

EMMANUEL M
ARRIAGA



FIRST ELITE

F O U N D R A S E R I E S

03

F I R S T

ELITE

EMMANUEL M
ARRIAGA

FIRST
ELITE

FOUNDRA SERIES 03

Copyright © 2024 eshLucient LLC

All Rights Reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

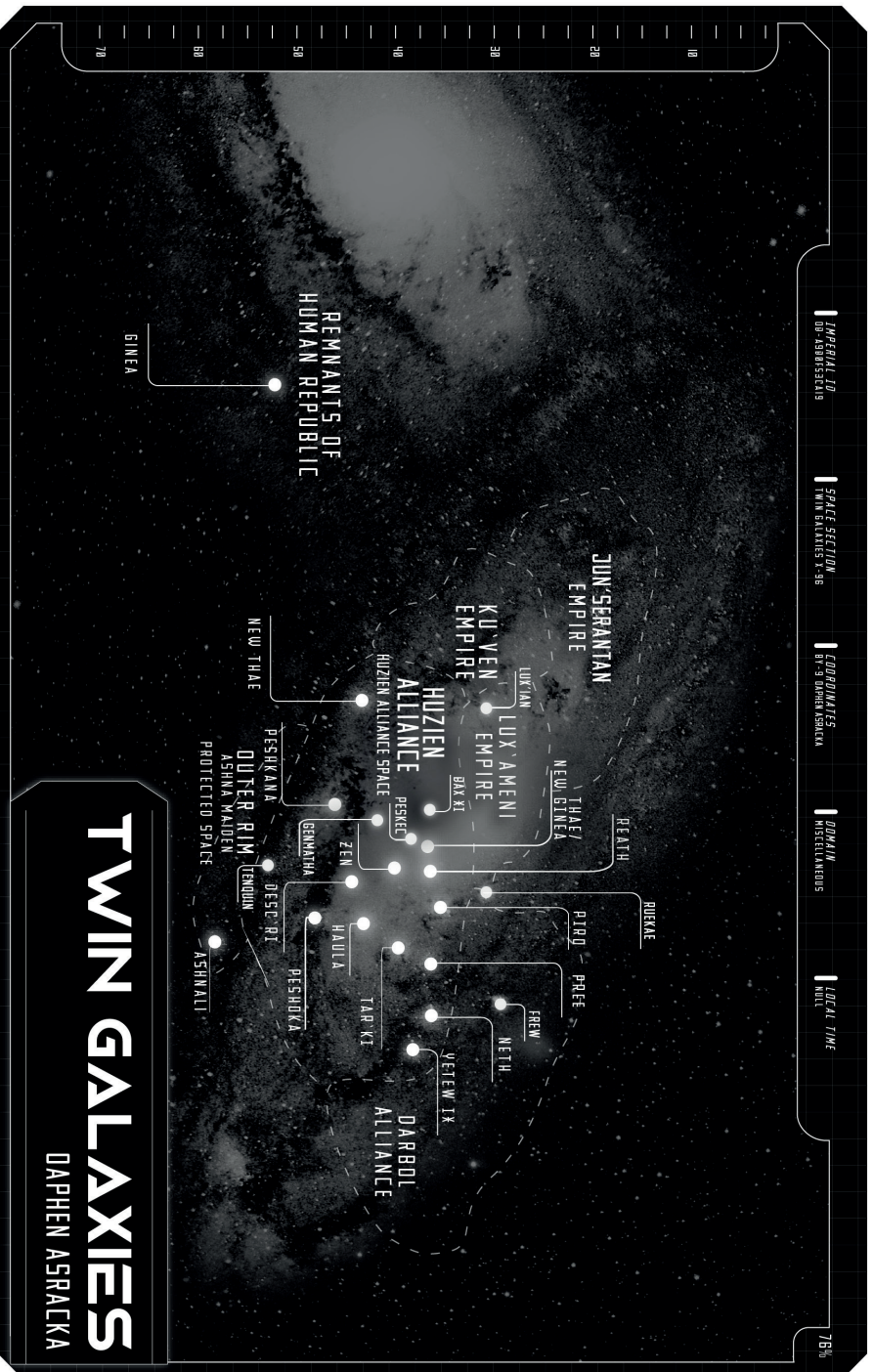
This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Cover design: Dayo Baiyegunhi

Internal formatting: Natalia Junqueira

Preview copy for Booklife

*To my son Daniel,
Your laugh always brings a smile to my face, and
watching you explore your imagination inspires me to
continue to share my own.*



IMPERIAL ID
00-45085326X19

SPACE SECTION
TWIN GALAXIES 1-98

COORDINATES
91-9 DORHAN ASRAKKA

DOMAIN
MISCELLANEOUS

LOCAL TIME
NULL

75%

REMNANTS OF
HUMAN REPUBLIC

GINEA

JUN'SERANTAN
EMPIRE

KU'VEN
EMPIRE

LUX'AMENI
EMPIRE

HUZIEN
ALLIANCE

HUZIEN ALLIANCE SPACE

NEW THAE

PESRIKANA
OUTER RIM
ASHNA MAIDEN
PROTECTED SPACE

GENMATHA

ZEN

DESC'RI

HAULA

TAB KI

PESHOKA

ASHWALI

DEATH

THAE
NEW BINKA

RUEKME

PIRO

PREE

FREW

NETH

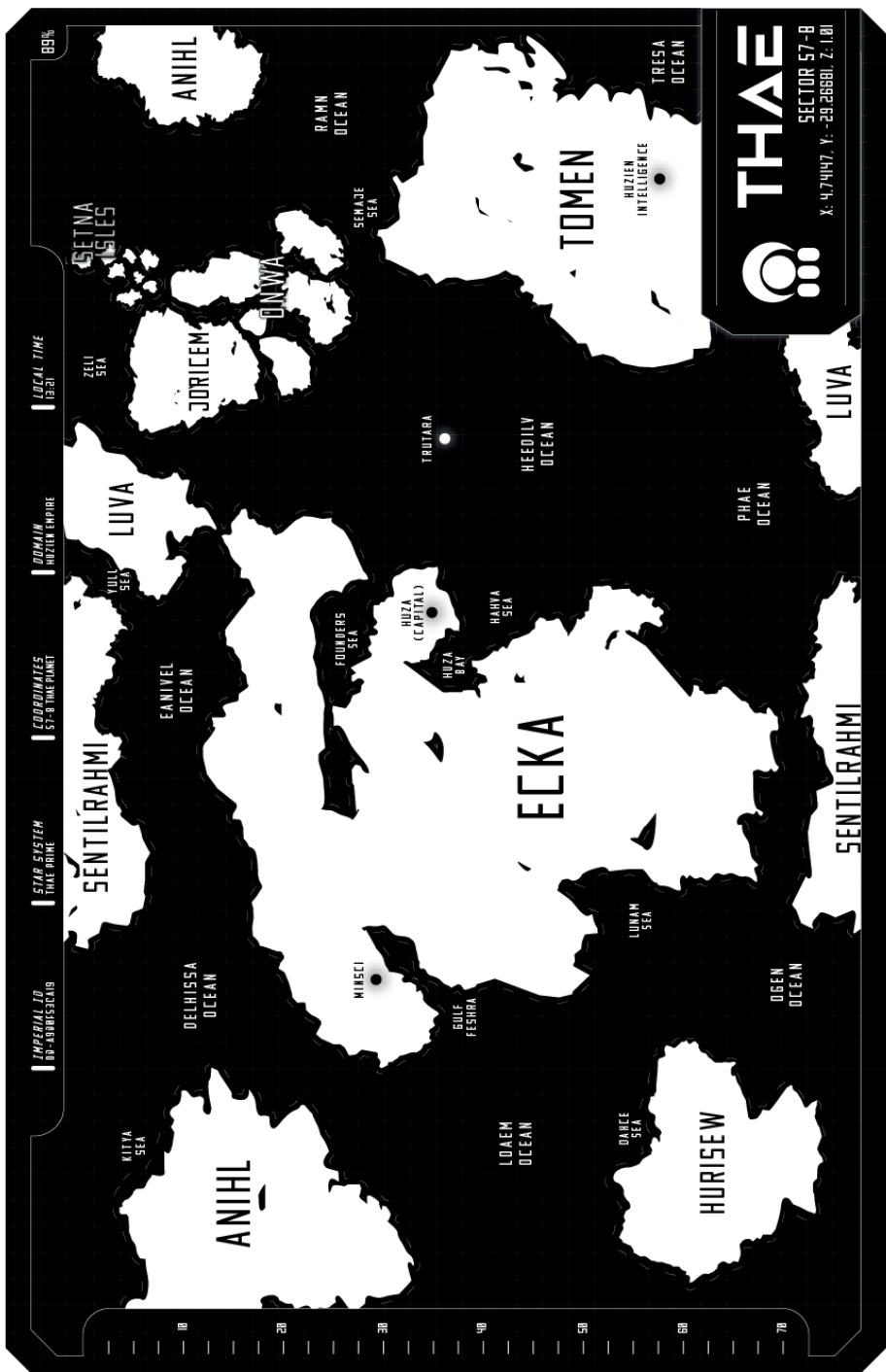
YETEW IX

DARBOL
ALLIANCE

TWIN GALAXIES

DAPHEN ASRAKKA

10 20 30 40 50 60 70



89%

LOCAL TIME
13:31

DOMAIN
HOTHIEV EMPIRE

COORDINATES
S7-B TIME PLANET

STAR SYSTEM
TIME PRIME

IMPERIAL ID
00-AB0055C3A9

Map labels and features:

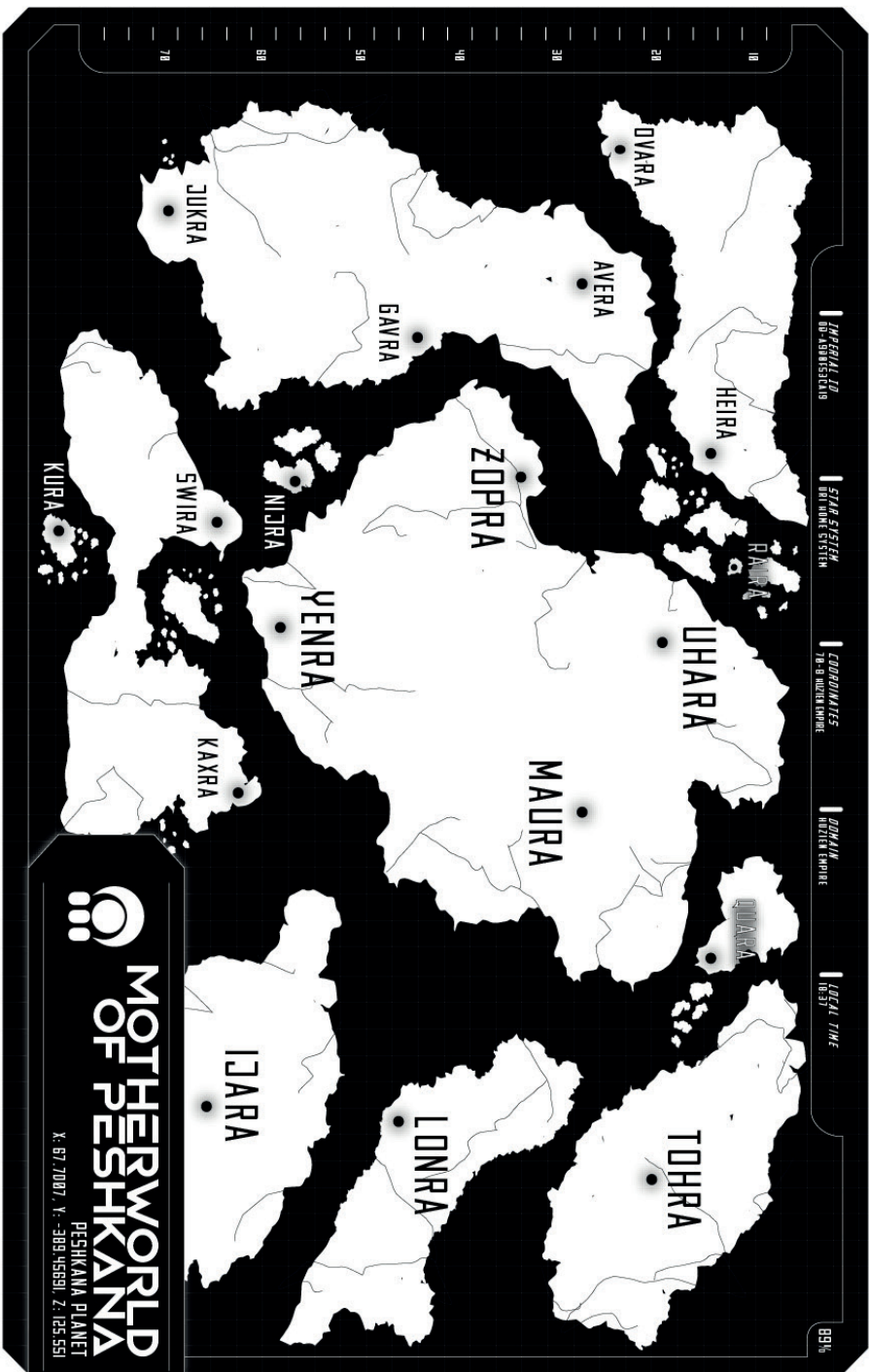
- Planets:** ANIHL, ECKA, TOMEN, LUVA, HURISEW.
- Oceans:** DELHISSA OCEAN, EANIVEL OCEAN, RAWN OCEAN, HEEDILV OCEAN, PHAE OCEAN, OGEN OCEAN, LOAEM OCEAN.
- Seas:** KITTA SEA, YULL SEA, FOUOGBS SEA, HABAHA SEA, DANCE SEA, LUNAN SEA, SERAJE SEA, SOLI SEA.
- Islands/Groups:** SETNA ISLES, TORICEM, ONWA.
- Key Locations:** HUZA (CAPITAL), HUZARA, WAZIEN INTELLIGENCE, MIAJSCI, EULI FESHRA.
- Other:** TRESA OCEAN.

THAE

SECTOR 57-B

X: 4.7947, Y: -29.2668, Z: 1.01





IMPERIAL ID
NO. 1504562310

STAR SYSTEM
BRI. ONE SYSTEM

COORDINATES
78.0 WEST 88.0 NORTH

DOMAIN
MOTHER EMPIRE

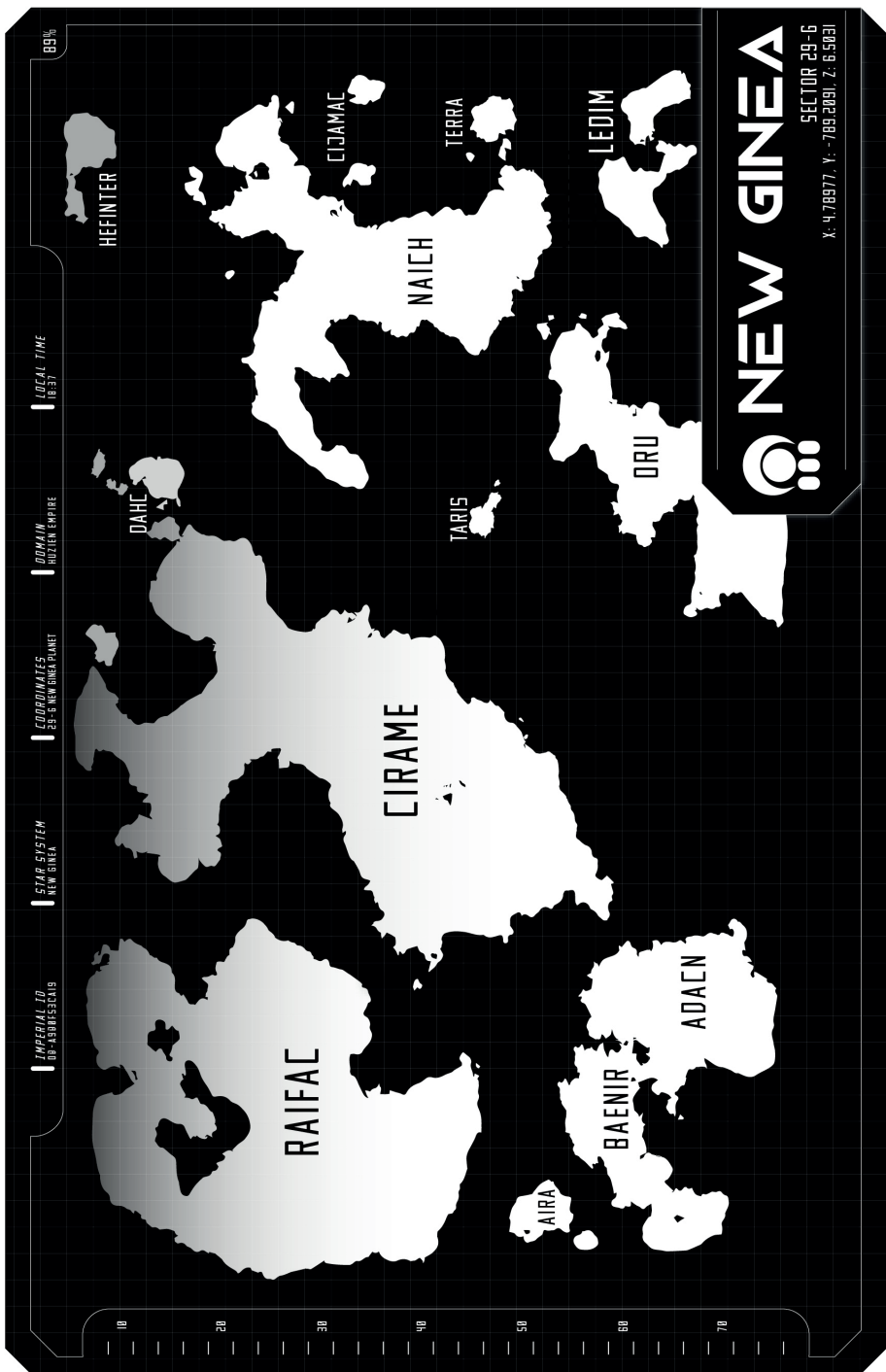
LOCAL TIME
16:31

89%
100



**MOTHERWORLD
OF PESHKANA**

PESHKANA PLANET
X: 67.7007 Y: -389.45891 Z: 125.551



IMPERIAL ID
OF ABBESSCLUB

STAR SYSTEM
NEW GINEA

ECONOMIES
SEE NEW GINEA PLANET

DOMAIN
BUREAU EMPIRE

LOCAL TIME
1637

89%

 **NEW GINEA**

SECTOR 29-6
X: 4.78977, Y: -789.2091, Z: 6.5031

IMPERIAL ID
10-07C9E1F9E4D

PLANET
TRAE

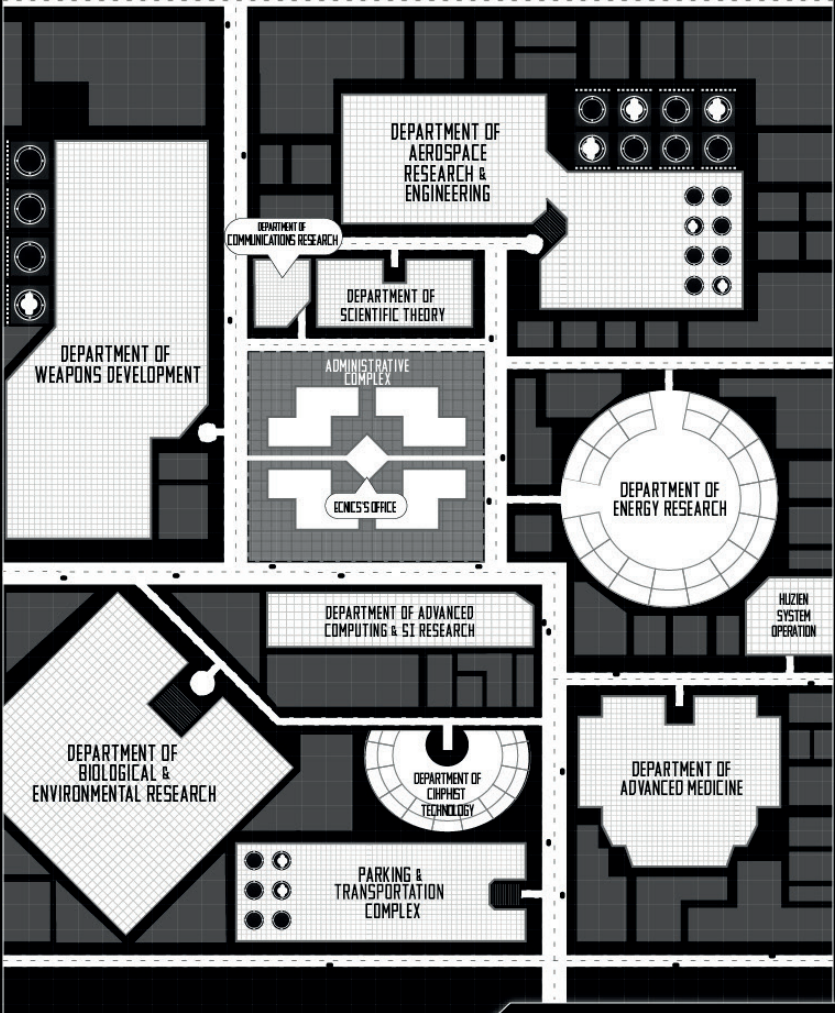
LOCAL TIME
16:05

IMPERIAL RANK
CAPTAIN

MISSION CODE
TR057849-0

MISSION TYPE
PERSONNEL TRANSFER

COMMAND ID
10-0000000000



LOG DATA

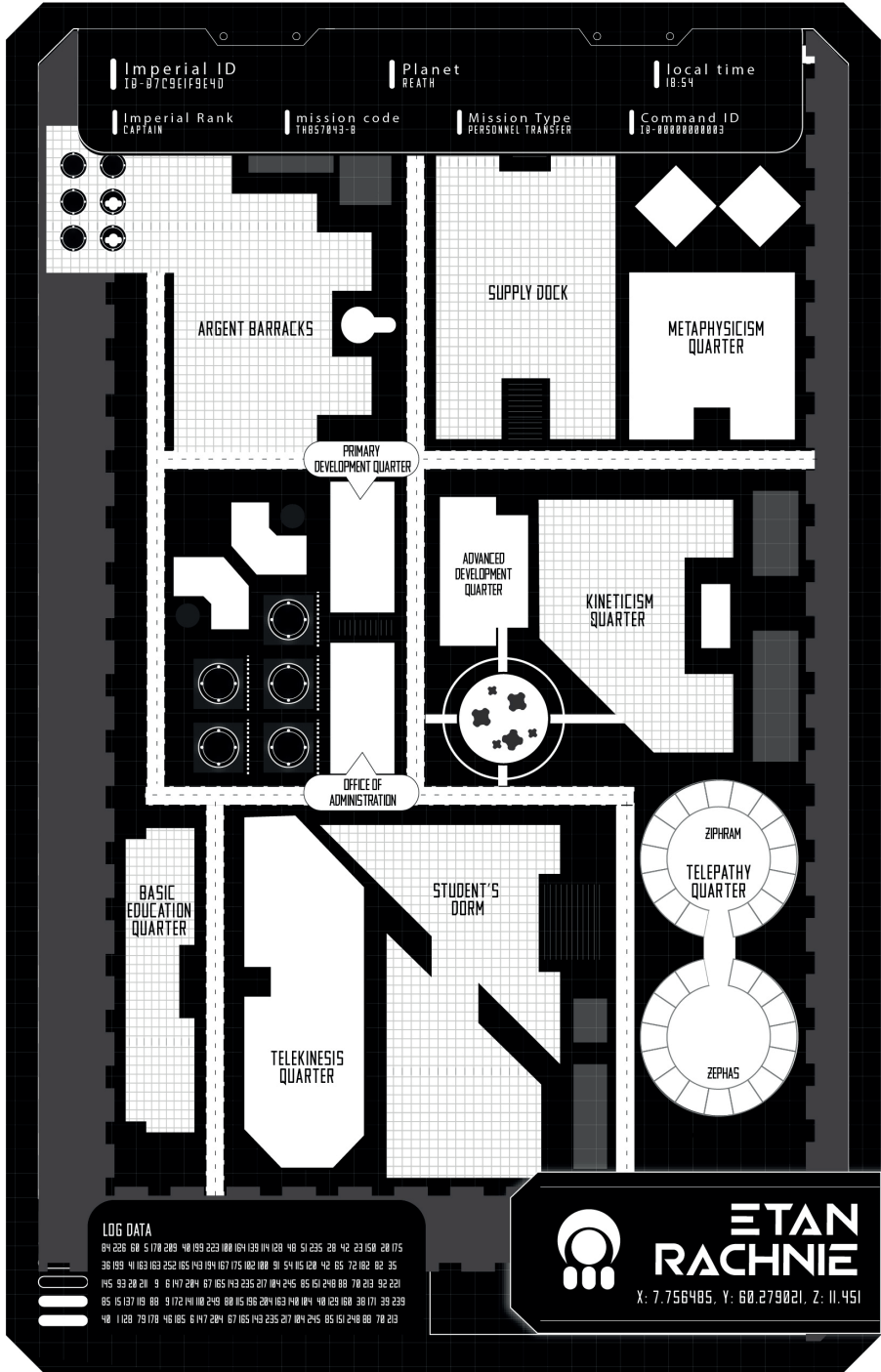
- 04 226 00 5 170 209 40 030 223 000 039 04 00 51 235 20 42 23 020 20 175
- 30 030 41 003 003 252 005 143 024 007 175 002 000 01 54 005 020 42 05 72 002 02 305
- 145 003 200 201 9 6 147 204 07 005 143 235 217 004 245 005 051 240 000 70 203 002 230
- 05 05 07 000 00 9 0172 141 000 240 000 005 005 204 003 000 004 40 020 000 20 071 20 230
- 10 1 020 70 070 40 005 0 147 204 07 005 143 235 217 004 245 005 003 240 000 70 203



MINSICI

MINISTRY OF SCIENCE

X: 0.73295, Y: -109.294021, Z: 13.21



Imperial ID
ID-87C9E1F9E4D

Planet
REATH

Local time
18:54

Imperial Rank
CAPTAIN

Mission code
TH857043-B

Mission Type
PERSONNEL TRANSFER

Command ID
18-0000000003

ARGENT BARRACKS

SUPPLY DOCK

METAPHYSICISM
QUARTER

PRIMARY
DEVELOPMENT QUARTER

ADVANCED
DEVELOPMENT
QUARTER

KINETICISM
QUARTER

OFFICE OF
ADMINISTRATION

BASIC
EDUCATION
QUARTER

STUDENT'S
DORM

TELEKINESIS
QUARTER

ZEPHRAM

TELEPATHY
QUARTER

ZEPHUS

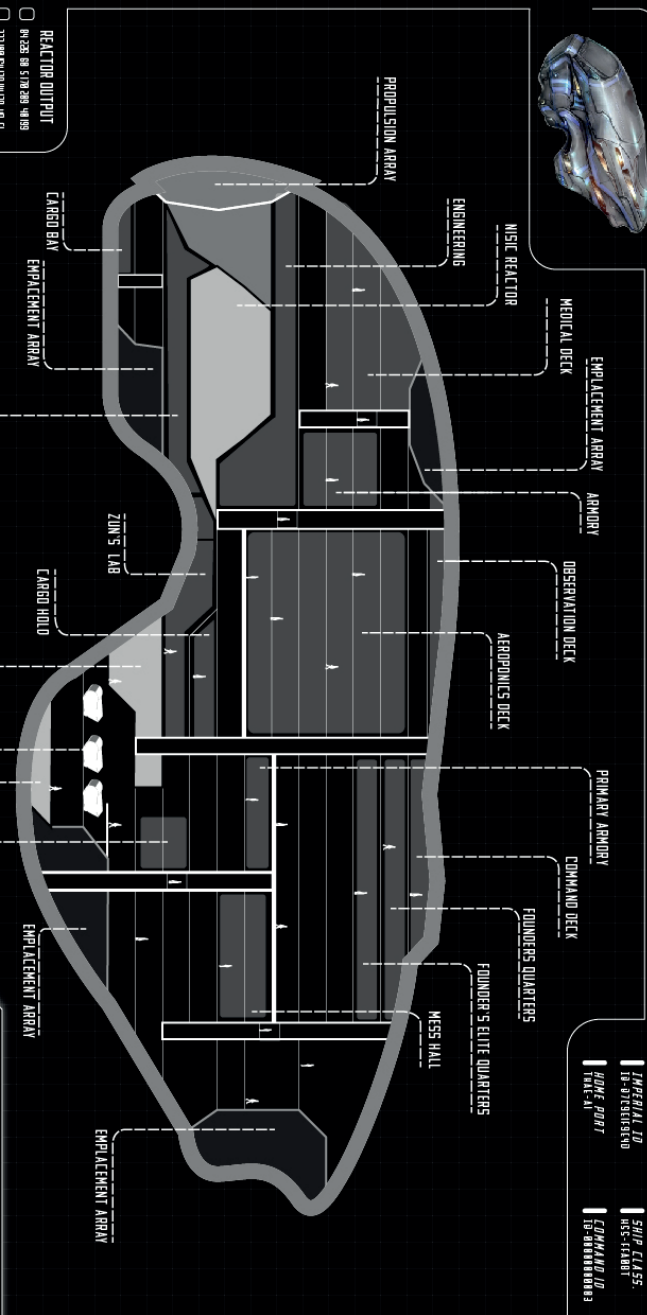
LOG DATA

04 226 60 5 170 209 40 189 223 100 164 139 114 120 48 51 235 20 42 23 150 20 175
36 199 41 163 163 252 105 143 194 167 175 102 100 91 54 115 120 42 65 72 102 82 35
145 93 20 21 9 6 147 204 67 105 143 235 217 104 245 85 151 240 80 70 213 92 221
65 15 137 109 80 9 172 114 110 240 80 15 156 204 163 110 104 40 129 80 30 171 29 229
40 1 120 79 170 46 105 6 147 204 67 105 143 235 217 104 245 85 151 240 80 70 213



ETAN
RACHNIE

X: 7.756485, Y: 60.279021, Z: 11.451

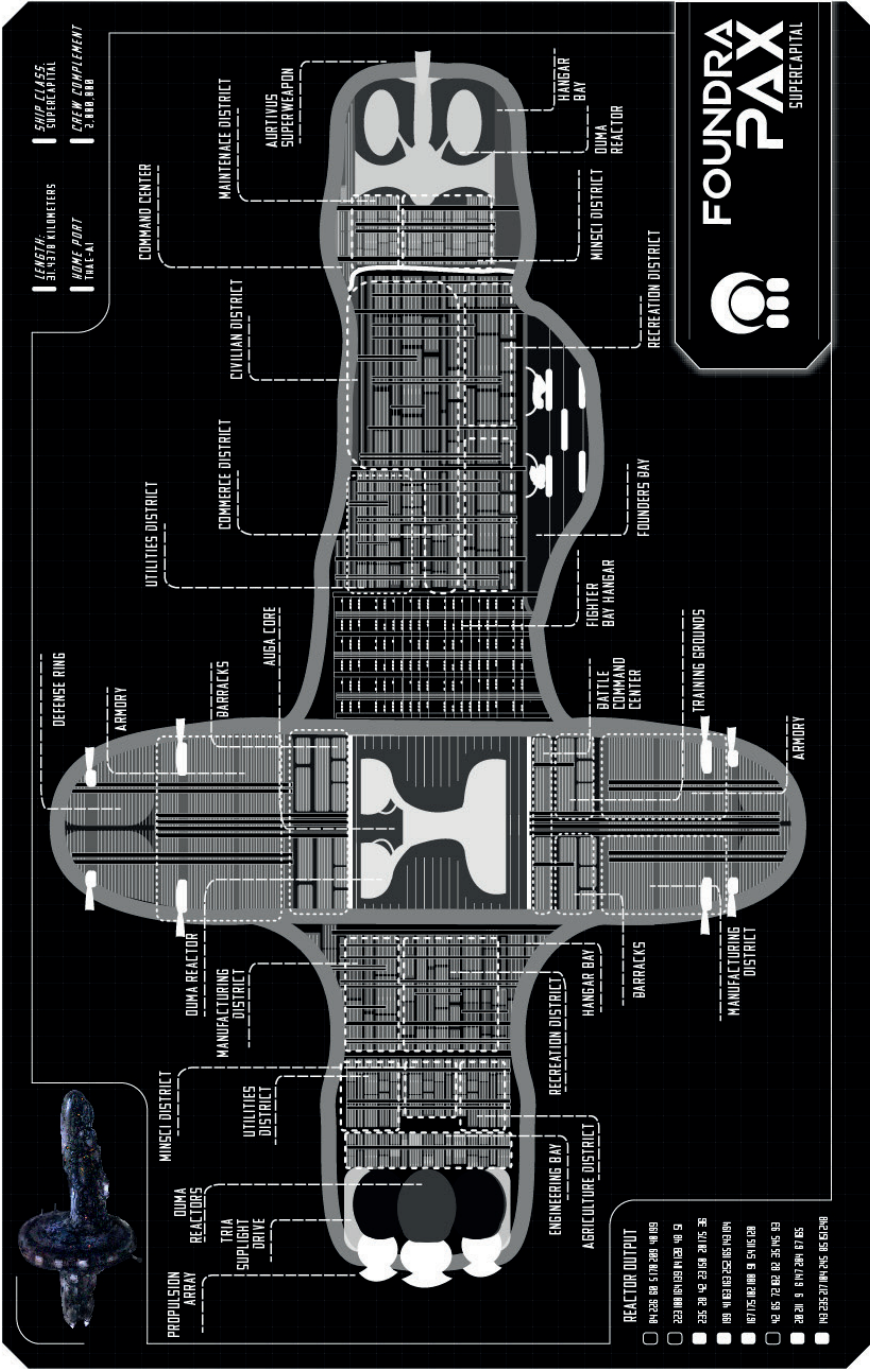


IMPERIAL 10
 ID: 01876583930
 HOME PORT
 THRACE II

SHIP CLASS
 USS-TAUBT
COMMAND ID
 ID: 00000000003

- 09230 08 5132000 04199
- 229 08061031010 08 08 01
- 325 09 24 2008 00 01 25
- 099 04 03 00 202 085 04 00 00
- 09715 06 00 04 5108 02 00
- 04 05 12 00 00 20 04 05 01
- 20 01 3 04 07 02 00 01 01 05
- 04 02 02 01 04 05 06 01 02 00

SHIP CLASS: SUPERCAPITAL
 LENGTH: SIXTEEN KILOMETERS
 HOME PORT: TRALE-AT
 CREW COMPLEMENT: 2,000,000



FOUNDRA
 PAX
 SUPERCAPITAL



REACTOR OUTPUT

- 84,238.88 5,178,200 48,103
- 223,180,670 94,238.18 9
- 235.25 10 23,158 20,175.35
- 103 14 183,183,252,183,183
- 18,715 182,100 9 5,116,528
- 10 15 12,182,182 30,115 43
- 28,21 9 8,197,204 1,185
- 183,235,207 284,216 185 63,249

PROJEKT: 17
19.03.2018

PLAN: 1
19.03.2018

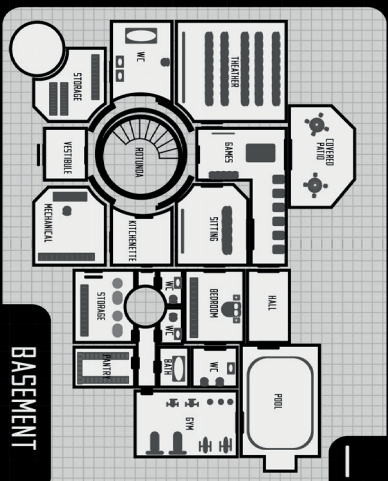
1:100
19.03.2018

1:50
19.03.2018

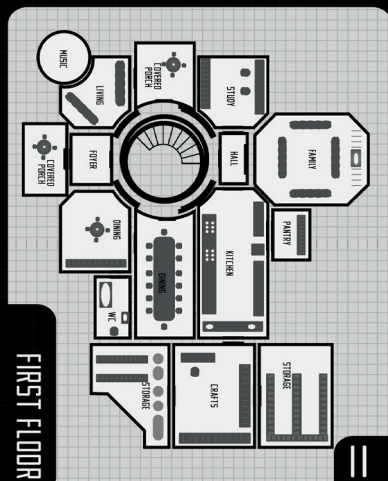
1:50
19.03.2018

1:50
19.03.2018

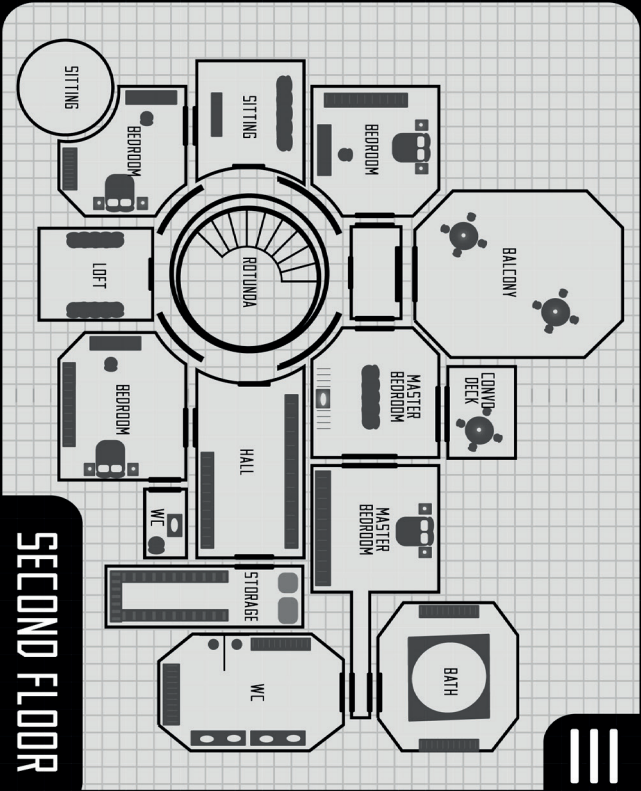
1:50
19.03.2018



BASEMENT



FIRST FLOOR



SECOND FLOOR



LANRETE'S HOME
HUZAS OUTSKIRTS

X: 80 767895 Y: 450 26921 Z: 61 6880

IMPERIAL ID
18-87C9E1F9E4D

PLANET
FOUNDRA ASCENSION

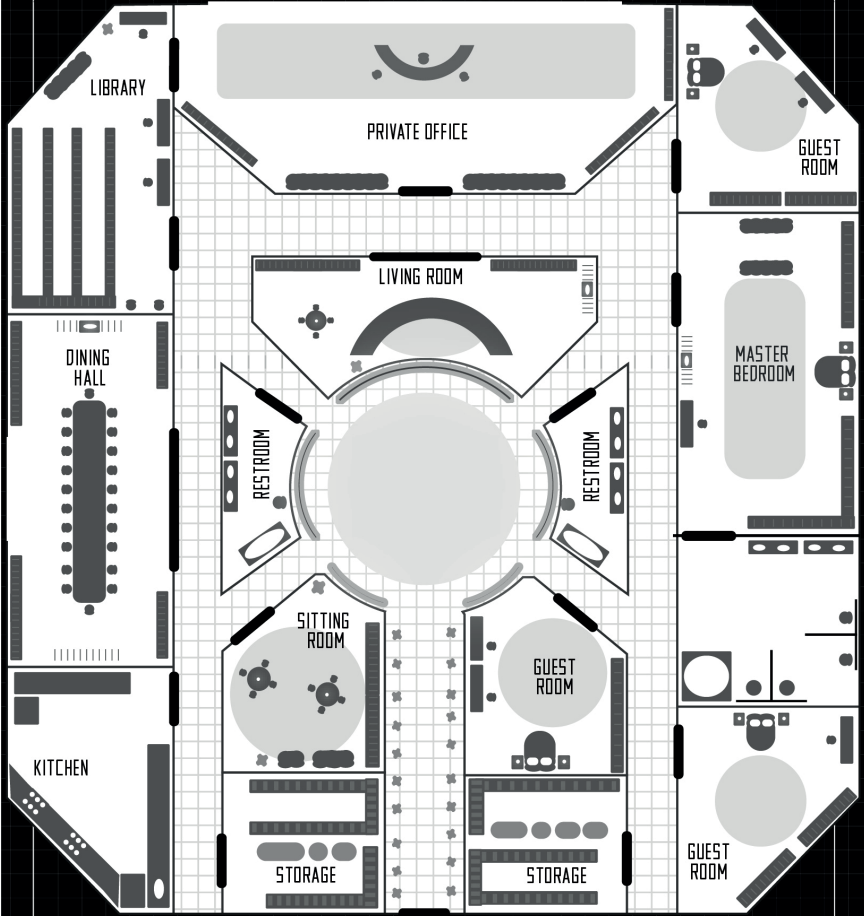
LOCAL TIME
22:26

IMPERIAL RANK
CAPTAIN

MISSION CODE
1H857843-8

MISSION TYPE
PERSONNEL TRANSFER

COMMAND ID
18-8000000003



LOG DATA

04	226	60	5	170	209	10	133	223	100	104	139	114	129	40	51	235	20	42	23	150	20	175	
36	159	41	163	163	252	185	143	194	167	175	102	100	91	54	115	120	42	65	72	102	82	35	
145	93	20	20	9	6	147	204	67	165	143	235	217	104	245	85	151	240	80	70	213	92	221	
85	15	137	119	88	9	172	141	100	249	80	115	136	204	163	140	104	40	129	160	30	171	39	239
40	1	128	79	170	40	165	6	147	204	67	165	143	235	217	104	245	85	151	240	80	70	213	



LANRETE'S QUARTERS

X: 7.756485, Y: 60.279021, Z: 11.451

IMPERIAL ID
10-07C9E1F9E4D

PLANET
REATH

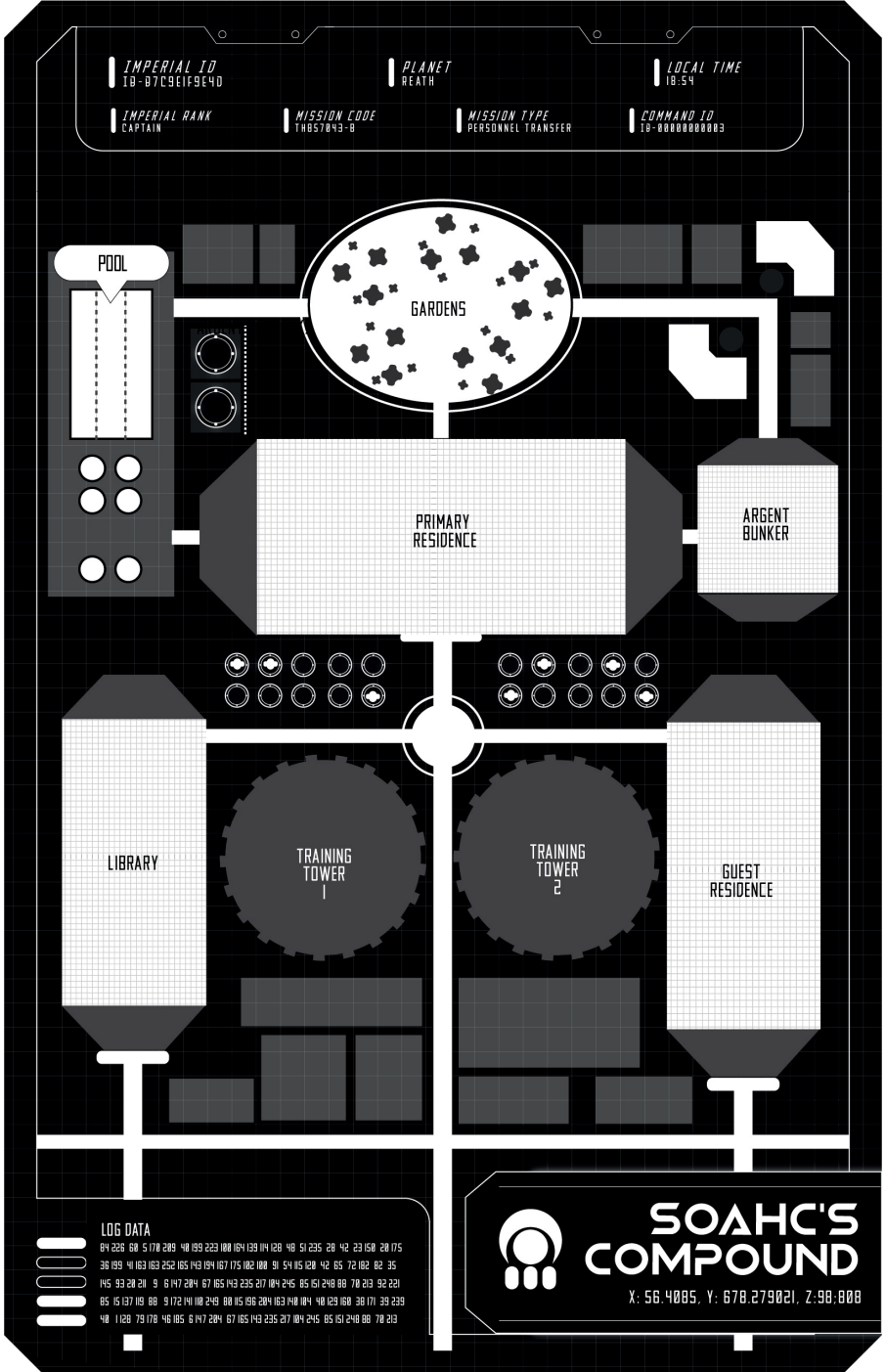
LOCAL TIME
18:54

IMPERIAL RANK
CAPTAIN

MISSION CODE
TH057049-0

MISSION TYPE
PERSONNEL TRANSFER

COMMAND ID
10-00000000003



LOG DATA

04	226	60	5	170	209	10	109	223	100	104	139	114	128	40	51	235	28	42	23	150	20	175	
36	199	41	103	103	252	105	143	194	167	175	102	100	91	54	115	120	42	85	72	102	02	35	
145	93	20	21	9	6	147	204	67	105	143	235	217	104	245	05	151	240	00	70	213	92	221	
05	15	137	10	00	9	172	111	10	240	00	15	106	204	103	110	104	110	120	100	20	171	20	220
40	1	120	70	170	40	105	6	147	204	67	105	143	235	217	104	245	05	151	240	00	70	213	



SOAHC'S
COMPOUND

X: 56.4085, Y: 670.279021, Z: 98.808



The effects of the Enesmic shipyards erected by Sagren during the Rift War appear non-reversible. Life will never again flourish here.

-FROM "ENESMIC SHIPYARD EFFECTS ON TRICA VII"
MINSCI METABASE

CHAPTER 1 - NEVEN KENK

*80123 FA (Present Day)
Foundra Ascension orbiting the Paradise Planet Genmatha,
Huzien Alliance space*

The steady, monotone beeping of the heart monitor blared across the medical deck.

Zun Shan's unmoving body was suspended in a complex surgical station and cordoned off behind a stasis field. Her neck was at an odd angle, and her hazelnut brown, angular eyes were lifeless and hollow. Her chest wasn't rising or falling in the universal life-signaling act of breathing known to most species across the galaxy. Instead, a drone was busy at work rapidly rebuilding the fist-sized hole in her chest.

The one where her heart should have been.

Jenshi Runso, chief medical officer aboard the *Foundra Ascension*, was methodically commanding the army of drones. His face was hard. Emotionless. Jenshi was known for his intense focus—that uncanny ability to shut everything out.

Neven Kenk, a Human pressed against the field surrounding Zun, wished Jenshi wasn't quite so skilled at ignoring him.

Neven's jade-green eyes trailed over Zun's tanned form, slowly tracing the light black esha marks running the length of her body. He remembered her touch and the warmth of her skin as they held hands on the beach, both finding the mix of her tanned skin tone and his dark olive a thing of beauty. He recalled how her smile lit up his life every time she ran her fingers across his muscular chest molded to perfection over two years of grueling sparring sessions with merciless combat trainers.

He closed his eyes, forcing himself to breathe. But behind his lids, the cold blue eyes and wicked grin of Zun's attacker stared back at him.

Entradis.

Neven, move! *Ellipse, his personal synaptic systems intelligence, or SSI, shouted in his mind.* He's going to kill you!

Neven was frozen, his body numb. His eyes hung on Zun's lifeless form as her blood changed the white sand to a dark shade of red. The soft hues of the setting sun were replaced by blinding lights all around him, and the intensity of it caused him to shield his eyes. The light was replaced by a wall of power armors jutting up out of the white sand of the beach, many of them closing instantly upon materializing, except for one directly in front of him.

Get in! *Ellipse urged Neven forward. Acting without conscious thought, he lunged, pulling himself into the back of the power armor.*

As it sealed around him, unseen forces knocked many of the other power armors away. It was the unmistakable work of Enesmic weaving—the powerful ability only usable by Cihphists. It was a power Neven had never had.

The freshly cleared path established a line of sight between Neven and Entradis.

“Beginning spinal realignment and neurological repair.” Jenshi's words snapped Neven back to reality.

He watched as another drone finished connecting a series of tiny thin nanotubes along the back of her skull, down her neck, and most of her back. A loud crack echoed throughout the deck



as her head shifted, becoming less macabre in angle. Many of the tubes exited her body, while the remaining ones moved rapidly in and out of her skin around the central part of her neck and across her skull, quickly working to rebuild the tendons, nerve endings, and grey matter. Another drone moved to assist, rebuilding the tissue in tandem with the other machines.

“Sweet irony.” Entradis reached out and clenched his fist. The area around them trembled at the terrible swirling of Enesmic energy.

A hum sounded from the primary power core as Neven’s power armor flared to life, and its innate defenses held the crushing Enesmic force at bay. Neven’s power armor glowed bright blue, and the cooling system let off a hiss as Entradis ceased his attack.

“Not this time, monster,” Neven broadcasted from his armor. “The Yuvan System I created will prevent you from killing any more Secnics in their power armors.”

A neural interface link slapped against the back of Neven’s neck, locking in place. He winced; the emergency link was less comfortable than his standard interface suit. A tingling sensation ran down his spine, signaling that his nervous system was syncing with the control interface.

Neven growled, rage blurring his vision. The power armor lunged forward with incredible speed.

Entradis shifted out of the way, using Enesmic forces to accelerate his body to inhuman speeds. Even with the boost, he only narrowly avoided a crazed Neven.

No! Neven, we must flee! Ellipse shouted.

“He just killed Zun, Ellipse.” Neven’s tone was cold.

Then we fight to the end, Ellipse said.

There was sadness in her voice. The other power armors came to life under her control. Dual Feponic shoulder cannons emerged from their dens, unleashing blasts of energized plasma at Entradis.

Entradis was knocked to the ground. The blasts impacted his barrier with devastating effectiveness. Scrambling up, Entradis shaped some Enesmic power into a rope and pulled it taut. “Let’s dance.” He grinned.

“Cardiovascular system reconstruction complete,” intoned the soft SI voice of the medical deck.

Jenshi didn’t respond, his eyes glued to one of the many holodisplays around him. A holographic representation of Zun’s spinal system appeared outside of her body. He walked over to the display and tapped a series of sections, immediately sending drones to work on those portions of her body.

He examined another holodisplay, briefly meeting Neven’s gaze along the way. Without acknowledgment, he tapped the screen and sent more drones into action.

Entradis ripped one of the power armors apart, using the powerful Enesmic force to peel back sections of the armor. Once he detected no soft Human center, he abandoned the target and pursued another.

Neven worked with the power armors, each attacking with their entire arsenal as he hid in plain sight, each armor a replica, mimicking his actions.

Entradis lunged into one of the power armors, his hands angled forward like claws as he dug into the machine in a frenzy. He ripped off the chest plate and roared, sending a torrent of Enesmic energy into the armor so it would expand as if hornets were swarming inside. It exploded in a rain of debris as Entradis lunged at the next power armor, tackling it to the ground. He raised his hands, formed fists, and brought them down, releasing a wave of Enesmic energy like a hammer. He repeated that action with inhuman speed.

Neven could hardly discern the movements, even as the power armor flattened under the assault.

Entradis turned his gaze on Neven. The look terrified him.

He smothered that part of himself with burning rage. Raising his arms, Neven pointed them at Entradis as shock blasters rose from his wrists. Each of the remaining power armors around him mirrored the action, all of them firing at the same time.

The intense blasts ripped through Entradis’s barrier. He gasped and flipped backward, quickly dropping behind cover. The continued assault left a trail of molten sand in its wake. Entradis reached out and



grabbed a large boulder from the water, and launched it into the nearest power armor. The sheer force of the impact punched through the shield, destroying the armor.

Only Neven's power armor and a final dummy armor remained. Entradis stalked toward them. Neven roared as he and the other armor charged at Entradis in tandem.

A series of small drones appeared and aligned down Zun's spine, while others came to rest on her new heart and at various points on her head.

"Ready to begin nervous system restart," the SI voice prompted.

"Initialize," Jenshi said.

A series of electromagnetic pulses emanated from each of the mini drones. Zun's body convulsed in the air, and the pulses stopped abruptly.

Nothing.

Jenshi narrowed his eyes, his gaze going to a nearby holodisplay as he analyzed the results. He tapped a few more places on the holodisplay, sending the larger drones quickly back to work.

"I haven't had this much fun in some time." Entradis peeled back Neven's power armor. He grabbed Neven by the neck, lifting him out of the broken shell.

Neven spat in his face as Entradis grinned.

Entradis summoned an energy blade and plunged it forward, but a familiar blade intercepted the Enesmic weapon. A kick to Entradis's chest quickly separated them.

Neven rolled to his feet, glancing at his savior.

Founder Lanrete of the Huzien Empire stood with his sword, Divinebreath, in his light-brown hand. There was murder in his eyes, his long, white mane of hair wild with fury. Jessica Olic was at his side, her silver gaze catching on Zun's body.

Entradis let out a low whistle. "Wondered when you'd show up."

Lanrete charged him, their weapons connecting in a flash. Their movements became a blur as Entradis kept up with Lanrete's speed. Lanrete

sought to push Entradis back with his raw strength, but Entradis matched the founder with the same intensity.

Shifting backward, Entradis lifted a few pieces of debris with Enemmic forces and hurled them at Neven.

Jessica Olic tackled Neven out of the way; the debris missed his head by a split second.

Lanrete charged forward, but Entradis clenched his fist, uttering a word of power as he vanished.

Cursing, Lanrete glanced around, but to no avail. There was no trace of Entradis.

His eyes caught Zun Shan's body in the sand, Jenshi already by her side. Lanrete's gaze went back to meet Neven's. The profound sadness in Neven's gaze was mirrored in Lanrete's weathered expression.

Jenshi initiated another pulse, making Zun's body convulse again in the air.

The pulse stopped, but her body remained limp.

Jenshi repeated the process six more times before slamming both fists on a nearby table, causing the holodisplay within to flicker.

Neven slumped to the ground, tears in his eyes as he stared helplessly at Jenshi.

CHAPTER 2 - SERAH'ELAX REZ ASHFALEN

Foundra Ascension *orbiting the Paradise Planet Genmatha,
Huzien Alliance space*

The full presence of the Founder's Elites had collected in the medical bay, with Tashanira and Jessica hovering around Neven next to Zun's bed.

Tashanira was a Uri—the catlike woman's fine fur was a mix of black and white, and she had yellow eyes. Jessica was a Huzien like Lanrete and Jenshi, with light-brown hair and orange highlights, dark-honey skin a shade lighter than Serah'Elax's own, and dark-brown esha marks that started at her temples.

Many small devices were all over Zun's body, each regulating some standard bodily function.

Serah'Elax Rez Ashfalen was sitting on one of the nearby empty medical beds, and Dexter Pinsten—the pale-skinned and red-haired Sentinel—leaned against it beside her. Serah'Elax's red hair hung down to her shoulders, and she kept her large, almond-colored eyes locked on Zun's body. Depending on how she moved, silver specks sometimes sparkled in Serah'Elax's skin when hit by the light. She was a Das'Vin and still new to the team now around her. Even though she'd only been with the Founder's Elites for a short time, she felt deep connections forming with them.

Jenshi cleared his throat. "I repaired the damage to her neck, and she has a new functional heart, but the brain damage from the blood loss and oxygen deprivation was severe. I reversed ninety-eight

percent of the brain damage by rebuilding the most severely damaged parts of her brain.” Jenshi clenched his fists, his gaze hardening. “However, I couldn’t fully repair the damage, and there is no brain activity.”

Neven stared at Zun. His posture was defeated.

“I’m sorry, Neven. I’ve failed Zun.”

Neven shuddered. Jessica and Tashanira embraced him as he broke down, sobs wracking his body. Dexter crossed his arms, his gaze stuck on the floor as Lanrete stood near the entrance to the medical bay, far away from the rest of the group. Erbusuc Tamn, the four-armed Ken’Tar—massive in size with golden-brown fur covering his body—moved to join in the embrace with Neven. His strong arms surrounded the group of three now sitting on the floor.

Serah’Elax looked from Zun to Lanrete. She could see a hint of restrained rage in the immortal’s eyes, but it was so subtle that she would have missed it had she not been raised by the Ashna Maidens. She had been trained to detect the emotions of people around her, always looking for the next ambush.

Lanrete turned away and exited the medical bay.

“We’re going to hunt Entradis down,” Dexter whispered. The former assassin’s green eyes were hard as he looked directly at her. “Nothing else matters now.”

Serah’Elax nodded.



Serah’Elax walked into her expansive quarters aboard the *Foundra Ascension*. The new room was still an adjustment from her small quarters in the Ashna Maidens. She had split her time between bunks on spaceships and her small quarters on Ashnali. In comparison, her new life seemed extravagant. Wasteful.

The Ashna Maidens focused on efficiency and doing more with less. From their long history of being surrounded by enemies on all sides, the Ashna Maidens had learned to optimize ruthlessly.



From what she had seen so far of the Huziens and the Alliance, it was the opposite. Everything was wasteful, and the people seemed oblivious to their ridiculous wealth and privilege. It sickened her.

“What’s wrong?” a voice asked from near the floor-to-ceiling window across the room.

Serah’Elax looked up at her mother, Dera’Liv. Her face softened. “The scientist, Zun, is dead,” Serah’Elax said. “Her life partner, Neven, is struggling with the loss.”

“He is lucky that they do not share a *ha’ishi*,” Dera’Liv said. There was a profound sadness in her voice. She returned her gaze out of the window.

“He is still in pain, *yu’shae*. I can see it. Just because others do not share the permanent connection from joining that we Das’Vin do, it should not diminish the pain they feel at the loss of those they love.”

“I did not say that.” Dera’Liv glanced back at Serah’Elax with annoyance. “I am sure that he is feeling pain. It may even be deep and soul-crushing. But his pain will heal, his heart will mend, and he will be able to join again with another should he choose to do so.” Her face hardened. “I will never again experience that joy. I will never have the hole in my heart filled. My *ha’ishi* will forever cause me pain at the loss of my beloved *dru’sha*.” Tears began to well up in her eyes.

An image of Ovah’Hal Vexi Rez flashed in Serah’Elax’s mind, standing defiant before the pirate scum who unloaded a barrage of weaponsfire into her chest. That was one of the few memories Serah’Elax still had of her *uma’shae*. The more peaceful memories faded more and more each day.

“I can only ever get hints of that connection—that pleasure and joy—through sharing my body with others who would have me,” Dera’Liv continued.

Serah’Elax grimaced.

Dera’Liv threw a hand up in anger. “Yes, you may view the idea that other people bring me carnal pleasure as an abomination, but I have nothing else. I have no other respite.” Sobs suddenly

overtook her as she leaned against the window, almost like she was in physical pain.

Serah'Elax rushed to her side, embracing her *yu'shae*. After a few moments, Dera' Liv's sobs subsided. She silently looked out into the empty void at the stars speeding by.

Serah'Elax released her and moved to her room; this scenario was all too familiar since they had left Ashna Maiden space. Serah'Elax returned from her room, changed into her typical relaxed attire, keeping her upper body nude and pairing that choice with form-fitting leggings down to her calves.

"I simply do not wish you to continue to live as a *fra'sha*," Serah'Elax said. She moved to the kitchen as the Omnifridge dispenser stirred to life and produced a bowl of red grapes and cheese. "Of all the things I've learned of our culture, that is the one that brings the most shame in our society, is it not?" She held up the bowl to Dera'Liv as she reclined on one of the nearby sofas.

Dera'Liv watched her daughter and slowly got up from the floor. "Not shame. Pity," Dera'Liv corrected. Sighing, she moved to join her daughter on the sofa. "It is only you who experiences shame at her *yu'shae's* choices." Dera'Liv side-eyed her daughter with hints of a smile.

Serah'Elax smiled back as the two silently ate grapes and looked out the window.





FOUNDER'S LOG: *No Peace*

When tragedy takes something away from you, it makes the loss even more bitter. In a world where tragedy is common, we can fool ourselves into believing that we will be spared.

But Entradis will never spare those around me . . . those who work for the good of the empire. He will never forgive me, and he will never give me peace. If I do not hunt him and put him down like the dog he is, he will kill every single person who means something to the empire I've tirelessly labored to build.

I must kill him. I must bring an end to the monster that has plagued the Huzien Empire—no, who has plagued me for far too long. I cannot continue to live in fear of losing those who bring me joy. He has yet to touch my family directly, but the threat is there. It will always be there.

In many ways, it is a blessing that Nalle feels no desire to serve the Empire and that her pursuits skew toward the entrepreneurial. He would strike out at her if she ever raised her hand directly against our foes.

That was his promise, after all, one that he has not shied away from keeping.

To have those I love live in fear that their actions will draw the ire of a psychopath is not a life I wish them to lead. Entradis does not feel remorse

and is driven by a desire to inflict pain and death. I don't understand the logic by which he operates—if there is truly any logic there.

I tried to understand him at one time, but I cannot truly comprehend the mind of one who has made a living of killing for no purpose other than to hurt me. I cannot allow this torment of those close to me to continue.

I will end him. I must end him. For Zun, Yuvan, Urt, Bevi, Cenxra. For too many to count.

I must end this.

-Lanrete



CHAPTER 3 - NEVEN KENK

Foundra Ascension *en route to Thae,*
Huzien home system

Neven sat in the Founder's Elite meeting room.

A dark-brown-skinned Huzien man was projected in the hologrid on the left, and his mother-in-law, Lansa Shan, was projected on the right. Zun had been the splitting image of her mother, Lansa, and Neven had difficulty focusing on the woman. Her eyes were bloodshot red, and her breathing was ragged. Zun's father had been dead for some time, leaving Neven and Lansa as the only surviving family members.

"I know the timing for these types of meetings is always poor," the Huzien said. "Forgive me for pulling you away from your mourning in this time of loss. My name is Rex Gefret, and I'm one of the attorneys for the Shan Estate Trust. From the medical report sent to me by Jenshi Runso, I understand that Zun is in a coma with no brain activity?"

"That is correct," Neven said. "We've reached out to some specialists on Thae, and they are en route to examine her and see if they can repair the remaining brain damage."

Rex nodded, his face somber. "I have called you both here today because the conditions for Zun's living will have been fulfilled."

“What does that mean?” Neven glanced at Lansa.

“What were her instructions?” Lansa said.

“In the event that she ends up in a coma with no brain activity, her instructions were to terminate life support immediately. She had a ‘do not resuscitate’ clause in her will.”

“No!” Neven stood. “I won’t let you kill my wife. I am her husband, and you can’t make that decision.”

Rex raised his hands into the air in a submissive gesture. “I am merely conveying the wishes of Mrs. Shan. Her living will was explicit and supersedes your authority as her husband.”

“We just recently got married. It’s highly possible that she didn’t have time to update her will. If I challenge this in court, I’m sure there is a case.”

“Her will was updated the day before you got married to include provisions for you as her husband regarding her assets. But she explicitly did *not* change this portion of her living will to remove the ‘do not resuscitate’ clause.” Rex sat back in his chair, his gaze softening. “I understand that it may be difficult to accept the wishes of your *wife*, but I have the legal authority to enact her will against your wishes, and I will exercise that authority in accordance with Huzien law.” Rex put his hands on the table. “I hope it doesn’t come to that.”

Lansa had remained quiet during the exchange, her gaze focused off to the side. Her face was soft, and her hands rested on the table, one on the other. “I’m guessing there were no special provisions for her mother regarding her wishes?” Lansa asked.

“That is correct,” Rex confirmed.

Neven glanced from Lansa to Rex and sat back in his chair, defeated.

After a long moment, Rex cleared his throat and folded his hands. “Regarding the next steps, do you intend to comply with Zun’s wishes, or will we need to proceed to the courts?”





Foundra Ascension orbiting Thae, Huzien home system

Lansa Shan stood on the medical deck of the *Foundra Ascension*, Neven at her side. She was latched onto his arm, like their first walk back on Thae—it seemed like that had happened an eternity ago.

Rex and Jenshi stood beside Zun's body, and the Founder's Elite assembled around them on the medical deck. All three Founders of the Huzien Empire—Lanrete, Ecnics, and Cislót—stood side by side, together in solidarity. Their presence was ignored, as every heart and mind was on Zun. Neven's parents were there also, both standing behind Neven and Lansa.

Rex looked to Neven as the two locked gazes. Neven nodded, and Lansa lowered her head as Rex signaled Jenshi to cut life support. Jenshi steeled his gaze and initiated the shutdown sequence for the devices, returning Zun's body to its lifeless state.

The world fell away as Neven stared at Zun's dead body, again. Except this time, it was permanent. The look on her face was peaceful—a stark reality to how she died.

His mind replayed the battle with Entradis, an act of torment he was suffering through, even in nightmares.

Everyone except for Neven and Lansa filed out of the medical bay. Lansa lightly tugged on Neven's arm, pulling him back to reality. He glanced at her as she met his gaze and then nodded her head in Zun's direction. Fear was in her eyes, and she was leaning on him heavily, the strength gone from her body.

He walked her over to her daughter as she held him for support.

"I thought . . . I would at least have another century before I experienced this moment," Lansa said, her voice cracking. "I accepted that my daughter would die before me due to the Human blood in her veins, but this . . . I . . ."

"I planned to die first," Neven said.

Lansa smiled at him and kissed his cheek. "Promise me something."

"Anything."

“Don’t lose yourself to this despair. It’s not what Zun would have wanted.”

Neven remained silent. His gaze hung on Zun’s body.

“Don’t kill yourself seeking vengeance either. It won’t bring her back.”

“I will not allow her murderer to continue to draw breath. I cannot.”

Lansa put her hand to Neven’s face, her expression pained.

Jenshi walked back onto the medical deck. The pair turned to him as he approached.

“Neven, can I, uh, talk to you? Alone?” Jenshi asked.

Lansa nodded, patting Neven as she removed her arm from his. She lightly touched Zun’s face and slowly lay beside her daughter’s body on the bed, then began to weep.

Jenshi led Neven into his office and closed the door.

“I know you did everything you could do, Jenshi,” Neven started. “I don’t hold any of this against you.”

Jenshi eyed Neven for a long moment, his gaze searching. “I appreciate that, but that’s not what I wanted to talk to you about.” Jenshi brought up a holodisplay, the screen showcasing Zun’s recent full-body scan. He highlighted an area around her abdomen and pulled out a view of her womb with a small sack attached to the side wall.

“I don’t understand. What am I looking at?”

“That is Zun’s uterus.”

Neven stared in confusion at Jenshi, his eyes slowly going wide. He started to wail, dropping to his knees as tears flowed in torrents down his cheeks. Pain wracked his body and heart as he struggled to breathe. Jenshi rushed to his side on the floor, wrapping his arms around him tightly.

“No, no! Please! Maker, no.”

“Without support from Zun’s body, the baby died quickly after the attack. I’m sorry, Neven. There was nothing I could have done at this early stage of development.”



Neven cried on that floor for a long moment, the tears eventually stopping. His gaze was distant. Something inside him broke in that moment, and a part of his soul shattered forever.

“I didn’t know,” Neven whispered. “The beach . . . she must have planned to tell me on the beach before—” Neven’s voice broke.

Jenshi stared down at the ground, his arms crossed. “Do you want me to share this information with—”

Neven shook his head no before Jenshi completed the sentence. Without another word, he slowly got up from the floor, absentmindedly patted Jenshi on the shoulder, and then walked out of his office—past Lansa, past Zun’s body, and out of the medical bay.



A state funeral was held in the Huzien capital for Zun the following day. It was an elaborate affair, and Zun’s casket was given a place of honor in the Huzien Capitol building. The ceremony was presided over by Founder Cislott.

Neven skipped the event, deciding to remain on the *Foundra Ascension*. He stood in his lab, staring at an empty workbench.

Neven . . . I . . . Ellipse’s voice spoke in his thoughts. *I am so sorry.*

“You know . . . I have never wanted to kill someone in my life. Not even Sagren or Sephan,” Neven started. “I knew that they needed to die, but I didn’t personally feel the need to kill them. It was more out of a sense of duty, you know? For the safety of the empire.”

Neven brought up a holodisplay, opening up a sequence for a new prototype. The workbench began to transform, coming alive as a three-dimensional model of a chassis for a new power armor was projected. Neven scrolled through variations in the starting configuration, settling on the one he had utilized in the battle against Entradis.

“But Entradis . . .” Neven spoke the name with venom. “I want to kill him with every fiber of my being. I want to rip off his head and

piss down his throat. I want to rip out his beating heart and club him to death with it.” Neven began to tear up, his voice cracking.

I know, Ellipse’s voice was soft. But anger is a dangerous thing, Neven.

Neven laughed bitterly. “What would you know of anger?”

Ellipse remained silent.

Neven’s face grew hard as he started modifying components in the power armor, ideas coming to him in a flood. The normal curiosity and excitement that drove his work was absent, and in its place was something else. Something more powerful.

Purpose.

His mind worked a mile a minute, and the workbench switched to fabrication mode after the final tweak to the digital schematic. Neven stepped back and watched his work—a new armor—coming to life on the table. The military-grade hardware printer built into the workbench omnistructed the armor, aided by an army of nanites.

I may not be Human, but I can feel anger just as you do, Ellipse said. I can feel it coursing through your veins, driving your thoughts. And through that, I feel it myself. So yes, I understand anger. I know its power and how that anger is driving you right now.

“Then you understand why I must kill Entradis.”

Is that what Zun would want?

Neven roared, slamming a nearby table hard enough to make the holodisplay within flicker. “No one can tell me what Zun would want anymore! Zun is dead, killed by a murderer in cold blood. The same murderer who killed her husband before. Zun would want me to avenge her.”

Just as she was driven to avenge Yuvan? Ellipse countered. Zun never once spoke of vengeance. Instead, she mourned Yuvan and moved on with her life. She didn’t dwell on Entradis or allow herself to be consumed by anger like you are now. She moved on, and because of that, you experienced the joy of her life, even if it was only for a short time.



Neven was speechless, his hands reflexively opening and closing. His breathing slowed, and his sight became blurry as the tears returned. “He has to die, Eclipse,” Neven said. “It hurts too much.”

Neven . . . I don't want to lose you too.

“I know, because if I die, then we both die. I get it. Maybe we can find you a new host. I can talk to Kechu when we get back to Thae.”

No, Neven. I . . . It's more than that. I care for you. I want you to be safe. I want you to live, even if it's independent of me. Eclipse's android body appeared at Neven's side. Her dark-brown hand came up to his face, softly caressing it. Eclipse's deep, golden gaze hung on him with longing, and the soft glow of her eyes was beautiful. “I can bring you comfort. I can keep you warm at night and help you through this tough time.” She moved closer to him, pressing her lifelike Human body against his.

“I appreciate that,” Neven said, half paying attention to her as the workbench signaled that the omnistruction was complete. “But this is something that I must do. And to do that, I must prepare.” He stepped away from Eclipse and back toward the workbench. Neven shut out the world as he began inspecting his work.

Eclipse touched the back of her neck, her gaze dropping to the floor as she frowned.



Multiple simulations played out on the holodisplay in Neven's lab. The new prototype on the workbench barely resembled where Neven had started just a few days ago. A blip from Neven's mobi broke his trancelike state. He frowned and then put the call through to a nearby holodisplay.

Rex appeared, his face grim. “I'm sorry to disturb you during this delicate time, but we must proceed with the reading of Zun's will as soon as possible. Lansa has requested that the reading take place in her primary residence. I believe you know the location?”

“Yes.” Neven let out a heavy sigh.

“When should we expect you surface-side?”

“I’m on my way.”



Ecka, Thae, Huzien home system

Neven stood at the entrance to Lansa’s mansion. The elaborate home sat on an expansive estate bordered by rolling hills and meticulously maintained nature. He remembered Zun standing in front of him, urging him toward the entrance, a look of excitement mixed with nervousness on her face.

She was so beautiful.

A tear rolled down Neven’s cheek. His body was numb as he willed it forward, forcing himself to put one foot in front of the other. Slowly, he made his way up to the front door.

The door was a relic with an elaborate golden handle that required manual force to open it. He stared at the handle for a long moment. His hand came to rest on it as he opened the door and stepped through it.

Rex stood a short way inside the entrance hall, his gaze meeting Neven’s as the young Human entered Lansa’s home. Rex was tall like most Huziens, his height dwarfing Neven. The other man quickly crossed the hall and extended his hand in a very Human gesture.

Neven subconsciously extended his own, and the two shook hands.

“We have set up in the study. This way.” Rex turned, prompting Neven to follow.

They wound their way through a series of hallways into a large study toward the back of the home’s first floor. Lansa sat in a chair a short distance from a large desk that was the room’s centerpiece. She was dressed all in black with a large black hat and veil



covering her face. She seemed frailer than when Neven had last seen her on the *Ascension*.

“Sorry for the delay, Ms. Shan,” Rex said.

She glanced up to meet his gaze, her face softening when she caught sight of Neven.

She looks so much like Zun, Ellipse said in his head.

Neven moved to the seat next to Lansa and sat. Lansa watched him silently before switching her gaze to Rex and nodding.

Rex launched into a bout of galese as Neven drowned him out, his gaze stuck on the floor, his eyes glazed over.

Neven remembered the first time he met Zun. It had been shortly after he had settled onto the *Foundra Ascension*. He had been a Founder’s Elite for less than a week, and it was his first time on a starship. He hadn’t trained with Soahc yet, and anyone with a hint of telepathy could easily read his mind. Zun had sensed his surface thoughts, his clear admission of her beauty putting her off guard. She hadn’t known what to make of him then.

He smiled.

“. . . approximately two hundred and six billion larods as of yesterday’s date within the trust with Neven Kenk and Lansa Shan as the sole beneficiaries.”

“What?” Neven asked.

“The trust,” Rex said. “As of yesterday, total assets were approximately two hundred and six billion larods. This would rank the estate and yourselves among the top one hundred wealthiest individuals in the Huzien Alliance.”

Neven glanced at Lansa with a terrified look.

She watched him curiously. “Zun never told you how wealthy she was?” Lansa asked. “She never told you she was a tech billionaire before she joined the Founder’s Elite?”

Neven shook his head, his stomach churning. He dropped to his knees and threw up on the floor. “I . . . I can’t process this right now.” Neven stood. “I . . . I have to go.”

Lansa glanced to Rex with a worried expression.

“Someone from the wealth management department for the Shan Estate Trust will reach out to you to ensure that you’re taken care of,” Rex said.

“I don’t need to be taken care of,” Neven countered. His head was spinning. He took a few steps toward the exit to the study, and the floor came up to meet him, his world going dark.



Neven woke with a start, sitting up in a luxurious bed. The room he was in was expansive, the décor elaborate with fine art tastefully placed on the walls. Jenshi was standing next to a holo-display built into an ornate end table. One of his medical drones was declocked and hovering next to Neven.

Lansa Shan stood from her chair next to his bed, a look of relief on her face.

“What happened?” Neven asked.

“A combination of fatigue and shock,” Jenshi said. “You and Lanrete are going to get my license revoked for negligence,” he whispered.

“You collapsed in the study,” Lansa said. “I called Jenshi right away. He was here within the hour.”

Neven rubbed his eyes.

“Ellipse tells me you were awake for three days before coming here.” Jenshi shook his head. “You’re picking up some bad habits from Lanrete.”

The drone tapped a liphogam to Neven’s neck, injecting the solution into his bloodstream. Clarity came to Neven’s mind, and the foggyiness quickly receded.

“You slept for two days.”

As if on cue, Neven’s stomach rumbled. Lansa snapped her fingers, and a serving drone carrying a large tray entered the room. A makeshift table expanded in front of Neven, and the tray was set down on it, filled with some of Neven’s favorite food.



“Thank you,” Neven whispered as he glanced at Lansa.

“I can’t have my son going hungry.”

A tear rolled down Neven’s cheek.

Lansa moved closer to Neven and cupped his face. “You will always be my son.” Her voice was firm, her own eyes tearing up. The two embraced in a long hug, and Jenshi quietly made his way out of the room.

Lansa eventually broke the embrace, moving to retake her seat. She motioned for him to eat, and he obliged. The two sat in silence as Neven made his way through most of the food.

“You should take some time off. Spend it here with me. We can talk about Zun and your adventures.”

Neven was shaking his head before she finished her statement. “Entradis is out there.”

“You still intend to hunt him?”

“And kill him.”

Lansa let out a slow breath, getting up as she moved to a nearby window and looked out to the lake. “Do you remember when I asked you what you were worth?”

“Yes.” Neven remembered the scene of Lansa and him sitting on a bench in front of the lake after having walked half of the estate together.

“Do you remember what your answer was to me?”

“The lives of trillions of people, the love of a family, and the heart of your daughter.”

“You still have Zun’s heart. The love that she had for you will always be with you.” She turned to face Neven. “Do you want to honor that love with bloodshed?”

“Entradis killed her.” Neven’s voice was cold. “Of all people . . .”

“Don’t you dare!” Lansa shot back. “Don’t you dare tell me what I should feel.” She approached Neven with fire in her eyes. “I birthed Zun out of my womb, suckled, and raised her. I am her mother.”

The anger in her gaze caused Neven to press back into the headboard.

“I mourn the loss of my daughter, and I absolutely demand justice for her murderer. But I will not dishonor her memory by giving her killer victory over my soul. And neither should you.”

Neven stared at the tray in front of him. “I can’t let it go.” Neven’s voice was calm as he shook his head. “This is what I do.” He looked up at Lansa. “I am a Founder’s Elite. I kill people for the Empire. I build machines of destruction that win wars. What is it all for if I can’t even avenge my wife?”

Lansa took a step back, her gaze going to the floor. “Do what you must, but I want something from you before you leave.”

Lansa glanced off to the side as a young Huzien woman walked into the room, a hovering tray beside her. There were a series of stasis-ready storage tubes covering one side of the tray next to a device that caused Neven to blush. The woman came to a stop by the bed and looked to Lansa.

“Zun had several of her eggs preserved in stasis before she joined the Founder’s Elites,” Lansa said. She looked Neven directly in his eyes and then glanced at the woman. “Bevhar is a valued employee of the estate and a nurse. She will collect samples of your semen, and I will preserve them along with Zun’s eggs. If you get yourself killed, I will make my own grandchildren and love them in your place.”

She nodded to Bevhar, who bowed slightly.

Neven’s eyes went wide as Lansa left the room without another word.

CHAPTER 4 - URIEL KERVID

*56623 FA (23,500 years ago)
Atmosphere above Lux'ian, Lux'Ameni home system*

Battlecruisers and battleships littered the skies high above the surface of Lux'ian. The former jewel of the Lux'Ameni Empire was in ruins. Fleets of drones swarmed between ships, waging a war of attrition.

Uriel Kervid stood on the exit ramp of a small shuttle flanking the battleship of the 3rd Huzien Imperial Fleet, the HSS *Toma*. His sharp, silver eyes surveyed the aerial battlefield, his brown hair in a military cut. He had light-brown skin with grey esha marks.

He started running toward the edge of the exit ramp. The sharp drop into certain death far below didn't even cause him to sweat. Picking up speed, he jumped off the edge, drawing Wishwonder—his Iltarum blade—and landed on a large drone that came from under to catch him.

Iltarum blades were marvels, built with the finest technology in the Huzien Empire and utilized exclusively by the military. Wishwonder was a beautiful blade, the image down the sides that of a series of silver clouds with a shining ribbon of white that weaved its way through to explode at the hilt.

The drone sped toward the *Guysuma'revhia*, lead battleship of the Jun'Serentan Dominion Atmospheric Defense Fleet. The capital

ships for both fleets were exchanging blows in the upper atmosphere with their full contingents of dreadnaughts and battle carriers, their massive sizes incapable of navigating a descent into the inner atmosphere of the planet.

A series of drones peeled off from the fight and headed toward Uriel. He grinned. Telekinetically shifting himself, he landed on the first approaching drone, his energized Iltarum blade sinking into the heart of the machine as Uriel began to rip it apart, dismantling the drone with the powerful cihphistic forces at his command.

As the drone sputtered and died, he telekinetically moved to the next one and went to work cutting a hole into its top. The drone attempted to fling him off by turning upside down, but he punched into its hull, gripped the twisted metal, and finished his hole, climbing inside.

Uriel destroyed the drone from the inside out, exploding through the top and into the waiting clutches of the next enemy as he jammed Wishwonder deep into the machine's side. Summoning a fount of Enesmic energy to himself, he snapped his fingers to summon streaks of lightning to hammer into the drone.

He released the drone before the electricity connected and fell through the sky. He punched through the shield of a nearby ship with a terrible flash of Enesmic energy, landing with unnatural finesse on the hull of the *Guysuma'revha* a few hundred meters below. The disrupted shield rippled and reformed, the distortion only temporary.

Releasing his Iltarum blade, the weapon righted itself and hovered by his side. His hands went to work weaving a cihphistic manifestation, and the hull of the *Guysuma'revha* trembled under the invisible swirling of Enesmic energy.

Focusing the energy on an area in front of himself, a column of light tore through the hull, burning a massive hole deep into the ship. Jumping in, he landed in a scorched hallway, blast doors sealing around him. Bringing up a mini holodisplay on his wrist, a schematic of the ship appeared with an indicator of his current location highlighted in blue.



He charged down the hallway toward a closed blast door. Enesmic forces slammed into the door, forcefully pushing it up and out of his way. This continued for a few corridors until he encountered his first hint of resistance when a series of Lux'Ameni soldiers rounded the corner and opened fire.

Lux'Ameni were short, squat creatures with rigid bodies and large eyes on the sides of their head that appeared to move independently. Large, flat armored tails trailed them, and their giant mouths covered the width of their faces. With their battle armor on, they looked like walking metal depictions of the letter J.

Uriel held out his hand, crafting an energy barrier before him to absorb the shots. His floating Iltarum blade surged forward, slamming tip-first into the head of the first Lux'Ameni soldier and pinning his lifeless body against the wall. Following his whims, Wishwonder slid out of the corpse and went to work as if an invisible Redalam, a Huzien blade master, was wielding it in a deadly dance.

The soldiers didn't know how to react—a few scrambled away, unsure of which target to attack. A few attempted to fire directly at the blade as the weapon decapitated another soldier before spinning in a cyclone to cut another person in half.

Uriel telekinetically shifted past the carnage as the blade finished up the remaining soldiers and came to hover back at his side. He continued toward the engine room of the *Guysuma'revhia*, tearing through more soldiers along the way. Cihphistic energy radiated off him in torrents as he wielded the Enesmic forces with a vengeance. Soldiers were blasted apart by energy or physically ripped apart through powerful Enesmic forces.

He was unfazed by the bloodshed and emotionally detached. The Huzien soldier was the single most powerful unit in his battlegroup. He was a Huzien Mobile Infantry Elite, a living weapon infused with nanitic technology and cybernetic enhancements, battle-hardened through intense martial and cihphistic training.

He was a walking weapon of mass destruction that had one purpose: to win the battle at any cost.

He never failed.

Uriel ripped the primary door to the engine room off its track, sending the crumpled metal behind him and into an approaching group of Lux'Ameni soldiers, who were crushed beneath the force of the door.

He walked into the engine room, surveying all the engineers and crew members looking at him with wide eyes. They backed up, clearly not wanting to move closer.

Distance didn't matter.

He sent his blade forward, slicing through the unarmored Lux'Ameni like a hot knife through butter. He walked through the decimation, his blade still at work as Lux'Ameni fled in terror, until he came to stand in front of the main reactor. Lifting both his hands slowly, the area around him began to tremble. The protective housing of the reactor was ripped away, triggering warning claxons to blare across the ship.

He burst into a rhythmic dance of cihphistic weaving as the forces tore into the reactor. The reactor went critical, exploding outward in a blast that Uriel struggled to catch and contain in a newly created barrier. He molded the barrier, channeling the blast in the most devastating ways possible before sending it into the most populated parts of the ship, targeting critical systems and expanding the explosion toward the bridge.

Releasing it all at once, he grabbed his blade as it returned to his side and clenched his fist, teleporting back to the shuttle. The ship's shield flickered back on at his mental command.

He watched his handiwork play out as, in the distance, the detonation of the *Guysuma'revha's* reactor tore the ship apart with brutal efficiency. The remnants of the ship started to fall out of the sky, looking like a lumbering giant knocked to the ground.

His sharp silver eyes turned to their next target, Uriel thrilling in the rush of battle.





HSS Lukim orbiting Lux'ian, Lux'Ameni home system

“Impressive work out there, Uriel.” Fleet Admiral Retyu Dewerter motioned for Uriel to sit in the chair across from his desk.

Uriel saluted and moved to the chair, his posture perfect.

“Thanks to your actions, we were able to break the stalemate and gain the upper hand due to them diverting resources to cover their losses,” Retyu said.

He motioned to a nearby drone that came to hover next to him. He made a selection, and a drink appeared in a little alcove. Taking it, he signaled for the machine to go to Uriel. The Huzien Elite dismissed the drone, taking nothing from it.

“Your prowess on the battlefield has caught the eye of our great founder,” Retyu continued.

Uriel perked up. “Founder Lanrete?”

“Yes, the *Foundra Ascension* is docked here. Founder Lanrete has personally requested an audience with you aboard his ship.”

Uriel stood. “I will go right away.”

“No, wait until the morning.” Retyu motioned for him to resume sitting. “For now, your orders are to enjoy the night off and revel in your accomplishments. This has been a major strategic victory for our empire.” Retyu took a long draw from his drink, then got up and moved to a nearby window in his expansive office. “This battle may have single-handedly won us the war against the Jun'Serentan Dominion. We have leveled the Lux'Ameni home world and broken their will to fight. We have officially threatened to crack the planet itself if they do not withdraw from the conflict immediately. As one of the ruling species in the Dominion, the loss of their forces will lead to our swift victory.”

“Will they call our bluff?”

“It's not a bluff.” Retyu glanced back at Uriel. “We have cracked planets before during military campaigns. It's not ideal, but we must carry through with our threats. Otherwise, people will doubt the might of the Huzien Empire.” Retyu drained the rest of his

drink. “Anyway, you’re dismissed. Go *vusg* something. Get trashed. I don’t care. Just enjoy yourself.”

Uriel stood, saluted, and then exited the office.



Uriel sat on top of a large storage container as he watched the soldiers unload a prisoner transport—the male and female Ku’Ven were forced to walk in a straight line.

They were a towering species, tall above eight feet, with lanky yet deceptively athletic builds and striped azure-colored skin. Their unnerving white eyes were large, and the women had hair mostly in braids that hung down four to five feet on average.

They were a beautiful species, even by Huzien standards.

The Ku’Ven prisoners were required to remove their clothes to reveal any potential weapons, then clothed in standard, transparent Huzien prisoner uniforms that afforded no modesty. Nothing was left to chance in Huzien military processes, even with advanced scanners that could detect most weapons.

Uriel felt nothing at the scene: no anger, pity, or remorse. He had massacred hundreds of thousands of Ku’Ven, Lux’Ameni, and Jun’Serentan, yet he harbored no hate or negative feelings toward them. Sure, they were the enemy of the Huzien Empire, but he felt nothing.

Some guards pushed through the prisoners, grabbing a few of the more attractive Ku’Ven. The three Ku’Ven who were singled out—two females and one male—glanced around in terror while the other prisoners kept their heads down around them. A group of visibly eager guards pushed the trio toward a secluded room.

Uriel scowled and was moving before he could process his actions. He walked in the direction of the soldiers and the sobbing Ku’Ven trio.

One of the soldiers caught sight of Uriel and moved to intercept him. “Major.” The man smiled with a salute. “Can I help you?”



“What are you planning to do with those prisoners? Huzien policy clearly states that they must be processed and confined.”

“Oh, absolutely,” the soldier said. “We’re taking them aside for additional inspection and interrogation. You know, making sure we check all the holes. Multiple times if necessary.” He grinned.

“Interrogation rooms are that way.” Uriel turned and pointed in the opposite direction to the far side of the processing deck.

“Oh, well . . . it’s a bit far, so we decided to do it here instead.” The man laughed.

“Is there a problem here?” Uriel and the soldier turned to regard an approaching officer who held the same rank as Uriel.

“No problem, sir,” the initial guard said. “Just informing Mr. Elite here that we need to pull a few prisoners aside for enhanced screening.”

The major nodded and looked at Uriel. “Thanks for your concern, Major, but I think this situation is under control.”

“This is a violation of policy.”

“I’m the commanding officer here, and I think this situation is under control. Do we have a problem, Major?”

Uriel narrowed his gaze. Glancing toward the soldiers that had taken the prisoners, he felt rage build up inside him. The area trembled slightly as the swirl of Enesmic energy answered his unspoken call.

Letting out a slow breath, he calmed himself. “No, sir.” He spat on the floor toward the soldiers and left the area. He contemplated going to Lanrete right then—against orders—but decided against it. He didn’t want to show his hand too soon.

Reluctantly, he returned to his quarters and called it an early night. After running through multiple cycles of his VRC, he walked into his bedroom nude and collapsed onto his bed. Given his rank and position as the battlegroup’s Elite, Uriel was afforded private quarters aboard the *Lukim*.

Moving under the covers, he stared at the ceiling, his mind returning to those prisoners. He had difficulty falling asleep, their gazes haunting him as he held on to the pent-up tension.

He forced his mind to still, using a technique taught to him early on in his days in the mobile infantry to help with sleeping near the front lines of an active warzone.

Sleep eventually took hold of him.



A subtle chime woke Uriel the next morning. Removing the covers, he sat on the side of his bed and ran through stretches and light exercises to wake his body up. He then moved to the window of his quarters and stared out of it. Tapping the window, he stood brooding for a long moment.

Eventually, he pulled on his uniform and departed toward the *Foundra Ascension*. A set of guards vetted his credentials and allowed him access to the ship. Stepping off the meglift, Uriel was surprised by the elaborate décor of the hallway. Art from across the galaxy lined the walls, a mix of pieces that looked expensive, with a few nameplates highlighting artists he recognized.

Focusing on his purpose, he ignored the paintings and made his way to a large double door that opened at his approach. More luxuries caught his eye as he stepped into the great hall. The portrait of a beautiful ebony-skinned Huzien woman sitting with Lanrete hung on the wall opposite the entrance.

A man emerged from one of the connecting hallways. “My late wife, Trisha.”

Uriel stood to attention. “Founder.”

Lanrete glanced toward Uriel before stopping in front of the picture. Crossing his arms, he stared at it for a long moment. “How many times must I recognize the value of something only after I have lost it?”

“Sir?”

“Nothing.” Lanrete turned to face Uriel. “Follow me to my office.” Lanrete turned and walked back down the hallway he’d appeared from.



Uriel frowned and followed Lanrete. He eventually entered a large office at the back of the quarters. Lanrete moved to sit at a large desk, and Uriel sat in a chair in front of it. He kept his posture perfect and sat at the edge of his seat.

Lanrete leaned back in his chair and watched Uriel for a few moments. Then he brought up holodisplays showcasing captured footage of Uriel's prowess on the battlefield. "I've been impressed by your work. You are one of the most gifted Elites in Huzien military history." Lanrete dismissed the holodisplays and turned his chair to face the ceiling-to-floor window that lined the back of his office and showcased a breathtaking view of the planet Lux'ian.

"I'm sure Retyu has already lavished you with praise, so I won't waste our time repeating his words. Instead, I'll get right to the point." Lanrete stood up and moved to the window. "I summoned you here today because I want to build a team of elites—the best of the best. What you did on the battlefield—the focused assault on key assets and the controlled chaos you brought everywhere you went—I want to engineer that on demand. I want to be able to take an elite force into any situation and turn the tide of battle, break the stalemate, assassinate the tyrant, or whatever the case may be." He turned back to face Uriel. "And I want you to lead that team at my side."

"At your side?" Uriel gave Lanrete a confused look. "You intend to go into combat?"

"Yes," Lanrete said. "I want to be on the front lines of conflict, surrounded by a team of people I can trust. People who can hold their own and who I can rely on."

Uriel sat back in his chair, his eyes narrowed and his body tense. "You want me to be your bodyguard?"

"No." Lanrete shook his head. "I am not looking for a bodyguard. I will take care of myself. Rather, I am looking for people who I can trust to get the mission done at all costs. People like yourself."

Uriel relaxed slightly.

"This ship would be our base," Lanrete continued. "We would travel wherever we were needed as a strike force unlike any other." Lanrete moved back to his seat and sat down. "It would be called the

Founder's Elites, and it would be an extension of not only my will but the will of the Triumvirate."

"We would be working in service to you, Founder Ecnics, and Founder Cislot?"

"Yes."

Uriel lowered his head and stared at the ground for a long moment. "Before I answer, I have a question for you." Uriel locked gazes with Lanrete.

"Of course."

"Do you believe in justice?"

Lanrete sat silent for a long moment, studying Uriel. "Justice for whom?"

"Justice for the weak, the disenfranchised, and the subjugated."

Lanrete leaned back in his chair. "This sounds specific. Elaborate."

"Retyu gives free reign for those under his command to break Huzien laws and engage in the rape and exploitation of prisoners. He turns a blind eye to the illegal acquisition of contraband and retaliates against those who speak up. These actions result in a culture of willful ignorance that empowers the worst in the Huzien military."

"That is a serious accusation against a highly respected officer. Do you have proof?"

Uriel brought up a holodisplay recording showcasing the inside of the secluded room the soldiers had taken their prisoners to from the night before. He then brought up additional recordings from over the past year, showing several high-ranking officers participating.

Lanrete watched a few of the recordings in silence and let out a sigh. "And Retyu is aware of this?"

Uriel brought up another recording, this one showing Retyu participating. He closely watched Lanrete, attempting to discern the man's emotions, but Lanrete's face was a mask.

Lanrete dismissed the recordings and brought up a holodisplay displaying Fleet Admiral Retyu.

"Yes, Founder?" Retyu asked.

"Come to my office, now," Lanrete said.



“Understood.”

Lanrete dismissed the holodisplay and sat silently, gazing out the window. After a few minutes, the door to Lanrete’s office chimed as Lanrete signaled for it to open. Retyu walked into the room and nodded at Uriel before standing at attention in front of Lanrete’s desk.

Lanrete brought up the multiple holodisplay recordings with prisoners of all races being raped. The raw acts on full display in all their sickening horror caused Retyu to take a step back.

“Are you aware of what’s been happening under your command, Fleet Admiral?” Lanrete asked.

Retyu’s face paled, his breath catching in his throat. He turned to look at Uriel, his face hardening. “I will get to the bottom of this, Founder.”

“Will you?” Lanrete brought up the video of Retyu laughing with another soldier as a terrified prisoner with stark-white, almost bonelike skin sat in the corner of a holding cell, crying. Retyu walked toward the muscular Jun’Serentan woman as her large, solid black eyes widened.

“You *vusging cith!*” Retyu charged at Uriel.

A flash out of the corner of Uriel’s eyes caught him off guard as he jumped to his feet to defend himself. Lanrete stood between the two, his legendary blade, Divinebreath, drawn and coated with a thin line of blood.

Retyu staggered back, his hand going to his throat as he collapsed to the floor, blood spray escaping his hand as his eyes bulged.

“Attempted assault on a Huzien officer is a capital offense punishable by death in wartime.” Lanrete turned to regard Retyu, disgust on his face. “You will be replaced, and all of those you empowered will be dealt with in accordance with Huzien law.” Lanrete sheathed his blade and turned to regard Uriel as Retyu bled out on the floor. “Laws exist for a reason, and considering I wrote most of them, I expect them to be upheld by those in the highest positions of power. Any violation of that duty is unforgivable. Justice is afforded to the weak and the strong, irrespective of standing.”

“Then I accept your offer,” Uriel said. “Let’s build a team.”

