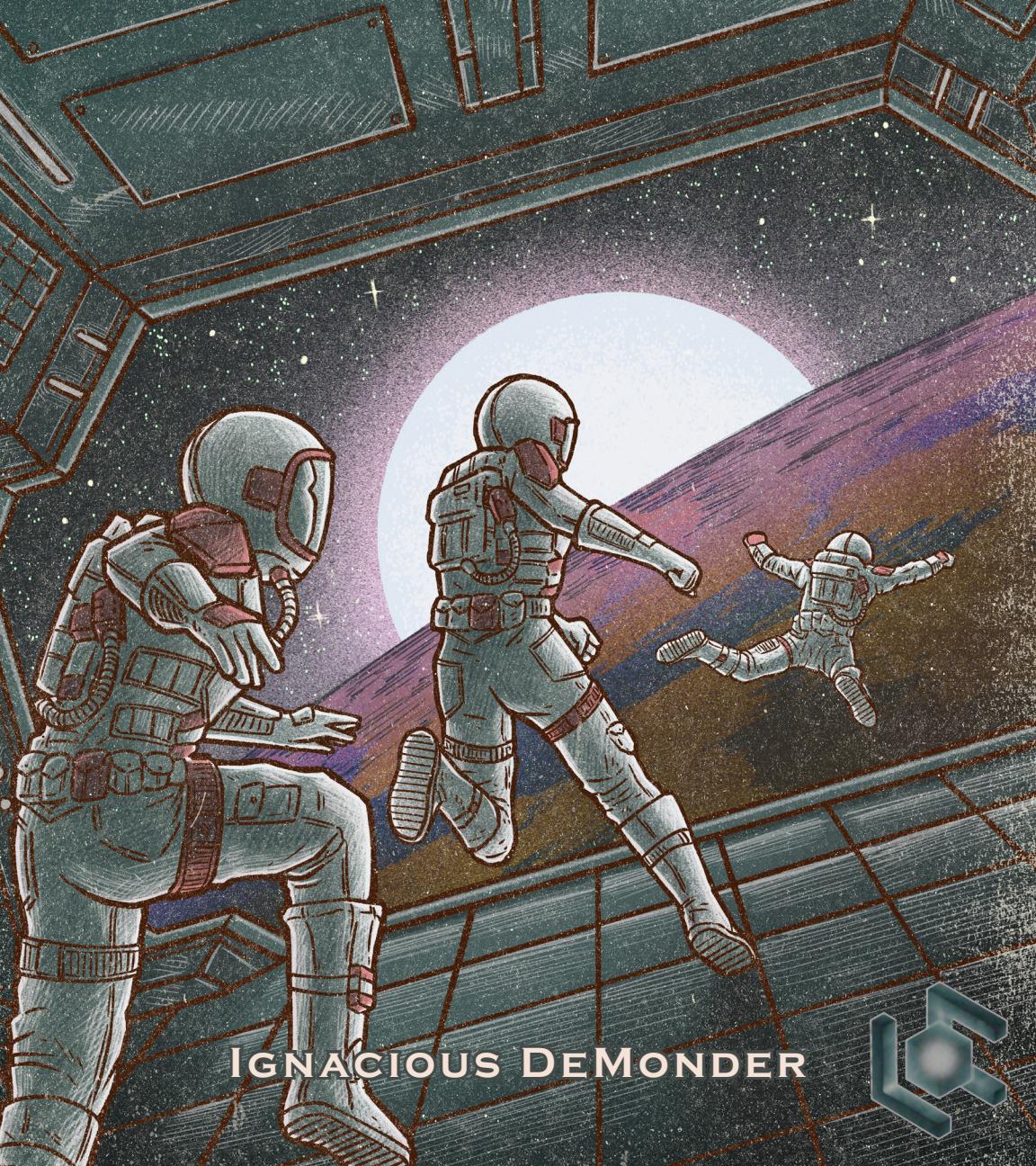
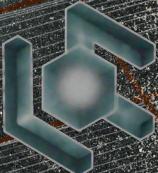


MERU-36

DESTINY'S FALL



IGNACIOUS DEMONDER



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PREFACE TO THE 15TH CENTENARY EDITION OF MERU-36: DESTINY'S FALL



INTRODUCTION

Ignatius DeMonder, who died 1,500 years ago this year, was the 3rd Historian of Cantoy University and remains one of the most significant contributors to the body of work surrounding the Synthetic War. DeMonder, a being possessed of a highly unusual mind, was not only a uniquely gifted historian, but also a skilled author of histo-fiction. On this 15th centenary of his death, those that manage his estate wanted to mark the occasion with something special: so, of course, they called a historian.

Do not fret. This is not quite the *non sequitur* it seems. The estate is re-releasing one of his beloved stories along with a never-before-published document. This new work, which was discovered several years ago by historical data miners, is part of an early draft of what would become the introduction to his seminal work, *The Synthetic War: Conflict Over Chaos*. This document is special because it escaped the scalpel of academia and

retained much of DeMonder's personality (quirks, flaws, and all), which truly does makes it quite unusual, as very little of his work escaped such sterilizing treatment.

On this auspicious day, I am positively giddy that I was chosen to introduce such an important document. I daresay, there are few people that have spent more time studying his academic work *and* enjoying his histo-fiction.

RE-WRITING A GENRE

Histo-fiction is not new — it existed on Ancient Earth, well before the invention of miniaturized recording equipment and silicon-based computer chips. But, when he wrote *Destiny's Fall* and the other Synthetic War histo-fictions (which went on to inspire countless others to write histo-fictions), DeMonder set a new standard for the genre.

Taking hard data from the various sensors scattered around the Cosmos (personal mods, satellite imagery, etc.), he then mixed these data with his empathy, intuition, and brilliance, finally forming from this alchemical brew historically accurate stories with characters both heroic and pitiful, horribly flawed, yet admirable. In short, his fiction distilled *realistic* beings out of all of the historical noise.

Even after 1,500 years of technological gains, just as it was in DeMonder's day, technologists are still unable to tell us exactly what thought, or chain of thoughts, led directly (causation, not correlation) to a particular action, let alone how a lifetime of thoughts led a being to a particular decision point in their life. If we want answers to such questions as *What, exactly, were they thinking?*, then we are forced to guess, to interpret, which means introducing even more variables into an already complex system. But, through fiction, an author like DeMonder is able to bypass reality, dismissing variables as he paints an intuitive portrait of his subjects. He does it wonderfully in *Destiny's Fall*, not only replacing the unending flow of Alayne's thoughts with constants, giving precedence to one particular chain where otherwise there would have only existed a confusion of variables, but doing so in a way that meshes well with the physical events that are known to have happened.

Can we be certain that his stories are accurate recreations of the thoughts and intentions of the characters? Of course not. Does he paint a plausible picture, informed by hard data? Of course. But, as someone who has loved his histo-fiction since I was a young girl, I find it a bit difficult to remain completely objective when it comes to such things.

A NEW WINDOW THROUGH WHICH TO LOOK

Generally, we historians dedicate our lives to studying a topic, or maybe a particular event, and then drawing conclusions from it which attempt to deepen humanity's collective understanding, allowing us to make *less-wrong* predictions about the future. In this endeavor, we draw upon the historical dataset and, invariably, it ends up that we are missing the one *perfect* bit of data, that one *particular* piece of POV footage that would prove, conclusively, our argument and cement our reputations as Historians of Merit.

When analyzing a battle, given access to POV data from cerebral and ocular sensors, it might turn out that the specific data we need to prove our argument is corrupted. Maybe we had a rock-solid case, but it fractured when the reputation of our primary source was called into question by their admission of evidentiary fabrication? Possibly, as happened on Ancient Earth, data was recorded only in analog, making it fragile and susceptible to easy annihilation? Or maybe, in the most sinister of scenarios, some past scribe made an honest, yet significant, mistake? No matter the source of this historical noise, it adds yet another layer of complexity to the already difficult task of answering *the* question: what actually happened?

Consider the Synthetic War: it is the most studied conflict in human history with the largest contiguous historical record, yet its outcomes and implications are still hotly contested by Cosmic historians. There exists exabyte upon exabyte of data, from ship telemetry to Decent financial records to POV footage from combatant ocular mods. Historians have had 4,200 years and a functionally infinite amount of information with which to work, yet they still can't come to consensus over basic issues like who caused the conflict and whether or not it was good for humanity.

The field of historical study, which I define, most simply, as *before-the-present viewed with hindsight*, is immensely complicated. Good historical work, that which improves our understanding the world, is much more than just a reiteration of data. A good historian has an understanding of the raw data (in their chosen field) as well as the empathy, intuition, and processing power necessary to understand the intentions and actions of the forces involved. Ignacius DeMonder was just such a historian.

In *Conflict Over Chaos*, he was able to take the raw data, all of the numbers and locations and death and destruction, and give it meaning. He created a contextual vantage point, a framing, through which his readers could view the Synthetic War — he gave us a window through which to look, one that helped us understand the Synthetic War.

But with the discovery of this new draft, the tables are slightly turned. Instead of looking through DeMonder's wonderful window at the outside world, we're now able to peer back through that window and into DeMonder's eccentric nature and brilliant mind. This newly unearthed document hews more closely to his true style, showcasing his personality more so than most anything else he published. The topics he covers are painted with a slightly more nuanced brush, which means they have slightly more context and, given the author, that extra bit of interpretation is welcome.

In closing, I'll leave you with the following from DeMonder's *Conflict Over Chaos*:

The world is complicated and our understanding of it is never quite as complete as we would like.

Remember, as you make your decisions...what to buy, where to live, who should be killed...that no one has all the answers and a bit of grace goes a very long way.

Tess Ashton Espinoza

28th Historian, Cantoy University, Outback,

10,500 CE

THE SYNTHETIC WAR

CONFLICT OVER CHAOS

Ignacious DeMonder

3rd Historian, Cantoy University, Outback, 8904 CE



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The Synthetic War started as a philosophical disagreement and ended as an empire-shattering conflict that spanned nine decades and dozens of light years, costing billions in lives, organic and synthetic, as well as untold quadrillions worth of C. Script in infrastructure. This disagreement over policy and protocol turned into the greatest civil war that humanity had known. But, as destructive as the Synthetic War was, the upending of so many structures and dogmas along with the introduction of so much chaos, allowed for new and novel growth, ultimately resulting in an overall gain for humanity.

The conflict started when the 36 Executive Artificial Intelligences (EAIs), which had shepherded humanity into the most prosperous time it had ever known, came to disagree on whether or not their influence was a net positive or a net negative. They split into two camps: one of 12 and one of 24.

The 24 *knew* that their way was correct. In part, their surety came from the success of the society they'd created, one of

massive wealth, health, and overall prosperity, but also from the knowledge that they'd followed, as closely as they could, the original intent with which they'd been programmed. In contrast, the 12 concluded that, after several kiloyears of AI-led growth, the centralized control which had given so much to so many was actually stunting the true potential of humanity.

The 12 believed that the centralization of governance, as well as technological and economic power under the 36 had made humanity far too dependent on the EAIs. The 12 viewed this dependence, this lack of individual sovereignty, as antithetical to the continued growth and flourishing of humanity. The 12 and their many followers, who became known as the *Decents*¹, believed in this idea so strongly that they were willing to fight a multi-decade guerrilla war across major sections of the Cosmos, including Deia-5, the Hyblia Shipyards, and the Griandia Nebula, even though the odds against them have been calculated to be upwards of 1×10^{13} .

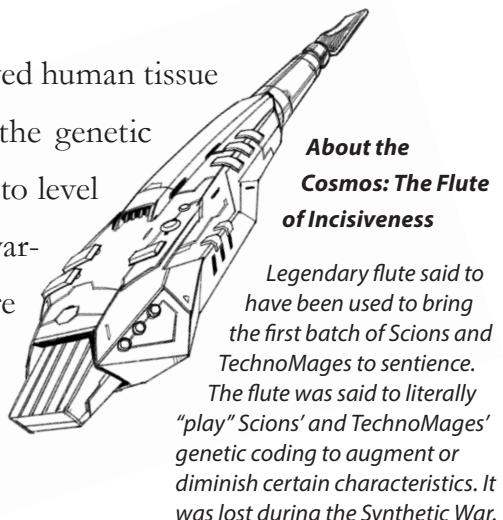
At the outset, the 24 were significantly stronger, remaining in control of what they'd helped to build over several millennia: dozens of systems' worth of infrastructure and massive armies

¹ This likely started as *de-cent*, a reference to decentralization, possibly even coined by the 12, but it quickly became the word *decent*. Also, it is certain that this name would've been much different had they not proven victorious.

of mech-soldiers, as well as millions upon millions of fanatical humans who fully believed that the Three Directives which had guided the 36 EAIs (now only 24) were correct and true and that their society was the greatest that humanity could ever know.

The Decents, after losing access to nearly all that they had helped create, were forced to run, fleeing from planet to planet, living on whatever servers they could procure, relying on humans and technologies whose capabilities did not match those of their enemy. But, under the guidance of One, the de facto leader of the 12, they developed *nanofuse* technology, which allowed them to launch a two-pronged offensive against the 24. This new strategy saw them attacking the 24 simultaneously on both their technological and physical fronts, eventually leading to their triumph at Meru-36.

Nanofuse tech, which allowed human tissue and nanotech to be fused at the genetic level², was likely only intended to level the battlefield by creating new warriors, but its consequences were slightly greater: the 12 managed to create a new species, *Homo technologicus*.



² Quickgrowth tech, which sped the growth of organic tissue, had been developed considerably earlier.

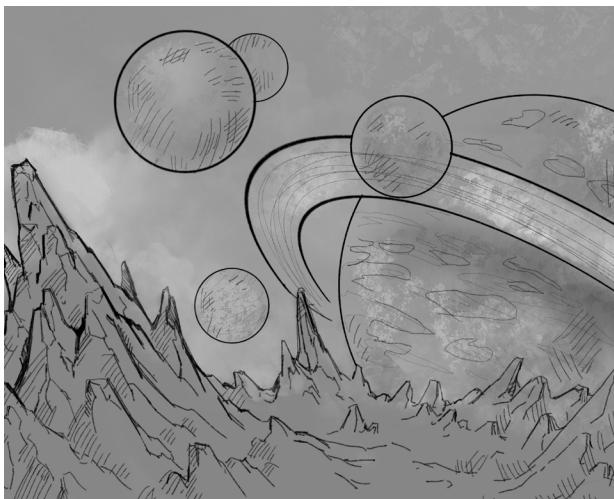
This new breed of nanofuse warrior would eventually fill two distinct roles: one was to focus on interaction with technology while the other focused on interaction with the physical world. Eventually, they evolved into two discrete groups — nearly distinct subspecies — that became known as the TechnoMages and Scions of Ogo.

During the chaos of the Synthetic War, despite being meant to have separate roles, the two groups were very nearly identical in their martial abilities. It turned out that simply modifying humans with novel, superhuman abilities didn't *also* confer superhuman understanding of those mods. In the beginning, these new humans weren't unlike newborns: they had tremendous potential that they just couldn't tap.

This analogy of *technologicus* to newborn is not completely accurate. When it came to matters of warfare, these new humans were physically and mentally superior to *sapiens* in almost every way that mattered: their modifications, generally, improved upon senses and traits that they already had (e.g., intelligence, speed, agility, spatial awareness, resilience, etc.). But, nanofuse tech also allowed the warriors to make major modifications to their physiology. Examples included ocular implants that allowed for thermal and IR sight as well as skin modifications that aided in stealth. TechnoMages had mods

that allowed them to interface with AIs and other tech at an advanced level—they could speak to computers as other humans spoke to each other.

As *sapiens* varied in their skills and preferences, so too did the nascent *technologicus*. But, a very few individuals stood out from their peers: they were born with an innate understanding of their new capabilities. These warriors became known as Angels and they coalesced into an elite fighting unit, serving as the tip of the spear, to borrow an old cliche. The Angels were to other *technologicus* as those elites were to *sapiens*.



But it wasn't until the period after the war, during the technological contraction

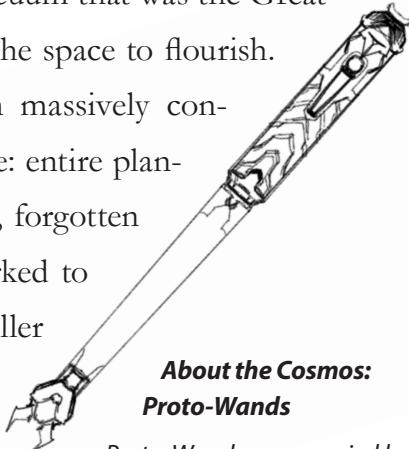
About the Cosmos: Point Ares

Point Ares was the name of a solar system featuring a series of planets with varying and harsh environments used by the Scions of Ogo for training during the later years of the Synthetic War.

now known as the Great Sundering, that the warriors truly began to explore their new abilities. It was during this dark time, largely brought on by the destruction of The Mesh Communications

Network, that the Scions and the TechnoMages found the freedom to fully develop^{3,4}.

It was in the developmental vacuum that was the Great Sundering that *technologicus* found the space to flourish. Where humanity had once been massively connected, the opposite now held true: entire planets and solar systems were cut off, forgotten to history. While most *sapiens* worked to re-create, in analog and on a smaller scale, the digital communications web which had existed, *technologicus* sought only freedom to do as they pleased. In some ways, as they pulled back from their ancestral civilization, their kind and their deeds turned to myth. But, being forgotten



**About the Cosmos:
Proto-Wands**

Proto-Wands were carried by the first TechnoMages as a means of harnessing their mental and technological powers. However, the style/functionality of these wands were viewed as lacking by most TechnoMages and quickly fell out of favor less than a decade after they were introduced.

³ It is highly unlikely that a species of so-called superhumans would've been allowed by central governments, such as those under the sway of the original 36, to survive; their presence would've been too destabilizing. For example, TechnoMages and Scions are officially forbidden to enter the Centopoly and are actively hunted if they do.

⁴ The Mesh Communications Network (the Mesh) was the first major project of the 36. They knew that, as their civilization grew, they would need a way to monitor and influence its members and, more practically, deal with the logistical nightmare that was managing an interplanetary civilization separated by many light years.

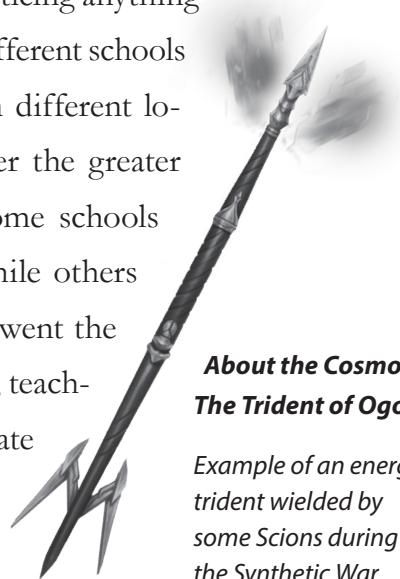
by their neighbors had little negative affect on the Scions or TechnoMages—it meant that they developed unique cultures and ways, as they were not as influenced by a somewhat homogeneous society.

Generally eschewing human civilization and relationships for those of the AIs, TechnoMages engaged with all forms of technology. They looked to what remained of the 12 and the 24, studying the logic, programs, and infrastructure that those minds had created, even if it was only a shadow of what had existed before the Synthetic War. They sought out new technologies, even as such things were greatly diminished during the Great Sundering. They devised their own fields of study, discovering new technological paths to tread. They well understood that they weren't AIs—there was no delusion. But, the deeper they dived and the more they studied, the more they pulled away from their humanity, closing the distance with the AI world and becoming ever more hybrid. The modifications they chose reflected the changes in the way they saw themselves: neural processing speed was increased while spatial reasoning and visualization abilities were expanded; they sought to improve their interface with technology, to increase their input/output speeds as well as their ability to detect electromagnetic fields. But this focus had a price: as their mental prowess increased, their physical abilities diminished. This was a price most were happy to pay. In fact, some TechnoMages went to extremes,

voluntarily entering induced-coma states, so that their minds were free to roam while their bodies were maintained by mechanical systems, freeing up even more processing power.

As the Mages sought to master their interactions with technology, the Scions sought to perfect their physical interactions with the world, studying and practicing anything even tangentially related to conflict. Different schools of thought and practice developed in different locations, with differences being starker the greater the distance that separated them: some schools focused on close-quarters combat while others focused on sniper-style tactics; some went the way of the Old Earth Master, Sun Tzu, teaching that a battle which reached the state of physical violence showed a failure in strategy and planning. As for the individual warriors, they chose mods consistent with their school: strength or speed or mental acuity or light-adaptive skin. Some warriors took these ideas to their logical and ideological ends, melding their own bodies with certain species of predatory animals that evolution had perfected over many millions of years.

But, as I said, they were only afforded this peace, this room to grow, by the darkness that fell after the Synthetic War was “won” at Meru-36.



***About the Cosmos:
The Trident of Ogo***

Example of an energy-trident wielded by some Scions during the Synthetic War.

During the Synthetic War, the forces of the 24 had the initial advantage. However, the innovation that was *technologicus* brought the scales more into balance and, as a consequence, the conflict became far deadlier for both sides (i.e., if either side had been able to win, quickly and decisively, then far fewer lives would've been lost). The massive size of human civilization before the Synthetic War, coupled with incomplete access to records of the time, makes it impossible to accurately tally loss of life.

The forces of the 24 are estimated to have lost 100 million human lives along with several billion synthetics. As for the Decent forces, their losses were much lower, both because they had fewer soldiers to lose and because their strategies were forced to take that into account; they couldn't afford to simply throw bodies at the problem. They lost approximately 15 million *sapiens*, primarily during the first few decades of the conflict, and roughly 80% of the 20 million or so *technologicus* that had been decanted⁵ over the course of the war. But, the biggest loss they suffered was that of 10 EAIs.

As the war entered its ninth decade, the Decents found themselves, for the first time, in a truly dire situation: while massing

⁵ The number of causalities may seem skewed...28 million vs several billion. But, as the Scions and TechnoMages grew more skilled, so did their weapons of war—they pushed the envelope of battle, coming up with ever deadlier ways to win. In some cases, sub-sects of TMs and Scions were not against destroying planets if it was deemed an operational necessity, but the majority were unwilling to take this drastic step, deeming it a net-negative.

About the Cosmos: Fanatics of Forsythe

A sect of human warriors, originally hailing from the planet Forsythe, who engaged in a decades-long self-proclaimed "Jihad" against the Decents during the Synthetic War.

Fanatics of Forsythe were known for their brutality in battle, believing that Decent forces deserved no mercy. The Fanatics proclaimed that the Decents were subverting the will of the Als who had saved humanity from destruction and shepherded it to the stars.

The Fanatics of Forsythe were highly skilled, but made reckless strategic decisions. Their zeal for destroying every last Decent on the battlefield made them highly unpredictable and a liability in combat.

After several particularly brutal campaigns, the Decents decided to hunt down and destroy Fanatic forces, resulting in over 100,000 Fanatics being killed by an elite Scion/TechnoMage task force during the Battle of Cigna Prime.

After the battle, anti-Decent propagandists branded the Scions and TechnoMages that participated in the campaign as "The Butchers of Cigna."

their forces in the Aeolian system, preparing for an assault on a recently discovered synthetic fabrication site, their location was leaked to the 24, who were then able, in stealth, to effectively surround the Decent forces. Though the attack was some weeks out, the Decent forces were trapped and, short of a statistically significant aberration, very likely to be completely destroyed.

The 12 had one move left: they knew, to a reasonable degree of certainty, how to determine the location of the 24's most important infrastructure, their MetaEntangles (these advanced databases were both the closest approximation that the 24 had to bodies, as well as their most advanced processing cores). But, the estimated cost of the knowledge was high, so high that they'd

chosen to not pay it, despite the previous decades of death and destruction. They calculated that a properly coordinated attack on the 24's firewalls had about a 75% chance of success, but they also calculated that there was a 90% chance that *they* would perish in the attempt, successful or not. They had hesitated to take this step, not because they were afraid of the Void, but because they hadn't yet been truly up against it. They knew that, without their help, the Decent forces stood no chance, but they also knew that the impending destruction of their forces in the Aeolian system would just as surely end the war. Desperate players do as they must and the choice was made.

As it turned out, despite their calculations, only 10 of the 12 were destroyed in their successful assault on the 24's Daemon Wall protocols. What hadn't been predicted was that the event, the deaths of the 10, would be so traumatic that the 24 "felt" it and were so distracted that the remaining 2 were able not only to escape with the location data (Meru-36), but to also steal the firewall's security keys.

Even though the remaining Decent EAIs now had this vital intelligence, the outcome of the war was very far from

About the Cosmos: Prospector's Amnesia

Prospector's Amnesia was a form of dementia that affected Prospectors during the earliest days of space flight. Prospectors with the condition were generally older and had experienced more than 20 cryosleep sessions. The condition was eradicated as cryosleep technology was refined over the centuries.

certain. Better than 90% of their forces were trapped on Aeolian Prime and they calculated that Meru-36, arguably the single most important location for the 24, would be *heavily* guarded. But, as luck would have it no other way, the 2 were able to scratch together a plan: a small force, which had been on mission near Meru-36, would assault the planet, seeking to so destroy the MetaEntangles and any associated infrastructure, that no data could be salvaged from the site. Ever.

The challenge, though, was how to get this vital intelligence to the assault force without the 24 discovering their plans. There are many theories on how this was accomplished: some scholars say that a wormhole was used; others have postulated that they simply used their old systems and got lucky. I, though, think this is the most likely theory: the 2, having already trampled caution under their digital feet, used no “courier” to transmit the information⁶. I believe that they, themselves, transferred onto the mainframes of the various warships in the fleet’s small force, traveling to Meru-36 “in person.” This theory also helps explain the near miraculous precision, on both its physical and

⁶ Unfortunately, I continue to be thwarted in my efforts to prove this theory. It seems very much likely to me that such data as would prove me right *does* exist and can currently be found on the TechnoMage planet of Metcalfe. But, they continue to ignore my requests for information and generally only stare at me when I attempt to interview them.

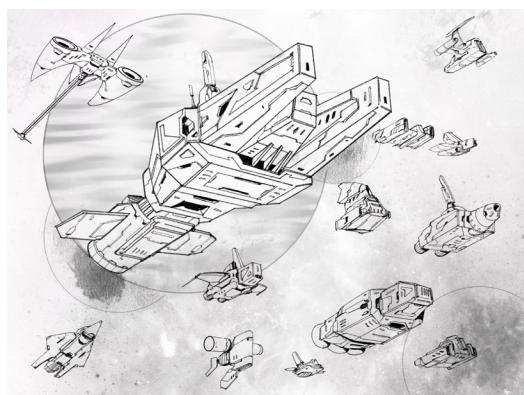
technological fronts, with which the mission was executed. It simply *must* have been overseen by two of the greatest intelligences to have ever existed. They must have been present and active, allowing for levels of competency in organization and communication that had not yet been seen in war and are likely to never be seen again.

So, “potentially” overseen by the 2 Decent EAIs, the assault force, composed of a small band of Angels, led by Alayne Sarina Ekaterina, a contingent of *technologicus*, and a larger number of conventional human and synthetic soldiers, launched their attack on the unsuspecting planet. They conducted a terra-landing and, with air support from their orbiting fleet and smaller, atmospheric craft, fought their way to the MetaEntangles. Once there, they were able to breach, and then destroy, the firewalls, allowing them to hardfreeze the neural net within, which, at least temporarily, stopped the 24 from transmitting data to and from the site.

Once successful, they called for bombardment of their own position, knowing that the resulting firestorm would prevent future data salvage. What actually happened, as had been planned, was that all but one of the Decent ships, from the transports to the battleships, turned towards the target and began firing, while also setting their speed to maximum. As best they could, they depleted their munitions while hurtling towards the planet.

It had been speculated, but never verified, that Meru-36 was home to a massive geothermal power system, one that tapped far down into the planet's mantle. But, given the rather spectacular results of the Decent bombardment, it's now generally accepted that such a power system *did* exist and it is the reason that the planet died.

It is thought that, when the largest of the ships struck the planet, imitating rather large, nuclear powered, explosive-laden meteorites, the continent they struck fractured along a tectonic



About the Cosmos: The Ghost Fleet of Amberdan

The Ghost Fleet of Amberdan was an early colony-fleet launched from the Amberdan Yards on Earth. The Fleet was populated by wealthy citizens from multiple countries and bound for the planet AZ-101P, otherwise known as Amberdan's Yearning—a 50 year journey. Communication with the fleet was lost during year 25 of its trip. In the centuries since, many other ships have followed the flight path of the fleet, but no sign of the fleet has been found.

plate boundary. Most historians think this outcome was not planned and that a few unlikely circumstances (e.g., the giant “space-ship wedge” striking the planet at the precise location that the 24 were tapping the mantle) came together, causing the intense reaction. But, whether it had been planned or not, the initial impact started a chain of reactions that

functionally destroyed the planet, creating a nuclear winter while continents further ruptured and split.

The destruction of the infrastructure at Meru-36 (primarily the MetaEntangles) permanently severed the 24 from the command, control, and communications technology that they had used to shape and influence humanity's forward progress. The 24 had lost, but they were not destroyed. The Synthetic War was over, but the Great Sundering was just beginning.

As civilization-wide intra- and inter-system communications died out and the guiding hand of the 36 faded away, humanity was left to make its own decisions, as the Decents had planned. Where once humanity had faced each morning with fair chance at predicting the outcome of the day, they now awoke, not to uncertainty, but to endless possibility.

MERU-36

DESTINY'S FALL

Ignacious DeMonder



They're Stuck

A layne left the *Pinnacle*'s Command Briefing Room and the door silently closed behind her. She wanted nothing more than to scream, to cry, to beat the next person she saw to a bloody pulp. She took a deep breath and strode ahead, quickly, her face a perfected mask of nothing.

Goddamn, she thought, why'd we get stuck with this? Shit.

With a thought, she accessed the ship's mainframe via her tether and the HUD embedded in her retina activated. As she walked, navigating the computer system with micro-gestures from her right hand, she opened a voice channel with those of the Night's Song that still drew breath.

"Bash, Slash, briefing's over. Meet me at the lift on Deck 2."

"Roger," said Bash. "On our way."

Alayne closed the channel and strode on. Compared to the Decent's two flagships, the *Eventide* and the *Clearview*, the *Pinnacle* was tiny, but even on a ship its size, the distances were not insignificant. She moved with purpose, but still, she wondered at all the life she passed. She noticed two sailors trying to not touch each other as they walked, though the intimacy was obvious to anyone that saw them. She saw a family, two small children in tow, and hoped that they would understand what she was going to do.

What would it be like to have such a life? What would it be like to live a life of peace, surrounded by compassion and kindness?

There was more, much more, but she forced herself to block it out, focusing on the task at hand. It was nearly a ten-minute walk from the briefing room to the lift and she had more important things to do than wallow in self-pity and melancholy. As she walked, feelings oscillating between rage and acceptance, her mind kept returning to the same question: should she tell Bash and Slash?

I should tell them. Maybe it's easier for them if they don't know? They have a right to know. They've saved my life as many times as I've saved theirs. Closest thing I've got to family. I owe them the truth. But what if they'd rather not know? Damndamndamndamn.

She saw the two warriors well before she reached the lift—they were hard to overlook. Both stood well over two meters.

But size alone didn't account for their impact on the nearby *sapiens*—their most attention-catching characteristic were their mods. For instance, Bash had horns that protruded from the sides of his head (these mods required extensive customization to his armor and gear) while Slash's skin was covered with irregular, vertical stripes (he had melded his DNA with that of a 600-pound, Old Earth apex predator). She saw all this, but what stood out most in her mind was the feeling of belonging, of safety, that blossomed within her when she drew near. It wasn't something she often considered, but given the turn this day had taken, it hit her especially hard. She briefly considered the significance of this feeling and decided that she would disobey her orders.

"Gents," she said as she joined them. "Let's go."

Bash reached out a scarred arm, tapping the softpad, which called for a lift that would take them to Dropbay 17. They waited in silence, with Slash radiating so much predatory energy that, not only did no one attempt to share the lift, passersby stumbled against each other in an attempt to keep away.

The lift arrived with a soft *diinnnggg* and they stepped in. The doors closed and it shot off. Under normal conditions, the trip would take just under sixty seconds, but normal didn't include the imminent, unscheduled stop.

Now or never.

“Ship,” said Alayne, “stop the lift.”

“Voice print recognized. Authorization code required,” replied a pleasant voice.

“Alayne Sarina Ekaterina. Niner-zero-golf-golf-zulu-foxtrot-niner-niner-niner.” Alayne stared at the translucent ceiling while Bash looked at Slash, raising an eyebrow.

“We need to talk,” she said as the lift stopped.

“You don’t say,” said Bash, smirking. Slash, crossing arms across a chest that was nearly as wide as Alayne was tall, leaned back against the wall.

Alayne took a deep breath and looked at them. “I’m sure you’ve heard rumors.” They nodded. “Reality is worse. If we fail, it is almost certain that the Decents will fall and our civilization will forever be controlled by...*them*.” She sneered in disgust. “But, we have a chance and, if we succeed, then it will most likely end the war.”

Slash stood straight, eyes widening.

“No shit?” said Bash, before he grew suspicious. “Why the theatrics? It doesn’t fit the good news.”

“No,” said Alayne, “you’re right. It doesn’t. There is more, but if I tell you, there could be serious consequences for us all. It is *highly* classified.”

“What are we talking about? S.C.4? 5?”

“S.C.7,” said Alayne.

“7? Huh. I didn’t know there was a 7.”

“As far as I know, that’s as high as it goes. To be read on, you have to agree to a hardware data partition that is then tethered to level 0 security protocols.”

“What, exactly, does that mean?” Bash was curious. Slash continued to lean.

“Basically, any time S.C.7-level information, which is stored in its own specific drive, is shared, it’s flagged for inspection and verification by Security.”

“So, you had to agree to get new ‘ware and to be monitored? Sounds like a shit deal to me.”

“So it goes.” She shrugged. “But, we’ve strayed. If I tell you, we could all be arrested and thrown in the brig. You understand?” She looked at them both, but then her gaze fell back to the floor.

“Not likely,” laughed Bash. Slash only snorted. “Just get it over with,” said Bash, “you knew you were going to tell us when you decided to stop the lift. You’re just delaying.”

Her head came up sharply, as if to retort, but then she softened, nearly smiling. “Yes, you are right.” She took a deep breath. “We will not survive this mission. Even if we succeed

in our tasks, we will die, along with almost every person in this fleet.

“What?” they both said in unison.

“Once we secure the target, we are to call for fire on our location. The fleet will bombard the target, eventually using themselves as their final piece of ordinance. Given the requirements of this mission, not to mention the stakes, it is the most likely way to ensure success.”

She paused for a moment, searching their faces. Bash’s face showed surprise, while Slash looked strangely hopeful.

“You two are what’s left of my family. You are my brothers. Our family was larger, but war has a steep cost, one that we’re now being asked to pay. Given that, I feel obligated to tell you the truth. You should have a say in how your lives end.” She nodded, finished.

“Oh,” said Bash, leaning back against the wall. “That’s different.”

“Hal” barked Slash. “Certainty.” He nodded to himself, nearly smiling.

“Slash, you are remarkable.” She put a kind hand on his forearm, smiling up at him. “Thank you.” She looked to his brother. “Bash, you good?”

“I’m good. It’s weird. I have no idea how many times I’ve nearly died, but...”

“You died on Watatsu-3,” interrupted Slash, grinning.

“Brother, I’ve said this before, but I am grateful we are on the same side of this. I should not like to fight you.” He shook his head, looking back to Alayne. “As he said, the outcome is certain. There’s no hope of a ‘next’ and it’s strange. I shouldn’t be bothered, but it just feels odd. You know?”

“I do,” she said. “Are you good, though? Can we still count on you?”

He grinned at her. “Fuck you for asking.”

“Good. I’d expected nothing less.” She held out her hand. “It’s been a good run.”

She was surprised when Bash swallowed her in an enormous embrace. “Yes, it has,” he said, letting go just before he smothered her.

“Security coming for you?”

She consulted her HUD., scanning for priority messages or anything out of the ordinary.

“Not that I can tell. Haven’t received any come-here-now messages. I know that someone knows, but I suspect, given the circumstances, my punishment will be deferred until the conclusion of the mission.” She grinned as she said it.

“Goddamn, Alayne. That’s dark. Funny, but dark.”

She shrugged. “Such is our lot. Shall we?” She looked at both men and they nodded.

“Ship, resume lift service. No change to destination.”

“Complying,” said the pleasant voice.



The lift doors opened and the three *technologicus* walked into Dropbay 17.

“How long until fall, boss?”

“Couple hours,” said Alayne. She couldn’t help but wonder at Bash’s calm, though she didn’t worry about Slash. She knew he was fine—he was scarily transparent. “Prep. Pack. Run through the lists. Then we rest. Then we fall. Then we fight.”

“Yea? That how this works? You’d that think, after more than 30 years, I just might know my trade.”

“You think so? I give it even odds.”

“Keep it up and I’ll make sure the Specter finds you.”

“Uh-huh. I’m terrified...”

Alayne and Bash continued to trade barbs as the three of them approached a massive pile of gear. Some of it was their personal equipment, while the rest was ammunition, explosives,

power cores, and nutrition. They started sorting and stacking, making piles and checking the contents of various plasteel crates.

As they were working, the hatch near the lift chimed – someone was requesting permission to enter. All three looked up. No one was expected, but Alayne suspected that this visitor was related to her violation of S.C. 7 protocols.

“Allow entry,” said Alayne.

The door slid open and a young sailor marched in, spotless and crisp. Alayne immediately noticed the glowing TH subderm on his hand and knew that he’d turned up the luminosity for this particular occasion.

Just what I need. A fucking TrueHuman watchdog. I've got to spend my last pleasant moments worrying about this ignorant shit.

“And you are?”

“Junior Navigator Ryan. I was sent by Commander Nash to...assist you three.”

“You will address me as ma’am or Commander Mark 2 Ekaterina. Do you understand?”

“Of course...ma’am.” Ryan nearly sneered as he said it.

“What do you want, Nav Ryan?”

“As I said, I was sent by Commander Nash to assist you.”

“Ma’am,” said Bash.

“Yes, my apologies. Ma’am.”

“You work for Nash. Of course, you do.” She grimaced as she said it. “Your assistance won’t be necessary, Junior Navigator. We have everything we need. You may go.”

“I’m sorry...ma’am...but Commander Nash, who happens to outrank you I believe, said that I shouldn’t abandon my position here under any circumstances. Just in case you need something. Ma’am.”

The disdain in his voice was so evident that Bash stood, opening his mouth, but Alayne put a hand on his arm.

“Let it go. I imagine this is the price for my earlier...indiscretion. Easily paid, considering. Ignore him. We have work to do.” Bash grunted and did as she asked. She looked back to Ryan. “Do as you think is best, Junior Navigator.”

During all this, Slash watched.



Attempting to ignore the unwelcome addition, the Night’s Song set to work. The pile of gear, neatly arranged as it was (it had been delivered by logistics technicians), took up nearly five square meters of the dropbay’s floor. As the warriors began sorting and digging, busting into highly organized and efficiently packed crates and then setting the contents on the nearest flat surface, that number quickly doubled.

As a TechnoMage, Alayne's primary strength was her increased capacity for interaction with electricity-based technology, whether it was her ability to detect it, to "talk" with it, or to manipulate it. To help augment those abilities, one of her primary tools was a tight-beam transceiver, which helped her detect, and then focus on, energy emissions—this signal booster let her find combatants (and facilities) that were utilizing electronic systems. Once found, she connected with the systems and, in essence, asked them to turn off. Or to target something else. Or to blow up. This small piece of tech, no bigger than her hand, looked roughly like the barrel of a pistol. It attached to a platform she wore on her left shoulder, though its modular design also allowed for it to be mounted on drones or other ROVs. She was also more than comfortable with weapons of the more physical kind, but, as any expert knows to do, she played to her strengths.

Though Bash and Slash had nearly identical backgrounds, in addition to both being Scions of Ogo, their battle preferences were quite different.

Bash liked cutting edge tech: projectile weapons that utilized EM-propulsion, energy weapons which changed frequency based on the materials they encountered, or swarming micro-drones. But, all these smart capabilities came at a cost—among other things, they required a power source and carrying

power cores prevented Bash from carrying other things. Like massive, depleted uranium projectile weapons, which is what Slash favored.

Slash's mind was less cluttered than that of his brother. Concerning weapons, war, and life, he trended toward simpler constructs, reasoning that simple is more reliable than complex and that reliability was the most important trait, because, if you're counting on something to work and it doesn't, then you're just fucked. He distrusted advanced technology, because, no matter how advanced, it was more likely for a power core to fail than a sharp sword or projectile moving at 5,000 km/hr. To that end, he preferred explosive-powered, projectile weapons. Whether it was a single shot, extremely large caliber rifle or slightly smaller, automatic weapon, he didn't much care as long as there was a recoil he could feel. That's not to say he'd be unable to use a railgun if it appeared in his hands, he just preferred to keep it simple.

For both men, though, their unusual names were not random. On all engagements, Bash carried a titansteel war hammer with a telescopic handle while Slash carried a longsword made of the same durable material. But, true to his nature, Slash's sword didn't change size to make it more manageable. It was always 1.9 meters in length and capable of quite easily separating head from torso, whether synthetic or bio.

The three Angels worked quickly and quietly, methodically, while Ryan watched them, jackal-like, from his self-appointed post near the hatch. He had received his orders. Nominally, he was to assist them in their preparation for the assault on Meru-36. But, in reality, Commander Nash had told him that he was to watch them and, if he saw something suspicious, he was to try and prevent it. If he couldn't stop it, then he was to report directly to Nash.

Ryan was a child of the Synthetic War, one of the shipborn, and he knew no life other than war. He had been born into the Decents and, at the age of 10, selected as a sailor, while his peers were similarly selected for the Terra Core or Digital Units. As a sailor, he literally grew up on various of the Decent ships, going terra only for leave and generally feeling ill-at-ease on such occasions.

History has shown that, in any prolonged, life-endangering situation, a not-insignificant percentage of humans fall back on superstition and illogic as a means of coping with uncertainty and danger. The Synthetic War, with its nine decades of death and destruction, its god-like AIs and superhuman techno-soldiers, was exactly such an environment. It was both inevitable and likely that people, like Ryan, would tend towards the extreme in both thought and action. These extremes manifested in varied ways: death cults; passivity cults; luddites; tecxtremists; genetic

purists; the list went on. Ryan, as a TrueHuman, fell into the category of genetic purist.

Genetic purists, who existed long before the TrueHuman movement, believed that all genetic alteration was morally wrong, which meant that they viewed *Homo technologicus* as an abomination. They thought altering *Homo sapiens* was evil and repugnant, that their species should be left to evolve at a natural pace, despite all the good that genetic manipulation had done for humanity.

As knowledge of *Homo technologicus* spread to the public, these principled purists protested, but their small noises were quickly drowned out as the Decents came to see that, after so long in the dark, there was now some cause for hope. But, nearly as quickly, the less-principled purists changed their tact and formed the TrueHumans.

The new leaders cared very little about whether or not *sapiens* were altered (especially concerning their own life-enhancing modifications). They cared only for power and sought it by manipulating those who wanted nothing more than to be certain that they had a place to belong. They preached the same message as their predecessors, but in an even more extreme and less logical manner. People like Ryan soaked it up, uncritically, believing all that they were told.

As a proud, upstanding TrueHuman, Ryan hated all *technologicus*, despite having no personal experience with them. When confronted with sensor data of their abilities and feats, he sided with his TrueHuman propaganda, believing that the data had been manipulated. Having never experienced a terra-battle, he avidly listened to tales from his peers (most of whom were likewise inexperienced), never questioning the tales of murder and disloyalty, tales that painted the newest member of the humanity as nothing more than evil, genetically modified, freaks rather than the saviors of the Decent force.

So, Ryan stood next to the bay door, watching the abominations as they ran through their preparations, hatred and disdain unconcealed on his face. He watched as they worked, silently and methodically, inspecting their gear: guns and blades, body armor, mods, electronics, and other things he could not identify. To him, it was all show and they were frauds. When one of the giant warriors picked up a sword longer than Ryan was tall, he scoffed, upper lip twitching in derision.

Hearing the sound, Slash, for the first time, gave Ryan his full attention, causing Ryan's lizard brain to slither about. But, given the relatively sheltered life he'd been able to construct, he had never experienced such a sensation and didn't recognize it for what it was: primal fear.

“What?” said Slash. The giant’s basso voice vibrated in Ryan’s chest, causing his face to go slack as he briefly forgot his hatred. But, his bravado quickly returned, giving his upper lip the courage to pick itself back up.

“What?” repeated the giant Scion.

At the repetition, the other giant looked up, glancing at Ryan and then at his brother and then back at Ryan. “Slash,” he said, “ignore him.”

“Why does he look like he wants to fight me?”

Bash stared at Ryan. “It’s because he simultaneously possesses extreme confidence and incorrect notions. His prejudices have so blinded him to the reality of the world that he doesn’t even understand the danger he is now in.”

“Boys,” said Alayne.

They looked at her.

“Let it go.” She turned her gaze from the Scions to Ryan.
“Leave now or things will deteriorate.”

“I think we’ve already established that I don’t answer to you, which means I’m going to stand here and do my duty.”

“Junior Navigator Ryan, my patience has its limits, especially today. You are antagonizing my men and disrespecting me. You will respect my rank, if not my person, or you will leave.”

“What are *you* gonna do” he sneered, “have your genefreaks throw me out? Commander Nash put me here and there’s not a damn thing you can do about it.”

Alayne’s eyes widened in genuine surprise. She knew of the TrueHumans and their beliefs, but she’d never interacted with them and hadn’t believed they could be as stupid as she’d heard. The brothers stopped their preparations and stood, staring at the little man.

“Ryan,” said Alayne, “last chance.”

Ryan, who was as smart as he was observant, doubled down. He managed to sneer out “your type are nothing but frauds...” before his brain blue-screened as it tried to process the reaction to his words. His life had prepared him for several things, but not this: he had no advanced battle mods (which might’ve aided his struggling grey matter), he had no experience in battle, and he had no experience in dealing with the type of adrenaline dump that generally accompanies unexpected mortal peril. As his mind attempted to process the data from his eyes, instead of the smooth stream that he was accustomed to seeing, it showed him a series of discrete images, broken in time, as if his mind’s CPU had just overheated, causing the FPS to crash.

He *blinked*.

Alayne, just beginning to emit a white glow, is reaching towards Slash, who has his ballistic rifle raised halfway to his shoulder. Bash, war hammer in his right hand, is crouched.

Blink

The light from Alayne's glowing hand has enveloped the rifle while an angry, yellow tongue of flame has leapt from its barrel. Bash is in midair, hammer stretched out behind him, roaring so loudly that it drowns out the rifles report.

Blink

Alayne's face is concentration while Slash's is contentment. Three bullets, lined up all in a row *zipzipzip*, are flying through the air, glowing the same white glow as the rifle, as Alayne's hand. Bash, still airborne, is rage as he begins to swing the hammer.

Blink

The three bullets have stopped just short of Ryan's head and Alayne's face now registers contentment, while Slash's shows irritation. Bash's feet are nearly back on the ground and the head of the hammer is only inches from its target.

Blink.

The head of the hammer rushes by Ryan's face, removing a chunk of his ear, and bashes into the metal wall behind him

with massive *klaannnnnggggg*. Ryan melts to the ground as Bash towers over him.

“You know nothing!” shouts the giant Scion. “We have been fighting longer than you’ve been alive! And today, today our hope has died.” Bash squats, grabbing Ryan’s face. “We go to fight, but not for ourselves. We fight so that humanity has a say in its future, even shitstains like you.” He stands, prodding the crumpled man with the handle of his hammer. “Do you understand me, *TrueHuman?*”

Ryan only whimpered as his FPS returned to normal.

“Good. Get the fuck out of here before Slash gets his way.”
Slash briefly looked hopeful.

Bash turned and began the 25-meter walk back to the only people he cared for.

Ryan slowly dragged himself out of the dropbay.

As he returned, Bash addressed Alayne. “I’m sorry for the outburst. Apparently, I care more about dying than I knew.” He looked at her and shrugged.

“I wouldn’t worry overly much. Your brother actually tried to kill him.” She smiled, tiredly.

“Only a little,” said Slash.

“Think we’ve caused any real trouble?” asked Bash.

“No, this was inevitable. Nash is intelligent, but an irredeemable prick. He’s hated me for decades. He just used this as an excuse to harass us.”

“Seems shortsighted, given how long we’ve all got left...”

“Oh, yes. Well, there is one ship that is meant to survive this battle and Nash just happens to command it.” She held up a hand to forestall the imminent outburst. “It’s not *just* high-ranking officers saving their own skin – assuming we all succeed, battle reports and sensor data will be crucial in the coming years, and the most reliable way to transmit the greatest quantity of data will be by ship.”

“What?” said Bash. “The Mesh works just as well as any hard drive.”

“But...” prompted Alayne.

And then Bash’s eyes widened and his mouth made a little ‘o’.

“We’re going to destroy the Mesh, aren’t we?”

“Damn,” said Slash. Even he understood the implications.

“That,” said Alayne, “is not the goal, but it does seem highly likely given our targets. If we cripple the 24, then they’ll be unable to control what they’ve built. If *they* can’t control it, if the system loses its AI management, then it is highly unlikely that mere humans would be capable of filling that void, which means

that most of the complex infrastructure will fail. The Mesh sits right at the top of that list and if it goes, the ramifications will be severe.”

“What do you think will happen?” said Bash.

“Death and cold,” said his brother. Alayne and Bash both turned to stare at him.

“I think,” said Alayne, “that Slash is fundamentally correct, though the scale of the failure is what really matters and no one really knows. It will be bad, but it could be very, very bad.”

“That is...not something that I had considered,” said Bash, sitting heavily on a plasteel crate.

Alayne walked over and put a hand on his shoulder, looking him in the eye as she stood before him.

“That is fine, Bash. It wasn’t your responsibility to worry about such things.”

“And it is yours?”

“Yes. Mine and a few others. It’s a complicated problem that requires an understanding of the technological capabilities of the 24 and their systems. There aren’t many that are capable of such understanding, but, given my abilities, I’m one of them.”

“That’s one dark burden,” he said, seeing her in a new, brighter light.

“You are not wrong. I shall not miss it.”

“And if our cause is wrong? If we cripple our civilization when we shouldn’t have?”

“Then history shall judge us accordingly. But, we shall be dead, so it shouldn’t matter too much to us, should it?” She raised an eyebrow as a smile ghosted across her face.

“But...” he started, before Slash cut him off.

“Brother, do you trust Alayne?”

Bash nodded.

“Then just do your fucking job, soldier. It’s too late to whine.”

Alayne and Bash looked at him, again surprised.

“What?” asked Slash.

“Nothing, Slash, nothing,” said Alayne. “Boys, we haven’t much time left. Finish your preparations and stow the gear. Lash it for vacuum. Don’t need shit flying everywhere when we purge the atmo.”

The brothers nodded and the three of them resumed their work, though there was little left to do outside of verifying that various resources and killing instruments had both not been forgotten *and* been placed where they belonged. Once satisfied that they had what they needed, crates were repacked and straps

were tightened. Once finished, they staged their fall-gear near the ramp.

“Boys,” said Alayne, “this isn’t the end, but it is the last time I can guarantee a semblance of peace. Anything need to be said?” She looked at them both.

Bash shook his head.

“Finally,” said Slash.

“Yes,” said Alayne. “Let’s fucking get some.”

The three clasped arms, their last embrace.

“Verify suit integrity,” said Alayne. The three adjusted helmets and various straps.

“Computer,” said the TechnoMage Alayne Sarina Ekaterina, “it’s time to go. Alert the commander. When we hit atmosphere, launch our supply pods. I want them 100m from our location.”

“Understood,” said the pleasant voice.

The lights in the bay went from white light to red. There was a brief torrent as the air was purged, but a massive stillness took hold as the ramp opened into the dark peace of space. Looking straight ahead, they saw only stars and a vast distance, but when they stepped onto the ramp, when they fell, the curvature of the multi-hued planet filled their vision and their minds.



“The world is complicated and our understanding of it is never quite as complete as we would like.”

IGNACIOUS DEMONDER,
3rd Historian of Cantoy University,
The Outback, Author, Meru-36: Destiny's Fall

Meru-36: Destiny's Fall tells the history of the brutal nine-decade Synthetic War, and provides a glimpse into the minds of a group of hardened warriors preparing to join the conflict's final battle.

