

Tara let her head fall against the glass and her shoulders slump as, once again, overwhelming feelings of defeat played through her. The airways below were jammed with hovcars and the streets farther down were obscured by the endless traffic. The sun shone clear between the buildings, when there was space, but always the shadows on the streets below turned them into a warren of shade where light had little time to dance. Though she lived middle, a symbol of the quad's success, she still looked out on nothing but the sides of apartment and office buildings. The morning sun had passed behind Hyatt Comms and Suites and she knew it was time to prep for work. She turned to wake up Waylon—he too would have to leave soon—and saw him already awake, regarding her with sad eyes.

“I keep saying, we could go back,” he offered. They kept their voices low, but they didn't bother whispering. Neither Tom nor Annette shifted in their embrace. No surprise, they always slept deep with the contentment of those who belonged.

“I know. We can't, though. It's too expensive, and we love them too much. And you know they couldn't thrive.”

“I just hate to see you... like this. They do, too.”

She nodded. The world was full to bursting. There wasn't much space for solitary living. Those who could afford it, did. The fashion of the rich was to live on old farmsteads and the filthy rich on plantations or estates. To the exclusion of everyone else. But even these were disappearing in the face of populace demand.

Middles, like themselves, could only hope to, at best, find some place in the most uninhabitable of climes where the soil was poor and food production was still too inefficient to be supported. Even the high rises had found a home in the countryside, with farmlands being multi-floored. All to support the unending growth of humankind. She snarled, in her mind, Children! It was always about the children. The sacred little creatures to which everyone had a right and yet no one owned and was the pinnacle of life and towards whom all empathy was focused. Kids as icons of religion. Hah!

Nobody wanted to die and few wanted to accept that continuing with even a 1-to-2 child/parent ratio was unsustainable. So, instead, technology and innovation had to find a way to pack more and more people onto the planet and to sustain them all. There was practically nothing but city and industrial

farms and resource development.

She turned from the window, “I hear they’re opening a new float-town soon. It’s supposed to be close to Bermuda. Maybe we should apply?”

He considered the couple entwined next to him.

“That might work for a time. Especially if we could get an edge lot. We’d have to save, though. At least you’d get the sun, then. How long before the crannog is built?”

————— Two months later and in another solar system —————

“Y’Ru! Become present.” [1]

“Ka’ Bai. Complying.”

Y’Ru dropped down onto four of six limbs and, grabbing a datapad, trotted briskly out the office. Ka’ Bai’s return from the outer holdings had been an abrupt change to the operating procedures of the lair. Where his sire was sedate and methodical, Ka’ Bai was decisive and impulsive and demanding—at least by Daru standards. But Y’Ru wasn’t upset over this. Pack Do’ Bala had to shake things up or they would oblivate [2]. Ka’ Bai’s sire, for all his good qualities, had run the Pack into ruin. The only thing paying the bills were the revenues generated by Ka’ Bai’s well-run mining and colonization efforts. And while he was off on some distant world developing new entertainers or overseeing the development of a new asteroid belt, Bo’ Kai was trading it all away in bad deals that advantaged only other Packs. Y’Ru’s office was near to Ka’ Bai’s working chamber, so he was up the ramp and bowing before the First in moments. “Ka’ Bai, I am present. Counsel required?”

“Y’Ru, it is both counsel and sharing I claim. First the sharing. I’ve been reviewing my sire’s accounts for the last two weeks [3]. I’ve found an interesting anomaly. Inquiring in great detail the legality of the situation, I’ve come to the understanding that we own a completely untapped system. Do you own this knowledge, already?”

“Ka’ Bai, my memory informs me that I have this knowledge already. It was acquired when your sire’s sire was First. When he passed, shortly after acquisition, your sire deemed the enterprise of development too costly for current resources and too risky without knowledge of its contents. We have only depleted our resources more, since that time. I don’t perceive a way to develop that system, even if there were evidence that it was worth developing. The old probe [4] never responded, so it would be a gamble.”

“Y’Ru, the old probe spoke to us six days ago. Why it has been silent for so many eons is unknown, but the typical reason is that either a catastrophe has occurred which uncovered it from some sort of shielded location or intelligent life has disinterred it from such a situation. In either case, the probe has told us of an oxygen-rich, resource-rich biogenic world, as well as several other large rock and gas planets, as well as an asteroid field. If we were to find a way to develop this system, it might provide us with sufficient resources to dig ourselves out of this hole.”

“Ka’ Bai, this is intriguing news. I shall not repeat myself to your displeasure regarding a lack of resources needed to develop such a system.”

“Y’Ru, you are quite a clever paralectic speaker. Own no fear of harsh reprisal and speak your mind until given commandment to not. The Pack has two great needs. First, we must have someone who knows [trade](#) better than my sire. Second, we must have value to [trade](#). My skill is not in the first, but it is in the second. We can continue to fritter away our resources in a multitude of enterprises, none producing well, or we can devote ourselves to this great endeavor, utilizing my talent for development. We will risk everything for the greatest of returns and for a shot at the Council where we will be able to multiply our [trade](#). There is a way.”

“Ka’ Bai, I present myself receptive.”

“Y’Ru, I have spent the last two days reviewing your written counsel to my sire. I have read how on most occasions he has simply dismissed your advice, but your recommendations on matters of [trade](#) indeed seemed to me wise. You will elevate someone who’s mind is sharper than your own and who is educated in matters of [trade](#) to be your second. You will, without ego-obstacle, hear his counsel on all matters of [trade](#). You will then make your best decisions regarding our holdings. In essence, I’m handing you the power to lead the Pack while I’m away. You will [trade](#) away all things required to raise the capital for this most ambitious of endeavors. Begin with the least priority holdings and proceed through until we have covered the expense of the Toroids. I will today secure a loan to cover their cost. I want them on their way within the week. You will sell everything necessary to cover that loan in as short of time possible.”

“Ka’ Bai, I hear that you have a three step plan. You will obtain a loan to cover the cost of the Toroids and have them underway within the week. You will have me, with counsel, [trade](#) away our holdings for the capital to cover that loan. You will embark on a mission to the new system to develop it for

its resources, for which you have shown remarkable talent. I and my second will remain and maintain, as best we can, in your absence.”

“Y’Ru, you have the knowledge I wish to share. Your counsel, now.”

“Ka’Bai, you have no criticism from me. This Pack has been dying a slow and lingering death. Either we Take Down Game or we oblivate trying. It is the proper way of a Pack. I thank you for the honor.”

“Y’Ru, I am pleased to hear your words. Begin your new work.”

With a spring in his steps, Y’Ru left the working chamber.

————— 1.5 months later on Earth —————

SAC [5] President Tomas Morales was sitting in his office, poring over economic analyses. He basically could see only two ways forward after the devastating collapse at Angel Falls over two months ago. Tourism throughout South America was, without question, one of the SAC’s top sources of revenue, and the Resorts at Angel Falls was among the top producing sites. And now calamity. Not only had the Falls collapsed leaving an unsightly pile of rubble and water, not only had the resorts been destroyed bringing devastation to vacationers and employees, but the rescue missions and emergency engineering project to redirect the water flow back to its previous path created an exorbitant cost that laid over all of it. And that wasn’t all. There was the artifact found within the rubble of the Falls.

He glanced at another tablet with a picture of the thing. It was spherical, of an alloy not created by any known human agency, and estimated to have been buried in rock formed over 20,000 years ago. One side of it looked a little dented, but otherwise, it remained in remarkably good condition. The scientists were still examining it. Carefully. It had already destroyed one crew and no one knew how or why. So, on top of the devastation of the Falls, President Morales had been fending off the Northern Pact, the fractious States of Africa, and China. They were all clamoring for access claiming the artifact represented a global concern and everyone had a right to it. When news of the destroyed hovcar leaked out, the intensity of UN talks on the matter reached the shrillest levels Morales had seen in his term. He slid everything over and began dictating his policy response to the situation. It outlined his plan to allow access to the artifact, under strict supervision and analytical oversight, for a price that would easily cover the lost revenue of the resorts. In the short term, however, he would have to raise prices at other tourist locations, but not so high as to drive off too many potential visitors.

“Gracias a Dios por los economistas,” he muttered to himself.
Just as he was starting to proofread the document, an aide rushed in.
“President Morales!”

Rarely flappable, he glanced up, eyebrows raised.
“We have a report from the Atacama Unified Observatory. Flashes in space... in our solar system... not human, but clearly of intelligent origin.”
The aide handed a tablet into the waiting hands of the President.
¡Híjole!, he thought.

————— Two weeks later —————

“They want what!?!?”
UN Secretary-General Lee Kai couldn’t believe it. He and the think-tanks had envisioned all sorts of outcomes to their encounter with the aliens, but this wasn’t one of them.

The young staff member watched the Secretary-General’s eyes regain focus before confirming, “That’s what the linguists say. And they seem pretty confident, too. The aliens who call themselves either Daru or Do’Bala—they’re not certain about that part—want us to ‘display art’ for them. We’re not certain how they want that to happen, but at least we’re starting to make sense of their language. The written form is much easier to analyze than their four track vocalizations. Oh, and they want their probe. We’ve been going back and forth on this with SAC President Morales staff. They want compensation for sacrificing what SAC considers a national resource.”
He thought back to that first meeting. The blackout had come fast. Within a day of the light show, communications with the cities on Mars had stopped. Within two, every satellite and space station and ship could no longer communicate with the planet.

A few hours after that came the signal from somewhere in space identifying the spatial coordinates of the Earth’s magnetic poles using various reference points and using a binary numbering system. There followed other reference points on the planet indicating possible open locations, presumably for touchdown. The UN quickly deciphered the communications and understood that the visitors were requesting a location to land. They sent back, using the solar coordinate scheme offered, the location of Atlantic B3, an ocean-based [platform](#) used as a landing and launching pad for human spacecraft. It was there that the UN Secretary-General had stood and waited for whatever was to come next, along with a whole host of scientists, linguists, mathematicians, world leaders, and so forth. And they waited for most of

nine hours.

They didn't hear much before the alien craft landed or even when it landed. That's because it didn't so much land as 'arrive'. There was no discernible deceleration and no sound of collision. Like a meteor, the craft rocketed down from the sky and the next moment it stood still on the [platform](#). It was very tall and cylindrical; it was equivalent to a 10-story building in height. The outlines to portals were rather large, obviously to allow cargo to enter and [exit](#). And since it was matte black, it would be effectively invisible to light observation while in space. No doubt, their craft had all manner of sensor-defeating protection.

Those portals quickly and silently dropped open. Stepping out with a lithe, but deadly-air of domination, came metal-armored figures larger than elephants. They had six limbs and two segmented torsos, allowing them to stand on either two or four limbs [6]—the lead walked on four, while the retinue walked fully upright. And they were helmeted. They took no more than a few moments to survey the human soldiers in their uniforms and weapons and proceeded forward to tower over the UN delegation. Lee Kai admitted to no one that he was quite intimidated in that moment.

The lead alien "said" something, though it sounded like a discordant mix of multiple sounds and produced a device in its hand—with tentacles instead of fingers, of course. The humans handed back a simple press-one-button tablet that would hopefully be able to teach English using an immersive approach. It looked like a tiny thing in the alien's grasp. Then, simple as that, they turned and left as quietly as they arrived.

And now, the report he just read said the aliens had communicated a desire for the humans to "display art". Well, that could be easy or hard depending on what was meant by "art" and what was meant by "display". Art was a contentious topic on the planet, at present. The Responsibility Act for Curators of the Soul was hailed as both a landmark in social consciousness and economic stupidity. Passed into law 26 years earlier, it provided for a series of pricing regulations on artistic creation. The RACS law provided pricing minimums for paintings and sculptures based on size and components, living art based on ensemble and audience size, and so forth [7]. The goal was to give those who elevated humanity out of the mire of mere production and consumerism a return on their time and energy that would ensure a decent living. It also offered a stipend from government

funds to those who could procure a certification and license to produce art at a minimum standard. For too long, it was said, artists who labored for intense hours and days and months and years to produce those things that spoke to the soul were not properly compensated and it was time that humanity properly recognized their invaluable contributions to the human condition.

The result was a predictable disaster. Far too much art—too much bad art—and too many artists, all of whom were weighing down the system just as surely as the homeless and the indigent. And most of it wasn't selling at the prices required by RACS. Millions of drawings and paintings and sculptures sat idly in warehouses before eventually being incinerated or pulverized. And then there was the art being sold on the black market for far below RACS prices!

But what sort of “art” did these Daru or Do'Bala want? Paintings? Dances? Opera? Porn?

And did they want humanity to assemble it for their viewing pleasure or were they asking to take tours?

What the hell?

Lee Kai spoke to the young staffer, “Please request that the linguists put together a response asking the aliens for a little more clarity. We need to know what kind of art and how they expect to view it all. Let's get all of our diplomats involved in this. I'd like the response reviewed before we send it.” That was just politics. No doubt the diplomats would insert every unnecessary word they could dream up. Lee Kai had no intention of complying. He wanted communications as simple and clear as possible. The military commanders had already told him, based on the technology they had already demonstrated, they had great doubt in their strategies to handle a conflict situation with the aliens.

——— Two weeks later. AI had been shut down for obscure reasons ——
As though she couldn't get enough, Tara leaned out over the railing of the balcony to let the salt air fill her nostrils while the sun, not long having cleared the horizon, cast a brilliantly glittering, staggering reflection across the water between them and its joy upon her face. In moments such as these, she was oblivious to any regret that might have tickled her conscience over the quad having gone so deep into debt to get here. She looked down upon the sea gulls flying below her. They could very well be her disembodied

spirit in that moment, flying lazy circles basking in the sun. Gently, Annette's warm arms slipped around her and her head laid upon Tara's shoulder. Tara allowed herself to settle back somewhat to accommodate the embrace.

"Hello, sweet girl," Tara murmured.

"It is so good to see you so happy again. I would have traded much more for this."

"I love you all so much. What we've done is so foolish, but I don't regret it at all. I'm going to find a way to pay you all back," she said.

"Ha! You make it sound a threat."

"No, the best kind of promise."

"To be honest, I don't think any of us really want anything that we don't already have. It's going to be hard to pay us back." She tickled Tara gently, but surprisingly. "I'll have to think of something."

Tara turned to look at the shorter girl who pulled back a little to look up at her.

She asked, "Did Waylon tell you that I've found us a second venue in which to perform? And they're willing to pay us twenty percent more than what we're getting now at the Caribbean House."

Annette's eyes widened, "Really? That's great news. Where? How often?"

"Twice weekly at the Diamond in the Rough."

"Wow. That's another level of amazing, Tara! Who knew moving here would be such a great career move, too."

Annette looked out on the ocean. "Have you given any thoughts to the President's speech?"

Tara returned her attention outward, as well. "I wonder if I could hang glide from up here, somehow."

"Oh, Tara," Annette sighed.

"Yeah, I've thought about it. Do you guys want to sit down and discuss it tonight? I can't imagine how we could be much happier than we are now, though. I'm tempted, just by the excitement of it all, but there's risk, too. We don't know what it will be like or if we'll ever be back or... anything really."

"Please, yes, let's talk about it tonight. I'm not like you. This is lovely, I admit, but I'm drawn to the adventure. There are no unexplored places on this planet anymore. I want to go somewhere never visited by humanity and see things no one has ever dreamed of seeing. And, of course, this place

would be paid off.”

Tara laughed, “I think you may have found a way for me to pay you back without a lot of effort. We’ll talk to the guys tonight.”

————— One and one half months later and in-transit —————

Ka’ Bai sprawled on the floor of his state room aboard the flagship of his small armada. It was his common meditation pose, rear legs splayed out behind, mid-limbs splayed out to each side, and fore-limbs splayed ahead. “Stretch the body, stretch the mind,” [8] as the saying went.

Ka’ Bai had completed several rounds of interviews with his human possessions and found them difficult—the entertainers particularly. Originally, he wanted to apportion them into equal groups of no more than four or five, but they steadfastly refused. In his most recent group interview with an orchestra, he ended up stepping on one particularly odious specimen and the others responded in a bewildering variety of ways. Some raised a cacophony, others appeared stupefied, and still others clapped their hands together.

He was learning human husbandry quickly. He found that they balked at orders, but responded moderately well to requests, depending on the particular human and particular request. For example, they all refused to change their form in any drastic way. He couldn’t get the gymnasts to sing or the singers to perform ballet or ice skate. The few who seemed eager to please, were willing to try new things, but when they failed miserably, many of the other humans simply made cackling sounds while baring their teeth. Some even seemed to be moved into contortions of pain.

There were the ensemble pieces, such as the orchestras and choirs and the like. If he could split these larger groups into smaller groups to focus their performances in different locations, he would find a much greater return on their value. But in many cases he faced extreme reluctance from those humans. They said they needed each other to make the music or the circus acts work. They said they were family and couldn’t be separated, but this was clearly not true. He came to understand that they simply held familial-type emotional bonds with each other.

He had taken on board his ships more than 8000 entertainers and over 1.3 million pieces of art and statuary. This was all an amazing result of the exploration. He could never have hoped, prior to setting out, that he would encounter such a deep inspiration reservoir that could be immediately

productive. All-in-all, they were returning to the Pack with more than 20,000 humans, which should be relatively inexpensive to care for. And their performances would be aboard Do'Bala ships, so the only real cost would be the fuel to ship the humans to their respective destinations.

The Do'Bala fortunes had not looked this bright in over 1.5 centuries. They would pay off their debts almost instantly, upon their return, just from the sale of Terran Art. And the revenue they would bring in from the entertainers could triple that, easily. But only if he broke up some of these groups. The ideal scenario would be to have regular performances of one to four people in 2000 to 6000 different locations. But the way they were trying to apportion themselves, he would be lucky to get 1000 simultaneous performances. He had several groups made up of more than 100 musicians alone. Admittedly, these orchestras were the loveliest to hear as they created a sublime mix of sound that no other group could match. But they were wasteful of resources, too. And the choirs were worse. These singers often sounded like a jumbled mix of similar sounds.

Then there were the bands. These were most common, thankfully. The bands typically consisted of 3 to 5 members, where one was primarily a singer and the other members each specialized on a specific musical instrument. They were, in essence, weak orchestras, but were ideal for maximizing resources. This would be his most profitable pool. He wouldn't force the orchestras to break up. There was a value there that, while somewhat wasteful, simply couldn't be matched. They would be the crown jewels of his Terran Art crown. But the choirs would not be so fortunate. There was no justification for that nonsense. They would be broken up—and made to serve the greater goal of revenue.

And there were a capella groups, as well. These ranged in size from small band to large choir. Some of these would have to be broken up, as well. But one such group was remarkable. He had to find a good way to use them. For millennia, things hadn't changed. The same types of songs were sung, the same types of music were produced, and even artistic expression of paint and chisel and mold had long ceased. Oh, there were swings between this genre and that genre. But ultimately, it was all the same.

Every Pack had their own versions of the Nine Verembors—the vocalists who could match the known 36 Daru ranges, their own versions of the thumping bands, and their own versions of the ancient gripping tongs.

Everything. Everyone had everything and while everyone tried to [market](#) their entertainers as the best of the packs and employ simple gimmicks to differentiate their acts, none were really any different. And since everyone tried to get everyone to pay to see their show, no one was really making much profit.

Even the non-Daru acts were now homogeneous, with all owned species having been bred and shared among the packs. The only thing new and distinctly interesting in the last hundred years were when the Daru discovered that the octopedal Krippids could mimic the stunt acts of other bipedal/bibrachial life forms. This led, of course, to the Mimicry movement as the packs tried to get as much mimicry as possible out of all their species. Until that happened, the fluctuation in entertainment prices was pretty much non-existent. If you wanted to see a Jarius ballet, you knew exactly how much you were going to pay, and it was basically at cost for the packs plus the barest profit. It hadn't varied, other than with standard currency fluctuations, in over thirty years—not since the Mimicry movement. But the Terrans were different and Ka'Bai knew this. There was an inventiveness to this species; a well of creativity in their minds he had not encountered anywhere else. Their combinations of artistic expression were more than just a dance and a song at the same time. There was an intertwining in all that they did. The music was in the dance as much as the dance was in the music. Even the form of music known as “dubstep” had a distinctively pleasant sound that defied description, but the electronic music had to be done away. His orchestras promised to try to reasonably recreate the sound, though, having had some collaborative historical efforts with electronica.

He was certain he would revolutionize the Daru spirit within the month. This was to be an age the Do'Bala would usher in that would mark them forever in the records of Daru, barring obliviation. It would be a long time before any pack would be able to compete with them. He would drive many out of the [market](#) altogether, he was certain. And those who wished to compete would pay handsomely for rights to his entertainers and Terran breeding stock.

They were competing in a whole new [market](#). Sure, it was still entertainers and art and statuary, but it was not the same entertainers or art or statuary. It was a new good. A new service. And nobody had it other than Pack Do'bala. As expected, they commanded the entertainment industry almost

immediately. Even Ka'Bai was astounded by the prices they were charging and still unable to meet demand. It almost felt like an actual Pack raid, the way they would fly their ships into a system and come out packed with revenue.

As the clamor to see his new acquisitions increased, Ka'Bai was actually reducing the number of showings. There were many good reasons: his performers needed rest to perform with peak **efficiency**, he had promised them the ability to visit new worlds and intended to keep his word, but mostly it created greater **scarcity**. Thus, his showings individually became more valuable and he was able to reduce the cost of transporting and securing his cargo—which was becoming a growing concern. They had already fended off raids from smaller Packs and many of the bigger Packs were aggressively pursuing his promises to provide breeding stock. Those promises were the only things preventing those Packs from swooping in, in the dead of space, and taking them by force.

While he stalled them, he was quickly beefing up security, consolidating ships into individual armadas, establishing secret bases to store his humans, and putting out feelers for alliances.

If he could maneuver his way through this phase of his operation into a position of greater strength, Pack Do'Bala would have cemented its position as a dominant Pack. But these were perilous times, indeed.

————— Six months later and in-transit —————

Y'Ru stood, unmoving, before the bay window on the bridge of Natant staring out into the lustrous black. The bridge staff came and went over the course of star days, but Y'Ru never moved. He was like the wave breakers of ancient seafaring ships, standing forth, bold, unyielding. Three hours previously, they moved out-chute [9] and were almost within transmission range of Dardin Base where Ka'Bai's flagship armada was expected. Y'Ru stirred himself. He turned and said, "Communications, I will have you hail the First."

There was no response from Dardin Base. He waited a short time and impatiently said, "Repeat."

This time there was a response, but it was garbled. Y'Ru cursed inwardly. After another pause, he looked meaningfully at Communications who responded quickly.

Over the bridge speakers came a voice, “Do’Bala command: deliver your identity.” The tri-part vocalization was signature Do’Bala and put Y’Ru at ease.

“Command, Second Y’Ru present. I will have contact with the First immediately.”

“Y’Ru, it is our desire to comply. The First is presently engaged.”

“Command, unless the First is engaged in Class 1 activity, he will want to obtain communication without delay.”

“Y’Ru, he is. But you will have the message delivered. Patient indulgence necessary, apologies.”

Y’Ru’s first stomach sank to his second. K’Bai was already engaged in Class 1 activity? Had the Baroyne arrived here already?

“Sensors, do you detect Baroyne presence?” He knew it was a futile question, Baroyne ships were very difficult to detect unless within very close proximity. They were akin to powerless, inert asteroids that soaked up all energy in their vicinity. Their ships floated through space listlessly and, though extremely rare, one could be found randomly anywhere in star systems or deep space.

The Baroyne had been known to Daru for centuries, although they existed in a state of obscurity. Historical records indicated they were harmless except when provoked. Well, provoked might be the wrong word. The Terrans had an animal, the porcupine, which was similar. It moved about unthreatening, unconcerned, and well defended. And their lack of activity was legendary. One record in Daru lore details the observations of a research vessel tracking a Baroyne ship in deep space for twenty-four years. The ship never altered its inertial path nor exhibited any sort of detectible activity. It was, to all intents and purposes, a dead and floating centuries-old—or older—artifact. Y’Ru wouldn’t want to have been aboard that research vessel. ‘What a mindless, tedious job that must have been’, he thought.

But they weren’t inert. This was discovered by the first Daru team attempting to board a Baroyne vessel. As typical, all hails had been ignored and when the assault craft approached, a small projectile was emitted by the Baroyne vessel at rapid speed that struck the Daru craft destroying it utterly. There was only a large explosion of energy that was sucked into the hull of the Baroyne vessel. Then nothing. In fact, their only understanding of the shape and details of the Baroyne ships were by understanding where no

electromagnetic radiation would reflect. Just like a floating blackhole. Several other ever larger attempts at conquering a Baroyne ship all met with similar endings.

Prior to last week, only five Baroyne ships had been discovered by Daru Firsts[10][11]. Last week, hundreds had appeared. And their appearance was unheralded by announcements or any signature of propulsion. There were just these black blots in space surrounding Do'Bala compounds. Ka'Bai's voice came over the speakers, "Y'Ru, there exists massive Baroyne build up here. Do you have knowledge of Baroyne?"

"Ka'Bai, I have this knowledge and knowledge of Baroyne presence, as well."

Ka'Bai's surprise was apparent when he asked, "Y'Ru, how do you have detection from such distance?"

"K'Bai, I give apologies for confusion. I offer the knowledge, only, that Baroyne presence elsewhere is what brought us here to deliver the news." There was a moment of silence, then Ka'Bai's puzzled voice came back, "Y'Ru, where?"

"Ka'Bai, everywhere. All our bases, planets, and ships that home the Terrans. That is where the Baroyne can be found."

"Y'Ru, this cannot be a portent of good news. With the Mimicry movement back and competing with our Terrans, we're already facing deep losses to our revenue. We don't need a war with the Baroyne, as well."

Ka'Bai was referring, of course, to the Packs that revived the Mimicry style from decades past that sought to emulate the art forms of one species with the movements and vocalizations of another. It was a poor substitute for the original, but was successfully cutting into Do'Bala profits by offering lower prices. The five most active Packs selling access to Terran Mimics were making a bundle, but they were effectively dividing up what Do'Bala couldn't provide. Do'Bala still sold better wherever they went, but they had to lower prices to keep pace with the competition. All-in-all, things were tough, but not bleak.

Now this? This couldn't be good.

"Y'Ru, activity. I hold the belief that we are being scanned. Our systems are being downloaded. We abide. Patience required. You will be informed when

we obtain more knowledge.”

They didn't have long to wait. A voice, later to be learned, was broadcast to all Do'Bala locations across Daru space. The voice was all-too-perfectly Daru—clearly artificial. It stated:

“You will deliver all Terrans, without delay, aboard life-supporting ships, absent non-Terrans, and awaiting our control. Failure will result in assault. Every facility housing Terrans will be invaded, all non-Terran life forms within these facilities will be destroyed. If any Terrans are harmed prior to delivery, prior to assault, subsequent to delivery, or subsequent to assault, then Do'Bala destruction will commence following a torture period of twenty years followed by destruction of all Daru Packs. There will be no end to destruction until all Daru are obliterated. There will be no compromise. There will be no negotiation. You have two hours.”

Boroyne audacity went unchallenged. The legends were infamous enough, the technology exotic enough, and the demands bold enough that Ka'Bai was sufficiently intimidated. He signaled that he would comply, but that he was concerned his people in other regions of space would not know that they should. The Boroyne confirmed that his words were transmitted to all his holdings. And that was the end of it. Within the hour, Ka'Bai had the Terrans in his keeping on a transport shuttle and launched in no particular direction away from Dardin Base. The Boroyne ships swarmed in and obscured the transport ship from sight. They never expected to see the Terrans again. They were wrong.

Tara sat, uncertain, within the Do'Bala transport vessel waiting for whatever would come next. Waylon's arm was wrapped around her shoulder, while she, Tom, and Annette had their hands intertwined in Annette's lap. The group had been among the most fortunate of the Do'Bala possessions. On earth, the a capella group had incredible success, largely due to Tara's voice. The quality of which might best be described as a violin constructed of gravel. It was the most unusual human sound ever, but at the same time, it was mesmerizing. And the harmony of all of their voices together created an incredible sound tapestry that captivated audiences. But with the Daru, the effect was unbelievable. They were quite literally spellbound. While Daru were notoriously attentive, often sitting with perfect stillness for hours to focus on a given performance, with the quad's performances, they would often not stir until the morning after an evening concert. At first, this caused

quite a stir and medical staff were brought in to examine the unresponsive Daru. But upon breaking from their reverie, their unanimous response was to describe the experience as exquisite to the point of matching certain drugs. This gave the quad immense standing within the Do'Bala organization. Ka'Bai was most loathe to let them go.

They did not have long to wait before a clearly artificial human voice was broadcast across the ship: "Greetings, Terrans. Your planet has been freed from Daru control. We are honored to have you as our guests. We are prepared to transport you back to Earth where you may begin to negotiate with other races to [trade](#) your art for your own gain. We have offered to provide unlimited transport and protection to your species while we bring you back to, at least, technological parity with ourselves. Please be unafraid and be prepared to move to Earth space within the next hour."

Epilogue:

Over the course of the next fifty years, mankind acquired a technological base heretofore undreamt of. The Boroyne [12] began by augmenting the complexity of neural implants to super-boost human intelligence, which was important with the loss of AI due to interstellar law. This then provided humans the tools to understand the rest of the technology the Boroyne provided. They then scoured Boroyne archives looking for hints that could elucidate the technological advances that made pre-Terran hominids one of the two greatest powers in the galaxy. Amongst many advances, they quickly rediscovered the cure for aging. The new knowledge was a bombshell to evolutionary theory, of course, which was spun around on its axis. Understanding they had put the cart before the horse in much of their aligning of the data.

With Boroyne protection, the Terran neighborhood grew rather quickly to include the conniving Shrae, the ethereal Axriale and their stolid Damoxen counterparts, and the Legaran. Each nation-bloc began negotiating with each other over how they would supply artists and at what prices to the galactic marketplace. This National Cartel had difficulties. Settling on quotas and a global pricing scheme was fraught with corruption and argumentation and duplicity. Still Earth was able to acquire ships, advanced equipment, and a larger knowledgebase with the profit they made off of their art. Eventually, and with Boroyne urgings, a more powerful global government evolved that put mankind's goals above National goals.

The Boroyne also confirmed that Tara's voice was an evolutionary throwback to when pre-Terrans had mesmerizing powers over other species and through bioengineering, this "talent" was quickly made available to the rest of humanity.

Within one hundred years, man was well-beyond Boroyne technology and quickly researching a fix for the Boroyne's problems. Terran holdings quickly grew, their galactic power reemerged, and they began preparations for the possible return of the Frakma, the Great Enemy, which must surely come to know of their continued existence from the great war that was fought so many millions of years before. But they were a somewhat different species from the one that lost that war and they held hope that those differences would decide the fate of such a battle.

————— Footnotes —————

- 1) Daru speaking conventions require that all utterances, either single sentences or whole speeches, be prefaced and followed by the first and last part, respectively, of the recipient's name. So, the actual sentence here would be translated more like, "Y, Become Present, Ru". For the sake of clarity, this has been modified by simply compiling the address at the beginning of each utterance. Pedantically, it should also be noted there are established forms of address for various pluralities, such as audiences, gender groups, and so forth.
- 2) Coined term to capture the essence of a powerful Daru word expressing the action of "becoming non-existent and lost to knowledge". It is a great fear for a Pack to die and "become nothing". In such cases, all formal references to the Pack will be wiped from historical records and replaced with a generic term akin to "a Pack of non-virile lineage".
- 3) All times have been translated to standard Earth times to be more accessible.
- 4) Referring to the ancient probes sent out several millennia past to far-flung solar systems in an effort to identify the most lucrative locations for development.
- 5) SAC is the South American Consortium, established to leverage the combined value of the continental countries in order to compete with the EU, China, and the States of Africa
- 6) To help with the imagination here, try imagining something like a centaur only where the "horse body" is also segmented such that the front legs are also arms and the centaur could stand fully upright. Only Daru look nothing like humans or horses.

- 7) This is a price floor concept, not price ceiling, but the intuitive understanding is more important than the specific version of price control. This fits the story much better.
- 8) In Daru, the first and second clause are spoken simultaneously as so many such literary couplets/triplets are.
- 9) A “chute” is the term applied to the lanes created by the tunneling toroids that facilitate interstellar space travel.
- 10) All discoveries made by ship captains were credited to the associated Pack’s First.
- 11) Even the name, “Baroyne”, was apocryphal and only derived from interactions with the Jarius species who had given this name to the ships. The origin of the name had been destroyed by time.
- 12) Turns out that “Boroyne” was a very close approximation to the species name. The Jarius had come to know when a sublight vessel was rescued by the Boroyne during a colonizing mission in early Jarius history.