

Far From Home

An EVE Online Story



by

Ciarán Mac Lochlainn

Prelude

1

The battleship floated in space, within sight of the Efa stargate. On his overview, the pilot could see the distant forms of the smaller vessels used by his gangmates. They watched and waited.

They were there to guard the 3-FKZ system, gateway to Querious, against incursions by the northern allies. The main Firmus Ixion fleet was far away in Tribute, and the Forsaken Empire in particular had been mounting regular counter-attacks into Fix space.

"My ship looks like a giant golden tadpole", thought Oisín idly, recalling the wild lakehopper larvae he used to trap as a boy. That was in a more innocent time, and far away from Querious. Home, a long way from home.

A glow of white light brought him back to reality as the stargate burred into action. A new pilot had entered the solarsystem. He quickly searched the databanks for information on the visitor, who was still cloaked.

"A rookie pilot. He's way out of his league here.", said Oisín.

"Is he a target?", came the voice of one of the newer members of the gang.

"Kill him", answered the admiral, scrambling the visitor's warp drive as he decloaked and attempted to escape.

Following the order instinctively, Oisín locked and opened fire on the target, destroying his flimsy Vigil-class frigate almost instantly. His capsule too was vapourised within seconds.

"Some target," thought Oisín with a little regret, "he was probably on his first serious mission." The erstwhile visitor was by now waking up in a cloning station somewhere. Lawless space could be harsh to the unwary.

He remembered a classmate who had been recruited to spy on the old Curse Alliance and after being pod killed eight times became a planetside engineer instead. Oisín had burned with indignation at the cruelty of it all. That was just a year ago.

"How far you've come..."

2

Of all the colonies on this side of the Eve gate, Intakee is where I feel most at home. I don't know if that is because so many of the colonials are from my own place on old Earth, or just because their natural placidity strikes a chord with this old transport pilot.

My name is Ossian McGinn. I have seen most of the settled worlds on both sides of the Eve gate, and there are very few where I would choose to make my home.

I was born and raised on old Earth, but I cannot abide its frenetic pace. They call it the planet which never sleeps. That isn't my kind of place.

I have visited the settlement called Amar, a place which honestly disturbs me. Those colonists are such fundamentalists that they have built a palisade wall around their tiny village, even though the nearest other colony on the other side of the planet. I suppose they'll try to shut themselves off from the rest of the universe, and when they succeed, they'll eventually be forgotten entirely.

The Gallant planet is a good place to relax - those guys really know how to enjoy themselves! But don't stock up on any supplies there. You can get everything you need for a better price from their Kaldari neighbours. I suppose with all that terraforming, they need some sales to pay the bills!

I've even been to the eco-warrior colony in the east. Mater Earth and Pater Sun... I don't know what my Ma and Da would have thought of it! What I will say in their favour is that they've got a fine setup considering their planet has no fossil fuels. But unless sleeping under the stars – even with the perfect weather they enjoy - is your definition of luxury, I wouldn't recommend it as a tourist stop.

No, Intakee is where I want to raise my family when I settle down. That's a place where a man can relax after a long month of slow hauling.

3

"Ma, who's that man on the holo?" asked Oisín.

"That's Mentas Blaque. He and I were friends before I met your father."

"Is that why he hates Intakis? He's saying mean things about us all."

Her silence was his only answer. He was already old enough to know when she didn't want to discuss something.

Lessons

4

"You disgust me, coming to me with that wannabe freedom fighter bull. You are a hypocrite. You say you oppose slavery but you have so many Amarrian friends. You call yourself an Intaki separatist but you can't even speak our language. You are only half Intaki, you have never even been to our home planet, yet you say you want to make us all free! Leave, and don't come back unless you can prove your worth to us."

Oisín did not return. He had tried for weeks to contact this man who he had believed was a wise and powerful leader, but all he found was a fool who judged on appearances and was followed by his associates only because his voice was the loudest.

Nor did he tell his father, who would have appreciated knowing the whereabouts of one of the Federation's most wanted men.

"So, what do you think of this Oisín character?"

"His will is weak – see how quick he was to walk away when I questioned him. But he is still young, and he did succeed in finding me when I did not wish to be found. He may yet prove his worth to our people."

5

The Dominix-class battleship was slow and ugly, but he loved her raw power. Even though he could not yet use the proper armaments and heavy drones to defend her, he was eager to try her out. Still largely ignorant of the dangers of 0.0 space, despite having fought for the QDF in a minor skirmish, he flew her from H74-B0 in the far south to the Hostni system on the Amarr Empire's

southern border. Nobody told him about using warp core stabilisers for safe travel, so it did not occur to him to fit them. He tested her in battle in a low security system plagued with devotees of Sansha, and was happy with her performance. After a few days he flew her onwards to Misneden, just a few stargate jumps from his home planet.

A few days later while operating against the Serpents corporation in a poorly policed system in the Essence region, he was attacked by a notorious local pirate. Oisín escaped in his capsule, but the battleship was destroyed and her entire crew perished.

Origins

6

"Don't you believe in God?" asked the Ammarian. It was a rhetorical question, but if she had waited for an answer Oisín would only have dithered. He hadn't really thought much about spiritual things. Oh, he was familiar with the old Intaki legends of godlike figures and enigmatic spirits, but to actually believe they were present and had power?

"Do you ever think that your character has been shaped by a controlling force, shaping the line of your jaw and the shape of your nose, directing your path through this life, choosing the skills you learn and guiding you through the momentous decisions you will make?"

He remembered his own clan's legend, that a warrior hero from a forgotten place had followed a blonde-haired maiden to a new world, had lived there with her for ten years and then returned home. On his return to his own land, two hundred years had passed and everyone he knew was gone.

The academics at Caille had known the story and been curious to meet a scion of clan Oisín. They told him it had once been thought to refer to a journey through the Eve gate, but that modern historians treated even that with scepticism. Oisín himself was doubtful...

He realised she was waiting for an answer to a question he hadn't heard.

"I..."

She didn't wait for him to respond. Maybe, seeing the confusion in his eyes, she just decided not to press the issue.

"It could be because I'm a pod pilot. I've noticed that when I'm in my ship that the feeling of being guided is most intense, and when I am planetside or at

leisure in a station, it is weaker."

Oisín was not a pod pilot, though he had toyed with the idea of becoming one after he graduated. This talk was not very encouraging.

"You're sure it's not some side effect of the implants you use?"

"You, my friend, are too sceptical by far."

7

They say the Eve Gate is no more. Not that it affects us much here. We are few, and since the people came here we have set out to live on what Mater Terra gives us. It is not an easy life, but our ancestors chose it. That which does not kill us makes us stronger. Stronger in body, we call Starkmanir, from an old word meaning strength. Stronger in ingenuity, we call Sebiestor. And so on, to each of the many strengths that we find within us.

8

The phenomenon of Intaki Rebirth is something few Intaki understand in detail, let alone those of other races.

The process is surrounded by layers of mysticism which outsiders regard as either primitive, tedious or irrational. Rare plants native to Intaki are used in ritual ceremonies preceded by long periods of fasting and tests of solitary endurance - conditions which, the sceptics say, induce hallucinations and suppress rational analysis of the experience.

In modern times, the process of Rebirth has been augmented with memory transference, cloning and other technologies. The Intaki claim that this strengthens the effects of Rebirth. Others say that prior to the introduction of the new techniques, Rebirth was nothing more than primitive mumbo-jumbo,

useful perhaps only for fostering a shared identity among the Intaki.

The loss of the Eve gate, at a stroke, cut the Kaldari off from all that was valuable of human civilisation. Our trade routes, our business contacts, our sources of knowledge, supplies and labour, all vanished overnight. We were the most advanced of all the colonies on this side of the Gate, and we were knocked back to barbarism. That was the hardest blow of all. But to keep the terraforming equipment running, we would have fed even our children into the furnaces. Of course, we did not have to go that far, and we survived. That which does not kill us makes us stronger.

All Oisín knew was that his mind was filled with disjointed, fragmented memories from times long forgotten.

9

We, the seven hundred faithful of Amar, rejoiced when we heard of the closing of the Eve gate.

"So He drove out the man; and He placed Cherubs at the east of the garden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life."

This was written in the most Holy books which our ancestors had brought from Earth. All the great events of our lives are presaged in those pages, and all our great decisions are guided by them.

"The Lord said, Unto thy seed I give this land, and here we built an altar to Him."

To our seed. This land. All of it.

We built an altar.

Here.

In our village.

Dam-Torsad.

Identity

10



“These stars are part of us, and we of them. We may be defeated, but we can never be separated from Querious - our home.”

Those words were spoken when Firmus Ixion – the alliance better known as Fix - was founded, and now Oisín and his corpmates were about to leave the alliance. The words had lost their holding power, and The Council was entering a new era.

For the past seventy years, we settlers have had no contact from beyond the Eve gate, and we hear less and less from the other settled worlds beyond Intakee. This world was claimed by, and named for, the IntaKee corporation of old Earth, but ten years ago we declared independence. Some of us felt that by so doing, we might provoke a response from IntaKee, and that way re-establish contact. There has been no such response, so our independence in name is matched by independence in reality.

My name is Ossian, and I am named for my father, who is named for his father in turn. My grandfather told me of a legend from old Earth, of a great warrior named Oisín, son of Finn, who followed a fair haired princess to a far away land, and when he returned found that centuries had passed. My grandfather loved the story because his own name also means Oisín, son of Finn, and because he hoped to return eventually to old Earth, even if it had changed beyond recognition. His father was not named Finn, so I do not understand why he was thus named.

We have our own traditions now, one of which we call Rebirth. Through it I had hoped to understand more of the places beyond the Eve gate

and of my ancestors, but instead I learned nothing of interest to me.

11

"Read it."

"No."

The schoolpad's text shimmered in front of the boy. "Our ancestors, the Gallente, settled on a planet in the system we now call Luminaire..."

"But I am not Gallente," cried the boy.

"Oisín," - The teacher pronounced his name in the Gallente style, 'wa-zeen', which did not help the child's temper much, - "if you refuse to read the text I will send you to the head teacher's office. Maybe you need more reading lessons."

Oisín was seven years old and could read, write and speak two languages - Gallente and Matari. The teacher knew this much. She did not know that Oisín did not understand the Intaki tongue, but she would not have considered it important. Neither did his father. It was his mother who taught him Matari, and who had also taught him the importance of his own identity.

"My parents escaped from a slave colony, and my father was killed helping my mother reach Gallente space. I am Matari, but I owe the Gallente a debt for giving us freedom". Those had been his mother's words.

Oisín's father was a diplomat whose career was built on keeping his opinions private. Oisín sometimes wondered how his parents, so different in temperament, could get along at all. But get along they did.

"But why do I have memories of Amarr?"

Experience

12

"Where are you guys?"
"HED-GP"
"I'll be right there."

"Another Stabber."
"They're all bloody stabbers - warpcore stabbers!"
"Silence on comms!"

The Armageddon was positioned directly on the Keberz gate, as Oisín tried to aim his lasers at a hostile interceptor almost two hundred kilometres away. The Crusader class ship was too fast and too small for him to destroy, although he did land enough shots to make its pilot keep his distance.

"Incoming hostile"
"Ship type?"
"I don't know"

Oisín switched crystals as the hostile Megathron decloaked right beside his own battleship. He immediately opened fire, as did his gang mates.

"He's into armour... he's tanking!"
"Two more hostiles incoming!"

Two more Megathrons decloaked, well within blaster range of Oisín and the others. He found his ship was locked in position, warp scrambled and webified, and now unable to use the gate because of the ongoing battle.

"He's too heavily tanked! New primary!" yelled the gang leader.

The new primary target had by now blasted through Oisín's shields and

armour, and from inside his capsule he knew that the widening red arc on his structure display meant that many hundreds of his hand picked crew were dying. How many mothers and lovers would be in mourning tonight?

As the ship exploded Oisín's pod warped away, narrowly escaping destruction itself. He realised that in the ambush he had not even thought to deploy his drones!

He realised too that he had underestimated the enemy, and that his mistakes had cost dearly. The battleship was insured, and his pod was safe for now, but the battle had been lost and thousands of keen and talented young men and women - who had trusted him as he trusted them - were now dead.

Ye Shall Not Again Underestimate The Lord's Enemies

High Priest Khazaroth caused these words to be carved into the stonework above the main door of the Temple of Reclaiming in Dam-Torsad on the day that the heretics were finally crushed. The war had been long, vicious and bloody, and the surviving heretics would soon be put to the Question and then punished for their sins. A quick death for those who repented, or a slow and painful one for those who held out.

And he would see to it that every last surviving book would be burnt, lest anyone should again twist their written words against God's spoken will.

For only the High Priests could speak in the name of the Almighty.

13

"So what are you going to do with your pod licence?" asked the Civire. He was a family friend a few years older than Oisín - their fathers had worked together

on some unknown project when they were both much younger.

"I don't know... I hear Duvolle Labs are always looking for capsuleers to run errands for them. Working with a leading name like that sounds interesting."

"Come on, don't you want to see some real action? Go into the new frontier where there's no law and no duty besides the ones you make yourself! That's where it's all happening - all the risk and all the reward that goes with it. Have a bit of fun for a change!"

The sentiments were not what a stranger would expect from any Caldari, but Oisín was well used to his friend.

"All right, I'll give it a try."

14

The old man lived alone in a dilapidated hut in the foothills of the Akat mountains. It was surrounded by forest, although the tree cover was much sparser here than it was closer to the villages. Up here, trees did not grow as quickly, and if I followed the trails a little further, I would reach a place where no trees grew at all.

I was here for my Rebirth.

He pointed out a magnificent tree, larger than any other I had ever seen.

"This tree is called the Redwood. It takes many centuries to grow to maturity; this one was planted by the first settlers to come here. It will grow still taller in the years to come."

I knew many people who doubted the stories of where our ancestors came from. In enormous metal boats from the sky, we were told. It

didn't seem possible to me. We are part of this land, and we are tied to it as a snail is tied to its shell. Wouldn't it be more reasonable to think we had always been here?

Through the Rebirth rite I hoped to learn more about our past.

"This is a Draian tree, also called the blackthorn. Its berries will purify you before the rite can begin."

The blackthorn was common enough around our village. We collected the berries at summer's end, and soaked them for a full year in freshly distilled Wiske. The resulting beverage was well worth waiting for.

Everyone in our village also knew the other use of Blackthorn berries. I remembered what had happened one young boy who had eaten too many of them - although nobody could understand how he liked their bitter taste! The poor boy couldn't sit down for days...

The old man was a medicine man, one of the Dree: the keepers of our ancient memories.

"This plant grows here in the forest. It will help you to see the past.

This plant grows in the swamp. It will help you to see the present.

This plant comes from the desert. It will help you to see the future."

Mushrooms I had seen and eaten before (although not the one I was being shown now), and I knew of the blue swamp moss's use as an antidote to even the worst drunkenness, but the other spiky, fleshy plant was not one I was familiar with.

I had been fasting since sunrise the previous morning, and I was

hungry. The old man gave me a handful of blackthorn berries and told me to eat them. I didn't need to be told twice, no matter how bitter they were.

"You will go to the midden now and come back when you have purified yourself."

I did.

"Eat this mushroom and behold your past!"

That I did.

Some time later (I have no way of knowing how long it was) the old man gave me a cup of milk, which I drank eagerly.

"Eat this moss and behold your present!"

As I chewed the tasteless moss, my head cleared and I became once more aware of my surroundings, my life, the everyday concerns I had, and my reasons for being here.

"Now eat this cactus and behold your future!"

This I did too.

My Rebirth gave me some answers to the questions I had been pondering.

I understand now that while we Intaki belong to this land, still we are not

made from it. Our ancestors came here from some other place, bringing with them some of the plants and animals we use, and learned the uses of others which had always grown here - the blue moss for instance.

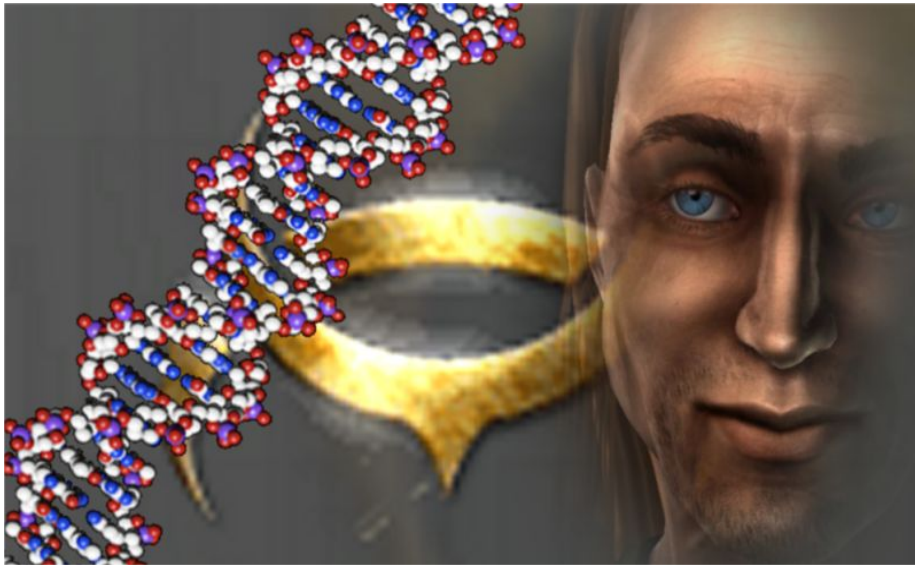
My Rebirth also gave me new questions to ponder, which had never crossed my mind before.

I wonder if there are other worlds where settlers had made their homes; where they came from and how they got here; what had happened to make the settlers lose contact with the places they had come from; if they all came from one place or from many different places.

I knew these questions could not be answered. Nobody can be Reborn twice.

Heredity

15



"You can't be serious!"

Oisín was speaking to a specialist with the cloning facility he used in Agil.

"I am quite serious. We ran two separate analyses to make sure."

Oisín sat silently as he digested the news. He read the datasheet again, hoping it would change.

Nuclear DNA Pattern Analysis

Subject Licence ID: 1674069066

Hereditary Disorders: Negative

Composition: Mixed race (details follow)

43.75% Intaki

25.0% Sebiestor

25.0% Amarr

6.25% Achura

It looked as though his grandmother had not been entirely honest about her escape from slavery. He understood, but he was not sure if his mother would take the news well. It might be better not to tell her...

Journey

16



beep, beep, beep

Oisín turned over in his sleep, murmuring involuntarily.

Beep, Beep, Beep

Now half awake, he opened his eyes a crack and found the light painful to bear. Despite being used to waking for alarms, he was still nowhere near alert.

BEEP, BEEP, BEEP!

He reached out one hand, clumsily knocking an empty glass to the floor. The communicator alarm sounded one more time, even louder than before.

His second attempt to answer the comm was more successful.

"Morning", he slurred.

"Oh-zeen, I have a Mr. Usheen who wishes to speak with you."

He stifled a laugh. The Ni-Kunni comms operator had finally, after weeks of him working out of this station in Kihtaled, managed to pronounce his name correctly, but she didn't even know it.

"Thank you, I'll take the call".

"Hi, Da," he said, trying to sound as if he had been awake for hours.

"Son, how are you? It's been too long."

"Great, thanks Da, doing something different every day! Getting into piloting was the best decision I ever made!"

"Glad to hear it. Your mother wants to know when you'll be home again."

"I'm planning a trip home in a week or two- I'll be sure to drop in then."

"That's be great. You know she wasn't impressed when she heard the last time you came to Sinq and you didn't visit."

"Can you tell her I'm sorry? I couldn't help it, I was in a hurry that time."
This was true, but he didn't know how to explain to his parents that the alliance he had been a member of was involved in a Concord-sanctioned war without worrying them.

"Anyway that's not why I called you. A colleague of mine tells me you've been talking to the separatists. Is that true?"

"Da, you know I've always felt we Intaki aren't treated as equals in the Federation."

"So it's true then?"

"I'm not going to lie to you Da, I haven been talking to some people in the Intaki movement. More listening than talking, to be honest. I agree with a lot of their, ehm, observations, on how the Federation treats us."

"Hang on a second, you haven't forgotten the President is Intaki, and so are a lot of other people in positions of influence in the Federation?"

This was an old debate between the father and son, and Oisín answered by reflex.

"Of course, anyone can see that end of the scale, but you know the other

statistics too Da? How Intaki are twice as likely to be unemployed and five times more likely to be in jail? Are you going to say we're all lazy and dishonest?"

"I'm not saying the Federation is perfect..."

"Good, because it isn't perfect. I'm not saying it's hell either Da, I'd still rather be Intaki than Ni-Kunni, but nobody is going to make ordinary Intaki lives better if we don't do it."

"'We', meaning the separatists?"

"We aren't all separatists, you know. Most of us just want a fair chance."

"You can't say you didn't have a fair chance, son. Look at you, if you had grown up on Intaki or even Stacmon you couldn't have hoped to become a pod pilot. You're where you are because of the opportunities the Federation gave me."

"That's exactly my point, and it's the same for millions of Intaki - if they don't work for the government their kids won't have the same chance as kids growing up on Gal Prime."

"You know, I didn't ring you to argue. I rang to tell you some good news and to ask a favour."

"Sorry Da, we do seem to go over this ground a lot... anyway, go on."

"I'm retiring in a few months, after the job I'm working on is finished. I'm not sure exactly when that will be, because it's complicated and there's a lot of detail to tie up, but my mind is made up."

"I'm delighted for you Da, you worked so hard for the government all these years. I hope they appreciate it."

"So do I son... the favour I'm asking is related to that. Just don't do anything that would give them an excuse to sack me. That's all I ask."

"They wouldn't do that!"

"They would, otherwise I wouldn't ask. And I am asking, man to man, Intaki to Intaki, father to son. Please?"

"I promise."

17

"So, have you found yourself a nice girl?"

"There are lots of nice girls out there Ma, I'm just not ready to settle down yet."

"You're not as young as you look, you know - cloning might keep you young looking but I know how old you really are."

It was twenty-seven standard years since Oisín's birth. He didn't think this was old, either, but his mother had the same instinct that all mothers have.

"Anyway, that's not why I wanted to talk to you". This was actually a surprise. 'Settling down' was a regular topic between them. And his mother usually got to the point right at the beginning of the conversation.

"If you make a career working for the **filth** you are working for right now, you will end up getting shot at by the Ushra'Khan. You're my only son but still I understand why they would do that."

"How do you know that? - I mean, why is that?"

He had blurted out the wrong question. He knew his work for the Royal Khanid

Navy would bring him to the notice of the Minmatar terrorists, freedom fighters, call them what you like. Many of their fighters were known to fire on other pilots without warning if they had high standings from the slave holding factions.

He had no particular motive for choosing to work for the Khanid Navy. He had simply been based in Querious for many months, and when his corporation, The Council, had left the Firmus Ixion alliance he had found the Khanids a convenient employer. His work for the navy involved security missions, usually fighting Blood Raiders and Sansha's Nation. And occasionally, Minmatar freedom fighters would be the target.

So it was inevitable that his work would bring him to the notice of those freedom fighters. He didn't think it would happen so soon, however.

"You know how I know that." This was true, because although it was never mentioned openly he knew that his mother had helped many slaves to freedom over the years.

"I don't believe they would fire on you now, but it can't be far away. Tell me, why did you choose the Khanids?"

How to answer this... Because they were *there*? A kingdom which enslaved not only his mother's people (as did the Amarr) but his father's as well?

The truth, partly, was that to work for the Khanids didn't conflict with his corporation's strategic need to have him close to the battle zones in the deep south. Working for any other faction would mean having to travel halfway across the galaxy. But that answer wouldn't exactly please his parents either. He didn't think any answer could.

His father spoke up, saving him from an awkward answer... and posing a more awkward dilemma.

"Could you work for someone else instead?"

Oisín thought about it. He still had reasonable contacts in the Federation. It was an option, definitely.

"I could, but -"

"Son, I asked you a while ago not to do anything that would, ah, *embarrass* me in my job. This is much more important. If you could stop working for the slavers, it would make your mother happy. Who you choose to work for instead, well, I can live with that."

"I suppose working for the Thukkers is out of the question?"

"Definitely," said both his mother and father together.

Leaving the south - and his friends - would be a wrench. But making his mother happy was more important.

Oisín's mind began to drift as he weighed up other potential employers.

18

Those faces still haunted him.

Their dull, despairing eyes.

The complete lack of resistance, lack of fear, lack of hatred. All the things one expected of a functioning human spirit - missing.

It had been a mission much like any other. The Blood Raiders have

established an outpost in Ipref, and I want you to destroy it. I know you're up to it. By the way, I like your ship.

But what he saw when his pulse lasers ripped through the storage area... Oh, what he saw...

Worse than broken limbs. Broken spirits.

Seventy slaves - enough to populate a small village on Intaki. Under Khanid law, they became Oisín's property as 'spoils of war'. His *slaves*. Ouch.

He contacted his agent and asked how to go about freeing the slaves.

"You can't free slaves."

"What do you mean? Slaves win freedom all the time in the Kingdom."

"No, *you* can't free slaves."

"Why not?"

"You are an infidel. How can you judge whether a slave in your care has learned to truly love and fear God?"

"An infidel?"

It was the first time Oisín had heard the word used seriously in conversation. His contacts in the Kingdom were normally quite charming, if a little overtly religious for his University of Caille taste.

"Yes, an infidel. You do not love God as we do. Please forgive me if this sounds harsh, but that is exactly what you are."

So a few days later, when he visited his parents in Eglennaert, he was already disillusioned with the Khanid Kingdom. He knew he would never be truly accepted there, merely tolerated, an irritation like many others who were simply necessary to keep the Kingdom alive. But never a citizen; never one of *them*. He had been blinded to the subtle, casual, callousness and lack of concern that should have been obvious to him in a Kingdom which kept slaves of every race and yet also freely employed every race in its business.

The seeds were sown.



Rebirth

19

Placid Reborn... the very name hinted at what it meant to be Intaki. This was the corporation Oisín chose to join, if they would have him. But first, he would have to speak to his father. In person.

“Da, I’m moving back from the South.”

“That’s great, wait till I tell your mother!”

“I’m not coming back to Sinq for good. I’ll be working out of Placid, maybe Essence and Verge as well.”

“Placid... hmm, will you be changing corporations or staying with The Council?”

“I’ll be applying to join another corp. Placid Reborn, to be exact.”

“The separatists?”

“Not everyone in PR is a separatist. A few of them even work for the Navy.”

“I know that, but I needed to hear you say it. Between yourself and myself, I fear for the peace we enjoy between the empires. If war does come, the Intaki movement has a part to play, and I would rather you fought on our side than against us.”

“So you don’t mind then? What about your career?”

“To be honest, I think you doing what you are doing was inevitable. I see now you needed to take that step for yourself. I’m glad you’ll be closer to home, and your mother will be glad you’re not working for Khanid anymore. You

know, I’m almost sorry I asked you to hold back that time. I hope you understand I had to ask that.”

“It suited me too – gave me time to think things over, to be sure this was the right choice. So anyway, what about your job?”

“You know the election’s been delayed yet again.”

“Yes, but I don’t see-”

Oisín stopped in mid sentence, his eyes widening.

“Mentas. Bloody. Blaque.”

“Less of the profanity, son. Yes, Mentas Blaque would have sacked me given any excuse. But now I’ll be retired before the election is over, so I’m not afraid of him anymore. Not for my own interest, at any rate.”

“You think he’ll win?”

“I don’t know, but the way things are going I can see the voters wanting a president they think is strong. And Blaque looks like that strong man.”

“You think he isn’t really strong?”

“He’ll be decisive at least, which will make a change. But strong... well, I don’t know, I just hope he’s learned the difference between courage and zeal, or that holding a grudge isn’t a substitute for pride in your past.”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“I know you’re not, and I’m not saying anything more. I’ve already said too much about him.”

Rodovald Avorsand was officially a cultural attaché employed by the Minmatar diplomatic services at one of their stations in Masalle. Of course, it was common knowledge among the local pod pilots that she often required mission services. It was the practice across the civilised galaxy for the empires to set up stations in each other's territory to pursue their own interests there. The exception was the Khanid Kingdom, which for reasons best known to Khanid II and his government, would not sign any treaties to allow this practice. In Khanid space, there were only Khanid and Concord stations; and there were no Khanid stations outside the Kingdom's borders. The Minmatar and Gallente had no such difficulty, and had opened many stations in one another's territory. One such station was the Republic Security Services base orbiting Masalle IX in the Verge Vendor region, and it was here that Oisín sought out Avorsand.

"Your reputation precedes you, Oisín. According to Minmatar law, because of your previous work for our enemies I should not be speaking to you now."

"According to the Yulai Convention, you shouldn't be handing out kill missions outside Republic territory. But I didn't come here to argue legal points, I came to look for work. I know you're not comfortable with my past, but I also know I can help you. And so do you."

"The Republic doesn't need your help."

"Of course it doesn't *need* me, I'm not all that good! But I'll say it again – I can help you."

"You're very direct for an Intaki, Oisín."

"My mother is Sebiestor."

"And you worked for the slavers? That is very interesting. Tell me, are you

related to the Oisín who was a liaison with Concord in the eighties?"

"He's my father."

The mask of hostility fell from her face.

"Then I owe your family a debt of gratitude. Your mother helped me to freedom when I was a girl."

"She told me to come to you, but she didn't tell me that part."

She laughed.

"Probably knew I'd figure it out myself! And that I'd make you sweat blood over your track record... so anyway, why did you take the slavers' isk?"

"It was corp policy to be based in the Kingdom, so there wasn't much choice really."

"I see. Well, I have worse than you on my books. Let's see what you're made of – there's an Ammatar slave raiding party heading this way and I want you to stop them. Oh, and if you turn this one down, don't bother coming back here."

"You can count on me."