

Zuttara and his team entered the town of Magam, which appeared to have been deserted in haste. Doors flapped in the light breeze while trash blew about the streets as the wind and cold, light rain continued to blow in from the northwest. Gula took a team into a few of the homes on the way. One home still had a meal set at the family table. The insects were having a feast now, but he wondered what chased these people out of town with apparently no warning. Another home still had laundry blowing in the back yard on rope lines running from the house to a pole on the far side. They held their scanners out and detected only small animal life but no people or Ineans.

Gula turned to Zuttara. "What do you think happened to them?"

"Hopefully they got away, but, I suspect the Ineans got to them," Zuttara said while scanning another building.

"Usually they take the women and children and leave the men, but there are no bodies," another in their group stated.

"Then I hope they got out in time." Zuttara said as he began walking deeper into the town.

Gula spoke while he looked at the clouds thickening from the northwest. "There is no evidence to support either."

"We don't have time to investigate. We have to stick to our mission before the Ineans get wind of what we are doing," Zuttara stated with firmness in his voice that ended the conversation instantly.

They entered larger buildings in search of the Inean transport, but did not find anything on this side of town except supplies: cargo container after cargo container of food, clothing, portable generators and every other imaginable necessity. Gula studied the labels and turned to Zuttara, "These were destined for Belit-Sheri."

"What is the ship date?" Zuttara asked.

"These were to be shipped the twelfth of Alme, last year," Gula said.

"Six months ago. At that time it may have helped," Puhrum said while leaning in to read the label.

Gula turned towards Zuttara. "We should take as much of this as we can to Antum."

"On our way out."

They made it to the Akkad River and stopped. The Akkad River flowed from the western mountains twelve-hundred zag away to Delondra and emptied into the ocean there. Zuttara looked up river and then down river, all bridges crossing the river had been collapsed into the raging water. Water flowed through and over the debris at a fairly good clip, even though the river was much lower than normal for this time of year.

Puabi winced at the icy cold rain hitting her in the face prompting her to flip up her collar to block some of it. “Why would they blow the bridges?” she asked gripping her automatic rifle while walking with her team to the edge of the river. They all looked up river at the remains of the largest bridge.

“We don't know who blew them, could have been the townspeople for all we know,” Zuttara said. He tried to scan for heat signatures on the other side of the river. “If that ship is here it has to be in one of those buildings.”

“As long as the Inean was telling the truth,” Puabi mumbled, but loud enough for Zuttara to hear.

“Oh, it's here all right. We need to get across this river before dark,” Zuttara stated and he turned to Gula. “Back in that warehouse,” he turned and pointed to the large brick structure, “I saw some portable floating boat docks. We could string them together and get back and forth.”

“I'll get right on it.” Gula then turned to one of his officers, “Dingar! Take your men and bring the open trucks to that warehouse.”

The men raced back up the hill to retrieve the trucks for Gula, and Gula turned towards Zuttara, “When we are done here, make sure we load the trucks and carriers to their limit with these supplies.”

Zuttara stared into the cold mist blowing from the northwest. “Yes, we should. Let's find that Inean ship first before they find us. There is no doubt the Ineans know what we did to them in Utuk and are probably looking for us.”

Utui was a faint glow through the clouds while inching towards the western horizon when Gula and his men finished the rickety bridge. The first team, walking single file, went across carefully while the makeshift bridge swayed and creaked from the water flowing against it. The next team tightened the bridge and went across and the other two teams stayed behind and guarded the vehicles.

Puabi joined Zuttara, Gula, and Gisiga as they walked along the street. Zuttara was studying his scanner he held up at eye level and swept it side to side. He was looking for the distinct signature of an Inean power supply. He got a blip, and then it was gone. He could not make it do it again. Puabi looked at Zuttara. “It beeped when you held it that way.” She said while pointing up the next hill to a large building halfway up the street which was littered with abandoned vehicles and other debris.

“Has to be a half zag away,” Zuttara replied.

Puabi started leaning towards the direction of the large building. “I'm sure it was that direction. It did beep only for an instant though,”

Zuttara looked at Puabi. “All right, let's check it out.”

They walked towards the warehouse while Zuttara held out his scanner.

He was beginning to have doubts until the scanner beeped again. Now he was certain they were heading in the right direction. After about twenty minutes they approached two large doors, big enough for an Inean transport. Dingar walked up to the door and cut the lock off with large bolt cutters. The lock and heavy chain clinked to the ground. Each of them turned on their hand-held lights and entered the dark building. Soon they stood in awe of the ship before them. It was not a transport. It was a sleek-looking, long-range craft, by the look of its engines.

Zuttara turned and faced his people, “Gisiga, Gula and Puabi, get on that ship. The rest of you, set up a perimeter in case the Ineans show up, and they might once we get tinkering.”

Gula walked towards the ship first looking for the hatch while Gisiga studied the writing on the craft and compared them to his notebook.

“Where's the door?” Gula asked.

Gisiga studied the words on the side of the ship with what was displayed on his hand-held computer. “I think this is it,” Gisiga said. “I think you press this.”

When he did, a touch pad lit up to the side of the hatch, which was defined by a thin line that was now lit in green around the outline of a hatch. The pad had a dozen Inean symbols, which resembled Chinese symbols, arranged in four rows of three. Gisiga consulted his notes and pressed six of the buttons. There was a hiss and the door swung open.

Puabi walked up first. “How did you know what the code was?”

“Stupid Inean wrote it down on the inside cover of his instruction manual.”

“Good for us. Ooh, *what* is that smell?” She exclaimed as she wrinkled her nose while stepping up into the craft.

Gula sniffed and gagged on the Inean stench. “I don't think I want to know.”

They entered the craft. The lights came on in their bright yellow, and then the heat started with a puff of steam from the vents. Other systems turned on and began humming as they walked forward. Zuttara entered the ship while looking around as his scanner recorded everything it could.

Puabi sat in the large hard seat meant for an Inean's large body. Her feet did not touch the floor when she sat, and this made her feel like a child sitting in her parent's chair. It was metal and uncomfortable as she tried to fit herself to it. She gave up and began studying the controls when Gisiga showed up. He removed a roll of paper tape and a marker from his backpack and started ripping small strips of tape and sticking them to the control panel. Then he consulted his computer as he entered the words on the display. “This one is

thrust,” he said as the marker squeaked on the tape. “This one is lift. These controls are the vertical thrusters. These are the steering thrusters. This is the guidance system.” On and on he went until everything on the control panels was labeled.

Zuttara stepped on the craft and went forward. “We need to get this craft off the ground as soon as possible. There is another CME coming in from Utui and we can use it as a screen to get this out of here.”

“And take it where?” Gula asked.

“Anaru base.”

“You want me to fly this in space?” Puabi asked while spinning around to face Zuttara. “I thought we were going to Antum?”

“No, Anaru base. You have about an hour to learn this craft and get it off the ground. I received a message from Antum that the Ineans have moved all their ships behind the planet. We have a clear shot out of here. In one hour,” Zuttara stated.

“You have to be kidding me. It will take more than an hour to learn this craft,” Puabi muttered.

“You have your orders. One hour I want this ship out of here,” Zuttara said.

Zuttara turned his back to her and left the ship.

“This ought to be fun,” Gula said to Puabi.

Gisiga leaned forward. “It won’t be bad. All we have to do is program the guidance system and it will take us there.”

“Oh, is that all?” Puabi said sarcastically.

“Watch,” he said. He pressed a symbol on the panel and a menu opened on the screen. He entered some Inean commands and pressed another button and the screen lit up in their language.

“Wow! They had our language programmed in here all the time?” Gula asked.

“Yes, I think this was an advanced scout ship that studied us before the invasion. There might be a lot of useful information stored in here. But our scientists will have to get that. Our job is to deliver this craft to Anaru.”

They worked for their hour while the craft was loaded with many supplies taken from the warehouse in town.

Zuttara returned. “Time is up. The storm is about to strike so it is now or never, Commander Puabi.”

“Get everyone away from here just in case,” Gula said and they buckled

in and began their preflight check list, Inean style.

One of Zuttara's officers raced onto the craft, "Sir?" he said out of breath, "Ineans coming this way. More than a hundred of them," he panted.

"How soon will they be here?" Zuttara asked as he walked towards him.

"Ten minutes at best," the man said recovering his breath finally.

"We will fall back a hundred ima. Start your launch in six minutes." Zuttara raced away with several officers after him. "Relay to the troops to set up in those buildings to ambush them when they get here," he said to his officers while he studied the hand-held scanner displaying the Ineans coming their way.

Gisiga instructed Puabi on programming the Inean flight computer, and, after six minutes, she fired the engines. The craft lifted slowly and floated a few feet above the ground. She entered the next commands which sent the ship backwards into the rear wall of the large building with a crash.

"Cushik!" she swore and entered in new commands. "Duga sa Tari!"

"Easy. Here, try this," Gisiga entered a few more commands and the craft lurched forward and crashed through the large doors and then floated outside. They were now in the open. She pressed another command and the craft took off towards space at incredible speed, pressing them against the seats. After a few minutes, they were engulfed in the fireball that was striking the planet. Then the craft turned and flew towards the outer moon Anaru. The craft raced outward from the planet and closed in on Anaru. It entered orbit in just a few hours. The tail end of the fireball began to pass the planet. It was hot in the Inean ship as the cooling system struggled with the conditions they were flying in. Soon, they flew close to the moon and circled around to the back side, which was in partial light of the star. Puabi manually set the craft down while Gula contacted the base to open the doors. There was no verbal reply, but the large doors slid open enough for the craft to enter. Puabi then guided the ship into the military base buried in the side of a deep crater. She brought the craft to a stop while the large doors closed and the flight deck pressurized.

Several minutes passed as scientists in pressure suits walked around the Inean ship taking notes. And then one took his helmet off and gave them the thumbs up. Puabi was first out of her seat followed by Gula and a rather ill Gisiga. Gula patted him on the back, "Good job, first time in space?"

"Yes," he moaned.

Gula helped Gisiga to his feet. "You will get used to it soon enough. Let's go."

"I'm not sure if it was the flight or the stench of this ship?"

Gula laughed. "Good point."

Puabi fumbled with the hatch controls and the hatch finally opened with a hiss of its air controls. All three stepped out onto the cold flight deck of the moon base. They looked around at the immense facility. Dozens upon dozens of ships parked here of several varieties each: short-range fighters, long-range fighters, transports, cargo ships, and science ships. All parked in rows stretching into the deep cavern hollowed out in the moon.

General Innin walked up to them and they all snapped to attention. “Commander Gula, Commander Puabi, Specialist Gisiga, welcome to Anaru. The people of Ardonnar owe you a great debt right now. I sense a turn in this war by bringing us this craft.”

“I certainly hope so. I hope there are no tracking beacons on this craft,” Gula stated while getting accustomed to the lighter gravity of the moon. “Were we detected by the Ineans?”

The general glanced at the ship. “We don’t think so. The solar storm raises Tari with both our sensors and theirs. Lucky for us.”

Gisiga leaned in after his stomach settled down some. “I turned the tracking beacons off. I hope!”

“Praise Kur,” Puabi stated and she bowed down to the deck. The others followed her lead and then got back up.

Holding out his hand to guide them off the flight deck, Innin said, “Let me take you to our command center while our scientists take this thing apart.”

“What is the plan now, sir,” Gula asked the general.

“We hope to study their high-speed engines and adapt them to our ships. Then, we hope to send our ships to their planet and destroy it.”

“Destroy their planet? Why don’t we fight them here?” Puabi asked.

“Good question, but not practical. They control everything and our forces are scattered. If we bomb them back home, then they may withdraw troops to deal with that and give us a chance to gather our troops in the field and fight them here,” the general said while walking towards two guards blocking a door at the far end of the corridor. They snapped to attention as the general and his guests made it to the door. Then the guards stepped to the sides to allow the general to enter the room with Puabi, Gula and one other guard. Gisiga remained at the craft with the scientists still complaining about the stench and his stomach.

“Bold plan, and it assumes a lot,” Gula said while looking around the base control room.

“Too many assumptions if you ask me. Way too much can go wrong or we run out of time, but it is what we have right now,” the general said. “Here is our control center. From here we have been studying the Ineans for several months and have learned an enormous amount of information.”

“Impressive,” said Puabi. “And they don't know about this place at all?”

“Either they don't know or don't care. They are quite arrogant about certain things, and they are lax in security,” the general stated as they watched the CME exit the area. “Silent mode people.” And the lights dimmed. “They are careless, and some would even credit the Ineans with being reckless.”

“That's because they don't consider us a threat, General,” Puabi said.

“I hope that changes,” Gula said while he studied the information scrolling on one of the computer terminals.

“We all do, but not yet. I want those ships retrofitted and loaded with our latest urukii bombs.”

Gula lifted his head at that and looked at the general. “Are those the multi-warhead ones?”

“Yes, and they each pack quite the punch.”

“Those are the planet busters, right?” Puabi asked.

“Yes,” replied the general.

“I want to pilot the first ship there and deliver one myself,” she added.

“You might get that chance, Commander.”

“Great. I can't wait,” she said.

Puabi began studying another computer terminal while Gula walked over to join her.