If the Unoren had taken over A'mian you would have been killed sooner or later,” she said. “It should have been your concern no matter what part you played.”

“There were tons of a'mians who wanted to fight to the death and got the chance. Combat is exhilarating for them. It was their thing. Their choice. They did not do it to protect me or others. They just do, like all of us.”

A'jura sighed with her frown holding on. A'vorna began to look worried.

“Is there something wrong?” she asked. “I may no longer be your guardian but I am still here for questions.”

“I feel somewhat misunderstood,” A'jura said as she rose from her spot. “I wanted to ask you again if you could stand next to me at the end of the ceremony.”

“It is your ceremony. It is what you do,” A'vorna said with a friendly face. “Not what I do, and that is how it should be.”

The chamber went silent for a minute. A'jura's frown slowly went away replaced by some shakiness of her fingers.

“I aim higher,” she said. “I do it for us all.”

“Then be very careful what you do for others, A'jura,” the old A'mian said. “You might do something that they did not ask for.”

“Few a'mians know what truly needs to be done. Few are in a position like mine.”

A'vorna stood up, her expression still positive.

“And that is fine,” she said. “A'mian thrives. It has been safe for many years now and we have even made a name for ourselves amongst the outside worlds.”

“So what about the ashen cult rapidly growing in our midst?”

“It is nothing to worry about. They too are our people.”

“And our people made great mistakes in the past.” A'jura said curtly.

She walked towards the stairs with every step made tense. A'vorna watched quietly without a reason to stop her. Without a way to reasonably dispute A'jura's claim. She headed back in the direction of A'ro's pyramid. Smoke came from her nosebones, pupils twitched slightly. She walked over to the three statues under the yellow, flaming orb. She immediately pressed against her neckscales with her claws and closed her eyes for a prayer. The presence of the orb's fire steadied her breathing. The I'riscurum it radiated fuelled her for another hour. She muttered a song to herself that broke doubt with every sentence passing.

“A'ropreimaletshikbjun

E'tothonujer,

E'bijemajvina,

E'mirtal.

A'rozarujmirtaljehnan

E'tovosaakher mosa.

I'pj E'tolsheja sodem

emjhefas.”

“A'ro, come make rivers deep

bright on the bottom,

crossing the streams,

alight.

A'ro, be my blazing shield

against darker depths.  
This broken light is soon  
reborn.”

Her claws moved back to her sides. She lifted her head to the yellow orb and blinked consistently in respect. When she looked away she saw a familiar A'mian standing by the wall of the pyramid. E'kinre watched the yellow orb.

“At least thirty A'roocemirtal here at the palace, today,” said E'kinre. “They all look at the simulacrum like you do.”

A'jura squinted. She thought she had a moment for herself.

“It's the part of A'ro that is closest,” she said. “It could use some appreciation.”

“I have no doubt,” he said, shrugging. “I am only thinking. Thirty A'roocemirtal were here, and two others. Me, and E'racel.”

“You think a lot without much result.” said A'jura.

“Thinking is an art,” said E'kinre, eyes giving away his sly demeanour. “It keeps me well away from the lazing curse.”

His words sparked the slivers of empathy within her.

“Luckily.” she muttered.

A'jura scratched at the scales of her trunk within reach of her claws.

“Where is E'racel?” she asked.

“He arrived half an hour ago from treatment. They upgraded his pump to counter frequent exhaustion.”

“I want to speak to him.” A'jura said.

She walked to the pyramid's southern entrance. E'kinre nonetheless brought forth a question.

“This ceremony is different than the others, isn't it?” he asked.

A'jura widened her eyes but did not stop. Instead she briefly quirked her head to E'kinre.

“It will be much greater than the ones who came before it.”

Arriving at the advisor's pyramid A'jura once again wanted to calm herself before heading in. It would be her last talk for the day. Last piece of her task. Before entering E'racel's abode she leaned against the walls overgrown with algae. Her claw touched her forehead, she pinched one of her nosebones. Just a few deep breaths, a few flames pouring out. Words of her mother and father

had disturbed her thoughts but could not sway them. She stared up the ramp to the meeting room. The soft, purple glow of the lantern next to her caught her glance. It rapidly flickered. As far as A'jura knew, the algae inside did not have the sentience to do that, but whom was she to question the choices of evolution. She gave the lantern a bop that seemed to fix it instantly. Multiple other lanterns began to flicker in the same manner. A'jura watched them for a minute with curiosity. As time went on they slowly began to glow as normal. At the very least her short distraction had brought back her focus. She went up to the ramp to check if E'racel was already there and sure enough, the elder sat on the largest, most comfy chair of his botanic pyramid. He was obese to nauseating degree, though excusably so considering weightiness was a common development amongst a'mians centuries past their prime. A'jura recognized heavy bodies as signs of wisdom and could only look upon E'racel with the reverence for a seer. His skin nearly lacked the pale colour of other a'mians. He had large brown dots dominating most of his body, his nosebones had begun to fail about fifty years ago so they gave him a device around his cheeks to help with filtering I'riscurum. A'jura was given mercy for she fortunately could not see E'racel's wobbling flesh while he wore his favorite, flamboyant robe. He barely had the ability to speak so A'jura sat down at the council table, as close to him as she possibly could.

“E'racel.” she said, as she laid her trunk on her left shoulder.

The burdened A'mian opened his mechanical eyes to gaze upon his favoured student.

“Oh, A'jura.”

He rasped out every sound.

“I thought you would be busy with your ceremony.” he said.

“I prepared well enough,” A'jura stated. “I came to ask something about my mother.”

He bowed his head politely.

“Go on.”

“She was picked by you and a few others, yes?”

“Hmhm.”

A'jura took a deep breath to keep her composure.

“Why was she picked?”

E'racel put his head against his chair's backrest. He stared at the algae on the walls.

“Because the chieftain before her left,” he said calmly. “She ran away in search of new blue caverns to seek freedom and find her place in the universe. We needed a chieftain to replace her whom was praised for great deeds of her own. Someone whom represents ambition, and who better than the a'mian that incinerated giant beasts all on her own?”

“She is an idol.” A'jura said.

“Yes, she is. An idol who tells us that hard work pays off.”

“While she has no beasts left to hunt.”

E'racel sighed quietly.

“Because she dealt with most of them before she became the chieftain,” he said. “Would you support me once I have dealt with the ashen cult? Even though I would not need to deal with it after I accomplished my goal? Your mother has done everything she needed to. Her task is finished.”

A'jura blinked and comprehended.

“Thank you,” Her eyes wandered away from E'racel before she stood up. “I know how much you like E'qonag's theatre. Enjoy their performance. The full ceremony will be broadcasted.”

“I will try to enjoy it.” he answered.

“I'm glad.”

Slowly A'jura stood up and walked towards the meeting room's exit.

“You need to promise me something, A'jura.” E'racel suddenly said.

“Alright.”

She turned back towards him.

“Do not use the voice of reason.” he said sternly.

“It is very useful.”

“It is very dangerous.”

“Then I will be careful with it.”

E'racel groaned quietly as A'jura headed down the stairs and towards the nearest corridor. She could not promise it to him. But she would heed the warning. Maybe.

“Finally...” muttered A'jura to herself.

She went down with one of the pad elevators in the palace walls. The pad was ordered to go to its lowest level. There it connected to several thin hallways dug out beneath the palace's plaza. The underground floor of the palace also connected to living spaces for regular palace visitors. A'jura's room was only a few steps into the southeast hallway, to the right. She walked up in front of its door, tapped a code into the console next to it and went inside. She saw her shelves with sopherast data disks along with piles of ancient text written on I'melaj leather. Her personal fountain was beside it. Water streamed out of its stone I'rothas eye. Soft algae carpets were spread out on the floor and one algae-powered lantern hung from the low roof. Her clothing was stacked up nicely on a table. She had some of it under the table as well. It was cleaned in a water tank where a specific type of scaled, four-legged amphibian ate the filth that flaked off the clothing. To get some sleep A'jura walked to her black, leather chair. Everywhere on A'mian temperature was high. She took off her robe in its entirety, sat nude, then bent over backwards to lie down in her seat. Once comfortable



she moved her trunk into the fountain close by. With its end submerged she could drink during her sleep. Only three hours of rest. Her task still remained.

## *Day 2*

Blinking and shivering. Right as rain instantly. The moment to regain consciousness was hilariously fleeting. Upon rising she fell on her knees to get under her table. The amphibian cleaning her clothes hung onto its munch toy and let go at the first pull from its mistress, and she put the leather robe onto one of her shelves to let it dry. She walked to her fountain and slanted across the edge to let the water serve as her mirror. She took up a scraper of sharp stones, then used it to remove the uneven ridges on her trunk and nosebones as well as dirt between her claws and talons. She eventually ran it across her pale white skin, rough enough to withstand a bit of scraping. With the slowly growing, brown spots shaved off, all colour upon her person rested in the black scales around her eyes, neck and waist. A'jura looked over to her shelves and decided to spend some time with a cup of water and a scroll. A sopherast selection screen was on the shelf, so all A'jura had to remember was a number. She was presented the scripture and the shelf popped the parchment out into her claws. Once she was down on her chair, she recalled the story.

“I hereby write of chieftain A'mokenan and his rise to the palace. A tale of strength and courage brought about during the seventh war with the Unoren. One foretold for many ages. From a time so overflown with death and destruction, endless shadows. In such hardships we believed the hatred would never die, replenished at every field of battle. A'zi and A'ro were enemies at every hour. A'ro called out to the surface of A'mian, but it could not reach us. The clouds of our world were grey starships of Unorena. An eclipse without a moon.

None shall forget the halls as they were in darkness. The circle of the chieftain's chamber painted in vilthar. That hellish substance would drown every flame. Our great palace, I'akthola, stood on its own within the great tunnel of A'mian, bordering the great lake A'mirkotio. We had cities in every labyrinth, but there was no city around the ancient palace. That city was a burning pile of ashes. I'riscurum set ablaze with the fires of hatred. The Unoren's one moment of glorious victory was upon them. Their warlord, Mazath, reached the palace and took it for his own. But as always, alike the six wars that came before us, none would hold on to the prized palace for long.

A'mokenan, to become the fifteenth chieftain of A'mian, was the only A'mian alive in the palace. His father, A'crezim, the fourteenth chieftain of A'mian, had perished in the first grand scale attack of the Unoren. After he was slain on the highest peak of A'mian his body adorned the balconies of the pyramid of A'ro's son, like a trophy from a glorious hunt. But A'mokenan, the Unknown Force, did honour to his name. He fought to retain his home, which had brought him memories of joy all throughout his life. From no particular place he savoured a force deep within his heart. He persevered against the Unoren monstrosities.

With his cunning and his grace he snuck past Mazath's most elite forces and crawled into the chieftain's chamber. He saw Mazath and Mazath's notorious invention mounted onto the Unoren's shoulders. The mighty viltharese cannon! Its freezing, shiny, black sludge sprayed all over the pillars of the chieftains and the circle of A'ro. The vandalism brought A'mokenan to righteous fury. In his rage he scorched the pillars until the vilthar exploded violently. The sludge covered all of his skin, cooling him down to become a block of ice. It absorbed all heat within its reach, but in this ice he was safe from the inferno he had unleashed in the chamber. As Mazath looked upon his enemy within ice of his own creation his body turned to ash and his screams echoed from the palace to the great lake. On the brink of death A'mokenan freed himself from the prison. With the first viltharese cannon destroyed the palace was his to reclaim.

As the screams of the warlord wandered the tunnels of A'mian, the A'roocemirtal lost their fear for Mazath and his Unoren. Viltharese guns were still a threat, but they were no longer the weapon to end all strife. A'mian freed itself in a single week only by example of A'mokenan's fury and courage. Strength that had not been seen for hundreds of years suddenly emerged from every cavern. I'melaj rose from the lakes and drowned Unoren in toxic waters. I'rothas woke from their sleep and crushed the Unoren armies with wild swipes. I'kemenan lost their minds and tore every starship from the sky with their tongues.

A'mokenan proved what we knew from the moment when our first chieftain was chosen. A chieftain shall lead by example and the people will follow with their spirits lifted, their ambition renewed.”

“A'jura?” said A'mej, speaking from the other side of the door.

“You can come in.”

A'mej tapped the code to open the door. She stepped inside once it was open. Sat down on a leather stool by the table. She did not concern herself with A'jura's lack of clothing.

“The ashen prophet and I spoke for most of the night.” A'mej said.

“You should not listen to him. Why did you go to him?”

A'jura stood up as she put the scroll back into its designated shelf. She grabbed her dried robe and pulled it on.

“I did not want to be convinced of anything,” said A'mej. “I only made some attempts to understand him.”

“We are better off playing deaf around him,” A'jura replied coldly. “There is no excuse for what he has done.”

“I know, but I am here to sometimes question you, like you asked me to. So I once again have a question.”

“Alright.”

A'jura's attitude was particularly absolute. A'mej grunted, scratching at her neckscales with doubts on her mind.

“I saw his condition,” she said. “His confinement torments him. His body continues to heat up. A'senai already brought in a medic yesterday because the prophet regularly ceases to breathe in new I'riscurum.”

“I guess you question my decision to keep him caged for this long,” A'jura said. “I did not want to. And I had hoped that the ceremony could be set up much faster.”

A'mej blinked a few times.

“This definitely wouldn't be the way to go about with him,” she said. “I was not sure about surrendering him to A'ro, but seeing how this is one of the other solutions...”

“It is a disrespectful solution, yes. Believe me, I will regret it,” A'jura loudly blew smoke through her nosebones. “Therefore we should probably get him out now instead of wasting time with banter.”

She fiddled with the small bones that closed the front of her robe. For this day each piece of bone had to shut her robe and rest in perfect vertical formation.

“As you wish.” A'mej said obediently.

The morning of A'mian was no different than its noon or evening. Another hour in the dark.

Through the sopherast windows of the palace they could see I'serovaya, as active as it was before. This time, the centre of attention laid at the palace walls. Crowds gathered right in front of the arches to the plaza readying themselves for the ceremony taking place many hours later. They had already brought out their instruments and voices. The songs they sang brought more a'mians' attention to the plaza. A'jura and A'mej walked towards the linerider station located against one of the palace walls. It was only one elevator up, one elevator down and two corridors away hidden behind the head technician's pyramid. They could see the large linerider rails descending to the station, then rising back up to reunite with their tangled twins. The station itself had a small row of waiting seats and two separate docks that the spherical lineriders could be trapped into. Waiting for the vehicles seemed like no issue. A'jura pressed onto a 'drop' button, which opened the roof of the station. An entire linerider fell down from the attic, straight onto the rails. The consequential slam was loud but spared the eardrums. The linerider opened up its sphere and linked a solid lightbridge to the station dock. The piece of bright light had spawned out of nothing, yet carried the weight of the linerider passengers as they climbed into the sphere. A'jura and A'mej went across it, one by one, and hopped into two out of the five seats in the sphere. It closed by itself and the lightbridge vanished. The jet strapped to the sphere warmed up. A'jura tapped a touchscreen to choose destination. Immediately the jet picked up speed and shot both a'mians across the rails. Within less than a minute the colossal city of I'serovaya was completely out of sight. Districts and zones went by in a flash, the linerider raced along the tunnel walls only to reach a massive hole located close by A'mirkotio, placed within a separate wall of stone. Within there a giant cylinder had linerider rails spiralling vertically along its walls. The depth of the cylinder definitely emphasized how many labyrinths A'mian's underground possessed. Several hundred lineriders spiralled in the cylinder at any given time yet perfectly avoided each other with the power of algorithms. Eventually, the sphere that A'jura and A'mej were in dived into one of many diagonal passages in the cylinder walls. The gravity was deadly, but the sphere suppressed so much of it that no passenger could feel it. A'jura and A'mej shot past a few A'mian villages in smaller caverns for at least a thousand miles. The trip lasted no more than forty minutes regardless. The linerider's wheels forcefully stopped spinning as it approached a colossal cave. Said cave had nothing but a massive lake on the bottom glowing with all colours of algae light. Although the cave could possibly fit a hundred cities from its roof hung just a small, single one. Right beside the city hung a humungous I'rothas with its two limbs grasping onto the biggest stalactites. The creature itself was already larger than the city. It was peacefully peeking at the a'mians of the city next to it, using its hypnotizing, giant eye. The cave was a dead end for public transport. The linerider rails circled the entire cave before going back the way they came. The rails lifted upwards when they got near the city. They slowly ordered

A'jura and A'mej's linerider to a halt as the two closed in on their destination. As it went towards the linerider station at far too high speed to feel comfortable with, A'jura and A'mej stared forwards awaiting their 'demise'. A hook popped out of this station's attic, right above its docks. It penetrated a small circle on top of the linerider's sphere. The sphere flew upwards while attached to the hook, lifting off the rails. Clamps surrounded the wheels when the linerider bashed into the station's attic, stopping all of its movement. The clamps then dragged the linerider away to the other dock of the station; the starting dock. Halfway there the sphere opened up, the machinery stopped and a sharp light bridge came down to let out the passengers. A'jura and A'mej felt totally alright once on solid ground. The linerider, once they had left it, disappeared into the attic to await new visitors. The relatively uneventful city of I'agrez had over thirty different streets, all hung from the roof using anrehar chains and supports. The two a'mians of I'serovaya blended subtly with the countryside folk and their less outrageous fashion choices, now on their way to a secret location among the farmhouses. A'mej peered down one of the fences of the streets to watch the single I'rothas hanging nearby receiving a clean-up of its eyeball, then quickly followed the much swifter A'jura. They went to the upper streets of the city, passing most botanical gardens it had to offer and knocked on a seemingly arbitrary door. A childbearer's voice rose from behind it.

"I am quite busy right now." she said.

A'jura let out a puff of fire, loudly.

"We're here, A'senai."

"Oh, A'jura. Little early, aren't you?" said A'senai as she opened the door. Contrary to a'mians like A'jura she wore a black, belted vest and trousers. She had no scales around her eyes or neck, nor at her claws and toes. Few a'mians had such a pale countenance.

"A'mej said you had to call a medic yesterday."

A'jura commented while walking into the house. It had two floors with the first normally possessing attributes of a normal living room. A few systems were in place on this floor, such as some sensors to check movement in case anyone would dare escape the second floor. A'senai had a bunch of floating touchscreens moving all around her hips and linked to her netclaw. She pulled one of them up to eyeheight and showed it to A'jura.

"The prophet began spouting dirty words," said A'senai. "He kept bonking his head against the walls of his cell until he passed out. When the medic woke him up he seemed fine."

"Did the medic ask any questions about the prophet's imprisonment?"

"He was focused on his task of healing, A'jura."

"Good."

A'jura peered at the touchscreen to see the prophet in his cell, spied on by the camera installed.

“I will speak with him.”

She headed upstairs, alone, to where the secret cell had been placed. The cell was not as brutally designed as might be expected, considering it had everything that an a'mian would need to live behind bars. A fountain to drink from. A chair to sit on. Plenty of I'riscurum to respire. Yet the a'mian on the cage's chair was anything but healthy despite these efforts of comfort. His face sallow, his cheekbones shivering. The pale skin of the prophet had hints of red that told all of the heat slowly building and scorching his insides. Scarred fingers, twitching. Caressing the chair like a precious young one he slowly developed a deadly fever while the energy within him sought to be spent. A'jura saw the grim outlook in his blank eyes bared, the new pustules of fat protruding from his body, his trunk wrinkled by hours of sucking up water to try and satisfy needs unsatiable. A'jura's stare softened. She never did intend to inflict the lazing curses upon him.

“In a few hours this will be over,” she said as she looked into the prophet's eyes. “You shall be in A'ro's embrace. Your curses shall be cleansed.”

The ashen prophet squinted, speaking with a hoarse, grinding voice.

“I just want to leave.” he said.

A'jura looked into his eyes again.

“You can leave soon, prophet,” she said. “When the time comes you will feel healed. Equal. You won't have to take action to be equal.”

The prophet stared at A'jura.

“We all will be eventually,” A'jura said, taunting him. “You understand?”

The prophet raised his scaled brows.

“You read prayers.”

“I do.”

She opened the cell and walked over to the prophet's chair. She sat down on a stool, facing him as if they were on good terms.

“What does your cult plan to do now, prophet?” she asked. “Where is their base of operations?”

“I am not a part of that cult,” he said. “And I am not a prophet either.”

A'jura puffed smoke from her cheekbones. She would not answer to the excuses of a desperate zealot.

“Are you going to tell me that all they whom shouted your name were pretending that you were the prophet?”

“We all deserve at least one day in the light,” he replied. “How can you not believe in that?”

“Nobody is privileged to live a day in the light,” A'jura replied. “We are born, and what we make of our life entirely depends on what we do.”

The prophet looked up at A'jura. His pupils were twinkling, white stars in a dead, black gaze.

“This is not your day in the light.” he said.

“You do not get to judge,” she said. “By the end I will be known to the cult. They will come for me, I will capture them and A'mian can say farewell to terrorism.”

“At the cost of your sanity.” said the prophet.

“Sometimes sacrifices have to be made. That is the great lesson of A'shar.”

The prophet sighed loudly, blowing smoke from his nosebones.

“I grow weary.” he said quietly.

A'jura stood up and walked out of the cell.

“Sacrifice. A'shar is a part of us, just like A'zi. Death.” she said.

She was about to head downstairs until A'mej came up. A'mej walked up to the bars and spoke to the prophet. Her words were less calm and controlled than A'jura's.

“How are we going to protect ourselves from A'shar, prophet?” she asked. “How can you do so, without us A'roocemirtal to keep you safe?”

The prophet rose his voice more confidently, sensing whom of the two free a'mians was more susceptible.

“What use is your sacrifice when we had the technology to stop A'shar for many years?”

A'jura held onto A'mej's arm and tried to bring her back down the stairs.

“Come.”

A'mej looked back, blinking a few times. She went along after granting the prophet a defiant glare.

On the ground floor A'senai stood waiting with several chains rolled up around her claws. She watched A'jura and A'mej as they returned.

“Shall I get him to the lineriders?” she asked.

“Muzzle him first.”

The three a'mians dragged a large block of anrehar across the streets. Usually cages like these were meant for wounded creatures in need of transport, but this cage had a prophet inside, obscured by the leather cloak that hung across the bars. The cage with wheels slid onwards pulled by chains and the linerider station of I'agrez soon came into view. On their way not a single a'mian would intrude upon their business, and once they got inside of the empty station A'jura called one of the lineriders to come down from its attic. Then A'mej and A'senai pushed the prophet's cage into the linerider sphere with the lightbridge as the ramp. The trio got into the sphere after the cage had been placed between the chairs. A'senai shut the linerider, fired up the jet and took command of its speed. A'jura looked at A'mej. One cold gaze reached out to the other. Uncertain of the look that



A'jura gave her A'mej turned in her chair to speak to the prophet behind her.

“You can watch the rest of the ceremony if you want.” she said.

One piece of the leather cloak she nudged aside to see the prophet. The prophet did not react, covered by the shadows that the cage casted over him.

“I think you do him a favor by not reminding him of what is to come.” A'jura said.

A'mej slowly turned away from him. A'senai looked at A'jura while she launched the linerider further through the tunnels.

“He is a prophet,” she said. “So what exactly can he predict?”

“Nothing,” A'jura stated. “He only made his promise.”

“That everyone will have equal value?” A'senai wondered aloud.

“Something of the sorts. I am not entirely familiar with the cult's preaching.”

“Neither am I.” A'senai mused.

“They have killed several A'roocemirtal now,” A'jura said. “The actions speak for themselves.”

“Who would have thought the A'zi could be so violent.”

The prophet responded with growls.

“You are the terror on this world, A'jura.” he said.

Instantly A'mej went for the defence.

“She aims to remove the terrorists. Your followers of A'zi. They have razed towns in the depths, prophet. Violence from our own kin. That cannot be excused.”

“A'zi would never bring fear!” the prophet yelled out with the last of his vigour. “A'zi is the ashes, ashes is our flames and us! A'zi brings peace to our dead.”

And at that moment even A'mej could not comprehend. She growled back at him and shook her head. Like A'jura she was now focused on the ride, looking for the lines up ahead and the hole into the great cylinder spiral. Time went by quickly, even in silence as A'jura rehearsed every part of the coming ceremony in her head. Multiple snaps of the rails went up all the way, swapping tracks here and there to get onto the I'serovaya line. A'mej turned to the prophet quite often but with hesitation decided not to speak with him.

“Where do we drop him off?” A'senai asked.

“Underneath the plaza's centre,” A'jura said. “A'mej can push him onto the stage at the right moment.”

A'senai blinked a few times.

“I will watch the ceremony when I get the chance.” she said.

I'serovaya came into view quickly. The most visited part of the capital today was the palace. Much of the city had gone empty for the grand event just so the palace could be surrounded at its walls by

a crowd of thousands upon thousands setting up camp until the inevitable hour had arrived. The sound of instruments and song was everywhere, overruled by more of that same sound until it was a beautiful noise. The linerider station at the palace walls was very crowded, so the linerider of the three a'mians and the prophet had to circle the rails around the capital twice before it could dock with a loud bang. A'jura could witness the fruits of her labour. A glorious gathering of all a'mians with an interest for unity against the fear. After a severe docking at the station A'jura, A'mej and A'senai each opened the sphere to step on the lightbridge first. A'senai and A'mej lifted the cage and began to drag it through the station while A'jura lead them and the cage out through the masses and into the nearest elevator. She ordered the elevator to go down to the tunnels underneath the plaza, only one level underneath the slab-riddled floor of the palace where barely a single a'mian could be found. The hallways beneath the palace were as empty as ever, recognized as the private spaces of the respected palace inhabitants, however this meant everything but silence. The ground above was roaring louder than launching starships; the roar of thousands in an all time high. Going through the hallway directly northwest revealed the chamber beneath the plaza's centre stage. Its making was a tribute to accomplishments of ages past with the first iterations of many different classes of medicine, devices and scriptures. They had been preserved on tenesteel pedestals scattered along the walls. This chamber had a very similar circle to the one of the chieftain's chamber. Yellow colours and crackling rays of sunlight painted everywhere across the black metal. To top it off they bore a tiny hole in the roof too to bring down the shine of A'ro from the hole in the earth located directly above the palace plaza. A'mej and A'senai dropped the cage's chains. A'senai left the chamber about two seconds after.

“I will see you when the hunt is on.” she said while moving back through the tunnels.

A'jura's attention went to the prophet. She peeked inside the cage appearing surprisingly compassionate towards her enemy.

“No injuries?” she asked.

A'mej seemed delighted by A'jura's concern.

“Does my pride count?” the prophet asked.

A melancholy voice jesting in the face of fear. From one of the hallways came the short a'mian by the name of E'qonag; the ceremony master. He approached A'jura and ignored the caged prophet.

“All is ready,” he said. “Not much time left.”

“Well done,” A'jura said. “Are E'kinre and A'vorna anywhere to be seen?”

“They are in the chieftain's chamber peering through the sopherast,” said E'qonag. “E'racel asked me to pass on a message.”

“I see. What is the message?”

“It did not make that much sense to me.”

E'qonag took a leather parchment from his robe and held it out. A'jura bent down to receive it from the small genebearer.

“It must be from one of the prayers you study?” he pondered.

A'jura grabbed the parchment with both claws and read it.

“And the First Watcher, shaper of the fire.

She would look up at A'ro for guidance.

She would stare down to the ashes with sorrow.

And she would glare at the mountains ahead with rage as they cast their shadow.”

“There are many tales about the First Watcher in the archive,” she said. “Why did E'racel want me to have this?”

E'qonag only replied with a confused look.

“I really do not know what E'racel wants,” he said. “But best keep the parchment so you can ask him later.”

A'jura blinked several times and pocketed the piece of text.

“Is there anything else you want to know before it begins?” she asked.

E'qonag gave the prophet a disgusted peek.

“Did you torture the prophet?”

“I did not have a choice,” said A'jura. “He would have ran.”

E'qonag grumbled with annoyance.

“As long as it will not give his zealots more reasons to fight.”

“E'qonag...”

He looked up at A'jura upon hearing his name. A'jura bent her knees and spoke to him at equal height.

“This ceremony is about bringing the zealots out of the dark,” she said. “We want them to reveal themselves and fight so that we can defeat them.”

The small but experienced A'mian became hesitant.

“He is bait. I know.”

“Bait for who knows how many roaming zealots of A'zi. I need your singers, E'qonag. I need them to stop the zealots. We have to make them come to their senses.”

He blinked. Continued to blink. Then inhaled. And bowed his head.

“I trust your determined mind, A'jura.” he said.

Nevertheless, he could not bear to remain and wandered into the nearest hallway.

The midst of the plaza. The orchestras, a dozen lined up along every wall of the palace. Melodies abound. Unruly, improvised music as the players practiced. Hundreds of players for a crowd of millions. The song was harmoniously correct. Spot on. A'jura only had to walk up those stairs and stand. Watching, listening to what her plans would come down to. She could not escape the eyes of her kin. close by they turned to the circle and laid their trunks onto their left shoulders. Far away, the songs reached out to the master of ceremonies. E'qonag walked onto the circle and stood beside her. He installed a seat for himself and placed a large console in front of him. His console would take control of the screens on the walls of the palace, alongside the screens the orchestras presented before them, therefore he would decide what was about to commence. A'jura stepped along the edges of her stage and awaited the new song. The ceremony was set, ready to go. Everything alive, everything full of I'riscurum gave her the lucid senses. She moved under the shining light of A'ro coming down from the hole in the roof of I'serovaya's tunnel. The light poured in straight from the surface to bathe the plaza with infinite energy. Flames came from A'jura's nosebones, her palms. In every exit formed a grand plume of fire. The very middle of the crowd, an entire people had become a blazing inferno of passion. True fire, deadly fire so invigorating it set the plaza floors aflame. The fire of an A'roocemirtal brought silence to the plaza. The song faded. Even the most entranced felt the heat of A'ro upon their skin. When the song had left they could hear the crackle of flames and the roar in the wind. Her voice echoed against the walls of I'serovaya, involving every A'mian within five miles. Resting her arms, bowing down her head she was the centre of attention. The fire had spread.

“I welcome you!” she yelled. “A welcome from me! A welcome from our chieftain. A welcome from her partner of endeavours, the advisor and our palace technicians. And finally a welcome from the master of this dusk's entertainment!”

The people sang a very distinctive series of notes in response. No words. The sound bellowed through a hundred tunnels. A'jura cast out red flames to the light above. Right away, songs appeared on the screens around the plaza; now a world of its own enraptured by music.

“E'nirethizen ian E'nikra.

E'niyazaj aj E'nica.

A'rogix E'nivun.

A'ro ena I'manareyilum.

I'vothi E'nithrunj.  
I'mana E'nisalothegiz

E'niduthanzorsh.  
E'nigathazmaj  
E'nikara  
E'ni kammath E'nilay.

I'nalnavam E'nisith  
E'nihalaj rax  
E'nizorayanj.  
E'sizon ian I'gar, E'nicrath  
E'nironkresh  
I'wenvarvazis roj I'mnai.

E'niduthanzorsh.  
E'niraenazgath.  
E'nikara.  
E'ni kammath E'nilay.”

“Guide me to the first step I must take.  
Leave me when I come of age.  
Show me A'ro's brightness.  
Like him this life is an eternal light.  
The one story they will not forget.  
So have me make it worth my time.

My energy must wane.  
Then my ambitions will rise.  
I am the youngling.  
I become myself overnight.

Drag me down, challenges ahead.

I do not need strength with  
no weight on my shoulders.  
Face me with your trunk to the wall.  
The lazing curse is beyond me.  
There is a pillar in the palace waiting.

My energy must wane.  
Then my tale cannot die.  
I am the youngling.  
I become myself overnight.”

Composition after composition. No rapture must end. A'jura stood. She revelled. All a'mians in unity as they sang their song. E'qonag immersed himself pushing his orchestras to their best and synchronized. No limit to sound. His voice rose, he sang too and a powerful bliss awakened the subconscious further, breaking in and blessing the ceremony with a greater intensity of light. A'mej had come up onto the circle to share her voice; an exceptional one that A'jura adored, though E'qonag could overwhelm anyone at the plaza that day. In the windows of the chieftain's chamber A'jura saw her mother and father watching and singing with their trunks entwined behind their backs. The ceremony continued flawlessly for at least four hours. More and more people flooded the enormous plaza to join in and celebrate what seemed a moment of unprecedented union. The palace itself had now been filled, the streets outside had obviously overflowed. The I'melaj at the nearby gardens peeked over the walls with intrigue as their riders had climbed onto their heads to sing and watch.

Then, a culmination.

The final song ushered in. Not a single instrument left unmanned. And A'jura stood there, voice silent until the moment was at hand and the five last notes were stretched out for as long as possible to force the breathe from the lungs of the people. A'jura quickly went to the chamber beneath the plaza, A'mej was at her heels. Each of them grabbed one side of the prophet's cage and hauled it up a small staircase. Upon that centre stage now laid this grey, metal cage intended for the beastly. The music echoed in the far away tunnels but out here it had gone. The people sat down on the tenesteel plaza with their energy spent. Only when all others were silent, A'jura raised her voice.

“A'ro is proud! Today his light shall shine brighter than ever and bring his chosen our way!”

After many hours of music the crowd enjoyed this simple listen.

“The flame lives on within us all. Every speck of heat overwhelms us. The cleansing of our curse has always been A'ro. Its gift has protected us for countless, unimaginable years and shines through all of us. Each one of you have shown your dedication to me and anyone else whom joined us tonight!”

The talk was constantly interrupted with a series of notes that expressed great approval from at least half of the crowd. Another smaller part of the crowd showed displeasure. A'jura continued.

“The gift of A'ro, the abundance of it within our A'roocemirtal. It is not privilege, it is a duty. A duty to protect the unfortunate. The task of the strong is to soothe the weak! The task of the weak is to support the strong! Who would want to ruin this balance?”

A'jura answered for them.

“The prophet of A'zi!”

She roughly pulled the leather blanket off the prophet's cage. A'mej opened the cage. The sick a'mian would not come out on his own.

“The ashes seek to embolden the weak! They fight against those with what they perceive as greater tasks. I hereby call out the prophet for inciting terrorism and instigating the deaths of our A'roocemirtal. The destruction of our homes in the outskirts of our world, led by the black cloaks of the ashen cult; it is his doing, his revival that brought this about.”

A'jura snuck her claw into the cage and personally pulled out the accused. He squirmed on the searing floor at the centre of the stage. The light above, A'ro, shone down on him and began to relieve him of his curse.

“The people of A'mian shall not be torn apart! They shall remain a unity of individuals forever more! We unite under A'ro's promises! A task of your own, a free mind! You have all attended on your own volition, have you not?!”

And to this the crowd screamed with their desires understood.

“Do not let others speak for you. Do not let this prophet bring life to your hate.”

A'jura took the shivering prophet by his neck and dragged him further into the light. The flames so bright the prophet could hardly bear it. The colour of his skin grew brighter, pustules on his body busting and bloating. The audience observed with great curiosity.

“The A'roocemirtal will do anything to protect you! So it has been since the dawn of time!”

The prophet dropped down onto his back to stare into the burning light. His skin now turned red. He did not cry or shout. The heat took hold of his lungs.

“Then know that I am here for all of you to do what needs to be done! I will protect A'mian against the faith of A'zi. I will not have the A'roocemirtal be murdered on my watch!”

Flames started to form on the prophet.

“With nobody to divide us as a people! With nobody to tell us how lives are lived! That is how we are a unity! How we thrived, how we fought and how we survived!”

The flames engulfed the prophet's body.

“So let this moment be an example of that fact! Strong and weak shall be unified, and whomever tries to take our tasks from us can expect retaliation! Terror shall never control us!”

A'jura lifted her arms, the heat of A'ro was in her palms, she brought them to life, she guided them to the jailed, she let them rake his boils, bore into his head, melt his eyes, snap the sinews of his limbs. Red skin.

The crowd stared. She stared back.

“Now that the prophet is gone I shall hunt the rest of the cult. I dare you, rebels of the ashes. Come face me. Come bring revenge to me. Come show me your conviction.”

The crowd was silent still. They saw the incinerated prophet.

“...what?” A'jura spoke quietly to herself. She got nervous, clenched her claws.

They stood there as millions.

Standing, watching.

Uncertainty.

A'jura had been infected by it.

A'mej politely, supportively raised her voice from the other side of the cage.

“Keep going.” she said.

A'jura tried to speak from her nosebones. They felt clogged.

“Keep going.” A'mej repeated.

“We can rest easy now!” A'jura yelled out as she retrieved her strength of will. “Know that the cult will soon be undone. The ashes of death, A'zi, will not bring fear.”

The crowd, millions of heads silent. A'jura darted her own head left and right. E'qonag silently sat in his chair and he looked to the floor in shame. A'mej was beside her and touched her shoulder.

Trying to be supportive. Far into the distance they saw an a'mian youngling weeping in the arms of its guardian. Without another word A'jura went back under the plaza to hide from the crowd. Every step of her talons heated the stone below her. A'mej closed the ceremony instead.

“Let us be at our strongest and weakest, let us be A'roocemirtal,” she shouted. “Let us remain unified or individuals. One or the other, at any time, as much as we would like.”

And she bowed down with a last hurried slip. E'qonag left the stage alongside her.

“Why are they silent, A'mej?”



A'jura grabbed her by the shoulders. E'qonag walked to the edge of the room. The sound of a million leaving steps came from the plaza above.

“I don't know but please stay calm.” said A'mej.

“Were they in support of the prophet? Is that it? What do they want, A'mej?”

“No, stop thinking like that.”

“Did the people love the prophet? Are they the cult?!”

A'mej bashed her head against A'jura's, and shouted.

“Stop it!”

A'jura wobbled backwards for a few seconds. She stumbled into one of the stands that held an artifact of the palace, grasped the sopherast glass and clutched it to regain her balance.

“Something is not right.” she whispered.

“Calm down. Just calm down.” A'mej said in frustration not meant for her partner.

Contemplation. Silence within the thundering drums of talonsteps up above. A'jura regained her senses. She stroked her claws along her nosebones. A'mej stared at her.

“What did they expect me to do?” asked A'jura. “That I kept the prophet imprisoned for an eternity?”

A'mej softly patted A'jura's side.

“I do not understand it either,” she said. “We should continue with the hunt.”

“Probably,” A'jura placed her forehead against A'mej's. “I am sorry for this misjudgement.”

“No need to worry,” she said while returning the gesture. “We will continue. I have faith in A'ro and you.”

Loud talonsteps were heard from one of the hallways that bordered the underground chamber.

E'racel came walking towards the two embraced. He wheezed smoke out from his breathing apparatus. No doubt from running. A'jura turned away from A'mej to face E'racel and E'qonag rose his head to see his old companion out of breath.

“A'jura.” E'racel said.

He began panting between words.

“You need to come with me.” he said.

“Why?”

E'racel grunted as he nervously rubbed his belly.

“I need to take you to the archive.”

“Now?”

“Yes, now.”

A'jura took the message from him out of her robe. Without hesitation she presented it in front of his

face.

“You sent me this. What do you mean exactly? What about The First Watcher?”

E'racel widened his eyes.

“Come with me,” he said with a hushed tone. “You should have received that message days ago.”

E'qonag spoke up.

“I am sorry I did not send it, E'racel. She was not anywhere near me.”

“You could have sent it via netclaw!” E'racel growled, then coughed violently into the pipes strapped to his nosebones.

“She did not have her netclaw.”

A'jura looked between the two geneticals. E'racel looked back at her.

“I did not have it.” she confirmed quietly.

E'racel slowly turned around and began stomping through the hallway to the archives. A'jura stared at his back. She put the message in her pocket.

“Why are we going to the archives?”

“I think you know why.”

“No, I do not.”

E'racel sighed into his pipes.

“You should have known why.”

A'mej stared on as they left. She and E'qonag.

Hurriedly A'jura and E'racel walked into the archives; one of the most glamorous buildings in the capital city. Not only did scriptures belong here, but so did every other form of art that the a'mian people regularly practiced throughout millennia. The pyramid had the largest amount of floors and was the tallest of the six. Both a'mians went up the many stairs. Passing by every floor they came across the sculptures first. They had been arranged from the eldest to the youngest. The first sculpture a mere shard of rock. A leftover from the art it was part of. At the very end of the extremely long line of sculptures was the most recent, resembling A'vorna fighting against the I'kemenan in highly detailed fashion. One floor up were the scriptures stored in cubes representing their age. These parchments went back even further in time. Many of them were locked in sopherast casings, purified of any outside influence and meant to be preserved. E'racel laboured his body onto a stool and pointed at a parchment so worn down and ancient that A'jura had never permitted herself to release it from its prison. But she had read it. She had read it countless times. A tale of over a thousand pages. E'qonag used the mechanism in the sopherast casing to turn the pages of the script. A'jura saw his eyes land on one of the final pages.

“Read.” he commanded.

And A'jura listened.

She never refused a chance to let history unfold.

“The fire had risen from A'ro. The flames beckoned from within. The fires would come, the destruction of A'shar. Every year the skies would ignite as the I'riscurum rose to deadly heat. The skies would fall, the First Watcher would guard. Fire in the tunnels, fire in the skies. The great blast, A'shar, at noon. The strongest flames of A'ro. 'Have mercy', the watcher would say. Beg to stop the blast from spreading and reaching the A'mian world of the underground. Now she could beg and live to tell her tale.

The flames from her palms cast outwards. Fingers wrapped by the inferno. The exit to the surface, there she stood. It was almost here. The moment. A'shar. She closed her eyes. Breathed in I'riscurum, it coursed through her veins. Fire from her palms, fire from her nosebones, fire from behind her eyes, fire from her trunk. She was fire itself. In that moment A'shar came. Blazing inferno of the death at noon. All the sky set aflame. The mountains washed in flame. She watched that one tunnel and looked into the blinding light of the erupting atmosphere, and she felt powerful. Her flames fought those outside; she was a body on fire. And the flames outside did not dare to come in. She had saved this tunnel, but more would be next. Could they too have watchers of their own? Watchers of fire.

She wandered up to the surface. Hours after the blast had gone. All was dead underneath the blazing sky. The mountains molten and splintered, the beasts mere vapor. So it would be again, when A'ro is nearest once more. Would there be more watchers this time? She, the First Watcher, would see to that.

And the First Watcher, shaper of the fire. She would look up at A'ro for guidance. For A'ro had brought fire upon her. The means to protect and destroy. The first with the task she was given.

She would stare down to the ashes with sorrow. Death had come and would come again. And the dead and lost, they too deserved to be enveloped by A'ro's embrace.

And she would glare at the mountains ahead with rage. They had broken from the flames. Those mountains would fall down in the coming year. They would control the shape of their world and cast a damning shadow.”

“Do not control the shape of your world, A'jura,” E'racel said. “Let A'ro guide it.”  
His words were left unanswered.

“And the First Watcher said: 'Let A'ro be our guide, let ashes be at peace and let the mountains lose control.'”

“Lose control?”

“You cannot have this much control.”

“Why? What have I done?”

“You are the mountains.”

“A'zi is taking control, E'racel. The prophet took control. He did it with violence.”

“And now you are taking control with your voice. You need to let go of it. Now.”

A'jura walked downstairs. A'mej awaited her at the bottom of the archives. The soft look of the supportive A'mian betrayed what she saw in her companion; a lost flame brought down from its greatest heights.

“What did he say?”

“I am the mountains.” she cryptically replied.

“Looked upon with rage.”

A'mej understood. She guided her partner to the nearest bench close by the sculptures. They only sat at first, but soon entwined their trunks and placed one head against the other.

“E'racel says I need to lose control.”

“What have you done wrong?”

“I need to lose it. Our people saw a tyrant, A'mej.”

“You, a tyrant?”

Eyelids fell and claws clutched around the smaller A'mian. She returned the gesture.

“You want to protect them.” A'mej said.

“I need to protect them.”

“And they should let you.”

“The people will have to protect themselves.”

“Sometimes they cannot. Sometimes they are weak.”

A'jura slowly rose as her own words were used against her. Their eyes met. They created some distance between them.

“Sometimes they cannot.” A'jura said.

“You should protect them,” A'mej repeated. “And they should let you. There is no tyranny here, only the protection of the A'roocemirtal.”

“It cannot be me.”

“Why?”

“I do not know but the people were silent.”

At first it was peerless devotion A'mej meant to express. Then she remembered the sight of millions of a'mians in doubt at the sacrifice of the prophet.

“I should not be here anymore. Not now.” A'jura said.

“What?”

And still A'mej was surprised to see the doubt on A'jura's face, crossed over from others to her.

“I do not want to take control.”

The hypocrisy of their actions dawned on both. They let their failures wash over them. Rather than fire, the water came down from behind their eyes.

From one pyramid to another. The walls of the palace displayed the city behind sopherast glass like an artifact of its own. The two a'mians silently wandered in the empty hallway atop the wall and watched every living thing leave the great plaza. The swamp below, the linerider station each stuffed with their own species. They could not see the thoughts or emotions on their faces from here, neither would they speak of their doubts. It was the silence that permeated and the echoing steps of talons that reigned. Never did it seem like they were going anywhere in particular. Without thinking, A'jura's next step was already in motion. A'mej stopped once the two entered the pyramid for palace technicians and sat down at the edge of the room on a simple bench. Her eyes would not leave her partner alone. A'jura got onto one of the elevators; in particular the platform that lead to her brother. Upon arrival at that high office she appeared worn out and he sat behind his desk fiddling with A'jura's netclaw. A while longer and A'jura found the time to sit down by the desk with her claws against her nosebones, elbows on her knees and her white pupils observing her brother. A'troz was more confident today.

“Was that the plan?” he asked carefully.

A'jura bowed her head to confirm. Nevertheless her brother reached out with his claw. He put the netclaw, now a hacking device, on the desk before her.

“The new interface is simplistic. You will not have any trouble using it,” he said. “If the terrorists use any network security from other planets the device should be able to break through it consistently.”

“You are still aiding me?”

A'troz puffed smoke from his nosebones.

“Of course,” he said. “You called out the terrorists and you still need to deal with them.”

She took up her netclaw device and linked it around her lower arm.

“Besides,” he continued. “I stand behind everything you said in the ceremony. 'A unity of individuals'. Strange term, but it can work.”

She shook her head in disbelief and stood up. Her mind not as sharp, not as able to reply.

“Media received it quite well,” he said. “They claim you show conviction that rivals only some of our past chieftains. They accept it as your task to find the terrorists.”

“Well,” A'jura finally spoke up yet very insincere. “That is good to know. Thank you for the upgrade. I will put this netclaw to use.”

“May it serve you well.”

She bowed and went onwards returning to the platform. A'troz turned around to view one of the netclaw channels. A circle of a'mians were discussing the new political developments that A'jura had ushered. When A'jura got back to the ground floor she walked towards the bench A'mej rested on, and just a couple steps away stood A'vorna and E'kinre, former guardians together at the bench. They awaited their young one's arrival. Much to her dismay A'jura could have guessed it would E'kinre to speak up first.

“I am glad that A'mej was there to support you, A'jura,” he said. “I apologize for doubting her.”

A'jura raised her brows in full surprise at the apology. She sat down beside A'mej.

“Really?”

“But this ceremony of yours was a disaster,” he said as he showed his truly disapproving squint.

A'vorna quickly intervened with raised voice.

“She tried to make everyone aware of the threat. And that action needs to be taken.”

“And that they need not fear the ashen,” E'kinre said. “I know what she tried to do. But she has placed a defaming mark on the followers of A'zi. They too are part of our world.”

A'vorna placed a hand against his chest.

“Only when the problematic cases are rooted out can the followers of A'zi keep their rightful name,” she said. “Although I strongly disagree with our young one's choice to incinerate one in

front of our eyes, the intentions were good.”

E'kinre sighed out and shook his head. A'mej watched in silence. A'jura stood up to defend herself. “I did it for many reasons,” she said. “But I did not intend to direct our people in a shape of tyranny. I made the choice for them to act upon the ashen. I wanted to show them the power we have to fight injustice. But I may have shown too much of my power.”

“And I believe such power is better served elsewhere,” E'kinre replied. “A chieftain only leads by example. They do not direct our people, A'jura. The people can look after themselves.”

And A'vorna bowed her head in agreement. A'jura too, bowed her head obediently and sat back down. A'mej spoke up only when all others were quiet.

“What should she do?”

“Stay low, do nothing for a while. Let your influence simmer down.” A'vorna said.

“I cannot do nothing, I will be cursed like the prophet.” A'jura stated.

E'kinre groaned loudly through flameless noseholes. His pupils went wide, unable to keep calm.

“Then perform your tyrannical tendencies elsewhere,” he said. “Leave those terrorists to A'mej.”

Shock coursed through A'jura's veins.

“To A'mej?”

She was hesitant to ask for an explanation.

“She knows everything you need to know. Isn't that what you told me yesterday?”

A'mej was dumbfounded. Yet she stood up and bowed down before A'jura with shivering pride.

“I will carry on our task, wherever you may be, A'jura.”

A'jura shivered too but in great panic. Limbs grew wild as the fire rushed through her veins.

“Do I just leave?! Abandon my task?”

Only E'kinre could bring forth the cruelest words.

“If you do not want to shape our world in your image then you should leave it alone for a while.”

“I know,” A'jura said. “I know that.”

“How to achieve this is up to you.”

“I know what I have to do,” she said. “I will leave and care for something else.”

Her eyes averted the gazes of others. E'kinre bowed in agreement and left with A'vorna, surrounded by one of her arms. Words trailed behind him.

“Some time elsewhere can do one good, allow one to look upon our world from a different perspective.” he said.

The chieftain herself appeared sorrowful. A'mej stood in limbo, both worried and proud. It took all of her might to stand. She wandered out of the pyramid and towards the nearest wall. From above her brother had watched and listened as he stood at the edge of his office. She wondered when she

would see him again.

A'jura and A'mej had gone down the side of the wall. The elevator to the linerider station. When the door opened up they stepped into the departure hall. Even hours after the ceremony the station was entirely full. Passengers stood ready to leave in a lengthy queue, waiting for their linerider to arrive. A new linerider already rushed up on the rails, ear-deafening with its charge. A'jura stared at one of the large screens on the station's walls broadcasting a discussion of the ceremony that had taken place many hours before.

“But the ashen do not represent a threat to any of us. A few villages? That is nothing.”

“These are not the ashen, these are terrorists.”

“The chieftain's daughter expressed otherwise.”

“No, she did not. She is targeting the terrorists only.”

“And she has now called them out to avenge their fallen prophet. A prophet, no less. I never knew the A'zi would have a prophet among them still.”

“This prophet must have been far more dangerous than anyone ever expected, and A'jura has prevented disaster.”

“She incinerated him before us, gave him to A'ro, when he should have been tended to by the followers of A'zi. That A'mian was weak, he was affected by the curse!”

“I cannot stand the fact that the chieftain's daughter captured this prophet and made him suffer in a cage where nobody would know of the torment she was inflicting.”

“She has saved us all from a violent criminal.”

Every word only scrambled her thoughts further, every word further enraged the hosts and guests. The crowd split and let A'jura skip the queue to the lineriders. They watched her and she watched them as they became two camps, stood to her left and right side. An unwelcome sight.

“Let's go somewhere else like your father suggested,” A'mej said. “Somewhere we can be at peace.”

A'jura shrank her pupils and blinked slowly.

“Anywhere but here.” she replied.

“What about I'cethpa?” A'mej suggested.

“Good enough.”

They stepped into the first linerider that arrived before anyone else could. They shut the door and set the destination. A'mej kept an eye on the lines ahead while A'jura let the storm in her mind rage on. As was easily visible during the ride, the labyrinths consisted of nearly endless connections



between tunnels of small length. All the scraped stone showed how the water had forged the tunnels throughout countless millennia. Erosion formed dozens more paths within each stack of strata to shape dozens of rivers and even now the dark, blue tunnels remained halfway drenched in water. The linerider stopped at a station that hung from the ceiling. It was not a complete dead end. Passengers could possibly continue on the rails to reach other landmarks, but this particular station had access to I'cethpa, the nearest lake, as well as the tiny village that hung down from the ceiling. Only four houses hung off that station like I'rothas dangling above water together with huge, hanging vines made of algae littering the residences. This tiny village served as one of countless farms, home to the heat-seeking net guns mounted on the edges of the village's platforms to catch the most profitable water critters. On the tunnel ceiling were networks of walkways that could lead to other parts of the I'cethpa labyrinth. A'jura and A'mej hopped out of the linerider at the station. Both knew where to go considering they turned to one of the doors leading onto the walkways along the tunnel roof. It was a dangerous path without fencing, left only with plain, flat boards of anrehar held onto the roof with anrehar poles. No effort was made to simplify the labyrinth either. Visitors would have to know the area, and these particular visitors knew I'cethpa like the backs of their claws. The two a'mians took that fifteen minute walk to their place of rest to reach and exit this single tunnel, then walked above I'cethpa's grand, subterranean lake. Easily said, the lake was the bottom of a colossal and extremely tall cavern. Said cavern was all but shadowed. The glowing algae of A'mian lined up all over its walls and within the waters of the lake. Just on its northern side was a dry island home to a small building, a cottage of sorts, made out of metals and multiple rooms linked to algae conservatories. The building and isle were a small, silent and abandoned abode. The walkway that A'jura and A'mej were on went down towards it, meant only to end at this refuge. Once they treaded on the surface of the isle their talons were greeted by the softest, most colourful algae clinging to the shore. Tiny, glowing, tube-like creatures squirmed between the stone cracks and fled from their steps. The two a'mians entered their home away from home with a flick of the wrist. Their netclaws were identified by their door and said door opened wide and welcoming. They moved past their fountain room and reading room. As they reached the lounging chairs in their main conservatory A'jura walked forward among the homegrown algae and to the small pond in front of the sopherast glass. A'mej watched her partner in endeavours drop her talons into clean waters.

“E'kinre wants you to take over.” said A'jura, nervously rubbing her temple.

A'mej gave a slow nod. She approached and sat down beside A'jura.

“I will do everything I can to make our task a success.” she said.\

“Those cult terrorists are still around. You think you can take care of that?”

“As long as we have E'qonag at our side and his apprentices of the voice, no lie can escape us.”

Despite reassurances, A'jura's nails tapped the edge of the pond incessantly.

“With any luck the ceremony will force the fanatics out of hiding.” she said, trying to force her worries away.

“But we suffered the consequences.” A'mej said.

A'jura stared down into the water as she replied.

“I still believe in our show of strength. The prophet had to be dealt with. And those fanatics need to come out before they cause more trouble. I think I did the best I could.”

“I agree, A'jura. But we still suffer.”

For a moment they locked eyes and remembered why they were partners in endeavours. Their whispers made waves across the surface of the water. A'mej's claw held on to the other's thigh. They turned their backs towards each other. Placed their backs against one another's. Their trunks entwined. They closed their eyes and took deep breaths, meditative in nature. The slow exhales spawned the softest, most cradling and tender of flames from each their nosebones, and the flames became one as they met at their trunks. They could go on for hours to immerse in mutual warmth. The rough, unique patterns of the scales on their claws. Time became blurred. Two beings lit by a thousand fluorescent lights.

“I do not want to wait out my days,” A'jura broke the silence. “Where should I go? What should I do? There is no living without a task.”

“I remember well when you had different tasks entirely. Would you not go back to them?”

“No.”

A'jura moved away. She stood up and made use of the nearest chair. A'mej frowned at the undesirable suggestion she had made.

“I need to be away from this trouble,” A'jura said. “I should find endeavours elsewhere.”

“Where?”

“To Borum, perhaps.”

“That would be interesting at least. You could meet the singers.”

A'jura just shook her head and laid down on the lounge chair.

“Only for a while.” she said.

A'mej kept on asking and wondering.

“Who is going to take you there?”

A'jura kept on shaking her head until her mind was set.

“I will send out a message to the I'kajoneth,” she said. “They can set up a ship with pilot for me.”

A'mej bowed down, trying to remain calm at the thought of A'jura's departure.

“Care for a cup?” she asked merely to distract herself from more complex problems.

A'jura slowly resigned as she ran her palms across her face.

“Alright.”

Hours passed with slow drinking and fewer words. A silence among the waters, the caves in colourful light and the future uncertain.

“I will try to keep contact with you, A'mej.”

“Have you decided, then?”

“Yes. I will rest on Borum.”

A'mej's claw shook together with her cup. Her grasp around it grew tighter.

“You do not need to worry about me,” A'jura said. “Be concerned for yourself. The terrorists are out there. You will have to face them.”

The smaller A'mian stood still in quiet anxiety.

“As you say.”

“And if necessary you have my permission to employ the singers this time.”

“Of course. Gladly.”

Then they wandered the house until their bodies would ache with an a'mian's incessant need to act.

The partners of endeavours went back to the linerider station. After all, dusk was just around the corner. Their movement was a slow tread on the anrehar plates. The a'mians at the hanging algae farm were diving into the water, catching spores with special nets. Young ones were abound as a more typical sight among a'mians such as these. Somewhat simpler, living a life of physically oriented tasks moving day by day, unbeknownst of the slow gratification they would grow accustomed to in later years. When A'jura and A'mej walked back into the linerider station a single A'mian young one sat by the arrivals rail. It could not be more than fifteen years old. A'mej immediately headed for the linerider, but A'jura changed tracks, thereby forcing her to wait.

“Young one. You're alone.” A'jura kneeled in front of the small A'mian. “Are any of your guardians nearby?”

The young one spoke with a high-pitched voice. She betrayed that she was a childbearer.

“Here on my own for task.” she said.

“Leave the young one be,” A'mej said. “She has guardians who will look after her.”

Yet A'jura fully ignored her.

“Oh, your task, hm?”

The young one bowed and laid her trunk on her left shoulder.

“I check if harpoon guns work okay. I want to craft one too.”

“That is really wonderful, go for it,” A'mej held onto the side of the youngling. “Your guardians know about your task?”

“They do. I am going back to them when I am done.”

“There are no harpoon guns in the linerider station.” A'mej stated.

“Very good. Work hard, then.” A'jura said with strict tone. After a quick turn she once again paid attention to A'mej, then readily hopped into the linerider sphere with her.

“It should have guardians to protect it,” A'mej said. “You do not have to protect her for them.”

A'jura gave A'mej the mildest glance of agitation before she assigned the sphere its destination.

Soon enough they were rushing through the tunnels at breakneck speed.

“I am not heading back to my chamber just yet.” A'jura said.

“Where are you going?” A'mej asked.

“Take a walk at A'mirkotio.”

“What should I do in the meantime?”

A'jura sighed out from the hole between her nosebones and shook her head.

“Prepare for a task of your own. Would be my advice.”

A'mej closed her eyes. The uncertainty could be read on her face.

The linerider halted at the palace with a daunting slam into the station. The usual slam. The sphere opened, the bridge of solid light appeared. A'mej got up from her chair.

“Come back safe,” A'mej said. “Do not go where the zealots may find you.”

“I will be fine.”

A'mej bowed before stepping out of the linerider. Once she was off the bridge she raised her voice.

“I will be waiting for you in your chamber tonight!” she yelled.

A'jura closed the sphere of the vehicle and fired up the jet. She waited for a pair of lanterns to glow white before launching herself across the lines. The rails brought her only several miles far to the outskirts of I'serovaya. In that small journey she passed half of the eternally bright city, then popped out of the great city tunnel to witness a cavern of unbelievable, immeasurable size. A'jura's eyes were upon the very shore the capital had settled in its earliest days. This northern area was most of all a delta. It bordered A'mirkotio; an underground sea so large that the tunnel to the capital city was just a tiny speck upon its coast. The other end of A'mirkotio could not be seen due to masses of white fog forming the only clouds that existed on the planet. The entire sea glew with its algae, from the shallows to the deeps, I'melaj swam in the distance, at least thousands of them jumping high from the water in plain sight. Throughout the entire cavern were multiple other shores and one twisting linerider road that circled the entire sea. One of the shores was I'serovaya's, which housed

an entertainment centre of its own and the only homes built on the cavern's floor. There were strange, sopherast bells taller than buildings and slimmer than a'mians hanging from tenesteel pillars in the shallow water near the coast. One of the bells echoed across A'mirkotio, beckoning the I'melaj towards a huge basin floating in the water. The basin housed metric tons of algae to serve as a nest for the beasts and their eggs. A'jura had seen it all a thousand times before. She hit the linerider station in the centre of that subterranean delta and stepped out on first opportunity. The A'mirkotio station was busy and surrounded by over forty exits. Her exit faced the sea, as walking outside revealed a way to walk down to the coast in one straight line. She was recognized upon that street by many an a'mian, but their calls and questions had become irrelevant for the time being. The entire way A'jura pushed through crowds that came for entertainment. Halfway to her destination A'jura saw an attractive terrace raised along the slope to the coast. Comfortable leather chairs lined up in the open sky with walls around the terrace that nullified the sound of the street and amplified the sound of the shore. She sat down on one of the chairs. Other a'mians rested in that space, all of them on their own. Most projected their netclaws onto their laps and passed the time with their own projects. A'jura, though, simply looked out over the low roofs leading to the coast, watching I'melaj dance in A'mirkotio. Very soothing, but sadly she was undisturbed for only a couple of minutes.

“Master of ceremonies,” said a genetical's voice close to A'jura.

A'jura turned her head to see whom had spoken. He was incredibly tall. He was broad. His eyes wide, large, intimidating. He had far more black scales than any a'mian A'jura had seen before. They covered him like armour. He wore black leather trousers and little else. A'jura peered down at his menacingly heavy claws. They had already set themselves on the table next to her.

“And you are?” she asked sternly.

The genetical sat straight and disciplined.

“An A'mian who saw your ceremony. A'losiir.” he said.

A'jura tensed up as she faced him.

“I think it is best for the both of us that you leave again.” she said.

“I want to make something known.” he said.

Silence fell until A'jura gave reluctant permission.

“Go ahead.”

“You have inspired me.”

A'jura tilted her head.

“Us A'roocemirtal are well deserving of our place, A'jura. I do think we should rise up against the weakness that the A'zi bring to our world.”

A'jura obtained an extremely vile frown, her voice hissing like a fuse.

“That was not the inspiration I meant to give you.” she said.

“But have you not shown that the gifted of A'ro are in many ways superior?”

A'jura needlessly raised her voice.

“If you say the word 'superior' again I will be very unkind!”

The genetical stared silently and woefully confused.

“I am strength. I am A'roocemirtal. I am the chieftain's daughter,” she continued. “But never will I claim myself superior!”

The genetical slowly stood up.

“I thought you understood me,” he said. “Are you not tired of carrying the burden? We cannot thrive if we indulge the meek.”

“You clearly understand nothing. In fact, I am about to leave this world and let my assistant take over.”

The A'mian named A'losiir stared for a while longer until he took a slow bow, then cautiously a step back.

“I do not believe your partner is weak, however. A'mej seems a promising A'roocemirtal.” he said.

“I want none of your words.”

“It seems we do not see eye to eye, then.”

“You cannot compare my sight to your blindness. Off with you.”

He hissed out from his nosebones, puffed out a large cloud of smoke and escaped A'jura's gaze to leave the terrace. A'jura loudly growled to herself and tried to relax. The attempt would only last a few minutes. She got up from the chair and walked down to the shore to take a walk and think of what is to come. Meanwhile the words of the genetical silently infuriated her, keeping the stress alive.

On her way back from shore to street, from street to station, the noise of thousands throbbed in her head; sounds to escape from. A deep-red flame blew out from her nosebones once she settled back into a linerider sphere. The soundscape was her own again. In the moments she could think clearly she reminded herself of a possible destination. She typed on the sphere's console and ordered for a trip to the I'serovaya centre of entertainment. Throughout the entire journey her eyes remained shut and she revelled in the silence. The linerider sphere slammed into the desired station, then A'jura got up. She stepped out of the linerider station with a blank look on her face. The streets welcomed her with open arms, a'mians all around her placed their trunks upon their left shoulders. Some did so with great

hurry. A'jura spotted that slightest hint of fear in their eyes and instantly felt undeniable self-loathing invade her. While heading to E'qonag's theatre she passed the gardens first. It was evening but nobody was resting. Something had stirred up the people to continue on with their daily schemes and it left the park empty. The black and gold hues of the palace loomed over her. The sight of the pyramids not too far away. A'mej would be waiting there. When A'jura entered the theatre the choirs and orchestras were in full swing. They created new songs about a chieftain named A'jura who defeated a cult before it was truly born. But from the other halls she heard lyrics of very different intent about an A'mian named A'jura whom snuffed out the last hope for the ashen faith. A'jura walked towards the tenesteel entrance of E'qonag's office, almost rudely ignoring the beauty of song. She lifted her netclaw and stared at the console next to the door. She went through a few options in her netclaw's interface until the buttons swapped out when her arm went closer to the console. There were three options. 'Hack', 'Sap', and 'Leave'. A'jura decided to press 'Sap' first to see what would happen. A small loading bar appeared and filled up in seconds. A file came rolling in from the console, telling the exact combination of the lock inside it. A'jura typed in the combination and the door opened. She walked onto the gravity elevator behind it and went up to E'qonag's office. Nothing had changed about this particular space. E'qonag sat in his chair as he looked through his sopherast window, clutching a cup of water. A'jura stepped inside and picked the chair that she sat in yesterday. The smaller A'mian was startled and instantly turned around.

“How did you get in here?” he asked.

“I have a new netclaw.”

E'qonag's eyes squinted.

“That you can break into my office with?”

“I have more important matters to talk about with you.”

E'qonag sighed out from his nosebones and made a sincere attempt to relax in his chair.

“Firstly, A'mej is taking over for a time,” she said. “Make sure she has access to the singers.”

“I see. We all sensed it, didn't we? The people were displeased by the sacrifice.”

A'jura leaned forward and laid her claws on her lap.

“Yes. Mountains looked upon with rage.”

“Mountains? Rage?” E'qonag asked.

“Old scripture.”

“Ah.” he exclaimed without comprehension.

“I want to arrange travel to Borum.” she said.

Once again the other A'mian felt surprised.

“Why?”

“I need time to gather my thoughts.”

“Then why not head to some of the outback tunnels and take some time off?”

“I am an A'roocemirtal, E'qonag. I suffer the lazing curse faster than others. I must have a task.”

E'qonag seemed troubled as he ran his palm across his face.

“Alright. Borum is an interesting place. I suppose you could visit the Zardai. They have not had a visit from palace folk for many years.”

A'jura bowed her head. The decision was made. She stood back up only to be called back by the trembling voice of the small one.

“I want to make sure that the cult is dealt with,” he said. “I don't think I have to say that twice for you to know how important it is to me.”

“It is not healthy to make this kind of thing personal.” A'jura said quietly.

“It is not I who made it personal. He was fishing, A'jura. Merely fishing.”

“I know,” A'jura puffed flames from her nosebones. “Make sure A'mej has all your support. Then she will not disappoint you. The voice of reason will be enough to stop the cult.”

E'qonag kneeled obediently.

“I will do everything I possibly can. I will ensure A'mej performs the task correctly, and I shall supply her with singers as you ordered.” he said.

“A'mej has as much experience as myself and she has understood the cause from beginning to end. You would do better to take lessons from her.”

He huffed out ashes from his nosebones.

“Fine. Thank you. Yes, I will listen carefully to the A'roocemirtal.”

A'jura stood up. She walked back towards the elevator pad. E'qonag lifted his head and looked upon his leaving friend.

“May you find the peace you seek on Borum, A'jura.”

“And may you ensure the cult's demise.” she replied, before vanishing down the elevator shaft.

A'jura went back to the palace and let be the sound of choirs. Steps followed every waking hour. Steps of the a'mians around her. Common achievers, so much alike yet so unlike her. At least it was the empty park that could mildly soothe her with the waving branches of piling algae, the gentle trickling of the cold water and the slow rumbling of I'melaj in the depths. Windless tunnel, endless colour, and a dark, black wall ahead of her. The palace wall on the south-east side. She stood in front of the arch that brought her into the great plaza.



Finally, after the commotion of today it had been completely deserted. The state of the palace as it always had been to some degree, only lived in by idols. Remaining a'mians she could see walking through the palace corridors, high up in the walls. She slowly turned her head to the middle of the plaza where the prophet was sacrificed. She walked towards it and climbed onto the circle. The ashes of the prophet rested in that gorgeous light of A'ro. Mere ashes, charred bones and one a'mian skull. A'jura stared at the ashes. She absorbed that image, branded it upon her retinae. The sight of her guilt would not be easily forgotten. As she peeked down to her netclaw and checked the time, she made her way down the centre of the plaza and into the room with artifacts. It was only a few hallways away from her own room. Moving through these hallways was usually quiet, excluding the failures of the lighting. The algae lanterns that usually lit A'jura's way were sometimes flickering at rapid pace. Algae within them appeared upset at nothing. A'jura quickly got to her room and upon walking inside she could see A'mej on one of her two chairs reading a prominent scroll. The incredibly lengthy scroll of the First Watcher tale. A'jura closed the door hastily behind her. The two a'mians watched each other while A'mej blinked several times during her greeting.

“Welcome back,” she said. “How are you feeling?”

“Watched,” A'jura said. “Do you know why all the lanterns are flickering?”

A'mej raised a brow.

“Algae cannot turn off their shine, A'jura.”

She then handed over the scroll she was reading.

“The First Watcher truly disliked the mountains. She describes them alike I'kemenan. Proudful, hungry beasts.”

A'jura took a deep breath. She sat down with the scroll that A'mej showed to her. Her thoughts dwelled as she awkwardly stared at it.

“I want to message for a ship to Borum.”

“I will be there tomorrow then,” A'mej fidgeted. “At your moment of departure.”

When A'jura lifted her netclaw she first observed the messages that had come in. She had expected her inbox to blow up on a day like this, but the filter had plucked out one message in particular that stood out to her. It was from E'qonag, sent very recently.

“Greetings A'jura. It is unfortunate that you wish to leave but I hereby want to ease the process. I have been to Zant Nurn several times and the planet serves as a fantastic hub for travel to all corners of Cloa Geska. I asked E'lías, a friend of mine, to provide a crew. He is a skilled navigator and frequently travels between several of our

neighbouring solar systems. The vessel called 'Black Zenith' should leave from dock twelve in I'kajoneth come dawn. The vessel should be adequate enough to take you through all manner of dangerous atmospheres. I wish you the best journey possible. May you return swiftly and in good health.”

A'jura stared at the message and shook her head.

“I suppose this is it then.”

“You have a ride?” A'mej asked.

“E'qonag managed it for me.”

A'mej slowly sat down on A'jura's chair, right beside her. She stroked her claw across A'jura's shoulder.

“When do you expect to return?” she said.

“Within a month.”

“Not all that long.”

A'mej widened her pupils and squinted her eyes, seemingly happy to hear it. A'jura slowly put one arm around her.

“You will see me again.” A'jura said, then moved her forehead against A'mej and closed her eyes.

“Of course. I have faith that A'ro travels with you.”

A'jura grew silent, crossing her arms. She let A'mej sit beside her for as long as she could.

“I shall continue with our task, I swear it.” A'mej said.

As the fire in their bodies went out their eyes found rest.

### Day 3

A slow groan and the gentle entry of the light. Colours kaleidoscoping the rim of her iris. Just another dawn that could not be signified by more than the algae lamps turning white. A'mej had her fill at the fountain while A'jura got up to pack. Clothing first. Among those were the black and yellow robes that she wore most of the time. She picked out several more sets. Red and black, another green and black and a final one that was blue. Each set she stuffed into a compression orb. The device maximized the space within the orb to allow for hyper-efficient storage. She used another orb for her scrolls as well; a hundred replicas of memorable stories easily remained within her second ball. She picked up a third for the miscellaneous. Leather blankets, water flasks, data disks, products for personal care and a few of her own written songs. By the time A'jura was finished A'mej stood at the door. A'jura stored the three compression orbs into one backpack of scaled leather. The conversation returned like no sleep had divided it.

“Do you know how to get to Borum?” asked A'mej.

“It should be a simple flight?” said A'jura. “Other than the breach through the platheum shield.”

“E'qonag travelled to Borum. He would know.”

“He said something about Zant Nurn in his message.”

“What kind of world is that? A hub?”

A'jura shook her head.

“No idea.”

A familiar, old voice rung from behind the door.

“A'jura. I heard you were leaving.”

It was E'racel.

“That is correct. I am.”

“Care to speak before you depart?”

A'mej let an encouraging puff of smoke fume from her nosebones.

“I can carry your items.” she suggested.

From the underground to the wall, A'jura followed the coughing, loud A'mian as his death slowly trailed his weighty steps. Every fiber in his being housed fats and warts, the energy within his body unprocessed. His demise would arrive soon after his four-hundred years of palace walks.

“We need to sit down for this.” he said, stepping into his very own home; the advisor's pyramid. He stomped up his own stairs, past his overgrown hall and purple lights. A'jura made her way to one of the chairs by his lengthy table, but only after she let E'racel down on a chair of his own.

“Have you learned, A'jura?” he asked first.

Incessant coughing followed.

“Yes I have. I am leaving. It seems that I am not desired at the moment.”

E'racel placed his large claw on the table and leaned back into his chair. He seemed more at ease.

“I believe that to be a very wise choice,” he said. “The mountains never walk away from the valleys they loom over. They are always tied to the ground, destined to cast a shadow. Move away now, let the valley into A'ro's light for a while, and you will be unlike the mountains. Perhaps you will too see the troubles that A'ro illuminates.”

A'jura puffed smoke and shrunk her pupils. E'racel's dogmatic philosophy could only amuse her.

“I will find some other task in the meantime,” she said. “Given our history with Borum I thought it would be an interesting place to stay for a couple of weeks.”

“A whole other world?” His brows raised.

“Yes.”

He shivered with a hand.

“Out there.” he said.

“Yes. Out there.”

“Countless worlds of fools, tyrants, liars and the lazy.”

He nearly growled with great disdain, until his coughing halted him.

“Are the Zardai people of Borum not our allies?” A'jura asked. “Are they fools too? Tyrants?”

“Only they understand our plight against the Unoren, A'jura. All other species spend their efforts on wars of their own.”

“Wars of their own?”

“What matters is our war. The Unoren are still out there.”

A'jura bowed down. She acknowledged that.

“If not for the platheum shield,” E'racel continued. “They would be onto us right this moment, seeking to overthrow us all.”

“I know that, advisor.”

“It must be said again!” he yelled madly. As much he could through metal tubes of impending doom. A coughing fit broke out. He leaned forward and rested his talons on his knees. A'jura caught his arms to ensure his balance.

“I know the Unoren still exist,” she said. “But it has been three-hundred years since the platheum shield was activated. The conflict has subsided completely.”

The ancient A'mian gave in to his miserable state. His paranoid eyes wandered throughout his chamber searching for the conflict that A'jura claimed had long subsided. He took a few deep breaths to calm himself so he could speak his final sentiment; one only very loosely connected to all

he had said.

“You are wise to leave, but please return as soon as you can. I wish not to die before I see your face again.”

A'jura reached out to the long lost historian. She entwined his trunk with hers and made a promise.

A'mej watched her partner stroll towards her, out from the pyramid and onto the wall. Together they went onwards from the wall to the station. This time it was on a relatively quiet morning, from the station and into the sphere. It was the same colourful, beautiful city, from the sphere to the elevator. A'jura could finally look upon that city like it was something special, knowing that she would not see it for some time. Her gaze never left it while A'mej focused on transport. Her partner of endeavours spoke constantly just to comfort herself.

“We have not been apart for more than a few days ever since...”

A'jura did not pay attention, neither did she reply.

“Hopefully the voice of reason can bring all of the cultists into the light.”

Colours in her black eyes, hypnotizing her to melancholy. A'mej kept talking. The linerider sphere stopped, the door opened up. Solid light shaped another bridge. A'jura had picked up her backpack and settled the straps. The duo wandered up to the grand elevator of I'serovaya and placed themselves on the benches within the gravity field. No queues this time. Once on that bench one talon went out to A'jura and rested on her shoulder.

“Are you well?” A'mej asked.

“Nervous.” she answered less confident than ever before.

“All of E'qonag's singer trainees go to Borum. Surely it is a fantastic place.”

“Not worried about the destination, A'mej,” she said as her pupils went wide. “Worried about our home.”

The elevator came to a sudden, dangerous halt at the end of its tall shaft. The city was out of sight and its main transport centre appeared right in front. Nothing about this place had changed since last they were there. A'mians passed by putting their trunks onto their left shoulder. A'mej began to walk slower, as if to delay the upcoming separation. A'jura realised so she slowed down to rest at the central fountain. She put her trunk into the water and tasted its freshness once more like a luxury soon to be lost. Her partner joined in on the feast, then voiced her concerns.

“I do worry about your destination,” she said. “I do worry what the places beyond our world could be.”

“I can handle that uncertainty. A'ro's fire never leaves me. You only need to worry about our task. For now it is only your task.”

“I will do whatever it takes to see our task through, A'jura. The terrorists must be found.”

She stood again with trunk refilled and hope somewhat renewed. At the highest floor of the largest of transport stations, on the height of the nose of A'vorna's statue, the elevator pad to I'kajoneth awaited. A'jura lead A'mej to the fast way up. The elevators were everywhere as more pads flew through the I'riscurum taxying travellers back and forth. When the pad was at the top floor they got off and finally reached the last elevator. “I'kajoneth” was the word above the entrance. The one and only station for incoming and outgoing spacecrafts.

“Someone is approaching us.” A'mej remarked.

From their left side a genetical arrived. He wore a black, leather cloak around his leather clothing. The robe he wore was pitch black as well and wide. His face was a calm sort, his body tall, healthy and bright of skin. Whereas most a'mians only had one nosebone moving up along each cheek, this particular genetical had four nosebones in total. They were thicker, tougher and smoked quite a bit. He presented himself gracefully with a low-pitched voice of strength and self-assurance.

“Greetings, A'jura. A'mej.” he said.

A'jura sighed.

“You are the pilot that E'qonag messaged me about?”

“Precisely. E'lías.”

He bowed and placed his trunk on his left shoulder.

“I understand that you may not want to be bothered right now, A'jura,” he said. “I know this may have been a very difficult set of days for you. Rest assured, I will make your journey most comfortable.”

“You need not comfort me,” A'jura replied. “Follow me to your ship.”

“Follow you?” He bellowed a gurgling sound from his nosebones and trunk. Some sort of laughter.

“Yes, come on.”

She went through the entrance and onto the last, large elevator. No benches, very plain, no other travellers. Heading to the spacecraft station was not a daily activity for most, if not all a'mians.

“Would you like more information about the trip?” E'lías asked.

“Later.”

“We have sleeping chairs in the-”

A'jura raised a finger and placed it against E'lías' stomach. The large a'mian had immediately been startled by the sudden touch.

“Relax.” she said.

Then let her finger fall back to her side. He huffed loudly, brushed his robe, groaned and replied with slight dismay.

“As much as I praise your bravery, that was unwarranted.”

He stepped onto the elevator pad with A'jura. A'mej had already positioned herself next to her partner. A'jura responded to E'lías' irritation.

“Leave the information for when we have hours of rest inside the ship.”

Just minutes ago they stood covered under the masses of overbearing stone. Now they stood at surface level, entering a hall full of sopherast windows that watched out across the plains of pure, white rock. On every side the architects had designed docks for spacecrafts of medium size. The metallic, interplanetary travellers were connected to the grand hall with a small tunnel for each. Most of the ships were highly streamlined in shape, reminiscent of the worm-like appearance of I'melaj. On the upper level were a few alien scrapyards from distant planets. None of them were anything close to the perfection of a'mian design. The flying scrapyards were designed in chaos, produced, owned and found near wholly varied solar systems. The station's interior consisted of dozens of paths to specific docks. Empty paths, though. Barely a soul walked about in the station, excluding several a'mians with detection apparatus strapped onto their spines. All forms of trade were under tight supervision. With the knowledge that this was the only station for interplanetary travel it was certain that the a'mian language had no interest in words for immigration, nor emigration. Several kiosks were on this station floor. Delivery checkpoints for traders, though very few aliens were present on the station. Probably none past this very structure. But A'jura did catch one in the corner of her eye as she wandered the station and lead the trio towards dock twelve. The only alien that A'jura could see was this tall, bipedal creature with a swaying tail and a light-blue skin. It had an actual mouth; A'jura had never seen such a thing. The real mouth was full of sharp, crooked teeth. That sight of jaws and teeth disturbed her. Bare flesh bulged around white, hard material. A type of worm swung in the back of the mouth like a trunk the thing had swallowed. The being's nose had at least seven tiny noseholes, vertically lined up between eyes and mouth. The white-fleshed, glowing eyes were at its temples, four on each side, some of them retracted so far into the being's skull that they could hardly be spotted. The back of its head was covered, as the thing had over fifty tendrils sticking out from that scalp. They all moved independently to form a complex body language. The rest of the thing had very defined muscle and four arms. Each arm had two large nails, and the feet appeared as if the thing used heeled shoes. A'jura tried to discern what it was, who it was, how it could possibly behave. The outsider was avoided and preferably unobserved until A'jura had kept her eyes on it. Perhaps the monster was there for a reason. Perhaps it even had a gender. It wore rough, spotted fabrics of blue and dark green, as well as a tank on its back filled with clean air. A'jura knew it was the substance that most

aliens required to function. The tank came with a transparent mask that she had put around her mouth. She could not fathom the terror of those jaws.

“I need you both to wait for a moment,” she said to A'mej and E'lias. “I want to speak to that alien.”

“Of course.” A'mej replied with a hint of surprise.

A'jura walked towards the blue thing. It sat on a leather bench with its two smaller, upper arms folded around its shoulders. The arms connected behind the alien's neck, hands holding them around it. The lower arms held a portable device. When A'jura approached, the thing turned its head sideways to observe her instead of the screen. To be understood A'jura switched her language from local to the universal Gescarian.

“Welcome to our world,” A'jura said. “My name is A'jura.”

She placed her trunk on her left shoulder in respect. The alien remained seated. Although A'jura had never heard the voice of a mouth-user before, she caught vague tones in the alien's voice that suggested femininity.

“You are my contact?” the alien asked.

“That would be very unlikely. I only got curious upon seeing you. May I ask where you come from?”

The alien sighed out from her fleshy mouth. She seemed to wiggle the worm inside it with deliberate movements.

“I am from Hinneth. The east of Brinestar. My species is Imzerdon. My name is Dorgetan. I am a merchant traveling between your world and Dryn.”

A'jura raised her brows and calmly sat down on the bench next to this thing called an imzerdon.

“I hope you find A'mian to your liking.” she said to try and play the host.

“I have only seen this station and your surface,” said Dorgetan. “Nothing else concerns me. I will be on my way to Marraxul later on. If you are an inspector of some kind, you should know that I am a certified employee tasked to supply this station with anti-matter on a yearly basis.”

A'jura stared cluelessly.

“Anti-matter?” she repeated. Dorgetan sighed once again.

“Anti-matter collision power,” she carelessly explained. “All spacecrafts runs on that fuel. I transport it.”

“I see,” A'jura blinked and no doubt seemed horribly ignorant. “Right then. I appreciate that your task aids our world. It is highly appreciated when other species work for A'mian.”

“I do not work for your kind.”

A'jura did not look offended. Simply more interested.

“I nevertheless appreciate your presence here. Sadly, now I must go.”



Dorgetan wrinkled her brows. The third sigh had escaped her as her gaze turned back to the screen of her datapad. A'jura stood up and reunited with the two a'mians waiting for her. The both of them stood at the ramp that headed up to the station's second floor. E'lias bowed and moved up the pathway, closer and closer to the ship they were looking for. A'jura kept A'mej occupied.

“E'racel told me that there are many fools out there. Perhaps he is right.” she said.

“It seems more complicated than that,” A'mej assured, giving her partner a comforting pat against her side. “And E'lias here is knowledgeable.”

“Very much so.” he boasted.

“A guide is helpful, at the very least.” A'jura said, mostly to comfort herself with a lie. She looked away from her companion, then ahead. The second floor of the station would be the primary docking bay. It was also the storage for heavy load, with large claws hanging from the roof to hold up big, metal crates of transport cargo. A'jura began to notice the silence at the station and on the very surface of the planet. The only sound was a pair of a'mians at one of the bays unloading a newly arrived ship. The ship had the same blue colours as that of Dorgetan the imzerdon. E'lias wandered past every dock to reach number twelve, and once they arrived the tenesteel walls around the group narrowed down to a single path that led them towards the ship's entrance. The ship in question was a mere a'mian transport jet. Black, wingless, streamlined and powered by four large turbines on the back end. It had an expansive, pointy cockpit and probably several more rooms in the jet's belly. E'lias dialed a code for the jet's door onto his netclaw.

“This is the vehicle we are to use.” he said.

“It looks rather cramped.” A'jura whined.

“It seems fine for two people.” A'mej said.

E'lias walked into the jet, motioning for the others to come inside as well.

“We will not be with two, but five.” he said.

A'jura carefully stepped into the jet's thin hallway. From there she could head on to the cockpit, observe the three doors to her left or investigate the back of the ship. The stern was more like a living room. The doors to her left lead to two minimalistic sleeping rooms and a storage room. Two a'mians that A'jura had not seen before came over to her the very instant she looked around. They were both of exceptional length, muscle and broad shoulders with scales adorning much of their pale skins. Each were in robes of soft, red colour and armed with a rocklash gun. Those guns gathered and welded stones together with magnetic force and swung the stones around like a fragmented whip. Both new a'mians laid their trunks onto their left shoulders but the one with a fairly scarred face spoke first.

“Welcome, A'jura,” he said. “You are on the Black Zenith. I am E'zokuj.”

“And you may call me E'natath.” said the other. “We are here to make sure that you will arrive safely at your destination.”

A'jura stared at them.

“No introductions required from one a'mian to another.” she said. “Just get on with preparations. Let your tasks come first. I will speak to everyone soon.”

“Very well.” E'natath complied.

She moved back into the cockpit together with E'zokuj. E'lias walked with them and let the two partners be together. A'mej nudged A'jura's netclaw with a finger.

“Can you send me your new contact information?”

“Please do everything you can around here,” said A'jura as she opened up the holographic netclaw screens and relayed the network code to A'mej. “I hope these few weeks elsewhere will help us.”

“I have faith.” A'mej said, pupils widening with joy. She held her forehead against A'jura's, each of them briefly closing their eyes.

“That was all I wanted to hear,” A'jura nodded, letting go of A'mej. “Be safe and be alert for when I contact you.”

“I will await your voice with eagerness.” A'mej twitched with her eyes. She turned around and left the dock. A'jura watched her until she was out of sight and shortly after E'lias arrived with a most confident gait in his stride.

“I think it is time for a short tour.” E'lias said.

A'jura puffed smoke from her nosebones.

“No need for a tour. I can figure it out on my own.”

She stubbornly walked into the sleeping room to her left. E'lias remained with a dumbfounded stare of uncertainties. The room A'jura got into had a fine leather chair with soft padding. There were basic necessities like clothing racks, a fountain and the entrance to an emergency escape pod. A'jura was in a visibly foul mood. She began to unpack when E'lias peeked into the room.

“If you have any questions just ask.” he said.

“I certainly will.”

She shut the door and sat down in the chair. Halfway through checking her backpack she saw the single small window in the room. For now it displayed the high mountains of A'mian that surrounded the valley containing I'kajoneth.

Once her clothing was set up on the racks A'jura walked back out of the room. The ship's front door had been shut. The two crew members and E'lias sat by a table in the cockpit behind the pilot's chair. They spoke among themselves and A'jura felt no need to intervene. Instead she

wandered the hallway and looked out through the window. She saw A'mej standing there still, near the dock, all alone. They caught each other's eyes. A'jura shut her own and placed her forehead against the window. Another small goodbye. As she left the window, A'mej left the dock.

While the Black Zenith was prepared by its crew A'jura idly walked into the room at the back of the ship. It had a big leather couch, some cheap sopherast decorations and a fountain. What easily caught her eyes was the interstellar map on the central table. She could look down upon an infinite collection of connected stars in the great, dark expanse of Cloa Geska. She saw A'mian in the southwest of the map. A finger's length further southwest was Unorena; the name was instantly recognizable to her. She saw Hinneth, the planet that the imzerdon spoke of, far to the east near the bright, white core of stars in the centre of the universe. The tips of her claw moved back to her own planet to spot a cluster of nearby worlds, all orbiting within separate solar systems. She could see the planet named Zant Nurn north of A'mian. The distance between the two planets seemed insignificant. Surely it would be less than a few hundred lightyears. A'jura sighed and raised her brows. There was someone else in the living room, sitting in the corner. He was covered in black cloaks, barely a part of his face visible to A'jura. He seemed the least bit trustworthy.

“Who are you?” A'jura asked frigidly.

“Just leaving A'mian.” he said.

His calm and damaged voice was unrecognizable to A'jura.

“I asked for your name.” she said.

The a'mian lowered his hood and revealed his face to appeal to her and seem alike a regular person, but beneath his mask was a frail and broken being. His shine of white pupils had dimmed. The scales on his claws, his neck and around his eyes were like broken glass trapped inside his feeble skin. Something about the way he slumped on the couch, hid his body, shivered on the spot. He was a weak kind of a'mian genebearer to her.

“E'kythsi,” he said. “That is my name.”

A'jura narrowed her eyes.

“Embracing Shadow?”

After a few seconds of contemplation he stood up to make himself larger.

“Yes.”

“Embracing Shadow,” she repeated while cautiously moving closer to him. “Who would ever give you such a name? It would befit a Unoren.”

“Guardians with a very troubling sense of humour.” he replied.

A'jura walked up to him. She became unafraid of his awkward mutations. He continued to shiver.

“And why would you be on this ship?” she asked.

“This is a transport vessel,” he answered. “And I am leaving. I seek purpose outside of A'mian.”

“Why would you leave A'mian?” she said. “Have you caused harm to our people?”

“I would never hurt you, or anyone.” he said as honest, plain and simple as he possibly could.

“Surely you will not. A harsh payment would be due for anyone who did.”

A'jura grunted loudly, puffing fire through her nosebones as she wandered towards E'lias. Just a hallway away the crew sat ready in front of the flight instruments. E'lias turned over to A'jura when she walked up to him. He was quick to turn and address her, as if she were his superior. E'zokuj was in the pilot's chair and readying the jet for departure.

“E'lias,” A'jura said hastily. “Who is the shady A'mian in the back?”

He questioningly looked back at A'jura.

“He wants to leave the planet. Arranged transport. Making good use of an opportunity to, well, leave.”

“And why is he leaving?”

“He is genetically misshapen,” said E'lias. “I figured that A'mian had no place for him.”

“All a'mians can find a place on A'mian if they try hard enough,” A'jura said. “Why do you think his imperfections could stop him from finding his place?”

E'lias stared stunned by the confrontational question. He shook his head and let it be, but A'jura was quick to demand more of him.

“I need to be informed about this next time. A cult is hunting me and I do not want to be followed. You understand that?”

E'lias respectfully bowed his head.

“Loud and clear, A'jura. Perhaps I should have clarified the situation. I mean to keep you safe and sound on your journey to Borum. We will briefly stop at Zant Nurn to drop off the cloakbearer. He will not be with you for the rest of the journey. Even if he threatens you, then me, E'zokuj and E'natath will be there to protect you. We will leave very soon, so just be prepared for that. The view will be gorgeous.”

A'jura stared silently. She turned and made her way onto the couch far behind the seats of the crew.

“I see.”

E'lias had pacified her concerns.

“I can understand that this situation is making you tense,” E'lias said. “But there are many good things in store for us.”

She followed his gaze but not his words. The vague hope of good things coming their way was something she had never heard another A'mian say.

“Does our kind wait for luck to strike them, E'lias? Or do we prefer to act and decide our own fate?”

E'lias registered A'jura's response but only looked at her for a moment. He did nothing with it. Instead he walked over to E'zokuj, the pilot.

“Deactivate the anchor.” he said.

A'jura sighed loudly. She went into her private room with the sleeping chair to avoid the sight of the launch.

Black Zenith blew multicoloured steam against the pale stone underneath it. E'zokuj hovered the jet above the spacecraft station. The engine fuel began colliding its anti-matter in a metal casing, causing sudden roars. A'jura looked down at the surface and the steam from a window in her room. The jet rose up high. She could look past the mountains, and more mountains would rise behind them. Endless peaks below, A'shar's debris above. Countless islands of rubble in the skies. A yellow A'ro shone down on the surface to cover a third of outer space. It was the eye of fire beyond a nearly evaporated ozone layer. The sunshine reflected on the pale stone and bloomed with a blinding light that would make some species cower and turn away. A'mian's landscape was dead, it was extremely harsh. No life, but great serenity. A'jura could not keep her eyes off the infinite white mountains. The jet was in flight and turning further away from the station. The skies approached and the colour within it began to fade. Its soft and gentle colour of blue became an encroaching, violent, black mass. A'jura had never seen it before. They soon arrived at the very border of the skies. A massive shield of mystical qualities revealed itself; a fully transparent giant of a planetary barrier, barely visible to the naked eye and shaped from a mass of panels suspended in space. It was known as the platheum shield. A'jura could hear the voices of the shield's warders coming through speakers at the pilot's chair in the other room.

“Your departure code. Now.” the warder demanded. It was an oddly familiar voice.

“Prim Grimy Axle Sprung.” E'zokuj replied.

“Are all systems within your vessel fully operational?”

“Report sent.”

“Phantom detection installed?”

“Yes.”

“Move through within the next thirty seconds. Countdown is on your display.”

One of the transparent panels disappeared in front of the ship and made a hole in the platheum shield. The jet went right through in this very short timeframe. A'jura too passed the great barrier and went out into the unknown. The world she knew became a small, sweet little thing of pure

white on a black stage like a marble in a bed of rock, serving no particular meaning, no grandeur, no pleasure nor suffering. As the distance veiled itself the darkness crept until it consumed the marble and left nothing but an eye of fire to see. This transport vessel was quick, far too quick. A'jura's eyes bore into the speck of white that had vanished amongst infinite stars and shadows. She saw it for as long as she could, and when she could not see it she saw A'ro behind it. Slipping away too. No less insignificant. She was floating in wide open space and watched every part of her existence fade to nothing in the infinite dark. Dread rushed into her blood and brain. Her nails scraped the window. Every sense she ever had of the size of her world, her own success and failure became miniscule. Just a fleeting emotion. A trick of the mind. Nothing was ever as enormous as the universe that surrounded it. All her desires and worries vanished in the name of the darkness; the wide open space where anything was possible. She covered her eyes with her claw and refused to see it for what it was.

Rest was the only possible thing that could take the anxieties away, but an A'mian could not rest for long. She stood up and tried to find better distractions. With regained composure she walked back out of her room and faced the sopherast windows of the jet. Not A'mian nor A'ro were anywhere to be seen in the void. Her heart was forced to halt. One of the crew members, E'natath, walked up to her and brought her back to life.

“Is there something I could discuss with you, A'jura?” she asked.

A'jura slowly turned towards her. E'natath's posture seemed strong and her leather clothes uninspiring.

“What do you want to discuss?”

A'jura's voice showed no signs of the uncertainty that had enveloped her moments ago.

“How long did you keep the ashen prophet captured in secrecy?” she asked.

“That is not a discussion, that is a question.”

“I am sorry.”

E'natath scratched her belly and limbs. She appeared so nervous.

“I was simply astounded by your accomplishment,” she said. “I would like to know how you managed to capture him.”

A'jura observed the a'mian eyes for a while to discern her motives, but her focus had been elsewhere for the past hour. Instead she spoke without thinking.

“I used the global network to track down where he was about one month ago. I got a hold of him rather quickly when he travelled through I'ceun.”

“How could you recognize him?” she asked. “Nobody knew who he was.”

“I was clued in by several inhabitants of the town. He himself was quick to confirm my suspicion when I found him.”

E'natath widened her eyes and shrunk her pupils. She seemed delighted.

“I cannot thank you enough for your display of organisational skills,” she said. “It has invigorated me to become stronger than ever before.”

“Surely,” said A'jura, dismissively waving her claw. “It was for our protection.”

“You prepared the ceremony all throughout the month that you had the prophet locked up?”

A'jura eyed E'natath up and down, finding her more than just inquisitive.

“Yes.” she answered.

“Much work must have went into that. How many theatres were involved?”

“Eight. E'qonag took the lead.”

“Very impressive,” E'natath said, giving another friendly look. “I wonder, though. Why are you here now? I thought your ceremony was incredible.”

A'jura stared at her. She did not know how to answer.

“Only those at the palace know you are leaving, and us inside this jet,” E'natath said. “It's best kept a secret, is it not?”

“Yes. Best kept a secret.”

A'jura grunted loudly.

“Rather unfair, do you not think so? Your accomplishments were met with so much reluctance to accept you.”

A'jura began to sense something about the words of the childbearer. The kind of nuance she had used herself. The little touches of a veteran of rhetoric. She avoided the question with one of her own.

“And what is your task?” she asked.

“I have participated in several tournaments and won, using the rocklash.”

She patted her gun.

“Yesterday E'lias asked me to join him,” she said. “As part of security.”

“I do know how to defend myself,” A'jura said snidely. “E'lias. He also employed the pilot?”

“He also employed E'zokuj. We three have completed quite a few interesting endeavours together.”

“Oh, really? What kind?”

“Mostly missions regarding a'mians whom wanted to leave our planet. We are usually in E'zokuj's transporter, but this jet was provided by your father.”

“By my father? Black Zenith, it was called?”

“Indeed. Perfect for travel between planets. We will be in Zant Nurn within a day with this powerful

of an anti-matter collision drive.”

A'jura crossed her arms and rose her claw to scratch at her nosebones. Secretly she blocked sight to her eyes to conceal that she was both impressed and frightened by the thought.

“A day? Are you serious? It takes only one day?”

“One day, more or less,” E'natath said. “We will cross about a hundred solar systems in the meantime. You cannot see them now. Moving too fast.”

A'jura rubbed her neckscales.

“I did not see anything between A'mian and Zant Nurn on the map in the back of the ship.”

“It is probably fully zoomed out.”

“Right,” said A'jura. “Tell E'lias I am in the room with the sleeping chair. I would like to speak with him when he has time.”

E'natath blinked a few times.

“He will be with you soon.” she said.

The tall A'mian reached for the door and it opened by itself. He saw A'jura sitting on the edge of the fountain with her trunk in the water for a drink. Once he stood beside her he closed the door behind him.

“You wanted to talk?” he said.

“Yes.”

A'jura stood up.

“Tell me everything I need to know about our trip to Borum.” she commanded.

E'lias stared her down from trunk to talons.

“Very well. Borum is a planet with sand and water. It has a large amount of orbiting suns and encases itself within a perpetual sandstorm. Reaching it is a difficult task.”

“You are up for that task?”

“Yes I am, A'jura,” he promised. “My experience travelling these sectors is extensive. And E'zokuj is a skilled pilot. He can navigate through the sandstorms and land close to Borum.”

“Close to Borum?” she asked. “It is a planet.”

“Close to the city of Borum.”

“It is a planet.”

“With one city.”

“A single city?”

The very concept seemed wholly estranging. E'lias was quick to break the silence and prove his knowledge.



“To reach Borum we will need to refuel at Zant Nurn. From there we will move further towards the southern planets. Perhaps I could show you on the map?”

A'jura closed her eyes to deny his offer with a gesture. He made his pupils widen ever so slightly to bare his dissent.

“Very well,” he said. “Is there more you need to know?”

“Will the Zardai and the singers be there in the city of Borum?”

“Yes, surely.” he said.

A'jura wandered away from the fountain to the window presented on the other side of the room. The view held stars full of potential within infinite darkness.

“It is horrific to be out here.” she said.

“You get used to it.”

A peek went out to him.

“Would you not consider A'mian your home? I have already grown homesick.”

E'lias pondered for a long while, letting the other stare into the dark.

“You are a powerful being,” he eventually claimed. “You will overcome that illness.”

“Too powerful.”

He frowned deeply.

“Too powerful?” he repeated with snide tone.

“Absolutely,” A'jura said. “Did you witness the sacrifice of the prophet?”

“I did.”

“I let myself go. I made decisions that were not mine to take. This departure is punishment for my transgressions.”

E'lias would respond astounded, eyes swelling and nosebones pouring out smoke.

“You have made the right decision every step of the way,” he said fully convinced. “The people of A'mian cannot survive without a chieftain to cull these obvious threats to your society.”

“My society?” she said as she turned to him. “It is not my society, E'lias. Is it not your society as well? Is it not a society comprised of many individuals?”

“It could be your society if you had the guts to take that which was handed to you.”

His voice rose as his nosebones fumed. A'jura stared at him with complete shock; she furiously retaliated when the flames trickled out from her orifices.

“How could you say such a thing. Do you want to make a tyrant out of me?!”

“You only need to realise your own potential.”

“You are utterly selfish to think that my own potential precedes my people's freedom!”

And E'lias only grew more and more enraged, pressing his tall body against A'jura in an attempt to

intimidate her.

“What purpose does freedom serve when nobody knows how to use it?! Even you are clueless!”

E'lias took a small gun from his cloak and stuck the barrel to A'jura's chest. Caught up in the madness she barely noticed the gun as it shot a needle straight into her stomach without warning.

“I... you...”

She felt her muscles paralyze in mere seconds. Her body had no choice but to descend. Her eyes closed by themselves. She could only hear a deep, disturbing buzz ringing in her earholes when the toxin settled.

A'jura's muscle ceased giving up. She managed to regain control. Claws and knees to the floor, joints straining to push herself up. She could hear again, now listening to lots of noise on the other side of the door. She opened her eyes as they twitched and showed nothing but a haze. The large red needle stuck in her stomach, she could feel it. Without a single thought she grabbed the needle and pulled it out of her flesh. Her bright yellow blood gushed out but the haemorrhage did not last long enough to kill her. A'jura shakily managed to get onto her feet while her nosebones began flaring. Triggered into panic and rage she promptly forgot about the bleeding, her poor sight and shaky limbs. She lifted a leg and kicked at the door. It was shut. More sounds came from behind it. A'jura kicked again and again. Her talons raked the steel surface of the door. There was another option. She stood still instead, focused on the I'risicurum flowing through her body, let the rage bring out her worst. Like a true A'roocemirtal flames bursted from her nosebones and the hole between them. As the room filled with flames A'jura spread her palms out and fired a glowing, hot, continuous blaze at the door's lock. The whole of the room became fully incinerated, coated with heat and light. When A'jura stopped she immediately kicked into the molten lock. The door dropped out of its hinges and fell into the hallway of the Black Zenith. She walked out of the room and instantly found herself in a crossfire. A rocklash gun instantly hit her left shoulder with its black stones, forcing her to get back into the sleeping room. She grasped her wounded shoulder, stumbling onto the floor.

“What is going on?!” she shouted without receiving an answer.

Randomly shaped objects of solid light fired their way towards the left side. The rocklash gun came from the right. A'jura began to lose herself in fury as she stood up again, barely affected by the blow. Her nosebones blasted plumes of flame at random, scattering throughout the entire ship. Her flames turned blue and blindingly bright, denying vision and forming scars for the unaware. The skin at her palms opened wide. She stepped into the hall and lifted one claw in each direction. Her light-blue fire, now directed, shot out from her palms. Both parties in the battle had retreated

because of it. Her eyes could spot neither, but she knew not to move towards the rocklash gun. A'jura vengefully searched for E'lías, whom would surely be hiding in the cockpit with his crew. She walked right through her own fading flames, left completely unharmed.

“You have much to answer for, E'lías!” she screamed with her nosebones casting a cloak of fire behind her. As soon as she got into the cockpit, E'zokuj and E'natath lashed out at her. A'jura got slammed back into the hallway by the rocks, growling loudly once she hit the windows with her spine.

“Get over here!” yelled the cloakbearer from the living room. A'jura had to take some time to recover before crawling out of the rocklasher's line of sight. A red needle barely missed her. She doused most of her flames when she got into the living room, taking cover behind a wall close to the galaxy map. She stared straight at the one-eyed cloakbearer that sat next to her. He hid as well, holding a gun with a lengthy barrel in his hands that probably shot the odd objects of yellow light.

“They attacked me!” said A'jura with all too obvious anger.

“I asked to speak with you but they denied me,” said the cloakbearer. “When I pushed the issue they attacked me too.”

“They are cultists!” yelled A'jura. “Kill them!”

The cloakbearer pulled a handle down the barrel of the rifle, charging his ammunition.

“I will cooperate,” he said with a bow of his head. “Blind his guards with your fire. I will shoot them.”

In a complete bliss of violence A'jura hardly registered the cloaked a'mian's plans. She peeked past the corner of the wall and into the hallway. The cloakbearer stood up beside her.

“If you can overheat their guns, that would be lovely.” he said.

“And you do not have to worry about a single thing. Just shoot them.” A'jura replied.

Upon finishing talk a red needle went by, sticking into the couch of the living room. A'jura hoped that the needle gun required a reload of some kind, so she took the opportunity to move into the hallway with palms blazing. The entire hallway filled with her fire, blocking vision from one side of the ship to the other. The cloakbearer stood to her right and his one eye shrunk its pupil to less than a bead's size. He drew the scope of his gun towards his eye and fired a barrage of solid light objects, most of them pointy. A'jura could see him at work from the corner of her eyes while she spouted more red flames through the hallway. He kept spraying the objects down the hallway for several minutes. A'jura advanced forwards as they received no counters. Shrieking sounded from behind the flames. Then a needle shot her straight in the thigh.

“I'm hit!” yelled A'jura to her ally.

Her mind would soon be gone. She fell to her knees. The cloakbearer stopped shooting and tore the

needle out. A'jura dropped onto claws and knees. Only the fire in her veins kept her awake now. She forced herself to stand back up and keep feeding flames into the cockpit until the cultists would give in. New, stronger blue flames travelled. They heard the cultists trying to move out of the flames while failing to orient themselves.

“Forward,” the cloakbearer said. “Finish it.”

“Capture one.” said A'jura, forcibly calmed by the toxin. She had trouble maintaining her balance. The cloakbearer finished the assault as he stepped into the cockpit and sprayed the spiked light into the room. Cries and flailing followed. Badly scorched, now pierced too, the crew of the Black Zenith suffered as they fell to the floor. The flames slowly disappeared. A'jura firstly saw E'zokuj underneath the pilot's chair gripping his scorched legs. E'natath was spread out across the floor, with dozens of bleed wounds, red and covered in pustules from the heat. E'lias hid in the corner, as much out of reach of the flames as he possibly could have been. Seeing the cloakbearer he hastily lifted his needle gun and fired haphazardly. Cloakbearer quickly retreated out of the cockpit and behind the nearest wall.

“Stay back!” E'lias yelled. “I have enough ammo for you to never wake up again!”

The cloakbearer looked at A'jura.

“Enough for the weakling as well!” E'lias added.

A'jura frowned wildly, nosebones flaring up again.

“Put the gun away or I will kill you!” she replied.

“No, you are coming with me, A'jura!”

“Put the gun away!” A'jura repeated.

E'lias threateningly fired the needle gun into empty air while A'jura and the cloakbearer stood behind the wall. It did not matter. A'jura thrust her palm forward and fired a tongue of flames down the cockpit, aiming for the corner E'lias had been forced into. As the screeches of pain bellowed and the spray of needles had stopped, A'jura stepped into the cockpit. The blazes poured from her palms as she screamed at the liar. He grappled with his eyes. The flames had taken them. Scorching scars formed all over his head, pustules violently bloated on his skin.

“Are you a zealot of A'zi?!” A'jura yelled.

But his suffering denied him from answering. She grabbed hold of E'lias' face and blew the infernal heat down his eyes and into his head. What followed were death marks of horror. While E'lias met his end, E'natath tumbled down like a ragdoll. A'jura furiously stared down at her, placing her foot on her torso while she bled dry.

“And what position do you have in the ashen cult, E'natath?” she asked.

E'natath granted her a most sullen stare.

“I am no ashen...” she muttered with a hopeless face. Her claws clasped around A'jura's scaled heels. The ritualist let herself go. Blazes broke E'natath like they broke E'lías.

When the smoke had settled the fire faded. When the Black Zenith yet soared through outer space, no pilot did anything to guide it. A'jura could only watch the control panel and pray they had not gone off track. Luckily she would not have to ensure it herself. She grabbed whimpering E'zokuj by his shoulders and dragged him onto the pilot's chair. The cloakbearer fetched the two charred corpses of E'lías and E'natath. He dragged them into the storage room. A'jura sat down beside the pilot's chair and watched the living cultist. He had a large cut in the middle of his nosebones. He was hyperventilating, in need of the I'riscurum that he could barely inhale. Burn scars were all over his legs and infused him with great pain. A'jura left the defeated cultist to his misery and made her way to the storage room where the cloakbearer would be. She looked for a canister of I'riscurum to revive the cultist enough for him to talk. About fifteen of the canisters were stacked in the back of the room. The cloakbearer stared at the two corpses he had dropped in its centre.

“Why did they lash out at you?” he asked.

“For mere disagreements.” said A'jura.

He gave A'jura a most tired look. His claw was on the wound at his arm.

“They wanted to dispose of me.” he said.

A'jura sighed.

“And capture me.”

“Why?”

Just a shaking of heads followed alongside a vile glare at the corpses. The cloakbearer groaned as he placed the light gun he used into one of the crates in the storage room. Meanwhile A'jura lifted one of the canisters of I'riscurum onto a shoulder.

“Zealots retaliating against my ceremony,” A'jura said. “Ashen cult. They lured me into a trap.”

“Would the ashen cult really do this to you?” he asked tentatively.

“Yes. They were zealots, terrorists. And they showed their true colours today.”

The cloakbearer let a plume of smoke flow from his nosehole.

“I remember them being less forceful.”

“Not anymore,” A'jura said. “The situation is dire. Perhaps much more dire than anyone guessed.”

She headed back out of the room and sat down next to the wheezing E'zokuj. A'jura held onto a thin, black tube that was tied to the I'riscurum canister. The end of the tube she pushed into the speaking hole between E'zokuj's nosebones. He slowly began to breathe normally once again.

A'jura peered out of the cockpit's window. She could still see the stars passing by at incredible speed.

“Cultist. Turn us around, back to A'mian.” she asked.

“Please... spare me.” said E'zokuj.

“Was it you that hit my shoulder?”

He did not dare to answer, neither with truth nor a lie.

“Pilot this ship back to A'mian and I will not kill you.” A'jura promised.

E'zokuj let out a massive sigh of relief. He believed it. The cloakbearer came into the cockpit and sat down by the table, behind the pilot's chair.

“Order the jet to turn around right now,” A'jura said to E'zokuj. “Check all the values on the dashboard. Press the right buttons. That sort of thing.”

“You want to go to back to A'mian now?” the cloakbearer asked.

A'jura turned her head towards him.

“Of course I do,” she said. “These fools have convinced me with their attempt to capture me.”

“I planned to leave A'mian,” he said. “But we also need to refuel at Zant Nurn before we can turn around.”

“So we must arrive on Zant Nurn first?”

“Unless you want to risk being stranded in outer space.”

The notion. The idea. Anything but that. She pushed E'zokuj's back.

“How much longer until Zant Nurn?” she asked him.

“Two... hours.”

“Stay course to Zant Nurn. Refuel, then we turn around. Is that clear?”

E'zokuj obediently placed a claw to his chest. He visibly shook. The cloakbearer put his trunk on his left shoulder in respect and stood up to handle the corpse problem.

“Wait,” A'jura said to him. “You need a better name than the one you were given.”

He turned slowly to A'jura, raising his brows.

“What of a cloakbearer? E'rajazon,” A'jura proposed.

“If you wish. E'zon, the cloak.” he said.

A'jura blinked.

“E'zon it is.”

They bowed heads to one another. A'jura repositioned the couch and placed it in front of the pilot dashboard. From there she could tend the wounded cultist and keep him alive for piloting skill.

“Tell me if you need anything.” she said.

E'zokuj blew smoke from a cough. He was disinclined to ask for remedies from the beast that had

bitten him.

“Keep the tube in your nose for now,” A'jura continued. “I will get some medical supplies on Zant Nurn if you play nice.”

She stood up, walked out of the cockpit, through the hallway and into the living room. She took a chair with her to put next to the star map. E'zon was already sitting by it, fiddling with his scaleless claws.

“Can you give me some overview of the direction we need to take?” A'jura asked, after sitting down as well. “I do not want to be fooled by this cultist.”

She forced herself to take a good look at the controls of the holographic star chart before figuring it out. The first button that she pressed caused the number of planets shown to expand exponentially. A'jura stared into the simulacrum of endless void between every world, forever separating them with great distance. Between A'mian and Zant Nurn were now over four-hundred dots. Names of stars she had never heard of.

“We are in the southwest on these types of charts,” E'zon said. “Zant Nurn is closer to the nucleus. Cloa Geska.”

His frail finger pointed to the white globe. The core of everything.

“Does this map show every planet?” A'jura asked.

“No. Only the planets discovered and suitable for sentient lifeforms.”

He slid his finger along the circle that completely surrounded the galaxy map.

“Here is the border. They called it Marra Zeya. From its borders onwards, you get pulled away by a powerful gravity stream. Everyone who is pulled out of the galaxy and into Marra Zeya does not return.”

“The very edges of nothing? Where there is less than nothing?”

E'zon kept blinking and shaking his head.

“So there is a border and a centre.” A'jura said.

“You have no clue what the universe is made out of, do you?”

She was irritable but waved a hand in dismissal. He merely bowed his head.

“We live in an equilibrium of matter and anti-matter,” he explained. “Between the centre and border of our galaxy. While the centre is a chaotic storm of matter, the border is an infinite darkness of anti-matter.”

A'jura ignored most of what he said.

“It means that Cloa Geska is safe from turning into a giant black hole.” E'zon added.

But eventually she had to join his knack for astronomy and present a question.

“Black hole?”

“A gravity well in outer space that sucks in every type of matter, making it disappear into Marra Zeya.”

Slowly A'jura adjusted her seat and placed her elbows on the star chart. Her body distorted the holographic stars and planets as she leaned forwards. She watched the spaces between worlds, rather than the worlds themselves.

“How come you know all of this?” she asked to E'zon.

“I have been outside of A'mian before.” he said.

“What were you doing away from A'mian?”

E'zon diverted his attention to the map.

“I was on Zant Nurn.”

He put his finger on the dot that represented the foreign world. A small description tab appeared in the chart but it was empty, apart from a number that indicated the height at which the world floated in space. Sadly the numbers could not be read by A'jura, as every letter or number used did not look like either to her.

“Did you try to leave, then hide on Zant Nurn?” A'jura asked

“I did.” he said, yet did not elaborate further.

A'jura put her elbows on the chart and looked towards E'zon's single eye.

“And came back?”

“I came back because Zant Nurn is a very difficult place to be.” he said with slight dissatisfaction.

“That planet is nothing like A'mian, then?” A'jura questioned.

“It is a hub planet, housing as many species as possible.”

A'jura stared blankly into the map.

“How many?”

“Countless. Half of them exist in the western half of the universe, called Brinestar,” he continued.

“Zant Nurn is a common meeting spot for many different species of aliens in the southwest.”

“Our history was only filled with the names of a'mians and unoren.” said A'jura.

“True, and we have not concerned ourselves much with what goes on outside our planet, which may have been for the best. The universe is full of war and horrors.”

A'jura looked over to E'zon. She already guessed the parts about war and horrors.

“Can you tell me where Borum is?” she asked.

E'zon gave a few blinks, and moved his finger to the east of Zant Nurn.

“You first go here. To Dryn,” He tapped the dot, before he moved on southeast of Dryn. “And here is Borum. You cannot make the journey without a stop for more anti-matter collision power, and as you can see by the green colour of Dryn's dot, that is the most convenient stop to obtain fuel.”



A'jura bowed her head and laid her trunk on her shoulder.

“At least I know just a little bit more now.”

She could hear the wheezing breath of E'zokuj as she looked through the sopherast windows. The jet no longer went faster than light. She saw some of the chaos ahead of her on an object within the dark near an orange A'ro, small and frail. It had flames but little else it could impress her with.

“We are here?”

E'zon replied from the back of the ship.

“I believe so.”

Out in the darkness dwelled a planet mixed in crimson and emerald colours. She kept watching it as the jet approached and within her mind shaped an image of the stars that were out there even if they seemed so unappealing. An image of a world under red light dwelling on a maze of marshes.

Spaceships flew past close by and far away. Their destination was truly immense, unprecedented in A'jura's eyes; one of many hubs in the universe. Suddenly a voice invaded the speaker inside the pilot dashboard. This voice did not speak a'mian language but rather the widespread gescarian.

“Zant Nurn atmosphere travel control. Your destination?”

“Criyos Zant.” E'zokuj said weakly.

“Follow track fifty-nine.”

A'jura looked towards the cultist.

“We are going in and out as fast as we can, understood? Land, refuel, then back up. I need to be back on A'mian before your companions make a mess.”

E'zokuj loudly swallowed in his trunk, hoping to not upset a particular someone with his mere presence. Despite his perfidious behaviour he did follow track fifty-nine, indicated once more with numbers A'jura did not recognize. The Black Zenith burst through the ozone layer of Zant Nurn revealing trails of flying dots within the air signalling numbers to the ship. They guided the way to the spaceport of Criyos Zant, yet where this mythical city of said name existed A'jura could hardly tell. The planet surface had been littered, destroyed by infinite lights. Everywhere and everything was illuminated, even if Zant Nurn's A'ro was embarrassingly weak. She saw many cities on the muddy surface of the world individually encapsulated by walls and connected by isolated, singular roads passing through the damp, overgrown marshes. Much like her blood the vehicles travelled on these veins to reach the many organs that formed the planet-wide megalopolis of Zant Nurn. A'jura looked out through the front window and saw the single node they headed towards. At first it seemed a small wart on the skin of the planet feeding traffic to those around it, but as they closed in

on Crios Zant it quickly dwarfed I'serovaya's size to absurd degree. E'zokuj took control of the Black Zenith's movements and held onto a triangular steering wheel, plus four levers at his side. They headed to one of four grand buildings with a white roof on the city's circular edge.

“We need to prepare,” said E'zon to A'jura. “You will have to find more suitable clothing or some species may find you attractive enough to approach you.”

“What? Attractive?”

“There are a lot of species who see childbearers in dresses and get excited for the currency you might carry. They will think you are wealthy.”

“Alright. Alright, fine.”

She did not understand it but listened either way.

“Also, the I'riscurum tanks have to be filled to the brink and brought to the cockpit. I will do that.”

E'zon walked over to the storage room. A'jura stared down at herself and her robe. It barely showed off but apparently it was enough. She walked over to the fountain room, passing the storage room. She could hear E'zon.

“Wear the leather in your emergency supply case.” he suggested.

“I am going to decide that for myself.”

“Apologies. Trying to help.”

Though she would rather refuse it he did seem to know what would work. All of her clothing hung from the racks on the wall. All of them were robes. Having little choice, A'jura grabbed the emergency case from under the fountain and upon prying it open revealed several canisters of I'riscurum, bottles of water, a ship repair kit and a bandaging kit with many different algae salves against specific types of infections. Lastly, a set of black leather clothes with wide orange stripes on it. A'jura felt a sense of inelegance upon unfolding of clothing, but she assumed it would only be worn for a while. She took off her robe and instead tugged up the leather trousers and top. Both pieces felt like they were slightly too small, leaving some skin shown near the feet and waist even though the leather was surprisingly elastic and insulating. A'jura also pulled on a pair of tough boots that would not cover any of her talons to ensure that they were still usable for digging and raking. After doing a couple of stretches to get comfortable she headed to the storage room.

“The tanks are ready.” E'zon said.

When A'jura got in she saw two mechanisms laying on a crate. Each of them was about as large as an a'mian head, and was to be mounted on an a'mian's back as their lifeline in a world of air. Four ribbed tubes came out of the I'riscurum tank to link it to a'mian nosebones. E'zon had already pulled on one of them, tubes inserted and breathing through them with a very quiet wheezing sound. A'jura followed his example and lifted one of the tanks, strapped it to her back and inserted the tubes. She

looked out of the cockpit window with the dreaded knowledge that Zant Nurn was closing in. Now the space around the planet was stuffed with other spacecrafts. They sailed the open space to the very end of the horizon all moving in the same direction to get in or out of the planet. A lane in the air full of spacecrafts indicated by the lights in the sky. Not only was this planet enormous, it was crowded too. Incredibly, irrevocably crowded. E'zokuj took up an I'riscurum tank as well and used his claws to keep the tubes in his nosehole. He had some white algae salve at his nosebones to make sure he could breathe more efficiently. A'jura approached him. Loomed over him.

“Before we land, I want to ask you a couple of questions.”

“You may.” said E'zokuj.

“You work for the ashen, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Did you plan to capture me?”

E'zokuj quickly responded.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“The ashen prophet demanded that you would pay for your crime.”

E'zon sat on the couch as he watched the hundreds of spaceships travelling with them towards Criyos Zant.

“Explain further.” A'jura said as she placed a claw onto the cultist's shoulder.

E'zokuj instantly rephrased.

“You were to be captured and punished in the name of the ashen prophet.”

“The ashen prophet was in a cell, in I'agrez,” A'jura said. “He could not have had contact with any of you.”

“Perhaps you should not trust your acquaintances so easily.”

The claw around his shoulder dug its armoured nails into his flesh. He froze.

“You had best be more careful with your words.” A'jura said quietly.

“Would you leave the prophet be in the state that he was in?” he said. “I would not. I would help him out, cure his curse and bring him home.”

She grasped tighter, spoke demanding and unwavering.

“How did you lure me into this ship? Did you get into my netclaw? I was sent a message.”

“Your trust is simply misplaced,” E'zokuj said as he kept sowing seeds. “Your father is quite sympathetic towards us.”

She grabbed at E'zokuj's shoulders and slammed his head down into the dashboard. E'zon quickly rose up and pulled A'jura away. The cultist sensed his wounds anew.

“Do not do that. You could damage the controls!” E'zon shouted.

Yet she could hardly be held down, firmly holding onto the shoulders of the accused.

“A'jura,” E'zon interrupted, moving into her vision. “I advise you let him go before we crash into other ships.”

Casting back a gaze she slowly did as was advised, standing straight and puffing smoke from her nosebones.

“But E'lias was a fool,” said E'zokuj with sputtering breath. “A fool to think that you could be reasoned with. To think that you had the strength of will. You, A'jura, are what broke the peace on A'mian!”

“Get us into the landing bay before I kill you.” she said plain and simple alongside a buried, silent hatred. To stop herself from acting on her desires she turned and made her way to the living room in the back. With some concern on his face E'zon followed along. She sat down at the starmap with her head in her claws.

“Curse him.” she said.

E'zon did not reply for a fair while. He fidgeted with his robe. She showed her panicked eyes and held at the base of her trunk with one of her claws.

“What are you doing here, E'zon?” said A'jura. “What is all your help for?”

E'zon looked away in contemplation. He knew the answer had to be the best it could possibly be for he had witnessed the charred corpses.

“I know a liar when I see one,” he said. “And E'zokuj is most certainly a liar.”

“He has every reason to be concerned for his life.”

E'zon pondered more, the fear mildly evident on his face. He peered at A'jura from under his hood, from the corner of his eyes.

“You did not break the peace on A'mian. The terrorists did. Planting explosives, burning down villages in the outskirts. That breaks the peace. You only responded to their violence.”

“Yes,” she nodded frequent and swift. “Of course these cultists are to blame.”

Yet her thoughts dwelled on doubts and she could not let go of knowing, assuring, confirming.

“How many of the people I know are part of the ashen, E'zon? Make a guess.”

“I have no idea, A'jura.”

“Make a guess!”

He huffed out through his nosehole and looked around in search of a viable answer.

“Two? At most.”

“Who?”

“I have no clue. I do not know the people you associate yourself with.”

“The message from E'qonag,” she said out of the blue. “He pointed me to this ship. E'lias said it was my father's ship. A'mej could be in serious trouble.”

“Let me assure you of one thing.”

A'jura raised her head and stared up at the malformed a'mian with scales like broken glass.

“I told the truth,” he said. “I am a leaver, and I am going to Zant Nurn. I had nothing to do with this crew or their cult.”

“They did attack you,” she said. “I suppose I can somewhat trust you.”

He bowed down and laid his trunk on his shoulder in respect. And relief. A'jura herself continued shaking. Movements stiff, claws reaching for something to hold on to.

“We can turn around soon,” she said. “I need to find out who paired me up with these fools.”

“I understand.”

“Thank you,” A'jura stood back up. “And keep an eye on E'zokuj with me. Do not believe a word he says.”

“As you wish.”

The servile nature of his response managed to soothe her.

The Black Zenith carefully lowered itself to the surface following other ships at great speed and in tight formation. E'zokuj remained in the pilot's chair, watched by A'jura and E'zon. While A'jura looked across the surface of Zant Nurn she could see endless amounts of cities reaching up to the horizon. Most if not all of them had the same kind of structures visible from this high. These spires were disks, placed on poles of bewildering height stacked on top of each other, and some supported a diameter large as a quarter of the city beneath them. Other disks were flying off the poles, heading into the air and joining the Zenith in its flight. They blocked the view of Zant Nurn's red sky, and the vague shine of an orange sun that came in through dense clouds.

“This is insane.” A'jura said.

“Seems like a typical hub planet,” E'zon said as he sat on the couch nearby. “Looks like the population has exceeded the limits of the planet a long time ago.”

A'jura listened quietly, meanwhile staring out over the ground level of the city.

“How do they keep these people under control?”

“They create a hierarchy,” E'zon explained. “Some will control the rules. Others will act out punishment. And some are not allowed to control anything at all as they live at the whims of the rulemakers.”

“I see.”

E'zon stared at E'zokuj, unnerved as the pilot was while he focused on the journey to the Criyos

Zant docking station. That city, Criyos Zant, down below. That junkyard spread itself across a light-green landscape with very few pastures between them. In the marshes outside the city walls were glades of weed and shrubbery shaped like giant funnels to catch the rain. Far from the hustling urban labyrinths were more swamps, more mud fields guiding rivers coloured like excrement. The city itself, from the streets to the roads, crawled with moving heads and vehicles. Some of the traffic on the roads was of wealthy, functional design, others buggies of scrap and rust. A'jura saw the single ring of walls and that which awaited within clearer by the second. She could not imagine an alien with standards would voluntarily walk down in those unpaved streets of mud and planks. Because everything created in Criyos was a mismanaged decision, the only consistency A'jura observed was an outcry for attention. Bright, blinding neon lights. Billboards trying to sell items of insignificant value.

“I will head someplace safe once we land.” E'zon said.

A'jura inhaled slowly through the tubes of her tank.

“How much longer will you be around?” she asked.

His gaze avoided hers.

“Frankly I wish to leave as soon as I can.” he said.

Still she looked for something to hold on to.

“So do I.” she said quietly.

A generated voice rose from their communications channel.

“Black Zenith, fly to bay three-hundred-and-six.”

After many a language repeated the same clause, E'zokuj guided the jet through a maze of tubes with directions given to the docking bays. Taking turns revealed a somewhat cramped bay for their jet. It was an entirely empty chamber, coloured chrome and moss green, with clamps from the roof latching onto the vehicle. Once the jet had settled on the designated circle, E'zokuj turned off the engine. A'jura stared into the docking bay and watched a wall rise up high. Beyond the wall was a lengthy, slim hallway with a single window. The only light came from white, bleak lamps stuck in the ceiling.

“Ready. Let's get out, fill the fuel tank, then back in,” she summarized. “Open up the jet.”

E'zokuj stood up and did as a commanded. A sudden wave of air came screeching into the jet faster than a hurricane, sucking up the I'riscurum as if it were an inferior substance. The a'mians all squinted their eyes and stepped back. A'jura's eyes turned slightly grey from the touch of air. It was uncomfortable, cold and damp. She could already sense that her skin was not going to enjoy the air's touch.

“Onwards. E'zokuj, you first.”

She commanded and he did as told. Quick to do so. The more distance he could create from her, the better. He tapped onto a remote to close the Black Zenith from a distance. Past the risen wall, into the hallway, the roof of the arrivals station rose to unnecessarily great heights. Looking up, A'jura saw the red sky of Zant Nurn through transparent material. Studded panels made up most of the walls, with great banners hung up across the hallway. The dark red banners had a symbol reminiscent of a grinding stone. Around the stone were countless, thin, blue fins all protruding in the same direction turning the grinding stone into a sawblade. The one transparent window in the wall had a counter behind it. There it stood. Something mawless yet disturbing. Some other type of horror creation. Its face was visible, if it were a face. It was one oversized, bony head, shaped like a thin triangle as seen from above and the front. It had horns coming out of the back ends, ribbed and curled and two small nostrils hung under the triangle's pointy front end. It had no eyes, nose, mouth nor chin. Loose, light-brown skin hung from the triangular skull and connected to a very imposing body frame of which only the upper half was visible. It had very simple, muscular arms lifted onto its desk with light-brown skin merging along some sort of scaly brown bone that the head was made of. The loose skin hung at his three fingers too on each of his two hands. When it spoke it sounded like a genebearer. Clearly he could not speak by creating waves of sound. Instead, the words heard directly implanted themselves into A'jura's mind. She could only assume the others heard it too. The voice was jolly and fake.

“You have arrived at Criyos Zant.” he said. “You have no wares with you that I should be concerned about, yes?”

A'jura walked over to the window in front of the counter and bowed her head to the thing. It did nothing to acknowledge her presence or her gesture.

“No,” she said. “We need fuel. To get back to A'mian.”

The alien nodded his triangle head.

“I need a genetic imprint of your pilot.”

“Here he is.” A'jura said, pointing to E'zokuj. E'zokuj hesitantly glanced at A'jura before he slowly stepped forwards. The alien moved a hand to a screen next to him. Somehow he could see what was on it without eyes.

“I sense that you are E'zokuj,” he said. “Now I need the code of your bank account to pay for the fuel and a pre-registered planetary emigration form approved by the Sirrel immigration and emigration assembly of Criyos Zant.”

A'jura gazed right through the alien. Realising that she could barely understand the words he spoke she turned in search of help. E'zon slowly came forward.

“We have not established a bank account.” he said.

“Then you need to establish one.” the alien said as if it were the simplest solution in the galaxy. He went across the screen with both hands and entered data without the use of any hardware.

“Your name?” he said.

“I'd like to ask something.” A'jura interrupted.

The alien turned its head towards A'jura, though it was just a formality for it.

“How did you do the inputs for that machine?”

She pointed at the screen near the alien.

“I am of the Akang species, a'mian. We can enter the minds of mechanical systems.”

“I was fairly certain that mechanical systems did not have a mind.”

“So says you.” answered the akang.

“Alright,” said A'jura, looking at E'zon. “Did you know?”

E'zon shook his head and tried to get back to business.

“Are you making a bank account right now?”

“I made the attempt,” said the akang. “But it appears you are not on the list of registered citizens of the Brinestar interplanetary citizenship. Due to the risk involved with that I cannot open a bank account for you.”

“Can you open a bank account for A'jura? E'zokuj?”

“You first must register for citizenship at Vurak Zant. Then request a bank account at Sirrel bank in any city. Then return here to receive fuel after a transaction of currently seven-hundred skims. Then you must message the Sirrel immigration and emigration assembly of Criyos Zant and ask for a request to depart from Zant Nurn with a list of all items discarded in the process of moving to transfer ownership of those possessions to officials before departure.”

A'jura slowly turned towards E'zokuj, zoned out of the bombardment of bureaucracy.

“Is this funny to you?”

She approached E'zokuj with firm steps.

“I did nothing, I swear.” he said.

A'jura grabbed E'zokuj by his neck and pushed him to the silver wall.

“Is this another trick?”

E'zokuj shook in her grasp as he panicked.

“I do not know what that alien is talking about!” he yelled.

“You will tell me right now or you will join E'lias.” she whispered.

E'zon walked over to A'jura.

“Stop right now,” he said. “He has nothing to do with any of these rules.”

On edge, A'jura turned to E'zon, raising her voice.



“And how would you know?!”

“This is strictly an administrative problem.” E'zon said.

He was surprisingly calm.

“We need fuel, that is all. Why can he not provide us with fuel? We need to get home.”

“I need to comply to the guidelines or I lose my position.” the akang said.

A'jura stared cluelessly. In utter confusion and frustration she let go of E'zokuj. Her mind spun with emotions as she begged for answers.

“What did E'lías plan for you to do the moment you got here?” she asked.

“I have no idea!” E'zokuj yelled out in terror. “Buy fuel, that is it!”

“That makes sense, A'jura,” said E'zon. “E'lías was probably the one with a bank account.”

A'jura took a deep breath.

“Other options?” she said, as she looked back to the akang.

“I can send a message to the immigration and emigration assembly and they can instruct you further.” he said.

“That would be appreciated.” she said.

“Remember...” the akang uttered soundlessly. “You pay an hourly fee for the occupation of this docking bay with your spacecraft.”

One drop too many in the bucket and A'jura went back around to the bureaucrat with an untold fury building within. But looking to him meant looking to E'zokuj. The cultist had begun to sprint at an alarming pace, back towards the Black Zenith.

“No! get back here!” A'jura immediately went after him through the hallway with E'zon at her heels.

“Stop him!” she yelled as they went past the akang.

E'zokuj was nearing the risen door; the wall that had separated the docking bay and the hallway. Carrying the remote for the spacecraft in his hand he looked forward to his escape vehicle. The akang responded to A'jura as he turned to the nearest screen. One invisible input later and he had triggered shutdown. Within a second the wall that had opened up from the docking bay fell back down. E'zokuj re-activated the engines of the Zenith with his remote in his final breathing moment. A wall came down from above and crashed down in the middle. He screamed. For a single, tiny moment he screamed. The door slammed into his spine. Blood and guts launched into the hallway. From where A'jura and E'zon stood they no longer saw the ship and only one crushed half of E'zokuj. The bottom half. Pools of yellow blood grew on the floor. Small fountains of blood squirted out of his body. Then his Iriscurum tank exploded and shattered into shrapnel. A'jura and E'zon covered their heads with their arms to protect themselves as the shards dug deep into their

skin.

They stood in front of the akang, pupils shivering with disgust.

“I asked you to stop him, not kill him.” A'jura said.

“I did stop him. I am not responsible for dissent in your ranks.” the akang said coldly.

“This is not an accident. You killed him. We still needed him! He was a pilot!”

“I did what you asked, that is all,” the akang said as he shrugged. “I suggest we forget about this incident.”

The door to the docking bay rose back up and revealed E'zokuj's top half on its other side. From the walls erupted a group of mechanical arms. They shovelled E'zokuj's body parts into bags and used a vacuum tube to suck up the gore. Small tracked robots gathered the lost shrapnel while A'jura and E'zon pulled it out of themselves.

“As far as you and he knows,” said the akang. “The dead alien was a notorious smuggler.”

“He was not a smuggler, he was a pilot,” she said. “He was supposed to get me home.”

“I am certain you can find another pilot in Criyos.” the akang said, trying to reassure.

“Your words have done nothing but create obstacles.”

“I am simply doing my job.”

A'jura walked to the end of the hallway with a fist at the ready for a punch. E'zon deviated. He moved back towards the Black Zenith to pick up the remote control that E'zokuj had dropped and followed only then. Catching up with A'jura, he handed the remote over to her.

“What a fool.” he said quietly.

“I need to get out of here.”

At the end of the hallway began the grand hall of a transport hub where A'jura only required several seconds to notice at least ten different alien species passing by. They wandered in every direction. Suddenly she was a part of the masses.

Some had nothing recognizable, comprehensible, not a single body part she had terms for. Some seemed alive and thinking, but she could not be certain if they actually were. But most had some kind of machinery attached to their bodies to allow them to survive in the atmosphere of Zant Nurn. All of the walking space that there was filled and filled more and more with hundreds of these things, these creatures of faulty creation intriguing and disturbing her all at once. One sign in gescarian drew A'jura's attention instantly, for it displayed the words 'exit in this direction'.

“Outside! We need to talk!” yelled A'jura hurriedly trying for the way out. Sound everywhere.

Voices and music. The trip to the exit was easier said than done for the floor of the main hall had wasted away to become one of the most dilapidated of villages located inside the transport hub.

A'jura could see aliens cooking food, vendors shouted throughout the hall telling of the different stores available within it. Cheers roared from the fighting ring set up in the middle of the hub. Several rows of aliens were lined up to watch two brawler types duel it out. All seats full while the combatants broke bones in their attempts to claim respect, but none of that violent mess compared to the amount of junk and mud weighing down every step of their talons. A'jura and E'zon had to wade through people of random sizes, layers of synthetic materials and metal scraps, pools of clay and bushes of weeds. A'jura stared, wondered whether the station of Criyos Zant had anyone at all dedicated to maintaining it. She came stumbling out of the exit only to find the situation around her tearing further into her head. Before her laid a mile of shoddy pavement with countless randomly placed stores attached to it. Every store had spontaneously been placed on top of others with the shop owners hoping for even a slight amount of extra attention by increasing the height and luminosity of their billboards. The dark red sky nullified their efforts. The crimson drops of rain silenced all voices and burdened every being. The great disks of the city were high above A'jura and E'zon, acting like a lure for the ambitious. A paradise in reach but unreachable; they trod through the rain came before it. A'jura felt the polluted water on her skin, an unfamiliar sensation and an undesirable one.

“It's crowded everywhere!” she shouted to E'zon so he could hear her better than the synthesized music, the masses of aliens, the yelling shopkeepers, the red-shaded rain, the roar of spacecraft engines up above.

“We should get inside somewhere! Anywhere!” he yelled back.

It was hard to tell which building was suited. A'jura held off on attempting a hopeless search as the doors of the stores remained closed before her. She pulled E'zon with her into a small street, away from the main path. Although many aliens were passing through it the place turned out to be not as noisy. They were soaked by the heavy rain. Standing in a corner, against the wall of a store crafted from rotting wood they could put their heads together and listen to each other.

“Where to for a pilot?” A'jura asked, trying to sound calm, but sounding stressed. “We have to find a pilot, and we have to get a bank account. Right? Let us start with that.”

“You are working on it,” E'zon said. “That is your task. I have my own.”

“What?”

“I got here and now I need a place to stay.”

A'jura grasped at his shoulders.

“Hold on, E'zon. You need to help me here. I have no clue where to start.”

E'zon shook his head.

“Don't expect to be flying for A'mian today.” he said.

“I will do everything I can to get out of here. I need your assistance.”

He took up his arm, then let it fall. Stroked the rim of his netclaw.

“Are you leaving me now?” A'jura said, trembling but not angered. “Just like that?”

“We each have our own task to fulfil,” E'zon said. “No different than on A'mian.”

A'jura knew it to be true, yet cautiously moved away from the scarred cloakbearer. She lifted her head hesitantly, forcing some of her troubling thoughts away. Watched the rain fall and drown her and let it happen.

“Yes, understood,” she said. “I have gotten too accustomed to A'mej being at my side.”

E'zon blinked a few times and briefly put a claw on A'jura's belly.

“You are gifted,” he said. “You will do just fine. Remember that A'ro protects you.”

He then moved further down the street while peering at his netclaw. A'jura remained standing, looking at his back, overcome by rain, sound and stench. She cautiously moved into a new street but it was as crowded and messed up like every piece of Criyos Zant she had seen thus far. Of E'zon there was no trace. Not in a million years she could guess where he had gone, though pondered what he was searching for. She got pushed against the shoulders over and over by species of some place she did not know, made of something she did not recognize. Their misshapen nature, the strangeness of their language sparked her avoidance of them. A small alien bumped against her legs. As she peered down she saw a strangely shaped white blubber moving sluggishly. It was unclear whether it could see her, hear or smell her, considering the thing was nothing but moving goo. It had a fat blob as a torso with short, slimy limbs. Two for arms, two for legs, and one sticking out of the top of its body, all hanging down limply. It did not have hands but metal protrusions dangling out of the slime in random places, acting like functional limbs. A'jura stared at its slow and sombre walk, its lack of potential, its wasted evolution.

“Slime,” said A'jura, trying to catch its attention. “Slime beast, can you talk?”

The blob moved the limb on the top of its torso, like a head lifted by the neck. It had no eyes, but it seemed to stare.

“Yes or no?” A'jura tried to confirm.

After a few seconds the blob continued walking. A strange brown alien that A'jura could not see very clearly laughed towards her. Its genebearer voice barely pierced the howling of ships in the sky.

“Groff do not speak, rookie.” he said in gescarian.

He was gone before she could observe him, perhaps speak with him and find a few answers. All those around her became faceless and unbearable nothings like him. She saw at least twenty different intersections from here and none of the paths had a clear destination. No equal distances

between every alley, no buildings of equal heights. The rain and mud made every stone slippery, uneven streets now flooded up to the ankles. The salesmen could not care less as they set up in random places shouting away and pretending like all was fine and dandy. It did not make the crowd find shelter either. Contrarily, as A'jura walked on just another piece of the street the aliens sat on the ground before her in a large group. They raised their maws, trunks, tubes, cups and buckets to the sky and drank or gathered every drop of rain they possibly could. A'jura carefully treaded around to not disturb what she saw as a ritual. Buildings that she could see were foodstores, drinkstores that did not sell water nor had fountains to converse at, garages with vehicles of scrap metal, armouries, clothing shops, weapon stores. Some buildings offered services. Financial, legal, social, technological, magical. Though often automated, the machines that replaced workers were still manned by workers to manage them. Those oddly-shaped aliens stood there silently, waiting for something to become broken while otherwise serving no purpose. All of the stores, no matter what they were providing paled in comparison to the great space station close by that housed the Black Zenith, even if the station's interior had been reduced to match the city it was built in. When A'jura looked inside some of the buildings she more often than not saw a single, tiny room with products on display and a desk to sell at. Everything seemed so poorly and cheaply made and customers were nowhere to be found. She walked on praying to find a sign in gescarian with the word 'pilot'. Her talons were covered in mud by now. She pushed away sharp pieces of scrap metal with her toes. Soaked, looking forwards with pupils wide to let in the light. A building like no other was finally in sight. It was taller than the rest and inside was a soft, cold blue, plus benches carved out of dry wood to rest on. Although the tall box looked more welcoming than anything else there was no alien who dared to get close to the entrance. Huge pieces of metal had been hammered onto the front wall. Together they created a symbol of eyes tied to an opal ring that looked into every direction. Each of the eyes possessed three pupils, lined up horizontally. For just a moment she could not resist the pull of a refuge from chaos. When A'jura got inside of the box she grasped her trunk with both claws. She slid it across her skin to taste and drink the red raindrops on her. Her tongue responded like she drank the blood and sweat of these forsaken aliens. Observing the one hall she was in revealed that the rows of benches faced a small altar. Three aliens resided on the benches, all of the same species. Their skin dark purple and wrinkly, their eyebrows crested around their heads as the halo. On the altar was a metal face, very similar to the ones of the aliens in this chapel, but the bust squeezed its eyes closed to block its own sight to the world around it. The rest of the building was full of grey ornaments, surrounded by grey walls. The multicolour lighting of the street outside came through their broad windows. A'jura could not shake off the menacing feeling that the aliens gave her. She could hear voices coming from empty places. Somehow the

noise outside had vanished. The pace of her heart began to slow down while the strange voices sped up. The altar became hazy and hypnotic. A'jura wanted to speak to one of the aliens, but she was drawn towards the altar instead; the face that blinded itself to the outside world. Before being conscious of the fact, she stood in front of the blind bust. She could not take her eyes away. Everything blurred except the altar. The face opened its eyes, revealing empty eye sockets black as the abyssal depths of space.

“Mu'en zhesath.” it said.

A'jura felt a sense of danger and spoke carefully.

“I am looking for a pilot.”

Surprisingly, the face easily switched to gescarian.

“It is a pale one,” said the face. “Come from foreign lands, have you? To where must you go?”

“I need a pilot who can bring me back to the planet A'mian.”

The face hummed as it distorted in A'jura's view. Space around her shifted like she had been inebriated.

“There are many pilots. I am a pilot too, figuratively speaking. I can take you to many worlds.”

“To where?”

“Would you like to go to the Land of Shards?”

Although A'jura still felt highly uncomfortable she decided it was best to play along.

“What is the Land of Shards?” she asked.

The face seemed pleased by curiosity, despite it never expressing anything.

“In a time before time the Varazhe were wrought by sorrow,” it began to explain with great pride and flamboyant tone. “Plagues devastated their planet and left their bodies forever scarred. They grew frail, climatizing themselves to eat and drink minimally. To release their fear, their minds combined and shaped the Land of Shards. Pieces of their thoughts and hopes linger within one realm, where they came together to form a dream. A dream they shared, and can share with those who are not Varazhe as well. Do you seek to accept the gaze of horrors that surround you?”

A'jura eyed the strange face. The maw it had in particular. Its entrancing presence was intoxicating, the unmoving maw yet speaking mystical and prophetic but A'jura could stomach and fight it.

“You sure have a lot of trauma to work out.” she said.

“I am a manifestation of their hope, born from sorrow. The Varazhe made me a guide to their people, a leader. They named me their king. A bloodline of many perspectives.”

A'jura nodded slowly and began looking for a way out.

“Sure. And you can guide me as well?”

“I can guide you, but I do not exist. Your mind is your best guide.”

“So you cannot tell me where I can find a real pilot?”

“...no.”

A'jura bowed her head in respect attempting to get the lunatic ghost on her side.

“Do you know anyone familiar with any pilots?” she asked.

“You are on a planet with many connections to Cloa Geska. You will find a pilot,” said the face, only to snatch the chance to continue speaking in riddles.

“I can feel your perseverance. Your willingness to combat control. You have my gift.”

“Your gift?”

Within a second A'jura returned to a proper reality. The one which did not have talking, metal faces. Nothing presented itself on that altar. The Varazhe in the building were still in heavy meditation. She looked down in her claw to see a small pink shard in her palm sharper than a knife. Voices whispered all around her uttering an unheard phrase. Claws clutching around the fragment, she knew it was not her mind playing tricks on her. She could touch it, spin it and put it in one of her pockets. She turned to the outside and approached it with a slightly new take. The red rain became a thunderstorm. The winds got powerful. A'jura saw red lightning striking the great disks up high, causing no damage but creating a devastating lightshow. She went back onto the street to continue her search.

“That made no sense at all.” she muttered to herself.

More of Criyos Zant meant much of the same endless maze of disorganized accommodations. A'jura had been looking for the word 'pilot' on the billboards but somehow it was tough to find any mentions. If the signs would not tell her perhaps the aliens still could. A very clear indication on a large building in one of the random streets eventually drew her in with a large and colourful billboard. 'New Agata Tavern'.

“A'gata?”

Walking closer she saw two monstrous odd aliens in front of the entrance. They were extremely tall beings with a physique more common to childbearers. Their hair was most notable, comprised of great manes of shimmering crystals flowing down their spines. The manes shone well along their grey skin, both reflective and very tough; possibly made out of esteemed minerals. They possessed two large, blood-red eyes, but also a maw. A mouth full of black, jagged teeth. One single second of them in her view and A'jura retched. She bent forward and strangled her own trunk to keep the water inside. It took her minutes to regain her posture and dare approach further. Tubes stuck on the alien shoulders, linking to a canister on their back. Vital substances for the creature, supposedly. On their hands were drill weapons, easily carried by their massive and muscular frames. A'jura finally

got close enough for one of them to notice her. Without a doubt she could not look at their teeth.

“You cannot go in without. A check.” she said.

“Well then,” said A'jura. “Do your check.”

The alien lifted a small device out of a cache in her drill weapon. She raised it in front of A'jura and scanned her with an orange light.

“Unknown,” said the alien. “I need your name. Species. Planet of birth. Occupation, and. Company allegiance form.”

“Company allegiance form?”

“Yes, which. Cartel employs you.”

“My name is A'jura, my species is a'mian, my planet of birth is A'mian, my occupation is uncertain and I belong to nobody. Now where can I find a pilot?”

The alien nodded several times.

“You can. Enter now.”

“I need a moment of your time,” A'jura said. “Where can I find a pilot?”

“Everywhere.”

“A pilot whom will return me to A'mian.”

The crystalline creature remained silent. A'jura looked towards a clump of weeds on the street with the urge to throw it.

“Your species?” she asked.

“Xehyss.” the creature said.

“How many different species are there in Criyos Zant?”

“Nobody knows.”

“How many a'mians?”

“How many. What?”

A'jura wiped the rain off her forehead with a quick strike of her claw. She stepped into the tavern without another word. Even if this establishment seemed quite commodious from the outside, it was fairly small nonetheless. The amount of guests was nothing to write home about while the amount of employees was far beyond required. The tavern had benches and tables of wood against the walls, a bar with a kitchen behind it at the end of the room with cooking utensils and machinery on display. Builders used scrap metal as the main crafting material for almost everything inside, like the platform of a circular stage at the centre of the tavern. Expensive lights hung from the roof with ropes facing the stage with an odd, black light. The light darkened the singer on stage to partially hide her and add mystique. Unlike any other creature in the tavern, A'jura could recognize that being on the stage. It was a zardai of Borum. Its body was plain and curveless. Smaller than most



too. The two features that stood out easily were its bronze skin, shimmering bright within the dark light, and two massive horns coming out of the sides of her skull. The horns were gold-coloured waves of very impractical size flowing backwards in many elegant twists and curls. So unmanageably huge they would hit the floor upon lifting the head. Inscriptions engraved all over its skin and horns created a variance to their appearance that A'jura could observe with some fondness. The zardai herself wore a very expensive robe with many meaningful markings, painted to be a colour blending with the lighting. It did have a mouth, but no flesh nor teeth could show itself from behind the metallic skin of golden colour. A'jura already knew that zardai were impossibly great singers from Borum, but the words that flowed from this zardai's plump metallic lips were still far more impressive than she had ever heard before. With every note that rang through her shell-less ears she wondered if it could end. If the zardai could stop being so heavenly clear and stable in that soprano range. She made the words spill effortless, last forever.

“Miik naies enimi na kuva.  
Vyv na daiva an boré.  
Oas kii aph, Oas kii aph.  
Borum paiar pha rym na iia.”

“I long for endless deserts.  
Gleaming planet of my kin.  
Send my body back, send my body back.  
Borum hides the life of us.”

A'jura listened quietly while stood between tables. That voice, that sound, hypnotizing, disarming thievery. The alien at the bar pressed a few buttons on a remote to turn the dark lighting off the moment the zardai let out the last note. It had cut the act short and guests paid no mind. A'jura stared onwards, stranded in thought as the voice still lingered in memory. Quietly she walked up to an empty table and sat down. Inside the wooden table was a small screen. It asked A'jura, in gescarian, to select a language from a database of six-hundred. 'A'mian' was not a viable option. Then a list of potable products appeared of which none were water. She had to scroll all the way down to find it, but the water she saw displayed on screen was red.

“Seven skims for red water?” she asked herself, blinking.

“A'jura.” she heard behind her. It was one of the xehyss from the tavern entrance.

“Yes? I was about to ask. Can you tell me what I have to do here?”

A'jura pointed at the screen. The xehyss pointed at the communicator on her own wrist.

"I need to connect with. Your communicator," she said. "For access to your. Bank account. You. Did not pay for entering."

"What is a communicator?" A'jura said.

She stared and waited, begged almost for a proper answer. The xehyss opened her mouth slowly.

"So. You. Must be new here?" she said.

"I am, but I am not planning to stay either. I have to find a pilot to bring me back to A'mian. I believe I told you."

"You told. My sister. Now, to pay anything in. Our tavern you. Will need a bank account. I advise that you. Make your way to the Sirrel bank instantly. Where is. Your communicator?"

A'jura pointed at the screen with one of her nails.

"Can I have some water?"

The xehyss glanced down at A'jura's wrist, seeing only a foreign device.

"Wait," she said. "You have. No communicator?"

"I have a netclaw." A'jura answered as she tapped it.

"I doubt. That suffices. Very well. You need to go to. Civil services and acquire. A communicator. It is free. You can get it at. The transport hub."

"What do you mean, it is free?"

"You do not have to. Pay for it."

"I do not have to pay for anything. My netclaw is just fine. All I want is water. Normal water. You do have some water, right? It falls from the sky on this planet."

The xehyss gnashed her teeth together, creating a very threatening, rattling sound.

"You. Cannot be in our. Tavern without paying for products."

"All I am asking for is water. Not products. Water. Transparent, colourless water."

"Sirrel does not allow. You to walk around on this planet for more than a couple of days. Without a communicator. And. You cannot purchase water. Without a bank account."

"I decide where I walk and I do not understand your trivial systems."

The xehyss growled wildly, then grabbed A'jura at her leather top.

"You. Are leaving."

A'jura tried fighting back right away, swinging her scaled claws at the xehyss' hard skin. She was unprepared for battle and it showed with her arms wildly, unceremoniously flailing. Unfortunately the alien was physically immense, nor did it seem able to suffer from wounds. By now all the guests and employees in the establishment looked at the distress. The xehyss easily dragged the a'mian out and unharmed by her claws. She threw her out onto the street. A'jura landed on the broken

pavement and the metal scraps, white skin at her arms raked open by the sharpest ends. Steps of talons, feet, and many things that resembled either passed by her mud-covered head. She began to bleed. The alien stood in front of that odious place with no comments to give. Just another day on the job.

Rain, and steps of creatures, wailing winds and howling ships, plummeted to the unknown ground. Seeking grip, something to hold on to. Blinded in the eyes by mud, strangled by the blood running down her arms. She shivered with her limbs though weakly defended herself against the burden of gravity. Something in the water, something in the air. People not like people. Where? She pushed the scraps away from her arm. Puffs of smoke blew out as she managed to get on her knees and claws. A hand came down from above. It was brown. It had six fingers, two of which thumbs flanking on either side. Tiny, white spots on the brown skin, except for the nails. Those were a bright and poisonous green, capping the tips of every digit. She took the hand slowly. Her talons found grip. This alien stood in front of her. It did not look much friendlier than others, but at least it was an obvious childbearer easily visible thanks to what A'jura believed to be a very elegant posture and the minimal shoulder width. The creature wore a belted, brown leather vest, tight trousers and boots that matched her light-brown skin well. Although some parts of her, like her armpits, had a vaguely white skin. Another belt around her hips carried two of the same guns. Her limbs could be understood, as she had two arms and two legs just like an a'mian. The arms were very normal, apart from the strange nails plus the rings right under her shoulder and wrist. Upon closer inspection the brown rings were fungus caps. Only on the side of them that faced the soil below could A'jura see small bulbous sacks that glew with the poisonous green the nails carried too. A'jura looked up from the alien's three-jointed legs, across her slim torso, to her face. She had two eyes with a bright green glow, as well as a pair of lips made from the poison sacks she had seen on the fungus and the nails. Her nose was quite normal, until the nosebridge parted in two, going completely around the eyes, connecting to her hairless brows on each side. Lastly, she had hair that was nothing like hair. They were hundreds of brown strings with tiny versions of those green sacks, all glowing bright. At every move the creature made orange spores fell off the hair of vines. On top of her head she placed a very wide-brimmed, leather, brown hat to cover the spots where her hair connected with her scalp. The inside of the hat had been heavily stained by spores. She gave A'jura a smirk.

“Fantastic show.” said the alien.

Her voice was high-pitched, possessed a slight echo. A'jura blinked, not quite realising what she was looking at. Who she was looking at. What the movements of the fungus' mouth meant.

“Tried to ask for water.” she said quietly, still dizzy and bleeding.

“Do you have anything to get those nasty wounds patched up?” the fungus asked. “We can go to my jet. I have bandages, water and foliage.”

“You have a jet? Are you a pilot?”

The alien raised a hairless brow.

“Of course I am a pilot. How else could I get here?”

Rain did not relent, thunder was consistently striking, but A'jura could finally look upon the street and sense direction. She let herself be guided by the new alien, walking through alleys that brought her further away from the transport hub, as well as the tavern. She rubbed at the three large cuts in her bleeding arm.

“I could use the name of the one who's aiding me.” she said grumpily.

“Seeh.” said the alien.

“Seeh?”

“That's right. Saw your fierce clawing of the bouncer in the tavern. Enjoyed that.”

“A'jura”.

Soaked, covered in mud, broken in spirit.

Seeh grinned widely.

“So what is it you do in your spare time? Beg for water?” she said as she adjusted her hat.

“You seem to think I am weak and clueless,” said A'jura. “It gives me nothing to work with.”

“Is that why you need a pilot? You want to get out of here? Who wouldn't.”

A'jura looked at Seeh, stopping in the middle of the street.

“Yes, that is it. Can you bring me back to A'mian?”

“To where? Where is this A'mian, then?” Seeh asked conspicuously.

A'jura stepped faster and halted the talking, elegant mushroom. Her pupils wide, claws raised as she demanded her attention. Seeh seemed very delighted to listen.

“Southeast. It is southeast from here on a regular map of Cloa Geska.” A'jura informed.

“Alright, perfect. Believe me, that information is more useful than you know.”

A bright and enamouring smile was on the living fungus' lips as she moved onwards past A'jura.

With only one way to go and one person to hear her out, A'jura nearly stumbled upon accelerating.

“To get there I have a ship stationed here at Criyos Zant,” she said. “It needs fuel, skims for the fuel, and I need to connect to A'mian's network to pass the platheum shield.”

“Those are a lot of things you need,” Seeh said with a slight pout. “But hey, one thing at a time. To my ship. We can think about networks and all that stuff later.”

Her casual nature and carelessness was not comforting enough. She gave A'jura a rather confusing

push to the hips.

“You should have some patience,” Seeh said. “It's going to be night soon, and you do not want to be on street when it's night.”

A'jura looked very confused about being pushed. Conversation she could at least follow, gestures much less so.

“Ships cannot go through the planetary shield around A'mian without a code,” she said. “And it could take a lot of time to connect with the network.”

“When it's night,” Seeh said, continuing on her own train of thought. “Those aliens of the hollow start coming out, scheming and stealing.”

She wiggled her fingers and bent her back to fail at acting scary.

“What is the hollo-”

“So I think it would be better if you stay in the jet for the night, so you do not -die-.”

Seeh poked against A'jura's side.

“Okay, stop talking.”

Seeh blinked, ceasing the silliness..

“I have never been here before,” said A'jura, rubbing her neckscales in frustration. “Can you answer my questions instead of interrupting them?”

“I can answer your questions,” she said. “And you can stay in my jet for a night.”

One of Seeh's tiny hair sacks suddenly popped, releasing a small cloud of orange spores. A'jura stared for a while at the drifting orange cloud.

“Your jet is clean, I hope?” she asked.

“Not at all!” said Seeh with another smirk. “But surely you could change that if you want.”

A'jura raised her brows.

“I am not going to clean up for you.”

“We will see about that.”

This far into the city each street had turned into a gangway. Planks covered up the pools of mud that prevented proper exploration. Sometimes A'jura walked through a hall with Seeh to get to the other side, onto a new gangway, into a new swamp of shouting merchants and rain. The stores inside each hall had an army of salesmen diving onto them. Seeh had a simple solution and snatched both guns at her hips waiting for the aliens to back off in fear. A'jura took her confident presence to heart. She could hold on to it, she gladly did. While the mushroom lead the way the endless advertisement was less dispiriting. The amount of aliens that A'jura did not know kept increasing but at least she knew one. While A'jura had not seen most species more than one or

twice, the white slimes with mechanical limbs kept reappearing from walls and alleys ready to take out the trash.

“What are those sludgy creatures?” asked A'jura.

“Groff,” Seeh said. “They're the silent labourers of Zant Nurn doing the dirty work. And the very dirty work.”

“There is work that nobody wants to do here? Do they not have a task?”

“Sure they do. It is called employment.”

A'jura puffed smoke from her nosebones.

“And that means?”

“My bad,” Seeh said. “You really need an update on Zant Nurn, I figure.”

“I am only curious for the moment,” said A'jura. “I should be off this planet soon.”

“Sure you will be.” came back at A'jura with an optimistic voice and rivers of sarcasm.

The edge of the gangways revealed itself to her and Seeh while the dusk settled. The rain had stopped but the thunder went on. They could see a red sun through the clouds reaching the horizon in a red sky shifting pale, yet darkness was just around the corner. At the edge of Criyos Zant's gangways they could see the tamed nature surrounding it in the shape of the marshes and ponds. Beyond that the cities far ahead infinitely followed on every part of the horizon, with the cold white light illuminating the skies. Directly below them were the muddy pools of dirt. Unliving dirt, dead and drab, sinking into the gutters beneath this city with streets stood on pillars of rotting wood above a hollow shell of scrap metal, for the soggy earth was more likely to cause drowning than support. She saw more aliens living down in the shell beneath the surface, where all the mud and junk gathered up in giant piles.

“You may want to watch your step,” said Seeh. “No fencing. And you do not want to be down in the hollow.”

A'jura blinked. One wrong step and she would fall to her death.

“A'ro can save me from a fall.”

“Who?” Seeh slowly turned to look at her.

A'jura looked back. She received the question. Someone asked.

“A'ro. The inferno in our skies. Our eye. This planet has one too, but it is frail.”

“You mean a sun?”

“No. Not just a sun. A'ro.”

Seeh snickered quietly. At the end of the last gangway on their trip was a fenceless terrace, but more importantly, a very tall pillar. It had very obvious openings for flying vehicles to come and go. Many did so too, constantly. A large billboard on top of it had some words of a language A'jura

could not understand. Seeh gave the console next to the huge pillar's entrance a tap. A voice came from a nearby speaker.

“Zabagnag Seferaaas.” the gurgling, rumbling voice said.

“Nazbziba muelhatuahbaak blunbzab.” said Seeh.

“Mabwizof raba.” was the answer to that.

A'jura just shook her head, not even trying to comprehend what just happened. The conversation did cause Seeh's lips to curl upwards. That must have meant something. Must have been some kind of expression of emotion. The metal door opened by itself and revealed the inside of the pillar.

There was nothing other than a silver hallway that headed straight to the middle of it. Seeh stepped into the elevator, thus A'jura decided she might as well follow. Up they went in the centre of the pillar passing parking spaces for many varied ships. Slowly and turned to the left as the elevator rose, A'jura peered at Seeh, whose mouth let orange spores escape as if even the insides of her body had been invaded by them.

“Can I ask what you are?” A'jura said.

“Don't trust me, do you?” Seeh chuckled.

Only now her immense fangs flashed dripping with an orange acid.

“I do not have a reason to trust you, but you will have to do.” A'jura said.

“I know this planet is not the place for trust.” Seeh replied.

A quick glance to the white pupils of the other.

“So you saw what happened in the tavern?”

“I think everyone in the tavern saw what happened. Except for those without eyes. You refused to pay for the sickly water.”

“Sickly water?”

“Everything that you eat and drink here is filled with an addictive chemical called rensphul,” she explained. “Good thing I found you before you started drinking. I take it you do not eat since you lack something to chew or suck with.”

A'jura rubbed at her forehead with her claws as a strange sign of her despair.

“But everyone has to drink water,” she said. “Are you saying all water on this planet is toxic?”

“Pretty much. You get the gist of it. And in turn, anyone who lives here is addicted to the drinks here. They can't leave the planet without going into heavy withdrawal.”

“But I need water to survive...”

“Lucky you. I have a reserve of clean water, straight from the clouds.”

Seeh gave A'jura another nudge to the shoulder while the elevator opened. It was a fine dock for a unique spacecraft on a particular floor of this hangar. Relatively small too. It had Seeh's ship as the

only object inside on a rotatable disk. At the end of the dock was a hatch, should they want to fly out into the red sunset. The jet was neatly compressed with its rooms not any larger than they'd have to be. From the outside it had an orange colour with brown, dead vines growing on some of its chassis like an infectious weed. It had eight wings in total spreading outwards and backwards, and a huge engine at the back glowing bright blue. The cockpit was optimally reinforced with multiple layers of transparent plating much alike the Zenith as necessary improvements for interstellar travel. Seeh moved towards her ship's entrance. She took a small remote from her vest and pressed a button to unlock it. The door opened and a ladder dropped down. Following Seeh with a small climb, A'jura got into the jet. A small thing compared to the Zenith. Tight, narrow hallways and rooms.

“You can take off your hat and your boots here.” Seeh said as she moved into the first little hallway and took off her own hat. It balanced on the hook of her hat stand. A'jura gave the stand a confused stare.

“I do not have a hat. Or boots.” she said.

“I do not mind. You look lovely either way.”

The rest of Seeh's glowing hair was revealed. It glew more orange at the top of the scalp. The vines were longer too heading past her shoulders with ease. This part of the jet already had its floor covered by the spores, some mud too and random garden waste. Just one look away was the cockpit, right in front of them. Although standard for the most part, Seeh had placed two big tanks next to the muddy pilot's chair. One of them held water while the other held dying plants. Seeh pulled out a modest wooden stool to sit on for A'jura, right next to a closed, white door. It probably led to the rest of the jet's rooms. Seeh sat down onto the pilot's chair to check up on her systems.

“So, back to A'mian?” she said.

A'jura blinked a few times.

“Yes, I need to return as soon as possible.”

Seeh pointed over to the water tank.

“Feel free.” she said.

A'jura looked at the transparent, soothingly colourless water and frowned in suspicion.

“You do not expect me to pay?”

“On the house. Water that doesn't make you an addict, right there.”

A'jura, still hesitant, sat down on the stool and picked up a brown cup. Her scaled nails turned a crank to let water flow into the cup. She put the cup down behind her and placed her trunk inside. She closed her eyes, allowed replenishment. Seeh began to laugh.

“That looks very awkward.” she said.



“This? Awkward?” A'jura looked at Seeh, lifting her trunk as if to save Seeh from the sight of her drinking. “What about you? Those things on your head are popping out orange specks.”

Seeh leaned back in her chair. It too was covered in orange.

“They are spores, what else would they be? That is just my way of procreating.”

For a moment A'jura made sure to look inside her cup of water. She let out a sigh of relief seeing the lack of orange specks.

“Are you telling me those are your offspring?”

“Have to do nothing for it,” Seeh said with a grin. “It all happens automatically. That is the best part.”

“Your entire jet gets stained automatically too.” A'jura commented.

Seeh bared her fangs as she grinned even wider.

“Not a gentle soul, are you? Quite honest.” she said.

“A soul?”

A'jura wondered about the word while drinking slowly. Seeh swayed her hands down like a wave and A'jura had no idea what that gesture meant.

“Honest, sure,” A'jura said. “I can lie if I need to. Now, when are we leaving?”

“You're also rather serious.”

Seeh lifted her feet, and pulled off her boots with a calm smile. She revealed her webbed, long toes ending with more of the acid-coloured nails.

“I don't have many problems,” she said. “So not many reasons to be serious.”

A'jura stared at Seeh's weird feet, right in between the toes.

“I do have a big problem,” she said. “There is a cult on the loose. My homeworld is in danger and I need to go back.”

“That's not really your own problem, is it?”

A'jura's gaze slowly went upwards into Seeh's stressless eyes.

“It is definitely my problem. I am responsible for the retaliation of this cult. I forced the cult to respond.”

“But you are not even on A'mian. ”

“I have decided that my task is to protect A'mian, Seeh. I care about my planet, dearly.”

“How sweet. So why are you not on A'mian?”

A'jura stared again. This time she was highly irritable.

“None of your business.” she said quietly.

Seeh raised her brows and put her hands on her lap.

“Did they tell you to leave?”

“Not quite. I left on my own accord.”

“So there is your problem. Trading your home for getting stuck on Zant Nurn. The universe just shat in your face.”

A'jura let her shoulders hang low.

“Thank you for reminding me.”

“How about we forget about your silly quarrels and I show you this room I have.”

Seeh stood up and opened the white door to reveal a narrow, windowless hallway. It had a few doors and a few shelves on the wall at the end. On the shelves were sealed bottles, halfway filled with dirt. Strange plants grew out of the bottled soil. A'jura stood up, took her cup of water along and followed Seeh during the tour.

“You did not answer me,” she said. “When are we leaving?”

Seeh opened the door furthest in, revealing a small bathroom. It was unfortunately not quite what A'jura expected. It had a tub made of clay and full of mud. There was still a closet, shelves, so at least the room was not entirely muck.

“The mud's very warm, and I have a fertile dirt layer at the bottom that's been festering for a few months.” Seeh said with a sense of pride.

A'jura shook with disgust.

“I do not sleep in mud.”

Seeh raised her brows, almost disappointed.

“Are you certain that you do not want to try it? When the zymosis starts it gets cosily hot.”

“I have no clue what you are on about. Can you find me a comfy chair?”

Seeh snickered and closed the door to the bathroom with a reckless slam.

“Of course I have a comfy chair for you.” she said.

“Seeh. When are we leaving?”

“We will discuss that in a moment.”

The answer did not gratify. Seeh opened up the space next to the bathroom. It was a supply room with a big window, table and three sufficient seats. Crates were stacked up inside of the walls. They had labels on the front, for the most part describing ingredients contained within. Seeh sat down on the table and kicked up her legs.

“These chairs will work?” she asked.

A'jura gave a slow nod of approval.

“This will do.”

A'jura sat down on the opposite side of the table to try and get a feel for the space she was in. Light came in from the big window, partially originating from the red sun in the sky. The chairs had

leather padding and a high leaning. They would do, indeed.

“So what did you need to go back?” Seeh asked casually.

“I need a pilot. I need to contact the warders of the platheum shield. I think I also need a bank account, the alien in the station said. I need skims. I do not know for certain what else it said.”

“And play along with Sirrel?”

A'jura turned her head to Seeh curiously.

“Is Sirrel the organisation with the sawblade banners? And why would I need to play along with them?”

“You get to wear those ugly suits and have an education. How are those wounds, anyway?”

A'jura looked at the cuts in her arm. They had stopped bleeding for quite some time now. The skin restored as quick as any a'mian's skin.

“Maybe one bandage,” she said. “And something to get clean.”

She took a breather and a sip from her cup. Seeh hopped off the table, went towards the wall and opened one of many crates. Taking out a simple bandage roll of a sticky type of cloth, she walked up to A'jura, grabbed her by the arm and packed up the wounds.

“Did Sirrel ever do anything to you?” A'jura asked.

Seeh finished first aid and sat back down on the table. She put her chin in both hands.

“So glad you asked. I tend to have run-ins with their roranka guards. They're stupid elemental pipsqueaks that hate anything fleshy.”

A'jura squinted.

“I see. And you are not part of any cartel?”

“Nope. I have only been here for a month.”

“So why are you here?”

“I'm here for my customers. Alchemist work.”

A'jura stared her down.

“Alchemist?”

“Someone who makes special kinds of draughts,” Seeh fiddled with her acidic nails. “Most often to get people high.”

“Aren't such practices automated these days?”

“Machines don't know anything at all about the millions of recipes in Cloa Geska. I go wherever I want. Get whatever ingredient I need, then experiment. Anyway, what do you think of your bedroom?”

A'jura took a good look around.

“A bedroom?” she asked.

“Never mind then. A chair-room.”

“You cannot do anything about the awful smell? I think it comes from your tub.”

“Are you kidding me?” Seeh grinned, standing up.

She headed over to the door.

“This odour is just delightful.”

Seeh got back into the cockpit and pressed the button on a remote. The hatch of the spacecraft dock opened up. A'jura slowly walked up to her, peering through the jet windows. Past the opened hatch were the clouds above, a magnificent skyline underneath, shining brightly into the night.

“Want to take a look?” Seeh said.

A'jura bowed respectfully.

“Maybe I can spot an ally of mine.” she said.

“That would be a chance of one in the billions.” Seeh replied.

A'jura walked to the exit and pulled at the door, climbed down the ladder and walked up to the hatch. As she moved forward a view of the city opened up. Bright sawblade ships in the sky, white lights on the mezzanine and rainbow neon on the gangways below her. She could easily fall over the edge of the building, especially with the harsh winds passing by her face. Torrents of sound came from above and below, but not being on the same height lessened the torture. A'jura quickly realised that she had no way to discern E'zon from a random alien in the crowd below. Seeh came over to stand at her side while chewing on a glittery pearl.

“You are right. No chance I can find him,” said A'jura. “He protected me against the cult. I am not even sure why the cult also attacked him. Smokewaders like him, they would not be a threat to the cult.”

“Is that why his name starts with an 'e'? Because he is a smokewader?”

“Yes. Exactly that.”

“Just relax. Don't think too much. Enjoy the sight of a colourful dystopia.”

A'jura sighed out through her nosebones with a plume of smoke to boot.

“If you knew how A'mian looked,” she said. “You would not be able to enjoy the sight.”

Seeh nodded slowly.

“I think this is closer to my kind of climate,” she said. “Didn't A'mian not have air?”

A'jura sat down to avoid the possibility of being dragged away by the wind.

“Tomorrow I will look for those in charge of bank accounts,” she proclaimed. “We can leave after that.”

Seeh bit on the pearl. It cracked open, releasing white chemicals that she swallowed right away. Her eyes dwelled on the back and the trunk of A'jura.

“So why did you leave, then? To Zant Nurn of all places.”

“I was supposed to move on to Borum.”

A'jura turned and looked at the fungus.

“I saw one,” said A'jura. “A zardai from Borum, in the tavern.”

Seeh leaned against the wall and snuck a new pearl out of her vest. She flung it between her jaws.

A'jura watched the jaws spread outwards and retract. Just two shiny, white fangs. Just two. Only two. Bearable.

“I did not know they were called zardai,” Seeh said. “They are the shiny aliens that sing?”

“And they are incredibly good at it too. They have a power named the voice of reason. That should explain it.”

“Explains nothing to me.”

Seeh dug her fang into the pearl and cracked the surface.

“What is that you throw into your mouth?” asked A'jura, unable to ignore the chewing. The motion of it, the sounds coming from it.

“Base bombs. To counter my acid. Not enough bases in the air here.”

A'jura pointed to the I'riscurum tank on her back.

“I need to breathe I'riscurum, not air.”

“I suspected it to be something along those lines.”

The both of them kept silent for a while as one of the colossal disk-shaped spaceships nearby rose up from the massive spire it stood on to wander off into the dark night. The sound was deafening and denied any conversation until it was gone.

“The crew of the ship that was meant to transport me,” said A'jura. “They were part of the terrorist group I was fighting. The ashen cult.”

Seeh fetched a new pearl and played around with it in her hand as she spoke.

“Sounds like a whole lot of trouble.” she said.

“I need to be able to trust you.”

A'jura stared at Seeh's poison eyes. Seeh quietly looked back until a grin painted her face.

“No guarantees. Either way, I need sleep,” she said. “So do not jump into my mud before I do.”

“I most definitely will not.”

The alien left and let A'jura remain. A'jura crossed her legs as she sat, placed her claws on her knees and scanned the city. The location of the Black Zenith. The places she had been to reach the edge of Criyos Zant.

Hours later A'jura sat down by herself in Seeh's ingredient room, darkness enveloping the

night as the sun had fled below the horizon. Something A'ro would never do. A'jura pressed the netclaw around her wrist. It turned on and revealed the networks that A'jura could connect to. She scrolled down on the screen for a while to find a network connected to A'mian. Hundreds of options in, nothing seemed to be it. She invaded a random network instead and a message popped up; 'Unauthorized communicator. You require updates'. Immediately after that notification a pop-up showed itself with three options. The interface her brother A'troz had installed.

"Hack, sap, or leave." A'jura whispered to herself.

She pressed 'hack'. Five seconds later she saw that she had connected.

"Well done, brother."

"You are an interesting being." said a quiet genebearer's voice.

A'jura nearly jumped out of her chair with shivering pupils. She stared into the window of the storage room. The purple face without eyes. The so-called king, out in the open. Within the very darkness of the night, a grim shadow. A reaper come to harvest. A'jura could look down his body and this time observe his wrinkly shoulders and arms. It seemed like he sat on the other side of the window at the mirrored version of the table.

"How are you here?!" A'jura yelled.

"I am here because you let me be here." said the ghastly king.

He motioned towards A'jura's pockets.

"Take out my blessing, pale one."

A'jura carefully put a claw in her pocket and took out the fragment. She looked at the pink surface of the crystal, glowing as if it had been activated. She dropped it on the table and gazed into the eye sockets.

"This is magic." she said.

"Magic? Our universe is full of wondrous powers. Some defy the laws of nature. The formulae of physics."

He pulled up the corners of his lips and stood up. His scarred, destroyed body was like that of his followers. Famished, broken and frail. When walking out of the window he suddenly appeared to stand right in front of A'jura. Made whole.

"There is no magic in our worlds, pale one," he said. "There are only species. Millions of them. So many that there are bound to be ones who would amaze you."

"I am disgusted rather than amazed by your ability to watch me through a window." A'jura stated.

"I never did ask for acceptance of the way myself and my people conduct our daily lives." he said to her.

"Why are you here?"

The king shook his head and sat down on the chair even though he did not actually do so. The lack of sound apart from his voice gave away to A'jura that this was all a spirit. A mirage. A trick of multiple dimensions fooling around, entangled and distorted.

"I have come from the Land of Shards to seek agents of change," he explained in cryptic ways.

"The pale would defy its heritage and call for the invisible sky to open wide."

A'jura sighed as she sat back down in front of him.

"You are just crazy, aren't you?"

The king laughed, though not to upset.

"I see through many eyes, but not my own," he said. "Forgive me for being blind to what lies ahead of me."

A'jura leaned forwards to run her claw through the being. She did not touch anything, yet he seemed entirely solid.

"Why have you decided to show yourself?" she asked.

"I want to inform you that the threads of fate intertwine at our feet. You will know when you have a use for me."

"And how would you know when I will need you? You lead a people."

"Vision," he said. It was meant to be an answer, but it was not.

"I know you are trying to be mysterious here," she said. "A proper explanation would be wonderful. I do not want to be stalked by you."

"Imagine if your glorious sun had a voice," he replied. "Imagine he had his thoughts and his realm beyond yours. Imagine if the eyes of your people were truly his alone."

A'jura stared silently at the king. At least he tried to explain himself.

"While my people and I live in the great and quiet land," he said. "The world around us wails in agony. I sense within you a seed of rebellion from an age that was left behind on this planet. I sense that you can make history, theist of A'ro."

His body was gone within an instant. Not even a flash or a slow fade. The king had been freed from the mind's eye. A'jura grasped at her forehead with the questions of sanity. She leaned back in the chair, twirling the fragment of the king between her fingers. The light inside of it faded away. She pocketed the shard.

"Perhaps I need some sleep."

"A'jura. Are you talking to yourself?"

From the bathroom nearby came Seeh's voice alongside the sound of sloshing mud. A'jura decided to relax, think and silence herself. But only to rest. She had not felt this tired for many years.