

Iota 7
by Joseph Vermette

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by Joseph P. Vermette

Dedicated to all my fellow dreamers — they know who they are.

Life is but a series of challenges which you must conquer.

– Lt. Steven Frederick Saunders

It was a clear and cloudless afternoon in Freedahmer, the busiest and most prosperous city on Iota 7. The glowing horizon was nearly engulfed by the sprawling skyline, which was no longer praised as the architectural triumph it was. Long abandoned watchtowers encircled Freedahmer, connected by massive shielded barricades that had recently been converted into shopping promenades. The Shadows inhabiting the hamlet did not even vaguely recall the ancient and formidable threat that had prompted their ancestors to so entrench them.

None of them, that is, but for Conan Switzgerald. For him, the heat of the battle still lived as memories of the old glory days came to dance on his eyelids in the thick of the night. Shadowkind had been transformed since the end of the war, but Conan's mind had not digressed but in the tiniest of ways. The hardened veteran both laughed and shook his head at the antics of the new and inexperienced generation. How would Lord Damon have dealt with such frivolity?

He knew how he looked to the youth, though. He was a dusty and cobwebbed relic, better off in a museum than on the streets. His skin was leathery and marred by criss-crossing scars, his close-cropped hair white. He had a short beard and mustache that greatly accentuated his age.

Walking with a CR-pistol on his hip, Conan refused to degrade himself by joining in on new trends. He refused to wear anything but the silver and black uniform of the Emperor's elect guard, including when off-duty. The present ruler, Cliff II, was rather slack and submissive. Consistently, the once small but adept guard had quadrupled in size in the past quarter century. It seemed there was nothing sacred in this era.

As he maneuvered the bustling streets, Conan observed the decadence of his once great people. The roads and walkways were marked by graffiti and garbage, as if these testaments to time were valueless. Statues erected in honor of a string of Shadowway Emperors had been defaced and slicked with grime. In disgust, he noticed that there were call girls on almost every corner.

What had happened to the Shadowway Empire? In its prime, it had been formidable and cutting-edge, wresting the Earth from its lazy natives. Now it appeared to have become as inept as the fools it had deposed.

Lord Damon had told Conan he would one day lead the empire. He had waited patiently since then, never expecting it would be so long. Now he suspected that the fruit was ripe for the picking and he would not let it slip through his fingers. The current ruler would have to be sacked, for he was finalizing the Shadowway's demise. If Conan waited too long, there would be no empire for him to guide.

The Citadel overshadowed the downtown area, an ornate and ostentatious superstructure. Three large tiers emerged from a central hub that was heavily shielded and gold-plated. Extremely small slits around the contour were actually windows, like dozens of hidden eyes. Airmobiles did not come within a block of the edifice's no-fly zone, making it seem even more dark.

Conan did not find it eerie in the least. In fact, he found himself right at home within the Citadel's periphery. He slipped right past the guards, who out of habit gave a curt salute.

Inside, the Citadel seemed even more huge. Conan passed room after room after room in what seemed to be an interminable wide and high-ceilinged corridor. Flux lights — activated by his body heat — projected a crimson incandescence, coming alive one-by-one.

When he walked into the presentation room, his footfalls foreboding his appearance, Conan was displeased to see that His Eminence was picking something out from underneath his fingernails. *Captain of the Guard*, he thought, *and I still have to pander to this comedian!*

Seeing that the Captain of His guard had arrived, Emperor Cliff Gildran II sat up in his gigantic throne, which looked more like it had been carved out of coal than a n opulent mineral. He spoke in his harsh and abrupt manner: "Glad to see you are still breathing, Switzgerald. Everybody else..." He looked around the room so that the other soldiers smirked. "...Everybody else decided you had been killed by Zenithian insurrectionists!" He chuckled in his rasping and disdainful way.

Highly affronted, Conan held back a yell. Anyone with sense would realize that by being vigilant about the Zenith, the human military movement, he was simply trying to consolidate the empire. But the current emperor, even worse than his predecessor, insisted on making of fool of Conan and his "paranoia". He could not deny that there had been limited contact with the Zenith, no more than a few minor skirmishes in the last two-hundred years. But to him the threat was always pressing, especially since he had led the original campaign against humanity.

Conan tried his best to sound harried. "I'm lucky to have survived, Your Highness. The Zenith has begun a full-scale invasion of this system and perhaps others. The weapons they are using...are unlike anything I have ever seen."

Silence overcame the audience chamber as the Emperor decided whether or not Conan was genuine. Finally, in an irritated timbre, he said, "Enough of your nonsense. I was hoping you would not take long to get here... because we've something out-of-the-ordinary to discuss, something which *has nothing at all to do with the Zenith!*"

"And what would that be?" asked Conan, putting as much haughtiness into the remark as was achievable. He did not address the Emperor any more than he would a commoner.

Cliff II came forward in his throne, his large stomach heaving, and snarled to reveal yellowed teeth. Large and bulbous flux lights beamed red light onto his face, so his pinched gray eyes looked all the more sinister. "You will address your Emperor as 'Your Highness' or 'my Lord'. Or do you have an issue with that, Captain?"

Deliberately Conan took several heartbeats to respond. "No — no problem, Your Highness." He put enough phony sincerity into the reply to keep his life's blood, but anyone could have detected the irony. For effect, he added, "I am truly sorry to have offended you." This transfer reminded Conan of a frivolous human, putting the utmost emphasis on title and grandeur. In his heart, he heaved a massive sigh.

"Splendid," Cliff the Second returned, wondering if perhaps he had subtlety been made a mockery of. "Now that we've settled that, we can move on to a truly important enterprise. Follow me."

The over-fat glutton came off of his unimpressive chair and moved slowly to the corridor. Conan moved with him breast-to-breast while the remaining guards flanked him on all sides. The Captain knew that at least two of his five counterparts would be willing to do in the feeble ruler — if the time and method was delicately set.

As they approached the conference room, they passed Conan's daughter, Faith Switzgerald. Quickly, Conan asked, "My Lord, would you mind if my daughter accompanied us?" The nineteen-year-old was intelligent and acted as a sounding board for ideas. The Emperor had recently begun letting her sit in on more minor conferences.

Cliff II chuckled, but not out of maliciousness. "I sent for your dear Faith, Captain. I believe she should be included in all aspects of government from now on."

Conan was surprised at the man's spontaneous good judgment. "Yes, sir, having her around will be quite advantageous."

Quietly, the dark-haired girl followed the delegation like a silhouette. She had her father's striking lime-green eyes, freckles and full, pouting lips. She was wearing a one-piece leather cat-suit which hugged tightly her small narrow frame and revealed the tops of her breasts. Everyone knew she did not engage in pointless conversation, but when she opened her mouth it was always to say something discerning.

The room they finally entered was wide and spacious, but filled with contraptions one would not normally associate with a meeting place. The ceiling was so high Conan and most others had ceased to contemplate it a long time ago. It was designed during the colonization of Iota 7, probably as an interrogation room. The walls were whitewashed and adorned by nothing more than rudimentary green flux lights.

There were of course no chairs, since standing was considered healthier. The Emperor stopped in front of a presentation screen that would have been imposing to outsiders. He brought up an image of an alien and inhospitable-looking planet.

Conan recognized the purplish ball as Ceres II, a world unimportant even by the most practical of standards. The first Shadowway expedition to Ceres II had resulted in the destruction of a sophisticated and costly craft, which had burned up in the sulfuric atmosphere. Three years later, a second team touched down on the planet's surface, but their heavily shielded craft suffered enough damage to nearly prevent their departure. No one to Conan's knowledge had ever bothered with the worthless rock since.

"Ceres II," Faith Switzgerald said, obviously puzzled.

"*Ceres II*," the Emperor echoed, using the controls to zoom in on the picture. "A world that has been blacklisted by all as completely valueless. Nevertheless, I have been thinking lately that it would be beneficial to assimilate it into our empire and convert it into what would be our only outlying base of operations."

Faith nodded, seeing what the Emperor was getting at. "Then we'd have first strike capabilities against would-be aggressors such as the Flameoids or the Zenith." She studied the image in the view-screen intently.

For once Conan had to agree with his superior. "I agree it'd be nice to have some means of defense that far out, but Ceres II, Sir?" He wrinkled his brow.

"It would be strategically speaking the superior choice, Father," Faith countered, speaking softly.

Conan smiled at his lovely daughter, contemplating how he would make her a princess. "Yes, but how would we get around the destructive atmosphere? Any ship we send in hardly comes back in one piece. And no one can spend more than a few hours on the surface without ill effects."

"That is exactly what I intend to ascertain," the Emperor replied, a lilt in his voice suggesting that he thought he was incredibly inventive. He rubbed his hands together, as if going over the rewards in his mind. "I have reason to believe..." Here he spoke with deliberate slowness. "...that the Flameoid Overseer intends to attack within the next few years."

Conan began to piece together the many pieces of the Emperor's scatterbrain reasoning. "I see. And with Ceres II, we would be more apt to fortify our fringe colonies, such as Njartis." The idea of an alien onslaught shook Conan to his very core.

"Exactly," said Cliff II, switching off the view-screen. As usual, he had decided without warning that the conference was ended. He would expect them to report back with ideas in several days, after they had had "ample time to think".

Conan thought that perhaps he should take a sojourn out to the fringe colonies...and into the Flameoid Empire to see what was afoot....

Some say mass destruction solves no problems. But in reality, the enemy can rarely be persuaded to change its way of thinking. Therefore, the only way to stop it is to blow it all to hell.

- General Anthony Stokk

Trim and Slender, Princess Alpha Woddner ambled slowly down the zigzag path that led from the Njartian Palace to Wellington Lake. She peered with bright green eyes through the dark dense wood, surveying her surroundings. Her head of luxurious red hair flowed elegantly behind her.

At that moment, the path emerged into a mile-long beach with immense sloping sands. It was a picturesque scene: The placidity of the lake beneath a clear blue sky, decorated and enhanced by healthy green trees and delicate pink seashells.

Alpha stood before the placid water, amidst the rippling sand and rocks. A warm, gentle breeze caressed her soft smooth skin; her beautiful pink dress flowed at her stockinged feet. A tiara gleamed, a golden necklace shimmered. It was near midnight and the planet's three moons cast a silvery incandescence across the top of the water.

Quietly and undetected, a young man emerged from the obscurity of the forest. Finally, he whispered, "Alpha!"

Slowly, the princess turned to face him and she smiled. "Hello, Ja'Ceb." Her voice was so soft, so soothing! It was like birds singing, bells chiming, and when it stopped it left a certain emptiness behind.

The young man smiled, quite charming, and replied, "Good day, my sweet princess." Then he kissed her hand vigorously.

Alpha smiled, blushing. "How did you find me?"

Ja'Ceb chuckled and gazed out into the lake. "I knew you'd be here. It is so beautiful." Ja'Ceb's hair was jet black and slicked back with gel. His congruent mustache, from beneath which he spoke, was fastidiously combed and painstakingly arranged. "Just look at that water, so much like glass. Sir Wellington would be pleased." He spoke clearly, gentleman-like.

The princess nodded, then whispered, breath-taken, "He most certainly would." She lifted her long flowing skirt and advanced several feet, then sat down on the sand. "Here — come join me." She patted the ground beside her, smiling prettily.

Ja'Ceb joined her without hesitation, put his arms around her. "This is, I believe, the most spectacular place on Njartis."

"Indeed it is," she said, eyes sparkling. "How fortunate that the palace is right above it on that hill. Surely it was the intention — for people to come down here and stare for hours at such sights."

"Or for couples to enjoy an evening of solitude — *together*," Ja'Ceb whispered, drawing her into a taut embrace. He brought his lips against hers and they kissed.

Both Ja'Ceb and Alpha lived reasonably temperate lives in the engineered peace of Njartis, the so-called Wilderness World. Ja'Ceb's father had been a corporal in Emperor Eugene Gildran's elite guard and upon the old man's death had settled down here in this backwater haven. Ja'Ceb took after his late father, serving in King Woddner's regiment.

Alpha was the only heir to the Njartian throne, and she was quite happy to serve in her current capacity. No doubt though Woddner had more grandiose notions. The Woddner monarchy had been knocked out a millennium ago, but he still felt his lineage had a claim to the crown.

In the end Alpha was not happy with the way her father bore down on her life. She had no delusions of becoming an empress and did not even desire to rule over her own planet. Ja'Ceb promised he would take her away some day, once both their obligations here had been fulfilled. For now, they took in the sights....

Sprawled out on the heaps of soft sand, the couple gazed up at the starry sky. The constellations of Njartis glittered and winked at them. There was the Bor, which resembled a swimmer from side-view. There was the Reaab (bear) and the Serrix (mouse) as well as various other animals.

The favorite among most, though, was Ja'Ceb the Warrior, from which this palace guard got his name. *We've been through a lot*, he thought. *If only I could have been as much of a help to my father....* Ja'Ceb had spent his entire life protecting and rescuing, but had been unable to stop an old age disease from slowly taking his father. It had been three years now, but still the young man felt pangs of regret. *How horrible...to have no control...none at all....*

"You know, Alpha," Ja'Ceb whispered, brushing a hand through the princess's hair, "I *will* take you wherever you want. The time will come sooner than you think."

"I know," Alpha replied, already dreaming of the far-off worlds that were beyond her reach. "But not if my father succeeds...." She had always felt cheated since she was essentially unable to have a normal relationship with father. The Queen was always trying to repair the broken bridge between them, but to no effect. Unfortunately Samuel Woddner VII was a very deluded man.

The couple were calmed by the harmonious chatter of birds that gathered around the lake. Eventually they drifted into slumber in each other's arms with nothing at all to disturb them. Ironical that the powerhouse of their shared misery sat atop the hill on the other side of the Wellington Wood.

The amity soon disappeared however into a mind-shattering explosion. There was a flicker of orange, then nothing...and a fireball the size of Mount Everest, as a deafening roar squeezed peace out of existence.

*What has happened cannot be changed.
 What is happening is going to happen.
 What will happen cannot be altered.*

- Lord Damon,
 In a speech to the Shadowway

Bathing in a pool of Sigma juice, Flameoid Overseer Sebastien Qwerty watched as a diminutive, long-faced man approached. He was small and pale, his figure skeletal. His mouth was draped with a drooping mustache.

"Your Highness," said the newcomer, "we've gotten word that the preliminary fleet has arrived at Njartis." His meager lips turned upward just slightly in a smile.

The Overseer's eyes grew wide and he sat up, amidst the churning water of the Sigma pool. "Is the second directly behind?"

"Yes, of course, Your Eminence."

"Capital. Simply exquisite." Qwerty laid back, once again submerged in the soothing liquid. "You serve me well, Belaja."

The man's jaw dropped; his coal-black eyes glimmering with an inner fire. "Sire! You must never call me by that name! You know that!" His eyes darted around the room, as if he half-expected eavesdroppers. "Here, they know me by my alias."

The Overseer grumbled, irritated, the tips of his enormous wings protruding slightly from the water. "Very well, *Carleton*." He paused and waved a hand toward the exit. "You are dismissed. But on your way out, would you mind sending for my concubines?"

Carleton Kane bowed and headed for the portal. He did not look back and vanished into the hallway without saying a word.

An annoying man. And ugly, too. But he's critical to my plans. Duke Qwerty shook his head, exasperated, and was relieved to see a group of pretty women emerging from the darkness.

As he was rubbed and massaged by his retinue of women, the Overseer couldn't help but wonder if things would go according to his plan. *Not likely*, his conscience told him. *Expect the unexpected*. But he forced the thoughts away and focused instead on his relaxation treatment.

An hour later, Qwerty and his followers were gathered at a table, discussing important matters. "I've brought you here today, men, to acknowledge that - yes - we've entered the final stage of our elaborate plot." He narrowed his fiery eyes. "Could any of you explain what this involves?"

Jeb Hann was the de facto head of the Zenith Security Council, the human alliance that operated on the fringes of explored space. He frowned and turned a disdainful glance at the others. "Is it safe to speak?"

"Of course." The Overseer put out a beefy hand and gestured toward an extremely pale and stick-thin man. "This, friends, is Carleton Kane, a long-time companion of mine. His knowledge of the Shadoway has helped me exquisitely in my planning."

The various members muttered their greetings and Gildran's voice rose suddenly above the rest. "Stage four calls for assassination of Emperor Gildran."

The Overseer grinned, exposing rotten teeth, and glared at Jeb. "Well done, my friend. You deserve a cigar for that one." He reached into his trousers and pulled out a package of smokes.

"No thanks," Hann replied, frowning at the package. "Flameoids may love their smoke, but I do not. I've had enough toxic substances polluting my lungs." His close-cut brown hair was gleaming with sweat under the long and deep red Pronensian flux lights.

Unruffled, Qwerty sparked the cigar and puffed contentedly. "Stage four will see the death of Emperor Cliff, yes, which will open the way for our dear Njartis Baytor to lay claim to the Shadoway throne." He drew a long, deep breath of his disgusting coal-black smoke. The embers like millions of bits of pepper scattered over his body winked in and out of view.

"Too bad the throne looks like a chunk of coal picked out of the filthy mines of Ceres." Njartis Baytor was a cantankerous gnome of a man with colorless dead eyes and unusually thick pink lips. He was a long estranged member of the Gildran family, the spawn of a long-lost bastard.

"Be silent, Baytor." The Overseer scowled, displeased. "We have no

time for foolishness." He slammed his fist against a button and a projection screen lowered before the table. "Watch closely, friends." He tapped a button and upon the screen appeared a detailed depiction of a space craft. "This is our latest weapon: the Halo-void ship."

He moved his finger across the photo, tracing details about the ship. "See these massive cannons here? These are the most destructive ones to date." He licked his beefy lips. "Tartazyr beams powered by a CR power core. Most exquisite. But the greatest part is the Halo technology, which renders the vehicle imperceptible."

The Halo-void ship, jet black, resembled a hefty beetle, its cannons shaped like pincers. There were vague descriptions of the numerous components to the craft, though they were blurred and indistinguishable.

"Our *Pa'Lah* fleet is striking down Njartis as we speak." He pressed a button and the image faded; the thin screen rose. "We will declare war against the Shadoway momentarily, before the blundering Shadows have a chance to act." He flashed a scowl at Baytor, who was chuckling to himself. Qwerty snapped at him in Tloy-Hoff, the Flameoid tongue that he would ordinarily have spoken. Continuing in the common vernacular: "I will not send you in, Baytor, until the dust has settled. We do not want Switzgerald or the rest of the guard to become apprehensive." He paused and flapped his huge hairy wings, which sent red-hot embers drifting to the floor. "Any additional questions?"

Jeb Hann ground his teeth together, making an annoying noise that everyone ignored. It appeared he was probing his mind to make certain all his issues had been addressed.

The Overseer's visage bore a slightly quizzical expression for a time, then returned to its prototypical noncommittal. "The Flameoid Empire is glad to have the ZSC at its side, Commander Jebediah Hann. With allies such as you we will unequivocally put a stop to the Shadows' campaign of bloody conquest and bring harmony to the Discovered Galaxy."

Hann nodded. "Yes, the ZSC is honored to have you as an ally." Oddly, he did not emanate outstanding spirit. His demeanor led one to believe he had been guided here by the rough hand of fate and not particularly his own judgment. Evidently, that did not bother the Overseer in the least.

"You will lead your forces into the front lines," Qwerty said, "once our full-scale invasion is under way. I regret that my engineers were unable to install Halo technology onto your vessels." Hann was certain that had not been anything

but deliberate.

The Overseer rose into the air, flapping his massive wings. "This calls for a toast, my friends — to the debut of what will surely be a long-lasting camaraderie." He removed a bottle of Golden Pronensian Tonic from a barrel beside the table and put it down in front of them. "For non-Flameoids this takes some getting used to...but I guarantee you will find it...satisfying."

Hann was inclined to turn down the drink, for fear that it might be poisoned, but reconsidered. It would be best to show trust for his new comrade-in-arms, if the alliance was to have any chance of lasting.

Qwerty took the first gulp, savoring every drop of the thick globular substance. He closed his eyes for a moment, revealing thickly veined eyelids. He sighed contentedly and passed the canister to Njartis Baytor. When it came to be Hann's turn, Carleton Kane passed the bottle, glaring at him with beastly bright eyes, as though he expected him to refuse the Overseer's gratitude.

But Jebediah Hann accepted the offering, paused for but a second, and took a brave long swill. He found it strongly bitter, but the others would never have been able to tell. Finishing off the final drops, he grinned and held the empty bottle out in front of him. It would all pay off. He was certain.... "You got anymore of this stuff? It's mighty good."

*Like a ponderous leviathan,
Death rose from the trenches,
emerged from hiding, veracious,
yearning for the blood of innocence;*

- D'jardo Opas IV,

Collected Poems

Dozens of Flameoid Halo-void ships uncloaked without warning and joined the dozens more that had come with the first attack wave. "All right! Let's do this," the commander boomed. "Engage! Engage! *Engage!*"

The new arrivals encircled Njartis along with the joint Flameoid-Zenith Armada. The soldiers inside the void-ships were distinctly from Pyro, their bodies enveloped in billowing flames. The Zenithian vessels were larger, less sophisticated looking, but had superior shielding and armament. Less than five minutes later gunfire spit out at the invaders, as a deluge of Njartian RRCs ("Repidez Repoz Culs", Rapid Response Vessels) came at them, weapons blazing.

"Strike back!" The Flameoid Point Man shouted. Waves of CR (Condensed Radiation), Switzgerald missiles, and RPGS began riveting to and fro. Many ships burst into a shower of white-hot atoms. The much larger Flameoid fleet obliterated five RRCs before the remainder turned back. Once the small bluish space craft had vanished, the Flameoid commander gave the order to engage the planet surface. The Flameoid void-ships penetrated the cloudy atmosphere first, followed by their Zenithian counterparts. The sounds of CR fire ignited once again....

* * *

King Woddner was furious and justly so. "Damn Qwerty and all his filthy followers! He's betrayed us!" He observed the flutter of attendants as they attempted to follow his orders. "Can you get Qwerty on communication?" Stress lines were apparent on his face and his robes were ruffled, as he had had no time for pleasantries when roused from his deep slumber.

Ja'Ceb stood at attention, holding his CR cannon unflinchingly. He tried to remain stoic, but the fear ate through to manifest in his expression. He cast a sidelong glance at Alpha, who showed grave concern.

"Your Highness," shouted a house servant. "We have Qwerty on Com-1! Secure channel." His voice was extremely shaky as he worked the controls. Sweat rolled down his face in a noticeable stream as he acknowledged his king's command to open the channel.

A face submerged in flame materialized on the royal view-screen. The look on the face was of feigned incredulity. "Hello. This is the Overseer Sebastien Qwerty." He acted as though he was utterly blameless.

Woddner came forward in his throne, his eyes quivering with anger. His face was a sickly cranberry hue. "Qwerty!" The King ejected the words like phlegm. "You are a despicable traitor! We have an agreement..."

Ever charming, the Overseer smiled as though it all made sense to him now. "Ah your Lordship, I am sorry. Our objectives here in Laleth have changed dramatically in the past few years. Power in the Milky Way, as you call it, is shifting. As of thirteen hours ago, the Laleth Treaty became void and irrelevant."

The King's eyes did not widen, simply sunk with acceptance of what he had known all along. He spoke the words as though they ground into his chest: "The rest of the Shadowway will retaliate...."

The Overseer licked his lips with his long serpentine tongue, narrowing his red eyes. "Yes. And the new Pyro-Zenith Alliance is prepared to meet them. You don't seem to understand, Samuel. Time is passed...and with time passed comes change. Out with the decrepit, in with the young and sinuous." He brought his face even closer to the view-screen, so his opponent could see the black spider-like veins on his eyeballs. "Ready your populace for occupation." With that, Qwerty cut the transfer and the screen went dead black.

The chamber was overcome by an uncharacteristic silence, shocked that even the Flameoids could be so vindictive. Finally King Woddner broke the wistful lull. "We cannot wait for the Shadowway.... We need to mount some kind of defense. Do something!"

Ja'Ceb cleared his throat, spoke in his clear concise manner. "Sir, if I may?...This may sound a bit desperate, but I believe it is such a time. The CR generators that provide our power is extremely flammable. I suggest we set the surrounding forests and fields ablaze, cutting off any attack on the palaces."

Alpha gasped, horrified by the destruction such measures would cause. "*Burn down* the forests? But Ja'Ceb, that's Njartis' crowning feature. And think

of..." She realized that her argument was hopeless and discontinued.

King Woddner seemed to be highly impressed. *Perhaps I have misjudged this man....* He scratched his glistening forehead. "Would this ensure our palaces are untouched?"

Ja'Ceb flashed a meaningful glance at Alpha, telling her that he understood how she felt. "I am sorry it has come to this, but I do believe it would prevent any direct assault on our facilities here in Wellington Cove. Their vessels are obviously not designed for atmospheric flight. They are landing the ships and grouping outside the town. Making the woods impassible would cut them off from us completely."

It did not take more than a heartbeat for Woddner to come to a decision. "Do It." Surprising his daughter Alpha, the King leaped from his throne and stalked toward her. He gently took her arm and pulled her toward the exit. "I want you in the bomb cellar. Just in case our efforts here fail."

"No, Daddy!" Alpha cried, pulling her arm from her father's grasp. She drew her irritation from a deep-seated well that had been added to gradually over the years. "No! I want to stay up here, where the action is. I refuse to be buried away in some hole."

Ja'Ceb whispered quietly, "It would be for the best, Alpha."

Turning toward the soldier's voice, King Woddner ordered, "I want you to personally oversee the detonation of the CR Generators. Immediately." He grabbed his daughter's meager arm once more, and pointed out into the corridor. "You heard your lover. It *is* for the best."

Alpha stared at Ja'Ceb, who came over to give her a firm hug. "Nothing will happen to me. I'm absolutely certain." As Alpha gave in finally and followed her personal guards to safety, Ja'Ceb called out, "I'll be back to see you before you even know I'm gone!" He did not acknowledge the King's displeased glower, but pretended he did not notice as he departed the homely chamber.

* * *

It took no more than eleven minutes to overload the circuitry within the generator. There was a burst of blue-green gas as the intricate machinery shorted and caught fire. The voracious fireball swept across the field in seconds, then the lush forest. Monstrous old trees crackled and shriveled under the incomprehensible heat as shrubbery and fauna were swallowed instantly.

When the enemy forces arrived at the edge of Wellington Cove, barely able to see even the tip of the palaces above the forest, the turquoise blaze had become an impenetrable blurred barrier. The sizable group stopped in their tracks to survey the surprise interference.

Flameoids of course survived intense heat and were composed partially of smoldering embers, but a CR fire was so destructive it was impassible even to them. The surly Flameoid Point Man let out an aggravated cry and turned to face his troops. "Search for a way through. If we are unable to find one regroup here and we will set out to finish off the remainder of the planet. We must prevent them from erecting any more barricades. Set out!"

Like a colony of ants, the troops dispersed. Noticeably, however, the humans stayed in a group to themselves. Apparently they were not overly fussy on mingling with the Flameoids.

Unable to locate a maneuverable route into the capital city, the enemy set out to obliterate the remainder of the planet. Entire villages were razed, piece by piece, and not one life was spared. Viewed from above, Njartis was shimmering with the weapons fire. Combined with the deliberately set blaze, the entire world had been reduced to ashes. Nothing was left of the once magnificent forests, not even a stump, but the blackened charcoal landscape that went on as far as the eye could see. The heart of the world lay untouched however, near the center. It rose triumphantly but without pride beyond the rising smoke.

The enemy expedition had returned to their space craft in order to meet the Shadoway response team that was just arriving. The Galactic Command Craft hovered above the dying world, sent to rescue the Njartian royal family.

* * *

It seemed like hours had passed before the cellar door opened, admitting light. Alpha looked up, sitting on the stone cold floor, and smiled. The outline of a tall thin man blocked the light momentarily and descended the staircase. Up close she could see he was quite shaken, his hair heavy with perspiration. "What's going on, Ja'Ceb?"

He took a deep breath and put his hand on the princess's shoulder. "It's looking pretty bad. The Shadoway armada has arrived, but right now they're at a standoff. A third wave of Flameoid vessels appeared out of nowhere for a second, then vanished...into the vacuum." He did not have to tell her that her beloved forests were decimated. "We know they are there nonetheless...and who can say

that there isn't more?" He cut himself short, squeezed her shoulder tighter. "The palace is evacuating into the GCC. It's time we catch up with them."

Alpha's eyes brightened. "My father trusted you?"

Ja'Ceb's smile vanished and he removed his warm hand. "King Woddner is at the top of the stairs." He nodded roughly in that direction. He moved forward, then back again. "Come on." He meant well, but to the princess his words were like icepicks.

In actuality, Alpha did not want to be anywhere in proximity to her father. But what choice did she have? She could not stay on Njartis and die? Or worse — become a Flameoid or Zenithian prisoner. So she followed Ja'Ceb to the top of the stairs, letting loose all her doubts for now in a sea of desperate hope.

*Love is greater than the Elysian Fields. Unfortunately, not
all of us are lucky enough to experience it.*

- Carleton Kane

Captain Conan Switzgerald sat in his private suite during his few hours off. In his hands was a thick and dog-eared journal, which he had penned during the Crude War almost three centuries prior. He grinned, slipping into reverie whenever he came across a particularly colorful entry.

Switzgerald was an intellectual, but he was also very impatient. He sat still long enough to scribble the reports that were required of him, but he longed to complete further memoirs. *Maybe someday, when I've mellowed a bit with age....* He could not seriously see himself retiring any time soon, although his decades of service entitled him to do so.

The standard Shadow life expectancy was one-hundred and fifty years. Conan had lived more than double that, at the ripe age of three-hundred and three. The transcendental Lord Damon had done something to him all those years ago...something that had greatly enhanced his longevity. Plus, he ingested the ADB stimulant daily, a conglomeration of thousands of chemicals that provided great strength. To this day Switzgerald wondered whether or not Lord Damon had been a god, as he had claimed. Clenching his large fist, he decided that whatever he had or had not been, Lord Damon had possessed incredible powers.

Lost deep in contemplation, it took several moments before Conan noticed the insistent and deliberate coughing sounds coming from the doorway. Turning, he saw a messenger whose face spoke of grave news. "Yes? What tidings do you bring?"

The man, dressed in Shadoway livery, came forward. "Captain...I regret to inform you that the Flameoid Empire has attacked and occupied several fringe colonies, including Njartis. In conjunction with the Zenith Security Armada, Overseer Sebastian Qwerty has declared war on the Shadoway. Our response team is currently at a stand-off near the space border."

Conan's eyes widened, revealing that this was a surprise even to him. He had fortified defenses in the Empire steadily during the past few years, but out of an entirely different fear. He had expected trouble with the previously nomadic Zenith, but not Qwerty.... *This should come as a lesson that no one and nothing is*

worthy of our trust...maybe not even ourselves. A tactical decision came to his mind. "Tell our forces to pull back and make a temporary base at Ceres II. Our work there has just begun, but at least it will provide some building blocks. Switzgerald observed as the stick-thin man bowed and slunk out into the hall, resisting a desire to kill the messenger.

Thanks to his handiwork, the Empire should be able to maintain its borders. But for how long? And what kinds of weapons did the Flameoids have in their depository? Thoughts such as these swirled through the Captain's ever-busy mind. It would be necessary to halt all conspiracies against the Emperor's life, at least for the present. To ensure victory Switzgerald's focus would need to be laser-sharp.

* * *

An emergency meeting was held in the conference room. Emperor Cliff II was perched over the round table like a stuffed mannequin, listening. He was inexperienced in warfare and needed to learn from his so-called "underlings".

Lieutenant Leechon was the man directly beneath Switzgerald. His head was round and sinewy, just like the rest of his body. He had thick tanned skin and piercing blue eyes that sat rigid in the sockets but never went dull. Leechon was well-liked in the Shadoway legions, for both his camaraderie and dead-on training tactics. Speaking in a guttural voice, he said, "We must assume that Qwerty's main plan is to make his way here, to Iota 7."

"I would tend to agree," Switzgerald returned, slightly annoyed that he had not been able to point that out first. "But we need to begin thinking how we can retake Njartis, Oepon, Kela A and the other colonies. Meanwhile, we can institute measures to secure the capital."

Lieutenant Leechon continued calmly as if he had not heard his superior's comments. "I suggest we reinstitute Project Atlantis — but on an interplanetary scale. We can erect missile launching platforms on the moons of key planets throughout the Empire."

Seeing the potential, Conan joined in immediately. "Yes, and we should continue to fortify outposts like Ceres II...and Taed." He nodded, tapping his fingers against the table. "We should start with our own satellites, Atlantis and Plymo."

"On both moons?" said Cliff II, then answered his own question. "Yes...yes...we should convert both into missile platforms."

Leechon smiled at his Emperor, revealing pearl-white teeth. His lapel was adorned by the Shadoway crest — a black snake coiled around a bone amid a crimson background — and his breast shone with enough medals to rival Switzgerald's. He had been in the service for seventy years, dating backing to the rule of Eugene Gildran.

The Emperor did not smile back, but acknowledged the lieutenant with a curt nod. He said, "I want you, Leechon, to prepare the first division for combat, should Qwerty come knocking at our door. Can you guarantee me they will fight with every ounce of strength in their bodies — for the Empire?"

"That is of a certainty, Your Highness," Leechon assured him. Conan was not so convinced. That they were strong in numbers there was no doubt. But Conan knew that the Shadoway armed forces were nothing like they had been during the last war.

Faith Switzgerald appeared at the entranceway, her demeanor unaffected by the dire turn of events. "I've met the Njartian royal family. They are waiting for you, Your Highness."

"Thank You, Faith," both Conan and the Emperor said in unison. Cliff II seemed both embarrassed and aggravated, but he chose to disregard the incident and rose toward the hallway.

As he followed his superior, Conan contemplated the redundancy of history. *All this happening all over again....* There had been a time when he had lusted for war and the free reign on dark emotions it had provided. But that had been over two centuries ago and somehow his current perspective did not hold up to the past.

Still...there was a particular magnetism to the ideal of fighting yet again, especially since it provided the chance to fully obliterate humanity. There could be no sensation greater, he felt, than getting even with an ancient rival.

I hold there is no greater moment than when you realize nothing matters —and that nothing in this universe ever will.

- Sykehelyla,
The Eccentric Philosopher

The whole Njartian delegation received lodging within the Shadoway Citadel. The rooms were well-lit and spacious, and the furnishings were magnificent. Fully customizable lighting apparatus and beds gave it all an assuring sugary coat. But none of it in the end felt at all like home.

"You know it's funny," whispered Alpha, before retiring the first night. "For years and years I imagined setting foot off Njartis and being free from my father's clutches. Now, though...I long to see the palace and my bedchamber...."

At Alpha's insistence Ja'Ceb and the princess had been given a room to themselves. Although the King was across the hall, it allowed them a privacy they had long desired, a temporary retreat from the vindictive universe. If only it could have come with better times....

Ja'Ceb, like his consort, did not comprehend the world's goalless malevolence. But he was able to reach into their collective cauldron of spirituality for consolation. "The tide will turn," he said, with a smile, coming to comfort his love. He was quoting from a poem he had just written in a small brown notebook. It was filled with many years' worth of verses, one of the few possessions he had saved. Putting an arm around her and bringing his face close to Alpha's, he whispered the rest of the poem:

*"I call it turn of the tide
Retribution for the hard life,
A taste of deceit for those that lie,
A chance for the poor to see a high-rise,
And a chance to bring directly to us what we spy;
I call it turn of the tide,
A chance for the down-trodden to shoot into the sky,
An utter reversal,
Satan's turn to cry,
A glimpse of what it's like for the fall guy,
And to bring directly to us what we spy."*

As Ja'Ceb spoke the final words, his voice became lower and he drew his face closer to the princess', until their lips met. The young man, still in uniform, pushed her gently down onto the surface of the bed and crawled on top of her.

Mouth open and exhaling slowly, Alpha whispered, "Beautiful." But Ja'Ceb did not know whether she was referring to him or the poem and he did not bother to ask. Blithely he lifted the princess' extravagant pink skirt. She did not impede it in the least, but spread her arms out over the bedsheets, and prepared to learn to fly....

The following morning, the couple awoke to see a teenage girl staring at them inquisitively. She was rather benign-looking, with soft lily skin and black hair done up in pigtails. Blinking, Alpha said, "Who are you, may I ask, Young Lady?" She smiled warmly to ensure it was taken the right way.

The girl smiled back, bowed uncertainly. "I am Faith Switzgerald, Ma'am. I was curious...and...I wanted to come welcome you to the Citadel and to our world." She turned her attention on Ja'Ceb, who was already sitting up.

Alpha nodded and spoke pleasantly. "That is so sweet. Thank you, Faith." She recognized the surname Switzgerald as one of high importance within the Empire. However, her pleasantness was entirely genuine. "This dark and mysterious man beside me is Ja'Ceb. He is...my guardian of sorts."

"Yes," added Ja'Ceb. "I am my own arm of the law among us. But you needn't worry...I am more than fair." He put out his hand which the visitor shook readily.

"I am sorry about your home world Njartis," Faith said, looking around the room. "I think you'll like it here on Iota. The environmental differences might take some getting used to, such as the color of the sky."

Alpha glanced back at the window, seeing the purplish maroon-tinged brightness of the strong Iota star. "You've been more than hospitable. And thank you for coming to see us, dear." She paused, contemplating. "In the future you can refer to me as Alpha." The princess did not care for diplomacy or big wheel semantics, but enjoyed being close and personal with her subjects.

"Thank you, Alpha. I will keep your kindness in mind." She seemed to be intelligent and voyeuristic. At least that was the impression she imparted. If circumstances had been different, Alpha would have invited her back to the Njartian Palace.

Just then King Woddner intruded. He was dressed in ostentatious garb that included a maroon robe, flannel top and a long crimson cape. He had allowed his beard to grow in the past while, so it was now long but streamlined. "What is the meaning of this gathering?" he demanded, hands on hips. He spoke in his usual condescending manner.

Faith Switzgerald bowed low in respect. "Your Highness. I did not mean to cause a disturbance. I am truly sorry if I —"

"Yes, yes, " he abruptly interrupted, "I do not need to hear *that* as of now. Simply answer the question —"

Now it was Alpha's turn to cut him off. "Father," she said with a deliberate lack of tone, "You should not be so inhospitable to our guest. This is Faith, the daughter of Captain Conan Switzgerald."

The King was caught off guard and attempted to cover it up. "I will keep that in mind. But now I believe it would best if we granted our death Faith leave so as we get down to some private and important matters." He raised an eyebrow, looking sidelong at all parties.

After bowing once more, Faith departed, her pigtails bouncing just slightly. Alpha called out goodbye, but it was too late. The girl was already way beyond hearing range.

Alpha sighed, irritated, and looked up at her father. "Was that really necessary, Father?"

"Yes I believe it was. Before I inquire as to how went the night, I'd like to let you know that there are crucial decisions on the verge of being made." His hands were still on his hips, and he frowned at the couple in their bed.

"The night went fine," Alpha replied, her arm around Ja'Ceb's thin neck. "What decisions are being made?"

The King appeared relieved that she had resigned to talk business. "The Shadoway has offered us disaster relief, either in liquid or hard form. One option is to relocate to a new planet far from the Flameoid border and start a new life for ourselves."

"That sounds all right, Your Highness," Ja'Ceb pointed out.

"Indeed it does." King Woddner turned toward the door, then glanced back. I expect you to meet me in one hour outside the Citadel. We are going to enjoy an afternoon in the gardens with our generous hosts. You wouldn't want to offend anyone."

Alpha watched until he was gone and turned to Ja'Ceb. "I dream of the day when I will be free from that foolish old fossil." She crossed her arms and allowed herself to sink into the massive pillow.

Ja'Ceb sighed. "He has your best interests at heart...even if his methods are a bit questionable." He finished donning his uniform and adjusted the buttons at the collar. "It's best we get ready. He's right that we don't want to offend His Royal Majesty."

Alpha did not seem to be very impressed, although she agreed with the assessment. "I know, but it's not like we need any more meetings with the dignitaries. I'm waiting to get into the driver's seat of my life...and right now it looks like the vehicle is on a crash course."

*Opposition is ejected from the battle,
Like lint from a pocket;
Only the bystanders remain,
Like a guerdon of sitting of ducks*

- Carleton Kane,
collected poems

She would not have revealed it to her illustrious father, but Faith felt superior to Conan in more or less all respects. She was outstandingly intelligent and knew in her heart that such pomposity was irrational, but still she could not shake the feeling. *I love you, Father, but compared to me you are a mere aspirant.* As she walked down the dim-lit corridors of the Citadel, she wondered what she would do if she had the reach of an Empress. *Someday...sooner than later....*

The events precipitated by the illicit hand of Sebastien Qwerty did not seem at all logical to her. The Overseer's rule encompassed a thousand planets at least and millions upon millions of his citizen's lives. It seemed foolish to journey three quarters of the way across the galaxy to annex a foreign empire. Why couldn't he have been content with his own territory? Faith estimated this war would reign supreme hell for a while, then subside slightly to drag on for decades.

Faith dreamed how she would respond to Qwerty's blatant betrayal. Certainly she would have handled things far better than the dolt of an Emperor Cliff the Second. Even her father would have been better prepared for an enemy such as this one....

The issue Faith had with her father was that his feet were never planted firmly in the so fertile ground of reality. Instead, the Captain of the Guard remained aloof, smug with his false potency. The man had never taken a wife, but fathered several children with various concubines. He had only kept Faith under his care to secure his image. There was no fatherly affection, just expectations and pretense.

As a girl, she had been forced to listen to Conan's rants about the superiority of their race, particularly when compared to the feral humans that had dominated Earth. Faith had never visited Earth, but she had often imagined how it would feel to stroll its grounds. To her there was no doubt that the Shadowway was degrading. Someone had to rise to the occasion, become the new visionary....Some one like herself, maybe....

She was always annoyed by the swaggering superiority of others and a lack of opportunity to display her true abilities. Her nineteen and a half years had been marked by ceaseless upset and one disaster after the other. The way the present crisis was being handled was laughable.

"Miss Switzgerald, if I may —" A soft voice spoke next to her ear. She whirled to face the man, a Lieutenant Ero Yake, a younger member of the Emperor's guard. His lips were stretched into a burlesque smile, which made him all the more suspicious. The Lieutenant did not wait to continue. "An emergency meeting has been called for the senior officials, one half hour from now. Your presence is specifically requested...."

She nodded, electing to say nothing to this man she had grown to despise. Many years ago, Ero Yake endeavored to make her his lover. Faith had explicitly declined, on more than one occasion, but the man had an apparently very thin ego. It was not until she involved Lieutenant Benjamin Leechon that Yake accepted her answer as final.

In most circumstances Yake would no longer be around, but the Emperor had taken a liking to him for some bizarre reason. It was not so surprising, since the Emperor was the type to fall for false bonhomie.

"I've got the message, Eko and I'll be there," she said, turning away. She did not wish to have any further transfer him, so she set off in the opposite direction. Wondering why an emergency convention had been called, all sorts of images came to her mind. Had the Flameoids attacked — conquered? — another world? She doubted there was any direct threat to their world, since there was so much defense between Iota 7 and the enemy empire.

The corridor seemed to stretch on for miles and she quickened her pace. She passed the ornate chapel, not even pausing to look at the exaggerated Lord Damon effigy. Legend and time had distorted his image, but the attitude was still the same. Faith decided she would take a rest for her remaining twenty minutes and then head for the assembly chamber.

Entering her chamber, she sighed contentedly at the peace it provided. She set an alarm, just in case she became too comfortable and drifted away. Of all the Citadel, this was her favored spot, the only place where she could truly be alone to *think*. No one had ever shared her bed and she did not foresee that anyone soon would, although she longed for the right person.... An intellectual like herself would fit the bill, but such men were hard to find at present.

She near-literally fell onto her bed and was consumed by the cool pillows...

* * *

She opened her eyes to the sound of the alarm, not disoriented for a second. Faith jumped from the bed and smoothed the wrinkles out of her conservative hoop skirt. She was not a shallow girl, but she understood how she needed to appear to the public. Although she had her issues with him, she made certain she met her father's expectations.

The halls were devoid of life as she made her way to the Emperor's meeting. Everyone must have already been there. Half-running, she came to the appropriate doorway and scuttled inside without knocking. *Why knock when you belong inside?* She took a seat opposite to her father, who would have commented on her tardiness, had the Emperor not been speaking.

"Since you are just arriving," Cliff said upon seeing her, "You should know that the entire Lebensraum system is now under Flameoid jurisdiction. News came of it this morning." He seemed highly annoyed, as if this predicament was designed solely to destroy his comfort.

"That's the planets Psi-Chi and Taed, am I right, Sir?" Faith wrinkled her brow. "But how did it happen? We had them in a bottleneck...."

The Emperor sighed with impatience, not so much at her as at the situation. "Qwerty's using a technology called *Halol Eghnit*, something that is completely new to us. It makes their ships imperceptible to our eyes, our ears, smell, touch. Our radar can't pick it up, of course. A third division slipped right past our damned defenses. We didn't realize any trouble until Lebensraum was under siege. "

Rather relaxed, Lieutenant Leechon commented, "We did not have a chance to make the moons battle-ready. They saw that and attacked." His hands were folded neatly and he sat back, relaxed considering the goings-on.

"We've got to eliminate vulnerabilities before Qwerty can take advantage," Faith replied quickly.

"Revettom and Veronica's moons are all ready to go," Leechon said without any particular emphasis. " Smiling, he separated his hands. "The same for almost all the worlds in the First Quadrant, except Pajarr and Honlu."

"What about heat?" Faith asked. She put her hands on the polished tabletop. "Could we pick up the ships with heat sensors?"

"No, that doesn't work either," the Emperor replied gravely. The bags underneath his quivering eyes were quite apparent. It seemed to Faith that Cliff II had aged years since the advent of war. "Now, we don't even know how the technology achieves its cloak. But I want you to study it, Faith...like you have in the past, and come up with countermeasures."

Faith knew she would likely see things that others would miss or brush off as irrelevant. The problem was that she had nearly nothing to work with. She thought carefully and whispered, "Your Majesty, I will need more to work from. I don't have enough to make *any* calculations. "

"Extrapolate," her father ordered harshly, from his perch across the table. His eyes were distant, as though his thoughts transcended the here and now.

"No — I have a better idea," countered Leechon, not even looking at Switzgerald. "Faith and I could travel to the Ver system and settle in on Veronica, almost certainly the Flameoids' next target. I can guarantee you victory and that no harm will come to Faith. But she would have an opportunity to see the Halo-void ship up close. We could even capture one for examination."

Conan jumped forward in his seat, both pleased and upset. His eyes darted back and forth, from his daughter to Leechon to the Cliff II. "How can you be sure she will *not* be harmed?" he hissed.

Leechon observed his commanding officer with a curious eye. "Sir...all six of the system's moons have been converted already. That is not to mention the special forces that would accompany us. She would be perfectly safe, not even close to the battle, in the GCC."

Faith stared her father down tellingly. *I don't want you to accompany me. I will have to fend for myself this time.* Instead of anger, her father actually showed a grumbling acceptance. "Even you have to agree that the GCC is practically indestructible," she said aloud. His subdued gaze told her all that she need to know.

"Anyway, it is my order that she go to Veronica and gather the inside story on the Flameoids' key advantage." The Emperor had been grandstanded enough. "In a time of war, every one must take risk."

However, Faith was not thinking about the risk at all. She was ecstatic

that she would escape from her father's sphere of influence, even if just for a few weeks. It would be her first chance ever to flower and make her mark on the empire.

*"When will it stop?" they cry,
 To which Death responds, "At the end of time";
 This is correct, you see,
 As without Death there is no life;
 and without life there is no Death;*

Thus the carnage continues....

*- Carleton Kane,
 collected poems*

For most of his adolescence, King Woddner had known nothing but turmoil. His father, Gheng Lo, had been a corrupt and amoral businessman on Lakner, a small and crude but life-supporting satellite of Njartis. Through adroit capital spending, Ghen Lo was able to make his family into one of the capitalist elite. Shortly thereafter, the cold and distant man died, surrendering his fortune to his only son.

After enduring decades of his parents' griping about his family's loss of renown (namely, the Shadoway throne), Samuel Woddner VI had purchased the relatively untouched world of Njartis. Compared to a lot of planetoids like Iota 7 and Ceres II, he had chosen a lush haven. But he would never forget the pain of his early years, however much it became buried in the past. The birth of his daughter Alpha had been brought him happiness beyond his wildest dreams, but he did not wish to spoil her with kindness. He cared for her enough that he did not want her to follow the path of his forefathers. The Woddners' status in the Shadoway must not slip through their fingers again.

Now the beautiful Njartis was gone, existing in memory alone. Though they were still nobles, he *had* lost a lot of what he had intended to leave for his daughter. Frowning, he contemplated this, and decided he would speak to her pronto. *This Ja'Ceb seems to be a noble man, but can he be trusted to protect our fortunes?* Biting his withered lip, Woddner sorted out his reservations about the young soldier. *Ja'Ceb...does he really have the heart of a warrior? Can he provide everything needed of him?* Unsettled, he realized he did not have the answers.

When the door to her chambers opened, Alpha laid back in her bed to portray she had been resting. Looking up, she whispered, "Hello, Father." There was an indifference in her tone that her father could not detect.

"Hello, Alpha," he said rather pleasantly. One eye locked onto Ja'Ceb, however, who occupied the space on the bed right next to the princess. "How are you this morning?"

"All right," Alpha replied without much spirit. "The best I could be...*here*." With this, she looked around at the surrounding walls. She bit her lower lip, much like her father did.

"Well, there aren't any meetings scheduled for today," the King let them know, "so you can enjoy your day...together...." He said the word as though it had a negative connotation.

Ja'Ceb put a hand on her shoulder for consolation, but it did not contain Alpha's reaction. "You don't need to blacklist all of my friends and everyone else!" she cried. "I love Ja'Ceb and he loves me! There isn't any grounds for your contempt."

Woddner thought for a moment and shook his head from side to side. "You aren't getting it. I'm only trying to protect you. And make you into a reckoned leader. You've been resisting from the outset, which saddens me. There are no grounds for your hostility." He folded his arms together, as much to conceal his shaking as to appear stern.

"*Hostility!*" Alpha raised her eyebrows in amazement. "You're one to be speaking of hostility!" She felt Ja'Ceb patting her shoulder and just flashed him an acknowledging half-smile. "Give me one good strike against Ja'Ceb."

"That's all right, Princess," Ja'Ceb cut in finally. He smiled to reveal pearl-white teeth. "The King is only looking out for your best interests." He sat up and grabbed his underclothes from the bedstand.

"Precisely," agreed Woddner, uncrossing his arms. "I..." He struggled with the words, but made sure he got them out. "...love you, too, Alpha — no matter what. I don't think you understand how important you are to me."

As still as an effigy, Alpha was not so quick to declare her feelings. But with an insistent nudge from Ja'Ceb, she looked into her father's face and saw truth as well as a benignity she had never before noticed. She fumbled with her tongue a bit, then whispered, "I love you, Father."

The old King grinned, assuaged by the words he had never realized he wanted to hear. He said pleasantly, "You know what....? Why don't you two come down to the mess hall...and we can have breakfast...together?" With nods from his

daughter and her lover, Woddner moved to the exit. He donned his typical suave demeanor before going out. Turning back for a second: "I'll see you down there, then."

Once the King had departed and his footsteps could no longer be heard, Ja'Ceb hugged Alpha. "There we are, Princess....like I told you! That wasn't so bad after all, hmmm?"

Grinning, she returned the hug. "No...it wasn't. I didn't know father actually cared. If I had...maybe things could have been different." She sat up, glancing behind her to see the golden glow that streamed through the curtains.

"Now you can change things," Ja'Ceb assured her, standing tall beside the bed. He pinned something to his standard dark red Njartian uniform. "Change things forever...."

An explosion of gunfire ripped through the hallways outside the door. Alpha screamed, jumping. Her gaze darted around, from Ja'Ceb to the doorway. Ja'Ceb grabbed his CR pistol in his tight and agile grip. He moved toward the princess and pointed toward the lavatory. "You go in there and lock the door. I'll protect you."

Alpha grabbed Ja'Ceb by the collar of his uniform, staring into his determined eyes. "I don't want anything to happen to you! What —"

He put a finger gently against her lips and she stopped mid-sentence. "I'll be okay. But your safety is paramount, so you must hide." He nodded his head in the direction of the lavatory.

More gunfire sounded in the corridor, along with a shrill scream. Running...many sets of feet. Another round of what was most likely CR fire. There was a moan precipitated by a loud thud and finally an eerie silence.

Ja'Ceb cracked the door open, peeked out, and made his way into the hall. Weapons fire was heard again, farther away. Alpha stared after him with trembling eyes, before closing the bathroom door.

About half a minute had gone by when Ja'Ceb walked back into the room. His expression was unreadable and he still held his pistol with tautness. He called for Alpha quietly and she came out. He hung his head sorrowfully and opened his mouth.

Before Ja'Ceb could say anything, Alpha said, "Something very bad has

happened. What...?" Her wide blue eyes met his.

"Yes," he whispered, gulping a knot in his throat. "Your father has been killed."

"My father...has been killed?" Conflicting emotions flooded into her mind as her face went ghostly white. "How — who —"

"There's no time," Ja'Ceb said, patting her on the back. "I'm sorry. But something big is going down. I've got to get you out of here — I promised your father." Before she could ask him what he meant, Ja'Ceb opened the door and checked the way. "It's clear — so far. Stay behind me, so if anyone gets shot, it'll be me."

They stepped over the remnants of the two sentries that had been posted outside the door. Condensed Radiation had burned them beyond recognition, into blackened meat. To protect the Princess and her consort they had not stood a chance.

"This must be Qwerty's doing," Alpha hissed in a voice that was barely audible. She stayed close to Ja'Ceb's back, who only nodded at the comment. Obviously, he thought so too and had no more to add. *Now they've taken away an ally I never knew I had.* All her life, she had thought of her father as an adversary, a lock that kept her from being free. *Although I never thought I would, I miss him.*

Further down the hall was the bloodied body of King Woddner, slumped lifelessly against the wall where he had fallen. A hole was burned through his chest, leaving the surrounding clothes in tatters. The face was slightly singed, but otherwise the same as it had always been. The eyes were in separate directions, though, showing an indignity that he would never have in life.

The beginnings of tears formed in the corners of Alpha's eyes, but she was pulled forward by her guardian. "I'm really sorry, but there's no time!" he commanded. "Come on!" Trusting him, she followed him around the corner, not even taking a last look at her father.

The corridor ahead seemed much longer and windier than it actually was. Every doorway was a possible hiding spot, from which an assassin could leap forward. Smashed lights flickered on and off, making the various silhouettes move eerily. Gunfire sounded just barely audible in the distance.

Ja'Ceb cocked an ear toward the first room, listening for the sounds of footsteps or breathing, anything that would give a lurker away. He took shallow

and almost silent breaths, made sure Alpha was close enough by. Satisfied, he moved on, pausing before the next door. He always had his pistol ready for use, in an immovable grip. He moved on to the next doorway, and the next and the next, until they came to the end of the hall. There he stiffened. "There's some one out there." He peeked around the corner. "Looks like it was insider attack. Members of the Shadoway guard are walking out of the throne room...carrying the Emperor's carcass."

Alpha did not know what to say and simply opened her mouth. Finally she said, "Are they impersonators?"

Ja'Ceb half-turned his face to her. "No...I don't think so. Qwerty has moles within the Shadoway itself." He said only what was important and shut his mouth. A moment later: "There's too many of them here. We'll have to go another way." He turned in the opposite direction, grabbing Alpha's slender hand.

There was a hall to the left that led in the opposite direction. She stared ahead, finally realizing where Ja'Ceb was headed. "Conan Switzgerald...how do you know he'll be down there?" She gulped the knot that was taking over her throat and stared at him with quivering eyes.

"I don't for certain," he whispered, "but I have a hunch that he and the other loyalists are there." He began in that direction, letting go of Alpha slowly. There was no need to question Switzgerald's loyalties, as he had been captain of the Emperor's guard for the past two centuries.

There was the sound of explosions and they knew instantly that the intruders had set off massive bombs throughout the complex. Shouting as well as the rumbling of walls caving in followed them down the hallway. *How did they do such a thorough job?* Alpha wondered. The Shadoway Citadel was supposed to be the most secured area in the empire. Obviously, that did not speak much for the Shadoway's security.

The sounds of footsteps preceded the appearance of two soldiers. Alpha and Ja'Ceb slipped into a convenient dark passageway, huddling against the hard cement wall. The chatting troops passed by without noticing them, moving stiffly.

"Leechon's away on Veronica with Faith Switzgerald," one of them said quietly, a bit of derision in his voice.

"Mmmm," mumbled the other. "Faith...there's a pretty little lady. I wish it was me instead of Leechon." The guards chuckled in stereo. "But he'll be back soon, anyway, after he *takes care of her*." They laughed again in their snarly

disrespectful tone.

Ja'Ceb and Alpha exchanged a mutual look of understanding. Leechon was one of the highestlieutenants in the Shadoway corps, second only to Switzgerald. It was no surprise, then, that this rebellion had been so successful. Ja'Ceb wished the traitor lieutenant was in front of him, so he could tear out his black heart.

Wide-eyed, Alpha thought more about Faith Switzgerald. She had met the girl not long ago, and they had connected to her surprise. It was horrifying that she was now in the clutches of a turncoat, who could be planning to do anything under the stars to her.

Once the soldiers' chattering had gone out of earshot, Ja'Ceb and Alpha prepared to move on. However, a doorway opened to their left and a figure appeared holding onto a sleek and surely lethal weapon. A growl emerged from the silhouette, who stood in a bath of yellow light: "Who are you? Are you on the side of the traitors?" It was the sharp and interrogative growl of Conan Switzgerald.

"No!" Ja'Ceb said. "We are members of the Njartian delegation. We're on your side, sir!" He was desperate to preserve the princess's life.

Conan Switzgerald looked them over suspiciously, then receded into the room. Dozens of other soldiers could be seen in side, sweat and nervousness upon their faces. "All right," he said, "you can come in here." He motioned them inside.

As they followed the Captain, Ja'Ceb closed the door and whispered, "I feel obligated to tell you, Sir, that Lieutenant Leechon..."

Abruptly, Conan cut him off. "Yes, I know, he is the ringleader of this circus. As far as we can tell, at least six of our higher officers are in on it. We know that much, at least."

"He's taken your daughter!" Alpha shouted, unable to contain herself. She didn't seem to realize the error in her outburst.

Conan simply nodded and whispered, "I know. It was all part of his cowardly scheme." He hissed the final words, then straightened himself for the benefit of his troops. He stood in front of them, called out over the dissipating chatter: "We have here the Princess of Njartis and a member of her guard." He pointed his CR pistol at the direction of the crowd, as if he might shoot. "What is

your name, soldier?"

Ja'Ceb squared his ample shoulders, tried to look composed. "Ja'Ceb the Warrior." Alpha was surprised he had dropped his surname. Was he abandoning everything he had left behind? His voice cracked as he spoke. "My family...was lost on Njartis. All of them. So I no longer have a surname."

Conan glared at him with a flare in his eyes. "Very well, Ja'Ceb, we will call you the Warrior." He nodded with deliberate slowness. "And you Alpha, now that your father is dead — you are the new Queen."

Queen? Alpha paled as the realization struck her. *But I've no planet to rule! And I'm not ready!* Then she realized that probably few people are. *How I can be the Queen when we have no world?*

Conan continued to nod, as if reading her mind. "You will be the leader of your people. There's no one else that could do better. You *will* be a Queen without a planet, at least for now. But a good leader doesn't need anything, just a voice." He paused, shifting his weapon in his hands. "And maybe some one to protect her. That's where your Warrior comes in, my dear."

Ja'Ceb wrapped his arm around her shoulders, trying to console her. "I know this is tough," he whispered lovingly, "but we'll all pull through." Images of his lost family entered his mind, however....

"First thing's first, however," Conan announced. He raised his pistol to the cheers of everyone in the crowd. "We'll retake the Citadel from the traitors!"

"But there's so many of them, Sir!" Ja'Ceb pointed out.

"Numbers cannot stop us," he returned with scorn. "Look around this room —

at all the devoted Shadow soldiers. They won't be able to put a halt to our aggression. We own this castle!" The group roared in agreement. "But just to assure you, Njartians...once we overtake the control rooms, we can flood the Citadel with deadly Tartazyr gas. That'll quell the tides of the cowardly fools."

"Sir —" Ja'Ceb wished to show his respect to the illustrious captain. "I do not need reassurance. I'm with you all the way — even if it leads to my death." He knew this would bother Alpha, so he squeezed her harder for support.

"You're noble," Conan said, walking through the midst of the assemblage. "And you are brave. Two traits that I cannot put a sufficient value on."

To fight and die for the Shadoway — for the Emperor — that is the measure of a man!"

Ja'Ceb did not completely agree with the Captain's ideals, but he nodded to show his appreciation. "Yes, Sir."

You can't die! Alpha thought with panic. *You're the only one I've got left!* Visions of leadership and great struggle permeated her mind's eye and she took long deep breaths. *I wish you were here now, Father.* The thought was highly ironic.

"Let's go — engage the bastards!" yelled Conan, at the doorway. Looking at the Njartian couple: "We'll fight to the control rooms. Down this hall and passed the security barricades. I know the security codes."

As the group of loyal soldiers cheered, Ja'Ceb hoped he would make it there intact. *At least for Alpha's sake.*

Life: is it not a speck of dirt in the eye of eternity?

- Lord Damon,
His teachings at the Elysian Citadel

The enemy they met was less determined than by all rights should have been expected. No one noticed it offhand, not until the fighting was long over, but it allowed the loyalists a solid victory.

The turncoats did not seem concerned about losing control of the Citadel. They fought viciously, but only to save their lives. Beyond that, they did not expend any effort. They seemed somewhat rag-tag now, as if the assault had only been planned up to this point.

A paltry line stood between Conan's troops and the control wing, one that was quickly cut down. Their coward's cries echoed into the corridor, like a shrill looping signal.

Grudgingly, and after much argument, Ja'Ceb and Alpha had been allowed to accompany him. They stood in the thick of the group, protected by their armor and the mass of human shields surrounding. Ja'Ceb would have likely thrown himself on top of the princess if he saw she was in the line of fire.

Finding a new sense of control in her CR pistol, Alpha aimed with vehemence and squeezed the thin trigger. An unholy hell erupted from the barrel, burning a crater into an enemy soldier's chest. As the man screamed in horrible pain, Alpha felt both sickened and satisfied, moving on to the next target.

One of the men beside Conan in the front line was struck by a missile and fell, reduced to a frothing red mess. The Captain did not pause; he was used to such events and knew to roll with the tide. The way he brandished his weapon lent the feeling that it was his primary appendage. *Wham! Wham! Wham!* He held the trigger down for several seconds, wiping out the remaining traitors in one long burst.

The men that stood at the back, protecting the rest of the division's backs from anyone who might sneak up on them, turned to observe the fall of the final opponents. They mouthed curses, their breath already sucked from them, and fell into the heap that was their twisted and bloodied comrades.

"Good — now let's get in there," shouted Conan, moving along. He led

them into the control wing, where there were rows of beeping machinery.

"Suffocate them!" someone snarled, with all the hatred he could muster. "Gas them!" Others joined in, forming a chorus. "Gas them! Burn their evil little lungs out!"

Conan grinned, hunched over and worked the controls. "I'm releasing Tartazyr gas into all the outer hallways and chambers, including the throne room. They'll all drop in under a minute." He pressed a final button and nodded to himself.

Ja'Ceb glanced at Alpha, then turned to the Captain. "Excuse me, Sir, but are you sure there aren't any innocents out there? I mean — the traitors deserve what they get, but what if some poor servant is caught up out there?"

Conan shrugged, labeling the question unimportant. "Who can say?" he said, looking around at the crowd. "Everyone important is here." Lowering his voice, he growled, "I only wish I could pour poison down Leechon's throat...." His eyes simmered and he fingered his gun.

Ja'Ceb gulped as he realized there was no chance for any stragglers. He looked at Alpha and saw her still glaring at her weapon. She had found power in her ability to take life...but it left an uneasy feeling in her stomach. "Are you all right?" he whispered.

"I think...I think so," she replied, looking out through the thick glass barricades. Purplish gas could be seen curling through the air, growing darker as the concentration grew.

Enemies came running up the hall, but collapsed before they could get within ten meters of the control wing. One vomited, the juices seeping down his chin onto his uniform, and stood trembling for a time before caving in on himself. There was a lot of shouting and cursing which died down quickly.

Conan sighed and shook his head. "Utterly foolish," he grumbled, glancing at Ja'Ceb. "They gave their lives — for what? For a worthless Flameoid dictator! Damn Qwerty and all his kind! Death to the Flameoids! They should all be put down, the traitorous vermin!"

Ja'Ceb sighed, but for a somewhat different cause. He did not wish to see the destruction of every Flameoid, nor that of every species but his own. Unfortunately, the short-sighted Qwerty had compounded the intolerance and xenophobia of shadowkind. It has always been natural to believe that your species

— *your* race — is God's gift to the universe — and that every other is hopelessly inferior. Such apartheid and prejudice had been prevalent since the early days directly after the Creation. Ja'Ceb decided to say nothing.

* * *

It took about an hour for the last of the gas to dissipate, after which everyone returned to their private chambers. Ja'Ceb, Alpha and the rest of the Njartians agreed that it had all probably been an elaborate Flameoid plot to undermine the Empire.

Conan, on the other hand, saw an opportunity to exact his influence. The late Emperor Cliff Gildran II had had no heirs, so the kingdom could not be handed over in a clear-cut way. In the past, the closest blood-tie had been chosen, but in this instance there appeared to be no such person.

The general opinion among the guard was that Conan Switzgerald should be crowned the next emperor. He had served the Shadoway for over two centuries without err, ensured their victory during the Crude Wars, and just now saved the Citadel from enemy takeover. Conan did not play modest or deny the accolades, simply accepted it and displayed his desire to take the throne.

"I would be honored," he said with a great power in his voice, "to sit on the Shadoway throne — after all these years of service!" This was to enormous cheers and applause. He surveyed the audience with enormous eyes. "I can assure that the villain Qwerty and all his horrible minions will see the Shadoway's vengeance! They'll see that we are not a people to be toyed with!"

But before Conan could formally accept the mantle, Njartis Baytor Gildran — who claimed to be a distant nephew of Cliff II — arrived at the celebrations. He acted haughty and self-assured, as though the pomp and honor was intended for him. "I am the rightful heir to the throne!" he cried, almost child-like in his insistence. "I met Cliff the Second on numerous occasions — *I* was his favorite nephew." He didn't bother to explain why, then, he had been so difficult to find.

Conan took an immediate dislike to the gnomish character, especially his pale skin and uncanny coal eyes. His lips were thick and pink and the Captain tended to focus his eyes on them as Baytor spoke.

There was no denying the man's claims, however. The DNA tests were completed within a week, approved and overseen by Baytor himself. He apparently did not trust the scientists to not falsify the records, which greatly spent

Conan's patience. But there was nothing the Captain could do.

I came so close! He thought, still fuming. Unfortunately, though, coming close to a goal does not mean a thing. One can fall away from it, fall away forever....

*The Garden of Eden is a fanciful tale, but no more. Ask yourself:
Could something so beautiful have existed amidst all this blackness and rubble?*

- Ther Von Lecer,
Earth author
(2025 – 2117 AD)

He never once questioned what he was setting in motion. Benjamin Leechon was not such a contemplative man. As soon as he saw a prize, he set out to grab it. That was precisely why he had turned on his former comrades. It was not that he particularly fancied the Flameoids victorious, but it would be satisfying enough to see Switzgerald and all his counterparts' heads ground into the muck.

Leechon relaxed as the spacecraft came into the almost cloudless atmosphere of Veronica. The planet was by all accounts a diamond in the rough. The other eight rocks orbiting the medium yellow sun were stripped of air and barren. But Veronica was something out of a drug-induced fantasy — wild pink terrain with all kinds of exotic plant life and sparkling cerulean seas. Birds with long sinewy bodies swept through the air on beautiful silk-like wings.

"Wow," Faith gasped, taking in the sights. She did not blink as the vessel shuddered into the docking terminal. The nearby village glowed white, like something that had stepped out of a fairy tale. The Ver castle was nothing at all like the Shadowway Citadel — not ostentatious, but snug and homely in design.

It was hard to decipher the expression on Lieutenant Leechon's sunburned face. He shielded his eyes with a beefy hand, looking to his counterpart. "You see that we came here none too soon?"

Faith peered closer at the village and saw it was filled with Shadowway troops. *A travesty to attack something so beautiful*, she thought, sickened. "No, Sir — I think we were just in time. How is the home guard?"

"Veronica has no military to speak of," Leechon said derisively, concealing a smirk. "Just a volunteer force of about sixty-five men and women to protect the castle — which is where we're headed." He began in the direction of the small village, his medals and boots shining in the brilliant sunlight.

Spit polished. Faith knew the lieutenant was all about show — one reason he did not particularly care for this too-cozy planet. *No, not spit polished.*

He would've used the finest cleaner. Whatever was the most expensive.

As they passed the jovial and well-meaning residents, dressed in loose cotton clothes and wide-brimmed straw hats, Lieutenant Leechon did not look at them or offer a hello. Faith smiled at them and nodded. She did not understand the point of intimidating these folk.

A yellow brick road led up a steep grassy knoll to the Vor castle. They were flanked by colorful and smelly shrubbery on both sides, which Leechon stared into on occasion. Did he expect assassins to leap out from the bushes then and there? Faith very much doubted that particular series of events.

There was a pair of men dressed in plaid shorts and flannel tops guarding the entrance at the very top of the hill. They stepped forward with a stylized version of CR pistols. "You are from Iota 7?"

"Yes!" snarled Leechon, moving forward.

One of the guards worked the crank to lower the bridge across the moat. It took five seconds before it was ready. Nearly rolling his eyes, Leechon followed the pair into the building. "I certainly hope they do not expect that to stop Qwerty's forces," he whispered.

Faith thought this world's design was beautiful and not the least bit gratuitous, but she said nothing to her superior. *I better try to get along with the oaf...*

Inside they were met by a woman that was the classic image of a queen. She wore a light button-up blouse and a pink voluminous dress. Her golden hair flowed from a silver tiara, just one of the many pieces of jewelry that adorned her person. "Hello!" She beamed at them. "Lieutenant Leechon, welcome back! And who is this?" She beamed at the visitors.

Leechon was offended by her lavish dress, so he did not offer any pleasantries. In his mind any extravagance was designed to outdo him. "The weaponry is all in place on the planet's moons," he said slowly. "The next objective...should be to build evacuation domes in secure locations, a place where the population could hide out."

The Queen's blue eyes jumped from place to place, until she settled on Faith. "Well when do you think there could be an attack?" she asked shakily. It was obvious now that the woman's pomp was an article behind which she could hide from the Flameoid threat.

"Veronica is likely to be one of the next targets," Leechon explained harshly. "And Duke Qwerty I'm *sure* would not leave a *gem like this* for the picking."

Feeling sorry for the Queen, Faith came forward and put out her hand. "Hello, Your Highness. I am sorry you have fallen into this predicament. I am Faith Switzgerald." She did not explain why she had come.

"I am Cassandra Veronica," the Queen replied, smiling to reveal pearl-white teeth. "You don't need to call me Your Highness or anything like that. Just call me by Cassandra. That'll be fine." Faith returned the Queen's warm smile.

Feigning a cough, Leechon got their attention again. "About the evacuation domes," he said not totally in an unfriendly tone, but without any reservations, "I'd suggest we take care of that right away. Otherwise in an attack even more people will die."

"Then do it," the Queen said in a somewhat raised voice. Turning from the lieutenant to Faith, she continued softly. "Let's take a stroll into the village and show you around. You've never been here before?"

"No," Faith replied. "I'd love to take a look at the village." *While there's still something left of it.*

* * *

Leechon was clearly annoyed that his counterpart decided to go off exploring while there was work to be done but he could think of no way to stop her. Faith and Cassandra Veronica followed the yellow brick road through the shrubbery down into the dreamy village.

"This is so different from the other worlds I've visited," Faith commented, hoping to discover a bit more about this paradise. "I've been to Ceres and Taed, Iota 5....The only place that comes close to this is — *was* — Njartis. That was before the Flameoids paid it their visit."

The comment further frightened the Queen, who did not want to see her world reduced to an ugly cinder. Changing the subject, she asked, "You were born on Iota 7, right? I've been there more than once, talked to Emperor Cliff II. I never had much time to tour. Why don't you tell me what it's like to live there?"

Faith actually laughed, walking casually beside the Queen. "It's a lot

different from Veronica, of course. There's a lot of big noisy cities crammed with people. It can get really hot and really cold, depending on where you live. In the capital, Freedahmer, it gets bitterly cold. The atmosphere makes the sky look strange compared to most other worlds. But it can be beautiful sometimes, at least in an odd way. So many colors in the sky, moving around like they are dancing and in communication with each other."

Cassandra tried to envision this and put a finger to her lips. Finally she said, "I think we have something similar to that here. It's called the Rainbow Cloud. On clear nights you can see it outside the city — a mixture of gases from the sea that rise up and come to life with the colors of the rainbow."

"At least we have that much in common," Faith laughed. She felt that she connected with this woman and was perhaps forging a lasting friendship. It had been hard to make friends back home, but on this exotic alien landscape....*At last! I'm opening up new doors!*

The village people were just as friendly as their Queen. There was a whole slew of characters, from the children that played games on the grass to the old men and women that sat comfortably on chairs outside their dwellings. It was outstandingly peaceful and dynamic. With a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach, Faith realized it could vanish in the blink of an eye.

They stopped to talk to an old man in a pair of jeans and a cotton T-shirt. His face was stretched and wrinkled, with a long nose and considerable beard. The mouth amidst all the hair was thick-lipped and glistening. He explained he was not getting himself worked up about any possible invasion.

"If they want to come barging in here they can," he said, not particularly angry. "We'll fight back...The boys'll fight back. Everyone will resist them. And if we die then me and Tharlene have had a good long life. Why let those greedy barnyard animals get into our heads?" He sucked back some air and spit on the ground. "They can bring their fancy ships and big guns, but they're still pigs to us. And *we're* still the same people, no matter what they do."

"I agree with you, Royl," Cassandra whispered. "We mustn't let them take our dignity."

"Dignity?" The old man chuckled and began stumbling around the yard. He picked up his gardening shears and looked up. "It's not about dignity or anything. It's about not letting them get inside your head. And we don't intend to."

An interesting way to look at it, thought Faith. Surrounded by the

military all her life, she could not help but look at it from an officer's perspective. It was a matter of winning or losing and she much preferred to win. She hoped that Leechon knew what he was doing and that the world would be spared a Flameoid takeover.

* * *

The following morning one of the Ver birds flew by her window when she was up to see it. It was oblong with shiny black feathers and swirling silky wings. Its large eyes sat atop its head, peering in for an instant before returning its attention to the forefront.

"Isn't that amazing?" Faith asked the attendant who had entered the room to fix her breakfast. Her hair was not yet done and she was in her night gown.

Before the attendant could respond, a deafening roar ripped through the air and orange explosions brightened the starry sky. It was obvious the Flameoid attack had begun. But would the defenses hold?

Faith's stomach turned and she was unable to as much as look at her breakfast. All thoughts of the pleasant bird now purged from her mind, she could only imagine the Shadowway warships engaging the oncoming enemy. Or would the Flameoids be using their infernal Halol technology? That would make it even more treacherous. How could you fight when no one could see the enemy?

Sirens squealed throughout the castle and everyone rushed out into the hall. Faith waited for the commotion to settle slightly. Finally, the door opened and an attendant appeared, the stress lines distinct on her face. It was the same woman who had brought her breakfast. "Come on, Dear!" she called. "We must get you to the cellar, where you will be safe!"

Although she would have much preferred to be aware of the goings-on, Faith followed the attendant out into the hall and down into the cellar where it was apparently safer. *But how much safer will it be?*

The sounds of gunfire and explosions followed her all the way.

Evil is strong and inevitable, while good is weak and easily destroyed. This, I tell you, is the proper philosophy.

– Tobias McCoy

Thinking of how they had failed him the past, Lieutenant Leechon was comforted by the knowledge that his former colleagues would soon be put down. Even more comforting was the look that would be on their faces as he led the Flameoids into the Shadowway Citadel. He spoke into his com-line, "All right, troops, that's all right! Keep on fighting them!" He pretended to engage the invaders, although his cannons were firing blanks.

The Flameoid Point Man nodded at him knowingly, holding back a grin. More ships materialized behind the Shadowway lines, making clever use of their sophisticated technology.

Now why doesn't the Shadowway have halol technology? Leechon wondered. There was another reason to switch sides. *Hah!* In actuality, though, he did not fancy the thought of being labeled a traitor, but the circumstances left him no choice. *I couldn't stand another day under Switzgerald or....* He realized the old Emperor Cliff II should have been assassinated by now. *Word will probably come soon.* Smiling, he switched his cannons from blanks to CR shells and turned them upon the Shadowway ships. Several other turncoats followed his lead.

"What's happening?" shouted a subcommander on the radio. "We're not gonna—" With a sigh, the Lieutenant switched off the device. *I don't need to hear any of that foolishness.*

Leechon had already used his access codes to deactivate the moon defenses. Now there was nothing to stop the Flameoid ships from cruising into Veronica's atmosphere. For good measure, Leechon shot and obliterated a few more of his allies. *Got what they desired. Idiots.* He had only brought those that he deemed worthy into the scheme. Anyone else that may have exposed him was expendable. Wreckage scattered around the battlefield would eventually drift into the planet's orbit. The fire and smoke was already dying out.

"Ready to proceed planetside?" questioned the Flameoid Point Man. He was itching at the controls.

Leechon spoke gruffly. "We agreed you will destroy the castle or the

villages. You will not harm citizenry, only the Ver troops that resist."

"Yes, but of course," came the reply. The Point Man's aura of flames burned brighter with each passing second. His brown eyes stared soullessly.

"Then go have a field day," he transmitted, readying himself to face Faith and the Ver Queen. He would want to appear suitably ruffled. Perhaps a slight wound applied to the face would convince them....

Leechon brought the ship into the atmosphere.

*What would you say to a trade? How about
your humanity for eternal wealth and happiness?*

- Ther Von Lecer,
The Sociophile
(first printed 2087)

Njartis Baytor rubbed a jeweled finger carefully, eyes narrowed. He sat back in the shimmering emerald throne he had brought to replace the old one. He maintained a hollow expression, not wanting to show his true countenance, but on the inside he gloated. *Hah hah!* He thought. *Here I am, sitting on the throne, despite their best efforts!* He felt like he wanted to grin and concealed it in a nasty sneer. His colorless eyes darted to see a tall man moving toward him.

Conan Switzgerald stood scowling alongside another guard. Both stiffened the grip on their weapons as they stared down at the newcomer. *It is never good news*, Conan thought miserably.

The messenger bowed low, almost as if it were a parody, and rose again to look the Emperor in the eye. "I bring dire news, I'm afraid, My Emperor. We were defeated in battle three days ago by the Flameoids. The planet Veronica belongs to Overseer Sebastien Qwerty."

The Emperor intensified his scowl and dismissed the messenger. Although he was pleased with the news of Qwerty's success, he had to act to bear the closest scrutiny.. A bit melodramatically, he glowered, his eyes bulging against ghostly pale skin.

The guards grumbled and cursed. Another stronghold fallen meant the enemy was pushing closer, forming a noose around their necks. With their Halo-void ships, the Flameoids could be pushing near Iota 7 with no one the wiser.

Conan's green eyes burned on the messenger's back until the man was gone, then shone into space. *That traitor.* He ground his teeth together, wishing he could impale Leechon's head with his pistol. *He let them win. Somehow...he let them win!* Still grinding his teeth, he looked at the Emperor. *I should be in that chair! I should be calling the shots!* The Captain had barely gotten any sleep at all in the past few months. Now, his daughter was missing in a whirlpool of violence. It was quite possible she had been killed in the Flameoid incursion.

Conan was sure that this Njartis Baytor had no experience whatsoever in warfare. He doubted very much he would match the bare-boned adequacy of Cliff II. In this case, the late ruler would have been an improvement.

Njartis Baytor's purpose was to undermine the Shadoway. He had no interest in effective leadership or furthering the war machine. *Another planet ours! Today it is Veronica! Tomorrow it will be Honlu! Pajarr! Ceres II!* He rattled off the names of vulnerable planets that were next in Qwerty's wake. *Iota 7!* He relished the thought of Flameoid Halo-void ships descending upon the capital. Perhaps the Overseer would allow him to remain ruler of this sector....

Conan was grimacing in the Emperor's direction, still scraping his teeth together. Blood rushed to his face as his eyes started quivering. "Sire!" he snapped. "Are you with us today or shall I preside over this matter?"

Realizing he had drifted away, the skeletal man leaned forward, rubbing his chin with an extended finger. "No, that will not be necessary, *Captain*. It is probable that Lieutenant Leechon perished along with most of our troopers in the onslaught. Since you know the men, I will leave it up to you to replace him."

"It was Leechon," the Captain said dryly, "that betrayed us, causing the defeat. I believe he is still alive — almost certainly *he is*. But I will appoint a new lieutenant as soon as I come to a decision." Again, his thoughts dwelled on his daughter. She had to be alive! He had invested so much time and effort into her. *Oh Faith, I wish I could go find you!*

"You'll report to me as soon as you do," Baytor said, folding his hands in front of his face in a way that made him appear ghoulish.

Conan nodded, still contemplating the events on Veronica. He chastised himself for not seeing the signs in Leechon, for not doing something to prevent Faith from traveling with him. *They were seemingly insignificant — but the indicators were there!* He recalled Leechon's distance and refusal to attend socials. When Conan had courted Cathryn, the bearer of his daughter, the lieutenant had reacted in an odd way. He hadn't thought anything of it at the time, but now he realized that perhaps it had been jealousy. Leechon's abilities and exemplary service record had seemed to make up for all his quirks, though. Now he could see that the lieutenant was a very paranoid and sociopathic character, unfit for any command. To think Faith was in his clutches....It sickened him.

A representative from Honlu scheduled for an audience arrived. He was a stately man, tall and proud, carrying a brown portfolio at his side. His head was shaved bald to reveal dark and rugged flesh pervaded by a dozen or more shiny

golden rings. His nose was insubstantial below striking lavender eyes.

Conan disliked the Honlu for their braggadocio. The way in which the representative carried himself was enough to make the Captain want to reach out and wring his neck.

Without even bowing, the man said, "I am Hu Bey, Director of the Honlu Council. I've come to make a request." He spoke as if he was on the same level as the Emperor, if not a bit condescendingly.

Baytor produced an impatient and slightly annoyed sigh. "The battle stations are being set up on the Honlu satellites as fast as possible. They will be done when they are done. I can't make any more promises." He folded his bony hands together and bit down on his lower lip.

Now it was Hu Bey's turn to appear annoyed. "Sir — I am not here about the satellites." He moved the portfolio around in his hand as if to relieve stress. "I request that the royal family as well as the democratic council and their immediate family members be permitted to relocate here in the Shadowway Citadel until the danger has passed."

"What?" Baytor acted as if the request was entirely absurd. "The answer is no, Director Bey. There are several royal families already here and we are filled to capacity. This is not a motel we are operating here — it is an empire!" He raised his voice, eyes wide. "If there is nothing else, you should leave. And I will expect to never hear of this again."

The Director's mouth gaped for a moment, but he quickly covered himself. He seemed offended that the Emperor would address him with such flippancy. His voice a bit shaky and discomposed, he said, "I am only trying to ensure the safety —"

"Enough!" Baytor snapped. "Or I'll have you executed!" He shouted with such ire that Conan and the other guard prepared their weapons.

But the Director bowed and made his way toward the exit, uncharacteristically flustered. A drop of sweat rolled down his forehead into his eye. He squinted and rubbed at his eye to relieve the sting, making it look as though he were crying.

The Emperor sat back, his face still ghostly white. His eyes were completely dead, like those of a corpse. He rested his hands on his lap, waiting for the next appointment to arrive. *I hope the next meeting is less trite. I really would*

grow tired of such unproductive canter.

Conan Switzgerald stared after the Honlu representative, surprised that His Majesty had finally put him in his place.

* * *

Conan had a candidate in mind, but was unsure whether or not he would be up to the task. Ja'Ceb had shown great initiative and loyalty when his princess' life was in jeopardy. *He is clearly prepared for combat. But would he always show the same bravado?* His long shift finally over, Conan stalked the hall, looking for the soldier's room.

He was not overly concerned for the new Emperor's safety, but the army could not function with a key element missing. *Yes....* He decided he would install Ja'Ceb as his new underling. *He is of a moral fiber. He will not question my command.* It was always a plus to have some one who would be easier to handle. *That is if I can find him....*

Eventually he located the Njartian royal chamber. He expected Ja'Ceb to be with his protege, not leaving anything to chance. It had already been demonstrated that the Citadel was far from secure. Conan scowled at the memory, but assured himself he had taken measures to prevent such a thing from occurring again. Leechon had been the liability, a hole in his defensive network.

The door flew open and Conan was greeted with the barrel of a gun. As he had expected, Ja'Ceb was guarding his princess like a mother bird did her chicks. "Ja'Ceb the Warrior," Conan stated in a steely voice, "I have elected you to become the next Shadowway Lieutenant-Commander."

The gun lowered to reveal the surprised look on the young man's face. "Surely you could find some one else?" he whispered politely, not wanting to offend the Captain.

Smiling nonthreateningly, Conan shook his head from side to side, just once. "No — I cannot, actually." His voice took on a parental harshness, as if he were advising his missing daughter. "Don't throw this away with a quick flick of the wrist. That would be an extremely pedestrian maneuver. I've come to you for a reason, Warrior, and you will hear me out."

Ja'Ceb took this in with a slight flush in his cheeks. "You might as well come in," he said, moving back into the chamber. Alpha sat on the bed, already in her nightgown.

Without saying a word, Conan strode forward. "It would be in your best interest to jump on this opening. It may not be available after this evening — who can say?" He shrugged, indicating he did not know the answer. "I can say it will not be vacant for long."

"Why me?" Ja'Ceb stood in front of the bed, running a finger along the barrel of his gun. Ensuring the safety of the princess was enough for his ego. Should he take the offer, though, for the sake of the Shadoway? The dilemma became clearer in his mind each second.

"Because there is no one in my opinion more qualified," Conan replied, putting as much certainty into the tone as he could muster. His gut instinct told him that the statement was true. "You've served on Njartis for what — a decade? — decade and a half? And your dedication has not wavered! Not for a second!"

Ja'Ceb thought of the murdered King and bowed his head in shame. He looked as if he were about to speak, to admit his failure, but Alpha saw it coming and interrupted.

"You should agree to it, Ja'Ceb," she said, getting to her feet. She walked over to where he hung his head and placed a small hand on his large shoulder. "Don't spoil it all for me."

"But —"

Alpha put a finger to his lips. "No — you *should*. The Captain is right about everything. In all my life I've never known a more reliable or hearty man. You were made for the corps!"

"But my time is not spoiled with you!" he cried, unable to let that statement pass uncontested. "Every second I spend with you is like an eternity in bliss. You owe me nothing for the time I have invested to keep you safe." He moved to take her in an embrace, but Alpha pushed him toward the Captain.

"I love you, Ja'Ceb, and I always will, but in your heart you know your call." She smiled and leaned forward, kissing him nimbly.

Ja'Ceb squared his shoulders and took a deep breath before responding. He looked Conan over momentarily. "Okay. I would be honored to serve in any capacity...as long as...you can promise the princess' safety."

Conan's steely gaze did not shift. "You have my word, Lieutenant.

Guards will posted outside this doorway at all times, as well as at the ends of all the hallways leading up to this wing. Now come with me. As Leechon's replacement....You have a lot to catch up on."

Ja'Ceb looked back at Alpha, then saluted the Captain. "Right away, Sir."

Begging for mercy is like milking a lizard. The cold-bloodedman is incapable of empathy, of putting himself in another's position.

- Faith Switzgerald,
Reflections Through a Tainted Glass

Benjamin Leechon could not have felt more pleased with himself. He stalked back and forth next to the bloodied corpse of Cassandra Veronica and the cowering form of Faith Switzgerald, who had her hands covering her face. His lips were stretched into an inhuman grin, giving his face the appearance of a skull. Medals still dangled from his breast; he wore them like a second skin.

Thanks to me, he thought concededly, this has become the Flameoid foothold in Extor Quadrant. And I've got everyone where I want them. The Emperor, in his grave; Conan Switzgerald, Faith.... He had always envied the Switzgerald family, who had had it comfortable for decades, long before his birth. He'd loathed Faith the most, strolling around as she did in the Citadel like a princess royal. *Now no more....*

Faith began to shake as she broke out in a cold sweat. She had witnessed the annihilation of a Shadoway colony, the murder of her new companions, and had been imprisoned in this alcove for several hours, with Leechon pacing like a feral creature. *What is he going to do with me? Why'd he bring me here?*

Leechon licked his lips, anticipating what he was sure would be a grand future. *Maybe he'll even give me this planet as a reward, for everything I've done to augment his success.* He ran his tongue over the black mustache he was growing. "Faith," he said in a peculiar voice.

Faith looked up in horror as he came down upon her. She could not fight against his power and gasped as he slowly removed her clothing and deposited it in a heap to the side. "Noooo...." She whispered futilely, shaking her head.

"Faith," the former lieutenant repeated, unbuttoning his military issue trousers. His brown eyes sparkled as he ran them over her curvaceous features. Surprising her, he shouted: "Faith!" She jumped and he grabbed her by the shoulders. She screamed as he slammed her hard against the wall. "You don't feel like the aristocrat now, do you, girl?" He ground his teeth together and grunted,

pressing his erect penis against Faith's buttocks.

Feeling powerless, Faith sagged against the wall and endured the violent rape. She had been on top, riding the highest wave of the universe, until the tide turned and sucked her under. She felt like she was drowning and there were no rescuers in sight. None that she see, at least.

The Castle was overrun by Flameoids, including the Point Man who had led the invasion. He was Rul elaar h — and insisted on being addressed precisely so. He was fifty-five years old, a middle age among his people, and not at all compassionate. He treated the universe like it was Flameoid property — or more precisely, *his* — and that all others were trespassers. Predictably, he did not care for but accepted grudgingly the Zenith-Flameoid alliance as well the relationship with Leechon's turncoats.

Rul elaar walked in momentarily and stood silently, waiting notice. Leechon did not bother to acknowledge him immediately, but moved rhythmically in harsh thrusts. Finally, he slipped out his victim, who remained quivering against the wall, and pulled on his trousers. Frowning, Rul elaar spoke: "Overseer Qwerty is on his way to Veronica, which he has designated the new center of Flameoid operations. For the length of his visit —" Here he paused, brought out an electronic binding device, which he slapped over the other man's wrists. "— you are to be locked up. For security reasons of course."

Leechon's face grew as red as a standard flux light. He struggled against the energy bindings, but soon realized it was hopeless, and raised his useless appendages for the Point Man to see. "This is foolishness! I've served the Overseer in every capacity! How could he doubt my loyalties?"

"The Overseer can and will," Rel elaar responded coldly. His aura burned a dark orange, the wings glittering with little embers. "Now will you follow me to the dungeon or should I call for the security outside the door?"

Leechon realized there was no way out and his eyes widened. "How long will I be...locked up?"

"Only for the length of the Overseer's visit. It is a mere precaution. He could choose to let you out at any time, and indicated he has much more use for you." Rel elaar flashed a maddening smile, turning to the doorway.

Much more use for me! Leechon felt like he would strangle the Point Man if he was freed from the restraints. *If he expects me to agree, he better treat me with some respect!* He did not comprehend that Overseer Qwerty had him

under his red-hot thumb.

Rel elaar glanced back at Faith, who had sunk to the floor. He looked sidelong at his captive. "What should be done with her?" he asked, letting Leechon walk on ahead.

"I don't know," he grunted. "Lock her up, too." Desperate, his eyes darted in all directions.

"A good idea," the Point Man said, not allowing his charge to bother him. As the first officer in his fleet, Rel elaar was used to nasty retorts and disobedience. Never before, though, had he encountered a subject as perverse as Leechon. He naturally distrusted the arrogant man, since he had betrayed his Emperor for what was most likely grandiose notions of personal advancement. If it was up to him, the traitorous dog would be destroyed, before it struck again. But Qwerty had not gotten to power by squandering resources and Leechon was a valuable one.

I deserve so much more! Leechon thought angrily, irritated because he could not move his hands. It felt unusual to be restricted; he was used to holding a weapon or improvising with his fingers. To him, even a nail could be put to violent use. It could, for instance, be used to gouge out an eye. Now he felt powerless. His hands might as well have been dismembered. *Damn Qwerty! He betrayed me!*

As he was led into the dungeon, Leechon grew more and more panicky. What if the Overseer was actually planning to do away with him? But he forced himself into a sense of calm. *He could not...not when I can offer so much more....He might be able to win the war without me!* Thus he was convinced Qwerty would release him sooner than later.

Rel elaar noticed the erratic expressions on the prisoner's face, something he had become accustomed to seeing. Those that acted like the lieutenant were in actuality quite cowardly and insecure. The haughtiness was simply a wall built around those liabilities, over which many had difficulty seeing.

After depositing his prisoner in the old smelly dungeon cell, Rel elaar walked away not wishing to converse any further. Leechon, though, hanging his head in self-pity, whispered, "You are a strange people, Rel elaar."

The Point Man turned, flames erupting from his body. "That is Rel elaar h!" he shouted, debating whether or not to open up the cell and strike the fool. He opted against it. "In the future, I suggest you address me so."

Leechon gritted his teeth, not permitting his tongue to run away on him. *Uhhh....I wonder if all Flameoids are this hateful?* He sat without saying another word, as the Point Man receded. *He reminds me so much of Conan Switzgerald....* He almost found it ironic that he was again a subordinate.

Letting the dungeon door slam behind him, Rel elaar sighed in irritation. He was so sick of these supercilious types.

* * *

The Overseer arrived late that night. His wings were glowing healthily, delicately pruned, and his golden claws had been manicured. He maneuvered the steps leading down to the dungeon with a guru precision. In each step was a swell of self-assuredness. He felt confident that his Empire was going to subsume the Shadoway.

We have been so successful as of yet, he knew. We must be the chosen race, Kaj's gift to a depreciating universe! Kaj was the king of the gods, who had according to the holy texts, created the first two Flameoids, Sallendra and Ykarto. Sallendra, interestingly, was Old Tloy-Hoff for "the Spark that Destroyed". That is where the Sparks, the first people on Pyro, adopted their name.

For centuries the Flameoids had been a violent and warring race, splitting into two factions, called the Sparks and the Leviathans. The Sparks had claimed Pyro as the Leviathans claimed Pronensia. The first and only civil war in Flameoid history ensued, called the Battle of the Inferno. Qwerty thought of this often, consoled by the fact that the two groups had reconciled their differences and negotiated a truce. *"We became one. One strong and proud,"* he often said.

They had become noble and strong, directing their vehemence toward the outside. No Flameoid had harmed another in decades. *I wonder if the Shadows could say the same?*

The Overseer directed his attention to the prisoner before him, stepping ahead of his burly guards. "Ahhh, my good friend, Benjamin!" He flapped his wings energetically, grinning to reveal his blood-stained fangs.

Leechon did not risk losing any standing he may have still had by grimacing or growling. Instead, he put his face against the bars and exuded innocence with large eyes. "Your Majesty, I have done nothing but serve your cause. May I ask when I will be released?"

Overseer Qwerty pursed his lips as if he had not yet considered it. "Anytime, Lieutenant. Probably very soon." He was famous for his ability to stick-handle around a question. His tone changed, becoming rougher and somewhat vindictive. "I only need to be certain you will not do anything to jeopardize our mission. I spoke with Faith Switzgerald...and I am greatly displeased with her treatment." He glowered and revealed his fangs. "I am not impressed by that at all."

"Then it will not happen again," Leechon blurted, willing to say anything to get out of his cell. He felt like rolling his eyes at the Overseer's stupidity. Why would he care about Faith Switzgerald?

"You are probably wondering why I care about her," Qwerty said. "You think I am just foolish." He shook his head vigorously. "How you treat your prisoners of war is a testament to how you would deal with my people. And I must tell you I cannot have you violating my subjects." He spread his fiery arms. "So here you'll stay until I have use for you again." He turned and his guards followed suit.

How dare he? Leechon balled his fist, wanting to punch the wall. He restrained himself, just barely. *After all I've done....*

"That might teach you," the Overseer said, from the top of the staircase, "for next time." Then he disappeared behind the clanking metal door.

"I'll get you back," Leechon hissed under his breath, so nobody could hear. "I'll *take back* everything I've given you." He had formulated a plot in his mind, one that seemed just devious enough. He would continue helping the Flameoids in their campaign, until they subsumed the Shadoway, but after the dust had settled he would strike. And Overseer Qwerty would never know what struck him down.

* * *

The battle stations on Veronica's two moons were completely repowered. The largest, Agamemnon, had the largest CR cannon anyone had ever built. The smaller, Clytemnestra, had a Tartazyr projectile launcher which would augment its counterpart's effects.

The Flameoid fleet gathered around the pink world with the famous bluish rings prepared to move on to the next target: Tesoidnarg Prime, of the Beta-Yron system. It was to be the final stop before they moved on to the next system, Ryes-Ultor, home of Iota 7. The Overseer was expecting and had steeled the

forces for fierce resistance. This was despite the Shadoway's armada being severely depleted and disenchanted.

The Flameoids were speculating that the Battle of Beta-Yron might seal the fate of either side. It was imperative, then, that the Shadoway be put down at all costs. The Overseer was putting every man, woman and child — even if they were only half-able — into the endeavor. He planned to go there himself, as soon as he knew it was safe, in the *Laleth* command vessel.

I can't wait to be there. Qwerty could already feel the excitement bubbling through his pours.

There is a time for a stand and that time is now.

— Cpt. Conan Switzgerald

Tesoidnarg Prime was possibly the dreariest world in all the Shadoway. It had not always been so. During the reign of Samuel Woddner VII, it had been an extraordinarily prosperous epicenter. Then something happened — maybe Iota 7 snatched the spotlight — and Tesoidnarg Prime was sunk. Industries packed up for more viable worlds and construction halted half-complete. This left many cities fragmentary and ghostly, worse now as the polished metal infrastructure rusted and fell apart.

Nevertheless the gray planet, named after Mustapha Tesoidnarg, creator of the CR pistol, had become a prime military base. It was capable of firing up to sixteen CR warheads simultaneously, equipped with a planet-wide Tartazyr shield. It served as the protective barrier between Iota 7 and the outside.

Ja'Ceb transferred with reservations to Tesoidnarg Prime. He felt cold and empty, like he had left his heart with Alpha. He remembered his promise to Samuel Woddner that he would ensure the princess' safety. Now he awaited the Flameoid incursion with a queasiness that almost overshadowed his senses. Had he done enough to fulfill his word?

Presently, Ja'Ceb, now the Lieutenant-Commander of the force, ambled through the dark and grimy boulevards, coming across from time to time wide arteries that led nowhere. Frowning, he noted the pipes running along the walls and walkways, with no regard for aesthetics. *This place looks as dead as I feel.*

His shift started in forty-five minutes and he had hoped to lift his spirits before then. But he found no comforts in his surroundings. He would be expected to instill confidence in the troops, to lead the charge into the animal ranks. It required a lot of melodrama, he thought with a smile. *There. At least my face is still working. But will it be for long?* He needed to dispense of all pessimism.

Nearing the main base, he looked up into the cloudy sky, imagining enemy ships pouring down upon them. The dreariness was augmented by the thick and lumpy clouds. But he knew if it had been sunny, he would have been angry anyway. It would have been beauty destroyed by the frivolity of civilization. *They could come any time, in a few minutes or in a few days.* His job was not to anticipate when, but how.

Weeks before his post on Tesoidnarg, he had contemplated Qwerty's intentions. At first he he had been stumped, but then the pieces began to come together. A good strategist looks at the stars as a gigantic chessboard, with troops as the pieces. The scariest notion was who may become the pawns. Ja'Ceb had come up with an invaluable idea, one they had implemented right away. He had developed the notion of a Condensed Radiation bomb tripped by the Flameoid's own halol technology.

They were still unable to mimic the cloaking apparatus on their own ships, but they had discovered how it operated. It generated a field which acted as a reverse mirror, projecting the image of space around the vessel. The grand deception had all turned out to be smoke and mirrors. Now they intended to turn it to their benefit. The field itself would trigger the detonation and their once-venerable technology would become their greatest liability.

Ja'Ceb comforted himself with the fact that he at least accomplished this. In his mind that would never truly excuse his leaving Alpha, but it meant he could tolerate himself until the day that he saw her face again.

As soon as he came upon the base Ja'Ceb underwent a transformation. He became as steel as the surrounding infrastructure and gave the troops no indication that he felt anything but optimistic.

A particular soldier named Hans Ober, a twenty-five year old recruit from Dyta 5, was visibly shaken. He doubted they would pull through the encounter. "I'm just a young man, Sir," he whispered, very careful how he spoke to his superior. "I've got a pregnant wife back home. I don't want to perish and leave them to fend for themselves."

Ja'Ceb put a hand on the young man's quivering shoulder. "You've got to believe you can pull through," he said confidently. "You've got to believe in yourself, in the unit, in *me*, in your wife.... Lord Damon will take of her and the baby, even if you do not survive the battle. Be proud you are a Shadow and fight for the empire's future!"

The recruit thanked him and returned to converse with his comrades. He would never have guessed the Lieutenant was experiencing similar doubts. *What we must do to fulfill our destiny*, Ja'Ceb remarked.

* * *

The Halo-void ships arrived the very next day. They approached their

target from two directions, dispersing themselves in loose lines.

The mines were disguised as floating chunks of rock and eluded the Flameoids' notice. As soon as they came too close, the devices exploded and wreaked unholy havoc.

The first two tangents of ships were obliterated in a single sweep of flame. The third was thrown off course and most ships became burning metal husks. The entire fleet stopped to assess the situation, not sure what had occurred.

Point Man Rel elaar could not believe the enemy had duplicated their halol fields. "There must be something else," he growled, observing the smoldering wreckage on his view-port. "Scan the entire vicinity — from here to the planet. Find it!"

It took quite a time and much head-scratching, but the technicians finally uncovered the sneaky scheme. Rel elaar growled furiously and punched his own forehead. "The audacity! Let's move forward! Our force is still large enough!"

Several ships were still emitting smoke as they reentered the fleet. Many were short dozens of officers and further slowed down by unreliable equipment that had been hastily repaired.

* * *

Ja'Ceb was pleased with the initial reports that indicated more damage than they had anticipated. He shouted across the comline: "All right, everybody! Let's give it to them!"

Every able man and woman had been drafted into this campaign. Still, the numbers were sobering. The enemy fleet would pack a significant punch with more than fifteen thousand ships; Ja'Ceb had to make due with ten thousand. Of course the Flameoid force had been cut down....Now perhaps twelve thousand strong? Emperor Baytor had promised five thousand additional vessels from his elite corps. They were due to arrive any time now, but waiting was not an option.

The lull had given Ja'Ceb's forces the chance to get into position, protected somewhat by the battle moons. They could not use the CR warheads, as that would destroy everything within a hundred mile radius, including the *Tesoidnarg* space station. Ja'Ceb was relying on the moons and his own wit.

The Flameoids had not discovered that it was their own systems

detonating the mines. They were baffled that the Shadows had apparently spotted them despite their imperceptibility to the eye. They roared along, though, slowing to scan every asteroid or rock in their way.

There were no more mines between them and the planet. The unexpected explosions would not be repeated. Ja'Ceb had not planned on the success, but it gave him a huge advantage. Of course, he would never be able to use that same trick again....

The battle moons began a light show of weapons fire as soon as the Flameoids appeared. It was an instantaneous materialization once they disabled their halol fields. The Flameoids constructed their ships from very heavy material; thus, they could endure significant stress.

"Launch the Switzgerald missiles!" Ja'Ceb cried, simultaneously deploying his own. The deceptively thin objects struck the enemy front lines, nearly eating away at the hulls with exceptionally corrosive chemicals. Smoke began billowing from the ships, which soon looked like skeletons. "Keep them coming! Keep...them...coming!" Ja'Ceb sent another volley at them, his face tight with determination.

The Flameoids were packing an equally destructive punch with their integrated CR-Tartazyr weapons. Entire ships exploded into a cloud of debris from the awesome force of the cleverly designed attack.

Ja'Ceb felt his heart leap into his esophagus with the vessels exploding around him. *How long have they had this new attack?* It did not matter; they would have to match it. He transmitted orders to the battle moons to directly target the Flameoid's weapons ports. That was a capability his battleships did not have.

The Flameoids continued firing to match their counterpart. The obvious weapons mechanisms were on their vessels' undersides. Inconspicuously, several ships redeployed their cloaks and vanished. Not even Ja'Ceb noticed them until they were blasting away at one of the lunar battle stations.

"Stop them!" Ja'Ceb howled, hating himself for not expecting that. The battle moons were integral to their defense.

The other battle moon turned its attention from enemy fleet to the few that surrounded its counterpart. The Flameoids were intent on wreaking mass damage, however, and remained in position.

"Somebody leave the lines and put a stop to that!" Ja'Ceb shouted

angrily. Several ships moved out and engaged.

The battle station was already aflame and would soon be useless. One Flameoid ship exploded and severely damaged the one next to it. But there still three more.

Sweat poured down Ja'Ceb brow as he tried to negotiate two situations at once. "Use Switzgerald Launchers!" He was transmitting to the battle stations. "We can't lose you!"

The Flameoids, bombarded by dozens of missiles and various other weapons, called off their sneak attack. They disappeared and returned to the main fleet. Precautions would have to be taken against such maneuvers.

"Refocus on the enemy! Switch back to CR!" Ja'Ceb frantically worked his own controls. Sweat rolled down into his eye, but he didn't bother to wipe it. Looking at the time display, he wondered where the Emperor's forces were. *They should be here by now. What's keeping them?* Bright flames blinded him momentarily and he had to cover his eyes. *Damn it!*

The additional forces would never turn up, though. Emperor Baytor had seen they would encounter an impeccably timed glitch that stopped them on their way. Stranded far from Tesoidnarg Prime, they would not be able to offer any assistance. Upon further inspection, they discovered that their engines had been sabotaged. The technicians assured the damage could repaired, but it would take several hours. That was a delay that could cost them everything.

Eventually Ja'Ceb decided he could not count on the reinforcements, but had make due with the resources he had. The battlefield was searing with sweeping fires and the screams of dying men and women. It was looking extremely bad for the Shadoway. If only he could come up with another deception....

The Flameoid Point Man transmitted a gloating message over the general frequency. "You are losing, Shadoway. Soon you will have no choice but to accept a humiliating defeat. Hah!" The laugh was snarly. "Whose side do you believe Kaj is on now?"

Ja'Ceb did not know who or what Kaj was and he did not care. He did not consider responding to the Point Man's swagger. There was no point to add insult to injury. After several more minutes, a plan came to focus in his mind. He transmitted to all his forces over the encrypted channel: "All right, this is going to sound strange to you at first. But you must believe me. It could ensure our

victory." He allowed only a moment's pause for it to sink in. "We must pretend we are retreating to the planet. We may not be able to pull through up here. I will tell you more once we are planetside."

The complaints and groaning came over the comline immediately and Ja'Ceb turned off the sound on the receiver. "Listen to me, all of you! I am sure this will work!" He tried to compose his thoughts. "The longer we stall, the less chance we have. We'll have a better chance on the ground."

More complaints came over the comline initially, but these eventually subsided. Ja'Ceb fired one last Switzgerald missile before he turned himself around. *I know I am doing the right thing. I know... I hope....*

* * *

Point Man Rel elaar laughed when saw the enemy retreating. "You can see," he proclaimed, spreading his flaming arms, "that we are the superiors here!" He laughed some more, sounding a bit like a not-so-distinguished farm animal. "Follow them to the planet — wait!" He lost all humor in his tone. "It may be a trick....Maybe more of those mines." His eyes glared into the view-screen. "Scan for them, Elaaj!"

The man sitting in front deftly worked the controls. "I'm not picking up anything, Sir — unless they have them cloaked."

"They could have them cloaked," Rel elaar whispered suspiciously. He stomped around the command bridge, hoping for something to give the green light to proceed. "How could we make sure we won't get blown up if we cross into the atmosphere? I'm not so sure they are retreating out of necessity." He put a finger to his lips for a moment. "Send a couple ships in first to test it!"

Elaaj and the other officers did not seem too thrilled by the jeopardizing of their comrades, but did not wish to invoke the Point Man's wrath. Several were sent ahead without knowledge of the danger. When nothing happened, the Point Man grinned and took a seat in his chair.

"Yes! We've got them right where they should be!" he exclaimed, getting comfortable in his seat. "Send the first line in!"

"Yes, Sir," came the reply from Elaaj.

Through the view-screen everyone watched, holding their collective breath, as the first wave descended upon Tesoidnarg Prime. Some seemed to

expect that they might be destroyed, after all. But the ships penetrated the outer atmosphere without incident.

"Send the second line in," Rel elaj commanded. His voice had regained its smugness in light of their impending victory. *Ahhh — how sweet life can be when a plot unfolds so....* He couldn't wait to crush Ja'Ceb and the Shadoway fleet. Smiling, he imagined being the first Flameoid to set foot on Iota 7. *The capital world!* He questioned whether it was as magnificent as rumors suggested, but it *would* be magnificent.

Soon it was the Point Man's own line that proceeded toward the grayish planet. He knew it was a rather dreary place, but that would not lessen the pleasure he squeezed out of it. He would not remain on Tesoidnarg Prime for very long, just enough to show that it was now his. When it was all said and done, what really mattered was the power one could exact upon his own. *Or in this case, a lesser species....*

*Focus on what's wrong and that is all you'll have.
Look past it to the bright side and you'll find paradise.*

— Sykehelyla,
The Eccentric Philosopher,
Collected Sayings

Alpha couldn't have imagined the heartbreak she faced. *First my father, now Ja'Ceb.* But she couldn't have kept her lover from the battle; it was his calling. She couldn't keep him imprisoned, not like her father had her. That was like caging a bird and sucking out its vitality. Nothing could live long as a prisoner, not without withering. She still felt that her father, despite his love for her, had taken too much from her. *I couldn't have have done that to Ja'Ceb...*

Alpha wondered what had happened to Faith Switzgerald. She remembered the day the girl had come into her room, how they had connected. Alpha couldn't recall seeing her since the beginning of the war.

She heard reports about the war, and was very concerned. The word on Tesoidnarg Prime was that the battle could go either way. She had faith in Ja'Ceb and his capabilities, but didn't know how much any man could take.

She wandered the veins of the Citadel day by day, searching for someone or something. Most of the people filling the halls were either employees or soldiers of the guard. There was a handful of children and seniors spread about the building, however, only if they could be found.

Ja'Ceb had been away several weeks now and it was harder to keep from panicking. It was afternoon and she was walking through the royal guest wing when she came across a humble old king.

He was from Dyta 5, a world she had never visited, and liked to be called King Wise. *Peculiar name.* As she looked him over, she realized he was perhaps the most benign ruler she had ever seen. *How could keep control over his people?* His face was a sea of wrinkles and liver spots with soft blue eyes that were considerably sunk in. He wore black trousers and a white shirt over which he draped a flamboyant but somehow gentle red and golden cape.

"How are you doing, Your Majesty?" Alpha whispered, stopping in the middle of the hallway. Above her head hung a portrait of Emperor Edward

Gildran, a rough-featured man with a broad nose, pockmarked cheeks and substantial mustache. She smiled at the old king underneath the crimson lights.

Wise studied her for a moment and chose his words instead of blurting them out. A few seconds had passed when he answered her. "The real question I think, Madam, is how are *you* doing?" Alpha looked back at him blankly. She did not know what to make of it. "You are a princess, correct? From Njartis?" She nodded questioningly. "I am not trying to be rude, but you have lost your world." Alpha thought maybe she should have bypassed the old man at this point. "If anyone should be feeling down, it should be *you*, Princess. Take comfort that you will be in my prayers."

Alpha rose an eyebrow, still uncertain. "Thank you, Sir, but I am doing well considering. I hear that all's not well on Tesoidnarg Prime."

"Yes," said King Wise, "but that's not the point here. " His voice was not edgy or harsh in the least, but exuded confidence and a warm hearty ambiance. "I know there is more to your unrest. There always is. If you are offended by my intrusion, I will leave. But if you want someone to talk to, here I am!"

"I have been wanting someone to talk to," Alpha whispered.

"Excellent!" exclaimed King Wise, spreading his arms and his jaunty cape. "What has been bothering you, Princess?"

Alpha adopted his practice of carefully selecting her words. Finally she said, "My consort Ja'Ceb is off fighting the Flameoids at Tesoidnarg and I have done nothing but worry and worry all the time."

"And seethe over the Flameoids' duplicity," Wise interjected.

That comment surprised her immensely in its exactness. "Yes," she whispered, "You could say that I am experiencing an increasing hatred of the Flameoids." It bothered her to admit it, but she doubted she could deny it in the gaze of the old king.

Pursing his lips, Wise paused to think. "You know," he said eventually, "the Flameoids are not all that bad of a lot. It is just a few — like the Overseer and his crew — that spoil their reputations." He shook his head slowly. "It's like that for all species. One forms a prejudice by impression and makes a beast of the other. It's human nature, of course. We need an enemy on the outside, so we'll band together as a whole."

Most of this went over Alpha's head, but she would piece it together, bit by bit, as she lay in bed that night. "That's heady stuff," Alpha said, biting her lower lip. She found it odd that this intelligent man had suddenly appeared when he was needed. But she did not deny her senses. There was a question burning in her mind and she decided to voice it. "Why does there have to be war then — if there really is no evil species?"

King Wise nodded and laughed a grim laugh as though it were inevitable. "Because it is a necessity. It furthers the species by forcing it to build and come up with new ideas. What do you know of history? A bit? Then think of how many things we take for granted that we would not have if not for war. The computer is one them. You might say space travel is another."

Alpha thought about this and she realized it was true. "It is sobering to think that war is a necessity to life." She frowned, overcome by it all.

"Our kind of life," Wise corrected her, his eyes wide. "Beyond that who can say?" He shrugged, indicating there was no answer. He nodded to her and smiled feebly. "I'll move along now, if that's all right. Come and see me any time, Princess. I believe I'm right across the hall from you." He ambled down the corridor and disappeared past a sharp turn.

Alpha returned to her chamber, heavy with thoughts. She would make due with the knowledge that Ja'Ceb was furthering the species as well as defending it. *I have to believe in him. I have to.*

*Fall off the world? Now there's a question! No, of course,
the world is not flat, but I would not be so sure the answer is no.
Just because you cannot see a thing does not mean it is not there.
Just because the Earth has no edge does not mean you can't fall off.*

— Sy Re,
Earth philosopher and poet
"World's End" pub. 2047

Ja'Ceb was waiting for the enemy ships to emerge from the gloomy cloud cover. He knew they could come any second, so he had to steel the troops. A cold wind whistled and chilled his bones, but he tried to ignore it. He strapped on his best armor and hunkered down inside the Switzgerald turret. The windows were mere slits, but he did not rely on them to see out. He brought a set of goggles down over his face, which provided him with a radar view of the sky and surrounding territory.

Let them come, he repeated to himself. *Let them come and we can blow them all to hell.* He scanned the skies as well as the ground continuously. He knew they could swoop down and land with cloaks engaged. *Then they'll meet a gruesome end when they come out and are hit with these missiles.* He shivered, felt goosebumps touch the insides of his suit.

The foxholes were underground, protected by layers of dirt and EM shielding. It could not be detected by any scanner, which would simply register the activity as normal planetary energy or perhaps a CR deposit. As soon as they were ready to attack, the missile launchers would sprout from the ground and stay long enough to launch the missiles before receding again.

There were dozens of such facilities scattered around the world, particularly around the primary bases. Ja'Ceb was hoping the element of surprise would give them a stranglehold on the enemy. He pictured the beastly creatures awash in a pool of Switzgerald acids, painfully melting away into bone.... He did not have any respect for the Flameoids; at best, he regarded them as primitive animals.

The Flameoid ships landed in bare fields several kilometers from the primary base before disengaging their cloaks. Troops poured from the spacecraft, moving their weapons back and forth, viciously searching for opponents.

"They must be in the buildings," one of them said, in Tloy-Hoff. With

that, they formed several loose lines and headed in the direction of the base.

As soon as the Flameoids got within range, the Switzgerald turrets popped out of the ground. "Let her rip, Boys," Ja'Ceb growled into the comline. "Let's make ourselves some smoked meat!" He fired the first shots and took first kill. To his disappointment he could not hear their screams. He fired more and more, targeting various groups that were running in various directions. He thought of Njartis and how had been forced to destroy its beauty. He had not seen it in months. Maybe he would never see it again. All because of the insipid Flameoids.

The rampaging units were taken completely by surprise. They hollered commands and curses. Someone suggested they return to their ships. The inability to fire while cloaked was the main disadvantage of their invisibility technology.

"No!" the subcommander shouted. "We can get to the base! We'll take them out before they do much damage!" But the acidic weaponry ate away and the Flameoids dropped like flies, first one by one, then two by two, and three by three.

Ja'Ceb frowned, despite his grim satisfaction. It was hard to take pleasure from death, even it was that of a hated opponent. He launched more missiles, taking out the last of a line. *We're doing good, but I wish the Emperor's troops would get here.*

But something told him they would not be making an appearance.

Body parts were scattered around the searing battlefield. Switzgerald missiles descended like death ravens, spilling their toxic guts. The sun peeked through the dense cloud cover intermittently, poking through the heavy air. Blood and scorched earth was all there was to see from every vantage.

Ja'Ceb only grew more vicious when he saw the Flameoids retreat to their ships. "So they're cowards as well as conartists," he hissed, bringing down another. It was almost like seeing another realm as he peered through the radar goggles. The men being killed were red dots before a wide grid, with a caption that read *opponent*. In this context good and bad was as easy to distinguish as black and white. Spot, target and fire. *Kapow!* There was another one picked off. *Praise Lord Damon!*

The remaining Flameoids ran to their ships and engaged their infernal cloaks. All the targets vanished from Ja'Ceb's grid and he removed his goggles, cold with sweat. *Damn it!* Too many were getting away. The solution came into his mind and he was as certain as he ever had been. Speaking into the comline: "This is a notice to all battle moons. You have thirty seconds to evacuate before I

launch CR warheads into orbit. I'm calibrating them to detonate as soon as they're up there." His fingers flew over the controls. "I repeat, you have thirty seconds to clear...." He set the message to repeat over and over until it was all over.

It would be a shame to loose the lunar installations, but Ja'Ceb hoped after this they would not need them. He counted down the seconds in a methodical whisper: "Ten...nine...eight...seven..." He spoke into the comline: "Five seconds until detonation!" He gulped past the painful lump in his throat, hoping everyone had gotten out in time. *Too late now....*

* * *

The CR bombs sailed out into the void and jettisoned their outer casing. This revealed brilliant blue-white balls that temporarily blinded all observers.

"What in the name of Kaj is that?" cried Point Man Rel elaar, shielding his fiery eyes. "They must be weapons! Quick — put all power into the weapons and get us out of here!"

But it was way too late. The nucleus of the CR core collapsed, releasing deadly energy in a cataclysmic explosion. Everything was cleaned off the surface of Tesoidnarg Prime's satellites and chunked into space as no more than a bit of dust. The eleven Flameoid vessels were crushed into billions of particles that scattered quickly into oblivion.

Rel elaar had no time to scream, no time to issue his final insults. His life and all it entailed became nothing. For all intensive purposes his existence had been a farce, but one that would not be forgotten soon.

* * *

Ja'Ceb observed the carnage through slitted lids. *Poor misguided creatures....* He should not have felt sympathy for the beasts, but it was his nature. *There might a few escaped, but we've driven them back, even without the reinforcements.* He noticed blood red vapor and twisted metal seeping through the clearing cloud above. Sickened, he knew it was a stain he would never be rid of.

When the wreckage had dispersed enough so that there was nothing more to see, the troops emerged from the foxholes. Ja'Ceb cheered along with them and dispensed several well-deserved claps on the back. But he was overcome by a sudden suspicion that the war was not over. *What if they have more ships to engage Iota 7?* Perhaps that was why the reinforcements had never come. *What if*

they are all dead? He gave a few more high fives before making his way to the communications building.

No, it's impossible. Nobody could ever put together an army that big. Ja'Ceb initiated an interstellar transmission. The signal shot out the satellite tower and into space, an invisible carrier wave that piggybacked itself off multi-mirror relays on various moons and asteroids. It would make its way to Iota 7 in less than thirty minutes. Until then he would grind his teeth in suspense. There was nothing worse, in Ja'Ceb's opinion, than waiting on news that could turn out extremely good or bad. He called it a flip-of-the-coin predicament. On one side was comfort, on the other horrible pain.

Life is a cliché.

— Kevanon Poqaz,
High Duke of the Spark Empire

It was intense heat unlike anything Faith had ever experienced. The volcanoes rose like leviathans from the black rugged soil and regurgitated lava. Small furry creatures roamed the high cliffs and snaking thorn vines. Various bulbous plants had cavernous jaws that snapped shut on careless insects.

She had been hauled through the smoke and ash, past the pools of frothing magma, all the way to the Overseer's melanoid lair. She had endured hours of confinement and the brutality under Leechon, only to face a new terror. But she would not lose her spirit. *I will come out of this empowered!*

The Overseer made Faith watch as he removed his robes in preparation for his Sigma bath. "Do you know why I bathe in it?" he asked, putting a foot into the tub. "Ahh...the perfect temperature." When he spoke in Yok-hajjar, the Shadoway tongue, he put weird accents on all the vowels.

Faith did not respond, choosing to glare with her piercing green eyes. *Provoke me enough, Qwerty. I'll get you eventually, as soon as your ugly back is turned.* She wasn't bothered by his naked form, merely regarded it as an insult to her dignity.

The tips of his wings were hanging over both edges of the steaming tub. He sunk in, the enjoyment distinct on his reddish visage. "I use Sigma Juice," he said lightly, "because it postpones the effects of aging and contains hormones proven to attract the opposite sex." He aimed his eyeballs at Faith, moving his fat charcoal tongue over the tips of his fangs. "A beauty, don't you think?"

"I find you to be...rather repulsive, Your Exaltedness," Faith laughed, showing her teeth. She had not brushed them in a long while.

The Overseer scowled, placing his hands on the tub next to his wings. He gripped tightly. "Why? Is it because I am Flameoid?" He ran a hand across his chest, as if indicating special features. "You are not prejudiced are you, my dear?"

She pursed her lips for a moment, then said, "In this case I think I am, Sir." *Better not go too far. I do want to come out this alive. Test my limits and*

back off.

The Overseer acted as though he was immensely disappointed. He tried to relax again, but he was troubled. "I welcomed you into my palace, offered you food, my servants, my entertainment. I offered you me!" He pounded the bath liquid, making a moderate splash.

Faith moved back to avoid the sprinkles. "But why? Do you have malicious reasons? As a Shadow I don't have many reasons to trust your people."

He seemed to calm a bit and sunk down in his bath. "We're not all bad people, Faith. That's propaganda circulated by the Shadowway Citadel to blacklist us. In fact, a lot of us you will find are quite gregarious."

"Then why are you invading our home? Why did you kidnap me?" Faith found his statements impossible to consider.

The Overseer sighed as he moved his hand around in the bath. "Because we want to show you the better way. If you had not resisted, none of you would be dying. The Flameoids are the future — it is the will of Kaj — or whatever you call God. Who can sit idle when the Lord commands you to expand?"

Faith simmered with anger now. *How dare he bring Lord Damon into this nonsense?* She said, "I very much doubt that is why you seek power. Wouldn't you agree that you are fond of the pomp and the pampering you receive? Doesn't that whet your thirst?"

The Overseer actually chuckled. "Yes — that does play a tiny part. But it is way more than pomp and pampering. It involves a lot of work. It takes more than laying into a pool of Sigma Juice to maintain power. But since we're speaking of pampering I insist you step into this tub. You will have a fun time, I can guarantee."

Faith turned her nose up at the suggestion. "Bathing with you is about the last thing I want to do." She squared her shoulders, steeled her gaze. "Or will you just rip off my clothes, drag me in and rape me?"

The Overseer's eyes widened and he crossed his arms defensively. "I have never forced myself upon anyone, let alone a girl as spectacular as you. Preposterous!" He spat the word like phlegm.

"Leechon could not say that," Faith whispered, remembering the events

on Veronica's moon.

"I should have killed him myself," the Overseer said quickly, waving a hand toward the exit. "You can go, but feel free to ask for anything you like. You can roam anywhere but the private rooms and my audience hall, but the rest is the fair ground. See how hospitable the Flameoids can be."

Faith marched out the door as briskly as possible. She had been worried for a moment that Qwerty would attack her like Leechon. *"Should have killed him myself". Now there's an interesting thought.* She entered the dim-lit corridor, uncertain which way to head. She turned to the right because that was the way she had come in. *He should have killed him, if just to satisfy me....*

The Overseer was shocked when he heard news of the defeat at Beta-Yron. By all accounts, Tesoidnarg Prime had been well defended, but it shouldn't have been anything his forces couldn't put down. "But they were defeated humiliatingly!" he cried, stalking the lavatory like an ensnared wildcat. "Damn it! How could this have happened?" He then demanded a report on casualties and survivors. A document was handed to him by shaky attendants, which he read with glowering eyes. "Abysmal," he growled as he shredded the paper with his claws. Throwing the remaining bits to the floor, he flew out of the room in a rampage.

The heat was still unbearable, but Faith slowly adjusted. Her skin was discolored and itchy for her first few weeks on Pyro. She avoided interaction with the Flameoids for a while, until a man named Ul relo j approached her. He was an eager Flameoid with the light blue eyes characteristic of the young.

He claimed he was very fond of Shadows and did not approve of the Overseer's murderous agenda. "Then you shouldn't say such things, Ul relo j," Faith cautioned, in a voice barely audible. "Aren't you scared someone will find out? What if there are listening —"

"It's okay," he assured smoothly. "I've been talking like this for a long time." He studied her for a moment, the pale orange of his aura reflecting in his pupils. "And you can call me Ulrelo, just like it's one word." He chuckled kindheartedly. "I'm not picky about the whole three word designation or any of that malarkey. You're Faith, right?"

She nodded. "Are there others like you — other Flameoids like you, I mean?" She still did not entirely trust him, but the ice was cracking nonetheless. She thought she'd play it out to see where it went.

"Yes there is," Ulrelo said, glancing away for a moment. "I particularly

like Shadoway girls, like you." Smiling, he reached out to touch her hair.

Faith froze for an instant, then backed away, uncomfortable. "I don't know about this. What is it you want from me?"

He immediately pulled away and locked his arms at his sides. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to intimidate you. I'm just a little fast, that's all. I don't want anything out of you but your friendship. If that's all right with you."

Faith didn't answer for several seconds. Finally she nodded slowly and whispered, "Yes, Ul relo j, I would approve of that." She studied him some more before turning to leave. "I'll see you later. You can...come see me in my room. The Overseer gave me one as well as some other pleasantries I probably won't use."

"You should take advantage of him," Ulrelo said. "Why not? If he's that foolish..."

Faith was surprised at his audacity. What if there *were* listening devices in the hallways? "I suppose so," she replied. "Goodbye. I'll talk to you later."

"Goodbye," Ulrelo whispered, eying her as she walked away.

He was his only friend, but in arrogance Jo turned his back to him. This just gave the other man the chance to stick the knife in.

— Sy Re, Earth author
A Time So Old

(pub. 2030 AD)

Conan Switzgerald looked down his nose at Leechon. "Our ships have the planet surrounded. It may have taken a while, but we overcame your' cowards sabotage." He scoffed and lashed out with a fist. Leechon did not flinch as his eye sustained a direct hit. "So you're not talking, huh?" snarled Conan. "Cowardly folk rarely do anything, at least not until you're not expecting it. So where is Faith? Where is she, you paltry piece of filth?" Leechon smiled, almost imperceptibly, since he seemed to find his predicament humorous. Conan punched him again, in the other eye, this time harder.

Taking his time, the former lieutenant said, "You think I know where Faith is, don't you? But I don't...." He smiled with mirth. "The Overseer took her. How should I know where? Pyro, perhaps. Yes, probably Pyro."

"Pyro? Tell me anything else you know," Conan snapped, "and I might give you painkillers while we slowly disembowel you."

"Disembowel?" Leechon queried, totally incredulous. "Isn't that a bit barbaric?" He paused and mimicked a frown in a manner reminiscent of bad theatrics. "She is no longer a virgin, you know. I saw to that myself while I had her...here...in this very room." He looked around. "Yes, I re—"

Conan's eyes flew open as he exploded in fury. "Coward! Coward! There's no height to your treachery and lack of — oh, you'll loath the day you were conceived when I'm through with you!" His face went blood red and his eyes looked as though they would pop out of their sockets. He considered having the dirtbag executed immediately, but opted against it. *How about draining his blood bit by bit so he withers away like a parched plant? Of course I'd rather keep him alive, to torment until he begs me to stop. Get down on your hands and knees, Benjamin, and I might consider it...*

Leechon smacked his lips veraciously. "A fine daughter you've got — had — assuming she's still alive. She was delicious!"

Why is he provoking me? "You are a scumbag and the fool of all fools." Conan walked up to him and spit in his face.

Leechon let the saliva drip down into his eye. He never winced, not a bit. "Not very amicable, are you? Not a deficiency a leader should have. I should take your plac—"

Conan roared, "Damn you! Shut up! You could be Aytlon's offspring!" He believed it, too.

"So I'm satanic now — just because I side with the Flameoids and have sex with your daughter?" Leechon laughed. "I think I understand your frustration, though."

"Frustration!" Conan exclaimed furiously. "Ahhh! Your mind is a twisted mess! I'll deal with you later and you'll wish you had died fifty years ago." He stormed toward the exit, struggling not to personally decapitate the man now. *Either very evil or incredibly idiotic!*

"I'm fifty-two, Switzgerald." Even the voice was aggravating, with its ruggedness and bass. Conan decided to leave before he did something he would regret.

* * *

The Captain and his large fleet had paid a brief visit to Tesoidnarg Prime, pleased to see they had defeated the enemy independently. He had made a point to see Ja'Ceb before he departed to liberate Veronica.

Ja'Ceb had become rigid when he saw his superior and Conan had told him to put himself at ease. Ja'Ceb loosened up just a bit. "It went well obviously. How was it?"

"Very difficult, but we pulled through," Ja'Ceb replied, both proud and intimidated to be having a conversation with the Captain of the Elite Guard. His uniform was neatly pressed and tidy, as though it had never been worn in battle. The numerous blood stains were hardly noticeable after the Lieutenant worked so hard to scrub them out.

"My faith in you was not misplaced," Conan said, nodding once. "I knew you'd be perfect when I saw how you acted. Your princess told me to tell you that she loves you and awaits your return. I said you would say the same to

her."

Ja'Ceb smiled wanly. "Thank you, Sir. You anticipated me well." His expression became stormy. "I hope you find your daughter, Sir. She is an extremely special girl."

"Yes," Conan said and he wanted to end the conversation there. But Ja'Ceb obviously had more to say, so he did not object. "Go ahead. And you can speak freely to me. I won't reprimand you."

Ja'Ceb was fumbling with his tongue. "I don't know what kind of monster would take such a beautiful young girl. I baffles me to the core. What do you think?"

Conan knew the young man would not like to hear of his turbulent early years, but he did not hesitate to burst his bubble. "I was quite the devious character in my adolescence. That was a long time ago, because of the ADB drug I use and the life Lord Damon breathed into me. But it actually happened." He stared into Ja'Ceb's eyes, trying to make him believe. "I did things you wouldn't have imagined. The reason was simple. I couldn't think of anyone but myself. I had fallen into that way of thinking because of my childhood and my false conceptions. I am the way I am now because I realized the error of my ways. Many people helped me come to that."

Ja'Ceb glared and said nothing, awed by the revelation. *Conan Switzgerald was a rebel in his youth?* He thought. "You were a rebel, Sir?" He thought this might lessen the impact of it all.

"Oh, I was more than a rebel," Conan revealed earnestly. "I was a person you, Lieutenant, would not have liked at all. But then something happened, something that changed my perception completely."

"What was that, Captain?" Ja'Ceb felt better to know that fate had intervened to rectify the situation. "Bless Lord Damon you turned out like you are!"

"Of course," Conan agreed, emitting a half-hearted laugh. "When I first became a Shadow, I sneered the the civilization I left behind. I've written about this in my memoirs, if you're interested. I loathed humankind for what it was and what it could not be. But I was mortally injured many years down the road and guess who came to my aid?" Conan did not pause to hear Ja'Ceb's guesses. "It was one of the mere humans I left behind." He laughed, more at himself than at the irony. "I moved on with my life, and I remained loyal to the Shadoway — but I

never forgot."

Ja'Ceb's eyes were wide enough now that the arteries were visible. This was something he would have never imagined. *I'll have to read those memoirs*, he thought. *I'll read them the first chance I get*. He mustered enough courage to ask a question that bothered him a lot: "Weren't you guilty — pardon me if I'm out of line — but weren't you guilty about fighting the Zenith, after one of them spared your life?"

Conan accepted this in a matter-of-fact way. "I understand why you wonder, but no, I does not bother me. That's because I know I fought fair and I believed in what I stood for — and that was a better world. If it wasn't for the faith all Shadows shared, there would be no Shadoway today."

Ja'Ceb contemplated that, but it was of too great a magnitude to encompass. "That's a scary notion," he whispered.

"It is," agreed Conan. "But we don't have to worry about that now. That worry we can save for the fight with the Flameoids. Putting them down is something else I believe in." He waited for Ja'Ceb to comment, but the Lieutenant said nothing. So he continued, "I'm leaving for Veronica tomorrow. The Queen's dead, along with most of the citizens most likely, and it's occupied by Qwerty's abominations. We should be able to take it back easy now, thanks to you, Warrior."

Ja'Ceb brightened at the mention of his nickname. *Ja'Ceb the Warrior*. "A sad story, Sir, but I'm sure it will have a happy ending."

"Hopefully," Conan said quickly, not eager to dwell on hypothesis. He put up with enough of that in strategy sessions. "We'll show them what the Shadoway is made of."

"Good luck on getting Faith back," Ja'Ceb whispered, the concern in his voice clear. "I've got a good idea what it feels like." He hung his head momentarily, imagining what Alpha might be going through.

"Good luck to you too," Conan replied, not feeling all that confident. "Thanks for your support."

* * *

Now he wondered whether Ja'Ceb could actually understand his pain. During his exceedingly savage campaign of violence and expropriation, he would

never have experienced such emotions. Now that those days were a smudged memory he was enduring the turmoil of being human. *Why did I let her go with that beast?* He asked himself, again and again. *Why? Why? Why?* He questioned his grip on his sanity.

In the weeks leading up to the Shadoway's success, the goal had been to purge the enemy from its territories. Now Conan was becoming increasingly certain that it would be necessary to lead a strike into the nerve center of the Flameoid horror. *After all, that will be the only way to save Faith....* He saw no way out of it. From Veronica he would go to Njartis to secure whatever remained and then venture into Flameoid space.

It would all have to be carefully planned to succeed. Usually he brought his daughter into the planning phase of it, but that was certainly not possible now. *I need to get her back....*

If you're searching for something, look in all the nooks and crannies. You could find gold where you least expect it.

— Jeb Hann,
ZSC leader

It took a while, but Faith eventually discovered that Pyro was not such a bad place after all. All the scathing propaganda and tales of terror had made it seem like such a nightmare, but she found there was people here — albeit Flameoids — that were a lot like the Shadows.

The Overseer was not one of them. He had left her to herself for a few days, then came barging onto the set for another show, speaking the same balderdash. He wanted to know if she had seen the light, whether she would join him for a dip in the Sigma bath. She did not let on she had changed her mind at all, responding to his offer with derision: "What? I'm not getting into that horrible cesspool."

Shaking his head, the Overseer left her alone for another stint. Faith strolled the halls of the palace, still getting odd looks from all the passers-by. She hadn't spoken to her friend Urelo for a couple weeks, but she had been thinking about him. *I wonder how many of them there are in his revolutionary movement? A thousand, a hundred, just a few dozen.* She had a hard time imagining many would defy Qwerty. He may have seemed a bit irresponsible and asinine, but he had jaws that clamped shut just as quickly as he flopped around and ordered sloppy pastries.

Faith awoke one morning to see a bulky figure standing at the foot of her bed, through bleary eyes. She sat up immediately and scrutinized him without saying a word — at least she was pretty sure it was a he. She waited for him to announce his purpose instead of embarrassing herself with semantics.

He was a large broad-shoulder man with long white hair, a substantial nose and outstandingly bright blue eyes. He did not seem very old, but his eyes told differently. His breathing was methodical and heavy; Faith could feel it blowing against her face. He lifted his chin when he chose to speak. "Good morning, Faith Ellenore Switzgerald. I am sorry to disturb you, but it is urgent, I'm afraid." When she didn't respond, he continued, in between deep careful breaths. "I knew — in fact, I *know* you're father, Conan. I knew him way before you were born, in the days before the Shadoway was a star empire." He smiled, revealing

rows of gleaming pearl teeth. "I knew it would come to this, though. And I saw the threat back then. I know the threat will not end soon. Do you believe in me, Faith?"

Faith look at him incredulously. "Believe in you? I don't even know you!" This encounter was turning out to be more perplexing than anything else.

The man laughed at this as though that was the most foolish statement he'd heard. "Everybody knows me. Take a closer look and see if I don't look familiar." His transparent eyes stared back as she analyzed his features. "Anything striking you yet?"

In fact, something was leaping out at her. She hadn't noticed it until now, but he looked like someone she had seen often, someone... who had done something extraordinary! Faith realized the face was like an image out of historical records. She had never seen him in flesh and blood, but this man was an exact duplicate of Lord Damon. "But nobody has seen you since the end of the Crude War!" she exclaimed.

"No Shadow has seen me," Lord Damon answered, with a keen flicker in his eye. "But I've been to other places..." He made a swipe at the air and came back with a balled fist. "...places you wouldn't even be able to imagine!" He nodded to ensure her that he was stating facts. "I've been to a planet where the people are only half carbon! It's the only other species in this galaxy. The Elysians — comparable to the Atlanteans back on Earth."

"Who were the Atlanteans?" she asked, momentarily curious. *Is he just speaking riddles or should I listen?*

"They were an advanced group of humans who accomplished what no other could," he replied vehemently. "They had medicines to cure the worst ravages of the time and machines that made life simple. They would have conquered the Earth if they had had the right incentive." He did not bother to enlighten her on the Atlanteans' untimely destruction. Perhaps he did not think the Elysians were in danger of that fate.

"Convince me that you are Lord Damon," Faith challenged, crossing her arms over her chest. She had heard of cloning from dead cells, but that had not been done in generations. It was quite possible, though, that the illustrious figure was still alive and standing before her. But she had to have no doubts.

"Your doubts are understandable," Lord Damon said. "But we can't let them remain. Your father doubted me once, a long time back, but I showed him

the truth."

"He says he is where he is now because of you," Faith whispered. "He admires you." She was amazed to find that the founder of the Shadoway seemed as amazing as history told.

"But you want proof," he said, with a chuckle. "All right, that shouldn't be too hard. Take my hand." He extended it to her lithely.

Faith looked at it for a moment, as if she was performing a spectral analysis. Finally, she took it and asked, "What are you—"

There was a flash of light and Faith fell from reality into what can be best described as a drug-induced chimera. There was blackness initially, until brilliant little stars ripped through. She put a hand over her hurting eyes and saw that it was indistinct and gooey. In awe, she moved it around and it became further blurred around the edges. Bits of flesh came off and dripped into oblivion as red and purple light surrounded. "Wha-wha-wha-wha-t-t-t is-is go-o-ing on-n-n?" she called out, but her words came out chopped and indecipherable.

There was no answer and she began to feel hot. She did not know whether that was from fear or something else. *Where am I? Where is he?* Faith felt like she was being raped a second time, albeit in a different fashion. Then images began flooding into her mind, thousands of them. The flood gates had been forced open and now the tide was surging through. *No — they're not images — more like sensations.* She realized how odd that seemed.

She was experiencing the first excavation of Condensed Radiation on Earth, over two hundred and fifty years ago. The newest fuel had been discovered by accident in the deepest caverns in the planet's crust. Teams of scientists had ventured into the boiling catacombs, protected in cooling suits. "Personal Air and Cooling Units" they had been called, PACs for short. Originally hailed as an outstanding disinfectant and then the next great energy source, no one imagined CR would ever bring the death and mayhem it did.

Faith saw massive explosions and mushroom clouds of blue-green gas. Entire cities were wiped off the map and millions killed in an instant. Industries as well as large corporations went bankrupt. Entire governments disbanded and power shifted unevenly across the globe. New alliances and the dramatic toll from the CR Catastrophe led to the formation of the Shadoway. Originally an obscure fascist regime, it gained ground quickly as thousands of angry and disenchanting people joined it in its struggle to find "The Way." They suffered humiliating defeat at the hands of the United Commonwealth and Zenith, and eventually backed

down.

Then she saw her father at the head of huge battle formations, thousands of Shadows charging well-known landmarks. She recognized the Eiffel Tower and London Bridge from history texts. The Statue of Liberty sustained a direct impact from a missile and crumbled into thousands of pieces. The Shadows rejoiced after a shocking victory in the North American theater.

Swelling with pride, she momentarily forget she was lost in the void. *Father, I wish I was with you now.* She was still unsure about the man she met and what he had done to her. *Could he have drugged me somehow? But that doesn't explain this....*

She peered through parted darkness at an epic battle scene. It was like a busy ant hill, swarming with tanks and warplanes. Odd-looking CR weapons blazed continuously, incinerating the flesh of thousands of combatants. Half of the troops wore the Shadoway gold star and black uniform but their faces were unlike that of any Shadow alive in Faith's time.

The image crossfaded into what appeared to be a spacestation. An albino woman with extremely pale skin and a multitude of snakes emerging from her arms, her legs and hair stood scowling at a trio of onlookers. She shouted, but Faith could not make out the words. The foreign woman flashed a long blue tongue, the snake-like heads squirming over her body. There seemed to be a lapse of time — how much was unclear — and a figure leaped out from the shadows, sending the snake-woman through the space station's plate windows. The glass spewed out into the backdrop of stars and both people vanished.

Elysia, Faith thought. *Wait — why is that word coming to my head?* Everything was flying past her at lightning speed. She didn't think she would ever make any sense out of it. *What in the universe is Elysia?*

Then as though with the flick of a switch Faith was back in normal time and space. It took several moments to get reacquainted with the colors and general feel of this reality. She blinked her eyes and looked up to see Lord Damon smiling down at her. She moved around, realized she was still sitting up in her bed. "What — was that?" She whispered, in a lower voice than she had intended to use.

"I showed you significant instances from the past and the future. It will come together in the end, but we must put a stop to Sebastien Qwerty's meddling." Lord Damon looked toward the exit, then back at Faith. "By the way, Elysia is a planet very far from here. I told you about them when I first came in and we

compared them to Atlanteans."

Of course! That's why that was popping into my head! Faith worked her way out of her flamboyant pink bedsheets and stood rigidly. "Yes, I remember that. The Elysians. Will they destroy themselves like the Atlanteans or will they be lucky?"

"Oh no," Lord Damon said. "Neither. Elysia will play a major role in the Shadowway's future, but you needn't concern yourself with any of that. Leave it all to me." He took Faith's hand gently and she was reminded immediately of the dream image of the hissing red-eyed snakes. "You will get out of here. Just trust me and trust yourself. Conan worries, but that is unnecessary. And remember to do anything you can to stop Qwerty."

"Can you help me escape?" Faith asked, but felt foolish when she saw the Flameoid guard at the door. It appeared as though she was shouting into thin air.

Angrily, the Flameoid barged into the chamber. "If you're addressing me — *no*," he snapped. "His Eminence wishes to see you, so come along." He pointed his gun toward the door, prodding her along. "Be careful with the Overseer." He wasn't offering advice, just trying to scare her. "He's had a particularly bad couple of weeks."

Faith walked along trying to appear composed, but the incident in her chamber did not make that easy. She wondered if she had imagined the entire thing. After all, after the guard's intrusion, Lord Damon had disappeared. In all their conversations, her father had never mentioned anything like that. *Maybe I'm going crazy. Maybe it's just wishful thinking.* Then why would her mind have chosen Lord Damon? There were dozens of other, more suitable candidates for a hallucination. Her father would have been the most logical choice. *Dad, what should I do? What should I do?*

As the golden doors to the Overseer's throne room came into view, she began to feel nauseated. What would the glutton demand of her today? Would he finally force himself upon the pretty young woman? Faith didn't believe his claims of nobility and good intentions. She figured if he got a chance to take advantage of her he would. He had certainly abused his position of power.

Faith may have had her doubts about her conversation with Lord Damon. It may not have actually happened. But she plucked one good idea from it. That was Lord Damon's advice to take down Sebastien Qwerty. Up until now, Faith had tried to defeat him with vindictiveness and by causing him misery.

Maybe it would be best to play along and get into his good graces. She smiled when she the pig sitting on his luxurious volcano glass chair. *Then I'll lull him into turning his warty back.* She nearly salivated at the idea of sticking the knife in.

"I'm glad you're here," the Overseer said, somewhat aggravated. His wings were drooping close to the marble floor and exuding clouds of ozone. The smell reached Faith's nostrils. "It's not been a good time for me lately. Not for the Empire, actually." He tried to sugar-coat it by fabricating excuses. "I should be leading them myself. The last Point Man of the Fleet was not my greatest choice. The Shadowway is a tricky enemy...."

Why don't you lead the forces yourself, coward? It took a lot of effort for Faith to conceal her hatred for the large and ugly beast. She whispered, "Tell me what's happened, Sir."

The Overseer raised an eyebrow, surprised to hear no insults. He flapped his wings, spraying embers. "All right, but you might as well sit down. And servant: you should bring us some of those cheesy pastries I had yesterday. With some potent drinks."

Computers are actually very stupid. They cannot grasp anything more subtle than two plus two or half the value of pi. That is why I fear the gradual machine takeover of everything biologicals have, up until now, done for themselves. When people cease to face challenges their spirits will die and become like a crumbling monument.

— The Anti-Technology Rallies in Washington

Alpha despised the thick purple mists in the sky. She despised Iota 7 in its entirety and could not wait to leave. But she did not know how long she would be trapped on the capital, a prisoner with imagined bars. She wondered how many people in history had felt so powerless and lowly. It was a terrible feeling, even worse than what she had experienced at home. Now she longed for the green hills and trickling waters that went on and on, the mighty old forests exuding a vigor for life. But that was all confined to her memory, unless one counted the charred stumps that would be found on Njartis now. It sickened her what circumstances necessitated. For instance, she had been forced to exist here for close to a year without any hint of something over the horizon.

From time to time she experienced a deep depression, but always emerged brighter and more hopeful than before, convinced that Ja'Ceb would return with arms wide. *If not, what is there to look forward to?*

Alpha walked several miles from the Citadel to what was called the East Aqueduct, where thin columns supported rows of basins that carried gurgling water out of a small body of water to various parts of the city Freedahmer. There wasn't much to brag about for scenery, but for a handful of furs planted here and there by zealous clodhoppers. The small basin was replenished by water that trickled from baby hills, but to Alpha it appeared to be little more than a cesspool.

She sighed and sat down in the hay-like grass. *It's not really that bad and I know it, but I just wish I was home.* She had never thought she'd come to it, but it was very clear to her. *I can make the best of it until Ja'Ceb comes. I'm so proud....*

Animals called ratzkins poked their pointed snouts out of their hidden burrows, realizing they weren't alone. The ratzkins were plump balls of fur with beady black eyes, ringed tails and two powerful legs. They had been reviled by the first settlers on Iota 7, but later generations, thinking the animals were cute,

brought them into their homes as pets. That tradition carried on today, with the ratzkin seconded only by the larger four-legged Wufflers. Personally, Alpha preferred the ratzkin.

When it hopped over, she picked it up and squeezed its midsection. It squeaked and squirmed happily, its head sinking into the softness of its fur. "Can I keep you as a pet?" she asked playfully. She patted it on the head and ran her fingers along the rings of its tail. "You're so cute! I think I'll call you something sweet...something like..." She didn't have to think about it long. "Cebble! That's short for my boyfriends name, Ja'Ceb!" She giggled, trying to take her mind off her problems. *I wonder how Ja'Ceb would react if I called him that? I don't think he'd like it all that much!*

* * *

It was a day later and things seemed better with Cebble to keep her company. "You will call me Princess!" she exclaimed jokingly, sitting with him on her bed. It stared with its coal-black eyes, not sure what to do. "Just kidding, Cebble. I'm not exactly one anymore, unless I'm a princess without a planet." She sunk down into her pillow and closed her eyes. The ratzkin squeaked in protest. "Let me lay here a minute, Cebble. I'm not feeling the best, you know."

About fifteen minutes later she decided to rise for the day. The sun was sending in its daily greetings and she drew the curtains to let in the light. It was not as beautiful as a morning on Njartis, but she was intent on making the best of her life here. *Enough being down in the pig mine*, she told herself. *Climb to the top of the ladder to see the sun if you have to, or fly a plane above the clouds. Hmmm....That's getting a bit perverse*. She chuckled as she slipped out of her nightgown and grabbed her hairbrush.

She straightened her long red hair a section at a time, staring into the mirror at her duplicate. *Well, hello there, Alpha? Do you look good or not? Let's see*. She scanned her physique, noted the curves of her shoulders and breasts, coming eventually to her hips. *I'm not a shallow person and neither is Ja'Ceb. I shouldn't be worrying about how I look*. She had always figured love based on the body was a load of stinking rubbish. Hadn't shadowkind progressed beyond its animal tendencies?

Alpha finished straightening her hair and slipped into a white blouse and short navy skirt. She looked at her mirror double who nodded as she did. *There now, goodbye!* She decided today would be one of her better days. *I don't feel too bad, so why ruin it with nihilism?* She was wearing stockings and high heels by the time she left her room. It was hard to part with old habits, especially

since Ja'Ceb had given her the articles.

She strolled through the hallways, whistling her hellos, with a newfound bounce. Out-of-doors smelled sweeter than she had ever bothered to notice, like vapor honey. *Is it my imagination or is everybody looking at me differently?* It is amazing how one's mind will create illusions to suit one's beliefs.

Alpha decided to make her way across the Numbner bridge, over the river that separated Freedahmer from the neighboring metropolis Allerhalm. It was an hour's walk from the Citadel, the most ambitious hike Alpha had gone on yet. It was far better to find challenges than to stagnate waiting for them to cross her path. The other city loomed across the dark water dotted with fishing vessels and recreational sailors. A smog hung in the air from industrial ventures, but Alpha ignored it.

She was about a dozen steps from the Number bridge, gazing toward the other end, when a voice gave a jolt. "Alpha!" it cried. "Alphaaaa Woddner!" She looked behind her and momentarily forgot to breathe. It was Ja'Ceb and he looked like he had something important to say.

Alpha helped close the gap by meeting him half-way down the road from the bridge. "Ja'Ceb!" she cried. "Ja'Ceb! Jaaa'Ceb!" She couldn't think of anything else to say, just wanted to feel his indescribable touch. They embraced on the sidewalk below tall brick buildings. "I didn't know whether I'd see you again." She noticed there was a new medal dangling from his chest. "What's this?"

He didn't seem to understand until she pointed to the brass. "Oh that," he said, like it didn't hold any significance. "That's for my contribution to the Battle of Beta-Yron. That's what they're calling the battle for Tesoidnarg Prime."

"I hear it was a striking accomplishment — a victory over a larger enemy force." Alpha ran her fingers along his pink cheek. "I'm so proud of you. Do you have any idea how I missed you?"

"It couldn't be any worse than how I missed you," Ja'Ceb said, fully recovered from his mad dash across the city. "But I came rushing — I had to talk to you — because I'm going to be the second lead in our next battle. It's going to be extremely dangerous. I don't know...whether I'll be back, Alpha."

Her stomach lurched and a lump formed in her throat at those ominous words. "You have to do your duty, Ja'Ceb. The Shadoway comes before the individual. That's our desires and our plans," she whispered.

"Is that true?" Ja'Ceb asked with a tone in his voice that betrayed his doubt. "I'm not so sure about it. Why should I leav—" He was silenced by a finger applied to his chapped lips.

Alpha said consoling, "I'm absolutely certain it's the truth. We can't let the bad guys win here. I know that you feel the same underneath all that worry for me." She, too, wanted to have him by her side, but her nobility would not allow her to meddle selfishly with the Shadowway's future. "I'm starting to get used to it here. I just needed to get past my preconceptions." Suddenly her eyes widened with surprise and she scolded herself for being so stupid. "Where is your next assignment, Ja'Ceb? I total—"

"Pyro," Ja'Ceb said with reservations. He put his hands on his hips and took a deep breath. "Straight through Qwerty's front door. It'll be the worst, Alpha, and the Captain insists on it. To tell you the truth, I agree with him. We can't...leave that menace stewing right next to us."

Alpha was stunned by the revelation, but she did not want to dissuade him. "I agree with him, too. You're both perfectly right. We *can't* leave Qwerty to regroup and launch another attack. We were pushed out of our home because we were lax."

Ja'Ceb finished her sentence. "And we can't afford a repeat. I know we can't. It's just I'm afraid I won't see you again." He placed his hands on Alpha's shoulders. "You've heard of love that's more than skin deep. Well, my love for *you* is beyond skin, it's beyond emotions or soul — it encompasses everything, everything that *is you*." He had let his chin down and Alpha pushed it back up. He straightened automatically.

"I feel the same for you," she whispered, getting ready for another hug. This one was longer than the first and followed by an intense kiss. It was unbelievable nobody on the street stopped to observe it.

"I'll look at it as another challenge then," Ja'Ceb stated when they were finished. "Who was it that said life is but a series of obstacles we must overcome?" He looked to her for the answer, but she didn't know either. "I'm pretty sure he was a warrior like me and his words speak volumes to me."

Alpha brushed a hand through her hair, which was ruffling in an emerging breeze. "You can overcome this hurdle just like all the others," she whispered, smiling encouragingly. "I believe in you along with everybody else. Remember that, okay?"

He took her hand and turned her around in the direction opposite the bridge. "Let's get back to the Citadel so I can attend to my business," he said, feeling a lot better about the impending battle. He looked at her appraisingly. "Or do you want to stay here?"

"No," she replied, grinning. "As long as you're with me, I don't care where I am."

Ja'Ceb's heart filled with warmth as he proceeded in the direction of the Shadowway Citadel. The sprawling structure could be seen blocks away, all granite and sandstone made to look eloquent. Like his superior, he did not care for Emperor Baytor, but it was his duty to answer to him. "You know, Alpha, things aren't so bad actually."

The waiting is the worst. That's what will do you in, I think.

— Ther Von Lecer

A week before the aptly named Fervor Fleet hit Pyro, the planet fell into an uncharacteristic hush. Businesses closed along busy streets and everyone young and old rushed home. The downtown of the capital Gu'Rathqul became a spook town. Only the the most foolish ventured out of their bomb shelters for a loaf of bread or a drink. An electronic billboard constructed during the Information Boom thirty-seven years before flashed an ominous message intermittently:

(We will soon be under attack!)

(ETA: 1 days seven hours) [sic]

The Overseer planned to make his stand against the Shadows on his home turf. His ego had obviously been ruptured and bleeding after being forced out of his enemy's space. He had done his best to patch up the injuries and pick up where left off, but the chagrin was distinct in the way he spoke, in the way he walked.

"I am about to blow my composure!" he screamed, flapping his enormous wings intermittently. Sparks flew onto the hardwood flooring. "The Shadows...are *inferior*! We shouldn't be cowed by inferiors!" He paced from one side of the room to the other.

"Your Eminence," Drere Local confidently whispered, "we still have the halol technology. Since they do not, we have the advantage here." He was a burly man with oversized wings and a thick disheveled unibrow. He had fervently served as Point Man for several months, since his predecessor's death on Tesoidnarg Prime. He was not so vicious as he was energetic and determined. Drere Local did not value sleep and got only a few hours every night.

The Overseer rubbed his forehead in contemplation. "We *do* have our Halo-void ships, but I don't know if that will be enough! They destroyed half our fleet last time with some kind of bombs. We should have something like that waiting for *them*. But we are just waiting like weaklings. And we're not

weaklings!"

"No, we most certainly are not," Local said in a low voice. He scowled at the suggestion and sifted his thoughts for a solution "You've still got the Switzgerald girl? I suggest using her as a bargaining chip. " He and Qwerty stared at each other for a second, then Local continued enthusiastically. "We could feign a surrender, which under the circumstances wouldn't seem very suspicious. Then — "

Qwerty didn't seem to appreciate the idea of surrender, even if it was never truly being considered. He acknowledged that it might work, however. "Yes, chances are that Switzgerald will be leading the attack."

"Even better odds for us," the Point Man said. "He will want his daughter back — naturally — in exchange for calling off his brethren. We will let Faith go and she will unknowingly bring aboard a broad-line halol chip."

"What will that do?" demanded the Overseer, growing impatient with the tedious details. There was a glint in his eye, though, that told he liked where this was going.

Local grinned and rubbed his hands together. "It's a new device designed to transmit a halol field over a wide radius. If we activate it on board each Shadoway vessel will become undetectable to the other. In essence, the hand will not know what the other hand is doing."

"It'll be all the easier for us to snip the rats' tails," the Overseer hissed, narrowing his eyes odiously.

"A very good way of putting it, Your Eminence," the Point Man returned in his deep gravelly voice. "Should I get the Switzgerald girl?" He couldn't wait to put the plan into motion, to bring down the enemy in one masterstroke.

"Bring her here," the Overseer said in between chuckles. He turned his back to Local and looked out the bath house's gigantic glass window. Beyond the bumpy horizon were the millions of tiny stars that made up Pyro's constellations. Of particular significance to the Overseer was the vision of the Leebir, the top predator and most ferocious animal on the planet. He compared himself to the Leebir — stronger, faster and more clever than the rest. *Failure is not possible for a man like me....*

* * *

Faith Switzgerald had made great progress in the Flameoid underground. There were more revolutionaries than she had anticipated in her most liberal estimation. The group had spent the past few weeks running down the Qwerty dictatorship, discussing Flameoid weaknesses and secrets and coming up with ways they could aid the impending Shadoway incursion.

Presently, Faith was hunched over a contraband communications console. The beeping, ticking and outdated machine was sitting in the chamber of a co-conspirator. She was transmitting a message to the fleet containing an in-depth description of the working of the halol fields.

"This has given them the upper hand in previous engagements," she wrote quickly, *"but it is time to turn it to the Shadoway's advantage."* She was fairly certain the message would not be intercepted, but she thought better of including her name. It took her a moment to decide. She concluded the transmission, *"Your allies on Pyro"* and beamed the encrypted signal into space. *I'll see you soon, Father,* she thought, her hopes high.

When she returned to the main hallway a chill coursed down her spine. *Am I imagining it?* She wondered. *Or are those guards looking at me strangely?* Both soldiers were stationed at the opposite end of the corridor and did not appear too gregarious. When the huskier one put his hand on his CR pistol, she knew she was in trouble.

She started running down the hall, not looking to see if she was being followed. *Do they know about my transmission? Did someone rat me out?* She soon heard the heavy footfalls of the guards' pursuit.

"Stop right there!" a loud voice shouted. It was snarly and held unspoken threats. "Stop or we'll shoot!" The pounding of boots was growing heavier; other guards were joining the chase.

Indignantly, Faith slowed and came to a halt. *Which no-good gave me away?* She wiped sweat from her brow, panting, and spun around. There were six troops pointing CR pistols as though the weapons were but extensions of their arms. The man in front had a blinding glow that represented his rage. Faith didn't speak to him, waited to see what he offered.

The words out of his mouth were completely unexpected. He whispered, "Why did you run?" The others stayed silent as he gripped his weapon, staring down at the young woman. He repeated, "Why did you run?"

Faith blinked. *Why did I run?* She felt very hot suddenly but did not realize that her cheeks were turning a bright pink. *That's a good question.* She realized to her embarrassment that she did not actually know the answer. She told the guards so with an uncertain laugh.

He lowered his weapon and the other guards followed suit. His breathing returning to normal, he nodded and said, "We don't have time to discuss it. Your presence is requested by Overseer Qwerty right away. Will you follow us....?"

Faith nodded and followed the troops to Qwerty's bathing room. *Why does he have to meet me here every time? Is it just to spite or intimidate me?* She held her chin up and straightened her posture. *It isn't going to work.*

Upon entering the glowing room, Faith was met by the sounds of bubbling liquid. Additional tubs and fountains had been installed since her last visit. The Overseer soaked in a creamy white substance, his wings hanging over the floor. He was trying to act composed, but Faith could tell his mind was in disarray.

"My dear Faith!" the Overseer boomed, as though he had not expected her. "Come in and take a seat beside me! Right here beside the fountains." He glanced at the gushing liquid and sighed. "Don't you find them pretty?"

Faith did not answer and did not move from the doorway. *What do you want from me, Sebastien Qwerty? You are a man who does nothing without purpose.*

"Not speaking, heh?" The Overseer sighed again and scrutinized Faith's physique. She was wearing a loose-fitting T-shirt and a pair of blue shorts, nothing else. *Her face is a bit red, but she seems to have adjusted to the temperatures.* "Do you find it hot?"

"Only a little," Faith lied. Actually, she found it barely tolerable, but she would never reveal that to her oppressor. She scowled and spoke slowly. "If you've brought me here to coax me into joining you in that tub —" She brushed a hand through her ponytail, causing it to bob.

"No, that's not it at all," the Overseer interrupted, sounding irritated. He paused, thoughts sifting through his brain. The fire in his eyes began dancing. "How would you like to see your father again?"

"My father?" She regretted sounding so weak, but she had been caught

off guard. *Why would I be seeing my father? What is he planning?* She expected nothing but trouble from the beastly man.

The Overseer came forward in the tub, causing water to splash against the porcelain. "Yes, your father, Faith!" He manufactured a pleasant laugh. "You see, the Flameoid Empire does not wish to fight any longer. Especially not here at home. If we could strike a bargain with the Shadows, a swap maybe — their retreat for your safe return — that would be most equitable."

Faith could not keep the confusion out of her expression. "Do you really want to surrender?" *How could this lead to a trap?* She trusted Qwerty less than she did Lieutenant Leechon.

The Overseer nearly cringed at the word "surrender", but he restrained himself. "Yes, that is the truth, as much as I hate to say it. Our losses so far are too much to have to recover from. If I continued the war any further, the people might revolt." He put as much sincerity into the words as he could.

Faith immediately thought of the revolutionary underground. They had been disgruntled with the war and Qwerty's handling of it since nearly the beginning. *Maybe he's telling it as it is for once.* She stepped further into the room and gazed out the glass into the waning sun.

"They will be coming in the morning," Qwerty said, "give or take a couple hours. How would you like to put an end to this ruinous war? Surely the Shadows would not object to that?"

Faith did not find that at all unreasonable. Still, she was leery. "I want to put an end to the war," she whispered carefully, "and I want to be with my father again. But do you have any other plans?"

The Overseer chuckled and said, "I do not deal in schemes, young lady. If you would have spent a little more time by my side you would have figured that out. Oh well. I will have to settle for a lesser female."

Faith did not wish to comment on that. Instead, she stared out into the sunset and studied the silhouettes of mountains rising into the atmosphere. *I'm starting to see the beauty of this ecosystem,* she realized. *Given time, it could have grown on me.* She thought of the seas of lava, the exotic and bizarre fauna and flora.

"That's Kevanon Mount," the Overseer informed her. She turned her attention to him and blinked uncomprehendingly. "That mountain," he explained.

"It's named after Spark High Duke Kevanon Poqaz, who helped bring the Empire to its present form. He fought during the War of the Inferno, around fifteen hundred years ago."

"That's the war between...?" Faith didn't know much about Flameoid history, but was beginning to find an interest in it.

"The Sparks and the Leviathans," Qwerty replied. He had found an opening and was taking it. "That war is why the planet Pronensia is the ball of charred rubble it is today."

Faith saw what he was doing and chose to close the door. She cut him off: "When will you need me?" *I don't need to spend any extra time here.* She half-turned toward the exit, one eye on the Overseer.

"You should be here before the Shadowway fleet's estimated time of arrival," he informed her. "We don't want to leave it too close, but you can get some rest or whatever you would like." He grinned, revealing his yellowish fangs and serpentine tongue. "I prefer to spend my downtime in the baths, as you can see."

Faith felt like rolling her eyes. "Very well, then. I'll be back before then." She spoke abruptly and a bit condescendingly. She walked through the exit, yelling out, "Leave me alone until then, Sebastien Qwerty!" The Overseer's eerie laughter followed her down the corridor.

I still don't trust the man, but I don't see how anything horrible could come out of this. She was approaching her chamber on the far side of the palace. Most Flameoids did not glance up at her in puzzlement anymore, but some of the young men still took a fair peek. *Maybe he's telling the truth.* She bit her lower lip, relished the sensation. *Maybe, maybe not.*

* * *

The Fervor fleet received Faith's transmission when they were still several hours from Pyro. In total it was a page and a half long, containing schematics for the Halo-Void ship and specs for the halol "chip". It was signed "*Your allies on Pyro*" — fairly odd, under any circumstance.

Captain Switzgerald was stirred by the message, but he did not allow it to get his hopes up. *For all I know, Faith may be dead and this may be a Flameoid trick.* "Continue on," he ordered the pilot in a somewhat distant voice. *Faith...? Is it really you?*

Standing beside him, but keeping silent, Ja'Ceb was contemplating similar things. Mostly, he thought how terrible he would feel if Alpha had been kidnapped and taken to a hostile planet. *Thank God you're safe.* He had the princess to come home to. *You made me promise I'd be back, and I'll try my best to do good on my word.* He had only the slightest tinge of doubt.

Conan studied the schematics quickly. "The halol field is so simple an idea," he said, turning to a technician. "But we should be able to neutralize it, right?" His voice did not betray it, but he was not entirely certain.

"I am almost sure we can," came the reply from the tall and pale technician. "It'll take a while, though. I'll need to recalibrate the scanners and add a lot of —"

Conan cut him off, not out of impatience, but out of necessity. "How long, Hool?"

"About two hours," the technician replied, scratching his mop of thick curly hair. His eyeglasses were falling off his nose and he pushed them back up.

Conan stroked his beard for a moment, then ordered, "Make it one hour, Hool, and make sure it works." *If we can neutralize their halol shields, it'll make things a lot simpler. It might save lots of lives. Thank you, Faith — if that message was from you.*

"Yes, Sir." Hool scurried away, eager to get to work. The schematics were detailed, but there were a lot of guesses to be made and tested. Sweat soon glistened on the technician's brow as he tried to complete the work in the short time provided.

Conan turned to Ja'Ceb and waited a moment before speaking. He spoke low so no one else could hear. "I'm wondering if that transmission — if it couldn't be from Faith." Nervously, he stroked his beard and looked away from his comrade. "I know that's a silly question, but...."

"No, Sir, that's not a silly question at all," Ja'Ceb replied. "It's important to hold out hope. Otherwise, we wouldn't ever get anything done. This battle, for instance. If we had no hope, would we have set out in the first place?"

"I suppose not," said Conan. "But how does this pertain to my question?"

"I'm getting to that, Sir," Ja'Ceb explained, "so just bear with me. The fact is that hope and to perhaps to a lesser extent courage are prerequisites to any endeavor. That's anything we aspire to do during our lives. It's a natural thing — hope. And we need it to live day-to-day."

"I see what you're getting at," Conan said wistfully. "But that doesn't answer my question."

"I'd love to think it was Faith, Sir." Ja'Ceb's expression was uncharacteristically serious. "And I really wish I could say it was so. But giving false hope is not something a true friend should really do." He sighed, glanced at the technicians scrambling to reprogram the ship's systems. "I want to get Faith back as much as you do, though. I don't want you to get me wrong."

Conan gave Ja'Ceb several substantial claps on the back. "You're a good man, Ja'Ceb! Never doubt that!" he exclaimed. "I just wish —"

"Captain!" the communications officer called out. "We're receiving another transmission. It's pre-recorded and self-terminating. What are your orders?"

"Put it on screen!" Conan shouted, his tone betraying his elation. *Could it be from the people? Could it be Faith?* The tension built inside him, until it was almost bubbling from his pores, then plummeted when Overseer Qwerty's face appeared on-screen.

"This is the Flameoid Overseer," he said in his deep and gravelly voice. His wings were not visible, but for a small portion on the sides of the screen. "I have an offer to make — one I suspect you will not want to refuse. The Flameoid Empire has been severely injured in the war thus far and we no longer wish to engage you."

They've been severely injured! Conan glared at the ugly face incredulously. "I can't believe it," he murmured. How did he expect them to call off the fight now?

"We can offer you a fair trade," the Overseer rumbled, bringing his face closer to the screen. "We have Faith Switzgerald in our custody." The screen switched to a view of the young woman chained to a cement wall and hog-tied. She squirmed as guards brought a flaming hot poker closer and closer to her face. Her eyes sparkled in the flickering light. "In return for your complete withdrawal from our space I will hand Faith over to you, safe and sound. If not...." He shrugged as though the consequences were irrelevant. "Well, let's just say you

wouldn't like to choose that option." His eyes narrowed to coal-black slits. "You have two hours to decide. I hope to hear from you then." The transmission ended with an image of Faith staring wide-eyed into the camera. Then the screen faded to black.

Every end is a new beginning.

— Unknown

The Fervor fleet was three hundred kilometers from Pyro when it came to a sudden halt. Communications lines crackled with EM interference. Conan Switzgerald was, for the first instance in his long career, completely uncertain. Qwerty had him in a tasteless but effective trap. The wrong move would be disastrous.

Conan brought Ja'Ceb into his small and conservative bedchamber. There was only a single bunk with drab sheets and a pale flux lamp. "What should I do?" Conan hissed, profusely sweating.

Ja'Ceb was hesitant, but he went with his heart's instinct. "My brain says it is a gamble," he admitted, "but I wouldn't feel right if we didn't attempt to save her."

"So you think I should accept the bargain?" Conan asked. He glared at the other officer for a moment and sighed. "I couldn't say no to that...Especially not now. You even keep your suit perfectly ironed and clean."

Ja'Ceb actually found that he was able to laugh. "I didn't know you had a sense of humor, Sir. But yes, I consider the uniform a part of my person. I rise extra early to make sure it's spotless."

"There's a lot you don't know about me," Conan replied. "I'll let you read my memoirs from the War, if you'd like, as soon as we're home." He inched toward the door, now completely serious.

"I'd love to absorb your memoirs," Ja'Ceb said, honestly engrossed by the idea. He had long been fascinated and intimidated by the Captain's distinguished past. *He has accomplished and lived so much more than me. One day, I want to be just like him.*

"I must warn you, though," Conan explained, as they walked down the dim-lit hallway. Broken lights flickered and sent a shower of sparks over their heads. "The initial days of the Shadoway — and also of my life — and not exactly as you must picture now. You should steel yourself for whatever those memoirs contain. It won't all be honorable."

Ja'Ceb remembered having a similar conversation before. "I remember you telling me before," he whispered. "Don't worry. My mind is open." He wondered, however, what made the Captain so pretentious. *What has been hidden from me all this time?* He looked at his superior, the long nose, short snowy beard, broad shoulders and could not see beyond the glowing perception he had always had.

"Get me Qwerty!" Conan commanded as he stormed onto the bridge. "I want my daughter back and I want to tell him myself. Delay that!" He turned to the technicians still scrambling over the shimmering computer consoles. "What's the status on those modifications?"

"They're just about complete," came the hurried reply. The man was almost panting. "Can I have just a few more minutes?"

"You've got them," Conan said, "but make it quick. I want you to scan everything within a five hundred kilometer radius of the planet. I want to see what the Flameoids have lurking out there." He waved for the communications officer to proceed. He stood rigidly in the center of the bridge, waiting for the repulsive visage to assault his eyeballs. It took nearly as long as he expected, give or take a few seconds. *Biding your time, eh Sebastien?* He fought an urge to spit on the floor. *There's nothing I'd rather see than the last Flameoid's carcass strewn across your filthy world.*

The Overseer appeared on the view-screen. He appeared disheveled and unprepared, his eyes wild and staring. He breathed heavily, slow deep breaths. "This is —"

Conan railed at him. "I know who you are, Qwerty. Obviously, you know who I am, as well, or we would not be having this conversation." He was greatly annoyed it had taken so long for Qwerty to answer his call. "What took so long? Did I catch you on the toilet?"

"I am the Overseer! I have important things to do," he huffed. In actuality, he had been awaiting the Captain's call, but had not wanted to give his adversary the benefit of a swift response. That would have told too much. So he had taken time to inspect and arrange the portraits of past Overseers on the Wall of Infinitude. The prized portrait of his father had been slightly askew.

"I'm sure," Conan snarled. *He was probably picking the food out from underneath his claws.* A silence fell as each man waited for the other to bring up the real purpose of the communiqué.

"Have you thought over my terms?" The Overseer finally asked.

"Yes, I have," said Conan, as he glanced at the now still technicians. It looked as though they had completed the updates to the scanning equipment. He hesitated before stepping beyond the point of no coming back. "After conferring with my group, we've decided your terms are acceptable." The words were like filth in his mouth. "We'll leave your space...as soon I see Faith safe and sound on this bridge." He stared down his nose at his hated rival — the man that had single-handedly brought so much destruction to his home — with defiance.

"Yes, yes. You don't have to worry," the Overseer said. "I'll have my Keeper release her right away." He turned away and the connection was severed.

My Keeper? Conan thought in puzzlement. *That's an odd term.* He looked at Ja'Ceb, said, "That must his 'dungeon keeper'. Well, there's no turning back now. We've made the agreement and I will not renege. Sometimes I think all I've got is my honor and my body — and my daughter, if she is actually coming back to me."

"I believe she is, Sir," Ja'Ceb whispered, his eyes filled with hope.

The scanning system was now geared to detect and neutralize the effects of the Flameoid halol. Several seconds after the first sweep was initiated, they got a bird's eye view of Pyro and its two satellites. The beam revealed a tangent of Halo-void battleships, one by one.

"So they *were* hiding up here," Conan grumbled. "But we knew that. It looks like they have their entire fleet in orbit. They were prepared to battle." During his youth, Conan might have risked a hostage's well-being and went in with guns afire. He had realized the value of life, however, as old age made him wiser. *Besides*, he thought, *how could I ever do that to Faith?*

Twenty minutes later a cargo vessel was requesting clearance to dock in the spacecraft's hold. Permission granted, it inched its way slowly through the hatch and came to a rest on the titanium bay floor. Conan, Ja'Ceb and a retinue of guards rushed to its side, just as the port opened.

Conan waited anxiously, not worrying for once about appearances or ceremony. Would his daughter emerge from the ship? Logic told him so, but fear threatened to eclipse any sanity he had retained.

Faith appeared suddenly, a bruised and soiled bag of bones. Her eyes

brightened as she ran forward, like an ecstatic child. "Daddy!" she cried. "I never thought I'd see you again!"

Conan wrapped his arms around his daughter and felt her shivering goose flesh, realizing she was indeed hard and real. "I missed you," he whispered. "But I thought I'd get you back, even if I had to risk everything."

Her eyes widened. "What did you do to get me?" she asked.

"You don't know?" He thought for a second and answered that himself. "No, of course you don't. I had to agree to call off my attack and leave Flameoid space. I regret not being able to grind Qwerty into splinters. But I'm just glad to have you. That's worth more to me than any of that."

After hugging her father again, Faith looked to Ja'Ceb, who stood erect to the side, smiling warmly. "Do I have you to thank, too, Sir?"

The Lieutenant put out his hands in a modest gesture. "It was all the Captain, actually. He wouldn't rest at all. The name's Ja'Ceb, by the way. I'm glad to finally see you, Ma'am."

"Ja'Ceb has done a lot more than he will admit," Conan said, patting the other man on the shoulder. "He led the victory on Tesoidnarg Prime, pushed the invaders completely out of the Shadowway. I knew he would be an outstanding commander when I first saw him in action."

Ja'Ceb looked as though he might blush. "I'm just doing my duty," he said. He was never comfortable with praise and attention. He'd rather have the satisfaction of knowing he had accomplished good than awards and commendations. "But you are both most welcome."

When the group returned to the bridge, they were met by shouts and confusion. "Sir!" called the technician. "We've lost contact with our fleet! We can't communicate or see any of them on radar!"

"What's causing it?" snapped Conan, annoyed at how fast the calm had been shattered. *A few seconds of happiness and I have to pay for it like this.* He shook his head. "Could it have something to do with the scanner modifications?"

"I don't think so," the technician said. "Wait....I'm detecting a halol field, something different from what we've seen, but I'm sure that's what it is. I believe it's originating from our ship."

There was an eerie radio silence. Only the beeping of machinery remained. On the view screen, Flameoid ships stripped of their cloak moved into position around the Shadoway battalion. Conan figured out what was going on as soon as he saw what they intended to do. He marched over to Faith and said, "Check yourself for something unusual — they must have planted the halol device on you."

Faith searched her clothes and hair, patting everything down section by section. "I don't — wait!" she exclaimed. "They injected me with something! Could it be that small? When I asked what it was, the doctor wouldn't answer." She rubbed a red blotch on her forearm.

"Here?" Conan put his face close to the barely visible perforation. "It's probably in there, but how will we get it out? I would imagine they embedded it pretty deep."

"I don't think the needle went in very far," she explained, digging at the spot with a fingernail. "If only I could get it out." She dug a bit more, then gave up. "I need a knife, something I can use to dig the damn thing out of there."

Conan was greatly alarmed. "Are you sure? I wouldn't want you to —" An explosion rocked the ship as the Flameoids initiated their attack. He struggled to maintain his balance. "Fire back! Let them know we can see them as well as they see us!" He glared at his daughter and called for a scalpel with great reservations. "This is only because it is absolutely necessary. We'll just cut enough to get the device out and our doctor will make sure you're okay."

"I'm not worried about that," Faith said, her voice trembling. "I want us to come out on top." She extended her offending arm for a grayish-haired man in a dark brown medical vest. "Quickly, while we've still got a chance!" She cringed as a massive explosion indicated the loss of an allied vessel.

The doctor passed a scanner over the arm twice and snapped it shut. "There's something there for sure," he explained, removing a sophisticated laser scalpel from his breast pocket. "You'll feel a lot of heat when I —" She motioned for him to proceed and he pressed a slender finger to the top of the instrument.

As the red beam concentrated on her flesh she tried to stay still and avoided looking down. *It's no so bad. I endured the flames of Pyro.* Before she completed that thought, the laser was off and the heat was dissipating. "Is it done?"

Forming a pincer with his thumb and index finger, the doctor extracted

a jet black piece of machinery. Holding it out so she and Conan could see, he proclaimed, "Now it is done!"

Conan snatched it and had it crushed beneath his boot in an instant. "There we are," he said, spreading the particles around with his heel. "How is the halol field now? Can we communicate with our fleet?"

There was an alarming pause before the comm officer spoke. "Yes, Sir, we're registering all fifty thousand ships." A roar cut off his last few words.

"Tell them to go into square pyramid formation and prime their Switzgerald Launchers! Our agreement with the Flameoids is *off*!" Conan snarled. "Fire a spread of missiles and don't miss any of the bastards!"

Blood trickled down Faith's arm, but she didn't move to wipe it off. *All of us, from the commoner to the King, share the same blood. But does that include the Flameoids? What kind of people are they, really?* She found it hard to follow most of her people in categorizing them as savages, especially after spending so much time in the revolutionary underground.

Conan wiped the blood from her arm with his fingers and onto his uniform. When his daughter glared at him in surprise, he said, "You're more important than these garments, Faith. I love you like I've never loved anyone in my entire life." He finished cleaning up the blood, then added with a smirk, "It's not like it doesn't have blood stains already."

There was another massive explosion very close to their ship. Ja'Ceb watched the carnage on the view screen, shaking his head. "We're taking a huge beating. I wish I was on the surface, fighting my way through hordes of enemies." He took his calling from Ja'Ceb the Warrior and preferred the heat of eye-to-eye combat than the ambiguity of space warfare.

The rumbling was like thunder in everyone's ears. "Hopefully we will get there," Conan said quickly, before shouting orders to the sweaty pilot.

Faith was sifting her mind for ideas. *There must be something we can do. Is there anything I'm forgetting?* She recalled studying the ins and outs of Flameoid weaponry. *The Halo ships are heavily shielded, but there must be something....*

Ja'Ceb was becoming anxious. *Pacing the bridge when I could be slaying foes!* He, too, was scouring his memory for anything that might be useful. "Is there any way we could use their halol technology against them?"

That popped a cork in Faith's brain and she immediately formulated a plan. "Are there any more ships cloaked?" She demanded, loud enough so that everyone could hear. When it was confirmed, she continued, "Is there any way we could produce laser beams?"

"All our vessels are equipped with lasers," Conan explained, "even the most basic freighter. But they're only useful for maintenance and exploration purposes, not any kind of combat."

"Oh I believe I can think of combat where it would be useful," Faith replied, looking at her father with a glint in her eye. "Get back a good distance — a little farther than you are now — and hit one of those cloaked ships with a laser beam. I am almost certain you'll be happy with what happens."

Confident in his daughter's assessment, he shouted, "Do it!"

A few seconds later, a laser shot across the glowing battlefield and intercepted one of the Flameoid vessels hiding in orbit. This caused a slight ripple in the halol field, momentarily revealing metal. The red beam bounced from that ship to the next to the next as every one imploded upon itself with an awesome squeal.

"Keep firing the lasers," Faith said awkwardly, looking at her father. "We want to keep the effect to a maximum."

"And launch another volley of Switzgerald missiles," he added, winking at Faith. He watched with wide eyes as one enemy ship after another caved in on itself, killing hundreds of Flameoids instantly. *An awful amount of killing, but think...I would have enjoyed it once.*

The Fervor fleet gained considerable ground following that massive blow. Eventually they were able to surround the enemy in a loose circle, CR weapons pointed threateningly.

"We'll give you one last chance to surrender," Conan transmitted, showing a gleam of compassion. *The scum are lucky I'd even consider such an irony.* When several seconds had passed, he repeated the statement, adding, "This is it. If you pass this up I will *not* show any mercy whatsoever." This was no bluff; he would hang by every word.

A Flameoid vessel opened fire, making their intentions clear. "Finish them off," Conan growled, feeling like slapping himself.

The Fervor fleet went through numerous maneuvers before cornering the last vestiges of the Flameoid military. Dual Condensed Radiation and Switzgerald missiles stripped the vessels of their hull, sucking the crew into space. It was gratifying to know they would never have a chance to let out their last cries of anguish.

Eventually there was nothing left but the three quarters that remained of the group that left Iota 7 and the flaming husks of the enemy crafts. Pyro hung before them, like a vulnerable fruit that was ripe for the picking.

“Ja’Ceb, my friend,” Conan said triumphantly, “it looks like you’ll be going groundside as you wished.”

* * *

The Overseer was forced to watch as his kingdom disintegrated around him. With most defensive structures lying in ruins, Flying Fortress CR II’s had systematically shelled the perimeter, reducing his guardian force to a third of its size. Now Shadow troops were swarming the horizon, the way open for them to subvert the governmental palace.

Teeth gritted, the Overseer watched as they approached. He felt backed into a corner and let down by his god, but he would not concede defeat. *Flameoids are the superior species, so it would be anathema to cow to these Shadows*, he thought. Pure abhorrence registered on his face as he recognized the leader. *Conan Switzgerald, a repulsive patsy if ever I’ve seen one.*

The clouds parted by and by, allowing Pyro’s intense crimson sun to shine down in resentment. Maroon pterodactyls flew by, emitting shrill squeaking noises. The volcanic wasteland as a whole seemed to writhe with tension, awaiting the outcome of the battle royal.

The Shadows stopped half a yard from the Flameoid palace. Conan Switzgerald scrutinized Qwerty with a scornful eye. *He must be surrounded by his entire palace staff* he laughed inwardly, *even his maids and butlers*. He noted several adolescents were in the group. “You know why I am here, Qwerty,” Conan called out, not bothering to respect his title. “Why not give up here and save your rotten skin?”

Qwerty spit in the dirt beneath his clawed toes. “I’d sooner bathe in ice water,” he snarled.

Ja'Ceb panted, pointing his CR cannon firmly in the Overseer's direction. *This is the beast that took Faith. I could never forgive him. Neither could Conan.* He looked at his mentor's husky back. Ja'Ceb was all sweaty after running through Laleth, the central peninsula on Pyro. He had helped lead the takeover of the spaceport before charging into the capital city. The palace loomed before him like bait, the final hurdle in this lengthy and trying course.

"You know I penetrated the most 'secure' areas on Iota 7?" Qwerty asked slowly, raising an eyebrow in derision. He didn't wait for an answer. "I have my own operative installed as emperor, who also happens to be a friend of mine. Yes, Njartis Baytor and I go a long way back." He chuckled at Switzgerald's expense.

I should have known, he thought in disgust. He was taken aback slightly, but couldn't have said he was all that surprised. *Baytor struck the wrong chord with me the first time we spoke.* "What does that have to do with the now?" he snapped.

"I thought I'd bring you up to date on your ineptitude," the Overseer laughed. "Are you ready to fight one-on-one?"

"Let's get at it!" Switzgerald shouted. He took a fighting stance as the assemblage of Flameoids made an opening for the Overseer.

"I'll dispense of this scum for you, Sir," Ja'Ceb cut in, eager to tackle the source of his anger.

"No," Conan said. "I want to do this myself." He threw his weapons to the ground and balled his fists. "There couldn't be anything more suitable now than giving him a good face lift."

The Overseer advanced, flapping his giant wings. "Have you ever been on Pyro before? It's really quite magnificent." He lashed out, trying to surprise his opponent, but Switzgerald ducked. "Hah! Good show!"

Conan resigned himself to silence as he appraised the Flameoid. *Blah, blah, blah — always flapping his bloody gums.* He made as though to strike with his right hand, but quickly lashed out with his left. Qwerty was flabbergasted and suffered a smack in his eye. "That's for what you did to my daughter."

The Overseer scowled, no longer feeling jovial. He moved from side to side, searching for an opening. "Dirty tricks, dirty people," he whispered, like it was a mantra. He lashed out, but was blocked and fainted to the left.

Conan took that to his advantage and tripped the Overseer, pounding him on the back of the skull at the same time. The Overseer fell into the black mud to the cheers of the observing Shadows. Conan kicked him in the spine several times, grunting and puffing. His face was red and his eyes seemed wild, taking him back to his rambunctious youth.

The Overseer remained where he was for a moment, and then made a move that was barely noticeable. Conan saw the glint of metal and sent a meaningful nod in Ja'Ceb's direction. When the Overseer leaped from the ground, wielding a poison-pod projector, he was met by a blast from Ja'Ceb's cannon.

"Hope you rot in hell," Conan hissed, kicking at the burned and smoking meat that fell to the ground. He looked up at the crowd of Flameoids and extended his hands. "Anyone else looking to pick a fight? Because I'm piqued." There were no takers.

The Shadows stormed into the palace, but met no resistance. By this point it was obvious who had won. They were even cheered on by a group who declared themselves the "Revolutionary Underground". Apparently, they had provided Faith with a great deal of the information on halol fields and other Flameoid technologies.

The Shadoway declared martial law across the entire Flameoid Empire. Eventually, they would appoint a new government, but things would have to be in relative order well before that. Several months later, angry mobs tracked down and killed the remaining Qwerty family, including two illegitimate sons and a daughter.

Here we are, again at the beginning.

— The Wanderer

Alpha found herself sharing more and more time with Cebble. "It's funny," she whispered, "you're just a ratzkin, but you seem so true compared to everybody else around here." The animal burred in contentment as she stroked its fur.

She took Cebble with her everywhere, from the market to the neighboring towns. Iota 7 had beautiful country air that was just beginning to be ruined by industrial toxins. *Following the same patterns*, Alpha realized, *over and over*. Sometimes life grew tiring and it seemed preferable to just lay in bed.

But Alpha forced herself outside, into the calming breeze, if for her ratzkin's benefit. This particular day was rather melancholy, with a thick of clouds overhead and a light drizzle. She decided she couldn't stand being inside any longer, though, and started toward the twin city.

It turned out she was not the only lonely soul. She passed other people from all walks of life on the various roads that led through the sections of Freedahmer. The downtown was busy and growing, while the surrounding neighborhoods were gradually becoming slums. Alpha followed the by-road that led to the Numbner bridge and the city of Allerhalm.

She loved sprawling Allerhalm because it seemed so foreign and exciting. Many months imprisoned in Freedahmer had diluted her experience there, so she had to begin fresh somewhere else. *This*, she thought, *is a place just as good as any*.

Cebble followed along, of course, grown accustomed to the princess' presence. It squeaked and made other shrill noises as it jumped around her. Alpha smiled down at it, offering the occasional treat. Cebble enjoyed a fruit mixture called Berririum, so that was what she gave him on these long walks.

Alpha took in the scenery as she traversed the bridge, including the tall trees and abundant shrubbery. There were young couples sitting on benches amidst flower gardens. There may have been something here that reminded her of home.

Several more hours of exploration ensued. She was pleased at first, but

frustrated when she realized there were areas of Allerhalm that paled in comparison to Freedahmer. Every beauty, she found, had its cancer.

When she returned to the Citadel, drenched and shivering, she was met with a flurry of activity. Soldiers were returning from the Flameoid Empire, proud of what they had accomplished but sobered by the tremendous losses. Alpha brightened momentarily, her eyes scanning the crowd. Her heart sunk and a feeling of dread surfaced when she couldn't find Ja'Ceb. She drifted amid the gigantic throng, looking occasionally like she was going to stumble. *Where is he? He has to be here!* He had promised he would return.

One soldier noticed her stricken expression and stopped for a moment. He explained, "Do not worry, Princess. The Lieutenant is safe and sound. He stayed a bit longer with the Captain to tie things up on Pyro. He'll be here within the next few days."

Alpha was relieved more than saddened by the fact that she would have to wait a few additional days for Ja'Ceb's return. *He's alive and he will be back. That's all that matters.* She put her hand on her heart and whispered a prayer to Lord Damon.

* * *

It was three days following the army's return to Iota 7. Alpha awoke to see the sun's billions of bright smiles coming through her window. She glanced at Cebble who was curled into a sphere beside her bed.

She dressed for the day, not bothering to look at herself in the mirror, dreaming of her return to Njartis. But she knew that would be a long way off. Ja'Ceb was a lieutenant in the Shadoway elite guard and his obligation was to remain here. That's why she was trying so hard to make a life for herself.

When she was finished dressing and fixing her hair, Alpha made her way to the door. "You'll have to stay here," she said to Cebble, opening the door. She turned around and froze mid-way through, nearly bumping into Ja'Ceb.

"Alpha," the young man whispered. There was a pause, then he and the princess embraced. "Sorry I took so long. I came back like I promised." They kissed several times and Ja'Ceb brushed a hand through her hair.

"The Flameoids —" Alpha gasped. "Are they —"

"They're not a problem anymore," Ja'Ceb said in between kisses.

Eventually, he gave her a final hug and stood straight. "We're in control of Pyro now, but Shadows are benevolent masters. We'll make sure everything's in order, then appoint a new government. It will be Shadoway-backed, though. We have to make sure that no one like Qwerty ever gets in power."

Alpha frowned at the mentioned of the reviled Overseer. "What happened to the creep anyway? I'm not one for revenge, but I wouldn't say he didn't deserve it."

Ja'Ceb put a hand on her shoulder, unable to take his eyes off her. "He met a most ignoble end," he explained, his mind drifting back for a moment. "I imagine Flameoid history will paint a scathing portrait of Sebastien Qwerty. He was a self-centered glutton for power and led the Empire to ruin."

Squealing happily, Cebble hopped to the door and jumped at the couple's feet. Ja'Ceb smiled, recalling his princess' newest pet. "Hello, there! I see my namesake's still doing well despite everything. Not to worry now, buddy, everything's going to be okay."

Alpha open her mouth to speak, but for a second no words came out. *Should I tell him?* There was no time to decide and this was the perfect opening. "Ja'Ceb," she whispered, looking into his blueberry eyes. "It looks like you'll have someone else with your name very soon." There was a silence and she put her hand to her stomach. "You can't tell yet, but I'm expecting a Ja'Ceb Junior."

Grinning, he couldn't resist hugging her even more vehemently. "He will be our little warrior. This puts everything in a better light."

"Yes, it does," Alpha said, imagining a magnificent home on the hills of Njartis. *Everyone has to dream...*

Ja'Ceb surprised her by revealing he was thinking along the same lines. "I know it must difficult to for you here," he whispered, "but I promise I'll make it worthwhile. You *know* I keep my promises." He bit his lower lip and gazed lovingly at Alpha's tiny stomach. He put his hand on it and felt the slow rise and fall, rise and fall of her breathing. "Someday, when I've completed my duty here I'll take you both — and other children you'd like to have — back home to Njartis."

For the first time in a long while, Alpha believed things would turn out all right. "That will be just fine," she whispered, "for both of us."

"The Princess and her little warrior," Ja'Ceb commented.

It's time for me to go...someplace far from here.

— The Wanderer

Conan Switzgerald strolled through the streets of Freedahmer, grimacing as paper and other garbage flew overhead. Despite all it had been through, the Shadowway would not turn from its path of decadence. It was repulsive for a man who had seen the Empire at its greatest. *But how longer will I be around to see it?* He shivered in the autumn breeze. *I'm certainly getting old. I'm starting to feel the chill*, he thought miserably. *Maybe I've had my last battle*. Somehow, though, he believed there would be more.

Conan had wanted to execute the reviled traitors, Leechon and the "Emperor" Baytor. But his daughter had rejected that option in exchange for what she thought of as a greater punishment.

"Why shouldn't they live out the rest of their lives on Pyro?" she suggested. "And never let them leave." Her voice was intense and cutting.

Conan maintained it would be more satisfying to disembowel each man slowly, with the other one watching. But he eventually came to accept Faith's point of view. After all, she had been Leechon's greatest victim. Anything she said held significant weight.

Leechon and the deposed Emperor had been deposited on Pyro over a week ago. Conan thought it was fitting that they be forced to stew in the mess they had created. The large Shadowway presence there would ensure that they never left. *Never*.

The prisoners had not fought their deportation, simply accepted their destiny. An angry mob had added color to their departure, hurtling insults and curses as the pair were escorted onto the freighter.

There was still the matter of the Zenith, which had been present at the Battle of Beta-Yron, but markedly absent afterward. *Maybe they lost their faith in Qwerty*, Conan hypothesized. *I certainly would have*. But they were out there somewhere, dreaming of a triumphant comeback. When the dust had settled from the Flameoid war, Conan intended to find and annihilate them. He did not intend to let the cancer grow.

Later that day, Conan was surprised by an assemblage in front of the Emperor's throne room. His daughter was smiling, and Ja'Ceb was standing beside her, rigid and impeccably dressed. "Hello, Sir," he said.

Conan scanned the crowd, noted something glinting in Ja'Ceb's hand. "What's this — what's that in your hand?" He knew it would not be anything malicious, but he had better things to occupy his time than silly games.

Ja'Ceb held out the jewel-encrusted metal object. "It's the Three Diamond crown!" he exclaimed. "I have the support of the entire Shadoway guard to make you our next Emperor. That is, if you accept."

Conan looked from face to face. Everyone was glaring at expectantly, but they were eager to see him take the crown. *I've waited for this day so long!* He didn't hesitate at all. "I accept! But how did this come about?"

"We know it has always been your dream," Faith said, glancing at Ja'Ceb. Her visage swelled with pride as she watched Ja'Ceb place the crown over her father's snowy white hair. *Lord Damon was right! You were destined for great things, including the throne!*

Conan attempted to look regal as Ja'Ceb made the traditional declaration. "With the full support of the guard, I transfer the throne to Conan Reagan Switzgerald, a true Shadow in every respect!" That last part was Ja'Ceb's own invention, but it was fitting. Ja'Ceb shook the new Emperor's hand. "We've been without a real Emperor too long, Sir."

"I'll second that," Conan declared, as his subjects bowed low. "I'll serve you in every way possible, neglecting not even the smallest child." He stood rigidly as the ages-old red-and-white cape was draped over his shoulders. *Lord Damon, he realized, wore this very cape and this crown — over a millennium ago! My faith in him was not misplaced.* He spoke his last thought out loud: "The Shadoway will accomplish tremendous things, Lord Damon willing!"

* * *

That same afternoon, Conan made a point to bring out his old journals. They hadn't been opened for years and were extremely dusty. Conan took a long sniff; to him, the smell spoke of decades of accomplishment. *It would be an adventure even for me to read these,* he realized.

Conan brought the journals to Ja'Ceb's chamber. The door opened almost the instant he knocked. He saw Alpha inside, sitting on the bed. "I hope I'm

not disturbing anything."

"No, Your Highness," Ja'Ceb said, moving out of the Emperor's way.

"You can call me 'Sir', Lieutenant, that'll be just fine." Conan made his way in and set the books on a tall table. "These are my memoirs. You can borrow them for as long as you need to read them, but I shouldn't need to tell you to be extra careful."

Ja'Ceb's eyes widened and he went to the table. "No, Sir. I'll be more than careful." He was worried what might be contained between those covers, but felt it was necessary reading. He looked over at the man he had helped secure power. *Or is it?*

"I heard about Alpha," Conan said pleasantly. "She's going to have your child. Congratulations."

"Thank you, Sir," Ja'Ceb whispered.

"Thank you very much," Alpha added also, resisting the urge to feel her stomach. There was nothing visible yet, but very soon....

"I'll leave you two alone then." Conan made his way to the door. "Enjoy the journals and...remember what I told you. The things I said then wouldn't hold any weight with me today." He glanced back at Alpha and marched out into the corridor.

Ja'Ceb opened the soiled cover with precision, unleashing a plenitude of dust. "It is certainly old." He sneezed in the opposite direction, almost hitting Cebble, who darted across the room. "I wonder what's in here. I'm kind of scared really."

"That's illogical," Alpha indicated, coming to peer over his shoulder. "After all you've been through, everything should seem too simple."

"Still, I'll be sure to read this with an open mind." Ja'Ceb took the book to the bed and got into a comfortable position. And he turned to page one.

Of the Planets

A. Njartis

(i) In the Beginning

Called the *Aryr Zep Deltoid*¹ for its delectable habitat, it is regarded as the apex of beauty, even by contemporary standards. Two bodies of water, the West and the East Ocean, respectively, surrounded a land thick with forest, and were adjoined by the Wellington Lake.

By the advent of space travel, primeval humans uncovered its existence, and by 2068, the blue-green planet appeared on the maps as one Jartis IV, of the yellow-white star Felpoy (named in honor — or perhaps hatred — of the Êkozned² Earnest H. Felpoy).

The world was visited twice — first in 2071, then later in the spring of 2090 — by the unmanned probe *Sprawler*. Soil samples were collected during the second expedition, and examined by Dr. Jenry Switzgerald. Insects were discovered, to their surprise, and a plethora of micro-organisms.

With the outbreak of the Crude Wars on Earth in 2100 AD, nearly all progress was ceased, as efforts were channeled into the funneling war machine. Jartis IV was all but forsaken.

It was not until the autumn of 3200, when humankind was boldly squeezed from Primordial Earth by the Shadows, like pus from a pimple, that Jartis IV was revisited. It was the Zenith, as the humans liked to be called, that first colonized the world of Iota 7 (of the Ryes-Ultor system) and then later Jartis IV, which they re-named Njartis (ne-'jar-tiss).

(ii) The Ascension

Under the Umbrella of King Eric D. Winchester, the Njartian populace began work to transform the planetoid's surface.

A village was constructed using far-from-space-age materials at the foot of the Wellington Lake, and this settlement was named Denphonite, (signifying "Little Denphon").

Acreages of forest were cleared farther north, and the Njartian Citadel was constructed by D. Salmon — a renowned architect. Work on the stone castle

began in 3204 and did not totally conclude until 3209, at which time the king, greatly pleased, moved into the elaborate *château*.

The Winchester line oversaw the development of further villages and towns for three-and-a-half decades; the absence of advanced communications and interstellar devices meant extreme polarization and thus zero contact with outside worlds.

The Battle of the East shed much blood in 3239; the *Kejartian* forces emerged victorious and subsequently marched to the Njartian Citadel, and overthrew the king's elite guard.

Thus ended the reign of the Winchester line, allowing one Luke Poqaz to usurp the throne. His line would continue to rule for the better part of the 3240s.

The dynastic shift did not breed chaos, as had been expected, but instead the populace seemed to welcome the new king. The fiftieth anniversary of Luke Poqaz's reign was celebrated in Wellington Square, and heralded in by a live marching band and small, but impressive fireworks.

The Poqaz hierarchy ended abruptly in the early 3260s, when the then-current king was exposed as a con artist — the weasel, it seemed, had leeches 1.6 billion Jartos (equivalent of \$200 billion US dollars). Social unrest led to increasingly violent uprisings, and in 3265, the turncoat king was hung in an ornate display atop Wellington Square.

The lack of an heir led to the grasping of straws; in less than a month, there was a mushrooming battle. The insurrection of the rifle a few years earlier meant more gruesome bloodshed.

Bluntly put, Ewlanor Guerdon III rose to the top of the carnage, securing his paws upon the much-sought-after dynasty. Unfortunately, for the remainder of the populace, this Ewlanor Guerdon was not a compassionate man. This, therefore, hurtled the Njartian civilization into an ever-plummeting dark age.

(iii) The Interregnum

In the decades that followed, the future of Njartis appeared bleak. There was no hope, no means of ascension.

The Wellington Square became a platform for bloody gladiatorial exhibitions — The Ewlanor Games, they were called. "A Blissful Retreat" the king called them, though this was a sad laugh; those that attended had to pay Jartos

or be damned, and one can guess the implications of the latter option.

Salaries were beyond skimpy — a few Jartos, at best. Child labor was a wide-spread atrocity. Laws were ineffective, not enforced.

Disgruntled civilians torched the Njartian Citadel in 3290, killing King Guerdon, and thus ending the unsavory interregnum. Guerdon had likely sired multitudinous offspring, but no official heirs.

(iv) An Empire Rebuilt

More than a decade later, Njartis was yet recovering from the result of Guerdon's reign. A shift to a more "liberal" government allowed the populace to "elect" the succeeding head of state. Thus the rise of Ėkozned Vincent ZepFelpoy — a compassionate charismatic Njartian of mild demeanor and respectful laxness, he would do well to usher the world into the next epoch.

The advent of Primordial Earth-age communications and space travel equipment led to renewed acquaintance with Iota 7 and allied planets. Assistance arrived from a handful of worlds, and the beginnings of interplanetary trade routes sprung up.

This paved the way for the erection of cities — Winchester's and Poycon were among the first to materialize. Modifications to existing automobiles rendered travel much easier. And the renewed usage of Condensed Radiation in the late 3300s made it near-necessary for the construction of CR generators³ a few years later, in the uninhabited barrens of the Eastern Drylands.

The loss of Iota 7 to the Shadoway was a major loss to the Njartian economy, but the world moved on, consolidating its own strengths, and ironing out its deficiencies, so to say.

The area containing the debris of the burnt-down Njartian Citadel was thoroughly cleaned out and a park was constructed in its stead. Vincent ZepFelpoy directed the world from the Parliament Building in the capital of Poycon.

Discovery of the neighboring Spark Empire forced the Njartians to revert to a pre-Interregnum monarchy, for diplomatic reasons. In 3301, King Harris arranged a meeting with Duke Qwerty of the Sparks and departed the following week. Oddly enough, the king never returned, and was assumed assassinated. His heir, Cornelius Harris, inherited the dynasty.

(v) Charades

Communication with the Sparks was attempted for years, but to no avail. A response was finally received, however, when a heavily armed Spark-ship battalion swooped down over the capital of Poycon, obliterating over half of the city. Anti-aircraft ballistics were brought out, but too late — the majority got away, leaving the metropolis in ruins.

A retaliatory strike was impossible; the Njartian militia was too small to take on a whole Empire. They were lucky thereafter, though; the Sparks turned to civil war and turned to them a blind eye.

Njartian King Harris foresaw trouble brewing however, with the rapidly rising Shadowway Empire — it would be important, he said, to beef up their armed forces and consolidate their alliances with neighboring worlds.

Volunteers took off into space, heading for far-off worlds — so as not to keep all of their eggs in one basket, to use a Primordial Earth cliché.

(vi) Assimilation

In 3500 AD, the planet Njartis was forced into submission and surrendered to the Shadowway Empire, offering their liberty and their world in exchange for their lives. The planet was eventually repopulated with Shadows and the remaining natives were forced off-planet and shipped to other parts of the galaxy.

Shadowway Emperor Eugene Gildran committed suicide in 3752, by apprehending a Flameoid Halo-void ship, and crashing it into the Njartian Citadel. The King survived, but Gildran was killed instantaneously. The circumstances surrounding this event have been debated for centuries, but as of yet, no definitive conclusions have been reached. Suspicions indicate that it was a Flameoid plot, perhaps political, perhaps not, centering on Gildran's psychosis, which they used to their advantage.

The Njartian Citadel was soon rebuilt in a period of five years, almost as elaborately as the earlier incarnations.

In 3782, King Ronald Harris surrendered his reigns to Samuel Woddner VII, who purchased the world for an undisclosed but surely considerable amount.

The planet was completely destroyed and abandoned following the Flameoid sneak attack in 1779. For further information, read the novel *Iota 7*.

¹*Aryr* is the Yok-hajjarian equivalent of "Wilderness", *Deltoid* is "Planet" and the term *Zep* turns the emphasis back on "planet", acting as the English word "of". In layman's terms: Wilderness Planet.

²Title of utmost distinction, leader of a nation

B. Iota 7

(i) First Colonization

Iota 7, of the Ryes-Ultor system, was first inhabited by a group of renegade Flameoids from the Spark Star Empire. These renegades, called the Leviathans, arrived in 2001 AD, toting advanced terra-forming equipment. Through brute force, they rendered the planet habitable, and began work converting it into a heavily industrialized, mechanical base-of-operations.

Thus establishing an exponential foothold, far from Spark intelligence, the Leviathans managed to conspire against their counterpart, spinning web upon web of multi-faceted plots.

The Leviathans, now, were a violent people — but toward outsiders only. Amongst themselves, they were progressive, resourceful and chalk-full of good will. No laws were required — indecent acts were unheard of. The Leviathans functioned with a hive intellect, acting together as a whole. When Emperor Poqaz ventured to issue an order (after painstaking analysis and precise contemplation), the populace would comply, thus spinning the wheels of their war machine.

For decades, the Leviathans worked on reconnaissance alone, watching and observing minutiae, and eventually began planting moles within the enemy's boundaries. Finally, they risked an attack — in 2056. Using the Sparks' reliance on planetary shielding (energy forcefields that surrounded their worlds), the Leviathans targeted a poorly defended and outlying world, Pronensia. They spearheaded the conflict by crippling the planet's orbiting CR generators, thus disabling the shield and most off-planet weapons.

The local militia stood little to no chance against the prepared invaders — in less than three days, the Pronensian army surrendered; thirty-three of their divisions were destroyed, five-hundred-thousand civilians had been killed.

The Leviathans took hold of the former Spark world, and moved the remainder of their forces from Iota 7 to Pronensia. Iota 7 was thus abandoned. The

Pronensian planetary shield was reactivated and the newcomers dug in, consolidating their grip.

(ii) Second Colonization

Centuries of abandonment reduced the Iota cities to dust; when the Zenith, then, fled from Primordial Earth to Iota 7, they had no choice but to erect cities from scratch. This occurred in 3200 AD, at which time the dreaded Crude Wars had blossomed to full force.

Emperor Solomon the Great brought whole cities to fruition; economy, religion, life as was on Primordial Earth — these things flourished. Decades of insurrection were to come.

Via terra-forming equipment, three other worlds of Ryes-Ultor were, too, colonized — Iota Six, Oh'oy-sela and Tert-Poyance. This was largely due to the mass preparation conducted centuries before by the Zenith on Primordial Earth.

In 121 CP, the Zenith was discovered by the Shadows, who had since beefed-up their forces and begun scouring the galaxy, spearheading a pseudo-Empire. Iota 7, the Zenith capital, resisted until the end, but were severely crippled and forced retreat to the outer fringes of the galaxy.

(iii) Under the Shadoway's Belt

Similar worlds faced the same fate as Ryes-Ultor, including Njartis and Lebensraum III (later to become Psi-Chi).

Iota 7 was revamped and repopulated by Shadows, under the watchful eyes of Emperor Victorio Gildran, and soon became the Shadoway capital. Trade routes presented themselves, and the Shadows initiated them quickly, never a people to waste precious resources. Condensed Radiation, earlier denounced by the Zenith, was made popular once more, and rapidly became the most popular commodity.

But as is too common, one problem is soon replaced by another: the Flameoids (union of the Spark and Leviathan Star Empires). Acquaintances are made quickly between the two political powerhouses and negotiations began.

Why not, the Shadoway asked, join us in our battle against the Zenith? But the Flameoids had no intention of joining the other empire in any sort of alliance. They eyed their territory jealously, the wheels in their brains turning

around and around.

Victorio Gildran abdicated during this period, due to an illness he had been battling willy-nilly for near three years.

(iv) The War of the Empires

In conjunction with the development of the new Halo-void ship, the Flameoid Empire went turncoat. In 1797 CP, they used the ships' enhanced cloaking abilities to attack Njartis, the Shadoway planet nearest their border, completely destroying it.

The Shadoway Empire directed its war campaign from its seat of command on Iota 7.

C. Psi-Chi

(i) Lebensraum III

Psi-Chi, of the Domacus IX-Cyberius II system, first appeared on the cartography charts as one Lebensraum III (pronounced Lay-ben-srom). The term *lebensraum* translates from Terrestrial English into modern Qatar as *poycon elexiis ye lif blosco, ni rivit* (space required for life, growth or vitality). It has long been a subject of mass debate in regard to the reasons behind this strange label. Perhaps it refers to the location of the planet or the star system. Maybe it was considered a possible retreat for humankind should the Shadows prevail in the Crude Wars. Who knows?

What is certain is that a pantheon of probes are known to have visited the world, including, but perhaps not limited to: *Voyager X*, *Pioneer XV*, *Leviathan I*, *Cousi*, *L'Armstrong*, among various others. The planet was obviously of much interest to the Terrestrials.

Despite this, it was not until 57 CP, when Shadowkind began its scouring of the stars, that Lebensraum III was visited. A manned expedition landed and remained for two-and-a-half days, conducting experimentations and analysis. They departed, stating that it was not the type of world they were searching for.

And Lebensraum III was abandoned for many years; it was on the fringes on the Empire, alas, and was not readily noticeable or accessible.

(ii) The United Psi-Chi

The Crepes-Pnalamus² era saw to an increase in lesbianism, particularly in the latter half of the forty-thousandth millennium CP. The precise reason is unknown, although it is thought to be related to the general attitudes of that era.

The Battle of Beta-Yron in 49 989 saw to the wide recognition of the United Psi-Chi of the planets Taed (pronounced Tayd), Tryst-Ora and Janus, when the lesbians combined forces and crushed the neighboring Beta-Yron system in a landslide battle. A percentage of the Psi-Chi then settled on Lebensraum III, which they immediately renamed Psi-Chi.

Queen Hitomi Saunders (supposed descendant of the legendary Steve Saunders and Carrie Whitmore I) mounted the planet Psi-Chi's throne in 50 000 CP, overseeing the consolidation of her realm. Psi-Chi and Taed, among other UPC worlds had since been accepted into the Shadoway Empire, a massive victory for them.

(iii) The Alliance

It is assumed that it was during Hitomi Saunder's reign that the United Psi-Chi chose to ally with the scarcely-heard-of Zenith Security Council, the remnants of the Zenith, which had been defeated mellenia before.

Together, the UPC and ZSC worked to free the Yok-hajjar cult from containment on Iota 7, during the term of Chairman Robert De Vries.

The Yok-hajjar was a religious band which had fled in terror from the Etisopian Empire, pursued by the Brunth. The Psi-Chi and Zenith Security Council willed to stop the Brunth in conjunction with the remainder of the Empire.

For further details, consult *The 11th Commandment*, a chronicle of these events.

(iv) The Future

The loss of Queen Hitomi Saunders was a grievous loss, but the Psi-Chi would survive for centuries yet — straight into the Post-Renaissance years.

¹Rendered using Terrestrial English characters. See "*Of Language*" for further info on Qataran letters.

²Post-Crude Wars

D. Pyro

(i) The Early Years

According to the Flameoid Bible, the universe sprung into existence ab initio in an enormous explosion, as a result of the efforts of the Flameoid god Kaj — a gigantic ant-Flameoid specimen of extraordinary powers. Three planets were blessed with the disease that is life (or "the gift", as it is described in the Halo-Bible¹): the lava-encrusted Pyro, the paradise of Elysia and the water-draped Earth.

The first Flameoids were Ykarto and Sallendra (the fact that "Sallendra" translates as meaning "the Spark that Destroyed" is a curious enough fact) who gave birth a daughter and a son, who they interbred.

Initially under guidance of the wise figure Kaj, the Bible portrays that the Flameoids developed and grew completely separate from humankind — that is, they had no relations with Earth, nor did they follow the Earth's ways. For example, the Flameoids were not violent by nature; there were no wars, no homeless, no killings. That is not to say there were *no* disputes; they merely did not culminate into mushrooms of aggression as occurred on Earth. Another interesting fact is that the Flameoids did not require locks on their houses. There were no break-ins (they did not, even, have such a word in their vocabulary); such things were unfathomable. The vastly-contrasting planet of Earth was under the keen eye of a much different god — who went by the name of Lord Damon.

What, then, you ask, was the cause of the War of the Inferno (the civil war between the planets Pyro and Pronensia)? Philosophers have long debated this subject, but alas, no incontrovertible explanation has been reached. D'jardo Opas once suggested that perhaps the Leviathans (group of Flameoids) were unhappy with the way the trade routes were operated. Pyro, after all, produced much of the foodstuff, since Pronensia could not readily yield crops. A multitude of theories have been presented by innumerable scholars.

Opas even once went so far as to deduce that the famed Glissior, the natural disaster that left Pronensia in ruins, was caused by the Sparks of Pyro. This, of course, cannot be proven, and is rejected by many historians. What we do know is that in the centuries that preceded the War of the Inferno, the Flameoids were of good character and demeanor.

(ii) The War-torn Years

The mild behavior of the Flameoids as reflected in a plethora of biblical accounts:

"And the God Kaj said unto Sallendra and Ykarto: ' You will protect and nourish this world I have passed over to you, and all the worlds you will ever inhabit. You will bear many children and fill your slyks [OS²: "a place in which one lives"] with their laughter. You will not harm others, nor do I expect this of you. If a neighbor requires shelter, then you will provide.'"

This peace ended suddenly in 2084 AD, though, when the renegade Flameoids, the Leviathans attacked and captured the planet of Pronensia, hurling the Flameoids into a civil war that would last for decades. (See chart, *below*). The Sparks and the Leviathans battled for centuries, until finally, in 3501, their former nature resurfaced and they agreed to a truce. After such a long battle, the Empire was once again whole.

(iii) The Flameoid Blitzkrieg

The succeeding decades diverged considerably from the Flameoid past. After the vicious Dy Qwerty assumed rule over the empire in 11 CP, the Flameoids began the pursuit of blood and conquest.

Overseer Sebastien Qwerty oversaw negotiations with the Shadoway, while secretly building up his armada and fortifying his armament. By 1797, he was in good position to take on the leading galactic power.

¹The prefix Halo- is a euphemism for *Halol*, which signifies anything that is of or relating to the Flameoids.

²Abbreviation for Old Spark, the earliest thought predecessor of the Flameoid tongue Tloy-Hoff.

Planets of the Shadoway (major worlds as of 1791 CP)

Iota 7 \ī-ō-tä\ [Etymology unknown]: a sizable world well-known for its splendid architecture; wealthy; unemployment low; population: ten thousand trillion (12% increase from last report), thus the immigration appears unrelenting; land area is considerable, though, and could easily support another million people; overall, this world is doing extremely well; it has two moons: Atlantis and Plymo

Njartis \Ne-jar-tis\ [YHJ *Njartis* fr. TH *Nejarti* - more at wilderness]: Known as the Wilderness Planet, it is small but splendid water-rich paradise. It has numerous forests surrounding prosperous cities. The current rule King Woddner VII resides in the Njartian Palace in Wellington Cove. The population is around 1.6 million and the employment rate is near nil.

Delta-9 \del-tä\ [TE *delta* fr. ME *deltha* fr. GK *delta* of Sem origin; akin to Heb *daleth* daleth]: its market has been severely crippled since the loss of its adjoining planet (Njartis) , thus unemployment has gone up dramatically (a sorry 58% to date); Delta-9 has two moons: Galfa and Lakner

Ceres \sēr-ēz\ [TE *ceres* fr. L]: an extremely wealthy planet raking in a substantial amount due its expertise in the production of ships and ground vehicles; its future is looking undeniably superb; its sports one moon: Ceres II

Psi-Chi \Sī-Chī\ [Pan-Latin *psi-chi* fr. TH *si-chigh*, homo-land - more at Lesbian Planet]: a large planet of roughly 16 trillion, it is a hot-spot for anti-male and lesbian/feminist rhetoric. Since 66 Post-Renaissance, it has been a member of the Psi-Chi League. It has two moons: Atlantis B and Switzgerald's Realm. It is said no male has ever set foot on Psi-Chi's surface.

Taed \Tād\ [PL *taed* fr. TE *taed*, weapon - more at taesar]: a fairly large planet of approximately 56 million, it is a retainer of anti-male and lesbian/feminist apocrypha. In 54 Post-Renaissance, it became the titular head of the Psi-Chi League.

Switzgerald-A \Switz-ger-uld\ [Qatar *Switzgerald* fr. YH *Switzgerald*, Conan Switzgerald - respected Emperor of the Shadoway Empire]: major exporter of the *Sigma Juice* catalyst. It's main competition is the planet Pyro, another exporter of the revered product. It has no moons. Ruled by Lord Revettom VII.

Switzgerald-B \Switz-ger-uld\ [Qatar *Switzgerald* fr. YH *Switzgerald*, Conan Switzgerald - respected Emperor of the Shadoway Empire]: In the

Astronomer's Bible (by D'jardo Cyprus), Switzgerald-B is referred to as "the ugliest planet in the entire universe". Congruently, the planet is dreary and solemn, with violent electrical storms and numerous tornadoes. Its atmosphere is thick with numerous gasses and a conglomerate of particles, resulting in poor photosynthesis. The plant life, thus, is close to nil; wild-life is scarce and the lands are barren. Lord Demetrius Switzgerald shows no mercy to his citizens; executions are frequent and gladiatorial exhibitions are the norm for entertainment. Unemployment marginal (20-30%).

Switzgerald-C \Switz·ger·uld\ [Qatar *Switzgerald* fr. YH *Switzgerald*, Conan Switzgerald - respected Emperor of the Shadoway Empire]: an extremely poor planet. Since the abysmal failure of its Sigma Juice substitute, a "cheaper, more accessible product," this world has been plagued by a rash of crime, a terrible debt, and an ever-climbing unemployment rate. Lord Arnold Ter'on has lambasted the Emperor with repeated requests for financial assistance, but to no avail.

Veronica \V ûr-onik·ä\ [Qatar *Veronica* fr. YH *Veronica* fr. TE *Veronica*, Veronica]: a wealthy exporter of the Sigma Juice catalyst, this world is extraordinary. Surprisingly enough, it's land is covered with purplish-pink Ykartograss and its singular ocean, the Agamemnon Sea, is composed entirely of cerulean Sigma Juice. Its population is approximately seventy-seven million. It has two moons, Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. Ruled by Cassandra Veronica.

Earth (aka Terra) \ûrth\ [Middle English *erthe*, from Old English *eorthe*]: the mother planet of both humankind (the Zenith) and the Shadows. It has a rich history which was partially lost during the Crude Wars. The world was divided into roughly seventy-eight zones, which were ruled by different clans. The leading zones were the United States, the Commonwealth, Korea and China, all of which were overthrown by the Shadoway. Earth's current population is nine hundred ninety nine million seven thousand and fifty-six.

Planets of the Flameoid Empire **(major worlds as of 1791 CP)**

Pyro \pī·rō\ [TE *pyro*] (3501 AD): the Flameoid capital is doing well; of particular interest is the planet's highly profitable *Sigma juice* production, which provides work for many and has, as of yet, plunged the unemployment rate to 25%); population: five-hundred thousand; it has two moons: Ceres III and Ceres IV

Pronensia \prō·nen·sēä\ [TH *pronensa* fr. LN *praninsa* - more at sea]: Known in some areas as the *Glissair* or the *Sljk*, this world remains uninhabitable; plans were underway before the war to dispatch a scientific team to determine whether the natural degeneration of this world can be stopped (For further information, see King Cornealius Denarii III's *The Glissair That is my Heart*)

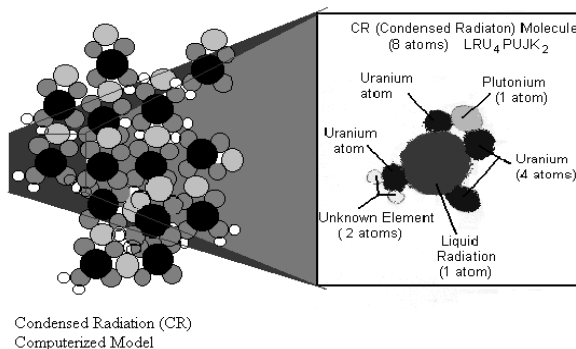
Tloy-Hoff

Tloy-Hoff is the primary tongue and alphabet of the Flameoid Empire. I have provided an index to initiate the newcomer to the basics of it. The Flameoids use a base six numbering system (0 – 5); therefore, you will only see that many symbols. Note that there is no distinction between upper and lowercase letters.

A/a	B/b	C/c	D/d	E/e	F/f
⌒	Ƒ	⌒	ƚ	Ɔ	Ɔ
G/g	H/h	I/i	J/j	K/k	L/l
Ɔ	Ɔ	ƚ	ƚ	ƚ	ƚ
M/m	N/n	O/o	P/p	Q/q	R/r
Ɔ	Ɔ	ƚ	ƚ	ƚ	ƚ
S/s	T/t	U/u	V/v	W/w	X/x
ƚ	ƚ	ƚ	ƚ	ƚ	ƚ
Y/y	Z/z	.	?	!	\$
ƚ	ƚ	.	ƚ	ƚ	ƚ
0	1	2	3	4	5
ƚ	ƚ	ƚ	ƚ	ƚ	ƚ

Condensed Radiation: Analysis and History

Condensed Radiation, generally known as CR, a powerful element that is extremely volatile. It belongs to the actinide group, which includes einsteinium, neptunium and plutonium. It is inarguably the most well-known of the elements, with the pomp and fanfare that marked its absorption into mainstream culture. It is best known for its use in the CR bomb, a weapon approximately 10×7^{12} times stronger than the Hiroshima A-bomb.



DISCOVERY. Condensed Radiation was found in 2020 AD in a subterranean cavern approximately twelve-hundred meters beneath Primordial Earth's surface. A rudimentary diamonds mining operation stumbled upon the raw substance by chance. At least one worker was reported to have been injured (possibly suffered burns). Contemporary accounts place the excavation site as being north of the equator, within the lower Zenithian Empire.

Samples were handed over to Dr. Jenry Switzgerald, possibly the empire's greatest scientist. Purportedly in a matter of weeks, Switzgerald reported that the substance was "exponentially powerful" and "possibly the world's next energy source."

USAGE (on Primordial Earth). By 2040, Switzgerald had discovered that CR had a profound effect on viral and bacteriological bodies. The substance, even in small amounts (.065 ml), was potent enough to crack and alter the DNA structure of the one-celled organisms enough to render them moot. Obviously, this was an amazing development. Experiments on lab rats pre-subjected to illnesses ranging from the mundane (common cold, influenza) to the serious (HIV) showed a complete obliteration of the microbes.

Unfortunately, the Condensed Radiation left the rats' immunolymphatic systems almost entirely crippled and on top of that, the dangerous element remained in the tissues of the circulatory system for up to six months. All red blood cells in the arteries and veins at the time were destroyed, too, leaving it up to the body to replace them. Foreseeing this, Switzgerald and his colleagues had had red-blood cell injections at hand, so as the rats would not succumb to nutrient and oxygen starvation.

For years, Switzgerald was at a loss. Perhaps Condensed Radiation would prove to be a failure. Offers of implementation of the substance into everyday society had fallen on deaf ears and blind eyes; CR was too dangerous to use as power. It was not until the early 2050's that Switzgerald stumbled upon an alteration of the element that would make it harmless to human (and animal) antibodies. Tests were performed again on rats and the results were astounding — a lower dosage of the CR-variation (a mere 0.005 ml) killed the majority of foreign microbes, without harming the body's antibodies.

After further analysis, three human test subjects were paid 1.5 billion Euros¹ apiece. Starting at 0.005 ml, and later 0.05, the individuals were administered the common cold first, then the substance via injection (after a 24 hour interval²) — albeit very nervous. All three experiments were a total success.

The microbes were destroyed entirely, without the subjects even beginning to feel any cold symptoms. As had been in the contract, the three people were required to remain in the hospital for seven days, then released. They were inspected bi-weekly for any cell deterioration or sickness, but neither was found.

Thus the CR anti-fungal and anti-bacterial substance — called *CR Clean* — was near-forced onto a wary public. Initially, this was a marketing ploy designed to reap profits. It was backed by the Velstrom Institutes, Inc. and not Dr. Switzgerald. Soon, the so-called "microbe immunization" was made mandatory by the Zenithian government and *CR Clean* was withdrawn from stores.

USAGE (galactic). The CR pistol was developed on Mars by Dr.

Mustapha Tesoidnarg in the mid-2050's. CR weaponry was first demonstrated in the Heat War between the United Commonwealth³ and the Eastern Triumvirate on Primordial Earth. It was the sophistication of their CR weaponry that gave the Triumvirate its advantage over the UC; had it not been for the intervention of the Sparks of the planet Pyro, the Triumvirate dictator Earnest H. Felpoy may have seized global power and altered humankind's history unfathomably.

The CR-powered Switzgerald Launcher was evidently developed by Emperor Conan Reagan Switzgerald, though at what time it is not clear. Historians such as D'jardo Opas have estimated its creation during Switzgerald's pre-dynastic years, circa 2125, when he was a student in the Emperor's Citadel. Currently, this hypothesis seems likely, as Switzgerald is known to have created other such devices during that period. Another, less common invention of Conan's was the Switzgerald Beam — an electro-energy weapon widely used during the early Crude Wars, when the Shadows did not wish to pollute their own territories with pure-CR weapons.

OCCURRENCE. There was an abundance of CR in Primordial Earth regions such as the Upper and Lower Zenithian Empire and across Former Europe. Oil-rich areas such as the Middle-East had little CR and had to import it. Key sites scattered across the Shadowway Empire (former Russia) were also rich with the substance, though in the beginning the Shadowway relied on stealing from other countries the CR that they needed.

Primordial Earth was the only planet of the Sol system which had any CR to offer, but there was certainly no shortage of the compound across the Milky Way galaxy. Many earth-like worlds offered much Condensed Radiation. Notably, the planet Dyta (cf. "Sykhelyla I") discovered CR in 2031 AD (more than a decade after Earth), but developed CR weaponry much sooner than the Earth people, in 2045, via the Deinheimer Project.

PROPERTIES. For all the hype surrounding it, Condensed Radiation has been studied and documented very little. Apparently, the majority of institutes were more keen on reaping profits than unraveling the mysteries behind its properties. What is known to date is that it is composed of 65% liquid radiation, 21% uranium, 10.6% plutonium and 3.4% is currently indecipherable.

One CR molecule contains eight atoms: one liquid radiation, four uranium, one plutonium and 2 of unknown nature.

Condensed Radiation has an atomic weight of 1992.73 and its atomic number is 114. It has no stable isotopes. Its melting point (degrees Tartazyr) is 1162 and its boiling point (° Tartazyr) is 4600. CR has a Mohs' hardness of 0 and a

density of 19.3 grams per cubic centimeter. It is not found in the atmosphere of inhabitable worlds; non-life supporting planets, though, have been found to contain approximately 0.003 to 0.067 percent in their lithosphere.

What is intriguing in regards to CR is what makes the compound so volatile. Traditionally, of course, on Primordial Earth, uranium and plutonium were used in nuclear weaponry, until replaced by CR. When examined at the molecular level, the two unidentified atoms may account for this attribute.

Most questionable is why this element is unidentified. Upon examination, Dr. N'jartis K. Yarto of the B&Y Institutes of Elemental Research has discovered, recently, that the two atoms have each an atomic weight of 100.03 and are of course unstable isotopes. The two atoms respective to each molecule are each fused to the same uranium atom. When viewed as a helix, there is a pair of these two atoms for each uranium counterpart.

Lab tests have revealed that it is these two atoms (which Dr. Yarto has named njartium) that make CR so potent. The njartium, the doctor explains, acts in concert with the liquid radiation to actually *split* the adjacent plutonium atom. This starts a swift chain reaction — atom after atom split, until eventually all plutonium in the CR has been affected. The liquid radiation and split plutonium (a substance once used, of course, in nuclear devices) create an earth-shattering explosion, ripping apart anything in its radius.

One ton of Condensed Radiation is enough to obliterate the equivalent of two medium-sized towns (approximately forty square miles). Thus, ten tons would wipe out a large city (approximately four hundred square miles). The devastation CR will cause, then, can be determined by the following formula: $40(x \text{ tons}) = \text{amount of destruction in sq miles}$.

This works with the assumption, of course, that Condensed Radiation will never be stored in a quantity less than a ton. For a much smaller amount — one hundred pounds, for instance — one could utilize the formula: $0.5(x \text{ pounds}) = \text{amount of destruction in sq miles}$. This is because one pound of Condensed Radiation will raze all objects within a half mile radius.

The CR bombs traditionally used on Primordial Earth were one hundred tons and caused damage within a four thousand sq mile radius. Contemporary CR bombs are one hundred *megatons* — enough to obliterate an entire planet.

CURRENT USES. Many worlds today, within the Etisopian Brunth Empire use Condensed Radiation as an alternative to electric power. Massive CR-

generators erected in often uninhabited areas supply energy to the entire planet via high-tension wire. Following the multiple CR-generator explosions on Qarvaj (*see below*), ultra-heavy titanium-alloy protectors were made mandatory on all worlds within the Empire, as to prevent devastation. Otherwise, CR-power is an inexpensive (if one can afford the initial investment) non-polluting energy source.

NOTES

¹The Euro was the standard currency of Primordial Earth by the early 2050's. One Euro = 0.05 Brunth Talents.*

²Twenty-four hours was the length of a Terran day. It was six hours less than today's synchronized thirty.

³The United Commonwealth was a global alliance formed following a severe depression which swept across Primordial Earth circa 2040.

*1 Euro = 0.05 Talent

20 Euros = 1 Talent

40 Euros = 2 Talent

100 Euros = 5 Talent (1 Double Talent)

2000 Euros = 100 Talent (1 Triple Talent)

Glossary

The following is a list of terms used in this work which may have had an unclear meaning.

A

ADB - (abbrev.) See *Adrenaline Booster*

Adrenaline Booster - extremely powerful drug that is actually a conglomeration of at least one hundred other substances. It is estimated to be one hundred times more potent than real adrenaline. It is administered, in combination with Ykarto-plasm, to Elysian Baytors, in order to strengthen their bodies and help raise their immunity to human emotion.

Airmobile – Vehicles using an anti-gravity mechanism designed by Deinhiemer Corps. They have been in use since the twenty-first century.

Ancient Terrestrial - term depicting the humans that dwelt on Earth before the Crepes-Pnalamus era.

Atlantis - The smallest of Iota 7's two moons

Atlantis B - The largest of the planet Psi-Chi's two moons

B

Barbric's Domain - the smallest moon of the planet Elysia. Named in honor of Effistic Barbric, the attributed hero in the Glisser Disaster. (See *Glissair*, variation of Glisser).

Baytor - See *Elysian Baytor*

Baytors-in-training - Elysian Baytors that not yet graduated from the Baytor academy on Elysia's moon. There are five main stages. Once a man completes all five, he is admitted into the Baytor army. (See *Elysian Baytor*).

Brunth - The clan which rules the Etisopian/Elysian Empire (See *Etisopo* and *Empire, Elysian*)

C

Ceres - A small planet not far from Iota 7. (See *Ceres II*)

Ceres II - A satellite that bears an atmosphere so rich in sulfuric acid that all but the most heavily armored space craft will be fatally damaged upon attempting entry. (See *Ceres*)

Ceres III - One of Pyro's two large satellites

Ceres IV - The more massive moon of Pyro (See *Ceres III*)

Citadel - See *Shadoway Citadel*

Cloak - to make invisible

Commonwealth, United – The UC (abbrev.) was a group of Earth's nations that allied against the Eastern Triumvirate in what was essentially the third world war. The forerunner of the Zenith.

Condensed Radiation - extremely dangerous, volatile substance discovered beneath the Earth's crust in 2020 AD.

Connection, the - See *Outer World*

CP - (Crepes-Pnalamus: "Post- Crude Wars"); signals the era following the conclusion of the Crude Wars.

CR - (abbrev.) See *Condensed Radiation*

CR cannon - (*Condensed Radiation* cannon): a deadly energy weapon powered by Condensed Radiation

CR-cruiser - a heavily armored space-craft which employs a modified version of the CR-generator, giving it enhanced speed, cloaking, and first-strike capabilities. Created by the Shadoway Empire.

CR-generator - a device which is used to convert raw CR into power that can be used in something, like a shield.

CR pistol - (Condensed Radiation pistol): deadly energy weapon powered by Condensed Radiation

CR rocket - projectile containing *Condensed Radiation*

Crude Wars - This lengthy battle was specifically between the Shadows (of Damon) and the Zenith (allied nations of Earth, and later planets of the Milky Way). It began in 2100 AD and concluded in 2187 AD. Sometimes referred to simply as Crude *War*.

Cyberius II - Bluish star of the Ryes-Ultor system

D

Damon – purported founder of the Shadoway on Earth. Hailed as the Keeper of the Light, the One and Only god.

Delta 9 – Satellite of the planet Njartis.

Deltus - A drug which will cause a series of lengthy hallucinations

Domacus IX - the medium-sized star of the Ryes-Ultor system

E

Ëkozned – leader of a Commonwealth nation on Earth before the Shadoway takeover

Electro-matter - deadly beam of focused energy

Elysia - capital planet of the Elysian Empire. It has three moons: Revettom, Baytor (training place of the Elysian Baytors) and Barbric's Domain.

Elysian Baytor - the Emperor's army. It is composed of stoical soldiers that are resistant to pain, unswayed by grief or compassion, and completely unmarred by emotion. They are administered two drugs: Ykarto-plasm, a powerful stimulant, and ADB (also a stimulant).

Elysian Intelligence - of, or relating to the Elysian Empire, its affiliates, planets, society, or science.

Elysian Renaissance - the so-called "rebirth" of the Elysian Empire. It is said that at this time, St. Hitomi Saunders ascended into the Outer World, confronting the gods, and surrendering her life for the good of her people. (For further information, see *Outer World*).

EM - (abbrev.) See *Electro-matter*

Embassy - See *Flameoid Embassy*

EM Cannon - (*Electro-matter cannon*): energy weapon that can, in different amounts, be used to either jam frequencies or kill

Empire, Elysian - the clan which rules the planets in the universe. It is headed by the Emperor, and his trusted affiliates. Sometimes referred as the Etisopian Empire. (See *Brunth*)

Empire, Etisopian - See *Empire, Elysian*

Etisopo - Forerunner of the Elysian Empire. Ergo: the empire that eventually grew to become the Elysian Empire. (See *Brunth*)

F

Flameoid - inhabitant of the planet Pyro (or any other Flameoid home world)

Flameoid Embassy – Royal palace where the current Overseer of the Flameoid Empire dwells

Flameoid Empire - the section of space controlled by the Flameoids.

Flameoid Home world - either of the planets that are under Flameoid control (See *Flameoid Empire*).

Flux light - an illumination device of Flameoid manufacture which will activate upon detecting a person's body heat. It can be deactivated by a pre-selected password or a series of finger snaps or gestures. It is the most widely used lighting device in the galaxy.

G

Galfa - the largest of Delta-9's two moons (See *Lakner*)

Galactic Command Craft - any ship with three long tiers protruding from a central hub that is used by people of moderately to extremely high class (Shadoway Emperor/Empress, etc...)

GCC (abbrev.) - See *Galactic Command Craft*

Glisser (var.) - See *Glissair*

Glisser Disaster - See *Glissair*

Glissair - According to legend, the *Glissair* of Shostakovitch is a giant black hole which gradually grows and grows in the center of the planet Pronensia until the planet is obliterated. (Commonly referred to in curses such as *Damn the Glissair*) Also referred to as *the Slijk*. In some dialects, the *Glissair* refers to the actual event, not the black hole.

H

Halo-void ship - a space craft of Flameoid manufacture which sports the first invisibility mechanism in the universe.

Halol field - a device which can be used to cloak a ship or area of up to three hundred miles

I

Iota 7 – gigantic capital planet of the Shadowway Empire

K

K'tar - religious gathering of the Etisopian faith, where the numerous gods are placated.

L

Lakner - the smallest of Delta-9's two moons (See *Galfa*)

N

Njartian Palace - Government building where the current King or Queen of Njartis dwells

Njartian Triad - See *Triad*, *Njartian*

Njartis - medium-sized planet (sometimes referred to as *Aryr*, meaning: the Wilderness Planet).

O

Outer World - the New Jerusalem or Elysian Fields. The name from which the Elysian Empire's name is derived. (*Heaven* or *Hereafter* in some dialects).

Overseer – ruler of the Flameoid Empire. Resides in the Flameoid Embassy on the planet Pyro.

P

Pajjar - a near-autonomous planet in the Zenithia sector. Noted mainly for its production of Ykarto-plasm, formerly known to the scientific community as Element 219. Similar in properties to the ADB narcotic, it is given to Baytors-in-training. It has no moons. It is remembered widely due to a battle which took place there, the War of Hajar. (For further information, read Governor Beal's, *The Celestial Body*).

Pa'Lah – Term from the Tloy-Hoff tongue that signifies “the first of” something. Often, the “pa'Lah fleet” will be the first attack run against an enemy.

Pan - Prefix meaning *variation* or *varying*

Pan-Latin - a heavily modified form of Terrestrial Latin which was used during the battle of Beta-Yron

Pyro - large planet with seas of lava and numerous volcanoes. Capital of the Flameoid Empire.

Plymo - 1. The largest of Iota 7's two moons (See *Atlantis*) 2. A drug which stimulates the pituitary gland to release a hormone which will induce a state of ecstasy

Post-Renaissance - the era following the Elysian Renaissance. (See *P-R*).

P-R (abbrev.) See *Post-Renaissance*

Pronensia - a planet that has been long-abandoned (See *Glissair*)

Pronensian - of, or relating to Pronensia

Psi-Chi* - (Pan-Latin, meaning the "Lesbian Planet") a large planet of

roughly 16 trillion, it is a hot-spot for anti-male and lesbian/feminist rhetoric. Since 55 996 CP, ruled over by Queen Hitomi Griselda Saunders. It has two moons: Atlantis B and Switzgerald's Realm. It is said no male has ever set foot on Psi-Chi's surface.

Q

Qatar - native tongue of the Etisopian/Elysian Empire

R

Revettom - satellite of Elysia.

Ryes-Extor - a planetary system

Ryes-Ultor - Planetary system

S

Shadoway - The leading galactic empire administrated by the Shadows. Founded on Earth shortly before or during the Third World War. Unsubstantiated historical documents trace purported founder, known only as Damon, to the disenfranchised nations of southwest Asia.

Shadoway Citadel - structure on the planet Iota 7 where the Shadoway Emperor/Empress dwells

Shadow - Citizen of the Shadoway Empire

Sigma juice - A Pronensian product which improves skin tone and strengthens muscles. It contains hormones that are proven to attract the opposite sex.

Sigma pool - A pool containing Sigma juice

Sljk** - (slang) see *Glissair*

Switzgerald-A - Planet named in honor of Shadoway Emperor Conan Switzgerald

Switzgerald-B - Planet named in honor of Shadoway Emperor Conan Switzgerald

Switzgerald-C - Planet named in honor of Shadoway Emperor Conan Switzgerald

Switzgerald launcher - projectile launching weapon created by the Shadoway Emperor Conan Switzgerald

Switzgerald missile - ammunition for the *Switzgerald launcher*

Switzgerald's Realm - The smaller of Psi-Chi's two moons; it is named in honor of Shadoway Emperor Conan Switzgerald.

T

Taed - planet which is the leader of the United Psi-Chi. Each year, there is a meeting held there between the Psi-Chi and the Zenith Security Council.

Tartazyr explosive - time-bomb which will release a deadly vapor two to fifteen seconds after being triggered

Tloy-Hoff - Principal language of the Flameoid Empire.

Tranjentalist - Any individual who defers from human society, its beliefs, values or cultural tendencies. Specifically: one who has improved from the norm. (Compare: *Elysian Baytor*).

Triad, Njartian - self-appointed democratic government of the Shadoway Empire. It assumed control in 4099 CP when Emperor Raymond Stoj was defeated in the Battle of Beta-Yron II. It had 33 seats, including: chairman; vice-chairman; 28 councilors; financial consultant; public affairs coordinator and chief advisor. There were also a number of sub-positions including advisers and attendants.

Triumvirate, Eastern – The Eastern Triumvirate was a group of Asian and Middle Eastern nations including Felpoy and the pan-African union that instigated the third world war on Earth. The Triumvirate was defeated by Flameoid intervention in 2090 AD.

V

Veronica - small planet. Notable for its Agamemnon sea, a body of water composed entirely of Sigma Juice. Its grassland is composed of pinkish-colored Ykarto-grass. (See *Sigma Juice* and *Ykarto-grass*).

Y

Ykarto-grass - synthetic grass that can be grown in a number of colors: red, blue, green, yellow, pink, magenta, brown, turquoise, etc. (The name *Ykarto* is thought to derive from its inventor, Ykarto Gnollenburg).

Ykarto-plasm - powerful stimulant which is employed by Baytors-in-training, who claim it strengthens their bodies and raises their immunity to human emotion. (See *Baytor* and/or *Baytors-in-training*).

Yok-hajjar – primary language of the Shadoway Empire

Z

Zenith - the group of allied planets which fought the Shadows of Damon during the Crude Wars.

Zenithian - 1. member of the Zenith 2. of, or relating to, the Zenith

Zenithian Eagle - A black and crimson bird with enormous drooping wings and large blue eyes. Its traditional home was Njartis, though it has been smuggled to other parts of the galaxy. It is often served as a delicacy in many parts of the Empire. *N'bourno-trazk-lelo* (Zenithian eagle submerged in sweet 'n' sour sauce) is the favorite of many.

Zenith Security Council - a group of faithful Zenithians that have not yet come to accept the reality of their defeat.

ZSC - (abbrev.) see *Zenith Security Council*

*Pronounced "Si-Chi"

**Pronounced "Slyk" or "Slike"