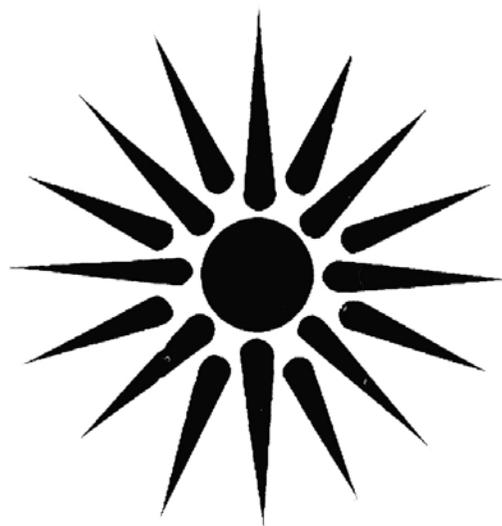


The Alien that changed the world

Part 3

*Otsiron's Final
Adventure*

A novel



By Risto Stefov

The Alien that changed the world
Part 3
Otsiron's Final Adventure

A Novel

Published by:

Risto Stefov Publications
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Toronto, Canada

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FICTION - ADVENTURE

e-book edition

August 12, 2020

Back to Ostikon

The shuttle looked familiar but then I remembered what Delche had said; they all looked alike. It was piloted by two women a little older than me. One came to the back, opened the hatch, grabbed my hand, pulled me in and closed the hatch. I dropped my bag on the floor. She escorted me to the cockpit, sat me down on the third seat and she took her seat behind the controls. The other looked at me, smiled and went on piloting the ship. I assumed she was the captain. They looked at each other and the captain punched the autopilot.

It took us twenty-seven minutes to get to the mother ship. I expected it to be a science vessel but it wasn't. It was a cargo ship.

On the way to the mother ship I felt very anxious. My bravery and clear mind, whatever little I had left in me, had evaporated and my stomach was filled with butterflies. The women didn't say a word to me or to each other. I too kept silent.

After we boarded the cargo ship we stayed inside the docked shuttle for almost two days. During that time no one said anything. I didn't know where we were going and how long it was going to take. I spent almost all of my time resting on the metal bench inside the little cage that looked like a prison cell. I used my bag as a cushion.

History was repeating. Except this time it was much more painful. The two women, who wouldn't speak to me or in front of me, whispered to one another when I wasn't there. Unlike the last time when I was drugged, this time I was conscious. They regularly gave me food and water. The food consisted of the familiar dry blocks and the water came in plastic bags.

A person could escape from prison, a person could run away from a place but one couldn't escape the torment of their own mind. Not knowing what was going to happen was bothering me a lot. If they wanted to kill me why not kill me here and now. Why torment me? But then I remembered what we did to political prisoners on earth. We tormented them. We put them through a show trial. We found them guilty of misconduct. And finally we sent them to prison to

rehabilitate them, or executed them to remove the defiance and disobedience out of them.

Why should an alien society behave any differently? After all I had interfered in their affairs and turned their world upside down. There was no question about that. There was no question that my interference had caused a major disruption. More than that... It shifted the balance of power from something that was stable and time tested for centuries and turned it into something untested and volatile. Who or what gave me the right to interfere?

It was time for me to pay... pay for my meddling...

After the second day, we left the cargo ship and flew in the shuttle for about half a day and then rendezvoused with a larger ship which, if I were to guess, was a galaxy trader ship. It wasn't a battle cruiser. Before leaving the shuttle the women placed a hood over my head and I was escorted to a cabin blindfolded. I guess they either didn't want the crew to see me or me to see the crew.

I spent about seven days confined to my cabin. The only people I saw were the two women from the shuttle. They brought me food and water.

To pass the time and keep sane, I spent my entire time thinking about the things I had done on earth and the good times I had had with my friends. But once in a while, especially when I was relaxed, my mind drifted and became filled with dark thoughts. I kept thinking what I had done, the sins I had committed and the price I was going to pay.

By the tenth day I was back on the same shuttle with the two women and, as I found out later, heading for Ostikon.

When we reached the planet we entered the atmosphere in a down spiral. Ostikon looked as beautiful as I remembered it.

As we were approaching the surface I could see a number of people standing on one side of the landing pad. The moment the door opened Ostikon's familiar aroma of flowers and ripe fruit hit my

nostrils. The air was thick, hot and humid, unwelcome to my system, just like I remembered it.

After I stepped out from the shuttle the hatch closed and the shuttle flew off. Two beautifully dressed young ladies, no more than twenty years old, dressed in the familiar uniform Airam had designed for us, with the Macedonian colours, approached and stopped in front of me. One handed me a package. It was a uniform.

The other spoke softly and clearly words that sounded familiar but I didn't know what they meant. I then remembered not what the words meant but how Vos used to say them to me so that I could learn their language. And I always used to answer with the word "Otsiron", which meant "Great friend" in their language.

I said, "Otsiron."

They smiled, looked at each other and then looked at me.

The one standing to my left extended her hand and in Macedonian said, "Welcome to Ostikon, my name is Velika, I am your communication's officer. Nice to meet you, Sir."

I took her hand, shook it and said, "Nice to meet you too Velika."

The other one also extended her hand and in Macedonian said, "Welcome back Sir, my name is Dafina. I am your navigation officer, we were sent here by Asora to escort you to headquarters."

I shook her hand too and said, "Nice to meet you Dafina and what's with the Macedonian names."

"Many young people here, especially those in the service, have taken Macedonian aliases. These two names were given to us by your friend and former navigator Delche."

"Ah, so you know Delche? How is he doing?"

"Everyone knows Delche, he is doing fine."

The girls took the lead and I followed. Just as we stepped down into a tube station the other people who were at the landing pad with us left. A car looking like a glass jar was waiting for us in the tube.

The girls sat on the seat facing forward and I sat on the one facing backwards.

Moments after we disappeared into the tube tunnels we reappeared in what looked like a large mall. The girls took me to a hair salon. It was managed by five women and there were no customers when we arrived.

The girls asked me to take a shower and pointed me to a booth. I took off the sweat-ridden, stinky military clothes I had worn for the past ten days, had a shower and before I had a chance to change into the new uniform, the women threw me a towel and sat me on one of the chairs. They gave me a haircut and shave and sent me back to take another shower. I guess they figured I wasn't clean enough.

After I dried myself I put on the new uniform. In the meantime the women washed and dried my old clothes, placed them in a bag and gave them to the girls.

One of the women adjusted my pants, shirt and jacket so they fit well and then combed my hair. There was a lot of chatter in the salon. The women looked happy with their work.

When I got back to the girls I got my medallion out of my bag and hung it around my neck. Both girls touched it and smiled.

“Since you're my navigator and communications officer I assume we'll be flying the ship again?” I asked.

“We can't tell you anything before you're briefed.”

“Did Viera hand pick you for the job? And why girls?”

They looked at each other. Their smiles faded and the other one said, “Sorry, we can't tell you anything before you're briefed.”

“Vieria is still commander of the military, right?” I asked but got no reply.

It was a forty-five minute ride in silence where my own officers, whom I was expected to trust with my life, would tell me nothing. I wasn't happy about that.

Just as we stepped out of the tube car I asked, “Am I your captain and superior officer?”

“Yes Sir you are,” they both confirmed.

“Then I order you to answer my questions truthfully or I will dismiss you right now and you will never serve with me!”

“VELIKA!” I yelled.” May I call you Vel?”

“Yes Sir? You can call me Vel!”

“Vel! Where are we going?”

“Asora and the war council have organized a military parade to welcome you back. It's supposed to be a surprise. That's all I know I swear to Mother Nature, Sir.”

“Thank you. Now both of you place your hands on my medallion and swear to me that you will always answer all my questions truthfully and you will obey all my orders without hesitation or question.”

They both placed their hands on the Macedonian star at the same time and said, “Yes Sir!”

“Yes Sir what?” I snapped.

“Yes Sir, we will always answer all your questions truthfully and we will obey all your orders without hesitation or question.”

“Thank you. And may I call you Daf?”

“Please do Sir...”

We took an elevator up to a balcony high on a hill from where we could view the entire valley.

I couldn't believe what I saw. There were over a dozen groupings, little rectangles fifty long by twenty wide, of young ladies wearing white boots, white skirts and white uniforms with the Macedonian colours in perfect formation marching down the valley in perfect step. The band was playing familiar earth marches similar to those the Macedonian military played.

“Who are all these women?” I asked.

“They are your soldiers, your army, Sir,” replied Vel.

What she said made no sense but I decided not to question her. At the moment I was more interested in watching the parade.

“I want to go closer and have a better look,” I said.

They looked at each other with a worried look on their faces and hesitated.

Before they had a chance to reply I jumped off the balcony and went down the hill. They followed me. When I got within a few steps of the parade grounds I stopped and admired the perfect formations. Every single girl looked at us as they marched in unison and smiled as they passed us by. Each wore a red beret with a golden Macedonian sun pinned to it on the front side of their foreheads. They each carried a rifle in their hands. They all had short hair.

The looks, the smiles, the vibration of their steps in unison, the marching songs, the way they carried their weapons... gave me an unbelievable feeling. I had goose bumps all over my body, my hair stood up and my throat constricted. I could feel tears running down my cheeks. It took me a minute or two to compose myself.

When the last column had marched by us I asked the girls why they had gone through such an effort to welcome me and why only women and no men?"

"Well, Sir, you know we are at war. All the men have been sent to the front already and you were summoned here to lead the women. These are your battalions which you will lead to bring us victory. Victory is close at hand!" said Vel.

This bit of news was devastating to me. Had I caused this? Of course I had!

After I recovered from the shock and was able to speak, I asked, "Who are we at war with?"

"Well, Sir, we're not directly at war with anyone. We're helping an ally fight a war," replied Vel.

"Why?"

"Well, Sir, after you left our government signed an agreement with the galaxy traders to help each other in case one was attacked and they, unfortunately, were attacked and we are obligated by this agreement to help them."

"Who's attacking the galaxy traders?"

"That, I don't know, Sir."

"Who does?"

"Perhaps the war council, we are expected to be with them in less than an hour."

"How do you know we're winning the war and that victory is at hand?"

"Well, Sir, we get reports from the galaxy trader outpost closest to us."

“Have any of the fighters returned?”

“No Sir.”

At this point I became angry, very angry. I knew it wasn't my business to interfere but I couldn't help it. What they were doing here was a familiar and personal theme for me. This is exactly what the Greek communists were telling the Macedonian people in Greece during the Greek Civil War. Sacrifice a few more Macedonians and victory will be ours. In the end, we not only lost several generations of young men and women, including children as young as fourteen years old, who fought and died in the mountains, but we also lost our homes and ancestral lands. And when we lost the war which we were assured we would win, we became permanent refugees roaming the world. I was angry all right.

We went back to the balcony and down the elevator. We again boarded a tube car and left the station. The girls were silent.

About fifteen minutes after we left the last station we arrived at another station and stopped. This was a well-decorated station with a lot of posters with writing high up on the walls. There were also portraits, I assume, of famous people. Among the many there was a portrait of Vos, Vieria, Asora and Anelia which surprised me. Anelia was the princess who had caused me all my troubles. What in God's name was her portrait doing up there side by side with Vos and Vieria. And where were King Velion and Anelia's sisters?

I looked on the other wall, on the opposite side, and there was a portrait of my ship with me, Delche and Ori standing beside it. The girls watched me looking at the posters emotionless.

As soon as I looked down they began to walk away and I followed. They led me through a corridor guarded by young women. No one asked me for identification or searched me.

From there we entered a wide lobby and were escorted by an armed female guard towards a large door that was closed. Two armed guards, both women, stood on each side of the large door. When we

came close they opened it and we walked inside a big room that looked like a conference room.

I went inside first and was followed by Vel, Daf and the armed guard who had escorted us.

Everyone sitting around a long table stood up when we entered. No one said a word.

I only recognized Asora in the room. She was sitting on my left, closest to the head of the table. A large man dressed in black was sitting at the head of the table. There were more women than men in the room.

The large man said something and everyone sat down. I didn't sit.

Asora looked tired and burned out. She said something and Vel translated.

"First please allow me to welcome you back. We're sorry to have dragged you back here from your home world but, it seems, once again we need your help. As you probably know we are at war and we need you and your ship to lead our troops to our final victory. As the leader of this world and as your friend, please consider my offer," she said and sat down.

"May I ask you some questions?" I asked.

"Please do," Asora said. "That's why we are assembled here today."

"Everywhere I look I see women but no men. Where are the men?"

"Well, they are fighting at the warfront. We sent almost every man we could spare but with a little more effort and with your help, we will win this war."

"Where is this war taking place and how long has it been going on?"

"On the far side of the traders' galaxy. It started almost one year ago. Just two days ago we sent two million well-trained young men.

Before that we sent one million of our most capable fighters. And now we are preparing to send two million more well-trained young women and we want you to lead them to victory.”

“Who is fighting in this war and why are you involved?”

“The galaxy traders are fighting against an alien race. We are involved because we are obligated by an agreement we made with the galaxy traders to defend each other in case of outside attacks.”

“Why is this war being fought? What are they fighting over?”

“That, I don’t know for sure but this is the galaxy trader’s ambassador, perhaps he can tell you more,” she said and pointed at the large man.

“You mean you’re prepared to sacrifice your entire young male population and your young female population, generations of it, in a foreign war and you know nothing about it?”

“We are doing this because we know we’re going to win and all of our soldiers will come back. We have assurances from our allies.”

“What happens if you lose this war?”

“We are pretty sure we will win it.”

“My dear lady, an entire galaxy of hundreds of planets with billions of people and far more sophisticated weapons and technology could not drive the aliens out. What make you think that your soldiers can?”

“Well, that’s why you are here... to help us... to advise us.”

“How many galaxy trader soldiers are involved in this war?”

She looked at the ambassador, he said something.

“Ten million!”

“You mean to tell me a galaxy of hundreds of planets can only raise ten million soldiers and your planet, as an ally, has to raise five million? And that’s for now and how many more later? What if they ask for more, will you commit to more? How many more will you commit to? Until every young man and woman from your three planets is engaged? What kind of an agreement is this?”

There was silence in the room.

“No! I’m not here to sacrifice your entire youth on an adventure,” I said. “If you want me to end this war I will end it on my terms. Now I want you to immediately recall the ships with soldiers en route. Bring them back if you want me to help you.”

“With due respect, Sir...” piped up the ambassador.

I interrupted him and said, “This, Sir, is an internal matter that does not involve you. I don’t even know why you’re here.”

A young lady sitting beside Asora, whose face was hidden all this time, jumped up and yelled, “No! The troops can’t be recalled. They are committed to the war effort and must engage the enemy!” She then pointed at me and said, “You, Sir, are out of order, this is a decision for the war council.”

I recognized the face. It was Princess Anelia, one of King Velion’s daughters; the woman who had kidnapped me from my planet five years ago and brought me to Ostikon.

“With due respect Princess Anelia, it was this council that summoned me here and is asking for my help. I’m trying to help. My first priority is to protect your people. I can’t possibly commit to something I don’t understand. I need to know everything about this war before I commit to anything.”

“I am the Minister of Defense and commander of all the troops and I decide what happens, not you,” she snapped at me.

Everyone stood there frozen. No one wanted to say or do anything.

“Who appointed you Minister of Defense and commander of the troops?” I asked.

“This council appointed me unanimously.”

“So, you’re acting under the authority of this council then, is that correct?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“In that case you don’t need me. You can lead the troops into battle yourself.”

“But I need the ship,” she replied.

I took the medallion off my neck and tossed it at her and said, “Here, you can have it!”

The medallion hit the table hard and bounced off. The ambassador caught it and said, “We can’t do anything without the ship,” and came over and handed the medallion back to me.

I raised my arms up and said nothing.

Moments later I asked, “Who’s in charge of the war council?”

Asora looked at me surprised because I knew the answer to that question and wondered why I would even ask.

She said, “I am.”

“Then as leader of the war council you will have to decide what you want to do next.”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you want Anelia to lead the troops into battle or do you want me?”

“You, of course, that’s why you’re here.”

“Then, I expect this council to give me full authority to act on its behalf legally.”

“I believe this council can do that. What are your terms?”

“Like I said I want the war council to vote to recall the troops, put me in charge of all the troops, give me a chance to investigate the war situation and analyze what is required to bring you victory, if that’s even possible, and to report my finding directly to Asora, the war council leader. I’m also asking to be appointed member of the war council.”

Asora looked around at everyone and asked, “Are there any questions?”

“Does that mean I have to give up my command? asked Anelia. But I’ll still be Minister of Defense? Right?”

“We’ll put it to a vote,” replied Asora.

One by one they all put their hands up except for Anelia and granted me everything I’d asked for. They also voted to remove Anelia as commander of the troops. She retained the position of Minister of Defense.

Now that I was a member of the war council I asked the ambassador to leave the boardroom and wait outside.

I asked Asora to sit at the head of the table. I then took her seat and sat beside Anelia. I turned to Asora and, in front of everyone, said, “What have you done?”

She slumped forward and put her hands over her face.

“And you!” I said, pointing at everyone else. “You were elected to protect your people. You were given this position, this privilege to sit on this council to serve the people, not to send them to the slaughterhouse.”

No one said a word. They stood there stunned.

“Asora,” I yelled, “get on your communicator and issue an order to have your fighters, your children, returned to you immediately. Take a vote if you have to.”

She did and, with the exception of Anelia, it was unanimous.

After she made the call she said, “It will take three to four days before they’re back.”

I asked Asora to dismiss the meeting but have everyone remain in the boardroom and work out a plan to get out of the agreement with the galaxy traders with minimum impact.

I then asked Asora, Vel and Daf to go into Asora’s office with me.

The four of us sat around a small table. Asora offered us a drink.

“It’s still illegal on this planet but I just keep a bottle or two for my guests,” she said.

Both girls said no to a drink but I insisted they have some, just a little.

It was rakia; Delche’s rakia.

To my surprise Asora poured herself half a shot and gulped it down. She realized what she had done and apologized.

She smiled and said, “I’m sorry. What a hypocrite I am... Unfortunately I need it to calm my nerves.”

I grabbed the bottle and poured the girls a bit and myself and Asora a full shot. We clinked our glasses. Delche had already taught the girls how to toast and sip the rakia and not gulp it down.

I toasted, “To old times,” with Asora and, “to better times,” with the girls.

Asora said, “Delche never taught me anything about how to toast or how to drink it. He doesn’t even know I drink. Airam brings me a bottle or two from time to time.”

I asked Asora how Airam was doing. She said she would have been lost a long time ago without her. She had been her pillar in these trying times.

“So, what happened, what went wrong?” I asked.

“Well, I never wanted any of this but, you know... I was never good at politics. I tried my best but I just couldn’t convince anyone to stay out of the war. After Viera and Velion were assassinated I had no support from anyone. The galaxy traders bought their way into everything, including my cabinet, and I became the rag that was used to wipe everything clean. They used my good name to convince the entire planet to join the war effort. And here we are.”

“You mean to tell me Viera is dead? Who did this?”

“We don’t know for sure, but if you ask me Anelia’s behind it. She rose to power after Viera and Velion were assassinated. Anyone who disagreed with her or disagreed with joining the war effort met with bad luck. Including her sisters whom she exiled and said it was for their protection.”

“Can you prove any of this?”

“We have her accomplices imprisoned but they won’t talk.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“I just want to say that I’m happy and very relieved that you’re here. If there’s anyone who can pull us out of this mess it’s you.”

“Before we go back to the boardroom, I want to ask you for a favour.”

“Anything, name it.”

“I would like to visit my friends, could you arrange that for me?”

“Yes, I can do that for you. I can have one of my assistants track them down for you and have you flown to them or you can fly your own ship.”

“Thank you,” I said and smiled at her. I wanted to ask her many more questions but she looked very tired.

There was a lot of yelling and arguing in the boardroom but they all went silent the moment Asora opened the door.

I looked very serious when I took my seat. All eyes were on me.

“So, ladies and gentlemen, what have you decided?” I asked.

There was silence.

“Well, speak up,” I said.

Vel said, “Begging your pardon Sir, but they’re afraid of you. They’re scared shitless of you so be more specific as to what you want from them.”

“Does anyone have any ideas on how to break this agreement you signed with the galaxy traders without suffering severe consequences?”

Still silence.

“Was anyone here bribed by the galaxy traders to sign the agreement?”

Still silence.

I asked Vel to go outside and bring the ambassador back inside.

She escorted him back and sat him on the opposite side of the table.

After he sat down I said, “We have unanimously agreed to pull out of our contract with the galaxy traders and we have recalled our troops. We’re abandoning your war. It’s your war not ours.”

“You can’t do that,” he yelled. “We’ll take legal action...”

“Go ahead, but before you do that, go and inform your superiors that our troops are disengaging from the war and are coming back.”

He looked at each member of the council angrily and said, “You bastards, you took my money and now you’ve screwed me!” He then looked at me and said, “Yes, they took my money to vote to honour the agreement and I hope they rot in hell for it. Bastards...”

“It’s best that you go back to your office now Sir, your work here is done,” I said and asked the guard to escort him out.

Asora dismissed the meeting and told everyone to be available on short notice for more meetings.

It was getting late in the day so I asked Asora what other plans she had for me. She said she had none.

“So, what happens to us now?” I asked. “I have these beautiful girls in my arms and nowhere to go.”

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “I forgot to tell you about your accommodations. We have three hotel rooms booked for you right here in this complex where you can spend as much time as you want. They have Macedonian style food and drinks prepared just for you in the restaurant. I’ll take you there myself.”

Minutes later we were in the hotel lobby and were greeted in Macedonian by an old man named Nagol who said he was a friend of Delche. He was the hotel owner.

After Asora left he took us to our rooms and waited outside. When we came out he took us to a lounge and ordered food and drinks. One of those drinks was a bottle of Macedonian wine from Macedonia.

“How is that even possible?” I asked.

“Anything is possible if you have money,” he said.

“It would be sacrilege to open this bottle. You should keep it as a souvenir,” I said.

“Delche was right about you,” he said.

“Well, what did he say about me?”

“I know you Macedonians despise flattery so I’m not going to say anything.”

I didn’t say anything either.

He then turned to the girls and said in Macedonian, “How did you beautiful girls get mixed up with him?”

They looked at each other and Vel said, “When Delche came to the academy to interview people for this mission we volunteered. He said that we might be going into combat and get killed but that didn’t stop us. Daf and I are old friends and schoolmates. We studied in the academy together; we both took the same class to learn Macedonian as an elective. I studied communications, she studied navigation. We were a perfect match for the mission. In addition to learning about him from the mediums, we also studied Otsiron at the academy. We watched every video made of him including the documentaries made by Ruzha. When Delche found out about this he selected us.”

“So, Nagol, tell us more about yourself. How did you learn Macedonian and how do you know Delche?” I asked.

“Well, it’s a long story...”

“We have all night, please tell us, we’re all interested to know,” Vel said.

Both Daf and I shook our heads in agreement.

“Well, let me begin by saying I was Delche’s teacher. I was one of those teachers who taught alien languages. I have a gift. Well, I had a gift when I was young. I was able to learn languages fast. I’ve never been to Macedonia but when I found out Delche, one of my students, had been I went to see him and had long discussions with him. This was before you arrived the first time. I wanted to meet you when you were here but your stay was brief. I got in touch with Delche after you left and he told me a lot of things about you. He couldn’t stop talking about you. He was very sad to see you go. The man loves you and misses you a lot. You should go and see him the first chance you get.”

“I will go and see him. I want to see all my friends. Asora promised me she would find them for me and let me know where they are.”

“I can also help you with that. I was a friend and schoolmate of Vieria. She often came here to unload and seek my advice so she told me things about them. We used to spend hours and hours talking. I miss her visits. She too was fond of you. She made every effort to get you home safely and keep you alive. There was a lot going on in those days. She managed to improve things here but then we got involved in this damn war.”

“I was really surprised to hear that Vieria had been assassinated. Who would want to do such a thing?” I asked.

“Well, she did her best to eradicate the rats but she couldn’t destroy their secret societies. There was a core of them still active even after Asora won the election. The rats needed to eliminate you so they made every effort to get rid of you, even on your own planet but, it seems, they failed. When that didn’t work they began to look for a chink in Asora’s armour and they found it but they had to work from the inside. For that they approached the rebellious Anelia and promised to make her a powerful queen if she deposed Asora’s government. One day Anelia showed up and wanted to join Asora’s party. She promised Asora that as an insider she could attract more support for her party including support from the royalists, the bourgeoisie and the rich youth. I don’t know exactly how Asora felt

about this, but from what Viera told me she figured it was better to have her as an ally than as an enemy. Viera advised Asora to take her but keep her at bay. But it didn't take Anelia long before she became active in the party. Then, when the war started and no one was prepared to make the difficult decisions, she began to publicly criticize the war council claiming it was unfit to make decisions. Here is where they made a mistake. Instead of throwing her out, the war council appointed her Minister of Defense in Asora's government in order to shut her up. At that time Viera was commander of the military and, as promised, had begun preparations to raise and train an army, the army that Voskot wanted to defend the planets. When the war started Viera was on a collision course with Anelia over how to use the military. Viera, of course, was against sending her forces to a foreign war. That was not the purpose of creating the army. Anelia insisted the forces be sent to war to fulfill the planet's obligations to the galaxy traders. Then, one day, Viera disappeared. Velion wanted to launch an investigation and he too disappeared. Anelia began to cry foul and moved her sisters away under the guise of saving them from the assassins who had murdered her father and aunt," concluded Nagol, raised his arms up and paused for a moment.

He then said, "Even a child could see the connection here but no one it seems had any evidence to prove that Anelia was involved. After that Anelia forced her way up the government ladder and all those who opposed her somehow met with bad luck. When people began to see what was happening they didn't dare question Anelia or her motives. Then, I guess when she found out she was fighting a losing war, she knew she would be in trouble, so she asked for you. With you leading our forces it would be a win-win situation for her. If you lost the war she would blame you, if you won she would take the credit."

"I don't understand, why did she think that by entering the war her situation would improve?"

"Well, believe it or not, it did. Committing to the war propelled her from nobody to the most powerful position in Asora's government. Besides that she received support from the secret societies here on our planet as well as money from the galaxy traders. Both the rats

and the galaxy traders promised her money, power and glory if our planet joined the war.”

“Tell me about this war. What do you know about it?” I asked.

“Actually nothing... The only thing we know about it is what the galaxy traders tell us and that’s not much. Every day they tell us they are winning yet they keep asking for more and more troops. At the same time Anelia’s propaganda machine has blinded our people and they all want to go and fight. Opposition to the war, however little there was, has been silenced and, to me at least, the people on this planet seem to have gone mad.”

“I’ve seen this before on earth with my people, they too became suicidal and intoxicated with fervour and then they were destroyed and driven out of their homes and lands. In your case, by engaging the enemy you have committed your planet to war and if this enemy is as powerful as I think it is, your planet and people are doomed. By engaging them you have given them the right to attack you legally and they will until they destroy you. That’s what I would do, that’s what has always been done in the history of warfare. If they defeat the mighty galaxy traders, you have no chance. And me being here gives them the right to attack earth, my home planet. War is a dirty and messy business. I hope Anelia and those who support her know that.”

“I hope so too, we’ve lived in peace for over a millennium and have forgotten about the perils of war. We’ve even forgotten why we buried ourselves underground. You remind me of the discussions I had with Voskot before he was assassinated. He was fearful of wars and spoke very passionately about them. Ironically, just as we started building on the surface again we are faced with another war. Just as we began to see progress we are faced with destruction. Is history repeating itself?”

“I guess it is. History will repeat itself if people become blind to the dangers that surround them and put their personal ambitions and interests ahead of those of the people. And, it seems to me, that’s what’s happening here.”

“So, what do you think we should do?”

“The first thing we need to do is pull our forces out before they’re decimated. The next thing we need to do is find out all we can about this war. We can’t trust anyone who doesn’t have this planet’s interest. That would be like trusting a person who is drowning not to pull you down under water. I think the galaxy traders are rapidly losing this war. That’s why they came here asking for help. Jumping in to help them is like jumping in to save a person drowning, they will pull you down with them,” I said and paused.

I then looked at the Vel, Daf and Nagol and said, “After the planet’s forces return to this planet we’ll have to put a pause on the war until we find out everything we can about it. And, if the galaxy traders are winning like they say they are, we’ll push for peace and I’m certain we can negotiate one. But if the galaxy traders are wrong then we have to prepare for an attack if peace can’t be negotiated. It’s as simple as that. In the meantime it would be wise for your planet to form a coalition with the other planets in this galaxy to show unity. And with unity comes strength. That’s what I think.”

“I’m on good terms with Asora and a few people on her war council. I’ll schedule a private meeting with them here but first you should go and see your friends. It’s getting late and I think we should retire for the night. I will, however, be here tomorrow morning and you’re all invited for breakfast. We’ll talk again tomorrow and I’ll bring you up to date with what’s been happening with your friends. Good night and see you in the morning,” said old man Nagol and left.

After we said goodnight the girls and I left the lounge and went to our rooms.

Early the next morning there was a knock on my door. It was a man my age. He said something but I didn’t understand the language. I knocked on Vel’s door and she answered without opening the door. The man said something to her and left.

Moments later both Vel and Daf came out. Vel said Nagol had summoned us for breakfast and had news for us.

“What news?” I asked.

“The man didn’t say,” she replied.

I found it funny going up to the lobby instead of down. Because the hotel was underground we had to take the elevator up to get to the lobby. I must have laughed out loud because Vel asked me what was so funny. When I told her she gave me a weird look.

I said, “On earth the buildings stand above ground and here they stand below ground.”

She didn’t see anything funny about it.

When we arrived Nagol was sitting side by side with the man who had come up to get us. Nagol welcomed us and asked us to sit down. The moment we sat down the man disappeared for a moment and came back with a couple of platters in his hands. One had pancakes and the other had fried eggs. As soon as the man put the platters down on the table he gave us each a plate, knife and fork.

“I’ve seen these at Delche’s restaurant,” said Daf and grabbed a knife and fork.

“These are foods the people on earth eat,” said Nagol. “I learned this from Delche.”

I told them what they were called in Macedonian and the three of them laughed. They had never heard such words before.

“How do we eat them?” Vel asked. Vel had never seen these foods and had never seen a plate, fork or a knife.

“Perhaps Otsi can show us how?” said Nagol.

“Why did you call him Otsi?” asked Vel.

“That’s what his friends call him,” Nagol replied.

I showed the girls how to hold the fork and knife and how to use them. I told them they had a choice of eating fried eggs or pancakes but they insisted they wanted to try both so I recommended they start with the eggs first. I put a couple of eggs on their plates and showed them how to eat them. After making faces they began to enjoy the eggs, the buttery flavour, the texture and the taste...

After I ate my eggs I showed them how to scoop a pancake and put syrup on it made of condensed fruit juice, which was a little tart for me but the girls didn't know what syrup tasted like and enjoyed the pancakes. Nagol didn't have any because he said his old system couldn't handle the richness of this kind of food.

I looked at him with disappointment.

"I enjoyed watching you eat, especially the young ladies, and that was enough enjoyment for me. And yes, I can't drink either but I do have some of Delche's finest on hand," he said.

"Thank you for the food and perhaps later in the afternoon the girls and I will try some of Delche's finest."

He laughed and said, "It's so nice to finally meet you in person..."

We all turned and looked at him.

"You must be wondering what the news is all about... Right?" he asked.

After a short pause he smiled and said, "I have a surprise for you."

I smiled while looking curious.

"I've made contact with your friends and they're coming here tomorrow evening. I was trying to get them here this evening but a couple of them couldn't make it. I also spoke to Asora and asked her to give you some time so that we could get to know each other better."

"That's fantastic," I said. "Thank you very much."

“I did it more for me than for you,” he said. “I’ve heard so much about your friends but, outside of Delche, Asora and Airam, I haven’t met any of them.”

Vel and Daf looked at each other and then looked at me. I looked at Nagol.

He said, “My dears, you are also invited and you know something, you’re part and parcel of this team and you go where he goes, and don’t forget that.”

They didn’t understand what “part and parcel” meant so Nagol had to explain it in their language.

“If we have the time, I was wondering if you could tell me a bit about what happened here after I left, especially to my friends. What are they doing now? I doubt that I’ll have time to spend with each one individually.”

“That I will do, I’ll tell you everything I know about them. We have time but you should go and see your friends individually anyway.”

“There’s also the matter of my ship. I’d like to take it out of storage and bring it here as soon as possible, just in case something develops.”

“You’re right about that, I can have my driver fly you and the girls there and you can fly yourselves back. But first let me call Asora and get her permission because the facilities in Apserpon are now heavily guarded,” he said and walked away.

Minutes later Nagol came back and gave us the nod.

“There’s one more thing,” I said and I pulled my medallion from inside my shirt.

When Nagol saw the medallion his eyes opened wide. “Is that the key to the ship?” he asked.

“Yes, but it’s encased in epoxy and I need to get it out.”

“I can help you with that. I’ll take you to a jeweler, he’s a friend of mine, and he can cut it open without damaging it. Why don’t we go and do that now.”

About five minutes later we were there and were introduced to the old jeweler. Nagol spoke to him in their language. The man extended his hand. I gave him the medallion and told Nagol to tell him to be careful with the badge imbedded inside it.

When he took it he began to walk away to the back. I followed. Nagol looked at me and was about to say something. I interrupted and said, “I’m sorry but I can’t let the badge go out of my sight.”

The jeweler must have realized what I said and waved us all to the back. It took him several minutes to take measurements and program his laser cutter. The cutting itself took seconds before the medallion was split in two and the badge was exposed. After the man removed the badge he handed it to me and asked Nagol if I wanted the medallion put back together.

“If it’s possible, why not,” I said.

Seconds later the man handed me the medallion and I handed it to Nagol.

He looked at me, slightly confused.

“This is for you, a gift from me. There’s no one in the universe who would appreciate the medallion more than you.”

The man was shocked and didn’t know what to say.

“I need one more favour, I need a chain to hold the badge around my neck.”

Nagol spoke to the man and he pulled out a chain that could withstand a hard tug.

After I placed the chain around my neck I removed the piece of paper with the codes written on it from the back of the badge and put it in my pocket.

Before we left Nagol tried to pay the man but he refused his money.

Minutes later we were back in the hotel lounge. Nagol waved at the man who had served us earlier and said something to him. The girls looked at each other and stood up.

“You can go now and get your ship. The cab is waiting for you on the surface. It will take you to your destination. When you come back land your ship on the landing pad above the hotel and come back here. I’ll be waiting for you.”

“Thank you,” I said and we left.

Recovering the ship

Vel and Daf looked excited as we flew towards Apserpon. They were looking at me strangely which made me nervous. I guess this was the moment of truth for them, to serve with me on the famous ship. I looked at them and they both smiled. They looked like little girls. They were the same age as Ruzha was when I met her but I had aged since then and now they looked so young. I smiled back at them. They looked so innocent and unaware of what was in store for them. I wondered if they would survive to see old age.

As we came closer to our destination I began to recognize the terrain. The sight of the facilities, even from this distance, gave me a sharp pain in my gut like someone had slashed me with a knife.

I was feeling nauseous when Vel asked me what was wrong. I said it was nothing, just nerves. She gave me a strange look and kept looking at me. It wasn't what I'd done in the past that had brought this on. I felt sick because of what I was going to do in the future with the ship in my hands. How many more lives was I going to take? I don't think the girls understood what war was. They knew nothing of war.

The moment we landed we were ambushed by a squad of women soldiers dressed in camouflage uniforms. They were pointing their weapons at us. There were seven women; six were standing still and aiming their guns at us, while the seventh, who appeared to be their leader, came over, opened the cab door and ordered us out.

“What is your business here?” she asked loudly.

“This is Captain Otsiron chief commander of the military forces on this planet and he is here to reclaim his ship. I am Lieutenant Velika, this is Lieutenant Dafina. This is our driver who brought us here.”

“The driver can go back in his cab and wait there, the rest of you get your hands up and follow me.”

The driver went back into his cab and waited there.

I refused to raise my hands. The leader yelled something and she and Vel got into a yelling match.

“ENOUGH!” I yelled. “Put your guns down and let’s talk.”

The leader ordered the others to lower their weapons and we all sat around a makeshift table made of logs.

Vel was furious and again fired a volley of words at the leader but she didn’t seem to care. I don’t know what she said.

I told Vel, “These women are soldiers who have dedicated their lives to serve and protect, threatening them with words won’t get you anywhere. We need to find out what they want from us.”

The leader demanded to know what I had said and Vel translated and also apologized for yelling at her.

When Vel was done translating the soldiers looked at me.

“Now that we are your prisoners what are you planning to do with us?” I asked the leader.

The soldiers looked at each other.

“You held your weapons trained on me and two of your officers,” I said. “Surely that is mutiny and mutiny is punishable by death during war.”

The soldiers looked at me and laughed.

“We’re dead already, don’t you know? You, your officers, me, my unit, this whole planet... dead... That’s what war brings... death, do you think I’m afraid of your little threat?” asked the leader looking into my eyes.

“I have to agree with you on that,” I said.

“You’re here to take the ship and our soldiers and lead them into a foreign war, aren’t you?” the leader asked.

“Yes and no. I’m here to take my ship but not the soldiers. I need my ship to end the war. I will do it on my own, without sacrificing any of your soldiers. Not only that, but I have already asked the war council to bring back the soldiers that have been committed to the war. Asora has made arrangements to bring them back, at least the last two million that were sent most recently. They will be coming back in a few days. The rest I don’t know, I’ll have to go to the front myself and find out what’s happening with them. That’s my plan. Now, what are you planning to do with us?”

After I finished talking she stood up, paced back and forth a couple of times and said, “Tell your driver that you are my guests here and I will look after you. Let him go before Anelia sends the army to wipe us out.”

I asked Daf to tell the driver to go back and tell Nagol everything was okay and that we would be arriving maybe a little later than expected.

I then turned to the leader and said, “So, I take it you don’t see eye to eye with Anelia?”

“I don’t know what that means,” she said, “but I despise that woman. I also know what she did to you and yet here you are ready to serve her. That I don’t understand.”

“I’m not here to serve her. I am here to clean up the mess I made. I could have done more before I left but I didn’t. So, now I feel somewhat responsible for what has happened.”

“What was done is done; it has nothing to do with you. My concern now is how we avoid being annihilated by the enemy which is annihilating the galaxy traders. You know that by participating in this absurd war we’ve made ourselves a target. When the attackers are done with the galaxy traders they’ll come for us. By accepting to fight against them we’ve opened the door for them to attack us. I tried to make that point clear to everyone but no one listened, least of all my boss Anelia. If the powerful galaxy traders can’t stop them then how can we? And that crap about victory is at hand, well, it’s

pure crap created by Anelia's propaganda machine. There is no victory, only death... for all of us."

"Yes, I know that," I replied.

"So, what can we do to change the situation?" she asked.

"You mentioned Anelia sending the army to wipe us out. Aren't you part of Anelia's army? Why would she send troops to attack her own army?"

"I know for a fact that Anelia has her own private army. Her elite personal guards, if you like."

"Until yesterday Anelia was commander of the entire army on this planet, why would she need a personal army?" I asked.

"The planetary army is loyal to the people. Her army is loyal only to her."

"So, let me ask you this. What will happen if I leave this planet with the ship and not return?"

"You know what will happen. A coup... She will use her elite forces to overthrow the elected government and appoint herself boss of our planet and probably send us all to the galaxy trader war. A lot of us will die fighting and those who object will serve in her prisons. That's what I predict will happen if the ship is gone."

"I don't doubt that for a second but how do you know for sure that Anelia has a private army? No one else seems to know that."

"Well, I wasn't always a sergeant; I was a colonel in Voskot's time and responsible for training our elite forces in marshal arts. I still correspond with a lot of them. Some are serving in her private army right now as we speak. They told me so themselves. That's how I know."

"Then, am I correct in assuming that Anelia asked for me to be brought here in hopes of getting rid of me and the ship once and for

all? Send me to a war from which there is no return so that she can take control of the planet? And, at the same time, annihilate Viera's army which may oppose her takeover?"

"Now you're thinking. I would say that you're correct in your assumption," she replied.

"Interesting?!" I said.

"So, now that we both understand the situation we're in, what can we do to change it?" she asked.

"In my opinion we first need to save Viera's army. We need to do it under the guise that we are preparing it for war but it must not engage the enemy until I personally assess the war situation. This way we can keep the army here. I can convince the war council to do that. In fact I've already convinced the council to do that and it has agreed. Then I will take the ship and go to the war front to see for myself what's happening. After I find that out I will use every means possible to end the war. There are two possible outcomes from that. I will either succeed in ending the war, which means your soldiers will be spared or I will be destroyed and the war will continue and eventually reach your planet," I said.

"What can I do to help?" she asked.

"Well, if you want to help, I'll welcome your help. I'll do something drastic but I think it will work. I'll appoint you chief commander of the military in my absence. I'll promote you to general and you can start preparing an elite army. I have the authority to do that, I was sworn commander of all the forces just yesterday. I would also want you to covertly gather intelligence and infiltrate Anelia's army and break it up from the inside. If I succeed in ending the war then I would want you to eliminate all internal threats on this planet, including those coming from Anelia, and take control. If I fail to bring peace then I'd want you to brace for war. Be prepared for war but always talk peace. This is how you can help."

"You mean your not sending me to the executioner for pulling a gun on you?" she asked jokingly.

“We all had a laugh and I said, “It’s nice to see a soldier with a sense of humour.”

While the unit was having a chat with their leader, Vel turned to me and said, “How did you do it?”

“Do what?” I asked.

“How did you turn an enemy into a friend?”

“She was never our enemy, she just didn’t know us. When two people want exactly the same thing, the only thing they can be is friends.”

“Like me and Vel,” said Daf.

“Yes,” I said and winked at them but I fear Delche never taught them about winking.

“General,” I said.

The leader laughed and said, “I have a name, you know?”

“I know,” I said. “I’m sorry but I can’t pronounce your name properly so I’ll call you general. Get used to it.”

I paused for a moment and then said, “I want you to come with me and meet some people and after that I’ll ask the war council in your presence to ratify your appointment as general and make it legal. I’ll also tell them that you will be acting on my behalf when I’m gone to investigate the war. How does that sound?”

“I’m sorry but I have become rather cynical in my old age and I’ll believe it when I see it. It’s not that I don’t trust you, I just don’t trust the war council.”

“For now you have my word. Now tell me, did you know Voskot?”

“Yes, I did. He was very fond of me... but not in that way... He was the one who saw my potential as a good soldier and wanted my skills taught to others. He promoted me to colonel and asked me to take over the martial arts class in the military academy. I was the youngest colonel in the school. But after he was gone I was removed, I guess I was too vocal and critical, too critical of the politicians, so I ended up here in isolation. I have been here for five years. They rotate my soldiers every six months but I am a permanent resident here in this prison.”

It was almost noon by now and we were invited to go to a tent and have lunch with the soldiers. I felt it was important to accept their invitation so I asked the general to contact Asora to let Nagol know that we would be late. Vel said that there was no need for that because she could directly contact Nagol and asked the general for a communicator.

“Is that old man Nagol, Voskot’s and Viera’s friend?” the general asked.

“I think so,” I said.

She immediately asked Vel for his contact number and began to chat excitedly with him in their language. She kept looking at me and smiling.

“They know each other,” said Vel.

“You’re taking me with you back to Nagol’s place, right?” the general asked.

“Yes, as soon as we recover the ship we’ll fly there,” I said.

When we were done eating the general said, “Go, do what you have to and come back here with the ship. You can land it over there on that pad.”

“We’re all going to get the ship, I’ll take you for a tour.”

Some of the soldiers seemed hesitant.

“What’s the problem?” I asked.

One of them said they weren’t allowed to enter the facilities. They had strict orders to stay out.

The general and I laughed and we both invited them in.

My badge seemed to work on all the doors, including the museum. I took everyone on a short tour. When we got to the last door behind which stood the ship, the badge wasn’t working. The door itself had scorch marks. Someone had attempted to shoot their way in with an energy weapon.

The general said, “These burns must have been here before my time. No one has been in here since then. So, what do we do now?”

I asked them to bring some rags and clean the burn marks. After they did the door still refused to open. I asked them to bring something sharp and I scratched out the burn marks on the laser eye.

The door finally opened. I was relieved and so was everyone else.

While everyone looked around examining the ship and the hanger around it, I struggled to open the ship’s door. I was surprised that I still knew how to open it and that I remembered all the codes. Eventually we all got on the ship. I showed them the uniforms sitting on our seats and asked Daf to mark them and put them to the side. I was going to take them with us and give them back to Ori and Delche. I had concerns about the hangar door above us working. I wondered if I’d have to go up and grease the tracks. It hadn’t been opened for the last five years. I decided to try it anyway. After a lot of creaking and crunching it finally opened fully.

After we took our positions I activated the docking robot and lifted the ship out of the hangar. The ship was exactly as we’d left it and so were the robots. After I watched the hangar door fully close I flew off gently and landed on the makeshift landing pad. After we landed and all the soldiers got off, I activated and armed my guards and went back and closed all the doors inside the facilities. As

expected they followed me everywhere. The soldiers found that very amusing.

The general in the meantime ordered her squad to remain there until further notice.

After I got back on board, I instructed my guards not to shoot at the people on my ship unless they received orders from me. After getting some dirty looks from Vel and Daf, they took their appropriate seats. The general stood behind me hanging onto my chair.

I was surprised that I still remembered all the codes and how to fly the ship. Vel and Daf knew exactly what to do and when I said something to that effect Daf said, "I've done this in the simulator over a thousand times, so don't worry." Then she asked me to set the speed and punch the autopilot.

When we arrived over the hotel the ship stopped and began to hover. I took my time landing it. I took a smooth ride down to impress the general but she was more interested in landing fast. She was anxious to see Nagol.

As soon as we entered the lobby the general spotted Nagol, ran towards him and embraced him like he was a family member. While watching that I wondered if Nagol was her father or perhaps her grandfather?

When we sat at the table I asked the general how she knew Nagol.

"General, how do you two know each other?"

Nagol interrupted and said, "This lovely girl has a name, you know. Call her by her name."

"I'm sorry Sir, I can't pronounce her name. Also, let her get used to the idea of being called general. I feel funny being her commander given that she's at least five years older than me. I think she should be my commander. She has the aptitude, training and experience for it. I have none of those," I replied.

The general wanted to know what we had said. Vel translated. She and Nagol looked at each other and nodded in agreement. I decided not to ask any more questions about their relationship. I knew she was special to him from the moment I saw them embrace.

“So, let me understand you correctly, this lovely woman tells me that you want her to take over the entire planetary force and lead it while you’re away investigating the war? And you promoted her from squad sergeant to general all on your own, without consulting the war council or military command?”

“Yes Sir,” I replied.

After he laughed out loud he said, “Otsiron, I love you like a grandson but sometimes I wonder what you’re thinking. Things are not as simple as you may think. Just because a bunch of crooked politicians appointed you commander, to save their own skins, doesn’t make you commander. You need to earn the position. You also need the support of the military, the officers, the troops... They are the real power, not the word of a bunch of politicians. I’ve been in this business for a long time and know how things work.”

“You’re absolutely right, Sir. This was a decision I made on my own under the assumption that the authority given to me was genuine. And as such I’m acting on it like it is genuine. I was led to believe that my authority was handed to me by the war council consisting of elected officials, crooks or not, elected by the people with authority to act for the people. It is their responsibility to inform the military and get its approval. That’s how I understand things. Promoting this lovely woman to general will be a test for me to see if my authority is real or not. And yes, I intend to promote her like I promised.”

“And what if you fail?”

At that point I stood up and loudly said, “If I was given the position by deception then I will resign and the ship will never fly. Or I might use the ship to do what I feel like. I might even decide to take revenge on those who deceived me. As far as I know my authority is legal. It was given to me by vote, by the elected war council. I’m a

soldier and I will exercise my authority. I took a pledge to defend the people on this planet and I will equally defend them from an internal enemy as I will from an external one.”

Nagol looked away, shook his head, took a deep breath and said, “You talk tough but you have no idea what you’re up against. You have no money, no power, no connections, no allies... and on top of that, you don’t even know who the enemy is...”

The general looked at me, smiled and whispered, “Bravo, bravo...”

“What are you two doing, playing some sort of a game?” asked Nagol.

“Yes, yes we are, he knows what he’s doing. They need him and they will tell him what he wants to hear as long as he promises to help them but he won’t help them until they give him what he wants. That’s a good strategy,” said the general.

“If you ask me, I think you’re both crazy. But that’s me,” said Nagol. “On the other hand we’re in a big mess here and we need to do something, so please focus on that.”

After a moment of silence I said, “My gut tells me the war will end before it gets here. My gut also tells me that I won’t be coming back and neither will my ship. You don’t have to believe me. But suppose that my gut is right, what do you suppose will happen here after the war ends and the ship is no longer around?”

Nagol looked around. No one was offering any answers.

“Anelia will make her move and take over the government, even by force if necessary. After that she’ll eliminate every bit of opposition, everyone knows that,” he said.

“So, as you can see the danger you’re in is not just from the outside. I think Anelia is a far greater danger to you and your people than any distant war. That’s why I’ve chosen to promote this lovely woman to general with the responsibility of taking command of all the forces so that when the time comes she will be ready for Anelia.

I know this is a big step to suddenly take but we're running out of time and, as you mentioned, I have no one else I can trust. Plus the general believes, or I should say has confirmed that Anelia possesses an elite army of her own."

"It's true grandfather, she does, I know that for a fact. I just don't know how big it is but I intend to find out."

Nagol took another deep breath, looked at her and then at me and said, "She is my only grandchild. I can't agree with anything that puts her in harms way. Whatever she does will have to be her own decision and whatever she chooses to do I will support. But, if you ask me, this is suicide for the both of you."

"Thank you grandfather," she said.

"I don't think she'll be in much danger as long as she follows the rules. I will insist on a couple of things. One, the troops be properly trained in martial arts for hand to hand combat and two, the troops must wait here until my return. The general will work under the assumption that we'll be going to war; it's a matter of when. While this goes on, the general will covertly prepare the military for any and all actions. She will insist that she needs more specialists in order to properly train her forces and in this way she will deplete the elite from Anelia's army. Anelia must not find out that the general knows about her private army..."

"Enough talk," Nagol interrupted and waved at the man looking in our direction and yelled. "Bring us food and drinks."

The general kept looking at me and smiling which made me nervous. I looked back at her and said, "What?" in Macedonian.

She didn't understand and said something to me in her language but I motioned with my hands that I didn't understand either.

Vel looked at me and said, "Would you like me to translate?"

"No," I said, you can tell me what she said some other time.

The moment the server filled our shot glasses with rakia, Nagol picked up his glass and toasted us with the words, “To our friendship”, touched the glass to his lips and put it back down again. The general and I gulped it down quickly.

“I needed that!” I said.

I looked at the general and said, “May I call you Gen?”

She laughed out loud and said, “I was wondering when you were going to come around to finding a pet name for me? Yes, of course you can call me Gen.”

I took offense to that so to get back at her I said, “I only give pet names to the women I admire.”

“Don’t encourage her,” said Nagol. “She was infatuated with you after you left, like every other woman on this planet. Ruzha made you into a star.”

Gen smiled, shook her head and said, “When it comes to men I’ve been a disappointment to him. He wants great grandchildren but doesn’t like the men I choose.”

“You’re so lucky to have a grandfather who loves you,” I said and clinked my glass against hers and we gulped another shot.

Vel and Daf were still working on their first shot.

Gen was tall like her grandfather but also thin and very muscular. She was honest and brave. She reminded me of Asora. But Asora lacked her toughness and steely determination. She would make an excellent commander. I had no doubt about that. But given the current circumstances with the war going on and Anelia plotting to take control of the planet, what price would she have to pay? And again, it would be my fault if things went wrong. She was good looking but I couldn’t help but look at her with sad eyes.

After a few moments of silence Nagol spoke and said, “I guess now is as good a time as any to bring you up to date regarding your friends. Which one would you like me to start with?”

“Please start with Delche, and Vel please translate for Gen.”

Getting reacquainted

“Delche was one of my better students. Unfortunately, after all he’d done for the planet, especially for the scientific community, he was punished for his wife’s activities, which had nothing to do with him. That’s how corrupt our judicial system was but I think you already know that. I wanted to help him and even got Voskot and Viera involved but we could do nothing. All we managed to do was save him from going to jail. The man became so alienated and disillusioned by the whole experience that he left the middle zone and disappeared. His name wasn’t always Delche. He used that alias to hide but I guess you already know that too.

Well, after you left I went to see him at his restaurant. That’s when I learned about the rakia and the Macedonian foods he was cooking. I wasn’t sure how he was going to react, given that I had failed to help him in the past, but I was interested in finding out more about you. So I set everything aside and went to see him. I was surprised by how accepting he was. He was a more mature version of the Delche I used to know. A bit more cynical but the same old Delche nonetheless. All he wanted to do was talk about you, Ori and your adventures. At the same time he told me that the captain of the science vessel which took you back to earth had contacted him and discussed a business proposition to distribute rakia to the galaxy traders. Oh, that was a big deal for him, a lifelong dream. He said that you had made it possible for him. By the way the captain is retired now and he’ll be here with his wife tomorrow. He too is anxious to see you. You must have made quite an impression on him.”

“So, what happened with his rakia business?” I asked.

“Well, when the war broke out all business with the galaxy traders abruptly ended. Delche was a tycoon for four years and amassed a lot of money which he donated to develop the outer zone where he lived. He sponsored a lot of businesses which still function to this day. Now he’s back in his restaurant cooking Macedonian foods. He said to me, ‘What’s the point in having all that money if it doesn’t make you happy?’ Rakia, unfortunately, is still illegal on this planet and he can’t sell it so he gives it away... Asora left him you know,

she left him before you departed for earth but Delche didn't want to tell you. He knew how disappointed you'd be."

"I kind of knew that because they hardly spent any time together. I don't blame Asora, she had a hard life. I kind of feel responsible for their breakup because I put them in that situation, first Delche as my navigator and then Asora in politics; something she wasn't ready for."

"Don't blame yourself for that, you couldn't have known what was going to happen. Anyway, Airam was the glue that kept them in contact. After you left Delche started to fall apart but Airam kept him from jumping into the deep end. She was helpful to her mother too. Every time Asora had a breakdown she ran to Airam. Ironic, isn't it, a mother running to her daughter. So, we all owe Airam a lot. Unfortunately her commitment to her father and mother and to the restaurant took a heavy toll on her romantic life. Even Ori cried on her shoulders many times, looking for solace after you left. He asked her to marry him but she turned him down. She told him she didn't want their marriage to turn out like her parents' marriage. Poor Ori, he left his post in Asora's government and lives like a hermit now somewhere in the outer zone. He volunteers at a mission in the slums helping the helpless. Airam visits him once in a while to bring him rakia and make sure he's still okay. I understand he also drinks a lot. That poor guy wasn't ready for what awaited him but at that moment Vieria didn't have anyone else. I told her that he wasn't ready but once you became inseparable she decided to leave him with you. No one knew that you would be separated. I'm so sorry that things turned out the way they did for the three of you," said Nagol and paused for a moment.

He then looked at me and said, "After you left for earth Ruzha came onto the planetary scene with stories, magnificent stories about you and your exploits. She was so good she made all the girls on the planet go nuts over you."

"Really?"

"It's true, I was one of those girls, it happened to me. You were very popular, even more popular than royalty. Only a woman in love

could have done all the things she did for you. And you ended up breaking her heart,” said Gen.

“Yes, it’s true. You became a subject in our history lessons and in the Macedonian school. Every student wanted to learn Macedonian because of you. They had to put a limit on how many students the academy could enroll,” said Vel and Daf agreed.

“I find that hard to believe,” I said.

“Well, you watched the parade of thousands of young ladies marching for you. Why would they even have such a parade if they felt you weren’t important? And now all those women see you as their saviour. And the more I listen to your conversation the more I believe this is yet another deception and I’d have to agree with Gen, that they’re out to get you and destroy Vieria’s army; the army I belong to. But these poor girls don’t know that, do they? I didn’t know that until today,” said Vel.

Nagol looked at me with a worried look.

Gen interrupted and said, “Grandfather, this is my fault, I’ve been thinking out loud again, I’m very sorry.”

“Well this is the sort of thing that could send you into isolation again, so you have to be careful what you say,” said Nagol.

“Please Sir, with due respect, these two young ladies are my officers whom I trust with my life and they’ll never repeat to anyone, outside of this circle, what they’ve heard no matter how hard they are tortured. Isn’t that right Lieutenants?”

“Yes Sir,” both of them replied in unison.

“I’m sorry girls but I’ve been in this game too long and have seen what can happen if we let things slip, even unintentionally. I tried to tell this to my hard-headed granddaughter but she didn’t listen to me and preferred to learn things the hard way.”

To change the subject I asked, “So, what is Ruzha up to now? Did she marry?”

“No, I’m afraid she didn’t marry. Just after you left she became influential, too influential, especially with the outlanders. So the rats made her life difficult. One by one the networks began to drop her stories until she disappeared from public life. Now she works as a photographer cataloging items for the main science lab in the centre zone,” said Nagol.

“Did she at least finish her education?” I asked.

“Yes, while serving on the science vessel for two years she finished her education and became good friends with the captain and his wife. When the captain retired and the ship was passed on to another captain she left the science vessel and retired from journalism. After that she took the job in the science lab. She’ll be here tomorrow.”

“She didn’t marry because she’s still in love with you. I’m surprised she hasn’t contacted you already,” said Gen.

“And how do you know that?” I asked.

“She told me herself when she came to film the facilities. I was in charge of guarding the place. She spent three days and two nights with me. All she did was talk about you. Why did you leave her? How could you do that to her?”

“Gen, you more than anyone should understand that there is a time for relationships and that was not the time. I’ve met many women with whom I could have had relationships, not just here but also on earth, but I know how dangerous that would be for them and for me. Ask your grandfather if you don’t believe me.”

“I know that but...” she replied.

“It hasn’t been easy for me either but I know it would be much harder if I was in a relationship and my enemies got hold of the person I cared for? If that happened, in my position it would be a

disaster. It would be over for me, the ship and for everyone who depends on me. That's why I can't have a relationship with anyone."

"Yes, I'm very sorry about that," said Nagol. "I too have problems with relationships."

After a moment of silence, Nagol took a deep breath and said, "If there are no more questions, I'd like to give you a tour of my museum. I keep things there that are illegal. When we own things that are illegal on this planet we open private museums and put them there. That's considered legal... to have illegal items in a museum. It's a loophole for collectors of illegal items."

As soon as we stood up and began to leave the table, the man serving us came over to clear the dishes but Nagol signaled him to leave things as they were.

The museum was close. It was located behind closed doors. Nagol opened the door with his badge and we walked in. The first thing he did was take my medallion which was hanging on the wall and show it to Gen. She immediately recognized it. Ruzha had shown her pictures of it. I didn't remember Ruzha taking any photographs of my badge but I guess she had during the brief time we were together on the science ship. I watched Gen admire it and rub it with her palm.

It was a museum not too dissimilar from Voskot's. Nagol and Vos must have shared the same passion for artifacts and weapons. I looked from shelf to shelf and from wall to wall. One shelf was full of various alcoholic drinks including some from earth. Nagol must have seen me shaking my head, impressed with his collection of booze, something which Vos didn't have.

I smiled and said, "For a man who doesn't drink you sure have a hefty collection of rakia."

"Only a drinker would notice that," he said. "There was a time when I could drink."

“So, how did you come to collect rakia from so many far away places? I see you even have rakia from earth.”

“I have to thank my students for that. They brought me things from their expeditions. Some things, including some of the weapons and ammunition, I bought on the black market.”

I noticed Vel and Daf looking at the various museum pieces and talking about them in their language. Nagol and Gen went to the corner and took some time to talk in private. And here I was, once again, feeling alone, having nothing in common with these people. I shouldn't be complaining because I'd felt alone even when I was on earth.

When we were done exploring Nagol led us back to the lounge and Gen and I resumed drinking while snacking on the chunks of fried meat and white cubes that passed for feta cheese. Nagol spent some time talking with Vel and Daf, getting to know them better.

Sometime later, when Gen and I had had enough rakia in our system, enough to make us feel brave and uninhibited, we joined Nagol and the girls and wanted to talk strategy about what to do next.

“We're free this evening,” I said. “So why not invite Asora and some of the other politicians you trust and have a frank discussion with them about a strategy to end the war?”

“Well, but we'd have to be discrete. I only trust Asora, I don't know about the others.”

“All you have to do is bring them here. I'll do the talking and I'll be very discrete.”

After Nagol walked away, everyone looked nervous, especially Gen, who was now full of rakia. But then again, rakia doesn't work the same way on everyone. As I recall I've made many decisions under the influence of rakia which I ordinarily wouldn't have made. I regret some but I'm grateful for most. Rakia appears to work the opposite on Gen. It makes her meek and placid, which is okay.

When Nagol came back he said, “The war council is in assembly right now and will see you in their boardroom as soon as they’re done. They’re expecting you to be there as soon as possible. When you’re done with them you come back here for dinner.”

“You’ll join us in the boardroom, right?” I asked Nagol.

“Of course I will, I wouldn’t miss that for the world. Plus I want to be there to see my granddaughter promoted to general. Imagine that!”

“I hope you’re not being sarcastic, Sir?” I asked.

“I’m everything you can think of, I’ve seen it all and I’ve done it all. I’ll believe it when I see it. But, at the same time, I must have hope. I will be there with you.”

Old man Nagol slowly led the way and we followed. Just as we approached the long security corridor I began to wonder how I was going to get my armed guards past security. I was about to say something to Vel when the big door flung open and there was no one in the long corridor.

Nagol must have been watching me fret because he said, “Don’t worry, they’re all gone home for the evening. The guards are only here during business hours and special sessions. This is an informal meeting.”

We waited outside the big door in silence while the war council continued to have its discussions. When they were done, Asora opened the big door and invited us in.

When we entered the conference room I noticed everyone was there and sitting in the same seat as before. The seat beside Anelia was empty. I decided not to sit there. I decided I was going to sit on the opposite side of the table with my armed guards standing behind me. Asora was familiar with them and wasn’t worried about them being armed but I could sense fear in the rest of the councillors.”

I introduced everyone including my personal guards and Nagol, whom everyone already knew, and we sat down.

“I’ve come up with a proposal on how to approach the war situation and I want to discuss it with the council with hopes of getting it approved,” I said.

Asora looked around and said, “All in favour of hearing this proposal raise your hand.”

They all raised their hands.

“Like I said before, I’m willing to lead your armies into the war but before I do that I want two things done. First, like I said before, I want to know everything there is to know about the war, which I will investigate myself. Second I want to lead a strong army to ensure, without a doubt, that complete victory will be achieved. The army I lead must be well prepared for all kinds of combat, especially hand to hand combat. Most wars today are fought with high technologies. They are rarely ever fought with ground forces. From the number of troops involved in this war I have deduced that the fighting is done on inaccessible terrain, inaccessible to high technology, most likely underground or in places that technology cannot reach. That is why it is imperative that my forces are prepared for every kind of action, especially hand to hand combat. I searched your databases for trainers who can give me quality soldiers and fortunately I found one. According to your data this soldier, sitting here, is one of the best trainers in marshal arts on your planet. I need her and many others like her to train the troops. When the soldiers return, the ones that have been recalled, they too should be trained in hand to hand combat. I also want them trained in marshal arts. We need to crush the enemy at the source and must not let it escape. For that I need capable soldiers who can do the job. But, in order for them to do the job, they must know how to do it and this soldier here, in my opinion, can give them that. But she can’t do it alone and neither can she do it as a sergeant. That’s why I have come here to ask for your help to give me the opportunity and authority to prepare your army, my army, for the final victory. I want this sergeant promoted to general with authority to act so that she can train and organize the army on my behalf while I’m away

investigating the war. We must have the army ready and prepared for transport upon my return. As I understand it, the war is expanding and unless we act immediately, it will gain strength and come closer to us, which we don't want. You must also contact the galaxy traders and ask them for permission to give me access to their airspace so that I can carry out my investigation. You must inform them to also make preparations to receive a huge army. And may Mother Nature be with us!" I said and looked around. Everyone sat there in silence.

I then said, "Since you're all here, please take a moment and think about my proposal. Please let me know if I'm going in the right direction and if I should continue with this plan."

Asora looked around and said, "Does anyone have any questions?"

"I have a question," replied Anelia.

Everyone looked at her.

"Why her?" she said pointing at Gen. "You know she has a criminal record. She's been charged with insubordination. I don't want her near my soldiers."

"I don't care who she is and what she has done," I said. "Find me someone better and I'll let her go. Do you have someone better in mind?"

"No, not at the moment, but I'm sure I can find someone in a couple of weeks."

"With all due respect Anelia, I plan to leave this planet as soon as the forces that have been recalled arrive. That's in a few days and if you don't agree with my plan you can put it to a vote. But unless I get what I need, unless I can assure you that I will bring you victory, I'm not taking on this mission. Failure for me is not an option."

Asora stood up and said, "Thank you Anelia, thank you Otsiron for your suggestions. Now I think I'll put Otsiron's proposal to a vote. All in favour please raise your hand."

“Thank you. Let the record show that the vote is unanimous with the exception of Anelia who opposes.”

Asora again looked at everyone and said, “All in favour of promoting [Gen] to General in charge of all forces in Otsiron’s absence and as master trainer in marshal arts and hand to hand combat, please raise your hand.”

“Thank you. Let the record show that this vote too is unanimous with the exception of Anelia who opposes.”

After everyone settled down I said, “Thank you for having confidence in me. Now there are a couple more things that need to be done. One, because Anelia opposed my proposal which is now legal, it would be a conflict of interest for her to remain as my boss in your government. She cannot be my boss if she is against what I plan to do. So I’d like to ask the council to take one more vote. Should the council decide not to remove her, I’ll have no choice but to resign, take my ship and go back to earth.”

Vel was about to jump off her seat and yell “NO!” but Nagol grabbed her by the wrist and told her to sit down, be patient and continue translating.

Vel’s sudden stir caused my guards to jump back a step and take on a state of readiness, ready to draw their weapons. That didn’t go unnoticed. Everyone in the room saw what had happened but, as it turned out, no one said a word or objected to them being there.

“Cool it,” I said to Vel. “You promised me you’d trust me.”

Asora pretended she hadn’t seen anything and put the motion to a vote. One by one the councillors raised their hands and again, with the exception of Anelia, they voted in favour of stripping her of authority over the military. It appeared that at that moment they were more afraid of me, or I should say of my guards, than they were of Anelia.

“There is one more thing that the war council needs to do,” I said, “and that is to inform the government and military command of all the changes that took place here in the last two days and find out if they agree with my plan. I would welcome any comments or suggestions from them.”

“With the council’s permission I’d like to inform military command as suggested. In the meantime I propose that I temporarily take over Anelia’s role in the military, if that’s okay with the council,” said Asora.

After looking around at everyone she said, “I’m putting the last motion to a vote, may I see some hands?”

One by one the councillors put their hands up except for Anelia.

“Thank you again. Let the record show that this vote too is unanimous with the exception of Anelia who opposes. If you would excuse me, I’m now going to make a call to military command and give them our decision. As for informing the government, as president I can make decisions for the government and I will make sure the war council’s recommendations are ratified.”

While Asora was away there were a lot of whispers around the room among the councillors. They were all busy discussing, maybe their fate, except for Anelia, who, by now had realized that she’d made a mistake. She could have agreed to everything but she didn’t and was now quietly contemplating what she was going to tell her backers. She had her own army and potentially she could strike at us before we organized but, looking at my guards behind me, was reminded that the ship was now in my hands and if she pulled any stunts, even a single stunt, her and her army would be obliterated. With Gen on my side and with me here she knew her chances of gaining power were slim. My hopes were that she wouldn’t do anything until Gen, the army and I left the planet. Then, in our absence, she could make her move. But what she didn’t know was that the army wasn’t leaving the planet, not now, not ever, and Gen was going to make sure of that. But in order to convince Anelia and her backers to wait, it was very important that we emphasized the idea that the army was going to leave the planet, and that it was only a matter of time. And

as such, we needed to do everything possible to lead Anelia to believe that the army was going to leave and delay any action she may have planned.

When Asora came back she was happy to report that military command was pleased with our decision and would be happy to welcome Gen at headquarters as commander of all the forces in training. Command also agreed that most of the troops could use more training.

Just as Asora finished talking I said, “Before you adjourn the meeting, I would like to thank everyone for the opportunity you have given me to once again serve you, your people and your planet. If I don’t see you again, farewell. I’ll be leaving for the war in a few days. I also want to assure you that I will do my best to lead your armies into war and bring you victory. Victory shall be ours!”

“Immediately after that they gave me a standing ovation with everyone yelling “victory, victory”, including Gen and Nagol.

After Asora adjourned the meeting she apologized. She said she had to leave for another urgent meeting but promised to join us the next evening for dinner.

After we exited the boardroom she locked the door and left.

We quietly walked back to the hotel like nothing had happened until we got inside the lounge and Nagol closed the door. Gen, in her camouflage uniform, began to jump up and down like a little girl, looking comical. She then decided to do a forward flip and then a back flip which made me nauseous just looking at her. Then she picked Vel up and swung her around. She did the same with Daf and then came for me but I objected harshly.

Looking at her Nagol said, “She’s acting like a child. I would have made fun of her if she wasn’t my granddaughter. But, even with all her silliness, I still love her.”

When she was done horsing around she filled my glass with rakia, gave it to me, clinked it and said, “To magic. I saw it but I still can’t believe it.”

After we all sat down Nagol said, “Son, you’re everything Delche said, and more. You’re crazy, a liar and more. How in Mother Nature’s name did you think you could bluff your way? How did you know they’d fall for your bluffs? You were so convincing in there I almost started to believe you myself.”

“It takes practice and knowledge of human nature, but mostly threats,” I said.

I then turned to Vel and said, “Thank you for that stunt you pulled, that was masterful.”

“I’m very sorry Sir. I didn’t do that intentionally. I was going to object because I didn’t want you to resign! I’m very sorry, Sir.”

“Well, please don’t do that again. But I have to thank you for doing it this time. Everyone’s heart jumped when they saw my guards jump back and get ready to draw their weapons. Fear is a great motivator. All the crooks in there shook in their boots. And do you know why...? Because there is no profit in death, all the money they got selling out your people is worth nothing if they die.”

“It’s so hard to tell when you’re bluffing Sir, and when you’re telling the truth,” said Daf. “I guess it’ll take us some time to get to know you.”

“I will always tell you the truth. I only bluff in situations where I can gain advantage. You just have to trust me. I always have the best interests of my officers in my heart.”

“Oh, how romantic! I guess you have my best interests in your heart as well, I assume, since I’m now officially one of your officers?” said Gen sarcastically.

Nagol said something to her and she quickly apologized and brought us another shot of rakia.

I ignored her sarcastic remark and said, “It’s imperative for everyone here to keep our plan a secret, especially for you Gen when you’re at military command, and vigorously promote the idea that we’ll be going to war and it’s only a matter of time. We must make Anelia and her backers believe that you, me, the ship and the army will be leaving this planet. This façade must be maintained until you are certain Anelia is no longer a threat. Do we understand one another?”

I heard three “Yes Sirs” simultaneously.

Nagol began to laugh out loud but wouldn’t tell us why he was laughing.

It was evening by now and nearing dinner time. Nagol went away and came back with our server who asked us each what we wanted to eat. Nagol said something to him and motioned for him to wait.

“Forgive my server,” he said. “I’ll straighten this out.” He then spoke to him and sent him away.

Moments later the server came back with two large porcelain platters. One was full of strips of fried meat that looked like bacon and the other was full of fried fish. The server then went back and brought another platter full of fried potatoes and vegetables. I had never seen vegetables like that before. We used the same plates, forks and knives from earlier. I guess Nagol only had a limited number of them, probably no more than six.

After Nagol said something in their language, he took a fish, a couple of strips of meat and some vegetables with his fork and placed them in his dish. He then looked at me and pointed at the platters with his fork. I did the same and so did the others.

I ate the fish first. It was delicious. I then tried the bacon and made a face.

“You recognize it, don’t you? Nobody else here has ever eaten it,” said Nagol.

Vel translated for Gen but she didn't know what Nagol was talking about.

When Vel looked at me I said, "I ate a half raw version of this meat during my trials which, uncooked, I'm told, is poisonous to most of your people."

No one except Nagol knew what I was talking about. I didn't bother explaining. The food was so delicious I had seconds and thirds and so did the others, except for Nagol who had to be careful what he ate and how much.

"Old age is sure a bitch," I mumbled.

Before we finished eating Nagol said, "Before we get involved with something else, I'd like you to take me to the surface and show me the ship. I've been waiting a long time to see it and I don't want to miss this opportunity."

Everyone looked at me with great enthusiasm as I smiled and said, "It would be my pleasure, Sir."

Just as I said that I watched everyone rush to finish eating so that we could get going. But before we left I asked Nagol to do me a favour.

"Is it possible, Sir, to have a replica made of my medallion, perhaps a lighter and thinner version, with the Macedonian sun on both sides and with a nice chain to hang it around my neck?"

"Of course," he said. "I'll go and order that right now. It should be ready by tomorrow. May I ask why you need a replica?"

"I have an idea but I'm not sure yet. I'll let you know after I see what it looks like."

After Nagol came back we all strolled down a long corridor and emerged in the tube tunnels. From there we walked up a set of stairs and went outside. It was hot and humid and the aroma from the

flowers and ripe fruit was suffocating. We spotted the ship resting on the landing pad about one hundred metres away.

Nagol complained that he couldn't see it clearly but as we got closer he said, "It's an ugly brute and so small? How could such an ugly little thing have such a big and beautiful reputation?"

"It's a war machine grandfather, built a thousand years ago. What did you expect?" asked Gen.

"What is that graffiti all over my ship?" I yelled. "What does it mean?"

"Someone has painted 'VICTORY' all over your ship," said Gen.

I smiled and said, "Well, I think someone had good taste in names. It would have been nicer to call her 'Victory' instead of 'Dragon Fire', the name given to her by Viera's propaganda machine."

"Sir, it's a ship, why do you call it 'her'?" Vel asked.

Nagol and I both laughed but didn't explain.

As we got close to her, Nagol put his hand on the hull and said, "So, you're the mistress my friend Voskot was in love with all these years. You're the big secret. You're the treasure hidden in the chamber of secrets. You have been a mystery for a millennium and now here you are, you ugly brute, shamelessly standing there in front of me."

Nagol was distracted by the noise of the hatch opening in the back.

"Would you like to go inside, Sir?" I asked.

Gen had to grab him by the arm, as Nagol lost his step and almost fell down.

He didn't say anything as Gen helped him walk up the ramp. When he got inside he looked around.

“Is it possible for me to make a call to my troops from here?” asked Gen.

“Why don’t we just take a ride there and you can talk to them in person,” I said.

Gen looked at me strangely, wondering if I had lost my mind expecting an old man to stand there on a moving ship.

At that moment I asked Nagol if he wanted to sit down and I offered him my seat.

He slowly turned towards me and said, “You’re giving me the captain’s seat? Can you do that?”

Even before I had a chance to answer Gen helped him sit down. “Where are you going to sit?” he asked me.

“I’ll stand here behind you, Sir,” I said and began to enter the codes. Then, after Daf entered the coordinates, I entered the speed and activated the docking robot. When the ship began to hover above the landing pad I grabbed Gen by the shoulders and placed her in front of me and asked her to hold onto the chair. I then showed Nagol which button to push to make the ship go. I felt the ship lift, which put a lot of weight on my knees. But, as the speed stabilized I was able to stand. Everyone was quiet until we arrived on top of the makeshift landing pad at the Apserpon facilities. I activated the robot again and it gently landed the ship.

Gen helped Nagol up and we all got off the ship. When we came out the squad was lined up on both sides of our exit ramp saluting us as we descended. Gen immediately took them away and left us standing there.

Nagol looked around, took a deep breath and said, “So, here’s where my good friend lost his life. He was only a few years older than me. He loved me like a brother. Thank you for bringing me here. This is a sad moment for me but a necessary one. I’ve wanted to do this for a long time but didn’t have the courage to do it on my own. Also,

thank you for bringing my granddaughter home. I've been avoiding her for years for her own safety.”

I left Nagol with the girls and took a short stroll through the big, broken front door and up the pile of lumber. I looked down at the water fountain and the shower. Water was running through both. I figured the water pressure must have been building over the years.

I decided to leave the place because I was getting caught up in my past and it was bringing back memories for which I wasn't prepared. I didn't have the courage to face them, at least not now. Plus, the presence of my guards made me anxious.

I found everyone waiting for me by the ship's hatch.

When I got there I asked Nagol if he wanted to go into outer space.

He knew I was serious so he took his time and said, “Yes, yes I would. I've never been in outer space. I sent many of my students out there but I never had the opportunity to do that myself.”

Gen wanted to know what we were talking about but no one wanted to tell her.

“Let's get on the ship first and I'll tell her then,” said Nagol.

Gen helped him get on the ship and sat him in the captain's chair. For a moment Nagol hesitated but I assured him it was okay.

After I entered the codes and got the ship powered up I asked Nagol to pull the joystick slightly back and then ease it forward. The ship reacted and began to fly slowly forward and up. When it had achieved a forty five degree angle I asked Nagol to hold the joystick steady as I tapped the speed button for a smooth ride. After that I activated gravity control so that Gen and I wouldn't float inside the ship.

We climbed slowly until we were flying above the atmosphere. At that point I asked Nagol to ease the stick forward while I reduced the

speed to zero and we achieved a parallel and free orbit above the planet.

Gen was furious with me for taking such a risk but after looking at her grandfather's face, lit up with excitement as he looked down at his planet, she said, "Wow, it's so beautiful down there. I've never been into outer space. The planet looks so much better from here than in photographs."

"Do you want to know what it feels like to have no gravity?" I asked.

They all said yes.

I asked everyone sitting down to engage their seatbelts. Gen helped Nagol put his on. I then grabbed Gen's hand while she held onto the chair and pushed the gravity control button off. Just as her feet began to leave the floor, Gen complained that she felt like she was going to fall and asked me to put gravity back on. I immediately pushed the gravity control button on and we both dropped to our feet.

"Wow, I feel so heavy now..." Gen said as she tried to brace herself against the chair.

Nagol didn't say anything and resumed looking down at the planet as the ship began to descend towards the surface in free fall.

A few moments later Daf punched in the coordinates for Nagol's hotel and I punched the autopilot. It was a smooth ride down.

Gen helped Nagol up and out of the ship. After we were outside and the hatch was closed Nagol kissed Gen on the cheek and said, "It's nice to have you here my dear. I missed you very much."

Nagol then turned to me and the girls and said, "Thank you for what you did for me today," and with that he asked Gen to take him home to his room so that he could have a rest.

“Good night and see you at breakfast tomorrow,” he said and slowly walked away in the dark with Gen holding onto him.

The girls and I took the usual path down the stairs into the tube station and from there through the lobby and into the lounge. What we found was Gen waiting for us with a bottle of rakia and four glasses.

After we had a drink I said, “We accomplished a lot in one day. I forgot how long the days are here on this part of your planet.”

The three women looked confused and didn’t understand what I was talking about until I said, “I’m from earth, remember, and our days average about 12 hours while your days here are 21 earth hours.”

They didn’t seem to be interested in my explanation and began to chat in their language. I didn’t bother to ask what they were saying. Like Nagol, I too felt very tired, said goodnight, left and went to my room.

Visiting old friends

The next day there was a knock on my door. It was the same man as the previous day. He pointed up with his finger and left. I assumed he wanted me to go up to the lobby.

I put on the brown army uniform I'd brought with me from earth and went up to the lobby. When I entered the lounge I saw Gen, Vel and Daf sitting down on a soft couch, still chatting. They began to laugh when they saw me.

“Did you get any sleep or have you been gossiping all night? And what’s so funny?” I asked.

Just as I said that Nagol walked in and interrupted.

“Is that a World War Two uniform you’re wearing?” he asked me.

He surprised me and the women too. After thinking about it for a moment, I said, “Yes! How did you know that?”

“Delche showed me photographs of earth men, earth soldiers, wearing such uniforms during what I believe he called World War Two.”

But as soon as he said that, Nagol turned around and left the lounge. We were left there puzzled looking at one another, wondering why he had suddenly left.

Moments later he was back holding the replica medallion in his hand.

“Sorry about that,” he said. “I forgot to pick up your medallion.”

I looked at it; it was light in weight but beautifully painted with a bright red background and flashy, sharp yellow rays. It looked like someone had taken a plastic magnifying glass, removed the holder, drilled two holes at the edge to connect to the chain and painted it red and yellow. No matter, its construction was not important. The chain was silver in colour and long enough to fit over my head.

“It’s beautiful,” I said, “thank you.”

The women came over and looked at it but weren’t too impressed. They went back to the couch and resumed their conversation.

I put the medallion around my neck but it didn’t look good against a brown background so I hid it behind my brown shirt.

“You still haven’t told me what it’s for,” said Nagol.

Since the women weren’t interested to hear what it was for, I took Nagol to the table and, after we sat down, I said, “I’ll use it as a ceremonial object. I’ll give it to Gen in front of the troops as a symbolic gesture of passing command from one commander to another. The real medallion, the one that held the key to the ship had a lot of power and significance. I want to publicly pass that on to Gen, especially when she takes control of the troops. The idea is that whoever holds the medallion possesses its magical power. No one outside of us will know that the medallion is just a piece of plastic or that it’s a replica.”

Nagol first gave me a funny look and then looked away into the distance, thought for a moment and said, “Yes, yes that’s an old tradition we used to practice here during the changing of the guard in the palace, when we had guards. The departing commander passed on the key to the palace to the incoming commander every time the guard changed. I think I can do something to bring that tradition back, I mean to popularize it... I can do that... I think it’s a good idea to pass on something symbolic from one commander to the next but the people must know what you’re doing before you do that. I can help with that. I think I’ll call Ruzha and ask her to film our event tonight where we’ll show the medallion and explain its significance and power. Then we’ll play the film on channel 45 as an information piece to let the people know what’s going on and what we’re doing to end the war. I think that’s a good idea. Yes. I will, of course, have to clear all this with Asora first. Let me worry about that, now let’s have breakfast.”

Nagol waved at the server who was standing behind the slightly open door. This time the server knew what to do. First he brought us plates, forks and knives and then he brought us two platters, one with fried eggs and the other with crepes loaded with honey and jelly. They looked disgustingly delicious. The server then went back and brought five porcelain mugs and a porcelain pitcher full of what looked like hot chocolate. But it wasn't. It was hot, concentrated fruit juice from a variety of fruits. It was actually quite good after you got used to the taste.

The women came over without invitation and practically devoured everything.

As usual I ate more eggs than anything else. I did try the crepes but found them to be too sweet. The women loved them. Nagol didn't eat anything but watched us enjoy eating his food with a smile on his face.

"So, ladies, you've been chatting for a long time. You've become inseparable. What are you talking about?" I asked.

Nagol laughed, looked at me and said, "I thought you had more sense than to ask women that kind of question."

Gen was about to take a strip off my hide but Daf beat her to it and said, "I didn't know this before but we have a lot in common. We found out the same professors taught us in the academy. Gen also told us stories, all sorts of stories about her experiences with boys and how she put them in their place, especially the tough guys who challenged her in marshal arts duels."

"Thank you for that, I'm happy that you're getting along so well, and I'm sure you'll learn a lot more from Gen. She has an exemplary career as a soldier, something to be very proud of," I said.

After Vel translated Gen didn't say anything. She just looked at me and smiled.

Nagol leaned over and whispered, “There’s hope for you yet!” and then said. “Excuse me I have to go and make some arrangements for this evening,” and he left.

After Nagol left I said, “Ladies, I’m going up to the surface for a walk, I haven’t had any exercise for days and I’m beginning to feel stagnant.”

After a long pause Vel piped up and said, “You can’t walk on the surface for long, someone might spot you and take a shot at you.”

“I’ll have my guards with me,” I replied.

“No!” she said and the other two agreed with her. “Someone can shoot you from the distance and you’ll be dead before you know it or before your guards figure out what happened. No! You can’t do that!”

“Perhaps you’re right. Thank you.”

“We’re not just your officers, we’re here to advise and protect you as well!” said Gen.

“So, you care for me?” I said with a big smile on my face.

“I’d show you how much I care,” said Gen. “But I don’t want to die!”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“I would flip you and land you on your fat butt,” she said. “But I’m afraid your lady friend guards would shoot me.”

“So, now you’re jealous of my robots... And have you looked at your own fat butt lately?”

While Vel enjoyed translating Daf said, “Thank Mother Nature Nagol isn’t here to hear such language coming out of the both of you.”

At that moment I grabbed Daf, squeezed her into my arms and gave her a big hug.

After I let her go we watched her face go through a number of emotions from confusion to anger, to disgust and finally to happiness. She then took a run at me, jumped on me and gave me a big hug. The guards didn't react.

I looked at Vel. She had a puzzled look on her face.

“Do you want me to give you a hug too?” I asked.

Even before I was finished talking I grabbed her and gave her a big hug. She looked red in the face when I put her down. I was surprised that outspoken Vel was actually embarrassed from being hugged. I decided not to tease her anymore.

I looked at Gen and said, “It's your turn now,” but neither girl wanted to translate.

“You don't need to translate,” I said. “She already knows what I'm talking about.”

Daf said something in their language but didn't translate for me. Gen also said something.

“Go get her,” said Vel.

“Not if she's going to flip me,” I replied.

Daf shook her head, probably telling her I wasn't going to do it.

Looking straight into my eyes Gen started coming towards me and said, “Equal treatment means equal treatment.” She then grabbed me and gave me a gentle hug. While walking away she said, “Let's go up to the ship, arm ourselves, grab a couple of communicators and go for that walk.”

“But...” said Vel.

“No buts... I’m your superior officer now and that’s an order... I also feel like shooting someone to let some of my years of pent up frustration out.”

As we walked out Daf asked, “Why did you hug me Sir?” And to cover the idea that she might have never been hugged before added, “I’ve never been hugged by an older man before.”

I didn’t know what to say and before I had a chance to answer Vel translated for Gen.

Gen piped up and asked Daf, “Did you like it?”

She took her time to answer and said, “Yeah?”

“Well, I’d never been hugged by a younger man before, and I liked it too, so what’s the big deal...?”

Gen must have realized that she was making light of an important experience and in order not to rob Daf of it, said, “We must cherish these moments because they are precious and rare in life. He hugged you because he adores you as a woman, as a soldier and as a friend... cherish it.”

I looked at Gen with genuine surprise and, when nobody was looking, she stuck her tongue out at me. I felt like taking revenge but she was stronger than me and would wipe the floor with me, so I just smiled.

When we got to the ship Gen watched me carefully open the panel and enter the codes.

“I can do that too, I memorized your code and all I need now is to take your badge and the ship will be mine. What’s to stop me from doing that?” she asked.

“Well, my guards for one...” I said but before I was finished she interrupted me.

“Let me try. Unless you’re afraid I’ll take your ship?” she said.

Both Vel and Daf advised her not to but she insisted and grabbed my badge and pulled it out of the slot.

I took the badge off my neck and gave it to her.

She immediately slipped it into the slot the right way. The panel door opened.

“I’m half way there,” she said and began to punch the code. When she was done she placed her palm over the laser eye and “zap” she was shocked and landed on her butt on the ground.

We all ran over and gave her a hand up. She was pretty shook up and admitted that the shock was quite strong and painful even for her; a black belt marshal arts champion who was used to enduring pain.

“You were hit like that too?” she asked.

“Yes, many times. In order to gain access to the ship you not only have to know all the codes, but you must also withstand the shock without letting go.”

“You did that?”

“Yes, but only a couple of times until the ship got to know me.”

“I don’t believe that,” she said.

I didn’t want to tell her that I was under the influence of firewater at the time so I didn’t answer her. I was hoping that now she would show me a bit more respect.

I went through the sequence again and after we gained access to the ship the ladies wanted to know what was in the big box tied to the floor.

After telling them to stay out, Gen opened the box anyway. She said something to me but the girls refused to translate.

I offered to give her two bottles as a gift from me and if she wanted I would fly her to the Apserpon facilities to have a drink with her soldiers.

She said her soldiers didn't drink but, now that I mentioned it, it would be safer if we went to Apserpon and did our walking there.

We all agreed.

Gen asked Vel to contact her soldiers and after she did Gen sat on my lap.

"My knees are killing me. I'm not going through that again," she said.

"You can't do that, I need to steer the ship," I protested.

Daf piped up and said, "No, you don't Sir, the coordinates are set, just set the speed and tap the autopilot."

"So, you have no problem with her sitting on my lap?" I asked.

"No Sir!" said Daf and the two girls began to giggle quietly.

I'm sure Gen did this to humiliate me in front of the girls because I hadn't warned her about the shock.

The moment I punched the autopilot I grabbed her with both arms and held her. I figured she would object but she didn't.

With the dampers on and with Gen sitting down, I was able to fly the ship at a faster speed. We arrived at the facilities fairly quickly.

After we armed ourselves and picked up a couple of communicators we went outside and met the soldiers. They went through their routine of saluting us and then took us to a shaded area and told us that just moments before they had spotted a ship hovering over the hills and that it might still be there. Gen asked them if they had reported it. They said no because they didn't know who to contact.

She was their only contact. I asked Gen if I should fly up there and investigate.

“Let me make a couple of calls and I’ll let you know.”

Gen and Vel went back into the ship and made a secure call first to Asora and then to military command. No one seemed to know whose ship it was and what it was doing in prohibited airspace.

After they came back we discussed how we were going to investigate. Gen insisted she wanted to be on my ship but I couldn’t risk flying at break-neck speeds or make risky maneuvers with her not strapped in on the ship. I needed my communications officer and my navigator if I was going to go up.

Finally Daf said, “You don’t need me. I’ll program the home button in the ship to bring you back here if you get lost. But please don’t stray too far outside this planet.”

After Daf programmed the home button with the coordinates, I asked Gen to take Daf’s seat and we took off straight up at maximum speed with all sensors operational. After we went up several kilometres we started searching for ship signatures, transmissions, heat signatures, energy signatures... but found nothing.

Gen said, “It doesn’t appear to be here. It’s probably gone...”

But I wasn’t prepared to accept defeat yet, not without figuring out what it was doing here. So, as we slowly descended I asked Gen to contact her soldiers and ask them exactly where they had last seen the ship relative to us. They pointed out that we needed to go to the left on top of the next grove ahead of us.

Just as we moved in that direction we felt a sudden blast from an energy weapon that blinded us and our sensors. After I regained control the soldiers informed us that the ship had flown out from under us and over the mountain. I immediately powered up all weapons, reset the sensors and quickly flew over the mountain. The ship was heading for a ravine on the other side of the mountain and

quickly disappeared. I guess its pilot was hoping we hadn't seen it. To make them think that we hadn't seen it, I quickly flew over past the ravine. I then turned the ship around and positioned it on the opposite side of the hill facing the ravine.

So, unless it was going underground somewhere there was nowhere for the ship to go without facing my cannons.

We were far enough away so initially I contemplated using a torpedo but Gen talked me out of it.

She said, "We should try to capture its crew and question them and then asked Vel to send a message on all frequencies and tell them that we just wanted to talk."

But, before Gen was finished talking Vel said, "I'm detecting a massive power surge emanating from the ravine."

When I heard the words "massive power surge" I pushed the joystick forward hard. Our ship jumped over the hill in a split second, avoiding a massive blast coming at us.

"Did you see that?" I yelled.

"I saw it, heard it and have it on video. Our sensors managed to capture it all," replied Vel.

After we flew back down we took photographs of the damage. There was a huge circular crater on the other side of the mountain but not very much damage in the ravine.

We circled around several times and took more photographs.

After that we flew back to the facilities to examine the evidence. Before we got off the ship I ran diagnostics while Gen contacted military command and sent them our logs of the incident and asked them to identify the ship and call us back.

We took a copy of the logs and ran the video on Gen's large entertainment screen in their makeshift lounge at the facilities. Vel

ran it in slow motion and we could see that the blast was cone-shaped and directional, designed to take our ship out. We could also see that it had missed our ship by a fraction of a second.

Everyone was scared, including Gen, but she made light of the situation and said, “Your captain has the instincts of a cat. He knows when to bluff and when to pounce. But this time I’m glad he pounced so that we can live and fight another day. This is war, ladies, get used to it.”

“So, ladies, we all saw what happened, so speak to me. Tell me why did this happen?” I asked.

All I heard was silence.

“Okay then, why did the ship expose itself to the soldiers here and then land, hide and wait? Why did it graze us with a light plasma blast instead of blasting us with everything it had? Why did it wait for us to see it going into the ravine? Why stay and hide when it had a good chance of escaping. Why did the ship blow up in a massive directed blast, directed at my ship? There is no doubt that it was a very powerful blast and directed at my ship, any comments about that?”

“I don’t want to speculate, I prefer to work with facts, but in this case someone wanted your ship destroyed with you in it and they wanted to do it here, away from prying eyes. For some reason there is no surveillance around these facilities,” said Gen.

“I believe that’s true, Voskot classified the facilities as restricted airspace because he didn’t want anyone spying on him when he took the ship out for a test run. He told me so himself. But who else knows about this? How did you know that there’s no surveillance here?” I asked.

“I don’t know for sure but every time I reported something that should have been picked up on radar or on satellite, military command told me they hadn’t see it.”

“So, if we can work under the assumption that this was a planned secret attack on me and my ship, then who planned it and why? Let’s make a list of who could have done this,” I said.

“Well, we could have done this, Anelia and her backers could have done it, the Karons could have done it, the galaxy traders, the aliens that attacked the galaxy traders, and so on. We can speculate all day but there’s not much we can conclude without facts,” replied Gen.

Moments later we received a call from military command and, after congratulating Gen for stopping the danger to their planet, they told us it was one of their ships. In other words an official Ostikon ship was used to attack me and my ship.

I knew Gen was a straight shooter when she corrected military command about who had stopped the danger and then said that if it wasn’t for me, she wouldn’t be talking to them right now.

After that she asked military command to send a team of investigators to examine the site.

When she was done with military command Gen instructed her squad to keep a low profile and assist military command with their investigation. We got on my ship and left for the hotel with Gen sitting on my seat and me standing behind her hanging onto my chair for dear life.

By the way, she had been watching me very carefully when I flew the ship and pushed all the right buttons, including the button to activate the docking robot, which landed my ship. In other words she flew my ship from the Apserpon facilities to Nagol’s hotel without my assistance... or permission.

I was about to say that I might as well go home and she could have the ship but she beat me to it and said, “I don’t believe I can replace you, especially after what you did earlier, but I wanted to do this... This is probably the last time I’ll be part of your crew and my last chance to lay my hands on the ship.”

I thought it was an appropriate response and a bit sad too.

Before we stepped out of the ship I stopped the three and said, “What happened earlier was real, the explosion was real, and I’m sure it will happen again and again. So here and now, I’m going to ask you, if this isn’t what you want you can leave this crew and I won’t hold it against you. I don’t want anyone to die, but there is a chance that one or all of us will die. The risks are very high with this job, which goes for you too Gen. What do you say?”

They all looked at me but no one said a word.

“If you stick with me then I assume you accept the risks... What do you say?”

“We’re all with you,” said Gen loudly and Vel and Daf agreed.

After the girls stepped out of the ship Gen showed me her fist and made a mean face at me.

I grabbed her shoulder walking down the ship’s ramp and squeezed it gently. I guess she was mad at me for being so mean to the girls.

“I believe honesty is the best policy,” I said out loud.

Daf whispered something to Gen, which I assumed was the translation of what I had said.

As soon as we got inside the lounge Nagol ran for us and wanted to know if we were all right.

“There were all sorts of reports in the media that a ship was destroyed,” he said. “But they were confused as to which ship was destroyed and I wasn’t sure if you were alive. Thank Mother Nature you’re okay.”

“Grandfather, you can’t worry about me, about us, every time something happens out there. This was nothing given the calamities this ship has faced in the past. The important thing is that we are here and we are safe and sound.”

Just at that instant Asora stormed in asking me what had happened. I pointed her to Gen and Vel and while they discussed what happened I asked Nagol to bring out some rakia.

After he came back I poured myself a shot and gulped it down.

Nagol looked at me and said, “How do you do it, how can you take the stress and still function?”

“I pretend a lot. I pretend to be tough. I have a gift. I’m able to hide my fears well outside while my inside shakes like a leaf in a windstorm. I must also be lucky, very lucky.”

“Thank you for being honest with me. And please, look after my granddaughter and after those two young and precious girls.”

“I will do my best, Sir,” I said.

Just as he was about to leave the noisy lounge, Nagol turned to me and said, “Ruzha is coming here at noon, in about an hour or so. Let me know when she arrives.”

His words gave me a pain in the gut. It was real, I was about to meet Ruzha face to face. All I could think of was her cries to take her with me to earth before we were separated. What would she think of me five years later? How would she react? What would she look like? Would she be as beautiful as I remembered her? There was a time in my life when she was my only friend, the only person who paid attention to me, who listened to me, with whom I could communicate? Was Gen right that Ruzha had never married because of me, I wondered?

“She’s gone now!” said Daf and sat beside me.

“Who’s gone?” I asked.

“Asora,” she said.

“Well? What did she think happened?” I asked.

“She didn’t want to speculate but she thinks it was Anelia... She thinks Anelia doesn’t believe you. Anelia believes you won’t deliver on your promises and doesn’t trust you or Gen. She thinks in time Gen will turn on her. That’s all she said and suggested we be very careful from now on.”

“Daf, tell the others to put all this aside and lets concentrate on the party. I understand Ruzha is coming here around noon.”

Gen politely asked everyone to leave the lounge and watch channel 45 for updates.

After the four of us sat at the main table Gen said, “I know it’s important for you to see your friends but we can’t stop the investigation, we need to know for sure who did this.”

“My dear Gen, this is now a matter for the government and the police. It’s very important to cooperate with them but not participate and be in their way. Besides, what could we do even if we did find out who did it? Are we going to go out there and shoot them? It would still be a police matter no matter what. Also, in times like these we can’t afford to be distracted from our main objective, so we need to calm down and enjoy life while we’re still alive.”

She grabbed the bottle of rakia and my shot glass, poured herself a drink and gulped it down.

“Hell, I’m a common soldier, who am I kidding? I’ve never been shot at and have never shot anyone...” complained Gen.

“Gen, are you having a breakdown?” I asked but the girls didn’t want to translate.

“Of course she’s having a breakdown,” said Vel. “You expect too much from people. We almost died out there... Give us a chance to take a breather...”

Vel’s words rang loud like a church bell in my brain. Reality was catching up with us but I kept pushing it away. I got up, grabbed Gen in my arms and squeezed her. To my surprise this tough woman

who could crush me began to cry on my shoulder. The other two also began to cry. After I let go of the first I grabbed the other two and gave them a hug. This wasn't the time for lectures or jokes; it was the time for compassion. I looked at the three with sad eyes. The young ones looked back and smiled. Gen refused to look at me. I tried to help her up but she refused to take my hand. I grabbed her and squeezed her. She didn't resist.

Vel said something to her. She turned around, grabbed and held me for a moment. She then began to laugh. We all began to laugh.

At that moment Nagol walked in and said, "It's so nice to see you all so happy..."

We began to laugh even louder and longer which made Nagol shake his head in disbelief.

"So, are you all ready for Ruzha's arrival?" Nagol asked.

"Oh, grandfather, you worry too much. Of course we're ready."

"I spoke with her yesterday and asked her to bring her cameras. Some of you will need to help her set up. I'll ask my servers to give you a hand."

"Okay grandfather, we'll take care of it. Now come and join us here."

"No one told me what really happened out there today. Can you tell me what happened and why were you in Apserpon anyway?" asked Nagol.

After we looked at each other, Vel stepped up and explained everything in detail to Nagol, in their language. We were all fascinated with her ability to tell a story and even though I didn't know what she was saying, I could see that she had a talent to captivate people, even an old man.

After Vel was done telling the story Nagol looked at me and said, “Why did you decide to fly away at the moment when you did. What went through your mind?”

“To be honest, Sir, I thought the enemy ship was going to fire on us so I moved our ship out of the way to avoid the blast. I know energy cannons take some time to charge so I bolted before the enemy ship’s cannons could fully charge. I had no idea the ship was going to explode or that we might have been a target,” I explained.

Nagol looked at me and shook his head but didn’t say anything.

Just as we sat there quietly reflecting on things, the server barged in and said something to Nagol.

“Ruzha is here, I’m going to send him to help her with her things.”

The moment I heard her name I felt a sharp pain in my gut. Gen took the girls and bolted for the door. Nagol looked at me and motioned with his head for me to go.

“I’m very nervous. I’m afraid to face her after I abandoned her.”

“She understands, she forgave you years ago, she told me so herself. She’s a smart and mature woman; there’s no need to be afraid.”

At that very moment the door flung open and after the server walked in, Ruzha followed. Gen embraced her first and introduced the girls to her. After that Ruzha looked over and saw me and Nagol. We stood up. She came and greeted Nagol first and then me.

She gave me a big smile. She was more beautiful than I remembered. She looked very sophisticated but the kindness in her eyes was still there.

I grabbed her, squeezed her against me and kissed her on the mouth.

“It’s nice to see you again Ruzha,” I said.

“It’s nice to see you too.”

She took a few steps back and said, “I’ll set up my cameras so I can film all this. Act natural. I’ll program the camera to follow me and it will automatically film everything that happens around me. Close ups and other things I can remotely control with this gadget, the camera knows how to do the rest. Is everyone ready? Take your places.”

Ruzha walked out and walked back in again and went through the same sequence of motions as before. When she came to me she kissed me just like I had kissed her earlier.

Nagol looked at her.

“Forgive me Sir,” she said to him, “I’ve wanted to do this for a long time.”

“Now that you’re well-acquainted with him what’s on your agenda next?” asked Nagol.

“Well, from here on I will train the camera on him and have him followed as he meets his friends. I’ll use other cameras to capture other things, and so on,” Ruzha replied.

After looking at me sideways with a big smile Ruzha was mobbed by the women who took her away for a chat.

“I could have had a great life with her but I pissed it away and I don’t know for what. My life was a misery on earth and I never did get to see my parents again.”

I looked at Ruzha and noticed that once in a while she looked my way and smiled.

“We all have to live with the choices we make in life. But I can tell you one thing, you couldn’t have predicted any of it, just as you won’t know how your life could have been with Ruzha and the dangers you would have put her through.”

“I know you’re right Sir, but why doesn’t that make me feel any better. Why am I so sad just looking at her?”

“Son, you had a near death experience today and things like that make you see life in a different light. You have some regrets, who doesn’t? Get over it. Delche is coming next. He’ll be here soon, focus on that.”

“Thank you for that,” I said.

He looked at me but didn’t say anything.

Moments later he said, “You’ve been through a lot for a young man, haven’t you?” and poured me a drink.

I didn’t reply. I kept looking at Ruzha hoping to get another glance and another smile.

Daf came over, sat next to me and put her arm around my shoulder. She then put her head on my arm and said, “You have great friends who love you...”

I put my arm around her shoulder and said, “Thank you.”

I looked at Nagol sitting opposite to me and all I could think of was taking this young and precious girl to war and perhaps to her death. Tears began to run down my cheeks.

Nagol looked at me and said, “Sometimes we all have to make hard choices.”

I was able to hide my tears from Daf but not from Nagol.

“This was supposed to be a happy occasion...” he said.

Daf left and joined the other women. I could hear them chatting cheerfully. And even though I didn’t know what they were saying, they were talking about happy things. Why couldn’t I do that?

The server was back whispering to Nagol.

“Delche is coming!” yelled Nagol.

I quickly composed myself and went for the door. The server opened it and there was Asora followed by Delche and Airam.

Asora shook my hand, gave me a hug, kissed me on the cheek and went past me to greet the others.

Delche and I looked at each other eye to eye and our eyes began to tear. I don't know who started first but I think it was me since I was already emotionally charged.

Delche threw his arms around me and picked me up like we do in Macedonia and held me there for a long time.

After he put me down he said, “It's nice to see you again my friend. You took your time coming back but I'm glad to see you're here, safe and sound.”

“Thank you Delche. It's nice to see you too.”

“I'm going to go now, my daughter is anxious to see you. We'll talk later. Come and see me at my restaurant.”

The moment Delche left, Airam, with tearing eyes, gave me a hug and kissed me on my face and mouth and all over. She then smiled, let out a silly laugh and began to wipe the smudges off my face. When she was done she gave me another long hug and left to meet the others.

When I looked back Delche was talking with Nagol and looking at me. Airam was shaking hands with Gen. How unusual was that? These people were hugging and shaking hands like we do on earth. This was something that I had introduced when I was here the last time. Delche of course helped a lot too.

Moments later I saw Airam heading for the door at a fast pace. I was about to ask where she was going but Nagol beat me to it and said, “Ori is coming.”

Delche quickly came over and the two of us went towards the door.

I didn't recognize him when he walked in. He was wearing tight black clothes, had a black beard and long hair. He was clean but sunburned. He was very thin which made him look very tall.

He stretched his hand towards me but I grabbed him and gave him a long hug. Delche joined us also which made the situation even more emotional. We held each other for a long time.

"It's nice to see you Ori," I said.

"It's nice to see you Sir," he replied.

"Ori, you don't have to call me sir."

"I know, but you will always be my captain," he said.

Just as we were done Airam took him away and introduced him to the rest of the people. Ori was the least known member of my circle of friends and this was a good opportunity for him to meet others. At least that's what Delche said.

"I'm happy to see you haven't forgotten how to speak Macedonian," I said to Delche.

He gave me a whack on the back of my head and swore at me in Macedonian.

"It's nice to see that you still have your warped sense of humour," I said.

At that moment Vel and Daf came over with Gen, and began to talk to Delche.

"So, you're the famous Delche everyone is talking about," said Gen.

"So, you've heard of me, eh? Have you heard of my adventures as the navigator on the warship?"

“No, not that. You’re famous for your rakia.”

“Are you a drinker?”

“Oh, yes I am!”

“Ah, then you’re my kind of people, just like Otsi here. I’m sure we’ll become good friends.”

Delche then turned to me and said, “Bring her with you when you come to see me.”

The girls giggled but wouldn’t translate for her. The three walked away.

Delche looked at me and said, “What a lovely woman, who is she?”

“She is Nagol’s granddaughter,” I replied.

“No way! I didn’t know he had a granddaughter.”

“It appears he kept her a secret; I guess to protect her.”

Delche kept looking at her as she drifted off to the other side of the room.

When he turned around to face me he was startled by my guards standing behind me and said, “With those two standing behind you and with your brown World War Two outfit, from here you look like a dark angel with wings. Do you ever part with them?”

I was just about to make a snide remark but was interrupted by Nagol who said, “The Captain and his wife are here.”

Delche and I were closest to the door and were about to leave when Delche said, “Leave your guards here, they’re scaring people.”

“Guards, Macedonian mode.”

“That’s better,” replied Delche and ran past me and opened the door.

There was no one there so we stepped outside and waited. Ruzha came over and said, “Come back inside, I want to film the moment. These are the last guests to arrive.” She then looked at me and said, “You should be wearing your uniform. Maybe you can put it on after the captain arrives.”

Just as we walked in the door flung open and the captain and his wife walked in. Delche greeted them first. They had become good friends in my absence and saw each other often, especially after the captain retired.

I had forgotten how big a man the captain was when he gave me a crushing hug. His wife gave me a hug too.

“It’s nice to see you both,” I said. Delche translated.

“It’s nice to see you too,” the captain said and asked me who the lovely ladies behind me were.

Delche told him they were my guards to which he said this guy must be privileged to have two lovely women for guards. When Delche told him they were robots he laughed so loud the room shook.

Ruzha ran over to greet the captain and his wife and took them around to introduce them to everyone.

“We did well for a couple of screw ups, didn’t we?” said Delche and pointed at our friends with his chin.

“You’re right you know, you’re right. We do have a lot of friends. We’re surrounded by people who love us.”

“When I heard what happened earlier today my heart dropped. Those idiots in the media, as usual, made a mistake and said your ship was blown up. I didn’t believe it for a second but still I felt the shock.”

“I’m sorry about that Delche. If my fate is to die I’ll die but so far it looks like Mother Nature has different plans for me. Let’s live like soldiers today and worry about the future tomorrow.”

“That’s a good one; I’ve got to remember that one... Tomorrow never comes, right?”

“I need to go to my room to get my uniform so that I can look like my guards... and like a white, I mean colourful angel.”

“I’ll come with you. Let me tell Ruzha first before they send a search party for us.”

When Delche came back the captain came with him. Delche said, “The Captain has a favour to ask.”

As we went down in the elevator the captain looked at my guards, smiled at them and said, “I understand you’re leaving for the war in a few days. Here are the coordinates of a place in the far right of the galaxy,” and handed me a piece of paper. “It’ll be on your way to the galaxy trader outpost. My friend, the galaxy trader captain whom you met before, is in retirement there. Delche will give you a case of rakia. I want you to deliver it to him. He’s hiding there and is off the grid so when you go please be careful not to be followed and no communications while you’re there. Will you do this for me?”

I looked at Delche. He shook his head yes.

“It would be my pleasure, Sir.”

After I put my uniform on I left my medallion hanging in front of my chest in full view and we returned to the lounge. When we went inside everyone was sitting at the long dinner table waiting for dinner to be served. Ruzha and Nagol were waiting at the door for us. When we walked in everyone clapped their hands. Ruzha escorted the captain and Delche to the table and brought back Asora, Gen, Vel and Daf. While Vel and Daf stood on each side of me with my guards behind us, Gen stood directly in front of me facing me. With cameras rolling and Nagol talking in his language, Asora took the medallion off my neck and hung it on Gen’s neck. This was the

first time I had noticed Gen wearing the white uniform with the Macedonian colours. She looked thin, proud and beautiful. After that Gen and I shook hands. Gen hugged me, giving me a symbolic goodbye, and the filming was over.

After we sat at the table we had a wonderful dinner consisting of many foods made with ingredients brought from other planets, courtesy of the captain and his wife.

When I heard that I felt very grateful for what they had done. I went over to the captain's wife and gave her a kiss on the mouth.

"I thought only my husband was allowed to do that. What was that for?"

Ruzha told her that it was for the superb food she'd provided for us today and to accept the kiss as the best compliment she could get.

She then got up from her chair, wrapped her arms around my chest gave me a kiss and said, "For enriching my life and for bringing Ruzha into our lives."

"I got that on film you know, shame on you kissing an older woman..." said Ruzha jokingly.

Everyone laughed. Vel translated for Gen, the captain and his wife.

"You must be jealous!" I said.

"I am!" she replied. "She's my adopted mother!"

Ruzha's words too were a compliment for the captain and his wife.

I touched Ruzha's beautiful face and went back to eating and drinking alien ale, which I swore tasted like the beer on earth.

The party ended at about midnight when everyone got up, said goodbye, wished me good luck with the mission and hoped to see me again soon.

Nagol looked very tired. After he said goodbye to his guests Gen took him to his room.

Airam left with Ori who was going to spend the night at the restaurant with her. I didn't have much of a chance to talk to him but I wished him all the best with his work at the mission. Delche left with Asora and Ruzha left with the captain and his wife. Delche again mentioned to me about visiting him at his restaurant and told Daf to remind me.

When Gen returned she gave me back the medallion and the four of us sat on the couches in the corner of the room.

"If you're going to gossip I'm not interested," I said. "We should be going to bed."

"No, we aren't going to gossip," said Gen. "I had a chance to talk with Asora and she suggested we come up with a plan to receive the returning troops who are arriving the day after tomorrow and that we, the four of us, should be there to receive them and be prepared to explain to them why we've brought them back."

"But isn't that Asora's job as the president of the war council?" I asked.

"Yes, but this was your idea and the less she says the less she will be blamed for if things go sideways. You know how politicians are," Gen replied.

We all looked at each other, which made me wonder if this was how political and business deals were made, wars started and wars ended; drunk and sleep deprived.

"Of course, why not, I've done worse," I said. "The only plus in this scenario is that I care for the troops and the right words will come to me without having to lie too much."

"What? You lie? Never!" replied Gen and then realized that I was being serious.

She then said, “I know you love the troops and you’ll put your life on the line for them but you can’t reveal our real intentions, not even to them.”

It’s getting late and I can’t think straight. Let’s do this tomorrow morning and then go and visit Delche at noon. Daf, you let him know, leave him a message. Tell him we’re coming for a chat and a drink and not to go overboard with the food.”

I then looked at Gen and said, “He wants you to be there.”

“Yeah, right! He’s married to Asora, my boss. If he wants me to be there I’m not coming.”

Daf, who wanted her to be there said, “You know he’s joking. He’s trying to get you back for something.”

“See ladies, I told you men are cruel. I’ll be there and I’ll ask Ruzha to come with me.”

“See ladies, now who is crueller, me or Gen?” I asked

I then turned to Daf and said, “Daf, ask Delche to keep Ori there for another day, I feel bad I didn’t spend any time with him this evening.”

Before I was done talking Daf was on her communicator talking to Delche.

“Don’t call him right now,” I said but no one seemed to listen to me

A moment later Gen was on a communicator talking to Ruzha.

“Okay,” I said, “I’ve had enough of you ladies for one day. I’m going to bed now,” and I left.

I looked back before leaving the room and they were back to chatting... They didn’t even see me leave.

Back to Delche's restaurant

When I arrived at the lounge the next day there was no one there. The server informed Nagol that I had arrived and then brought me a hot drink.

Nagol gave me a curious look and asked where the others were. I shook my head and said I didn't know. He immediately asked the server to go and look for them.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Last night your ship was attacked. It was hit by a powerful, narrow energy beam from outer space but doesn't appear to be damaged. It was inspected by military experts from military command earlier this morning. They said the ship was okay but they had never seen anything like it before; a narrow energy beam originating in outer space. The energy beam lasted only seconds but it was powerful enough to cut a mountain in half. But it didn't damage the ship."

"Why didn't anybody wake me up? Why am I finding out about this now?" I yelled.

Nagol looked at me and said, "Listen to me, you know, I know and they know your ship is made of a type of material that can't be penetrated by a simple energy weapon, no matter how powerful. If they wanted to destroy your ship they would have fired a huge torpedo at it and would have buried it kilometres underground. This leads me to believe that your ship was not the real target. You were. Right now there is no one who can replace you as the captain of that ship so if you are removed the ship becomes a lump of metal. Someone desperately wants you out of the way. We didn't get you because if we had you'd be dead now."

"What about my crew and Gen?" I asked. "Where are they?"

"I'm sure your crew is safe. I don't think they wanted to go after your crew. They were only interested in you. I think the girls are probably sleeping. From what I heard they spent most of the night working on a plan to welcome the returning soldiers."

“Oh, is that what they said?”

Just as I turned to sip my hot drink, the three ladies ran in with worried looks on their faces. Nagol asked them to sit down and explained what had happened.

I was visibly upset with the whole thing and with them.

Nagol looked at me and said, “Take it easy on them, if you want to yell at someone yell at me.”

Vel spoke up and asked, “Outside of the ship being attacked what else happened and why would you want to yell at us? What did we do?”

I didn’t reply.

The three got up and were about to walk away.

Nagol yelled at them, “Sit down. You have a job to do. You can’t just yell at each other or walk out on each other every time you face a crisis. You need to be united in this. I know you just had a near death experience only yesterday and another attack today but you can’t function properly if you act this way. You need to get past it. It’s not just your lives that are at stake here, millions depend on you. So, suck it up and start talking.”

Gen looked at her grandfather with a surprised look. She was seeing a different man in him. He’d begun to sound more like me or like one of her commanders.

Gen said, “First things first. First we need to secure our survival before we can secure anyone else’s so I’m going to make a call to military command to request that they immediately inform me when they detect anything suspicious in our area. I’ll also ask for a security detail to guard this hotel and Delche’s restaurant. I will hand pick the security detail myself. This attack has created a reason for me to start building my own special squads without objections from the military or from the likes of Anelia. I will start this the

moment we are done here. Now, let's get back to the immediate question, what are we going to tell the returning troops?"

Nagol turned to me and said, "What are you going to do?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Listen to me. You have the best eyes and ears on that ship: your sensors. The next time you get in your ship program your ship's sensors to stay on at all times and warn you when something suspicious or dangerous is detected."

"We can do that?" I asked.

"Yes, and more, we can record everything that happens and I can monitor what's going on remotely from my communicator," said Vel.

"Had you done this earlier, you would now know a lot more about who fired at your ship and who wrote the graffiti on it," said Nagol.

I felt like saying, "Now you tell me..." but I realized Nagol was trying to help.

"Well, let's do that then, right after we decide what to tell the returning troops," I said.

Daf piped up and said to me, "I have a summary here of what we discussed in the past and last night and, with your permission, I would like to go over it for you."

I looked around, no one had any objections so I said, "Go ahead."

"You said we're bringing the troops back because we want to further investigate the war before we engage in it and to prepare them for hand to hand combat because you believe that's what they'll be doing. You also said you chose Gen for her training skills and as the best candidate to train the troops for the job. What you haven't said is why Gen needs to take full command of the troops and not just cooperate with the existing commanders. I think we need to find a

good reason for this because the way things sound, it appears like you're trying to take control of all the armed forces and separate them from central command. It appears like you're trying to remove central command from the picture and that makes military command and many people on all levels very nervous, not to mention Anelia and her lot. Anyone can make the argument that a trainer doesn't necessarily need to be the chief commander to train the troops. Even a sergeant can train troops," said Daf.

I looked around and said, "Well, any ideas?"

"Well, Sir, we spent part of last night looking for a suitable and believable solution but we couldn't find one that was convincing," said Daf.

"How about you Gen, you've been a commander before, what would convince you to relegate your command to someone else in a situation like this?" I asked.

"Outside of being ordered... nothing! Not without raising a lot of suspicion. But, come to think of it I don't have to take charge of all the troops. But since the war council already promoted me to General I will retain that rank and start building an army of my own and that way I won't have to interfere with military command or anyone else."

"What makes you think that would be acceptable, especially to military command?" I asked.

"What happened to us yesterday and today is a sign of things to come. It justifies putting an appeal before the war council to allow us to develop a security team to not only guard us and the ship but also the troops. Since we don't know who the attackers are, who is to say that they won't attack the troops? Today the attackers attacked the ship and tomorrow they may attack the troops. We'll have to make a case to the war council to give me the right to build a security team. We need to sell the idea that these attacks may be coming from the aliens that attacked the galaxy traders and that we need to put measures in place to protect ourselves. In other words, we need a security force to protect us and the troops from outside

attacks, especially after the ship leaves our planet. I'll need permission from the war council and from Asora's government to build this security force and it will have to be built with people I know and trust and who will be loyal to me," said Gen.

I looked at everyone. There didn't seem to be any objections.

"On top of that," I said, "this will kill Anelia's propaganda machine, which I'm sure has been busy trying to convince everyone that Gen wants to take over this planet's military."

"What if Anelia offers her private army as a means of providing security for the planet? In which case it will make it unnecessary for Gen to form one," said Vel.

"She won't. She can't. Officially no one knows she has a private army. If she makes such an offer she'll create a lot of suspicion. Everyone is allowed to have personal guards but there is a legal limit as to how many one can have. She won't risk exposing her private army," said Gen.

"Okay then, this sounds like a convincing argument. You just have to be careful how you present it when the time comes. Now let's eat," said Nagol and waved at the server to bring us food.

When we were done eating our breakfast we strolled to Asora's office and Gen made her pitch. Asora agreed to almost everything Gen asked for. She liked the idea of forming a security team to guard the troops. After carefully examining what was said Asora assured us that the war council would pass a resolution to allow Gen to create and command a security team and that her government would ratify it to make it legal. She also liked the idea that we weren't going to interfere in the affairs of the military, outside of training the troops. She wasn't sure how that was going to work but she didn't believe there would be objections, outside of Anelia and her backers. Asora seemed to be calm and confident and liked our plan.

“Now go. Delche keeps calling me looking for you. Go and have a good time and I’ll see you back here tomorrow,” said Asora and literally threw us out of her office.

After Gen took Nagol back to the hotel she joined us in the tube tunnel and we went to the ship. As we got closer I could see the burn marks on it. The ship wasn’t damaged, at least not on the outside.

As soon as we got inside I asked Vel and Daf to reprogram the sensors to monitor activities and showed Gen how to run diagnostics.

When we were done and after we had verified that everything was okay and running normally, Gen asked me if she could pilot the ship to Delche’s place. Her argument was that I had allowed her grandfather to do it so why not her?

I couldn’t say no to her and get away with it but at the same time I didn’t want to make it easy for her so I said, “It’ll cost you,” without giving a thought as to how she would interpret my comment.

“Of course it will. It always costs me... every time I ask a man for a favour it costs me... why not?”

Daf came to my rescue and said, “Can’t you see he’s messing with you? He’s not that kind of man.”

“All men are that kind, it’s in their nature. What makes you think he’s different?” asked Gen.

“He has feelings for Ruzha and she has feelings for him. He won’t mess with anyone else,” replied Daf.

Gen, it appeared, had lost her desire to fly the ship and after she activated the docking robot she punched the autopilot assuming the ship was going to take us to Delche’s place, and we flew off.

Without saying a word, Gen raised her hands up and I grabbed them and hung onto her until we arrived at the old open spot under the grove above Delche’s restaurant.

“Is this where you met Ruzha for the first time?” asked Gen.

I didn't reply to Gen but I did ask Vel to take the three original uniforms so that I could return them to their owners. I was going to give mine to Airam as a gift for her fabric museum.

As we walked out of the ship the place seemed a little different, the trees in the grove had grown and the path looked well used. It abruptly ended in open space where there was a plaque. Without me asking what it was Vel said that it was a tribute to the ship and its crew for affording rights and bringing equality to the outlanders.

While the ladies went to have a closer look at the plaque I left with my guards and slowly headed towards town. When they caught up to me they wanted to know what was eating me, as Gen put it.

At first I said I didn't want to talk about it but then I said, “To afford them rights and bring them equality? That was the idea but look what happened...”

“Nothing happened!” yelled Gen. “Explain to me how what happened is your fault!”

“I don't want to get into it right now but, just for your information, I was the one who pushed this planet to start trading with the galaxy traders, which then led to the dreaded agreement that dragged this planet into someone else's war. Please no more talk.”

My words must have upset Gen. She ran back to the ship and sat down beside the landing gear. The girls looked at me like I was some kind of monster.

Daf grabbed my hand and said, “I know emotions are running high right now but this isn't the time to be fighting. Your friends are expecting you to be there and want you to be happy. If you want to be the bigger person go and apologize to her.”

I looked at Daf, pulled her by her hand and we took a slow walk towards Gen. I extended my hand and after Gen grabbed it I pulled her and she stood up.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

Holding them by their hands I dragged them right beside me as we picked up the pace on our way to Delche’s place. Every time I looked back I saw my guards following close behind and wondered what they were thinking, especially of our little drama.

Just as the town became visible we saw people gathering in the streets. There were hundreds of them, maybe thousands. When we came closer they began to run towards us. I told the girls to tell the people to stop running and not make sudden moves or my guards would shoot them. They listened and stopped. Delche, Ori, Ruzha and Airam ran over to us and wanted to know what was happening. They had heard on the news that our ship had been attacked and they wanted to know if we were okay.

When the people saw Ruzha they began to swarm around her asking all kinds of questions. I watched her masterfully calm them down and take their questions one by one

“What do they want?” I asked.

“Almost to the last one they want to welcome you back and want you to end the war. They don’t want their children to be sent away to fight.”

Ruzha told them that I was here to listen to the people and do what the people wanted just like I had always done.

Moments later we were swarmed by reporters with cameras who wanted to know why I was here and what I was going to do about the war. Some had live feeds and the entire planet was watching.

Because I couldn’t speak their language I took Gen and the girls over to Ruzha and asked Gen to speak on my behalf. I then told Ruzha to tell the reporters and the crowds standing behind them that

I was appointing Gen to take my place on the planet while I went away to investigate the war. Then as a gesture of passing authority from one commander to another, I asked Ruzha to take the medallion off my neck and place it on Gen's neck and tell the people what that meant.

Of course the people knew of the symbolic passing of power already since channel 45 had already reported on our get together from the night before where that was well explained by Nagol's commentary and Asora's demonstration.

After Ruzha transferred the medallion from me to Gen and explained the symbolism of the passing of power, the crowd went wild in support.

Ruzha then asked Gen to speak to the reporters and the people and explain to them the details of our plans, which had already been approved by Asora.

All eyes were on Gen. She took her time to eloquently explain in detail what our plans were and how we were going to execute them, starting with welcoming the troops back the next day.

Up until now the people didn't know that the troops were coming back and that their children would be returning home. If nothing else, the fact that their children, two million of them, were coming back was a solid reason for the people to put their trust in us and their support behind Gen. They loved her and were ready to follow her, which was a great boost for Gen.

While Gen spoke I invited Delche, Ori and Airam to join us in front of the cameras. We heard people whispering when they saw us all together.

When Airam saw Vel holding the old uniforms she took them off her hands.

"You did this, didn't you?" I asked Delche.

"Did what?" he asked.

“You told these people about Gen and our plans beforehand didn’t you?”

“Yes, yes I did but not about the return of the soldiers. For the first time in years I had something positive to say to them. They’ve been asking me for your return since you left and all I could say was I’m trying, I’m trying and I’m working on it. Now, finally you’re back, you brought the ship back and you gave them hope. Most importantly, they’ll see their children again... they will have their children back.”

“Delche, this whole thing could turn into a disaster and it won’t sit well on my conscience.”

“Yeah right, I know you won’t let it turn into a disaster and if it does you’ll be dead. We’ll all be dead and it won’t matter.”

“Delche we are in this mess because of me and you know it.”

“Well, because of you, because of me, because of Asora, Airam, Ori, Ruzha and many other people we can blame, but is it? And don’t tell me you’re the only one who has a guilty conscience. No one blames you for anything; you blame yourself for that and frankly I’m tired of it. You say you’re a soldier so why not act like one? Go out there and do your duty, end this damn war before it consumes us all. And, before you chew me out, I’m telling you this because I’m your friend and I care about you.”

Just as Gen was finished talking Airam, in front of the cameras, handed me, Delche and Ori our old uniforms. I grabbed Vel by the arm and told her to tell Airam that I was donating my uniform to her museum. When Delche and Ori heard that they also gave her their uniforms for her museum. Then, suddenly, every reporter wanted to know what was going on. Ruzha explained to them who Airam was and her role in designing the new uniforms for the planet’s military with the Macedonian sun and Macedonian colours. When the crowd stopped clapping and cheering and Airam had her moment of fame, Ruzha further explained that every uniform worn by every soldier carried the Macedonian sun; a symbol of power.

At that moment Gen raised my medallion, the little round piece of painted plastic and, in the eyes of the people, turned it into a symbol of something extraordinary. At least that's what I was told by Daf who was translating for me.

When we were done Ruzha told the reporters and the people that the world was in good hands and not to worry.

"What are you trying to do?" I asked. "Put more pressure on us?"

"No," she said, "I want to go inside and have a drink and eat the food Delche's crew slaved to make for us."

After we all waved goodbye to everyone we left and went inside the restaurant. I noticed Delche had made some small changes inside. One thing I noticed is there were round tables in the area where the dance floor was. The dance floor was gone.

When Ori saw me looking and smiling it reminded him of the first night we spent here and the great time we had dating my guards Glory and Morning. He smiled at me and said, "We had some great times here, didn't we?"

At that moment Delche's chef came over and gave me a big hug. He then drummed the theme from the "teshkoto" dance on the table with his fingers, which he had done for us the night before I left. He seemed happy to see me and so did Airam, who dragged Vel over to properly thank me for giving her my uniform for her museum.

I grabbed her by her shoulders and pulled her close to me. She had fully grown into a beautiful woman now and was not the same girl I remembered. This was the first time I stared into her beautiful eyes and she stared back at mine. I looked over at Delche who was keeping an eye on me and he gave me the nod. I then gave her a long kiss which made Vel turn away. After that we both walked away and said nothing. Airam went with Vel to bring us the food and drinks.

Delche came over and said, “She always loved you, even after you left. She kept talking about you, asking about things that daughters don’t usually talk about with their fathers. We all missed you. You became part of our lives and then you left us.”

Just as I was going to apologize to Delche for leaving, the chef announced lunch was served.

Delche sat at the end of the table and asked me to sit beside him and Ori beside me. Gen sat opposite Delche facing me followed by Vel and Ruzha. Airam sat beside Ori, and Daf sat beside Airam. The chef sat at the other end of the table facing my guards who were standing directly behind Delche. By now everyone was used to them and because they were quiet and motionless they were practically invisible.

Just as I looked around I noticed Ruzha had set her cameras all around us and was filming the event, which made me think of the last supper. I don’t know why.

Delche looked down, closed his eyes and said something in their language and then looked at me. I was going to say something but I didn’t. I was going to ask him when he had become religious but I didn’t.

To honour me Delche had Airam, the hostess of the house, fill our glasses with rakia and place them in front of us. She mixed the rakia for the women, including herself, with the green stuff.

After Delche toasted us and we all had a sip I asked Delche about Airam drinking. He said she only drinks the green stuff and only during ceremonies.

The meal was virtually identical to the food we ate when Ori and I met Delche for the first time. It was roasted meat with small roasted, glazed potatoes and roasted peppers.

After I had a few bites I said, “Compliments to the chef. The food is more delicious now than I remember when we ate here the first time.”

When Delche translated the chef came over and gave me a big hug.

“You made his day, good for you,” said Delche very quietly.

When we were done eating we drank some more and when everyone seemed relaxed I asked Delche to help me acquire supplies for my ship. He said he would make the necessary arrangements.

Perhaps, this was the wrong time to talk about leaving again but I didn't want to forget about the supplies. I looked around and could see the worry on people's faces, especially Vel who sat on the other side of the table.

After Airam poured us more drinks she smiled at me and asked her father to translate for her.

“Tell us about your return to earth, how was it? Was it as good as you expected?”

This was a surprise for me. I was caught off guard and didn't know what to say so I decided to tell them the truth. I wasn't going to lie to them so I told them everything. Surprisingly no one seemed to care or be sorry for me. They were more interested to know about the women I'd met and about Oscar and his people. It seems like my painful experience didn't matter much to them.

More drinks for everyone,” yelled Delche. “I want my friends to get drunk today and, as Otsi here said a couple of days ago, worry about the future tomorrow.”

With those words, the women grabbed their drinking glasses and a bottle of the green stuff and went to another table. The chef left and went back to the kitchen to prepare food for the customers. That left Delche, Ori and me, the old crew, at the main table.

After I started talking to Ori, Delche excused himself and said, “If you stay here late tonight I can get you your supplies and the box of rakia for the captain by tomorrow.”

“I guess I’ll have to,” I said. “I don’t know how much time I’ll have after tomorrow, after the troops arrive. We’re expected to be there to welcome them back.”

After Delche left I looked at Ori and said, “You look like hell man, what happened to you?”

“I don’t know. I guess I became a misfit. Putting it simply, I turned into a hybrid of two cultures and when that happens, you don’t know where it’s going to take you. In my case I didn’t fit anywhere. My people, including my parents, didn’t want me because they felt I had betrayed them. The outlanders didn’t want me because I wasn’t one of them or something. The only place I felt comfortable was in the slums. Nobody questioned me or judged me there. We were all desperately trying to survive while coping with our problems. Even Airam rejected me. I really thought I could have a meaningful relationship with her but it didn’t work out. She cares for me, I know that and I’m not complaining, but we have no future together. So, now I’m a reject and live with the rejects of the world.”

At that point I turned to him, grabbed his neck with both hands, pulled him against me and said, “I’m so sorry man.”

To my surprise he said, “There’s nothing for you to be sorry for. I’m thankful to you for all the things you did for me. You cared for me and treated me as an equal. I learned many things from you and Delche. I was on top of the world when I was with you. You opened my eyes to the truth, to everything that was real. It’s not your fault that this place turned out to be shit-hole. I’d rather know the truth and be miserable than live a lie.”

“You’re a good man,” I said.

“Don’t worry about me, do what you have to. Save the young lives. The entire planet has gone mad and nobody seems to see what’s happening... Or they simply don’t care. I don’t know,” he said.

I looked at him and he looked at me. He said, “No!”

“No what?” I asked.

“No, I’m not coming with you.”

“I haven’t asked you to come with me.”

“I know you want to but I couldn’t possibly rob anyone of their aspirations, not even if I had to save their lives. They need to experience things for themselves, on their own, just like I did. I’ve had my time, let Vel have hers.”

The women saw us looking at them and they were pretty sure we were talking about them so they came over.

Gen was first to speak and said, “Are you talking about us?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Vel and Daf, tonight we’re spending the night here. We’ll sleep on the ship. I want you to become accustomed to sleeping on the ship before we leave. Unless you want to stay back in which case I’ll take Delche and Ori with me.”

At first they thought I was joking but after seeing that no one was laughing they agreed to sleep on the ship.

Daf said, “We’ll have to sleep naked since we didn’t bring any sleepwear.”

Ori laughed but didn’t say anything.

“Being a soldier means you’ll have to sleep with your clothes on, or naked if you have to,” I said.

They both looked at Gen for support but unfortunately for them Gen said, “A soldier must be ready to act immediately at any given moment and must be prepared for everything.”

Ori then said, “When he calls you to the com you must run at once and if you happen to be naked too bad, you’ll be sitting naked in front of him.”

“I guess you had to do that, eh?” said Vel.

Ruzha burst out laughing and said, “I wouldn’t mind standing naked in front of him.”

“And what if he asks you to open a channel on the viewer and talk to a bunch of men on the other side?” asked Ori.

“Oh come on people, what’s the big deal with being seen naked. You all undress for your doctor, your boyfriends, how’s that any different? He’s your commander and is responsible for your lives and you worry about him seeing you naked?” said Airam.

I looked at Airam and started clapping. Ori joined me. The women then started clapping.

“Don’t get carried away now. The chances of me seeing you naked are very slim, besides we need to respect our privacy and when we feel uncomfortable we ask for privacy. I have no problem with looking the other way if you ask me.”

At that moment Delche walked in and said, “Your stuff will be delivered to you at the ship very early tomorrow morning, make sure you’re there. Asora will be paying for it.”

“Thank you, but why so early? Is it illegal stuff?” I asked.

“Of course it is, that’s the only way you can get things done here quickly, and no questions asked,” replied Delche looking at us, men on one side of the table and women on the other.

“What’s going on here?” he asked.

“Silly things, you don’t want to know about,” replied Airam and left the table and went to the kitchen.

Delche looked at Gen and said, “Are you prepared for the crap they’re loading you with? I know what it’s like. If you aren’t ready it will ruin your life. It ruined my relationship with my wife.”

Gen thought for a moment and said, “Now that I think about it, I guess I’m not. I guess nobody is. I’ll have to depend on people to support me, especially all of you. Come to think of it, I’m really alone in this. Except for this piece of plastic I’m wearing around my neck I’m powerless and there is no one to help me. On top of that I’m just a practical person and don’t know crap about politics.”

“That’s not true, you’re the strongest person I’ve ever met, and I don’t mean physically, but in character. You’re honest and determined and those are rare qualities. I’d say you’re more like him (pointing at me) but honest,” said Ruzha.

“And when did I ever lie to you?” I objected.

“Not to me or to your friends that I know of. But I know you have bluffed your way out of things many times with lies.”

“Enough crap,” yelled Delche and called for more food and drinks. “I want everyone to be happy today. This is my day; I asked you all to come here so that we could have some fun together before we’re separated again. One more thing... Ruzha and Gen, you should consider working together. Hear me out before you shoot me down. Ruzha I’ve known you for a long time and I think you should go back to doing what you do best... go back to television and tell stories... tell the truth like you did before. Gen, I don’t know you at all but I know your grandfather well. He taught me many things including the Macedonian language, and has been my mentor for a long time. I also trust my friend’s (pointing at me) judgment in choosing you for the job. So I know you can do it. But you will need someone, you will need an ally, you will need Ruzha to help you translate your plans so that everyone will understand them. I heard you speak outside today and you did a fantastic job but it took Ruzha to bring you out of the shadows into the spotlight. I want to see Ruzha tell stories on television again like she did before and make television worth watching again. You’re going to face a lot of propaganda and a lot of criticism on the public forum and you’ll need someone, a trusted ally to fight for you, and by trusted I mean someone who the people trust, like Ruzha. What do you think?”

We all looked at Delche.

“Delche, since when have you become a philosopher. It wasn’t too long ago I couldn’t even get a single word out of you that wasn’t sarcasm? What happened to you?” I asked.

Ruzha and Gen looked at each other and they both said yes to Delche’s suggestion.

What everyone didn’t realize was that the cameras were still recording our conversation. When I noticed that I asked Ruzha to turn them off and edit some of the parts out.

“Not on your life. This is history in the making. You taught me to capture real moments, spontaneous moments, when people aren’t aware that they’re being filmed. These are real moments and, based on what happens in the near future, these could be the most precious moments of our lives.”

Before I had a chance to reply to Ruzha, compliment her on her artistic abilities or give her hell for filming us this way, Airam showed up with a platter of meat and two bottles of rakia, one of which she placed on the table and the other she gave to Ori.

She looked at her father and Delche said, “They’re ready to go.”

After everyone said goodbye to Ori, I followed them outside and I said goodbye to him like it was my last goodbye. Deep down Ori felt I wasn’t coming back from the war unless I was able to stop it. He also knew that the chances of that were slim. It was a sad goodbye for both of us. I asked him not to discuss his opinions with Airam. He agreed.

I couldn’t shake the sadness of saying goodbye to Ori so when I went back Delche took me to the side and said, “You can’t feel responsible for everyone all the time. Ori chose his path in life. Let him live it the way he wants to. I chose my path and I’m happy where I am. I don’t agree with what’s happening but getting angry, being upset, worrying doesn’t do anything to help the situation. It simply drags you down and drains your energy. I was king for a

while, the entire world was mine. Everyone loved me, especially for the loads of money I gave them, and then the war happened. Well, all I can say is everything has its time and trying to hang onto things that have passed their time is a wasted effort. Look at me, I'm telling you things you used to tell me. Perhaps you need to hear them from someone else. Look at the lovely women you're surrounded by, stop worrying and go over there and have some fun."

I didn't say anything but I could sense that Delche too was worried about me and he too suspected that once I left I wouldn't be coming back.

The food and drinks finally arrived and we got back to eating and drinking until it was time to go to bed. We also watched channel 45 and saw Ruzha telling our story and the things she had recorded a couple of days before. We watched the ceremony of the passing of the medallion and noticed the big smile on Gen's face.

"Gen, you look so happy being loaded with my burdens," I said.

"I smiled for the cameras not for you. Look how beautiful I look with your medallion around my neck. It's mine now and you can't have it back."

Ruzha told us to be quiet and enjoy the show; it could be her last one.

Despite our troubles we all looked very happy. I gave Ruzha a kiss for a job well done. Then everyone gave Ruzha a kiss and a hug. It was nice to be alive, I thought. I was hoping this was not the calm before the storm.

A while later Gen's cab arrived. Ruzha announced that she was going with Gen to the hotel. Gen had called Nagol and asked him to send his cab to pick them up.

Ruzha gave me a kiss and said, "I don't know when I'm going to see you again," and the two left.

We too decided it was time to go and, after we said goodnight to Delche, Airam and the chef, we left the restaurant and went to the ship.

I took my old place on the ship and went to sleep. After lying there for a while it felt like I had never left.

Welcoming back the troops

Early the next morning there was a loud metallic knock on the hull of the ship. I jumped up and looked outside through the ship's windshield. It was dark outside.

“On your feet ladies, our supplies are here,” I yelled.

My guards promptly disengaged from their docks as I opened the hatch and followed me outside.

A man greeted us with words I didn't understand and pointed at the three crates loaded on a green trailer pulled by a green tractor. I tried pulling a crate off but it was too heavy for me to budge. The man shook his head “no”.

By then Daf was outside half-dressed, her hair messed up and looking sleepy.

“The man says we need to offload our supplies as soon as possible because he has to go,” she said.

After Daf translated for me I ordered my guards to grab the cases one by one and take them inside the ship. But as we took the cases inside the man got upset and yelled something. By then Vel was outside and when I asked her what the man wanted, she said he wanted his cases back. When she told him it would take some time for us to empty them he took off and left his tractor and trailer behind. He disappeared into the grove.

I shook my head and said, “We'll take the tractor and his empty crates back to Delche's place when we're done here, now let's unpack everything.”

I looked at Vel when she came inside. She looked a mess.

“Go clean yourself up,” I said.

“With what?” yelled Vel. “There's no water, no towels, no combs, not even water to drink.”

I didn't say anything.

After we opened all three crates we secured all the bags of water in the cabinets and filled the shower and toilet tanks. Delche had ordered extra water in anticipation that we might need it for the tanks.

When the first crate was emptied I took it outside and put it on the trailer. After that we took a short break and each had a drink of water.

After we started unpacking the food I asked the girls to make sure there were no glass or breakable containers and if they found any to let me know.

It took us more than an hour to unpack everything and put it away. Delche had ordered a lot more provisions than we had space for but we managed to stow everything away. To make more room we took the bedding from the cabinets and put it under our mattresses.

After we were done unpacking and I'd taken the rest of the crates outside I realized that we were missing the captain's rakia. We were supposed to take it with us.

When I stepped inside to ask if the girls had seen the case I heard a voice outside speaking Macedonian. It was Delche. He was holding a case over his shoulder with one hand and a rope with his other hand.

"Hey sleepy heads, are you done packing yet? I've got more stuff for you," he said.

Without looking at us Delche walked right inside the ship and tied the box to the floor next to the other one and said, "Here is the rakia for the captain. Don't worry, the bottles are plastic. And here are a couple of bottles of the firewater for you. You left these behind when you left for earth."

While I secured the firewater in a small cabinet under my bed Delche opened the other box, took a bottle of rakia out and said, "I'm taking one of these babies with me. By now, after resting for five years in here, this stuff should have aged enough to be called premium quality. We can try it out when you come to the restaurant for breakfast."

By then the three of us were standing over him.

He looked up and said, "Oh, good morning," and started laughing.

"What's so funny?" asked Daf looking at him while he was looking at her hair.

"You look like you had a sex orgy in here last night," he said.

"Hey, hey," I said in a serious and protesting tone of voice. Smiling I then said, "And how's that any of your business?"

The girls didn't know what to make of our comments so they began to laugh sarcastically.

Vel said, "Ha, ha, that's very funny!"

Delche apologized and said, "Get used to it. People will gossip about you. They always assume these things happen with mixed crews. But I'm certain Otsi here will be a gentleman, even when he's drunk."

After I thanked Delche and the girls for their help in securing and putting away our supplies, Delche invited us for breakfast. But first he had to take the tractor back.

"Why did the guy take off like that?" I asked.

"He has a criminal record and didn't want to get caught," Delche replied and drove the tractor away.

“Speaking of surveillance,” I said to the girls, “before we go for breakfast please check the ship’s logs and see if anything happened last night.”

When Vel was looking into it I grabbed Daf and straightened her twisted clothes which she’d slept in last night and combed her hair with my fingers. She didn’t resist but kept giving me dirty looks.

When Vel saw me doing that she made a motion with her hand telling me to stay away from her.

“Wash your face; you’ve got dried stuff all over it,” I said.

She ignored me and said, “Outside of the usual traffic overhead and the night creatures in the forest, there were no other activities captured by our sensors.”

She then went and washed her face and combed her hair with her fingers.

By the time we got to the restaurant Delche was back and our breakfast was ready. Airam was back too from taking Ori home. She said she had a great time with him and he was feeling much better after seeing his friends.

After we ate breakfast Delche opened the bottle of rakia he’d taken from my ship and poured us each some. The girls didn’t want any and left to join Airam in the kitchen.

Looking at Airam Delche said, “This has been good for her too. She hardly socializes anymore. She had a good time with the girls the last few days. I had a great time too, not as good as the old times, but good.”

Then, after he took a sip of the rakia, he said, “Unfortunately it seems aging this rakia doesn’t make it any better, it still tastes the same.”

“I have mixed feelings about my return here,” I said. “Life for me on earth was terrible. I wanted to be free and do what ordinary people

do but I couldn't. And, you know, I don't belong here. I feel uncomfortable, especially with my ties to the ship."

"Don't talk like that. Think about all the people you've helped, the lives you've changed, your friends who love you and the young ladies who adore you. So, you made a few personal sacrifices. So what! Soldiers die for even less."

"Dying is easy Delche, living is difficult. I'm not just talking about the relationships I've missed out on. I'm talking about the lives I've taken. What scares me the most is how many more lives I'll have to take before the gods of war take me. When a soldier starts thinking like that it's over for them. Good soldiering means kill before you're killed but the question is how many do I have to kill to keep saving my own hide?"

"I can't help you there; you'll have to decide that on your own. All I'm saying is that you have many friends who love you and it would be unfair to them if you're gone because of your stupid dilemmas."

"Delche, I'll make sure I do my best not to disappoint my friends and you know that's the truth."

After he poured us a second drink Delche took his time and said, "I believe you... That's why you came back..."

Just as we sat there sipping our drinks Vel ran over and said, "The troops will be arriving here in a few hours but Asora has ordered us to go into outer space, rendezvous with the returning ships and escort them to a base called Nulos. She gave me the coordinates."

"Why do we need to escort them?" I asked.

"For security reasons," she said. "There are over one hundred ships and they will all have to slow down in order to land, at which point they'll be vulnerable to attack. They've already been attacked and we don't want a repeat of that. Six of our escort ships were destroyed during the attack. It's all over the news."

"Okay, call Asora back and tell her we're on our way," I said.

Everyone's eyes were glued to the holographic viewer as Delche put on the news.

I gulped the rest of my rakia and asked Delche if he had any camouflage uniforms lying around. Delche called Airam and she brought me two full uniforms in my size. She then took the girls and also outfitted them with two uniforms each.

"We'll change on the ship," I said as we said goodbye to our friends. Airam squeezed my hand and said, "Please come back soon."

As soon as we got on the ship we quickly changed and tossed our dress uniforms on our beds on top of our spare camouflage uniforms and took our positions. I powered up the ship and shot it into outer space. After Vel made contact with the admiral leading the fleet and got their coordinates, Daf entered them into our navigation computer. I set the speed to max and punched the autopilot.

"This is our first mission together, isn't it exciting?" I said to the girls.

They both looked at me like I was crazy but said nothing.

"What? No comments?" I asked.

"Sir, perhaps you shouldn't have had that rakia so early in the morning," replied Vel.

"Call the admiral and tell him we'll be arriving in five minutes," I said. "We'll do a fly by around the ships. Also ask him to let us know if the ships have observed anything unusual."

"Sir, the admiral is a she not a he," said Vel sarcastically.

"My apologies Lieutenant, I thought the lead ship was composed of an all male crew."

When we arrived I took control of my ship and flew it close to the formation. The ships were arranged in a horizontal plane in diamond formation. From the distance they looked like one huge ship.

“Are those people waving at us?” asked Daf.

“You must have good eyesight Daf, I can’t see anything,” I replied.

After I did a flyby and we checked our sensors I asked Vel to contact the admiral and ask for permission to land our ship on the lead ship so that I could speak with the admiral in private.

Vel made the call and said, “Permission granted; they’ll open a hatch for us.”

“I see it,” I said, “and flew inside.”

“What are we doing in here, Sir?” asked Vel.

“I want to meet with the ship’s crew and find out the details of their attack and whatever else they know about the war. If anyone knows anything it would be the top commander, and that, at the moment, is the admiral. Let me do the talking and please don’t reveal anything. We don’t know who these people are loyal to.”

After we landed I opened the hatch and as we stepped outside we were told to disarm. We weren’t allowed to carry arms inside the ship. I said we weren’t going to disarm and made the argument that they allowed a fully armed warship that could slice the entire fleet into pieces to enter their ship but they were afraid of a couple of armed guards.

At this point the admiral dismissed the officers and walked right into my ship.

“Damn protocols, don’t pay attention to them, they’re only trying to do their job. What can we do for you Captain?” she asked.

“I want to know what happened, who attacked you and why?” I said.

“I’m afraid all I can tell you is what happened. I’ll have to speculate on the rest.”

At that point I got a couple of plastic cups and filled them with rakia and offered the Admiral some.

After she took it she looked at me and said, “I’ve had one of those before. It was during a friend’s retirement party.” She mentioned the friend’s name but I wasn’t familiar with it.

“You know the captain. You know him, you saw him with his wife at our party a couple of days ago,” Vel said.

At that point I toasted and said, “To the captain and our mutual friend,” and we each took a sip.

After one of her crew members brought her a chair she placed it in front of us and sat down.

“I’ve heard a lot of things about you, good things, first from Princess Viera and then from the captain during his retirement party. I was told to trust you and tell you what I know,” she said.

She then spoke to the girls and asked them to take an oath that none of what we discussed here would leave the room. They both agreed.

“We were attacked by the same ships that we expected to escort us to the war zone. They attacked us unprovoked and wanted to take control of our ships the moment we informed them that we were turning back. We had to launch our entire escort to fight them off. They fought very aggressively. These ships were galaxy trader ships. I haven’t told anyone this because I don’t know who to trust. I opposed going to war in principle because I believed it was counterproductive. But I trusted that the galaxy traders had told us the truth. I don’t know what to think anymore. In other words, the situation is not what it seems and I’m grateful to you for calling us back. Unfortunately I don’t think everyone in here will agree with me, including some officers and soldiers who think we’re going on vacation. I know it’s bizarre... It would be a service to us if you

could get to the bottom of this war. I don't want to risk any more lives until we know what we're fighting for."

"Any more lives?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, we've already committed one million of our people and I wish to Mother Nature I'm wrong. But I don't believe we'll see any of them back. If our allies are willing to attack us to keep us here it must be one hell of a war from which there is no return."

She stuck her rakia cup out and I filled it again.

After she gulped it down she grabbed my bottle and said, "I'll need more of this, it feels like we're slowing down. We'll be landing soon, I've got to go. You stay in the rear and guard our ships."

"I will," I said. "Tell no one that the galaxy traders attacked you. I'll probably see you after we land."

"You forgot your chair," yelled Vel.

"Keep it," yelled the admiral and ordered everyone to clear the landing bay so that they could open the hatch for us to leave.

Moments later we were outside in outer space watching the ships dive down one by one.

"Why did you offer her rakia Sir, and how did you know she was going to drink it?" asked Daf.

"My dear officers, I can tell you all kinds of stories but the fact of the matter is, I didn't know how she was going to react. I didn't know if she knew what rakia was or that she knew the captain, which was a surprise to me. The rakia was a simple and subtle test to find out how much she knew. Anyone can say they knew Vieria and went to the captain's retirement party. But how many people would know about rakia and what it tasted like. Offering her rakia was what a good host would do, but at the same time it revealed a lot of things which we otherwise would not have known. Besides I never told her what it was. She only knew what it was because she'd had it

before and I'm sure the captain wouldn't have offered it to someone he didn't know."

I paused for a moment and then said, "Did you know that the captain is a royal... his mother and Voskot were first cousins."

"Wow, no Sir, I didn't know that," said Vel.

"I may have known that. I'm sure Delche mentioned it to me before at some point in our conversations," said Daf.

"Any activities on our sensors?" I asked.

"No, none," replied Vel.

"Who do you think attacked our ship the second time, Sir? We never did discuss that," said Daf.

"I don't know Daf, but I can tell you it wasn't the galaxy traders or the so-called aliens that are attacking them, because if it was them there would be no more us or our ship. It's probably an inside job... It was Anelia and her idiot supporters, no doubt."

"I tend to agree, Sir and thank you," said Daf.

I looked at her looking at me and smiled.

"Last ship going down," said Vel. "Should we follow?"

"One more sweep of the area and we'll follow."

"Nothing on the radar and nothing on the sensors, Sir."

Enjoy the view ladies; it's a beautiful day on the planet. Let's go and meet the troops."

As we slowly descended diagonally in a straight line we could see the base from the distance. All the ships had landed in a straight line and the troops were lining up in multiple lines as they left their ships.

“Look at that,” I said. “Every single dot is a soldier, a living being, returned safe and sound from the slaughterhouse.”

“Sir?” asked Vel.

“Never mind,” I said.

“You asked us to be honest with you; it’s time that you’re honest with us,” said Vel.

“What are you saying, Sir? What do you know and don’t want to say?” asked Daf.

“Not important, another time, it’s time to land.”

“I’ll inquire where, give me a moment,” said Vel.

After she made the call she said, “Land behind that group of people on the left side of the white rectangle.”

As we got closer, the white rectangle turned out to be an all women’s marching band beautifully dressed in uniforms with the Macedonian colours; marching in perfect formation.

“And look at us, we look like ground troops in camouflage,” I said. “And whose stupid idea was it to dress like that?”

“Yours, Sir,” they both said at the same time and began to giggle.

I said guard mode to my guards as we descended from the ship and went over to join Asora, Gen, Ruzha and members of the war council who had begun to march behind the marching band.

As we looked down we could see the long lines of soldiers descending from the ships and forming rectangles like that of the women’s marching band slowly moving ahead of us.

I poked Vel and asked her to ask Asora what she was going to do with all these returning soldiers?

“I don’t know yet. What would you suggest?” asked Asora.

“Send them home,” I said. “And then call them back in small groups for training as required.”

“Thank you, I’ll mention it to Gen and the other military commanders.”

Vel grabbed my hand and squeezed it. I looked at her; she had tears in her eyes. She said she was sorry.

“Sorry for what?” I asked.

“Until now two million was a number for me, but looking at two million people in front of me gives me a different perspective of how immense that number is. It’s easy to sit behind closed doors and make decisions that involve people’s lives but it’s different to face those people eye to eye. Imagine all of them not returning...”

“Yes, my dear Vel, war is a game of moving pieces until people start dying but then it’s too late. After blood is spilled it’s too late. Unfortunately it doesn’t end with the dead. Its destruction brings ruin, hunger, disease and suffering long after the war ends, not to mention the pain and anguish it causes for the broken families, the widows, the orphans, the maimed and the invalids... It’s worst for the losers...”

She kept holding my hand and squeezed it even harder.

“You should be happy,” I said. “We saved these people. They’re all back home safe and sound.”

Moments later the media began to set up around a large makeshift stage on top of a small hill. We were escorted onto the stage where we were saluted by ten commanders, five men and five women, from military command. We saluted back to the best of our ability. Two of the women commanders broke the line, smiled and shook my hand.

“They are mothers. Two of the returning soldiers are their sons,” said Asora quietly and Daf translated.

Everyone on the stage wore white uniforms with the Macedonian colours, including Ruzha who I’d never seen in uniform before. Everyone wore white except for my crew who wore camouflage. I grabbed Ruzha by the hand but she said, “Not now, I have to speak to the troops.”

As we shifted our way to the back of the stage, Asora shoved us to the side and we became completely visible to the columns of soldiers. Both girls were now holding my hands tight, one on each side. There was a roar coming from the soldiers.

Ruzha stepped up to the podium, raised her arms and the band stopped playing. There was complete silence.

Ruzha picked up the microphone and introduced herself as commander of communications in the training sector. There was a big roar.

“She’s very popular, especially with the men and looks even more beautiful in uniform,” said Daf.

“I hope she’ll be my boss one day. I would love that,” said Vel.

After she introduced herself, Ruzha introduced us. The girls lifted my arms up and we bowed and then saluted military style. After the big roar was over, we stepped to the back of the stage and the military commanders took our place, including Gen, who stood in the centre. The commanders didn’t bow but Gen lifted her medallion and received many cheers and salutes. After the commanders saluted they stepped back and the war council took their place. All they did was wave.

After that we were asked to step forward again and we stood behind Asora and Gen. Gen took the podium and, side by side with Ruzha, explained to the troops why they were back and what the plan was for them in the future. When Gen was done Asora took her place and informed the troops that they could now go home and wait to be

called in for training. After the big cheers died down Ruzha asked one of the commanders, a woman, to dismiss the troops and many ran to see their relatives and loved ones who were waiting for them on the sidelines.

Suddenly I had this urge to go down to be with the troops. While still holding hands with the girls, the three of us and my guards ran off the stage and jumped into the crowds of soldiers. The media immediately followed us.

The girls kept asking me if I'd gone mad so I let go of their hands but they still ran behind me. When the soldiers saw us coming they ran towards us but the girls told them to stay back because my guards had their weapons out and were ready to fire. The soldiers formed two lines, one on each side of us and extended their hands so that we could touch them. We touched everyone we could reach.

I heard Vel say in Macedonian, "So many men, so many beautiful men, fathers, sons, brothers, husbands, lovers..."

Eventually one of the officers, a man, standing on the stage picked up the microphone and ordered the soldiers to leave the grounds. Moments later we were left alone with the media, among whom were Ruzha's crew.

One person asked what I thought of all this.

"I'm happy to see the soldiers back safe and sound."

After we were abandoned by the media we started walking back to the ship and ran into a lone figure standing in our path in the distance. It was the admiral and she was waiting for us.

When we caught up to her she said, "We have much to talk about, But not here. I want to meet with Asora and those other two women. One I recognize but the other I don't know."

Vel explained to the admiral that the woman she didn't know was Gen, Nagol's granddaughter. Of course, the admiral happened to

know Nagol because she had been a student of his when he was a young man.

“See, I used one of your tricks to test the admiral, aren’t you proud of me?” said Vel.

I smiled as I punched the codes into the ship’s panel.

When we got in and the guards took their place in their docks I pointed my chair to the admiral. She looked at me, smiled, sat down and said something.

I looked at Vel and nothing. I looked at Daf and she too refused to tell me what the admiral had said.

The admiral said something again and Vel translated.

“The admiral said she outranks you and would have taken your chair anyway if you hadn’t offered it to her.”

I smiled. She pulled me down by my arm and gave me a kiss on the cheek.

“Sooo she’s a joker... just... like... you...” said Vel.” I’m sure you two will get along very well.”

“Don’t translate that,” I said to Daf.

After I sat down on the chair the admiral had told us to keep earlier, which I had secured near the box of rakia that Delche had given us, I asked Daf to set the coordinates for Nagol’s restaurant.

After that the admiral took the controls and flew us there.

“Not bad for an old lady, eh?” she said. “I used to be a pilot when I started my career with the military.”

After she landed the ship on the designated pad without any aid, she turned off the engines and opened the hatch.

The girls helped her out of the seat and, after they took her outside, began to walk towards the tube station that led to Nagol's hotel.

She was a tall, thin lady and must have been very beautiful when she was young. She had to be younger than Nagol since he had been her instructor. I was curious to see what a pupil meeting a teacher after so many years would be like so I closed the ship's hatch and followed closely behind.

When we arrived I opened the lounge door and almost ran into Nagol.

"Where have you been?" he asked. "I was expecting you here this morning but you didn't show up."

He then immediately turned his attention to the admiral and came closer. He looked at me but since I didn't know her name I said, "This is the admiral who led the troops back home."

He looked at me and said, "Ah, they're here, that's great," and then looked at the woman again.

A moment later I saw tears running down her cheeks and heard Nagol say in Macedonian, "The eyes never lie."

I had heard that phrase before. That was what Oscar's mother had said when she looked into Oscar's eyes after seeing him for the first time in ten years. What's going on, I wondered? Could they be relatives? Why didn't the admiral say something?

As they grabbed each other's hands and kept staring at each other, I took the girls away to give them some privacy and asked Vel to contact Gen, Ruzha and Asora and ask them to come here at my request and not tell them that the admiral was here.

Daf in the meantime had turned the viewer (holographic television) on and was watching a video of us at the base meeting the soldiers.

Daf asked me to sit with her while Vel made the calls.

I looked away and noticed the admiral and Nagol sitting on a couch in the corner of the lounge still holding hands and talking.

“I bet you they were lovers,” Daf said.

“I’m sure we’ll find out eventually,” I replied.

I then saw a shot of the long line of soldiers lined up to touch our hands. I was surprised by how many there were there.

“They’re placing a lot of hope on us,” I said. “I hope we don’t disappoint them.

But before Daf had a chance to reply I said. “You and Vel seem to be very popular with the boys, look at them all smiling at you.”

She slapped me on my arm and made a cute face at me.

Vel came back and said that Asora, Gen and Ruzha were in the building and would be coming here.

“Asora asked what the urgency was but I didn’t know what to tell her so I said I didn’t know. Was that okay?” asked Vel.

At that point I grabbed Vel by the arm and pulled her closer. She moved away.

“If you’re going to be that way” I said, “then go over there and tell Nagol that the women will be here any minute and ask him what’s with him and the admiral.”

Looking angry she said, “Is that an order, Sir?”

“No,” I said.

Then she said something angrily in her language, which made Daf snicker.

“What did you say?” I asked.

“I said for you to go and do the impossible with yourself,” she replied.

After that I got up and went towards her. She stood there frozen, looking up at me with sad puppy dog eyes, wondering what I was going to do to her.

“Take it easy Vel, I was only messing with you. I’m sorry if I offended you.”

She looked at me, smiled and went over and informed Nagol that Asora, Gen and Ruzha were on their way. She then told the admiral, “I invited the three women to come over as you requested.”

Moments later Asora, Gen and Ruzha walked in and wanted to know what was so urgent. Vel pointed them to the admiral who introduced herself and told the women that they had been summoned at her request. She also told everyone that anything that was said here had to remain confidential.

After that she explained her relationship with Nagol, which Daf had guessed correctly. She also told us that she was planning to retire after the war was over and remain with Nagol. She emphasized the fact that she trusted no one outside of her circle and that we should do the same.

After Gen explained her plan and what she was attempting to do, the admiral said that she would put her support and the support of the people she trusted behind her. She then turned to me and, through Vel, told me to go out there and find out what this war was about. She strongly emphasized to me that I should trust no one and verify multiple times what anyone tells me because things were not as they seemed, especially with the galaxy traders.

When she was done talking to everyone, the admiral, Asora, Gen and Ruzha went to the corner of the lounge and had more talks. Nagol took some snacks, forks, glasses and a bottle of rakia to them and said to me, “They’ll need this.”

When he came back he asked the server to bring us some snacks and drinks and began to tell us how he'd met the admiral when he was younger.

I asked him if Gen knew about her. Nagol said his affair with the admiral ended before he was married to Gen's grandmother. The admiral and Nagol were split apart when the admiral was assigned to a mission. Nagol never heard from her or saw her after that. She was sent to pilot a ship into deep space while he remained behind teaching. When she came back Nagol was already married. When she found out Nagol had a wife she didn't want to bother him so she never made contact with him. The admiral never married and has no family of her own.

After Nagol finished telling his story he went and got the admiral and they both left the lounge. At the same time the server brought us our supper and left us alone to eat.

Then, just as Asora was done eating, she took a long gulp of rakia, excused herself from the table and left for her office.

"So, what did you ladies talk about," I asked with a mouthful of meat.

"Oh, you're so gross and to think I kissed that dirty mouth," replied Ruzha.

"Hey, you don't see me accusing you with this, that and the other," I complained.

Gen laughed out loud and said, "I don't know what you're saying but you sound like an old married couple."

We all laughed.

I then said, "Look, Gen has developed a sense of humour, who would have thought it possible?"

Gen then filled her mouth with food, took a gulp of rakia on top of it and said, "Look at me I am Otsi making a joke!"

“Stop it! Enough of the childish stuff,” yelled Daf. “We only have a short time to be together, can we at least be civil?”

“Okay boss!” I said which made Gen laugh.

I looked at Gen and said, “You’re worse than me, you know!”

“So, what did you talk about,” asked Daf.

“You already know what we talked about; the admiral told you the same things she told us. She wanted to make sure that we were all on the same page,” said Ruzha, and then asked. “When do you plan to leave for the galaxy traders to investigate the war... do you have a plan?”

“We’ll leave the moment you tell us that you’ll be safe here without us,” I said.

“What about a plan?” Ruzha asked again.

“No, we don’t have a plan other than to go there, ask around and find out what’s going on,” I replied.

“Make sure you keep us informed and do it through a secure channel,” Ruzha emphasized.

“Thank you mother,” I said. “I’ll also write you a letter every day.”

After a long pause Ruzha smiled and said, “You’d better, I’ll hold you to it!”

“If it’s all right with you, you should leave as soon as possible to avoid suspicion. Leave casually and make it look like you’ll be coming back soon. Just leave and don’t go saying long goodbyes to everyone... like you’ll never be coming back,” suggested Gen.

“I agree with you Gen. We’ll leave tomorrow morning after breakfast. We’ll say goodbye to Nagol and the admiral and then leave. Are you planning to be here?”

“Yes, we’ll be here. I plan to film this historic moment,” said Ruzha.

“I’m not sure you should broadcast it,” I said. “Don’t tell our enemies we’re gone until you feel comfortable and safe without us.”

Gen agreed and told us that she had already started her selection of trusted people and members of her chosen security team had started assembling. Her troops would be arriving at the training centre the next day.

“The moment they arrive and secure the base Ruzha will broadcast your departure on channel 45 and everyone will know,” added Gen.

At that point I reminded the girls to pack what they needed and have it delivered to the ship before nine a.m. the next day, at which point we would be leaving. I also reminded them that we would be sleeping on the ship again and to get their sleepwear if they didn’t want to sleep with their clothes on or naked.

“It must be every man’s dream to sleep with two beautiful young women,” remarked Gen as translated by Ruzha.

The girls didn’t appreciate her comments but remembered what Delche had told them.

So, in response to her comments Daf said, “We trust our commander and if he wants to sleep with us it would be an honour to sleep with him in the service of our planet.”

“Ruzha and Gen both laughed out loud and Ruzha said, “You know she’s joking, right?”

To which Daf said, “Got you!”

“Aha!” I said. “They outsmarted you both.”

Vel poured us more rakia.

The more we drank, the more we joked, the happier we looked, the sadder we felt. Deep down we were all afraid of tomorrow and what it would bring.

It was midnight when, holding hands, the girls and I, with my guards dragging behind us, left the lounge and headed for the sip. It was a beautiful night. It was cool and full of aroma emanating from the ripe fruits and flowers on the trees all around us.

The last thing I said before I dropped on my bed was, “Oh crap, you forgot to get your sleepwear from the hotel.”

I heard one of them say, “We’ll get it tomorrow.”

The other one said, “Who cares...” and mumbled something unintelligible.

On the way to the galaxy traders

The next day I heard banging on the ship's hull. I looked outside through the ship's windshield; it was light outside. I jumped out of bed and pushed the hatch open button. Ruzha walked up. This was her first time on the ship. She regretted not having her camera with her.

As she looked around I yelled "Ladies, we have a visitor."

Vel and Daf both jumped out of bed. And like the night before Daf's hair was a mess and there was drool on Vel's face.

Ruzha smiled and said, "Good morning ladies."

She then turned to me and asked, "What happened to their sleepwear?"

"We forgot to pick it up last night," I said.

"What about other things, they're women and will need many other things?"

"Ruzha, I don't know what they'll need..."

"Not to worry, I'll take them shopping this morning. You may have to delay your departure by an hour, two at most."

"Okay, do what you have to but remember we have no space to put things on the ship."

"Okay," she replied.

"I'll see you at Nagol's when you return," I said.

Even before I was finished talking the three bolted out of the ship and rushed down to the tube station.

Closing the hatch I looked at my guards and said, "Look at them, just mention the word shopping and they run..."

I got no response.

As I took my time going to Nagol's I realized that this was the first time I'd been alone in a public place, full of people. People went about their business passing by without even noticing, especially with my guards following me. It felt strange. I was walking among aliens on a far away planet but I was the alien.

As I gently opened the lounge door I noticed Nagol and the admiral sitting opposite one another smiling, with Gen sitting at the end of the table next to them. Gen looked sleepy.

"Ah, you're here. Where are the others? Didn't Ruzha find you?" asked Nagol.

After I greeted them I said, "Ruzha and the girls went shopping for women's things. They'll be back in an hour or two," and then sat next to the admiral.

The old lady grabbed my arm with both hands, squeezed it and smiled.

Nagol looked at me and said, "I want to thank you for bringing us together, first with my granddaughter and now with my boyhood friend."

I didn't know what to say so I said, "It was fate that brought you together and there's no need to thank me for that. It all happened by accident."

"So, you do believe in fate," he said.

"Yes, I believe nature needs to keep things in balance in order to avoid chaos."

"You must have enjoyed your time with Voskot," he said.

"Very much, he was a simple and complex man all in one. I learned a lot from him."

“And him from you. He was very proud of you and respected you... enough to give you his most prized possession, his mistress... which he spent his entire life courting.”

I didn't reply but looked at Gen who looked bored.

“You should translate for the ladies so we can keep them in the conversation,” I said.

Nagol ignored what I'd said and waved the server to bring us food and hot drinks.

He brought me a plate of home fries, bacon and eggs and a cup of coffee, which I found bitter. The coffee was made from poisonous beans, hazardous if not properly baked. Nagol only had a hot drink which looked like concentrated fruit juice and the ladies had sweet crepes and pancakes.

I looked at the admiral. She had no problem using a knife and fork. She must have done this before. After she ate some of her sweet stuff she looked at me and pointed at my home fries with her fork. I shook my head acknowledging that I saw them. I didn't realize she wanted to try some until she stuck her fork in my plate, took a piece of potato and put it in her mouth. First she made a face and then took another potato and then another. She then said something to Nagol. Nagol waved at the server and he brought the admiral a plate just like mine.

“So, the lady isn't sophisticated,” I said to Nagol, thinking that he wouldn't translate but he did which made me feel a bit awkward.

“You're very brave for a young man,” she said, smiled and added. “I take it this is Macedonian style food.”

“Yes,” I replied sheepishly.

The next thing I noticed was Gen's fork in my home fries.

Nagol laughed out loud and ordered another platter for Gen.

“I’m happy that we’re together like this, even if it’s for a short time. In my old age I’ve learned to relish every good moment I have. I take it you and the girls will be leaving as soon as they come back from shopping?” asked Nagol.

“Yes Sir,” I said.

It was only half past nine when Ruzha and the girls got back.

“I’m surprised you got back so soon, in less than an hour. Did you get everything?” I asked.

“Yes, yes. Is it too late for breakfast?” asked Ruzha.

Nagol pointed to the crepes, pancakes, home fries and asked, “Which one?”

To my surprise Ruzha took my fork and sampled a crepe and then a potato from Gen’s plate and pointed to the home fries. The girls said they’d have what Ruzha was having.

Nagol looked at me and said, “I would have bet the other way...” and waved at the server to bring more food and drinks.

As I watched the ladies eat and enjoy their breakfast chatting in their language, my hearing began to tune out and came to a point where I could hear nothing. I was overwhelmed with a sadness that I could no longer control. This had happened to me before and I knew it would be temporary so I excused myself from the table and went to the washroom. I was feeling fine when I returned and announced it was time to go.

I noticed that Ruzha had already set up her equipment and had been recording us all along. Everything I said and did was recorded. I felt like saying something but what for. Ruzha was a responsible person and I was sure she wouldn’t make our private moments public.

No one objected to my announcement to leave. After we took everything from our rooms we came back to the lounge and casually

said goodbye without shaking hands, hugging or kissing, as Gen had suggested the day before.

After we walked out I grabbed the big box from Daf's hands and gave it to one of my guards to carry.

"You'll have to find space for all this. You can store some stuff in the armory wherever you find space," I said.

"Ruzha estimated we would be in outer space for a month or even more," said Daf.

"Are you kidding me? It won't be more than a week or two," I replied.

After we boarded the ship the girls did find space to put their stuff but had to rearrange some things.

It was ten past ten when we lifted off for outer space.

"It was stupid telling Ruzha to delay broadcasting our departure. I'm sure we're being watched by Anelia's minions at this very moment. The only people who won't know we left are the people who should know, and that's the ordinary people," said Vel.

I decided to let Vel's remark fly because she was right.

"You're right Vel..." I said.

When we reached outer space I said, "We need to go and see the galaxy trader captain first. We need to deliver the box of rakia and see what information he can give us. When we near his planet I want every detectible item on this ship turned off."

"That means we'll be flying blind," remarked Daf.

"Now we have a choice to make," I said. "We can fly normally at top speed and get there in several days or we can activate the hyper drive and be there in several minutes. The second option, unfortunately, is very risky. This has to be a unanimous decision."

After I gave Daf the piece of paper with the coordinates the captain had given me and she entered them into the navigation computer she said, “I looked at the logs and I know how to activate the hyper drive and the path to take. If we do a jump then it will have to be done in two steps. One, follow the path that Delche set, because we know it’s safe, and when we get there calculate the second path. We’ll use up a bit more fuel but it’s safer this way.”

“I’ll run diagnostics on the hyper drive and see how it’s functioning,” I said.

“I agree with Daf, we should do the first jump on hyper speed and then see how it goes from there,” said Vel.

After the diagnostics ran and passed I asked Daf if she had maps of the system we were about to enter. She said we only had what Delche had left us in the ship’s navigation computer and that wasn’t much.

“You’d better contact someone and get the most up to date maps from all the sectors before we leave,” I said.

“I’ll contact the admiral,” said Vel, “and find out where we can get such maps.”

After contacting Asora, who had one of our communicators, Vel spoke to the admiral who put us in touch with the captain of the lead ship that had brought the troops back and he allowed us to upload the maps from his navigation computer.

Daf smiled a wide smile and said, “My display just lit up, we now have detailed maps from all the sectors in this and other galaxies.”

“Are these maps current?” I asked.

“As current as a few days ago.”

“Can we do a single jump now?” I asked.

“No, I’m not experienced like Delche. I’d feel more comfortable doing it in two jumps,” replied Daf.

Vel agreed.

“Before we do it let’s make sure everything is strapped in and packed tight,” I said and looked around the cabinets and tested the straps on the boxes.

After we got back to our seats and strapped ourselves in, I powered up all sensors and set them to maximum sensitivity, then powered up the energy cannons and set them on auto fire at maximum. I powered up the retro rockets and finally set the hyper speed timer to one minute and forty seconds.

“Here we go,” I said and punched the hyper speed button.

“What happened?” said Vel, “Why did we fizzle out?”

“Check your instrument panel,” I said.

“Holy Mother Nature,” yelled Daf. “We’re there... We made it. I can’t believe it... and it only took seconds.”

“Now plot a course to the captain’s planet and we’ll do it again,” I said.

“I’m sorry sir, I don’t feel confident enough to do that. Besides, by the time I run all the calculations, we’ll be there. It should take us less time at maximum speed to get there than for me to do the calculations.”

“Why would it take you a day to do the calculations? It took Delche only minutes.”

“With all due respect Sir, Delche fudged everything. He didn’t do any calculations, he visually looked at the maps and, because it’s mostly empty space, he guessed there would be no obstacles in the way, no big obstacles anyway,” replied Daf.

“Vel, please check the logs and see how many times the cannons fired,” I asked.

“None Sir, they didn’t fire at all,” she replied.

Daf was about to say something but didn’t.

“Is there something on your mind Lieutenant?” I asked.

“What I said shouldn’t be taken as a criticism of Delche. I don’t know what happened when you were here the last time. I don’t know what the circumstances were, so I’d like to apologize for what I said.”

“You’re right about that, you don’t know. Apology accepted,” I replied.

“Now set us on a straight trajectory to the captain’s planet,” I added.

“It’s best if we move ahead and take a well-traveled route that we know will be clear of obstacles and if you’re going to turn off all communications and sensors, I suggest we travel at a slower speed before we run into another ship or the planet,” suggested Daf.

“We don’t need to turn off everything. We only need to turn off the equipment that can be detected by passing ships, like the galaxy trader border patrol,” I said.

“In that case we’ll turn off the communication’s transmitters and long range sensors but fire up the engines to maximum for a short time and as we get closer to the planet we’ll turn them off and drift like a comet,” said Vel.

“There are no such comets in my star chart, we’ll be spotted immediately,” argued Daf.

“Ladies, please, let me worry about that,” I said.

“And if that happens, what are you going to do, Sir,” asked Daf.

“Always the curious one, eh...? When they come closer to investigate us we’ll blast them out of existence,” I said.

“The coordinates have been set, Sir,” said Daf.

“The long range sensors and communications transmitters are off, Sir,” said Vel.

After I set the speed to max and punched the autopilot I said, “Ladies, now sit and relax.”

Just as I lay there looking outside the windshield into the black space something occurred to me.

“Oh crap,” I said.

The girls turned slightly and looked back.

“Do you speak any of the languages spoken in this galaxy?” I asked.

They both said no.

“So, how are we going to communicate with the galaxy trader captain... or anyone for that matter in this galaxy?” I asked.

After thinking for a moment Vel sarcastically said, “I’m sure you’ll find a way, Sir.”

“Well, you’ve met him before, how did you communicate with him then?” Daf asked.

“It was complicated. The captain had an interpreter who spoke your language. The captain spoke to him, he interpreted for Delche and Delche interpreted for me,” I replied.

Vel laughed again but didn’t say anything. I knew something was bothering her.

“Vel, you can’t stay angry at me forever, so whatever it is spit it out,” I said.

“Since you asked, Sir, here it is: The whole world spoke of you and how great you were, especially Ruzha to whom I devoted a lot of my time listening. You turned out to be another jerk who doesn’t know what he’s doing. Some great hero you are. You, you don’t even know how to operate this ship and yet you brought us out here. And you’re going to save the world?” she said and began to cry.

Daf was in shock. She couldn’t believe what she’d heard.

After simmering for a while; simmering because I was risking my life to do this the best I could for their planet’s benefit, I calmly said, “You’re right Vel, you’re right about all of it. So, if you’re angry you should be angry at yourself for believing the crap people told you about me. I never told you those things and I never promised you anything, except that I would try. Now, let me ask you this; what do I get for sacrificing my life to save your world? Last time I did this I was kicked off the planet and exiled on my own planet to live a cruel life as a hermit. Do you think that was fair? Look at the difference between what your people said to you about me and what they actually did to me. If anyone here should be angry, it should be me. If I was the jerk that you think I am, do you think I would have come back to help you again? In reality, after what your people did to me I should have destroyed your planet. I should have used this ship’s guns to take revenge on those who exiled me and ruined my life. I accept I don’t know what I’m doing for many reasons but to fault me for that I think is cruel. I was never trained to be a military strategist, a politician, a captain, or a pilot. I was only taught to fly this ship on a simulator. Voskot was killed before he could finish my training. I don’t know anything about how the ship works or how to read the instructions to find out, but I’m managing. Being in this situation wasn’t exactly my idea or my choice. So I can’t see how you can fault me for all these things. Also, I was always truthful to you about what war is and you haven’t seen any of it yet. So if there’s anything romantic in your head about all this I didn’t put it there.”

After I paused for a while I said, “If you want to quit this mission I’ll drop you off on the captain’s planet and you can do what you

want from there. I'll go on the mission alone... And I don't plan on coming back!"

After I said all that I felt very angry but when I saw that both of them were crying I felt sorry for them and stopped talking.

Without looking at me Daf extended her dirty hand smeared with tears and other things towards me and I took it. There was no point in punishing her for how Vel felt about me. Daf stopped crying. When Vel saw us holding hands she began to cry out loud and covered her face with her hands.

Daf tugged at my hand and motioned something with her head. I didn't know what she wanted. She got off her seat and pushed me towards Vel. I got up and walked in front of her, grabbed her hands and pulled them away from her face. Still crying she opened her eyes, full of tears, and looked at me. She looked terrible but her eyes were beautiful. She jumped out of her seat and squeezed me tight around my shoulders. I squeezed her back and held her until she stopped crying. She then began to laugh. I didn't ask why she was laughing. She wiped her face with her hands and sat back down on her seat. She looked at me, smiled and laughed again. I felt like saying "crazy woman" but it would have been inappropriate. Then Daf pointed to my shoulder where there was a pile of fluids, tears, saliva and other sticky things on my uniform.

Just as I sat down I heard a muffled sound, "I'm sorry."

Vel looked up at me and said, "Let me wipe that off."

"No," I replied. "This is my badge of honour and it stays."

Vel came over, sat on my knee and said, "I don't want to leave. If you're not planning on coming back, I'm not planning on coming back either. And if you don't mind I'd like to give you a big kiss."

Before I had a chance to reply she kissed me, smiled and went back to her seat.

Daf looked at me.

“You crazy woman, look what you’ve done. You’ve made Daf jealous.”

“Let her kiss you and make it even.”

I bent forward and Daf gave me a peck.

“There is still the matter of how we’re going to inquire about anything in this galaxy without knowing the language,” I said.

“You called me a woman; this is the first time you referred to me as woman,” said Vel.

“Vel, I’m being serious...” I replied.

“Like I said, I’m sure you’ll find a way. I have confidence in you, Sir,” she said.

“That’s enough!” yelled Daf. “We’ll worry about it when we get there. Now make up and stop bickering. Vel, I’m surprised at you.”

At that moment Vel reminded me of Jean with her stubborn streak and evil ways. Was she going to be another Jean?

No one said a word until it was lunch time. I went and got a jar of meat and three spoons. I was too lazy to go looking for plates so I gave the girls a spoon each and asked them to pass the jar around. I then went and got a cup and pulled a bottle of rakia from the big box which was now filled to the top with women’s stuff. Daf looked at me.

“Do you want some rakia?” I asked.

They both shook their head yes.

After I handed them the cups full of rakia I toasted to “our final adventure”.

I immediately realized that what I had said wasn't appropriate but that's what came out of my mouth so I said, "To Otsiron's final adventure!"

Daf said, "To our success in ending the war!"

After waiting for a while Vel said, "To our magnificent captain!"

I realized I was going to have problems with Vel especially at critical times but then I figured I was no different than her. I too was a thorn in peoples' behinds and only time would tell how things were going to go.

After I had a few drinks I pushed my chair back to the sleeping position and said, "Wake me up when we arrive."

What seemed like moments later, I was rudely awakened by a loud beeping sound.

"What's that damned racket, please turn it off," I said.

"I can't, only you can turn it off. It's the emergency alarm," said Daf.

"Someone is scanning us from the surface. They're powering up weapons, do something!" yelled Vel.

After I turned off the alarm I said, "Standby and don't do anything."

"They'll fire at us, change course quickly, Sir," yelled Daf.

"Stand by," I said, "and don't do anything."

"They've stopped scanning us and turned off their weapons," said Vel.

"Proceed on course and prepare to land.

"The entire planet is a swamp, except for that small green patch that looks like an island," said Vel.

“The coordinates we’re following will land us on that patch,” said Daf.

“Daf, please calculate the landing speed for the atmosphere on this planet and read it out to me,” I said.

After I fired the retrorockets to slow the ship down, I entered the speed and punched the autopilot. But as soon as I did that another emergency alarm went off.

“What now?” I asked.

“Take the ship off autopilot and fly it manually. The coordinates we have are for the centre of the planet,” said Daf.

“Thank you Daf,” I said and imagined what Vel was thinking.

“No comments from you, Vel,” I said.

“No Sir. I imagine you’re very lucky, Sir.”

I didn’t say anything.

After we flew the ship along a path we ran into a grove of fruit trees in the middle of the island, inside which was a building and other structures. I landed the ship next to another beaten up ship and before we left I ordered my guards to hold their hands up where they could be seen. I did the same and suggested Vel and Daf do that too.

After I closed the hatch and proceeded to walk towards the building, the door flung open and a tall, skinny young blond girl jumped out and, with a big smile, ran towards us. Wow I figured, what a welcome I was going to get. But instead of coming to me she went past me and grabbed Daf and hugged her, speaking to her in their language. She then ran to Vel and did the same. The blond girl then grabbed the girls by their shoulders and took them inside the building and closed the door. My guards and I were left outside waiting. My guards still had their hands up.

Just as I ordered my guards to lower their hands, the door opened and the captain waved us in. As we walked in I watched the girls talk to each other in a language neither I nor the captain understood. He smiled and slapped me on the back. I remembered these were different people, friendlier and more sociable than the people of Ostikon.

I forgot to bring the box of rakia so I grabbed the captain by the arm and took him to the ship. By the reaction on his face he seemed amazed at the security protocols I had to go through just to open the door on my ship.

He let out a big “ahhh” when he saw what was inside the box.

When we were back in the house the blond girl started talking non-stop, in a language that only the captain understood.

The captain said something and the blond girl offered her hand to me and I took it. She kept smiling and I kept looking at her while holding her hand.

“She’s trying to shake your hand. But I guess her father never taught her how,” piped up Vel.

After I showed her how it was done I said, “So, you’re the captain’s daughter?”

Vel translated.

“I am.”

I noticed she had a round head, golden blond hair and beautiful transparent and peaceful green eyes. I could have stared at them all day.

She then pointed at herself and said, “Ireva”, pointed at the captain and said, “Orihci” and then pointed at an older blond woman who had just arrived and said, “Amih”. After that she took a few steps into another room and pointed at a man lying in bed and said, “Ukasnek”.

“That’s her mother, I don’t know who the man is,” Vel said.

So Vel and Daf sat side by side with Ireva and we began to talk.

To spite her, because of her criticism of Delche having to translate through another translator, I asked Vel to translate. Surprisingly she was happy to do it.

The first question I asked was how the girls knew each other. Captain Orihci answered that one.

He said that after Ostikon opened its gates to trade with the galaxy traders he’d sent Ireva to school in Ostikon under an education exchange program to learn their language. The idea was that one day she would take over the rakia business that he’d established with the other captain and run it on her own. The girls had met and become friends at the academy in Ostikon.

While translating Vel also told me that her and Daf and her other friends in the academy had no idea that Ireva was a galaxy trader or that she was a captain’s daughter.

In addition to learning the Ostikon language she’d also studied navigation and had become a capable navigator; again so that one day she could fly her own ship. She was already a pilot.

When I said that she was too young to have acquired so many skills, Captain Orihci said that she was thirty two years old. I too was that age but looked like an old man compared to her.

After I found that out and the fact that these people lived way longer than the people from Ostikon, I developed a new appreciation for her.

We spent a long time talking and after we discussed everything there was to discuss about personal things, we took a break and had supper. The main course was fish, more like catfish, that Amih had caught in the traps she’d set in the swamp. It had been prepared well

and was delicious. One thing about the galaxy traders was that they loved their food and made every effort to make it taste delicious.

After we ate Captain Orihci and I went outside and back inside the ship. I got a bottle of rakia out of the big box and grabbed my cup. He grabbed Vel's cup, sat in the admiral's chair and extended his arm out. I filled it to the top and did the same with mine. I sat in my chair and we both took a big gulp. It was sad that we couldn't converse. Language was a barrier for both of us. Captain Orihci was a decorated captain of one of the biggest galaxy trader warships and he could have taught me a lot of things. I wanted to ask him what had happened to his ship but in order to do that I had to involve two translators. It was just too cumbersome.

No one noticed when we came back.

We were on the planet a long time and I noticed the sun hadn't moved at all since we'd arrived. When I asked why that was, Ireva said the planet didn't rotate and continuously faced the sun. She also told me that the island was artificially created by galaxy trader scientists. They'd created the island a long time ago and used it as a base to study this sector of space. The island was abandoned many years ago. Captain Orihci and his wife fled to this place after their two sons were captured and taken to serve in the war. Before they arrived here they sent Ukasnek, their trusted friend and business partner who had his own private ship, to look for their sons but he couldn't find them. The wreck outside was his ship. He had been badly wounded a few days ago when the ship was shot at. He would tell us more as soon as he recovered. He'd been back for two days and was recovering nicely but still couldn't speak. His ship had been attacked and crippled but he'd managed to escape and land here barely alive. The moment he felt better Captain Orihci would talk to him.

After a long talk with Captain Orihci through two interpreters I began to appreciate how difficult the conversations were.

In our long conversation I jokingly asked the captain if it would be possible to leave Vel here and take Ireva on my mission, given her language skills and experience.

“Vel isn’t very happy with me so I’m wondering if I can trade her for Ireva on my next leg of the mission in exploring the war.”

They all knew it was a joke but reacted sharply to it. Amih, Ireva’s mother, spoke first.

“I’ve already lost my two sons to this cursed war. I’m not going to lose another child!”

Captain Orihci said, “Absolutely not! There is no damn way I’ll send my daughter to get killed. If you want someone experienced I’ll go with you.”

The captain then paused for a moment and said, “You shouldn’t be taking them with you either,” pointing to Vel and Daf.

Captain Orihci then walked out and went to empty the case of rakia and fill it with identical bottles of the green stuff and gave it to me. He then went back and brought glasses for everyone, poured us rakia and added some of the green stuff on top and we toasted again.

“To a quick end to the war!” toasted Captain Orihci.

After she added more rakia to the green stuff, Amih toasted, “To peace and prosperity.”

The rest of us toasted to peace in our various languages.

Amih frequently walked out of the room to see how Ukasnek was doing in the other room and kept telling us that he was resting.

It was past midnight Ostikon time when I figured it was time to leave and go to bed. But, unlike the people of Ostikon, the galaxy traders were culturally different and didn’t want us to leave.

Amih said, “You’re my first guests since we arrived here. It’s nice to have company, especially for my Ireva who hasn’t seen or spoken to anyone since we left our home.”

Ireva spoke up and said, “Mother, these people need to sleep, they’ll be back after they’ve slept and we can visit some more with them.”

And with those words Ireva escorted us to our ship and asked if she could stay a bit longer and visit with the girls. I said yes and went to my bed.

The next morning when I got up I found Ireva sprawled on my (the captain’s) chair and the girls sprawled on their chairs with an empty bottle of rakia laying on the floor. The ship’s hatch had been left open all that time. I was surprised that Captain Orihci and his wife hadn’t come looking for their daughter. Maybe they had and thought it was okay for her to get drunk with her former fraternity mates on my ship. In any case, I wasn’t going to say anything.

Very quietly I tried to sneak off the ship to see if I could bypass my guards but it didn’t work. As I dashed outside they ran after me. I looked back inside and the girls were still sleeping. My God, that was a lot of rakia they drank, I thought.

When I walked inside the building I found Ukasnek awake, talking to Captain Orihci and his wife. My presence and the presence of my guards startled him and he passed out.

Ukasnek talks about the war

Amih said something and the captain escorted me out of the room and signaled for me to stay outside. He figured we should stay outside until Ukasnek recovered and was assured that my armed guards and I posed no threat to him.

Why was Ukasnek afraid of us? What is because of the uniforms we wore or the weapons we carried? Was it because my guards were machines? But he couldn't have known that they were machines. I had to find out. I went back to the ship to wake the girls in hopes of getting some answers.

I first picked up the empty bottle from the floor and put it away. Then as my guards were going back to their docking positions I took Daf's hand in mine and tapped it lightly. She made a snorting sound and opened her eyes. She then made a face with a painful expression and placed her hand over her head. I assumed she had a bad headache. That's what happens when you drink too much. In English it's called hangover.

"Wake the others and meet me outside," I whispered to her.

Just as I stepped on the ramp to go outside my guards followed.

Moments later the three girls came outside and found me staring at the sky. I couldn't get over the idea that it had been daylight all this time.

"I'm surprised the planet hasn't burned up from constantly being heated by the sun," I said.

"As you can see it's cool out here. That's because the planet on the dark side is frozen and cold water currents find their way here and cool the surface. Feel the breeze? It's cool," replied Ireva.

"It's a nice place," I said.

Vel then piped up and said, “When we were on our way here we were scanned and we registered weapons being powered up. Who did that? Are there other people living here?”

“Oh I’m sorry, that was me. There are no other people living here. I’m in charge of monitoring the sky to make sure we’re not ambushed. Had you powered up your weapons or turned away, I would have fired at you and destroyed you. By not doing that I knew you were friendly. We have a pretty hefty defense system installed in that tower over there. In fact, that thing standing upright isn’t a smoke stack; it’s an energy cannon that can smash a small moon into pieces with a single shot. It was here when we arrived. It must have been installed here when the scientists were using this place as a base. At least that’s what I was told. But I think it’s a border defense system. In any case, I’m happy that it’s here and I know how to use it. I love it,” replied Ireva with a smile on her face.

“Maybe you should go with him after all, you seem to love your toys as much as he does. I’m sure you’ll get along well,” replied Vel in Macedonian but didn’t translate.

Ireva smiled but I doubt she understood what Vel had said.

I looked at Vel, shook my head and said, “You can stay here if you want, I’ll take Captain Orihci with me.”

“No Sir, I’m afraid you’re stuck with me,” she said, shook her head and in her language quietly said something to Daf (When I later pressed Daf she told me what Vel had said. “What an idiot he is, he thinks he can take Captain Orihci instead of me. And how are they going to communicate?” to which Daf replied. “He’s managed to do fine so far?”)

At about that moment Captain Orihci came outside and called us in.

He said he’d spoken to Ukasnek and assured him that we were friends and no threat to him

“He isn’t afraid of you; he’s terrified of your guards. He’ll explain why.”

When we went inside, Amih was helping Ukasnek sit in a chair at the centre of the table. He wasn't wearing a shirt and his wounds were exposed so that they could air out. He had severe burns on one side of his face and on his chest.

I sat my guards down on the floor behind us and ordered them to look the other way. The girls and I then sat on the opposite side of the table while Captain Orihci and his wife sat at each end, adjacent to us.

With an expression of pain on his face Ukasnek began to tell us what had happened.

“I was in my warehouse offloading cargo from my ship when Captain Orihci came to see me about his sons. By then his sons were gone and he had no idea where they were. His neighbours had told his wife Amih that they had been abducted by uniformed men and were probably taken to be processed and trained to fight in the war. The captain was worried that they were also going to take his daughter and wife next and decided to leave. I knew where he was going when he said, ‘When you find them bring them to the island.’ By that he meant here in this secluded place where we, I mean I used to hide illegal merchandise,” he said and looked at the captain.

He took a deep breath and continued, “My ship was originally an attack ship. I purchased it from a pirate. The moment I got it I stripped its weapons and converted it into a cargo ship. It was a lot faster and sturdier, not to mention cheaper than a commercial vessel its size. Anyway, after I offloaded my cargo I dug out the ship's weapons which I had hidden in the warehouse and converted it back to a warship. I didn't know where to look for the boys so I kept asking around until I saw a young man being chased and abducted by uniformed men. I followed them and saw where they took him. It was a large transport ship parked outside the city. I went back, got my ship and waited in the distance until it left. I followed it. I was careful not to be detected, which I'd learned during my pirate days. I was one of the best pilots to avoid the authorities. One time I flew right by them just after I broke a couple of my friends out of jail. I flew so close to the police that they thought my ship was just

another cargo ship passing by. I made sure everything that didn't belong on a cargo ship was turned off. If you panic and run then you get caught..." Ukasnek said and then was interrupted by Captain Orihci who gave him a hand signal to get back on topic.

"Anyway, I followed the big ship until it landed in this huge valley. It was one of hundreds that had landed in a long line facing a huge building with a metallic ramp leading to the upper floors. There were kilometre long lines of people coming off the ships, climbing up the ramp and going inside the building. The building was too small to house them all and I didn't see any coming out.

I landed my ship in a grove on a small hill some distance away and got my viewer (I assume he meant binoculars) and watched. The lines were moving slowly. I could see guards with energy spears poking at the people, moving them along.

Then, suddenly, I heard a twig snap behind me so I instinctively raised my arms up and dropped my viewer. That's what criminals do you know, if they don't want to get shot. It's a nice trick to remember.

Anyway, I turned around slowly and looked behind me. I saw a short man, even shorter than me and he was laughing like he knew me. He wasn't armed. I kept looking at him until he came close by and sat next to me. He was filthy. He pointed into the distance and said something. I said, 'I don't understand you friend.'

He looked at me and in my language said, 'What are you doing here? Did you escape?'

He'd seen my ship so I couldn't lie to him. I told him the truth and asked him if he would help me find the two boys.

He said, 'Look out there, how can you possibly find anyone? Do you know which ship they came in?'

I didn't know anything so I asked him who he was and how he'd learned to speak my language, a language spoken in another galaxy. To my surprise he said he was one of the abductors responsible for

committing a lot of crimes against humanity. He said he was one of three technical people who operated the machinery that processed the people and turned them into soldiers. He said he wanted to leave but they wouldn't let him so he pretended to be crazy and ran all over the facilities like a madman. One day, when no one was looking he ran off and hid underground. He then escaped through the drainage system. After that he told me he spoke five languages, which was a requirement for the job he was doing. When I asked him how he was surviving he said he ate discarded food dumped in a garbage dump further down the valley.

I asked him to go back inside with me so that I could search for the boys but he refused. He told me that if they'd been processed I wouldn't be able to recognize them and they wouldn't recognize me either."

Ukasnek paused for a moment to compose himself and said, "The man told me they took ordinary people and put them through a string of violent and painful procedures. They first injected them with a powerful chemical that heightened every nerve in their body. Then they put a ring with wires around their heads which zapped their brains to erase their memory. They then injected them with large doses of hormones that made them super strong. After that they injected a control chip into their spine at the base of their neck and sent them underground to bulk up and train for the war.

You keep saying they, I said to the man. Who are they?

He looked at me with a surprised look and said, 'You're not from around here are you?'

When I said that I wasn't, even though I was, he began to explain. He said, 'They're robots, machines made by two brothers who were competing to make perfect soldiers. In the beginning the brothers worked together but, after some creative differences, they split up and each opened a laboratory, one here and the other on the other side of the planet. Because their work was a bit on the shady side, they couldn't get anyone reputable from the scientific side to work with them. So, to overcome their problem one of them built himself a big robot and programmed it with all the scientific knowledge

required to do the job, which was illegal. When the other brother found out he stole his brother's plans and he built an identical robot. When they ran out of money the two brothers began to steal gold. After it's melted and mixed with other gold, the gold becomes untraceable. They used their super soldiers to steal it. As they kept looking to steal more and more gold the super soldiers from the two sides began to collide. One day they had a big skirmish during which they left a lot of innocent people dead and a lot of destruction. After that the authorities got involved and began to hunt them down. During a massive raid on both facilities the brothers were killed because they refused to surrender. Unfortunately the raid activated the self-defense mechanisms in both robots. The self-defense mechanisms were programmed into the robots in order to protect them from such attacks. As a result the leading robots declared war on everyone and that's how the war started. After that these leading robots captured and reprogrammed every working robot they could get their hands on and now these robots work for them. They are the ones with the spears in their hands. They are the ones that lead the raids and control the planet's defense systems. That big robot at the beginning of the line is the lead robot. It's the boss and one of the culprits running this war. They use the super soldiers they create to fight their war. The robots don't care for human life or for the damage they cause.'

After he told me that, I asked him what his role was in all this. He said the robots didn't know how to operate or fix the machinery so they kept people like him alive working as slaves serving the robots.

I wanted to take a closer look at the facility but the man told me that it was impossible. Not if I fly close over the facilities I told him and asked him to come with me. After he told me that I was crazy and that I didn't know what I was doing, he fled into the woods. I realized I'd made a big mistake asking him to come with me. I should have kept my mouth shut. I could have learned more from him but by then it was too late. Despite his warning I went ahead with my plan and did a fly by anyway.

I looked around and saw no ground defenses or attack ships nearby so I figured with my great flying skills I'd be in and out and gone before anyone detected me. How was I supposed to know that the

bloody lead robot was equipped with an energy weapon which blasted my ship on approach? I was hit and a fire started inside my ship. Good thing my fire suppression system went off and put the fire out. I would have been completely burned. I was also lucky the ship's hull wasn't punctured. I didn't know where to run so I came here. That's about it," concluded Ukasnek.

"It's a hell of a story. I'm happy to have you back alive," said Captain Orihci.

"So, there are no aliens attacking the galaxy traders," I said. "This whole thing sounds insane. Can you tell us how to get there?"

"Ireva can show you from my ship's logs. I think the navigation logs are still intact. She knows how to operate my ship better than me. I taught her how to fly it myself," said Ukasnek.

Captain Orihci gave Ukasnek a look to which Ukasnek replied, "Someone had to do it; you were away most of the time."

"Can you tell us more about the other facility, on the other side of the planet? Do you know where it is?" I asked.

"No, I'm sorry, I don't."

"What about the man in the forest? Is there any way we can get hold of him?"

"I'm sorry I don't know. Perhaps if you land in the grove he'll find you. The coordinates are in my navigation computer."

"What can you tell us about the soldiers? How do they recruit them?" I asked.

"Are you kidding me? You can't call that recruitment. They grab people by any means possible and take them away."

"Who grabs them?" I asked. "The robots?"

“Yes, the robots. They’re fearless and unstoppable. They will not relent until they finish the job. The only way to stop them is to destroy them. They are fast, accurate and relentless. The only good thing about them is that there aren’t that many. So I advise you, please leave your robot guards behind because you don’t want them in their hands. One of them is worth a thousand of us. And if you get into a skirmish with them, run or fly away as fast as you can because they’ll come after you. There is no escape from them, that’s another thing the man in the forest told me.”

“Thank you for that, I’ll keep it in mind,” I said.

“Did you find out what happened to our warships, to my destroyer after it was confiscated?” asked Captain Orihci.

“I’m sorry I don’t know. Outside of the transports, I didn’t see any other ships there in the valley,” replied Ukasnek.

After thinking for a while I asked Ukasnek, “How was it possible that a small number of robots took over the galaxy trader destroyers without any resistance?”

“I can answer that,” said Captain Orihci. “In my case my ship was disabled by a computer virus and we were stuck in space. After we called for help the authorities came with a small repair crew. They told us that they couldn’t repair our ship and would have to tow it to the shipyard. When I refused they arrested my crew and took them away. I knew something wasn’t right so I covertly escaped in a shuttle and went home.”

“So, what happened to the ship and crew?” I asked.

No one had any answers.

Now that we all, more or less, knew what was happening with the war we had to make a decision on what to do next.

“I had high hopes of negotiating a peace treaty with the two factions but how do you negotiate with robots that don’t understand what

that is. I doubt that they were programmed to understand anything outside of their main functions. They are machines...”

“Yes, you’re right,” replied Ukasnek. “Don’t waste your time attempting anything outside of their destruction. The moment they detect you they’ll come after you, capture you and turn you into a brainless fighting machine.”

No one had any suggestions as to what to do next so we sat there looking at each other.

Finally Captain Orihci said, “Let’s have some food, I’m sure we’ll think of something.”

While the ladies went away to bring food Captain Orihci brought a bottle of rakia and glasses.

We each toasted in our own language and had a sip. As usual it burned as it went down. As I felt the burn I realized that we did have something in common; it was Delche’s rakia. We were now drinking before breakfast, something my grandfather used to do back in my village. I also remembered Delche learned how to make rakia in my native Macedonia. I don’t know why I thought of these things. Perhaps this was a time for reflection.

By the time the women came back with the food we were working on our second drink. I was surprised at how much Ukasnek drank in his condition.

The food again was plentiful and consisted of leftover fish, a variety of biscuits, jellies and aromatic tea.

After we ate I thanked our hosts for the food and apologized for depleting their supplies. I took the girls back to the ship and asked Ireva to take some of the extra food we had, which I figured we wouldn’t need. There was no objection from Vel and Daf. We had enough food to last us months and we figured our mission wouldn’t take more than a week.

Both Captain Orihci and his wife were in tears when they saw all the food that we gave them. In return they gave us tea and jelly which they said was a local product. The jelly was made from the fruit on the trees that grew around their home.

The girls opened a jar of meat and passed it around. Everyone took a bit to sample it. Our hosts approved that it tasted okay and were grateful to have it. Captain Orihci then plopped the rest of the meat on a plate and he, Ukasnek and I shared it as we drank rakia.

“Your ship is legendary,” said Ukasnek. “They’re still talking about you outfoxing our most capable captain even today. So I don’t think for a moment it would be difficult for you to destroy the robots in a conventional sense. The problem is that there are two of them. The moment you hit the first the second will come after you with a vengeance in which case you’ll have two options; fight or run. If you run you accomplish nothing. They’ll come after you and hunt you down until they destroy you. If you fight you’ll be facing fierce opposition. They’ll throw everything they have at you until you completely destroy them or they destroy you.”

“What if I offer assistance to one robot to eliminate the other?” I asked.

“Perhaps you misunderstood me,” said Ukasnek. “Outside of themselves, the robots consider everyone an enemy; they have no concept of what an ally is. Besides, they are constantly looking for bodies to turn into soldiers. They see us as raw material to make more soldiers. That’s what their programming tells them to do. The only way to get near them is to surrender and let them grab you. But if you do that then you’ll no longer be you. You’ll become one of their zombie super soldiers and kill your own mother if they order you. The only time the robots will fight one another is when they’re after gold. But I doubt that they’ll fight each other, they use the super soldiers for that.”

I looked at Captain Orihci and at all the eyes looking at me, scratched my head and said, “This is a tough one...”

“What about a simultaneous attack on both facilities?” I asked.

“With what? You have another ship?” asked Ukasnek.

I didn't reply.

After sitting there silent for what seemed like an eternity I said, “I'm going alone. I'll destroy one of their processing facilities and then go after the other and take my chances. I'll fight until I destroy them or they destroy me. In the meantime I want you all to help me prepare a report so that, when I'm far from here, I can send it to Ostikon to let Asora know what's happening. Can we do that now?” I asked.

Everyone was in agreement, except about going alone. Captain Orihci, Vel and Daf objected to me going alone and the three volunteered to go with me. I told them that we'd settle that later, first we needed to write the report.

Captain Orihci said he was going to Ukasnek's ship to get me his logs and give me the coordinates. When he came back we were all inside my ship and Ireva was entering the report into my ship's communications computer.

After Ireva was done she read back what she had written and while Vel translated for me Ireva translated for the captain, his wife and Ukasnek. Ireva was very good, we all agreed on that. The report was accurate. And even though she was best suited to go with me on this mission, she was still not allowed. I wouldn't even allow it. I told Captain Orihci I couldn't take him either. He had a family and was needed here. He agreed and then gave Ireva the coordinates and their descriptions from Ukasnek's navigation computer which Ireva and Daf then entered into our navigation computer.

After we finished the main report I asked Ireva to include the names of all of us who were involved in its preparation and a short description of who each person was. I then asked Vel and Daf to prepare a separate report for Gen and tell her what we were going to do. If she didn't hear from us in a week's time she was to send attack ships to the coordinates given to us by Ukasnek and finish the

job. Under no circumstances was she to send soldiers. We told her we were going to look for and destroy the other robot first.

“It makes sense,” said Captain Orihci. “You already know where this robot is and you don’t have to look for it once you destroy the other one.”

“Do you know anything about how the robot communicates with the super soldiers or with the other robots?” I asked Ukasnek. “The reason I’m asking is so that we can find a way to disable their communication.”

“I’m sorry I don’t know anything about that but I assume the robot sends commands through the chips in the back of the soldiers’ necks. I’m sorry but anything more I tell you will only be a guess and I don’t want to mislead you and make things worse,” Ukasnek replied.

After we were done with the reports we went back inside the house and resumed drinking rakia while discussing various scenarios of what was going to happen if we succeeded in destroying the robots or if we failed.

At one point Ireva gave Vel some channels she could call and leave information with her on our progress. This would be one-way communication but Ireva assured us that she would receive the information because her receivers would be on at all times.

My heart began to pound as I began to think about our departure. Everyone looked nervous when I said, “We should get going. It’ll take as about a day and a half to arrive at the planet and I have no idea how long it will take us to find the second robot.”

After we said our goodbyes, which were very emotional with these people, we took off into space and remained in communication silence until we reached the galaxy trader frontier; the place where we were turned back the last time I was there with Ori and Delche.

The moment we arrived we were approached by three attack ships. I asked Vel to open a channel and tell them that we were mercenaries

and we had soldiers to deliver and needed to know where to deliver them. After some silence we heard a voice say that the soldiers had to be delivered to a facility which had coordinates on the other side of the planet and that we would be followed to the destination by one of their ships.

After we agreed the same voice came back and said that we weren't allowed to proceed beyond this point because our ship was armed.

When I asked what they suggested we do, the voice said to proceed to a small space station ahead and surrender the prisoners there. We agreed as long as we got paid.

“This is foolishness Sir,” said Vel. “You'll get us killed.”

“My dear Vel, just play along and see what happens but be prepared to act quickly when I tell you.”

After being escorted by the ships, one in front of us and two behind, we arrived at the space station where a hatch began to open and the voice instructed us to fly inside.

At that very moment, instead of flying inside, I powered up all our energy cannons and torpedo and quickly flew under the station and behind it. I then turned our ship around and fired a torpedo at the space station.

I asked Daf to lock-on to the three ships that were momentarily disabled by the blast. I fired the three cannons at them split seconds apart. Two of the ships exploded and were destroyed. The third was crippled but kept firing at us. When I saw that it couldn't maneuver, I flew away from its firing line and zapped it with my last charged energy cannon.

After it blew up I asked Vel to check all communications and see if any of the ships had sent a distress call. Vel said there were none.

We then scanned the region with our long range sensors to see if there were any other ships in the area. There weren't any.

“Well, what do you think ladies?” I asked.

“All in a day’s work, Sir,” said Vel and saluted.

“Shouldn’t we be sending our reports right about now?” asked Daf.

“Yes we should,” I said. “Vel will you please do me the honours and tell me how long it will take for them to get there? And... please include a request for acknowledgment to let us know they got them.”

“Yes Sir. It will take twenty minutes for the messages to get there, another twenty to get back plus the time it takes the people to read them and decide what to reply. In other words it will take about a day or two before we get a response, Sir.”

“Vel, what’s with the sarcasm? You were so nice to me on the planet... in front of Irevia,” I said.

“You and her are a perfect match, Sir,” she said and mumbled something in their language.

I was going to say, “You’re jealous,” but I didn’t say anything.

Daf shook her head and she too said nothing.

“Do you think robots were flying those ships, Sir?” Daf asked.

“Yes Daf, I’m sure robots were operating the space station too. A computer can fly a ship. It does every time we activate the autopilot. Imagine if we were smart enough to anticipate everything that might happen and program that into our computer. Then the computer could fly our ship too,” I replied.

“So, it’s possible...” said Daf.

“It’s not only possible it actually happened. Those ships didn’t expect our brave captain to do what he did. We didn’t give them a reason to suspect anything. They accepted what we said to be the truth. Like you and me, they had no idea that our courageous captain

was going to fly under the space station just like he did and blow them out of the sky. And we had no idea that we were flying into a trap,” replied Vel.

“What trap?” asked Daf.

“My dear Daf, luring us into the space station was the trap. They wanted to capture us. They would have agreed to give us all the gold on the planet to get us to go inside the space station,” I said.

“And you cooperated with them knowing all that?” replied Daf.

“You’ve got it my dear Daf...” said Vel.

“We’ll wait here until we hear back from Ostikon and then decide what we do next. Is that okay with you lieutenants?” I asked.

After I got a positive response from both of them I told them to keep a close eye on the long range sensors for approaching ships. I then pushed my seat back and stared at the dark space outside our windshield.

Moments later I noticed a flash above the window on the right side of the windshield.

“What’s that?” I asked Daf, pointing at the right corner of the windshield. I asked her because she was closest to where the flash had taken place.

After looking in the instructions manual Daf said, “It’s a visor for the windshield, Sir.”

“Not that. The flash I saw.”

“I didn’t see any flash, Sir” she said, “There are all kinds of activities in outer space; perhaps we got hit by something microscopic that caused a flash.”

Looking at Vel I said, “Daf, I didn’t know we had a visor on this ship.” I actually didn’t.

“Now you’re making fun of me...” said Vel. “You know every ship has a visor, a metallic shield to protect the windshield when flying through meteor storms, Sir.”

“Daf, show me how to close and open it...” I said.

Daf came over and showed me on my panel which button to push to close and open the visor, which I did several times.

After Vel mumbled something I stopped doing it and asked her how long it had been since we sent our transmission.

“Ten minutes, Sir,” she said.

“I’m going to sleep now,” I said, “wake me up when something happens...”

“Like what, Sir?” asked Vel and looked at me with a funny smile on her face.

Daf said something to her in their language and Vel replied in Macedonian, “Why shouldn’t I make fun of him... while I have the opportunity? Tomorrow we could all be dead...”

An unexpected turn of events

Just when I thought I'd fallen asleep I heard a single loud beep that sent me flying off my chair. At first I didn't know where I was but then I heard Vel laughing.

“On your feet soldier!” she yelled in a man's voice. “We have an incoming message from Ostikon”.

“What does it say?” I asked.

“Just got it, I haven't read it yet!”

After I composed myself and pulled my chair back to its sitting position I asked Daf how long I'd been sleeping.

“Nearly six hours, Sir,” she replied.

“Oh, wow, that long. What have you been doing all this time?”

“Watching the sensors and waiting for the reply, Sir.”

“Are you ready to hear this, Sir?” asked Vel.

“Yes, go ahead.”

“They received both of our messages and they're okay with them,” said Vel.

“What? That's it?” I asked.

“And, oh yes, they said the galaxy trader outpost which continuously sent them information on the war... has gone silent. They are no longer receiving information and want to know what happened,” said Vel.

“How should I know what happened...?! Now they want us to find out what happened to the outpost?” I asked. “Daf, what are the coordinates of this outpost?”

“We’re sitting on top of it, Sir,” replied Daf.

“Now you’ve done it, Sir. You blew up their stupid propaganda machine,” Vel said, paused for a moment and continued.

“So the space station, this tiny little speck of metal in space, was their famous galaxy trader voice that got my entire planet involved in an insane war to which we were going to commit five million lives?” Vel said angrily and began to yell at the top of her voice in their language.

Just as Daf was about to yell at her to stop yelling, I grabbed Daf by the arm and said, “Leave her...”

After Vel yelled for about a minute, Daf, looking annoyed, put her hands over her ears and stared out into space through the ship’s windshield.

About a minute later, still yelling, Vel got up, rummaged through the big box and pulled out a bottle of rakia. She then grabbed our plastic cups, washed them, poured rakia into them and handed me one.

Daf didn’t want any.

When I took my cup I looked at Vel. She said something in her language which made Daf blush. After Vel took a big gulp of rakia she said, “I feel better now...”

I asked her what she’d said but she wouldn’t tell me. I asked Daf what Vel had said but she wouldn’t tell me either. All Daf said was that she didn’t know the words in Macedonian.

After I drank my cup dry Vel refilled it and said, “How can an entire planet be so stupid?”

She took another sip, looked at me and said, “At first I couldn’t understand why you wanted to investigate this damn war rather than just fight in it like you were expected to, but now I get it, and you, you can gloat all you want but you were right. There, I said it.”

“Does that mean that we’re friends now and you’ll show me some respect?”

“No, don’t count on it, but I will have some appreciation for your crap and maybe listen to you once in a while.”

Daf shook her head.

After she poured us a third drink Vel went and got a jar of meat and three spoons and we passed the jar around.

Half drunk Vel looked at me and asked, “Do you think we’ll come out of this alive?”

I had another sip and shrugged my shoulders.

Daf also looked at me and was expecting an answer so I said, “Given our track record I’d say that not only will we come out alive but we’ll win the war and save your planet.”

Daf looked at me with her sad eyes and soberly said, “I believe you, Sir, thank you,”

Vel didn’t say anything but moments later passed out in her chair.

“So Daf, it’s you and me now. Tell me something, the propaganda messages coming out of the galaxy trader outpost didn’t exactly fit the robot agenda. I doubt that the robots were even aware of Ostikon’s existence or the mutual defense agreement between Ostikon and the galaxy traders. Don’t you think we’re missing something here?”

“You’re right, Sir, do you think the galaxy trader ambassador has something to do with this?”

“Well, for one, he’s the one informing the war council and Asora’s government. He’s the one receiving and translating the diplomatic dispatches to and from the galaxy trader outpost. Has anyone from Ostikon looked at the original dispatches coming from the outpost?”

“I don’t know... I don’t even know how we can find out.”

“Before we destroyed it, was the outpost transmitting?”

“I don’t know, you’d have to ask Vel. She’ll need to find its frequency and check the logs, Sir.”

“I don’t want to disturb her. Let her rest, we have lots of time. We’ll look at the logs later. For now let’s assume the galaxy trader ambassador is involved. The question is why and what does he have to gain by all this?”

“Maybe it’s not him. Maybe Anelia put him up to this. Maybe it’s Anelia who, through him, is bribing government officials to support the war. She’s the one who insisted on sending our military to the war. To me it makes more sense that she’s behind this than the ambassador. She wants the military off our planet so that she can execute her coup. That’s what I think,” replied Daf.

“I’d have to agree with you and we can prove this by looking at the dispatches sent and received from the outpost. And if that’s true then we need to inform Gen and fast, before Anelia makes her move.”

“I agree, Sir.”

“I think it was a mistake to inform Asora’s government what we found about the war. This will alert Anelia and I’m sure she’ll act before Gen is ready for her. We need to go back to Ostikon and put the ship’s support behind Gen,” I said.

Daf looked at me and saw that I was genuinely concerned. She kicked Vel on the right hip and the two began to yell at each other in their language.

After yelling and swearing Vel finally looked at the logs and said, “The outpost was sending a signal with no data in it. It was just a beacon to let ships know where to arrive and check in before entering the galaxy. Why didn’t we look at that before?”

“I’m sorry to say this but we were all fooled...” I said.

“I agree we should go back and make the jump. We’ll be there in less than an hour. I hope Asora has already sent the troops home to keep them out of harms way.”

“Wait a minute, there’s one more question that’s unanswered,” said Daf.

“Which is?” I asked.

“What were the robots going to do with five million of our people?”

Vel and I looked at each other.

“Vel, since you don’t like my crap, you can take this one,” I said.

“My dear Daf, like any other machine the robots will continue to do what they’re programmed to do. They’ll continue to make super soldiers until they run out of fuel or break down, which may take centuries. In the meantime they’ll continue to abduct people and turn them into zombies. And the idiots from our planet will supply them with all the people they need without question.”

“That makes sense, thank you,” Daf said.

Vel looked at me.

“What?” I asked.

“Well, am I right?”

“Are you asking for my approval?”

“No! I’m asking you if you agree with me.”

“You’re right! Your crap makes perfect sense to me. Now prepare for the jump. That means you Daf.”

“There’s nothing to prepare, Sir, just activate the hyper drive and punch it.”

“Thank you Daf. Vel put away the cups, jar and bottle of rakia and strap your seatbelts.”

After Vel sat down I turned the ship around and lined up with the green vector showing on my panel, set the timer to one minute and forty five seconds, turned the cannons on and set them on auto fire, turned on the retrorockets and punched the hyper drive activation button.

“We are on top of Ostikon, Sir, I have confirmation,” said Daf.

“Not bad flying, Sir, but I see you still guessed at the travel time. But more accurately this time... Congratulations, Sir.”

“Coming from you Vel, that’s a real compliment.”

The moment we arrived Vel made contact with Gen who gave us the bad news. Anelia had already made her move against the base in Nulos and was about to wipe it out with all the soldiers on it. Asora had done nothing to send the soldiers home because she didn’t have the vehicles to transport them. She was still arguing with the local authorities about getting vehicles.

“Ladies we need to stop this and fast,” I said.

“Gen told me she can’t do anything; she can’t even warn the soldiers to abandon the base. No one will take her calls. Besides, there’s nowhere for the soldiers to go. Anelia’s forces have surrounded the base and are waiting for orders to start the slaughter.”

“Daf, quickly point me in the direction of the base,” I said.

I didn’t bother to run diagnostics after the jump. I just punched the autopilot and powered the torpedo and all the ship’s cannons. I then asked Daf to arm the torpedo for maximum impact and to explode it above the base at a safe distance from the ship and the base. The moment she was done I fired it.

“This should get everyone’s attention and let them know we’re here,” I said.

It was a powerful explosion. It shook the ship.

“What happened, Daf? Did you do what I asked you?”

“No Sir. You launched the torpedo before it was ready.”

“And why did you give me the signal to fire?” I asked.

Vel began to laugh and said, “We have a war going on here and you two argue about semantics? What do we do next?”

“Contact Gen and ask her to contact Anelia and ask her to pull her forces back. Tell Gen to give her two hours. When you’re done with Gen contact Asora and tell her what’s happening. Tell her to issue an arrest warrant for Anelia and charge her with something... treason... an attempt to commit genocide... think of something.”

“Sir, my com is jammed with messages accusing us of firing at the base.”

“Forget the messages and do what I tell you. Now!” I said. “And let me know when you’re done.”

Moments later Vel said, “I contacted both Gen and Asora, now what?”

“Now contact Ruzha and let her know what’s going on and who is behind all this. Then tell her to get on channel 45 and inform the people of what’s happening.”

Daf said, “Won’t Anelia take advantage of the situation, invade the base and convince the soldiers to fight against us given the torpedo situation? I’m sure she’ll make the argument that we attacked the base unprovoked and she and her forces were there to save the soldiers... and then start killing them and blame us for it?”

“Ruzha is with Gen and Asora who are closely monitoring the situation,” said Vel. “Now that the ship is back Ruzha will explain to the people why we’re back. She’ll not only tell them that the war is a hoax but also that Anelia and her supporters are behind the hoax. Ruzha will also read out lists of names of people wanted for treason which will include the galaxy trader ambassador. Ruzha was certain he would have a lot to say to save his own skin. And Gen is making contact with her friends in Anelia’s army as we speak and is trying to convince them to surrender.”

“Vel, can we make a general announcement to the troops inside the base from here?” I asked.

“No Sir, not directly but I can ask base command to patch us in on the public announcement system which is tied to every building. Every soldier can hear us.”

“Do it then?”

Moments later Vel slammed her hand on her panel and went into another yelling fit.

“What now!?” I asked.

“Now I’m stonewalled by bureaucracy. I’m told it’s against regulations to have an outsider address the troops inside the base, Sir.”

In response I armed the torpedo tube, activated the torpedo cannon, pointed the ship at the base command building and said, “Vel, ask them again.”

But before Vel had a chance to open a channel they contacted us and said, “There was a minor misunderstanding, we have patched you in and everyone is waiting for your message.”

I pointed to Vel and said, “Vel, it’s your time to shine, do your thing and tell them everything.”

Vel opened the channel and began to speak in their language.

“She’s good. She’s a match for Ruzha. Very convincing too,” said Daf proudly with a big smile.

“Tell me Daf, can the base monitor what we’re doing in here? How did they know about the torpedo, which reminds me I’d better turn it off before I accidentally launch it...”

“No, don’t turn it off. The base is equipped with everything; monitoring equipment even energy cannons that can blast us out of the sky and they may do that now that you’ve threatened them directly. They can monitor all energy fluctuations and outgoing communications. But I don’t think they can decode our communications because we use encryption. They can decode them but it will take them a long time.”

The moment Vel was done talking we saw soldiers running out of their barracks and onto other buildings and breaking doors down.

“What in Mother Nature’s name are they doing?” I yelled.

“They’re breaking into the armories and arming themselves,” said Daf.

“What did you say to them?” I yelled at Vel.

“I told them everything like you asked,” she replied in a disappointed tone of voice.

“I can vouch for her, Sir,” said Daf.

“So, why are they getting guns and who are they going to turn them against?” I asked.

“Oops, I also told them that their base was surrounded by Anelia’s forces, I guess I shouldn’t have done that.”

“Get back on the com and tell them to hold their fire. We’ll resolve this problem peacefully. There’s no need for them to get involved,” I said.

But before she got on the com a message came in requesting that we open a channel with base command.

After Vel opened the channel she informed me that all the top commanders in the base had been arrested and the troops had taken over command.

“They’re waiting for our orders on what to do next. What shall I tell them, Sir,” asked Vel.

“Tell them to take defensive positions and wait for further orders, then contact Gen and Ruzha and tell them to get their butts to the base and take command of the troops.”

Just as Vel relayed the message we could hear cheers from the troops.

“What did you tell them now?” I asked.

“Exactly what you told me... Plus I told them Ruzha might be coming to visit them.”

“Why did you tell them that?”

“Because that’s what you would have done, Sir, I’m learning from the best!”

“Now contact Gen and Ruzha.”

“Yes Sir!”

Moments later Vel said, “It seems that Ruzha anticipated your move and she and Gen are on their way to the base. And, according to Gen, there is discontent in Anelia’s forces.”

After thinking for a moment, I said, “Vel, contact Ruzha and tell her to make an announcement on channel 45 and say that there are unconfirmed reports that Anelia has been arrested and urge her

forces to surrender to Gen now and there won't be consequences for them."

"But Sir, isn't that a lie?" protested Vel.

"I'll take responsibility for it," I said.

"So, it's another bluff to scare Anelia's forces to surrender quickly," said Daf.

"I just hope it doesn't backfire, Sir, especially if Anelia shows her face on the viewer," remarked Vel.

"Then we'll have egg on our faces..." I said.

They both looked at me and Daf said, "I don't know what that means, Sir."

I didn't bother to explain.

About five minutes later, we saw Gen and Ruzha arrive at the base in a little ship. About five minutes after that we saw women soldiers coming out of the bushes with their hands up.

"It looks like Anelia's troops are surrendering, Sir," said Daf and smiled.

"Vel, contact base command and ask for permission to land," I said.

After she did, Vel said. "Gen answered and told us to find a place inside the walls of the base. She also said that she's now in command of the base."

"Okay Daf, where do you suggest we land?"

"I don't know, there are soldiers everywhere and they're cheering."

"How about we start coming down slowly in the middle of that yard and hope that everyone moves away," I said.

After I turned off all our weapons we began to descend. The soldiers started to move away.

“The moment we open the hatch you must warn the soldiers about my guards... No lunging and no grabbing. I don’t want anyone to get hurt or killed,” I said.

After we touched down and the dust settled I opened the hatch and to my surprise the soldiers had formed two lines, starting at our hatch and extending to the door of the command building. They were all quiet and saluting.

“I guess Gen and Ruzha beat us to it,” said Daf.

“No, this is Ruzha’s work, I’m sure of it,” said Vel.

And sure enough Ruzha’s crew was there filming us getting off the ship and making our way to base command.

“Yeah... another historic moment for us, eh Vel?” I said.

“Not now, Sir,” she answered quietly.

When we arrived inside, Gen gave us a military salute. The girls saluted back but I didn’t. I found it a bit formal. I hugged and kissed Ruzha and then went and grabbed Gen and gave her a kiss too.

“That bad, eh?” asked Gen. “And it’s only been a couple of days.”

“All joking aside, I’m so glad you showed up here when you did. We will always be grateful to you for that. I thought we were done,” said Gen, lunging forward and giving me a hug and kiss and then hugged the girls, first Vel, because she was closest to her and translating for me, and then Daf.

I looked at the girls and winked at them but I doubt they knew what that meant.

When we were done with our greetings Gen asked, “What can we do for you?”

“It looks like you two have things under control here but there is the matter of the two robots on the galaxy trader planet,” I said. “I’m going back to destroy them as well as fulfill your agreement with the galaxy traders about supporting one another during a war, but I’ll need help. I need attack ships so I can attack both robots at the same time.”

Gen looked at me with a sad look on her face and said, “We thought about that when we got your first message but, I’m sorry we can’t help you. First, thanks to our former leadership, we don’t have the kind of ships you’ll need and whatever little we have we’ll need here. Our planet at the moment is vulnerable to inside and outside attacks. We have no idea who is behind Anelia with regards to this coup so we’ll need everything we have until we get to the bottom of it.”

After looking away to hide her emotions, she continued, “If you stay around for a month or two and help us out then maybe we can put a force together and carry out your plans.”

I looked at her and said, “Gen, every moment of every hour we’re here the robots are turning your soldiers, your fathers, your brothers, your sons, your people into zombies who, one day, sooner or later, will attack your planet and turn everyone of you into zombies. Every moment that we wait, one of your people dies and one more super soldier is added to the menace that exists on that planet. And for that reason I must go now.”

They all looked at me and didn’t know what to say. Was I insane or pointing out the reality of the situation that no one wanted to face?

As I stepped away I said, “Are you coming little sisters?”

Both Vel and Daf began to follow me.

Ruzha yelled, “Wait!”

I stopped. She ran over and dragged me into the corner away from her cameras. She then squeezed me, gave me a long kiss and said, “You come back... Do you hear me?” as I walked away.

Ruzha then hugged the girls and said something to them in their language, laughed, looked at me and said in Macedonian, “Little sisters.”

Gen came over and did the same.

After we boarded my ship the soldiers who were hanging around it moved away and we gently lifted off vertically. I then pushed the joystick forward to max and cause a huge explosion as we shot into outer space.

When we leveled off I stopped so that we could run diagnostics and prepare for the jump.

“You never fail to show off, do you, Sir?” said Vel.

“I’m Macedonian and we Macedonians don’t show off,” I replied.

The com began to beep repeatedly. Both girls looked.

Moments later Vel started laughing and said, “My com is jammed with messages, hundreds of them, and they’re all coming from the same source, the base.”

“What are they saying?” I asked.

“The idiots are proposing to us. They’re all marriage proposals to me and Daf, I can’t believe it,” Vel said.

“Any for me?” I asked.

Daf looked at me.

“I’m joking, I’m joking,” I said.

“I don’t know how you can joke at a moment like this, Sir,” Daf said.

“I know,” replied Vel. “Isn’t he something?”

“So, you think you’re any better?” I asked.

“STOP! Stop your constant stupidity, it’s annoying!” yelled Daf.

We didn’t say anything. I guess she was right.

“We’re ready to do the jump, Sir, but first we need to get to the jump coordinates. Just tap the autopilot, Sir,” said Daf.

“Thank you Daf. My diagnostics are almost done. I’ll do it as soon as they’re finished.”

Moments later I got a beep on my console and there was a red indicator under something in the diagnostic results.

“We’ve got some sort of problem. I’ve never seen this before,” I said.

“What is it, Sir?” said Daf and came over to look.

After touching a few buttons and looking into the instruction’s manual she said, “It looks serious, you’d better activate the repair robot. Move over, let me do it for you, Sir.”

I didn’t know what to do so I let her sit in the captain’s chair to do her thing.

A second later the repair robot came alive and did a number of things before it docked again.

“How many problems did we have?” I asked.

“Oh, I had the robot replace our fuel cells and energy cells for our weapons. The fuel cells were nearly depleted. I figured we’ll be doing a lot of fighting and flying and it’s best to be prepared.”

“Thank’s Daf,” I said and punched the autopilot button.

Seconds later we were at our usual launching spot. After lining up my ship with the green vector on my screen I powered up the ship’s cannons and set them on auto fire, turned on the retrorockets and hit the hyper drive button.

The moment we arrived at our destination and stopped we were attacked by three galaxy trader attack ships like the one’s we’d destroyed the day before.

I instinctively fired back and hit the first one. It was a direct hit and after firing a few flashes at us, it exploded. The other two left, regrouped and came back at us from two different directions. I knew if I fired at one the other one would certainly fire at us. So, instead of attacking them I flew up perpendicular to them into empty space. They both fired at us but missed. By now we were out of range and too far for them to fire at us but they were in pursuit.

“I’ve never seen you do that before, Sir,” said Vel.

“How I demolished the first ship?” I asked.

“No! How you ran away from a fight!” she replied.

“Vel, there are two of them and they were lined up to take us out. I could only shoot at one of them, not both. The other one would have certainly got us. So, what choice did I have except to run?”

They both looked at me strangely.

“Am I missing something here?” I asked.

“How far are you going to run now, Sir, until one of us runs out of fuel?” asked Vel.

“Well? What do you suggest I do?” I asked.

“Turn around and chase them. Our ship is much faster. Catch up to one, shoot it and then chase the other one until you get it too,” suggested Vel.

I did exactly that but before we got into firing range the two ships split apart and took similar positions like before. This time I flew down and escaped again. They both flew up in anticipation but we fooled them. They turned back and followed us again.

“Hmmm!” said Vel.

“So, that’s all I get from you two!” I said.

I then turned my ship around and headed back for the ships. The moment I lined up my ship in a direct line with them I locked onto the one on the right and fired my two right cannons simultaneously. There was a huge flash and a bang and the target ship was obliterated. My ship shook like a giant hammer had hit it. We had never experienced such a shock, not even when four of the cannons were fired at once. As soon as I regained control I went in pursuit and shot down the third ship which was still coming for us at full speed on a suicide mission.

After I stopped dead in space I looked at the girls. They were both in shock and wondered what the hell had happened.

After Daf looked at the logs she said, “I know what happened, you fired two cannons simultaneously. That’s a no-no and everyone, even cadets, knows not to do that.”

“My dear Daf, why did the ship allow me to do then it?” I asked.

“Now I know what Ori meant when he said ‘this captain is crazy, so don’t mess with him’ ...,” said Daf in a man’s voice.

Now she’s making fun of me, I thought to myself.

“Daf, why are the cannons firing so much more energy? What did you do?” I asked.

“Nothing! I didn’t do anything!” she replied and went to check the logs. “I ordered the robot to fine tune the cannons for higher efficiency but that idiot changed them to use double the energy.”

“So, the robot is an idiot now...” I said before I was interrupted by Vel who yelled.

“Stop that. Stop arguing and help me here.” She sounded like she was in a lot of pain.

We both jumped out of our seats. I lifted her out of her seat and sat her on the floor. She was holding her left hip. Daf pulled her camouflage pants down and we noticed a huge bruise the size of a grapefruit on her left hip.

“I hit the side of the chair when the explosion took place. I guess my lower seatbelt wasn’t tight enough. A good lesson for the next time,” said Vel.

“Daf, where is the first aid kit? Do we have something we can give her for the pain?”

Daf looked at me and shrugged her shoulders.

“There’s nothing you can do for a bruise, just pour me some rakia,” said Vel.

I went over to comfort her but she pushed me away.

“That hurts my feelings...” I said to Vel while Daf was pouring the rakia.

“You have feelings... for me?” Vel said sarcastically and then asked me to hold her head up so that she could drink the rakia. She drank it all and moments later she was out... with her pants down to her knees.

I looked at her and smiled. When Daf saw me she shook her head and said something in her language.

“What?” I asked.

“You two have the strangest relationship. I’ve known her almost my entire life and I’ve never seen her act this way. What’s with you two?” replied Daf.

“I wish I knew? I wish I knew,” I said.

I looked at Daf and said, “How did you know what Ori said and were you making fun of me?”

“Sir, that line is now a famous line in the academy. Everyone has heard it... And yes... I was making fun of you, Sir.”

“Why not? Everyone else does,” I said and sat down in my chair.

Moments later I said, “Daf, how about we eat something and take a short rest while Vel is resting. We’re in no condition to go into battle like this.”

“Will the robots be expecting us, Sir?” Daf asked with a mouthful.

“My guess is no. But they knew about us when we arrived. I suspect they also knew that we shot down their ships and destroyed their outpost. They must have another way of communicating, one we can’t detect. But I can tell you with some certainty that they don’t know we’re here to destroy them. However, they’ll take precautions against the kind of firepower we carry and the next time we fight them it won’t be so easy.”

After I started the diagnostics on our weapon’s systems I pushed my chair back and closed my eyes.

Battle at the green valley

“Do you think we’ll find any of our soldiers alive, Sir,” Daf asked while looking outside through the windshield into dark space.

“Go to sleep Daf, please... No more questions...” I replied.

“You said some things to Gen about rushing to do battle to save our soldiers, did you mean that or were you upset because she couldn’t help you?”

“Both! Now go to sleep!”

“Why are we sitting here and floundering?”

“Look, I don’t know why? All I know is that I need to do something but I didn’t want to get involved in the affairs of your planet again. Your people will have to learn to defend themselves on their own and me being there doesn’t help them.”

“Sure it does, Sir!”

“Look what happened when I interfered the last time...” I said.

“Are you feeling guilty for abandoning Gen, Sir? You put her in that position and then abandoned her just like you did Asora?”

“Well, what do you think, Daf? She asked me to stay and I left. Now tell me, if we don’t find any of your people alive and return to Ostikon with no one or we return to Ostikon to find Gen, Ruzha and Asora in chains; whose fault do you think that would be?”

“I’m sure that’s not going to happen, Sir. It’s best we get some sleep,” she said and went to her bed.

“But, at the same time, I can’t keep coming back to rescue your people every time they’re in trouble,” I said.

Hours later I was awakened by a bright flash that hit our windshield. I jumped up and must have yelled something out loud because I heard Vel yelp and then make groaning sounds.

“Daf, wake up!” I yelled.

She ran over and helped Vel up and put her pants back on. She then helped her sit on her chair.

“How are you feeling Vel?” I asked.

“Okay, I guess.”

“Are you in pain?”

“Yes, but I can manage.”

“I saw a bright flash on our windshield. Can you please check the logs and see what it was?”

“There’s nothing in the logs, Sir, not for the last seven hours. Nothing,” replied Vel.

“What do we do now, Sir?” asked Daf.

“Any messages from Ostikon?”

“None, Sir,” replied Vel.

“Well Daf, do you still have the coordinates the voice from the outpost gave us to deliver the prisoners?”

“Yes Sir?”

“Patch them in, we have prisoners to deliver.”

“All done, Sir.”

“Vel, make sure everything is turned off, except for our short range sensors and keep one communication channel open, the universal one. Make us look like a shuttle delivering prisoners.”

“Done as you ordered, Sir... Can I have some rakia now... I’m starting to feel pain again.”

“Daf, please bring us some rakia and bring some food with it, I don’t want you getting drunk.”

“Yes Sir, but I’m not having any rakia. No thank you.”

After Vel and I had some Daf changed her mind and poured herself some, looked at me and smiled.

“You have the right to change your mind,” I said. “But it’ll cost you.”

“It will cost me what, Sir?”

“You’ll have to sing us a song...” I said and began to laugh.

After a few gulps on an empty stomach Vel began to laugh and sing.

“Vel, open the universal channel and leave it open.”

“Not until you tell me why, Sir. Everything we say is recorded in the logs when we have a channel open and I don’t want to be made fun of unless it’s for a good reason.”

“Vel, you two are going to pretend to be a couple of drunken pirates delivering prisoners. You’ll sing like pirates, swear like pirates and keep blaming one another for being lost in space. Vel, you’ll complain about the outpost beacon not working and no one answering your calls. You’ll swear at Daf and blame her for everything. Got it?”

“Yes Sir,” said Vel, “I can do that. I’d love to do that but I’ll need more rakia.”

“No more rakia, I don’t want you passing out. And you Daf, you play the victim and complain about being blamed for everything that went wrong on this flight, okay?”

“Yes Sir, whatever it is you’re doing, I hope it works.”

“Okay then, let’s set the speed to shuttle speed and keep your eyes open.”

And with those words I punched the autopilot and off we went towards the centre planet.

As Vel was singing Daf went silent for a while so I gave her a swift kick on the side of her butt and she yelled out in their language, “Ouch, stop kicking me! Why did you kick me?”

Vel then fell into the act and said, “For getting us lost, you so and so…” (This was all they were willing to translate for me from the logs. I guess they were embarrassed to tell me what they called each other and said to each other during their twenty minute raunchy, improvised yelling match.)

This went on for about twenty minutes before we got a response on the same channel. The girls were so deep into their act they literally cheered when they heard the voice instructing them to remain on this trajectory and follow the beacons to a landing site on the planet. They were also told to close the channel and wash their mouths.

“I guess we were too vulgar for them, eh Sir,” said Vel.

“Don’t include me in this, you’re the vulgar one,” said Daf.

“That was not a robot, dear ladies,” I said. “It appears someone who speaks your language is working for the robots. How much do you want to wager it’s one of those technicians Ukasnek spoke about.”

“I agree Sir,” said Daf.

“You always agree with him,” said Vel and asked for more rakia.

“Give her some more, she earned it,” I said.

“But Sir, she’ll pass out again.”

“How long do we have to our destination at this speed?” I asked.

“About eight hours before we reach the centre planet, Sir.”

“We have plenty of time, give her more rakia and let her get good and drunk. I think I might do the same and get some sleep.”

After she handed me my cup I noticed Daf pouring herself another.

“Can you handle drinking two of those? I want you alert while we sleep, okay?”

“I’ll stay alert for you, Sir!” Vel said and passed out dropping her empty cup on the floor.

Daf and I looked at each other and we both laughed.

Daf said, “Don’t worry about me, I’ll sip my drink very slowly. You can count on me to be awake, Sir.”

I looked at her and said, “Yeah right,” then gulped down my rakia, put my empty cup in the holder, pushed my chair back and closed my eyes.

About eight hours later I heard a beep. The ship had stopped before entering the planet’s atmosphere on account that it was going too fast and didn’t know what to do. I looked at the girls and they were both sleeping on their chairs.

I kicked Daf on the side of her butt and said, “Wake up!”

“I’m awake, Sir!” she said.

“Now you’re awake, how long were you asleep?”

“Probably four to six hours, Sir. I guess I drank the rakia quicker than I thought.”

“Good thing the ship has safety features... Now calculate the maximum speed we can fly in this atmosphere and give it to me. I’m sure we’re being watched and those watching us are laughing their asses off at our incompetence.”

“That’s good, Sir, isn’t it?”

“Yes it is... being laughed at for being drunk and asleep at the wheel,” I mumbled.

After she gave me the number for the speed I punched it into the computer and told her to wake Vel. Moments later we were flying inside the atmosphere and heading to our destination.

“Hello sleepy head, it’s time to do battle. Are you up to it?” I asked Vel.

Vel gave me a look and said something in her language which, according to Daf’s expression, wasn’t very nice. But, given that I was possibly taking her to her death I said, “I love you too sweetheart.”

I looked at Daf, she was snickering. “Is that the best you two can do, Sir? We could get killed any minute, you know?” Daf said making fun of me.

“Oh shut up Daf, I have a huge headache and my hip is killing me and all you want me to do is show respect for him? Why?”

“Because you’re in love with him and you can’t handle it,” replied Daf.

Vel looked at her with a shocked look on her face.

“Shut up the both of you and pay attention. Daf, have a look at my viewer. What the hell is that?”

She came over, looked and said, “Those are the beacons we’re supposed to follow to the landing site.”

At that point I took the ship off autopilot, lowered it to surface level and flew slowly, following the arrows displayed on my screen.

Moments later we could see the great big facility in front of us. It was a huge place. Hundreds of large transport ships were parked in the valley in a straight line to where the arrows were pointing. There were thousands of people, looking like dots, lined up climbing up a long ramp on the right of the huge building that curved to the left as it rose up several floors.

“They’re our soldiers,” yelled Daf with excitement.

“How can you tell, they look like dots from here,” I said.

She jumped out of her seat like a gymnast, pushed a few buttons on my viewer and showed me the Macedonian star on their dirty uniforms.

“This ship has a magnifier?” I asked.

“Yes, but never mind that now Sir, we need to save our soldiers. What should we do?”

“Daf, first stop panicking,” I said and slowed the ship down to a crawl.

“Now listen to me carefully and do what I tell you,” I said explaining that we needed to scan the area and look for energy cannons, especially in the area at the side of the building where the lead robot was situated. We couldn’t go off course to do the scanning, I was pretty sure they would fire on us. And, if they started firing chances were many people would be killed. So we needed to do something different.

So, this is how it went after Vel opened the universal channel.

“Hey voice... Hello voice... Are you there voice...? Where are we supposed to land, voice?” Vel asked.

“Behind those ships, you idiot, where else?” said Daf.

“Hello voice, I need help here... Don’t tell me what to do and don’t call me names. You’re the idiot.”

“Land here!”

“No, I’m not landing here, it’s too far, I have to walk to the top of the ramp to get my money and I don’t want to walk. I want to get paid now and do you think they’ll pay me now if I land at the end of the line? I have to go to the top of the ramp to get paid. Besides, compared to those big ships, this is a small shuttle and we can land at the front of the line. Look, up there, there’s space up there... all we have to do is move those people out of the way,” complained Vel.

“Land here you drunken bitch before you get us both in trouble!” yelled Daf.

After almost landing at the back of the line I continued flying over the ships and part way up the ramp the voice came on and said, “Go back and land at the back of the line.”

“No, I don’t want to! I don’t, want to walk for kilometres...” yelled Vel.

“Go back or you don’t get paid. And shut your foul mouths,” said the voice.

Before closing the channel we heard one of them say, “What kind of a shit ship are these pirates flying...?” Another one said, “Greedy bitches, they’ll do anything for money!”

“Okay, Sir, okay, sorry...” said Vel and closed the channel.

I slowly turned the ship around in a wide jerky circle and flew above the crowd which was going nuts, attracting the attention of the robots.

“What’s wrong with these people,” I said.

“They must have recognized our ship and figure we’re here to rescue them, Sir,” said Vel.

“Fat chance,” I said, “all these little ships look alike from the bottom.”

“No Sir, not the ship, the symbol painted underneath it. The Macedonian star which they wear on their uniforms,” said Daf.

“Oh, crap,” I said.

They both looked at me.

“I forgot about that. We could be in big trouble. If the soldiers saw the symbol chances are the robots on the ground saw it too and if they make the connection we’ll be in big trouble. Here’s what I want you to do,” I said. “I want you to go out there and tell your soldiers to calm down, stop running, and pass the word around to everyone that when the shooting starts they should run and hide inside the ships. You should find pilots for each ship and stand by to fly the ships out on my command. Daf, you fly in the lead ship and guide the ships back to your planet. Vel you fly in the last ship and make sure everyone is on them, including any other people outside of your people. Take your arms, take several pistols. Take extra communicators with you and let me know if you get into any trouble. The moment I see a clear shot at the lead robot I’ll take it. Keep your channels open at all times.”

Just as I landed my ship I opened the hatch and Vel and Daf began to walk out. Daf dashed back and gave me a kiss and began to cry. Vel limped back and also kissed me, smiled, winked at me and said, “See you at Ostikon.”

Just as I closed the hatch I could see a wave of people running towards us.

“We’re in position, Sir,” said Vel on her communicator. “But I have been informed that a large number of our soldiers aren’t here. They’re in the green valley working on the farms. What are we going to do about them, Sir?”

“Send people to get them, bring them here and start loading them on the ships.”

“Sir, I’ve been informed that an armed robot is guarding them in the valley and any unauthorized person who goes to the farms will be shot on sight. Should I go, Sir?”

“No Vel! You stay here. Find a few of your elite soldiers, give them a communicator and guns and send them. Tell them to approach the robot from multiple directions and fire at it all at the same time.”

“I understand, Sir.”

“You’d better hurry, I see a bunch of robots coming down the ramp and heading this way. I’m going after them,” I said.

I quickly powered up everything. When the engines came on line I pushed the joystick up and forward. At the same time I fired all four of my cannons, one after another, and quickly turned away with a hard right and went down under the ramp. I saw flashes firing above my ship as I flew back to take another run. On my way back I saw people running down the ramp trying to get away. They were being fired on by energy cannons from the top of the building. It was probably the same cannons that had fired at me. I saw no robots on top of the ramp; I must have wiped them out. But I did see a big gaping hole. The ramp was cut in half.

My priority was to destroy the lead robot but I realized that in addition to killing many soldiers the energy cannons on top of the building were in a position where they could fire at the transport ships on the ground, and without them we couldn’t escape. So, instead of flying up the ramp like I was planning to, I turned around,

flew over the parked ships and attacked the cannons from the side. They were three and I took out all three of them, one by one, one shot each. I was now free to attack the lead robot.

I turned the ship around and went back and followed the ramp up like I'd planned to do earlier. The coast was clear and there was no one at the top of the ramp so all I had to do was take a sharp left when I reached the top and I would be face to face with my adversary. But then I thought, what if my adversary expects me to do just that and is waiting to ambush me?

I slowly following the ramp, slow enough so that I could make the sharp left turn, then, instead of going all the way up to the top, I quickly flew off the ramp and under it. When I arrived at the far side of the building I fired one of my cannons up at the underside of the ramp and poked a hole in it. I flew away to the right when debris began to fall and came face to face with three energy cannons. The one good thing about this was that I'd destroyed their equipment used to turn people into super soldiers and, at the same time, cut off all escape routes down the ramp. Unfortunately I had no idea what was inside the building and if the robots could escape a different way. So, to entice them to stay and fight I began to bob my ship up and down pretending I was hit and disabled. I kept bobbing closer to the building and going lower and lower towards the ground.

Before I hit the ground I looked up and saw the robots looking down at me from the top of the ramp. At that moment I raised my ship up and as I pulled away from the building I fired a cannon shot at them. The ramp broke off and the robots started to tumble down. At that moment I fired another shot and flattened them against the building. There was a huge explosion. I assume the lead robot blew up. The explosion pushed my ship back and sent it out of control. I was now in range of the big cannons situated on top of the building.

As soon as I regained control my ship was hit. This was the first time I had been hit by a large energy cannon. It felt like someone had hit me on the head with a baseball bat while I was wearing a motorcycle helmet.

I quickly pushed my joystick forward towards the building to avoid being hit again. There was a huge hole in the wall where the robot had blown up. Inside the building I could see huge men and women getting dressed and preparing for something; probably for an attack on the people and ships outside.

The sight of the super soldiers frightened me but my fear quickly turned to anger. I was tempted to fire a torpedo inside the hole but I figured that would cause a huge explosion and blow up the building, which would destroy the transport ships parked next to it and kill a lot of people. Instead of firing a torpedo, I pushed my ship to the limit climbing straight up close to the building's wall and fired at the cannons. I missed all three of them. The angle of approach was too steep, I barely grazed them. In my anger I flew straight up into the sky, turned around and dropped a torpedo on the top of the building. It took out three floors including all the cannons but also tossed a lot of debris on the people and the ships parked beside it.

I flew around the building looking for more defenses but I didn't see any. I then noticed a large green window. There was motion behind it.

“So, this is where the ‘voice’ is coming from,” I guessed. I had mixed feelings about what to do but, in the end, I decided to fire a blast of energy and destroyed it. This, I figured, was payback for the crimes these people had committed against humanity.

For a moment there I put myself in their position and wondered when my turn was going to be to pay for the crimes I had committed against humanity. Perhaps never... if I won.

I again contemplated blowing up the entire building with the super soldiers in it but I again figured the explosion would damage the transport ships. This would have to wait until the ships were out of the way.

The immediate problem facing me at the moment was the super soldiers and how to deal with them when they came out. There was also the problem of dealing with an aerial attack when it materialized. How was I going to handle both of them if they

occurred at the same time? I figured it was a matter of time before reinforcements were sent to blow up the transport ships, not only on the ground but up in the sky too. I would need to provide air support for them.

I landed my ship on the bottom of the ramp in front of the transport ships to provide cover for them and to watch for the super soldiers.

As soon as I landed I made contact with the girls.

“Well, little sisters, what’s happening out there?” I said.

“You gave us quite a show, Sir,” replied Vel. “You’re a hero now and if we make it home, there’ll be statues of you in every tube station.”

“Thank you my dear Vel, and statues of you two holding my hand,” I replied.

She didn’t say anything.

“And how is my other little sister?” I asked.

“Fine Sir, thank you. I found pilots for all our ships but it’ll take us a long time before we get all the people on the ships. These people have a lot of horror stories to tell and they all thank you for coming to save them. Some estimate that there are about eight-hundred-thousand of them, which means we lost about two hundred thousand, Sir.”

“Please Daf, hurry and get them on the ships and no ship leaves until everyone is on board. You hear me? All the ships have to leave at the same time. That’s the only way I can protect them from attacks, okay?”

“Okay, Sir, I’ve got it.”

“Vel, how did you deal with the robot in the green valley?”

“I told the soldiers what to do and they got the robot. Only one of them got shot but it wasn’t fatal. He’ll live and will be a hero at home... and will get all the women he wants... that’s what I told him.”

“Vel, please hurry and get everyone on board, I had a look at the super soldiers and they scare me.”

“I’m doing what I can, Sir. There’s almost a million people here and we need more time.”

I was feeling very anxious and didn’t know what to do. I wanted to go outside but I couldn’t risk it. I wanted to talk to someone, but there was no one to talk to. I wanted to drink but that too was risky at a moment like this. I was going out of my mind.

I decided to fly around just to keep busy so I lifted off and flew up the ramp, surveying the damage. Then, suddenly, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a line of super soldiers on the floor at the top of the ramp ready to fire on the transport ships.

They saw me fly by but ignored me. I turned the ship around, pointed my cannons at them and nothing, they again ignored me. “They’re zombies, they’re completely oblivious to my presence,” I thought but then I remembered they had no mind of their own and were totally under someone else’s control. They were also oblivious to danger.

I felt sorry for them as I fired one of my energy cannons at maximum strength and obliterated them. After I sighed deeply I figured there had to be someone who was still in control of them but where could they be? Could it be the other robot? I could only speculate.

I contacted the girls again and told them what I had seen and to hurry up. They were doing their best and were determined to save everyone.

“Some of these men are rotting from sores Sir, they need medical attention,” said Daf.

“I’m sorry Daf, there’s nothing I can do. Get help to wash their sores before they board the ships and hope for the best. I’m so sorry to have to put you through this.”

“That’s okay, Sir.”

I continued to fly around and look for movements inside the building and above in the sky. It was getting late in the evening and dark outside. More people came to Vel and Daf’s aid and brought water and food for the long trek back home.

By early morning the next day all the ships were loaded and ready to take off. All the dead who’d died of exhaustion, dehydration and malnutrition were properly buried and we were ready to leave the planet.

The girls wanted to come back to my ship but I said no. They would need to take their people home while I stayed behind and tackled the other problem; the second robot.

Just as the sun began to rise, the ships, one by one, lifted off and flew up into the sky.

When the last ship lifted off I was just about ready to go back to the facilities and level them to the ground, when I got an urgent call from Daf.

“We’re about to be attacked by three attack ships, the kind we encountered before. They’re asking us to turn back or they’ll fire on us. What shall we do, Sir?”

“Tell them you’ll comply and stall them until I get there,” I said.

“I’ll be back for you,” I said to the building and pushed my ship up at top speed passing over the other ships in an attempt to catch up with the lead transport ship.

“We see you Sir,” I heard Daf say.

“I made an attempt to open a channel but I had no idea how to contact the attack ships. I then realized I also didn’t speak their language.

“Daf, I don’t know how to contact them,” I said. “Please contact them for me and asked them for the coordinates where they want you to land and tell them I will escort you there. Then get the pilot in the lead ship to follow those coordinates.”

“Are you nuts, Sir?”

“Trust me Daf.”

“Okay, Sir.”

Moments later the lead transport ship turned around and began to descend. The first attack ship broke formation and began to follow. The moment it came into my range I fired and destroyed it. I then went full speed after the other two and turned away before I was in their range of fire. The moment I had a chance I contacted Daf and told her to turn around and resume course for Ostikon. The attack ships went after me and stayed in formation chasing me, one on each of my flanks. I figured I could outrun them but then I figured they would turn around and attack the transport ships. I couldn’t shoot them without risking being shot.

I decided to play a trick on them. I slowed down a bit until they caught up to me and then pushed my joystick forward hard and shut the engines off. My ship suddenly shot forwards and quickly stalled. I powered up the engines again and stalled them again. I did that several times to make sure they thought I was having engine problems. Then, when they came within firing range, I fired my retrorockets which sent me backwards and behind them. Both attack ships fired their cannons at me but missed. By the time they turned around I had a fix on one and shot it. It became disabled. I ran after the other one and blasted it out of existence. On the way back I finished off the first one and resumed my course back.

Unfortunately, without a navigator I had no idea where back was.

Just before I entered the planet's atmosphere I got a call from Vel who said, "Nice shooting, Sir. I'm sure that stunt you pulled will be named after you. They'll call it the 'Otsiron maneuver' and it'll be taught to every cadet in the academy."

"Thank you Vel, I'm so glad you appreciate my skills."

"I sure do, now go back down and finish the job Sir. We'll manage from here, the last ship has just left the galaxy trader outpost. See you back home!"

When Vel said finish the job it reminded me of where I had left off. I needed to go back and blow up the facilities but how was I going to find them without a navigator?

I then remembered the last entry in the navigation computer was the facilities. I was there in five minutes.

The ruins were still standing but looked dead. I got the urge to go closer and investigate but I had the feeling that the building might be booby trapped so I fired a torpedo from the distance into the hole of the bottom floor. There was a tremendous explosion that could have destroyed half the parked ships had I done this before.

Seconds later there were more explosions underground which caused huge craters that thrust dust and debris into the sky above, seeding it in the green valley.

I wondered what was under there and if it was toxic to the environment. I also wondered how many thousands of people I'd killed and if any of them were from Ostikon. I figured I'd best not distract myself with this. I had a job to do.

As I began to move away I could see more flashes coming from underground and black smoke rising up into the air and particles dropping in the green valley below.

I flew low and took my time. I was worried about being shot from the ground, but more worried about being shot from the sky. There was the matter of the galaxy trader destroyers which would be

unstoppable in the hands of the robots. I had to anticipate many things before I went into battle again, including safeguarding my robots. I didn't want them falling into enemy hands. So, the next thing I did was disable my guards through the "guards deactivation" command.

I also didn't want my ship to fall into enemy hands. I would destroy it before I let them have it. But, outside of flying it onto a big rock, I had no idea how to destroy it. Anyway, that wasn't important at the moment. My first priority was to find the location of the second robot. I knew the coordinates were entered somewhere in the navigation computer, but I didn't know which ones they were. I didn't know how to read their language. The only thing I knew how to read was the numbers. That's the only thing I learned in Ostikon. And that was thanks to Voskot who insisted that I learn the numbers.

As I scrolled through the screens in the navigation computer I realized that each line was a command or an instruction for the ship to follow. The lines were in three colours, yellow, green and white. The symbols in most lines were yellow. This told me that they had already been used. I also knew the first line on top of the display was the last path we had followed to the facilities I'd just blown up. I saw Daf enter the coordinates as given to her from Ukasnek's ship, and knew they were in the computer but had never been used. I traced back to the last green line and executed it. I then punched the autopilot.

I took a chance that those were the right coordinates. It was better than flying for hours and hours looking for the place and being attacked by ground fire or aerial attacks.

I flew low and for the first time I got the chance to look at this beautiful planet. The terrain was beautiful but completely deserted. I wondered where the people had gone. I didn't see any big cities, only small settlements, but they were all empty. I refused to believe that all the people had been captured and turned into zombies. It was impossible to transform all these people into super soldiers. Or maybe I didn't want to believe it. I believed a lot, the vast majority of the people had left the planet, just like Captain Orihci. They must have abandoned their homes and flown to other planets to save

themselves... and they were going to come back when this was all over.

Was this an agricultural planet? Because all I saw were beautiful green valleys. It all began to make sense to me. The brothers set up shop here in this secluded place to conduct their experiments to avoid the authorities because they were doing illegal stuff. Unfortunately something went horribly wrong and Ostikon was now paying the price...

The ride was very peaceful and took approximately twenty minutes. My tranquility unfortunately was shattered by a barrage of cannon fire that repeatedly hit my ship, driving it closer and closer to the ground.

The only thing I could think about at that very moment was the horrible pain I was experiencing from being beaten down. The cannons kept pounding my ship nonstop until it hit the ground.

The moment the ship hit the ground the cannons stopped pounding. I was surprised the ship was still intact. The hull wasn't damaged at all.

I turned off everything on the ship, closed the visor over the windshield, opened the hatch and stepped outside with my hands up. I then closed the hatch and threw my badge in the rubble next to the ship and waited. There was no point in struggling I figured. The only thing struggling would do was cause me more pain. There was nothing I could do against the robots that grabbed me.

I was ready to face my fate. I was glad the girls weren't with me. At least they were safe.

The final battle

As I relaxed my arms the two robots holding me let go of me and began to walk ahead. I followed. Following behind me were two more robots holding energy spears pointed at me. I only stopped for a second to look away when I felt a jab on the right side of my back. The pain was excruciating. I fell flat on my face. The other robot that followed behind was about to jab me again but I quickly jumped to my feet and resumed walking up the ramp. I looked away to my left where people were standing in line and was about to be jabbed again but I quickly turned away and looked ahead.

I was sure I was being escorted to see the lead robot. And given the trouble I'd caused, I was sure I was going to be tortured. They would make an example of me. They would torture me until they broke me and it would be very painful and humiliating, I thought.

I wasn't sure how much pain I could endure before I'd start screaming and that would be humiliating in front of all these people. But it wouldn't matter. They would all be turned into zombies soon. I was sure by now every person in the line knew who I was and the damage I had caused. Some may have even hoped that I would rescue them. Or no one knew who I was or cared. Everyone had their own problems.

I looked at them again. They looked so weak and worn out. Their clothes were filthy.

It was disgraceful for me the way they had captured me... the way I gave up without a fight. Perhaps that's the way it was meant to be. Would any of them have any faith in me after I gave up on them like this? I must be a total disappointment to them. Or, like I said, maybe no one knows anything about me and they figure I'm just another victim of misfortune. But the robots must know who I am and that's why they want to torture me.

As we climbed higher and higher up the ramp I looked to my right and noticed how high we had climbed. One could easily get killed if they fell off the ramp from here. I wondered how many had jumped

to save themselves from being turned into zombies. Would they have known that they would be turned into zombies?

I contemplated jumping for a moment and then remembered that there was a way to beat the pain. All I had to do was drink the firewater I was carrying in my left breast pocket.

As I wiped the sweat off my face with my right hand I slipped my fingers inside my left breast pocket, pulled out a vial and popped it into my mouth. I clamped down on it with my teeth and it popped open. After I drank the liquid and felt its effects I pulled the empty vile out of my mouth and put it back in the same pocket. I don't think anyone saw me, not even the robots escorting me.

About two minutes after I drank the firewater I was standing in front of the lead robot. It spoke to me, how, I don't know. I had no idea robots could speak. None of my robots spoke, not even my guards.

I looked at the robot with a surprised look and in Macedonian said, "I don't understand what you're saying."

I looked around and saw the first man in the line behind me motioning to me to sit. I sat down on the ground. The robot again said something. I stood up. The man behind me motioned again and when I didn't understand he bowed and showed me how to do it.

"I understand," I said in Macedonian. "But I'm not bowing to a robot!"

The robot didn't understand me. I looked up to where its head was supposed to be but I couldn't see any eyes. I had no idea where its eyes were. I motioned "NO!" in the Ostikon language; something I had picked up in my travels.

There was no reaction from the robot. I thought maybe it didn't understand me so I said "NO!" in the Ostikon language, one of the few words I had learned.

The moment I said "no" I felt two jabs in the small of my back. It was very painful but I didn't flinch. I got very angry and felt like

grabbing the two robots behind me and smashing them against one another but I remembered what had happened to me when I tried to lift the tank back on earth. Besides, I didn't want to take chances. The lead robot could have shot me with its energy rifle if I made a sudden move.

The robots jabbed me a second time and a third but I wouldn't flinch. Fortunately for me these were energy spears and not real spears. If they were real spears I would have been dead.

Failing to make me bow to the lead robot, the two robots grabbed me by my arms, turned me around, took me back, sat me on the conveyer belt chair, buckled my seat belt and strapped my arms and legs tight on the chair. I didn't struggle.

When I was taken back I looked around at the crowd and noticed everyone looking at me. I'm sure everyone knew what a jab with an energy spear felt like.

Seconds after the conveyer belt started moving I arrived at the first processing station. This, according to Ukasnek, was the place where my brain was going to be fried with chemicals and my memory wiped with energy. The conveyer belt stopped and a crown tied to a chain with many wires attached to it began to descend towards my head. A needle was about to jab me so I wiggled my body and it missed me. I then moved by head back and forth refusing to allow the crown to land on it. After the crown was raised and lowered several times unsuccessfully, a robot came over and forced it on my head. I moved violently from front to back and from side to side to dislodge it but I couldn't.

Then, suddenly, there was a small energy blast from the right side of the ramp. It hit a metallic sphere on the left side just inside the building. The blast came from a tiny ship that had risen up from the outside of the ramp and dropped down again. I momentarily saw it from the corner of my eyes.

The robots ran to the edge of the ramp but by then the little ship had disappeared.

When the electrical sparks on the metallic sphere stopped flickering the crown came off my head and the conveyer belt advanced to the next processing station. I felt no pain and no memory loss. The attack on the metallic sphere definitely wasn't part of the process so I figured someone didn't want me to lose my memory.

The conveyer belt stopped again. I looked up. A number of robotic arms with needles connected to hoses began to descend. This must be the hormone injection station I figured, from what Ukasnek had told us. I looked to my right waiting for the little ship to appear, and it did, but this time the robots were prepared for it. The moment it fired, its energy was deflected by an energy dome, a shield of sorts. It became visible when the energy fired by the little ship hit it. I also noticed a delayed reaction from the robots. They didn't fire at the ship until the energy shield dissipated. By then it was too late. The little ship had disappeared again.

While I was distracted looking at the ship and the robots, the robot arms poked me several times on my shoulders and back. When the poking was done the contraption retracted up. I didn't feel any pain or discomfort. I figured I was still under the influence of the firewater.

The conveyer belt started moving again and stopped at the third processing station. This was where I was going to be "chipped", according to Ukasnek. I waited with anticipation to see what the little ship was going to do this time but again, to my disappointment, it was unable to do anything. When it popped up it began to fire indiscriminately all over the place, activating the protective shield each time. But instead of dropping down and disappearing, the ship hovered around for a while. What was it waiting for?

The robots couldn't resist the chance to shoot at it so they lowered the shield and fired at it. It received a direct hit.

When it was hit something metallic fell off it and landed near me. I thought a part had broken off it when it was shot. The ship then dropped down and disappeared, looking like it had crashed.

I looked hard to see what had dropped and to my surprise it was a gun. It was a long rifle that shot bullets. It was weird looking and had a long barrel. The robots didn't seem to react to it or recognize it. I wondered why the little ship would drop a gun like that just beside me. Was I expected to do something with it? But what, shoot the robot with it?

At that very moment I felt a strong jab at the back of my neck which momentarily blinded me. I guessed that that was the chip stuck in the back of my neck. I immediately went blind. All I could see was static like the type we used to see on the old televisions back on earth when there was no signal on the channel.

I heard the robots moving around me but I couldn't see them unbuckling me and moving me off the conveyer belt. I couldn't see them place me in front of the lead robot. I was aware that I was being moved but I couldn't see where.

Moments later someone spoke to me and my sight began to come back. When my sight was completely restored the first thing I saw was the lead robot. It spoke to me and I actually understood what it said even though it wasn't in my language and was without words. In other words I understood its thoughts. I looked at the robot from top to bottom. My eyesight was very clear, much clearer than it had ever been. The robot looked very friendly, I felt very close to it and comfortable. My anxiety died completely, I had none.

I felt like I was in heaven and the robot was making that happen for me. It asked me to bow down and I gladly did. I gladly went down on my knees and bowed my head. I kept looking at the gun but didn't know what to do with it.

As I looked down at it I heard energy guns firing. I felt they had nothing to do with me. I was safe, the robot kept reassuring me. I took the gun in my hand and stood up. What was I suppose to do with it?

The ship kept popping up and disappearing, firing at the lead robot and popping down under the ramp. I watched the shield come on

and off as the shooting continued. I looked up on the wall and saw a red light flicker on and off as the shield came on and off.

I didn't like the red light, it disturbed me. I began to feel uncomfortable as my own mind began to assert itself over the robot. Something told me to shoot the red light. I did and hit it several times. The lead robot came at me. I shot at him too but the bullets just fell off. They hit the robot, flattened and fell to the ground like coins.

Suddenly the robot turned its gun on me, shot me in the gut and knocked me off the ramp.

I felt great pain and passed out as I fell down three or four stories.

Moments or maybe hours later I felt someone slapping my face.

"Stop, stop it," I said in Macedonian. At that moment I wasn't sure who I was or where I was. I kept passing in and out of consciousness like I existed in two different worlds. I wondered what was happening to me. I tried to move but felt excruciating pain in my abdomen.

The man who slapped me was hovering over me and putting cool mud on my gut. He kept saying something but I didn't understand what he was saying. He looked like he was panicking and in distress.

He slapped me again, several times, and when I looked at him he clenched his fists and made a face. He looked like he was constipated. What was he trying to tell me?

After slapping me a few more times he grabbed my hands and tried to stand me up. I again felt excruciating pain emanating from my gut. I looked up at him. He was panicking. I passed out for a moment and fell down again. I felt wonderful while I was passed out. I could hear the soothing voice of the robot talking to me, trying to summon me to go to it. It had a wonderful voice.

The man slapped me again, this time hard. I grabbed his arm by the wrist. I saw fear in his eyes. I felt sorry for him so I let him go. I didn't know what to do.

The man again made a constipated gesture and, after looking at my blank stare, shook his head and grabbed his face with both hands. I felt like passing out again but resisted.

Perhaps the man wanted me to resist passing out, I thought. That's it he wants me to resist passing out, that's what the constipated look was for, to let me know to resist... to resist the robot.

I tried getting up on my own. I again felt excruciating pain. Then I remembered; it was the robot that had done this to me; it had shot me in the gut... that bastard.

When the man realized that I understood what he was trying to tell me he came back again and tried to help me up... but I couldn't get up. He shook his head and couldn't understand why. Then I remembered. He must have seen me getting zapped by the energy spears and I hadn't flinched. He saw me getting shot in the abdomen by a powerful energy weapon and I was still alive. He must have thought I was some kind of super being. And now he couldn't understand why I just couldn't get up.

What the man didn't know was that at that time I was under the influence of firewater, a very powerful drug.

While the man looked away fretting, I reached into my left shirt pocket and popped some more firewater in my mouth. Seconds later I was on my feet. I startled the man when he saw me up.

We sat in the sand and I kept looking at my gut wondering if the mud the man put on me was there to hold my intestines from flopping out. At the moment I felt no pain as I watched him draw a cannon in the sand with an energy blast in front of it. He then drew two cannons side by side like the ones in my ship each firing at the same time creating a spiral blast. I immediately understood what he was trying to tell me; two energy cannons firing at the same time might be a way to destroy the robot.

When he drew a shape of the robot in front of the cannons firing, I was sure of it. Only my powerful cannons could penetrate the robot's defense shield and destroy it but they'd have to be fired simultaneously.

When I shook my head motioning that I understood he escorted me to his ship and flew us to a grove just opposite the facilities.

The facilities were again in full operation.

I looked down the hill and saw my ship sitting there like a green dog taking a dump. It was guarded by two robots, one on each side. I guess after I was shot the robots must have looked for my body and when they couldn't find it they figured I was still alive and was bound to return to my ship. But the idiots were in full view. Maybe they wanted me to see them. Maybe the idea was for me not to get access to my ship. I don't know; I figured my friend here would know what to do.

While we sat hiding in the grove I had a chance to look around. This facility looked identical to the other one. Transport ships were parked to its side and people climbed up the ramp to be processed and turned into super soldiers.

It was nice and peaceful up here but I was hungry as a dog. I looked at the man and, for the first time, noticed how short and skinny he was. His skin was thin and dark, burned by the sun. I then looked at the sun and noticed that it was going to set in a short while.

The man grabbed my hand and forced it to the ground. He looked at me and did the same with his own hand. What was he trying to tell me? Feel the ground?

A moment later he stood up. I tried to stand up but he pushed me down. I then realized he was trying to tell me to stay there.

He went to his ship and when he came back he had a gadget in his hands with several wires sticking out of it like horns. I had no idea what it was. He took a spool of wire out of his pocket and connected

it to the gadget. He then drew a diagram on the dry ground with the two robots and my ship. Behind my ship he drew a small circle and pointed at the gadget. In other words, we needed to place the gadget behind my ship. What it was supposed to do, I don't know.

After that he pointed at the sun and placed one hand over his eyes. By that I assumed we needed to do this after dark. Why after dark? I was pretty sure the robots could see in the dark but then it occurred to me that someone else, perhaps a human, was watching my ship from the distance. That too didn't make any sense because they could use night vision goggles to see what was going on.

I figured the man knew what he was doing so I stopped wondering and decided to watch the sunset like it was my last.

Hours later I began to feel severe pain in my abdomen, especially when I tried to stand up. The man gave me the gadget and pointed in the direction of my ship. I figured he wanted me to take it there covertly.

Before disappointing him I decided to drink the last vial of firewater and face the consequences later.

While he tried to unwind the wire I popped the contents of the vial into my mouth and swallowed it. I felt its effects in seconds and got on my feet without hesitation.

Just before I took my first step down the hill, I saw the man pull something out of his pocket, point it in the direction of the facilities and pulse it on and off a few times. I immediately realized what he was doing. He was messing with their surveillance equipment causing faults to occur. The robots must have had cameras trained on my ship and were monitoring it from the facilities. The pulsing from the man's gadget was causing disruptions making it look like the equipment was malfunctioning. He was indeed clever I thought and wondered if he was the same man Ukasnek had encountered. Maybe he was.

I slowly and quietly went down, placed the gadget behind my ship and was back in less than one minute.

The moment I returned the man pushed a button on the remote at the end of the wire, grabbed my hand, flashed his gadget again and we both ran towards my ship. When we arrived the robots ignored us completely. I assume the gadget with the horns interfered with their detection circuits.

I looked at the man with a smile on my face but he didn't smile back. He looked like he was panicking trying to get me to open my ship. He flashed his little gadget while I looked for my badge. Lucky for us I found where I'd dropped it.

Moments later we were inside my ship and the hatch was closed. We climbed our way up and managed to get to the seats. The ship was resting at an angle and we had to fight gravity to get to them. I sat in my seat and he sat in Daf's seat. We spent the night resting undetected.

Everything was powered down and my ship looked dead when we woke up. He woke up first.

I had no idea how much my ship was damaged and if it could fly again but I went through the sequence of powering it up.

The moment the engines were up and running I pushed the joystick forward and we quickly flew up into space, away from the facilities.

The moment we moved we were fired upon by the energy cannons stationed at the top of the facilities. We weren't hit.

When we entered outer space I leveled off the ship and turned off the engines, letting it drift.

Moments later I went and got some water and a jar of meat which I was going to share with the man but he grabbed the spoon and ate the contents of the entire jar. I gave him a second jar and got one for myself. While he was busy eating I refilled my firewater vials and placed them in my left breast pocket. I then went and got a towel and tied it around my wounded abdomen.

We were both exhausted but he kept asking questions. I had no idea what he was asking. I powered up Daf's viewer and he began to look at it. He began to push various buttons and brought up information like he knew what he was doing. I then realized that he was familiar with the Ostikon language and was able to read everything. He understood the symbols.

While he was busy reading I turned on our long range sensors and began to scan for ships in case we had been followed. There was nothing out there. I guess they weren't interested in us since we no longer posed a threat to them, I thought.

Just as I was about to doze off the man slapped my face.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I yelled in Macedonian. I then realized that he was trying to stop me from falling asleep. He knew that the robot would try and gain control of me if I fell asleep.

I reached for the back of my neck and felt the wound where the chip had been inserted. It was painful to the touch. The man shook his head meaning don't touch it and made a motion of an explosion with his hands. I assumed the chip couldn't be removed without causing an explosion which would kill me.

He continued to access my ship's computer faster and faster.

After I ran diagnostics I found many things wrong with the ship. I activated the repair robots and they took care of the problems.

By what he was trying to tell me I figured the man had found a way to effectively maximize the ship's weapons with less risk to the ship. He used his hand to demonstrate how we could simultaneously fire two cannons at the same time without blowing up the ship. He must have checked the logs and seen that I'd done that before. He showed me by using the fingers on his hand. He indicated that we should fire the two outermost cannons when we needed to fire them simultaneously. He explained why this was but I couldn't understand him.

By the number of things he learned about my ship in a short time, I figured this guy was a genius or very knowledgeable of ships. At times, from the expression on his face, he was very impressed with what he read about my ship. I just wished we could communicate, I could learn a lot from him.

I began to feel pain in my abdomen and decided to lay down on my chair to rest. I didn't feel like taking any more firewater. I had no idea what damage it could do. But at this point I figured it wouldn't matter anyway because I was going die from my gut wound before I died from the firewater. It was only a matter of time. But, it would be a shame if I died before I finished the job of destroying the robot.

Moments later I was in heaven. I felt great and no pain until the man began to slap me again. I had fallen asleep and he was trying to wake me up... but it was too late. I had become a spectator in my own body. The robot had taken it over.

I could hear myself speak in a language I didn't know. I angrily said something to the man which terrified him. He looked away. I groaned, sat up and looked down at my gut. The mud that had dried began to break and fly off. The man ran over to the cabinets, opened a jar of food and gave it to me. I tipped it over and sucked out the food like an animal. He got me another jar and I did the same. I could hear my own heart pound like a sledgehammer against my chest, pounding faster and faster. I could feel my body burning. The man brought me bags of water and I sucked them dry without spilling a drop. The man brought me more food and I ate that too. Where was I putting all this food? My stomach wasn't that big?

I watched myself grow but it wasn't me growing, it was someone else. I drank more water. My heart continued to race, running like the engine of a race car. I watched my muscles grow and my sweat washing the mud off my gut. The burn began to disappear and slowly shrink from the size of a saucer to a coin and disappear.

The man watched me from the distance as my heart slowed down and I began to feel great again.

The man looked at me strangely not knowing what I was going to do next. He had a worried look on his face.

I asked myself, “If the man knew that I was going to turn into a super soldier why did he help me?”

I had no idea but, for some reason, I trusted him.

I began to speak to him again but it wasn't me talking. I still couldn't understand what I was saying but as an observer I could see that the man was worried, especially after I began to laugh at him. Why was the robot laughing at him and could robots really laugh or even understand what laughing was?

After thinking about this for a moment I realized that I knew nothing of the robot, this man, their relationship or any of it.

After I stopped laughing I pulled out my pistol and aimed it at the man's head. He cowered but kept looking at me with fear in his eyes.

I yelled, “NO!” from the inside and stopped myself cold. I surprised myself. Or I should say I startled the robot which was in control of me, if that was even possible. Could robots be startled?

I looked at the man and he made the constipated look at me again. He was asking me to resist the robot.

After looking into my eyes the man took his seat, punched something into the navigation computer, reached back and pointed at the autopilot button. I pushed it and off we went.

I knew the man was in a hurry to do something but I had no idea what.

By now my robots were finished doing the repairs to my ship and docked themselves before we arrived at the facilities. When we were in range I powered up all the cannons and torpedo and set them to maximum power. I then stopped the ship in midair.

I looked at the man and he looked back at me. I showed him the cannons with my fingers and pointed at the outer two fingers. He shook his head no and pointed at my middle finger. I laughed but I don't think he knew why I laughed.

Before firing I took a quick scan to confirm that there were no ships around. There were none but I got a massive reading, off the scale massive, from the facilities. I fired the cannon and looked at the sensor before the flash disappeared. It was a direct hit but had no effect. In fact it looked like the facilities had absorbed the energy from my cannon and added it to its own shield. I replayed the shot several times, even in slow motion, and watched the electrostatic field, looking like a dome above the facilities, suck up the light energy like a vacuum cleaner sucking dust. In other words the energy fired from my cannon made the facility's force field even stronger. This was indeed a clever move.

I looked at the man and saw disappointment but no surprise on his face.

He punched some more numbers into my navigation computer and, without looking at me, pointed to my panel. I punched the autopilot and in a minute or so we landed in the grove where his ship was hidden.

After we landed the man got out of his seat, grabbed his chin with his right hand and began to pace back and forth in the confined space inside my ship.

While looking at him, I looked at myself and was surprised to the point of being startled by the size of my arms and legs. I looked like the incredible hulk in Bruce Banner's clothes. My camouflage uniform was ruined.

Suddenly the man stopped pacing and said something which took my attention away from me. He opened the hatch on my ship and signaled for me to stay. He ran outside and disappeared.

About twenty minutes later he reappeared, hurriedly climbed into my ship and showed me something. It looked like a model ship

sitting on a foot long cross with a string to wear around a neck. He turned on all my viewers and waved it all over the place inside my ship. Nothing happened. He then put it against the wall and nothing happened. He gave it to me to look at and put it around my neck. It was heavy but looked nice; a bit large but nice.

Just as I finished admiring it he took it back, shoved it in front of my face and twisted the ship on top of the cross clockwise. Suddenly the viewers became distorted and stopped working. He straightened the ship on the cross and moments later the viewers came back again. He did it again and then asked me to do it. After I did it he took the device close to the wall of my ship and the moment he turned it on the device jumped, hit the metallic wall and became stuck to it.

At that moment I realized that it was an electromagnet like the one he'd used earlier to disorientate the robots guarding my ship. It didn't take me long to realize that this magnet was meant for the lead robot but how was he planning to bring it close to it?

After he put it around my neck the man went on pacing again. I assumed he wanted me to bring it to the robot, turn it on and attach it to it. But how?! I figured he was pacing trying to think of how to get me close to the robot without the device being detected.

Suddenly he stopped pacing and came over. He said something but I couldn't understand what he'd said. He then entered some coordinates into my navigation computer and went and closed the hatch. After he sat down he pointed to my panel and I punched the autopilot.

Moments later we landed inside the grove opposite the big facility. We both got off the ship and I closed the ship's hatch. We walked down to the last line of trees and sat down. We could see all the activities from here. The facility looked like a big factory operating as usual except the top part of the ramp was surrounded by dozens of super soldiers. The place looked impregnable.

After a few minutes of watching, the man took my energy pistol and put it on the ground. He then motioned something to me. He wanted me to do something but I couldn't understand what. Finally he lay

down on the ground in a sleeping position and motioned for me to go to sleep. When I was lying down he glued something behind my ear and indicated that I shouldn't remove it.

I was very tired and it didn't take long for me to fall asleep.

I was in heaven again and beckoned to go and visit the king. The way was pointed by green arrows. When I arrived the king touched me on my head and made me kneel before him.

At that very moment I heard what sounded like energy fire in the distance. Then, suddenly, I felt an unpleasant and painful sensation behind my ear. It woke me up. I remembered the cross. I had to take the cross off my neck and place it around the robot's neck. After I did that I turned it on and felt great pain in my head.

Every super soldier, including the lead robot, was going bonkers running around, falling on the ground and swinging their arms all over the place. I tried to run down the ramp to avoid being trampled but didn't get too far before I was pushed off the ramp by a blast. I landed in the field three levels down. I landed on top of another super soldier who broke my fall. I was all right but he was bleeding from his head.

As I looked at him I saw a beautiful young woman rise from behind a super soldier sprawled on the ground a few metres away.

The young woman looked at me and began to sing a beautiful song which lasted a couple of minutes. When she was done I said to her, "That's a beautiful song, what do you call it?"

"Thank you for saving me," she said and there, before my eyes, she disappeared. I went over to look for her but she wasn't there. The super soldier she was standing over was dead. I pulled his breathing device off and looked at his face but I saw a woman's face.

I looked around; there were many wounded soldiers everywhere. I looked up and saw a gaping hole where the top of the ramp was. I could no longer feel the presence of the robot in me. The king was dead I figured and my mission was over... at last.

When I looked back I saw the super soldier who had broken my fall looking at me. He looked like a lost child. I felt sorry for him. I didn't know what to do. I ripped the bottom of my shirt and made a band aid with it and wrapped it around his head. He kept looking at me.

Others who had wounds came over and began to congregate around me. In no time I was surrounded by about a dozen of them. My friend who had been with me on my ship ran over to see how I was doing. The super soldiers surrounded me and wouldn't let him come near me.

I made my way over to see what he wanted. The soldiers let him through. After I showed him what to do, so that we could patch up the wounded faster, he left and ran inside the building. Moments later he came out with nine men who looked like him. They brought medical supplies with them. Unfortunately the super soldiers wouldn't allow them to touch them and all came to me to fix their wounds.

In time all of the wounded soldiers were looked after. I was surrounded by them and they went everywhere I went.

I didn't know what to do with them. So, one by one, I lined them up in a semicircle and sat them down. There were eleven of them.

I was beginning to worry. What was I going to do with them? They were people just like me but whose memories had been wiped out and they didn't know who they were or what to do on their own.

I took a deep breath and looked around and up the ramp. Just beyond us, closer to the ramp there were many torn up dead bodies. They were the bodies of the super soldiers that had run to assist the lead robot before it blew up. Their bodies absorbed the blast and saved my life and the lives of the others.

There was also the question as to why the robot blew up? Why did it blow up much later and not when I placed the cross on it? Did the cross have a time delay device on it or had my friend activated the

explosion from the distance with a remote control. These were valid questions, I thought, but without the aid of language I couldn't ask them.

I looked up at the ramp. The captives were still there looking down at us. They were guarded by the robots that refused to let them move.

How was I going to free them?

More importantly these people needed food, water and bathroom breaks. Now that the process was disrupted everything came to a halt.

I waved at my friend. He came over looked at me and raised his arms up high. He seemed frustrated with the whole situation. I pointed at my mouth and then pointed at the soldiers and the captives above. He knew what I was asking. He said something to the nine other men who stood there looking confused and then ran off into the building.

Suddenly there was a lot of activity, people and super soldiers began to appear from everywhere. Ships began to appear from the sky and landed in the distance. Two of them I recognized as the galaxy trader destroyers. Trucks began to appear from the valley bringing food. It was chaos and I was in the middle of it. Armed super soldiers kept coming out of the big structure and lined up in long rows beside me.

My friend was doing his best to keep order but he had no effect on the super soldiers who tended to follow me. I couldn't leave the place without them following me and I couldn't communicate with them to tell them not to follow me.

The new arrivals who arrived in the ships began to appear on the horizon but the robots wouldn't let them come near us.

So, after a forty minute debate between my friend and the other nine men we finally had a resolution. What it was, I didn't know but I trusted my friend.

After several of the little men disappeared inside the building a couple returned with two gadgets. One looked like a crown and the other one was a talking box.

My friend motioned for me to put the crown on my head but I refused. It reminded me of the machine that had wiped out the memories of the super soldiers.

Failing that the two men began to play with the talking box. Each time they played something they looked at me. What were they trying to do? I couldn't understand until I realized what they were doing. They were playing segments of the various languages spoken in their world.

About two hours later when I was about ready to smash this thing to pieces I heard the Macedonian words, "Do you speak Macedonian?" coming out of it.

"YES!" I yelled out in Macedonian.

They immediately took the devices back and several hours later came out with what I later found out to be a universal translator adjusted to speak their language and mine.

My friend said something and the machine translated what he said in Macedonian. It wasn't perfect but I understood what he was saying.

The first thing I said was, "The translation isn't very good but if you explain things slowly and in many words I'm sure I'll understand you."

My friend laughed out loud, gave me a big hug and said, "I am Enai. I'm from a far away planet called Ailar and these are my associates and countrymen."

"I am Otsiron, my friends on Ostikon call me Otsi, and I'm from the planet earth," I replied.

Enai then grabbed the crown and said, “This thing here I’m asking you to put on is a device with which you can communicate with the soldiers and perhaps with the robots. The things stuck in the back of their necks have been programmed to understand commands coming from this device. You will need to put this thing on your head to try it out and see if it works.”

He paused for a moment and then said, “This is a device used by my associates to remotely speak to the soldiers and diagnose their problems. I know it’s a medical device but that’s all we have for now. If it works it will give you the ability to bring some order to this chaos. Please trust me it’s safe, I’ve used it myself in the past.”

“If you know how to use it then why don’t you put it on and bring order yourself?” I asked.

“Believe me my friend, I would in an instant if I could, but I can’t. None of us can. We all have chips in the back of our necks which prohibit us from taking control of the super soldiers. We can only do medical exams. If we could talk to the soldiers we would have ended this madness a long time ago.”

“So, if you have the chip in the back of your neck... How did you get away from the robot’s grasp and why didn’t it kill you?”

“The robot is not authorized to kill us through the chip. Plus, like you, I had the will to resist it.”

“I see,” I said and then asked. “Why are the super soldiers coming to me and not to you, your associates, or the robots”?

“That my friend, I don’t know. It appears that after the lead robot was destroyed they became attached to you. Why, I don’t know but you have no choice about this. Without you they will go mad or die of loneliness.”

“You’re kidding me, right?” I asked.

“My dear friend, please trust me on this. Without their memories they exist in darkness. Their human mind is a blank. The only

beacon of light is your soothing voice which gives them comfort and pleasure. They will obey you and do anything you ask of them,” he said.

He then looked at me with pleading eyes and said, “You came here to save us. I know that. Everyone knows that. So please save us. These are our people who have fallen victim to this madness. They didn’t want this. They weren’t given any choice. They were turned into something they didn’t want. They don’t deserve this,” and then he looked down.

“But it could be worse. They could fall into evil hands,” he said.

“Okay, okay, I’ll do it,” I said, and thought to myself. “Here’s another situation where I’m forced to become involved that doesn’t concern me.”

I took the device and placed it on my head and... nothing.

Enai then pointed to a button on the crown that sat to the side of my right eye and asked me to push it. I pushed it and heard it click but nothing happened.

“The button activates the transmitter, he said. “Say something in your language.”

I said several things and nothing happened.

Enai looked at the other men and they began to yell at each other. They went on yelling at each other not realizing that the universal translator was on and translating everything they said. Both Enai and I could hear them swearing at each other in the most foul language.

Enai looked at me kind of sideways and, after smiling for a while, began to laugh.

“This is how we solve problems here, no wonder we’re in such a big mess,” he said.

“Does the device use power and is it powered on?” I asked.

“Of course it uses power. It has a special transmitter which they assured me they had modified to reach long distances. But I don’t know if it’s powered up, it should be, we may be incompetent but not that incompetent.”

“Will I feel or see anything when the device is operational?”

“Of course you will. You’ll feel a slight current trickle through your head and see the command lines in front of your eyes. Then all you have to do is say the specified command number and the computer in the device will execute it and send out instructions in the language the soldiers understand. In time you’ll learn all the commands and speak them yourself. Eventually you’ll be able to communicate with them by thought.”

After Enai said that he came over and examined the device. He then yelled, “STOP! You idiots forgot to turn the power on.”

Enai then turned to me and said, “Are you ready for this?”

When I said yes he turned on the power switch and a bunch of symbols appeared before my eyes.

“I can’t read this. It’s all symbols which I don’t recognize.”

They all began to look at one another. One of them said, “We don’t have a written form of your language.”

“This is useless,” I said and in frustration took off the crown and gave it to Enai.

He turned off the universal translator, yelled a few choice words, turned it back on and began to pace.

“How difficult is your language?” he asked me.

“It consists of thirty one phonetic letters.”

“What are letters?” he asked.

“They’re something like your symbols but with a single unique sound.”

“Our symbols are phonetic too and have a single sound,” he said, looked at his associates and said. “We shouldn’t have any difficulty converting them. You just have to tell us which letter goes with each sound.”

One of the men brought something to write on and I sketched out the capital letters of the Macedonian alphabet one by one. Each time I sketched one I told them what it sounded like and one of the men sketched out the corresponding symbol. We also did the same with the numbers zero to nine. When we were done they took the crown and went back inside the building.

I looked around and saw people delivering food and water to the captives above, on top of the ramp. The line of super soldiers was growing but the super soldiers wouldn’t accept the food or water handed to them. I could see more loaded vehicles appearing in the distance. The captives standing still were looking at me. I felt uncomfortable. I looked like the hulk with a naked gut and the only one wearing tight camouflage clothing. I looked pathetic.

Enai looked at me looking at myself, laughed and said, “If that was your only problem, we could fix it in no time.”

“You mean you can reverse my bulkiness?” I asked.

“No, no, not that, your gross look will reverse itself in time if you stop taking hormones, I mean we can fix your torn clothes...” he said and laughed again.

In the meantime I decided to ask Enai why the robot blew up long after the magnet was turned on and not just then.

“I’m sorry about that. The robot didn’t blow up from the magnet. I’d placed explosives in the device which I remotely activated from the distance.”

“Why are you sorry? The explosion did the job.”

“Oh, I’m not sorry about that, I’m sorry I had to hurt you. I could have killed you. You see I only had seconds before the robot was able to recover from the disruption of the magnet and if I didn’t blow it up, we’d be in big trouble now,” he explained.

“And here I trusted you with my life...” I said and smiled.

“And so you did. I thank you for that,” he replied.

“One more question, Enai, you tossed me a hot gas gun when I was in front of the robot, what was that for?”

“Oh, yeah, you did exactly what I expected you to do with it; disable the shield. But I wasn’t able to fire at the lead robot. In retrospect, even if I did, it wouldn’t have mattered because the robot had another shield, an internal shield, about which I wasn’t aware,” he replied.

Moments later a couple of Enai’s countrymen ran outside with the tablet in their hands and showed me what they had written on it in Macedonian letters and asked me to read it and tell them if it made any sense. It read, “Good morning” in Macedonian.

I was so happy I yelled the words out loud and laughed with excitement.

“Soon you’ll be a king in tattered clothing...” said Enai and laughed.

The men ran back inside the building. Moments later they came back carrying the crown.

After Enai crowned me with it he turned the power on. I felt a sharp pain in the back of my neck and saw Macedonian letters appear in front of my eyes in strings like sentences. The technicians, however, had forgotten or didn’t know how to separate the words with blank spaces. But, it didn’t matter, I could still read them.

Enai must have seen me flinch when the power came on and said, “The proximity of the transmitter to the chip in the back of your neck caused you the pain when the device came on. It happened to me every time I turned the crown on. You’ll get used to it.”

I looked at the string of words in front of my eyes, pushed the activation button and said “Attention” in Macedonian. A split second later I heard an echo. It was my own voice speaking back to me in a different language. It was annoying.

Finally victory is mine

I looked at Enai with a puzzled look.

“Did you hear yourself speaking?” he asked.

“Yes I did and it was loud and annoying,” I replied.

“We’ll fix that later,” he said, pointed with his finger at the super soldiers and said. “Look. They heard you.”

I looked at the super soldiers. Those who were sitting suddenly stood up.”

“Did the robots hear me?” I asked.

“Everyone who has a chip in the back of their neck heard you, including the robots, myself and my associates.”

“Well, how do I disable the robots?” I asked.

“You can’t disable them,” he said, “all you can do is order them to stand down. Find the command for the robots and order them to put their weapons down.”

“I can’t find the command,” I said.

“Look, there are three levels of communications at your disposal; all, group, or individual. My associates and I can only communicate to individuals but you have the ability to communicate on all three levels, so look for group and robots and select the command for weapons down.”

After fumbling for a while I found something to that effect and was about to go up the ramp to test it when I noticed a whole column of armed super soldiers following me.

I stopped walking and asked Enai why they were armed.

“This was their state of readiness when the robot blew up and they will remain this way until you order them to disarm. The robot had armed them to defend the place in case you staged a ground attack on the facilities.”

“Thank you for the explanation,” I said and began to look for a command to tell the soldiers to stop following me. But again I was having difficulty.

When Enai saw me getting frustrated he said, “Tell them in your own words and see what happens. They are human beings just like you and me and should understand basic things. The only difference between you and them is that they have no memory of their existence.”

I pushed the button and said, “Attention! Soldiers, please stay. Don’t follow me.”

Nothing happened.

I looked at Enai and raised my arms up.

“I thought you wanted to disarm them,” he said.

Frustrated by the whole thing I began to walk away.

“Look,” said Enai. “They’re not following you. The command worked.”

We walked down the field and then up the ramp. Everyone was quiet and all eyes were on us.

I pushed the button and said, “Attention, robots, disarm!”

Nothing happened.

“Not again!” I yelled.

Enai looked at me and said, “These are robots, not human beings, you will have to find the exact appropriate commands for them.”

At that moment one of his associates came over and quietly said something to Enai. Enai then turned to me and asked me what I wanted to do with the robots.

“I want them disarmed and disabled and if not disabled then I want them back in their docking devices so they don’t harm anyone.”

“Give me a moment,” he said and spoke to his associate.

He then turned to me and said, “My associates will find the appropriate commands for you and will be back in a moment.”

While we waited I asked, “What are we going to do with all these people?”

“One thing at a time, my friend, one thing at a time... I’m sure a solution will present itself. All we have to do is be patient and keep trying. We need to do right by these people... They are good people, all locals, you know...”

Just as he was about to tell me more his associate came back and handed me a tablet with Macedonian letters written on it.

“Push the button and read it!” said Enai.

“This isn’t Macedonian!” I said. “I don’t understand what it says.”

“I know that, it’s in a language the robots understand, just push the button and read.”

I pushed the button and read the entire string. I heard the associate clapping.

“Very good, it was clear and understandable,” said Enai and pointed at the robots in front of us.

The robots suddenly dropped their energy spears and one by one descended down the ramp and disappeared into the building’s lowest

floor. There were great cheers from the captives and the crowds of newly arrived people suddenly rushed to look for their relatives.

“What do we do next?” I asked Enai.

Enai looked at his associates and they all put their hands up in confusion.

“From the look of my associates there are so many things to do they just don’t know where to start,” he said and laughed.

After I scratched my head and smiled he looked at me and said, “Look, we have been slaves our entire lives and were told what to do. Don’t expect us to become leaders at a moment’s notice.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t mean to be disrespectful.”

At the same moment one of Enai’s associates ran at me and grabbed the tablet from my hand. A super soldier standing beside me pulled his energy gun out and was about to shoot him. I raised my arm and the soldier lowered his weapon. But, instead of thanking me for saving his life the man ran away.

“I just saved your life the least you could do is say thank you.”

Enai looked at me and said, “I saved your life, did you say thank you to me?”

I looked at him, smiled and said, “I don’t recall you saving my life?”

“Not once but three times. The first time was when I shot the brain scrambler power unit, the second time was when you were shot and fell off the ramp and I caught you with my ship and the third time was when I gave you food and water in your ship. If I hadn’t fed you and given you water, you would have burned up from the chemicals injected in your body.”

“You mean the hormones?” I asked.

“Yes, the hormones... if that’s what you call them on your planet,” he replied.

“Thank you my friend,” I said. “Now let me have a look at this brave soldier who came to my rescue to save me from your big bad associate. Do you think he’ll object if I remove his helmet and breathing device?”

“I don’t know? Try it and see.”

I went closer. The soldier didn’t move. I looked into his eyes but I couldn’t see anything through the dark visor. I unbuttoned the chin strap and heard a pop. The breathing device snapped off and swung around and hit him on the cheek. I pushed his helmet up and off his head. It fell behind him.

“He is a she. The soldier is a young woman,” I said to Enai.

“How can you tell, unless you look down there?” Enai asked.

“Those are the most beautiful green eyes I’ve even seen. She has a very smooth face and looks like a girl I once met on another planet in your galaxy.”

“What’s her name?”

“I’m trying to remember. She’s the daughter of a captain. The captain of the second destroyer... Ah, I remember her name now, Irevia and the captain’s name is Orihci.”

“I know them! They’re from another part of this planet. Did you by any chance meet Ukasnek, Captain Orihci’s partner?”

“Yes I did. He was the one who sent me here and told me about a strange man he met in the grove.”

“That was me...”

Then, suddenly we were interrupted by a crowd of people yelling and wanting to know where their relatives were.

I looked at Enai and he looked at me and said, “Tell them something...”

I grabbed the super soldier by the hand and dragged her with me. She was still armed.

Enai looked at me strangely.

I said, “For insurance...”

“Ah,” he said.

I then said, “Gather your associates here and send one of them to guide these people inside the facilities so they can look for their relatives.”

After he pointed to one of them and sent him away I asked Enai if they had a strong communicator in the facilities and if they could communicate with other people on this planet.

“We have the best communications equipment money can buy and we can talk to the entire galaxy from here.”

“Pick a couple of your best people and send them to make an announcement to the world. Have them tell everyone that the war is over and that people can start returning to their homes.”

“These two are the best for that,” said Enai, and sent them to do the job. Then he asked what I wanted to do next.

“I want the transport and other large ships including the two destroyers to remain here. Anyone who needs transportation can use the shuttles and then bring them back.

I want food and water delivered to the super soldiers. Tell the staff and helpers to remain here and work until we decide what to do with the soldiers.”

Just as Enai was about to say something I interrupted him and said, “Kindly ask the staff and helpers to voluntarily help us look after the super soldiers. Tell them they have the choice to stay or go. If they stay the understanding will be that they are doing it of their own free will. But also remind them that these soldiers are their sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, fathers, mothers, husbands, wives...”

After I said that, Enai sent two more of his associates out, one to monitor the ships and the other to see the supervisors of the farmers and speak to the servers.

After that Enai asked, “What else?”

“I want to disarm the soldiers but not out here.”

“Why not?”

“There are thousands of them. If they drop their rifles on the ground whose is going to pick them up?” I asked.

Enai began to laugh uncontrollably and would crack up laughing again every time he looked at me.

In the meantime I couldn’t resist looking at the super soldier’s green eyes which stared back at me innocently and with curiosity.”

“Stop that!” I heard Enai say. I looked at him. He was talking to me.

“Don’t be cruel to her. She’s a human being you know... Someone’s daughter... She could be Captain Orihci’s daughter you know. She has feelings...”

“You lost someone, didn’t you?” I asked.

He didn’t answer.

“That’s why you left this place and are fighting so hard to free it. Did you lose your daughter?”

“Yes...” he replied with a sad look on his face.

“Is she still alive?”

“Yes, but I don’t know where she is.”

“I’m very sorry,” I said. “Let’s get all these soldiers inside, disarm them and get them back in their old routine until we decide what to do.”

Without looking at the commands that popped up in front of my eyes I said, “Attention all soldiers, please go inside the facilities, put your rifles away and go back to your stations.”

The moment I said that, the soldiers began to move. They made their way inside the facilities through the ground level doors.

It was difficult speaking and listening to my own voice yelling in my head so I said to Enai, “It’s time to silence the voice in my head.”

He summoned another of his associates and told him to help me. The man took my left index finger and placed it on a button on the left side of the crown and told me to look at a super soldier. I looked at several of them and each time I focused on them I saw a green circle with symbols inside it. I recognized the symbols, they were numbers. The man then asked me to look at a soldier in the distance and tell him or her to sit down. I did that and it worked, the soldier stopped walking and sat down.

“Now look at your right arm and remember the number you see in green and say ‘voice off’...”

After I did that my number and circle around it turned red.

After I did that he said, “Now ask the soldier sitting down to stand up and go inside.”

This time I didn’t hear myself speak as I watched the soldier stand up and follow the others inside.

“From the smile on your face I gather it worked,” Enai said and asked. “What about her?” pointing at the female super soldier standing beside me.

“She stays with me... I promise you I won’t abuse her.”

“She may be a killing machine but she’s as innocent as a child,” he said.

“I wonder if she understands what we’re saying,” I asked.

“Of course she does, she understands my language. From her looks I can assure you she is a local girl from this planet... Whatever I hear she hears.”

“Why doesn’t she speak to us then?” I asked.

At this point I could see that Enai was getting frustrated with me and didn’t want to talk about it.

“Because she can’t speak!” he yelled.

“Why not?!” I yelled back frustrated with his hesitation to tell me.

“Because that part of her brain was also destroyed.”

“Can she have sex?” I asked.

He looked shocked by the question but answered it anyway.

“Yes, but she has no desire or feeling.”

“Don’t tell me... that too was ripped out of her! You bastards... YOU F...N BASTARDS!” I yelled out loud.

After I composed myself I asked, “Can she have babies?”

“Yes she can,” he replied very tersely with hesitation.

“Can the soldiers be taught things besides being soldiers?”

“I guess they can, why not. I guess their memories are still working... They can learn new things... I guess.”

I grabbed my female super soldier by her waist belt and pulled her close to me and said to her, I don't like your long number so I'm going to call you Nine, that will be your name. When I call your name you come to me.”

“What are you doing?” Enai asked.

“Watch,” I said, walked away and then said. “Nine come to me.”

Nothing happened.

“You know she can't understand your language,” Enai said.

“Didn't the gadget translate?”

“No, not from that distance!”

I walked a little closer and said the same thing. To our surprise she came over very close to me.

“Mother of God, it worked! There is hope for them after all!” said Enai with excitement and a tone of sadness in his voice.

“Watch this,” I said.

“Nine, I'm going to kiss you now.”

Enai gave me a dirty look but I ignored him and kissed her on the lips. They were warm and I could feel her warm breath on my face.

There was absolutely no emotion on her part.

I then walked over to where Enai was and said, “Nine come here and give me a kiss.”

This time Enai watched with curiosity as she walked over gently with her bulky body and tenderly kissed me on the lips.

The next thing I heard was Enai saying, “While you fool around with your girlfriend, I’m going to look for my daughter,” and he ran off.

“Wait!” I yelled, “what are you going to do when you find her? She won’t recognize or listen to you. Let’s find her together and I’ll assign her to you, if that’s possible.”

“You’re right, of course,” he said, walked away and yelled. “I’ll be inside the building on the left, first door.”

I took Nine by the hand and looked around. The sun was about to set. Almost everyone had gone inside. A convoy of trucks was heading back towards the farms. I grabbed the universal translator and handed it to Nine. I then squeezed her hand and said, “I’m squeezing your hand. If you understand what I tell you squeeze my hand back.”

She didn’t.

“Your name is Nine,” I said. “Do you understand?”

To my surprise she squeezed my hand.

“You will always stay close to me and protect me, do you understand?” I asked.

She squeezed my hand.

“Are you my girlfriend? Do you understand?” I asked.

She didn’t squeeze my hand.

“A girlfriend is a female, like yourself, who cares for me,” I said. “Do you understand?”

She squeezed my hand.

“Are you my girlfriend? Do you understand?” I asked.

She squeezed my hand.

“You are so beautiful, if only you could smile,” I said.

The crown on my head was getting heavy and despite my super strength and bulk I was getting a sore neck and a headache so I took it off and carried it in my hand.

When we got inside the building my bladder was about to burst so while Nine sat at a table with Enai, I was pointed towards a washroom.

When I got back Enai said, “You should have taken your girlfriend with you.”

“Please my friend, call her Nine from now on.”

“Okay, but please take Nine to the washroom before she bursts her bladder. And please tell her to eat and drink. She refused the food I gave her.”

“Okay, okay,” I said and took her to the washroom. She knew what to do on her own. I waited outside.

When we got back one of Enai’s associates brought us food and water and sat with us.

He said, “Reports are coming in from everywhere and a lot of people are looking for their relatives. Many will be coming here. We need to prepare for them. The farmers, staff and helpers are all staying; not that they have anywhere to go, but have shown goodwill towards our cause to save the soldiers.”

He then turned to me and said, “I’ve found quarters for you to sleep, will she be sleeping with you?”

“I guess, I hadn’t thought about it but if she’s going to be my personal guard then she might as well sleep in the same place as me.”

“Okay then, I’ll set up a cot for her as well.”

“Thank you,” I said. “And please call her Nine.”

Enai agreed with me and said, “If we want the soldiers to integrate into our society we need to treat them as our equals. Nothing that was done to them was their fault. You could have been one of them,” he said to his associate.

The man looked at me and said, “Yes Sir!” and left.

“You know, I’ve been looking at this whole thing wrong,” Enai said. “Nine attached to you the way she is, and you as her mentor will inspire others to adopt soldiers. Perhaps there is a solution to this problem after all.”

“You’re thinking of your daughter aren’t you?” I asked.

“Yes I am, yes I am,” he replied and looked down.

“Another question for you, tell me Enai how did the soldiers know to enter the building from the ground level? I didn’t tell them to do that.”

“You sure seem to ask bizarre questions at the most inappropriate moments?” he said.

“Please, my friend, there is a method to my madness.”

“I don’t know, but I think you have an answer, or suspect something. That’s why you asked me. So, what’s your explanation?”

“I think the soldiers can read my thoughts…”

“Ha, ha, ha, you think, after less than eight hours of exposure you think you can talk to the soldiers with your mind? Ha, ha, ha!” he laughed out loud.

“Yes.”

“Prove it!” he said.

I explained to him what I was going to do and what I was going to think when the soldiers arrived. I said I was going to summon six soldiers and ask them to look but I was not going to tell them where to look. But while asking them to look I would think about looking up at the ceiling.

I took my crown back and put it on my head and after looking at some numbers I summoned six soldiers to come to the concourse.

When they arrived I asked them to sit at a table farthest away from us. This was so that they couldn't hear us. I asked them to sit opposite one another, facing each other, three on each side of the table. After they had sat down I pushed the button and said, “Look!”

They all looked up at the ceiling.

“Oh, you f...en bastard,” Enai yelled. “We've been trying to do this for a whole year with no results. How did you f...en do it?”

“Eh, watch your language, there's a lady present,” I said.

“I'm curious, how did you do it?” he asked me again.

“I don't know,” I said. “Maybe I've been a little more observant than you.”

“I underestimated you, I won't anymore...” he said and looked at Nine.

Isn't she lovely,” I said. “Look at her beautiful eyes, I could stare at them all day long... and she doesn't mind it.”

“Watch this,” I said.

I looked into her eyes and said, “You have beautiful eyes. Beautiful is something very desirable, like the sweet dessert I gave you to eat, do you understand?”

She got up, grabbed my hand, squeezed it and sat back in her chair again.

“That means she understood,” I said to Enai.

He looked at me funny and tried to hide it.

I then touched Nine gently on her face and said, “This is a sign of affection. It means I like you very much, do you understand?”

She again got up, grabbed my hand, squeezed it and sat back in her chair.

I touched her face again and she came over and kissed me.

“See, affection paid back with affection... She must feel something,” I said to Enai.

“Perhaps her feelings will come back. I don’t know,” he said. “I’m going to bed. I’m very tired. See you tomorrow.”

“One last question, Enai. If I was given the same dose of chemicals that robbed the soldiers of their ability to speak and smile, why wasn’t I robbed of them?”

“I don’t know. I’m leaving now and going to bed,” he said and left.

Perhaps because I was under the influence of firewater, I thought to myself. Maybe! Or perhaps I hadn’t been injected with chemicals at all?

Right before he left Enai told one of his associates to bring me some clothes. He was tired of looking at me looking like an oversized hermit.

After the associate took us to our room he brought me a super soldier uniform and handed it to me.

“I’m sorry Sir, but this is all we have in your size,” and quickly left the room.

I looked at Nine and said, “I wish you could smile...”

But she didn’t.

Before going to bed she removed her uniform. She was completely naked and looked gross. I felt very sorry for her. She was a beautiful woman and had been ruined. She just didn’t understand the rage I was feeling at that moment.

The next day there was a knock on the door. I didn’t realize that I was naked when I picked up the universal translator and went to answer it. I also didn’t realize how gross I looked when I opened the door.

“Uh, please Sir put some clothes on... we’re expecting you. People are coming looking for you, please come,” said Enai’s associate.

It took us a minute to get dressed before Nine and I were outside of our room. The uniform I was wearing was made of dark leather but it was quite comfortable.

Nine grabbed the universal translator and we both bolted out and followed the man. When we reached the common room I saw Captain Orihci, his wife Amih, Ukasnek and Irevva.

With Nine holding the universal translator I was able to communicate with them without a translator.

After we hugged and kissed I said, “It’s so nice to see you, how did you find us?”

Captain Orihci, surprised to hear my voice in his language, said, “We heard the broadcast that the war was over and that we could

return to our homes so I figured you'd succeeded. I don't know about every one else but I had no doubt that you would. I also see that you recovered my ship."

At that very moment we were distracted by Ireva who began to cry.

"What is it dear?" asked Amih.

Ireva pointed at Nine and said, "She's my friend, my cousin Jess from your family. Why doesn't she recognize me and why is she so big?"

At about this time Enai showed up and after he greeted the entire family I left it to him to explain things to them. I took Ireva to the side and gave her a hug and said, your cousin is safe and sound, something has happened to her and she has lost her memory and ability to speak."

Ireva looked at me with her beautiful green eyes and said, "I know what happened to her, I'm just sad for her. She's my age and had a beautiful mind. It's a real shame what happened to her," and began to cry again.

I looked at Nine and saw tears running down her big cheeks but with no emotion on her face. I felt very sorry for her and held her in my arms. Ireva joined me.

When Ireva composed herself she looked at me and said, "What happened to you? And why are you wearing that ridiculous uniform?"

"I was zapped too but I'm lucky, they didn't erase my memory."

"So, what's going to happen to my cousin Jess?"

"I'm sorry my dear, your cousin Jess has been turned into a super soldier. I named her Nine and she's my personal bodyguard."

"Of all the soldiers you could have picked why did you pick her?"

“Actually she picked me and after looking at her beautiful eyes she reminded me of you.”

“So you picked her because of me. I knew it. I knew you had feelings for me, every nerve in my body was telling me that but I kept telling myself what could he possibly see in me when he had the entire galaxy in his hands?”

“You underestimate your attraction to men. Or is it just me who had an obsession with green eyes and tall, skinny blond girls?” I asked.

“Stop it! We’re upsetting my cousin. Look, she’s crying.”

“You’re right, I’m sorry,” I said and went back to Nine, wiped her tears and kissed her all over her face.

“She can feel it you know. She just can’t express what she’s feeling emotionally; only through tears. The bastards ruined her, such a beautiful girl ruined,” I said.

At that very moment Captain Orihci came over to our table holding his face and shaking his head and asked, “Do you have any rakia? I could use some right about now.”

“I do,” I said. “But it’s in my ship quite a distance from here.”

“Let’s go get it,” he said.

When Amih and Ukasnek saw us getting up they came over. Then, just as I got up, Nine also got up to follow me. Ireva said I’m coming too. When Enai saw us going out he followed us.

As we quietly walked away I placed my arms around Nine and Ireva who had snuggled under my arm. I held the girls one on each side.

Amih was happy to see that and said to me, “I’m so glad to see you again, alive and well... We owe you a lot of gratitude for finding our niece and adopting her.”

“Mother, Jess, I mean Nine, is not a child? And obviously he loves her and she loves him too. Look at them; they’re made for each other.”

“Hey, I can hear you, you know?” I said.

Ireva squeezed my arm and said, “It’s true, isn’t it? You and Nine?”

I didn’t say anything.

After I opened the ship’s hatch I told everyone to stay here and Ireva, Nine and I went inside and got the rakia, meat jars, one each, spoons and cups and came outside.

After Ireva gave each person a meat jar and a spoon, they all sat on the grass and enjoyed the view. Nine watched what I was doing and did the same.

“Do you like the food?” I asked. “Do you understand?”

Nine grabbed my hand and squeezed it. Ireva laughed a silly laugh and looked at me.

“Nine give me a kiss.”

After she did Ireva laughed a silly laugh again and said, “I’ll be damned, you are lovers!”

Enai came to my defense and said, “No they’re not. She has no feelings and only mimics what he taught her. She has no idea what a lover is.”

At that moment I grabbed Ireva gave her a big hug and said, “Your cousin is in good hands and if there is any way to bring her back I’ll find it. Now give her some rakia and see how she reacts, but first I’ll take her gun.”

“She could crush you but look how tender she is around you. She must have feelings for you,” said Amih.

“I don’t know, it’s too early to tell,” I said and then turned to Enai.
“Have you had rakia before or is this your first taste of it?”

“I’ve had rakia before and many other exotic drinks. Before we came to work for the brothers we were businessmen importing and exporting exotic merchandise.”

“You mean you were pirates trading in illegal merchandise?” piped up Ukasnek.

“Pirates, businessmen... what’s the difference?”

“I could swear I’d done business with you before but for some reason I’d forgotten,” said Ukasnek to Enai.

“I remembered you but I didn’t want to say anything. I was unsure on which side you stood so I kept my mouth shut,” replied Enai.

After Ireva filled our cups with rakia again I said, “To a new beginning and may peace reign in the galaxy again.”

I showed Nine how to drink the rakia. I showed her how to sip it but, with the size of her body, she would have to drink a litre or more before she was drunk. She didn’t particularly like the taste of rakia so, after she finished eating the meat, I gave her a jar of sweet jelly that Captain Orihci’s wife had given us.

Amih didn’t fail to notice that and whispered something in my ear and then smiled a big smile. Without the universal translator I didn’t know what she’d said but I suspected it had something to do with me liking Nine.

After we were done eating and drinking I took a few bottles of rakia and gave one to Captain Orihci, one to Ukasnek, one to Enai and took one for myself.

When I got the looks from Ireva I motioned for her to go back inside my ship and take what she wanted, especially the stuff for women which was useless to me now without Vel and Daf.

She came out with a bagful of stuff, one bottle of rakia and one bottle of the green stuff her father had given me.

She pointed at the bottles and said, “I’m going to share them with my mother.”

After I closed the hatch we slowly walked back to the facility where Enai’s associates were waiting for us with more people looking for their relatives

It appeared Captain Orihci knew some of them; they were his neighbours. So I asked him and his family to help them find what they were looking for.

Ireva insisted she wanted to stay with me and would serve as a translator and navigator in case I had to use my ship again. Captain Orihci agreed and he, his wife and Ukasnek left with one of Enai’s associates and went to look for people.

In the meantime Enai took me, Ireva and Nine for a tour of the underground to see the barracks, mess hall and gymnasiums where the super soldiers resided, the warehouses and whatever else existed deep underground under the buildings.

I didn’t have to wear the crown to be recognized by the soldiers. They all stood up as I passed by.

I touched their shoulders and took pride in doing that. I was one of them and felt in touch with them. There were thousands of them and I had sympathy for every single one of them. I think they could feel that.

Because the facilities weren’t big enough, they took turns eating in the mess hall and exercising in the gymnasiums. They had their routine and they followed it without me having to give them orders.

Nine followed me like a puppy dog without question or hesitation and as much as I felt sorry for her I admired her very much. I often hugged and kissed her, which somewhat annoyed Ireva because, like Enai, she thought I was taking advantage of her. But I think Nine

liked the attention. She told me so herself every time she squeezed my hand.

One thing that made me sad, that made everyone sad, was that she couldn't smile or show any emotion. That often angered me but, outside of yelling, swearing and cursing, what could I do?

The place underground was huge. We spent many hours circling around looking at various facilities but the one thing that impressed me the most was the gold stored in the vaults. What in God's name were these robots going to do with all that gold?

I asked around but no one could tell me. What were these robots going to do with so many super soldiers? Again no one could tell me.

What a tragedy this was. Sometimes I felt so sad I was sorry that I'd met Nine. Her beautiful green eyes and her inability to smile constantly reminded me of this massive tragedy.

After seeing the gold I asked Enai who it belonged to.

"I don't know. I guess to whoever holds it. Today that would be you."

"But wasn't it stolen from someone? And shouldn't we be returning it to them?" I asked.

"Yes it belonged to someone, to many some-ones, but they're gone now."

"Gone where?" I asked.

He looked at me with a sad look and said, "You're looking at them. They're all around you. They were all turned into zombies."

I shook my head and said, "We should use it to pay the workers, the farmers, the staff, the volunteers and the destitute. There is enough gold to do that, right?"

“My friend, there is enough gold here to buy everything on this planet.”

Ireva agreed.

“So, get some of your associates working on it and start paying everyone retroactively from the day they started working here. Let them rebuild their lives and start over again.”

It took us several days to tour the entire facility. We all took up residence in the same building and I became accustomed to staying in the same room with Nine. She kept telling me that she was okay with it by squeezing my hand. But many times I wasn't sure. When a person can't show you how they feel, what are you supposed to think?

Day after day I went to the gymnasium and exercised with the soldiers, ate with them in the mess hall and touched their skin. They all began to take their gloves off to touch my hand but they couldn't show me any emotion... which was killing me.

Enai and Ireva stuck with me and felt my pain as we went from soldier to soldier.

We kept looking for Enai's daughter but we had no luck.

About a week later it occurred to me that Enai's daughter would be small and short like him so I suggested we only target the short soldiers. And, instead of just looking at their cheeks, we removed their helmets and looked at their entire face.

After about a day's search, we found her. Enai cried tears of happiness when we found her and tears of disappointment when I assigned her to his care. She understood that he was her father but she didn't care for him at all. She often came to me to caress her emotionless face which she liked very much.

Enai finally understood why I was so angry when Nine didn't smile for me no matter what I did for her.

I vowed one day that I would change that. My promise made Enai even sadder because a promise such as that was, to him, wishful thinking.

A couple of weeks later, on the fortieth day of their cycle, all the soldiers came outside to receive their dose of what I figured was hormones but was in fact a poisonous chemical that screwed with their brains and robbed them of their feelings.

When no one could tell me what it was that these soldiers were getting I said “no” to it. I ordered the soldiers to destroy the injection stations and line up outside in the field. I then ordered them to march and I marched along with them.

Every day after that, I armed the soldiers and took them for long marches. Every day I tried harder and harder to communicate with them without the crown.

After our third march, Enai and Irevva stopped coming. The marches were too hard for them.

I led the marches with Nine to one side of me and Enai’s daughter to the other. And the harder we marched the more I shared my happy memories from earth and Ostikon with them. My memories were becoming their memories. My joy became their joy. My desires became their desires. I constantly showed them beautiful images of smiling faces and let them feel the pleasure I felt from them.

On the eleventh day of our marches, during our assembly before going out, I removed my crown and gave it to Enai to hold. I yelled “watch this!”

I looked around. Everyone was there, Captain Orihci, his wife, Irevva, Ukasnek, Enai’s nine associates and many spectators still looking for their relatives.

I closed my eyes for a moment and concentrated hard. I thought of the parade that was performed in my honour when I first arrived at Ostikon. The beautiful women soldiers marching in perfect formation in long and wide columns looking at me and smiling... I

projected the exhilaration I had felt during that moment which surged through me. I then held that image in my mind and projected it outwards without my crown.

The soldiers began to stir and form long straight, multiple columns like never seen before. I could see them forming what was in my mind.

Minutes later the perfect formations were complete and all the soldiers saluted in unison just like the women soldiers in my mind. Nine and Enai's daughter also saluted. I then focused strongly on the women soldiers of Ostikon smiling at me, held that image tightly and then opened my eyes. Every soldier was looking at me and smiling.

I looked to the side and saw tears in Irev'a's eyes. Some of the spectators began to clap, some began to cry.

Enai grabbed his face, looked at me and said, "You did it! It's a miracle."

The soldiers then put their arms down and rifles to their right side, wiped the smiles off their faces and stood at attention in perfect formation waiting for the next order.

When everyone was done clapping I looked around and yelled, "We have an army, we have weapons, we have gold, we have warships... What shall we do next!?"

I then thought to myself, "We could march on earth and free Macedonia!"