The Triad Chronicles: Book One

First Contact

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Prologue: The Story So Far

There is a story that has been told since before records began[[1]](#footnote-1). About 14 thousand million years ago, probably due to some random quantum stuff, a universe appeared. It was not the first and won’t be the last. For a few eons, it was pretty empty, bar the odd few million galaxies. Then, for some bizarre reason that no-one knows to this day, beings from an older universe seeded the younger universe with single-celled organisms. A group of these organisms evolved over time to become the First Civilisation, who named themselves the Shar’zentin garothdihaí[[2]](#footnote-2), or The Enlightened Ones. Once the beings from the older universe believed that the Shargaroth could comprehend the truth of their creation, they revealed themselves and were named the Oeden Íaheí and worshipped as deities. Soon another civilisation born of the Oeden Íaheí caught their attention. This was the harmonious civilisation that inhabited the fabled planet of Skarrabox, formed by the Coleopterans and the Drakanae. When visited by the Oeden Íaheí, both races acknowledged the truth of their creation but refused to worship the Oeden Íaheí as the Shargaroth did.

Chapter one: Introductions

The Tyrant Lord Geltzan was sat in his chair, going over generic Tyrant admin as a shadow flitted across the rafters. He looked up, but dismissed it as a symptom of tiredness. He stood from his chair, stretched then went limp as a crossbow bolt pierced his chest and spinal cord. I dropped from the rafters, landing softly on the balls of my feet in a crouched position and placed the crossbow on the desk whilst grabbing as much important looking paperwork as possible. The information gained from this mission would help The Triad in their efforts to stop the Tyrant Legions before they became a significant threat. After gathering the info, I stood by the window and waited for the spell I had placed on the crossbow to decay. After a few seconds, the crossbow exploded and threw me out the window. As I fell, I quickly went through a mental checklist to make sure I had done everything I had set out to accomplish. Number one: Take out Tyrant Lord; check, Number two: Gather intelligence on Tyrant funds and stuff; check, Number three: Satiate need to defenestrate self at any possible opportunity; will never be fulfilled but still having fun doing it. There was, however, one thing I had neglected to take into account.

“There’s always something,” I said to myself as I plunged into the raging seas below the Tyrant Lord’s private island home instead of the calm waters that had been there not ten hours previous. I bobbed to the surface and swam to shore, shivering with cold as I entered a nearby cave that reeked of sea salt and rotting seaweed. After drying off; which only took a couple of seconds thanks to the magic of Magic, I went through the papers I had ‘acquired’ from Geltzan’s office. They were mainly shipping manifests and invoices concerning the procurement and movement of weaponry and manpower, but vital information was still in there. About half an hour later, I had learned the location and flight paths of three separate Tyrant fleets, most of which were headed toward Inkorinkas Citadel; the Tyrant’s headquarters. I sensed movement inside the cave and quickly stuffed the papers in one of my coat’s many internal pockets. A group of bats flew out of the cave and into the starlit night. I then took the papers out again. Paper, made from trees. It wasn’t information stored on a data crystal, it was old fashioned paper. A bold move by anyone’s standards; paper was perishable and easily lost. I ran my hand over the rough, brown papers noting how it felt as if they’d crumble at the slightest breath. “What are you up to?” I asked. I started running through possible explanations to the paper conundrum, but that was interrupted by a slight vibration emanating from the deep recesses of my coat. I took out a small grey device and put it to my ear. “’Sup?”

“Shuttle is en route to your location,” Said a slightly crackly voice through the device. The reception in this cave was awful.

“Marker is green smoke, I repeat; marker is green smoke.” I then took the device out of my ear and crushed it, throwing the debris into the ocean. After carefully putting the papers back in my coat pocket, I left the cave and stood by the mouth, setting off a green smoke signal. There was a slight tremble in the atmosphere as a small, silver box with wings descended slowly out of the clouds. The shuttle made its way towards the cave, but the narrow cleft in the cliff where I was sat meant that it could only get about 100 metrae towards me before it had to stop. Grudgingly, I waded out into the planet’s highly saline ocean to a rope ladder that was my red carpet into the shuttle. I dragged myself into the craft and signalled to the pilot to go.

Three days later I was dropped off at Interchange 668, a sort of intergalactic services on the edges of the Aethrel Galaxy. This particular interchange was well known by traders, buskers and about 90 per cent of the Godfathers and gangs bosses in the local group. You couldn’t walk through without witnessing a shady deal going wrong because someone forgot the goods, or be assaulted by some has-been musician trying to get their old life back. It was a shit tip of the lowest order and perfect for someone like me, trying to stay off the Tyrant’s radar. Unfortunately, it’s also the kind of place where I frequently run into my own shady past. Sitting down at a bar, I noticed a familiar stench. A mixture of expensive booze and cheap cigars seasoned with some…unsavoury substances of a recreational nature. “Well looky what we have here, boys. Old Golden eyes himself.” I turned to face the putrid mass of fat and flesh that was Gen’hime Bosat, leader of a notorious drug smuggling ring. He was short, fat and dressed in more fur and gold than was entirely necessary. He held a glass of *tzenifín[[3]](#footnote-3)* in one fat, ring encrusted hand and a cigar in the other. Gen’hime was accompanied by two very large, black suited bodyguards that were meant to intimidate, but I ignored them.

“Still leading a feigned life of luxury I see, Gen’hime.”

“I wouldn’t really say ‘Luxury’. You see, after you killed all of my men and publicly humiliated me, I was forced into hiding to prevent any interested parties from tryin’ to steal what was left of my business.”

“Hiding? Here? You truly are a *ditz*, Bosat.”

“Oh really? I’m the idiot? Says the most wanted man on this station.”

“If you truly value what is left of your small, narcotics-riddled brain I suggest you keep your voice down.”

“And who are you to order me around, huh?” Gen’hime jabbed me in the chest with a pudgy finger.

“It was a suggestion, not an order,” I replied, unperturbed by the blatant invasion of my personal space. “Of course, you’re not here to get even; I scare you too much.”

“As it happens, no I am not here to cause any trouble. I would like to, how shall we put this, acquire your services as it were.” His response was intriguing.

“My services?” I asked, “What service would that be?” Gen’hime put his glass on the bar and pulled out a small grey square from his layers of fur coat, which he then handed to me.

“It appears we have been unwillingly workin’ for some two-bit Tyrant, goes by the name ‘Altardt’.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard of him.” I lied. I pressed the small button hidden on the edge of the holo-reader and a ghostly purple display appeared. Most of the information was written in Enlyan, Gen’hime’s native tongue, but I knew enough to get a general gist of what Altardt had been doing with Bosat and the remains of his gang. “Let me guess, you need him dead?”

“And we’ll pay handsomely for it, too.” I leaned back against the bar and thought about the proposal. I really needed to get the information I’d taken from Geltzan back to Triad HQ as soon as possible and this job would put me well off course, adding weeks that could be spent figuring out what Geltzan had been up to.

“What’s the time limit?” I asked.

“Time is no issue here, my friend. Take as long as you like.”

“Great, I’ll take it. But don’t expect to hear from me anytime soon; I have more important things to be doing right now.”

“I understand, but when you do finally rid the universe of that no good sack o’ shit permanently, just head straight to Mustar and we’ll sort out payment.”

“Agreed.” I grudgingly shook the Enly’s hand, sealing the deal. After Gen’hime had left a Pluthinian joined me at the bar.

“Heading west, my friend?” He asked.

“We’re on the edges of deep space; there is no orientation out here.” I replied, pocketing the holo-reader.

“That is true. I must ask, what is a Mage of your standing doing in a place like this?”

“You claim to know me, Pluthinian?”

“I do believe you are Dazjtak Radon Temporum-Drakus, Apprentice of the great Aezjtak Haethrin and child of the Ancient Aerithris. Am I correct?” I simply responded with a word and a shrug.

“Possibly.” I took a sip of the *tzenifín* Gen’hime had left behind. It was dry and tasteless, so I tapped the glass and changed it into something a bit more palatable. “And who are you, who so claims to know me?”

“I am Terlad, of Pluthinar.”

There was a brief, but awkward silence that lasted a few seconds. “So, are you him?” Terlad asked, breaking the silence. I sighed and finished my drink.

“Yeah, I’m Radon, what of it?”

“The Sectinate have called you back into active service.” I gave Terlad a questioning look.

“Really? By the Six, they must be desperate.”

“Desperate enough to put together a team comprised entirely of the most powerful assets they have.”

“How many on the team?”

“Including you? Six, all of whom you have fought alongside before.” I drafted a quick list of who were most likely to be on the team. Ras’lion would be there for sure, as would Aiden, if we could find him. Of course, The Triad weren’t going to try and recruit me without an incentive.

“So what are you luring me in with then? Good pay and a decent healthcare plan?” Terlad almost laughed.

“A Drakan, on a healthcare plan? Don’t be ridiculous. No, The Sectinate wishes to reinstate you at grade III-R with unrestricted access to any information you need. And of course you’ll get your own vessel; I imagine public transport is a nightmare these days.” Fortunately for The Triad, business had been slow this past year so I was already going to accept. The ship was just the icing on the cake.

“Ok, I’m sold, where do I sign?”

The man in the mirror stared back at me with mild distaste. His dark brown hair was scraggy and unkempt and in dire need of a good trim, the area around the mouth and cheeks was dark with stubble and his golden eyes gave away the sleep deprivation. I hadn’t seen my own reflection for about three months and it now came to light just how rough they’d been. Fortunately, my clothes had escaped pretty much unscathed. The boots were still black and not riddles with holes, the trousers were also black and had only minor fraying at the hems and the rust-coloured trenchcoat was still in the same condition it had been in when I had bought it about two years ago. The fingerless gloves had to go, though; they made me look too much like a hobo. A beep from the intercom broke me free of my reverie and I went over to the box on the wall.

“Yes?” I said, pressing down on the button labelled ‘SPREKNA’ (talk).

“The Sectin will see you in the meeting room, now.” Replied Terlad’s voice. Completely ignoring my own advice on the matter concerning the gloves, I left the room and headed towards the aft of the Sectin’s vessel.

It took more time than was entirely necessary to find the meeting room; the vessel was a new pattern that had been released only very recently so I wasn’t familiar with the layout. It was a simplistic and logical design: command at the front, amenities in the middle and engineering at the back. However, the designer had, for some strange reason, put the meeting room in the amenities section instead of the command section, hence the unnecessarily long journey. Eventually I located a door labelled *Konvírn G’ralthí* (Meeting Room) and knocked.

“Enter!” Came a familiar voice. I, rather grudgingly, opened the door and stepped in. The first thing that struck me was the contents of the room, or lack thereof. Bar me and the other occupant, the room was empty, possibly due to a hurried launch. Scarcity aside, the room was quite nice, just big enough for a small party to have a meeting. Warm, welcoming, a nice little room. That was until one considered the other occupant. He was tall, with long braided hair, gold eyes and dark skin. He wore brown robes with gold, leaf-like patterning and had an air of…well, I couldn’t quite figure out what it was, but there was an air about him.

“Ah, Radon, welcome to my vessel. I have no doubt you know who I am.” He said, in a smooth voice, something that was undoubtedly synonymous with our race.

“Cyros Emanon-Invara, Gíth-Aezjtak and Sectin of Skarrapraesh. Yes, I know who you are.”

“Good, now that we have introductions out of the way, we can get down to business. While you have been away, the Tyrant Legions have been more of a nuisance than usual; attacking colonies, hijacking trade convoys, they’ve even attempted to destabilise key Triad governments, something you’ve witnessed first-hand if I recall.”

“Yeah, the Tyrants have been doing that since their conception.”

“That is true, but is a large scale massacre on Mustar common Tyrant behaviour? No, not since Galon’s reign anyway. They’re becoming bolder, more violent; reports even say that they are looking for something; something so valuable to Shan-dor that he’ll commit genocide to prevent us from stopping it falling into his hands.”

“I don’t think the massacres have anything to do with whatever Shan-dor is hunting for. They’re more likely to be related, but not fully connected.”

“And what makes you think that?”

“For starters, there are no items of interest to Shan-dor that require the wielder to commit genocide in order to obtain them. The only one I can think of is Godreaver, and Shan-dor is not one of the few people who know of his existence. Secondly, I found some info from some Tyrant Lords that gives me the impression that these massacres were not Shan-dor’s doing. He’s too busy gathering his forces at Inkorinkas Citadel.” I pulled the papers I’d got from Geltzan and handed them to Cyros.

“Paper?” He said, taking the brown sheaf. “Why…” Cyros took a very close look at the papers. “Oh, that’s not good.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“This is ancient spell parchment, from the time of Godslayer.” Cyros waved his hand over the paper and the writing rearranged into an ancient pictographic script.

“That’s Coleopteran,” I said, recognising the script.

“Can you read it?” I shook my head.

“I never learned Arkan form, but fortunately this looks like a primal dialect so I’m sure Haethrin will be able to translate.” Cyros carefully rolled the papers into an empty scroll case. “So, was it your hare-brained idea to put this team together?” I asked, finally getting to the subject I wanted to talk about.

“No, surprisingly enough your Terran friend had this idea,”

“Aiden? There’s no surprise about it, we had a good run together,”

“Well, he did ask for you by name,”

“So he finally made the trip to HQ did he?”

“No, he sent us a video recording.” Cyros picked up a small pane of glass and handed it to me. As soon as I touched it, it sprang to life, showing the face of a man I knew well. After a brief pause, Aiden began speaking.

“I…am Aiden. I am a Lt. Commander in the 5th fleet of the Terran Empire. For 100 years, I have been in the shadows and I would spend another thousand, hunting and killing every Demon. This is a recruitment message. Your leaders, The Triad have ordered me and tasked me with this mission: To create a taskforce known as Project Alpha-Beta-Alpha. They…we are in dire need. You, Radon Temporum, we need you. You are one of the most powerful Mages in the universe and we need your expertise in all aspects of Astral Magic. I do not ask you to do this because you are a member of The Triad of some rank that I do not know. I ask you for the greater good of every life, because a war is coming; a war that will engulf us all. Please…heed my warning. If we do not combat this, we all die; everybody, no matter how strong. Thank you.” I handed the screen back to Cyros.

“That was…compelling,” Aiden’s words echoed in my head. ‘If we do not combat this, we all die.’ “Who else received this message?”

“Ras’lion Gond, Nagaon, Velgor Aneiris Stelleriath and…” Cyros sighed before upending my entire world. “…Alayna Kurinav.”

“WHAT?!” I roared. The lights dimmed and flickered in response to by outrage. “How long have you known?”

“Well, she really…”

“HOW LONG INVARA?” I yelled, cutting him off mid-sentence.

“Siddhartha returned her three weeks after the incident.”

“And is she on board?” Cyros nodded and told me where she was staying. I turned to leave but then swivelled and hit Cyros square in the jaw. “Don’t EVER keep something like that from me again.” Anger now spent, I left the room in search of Alayna.

Chapter 2: The Fairan

I smashed my hand on the nearest table, ignoring the pain that radiated up my arm. I did it again, and again denting the metal deeper after each anger driven blow. The sound of my bone cracking was enough to make the people in my personal cabin cringe. After the seventh hit I managed to calm myself down and began to inspect my hand as I went over to look through my viewing port, as countless light years past by me in mere seconds. Inspecting the damage, I had rightfully broken my hand in several places, but I didn’t care.

“My Lord, are you alright?” asked my second in command. I turned to face her; concern had been etched into her face, something that you rarely saw in an Akuferin. Like me she wore a military uniform; a dark red shirt with several white stripes on her shoulders, black trousers and military combat boots. The only difference between me and her is that I wore golden epaulets with tassels that went down my chest.

“No I’m not Commander,” I said deeply, with anger still lingering in my words. “How many died in that massacre?” I asked. I wanted to know how many people I left behind to die at the hands of those merciless creatures, all to try and find some lousy arms dealer.

“It’s a number near twenty thousand.” She said, sounding very enraged as a few drops of spit flew from her lips. I put my functional hand on my face at hearing the stupidly high number. My rage begun to re-fuel the urge to start smashing things around again.

“Ras’lion, listen to me.” The other occupant of the room said. It was the Captain of the ship and my brother Asteronth, a large Fairan like myself just a little shorter than me wearing the standard naval uniform of a white long sleeved shirt and grey trousers with a red trims going up the seams. His voice was calming and very commanding and as he was one of the few people I would listen to when I was this angry, so I did. “I know you would want to go home and deal with this situation, but we have a mission straight from the Admirals and the Queen herself,” He sighed, like it hurt him to say that. He wanted to go home too, an attack on the people we all swore to protect hurt us all than what most people can imagine. Asteronth continued to speak, still using that calm voice to keep me in check. “But perhaps finding this Tyrant Lord could be the key to this sudden slaughter of the innocent.”

“Maybe brother, but you had best be right,” I said pointing a finger. “Keep our course for the Triad border…and prep the shuttle for six instead of five. I’m going down personally.” I opened one of my draws and took out a tablet and swallowed it. Heat gathered in my hand as nanites repaired the broken bones. I then stood up and left the cabin to go get ready for the mission.

I was in the middle of putting on my amour and weapons, strapping on the dirt brown chest plate made of bruilli, a rare and near indestructible metal which was mined by the very people who had just been killed. A metre length sword hung on my left thigh, and the shield strapped to my arm shrunk and receded into its cuff and would reappear if I willed it to. I also grabbed a thermal rife and two pistols; even though I wasn’t the best at long range and preferred close-combat it would be stupid to not carry some form of long range capability. I was about to place on the helmet, which had been carved to look like our great King Orion Auros. I swear in the ships artificial light he was frowning at me but I blinked to see his normal blank expression. He was the one that united my race thousands of years ago; we were no longer Fairan, or Akuferin or even Enlyan. We were Mustarans, the sword and shield that protects the Triad.

“Oh boy, am I going to be the sword alright.” I mumbled to myself as I put on the helmet and headed for the shuttle. The team was already waiting outside the ramp and when they saw me coming they all came to a brisk salute; a quick flip of the hand with the index finger touching the right temple. I saluted back and they gathered round. They all seemed anxious to get going, and I didn’t blame them as we all wanted to do something. “Right, the mission is grabbing a Solin who seems to be funding proxy wars on the Triad borders. It’s meant to be a covert mission, but I don’t feel very covert today.” I said darkly, as my team smiled. “The Solin could be of Tyrant affiliation, so don’t play gentle. We’re going for a full frontal assault on his hideout, expect to use deadly force and show what it means to cross the Mustarans and especially the Putis Incendia.” I shouted as the team roared and went to grab their seats on the shuttle.

Before I got in, my brother came down from the elevator and called for me.

“Ras a message for you,” he showed me a holo-message but I declined to listen to it now.

“No thanks, I got a Solin to catch.” I said but he grabbed my arm before I could get on the shuttle.

“It’s marked important, it’s from the Triad.” I shook my head.

“They’ve screwed me around enough for several lifetimes and I’m actually doing something important compared to what they send me on. I’ll read it when I get back if they’re lucky.” I got onto the shuttle just as it was getting ready to take off. My brother looked annoyed but he decided to let the matter go.

The planet we landed on was damp, wet and cold, fittingly known as *Ieriri* or ‘freeze’ in Enlyan, my native tongue. Luckily it wasn’t winter at the moment but this wasn’t my type of place, especially since I grew up next to active volcanoes and lava lakes. Not to mention I had the rare magical talent to bend heat to my will. Being able to summon flames would be extremely hard in these conditions.

The hideout was hidden away inside a forest of dead trees. Once it could have been an old vacation house, made of dark wood that had rotted away and smashed windows, with a silly looking brute of an Aelvorian, a serpentine race, keeping guard of a broken door that hung on its hinges. We knew from our Intel that what we really wanted was underground, a huge armoury that held enough weapons to wage a decent war. A buzz in my ear signalled that someone wanted me on the radio. I touched my ear to allow the person to speak.

“This is Longshot; wish me to take out the guard sir?”

“Stun him; we don’t want to go full out just yet.” I replied as I watched the brute collapse in a spectacular fashion, falling off the porch and into the short grass.

“Converge on the main door; use your sensors to pick up any traps or other guards.” I said as we all moved as a unit towards the house. Across the grass like armoured ghosts, we reached the house. I was first on the porch followed last by the Longshot who took down the brute. “Charge your energy shields, I’ll take point. Griss and Shor take the windows.” I hit the middle of my chest, activating my energy shield which glowed bright blue for several seconds then turned transparent. I looked to the group and nodded, as we all charged in shouting. We only found two occupants, who were both asleep.

“It’s clear sir.” One of my team shouted after all the rooms had been checked.

“Strange, the front door is the weakest in any stronghold. It’s where most people put their soldiers…maybe they’re all below.” I said.

Taking the two prisoner, we bound them to the walls as I interrogated one for the entrance to the lower levels. It didn’t take much convincing when a sharp sword was pointed at their throat, leading me to the stairs. I found the button that revealed a crude elevator shaft going down. “Tie up the prisoners, including the one outside. We don’t want a surprise attack on our rear.” I said as I called up an elevator to pick us up. All six of us could fit in and we began to descend. Looking around I had a sudden sense of dread as I saw a camera in the right hand corner. They definitely knew we were here.

“Into firing position!” I shouted, grabbing my own thermal rifle as three crouched and four of us stood ready to fight. The elevator stopped as we hit the bottom level and the doors opened to a host of several people holding a mix of weapons in a room filled with thousands of firearms, explosions, armour, melee weapons and other things that looked illegal, such as a designator ray. Lucky for us they weren’t trained all that well in combat as some had even forgotten to grab some cover.

I didn’t have to order for my men to open fire, and very soon enemies’ numbers soon dwelled.

“Fan out, take them down.” I shouted after hitting one in the leg then fatally to the head. However before we could leave the elevator, a sudden explosion from behind the enemy occurred heading straight to us, causing chain reactions with anything explosive along the way. I got to the front and put my hands up, and as soon as the fire touched me I began to absorb it. A futile attempt to kill us.

After the flames from the explosion passed, my team went around and rounded up any survivors. Only three out of sixteen, but none of them was the Solin we were looking for. “Where is that insect?!” I said loudly. I then turned to the prisoners. Doing the same as before, I interrogated one and he pointed to a safe room at the far end of the room, which had a massive steel door covering the entrance.

With the heat I gathered from the explosion, I unleashed incredibly hot flames on the door. Steel melts at 1370 degrees, an easy level for me to achieve after an exposure to so much heat as I manipulated it to reach temperatures that forced my team to keep their distance. Being a pyromancer I was immune to it, but I doubt the person inside was, and they’d be feeling it alright.

In a few minutes I had got through the door and took a look around. It was a treasure trove of information with hundreds of holo-pads, hard drives and other storable information. But before I could take another step, a winged figure hit me directly in the face at lightning speeds. The force knocked me over, but my shield absorbed any damage. I looked up to see the Solin I was looking for, holding a mace that looked way too heavy for him as he struggled to carry it. Although I give him credit for hitting me that hard with it.

“Come on down, its over you fool,” I launched another round of flames to add to my point. “I won’t ask a second time.” I launched the flames again, but this time the words (or the heat) hit him hard as he dropped the mace and put up his hands in defeat. When he landed my team came through the opening. One put some energy handcuffs on him as the others began to gather the all the Intel on the Solin’s activities…perhaps something here may lead to what happened back home on Mustar.

Still wearing my armour with the helmet staring at me on my desk, my brother came into the room.

“Nice one capturing the Solin, that Intel has provided us a lot of information on some of the Tyrant activities…it seems this guy was a little higher up then we thought.”

“How high?” I asked.

“High enough to have some Intel on their fleet numbers but that’s all. Something on their finances and funding as well but leave that to the logistical departments.”

“Anything on Mustar?” My brother shook his head, and I sighed. It wasn’t a waste of time but it didn’t help the ones who had been killed.

“Ras there is something else though.” I looked up at my brother who had taken out a holo-pad.

“This message from the Triad, I listened through it and I reckon you should too.” My brother pressed play as a familiar figure came up on the holo-pad.

“Aiden?” I was intrigued as the recording began to play. The message went on about a war that was soon to come, and how only a task force with several select people could help prevent it. He was always dramatic at times, but I never knew him to kid around with this type of stuff. I was told that if I was to accept I should make my way straight home to Mustar, where the rest of the team was to meet up. I also took a list of who else was on this task force, names I all recognised…one in particular more than the others. Perhaps it was a sick joke as my memory flashed back to that day…the only thing that really haunted my dreams. No it was a joke…she wasn’t alive. Something to get into my head, another reason for me to fight for this task force.

“Brother, take us home.” I said quietly. Asteronth silently nodded and left. It would be good to see that crazy mage of a Drakan and our old mentor again. I stared at the last name again however…what was Aiden playing at?

Chapter 3: Dynnergh dha Unysa

I sat outside a café on the outskirts of Mustar’s capital, Orion Auros, drumming my fingers on the table. Ras wasn’t late, the bastard had a better sense of timing than I did. No, I had made the idiotic decision of arriving early, knowing full well just how easily I got bored. After a few minutes I asked a waiter about the café’s cake selection.

“Well sir, the chef’s special today is the chocolate fudge brownie.” The waiter replied.

“And what’s the general verdict on that?”

“That, sir, would be absolutely delicious.”

“Excellent, I’ll have one of them please.” The waiter disappeared into the building and returned with the promised cake. He was not wrong about the verdict.

“You’re early,” I looked up to see Ras dressed in his usual military regalia. I responded with a shrug. Ras sat down and ordered fried lava-tail, his favourite meal.

“Some things never change,” I commented when the waiter brought out a dish with the fried fish. Ras smiled and started eating. I waited patiently as Ras ate, noting that he’d picked up a few more scars over the past five years.

“Is it true? Is she[[4]](#footnote-4) still alive?” Ras asked after he’d finished.

“Yep, she’s with Nagaon at the palace sorting out security.”

“And what about the *sangas* who dragged us all into this mess?”

“He went to Torlan to pick Velgor up. Quite when we’ll see Aiden is unknown even to him.”

“So you’ve spoken to him.” I shook my head.

“Nope, The Triad sent Nagaon instructions regarding our recruitment. The only contact I had with Aiden is when he sent me the call to arms speech.”

“He definitely spent hours rehearsing those speeches,”

“Of course he did, I imagine he hired a secretary to write them for him, the bastard.” Ras laughed.

“Yeah, that sounds like him.” A couple of silent minutes passed. Eventually, I remembered why I was in this part of the city.

“Come on, we need to take a trip to The Triad Embassy,” I said, standing up so quickly that my chair nearly toppled over.

“Why?”

“I don’t know, I’m not told this kinda crap,”

“Do you know where you are going?”

“Why do you think you’re here and not at the palace?” Ras sighed and stood up.

“You see that building across the street, the one with ‘Triad Embassy’ chiselled into the front,”

“Oh, that’s what is says,” Despite knowing basic Enlyan, I had never learned what ‘Triad Embassy’ was. Well, I know now. We crossed the road and entered the stone building. The embassy was rather quiet, though that was to be expected as most people were on their lunch break. Our boots made a soft clapping noise as we crossed the polished marble floor and approached the main reception desk. The desk was occupied by a young Enly woman, who greeted us in her native tongue.

“*Dynnergh dha an Triad Kheiligh. Fatlan reb myn gwer tywi*?” She said. I looked at Ras with a raised eyebrow.

“She says ‘Welcome to the Triad Embassy. How may I help you?’”

“Thanks.” I quickly memorised the phrase for later use. Ras replied to the woman, stating that we were here on instructions from The Triad. After a quick conversation over the Embassy’s internal comm system, the receptionist told us to wait in a nearby conference room until a Triad liaison officer came to see us. The liaison officer didn’t take long to arrive. He was a portly man, who Ras informed me was a *flogh’dewbragas*, which meant ‘Child of Two Countries’. He had the tanned skin of a Fairan and the calming aura of an Enlyan. The man put a briefcase on the long table then said something in quick-fire Enlyan, which went straight over my head.

“Sorry, my translation spell doesn’t support Enlyan, could you repeat that please?”

“Would you prefer it if I spoke in Drakanian then?” The man replied, in fluent Drakanian. Now it was Ras’ turn to be confused.

“As much as I would love to converse with a non-Drakan in my mother tongue, my companion also needs to be included in this conversation.” The man gave a short laugh.

“That is true. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Hir’gan Berin, though my colleagues call me Levu.” He said now speaking the common tongue.

“Levu? Is that a middle name?”

“No, it’s short for *Levuskis Ladern[[5]](#footnote-5)*.”

“You’re not handling our money, are you?” Ras asked. Hir’gan laughed again.

“Don’t worry, I got the nickname from my sword fighting days. I had this little trick where I would disarm my opponent without them noticing.”

“Ok, that’s enough about the past. Let’s talk about the present and very near future.”

“Yes, it seems that The Triad have decided to form a team made of the six people you’d never want to meet in a dark alley so I can only assume that this is their way of scaring the Tyrants into submission.” Hir’gan then opened the briefcase and handed us both a brown envelope with the Triad seal on the front. “These are your orders. They are to be read, memorised and then immediately destroyed.” I tore open the envelope and pulled out the solitary sheet of paper.

“Blah, blah, blah…investigation…blah, blah, blah…Return to HQ…blah, blah, blah…Shan-dor is a dickhead,” I then slid the paper back in the envelope and set it on fire, watching as the yellow flames devoured the orders and spat them out as ash. After Ras repeated the procedure, we said goodbye to Hir’gan and left.

“Was that line about Shan-dor necessary?” Ras asked as we made our way to the palace.

“Was your girlfriend’s dad a genocidal psychopathic megalomaniac?” Ras responded with silence.

“Raylow is not my girlfriend.” Ras said a few minutes later.

“Ras, you’re a shit liar.”

“I’ve been telling him that for years.” A hulking lump of weaponised muscle stepped out of a nearby transport gate. Nagaon had aged only slightly over the past five years but had yet to stop chewing on cigars.

“Aren’t you supposed to be at the palace?” I asked.

“Security’s all sorted. The Putis are a very efficient machine.” Ras gave a triumphant smile at that comment. “Anyway, the Queen wants to see you both regarding tonight’s festivities.” My stomach dropped.

“Festivities, what festivities?” I asked cautiously. Parties and I did not mix…at all.

“It’s Raylow’s birthday and you will attend.” Ras said in a calm but mildly threatening tone.

“Can’t I just be put on door duty?”

“No, you’re the Drakanian Mage Council’s representative, as per your duties as Dazjtak; Well, that’s what Raylow told me, anyway.”

“*Sa lisht fenkíro*.” (That little bitch)

“Language, Radon.” Nagaon said.

“*Sazanvarn*. *Lís M’ken vou aus sprekna Drakanage, M’ralshíehrta.*”(Piss off. If I want to speak Drakanian, I will.) Nagaon sighed and shook his head.

“Your mouth’s gonna get you into some deep trouble someday.”

“Already has, mate.”

“You’re right, Radon, some things just don’t change.” Ras stated.

The throne room of Stability Palace was decorated in the traditional purple and red of Mustar’s monarchy as well as the blue and gold that symbolised the Drako-Mustaran alliance. Tables of food lined the room, covered by white cloth to stop hungry Drakanae from getting to the contents, and the centre of the room was left clear for the toasts and speeches that were customary on such an occasion.

“Are you sure Raylow said I had to attend?” I asked Ras. Most people believed that Raylow and I got on very well, but this was only a façade as Raylow believed I was a bad influence on Ras and as such did not like me one bit.

“Yes, and she was rather adamant about it.”

“Ras’lion!” A young woman with long red hair entered the room.

“*Sprekna de lo kathilus*.” I said under my breath. Raylow ran across the room and embraced Ras, almost winding the poor sod.

“Hey Raylow,” Ras gasped. Raylow eventually detached herself from Ras.

“You haven’t come to see me in ages, how are you?” She asked with concern.

“Fine, just dealing with the Tyrants as usual.”

“At least you’re alive. How’s the family?”

“Dunno, haven’t gotten round to seeing them yet.”

“Well, you are rather busy. RADON! PUT THAT CAKE DOWN!!” I stopped just as I was about to eat an unguarded piece of cake. I gave Raylow a pleading look, but her stern gaze could cause even Godslayer to crawl into a black hole. I returned the cake, vowing to return later to claim that which was rightfully mine. “I expect you to be on your best behaviour tonight, understand?”

“Yes mother.”

“Raylow, leave him be. I’m sure he won’t do anything…Radon-y. Right Radon?” This time Ras gave the stern look.

“I am making exactly zero promises.”

“Radon, if you don’t behave tonight I’ll tell Alayna that you cried when you thought she’d died.” Nagaon said through a cloud of cigar smoke.

“Then you’d be lying to her[[6]](#footnote-6).” I retorted.

“She doesn’t know that.” At the back of the room someone cleared their throat to get our attention. We all turned to see an elderly man standing with a rather regal looking woman.

“Presenting Her Supreme Majesty, Queen Amyfex, ruler of the united…”

“Oh shut up, Durn’van.” Durn’van ended his long introduction with a sigh of relief. “Now I’m sure we’re all looking forward to tonight’s festivities, but we must also be on our guard. The recent massacres occurred in Marazi, which is only a few kilometrae from this palace and it is possible that an attack could happen within Orion Auros itself.”

“Speaking of the massacres, do we have any idea who was behind it?” I asked.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to bully the Sectinate to get that information.”

“Don’t worry, I’m pretty good at getting information from the Sectinate,” I replied, rubbing the knuckles on my right hand, which ached slightly at the memory of hitting Cyros.

“I’ve heard. Nagaon, are all the security measures in place?”

“They are, Ma’am. Both the Putus Incendia and the Gerratum[[7]](#footnote-7) are on standby.”

“Excellent. My Lord Gond, take the Dazjtak and Miss Kurinav on a full sweep of the palace to see if the Putus have overlooked anything.” Ras said a quick farewell to Raylow and we both left the Throne room to find Alayna.

We found Alayna in the guards’ common room winning an arm wrestle against a rather burly Putus. She only lost as her concentration lapsed when she saw Ras. Within seconds Ras was getting his lungs crushed a second time.

“Ok, that’s enough Alayna, we have a job to do.”

“Oh come on Radon, have a heart,” Alayna said, after detaching herself from Ras.

“I do, two in fact. The palace is rather big, so we’ll have a lot of time to catch up." For the couple of hours that it took to sweep the palace, Ras managed to tell Alayna most of what he’d done over the past four and a half years. Alayna, on the other hand, was reluctant to tell us what happened on Raldahost, but we didn’t press. The events on Raldahost had affected everyone in a bad way and forgetting what happened was impossible.

“So Radon, you getting dressed up for tonight?” Alayna asked. We had returned to the common room, waiting for the nod from Nagaon so we could get ready for tonight.

“Unfortunately, I am here on an official capacity after all.”

“That’s going to be fun,” Ras said, cracking a small smile.

“*Stek’vartap’gen[[8]](#footnote-8)*.”

“We still don’t speak Drakanian,”

“Then learn. It’s not hard.”

“That’s what you said about…you know what, it doesn’t matter,” Alayna said. At that point, Nagaon entered the room.

“Alright folks, time to get ready. Keep an eye on Radon to make sure he doesn’t sneak off.”

“*Tau de kleín hådur*,” (Ye of little faith)

The party was as I expected; BORING! It mainly consisted of gift giving, dancing, drinking and eating. Well I ate, not sure about anyone else[[9]](#footnote-9). As Dazjtak of Kaíotika, I was expected to present a gift to Raylow, but given that I’d only been told about it a few hours ago, I didn’t have one ready. Alayna had foreseen this and Raylow ended up receiving a *khlavíta*, a traditional Kaíotikan jewellery box. Some small part of me reckoned she knew that I had nothing to do with the gift, but she seemed happy with it. So the boring party with its boring party stuff passed through two long and boring hours. That was until some uninvited guests arrived.

“*Zha…vartanen…lørtah*,” I said. Ras and I were standing by the thrones, watching the guests. I was dressed in my blue and gold robes and Ras was in full military dress…again. Nagaon had gotten drunk and was dancing with the Queen and Alayna and Raylow were gossiping in the corner. “Can I go home now?”

“No! You will stay here until Raylow says so.”

“Gah, *vor lo bidz de varta*! Waiter, bring me cake.” But before I could receive cake, the doors burst open and three people strolled in. The intruders were immediately surrounded by Putus and Gerratum soldiers, but they didn’t seem to be bothered.

“Don’t worry ladies and gentlemen, no reason to panic. We’re just here to wish your new Queen a happy birthday.” Said the leader of the trio[[10]](#footnote-10). Before the meaning of what he’d said became clear, he’d pulled out a laser pistol and shot Amyfex and the guard standing in front of her right between the eyes. In the following second, quite a bit happened. First Raylow ran to her mother’s dead body. Then the Putus and Gerratum opened fire. The shots were deflected by a force field surrounding the trio, who then cut down the soldiers. Ras and I forced our way through the screaming crowd. Alayna, however, stood shocked at the fact that one of the three intruders was in fact her brother, Khainan. By the time we’d arrived, all the guards were dead. The leader took a swipe at Ras with his cane sword, which Ras met with his own blade. The third member took a few shots at me, but I dodged them and responded by ripping the air from her lungs through her chest. Khainan had already ran of like the little bitch he was. Very few swordsmen could match Ras, but the leader was doing just that despite the fact that Ras’ sword should have cleaved the thin cane sword in two by now. I flung a blue flame at the leader, but he dodged it. Drawing my own blade, Ras and I managed to drive him back to the doors, but eventually he disarmed both of us in one sweep and ran, dodging the flurry of fire that followed him. With the immediate threat now gone, we joined Alayna, Nagaon and Raylow by Amyfex’s prone form.

“What’s the deal Nagaon, you could’ve killed that guy in one hit.” I said angrily

“No I couldn’t. That man was Eoworien, a trained Seltrun killer. I have fought him before and almost died. Now can you please show some respect for the dead.” I apologised quietly and surveyed the scene. Most of the guests had fled and those that remained were in shock. The throne room was covered in mini craters from plasma and laser fire and most of the windows were smashed. A runner come to inform us that all the Putus who were on duty had been killed, leaving them almost depleted as most of the order were in the Palace that night. Finally, Raylow was in pieces and Ras was rather angry with himself. She had lost her mother and he had failed in his duties as Head Putus. Instead of consoling those who were grieving, I left the room to try and find some clue to where the attackers has gone, but there was nothing. I didn’t know who they were or what they’d wanted, but they had crashed the wrong party and they would pay dearly.

Chapter 4: Eyes and Promises

It was the bells that kept me awake that night, ringing all through the dark, and louder than the rain that had begun moments after the Queen’s tragic, and unexpected murder. As well as numerous friends and comrades I had lost this night.

Even if the bells were silenced, and the rain stopped I doubt I could have slept anyway. As Lord Protector I had failed, and in that alone would keep me awake for many nights to come.

So I kept to my office, sitting in the dark with the tiniest light that filtered from the security lights outside. Staring out the window panes, watching as the sky wept onto the city in mourning.

Still wearing my full uniform, with my sword and pistol spread out on my desk I buried my hands into my face, and hard enough that my elbows to feel like they were digging into the wood. For once I was cold, colder then I had ever been for years and it certainly didn’t feel good. Cold mixed with unbearable guilt.

The last time I felt similar to this, was when my master died, Dar’golith. But that doesn’t come close to this. He had died on his own will and terms, fighting for something he believed in. Amyfex had not, and we didn’t save her, people she trusted to keep her safe and away from harm. It was enough to tear me from the inside out, and what’s worse, by the time we had realised, she was already dead. In the middle of the most protected planet in the Triad, in her own home.

As I wallowed in my despair, my office door slammed right open. I looked up from my hands, to see the one person I was dreading to see. It was Raylow, her eyes, even in this light I could make out the colour of amethyst in her pupils. The sign of the Monarch, which transferred in death. They were red and puffy around the edges and staring right into my own, piercing deeply. Her facial expression was clearly one of anger, and resentment. I didn’t blame her as she had just lost her mother, the only parent she cared about.

I stood up slowly, and walked around the desk. She stood still, justly staring with hate. And then, with no hesitation, she ran right at me and began to hit me where she could, and did so whist screaming.

“Why didn’t you save her?!?” She yelled emotionally as I took the just beating. “Why?” She kept saying, each time a new blow found its mark. My legs, groin, arms, chest, face it didn’t matter to her. She was angry, and she needed to let it out. Who could blame there, who else was better? Sprouting curses, to me, the caned assassin, the Ancients and herself.

I don’t know how long she kept the hitting, but the cursing went on longer. Eventually she ran out of steam, and pushed her head hard into my chest, crying heavily as she began to collapse to the floor. All I could do was hold her and fell with her to the floor with her. I couldn’t summon a single word, although I wanted to console her. But I had not earnt that right. Every joint Raylow had hit ached with pain, every tump of pain reminded me of my failure. She had, quite rightly not gone easy on me.

As we sat, she continued to cry her heart and soul out for what felt like hours. I spotted someone by the door after a while, realising it to be Nagaon, with a troubled look on his face. He shut the door to allow us to have some privacy, I gave him a nod of thanks as he did so. The light once again shut out.

Eventually Raylow stopped crying, and began to speak but barely, through bursts of sniffs and hiccups. “I—don’t ---blame you Ras…it ---wasn’t your fault. They killed – so many –please find them,” she manged before closing her eyes. She was rightly exhausted and fell asleep, curled up in my arms. I caressed her hair, even in her sleep she looked miserable and sad. Wet tears still running down her cheeks, which I wiped away. I kept wishing I could take it away, but fully knew only time would heal such a wound.

After a few moments, the door reopened, not by Nagaon but by Radon. He was respectfully quiet as he moved, but showed no emotion like he usually does in these sort of situations. But in a way, that was his way of showing he cared. I learnt that well when we were training together, back in the Academy.

Silently he pulled out a holo-pad, and showed it to me. I grabbed it, to see it was details of the assassin we had encountered. Eowairan DcVic, a tall and slim build Terren with a shaven head and with eyes so thin, they were like slits. He was considered one of the best marksmen in the known Universe, and wielded a cane sword to great efficiently. As I had learnt first-hand; my sword hand was one of the few places that didn’t have a scar…until today’s events.

As I continued to read his stats, I came across his known and ex affiliations. Nagaon was right, he was an ex-Seltrun until very recently. An elite operative for the Triad, the best in the business – and once one of mine, Radon’s and Alayna’s colleague. Until myself, and Radon quit after many, many disagreements with the Triad’s polies.

“It is quite possible he is now in league with the Tyrant Legions – hence this attack. Properly hired by Gall….” I

“Shush Radon,” I said to keep him quiet as I pointed to Raylow. Any mention of her father, especially now would be unwise. Ever since he split and forced half the Mustaran Empire with him to the Tyrants, an unspoken taboo had been placed on his name.

“Right…okay well, we need to find him.” Radon finished.

“And make him pay.” I said angrily.

“It’s not like you to rush, I don’t like his actions.” He paused. “He showed us his face willingly, made a simple statement and left a paper trail to easy to follow for someone who was supposedly so skilled. He wants to be followed, and as we saw today he matched both of us in battle, and even Nagaon said he would be killed. We need to me careful with his guy.” He finished.

“What do you promise we do? We’re meant to investigate the massacre.”

“Nagaon and I went to the site of the massacre, while you were here sorting things out and looking after your…” he looked at Raylow, “damsel.” He paused, as I gave him a stern look while he rolled his eyes. “There’s no leads,” he moved past us to look out the window, “but here I was thinking. The assassination and the massacre, are quite possibly connected, giving us just cause to follow our assassin friend.”

“How’d you figure that?” I replied.

“I thought you would be happy at such a suggestion?”

“I am.” I stared at Raylow. She didn’t blame me for her mother’s death? She should do, with righteous cause. But, inside I was relieved at her words. I held her tight, as a more useful feeling began to drive away the guilt and sadness. Vengeance.

“We’ll leave tomorrow evening, that should give you enough time make your preparations. We first must learn about our enemy, and we need new answers.” Radon said as moved to the door, but turned at the last second. “We’re going back to Triad HQ – Talk to a few old friends of ours, and see if we can’t figure out the motives of our friend with a cane.” He finished and left, leaving me again with Raylow. I sighed, both out of exhaustion and new, growing determination.

I carefully picked up Raylow from the floor, and carried her out of my office. And took her to her chambers, a few floors up. The Putus who were assigned to protect her didn’t notice she had left, and looked alarmed when was carrying her back.

They opened the doors for me, and I took her inside. Placing her on her double bed and pulled the covers over her. I planted a quick kiss on her forehead, which was enough to wake her. She looked at me blankly, and indicated to lie down next to her. I did so.

“Make me a promise Ras’lion,” she whispered but it was clear enough it was serious. “Bring back that assassin, bring him to me so I can make him pay.” Her eyes, which were once a deep brown, still watering with tears, begged me to do this. I managed a simple nod, a promise made without words, which was too be completed by actions I know meant I was going to, delve, quite willing, and gladly into a world of pain.

She smiled softly, and moved closer and we gently kissed, sealing the vow. Still, even next to the women I love, and the comfort she gave me, I still could not sleep that night. But I was no longer cold.

Chapter 5: The Mission

Everything seemed slow. The occupants of Stability Palace were slow to rise from bed, the guards wondered slowly through the corridors and even Mustar seemed to be turning slower than usual. The assassination of Amyfex hit everyone hard. Well, all except me. I had barely known her and so felt nothing, her passing was inevitable so why even bother. But something bothered me. It wasn’t because Eoworien had simply waltzed in and shot her or that he’d vanished without a trace. No, he hadn’t vanished without a trace, he’d left a fucking huge trail for us to follow but we couldn’t follow him directly. He was leading us somewhere, into a trap most likely. After leaving Ras alone with Raylow last night, I had contacted Kester Noran, a friend from my days at The Academy, and asked him to look into the information we’d found. He had yet to reply, but there was a lot of information to go through.

Perched on the balcony of the room I was staying in, I watched the sun rise over the caldera of the volcano where the palace was built. A familiar scent drifted on the breeze as Alayna joined me on the balcony.

“One of these days you’re gonna fall off whatever railing you’re perched on.” She said, keeping her distance from the edge.

“You know that Drakanae can fly, right?”

“Yeah, but you know what your luck’s like.”

“*Steir pløv vor hådur*.” (So much for faith) She wrapped her arms around my chest and rested her head on my shoulder.

“You won’t die on us, will you?”

“No, but you might if you don’t get off.”

“If I go, you’re coming with me,” She replied, tightening her grip.

“It’s a long way down, I can fly and you cannot. Make your choice.” With a grunt of dissatisfaction, Alayna let go and wandered off back into the palace.

1. About 60 million years ago, last Tuesday. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For obvious reasons, this was shortened to Shar-garoth, or Shargaroth as most write it. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Basically champagne [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ah, the pronoun game. A personal favourite of mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Levuskis Ladern means ‘Swift-handed thief’ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. No he wouldn’t. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The Gerratum Inserdjuts are the Triad equivalent of the S.A.S. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Means Shut the Fuck up. Used exclusively by Radon as the phrase has never left Earth. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Not because I had eaten all the food before anyone could have some. Ras and Alayna were very strict about the amount I was allowed to eat. Killjoys. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Think Jason Statham with a cane. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)