

# THE END OF A STORY

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A Small  
Piece of  
Gatrubbian  
History

# Introduction

## Inspiration

Before I begin the story, I feel as though I should give some motivation for why I am writing. The Gatrubbians were first written about in September 2014 as part of a story for the Seiklon Axel, a play by email RPG set in the Star Trek universe. Back then the Gatrubbians were little more than a couple lines of writing here and there. They stayed that way until the summer of 2016 when I set aside the time to develop the race a bit more. The results were the creation of a whole language along with a basic structure of the Gatrubbian's culture. As of the time of this writing the Gatrubbians are still playing a large role in the community they were conceived in.

I mentioned that the Gatrubbians came about as an idea for a play by email RPG. During 2016 the Seiklon Axel group merged with another group by the name of Outpost Hope One, both are located in the same setting and are members of the Star Trek: Borderlands universe which consists of several groups. I have been a participant in the group since 2011 when I stumbled upon it in high school. It was

from this group that I learned about NaNoWriMo which is one reason for choosing to write this story. For months I have toyed with the idea of writing up a small history of the Gatrubbians. But an email RPG isn't the right setting for writing such a long story. Readers familiar with the Gatrubbian storyline from *Seiklon Axel* or *Outpost Hope One* will no doubt recognize some of the characters and events written about in the following pages. That being said this story is also meant to be enjoyed on its own as an entity independent of any previous writings about the Gatrubbian people. To that end I am including a brief discussion of the Gatrubbians' appearance and culture in order to set the stage for the story that follows.

Before I finish this section I would just like to take a moment to thank all the members of the *Star Trek: Borderlands* community. Without them I don't know if my love of writing and storytelling would be as complete and full as it has become over the five years I've written with the group. I would also like to thank Rich LeValley who has led our group since I joined. His willingness to put up with my crazy ideas is something I am truly thankful for. Finally, I would like to thank my brother Sean for helping do any revisions. Now without further ado I would like to present the Gatrubbians and their story.

# Background

We shall first begin with a description of the standard Gatrubbian. Like us, they are bipedal in nature and by most standards they resemble the average human in their features. In place of hair, Gatrubbians have a series of ridges which meet at the center of the forehead and flow back to the base of the neck. The sides of their heads are purple and frilled vertically with the frills wrapping around the ear. Beyond that there are no other major differences.

Second and most importantly one ought to know that the Gatrubbian people center their lives around the Great Story and the Writers who are said to have conjured that story into existence. This idea plays a large role in Gatrubbian culture. As interpreters to the Great Story the Gatrubbians have the Readers. The Readers are a small minority of the population who are born with the ability to foresee events in the Story in the same way as a psychic may be able to see into the future. The Readers also act as religious leaders where they take on the responsibilities of leading people in their worship of the Writers. For the Gatrubbians it is a great honor to be able to tell a grand story which is rich in details. In the Gatrubbian language the idea of telling a story and bringing it into existence are equivalent

statements. Thus to tell a story for the Gatrubbians is to in essence construct a universe in which that story takes place. It is to this end that I wish to carry out this tradition and bring the Gatrubbian story into existence as best as I can.

The only details of the Gatrubbian language that are needed to read this story are the details pertaining to names. Even though not as complicated as the many intricacies of Russian names the Gatrubbians do have some rules to dictate proper names in the language. Male names are known for ending with the -a, whereas female names end in a consonant. The other thing to note is that almost all Gatrubbian words and names are pronounced with every letter that is written. This is akin to the German language where silent letters occur rarely if ever. For anyone interested in learning more about the Gatrubbian language I would recommend visiting the Outpost Hope One webpage where a guide to the language can be found.

# Part I

## Chapter I

As the cadets left their afternoon class on zero point energy propulsion they were relieved to feel the warmth of the sun after spending the last hour and a half in a cold basement classroom. The campus of the Gatrubbian Space Command's academy was filled with cadets go to and fro across the intertwining paths that led between the buildings. Cadet Bresa Voci was just one of the faces in the crowd. He was still trying to process all the information he had been given in the lecture when his roommate and close friend Belva came up to him.

"Is it just me or does Professor Tama go into his own little world every time he begins lecturing?" Belva asked. He always found the professor's lectures to be long winded and full of tangents.

Bresa shrugged, "Can you blame him? He was part of the team that built the first zero point drive. His mind is so full of ideas it's no wonder he gets everyone else lost."

“The first zero point drive.” Belva smiled at the thought. “Can you imagine what that would have been like? Breaking the light-barrier after everyone said it couldn’t be done. I hear they’re almost done constructing Sojourn. After that we’ll be travelling the stars. Just think, you were accepted to be a part of that.”

“We’ll see how that turns out.” Bresa replied. The thought of leaving the star system he called home always left knots in his gut. It was one thing to ride aboard a colony transport but it was another to ride a ship that could leave Gatrubbe one day and be in another system the next.

“So any plans before you set out?” Belva asked as the pair walked through the campus’ cantina. Both classmates were making their way back to the dormitory. Now that the final semester was winding down, all upcoming graduates were given one week of leave to spend with family and friends before being shipped out to their duty stations.

“I’m taking the morning shuttle home. I plan on spending the week with my family. With Sojourn’s mission we’re not expected to come back for a few years.” Bresa’s parents had made it clear that they wanted this time to spend with their son before his big farewell. “How about you? Any big plans?”

“Heading home for a couple days then going camping out on Elsova Ridge. I hear the sunrise is something to see at least once in your life.”

Bresa and Belva entered into the dormitory. They walked up the stairs to the second floor where their room was located. They had been roommates since the first day of their arrival to the academy. The six years of training had brought the two together and now they found it hard to believe that it would be over in a week’s time.

## Chapter II

Bresa walked off the shuttle. His single bag of belongings was strapped over his shoulder. The short flight had been uneventful. As Bresa walked for the exit he heard a voice calling his name. He turned to find the source only to see his younger brother charging at him.

“Bresa you made it!” Valena almost knocked Bresa off of his feet.

“Shouldn’t you be in school?” Bresa smiled looking at his brother.

"I'm not missing anything important." The young Gatrubbian replied. "Besides I can make it up another time."

"Well if you're going to skip then you might as well be put to work." Bresa unslung the bag he was carrying. "You think you can carry this?"

Valena picked up the bag. He wobbled a bit as he tried to adjust his center of balance. Finally, he stabilized himself and stood confident in his abilities. "Come on, I think mom's home getting your room ready."

"Lead the way." Bresa gestured allowing his brother to go ahead and the two walked towards the exit.

The weather today was much as it had been the previous day. The sun was out and there was barely a cloud in the sky. Bresa always relished in journeying through the neighborhood. Many of the old houses had withstood the test of time. Along the journey, Valena filled Bresa in on all the neighborhood news he had missed while at the academy. The walk took about half an hour but it felt much quicker with his brother's stories to fill the time. Before long the siblings arrived at the front gate to the Voci house.

The house was surrounded by a lush garden the Bresa's parents tended to in their spare time. A small stone path led around the house leading wanderers through a shaded passage which was walled in by bushes, flowers, and trees. Around the right side of the house there was a small patio consisting of a wooden overhang protecting a table and several chairs. Bresa could recall several long evenings spent on that patio.

Valena opened the front door and Bresa followed close behind him. They took off their shoes and Bresa felt relieved to be home. Even though it had been less than a three-hour journey he could have sworn it had been a full day of travelling.

"So are mom and dad gone?" Bresa asked noticing that the house stood quiet. He wasn't too surprised. Bresa's mother Mal worked as an archivist and his father Vanka was employed as a professor of biology at a university in a nearby town.

"They told me they'd try to get home earlier today." Valena walked out of the entrance hall and made a left into Bresa's room. He sat the bag down and continued to speak. "Until then we have the place to ourselves. Though they did leave a list of things we could do if we get bored. Also Ms. Navank wants to talk with you sometime."

Bresa sighed. Ms. Egam Navank was an old family friend. She was a widow and spent her days prowling the neighborhood for the local news. When Bresa was younger she would come and watch him while his parents were away. On those nights Bresa remembered falling asleep to her monotonous voice as story after story flowed from her lips. At the end of the day Bresa didn't mind the old woman, but he dreaded the thought of being trapped with her as she told him what all the neighbors had been up to while he had been away. "I should probably get that out of the way."

"Want me to come along?" Velená asked as Bresa walked back towards the main entrance.

Bresa put his shoes back on. "Since you're going to skip your classes you might as well make up for it somehow."

With that the Voci brothers set out for their first adventure of the week. The hours with Ms. Egam Navank passed slowly but with little lull in conversation. She told both boys about the latest stories that she claimed to have seen with her own eyes. During that time the brothers stayed attentive for one of the old woman's skills was to tell a captivating story. This skill often offset her monotonous voice and cackling laughter.

Throughout the day long conversation Bresa made sure to tell of his adventures at the academy. He told about the time that he and Belva had nearly burnt down the engineering lab in an effort to reconstruct a mini replica of a zero point reactor. If it hadn't been for the lab's safety protocols the story would have ended much differently. The afternoon was late when the Voci brothers departed Ms. Egam Navank's house. As was usual they had been well fed as a reward for their visit.

Back at the Voci house Bresa's parents were both home. They were delighted to see both of their sons return in time for dinner. Bresa and Valena exchanged glances. Their stomachs were still full from their last meal. Without hesitation they took their seat and stuffed themselves once more with the delectables that their parents had prepared for Bresa's homecoming.

After dinner Bresa helped his father clean up the dining room and kitchen. Bresa was carrying plates back to the kitchen when Vanka began to speak. "You know your mother's worried about this assignment you have."

"I figured she would be. But it's something I've dreamed of doing for years." Bresa replied setting the plates down on the kitchen counter.

“She knows that, that’s why she’s tried not to show it.” Bresa’s father took the plates and began washing them. “We remember when you came home from school at Valena’s age excited to show us the report you wrote about the inventors of zero point drives. They were your idols back then.”

“You guys really remember that?” Bresa was impressed. He had almost forgotten about that report. It had been a small thing compared to the assignments he did for his classes at the academy.

“Of course we do. We still have it laying around somewhere with some of the other projects you showed us.” Vanka set the sponge he was using down and looked at his son. “Are you sure it’s safe?”

“What?” Bresa was carrying another load of dirty dishware into the kitchen.

“This whole faster than light travel.” Bresa’s father replied. “It just seems too new in development to be used on such a large project like the Sojourn.”

“You think they should wait longer?” Bresa walked over to where the clean dishes sat. He picked up a rag and began drying the cleaned dishware. “The ship has been in the works for almost a decade, zero point drive has been around for almost three.

I've talked with the ones who helped create the technology and they've run every conceivable test."

"It just feels rushed." Vanka gave a sigh. "As a science, the field is new and still in development. We have the same thing happen in biology, one of us comes up with some kind of a breakthrough and we want to utilize it right away but the right pace has to be set. Go too fast and you're bound to miss something, go too slow and your field suffers."

"But we're not going too fast, we've tested these drives on smaller ships for the last several years. Yes, the civilian sector has refrained from using them until a need arises but that's why we need the Sojourn. She'll be Gatrubbe's eyes and ears among the stars, giving us the ability to go forth and seek out new planets to colonize and new resources to utilize."

Bresa's father chuckled as he listened to his son. "Sounds like they've convinced you of the necessity of this project. You and your grandmother would have gotten along well. Your passion reminds me of the way she would talk about her work in the field."

"Whatever happens I promise I'll write home every chance I get." Bresa assured his father. The kitchen duties came to a close about this same time.

Bresa decided to retire for the night. It had been a long day and he was determined to catch up on all the sleep he had missed over the last six years.

## Chapter III

The senate room was filled with innumerable conversations coming from all directions. The morning session was about to begin and the topic of today's agenda was already sparking debate both inside the room and out. The Head of the Senate, Senator Terb Eskan, was an aged member of the Senate. She had been around when the Sojourn project was first brought to the floor. The other senators respected Senator Eskan's authority. She had worked hard to get to her position. It had taken years of finding the right balance between listening and decision making but those years had finally paid off. The senator stood at the behind podium at the front of the room and brought the room to attention. "Settle down, settle down. Everyone will have a chance to voice their opinion. I understand that the GSC Sojourn is raising concerns. Today we are here to discuss the final details of the project's mission. I would ask that we all remember that as we continue with the day's proceedings. Senator Skrit the floor is yours."

As Senator Eskan left the podium one of the older senators stood up and made his way to the podium. Kelena Skrit had served for several years as his district's representative. His efforts to push forward the reformation of Gatrubbe's navy from the sea to the stars had gained him a considerable number of both allies and opponents. Before speaking he look out among the crowd. His esteemed colleagues held him in high respect for his years of public service. He had served almost as many years as Senator Eskan but even he hadn't been around that long. "My dear colleges, I have long been a supporter of the Sojourn project. Today I stand before you not to delay the project but to bring forward concerns of the project's security. The Gatrubbian Space Command believes their security forces will be enough to keep the ship secure during her maiden voyage. I have talked with members of the Navy and they disagree with that assessment. Therefore, I would like to propose that the Sojourns crew be complemented with the addition of a security detail which has been trained at the naval academy."

The room erupted in conversation. Senator Skrit stood silent at the podium as Senator Eskan tried to calm the various outcries. After several minutes the room settled back down and Senator Skrit was allowed to continue speaking.

“My dear senators realize that the Sojourn project will be launching shortly, we can either let her go unprepared or not. The choice is yours. With that I yield the floor back to Senator Eskan.”

As the aged senator took a seat, Terb came back to the front of the senate floor. She took her position at the podium. “In opposition to Senator Skrit’s proposal is Senator Genet. The floor is yours senator.”

Bolan Genet was a younger senator. This was her first term in office and she was still in the process of making a name for herself. As a representative for the colonies her reputation was much less than that of the previous two senators. That made no difference to the rest of the room which became silent as she approached the podium. All ears were eager to hear what she had to say about the situation.

“Thank you senator. As a representative of the colonies I cannot stand in support of Senator Skrit’s proposal. How can we talk about protecting a starship before law and order are being rigidly enforced outside of this planet’s atmosphere? My constituents have demanded that the Navy help provide protection, but their cries have gone unheard. The Sojourn project has put a large dent in the government’s budget but when the colonies ask for a

small portion of the budget they are told that they can have whatever remains. Why should we be exploring other star systems when we can't even keep ours running efficiently?"

Senator Genet waited as the senate's murmurs died down a bit. Once the room had returned to its previous state of silence, the young senator continued. "I am not the first senator to bring up this issue, when the Sojourn project first came across the floor of this senate, many of Senator Skrit's colleagues expressed the same concerns. Senators it may be too late to stop project Sojourn, but if we have the resources to give her extra security, why can't we direct those resources to the colonies instead? I know I am not the only one in the room today who feels this way."

The senator's pleas continued. Some of the other senators got up and left the room to refresh themselves. Soon the morning had passed and the debate over Senator Skrit's proposal was just getting warmed up. By late afternoon the proposal had turned from adding a security detail to using the Sojourn as a sentry for the colonies. Senator Eskan continued to moderate the debate, but as the day wore the rising tension in the room made it more and more difficult to keep order. Finally, the last words

were spoken and the proposal was brought up to a vote.

With that a final close decision was made to continue to use the Sojourn as a ship of exploration but the additional security detail would not be added.

## Chapter IV

Captain Manar Ketel was not a forced to be reckoned with. She had earned a slew of nicknames by the students at the academy none of which were spoken of when the captain was even remotely in the area. Rumor had it she could hear a conversation from a kilometer away. No one dared test that rumor. In the few classes that the captain had taught for the cadets who were destined to serve on the Sojourn, the rooms had been dead quiet. The captain had been in the service of the Gatrubbian Space Command for several years now and had served in just about every position that could be thought of. The hard worked had paid off when she had been selected to command the Sojourn on her maiden voyage. Now that duty was only a few days away from being fully realized.

The captain's shuttle ascended through the atmosphere from the port located at the Gatrubbian Space Command's main facility. Unlike the large

atmospheric shuttles, the one that the captain now flew in was smaller in size. It was large enough to carry a group of six or seven passengers and was commissioned for use as a private shuttle. The ascending journey took only a few minutes. The captain sat in the copilot's seat and watched as the blue sky faded into the dark black background of the universe. She had made several similar journeys but this was going to be one of the last journeys she would take from the surface. Soon Space Command's orbital shipyard came into view. Moments later the Sojourn could be made out sitting in one of the construction docks. Her outer hull contained no more gaps and from the outside looked complete. She was a long and narrow ship except for her aft side which housed four large sub-light engines. Overall the Sojourn was no larger than some of the largest system cruise liners. Unlike the cruise liners, the Sojourn was equipped with a zero point energy system. Once turned out it would power all of the ship's systems indefinitely and also allow the ship to break the light barrier as the first prototypes had done only a few decades before.

The shuttle swung around to the front of the construction dock and approached the port docking bay. This approach allowed the captain to get a closer look at the skin of her new ship. The plating was almost seamless and better quality than she had ever

seen in a vessel of this magnitude. The ship passed through the bay doors and landed. It was a few minutes before the hangar repressurized and the shuttle doors were allowed to open.

Approaching the shuttle to meet with Captain Ketel was the ship's chief engineer Nadala Gamut. He was a shorter man. Nadala had grown on Keshintir, one of the first planets colonized by the Gatrubbians. His talents with various mechanisms didn't go unnoticed long and the Gatrubbian Space Command recruited him to the academy. Before long he had graduated and spent several years serving aboard a government supply freighter. It wasn't the luxury that he had been promised, but being asked to serve as chief engineer of the Sojourn had more than made up for that.

"Captain Ketel, we've been expecting your arrival. I think you'll be pleasantly surprised at the progress we've made since your last visit." The pudgy Gatrubbian gave a respectful bow to the captain who had now made clear of the shuttle's hatchway. Nadala led the captain out of the shuttle bay and into the connecting corridor.

"I see that the crews have finished installing the exterior plating. How are the rest of the systems coming? I hear there have been some setbacks."

Manar had read up on the latest progress reports. Most of the points were to her satisfaction. She had attended the latest senate session and watched as the politicians argued over the Sojourn's purpose. She had been glad when the final vote came out in favor of keeping the Sojourn on her path of exploration.

"So you heard about the decision to have the zero point drive tested once more I assume. It seems no one can let it go. But it's no problem. I have a group of engineers working on the requested simulations. The committee should be more than satisfied at the results." As the pair turned the corner they nearly ran into a well-dressed Gatrubbian.

"I'm sure we will be." The man spoke. Captain Ketel recognized Senator Skrit from the several meeting they had attended. He gave a nod to the captain. "Ma'am."

"I was not aware you were aboard senator." Captain Ketel's posture became more rigid at the appearance of the bureaucrat. "If you would like a tour I'm certain that the chief can find someone to lead you around."

Kelena waved off that idea. "I was just on my way out ma'am. Thought I am glad to have caught

you. No doubt you were at the senate when my proposal came up.”

“I was.” Manar nodded, “I’m sorry to hear that it failed.”

“It’s no matter. As long as the Sojourn is still able to set out among the stars and help the Gatrubbian people make a name for themselves.” The senator smiled with pride. “There will be great stories told about your ship’s adventures. I am glad to have been a part of the cast that set the stage for such stories.”

“Thank you senator. Your committee’s contributions are much appreciated. I know that this project has encouraged several recruits to join Space Command.” One of Captain Ketel’s last duties before sending the Sojourn out to the stars was to speak at the commencement ceremony for the latest batch of recruits. Almost half of the upcoming graduates had been approved for service on the Sojourn. Most of the recruits Manar had met in the last few years during the interview process that went along with the application to serve on the Sojourn. From those she had met she anticipated that many of them would serve the ship well.

“While you are away we hope to convince the Senate to allocate some more funds to continue endeavors to building a fleet of ships to explore the unknown.” The senator’s confidence didn’t waver. He was certain that the opposition to the Sojourn was only a temporary setback. Sooner or later the colonies would come to see that building an interstellar fleet would lead to benefits for all Gatrubbiankind. “If you’ll excuse me, I am due back on the surface for an important meeting. I have enjoyed looking around. She’ll make a fine ship when she launches.”

“You are always welcome back senator.” Ketel gave a farewell. “Your efforts will be remembered.”

After the senator walked off, Manar and Belva continued their stroll through the corridors of the ship. “Are we still on schedule to launch?”

“Yes ma’am.” Belva nodded. “With some luck we might even be ready ahead of schedule.”

“Are you considering supplies in your estimation?” The captain asked. She had seen several supply shuttles in the hangar and assumed they had been emptied out. The last time the captain had been aboard the ship’s cargo holds had only been partially stocked. She couldn’t wait to see how they looked now.

“I am. I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised at the amount of time that has been put into completing the project.” The pair reached a door and Belva entered in his access code. He opened the door and gestured towards Manar. “After you ma’am.”

“Thank you.” The captain stepped through the doorway and stopped. She had never seen a zero point drive. Even though it was still on standby, the captain was still awestruck at the device. It was the heart of the Sojourn there was no doubt about that. All around there were various engineering crews working on different aspects of the drive.

“Impressive isn’t it?” The chief engineer asked watching the captain’s reaction. “Once she’s online she’ll be even more impressive.”

“How long until then?” Manar approached the drive’s casing and observed its flawless design. The drive itself was about five meters wide by ten meters long and took the shape of an ellipsoid propped up on legs. Running through the top and bottom of the amber colored egg were conduits to direct the power generated by the drive through the ship’s power grid.

“We should be ready to try it out in the next three days.” Belva shared the feeling of anticipation

that the whole crew had. They were going to be doing something that only Gatrubbian storytellers could do. They were going to go to the great beyond and see what was beyond the comfort of their home.

“Let me know when you are ready to turn her on.” Captain Ketel turned to face the chief. “I have to meet with the other departments, but I look forward to going over the progress reports sometime.”

“Of course ma’am. We can come up with a time.” Belva approached the zero point drive to help one of the crews with wiring up one of the conduits as Manar left engineering to check in with the medical staff.

## Chapter V

Several orbital bodies from the temperate world of Gatrubbe a massive asteroid drifted in orbit about the only star of the Gatrubbian system. On this asteroid there were several interconnected facilities that made up a mining colony. Most of the resources had been drained from the interior of the rock leaving little more than empty tunnels and minimally lit passages though the asteroid. It was in these tunnels that the local cell of the Colonial Liberation Movement held their meetings.

Around a metallic table similar to those used elsewhere in the facility there sat a band of Gatrubbians. The group was composed of every imaginable size and type of Gatrubbian that could be imagined. All of them had one thing in common. They had a passionate distaste for how the Gatrubbian government was treating the colonies. Those who wanted to leave the colonies for Gatrubbe had been denied for one reason or another. Even those who were born into the colony life weren't allowed the chance to make something for themselves outside of the colonies.

The latest meeting of the Senate had been a catalyst to bring the group even closer to acting out. The fact that the precious Sojourn project had taken precedent over the wellbeing of the lives of Gatrubbians was more than enough for outcries to be heard throughout the colonies. Now there were incoming reports of protests forming outside the Senate building. This news brought some joy to the ears of the revolutionaries, but it still wasn't enough.

Shra Blansh stood at the head of the table. He was not quite middle aged and had already become a powerful voice within the organization. He had been given charge of the asteroid's cell after the last leader was called off for a greater position within the movement. Shra had spent his whole life on the

asteroid. His parents had moved to the asteroid as miners. Shra was one of those who had tried at an early age to move to Gatrubbe where he could receive a better education and have more opportunities for employment. The opportunities that presented themselves on the asteroid were far less glamorous. Like the others, Shra had been denied permission to visit Gatrubbe. He had considered stowing away on an outbound freighter but had heard horror stories of those who had been caught. After resigning himself to the fate of becoming a permanent resident of the colonies, he focused on what he had and what was obtainable.

That was when Shra met his wife. The two had met at the colony's local cantina one night during a celebration. They were mutual friends to a married couple who were throwing an anniversary dinner. The night the two single Gatrubbians talked and talked. They talked through the night and within a year they had settled on getting married. Shra was the father to three kids. Neither them nor his wife knew about Shra's involvement in the Colonial Liberation Movement. Shra hadn't been a member back when he met his wife. His involvement came afterwards when he was trying to visit Gatrubbe to visit a dying uncle of his. When he was denied the permission to even visit the planet, Shra's annoyance could no longer be contained.

It was about that time that Shra had been recruited by the Colonial Liberation Movement. They took his frustration and the similar feelings of frustration felt by others and put them towards the constructive goal of one day having the colonies govern themselves. If Gatrubbe wasn't going to do anything about the colonies, it would be up to the colonies to come up with their own solutions.

Shra's palms were on the table as he stood and looked at the faces of his comrades. The faces he saw were filled with misery and sorrow. Some still held out hope that maybe the government would turn their eyes towards the colonies but many within the movement had lost that hope and turned it to disdain. Shra began to speak over the light murmurs of the crowd. "Good evening fellow comrades. This emergency session has been called by request of my superiors due to the nature of the latest meeting of our beloved Senators."

The murmurs quieted down and the rocky chamber was silent except for the hum of the lights. Shra continued to speak, this time he began to wander about the table. "It appears that our representatives have decided their precious spaceship is too privileged to help us. Not only that but they denied us resources they were more than willing to give to that cause."

“Criminals!” An outcry was heard. This led to several more interjections.

“Please try to withhold your reactions.” Shra waved his hands downwards to try to control the sudden increase in conversation. “Headquarters has heard pleas from several other cells. That is why I called you here tonight. Finally, it has come time that we present Gatrubbe with an ultimatum. Senator Genet has done well trying to fight for our cause in a peaceful manner but if the last session has shown us anything it is that the peaceful approach will not work with such people.”

“Give us the word!” Another enthusiastic voice made itself known.

“I’m proud to see such desire. It will help our cause go far.” Shra approached the front of the room where he had begun his introduction. “I am happy to announce that we have been chosen to help begin the revolution. The plans are still being finalized but I am told that we should be ready at a moment’s notice.”

Cheers of excitement filled the room. Everyone made sure they were not too loud. If their meeting was caught in the act it would all be over. The tunnels were rarely patrolled but the group could never be too sure.

After letting the group expel their excitement Shra finished up his part of the meeting. "Are there any questions? I don't have much information at the moment but I'll do what I can."

"What should we do until the plan is ready?" One of the newer members asked.

"Keep your routines the same. We don't need anyone becoming suspicious until after the plan goes into action." Shra answered. The instructions he gave were no different than those he would give at any other meeting. Disguise was the best tool the group had and it would need to remain that way for them to succeed.

"What about our families?" Another member asked. "Will they be safe?"

"I have assurances that what we do will bring no harm to the civilians of the colonies." Shra repeated the assurance. "The only ones who should be fearing right now are those who serve the corruption that keeps us here."

"So people will be harmed?" An unseen source asked this question.

All eyes turned towards Shra for an answer. The room became silent and awaited a response. "No

more than necessary. If all goes well there will be no casualties. I don't think any of us want to see harm come to another Gatrubbian, but we need to remember that we're fighting for our rights as Gatrubbian citizens."

An applause broke out as the members of the movement cheered for the common cause they were fighting for. Their spirits were high and they felt as though nothing could stop them. The members stood up not seeing any more questions being raised.

"Return home tonight." Shra officially closed out the meeting. "Return home with the hope that tomorrow things will be better."

## Chapter VI

The commencement for the graduates of the Gatrubbian Space Command academy ended and a flood of Gatrubbian's filled the adjoining flora filled plaza. Near the outer wall of the auditorium sat an arrangement of food and beverages for the guests to snack on while they visited. Once Bresa made his way outside now wearing a uniform with the rank of ensign he made his way through the crowd to find his family.

Bresa had spent the last week with his family as he had intended to. They had spent a lot of time visiting some of Bresa's favorite spots. Places he liked to walk, to eat, and to shop. Valena had set aside a lot of time to spend with his brother. It almost felt like old times having his older brother back in the house. The day before the commencement the family had visited the local temple to hear the Reader Banta's interpretation of the Great Story. Reader Banta had always moved Bresa. His ability to use intonation just right when speaking kept Bresa and the rest of the congregation on their toes. Bresa was going to miss the reader's interpretations.

Thoughts of these last few days flooded the new recruit's mind as he approached his parents and brother. They were near the trunk of one of the campus' oldest trees. The shade provided a cool space for families to stand while they waited for their recent graduates. All three of them were brimming with smiles as they saw Bresa approach.

"Congratulations." Bresa's father stepped forward and hugged his son. "The new uniform suits you well."

"Thanks." Bresa said coming to the realization that in a few hours he would be aboard the Sojourn,

far from his closest family members. "I couldn't have done it without the support of you guys."

Captain Ketel approached the family. She was wearing her dress uniform and was making the rounds meeting the newest additions to her crew. "Ensign Voci right?"

Bresa stood at attention when he heard the captain's approach. "Yes ma'am."

"Relax ensign, there's no need for formalities at the moment." Manar approached the ensign. "I'd like to welcome you as one of the newest additions to the Sojourn. The chief was impressed with your service record within the academy. He thinks you'll make a fine addition to his engineering staff."

"Thank you ma'am. I look forward to boarding." The last sentence came after an almost unnoticeable pause. Bresa had no intention of backing down, but it was hard coming to grips with the reality that graduation brought to the young Gatrubbian. "What time does the shuttle leave?"

"Two hours." Captain Ketel replied. "There will be a welcoming dinner served in the ships mess for all the new officers. Nothing formal, just a chance for you all to meet with your fellow officers before your duties officially begin."

Bresa nodded. "I'll be there. Thank you ma'am."

"It was nice to meet you Ensign Voci. I'll let you get back to your family." Captain Ketel turned and wandered off towards a group of ensigns.

Bresa rejoined his family who had backed off a bit to allow Bresa and the captain to have some privacy in the conversation. "Sorry about that."

"Bring back something cool will you?" Bresa's brother asked. Valena didn't want to see his brother go, not without taking him along. Bresa's brother awaited to hear the stories that Bresa would tell once the Sojourn returned from their voyage. He had read all about space monsters and untamed aliens in far off nebulae. Those stories were the most interesting in Valena's opinion. He hoped that his brother would be able to provide such stories once he finished travelling.

"I'll see what I can find." Bresa laughed and put a hand on his brother's shoulder. After a few moments Bresa stood up and looked at his mother. Of the group, she was having the hardest time trying to cope. Her oldest child was now leaving the nest. Sure Bresa had been away for several years now, but he had always come back for vacations and breaks.

This time things were going to be different. Bresa knew this and reassured her. "I'll write when I can. I packed a camera to take pictures. With the communication relays we're going to setup there should be no problem with us getting a signal back home."

Even with her son's reassurance, Mal had trouble holding back some of her tears. She gave Bresa a hug and spoke. "Don't forget to bring souvenirs and stories. Ms. Navank will want to know how you're doing out there."

"I'll be sure to give her more stories than she has time in the day to read." Bresa promised. "Maybe it will get her off talking about the neighborhood."

Bresa's mother laughed at that comment. "She'll like that."

The ensign let out a sigh as the group of four stood there silently. "Should we make sure my belongings are all packed?"

Bresa's family agreed and they went to the dormitory. Unlike a week ago, the room was now almost completely empty. Both Bresa and Belva had cleaned out their respective sides of the room. Besides a couple of packed bags and belongings that

were needed until graduation, there were no more personal items in the room. When the family arrived they saw Belva and his family. They too were helping their son on his move out of the building.

Unlike Bresa, Belva hadn't been given a position aboard the Sojourn. Instead Belva had been assigned to an engineering post on one of the jointly owned Naval and Space Command outposts on Keshintir, one of Gatrubbe's nearest planetary neighbors. The outpost was lightly manned, but they needed an engineer to make sure the outpost was well maintained. It wasn't a glamorous job, but the responsibility and independence that came with the position usually led to remarkable things. Belva had been excited about the assignment since it allowed him to spend some time tinkering with the various devices he liked to build on his free time. He aspired to one day build a fully working android. So far in the academy he had succeeded in designing smaller and far simpler utility robots. He hoped that this assignment's distance from other distractions would help in achieving his goal.

"Bresa good to see you!" Belva had turned towards the doorway when he heard the door opening. He smiled at the sight of his roommate. "We made it."

Bresa smiled. He was going to miss the late-night conversations he and Belva had engaged in. He was going to miss the projects that the two had partook in during their six years together. More than anything he was going to miss the friendship they had crafted during their time as roommates. “We did. So when do you set out for the outpost?”

“The shuttle picks me up tomorrow morning.” Belva replied zipping up the bag he was packing. “From there it’s a couple hours to the outpost where I meet the rest of the personnel. I hear there’s only five other people on that barren rock of a planet.”

“Sounds like your kind of place.” Bresa joked. “Hope you enjoy it.”

“Can’t wait to get my hands on my own personal workspace.” Belva’s enthusiasm was hard to miss. “What about you and Sojourn?”

“I leave this afternoon. After that, we do our final checks and with any luck get underway right on schedule.” Bresa checked his desk drawers to make sure they were empty.

“I’ll be sure to wave as you fly by.” Belva smiled. All the Gatrubbian people were planning on watching the Sojourn launch. Even the schools were

planning on closing for the day to allow the children to watch their race's first large step into the unknown.

"I'll keep an eye open. Maybe I can see it before we leave the system."

The two friends basked in the silence of the situation. Their families had made their way out the corridor to leave the roommates alone one last time. Both ensigns were lost in their own minds now that they were out of the academy. No more tests, no more classes, now it was just the duties they were assigned. The early afternoon sun shone through the open window. A slight breeze went through the room and brought the sounds of birds.

Once both had finished packing they said their last goodbyes before parting ways. They promised each other that they would write and keep each other apprised of the progress they made on their personal projects. Bresa's family spent their last couple hours walking around the campus. Bresa showed them all the spots that he and Belva had occupied during their time at the academy. Bresa took them through one last tour of the engineering facility that had been his second home during the last six years.

By the time Bresa had finished his little tour, the time had come for Bresa to make his way to the

shuttle that would take him and the new officers to the Sojourn. Bresa and his family parted ways at the port. His family was destined to go to the shuttle which would take them home and he was destined to take the one that would take him to the Sojourn. Bresa left for the shuttle carrying on a single bag of belongings. The other bags were being taken by his parents for safekeeping back home.

The shuttle sat in its bay awaiting a full load of passengers. One of the port's officers took Bresa's bag and placed it in the cargo section of the shuttle. Similar in design to the atmospheric transport shuttles, the shuttle that Bresa would take to the Sojourn had room for approximately thirty passengers. Between the engines at the back of the shuttle and the passenger compartment there was a small cabin for baggage and other supplies. Bresa boarded the shuttle. He took a seat near one of the other ensigns who had graduated just a few hours before. The two began talking, both shared their excitement and anxieties about what was to come. After a few minutes both of them became quiet and got lost in their thoughts. Not more than five minutes later Captain Ketel came aboard and took role to ensure that everyone was aboard who was destined to be aboard.

Once that process was completed, the shuttle doors closed and the drone of the engines picked up as the shuttle lifted off. Most of the new recruits were silent. Bresa supposed that many of them shared thoughts like his own. Beyond a couple zero gravity training sessions, none of them had spent much time outside the confines of Gatrubbe's protective atmosphere. Looking out a nearby viewport Bresa watched as the blue haze of the sky faded into the blackness of space.

## Chapter VII

The shuttle landed in the Sojourn's starboard docking bay a few minutes after launching. The tension in the shuttle rose as everyone waited for the bay to repressurize. The cabin was filled with murmurs of excitement. It was almost unreal to the new crew members that they were now aboard one the most important ship known to Gatrubbian history. The shuttle doors opened and Bresa waited anxiously for his turn to leave.

The young ensign took his first steps onto the Sojourn. A wave of relief swept over him as he came to the realization that he was now at his new home. One of the ship's personnel was already going through the process of unloading the cargo section.

Bresa grabbed his bag and reported to the captain who was in the process of giving out berthing assignments. After receiving his assignment, Bresa made his way to his new quarters. Over the last few months Bresa had made it a goal to memorize the Sojourn's deck layout. The work he had put into that little project had paid off as he had no trouble finding his way to the room he had been assigned. He opened the door to reveal a single room whose window opposed the door and faced out the port side of the ship. Against either wall was a bunk each raised above a dresser and a desk. The left side of the room was already unpacked with belongings so Bresa decided to place his bag on the right desk.

Once he had finished getting ready for the dinner that the captain had mentioned, Bresa started to make his way towards the mess hall. Inside the mess hall several of the other new recruits were seated and starting to talk to one another. Bresa took a seat near a group of new engineers that he knew from his classes. None of the group were great friends, but they at least knew each other by virtue of the fact that they all shared in the same classes. Bresa struck up a pretty good conversation about the potential use zero point technology with civilian vessels. The conversation turned to be more politically focus than engineering focused.

It wasn't long before Captain Ketel took a position at the front of the room and began her speech introducing the new recruits to the senior officers of the Sojourn. As with the rest of the new engineers, Bresa was anxious to meet the chief engineer. Bresa had heard many things about Nadala Gamut. Back at the academy his name was associated with the team that drafted the plans for the Sojourn. Beyond that he had drawn up plans for several other space faring vessels that were in some way or another used in the day to day affairs of Gatrubbe and her colonies.

By the time Bresa's mind came back to focusing on the captain's speech, she was amid wrapping it up. Following the applause of the crowd trays and trays worth of food were brought to the tables. Baskets of buns made their way around. Serving dishes of various meats, vegetables, and noodles were brought to the tables. There was enough variety spread across the room that no one in their right mind would be able to taste it all in one sitting. Following the meal came an even larger variety of deserts. Platters of cookies and pastries made the rounds. Bresa and the other engineers held a lively discussion while they snacked their night away. At least once during the meal Nadala came by to introduce himself and partake in the conversation.

Several hours after the food had been taken away and the crowds had died down, the engineers began to disperse to their respective rooms. To Bresa's surprise he found out he was sharing a room with another engineer who had also graduated that afternoon. With all the excitement he had forgotten the feelings he had experienced on the surface. He was finding it easy to ease into his new role as an engineer aboard the Sojourn.

After an uninterrupted night of much needed sleep, Bresa awoke to the alarm he had set to wake him. After showing and getting into his uniform in the bathing facilities located down the corridor, the ensign made his way to the mess hall to grab a bite to eat before reporting to his assigned duty station. In less than two days, the Sojourn would be departing. In that time Bresa and the rest of the officers who had been brought aboard were going to be pushed through a quick orientation before starting their official duties. Bresa finished his breakfast and proceeded to make his way to engineering where his adventure of a lifetime was about to unfold.

## Chapter VIII

A day later and several kilometers below, the Gatrubbe Intelligence Agency was operating in

overtime. Over the last decade they had been tasked with protecting the Sojourn project from any forces that would oppose it. Of course this was only one of their responsibilities. The agency was established to provide protection against any subterfuge that had the potential to undermine Gatrubbian society. Today was a big day. Today marked the day that once and for all would mark the beginning of a new era for today was the day that the Gatrubbian people made took their first steps outside of the star system they called home.

The agency was communicating with both Naval and Space Command forces to ensure that the Sojourn's path was clear. As these checks were being made, a notification went off in a separate department of the agency. The agent in charge, a man by name of Voshara left his station to report to his superior.

Voshara made his way to the main conference room where many of the department heads were watching the broadcast that was to be followed by Captain Ketel's address to the public. The Gatrubbian agent saw his boss, an older gentleman by the name of Etana sitting near the doorway. Voshara grabbed his attention and Etana excused himself.

Outside the conference room Voshara shared the information he had received. "Sir, we've gotten a

report from one of the outposts in the outer asteroid belt. One of the guards reported increased activity with the local liberation movement.”

“What kind of activity?” Etana asked. He was eager to get back before the captain’s speech began. “Is the Sojourn in danger?”

“No sir, but the report indicates a possible increase in meetings and radio chatter.” Voshara couldn’t help but notice Etana’s body language. The older Gatrubbian was tapping his foot in an agitated manner.

“What am I supposed to do about it?” Etana asked. “Let the fools talk, they’ve never acted out of line any more than a couple protests here and there.”

“It’s just that with everything that’s going on, the report was marked as high priority.” Voshara pulled out a copy of the report and handed it to Etana who proceeded to fold it up and stuff it in a pocket.

“Increase surveillance if you feel it’s necessary.” Etana replied. He would read the report after the Sojourn was safely on their way. “Now if you don’t mind, the captain’s speech is supposed to start at any moment.”

Voshara nodded with reluctance. He felt that his efforts were in vain but there was little that he could do. "Thank you sir."

The agent made his way back to his desk. He sent a reply to the field agent who had sent the report. Afterwards he sent another message to another department in the agency to increase surveillance of the movement. Voshara just hoped that his efforts were not lost on deaf ears.

Elsewhere around Gatrubbe, families and crowds gathered to tune into Captain Ketel's speech. So far Senator Skrit had given his speech which praised the efforts of everyone who had worked and was currently working on the Sojourn. One of the readers that had been invited to the ceremony retold one of the Gatrubbian stories which talked about the importance of the journey over the destination. As an intermission the broadcast showed various angles of the Sojourn's exterior while in the background a reporter gave a live report of the situation at the ceremony.

In the Voci household, cheers could be heard whenever the camera switched to a view of the crew and Bresa's face could be picked out of the crowd. Joining Mal, Vanka, and Valena were a slew of neighbors and relatives. Their house was packed

with guests. The chatter stopped the moment that the camera switched to the podium which Captain Ketel now stood behind.

The captain's speech, like the one she had given the night before was well thought out. The captain tended to speak with her hands as she addressed the crowd. She spoke of the importance of the Sojourn's mission and how the mission wouldn't be possible without the dedication and skills of the people who had built the craft and the people who now crewed the craft. Throughout the Gatrubbe system the captain's voice echoed through the various visual and audio media that were broadcasting her speech. From the heart of the Gatrubbian Senate to the furthest outpost, her voice could be heard. During her speech the Gatrubbian populace stayed silent. Some felt proud to be living in such a momentous time, others like the members of the Colonial Liberation Movement felt an anger rise up at the words the captain used: unified, peaceful, betterment of the Gatrubbian people.

When the speech ended. The entire system seemed to erupt with applause and cheers. The reader who had spoken previously came to the podium to give the Sojourn the blessing of the Writers. Following the blessing, Senator Skrit took the stage and formally passed command of the ship to

Captain Ketel. This was followed by another applause. After this the broadcast returned to the reporter in the studio. With the fanfare out of the way, the Sojourn was now on her final countdown.

As the cameras showed the last of the shuttles leaving with their VIPs, the broadcast switched to a live view of the bridge where Captain Ketel had taken her rightful place upon the center seat. Around her, other officers were sounding off all the final system checks. Audio from Space Command's control center filled the static leaving all the viewers and listeners on the edge of their seat. Finally, the control center sent the okay for launch.

Over the media streams Captain Ketel's voice could be heard. "Release docking clamps. Bring sublight engines to one eighth power and maneuver us out."

The scene changed from the bridge to a view of the dock where the Sojourn had sat for the last decade. The clamps that had long cradled the ship were now detached. The ship's engines gave off a glow for the first time as they powered up and pushed forward out of the dock. The ship's running lights also came online as she left the dock. Once there was enough clearance between the dock and the Sojourn, Captain Ketel gave the order to proceed to

full sublight speed. At this speed, the ship would be able to make it to the edge of the system in a matter of hours. But it would only take a few minutes to get to a safe distance from Gatrubbe before the zero point drive could unleash its full potential.

In those minutes, audiences all around the star system were left on the edge of their seats. The Sojourn quickly fell out of sight of the cameras and now only the empty dock was left while the reporters filled the air with commentary. The commentary paused as the control center gave the Sojourn clearance to engage their zero point drive. Seconds later, cheers could be heard as the news of a successful launch was reported. In the few hours that it would have taken the Sojourn to cover the Gatrubbe system, the Sojourn would be able to visit the nearest star system and return. Though in the case of the Sojourn they would not be coming back for quite some time.

## Part II

### Chapter IX

Several weeks passed since Sojourn's departure. On Gatrubbe and within the rest of the star systems, most of life returned to normal. There were biweekly updates over the news networks about life on the Sojourn. Without those, it would have been nearly impossible to tell that anything significant had happened. There were some, like Valena who kept the Sojourn in the front of their mind. The Senate went back to squabbling about the more mundane matters.

On Keshintir Belva had gotten settled in. The first few days he had been busy with getting acquainted with the personnel and the facility. Keshintir was named for its oxidized and surface. In the Gatrubbian tongue the same word for red was also used to talk about Gatrubbe's nearest neighbor. The planet's environment was inhospitable to life, but there were plans in the works to try terraforming the surface to allow the colonists the ability to be able to walk around outside the colony without an environmental suit. Almost a century ago the planet had been colonized by the first group of colonists to leave Gatrubbe. Their departure was celebrated almost as much as that of the Sojourn. The colony remained in close contact with Gatrubbe. Over the years, space travel within the system had improved and it became easier to transfer supplies between the two planets. It was only in the last few years that

tensions between the colonies and Gatrubbe even began to rise. Even then most citizens were content with the relationship that the two parties shared.

Long before those tensions, both Space Command and the Navy had decided that it would be beneficial to have an outpost separated from the Keshintir colony which had become the home to almost ten thousand Gatrubbian souls. It was at this outpost that Belva now found himself. The facility was lightly manned and with only a few personnel. The outpost had been forgotten to time, the technology that ran the outpost was still decades behind the latest technology being utilized on Gatrubbe. More than once a vote came up in the Senate to close the facility down. Each time the vote failed to pass on the pretense that it could one day become useful and that it made the colonists of Keshintir feel safer.

Belva spent today as he spent every other day, wandering the halls of the facility. If there was ever a need, there was room enough for a horde of marines to make the outpost their home. As his main responsibility, Belva had to ensure that the outpost was running at peak efficiency. If there were any faults in the systems, it was his job to correct the issues. Beyond those duties and the daily checks that needed to be done the new officer had the rest of the

time to do as he pleased. So far he had spent his free time setting up a workshop in one of the unused sections of the facility. One of the benefits to being stationed on a lonely outpost was the ability to requisition supplies items for any free time that might come up. The engineer had requested a slew of mechanical parts so that he could work on his hobby of trying to create a fully working android. He had made some progress. The hardest part of the process was designing hardware capable of keeping up with the desired software features that were required.

Belva went on walks around the outpost as he tried to figure out various problems that came up. Often the movement would get the blood flowing enough to clear the engineer's mind and provide a solution. Today Belva's walk was interrupted as a klaxon sounded over the intercom system. The new officer had never heard the sound outside the drills he had done at the academy. He looked around hoping that someone would be able to tell him what was going on. After seeing that the corridor he was in was empty he hurried to the command center where the outpost's command officer spent her day. Besides her and Belva, there were a couple security officers, a scientist, and a doctor for a total of six officers.

Belva entered the command center. One of the security officers was busy working away at one of the

consoles. The commander was busy at another console and turned when she heard the engineer enter.

“What’s going on?” Belva asked seeing that the alarm wasn’t a drill.

“Sensors indicated an intruder.” The commander replied. As Belva approached he saw that she was busy trying to open a channel to Space Command.

“How’d they get in?” Belva felt foolish interrupting what seemed like a dire situation, but neither he nor anyone else on the outpost had expected something like this to happen.

“It looks like a shuttle landed a few minutes ago. External sensors picked it up but they weren’t alarmed by it.” The commander went back to working on trying to contact Space Command. “One of the airlocks was unlocked by whoever was in the shuttle. That’s what set the alarm off.”

“What should I do?” The engineer stood in a state of confusion.

“Grab a gun and try to find the intruder.” The commander turned away from the screen before letting Belva walk off, “Make sure you stun them.”

“Yes ma’am.” The engineer left the command center and made his way to the armory. About halfway towards his destination, Belva could hear the sound of footsteps. They echoed from multiple directions and the young officer couldn’t decide which way to turn. He made up his mind to try to turn and take another route to the armory. Just as he turned he was startled to see another Gatrubbian less than a meter from him. He heard the blast of a blaster and then felt himself lose control of his body before losing consciousness.

## Chapter X

The first thing that Belva noticed when he awoke is that he was laying on a foam mattress. He was glad that the whole thing had been a dream. He turned to look at his clock. To his surprise he realized that he wasn’t in his room, he wasn’t quite sure where he was. The room was about twenty-five square meters and contained four mattresses in the form of two bunks on each side wall. The back wall of the room was bare except for a toilet and sink. On the sink sat an empty clear plastic cup. The front wall was plated with a clear polymer with a door in the center which connected to another room about the same size beyond that was a room that mirrored the one the Belva was in. Unlike the two side rooms, the

middle room had no bunks on the two side walls. Instead the room had a door on each wall.

Also in the same room as Belva was the scientist who was serving aboard the outpost. Doctor Graven Eteg was a microbiologist. She had been trained at the Bishova Institute for Research and Technology. Her interests were in studying how various viruses reacted to the foreign and inhospitable environment of Keshintir. She had joined the outpost two years before Belva's arrival. It had been her first assignment after her doctoral program. She had requested the location for reasons similar to Belva. She wanted a place to work that was away from the busy lives that were lived on Gatrubbe. She also liked the idea of being able to use her research to help progress towards the goal of terraforming Keshintir.

"What happened?" Belva held his head as he sat up. A large bruise had formed at the back of his head where it had contacted the floor.

"Your guess is as good as mine." Dr. Eteg replied. She felt some relief that her companion hadn't died. "I was working in the lab when the alarm went off. I went to investigate when I woke up here."

“Has anyone else come by?” Belva asked looking around at his surroundings. As far as he could tell there was no way out.

“Not yet.” The doctor got out of her bunk and filled the cup that was sitting near the sink with water. She brought it to Belva who was quick to down the entire thing.

“Any idea where anyone else is?” Belva continued his questions now feeling refreshed from the water he had received.

As one of the doors to the middle room opened and in walked a ruggedly dressed Gatrubbian. Over his shoulder was slung a rifle. He approached the door the separated Belva and the doctor from him. The two occupants got up. The Gatrubbian pushed a button by the door and the occupants could hear his voice.

“Glad to see you all made it through.” He looked at the two younger Gatrubbians. He easily looked a decade if not two older than the two prisoners.

Belva spoke assuming that his voice could be heard. “Who are you? Where are we?”

“Relax, lieutenant, right? That uniform looks pretty new, the roster says you arrived a couple weeks ago.” The older Gatrubbian smiled. “The name is Shra and at this point in time it looks like your prisoners in my outpost.”

“Your outpost?” Belva recovered from the shock that Shra had been looking through the outpost’s databanks. “Only until the commander’s message gets through.”

“What’s that phrase you homeworlders use? The dead tell no stories.” Shra grinned. “As for the outpost, it’s been claimed by the Colonial Liberation Movement.”

“Do you think that the Navy will just sit by and let you commit such crimes?” Belva asked, his anger could be heard as he spoke.

“I’d like to see them try and stop us.” The movement’s leader brushed off the young officer’s threat. “Out here, the colonies have control. You homeworlders can’t do anything about it.”

“And what about us?” Dr. Eteg asked. “Are you going to kill us as well?”

“That’s not up to me ma’am.” Shra gave a nod. “Your government has some hard choices to make

assuming they make it in one piece. Now if you'll excuse me I have an interview to attend. I'll have someone bring you some food."

Before one of the occupants could reply the leader of the rebellion left. The two prisoners discussed their options. Neither had a plan of escape in mind when their captor's voice came over the outpost's intercom.

"My fellow Gatrubbians I only ask that you give me a moment of your time. You may not know who I am so let me introduce myself. They call me Shra Blansh. I represent the members of the Colonial Liberation Movement. Today is a glorious day, for today is the day that the government of the homeworlders has to make an important decision. As they have no doubt deduced, my people have taken control of the outpost on Keshintir. All around the star system our people are taking control of facilities that you yourselves refused to maintain just like the colonies on those same bodies. Gatrubbians how long do we have to listen to the lies of a government who refused to help her people. Instead she uses her power to pursue her own interests. When she could have been building ships to help bring new supplies to the outer colonies, she instead builds a single ship to fly by without dropping even a morsel in our direction. Gatrubbians I ask that you rise up, I know

in your hearts you feel the same way, and now the Colonial Liberation Movement is here to provide you with those things that the homeworlder government could not. The homeworlders can keep their precious government but they have a decision to make in the next few hours. We have several hostages across many outposts. We also have armaments to go up against the Navy. In return for an armistice and independence we will return the hostages. You have five hours to decide before even more blood is placed on your hands.”

The room went silent as the opposition leader ended his speech. Both Belva and Graven sat silent still going through the words that their captor had spoken. Belva didn't want it to end like this. Just two weeks ago he had been talking with Bresa and in good spirits. Now it seemed that all that was no more than a distant memory.

## Chapter XI

All over the Gatrubbe Intelligence Agency, activity was at an all-time high. The servers were became so bogged down with communique that couriers were being sent between departments to deliver urgent messages. Etana found himself in an

emergency meeting that had been called together by the highest ranking officials.

“How did this go unnoticed?” One of the members of the meeting asked. “Etana isn’t your division supposed to be watching for such threats?”

“We were.” Etana defended himself and his staff, “We had no suspicion that this would happen.”

“What about the report filed by an agent of yours by the name of Voshara? He filed a request for increased surveillance but the request was never formally approved.” The head of the meeting pulled a copy of the report up on the conference room screen. “The alert he was responding to came up two weeks ago when the Sojourn launched and yet in those two weeks you failed to even acknowledge the existence of his request.”

“The request must have gotten lost in transit. I was never aware of any such report.” Etana didn’t like being on the defensive. Even worse, his job was on the line if it did turn out that he had completely disregarded such a request.

“It’s too late for excuses now.” A more experienced member of the meeting spoke up. “What’s done is done. Now what’s going to be done about the events as they stand?”

The head of the meeting tried to reassure the murmuring crowd. "The Senate is in the process of convening to decide on a course of action. Members from Space Command and the Navy are on their way to the building now to consult with the senators."

As the meeting continued, across the road the floor of the senate room was filled with noise as senators tried to get to their seats. At the front Senator Eskan took her place trying to bring order to the room. "Ladies, gentlemen please quiet down and take your seats. I know the situation is distressing which is why we need to handle it in a timely manner."

"How can we negotiate with terrorists?" One of the senators asked in reaction. "To do so would undermine everything we stand for."

"Your voice will be heard, please take a seat. We have officials coming in to apprise us of the situation so that we may make the appropriate decision." As Senator Eskan spoke she saw two generals and two admirals enter through the rear doors.

The cohort didn't hesitate on their way to the front of the room. The senator relinquished her position at the podium and allowed the four officers

to replace her. She stepped down to her seat located in the front row of the room. The room became silent shortly after this entrance.

One of the generals began to speak. “Good evening. I am sorry that you have been dragged out so late at night. For those of those who don’t know me I am General Baltama Kleg. As you are probably aware the situation at hand is unexpected. The intelligence community is gathering everything they can on the situation but it appears that Shra’s words were not empty. We have lost contact with all but a small handful of outposts and stations. As for the hostages, we have no way to verify the claim. At this point in time we need to work on the assumption that Shra has Gatrubbian lives in his hands. Are there any questions?”

“How long until the Navy’s ships can be ready?” A senator from the back of the room asked.

“As we speak both Naval and Space Command vessels are being prepared for action. Unfortunately, any ships that are already in the field will take several hours to fully group up with the ships that are being sent out. Without your authorization we are to refrain from taking any offensive action. We plan on having our fleet approach Keshintir at best possible speed. If we can stop this rebellion at its source, we

will be able to end this situation before it gets out of hand.” The general was breaking out in a sweat at the heat from the room’s lights and from the amount of stress he was under. Press conferences and presentations to the Senate were never productive in his mind. Instead he wanted to be back in a command center receiving continual updates on the situation. There hadn’t been an event like this in years, beyond the occasional pirates the Navy’s past engagements had been minimal.

“How did intelligence agencies miss this?” Senator Genet asked from the second row. Even from the minutes after the message was received she was already being accused of inciting the rebellion. Her affiliation as a representative of the colonies was acting against her. Her constituents were calling for her help and she felt like she had betrayed her people by not stopping such treasonous actions.

“As we speak they are looking into the situation. Right now they’re doing the best they can to find out any and all information that might explain how such acts were allowed to go unnoticed.” General Kleg gave the best response he could find. “Such an investigation is sure to go on for several months though. At this moment you need to make a decision about what to do next. I can have the most of fleet arrive at Keshintir before Shra’s deadline.

With a couple squads we should be able to suppress Shra and his rebellion before this gets out of hand. The choice is yours senators, I yield the floor back to Senator Eskan.”

As the general moved away from the podium and the lead senator made her way to the front there was a flash of light and warmth followed closely by a loud bang. Smoke filled the air and noises of panic could be heard. Senator Skrit had been far enough from the explosion to not have been hit from debris. He moved down the main aisle of the senate room to try and get to the exit. As smoke filled his lungs the old man found it hard to breath. An orange glow flickered off to the senator’s right and was growing rapidly. The smoke was still thick as the senator tried to push the rear door open.

The rush of fresh air was a relief. Senator Skrit hacked violently as his lungs tried hard to rid themselves of the dust and smoke filled air. The senator fell to his knees as the coughing fit continued for what felt like a long and painful eternity. After the coughing subsided the senator rose to see who else had made it out. He looked back but the senate room was filling with flames. Around him several senators were working their way towards the building’s exit. He began to move as fast as he could with the crowd.

Outside on the front lawn of the government building a crowd of politicians watched as the building they had come to know and love burned. Fire suppression shuttles could be heard approaching in the background. The crisp autumn air had the whole crowd shivering as they watched firefighters attempt to suppress the blaze. Senator Eskan was one of the last to make it out. She looked at the crowd as she stood at the top of the steps that lead to the entrance of the building. Even at a first glance the senator noticed several of her colleagues missing. She didn't stop to think about where they were. Something had to be done before full control of the situation was lost.

“Is anyone opposed to sending forces to Keshintir to stop Shra's madness?” She asked the crowd. The setting was not ideal to make an official vote but it would have to suffice under the circumstances. As Senator Eskan looked over the crowd she saw no hands go up in opposition. “In that case, General Kleg give them hell.”

## Chapter XII

Both Navy and Space Command forces left the safe orbits of Gatrubbe and made their way to Keshintir as fast as they could. Along the way they

met up with other government vessels who were already out patrolling the system. Together the fleet totaled twenty vessels of varying size and utility by the time they passed Keshintir's moon. It was here that they waited for the rest of the fleet to arrive. Most of the Gatrubbian forces were smaller vessels manned by crews of thirty to fifty officers. Only five of the ships were manned by a crew of more than one hundred. Those five ships were large carriers and housed several squadrons of fighters apiece.

It was only half an hour before Shra's deadline when the fleet was fully assembled near the moon of Keshintir. Together they approached the red planet. As they approached an orbit just above the outpost that Shra had sent his message from, a small flotilla of colonial militia vessels approached the fleet. Most colonies provided their own militia, the main government often refused to supply a militia. Their reasoning was that they were providing more than enough protection by patrolling major supply lanes and keeping criminals from travelling between colonies. As a result, many colonies collected the means to purchase outdated patrol ships and refit them to create a makeshift fleet to help enforce the local ordinances. Keshintir's militia sent a warning out to the fleet that now loomed overhead. Gatrubbe's forces were to stand down or face retaliation from colonial forces. To back up the threat,

several more militia vessels could be seen on sensors approaching the fleet's location.

Commodore Gromov Larant sat on the bridge of the head carrier. She was still figuring out how to react to the new threat of the colonial militias. Her superiors had ordered her to take the full force of the Gatrubbian Navy and put a stop to Shra's little rebellion. Now it looked like his rebellion was no longer little. She had sent word back to Gatrubbe, but so far she had not received a response back. Until a response came, the commodore was hesitant to proceed with her mission. There were few things that would prevent the commodore from executing a mission she was given, harming civilian lives was one of those things. She kept the fighter squads at the ready to depart for the surface. They were to escort two strike teams to the outpost and patrol the skies to make sure that Shra had no means of escape. Tension lingered in the air as the communication's console lit up with a new message.

"What does it say?" The commodore asked awaiting word from the communications officer on duty.

There was silence before the officer replied to the request. "It says to continue as planned and to do

anything necessary to ensure the completion of the mission.”

Gromov gave a heavy sigh. “Warn the militia vessels that their ships will be fired at if they attempt to interfere with our mission.”

The communications officer nodded and sent out the commodore’s message.

“Notify all teams to launch.” Commodore Larant stood up. She was getting uncomfortable in her chair knowing that the Gatrubbe system was a thin line away from a full-fledged civil war. This had become more than a couple unruly citizens; it had become at least a planet wide rebellion. At least if things ended now the civilians would more than likely have a chance to back down and allow the government to bring back order.

Gromov looked out the bridge’s display as the fighters and shuttles launched. As they made their way into an organized formation, flashes of beam weapons could be seen passing by the squads of small craft. The commodore turned to face the carrier’s tactical officer. “Who’s firing?”

“It looks like a couple of the militia vessels are trying to stop our crafts from making their descent. One fighter is reporting heavy damage. They’re

going to try to make an emergency landing on the surface. The other ships are taking evasive actions to dodge the fire." The ship's tactical officer was trying to keep up with all the changes. The mission was going off the rails. He was trying his best to keep the squadrons on track.

"Fire a couple warning shots at the militia vessels." The commodore ordered. "Don't hit them, just get close enough to deter them."

"Yes ma'am." The officer nodded tapping in the orders. In the viewscreen a dozen quick bursts of the carrier's beam weapons discharged over the top of the lead militia vessel. The action didn't have the effect that was expected. Instead a small group of the enemy flotilla pulled forward and made a run at the carrier.

The carrier shook as a barrage of energy and kinetic weapons broke through the defensive systems. Commodore Larant held on to one of the bridge stations to keep herself from falling. "Return fire."

"But ma'am. They're civilians."

"They gave up that right when they started this fight." The commodore turned toward the tactical station. "Return fire."

“Yes ma’am.” The carrier’s tactical officer did as he was asked. The volley of beams sent one of the rebellious ships spinning out of control before causing the ship’s reactor to overheat. The explosion from the destroyed vessel could be seen on the main viewer.

Following this short back and forth attack the remaining ships on both sides joined in. What had begun as a small skirmish between two flagships had turned into an all-out brawl. The military vessels were equipped homogenously with the latest beam weapons. The militia’s armaments varied in age. Some used beam weapons while others still made use of kinetic projectiles and missiles.

Neither side had fully expected a battle to take place. In the beginning the Navy’s fleet had a definite upper hand in the battle. Their improved technology and tactical abilities easily out matched the militia’s slightly smaller fleet. As the battle raged on, the militia’s reinforcements began to arrive. Their sheer numbers were hard for the superior fleet to cope with. Slowly the tide of battle began to shift. When the Gavan was lost, commodore Larant began to worry. The Gavan was one of the newest carriers. For her to fall was a big blow to the fleet’s morale.

“Get us out of here.” The commodore ordered. “Tell rest of the fleet to back off. Send a message to Gatrubbe letting them know that we’re retreating.”

“Ma’am?” The carrier’s pilot asked. For the last half hour she had been focused on navigating through the mess of battle, the commodore’s change in orders came as a surprise.

“You heard me lieutenant.” Gromov spoke with a heavy heart. She did not like the feeling of defeat, but to stay was to commit the crew to an even worse fate. Already the commodore knew that the battle had been lost. How the colonies had organized such a massive resistance was beyond belief. The commodore gave a sigh as she continued, “We’re falling back to Gatrubbe.”

“What about the crafts on the surface?” The tactical officer spoke up. He wasn’t about to leave his fellow officers behind. “They haven’t come back yet.”

“It’s too risky to stay and wait.” Commodore Larant defended her position. “We should have heard something by now. The fact that we haven’t is a bad sign.”

“All the more reason we should stay.” The officer stood his ground. “We have enough resources to hold on at least a few minutes longer.”

“The order still stands.” Gromov refused to listen to her subordinate’s pleas. “Feel free to make a formal complaint when we get home. Pilot, take us out of here.”

## Chapter XIII

As Lieutenant Avarta Tervan’s fighter sailed through Keshintir’s he tried his best to control his descent. The shot that had hit his fighter had knocked out his starboard thruster. The unbalanced thrust was making it hard for him to control his craft without causing unwanted drift to the right. He had become separated from the rest of his squadron, but sensors still indicated that the outpost was only a few kilometers from his current location.

It took a lot of work, but Avarta was able to keep his fighter stable enough to approach the outpost’s hangar. His fighter’s sensors weren’t picking up any of his squad up. As Avarta made his final approach he noticed that the hangar showed no indication of being occupied by the strike team’s forces. That fact made the pilot fearful. Without any allies he had no guarantee that he would be able to get out before being captured, but his only other option was to try to fly to the colony and hope that the citizens wouldn’t turn him in to the militia. That

too posed a problem. The fighter's damage would make it hard to make such a long journey.

The pilot resigned himself to his fate as his fighter entered the hangar. The hangar doors closed upon detecting the ship's entrance. As the bay pressurized and Avarta landed his ship he wasn't surprised to see an armed group of raggedly dressed civilians approaching his position. He opened the cockpit and tossed out his sidearm. The group approached and forced the pilot from his seat to the hangar's ground. He didn't try to resist when a set of handcuffs was put on him. None of his captors seemed too talkative beyond the occasional order which Avarta followed without hesitation.

Avarta was led through several twists and turns before he was ultimately tossed into the same room as Belva and Graven. He had been released from his shackles and looked back at the now closed door. He then turned towards his new roommates. One wore a Space Command uniform and the other worn civilian attire. Avarta couldn't help but laugh a bit at the irony of the situation. Here were three different Gatrubbians each representing a different aspect of Gatrubbe's society. The same society that this rebellion was trying to stop.

On the other end, Belva and Graven looked at Avarta as though he were mad. The two occupants had become acquaintances in the few hours they had spent together. They had come from diverse backgrounds but found that they were close enough in age to find some things in common. Avarta's arrival in the cell had been unexpected. Bresa was the first to speak. "Who are you?"

The pilot's fit of laughter subsided and he replied. "Lieutenant Avarta Tervan pilot for the Gatrubbian Navy. Not that it means much here. I'm guessing you two are the hostages that we were informed about."

"You could call us that. I'm Belva, I'm the outpost's engineer. At least that's what I was before all this went down." The engineer took a seat on one of the bunks.

"And I'm Dr. Graven Eteg. Pleased to meet you, make yourself at home." The doctor had accepted the situation she was in and was taking it quite light heartedly. Worrying about things outside of one's control was not something Graven believed in. The doctor's nervous habit of pacing around the cell began again.

Several minutes passed and no one spoke. Each prisoner was stuck in their own minds. Belva and Graven's thoughts turned to the battle they could only assume was going on overhead. Although the newest guest hadn't mentioned anything about a battle, his mere presence indicated that something was going on. Avarta was busy scouring the confines of the cell looking for any kind of weakness or exploitable feature.

The doors to the middle room that separated the outpost's two cells opened and Shra walked in backed by two guards. "It looks like your government has spoken. They seem more preoccupied with trying to stop a just cause than to save a couple of their fellow homeworlders."

All three prisoners were now standing in the center of the cell as they listened to Shra's boasting.

"You." Shra pointed at Avarta. "Your little squadron put up quite a fight. I know you've probably been wondering about them. They arrived not long after you did, though by then the colony's fighters had been scrambled and took care of most of the ships. The remaining ones aren't having much luck."

“But those are trained pilots. There’s no way you managed to outdo them.” Avarta said in disbelief. He wasn’t the most experienced pilot in the group. He had been around a few years, but the older pilots had been flying in the squadron for the last decade if not more. The chances that a ragtag team of colonial pilots had the knowhow to outsmart them was a laughable idea.

“We had some ground support.” Shra grinned with pride. So far he and the other leaders of the movement had managed to outwit the narrow minded homeworlders.

Avarta hung his head in defeat. If this was any indication of how the rest of the fleet was doing, there was no way he could go on.

“Cheer up.” Shra smiled. “You may not see it yet, but you’ll come to accept that you were fighting on the wrong side of history. Fortunately for the three of you it’s still early enough to change that.”

“What are you proposing?” Belva asked. He wasn’t intent on joining Shra’s madness but he also didn’t want to stay in this cell for much longer.

“You all have skills that the movement could use.” Shra opened the cell door. The two guards behind him watched carefully to make sure the

prisoners wouldn't try anything. "Now is your chance to contribute to the Great Story. We can make the Gatrubbian civilization something to be proud of once again. But it all starts here."

"And if we refuse?" Dr. Eteg asked. She was skeptical of the madman's offer.

"Then you can accept the same fate as the rest of the homeworlders who choose to refuse to accept our cause." Shra signaled the guards to approach.

"We'll help you." Belva spoke for the group before anyone else could react. He looked at his companions. It wasn't anger he saw in their eyes as much as it was shock. They nodded in agreement.

Shra smiled with glee. "Excellent, excellent. I'll contact the other leaders in the movement and see if they have need of your services. Your comrades here will help you find some new uniforms. There's no need for you to humiliate yourselves wearing those garments."

## Chapter XIV

The sun rose across Gatrubbe but the streets stayed quiet. The normal banter and bustle of business had ceased. Even the birds seemed to keep

quiet. At the Voci house the news played over the viewscreen. As the sun rose, the first images of the remains of the Senate building were being recorded and broadcast. Mal and Vanka sat at the dining room table and watched. It was unthinkable to believe that just a couple weeks ago the neighborhood had crowded around the same room to watch the same viewscreen to watch as the Sojourn and Bresa left the star system.

Neither Mal nor Vanka could believe that such an event would happen. The attack had been horrendous. Not only had the building been destroyed but there was news that system wide the government had lost control. There was no word of where the remaining senators were now meeting or what they were talking about, but a state of emergency had been called. As a result, all business was halted for the day.

Valena walked into the room. He had awoken in some confusion. The only times he woke up to the sun shining through the window were on days off of school. None of his teachers had talked about having the day off. "What's going on?"

Mal and Vanka looked at each other. They hadn't prepared for this situation. Vanka pulled a chair out. "You may want to take a seat son."

Valena did as told and sat at the table between his parents. He saw the news broadcast and turned to look at his mother and father. "Is Bresa alright?"

"Bresa's fine honey." Mal put a hand on Valena's shoulder. "Something happened last night. Some people attacked the capital."

"Were they caught?" The young Gatrubbian asked.

"Some of them." Vanka answered Valena's question. "But there's more."

"More people?" Valena looked to his parents for reassurance.

Mal and Vanka looked at each other once again. This time Mal answered. "The same people attacked the colonies."

"The Navy will stop them right?" The inquisitive mind of the young Gatrubbian kept going. "That's what they're there for."

"Get some breakfast Valena, we're going to visit Ms. Navank today." Vanka put a stop to the questions.

With little protest, Bresa's brother went to the kitchen and grabbed a plate of breakfast. After he had eaten, the Voci family went to Ms. Navank's house. They walked with her to the temple where they listened to Reader Banta interpret the various parables and stories about forgiveness. On the way back to Ms. Navank's house they passed a group of protesters who were walking the streets and calling for war. Fortunately, their protest was peaceful and they went on their way without bothering anyone.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully. In the background the news played continually. Valena learned about the fleet's retreat back to Gatrubbe. He was devastated. All his life he had assumed that the Navy was supposed to protect people but he never imagined that they could be defeated. Other times on the news, various correspondents were calling for the government to take action. Some opposed this position and asked for peaceful measure to be taken first. Valena saw his parents and Ms. Navank complain about how rash it would be to engage in a civil war. Communications with the colonies had been blocked. It wasn't clear which side had created the block but it prevented the news stations from interviewing people who were on the other side of the line.

Beyond the topic of what to do next, several analysts were interviewed about the effect that the situation would have on the markets. The news was not pleasant. The fear that was caused by the morning's events had taken its toll on the projections of the star system's stock market. Already people were in the process of planning what to do next. It appeared to the adults in the room that the end was near. Valena on the other hand was getting bored of all the conversations. He had the day off and he wanted to make the most of it. Once the young Gatrubbian had heard enough, he decided that to go outside and get some fresh air.

It was late afternoon and the neighborhood was still silent. Valena walked around hoping to see someone he knew. As he was walking he felt a hand rest on his shoulder.

"Shouldn't you be home with your parents?"  
The voice belonging to the hand asked.

Valena stopped and turned. Standing there was Reader Banta wearing the usual violent robes that the most proficient of readers normally wore. In a tone of shock, the young Gatrubbian spoke his mind. "Why are you here?"

“For the same reason as you are out.” The reader proceeded to walk to a nearby bench. “To take a break from the pain and misery of the last few hours.”

“Don’t you work in the temple? Why aren’t you there?” Valena asked sitting beside the reader.

“It may be my job to provide spiritual guidance, but my heart can take only so much.” Reader Banta stared off across the street. He focused on nothing in particular but could see out of the corner of his eye that his conversation partner was busy watching him.

Valena had never been close enough to the old reader to see the details of the old man’s face. Valena noticed that Reader Banta’s face was filled with wrinkles. Their shape indicated that the spiritual leader had laughed a lot in his life. Valena couldn’t image Reader Banta laughing. During the time of embellishing the reader always took on a serious tone only telling the occasional dry joke. Valena looked across the street to see what the reader was looking at.

“Your brother is on the Sojuourn right?” Reader Banta asked. For the first time today he was able to talk about a lighter subject.

“Yes. How did you know?” Valena looked at the reader.

“Your parent’s told me.”

“You talk to them?” The young Gatrubbian was shocked. He had never seen his parents talk with the reader.

“Why of course I do. I make it part of my job to talk to those who come to the temple.” Reader Banta smiled. His posture and speech exemplified a state of peace of mind. This was opposite of Valena who fidgeted and swung his legs as he sat on the bench. “They talk about you two a lot. Only good things of course.”

“You don’t talk to me and I go to the temple.” Valena pointed out the obvious counterexample to the reader’s statement.

“I am sorry. I didn’t know you like the to talk to adults.” The reader replied. In all his years as a reader he had only rarely had children voluntarily come up and talk to him.

The young Gatrubbian had now trapped himself in a corner. “Well it’s like this. I think some adults are okay. Though most are boring.”

“Am I one of the boring ones?” Reader Banta chuckled. Valena couldn’t help but smiled now that he had proof that Reader Banta was someone who laughed.

“No, I like to listen to your embellishments of the Great Story. Whenever we visit other temples the readers are boring. Even mom and dad don’t like listening to other readers.” Valena may have been overstating the truth a bit but of all the readers that the young Gatrubbian had listened to over the years, Reader Banta was his favorite. There were times where Valena fell asleep listening to him, but he didn’t think that the reader needed to know that.

“Well maybe when things calm back down we can talk more.” Reader Banta suggested. “Your parent’s wanted me to come to dinner sometime, would you like that?”

“Yes! Mom is a good cook; you’ll like her cooking.” Valena replied. His replied made the reader laugh. This made Valena happy to see. All day he people had been serious so it was neat to find an adult who wanted to laugh.

“Well Valena, I think you had better be getting home. The sun will be going down soon.” Reader Banta got up. He was enjoying his break from the

serious conversations that had filled his day, but it was time that he got back to the temple.

“Thank you.” Valena got up. “See you around.”

## Chapter XV

Commodore Larant walked the corridors of one of the frigates that had been involved in the early morning battle. It was now early in the afternoon in the capital’s time zone which was the standard time zone for Gatrubbian starships. The fleet had been back for a few hours now. It had come as a shock to the command centers on Gatrubbe that their fleet had been forced back by a bank of outdated vessels. Not only that but the fleet’s mission to take out Shra had failed. The commodore had not been reprimanded for the choice she had made. The command staff on the ground had determined that she had done the best she could with the situation at hand. She was awaiting to hear what the next orders would be.

The frigate that Gromov walked through had taken heavy damage during the attack. Several of her crew had either died or been seriously injured and she had been towed back by one of the larger vessels. Already engineering crews were hard at work trying

to piece her back together in case she needed to go back sometime soon. The commodore wasn't sure what the command staff and Senate would come up with. There was no way that they'd be able to construct new ships to help them in this fight and peace was rapidly being erased from the list of possible options. There was always the chance that some of the old ships would be recommissioned for future skirmishes. They were outdated designs, many of them were equivalent in technology to the militia vessels. It would be better than having no ships at all.

The loss of the Gavan had hurt morale even more than the commodore had originally thought it would. Back home, news of the carrier's destruction spread like a wildfire. Such a blow made several people question the amount of firepower that the government had inadvertently given the colonies by refusing them the assistance that they requested. If the government had supplied the colonies with the defenses they had requested, then the Colonial Liberation Movement would never have started and this situation would not have come up. Now because of the government's lack of oversight the Gatrubbian people were left in fear; waiting on the edge of their seats to see who would make the next move.

The commodore did her best to make up for the loss of morale. She visited the ship's medical bay which still held a number of patients who hadn't yet been moved off to a better facility. The officers were happy to have her visit. Many of them looked up to her with reverence. Though the battle the commodore had stood firm and continued to give orders without hesitation. The younger officers admired that and hoped to one day follow in her footsteps.

Gromov sat at the bedside of one of the ensigns who had the misfortune of being at the wrong place at the wrong time. The commodore could see that the right half of his body was covered in burns and lacerations. According to the doctor, the young officer had been going down a corridor when a plasma conduit ruptured and filled the corridor with superheated exhaust. The ensign was lucky to have made it out before any more serious injuries were sustained.

"Commodore." The ensign attempted to sit up and bring himself to attention but the commodore shook her head.

"Relax ensign. How are you doing?"

“It hurts but not as bad as it did when it happened.” The officer was now on a consistent dosage of painkillers to help with the recovery process. Over the last few hours he had been dosing in and out of consciousness.

“The doctor tells me that you’re scheduled to take the next shuttle to the surface.” The commodore felt some responsibility for the state of the patients in the room. They were indirectly under her command and it was her ordered that played a part in what had happened. “He tells me that your family has already been informed and will meet you there.”

The ensign tried to smile, but the pain was too much. “Thank you ma’am. I hope they’re not too worried.”

“How long have you been aboard?” The commodore asked. She tried to read up on all the records of those under her command. Her other responsibilities kept her from having enough time to go through each record in depth. She didn’t remember having yet read through the ensign’s file.

“I graduated from the naval academy a month ago.” The ensign’s reply came out between wincing of pain.

The answer hit the commodore hard. It was hard to believe how young some of the participants of the morning's battle had been. A large skirmish like that had never been fought except in the archaic days of oceanic naval warfare. At least in the ocean you had the chance to escape death if your ship was destroyed. "You've done a good job. Your parents should be proud. Now get some rest ensign."

A small nod came from the young officer as he closed his eyes to get some rest. The commodore got up. She visited the morgue located in an adjoining room. The cool air of the room made the veteran officer shiver a bit. Cloth covered corpses lay on the tables. Many of the bodies had already been moved to the surface. The ones who remained would be removed by the end of the day. The commodore felt overwhelmed knowing that these unfortunate souls would never get the chance to say their farewells. A day ago, no one had thought that something like this could have happened. These corpses broke that mirror of illusions. Not only could such tragedies take place but they had and now these poor souls were the one who paid the price.

Commodore Larant didn't know how long she walked around the tables of cadavers but it was long enough for the doctor to come looking for her. He saw the sorrow that filled her eyes, the regret that

came from knowing that the ones in this room had been under her command. "Doctor."

"Is everything alright commodore?" The doctor asked. "I was beginning to worry when you didn't come back."

"Sorry, I must have lost track of time." Gromov replied. "I should be going. I have some letters to write."

"Are you sure you're alright? Maybe you should get some rest. It's been a long day." The doctor had been up since the call came for the fleet to go into action. He knew that the day's events had taken their toll on him as well. "There are some spare beds in the medical bay."

"No thank you doctor. I really should be getting back to my office." The commodore made straight for the door. She left before the doctor even had time to respond.

## Chapter XVI

On the surface of Gatrubbe, Senator Genet's shuttle landed outside the bunker that had become a makeshift replacement for the now destroyed Senate building. She was approaching the security

checkpoint that protected the entrance when a group of guards came up and stopped her in her tracks.

“Can I help you?” The senator asked. The remaining senators were in the midst of deciding how to respond to the actions of the previous night. Senator Genet had been delayed by several reporters and had been unable to reach the bunker at the same time as the other senators.

“I’m sorry ma’am but we’ve been given orders.” The security chief for the compound stepped to the front of the group. Before being located here, he had worked at the Senate building so he had some knowledge of who the senator was. They had spoken before when times had been kinder.

“What kind of orders?” The senator hadn’t been told of any change in the regular procedures. She still expected that her belongings would be searched as was usual before entering a high security facility but this interruption had come as a shock.

“No off world citizens are being allowed access to government facilities. Unfortunately, that also means you. The policy was put into place to minimize the threat of another terror act.” The chief pointed back towards the shuttle. “You should return to your shuttle.”

“You can’t prevent me from doing my duty as a representative. My people are counting on me. Especially at a time like this.” Senator Genet stamped her foot. “I demand you let me through.”

“Ma’am if you don’t turn around, we’ll be forced to detain you. It’s not something I want to do, but after the way your people attacked us do you still think they deserve a voice?”

The chief’s words stung in the senator’s ears. Bolan had never taken him to be a man of harsh words. She couldn’t believe that in less than a day he had developed a hatred towards a group of Gatrubbians. “You don’t think we’re all like that do you? Don’t let the actions of a few change the way you view the rest of us. We’re Gatrubbian just like you.”

“Sorry we can’t take any more chances. Please ma’am I don’t want to have to force you out.” The chief looked at the guards who were accompanying him. They stood ready to do what was needed to keep the perimeter secure.

Senator Genet stood her ground. Passive resistance was one thing she had always admired in her political heroes. Growing up she had read the works of many political philosophers and the ones

who had really convinced her to pursue her course in politics had been those who were willing to stand up for that which was right. "I'm not moving from this spot until I can speak with my colleagues."

The chief waved his guards forward. The handcuffed the senator and took her briefcase. One of them grabbed her by the arm and led her towards the entrance. She resisted the whole way. The more she did, the tighter the guards grip became. After passing through the entrance the senator was led to the facility's detainment block which consisted of ten separate holding cells.

Time passed slowly inside the small cell. They weren't meant for long term imprisonment. Bolan waited patiently. Surely one of her colleagues would come and get her out of this mess. No such colleague came. Only the occasional security guard passed by. After some time he opened her cell door and led her to an interrogation room. In the room was a single table with two chairs. In one chair sat a well-dressed gentleman who had a series of files in front of him. The senator was led to the chair opposite. Reluctantly she took a seat. This was not how she had planned her day.

"Good afternoon senator. My name is Krola Imtaren. I work as an agent for the Central

Investigation Unit. I hope you understand why you are here today." The agent folded his hands together in front of him.

"Mr. Imtaren, I came here to this facility to do my job. Now if you don't mind that is a job I would like to get back to." Bolan stood up.

"Sit senator." Krola ordered. "You'll not be allowed outside this room until I give the word so you might as well get comfortable."

Senator Genet did as she was asked. She glared at the agent. "Why are you here?"

"I'm here to do my job. I'm investigating the events of last night." The senator pulled out an aerial photo of the remains of the Senate building and pushed it towards the senator. "Maybe you can help me out."

"You think I was a part of this?" Bolan scoffed. "I was in the room when the explosion occurred. Why would I put myself in harm's way? Has everyone lost their minds today or am I imagining things?"

"Someone would have needed clearance to get an operative in. You were the only off world patron in the building that we knew of." Agent Imtaren took

a long look at the senator. "Your fellow senators even note that you stayed silent while they discussed acting against the colonies. Quite suspicious for someone who has the best interest of their constituents in mind."

"I was just as shocked and outraged at the rebellion's act as anyone else in that room last night." Senator Genet got fired up. She was tired of being continually on the list of people to blame for the events of the previous few hours. "Maybe I didn't speak out because I agreed with everyone else."

"And where were you when the rest of the senators were voting to send the fleet to Keshintir?" Agent Imtarent asked. His voice kept calm even with the detainee's raised voice. Years of interviewing criminals had taught him well. He knew not to let his suspects get the best of him.

"I was in the front lawn just like everyone else."

"Not one of the senators can vouch for that claim." The agent quickly replied. He was ready for the woman's defense. "Maybe you were conspiring with another off world operative. It was dark, nobody would have noticed. Give us a name."

“How can I give you a name for someone who doesn’t exist?” The senator rose. She wasn’t going to be humiliated like this. It hadn’t taken long for paranoia to spread through all branches of society.

“Don’t be a hero senator. Your so called comrades will be found one way or another.” The agent’s voice began to rise. The senator was making Krola reach the limits of his patience. “The only difference is that if you help us you might get off with some shred of dignity.”

“I think you’re beyond help.” The senator retorted. “Seeing as we’re not going to get much further in here, I’d like to get back to whichever cell you decide to send me to.”

The agent sighed. He put the files he carefully back into the folder from which they had come. He went to the door and knocked to signal to the guard that the meeting was over. “I’m sorry that you feel that way senator. If you change your mind, I’ll be willing to listen. Just remember the penalty for treason. I would hate to see your political talents go to waste.”

Senator Genet refused to acknowledge Agent Imtaren’s final comments. Even if she had her freedom back, what would she do with it? From the

sounds of things, her and her constituents weren't wanted on Gatrubbe and their voices weren't being heard. Back in her cell the senator got comfortable. She assumed that at some point she'd be moved out of her current location seeing as it was only meant as a holding cell. As the afternoon turned to night, the senator decided to try and get some rest. Maybe the following day would bring some consolation and some sanity back into the world.

## Chapter XVII

Cheers ran through the main atrium of the Keshintir colony as Shra and his people paraded through the interconnected hallways. Following behind the leader of the movement were the three newest followers. As promised each one had been given a new uniform. Each had a sign hanging around their neck. In large red letters the signs labelled the three as homeworlders as Shra's people were fond of calling them. Up until the attack on the station, Belva and Graven had been unaware of the term's existence. As the trio were paraded through the corridors and open rooms of the colony they were heckled by spectators. More than once they were hit with rotting food.

In the atrium Shra made his way to the center where a pavilion sat in the midst of the sea of flora. The leader bid the three marked visitors to come and stand at the pavilion with him. They did as they were asked and went up the steps. They were covered in a mess of various substances. Their clothing was soaked with the juices of rotted produce and smelled horrendous. The crowd booed as they ascended to the pavilion but Shra ushered the crowd to become silent.

“My fellow colonist. Today has been a great day. Not only have our fellow comrades taken back that which is rightfully ours, but we have gone further and pushed back the menace that kept a watchful eye on us.”

The atrium erupted with cheers. Shra allowed the uproar to continue for a minute or two before signaling for silence. “Settle down, settle down. With me are three homeworlders who I met at the former government installation located on this planet. After talking with them they have agreed to renounce their former ties and join us in our glorious movement to uplift the Gatrubbian people.”

Another set of cheers rose through the crowd as Shra removed the signs. Neither Belva, Graven, nor Avarta felt too proud of their situation. Even as

the crowd cheered them on they hung their heads in shame.

“Before we get ahead of ourselves we need to remember that the fight has just begun.” Shra paused to allow the noise in the room to return to a lower level. “The government knows that we are no longer a force to be reckoned with. They are still refusing to talk to our leaders about a peace deal. Until that deal comes, we cannot consider ourselves free of the chains of oppression. On the surface of Gatrubbe there are stories that they are herding our people like cattle. Forcing them into camps. Separating parents from children, brother from sister.”

Boos could be heard as Shra filled the air with his stories. His facts were only partially complete. The movement’s informants were having trouble getting information out from Gatrubbe so the leader had to fill in some of the small gaps. He wondered how the other leaders were getting along. The other civilian colonies would no doubt be receiving similar speeches. Shra was glad that he had been chosen to be the face of the movement. His years of passion for promoting the cause had paid off when he had been informed of the decision to have him and his group take action on Keshintir. He took in the crowd’s excitement.

After allowing the crowd release their emotions, the Gatrubbian continued his speech. “To keep the government from oppressing their reign on us once again we need volunteers. Volunteers who are willing to stand for the cause, to protect their family, their home, and their way of life. Without these kinds of volunteers, today will mean nothing and the Senate will make sure that we are punished for trying to protect the things we love. With that in mind, please think about contributing.”

An applause erupted as Shra gave a bow. The group of three stood awkwardly not sure if they should join in or not. They continued to stand at the pavilion as the crowd began to dissipate. Some of the colonists came up to the new recruits and thanked them for choosing the right side of the Great Story. The trio did their best to seem grateful at the complements. After Shra had finished visiting with the remaining colonists, he led the group to the ambassadorial wing of the colony where rooms had been setup for their stay.

The night cycle in the colony had begun and Belva, Graven, and Avarta were visiting in one of the rooms. They had meticulously checked the room for any signs of a listening device before delving into any conversation that might end in their execution if heard by the wrong ears.

“Are they even listening to what’s going on?” Avarta was the first to speak out. “Shra’s fantasies about Gatrubbe are insane.”

“Maybe they aren’t that farfetched.” The doctor tried her hand at playing devil’s advocate. “We have no clue how the government is reacting to things. As far as we know everything he’s saying could be the truth.”

“Are you seriously buying into his madness?” The pilot couldn’t believe that the most rational of the people in the group would be siding with a madman. “How about you rookie, what’s your take?”

Belva looked up from the bed he was sitting on. “I don’t know. I don’t believe that our government would go so far as to segregate out the population.”

“Not even to protect themselves?” Graven asked. She wasn’t as set on the government’s intentions as her two partners were. She didn’t blame them; they had devoted their adult lives to serving the institution. She couldn’t imagine the conflict going through their minds at this moment. “I’m not saying it’s a pretty picture but we can’t discount the possibility.”

“How can you say something like that?” Avarta asked. He was pacing the room. “Sure people like Shra should be locked up for what happened but the idea that innocent people are being imprisoned? That goes against everything our people stand for?”

Before the doctor could retort, Belva interrupted. “Guys we could go on all night discussing that man’s claims, right now I just want out of this place. I don’t know about you but I have a feeling that Shra will get rid of us once he figures out our true intentions.”

“What are you proposing?” The pilot asked. Like Belva he was eager to get out. Being cooped up without a ship to fly was making him antsy. “We can’t just fly out of here.”

“Why not?” Graven asked.

“Unless we can get to the hangar and get full access to the bay doors there’s no way we have a chance of leaving.” Avarta was going through all the steps in his mind. Any plan he constructed ended up playing out poorly. “Even if we do make it, there’s no guarantee that we’ll be able to access any of the ships.”

The doctor thought for a few moments before her face lit up. “There is one way to do it. If we can

trigger the proper biohazard alarm an evacuation protocol will be enacted. Such protocols are meant to allow all colonists quick access to the hangars so that they can escape.”

Belva snapped his fingers as a lightbulb went off. He liked where the doctor’s plan was heading. “Those protocols unlock all doors and bring the hangar door subroutines to a more accessible level with the assumption that proper command authorization might not be possible.”

“So you’re saying that we can get to the hangar by setting off an alarm?” Avarta asked trying to keep up with the conversation. “What’s to prevent the other colonists from making their way to the hangar?”

“If we know it’s going to happen, we can be positioned by the doors when the alarm goes off. If the computer thinks that the bay is depressurizing it will prevent access to the hangar.” Belva was thinking though the subroutines that would need to be changed for everything to go down properly. “With the hangar controls at a lower level of permission it would be simple to change the code to make the computer believe the bay is depressurized even if the bay doors are closed.”

“What about getting into a ship?” Avarta still had reservations about the fine details. “Not to mention setting off the alarm.”

“Getting into a ship will be easy.” Belva replied. He smiled. “Don’t forget you have a fresh engineering sitting here. With access to the hangar cut from the rest of the colony we’ll have enough time to unlock the doors of a shuttle.”

Now it was Graven’s turn to commit an idea to the plan. “I can trick the alarms. I’ve worked with enough biological materials to know how to set them off. The sensors that some of these older facilities use can be fooled with a little handiwork.”

“Are you in?” Belva looked at Avarta.

“If it gets us off this rock.” The pilot nodded. “Let’s get to work.”

## Chapter XVIII

It didn’t take long for Graven to find the supplies she would need to make the colony’s sensors to think that a contaminant had been released. She kept the ingredients separated and in a bag she had acquired during her search. Meanwhile Belva and Avarta were able to pocket some basic tools that

would help them break into a shuttle. By the time the three rendezvoused outside the hangar entrance there were only a couple hours left before the night cycle ended. Once that happened it would be a lot harder to pull off the plan. Belva gave the okay to the doctor to set off reaction.

The chemicals that Graven had retrieved were mixed into a small container. Almost immediately the mix of liquids became gaseous and entered into the surrounding air. Moments later the klaxon signaling an evacuation went off throughout the colony. The sensors had been triggered as expected. This opened the doors to the hangar. Once inside Belva got to the nearest console and placed a temporary lock on the door. The lock lasted long enough for him to add a couple levels of security to the code so that it couldn't easily be overridden. Along with that he made sure to make the computer think that the bay was depressurized. That would ensure that even if the extra security was broken the doors would still resist being opened. His skills programming software had come in handy.

As Belva worked on the door, the doctor and pilot scoured the hangar for a ship that suited their needs. Avarta had some standards that he wouldn't fly without. The ship had to be small enough to avoid any kind of weapons fire. It had to be armed well

enough to fight back if needed. The ship in question would also need to be able to outrun any larger vessels. That's when it caught his eye. A beautiful and sleek diplomatic shuttle. The pilot had always dreamed of flying such a vehicle. She was a bit larger than Avarta had been planning but that was made up for with the latest in defensive and propulsion technology. Earlier Belva had shown him how to begin the lock picking process. With a bit of giddiness, the pilot tried his hand at the newly learned skill. By the time Belva made his way to the group Avarta had managed to crack the first couple layers of encryption. Belva sped up the process considerably and before they knew it they were inside the shuttle.

The interior was just as clean and sleek and the exterior was. There were four seats along the wall of the shuttle. Two in front and two behind with room enough in the middle for occupants to walk around. With haste Avarta and Belva took the front seats and warmed up the shuttle controls. Belva accessed the hangar controls and began the depressurization process. The hum of the engines was a relieving sound. They weren't out of the woods yet. The bay depressurized about the same time that the shuttle was ready to leave. The hangar doors opened and the shuttle darted out at full speed.

In the few minutes it took the plan to be put into action Shra had managed to scramble the militia's fighters which still hung in orbit of the planet. As the shuttle ascended, Avarta tried his best to weave and dodge through the swarms of metal. The defensive systems held up to their name and made it easier for the pilot to concentrate on his flying. Belva and Avarta did what they could to fire the shuttle's limited weapons. During the ascent they managed to disable three of the pursuing craft. By the time the shuttle left the atmosphere the superior engines were widening the gap between the opposing parties. With one last series of maneuvers Avarta activated the sublight drive and set a course for Gatrubbe.

# Part III

## Chapter IXX

Space Command's tracking stations were buzzing with commotion. They had been on high alert ever since the attack on the colonies. Now sensors were picking up a small craft approaching at high speeds. The Navy had been informed and Commodore Larant's carrier had been sent out to

intercept the craft. At the tracking station everyone was on the edge of their seats. It had been almost a day and half since the whole ordeal had begun and all government agencies were on the lookout for possible subterfuge.

The commodore paced around her bridge continually looking out the viewscreen. Any moment now the incoming bogey would be in visual range. Gromov had set two squads of fighters on the ready to launch. Soon an orange speck appeared on the screen. As it came closer the ship's communication's officer spoke.

"Ma'am I have an incoming message. I'm relaying it through. You'll want to hear this."

Suddenly Avarta's voice could be heard through the speakers. "This is Lieutenant Avarta Tervan. Navy identification number two seven three dash four seven. I have one civilian aboard by the name of Doctor Graven Etag and one Ensign Belva Tegmut from Space Command. Requesting permission to board."

"This is Commodore Gromov Larant. Where are you coming from Lieutenant?" The commodore asked. She had been told that all of the Navy's ships and personnel had been moved back to Gatrubbe.

“Keshintir ma’am.” Came the reply. The name came as a shock to the commodore.

“I’ll have a fighter wing escort you to the hangar.” The commodore gave her operation’s officer the cue to send out one of the readied squadrons. “I’ll meet you down in the hangar. Commodore Larant out.”

Minutes later the commodore and a security detail approached the landed diplomatic shuttle. The three passengers had already exited and were awaiting the commodore’s arrival.

“Lieutenant Tervan?” Commodore Larant asked approaching the man at the front of the group.

The pilot nodded. “Yes ma’am. I’m glad you decided not to shoot at us.”

“We weren’t expecting that there were any survivors. You gave the boys back home quite a scare. They were glad to know that it was one of our own that had triggered the alarms. The carrier is set to return to Gatrubbe. No doubt all of you will be interviewed upon your arrival.” The commodore began walking back towards the door. She dismissed the security team and ushered the three new arrivals to follow her.

“I don’t know about my colleagues but I could go for a nice shower before we get home. It’s been a long night for us.” Avatarta commented as the group entered the corridor. “So is there any news from the other hostages?”

“So far they’ve been unable to confirm the existence of any hostages. You are the first evidence we have that there were actually lives at risk. As for the colonies, we lost all contact not long after the fleet departed Gatrubbe. Neither side is claiming to be the source of the transmission block.” The commodore wanted to update the officers as best she could. “After your squadron left for the surface we were pushed back. The remaining ships are being repaired as we speak. The Senate is still in the process of deciding on an appropriate course of action.”

Belva and Graven listened intently trying to catch up on any events they had missed during their confinement. So far nothing new had been revealed beyond the blocked transmissions. The doctor spoke up. “What about peace talks? Is the Senate not going to take Shra’s request seriously?”

“Seeing as he and his accomplices destroyed the Senate building, I don’t think anyone is willing to make peace an option at the moment.” As the group walked they noticed that the officers they passed took

notice of their presence. It wasn't an uncomfortable feeling but ever since the humiliating walk through Keshintir the new arrival had been more aware of who was watching them.

"The Senate building was destroyed?" Belva asked in disbelief. "Did they find the one responsible?"

"It sounds like Senator Genet is being investigated." The commodore replied. The latest news reports had covered the senator's arrest. She had been transferred from a holding cell to a more secure facility for further questioning. Beyond that was only speculation. Already protests were being formed to have her executed for treason. Thankfully for her the movement was small and the views weren't shared by the majority of the populace.

The commodore stopped. "These three quarters should be more than equipped to accommodate your needs until we arrive at Gatrubbe. I would suggest not wandering too far from here. Everyone is on edge and suspicious of any out of the ordinary activity."

The commodore left the trio to their own devices. They used the time they had to rest and freshen themselves up. When the carrier arrived back

at Gatrubbe an agent from the Gatrubbe Intelligence Agency boarded by shuttle. An unused office was put to use in order for the agent to meet with the three new arrivals.

Agent Tamar Shamat sat behind the desk that she had been given to work with. The agency had given her short notice that she would be working in the field. The order came as a relief. The last couple days had been a nightmare for anyone working within the building. In coordination with the Central Investigation Unit the Gatrubbe Intelligence Agency was busy conducting an internal investigation into figuring out who was at fault for letting the Colonial Liberation Movement obtain the power it had. Beyond that the intelligence community was busy trying to help the Senet decide what to do next. Agent Shamat was glad to have been chosen for this assignment. It was far better than being stuck behind a desk filing paperwork.

Tamar watched as the first of the shuttle's occupants was brought to the office. She was planning to interview them one at a time. "Doctor Etag I presume."

Graven took a seat. She appreciated the comfort of a real mattress. The foam slab that she had been given during her imprisonment was lacking.

She had been lucky enough to be able to nap a bit before being led to the office. The doctor nodded at the agent's statement.

"I see that you're a microbiologist." Agent Shamat skimmed through the basic information she had been given before being shipped off. "Keshintir was your first assignment following your degree?"

"That's correct." Graven wasn't sure what she should be expecting. She understood the government's concern though.

"During your time there did you ever visit the civilian colony?" Tamar asked as she glanced between her interviewee and the file she held in her hands.

"Not until yesterday." The doctor replied. She kept her answers brief and to the point. There was no need for the government to know any more than they should.

"What happened yesterday?"

"The three of us were brought there by Shra and his entourage." Graven shivered at the thought of going back. Even though she had defended him while the two men didn't think twice about him, she never wanted to have to talk with him again.

“Did you go voluntarily?” The agent asked. The doctor’s brief replies were making it hard to get a good feel for what had happened. It felt as though the doctor was holding out on details. Whether she was covering something up or not was yet to be determined.

“Depends on what you mean by voluntary.” Graven shrugged. “If you mean humiliated in front of the citizens of the colony while being left to wonder if you would ever live long enough to see your family again then yes.”

Agent Shamat sighed. “Doctor I get the feeling you don’t want to be here. If you can help me then I can help you. So your stay wasn’t voluntary. What are your thoughts on Shra’s movement?”

“I believe the intentions are good. Shra knows how to draw a crowd and lead his people. That being said the movement’s not perfect. From what I gather it lacks the manpower to keep going.” The doctor answered as best as she could. She hadn’t spent much time with the leader or his followers so it was hard to come up with a purely object view. She gulped as the agent wrote some notes on a pad a paper. “I hear the Senate building was attacked.”

Agent Shamat continued to write as she answered the doctor's last sentence. "You heard correctly. Quite a shame that off world citizens would commit such an act. It's good thing that the Senate was able to put a plan together to keep them off the streets."

"What do you mean?" Graven continued her inquiry. She thought back to Shra's stories. Maybe they really did have some basis in fact.

"Off world citizens are being asked to come to the capital so that we can ensure that their business for being on the surface legitimate. It's the only way that we can be certain that the operators working with Senator Genet will be found."

"I thought she was only under investigation?"

"As far as the people are concerned there's no doubt she took part in the attack. Without her there's no way to explain how a foreign operative made their way into the Senate building." Tamar stopped writing for moment and looked at the doctor. "What conclusion would you draw?"

"I prefer to believe in our judicial system. Innocence is assumed until otherwise proven."

“Even in times as dire as this?” Agent Shamat arched an eyebrow. She was genuinely curious to see into the mind of the doctor.

The doctor gave a laugh of disbelief. “Especially in times like this. Making rash decisions when the information at hand is incomplete never leads to very confident results.”

“I see.” The agent hit a button the desk which opened the door to the office. She began to write some more notes. “That will be all.”

Feeling a bit like she was being shoved aside the doctor reluctantly got up. She didn’t like the feeling that she was being kicked out because the agent refused to continue the conversation.

After the doctor left, Belva was the next one to be brought to the office. As with Graven, the agent bid the pilot to take a seat. “Belva Tegmut, you’re an officer for Space Command correct?”

“Yes ma’am. I graduated less than a month ago.” The ensign sat upright and ready for any questions that were sent his way.

“I see you specialized in animatronics.” The agent nodded as she read through the ensign’s

accomplishments. "You wrote a paper on the future use of robotics and the military."

"Yes ma'am." Belva nodded. "My advisor was interested in the topic and suggested that it would be a good area to look into provided my background."

"And what would that be?" Agent Shamat asked.

"I'm looking into building the first fully functional android." Belva had nothing to hide. If anything he was proud to share his desires with the world. "Their use in the military could aid in defense and in the long term would cut government costs."

"What about their use by a group like the Colonial Liberation Movement?" Agent Shamat wrote down some notes on a fresh sheet of paper. "Did you consider that in your paper?"

"If you're implying that I helped Shra during my short time as his captive I assure you I did not." Belva became defensive realizing that the implication would mean.

"But you left your lab and research at the facility that Shra attacked correct?" The agent inquired. She stared at the ensign. "Would it be

reasonable to assume that he obtained access to your work?"

Belva hung his head. "Yes ma'am."

"Was it out of your control?" Agent Shamat asked as she scribbled even more onto her sheet of paper. "Could you have prevented it?"

"If I had known that there had been an attack I would have taken precautions." Belva was frustrated with himself. He had missed something so obvious and easy. His lab should have been the first place he went when he heard the klaxon instead he went the opposite direction.

"Is any of the exposed work capable of giving Shra an advantage?" The answer to this question would be vital for Agent Shamat's higher ups to know.

"No ma'am. My work is early in development. Unless he's capable of performing several months' worth of work he won't even be able to fully understand what I was doing." Belva was confident in his answer. He just hoped it was the answer that the agent wanted to hear. At this point Belva just wanted to be home. He wanted to see his family again. The last couple days had had a larger impact on the young officer than he had realized until now.

Tamar was sympathetic with the ensign's situation. She could see the shame in Belva's eyes as he spoke. "That will be all ensign."

The sudden ending came a shock to Belva. He had expected the interview to last longer. That wasn't to say he wasn't happy to be done. He spent no time getting up and getting to the door which Tamar had opened.

Agent Shamat was pleased with her progress. The information she was collecting about the situation would be helpful in determining how big of threat Shra's movement was. She only had one more interview to conduct. The interviews had been short, but they had been informative.

Avarta walked in. He took no time before taking a seat. Under the agent's orders the three had interviewees were separated so that they couldn't collude. This struck the pilot as odd, but he wasn't going to let it bother him.

"Lieutenant Avarta Tervan, I figured that you'd be more formal on your arrival or does the Navy take a lighter stance on formality than Space Command?" Tamar had been taken aback by the pilot's behavior. She didn't expect a uniformed officer to act so nonchalantly.

“Sorry ma’am.” Avarta apologized without changing his relaxed pose. “I assume you want to know about our time in the clutches of Shra. What do you need to know?”

“You’re jumping ahead of yourself lieutenant.” The agent began looking through the folder she had on Avarta. “Why don’t you start by explaining what happened to the rest of your group.”

“Well ma’am it’s like this. We came under fire on our way to the surface. My engine was hit but I was able to maintain altitude long enough to reach the facility. When I arrived none of the other ships were in the vicinity. My options were limited so I took the risk and landed in the hangar of the facility.” Avarta recalled the events as he remembered them. His sleep deprived memory wasn’t helping much. “Once I landed I was brought to the cell with Graven and Belva. It was there that Shra informed us that the rest of the squadron had been taken down. As far as I am aware I am the only survivor.”

“And while you were captive, did Shra obtain any confidential information or information that might indicate a weakness in our planet’s defenses?” Agent Shamat watched closely as the pilot gave his answer. So far she had been perplexed that the opposition leader hadn’t interrogated any of his

captives even though their knowledge could have been of use to his cause.

“Now that you mention it ma’am he didn’t say much to any of us.” Avarta thought for a while to make sure his recollection of events was correct. “He never separated us or tried to question us for information.”

“And you didn’t find that odd at the time?”

“To be honest, at the time the three of us were busy trying to find an opportunity to get away. The fact that he let his guard down so easily might indicate something.” The lieutenant’s mind was now clearing up a bit. He began to work through the puzzling events that had happened. Had Shra made an honest mistake or had he intended for the escape? The latter plan left a smorgasbord of questions unanswered. Maybe Shra was more clever than Avarta gave him credit for.

Agent Shamat began taking down some notes. The discussion had become more interesting than she had envisioned it would be. “How did you manage to escape Shra’s imprisonment?”

“Well the three of us had a chance to do some talking after our arrival at the Keshintir colony. Between our three specialties we were able to come

up with a plan that allowed us to escape. If it hadn't been for the doctor's knowledge of biology or Belva's knowledge of computer systems, we probably wouldn't be around to talk."

"Would you be able to submit a report on your observations of the rebellion's technology and resources?" The agent asked. Of the three Gatrubbeans that had been interviewed, Avarta was the only one that she knew had been trained to deal with the situation of imprisonment. She expected that he had been following the Navy's procedures during his time on Keshintir. From the sounds of it her assumption was a valid one.

"Yes ma'am. I can have something typed up and sent to you by this time tomorrow."

"Well lieutenant your narrative has been very helpful. The Navy will be eager to know what happened to their other pilots. It's too bad none of them were able to make it out." Tamar put her files on Avarta back in their respective folder. She now had the information she needed to help the government make an informed decision on what the next steps should be. "You may return to your quarters lieutenant."

“What about our departure to the surface?” Avarta asked. He was eager to get back to Gatrubbe. The string of events that had followed him through the last few days made him want to take a couple days to get his thoughts together.

“Once you have all been cleared, a shuttle will be able to bring you down to the surface. Until then the commodore has been gracious enough to allow you to stay aboard the carrier.” The agent stood up. She was done with her interviews and needed to get back so that she could write up her report to her superiors.

Avarta nodded. He wasn’t pleased with the wait but he was powerless to go against it. He turned and walked into the corridor.

## Chapter XX

Shra was furious. He had assembled his security chief and the Keshintir security chief to a meeting in his makeshift office. He had converted an abandoned wing of the colony into a base of operations for movement’s use in the nearby space. Although the other facility that the group had first taken over was better equipped, Shra liked to let the

people know that the movement was something that was on their side, not separated from them.

It was in this wing of the colony that Shra had turned an old maintenance closet into an office. He had a desk brought in and was working on having a terminal installed in the room. Currently he only had a handheld device to work with. It was suited for the task but the screen was too small for Shra's taste.

"How did they escape?" Shra asked trying to keep the outward appearance of being calm. "I had assurances that the hangar would be impossible to access."

"Sensors picked up a biological contaminant and the computer treated it as though the colony should have been evacuated." The colony's chief had been running through the sensor logs ever since the event had occurred. The proper protocol for a false alarm was to run a full investigation. "My officers found a bucket of chemicals that was the source of the alarm. The location of the source suggests that the fugitives were the ones who started the alarm in order to open the doors. Once that happened they somehow managed to lock out the rest of us and steal a shuttle."

“And why didn’t you have your men standing guard?” Shra glared at his own security chief. Benga Laman had been Shra’s right hand man and most trusted advisor for as long as Shra had been placed in his position as a leader in the movement. He had been trained as a colonial militia officer and Shra had entrusted him to help lead the fight against the homeworlder fleet. Benga had done well up to this point but he had made a mistake which had cost Shra’s trust in him.

“You never ordered it sir.” Benga’s reply was the only one he could come up with. “I should have posted them anyways. The mistake is mine.”

“I didn’t realize that I would have to order my officers to use common sense.” Shra stood up and paced behind his desk. He had to resist the urge to break a hole in the office wall. “Did they steal anything?”

“Beyond the shuttle and the tools they used to escape, there’s no evidence that they took anything else. We’re still finishing up our check though.” The colony’s chief of security had coordinated efforts to take inventory of the colony’s supplies along with the supplies that the movement had brought along.

“Has there been any headway into any of the research we found at the base?” Shra asked Benga hoping for a more definite answer.

“Our scientists are still working through everything. It appears the woman was working with various pathogens. Maybe a government attempt to sterilize our population. The other officer we caught was working with robotics. His work appears more theoretical at this point.” Benga didn’t know much about what the scientists had found. He was only relaying what he had received in an earlier report.

“Have our people work overtime if they need to figure out if the pathogens can be used against the homeworlders.” Shra’s current orders were to wait until the Senate made their next move. He felt like the orders would slow the momentum that the movement had built. From all the colonies including Keshintir there were civilians calling for independence. If the movement stopped now nothing would get done. If he could devise the next move against the homeworlders he would be heralded a hero among his peers.

“Understood sir. Will there be anything else?” Benga asked.

“No, now get out of my sight before I decide to replace you with someone more competent.” Shra waited until his security chief left. He turned his attention to the Gatrubbian who remained. “How many colonists have volunteered?”

“So far I have had two dozen come to register. Your officers were helpful enough to come and direct the new applicants to their workstations.” The escape of the prisoners had driven up recruitment numbers. Colonists had seen how elusive and deceptive homeworlders could be and were now pressing for something to be done to improve the security of the colony.

“We’ll be sure to keep the fleet positioned here. The homeworlders will think twice before trying the same tactics they used yesterday.” Shra was proud of his accomplishments. Beating back the Navy was no small feat and yet Shra had shown that it could be done with outdated technology and lesser trained crews. The celebrations of the victory had lasted long hours into the night after the last vessel had turned and scurried back to Gatrubbe.

“Thank you sir.” The chief was grateful. He feared what would happen if the Senate decided to punish the colonies for their desire of independence. “Will there be anything else sir?”

“My family will be coming to the colony soon. If you could have some more rooms prepared for their arrival I would be most happy.” Shra smiled. His family had been happy to hear from him. When Shra had revealed his position in the movement his wife had been in shock at first but had warmed up to the idea. She had grown up in the colonies and wanted better for her kids. The fact that her husband was fighting for a future that her children could be prosperous in was something she was willing to support.

“I’ll have a suite put together. You and your family will have more than enough room to live together. I can guarantee that it will be more luxurious than whatever you had on that asteroid.” The chief was confident in the colony’s ability. He had visited Shra’s home colony in the past and knew that the amenities were nowhere near as bountiful as on Keshintir.

“That would be excellent. Thank you chief. If you continue this way, you may find yourself doing well once the colonies gain the independence they deserve. Let me know when the suite is ready. My wife will be happy to have some pictures.” Shra had never expected this kind of luxury outside of Gatrubbe. The further this movement went along the more he was thankful that he had been denied the

chance to go to Gatrubbe. At this rate he would have everything he wanted at no cost to him.

## Chapter XXI

The room which held the Senate was now filled with Senators. The news of the arrival of three survivors from the earlier attacks had made its way to the top of the food chain within a matter of hours. Agent Shamat's report had now been read and annotated by all of the remaining senators. After everything that had taken place the number of senators had nearly halved. It was an unfortunate situation but the citizens of Gatrubbe demanded progress even if their particular region was not being represented. The citizens wanted to know that something was being done to protect their security so the Senate was doing its best to uphold their end.

It had been about a day since the news of survivors had been received. It would be hard to say that life on Gatrubbe was back to normal, but business was starting to return to its usual pace. Even though the threat of foreign attack was still present the people understood they couldn't live in fear forever. The markets which had taken a turn for the worse had begun to stabilize to normal levels. There were still protests taking place. There were protests

on both sides of the issue of colonial independence. Even within those two parties there was division over how to accomplish their respective goals.

As the Senate calmed down, Sentaor Eskan began to speak to the room. "My fellow senators. The people are calling for action and we have held out on them for long enough. The intelligence community has begun to finalize their reports and I'm sure many of you have kept apprised of the latest information. Today we are here to discuss the possible actions to be taken. So far our measure to detain colonists has been a success. But we cannot hold them indefinitely until we make a decision of what is to be done with the colonies."

Senator Skrit stood up. "I wish to speak on behalf of the Navy and their decision."

"Very well. If there are no objections the senator's request." Senator Eskan looked around and yielded the floor when she saw no signs of opposition.

Senator Skirt made his way to the podium. Like the other senators he was still getting his bearings in the new room. It was the little things that made a difference. The number of lights, the temperature of the room, the height of the podium.

As he made himself comfortable he looked among the crowd. It was weird not seeing all the familiar faces that he was used to working with. The senator sighed before beginning.

“Thank you senator. Thank you all for continuing your duty in light of the dangers that we faced. I have been in contact with the Navy’s administrators over the last couple days. We have determined that the best course of action would be to have our ships begin patrolling the system again. The Navy has come to the understanding that they may not be able to take the colonial forces on a head on skirmish, but by running patrols we can prevent ground forces and supplies from going between the colonies.” The senator listened as he paused. There were only faint murmurs at the moment which he took to be a good sign. “We would not be considering this an act of war and the patrolling vessels would not fire upon a ship unless provoked. Not only would this show the public that we are responding to the threat but it would also buy us some time to fully discuss the options. If this motion is passed the Navy would be willing to start sending ships out before this meeting ends. That is all I have to say, Senator Eskin the floor is yours.”

There was some applause as the esteemed senator left his position at the podium. He was the

first to propose such measures but now that they were out in the open they seemed to be worth doing. Senator Eskan returned to her position at the front of the room. She moved the meeting along. "Are there any senators who wish to speak against Senator Skrit's proposal?"

A single hand rose up. In the back of the room sat Senator Gatam Lemeg. She was a few years younger than Senator Eskan and had only served a couple terms with the Senate after spending most of her career campaigning for local government positions on a small coastal district. Senator Eskan nodded upon seeing her colleague's hand go up. She stepped down and allowed Senator Lemeg to approach the podium.

"Senators I know that our people are worried about the decisions we make. Over the last couple days my office has been flooded with messages from my home district asking for us to make the right choice whether it be peace or war. Senator Skrit's proposal seems to be a very neutral action to take. But we need to think through the eyes of Shra and his resistance. What would it look like if we began to stop their ships from moving around? It may not be war but it would be another hindrance that could be used to vilify us. Is that what we want? To make the colonies fear us even more? To do so would be to

make our jobs harder. The more we act out against this movement the more momentum it will gain. If we want to slow down this entity before it grows beyond us we need to begin talks with Shra as soon as we can.”

“Senator you are up to discuss the senator’s proposal, not present your own.” Senator Eskan reminded Gatam before allowing her to pull the room off topic.

“I am sorry. Senators heed my warnings, with Senator Skrit’s proposal we will be destined for war before long. With that I yield the floor back.”

Unlike with the previous speech, this one ended without applause. As Senator Lemeg went back to her seat, the Head of the Senate called for any more opposition. No one else spoke up. With that action Senator Eskan moved the proposal into the voting process. The votes were near unanimous with only a few senators taking Gatam’s side. The meeting then proceeded onward to discuss what the final actions would be against the Colonial Liberation Movement.

## Chapter XXII

Professor Vanka Voci's class let out promptly on time as it had ever since Vanka had become a professor of biology. After the last stragglers had left the room the professor packed up his notes and made his way to the department lounge. Today was the first day since the attack that the university had resumed classes. It had been hard to get students to focus with all the chaos that was taking place. In the lounge the viewscreen had been displaying news coverage nonstop. Every news station was focused on the movement and the effects that it was having. Vanka's colleagues spent their free time watching and discussing what was going on.

"Vanka did you hear, they decided to start sending ships out on patrol." One of the ecology professors spoke after seeing Vanka enter. "Word is the Navy might be using this as a way to change the battlefield to their advantage."

"Hard to believe that we'd engage in a civil war against the rest of the star system." Vanka took a seat near the ecology professor.

"Well you'd better get used to it. Everyone is predicting that by the end of the day we'll know whether or not the Navy will be authorized to use force against the colonies." The professor hoped to see the wrongdoers put in their place. Having people

go against the natural order of things was something that nagged at him.

Vanka knew how the professor thought. His thoughts on the situation revolved around his sons. Although Bresa was no longer within several lightyears of the situation, Valena was and Vanka refused to succumb to anything that had the potentiality to bring harm to his son. In this regard he was different than many people he met. Most were eager for a war to break out, but Vanka knew that war would bring the risk of attack and death. He couldn't bear the thought of losing his son over a conflict that neither he nor his son had any control of.

"I wouldn't bet on the odds just yet." Vanka replied. "Our senators know that the safety of the planet isn't worth a couple colonies."

"Is that so?" Came the response of Vanka's conversational adversary. "So you think they'll just give in to the demands of a terrorist?"

"I never claimed such a thing. I am merely pointing out the fact that there are more things to worry about in life than the independence of the colonies." Vanka wasn't sure he could get the professor to agree with him. "What good are the

colonies if what makes us Gatrubbian is lost in the process?"

"Maybe you should join the protestors outside the dining hall. They could use a rational mind to fight for their cause." The professor scoffed. Earlier that day he had been accosted by one of the protestors after having traded some harsh words about the topic. The only reason a fight hadn't broken out was the arrival of the campus' security crews who had been monitoring the protest closely. As far as the professor was aware the protestors had been allowed to continue their demonstration.

"They seem to be doing well enough without any of us joining in." Vanka stood up and filled a glass with water at the sink that was located in the room. He returned to his seat. He was in no rush to leave. He had finished teaching for the day and he was enjoying the conversation he was having. "I hear that the Sojourn has scouted out a couple more star systems."

"Oh yes, how is your son doing?" The professor asked. Space Command's missions weren't at the top of his list of interesting topics, but Vanka had a way of bringing them up when he needed a lighter topic to talk about.

“He’s doing well. His last letter home was a nice surprise to us.” Bresa had sent a letter to Mal and Vanka documenting his first couple weeks aboard. He had included pictures of some of the places the ship had visited and Mal had gone and had the pictures framed for around the house. “From the sound of it he’s moving up in the world. There have already been talks about assigning him to a more leadership oriented position.”

“That’s quite a rush don’t you think?” The professor shook his head. “Space Command has weird habits. There’s a reason I decided to join academia rather than their madness. At least here you have to earn your position.”

“Are you saying my son doesn’t deserve the position he has?” Vanka questioned the professors statement. “My son has worked far harder than some of the academics I know. To say that he doesn’t deserve to be rewarded is absurd.”

“Say what you will, but no one should be rewarded for doing something so trivial. Anyone can use their hands to accomplish a task, it takes true talent to use one’s mind.”

This comment was the last straw. Vanka couldn’t stand the professor’s pedantic nature any

more. "Where would we be without tradesmen? Who would keep our society from collapsing at the base? What we do here may change the world, but if we stopped working tomorrow, the world would go on. If every craftsman stopped working, our society would come to a grinding halt. We would be left helpless trying to keep the various mechanisms running. Consider that in your view."

The professor turned red in the face. "Without people like us Gatrubbe would be no better than the colonies. It's what makes us superior. It's people like Shra who place these ideas in the heads of the uneducated. They make their followers believe that they can get by without people like us to solve their problems."

"And why can't they get by?" Vanka stood up against the professor's views. "They're happy with their place in life. They have food to eat, a place to sleep, and people who care for them. Maybe they don't have all the luxuries that can be afforded by you or me but they certainly find happiness in the little things."

"Maybe you would like to join them Vanka." Came the only response the professor had. "I hear the government might be looking to detain more than just colonists."

“Is that what this world has come to?” Vanka was in disbelief. What had started as a friendly argument had turned to threats. “No one can express their views anymore without the threat of being detained? If that’s the case, maybe the colonies would be a better place.”

The professor peered at his watch. “It appears I’m late for an appointment with one of my students. Maybe we can continue this discussion at a later time.”

“Maybe we can. Maybe we won’t have to.” Both gentlemen got up and took their respective belongings. The professor was the first to leave with Vanka following not far behind. For Vanka the discussion had been enlightening, he had enjoyed its various avenues even if the end had become quite heated. He held out the hope that these feelings of fear and hatred would go away soon. He was tired of having to remind people that the other side had a reason for their actions. That idea seemed to be lost in the world. As Vanka passed a group of protestors on his walk by the dining hall he smiled knowing that there was still a chance that things could change.

## Chapter XXIII

Like the other colonists who had the misfortune of being on Gatrubbe, Senator Genet had been moved to one of the capital's abandoned prisons. The prison had been converted into a containment zone where colonists would enter but not leave. Inside the old compound colonists were free to roam as they like. Guards were posted on the inside to ensure order was maintained and on the outside to make sure no one left. Upon arriving at the compound the senator was presented with a friendly audience. The colonists recognized her and knew of the fight she had put up trying to help the colonies. The inhabitants of the prison were quick to find her a private room and ensure she was well taken care of. She appreciated the gestures and returned the kindness in any way she could.

Some of the inhabitants wanted to lead a riot to show the government they were upset at the decisions that had been made. The senator urged them to demonstrate peacefully instead. They listened and agreed upon a hunger strike. Many of the contained colonists had joined in, the elderly and very young did not. It was a day later and the various media outlets had gotten wind of the strike. To avoid public outcry, the Senate allowed reporters into the compound. The colonists were overjoyed at the news that their actions had spoken. One of the

planet's most prestigious reporters, Komara Elan decided to do an interview with the senator.

The colonists within the compound worked together to clear out one of the smaller rooms so that the reporter would have the space he needed to conduct the interview. Recording equipment was setup and two chairs were placed in the room facing one another. One was for Komara and the other for Senator Genet. The two Gatrubbians took their seats and the film crew began to document the interview. Both participants were dressed fairly formally. The senator had been shipped to the compound with only the clothes she had on her. Thankfully the inhabitants had been kind enough to lend her some fresh garments for her stay.

“Good afternoon Senator Genet.” Komara began the interview. “I’m glad that you were willing to talk with us.”

“I think calling me senator is a bit out of date seeing as I am no longer allowed near the Senate.” The senator knew that her interviewer meant no disrespect in his introduction. He had made an earnest mistake.

“What would you like to be called then?” The reporter asked.

“Either Ms. Genet or Bolan will be appropriate.” Bolan said. She hadn’t been called by miss since she had started office. It would be a weird habit to get used to again. “Bolan is the name I’m used to, misses sounds too much like a teacher.”

“From the sounds of the other colonists, you are a teacher in some sense.” The reporter had his handheld device open to the notes he had taken. “They say that you were the one who suggested the hunger strike in opposition to the riot that had been planned.”

“That’s correct.” Bolan nodded. “I was following in the footsteps of my role models. Political philosophers like Gamar and Nadala who wrote about nonviolent protest. If you remember back when our civilization was still in its youth and we had several states vying for control over resources they advocated for a peaceful means by which they could show the governments that the people were tired of conflict. Through the last century and a half their example has been used time and time again to bring attention to important causes.”

“And what cause are you hoping to promote with your actions?” Komara asked. Previous interviews all had different responses to the question.

Their causes all looked to be related but each activist had their own way of looking at the situation.

Bolan thought for a moment. With all that had happened she hadn't made time to fully reflect on what was going on. "I would ask that you look around Mr. Elan. Inside these walls innocent civilians are being cooped up because the folks outside think their livelihood is in danger. I assure you that these people are as innocent as you or any of the other natives of Gatrubbe. The only thing that these people want is to go home and be with their families. When the Senate building was attacked, these people stood in shock alongside everyone else."

"So you don't believe that there are people confined here that want to bring harm to the planet?" Komara took some notes down. He was enjoying this interview.

"Exactly. The people here are as Gatrubbian as you and I. Why should we let someone like Shra and his little militia define the people he claims to fight for? It may be true that some of the colonists who are out there have decided that Shra's movement is the only option, but there are some who have faith in the Senate. I received letters from far and wide as a senator. These letters were from people thanking myself and my former colleagues for our devotion to

trying to help make society better for all.” Bolan looked back at the experiences she had gone through during her short time as a senator.

It always lifted her spirits to hear from her constituents. When she had a chance she would read through the letters personally and write responses. She had received writings from all walks of life. School children would send her notes asking about what it was like to be a senator, the elderly would write her to thank her for serving their community, in between working class individuals would propose bills which would go far to help them improve their lives on the colonies. More than once one of the proposals would go through the Senate and the success would be followed by more letters of thanks from colonists.

“We’ve been following the activities of the Senate since Shra’s ultimatum. What would you like to see of your fellow senators? Would you be okay with them declaring war against the movement or would you like to see a peaceful resolution?” The reporter had asked similar questions to a whole variety of people in the last couple days. Each person had their own view of how the movement should be dealt with.

“I believe that my former colleagues have been struggling hard with the hand that they’ve been dealt. If they knew what they were going to do we wouldn’t all be waiting to hear the latest coverage. No offense. Personally I would like to see a peaceful resolution of the situation happen. I know that not all of us think that is a viable option.” The former senator’s remark was fairly neutral in comparison to other responses that Komara had heard.

“Would you go back to the Senate if a suitable resolution is found?” This question had been weighing on Komara’s mind for some time now. For the political pundits who had been following the senator’s story, this was an important question.

“If I can speak honestly Komara, I would have to say no. The Senate was a good experience, but I don’t know if I can work with a group of politicians who allow such injustice like the creation of this compound. They may mean well, but at the end of the day I don’t know if I could go back and look them in the eyes. I no longer feel like the colonies are being properly represented or listened to.” Bolan’s answer had been something she had thought about during her time in the holding cell. It was a hard decision to come to, but when no one came to get her out of that cell she felt like she had been rejected by the other

senators. For her there was no going back to that group.

“So what will you do instead?”

“I don’t know yet, maybe I’ll take up politics on the colonies and try to make a change on that end.” The answer relied on Bolan’s assumption that there would be colonies to go back to once this conflict was over.

“Thank you for your time Ms. Genet. We are glad that you were able to interview with us today.”

Bolan nodded in appreciation. “Thank you for coming out. I hope that your dedication makes a difference. Our story is only one of many that are being told so we thank you that you chose to come and talk with us.”

The cameras stopped rolling and the lights that had been used to brighten the room were shut off leaving only the ceiling lights on. The change in temperature was drastic. Bolan hadn’t realized how warm it had become in the room until the interview was over. Komara shared some final words with the former senator before bidding her a good day. The senator was left hoping that her actions had made a difference.

# Chapter XXIV

The Naval patrol ship Mukrala made her way along the route that she had been assigned to. So far the colonial forces hadn't been seen in the vicinity. Captain Bana Egrel was glad to be back out on duty. The last few days had resulted in a blow to morale. After the Navy's defeat at Keshintir spirits had been low. The Mukrala had been lucky enough to have not been heavily damaged during the attack. During the down time in orbit of Gatrubbe, the crew was glad to have some time to visit their families but the losses that had been taken still weighed heavily on their hearts. Many had lost friends in the battle and so when the call came to start patrolling the system for rogue vessels there was some rejoicing at the thought of revenge. Captain Egrel had to remind his crew that they were not here for vengeance but instead to help contain the situation.

The captain was fairly new to his position. He had been promoted only a few months earlier when the previous captain of the Mukrala resigned. The promotion had come as a shock to the Bana. He had worked for years starting at the bottom of the ranks and working his way upwards. It had had come as a surprise to see how far he had come in those years. The events of the last few days had taught him more

about commanding a starship than the years he had spent leading various levels of officers.

It had been less than a day since the Mukrala left Gatrubbe. They were reaching the outer planets when the ship's sensors detected a small craft trying to avoid the patrol crafts path. The captain gave the order to pursue the vessel. They had been told to treat all vessels as though they were loyal to Shra's cause. A small craft trying to avoid a patrol added to the suspicion that there was something not right. As the patrol craft caught up to the fleeing ship, scans indicated that it was in fact a small shuttle whose model was used primarily to transport personnel between colonies.

"Try to contact them." Captain Egrel ordered now that the ship was in range.

"No response sir." The bridge's communications officer shook her head. "They seem to be ignoring us."

"Is there anything wrong with their communications systems?" Bana looked to his tactical officer. There was another shake of the head.

"No sir, as far as our sensors can tell the shuttle is working perfectly."

Suddenly the shuttle veered off course. This wasn't the first time in the pursuit that the nimbler craft had tried to out maneuver her pursuer. The helmsman on the bridge entered in the course corrections. Ahead of the ships was one of the asteroid belts of the star system. Bana guessed that their target was going to try to use it to their advantage. The captain had some difficult decisions to make.

"Contact command and inform them of our situation." The captain walked over to where the communications officer sat. "Let them know that we're pursuing a rogue vessel into an asteroid belt. Ask them if we should continue pursuit."

The communications officer nodded to acknowledge that she understood the order. She opened a channel with the Navy's command center and the captain waited. The whole conversation was over in a couple minutes but to the captain the wait had felt much longer. The asteroid belt now loomed much closer. In a couple minutes they would reach a point of no return.

"Command says to continue pursuit. If the fugitives refuse to cooperate we are to use any means necessary to try and disable them."

The captain looked at his helmsman.  
“Continue to follow them. Try not to scratch the paint.”

“Should I try to contact the shuttle again?”  
The communications officer asked. She was ready to send another round of notifications to the leading vessel. She knew that time was of the essence and that any delay on her part could put people in jeopardy.

“That would be a good idea.” The captain endorsed the idea. “If that doesn’t work I want a couple shots over their port side. Nothing too close but enough for them to know that we aren’t playing games.”

“Aye sir.” The tactical officer warmed up the Mukrala’s weapons. She wasn’t heavily armed but the small patrol craft could handle herself in a fight. During the engagement over Keshintir, the Mukrala had managed to assist in destroying a number of hostile ships. The Mukrala’s shields were also brought online. Even if the shuttle didn’t return fire the shields would ensure that smaller debris from the belt wouldn’t damage the hull plating.

A minute later the ships entered into the belt. The captain paced anxiously. So far there had been

no response from the shuttle and the shuttle showed no sign of slowing down. The threat of being destroyed also seemed to not matter to the occupants of the shuttle who didn't react to the warning shots that had been fired. The shuttle's agility in the belt was beneficial in putting distance between the two ships. If nothing was done the shuttle would get away.

"Can we target their engines?" Captain Egrel asked. He was running out of options. "More specifically can we do so in such a way that the shuttle will become disabled without harming the occupants?"

The tactical officer nodded. He had been busy keeping aim at the shuttle and making sure enough power was being routed to the shields. "It should be possible. In previous pursuits we've been able to doing something similar."

"Take the shot when you can." The captain ordered. "They had their chance to back down and they decided not to."

Seconds later a blue beam of light flashed between the Mukrala and the shuttle. The shuttle's engines sputtered out and the craft was left adrift.

“Good shot lieutenant.” Bana congratulated his officer. From the viewscreen the shot looked clean.

“Thanks sir, but there’s something wrong.” The officer didn’t let his small victory get in the way of his duty. “The shuttles systems are beginning to overload.”

The captain went over to the tactical console and had a look at the readouts for himself. “Was it because of their engines?”

“Doesn’t look like it sir, whoever’s onboard that shuttle would rather destroy it than get detained.” The tactical officer made sure that his synopsis was correct. The scans of the shuttle didn’t show that an engine malfunction was the cause of the overloads.

“Can we stop it?” Captain Egrek asked. The shuttle was now drifting towards a large asteroid at an alarming rate of speed. The captain would risk towing the shuttle out if he had the assurance that the Mukrala wouldn’t also be damaged.

“I’m sorry sir, I don’t see any way to stop it without boarding.” The tactical officer shook his head. The captain had a look of disappointment on his face as he came to accept the results of the pursuit.

As Captain Egrel looked out the viewscreen he saw the shuttle break apart and release a light show as its self-destruct sequence completed.

“Any idea how many people were aboard?” The captain knew he would have to live with himself whether no matter how many people had been on the shuttle.

“My scans indicated five biosigns.” The tactical officer replied in dismay.

The captain gave a sigh. “Very well. Let command know that we’re returning to our previous course. I’ll have a report written up by the end of business today.”

## Chapter XXV

Inside the Keshintir colony spirits had been high. Outside colonies had come together at the planet and a celebration was held in honor of the battle that had been fought above the red planet. Shra along with other leaders of the movement gave speeches honoring their comrades who had died in the fight for independence. Further speeches were given to try to convince the last of the colonists of the vile nature of the system-wide government. Unlike the actions that were taken on Gatrubbe, Shra and the

other leaders of the movement refused to go against the colonists who still wanted to have a part in the Senate. According to Shra's reasoning, it would be hypocritical to speak out against detainment just to turn around and utilize it.

This had the effect of slowly gaining more supporters. As the second day of celebrations ended, almost the entire colony was partaking in preparation for the fight of independence. As promised, the colony's security chief had gone through the effort and put a suite together for Shra and his family to share. Within the next day they were scheduled to arrive. Between the celebration and making the appropriate arrangements for their arrival Shra had been going nonstop. It lifted his comrades' morale to see him out and about. They often came up to him to thank him for the work he was doing. He had to remind them that he was only one of many leaders in the organization. The only difference was that Shra's group had been the one to take down the oldest and largest colony in the system and thus his name became synonymous with the movement.

It was early morning on the third day following the start of the celebration when Shra was awoken by a call from Benga. His chief of security's voice made the request for a meeting sound urgent. Shra thought nothing of it as he made his way from

the bedroom of the suite to the bathroom. He made himself ready and presentable and worked his way towards the office. Shra was expecting his family to arrive later in the morning and so the early morning wakeup call hadn't disturbed him too much. When the leader entered his office, Benga was already sitting in a chair with a grave look on his face.

"Good morning chief. What was so important that you had to wake me?" Shra asked as he took a seat. His desk now held a computer console. The colony's maintenance crew had pulled an old console out from storage and refit it the previous day. Shra had been more than grateful for the effort the crew had put in and bought them a round of drinks as a thanks.

"We received a report from one of the listening posts that we captured. They've been monitoring the messages between Gatrubbe and the patrol ships ever since the Senate decided to allow the patrols to continue." Benga was nervous. After thinking long and hard about how to break the news to Shra, Benga decided this would be the only acceptable way.

"I'm sure they've received a lot of reports over the last day. Did you wake me just to tell me that?" Shra looked at the man who sat on the opposite side

of the desk. He had never seen his chief of security act so odd.

“No sir.” Benga’s reply was short and not at all helpful.

“Then out with it chief why did you wake me this early? I have to meet my family later and I don’t want to disappoint them.” Shra was getting fed up with his comrade’s cryptic actions and words. “If you don’t have something important to tell me you might want to consider carefully how you apologize for interrupting my sleep.”

“It’s actually about your family sir.” Benga paused. He wasn’t sure there was a better way to share the information so he stopped trying to go around the issue. “Their shuttle was destroyed.”

Shra was silent. Benga was worried when the leader didn’t react to the news. Slowly Shra recovered and asked to make sure he was hearing things right. “Destroyed?”

“Yes sir. I’m sorry to tell you but after they left your home a patrol ship by the name of Mukrala spotted them. When the shuttle tried to escape they were destroyed.” Benga sat the report on the leader’s desk. He hung his head. A weight was lifted off of his chest but he still felt bad for ruining Shra’s good

mood. Over the last couple days, he had seen Shra downright ecstatic with the way things were going. Now he was watching as his leader and friend's world crashed around him.

"Are you sure you have the right shuttle? Maybe there was another one travelling in the area." Shra held out hope that the listening post had made a simple mistake or that Benga was just playing some kind of sick joke.

"We reached out to the other colonies in the area. None of them report any other traffic. The shuttle carrying your family was the only one that was planned to fly that day." The report that Benga had placed on the desk had the full report. He had spent time investigating and making sure his facts were correct before presenting them to Shra.

"Check again." The leader replied. He refused to accept Benga's findings. "We've had a lot of people coming and going from Keshintir, maybe it was a shuttle of our comrades who were in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Shra." Benga looked his friend in the eyes. Eyes that were desperately looking for an answer. "There's no doubt about it. I checked twice. The only flight plan containing a shuttle like the one your

family was on was theirs. No other flights match the model that was sent in the report. Not only that, but the timing only works for the flight plan that was filed for your family's shuttle."

"Why didn't the Mukrala try to stop the shuttle?" Shra asked. He still wasn't fully convinced that his family had been aboard, but the occupants were almost certainly colonists and this was the kind of injustice that he and the Colonial Liberation Movement were trying to prevent.

"Their report says that attempts were made to contact the shuttle. According to them the shuttle intentionally refused to respond and didn't respond to the threat of being fired upon." Benga wasn't sure how much of the report was true but he trusted it enough to know that something was fishy on one of the sides.

"Why didn't our shuttle surrender? There's no reason that that ship should of attacked." Shra's was becoming outraged at the atrocity that the Murkrala had committed.

"I don't know sir." Benga was honest.  
"Maybe the pilot thought he could evade the patrol."

"Our pilots know when their outmatched. If that ship fired upon the shuttle it did so without

provocation. The report lies just like the rest of the government.” Shra stood up. He couldn’t keep his temperament in order knowing of the blatant attack on his people, quite possibly even his family.

“I’ll see if our operatives in the Navy can collect any more information. Maybe we can find out what really happened.” Benga tried to be rational with Shra.

“We know the truth.” Shra picked up the report and waved it in the air. “The truth is that the Mukrala’s captain is lying. They fired upon an unarmed vessel knowing that it couldn’t fight back. Well now it’s our turn.”

“What are you proposing?” Benga asked fearful for what his friend’s response would be. The look in Shra’s eyes told him he wouldn’t like the answer.

“We’ve done nothing to harm the civilian population. The one’s who have been harmed are those who have oppressed us. Now they repay our kindness with bloodshed.” Benga could hear the hatred in Shra’s voice and for the first time since joining the movement he was paralyzed with fear. The leader continued his rant. “We shall assemble the militia. By the end of the week the Senate will be no

more and the Gatrubbian people will rise up against the tyranny of their government. Wake up the others Benga we have work to do.”

“Maybe we should take a step back.” Benga suggested. He wasn’t going to move out of his chair until Shra calmed down and came to his senses. What the leader was declaring was an all-out war. That was an act that could never be taken back once started. He knew that war would condemn the movement to a painful death.

“Nonsense, we’ve waited long enough for the Senate to respond peacefully but they’ve done nothing but carry out arms against our people.” Shra wouldn’t back down. “Now go, I will make an announcement for the colonies to make preparations. They will need to know that the movement is entering its final stages.”

“I don’t this will be a good idea.” Shra’s friend kept at it hoping that he could bring some sense back into his friend.

“If we stopped anytime someone thought an idea wasn’t good where would we be? At one point people thought the Colonial Liberation Movement wasn’t a good idea but here we are in control of the colonies and where are the doubters?” Shra walked

around the desk. He put a hand on Benga's shoulder. "Benga you have been my friend and ally though these times. I need to know that I have your assistance in these matters."

"Yes sir." Benga said in defeat. He knew when to back down. He had seen Shra become passionate before but the Gatrubbian feared to see what would happen if he refused to join his friend in battle. Shra's temper was something that no one had yet witnessed and Benga didn't want to know how far it would go. He got up and faced Shra. "I'll contact the appropriate people and set everything up."

Shra smiled pleased at the response. "You're a good friend Benga. I owe you for your service. I will talk with the others and see to it that you earn your rightful place among the movement's ranks."

"Thank you sir. I would be honored." Benga bowed before walking out of the office. A pit formed in his stomach thinking about what had just happened.

## Chapter XXVI

As promised Benga put together a meeting of the leaders of the movement. Within two hours of the

meeting between Benga and Shra, the council of leaders had begun. A sense of great change loomed in the colony's air. The colonists and revolutionaries took notice of the missing leaders. The celebrations of the day were at a standstill and rumors spread through the halls about what was happening. Some said that the Senate finally came to a decision, others that war plans were being drawn up, and even some that believed the leaders of the movement had fled in the night.

The rumors were answered later that afternoon when a bulletin was sent out to all the colonies outlining the procession of the day's meeting. As many had suspected a declaration of war had been drawn up. The council of leaders had decided that in light of recent events the movement would have to bring their fight to the Senate's doorstep. Calls were given to the ranks to prepare for an imminent departure. The militia's fleet was sent several shuttles worth of supplies and munitions. Shra aided in the effort by trying to promote recruitment. Several young colonists pledged to join the fight and Shra thanked them for their commitment. They were given uniforms and sent off to be trained by a small group of officers who Shra had deemed skilled enough to teach the basics of combat.

Aboard the various militia ships, crews were busy unloading supplies. They worked quickly so that the shuttles could return to the surface for more trips. Repair teams did what they could to finish repairs on the militia vessels. Some of the major damages were quickly patched with the goal of finishing any big projects as the fleet approached Gatrubbe. The minor damages were pushed off until all necessary repairs were done.

A message was sent to the movement's operatives on Gatrubbe. They were instructed to do what they could to bring down the planet's defensive network. The operatives working in the Naval and Space Command centers did their part and planted virulent code into the systems to silently disable orbital defense platforms.

Benga did what he could to keep up with his friend's madness. During the meeting there had been a decision to promote Benga to lead the assault on one of Gatrubbe's main military installations. The installation in question was one of the last large bases that remained from the time before Gatrubbe was unified. The base was most notable for being one of the last places to hold a stockpile of fusion bombs.

At the height of the last war on Gatrubbe the threat of the bomb kept both sides from directly

engaging one another. The battles of the war had been fought on the territory of a third party and ended in the devastation of that territory and their people. Humanitarians on both sides of the conflict called for the governments to make peace so that the civilian population of the territory didn't need to live in fear. The war had created a flood of refugees for both opposing nations and that was the movement of which had led to the end of the war.

Regardless of how unified Gatrubbe became, the bombs of that era were kept around. Every now and again a bill would pass through the Senate urging for the disarmament of the stockpile and every time the bill would fail. The mentality of the Senate was one of preparation. As they saw the potential for an interstellar ship they worried that their presence in the stars would cause threats to Gatrubbe. In light of that fear they kept stockpiles of fusion bombs around in case the Gatrubbian people were ever threatened by an outside force.

Now Shra wanted access to one of those stockpiles. He was determined that the bombs were the key. If the movement obtained possession of such powerful weapons the Senate would have no choice but to respond to the movement's demands. Benga wasn't so certain about the plan but he had no choice but to be loyal to his friend and follow him into battle.

In some sense Benga admired Shra's cunning. As the face for the movement he had brought about more change than anyone could have predicted. Over the last few days he had more than doubled the recruitment numbers for the movement and the militia's fleets were for the first time fully stocked and battle ready.

Benga took a shuttle to the lead ship. The Kita was the militia's largest vessel and was one of the only reasons that the fleet had been able to take down a carrier during the battle of Keshintir. Benga had been on the ship before but he had never seen it as full and busy as it was now. He made his way to the bridge. Chatter on the bridge was constant with officers reporting on their department's progress and needs. In the center of everything was Shra who looked at Benga as the former chief, now commander, entered.

"Good afternoon commander." Shra greeted Benga as the Gatrubbian stepped down to the center of the bridge. Unlike some of the other ships, the Kita had a circular table at the center of its command room. The table had a holographic display which was fairly sophisticated technology for a militia vessel. Of all the militia ships the Kita was the best equipped to be the central hub of the fleet. The holographic display was currently giving readouts on all the ships

in the area. Shra could keep track of which ones were ready and which still had errands that needed completing before launch. The list of available ships was nearly complete.

“Afternoon sir.” Benga replied watching the display as it shifted between ships. “I see you’re feeling better.”

“Don’t let the look deceive you.” Shra’s smile went away. “The news from yesterday pains me, but I know that my family’s death will not have been in vain. In some ways I see this as a great opportunity. Without their death where would our movement be?”

“I guess you’re right.” Benga nodded trying to figure out how Shra could treat his family’s death as a good thing. “How are the ships looking?”

“Only a few more and the whole fleet will be prepared. The last three shuttles of supplies and personnel will be coming up from the surface in the next few minutes.” The leader of the group had been pleased with the colony’s ability to make the fleet battle ready in such short notice. By this time tomorrow Shra expected to be starting negotiations with the Senate about the independence of the colonies.

Benga went to work helping direct communication traffic through the fleet. As ships checked in, he updated the central holographic display with the changes. It wasn't long before the last shuttle departed back for the colony. Only two more ships were left finishing up their system checks. The display switched over to a three dimensional representation of the local space. All the fleet's ships could be seen as they moved into a formation that Shra had chosen. In the center of the cluster of ships was the Kita who would continue to be the central hub from which commands came.

Seeing that the fleet was ready Shra gave the order to set a course for Gatrubbe. In a matter of hours, they would be in orbit of the enemy and once and for all the Senate would know that they were no longer messing with an unorganized group.

## Part IV

### Chapter XXVII

Space Command's sensor network first picked up the fleet of incoming ships when they were about an hour away. At first the officers in charge of the

grid thought that a malfunction had occurred but after checking the system several times they became convinced that a fleet was really on its way. They were quick to report the incident to the higher authorities. In return the Navy was alerted to the issue. They scrambled to get a sizable number of ships together since many of their vessels were out patrolling the system.

An alert was issued to all on duty vessels to return to Gatrubbe at the quickest possible speed. In spite of that it would be several hours before a sizable number of patrolling vessels returned. Most of the vessels still in orbit were still undergoing repairs and as such weren't fully staffed. It would take several hours to return everyone to their post but between the Navy and Space Command there were enough shuttles to be able to get crew to the most repaired of ships. In the timeframe available estimates were that only forty percent of the ships in orbit would be fully staffed and ready to go.

Meanwhile on the civilian side of things the news outlets picked up wind of a possible invasion. People from all over Gatrubbe called in to report that their service member relatives were being called back into duty. In the hour that stood between the first alert and the arrival of the fleet, most of the Gatrubbians were made aware of the impending

attack. Because of this, more guards were put on duty to control the detained colonists. Former Senator Genet tried her best to keep the detainees calm but they feared for their safety and wanted to be released.

Within thirty minutes of the alarm being raised the Senate had convened. Senator Eskan did away with the formal proceedings due to the pressed timing that they were facing.

“Sorry about the late night call senators.” The Head of the Senate spoke before all of her colleagues had arrived. There was little time for her to wait for everyone. “Seeing as we don’t have much time I would like to begin. Half an hour ago Space Command picked up the inklings of an incoming fleet. After confirming their findings they signaled up the chain of command. The Navy is mobilizing who they can and defense platforms are standing by. There has been a call for us to call forth on emergency procedures to prepare for a possible ground assault.”

This last sentence worried the senators. The procedure for a ground invasion had been written up about the time that Keshintir was first colonized. The procedure had been written up to deal with the potential invasion from domestic or foreign agents. It had never been needed and for most of the senators it

had only been read about during their time at university. Nobody had thought that it the procedure would ever be called upon.

The procedure itself gave the Senate power to call into duty all able bodied Gatrubbiens for the purposes of defending the planet. First and foremost, heavily populated areas and vital government installations would be staffed first under the assumption that those would be priority targets for an enemy force. Any remaining forces would be asked to report to their local command center and would be used to defend various residential and industrial centers.

“Do we have enough time?” One senator called out in concern. “There’s no way we can equip everyone.”

“We have to try.” Senator Eskan replied. She too worried about the amount of time that they had to prepare. “The Navy can buy us time to mobilize the ground forces, but without the emergency procedures we may not have enough people to defend the planet.”

“I second the motion to enact the emergency procedures.” Senator Skrit stood up and looked towards his fellow senators. “For the sake of our

planet and our people we must put a stop to Shra's campaign of madness. In less than a week he's torn our society apart. If we don't stop him here, then when will we be able to stop him?"

Nods of agreement could be seen through the Senate chamber. Senator Eskan replied to the senator's call, "All in favor?"

Unanimously all senators voted yay to the motion. The whole proceeding had taken place in less than five minutes. After the vote messengers left the room to get the word out around the planet. Gatrubbe would prepare for war.

## Chapter XXVIII

Vanka Voci was in bed when the call came. He readied himself quickly and told Mal of what had happened. She wept at the news and asked him not to go. The commotion woke Valena up and he walked into the living room where his parents sat.

"What's wrong?" The young Gatrubbian asked. He was still groggy from having been woken up.

Vanka went up to his son and knelt by him. "Do you remember when we talked about the Senate building a couple days ago?"

Valena nodded. How could he forget? The attack on the Senate and the colonies was the only thing that his teachers talked about during classes.

"The same people are coming to Gatrubbe. I've been asked to go and help stop them." Vanka looked into his son's eyes. At this point in time he could think of nothing more than his sons and what they're well-being meant to the society. His generation had made mistakes, maybe theirs would do better.

"Will we be okay?" Valena asked looking at both of his parent. His mom still showed signs of having cried. Valena knew this was a serious situation by the way his parents were acting. He had only seen them like this on a couple occasions.

"Your mother will be here with you." Vanka stood back up. "Go pack some clothing you and your mother will be going with the neighbors until I get back. Understand?"

Valena nodded again. He went back to his room. He was scared. His father's serious demeanor concerned the young Gatrubbian. Whenever his

father was serious Valena knew that something important was going to happen. As he was asked he packed a bag with clothing. He also took along a picture that Bresa had sent and that his mother had printed out. The picture was of a nebula that the Sojourn was charting. Bresa had wrote a long letter to Valena talking about all the interesting things that were going on with the ship and her crew. Right now Valena wished he were up in space with his brother. At least there he would feel safer.

Mal came into her son's room. She had a backpack strapped on and made sure he was properly dressed for the frigid night air. The two made their way out of the house and down the street. Valena was in awe. The whole neighborhood seemed to be awake. Unlike the day that the Senate building had been destroyed, the streets were crowded with people. Mal held her son's hand and they shuffled through the crowd. They met up with Ms. Navank who comforted Valena's mother as the cold night continued on.

Vanka pushed through the crowd as fast as he could. Thankfully several others were also on their way to report in so some of the crowd were moving in the same direction that he was. After fifteen to thirty minutes he was inside the recruitment center that he was to report to. The officer in charge gave

him orders to report to the sixth shuttle which was stationed in back of the center. Vanka did as asked and went to the back of the building. There were shuttles abound. As each shuttle filled up it would take off and head for whatever destination it had been prescribed. Vanka entered the shuttle he had been assigned to and no more than a minute later the shuttle was on its way. Neither Vanka nor any of the other passengers knew where they were being shipped to, all they knew is that they had been called to act and so they had.

The shuttle travelled for many minutes and out the window, Vanka could see the sky turn grey as the sun rose. From what Vanka could guess the shuttle had travelled through three or four time zones. Such speed was rarely used in atmospheric shuttles except in extreme circumstances. He could only guess where they were being sent to at a time like this. The shuttle touched down at a landing pad and the doors opened. Without much talking the passengers emptied themselves so that the shuttle could return and pickup another load.

The first thing that Vanka noticed was that they had been placed in a fenced in compound. Further he could see that outside the fence was nothing but wilderness. The sun rose on the horizon.

Before the professor could take in anymore of his surroundings a voice called his group to attention.

The voice came from one of the bases commanding officers. He informed the group that they had been chosen to defend the base and that one more shuttle of recruits would be shipped from another neighboring city in the next few minutes. From the geographical information that Vanka had he could only assume that he was at one of the stockpile bases which had stayed commissioned after the last war. He had always envisioned different environment for such a base. It was almost tranquil out in the wilderness. If it weren't for the impending threat of attack the area would have been a great place to hike. Maybe Vanka would bring his family to this region when everything was over with.

After the next shuttle arrived, the group was led into the base's armory where they were given a quick rundown of the government issued beam rifle. The group consisted of around sixty healthy able-bodied Gatrubbians. They varied in gender and age. Vanka recognized none of them. As the dawn broke they were given tea and positioned at various spots around the base to await the possibility of attack. The chill of the night air ebbed away as the sun rose.

# Chapter XXIX

Shra watched out the viewscreen as the fleet approached the blue marble of Gatrubbe. He had dreamed of visiting the world one day. He had never dreamed of visiting it in this manner. He smiled knowing that his wife would have been proud of his accomplishments. She knew how much he had wanted to move to Gatrubbe. She didn't share in that passion but was supportive of Shra's determination.

Shra moved back from the screen and went up to his friend and advisor. Benga had stayed on the bridge during the fleets commute. He had never seen Gatrubbe. For that he was proud to be a part of Shra's company. The beauty of the clouds and they crawled across the colorful sphere were the things of paintings and stories. The commander couldn't help but utter his thoughts as the fleet approached. "By the Writers."

"Yes commander. Beautiful isn't it?" Shra asked seeing the mouth of his second in command gaped open. "This is what the homeworlders have kept from us all these years."

"I never imagined there could a world with so much vegetation. I always thought Gatrubbe would

be brown from exploitation.” Benga had always heard stories of the fabled world but nobody had shown him images.

“The only places that are exploited are the colonies. But soon those days will be over. By this time next week, we will all be able to roam Gatrubbe and take in the fresh air that it’s known for. Luckily for you and I we will be on the surface in a matter of hours provided the Navy doesn’t give us too many problems.” Shra was already yearning to feel the wind on his face. He had never felt air move past his face. The only air he had ever been exposed to the recycled air of the colonies and ships which had a distinct smell according to the various homeworlders that Shra had talked to over the years.

“How many ships do you think they have?” Benga asked. The planet was now growing to fill the viewscreen.

“Not enough to overwhelm us. I also have word that the defensive platforms have been disabled.” Shra had taken advantage of the Navy’s movement to patrol the system. He knew their patrol routes and had been able to successfully find a route which avoided the patrol. By doing such he had avoided setting off any alarms. By this time the planet’s sensors had picked up the incoming fleet and

the government was scrambling to get their act together, not that there was much they could do.

As the fleet settled into an orbit they flew right by one of the Navy's defensive platforms. As expected the movement's operatives had successfully disabled the programs that ran the platforms. Shra's fleet was able to move past without any conflict. The leader smiled at the thought of the surprise the fleet's maneuver would cause for the officers who were watching the situation from the ground. It wasn't long before the Navy's collection of ships approached the militia's fleet.

"Sir the lead carrier is sending a message." The Kita's communication officer notified Shra of the incoming message.

"Well go ahead put them up on screen." Shra waved his hand. He wanted to hear what the opposition had to say.

The view of Gatrubbe was replaced by that of the bridge of the Navy's lead ship. Commodore Larant sat front and center. "Mr. Blansh I presume. You've made quite a stir down below. I hope you don't expect to get much further."

"I'm sorry I don't think we've had the pleasure of meeting." Shra bowed. "Shra Blansh at your service miss."

"Mr. Blansh please stand down. We don't want to fire on our own but we will if you leave us no choice." The commodore wasn't going to play into any of Shra's games.

"So you give me a warning but an innocent shuttle you're willing to destroy without a second thought." Shra scoffed. "How considerate."

"I have no clue what you're talking about Mr. Blansh. Now what will it be?" Commodore Larant kept her demeanor as she spoke with the leader of the rebellion. She didn't care for the man's nonsense.

"If you're not here to discuss the peace talks on behalf of the Senate I see no reason why we should continue this conversation." Shra signaled his officer to end the call. The viewscreen went back to showing the blue world below.

"What now?" Benga asked. He had been intrigued with Shra's dealing with the Navy. He had laid the precedent and now he had to back up his claim. Benga knew this before even asking the question but he asked in the hope that his friend would reconsider the action he was about to choose.

“Have the fleet enter a battle formation.” Shra ordered. “Once organized open fire.”

The orders were sent through the fleet and in seconds the ships were ready for an engagement. They approached the Navy’s flotilla at high speed and made a run through the ships. Beam weapons fired from both sides of the engagement and flashes of light flooded the command deck of the Kita. Shra stood steady as they passed through the flotilla of ships and turned for another attack run.

This time the opposing fleet was ready and opened fire before Shra could give the order to make the run. The skirmish broke out into a free for all. On one hand Shra and the militia used their knowledge of hit and run tactics and on the other side Commodore Larant utilized the strategies that she had learned at the naval academy. The two different modes of thought led to an interesting interplay between the sides. Further adding to the battle was the motivations behind both sides. The commodore and Navy were just doing their duty and keeping an opposing force off Gatrubbe’s surface. On the other side Shra and the militia were fighting for their lives. They had reached the point of no return and defeat now would almost certainly lead to being tried and executed as traitors.

The first few minutes of the battle were intense as both sides attempted to get the upper hand in the fight. At first no clear leader could be determined. Every few minutes another ship was disabled or destroyed. This had the benefit of clearing the battlefield out as the first half-hour passed. Both the commodore and Shra were hoarse as they called out new orders. They tried to maintain some kind of order to the battle, but as time progressed this became a hopeless cause. Before the first hour was out the commodore's carrier had been disabled. They were adrift without power. Neither side seemed to care much about firing on disabled ships.

The Kita fared little better. Some of the bridge crew had been injured in an explosion. This left Benga and Shra busy trying to keep the stations running until the various departments could spare someone to take over. It pained Shra to see so many of his comrades losing their lives but he swore that their lives would not be lost in vain. He would make certain their sacrifice was worth it.

By the end of the hour the militia stood almost victorious. Only a handful of ships remained on either side. The Navy's sporadic reinforcements would be easy to deal with now that the bulk of ships had been taken apart. For the first time in an hour Shra took a break from giving orders. The last of the

stragglers were being dealt with accordingly and a flotilla of transports loaded with ground forces was arriving in the vicinity of Gatrubbe. The Colonial Liberation Movement was now ready to begin their assault on the planet.

## Chapter XXX

Shra gave the transports time to organize their landing parties. The transports were too large to land on the surface and thus the fleet would be utilizing shuttles to land troops. During this time Shra and the remaining leaders discussed the next steps. Few had thought that the battle would actually proceed as it had. The victory had come at a great cost. More than half of the militia's ships had been destroyed and several more disabled. Almost five hundred colonists had lost their lives in the battle. The Navy had lost even more than that.

Shra left command of the Kita in the hands of one of the other movement leaders. The leader of the movement had volunteered to lead one of the ground forces with Benga at his side. Shra refused to enter into combat without his loyal comrade. The two left the bridge and made their way to the armory.

“What will happen with the commodore’s ship?” Benga asked as the pair walked the halls of the Kita.

“The same thing that will happen to the rest of the Navy’s ships.” Shra replied. “The crew will be held captive and the ship will be placed under the command of the colonies.”

“Do you think we have a chance on the surface?” Benga’s worry had been floating in the back of his mind for the last few hours. It was true that the orbital battle had been won but that had been aided by the disabled defense platforms. The same actions hadn’t been fully taken on the ground. There weren’t enough operatives to cover every target that the movement had in mind.

“Maybe not at first, but by the time the day is over we will have a foothold established.” Shra was confident in his abilities. As the two walked they had to change their route to account for a rupture in the hull. A whole section of the Kita had depressurized. “By the end of tomorrow the Senate will have no choice but to surrender.”

“When will the first troops be on the ground?” Benga asked.

“The first wave will land within the hour. We’ll be on the second wave of shuttles and assist in securing a landing site at the base. The remaining waves will land in the capital and liberate the encampment that’s being used to hold our people. From there we’ll fight outwards until we reach the Senate. If they haven’t surrendered by then we’ll take whatever actions are necessary to force them.” Shra finished describing the plan as the two officered entered into the armory.

The room was filled with security officers. Some were getting ready to board the Navy’s disabled vessels while others were preparing to join Shra on the flight down. A small cheer went out when Shra entered. For the most part the comradery was being saved until after the fight was over. They had begun to climb the hill but there was still a long way to the top.

Shra and Benga dressed in the tactical gear that the militia had collected over the years. The armor they wore wouldn’t fully stop a beam but it would do enough to keep the wearing from going unconscious as long as too many hits weren’t taken in too short a time. In terms of weapons, the colony had a collection of older beam rifles and pistols that had been bought when the newer models were introduced

to the Navy. The older weapons didn't pack as much of a punch but they were just as effective.

Once dressed the two officer and the officers who had been selected to follow them made their way to the Kita's shuttle bay. They loaded into the small personnel shuttle and made their way to where the flotilla of transports sat in orbit. As the shuttle approached Shra gave the order for the first wave to depart. The result was a swarm of twenty shuttles departing from the various hangars that held them. The swarm entered formation and set a course for the target military installation. Shra waited a few minutes before calling for the second wave to depart. It would take time for the hangars to repressurize and for the next round of shuttles to be loaded up. Once enough time had passed Shra gave the order for the second wave to launch. This time a smaller number of shuttles launched and Shra's shuttle entered into formation with the others. Together they entered into Gatrubbe's atmosphere. Unlike Keshintir's atmosphere, Gatrubbe's was much thicker and the amount of turbulence the shuttles faced made the pilots and passengers uncomfortable. Few had visited Gatrubbe so they had never experienced what it was like to enter into such a thick atmosphere. The ordeal was over in less than a minute and all occupants were relieved.

As the shuttles entered lower into the atmosphere and passed through the clouds the ground could be seen below. Lush green forests passed underneath. The occasional river or lake could be seen. These were sights that many of the occupants of the attack force had only heard of in stories. They looked out the shuttle's windows in awe. If the situation had been different they would have loved to stay and take in the sights. Many of the minds on the shuttles were relieved at the sight, they had been struggling to come to terms with the thought that this might be their first and only time to touch the surface of the planet that their parents and grandparents had called home.

The shuttles approached their target. The first wave had done their job and made an attack run over the base before landing. The attack had disabled any anti-air defenses the base had. A landing site had been cleared and the visible laser beams told the passengers that the fight to hold the line had begun. The second wave touched down where the first shuttles had been only minutes early. As the shuttles landed their doors opened and the occupants flooded out and made their way to the front. Benga and Shra followed behind making sure there were no stragglers. Even though the sun had risen the wind brought with it a chill in the air. The two officers made their way to a group who was fighting for

control to gain entrance to one of the bases administration buildings. They had taken cover behind whatever they could find. A small wall provided cover for many of the forces as their fired at the building trying to take out the forces that were in the windows.

It was clear that both sides were making use of the civilian labor force. The accuracy of shots on both sides was much lower than one would expect with a trained military. Even Shra didn't have much experience firing a rifle. He had started practicing a few months prior when it became apparent that the skill would be used once the movement's ideas became reality. The training paid off. With Shra's assistance the militia forces were able to take out more and more of the building's occupants. The group rushed for the building when they saw their chance. As the building's forces recovered from the addition of another wave of militia forces the militia forced their way into the building.

Fighting within the building was even fiercer. Some had drawn knives, others stun sticks, and a select few had crafted bludgeoning weapons out of the objects they had at their disposal. Unlike the beam weapons all the close quarters weapons other than the stun stick led to physical injuries. As Shra and Benga entered the entrance of the building they

drew the knives they had packed from the armory. Shra was more eager than Benga to engage in hand to hand combat. The second in command still wasn't too convinced that this plan was the greatest but he knew that Shra would have nothing to do with any plan that didn't involve some bloodshed in return for the death of his family.

Across the first floor of the administration building a vicious battle was being fought. Blood from both sides was already beginning to soak into the carpets. Benga watched his friend's back as he made his way through a room full of cubicles. The first one to try and attack Benga was a larger Gatrubbian who wielded a metal pipe. Benga's opponent rushed down the aisle at to face Benga. The nimbler fighter moved out of the way and stuck out his blade. The knife protruded through the enemy's abdominal cavity. Benga was nearly thrown off his feet before he let go of the handle. The large Gatrubbian fell face down causing the blade to push even further.

Benga turned the body over and removed the blood soaked blade. It had done its job effectively. The attacker lay spurting up blood and he tried to hold the wound that was now releasing an ooze of blood and bile. It wasn't long before his glazed over and Benga turned his attention back to battle. He felt

a pang of regret but he knew that if he hadn't acted he wouldn't be standing. The newly appointed commander looked down the aisle to see Shra fending off attacks as militia officers backfilled the vacuum of power that was being created. Soon Shra was joined by other officers who helped fight back the opposition.

On the other side of the base Vanka had refused to believe that the Navy had lost the orbital attack. When the first sign of a ground assault became apparent the blood ran from his face. He wasn't prepared for that moment. For the first time he had to accept the realization that this might be the place where he and the citizens around him would die. The only thing that brought some solace to that thought was knowing that he would die defending the future of his sons. With that the man said a prayer to the Writers and grabbed the rifle he had been issued. He readied himself for what was to come next.

The volley of weapons fire between the shuttles and the anti-air cannons caused fear to run through the draft members. The noise signaled the beginning of the end. Fortunately for Vanka the shuttles set down on the other side of the base so he was spared the gruesome end that some of his fellow Gatrubbians would have to endure as the first wave

of forces flooded into the base. Vanka did as he and the others had been asked and took a defensive position behind a set of barricades that had been setup. The goal of Vanka and the group was to defend the bunker entrance which led to the stockpile of fusion bombs. They would be the last line of defense between the attackers and the most powerful weapons that the Gatrubbians had designed in their millennia of civilization and warfare. All they could do now was wait and hope that the other lines of defense would be able to thin out the attacking forces.

Shra took a moment to catch his breath as the last of the former occupants of the administration building were taken out. The cold outside air caused the leader's breath to become visible. His blade was soaked through and through with blood. The adrenaline that had run through his veins now began to wear off. He began to assess the situation as he could see it through his eyes. The sounds of gunfire could be heard outside the building. Already his men had taken to the windows to push back the defenders who were trying to take back the building. Benga caught up to him. The commander was soaked in blood splatters and had sweat dripping down his face.

“Good to see you still in one piece.” Shra smiled at the delight of seeing his comrade.

Benga nodded as he tried to catch his breath. "I wasn't expecting the situation to become so messy. I guess I didn't consider the fine details."

"The fine details are always something to consider after the fact. For now, just realize that we are making progress. How many of our comrades died taking this building?" Shra hadn't looked back to see how many had fallen.

"Not many, it looks as though the enemy underestimated our strength and passion." Benga was just relieved that he had lived this long. He felt some remorse for the lives he had taken but he told himself that it had been for the greater good.

"That's great news." Shra smiled. The day was going better than he had anticipated. "By lunch we'll have the base under our control."

"Maybe we should be getting back to helping our comrades before we talk about what could be." Benga walked past and approached one of the outer walls. He was looking for a place to setup and begin firing at the enemy.

Shra followed suit and found a position where he could target the enemy's position. As he began to open fire they began to retreat. Today was going to be a good day.

# Chapter XXXI

Back in the capital shuttles flew overhead. The first sign of them had brought cheers through the prison where the colonists were being held. As a pair of shuttles landed in the prison's courtyard, crowds rushed around to welcome the liberation force. The doors to the shuttle opened and militia members exited. They brought crates of weapons and ammo so the prisoners could equip themselves. Only a few followed the former senator's stance on peaceful resistance. The colonists saw the arrival of Shra's troops as a quicker way to achieve their goal than by a hunger strike.

Bolan stood at the back of the courtyard and watched with a mix of horror and disappointment as her people abandoned the path and decided to let violence be their way to being heard. How fast the peaceful became warriors when given the choice. Some of the colonists still followed her advice and stood by her. They refused to be caught up raising arms against their fellow Gatrubbian. As hordes of armed detainees rushed by the peaceful protestors stood their ground. Few people took notice of them. The others knew why there were just standing there and wanted nothing to do with them.

Once the shuttles took off again and the courtyard was empty, Bolan led the remnants of her people through the prison to see what damage had been done. Nobody spoke as the scenes unfolded. There weren't many bodies along the path but the guards who had only been doing their duty had paid the price. Many of them had been ruthlessly beaten by detainees and militia soldiers. Some were fortunate enough to still be alive, others had died doing their duty. Bolan's group reached the entrance to the prison and looked out to the streets of the capital. There was complete chaos for as far as the eye could see. Between the two opposing forces and the civilians who were trying to flee the scene neither side could do more than take the occasional shot as they tried to avoid the threat of civilian casualties.

Bolan made her way down the steps of the prison. She was urging parents and the elderly detainees to make their way into the civilian crowds so that they wouldn't be fired upon. She went with them and held the hands of some of the children who couldn't find their parents. The streets were filled with madness. The civilians were quickly finding their way away from the opposing forces and as the crowd dissipated the forces converged together. The colonists needed to make a quick attack if they were to have a chance of getting cover. Between the entrance of the prison and the barricades that had

been setup on the other side of the street there was nothing to protect the colonists except the crowd of civilians.

As the fighting commenced Bolan and the others made their way into an abandoned alley way. Some of the colonists had been in the area on business and knew the basic layout of the capital but everyone looked to the former senator who had lived in the city the longest. Bolan tried to get a plan together. She didn't know where it would be safe to be. "We should get off the streets. There's no knowing what will happen once the fighting intensifies."

"Where should we go?" An elderly gentlemen asked. He had been on Gatrubbe visiting his family when he had been arrested and placed in the prison.

"The local port should be our first stop. My guess is that the government will be evacuating civilians out of the area." The former senator posed the plan with her knowledge of standard procedures for evacuations. If the Senate had acted the way she thought, they would evacuate the capital and other major cities would be evacuated in order to minimize casualties.

"Won't the ships be shot down?" Came a concerned mother's voice. The others nodded in

agreement as they looked at Bolan for some kind of assurance.

“The civilians aren’t the target of either side. It would be harmful to the militia’s cause to harm the people they claim to be helping.” Bolan replied to the inquest. She sure hoped that she was right. The conflict she had witnessed outside the prison had supported the idea that neither side wanted to harm civilians.

“Which way do we have to go?” Another member of the group asked. By now noise of the battle could be heard in the distance. Overhead shuttles were partaking in a ballet of combat.

“Follow me.” Bolan ushered the group along. They exited at the other end of the alley and joined the tail end of the civilian crowd. It would be several blocks before the nearest of the ports came into view. The former senator spent the time talking to the children that she was watching over. Many of them were scared of what would happen but they talked about all things they had seen while on the planet and about how they would share the stories with their classmates once they got home. Bolan was glad that they had such a positive outlook.

Half an hour after the group had left the alleyway the port could be seen in the distance. There was already a large crowd of people trying to flee the city and shuttles were streaming in and out trying to evacuate the area in a timely manner. The large crowd dismayed many of Bolan's followers. They didn't think that they would get the chance to escape before the battle made its way to where they stood.

Bolan did her best to calm her followers. For the sake of the children she tried to tell stories about the neat things she had seen and done as a senator. She asked the children about their hopes and dreams. The parents in the crowd gave a smile to Bolan. They appreciated her way of keeping the younger ones distracted from the worries of what was happening. Slowly the crowd ebbed forward and the entrance to the port could be seen. At the rate things were moving the evacuation was moving faster than the former senator had thought. She was relieved at the thought as she began to struggle to keep the attention of her younger audience.

## Chapter XXXII

Mal, Valena, and Ms. Navank were in a similar situation. They were still in line waiting for a shuttle when the first personnel craft flew overhead. The

initial panic caused a rush in the crowd that had separated Valena from his mother. It was several minutes before the two were reunited. As the three made their way to the port Ms. Navank told Valena stories of her youth.

When Ms. Egam Navank had become Mrs. Egam Navank she had worked and ran a bakery. She told Valena that when she was young it had been her dream to become a baker. She had followed that dream through her schooling and graduated from one of the region's best culinary schools. It was during her time running the bakery that she had met her husband. He would come to the bakery every day and order something just to get the chance to talk with her. Ms. Navank became passionate talking about how much the future Mr. Navank would joke and play to get her attention. Eventually the two became married and ran the bakery together.

This was a story that neither Bresa nor Valena had heard before and Valena couldn't wait to tell his brother about it. Valena asked why the bakery had closed down. Ms. Navank continued on with her story. After several years of happy matrimony Mr. Navank had died suddenly of heart failure. His death had come as a shock to the widow and she struggled to keep the bakery open on her own. She had become so accustomed to working with her husband that she

had trouble finding the passion in her baking skills without him. Thus she told Valena that she sold the bakery and was old enough and wealthy enough to retire in peace.

The story had taken enough time that the trio had passed through the main entrance of the port by the time it had ended. Now they had to find their way to a shuttle. Fortunately the government had placed officers to help direct evacuees. Several lines formed leading to the various docks. Valena, Mal, and Ms. Navank stayed together in one line. They welcomed the more organized crowd indoors as compared to the chaotic one outside. The lines moved rather quickly and in ten minutes the three stood at the front of the line and awaited the next shuttle. As they waited a group customs officers were going through checking passengers and bags for any potentially dangerous items.

They interviewed the group of three. They asked Mal about her position as an archivist. They also asked her where her husband was. When she told them they thank her for his service. From the sound of it they had wanted to be stationed somewhere other than in a crowded port. They went on and asked Valena about various aspects of what he was learning in school and about what Valena was going to do when he grew up. Finally, they reach Ms.

Navank. The old woman gave them an earful when they tried to ask her some questions. She wasn't aggressive merely talkative. The officers had to get her to end her story so they could move on to the next passengers. They thanked the group for their time and continued on their way to the net group.

A few minutes later the next shuttle arrived. The three handed their luggage to the officer who was loading up the shuttle's cargo compartment. The trio made their way aboard and Valena insisted on a window seat. It wasn't often that he got to travel by shuttle so he always tried his hardest to get a seat where he could look out and see the ground below. The shuttle quickly filled with evacuees. Valena didn't recognize anybody else. He had thought that he would see some of his friends from the neighborhood but apparently he wouldn't get that lucky. As he got comfortable in his chair his eyelids began to droop. The early morning awakening was finally beginning to catch up with him. Before the shuttle left port the young Gatrubbian was fast asleep.

## Chapter XXXIII

The front line of the battle for control of the military base had slowly ebbed forward. The group that Shra and Benga were commanding had made

their way out of the administration and were now fighting for control of the base's barracks. The barracks were the last group of buildings that stood between the militia and the stockpile of fusion bombs. Both sides had taken casualties. For Shra and the rest of the movement their morale had stayed strong as they saw noticeable progress. Another round of reinforcements had arrived and were able to help bring a second wind into the invasion. Meanwhile the militia's shuttles and fighters fought for air superiority. They discouraged the inbound military shuttle which had been sent to bring reinforcements to defend the base. Thus unlike Shra's forces, the military and civilian mix that was fighting to defend the base were beginning to lose hope.

The fighting was intense inside the room where Shra and Benga now stood. Both sides were fighting between rows and columns of bunkbeds. Both Shra and Benga had traded their knives for something a bit more durable. Shra had picked up a metal pipe that one of the defenders had dropped and Benga was using a sparring staff to fend off his attackers. After taking down another soldier Shra turned to see how the rest of the battle was progressing. He was delighted to see his officers successfully maneuvering and fighting in the close quarters. Many of them had been trained on the basics only. It didn't matter much in this situation,

both sides were using untrained recruits and the fighting styles were fairly primitive at their core.

Before getting too off track Shra turned his attention back to his local surroundings. One of the base's soldiers attempted to attack him from behind. He was quick to react and hit the wrist of the attacker with his pipe. The knife that the soldier had wielded fell to the ground and Shra took no time swinging a second time to bring the soldier to the ground. He wasn't concerned with killing the enemy only incapacitating them. As he finished the move he ordered his men to charge further forward. The fight for the room was almost over. Beyond the sleeping room was a short hallway which led to the outside. They were so close that Shra could already see himself negotiating with the Senate for the independence of the colonies. The sweet feeling of victory was almost at hand.

That's when Shra heard the cry of his friend from nearby. The leader turned to see Benga on his knees a wooden table leg which had been sharpened on one end now went through the Gatrubbian's body. The owner of the weapon had been dealt with by another comrade not seconds after Benga had taken the blow.

The pain was intense. Benga looked down. The left side of his garments were now becoming red with blood. He had been so busy fending off one attacker that he didn't see the surprise attack that came from his flank. At first Benga hadn't felt anything. The adrenaline from the fight had kept him going to finish off the attacker he had been dealing with. Once the fight ended the pain started. Shra came to his friend's side. It was apparent that nothing could be done. The medics were stationed back at the landing site and by the time they got to Benga he would be dead.

"I should have been more attentive." Benga smiled trying to lighten the mood.

Shra shook his head. "No my friend, you have always been the one to see the finest of details. It was my fault for not watching your back as you did mine when we were in the other building."

Benga laughed which caused the pain in his side to become worse. He winced. "It's no matter now, I'm just glad to have made it this far."

"Don't give up hope." Shra looked around. Many of the others had continued to the other side of the room where the last of the fighting was taking place. "The medics will be on their way. They're

supposed to come to the front once a battle finishes. They'll be able to take care of you."

This time Benga was the one to shake his head in denial. "I know when you're lying friend. I've known you too long. Now go, continue the fight. Our comrades need your support."

"I'm sorry it had to end this way." Shra apologized. It was hard for him to concentrate. "I should have listened to your advice earlier when you told me about my family's death. I know you were against this plan."

"I was against it because it wasn't feasible." Benga was having trouble focusing on the situation. His mind was becoming foggy. "But now I see I'm wrong. Go friend, complete your story mine is already written."

Shra stood up as he listened to his friend's advice for the last time. He turned towards where the battle had progressed. He charged into the battle and fought more ferociously and viciously than he had all day. His vigor seemed to spread to his allies and before they knew it they had broken through the enemy's line which stood between them and the outside. They broke out of barracks and charged for the barricades that stood between them and the

entrance to the stockpile. As they charged they met up with another group of fighters who had come from another direction.

On the defensive Vanka and his fellow defenders fired over the barricades to try to take down as many of the incoming rebels as they could. Vanka's pulse quickened as he realized that his time had come. The other lines had failed and now it was up to them to stop the push. His accuracy was better than that of some of his companions. While teaching at the university he had taken advantage of the situation and taken classes in different sports and academic areas to broaden his knowledge. Several semesters prior he had the privilege of taking a class involving shooting sports.

He had taken the class for no other reason than because it was a skill he had wanted to learn. Vanka had never owned a weapon. He had done well in the class and now it was paying off. Unfortunately for him and the rest of the group their efforts were not enough. They were overcome by the sheer number of enemy forces. They did what they could to fend off the melee attacks they faced. Unlike shooting, Vanka had never considered taking a class on fencing or self-defense. Now he wished he had taken the opportunity. The biology professor had kept in enough shape that he could maneuver quite nimbly

as he dodged attacks. His agility wasn't enough in the end to deal with the overwhelming numbers that the group faced. Before going unconscious Vanka felt the cold metal of a blunt object strike the back of his head.

Cheers ran through the crowd as the last of the defenders was taken out. Shra stepped to the front to address his people. The door that stood behind him led to the underground storage which housed the weapons that he was after.

"Comrades we have come far against the homeworlders. I think we should take a moment and appreciate that fact." Shra began. He was exuberant knowing that success was at his fingertips. "Behind these doors are relics of our history. Relics which the government held on to in the hopes to one day use them. Today we will show them the error in their ways. Of all the mistakes they have made this one will be the one they will never forget."

Cheers rang out once again and Shra's followers readied themselves for the final push. It would be the hardest thing they'd faced all day. They would have to face a bottleneck as they passed through the only entrance to the underground facility. From there it would be a continual fight down several flights of stairs until they finally reached the facility.

Once there the fight would become even more dangerous as the corridors and rooms were the perfect place for ranged combatants to engage the oncoming front. It didn't help that they would be a long way from the medical unit and shuttles. A group of medics was going to come down to the depths but severe injuries would take much longer to respond to without the equipment that was at the makeshift medical camp.

Once Shra's followers were ready, the brave leader opened the door and ordered his people through. They didn't wait and worked quickly to overcome whatever defenses were waiting on the other side. Shra followed behind once his people made it though. The entry level had been successfully cleared and sounds of battle could be heard coming from the stairway that led down to the depths of the facility. Shra was impressed with how quickly the attack had progressed. He didn't know how many personnel manned the underground facility and had greatly overestimated the number.

By the time the leader caught up with his cohort they were fighting through the corridors of the facility's main level. He joined in on a firefight that was being fought in one of the branches of the seemingly endless labyrinth of hallways. Pinned on one end was a group of soldiers defending a three-

way intersection. A set of barriers had been put in place to help them defend their position. At a four-way junction several militia members were taking shots at the barricade trying to get lucky and hit the defenders. The fight was at a standstill. Shra grabbed a couple of the officers and had them follow him.

He led the small squad around to one of the side passages which led to the intersection where the barricades had been placed. With the constant fire from the front, the soldiers failed to notice the approach of the three resistance fighters who took advantage and took out the defending troops with a couple well placed shots. Shra ordered the rest of the troops forward. From there Shra and the squad of militia members weaved through the maze of corridors. From the information that Shra had the control room for the storage facility would be not much further. From there he would be able to communicate with the Senate. The control room also contained all the equipment to activate the small number of missile silos that the base had.

Not all the fusion bombs were meant for orbital deployment. Some had been housed inside old nuclear fission missiles. The rockets were now over a century old. Their mechanisms were still checked annually and repairs were done where possible. Most of the parts were outdated and no

longer in production but custom parts were easy to make. These missiles were Shra's true intent. With them he could target any place on Gatrubbe and have rocket reach there in a matter of minutes. Shra knew this and the Senate knew this. If they wanted to deny the colonies independence Shra would still have an ace up his sleeve.

The group of followers faced little resistance as they progressed through the hallways. They met up with some other fighters who were on their way to clear out some of the storage rooms. The rooms were large cement lined warehouse sized rooms. Many held nothing but stockpiles of old bombs and spare parts. Other parts of the facility housed old and outdated technology that sat around collecting dust. Old computers and adding machines could be found if one looked hard enough. Any abandoned projects that the government had deemed too dangerous for public release were also stored in some of the rooms. That was one reason for the facility's isolated status. Without being near the civilian infrastructure there was little fear of security risks. The location had been decided on during the last war when the region's government needed a place to work on the fusion bomb project.

Finally they made it. Shra bashed the door handles and broke any locks that were holding the

door shut. He entered the room and turned on the lights. Three rows of computer terminals filled the room and three large screens sat at the front. The leader felt as though he had stepped back in time. Not even the colonies had technology this archaic. A fine layer of dust had collected on the surfaces of the room.

“Boot everything up.” Shra ordered. His comrades took seats at the old terminals. Surprisingly the machines began running without much effort. The room came alive with the hum of the machines. The fans of the old computers whirred for the first time in decades. The system came alive and the three large screens lit up showing loading information as their programs initialized. Once the operating system had run through all of its checks the middle screen displayed a map of Gatrubbe. The side screens awaited further input for what information they needed to show.

Shra took a seat at one of the front consoles and accessed the terminal. The system still held the logo of the former regional government. The insignia had been out of use for over a century and had become part of the history books. Its sight brought a smile to Shra’s face. It was a symbol of the last time that the Gatrubbian people had been split, now after all these years the same computers were being used

once again during a time of schism. Using the old system Shra was able to use it to access the old communications lines. He found the destination he wanted and sent a signal. For the Senate's sake he hoped his calls were answered.

## Chapter XXXIV

Almost a continent away the Senate was in chaos. They had been watching as the invasion had taken place. The battle in the capital was at a standstill. The Navy was in the process of trying to regain control of the air but their fighters were being pushed off at an alarming rate. Fortunately, the enemy had respected the old rules of war and had been careful not to shoot down any civilian shuttles. More pressing was the battle for one of Gatrubbe's nuclear stockpiles.

The Navy and the Senate had lost contact with the base several minutes prior. They could only assume that Shra's forces had finally pushed all the way though and were now underground. This worried the senators. They didn't know what Shra's goal was with the base but they knew that if he had it then he had leverage over the situation. Senator Eskin tried her best to keep the room calm but it was hard when she couldn't get away from keeping up

with the latest reports. Almost every minute a messenger entered into the meeting chamber to deliver a new update. Every new update she would regurgitate to the crowd. Each update brought more worries and fears.

When a messenger came in with a confused look on his face, Senator Eskin knew something important had happened. She was handed a message and read it. Like the messenger, she had to reread it several times to make sense of what it said. She looked at the crowd of senators who waited for her to give out the information that she held.

“It’s a message from the base. It came in through the old channels.” The senator reported what she knew. “No one knows what to make of it.”

“We should answer it.” Came a voice from the crowd. There was a general agreement with that statement. The senator could see several nods at that request.

“I will see about having the call brought into the chamber.” The senator stepped down from the podium and left the room to find someone who knew how to work the base’s communications systems.

The task of rerouting the old system with the new computers was something that took several

minutes to do. The systems had been integrated previously but nobody thought that the old system would ever be used again. Once the new standard had been implemented between all the government facilities the old lines had been left to decay with time. Once the call was rerouted the senator made her way back to the meeting room. The other senators were awaiting her return and had become restless to hear from the base.

A voice cut through the static of the room's speaker system. The quality was poor and echoed as the voice on the other side spoke. "This is Shra of the Colonial Liberation Movement. To whom am I speaking?"

All eyes looked towards Senator Eskan. As Head of the Senate she had implicitly accepted the role as the room's speaker. "Hello Shra you have reached the Senate floor. You are currently speaking with Senator Terb Eskan."

Shra's voice picked up in delight. "Ahh senator I've heard so much about you and your standings. Not much in the way of colonial support if I remember correctly."

“What do you want?” The senator ignored the attack on her reputation. “From the sound of it you have access to the control room.”

There was silence on the other end of the line. The old lines were known to sometimes have a delay. “Very astute observation senator. You should know what I want. I called for it a few days ago and your people should have been discussing it.”

“If you’re talking about independence of the colonies you can think again.” Senator Eskan scoffed. “After what you’ve done against your fellow Gatrubbian what makes you think that you earned the right to discuss colonial independence?”

“If I’m not mistaken, this control room can launch a missile anywhere on Gatrubbe senator. Unless you decide to take my request seriously I am tempted to take more action. I think you’ll agree that enough lives have been lost already.”

The senator was silent. She knew that he was right. “The decision will have to be made by the Senate. Not to mention that even if we decide to enter peace talks, you have committed crimes against the Gatrubbian people.”

“Your time to decide is running out senator.” Shra’s voice didn’t waver at the senator’s mention of his treason. “Make your decision.”

The senator looked at her colleagues. They were all thinking the same thing. They didn’t want to admit that Shra had defeated them. As Senator Eskan wavered in making the final decision, Senator Skrit stood up and walked to the front of the chamber. The action had been unapproved but nobody was going to complain under the circumstance.

“Shra.” Senator Skrit called out the opposition’s name. “We refuse to negotiate with terrorists. You know that on the ground your people are outnumbered. It’s only a matter of time before our forces storm the base and take back what you stole.”

“Who is that?” The voice over the speakers asked. From the sound of it, Senator Skrit’s actions had caught more than the Senate off guard.

“Senator Skrit. I preside over the region that you have stepped your feet into. And before you say anything yes I do oppose colonial independence. I did put the Sojourn before your people, not because they deserve it but because the message of unity that the Sojourn symbolized was far more important.”

The senator spoke his opinion. He wasn't going to be intimidated.

"Thank you senator." The response came after several seconds of silence. "Thank you for admitting your mistakes. I don't think I will ever understand your reasoning. How could you think that a symbol of unity meant more than actually unifying our people?"

"Because in the end that's all the majority want." Senator Skrit defended his position. "Show them that you've made a change and they don't blink twice to think about the ones who were left behind. I don't expect a colonist such as yourself to fully understand."

That last statement was the last straw. "Maybe I don't understand. Well I have a message for you senator. Your actions have led to the death of hundreds of colonists including my wife and children. Would you consider your constituents to be like your children?"

The senator wasn't exactly certain what to make of that question. "Of course, I watch out for them and nurture them and their surroundings."

"Then consider us even senator."

The senators looked at one another. What had Shra done? There was one thought that they all thought was ludicrous. They refused to believe that even Shra would act so irrationally. The room went silent waiting for something. Some kind of sign.

The sign came as an alarm. The senators looked around in panic. They knew that sound. It had been played in the historical documentaries. It was the sound alerting occupants that a missile launch had been detected. Their worst case scenario had actually come true.

“What have you done?” Senator Eskan was the first to find her voice. She didn’t know if Shra was still listening or if he had decided that the fate of the world had been made.

“After all the misery and pain that your decisions have brought to the colonies now you’ve made a decision that has led to misery and pain for your own people. How does that symbol of unity feel to you now senator? Was it the right choice?” Shra’s question lingered in the air.

Senator Skrit wasn’t sure how to feel. He was still coming to terms that somewhere out there a missile had been launched. Where that missile landed there would be death for two hundred

kilometers around the center of the blast. The senator didn't know if he should pity Shra for his madness or be angry at him.

"That's enough." Senator Eskan was putting her foot down. This couldn't go on any longer. "Senator Skrit was right, you are no more than a terrorist. We're done here. Have you people lay down their arms and maybe they'll have a chance at freedom before the end of their lives."

"You just don't get it do you?" Shra was in disbelief. "I have the power to wipe a city off the map and you want me to surrender? Consider your words wisely senators for they may be the last ones you speak."

"Can we sit down and talk?" Senator Eskan sighed. There was nothing more she could do. Shra had been serious about his intentions and the senator had no way to diffuse the situation.

"You made the right choice senator. Meet me in the control center in one hour. Come unarmed and unescorted. You have my assurance that you will not be harmed." Shra paused. "Refuse or break any of those conditions and my ceasefire will terminate. Is that understood?"

“We have a deal. I will meet with you in one hour. Senator Eskan out.” The line went dead and the Senate lost control. The senator’s colleagues pleaded for her to have someone else go, to have some kind of hidden weapon, to come up with some kind of assault plan. The senator denied all those suggestions. She was to stay true to her word. The one concession she made in the interest of the Senate’s security team was that she would wear a recording device so that the others could know that she was safe. After she had been equipped with the proper equipment she boarded a shuttle. Looking at her surroundings it was hard to believe that somewhere on Gatrubbe a fusion bomb had been set off.

## Chapter XXXV

When Vanka came to the first thing he noticed after the headache he had was the warmth of the air. Opening his eyes, he noticed he was laying right where he had fallen. The concrete pressed against his face. Something had changed during the time he had been out. The sky had become a rich orange color. The only thing which made him realize that it wasn’t the setting sun making the sky change color was the view of the remnants of a mushroom cloud in the distance. If the base hadn’t been on a hill he would never have been able to see it. The sight jolted him

awake. He looked around. Shra's forces were nowhere in sight. The door to the underground bunker was still hanging open.

Suddenly a gust of wind whipped through from the direction of the cloud. If it was really a fusion bomb the shockwave had travelled over a hundred kilometers to reach the base. Vanka could only guess who the target had been. After the shockwave passed, the Gatrubbian used a nearby barricade to help himself up. A few nearby militia officers saw him get up and rushed over to meet him. They tied his hands and led him to the medical camp. On the journey over Vanka observed the effect of Shra's attack. The base was a mess. If he didn't know any better the sight would of suggested that the base had been hit by a bad storm. Many of the bodies had been moved aside, the stains of blood were the only remnants to indicate that there had been casualties.

The medical camp had changed during the time that the battle had progressed. It had moved further from the landing site. Most of the injured had been shipped off back to the fleet to receive better attention than the triage unit could accommodate for. Many of those who remained were civilians and soldiers who had fought on the side of the government. The medics had prioritized their side's injuries before moving on to civilians and finally onto

the soldiers. As expected most of the injuries came from the close quarters combat that had been fought in the buildings. The injured who had made it this far were more than likely going to make it out alive. Injuries which were severe like those that had been sustained by Benga almost never made it to the camp on time.

Vanka was led to a medical bed and examined by one of the colonial doctors who had volunteered to help out. Beyond the concussion that the professor had taken there were no other signs of injury. The medic attempted to make small talk as she worked but Vanka's mind was so far removed from the situation that he didn't hear a word she said. While he nodded and gave monosyllabic answers, he was thinking about his home. He worried that other places had been hit by the bombs and that his family hadn't made it out. Once the examination was completed the doctor gave placed a device on his head which was meant to help with the concussion. She asked him to lay down and get some rest. He placed his head on the pillow and faded off to sleep.

As Vanka rested a shuttle came over the horizon. It had two occupants, a pilot and a passenger. The shuttle was allowed to land and the doors opened. Senator Eskan stepped out. The senator had been on the base a couple times before

during her reign in the Senate. Not much had changed about the place in her previous visits. The was the first time in a while that the base looked brand new to her. The makeshift landing pad had thrown off her orientation of the base not to mention the medical camp that was sitting nearby.

Two guards came up and introduced themselves to the senator. They had been sent by Shra to escort her to his location. After they were thoroughly convinced that she had upheld her end of the bargain they led her across the base. As they walked she noticed the warm breeze that seemed to float though the battlefield. If the seasons hadn't been changing she wouldn't have noticed it. The sky had already faded back to its original blue tint. The senator was dismayed to see the extent of the damage that Shra's movement had caused. She was starting to feel like this could of all been prevented if the Senate had only listened to his demands in the first place. They had spent too much time squabbling about the fine details. They should have responded when a decision had been made. At least then Shra and the government would have known what to expect from one another.

The senator began to recover her bearings of the location as they passed by buildings that the senator recognized from her previous visits. Back

then the buildings had been occupied and the base had been full of life. Now the buildings looked as though they had been abandoned for years. Windows were broken, doors had come off their hinges, and debris was strewn everywhere. The guards and senator approached the entrance to the underground facility. The senator had been inside a couple times during inspections that the Senate was required to take of the base. As the group travelled down the stairs they passed by some militia members who stood at attention as the senator passed by. She was glad to know they still held some respect for government officials.

The maze of corridors still confused the senator. She had been through them before but their layout was hard to get down. All the sections looked the same and without any exterior landmarks there was no way that anyone would be able to get a sense of where they were facing or where they had come from. She had to give Shra credit. If he had known the layouts well enough to lead a fight in the labyrinth he was sharper than she had first thought of him. Senator Skrit may have thought all the colonists were uneducated but the Senator Eskin knew better than to make that assumption. People like Senator Genet had changed her mind about the capabilities of the colonists. She would need to add Shra to that list.

They approached the control room and the guards opened the door for the senator. She nodded out of respect and walked in. She had never been inside the room when it was powered up. She doubted anyone who currently worked on the base had been. The hum of the archaic machines was soothing. There were a couple militia members still in the room with Shra. The colonial leader turned to face the senator when she walked in. He made his way to her. He had a smile on his face. For the last hour he had been basking in the glory of his victory. They said it couldn't be done but he had done it. He had brought the Senate to their knees.

"Greetings Senator Eskan please come in." Shra proceeded to guide the senator down to the front where he had put together a table and a couple chairs. "Please sit. Can I get you anything?"

The senator did as she had been asked. "No, I'm fine. I'm here to talk about the next steps. That's it."

Shra nodded and claimed the chair on the opposite side of the table. "I assume you want to make a peace offering."

"That's a bold assumption. You gave me an hour to prepare, my fellow senators didn't have much

time to come to a consensus.” Senator Eskan pulled out her handheld device. On it contained the notes that she had taken from the Senate’s discussion on the possibility of peace. “Of course colonial independence would have big ramifications that need to be considered before a final decision is made.”

“You know that independence of our settlements is what we are fighting for.” Shra looked the senator in the eyes. “If you deny us that we will have to return to our people emptyhanded.”

“We’re willing to step up our resources for the colonies.” Senator Eskan remarked. She was going through some of the more reasonable points she had on her list. “We could also increase the governmental autonomy of the colonies, that is provided that the colonies are willing to start paying back the government for the help they receive.”

“How’s that any different from what we have now?” Shra asked. “You’re lack of intervention in the colonies is what caused this mess. Now you want us to pay you so that we can run ourselves? You must have something more reasonable on your list senator. For your sake and the sake of the capital.”

“Are you still threatening us?” The senator was shocked. “We’re here to talk about peace but you

can't expect that we'll just release the other planetary bodies in this system to you. The planet relies on some of the resources that the colonies harvest."

"Then you can pay us." Shra suggested. "We don't ask much and we'll take our independence into consideration when we set the price."

"That's unacceptable." The senator shook her head. "Not only will that harm our economy but how can you sustain yourselves without the basic resources that you depend on Gatrubbe for?"

"I believe that's what we like to call trade." The movement leader made his snide remark. With the power he wielded he felt like he could be a bit more rash than usual. Benga would have approved. "We barely pay taxes as is so what in the world could you want from us that's so damn important?"

"I'm trying to work with your requests, but a change like you want isn't something we can do overnight?" The senator tried her best to reason with Shra. "There are a number of considerations that we would need to take into consideration. Might I also remind you that your people caused more damage today than your economy will be able to pay for."

"You expect us to pay?" Shra scoffed at the mere suggestion. "If you had been more attentive

none of this would have had to happen. We were only doing what we needed to survive. You heard Senator Skrit, your votes weren't for the greater good, they were for what looked like the greater good."

"Can you blame us?" Senator Eskan asked. "We did what we had to. If it hadn't been for our actions, the people would have been sick with our performance as their representatives and we would have been replaced by a group that would have acted the same way as we did."

"Now I'm doing the only thing that I can think of that would be reasonable." Shra whistled to get the attention of the guards who had been waiting outside. They entered and made their way to the front. With one guard on either side of the senator they lifted her by the arms and stood her up.

"What is this?" Senator Eskan struggled to get free. She was unsuccessful. Her captors' grips tightened as she tried to squirm free.

"I gave you and the Senate a chance to make peace." Shra picked up the handheld device that the senator had dropped on the table. He waved it at the senator as he spoke. "Instead you come to me with empty words. Be proud senator at least you get to

witness the destruction of your home. If only your colleagues had been so fortunate.”

“You can’t do this.” The senator declared. She had stopped trying to struggle. She still wasn’t going to accept her fate. “Those are innocent people. What gives you the right to condemn them?”

Shra got up close to the senator. “The same thing that made you think that it was okay to leave us in such poor conditions. You ignored us for the greater good, now I get to decide what the greater good is.”

“How is this good in any sense of the word?” Senator Eskan tried to reason with the movement’s leader, but it was quickly apparent that her efforts were in vain.

“For the same reason you can call the suffering of a minority good.” Shra stepped up to the console he had been using earlier. He pressed a few button to execute the commands he had previously entered into the system. “Now watch as your world falls apart just as mine did when your killed my family and comrades.”

The senator watched as the main screen tracked the launched rockets. They spread out from the center of the screen at an alarming rate. Even if

the Senate was listening to her conversation there was no way that they would be able to react in time to evacuate. She cried out in mental anguish. She had family in the capital, her kids and their kids lived in the city. If they hadn't reached the evacuation site by now it would be too late for them.

Shra smiled in bliss as he watched the rockets take the trajectories he had planned. The first rocket hit its target within a minute. After that came another target, then another. By the five-minute mark every projectile had reached its intended target. Every major city had been levelled from its center to a several kilometer radius if not more. The heat and radiation from the blast would terminate all life within a one to two hundred kilometer radius.

The room was silent except for the weeping of the senator. Shra looked at the guards. "Take her to the shuttle. Load up the remaining personnel. There's not much time."

The room was evacuated. The leaders of the movement knew what the result of such devastation would be. That planet was going to tear itself apart from the inside. The bombs would start a chain reaction within the mantle which would head up Gatrubbe's crust. Anyone not off the surface by then would wish they were. Shra took one last look

around the control room. Too bad Senator Skrit wasn't around to see the symbol of unity that Shra had created. He would have appreciated the gesture.

## Chapter XXXVI

When Valena awoke from his slumber he knew something was wrong. The passengers in the shuttle were murmuring in worried whispers. He looked out the window. There was an orange glow below. The glow came from the ground which in the dark looked like it a patchwork of dark splotches sewn together with yellow and orange thread.

“What’s happening mom?” The young Gatrubbian looked from the window to the neighboring seat where his mother sat. Even in the dim cabin lighting it was apparent that she had been crying.

“We don’t exactly know dear.” She tried to hold herself together now that Valena was awake. The passengers had first learned that something was wrong when they saw the first mushroom cloud on the horizon. After two more sightings the cabin had entered into a state of panic. The pilot of the shuttle had tried to keep people calm. He had stated his intent of staying in the air until he had been given the

word that it was safe to land. This did little to make Mal feel better. She worried about her husband. For all she knew he had been caught in one of the explosions.

“Are we going to be there soon?” Valena asked not sure where there was, only that he had been told the shuttle was going to bring them to a safe place.

“Not much longer. Try to get some more rest.” Mal responded. She didn’t want to worry her son any more than she needed to. “I’ll let you know when we’re close.”

Valena shook his head in protest. “I’m not tired. Why won’t you tell me how much longer we have?”

“Because I’m not the one flying the shuttle.” Mal kept calm. She was understanding of her son’s inquisitive nature. The other children in the shuttle were asking the same kinds of questions. “The pilot is trying to find a place to land.”

“How long have we been flying?” The young Gatrubbian asked. The hardest part with shuttle rides was trying to keep track of the time when time zones kept changing. Valena felt as though he had slept for hours.

“We’ve been flying a long time dear.” Ms. Navank leaned forward in her seat to get a better sight of Valena. Ms. Navank was sitting on the other side of Mal. The two women had been talking during the shuttle’s flight. Ms. Navank was a skilled listener and was more than happy to sit and listen to the worries that Mal had on her mind. The younger woman was concerned about her husband and children. For her Valena was the only one she had left. For all intents and purposes Vanka could have been sent to the Sojourn. The fact that he wasn’t here made things less bearable.

“What are those ships doing out there?” Valena pointed out the window. In the darkness the outlines of a group of small craft could be seen. As the outlines became more visible it became apparent that the group was made up of fighters and shuttles. The shuttle’s occupants could feel the shuttle altering its course. The pilot’s voice came over the intercom.

“Hello again folks. I have an update on our situation. It appears as though landing on the surface would be too dangerous. No doubt you noticed the other vessels that we’ve fallen in line with. They are a composition of colonial and local crafts. Our new destination is to rejoin the orbital fleet which has offered sanctuary to all remaining people in the vicinity.”

The cabin's occupants were concerned. They still had no idea what was going on. The pilot's altered flight plan made many of the passengers nervous. Was he talking about the Navy's fleet or the colonies' fleet? Were they prisoners now? There were many questions being asked as the shuttle ascended out of the atmosphere. As the passengers looked out their windows they saw the ground below and were at a loss for words. The surface was losing its patchwork look and was becoming more and more vibrant as the crust began to break apart. No longer did they care which fleet they would be a part of. Any landing zone was acceptable with the situation at hand.

It wasn't long before the squadron of small vessels began to approach a larger mass of vessels. From what the passengers could make out the fleet was a conglomeration of the two fleets. Their shuttle approached one of the Navy's carriers. She was battered and showed scars of the recent battle. The shuttle approached one of her landing bays with another shuttle that had broken off from the group.

The shuttles docked and waited for the bays to repressurize. Tension within the shuttle had risen and many of the occupants were waiting to get out so they could learn about the fate of their home. After a few minutes the pressure had returned to normal

levels in the bay and the doors to the shuttles opened. It didn't take long for the shuttles to empty their contents out into the bay. The civilians stood around talking with one another trying to piece together what they could.

Commodore Larant walked into the bay. She had been helping supervise repairs to the rest of the ship. They had brought most of their systems back to minimal levels. She had made the final decision to allow the shuttles to dock in her carrier. It had been a hard decision to make with all the problems that the ship was still working through but these people needed her help and she wasn't going to let them down.

As the commodore approached the group of civilians they turned to her for answers. She stood at the front and tried her best to ease their worries or to at least start filling in the gaps in their knowledge. It was the least they deserved. They were the fortunate ones and they needed to know what was happening.

"I'm sure you have many questions. We should start with the obvious issue at hand. Gatrubbe is no longer capable of sustaining life. The colonial forces were able to destabilize the planet's interior. As you probably saw on your way up the crust has

heated up with the additional energy of the fusion bombs and has begun to merge with the mantle.”

“What about our homes and families?” One of the passengers asked.

The commodore responded to the question. “Your homes are no longer around. As for your families, if they weren’t in a shuttle when the crust began to heat up they are probably dead by now. I’m sorry about that. We’re trying to keep track of the refugees who have come from the surface. If your family members have made it to one of the fleet’s ships, then with any luck you will be able to find them.”

Mal held out some hope that her husband might have made it out alive after all. She asked the commodore a question. “Where are the colonial ships?”

“That’s a good question. A ceasefire has been drawn up. Our two forces have decided to put aside our differences in order to decide what will happen next.” When she hadn’t been worrying about the ship’s repairs, the commodore had been talking with the other side about the next steps.

“Why are we working with the people who destroyed our home?” One of the passengers

standing at the back of the crowd asked. The other passengers nodded in agreement and look to the commodore for an answer.

“I have been talking with the leadership of the other side. They assure me it was never in their plan to cause the mayhem that happened. One of their operatives went rogue and decided to fire the missiles. There was no intention on causing civilian harm.” The commodore didn’t completely accept the story she had been told but the leadership of the colonial forces had been kind enough to offer supplies and spare parts to help the Navy repair their ships.

“What are we supposed to do now?” Mal asked. She held her son close. There was no way she was going to lose him.

“We have some spare rooms available for families and as we speak we are converting a cargo bay into a shelter until the logistics can be properly worked out. I have officers standing by to help you find your way.” As the commodore spoke some of her ship’s crew members stepped forward. “If you have any more questions there will be command officers around to help you out. I’m truly sorry about what has happened.”

# Chapter XXXVII

On the Kita, a shuttle landed in the hangar. The doors opened once the room had repressurized and Shra stepped out. He was followed by the senator and the medical personnel who had been at the base when the evacuation order was given. With the medics was Vanka and some of the other patients. Vanka hadn't been fully informed of what had happened until Shra informed his people. Shra was met by one of the other movement leaders. They talked for several minutes. The passengers who didn't have an allegiance with the colonies stood awaiting their fate. They hadn't been shackled and worried that their time was short. Shra and his partner looked over to the group as they spoke. Shra was nodding. To Senator Eskan, Shra looked saner now than when he had committed his acts of mass genocide. She had no words for him. He was a despicable being and didn't deserve to be alive after what he had done.

Suddenly the conversation between the two gentlemen became heated. Nobody heard what had been said, but Shra's tranquil demeanor disappeared. He reached for his sidearm but the other leader was quicker to draw and brought Shra down before Shra's weapons was out of its holster. The two security

officers who had been assigned to watch the senator went over. They talked with the leader and proceeded to pick up Shra's unconscious body and move it out of the hangar. The leader then moved to the group who now stood wide-eyed at the scene they had witnessed.

"I'm sorry for that. I am Ibana Vivek one of the leaders of the Colonial Liberation Movement. We never intended for things to get so out of hand. We have been in contact with Commodore Larant of the Navy and have tried to explain what we could. Shra was never meant to go as far as he did. We had no idea that he would go forward and act out the way he did." Ibana bowed to the group. "Please forgive us."

"Forgive you?" Senator Eskan laughed. She couldn't believe the nonsense she was hearing. They had just destroyed the only inhabitable planet in the system and now they were asking for forgiveness. "After everything you've done? I refuse now take me to the commodore we have to discuss how to deal with such treachery."

Vanka took his turn as the senator stormed off to the shuttle. "Mr. Vivek I don't know if I can truly forgive you and your people for what has happened. But I understand that it was only one of you who made the fatal decision. I had family on Gatrubbe."

“I’m sorry, we will take you to the Navy’s flagship. Many of the survivors are being delivered there, maybe your family was fortunate enough to make it to a shuttle. If not, you have my sincerest condolences. The shuttle will leave right away. The other ship will have information on what to do when you arrive.”

Vanka went back to the shuttle. The other members of the group had also been given the advice to take the shuttle back to the other side of the fleet. Once they had all boarded the bay depressurized and the shuttle was able to launch once more into the void. The view of the planet was still a strange sight to behold. The planet that had been green and lush just a couple hours before now had become a deep orange. It was too surreal for Vanka, he kept thinking that he would wake up and find that it had all been a dream.

The shuttle approached the carrier. They entered the same hangar that the refugees had come in on. Commodore Larant was not around to meet with the new group of arrivals. Instead one of her subordinates had been given the task of guiding them to area of the ship that had been zoned out for refugees. After dropping off the civilians of the group, the subordinate went off to guide the senator to Commodore Larant’s office.

Vanka stood in the cargo bay where the refugees were settling in. He wandered the rows of cots looking for anyone he knew. Everyone he saw had a look of helplessness on their face. They worried about what was to come of them, what was to come of the Gatrubbian people.

“Dad!” A voice came from behind. Vanka felt a pair of arms wrap around his waist.

Vanka smiled, tears welled up in his eyes. He could believe it. He turned around and there was Valena and Mal. The family embraced in a hug. Their hopes had been answered, the Writers had been gracious today.

“I thought for sure you weren’t going to make it.” Tears rolled down Mal’s face. The day had been so hectic and chaotic. She never thought that she would see her husband again.

“You weren’t the only one. I’m glad to see that you were able to evacuate.” Vanka stepped back to give some space to everyone.

“We were able to get to Egam in time. She’s out finding some blankets for us to use.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Vanka gave a sigh of relief. “A storyteller like her will be handy in keeping

a record of everything now. Any idea what's going to happen?"

"They didn't tell us much. It sounds like the two parties are still in talking through things." Mal and Vanka took a seat on an empty cot. They were enjoying each other's company once again. "Maybe tomorrow will bring more answers."