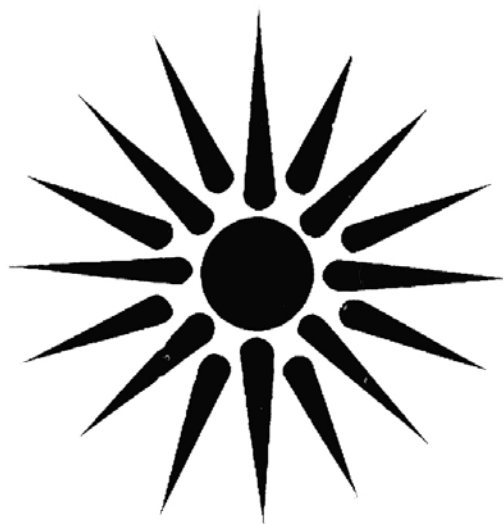


The Alien that changed the world

Part 1

*Otsiron's
Disappearance*

A novel



By Risto Stefov

The Alien that changed the world Otsiron's Disappearance

A Novel

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FICTION - ADVENTURE

e-book edition

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Before going back to where he had returned from, my old friend Riki, who now calls himself Otsiron, confided in me and told me the story about his disappearance. I suspect he will not be coming back this time. He disappeared years ago. We were told he was abducted. (See police report at the end of this story). But then later he came back but only for a brief time. He never told anyone what had happened and kept his abduction a secret. He told me to keep it a secret and until now it was... no one else knew.

I am getting old now so to preserve his story I decided to write it down. I will tell it in the first person just like he told it to me years ago before he disappeared for the second time. I will put the manuscript in a brown envelope and mark it "to be opened in 2020", about forty years after the story took place.

My trip to Kanata gone astray

It was early Sunday morning when I got on my bike and headed north. I had packed everything I needed the day before including provisions for my trip and some camping gear. I was going to Kanata Ontario, via Algonquin Park. It was quite a distance by bike from Toronto but I was determined to do it. I told my school mates about it but they all said that I was nuts, especially the part about going alone.

You see I had just graduated from University and was anxious to find a job. I had just finished my fourth year Electrical Engineering course at U of T and was looking for a good engineering job that would suit me. I figured I could find one in Kanata.

Unfortunately I was flat broke and couldn't afford to pay for transportation to get there.

Tuition in the 1970's was not that high, not like nowadays, but wages were not that hot either. I worked during the summers and weekends doing all sorts of jobs and made enough money to pay for my tuition but that was it. I had no money for bus fare or hotels, so biking and camping along the way, I decided, was the way for me to go.

How difficult could it be, I figured? Believe me, it was!

I spent several days biking along highways 400, 11 and 60 and all that time I slept in the open and cold outdoors. It was punishing but I was managing. I was eating double from what I had planned and that worried me a little.

I wanted to go to Kanata because I believed the semiconductor manufacturing companies there were as good as those in California. I wanted to work in the semiconductor industry. I found it fascinating, particularly the micro chip industry.

I tried to convince a couple of my school mates who were interested in working with semiconductors to go with me but they didn't seem to be that interested. I guess they would have gone if I had chosen an

easier mode of transportation. But I was poor and didn't have the money. So, if no one wanted to go with me I figured I would go alone. I was a loner anyway. I was born in a small village and basically grew up alone. I was used to loneliness.

Biking all that distance wasn't exactly going to be easy either but I wasn't afraid of a little hard work. I had always worked hard in my life and wasn't afraid of a bit of pain. As for friends, I didn't really have any. And that was my fault because I was trying to live a double life with no room for friends.

You see, even though immigrants voluntarily make a life choice to come and live in Canada it is never easy for them to let go of their past and embrace their future in a new and often alien world. So, many immigrants tend to cling to their old culture, customs and habits long after they arrive in Canada. My parents were no different.

Adults tend to cling to their past but that's not the case with children. Immigrant children tend to integrate into the new society quickly and become part of it. Parents, however, don't always approve especially when it comes to some things that collide with their own culture or beliefs. Immigrants don't always accept Canadian values and often want their children to grow up and embrace their old culture. This unfortunately often creates conflict between them. If parents are overly strict their children can't successfully integrate into Canadian society. As a result they tend to become isolated and distant.

When children break away from the culture of their parents, by disobedience or by being rebellious, they create a cleavage between themselves and their parents. Parents usually become disillusioned and feel they have lost their children and the children tend to distance themselves from their parents and their culture.

But when my family came to Canada I was old enough and mature enough to understand the importance of integrating into a new culture but without abandoning the old culture. So I tried to live two lives at the same time. That, of course, was not easy and had limitations on what I could do as a new Canadian. But no matter

how hard I tried sometimes I had to forsake one for the other. For example I wouldn't do things that my parents wouldn't approve of. As a result the circle of people I hung around with was very limited.

At the same time I did, without hesitation, what my parents asked of me. It seemed harsh but I understood why they did it. I understood their fears and apprehension and how they felt being plunged into an alien society at a late stage in their lives. I also attended many events that belonged to my culture. This was a surprise to many adults who thought of me as an overly unusual person but at the same time they saw me as the hope that was needed to carry our culture and traditions forward into the future.

When my parents came to Canada it was a leap for them from the stone age to the modern age. Back in the village we had no electricity, indoor toilets, indoor running water, television, car, etc. So, when we bought our house and a car a year or two after we arrived, they required upkeep and maintenance. We had a mortgage to pay and no extra money to pay plumbers, electricians, mechanics, etc., so I had to learn to do that myself. In addition to taking all the courses in school that would lead me to university I also took courses in which I learned how to solder, weld, house wire and repair cars, etc. Since my parents could neither read, write nor speak English, the burden of paying bills and dealing with the mortgage and home and auto insurance, filling out forms and doing tax returns was left to me. Also, any additional money I made working that didn't go for my education went towards paying the house mortgage and bills. My parents were blue colour workers who worked in factories and made very little money. I took on this responsibility as soon as I began to understand English. I was only fifteen.

A byproduct of living a double life and exposed to the burden of worry at a young age helped me to become independent, overcome peer pressure, take responsibility for my actions and have the sense of being productive. I also learned to deal with the consequences of my actions at an early age. The burden was mine and mine alone. I didn't know it at the time but I had developed a sense of self-confidence and independence and was able to take charge and deal with all sorts of matters on my own.

I also had this crazy idea which I wanted to try out. I remember seeing something like it in a movie or read about it, I don't remember which but I always wanted to strip naked before sunrise and see what it felt like to have the first rays of the sun hit my body first thing on a cool morning. I just wanted to experience that for my own curiosity.

When I had doubts about something I always looked back to the past and wondered how our predecessors had dealt with it. I truly believed tradition was a time-refined blueprint of how we should live, like the bible is for some Christians. So, when someone said something that contradicted my experience I always looked back to see how our predecessors had dealt with it. For example when people here started saying that fat was bad for you because it made you fat and caused heart disease, I looked back to my own experience for answers.

Back in the village pork fat was part of our staple diet. We ate it every day with almost every meal and none of my relatives became fat or suffered from heart disease. So, it was difficult for me to accept that fat was bad for me. In other words, I tended to question everything and looked to the past for answers.

I wanted to experience what our predecessors had experienced and often looked to the caveman for guidance. The caveman had it the hardest because he didn't have all the amenities we have today, yet managed to survive and thrive. How did he do it?

One of the things that fascinated me was how the caveman felt in the morning when the first rays of the sun came in contact with his naked body. I figured I could experience that at sunrise on a hill in Algonquin Park. I had been there once before and was familiar with the hill. I know it was a stupid idea but I wanted to do it. That's one of the reasons why I chose to go through Algonquin Park and spend a night there in the outdoors.

It was early June but how cold could it be? And I was only going to be naked for no more than five to ten minutes, not like the caveman who spent nights in the cold and then waited for hours for the sun to come up. Imagine the exhilaration the caveman must have felt when

the first rays of the sun warmed his naked body. I wanted to know how that felt. It was silly but I wanted to experience it for myself.

Regarding the long trek to Kanata, in order to make things easier on me psychologically, I decided to divide the trip into several milestones, the first being my arrival in Algonquin Park.

Once I completed a milestone I would then think of the next step. It was much too difficult for me to think of the entire trip all at once. It was overwhelming. I also thought a lot about what I was going to do and who I was going to see in Kanata.

My aim was to get a job in the computer chip manufacturing sector, like the jobs offered in Silicon Valley in the United States. It would have been ideal for me to go to California but it was too far and I had no desire to leave Canada.

My family had come to Canada from Greece, from the Greek part of occupied Macedonia, for a reason... so that I could get ahead in life... escape the Greek torment and poverty imposed on my people.

So, I felt I owed it to Canada to pay back for giving me opportunities, like an education, something Greece would not grant me... because I called myself Macedonian. Here I could go to school, to church, speak my language freely and call myself Macedonian without fear of being persecuted or deprived...

In other words, I was grateful to Canada for the opportunities it afforded me but at the same time I wanted to be Macedonian because that is what I was. I strongly felt I could embrace Canadian values but still be Macedonian. It is richer to belong to two cultures than to none.

Anyway, I arrived in Algonquin Park late in the afternoon and decided to bike right into the park without registering, and headed straight for the base of the nearest hill. I set up camp in the woods in a secluded place and, before dusk, went up the hill to explore it. It was perfect. It was open, flat at the peak and deserted. It was early June. No one goes camping in early June. No one but me... Besides

rarely does anyone camp up there. Not that I cared but I couldn't exactly strip naked if other people were there.

It was my understanding that the sun rose around 5:30 a.m. in that part of Canada so I set my alarm clock for 5:00 a.m. I was just going to go up in my regular clothes and strip before the sun rose, experience the sunrise, put my clothes back on and then off to Kanata. Most often, including this night, I slept with my clothes on so that I could get up and run if needed, in case of an emergency, like an animal attack, hopefully not a bear attack.

I couldn't sleep most of the night thinking about the next leg of my journey. The physical torture of having to bike and the anxiety of having to sleep outdoors in the open weighed on me.

The next thing I remember was jumping out of my sleeping bag to the dreaded loud ring of my alarm clock. Ah, my faithful wind-up alarm clock that had scared the wits out of me so many times.

I only grabbed my wrist watch, pocket knife and lighter before I bolted out of my tent. I left everything else behind, including my wallet. I would be back in less than an hour, I thought, and rushed up the hill so as not to miss the sunrise.

I got to the top of the hill in minutes and looked around. It was still dark and peacefully quiet. While thinking about how I was going to do this, I heard a rustling sound behind me in the bushes. It startled me. I turned around and looked but there was nothing there.

It was probably a raccoon going back to its tree to sleep, I thought.

Raccoons were common and plentiful in this park. But the thought of raccoons began to worry me. What if they found and ate my food? I began to worry and my thoughts of saving my provisions became overpowering. I dashed through the bush to find my way back, following along the same path I had come up. My thoughts were on my food as I ran fast. Then I was stopped abruptly by another rustle, which I heard in the bush on my right hand side. I went and looked.

I looked in the direction where the rustling sound had come from and saw something. I looked closer. It was a little girl crouching down. She was hiding behind a bush. I couldn't see her clearly from this distance and it was dark. I went closer and looked again. She looked frightened. Perhaps she was lost, I thought.

I took a couple more steps towards her and heard myself say, "What are you doing here little girl?"

I could clearly see her now. She looked horrified. She kept crouching more and more so as to make herself smaller. Suddenly she put her hands over her head to hide herself. I was completely puzzled by her reaction. Why was she acting this way?

The next thing I remember was pain, crushing pain on the left side of my ribs. I fell down. I was only steps away from her but still conscious. The surprise blow and pain made me angry and even more puzzled. Many thoughts went through my mind. Who had hit me? Why? What had I done?

I became angrier as I turned back to look at my assailant. I then saw something step over me and go towards her. In the murky dawn it looked like a walking tree. Was I hallucinating? I got up and, angry as I was, picked up the large, dead branch lying next to me, swung it around to give it momentum and "whack" I hit the walking tree on the side.

There was a loud crash and the tree fell down. I stared at it. It wasn't a tree. It was something else. It was some sort of creature, the likes of which I had never seen before. It was grey and smooth like a dead log without bark. But the funny thing was it had arms and legs, a round bald head... and a slit... black stuff was oozing from the slit.

Was that its mouth? That was all I could see in the dark. I became mesmerized and lost in my thoughts. I tried to make sense of what I'd seen and almost forgot about the little girl. I could feel the pain in my ribs but I didn't understand why. I raised my eyes to see what was distracting me. It was the little girl crouching behind the bush frantically waving her arms trying to get my attention.

She stood up. She was not a little girl. She was a fully grown, petite woman with long brown hair. She was Chinese... No she wasn't... Not her eyes. She looked frightened.

Then, from the distance I heard a loud policeman's whistle. It came from my left side. I became even more confused. What was going on? I looked in the direction of the whistle and as I stared away I felt a hand grab my hand and pull. She was pulling my arm leading me away.

I noticed she was wearing tight fitting camouflage clothing. Completely confused I followed her. About a dozen steps or so later, I saw a couple of men running towards us. They were small like her, perhaps shorter, had short brownish blond hair and were wearing tight fitting white clothes. They were angry with her.

She let go of my hand and ran towards them. They had quick words in a language I didn't understand. The two men grabbed her by her arms and began to drag her away. She snapped at them and they let her go. She was angry.

She took a few steps towards me and stopped. There was hatred in her eyes.

She said something loudly, turned around and walked past them into the distance. Looking even angrier the two men came over and grabbed me by my arms and began to pull me away in the direction the woman had taken. Completely confused I followed. I was so confused I didn't know what to feel or what to do. My mind was running like a runaway freight train trying to make sense of all this. It was about to crash so I surrendered my fate to them.

They led me and I followed without any resistance, without any hesitation. My mind was working overtime... I looked up and realized I had missed the sunrise. The sun was shining on the hilltop. I distinctly remember amidst all the confusion in my mind that there was also a sense, a feeling of curiosity in the back of it. What was going to happen next? It was like watching an adventure movie.

The two men suddenly took a sharp right turn into a secluded wooded area. I followed without hesitation. There, in the distance, I saw a dark opening into a structure. It had a ramp leading to an opening and on top of it stood the woman motioning with her arms. I assumed she was motioning for them to hurry. We picked up the pace. I kept staring at the structure. Was it a trailer, or perhaps a mobile home? No it had to be a truck, a big military truck because it looked brownish green, like the trees around it. But how had they got it in here? The place was surrounded by boulders and tall trees.

The two men pulled me up the ramp. It was a lot larger inside than it had looked like from the back. I stopped to look around but the two men pulled me away and shoved me into what looked like a cage or maybe a small jail cell. One of them shut the door behind me and I was now trapped like an animal. All I heard after that was the back door slamming shut and strange noises, almost like engines starting.

The next thing I remember was waking up hours later, maybe six hours later, which would make it noon the same day. I felt pain on my side. I was hurting. Was it from the walking tree hitting me or from lying on the metal bench substituting for a bed in the cell?

Was this all real or was I having a nightmare? I couldn't tell.

One of the men flung the door open. I couldn't tell which one he was. To me they both looked the same, like identical twins. After opening the door he was distracted by the other one telling him something which allowed me to take a peek beyond the hallway and into a room where the woman was sitting.

The room looked like the cockpit of a modern jumbo jet. There were instrument panels everywhere with lights blinking and strange lettering. I had never seen anything like it before. What kind of truck could this be? I wondered. And above and beyond the instruments I could see a tinted window. It looked black except for the object ahead of it in the distance which looked like a toy truck; maybe two toy trucks side by side? I couldn't tell.

When the woman saw me looking at her she slammed the door to her compartment shut. When he saw this, the man pushed me back

into the cell and pointed to the bench. I sat down and he slammed the cell door shut. He opened it again and gave me a plastic bag filled with a clear liquid. It looked like a milk bag. He shut the door again and walked away. I bit the corner of the bag and began to suck on the liquid. It tasted like ordinary water, so I drank it all.

The next thing I remember was looking at my watch. It was only one o'clock. I must have dozed off for an hour, I thought. My heart began to pound when I looked at the date on my wind-up wrist watch. It was six days later. I put the watch to my ear, it was still ticking.

I had been told to wind it up every day. I never thought it would work for six days without being wound. But here it was still working and according to it, I had spent six days in this cell, totally unaware.

I began to wind my watch again. I heard footsteps outside the cell door. I tried to sit up but my entire body below my waist was numb. I felt like I was paralyzed. What was wrong with me? Better still how could I have spent six days and not know it. Had I slept for six days?

I began to wonder where we could possibly be going, traveling for six days. Six days later and we were still on the road? Where are these people taking me and why have they locked me up? Why can't I move my legs?

The cell door suddenly flung open. The man looked around and made a face. He said something loud to the others. They too made faces. The men began to yell at each other. The woman said something and walked away. They were all angry.

The men too went away and one of them came back with what looked like a clear plastic bag. The other motioned for me to stand up, I assumed. I tried moving but I couldn't. They grabbed me by my arms and shoved my lower body into the plastic bag. It was a long bag so they shoved my entire body into it, up to my neck. They lifted me up, one holding my shoulders and the other my legs. When they lifted me I saw what the problem was. The floor was wet. And more than that... I assumed I had soiled myself and no one wanted to

clean it up. I assumed they had drugged me but my body continued to function doing its thing for six days without me knowing. They should have known I couldn't have helped it, but they were disappointed in me anyway.

My question now was who was going to clean me up... now that I was paralyzed? Strangely, so far they hadn't given me any food or drink. How was I even still alive?

The next thing I remember was being carried to a smaller vehicle that looked like a cat and being dumped on the back seat. The two men sat in the front seat and began to operate some controls. A big door opened and I could clearly see that we were in space orbiting a very large planet.

I could hear my heart racing and all I could think of was the saying, "Dorothy we are not in Kansas anymore"...

Had I been abducted by aliens? They looked nothing like the aliens I was familiar with from the movies and from the conspiracy theories.

These people looked like humans. The only difference between us and them was that they spoke a strange language and used strange symbols. As far as I was concerned they were as human as we are. I didn't know what to think.

As we descended towards the surface of the planet I could see a very large ship behind us looking like a huge ocean liner. We had just come out of it. I only got a short glimpse as we sped off. We were moving pretty fast.

By now my paralysis had begun to wear off and curiosity started to take over my brain. I surrendered myself to the sights. I knew that I was no longer on earth... but I was still alive. If they had wanted to harm me they would have done so by now, which meant they had plans for me. But what?

For the time being I didn't care, this was an opportunity for me to discover new worlds which, until about a week ago, I didn't know existed.

The planet grew larger and larger and took on many colours as we got closer and closer to its surface. When we got close enough to see what was there all I could see was trees, grass and a river. There were no structures or buildings.

The next thing I noticed was trees with fruits existing next to trees with flowers. It seemed funny to me to see trees loaded with fruit next to trees in full bloom. What kind of world was this?

I looked up towards the sky. The sun in this world was about four times the size of the earth's sun and much brighter with a yellow light... but there was also a silver tinge, especially in the shadows. I looked up in the opposite direction. I saw a bright silvery object in the sky. That must be the moon, I thought, thinking of earth. It was so large and so bright in the middle of the day. Or perhaps that was another sun, a silver sun, opposite the yellow sun?

This sun was much smaller, perhaps because it was further away? This sun was giving off the silvery tinge. What a world this was, what a world indeed, I thought.

The little ship landed on a long rock slab and the door beside me flung open. I was still inside the bag so I couldn't get out on my own. The two men grabbed me again, one by the legs and the other by the shoulders, and took me down a set of stairs into a well-lit tubular underground station.

When the ship's or the flying cab's door was flung open I felt the warm and moist air rush in. It was heavier than our air on earth and very aromatic. The smell of flowers and fresh fruits was everywhere and was overwhelming.

When we arrived at the bottom of the stairs I could see a cylindrical car in the station, looking like a large glass bottle with four seats in it, back to back.

There was no one in the station. The two men put me in the seat facing backwards and they sat behind me facing forwards. The moment they shut the door the tube car took off like a shot down the

tube tunnel. We traveled for only a few minutes before we stopped at another tube-like station. There was no one in the station.

The two men picked me up, bag and all, carried me up a set of stairs, across a small park and tossed me at the edge of a ravine near a wide slow moving river. Being confined in the bag I was unable to stand up so I rolled down a short slope and landed in a ditch about fifty metres away from the river. As soon as I stopped rolling the two men turned around and left.

Besides feeling hungry and groggy, I was fine and still alive.

Welcome to Nodekam

The river flowed gently. It was quiet in the ravine. I contemplated my situation for a few minutes and decided before I could do anything I needed to get out of the bag I was in. I reached into my shirt's front pocket, got my pocket knife out, cut the bag open at the top and rolled out of it. I now knew why they had put me in a bag. I stunk to high heaven.

It had been more than a week since I had stood on my own two feet so I found it difficult to stand up. I was able to sit up. I heard water running. I crawled a few metres to my left and saw a hole in the steep part of the ravine. It looked like a cave and water was gushing out of its entrance. The cave was a lot closer than the river so I decided to go for it. I crawled for a while but seeing the water gushing reminded me of how thirsty I was and how much I needed a bath. I got up and walked the rest of the way. The air was hot and humid and the water was refreshingly cool. I didn't go inside the cave. I wasn't sure what I would find in it. I stopped at the entrance and submerged myself, clothes and all, in the pool collecting the running water and drank from the flowing part above. It was clean, clear and cool water, just like the kind I remember from the village back home in Macedonia.

I took all my clothes off and washed them clean. I then washed myself from top to bottom. I didn't mind being naked. There was no one there and the warm air felt good on my cool skin.

I walked around naked and gathered some sticks of wood to light a fire. I figured a fire would dry my clothes faster. I found a lot of dry wood in the ravine and collected as much as I could and placed it in front of the cave entrance. I then collected some dry grass which was also plentiful. Then I remembered that I had my lighter in the shirt that I had just washed. I got it out but it refused to light. It was wet.

I became anxious as I toyed with my lighter trying to dry it and get it to work. What if I wasn't allowed to light a fire? What if I wasn't allowed to be naked in a public place? Was this a public place? There was no one there.

The only way not to feel anxious I figured was not to start a fire at all and put my clothes back on – wet. I did exactly that. It felt uncomfortable at first but I got used to it. Just like in the village when we worked out in the fields. I remember being rained on first thing in the morning and having to wear wet clothes all day. Eventually they dried. No big deal.

I had another drink of water but this time it didn't sit well. I doubled over with stomach pains. I threw up. There was nothing there but fluids. I realized I had not eaten in a week. I needed to find food. I remembered seeing the fruit trees loaded with ripe fruit. I climbed my way out to the flat part above. I found the climb very tiring. My body felt heavy and weak. I figured it was from hunger. How was it possible to be alive for seven days without any food or water? I figured the drug they had given me must have slowed my metabolism. I didn't want to think about it anymore. My stomach hurt and I needed food.

I didn't have to walk far before running into the first fruit tree. It was about ten metres tall and loaded with round, peach coloured fruit the size of very large oranges. It had small, dark round leaves the size of a golf ball. I picked one fruit and sank my teeth into it. I was too hungry to think of the consequences of eating alien food. The skin was soft and smooth. The inside was pinkish-orange. It tasted like a sweet melon with the sour tinge of an orange. It was delicious. I kept biting at it, again without worrying about the consequences that it might be poisonous.

There was a large, rock solid brown pit inside; the size of a golf ball. I looked at it and then tossed it as far as I could throw it. I immediately realized that I could have cracked it open and eaten the nutty part inside, if there was a nutty part. I reached up and picked two more fruits. I could have taken more but I figured it would be too much. I could get sick.

When I was very young my grandmother, may God bless her soul, back in the village used to tell me not to eat more than one apple at a time because the fruit was going to give me a tummy ache.

I took the fruit and ran. I rushed back to the ravine like I had something important to do. Why was I rushing? Perhaps I felt bad because I wasn't allowed to leave the ravine? Perhaps this was the forbidden fruit that I wasn't supposed to eat? I don't know. Being out there... I was apprehensive.

I sat down next to the pile of wood in front of the cave entrance and began to think about going inside the cave. I don't remember how and when but I ate the other two fruits. All I remember was holding the pits in my hand. The next thing I remember was breaking a pit. I put it on a rock and smashed it with another rock. It broke easily. It was white like a coconut inside, but solid right through. I picked up a sliver of the white that had broken off and put it in my mouth. I immediately spat it out and ran for water to wash my tongue. It was very bitter. I had never tasted anything so bitter before. I figured it wasn't meant to be eaten. My stomach began to feel heavy and started gurgling. I figured it was the fruit fermenting. My grandmother was probably right. The old people had learned these things from experience and it was worth listening to them.

An hour had passed and I was still alive and still sitting by the cave entrance. The fruit wasn't poisonous, especially since my stomach had begun to ease up. I guess it was time to go inside the cave.

The cave entrance was circular, about two steps wide and about three steps high. There was long grass growing on the sides and hanging from the top. It was wet everywhere. Water was rolling out over a large stone at the bottom. It was pitch black inside. I took a step in and got my right running shoe all wet. I then stepped inside on solid ground, on a rock. I was apprehensive and stood still for a few moments and listened. It was quiet. All I could hear was running and dripping water. I closed my eyes to focus on the sounds. There weren't any. I opened my eyes and was able to see a shadowy outline of the inside of the cave, but not very well. It didn't look like a natural cave. It looked more like a pile of large, discarded boulders with a large crevasse between them. Over time the running water had washed away the soil and left a hole. I guess that's what caves are but this one looked like it was manmade, by accident of course. Inside it was littered with rocks. It was dangerous to walk without

being able to see. So, the best way to explore the cave, I figured, was with a flashlight. But I didn't have one.

I looked around but all I could see were stones and water. I picked up a number of flat stones that were close to the entrance and placed them in the shallow running water at the entrance. They became my stepping stones for going in and out of the cave without getting my feet wet.

I went outside again and sat by the woodpile. I looked up at the sky and noticed the silvery tinge had gone. Everything was yellow now. I looked around and noticed the silvery sun had set. The yellow sun seemed to hover above like it was standing still. I had been here now for many hours and hadn't seen it move. I estimated I had been there for more than ten hours and it was still light outside. I began to wonder if the yellow sun ever set. I looked at my watch. It was still working but I hadn't notice what time it was when the two men dumped me in the ravine. The yellow sun was a mystery which I was going to solve later. Now, at this moment, I was feeling very tired and needed to find a place to sleep, a safe place.

I must have passed out because the next time I looked at my watch, which seemed like moments ago, it was a couple of hours later. I looked up and noticed the sun had moved. This meant that night was coming and I needed to find shelter. Who knew what kind of creatures lurked here at night, in the open space next to the river?

I made an instant panic-driven decision to move into the cave. I was going to light a fire to give me light and keep me warm during the night. The fire would also ward off any predators that might be lurking in the outdoors during the night and decide to come inside the cave.

I quickly went inside the cave, collected a bunch of rocks by feel and piled them up a metre high. I then placed more rocks all around the pile and made the rockpile into a raised pit. Then, armful by armful I brought all the wood and dry grass inside. I put some dry grass in the centre of the rockpile and lit it with my lighter. I then piled the dry wood on top, small pieces first and then larger pieces.

“We have fire!” I yelled out loud.

My voice echoed in the cave. I stood up and began to choke on the smoke. Rats! I had forgotten about the smoke and sat down again.

There was no smoke in the bottom half of the cave. In fact the smoke had found its way out and began to slowly dissipate. As the wood burned hotter it produced less and less smoke. I now had the light I needed to see and began to explore the entire cave.

I spent a couple of hours inside the cave, looking here and there. I then decided to go outside. It was cloudy and drizzling. It was a gentle rain. I remembered being brought here in a plastic bag. I went looking for it. It was exactly where I had left it. I dumped it in the pool of water in front of the cave entrance and washed it. I placed it over me and enjoyed watching the rain fall. The rain lasted about twenty minutes. After it stopped the clouds left and the sky cleared up. The sun was shining again and it was getting very humid. I went back into the cave and took the plastic with me. I looked around the cave for somewhere to put it to dry. I noticed a large pile of soil in the corner. It looked like a mini mountain. I went over and stomped on it. It was dry and fell apart. It was also very fine, like finely milled wheat flour. It would be a good place for me to sleep, I thought.

I remembered sleeping in the outdoors in summer back in the village. My favourite spots to sleep were in the fine dust which felt very soft, softer and more comfortable than an expensive mattress.

I leveled the soil with my feet and, after I dried the plastic near the fire, laid it on top of the dust. This was going to be my bed. I put more wood on the fire and went to try out my new bed. I raised some of the dust underneath the plastic to make a pillow and rested my head on it.

The next thing I remember was opening my eyes and trying to figure out where I was. It was dark in the cave and the fire had gone out. When I did remember where I was I felt this heavy weight on me and a sharp pain cut across my stomach. It could have been hunger but I was pretty sure it was fear. I looked at the cave entrance. It was

dark outside. I could have lit my lighter to see what time it was but I chose not to. It was best to preserve the lighter fuel for lighting fires.

I got up slowly. My body felt very heavy and I was lightheaded. I slowly made my way to the cave entrance and used the stepping stones to exit. What a good idea I thought. Now my shoes can remain dry.

As soon as I popped my head out of the cave it felt like I had entered a black and white movie. It was eerie outside. The silver sun was at the spot where the yellow sun had been earlier. If I could describe it, it looked like the full moon on earth on a clear night but shining at four times the intensity.

I felt like I was a character in a black and white movie. I sat outside the cave in the same place where I had sat earlier and looked at the sky. I looked up at the tree tops. I noticed the trees in the ravine were different, wild, tall and rough, like the willows around our rivers on earth. I thought I saw something move on top of one of those trees. I looked again. It was a round thing like a ball, the size of a basketball. My eyes and brain were telling me it was a round owl, a comical looking big owl. I didn't see if it flew but it disappeared quickly.

I looked at the river bank hoping to see some creature, but saw nothing. I wondered if there were fish in the river... and how I could catch some.

I lay down on my back and kept looking at the silvery sun. The sky was black. It looked like someone had poured a ball of mercury into a pool of black. It was too boring to look at so I closed my eyes and thought about how I had gotten here.

The two men and woman I had first encountered, I figured, were what we here on earth would call space people. They had come to earth to maybe do some exploring. The woman wore a camouflage outfit to blend in with the surroundings. The two men monitored her movements from their spaceship hidden in the rocks and bushes.

What I couldn't figure out was the thing that had attacked me. What was it? Obviously it was a living thing but what? What was the black stuff it oozed from its slit? Perhaps it was blood... It was too dark to make out the colour. And what about the policeman's whistle...? What was that and why did it spook the woman.

And another thing, how did she communicate with the two men who ran to get her? I saw no communicator. Perhaps these people can communicate in ways we don't know! Perhaps!? They can travel in space so obviously they were more advanced than us. And the thing, the thing I saw that looked like a truck, or like a couple of toy trucks side by side must have been the mother ship keeping an eye on them. I have seen enough Star Trek episodes to understand how these things work. But Star Trek is fiction...? So what! Well, anyway I have nothing else to relate it to. So Star Trek and aliens it was! But in this case I was the alien.

As I sat there wracking my brain trying to figure out what was happening, it occurred to me that the reason they didn't want me to see inside their ships and inside their cities was because they were planning to return me to where they had found me. The ravine would be familiar to me because we have ravines everywhere back home on earth. The less I knew the better.

If that were the case then the only thing for me to worry about now was my food and gear back in Algonquin Park. Would my bike, tent and food still be there when they returned me? Surely the bread and cheese would go stale and moldy but the canned food should be okay. Maybe the raccoons would have eaten the perishable food.

I figured it was a waste of time thinking about it. Let's wait and see what happens, I thought. How will I explain what happened to me to the people at home...? The missing time...? How was I going to explain to myself what had happened? Pretend it never happened? Pretend it was a dream... a bad or good dream?

All my life I wondered how it would be to take a step in outer space, to walk on the moon, to see the rings of Saturn from the surface of Saturn and to walk on one of the moons orbiting Jupiter. And here I

was on an alien world and all I could think of was to pretend it had never happened. Why are dreams so beautiful and reality so harsh?

I opened my eyes. It was still black and white outside. I went back into the cave and lay down on my makeshift bed. All I wanted to think about now was my life back in the village. It gave me some comfort.

The next thing I remember was waking up and looking through the cave entrance. I was happy to see the yellow light. It had a tinge of silver.

I felt hungry, very hungry but there was nothing to eat. I craved bread, cheese, meat... How about some sizzling bacon? I thought. No! So, fruit it was. I got up but still felt very heavy. The fire was out and had been out for a long time. There was little firewood left. First breakfast then firewood I told myself. I climbed up the bank and out of the ravine. I looked around. There was no one there. I thought perhaps no one lived there. I looked around and noticed the grass was trimmed and the area was cleaned of fallen fruit and leaves. I wondered why people would go through this effort to clean a park they never used. It was just a thought. The aroma of the fruits and flowers in the nearby trees was overpowering.

I went to the same tree and this time picked two fruits. I picked them from the ground. They must have fallen since the park was cleaned last. I could have taken more but I figured too much fruit would upset my stomach, like the last time. I took them back to the ravine, sat on the same spot outside the cave and ate them both. I washed my hands and began to look for more firewood.

I took a long stroll downriver and found plenty of firewood. I also found paths in the overgrown dry grass which led all over the ravine. I wondered what had made them. What kind of creatures roamed around this part of the ravine? I picked up as much dry wood as I could carry and followed one of those paths. It curved around towards the river. I came back to the cave. I went back for more wood. I followed a different path this time but I only found one piece of wood. It was a straight and well-trimmed stick. It looked like someone's walking stick. I paused for a moment to look at it.

Then, suddenly I heard a loud “honk” behind me. It was very loud and startled me. I swung around quickly with the stick in my hand. I then heard a loud snap. I looked down and there, in front of me lay a strange creature with its neck snapped. I had killed it. It was an accident but I had killed it. I felt terrible.

What was it? I examined it carefully and found its long neck was broken. I touched it with my hand, it was warm but dead. I looked at it closely. It had a round body the size of a basketball, two long stick-like legs, like those of a stork. It had a half metre long neck and a head that looked like that of a duck. It had no tail, wings or ordinary feathers. It was black and hairy. The hairs were actually thin centimetre long feathers. Had I just committed a crime? Of course I had! What was I going to do with it now?

The best thing to do with it, I thought, was eat it. I knew how to prepare it... remove its feathers, clean it and roast it, just like we used to cook chickens back in the village. It would be a shame to waste it. My grandmother had said that it was a crime to waste food and if you did waste it you would be cursed. So, I began to re-acquaint myself with preparing a chicken. Deep down I was happy, an answer to my prayers, to eat some fresh meat.

The first thing about preparing a chicken after it had been killed was to remove or pluck its feathers. But before doing that you must soak the chicken in boiling water. I had no boiling water or a container in which to boil water, so I decided to peel the skin right off it, feathers and all. I cut the creature’s skin from the neck to its legs with my pocket knife and began to peel it off. I found it was easy. I then cut off the head and legs and opened its innards. It was just like a chicken. I took the heart and liver out and removed the gallbladder. Everything else I threw out. I then trimmed a straight branch of wood and threaded it through the creature’s insides. I did the same with the heart and liver but with a much thinner branch. I placed the meat on top of a clean rock and started the fire. I realized I didn’t have enough firewood so I rushed out and got some more. The fire was burning hot and bright. The flames danced around creating moving shadows on the cave’s walls. The fire burned for a long time. It created enough coals to roast the meat. I was getting impatient so I decided to roast the heart and liver first and see what

they tasted like. It took a few minutes. I felt my heart pounding as I broke a piece of liver off the stick. I waited a few seconds for it to cool before I had a taste. It was wonderfully delicious. It could have used some salt. But where was I going to find salt?

I gobbled up the rest of the liver and heart and was ready to eat more. Patience, I said to myself, patience the chicken needs to be fully cooked before I can eat it. Fat began to drip on the coals and gave off an appetizing aroma. It took hours of cooking before it was fully cooked. I kept testing it by sticking a sharp toothpick-like stick into it. If blood came out it wasn't done. Finally clear liquid was coming out which meant it was cooked. The meat was very tender and cut easily. I put the entire bird on top of a clean rock and began to cut chunks out of it with my pocket knife. And as each chunk cooled I ate it. At some point I realized I had eaten too much and decided to lie down for a short rest.

The next thing I remember was waking up in the dark and staring into a woman's face. I jumped. She smiled at me. I smiled back. As soon as I got up she took my place and sat down on my bed. It was dark so I decided to revive the fire. I threw some dry grass into the ashes and stirred them up. I then threw some more dry grass on the glowing embers and puffs of flame began to appear. I added some dry wood on top and we had a burning fire.

For a moment I thought I was dreaming. I touched the flames. I felt the heat of the fire. I was not dreaming.

I looked at the woman again and noticed she was watching me with curiosity to see what I was doing. She was a small figured woman, just like the other one, but this woman's face looked different. She wore a mask with white and dark figurines on it. She also wore a shirt with glowing neon shapes on it. I looked at her face closely. She wasn't wearing a mask. I looked at her hands; they too were black and white. She looked like she had veins of black running on a white background. She looked strange, very strange. Her smile also looked strange, like she was mocking me. But what did I know? I knew nothing of what they looked like or their behaviour.

I was wondering why she was here and asked her in English. She didn't respond and gave me a strange gaze and a mocking smile. Was it possible she was a night creature and couldn't speak?

Here I was looking at a genuine alien. In ordinary times I would have a million questions to ask. Now, unfortunately, I couldn't even muster one. I then realized that in this situation I was the alien.

I cut a piece of meat from the bird and offered it to her. She didn't react. I put it in my mouth and ate it. She kept looking at me. I cut another piece and offered it to her. She took it and ate it. There was no reaction. Only the same mocking smile... I cut another piece and offered it. She looked at it and did nothing. I ate it. I then went closer and sat on one of the rocks next to her. She smiled and turned to her side and pulled out a purse. I hadn't noticed her having a purse. She pulled out what looked like half a melon. It had a pink skin. The light fruit was neon yellow and glowing, just like the shapes on her shirt. In the centre of the melon were black seeds looking like frog's eggs. She pointed to the melon. I took it and tried to bite a chunk from its side. She laughed without making a sound and took it from me. And there was that mocking smile again.

She looked me in the eyes, took a seed from the centre, put it in her mouth and began to chew it. I reached over and grabbed several seeds. She took them from me and gave me only one. I put it in my mouth and began to chew it. It was sour but only on the outside. The slimy and clear part was sour. The inside, the black part, was a real seed and tasted like an apricot seed. She took a second seed and so did I. I went for a third but she took away the melon and put it back in her purse.

Seconds later I began to feel light-headed and my worries began to evaporate. The flame in the fire looked beautiful and the water below looked dark and menacing. My entire world began to spin and I fell down on the rocks.

The next thing I remember was opening my eyes and feeling paralyzed from my neck down to my toes. She was nowhere to be seen and I couldn't move a muscle. What had happened to me, what

had she done to me and why? How had she found me and what was she doing in this cave?

None of this made any sense so I wondered if I had imagined it all. I began to feel pins and needles in my arms and hands and then in my legs and feet. Slowly I began to feel sensations and was able to get up. I went outside. It was a beautiful clear and sunny day. I took a deep breath and smelled the sweet aroma of ripe fruit and flowers in the air. I then looked at my hands. I was shocked. They were not my hands. They had turned completely white and had black veins running through them, just like the woman's. She was real, I hadn't imagined her and she had done this to me. The seeds she had given me must have been poisonous. I went to the calm side of the water pool and looked at my reflection. My face too was discoloured, the same as my hands. I didn't bother to look at the rest of my body. It was too depressing.

I didn't know what to do. After sitting outside for a while I felt fine. Other than feeling heavier than usual, I was fine. I was unharmed so why fret?

As I sat there, on my usual spot outside the cave, I noticed the yellow sun was behind the tallest tree in the ravine. I figured it was time for me to measure the length of a day in this world in earth hours. I set my watch to 12:00 noon and the month counter to 1. After that I went and got some more fruit and more firewood. And then I hung around the river bank looking around in anticipation of the woman returning. Well, she didn't. I was disappointed. When the yellow sun had set I went inside the cave and lit the fire. I ate more of the meat. It tasted quite good with the fruit. I waited for the woman. She didn't come back.

The next day I woke up early, before dawn and waited for the sun to hide behind the tall tree. Eventually it did and I calculated the day and night to be 34.5 earth hours. That is 21 day hours and 13.5 night hours. The next day I did the same with the silver sun and noticed that it too was 34.5 hours, 17.25 hours visible and 17.25 hours invisible. The two suns were exactly opposite to one another. And that's what I observed at the time. I don't know if they had seasons here like we do on earth but judging from the trees that had both

fruits and flowers at the same time, they didn't. They had trees there that flowered and bore fruit at the same time. What I didn't notice was how the flowers were pollinated and how long they lasted. In terms of wildlife, there was very little. But I did notice that it rained frequently, every two to three days, a gentle rain with small drops and there was no wind at all.

The day after the woman paid me a visit in the cave, while I still wore the black veins all over my body, I saw people gathering at the top of the ravine looking down at me. The black slowly began to disappear from my body. In a couple of days or so it disappeared and I returned to my normal self. But since that day a variety of people passed by and watched me. Every day like clockwork they came and stood at the top of the ravine and quietly stared at me. Men, women and children all dressed in white. They came to look at me, at the big monkey in the ravine. I just sat there doing nothing but they stared and stared in silence. Not a word... not a smile... not a motion. Why were they doing this?

And when it rained they all came dressed in their clear plastic overcoats looking like elongated umbrellas and on their heads they wore funny, tiny clear umbrellas. They looked comical. I stood there in the rain getting soaked and looked back at them.

One day, I believe it was the third day. That day I became angry at them and yelled, "WHAT DO YOU ALL WANT?!" in English, but nothing, not a peep, no reaction at all. I often wondered what they would do if I rushed them. If I ran up the slope and lunged at them. I was much bigger in size than the biggest of them.

But ever since they began arriving I made sure I got my fruit early, before they arrived.

No one came on the fifth or the sixth day. I was glad but kind of disappointed. It was very boring for me moping around in the ravine, too scared to go in the river and too afraid to escape and go somewhere else. So, in a way, their presence was company for me.

Then, early on during the seventh day, the two men and the woman who had brought me here showed up. I remember holding a wooden

spear in my hand pointing it up towards the sky. I had made it a few days earlier in anticipation of going fishing in the river but was still afraid to go into the water.

On the way to Apserpon

The woman, arms crossed, stood at the top of the bank looking into the distance. For some reason she didn't want to look at me. The two men came down the slope, approached me from the side ready to grab me by my arms. I pulled away and leveled my spear. One of them grabbed it hard and hurled it into the river. I was impressed with his powerful throw. They grabbed me and lifted me up by my arms like I was made of feathers. They carried me up the steep slope. They were strong, very strong. I could barely make it up the slope carrying my own body.

Before we reached the top the woman had turned around and left. She was ahead of us about ten steps. At the top I flexed my arms and they let me go. I began to follow the woman and they followed me. We reached a monument with stairs underneath it. I immediately recognized it. The woman went left and into a flying cab waiting for her. We went down the stairs. I noticed there was no one upstairs in the open or in the tube station downstairs. A car looking like a glass jar was waiting for us. Perhaps it was the same glass jar we had come in a week ago? I entered first and sat in the back, which turned out to be the front. They sat behind me. I was expecting to go back where we had come from, but that was not the case. About an hour later the glass jar stopped at a station. The door opened and we stepped out. Traveling for an hour at that speed I figured we were on the other side of the planet. They took the lead and I followed.

We came out of the tube station and walked through another typical park and out onto an old road. We followed the road on foot for about ten minutes and arrived at a wire and metal gate a few metres high. The gate was closed. One of the men pulled out something which I assumed was a key, opened the door and the other one shoved me inside. The first one then slammed the door shut and locked it. Without looking at me the two men turned around and walked away.

My first instinct was to jump over the fence and run away. It was a very high fence but I could climb over it. But where was I going to go. Obviously they wanted me there for a reason. I decided I was going to stay.

I turned around. There was nothing but junk as far as the eye could see. They had put me in a well-fenced junkyard and locked me inside. Could things get any worse? They sure could and did! I was attacked by what looked like a dog. A mean, vicious junkyard dog! I know it sounds funny but that's what happened. The small beast was relentless. It kept grabbing at my pant legs as I struggled to get away.

It wasn't a dog but I'd like to call it a dog because it growled and acted like a dog. It didn't bark but attacked like a dog. It grabbed my pant leg and tore it off. My leg was now bare. This was the only pair of pants I had.

After the little beast tore up the bottom of my pant leg, it came back for more. I grabbed the nearest object I could find. It was a metal pipe. I smacked the little beast on the head and showed it who was boss. It charged again. I raised the pipe. It stopped charging but wouldn't leave. It kept circling around me like a vulture. The creature looked funny... comically funny like it belonged in a cartoon. It had long grey-black hair and looked like a cube with a head like a turtle, four short legs and a bushy tail. It had a round furry head with a short snout and long sharp teeth. It kept growling and circling. No matter how much I threatened it, it refused to go away.

I looked around. There was nothing but junk everywhere, metallic junk and wood. About fifty metres away from the gate was a tall, beaten up bluish metallic structure. The door on it was partially open. Perhaps I could go inside, shut the door and leave the little beast outside, I thought. Holding the pipe in my hand I began to walk towards the building. The little monster followed close behind. I stepped inside. There was junk everywhere, the door was stuck, it wouldn't shut. I noticed the building had lights and they were on. It was boiling hot inside. Flies were buzzing around everywhere. They didn't attack me. To my right was a high pile of wood stacked nicely. I climbed up on the wood. The little beastie stayed at the bottom. Thank God it couldn't climb. I climbed to the top of the woodpile which was flat and smooth. There was a tall opening leading to the next structure behind the woodpile. It was blocked at

the bottom but there was enough clearance at the top for me to squeeze through. I climbed down. The place looked filthy. It was a very large room and there were metal tables all over the place. There were what looked like cupboards and cabinets all around the walls. To the far right there were what looked like shower stalls, like those in a prison or a gym. The place looked like a factory that had been looted and all the tools were missing. In front of the showers there was a stand with two streams of clear running fluid gushing vertically, peaking at about fifteen centimetres. It looked like a European street fountain but with two spouts about five centimetres apart. I wondered what that was for. I was hoping the fluid was water.

I went towards the fountain and stopped in front of it. I looked around to make sure the dog wasn't there. It wasn't. I touched the gushing fluid with my right index finger. I wanted to be sure it wasn't some sort of chemical, acid, oil, or fuel. I felt my wet finger with my thumb and then took a whiff. It had no odor and it wasn't slippery. It had to be water. I dipped my finger in again and licked it. It was water. I drank some but not as much as I wanted. I wanted to be sure it was safe and wouldn't make me sick or cause me to pass out. Passing out was not an option with the little beast circling around.

I looked up and noticed the big room had an indoor terrace right above the showers. It was a long terrace that extended the full length of the room. There was an open door that led to the outside in the middle of it. It was too high for me to see outside from where I was standing. I looked around. There at the far end, away from the showers, was a black metal door perhaps leading to another part of the building and beside it, on the right, was a staircase leading to the terrace above. I looked around for the dog. It wasn't there. I went to the far end and pushed on the door. It wouldn't open. I pushed it hard. It still would not open. I turned right and climbed up the stairs. They were rickety. They were probably hundreds of years old. I went straight for the door that led to the outside. It wasn't open like I'd thought. It was a plastic-like, clear solid door. I pushed it hard but it refused to open. I then pulled it. It flew open. There was another terrace on the outside. It was littered with bird droppings. There were benches for sitting and they were covered in bird

droppings. They looked like little mountains. I looked down. There was a tree down on the ground on the opposite side near the side fence. It looked black. I couldn't tell if it had black leaves or if it was loaded with black fruit.

I closed the door and went down again. The ceiling of the room was very high, I would estimate about ten metres. The drawers in the benches were empty. I opened one of the cupboards. It was disgusting. There were brown clumps of something that had rotted many years ago and had fossilized. I opened another cupboard. This one had glass jars covered in dust. Everything was covered in dust, the floor, the tables... It had even gotten inside the cupboards.

I pulled out a jar. It was heavy. I took it to the fountain and washed it. It was sealed and had a purplish red, solid looking substance inside. I was hoping it was food and not some sort of lubricant or grease. There was one way to find out.

I looked over the jar and besides it being a perfect square it looked like an ordinary half litre jar with a lid on it. I identified the top. It didn't have a screw cap. The lid, also made of the same material, lay flat on it. There was a tab about two square centimetres on its side attached to the lid pointing downwards. I pulled the tab away from the jar and heard a hissing sound. I then pulled it up and the lid flew open. The lid didn't fall off. It was attached to the jar top on the other side and pivoted open. The substance inside looked like fruit jelly. I took a sniff. It smelled delicious. It had to be food.

I couldn't help myself. I stuck my finger in it and put some in my mouth. It was delicious. It tasted like figs dipped in honey and butter all mixed with nuts. I ate as much as my fingers could reach. It was so delicious I didn't care if it was poisonous. I had no idea how long the jar had been there. The substance inside it was not stale... Not that I could tell.

I put the lid right back on and put the jar back in the cupboard... for later. I knew it wouldn't last long after it was opened. I was going to look for a utensil or a stick to eat it with. But for now I had some exploring to do. I went through every cupboard... and found nothing but petrified stuff. I then began to look in the cabinets. They too

were empty, except for one. It had clothes in it. Among them was a long coat. It looked like the kind doctors wear but it was brown. There was also a pair of brownish work trousers. Perfect, I thought, a solution to my pants problem. I pulled out the coat first. It wasn't brown, underneath all that dust, it was bluish just like the colour of the building. The pants were also blue. I shook the pants several times until the dust on the surface flew off in a dense cloud. I took my pants off. I put on the pair I had found. The waist was too wide and the legs were short. They were made for a shorter person but I didn't care. But the waist was a problem. What to do with the waist?

I looked around for a string or belt. There was nothing of the sort in the cabinet. I looked at the pants. There were no loops for a belt but there were two little tabs sticking out from each side inside the pants where a belt was supposed to go. I pulled on them slowly and the waist began to tighten. I pulled on both tabs. I kept pulling until the waist fit perfectly. The pants felt comfortable. The material was soft and smooth. Perhaps there was something like that to lengthen the pant legs, I thought. I sat on the closest bench, bent my knee and looked. I found a tab inside near the bottom of the pant leg. I pulled on it. It made the pant leg shorter. I pushed on it, twisted it, moved it left and right... Nothing! I pulled on it again and made the pant leg even shorter. I was getting frustrated. I had a perfect pair of pants and had ruined them. I pulled on the tab hard and fast. It suddenly shrunk and disappeared. I looked for it. It was still there but it had shortened. I stood up. Now the pant leg was too long. I felt relieved.

I figured out how the tabs worked and adjusted them so that the pants fit me just right. I cut the pant legs of my own pants off at the knee and turned them into shorts. I put the coat back in the cabinet. It was too hot for a coat in this place.

Pleased, very pleased with my find, I was ready to go exploring again. I must not forget to take my dog repellent pipe standing against the side of the bench, I thought. I grabbed the pipe and looked at my hand. It was brown. I was sweltering in the heat inside the building and all that dust that had flown off the clothes was stuck to my sweaty hands and face. I figured it was time to test one of those showers. I looked around. There was no dog. And except for

the insects buzzing around, there was no one and nothing around. Good, I thought, I can undress now.

But before undressing I went to the first shower, the closest one. How to turn it on? How to turn it on? The showerhead was solid and pointing vertically downwards. It had holes in the end and a little handle on the side. I pushed the handle back and forth. It was stuck. I went to every shower. It was the same. I found a piece of metal in the corner of the room. I went back to the first shower and hit the handle with it. The handle broke and fell off. Oh, the hell with it, I thought. I'll go to the fountain and wash my face and hands there. I did that and then put my right thumb on the right spout to see how high the water on the left spout would go. It went almost double the height. I turned my head to the side and wet it. The water felt cool on my ear. I then blocked the left spout with my left thumb stopping the water from running. I wanted to see if I could build up enough pressure to turn the fountain into a momentary shower.

Suddenly there was a loud sound in the big room. It scared the hell out of me. I almost fell to my knees. I let go of the spouts and looked in the direction of the sound. I saw water dripping from the first shower. After waiting for a moment to let my heart stop pounding, I again blocked the two spouts and watched the water flow out of the showerhead. It was rusty brown at first but became clear very soon. All I needed to do now was find something to plug the spouts and then I could have a shower. I was hot, my entire body was sweating and I could use a cool shower right about now.

There was a pile of lumber right behind me in the next room. I could cut some sticks and make stoppers for the fountain. Even make a wooden spoon to eat the delicious fruity stuff with, I thought.

I climbed up and went out through the same opening I had come in from. The dog was still there at the bottom of the woodpile, waiting for me. I had my pipe in my hand. I waved it at it. No reaction. I contemplated killing it but had second thoughts. In my frustration I jumped as hard as I could on top of the woodpile. The dog took off like a shot towards the inside of the big room. I've got you now, I figured.

I watched it go about ten metres or so and stop. It turned around and started coming back towards me. It had something in its mouth. It had caught something. It looked like a creature the size of a red squirrel. It had it in its mouth and was bringing it back. The rodent kept squirming trying to get away. I must have scared it when I jumped on the woodpile. The dog stopped in front of me, looked at me and clamped its sharp teeth on the rodent. The little creature stopped moving. Looking at me the dog then began to eat it, biting its head first. It looked disgusting.

I jumped on the woodpile again. No reaction from the dog. It kept eating. It ate it, tail and all. It then licked its lips and lay down in front of me, watching me. What was I going to do with this monster which refused to leave me alone, I wondered. I'd have to sleep up here on the woodpile, away from its reach, I figured.

I looked at it and said, "So, you're a rodent catching dog, eh? Or maybe you're a cat...? I don't know. What I do know is that you're a pain... And I don't know what to do with you."

I sat down at the top of the woodpile, put my face in my hands and we kept staring at each other for what seemed like hours. I was bored. I didn't have the dog's patience. I wanted to go outside. It looked like evening was approaching and the yellow sun would be setting soon. I wanted to look around outside before going to sleep on the hard wooden bed. Unfortunately the dog was in my way. Then it hit me. Why not go out the back way. I could jump off the terrace, do my exploring and perhaps climb back up. If not, come in through the front door and run up the woodpile before the dog had a chance to chase me. Besides, I had the pipe in my hand.

I got up, turned around and slipped down to the next room. Just then I realized I had forgotten to make my stoppers and wooden spoon. Oh, well, I'll do that later, I thought.

I went straight for the stairs. I looked at the big metal door beside them. What could be behind there, I wondered. I decided to try opening it again. I pushed hard but still it refused to budge. Then I decided to pull. The door flew open. There was a hall leading

forward and another to the sides. The entire place was lit with artificial lighting, electricity perhaps?

I turned left. There was a storage room but there was nothing in it. I came back and went straight. There was a washroom. It was disgusting. The toilets and sinks were filthy brown and covered in dust. I came back and went right. There was a door at the end of the short hallway. I figured it led outside. It did. The locking mechanism was broken and it opened slightly after a strong push.

I pushed harder and after something snapped, the door flew open. A pile of dry bird droppings was rolling away. It looked like a huge chunk of dirty styrofoam. I let go of the door and it sprang back and closed. I panicked. I thought I had been locked out and yelled a bunch of profanities out loud. I tried the door. It wasn't locked... But it was too late. I spotted the dog running towards me and growling. I stepped back inside and closed the door. I was very angry. This dog was getting on my nerves. Something had to be done.

I went back to the toilets. I was curious to see if they worked. I went to the first stall. There was no water at the bottom of the bowl. The toilet looked similar to the ones we have on earth. I looked for a handle to flush. I couldn't find one. Even if I had found one it probably wouldn't work. There was no tank to hold the water either. These toilets looked like they were a hundred years old. They probably were. I looked at the floor. It was filthy. I looked closer and saw a brown spot rising right in front of the base of the toilet. I scratched it with my foot. It was a metallic object, a coin perhaps? I tried to kick it. It didn't move. I stomped on it to dislodge it. Then, suddenly I heard a loud growling sound. I jumped up and turned around fast. My heart was pounding. The growling stopped. Had the dog gotten inside? I didn't see it anywhere. I turned around. The toilet bowl was full of grey and brown water ready to overflow.

Moments later it began to spin and whoosh the water disappeared down the hole. I heard water running inside the wall. It must be the reservoir or tank filling up. It took a long time before it stopped. I pushed on the coin again with the bottom of my running shoe. There was the growl again and then the whoosh followed. The toilet

worked. The inside of the toilet, the washed part, began to turn a tinge of white. It would need a lot of scrubbing, I told myself, especially the seat.

I turned around and left the stall. There were sinks in a line but no mirrors. I went closer. There was glass under the brown rubble. The mirrors were all broken. Part of one mirror still hung on the wall on top of the last sink, but it was covered in dust. I went there and ran my finger along its face. It was glass. It was caked with brown dust.

I tried the handle on the tap above the sink. It only had one handle. All of them had only one handle. It was seized up. It didn't move. I tapped it with the pipe I was carrying in my hand. Nothing... I tapped it harder. It moved but only slightly. I worked it back and forth, gently so as not to break it. Black fluid began to drip. I worked it some more and eventually got it to work. Clear water began to flow, but not a lot. I shut it off.

Enough fun for one day, it was time for me to go outside. I flushed the toilet one more time for good measure and walked away towards the water fountains for a drink before going outside. The water fountain had dried up. There was no water coming out from either spout. What a disaster, I thought. Then, moments later, water began to flow. About a minute later it had returned to its normal flow. It would seem the water in this facility was gravity driven and shared by all the plumbing facilities. The pump that pressurized the tanks must have been turned off or had died of old age. It didn't matter to me one way or another. But where was the dog getting its water?

I decided to play a trick on the dog. I got on the woodpile and began to hit the wood with the pipe.

I then yelled, "Hey, dog, where are you?"

Sure enough, as I predicted, there it was, in front of the woodpile growling and biting the wood. What a vicious monster you are, I thought.

While the dog was distracted, I slipped out the back door and went to investigate the tree I had seen earlier from the terrace. I walked

very quietly and arrived at the tree. It was a relatively small tree, about six metres high, but looked very old. Its bark looked like an old man's wrinkled skin. It had large dark green leaves that looked like those of a maple and a round black fruit smaller than a golf ball that looked like a fig. It was loaded with fruit. The ground was littered with rotting fruit and the flies were all over it. I reached up and picked one. It had a delicious aroma, much like the jelly I had eaten earlier. I took a small bite. It was reddish-purple inside and its juice looked red like blood. But the taste; it was out of this world, as sweet as honey mixed with butter and nuts. They must have made the jelly from the fruit of this tree, I thought.

I filled my shirt pockets with fruit. I noticed that my new pants had no pockets. I turned around and was ready to go when I noticed the extent of bird droppings that had accumulated on the side wall of the metal building. It must have taken many years... But, so far, I had not seen a single bird. Where were the birds? Maybe they had left, or died off?

I went back into the building through the back door, had a drink of water and went and sat on the woodpile. The dog was still there... sitting down quietly, staring at me. From the cracks in the tattered blue metal walls of the building I could see the yellow sun setting in the distance. I watched it disappear behind the tree line at the side of the open door. I ate the rest of the fruit and reflected on how to get rid of that damn dog.

The next thing I remembered was waking up in the middle of the night, burning up. Both the jelly and the fruit were very sweet and the sugar was burning me. I needed water. I looked around and then down through the opening into the room where the water was. The dog was still in this room, it hadn't moved. The inside of the building and the yard were lit like Christmas trees. There was no one here, so why were the lights left on? Had they turned them on for me? I was too tired and burning up to think about it. I needed water.

I clumsily made my way down the woodpile to the fountain. I drank my fill of water. When I stood up I saw movement outside the clear door on top of the terrace.

Instinctively and without thinking I yelled very loudly, “Who’s there!”

Immediately after I yelled I heard many wings flap and a cloud of birds flew by the clear window. The birds were resting on the perch on top of the outside terrace when I startled them. The dog also ran out to the side of the building to investigate. The birds must have arrived after sunset.

I went back to the woodpile but couldn’t sleep. The dog too returned and made a hissing sound before it sat down in the usual place, staring at me. I went closer to the wall of the metal building. It was cool, not hot like during the day. I looked outside through a crack. It was eerie out there under the light of the silver sun. Everything was black and white, even the birds that were returning from being scared away were black and white. I watched them fly by and listened to them chirping at each other. In a comical way they sounded like they were talking. Talking like the chipmunk cartoon characters on television back on earth. But what were they saying? I had to find out. My curiosity was killing me.

I went down the back way, this time very carefully. I walked along the wall, in the not so well-lit part of the room. I then went up the stairs and along the inside part of the terrace. I put my ear against the wall and listened. I nearly fell over when I heard what they were saying.

They said, “Who is there!” over and over again. I couldn’t believe my ears – talking birds.

I went back on top of the woodpile and must have fallen asleep because the next thing I remember was hearing the birds flying away in the morning, chirping “Who is there!”, “Who is there!”, “Who is there!” I sat up and looked through the crack in the metal wall. It was getting light outside. The vicious dog was still there... looking at me.

I figured it was time to start moving around, get the stiffness out of my body by doing some chores.

I took my pocket knife out, found a piece of soft wood on top of the woodpile and split a few strips from it. The strips were about ten to twenty centimetres long. I then slid down to the other room. I took out the open jelly jar and, using the longest stick of wood, scooped the jelly out and ate it. When I had eaten all the jelly I left the stick inside the jar and left the jar unwashed.

After that I went to the washroom. It needed cleaning.

When I returned to the fountain I carved out two wooden plugs to plug the spouts. I plugged them and for a while watched the water drip out of the shower head.

I then took all the stuff out of my shirt pockets, took off my shoes and put everything on top of the nearest bench. The bench was dirty.

I then went to the cabinet and took the coat, my short pants and the cut off pant legs and dumped them all under the shower. I stepped into the shower with my clothes on. Why did I do that? I don't know!

I watched the brown water flow down my feet and onto the clothes I was stepping on as the cool clear water dripped on top of my head. The water was cold and so was I. My head began to hurt. I stepped away from the water flow, took all my clothes off and put them under the dripping shower head. I then stepped on the clothes repeatedly until the water coming out of them was clear.

When I was done I rinsed them under the shower and left them on the floor. I ran water over my body under the shower and then pulled the wooden plugs out of the fountain spouts and set them to the side.

For a moment I stood there and watched the water squirt and dance out of the spouts.

I noticed the shower had stopped flowing. I picked up one of the pant legs, the longer one, and went to the bench. I took my stuff off of it and put it on the floor. I then ran the wet cloth over the entire surface of the bench end to end. The brown dirt wasn't coming off.

I went to the other bench and picked up the empty jelly jar. The inside was loaded with tiny flies. They looked like tiny wasps. They flew out and left the moment I grabbed the jar.

I went to the fountain and washed the jar. Surprisingly the jelly washed off without scrubbing. I then filled the jar with water and dumped it on top of the bench. I spread the water over the entire bench surface with the cloth.

I got more water and did the same on the next bench. I went back to the first bench and saw the dirt had turned dark brown and was bubbling up. I ran the cloth over it and the dirt came off. The top of the bench gave off a beautiful silvery metallic glow. I scrubbed it end to end and then washed the cloth and filled the jar with water and rinsed the bench again. All the dirt was gone. I rinsed and squeezed the cloth and wiped the surface dry. It looked beautiful. It looked like a mirror. Not a scratch or bump on it.

I went back to the shower, picked up all my clothes and set them on the fountain, beside the running water. They were dripping wet.

With the sun up the inside of the building began to warm up fast. The bench was dry to the touch. I picked up my stuff and shoes from the floor and put them at the corner of the bench. I couldn't believe how clean and beautiful the bench looked.

I took each piece of clothing, one by one, twisted and squeezed them over the fountain and placed them on top of the bench. I felt uncomfortable walking around naked so I spread my shorts over the bench top in hopes that they would dry fast.

I spent most of the day cleaning. I spent hours cleaning all the benches, the clothes cabinet, the cupboard and all the jelly jars.

After I cleaned the second bench I spread my clothes over it so that they would dry. By the time I was done cleaning all the benches my shorts were dry. I put them on and noticed that my feet were dirty.

I wanted to clean the sink and toilet next but was afraid to walk barefoot because of the broken glass on the floor.

I sat on the bench and waited for my socks to dry. I flipped them over.

I thought of going outside to look for food. I was getting hungry. Outside of the jelly and fruit there was nothing else to eat.

I thought of eating the dog. The thought made me laugh out loud. The echo in the big room startled me.

It was peaceful and silent inside the big room.

Where was the little monster I wondered? It should have been here by now after my loud laugh. Maybe it wasn't able to get inside the big room. If it did, I thought, it would tear my clothes to pieces.

My socks were still wet when I touched them.

As I sat on the bench I realized that my feet were dirty from stepping on the dirty floor and needed washing before I put my socks back on. I took the empty jar and went to the fountain. I filled it with water and poured it on my feet. I scrubbed them with my hand to loosen the dirt. Then I rinsed them. I filled the jar with water again and walked back to the bench. I sat down on top of the bench and rinsed my feet again. I used the pant leg, which was now dry, as a towel and wiped them dry and then put on my socks and shoes.

I realized the dirty floor was going to be a problem for walking barefoot so, before I went to clean the washroom, I poured water on the floor and scrubbed it. I made a clean path from the bench to the fountain and from the fountain to the shower. I noticed the floor was painted light blue, just like the walls and like my new pants which were now fully dry. I put on my t-shirt and short pants. I put the rest of my clothing, including the long coat and my other stuff, in the cabinet.

Cleaning the toilet seat, sink and mirror were not as difficult as I had thought. I kept filling the jar with water from the sink and splashed

it over the toilet surfaces and against the mirror. After the dirt started to bubble, I scrubbed it with the cloth. I then rinsed the surfaces with water.

I cleaned the mirror last and looked at myself. I had grown a beard and moustache. I looked comical, comically tragic. I had lost weight, my eyes were sunken and I looked like an old man. Looking at my physical state I began to feel very lonely and depressed. I needed to be with people. I even contemplated becoming friends with the dog...

I felt light-headed and stepped away from the mirror. Fearing I was going to pass out and fall on the broken glass I ran outside, not to the other room but outdoors. It was much cooler out there. The sun felt nice on my face. I wanted to sit down but there was nowhere clean to sit.

I went over to the tree and picked a fruit. I bit it but it didn't seem to taste the same as before. It bled down my finger, a thin dark orange blood... very thin. I looked up and around, there wasn't a single bird in sight. There wasn't a sound except for the buzzing of the little wasps...

I suppose people would kill for a peaceful life like this, I thought and surprised myself by that thought. Perhaps there was something in me that liked the seclusion. I felt like I was back in my village in Macedonia. I liked it there.

I figured it was time to make friends with the dog. We couldn't go on like this forever... I took a second bite of the fruit and it seemed to taste better this time.

I went back inside, drank some water and filled the jar, picked up my dog repellent pipe and went back on top of the woodpile and sat down. The dog lifted its head and looked at me as I stared at it.

Moments later I stepped down from the woodpile and went closer to the dog and sat down. There was no reaction from the dog.

I took a couple more steps down towards it, which brought me within striking distance with my pipe but still far enough away from its reach, and still no reaction from the dog.

Thanks to the little monster I was now bare-legged and if it bit me again it would be biting flesh, so I had to be careful.

I suddenly stood up and quickly raised the pipe up high. The little critter jumped and moved away a short distance, enough to avoid being hit.

I took another couple of steps down and sat down. My feet were now resting on the ground where the dog could easily reach them. The dog, however, didn't react and lay there like nothing was happening.

I suddenly lowered the pipe fast. The dog jumped to its feet and went outside. Then, when I slowly raised the pipe it sat down again.

I gently placed the jar with the water on the ground and flipped the lid open but got no reaction from the dog.

I left the jar on the ground and climbed back to the top of the woodpile and sat down. It was hot up there.

The dog ran inside and attacked the jar but didn't tip it. Its mouth was too small to grasp it.

I sat there watching the dog and in my disappointment I looked away, outside.

Moments later I heard the dog lapping the water. It kept lapping and lapping until the jar was dry. It then licked its lips and kept looking at me.

I suddenly stood up and jumped hard on top of the woodpile. The dog instantly ran towards the other end but came back with no creature in its mouth. I saw its tail wag for the first time but only slightly.

Were we playing a game? Were we becoming friends?

I took the pipe and stepped down to the floor. The dog stepped away towards the door to the outside and stopped. I took a step towards it. It moved an equal distance away. I guess it didn't want to leave me but didn't want to get hit either.

I wondered what would happen if I dropped the pipe? I'd better not, it was too risky I thought.

I kept moving towards the dog and it kept moving away, past the broken down front door and outside. We were both outside now, looking at each other.

There was a small woodpile on my right side so I climbed on it and jumped hard to see what the dog was going to do.

The dog dashed towards the fence and came back with a rodent in its mouth. It clamped its teeth on it, dropped it in front of me, moved several steps away and sat down looking at me. I didn't do anything with the creature but stepped away from it.

Moments later the dog came back and started eating it, head first. Seeing that the dog was distracted I decided to walk away towards the big gate. Keeping its distance the dog picked up the half-eaten creature and followed me. What is with this dog, I wondered?

I walked away towards the side of the building and the dog followed me. I walked towards it, it backed up. We sat there in the middle of the yard looking at each other like we were dancing the tango. I was leading. I think my stick or, should I say, my dog repellent pipe was leading.

Then, suddenly, as if the music had stopped, the dog dashed away towards the big gate as if looking for the next dance partner. I felt a sense of relief but it was short-lived. I was overpowered by a sense of fear when suddenly a figure, a human figure, appeared on the dirt road in the distance. It looked like a man and he was headed our way. Who was this man and what did he want, I wondered?

Meeting Voskot

The dog ran to the gate and anxiously stood behind the large door with its tail wagging. It was obvious the dog knew the man. I suddenly felt like a stranger, an intruder who had invaded this compound. I had no idea how this society worked and what their laws were. But it wasn't my fault that I was here. I had been brought here, dumped and locked up.

The man was wearing dark clothes, black, blue, brown, I couldn't tell from this distance. He was carrying a long stick and using it to brace himself with every step. He was carrying something on his back, a backpack perhaps. As he got closer I noticed he was short, shorter than me. His was wearing a dark red shirt and blue pants, the colour of my new pants. Maybe they were his pants, I thought.

He had a big head with long reddish-brown hair sticking out. He looked like Albert Einstein from the distance. I couldn't see if he was looking at me or not but I was sure he had seen me. There was no reaction from him as to my presence. In other words, he didn't pause or pull out a gun or anything, which led me to believe he knew about me.

I didn't move a muscle as he approached. He stopped in front of the gate, took something out from a chain around his neck and opened the gate. He closed it again and it automatically locked. He bent down, said something and petted the dog on the head.

He stood up, looked at me, pointed at the dog and said something in a language I didn't understand. I stood there motionless staring at him. He looked at the pipe in my hand. I felt uncomfortable but didn't want to drop it. He didn't say anything.

He was breathing heavily and perspiring profusely. He looked old, very old. His eyes were greenish brown and his teeth were tinted yellow, like a smoker's teeth. The others I had met and had had a close look at had pearly white teeth and very smooth skin. This guy was definitely very old.

He braced himself on his walking stick, twisted a little and his backpack slipped into his hand. I was impressed by how he had done that.

He took a couple of steps towards me and extended the bag to me. I hesitated but took it. It was quite heavy. Was this a package for me or was I supposed to carry it for him?

He began to walk away from me towards the building with the broken door. The dog followed at his feet right behind him. I stood there not knowing what to do. I saw his left hand wave slightly. I recognized the wave. On earth it means come, follow me. I followed and we entered the building through the broken door and went all the way to the far end.

The man was closely followed by the dog and me about ten steps behind. He stopped in front of the metallic door, pulled something out from the chain around his neck and opened it. The dog was about to enter. He said something and the dog came out and sat to the side.

He pulled out what looked like a bucket full of water from the other side of the door and sat it beside the dog. The dog didn't drink. He looked at me and waved me to come closer.

He took the backpack from my hand, pulled something out, broke it in half and gave one half to the dog. The dog took it but instead of eating it, hid it under the woodpile. The man made a face, looked at me and waved for me to go inside.

He took my pipe and leaned it vertically outside the door. He walked in, closed the door and leaned his walking stick on the wall near the door. He pointed at something in the room that looked like a seat. I went there and sat down.

He took the backpack to another room and came back with a cube that looked like brownish red cheese and a flexible plastic bag full of a clear liquid which I figured was water. I remembered that bag; it was similar to the one the man gave me after the woman and the two men took me into their ship.

He went back to the back room and brought two cube glasses that looked like the jelly jar but smaller and without lids. He flicked the water bag with something and poured the water into the two glasses.

He then broke the cube that looked like cheese with his hands and gave me half. It was wrapped in a very thin plastic-like substance. He rolled the plastic back and took a bite. He then picked up the glass, raised it, said something and took a long gulp. I did the same. I guess we were having lunch late in the day.

The dried stuff that looked like cheese was actually processed meat and perhaps other stuff. It was quite good. I could have gulped this thing in seconds but I took my time biting small chunks and drinking water just like the man did.

We ate in silence and I thought perhaps that's how they ate here. I finished eating last. The man looked at me and said something. I didn't understand what he said so I stood there looking at him.

The man looked up at the ceiling, twirled his index finger and said something that sounded Arabic. No reaction from me. He then said something else which may have sounded like Hebrew. Still no reaction from me... He said something that sounded Indian, then Chinese....

Finally I got the courage to say, "I don't understand you!" in English and raised my arms up with hands open.

He made a face and shook his head.

This is useless I thought. He doesn't know my language and I don't know his. I decided to step outside and went and sat on top of the woodpile. The dog didn't follow me and neither did the man. I'm sure he was frustrated with me too.

I sat there and looked outside. It was getting dark and the birds were coming to roost and singing the same old song. Someone needs to teach them something new, I thought. But not today...

As I sat there contemplating my new misery I wondered if those languages the man spoke were truly earth languages. I understood his motions and hand gestures. They were almost the same as those on earth.

Who am I kidding I wondered. Earth languages...? Earth gestures...? This is another galaxy? My desires and logic of the inexplicable were colliding, making a mockery of everything I knew. I had almost convinced myself that this was a dream, a nightmare from which I was going to awaken.

But then, at the same time, I thought of the people who had kidnapped me. They'd visited earth. What were they doing there, observing us? They could have easily picked up our mannerisms, even words from our languages.

Suddenly I felt cold. The wood I was lying on was hard. Dream or not, I figured I'd better go down into the next room and get my clothes and things.

The well-washed coat would make an excellent mattress. My shirt and long pants should do to keep the cold away. I picked up the empty jar; it was exactly where I had left it. I went down to the next room, washed it and filled it with water, picked up my clothes and a full jar of jelly and put them on top of the woodpile.

I debated whether I should open the jelly jar or not. I voted for "no" but opened it anyway. I ate some, with the piece of wood, of course and felt much better. It tasted like a sweet dream.

The next thing I remember was waking up to the man's voice calling out. It was a raspy old voice, not very loud and very difficult to produce. Was he calling me or the dog? It was light outside. I must have slept through the entire night. I looked outside and noticed the birds had gone and the dog was nowhere to be seen.

I stood up, came down to the bottom of the woodpile and looked in the direction of the voice. The door was open and the man was standing in front of it. He saw me and waved and I waved back. He motioned for me to come towards him, left the door open and went

inside. I could hardly walk; my back and legs were stiff. I stepped into the room and closed the door behind me. I didn't want the dog to come inside. In fact I didn't see the dog at all that morning.

I sat in the same chair as the day before and waited for the man to show up. This time he brought a couple of glasses full of fruit juice and a block of white stuff. He broke the white block in half and gave me a piece. The fruit juice looked disgusting. It was red and full of dark green chunks. It looked like a blended version of the fruit I had picked outside.

I took a sip; it tasted just like the fruit. I took a bite of the white substance, it tasted like the condensed milk that came in cans back in Canada and was just as sweet. This time I finished eating first. I put my finger up to suggest "excuse me", ran out, up the woodpile and picked up the jelly jar with jelly in it, brought it back and put in on the table. I flipped the lid open.

The man looked at me and went into the back room, brought a couple of small clear square glass plates and a couple of tiny triangular spoons that looked like canoe paddles. He scooped some jelly from the jar and put it on the plates. He pushed one of the plates towards me.

I began to eat and he did the same. He was impressed with the taste I assumed because he made a face and shook his head with approval. He looked at me and spoke hesitantly because he remembered the last time he had spoken to me I had become frustrated and walked out.

He lifted his finger up, signaling me to wait, then went into the back and brought back a little black block with a clear shiny surface and something that looked like a keypad on the side with alien symbols. It looked funny. The symbols were alien to me. He then picked up the glass half full of juice, pointed to it and said a word. I was confused, was he talking about the glass or the juice. He must have sensed my confusion and ran back to the room and came back with an empty glass. He said the same word again. I shook my head in agreement and repeated it. He gave me a nod of approval. He did the same for several items on the table.

After waving his hand over the black block on the table he tapped a few keys and a glass appeared hovering over it. It was exactly the same kind and size as the glass on the table. He called it the same as before and pointed at me. I looked at it and reached over to take it. It was not a real glass; it was lights dancing on the surface of my hand.

He laughed out loud and tried to hide it so as not to embarrass me, I assumed. He seemed very patient and sympathetic. He tapped more buttons and a small clear square plate appeared. He looked at me and pointed at it.

I had already forgotten what it was called and in my frustration said, “Gospo da me chua, ovoi chovek ke me pukni!” in Macedonian. This is what some of the women in the village used to say when they were frustrated with their husbands, which roughly translates to “God protect me, this man will make me blow up!”

I was startled by his reaction; the man froze in space as if I had said some magic word to make him stop moving. He was frozen still and looked at me. I didn’t know what to do so, just like him, I stood there frozen. A very slow smile began to develop on his face. He opened his mouth wide. I could see his teeth and they looked disgustingly yellow. Then a loud raspy sound came out of his mouth.

“Makedonski ah? (Macedonian, eh?).”

It took me several seconds to realize what he had said. I then instinctively said, “Da, Makedonski!” (Yes, Macedonian.)

I grabbed my face with both hands and squeezed it. I stared at the man. He was not an alien anymore; he was my grandfather whom I had never met. I felt an instant connection between us. Wild thoughts ran through my mind. This was unbelievable!

He composed himself and in Macedonian said: “Finally a common language we can share.”

I didn't understand all the words he said but I understood enough to know what he meant. I sat there frozen in space and time and stared at him.

“What's the big deal; we have been to many planets and have learned the languages of many alien cultures,” he said.

I wanted to jump out of my chair and hug him. I had so many things to say to him and so many questions to ask but this is what came out of my mouth:

“Of all the Slavic languages spoken on my planet you chose to speak Macedonian, why?”

“I studied Macedonian years ago when I was a school boy, the kind of Macedonian that was spoken a long time ago. I studied it for historic and scientific purposes. I understood that Macedonian was the root of all Slavic languages, which meant it was one of the oldest languages in existence on your planet,” he replied and then went on to say. “Studying alien languages was a prerequisite for many students who wanted to be space explorers. I just wanted to study the ancient languages of your planet, that's all, no big deal...”

I looked at him and said, “It is a big deal for me because according to some people on my planet the Macedonian language doesn't exist. They claim it was somehow recently artificially created and we weren't allowed to speak it. I wasn't allowed to speak it where I was born so, you see, it is a big deal for me. Our enemies say it doesn't exist in its home where the language was born and yet it exists and is spoken out here, in a different galaxy... For me that's a big deal.”

“I am sorry, I didn't know that!” he said and added. “I can assure you from what I know the Macedonian language exists and it is a big deal and, like I said, it is the mother language of many countries and people on your planet. That's why I chose to study it.”

It seemed like he wanted to get off this topic and go on to another topic.

“I’m sure we have plenty of other things to discuss but where do we begin...? How about we start with you asking me questions and I will try and answer them,” he said.

The ball was in my court now and it felt like a heavy burden. Where do I begin?

Then, without thinking, I said, “I assume you knew about my presence here, how about I ask you questions about why I am here and how I got here. Let’s clear that out of the way first.”

“Excellent point. Yes, I did read all the reports on you and saw the... (a word I did not understand),” he said. “Please begin.”

“What was that creature I tangled with when I first met that woman back on earth? Who were those people who took me and how and why did they bring me here?” I asked.

“The creature you are referring to we call Karon, it comes from the planet Barkon. These creatures were created (I think he meant genetically engineered) by a race of people who lived on this planet. People’s materials (I think he meant genes) from this planet were combined with those of the planet’s local life forms to create workers (I think he meant slaves) capable of surviving on Barkon and serving the needs of our people. That planet had a lot of useful raw materials that we needed here to build our cities and civilization.

Then, about one thousand earth years ago, there was a devastating war between us and the two closest planets. After we achieved peace we abandoned all ideas of using the Karons and forced them out to stay on Barkon. Well, some politicians didn’t want them here because they were hard to control and not intelligent enough to know to stay out of trouble.

Since then our society had grown very complacent. One day people decided to get rid of all weapons. They argued that ‘if they didn’t exist, they couldn’t be used’. Peace is great if everyone follows the rules. They even disarmed our ships. The only ones that have weapons now are the border guards, the pirates and the criminals.

The people here have grown soft and arrogant. They have become non-carrying. The Karons need trade to survive. They sell their raw minerals and metals to buy food, of which we have plenty, but our politicians say no!

We no longer need their raw materials and don't want the Karons around. So, the Karons are forced to trade with the pirates, thieves, criminals and weapon's dealers. There are rumours that lately the Karons have been buying up our decommissioned freighters (I think he meant old space ships) and converting them to warships. But our politicians are saying the Karon's don't have the intelligence to repair, refurbish, or arm them.

Our politicians ignore the fact that the Karons can pay others, criminals, to do it for them. And even though we have no warships, except for the few small ones used by our security forces in space, our politicians feel we can protect ourselves because the Karons don't have the capacity to plan and carry out massive attacks. I hope they are right because I am afraid one day they will attack and it will be a disaster... for us."

He paused, took a deep breath, looked at me and said, "Forgive my absentmindedness, I don't even know your name. I am Voskot, the first born of three in my family. I am the chief science officer and leader of this planet's military... A planet which has no military."

"My friends call me Riki. I just finished school and was on my way to look for a job when I ended up here."

We shook hands and Voskot, whom I later began to call Vos, said, "I know it is customary to do this on your planet. Besides learning Macedonian in school I also studied your mannerisms, hand gestures and body language."

I noticed he didn't mention the other ancient earth languages he had studied. For some reason that made me happy, he emphasized my culture's importance. If that were the case then why hadn't he spoken Macedonian to me earlier when he spoke the other earth

languages? I didn't want to ask him. I was very happy, ecstatic, that he spoke Macedonian and knew about Macedonia.

Before I had a chance to open my mouth he started talking again. He said, "Riki means something awful in my language, what if I call you 'Otsiron' which means 'great friend' in my language, would that be okay with you?"

I motioned yes with my head. He understood and smiled.

He began talking again and said, "The woman that you ran into is Princess Anelia, the fourth of seven daughters of King Velion.

She took the science ship that brought you here without authorization and went to study the earth cultures in a place called Canada, where you were. But, unfortunately, she did it without permission. She was not authorized to study your people because she was not prepared for it.

She didn't know the languages spoken there or how to interact with the local people. Also, there were rumours that the Karons were looking to grab someone from the royal family to force the government in Ostikon, on this planet, to negotiate terms of trade with them.

Young Anelia ignored all the rules because she wanted to prove to her father that she was the most capable of her sisters and should be the next in line to rule Ostikon.

And then you happened and, from the visual reports I obtained from the ball that was flying over her, she appeared like a coward and you saved her life. However she denies that, she says she saved your life. She said she had to take you with her to stop the Karons from killing you. But the truth is, she took you because you had seen too much and if left alive it would have caused your planet irreparable damage.

So, you had to go, either die or be abducted. She knew you had saved her life and probably didn't have the heart to kill you, so she took you with her and hated you for what happened to her.

Had she left you there alive after what you saw, it would have been a death sentence for her, well not for her per se because she is a member of the royal family, but for an ordinary scientist.

We have strict rules about revealing secrets to alien species on other planets. Her punishment...? It wasn't much but she lost her father's favour and brought shame to the royal house.

But... none of this is your fault... As for the other two, the men, they were her aides, assistants, guards... Whatever you want to call them.”

He stopped talking and looked at me as though he felt sorry for me so I took the opportunity to ask him something that bothered me.

“Did I kill the Karon that attacked me and what was that policeman's whistle I heard all about?”

He looked at me with a puzzled look so I made the sound “frrrrr”. He understood but only because he knew that this was the call Karons made to locate one another.

He smiled and said: “No, you didn't kill the Karon, you just knocked it out. It was up and about in no time (an expression I had heard my grandmother say). They had to send guardians from the mother ship to hunt the two Karons down. They killed them and disposed of them. They had to be beheaded. That was the only way to put them out of their misery quickly without much suffering.

Unfortunately what happened there, the entire fiasco, became big news here on our three planets and on Barkon, the Karon planet. It was a big scandal. The Karons threatened to retaliate, if not on us here then on planet earth. In the visual report it looked like you had killed the Karon to save Anelia and that the earth people had conspired with her to do the Karon's harm. I tell you it was a mess.

The Karon's felt that you should have been killed for harming one of them. And if not for that, then you should have been killed for what you had seen. And they were right. The fact that you are alive

and here on Ostikon convinced not only the Karons but also some people on this planet that there was a conspiracy and that the royal family was in the middle of it.

Many said this was Anelia's doing. It was a real mess, the scandal refused to go away so, at the insistence of some politicians, the authorities were ordered to monitor your every move. They even had a flying ball (he meant a tiny drone) watch you day and night. The craziness exploded when the entire planet saw you kill that rare baby Aktap, an old protected and sacred species loved by everyone.

And when they saw you cutting it open? Oh, there were no words to describe their disgust. The only place they couldn't see you was inside the hole under that park (cave). But when they saw that degenerate drug junky (the woman with black veins) spend the night with you and you came out with the black mark of the aker (drug addict), you became more than just a monkey in the zoo.

Lucky for you there were reports that you were sick with an incurable virus and people were told to stay away, otherwise you could have been lynched.

King Velion had finally had enough of this nonsense and ordered Anelia to dispose of you. He also ordered the media to stop reporting on you. Instead of having you killed, Anelia brought you here.”

“You mean to tell me the entire planetary system saw me naked out there?” I asked.

“Yes!” he replied and then said. “Is that all that concerns you?”

“Who was that woman, the junkie, and why did she come to see me?” I asked.

“She is an outlaw, a renegade, and because of her habits of selling and using illegal substances she was sent to jail by King Velion. So, now she will do anything to bring harm to the royal family. She used you to make Anelia look bad. The black lines are a visible indication

of substance abuse of this particular poisonous fruit seed. It is very dangerous... ” he replied.

I scratched my head and said, “When the two men were bringing me to your planet off the mother ship all I saw was parks and fruit trees. Where are your cities, your buildings, your multitudes of people?”

He looked at me, shook his head and said, “Good question. After the long and devastating wars ended about one thousand earth years ago, before the peace treaties between the planets were signed, the people here feared another war would be coming and began to build their cities, factories, facilities, homes, transportation routes, etc., underground. Methods were developed to preserve food and store it underground. Space was at a premium and expensive so everything had to be built with efficiency in mind. Standards were adopted so that everything could be stored efficiently, standards we use to this day. Everything had to be packed tightly. This is why we have square jars, glasses and plates like the ones here on the table. Even the ogalb (jelly) we ate earlier was made to last. That stuff is over one hundred years old but tastes like it was made last season. It was made with natural products.

Many years ago people cared and worked hard to build a future for themselves. They built quality stuff that lasted for a thousand years. The underground structures have served us well and are still going strong. But since then we have become lazy and complacent. I will go as far as to say that we no longer care about anything. We live meaningless and pointless lives. We don’t know how to do anything anymore. We go on living like we did years ago. We don’t even know where our food comes from anymore. We got used to using preserved food and prefer it over fresh food. We think only wild animals eat food from the trees.

You asked me about all the fruit trees in the parks. Those trees were created (genetically engineered) and planted to provide food for us. In times of plenty we stockpiled food for many years in case of a war. We became used to eating from the stockpiles. Our machines (robots) go out to collect, process and store the food in storehouses. The only thing people know how to do now is take it out of the

storehouses, put in on the shelves and sell it. Where does it come from? Who cares!

Machines pick, machines clean and machines repair machines. Machines maintain our parks at night. There is nothing wrong with the fruit but people have become so accustomed to eating the processed stuff they are disgusted by the real stuff.

It's so primitive they say. Some people don't care where their food comes from. If they stop selling it in the stores they will starve.

I am going to be honest with you, when I saw you eat that fruit and kill that creature, I was sure you did so because you needed to eat, to survive. I kind of admired that because you have the spirit of a pioneer, an adventurer, something we lack here. You even had a fire inside that hole. I recognized the smoke, and you probably cooked and ate the Aktap for self-preservation. I don't think people here know what that means. When I heard the news that King Velion wanted to get rid of you, I contacted Anelia and asked her to bring you here to me. I wanted to study you."

Vos probably thought he had overstepped the line with all the things he had said, especially the part about studying me, so he apologetically said, "I'm sorry I talk too much. Do you have any more questions?"

I enjoyed listening to him talk, he made a lot of sense. His world didn't sound much different than mine. It also seems we had something in common; we were both complainers and blamed the establishment and others for things that were wrong in our lives.

I was lost in my own thoughts and didn't have my next question ready for him. He must have sensed that so he changed the subject and said:

"Perhaps I should give you some more information about my planet Ostikon. The city that you were brought to is the capital of Ostikon and is called Nirelon. This ancient and now abandoned city we are standing in is called Apserpon. My county's name is Nodekam. We have two suns around which our planetary system orbits, the yellow

sun is called Proteron and the silver one is called Belikon. Our three planets from the largest to the smallest are called Ostikon, Simbolon and Sredeon. This planet, because of its size, has the largest gravitational pull, about one and a quarter that of earth's..." but before he finished talking I interrupted him and asked:

"Is that why I have been feeling so heavy lately?"

"Yes!" he said and continued. "This city we are standing in now was abandoned years ago; it used to be an industrial complex. This is where a lot of research was done on energy weapons and space propulsion systems. In those days people lived above ground and worked underground. But after we were attacked everything went underground. This city was completely destroyed and the workers were killed. Those left alive simply left. The city was never rebuilt; it was completely abandoned. But this was many years ago. Most people today have forgotten what happened and those who know seem to think none of it matters... It's ancient history only for the historians to worry about."

Vos looked tired, disappointed and burnt out. It was time to change the subject.

"Vos," I said, "may I call you Vos?"

"Yes, by all means, I would like that," he replied.

"Vos, the little animal, outside, the one that looks like an earth dog, is that yours?" I asked.

"You are asking me about Sep, right? His name is Sep, a male Klovion. His kind was domesticated and bred for guarding houses when they were on the surface. The species is not from this planet. It was brought here from another planet. And since we have no houses now on the surface we used the creatures to guard our buildings, such as this one, and our farms. They keep intruders and destructive critters away. They are notorious killers and will eat anything they catch.

That reminds me, I didn't feed the little bugger this morning. If you don't feed them they are liable to turn on you, excuse me for a moment."

As Vos left the table I followed. We had been sitting down for hours. My legs felt stiff and sore and I had pains in my back. Even though I was much younger than him, I acted like I was older. It could have been the gravity. I stood by the door and when he came back from the other room I opened the door for him. He tossed something outside and it rolled away. I saw Sep scurry to catch it. We both watched him grab the block and run under the woodpile.

"He will eat it, don't worry, he must be very hungry by now," he said.

Why Vos told me that I don't know. I looked to the side and saw that Sep had been drinking water from the flat bucket.

"Vos, may I ask you a question, it's kind of personal," I asked.

"Ask away," he replied.

"May I ask how old you are?"

He looked up, closed one eye, paused for a few moments, enough to make me feel uncomfortable and said, "Approximately 106 of your earth years."

I was about to say, wow that's old but I caught myself and instead said, "Thank you."

He didn't ask me how old I was and I didn't tell him. But I thought somehow he knew.

"How would you like to go outside?" he asked and added. "You won't need that."

I was reaching for the pipe leaning against the wall when he said that. I don't know how he knew I was reaching for it because he couldn't see me. He didn't take his walking stick either.

“I would love to go outside,” I replied.

He led the way walking very slowly and I followed behind. He looked at the top of the woodpile and noticed my clothes there. He didn’t say anything. We came out of the big door. He looked at it and made a face.

“Maybe it’s time to get this fixed,” he said.

I didn’t respond. We both stepped outside. He closed his eyes and faced the sun. It looked like it was almost midday. I pushed back my shirt sleeve and looked at my watch as if that was going to tell me what time it was.

Vos saw my watch and said, “That is a nice piece of machinery, I used to have one like it. It was given to me as a gift for being a good student. It’s in a museum somewhere now. It was probably brought here from your planet.”

I didn’t know what to say so I didn’t respond. We both turned around and went to the side of the building.

Vos raised his arm, pointed and said, “See that tree over there, that’s my tree. It’s as old as me. My father planted it there when I was born. Everything around it went to ruins but the tree survived... like me,” he said.

“Yes, I see it,” I said. “I was out here earlier and admired it too. I even ate some of its fruit. It was delicious,” I said taking a chance that I might offend him by eating the fruit without permission.

“Ah, how wonderful!” he said and added. “Most people today would be disgusted by its fruit, especially the younger ones, but wouldn’t hesitate to eat processed fruit. The juice you drank this morning was squeezed (I think he meant to say it was run through a blender) from its fruit.”

“Yes, I thought so, it was very nice,” I replied.

He saw me looking at the piles and piles of bird droppings and said, “They were made by a rare kind of bird that talks. The birds only sleep here now. They fly all day hunting for insects and return here at night to sleep. I like them. I allow them to stay. They keep me company. I don’t feel alone at night. They used to talk but now they have stopped.”

“They spoke to me. I yelled at them the first night I was here. I saw shadows of them in the night and I yelled ‘who is there’ in English and all night long and every night after that they have been chirping ‘who is there’, ‘who is there.’...”

He shook his head several times, tightened his lips and said, “It’s wonderful to hear that; you are now one of us.”

I don’t know what he meant by that. I didn’t respond. He then reached up, picked off a fruit and gave it to me. He then picked another one and held it in his hand. We looked at each other and stood there...

Finally I said, “It is customary in Macedonia for the host to start eating first.”

To my surprise he cracked up laughing loudly. Sep ran towards us with all his might and sat next to him. He ignored me as if I wasn’t there. Watching Vos laugh made me laugh. There was no reason for me to laugh but I kept laughing, making him laugh even more.

“I love that,” he said. “I haven’t laughed like this for a long time.”

It was good to be alive, I thought, despite the circumstances.

He bit the fruit with his yellowed teeth and I did the same.

“Let’s go inside,” he said, “we have a lot to discuss, but first we should eat.”

He put his hand on my shoulder and motioned for me to go ahead. I walked slowly and he followed and after him Sep followed. The

door wasn't locked so I opened it. He went inside and motioned to Sep to stay there.

I went back to my seat. He cleared the table. He had to go back a couple of times. I was about to stand up, I wanted to help, but he motioned for me to sit. He brought a couple of empty glasses and a clear bag of water. He then went back and brought a block of the purplish red stuff, broke it in half and gave me a piece. He poured the water into the square glasses.

He then looked at me, smiled and said, "I suppose the host has to start eating first," and then rolled the plastic back and took a bite from his block of dry food.

Before we finished eating he said, "I must seem like a hypocrite to you, eating processed food, for which I criticize others. Forgive me but I have nothing else to offer."

"No problem, I understand," I said.

He then went on to say, "One good thing about these dry slabs of food, besides lasting forever, they have all the vitamins, salts and irons (he meant minerals) that we need to survive. They were added after the food was processed. The water too is processed to remove living organisms (he meant bacteria) before it's packaged."

"You do have running water in the building," I said. "I've been drinking it for a couple of days. It's not a lot but enough for drinking, washing dishes and having a shower."

The man looked surprised and said, "This is a miracle. There has been no running water here for years. The water dried up at the source a long time ago during the dust storms and the pumps haven't been working ever since. I think they are broken. Are you sure there is water in here? It's a miracle indeed. Thank you. You are a good omen, a saviour. I had to bring water from the city, carry it on my back."

"When I went into the other room, over the woodpile, I found running water in the fountain with the two spouts. I then figured out

how to make one of the showers work. Then I made a sink and a toilet work. I thought you always had running water back there. But there is no pressure.” I paused for a moment and said, “Why a fountain with two spouts side by side?”

Vos laughed out loud and said, “That fountain was not for drinking, it was for washing eyes. The work done down here was dangerous and if toxic materials spilled on a worker’s face, they ran to the fountain to quickly wash it off, especially from their eyes. The fountain had to run at all times.”

“Ah, now I understand,” I said and asked, “what about all the brown dust everywhere? Why so much dust? You mentioned dust storms, was the dust from the dust storms? What happened?”

“The dust storms took place recently, about eight years ago. The government scientists were experimenting with putting clouds up in the sky so that they could control the weather but, up here in Apserpon, something went wrong. There was no rain for a couple of years. They tried to fix it and made it worse. Big winds were raised and blew for months. Everything was buried in dust. It was carried from the deserted farms beyond the valley and dumped everywhere. The king ordered the experiments to stop and over time the winds subsided and things returned to normal. Only the large trees with big roots survived. Everything else dried up. Thanks to Mother Nature my tree survived. It turned out to be a lot more durable than I thought. But since then its fruits have been smaller and much darker. But all in all I guess the climate in this region is slowly returning to normal,” he replied.

“I noticed it rained like clockwork in Nirelon, every second day or so at about the same time. Was that part of the same experiment?” I asked.

“No, no, the weather here has been controlled for years, but sometimes it goes out of whack and needs resetting,” he said and then asked me to go with him into the next room. He pointed to a tap with a single handle and said, “This is the source of my water (he meant the tap) in here and, as you can see, it doesn’t work. Can you make it work?”

I shook my head and grabbed the handle. I tried to twist it, push it, pull it, but nothing. I looked around for something to whack it with. There was nothing there. I opened a cupboard. Nothing! Everything there was made of glass and nicely stacked. Three sets of glasses with five glasses each, three sets of plates with five plates each. No bowls, no pans and no pots, only two juice pitchers, also square. I ran outside over the woodpile and into the other room. I looked at the fountain, it was still flowing. I looked around and found the piece of metal I had used to whack the shower head. I dashed back and found Vos waiting for me at the door.

We both went back to the tap. I raised the block of metal and began to gently tap the handle on the top. I then twisted it with my hand but nothing happened. I looked at Vos, he was motioning for me to tap front and back, front and back. I tapped it on the back and then the front. I could feel it loosening. I did it again but very gently. I then used my hand and worked the handle back and forth very gently. Vos kept watching me with much interest.

After a few minutes of working at it a black liquid began to drip. I kept pushing and pulling until a stream of water began to flow. I kept turning it on and off until the handle felt easy to work. I moved away and pointed at the handle. Vos swung it back and water flowed, he swung it forward and the water stopped flowing. There was a big smile on his face and he looked like a child with a new toy.

“I don’t know what to say my friend, you just restored my faith in humanity. I don’t know how to thank you.”

“All I did was make a rusty tap work,” I said.

These people were capable of making flying machines that could travel at “warp speed”, if I can borrow a term from Star Trek, and here was this man impressed with me kick starting a kitchen tap? How low had this world fallen?

“I am impressed with your initiative and ability to take charge,” he said. “It’s something my people aren’t willing to do. With them it’s

always someone else's problem, someone else's fault." He then looked at me and said, "If you don't have any more questions I want to take you for a tour. But first I want to show you your accommodations, I don't want you to sleep on those hard boards anymore."

I said, "I had no more questions for now and would love to explore this place, but could we do it tomorrow? Every part of my body hurts. It must be the gravity on this planet."

"Of course!" he said and grabbed two glasses from the cupboard and handed me one. We both had a drink of water from the tap and Vos said, "Ah, this is nice!"

He walked away and I followed. We went through a door on the right, down a hall and to the first door on the right. He opened it and said, "You can sleep in here." He then went to another hallway, turned right and said, "This leads to the outside, past the fence. From there you can see the valley. You can go on the hill above, if you want to be alone. The sunset looks pretty good from up there."

"Thank you, I will see you tomorrow," I said and went outside.

A tour of the Apserpon facilities

I went outside and up the hill. The valley behind me looked beautiful. I later found out from Vos that this was where the ancient city had been located. There was nothing left of it now. On the other side, what we on earth would call the west, the yellow sun was about to set. The silver sun was already up but was still dominated by the yellow sun. It was a wonderful sight. For the first time I could see the valley beyond the tree line. It was vast and beautiful.

Vos must have gone back inside. I guess he wanted me to have this moment to myself, to experience it alone. I was empty of thoughts for the first time in a long time. It felt great to be alive watching the sun set and feeling the cool breeze conquering the stifling heat.

It was good to be alive indeed. If only one had the power to turn off their mind, their worries, their fears and inhibitions... they could enjoy this immensely. Life indeed could be good. There was everything one would ever need here. It was within my grasp. Would I be able to live here happily and not become lonely and cynical... I wondered? Only if I cared for nothing, I concluded.

The sun was setting and the dark was winning over the light. It was something I had experienced back in my village. I wasn't afraid of the dark there, so why should I be afraid of it here! I was going to stay out here as long as my heart desired.

After the yellow sun set, Apserpon became a different world. It willingly surrendered to the black and white but nothing physical had changed. There were the same facilities, the same hill, the same trees, the same valley and the same fence. The only difference was that they looked black and white now. There was nothing there. No big monsters, no dinosaurs only the silver sun looking as mysterious as ever and tugging at my heart.

I heard a rustle and then footsteps. The hair on the back of my neck rose. It was Sep, he had come to visit me. He sat quietly beside me. Maybe, in the semi-dark of night he thought I was Vos. I lay on my back and looked up into the sky searching for stars. There were none. The silver sun dominated the sky and pushed everything away

into the dark. It kept pulling my eyes towards it like a magnet. God, it was beautiful, I thought. It had its own magic. It was mysterious and all alone. I was alone. A feeling of loneliness tugged at my heart. I was alone. Sights merged with thoughts, thoughts merged with dreams and everything disappeared.

A cool breeze blew over my face. I heard Sep shiver and make a sound. I opened my eyes. The silver was melting and merging with the gold. I jumped to my feet and ran up the hill. Sep followed. I took all my clothes off. It was cold. I turned and faced east; on earth we called it east. I looked away as far as the eye could see and witnessed the birth of a new day. I looked directly into the emerging globe of yellow fire for as long as I could see. The first rays of the yellow sun blinded me. I closed my eyes. My world was now pure gold; that is all that my shut eyes could see. I felt warm all over and understood the magic of the caveman. I heard a voice calling.

“I’m up here!” I yelled.

Sep bolted and ran to his old master. “Was Vos calling me or him?” I wondered. I put my clothes back on and went down.

Vos was there in front of the open door waiting. “Did you sleep out there?” he asked.

“Yes I did.”

“Did you sleep well?” he asked.

“I think so.”

“Come on in, we’ll have breakfast and go for that tour I promised you,” he said.

By the time I got inside he had the table set. I sat at the same place and we ate some of the white stuff and a small plate of jelly. Instead of juice we had tea, or a liquid that looked like tea. It was warm and sweet with a nice aroma which I could not identify.

Vos said, “Since we have water now we can afford to drink tea.”

Yes, he called it tea. I said thank you and finished drinking it quickly like it was juice. He took his time. I helped him carry the dishes to the other room and washed and set them out to dry. He didn't have machines to do the manual work, he preferred doing it himself. That's what he said.

"Come now," he said and walked down the hallway, past the door to where I was supposed to sleep and down a long set of stairs. He pulled a large medallion the size of a policeman's badge from inside the neck of his shirt. It was hanging on a chain around his neck. He placed it against a metallic box on the wall and pushed it in. The door clicked open. It was dark inside. He did something inside the room and the lights came on. The place looked very busy with gadgets. There were all sorts of things hanging from the walls including clothing that looked like uniforms as well as weapons of all kinds.

"They all work you know," he said when he saw me looking at the guns.

"I thought you said all weapons were banned here?"

He smiled and said, "Yes it's true, but this is a museum and these are genuine museum articles, genuine to me means real and working. Yes, by all means pick them up, touch them, feel them, they are not loaded," he added.

"Thank you, you must have read my mind," I replied.

He went on telling me stories about each weapon that I picked up and how and when it was used. This was an energy weapon; that was a hot gas weapon he would say with great enthusiasm. He sure knew his weapons.

"The ammunition is locked in those cabinets over there and you need this key (his badge) to open them," he said and added. "Maybe later or another day we can take one of these rifles out and fire it. We can go out there beyond the hill. You know, and even hunt something... cook it outdoors. What do you think?"

I thought for a moment and said, “That would be fine with me if you think we won’t get into any trouble?”

He didn’t reply.

This was the first time that I saw the letters of their language written on parchments sealed in glass.

“These are ancient letters. They are the same as we use today but these were written a long time ago. They are chronicles of our ancient wisdom on various subjects, including warfare,” he said and added. “They are illegal just like the weapons because some people think they can incite violence. They can only exist in private museums like this one. My great, great, great grandfather wrote this one here. See his mark (badge), I carry this mark (badge) today. It was our family tradition as warriors. I am the first born son of this generation in my family and that privilege has fallen upon me. But I never married and have no heir, no son to pass it on to. I’m afraid our long line of warriors is going to die with me.”

I didn’t say anything. I felt the subject was too personal for him. What could I possibly say?

He must have sensed my uneasiness and said, “Enough of this nonsense, let’s come back another time, if you want. Now let’s go out, pick some fruit, get some water, go up the hill and sit in the shade. What do you think?”

I nodded yes. I could see that he had a passion for the stuff in the museum, but outside of the weapons I had no interest in anything else, his history was meaningless to me and I could only take so much at one time.

He turned off the lights and pulled the door shut. I walked ahead of him and went back to the table and sat in the usual chair. He went to the other room and picked up his backpack and brought it over.

“What do you prefer to eat (lunch), the white stuff or the dark stuff?”

I pointed to the dark stuff.

“Me too...” he said and pulled out a couple of bags of water.

“Why not save the packaged water for emergencies, in case the tap water runs out,” I suggested and added. “We should fill the jelly jars with tap water and take them with us.”

“But we only have one jar,” he replied.

I raised my finger and ran outside, up the woodpile and grabbed the other jar. I quickly scurried back, emptied the water into the sink, rinsed it and filled it with tap water. When I returned I found him finishing the jelly from the other jar.

“I hope you don’t mind.”

I smiled, took the jar washed it and filled it with water. “Now we have tap water,” I said.

“We need to put the fruit in something, what do you suggest?” he asked.

My first instinct was to say in the backpack. I had no idea what people here put their fresh fruit in to carry with them. I thought of a plastic shopping bag but I didn’t believe they had any here. But this reminded me of the water bags, they were about a litre each and we had two empty ones.

“How about we use the empty water bags, do you still have them?”

He smiled and said, “Very good, I still have them. Let me get them.”

When he returned I got out my pocket knife and split the cut end open all the way.

“That’s a handy device you have there. I had one similar to it when I was young and had to give it up when they were banned,” he said.

“What do you do with the empty, discarded plastic bags and wrappers?” I asked.

“We send them back to the store for a refund. It is mandatory to do that or there will be stiff fines if we discard them. We are very vigilant about that. We have been trained since we were very young not to litter and to conserve. I think they melt them down and re-use them... I think.”

He went back into the other room and came back with a couple of cloth pouches that could be carried over the shoulder. He handed me one. I watched him put his cube, water and plastic bag in it and then put it over his shoulder. I did the same and we left through the front door. He picked up his walking stick and proceeded on his way out. I pulled the door shut and followed. I didn't take my dog repellent pipe. I felt I no longer needed it.

We walked around the building and stopped under the tree, his tree. I pulled out my plastic bag and handed it to him. He put eight fruits in it. He did the same with his bag.

We placed our bags of fruit in our pouches and began the trek up the hill.

“Many people find this fruit too sweet and won't eat it but I love it. I will never tire of its aroma and sweetness,” he said.

I picked one fruit out of the bag, looked at it and said, “I love them too, they remind me of the black figs we used to eat back in the village where I come from. They didn't have a strong aroma but had the same sweetness when they were fully ripe.”

He didn't say anything.

We kept walking along the fence and then we turned right and began to climb up the hill.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Please do!” he replied.

“I noticed you had flowering plants and fruiting plants in the parks at the same time. How is that even possible? We on earth have seasons and our trees flower in the spring and have mature fruit in the fall.”

He stopped walking, turned around and took a deep breath. Had I said something to upset him or was he getting tired from walking uphill?

“As you know, your planet tilts to give you the four seasons, ours doesn’t, well it only tilts very little and because of that we have only one season. Let me put it this way, it’s always summer around the equator, spring or fall and winter further away towards the poles. Each tree has its own cycle of flowering and fruiting depending on when it was planted. This way we always have flowers and fruit at the same time. Not from the same tree of course but from the same variety of tree. We have all kinds of trees, mostly hybrids created (genetically engineered) to thrive in this climate. And as you saw, we control the climate so that they can get plenty of water from the rain. We also control the wind because strong winds can be disastrous for the large fruits. It’s a perfect environment,” he said and resumed walking uphill.

I thanked him for the explanation and followed behind. Sep caught up to us.

Vos stopped, leaned on his walking stick while holding it tight with both hands, looked up towards the top of the hill and said, “It’s a shame what happened here. All the small trees dried during the great drought. All the children are dead. It’s now an old hill without children, just like me...” He paused for a moment and said, “Come, come let us go and sit on the rock under that big tree.”

I didn’t reply. I had nothing to say. I felt sad for him but what could I say?

The sun was burning hot but there was a fine breeze here which made the heat bearable and even comfortable in the shade. After we cleaned the leaves off the rock we sat on it like it was a bench. Vos

looked into the distance holding his walking stick in front of him with both hands. Sep curled around Vos's feet and lay down with confidence like he had done this hundreds of times.

"It's beautiful here," Vos said. "I can imagine it was even more beautiful when Apserpon was in its full glory before the wars. I spent many days here with my father and grandfather. We sat here on this rock and imagined what kind of city this would have been if the wars had never happened. We all vowed we would never allow this to happen again. But! But our governments had different ideas... They decided to abolish the military and we became generals without armies. Armies, they said, were expensive and we didn't need them. I can feel it in my bones that something bad will happen but no one is willing to listen to me. I want you to give me your honest opinion, what do you think I should do? More importantly what would you do if you were in my position?"

This was a question I never expected would be asked of me. Not in a million years would I have thought that an alien would ask me in my language, in Macedonian, what I would do if I were in his position. And yet, here we were, the question was asked.

"I honestly don't know. But if it came to Macedonia, my country, I would do everything possible to make things right. Unfortunately, I am in a similar situation as you, I have the right but I don't have the might. And if there's one thing I learned back home, if you don't have the might you don't have the right." I have no idea what made me say that but there... I had said it.

"Well, what if you had the might, what would you do?" he asked.

"I would do the right thing and reclaim what's mine. Macedonia belongs to the Macedonian people and no one else... period. I would make that very clear to anyone who stands in the way. That's how I feel!" I replied.

"I share your passion; I feel the same way..." he replied. Focusing his eyes into the distance he said, "It's beautiful out there, isn't it. Why don't we go exploring out there tomorrow and while we are there, do some old fashioned hunting..."

I took a while to respond but eventually I said, “I would love that!” Why I said that I don’t know. I guess it was better than moping around and, who knows, we might hunt something delicious to eat?

This prompted me to ask, “What kind of game is out there? What can we hunt?”

He replied with several names which I did not recognize.

Eventually he said, “I will show you when we get back down.”

We both got off the rock hard seat that we were sitting on and lay down on the dry grass.

It was as if we were both inebriated, which prompted me to ask, “Do you have whisky, wine or beer here?”

He shook his head not understanding what I was asking.

I thought for a moment and said, “Rakia, do you have rakia here?”

He giggled like a little girl and said, “I understand what you are saying but those kinds of drinks are prohibited here. They were outlawed a long time ago. We used to buy them from the pirates illegally when I was young but they are not available here anymore. The government frowns upon those breaking the law.”

I then asked, “Would you drink that stuff if it was available?”

He replied with a resounding “Yes!”

“I will make some then!”

He was so surprised he opened his mouth wide and said, “You can do that?”

“Yes I can and I will!”

We lay there on the ground looking up for what seemed like hours and then I heard Vos say, "Shall we eat?"

"Yes!" I replied.

I was used to eating fast and could have eaten everything we had in a matter of a couple of minutes but I paced myself. When we were done we both had one thing in mind. Go back down and plan the hunt for the next day. I wondered what quarry we were going to hunt and with what kind of weapon.

"Shall we go back down and see what we can do for tomorrow?" he asked.

"Yes, let's. You read my mind."

We scurried down quickly and stopped by Vos's tree. Sep ran past us and disappeared. Vos picked some more fruit and filled the plastic bags.

"For later!" he said and we went back to the room.

I sat on the same seat. Vos sat on the opposite side, fiddled with the little black block and a bird appeared over it slowly spinning.

"Here is the quarry we are going to hunt tomorrow. If not that then this... Or this..." he added while showing me holograms of the local birds.

They all looked alien to me, I had never seen them before.

He then enthusiastically said, "Let's check out the weapons and see which one is the best for this type of hunt."

I agreed.

We went back to his museum and started going through the arsenal.

I kept asking, "What is this and how does it work?" as I looked at each rifle separately. I finally came to understand that there were

two types of weapons; the energy weapons and the hot gas weapons. The energy weapons were useless for long distance on the surface of the planet because once the energy hit the atmosphere it would quickly fizzle out. The energy weapons were great for outer space but useless on the surface. We then began to look at the hot gas weapons that fired projectiles. But almost every single one was very powerful and designed to penetrate stone and thick metal, useless for hunting.

We were about to give up when Vos mentioned he had some more junk in a cabinet and insisted that we look at it too. After he flung the door open I began rummaging through the various barrels and surprise, surprise, I found an earth weapon, a 22 caliber rifle and beside it sat a box full of 500 shells. It looked very old but was beautifully made with the butt made of walnut. Beside it was an old cleaning kit with a rope, thin square cloths and a small can of oil.

I pulled the rifle out and yelled, “Look what I found?”

Vos looked at me with a puzzled look and said, “That piece of straw? What could you possibly do with that? Scratch the quarry?”

He was right. In power compared to the other rifles it was a toothpick among spears, but unless the critters here had super power I was confident we could bring them down easily. The 22 even had a scope and if it was set properly I could shoot a small coin from 50 metres.

“This is an earth weapon,” I explained. “I’ve used one just like it before and I assure you it will do the job and quietly.”

“I trust your judgment. And since you know how to use it you get to make the first kill. Then you can teach me how to use it. I am supposed to be an expert on weapons but I have never used one of those,” he added.

I smiled and said, “Thank you, I will be happy to show you...” I was going to say, “and I won’t disappoint you,” but I wasn’t that confident. Instead I said, “We should clean and test it before we go out.”

“Grab some shells and let’s go outside.”

I grabbed the cleaning kit and a row of shells and followed him.

We went past the front door to the gate. On the way Vos picked up a plank from the woodpile, I think it was hardwood, walked over to the far side, placed it against the fence, drew a circle on it with some black dirt and said, “Aim for the circle.”

“I need to inspect the rifle first,” I said.

He agreed.

I looked at it from end to end. There was no rust but it was covered with grease that had dried. I removed the mechanism with the firing pin and looked at it. It was clean. I smudged some oil on it and spread it thin with a small piece of cloth. I raised the barrel towards the sun and looked through it. It too was clean. I threaded the small piece of cloth through a slit on the end of the rope. Then I picked up the long piece of metal that looked like a brass bullet attached to the other end of the rope and slipped it into the back end of the barrel. I tilted the barrel down and let gravity pull the rope through the rifle barrel. I then pulled the rope from the front end allowing the oily cloth to pass right through to oil the inside of the barrel. I rubbed the oily cloth against the entire rifle surface and put the firing pin back. Vos kept watching me.

When I was done he asked, “Are you sure you have never been a soldier?”

I smiled.

I took 20 steps back, loaded the rifle with a single shell, released the safety, took aim and fired. “Crack!” Sep took off like a shot and hid inside.

Vos looked at me and asked, “Is that it?”

“That’s it; I told you it was quiet. Now let’s have a look if the aim was correct and what damage it did to the wood.”

We walked over to the board and Vos grabbed it.

“I’ll be damned!” he said. “Not only is the aim perfect but that little bullet penetrated the surface of this hardwood board!” He grabbed the rifle out of my hand and said, “I’ve changed my mind, I want to take a practice shot now. Show me how to load it and how to shoot.”

With much enthusiasm I said okay and showed him how to do it. He took a shot and came even closer to the centre of the circle than me. When he saw how well he had done he was like a child filled with joy.

“Let’s save our excitement for tomorrow,” I said.

He agreed.

“Before we retire I’d like to collect and crush some fruit so that it can ferment. Would you happen to have a bucket or something large I can put it in? Don’t worry I’ll pick the fruit from the ground.”

He thought for a moment and asked, “Does it need to be covered?”

“Yes so that flies don’t get in it.”

“I have the perfect thing for you.” He went inside and came back with what looked like a 20 litre, hard plastic bucket and a lid.

I thanked him, took the bucket to the big room with the fountain, washed it and the lid, and then took it outside. The ground under the tree was littered with soft, fermenting fruit dripping with juice. I made a motion with my hand and the little wasps took off. I picked the fruit, one, two or three at a time and put them inside the bucket, crushed them in my hand and dropped them to the bottom. It took me hours but I filled the bucket three quarters full. After watching me for a couple of minutes Vos was bored and went inside to, as he said, “play his favourite game”, which he promised to show me another time.

Before leaving he shook his head and said, “If this works it will be another miracle.”

I put the lid on the bucket, carried it inside and set it on the bench nearest to the fountain. I then went outside, found a dead branch, cleaned the loose bark with my pocket knife, brought it inside and stirred the crushed fruit. I put the lid on the bucket making sure it was not too tight so that it could breathe, placed a small rock on top to hold it in place and left. After that I went back outside to the tree where I was joined by Vos.

“Did you make it?” he asked and before I had a chance to answer he said. “You did a nice job cleaning up the rotting fruit, thank you.”

“I used the fermenting fruit for the brew and it should take about three weeks before the sugar in it turns to rakia (alcohol). We have to be patient.”

He again made a face, shook his head and laughed out loud at the mention of rakia. Why? I don’t know and I didn’t ask.

The yellow sun had not yet set but both of us seemed to be tired so I said goodnight and went to try my new bed indoors. I turned off the lights; I had finally found out how. I closed the door and sank into my bed. The room was very dark and quiet.

Hunt for the Akioson

I jumped off the bed when I heard a knock on the door. It was dark and I didn't know where I was.

"It's almost dawn and time to go hunting," I heard a voice yell.

"I'll be right out!" I heard myself say and then realized where I was. I was naked. This was the first night that I hadn't slept with my clothes on. Doing up the buttons of my shirt took the longest for me in dressing, otherwise I was flying just like a soldier. I made sure I had my lighter and pocket knife in my shirt pocket and put my watch on. I don't know why I carried my watch around but I did. It was useless here and I should have left it in Vos's museum or something.

By the time I stepped out Vos was standing in front of my door with the pouches and the rifle over his shoulder. He was excited when I greeted him. He was wearing camouflage overalls and a camouflage hat.

"Do you have the bullets?" I asked.

He tapped his pants pocket and began to walk towards the door. He opened the door and there was Sep, glad to see us. Vos handed me the rifle and half a dozen bullets and then picked up his walking stick. He took the lead with Sep beside him and I followed three or four steps behind. The birds were still perched on top of the terrace. They were quiet but the moment they saw us they flew off and began to chirp "Who is there!" Vos smiled and looked happy. His birds were talking again.

Instead of going up the hill like before, Vos continued walking straight along the flat part of the valley where the houses and farms used to be. We walked in silence for what seemed to be a couple of kilometres. Vos stopped to catch his breath.

He lifted his walking stick, pointed to the left side and said, "See that brook up there? There is a water spring to the left of the brook

about halfway up. That's where our water comes from. It used to be plentiful before the drought."

I looked up and shook my head in approval. We resumed the walk. I looked behind us. The valley below and the facilities were already bathing in the first rays of the yellow sun.

We reached a grove of very tall trees. Vos stopped walking, turned around and said, "We have reached our hunting grounds. We now have to keep quiet as we go through and listen and look up for the Akioson. Get your rifle ready."

I gave him the okay signal, put a bullet in the rifle, set the safety on and took the lead. About ten metres into the grove, I saw Vos point up to a tree on my right. I looked up but saw nothing. I then heard the shrill call of the bird. I spotted it. I very slowly raised the rifle and took aim. I lowered the safety making sure it didn't click, checked my aim again and slowly pulled the trigger. The bang echoed in the grove and on the adjacent hill. And then "plop". The bird was on the ground and Sep was all over it. He tried to drag it away but Vos caught up to him, raised his walking stick and Sep dropped it. I had never seen Vos move so fast.

But almost immediately he looked tired and unsure. Was he sorry for the kill?

He brought the bird back, looked down and said, "Thank you Mother Nature for providing us with this food. We shall use it to nourish ourselves and we will not be wasteful!" He then handed it to me and said, "Do your thing and let me know what you need from me," and walked away.

"We can't cook it here, we don't have water. We'll need to wash the meat and our hands. Besides, there is no dry wood here except for small dead trees but we have plenty in the facilities."

Vos agreed and we started our trek back. I cut off the bird's head and carried it upside down so that the blood could flow out of it.

When we arrived at the facilities we went into the room with the water fountain from the side door. We left Sep outside. Vos promised him he would bring him some meat later.

The first thing Vos noticed was how clean the bench surfaces were. “Great job!” he said.

After he looked around I asked, “Do you have another bucket like that one?”

Pointing to the bucket that was resting on the bench he said, “We have a lot of those but few lids.”

“I don’t need a lid, just a bucket.”

He was back in no time with a bucket in his hand.

I blocked the spouts on the fountain with the wooden plugs I had made earlier and waited for the shower to start running. Vos looked on with fascination. I placed the bird under the shower and looked at him.

He shook his head and said, “You never fail to amaze me. Fascinating! How in Mother Nature’s name did you ever figure out how to make the water come out of the shower? I mean making the shower work by plugging the fountain?”

“You would be surprised by what you can do when you have to survive,” I said and, so as not to sound mysterious, I added. “This trick I discovered purely by accident.”

When the bird was completely soaked I took the bucket and put it on the floor next to the bench. I took away the bucket of fermenting fruit from this bench and put it on top of the next bench. Vos motioned me to open it, he wanted to look inside. When I did the bucket was full to the lid.

“Did you add more fruit?” he asked.

“No,” I replied. “When the juice ferments gasses build up and push the skins and chunks up. It has already started to ferment.”

I then stirred it with the branch I had used the day before, put the lid back on top and placed the rock on top of the lid and said. “It needs to be stirred every day to submerge the fruit chunks; that’s where most of the sugar is.”

After that I went back to the shower, picked up the dripping bird by its legs and put it on top of the bench.

“Why did you have to wet it?” he asked.

“Ordinarily the bird should be soaked in boiling hot water but since we have none cold water will have to do. The water makes pulling the feathers easier. They also clump together and it’s less of a mess to pluck them,” I replied.

He accepted my explanation without commenting.

Vos stood opposite me on the other side of the bench and watched me pull feathers out and toss them into the bucket. I must have looked like a caveman, or maybe a barbarian. At least that’s how I felt. When I was done pulling feathers I cleaned the mess off the bench, washed the bird in the shower, brought it back and put it on top of the bench, washed my hands, took my pocket knife out and began to cut the bird’s guts open. I poked a hole closest to the bird’s breast on the underbelly, put my two fingers into it to push the innards away from the knife blade and proceeded to cut right down to the bird’s anus. I then scooped everything out with my hand and placed them on the table.

I knew this question was coming so I said, “You don’t want to cut the intestines or the gallbladder, especially the gallbladder, it’s really bitter.”

Vos shook his head with both admiration and disgust. I then separated the heart and liver from the rest of the innards and set them aside. I tossed everything else into the bucket. I carefully removed the gallbladder from the liver and tossed it into the bucket.

“My people have been far detached from this sort of thing and will never do this even if their lives depend on it,” said Vos.

I didn't reply but I thought that Vos was probably talking about himself.

I took the bird and the innards, washed them under the shower and put them on a clean part of the bench. I then cut around the dead bird's legs, snapped them to break them and then cut them off. I saw Vos flinch.

I put them on the table and said, “If you want, you can give these to Sep.”

He took them and was out of there like a flash. He waited for me outside. I left the bird and innards on the bench and went outside to decide how to cook it.

Vos saw me and said, “Sep loved the legs.” He paused for a moment and said, “What do you want me to do?” He sounded a bit distant.

I wasn't sure if he still wanted to cook the bird so I said, “We have no other means of preparing the bird except to roast it in an open pit. Is that allowed and can we do that here?”

He hesitated for a moment. I was sure he was going to say let's bury the damn thing and abandon this entire idea but instead he said, “By all means, let's roast the bird...”

I shook my head in agreement.

I looked around and said, “We should make a pit right here in the centre of the yard. Clean all the leaves, grass and sticks and circle it with stones. Do you have a shovel?”

He didn't know what a shovel was. I looked around and found a long piece of metal. I used it and scraped the soil clean in a circular shape about three metres in diameter. When I began to gather rocks for the pit, Vos joined me. Sep supervised us constantly looking at

Vos's hands. Perhaps for another handout...? It took no time before we had our firepit built.

It was noon by now and Vos went inside to get us some food and water. He came out with the pouches we had taken with us hunting earlier in the morning. But there was nowhere to sit and eat. I had an idea. I asked Vos if he had any more of those buckets. He asked what for and I told him to make stools to sit on.

"Come with me and take your pouch with you because Sep will tear it apart to get to the food," he said.

We walked about half the distance of the big room and there on the left side, behind a pile of junk, was a low door. I hadn't noticed it before. It wasn't locked. He opened it and it looked like a crawl space inside. It was dark but I could see the outline of the buckets. There were two sizes, regular like the ones I was using, and tall buckets about double the height. I pulled out two of each, one as a stool and the other as a table. Vos grabbed the tall ones and I grabbed the short ones. As we passed by the woodpile an idea hit me. We took the buckets outside and I came back to the woodpile. I pulled out a couple of hardwood planks about two metres long and about twenty five centimetres wide and took them outside. Using the two sets of buckets I placed a plank on each set and made a bench and a table. We set them next to the firepit.

We ate lunch without talking. Vos picked up the wrappers and jars and took them to the back room. I began to think about my next step; how to roast the bird.

When Vos came back I told him we needed a long stick to use as a rotisserie to turn the meat over the fire. He raised his finger and went back inside. In the meantime I went back to the woodpile and scrounged for short pieces of hardwood to burn. I found plenty and brought them outside. Then I looked for dry grass and brush. There was plenty of that in the yard.

Vos came back with his walking stick.

"Not your walking stick!" I said.

“I have plenty of these, this one was never used... Do you think it will do?” he asked.

I looked at it and said, “It’s perfect.”

I started the fire by lighting a bunch of dry grass with my lighter and then added brush and tiny sticks on top until the flames grew. Vos and I took turns adding larger and larger pieces of firewood until we had a bonfire.

As he sat there watching the flames dancing he said, “We should have done this at night. It would have been a wonderful sight to see in the dark.”

I went inside the room and took the bucket with the bird guts and feathers and brought it outside. “What should we do with this?”

Vos said we should bury it. I reminded him that we had no tools to dig a hole.

“You’re right, let’s burn it then.”

I looked at him and asked, “Have you ever smelled burning feathers?”

“No!” he said and added. “But I’m going to smell them now.”

I dumped the wet feathers and bird guts on top of the roaring flame. There was a loud hiss and black smoke puffed out. We both jumped out of the way to avoid the smoke and stench. Moments later the smoke disappeared but the stench lingered on for a while. We resumed adding wood to the fire.

“I think that’s enough wood,” I said. “When it fully burns there should be plenty of coals.”

We sat on the bench and watched the mesmerizing flames dance. The fire burned for hours. When the flames were out the pit was full of coals up to the top of the rock pile.

“It’s time to skewer the bird on the rotisserie,” I said.

We went inside. Vos brought the walking stick and held it firm. I picked up the bird and he forced the stick right through the bird from the back end and out the neck. He pushed the stick until the bird sat in the middle of it. He put it down gently on the bench. I then broke a piece of my stirring branch and skewered the liver and heart on it.

Vos backed away, put his hands behind his back, clamped them and began to walk towards the door. He gave me the impression that he didn’t want to touch the raw meat. I grabbed both skewers and followed him. He held the door open for me as we walked out.

“There are too many coals,” I said. “The meat will burn; we need to move some out of the way.”

He lifted his finger up signaling me to wait, went inside and grabbed the pipe, my pipe that was leaning against the wall. He came back and parted the coals in the pit.

“Perfect!” I said and put the stick with the bird over the fire, with the ends leaning on the stones of the pit, and began to turn it. I pointed the other stick towards Vos but he shook his hands wanting no part of it. I put the innards near the burning coals and rotated them. Both the bird and innards began to sizzle. About ten minutes later the liver and heart were cooked.

I pulled the innards out of the fire and placed them on our makeshift table. I looked at Vos.

He looked squeamish and must have regretted this moment because he said, “We have been evolving away from this sort of thing so it’s difficult to go back. Believe me I’m doing my best.”

I don’t know exactly what he meant by that. I’m assuming he meant his people gave up hunting and killing their food one thousand years ago. He then broke a bit off the liver, looked at it, closed his eyes and put it in his mouth.

He made a face and moments later said, "It actually tastes good." He broke another piece off and gave it to me.

I ate it too and said, "It would have tasted even better if we had some salt."

He didn't say anything.

He tried to break a piece off the heart but found it difficult. The heart muscle is hard even when cooked. I gave him my pocket knife. He admired it for a moment and then cut the heart in half. He gave me half and began to chew the other half.

"This is a historic moment for me..." he said.

I looked at him and said, "Not for me. In the village where I come from we often hunted. That's where I learned how to skin and gut the quarry, especially the kind that has a peculiar taste. I'll have to tell you about it one of these days. Maybe the next time we go hunting."

As we finished eating the rest of the liver I said, "The liver usually goes to the hunter who made the kill; it is the reward for their effort. The liver is the softest part of the animal and cooks the fastest."

He didn't say anything.

As I continued to turn the stick with the bird over the coals Vos inhaled deeply and said, "The meat smells nice, I bet it will taste even better than the innards."

I looked at him, smiled and said, "The aroma is from the fat dripping and burning in the fire. Fat keeps the meat soft, makes it cook better and, in small quantities, tastes delicious." I paused for a moment and said, "If only we had some beer or wine to drink to wash it down."

He didn't reply. Moments later he looked at me and said, "I don't know what beer is but I have heard of wine. I've never tasted wine. All we have here is aikar (firewater) and that's illegal, you would

have to get it on the black market far from here and it's very expensive."

I looked at him and said, "The stuff we are brewing back there in the big room will turn into wine. When it's done you will get your chance to taste it."

He shook his head. I didn't know if he understood me.

We both sat on the makeshift bench watching the meat cook. Vos looked at me and asked, "How do you know when it's done?"

"I usually poke the meat with my pocket knife, if red comes out it's not done. When clear liquid comes out then I will take it out of the fire."

He looked at me and said, "Show me."

I poked the meat with my pocket knife and red liquid dripped out of the tiny hole.

About half an hour later I looked up and noticed the sun was about to set. It would soon be getting dark.

"Vos, it's time to test the meat again," I said.

"Let me do it."

I gave him the knife and he stuck it into the bird's breast. Clear liquid came out. There was a big smile on Vos's face. I pulled the roast out of the fire and put it on our makeshift table.

"How do we do this?" he asked.

"First we'll have to let the meat cool down and then, since we have no plates or utensils, we'll cut small pieces and eat them with our fingers."

"Like barbarians?" he asked and smiled.

“Like barbarians!”

On closer inspection I noticed the bird’s wings were burnt so I said:
“The wings will go to Sep.”

Vos was happy about that.

By the time the meat had cooled down and I had cut the wings off with my small knife it was already dark. I had an idea.

“Vos, do you still want to have that bonfire?”

He looked at me. He looked both puzzled and happy. “Can we do that?” he asked.

“Yes, just toss some small pieces of wood over the coals and when they catch fire put large pieces on top.”

Vos picked up the wings and gave them to Sep. He then went to get some more wood from the woodpile. By the time he came back Sep had finished eating and was looking for more. I broke a leg off the bird and gave it to Vos. I took the other one. Vos was still squeamish but ate it. The firepit was in flames. When I finished eating the leg I tossed the bone to Sep. He caught it in the air, crunched it and ate it.

Vos did the same as well and said, “I’ve never seen Sep do that before.”

We sat there outdoors in the dark, staring at the dancing flames for hours. I had to stand up several times to stretch my legs. Vos seemed okay. Being indigenous to the planet’s gravity must have been more forgiving to him. I kept cutting into the bird and sharing it with Vos until there was no more to cut. It may have looked like a big bird but it didn’t have as much meat on it as I had thought.

I looked at Vos and said, “I think we ate it all.”

He looked relieved but didn’t say anything. I think we were both tired and had no desire to be witty or philosophical.

“Is it okay if I give the carcass to Sep?” I asked.

He nodded and then said, “Forgive me but I’m feeling a bit tired and am going to bed. I’ll see you tomorrow.” And with those words he got up and left.

I tossed the remnants of the bird towards Sep. First he jumped and ran. He was startled. Then he ran back, grabbed the carcass, ran inside the big room and hid under the woodpile.

I grabbed the empty bucket, stick (roisserie) and pipe and went inside. I secured the stick and pipe in a cabinet for the next time. I then half-filled the bucket with water from the dripping shower and dumped it onto the firepit. It steamed and fizzled and moments later it was out. I too went to bed.

I got up late the next day. I looked for Vos everywhere. He was nowhere to be found. His walking stick was still where he had left it the night before. I was sure he hadn’t gone out because Sep was still there, waiting for him outside the door. I knocked on the door to his room but he didn’t answer. There was no breakfast on the table.

I began to worry about him, especially after eating all that meat the night before, something he had never done in his life. I went out into the big room, unplugged the fountain and drank some water. I then went to the washroom and gave my face a wash. My clothes smelled of smoke.

I looked in the mirror and saw a different person. I didn’t like what I saw. My hair was a mess and my face looked scruffy. I looked like an old man. At that very moment Vos walked in. He must have noticed the disappointed look on my face.

Before he had a chance to say something I said, “I look terrible... like a barbarian. I don’t like how I look. My hair is long and uncombed and my beard... I shouldn’t have a beard. It should be shaven.” I paused for a moment, smiled and said, “This reminds me of something... I read somewhere that in ancient times Macedonian soldiers... I mean Alexander’s soldiers were all shaven and had

short hair. Alexander said he would be damned if he had a single soldier die and his throat slit because the enemy had grabbed him by his long hair or by his long beard. Short hair and well-shaven is a Macedonian tradition,” I added. I don’t know why I said that. What I should have said was, “...should have been a Macedonian tradition”

Vos walked over to the broken mirror, looked at himself and said, “Look at the mess I’m in... That tradition of yours sounds like a good idea to me. This hair has to go.”

I immediately and anxiously asked, “How are you going to do that? Do you have a hair cutting machine or shears?”

He looked at me, thought for a moment and said, “No, but there is a place we can go to that does.”

“A barber shop?” I asked

“I don’t know what that is but yes, a place where other people cut your hair and give you a shave.”

“That would be great,” I said and asked him where he had been this morning. I told him that I was worried that something had happened to him.

“I was preparing the game I told you about. After we go and have our hair cut we can play it.”

Vos was just as excited to have his hair cut as I was. I just want to mention at this point that Vos had no facial hair. Perhaps it was genetic with the men on his planet?

We filled our jars with water and put them in our pouches.

“What about food?” I asked.

“I ate so much last night I won’t need to eat for days.” Anticipating my next question he said, “Before you ask me I would like to say that I enjoyed last night very much and would like to do it again

sometime... And my system had no problems digesting the meat. I will get some food for you if you want.”

I smiled and said, “I’m good, let’s go and get our hair cut.”

He opened the gate to the yard, told Sep to stay and locked it again. I noticed he used his badge to do that. His badge seemed to work on every gate that had a lock.

We walked side by side for about twenty minutes before we arrived at the tube station. We walked down a set of stairs. It was dark inside but the lights came on before we reached the bottom. The place was empty and there were no tube cars in the station.

Vos pushed a button that looked like an elevator button. A few minutes later we felt a draft of air flow into the station, which in time grew in intensity until it became a strong wind.

A four seat car, looking like a large clear glass jar arrived and stopped. The door opened and we stepped in. Vos punched some buttons and then pushed a lever. The door closed and the car took off. Minutes later we arrived at another station. The door opened and we walked out. There were other people in this station, some standing, some coming in and others leaving the station.

Everyone here wore white and looked neat and tidy. The men had short hair and the women had shoulder length hair. Vos and I looked like barbarians, messy and unclean. We were getting stares. I felt uncomfortable like I didn’t belong there, like an immigrant, similar to how I felt in Canada when I arrived there and didn’t speak English.

We took a stairway down. A whole world opened up to us. It felt like we were inside a mall in Canada. Vos pointed to the right and about fifty steps later we were in the barber shop. There was one work station, one barber and several others, all men. The barber smiled. The others looked at us suspiciously. The barber greeted Vos like he knew him. They began to talk in their language. I didn’t understand what they were saying. Vos said something and looked at me. They all looked at me. There was disgust on their faces.

That's what I thought it was because I had no basis for comparison. I knew nothing of these people's culture or mannerisms. It felt like I was back in Canada being introduced for the first time to my classmates in school after I arrived from Macedonia.

After the barber finished with his last customer everyone left. I was next. Vos told me to sit in the chair and told the barber to shave me and cut my hair. The barber did that and fast.

The barber used machines both to shave me and cut my hair. I looked at myself in the mirror and was surprised by how good I looked. I had instantly regained my youth. Despite the beard my face was well-tanned. Vos then took the seat and the barber cut his hair very short. His head no longer looked huge. He looked good too.

After we left the barbershop I said to him, "Now you look like a general."

He smiled. We both felt nervous in the crowded mall so we decided to hasten our pace back to the facilities. It was noon by the time we arrived and we both had the same idea... lunch.

After we ate and washed the dishes Vos said, "Come with me, I will show you the game."

He was enthusiastic when he said it, which made me even more curious as to what kind of game this was?

The Game

We walked down the hall, down the stairs and instead of entering the museum we turned left and stopped in front of a door. Vos placed his badge in a hole and it clicked open. And there, in front of us was a huge, empty semi-lit room. The only things inside the room were three chairs; two low ones on each side and a high one in the middle. The middle chair had a panel, levers and a joystick with many buttons.

“You sit there and watch me,” said Vos and pointed to the left chair. I did as he asked and watched.

Vos placed his badge in a slot on the panel in front of his chair then shifted a lever to the forward position under his seat and the room lit up in many colours. A three dimensional hologram of a space ship began to emerge. It had engines, guns, cannons, panels and all sorts of colourful gadgets. We were inside it. It even had robots looking like people, three men and two women.

After the full picture was formed inside and outside of the ship, Vos and I found ourselves sitting behind a set of controls and facing forward. There was a huge window in front and we could see stars and other objects outside in the dark space ahead of us.

Vos turned to me and said, “The robots won’t work unless I enter the proper codes. The captain, that’s me, must enter the codes for each of the five robots before they can be activated. These two robots behind us are the captain’s personal guards.”

And as Vos, the captain of the ship, entered each code a red light looking like a Japanese fan scanned his face.

“Only the captain is authorized to engage the robots,” he said and then added. “And with this they recognize me, and only me, as their commander whose orders they must obey without hesitation.” As Vos entered each code the robot took its place on the ship. When he was done he said, “We are ready to play now.” He looked at me and said, “See the two young good-looking lady robots behind us, they are my personal guards and will follow me wherever I go. They are

programmed to defend me from danger. They have also been programmed with every marshal arts move known to my planet.”

I looked at him and said, “They are just holograms, right?”

He laughed and said, “Yes, they are just holograms; they won’t be able to harm you should you decide to attack me.”

I accepted his explanation but wondered why a captain would need personal guards in a closed ship flying in space without a crew? It was just a distracting thought.

He pushed a lever forward and the ship began to hum.

“This turns the engines on. We can now fly.”

He then pushed the joystick forward and the ship started moving in the forward direction. Vos explained how the joystick worked. It was no different than that of an airplane. He also pointed out the various buttons on the joystick and their functions but there were too many for me to remember. The only thing that I do remember is that the ship had two engines, four energy cannons and a torpedo launcher. At least that’s what I understood. Vos used words unfamiliar to me. Vos then went on to explain the various functions of the display but again he used words I didn’t understand. He looked at me. I looked at him looking lost.

“Don’t worry about the words (terminology) for now just watch what I do.”

He then pushed the joystick forward hard and the ship flew forward fast.

“I felt that!” I said out loud.

“Of course you did!” “How about this?” he asked as he pushed the joystick to the left.

“I felt that too!” I exclaimed.

“That’s because the simulation was created to make the ride and effects realistic,” he explained. “Watch that chunk of rock ahead of us.”

As I did he punched one of the buttons on the joystick and “bang” one of the energy cannons fired. There was a flash of light and the rock in the distance exploded to pieces.

“You just fired an energy weapon, right? Shouldn’t that have been silent?”

“Yes!” he said. “The flash of light is silent but when the materials that release the energy are mixed they explode. The energy is then focused by the barrel and propelled outwards.”

At least that’s what I understood him to say.

He flew the ship forward, to the left and to the right and we felt the sensation of moving and turning.

“These ships are built with dampers that absorb the energy of sudden impulses, especially at great speeds,” he said. “Without the dampers we will fly right off our seats when we turn,” he added.

Vos pushed the holographic ship to extreme speeds, flying through the solar system to show me how it felt and to familiarize me with the various planets and stars. He told me that everything I saw in the simulation, including the stars and planets, was an exact replica of the real thing. The only unique thing about this game was the ship. It was one of a kind. I didn’t understand most of the things he said and I forgot most of what I did understand. I was not fond of games; I believed they were a waste of time.

Vos must have sensed that and said, “That’s enough for one day, we will come back tomorrow. In the meantime let’s go back to the room upstairs and I will teach you some important words in my language.”

We went back to the room and I sat in the same place at the table. He made us some lukewarm sweet tea. After we drank it he turned

on the little black box sitting on the table by tapping on it and the box began to display objects and called out their names.

“This is a teaching device used to teach young children the names of various objects. This same device is used to teach the people who repair machines (mechanics) on how to take them apart and put them back together. I think you will find it very useful.”

He showed me which button to push to start it and which to make it repeat the object and its name.

I did what he asked but my heart wasn't in it at all. Vos could tell that I wasn't interested but insisted I continue with my learning. After I went through about a dozen objects he reset the device, turned the sound off and began to show me the same objects. He then pointed at each and asked me what it was called. I couldn't remember the names of any of them. He wanted to know why.

“If I begin to learn your language I will have to accept the idea that I won't be going home. I can't do that. I can't afford to attach myself to your society and culture. To me it means that I'd have to abandon mine and I'm not ready to do that.”

He smiled and said, “My dear friend, your old friends will still be your friends even if you find new ones. Learning my language does not mean you will be abandoning yours. It means you will be richer for it.”

Vos had a point and deep in my heart I knew he was right and so I did what he asked.

Every day we played the game. I not only learned how to operate all its functions but I also learned new fighting techniques and manoeuvres. And, to the best of my ability, I learned many new words from the black box. Vos was relentless, which made me wonder why he was so keen on teaching me all these things. In the game he pushed me hard until I was as good as he was, even better at some things. He made me memorize all the codes and wouldn't allow me to write them down.

He would say, “A good captain relies on his own memory not on...” but he would not elaborate, even though this was just a game.

We carried out attacks against invasions, meteor showers, pirate ships and even ground fire. I learned how and when to use the energy weapons and when to use the torpedoes. My ability to manoeuvre the ship and evade being hit by enemy fire went from 0% to almost 100%. In other words my reaction time, according to Vos, was better than his. He was very happy about that. I thought the whole idea of playing a game, especially by two grown men, was silly and downright ridiculous but I didn't say anything to Vos, I figured it was part of his entertainment, part of his customs maybe. What else were we going to do with all that free time?

I could have played the game during the times when Vos left the facilities and went to the city to get provisions, but I needed his badge which he refused to part with. It was as if it was attached to him. One time, in the beginning, he asked me if I wanted to go with him to the city, but I said no and after that he never asked me again.

On the twenty-sixth day after we started my rigorous training on the game, Vos finally declared that I was as good as him and that my training was over. In other words I had graduated from the Vos academy on playing the game.

To commemorate the occasion I said, “We should celebrate this moment. We should go on another hunt and have another roast. I'll also check on the wine and see if it's finished brewing. Maybe we can have a few drinks too.”

He looked at me, smiled and said, “Yes, we should be rewarding ourselves for our hard work. We deserve it, don't we?”

I gave him the thumbs up and he gave me the thumbs up right back. I had taught him about using thumbs up during our noisy practice sessions in the simulator.

The next morning Vos had to go to the city and the day after he promised me we would go hunting. In the meantime he told me to go and practice my learning and learn about the wildlife on this

planet. He said that he had set the device to show me the wildlife and on which part of the planet it was found. He also said he expected me to remember at least one creature and its name. He then walked away towards the front gate laughing. Was he making fun of me?

After Vos left I went straight to the big room and checked out the wine. It had settled and was no longer bubbling.

Back in Macedonia the wine, the liquid, was usually separated from the grape skins and other solids about three weeks after it had started brewing but here I wasn't sure, because the brewing was still active. The brewing usually stops when the yeast depletes the sugar or there is too much alcohol for the yeast to function properly. Alcohol, of course, is yeast poop but I wasn't going to tell Vos that.

I went to the back room and got one of the smallest square drinking glasses. I went back to the brew and dipped the glass past the solid stuff and into the red liquid. I drank some. It was still sweet but very strong with alcohol. It tasted like Port but with much more aroma. I loved it. I was sure Vos was going to love it too. But first I had to separate the liquid from the solids and squeeze the solids to remove all the liquid from them. The solids had lost their colour and looked light brown. They looked disgusting. I then realized that I had no strainer. I figured Vos might have something and decided to wait for him to return before I did anything.

It was a few hours past noon when Vos returned. I had picked some fruit and was eating it sitting on top of the woodpile. Sep was there at the bottom, a few steps away, watching me eat, expecting me to toss him some, but there was no point because Sep didn't eat fruit. When we heard the gate open we both ran outside. Vos was carrying two bags over his shoulders. He didn't look as tired as usual. At least he didn't have to carry water.

After he shut and locked the gate he said, "I have something for you." He put his hand inside one bag, pulled something out and tossed it to Sep. Sep grabbed it and disappeared into the big room under the woodpile. Vos then took the other bag off his shoulder and said, "This is for you."

He then handed it to me. It was light.

I said thank you and asked what it was. All he said was that I had earned it. I couldn't wait; I sat down on the makeshift bench, put the bag on the makeshift table, opened it and heard myself say, "WOW!" It was a full camouflage uniform complete with a shirt, pants, shoes, socks and underwear. With much excitement I said, "Thank you!"

"You can wear it on the hunt tomorrow. Now let's go inside and eat. I brought some different snacks for you to try."

While we were having our lunch I mentioned to Vos about filtering the wine and that I needed a strainer. He said he had never heard of such a thing. Later he remembered that the workers in this facility used sieves that fit on top of the buckets. They used them to remove clumped particles from the powdery chemicals.

"That would be perfect."

He then told me where I could find one. I also asked him if he had any old cloths that I could use to fine filter the wine. He gave me one of his old shirts.

I was very excited about filtering the wine but first I had to try out my new uniform. I ran to my room and put it on. I adjusted all the tabs on the shirt and pants until everything fit just right. Surprisingly even the shoes fit perfectly. I was amazed at the quality of the material and the stitching. This was something I could wear all the time. My own clothes were threadbare and I had to borrow clothes from Vos. My running shoes were torn on the sides and had holes in the bottom.

I ran back to show Vos my new attire. He said he should have done this a long time ago. He had never seen me so happy. I asked him if he wanted to participate in the filtering of the wine. He declined; he said he had something else to do.

I changed back to my old clothes. Filtering wine was a messy job and I didn't want to dirty my new clothes on the first day.

I went under the crawlspace in the big room and found a sieve. I also picked up one more bucket and returned to the water fountain. I plugged up the spouts and the shower started running. I washed and cleaned the two empty buckets and the sieve. They had been used to store and process chemicals so it was important to have them washed well. I used one bucket to store the liquid and the other to store the discarded solids.

The sieve fit perfectly on top of the bucket. After I washed it, I put the shirt over it to act as a fine filter and then gently tipped the other bucket with the wine and filled the sieve. The liquid ran right through the shirt and dripped into the empty bucket. I squeezed the rest of the liquid by twisting the shirt and discarded the solid stuff remaining inside the shirt into the other bucket. I did this over and over until all the solids were removed and drained. I had to wash the shirt several times to dislodge the fine particles clogging the shirt, which had acted as a filter.

When I was done I placed the lid tightly over the bucket with the wine to prevent bugs from going in, as well as limit the amount of oxygen coming in contact with the wine. Oxygen in time turns wine into vinegar. The bucket was a quarter full, about four litres. Then I placed the bucket on top of the bench so that the wine could rest. Wine, after it rests for a few days, should be either filtered or left in a cool place for a week or two to settle before drinking.

I was tempted to drink some but didn't. I knew that it tasted okay because I had tried it earlier.

After I dumped what remained of the brew under the fruit tree, where I had earlier collected the fruit, I washed the buckets, shirt and sieve and put them away in a cabinet which I had cleaned earlier especially for that purpose. I figured if this worked I would be making more.

Hunting the Ehsib

I had a hard time falling asleep that night, thinking about my new uniform, the wine and about the hunt the next day. And it would appear that my thoughts went to dreams because the next thing I remember was Vos knocking on my door.

I quickly put my uniform on and was out of my room in no time. Vos looked at me with admiration and handed me my pouch, rifle and some bullets.

“You look like a real soldier,” he said and then corrected himself and said. “I mean you look like a real hunter.”

We took the usual route out with Sep following. We were greeted by the birds as usual. Vos turned and smiled. I assumed he was happy that his birds were still talking.

“What is that strong odour?” he asked as we approached his fruit tree

“That’s the aroma of the rakia (alcohol). That’s what rakia smells like.”

I then explained to him that I had dumped the remnants of the wine under the tree. I didn’t know what else to do with them.

He turned, looked at me with excitement and said, “So, I take it you made the wine?”

I smiled and said, “Yes, and we will get to test it later.”

He gave me the thumbs up.

After walking for a couple of hours we arrived at the same grove where we had shot the Akioson about thirty days ago.

Vos stopped, turned and said, “We’re going past the grove. We will hunt for a creature indigenous to this region that does not fly but digs in the soil. Can you tell me what it’s called?”

I had no answer for him so he said, “You’ll probably recognize it when you see it.”

We walked through the grove and ended up on a slope. There was a streak of green grass growing from about halfway up the slope down to the bottom of the hill.

“That’s where we will find our quarry.”

We walked for another half hour and reached a flat and level area. It looked like a pond with tall grasses. Suddenly I saw something move. I removed the rifle from my shoulder and looked through the scope. It looked like a warthog but had patches of black and white on its skin. I waved Vos to come over and have a look and while he was coming I loaded the rifle and removed the safety. It was now ready to be fired. When Vos arrived he couldn’t see anything. I gave him the rifle and told him to look through the scope. He looked and spotted the creature.

“I see it. It’s a young ehsib.”

“Take the shot,” I said.

He hesitated.

“Take the shot because I see Sep coming up fast and he will spook the creature.”

He again hesitated, took a deep breath, held it and “bang” he shot the rifle.

“Did you get it?” I asked.

“I don’t know.”

Other than being startled Sep didn’t react the way I’d expected. He probably hadn’t seen what happened. Vos and I ran up the hill and began searching. We couldn’t find the creature. We saw Sep sniffing the ground and running into the tall grass. We followed him and

found him grabbing at the creature. It was dead. Vos raised his rifle and Sep stepped away. Vos looked at the pig lying there dead and felt sorry for it. He felt like he had committed a sin.

I went opposite to him, bowed down and said, “Thank you Mother Nature for providing us with this food. We shall use it to nourish ourselves and we will not be wasteful!” I then said, “It’s one thing to watch someone take a life and another to do it yourself... But it is what it is, its nature’s way; some creatures die so that others can live.”

He looked at me and I saw tears in his eyes. This was the only time I had seen Vos cry.

To ease the tension I asked, “Why Mother Nature and not God?”

He knew what I was talking about and said, “It’s the same thing, we call it one thing... you call it another... You see God as the creator of all things we see Mother Nature as the nurturer, the sustainer of all life. In the past we believed in many Gods, later in a Goddess as the mother of all Gods, then in a single God and so on. We have seen many worlds over the years but we have not seen a Goddess or a God. The only thing that we have seen that sustains and perpetuates life is what you call nature. Nature was common in all the planets we visited. So, in time we began to give credit to nature for our perpetual existence. It was simpler, much less mysterious and easy to understand.”

I picked up the ehsib and slit its throat with my pocket knife. Its skin was very tough but it was tender inside. Blood began to drip. I picked up the pig by one of its hind legs. It was quite heavy. As soon as we took a step away, Sep dashed to lick the blood.

We walked in silence. Some distance later Vos asked, “Does it always feel like that when you take a life?”

I thought for a moment and said, “Yes, but then you accept it as a necessary thing... for your existence. Nature is a good example of how these things work. All creatures need to eat to survive. I don’t

think a wolf or a lion thinks twice about attacking a sheep or an antelope. They have to eat. They need to survive.”

He looked at me and said, “Yes, that’s true for lions and wolves, creatures that eat only meat. But not for us, creatures that can have alternate foods.”

“You’re right, for us it is a matter of personal choice; we can choose to eat meat or not. But for those who choose to eat meat... I think the dilemma we are facing is, should we be personally killing the food we eat or should we be letting others do it like it’s done here and on earth. There is meat in the processed blocks of food we eat here, so we do eat meat.”

Vos stopped me right there because he was well-aware of the philosophical issues regarding this subject. He clearly understood the idea that we were top predators and fully capable of meeting our needs standing at the top of the food chain. Therefore no philosophical discussions or excuses were necessary. He was fully aware that he had to accept what he had done and get past it.

With how he felt he showed me that he was not all logic and that he did have feelings. I then thought and almost laughed at the idea that he was a soldier from a tradition of soldiers, and not just any ordinary soldier but the commander and chief of the military and he had never fired a gun against any creature.

I broke the silence and asked, “Vos, what makes a person a good soldier?”

Without hesitation he said, “Loyalty, obedience, commitment...”

I then interrupted and said, “I meant to say successful in facing the enemy.”

He must have thought I was leading him into some sort of trap and said, “I can only tell you in theory; I can’t tell you in practice, I have never faced that prospect.”

“But, of course,” I replied and continued. “As you know I’m not a soldier, I would like to be one but I’m not, I do however have friends who were soldiers and have seen combat. I often asked them that very question but they never answered. One time, when we were all drunk with rakia one of the army officers opened up and described the horror of wars and how it felt to come face to face with your enemy on the battlefield.

To my question of what makes a successful soldier he said you have to kill your opponent before he kills you. I swear to you that’s what he said.

This was an older man who had survived many battles, which led me to believe that he had killed many people, a subject in which he refused to engage. He did, however, say other things with which he would have to live for the rest of his life.

He said, ‘The young men killed in battle have families, just like we do. They have wives, children, mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, friends... You just don’t end one life when you kill a young man, you burn many lives...’ That’s what he said. So I asked him why do you do it then, why become a soldier? He said, ‘To protect our families and homes and to defend those who can’t defend themselves...’ That’s what he said.”

Vos looked at me and said, “Today I learned something important about soldiering that I had not in all my years at the military academy. I hope to God (he said God) I never face that situation.” He then said, “You never fail to impress me.”

The piglet I was carrying was heavy and was killing my arm and shoulder. It was a wild pig which would make its meat taste “earthy”, so it would need marinating before we cooked it.

“Vos, I have a question for you. Do you think we can get some onions to marinate the meat? This creature will taste foul if we don’t properly prepare it.”

He thought for a moment and said, “I don’t know what that is.”

I basically had to describe it to him, what it looked like and how it grew in bulbs but still nothing. When I told him about how it smelled he had an idea. He said there was a garden behind the facilities where all sorts of smelly grasses grew and it was possible that something like that might exist there. And the good thing about it was that it was on the way back.

We walked back in silence. It was past noon and neither one of us said anything about eating or drinking. It was a clear day and the sun was beating down on us. I found my uniform was a lot more comfortable than my other clothes. Stepping on pebbles and sharp things was not a problem anymore, my new shoes were great. I was a bit concerned, however, about Vos and what he would think of me after what I had said. But then I thought that it was only my own insecurity that I was feeling. He was a rational person in whom I had much confidence to get past any issue except, for the moment, he was in deep thought.

Just before we arrived at the facilities Vos stopped, pointed to the far side and said, “The garden I told you about is over there behind that building. Let’s go and see if we can find what you need.”

I gave him the thumbs up. He smiled and gave me the thumbs up. I felt much better, the old Vos was back.

It took us a couple of minutes to get to the garden. On the way I remarked how good the garden looked despite the dry and hot climate. It barely rained in this part of the country and when it did it was brief but, according to Vos, it was improving every year.

Vos stopped, waved his arm in a semi-circle and said, “All this is smelly grass.”

I looked at him and nodded my head. I then began to clip small parts of the grasses and sniff it. Vos lost interest in watching me and went deeper into the garden. He came back with a plant that had a tiny bulb the size of the tip of my finger.

“Could this be it?”

Just then I realized that I had not told him how large onion bulbs grow. “Let me smell it.” To my surprise it smelled like an onion.

“Yes, that’s it,” I said. I then thought to myself “what are the chances of finding onions on an alien planet, never mind Vos finding them.”

After we picked a bunch Vos said, “All these plants here were brought here from other planets. Our scientists experimented with them. They looked for plants that would survive in space. Some of these plants, the hardier ones, were put on our research ships in space and used as food on long voyages.”

Soon we were inside the facilities and we put the pig and onions on the bench closest to the water fountain. I rubbed my arm and shoulder to relieve my pain.

Vos saw me, smiled and said, “Hunting is hard work, especially for those who have to carry the quarry.” He then laughed out loud and added, “I thought of helping you but I could hardly carry myself... I am sorry about that.”

“No problem, I understand,” I replied. He then looked around as if looking for a place to sit. There was none.

“Let’s go outside and have our lunch, the bench should be in the shade by now,” he said.

I agreed and we stepped outside. Sep joined us.

While eating our lunch I mentioned to Vos that we couldn’t roast the pig today because it needed to sit in the onions for at least a day.

“We couldn’t have roasted it today even if we wanted to... Not enough hours until dark...”

After we had our late lunch we went inside the big room and I showed Vos how to wash the little onions one by one and put them on the clean bench. I then went into the woodpile and got a short

board of hardwood to use as a cutting board. I washed one of the buckets and put it to the side.

“We will put the onions and pig in this bucket for the night, and in this other bucket we will throw the waste and burn it in the fire tomorrow,” I said.

He shook his head in agreement.

After that I got my pocket knife out and began to skin the pig. There wasn't much fat under the skin but there was enough to help it cook and give it taste. After I removed the skin I cut off the pig's legs at the knees. It was a very difficult cut and I could have used a much bigger knife. Unfortunately we didn't have one. I showed Vos, who didn't want to look, what I had done and asked him if we should give the legs and skin to Sep.

He said, “Why not? Sep will eat anything.”

After that I opened the pig's gut and removed all its innards. It was a male pig. I tossed the stomach, intestines, lungs, bladder and other parts into one of the buckets and kept the liver, heart and testicles. Then, after removing the gallbladder from the liver, I washed the knife, gave it to Vos and asked him to cut the onions. I washed the other bucket and after that I washed each piece of meat and put them in it.

After washing my hands I showed Vos how to cut the onions on the cutting board and asked him to drop them into the bucket on top of the meat. I took Vos's walking stick from the cabinet, the stick we had used as a rotisserie to roast the bird, and washed it too.

Surprisingly Vos was not only a quick study but a fast worker. By the time I was done washing the stick he had finished cutting the onions and had placed them in the bucket. When he was done he came over and gave me the knife.

He rubbed his eyes with his wrists and said, “I'm done. That stuff is sure potent, it made me cry.”

I put the bucket with the meat on top of the bench and placed the cutting board on top to prevent bugs from going in. I left the bucket with the innards and onion scraps on the floor. Then I picked up the pigskin and we both went outside. Sep was there waiting for us. I threw the skin at him. He grabbed it and began to crunch it. He had powerful jaws and sharp teeth; even Vos was surprised at his ability to cut through the tough skin and crush the bones.

“I told you Sep would eat anything...” he said.

I shook my head and said, “He will never be able to eat the entire skin and the legs too. It’s a lot for a little dog that size.”

It was getting late and after watching Sep struggle with the skin for about half an hour we decided it was time to take a long deserved rest. We agreed to dedicate the next day to celebrating the successful completion of my training on the game and we were going to do it by eating roast pig and drinking homemade wine. I went straight to my room and lay in bed.

Celebrating my graduation

I woke up early the next morning and was as hungry as a dog. I hadn't eaten supper the night before. I put my old clothes on and went straight outside. I was greeted by a lethargic Sep. His gut was full and he looked like a pigskin football. I gathered he'd eaten everything that we gave him the night before. I looked around. Vos wasn't up. I decided to prepare the firepit. I went and got one of those big buckets and a smaller one from under the crawlspace. I placed the big bucket in the closest corner of the yard. I then scooped up the ash and coals with the other bucket and transferred them to the bucket in the corner. I emptied the entire firepit. Then I got some dry grass and small sticks and placed them in the middle of the firepit. I went to the woodpile and brought a whole pile of wood and set it beside the firepit. This should be enough for the roast, I thought.

Just as I was finished bringing the wood Vos came out with our breakfast. He looked like he was in a good mood.

He took one look at Sep, laughed and said, "I wondered if he was capable of eating the whole thing... Now I know."

I told Vos about my plans for the day and he approved. I then lit the fire and we piled the firepit high with wood. We ate our breakfast sitting on the bench and watching the flames rise high and listened to the wood crackle as it burned.

"This is nice, it gives me a sense of peace and comfort," said Vos.

"I feel the same," I replied.

I went inside and got the bucket with the innards. I waited until the fire had reached its maximum height and dumped the contents onto it. The loud hiss made Sep look.

We sat there watching the wood burn for a long time. There was some uneasiness in the air, I could feel it. I had often felt this way when there was a turning point in my life, when I had to do something new and unusual but I couldn't figure out what it was.

I looked at Vos. He was staring at the fire. He was mesmerized by the dancing flames. I looked at Sep. He was looking away but his back leg kept twitching. He looked like he was trying to kick something invisible, his indigestion perhaps?

I wanted to get moving and prepare for the roast but my body felt heavy and stuck to the bench telling me it didn't want to move. Vos said something and broke my trance.

“How long do you figure it will take to cook the ehsib?” he asked.

“We'll give it about four earth hours once all the wood turns into embers,” I replied.

I then went inside, got the pipe and gave it to Vos to spread the remaining unburned wood over the burning coals so that it would burn faster. I went back inside and got two small glasses and an empty jelly jar. I dipped the jar into the wine, filled it to the top and shut the lid. I was tempted to take a sip but decided against it.

When I came outside I placed the jar and glasses on top of our makeshift table.

Vos looked at them and said, “Ah, nice, another jar full of jelly.” He looked confused. “Why the small glasses?” he asked.

“In my culture it's customary to drink wine from small glasses and rakia from even smaller glasses,” I replied.

He smiled, shook his head and said, “I thought the stuff was jelly,” and began to laugh and dance.

He then started singing a song in his language. I kept staring at him, an old man looking like a little boy. I chalked it up to nervousness. It would appear he too was feeling uneasy.

He saw me staring at him and said, “This is an old pirate song. Pirates sang it and danced to it when they drank rakia and other illegal stuff.”

“The fire is just about ready, let’s gets the meat prepared and start the roasting,” I suggested and he agreed.

I removed the pig from the bucket and placed it on the bench. It smelled foul.

Vos made a face and said, “Are you sure that’s edible? It stinks!”

“Pigs generally do stink but it’s the combination of onions and pig meat you smell. It should go away after the meat is roasted, I hope,” I replied.

The fat on the pig’s surface made the meat look slimy and Vos refused to touch it. I had to put the rotisserie stick through it by myself. I did the same with the innards.

Vos parted the coals in the firepit the same as before and we began the roast. The innards unfortunately were too heavy to roast with one hand and I was afraid the stick holding them might break from their weight and we would lose them in the fire.

I also realized it might not be possible to evenly cook liver, heart and testicles together. The liver would burn before the heart was cooked. So I asked Vos to take over turning the rotisserie with the pig so that I could fix the innards problem.

I explained to Vos what I was going to do; cook the liver on its own first then the testicles and then the heart. He gave me the thumbs up and said he would be happy to operate the rotisserie. I thanked him.

I threaded the liver lengthwise so that it wouldn’t flop around when I turned it and began to cook it.

The melting fat from the pig began to drip into the fire, giving off a nice aroma. I noticed Vos was lifting the meat up every time flames flared up. I was happy to see that he knew what he was doing. He was smiling and looked happy.

The liver cooked in no time and was ready to be eaten. Liver always tastes better warm. I looked around the table for a place to put it down but it looked like there was dust everywhere. With the cooked liver in my hand I ran inside and got three large plates. I put the cooked liver on one of them and brought them all outside. I put the heart and testicles sitting on the table on another plate, went in and washed them and came back out. I must have looked like an idiot running back and forth inside and out. I saw Vos smiling and shaking his head.

I cut the liver into bite sized pieces and left it on the plate. I extended the plate towards Vos and said, “The hunter who made the kill gets to eat the liver.”

He didn’t say anything. He picked up one piece and bit it. He made a face and shook his head.

“It’s a little bitter, isn’t it?” I asked.

He shook his head “yes”. I tried a piece. A little bitter but it tasted fine. I ate the whole piece.

I looked at him and said, “It’ll taste fine if we wash it down with a bit of wine. What do you think?”

He gave me a short nod and smiled. I flipped the lid on the jar and poured a little wine into both of our glasses. I handed him one and he drank it all in one gulp.

“This tastes great,” he said and added, “you’re right it got rid of the bad taste.”

I smiled and said, “That was your practice drink. In my tradition we toast to our health and friendship by clinking our glasses together and then we drink. We sip it slowly and enjoy its flavour. This wine, that we made here, is particularly strong with a lot of rakia (alcohol) in it so we need to take it easy because we could get very drunk and sick. Since we don’t know the potency of this wine we need to drink it slowly and measure how much we drink. Then, when we are feeling good (high) we need to stop drinking for a while.

Every part of our brain will be telling us ‘more, more’ but we must disobey those orders or there will be hell to pay later. Also, when we reach our peak of feeling good our true selves will emerge; happiness, sadness, violence, regrets and so on. So, let’s do this again and do it right.”

I filled the glasses a quarter full and gave Vos his. I then showed him how to do the toast. I toasted to his good health, happiness and friendship and he toasted to my successful completion of training on the game. We each had a sip. I was surprised how good the liver tasted washed down with a sip of wine. Vos took bites of the liver with wine and no longer complained about the bad taste. He was always mindful not to burn the big roast.

By the time we had eaten all the liver we had drunk all the wine in our glasses. I was already feeling the buzz when I noticed Vos handing me his empty glass. His eyes were glazed and he was smiling a lot.

“Allow me to cook the testicles first and when they are done we will have more wine,” I said. I didn’t want us getting drunk.

At the sound of the word “testicles” he burst out laughing and said, “A month ago I had never eaten meat and now I am about to eat testicles, what will my friends at the academy say? What will they think of me? I am a real barbarian, aren’t I? Oh, I feel great. More wine!”

“Not until the testicles are cooked!” I said and began to spear them with the rotisserie stick.

Minding the roast and making sure it didn’t burn Vos looked into the distance and began to take deep breaths. He was enjoying every bit of the outdoors, the sun, the breeze, the rustling of leaves, the buzzing of flies, like it was his first time outside. He looked calm. I could see relief in his face from something he had been carrying in his soul for a long time. A man that old must carry many secrets, I thought. Why was he spending his time on silly things like this and with me, a nobody, who was lost in space and showing him things

that his ancestors had abandoned thousands of years ago? Who was this man and why was I so important to him?

“You’re burning the testicles,” I heard a voice say.

“Sorry!” I replied and began to turn them again.

We sat in silence for a while tending the cooking.

Then, in a sober voice, I heard Vos say, “I never married you know. I never married because I can’t have children. I very much wanted to but Mother Nature robbed me of that. I am the first in a very long line of men in my family who could not produce offspring. It was the hardest thing in my life to accept. I didn’t want to disappoint anyone, especially a young woman and leave her without children. I just couldn’t do that.”

I didn’t say anything. What was there for me to say? What could I say? I sat there looking glum, feeling sorry for him.

“Are those testicles going to be ready soon? I want more wine!” I heard Vos say in a commanding voice. I saw him wipe his tears.

I turned the rotisserie stick a few more times and decided to test the testicles and see if they were cooked. Clear liquid came out so I set them on the place where the liver had been and removed them from the stick. I then cut them into small pieces. I was surprised at how tender they were. I again filled the glasses a quarter full of wine and handed Vos his.

We again did our ceremonial clinking and Vos said, “To you my young friend.”

“To our friendship.”

Then to my surprise, ignoring my advice, he gulped the entire liquid in one gulp. I looked at his face. He looked like he was hurting deep in his soul. There was nothing I could do.

Before he gave me his glass back I poured him some more. He was surprised. He thought I wasn't going to give him any more. He began to eat the testicle and was pleased by how good it tasted and that he didn't need the wine to wash it down. We both ate the testicles without drinking any wine. When we were done we enjoyed sipping the wine all on its own.

“This is good,” he said, “the wine, the food, the atmosphere. Perhaps my culture, in its hurry to dash forward, lost out on things. They forgot how to live. They forgot what's important in life.”

He paused for a moment and continued, “Before you came here I was all alone. I thought I liked it. I thought I enjoyed my solitude because it kept me away from the silly antics of my society. It kept me away from the unimportant things which people today consider important. Everyone nowadays thinks of ‘here and now’ and has no clue or care of yesterday or tomorrow. They strive to impress each other, to outdo one another with things that are unimportant. We seem to have lost our common sense and the things we need to keep us grounded. Many times I have gone back to the military academy and spoken to the leading authorities about our vulnerability on this planet... but nothing. In front of me they humour me and say things like ‘it's too expensive and a waste of resources’ and behind me they call me an old fool. But deep in my heart I know I am right. I know the Karons or someone else will strike, it's a matter of time. It's like watching a steam tank building up pressure and you know it will eventually explode if that pressure isn't released. It would only be a matter of time. We can't forever ignore the Karon problem and expect it to go away without us doing anything.” Vos stopped talking.

Moments later he looked at me and said, “Let's test this thing,” pointing at the roasting pig, “and see if it's cooked... the wine is making me hungry.”

I gave him my knife and he poked it deeply. Red liquid came out. “It's only been three hours, give it another hour,” I said. “Why don't I cook the heart, it should cook in half an hour or so. We can eat it and have some more wine.”

Vos smiled and gave me the thumbs up.

I cut the heart in four, and threaded it on the stick and put it back on the same plate. I then went inside, washed the knife and filled the other empty jelly jar with water and brought it outside. I filled the empty wine glasses full of water and gave Vos his and said, “Drink it so that you don’t dehydrate.” I then stirred the coals and put the heart over the fire.

We both sat there in silence sipping on the water, sniffing the aroma of the burning fat and watching the roast turn red and crisp.

About half an hour later I assumed the heart was cooked. I took it out of the fire and cut it into pieces without testing it. It was a bit challenging, not only because it was tough but also because I was feeling a bit inebriated. Vos gulped down the rest of the water and handed me his glass. I watched him work the roast to see how he was doing with his coordination. He seemed fine so I divided the remaining wine in the jar between us. It was very little.

We chewed and chewed on the heart without any wine. I wasn’t sure if it was naturally tough or perhaps it wasn’t fully cooked. Neither one of us said a word. We gave our jaws a workout. We sipped the wine in silence until it was all drained.

It seemed like hours had passed when Vos said, “It must be cooked by now. My arm is getting sore. Please give me the knife.”

I gave him the knife but he found it hard to penetrate the outside layer of meat. It was hard because it was overcooked. When he did puncture the meat clear liquid came out. I took the two dirty plates that had been sitting on the table, went inside, rinsed them, brought them back and placed them on top of the table. Vos knew what to do and placed the roast on top of the two plates and allowed the meat to cool. I went back inside and filled the jelly jar with wine again. I filled our glasses full this time. We again “clinked” the glasses and began to sip on the wine while waiting for the meat to cool.

“The surface is so hard, I’m afraid we won’t be able to cut it with that small knife,” Vos said.

“Don’t worry we’ll find a way,” I replied. “We’ll break it up with our fingers.”

I took the empty water jar and went inside, washed my hands and filled the jar with water. When I came out I asked Vos to stick out his hands and I poured water on them. He rubbed them together and I rinsed them with more water.

“Let’s dig in!” I said.

He looked at me. He didn’t understand what I meant so I showed him. I grabbed one of the pig’s hind legs and broke it off. After a slight snap it pulled away very easily. Vos did the same. I took a bite. The surface was glazed and crispy. The inside melted in my mouth. Vos did the same. He couldn’t believe how good it tasted. The crunchy part was chewy and delicious and the soft part fell right off the bone. Vos was speechless or perhaps he was enjoying the meat too much to speak.

After taking several bites of the soft meat that melted in my mouth, I took a large gulp of wine. It was delicious. Vos did the same.

He closed his eyes and enjoyed the full flavour of the roast and wine and said, “And to think that I was ready to ditch all this just because it smelled bad. I can’t believe the taste and there is no smell at all, not like before... just a delicious aroma.”

I was getting tired of holding the roasted pig leg in my hand and put it on the spare plate. I ran inside and got a plate for Vos and he too put the meat down on the plate. We both continued to sip our wine, smiling away and picking on the meat. Life was good. We both knew we had had the right amount of wine to feel great and drinking any more would have made us drunk but we kept on drinking, we didn’t have the willpower to say no. We both wanted this feeling to last a long time and we were under the impression that we could do it if we continued to drink. Even I, who knew better, couldn’t separate myself from the wine. Vos gave me his empty glass. I turned around to get some more from the jar but it was all gone. I picked up the jar and showed it to him. He made a motion with his

eyes for me go get some more. I tried to get up. My legs refused to hold me. I put the empty jar back on the table a little too fast. There was a bang but the jar didn't break.

I heard Vos say, "I'm too drunk to get up, this will pass, right?"

I smiled and said, "Time will tell."

We continued to pick on the meat not because we were hungry but because the rakia (alcohol) in the wine was burning us, making our stomachs feel like we were hungry.

Our voices became sluggish and our words laboured. Vos began to mix the languages, his and mine. Half the time I couldn't understand what he was saying. We both looked silly and drunk.

"We'll have to wait it out," I said. "Have some more meat and take deep breaths."

Hours later I found myself slumped over the table. Vos was lying on the ground. The sun was about to set. I looked on top of the table and the half eaten pig carcass was still there. Sep wasn't there. Thank God Sep hadn't taken it, I thought. I noticed the bones we threw on the ground were gone. I stood up and felt a strong headache coming on. I went over to where Vos was lying and tugged on his arm. He moaned and looked up.

"I was feeling so great, what happened?" he asked and grabbed my hand.

I pulled him up. "We need to drink water, a lot of water to wash the rakia out of us," I said and took the jars inside, washed them, filled them with water and brought them back. "Here," I said, "drink it".

At first he refused but decided to follow my advice. Moments later he said the world was spinning around and he needed to lie down. I took him inside and helped him to his bed. Before I left he said he had something to show me, something very important. You can show me tomorrow I said and went outside. The cooked meat was still there. I didn't know what to do with it. We had no refrigerator

to put it in. I washed one of the buckets I had outside and put it inside. I took the bucket inside the big room and placed the cutting board on top of it. I then placed the bucket on top of the bench.

I went outside and got the other bucket, the four plates, two glasses and two jelly jars. I washed them and left them on the bench inside the big room. I then filled the bucket half full of water under the shower, unplugged the water fountain, drank some water and took the bucket outside. I dumped it on the fire and put it out. I took the rotisserie sticks inside and left them on the bench unwashed. By then I was exhausted and went to bed.

The next morning I got out of bed much later than usual. Vos was already up and preparing tea.

He looked at me and said, “You look like hell.”

“It’s from dehydration,” I replied. “We sat in the sun for too long and we didn’t drink enough water.”

“Are you sure it wasn’t from the wine?” he asked.

“That contributed to it too,” I replied.

“Well, despite my dizziness and nausea I enjoyed our time very much yesterday. It was one of the best times in my life,” Vos said.

I gave him the thumbs up.

While having our morning tea I reminded Vos of what he had said to me the night before, that he had something important to show me.

“That can wait, I’ll do that another time,” he said and asked me what I wanted to do today.

“We should eat the rest of the meat before it spoils. We should do that as soon as possible.”

He shook his head in agreement and said, “How about we start at lunch and eat until it’s all gone. And... we should have some wine with it as well. How does that sound?”

I had to remind him that the meat wasn’t going to taste as good as it had yesterday and that, unless heated, would be loaded with solidified pig fat. But I don’t think he understood me, at least not everything I told him, so I said, “We’ll make another fire, a small one, to warm up the meat.”

He thought for a moment and said okay and offered to help.

We decided not to eat breakfast; we were still feeling the effects of overindulging the night before. As soon as we finished our tea we went outside and began to prepare the firepit. We pushed the ashes and coals to one side and began to separate the coals from the ashes. We were going to ignite the unburned coals and use them to heat the meat.

After we were done with the pit we went to the bucket in the corner and did the same. We picked out as many coals as we could unearth and put them in the smaller bucket. When we were done we dumped the coals on the side of the firepit, placed the ashes with our hands in the smaller bucket and dumped them into the big bucket in the corner. It was almost full. We then gathered some dry grass and small sticks, placed them in the centre of the pit and lit them. We added some dry wood from the woodpile and when it started burning we began to add coals on top of it. I showed Vos how to blow on the coals with the metal pipe to start them burning. While Vos was doing that I went inside, washed my hands, brought the plates and wine glasses outside and placed them on the table. I then went in, washed the rotisserie stick under the water fountain and stuck the meat on it. I took it outside and rested it on two plates. I went back in and washed the bucket and filled it half full of water. I also washed both jelly jars and filled them with wine. I took them and the bucket outside and set them on the table.

“The coals are almost lit, what do you want me to do next?” Vos asked.

“We just have to wait for the flames to die out and we’ll warm the meat. In the meantime I’ll pour you some water so that you can wash your hands.”

I dipped my glass into the bucket and poured the water on his hands. After that we each had a drink of water in hopes of avoiding what had happened to us the day before.

Vos looked at me, smiled and said, “How about we have some wine while we wait for the meat to warm? Can we do that?”

“Why not?” I replied. I then looked at him and said, “How about you pour us the wine while I hold the meat over the fire?”

Vos gave me two thumbs up, grabbed the jar, flipped it open and filled our glasses half full. He then handed me my glass and said, “To our health.”

We clinked our glasses and I also said, “To our health.”

I had a sip, put my glass down and lowered the meat over the burning coals. I realized that we had started drinking before noon which is a no-no in Canada but okay in Macedonia. My father had told me that my grandfather drank a shot of rakia first thing in the morning for breakfast. I also heard people that say alcohol damages your liver. Ah, who cares, I thought.

Fat started dripping from the meat but didn’t have the same aroma as the day before. The wine didn’t go down as easily as the day before either. It seemed forced... There was no breeze in the air and the sun was stifling hot. I noticed Sep too was not his usual self even though his stomach had gone down.

I looked at Vos and he looked at me and said, “Put the meat on the plate and let’s go inside, it’s not a nice day to be out.”

I agreed, took the meat out of the fire and put it on top of the two plates and said, “It’s too much meat. Why don’t we take what we want and give the rest to Sep?” Vos agreed.

The meat was still hot as we picked at it until we filled our plates. Vos seemed to prefer the crispy part on the outside. I took a bite from the soft part. It tasted fine but not as good as the day before.

Vos tossed the rest of the meat in Sep's direction. Sep suddenly jumped and ran but slowly came back. He sniffed the meat and took a small bite. He looked away as if he didn't want it. Then he changed his mind and grabbed the whole thing. He slowly carried it inside. We both watched him struggle. The carcass was bigger than him. I heard Vos say "Sep will be chewing on that for days."

Vos took our plates inside and came back for the wine and glasses. I put out the fire and cleaned everything. When I joined Vos I found him nibbling on the meat and taking small sips of his wine.

"It's much better inside," he said.

The big secret

I sat in the usual place, had a bite of meat and a sip of wine. Vos looked at me and said, “Everything has its time, just be thankful for the good time we had yesterday. There will be more good times in the future, I’m sure.” He smiled and said, “Now is a good time to tell you my secret.”

Hearing Vos say that made me go through a swing of thoughts and emotions from suspicion to mistrust to fear to abandonment and eventually curiosity. I heard myself say, “You have a secret?”

I don’t know why I said that but Vos laughed out loud and said, “I am trying to be serious here, everyone has secrets, this is important.”

Feeling sheepish for making light of something that Vos felt was important, I decided to apologize. Vos accepted my apology and said that we were friends and there was no need for an apology.

“When we finish lunch I want to show you something.”

I ate the food faster than usual and gulped down the rest of the wine which by now was working on me and giving me a kind of forced buzz. Vos too picked up the pace eating and we were done in no time.

He led the way towards the game room. I figured he wanted to show me some fancy move to do with the game, something he hadn’t taught me yet. But instead of going to the game room, Vos continued walking down the hallway, turned right and stopped in front of a large door. The door had a shield engraved on it and on the shield was writing. Vos didn’t say what the writing was and I didn’t ask. In the centre of the shield was an engraving of a hand which I interpreted to mean stop. I tried to anticipate what he was going to show me but I drew a blank.

Vos slipped his badge into a slot on the door. The writing on the shield began to glow. Vos touched a sequence of letters. I recognized the sequence. It was the password he used in the game. He then placed his hand over the handprint and the handprint began

to glow red. The light was so strong I could see his finger bones. A second later all the lights on the door went off and the door clicked open. Vos pushed it in. The door was very thick. Vos said it was blast proof. It was dark inside as we walked in. Vos turned a switch and a bunch of lights came on.

“Oh, not another game?” I heard myself say.

Vos walked over to the ship, which was an exact copy of the ship in the game, slapped it with his hand and said, “See, it’s not a game, it’s real.”

I didn’t know what to say. Was this a prank? Was the ship real or not? And if it was, why was it a secret and hidden down here? I didn’t say anything but Vos knew exactly what I was thinking.

He looked at me and said, “It’s not only real but it also works. And as to why I kept it a secret, not just from you but from everyone on this planet, it’s because I don’t want to lose it. If people knew about it, especially the authorities, it would have been decommissioned and taken apart a long time ago. This ship is my inheritance and I am its keeper. It’s over one thousand of your earth years old. It was built after the great wars when people still believed that more wars would be coming. It is far superior to anything built before or after it. I can say with certainty that it is not only one of a kind but also the most powerful war machine known to this world. And no one must know about it. Come, I will give you a tour inside.”

At that moment I had a million questions running through my mind but I couldn’t even articulate one. Deep inside me I still believed there was a hidden joke somewhere in there and I was waiting for the punch line. But there was no joke and no punch line. I ran my hand over its surface and it was solid.

“I know you have many questions but first let us go inside,” said Vos, as he turned towards me and added. “No one outside of me can get into this ship or operate it, not without my code (pass code) and handprint. And because it was designed to outlast its captains there is a second code and a number of rigorous procedures to go through to change from one captain to the next. By that I mean the existing

captain must voluntarily abdicate in order for the ship to accept the next captain. Should the existing captain die before his or her time the new captain must also pass a number of tests then enter ten other symbols in the right sequence before the ship can accept him or her.

I have written the sequence of symbols on the back of the name tag on my uniform. To an ordinary person they are a bunch of random meaningless numbers. But used correctly they can activate the ship and allow the next captain to take control. The numbers point to the symbols on the ship's panel which I am about to show you. They each point to the symbol counting from the right and their order starts from the left most number.

This was done so that no unauthorized person can steal, fly or operate the ship. You can imagine how dangerous this ship could be in the wrong hands. Unfortunately to this day no one except for me can access it or knows how to operate it..."

When he was done talking Vos placed his badge in a slot on the side of the ship which opened a panel. In it was a plate, a keypad, with the same ten symbols as the door and a similar hand shaped pad to place a hand on. After he entered his pass code, Vos placed his right hand over the handprint and a red light scanned it from bottom to top. A loud click followed and a door behind the ship began to open. Vos looked at me and said, "The ship knows me from my handprint and code."

I looked at his hand and said, "Did the light hurt your hand? I could see your bones as it was scanning it."

He smiled and said, "No it didn't hurt."

I felt silly for asking.

Vos pulled out his badge and the panel door closed. We then walked to the back of the ship and went inside through the back door. Vos pushed a green button on the side of the short hallway which was glowing red while the door was opening. The moment Vos pressed the green button it immediately turned red and the door started closing. When the door was fully closed the lights inside went dim

and the ship's interior looked exactly like the one in the game. Vos took the captain's chair and I sat on his left. He flipped the lever under his chair and the ship's engines began to power up. The panels also powered up. Everything was exactly as it was in the game, even the robots, except they looked more realistic. The two women, his guards, who stood right beside us, looked cold and lifeless.

"I take it these two follow you around wherever you go when you are outside the ship?" I asked and pointed to the robot beside me that looked like a woman.

"Indeed they do," Vos replied.

"Why young females?" I asked.

Less conspicuous. They were meant to look like companions accompanying a young gentleman but now I would look ridiculous with them at my side. I just hope I never have to go outside in public with them."

Vos paused for a moment to give me a chance to ask questions. But I was silent still trying to process what was happening. He broke the silence and said, "Ordinarily a captain remains active for about a generation before a new captain is trained, usually a son or a daughter. But in my case I have been active for most of my life because I have no heir to replace me."

I looked at him, he looked sad. I didn't say anything.

Vos went on to say that the operation of this ship was identical to the game, the propulsion, weapons, navigation, tracking, communications, climate control, and so on but none of it could be used inside the hangar. The only things that could be used after the roof opens were the impulse controls. The robot in the front is responsible for taking the ship in and out of the hangar.

Vos also showed me how to operate the large panels above the hangar to open the roof from inside the ship so that the ship could be raised out. He said the panels above the hangar had to be checked regularly and lubricated so they wouldn't seize up. If they don't

open the ship can't fly out. The hanger itself was blast proof. It was made from the same material as the outer surface of the ship.

Finally he showed me where the spare fuel cells were stored inside the ship and how to install them. After that we went towards the back of the ship and Vos showed me the storage cabinets, beds and washrooms. The storage cabinets were filled with food, clothing, shoes and other supplies neatly packed. Everything was made of unbreakable material.

"No glass material is allowed on the ship," he said.

He must have read my mind because I was wondering if I could bring the wine jars and glasses here.

There were three beds, one on the right and two on the left. The bed on the right was for the captain. The washrooms were tiny, very similar to those in modern airplanes on earth. The one on the right was exclusively for the captain.

"So, this is your big secret?" I asked.

"Yes! It feels good to tell someone at last. Tomorrow we will go up on the rafters, lubricate the gears and open the roof. And maybe, someday soon I will take us out for a spin. Unfortunately it will have to be a short spin and in the night, we can't afford to be discovered," he replied.

Vos shut down the engines and closed all the doors as we returned to the room where we had left our food. We both looked at the jelly jar full of wine and had the same idea.

"This is a cause for celebration," I said.

"But we have no more meat."

"For an occasion like this we don't need any meat. I'll go and get us another jelly jar, a full one this time."

When I came back Vos had a couple of small plates and a couple of triangular spoons ready for us to eat the jelly. I flipped the lid open and Vos scooped us some jelly. I filled our glasses half full of wine and we toasted to the ship and may she keep our two worlds safe.

When we finished the wine in the jar I went and filled the jar again. This time we drank a large glass of water with each half glass of wine. And with each fill of wine we had another serving of jelly until it was all gone. The burning sugar forced us to drink water regularly, and even though we drank more wine than the day before we didn't get drunk or sick with a headache.

The next day we went up on the metal rafters and poured lubricant on the gears that opened the roof. Vos showed me the generator that powered the facilities. It had run continuously for years. It was powered by a fuel unfamiliar to me that was designed to last many years. It wasn't the same kind of fuel that powered the ship's engines and weapons. There were no moving parts in the generator. Vos said one day he would explain to me how it worked. We went back down to the ship and activated the motors that opened the roof. We watched the huge plates of metal parting and then the sun shining in. The ship's surface looked dark green in full sunlight. Vos then pushed the shut off button and the hangar and ship began to turn dark as the roof closed.

"It worked like a charm," declared Vos.

After that we went back to the front part of the facilities and had our tea. While drinking Vos mentioned that we had one more task to do in the ship. When we were finished drinking tea we went back and Vos showed me how to run full diagnostic tests on every piece of equipment in the ship. When the tests were done Vos showed me on the panel that everything was operational. If something wasn't working he'd have to activate the maintenance robots and they would take care of the problem. The ship was designed to require very little maintenance.

By the time we were done it was already evening and we ate supper. Vos said the next day he was going to the city to meet with some people and bring back supplies. He asked me if I needed anything

and I said no. He said he would be gone for a day and would be back the day after in the morning. When I got up the next day I found food on the table for four meals for me and Sep. Vos wasn't there. I assumed he'd left for the city very early in the morning.

I found the day very boring without Vos. Sep was no fun either, not like the old days. I spent the entire day up on the hill thinking about all the things that had transpired in the last few days and wondered where all this was going. Was I going to become Vos's heir? That had crossed my mind many times but every time I thought about it I came to the same conclusion; "ridiculous".

While Sep lay there snoozing I spent the evening hours looking at the sky wondering what was to become of me.

Tragedy strikes

There was a big bang which made me jump to my feet. I didn't know where I was. I saw Sep bolt and run down the hill. It was early in the morning. I realized I was asleep and had never left the hill last night. There was a lot of smoke coming from the direction of the facilities. A little ship hovered over the yard. I ran as fast as I could. There was a hole burned in the metal fence. The large front gate was gone. Fire was burning all over the yard. There was no smoke coming out of the facilities. I ran to the front of the yard and saw the little ship. It had landed in the yard. Three men came out and ran towards the facility doors. I saw Vos lying on the ground. He was motionless. We all ran towards him. Two of the men grabbed me by my arms. I started screaming and yelling profanities at them. Vos moved slightly and said something. The two men let me go. I ran to Vos and stared at him. It was horrible. The bottom half of his body was completely burned. I began to yell at the men and cursed them for what they had done.

In a faint voice Vos said, "It wasn't them, they are my men, I believe it was the Karons who attacked me. Listen to me very carefully, here is my badge, activate the ship. They will help you, you're the only one who can operate it. Protect my people and yours."

I was in shock, my best friend was badly wounded, I wanted to do something to help him, but what? Vos waved to the third man and said something. Vos passed out. The man tried to revive him. Vos came to and said something more while pointing at me. I was in tears. I tried to run to Vos but the other two men grabbed me and dragged me toward the inside of the facilities. The third man took something from the little ship, put out the fires and went back to Vos.

The two men first took me to the room where Vos slept. They grabbed his uniform. Then they took me towards the museum but it appeared they didn't know what to do. I showed them how to get inside the museum. I assumed that's where they wanted to go but they didn't. We left the museum and went further down the hall. We stopped behind the big door with the writing and the shield. I stuck

Vos's badge in the side of the door and placed my hand in the hand pad. The scanner began to operate. The red light felt warm and tingly, then suddenly I received a huge shock that threw me to the ground.

When I stood up the two men looked at me angrily. They pulled me up and gave me Vos's uniform. I assumed they wanted me to put it on, so I did. I looked ridiculous but they didn't seem to care. They again pointed to the door. I inserted Vos's badge in the slot again. Just then I remembered what Vos had said about the numbers written on the back of his name tag and how to engage the symbols.

I ripped off the name tag, found the numbers and pushed the ten symbols in the order according to the numbers. I heard a click and figured I was in. I then placed my hand on the hand pad and again I was shocked. I had done everything right but the door wouldn't open.

The two men dragged me back to the third man. They said something to him. I assumed they were explainingd what had happened. He said something to them and they took me to their little ship and sat me in the back seat. Before they closed the door the man said a few more things and went back to Vos who was still alive. I wondered when the medical team was going to arrive.

The first trial

We immediately took off and were in the air. We flew for hours before we landed in a field. We came out and walked up a hill. The weather there was a lot cooler. On top of the hill were all sorts of shacks and people walking around everywhere. Some people wore rags and others black robes. There were only a few people dressed in white. I saw people who were missing teeth and had white eyes, probably blinded by something. Almost everyone was selling something. Metal pots, pans, outdoor gas stoves... The kind of things Vos and I could have used. The thought of Vos made me feel sad. I wondered what was going to happen to him and if they would be able to save him. It was terrible what had happened to him. Maybe nothing had happened, maybe this was a bad dream and any second now I was going to wake up.

After walking for about ten minutes through the crowds, we came upon a wooden counter made of rough planks and stopped behind it. A young girl no more than sixteen years old came over and I assume asked what we wanted. She looked Chinese. One of the men spoke to her and said something. She looked away to the opposite corner of the yard at an old man. The old man was tall and thin and had a white beard. He also looked Chinese from the distance. He had white eyes and white hair. I assumed he was blind.

The girl yelled something at him in a different language. He waved the back of his hand upwards a couple of times which I interpreted to mean go away. The girl turned around and said something. The same man who had spoken to her became furious and pointed at my badge on the chain, which I was wearing around my neck, and demanded something from the girl.

She didn't look worried; she was probably used to being yelled at. She again told the blind old man what we wanted and again the man said something negative, I assume, but this time with his own voice.

The same man then pulled out his badge, which looked different from mine, made a motion with his finger and yelled something. This I interpreted to mean, "I am from the authorities give me what I want or I will burn the place down..."

The girl said something very terse to the thin old man and he disappeared into the back. The girl said something which calmed the situation.

Then, suddenly, the two men let go of my arms. A short old woman with messy reddish hair grabbed my badge and began to pull on it. She looked at me with a hateful look and with clenched teeth said something that seemed to be loaded with poison.

“What’s wrong with you?” I snapped at her in Macedonian.

She looked me in the eyes and in broken Macedonian said, “You bastard, where did you steal this? I know it’s not yours!”

I was so furious I didn’t even realize that she was speaking to me in Macedonian.

“Voskot gave it to me! Who do you think you are?”

She got even angrier and yelled out loud, “YOU LIAR, VOSKOT WOULD NEVER PART WITH HIS BADGE!!”

My anger turned to sadness and I said, “Voskot was badly wounded at the facilities in Apserpon earlier this morning. He said it was a Karon attack.”

Suddenly she let go of the badge. She turned to me and quietly said, “Voskot is my older brother.”

At about the same time the young Chinese girl came back with a four litre glass jar filled with a clear liquid and handed it to the man who had been yelling at her earlier.

I asked the old lady what her name was and she said, “Princess Vieria.” She then grabbed my wrist and said, “Take only four drops of this liquid with a full glass of water and do what these men tell you. You need to go through the initiation process before you can take my brother’s place. Do you hear me? I will find you a proper interpreter who can help you communicate with my people but it

will take some time. But first I need to find my brother and see how he is doing.”

And with those words she began to walk away. “How do I find you?” I yelled.

“I will find you!” she replied.

The two men grabbed me by my arms again and took me to an empty shack. There was an open window and people kept looking in as they passed by. In it was a wooden bench substituting for a table. The man holding the jar put it on top of the table and the other man went outside and came back with a glass full of water. The first man unscrewed the lid from the jar. There was a long dropper attached to the inside of the lid that reached to the jar’s bottom. It was full of liquid. The man tilted it and it began to drip slowly back into the jar. The other man brought the glass with the water close and the first man put four drops of the liquid into it. He then put the lid back on the jar. The other man handed me the glass. I took it and drank it. There was no taste to speak of. The two men watched me carefully from some distance like I was going to explode.

Minutes later my body began to burn and I was overwhelmed with a sense of strength. My mind came into sudden sharp focus and I felt like there was nothing I couldn’t do. My fears, anxiety and uncertainty evaporated and I felt I could do anything. I felt great and physically strong. The effects of the liquid lasted about twenty minutes. After that I felt exhausted and lay down for a few hours.

I spent the night alone in what on earth we would call a “flea infested”, dirty motel. The two men came back early the next morning and took me away. I had had nothing to eat.

The second trial

Hours later we landed on top of a hill. It was cold and a large fire was burning on the slope at the edge of the top of the hill. It was a very large fire. I noticed the two men accompanying me, whom I assumed to be my guards, were wearing side arms. One of them was carrying a long, hot gas rifle. We went to the fire and were joined by a number of local men and women. The men were very thin and almost three metres tall. The women were thin but shorter, about my height. They didn't speak. They wore loin cloths made of skins, moccasins and hats also made of skins. The women were bare breasted. No one spoke a word but they all seemed to know why we were there, except for me, of course.

I felt warm by the fire and began to relax. We seemed to be waiting for something but for what I didn't know. The locals kept shifting their positions making my two guards nervous. One of the women sat in front of me and began to back into me. A tall young man became upset and reached out to grab me. One of my guards pulled out his side arm and shot him in the arm. He made a loud but strange sound. His arm was burned and he pulled it in and held it tight against his chest. After that the shifting stopped. Moments later, one of the older men made a strange sound and pointed down to a path fenced by bushes where a creature, looking like a small hippopotamus, emerged. The guard handed me the rifle. I didn't know what to do with it. He pointed at the creature but I was not sure what he wanted me to do. He then angrily grabbed the rifle from my hand, aimed and took a shot at the creature. The creature dropped.

About a dozen of the younger local men ran down. They looked like walking sticks from the distance. They retrieved the creature and carried it back up. The older men took it over, skinned it, cut it into pieces and began to cook it over the fire. About an hour later the meat looked cooked. The oldest looking tall man took a big chunk and pointed it at me. I took it. It was very hot. I looked around and saw almost all of the locals looking at me and salivating. They were all waiting for me to do something. One of my guards looked at me angrily and motioned for me to start eating. I took a bite and shook my head with approval. I heard a loud roar and everyone began to

eat. To my surprise I had never tasted anything so good. The meat was dripping with blood but was so tasty I couldn't put it down. The locals ate their portions and disappeared. The two guards who had brought me there didn't eat any, why I don't know. When I was done eating they escorted me back to the little ship and took me to a chalet in the nearby mountains. It was very cold there. They locked me up in a cold room and left.

I noticed there was a fireplace and firewood but no matches or kindling. But that wasn't a problem for me. I cut a bunch of splinters off the dry logs and lit them with my lighter. The thick logs were very dry and caught fire quickly. There was no bed to sleep on so I slept on the floor. The two men came back early the next morning and took me away again. They gave me nothing to eat. I think they were surprised to find me alive.

The third trial

After flying for about half an hour we landed in a flat area on top of a short hill that led to a taller hill. From there they escorted me up the hill away from the ship and into a low building. One of the guards pulled out a key and opened the door.

A staircase led us below ground. We entered a very long and narrow room with multiple windows at ground level. The windows had metal bars on the outside and the glass was very dirty. There were no artificial lights inside. The place was lit by sunlight alone. From the distance the room looked like a long lecture hall with chairs lined up in rows and no desks. Most of the chairs were occupied by people wearing uniforms that looked very similar. On closer examination I noticed that the people were all dead.

The people sitting on the chairs were skeletons dressed in uniforms.

Suddenly I felt the door slam. It was shut behind me. I ran back and tried to open it but it was locked. I watched the two men walk back to their ship and take off.

I went back inside and looked around. I counted the chairs. There were fifty two of them. There were thirteen rows of four chairs each. The skeletons were tied with straps on the chairs. There were forty-seven skeletons. The rest of the chairs were empty. I looked around some more and found a room on the side without a door. There was a long bench on the far side. It was loaded with dust. The room looked like a waiting room. There was a washroom with running water next to the entrance. There was a dresser with towels and bed covers in the washroom. There was a sink but no shower or bath. Next to the washroom was a large cabinet. It was locked.

I could only speculate as to what this place was but from the skeletons I assumed it was a mausoleum.

I waited for the men to return but there was no sign of them. It became dark very quickly so I decided to use the bench for a bed and spent the night there in silence, among the skeletons, trying to

understand what was happening to me and why I was being put through these trials.

Early the next morning I heard the lock on the door click open. The two men were back. They looked for me. Again, I had the impression that they were surprised to find me alive.

They unlocked the locked cabinet, took out a uniform and motioned for me to put it on. It was a full uniform that included a pair of pants, a shirt, underwear, socks, shoes and a jacket. They adjusted it to fit me just right. They then threw Vos's uniform that I was wearing into a metal trash bin with some old rags. I ran over and got my lighter, knife, watch and Vos's name tag. They then grabbed me and the trash bin and took us outside. One of them poured something into the trash bin and lit it on fire. We waited for a few minutes until everything had burned down and went to the ship.

Meeting Oripson

As we flew to our next destination, I couldn't help but feel sad for what had happened to Vos. He was always on my mind. I constantly saw his friendly, smiling face everywhere I looked. I was hoping and praying that he was all right. He was my friend and I had a hard time accepting what had happened to him.

Suddenly I felt the ship take a sharp turn. We landed behind a junkyard. It was dark. A man holding a large suitcase walked over and sat beside me in the little flying machine.

He looked at me, smiled and said, "It's an honour to meet you Sir."

He spoke in Macedonian. He was young, younger than me, and looked very nervous.

"It's an honour to meet you too. But would you mind telling me who you are and how you know my language?"

He hesitated at first and said, "My name is Oripson, I studied your language in school." He then paused for a moment and added, "Princess Vieria sent me. She sends her regrets that she couldn't be here herself because she is planning her brother's funeral."

Hearing those words filled my heart with sadness. Vos was dead. My friend was gone. He predicted that an attack was going to take place and it had.

I felt terrible and heard myself say, "I would like to go to his funeral!"

Oripson hesitated for a moment and said, "Sorry Sir, that is not possible, we have orders to take you back to Apserpon."

He then went on to say that Princess Vieria had authorized him to be my translator as well as answer all my questions.

After I took several deep breaths and composed myself I asked him how Voskot had died.

“According to police reports,” he said, “he was instantly killed by the Karon ship that attacked the industrial facilities in Apserpon.”

This was disturbing news to me. I left Vos alive but someone had told the police that he had been killed. Only four people knew what really happened; myself and the other three men who arrived after the blast. Vos told me they were his men. Viera too trusted them and told me to do what they asked of me. At the same time I knew for a fact that Vos was alive for at least twenty minutes after the attack. He was alive while we were trying to gain access to the big door. What was interesting is that during all that time no medics had arrived to help him. That was indeed disturbing.

I opened my mouth to ask Oripson for an explanation but he looked at me with a mysterious look on his face and squeezed my wrist. I figured he also knew about the inconsistencies. He had probably learned about them from Viera and didn't want to tip off these guys. The fact that he didn't speak to me in Macedonian to tell me not to ask questions, led me to believe that our conversation was probably being monitored and recorded and these guys had their own interpreter. I got the message and kept quiet for the rest of the trip.

It was well into the night when we arrived at the facilities. The ship landed on the right side of the yard. There was a large tent pitched on the left side and the place was guarded by armed guards. The moment the door of our little ship opened, we were greeted by the first man, the man who had remained behind with Vos. The first thing he asked the other two, according to Oripson who later told me, was if I had passed the “keeper of secrets” tests. The answer was yes. The next thing he asked was if they had procured the “firewater”. The answer to that too was yes.

The third man, who I later found to be the district chief of police, ordered the two to immediately give him the jug with the firewater.

He ordered us not to move while he went away to secure it. When he came back he asked Oripson who he was and what his role was in all this. He kept us inside the ship while he asked questions, which was further proof that he was monitoring our conversations. Oripson

told him that he was a simple interpreter assigned to me by Vieria. The police chief then ordered him to talk to me only in his presence and to report everything to him. Oripson agreed with absolutely no hesitation. He then asked Oripson to translate for him and turned to me and asked me what my role was.

“I don’t know. I don’t have a role.”

He then said that he would give me a role later but for now my job was to obey him. He said that from today forward he, and only he, was the boss and giving the orders. He then asked me if I understood. I said yes. He asked me if I agreed with his demands. I said absolutely. He was happy to hear that.

A moment later he reached in and grabbed Vos’s badge from my neck.

He said, “You won’t need this anymore.”

I pulled it away from his hand and objected harshly. He wanted to know why.

“It has sentimental value. Voskot was my friend. He gave it to me and I would like to keep it for a while.”

He looked at me and said, “What if I need it to do something?”

“Then I will give it to you but for now I would like to hold onto it for a while.”

He gave me a suspicious stare and said, “Okay, okay!” and left.

The two men, who had brought us here, according to Oripson, were district detectives working for the police chief. They ordered us out of the ship. When they noticed Oripson was carrying a suitcase they stopped him and wanted to know what was inside. Oripson immediately opened it and showed them the contents. He had clothing and a shaving and hair cutting kit. He opened the kit. It contained just instruments and soap. They were satisfied with the inspection and asked us to follow them.

While the two detectives were walking ahead of us, escorting us inside, I very quietly said to Oripson, "Meet me here later," and pointed to the top of the woodpile.

When we went inside the room where Vos and I usually ate our meals the two men told us to take some of the food and water from the table to our rooms. Before they separated us they told us that we were not allowed to talk to one another. One of them took me to my room and the other took Oripson to Vos's room. Before the detectives left they posted guards outside our rooms.

About an hour later I came out of my room and was stopped by a guard. I pointed to the outside, to the tent where the soldiers were housed. He let me pass. But instead of going outside I climbed on top of the woodpile, hid behind the wood and waited. About half an hour later Oripson showed up. I waved at him and he climbed on top of the woodpile. I quietly pointed to the hidden entrance that led to the next room, which was only visible from the top of the woodpile. We both slipped down. This was the room with the water fountain and shower. The side door to the building was locked.

There was nowhere to sit so we both sat in the corner on the floor near the washroom. I said to him, "I don't think they know about this room so it should be safe for us to talk in here. But we need to speak very quietly."

He agreed, "We can't stay here too long, the guards will come looking for us."

"I have many questions," I said, "starting with what happened to Voskot. I left him alive and now you tell me he's dead, killed by an attack? That's not right."

"Vieria thought so too because you told her he was alive after the attack and the police told her he was killed during the attack. I think she believes you more than the police. She told me to cooperate with you and not with the police until we get to the bottom of all this."

"What else did she tell you?" I asked.

“She suspects the police want to gain access to the ‘chamber of secrets’ and when they found out that you were being primed to take over Vos’s position as ‘keeper of the secrets’ they killed him. Vieria told me to ask you to stall the police. Don’t allow the police to gain access to the chamber of secrets until we find out what’s going on.”

“Surely they can force me,” I said.

“Yes, they can but they won’t. They need you because you have successfully completed the trials. Many have tried going through the trials but ended up dead. I understand you passed the trials and you are still alive. It is easier for them to convince you to open the door than to try and find someone else who will cooperate knowing that they might die.”

“This whole thing is very confusing to me. I tried opening the door but I couldn’t. They forced me to do it twice and both times I failed.”

“Yes, they did that to see if you had been initiated and found out that you hadn’t been. That’s why they put you through the initiation and here you are, still alive,” he replied.

“So why don’t I just go, open the door, get in the ship and fly off?” I asked.

“Well, you can’t because you need to drink the firewater to be able to withstand the shock of initiation. And we don’t have the firewater. The chief took it away and hid it as a precaution.”

Surprised Oripson then said, “So, the big secret is a ship?!”

I didn’t want to reveal any more information so I didn’t answer Oripson’s question. Instead I said, “Why don’t we meet here again at sunrise?”

He agreed and we climbed back on top of the woodpile. When the coast was clear I went back to my room. A while later Oripson did the same.

Lying in bed I thought about how to get the firewater. I figured we had to find it and steal it from the chief. It would be risky. Then we would have to extract the four drops and put it in a glass with water. After that we would have about ten minutes to get past the guards as well as gain access to the chamber of secrets.

I don't think I slept at all that night. When it started getting light outside I got out of bed and went out of my room wearing only my underwear. I looked half asleep. My guard stood up but I walked past him like he wasn't there. He let me go. He figured I was going to the washroom. I climbed on the woodpile and found Oripson crouching behind it.

"We have to talk fast," he said, "I told my guard I was going to the washroom. He gave me five minutes. I have already been here more than that."

"Listen carefully," I said, "you have to find the firewater and steal some, but not too much so as not to raise suspicion. When you have done that, scratch your right ear to let me know you have it. Then place four drops into a full glass of water and leave it on the table. After I drink it I will cause a distraction. When the guards run out to see what it is, you slip past my room and go down the hall and wait for me. I will join you there."

With those words Oripson slipped off the woodpile and, ignoring his guard, went into his room. A minute later I too returned. While scratching my head and yawning, I passed by my guard and went back to my room. About an hour later I came out fully dressed in the uniform the two detectives had issued me the day before.

I sat in my usual place and began eating my breakfast. I noticed Vos's door was open and Oripson wasn't there. His guard was standing in front of the door. I pointed to the door and made a motion to his guard. He pointed to the outside and then to his mouth meaning he went outside to eat with the others.

After I ate my food I grabbed Vos's black box and began to play with it. I got it to talk and name the objects it was displaying. My

guard was not amused and went to the back room. About half an hour later Oripson came by, put his glass of water on the table, scratched his right ear and went to his room without saying a word.

His guard saw him going in and went and sat with my guard. I drank the water and moments later felt its effects. I then went over to the next room and pointed in the direction of the tent. The guards ignored me so I walked away. I took Vos's black box with me. But instead of going outside to the tent, I jumped on the woodpile and slipped into the next room. I grabbed the 22 rifle from the cabinet, filled my pocket with bullets, climbed on the woodpile, lay down and began to fire.

After I fired the fourth shot the guards ran past me and went outside. I quickly got off the woodpile and ran back through the door and bolted it from the inside. I ran down the hall and found Oripson waiting for me.

I handed him the black box and rifle and told him to hold onto them. I told him we needed to hurry because the locked door wasn't going to hold them for long. We needed to get behind the blast proof door. He agreed and we ran down the stairs and along the corridor until we reached the door with the big shield.

Oripson looked at it and said, "Wow the chamber of secrets... It's real!"

I quickly went through the motion the same as before and again I was shocked but this time I did not let go. It hurt just as much as before but I was able to withstand the pain. After the door opened I turned on the lights. Oripson saw the ship.

I took the box and rifle from him and asked him, "Where does your loyalty lie, with me or with them?"

Without hesitation he said, "My loyalty lies with Princess Viera and no one else!"

"Good!" I said, "Now come with me."

I pulled him inside, closed the big door and locked it from the inside.

“We will be safe in here,” I said.

Dragon Fire

While Oripson was admiring the ship I looked around. The entire hanger was surrounded with heavy duty metallic cabinets. They were all locked. I slipped my badge into one and it opened. There were all sorts of bits and pieces of equipment looking like spare parts for the ship. As I pushed the door shut I realized that the guards would be looking for us and might try to break in through the metal door and in the process might damage the locking mechanisms.

It would be best if we left the hangar, I figured. I quickly went to the side of the ship, slipped Vos's badge into it and went through the sequence of entering the long password. I then placed my hand on the hand pad. It was scanned halfway and then "zap", I was shocked. I endured the shock. I then entered Vos's short password from the game. The door on the back of the ship began to open. Oripson ran towards me and asked what was happening.

"It's time to go in and fly out," I said and shut the panel.

He looked at me and asked, "You mean this relic can fly?"

"It's time to find out."

We both ran inside and I pushed the button to close the ship's door.

When we were inside I asked Oripson to sit on my left in front of the communications panel. I took the captain's chair and went through the sequence the same way as I had during the game and started the engines and everything else, including the robots. I then activated gravity control. A good idea if you are flying in outer space, something Vos strongly emphasized. Everything worked as it should. The inside came alive and so did the five robots.

"You will need to operate the communications panel, are you familiar with the panel?" I asked.

He looked at it and said, “Yes, but this is an antiquated panel that belongs in a museum, we used panels like this in our games when we were children.”

“Good! Now strap on your seatbelt.”

I did the same and pushed the button to open the hangar roof.

There was a lot of banging and crackling and finally the roof was fully open. The ship took on a dark green metallic colour under the light of the rising sun. I then activated the docking button and the centre robot took control of the ship. There were a lot of puffs and hisses coming out of the ship, which raised a lot of dust inside the hanger. The ship eventually began to rise out of the hanger and above the dust. When it rose high enough above the roof I pushed the button and the hanger roof began to close.

“We don’t want those guys getting in through the roof,” I said.

Oripson didn’t say anything. He probably didn’t hear me. He was trying to process everything that he was doing.

I raised the joystick up, pushed it slightly forward and the impulse controls disengaged. The ship moved forward and flew over the facilities. I pulled back on the joystick and the ship flew up into the empty sky. We were in outer space in no time. When we leveled off we were confronted by about a dozen border guard ships.

“They are ordering us to stop or they will fire,” said Oripson.

I instructed Oripson to ignore them and contact Vieria and bring her up to date with what was happening. Also let her know that we have an armed ship in our possession and want instructions for what she wants us to do next.

Oripson agreed and began to set up communications. In the meantime I wanted to test what this ship was capable of in terms of speed and slowly pressed the joystick forward until it reached its limit.

I checked my display; it showed that we had been fired upon more than fifty times but we had outrun the little ships and they were nowhere to be found.

Oripson made contact with Vieria and assured her that the police had failed to gain access to the chamber of secrets and that we had an old ship in our possession and were flying in outer space. She suggested we stay there and keep an eye out for armed Karon ships.

I also told Oripson to tell Vieria that she had foxes in her henhouse that needed to be taken care of. Oripson told her exactly that and she understood what it meant.

I figured it was best to say as little as possible in simple communications which, according Oripson, even children could figure out. Discretion was necessary, I thought.

I told Oripson, “We’ll do exactly what Vieria wants us to do, stay here and watch for Karon ships, but first we have a score to settle down at Apserpon.”

Oripson strongly disagreed with my decision to return to Apserpon and insisted we stay up here as ordered. I told him this was my decision and this was my ship and had nothing to do with him or Vieria. He was about to make a call but I turned off his panel.

He told me I was crazy but I ignored him.

Moments later we were hovering above the facilities at Apserpon. The guards and police were still there. When they saw the ship they began to fire at it.

I told Oripson I was going to turn his communications panel on again and not to do anything unless I asked him. I also told him that it was time to test the weapons on this ship to which he had earlier referred as a relic.

I powered up one of the energy cannons and set it to minimum. I then asked Oripson to relay a message to the guards and ask them to

drop their weapons and surrender. He said he didn't know how. He didn't know what their call number was.

"Perhaps they will understand this," I said and fired the cannon above their heads. A bright flash of light came out and hit the hill on the other side of the facilities.

More guards rushed out and they too joined the guards already firing at us.

I powered up another cannon and set it at minimum.

"I have no idea what this thing can do but if they don't stop firing at us I will be forced to fire at them," I said.

Oripson practically freaked and kept screaming, insisting that we stop this and leave immediately.

I got angry and fired. The flash at such close range blinded me. When I could see again I looked outside. The entire area was burned and looked black. There was no one firing.

Oripson became hysterical and began to scream. I landed the ship in front of the facility yard and tried to calm him down. When he did calm down I told him to stay there and keep quiet.

I opened a cabinet, took three energy hand weapons and handed my guards one each. I then opened the ship's door and began to walk outside. The two women robots automatically followed me. The moment I stepped out the two detectives charged at me and my female guards shot them dead. I checked, they were dead.

I walked towards the tent, my female guards following closely behind. I opened the tent door and there was the chief with his hands up. I raised my hand and my guards lowered their weapons.

I raised my weapon, pointed it at him and in Macedonian said, "This is for my friend Vos." I then pulled the trigger.

When I turned around I saw Oripson behind me vomiting.

When he composed himself I asked him to go and get the jug of firewater and his suitcase and go back to the ship. I went to the big room and filled the three empty jars with the rest of the wine and put them inside an empty bucket. I then went to the cupboard and got four jars of jelly and placed them in the same bucket. After that I went to my room and got my stuff including the uniform that Vos had given me and returned to the ship. Oripson was there waiting for me, looking glum.

After I closed the ship's door and took my seat, I asked him to contact Viera and inform her of what we had done here and that we were going back into space to resume our mission of monitoring the border.

After composing himself Oripson did what I asked. To his surprise Viera didn't object to the diversion from our mission. In fact she approved of what we had done and said she would have done exactly the same thing. She then added that there were a few less rats to worry about. What I had done was as personal for her as it was for me.

Moments later we were again in outer space and took a stationary position behind some space debris facing Barkon, the Karon planet.

I got no satisfaction from what I did back on the planet because it wasn't going to bring Vos back. I was angry, however, very angry, which surprised me. I was also angry at Oripson for not understanding. He had sensed that and was afraid of me.

"It's time to talk," I said. "I want to know everything. Start from the beginning and tell me what is going on here."

He said he didn't know much but he would do his best.

"Let's start from the beginning. Who is young Princess Anelia and what does she have to do with Vos?" I asked.

"Who is Vos?" he asked.

“Vos is Voskot, that’s what I called him,” I said and asked, “And may I call you Ori?”

“Yes, yes, I would like that,” he replied.

He thought about it for a second and said, “Let me begin with the royal family. Vos was the oldest of the three senior royals followed by Viera and King Velion. After his father died Vos was crowned king of the planet. When Vos found out that he couldn’t have children he abdicated his position and appointed his younger brother Velion to become king. After that Vos isolated himself and chose the position of keeper of the secrets. His father before him was both king and keeper of the secrets. Since Vos couldn’t have children of his own he wanted to adopt Princess Anelia, one of King Velion’s seven daughters, but she was either not interested or Vos thought she was not mature enough. And, as it turned out, she was unpredictable, undisciplined and an embarrassment to the royal family.

I don’t know how you fit into the picture but some from the ruling class began to worry that Vos was spending too much time with you and was cooking up something.

No other people, except for the keepers of the secrets, knew what the secrets were. Most people assumed they were something important that needed to be guarded by the rightful keepers.

Unfortunately many people at the top didn’t want these secrets to go to you, an alien. And from what Viera told me, the authorities had been trying to get their hands on them for a long time. But, it seems, Vos for some reason didn’t want the authorities to have them, which is why he held onto them. He wanted to pass them on to someone who was not corrupted by the politics on this planet. At least that’s what Viera thought.

When the authorities figured out what Vos was about to do, make you the keeper of the secrets, they decided to act. So they grabbed you and because you are an alien and not from here, in other words you have no deep loyalties or caring for this planet, they figured they could convince you to give up the secrets to them.

After you passed the three trials they would have given you anything you wanted if you were prepared to give them access to the secrets. But I think they underestimated you. You had become too attached to Vos and much faster than they had anticipated. So, according to Vieria, they used the Karons to assassinate Vos but failed. So then they killed him and tried to blame the Karons.

The authorities figured that with Vos out of the way your connection to him would be terminated. They figured it was now a matter of time before you folded and they could get their hands on the secrets. But that didn't work for them either," he replied.

What were these trials I went through about?" I asked.

"I'm not certain but from what I've heard in the past they were purely ceremonial. But then many people died doing them so they figured a keeper had to be of a certain character to pass them. The first trial was drinking the firewater. If you don't know the formula and drink too much you will be poisoned. Too little and it would be ineffective. The second trial, the drinking of the blood of the Sopion is also poisonous to most people and they would die in a matter of hours. The third trial was sleeping in the chamber of the dead, the former keepers of the secret who supposedly would have ended your life if they had no faith and confidence in you.

But you survived the three trials while they had you in their hands and they figured it was now a matter of time before they broke you and got their hands on the secrets. No one knew what the secrets were," he replied.

"Is the Karon threat real or just a scare tactic?" I asked.

"The Karon's themselves, as I understand it, are peaceful creatures and want to survive like everyone else but there are elements on this planet that don't want them to exist and refuse to accept the wrongs they have done to them. Many, including Vieria, think someone else is behind the Karon revolt and is stirring them up to cause trouble. And, until yesterday, Vieria believed the influence came from the outside, probably from the elements they do business with. But after

Vos was killed, she thinks the influence is coming from inside this planet, probably from the high echelons,” he replied.

“Tell me about Viera. Does she have a family?” I asked.

“No. She never married. She has an abrasive character. She is pushy and very demanding which makes her unattractive. She is now minister of education. She became very bitter and isolated when Vos bypassed her and made Velion king. She was in line for the throne but Vos figured she didn’t have the right character to be a diplomat. But deep down she knew Vos was right,” he replied.

“Tell me about Vos.”

“Everyone knew and admired Vos. He was head of the military academy and commander and chief of the military forces, which we don’t have. He broke everyone’s heart when he quit being king. I think he quit because he didn’t like what was happening with our society. He didn’t want to be just a figurehead and be blamed for everything others did. In other words, he was fed up with our society and decided to isolate himself. He became a hermit. He also had reservations about who to pass on the secrets to and held onto that position far too long,” he replied.

“Tell me about King Velion.”

“King Velion is a simple and jovial man. He enjoys his position as a ceremonial king and loudly laughs off the criticism he gets. He is often called a buffoon. He loves to throw big parties and play loud music. Everyone on this planet was disappointed with him when he married a woman from the planet Stredeon. He has seven daughters very close in age and they are all spoiled brats,” he replied.

“Tell me about the government of this planet.”

“Well, the planet is divided into zones and each zone has districts. There is a middle zone and four outer zones. The outer zones have basically lawless districts run by gangs and self-appointed governors. The middle zone has strict laws that are well-enforced. Each district in the middle zone has elected representatives that run

the ministries. Each district also has its own law enforcement. These guys, the police, actually run the planet.”

But before he was able to tell me the whole story I interrupted him and said, “Too much information. I won’t be able to remember it all. Tell me what was written on the big door with the shield back in the facilities.”

“Oh, the big door!?! A few days ago I thought the chamber of secrets was a myth made up to make the royal family look mysterious and powerful. I thought it was a fairytale until I saw the door myself. According to legend the chamber of secrets was guarded by priests. The secrets themselves were passed on from generation to generation. Nobody knew what the secrets were and that’s why they were called secrets. Of those who believed that such secrets existed, many thought they were ancient knowledge written down on ancient tablets, locked in a secret room. Some thought they were magic potions. Some thought they were ancient weapons. Some even thought they were mythical creatures like dragons. And so on.

People basically just speculated as to what the secrets were and the more they speculated the more mysterious the secrets became. As for the writing on the door, it was random symbols without any meaning,” he replied.

“Tell me about yourself.”

“Well, there’s not much to tell. I come from a middle class family and am still in school. I’m at the top of my class studying communications with a minor in languages. When Princess Viera came to my school to give a lecture, during question period I asked her what alien language she would recommend for me to study. She said one of the more ancient earth languages. When I asked her which one she said Macedonian. That was probably the only one she knew about. The next time she came over she recognized me and asked me how I was doing. I told her that I was at the top of my class learning Macedonian. The truth is I was the only one in my class learning Macedonian but I was good at it. She congratulated me.

Several days ago she came back and asked me if I wanted to go on a mission for her where I could use the Macedonian I had learned. I was thrilled and said yes. My parents agreed and gave Viera permission to take me.

When we got to her office she told me what I needed to do and briefed me about you. She then told me to pack a suitcase and wait in the junkyard to be picked up by a ship, where you found me. That's it," he replied.

There was a blip on the panel that I hadn't seen before.

"What's that?" I asked Ori.

"It's an incoming call from Viera," he replied.

"Take it," I said and went to the washroom.

When I came back I asked, "What did she want?"

"She wanted to know how we were doing and if we were okay. I was a bit late with my report and she was wondering why," he replied.

"I'm getting the feeling that Vos didn't teach me everything about this ship, is there any way we can learn what all these blips and green lights, the flashing lights, etc., on the panel all mean?" I asked Ori.

"Of course!" he said. "The ship contains files with diagrams and explanations on the operation of every part of it."

After touching a few symbols on his screen Ori said, "Here is the file on communications. We have two types, general and secure. A general call is a blip and a green light. A secure call is a blip and a yellow light. So far we have been communicating on general channels that can be monitored."

"It's nice to have secure communications," I said. "Earlier I had the impression that the ship didn't have secure channels."

“So did I,” replied Ori, “but I guess I was wrong.”

He then went on to say, “Here it says every call, incoming and outgoing is recorded in the ship’s logs.

Ah, here it talks about the ship’s sensor arrays. We have six short range and six long range sensors, front, back, left side, right side, top and bottom. And here it says all sensor information is recorded and logged. All visual information is also recorded in the ship’s logs.

Here it talks about propulsion, weapons and gravity and damper control. Did you know that the energy weapons take half a second to fully charge? And no more than one should be fired at a time? There are four energy guns and one torpedo tube. Use of the weapons is also recorded in the logs,” he replied and I told him to stop.

He was giving me a headache. He apologized. I told him that it was enough for one day and that we would resume studying the ship the next day.

After spending three days sitting among the space debris both of us were running out of what to study and talk about. We were becoming stir crazy.

“We need to do something or risk going mad,” I said.

Ori agreed and asked what I had in mind.

“See that bucket over there, I have some wine in it. Would you like to have a drink?”

“Drinking wine or any other alcoholic beverage is prohibited. They are illegal here,” he replied.

“We’re already fugitives and going to jail anyway,” I said jokingly and added. “I’m having some, do you want some or not?”

He hesitated for a long time and said, “Yes.”

He probably thought I would shoot him or something if he said no. He didn't look happy.

"Can you play some music on that thing?" I asked.

"Yes."

"So, play some music... your favourite music," I said.

I looked through the cupboards at the back of the ship and found a couple of plastic cups. I filled them half full and handed Ori one. I then showed him how to toast and we did. We toasted to "new adventures".

I took a gulp and said, "In my culture it's impolite not to drink after you toast."

He hesitantly took a sip. The poor man, God knows what they told him would happen if he was caught drinking.

He licked his lips, looked at me and said, "This is good."

I raised my cup up and thought he liked it only because it was sweet.

By the time I looked again he had drunk the whole thing. I was about to tell him to sip it slowly but it was all gone. I realized that it was my fault. I didn't tell him the effects the potent wine would have on him. The music he put on was monotonous and annoying.

About five minutes later I watched him moving in his chair to the music and smiling.

"How do you feel?"

"Great," he said and began to move his body from one side of the chair to the other.

"Is that how your people dance here?" I asked.

"Nope, I just feel good."

I quickly removed all the contents from the bucket, and just in time.

He bent forward and vomited violently. I caught the vomit in the bucket. He vomited a couple more times. I took him to his bed and sat him on it. He lay down and fell asleep.

I turned off the music. I had to figure how to do it on my own. I then dumped the vomit in his toilet and washed the bucket. I had to use an entire bag (about a litre) of water to wash it, and then flushed it into the ship's waste tank. After that I continued to drink wine by myself.

A few hours later Ori was up and feeling fine. He wanted to know what had happened. I told him the truth and apologized for getting him sick.

To my surprise he looked at me and asked for more wine. He promised me he would sip it very slowly this time. I filled his cup a quarter full and gave it to him. He wanted to know what had happened to the music. I told him I had turned it off and asked him what kind of music it was. He said classical.

“What kind of instrument created those continuous tones without a pause. When does the musician take a breath?”

He laughed and said, “I studied that kind of music and musical instruments in my ancient history class. This is synthetic music created by a machine.”

“Tomorrow I want to go to the surface and have a proper meal, something roasted on charcoal,” I said and asked him if he wanted to join me.

After he had some more wine he said, “Yes.”

I then asked him if he knew of a place we could go, perhaps in the evening. He said he knew of a place from his friends in school who had been there. He was going to call one of them and get the coordinates. I thanked him for it, gulped the rest of my wine, set the

sensor alarms to on and went to bed. Ori sat in his chair for a bit longer contemplating what to tell Viera in his report.

It was dark in the space debris when I was rudely awakened by the loud and annoying sound of the sensor alarm. I jumped out of bed wearing only my underwear. I sat in the captain's seat. The screen was blinking with hundreds of moving objects coming towards us. I quickly powered up the ship's engines and all weapons and set them to maximum. I raised the ship out of the debris and pointed it at the incoming objects. The objects stopped moving. My sensors identified them as ships. I yelled at Ori to get up. He too showed up in his underwear and took his position.

He looked at my screen and said, "Mother Nature, they are Karon ships. Look at them all, there are thousands of them and they have their weapons trained on us. We have to get out of here and fast."

"We aren't going anywhere," I said. "Just open a channel and talk to them, ask them what they want."

He objected and advised me to get the hell out of there before we were blown to pieces. I told him to calm down and do as I asked.

Seeing that he had no other choice he opened a general broadcast channel and made an announcement.

We got no reply.

"Tell them we need a reply or we'll be forced to fire on them," I said.

Ori was freaking out so I yelled at him to do it. He did and they replied with "continuous clicking" (loud laughter in the Karon language).

"Okay then," I said, "I'm targeting the last ship in the distance, that larger one that is facing to my right."

Ori jumped in and said, “Are you crazy? Fire on these ships in the front to stop them from attacking us. That ship in the back is too far even for the most sophisticated modern energy weapons.”

“Stop arguing with me and tell them to back off or we’ll be forced to fire on them,” I said.

He did and immediately after that a dozen or so ships in the front began to fire at us. Then I did what Vos had warned me never to do. I fired all four energy weapons at once. There was a huge bang and a flash that lit the entire surface of the planet below. Our ship shook so hard I felt my feet go numb. For a moment I thought our ship had exploded. When I realized that we were still alive and in one piece I looked outside and saw a gaping hole in the ship formation. Everything in the path of the blast had vaporized.

Ori was freaking out and pulling his hair. I was freaking out from the unbelievably tremendous blast.

I heard myself say, “Dragon fire.”

I don’t know why I’d said that.

When Ori stopped freaking out he asked, “What did you say?”

I said, “Dragon fire. The ship, the flash, it looked like a dragon spitting fire.”

I told him to send a general message and tell the rest of the Karon ships to go home, the war was over.

One by one the ships turned around and left.

Ori then yelled at me, “What was that all about? You could have blown up the ship and killed us.”

“But I didn’t and, because of what I did, the Karons will never bother us again.”

All of a sudden his communications panel lit up. People wanted to know what had happened. I told him to immediately contact Viera and tell her everything. Let the politicians deal with the fallout.

I went to the back and put my clothes on. As much as I didn't want to admit it, I was shaken, first by the ships and second by the explosion. It was horrifying. The fact that I had also taken so many lives bothered me a lot. I tried to convince myself that I'd done the right thing and that I had done it for Vos... That's what Vos would have wanted, I thought. He'd told me so himself.

I grabbed my cup and filled it to the top with wine. Ori looked at me and asked me for some. I filled his a quarter full and told him to sip it slowly.

Moments later he called me and said, "Listen to this." He realized I didn't understand the language and said, "I'll translate for you."

"Today a tragedy was averted by our Military Commander Otsiron, Captain of the War Ship Dragon Fire, and protégé of Prince Voskot of the planet's Royal Family. It was estimated that over one hundred fully armed Karon ships were destroyed with a single blast from our warship's weapons. Commander Otsiron took pity on the rest, numbering over nine hundred or so armed Karon ships that were poised to invade our planet and told them to go home, the war was over. It is sad that Prince Voskot was not able to enjoy this victory as he had trained Captain Otsiron himself. Tragically Prince Voskot was recently assassinated during a Karon attack at the industrial facilities in the ancient city Apserpon."

"And there you have it, a lot of crap. Now they've named our ship 'Dragon Fire'. And why wasn't your name mentioned?" I asked Ori.

Ori immediately contacted Viera to congratulate her on the announcement but before he had a chance to ask her why he wasn't mentioned, she said it was done for his own protection because if his name was revealed the "bad guys" would go after his family.

"This isn't right. You should have been mentioned. You deserved to be mentioned! And who told them to call our ship 'Dragon Fire'?"

Surely we could have come up with something better like some bird of prey whose name sounds like one thousand years. And you'd better start using Ori as your pseudonym from now on," I said.

I then asked him to open a secure channel and talk to Vieria and give her his pseudonym so that she could mention it in the next media briefing but he refused.

"Just open the channel and I will tell her myself," I said.

He did and I told her to mention that Lieutenant Ori had assisted in the operation. I also asked her to promote Ori to Lieutenant because we shouldn't have civilians running military ships.

She agreed and Ori was flabbergasted at my audacity.

"Now, when I order you to do something you have to obey me or it will be curtains for you," I said and smiled. "You have no idea what happened here today, do you? People on all these planets will be talking about this day for generations."

He was about to say something and I said, "Yes the Karons too will be talking about it, about the lives we took and about the lives we spared."

After I said that I ran diagnostic tests on the ship to make sure everything worked okay and everything did.

"Do you still think she's a relic?" I asked Ori.

He smiled.

"Vos told me to never fire more than one energy cannon at a time. Do you know why?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied, "it's basic physics because the straight energy beams when fired side by side will join together to form a forward moving spiral of magnified energy that not only magnifies its power but extends its range... And because of that it could travel very far and do a lot of unintentional damage."

“Do you know why I did it?” I asked.

“I can think of several reasons,” he replied.

“The overpowering reason was to destroy the command ship in the distance. Yes! As well as to demonstrate our ship’s power and its captain’s willingness to ruthlessly exercise it. Two cannons would have done the job but this captain is crazy, so don’t mess with him,” I said and added. “In the long run this will save lives, believe me.”

A couple of hours later we received a call from one of the district police commanders who sounded livid. He was yelling at the top of his voice upsetting Ori and pissing me off.

“What’s he saying?” I asked.

“He’s calling you a lot of names.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Fool, idiot, moron, traitor, and many other things I’m embarrassed to say.”

“Why?” I asked.

“For letting the Karon ships go and not going after them,” he replied.

“Now he is ordering you to go and turn their cities into craters,” he added.

“What’s the word for stop (shut up) in your language?” I asked.

“Klom.”

“Open the channel.”

“It’s already open Sir.”

“KLOM,” I yelled out loud.

He stopped yelling and went silent.

“Tell him, I don’t take orders from him and then cut him off. When you make your report to Viera make sure you tell her about the police commander and his demands.”

The talk

When Ori was finished making his report I said, “We’d better have the talk before we have any misunderstandings.”

We both sat down in our chairs and I began.

“Today we did something extraordinary and very brutal. It was an historic moment. We will be heroes to some and villains to others. We will hear many comments from the mediums both good and bad. Some will see us as saviours and others as a threat.

We are neither heroes nor villains but simply soldiers doing what we were ordered to do. But that’s not the whole truth. We aren’t really soldiers; we are vigilantes and we do what feels right without weighing the consequences. I took a lot of lives today for absolutely no reason. These creatures had done nothing to me and I killed them for no reason. That pains me. What’s worse is that I did this for the wrong reasons.

Deep in my heart I believe the Karons are in the right; they are the victims and deserve justice. Your people are in the wrong for not giving them their justice. The right thing to do was turn the ship’s guns against the perpetrators, and that’s your people. The Karons did the right thing but the wrong way. And this is exactly what happens when you do things the wrong way.

An armed attack on your planet was the wrong thing to do. Attempting to kill innocent civilians who don’t even know who the Karons are was the wrong thing to do. Retaliation from your people, I’m sure, would have been immediate and swift. And then no more Karons.

Now you and I are caught in the middle of a fiery storm, a bitter fiery controversy that we will not survive unless we are smart and united. One thing we have that is to our advantage is the might of this ship. And as the old saying goes, might is always right.

So when I order you to do something, next time please don’t hesitate or question my judgment, especially in critical moments when many

lives are at stake. Viera has faith in you and you should have faith in me. I push the buttons to fire the cannons, I command this ship and I am responsible for what happens. Your job is to advise me when I need advice and follow my orders when I give them. Are we clear?" I asked.

"Yes Sir!" he replied.

"Friends?" I asked.

"Friends!" he said and reminded me that Viera had ordered us to stay here in case the Karons decided to come back.

"Fat chance," I replied but I don't think Ori understood what that meant and he didn't ask.

The controversy

While I was having lunch and polishing the last remnants of my wine, Ori was glued to the communications panel listening to reports coming from the planet's surface.

“You were right!” he yelled. “The planet is divided. Some are calling us heroes for attacking the Karons, for saving our planet. They are, however, disappointed that we didn't finish the job by eliminating the Karons. The rest, the majority, are calling us killers, criminals, vigilantes and calling on the authorities to arrest us, dismantle our ship and put us in a dark jail cell.

They're saying the ship is dangerous, we're dangerous and we shouldn't be allowed to have that kind of power in our hands. Some are saying they are afraid to go up to the surface because of us.

Some people, even respectable people from the big networks, are calling for our demise. Famous people whom I admired for their integrity are calling for our demise. They are siding with the Karons and calling us murderers and killers of peaceful and innocent creatures.”

“Turn the damn thing off and take a break,” I said. “They will drive you crazy if you let them. We did something we can't take back or deny, but was it the right thing or the wrong thing to do? It all depends on who you listen to. But who is right and who is wrong? They are all right and they are all wrong. But we have to do what we have to do,” I said.

“Did you get the coordinates of the place where we're going for dinner tomorrow? We're going to the surface for dinner tomorrow, right?” I asked.

“Aw heck, I forgot. I'll do it right away,” Ori replied.

“One more thing When you talk to Vieria ask her if she wants to see the sensor logs from the attack and send them to her from the moment we heard the sensor alarms go off until after we ordered the Karon ships to go home.”

“Sure thing!” he replied.

Dinner and a haircut

I got up late the next day. I was surprised that I could even sleep after everything that had happened the day before.

Ori was up and when he saw me he said, “They are still going at it on the news about us. The voices about getting rid of us, about blowing us out of the sky, are getting louder. They even reported fist fights taking place between the pro and anti movements.”

“Don’t worry about them, they don’t know what they’re talking about. We have the power in our hands and they can’t do anything about it. Did you find us a nice place for us to eat tonight?” I asked.

“I sure did. I even programmed the coordinates into the navigation computer.”

“Do you know how to work navigation?” I asked.

“Yes! But I don’t know how to read maps or stars; we’ll need an experienced navigator for that. All I know is how to enter the numbers into the navigation computer.”

The rest of the day we spent figuring out how to turn the female guards into our dates for the outing. I had Ori look through the ship’s computer and after hours of persistent searching he found out how to custom program their clothing and mannerisms.”

“You mean to tell me you can program the robots to understand Macedonian?”

“I’d never thought of that but I think I can. All I have to do is upload the Macedonian language dictionary, which I already have in my home computer, and in theory you can give them commands in Macedonian,” he replied with excitement.

“Go ahead and do it then.”

He made a couple of calls, did something to the computer, asked me to restart the robots and told me to give them a command in Macedonian.”

I looked at the nice lady to my left and said in Macedonian, “Kiss Ori,” and pointed to him. And she did.

Ori didn’t like that.

“We need to give them names,” I said. “Can we do that?”

“Their names are blank in the computer. I’ll try writing something. What do you want to call the one to your right?” he asked.

“You mean my date? I want to call her Glory,” I said and laughed. “I kind of like that name, she reminds me of the girlfriend I left behind.”

“Okay, try her now.”

“Glory, give me a kiss,” I said. And to my surprise she took a step, bent over and kissed me on the head.

“What would you like to call the other one, your date?” I asked Ori.

“Morning, as in the start of a new day,” he replied.

When he was done I said, “Morning, go pat Ori on the head,” and pointed at him. She did.

“This is fun,” I said and ordered them to go back to their docking stations.

After that we busted our heads deciding what clothing they should wear. We looked at many images of them on the screen with various dresses but in the end we agreed that their clothes should match ours. I only had two sets of clothing and they were both uniforms. I decided to wear the camouflage dress Vos had gotten me and go military style. Ori only had civilian clothes and after he decided what to wear, he selected Morning’s dress and colours to match.

Imagine a couple of men deciding what their dates should wear. In what world is that possible? I wondered.

Ori reprogrammed the images of the robots in the ship's computer with their new attire and saved them in a file called "date 1". He then said, "Say the words 'guards date 1 mode' and then 'guards guard mode'..."

I did as he asked and their attire changed.

"Are their clothes holograms?" I asked.

"Yes they are!"

"Glory date 1 mode" and only Glory's clothes changed. "Wow, this is great. The possibilities are endless!" I exclaimed.

When we were done we looked at each other. I hadn't shaven or cut my hair for weeks. We both looked a mess.

"I noticed you had hair cutting equipment in the bag back at the facilities. Is there any chance you can cut my hair and give me a shave?"

"That's not the problem. The problem is we don't have water on the ship. Also you don't want bits of hair getting into the air filters. And, if gravity control malfunctions we will be breathing our own hair. I'll take us to a proper hair salon where we can have a haircut, shave and shower. We could both use a shower. My treat," replied Ori.

"So, we should get going. It's not too early to go now is it? We can spend some time walking around outdoors on the surface. I miss the aroma of fresh flowers and ripe fruit. Contact Viera and let her know what we're going to do," I said.

We were on the surface in minutes and landed in a field inside a grove as per his coordinates.

“The ship should be secure in these trees. We can walk from here to both of our destinations,” said Ori.

Just as we stepped outside of the ship my guards, as expected, followed. “Guards date 1 mode,” I said and their black and intimidating attire switched and they looked like normal women.

I then said, “Guards smile”. No reaction.

“I’m afraid smiling is not part of their programming,” said Ori.

“They are serious dates then,” I replied.

Ori thought for a moment and said, “Yes serious!” but didn’t find my pun amusing.

As we walked to our first destination I kept taking deep breaths and enjoying the ever present natural aroma in the cool air. I also noticed that it was not as stifling here as it was in Nirelon and Apserpon.

There was no one at the hair salon when we arrived; it was a slow day. There were three male stylists working.

One of them said, “We don’t cater to women here.”

Ori laughed and said to me “He thinks they are real women.”

He then told the stylists that the women were with us and asked me to order them to sit and wait. I did and they both sat and watched.

Ori told the stylists what we wanted and they quickly and quietly did their jobs. Having a shower with soap and warm water was very refreshing for me. It added a kick to my step and I was looking forward to having a great dinner.

After Ori paid our stylists we walked out of the hair salon and our dates, looking serious, silently followed behind. Ori and I walked side by side and our dates walked side by side behind us. I felt like we were back in Macedonia with one exception; our women here were quiet.

After walking for a while, we arrived at a place, which according to Ori was called “The Bar and Grill”.

“It sounds like the kind of eatery you would find in Canada, the place I come from on earth,” I said.

“I was under the impression that you came from Macedonia.”

“It’s a long story. I’ll tell it to you someday when we are sent on some boring mission,” I replied.

It was early and there was nobody inside the restaurant when we arrived. A young lady came to the door and escorted us to a table in the centre of the room. She asked us what we wanted to drink. I said rakia. Ori then said that the woman was asking if we wanted yellow or white rakia. I said to tell her yellow for me. Ori also ordered yellow rakia even though he had no idea what rakia was.

“What is rakia?” he asked.

“Alcohol distilled from fermented grapes,” I replied.

“I know what alcohol is but I have no idea what grapes are,” he said.

“Isn’t it illegal to serve and drink alcohol here?” I asked.

“Not here, this is a lawless society, if I can call it that.”

All the while we sat there our dates sat beside us motionless like dummies.

“Is there any way we can liven them up?” I asked Ori.

“You’re the boss, order them to do something.”

“We didn’t think this through, did we? Ask the bartender if there’s something these ladies can do so they don’t look like they’re bored.”

He did and the bartender pointed to the video games.

I took Glory by the hand and sat her on the barstool in front of the bar and asked her to sit and play a video game. I asked Morning to do the same on another game. The video games were free and apparently popular with the young women in that part of the world.

“Now we all look like we’re doing something,” I said to Ori.

Just as I came back to the table, the bartender showed up with three drinks of rakia on his tray. He handed me one, he handed Ori one and kept the third for himself.

The bartender then raised his glass and said “Na zdravie” (to our health) in Macedonian.

We clinked our glasses and had a sip. Ori made a face. He had never tasted rakia before and found it very strong

It took me some time to realize that he was speaking Macedonian to us.

The bartender asked, “Do you like the rakia? I made it myself.”

“It’s nice, strong and smooth,” I replied.

“Too strong for me,” said Ori.

He asked if we were university students here on vacation.

“No,” I said and asked him how and where he had learned Macedonian.

“I am retired now but in my younger days I served as a navigator on a science research vessel and spent four years studying the mountains in a region called Bitola in Macedonia. I learned Macedonian in school here and some more from the locals there. I also learned how to cook and make wine and rakia from them. I love to speak Macedonian, it’s such a beautiful language but there is no one to speak it with.”

He smiled and said, “I named the drink rakia also, that’s what they called it in Bitola and that’s how the girl who took your order knew what it was.”

He then excused himself because customers were lining up to buy drinks. Before he left he said, “The food and drinks for you and for your lady friends are on the house, provided you do me one favour.”

“What’s the favour?” I asked.

“Be my guests tonight after work.”

“Thank you,” I said and promised him that we would.

“And here I was wondering how we were going to pay for all the food and drink,” Ori said smiling and then added. “Vieria offered to pay all our expenses. She gave me an account number to charge them against.”

The girl who served us came back, topped up our drinks and asked Ori if we were ready to order our meal. I told Ori to tell her we wanted some of their Macedonian cooking. I also told him to sip his rakia slowly. The girl then asked Ori if we wanted to order something for our dates.

Ori looked at me, smiled and said, “The girl wants to know if our dates want something to eat or drink.”

We both laughed and Ori said no.

Much time had passed before our main course arrived. We tried to drink the rakia very slowly so we wouldn’t get drunk. We were already feeling its effects when the food arrived.

Ori looked at the plates and said, “The food has a delicious aroma and there’s so much of it.”

The roasted meat and what looked like small roasted glazed potatoes and roasted peppers were served on real porcelain plates. Our server even brought us knives, forks and napkins. Ori had never seen food

like that. He had never seen plates, knives or forks. I showed him how to use them and he started eating. He was impressed with the flavours.

“With this kind of food, the rakia will go down easy,” I said.

He agreed and said, “Our friendly bartender here has taken a liking to your Macedonian culture. I’m sure you two will have many stories to exchange.”

“But did you hear? He said he was a ship’s navigator.”

“Yes I did! Perhaps we should try and recruit him,” he added.

“It won’t hurt to ask,” I said and thought that there was no chance in hell he would come out of retirement or give up his little restaurant business to come and fly with us.

Just as we were enjoying our meal, I noticed a chubby and stocky guy trying to talk to Glory. I called her over and asked her to sit next to me. She did and the man got upset at me and started yelling. I asked Ori what he was saying.

He said, “The man is accusing you of interfering in his affairs to make contact with the woman he saw first and wants to make an example of you.”

“Tell him she’s my date and to buzz off.”

He did that. The man got angrier and started charging towards me. And just as he was about to grab me Glory tripped him and he fell flat on his face. The bartender jumped in and helped the man up. He was about to say something when I interrupted him and told him to tell the man that I was going to give her to him if he did me a favour. I then winked at the bartender. If he lived in Bitola for four years surely he would know what a wink meant.

“And what favour do you want from this man?” the bartender asked.

“Just get him to kiss her on the lips, even if by force, and she will be his,” I replied. “I’ll send her to the dance floor, this could get violent.”

I noticed everyone in the restaurant was looking at us wondering what the commotion was. I then heard the bartender making an announcement. Ori said it was about the kissing. The bartender started taking bets as to whether the man was going to kiss the girl on the lips in five minutes. Everyone ran over and placed their bets.

“What are they saying?” I asked Ori.

“Almost everyone bet. Almost everyone bet on the man. They think he will succeed because he is huge and strong and she is so scrawny,” Ori replied.

“I will go bankrupt if she loses,” the bartender said in Macedonian.

After Glory and the man took their positions in the centre of the dance floor a metre apart from one another, the bartender set his big timer on the wall to a five minute countdown and said “Go!” and pushed the start button.

The man lunged at her and tried to grab her but she was too fast for him. She moved out of the way and he fell forward. There were a lot of laughs and boos from the crowd. She helped him up and he pulled her towards him but she jumped out of the way and ended up behind him. There was a lot of yelling in the crowd but they were all having fun and so was Ori. The worried look on the bartender’s face began to fade. Everyone on the floor was cheering and ordering drinks.

I heard a woman in the back shouting. “What’s she saying?” I asked Ori.

“She’s cheering for Glory and telling her to fight him, do it for all the women on this planet.”

Just as the man was about to turn around and look for her, Glory slipped between his legs and ended up in front of him. He didn’t see her. The crowd was furious and booing. When he turned around

Glory grabbed him by his shoulder, put her leg behind his leg and pushed him back. He fell flat on his back. The bartender was ecstatic and cheered her on.

He looked at me and said in Macedonian, “She is tough like the village women in Bitola.”

After about four minutes of being outmaneuvered by a little woman, the crowd began to feel sorry for the man, but loved the moves she was making. The women in the bar were cheering Glory loudly, except for Morning who sat there watching her emotionless.

“One minute left!” yelled the bartender.

By now the man was too tired and figured it wasn’t worth it but kept going through the motions to entertain the screaming crowd.

Then there was the five minute “ding” and the bartender declared the contest over. The woman had won.

He called on those who had bet on Glory to come and collect their winnings. Only one person came, the woman who had cheered for her loudly. The bartender gave her double the money back from what she had bet.

After she picked up her winnings the woman came over to our table and offered to buy as a drink. I told Ori to thank her but decline because our ladies didn’t drink and we were already drunk. Ori also told her to buy a drink for the man who had lost.

We watched her walk over with five drinks on a tray, put them on the man’s table, say something and point to us. While looking in our direction the man raised a drink, smiled and gulped it down.

“At least he got something for his humiliation,” said Ori.

Glory and Morning went back to playing video games. A young man came over to buy a drink and looked at Morning.

The bartender said, “I don’t understand what these women find in these games.”

The man looked at the score. It was low.

“Would you like me to teach you how to play?” the man asked Morning.

She didn’t respond.

“You can play against her and beat her. That will teach her to ignore you,” said the bartender.

“Yeah!” the man replied.

The bartender got my attention and asked me to come over.

“The man at the bar beside your woman wants to challenge her to play a video game, ask her if she wants to play him.”

I said something to Morning and the bartender said to the man, “She accepts your challenge.”

The bartender then announced the competition and read the highest scores shown on the game’s scoreboard.

Then he made an announcement.

“The young lady who has been playing the same game all day long has a score of 196, the young man, the well-known top gamer and champion of video games, has a top score of 208 out of a possible 250. The game will go on for ten minutes only, I’m taking bets.”

It was evening and the restaurant was full of people eating and drinking and looking for excitement. Almost everyone ran up to the bar. They all knew the young man and that he was the regional champion. No one knew the woman or her capabilities. The bartender plugged the game into the big screen above the bar so that everyone could see it. The scoreboard was reset to show 000:000. The left score was the woman’s. The bartender set the clock to 10

minutes, told the competitors to get ready, yelled “Go!” and pushed the countdown start button.

There were a lot of cheers from the crowd for the man as his score kept going up fast, and boos for the woman who kept falling further and further behind. The bartender looked our way with a worried look on his face.

I winked at him.

It didn’t help, the score was still widening until the man passed the one hundred mark and started slowing down fast.

“She finally figured out his moves,” I said to Ori.

The crowd was going wild and ordered a lot of drinks. I looked over towards the bartender, he was smiling now.

He yelled in Macedonian, “At this rate of drinking I will run out of rakia soon.”

“Make sure you save some for us for later,” I yelled back.

No matter how hard he tried the man couldn’t push his score past 200. In the meantime Morning crossed her old score and was going for maximum. By the seventh minute she crossed 200 and was on her way to winning the game, except the game was getting progressively more difficult with every second. By minute eight she had crossed 208 and was about to pass the man’s top score. By minute nine the score was 212:207 and when the clock stopped it was 215:208. When it was over the man was drenched in sweat and breathing heavily. He congratulated her and declared her the winner.

“Six out of the sixty-seven people who bet, bet on the girl, all six were women,” the bartender told us when he came over to our table. He then added, “This was fun for everyone and I made a lot of money.”

The man who had competed with Morning also came over to our table and wanted to know how Morning had done it and without breaking a sweat.

Ori said, “I don’t know. I just met her yesterday, and as you can see she prefers playing the video game over being here with me.”

Ori then handed him one of the extra drinks lined up in front of him. Each of the women who won bought Morning a drink but the girl serving them brought them to Ori because Morning didn’t drink.

The girl serving food brought us each a plate of small chunks of fried meat and said, “A snack, compliments of my boss to go with your drinks.”

Then she came back with another round of rakia.

The navigator

It was getting dark outside and the restaurant started emptying. People suddenly began to leave.

“Why are they leaving?” I asked the bartender.

“This place gets dangerous during the night. But you don’t have to worry you will be spending the night here with us; my daughter and me.”

“The girl who was serving us is your daughter?” I asked.

“Yes she is. And I am very proud of her.”

Everyone was gone within five minutes and the bartender locked the outside door.

“Can we give you a hand to clean up the place?” I asked.

“No.”

I asked Ori if our guards were capable of performing such tasks. He said he didn’t see why not. Just show them what to do and they will do it.

“There are a lot of dishes and glasses to be washed, the girls can do that for you,” I said to our host.

“But you are supposed to be my guests.”

Moments later I had Morning and Glory washing, drying and putting away dishes and glasses.

“Look at that... And not a single complaint...” he said to me and then said something in their language (I wish my daughter was like them).”

His daughter gave him a dirty look.

“They aren’t women, they’re machines, robots,” I said.

Our host laughed and said, “I can see that.”

Ori then interrupted and said something to him in their language. Suddenly both our host and his daughter turned serious.

“Show them,” Ori said to me.

“Guards, guard mode,” I said.

Their clothing suddenly turned dark and now they looked like warriors but continued to wash the dishes.

The daughter thought they were cool while our guest watched them with amazement.

“Where did you get them? They must have cost you a fortune,” he said.

We didn’t reply.

“By the way, we don’t even know your names,” I said and introduced myself as Otsi and my friend as Ori.

“My name is Delche and my daughter’s name is Airam. My wife named her after her own mother.”

Both Ori and I stood up and shook hands with both of them.

Delche said, “I see you are traditionalists, you follow the Macedonian tradition of shaking hands.”

We didn’t say anything.

Then there was the look on Airam’s face. She said something.

“What did she say?” I asked.

Both Delche and Ori said, “She says she knows you!”

I shook my head. How could she possibly know me?

Then there was the same look on Delche's face.

"You don't speak our language, do you? I haven't heard you say a single word all night. You must be that alien they were talking about in the news who was involved in the royal scandals."

Both Ori and I became uneasy and didn't know what to say.

Delche laughed out loud and said, "Mother Nature, of all the places on this planet you could have gone to you came to my restaurant, what are the odds... I am so grateful to you Mother Nature."

"And here I thought you would be upset," I said.

"Upset? I despise that society and would be happy to see it crumble. It imprisoned my wife for nothing, for trying to do something good. I am happy in so many ways that you are here, that you chose my place."

Both Ori and I relaxed and we all sat down. The guards completed their task and took their position standing motionless and expressionless behind me. Airam couldn't take her eyes off them.

"I need a drink," Delche said and the three of us grabbed a full glass each and clinked them.

Delche toasted, "To our health and friendship."

Ori and I repeated the toast. I looked at Airam sitting in front of me admiring my guards.

Delche said, "My daughter doesn't drink this stuff, thank Mother Nature, it would have rotted her liver."

"You mentioned a wife. We haven't met her yet, where is she?" I asked.

“She’s still in jail,” he replied, “This will be her twentieth year. She was jailed when Airam was only two years old. I had to bring up my girl alone. I had to leave the city because of the stigma and to avoid harassment from the authorities. That is why I came here and opened this restaurant. While I was on my mission to earth my wife joined a protest group that protested against the establishment and against how it conducted itself without any authority. After that she was watched and monitored. Then, one day, they stormed into our house and arrested us, including our baby. When I proved to the court that I was an army veteran and absent from this planet when the supposed criminal acts took place, Airam and I were released. They unfortunately sentenced my wife to life imprisonment. She is very stubborn and refuses to compromise on her principles.”

“I’m very sorry to hear that, it’s so sad,” I said.

Airam said something.

“She’s tired and wants to go to bed,” said Delche.

She got up, shook our hands and left. She then stopped, looked at the guards, waved to them and continued. They remained motionless and expressionless.

“How did you get the name Delche,” I asked.

“This is a pseudonym; it’s not my real name. I use it here to avoid being harassed by the authorities. They have eyes and ears everywhere. And hiring an assassin here is easy and cheap. There’s a funny story behind the name Delche. I was very young, in my early twenties and just out of school when I was sent on a scientific mission to study the mountains in Bitola. At the time I was an assistant to the navigator and spent a long time on the ship studying stars and maps. I was bored and wanted to go down to the planet but didn’t have the qualifications to do the work the scientists did.

Anyway, after persisting they decided to send me down but I had to be on my own and not interfere in the other people’s work. They read me what you call the riot act, of course, to make sure I didn’t goof up. They also gave me a name, an identity, clothing and a bag

of food so that I could look and act like the locals. They dropped me off on a path near our science laboratory and told me to go. I started walking along the path and kept walking in hopes of running into a settlement. After I walked for about an hour I ran into an old man riding a donkey. I took my hat off, said good day and put it back on. This is what our anthropologist had told me to do when greeting a native.

The man did the same and said, ‘Who are you supposed to be ... Delche...?’ I couldn’t make out the words precisely.

“Are you some kind of actor?” he asked.

“Yes, yes,” I said. “I am an unemployed actor looking for a job.”

“And what exactly can you do with those soft hands?”

I didn’t know what to say so I shrugged my shoulders.

The old man then smiled. He was missing a lot of teeth.

“Come kid, come with me, I’ll take you to the next village. You are going the wrong way, that way will take you up the mountain.”

As we walked along down the path I saw the old man pull out a metal flask from the saddle, take the lid off and take a gulp.

“What are you drinking?” I asked.

“Rakia,” he replied and handed me the flask.

I raised it up over my mouth and let a few drops drip onto my tongue. It was horrible and it burned. I gave it back to him.

“Nice rakia, huh?” he asked.

“Very nice and strong,” I replied.

“I made it myself,” he said.

About forty-five minutes later we arrived in a village. When we got to the village square the old man yelled, “I have a young man here, an out of work actor who needs a job.”

There was loud laughter everywhere. That can’t be good I thought. Then a woman come over and grabbed me by the hand.

“Come my son, come with me, surely there is something we can find for you to do here. Don’t listen to them laughing at you, they are all idiots. You must be starving. Were you traveling a long time? Where did you come from?”

“Yes, I was traveling a long time. I came from up there.”

“From the north of our country!?” she asked.

“Yes.”

Before I knew what had happened she took me to her house, sat me on a chair near a table and gave me some bread and cheese to eat. I had never seen bread or cheese before. I didn’t know what to do with it.

“You must be really tired,” she said and brought me a tiny glass of rakia. “Drink it, it will calm your nerves.”

She then ran over to the window and grabbed a photograph. She pointed at a young man in the picture and said, “This was my son... You look like him. He was killed during the Greek Civil War. Those bastards killed my son, my only boy, and I have to live with that every day of my life. I left my home and came here to Bitola to save myself. My husband is missing and I don’t know if he is still alive or dead.”

She ran back to one of the rooms and when she came back she grabbed me by the hand and pulled me away saying, “This was my son’s room, you can stay here for as long as you need to, these are his clothes, you can have them. Get rid of those silly clothes you are wearing, you look like a Komita (revolutionary) from the Ilinden era.”

When we went back and sat down at the table she broke a piece of bread from the loaf and a piece of cheese. She first bit a larger chunk of bread and a very small chunk of cheese and chewed them together. I did the same, it was quite delicious.

“That’s all I can afford on my own, I’ve become a charity case for these people. I used to be a very proud woman and had my own house and lands. We were well off back home before the war. Now we are spread out all over the place. They don’t like us here. I don’t blame them; we have become a burden to them.”

She went and poured herself a small glass of rakia and began to slowly sip it. I did the same. The woman seemed very nervous and sad.

I took her advice and took her son’s room, clothes and chores. I felt sorry for her but I didn’t know how to ease her pain. I didn’t even know how to do my chores. She had to show me everything. She wondered what kind of world I had come from. She often cursed my parents for not teaching me anything. I didn’t even know how to sweep the yard.

After I learned how to do things I tried to help everyone in the village and whatever the people gave me in terms of money or food I gave to her. She made food for me and washed my clothes. She even taught me how to cook. After a while I became the son who she’d lost to the war, even though I was about half his age. He was about my age when he’d been killed.

When people got to know me they adopted me and I became part of their families. Almost every father in the village who had a daughter, of marrying age, wanted me as his son-in-law. The men taught me how to plow, plant seeds, water the gardens and even how to roll and smoke tobacco and make rakia. It’s illegal here but there making rakia was an art.

One old man said to me, ‘You are not a man until you learn how to make rakia. Everybody can drink but how many can make the drink?’ He taught me how to make good rakia from fermented

grapes. He said rakia could be made from all kinds of fermented fruits. I make my rakia here from the local fruits. They are plentiful.

I learned a lot in those four years, much of which I brought with me here. I'm grateful to those simple but honest and loving people for teaching me how to live and how to respect others and treat them as my equals."

"Tell me more about your wife. Is there anything we can do to help her get out of jail?" I asked.

"Well, the only way they will release her is if my wife recognizes their authority and admits fault on her part. But she won't. She is stubborn."

"Will she leave the jail if the authorities admit they made a mistake in jailing her?"

"Fat chance getting the authorities to admit fault when they are in charge of everything. How are you going to make them do that?"

"I have a war ship with big guns. I can be very persuasive!" I replied.

"So, you are that crazy captain who blasted the Karons out of existence... It was idiotic of those simpletons to attempt an attack on Ostikon. What were they thinking?"

"Perhaps someone convinced them. Someone from your planet," I said.

"So, obviously, you aren't from here. Are you really from earth? And what is the deal with you?" Delche asked.

"I am Macedonian, I was born in Macedonia. Everything that they said here about me in the news is true except, as you can see, I'm not sick or a conspirator like they claim. I'm a simple person caught in a complicated situation that isn't of my making. I want the best outcome for myself, for your planet and your people. Eventually, I want all of this to be over so I can go back home.

I also want justice for your wife and for all those who are oppressed. I understand how that feels. I'm willing to get it for her if you help me. I need a navigator for my ship. Not a full time one but only when called upon. What do you say?"

"I'll think about it," he said, smiled and added. "I invited you here to be my guests so that we could have some fun and not discuss politics or how to save the world. Why would you want to save a world that doesn't want to be saved? Anyway, you didn't tell me where you came from in Macedonia."

"I come from a region called Lerin..." I said and was interrupted by Delche who jumped in and said,

"That's where she was from, I mean the woman who looked after me. I wrote about her in a report that I submitted to the anthropologist on the ship but my report was rejected because I was unqualified."

"This Macedonia sounds like a very important place on earth," interjected Ori.

"Not really," replied Delche. "Our teams investigated the entire planet. It just happened that they dumped me in Macedonia, in a remote area where I could cause the least harm. They were very careful to observe but not influence the locals. The people where they dropped me off were simple and lived traditional lives. It was a situation where they could influence you much faster than you could influence them. They felt they had everything they needed to survive and everything you offered them was nice to have and everything you told them was a nice story. The most important thing for them was their family, a value which we here lost a long time ago. The most important thing for us is material things and popularity, which that simple society in Macedonia despised."

There was silence.

Delche broke the silence and said, "We can sit here and talk forever and our conversations will never end. How about we call it a night

and tomorrow I will come and see your ship and give you an answer as to whether I'll join you or not.

We agreed.

Ori and I then went to bed. Delche apparently had only one spare bedroom which he gave to Ori. Without telling me he gave me his room and he slept in the bar.

Attack on the rats

The next morning I was rudely awakened by a loud knock on the door and Delche yelling at me that it was time to wake up. I was then startled by my own guards standing on each side of my bed.

“I see that you also picked up some bad habits from the villagers in Bitola,” I yelled.

“What’s that?”

“Trying to wake the dead!” I replied.

He laughed and walked away.

When I came down Ori and Delche were waiting for me in the restaurant.

“I made fried eggs for breakfast for all of us,” Delche said proudly.

“Where did you get the eggs?” I asked thinking he was talking about chicken eggs.

“There are no chicken eggs here. They are the eggs of a bird you are probably unfamiliar with. You can get anything here if you have money. But don’t judge the eggs until you try them.”

Ori wasn’t familiar with what eggs tasted like and said that he was willing to try them. Until a few days ago he said he’d never heard of all the things we were discussing here and was amazed at how many things were going on on this planet, of which he was not aware.

I noticed Delche had set four plates on the table and before I had a chance to ask him, I noticed Airam sat had down and started eating her eggs. It kind of made me feel happy to see her do that but I didn’t know why. I didn’t say anything.

Delche said something to her and he got her approval.

“Okay,” he said, “Let’s eat and get going. I want to see that ship of yours.”

We were all excited and finished our breakfast quickly. Delche then pulled out a couple of bottles about a litre each and said, “These are for you, my gift to you.”

“What are they?” asked Ori.

“It’s a surprise,” replied Delche.

When we arrived at the site the ship was still there.

Delche looked at it and said, “She looks magnificent. I recognize the glistening green alloy. It’s the strongest stuff known to science. It is so expensive that only the front shield of very important ships is coated with it. In your case, it looks like the entire hull is made of it. How thick is it?”

Ori piped up and gave him a number, something he had read in the ship’s database.

Delche looked at me and said, “Do you have any idea how much this ship is worth?”

“I paid nothing for it and it’s not for sale,” I replied.

After we got inside I asked Delche to sit to my right and I activated the panels. My guards walked in and took their place. Ori sat in his usual place, manning the communications.

“There are six messages from Viera, she has been looking for us all night.”

While Ori was trying to contact Viera, Delche was looking at the navigation panel.

“This is very old technology for a modern ship, I trained on a panel just like this one at the academy. Funny, the maps in it are modern and very up to date. I don’t understand this?”

At about the same time Viera replied to Ori. I asked him to open the visual screen so that she could see us. I introduced Delche to her.

Delche spoke to her in their language and told her something about being part of the crew in the scientific expedition to earth and that he spoke Macedonian.

She said she was not familiar with his name but recognized his face from the report he had submitted over twenty years ago on his anthropological findings in Bitola, Macedonia. She told him he had done well, much better than any trained anthropologist. Delche was thrilled to hear that and thanked her. She then asked how dinner the night before had been. I had Ori and Delche give her a detailed report as well as let her know about Delche's wife.

To my surprise she approved a plan for a rescue mission to go in and rescue all the political prisoners. She said she had an armed tactical team ready to go in. All she needed was a distraction and air support. I said we would give her anything she needed. She told us to stand by and wait for further orders.

About five minutes later she gave us the coordinates of a place in the middle zone and a countdown for our bombing run. She also warned us of the four energy cannons defending the underground building. I asked Delche if he wanted to be part of the mission. He said he wouldn't miss it for the world and entered the coordinates in the ship's navigation.

"This is police headquarters. It will give me great pleasure to see it blown up."

"It will take place in about three hours, we need to leave sooner and wipe out the building's defenses," said Ori.

"We need to fly very low and fast so that we aren't detected. I can help with that," said Delche.

He then mapped out the path the ship was to take and said, "When the time comes set the ship on autopilot and it will take you directly

to the targets. We can program the ship's energy guns to autofire when we are within range."

"This ship has autopilot and autofire?" I asked, surprised.

"From what I see this ship has those things and more," replied Delche.

"Show me!" I said.

"Once the path is set on the map like this, and the speed is set like this, then just push this button to engage the autopilot and the ship will do the rest. You can disengage by moving the joystick and re-engage by pushing the autopilot button again. As for the autofire targets, set the coordinates for each, power up the cannons, set the power limits and the ship will fire them one by one as the targets come into range. In this case because the cannons down there are hard targets you may want to set the power to maximum so that they will be obliterated. Do you want me to set them up for you?" he asked.

"Yes, please do," I replied, "except I'm not so sure about setting the energy guns on maximum power. Won't they do a lot of damage to the other buildings underground?"

"Yes! But only to the citadels where the cannons are housed. I know the area well, don't worry," he said and asked Ori to patch him in so that he could call his daughter and let her know he wouldn't be back for a while and not to open the restaurant until he returned.

We sat quietly waiting for the time to count down. Then we got a call from Viera who said her forces were ready to attack and for us to begin our bombing run immediately. We complied and had the ship operational and on course. I was surprised at the ship's maneuverability and reaction time as it flew through the terrain at low altitude and at breakneck speeds. Everything looked like a blur and I heard the energy cannons fire. After I recovered from my shock, I felt the hair on the back of my neck standing up. I looked at Ori and he too was in shock.

I then looked at Delche and he said, “The defenses are dust and the ship is yours.”

I grabbed the joystick, turned to Ori and said, “Contact Viera and tell her the defenses are down and to give us the word when to fire on the building.”

She replied and said, “We are in the process of extracting the prisoners, we faced no resistance, the rats are running further underground and abandoning the building. Stand by.”

About three minutes later we got a call from Viera with orders to vaporize the building and leave a crater.

“I want them to know who they are dealing with,” she said.

“Well, we have our orders,” I said. “Any suggestions?”

Delche said, “Four energy blasts at maximum power should open a hole underground and then a torpedo to create the crater.”

The energy guns were powered up and the torpedo tube was armed and activated.

I raised the ship to an optimal angle and distance and began to fire on the surface. It was the most gruesome sight to see. A hole opened up underground like some giant monster had taken a bite. The torpedo was so powerful it scared us all. Debris and dust flew high into the air. I looked at the site and thought I would never forgive myself for the destruction I had caused. We were all frightened by the ship’s awesome power.

The communication’s panel started bleeping. It was Viera calling to congratulate us.

None of us wanted to speak to her.

“Ori, send her a thank you message. Tell her we’re going to Delche’s and give her the name and coordinates of his restaurant.”

We took the same path back using the autopilot but at very low speeds and parked the ship in the same place.

We got out and began to walk back with our heads down.

“For years I hated those bastards for what they did to my wife and craved revenge. Now, after what we did, all I can do is feel regret. I don’t know what to feel anymore,” Delche said and shook his head.

Both Ori and I, half his age, felt it would be inappropriate to speak so I patted him on the back and said nothing.

When we got back Airam dashed outside and wanted to know what we had done. She said we were all over the news and people were accusing us of murder, high treason, destruction of property and so on and wanted our heads.

“I knew this was a mistake, we didn’t think it through, did we?” yelled Delche and asked his daughter to bring glasses, a bottle of rakia and some dry snacks.

“What are we going to do?” Delche asked.

“Nothing!” I said. “We are soldiers following orders.”

As we sat there feeling sorry for ourselves, there was a knock on the door.

“Don’t open it,” yelled Delche.

“I’ll get it. My guards are right behind me,” I said.

I opened the door a crack and saw a woman escorted by two men. She pushed the door slightly and it opened wide. I then heard Airam scream and run towards her. They embraced.

Delche grabbed his head and pulled his hair in disbelief. The two men who had come with the woman turned around and left. Delche ran towards the woman and gave her a long embrace.

He turned to us and excitedly said, “This is my wife. I can’t believe she is free. After twenty years... I can’t believe it...”

I felt like an intruder and said, “Ori and I will return to the ship to give you some time to be with your family. You have our call number, call us when you have some free time.”

When we arrived at the ship there was a message from Viera, she wanted to know if Delche’s wife had arrived safely and if we were all right. Ori replied and told her everything.

We didn’t feel like sitting inside the ship so we stepped outside and sat on the grass. I lay down and looked up at the perfect sky. It was noon and a perfect temperature. It was paradise but I felt like I was in hell. The one thing that gave me comfort was Delche’s reunion with his wife and Airam’s happiness to see her mother free and back home.

Ori turned on the news on his device and was giving me a play by play commentary on current events. The biggest news was the violent destruction of the district police command building. It had the entire population on the planet in an uproar. They were calling for our heads. There wasn’t a single person who supported our actions.

“Turn it off or change the channel,” I said. “We are depressed enough.”

Ori changed the channel. According to the news on this channel we were heroes for standing up to government oppression and for freeing the political prisoners.

“Enough, turn it off.”

I looked at him and said, “Ori, we need a long-term strategy to extinguish this situation before a civil war erupts and we get caught in the middle of it. It’s not going to be good if we have to choose sides. It must never come to that.”

“And how are we going to extinguish it?” asked Ori.

“We can’t, the government can’t and the royals can’t. They are all compromised. We need a fresh face, an honest face, a face that has suffered and is well-known to all the people on the planet. When we find that face we’ll put our support behind it.”

We heard footsteps and my guards turned to investigate. It was Delche.

“Are you crazy man, what are you doing here. You haven’t seen your wife for twenty years and you left her to be here with us?”

“No, of course not. She insisted I come and get you. She wants to see, meet and thank the people who changed her world.”

“Well, I’ll close the ship door and we can get going. We don’t want to disappoint the lady,” I said.

We walked back in silence. For some reason I was nervous and my heart was pounding. Delche sat us at the same table, went to the back and came back with his wife. He explained to her that I was the earth man who had piloted the ship that bent the will of the government and that I didn’t speak their language so he would have to translate for us.

When they came to our table he introduced her as Asora his wife and to my surprise she shook my hand.

In the midst of my nervousness I smiled and all I could say was, “Otsiron”.

When she shook Ori’s hand he had a lot more to say. She looked back at me. She looked at me with interest.

Delche said, “She knows the ins and outs of our society and politics more than anyone so if you have questions you may ask her.”

She said something to him and again began to stare at me.

“What did she say?”

Ori spoke up and said, “She wants to thank you from the bottom of her heart for freeing the political prisoners and herself and for making it possible for her to be with her husband and daughter.”

I didn’t know what to say so I said, “You’re welcome but it was a joint effort between the three of us on the ship and many others on the ground.”

Again, I didn’t know what to say and it appeared neither did Ori or Delche, so we sat there like dummies staring at this lady.

Before the situation became too awkward I asked Delche to tell his wife that we were simple people caught in a complicated situation and not to expect too much from us.

She burst out laughing and said, “I too am a simple person but with complicated principles. I don’t lie or cheat and always respect justice, I believe in equal justice for all and not just for the privileged ones.”

Her response made me even more nervous so I asked her, “What did you do that landed you in prison for so long?”

“I told the truth about our corrupt government and about the incompetence of our king. I pointed out the injustices exercised against our people and called for them to end. I was sentenced to life imprisonment for speaking the truth. They tried me in an open court and forced me to repent but I refused so they put me in prison for life.”

“How many people know that you were in jail and why they put you there?”

“Everyone! We were a big movement. We had branches all over the planet. They shut us down and jailed all the leaders. For a simple person you sure ask complicated questions,” she said and smiled.

I told her exactly what I had told Ori. “The reason why I’m asking these questions is because we need a long-term strategy to get us out

of this situation without bloodshed. And to do that we will need an advocate to carry us forward with a third option, which is to find a solution without violence. And for that we need to find a fresh face, someone to bridge the divide, someone to convince the people to unite under a common and just cause.”

Suddenly the woman perked up and said, “I’ve been thinking of the same thing for the past twenty years. I’ve also been thinking of a third option, someone incorruptible and trusted by the people to carry the torch forward.”

“I think you are that person,” I said. “You have all the elements to make a good advocate and lead us out of this mess.”

She smiled and said, “You have to be kidding me. I can’t possibly do that? I’m nobody. There is no way I can go up against the political machine or against the elite on this planet. I was sent to jail for just speaking up. No. No way!”

“Fair enough. We will have to find someone else,” I said. “In the meantime think about it.”

It was almost evening when we heard a knock on the door. Delche opened it and people wanted to know why the door was closed. Delche told them he had just been reunited with his wife and didn’t have time to cook and that was why the restaurant was closed.

When people heard that his wife was back there was a buzz in the crowd and many wanted to come in and see her. When word got around more people arrived. In a matter of hours the restaurant was full to capacity. They all wanted to see her.

I told Delche, “This is your night, spend it with your wife and call us when you’re free. We’re going back to the ship.”

Delche and his wife thanked us and we left.

When we arrived at the ship and were inside Ori said, “I don’t know about you but I’m starving, can we eat something?”

We ate some of the dry, preserved blocks of food from the ship's reserves.

"I used to love eating this stuff but now it feels so plain and inadequate," Ori said.

I told him he was getting spoiled.

I went to bed.

The next thing I remember was waking up to a beeping sound coming from the communication's panel. I could see from the front windshield that it was light outside. I called Ori and he was on it. He answered the call.

"Who is it and what do they want?" I asked groggily.

"It's Viera and she wants to know how we're doing. I forgot to file my report last evening."

"Tell her we'll call her back later. I want to discuss some things with her," and I went back to bed.

About an hour later, after we had had a dry cube of the white stuff and some jelly for breakfast, we contacted Viera and had a long talk about where we were headed with her campaign to drive the rats out of power, as she put it.

"To be honest, we are losing the campaign. We are losing because I can't get much support from the royal family or from the people because the media is controlled by the rats and they have the upper hand. I don't know where this will lead us. And if it wasn't for the fear of your ship, we would have been overrun by now and put in jail or killed," she said.

"We can't proceed like this because the situation will only get worse. We need to do something, something different," I replied.

I then introduced the idea of a third option and asked her if she was willing to support such an option.

“Wholeheartedly yes,” she said and was thrilled by it.

I mentioned Asora, as a possible candidate to lead a rebellion to unite the people.

Vieria agreed and said, “Asora would be an ideal candidate but I have my reservations about her accepting such as task. Asora is a great humanitarian but no politician. But if you can convince her, more power to you. All I want is peace and fair treatment for my people, that’s all I want, that’s all I’ve ever wanted.” And with that she closed the channel.

Ori and I looked at each other and I said, “Give it some time, the answer will come to us.”

There wasn’t much space to do anything inside the little ship except lie in bed or sit at the controls. We even had to eat sitting at the controls. We both sat in our chairs looking outside and thinking about what to do next.

Ori suggested we go outside. I agreed.

“Is there any chance we can leave the robots, I mean your guards, inside the ship and not have them follow us around everywhere we go?” asked Ori.

“I guess we could but what happens if we’re attacked, these are trying times. We are now public enemies and should take precautions, even arm ourselves maybe,” I said.

“There is another thing; we have no portable communication devices to take with us when we go outside the ship. We need one of those. Do you know where we can get one?” I asked.

“We have them in the armory where the guns are. I’ll get us a couple,” he replied.

“I don’t think I’ll need one, who am I going to talk to?” I said.

“Of course you do. You can talk to me or Delche. What if we get separated?”

“You’re absolutely right. Then get us three, one each and perhaps three side arms.”

“Carrying arms is illegal,” he reminded me.

“Not in this part of your planet,” I said. “And also arm the robots before we go outside.”

“Yes Sir!” he replied and went and opened one of the cabinets by the ship’s door.

I opened the ship’s door and stepped outside. The guards followed.

Moments later Ori came out with five guns in holsters and three communicators also holstered. He gave us a gun each and showed me how to tie it around my waist.

He said, “You already know how to use it, you shot the police chief with one of these.”

These were small guns but very effective for short range. The guards already knew what to do with them. He then showed me how to use the communicator. I found the instructions too complicated.

He took my communicator, pushed a number of buttons and said, “When you want to talk to me push this button, when you want to talk to Delche push this other button.”

I thanked him and then asked, “Can you talk to Viera with this?”

“This has all the communications functions the ship has for short range except it doesn’t have the big screen. It takes much power to drive the holograms and this gadget just doesn’t have it.”

I pushed the button and the ship’s door began to close.

“Are we going somewhere?” asked Ori.

“I think we should go and see Delche and give him the gun and communicator.”

He agreed.

We took our time going there but when we arrived we saw a large crowd in front of the restaurant. When they saw us they first ran and then began to yell. We then saw Asora with her arms raised up in the air and yelling something. The people stopped yelling.

“What did she say?” I asked Ori.

“She said we were the friends who freed her and not to be afraid of us.”

She ran towards us, grabbed us by the hands and raised them up. My guards pulled out their weapons and were ready to fire at her. I gave them orders not to. The guards were behind us and I don’t think anybody saw what had happened. There was a roar from the crowd.

While holding our arms up Asora whispered, “If the offer is still available I will take it.”

“It is,” I replied. “And you have our full support.”

At about the same time Delche arrived and Ori handed him the gun and communicator and said, “I take it you know how to use these.”

I figured Delche would refuse the gun but he thanked us instead.

“It’s a zoo out here and I haven’t had a moment of peace all night. I’m sure Asora is exhausted.”

I instructed Ori to contact Vieria, let her know what was happening and ask her for advice as to what we should be doing. Also mention to her that Asora has accepted to be the third option.

We got an immediate response and Viera wanted to talk to Asora. Ori handed her his communicator and they talked for about ten minutes.

When she was done, she raised her arms up high and said to the people, “Go home now and watch the news on channel 45 for my instructions.”

Channel 45 was Viera’s media network.

Asora told us to go inside.

We again sat at the same table and anxiously waited for her to tell us what Viera had said and what was going to happen. Asora looked nervous and very excited. She was running on pure adrenalin and was exhausted.

“Viera told me to act now, strike while the iron is hot. She asked me to make contact with my old network on the planet and revive it. She appointed me interim leader of my movement and asked me to form an illegal party. I am to remain interim leader until elections take place. She strongly suggested I work with you and follow your advice on strategic matters. She told me not to be afraid of the ship and its power, and to emphasize that to the people. Tell them that the ship is here to protect them and enforce the new laws that my party will enact when it gains power, laws that will be fair to everyone. Above all, she told me to be truthful about everything, everything that was done to me and my movement and by whom. She said she was well aware of my reputation for being honest and the people would believe me and do what I ask of them.”

Holding her hand Delche said, “You can do this, but you need to relax.”

I noticed teardrops running down Airam’s cheeks.

After some silence I said to Delche, “Tell her to make contact with two or three of her organization’s cell leaders using secure communications and then ask them to make contact with the rest of

the cell leaders and have them watch channel 45 for instructions. She can use your communicator.”

“That’s an excellent idea,” he said. “I’ll ask her to do it now and she can tell them what to expect through the media. And, at the same time, everyone else will know what’s going on.”

She agreed. Delche showed her how to use the device and she went to the back room to make the calls.

A short time later she came back smiling and said, “We have a plan now and we can relax, but not before I come up with a speech and broadcast it.”

“You can relax, we’ll all help you with the speech, we’re all behind you, the entire planet is behind you and you know it!” Delche reassured her.

The speech

“How do we go about doing this?” I asked.

Asora shook her head and said, “There is so much to say I don’t know where to start?”

“You should start by introducing yourself as Asora, leader of your worldwide movement and talk about your party and what you’re planning to do. Then in general and in simple terms tell the people what happened to you and to so many other people under the current regime. Tell them what the current government did to you for having the courage to speak the truth and fight for your rights. Tell them what motivated you to go into politics and what you aim to do. Tell them that you are willing and prepared to bring change for the better. Tell them that you want to get rid of the corruption, the injustices and give everyone a fair chance at a better life.

Tell them that you have our, the warship’s, support. Don’t tell them you have Viera’s support, she is a royal and right now people hate the royals because they stood by and did nothing while the people were oppressed by the regime.

When your party starts gaining popularity and strength then you can tell everyone Viera is behind you. The elite usually go with the strongest party and right now the rats have the strength. When the elite realize that you are gaining strength and are about to surpass the rats they will come running to you. That’s when you quietly announce Viera is behind you, in order to gain their committed support and the support of the royalists. With this kind of power and support you will then be able to dictate your own terms about anything.

Viera wants the same thing that you do but for now, in the eyes of the people, she is compromised; she is a royal and they hate royals.

You should also publicly address your party; tell the people in your party what you expect from them. This way everyone hears the same message.

Then, before you finish your speech, tell everyone to watch channel 45 for more announcements and further instructions.”

Asora looked at me, smiled and sarcastically said something. According to Ori she said, “Well, thank you, you just wrote my speech for me.”

I smiled back and Ori translated as I said, “That’s what I’m here for.”

We all cracked up laughing.

Asora and Airam then left and went into the back to work on Asora’s speech.

“Delche, I bet you wouldn’t have guessed in a million years that this was going to happen to you...” I said.

He laughed and said, “Oh well life is what it is and it’s full of surprises...”

Ori and I looked at each other.

“Delche, why don’t you start cooking some food and open the restaurant? Let your customers in, we’ll help you serve.”

“You’re right, I should open the restaurant. I always feel more relaxed when I’m cooking, I could use that relaxation right about now.”

He went into the kitchen and began to prepare the food.

I turned to Ori and said, “Maybe now we can get something decent to eat.”

“That would be great. But I don’t know how to serve food or drinks,” replied Ori.

“You’ll learn.”

Moments later Delche showed up with a plate full of meat and two forks. He went back and brought a bottle of rakia and three shot glasses.

I pointed at the meat and said, “That was fast!?”

“That’s your food from yesterday, you left it on the table and I just warmed it up,” he replied and filled the shot glasses with rakia.

We each picked up a rakia and Delche toasted to “a better future” and Ori and I repeated the toast.

After taking a sip of rakia Delche left and went back into the kitchen.

There was a loud knock on the outside door. I jumped. My guards also jumped and drew their weapons. Ori and I went to the door and opened it slightly.

There was a large man standing in front of the door wearing black clothes. He yelled something.

“What did he say?” I asked Ori.

“WHERE IS THAT BITCH?”

“Who are you referring to?” Ori asked him.

Without answering his question, the man shoved the door wide open and grabbed me by the throat. My guards quickly holstered their weapons, grabbed him by his arms and tossed him out. He fell flat on his back. My guards then drew their weapons and were ready to fire. I raised my arm and they lowered their weapons. I could see fear on the man’s face. I asked Ori to tell him that he was not welcome here. The guards then picked him up by his arms, turned him around and shoved him forward. He fell again. His face hit the ground hard. My guards picked him up again and gently let him go. He ran as fast as he could.

Asora and Airam were behind us and saw the whole thing. They had just returned from the back room. Asora said something to Ori.

He looked at me and said, “Asora said she recognized the man. He intimidated her in prison and probably wanted to silence her.”

Asora again said something and Ori translated, “We need to get my message out as soon as possible because it looks like the police goons are making their rounds intimidating the activists in my organization.”

I asked Ori to contact Viera and tell her what had happened here and that Asora was ready to make her speech and the sooner the better.

Moments later Ori handed Asora his communicator and said something to her. He told me that Viera was in the process of making arrangements for a live broadcast right now. Viera will be sending her crew here this afternoon, in about four hours from now, to do a live broadcast.

About ten minutes later Asora handed Ori his communicator and told him to tell me the arrangements had been made and she would be making her speech live here, today.

I asked Ori to translate for me, “Asora, it would be nice to have your supporters behind you cheering you on when the broadcast takes place. Would you be interested in that?”

She smiled, shook her head and ran outside. We followed her. She waved her arms for people to gather around and she spoke to them.

Without asking him to translate Ori said, “She told everyone to run back to their neighbourhoods and invite all their friends and neighbours to come here to hear her speech and participate in a rally which will be broadcast live on channel 45.”

After everyone left we went back inside. Ori and I went back to the table and resumed eating and drinking.

Just as Ori and I were finishing our third drink, crowds of people began to appear outside the door chanting “Asora, Asora, Asora”.

Delche jumped out of his kitchen and said, “There is no way we can accommodate all these people in here.”

Ori and I laughed. Asora explained to him what she was planning to do. Delche came over to our table and poured himself another drink.

About an hour later there were so many people outside they couldn’t even fit in the streets.

Ori and I went outside and looked around.

“What are we looking for?” he asked.

“We’re looking for a place where we can fit all these people so that they can be part of the broadcast. We need to show the world that real people actually support Asora.”

“What about the slope above the ship?” he asked. “There’s plenty of space there?”

I yelled, “ORI YOU ARE A GENIUS. We can have the crowd behind Asora and the ship behind the crowd. People will see the strength of her support.”

Asora and Airam ran outside to see what the commotion was about. Ori explained to them what we were discussing and Asora thought it was a good idea.

She raised her arms up and people began to come over. She told them to follow Ori and me to the ship and tell everyone to be there for a live broadcast.

When they heard the word ship the people became excited and wanted to see it.

On the way up people kept asking Ori questions about the ship, they seemed to be very interested in it. When we arrived in sight of the ship they all ran to it and began to touch it.

More and more people arrived. They all wanted to touch the ship. They began to chant “Dragon Fire, Dragon Fire, Dragon Fire.”

“What a horrible name for such a beautiful ship,” I said to Ori.

“What name would you have picked?”

“Probably ‘Phoenix Rising’, I said.

“I don’t understand? What’s a Phoenix Rising?”

Suddenly there was a big roar. The crowd came alive. Asora and the broadcasting crew were arriving. The crew told Asora to stand beside the ship and asked the people to stand behind her and around the ship. There were thousands of them.

When the cameras began to roll the crowd went into a frenzy chanting, “Asora, Asora, Asora”.

About fifteen seconds later, Asora raised her arms and then lowered them. The crowd went silent and she began to speak.

She was clear, concise and looked confident about everything she said. She pointed to the ship and its crew several times. When she was done, one by one the people came over, greeted her and then touched the ship and left. We were all very proud of Asora at that moment.

Moments later, after the cameras had stopped rolling, Ori received a call from Viera. She wanted to congratulate Asora for her fine speech and all of us for supporting her. She said the rally was fantastic, better than she had expected. We had done a good job. Having the ship in the broadcast was genius. I told her the idea for that had come from Ori. She was very pleased and personally congratulated him. Ori seemed happy.

When everyone had left, Delche and Airam went back to the restaurant. Asora stayed behind and wanted a tour of the ship.

She walked around it and inspected the guns and the torpedo tube. She then stepped back and said something which Ori translated, “The ship is so small and the guns are tiny.”

Then she came inside, looked around and went right back out.

“Not very impressive in looks but awesome in power,” I said and asked Ori to translate.

She gave me a quick smile and kept walking. Ori followed close behind. Waiting for the ship’s door to completely shut, I thought that Asora must be distracted with the great tasks ahead of her. I sure wouldn’t want to be in her shoes. I hope she would make time for Delche and her daughter. I felt responsible for loading her with this heavy burden. She was now caught in a situation not of her making, just like me.

When we got to the restaurant it was packed. People were standing inside and outside talking. Only those sitting at the tables were snacking and drinking. It was hard getting through the crowd because every person had something to say to Asora.

She said something to Ori and he translated, “I’m not cut out for this. I feel burned out on my first day. I feel this great weight on my shoulders and I don’t know how to get it off. What am I going to do? Am I going to disappoint everyone?”

I asked Ori to contact Viera and let her know that Asora was about to have a meltdown.

We took her to the back room and Ori handed her his communicator and told her Viera was on the line. Asora sat down in a soft chair and picked up the device.

We stepped outside and heard Delche yelling, “I need a couple of servers to help me.” Several people stepped up and volunteered.

“And here I thought he was calling us,” said Ori.

Ori and I stood in front of the back room door in silence. We both had the same thought. We didn’t want to be politicians.

About twenty minutes later Asora opened the door and pulled us in. She gave Ori his communicator back and told him to tell me that she was feeling much better after talking to Viera. She also wanted one of these communicators so that she could have secure conversations with Viera. I gave her mine.

It was starting to get dark outside and the people were already leaving. We said our goodbyes and we too left for the ship.

When we got back Ori powered up his screen and began to switch from channel to channel looking for news.

“After we bombed the building yesterday and Asora’s speech today, I figured there would be a lot of criticism from the rats, but it seems like they’re quiet,” said Ori.

“What are they saying on channel 45?” I asked.

“They are repeating Asora’s speech and taking calls from the public.”

“What are the people saying?”

“Almost all of them are looking for change and they seem to be behind Asora.”

Suddenly I had this uneasy feeling.

“Asora’s popularity will surely make her a target. I’m afraid she may be in danger. I’m certain the rats will come after her. She’ll need protection,” I said and then asked. “How safe is Asora’s home and the restaurant?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think it’s that safe.”

“Do you think we can fit the ship in the space in front of Delche’s restaurant?” I asked.

“Maybe? It will probably block the entire street.”

“There’s no traffic at night. We’re going there and if the ship doesn’t fit we’ll find another place,” I said and powered up the engines, lifted off and took a wide approach to scout the road.

Just as I lined up the ship to land I saw a large vehicle with its lights off speeding towards the restaurant. It had a turret and a gun mounted on top. I powered up the ship’s guns. When the driver saw us, the truck sped up towards us and fired at us. I pulled up, turned around and went in pursuit. It again fired at us and drove at high speed trying to run away. The gunfire from the truck was ineffective against the ship’s metal hull. I had Ori contact Vieria.

Ori gave her a visual of the truck and she said, “Destroy it. The rats probably sent their assassins to kill you.”

“I think they were after Asora, they were headed for the restaurant,” I said.

Just as the truck came out into the open I fired one of the energy cannons at maximum power. The truck was vaporized.

“Send me the visual sensor logs from the time you saw the truck, to the time you shot it,” Vieria said and told Ori to report the incident to the police and ask them to send a clean up crew to clear the road.

She also said, “Stick around until we send guards to protect Asora and her family.”

A little shaken I turned the ship around and landed it in front of the restaurant. Ori, in the meantime, sent the logs, reported the incident to the police and turned to channel 45 for news.

I was lying on the captain’s chair looking at the ship’s ceiling when Ori spoke and broke my trance.

“There it is, the video I sent to Viera of the truck we destroyed. It was broadcast on channel 45. The truck was identified as an official police vehicle belonging to the police department in one of the middle zone districts. The report said the vehicle’s presence at the restaurant was characterized as an assassination attempt to kill Asora and her family as well as kill the ship’s crew, that’s us, who at the time were participating in a rally.”

There was a knock on the ship’s hull. Ori jumped up. I got out of my chair and opened the door. It was Delche.

“Come on out,” he said in a jovial voice.

I stepped down and my guards followed behind with weapons drawn.

“You don’t need those, look around,” Delche said.

I signaled my guards to lower their weapons and what did I see? The street was full of people staring at us. “I have never seen anything like this in my twenty years here, people walking the street at night. We all saw what you did and so did the entire planet,” Delche added.

We waved at everyone and the silence turned into a low roar of chanting. I told Delche to tell the people to go home and stay home; it’s not yet time for celebrations. I also said, “You go home too and stay with your family. We will stay here until your guards arrive.”

I was about to say something else when Delche said, “Okay then, I’ll do that and go home and I will see you later.”

He then said, “Oh yeah, we got a call about the guards from Viera a little earlier. We also saw what happened with the truck from our window. The first burst of fire from the truck woke us up.”

After Delche spoke to the people they began to disburse. We waved at Asora and Airam watching us from the second floor window. They waved back and we went inside the ship.

Some time later we got a call from Vieria telling us that a truck full of her guards was approaching our position and not to shoot it. We were then ordered to leave and go into outer space in orbit and wait for further instructions. She gave Ori the coordinates.

Moments later the truck arrived and parked on the road behind our ship. After the guards took their positions around the restaurant we took off.

Encounter with the destroyer

When we arrived at our destination I asked Ori if he had entered the coordinates in the ship's navigation correctly. He said he had.

“Why?”

“Well, we're sitting ducks out here in open space.”

He didn't know what that meant. I guess he wasn't familiar with earth expressions.

“Sitting here at this distance in open space we're targets. We can be shot at by a torpedo directly from the planet's surface or obliterated by energy cannons from a ship moving by fast. We need to hide somewhere where we can't easily be ambushed. Call Viera and let her know what I said and verify that she really wants us here at this position.”

Moments later Ori looked at me and said, “She said to use our own discretion. She asked that we keep our long range sensors active and watch for large ships approaching this planet. And to stand by for more information.”

“We need to hide somewhere. Do you know the coordinates for where this ship was hiding before the Karon attack?”

“No. But I can find out from the logs.” Moments later he said, “The coordinates are locked in, just set the speed and activate the autopilot.”

I did that and moments later we were there. “We are now a speck of dust among the rocks in this massive debris,” I said.

We sat in our chairs quietly. Neither one of us felt like talking.

“It's late, I'm going to bed,” I said even though the sun was shining on me through the ship's window here in outer space.

We spent three boring days out there in outer space with nothing to do. We were exhausting our ship's crappy food reserves. The only thing that kept us sane and stopped us from becoming claustrophobic was the rakia Delche had given us, which we had to drink with fruit jelly. It was a horrible combination. We were also running out of water.

The call we were expecting finally came on the fourth day.

Vieria said, "There is a large warship, a destroyer, coming from the next galaxy. It's coming under the pretense of attacking our planet. But that's not true. The big ship is coming here to destroy your ship. This is part of an agreement the rats made with the traders from the other galaxy. All the traders want is to expand their trade rights to include our three planets but, so far, the rats have kept them out.

Now, it appears, the rats want to trade but under the condition that the traders destroy your pesky little ship which, according to the rats, stands in the way. That's why they sent their destroyer, one of their three big ships. According to secret information we obtained, the rats told the destroyer's captain that the little alien ship has become a pest and is holding our planet hostage. They predict you will either flee this sector of space or fight and be destroyed.

Without your ship we have no defenses and the rats will use the opportunity to force Asora's fledgling government to surrender and Asora and all the other activists will most likely be executed for treason or sent to jail for life.

Just remember a couple of important things. One, the destroyer will not attack the planet; it's coming to destroy you. The second thing to remember is that the destroyer is very slow moving in comparison to your ship. Its weapons are very powerful but sluggish, designed to hit very large, still targets. But the destroyer has well-armed little ships inside which can be deadly once released through a hatch. They will outmaneuver you and destroy you if you let them. I'm sending you the destroyer's specifications right now.

It's all up to you to defend us, so do your best, we are counting on you and I have faith in both of you. And remember, keep me

informed. And as they say on earth, Good luck!” and then she closed the channel.

I looked at Ori, shook my head and smiled.

“What are we going to do?” he asked in a sober tone of voice, knowing full well that this could be the end of us, our ship and our friends on the planet.

“We’ll do what we always do, lie, bluff, shoot and run,” I said.

“I’m being serious,” he replied.

“Don’t worry we’ll do the right thing and we will win. Mother Nature didn’t put us in this situation so that the bad guys could win. What I want from you is to be brave, act quickly and follow my orders. United we will stand. Do you trust me?”

“Yes I do.”

“Then there’s nothing to worry about,” I replied, wondering why I was telling him not to worry but I was shaking. My heart was pounding and all I could think of was that I would never get to go home. I thought about Vos and the good times we had together, Delche, his restaurant, how eloquently he spoke Macedonian... I couldn’t imagine losing all that.

And then I heard myself yell, “WE WILL FIGHT!” and added, “Freedom or Death.”

I glanced over at Ori who was already looking at me and said, “That’s what my ancestors used to say when they went into battle,” and smiled.

Ori wasn’t happy. The way I acted calm and nonchalant worried him. He hadn’t take this assignment to die. He saw himself as a simple interpreter and not as a pawn in some political game.

He said, “We should seriously consider the option of fleeing. I don’t want to die. There is no way we can win against a destroyer. He then got angry and yelled, “Are you out of your mind?”

I said, “We are soldiers and we aren’t going to disobey orders. But if you want to call Viera and get her permission for me to drop you off on the surface of the planet, I’ll do it. I will fight the destroyer by myself. I’m serious.”

I know he was scared but so was I; what else could I have said?

We sat there in silence. I spoke first. I said, “I will tell you a secret, size and strength matter, I’m not going to tell you that they don’t. But what matters more is how you use them. A sword is a powerful weapon in a strong man’s hand. But let me ask you this; do you think a strong man can kill a fly with a sword? Can you kill a fly with a sword?”

Wondering where all this was going, Ori gave me a strange look and said, “No?”

Why not?

“Well, because the fly is too fast and a sword is simply too slow.” He then thought for a moment and said, “Yes, a sword can kill a fly if it develops enough momentum before the fly detects it.”

“What if the man doesn’t see the fly in time and can’t develop the momentum?” I asked.

I could see that Ori was getting frustrated and before he had a chance to answer I said, “There are ways to overcome our problem and we can beat the destroyer, we just have to figure out how.”

I then asked him, “Are you in or out?”

He said he was in and asked me to pour him a shot of rakia.

I then told him to look over the destroyer’s specs and point out its weapons, launch bays and any weaknesses it may have.

After what I'd said, Ori must have thought I was either very brave or very crazy. I was playing with his life and mine, as well as with the lives of our friends... and what seemed to him, without a care.

There was nothing more I could say to him. If we were killed none of this would matter. If we survived he would be grateful. As for me, I didn't know what I was doing, I was truly an alien caught up in a situation where someone else was pulling the strings and I was just reacting. None of this seemed real to me either and the longer it went on the more I felt I was in a dream. I took my last gulp of rakia, pushed my captain's chair back and told Ori to wake me up when something happened.

I don't know how long I was asleep when Ori yelled that there was a bleep on the screen and the sensors showed it was the destroyer.

"Can the destroyer see us?"

"No. There's nothing powered up that can emit the ship's signature. As long as we lay low it will pass over and not even notice us," he replied.

"Then we have the element of surprise. Do we have the destroyer on visual?" I asked.

"Yes we do, it's the only object in the sky."

"Then let's turn off everything, including all communications and sensors. Is the destroyer scanning for anything?"

"Yes. Almost every second."

"Good, then it will never know what hit it," I said and asked him to give me a breakdown of the ship's weapons and bays.

He told me there were four massive energy cannons, one in each corner of the ship and only one launch bay at the back of the ship.

"So, what's the plan?" Ori asked.

“When the destroyer is at close range we’ll power up our ship and fire a surprise blast at it from this position. As I push the fire button, I’ll slide the ship out of the debris as fast as possible. I don’t think the destroyer’s sensors will be operational while it’s absorbing the blast from our cannons. As a result the destroyer won’t see us leaving the debris. Then, as the destroyer trains its guns on the debris we’ll move fast behind it and attack its cannons. I predict the destroyer will train all its cannons on the debris thinking that we’re still hiding there and will commence firing. In the meantime we’ll make our approach from behind the cannons and take them out fast before they have a chance to aim at us. They won’t know what hit them. By the time they realize their cannons are down we will position our ship in front of the launch bay. Then, when they open the bay to launch their little ships, we’ll fire a torpedo inside it and disable their ability to launch.

When the ship’s defenses are disabled we’ll open communications with the destroyer and offer its captain two options; leave peacefully and go back to where he came from or we’ll blow up their engines and repeatedly attack his ship until it disintegrates. I’ll do the shooting and you’ll do the talking.”

“Fair enough,” replied Ori and turned off his communication panel.

I turned off everything else including gravity and climate control and we both buckled our seatbelts.

“Is there any way we can estimate how long the destroyer will take to get here?”

“It will be in firing range in three minutes. We have enough air for twenty minutes.”

This was the longest three minutes of my life.

When the destroyer came into range it looked like a mountain made of solid metal. My heart began to pound. I looked at Ori. He was looking at me. I whispered it’s time and powered up the ship.

Everything was online and operational. I powered up all cannons and set them to maximum and then armed the torpedo.

“We’ve been spotted!” yelled Ori.

I fired the first energy cannon and pushed the joystick forward to its limit. We were behind the destroyer. It began to fire all four cannons at the debris at random. I maneuvered our ship and after locking onto the destroyer’s cannons I fired my energy guns several times until I saw each cannon drop down, one by one. After I’d destroyed the last cannon I quickly turned our ship around and went behind it facing the launch bay. Only one of their little ships had flown out. I fired a torpedo into the destroyer’s launch bay and watched it light up. The little ship that was out fired at our engines but missed.

“Ori, Mother Nature is on our side,” I said.

We went after it. It may have had the maneuverability but it looked like its pilot was inexperienced. I targeted his ship, locked on it and fired one of my energy cannons. Direct hit. It was vaporized. I turned our ship around and went in front of the destroyer and told Ori that he was on, to do his thing.

Ori spoke long and very slowly. Moments later the destroyer turned around and left in the same direction it had come from. I sat there pretending to be calm, cool and collected waiting for Ori to tell me what he had said to the destroyer’s captain to convince him to leave.

I looked at Ori.

“Give me a minute to calm my nerves. I’m not like you. I get very nervous.”

“Take your time.”

After taking a few long breaths Ori said, “I first gave the captain the two options like you told me. After that I told him that he was being dragged into an internal dispute and used as a pawn to bring change to an internal matter. I then simply told him that he was being used by the current regime to squelch a rebellion on the planet. I told him

that we knew of his secret plans to destroy this ship so we had no choice but to preempt his attack. Basically that's all I told him. When the captain heard all that he apologized, turned his ship around and left.

"Congratulations you're a genius but you'd better report this to Viera and fast. Also send her the ship's logs before we both get into trouble."

Ori looked nervous. He wasn't sure if he had overstepped his bounds and if there would be consequences from it.

"Just remember you are a soldier who acted on orders. Let the politicians take care of the politics. You did what you were ordered to do. You did well."

After contacting Viera, Ori turned to me and, with a big smile, said, "The entire planet is celebrating and we are invited to be the guests of honour. The people below can't believe what we just did." He paused for a moment and said, "I'm very sorry for doubting you."

As soon as he told me that, Ori turned to his panel and began to listen to the news.

Minutes later he jumped up and said, "I can't believe what is happening on the planet. There are hundreds of indictments being issued against high ranking police officials. They are accused of being involved in illegal activities and various conspiracies. The police are turning against themselves and arresting many of their own who were involved in the conspiracy to bring Asora's party down. It looks like it's over for them."

I interrupted him and asked, "What did Viera say, what are our orders?"

"Viera didn't say anything at all."

"So, unless you want to stay here then call her again and find out what she wants us to do next?"

Ori apologized and said, “Yes Sir!”

Moments later he said, “Vieria said we are invited to a celebration organized by King Velion in his garden. We should dress formally and are to go and purchase clothes, she gave me the coordinates, and she will pay for them. The party will take place in four days. She gave me the coordinates for where to land the ship. In the meantime we are free to do whatever we like.”

“So, we have four days to kill. Why don’t we go and see Delche?” I asked.

Triumph over the rats

On the way down to the planet's surface I asked Ori to contact Delche and let him know we were coming. We decided to take a slow ride down to enjoy the scenery. I was feeling good and from what I could see so was Ori. Our worries and anxieties for the moment had subsided. We believed we had reached an understanding with the galaxy traders and neither of us believed they would come back and attack in retaliation. But something had to be done to avoid that for sure, to make sure it didn't happen. I should have a talk about that and the Karons with Asora, I thought. Starting some sort of trade with them should alleviate the tension we had caused recently and focus attention on trade instead of retaliation.

As we approached the usual landing spot on the level part of the now famous slope near Delche's restaurant, Ori spoke up and said, "Look down, we are going to have company, look at all the people running, you'd better land this thing fast before they all arrive and block us."

I put the ship down and checked the ship's surface temperature to make sure it wasn't too hot because I knew the people would want to touch it. The surface was cool.

"The surface temperature on the outside of the ship could get very hot when we travel through the atmosphere fast," I said to Ori.

"Don't worry we are well-insulated inside and besides, atmosphere control will keep the temperature cool inside."

"I was thinking of the people outside touching the ship and getting burned."

"Ah, you're right," he said and checked the outside temperature.

When the people arrived they went wild with excitement. More people kept arriving and so did several news mediums including some from the rival parties. The people were jumping around and chanting and some were calling out the ship's name.

“How are we going to get past the cameras and crowds without getting mobbed?” Ori asked.

“I don’t know. I’ve never been in a situation like this before.”

Ori began to laugh.

“What’s so funny?”

“The mighty Commander Otsiron, Captain of the most powerful ship in our planetary system who defeated the Karons in battle, broke the regime’s backbone and sent a destroyer packing doesn’t know how to handle a mob of people who worship him? That’s a first!”

“I’m still your commanding officer!” I said and suggested that we arm ourselves to look official.

He stopped laughing and apologized.

“We’ll have my guards draw their weapons as we walk outside and you tell the people to stay back because the guards are programmed to shoot anyone who gets closer than a metre, and then apologize to the people. If the news people ask questions tell them that we are not authorized to comment and that they should contact Asora for information. This will tell them and the world two things. One, we get our orders from Asora and two, Asora is now the new authority.”

I pushed the open door button and Ori raised his arms. After some yelling and chanting the people stopped talking. Ori spoke to them and they moved out of the way. I pushed the close door button and waited for the door to fully shut. Ori took the lead. I followed right behind with my guards. They had their weapons drawn and walked on either side of me but one step behind.

We walked this way all the way into Delche’s restaurant. I felt very nervous and uncomfortable.

When we arrived we were greeted by Delche, Asora and Airam. After we hugged I asked Delche, “What are you doing out here, who is running your restaurant?”

“It’s run by volunteers, I also hired a chef. You won’t believe how many people want to work here for free now.”

“Did you tell these people we were coming?”

“Yes, there were too many of them here in the restaurant so I told them to go and greet you to get rid of them.”

Asora invited us in and took us into the back room. There was a table set there with six chairs and plenty of food and drink. Asora said something.

Delche translated, “You boys were very busy this morning, too busy to eat I assume, so I’m sure you’re starving. Delche has prepared something special for you. We also have a special guest with us today.”

Ori and I looked at each other and swallowed. We both felt nervous.

Moments later after we sat down, Asora came back into the room with Viera. We all stood up. She said something and then came over and pinned a medal on my chest over my heart and tapped my right shoulder. She did the same with Ori and Delche. After that she turned around called in one of her assistants, a young lady with a big smile. She handed us each a package. Viera then said something to Asora and was about to leave.

“Wait!” I said in Macedonian, “Give me a few seconds of your time I want to discuss something with all of you.”

Viera turned around and I asked Ori to translate.

“For political reasons I believe it would be a good idea for Asora, as a representative of the interim government of this planet, to contact the galaxy traders and the Karons and open communication channels with possible future trade agreements. This will focus their attention

on peace and trade instead of retaliation for what was done. This will also definitely strengthen Asora's position in foreign relations and further weaken the regime which, after this, will have no allies."

Vieria looked at me, then at Asora and said, "It's an excellent idea, call me if you need help."

She then said goodbye and walked away into the back.

Both Ori and I took a deep breath and sat down.

I looked at all the platefuls of meat and said, "Now that Vieria is gone there's more meat for us."

They all laughed and Asora said something.

Ori translated, "That's why I like you, you always joke just at the right time."

Airam said something and Delche told her off.

Ori translated, "What's in the packages? Don't be rude."

I had already forgotten about the packages and the medals Vieria had pinned on us.

What are they for?" I asked.

Ori translated for Asora, "The medals are for bravery and your voluntary service to this planet. The packages are the military uniforms you are to wear in four days at King Velion's garden party."

Seconds later Asora and Airam excused themselves and left the room.

"They are going to work on your ideas," said Delche, raising his eyebrows, smiling and pointing at me with both index fingers.

“I’m not going to say it (there is more meat for us!)” I replied and smiled.

“It’s been hell for me and my family,” Delche said. “A lot has been happening and very fast. All the news is about Asora, you and the ship. The regime has been very quiet even after all those indictments were issued. I just don’t trust the police doing their own policing. What if they are cooking something up? They still have the power and they can use it. I’m really nervous and don’t know what to do. This whole thing hinges on one person, my wife. It will fall flat if she is out of the picture. And if I know that, they know that. What if they make an attempt on our lives at Velion’s garden party? It would be a perfect place for an ambush. They can remove us all with a single shot. It’s too early to celebrate.”

“And here I thought the three of us were going to have a nice time. I don’t know about you but I can think better on a full stomach and slightly drunk. I’m going to eat, drink and enjoy myself today, while I am still alive,” I replied.

Ori piped up and, with his mouth full, said, “Delche has a good point, maybe we shouldn’t go to the party, maybe we should park the ship on the street and guard Asora.”

“And what would that tell the people? What kind of message will we be sending? That we are afraid? There has to be something better we can do,” I replied.

“You have a good point too,” replied Ori.

We all stopped talking.

We ate and drank in silence with the occasional toast.

I broke the silence when I asked, “What are governments most afraid of?”

Both Delche and Ori shrugged their shoulders.

I said, "From the people, without the support of the people they are nothing. So, try to think how we can use the strength of the people to turn the government into nothing?"

Now let me ask you this, "What gives the regime its power?"

Both Delche and Ori again shrugged their shoulders.

"Weapons, they have the weapons. So, if we find a way to take their weapons away from them they will lose their power?"

"And how are we going to do that?" both Delche and Ori asked at the same time, then looked at each other and laughed.

"It's not going to be easy," I said, watching Delche fill our glasses with rakia. "We will convince the people to storm the regime's stronghold, I believe there are two strongholds. After they enter the stronghold yards they can demand the weapons be surrendered. If they refuse, we will bomb their buildings to hell. I know Vieria has her own special forces which can protect the people if the regime decides to retaliate. Protect them long enough until we arrive and obliterate them."

"That's too violent and I don't want blood on my hands," said Delche.

Ori echoed his sentiments.

"I guarantee you there will be no bloodshed. We will offer those who cooperate with us leniency. These people are cowards and opportunists and they will do anything to save their skins. Do you remember the look on the big guy my guards threw out of your restaurant, you know the one who called your wife a bitch? He practically shit when the guards pointed their guns at him. They are all like that, all of them."

"Oh, yeah!" said Ori, "I remember that, we didn't tell you because we didn't want to upset you," he said to Delche.

“One more thing! We must somehow keep the attack a secret and surprise the regime. If they know our plan they may turn their guns on the people and spill a lot of blood. I’m sure they know that they are finished without their weapons. And we need to do this before Velion’s party.”

What was supposed to be a casual visit we turned into a brain exercise.

“I have another idea,” said Delche. “How about we organize a massive and peaceful demonstration around the two largest strongholds and tell the people to demand more rights from the regime. Simple things like higher pensions, free education, cheaper transportation and so on. They should be yelling, ‘if you don’t give us these things now we will vote for Asora’s party’. Hidden in the crowd we will have Viera’s armed forces dressed in civilian clothes. Once the regime sees that the demonstrations are peaceful and relaxes, Viera’s forces can go through the crowds and occupy the stronghold. If the regime resists we’ll call on the ship and they know what will happen next. We can then have the ordinary people assist with emptying the warehouses and driving the armed police vehicles out of there and into our hands. What do you think?” Delche asked.

“It’s a better plan, not as risky. We should talk it over with Viera and Asora. There are a lot of details to be worked out. It also needs to be well-coordinated and with great secrecy,” I replied and Ori agreed.

After we had eaten everything Delche stepped into the restaurant to see how his new staff was doing and came back with another plateful of food.

“They’re doing great out there,” he said, put the plate on the table and added, “here is some more food to go with your drinks.”

At about the same time Asora and Airam came back. Asora said something and Delche went back outside.

“We ate their food,” Ori whispered to me.

Delche came back with two plates of food, set them in front of Asora and Airam and began to talk. He got Asora's attention.

"Let the woman eat first, then you call tell her whatever it is you want to tell her," I said,

He looked at me, smiled and said, "Who are you my mother?" He then said something to Asora and she began to eat.

"Ori and I are going outside to give you some privacy for a while. Apologize to your wife and daughter for us leaving."

"Okay then, I will join you later," Delche said and sat down.

Ori and I got up and left.

"I overate and drank too much, I feel tired and sleepy," I said.

"Me too," Ori replied and suggested that we go back to the ship and have a nap.

When we arrived I sat in the captain's chair, tilted it back and lay down. Ori went and lay on his bed.

The next thing I heard was a knock on the ship. I opened my eyes and looked through the window. It was dark outside. I got out of the chair and felt a pounding headache coming on. My mouth was completely dry.

I pushed the door open button. It was Delche. He was holding a bottle of rakia in one hand and dessert in the other. He walked up the ramp. Ori was still sleeping.

"Ah, no more rakia, please!" I said. "We need water; our water supply here has dwindled."

"I'll bring water and restock the ship another time. I know a grocer who will give us stuff for free if we pose with him for some pictures. But I'm not here for that. Where's Ori?" he asked.

“He’s sleeping in his bed.”

“Wake him up,” he said and yelled, “Ori wake up!”

“Is it morning already?” Ori asked.

“Yeah, it’s morning,” said Delche.

“Listen, I told my wife what we discussed about the demonstration and she loved the idea. After that she contacted Viera and Viera approved the plan. She will give us two teams of her armed forces and they will attack the strongholds simultaneously but two minutes apart. The moment the forces attack, Viera wants our ship to make its presence known and show force, first at one stronghold and then at the other. Viera thinks the rats will think we have multiple ships and will likely surrender. The key is to get from one place to the other fast. That’s why the attacks will be two minutes apart. Viera and Asora want to know if that’s possible.”

“Delche, you’re our navigator, sit down here and do the calculations. Enter the coordinates and speeds and let them know if it’s possible,” I replied.

Delche took his seat, did the calculations and said, “Yes it can be done”. He then added, “I’ll have to come with you so that you guys don’t screw it up.”

“So, when is this going to take place?” I asked.

“You haven’t been listening to the news, have you? It’s taking place tomorrow at noon!”

He then handed me the bottle of rakia and said, “We’ll be drinking this tomorrow after our victory. You should come to the restaurant for a good breakfast tomorrow morning.” He then left.

Ori and I drank the remainder of the water supply from our reserves and went to bed.

The next thing I remember was a knock on the ship. I looked out the window. It was daylight outside. I opened the ship's door and Airam was there.

I called Ori and said, "Airam is here, see what she wants?"

Ori spoke to her and said, "She said her father sent her here to get our asses out of bed and join him for breakfast at the restaurant."

I looked at Airam, she was smiling.

We had no water, not even to wash our faces. We got off the ship, closed the door and followed Airam back to the restaurant.

"She'll make a nice bride for you," I said. He gave me a swift kick on the leg.

Moments later we were in the restaurant and there was Delche arms wide open wearing an apron.

"Are you drunk?" I asked him.

"Yes I am, with adrenalin. I didn't sleep at all last night."

We didn't say anything. We sat at the table and he brought us fried eggs.

My stomach was a bit squeamish but after I started eating it was fine.

When we were done eating he gave us a bagful of food and water and told us to go back to the ship.

"Are you kicking us out?"

"Yes. I need to prepare this place. I will be with you in an hour or before eleven o'clock.

I grabbed the bag, thanked him and we left.

As we walked back to the ship I said, “This is the most crucial moment in everything we have done so far. If we fail we’ll be screwed. A lot of people will die.”

“I know, I pray everything will work out for the best without bloodshed.”

When we got back on the ship we restocked our empty cupboards.

“This should last us for a few days.”

Delche arrived a lot earlier than we expected.

“A lot more people showed up to demonstrate than we expected.”

“That’s good, isn’t?” I asked.

“Yes!” but...

I interrupted him and said, “You have to have faith. When you do the right thing things will work out.”

“I hope so, I hope so.”

We all took our places on the ship and listened to news reports about the massive demonstrations.

“Will the government give the people what they want?” we heard one rival reporter ask.

“They should!” we heard another rival reporter say.

When Delche said, “It’s time to make our move,” I felt my heart jump. I powered up the ship, engaged the weapons and set the power limits to max. for two cannons and to min. for the other two cannons. Delche confirmed the speed and coordinates and, as we listened to the newscasts, I put my finger on the autopilot button ready to engage.

“Now!” said Delche.

I punched the autopilot button. We moved at incredible speeds and I heard one energy cannon fire. About one minute later the other energy cannon fired. Then, suddenly, the ship stopped and hovered above our second target. I grabbed the joystick.

“What do we do now?” I asked.

Listening to reports from the ground, the mediums were reporting that two ships had been spotted firing at the strongholds and that the regime had surrendered and that their arms were being confiscated by the people.

“Ori, contact Viera and find out what’s happening and what she wants us to do next.”

Both Delche and I were in a daze and not sure what was happening. Had we succeeded or failed?

Moments later Ori yelled, “We won, we won, we’ve got the weapons and the top echelons in the regime are surrendering.”

“What do we do now?” I asked Ori.

“Whatever we want. It’s over for the rats.”

Preparations for the party

“Where do you guys want to go now?” I asked Delche and Ori.

They both said they wanted to go home.

“I know where Delche lives but I have no idea where you live.”

“I can give you the coordinates,” said Ori.

“Unfortunately that won’t help me much because I don’t know how to navigate.”

Delche spoke up and said, “I have a solution. Let’s take Ori home first and then we’ll go to my place and you can stay with us. Then, two days from now we’ll go back and get Ori and we can all attend King Velion’s party. How does that sound?”

I looked at Ori and he said, “That’s fine with me.”

“Okay then, let’s do this.”

Ori gave Delche the coordinates and he punched them into the navigation computer. I set the speed and engaged the autopilot. Ori called his parents and told them we were on our way.

“You will come and meet my parents, won’t you?” Ori asked.

“Of course,” I replied and Delche agreed.

“I didn’t know you lived in the middle zone. I figured you were an outlander like me and Otsi here. How did you end up with Otsi?”

“Vieria,” replied Ori in a slow and low tone.

“Oh, I see, Vieria the great princess,” Delche said with a sarcastic tone of voice.

“Did you know that she called me a bastard the first time we met?” I said.

They both looked at me with a surprised look.

“Yes she did. When she saw the badge I’m wearing around my neck she freaked. She thought I had stolen it from her brother Voskot. Before I met her I knew nothing of Voskot’s family or that he was a king or that he had abdicated or that King Velion was his brother or that Viera was his sister. The only reason I came into possession of this badge was because Voskot gave it to me. Just before Voskot died he handed me his badge and asked me to take the ship and use it to save his planet and mine from the Karons. I was the only person in your world who could gain entry, access and fly this ship. I don’t know if that was intentional or accidental. Voskot was a great friend, a wise man but unfortunately he’d been deceived by the people he trusted and they probably killed him. The rats sure played him.”

“Voskot fought for me and Asora when we were tried in court. He was my commander and chief when I was in the military. If it wasn’t for him I too may have ended up in jail with my wife and only because I was married to her. My daughter would have grown up without parents. So yes, I have to agree with you that Voskot was a good person, even though I don’t like the royals,” Delche said, looked at Ori and continued. “So, I take it you come from a prominent family, eh?”

“I guess so, but I never thought of it that way,” replied Ori.

“We’ll be in your neighbourhood in a few minutes, is there a place where can we land?” asked Delche.

“Well, we live underground. I suppose we can land in the park right above my parent’s house. My place is on the other side of that grove of fruit trees,” said Ori pointing to our right.

Then, just as we cleared the grove, we saw a crowd of people congregating. Ori was surprised because he had never seen so many people in one place at one time on the surface.

Delche said, “It’s rare to see so many snobs together in one place.”

When they spotted the ship the people began to run towards it.

“Land here and we will walk to my house.”

I slowly dropped the ship and shut it down. I opened the door, we all got out and then I shut the door. When my guards saw the people running towards us they drew their weapons. Ori recognized some of them; they were mostly children from his neighbourhood. Ori said something to them and they stopped moving.

“What did he say?” I asked Delche.

Delche laughed and said, “He told them to stay back or your guards would shoot them if they get too close. Isn’t that hilarious?”

“We pulled the same trick with the crowds at your restaurant and it worked.”

Ori looked nervous as he led the way down some stairs, through a number of well-lit corridors and through a white door. A man and woman dressed in white came to the door and greeted us. Ori said something to them and they extended their right hand. Both Delche and I shook it. They were not firm handshakes. They sat us down on soft chairs and served us pink jelly on tiny square, clear glass plates and water in tiny square, clear glasses. There was a tiny triangular metal spoon on the side of each plate.

Both Delche and I felt nervous. Ori seemed to be tongue tied.

I told him to thank his parents and also tell them that I had had a similar but darker jelly when I lived with Prince Voskot. When they heard that I knew the prince they were impressed.

After Delche and I had one bite of jelly, Delche declared that we needed to go because we were expected at home soon and we didn’t want to be late.

We said goodbye to Ori, who seemed ashamed to speak Macedonian in front of his meek and snobbish parents, waved goodbye to the parents who seemed like they wanted us to go and we left.

When we were on the surface Delche asked, “Have you even been near a hive full of bees?”

“Yes.”

“How did you feel?”

“Very apprehensive,” I replied.

“Well, that’s how I felt in there today.”

“What was with the handshake? These people don’t shake hands. It felt like I was shaking a dead fish,” I said.

“Ori told them it was an earth tradition and to be polite.”

“They are both small, thin people. Ori is much taller than them. And what’s with the white clothing?” I asked.

“Ah, the white. In the beginning people in the middle zone wore white to reflect the sun and keep cool. It’s always been hot here. White later became a symbol of the middle zone and now it’s the symbol of prominence. Mostly educated people live in this area, doctors, lawyers, professors, people who think they are better than us.”

“Delche, were you one of them when you lived here?”

“Never! Certainly not after I returned from my mission to earth. Your people in Macedonia taught me a thing or two about how to be a good person.”

When we arrived at the ship the kids had gone.

It only took us a few minutes to get back to Delche’s restaurant. Delche couldn’t wait to get out of the middle zone so we flew out of there like a bat out of hell.

It was late evening when we arrived at the restaurant. We hadn't had lunch that day and were starving.

"There is no place like home," he said. "I like it here. I feel comfortable."

Airam, excited, ran out onto the street to greet us. She said something to her father and pointed at the people. I looked around and saw people walking the streets at night.

"Do you see that? That's what Airam came to tell me, that the people are starting to feel free to walk outside at night."

He paused for a moment and said, "Airam tells me that most of the rats are in custody and, since they voluntarily surrendered, they will not be prosecuted. They will only be fined and all their ill gains will be confiscated. Those who committed murder will definitely serve jail time. It's all over for them."

Someone called out from inside the restaurant. Airam said something, grabbed us by the hand, pulled us in and sat us at a small table for two. The man who had yelled, a huge man, brought us some food, said something and patted me on the shoulder. Airam brought us a small bottle of rakia and a couple of shot glasses.

"No rakia for me tonight, please, I have been drinking too much lately. But I promise you I will have some another time," I said.

"Ah, what kind of Macedonian are you?" Delche asked and told his daughter to take the bottle back and hide it somewhere.

"I never drink alone," Delche said and laughed. "That's what an old man in a Bitola village told me, then pulled his flask out and took a gulp. When I looked at him he said, 'Well I'm not alone, you're here aren't you?' Ah, those were good times."

When we had finished eating I said, "I should go back to the ship and go to bed. I will take my package with me and put the uniform on, to see how it looks."

Delche looked disappointed and before he could say anything I said, “You have a lot of jobs to do here and I don’t want to be in the way. Besides, I’m coming back tomorrow morning for breakfast. You still have eggs, right?”

He stood up, slapped me on the back, smiled and said, “Go, see you tomorrow.”

I waved at everyone who was busy working and left with my guards following close behind.

I went straight to bed and the guards parked themselves in their usual place in the ship and powered down so that they could recharge. I wondered if I could sneak out of the ship without them and what they would do. But I was too tired and lazy for games. I later found out that they were activated when I pushed the ship’s door open button. Fat chance of getting away from them, I thought. But if you think about it, the ship is only a chunk of metal without its captain. The guards were there to secure the operation of the ship by making sure its captain was alive and well.

The next day my portable communicator went off and I jumped out of bed. I pushed the answer button. It was Delche.

“What kind of soldier are you, sleeping in until the middle of the day. Get down here, your breakfast is getting cold.”

“Why are you calling me on this thing?” I asked.

“Because you don’t know how to work the other thing. Or did you want me to come and wake you up in person?”

I decided to dress in the camouflage uniform Vos had given me. I hadn’t tried on my new uniform so I decided to take it with me to Delche’s restaurant. I ran down the hill and sure enough my guards ran right behind me.

“You got here fast?” said Delche, sat me in the usual chair at the big table and brought my eggs. He looked at my package and angrily said, “I see you haven’t opened your package. Well, I opened mine

and the uniform is all white. I'm not wearing white; you won't catch me dead wearing white."

"In that case I won't wear it either."

We sat there opposite one another and ate in silence. Delche broke the silence and apologized for his angry outburst, which had nothing to do with me. He was fighting an internal struggle.

"I want my Macedonian colours on the uniform!" I said resolutely.

"What?!" he asked abruptly.

"I want my Macedonian colours on the uniform I'm going to wear!" I repeated and then said. "I also want the Macedonian sun painted under the ship and I will only attend Velion's party if I am allowed to land the ship in his garden. We have the power, we dictate the terms. I'm sure the people in the outer zones would want to see us do that, wear something different from the same old white they had to live under for years. This is their victory, our victory and we shouldn't allow the elite to bully us."

Delche jumped up and began to yell, "YES, YES, YES!"

Everyone looked at him and thought he'd gone mad. He called his wife, daughter and a few of his close friends over and told them what I had said. There was silence. His wife said something.

"She said it is strictly forbidden to bring arms to the royal party and our ship is full of arms," Delche translated.

Tell her this I said, "You want change, this is change, we voluntarily pledged loyalty to the royals, we fought for them, every order we followed came from Vieria, now we want something simple in return."

"Also tell Asora to talk this over with Vieria. These are the terms under which we go to the party, otherwise we won't go."

“I will wear the Macedonian colours too. And I will contact Ori and get his input,” Delche said.

Asora went to the other room and Delche pushed a number of buttons on his communicator and spoke to Ori in Macedonian.

When he hung up I said to him, “I’m so happy to hear you speaking Macedonian with Ori.”

“Well, it’s not what you think. We spoke Macedonian because he didn’t want his parents to know what he said. He also said he wants to leave home right now. He wants us to go and get him as soon as possible. And, oh yes, he will be happy to wear the Macedonian colours.”

Moments later Asora was back with a smile on her face as she said something.

“What did she say?”

“She said Viera was thrilled with the idea. She too was looking for change but didn’t know how to approach the subject without sounding like a dictator. Well, we solved that problem too.”

“That’s fantastic! Now let’s go and get Ori.”

Delche looked at me, hesitated for a moment and said, “You don’t need me, I don’t want to go back there again.”

“I need you, I don’t know how to find him alone or how to use the navigation computer. If you don’t want to go inside the house then contact Ori and tell him to wait for us somewhere outside, on the surface and we’ll pick him up.”

“Good idea. Well then what are we waiting for.”

On the way to Ori’s we discussed ways we could change the uniforms to include the yellow and red Macedonian colours and the Macedonian sun.

“You know something, I know a tailor who has a shop a few blocks from my restaurant who can modify the uniforms. I also know an artist, who occasionally drinks rakia with me. He will paint the Macedonian sun under the ship for practically a bottle of rakia.”

“What are you going to pay the tailor, two bottles of rakia?” I asked jokingly.

“Don’t mock me. I will do whatever it takes,” he replied in a serious tone of voice.

To change the subject I looked down and said, “Look down there, houses and no houses. There is a straight dividing line between the parks and the houses, why is that?”

“Because after the great wars the middle zone went underground in case there was another war and left the rest of us on the surface. They drove all the aliens and immigrants out of the middle zone and pushed them into the outer zones. Now all we are good for is paying taxes. Ah, don’t get me started,” he said and stopped talking.

Moments later we spotted Ori and picked him up. He was quiet when he took his seat and didn’t even greet us. Delche and I looked at each other and knew something was bothering him, but what? Was it us?

Moments later he dumped the package with his uniform on the floor. We noticed it was open.

“What, you don’t like the uniform?” Delche asked.

He took a while before he spoke and said, “I’m not upset with you or with the uniform. I’m upset with the racist attitude of my parents. They are selfish and chauvinistic and I’d rather not talk about it.”

“It’s not your parents, it’s you,” Delche said. “You’ve changed, you have seen the world with your own eyes and how beautiful, ugly and messy it is. Now maybe you can understand how I feel. But, enough of that, you can’t please everyone, you are your own person and you have to do what you have to do, rise above the crap and let’s have

some fun. Are you up to some drinking? My treat... It's always my treat."

Ori began to laugh and said, "Yes, rakia for me."

"Poor Ori, we have ruined you," I said.

Moments later we landed and went straight to the restaurant and sat in our usual places.

"No eating or drinking until we solve this uniform problem," Delche said.

Airam came over to the table and asked her father something.

"What did she say?" I asked Ori.

"She wants to know what's wrong with us not eating or drinking."

"Tell her Delche."

He spoke to her for a long time. She then went away and came back with a sketch pad and drew a coat and pants, sketched stripes on them and coloured them red and yellow. She went through a number of variations until we were all happy. I then took her pad and drew the Macedonian sun and pointed at the left arm of the jacket just below the left shoulder. She understood and sketched it in her drawings.

I then showed Delche and Ori my badge and asked them if we could make cloth replicates and paste them below the right shoulder. They both thought it was a good idea.

"This is to honour Vos, my mentor," I said.

I then told Delche to tell his daughter to draw and colour the Macedonian sun properly so that the artist could paint it under the ship. Airam did that for me.

“Okay, now we can eat and drink,” Delche declared and the servers brought our food. Airam retrieved the bottle of rakia she had hidden the day before and put it on the table along with three shot glasses.

After we ate we took the sketches Airam had made for us and the uniforms and walked to the tailor shop. Ori, my guards and I stood outside while Delche went inside.

We stood there quietly and waited. Moments later Delche came back.

“The uniforms will be ready tomorrow afternoon but the tailor needs a photograph of your badge. I will take it inside and bring it right back.”

With great hesitation I gave him the badge but not because I didn’t trust him. What if he was ambushed and it was stolen? I couldn’t access the ship without it.

Ori must have sensed my apprehension and said, “It has a tracking device, if it’s lost the guards will find.”

Moments later Delche came out, gave me the badge and said, “Let’s go find the artist.”

We walked a long way, turned left and walked for several blocks and finally came to an open space.

“I recognize this place,” I said. “This is where we shot that police truck a while ago.”

Ori agreed.

“This is where the artist lives and works,” Delche said as he pointed.

“It’s a junkyard,” I exclaimed.

Delche went in and Ori and I waited at the gate looking at all the junk and art pieces he had made from junk.

Delche came back and said, “He will do it and have it ready tomorrow but we have to bring the ship here and land it on that junk pile so he can access it from underneath. He will give us a ladder to get off and on the ship. Now let’s go and get the ship.”

About half an hour later we were back and I carefully landed the ship on the junk pile. When I opened the door we were about two metres off the ground, enough clearance for the artist to work under it. We each climbed down the ladder. The guards jumped off.

I told Delche to tell the artist to make sure he paints a large sun so that it can be seen from the distance.

Delche spoke to him at length.

“What are they saying,” I asked Ori.

“They’re haggling over the price.”

When Delche was done talking he said the ship would be ready tomorrow and asked what we wanted to do for the rest of the day.

Ori and I looked at each other and came up with nothing.

“You can’t think of a single thing outside of eating, drinking and shooting?” Delche asked mockingly.

“What else is there?” I said jokingly but was serious.

I had been here on this so-called civilized planet for over two months and had been living like a barbarian. I had no idea what these people did for fun or how they earned their living. And honestly, I didn’t want to know because deep inside I wasn’t ready to settle here, I wanted to go home.

Ori jumped in and said, “I thought I was happy until I met you two, now I don’t know what I am. Being at the top of my class, I thought I had a good grasp of the world and as it turned out half of what I was taught is lies and crap. I was fed a lot of crap about a lot of things, especially about the righteousness of the rats in the

government and about how corrupt and immoral the Karons and the outlanders were and only because they belonged to different cultures. My parents are ashamed of me for holding different views and for getting mixed up with you outlanders. But they couldn't wait to surrender me to Viera, only because she is a royal. Ah, the hell with it all."

"Ori, what we are doing here is bringing change, change never comes easily, and you have to destroy the old to build the new. When your parents realize what you have done and how you helped change the course of history, they will understand and appreciate you. Let me ask you this, what is history going to say about your parents? Nothing, not even a mention, but I will guarantee you, children in the future will be reading poetry about Ori the magnificent, a crewman of the great warship 'Dragon Fire', oh I hate that name, which defeated the Karon Empire, brought down the corrupt government on this planet and sent the mighty galactic destroyer back to its own galaxy. And this is only the beginning. If you still want to be part of this great change, ask Asora to give you a position in her government, think about what you want to do and ask. Her husband is your best buddy, how can you fail?" I said.

Ori took a big breath and said, "I could use a stiff drink right about now."

"We've ruined him!" I said and Delche concurred.

"Well, like I said, all we know how to do is eat, drink and shoot. It's one better than just eating and drinking," Delche said with a tone of disappointment.

We returned leisurely to the restaurant and sat in the usual place. It was nearing evening and the place was filling up fast. We were tired of talking to each other so we sat there sipping our rakia slowly and watching the people socialize and talk politics. For the first time since I had arrived here I felt very alone. All those voices, all those conversations were meaningless to me; not knowing the language was a great handicap. My guards didn't help my situation. I'm sure I would have received a tap or two on the shoulder but everyone was afraid to get close.

The time passed fast. Time moves fast when you have too many drinks. Ori and I said goodbye to everyone and were ready to go.

“Are you going back to the ship to sleep?” Delche asked. Like he didn’t know the ship was inaccessible.

“No,” I said. “We’re not that drunk, we’re going to the hotel on the next block, the owner offered us free rooms. We’ll be back tomorrow morning.”

I don’t remember much of what happened after that. In the morning Ori came and got me and we were back in the restaurant. Delche apologized for not having us stay at his place. He only had one spare room.

We drank a lot of tea with our breakfast that morning in an attempt to rehydrate. We all had a headache and didn’t feel like doing anything. Airam came by, collected the plates and said something.

“What did she say?” I asked Ori.

Delche was holding his head in his hands.

“She said she’s glad she doesn’t drink.”

We sat there drinking tea and feeling sorry for ourselves while watching the others work.

“We’re a bunch of slackers, aren’t we?” I blurted out.

“We should go for a walk,” Delche suggested.

Ori and I agreed.

We walked down the street very slowly and stopped in front of a barber shop.

Delche looked at me, laughed and said, “You look like a barbarian. You could use a haircut and a shave. You don’t want to look like that standing in front of royalty do you?”

“I agree but I have no money and I don’t want to constantly impose on you.”

Just as I finished talking the barber came out and loudly invited us in. He grabbed me by my arm and my guards pulled out their weapons. Delche had to tell him to let go and move slowly because my guards were very sensitive and might shoot him.

He laughed out loud and yelled something.

Ori said, “We’re getting free shaves, haircuts and a wash.”

The barber constantly talked as he worked. Delche kept moving his head in agreement.

Ori said, “He’s talking nonsense, little stories about his customers and that we are his most famous customers to date, and things like that.”

“This is who he is,” I said to Ori. “You can accept people and appreciate them for who they are or you can be like your parents.”

He quickly apologized.

“We are friends, and friends care for one another, there is no need to apologize.”

It took more than an hour for the barber to do his job but when he was done we looked fantastic. We thanked him and he thanked us.

From there we went straight to the tailor. Ori and I stood outside while Delche went in and came back with our uniforms. He unfolded one and we looked at it.

“I like it, I like it very much,” Ori said.

“I knew you would, look at the contrast between the white background and the yellow and red stripes in the front and back of the jacket and on the side of the pants. I love the round yellow on red Macedonian sun on the arm and how it stands out on the white background. We’ll be the envy of the party I’m telling you, and they will wonder why they didn’t think of it themselves,” replied Delche.

“The uniforms are indeed beautiful, look at the stitching, especially the complex colours and patterns of Voskot’s badge,” I said.

“Stop calling it Voskot’s badge. It’s your badge, you did more with it in a month than Voskot did in his lifetime,” Delche said.

Delche put the uniform back in its package and decided to carry all three of them.

Not long after that we arrived at the artist’s junkyard. The artist said something.

“You’re just in time, the paint is just about dry,” Ori translated.

I went under the ship and looked. It looked fantastic. He said something to Ori.

“The paint is reflective at no extra charge; people can see it in the dark when lights are shining on it. It will be my most famous masterpiece. Imagine that?”

While everyone else was admiring the painting of the Macedonian sun I climbed up the rickety ladder, entered the codes, tapped the handprint with my hand and opened the ship’s door. Then they climbed up the ladder, including my guards. Before closing the door we waved goodbye to the artist.

“I’ll give him his money the next time he comes to the restaurant. He wanted to do the job for free but I know he’s poor, I convinced him to take some money to pay for the paint,” Delche said.

I had the docking robot take the ship off the rickety platform using impulse power to make sure we didn’t tip over. After I took control

we landed the ship at the usual place, took our uniforms with us and went back to the restaurant to try them on.

Airam was excited to see the uniforms. These could become famous uniforms and she had designed the colours on them. Delche gave the sketches back to her.

After we put the uniforms on, Airam helped us adjust them so that they fit perfectly. She couldn't believe how good they looked and how good we looked in them. We all looked like high ranking military officers. She was very proud of her father.

Airam said something.

Ori translated, "Take the uniforms off and hide them. Take them to the ship and put them on before you take off for the party tomorrow. Mom and I will be there, I'll act surprised when I see you."

We took Airam's advice, took the uniforms off and took them to the ship. We each put our uniform on our chair and returned to the restaurant.

When we came back we realized that we didn't have proper shoes to go with our uniforms so we went walking down the street until we found a shoe store. Unfortunately they only sold custom made shoes. When Delche told the cobbler what we needed them for and that he was Asora's husband, he agreed to make them for us for free the same day. He measured our feet and had his assistants drop everything and start making our shoes. He then told us to come back before dark.

"I'm starting to like this... being famous," said Delche. "I just hope it doesn't corrupt me."

His words made me nervous and I wondered where the dividing line was and how many little favours it would take before we were corrupt just like the rats.

"Delche, I want you to make a list of every favour that was done for us including your own expenses so we can pay for them. If we

continue to accept favours like we have done so far, we could damage your wife's reputation as an honest person and I don't want to be responsible for that. We are accusing others of being corrupt, but what do we do? Accept favours and free stuff! I will find the money and we will pay for everything we have taken so far."

Delche agreed without reservation and made a list.

"The rakia too?" he asked jokingly.

"No. When your wife legalizes the sale of rakia then we'll think about it."

When it started getting dark outside we went back to the cobbler. The cobbler told Delche that the shoes were ready and we went in the back to get them. They were white. I wasn't happy with the colour and neither was Delche.

"I prefer them to be brown," I said.

Delche asked the cobbler if he could change the colour to light brown. The cobbler wasn't happy. Then Delche told him he was prepared to pay full price if he painted the shoes light brown. The cobbler agreed and went to the back.

"We don't have money," I told Delche. "How are you going to pay for the shoes?"

At that point Ori said we still had the account Viera had given us and we could take money from there.

The cobbler came back and the shoes looked fantastic. We tried them on and they fit perfectly. Ori gave the cobbler the account to charge the shoes against. After that we went back to the tailor, artist and hotel and paid them. We also paid Delche's friend who had given us provisions for the ship.

Both Ori and Delche refused to take money for their services.

It was late at night when we went back to the restaurant. Delche offered us food but we turned it down.

“Thank you but no more food, we’ve been eating all day, it’s time to rest.”

We said our goodbye’s and Ori and I went back to the ship.

King Velion's party

We got up early the next morning and went straight to Delche's restaurant for breakfast. After breakfast we used Delche's facilities to shower. Ori had his shower first and I had my shower with my guards standing just outside the shower stall. I had always regarded my guards as machines but standing naked in their presence made me feel awkward. Delche had his shower last. Asora and Airam had already gone when Ori and I arrived at the restaurant. They had been picked up by Vieria's limousine and had been taken somewhere for a meeting.

After we showered we left the restaurant and went to the ship. When we arrived there was a message from Vieria waiting for us. She gave us the coordinates for where the party was to take place and what time to arrive. She also told us that there was a special landing pad in the garden where we were required to land.

"It will be marked with a particular symbol which Delche and Ori will recognize," she said.

We were to arrive at exactly ten o'clock. We had two hours to kill.

I was nervous and excited when I asked, "What do you guys want to do to pass the time?"

We were all nervous, especially Delche, who I figured would be the least nervous.

No one had any ideas on how to spend the time.

I looked around and my eyes landed on one of my guards. I had an idea.

"Ori, it would be nice if my guards wore uniforms like ours. How long do you think it would take for you to create holograms in the computer?"

Ori became excited and said, "Now that I have something to do, I'll start right now but we should put our uniforms on first so that I can

model the holograms on them. I would also have to take a picture of your badge and create a hologram of it for the arm pads.”

“Do it!” I said.

Delche, turned to me and asked, “Are we going to the party armed?”

I thought about it for a minute and said, “The guards are going armed, not us. I know you don’t like these people, let alone trust them, but that goes both ways. We have to show that we are confident and not afraid of anyone. I’m sure there will be many rats at the party but I can assure you that if they make a move they will sign their death warrant. My guards will extend their protection to the three of us; we just have to make sure we are always close together.”

Delche was somewhat reassured but he still had his doubts.

As soon as Ori got dressed and put on his new uniform and shoes he dashed to his panel and began to work.

He told Delche to, “Stand still so I can see what belongs where on the uniform.”

When Ori was finished looking at Delche he took a picture of my badge and continued to work.

In the meantime Delche showed me how to enter coordinates into the ship’s navigation computer and how to activate them for the autopilot.

“Now you can take trips to unknown destinations by yourself. See this symbol here; if you get lost push it, set the speed, you know how to do that, and then engage the autopilot. The ship will automatically bring you here to this spot.”

I thanked him and asked him how much longer until departure time.

“Stop asking me that, you can look at the clock yourself, there’s one in front of you. You make me more nervous every time you ask for the time.”

There was a yell, Ori declared he was done and asked me to say, “Guards, Macedonian mode.”

“Why Macedonian mode?” I asked.

“Just do it, that’s what I thought of at the moment. What difference does it make anyway, just do it!”

“Guards, Macedonian mode,” I said.

“Wow, they look so beautiful, like real women,” said Delche

Ori then said to me, “Ask them to disengage from the dock.”

I did. Then he asked Delche to stand beside one of them, which he did.

Ori got out of his seat and examined both Delche and the guard, made some mental notes and went back to his panel. I was about to say something but he stopped me and said, “Stand by.”

Moments later he said do it again.

I again said, “Guards, Macedonian mode.” And then I said, “I feel funny saying that.”

Ori didn’t care. He got up again and reexamined his work.

He sat down on his chair, took a long breath and said, “Done.”

“Are you done with me?” asked Delche.

“Yes... Thank you.”

“I just remembered. We should put on and wear the medals Viera gave us. Find them and pin them on your jackets over your hearts,” I said and showed them how.

Moments later I said, “It’s time to go,” and turned on the engines.

The guards returned to their docks.

Delche took his seat and said, “They sure look beautiful.”

After we were off the ground Ori said he wasn’t sure he was going to finish designing the uniforms for the guards on time. Delche told him to stop doubting himself.

We flew in silence the rest of the way until the park came into view. We looked down and saw thousands of people among the flowering fruit trees. At the top of the park was a long table with a row of people sitting behind it. Ori pointed at the symbol where we were expected to land. The landing site was at the bottom of the park away from the people.

“I have never seen so much white in one place,” said Delche.

“And since when were you ever invited to a royal party?” I asked sarcastically.

“Ha! Ha!” he replied.

“Nobody is looking up,” Ori said.

“You want them to look up? Then let’s give them something to look up to.”

I pulled the joystick back as far as it extended. The ship’s engines exploded with a great force as the ship shot into space.

“That should get their attention,” I said.

Then taking a circular motion I took the ship down, slowly closing the circle as we descended until we were flying above the people's heads.

"I'm sure everyone has noticed us now."

"I'm sure some even filled their pants," Delche said.

"I'm sure there will be hell to pay for that stunt!" declared Ori.

"Well, I can see that you're no longer nervous," I said and pushed the door open button. I then instructed the guards to protect all of us and told Ori to go out first. He hesitated but I told him in my tradition the captain leaves the ship last. Ori stepped out first.

There were cheers from the crowd as we got off one by one. My guards followed me very closely as I got off and closed the door.

I didn't think too many people in the crowd knew that the women behind me were actually my guards and not my dates, so there was a lot of whispering about that.

After we got off the ship a man came over and told us to stand side by side in a straight line. He then introduced us as follows:

"1st Lieutenant Ori, officer of communications!"

"Commander Delche, officer of navigation!"

"Commander Otsi, Captain of the ship Dragon Fire, and his two personal guards Glory and Morning!"

Cheers followed along with whispers.

"I see you got a promotion," I said to Ori.

Our escort motioned to me to be quiet and made a hand gesture.

Seconds later Asora and Airam showed up and, without saying a word, escorted us up the hill to the big table.

The crowd was silent.

While Delche, Ori, Asora and Airam looked down as instructed I looked at the people looking at us.

When we arrived at the top Asora and Airam stepped to the left and Asora introduced us to the royal family sitting behind the big table.

Asora started with Ori and ended with me and the guards. When she was done a man standing to our left introduced the royal family. He started with King Velion, his wife and seven daughters from oldest to youngest.

I looked at each daughter individually and only recognized one, Anelia. She looked at me sheepishly and then turned away. She was the one who was responsible for everything that had happened to me.

I looked around, Vieria was not there.

When the man was finished introducing the royal family, King Velion began to laugh. He had a long and funny laugh. His laugh reminded me of the sound our donkeys made back in my village in Macedonia.

Velion spoke for a long time. I have no idea what he said. When he was finally done he looked at me, pointed and said something. He then pointed at his daughters, said something and stopped talking.

He looked at me as if expecting an answer. There was silence everywhere and no one said a word.

Finally Asora spoke up and told the king that I didn't speak their language.

The king said something and waved his hands.

Ori said something. The king then motioned to him.

Ori looked at me and said, “The king is offering you one of his daughters. It is our tradition to do that with our heroes. And since you already know Anelia he suggested you take her as your bride. Or you can choose another daughter.”

I looked at each one of his daughters behind the table from left to right. They were all smiling except for Anelia who looked mean, like she wanted to murder someone.

I told Ori to say the following to the king and make it sound good and polite. “I thank you my king very much for offering to make me part of your family but I am already married. I am married to that ship which can’t survive without me. I too can’t survive without it. And if I can’t survive then I can’t serve you and your good people on this planet.”

When Ori was done talking Asora began to clap, many followed. The king shook his big head and waved at everyone to stop clapping. He then pointed at the man to our right and the man came over to pin a medal on my chest. My guards instantly reacted. They moved in front of me and drew their weapons. I moved my hand. They lowered their weapons and went behind me. There was a big gasp coming from the crowd and then there was silence.

“Let this be a lesson to you all!” I said (in Macedonian).

Delche almost burst out laughing but Asora gave him “the look” and he cut it out.

I waved the man to come back and he pinned the medals on us. He gave me the medals for the guards and I put them in my pocket. He couldn’t pin them on the guards because their uniforms were holograms. It was sad watching him try.

When the man was done with the medal pinning we were escorted to a table below the king’s table and the three of us sat down. Asora and Airam were escorted back to their own table with the dignitaries.

When attention was taken away from us we began to notice things. Delche noticed that there were cameras all over the place taking pictures. Ori looked around and estimated that there were over one thousand people in attendance. I looked at the food on the royal table and our table. It consisted exclusively of preserved fruits, jellies and brown and white dried cubes. There were glasses filled with water.

What kind of a party was this, I wondered.

“We could use a stiff drink of rakia just about now,” I said.

Both Delche and Ori agreed.

“Everybody is eating, we’d better eat something, we don’t want to insult our host,” said Ori.

Delche was about to say something but I said, “Don’t!”

We each picked up our little triangular spoon and dipped into the three varieties of jelly they had set on the table for us.

Moments later a woman came over and whispered something into Ori’s ear.

“We have been summoned to go to the table where the dignitaries are.”

We got up and followed the woman down to where Asora was sitting. There was no place for us to sit.

Asora said something to the others around the table and they each had their chance to speak.

She then told Ori to tell me, “We have taken a vote and we unanimously agree to send emissaries to Barkon, the Karon planet and to the trader’s galaxy to open embassies for the purpose of trading with them. We want your ship to escort our people there.”

Delche told me, “Don’t argue with her here, do what she says and don’t make her argue with you. It will make her look weak.”

I agreed.

I told Ori to tell her the following and make it sound good, “I graciously accept your orders and will do as you ask.”

After Ori spoke to her everyone shook their heads in approval and smiled.

After that we left and walked over to our ship. I opened the door, waved goodbye to everyone who was looking, closed the door and slowly lifted off and vanished into the sky.

After we left we all took a deep breath and began to relax. I set the speed and pushed the home button and off we went, destination; Delche’s restaurant.

“I owe you two a lot for giving my wife her moment,” Delche said.

“Did you know that Airam was the only person waving back when we waved at the crowds before we left?” I said.

“I know you’re upset about what I said earlier but you’ll be doing it for Asora and for all of us. All you have to do is escort a shuttle to make sure it isn’t hijacked by pirates or something, that’s all.” said Delche.

“First, we’re all going together, and second, I know this planet has dozen’s of science vessels that can just as easily do the job. I’m not at all upset but I would have preferred to be consulted before I was ambushed,” I replied.

“Don’t look at it as an ambush, look at it as a favour to me,” said Delche.

I smiled and said, “Okay we’ll do it but it will cost you.”

“It always costs me,” he said.

I looked at Ori smiling and said, “What are you smiling about? You were in on this too weren’t you?”

“I’ve always wanted to travel to another galaxy,” Ori replied.

Suddenly the ship stopped and began to hover.

“What’s happening?” I asked.

“We’ve arrived, take the ship out of autopilot and land it,” said Delche.

As soon as we touched down we got a call from Viera. Ori put her on speaker.

“You did well,” she said in Macedonian and told Ori to turn on the news. “It’s all about you. The Macedonian colours were a smashing hit with the outlanders and I think we will make them part of the new uniform for the military fleet of ships we’ll be building in the future. This way the outlanders will know their voices have been heard. I hear you are soon going to venture into space? Good luck to you boys, and keep in touch,” she said and hung up.

“Does she speak Macedonian that well or did she just practice these lines for my benefit?” I asked.

“Never mind that, she called us boys. How sweet is that?” said Ori.

“Ah! Let’s get out of here. I need a drink!” said Delche.

It was past noon when we got back to the restaurant and we did exactly what we do best; eat and drink. Everyone in the restaurant was glued to Delche’s large viewing screen and watching the proceedings at King Velion’s party. It would appear that after we left they began to play loud synthetic music, which we could now hear blaring on the viewer.

“What are they saying on the viewer?” I asked Ori.

“One extreme side, the majority who are outlanders are behind us, they love the new colours, they see themselves as the colour splashed over the white, the beauty overpowering the mundane, and things like that. The other extreme side, a small minority see us and the ship as a threat to their way of life. They see the colours as the disease that has infected the purity of their white. And the stunt you pulled with the engines exploding? And with your guards drawing their guns? Well, some of the more conservative element on the planet, let’s say, are going nuts over that. And I don’t really want to tell you what they’re saying about you trampling over the sanctity of their culture with your barbarian boots...” he replied.

“Well, Ori, as I listened to you telling me all these negative things I felt angry. Yes, what they are saying is making me angry, very angry, angry enough to do something terrible. It’s human nature. But then that’s exactly what they would want me to do, do something terrible so that they can prove to the world how dangerous I am. That I am indeed dangerous and need to be put down like a rabid dog.

But, you know something? They’re the ones that are the dogs; they are all bark and no bite. By all means, let them bark all they want. If they could bite they would have done so already. They are just barking dogs,” I said.

“Stop listening to the idiot box and let’s enjoy our free time,” said Delche.

There was a huge outcry in the restaurant. People were cheering everywhere. We looked around. We saw Asora and Airam stepping out of the limousine and coming right for us.

Asora said something.

Ori translated. “First, I’m sorry for putting you on the spot today and second, we have a shuttle scheduled to leave for Barkon, the Karon planet, the day after tomorrow at ten o’clock in the morning. After the shuttle drops off our people on Barkon it will fly to the trader’s galaxy. We want you to escort it. Make sure you fully stock your ship for an eleven day trip. Use Vieria’s account if you need money”

After Ori was finished talking Asora and Airam quickly left and went to the back room.

“I don’t have enough rakia to last us that many days,” Delche said and added. “I’d better make some more tonight. Do you want to come with me and help?”

Both Ori and I jumped at the opportunity.

“We’d love to see Delche make rakia, it’s every drinker’s dream, and, by the way, a nice distraction,” I said to Delche.

Ori laughed.

We were so excited about it that we decided to leave right away. Delche took us along a hallway behind the kitchen and down some stairs and stopped at a metal door.

“It’s locked. I keep it locked because I don’t want anyone snooping, especially the authorities,” said Delche.

Delche opened the door, turned on the lights and shut the door behind us. Both Ori and I were amazed by the number of bottles on the big shelf leaning against the wall. I looked at them. They were all empty. I then looked over at the shelf on the opposite wall where there were only a couple of dozen bottles. They were full.

“Those bottles are full, the others are all empty. I’ll start the distillation now and when it’s done we will take empty bottles from that shelf, fill them from the reservoir one by one and transfer them over to the other shelf. First let me dump the fermented juice into the boiler, once the boiler heats up to the right temperature the rakia will start flowing into that reservoir.

We helped Delche dump a number of barrels full of fermented juice into the boiler and then he turned on the power to heat it.

“Do you have any unbreakable bottles?” I asked Delche.

“Sure, lot’s of them, why?”

“If we take rakia on the ship we should put it in unbreakable bottles,” I replied and then said. “We also have a glass jug full of firewater in the ship that needs to be put in unbreakable bottles.”

Delche suddenly jumped and said, “You shouldn’t have that stuff in the ship, it’s very dangerous. If you break the jug and it spills inside the ship’s electronics it will ignite and explode violently. So, go get it and bring it here. We’ll put it in those small unbreakable bottles and secure them.”

Ori and I left immediately and went back to the ship. We took the bucket, the full jug, the jelly jars and the other things that didn’t belong there and brought them back.

After Delche poured the firewater into many small bottles he gave me one to take with us and told me to use only four drops at a time and only in emergency situations.

“It’s very dangerous and will fry your brain if not used properly.”

He then warned Ori to never touch the stuff.

After Delche gave us a tour of his illegal rakia making facility he said, “There’s no point in us staying here anymore. The distillation process will take all night before it’s done. The distillation machine will stop automatically when the reservoir is full. We’ll come back tomorrow morning and finish the job. Sometime in the future I’ll show you which fruits to ferment so that you too can make your own rakia. Now let’s go for a walk and see my friend about the supplies for our ship.”

Delche’s friend had everything we needed, especially after Delche told him he was going to pay for it.

Later, when we returned to the restaurant we sat down and tried to figure out how we could keep cooked meat fresh for eleven days.

None of us had any ideas. I then saw Airam open one of those jelly jars.

“We should be able to preserve the meat just like the jelly,” I said.

“Why don’t we ask my chef how it’s done?” said Delche and called him over. When he was free the chef came over and Delche described to him what we wanted to do. The chef told us that there was a factory that did exactly that and was within walking distance of the restaurant. The chef used to work there.

“The factory supplies food for the ships that go on long voyages.”

The chef then asked Delche how many jars he wanted.

Delche asked him how big the jars were and how many in a case. The chef said each jar contained half a litre of vacuum sealed cooked meat and each case contained 10, 20, 30, 40 or 50 jars. Delche told him that we wanted fifty jars and asked him when we could get them. The chef asked for the money and then said he would be able to bring the jars here himself tomorrow morning when he came to work. Delche gave him Vieria’s account and told him the jars had to be shatterproof.

When we were done with the chef I said, “We accomplished a lot today. It’s getting late and I’d like to go to bed so I can get up early tomorrow morning and help you with bottling the rakia.”

No one had any objections so Ori and I said goodbye and left for the ship. I went to bed and Ori went surfing the channels looking for news on today’s events.

Preparing for the trip into deep space

The next day I was rudely awakened by my communicator. I looked outside, it was light and Ori was still sleeping. I answered the call; Delche was on the other side of the line laughing.

Before I said anything Delche said, “Where are my helpers? You told me you would be here first thing in the morning, it’s already mid-morning and why aren’t you here?”

“Good morning to you too, we’re coming right over,” I said and hung up on him and yelled for Ori to get up.

We quickly got dressed in our old clothes and ran to the restaurant. We left our new uniforms in the ship.

I put on my camouflage uniform and noticed it was getting dirty.

“We need to get some new clothes and wash the old ones.”

Ori looked at his civilian suit and said, “You’re right, we should mention this to Delche, maybe he can suggest something.”

“Guards, guard mode.” And the pretty girls following us turned into menacing warriors.

Just as we arrived Delche quickly took us to the basement and showed us how to fill the bottles and shelve them.

“Start working and I will go up and get our breakfast. We’ll eat down here,” said Delche.

Ori and I thought about how to do the work and decided to turn a one man job into a two man job. We began by me taking two empty bottles from the shelf. I placed one on the floor, removed the cork from the other one, filled it with rakia and placed it on the floor on the other side. Ori picked up the full bottle put the cork in it and placed it on the other shelf. While I was filling the second bottle, Ori brought another empty bottle and put it on the floor. So, with both of us working we were able to speed up the process considerably.

About half an hour later Delche showed up with Airam and brought us the food. Delche said he had already eaten his breakfast and took over for Ori. Airam looked around as if she had never been down here before and said something.

“So, this is where all the nefarious activities take place?” Ori translated.

Delche said, “I brought her here to show her this place. She will have to take over for me when we are gone. I don’t trust the others handling my rakia.”

Delche said something and Airam left.

As soon as Ori was done eating he took over for me and I ate my breakfast.

Delche was impressed with the progress of filling the bottles and said, “We will be done a lot sooner than I thought.”

While I was eating Ori spoke to Delche about getting new clothes and getting the old ones washed. Delche said he got his clothes washed down the next block in the public laundry. As for new clothes, he recommended we purchase clothes from the same friend who would sell us supplies for our ship.

“He also sells used clothes for a reasonable price, good quality used clothes.”

Ori made a face and was unsure if he wanted to wear used clothes.

“If you are concerned about the clothes not being clean, we can have them washed,” said Delche.

When I was done eating I took over for Delche and he began to pack the rakia in a strong box which we were going to take with us on the trip.

“We’re taking thirty shatterproof bottles, one litre each. I know that’s too many but maybe we can trade some in the new worlds.”

Ori and I worked while Delche watched us. “I had to do this by myself you know, it’s a long and boring job. This batch should last us a long time.”

When we were done Delche asked us to wash our hands. He then asked Ori to make a list of what we needed to do and what we needed to take with us before we left for our trip.

“Don’t forget to bring your new uniform,” I said to Delche. “There maybe occasions when we may need to wear it.”

Ori and I picked up the box full of rakia and carried it outside the basement door. Delche locked the door. Ori complained it was too heavy to carry. I suggested that I ask the guards to carry it, they’re machines and should be able to carry it. No one objected.

After giving my commands in various ways the guards finally picked up the box. They grabbed it one on each side and followed me up the stairs.

Delche said, “Keep going all the way to the ship and then come back and have them carry the box with the jars of meat.”

Ori and I led the way and my guards followed. After we offloaded the rakia we came back and took the meat. Delche gave Ori his new uniform and Ori set it on his seat in the ship.

When we came back it was past noon and Delche asked us to lunch.

“My chef brought an extra jar of meat for us to try. Sit and he’ll bring it over.”

The chef came over with three plates and forks and set them on the table.

“The meat looks like the canned meat the military ate during the wars back on earth.”

Delche took a bite and said, “Not as good as mine but its better than the dry cubes they call meat around here.”

We all tried the meat and found it to be okay.

After we ate lunch we went back to the ship and took inventory of what was needed and made a list.

“We’ll need to buy straps to secure the boxes to the floor of the ship, we don’t want a mishap,” Delche said.

Ori wrote straps on his list.

We took a leisurely walk down the street to the supply shop and gave Delche’s friend the list of what we needed. After that we went to look at the used clothing and rummaged through the racks until we found what we wanted. The clothes were used but very clean, Ori said he would have no problem wearing them. Delche asked his friend where he washed his clothes. His friend said he had a machine in the back where he washed and dried the clothes for his shop. Delche told him that we had some clothes that needed washing and asked him if the public laundry was still working. His friend said the public laundry was filthy and we shouldn’t go there. He could have our clothes washed right here while we waited.

“How much?” asked Delche.

“Because you are buying so much stuff from me I’ll do it for free.”

We immediately changed into the new clothes we had just picked out and tossed our dirty clothes in a pile. Delche’s friend took them and tossed them into the washing machine.

He then helped us adjust our new clothes to fit properly and said, “By the time I get all your supplies ready your clothes will be washed and dried.”

We looked around the shop to see if we needed to buy anything else.

Delche said, "I have been here many times but I've never noticed how much junk my friend has accumulated in his shop. Once a week he goes around the markets buying stuff that no one wants, cleans it, fixes it and sells it. That's how he makes his living. I admire him for that. He often comes over to my restaurant and while we drink rakia we philosophize about life. He's not from this planet. I never did ask him where he's from."

"Your clothes are clean and dry and packed with the clothes you just bought. I put everything in one big box and its heavy, how are you going to carry it?" Delche's friend asked.

Delche gave him the account on which to charge the stuff and told him to watch. He then pointed at me and said, "You're on."

His friend thought I would try to carry the box by myself and laughed. But then when he saw that my two guards, two skinny women, grabbed the huge and heavy box and hauled it out, he was awestruck.

"Straight to the ship," said Delche.

The girls carried the big heavy box into the ship without breaking any sweat.

"You wouldn't believe what I would give to have one of these working for me," said Delche.

We worked for hours restocking everything and making sure we had enough for the trip and plenty to spare in case we had an emergency.

It was evening by the time we were done and we all began to feel nervous.

"Does anyone know where we are supposed to rendezvous with the shuttle?" asked Delche. "What about the route we're supposed to take? I need that information so that I can get you there."

Both Ori and I shrugged our shoulders.

Delche then began to swear and curse in Macedonian. I was surprised that he even knew such words. I was about to ask him where he learned those naughty words, when Ori's panel began to bleep.

"What is it?" I asked.

"It's the coordinates and instructions for our trip. This information is for you, Delche. I don't know what to make of it," replied Ori.

Delche looked at it and said, "Finally, this is what I've been looking for. I'll enter it into the navigation computer and then we can finally relax until tomorrow."

"Who sent it?" I asked.

"It came from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and bears Asora's signature," replied Ori.

"Are we done here?" asked Delche.

"Check your lists," I said, "and see if we've covered everything."

"Delche, check out the spare bed and see if it's okay," I suggested.

He lay in the bed for a few seconds and said, "It feels good to me."

"Well then, let's go back to Delche's place and get drunk," I said.

After spending some time in the restaurant eating and drinking Ori and I decided we should go to the ship and have a long rest. No one objected.

"Be here first thing in the morning for breakfast," Delche said.

We said okay, said our goodbyes and left.

On the way to the planet Barkon

“It’s time to get up,” I heard Ori yell while I was having a dream about being home on my own planet. I often dreamt of being home in my village in Macedonia.

I tried to move but my body felt very heavy. I didn’t want to get up.

“We have less than two hours to get ready, have breakfast and be in outer space at our rendezvous place,” Ori said with a tone of urgency in his voice.

“Did we get any calls or new instructions from anyone?”

“No!”

I looked at Ori. He was wearing his new, slightly used clothes that we had purchased the day before so I decided to wear my new, slightly used clothes as well.

When we arrived at the restaurant the chef brought us our breakfast. Ori asked him something.

“What did you ask and what did he say?”

“I asked him where Delche was. The chef said Delche was with the wife spending quality time.”

I was about to say something but Airam showed up, gave us each a hug and left.

“Your people don’t hug. What’s that all about?” I asked Ori.

“Your influence! Probably something her father taught her to do, which he picked up from your planet.”

A little later Delche and Asora showed up. Asora greeted us with a smile and said something, probably good luck, and waved goodbye. Delche gave her a kiss and she disappeared into the back room.

“Let me say goodbye to my daughter and staff and then we will go.”

Moment’s later he came back and said, “Let’s go!”

I noticed that he too was wearing the slightly used, new clothes we had purchased the day before.

When we arrived at the ship we made sure everything was tied down and secure and began the countdown to our rendezvous. I was surprised that no one had called us.

I powered up the ship’s engines and ran all sorts of diagnostics. Everything was in working order. I checked the fuel gauges and counted the torpedoes. I then confirmed the numbers in storage with those in the computer.

“What are you nervous about?” Delche asked. “What’s with all the checking?”

“I’m just killing time.”

“Well, let’s get going, we can wait for the shuttle up in space. I’ve already punched in the coordinates, just punch autopilot and let’s go,” said Delche.

Ori was busy listening to the various media reports talking about our “historic mission” to the planet Barkon and so on and so on.

I raised the ship up, punched the autopilot button and the ship took off. I looked down at the planet and felt as if I was looking at it for the last time.

We arrived at our destination early and stopped. We were standing out in the open which made me nervous.

“I don’t like sitting out here in the open. Our ship is an easy target and it makes me nervous.”

“What do you suggest we do?” asked Delche.

“I suggest we fly around in random patterns. Ori you try and make contact with the shuttle.”

“I can’t, I wasn’t given any contact information or the shuttle’s call sign.”

I grabbed the joystick and began to fly the ship all over the place in random circular patterns.

“While moving we will be a difficult target to lock onto, especially from the surface,” I said.

A woman’s voice came over the speaker calling to make contact with the ship “Dragon Fire”. Her identity code popped up on Ori’s panel showing her to be the captain of the shuttle “Morning Star”.

Ori told the captain to stand by while he consulted with Delche and me.

“I suggest you call Vieria and find out what’s going on,” I said.

Moments later Ori gave us the thumbs up and went back on his communicator.

“I don’t recall teaching him about the thumbs up. Did you teach him that?”

“No, but you did when you were telling him your stories about Vos,” Delche replied.

After he spoke to the shuttle’s captain Ori gave Delche the new coordinates of where we were expected to be minutes from now.

“Isn’t it a little early?” I said.

“I asked the same question and was told that we were leaving early as a precaution,” replied Ori.

“Okay,” I said, entered the speed and punched autopilot.

We were at the new rendezvous point in minutes.

The shuttle captain gave us a new set of coordinates, which pissed off Delche because he had already entered the old coordinates and had the trip planned out.

When we got a visual of the shuttle I decided to follow it and didn't engage the autopilot.

"We can follow them without autopilot as long as we have a visual on them," I said.

No one objected.

As we got closer I looked at the shuttle and said, "That looks like the shuttle that took me from earth when I had my first encounter with Anelia."

"Probably not, they all look alike," replied Delche.

The shuttle flew in front of us much slower than I had expected. I kept catching up to it and had to slow down. It was tiring and nerve wracking.

Delche looked at me and said, "Let me help you. Your piloting is making me nauseous. I'm going to lock onto the shuttle and we will automatically follow it without you having to do anything."

"You can do that?"

"Of course! Just push that button," he said and pointed at it.

After I touched the panel where he said, the ship locked onto the shuttle and the autopilot took over the steering and maintained a constant distance behind.

"That's much better," I said. "Vos never taught me how to do that."

Everything around us was dark as we entered deep space except for the shuttle that reflected the sun's rays and looked like a star. And

then there was the occasional asteroid we saw glinting in the distance.

“What happens if we collide with one of those?” I asked Delche.

“The ship’s sensors will pick it up and the ship will warn us if there is imminent danger. You then just shoot it out of the way or the ship will automatically swerve to avoid it.”

“That’s nice to know,” I said and asked. “Does the shuttle have the same capability?”

“Every ship does,” replied Delche.

“Ori, did you find out how many people are on the shuttle and who they are?” Delche asked.

“No. No one said anything to me. But from what I know those shuttles are pretty small. They can only accommodate eight people at most. I would guess there are two crew, two ambassadors and four aids.”

“Was there any information on the captain?” I asked Ori.

“No. Nothing,” he replied.

“So, we have no idea how many we are escorting and no idea how long the trip to planet Barkon will take?”

“That’s partly true,” replied Delche. “Based on the destination coordinates we were given and the current speed we are traveling at, we will arrive at Barkon in approximately fourteen hours.”

“So, it’s going to be a long, uneventful and boring fourteen hours,” I said.

Just as I finished saying that a call came over the speaker. It was the shuttle’s captain.

“What did she say?”

Ori said, “She said she’s spotted a ship in the distance coming our way and that we should be investigating it and see if it poses any danger to the shuttle.”

“How come we didn’t spot it?” I asked.

Ori checked and said, “You haven’t turned on your long-range sensors.”

“I thought they were always on,” I replied and turned them on.

“There it is,” said Ori. “It’s a pirate ship heading for the shuttle. It appears it hasn’t seen us yet, maybe because it has no long-range sensors.”

Open a channel and ask them what they want with the shuttle.

Ori did that and got a response.

“They’re telling us it’s not our business. They said the shuttle is theirs. And if we don’t get lost they will fire on us. They think we are chasing the shuttle.”

“Tell them who we are and tell them that we are escorting the shuttle on a peaceful mission to Barkon!” I said.

“They refuse to listen and are telling us to back off.”

I then told Ori, “Inform the captain of the shuttle that we are disengaging and going in pursuit of the ship that’s coming for them.”

I then armed all the energy cannons, armed the torpedo and grabbed the joystick. I asked Ori to contact Viera, let her know what was happening and ask her what she wants us to do.

“Just fire a couple of blasts at them. Let them know we mean business. These troublemakers are lawless pirates and cowards. I’m

sure they will turn and run if they know we have weapons,” Delche suggested.

Ori made the call and Viera said that we should destroy that ship the first chance we get. Those are her orders. According to Viera that ship has been responsible for attacking many ships in this quadrant of space. It’s been nothing but trouble for everyone. It has attacked, robbed and destroyed many of our trading ships. She also warned that the pirate ship was well-armed and we were no match for it if we came within range of its cannons. We needed to fire at it from a distance.”

“There it is,” Delche said when he spotted it in the distance. “Holy crap, it’s a huge ship.”

“Turn away, turn away!” yelled Ori, “Another kilometre and we’ll be within range of its cannons.”

I turned the ship, circled around and put some distance between it and the shuttle. The pirates began to fire on us even though we were out of range.

I asked Ori to warn them one more time to stop the pursuit.

Ori put them on speaker and said, “They won’t listen, they’re laughing at us.”

“There is only one thing to do from this distance.” I said.

They both looked at me expecting an explanation.

I locked two of the cannons onto the pirate ship, told Delche and Ori to prepare for the boom and fired.

There was a huge bang. It shook our ship and caused a massive flash to fire forward.

“Direct hit, you blasted a huge hole right through the pirate ship,” Ori yelled.

I then locked onto the wreckage and fired a torpedo. A split second later the pirate ship was in pieces floating in space.

We heard the shuttle's captain say something over the speakers. Ori translated.

“Nice shooting Dragon Fire.”

“You scared the hell out of me. What the hell was that blast? Energy cannons don't explode!?” said Delche.

“Yes they do!” I said.

I then looked at Ori and told him to explain to Delche what happens when more than one energy cannon is fired at the same time.

After Ori explained Delche said, “That's only in theory, it's dangerous to do that in practice, nobody fires more than one cannon at the same time.”

“This captain is crazy, so don't mess with him,” said Ori.

Delche looked at me and said, “You are a crazy bastard, I'm glad you're my friend, I would hate to have you as my enemy.”

After we circled around and caught up to the shuttle we again locked onto it and continued to follow.

“Before I forget,” I said to Ori, “see if you can program the long-range sensors to engage when we power up the ship so that we don't forget to turn them on.”

“Sure thing,” he said and went to work.

Delche got out of his chair and went to the food cabinet. He pulled out a small bottle of rakia that he had hidden there earlier, grabbed three plastic cups, filled them a quarter full and said, “Some elixir to calm our nerves.”

“To still being alive,” I toasted.

“To our crazy captain,” Delche said.

Ori smiled and said, “I’m so glad I met you guys.”

After a lot of sipping and a long silence Ori said, “What do you guys think the captain of the shuttle would say if she knew the crew of the ship responsible for her safety was flying drunk?”

Both Delche and I cracked up laughing.

“Who’s going to tell her?” I asked.

“If I wasn’t married that wouldn’t be my first thought,” Delche said.

Just then another call came in. It was our favourite captain.

“What does she want this time?” I asked.

“She said there are three objects standing in our path ahead, I see them on my panel, they could be rocks, debris or powered down ships waiting to ambush us. We won’t know until we have a visual,” Ori replied.

“First scan and see if there are any other objects around and behind us, then inform the captain that we will be disengaging to investigate.”

In the meantime I ran quick diagnostics on the cannons and then powered them up.

“According to my diagnostic report the cannons are operational and in good working order.”

Delche laughed.

“There is nothing around us,” interrupted Ori so I grabbed the joystick and flew the ship ahead and past the shuttle at maximum speed.

“They are rocks,” both Ori and Delche said.

“I see them. Should we blast them?” I asked.

“Vaporize them!” said Delche. “They were probably put there by the pirates so that they could hide their little attack ships and ambush unsuspecting ships passing by. Blast them; let’s see what this little ship can do. Maybe we can impress the shuttle captain again.”

“Okay,” I said and locked the positions of the rocks in my targeting computer, confirmed that the cannons were powered up and set to maximum power and fired on them one by one, one after another. There were three consecutive flashes and the rocks disappeared.

We then waited until the shuttle flew by and resumed our engagement.

The shuttle captain called and wanted to know what had happened. Ori informed her what we had done. She was not impressed.

The rest of the trip was uneventful except for the time when we spilled one of our jars full of meat on the ship’s floor. Delche, our genius who said he knew how to remove the meat out of the jar without scooping it out, in an attempt to show us how it’s done, turned the jar upside down. He then held it with one hand and with the other he tapped the bottom gently. When nothing happened he hit the jar hard sending the meat flying on the floor. I picked it up and, following the three second rule, put it on a plate, cut it into three pieces and said, “Dig in.”

Delche and Ori looked at me like I was crazy. I picked up one piece with my fingers, took a bite and washed it down with rakia.

“Not bad,” I said.

Delche looked at me and said, “What the hell.” He then picked up the centre piece and began to eat it.

Ori refused to take his piece until he saw the two of us eyeing it and decided to take it.

“Why not?” he said.

The hours passed much faster than we expected or maybe we fell asleep because the next thing I remember was hearing our friendly captain’s voice on the speaker and Delche declaring that we had arrived at the planet Barkon.

Ori said, “Our orders are to stay in orbit until the shuttle returns in a day or two.”

“Whose orders?” I asked.

“I don’t know whose orders. That’s what the shuttle’s captain said,” Ori snapped.

“And since when do we take orders from her?” asked Delche.

“I don’t like this,” I said. “Sitting stationary in orbit will make us a target. Also sending the shuttle down unprotected into a pirate infested hostile environment is reckless. But, it’s not my call.”

I then asked Ori to contact the shuttle and confirm those orders.

Moments later we received a reply. The orders had come directly from the ambassador. We were ordered to stay in orbit until further notice.

“They can do whatever they want. But we are not staying in orbit. This place is infested with pirate ships which wouldn’t hesitate to fire on us. In fact, given what we just did to that pirate ship, they would be heroes if they fired on us.”

Then, just as I was going to spring out of orbit, we got a distress call from the shuttle. The captain reported that a small pirate ship had fired on them and was requesting our assistance.

Delche entered the shuttle’s position into the navigation computer and I punched the autopilot button. We flew at the maximum safe speed for flying in the atmosphere but by the time we got there the

pirate ship was gone. Unfortunately before we could get back into outer space we were caught in a tractor beam. I struggled to get us free but it was useless. The beam kept pulling us into the side of a mountain.

I looked at Delche and Ori. They were both looking back at me.

“Any suggestions?”

They both shook their heads. I could see panic in their eyes.

“This is serious, very serious,” said Ori and Delche agreed.

We were being tossed around like a kite in the wind as I kept struggling to escape. My fear was quickly turning into anger.

“THIS IS RIDICULOUS,” I yelled and powered up all four cannons, set them to maximum and armed the torpedo. Then, instead of trying to get away, I turned the ship around and steered directly towards the tractor beam.

I looked at Delche and Ori. They were both holding on to their chairs. They were probably thinking that I was crazy because my actions were going to result in suicide. Things were happening very fast and there was no time to explain.

I was tempted to fire all four cannons simultaneously but at this close range the blast would have destroyed our ship for sure. I took my chances by firing one cannon directly at the source of the tractor beam. The disruption freed us momentarily and gave me enough time to move away. I then fired a torpedo and took out the tractor beam. After that I made several passes and took out the entire installation and punched a hole in the side of the mountain.

We quickly flew up into outer space and hid in a pile of debris.

The three of us sat in our seats quietly trying to process what had just happened and waited for our hearts to slow down. No one said anything and no one wanted to say anything. We were surprised that we were still alive. I was wondering what they were thinking,

particularly of me after I pulled that stunt. And to be honest, now that I think about it, the move was suicidal no matter how you looked at it. I decided not to explain myself. I just didn't know what to say.

The ambassador didn't report the attack on the shuttle to the Karon authorities and, according to Ori who caught a media report, our incident was reported as a devastating gas explosion that left an open crater in the side of the mountain.

"These poor creatures will be manipulated by just about anyone. I'm having second thoughts about Asora opening trade with them," I said.

Delche said, "We did what we were asked to do and that's all we can do. It's not our concern what others do to the Karons. I'm sure it wasn't the Karons who attempted to trap us with the tractor beam. Had we been put out of commission I'm certain the rats in our home planet would have gotten back in power in no time. I'm fairly certain they were behind this."

Delche then smiled and said, "I'm not good at giving compliments but I have to say, once again, you saved our asses. How did you ever think of pulling such a stunt?"

"It was common sense to try and pull away in order to escape but you know that would have been impossible because the harder we pulled the more the tractor beam intensified. But, when the ship stopped struggling, the tractor beam loosened up enough for me to turn the ship around," I explained.

"Should we contact the shuttle and find out how they are doing?" asked Ori.

"Is there any point?" I asked.

"Maybe Ori likes talking to the captain," said Delche.

"Maybe I do, so what?" replied Ori.

“Guys, please, we’ve just experienced a traumatic event, do you want to talk about it. About what happened down there?” I asked.

They both said no.

“So, do you want to get drunk again and forget about it?”

They both said no.

“We are alive and well aren’t we? And our ship is intact. So what’s there to talk about?” said Delche.

“I have to agree with Delche. Let’s just eat supper and go to sleep,” said Ori.

While Delche was divvying up our food I made sure all sensors were operational and started a full diagnostics on the ship.

“The ship went through a lot of trauma down there and so did we,” I said.

I got no response.

We ate our dinner in silence, without a single drink and then went to bed. No one offered and no one drank any rakia.

The next morning we were awakened by a female voice coming out of Ori’s communications panel. Ori was still sleeping so Delche answered the call.

“It was the shuttle captain. She called to let us know that the shuttle would be leaving the surface and coming our way in outer space in the next couple of hours.”

I got dressed and immediately went to check on the results of the diagnostics.

“Well?” asked Delche.

“Everything is okay? It’s still okay even after the beating this little ship took yesterday. Vos did tell me that it was built to endure.”

Delche looked at the heavy boxes tied to the ship’s floor and said, “I’m glad you insisted on shatterproof jars, if any of the bottles of rakia broke we would have had one hell of a fire inside here.”

“Ori!” I yelled.

“Let him sleep, I know he didn’t say anything yesterday but he felt like this was the end for all of us. I could see it on his face,” said Delche.

I powered up the ship and checked the sensor logs. There was nothing there.

“We’ll fly around for a while to kill some time and have a look at the planet now that its surface is visible.”

Delche took his seat. We were both surprised at the devastation. The planet’s surface was full of holes and the planet looked lopsided. There was hardly any green anywhere.

“What did you expect? It has been mined for millennia,” Delche said.

Ori was up and getting dressed.

“Where are we? Why didn’t you wake me?”

“We’re leaving the planet in a couple of hours,” I said as he took his place in front of the communications panel.

On the way to the trader's galaxy

Ori too was horrified by the devastation the millennium long mining had left on the surface of this once beautiful planet. Everything was stripped except for the rocks and barren soil.

“I’m amazed that anything can live here on this wasteland,” Ori said.

Moments later the shuttle captain called and gave us the coordinates for where to meet and the time.

Delche plotted the course and said, “Punch it any time you’re ready.”

Moments later we flew over the side of the mountain that had tried to swallow us the day before. There was a fire still burning and smoke coming out of the crater we had created. We all looked but no one said anything.

I turned the ship around and asked Delche for the appropriate speed to get us to the rendezvous point on time. He did a calculation, I entered the number and punched the autopilot.

“Moving at this slow speed in a straight line is making me nervous, keep your eyes on the sensors,” I said.

This time they didn’t mock me.

After flying in silence for a long time Ori said, “There it is, it’s the shuttle. I see its signature on my panel.”

“Contact them,” I told Ori, “and ask them to give us the coordinates of their destination. Also ask them how things went on the planet.”

The shuttle sent us a text message with the itinerary for the trip and a note attached to it that read, “We can’t talk about it.”

Just as the shuttle flashed in front of us I went in pursuit and locked onto it the same as before.

“We now have a long trip ahead of us flying in the dark with nothing to do.”

“I get it,” Ori said. “In the dark, meaning in dark space and in the dark, meaning without information.”

“You are quickly becoming one of us kid,” said Delche. “Welcome to our cynical world. All you have to do now is be rude and you’ll be one of us.”

“Seriously guys we need to find something to do, besides eating and drinking, or we’ll become stir-crazy,” I said.

“Perhaps Delche can talk about his adventures back when he was serving on the science ship,” suggested Ori.

“No, Delche is not going to do that,” replied Delche.

They both then looked at me.

“That leaves you. Why don’t you tell us something about your experiences and adventures in Macedonia or perhaps something about your people?” Ori said.

“There’s not much to tell. We lived in hardship and our history is full of tragedy.”

They both gave me “the look”.

So I said, “Okay, okay,” and began to talk.

“I don’t know how much you know about earth and how much of what I’m going to tell you will make any sense to you but things are different on earth. The planet is divided into many countries and each is governed by its own government and type. It wasn’t always like that but that’s how it is now. Each country also has its own culture and language more or less derived from the majority of people who lived there. There have been many wars and conquests over the years and the borders of countries have moved. Some

countries were even completely occupied by other countries. Macedonia is one of those countries, which has been occupied by four different countries.

The tragic thing about Macedonia is that attempts have been made to erase the Macedonian culture and get rid of the Macedonian people. The countries that today occupy Macedonia have made many attempts to assimilate the Macedonian people. But, as you already know from your studies, Macedonia is an ancient country and its people have a long and proud history which they don't want to forget or abandon. And the harder Macedonians try to resist, the harder the occupiers try to erase them. This of course has led to hardship and tragedy.

We have tried to free ourselves many times but with tragic consequences. It seems that those who have the power to help us are the same ones who want to get rid of us.

Macedonians aren't the only people on earth who have suffered this way. For example the old races that lived in the new country called Canada, where I lived before I got here, suffered similar tragedies. These tragedies were inflicted by the people who occupied their lands by force and tried to wipe them out. The indigenous people who lived in Canada were slowly wiped out by various means including uprooting, isolation and assimilation. The occupiers wanted them to disappear so they could replace them with people like themselves or with people who would be loyal to them. So, slowly the old races were replaced with immigrants, a mixture of people from all over the earth. They were replaced by people like me who don't belong there but went there to find a better life. Ironically I was driven out of my home so that someone else could have a better life and in turn someone else was driven out of their home so that I could have a better life. Does that make any sense?"

"It does to me," replied Delche. "Many ancestors of the outlanders were driven out of the centre zone to make room for the affluent so that they could survive when the next war came."

"What were your personal reasons for leaving Macedonia?" asked Ori.

“Well, besides my country being occupied by foreign countries, the part of Macedonia I come from underwent a lot of changes which were catastrophic for the Macedonian people. The occupiers first changed our identity and declared that Macedonians didn’t exist. After that the occupiers changed our names and gave us new names similar to their own. Then they changed the names of our cities, towns, villages, lakes, rivers, mountains, etc., so that they too sounded like their own. After that they forced us to learn the occupier’s language and forbade us from speaking Macedonian. And if that wasn’t enough they excluded us from progress. We couldn’t attend higher education, we couldn’t rise up in the military or become members of professional organizations. We weren’t even allowed to build industries. We were literally treated like sub-humans. In other words, there was no bright future for the Macedonians in their own homeland. Our occupiers wanted us to leave and that’s exactly what most of us did. Canada was a favourite destination because it accepted us. Canada accepted us because it needed people like us to build its economy. Canada allowed us to be Macedonians and for that we became loyal citizens. We worked hard for low wages and we were happy,” I replied.

“Why do I get the impression that you weren’t happy living in Canada?” asked Delche.

“Of all people you should know why Delche. We were robbed of everything, including our dignity and had to settle to be grateful for being next to slaves. Canada didn’t take us to improve our lives; Canada took us because it needed our cheap labour. In other words we went from one exploiter to another. We went from being masters of our own destiny to being slaves of someone else’s. What is there to like about that? The illusion that we were Macedonian because we could call ourselves Macedonian? No one in Canada cared who we were and what we called ourselves. Our Macedonian patriotism meant nothing to the average Canadian. Where was the power and prestige of being Macedonian in Canada, a country that didn’t care about anything except for making money? There wasn’t any. And worse than that was the fact that in a generation or two we were completely gone. We intermarried with the other identities and

slowly began to disappear. We became lost souls with no roots. And, as you very well know, nothing survives without its roots.”

“That’s sad,” said Delche. “And I thought we had it bad.”

“Enough talk. I’m getting depressed. It’s time to kill some more brain cells. Delche open another bottle or rakia,” I said and was surprised to hear Ori agreeing with me.

“You know this stuff will not only kill your brain cells but it’ll rot your liver too,” I told Ori.

He looked at me and said, “I don’t care. We should enjoy today because we could be dead tomorrow.”

“I’m happy to say that you’re now one of us kid. More rakia coming up,” said Delche.

“I wasn’t brought up the same way as you guys but you seem to have a connection even though you are from worlds apart,” commented Ori.

“Suffering makes people appreciate one another. Both Delche and I have been wronged in the past and we recognize that in one another. We seem to have a subconscious connection. You are developing one too because you are a good person and can feel for others. You also have a craving for acceptance and would risk your personal comfort to get it,” I explained to Ori.

“Is that why I’ve been feeling so weird?” Ori asked.

“Yes Ori, I’m afraid we have ruined you. You’ll never be the same again. I’m also sorry to say that the more you know the less happy you will be. Eventually you will become cynical like us and will drink rakia all the time to drown your sorrows.”

Ori took a long breath, swore in Macedonian and said, “I don’t care!”

“Wow!” I said. “Who did you learn that word from?”

“You!” he cried. “You didn’t think I was paying attention? I heard you say that word and checked my dictionary.”

“You mean to tell me your dictionary has swear words?”

“Yes, under the heading of words to say to Macedonians to piss them off.”

“Wow, you’re cynical and you swear too,” said Delche and gave us each a cup of rakia.

“What should we toast to?” asked Delche.

“How about to our friendship?” I suggested.

Ori and I both said, “To our friendship.”

Delche said, “To Ori becoming a cynical person just like us.”

Delche felt his stomach burning from the rakia and decided to open another jar of meat.

“Ah, the crappy meat... Why didn’t we bring some real meat? We could have had real meat,” complained Delche.

Just then we received a call from the shuttle captain.

“What does she want?” I asked Ori.

“She says there’s a ship showing on her sensors coming our way. We should investigate.”

“And why didn’t we see it on our sensors?” I asked.

“Two reasons,” replied Ori, “one it’s beyond our sensor range and two we are drunk and don’t care.”

“How can it be beyond our sensor range?”

“Because the sensors on our ship are a thousand years old. The shuttle has better sensors.”

“Tell your girlfriend we’re going to investigate,” I told Ori.

“Yes sir!” he replied and saluted.

When Ori was finished talking to the captain he gave me the thumbs up and I disengaged our ship and flew right past the shuttle and into deep space. Moments later we spotted the blip on our sensors and went towards it. Our ship’s computer couldn’t tell us what it was so we had to fly closer to identify it. One thing we knew was that it was big and slow moving.

Moments later a voice came over the speakers. The language was not familiar to Ori.

Ori responded and asked the caller to repeat. A different voice came on and said something.

“It’s the galaxy traders. I think it’s one of their destroyers and they want to have an audience with the crew of the little ship that sent their senior captain packing. Listen to them laughing. They sound like they’re all drunk,” exclaimed Ori.

“Our kind of people!” said Delche.

Ori put them on speaker and the man on the other side said something.

Ori translated. “The man said that they are opening their bay for us to go into their ship and visit them. They’re inviting us to celebrate with them. Apparently today is some sort of holiday.”

We sat there in silence looking at one another.

“This calls for a unanimous vote,” I said and voted that we go.

Delche hesitated but also said we should go.

Ori disagreed and pointed out the fact that we had damaged their destroyer and they could be looking for revenge.

Ori was right so I had to think of something to convince him and myself that we were doing the right thing so I said, “Ori, given what we did to their destroyer do you think they would attempt to try and fight us again? You, yourself told me the captain was convinced that our attack on his ship was honourable because we were trying to defend ourselves. So, unless they are evil they wouldn’t dishonour themselves and attack us by using a cowardly deception. They are professional soldiers. Plus, if we run we not only jeopardize Asora’s mission to open trade with these people, but also prove to them that we are cowards and that we only care for ourselves. Come on what do you say? You trusted me before in worse situations and here you are still alive.”

He hesitantly said, “Okay.”

Delche looked at me and said, “You should have been the politician, not my wife.”

“You know I hate politics...” I replied.

Moments later we arrived, slowed down, entered through the bay and landed inside the hangar. Many of the crew with drinking glasses in their hands ran down to greet us. Delche grabbed two bottles of rakia. We came out and my guards followed.

Only one person in the bunch spoke a language that Delche and Ori understood. There was a lot of commotion and many were asking questions. The translator asked Delche something and Delche pointed at me. A couple of big guys came over and were ready to grab me. I told my guards to stand down. The crewmen were quite impressed with how well I handled my women. Delche told them that they were my personal guards and followed my every instruction. They all cracked up laughing. Delche then told them that they were machines. There was disappointment in their voices. The two big guys grabbed me by my legs and raised me up high. There were loud cheers coming from everywhere. Another man came over and handed me an elegant looking cup with a green liquid in it. I

accepted it and took a drink. It tasted much lighter compared to our rakia and it was sweet.

Delche opened one of the bottles. Everyone wanted to know what it was. Delche said it was rakia, poured some into their cups and motioned for them to drink it. No one did. He then asked the two men to lower me and he poured some in my glass. As soon as I drank some they all drank. It tasted superb as a mix. After that everyone wanted more. Delche gave them the two bottles and told them that they were a gift from the crew of the little ship and suggested they drink only a little at a time and share it.

After that they took us up to a beautiful mess hall in which there were several long tables. Each table had plates filled with various delicious looking foods including well-prepared meats and pastries. They invited us to join them later during their celebration.

Moments later one of their officers came and informed us that the shuttle was calling, probably looking for us.

I asked Ori to go with me to the ship to find out what they wanted.

When I tried to leave, our hosts were in an uproar and refused to let us go. I had to assure them that we were coming back after we took care of an urgent matter.

When Ori opened the channel he explained to the shuttle what we were doing. Suddenly a woman came on whose voice I didn't recognize and started talking nonstop. Ori interrupted her and told her to please slow down, he couldn't translate that fast.

“Ori give me the gist, what does she want? I'm too drunk to follow what she's saying anyway.”

“Basically she's pissed off with you for boarding the destroyer without her authorization and that by doing so you probably jeopardized her mission.”

I immediately got angry and was about to tell her where to go but instead I took my time and said, “This was an opportunity for us to

get to know the traders and for them to know us. We were invited to join their celebration. Today, it appears is some sort of holiday which they wanted to share with us. It would have been very rude for us to refuse. This would be a golden opportunity for you to come and meet the ship's captain and share a meal with him and his crew. I'm sure the traders will see this as a gesture of respect and goodwill. The captain knows you're here, what kind of message will he get if you decline his invitation..."

"We'll get back to you," interrupted the shuttle captain.

At that point I asked Ori to stay there and mind the ship while waiting for the shuttle to call back. I then ran back to Delche with my guards following me and asked him to ask the translator who the captain was. I told Delche that I had just lied to the ambassador and told her that the captain knew she was here and wanted to meet with her.

When we found him, I asked him through Delche and through his translator, "How would you like to meet the first ambassador to your galaxy from the planet Ostikon? How would you like to be the first person to make contact with her during this historic moment?"

He didn't have to think much before he said, "I would love to."

"Why not invite her yourself," I suggested.

Delche gave his translator the shuttle's call number and we all went to the bridge to make the call.

When they were done Delche turned to me and whispered, "They're coming."

The translator said something to Delche and Delche told me, "The captain is inviting us to sit with him at his table, but I don't want to, I'd prefer to stay with the crew."

"Okay then, go get a bottle of rakia, give it to the captain, thank him for the invite and tell him we've already been invited by his crew to sit with them."

When Delche came back he said, “The captain was quite impressed by your decline. He felt it was noble of you, not many people would have declined. He also said he was looking forward to meeting the ambassador. Also, Ori is quite upset with you for leaving him there. He’s still waiting for the shuttle to call back.”

“Didn’t you tell him the shuttle is coming here?” I asked.

“No.”

“Let’s go and talk to Ori and let him know what’s happening.”

On the way there we noticed the crew was forming two lines and each crewman was holding a beautiful flower.

“I guess they’re preparing to welcome the Ambassador. I hope she likes flowers,” I said.

“The love of flowers is universal,” replied Delche.

Ori didn’t look as upset as Delche had implied but was happy to hear the shuttle was coming onto the ship.

“I guess Ori will get to meet his girlfriend after all,” Delche said loudly.

“It’s sad, not only do we not know the ambassador’s name but we don’t even know what she looks like. The same goes for the shuttle captain and the other people in the shuttle. Look at the difference between these people and your people,” I said.

There was a commotion outside and we came out of our ship to see what was going on. The shuttle was spotted coming into the bay.

I looked at Ori and Delche and said, “We look like pirates. Let’s get back inside and quickly change into our formal uniforms and be the first to meet the ambassador and escort her through the welcome line.”

I got no objections.

By the time the shuttle docked in the hangar we were already dressed and ready to go.

We were the first in line in front of the shuttle when the door was flung open. Two women dressed in military uniforms stepped out first and took their positions one to the left and the other to the right of the shuttle door. An older woman dressed in black was followed by two younger women dressed in white and red.

The older woman stepped forward, looked at my badge and then at my face and said something. Ori replied. She bowed slightly and I bowed back. I then stepped in front of her and began to walk towards the welcome line. My guards, who now also wore their formal uniforms with the Macedonian colours, followed behind me side by side. Delche and Ori followed behind my guards side by side. The ambassador followed them alone and after her she was followed by her two aides side by side, who then were followed by the shuttle captain and her crew person. After we reached the welcome line each of the women took a flower from the destroyer's crew. The old woman, or ambassador, took a flower from the captain who was standing at the end of the line with his translator beside him.

The captain escorted the ambassador and her two lovely aides to his table and the rest of us veered off to the crew table to sit with them. As it turned out, only by accident, Ori sat beside the shuttle crew person, a woman perhaps a little older than Ori. Delche sat beside the shuttle captain, a woman about his age. I sat beside Delche on one side and Ori on the other. My guards, looking lovely in their uniforms, stood behind me. Facing me on the opposite side was the captain's table. The ambassador sat next to the captain. His interpreter sat in front of the captain and the ambassador's assistants, who apparently spoke the same language as the captain, sat on each side of the interpreter.

Before dinner the destroyer's captain made a speech during which he introduced the ambassador and his senior officers. The ambassador then introduced the rest of us starting with me and

ending with the shuttle crew person. She didn't introduce my guards. When she introduced me there was a lot of cheering from the destroyer crew. The captain of the shuttle made a comment to Delche.

"It's most interesting that they would cheer him, who nearly destroyed one of their mightiest ships," she said.

"These people are soldiers from a culture that admires what our captain did. With his courage and cunning he managed to outwit their most experienced captain and disabled his ship. That means something to them. They also admire him for not destroying their ship, which he could have done if he wanted. Our captain showed admirable respect for life and for fellow soldiers. These people recognize that as a sign of honour. We can learn a lot from them," Delche explained.

Delche told me later that, after that she didn't say a single word to him until it was time to leave.

We spent four hours on the destroyer and had a great time. After the ambassador boarded the shuttle, the destroyer captain came down to personally inspect our ship. Delche gave him a tour and two more bottles of rakia to share with his officers. The captain gave us a case of twelve large bottles of his green stuff and several boxes of their sweet baked goods. Before we left we had a drink with the captain and his interpreter. We mixed rakia with their green stuff, which the captain referred to as a symbol of the merging of our two worlds and we toasted our friendship.

When we began to close the ship's door we were cheered by the crew.

Moments later we caught up to the shuttle and locked onto it.

We were all tired and nobody felt like talking. We went to bed.

Many hours later I woke up on my own. Delche and Ori were quietly tapping on their panels.

“How long was I asleep?”

“Long,” replied Delche loudly.

Ori didn't say anything.

“I had a good time yesterday on the destroyer. The traders seem like good people. We should have no problem establishing relations with them.”

I got no response.

“Okay guys, what's the problem? Do you want to talk about it?” I said.

Ori spoke first and said, “I would've had a nice time if I wasn't sitting with the shuttle's second lieutenant.”

“What? That pretty young woman? I thought you'd be pleased,” I said.

“I was until she started talking, talking down to me like I was some sort of commoner, even though I outranked her.”

“You mean like some sort of outlander,” interrupted Delche.

“Why do you even care? Obviously the problem is with her, not you,” I said.

“It's not that. People from far away who don't know anything about me accepted me but my own people have a hard time doing it. Look at the ambassador, she is ungrateful, they're all ungrateful. We nearly died a couple of days ago to save them and they can't even stomach looking at us,” Ori replied.

“And what's eating you?” I asked Delche.

“The same thing, exactly the same thing! I thought I was over it. I thought I was over being upset by how they treat us, but I guess I'm not.”

We sat there in silence for a while and then I remembered what Vos had told me a long time ago about the people of the middle zone and how arrogant, selfish and uncaring they had become.

“Well,” I said, “Vos warned me about this a long time ago and the more I learn about your society the more I appreciate Vos’s wisdom. He said those who care will forget their own troubles and try and help those who have lost their way. You have to decide for yourselves what that means.”

“The worst thing about these people is that they didn’t earn their positions or the respect of the people; they were all appointed. Patronage appointments, they were all appointed by their rat friends,” added Ori.

I looked at Delche and said, “Well, what do you have to say?”

“You know me; I’d rather not say or I might regret it later. And you are right, the more you know them the more you despise them. What kind of world do we live in?”

“That’s why we’re here, to help your wife and her supporters fix it. It’s not easy fixing it, it’s not a machine you can fix in a few days, many generations will have to pass before the disease in them is cured. This requires patience and care and most of all persistence. Today we and this ship are the key to starting that change. I wonder if Vos knew what he had unleashed when he gave me his badge. I wonder how things would have been if Vos had given his badge to his niece Anelia or worse, if the rats had got a hold of it?” I asked.

“Yes, this whole thing is slowly beginning to sink in. I still feel like I’m dreaming, like this is some sort of game and anytime now I’ll wake up and find things the way they were before,” said Delche.

“So, do you guys want to annoy our guests on the shuttle? Do you want to give them a dose of their own medicine?” I asked.

Both Delche and Ori look at me. There was revenge in their eyes.

Delche asked, “What do you have in mind?”

“How about I fire an energy flash on the side of the shuttle? Not to hit it but to scare them. They won’t know where it came from. Then when they order us to investigate we’ll refuse. We’ll say that we will help them only if the ambassador asks politely. No, no, only if the ambassador begs. How does that sound?” I asked.

They both almost jumped out of their seats laughing.

Ori said, “That won’t work.”

“Why not!?”

“Because they’ll know who fired the shot and won’t order us to help them.”

“What do you suppose they’ll do?” I asked.

Ori laughed out loud and said, “They’ll probably crap their pants first and then start calling Viera to report us. But that won’t help either because it’ll take hours to get a message to our planet. Are you serious, are you going to do it?” Ori asked.

Delche piped up and said, “No he won’t, he’s just messing with you.”

“How about we contact the shuttle and tell them that we have some of the green drink and ask them if they want some?” I asked.

Knowing that I was messing with him, Ori lost interest in playing the game.

“If I had it my way and if I’d known that they were like that I would have abandoned them to the pirates,” said Delche. “Anyway, I’m getting tired of talking about them. Let’s focus on something else. Now perhaps you can appreciate why I drink so much.”

No one felt like talking or eating. We had skipped breakfast that day. No one felt like eating our food after we had had a taste of the food on the destroyer.

The next few days passed without incident. We received no communication from the shuttle and we never bothered to call them. None of us seemed happy with the people in the shuttle but that's how it was.

The day after we got a call from the shuttle, the captain said she had spotted two ships in the distance and ordered us to investigate.

Delche said, "We're entering galaxy trader space and they are probably scout ships patrolling the perimeter. How are we going to communicate with them if they contact us, we have no interpreter. I hardly think the entire galaxy was informed of our arrival and they probably won't know who we are. What if they order us to stop and we don't, surely they will fire on us..."

"I get your point, a little extreme but valid," I interrupted and asked Ori to contact the shuttle and have one of the ambassador's aides who speaks their language contact the ships and let them know who we are and why we're here.

Ori did that and was told to stand by.

A few minutes later the shuttle captain got back to us and told us to go back home, our services were no longer required.

"You mean to tell me we're fired?" I asked.

"It looks that way!" replied Ori.

"Call them back and ask for clarification!" I said to Ori.

"Armed ships aren't allowed to enter beyond this point," was the shuttle captain's reply.

And that was that.

We were all upset with what had happened but what could we do?

When you're a soldier you follow orders and you don't ask questions.

And this is the end of Otsi's story. This is what my friend Riki told me before he left. He didn't tell me where he was going but I suspect he had some unfinished business somewhere beyond earth. He didn't tell me what had happened to the ship or his friends either.

Perhaps some day he will return and tell us more. At his request I have included the police report that described his disappearance here on earth.

Missing person's report

According to the Ontario police, Riki was reported missing by his parents when he didn't call from Kanata several days after he was expected to arrive there.

According to the police report, Riki was traced to have entered Algonquin Park where the search was concentrated. After several days of searching, Riki's belongings were found, including his wallet and bicycle, in the bushes in a secluded place where he had pitched his tent.

There were no signs of a struggle and no body was found. Police believe there are three possible scenarios associated with his disappearance. The most unlikely is that he was ambushed, killed and carried off by a large animal, most likely a bear. This is an unlikely scenario because no trace of torn clothing or blood was found.

The second and most likely scenario is that he was kidnapped, probably lured by a female and then abducted by her accomplice or accomplices and taken far away.

The third scenario is that he disappeared on his own and made it look like he had been kidnapped.

Without a body, the police couldn't rule the incident a homicide so, for now, they have simply ruled it a disappearance.