

The Alien that changed the world

Part 4

Otsiron's Dilemma

A novel



By Risto Stefov

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Published by:

Risto Stefov Publications
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Toronto, Canada

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FICTION - ADVENTURE

e-book edition

September 4, 2022

Back to reality

“Are you out of your mind!?” Enai yelled.

“Did I say that out loud?” I asked.

“Yes you did! We’re going through a crisis here and you’re thinking of leaving...!? Going to earth...? With our people and our ships...? What’s going on here...!? What are you trying to do? Are you out of your mind!?” Enai protested loudly.

“Take it easy! Take it easy! I’m not going anywhere. It was just a momentary thought I had. I didn’t mean to say it out loud. It just came out; it wasn’t supposed to be heard,” I said.

“At this point, given the mess we’re in, it’s bizarre to even think of doing that. Dismiss the soldiers! Let them go back to their barracks and let’s talk. To begin with, what are we going to say to the people who come here looking for their children...? The children who went missing... the people who were abducted from the streets during the war? More and more people are arriving, even from other planets, looking for their missing children. What are we going to tell them?! They’ll need answers. We owe it to them,” Enai said in a calm tone of voice, sounding sorry as if he wanted to make amends for his own sins.

“And what do you suggest we tell them?” I asked.

“Well, I think before we tell them anything we should first tell them what to expect... That their children are... not their children any more... and that they have been turned into super soldiers. The super soldiers whom they fear the most... are their children. The parents need to know that... They should be told that their children are unrecognizable. I know it will be difficult to tell them that...but the parents need to know. They need to know that their children’s minds have been wiped clean and they won’t recognize them or remember anything from their past. Yes, they won’t recognize or remember their own parents. We need to emphasize that before we let them see their children. I’m sure many already know that from the rumours they’ve heard, but it’ll be different when they actually

see their children and what they look like. They'll need to be prepared ahead of time... We need to tell them that their children have no memories of them or of anything for that matter. They'll also need to see this for themselves... they need to see how their children have been physically altered beyond recognition... Many... Some may not even believe what they see... that those monstrous looking things are their children... They won't believe it. They won't believe us. We must find a way to prove it to them... It's going to be very difficult, not just for them to accept it but also for us to prove," Enai said calmly with a guilty tone of voice full of concern.

"Well then, we must first find a way to prove it. We must find a way to identify each super soldier individually and relate them to their parents with proof. Prove to their parents without a doubt that indeed these children are theirs!" I replied and, after a short pause, continued. "There has to be a way that we can scientifically match the soldiers to their relatives."

"There is a way! By DNA! We can harvest DNA from the soldiers living and dead and catalogue it in a database. Then, with each inquiry, we match the DNA of those inquiring against the DNA in our database," said Enai, thinking for a moment and then asking. "And what happens after that? How do we reunite the family after we find a match? Do we bring them together? I'm sure that's what the parents will want. Then what? What will the parents do with a super soldier? A powerful being that doesn't even know them... that doesn't recognize them or understand them. I'm sure it will cause a lot of anger and pain..." said Enai before I interrupted him.

"One step at a time, my dear friend, one step at a time... How long will it take to build such a database?"

"We already have a database and you already know the number of every soldier alive. All we have to do is match the DNA with the number. For those who are dead all we have to do is dig them up and catalogue their DNA. You call the soldiers one by one and we will do the rest. It takes only a moment to acquire their DNA and catalogue it," explained Enai.

“Go do it then and call me when you need me. I see Captain Orihci is heading this way. I’ll go and see what he wants,” I said and started walking towards the Captain. At the same time I dismissed the super soldiers and ordered them to go back to their barracks. Single file they began to head towards the building.

The moment Captain Orihci and I came close to one another he immediately asked me what Enai and I were arguing about.

I told him exactly what I had discussed with Enai. He agreed that something needed to be done for sure because more and more people were arriving at the facilities looking for their missing relatives.

“These people came a long way to see us and deserve some answers. What are we going to tell them?”

Instead of giving him an answer I asked him what he thought we should do. He drifted off into his own thoughts and didn’t answer me.

“What kind of heartbreak will we face when the soldiers don’t recognize or respond to their loved ones?” I asked. “And what do we tell their relatives when they ask us what we’re doing to fix these problems? I fear many, especially the parents of the younger soldiers, won’t like it when we tell them that there’s nothing we can do. They won’t understand why the soldiers don’t recognize them. Even Enai had difficulty accepting that his daughter didn’t recognize him. It was very difficult for him to accept that.”

“You have a point. We need to tell the people something... Give them some hope that perhaps down the line things will somehow improve. But what can we tell them?! And how long will it take to get some results? Unfortunately, for the moment, we have no answers,” he said, thinking for a moment and then adding. “Did you have any luck with Nine? How has she been doing? Did you see any improvement in her? Did she learn anything from the things you tried to teach her?”

“Actually I don’t know for sure? She reacts well with me because I have an internal emotional connection with her. I’m not sure if she really understands me or if she somehow reads what I want her to do and does it. We’ll need to do some more tests. I’ll have to talk to Enai and his people some more about that. We need to find out how she will respond to other people, if at all. We should have your wife and Irevva try and connect with her to see if she responds,” I replied.

Just as we stopped talking I heard someone running down the hill, waving his arms frantically.

“What is it?” I asked.

It was one of Enai’s associates. “Enai needs to see you,” he said and turned around and left. We followed him.

When we arrived at one of the labs, before I had a chance to ask what he wanted, Enai immediately said. “We have prepared the database and the lab and we’re ready to start collecting DNA. We need to start calling the soldiers and bring them here. We know the robots assigned unique numbers to them so, if you please, start with number one...”

But before he had a chance to finish what he was saying, I interrupted and asked, “What about the dead ones?”

“Well, there won’t be any numbers for the dead ones. We’ll just get their DNA and catalogue it without a number. We’ll catalogue them separately. My associates are working on that right now. Unfortunately we can’t start matching until we harvest the DNA of every soldier. So we need to do this procedure as soon as possible,” Enai explained.

“In that case I should start calling the soldiers right away,” I said and turned on my transmitter.

“Calling 1 – No reply – enter missing in the database.

Calling 2 – No reply.

Calling 3 – No reply.

Calling 4 – No reply.

Calling 5 – No reply.

Calling 6 – No reply.

Calling 7 – No reply.

Calling 626 – Present and on their way here.

Calling 627 – Present....”

As each soldier arrived in the lab one associate took their blood and numbered the vial with the soldier’s number and the other associate ran it through the machine. A second or so later the machine entered the DNA ID into the database and the associate labeled it with the soldier’s number. Enai and Captain Orihci supervised, making sure no mistakes were made. One by one I called the soldiers to the lab and sent them back to their stations after the procedure was done. I also made sure each soldier’s number was correctly entered into the database. The numbers were important since we had no names for the soldiers. We needed to know which soldier the DNA belonged to. That was the only way we could match a soldier with a relative. At least that was the idea.

As we continued with the procedure, I kept recording how long it took to process each soldier. After we’d processed several dozen of them I figured on average it took about 15 seconds each. So at this rate, even if we worked 24 hours a day we could theoretically process only 5,760 soldiers per day. At that rate it would take us more than half a year to process everyone. That was unacceptable.

I spoke up and said, “Stop everything. Let’s finish what we’re doing and take a break. We need to talk.”

Everyone agreed and after we processed the last soldier present in the lab we sat down around one of the tables and I gave them the news.

“Half a year is way too long. We need to cut down the time to no more than a couple of weeks. It’s unfair to the relatives to keep them in suspense for longer than that. In fact it would be cruel.”

“And how are we going to process over one million soldiers in a couple of weeks?” Enai asked. Captain Orihci shook his head in agreement.

“Gentlemen, that’s why we need to talk, to find a way! We need to find a way,” I said.

I then turned to Enai and said, “A while ago you told me that you and your associates who’d been chipped had the capability to summon the soldiers individually for diagnostic purposes. Do you think you can still do that?”

“Yes we can. We’ve done it hundreds of times. All we need are transmitters like the one you’re wearing on your head. But so what? We only have one DNA testing machine and that’s our bottleneck,” he replied.

“So it’ll be ten associates, you and me. There will be 12 of us calling on the soldiers and getting their blood. We don’t have to take the blood ourselves, we can get others, volunteers to help us. All we have to do is identify the super soldier by his or her number and label each blood sample...” I said before Enai interrupted me.

“So, let’s say we speed up the process and get blood samples in 5 seconds. And let’s say we do collect everyone’s blood in say two weeks, then what? We still don’t have the DNA machines to process them. I know it takes about a second for the machine to process a sample but you still need the time to put it in and then take it out. And what about the time needed to clean the machine and do preventive maintenance? And what if it breaks down, then what?” asked Enai with a tone of concern.

“You mean to tell me this is the only DNA machine in this entire facility?” I asked.

“Yes, as far as I know,” said Enai looking at his two associates. The two nodded their heads in agreement.

“What about the other facility that was destroyed? Could there be a DNA machine there?” asked Captain Orihci.

“I don’t know... I suppose we can fly there and check?” replied Enai.

“I bombed the place pretty good. It was on fire when I left. What about getting some machines from the other Galaxy Trader planets?” I asked.

“I can ask, there’s no harm in asking,” replied Captain Orihci.

“While you do that, also please ask your daughter to contact Ostikon and see what kind of help Asora’s government can give us with this,” I said.

With that everyone, except for Enai, left the lab. One associate took Captain Orihci to the communications tower and the second went looking for Irevva, Captain Orihci’s daughter.

“I hope we find what we’re looking for because I hear more and more people are arriving asking for their missing relatives. Wait until people from Ostikon come looking? We’ll have a flood of people here and nothing to tell them. Especially you, they’ll be looking to you for answers. You did promise them you’d end the war and send their soldiers home. You ended the war...” Enai said before I interrupted him.

“Yes, of course, even though I never did say those exact words, I’m pretty sure many will interpret it that way. They’ll want answers as to what happened to their missing children. I think we should invite the Ostikon government to send an investigative team to see for themselves what the situation is here on the ground. They may even have some suggestions as to what to do with the super soldiers.”

Just as I said that we both stepped outside of the facilities to get some fresh air and sat down on the ground.

After looking into the distance in silence for some time Enai spoke up and asked, “Why is it important to identify the dead super soldiers?”

“To bring closure to their families, I suppose. I don’t see any other reason.”

“You know that we’ll waste a lot of time and resources tackling that task. Perhaps we shouldn’t do it right now. Perhaps we should label the dead soldiers ‘missing’ for now and put a priority on identifying the living ones, since time is a critical factor. What do you think?” he asked.

“You’re absolutely right. For now we will report to the relatives that they are missing and get their contact information. Later, after we process them, we’ll let them know if we find a match and, based on what they want, we’ll take appropriate action.”

“I’m glad you agree. In that case I will recall my associates and have them reassigned,” Enai replied.

“Have them find as many transmitters as possible, at least one for every associate as well as one for yourself; even some spare ones if possible. Have them manufactured if necessary. Also, is there any way we can use the robots that have been deactivated for any of this?”

“I’ll have them do that immediately. I know we have at least 12 operational transmitters and some more sitting around on shelves in the labs. As for the robots...? Only you have the authority to order them around but you don’t know how. It will take you a long time to learn... Plus, it’s dangerous messing around with them. One little mistake and we’ll all be in trouble!” replied Enai.

“You’re right. We’ll leave the robots alone for now. Our priority is to get the DNA as soon as possible. But I’m afraid the bottleneck will be the testing... since we only have a single machine,” I said.

“I hope Captain Orihci will have some luck finding us more...” he replied, got up and went inside to look for his associates.

I looked around and into the distance. The place was buzzing with trucks and shuttles. The trucks were bringing food and other

materials into the facility and every new shuttle arriving brought more people looking for their missing relatives.

While thinking about how we were going to handle all these problems I heard footsteps. Someone was coming down the hill behind me. I turned around slowly and looked. It was Amih, Captain Orihci's wife and Ukasnek, Captain Orihci's friend.

"You look worried?" said Amih the moment she glanced at me. "I've never seen you so worried," she added.

Hearing her voice through the universal translator reminded me that we'd need translators, many translators, to talk to the people from Ostikon when they started arriving here. We'd also need a lot of people to receive them and find accommodations for them. And what were we going to tell them about their missing children? Suddenly I started looking even more worried.

But before I had a chance to say anything I heard Amih's voice apologizing.

"I didn't mean to upset you, I am so sorry."

I looked at her again and smiled thinking to myself how kind and considerate these people here were as opposed to the people in Ostikon; especially those dressed in white like Ori's parents.

She smiled back warmly and continued to smile as she listened to me unload my problems on her one after another. To my surprise, she not only understood my situation but volunteered to take over some of my burdens; especially the difficult ones that had to do with dealing with people and the inquiries about their missing relatives.

"Frankly this isn't your problem at all; you didn't cause any of this. As residents of this planet, it's our problem and we need to get organized and handle it. I will do everything I can to handle the inquiries. I will ask for volunteers to help me. I'll also organize groups to handle problems as they arise. That will free you to focus exclusively on the soldiers. If you need people to help you, let me

know and I will find them for you.” Then she tapped me on the shoulder and left.

Just as I thanked her, Ukasnek spoke up and said, “I’m also here to help in any way I can. I’m better at dealing with machines than people but I also have persuasive skills and a lot of experience in trade. Just tell me what you need and I’ll get on it.”

“Thank you!” I said and then asked Ukasnek to go and see how Captain Orihci was doing and if he needed any help.

As Ukasnek was leaving for the facilities I sat down on the ground, put my elbows on my knees and covered my eyes with my hands. Doing that sometimes helped me think better.

Moments later I heard footsteps rushing towards me. I looked up. It was Captain Orihci followed by Ukasnek running towards me. Captain Orihci had a worried look on his face, wondering what was wrong with me sitting there holding my face. But before he had a chance to say something I said, “You’re rushing to give me some good news, I hope?”

After realizing that I was okay, Captain Orihci looked at Ukasnek with a puzzled look and said “Oh yes, of course, I managed to locate three machines. They will be delivered sometime tomorrow along with experienced operators and millions of vials and other materials. We can keep the machines for as long as we need them. The health authorities from one of our planets will divert them to us. They had just purchased them and can afford to lend them to us for a while. All we have to do now is find space for them in our labs and they’ll install and operate them for us.”

“That’s great. That will cut down our processing time a great deal but we still need additional machines. Perhaps Irevia will have some luck too. We’ll see what she says when I see her. In the meantime we’ll need to find the transmitters. Enai told me we have enough to equip everyone. I mean all those who have a chip that can communicate with the soldiers. Also, before I forget, we’ll need to find some universal translators, as many as possible. We’ll need them to talk to the people from Ostikon once they start arriving,” I

said and after a short pause I added. “One more thing... After Irevia finishes her task, I want to get everyone together and have a discussion.” Then I got up and left for the communications tower to look for Irevia. Captain Orihci and Ukasnek followed me into the facilities and went the other way.

Before I arrived at the commutations tower I spotted Irevia and one of Enai’s associates in the distance going the other way. I yelled at them but the translator wasn’t loud enough for them to understand what I was saying. When they heard me they both turned in my direction and started walking towards me. There was a big smile on Irevia’s face.

When she got close enough she said, “I have great news. I got in touch with Asora and she was more than helpful. She will send us everything we need including the machines I asked for. She’ll send us five machines immediately with the first shipment along with experienced operators and translators. They’ll arrive here in about five days. If we need more she’ll send us more.”

“That’s great,” I said, “well done. We could use more machines but we are doing great for now. Great job... Thank you!”

“What’s next?” she asked. “What do you want us to do next?”

“I want to get everyone together and figure out how to move forward with all this. We have a lot of things going on and we need to make sure everything is handled properly,” I said an, after pausing for a moment, turned to Irevia. “Irevia you find your mom, dad and Ukasnek and bring them to the main conference room for a meeting in two hours.”

I then turned to Enai’s associate and said, “You go and find Enai and all the other associates and bring them to the conference room in two hours. I’ll go there right now and organize my thoughts about what we need to discuss.”

Immediately after that I turned around and left.

Getting organized

There was no one in the conference room. I had less than two hours to figure out what I was going to say so I began to prepare some notes.

The first thing we should do, I wrote, is gather and test the transmitters and universal translators. We should find space in the labs to install the DNA machines and other equipment we'll need. Enai and his associates should do that. Enai should assist Captain Orihci in receiving, installing and testing the 3 new DNA machines that are arriving tomorrow.

We should establish a reception area with a help desk near the main entrance of the facilities to assist visitors and answer questions, as well as find accommodations for them. Amih should do that as soon as possible.

We should have a separate DNA machine and operating crew in the reception area to take DNA and contact information from people looking for their missing relatives. We should do that the moment they arrive. We should take the DNA information and add it to a separate database along with the person's contact information. This should be done immediately. We should start with the people who are already here. We should handle each case separately on a first come first serve basis to minimize waiting times and inconvenience the people as little as possible. Amih should work with Enai and his associates to install one of the DNA machines arriving tomorrow in the reception area. This machine needs to be operational as soon as possible.

We should prepare to receive the DNA machines and operating crew from Ostikon. Ireva should work with Enai and Amih to find space in the labs for the machines and accommodations for the operators. Given the differences in languages Ireva, who speaks the Ostikon language, should test the universal translators and make sure they work properly before the Ostikon operators and others arrive. Ireva should also work with Enai to install universal translators in key areas in the reception room and labs. Enai's associates working with

the super soldiers should be able to freely communicate with the Ostikon people operating the Ostikon DNA machines.

We should establish a process with Ostikon where they can send us the DNA and contact information of those looking for their missing relatives instead of sending them all the way here in person. Irevva should look into that.

We should send someone over to the other facility to see if we can scrounge another DNA machine. I know the facility was damaged badly but it would be worth our while to investigate. Captain Orihci should work something out with Ukasnek. They'll need to find a shuttle or some other small ship for Ukasnek to fly there and look around, to see what else we can salvage.

We should establish a steering group and have regular meetings to discuss progress and pending problems. We should tie this group to those who handle traffic control, the food supply and distribution management, waste management as well as the facility management.

Each member of the steering group should establish working groups to handle the day to day routine tasks, as well as problems that might arise.

We should establish a routine meeting schedule as well as a process to handle health and safety emergencies.

That was all I could think of for now. I decided not to bring up the issue of what to do with the super soldiers in the long term. That would have to wait for later until we got more information. Perhaps someone here or outside this planet might have some ideas.

Just as I was finished writing my notes I opened the conference door and to my surprise everyone was there waiting. They were discussing ideas on how to proceed.

After we sat down I told them what I wanted them there for and assured them that I would answer all questions after I was done talking. I didn't know exactly how to start since I'd never done this before, so I read my notes out loud in Macedonian as the universal

translator translated into their language. Each time there was a task assigned I looked up to make sure that the person it was assigned to was in agreement.

To my surprise no one had any issues or questions. They all felt this needed to be done first before we tackled issues of less priority.

Amih was well on her way to establishing her working group. She had already found a number of volunteers.

Enai assured me that he and his associates would cooperate with the others and give them what they needed to do their jobs.

Before they all left I asked them to come back here tomorrow morning after breakfast to discuss the next day's events. Just as I dismissed the meeting I asked Captain Orihci and Ukasnek to stay behind. We needed to find a ship for Ukasnek to fly over to the other facility.

"Every little ship and shuttle we possess is in use. The civilians here need them to do their jobs. In fact we're short of ships... none can be spared. I looked into this earlier in case we needed a ship. All I got was complaints that we needed more ships..." replied Captain Orihci.

"What about the shuttles on your destroyer. Surely there must be a shuttle or two there?" I said.

"It's a long shot..." he replied but didn't elaborate.

"What does that mean?"

"Well for one, I don't know where my ship is. I know it's on this planet somewhere because I saw it on our way here, but without coordinates and the aid of another ship we could end up looking for it forever. Also, I have no idea if we can still board the ship using my old codes. I have no idea what shape it's in or if those bastards left any shuttles on it intact," he replied with an angry look on his face.

“Why can’t I fly your ship?” asked Ukasnek.

Both Captain Orihci and Ukasnek looked at me with a curious look, anxiously awaiting my answer.

“I guess you don’t know the story about my ship,” I said and smiled.

“I know it’s a powerful little ship with a big reputation but a ship is a ship!” said Captain Orihci.

“I’ll tell you the story some other day when we have more time, but believe me when I tell you that no one but me can fly this ship and I can’t afford to leave the facility for too long. I have no idea how the super soldiers will react in my long absence.”

“Can you at least help us find Captain Orihci’s ship?” asked Ukasnek.

“I can do that. I can leave the facilities for a couple of hours at a time, I suppose... At the same time I can bring my ship closer to the facilities... In case I need it for an emergency or something. I’ll have to run diagnostics first and make sure everything is operational before we fly...” I said with hesitation. For some reason I was afraid to get back on the ship and the Captain and Ukasnek could sense it.

“Why don’t we do that right now since we have some free time, before we really get involved with our projects,” said Captain Orihci with a serious look on his face; not sure how I would react.

“Sure, why not,” I replied and started walking out of the conference room.

We walked in silence when I heard my stomach growl like a hungry lion, low and loud.

They both laughed. I heard Ukasnek whisper to Captain Orihci, “Otsiron is so worried about things he forgot to eat lunch.”

“I heard that!” I said and they both laughed.

“We can eat on my ship. There’s plenty of food there.”

“And plenty of rakia too... I hope...” said the Captain laughing.

I didn’t say anything more as we continued on our way in silence.

As we got closer my anxiety began to rise. I was afraid I would forget the ship’s entry codes.

Then I heard Captain Orihci yell, “What’s that?”

I looked in that direction and both Ukasnek and I simulataneously said, “That’s Enai’s ship.”

“Why can’t we use that ship?” asked Captain Orihci.

Ukasnek looked at me. When he saw that I had no answer he said, “It’s too small and useless! Besides, it has no navigation or power to fly long distances, even if we know the way there. But I can fly it back to the facility. It could be useful for something.”

The Captain looked at me a little disappointed but didn’t say anything. Ukasnek went towards the little ship.

“We’ll be right behind you,” I yelled. “See you at the facilities. Come and join us for some food and drink.”

After I used my badge and entered the codes correctly, the hatch on my ship began to open. The Captain waved at me to go in first.

“I know your ship is booby trapped and I don’t want to go in first and risk being injured.”

I smiled.

As soon as the Captain sat down I powered up the ship and followed Ukasnek, landing behind his ship on a patch of grass in front of the main entrance of the facility.

By the time I started opening the hatch Ukasnek was there waiting to get inside.

Whispering, the Captain said to me, “I know him, he would travel the galaxy for a drink...” and smiled.

“My kind of person...,” I said and smiled back.

After Ukasnek sat down I grabbed three jars of meat and three spoons, passed them around and said, “I hope the food hasn’t spoiled.” I sat down and we all started eating like hungry wolves.

I finished first, got up, grabbed a bottle of rakia and three cups. The Captain and Ukasnek put their jars down, took a cup each and held it in front of me while I poured rakia into them. Ukasnek gulped his right down and made a satisfying sound. Captain Orihci held his cup out and toasted us before he took a sip.

“You taught us to toast and then sip the rakia slowly to get the full flavour as it goes down,” he said

“That’s right. I would have said that but I don’t remember saying it to you.”

“You, the rakia king, I don’t remember who said it either...who cares... all I know is that it came from you,” he replied and had a second sip while Ukasnek took the bottle from my hand and helped himself.

After I toasted the Captain and Ukasnek I had a few sips and started running the diagnostics on my ship.

The rakia calmed us down and we were feeling lazy when I received the news that the diagnostics had passed without a single problem and that my ship was space worthy.

“Well gentlemen, we are ready to fly. Are you up to it? Which one of you can navigate...?” I asked.

“You want to go now?” asked Captain Orihci.

“Why not? I’ve only had a couple of sips of rakia.”

“We should tell someone we’re leaving. Open a channel and we’ll inform the tower,” the Captain said.

“If only I knew how!” I replied.

“Well, even though I was the Captain of a destroyer with hundreds of crew members to do the jobs for me, I still knew how to open a channel...” said the Captain.

He was interrupted by Ukasnek who said, “I’ll do it!” and instead of pushing a button he walked out of my ship and into the facility.

We suddenly laughed out loud, clinked our cups and had another sip of rakia.

We waited a long time for Ukasnek to return and when he did we made fun of him, teasing him for getting lost after having only a couple of drinks. Fortunately he had good news for us. He’d run into Enai who was familiar with my ship and explained to him how to use the communicator as well as how to enter coordinates into the navigation computer. Enai offered to come with us but Ukasnek convinced him his time would be better spent in the facility. Ukasnek also obtained a map of the path they’d taken in getting here and was convinced he could retrace their flight.

After Ukasnek pushed a few buttons on the communications panel he informed the tower of our departure and headings. He then instructed Captain Orihci on which buttons to push on the navigation panel to enter the flight coordinates to follow the path they’d taken here.

Then he said, “Fly low and slow and look for a big ship.”

Captain Orihci laughed a big laugh and pointing at Ukasnek said, “What would we do without this guy?”

After I pushed the joystick slightly up and forward, the ship hopped up and began to move.

Without looking back at me, Ukasnek shoved his empty cup towards me and kept it still while I filled it half full of rakia.

“Drink!” I said. “You earned it!”

The Captain did the same. I felt like drinking too and my massive body would have absorbed the rakia without becoming inebriated but I felt it would be inappropriate... to drink and drive.

The Captain looked at me, smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

Moments later the two broke into a song that was unfamiliar to me and my universal translator.

“It’s an old pirate song, sung in an old, abandoned dialect spoken in this part of the planet before it joined the Galaxy Traders consortium,” said Captain Orihci.

“We used to sing it when we were youngsters... We were going to be pirates you know... Follow in the tradition of our ancestors...” added Ukasnek.

I smiled and said, “I know so little about your people. I don’t even know the name of your planet.”

“It’s called Nelez. It means green in your language. It’s not an important planet. That’s why most of our people abandoned it except for the farmers, those who want to toil in the soil and earn their living the hard way. The rest of us... I joined the military. My friend here maintained our old tradition by earning his living trading whenever possible... And by other means... You know!” explained Captain Orihci.

“Tell him the truth. He already knows I was a pirate but what he doesn’t know is that I was the best pirate. I was a successful pirate and very good at my job. And that was okay. Right?” added Ukasnek.

I smiled but didn't say anything.

They again broke into a song as they intently looked ahead, hoping to spot Captain Orihci's ship. When the song ended the two went silent. Too silent... I figured they'd fallen asleep... But I couldn't tell from behind. They were still in a sitting position.

About twenty minutes into the trip, Ukasnek startled me when he yelled loudly, "Holy Shit!"

"What is it?" asked Captain Orihci.

"Look to your right. There's your ship. Now look to your left. Down there... Down the valley..." said Ukasnek excitedly.

"Holy Shit is right! It looks like a parking lot for large ships. Every ship belonging to the Galaxy Traders must be here. How did we miss this on our way here?" asked the Captain.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked.

"Land your ship on the left side of the destroyer about midway down and look for a hatch. If all goes well I'll try to board it from there. As for the rest of these ships, we can't do anything with them right now. Let's focus on my ship," the Captain said as I landed my ship where he pointed.

I was surprised to see that Captain Orihci was so nervous and excited as he approached the hatch and told us to go back inside my ship and wait. We did as he asked without asking why. After he opened the hatch he waved for us to come out and follow him inside.

"Those bastards locked my ship up tight but forgot to change the codes. Good thing too because the locks are tamper proof. The ship would have fired an energy burst and sometimes they're lethal depending on where they hit you."

The ship's corridors were dark and every door was locked. The Captain flipped a switch inside a panel and some lights came on. I assumed these were emergency lights in case the ship lost power and I was right.

"Everything on the ship has been turned off. My poor ship is as good as dead. Only emergency power is available and that won't last long. It will take days and a large crew to bring the ship back to life. Even if we find shuttles inside it, without power we won't be able to open the hatches to take them out... But let's not worry about that for now. Let's see what we can find," the Captain suggested.

"Imagine what we could do with a ship like this... If we had it all to ourselves..." said Ukasnek.

"That's right my friend. I guess you've never been on my ship before. With its firepower it could split planets in half. She is a gentle but mighty beast. She doesn't look it but she is one of the most powerful ships in our galaxy," replied the Captain.

After walking down the corridors for what seemed like an eternity, we finally arrived at the back of the ship facing a cavern which, in the dark, looked like a very large cave. The Captain turned on another set of emergency lights and turned off the others. It looked like there were at least a dozen shuttles in the bays, all lined up ready to fly out. They looked like large beetles.

"Well here we are. We have more shuttles that we can fly but how do we get them out?" asked the Captain with a tone of concern in his voice.

"There has to be away!" said Ukasnek.

"There is!" I replied.

"There is?" they both asked.

"How?" asked the Captain.

"I can blast one of the hatches open with my ship's cannons."

“Oh no, no, no, no!” protested the Captain loudly. “You’re not going to do any such thing to my ship. Not as long as I’m alive!”

“There has to be another way! Are there no manual overrides on the hatches? What happens when the motors break down and you need to open the hatch manually?” asked Ukasnek.

“I call the maintenance crew,” replied the Captain and we all broke into uncontrollable laughter.

Immediately after that Ukasnek dashed down the rails to the back of the ship to examine the hatches.

“If there’s a way to open them, I’m sure Ukasnek will find it. He’s very resourceful when it comes to breaking and entering,” explained Captain Orihci.

Just as he finished saying that we heard Ukasnek yell, “Found it!”

We both ran down as fast as we could and saw Ukasnek pointing at a wheel that looked like those on a submarine hatch. Ukasnek tried to rotate it but couldn’t. The Captain also tried but couldn’t do it either.

“It’s stuck.” He looked at me and said, “If you can’t rotate it we’re screwed.”

I tried but couldn’t rotate it either; even with my immense body and super soldier strength.

“Maybe we can bang it with something and loosen it,” Ukasnek suggested but the Captain wouldn’t allow it. He didn’t want his ship damaged.

“There is another way,” I said, “but we mustn’t tell anyone about it. Swear to me that you won’t.”

They both agreed and had a laugh at my expense.

I grabbed a vial of the fire water I was carrying with me for such an emergency and popped it into my mouth as they both watched me curiously. A few seconds later I raised my arms up high, growled like a lion as loud as I could, for effect, and banged my arms down on the rails. The moment I began to feel the effects of the fire water, I went to the wheel and spun it as hard as I could like a spinning top. The moment the hatch was fully open I turned towards them, lifted my arms up and started growling and breathing furiously. I then started laughing and said, “You should have seen your faces...”

The moment they realized that I was teasing them the Captain said, “I have never before seen a hatch open so fast...”

But he was interrupted by Ukasnek who asked, “What the hell was that stuff? Can I have some...? Imagine the money it would bring selling it on the black market...”

“Sorry Ukasnek that stuff, I was told, is poison and only a few select people can tolerate it. In Ostikon they call it fire water. I have very little of it and use it only in emergencies.”

“Wow, how many more secrets do you have that we don’t know about?” asked Captain Orihci. He looked outside his ship through the open bay door and said, “We should be able to fly a couple of these shuttles out. You’re better pilots than me. Take them out and I’ll shut the bay manually and lock down the ship.”

“Sorry, I don’t even know how to get into one of these shuttles, never mind fly it,” I said.

“Didn’t they teach you anything in the academy?” asked Captain Orihci sounding slightly frustrated.

I smiled, raised my shoulders and said nothing.

Captain Orihci then turned to Ukasnek and said, “In that case you take both shuttles out, park them outside and wait for me. I’ll join you after I lock up.” The Captain then turned to me and said “You leave through there and bring your ship around. We’ll escort you

back to the facility so you don't get lost," he said while pointing at the open bay door.

I felt a bit insulted when the Captain said that but he was right. I wasn't a real pilot or a real Captain. I was nobody caught up in circumstances not of my making. Like a leaf caught in a windstorm.

The Captain was always surrounded by competent people who did what they were asked and did it with pride. All he asked me to do, a skilled pilot, was take a shuttle out of the bay and I refused to do it... because I truly didn't know how. But he didn't know that. I wondered what he really thought of me.

I parked my ship beside the shuttles and went outside and joined Ukasnek. While watching the ship's bay door slowly close, Ukasnek said, "By asking me to fly the shuttles out he admitted to me that I'm a better pilot. You saw that right? He could have taken the second shuttle out but he didn't. Why? Because he would have embarrassed himself if he scratched the shuttle. Is that why you refused to fly it out?"

"Yes, I have a robot doing the precision flying for me in and out of tight spots so I never learned how," I replied, attempting to cover up my inadequacies.

He didn't say anything as we waited for the Captain to return.

When we saw him approaching from around the ship he waved for us to get into our ships and get ready to fly out.

Ukasnek took the lead and took us back in a couple of minutes. We parked the ships one behind the other on the grass in front of the main entrance.

Just as I came out of my ship, I turned on the transmitter to check on the soldiers to make my presence known and make sure everything was okay.

When I was done with the super soldiers the Captain apologized to me for being a bit brisk with me earlier.

“It’s not in my nature to be rude to people so I apologize if I was. We truly don’t know you or your situation but we are sure grateful you’re here. You’ve been here for us when we needed you... Are we good?”

“Yes, we’re good. Thank you,” I replied.

Moments later Ukasnek, looking a bit anxious, joined us. “What do we do next?” he asked.

“When you’re ready take one of the shuttles and go to the other facility. See if you can find the machine and bring it back. Take someone with you to help carry it. Also look around and see if there is anything else of value you can scrounge,” I replied.

“I’ll go right now but I need the coordinates. I’ll get them from Enai, my old partner,” he said and turned to Captain Orihci to ask him if he wanted to go with him.

I immediately intervened and said, “I’ll need Captain Orihci here. He can’t go with you. Find someone else, perhaps one of Enai’s associates who might be familiar with the facility layout.” I paused for a moment and added, “You don’t have to go right now, it’s getting late and will be dark soon.”

“The sooner the better. It’ll be daytime on the other side of the planet. I want to be back before morning, get some sleep and join you for the morning meeting. Okay?” replied Ukasnek.

Both the Captain and I smiled and shook our heads, giving him our approval. The Captain then yelled something to him, which the translator couldn’t translate, before Ukasnek disappeared into the facilities in a hurry.

“If there is anything to be found I’m sure Ukasnek will find it! Now let’s go to dinner and bring a bottle of that good stuff” said Captain Orihci with a tone of confidence in his voice.

Double trouble

Just as we arrived at the usual dinner table we were joined by Amih and Irevva, and later by Enai and his associates. After they greeted us the associates sat at their usual table away from us but we could still hear them arguing and settling their differences. They weren't at all like Enai. They were timid and shy but very loyal to Enai. When they didn't want us to know what they were talking about they spoke in a different language. From what Enai had told me they spoke many languages; at least five.

Everyone around our table looked tired and a bit distracted. They didn't want to talk much about anything. Only Amih spoke up at one point reminding us of how anxious she was to find her sons.

"I hope they're still alive. I'm sure they were brought here. Ukasnek told me so. He followed the ship that brought them here. We need to find them... as soon as possible. I want to see my boys again and soon..."

At this point Irevva interrupted her and said, "I guess you're overtired Mother. I'd better take you to your room," and they both walked away. Beyond saying "goodnight" no one said anything else, not even Captain Orihci. We continued drinking in silence until Ukasnek and Enai's associate burst into the dining area to give us the bad news. Captain Orihci spoke first.

"You're back so soon? What happened?"

"It's bad... It's so bad. The facility is still burning... smoldering... but that's not the worst of it. There's a toxic cloud hovering over it which prevented us from getting near it, never mind inside. We had no protective gear in the shuttle so we couldn't get into the facility. Not without being poisoned. I'm sorry our mission was a failure," said Ukasnek.

"Don't worry about it. We'll ask the people of Ostikon to send us more machines. The moment the Ostikon crew arrives and makes sure their equipment is compatible with ours, we'll ask them to send

us another five machines...” I said and invited them to sit with us and have something to eat and drink.

Ukasnek sat with us while Enai’s associate went to the other table to tell them what had happened.

Feeling a bit better for not scolding him, Ukasnek began to tell us the details of his experience as if it was some sort of adventure story. At one point he asked Enai to find him protective gear because he was willing to go back. While recounting his story Ukasnek said something that caught Captain Orihci’s attention.

“While we were circling around looking for a way in that wasn’t contaminated, we spotted a small but very slick triangular ship fly out of the facility. I’ve never seen a ship like that before... and wondered what it was doing there?”

At this point Captain Orihci interrupted Ukasnek’s story and said, “I have!”

We all turned and looked at the Captain with much interest.

“Some years ago I ran into a small fleet of those ships. They were flying over one of our planets at the far end of our galaxy, looking for precious metals. I found that out later after I sent investigators to the planet’s surface. They told me the little ships were looking for gold. The locals told them they’d stolen their gold. The moment I came into contact with them I ordered them to leave but they refused. I knew there was a mother ship lurking around somewhere because the little ships were too small to venture out this deep in outer space on their own. So I ordered my crew to look for it. They found it hiding in space debris above the planet. I fired one round from one of my bigger cannons into the space debris near it to show them that I could see them. They instantly ran. We didn’t hit their ship. It wasn’t our intention to destroy it. But they got the message and disappeared. Now I see they are back. Perhaps it was a mistake to let them go.”

“I know for a fact that there’s a lot of gold in that facility. It belongs to the people of our galaxy. We can’t let them have it. We need to

stop them. You have to get your ship flying again and this time you have to shoot them down,” Ukasnek told Captain Orihci, sounding concerned.

“I can’t even if I want to. I have no crew...” replied the Captain and was interrupted by Ukasnek.

He turned to me and said, “Then you must go up and stop them. You have the firepower and from what it looks like you don’t hesitate to use it.”

“Calm down Ukasnek, don’t insult the man. He did what he had to do for our sake because we didn’t do what we should have done... protect our people and our planets,” interjected the Captain.

“Are they dangerous? Will they attack this facility too if they find out we have gold here?” I asked.

“That’s not the only problem. If they see all our ships, including my destroyer, parked there they’ll destroy them before we have a chance to fly them again,” replied Captain Orihci.

“Can you call for help?” I asked.

“I could but how’s that going to help?” As far as I know none of the planets have military ships or any other kind of defense. They were disabled by the robots just like my ship was disabled and they are all probably sitting in some valley here of this planet,” replied Captain Orihci.

As we sat there in silence, the Captain looked at me and said, “There is a solution! You have to go up and chase them away. You have to go as soon as possible. Go now, before they have a chance to scan the entire planet... if they already haven’t... If they did and found our ships sitting there unprotected they will destroy them.”

“But...” I said with an anxious look on my face when Captain Orihci interrupted me, “I know what you’re going to say... You have no navigator. So, you managed to find my ship without one right?”

Before I had a chance to say anything, Enai interrupted and said, “I’ll navigate for you. You know I can. Just like I did before...”

At the same time Ukasnek spoke up and said, “I’m coming too, I can show you where I saw the little ship...”

“Go now and don’t worry about things down here. I’m sure you’ll be back in a couple of hours,” the Captain said as Enai, Ukasnek and I dashed towards the exit.

It took us about a minute to get into the air and another for Enai to enter the coordinates. And even though I wasn’t sure what we were doing, let alone being able to find the little ship in the same area hours later, I pushed the ship to the maximum speed recommended for flying in the atmosphere and we were at the other facility in minutes. When the area was in full view I could see the ugly cloud covering the complex. I flew all around looking for the little ship but it wasn’t there. We didn’t know how to operate the ship’s sensors so we depended on our sight to find it. We couldn’t tell if the ship was hiding because we didn’t have the aid of our sensors.

Enai decided to transmit a warning message in all languages, the ones he spoke, and on all frequencies warning ships to stay away from this area, not only because it was toxic but also because the facility was protected and belonged to the people of this planet. But I guess Enai’s message must have been misinterpreted. The aliens came for us. They probably figured we were staking our claim on the facility and wanted the gold for ourselves. The instant Enai stopped transmitting we were swarmed by more than a dozen little ships swooping down on us from every direction and then disappearing after they took shots at my ship. I don’t know if they didn’t have the firepower to disable us or were just trying to scare us off. I flew slowly in a straight line for a while as they continued attacking us.

When I looked at Enai and Ukasnek I saw fear in their eyes. They both looked worried. They figured if this continued the hull would be breached and we’d be destroyed.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. They’re moving so fast I can’t even aim the cannons at them,” I said.

Unfortunately that didn’t ease their anxiety and they began to look even more worried. To reassure them that we would be okay I said, “Don’t worry the hull of my ship is impenetrable to their little blasters. But I do need to somehow bring them in line with my ship so that I can at least fire at one of them.”

So with that I flew my ship straight up into outer space, turned around and waited for them. But they didn’t show up. For some reason they decided not to chase us and disappeared back onto the surface. They probably figured they’d frightened us and we’d left for good.

Then, just as we were sitting there thinking about what to do next, we were blasted on the side so hard that we were sent into a dizzying spin into outer space. I guess they were aiming for my ship’s engines but had no idea how hard our hull was. They were probably aiming to split us from our engines but failed. I fired my stabilizer rockets which cut out my engines but managed to stop the ship from spinning. We were now sitting ducks. Fortunately my plasma cannons were still charged so when the ship came around to finish us off, probably thinking that our engines were dead, I fired one of my cannons at it but missed. I missed because I couldn’t aim the cannons properly without the aid of the engines. To avoid the blast, the alien ship flew above us and into outer space. It then turned around and came at us from the side to avoid being shot at, probably thinking our engines were still disabled. But before it reaching firing distance I had my engines working and lined my ship up on a collision course with them.

“I’ve got them now, no matter which way they go,” I said and fired one shot.

It was a direct hit on the ship’s front. Unfortunately it caused no damage. The alien ship absorbed the blast. It was big ship. Again it flew above us but didn’t fire. Why it didn’t fire, I don’t know. I turned us around and went in pursuit. We caught up to it fast.

Enai, for some reason which he didn't explain, opened a channel and asked the ship to stop running so that we could have a civilized conversation but the ship kept running. I fired my last charged cannon and hit its engines. It slowed down. Enai repeated the message while I recharged the plasma cannons and activated the torpedo. Again there was no answer, so I opened the torpedo tube hatch and was ready to blast them out of existence.

“Don't do it!” Enai yelled. “You don't want to start a war.”

At that very moment we saw a string of little ships coming fast straight for us, so I fired one of my plasma cannons at them and took out four with a single shot. By now the big ship had recovered from my blast and flew away. The little ships followed and they all disappeared from view. We didn't go in pursuit.

Enai looked worried when I looked at him but before I had a chance to say anything Ukasnek interrupted and said loudly, “What a story this will make. Let me tell it...”

Immediately after that Enai said, “I'm sorry for interfering back there. It wasn't my place. You're the Captain and I shouldn't have said anything.”

“You should have blasted the bastards to pieces. They'll come back, mark my words...” interjected Ukasnek.

“No problem Enai. I know you're far wiser than me and I trust your judgment. If these people are smart they'll realize what happened here today. Not just that we didn't destroy them when we had the chance but that we are reasonable people...”

But before I could finish Ukasnek interjected and said, “Let's not forget that we have superior ships and firepower.”

“They'll take that back to their planet and hopefully stay away from us. Had we destroyed them, their people would probably have sent a search party to look for them. And when they found them... dead and their ship destroyed, they would have come for us. They'd seek

retribution which, I'm sure, could potentially escalate into war," I added.

"Only time will tell! Now let's go home. I have a story to tell," Ukasnek said smiling.

"I guess we won't be sleeping tonight?" I said jokingly and engaged the ship to maximum speed.

It only took us a few minutes to get back and we found Captain Orihci waiting for us in the dining area with an almost empty bottle in his hand.

The moment he saw us he said, "I saved the last drop to toast your victory if you came back or drown my sorrows if you didn't. I'm just kidding, I knew you'd be back and exactly in less than two hours as I predicted."

"I guess we should let Ukasnek tell the story before he bursts from excitement," I said and went back to my ship to get another bottle while Enai left and went to bed. He had a lot to do the next day.

When I came back Captain Orihci said, "Congratulations, we'll pin yet one more medal on your chest. Unfortunately you did as I did. You made the same mistake. You didn't take them out and... I'll have to agree with my friend here... they'll be back."

"Well, all I can say is that I have a somewhat clear conscience. I didn't kill everyone today," I replied and added. "Let's talk about something else and enjoy our drinks... for now. We don't know what kind of shit we'll run into tomorrow."

The next morning I heard loud thumps coming from outside my ship. I was slumped in my Captain's chair asleep. Captain Orihci and Ukasnek were sleeping, slumped on the other chairs. My ship stunk of booze. I opened the hatch. Irevva started yelling at the top of her voice in a language I didn't understand. She came up to my chair and motioned with her hand. She was fanning away the smelly air in front of her nose as she slapped my universal translator on.

“It stinks in here! I’ve been looking for you forever. Did you forget about the meeting this morning?”

“What? Oh yeah, the meeting,” I said and tapped the Captain and Ukasnek on their backs to get them moving.

“Enai briefed us on what happened last night. Also you need to make contact with the super soldiers as soon as possible. We’re getting reports that they’re stirring and some won’t eat their breakfast,” said Ireva and yelled. “Now let’s get going. You can eat breakfast after the meeting is over.”

“I can tell you one thing, not only is she smart, she’s tougher than both my two boys combined,” said Captain Orihci to me quietly as we followed Ireva back to the meeting room. We were unwashed and smelled of booze; like hobos.

Well informed of the battle we’d waged against the aliens the day before, everyone stood up when we entered the conference room. Captain Orihci leaned towards me and in a quiet voice said, “Let’s see what they’ll do when they get a load of your aroma.”

I didn’t reply.

I sat at the head of the table with Captain Orihci and Ukasnek sitting beside me on each side. After I apologized for being late, I asked the attendants to excuse me for a moment while I determined what was stirring the super soldiers. That took only a few moments.

After that, one by one the meeting participants took a turn to bring us up to date with the previous day’s progress. Everyone was impressed with how well everyone else had done, given their inexperience and the lack of resources they had to work with. Maybe that was my perception or maybe there was a will and cooperation but, no matter, the place was ready to function after one day’s work and all we needed now were the machines.

We were informed that Enai’s associates had furnished Amih and Ireva with the universal translators, space and furniture for the reception area and the help desk. They had found and tested all

necessary transmitters, as well as the spare ones and each one of Enai's associates was successful in communicating with the super soldiers. They'd also found places to install the machines after they arrived. Amih and Ireva furnished the reception area and found volunteers to do the work not only in the reception area but also in the accommodations.

When everyone was done reporting I thanked them for their great work and apologized for being distracted with other matters. I then asked them if they had any questions or concerns. No one said anything. I suspect they had concerns but didn't want to bother me with the details given the state I was in.

“Thank you. The meeting is adjourned except for Enai and his associates. You stay behind. I have some technical questions for you.”

When everyone had left I said, “As you know sometimes I have to leave the facility for an undetermined period of time, like last night for example. So I want to ask you what will happen to the super soldiers if I don't get in touch with them... if I don't return... on time?”

Enai took the question and answered, “From what I was told and from the tests we conducted here in the past, super soldiers need to be in constant contact with... you know... the lead robot. If they lose contact for a prolonged period of time, say not more than six hours, they'll start stirring. They'll look for that soothing voice in their heads and if they can't reacquire it the soldiers will soon start walking. They'll walk all over the place, usually in a straight line, oblivious of everything and everyone around them. If the soldiers are armed they'll fire at anything that they perceive to be a threat to them, like sudden motions and things like that... The soldiers will continue to search until they reacquire the voice or until they die... from thirst, hunger, or even exhaustion. It won't be a pretty picture.” After pausing for a moment, Enai continued, “Worse than that is if the soldiers do acquire a voice, say the voice of one of these robots we have in the facility if they become active, or the voice of a loose robot drifting somewhere in the forests. Then we're in real trouble. Once they bond with the robot, like they did with you, we'll all be

doomed; perhaps more so than we were with the big robots. It's scary and you must take care so that that never happens."

Suddenly everyone in the conference room looked worried, except for Captain Orihci who was slowly turning into a comedian. I don't know if he was doing this to ease the tension or to make light of the situation.

He leaned over and said, "It sounds like Enai just crowned you king and gave you a job for life."

I couldn't help it and laughed out loud, which was inappropriate given the situation. But to cover it up I said, "You have nothing to worry about Enai, I'll be here for as long as I'm needed and I'm sure you and your associates with your great technical abilities will find a solution."

I then turned to Captain Orihci and said, "You remind me of Delche back in Ostikon."

"Oh yeah? How so?" he asked.

"You're both full of..." I replied.

Captain Orihci then said, "What if you remove the chip from Otsiron's neck and place it in someone else. Would they be able to do what he does?"

"No!" replied Enai, "The chip can't be removed without killing the host."

"Okay then, but can a new chip be inserted into, say a young person, and can they do what I do?" I asked.

"It's never been tested and we no longer have the equipment to do it with. It was destroyed remember? And besides, I would never do that to another human being," replied Enai.

"Can we reprogram one of the robots to do it? Make sure it's incapable of doing harm?" I asked.

“No! The robots we have are tamperproof and will explode if we attempt to do anything to them,” replied Enai.

“How about a computer, then? Surely you can program a computer to do the daily routine stuff that I do with them...” I said and was distracted by whispers coming from Enai’s associates.

“Well, according to my shy friends here... We can do that and we’re now kicking ourselves for not thinking of it...”

“But there’s a small problem, the transmitters we have can only talk to one soldier at a time and we have almost a million soldiers...” explained one of the associates.

“So, then you transmit the message one million times. You can do that, right? Computers can do that in seconds, right?” I asked.

There was silence in the conference room.

After looking at his associates for a moment and doing some calculations Enai said, “Yes, we’ll do that and let you know when we’re ready to start testing.”

“Please work on this later, after we complete the DNA work,” I said.

“We’ll work on this until we get the DNA machines. When the machines arrive we’ll work on them, I assure you. Okay?” replied Enai and they all left the conference room in a hurry.

“I guess we’d better go too,” I said. “We need to get washed and eat before the machines arrive.”

After we went away and washed, we returned to the dining area and ate some leftovers Ukasnek had scrounged for us from the kitchen. The dining room was closed and the kitchen staff were preparing lunch.

Before we finished eating someone passing by told us that the communications tower was looking for us. Given that none of us

knew anything about the communications tower or how to contact it, Captain Orihci, who had been there before said, “Let’s go, I know the way. I’ll take you there.”

So we got up, left our food behind and went.

“We have to get some portable communicators,” I said.

“We have plenty of them on my ship,” replied Captain Orihci.

“And some side arms too...” added Ukasnek. But before I had a chance to reply he added, “For defense you know!”

“Who’s manning the tower?” I asked.

“Volunteers, Enai and his associates trained them and put them in charge,” replied the Captain.

The moment we entered the tower a young man ran over, looked at me and said, “Sir, we received a call... They’re arriving right now.”

He was much too excited and spoke too fast for my universal translator to keep up, so I pointed him to Captain Orihci who said, “I’ll take care of it.”

“It sounds like they’ll be arriving early,” said Ukasnek.

“Who?” I asked.

“Our machines.”

“So, let’s go out there and get them,” I said.

Ukasnek made a hand motion to Captain Orihci who then waved us to go.

A moment later we spotted a small shuttle looking for a place to land. Ukasnek waved it to land behind my ship on the grass. The sun was in our eyes so we couldn’t see the second and much larger ship following it.

“How big are these blasted machines, that it takes two ships to deliver them?” asked Ukasnek with a frustrated but curious tone of voice.

After the first ship landed six people came out. They were greeted by Enai and his associates who’d gone over when the shuttle landed. They picked up the machines, which looked much smaller than ours, and went inside. The other ship continued to hover above as if supervising the situation. Then it suddenly landed in front of us, in front of Captain Orihci’s shuttles. A hatch at the front of the ship began to open. The ship looked luxurious inside as if it belonged to a king or an emperor. Two big armed guards stepped forward and took their place on each side of the hatch.

A man dressed in what looked like ceremonial dress came out of the hatch and yelled “Arrest that alien!” pointing at me.

My universal transmitter said, “I’m not an alien...” but that didn’t match my lip movement which was immediately detected by the man who was dressed like an emperor, convincing him that I was.

At this point Ukasnek ran inside to get Captain Orihci to straighten things out. In the meantime I raised my arms slowly and, suspecting there might be trouble ahead, popped a vial of fire water into my mouth and turned on my transmitter. When the guards saw my arms moving up they pulled out their weapons, trained them on me and started walking towards me.

At that very moment Captain Orihci ran out of the facility’s main entrance and yelled “Wait, wait, wait...”

The guards stopped moving.

“Who are you?” yelled the man who looked like an emperor.

“I’m Captain Orihci, Captain of the Galaxy Trader warship, the Second Destroyer.”

“Arrest him too. He’s a traitor, he surrendered his ship... our ship, to the aliens,” he ordered and two more armed guards came out and rushed towards the Captain.

“What’s going on?” I asked the Captain who was now near me.

“I don’t know!” he replied sounding frustrated.

As the four guards kept coming for us, I turned towards the emperor and said, “I will allow you to arrest me. I don’t care under what charges but I won’t allow you to arrest the Captain under those bogus charges, which I know aren’t true.”

Then the emperor yelled, “You have no authority here! Arrest them both!”

At that point I picked up the two armed guards coming for me and tossed them at the other two armed guards going for the Captain. The four landed on their butts and began to fire their weapons at me. The charges stung like bees but they couldn’t bring me down. People started coming out of the facility to see what was happening. They were followed by fully armed super soldiers running as fast as they could. They were all coming for us.

“Stop firing!” I yelled. “Or all of you will be dead!”

The soldiers must have sensed my distress and came to my rescue. Nine was leading and was the first to reach me. She got in front of me, placed her long rifle at the guard’s head, the one who’d fired last, and was ready to pull the trigger.

“No! Stop!” I yelled and the entire line of soldiers, hundreds of them, stopped running. I then pictured them surrounding the ship and they began to do that. Nine stayed with me despite my suggestion for her to join the others.

Our hostile guests stood there motionless as the number of soldiers around their ship multiplied. I offered my hand to the guards sitting on the ground and, one by one, they stood up and placed their weapons back in their holsters. Nine wasn’t going to take any

chances so she kept her rifle trained on the guard closest to me. I saw Captain Orihci pass by and ask me if I was all right. I said I was. He then told me to hold tight and not shoot anyone until he came back.

At that point he shoved the emperor out of the way and climbed inside his ship. Moments later more people started coming out of the ship. Two more men came out, wearing fancy clothes, and eight more male armed guards. The last two to come out were women whom I assumed were the ship's crew. After looking around I waved at Ukasnek to come over. I asked him to get Enai and tell everyone outside the facility to go back to work. When Ukasnek came back with Enai I asked them to disarm the guards. Enai did. Then I ordered the super soldiers to go back to their barracks and disarm. I asked Nine to stay with me for a while.

When everyone had left and we were alone with our guests I asked the emperor, "Who are you and what are you doing here?"

The moment he stirred Nine pointed her rifle at him, which looked more like a cannon given its size.

When he got up enough courage to speak he said his name, which I didn't catch, and that he was the governor of the 22nd planet of the Galaxy Trader consortium and that he had been sent here to investigate the alien invasion and the war raging in this part of the galaxy.

"If you were sent here to investigate shouldn't you be asking questions instead of arresting people?" I asked.

He didn't answer. I guess he felt it was in his best interests to keep quiet.

I then turned to Ukasnek and Enai and asked, "Do you know this guy?"

They both said no

Ukasnek then said, “I guess he doesn’t know that the war is over. When Captain Orihci ordered the machines, something in the central government must have been flagged so they sent him here to investigate. But instead of investigating he wanted to show us how tough he was.”

“So, your Galaxy Trader consortium likes to play dirty... and here I thought you were such good people...”

I heard a couple of the guards laugh. I thought that was good, at least they had a sense of humour.

I then turned to Nine and said, as always you’re my saviour and pushed her rifle down to point towards the ground in front of her.

I then turned to Enai and said, “Enai, please tell me why the soldiers are still armed? Didn’t we have them disarmed? Where did they get these guns?”

“No Sir! We can’t disarm them. Their weapons are part of them. They can’t exist without their weapons. That’s how they were programmed. Each soldier has a unique weapon registered to them and they are the only ones that can operate them. This protects them from their enemies using the weapon against them. The weapon must be either in their hands or in their holster at their station in the barracks,” replied Enai.

“Oh, that’s smart. But where did Nine get her weapon? We had no weapons in our room? Was her weapon hidden there from me somewhere?”

“No Sir. As she got anxious without you we had to move her back to her station in the barracks. When the servers delivered her food they found her stirring. I used my own crown to order her go back to her station in the barracks,” replied Enai.

“I see,” I said as I looked around. The crowd standing in front of the main door had disappeared. Our unruly guests stood there motionless watching us; especially Nine who was holding a large gun in her hands. They were listening carefully to our conversation.

“What’s Captain Orihci still doing in there? Who is he talking to for so long?” I asked.

“These bastards have no respect for our planet, our traditions, our language, or for us. They treat our planet like it’s their breadbasket and us like we’re their slaves. Look at them... The cowards! I spent my entire life running from them. I’ll bet they’ve never seen a gun pointed at them like this before in their entire lives. Well I have... pointed at me by the likes of them! This is Captain Orihci’s and my planet! Not theirs! What gives them the right to come here and harass us... and push us around...” protested Ukasnek.

“Stop talking!” I said. “They haven’t done anything to us... yet. Let’s wait for the Captain and see what he has to say before we judge them harshly...”

I saw apprehension on the emperor’s face. He swallowed hard.

“Are they really unaware of what happened here on this planet or are they pretending to be tough guys and want to push us around? You saw him order his guards to fire at me, right? That’s attempted murder, right? I asked Ukasnek with a serious look on my face. But he knew I was joking.

“Yes, yes. I’m not a lawyer but I know that shooting someone carries a heavy penalty on this planet...” said Ukasnek.

Just then Captain Orihci popped out of the ship and yelled, “Let them go. They are free to leave.”

Without saying a word Enai gave the guards their guns back and, like the rats that they were, they quickly scurried onto their ship and left.

“Well, you were in there a long time. What happened?” I asked but Captain Orihci’s attention was drawn to the facility entrance.

I turned around to look and saw a group of people coming out, looking at us.

“I’ll tell you later. Right now I feel the need to tell everyone, so why don’t we go to the communications tower and make a general announcement,” replied the Captain.

Things are starting to look up

On our way to the tower, after I'd dismissed Nine and sent her back to the barracks, Captain Orihci looked at Ukasnek, Enai and me in that order and said, "You'd better have more rakia in that ship of yours because it's time to celebrate my promotion. You're looking at the new governor of this planet."

We were so happy and excited when we heard the news that all of us cheered and spoke at the same time.

"Congratulations man I'm happy for you. But I have no idea what this means... if it's good or bad for us... because I know nothing of your political system or your politics."

"Me neither... Now excuse me, I need to go in there..." he said and entered the tower.

After he went inside the soundproof booth he spoke on the P.A. system for about twenty minutes. He addressed everyone in the facility and informed them of what had happened outside earlier that morning, what had happened the night before at the other facility and what we were working on to help the families of the super soldiers find their missing relatives. He told them that we were about to be visited by people from Ostikon in a few days and that we were expecting a visit from the Galaxy Trader central government and that he had been appointed Governor of this planet.

"What visit from the Central Government? Are they sending another useless government bureaucrat like the one this morning?" I asked the Captain the moment he stepped out of the booth.

"No!" he replied. "Come with me. Let's go to your ship and have a drink. We'll talk there in private."

The moment we stepped out of the tower, people in the hallways stopped to congratulate the Captain. Some looked curiously at the burn marks on my upper body, which I'd forgotten about.

“They think you’re a super super soldier...” the Captain said jokingly and Ukasnek laughed.

Enai looked a little puzzled. “I saw you get jabbed by the robots before you were a super soldier and you didn’t break down. It puzzled me then and it still puzzles me now. How were you able to endure the pain of the plasma spears without collapsing?”

When I didn’t answer Enai said, “You remember? When the big robot wanted you to bow before it and you refused?”

“Wow, it must have been some sight to see...” Ukasnek said sarcastically.

“I took a few drops of a chemical... It’s called fire water. I was given a jar of it back in Ostikon. I don’t know what it is or how it works. I was told to be careful with it because it’s poisonous and very dangerous. All I know is that it gives me super strength. I only use it in emergencies.”

“I’ve heard of that stuff before but I thought it was only a story... a story made up to entertain children. When I was a young child my grandfather told me the story. He said ‘A long, long time ago there was a burning planet where fire constantly fought against water, each trying to impress the gods. Who was stronger water or fire? In the end the water turned out to be stronger because it put out the fire. But in the long years they fought, the water took some of the fire’s strength. That’s why it’s called fire water. When you drink it the water releases the fire within it...’ That’s what we were told,” said Enai.

“Well, nice story but the fire water appears to be real!” said the Captain and sat down on the spare chair inside my ship. “I’m thirsty, hungry and I have a headache.”

While the other two sat down I went to get us each a bottle of water and a jar of meat. The Captain gulped the water down and finished the meat fast. Then he reached inside the box where I kept the bottles of rakia and pulled one out. After looking at it for a moment he said, “We’d best enjoy this one... it’s the last one.” Then he got

up, grabbed some cups, filled them half full of rakia and passed them around. Before he took a sip he said, “To our friendship, adventures and future headaches.”

“I second that!” added Ukasnek.

“What a whirlwind it’s been for me and the damage I’ve done in the hands of those damned robots and mad scientists. Thank you all for giving me the opportunity to undo some of the damage I’ve done. To our friendship and to a brighter future” said Enai and we all took a sip. He looked at Captain Orihci and said, “Thank you for referring to me as a ‘brilliant scientist’ back there during your speech. But, given the harm I’ve done, I don’t think I deserve such a compliment.”

“I’m sure we’ve all done things we’re not proud of... but we need to look ahead now. With my friend here as the boss of this planet, I’m sure the authorities will cut us some slack. As for me, all I want is to live like a person and not like a dog,” said Ukasnek.

“What I didn’t tell them during my speech was that the central government will be sending an investigative commission to look at every detail of what happened here from before the start of the war until today. God help us all. I’ve always been suspicious of bureaucrats and how they might misinterpret things, especially your actions,” the Captain said while looking at me.

“There is an old saying – You can’t get into trouble if you do nothing but the moment you do something you are in trouble. I just have to accept that... But then, there is the alternate option...” I replied.

“And what’s that?” asked Enai.

“I’d rather not say but... if you insist... Theoretically let’s say, I will not voluntarily allow them to railroad me or my friends to take the rap for doing what was necessary to survive. As for me personally, I did voluntarily jump into this mess with both feet... I have a lot to answer to for that. But I only went on what I knew, on what I had been told... I came here to stop a war, a war that was consuming

millions of people, and I did. Not just from here but from Ostikon and its sister planets. If they want to judge me for that, so be it,” I replied.

“You’re right. We had little choice in what we did. But you, your story is different... you volunteered for this. Yours is a greater story; a hero or a villain. You sit on the verge of glory, of being judged as a hero for ending the war and for saving millions of young men and women from here and from Ostikon. You also sit on the edge of the precipice of being judged as a villain for taking down the robots along with so many lives. How can we be sure that the Galaxy Trader government wasn’t the sponsor behind the two mad scientists? And if it was, guess who they’re going to put the blame on for ending their big project? Us of course!” said the Captain, paused for a moment and continued. “What puzzled me from the beginning was why were they building such a large army and most importantly for whom were they building it? This was a big, big operation. Who could afford such a big operation and what were they going to do with this army? Think about it! This is something that has been bothering me since the day Ukasnek gave us the news about this place,” said Captain Orihci.

“And what about me and my associates? We helped create this mess. We volunteered our services because we needed work and because we were good at what we were doing... In the beginning... But then the robots turned us into their slaves... Yet still we kept working for them. We could have escaped? I escaped... I could have left permanently but I didn’t,” said Enai.

“Don’t beat yourself up over this Enai, your daughter was here... you couldn’t leave... you wanted to help her... I still think you’re our best hope of getting to the truth, not only of what happened here but also to find a solution to save the soldiers,” I said.

“Well, compared to you I’m a saint... A regular run of the mill...” said Ukasnek when we heard a female voice yell.

“I knew I’d find you here drinking!” It was Ireva and she just walked in on us. After she came up the ramp she grabbed a

discarded cup on the floor and shoved it towards her father who was holding the last, almost empty bottle of rakia.

After Captain Orihci poured the remaining liquid into Ireva's cup he said, "Enjoy it my dear, you have the pleasure of drinking the last drop of rakia we have... There is no more..."

"In that case I'll drink it straight and enjoy it..." she said and gulped it down in three quick gulps. When she was done she said, "The machines are up and running. We installed two in the lab and one in the reception area. Any final instructions before we start them?"

"Yes," said Enai, "on top of collecting DNA and contact information, please instruct the crew to take pictures of everyone whose information is added to the database. We may need it to visually identify the subjects. Also record if the soldier is male or female. That's all I can think of for now."

When Ireva left we followed her. She led us to the lab. We inspected the new machines and met the new crew operating them. After Ireva informed the associates of the changes, she left. One of Enai's associates came over to tell us that he was going to the facility shops to look for cameras. Enai instructed him to integrate the camera into the system and make the process seamless.

"That way it will be faster, more efficient and we can avoid errors." After looking into the distance for a while Enai said, "It just occurred to me... If we had all the machines in one lab we'd only need one of my associates here to bring the soldiers in."

"What do you mean?" asked the Captain.

"Well, we already have the crew to operate the machines, one crew member per machine, right? Now all we need to do is get volunteers, one per machine to take the blood and put it in the machine and another to enter the soldier's number and sex into the computer. The computer will automatically take the picture and acquire the DNA from the machine," Enai explained.

“What about the associate? You said only one associate...” declared the Captain.

“You see, all the machines will be in the same room. If we can accomplish that then we’ll only need one associate to bring the soldiers here. He will line them up in the hallway and when a machine is free he’ll escort a soldier there...” explained Enai.

“Then what?” asked the Captain.

“The associate will tell the volunteer operating the computer the soldier’s number and sex and then go and get the next soldier and take him to the next free machine,” replied Enai.

“What happens to the soldiers when they’re finished working on them?” asked the Captain.

“Before he introduces the next soldier, the associate will dismiss the first soldier and send him or her back to the barracks,” replied Enai.

“I think that will work...” said the Captain.

“This way the other associates will be free to do other jobs, like the automatic transmitter you asked us to build,” Enai said looking at me.

“We should make building the transmitter a priority. We don’t know what will happen to us; especially to Otsiron when the Commission arrives,” said the Captain looking at Enai.

“I think my associates have already started working on that project. I’ll go and tell them to hurry it up. I’ll see you later,” replied Enai and left the lab.

“We should go and see how your wife and daughter are doing... and inspect the reception area,” I said.

Both the Captain and Ukasnek agreed and we left the lab. On the way there we ran into the associate who’d gone looking for cameras. He told us that he’d already installed the camera in the reception

area, modified the database and everything was ready to go. He then left in a hurry, heading for the lab.

“Why did he add a camera to the reception computer?” asked the Captain.

“Because Enai probably told him to...” replied Ukasnek.

“It doesn’t hurt to have a picture of the people looking for their relatives? Does it?” I asked.

“I guess not. It’s better to have one than not to...” replied the Captain.

“There they are,” cried Ukasnek as he waved to Amih and Irevia.

When we arrived Amih introduced us to the two men standing by the machine, whose names my translator botched up. She told us they were ready to assist with the operation that could be started any time now. They even offered to take down contact details and enter them into our computer.

“That’s great,” Captain Orihci said and then looked at me. I looked like I had something to say.

“What now...?” he asked.

“Well, we need the skilled staff to operate the machines and we do intend to run them for as long as possible, day and night; nonstop if necessary right? Wouldn’t it make more sense to have volunteers enter data into the computers, while the skilled staff work in shifts?”

“Of course... We can do that,” replied one of operators. “Perhaps that’s what our supervisors were thinking when they sent us over. It takes one operator to run the machine and the machines were designed to run nonstop.”

Captain Orihci then turned to Amih and said, “Since you’re in charge of running this area, find your volunteers, work out your shifts as you see fit and get this operation going please... And by the

way, keep track of who is doing what and for how long. I intend to pay these people... The moment my appointment as Governor is confirmed I'll pay them... They deserve it... They need to eat too you know... See you later."

The moment Captain Orihci finished talking he turned around and headed for the exit. Ukasnek and I waved goodbye and followed.

We heard the operators say, "Thank you Governor Orihci, you're very kind..."

"I didn't mean them... But now I guess I have to pay them too..." the Captain said and laughed.

"I'm confused now," I said. "What do I call you, Captain Orihci, Governor Orihci, Captain Governor Orihci, Governor Captain Orihci, or just Orihci?"

After he laughed out loud he said, "If you weren't so big and if I didn't fear you would slap me back, I would have slapped you behind your neck so hard I'd have sent the snot flying out of your snout."

"Don't tempt him, he'd do it. When we were young he used to do that to me... for fun... Only he was the one having the fun..." said Ukasnek.

"You can call me whatever you want provided you find one more of those full bottles of rakia. And please, don't lie to me and tell me you don't have any. I know you do. You have some stashed inside your ship. Am I right...? For medicinal purposes only, of course," suggested the Captain, thought for a moment and continued. "For now you can call me Captain Orihci. I like the sound of that... It makes me feel like I'm still a Captain... of something."

"Then Captain Orihci it is..." I replied and added. "It looks like you're sliding nicely into your role as 'the boss'. You even dared to order your wife around..." I said jokingly.

“Well you know, I learn things from you... I do as you do... I fumble my way around, speak loudly and pretend I know what I’m doing,” the Captain replied and laughed out loud.

Then Ukasnek looked at me with a sad face and sarcastically said, “Oh, I’m so sorry...” Then he laughed and said, “No I’m not... I’m happy to sit here and not be the butt of his jokes for once. But I have to admit, you walked into that one all by yourself...”

“All joking aside, let’s go to the lab and get Enai and his associates going on the DNA collection...” the Captain said.

“After that let’s get something to eat,” Ukasnek suggested.

“After that we can go back to your ship and find some of the illusive rakia you’ve been hiding and resume our discussion from this morning. We should also invite Enai. I like him, he’s a good guy,” said the Captain.

“You think he’s a good guy because you know nothing about him... I’ll tell you things about him that will make your skin crawl, but later...” Ukasnek said just as we arrived at the lab.

Captain Orihci went inside by himself. Ukasnek and I stayed outside by the door. Moments later we heard a lot of cheering and yelling. When the Captain came back he said, “Yeah, I do like my new role as ‘the boss’. I never knew how happy people could get when you throw someone else’s money at them... Maybe I’ll turn into a politician some day after all...”

“I’m starting to like you even more...” said Ukasnek.

Even before I had a chance to ask him how it had gone in there, the Captain said, “I made them the same offer I made to those in the reception area and they gladly took it. Also, they are prepared to start the ‘DNA collection process’ immediately and will work shifts... God, money is such a great motivator... They’re also working on the transmitter you asked them to build and think they’ll have it working by tomorrow. They’ll need you to help them test it. I

also invited Enai to our get together on your ship. He'll be there later. Now let's go and eat."

As we walked towards the dining area the Captain seemed distracted. He moved his head to the side from time to time, like he was talking to someone.

"I never saw him bob his head like that before," I said jokingly to Ukasnek who was walking next to me behind the Captain.

"He does that when he's deep in thought."

"Making fun of me again are you?" asked the Captain.

"No Sir!" said Ukasnek... "Just stating the facts..."

In my attempt to gain entry into my ship the Captain couldn't help but tease me yet again about taking forever to open the hatch. This time he did it to get back at me for the remarks I'd made about him bobbing his head.

"I bet you I can open the hatch on my huge destroyer ten times faster than he can open the hatch on this dinky ship," he said to Ukasnek

"That joke is getting a bit old and stale..." I complained.

Ukasnek laughed and the Captain slapped him on his neck.

After we'd entered my ship and sat down, the Captain said, "Let Ukasnek look for the rakia. He's good at that... He's good at finding things fast..."

After Ukasnek got up to look I said, "No! I'll look for it myself. Ukasnek can get us some cups... Wash those on the floor... And get some food if you want a snack with your drink."

I walked over and opened the box with the green stuff the Captain had given us when we visited him on his island home and pulled out a bottle of rakia.

“What the hell?” he said and looked at me. “I didn’t give you any rakia, did I?” Then he smiled slyly and said, “Oh, I get it... You clever bastard, you hid the stuff where you thought I’d never look...”

After we had our laugh I handed the Captain the bottle.

Enai arrived about two hours later. The two were singing a pirate song in their native language. They were trying to teach it to me.

“Ah, you’re here...” I said.

But instead of answering me Enai began to sing along with them.

Surprised, the Captain stopped singing and said, “How’s that possible? No one but us locals speaks our language; never mind knowing that song!?”

“Your best friend, my co-conspirator and former business partner taught it to me. He said it was part of my initiation to becoming a pirate,” replied Enai.

“I guess there’s a lot I don’t know about you... but I’m glad you’re one of us...” said the Captain.

After we had one more drink, the first for Enai, the Captain reached into the box, pulled out another bottle, turned to me and said, “Earlier today when we were having our conversation you said, ‘I won’t allow them to railroad my friends into taking the rap...’ What exactly did you mean by that...? Start a war with the central government?”

“Yes, if those running your central government are that stupid, I will. If they’re like the clown they sent to investigate us... I will. But I don’t think they’re that stupid,” I replied.

“How so?” asked the Captain.

“For starters they have no warships or armies. If they do have armies then how will they get them here? We, on the other hand, have a million well-armed super soldiers and my ship. It’s no destroyer but it has a reputation... It did disable your best ship, didn’t it? And everyone, including you, knows it...” I replied.

“Yeah... You told me that yourself, remember? He outsmarted that shithead aristocrat Captain and sent him into retirement... Who can forget that?” said Ukasnek.

“I don’t know anything about this and I hope you’re not planning to go to war for my sake...” said Enai.

“We’re not going to war... I’d rather surrender than bring death and destruction to anyone. I don’t care about myself. I’m a soldier and prepared to die to save lives... But Otsiron here has a good point. They think he’s crazy...” said the Captain, looked at me, smiled and said, “cunningly crazy with all the power in the world. They also know my destroyer is here. And if they don’t know we’ll make sure they find out.”

“We’re getting ahead of ourselves,” I said. “They’re sending an investigative commission, not the military. They’ll depend on us to tell them what happened here. We will make sure they know all the facts before they write their report. Also included in those facts will be the power we wield here. We’ll make sure they write that down. We will make sure they know we have your ships, mine and the Captain’s under our control. Let’s not forget the fact that we also have the planet Ostikon behind us. I’m a member of the Ostikon war council. They don’t know what kind of power I wield...? Ostikon entrusted me with their most powerful ship. Surely I must wield a lot of power, right? The commission will only know what we tell them. All these things we’re talking about will have to enter their report but not sound like a threat. We’ll need to feed them this information indirectly... Make sure they understand all these things and write them down but not sound like threats.”

“And how are we going to do that?” asked Enai.

“Well, when you describe the current situation with the super soldiers you make sure you tell them that they are all under my control... They obey my every command... They do everything I tell them to do. It’s the truth; you won’t be lying to them. But you have to make sure the commission understands all that. Give them some examples. Tell them what happened when the governor tried to arrest me...” I replied.

“You mentioned my ship. You know I can’t make use of my ship without a properly trained crew, right? How am I going to convince them I have control of my ship?” asked Captain Orihci.

“Well, you don’t have to tell them you have control, all you have to tell them is that you’re preparing to fly your ship. You’re bringing back most of your old crew and recruiting locals to fill the entire supplement,” I replied.

“You’ve done this before haven’t you?” asked Captain Orihci.

“Done what?”

“Bluffed your way out of trouble.”

“Yes, all the time. Bluffing is part of my strategy... for keeping the opponent in check. Wars are won, not only by brute force but also by psychology and cunning. You have to know how your opponent thinks and how he’ll react to certain situations. You just tell him indirectly what you want him to know, while you play dumb.”

“What do I tell them?” asked Ukasnek.

“You don’t tell them anything. You stay clear of the commission. You have a long criminal record. There may still be warrants for your arrest. Don’t take risks, please...” stressed the Captain.

By now we’d drunk the second bottle of rakia and if we continued to talk we’d be opening a third bottle so I said, “I’m feeling kind of tired, I think we should take a break and rest for a while.”

“I agree,” Enai said and added. “I need to go back and see what my associates are doing with that transmitter and make sure they finish it before tomorrow.”

“I’d better go too before my wife and daughter come looking for me. They already think we’re overdoing it with the drinking,” the Captain said.

“I’ll go with the Captain. Good night,” Ukasnek said and they all left.

I decided to spend the night on my ship, so after I closed the hatch I went to bed.

I don’t remember what time I went to sleep but it seemed like moments later that I heard banging on the hull of my ship.

“Who the hell is banging in the middle of the night,” I yelled. When I opened my eyes I saw light. “It’s morning already?” I yelled and punched the hatch open button.

“What do you want?” I yelled.

One of Enai’s associates came in speaking in a language I didn’t understand.

He ran over to my chair, grabbed the translator box, punched the on button and handed it to me. “We ran into a snag with the transmitter and need your assistance immediately.”

“What kind of snag?” I asked while putting on my super soldier uniform. By now he had turned his back to me to give me some privacy, or he was grossed out by my bulky and ugly body.

“Well, everything works but the soldiers aren’t responding. We need to run some tests on you to see what you’re actually sending when you talk to the soldiers. And for that we need to hook you up to the receiver we have set up in the lab. We need to monitor and see what comes out of your brain.”

By the time he'd finished explaining we were in the lab and I was hooked up to a device.

“Now turn on your transmitter and say something to the soldiers.”

So, as per usual, I didn't bother to go through the commands and started out by thinking of one of my favourite Macedonian songs to which the soldiers were accustomed.

I heard the associate yell, “Holy shit! This can't be?” and called for the others to come and see.

“What's wrong?” I asked.

“Data overload...” he said. “I haven't seen anything like it before. It's like your brain opened up and spilled its entire contents. So much information... and in 3D.”

The others agreed.

“What does this mean?” I asked.

“We can't do it...” he replied and Enai shrugged his shoulders.

“What do you mean you can't do it? You need to do it! Find a way!” I yelled.

“Getting angry at us doesn't help,” Enai advised.

“I'm sorry my friends, I'm not angry at you... I'm just frustrated...”

“We all sat there scratching our heads when I asked, “Well, how did the big robot do it? Wasn't he just a computer?”

“No... I guess I never mentioned this to you. The big robot had a human brain that was connected to a computer, a chip and a transmitter. That's why we can't do this without a human brain... Besides, we don't have the knowledge or the tools to do it with... Nor do we want to do it even if we could...” replied Enai.

“What are you telling me then? I’m stuck here for life? I’ll never be able go home to earth or go back to Ostikon? That I will never see my friends in person again...?”

They all looked down and no one said a word.

After a deep sigh and a long pause I asked, “What if we copy what comes out of my brain, digitize it, copy it into the computer, recreate it and play it back through the chip and out the transmitter? Will that work?”

“Well, I don’t know. Let’s give it a try and see,” replied Enai. “What gave you that idea?”

“Well, when you watch something on a video screen can you tell if the message is live? No! You can’t really tell. It could have been prerecorded. So what if we prerecord what comes out of my brain and play it back for the soldiers later. Will that work? I’m sure it will, but do we have the technology to do it...? And by that I mean put the message through an analog to digital device, recode it in a computer and play it back through a digital to analog device.

“I know how that works...” Enai said and added. “We do have the technology but I’m not sure how long it will take to cycle the message one million times.”

“Let’s try it and see... What do we have to lose...?” I replied.

By the time I finished talking with Enai, the others had gathered all the equipment they needed to do the experiment and were ready to hook it up. It took them about half an hour to get it all working. In the meantime they had me invite Nine to the lab. When they were ready to test they shoved me in a metal cage and, before closing the metal door, asked me order Nine to sit down. When they opened the door Nine was still standing up.

“What happened?” I asked.

“It worked!” one of them cried, with excitement in his voice.

“No it didn’t!” I replied.

Enai came over and explained the entire process to me. “We had to place you in a metal box to see if the signal from your transmitter could be blocked and it was. Now we’ll give you a passive antenna, you know the kind that doesn’t have any powered devices in it and we’ll record the signals coming out of your brain through the transmitter resting on your head. But in order for the signal to be pure and clean, not contaminated by other signals or equipment interference, it has to be recorded in a clean environment. That’s why it needs to be done in isolation. That’s why we have to put you in this box.”

“Okay then, let’s do this.”

After they recorded my signal ordering Nine to sit down, they opened the cage door and asked me to turn off my transmitter. Then they played back the signal through the transmitter they were building and Nine obeyed. She sat down.

Everyone was happy that the experiment had worked.

A couple of hours later we finished recording all the necessary routine messages that would be needed to take care of the soldiers in my absence.

A few minutes later Enai, looking sober, gave me the news about the cycle time. “The shortest time for talking to one million soldiers will be six minutes and the longest seventeen minutes but we can slightly shorten those cycles by not transmitting to soldiers that don’t exist in our list.”

“Hey that’s great. Congratulations,” I said and asked if I could dismiss Nine.

Enai smiled, took a deep breath and said, “Yes, yes you can send Nine back. We don’t need her anymore...” He then paused for a moment, “Thank God you’re happy with the cycle time numbers. That worried me a bit.”

“I think stretching out the cycle time instead of sending the commands to all the soldiers at once will somewhat alleviate the bottlenecks, especially the long lines waiting to get through the doors or waiting to get on the exercise machines in the gymnasiums, etc. Also, there’s no need to shorten the cycle times. Leave them as they are. Start with number one, even though there is no soldier associated with that number and end with one million,” I replied.

“In that case, we’ll assemble the equipment and install it in a special booth on top of the facility. We’ll do it right now,” said Enai.

“No. Not above the facility! It won’t be safe there. A passing ship could blow it up. Place the equipment in a secure room inside the facility and put only the transmitting antenna on top. Make sure the antenna is easily replaceable in case it’s destroyed. And make sure you have spare antennas and backup equipment. Store everything in a separate secure room because you never know...” I said when I was interrupted by one of Enai’s associates calling him.

“Thanks for that... and sorry I have to go,” said Enai and left to join the others.

When I realized what time it was I went straight to the dining area to have some food but when I got there the place was closed. “Oh no, not again...” I mumbled to myself and asked. “Where is Ukasnek when you need him?” I decided to go to the reception area and found Ukasnek there. He’d saved a platter of food for me.

Hours later, while standing near the Machine in the reception area having a conversation with Captain Orihci, I suddenly heard a loud voice speaking to me in a language I didn’t understand, followed by a sudden flash of streaming images. They were so intense they made me lose consciousness and I fell to the ground. The flash of images was instantaneous but debilitating. When I regained consciousness I saw people all around looking at me, asking if I was okay. I tried but was unable to respond. Not knowing what to do, Captain Orihci sent Ukasnek to get Enai. I was still on the ground unable to move when Enai arrived.

“What happened?” he asked frantically. No one knew.

When Captain Orihci explained to him what had happened Enai asked him, “When exactly did it happen?” When the Captain gave him the exact time, Enai said, “It was that damned transmitter that did it. It happened the very moment we sent a message to all the super soldiers on our list... I should have known... His number was on the list. It shouldn’t have been there. I forgot to delete it.”

“So what happens now? Can you fix him?” asked the Captain.

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?” yelled the Captain.

There was a stir in the crowd that had gathered all around me.

“I’ve seen this before... with soldiers whose brain wasn’t completely erased. That’s why we had to erase many functions of their brains... To stop this from happening...” replied Enai.

“So, what will happen to him?” asked the Captain.

“According to our findings he’ll die. Right now he’s in a coma. We need to wake him up or he’ll die. But how? In the past we tried everything but nothing worked,” replied Enai.

“I know what to do,” said Ukasnek.

The Captain and Enai looked at each other.

“I’m out of options, let him do what he thinks will help. What do we have to lose?”

The Captain agreed and said, “Go ahead!”

“First, get everyone out of here because I don’t know what will happen.” After everyone was gone he reached into my uniform pocket, pulled out a vial of fire water and squeezed it into my mouth. About twenty seconds later I jumped up like a wild animal

after it had been tranquilized and given the antidote. Everyone stood back while I struggled to get up and regain my balance.

“What happened?” I asked. At that point everyone looking on from the distance came back yelling and cheering.

“Hey, you’re alive again. Welcome back from the dead. Now I have to declare you immortal...” said the Captain jokingly in a loud voice. He didn’t know that I could hear and see them and that only my body was paralyzed. The other soldiers in my situation probably died of thirst, starvation, or neglect. Enai’s diagnosis was wrong. I wasn’t in a coma, my body was completely paralyzed but my mind was still working. The fire water must have given me the necessary boost of energy to snap me out of my paralysis.

After Enai explained everything about what had happened to me, he asked for my soldier number so that he could remove it from the list.

“Whisper it to me. No one must know your number! Your number and what happened here must remain a secret. I’m going to take care of this right now,” and then he left.

While Enai was gone I asked one of his associates why this hadn’t happened to me earlier, when I heard my own voice... when I first made contact with the soldiers.

“You didn’t know how to fully use the power of your chip then. Also you hadn’t yet bonded with the super soldiers or developed the capability to send them images. It was the images that knocked you out. They were so fast and so intense that they sapped every gram of energy from your body. While your brain was trying to process them at the same time it was running every function in your body. In the beginning we didn’t think it was possible for a soldier to bond with another soldier... never mind one soldier with every soldier. We also thought it was impossible for a soldier to send images and memories to other soldiers like you do In fact, according to our analysis, you have way better contact with the soldiers than the big robot ever did. The soldiers are much happier now than they have ever been. We had no sickness and no odd behaviour. I know that because we regularly monitor their health. Also, since you’re the

only one with the capability of sending images and have turned off the ability to send information to yourself, we didn't think you were in danger..." he concluded, paused for a moment and continued. "Who am I kidding? There are so many things taking place and so fast, we cut corners. We simply forgot... But I'm happy that we didn't kill you."

When Enai came back, he, Captain Orihci and Ukasnek escorted me to my room in the facility and Enai gave me an injection.

"Sleep now and recuperate, you have a long day tomorrow. The people from Ostikon are coming to deliver the Machines and I want you to be in ship shape."

"Yes doctor!" I said jokingly, removed my uniform and went to bed.

A surprise visit

Sometime later I felt a small hand slapping my face gently and a voice saying, “Wake up, wake up. It’s your doctor ordering you to wake up.”

Suddenly, I grabbed the hand that was slapping me by the wrist and asked, “Where am I? What time is it? What are you doing here? Is there a problem?”

After I opened my eyes I said, “Oh, it’s you Enai, what can I do for you?”

“You can let go of my wrist. You’re breaking it!”

“Oh, I’m sorry...”

I looked around and saw Captain Orihci and Ukasnek looking at me.

“Good morning gentlemen, what brings you all here?”

“What morning? It’s mid-afternoon already...” replied Captain Orihci.

“You mean to tell me I slept through to the next day past noon? What did you give me Enai, a horse tranquilizer?”

“I don’t know what a horse is but I guess the dosage of the sedative I gave you was too strong. I’m sorry about that. I’m still experimenting with the dosage for soldiers.”

I jumped out of bed suddenly and said, “Shit! Did I miss the arrival of the ship from Ostikon?”

“Sir, please cover yourself...! You haven’t missed anything. I made a mistake with the date. I’m sorry about that too. The ship is arriving tomorrow, not today. When I realized that, I decided to let you sleep as long as you wanted so that you’d fully recuperate. But when I saw you weren’t getting up on your own, we came to see how you were doing.”

“In other words we came to see if you were dead or if Enai had killed you for sure this time...” Ukasnek said with a serious look on his face.

Captain Orihci broke into laughter. It was contagious and we all started laughing.

“That’s the best joke I’ve ever heard you tell...” the Captain told Ukasnek.

“Now get the hell out of my room,” I yelled, “so I can get dressed... Wait for me outside.”

When I stepped outside I said, “Shit! What about the soldiers... They must be going berserk by now?”

“Don’t worry about them. We put the system online yesterday and it works. They all think you’re alive and well, even if you aren’t,” explained Enai.

“I never knew you to be a joker Enai.”

“Because you don’t know him as well as you think,” said Ukasnek.

“Don’t you think I would have woken you if the device hadn’t worked? You know we would have been up to our eyebrows in shit if it didn’t,” replied Enai.

The Captain started laughing again and said, “It feels like we’re reaching a new low... we’re acting like teenagers... Let’s go and inspect the labs and see how things are going there.”

“I’m hungry, how about we eat something first?”

“We saved you plenty. It’s in the cooler in the lab,” replied Ukasnek.

While walking in silence to the lab, Captain Orihci broke out into laughter again.

“Okay, okay... It wasn’t that funny...” protested Ukasnek.

“Up to our eyebrows in shit... Try and picture that... One million soldiers each the size of a small hippo dumping all at once...” chuckled the Captain.

We all broke into laughter again.

“I wonder if those idiot associates of mine were dipping into the laughing gas again and forgot to turn it off. I never knew adults could laugh at silly things like that?” Enai muttered.

“I don’t see anyone else but us laughing out here?” I said, while still laughing.

“That’s because they haven’t heard my joke,” laughed Enai.

We stopped laughing when we arrived at the lab. The moment Enai’s associate, in charge of calling the soldiers, saw us he shook his head and said, “It’s so sad. According to their DNA every one of the soldiers I’ve called in is a local; mostly males, young men. Such a tragedy...”

We weren’t laughing anymore. We all felt a great sadness overcome us.

“What in God’s name are we going to tell the people...?” asked Captain Orihci. “Will they understand...? How many mothers are we going to upset when we tell them?”

He was probably thinking of his own wife.

“We’ll tell them the truth... exactly what happened... and that their sons and daughters are alive... That’s the most important part,” I replied as I thought of the anguish this would cause Amih because of her sons.

At that very moment Ireva entered the lab looking for her father.

“What’s wrong with all of you? You look like you’re at a funeral.”

Nobody wanted to speak.

When Ireva looked at Ukasnek he broke down and told her about the DNA discovery.

“Why are you so surprised?” Looking at me she said, “You’ve known this all along. You evacuated practically all the young men from Ostikon before they were turned into super soldiers and then you destroyed the rest when you bombed the facility. So naturally everyone who remained had to be a local or from the other Galaxy Trader planets that were raided by the robots. Practically every local who was abducted here was turned into a super soldier. You know that... your girlfriend Nine who is my cousin Jess is local, you know that right?”

“Yes, you’re right. There were no more than a few thousand locals who weren’t turned into super soldiers. When they were rescued some went home and many remained here. They are our helpers,” I replied.

“Now come with me and I’ll show you what we’ve done in the reception area...” ordered Ireva.

“You misunderstood us. We aren’t sad because the super soldiers are locals... We’re sad because of the pain we’ll bring to the relatives when we tell them their children are super soldiers... This includes your mother,” Captain Orihci said after a long silence.

“It will be no surprise to her. My mother already knows they were super soldiers. The question for her is, ‘are they alive or dead?’ You’re forgetting many were killed during the initial attack when the big robot was destroyed.”

“How do you know all this?” I asked.

“I’ve been asking questions and doing my own investigation. I ask questions and people tell me their stories. Now be quiet and smile,

my mother is looking at us. There's no point in bringing her down too... with your nonsense.”

Amih was excited to tell us that they'd started taking DNA, pictures and contact information.

“All the people who made inquiries were locals and they all volunteered to help here or in the fields. Ireva started conducting interviews to get the people's stories. Some have been here since before the facility was built and some even helped to build it. It was Ireva's idea to collect their stories. One thing you didn't ask us to do is prepare a clinic and a jail. We found space for both but we have no doctors or policemen.”

Somewhat surprised, Captain Orihci looked around and said, “Ukasnek, I appoint you police commissioner. You're now responsible for law and order in the facility. I'll ask Enai to find us a doctor or two.”

“I don't know anything about the law and besides I'm a criminal, you said it yourself...”

Captain Orihci interrupted him and explained, “You're all I have and I trust you to make the right call when it comes to crime. Use your common sense... Now go and find some volunteers to help you...”

After that Ireva took us on a tour of the accommodations area and we met some of the people she'd interviewed. We heard the problems they were facing, which gave us a better perspective of what life was like in the facility for the civilians and those working the fields. Captain Orihci appointed Ireva as the official investigator.

“Congratulations my dear, from now on you are our official investigative journalist and student of history. And you will be paid...”

We all felt like laughing but no one dared. Not only because we feared Ireva's wrath but also because Captain Orihci was serious.

We spent the rest of the day roaming the facility and talking to people.

The next day I woke up early in the morning and went straight to the communications tower. There was a written message for me which, of course, I couldn't read so I handed it back to the person who had given it to me and asked him to read it.

He gave me a strange look and read it out loud, "We've been contacted by the Ostikon ship. It will arrive early this morning..."

"What time?"

He said he didn't know but it could be anytime now.

"Call them back and find out."

Moments later he said the ship would arrive in approximately a half hour.

I quickly went to the lab and found Enai there.

"Enai don't you ever sleep?"

"Not well. What can I do for you?"

I told him I was going outside to welcome the ship coming from Ostikon that was due to arrive in less than half an hour.

"Going alone? Ah, that might not be a good idea... I don't think you are the best person to welcome them."

"Why not? They know me..."

"Look at yourself... The best person would be Irevva. She's been to their planet and knows a bit more about their culture and protocol, and she also speaks their language..."

“Okay then, go get her and Captain Orihci and meet me outside... Also bring some help to carry the machines back here,” I said and left.

About fifteen minutes later Captain Orihci, Ireva, Ukasnek, Enai, Amih and about ten others showed up.

I was about to jokingly ask how was it possible to wake that many people so quickly and have them ready, especially the women, in such a short time. But I decided not to when I realized they must have already been awake and prepared for this. Ireva and Amih were looking spiffy and Captain Orihci was wearing his military uniform.

“Wow!” I said, “Are we expecting royalty to arrive?”

“It was Ireva’s idea...” replied the Captain.

“I know a bit about their habits. They respect well dressed people.”

“Why are you all standing there looking so nervous?” I asked.

Only Ireva answered.

“I’ll get to speak their language again and perhaps... I’m hoping that Velika and Dafina might be there. You never know?”

For the next ten minutes or so we watched Ireva pace back and forth, biting her thumbnail and mumbling in a language no one there understood.

“She’s probably practicing her welcoming speech,” Amih said, trying to explain her odd behaviour.

“She must love and respect those people. I’ve never seen her so nervous before,” the Captain commented.

“That’s my girl... I’m proud of her...” said Ukasnek.

“There they are!” someone yelled.

They'd appeared from behind us. We were looking in the wrong direction. Ireva raised both arms, made some arm motions and pointed in front of where we were standing.

"Those are Ostikon hand signals. How does she know them?" I asked.

"They're our signals too. I taught them to her. She used to help me land my ship in tight places. She's a pilot too you know... unofficially," Ukasnek said proudly.

I looked at the ship very carefully and if it wasn't for the Macedonian star painted on its underside, I would have said this wasn't an Ostikon ship. It must be a new model. They'd been working on building a new fleet since before Princess Vieria died. She'd wanted to revamp the military.

After the ship landed and turned off its engines we all dashed towards the ship's rear and watched a large hatch open and turn into a ramp. Two middle aged women, dressed in white military uniforms with Macedonian symbols on them, stepped outside. Ireva spoke to them in the Ostikon language and they responded. Then six young women and six young men side by side in pairs, dressed in the same kind of uniform, stepped outside and waved at the small crowd gathering behind us. Following them were two older men also dressed in military uniforms. One of them said something to the two women standing at the bottom of the ramp and they followed the others, who were being escorted by Ireva and her mother past the cheering crowd and into the facility. The two older men stayed behind. The one who spoke kept looking into the crowd. I was curious to know what he was looking for so I went closer. I instantly recognized them. It was Delche and Ori.

"Delche, Ori," I yelled in Macedonian.

"Otsiron is that you? I can hear you but I can't see you anywhere. Where are you?" Delche yelled as Ori stepped forward to look for me.

“The big guy in front of you wearing black...” I said and grabbed Delche’s arm.

“What the hell?” he yelled and tried to free himself.

“Look at his face...” said Ori in Macedonian.

“What have you done to yourself,” yelled Delche, looking horrified.

“I did what I had to do. This is the price I paid for ending the war and freeing your people,” I said and gave him a big hug. I could see tears running down Delche’s cheeks. Then I went and hugged Ori who was already tearing up.

“It’s nice to see you guys... What the hell are you doing here?”

At this point the two women, Delche had asked to go with the others, came back. The first one gave me a snarky look; like I was some kind of beast.

“Have some respect... This is Otsiron. He sacrificed himself to save your asses and you look at him like he’s some kind of beast? Besides he’s still your boss...” said Delche and Ori translated for me.

The women instantly smiled and saluted.

“What do you want? I told you to go inside. What are you doing back here?” Delche asked them and Ori again translated.

“We need to go back immediately. Those are our orders, so please open the crate and unload the machines,” the woman with the snarky look explained.

I assumed that she was the Captain.

“I told you before and I’m telling you again, we can’t open the crate before it’s inspected by the Galaxy Trader Customs Authority,” Delche barked and told me in Macedonian that he wanted to get rid

of them because, in addition to the machines, he was transporting rakia which was illegal to transport on an Ostikon ship.

Suddenly Captain Orihci came to the front, stuck his arm out and said loudly, "I'm the customs agent you're looking for."

My universal translator translated that into Macedonian, which both Delche and Ori understood. Ori translated for the two women.

Delche was so surprised that he was speechless. After a moment of silence, while looking at the speaking box, he asked, "What the hell is that?"

"A universal translator," replied Captain Orihci. "I can't inspect the crate here. So why don't we remove it from the ship and take it inside the facility. I'll inspect it in there. Let the ladies go."

He told Ori to translate for the ladies and thank them for their service and wish them a safe trip back.

After that I called my friend Nine and a couple of other super soldiers and we pushed the crate out of the ship, down the ramp and placed it on the grass. The moment the crate was out of the ship the two women closed the hatch and took off without saying goodbye.

"I hate their superior attitude..." said Delche, and Ori agreed.

"Now that they're gone why don't you introduce us to all these bright faces looking at us," said Delche.

"I don't know any of the people back there; they're spectators. They work in the facility and came out to welcome you. But these guys here to my right are Enai's associates and this is Enai. He's our chief scientist, cook and bottle washer."

Enai looked confused.

Delche stepped in and said, "This guy, always with the jokes, even in the company of strangers."

“It’s nice to meet you Enai, and your associates.”

“It’s nice to meet you too,” Enai said smiling.

Then I turned to my left, pointed to Ukasnek and said, “This is Ukasnek, the best and most clever pirate I know and, as of yesterday, our police commissioner.”

Ukasnek must have liked what I said about him because he had a huge smile on his face.

“At your service,” he said and bowed.

Before introducing Captain Orihci, I asked Ukasnek to disburse the crowd and send the people back in.

Finally I got to Captain Orihci and said, “This man is not only our customs agent, he’s the Governor of this planet and your old rakia partner Captain Orihci; Captain of the Galaxy Trader 2nd Destroyer.”

When Delche heard that he lunged forward, grabbed the Captain, raised him off his feet Macedonian style and gave him a big hug. Delche then introduced Ori and told the Captain that they were my old crew who’d flown the ship parked behind us.

“This is really you, ‘the rakia king’, my old partner...” asked the Captain looking like he was at a loss for words.

“Are you going to be here long?” I asked Delche and Ori.

Delche looked at me as if I was joking.

“You just saw our ship leave. We’re stranded here for as long as you can tolerate us,” Ori said.

“Okay then, let’s unpack the crate and get the machines inside. Enai and his associates are waiting. They have a lot of work to do.”

“No, no one touches the crate. I’ll have to unpack it myself. There are fragile things in there that are very important. I’m the only who

knows where they are,” said Delche, walked over to the crate and started cutting the straps holding it together. “I sealed each box myself and labeled it ‘inspected’. After I packed the crate inside the ship, during the night mind you, I bribed a custom’s official to seal it and inform the authorities to let us fly it here.”

“Will you need the super soldiers to carry the boxes or should I dismiss them?”

“Dismiss them... And you come over here and help me sort the boxes.”

“Did the customs guy in Ostikon know you were shipping rakia?” I asked.

“Hell no! I told him it was to expedite the inspection because we were in a hurry to leave. You know how it is? If you want something done quickly you have to bribe somebody. If I told him I was carrying rakia I’d be in jail now. The rules have changed since you left... They’re stricter now...” replied Delche.

“The authorities know very well what you do, right? How did you convince them to let you come here?” I asked.

“They had no choice. No one could do the calculation for the hyperdrive jump fast enough to meet the deadline... and I refused to tell them because I never did any calculations! So what was I going to tell them? That I fudged them and took a chance? That we could have flown into a planet? So they either took me or took weeks to do the calculation... which was unacceptable to the government. And if they were late delivering the promised machines Asora told them Otsiron might fly back looking for them,” replied Delche.

“Are they afraid of you? I thought you were their ally and protector,” said Captain Orihci.

“He is... to some but not all. It’s a mess back there. I’ll tell you about it later, it’s a long story,” interjected Delche as he began to unpack the big boxes and remove the smaller boxes resting inside on top. “These boxes on top are the machines. The rakia is packed in

the bottom boxes in breakable glass bottles. I took the bottles directly from my shelves. You know the ones in my restaurant's basement? I didn't have time to pour them into unbreakable bottles. I brought you ten machines and two boxes of the parts you'll need to maintain the machines, as well as the correct vials for collecting blood. These fit directly into our machines. Those boxes over there, you can start taking them in. They hold the machines. They're light so your guys can take one each."

"Ten machines? They told us they could only give us five for now."

"And you're lucky you got them. After Asora promised the machines to you she went to parliament to ratify the order. But instead of getting a rubber stamp she got opposition. Some parliamentarians wanted a debate... which could have taken weeks... When I found that out I figured you'd never get your machines this way, so I put the word out that I was looking for five DNA testing machines. They arrived on my doorstep over night. You don't want to know how I got them... I didn't want to know how they got there... But I got them..." replied Delche.

"My kind of people... Ask and you shall receive..." said Ukasnek.

"What about the other five?" I asked.

"Well, Asora had to pull her 'Otsiron' card on them. She said if those machines didn't arrive at their destination on time you'd come looking for them. That motivated them to forego the debate and release the machines," replied Delche.

After Enai's associates took the machines to the facility Delche looked around and asked, "Is rakia legal here?"

I guess so," said Captain Orihci. "Most people, including the authorities, don't know what it is. If anyone asks we can tell them its machine cleaner and sterilizer... And we wouldn't be lying to them."

"Where can we store it?" asked Delche.

“Let’s put it in my ship for now. We’ll stack it so it can fit.”

“No, no stacking and not in your ship! I don’t want to destroy your electronics if there’s an accident; if a bottle breaks,” replied Delche.

“What accident? The ship is stationary and will remain so!”

“Yeah but what if a passing ship, let’s say a drunk pilot, flies by and decides to take a shot at your ship because he thinks its ugly?” replied Delche.

Everyone cracked up laughing.

“I have a secure place in the facility where I keep valuable things. There is plenty of space to put them there. All the boxes can be placed on the floor... Are the boxes heavy and can we carry them?” asked Enai.

“Yes, they’re heavy. Each contains 16 one litre bottles. This was another reason why I had to pack the boxes inside the ship. They were difficult to lift full. I don’t think we can carry them from here to the facility...” explained Delche.

“I’ll get some soldiers to help us. If I can carry a box so can they,” I said.

“You’ve got to tell us how you got to be like this,” said Ori.

“Like what, big, strong and ugly? I’ll tell you in good time my friend,” I replied and ordered twelve super soldiers to come over and carry the boxes.

When we were finished I dismissed them and we all left and headed for the labs.

“It must be nice to be in charge of an army. How many soldiers do you have?” asked Ori.

“You mean the super soldiers? We have about a million of them,” I replied.

Ori suddenly stopped walking.

“One million of them, where do you keep them all?!” Not in this small place...?”

“This facility is bigger than a city. It’s all underground. It has everything you can think of... I’ll tell you more about it later,” replied Enai as we entered the lab.

The machines weren’t there. Enai’s assistant told us to go to an adjacent lab, a bigger one. When we arrived there we saw the machine operators in their nice white uniforms, with the Macedonian symbols on them, talking to Enai’s associates without a universal translator.

“What the...” I asked Enai. “Do your associates speak the Ostikon language too?”

“No, they’re speaking the Galaxy Trader language.

Ori then interjected and said, “The young operators who were recruited for this mission were medical students who had just graduated. They were all proficient in the Galaxy Trader language even before the war started. They were looking for work when we recruited them. When word came down from the government that they were looking for people with technical DNA machine operating skills, able to speak the Galaxy Trader language, we received over one hundred and fifty applications. To expedite the hiring process Delche used a lottery to recruit those twelve.”

“Why twelve... and not just ten, one per machine?” I asked.

“That’s how many empty chairs we had available on the ship. Why not twelve, I thought... They could all use the experience...” replied Delche.

“How did you get to come here?” I asked Ori.

After pointing at Delche he said, “I wanted to... I wanted to do something... something important with my life. I begged Delche to take me. I was there, at his place, visiting his daughter Airam when we found out you were looking for DNA testing machines. They didn’t tell us much other than DNA testing machines...? What was that all about? I insisted that Delche take me with him.”

“There was no way I could take him. He didn’t have any of the required qualifications. There would have been an uproar from those qualified. So I lied. I told the authorities you had asked for a translator to communicate with the DNA machine operators. It made sense, right? They said no because it would take too long to recruit one. So I recommended Ori, your former communications officer. I told them he was available and willing to go on short notice. The bureaucrat got frustrated with me and said, ‘Do what you want!’ So I took him with me,” replied Delche and looked at the young woman coming towards us. It was Ireva.

Ireva looked at him and asked, “Can I help you Sir?” in the Ostikon language.

“I know you!” cried Delche, looking surprised.

“No you don’t!” replied Ireva in an irritated tone of voice.

“You’re from Ostikon aren’t you...? I met you at the languages academy when I recruited Velika and Dafina for Otsi’s crew. I couldn’t take my eyes off you... Your beautiful green eyes... Your blonde hair... Your tall, slim figure...”

I interrupted Delche and said, “This is Captain Orihci’s daughter. Her name is Ireva.”

It seemed she either didn’t remember Delche, or Delche had said or done something to her in the past. Something she didn’t like.

Delche understood why I’d interrupted him and said, “Nice to meet you Ireva, perhaps I was mistaken about seeing you on Ostikon. It must have been another woman.”

Captain Orihei suspected that there had been something between these two but didn't say anything.

Our attention was drawn to the raised voices in the communication between Enai's associates and the Ostikon machine operators. We went over to see what was happening.

Enai asked them what the ruckus was all about.

One of his associates said, "We're having difficulty integrating their machines with our computers. Each group is blaming the other for the problems. The data formats and communications protocols are different and we aren't able to match them."

"Of course you aren't able to match them. They come from two different worlds. They are like us, the people, we speak our language and they speak theirs... They are different languages... and we can't understand each other. But you see this?" Enai pointed at my universal translator. "We built these things to translate for us so we could understand one another. You need to build a protocol converter... just like the universal translator... Connect the machines to the computers through it... Now, instead of arguing go and build one..." He then turned around to face us and in a quiet voice said, "The more brilliant they are the less common sense they have."

"It must be a universal thing..." Delche said laughing.

"You might as well go... get our guests settled. This will take a while. I'll call you if I need you. And Irevva, you make sure Delche and Ori each get a universal translator," Enai ordered and left to join his associates.

"Okay Enai, I'll take care of things..." replied Irevva and waved for us to follow her.

On our way to the reception area Irevva said, "I can give you a Galaxy Trader to Ostikon translator or Galaxy Trader to Macedonian translator. Which would you prefer?"

“Since they both speak Macedonian, give them the Galaxy Trader to Macedonian translator so we don’t exclude Otsi here,” pointing at me, “from our conversations. Is that okay...?” Captain Orihci suggested.

Both Delche and Ori laughed and shook their heads. “Galaxy Trader to Macedonian is fine,” replied Delche.

“Thank you Captain Orihci...” I said and also laughed.

By now we were in the reception area and after Ireva introduced our two guests to her mother she left to look for the translators.

“This is my wife Amih,” said the Captain. After introducing Ori he introduced Delche as his former partner in the rakia trade.

“Nice to meet you,” she said, “and to finally meet you in person, Delche... We’ve heard so much about you from the Captain. You’re a legend in our community. You are known as the ‘king of rakia’ but none of us had met you or knew your real name...”

“That’s how pirates operate... It’s best not to know your partner’s name. That way if you get caught you can’t betray them, even if you want to,” interrupted Ukasnek.

Moments later Ireva came back, gave Ori and Delche their universal translators and said, “Get your luggage and follow these two young ladies. They’ll take you to your quarters.”

Ori and Delche looked at each other and asked, “What luggage? We didn’t bring any luggage...”

“Not to worry, we’ll provide you with whatever you need. As for clothing, you have a choice; military or maintenance uniforms... Your white uniforms will get dirty in no time, especially if you drink too much and roll in the grass and dirt like these guys here...” replied Ireva in a sarcastic tone of voice.

Her tone and comment irritated her parents and both were about to scold her but Delche interjected and said, “You mean to tell me you have rakia here...? We didn’t bring any.”

“Look, I come from a pirate family and know all the tricks... I know you brought some! Why else would you get rid of everyone before you opened the crate? You didn’t want them to see it... or ask questions... I’ll bet you half of that load was rakia. Am I right?” replied Ieva.

“Wow! You’ve got me there...” said Delche.

“That’s my girl! I taught her everything she knows...” yelled Ukasnek proudly.

“Well then...” said Delche, “what will it take to buy your silence?”

“Share the rakia with all of us!” she said which sent everyone, including herself, into loud laughter.

“I think we’ll be okay...” said Captain Orihci.

Ukasnek agreed.

The Captain then spoke to the two young ladies standing beside Ieva. “Please take our guests to their rooms, let them rest and at noon bring them back to the dining area for lunch.”

Getting reacquainted

Captain Orihei, Ukasnek and I were sitting in silence at our usual table in the dining area. Looking tired, we watched the facility workers walk in, eat their lunch and go back to work. We were waiting for Delche and Ori to arrive. Strangely, we felt a bit nervous but had no desire to have a drink. We each had many questions for our guests and many stories of our own to tell them.

To their credit these people here, and probably on the entire planet Nelez, were punctual or had a very good reason for being late. So we expected the young ladies to deliver our guests on time and they did.

The three of us at the table suddenly jumped to our feet and had great big smiles when we saw them coming.

“Here we are...” said one of the young ladies, with a smile on her face as they started to walk away. The Captain thanked the ladies for their help and they left.

Delche spoke first. “Ireva wasn’t kidding about the uniforms. I wanted a military uniform so I could look like you but there wasn’t one that fit me,” he laughed pointing at me. “I’m kidding... Ori convinced me to go with the maintenance uniforms so we could blend in...”

“I did no do such thing!” replied Ori smiling.

“I have a million questions to ask you but I can’t think of one right now, so let’s sit down first and we’ll go from here,” I said.

“Us too, we have many questions for you,” said Delche.

“I don’t know about you guys but I’m hungry. I think we should eat first,” Ukasnek said and led us to the food line.

As we chose our food Delche said, “I’m impressed with the great selection of food you have here. And it all looks so fresh! The only

thing you're missing is the servers; people to deliver it to you at your table."

"We have places like that here too where you can sit, relax and spend a long time eating. But the people here, the workers, are in a hurry and can't wait to be served. Besides this way you get to choose what to take... what you want and as much as you want; just look at Ukasnek's tray..." replied the Captain laughing.

"Is this all free?" asked Ori.

"Yes, it's a worker's benefit. But under the current situation it has been offered to everyone who comes here. This is a rich agricultural planet and we have plenty of food. All of it is locally grown," explained the Captain.

Just as we sat down Enai showed up, rushing as usual and went straight to the food line. When he had his food he sat beside me and apologized for being late.

"I'm sorry I'm late... Actually I shouldn't even be here... but it would have been impolite to our guests if I didn't come... I have some good news... We built a prototype protocol converter and are able to access the Ostikon machines from our computers... That's the good news... The difficulty now is converting the data so that our computers can recognize it... This may take weeks, months, or even more..."

As we all sat there looking stunned Ori spoke up and said, "Perhaps there is a way... But we'll have to talk to your technical people..."

"I'm a technical person. I know a bit about almost everything here..." replied Enai.

"How much do you know about your DNA machines?"

"Practically nothing."

"Is there someone who does?"

“None of my associates... or anybody else from this facility... that I know of...”

“What about those operating the machines...? They must know something?”

“Oh, yeah... I forgot about them... They’re not from this planet.”

“Can we speak to them? As soon as possible... If they’re familiar with how your machine analyzes the DNA we can do something with the data conversion. I have some ideas...”

“I don’t know about that. Half of them are operating the machines and the other half are sleeping. I don’t want to impose on them...” replied Enai.

“I’ll tell you what. Let’s finish eating and we’ll all go to the lab and talk to the operators, the ones on duty, and see what they say. If even one of them says yes then we’ll take it from there. If they say no... then we’ll look for alternatives...” said Captain Orihci.

We were all curious to know what Ori had in mind, especially Enai, who said that if this worked it would be a historic moment for Nelez and Ostikon. We could claim we were the first “scientists” to marry the two technologies. So our lunch turned into a race to see who would finish first. Almost all of them bet on me, except for Captain Orihci who bet on Ukasnek, who actually won even though he had more food on his tray than anyone else. Captain Orihci called it the “eat and run syndrome”, common among the pirates. Enai finished eating last. That was expected since he’d arrived last.

The first operator we spoke to said, “I know some things about the machines and if I don’t I have a manual where I can look it up. What kind of things are you looking for?”

The operator didn’t understand what Ori was asking, perhaps the meaning was lost in the translation or the translator didn’t have the appropriate terminology in Macedonian... So Enai stepped in and explained.

“We need to convert the DNA data coming out of the Ostikon machines to look like the data coming out of our machines so we can process it in our computers.”

“No problem,” said the operator as he opened a door on his machine and pulled out a manual, flipped some pages and found the table he was looking for and handed it to Enai.

Enai showed it to Ori who said, “Now let’s go and see our people, the operators from Ostikon and ask them the same question.”

The big lab was two doors away and we were there in seconds. The first person we asked also handed us a manual with a similar table.

“Yes this is the manual. The table explains the various elements of the DNA strand and shows the letters and numbers the machine generates to represent the various elements in the strand,” said the operator.

“Now if we can only match our numbers and letters to the Galaxy Trader symbols,” Ori said.

Again we began looking glum, like we were lost.

A young lady, an operator from Ostikon, who happened to be eavesdropping on our dilemma came over and said, “I can help you with that. I happened to be looking at the same table earlier and the key to matching their symbols to our letters and numbers is through the description of the strands. I can do that for you...”

Not wasting any time Enai said, “Thank you, you’re a godsend. Now come with me...” and off they went in a rush to the research lab.

“I picked her,” Delche announced proudly.

“No you didn’t,” Ori grumbled. “You only picked a number from the lottery which happened to be hers.”

“Now that we’ve solved that problem, let’s go back to the dining area and resume our lunch. I’m still hungry. Let’s have a drink to properly welcome our new friends from Ostikon,” said Captain Orihci.

No one objected.

To our surprise the Captain pulled out a large glass bottle from his trench coat and put it on the table. We were all shocked.

“What the hell? Where did you get that?” I asked.

“Enai must have given it to him. But when? I was with him all the time,” said Ukasnek.

“Nope! I got it myself. I stole it right in front of your eyes when you were moving it to the secure place. In fact I took it out of the box Nine was carrying and hid it in my coat.”

“You’ve still got it boss, even I didn’t see you...” Ukasnek declared.

“We would have been great partners, you and I,” the Captain said to Delche, “and would have built a rakia empire. I was even planning to induct my daughter Ireva into the business. That’s why I sent her to Ostikon to learn your language. But that damned war ruined everything.”

“I taught her how to fly and navigate. She would have made a great pilot. I also taught her everything I know about pirating and our old traditions. She was a top student in the academy, just like her father. She graduated with honours. After that I enrolled her in the military academy. She was very ambitious and wanted to become a Captain... before she turned forty. She would have been the youngest Captain ever... and she would have made it, except for this damned war,” Ukasnek added.

“But how, she looks like a child, she couldn’t be more than twenty...” Delche exclaimed.

“She must be over forty by now, about ten years older than me and perhaps older than you Delche,” I replied.

Delche shook his head, looked at Captain Orihci who looked older than all of us and said, “If she’s your daughter I don’t want to know your age...”

At that point Ireva walked into the dining area and we all turned to look. Without looking at us she went straight for the food line and said, “Talking about me... again...?”

We all cracked up laughing.

“I knew it...!”

Her father spoke up, “We were saying good things about you dear... How gorgeous you look in your work uniform...”

“That’s just it. You like things about me that are gorgeous. Traits that have become impediments for me... My green eyes... My blonde hair... My youthful looks... I’ll bet those were the same type of qualities you looked for in Mom. That’s why you married her... right? I like to be noticed for my accomplishments, not my looks. No one except Ukasnek here ever said anything to me about how smart I am, how good an organizer I am... how good a leader I am... how good a pilot I am... You wanted me to be your business partner and even sent me to Ostikon to learn the Ostikon language but never once did you speak to me seriously and ask me what I wanted to do!”

We all sat there in silence. It felt like a ticking time bomb was about to go off. No one dared speak. As we stared at her in horror she must have realized what she’d said and how inappropriate it was. Her father was a respected leader and accomplished member of this community and he didn’t deserve words like that from her.

She felt awkward and it was visible.

“Speak up my dear, let it all out, you are among friends here...” said Ukasnek.

“What you have Irevia is not an impediment but an asset which can open doors for you everywhere. You have qualities that any woman would kill to have. You have them but you don’t know how to use them. You opened the door for me to say this and if you don’t like it, you only have yourself to blame. Basically I think you’re spoiled and your attitude stinks. You want men who don’t know you to like you, not for your good looks but for your brain... Well my dear, I’ve been to three different worlds and I know it doesn’t work like that. You are a strong character, gutsy and smart but all you do is denigrate and piss people off. Look what you just did to your father... to Delche... What did Delche ever do to you? You are being rude to my friends for complimenting you on how good you look. What’s wrong with that? You were rude to me too... many times. Why don’t you just sit here beside me and be like a big sister to me...?” I asked.

Everyone was cringing and waiting for an explosion. But there was no explosion. She put her food down on the table and sat down beside me like I asked. She wanted to cry but Ukasnek, sitting on the other side of the table opposite her, gave her a stern look so she didn’t cry.

Her father spoke next and instead of saying the usual crap and apologizing to her for not being there for her while she was growing up when she needed him, etc. etc., he said, “From now on I want you to join this group, sit with us and participate in our discussions, our jokes, our drinking bouts and everything else we do...”

Everyone broke into laughter. At this point Captain Orihci opened the bottle of rakia and Ukasnek brought us glasses.

“To my daughter who just grew up...”

“To your daughter...” the rest of us echoed.

The Captain then looked at Irevia and said, “Just think about what the big fellow beside you said and you’re forgiven... Now enough of this, let’s get on with the business at hand. Who wants to go first?”

“I do,” said Ireva. “I first want to apologize to everyone for my behaviour... These are trying times for me... and I realize that I haven’t proven myself, especially to my father. But I will do whatever it takes... And thank you all for allowing me to be part of this group.”

Everyone shook their heads accepting Ireva’s apology. Ukansek smiled widely.

“I thought we should use the rest of the afternoon to tour the facility; show our guests how to get around and where things are. And tomorrow, after they’ve had a good night’s rest, we can take them out with the soldiers on their long march and show them what we do here. One thing I want to remind everyone of is the visit from the inquiry commission. We should be getting news of its arrival any day now,” said the Captain.

“What’s that all about?” asked Delche.

“From what the Galaxy Trader central government told me they’ll be looking to get to the bottom of how and why the war was started, who was involved, who were its architects, what effects it had on the population and the damage it caused. But I don’t trust the government because I believe there is a possibility that our government was somehow involved in this mess. Also, since you Delche and Ori are representatives of Ostikon, a major contributor of soldiers to this war, you’ll be asked questions too... about Ostikon’s involvement... For example, they’ll want to know what the Ostikon government knew about the war. Please be careful what you say... And please don’t play dumb or lie. You don’t know what they already know...” replied the Captain.

“Are we and the machine operators from Ostikon in any danger of being arrested?” asked Ori.

“I don’t think so. Like Otsi said earlier, the commission’s goal is to investigate the situation and see if there are grounds for charges and prosecution. So we should all be safe for now... But please be careful what you say,” warned the Captain.

“I’ll tell you what. I’ll take our guests and show them around. You stay here and finish your drinks. If they’re going to look around they don’t need you to distract them,” Ireva said and waved for Ori and Delche to follow her.

“I’m glad she decided to accept my offer to join us. That way I can be with her and keep an eye on her. Let her spread her wings a little. She has been a big weight on my shoulders. I had no idea what to do with her...”

“It’ll be awkward for a while... for all of us...” I said.

“We’ll have to adjust... My dear friend, she’s never been a burden for me,” said Ukasnek.

After we polished off the entire bottle of rakia, which seemed like a lot but divided among that many people wasn’t, we went to see Enai in the research lab.

“This young lady here is a godsend. I think I’ll keep her in the lab. She helped us map all the DNA components and we are this close to building a translation table. Imagine what that’ll mean for us. This lab will make history.”

“It’s well-known in my world that wars tend to accelerate technological developments and open up new possibilities for people. Keep up the great work, Enai...” I said and we turned around and left.

“Where to now?” asked Ukasnek.

“You know something, if you don’t mind I think I’ll go... get some rest... This thing with my daughter has exhausted me.”

“I’ll go too... Look into the jail business that Amih asked me about.”

“I’ll be in my ship if anyone is looking for me. I need to do some cleaning. I’m sure Delche and Ori will want to see it soon. And by

the way Ukasnek, how good are you at getting supplies? I need some for my ship? I need water for sure and some food in sealed containers to last several days... You never know... I may take the boys on a ride around the planet... for old time sake. But you know I can't pay you. I have no money."

"No problem, I'll look into it..."

The ship was a mess. I was tired and too lazy to do the job myself so I activated the general maintenance robot and let it have a go at cleaning the ship as part of its preventive maintenance procedure. In the meantime I sat in my Captain's chair, reclined it as far back as it would go and watched the robot work.

Suddenly I was startled by a hard knock on the hull coming from outside. The hatch was closed. I had closed it to keep the maintenance robot in, in case it decided to escape. I'm just kidding, if the robot wanted to escape all it had to do was push the green button and open the hatch. There was another hard knock. I looked around. The robot wasn't there. I must have fallen asleep. The ship was spotless and the robot had gone back into its dock. I got out of my chair and hit the green button. The hatch started to open.

I heard Delche's voice, "We know you're in there... they told us you were here. What, you have a woman in there?"

"Come on in," I yelled.

"Wow! You've kept the place clean... How did you manage that?"

"I have servants..."

"Get out of here..."

"He probably activated his maintenance robots," said Ori.

"He has robots that clean his mess...?"

"Ah, never mind..." said Ori.

“Why are you guys back so soon? You’re supposed to be on a tour with Irevia.”

“Boy, can that woman talk. We’ve had enough of her for one day. In four hours she managed to tell us the entire planet’s history, including your so-called adventures and how you got to be such a big and ugly guy... Do you have any rakia in here or do I have to go and beg Enai to give me a bottle... I see the box I gave you is still tied where I left it...” Delche opened the lid and found the box empty. He was about to say something but I preempted him.

“Look in the other box.”

“There’s only green stuff here...”

“Keep looking!”

“Ah, here’s one. Now get us some glasses.”

As I got three glasses I said, “I’ve been meaning to ask you, what happened in Ostikon after I left... the second time?”

“Well, after our soldiers came back many were treated for injuries, dehydration, malnutrition and other illnesses. When they recovered they were sent home. Soon after that the entire army was demobilized and sent home. Even Princess Anelia’s private force was dismissed. They were all owed back pay but Asora’s government had no money to pay them. Anelia had the money and promised to pay the soldiers in exchange for her amnesty and to be allowed back into parliament. And sure enough she was amnestied and voted in. As a result she was never charged with anything. For her immunity from prosecution she gave up her private army and paid the soldiers their back pay. The soldiers weren’t expected to be back so soon, so no money was budgeted for their salaries. Now that Anelia was back in parliament, the opposition, the White party, began to gain strength. Back in her old position as Commander in Chief of the military she decided to demobilize the entire army, not because there was no money but because, according to her, it was no longer needed after the war ended. Now once again Ostikon has no military to protect its citizens. As a result the rats were able to bring

back the draconian laws and took steps to rob us outlanders of our liberty and freedom. I'm sure all this was perpetrated by the rich Whites..."

"So, what happened to Gen and Ruzha?"

"Well, Gen was sent into retirement and took over managing her grandfather's hotel, and Ruzha went back to working as a photographer cataloging items for the main science lab in the centre zone, same as before."

"How's Nagol doing? Did he and the Admiral stay together?"

"Yes they did. Nagol was very happy to see Gen leave the military. With her taking over the hotel he had more time to live the life he really wanted."

"What about my little sisters Vel and Daf, what are they doing now?"

"They went back to the language academy and now teach Macedonian. They are very popular. Everyone wants to hear their stories, especially about their experiences here. They tell stories about the battles they fought as the crew of the Dragon Fire and about their experiences in the battlefield in their quest to end the war and bring back our people. The entire planet knows about that. You're a hero in Ostikon... Then, when we heard nothing from you for a long time we all assumed you were dead. You promised us you'd be back if you survived but when you weren't... naturally people assumed you were dead. So you were a dead hero to them. That's the reason I believe Anelia and her supporters became so bold and bullied Asora's government into giving the criminals amnesty and allowed them to take control of Ostikon."

"What happened when you found out I was alive?"

"The planet shook... Unfortunately by then the military and all those in a position to unshackle us didn't exist any more. They tried to force Asora to break relations with you but she refused. All your friends wanted to leave the planet and come here but the White party

refused to grant them passage. As for me and him, they saw us as a problem. We were a living legacy of the past but they didn't do anything to us... Even dead they feared you..."

"Wait until they get a load of you now!" exclaimed Ori with a menacing look on his face.

"Wait until they get a load of my army and what I can do with it. I'll give you a demonstration tomorrow during our march."

"What about your daughter? How's she doing?"

"Airam has been running my businesses for some time now and looking after Asora; trying to keep her sane. I guess they're both coping... Airam and the chef are doing very well actually. They don't need me anymore."

"I'd like to help Asora... I feel responsible for getting her into this mess. We need to do something to help her get out of this predicament. She doesn't deserve the punishment she's getting..." I said.

"But what can we do, especially all the way from here?" asked Ori.

"Perhaps we can make a recording of the march tomorrow, send it to Ruzha. She'll find a way to broadcast it on channel 45. By showing proof that I'm still alive and well and in possession of a very large army might give her some leverage over the Whites. What do you guys think?"

"Yeah, it might alleviate some of the pressure... it will certainly get the Whites' attention... It might even scare them a bit knowing that you now, in addition to still flying the ship, have a big army. But at the same time, it might make things worse. We now have a new fleet of ships which the Whites possess. They may decide to use them against you," warned Delche.

"If you can get the soldiers to do something like yell 'Ostikon', 'Ostikon', 'Ostikon' in unison for example, one million of them, might make the Whites think! Let them sweat it out. They have no

idea what we've been telling you about the situation in Ostikon, especially in the outer zones! They'll regret having allowed us to come here," said Ori.

"Unfortunately the soldiers can't speak... But we'll see."

"Enough of this crap. I get enough of it at home. I don't need to hear it here too. Let's drink before we forget how to," yelled Delche and poured us some rakia.

"To old friends back together again..." toasted Ori.

"To better and bigger adventures... and more drinking in the old ship..." toasted Delche.

"To you guys! It's nice to see you and be together again..."

I sat in the Captain's chair and Delche and Ori sat in their old chairs.

"We should fly this thing one of these days... Take it for a spin around the planet... See the sights," I said.

"I see you've updated the navigation system with up to date maps... and you've traveled a lot. You used up quite a bit of fuel and ammunition. I should check and see what you have in reserve. If you run out of fuel or ammo the ship is as good as dead. I think I'll check later. It's time to drink now. Do you have anything to eat?"

"Look around. There might be some meat jars left and there should be some other food. The Captain and his wife gave us a lot of food when we were at their island home."

"May I look around in the communications computer?" asked Ori.

"Help yourself but do it quietly please... I still have a headache from drinking earlier."

"I'll use my headphones..."

Delche laughed.

“What’s so funny?” I asked.

“Ori...” he replied but didn’t explain.

After listening to old messages on his earphones, recorded a long time ago, Ori asked me if he could call Airam...

“Can you do that? I mean call Airam from here?”

“Yes, I’ll encrypt the message so no one else can access it. She has the key to my encryption code and she’ll know what to do...”

“You sly devil you...” said Delche. I think that’s why Delche had laughed earlier. He knew that Ori wanted to contact Airam. But for some reason Delche didn’t fully approve.

“Sure, go ahead. Help yourself,” I replied.

Sitting in my Captain’s chair enjoying my drink, I watched both Delche and Ori going through the old computer logs reminiscing about the time we were together. Once in a while Ori let out a quiet chuckle... He was probably reminiscing about something from our past.

“I’d like to sleep here tonight if I may...” said Ori.

“Sure, why not? I might decide to stay here tonight as well... if I get too drunk...”

“You don’t get it. He wants to be here when the reply from Airam arrives...” said Delche.

“That’s nice... Give her my regards...”

“Thank you...”

“Why don’t you have your guards following you around any longer? Like in the good old days?” asked Delche.

“I was told not to. In case they were taken over by the big robots. I think it was Ukasnek who warned me and asked me to dock them permanently; for as long as I’m here.”

“Do you remember the time when you and Ori came to my restaurant? I think it was your first time and you introduced your robot guards as your girlfriends... Glory and Morning if I remember correctly...”

“I do. Those were good times...”

“I think I’ll spend the night here too.”

“Okay...”

The long march

The next thing I heard was Ukasnek's voice. "It stinks in here. What are you doing still sleeping? The Captain is looking for you."

"How did you get in here?" I asked.

"I walked in. The hatch was open..."

The three of us had fallen asleep in our chairs.

"Where does the Captain want us to go?"

"Outside the facilities main entrance, over there... It's time to take the soldiers out for their exercise."

"Can you get hold of a good camera and record our march today. I'll attempt to do some new maneuvers and I want them recorded. I want to send the recording to Ostikon to show them what we're doing here."

"There are some good cameras in the research lab. I'll ask Enai to lend me one."

"Good, now go get it and start recording the moment you're out."

"I will," he said and ran off.

"Do we get to eat breakfast today?" asked Ori.

"No. No breakfast today. We ate enough last night. I see all my reserves are gone."

We left my ship immediately. We didn't change, brush our teeth or even wash our faces...

"We need to look rugged for the camera... The Whites hate rugged..." joked Delche.

We met the Captain and the others in front of the big door. Before I put the transmitter on my head I asked Enai to turn off the remote transmitter. Having both on at the same time might cause confusion for the soldiers. Enai told me that the remote transmitter was already off.

When I saw Ukasnek pointing the camera at us I said, “Here we go!”

Moments later fully armed soldiers wearing their battle gear began to pour out of every door.

“Why are they armed?” asked Enai.

“We’re recording this march and we want them to look like soldiers, not gorillas.”

“Won’t they be hot with their masks on?” asked Ori.

“The masks are part of their battle gear.”

“Formation: Squares 100 by 100, face me,” I yelled.

“Don’t tell me they can hear you all the way there and they understand when you speak to them in Macedonian?” asked Delche.

I laughed and said, “I’m telling you what I’m going to do. I send them mental images and they do what they see.”

“How do they know what to do?” asked Ori.

“I don’t know? They just do... keep your questions for later. I need to concentrate.”

It took some time for all of them to come out but when every soldier was out of the facility they formed almost 100 squares.

“One of these days we should time them and see how long it takes for them all to come out...” I said.

“I can tell you that from the recording...” remarked Enai.

“Watch this...” I said. “I’ll form perfect squares.”

I could hear the spectators whispering as the lines in the squares began to straighten.

“Rifles on shoulders!” There was a loud “aaaaah” from the crowd as every soldier placed their rifle on their shoulder at exactly the same time and at the exact angle.

“I don’t believe that... Even though I saw it with my own eyes... What I saw is impossible,” cried Delche.

“Watch this: Turn counterclockwise 180 degrees,” I yelled. Every soldier turned counterclockwise at the same time in perfect formation.

“That’s truly impossible... I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t see it with my own eyes,” cried Delche.

“Forward march!” The soldiers began to march in perfect step, in unison.

“That is remarkable... Can they fire their rifles in unison too?” asked Ori.

“I guess so? I’ve never had them fire their rifles. Maybe we can try it... We’ll have them point into the sky and focus on that big planet over there? Would that be okay, Enai?”

“I guess so.”

“Ready: Halt. Ready to fire, aim at that planet. Ready: FIRE!”

Suddenly there was a huge blinding flash; up there in outer space. It lasted about three seconds. It scared the hell out of everyone.

“What the hell was that? Did you record it?” I asked Ukasnek.

“Yes I did! All of it! I had the camera pointing at the planet.”

“I know what the flash was,” said Ori. “Thanks to Mother Nature it happened in outer space.”

“Well, what was it?” I asked.

“The plasma strands from the rifles must have combined at a focal point somewhere in outer space to form a thick, tight plasma rope, like the one your four cannons formed when you simultaneously fired them at the Karon ships, remember?”

“Yes, I remember but how do you explain the flash? Only an explosion could have caused such a flash.”

“Yes, you’re right. The plasma must have hit a large hard object, like a meteor or perhaps some space debris,” explained Ori.

“Thank God the explosion didn’t take place inside the atmosphere... It could have been catastrophic. It would have caused a big bang and God knows what other kinds of damage it would have caused,” said Enai.

“I won’t do that again, that’s for sure,” I promised.

“Yes, please don’t... It scared the hell out of me,” Ori complained.

“I never knew that a million rifles that size could deliver such a big punch... I would like to examine one of those rifles... and perhaps fire one,” said Captain Orihci.

“Unfortunately you can’t. Each rifle is DNA coded to a specific soldier. They were designed that way. The rifle won’t fire unless you have a DNA match. It’s also tamper proof. It will explode if you attempt to meddle with it,” explained Enai.

“Why were they made that way?” asked Ori.

“So the enemy can’t use the rifles...”

“Now if you could only get your soldiers to speak?” Ori suggested.

“I’ll try.”

“Back in formation, forward march.”

Once the soldiers started marching I said, “Yell, Ostikon.”

Nothing happened.

“I’m sorry Ori but I can’t seem to create an image in my mind that will make them talk; if they can even talk.”

“Try saying the words in your mind and see what happens...” suggested Ori.

Taking his suggestion, I concentrated my thoughts not on making images but on making sounds. I kept yelling “Ostikon, Ostikon, Ostikon...” repeatedly in my mind.

“Do you hear that? They’re yelling ‘Ostikon’...” cried Ori excitedly.

“Yes I do but why do they sound like they’ve had throat surgery?” I asked Enai.

“Mother of God... Because they have!! Their brain function for speaking was obliterated. Their architects didn’t want them yelling and screaming when they were shot or injured... disrupting the battle. I have no idea how they made that sound! It’s impossible...”

“I’ve seen a lot of things today that are impossible...” said Delche.

After we marched for a couple of hours I dismissed the soldiers and sent them back to the barracks. While everyone else went back to work, the Captain, Delche, Ori, Ukasnek, Enai and I went to the research lab to view the recording on the big screen.

We all laughed when we saw ourselves on the screen. It sounded very strange when I heard myself speak and I was surprised by how

awful I looked. With my heavy, black uniform I looked like a wine barrel with arms and legs. My body was round and huge and my head was tiny in proportion. I looked like a pinhead. Everyone else looked normal to me.

“You have to edit me out of the recording,” I said. “I look awful. I don’t want the people of Ostikon to see me looking like this; especially those who know me.”

“You mean your lady friends...” remarked Delche jokingly.

“I wouldn’t advise that. If you plan to broadcast the recording, the first thing the broadcasters will do is authenticate the recording... to make sure it hasn’t been altered. If you edit anything they’ll know because this camera has every frame numbered sequentially,” said Enai.

“And if you do remove yourself then how will anyone know it was you who was in charge of the soldiers. This way they’ll see your face and your body which matches the bodies of the super soldiers. There will be doubters and conspiracy theorists but so what? Those who fear you will not only know it’s you but also the awesome power you wield,” said Delche.

“YES!!!” yelled Ori.

“Plus, at the end of this recording we’ll record you unlocking your ship, which no one else can do. That will authenticate you as the genuine ‘Otsiron, Captain of the warship Dragon Fire’, okay?” added Delche.

“I hate that name...” I said.

“What’s this all about? What are you planning to do with the recording?” asked Captain Orihci.

“I guess no one told you? I plan to send it to Ostikon as an information piece to let them know that I’m still alive and basically to tell them what we’re doing here, trying to reclaim our lives. It will

also serve as a warning to my enemies in Ostikon who have been emboldened by my absence and are causing havoc.”

“You know we’re all behind you here and will support you in whatever you decide to do. We owe you a lot but please, whatever you do, do it without violence. We need peace, not another catastrophe,” the Captain pleaded.

“I can’t promise you anything... and I don’t know what the future will bring, but since he came here my people in Ostikon have been subjugated and are suffering. Something has to be done. I also know that those who are in control now are cowards and fear him immensely. So all he has to do is show them that he’s still alive and carries even greater power than before and I assure you they will run like the rats they are without him doing anything. I know this man well and I can assure you he will never use his power for reprisal, revenge, or personal gain...” said Delche.

“Okay then, perhaps we should send the recording to the Galaxy Trader planets as well, as an information piece and let them know, indirectly of course, what we do here and the power we possess. I have to admit the flash I saw scared the hell out of me too. I’ve never seen anything like it. And I agree with Delche, I would turn and run too if I was his enemy...” said the Captain.

“Now that we’ve settled all that, let’s get on with analyzing the recording. I have other work to do, you know! I’m anxious to see how we are progressing with the DNA protocol converter,” interrupted Enai.

“We don’t need to watch the entire segment now, just speed it to the flash and see what it looks like in slow motion...” I said.

We all stood in awe as we watched the flash develop and explode. We watched it again and again, several times.

“It scares the hell out of me every time I look at it. I imagine it hitting my destroyer and obliterating it... Hell, it could even split a small planet in half. It looks like a lightning strike magnified ten

thousand times. So, that's what happens when you combine plasma strands," remarked the Captain.

"Yes, one of the things they teach us in the military academy is to 'never fire more than one plasma cannon at a time'. He didn't know about that when he simultaneously fired all four plasma cannons at the Karon ships. I guess he wanted to make a statement, which almost killed us. My ass is still numb from the vibrations of that explosion. But I have to admit his statement ended the invasion and prevented a war. The Karons weren't prepared to face that kind of power. I hope the Whites learned something from that," Ori said.

Compared to the part with the flash, the rest of the recording looked mundane. After Enai left we went to my ship and Ukasnek recorded me gaining access. I had to put my hand over the key pad to hide the codes but, beyond that, no one else but me could open the hatch or activate the ship. As added proof I also released my guards, temporarily to show that it was me doing it. Surprisingly my guards had no problem with my appearance and recognized me instantly. Neither Delche nor Ori had any idea how they were able to recognize me.

We went back to the research lab and watched the entire recording again, this time at normal speed.

"Are you all convinced that it was me in that recording? Does anyone doubt it?"

No one said anything.

"By the way Ukasnek, thank you for doing this. You did an excellent job. Now let's figure out how we're going to send it to Ostikon," I said.

"And to the Galaxy Trader planets," added the Captain.

"We can broadcast it on all channels from our communications tower. I'm sure someone will pick it up," Ukasnek suggested.

“They could but I don’t trust our central government, they might sensor it and no one will see it,” said the Captain.

“You’re right, I don’t trust our government either and I’m sure they’ll never allow it to be shown on any of the public broadcasts. We have to somehow sneak it in and broadcast it on channel 45. The rest of the stations will have no choice but to pick it up. Once its shown on Ostikon we can show it here and say it was picked up from Ostikon,” said Delche.

“That might work. It would be embarrassing for our central government to cover it up after it was seen on Ostikon. The Galaxy Trader people might get suspicious as to why their government isn’t showing them what’s happening on one of their own planets... and why they have to find out from outside sources...” added the Captain.

“I know how we can sneak it into Ostikon without detection,” said Ori.

“I knew it! You’ll send it to my daughter and implicate her in this, right?” grumbled Delche.

“No! I’ll send it encrypted to Ruzha and send the encryption code to Airam. I fact I’ll send the code first and then ask Airam to deliver it to Ruzha in person. I’ll ask Airam to tell Ruzha to act on it as soon as she receives it. And then, the moment I hear back from Airam I’ll forward the recording directly to Ruzha. Even if it’s intercepted they won’t have time to decode it before it’s on the air. And no Delche, I won’t implicate Airam. We use untraceable bogus accounts. I’m a communications expert, remember!” replied Ori with a slight tone of resentment.

“They all say that until they get caught,” replied Delche.

“Enough! Just do it and let me know when I can do my part. Now let’s figure out how to get the recording off the camera and into the communications device on your ship,” ordered the Captain.

After scratching his head for a moment Ori said, “I’ll give you a frequency that no one uses and someone from the tower can transmit it at very low power through a directional antenna pointing towards our ship. I’ll capture it in our communications computer and encrypt it. Before I send it to Ruzha I’ll mark it ‘research material’... Would that be okay?” asked Ori.

“I don’t know how to do it. I don’t even know how to get the recording off the camera,” replied the Captain. “You’ll have to find someone who knows...”

“Well, perhaps Enai or one of his associates might know...” said Ori.

“Why don’t we go and ask Enai,” said the Captain.

“I’ll tell you what. Why don’t Otsi and I go to the ship, open the frequency and set the communications computer to start recording the moment it sees a signal. And you guys go to the research lab and talk to Enai. We’ll meet you there,” suggested Ori.

It took Ori only a few minutes to set up the equipment on my ship and we were in Enai’s lab in no time.

“It’s way past noon,” complained Ori, “and we haven’t eaten breakfast or lunch. I’m starving!”

“The dining area is probably closed by now and I have no food in my ship. Let’s finish this first and we’ll worry about food later...” I replied.

When we arrived at the lab the others were waiting for us at the door. Holding the camera Ukasnek said, “Enai told us the operators in the tower know what to do. You just have to explain to them what you want done and give them the frequency.”

When we arrived at the tower the Captain spoke to the operator on duty and Ori explained to him what he wanted done. The job took only a few minutes and we were gone. The Captain took the camera

with him. Before he left he said, “When you’re finished your part let me know and I’ll do mine. Good luck...”

Ukasnek went with him.

Ori, Delche and I went straight to my ship to make sure the message was received. And sure enough, it was there when we arrived.

“Leave it to me now and I’ll do my part. It may take a day or two before I’m finished, depending on how fast Airam gets back to me. I’ll keep you informed,” said Ori.

“I’m tired and starving,” said Delche. “I had no breakfast or lunch and the march took a lot out of me. I’m not as strong as I used to be and I’m not in as good shape physically.”

Just as Delche finished talking we heard footsteps. Someone was coming up the ramp. It was Ukasnek. He was carrying a large tray full of a variety of desserts. The Captain was right behind him.

“What kind of hosts would we be if we let our guests starve?” asked the Captain.

There was no space for everyone to sit or put the tray down inside the ship so we went outside. When Ori saw the food he joined us. Ukasnek put the tray down on the grass and we all sat around looking at it.

“Where did you get this? These are the kind of desserts you used to serve on your ship. Am I right?” I asked.

“You’re right. Someone donated it for the reception area and I stole it from there,” the Captain said jokingly.

“If Ukasnek said that to me I might believe him but you, I don’t believe you. Besides, both Amih and Ireva would crucify you.”

“You’re right... Under ordinary circumstances, yes... But when we told them that you and our dear guests hadn’t eaten breakfast or

lunch, they instantly folded and handed me the goods. They'll be joining us soon."

"What, to make sure you and Ukasnek aren't polishing the snacks by yourselves?"

"No. To have a drink with us and congratulate you for the great show you put on this morning."

"I saw them there in the crowd watching us but I didn't see them during the march or after it," I said.

"They didn't go on the march... They have jobs to do... Actual work..."

"I'm salivating here and listening to my stomach growling. Can we start eating... please?" complained Delche while eyeing the desserts.

"Sure, sure, go ahead, I'm sorry..." said the Captain.

We each took a piece and savoured it. We all looked at Ori who had his eyes closed while he enjoyed his piece of the delicious dessert.

"Well?" I asked.

"Can't talk... Eating..." Ori replied.

We all broke into laughter. We continued laughing as we watched Ori chew ever so slowly with his eyes still closed.

"What's so funny?" we heard a female voice ask, coming from behind the ship.

"They must be dipping into that laughing gas again dear," said another female voice.

It was Amih and Irevva. Irevva was carrying a bottle of rakia and Amih was holding the glasses.

“I see you’ve already dipped into the dessert. You couldn’t wait for us... could you?” complained Amih.

“I’m sorry, it’s my fault... I was starving and couldn’t wait any longer. I know you have a tradition here that you follow when it comes to food and I respect that...” said Delche.

“I didn’t mean anything by it... I was just joking...” interrupted Amih.

“In that case I take back what I said...” replied Delche jokingly, as he took another piece.

“Are you now ignoring our valued cultural traditions and resorting back to pirate ways?” asked Ireva.

“Those are ‘Galaxy Trader’ cultural traditions... We here on Nelez have our own,” said the Captain, took the bottle from Ireva who sat beside him and poured us a glass each.

The Captain then raised his glass and said, “To our traditions and to the traditions of our guests...”

“To our traditions!” we all toasted.

“Destiny brought us here from different worlds and, despite our differences, we became good friends. I would say there’s still hope for our worlds...” Amih said as she toasted.

“Since when have you become a philosopher... dear?” asked the Captain jokingly.

Amih threw her dessert at him. He caught it and ate it all at once, sending everyone into long and loud laughter.

The stars were bright that night.

Disaster strikes

We had spent most of our evening the day before eating, drinking, telling jokes, laughing and, later in the night, watching the stars. They looked majestic and magical, just like they had when our ancestors looked at them and dreamt of flying there.

While the rest of our group left sometime past midnight to get some sleep, Delche, Ori and I spent the night sleeping outside my ship under the stars. Nelez is a beautiful clean, green planet. It has a seasonal climate similar to that of earth. The days are slightly longer. I have no idea how many days there are in a year. It was summer when I'd arrived.

The morning of the next day, before the sun had risen, we were woken by a man from the communications tower.

"I need you to see something back in the tower. It's urgent... Please follow me. Just before I came here I observed unusual activities in the sky above the other facility. I need you to have a look at them."

He then asked if we knew where Captain Orihci was and I said, "He was with us last night but left around midnight."

The man then suggested we go directly to the tower while he looked for the Captain.

We found the Captain in the tower when we arrived. Without saying a word, not even good morning, which is very unusual for him, he called us over and, looking very concerned, said "Look at this! What do you make of it?"

I didn't know what to look for or what it meant but both Delche and Ori did.

"Six come down... five go up..." said Delche. The others agreed.

"What the hell are you looking at?" I asked.

“Six flying objects came down to the surface on top of the other facility and a moment later five went back into space,” Ori explained.

“Can you tell what the ships look like?” I asked.

“No... All I can tell is that their shape is triangular... That’s all I can tell you from looking at this viewing screen,” replied Ori.

“Why does it matter to you what they look like?” asked Delche.

“Someone go and get Ukasnek... Quickly,” I ordered.

“I’ll get him, I know where he is...” said the Captain.

“These are the kind of ships that Ukasnek and I encountered before... not too long ago. I want him to look at the images and tell me if I’m right.”

When the Captain came back with Ukasnek they went straight to the viewer.

“Yup, it’s them all right... They’re back...” said Ukasnek.

“I told you they’d be back. You should have blown them out of the sky when you had your chance,” grumbled the Captain.

“What do you suppose they are doing here?” asked the man from the tower, the same man who had summoned us.

“They could be doing a number of things,” said the Captain. “To begin with, they could have come back to get the gold. But then why leave so suddenly...? Surely they couldn’t have gotten any gold that quickly... And what happened to the sixth little ship. Where did it go?”

Suddenly there was a worried look on the Captain’s face.

“What is it Captain?” I asked.

“They’re probably hoping we wouldn’t notice a ship left behind. I’m speculating it was left behind for a purpose; to look for something... but what? My fear is that it will find my destroyer... and probably damage it... or worse... try to steal it. You have to go up there right now and find that little ship... This time get rid of it and all the others... You have to do it now before they cause us more grief. I should have known...”

“Well, I guess we’ll be going for a ride a lot sooner than we expected... Don’t worry Captain we’ll find those bastards and deal with them. This time for good!”

Before we left, Ori told the tower operator to monitor us on the frequency he’d given him earlier and get himself a universal translator. “It’s difficult to speak on a radio through a translator... We’ll be reporting our progress to you in Macedonian.”

I figured this would be a short trip and we wouldn’t need supplies, so the moment we left the tower we headed straight for my ship. The Captain and Ukasnek escorted us out to the facility’s main door and waited there, watching us head for my ship.

I ran ahead to enter the codes and left Delche and Ori following behind. Just as I got to the ship and raised my arm to open the code pad lid, I saw a bright flash on the ship’s hull and felt excruciating pain on my back. I fell forward onto the ground.

I heard Delche yell, “We’ve been hit, Otsi is down... Did you see that, it was one of those little triangular ships.”

“Don’t touch him, don’t touch him. I know what to do,” yelled Ukasnek.

I was conscious but didn’t want to move, for good reason. Ukasnek knelt down beside me and tried to turn me over. He wanted to give me fire water, just like he had the last time I’d experienced a medical episode.

When he came close I said, “I’m fine. Please listen to me very carefully and don’t say anything. Pretend I’m unconscious. If the

people who attacked me are watching and figure I'm still alive, they'll attack again. Quietly tell the others what I've told you and then get Enai and a stretcher. Take me inside to a secure room where we can talk without being seen or heard. Don't tell anybody anything. I think we may have a mole in the facility. Now go!"

The moment Ukasnek stood up the Captain asked, "Is he alive?"

Ukasnek loudly replied, "I don't think so but we need a medic to confirm it." Then he went past them whispering and told them what I had said to him.

A crowd of people started forming all around. Everyone looked sad and very concerned.

The Captain tried to push them back yelling, "He needs a doctor, is there a doctor here? Delche and Ori hovered over me looking sad and very angry.

The next thing I heard was Enai's voice telling Ukasnek to disburse the crowd and make way for the stretcher. Ori and Delche grabbed my arms and the Captain my legs and they moved me on top of the stretcher. They put me face down exposing the large black burn on my back.

"You need to take him inside. I don't have the equipment to examine him here," yelled Enai and called Ukasnek to come back and help carry the stretcher. The crowd outside was growing larger, even the tower operator had left his post and came outside to see what was going on.

"Is he dead?" he asked.

"There is every indication that he is but we won't know for sure until I put him on the machines in my clinic," replied Enai and left to lead the stretcher carried by Ori and Delche in the front and the Captain and Ukasnek in the back.

“Where are you taking us Enai, he weighs a ton, like an elephant,” complained the Captain. Whispering, he said to me, “I bet you’re enjoying this...”

“We’re going to my clinic,” he yelled and then whispered, “to the nightmare room. I don’t have a clinic. This is the only secure place where we have medical equipment. We used it to try to repair the soldiers whose conversion failed and were in agony. We had to tie them down and lock them up.”

The moment we entered the nightmare room Enai locked the soundproof door. Then I jumped off the stretcher, took my fire water to ease the pain and accelerate my recovery, and said, “We need to act and fast!”

“Ukasnek told me we have a mole amongst us, is that true?” asked Enai.

“Nothing is for certain but this seems like a coordinated attack on me and me alone. Think about it; with me out of the way so is my ship and the soldiers. It’s a smart move. My enemies in Ostikon will benefit from this... And so will the pirates with the triangular ships. With me out of the way they can pillage the gold unabated. I know this sounds far fetched but it makes sense. Now the question is who is giving them information from here? Someone must be! How else did the assassin know precisely when and where to attack? And how did he know what I looked like? He couldn’t have just been parked outside, risking being spotted. Someone must have told him when I was coming out so that the assassin could time the hit.”

“So what do you have in mind? How do we find this mole?” asked the Captain.

“Outside of us, no one must know that I’m alive and that we suspect we have a mole. The first thing we need to do is set a trap. I’m certain that communications from the mole to the little ship are done through the airwaves, right? And they can be monitored by a receiver... right?”

“Yes, but the message could be encrypted!” replied Ori.

“It doesn’t matter! Here’s what we’re going to do. We’ll set up a receiving device to monitor and record all active frequencies the moment a signal appears on them. We can’t use my ship and we can’t use the tower without giving away our plans. We need to use equipment that no one knows about. I assume you have such equipment Enai?”

“Yes, we have portable receivers that we use in the field. I’ll set one up as soon as we are done here.”

“You have to do it now, as soon as possible. First you set up the receiver and then you make an announcement. You explain what happened outside and you, as my doctor, give the people a status report on my condition. You need to inform the entire facility. I’m certain the mole will want to know my condition so that he can report it to the assassin out there in the little ship. And when he does, we’ll capture his transmission and hopefully him. Does that make any sense?”

“What do I tell my wife and daughter, who are probably looking for me right now?” asked Captain Orihci.

“You don’t tell them anything. This will be over soon. Enai will make the announcement the moment he finishes setting up the receiver. He will tell the people that I am barely alive, hanging on by a thread, and that he had to put me into a coma to keep me alive. I’ll be bedridden for a long, long time. I’m sure your wife and daughter will hear the announcement.”

“After we uncover the mole we’ll decide what to do next, right?” asked the Captain.

“Right!”

“Do you think there might be more than one mole?” asked Enai.

“Time will tell. Now go and do your part. I’m sure the people are anxious to know how I’m doing, especially those who planned my assassination.”

“You sure are a clever bastard...” said Delche and surprisingly the Captain agreed with him.

“We’re still alive because of his cleverness... Don’t forget that,” said Ori.

“They don’t want us dead, they just want him out of the way...” replied Delche.

“Why not?”

“Because we are replaceable...” replied Delche sarcastically.

“Oh, I see...” replied Ori with a tone of disappointment.

“Enough!” said the Captain. “So, what happens after we find the mole? Are you going after the little ship...?”

“Since that concerns you so much, I will go after the little ship. I promise you. The pirates have now given me a reason to go after them... and I will go after them the moment we arrest and interrogate the mole... and what a surprise it will be for them... to see me alive and well and pointing my ship’s cannons at them.”

“Good! That makes me feel a little better. In any case I should soon get my destroyer operational again in case we need it... I’ll try and look for a crew... I’m sure a lot of these farmers here have experience with ships... like Ukasnek and my daughter.”

“Ukasnek, how long will it take you to acquire provisions for my ship? Say, enough for a couple of weeks or so for three people?”

“I can have them by this afternoon. I’ll have the food prepared, cooked and packaged at noon and can stretch a hose from the facility to fill the tanks with water.”

“That’s great! But please don’t attract any attention. Bring the food and store it here. When all is clear, I’ll open the ship for you and you can fill the tanks with water.”

“When the time comes I’ll fill the tanks and Ori can bring the food and store it...” said Delche. “We should do this at night, when it’s safe, or whenever the Captain, I mean Otsi, says. Ukasnek, there’s no point in you sticking around. You can go and do your job...”

“Go now, get the food prepared...” Captain Orihci ordered.

Just as Ukasnek stepped out, Enai rushed in and said, “The transmitter is up and running. I’ll go and make the announcement now.”

“Why don’t you let me do the introduction, inform the people of what happened and who we think was responsible for the shooting and then you can tell them about Otsi’s condition,” said the Captain.

“Gentlemen, it looks like we’ll be going to battle soon. If we can pull this off and get the mole in time, we’ll surprise my attackers and blow the hell out of them.”

Moments later Ori said, “Listen! Turn up your translator.”

It was the Captain on the public announcement system. He was informing the people of exactly what had happened... that a small ship had attacked the Dragon Fire and severely injured its Captain, etc.

Then Enai came on and said, “The Captain of the ship Dragon Fire sustained severe burns on his back down to his bones. He was rendered unconscious by the blast and is now in critical condition in a coma. He couldn’t breathe so we had to hook him up to a ventilator in my clinic. We’ve done everything we can to keep him alive. It’s now up to God to save him. Please pray for him...”

“Pray for him to die or live?” asked Ori jokingly.

“That Enai, he’s a sly dog... He chose his words very carefully...” replied Delche.

“He did way better than I thought he would,” I said.

“Earlier you mentioned that the Whites might somehow be involved in the assassination. How do you figure?” asked Ori.

“We will probably know more once we capture the mole. I figure the pirates, you know the ones flying the small triangular ships, are probably collaborating with the Whites. I destroyed a couple of their little ships and nearly destroyed their mothership. So they are surely pissed off at me and looking for revenge. They know they can’t take me on alone so they probably turned to the Whites for help. You know, the enemy of my enemy is my friend. So my theory is that the Whites may have humored them until now, that is until they intercepted the recording that you sent to Ruzha. They probably weren’t very happy with my army. One million super soldiers under my command yelling, ‘Ostikon, Ostikon, Ostikon’... That must have chilled their shit. So they approved the hit to get rid of me as soon as possible. That’s what I think!”

“But I haven’t sent the recording yet! I’m still waiting for a reply from Airam. I said it might take a few days... It’s only been one day,” replied Ori defensively.

“Well, that was only a theory... Let’s hope Enai has better luck,” I said.

“Well, if you didn’t send the recording to Ruzha then who did? I’m only saying this because I trust your instincts,” Delche explained.

“Wait a second, who else here had access to the recording?” asked Ori.

“Ukasnek and the Captain,” I replied.

“Also the communications tower guy...” replied Ori.

“What does he have to do with any of this...?” I asked.

“Everything...” replied the Captain who just walked in with Enai. “You’re right Ori, our mole is the tower operator. And you were also right Otsi, he didn’t waste any time. The moment we made the

PA announcement he transmitted an unencrypted message. How do we know that? We captured the message. It was transmitted from one of the frequencies the communications tower uses. And he was the only person on duty at the time. The message read, 'The deed is done...' That's it."

"That is bold... An unencrypted message...? Straight from the tower...? And he suspects nothing?" I asked.

"I don't know... I don't think so... He's still in the tower."

"So, let's go and arrest him then..."

"Let's wait until Ukasnek comes back with your food. What's the rush? We'll grab him and bring him here. We'll make sure no one sees us in case he has accomplices. We'll also monitor the frequencies and see what else develops," said the Captain.

"The arrest has to be official. He could charge us with kidnapping if he is innocent. We need solid evidence to prove that he was involved in the assassination attempt," I said.

"But where are we going to get such evidence?" asked the Captain.

"I know how," replied Enai. "This guy is new and doesn't know how the tower works. But a couple of my associates do. We can look at the old communications logs for evidence from before the assassination attempt."

"We don't want to tip off any more people about this so let's think of another way. Maybe we can confront him directly? How about we do this; you put me on a stretcher, attach a ventilator and turn it on so it looks like it's keeping me alive and cover my entire body, like I'm dead, so that no one can see me. Then take the stretcher down the hallway that leads to the tower. When we get close, take me inside the tower and call the tower operator over..." I said before the Captain interrupted me.

"Then close the door and uncover him. I'm sure the moment the operator sees him alive he'll shit his pants. Not only because he's

still alive but also because of what his collaborators will do to him when they find out he lied to them. We'll make sure he understands that. I'm sure he'll tell us anything we want to know... especially if we offer him protection... which we will if he confesses to everything he knows..." said the Captain.

"Make sure to ask him if he had accomplices..." added Enai.

"You'll be there too... escorting the stretcher. It has to look legitimate... You're his doctor..." said the Captain.

While Enai went to find a ventilator and any other lifesaving gadgets that were needed to make it look like he was keeping me alive, we nervously paced around the room.

It seemed like we'd waited for hours when there was a knock on the door. It was Ukasnek with a cart full of supplies for my ship. The Captain quickly whisked him inside and said, "Why did you have to knock? You scared the hell out of me."

"Sorry, I don't have a key..."

"Never mind, did anyone see you bringing the supplies here?"

"No! I made sure of that..."

"I believe you..."

The Captain then brought Ukasnek up to speed on our plan and the five of us continued to pace, waiting for Enai. We all jumped when Enai flung the door open and said, "Don't just stand there help me with this... It's breaking my back."

"Did you have to bring the entire lab? We have to carry him and all this stuff on top of him..." said the Captain. "Did anyone see you?"

"Yes, a group of people. They saw me struggling and asked me if I needed help. I said no, I didn't have far to go. One of them then asked, 'What's all this for?' so I told him it's backup equipment to keep Otsiron alive."

“That’s great!” I said.

“Why? For making me a liar...?” complained Enai.

“You must be a different Enai, not the pirate I used to know...” said Ukasnek sarcastically.

“Enough!” yelled the Captain. “Now prep him and let’s go!”

They took their time getting there. I guess because the stretcher was very heavy but I heard no smart remarks from anyone... In fact I heard no remarks at all. I figured they were all nervous as hell.

The moment we came close to the tower I could feel them turning the stretcher. I heard the tower guy speak. It was the same tower guy... I recognized his voice. “Ah, what can I do for you now?”

The Captain said, “We came here to thank you...”

That was my cue to rise from the dead. When I moved in an attempt to gracefully jump off the stretcher, the life saving equipment began to rock and fall, making a great racket. Enai slammed the door shut so as not to attract attention from people passing by. Thanks to the resolve of my carriers they held the stretcher steady until I got off it gracefully, onto my feet instead of landing on my big super soldier ass.

No one had to say anything. The guy turned white, white as a ghost... a good thing too because, at that very moment, we looked more like clowns than investigators... no one had even thought of bringing a gun. He could have killed us all if he was armed.

“Leave him to me!” I then turned around and showed the burned hole in my back and calmly asked him, “Were you involved in this? DON’T LIE TO ME. YOU KNOW I CAN READ MINDS. Don’t make me read yours because you’ll turn into a mute, rotting vegetable if I do.”

“I’ll tell you everything you want to know, just please don’t hurt me.”

“HURT YOU! He will rip you apart!” yelled Ukasnek angrily.

“I know you must have had your reasons for doing this... And I know there is no profit in death... I also know you will tell me the truth about everything... Now start talking... Start from the beginning!” I said calmly.

Ukasnek interrupted and said, “I have to record this as evidence. Do you mind?”

The guy looked at me. I gave him a stern look.

“No, I don’t mind,” he replied looking glum.

“A long time ago my partners and I used to trade with these pirates. We were their scouts. When we found something worthy we contacted them and they gave us a cut of the loot. But after the war started they disappeared. They no longer ventured into this sector so my partners and I were left without an income. We came here to find work. But instead of giving us work the robot captured my partners and turned them into super soldiers. I was next but you stopped them before they had a chance to turn me too...”

“Go on...”

“I am sorry... but after the war ended and when I found out there was gold in the other facility, I decided to contact the pirates again... But I needed access to a long range transmitter. So I asked one of Enai’s associates if I could work here in the tower. He gave me the job and some rudimentary training. A while later I contacted the pirates. We have a secret word we use so they’d know it was me. Anyway, three days later I got a reply. They asked me what I had in mind... I told them about the gold in the other facility. They weren’t interested... Too risky they said. Then when I told them how much gold there was... enough for the planet to retire... they accepted. But then you attacked them and they backed off without taking any of the gold. Like you said, there’s no profit in death. But they still

wanted to know about you. I didn't know anything about you... I just told them that you're from Ostikon. Nothing for a while, then yesterday they had a pile of questions... Then they staged the show over the other facility to get your attention. They told me to immediately tell you about it. They asked me to tell them what you looked like and I gave them a description. After that they told me to contact them the moment you were outside. After you left here I told them that you were headed for your ship right now..."

"Is that everything?" I asked.

"Yes..."

"I know you lied about some things and that's a strike against you. But did you know they were planning to kill me?"

"NO! I swear to you, I didn't know!"

"You're lying again! Did you know that everything transmitted and received through the communications tower is recorded and dated? And did you know that we have access to those recordings? How do you think I know you're lying?"

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry..."

"You will be very sorry if you continue to lie to us. You will be prosecuted for this to the fullest extent of Galaxy Trader law. But the question is what kind of punishment will you get? Light or severe?" threatened Ukasnek.

"If you voluntarily confess to everything we found in the recordings without coercion I will personally speak to the court and ask the judge for leniency. But if you lie, just one more time, you're on your own," added the Captain.

After that the guy sang like a canary. He told us everything we wanted to know.

"To sum up for the record, give us your answer to the following questions," ordered Ukasnek.

“Did you know that the pirates were planning to assassinate Otsi, the Captain of the ship Dragon Fire?”

“Yes!”

“Did you inform anyone here?”

“No!”

“Did you set him up and help the pirates attempt to assassinate him?”

“Yes!”

“Do you have any accomplices here in the facility?”

“No!”

“Did you send the recording we gave you to Ostikon? You know; the one from the camera?”

“How did you know about that? The pirates told me it was encrypted and the communication source was untraceable.”

“Well, your pirate partners sold you out because the recording was neither encrypted nor its source untraceable. They wanted you implicated. You are now the fall guy. So if there is anything more to tell us, or if you have partners to reveal now is the time to speak up.

“One last question, are you working alone or with someone else in this facility?”

“I have no other partners and I’m working alone.”

“Tell me, you did this because your pirate partners convinced you that they couldn’t get to the gold with Otsi around? And that he had to die? But did you ever ask yourself why they asked you to send the recording... to someone in Ostikon you didn’t even know? What does Ostikon have to do with the gold? Did you ask yourself that?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

That’s enough Ukasnek, take him away and lock him up. No one is to see him or talk to him until I tell you...” ordered the Captain.

“I’ll go right now before the next tower operator arrives for his shift. Tell him he is with me. And you,” speaking to the guy, “come with me. Walk casually, like we’re going to do a job or something and focus on looking at the ground. And don’t you dare say a word to anyone. Understand?”

“Yes Sir...”

“I didn’t know he had it in him but he did all right...” I said about Ukasnek.

“His ass has been kicked many times in his life. It’s about time he starts kicking back. Under different circumstances those two would have been partners...” replied the Captain.

“What do we do now?” asked Delche.

“Shouldn’t we be taking the food to the ship?” asked Ori.

“All in good time Ori... First you have to take me out of the tower before the next guy arrives. Take me back to the nightmare room. I don’t want to be seen by anyone, not until we settle this matter.”

“You want us to carry you again?” asked the Captain.

“How else am I going to get there unseen? Just take me now and come back for the equipment.”

While the Captain and Delche stayed with me, in the nightmare room, Enai and Ori went back to get the equipment. The next shift operator was there when they arrived and asked where the previous operator had gone. Enai told him he was with Ukasnek.

When Ori and Enai came back with the equipment, Enai said to the Captain, “You should go and speak to the communications tower operator. Give him the official line about what happened here today. I’m sure someone will be calling to ask him what happened and how Otsi is doing. Maybe those who ordered the assassination will call. They might want confirmation of Otsi’s assassination attempt and possibly details of how it went down. The tower operator currently on duty doesn’t know anything about that because he was asleep when it all happened and when we made the announcement. He didn’t even ask us what the equipment was for. Imagine if someone, a coconspirator for example, calls and gets a different story from the operator than he got from the mole, like, ‘I don’t know anything about that...’ What do you think the coconspirator will do? Don’t you think he’ll suspect that something isn’t right? That will jeopardize your surprise attack for sure,” said Enai.

“Yes, please do talk to him. Also go talk to your wife and daughter and don’t lie to them or you’ll regret it later. Just tell them not to tell anyone and stick to the official line,” I said.

After the Captain left Enai said, “I have to go now. I can’t stay here doing nothing... I’ll check on the receiver. If I see anything relevant I’ll come back and tell you. Otherwise I’ll be in the lab.”

“It’s way past lunch time. You two go and have lunch... Bring something back for me... but please hide it.”

The next thing I heard was a knock on the door. I didn’t want to answer it. I was afraid of being seen.

“Open the god damned door... It’s me!” the Captain ordered.

“Me who?” I asked in a woman’s voice, pretending I didn’t know who he was.

“No games, please...” he said.

I flung the door open and was mobbed by Amih and Irevva. They hugged me and kissed my cheeks.

“We thought you were dead,” cried Amih.

“I didn’t!” Ireva exclaimed. “I knew this was one of your tricks... that my father and you concocted.”

I then turned around for her to see my back.

“Oh my God... You aren’t joking! Oh my God, does it hurt? I can see your burned flesh... I can smell it too... Oh my God...” cried Ireva.

“Of course it hurts but I have to endure it... Until this matter is resolved.”

“I’m starting to develop a new respect for you... God I couldn’t do that. I couldn’t smile, laugh and tell jokes with an open hole like that in my back.”

“Speaking of which, my wound hasn’t been cleaned at all. Can you please clean it and bandage it for me... And bring me a new uniform?”

She gave me a look and said, “I’m not touching that! I’ll get you the uniform but I’m not touching your wound.”

“Hide the uniform. Put it in a bag. Make sure no one sees it.”

“Okay...” she said and left.

“I’ll clean your wound,” said Amih. “And if you want me to do the job properly you’ll have to take the uniform off.”

“What?” I asked. “The uniform is one piece. I’ll come out buck naked. I’m sure your husband will object.”

“Would you object?”

“Nah... It’s not like you haven’t seen one of those things... but don’t expect a big thing just because the guy is big. I’ve seen it and it’s not impressive...”

“Stop it... You’re embarrassing me.”

She then gave me a lab coat to cover myself and began to work on cleaning my wound.

“It’s superficial,” she said. “Even the skin isn’t burned. It’s just black.”

“Look at the uniform dear. It’s a battle uniform and it was melted. I saw him get shot by a plasma cannon...”

“I know that, you already told me that but I’m telling you what I see.”

“I’m a super soldier and have the ability to heal fast. I also took the fire water which helped accelerate the healing process. But if the wound has healed, why does it still burn like hell?”

“Because you are burning inside..., a side effect of the plasma burn. It will pass. Put some cold on it,” said the Captain.

After Amih washed off all the black, she went and got something cold, wrapped it in the same kind of gauze that she used to clean my back and placed it on my wound. It was soothing and relaxing. I sat back in my chair and closed my eyes. I never did hear when Irevia came back. I only heard the words ‘disgusting’. When I opened my eyes I saw the awful look on her face.

“Since when has our daughter become such an aristocrat?” asked the Captain.

“Since she came back from Ostikon. You weren’t around to see her...” replied Amih.

“Sincerely dear, you have pirate roots so stop acting like you’re an aristocrat. You act like those Whites from Ostikon that Delche and Otsi described earlier,” said the Captain.

“Let him rest. Why don’t we go back to the reception area? We’ll see him later,” said Amih.

After they left I put my new uniform on. Soon after that Delche and Ori came back from lunch and brought me some food, which I wolfed down like a hungry dog.

“Let’s sit it out until dark and then we’ll load our supplies on the ship, fly off and go hunting,” I said.

Before dark the Captain, Ukasnek and Enai came back to see how we were doing.

After I explained our plan to them, I asked them to help us load our supplies and get our water. While Ori and the Captain brought the food, Ukasnek supplied us with water. Enai brought us some rakia in plastic jugs. Delche checked on our spare fuel and ammunition and I ran the ship’s diagnostics.

When we were done I said, “Don’t tell anyone where we’re going; not even Amih and Irevva.” I then pushed the hatch close button.

Hunting we shall go

I didn't know about the others but I felt my heart pounding hard and fast. How many more people would die this time? Every time we went on a mission people died. Or would it be our turn to die this time?

I put on my transmitter, the one I use to communicate with the soldiers, to show them what space looks like; at least that's what I told Ori when he asked me why I'd brought that silly thing with me. But truthfully, I enjoy talking to the soldiers. They always listen to me, no matter what I say and they never talk back.

As we lifted higher and higher into space my contact with the soldiers began to weaken and eventually cut out.

"Crap, I lost contact with the soldiers. This thing has crapped out. Is there any way we can boost the signal?"

"Nope...", said Delche. "I'm not going to sit here scanning for the little ship alone while you screw around with that thing."

"What frequency are you transmitting at?" asked Ori.

"How should I know...?"

"Okay then, I'll scan the entire spectrum and see if I can find it..."

Moments later Ori said, "Wow! Is that you? I detected a huge volume of data in the upper frequency spectrum. Turn off your transmitter."

"Yup, that's got to be you. The signal disappeared. Turn it on again. There it is. Let me receive it, boost it and retransmit it."

"Thank you Ori. It works fine now but I still can't hear the soldiers."

"That's because the signal coming back is weak. I can fix that. I'll clean it up and enhance it through the ship's receiver."

“Thanks again Ori.”

“Enough of that thing... Turn it off and turn on the long range sensors. Let’s start scanning for the little ship,” said Delche.

“When you turn your transmitter back on the ship’s computer will automatically reconnect you with your soldiers,” added Ori.

After we leveled off beyond Nelez’s upper atmosphere, we began to orbit the planet. Unfortunately all we could detect on our sensors were the Galaxy Trader ships on the surface.

“What kind of ship signature should we be looking for?” asked Delche.

“I don’t know. Check the logs...”

“For which day?”

“I don’t know... Look for the last day the cannons were fired...”

“I’m not your science officer... You should know how to do that yourself...” mumbled Delche.

“I didn’t hear what you said, can you repeat it?” I replied, even though I’d heard him perfectly.

“Never mind, I found it. I also found some ship signatures...”

“It must be them...” I said.

“Yes... all of you, start scanning...” ordered Delche. We’ve been up here for hours and gone over the entire planet’s surface, at least twice and nothing!”

“Can we scan for the ship’s ion trail?” I asked.

“What? What the hell is that? What the hell are you talking about? Are you running out of ideas and now you’re making things up?” grumbled Delche.

“I must have heard it somewhere...” I said and asked. “What’s eating you? Why are you so grumpy?”

“It’s way past midnight... Way past my bedtime and I haven’t eaten anything since noon... Wouldn’t you be grumpy?”

“Yes I would. Okay, I’ll fly into that pocket of debris over there and we can stop and have a rest. Now turn on the long range sensor alarm and both of you go to sleep. We have food, you can eat if you’re that hungry. Okay Delche?”

“I’d better not; it won’t sit well when I sleep...”

About an hour later the alarm went off full blast.

“What now? Can’t a person get a moments rest?”

“According to the logs, we’ve been sleeping for over an hour...” said Ori.

“So what the hell tipped off the alarm, another meteorite?” I asked.

“Holy crap, it’s one of those ships we’ve been looking for; the big one,” cried Ori.

“Are you sure? There shouldn’t be any ships here at all. Has it spotted us?”

“Yes and it stopped. It’s sitting there beyond our range of fire.”

“Some surprise attack this is going to be, eh Captain (referring to me)? Who’s surprised now?” asked Delche sarcastically.

“No problem, we’ll blast him out of existence the moment he attacks.”

“As you can see, he’s not going to attack.”

“Then we’ll chase him, overtake him and shoot him out of existence, okay? What’s the big deal? They don’t have the speed or firepower we have. I’ve chased one before.”

Delche realized that bickering wasn’t helping the situation so he stopped pestering me.

“Ori, open a channel and ask him what he wants.”

“I don’t speak their language, whatever it might be...”

“Talk to him in Macedonian for all I care. We have to do our due diligence before I blast him.”

“This is the Ostikon warship Dragon Fire requesting communications with the Captain of the ship facing us.”

“No reply, Captain.”

Moments later Ori called him again and asked, “What do you want?!”

He gave us a one word reply in Ostikon. He called us ‘pigs’...” said Ori, surprised.

“My younger self would have blasted him by now but my older self smelled a trap. Well guys what do you want to do?”

“Blast him!” said Ori, and Delche agreed.

“Translate for me Ori: This is the Captain, if you don’t leave right now I’ll chase you down, overtake your ship and this time blow it up! Understood?”

“You’ve had a run in with these guys before I assume,” said Ori.

“Yes! Now tell them what I said!”

“I did and they called us pigs again.”

“That’s probably the only Ostikon word they know. Let’s get out of here and see what happens.”

The moment we pulled out of the space garbage they followed. They were yelling at us in a language Ori didn’t understand.

“They’re goading us to attack them. But why?” asked Delche.

“Let’s get out of here... show them what this ship can do... Full speed ahead...”

“Sorry Captain they’re right behind us and, from the looks of it, they’re aiming to overtake us,” said Ori.

“So, why haven’t they fired on us? What are they waiting for?” asked Delche.

“Because they don’t have the range we have, I think. If they get too close they know we’ll fire at them. I can prove that.”

Suddenly I hit the reverse thrusters and quickly turned the ship around to face them. They instantly flew off in a tangent and when they were out of our cannon range they stopped.

“At least we know they don’t have the firepower to destroy us without destroying themselves. They must have enhanced their speed capability since our last encounter... But why? What are they planning to do... what kind of trap are they setting for us...? And who helped them enhance their speed?” I asked, thinking out loud.

“Holy shit! Two more of those ships are closing in. They’re right behind the pirate ship.”

“What’s going on? Are we going to have a party?” asked Delche sarcastically and somewhat curiously.

But before he finished talking we found ourselves surrounded inside a perfect triangle. They were all facing us and had their energy cannons fully charged.

“Interesting?” I said. “They can outrun us but not outgun us. We, on the other hand, can outgun them but we can’t outrun them. Their only hope of hitting us is if we make a mistake. Say, run towards one ship to get close enough to fire. But before we even get close enough, the other two will catch up and fire at us and possibly disable us with their combined firepower. Hmm, I think we have a bit of a problem. Diplomacy is in order... If we don’t move they won’t attack.”

“How do you know that? The three can take a run at us simultaneously and fire at us...” said Delche.

“If they do that they risk losing at least one ship. My guess is they think we’ll make a mistake and they’ll do something without any risk to themselves. Their ships are too valuable for them to risk on a stupid firefight like this one... They’re waiting for us to make a mistake, I’m sure of it. But we won’t make any mistakes if we just sit here, right?”

“Ori, open a channel and start groveling in Macedonian. Tell them we’re willing to surrender; ask them for terms. Just be mindful of what you say because your conversation with them is being recorded in our logs...”

“Delche, I have a job for you too.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Find a way to outrun them! Think hyperdrive...”

“You’ve got to be kidding me. Do you know how many calculations I have to do... and how long it will take? And besides we can only go in a straight line!”

“Delche, you haven’t even heard my plan and you’re complaining already?”

“Captain, oh Captain... They’re not responding... What do you suggest?” asked Ori.

“Keep trying. Let them think we’re desperate...”

“Here’s what I think we should do. We should do a short jump from here close to the ship facing us; close enough to fire at it. We should program the two outer cannons to auto fire the moment we come out of the jump. You just have to figure out the timing from here to there and program it into the navigation computer. If all goes well and the first ship is disabled, I’ll fly to the left and go after the second ship, the one on the left behind us. I’m sure when they see what happened to their pals on the first ship the two ships behind us will run in opposite directions. That way we can only go after one and the other one can escape... Now here is where you come in again. Set up a second jump for a predetermined distance and set the middle cannons to auto fire. When the second ship reaches that distance you activate the jump and the cannons will fire when we come out of it. Okay?”

“I can do that... and I think it will work. But what happens if the two ships decide to pursue us instead of running off?”

“Then we die... or... You prepare a third short jump and we’ll jump again and hope we don’t hit anything while we’re flying blind.”

While Ori kept pleading and enduring ridicule from all three ships in a language he didn’t understand, except for the word ‘pigs’, Delche went to work figuring out the jumps.

“Damn it, the computer won’t let me enter the commands without coordinates...”

“What the hell do we go now? Ori, any ideas?”

“Let me look it up in the manual... Here it is... For jumps without coordinates enter zero for the coordinates.”

“Thanks Ori, it worked. Okay Captain, I’m ready to do my part.”

I powered up all four of my plasma cannons and asked Ori to open a channel from my microphone.

“This is the Captain. Okay you f-ups, I’ve changed my mind... No more negotiations... Prepare to be blasted.”

Ori put their reply on speaker. They were all laughing at us. “First you grovel and cry like the baby that you are and now you play the tough guy by powering up your big cannons. Go ahead blast us... all three of us,” someone said in Macedonian, from the ship facing us. There was a lot of laughter in the background.

“I told you, they think they’ve got us over a barrel. Turn them off Ori!”

“Are we ready to do this?”

“Yes Captain...” said Delche, and Ori concurred.

“Hold on to your asses because when those cannons go off they’ll kick like a mule. Daf had them enhanced and they now kick harder than ever... Delche set us up for a jump.”

“Three, two, one, NOW!”

In the blink of an eye my ship exploded and the ship ahead vanished after a huge flash of light. A split second later I heard Ori screaming and holding his hip. And, as predicted, the two ships flew off in opposite directions. I powered up the engines, which I believe had stalled to avoid the flash ahead of us, and went in pursuit of the ship to our left.

“Turn off one of the cannons Delche, before we destroy ourselves.”

“I can’t, there’s no time... Prepare to activate the hyperdrive on my mark. MARK!”

My ship exploded again and the ship ahead vanished after another huge flash of light. This time our engines didn’t cut out.

“Are we going after him? The third ship,” yelled Delche excitedly.

“No, he’s gone... You tend to Ori and I’ll check the ship for damage. We’ll watch him from here until he disappears from our scanners.”

“Ori has a big bruise on his hip but he’ll live. I don’t think he has any broken bones. I’ll give him some rakia to ease the pain and put him to sleep.”

“Pour me some too and let’s find a secluded place to hide so we can get some rest... We won’t be able to catch up by chasing him. We’ll find another way.”

“I’ll bet you they’re not laughing now?” said Delche.

“It looks like there’s a whole pile of debris over there. I’ll hide the ship in it. It should at least keep us out of sight.”

“Out of sight, yes, but not out of detection. The ship’s engines still need to run to keep us alive in this vacuum of space.”

After we landed I helped Delche move Ori into his bed. He was completely plastered and asleep.

“There’s something wrong with that chair,” I said. “The same thing happened to Vel when I fired two cannons simultaneously during a previous mission.”

“I know, I spent some time with those two girls and Vel couldn’t stop talking. Especially about you! She’s your biggest fan.”

“That’s funny because when we were together she hated me and made fun of me at every opportunity.”

“I guess people are funny that way. I’ll have one more drink and I’m going to bed.”

“I’ll finish mine and I think I’ll stay here and continue to run diagnostics. Is the sensor alarm on?”

“Yes...”

I was very tired and must have fallen asleep when I heard a quiet beeping sound. It was the diagnostics alarm.

“What now?” I asked and put my hand over my mouth when realized both Delche and Ori were asleep. I turned off the alarm. When I looked at my viewer I saw all kinds of diagnostic errors. And since I didn’t know what to do I activated the maintenance robot; risking waking Delche and Ori. The repairs needed to be done as soon as possible. In our situation one never knew what might happen at any time.

I watched the robot work, move from place to place, open panels, remove parts, put new parts and wondered how the hell it knew what to do? I guess it has been programmed to take care of most things. What would happen if we ran out of parts, would it tell me? I didn’t think so, it didn’t speak. Would it skip the current task and go on to the next or would it stop and sit there like an idiot?

The next thing I remember was hearing a beeping sound coming from Ori’s computer. I must have been sleeping a long time because the robot had already finished the repairs and docked itself. It was probably an incoming call or a message. After beeping for a while it stopped on its own.

I must have fallen asleep again. I suddenly jumped up when Delche said something. When he saw me jump he said, “Sorry I didn’t know you were still sleeping.”

“How long have we been sleeping?”

“Long... I don’t know.”

“Go and see if Ori is still alive and wake him up.”

“I’m awake and I’m alive... I’ll be there in a minute...” said Ori.

“We’ve been in this dust bowl for nine hours and we’re buried in dust... And I mean deep in dust,” said Delche.

“Speaking of Nine, can I contact the soldiers and see how they’re doing. And also test to see if this thing works from this distance... By the way, where are we?”

“You’re the boss... Go ahead, talk to your soldiers... Just remember there will be a long delay before you hear back from them...” said Ori.

“We are... far from Nelez, that’s for sure,” said Delche.

“The transmitter isn’t working.”

“I just told you to expect a long delay because we’re far from Nelez. Keep it on for a while,” replied Ori.

After they’d both sat down, I asked Ori how he was doing.

“I’m doing fine, I’m sorry if I overreacted earlier.”

“No problem, we’re all friends here.”

“What do you want me to do?” asked Delche.

“You check our long range sensor logs to see if anything of importance happened while we were sleeping. Ori, you check your computer, it was beeping earlier. And I’ll take us out of this dust bowl.”

“Excuse me Captain but I have a message here from Airam. It’s about the recording. She tells me that Ruzha will accept it and is ready to receive it.”

“Send it then! Also, ask Airam to contact us after it airs in Ostikon. I’m curious to find out how they react.”

“There’s nothing in the logs... What’s do we do next?” asked Delche.

“We have two options. Go back to Nelez or go after the ship.”

“We should go after the ship. You promised Captain Orihci you’d destroy all the pirate ships. What will you tell him if go back now, Captain?” asked Delche.

“Ori, when you’re done sending the recording contact the Nelez tower. Send a message to Captain Orihci, give him a brief update and ask him what to do next. Do we return to Nelez or continue to pursue the pirates. Okay?”

“Okay Captain.”

“All this respect... from the both of you... calling me ‘Captain’ this and ‘Captain’ that. Where is it all coming from? Or are you being sarcastic?” I asked and laughed.

“I’m too tired for jokes... Please just get us out of this dust bowl so I can see light again. I feel like I’m dead and buried.”

“Yes Sir,” I said and gently pushed the joystick forward.

“It’s still dark out there, how deep are we buried?”

“It’s our shield. It’s loaded with dust. I’ll close the visor. Hopefully it will push the dust off.”

“We have a visor?” asked Delche, laughing out loud.

“Vel again... Am I the butt of all her jokes?”

“You sure are! This is one of her best. She tells it so well,” said Delche.

“Excuse me guys, I got a reply from the soldiers...” I said. “This thing actually works... this far out in deep space. How about that? I think I’ll send them a nice image of the sun rising on Nelez.”

After I fiddled with the visor, closing and opening it several times, we could finally see some stars in the distance. It was dark everywhere.

“The dust has covered everything. It’s everywhere. How do we get rid of it?” I asked.

“Leave it. It’s an improvement on the colour of your ship. Grey looks better than shit green, doesn’t it?” Delche asked.

“Don’t you speak like that about my ship...,” I said jokingly.

“Spray some water on the shield and it will wash off the dust. As for the rest of the ship, the moment we hit a pocket of air it will fly off.”

“We have a shield washer?” asked Delche jokingly.

“Don’t you start with me again... If you know how to do it then do it,” I said.

“Captain, Captain Orihchi has gotten back to us,” yelled Ori.

“Did you get an answer from him?”

“Yes. Captain Orihchi said to go after the third ship. We can’t allow the pirates to threaten our ships and people and get away with it.”

“Well gentlemen, we have our answer. Is that okay with you?”

“As if we have any choice,” said Delche.

“We always have a choice but do we make the right one? And that’s what gets us into trouble. As for me, my entire life I’ve been pulled into someone else’s problems and doing someone else’s bidding. Just as we pulled out into space earlier, I wondered how many more people were going to die today, during this mission. Every time I go on a mission people die. So my friends, we do have choices but don’t get to make them ourselves. Someone else makes them for us...”

Not a word from either one.

“Delche, please plot a course to the ship’s last known location...”

“And then follow its ion trail?”

“Are you making fun of me now?”

“Take it easy man... I’m trying to lighten the mood. People do die!”

“And you’re telling me it’s not my fault? That we decided to fight and not flee? We could have run you know...”

“Yes we could have! But that’s not us. Macedonians never run from a fight. You told me that! They fight and win...”

“How many people died at my hands because of that... And what did they ever do to me?”

“Shot you in the back! Now push that button and let’s get going.”

“I’m hungry, do you guys want something to eat?” asked Ori.

We both said yes.

Perhaps it wasn’t appropriate for me, at this time, to say what I’d said but I wanted them to know how I felt. I had the feeling that we weren’t coming back alive from this mission. I know how Captain Orihci felt but he should have taken the diplomatic route, not violence to deal with these pirates. I know he wants peace deep in his heart. But for some reason he seems to have a grudge against these particular pirates. Unfortunately for us these pirates are a determined bunch and will retaliate, especially now since we’ve encroached on their territory and shot down two of their ships. They’re probably asking themselves “why is this lunatic, a total stranger with no connection to us, attacking us?” I would be asking myself the same question. Why did I attack them out in space after they left Nelez the first time? I had destroyed several of their little ships... for no reason at all! I could have just left without firing a shot. I got shot in the back because of that... I may even have created an alliance between these pirates and my enemies on Ostikon because of that. If these pirates hadn’t been my enemies before, they would be now. After I’d destroyed two of their precious

ships I was sure they'd retaliate... This time big time, I could feel it in my bones.

"This is endless desolate space, there's nothing living or moving here for as far as our sensors can reach. We're wasting our time looking here, Captain," said Delche.

"Perhaps... But where would you hide if you saw your friends slaughtered in a way you've never seen before?" I asked.

"That and the shame they have to live with, the shame of losing, the shame of sacrificing their people and their ships. And for what? There is no profit in what they did. Not to mention their dignity as pirates. They will be looked down upon by their peers for the tragedy they brought upon them," said Delche.

"You seem to know a lot about these pirates Delche," I said.

"It's the same with all pirates... There is a saying: 'Never get into a fight that you can't win'..."

"Well, they thought they could win... I'm sure of it... and they were arrogant about it too. But you never know what kind of hand fate will deal you."

"In this case, given what you and Delche said, this would be a good place for them to hide," said Ori.

"The only way these pirates will get their dignity back and accept their losses is if they capture our ship or destroy it with us in it. And if they fail that, and don't want to face their shame, they'll destroy themselves," said Delche.

"So, they're like a wounded animal and we are it's hunters in pursuit... Keep your eyes open at all times and prepare for an ambush," I warned.

"You're probably both right. It sounds to me like there are only two acceptable options for these pirates; glory or death. And if they can't have glory they'll choose death," said Ori.

“It’s the pirate way...” said Delche.

Then, as we quietly scanned every inch of space, the sensor alarm went off. Expecting an ambush I instinctively dove down and avoided the plasma blast aimed at us. The ship was hiding in a pile of space debris directly in front of us.

“What the hell was that?” I yelled.

“It’s the ship we’re hunting. But how did you know he was hiding here and to duck at the right time?”

“Ori knows. We pulled a similar stunt on the Galaxy Trader destroyer a long time ago... You know the one... for which I became famous. We hid in space debris and turned everything off that might us give away. Then we pounced on the destroyer. Just like these guys did to us. But unlike the destroyer’s Captain who tried to use a conventional means of defense, this Captain ran... and avoided the blast.”

“They’re getting away Captain, what should we do?” yelled Ori in a panicked voice.

“They’re not going anywhere. They’re only setting up for their next ambush. It seems that the mouse is now chasing the cat.”

“You don’t seem to be too concerned Captain, but their next hit could be our last...” yelled Ori.

“Look, all they can do is shoot at us. If you paid attention you would know they only have one medium strength plasma cannon and no torpedoes. Their ship seems to be designed for speed. Their weapon’s system is limited at best. It’s designed for defensive purposes. Their cannon isn’t capable of penetrating our hull. The best they can do is disable our engines momentarily, which gives them enough time to escape. But it seems to me they don’t want to escape...”

“So, why are they attacking us then?” asked Ori.

“I don’t know. Perhaps they’ve underestimated the capability of our ship. They probably have no idea how thick our hull is. But by now they should know what kind of firepower we carry,” I replied.

“Strange... This all seems strange to me...” said Ori.

“Perhaps we’re looking at this all wrong. What if they’re doing this to keep us here while they wait for reinforcements?” Delche suggested.

“You mean more of the same ships?” I asked.

“No! That would be insane,” replied Delche. “By now they should know that we can destroy them and I’m sure they don’t want to lose any more of their ships. Earlier you mentioned you suspected that there might be a connection between these pirates and the Whites in Ostikon. I’ve heard rumours that the Whites in Ostikon were building a ‘secret weapon’, a warship like this one but far superior which can outrun and outgun us. What if they’re waiting for something like that to arrive?”

“Are you kidding me man? If they had such a ship don’t you think they would have used it by now? They would have attacked us directly in Nelez... instead of going through the pirates?”

“No, I’m serious! They can destroy us here and blame it on the pirates. Who would know?”

“Why would the pirates accept such a responsibility? Why risk a war with the Galaxy Traders? You know that Captain Orihci will get his ship flying sooner or later. And what do you think he’ll do when he finds out the pirates destroyed our ship and killed us? No, there has to be another explanation as to why they’re goading us...”

“Perhaps...! Perhaps I’m wrong... I hope I am... we’ll see,” said Delche and resumed looking for the ship.

A day later Ori received a message from Airam informing us that the recording we sent to Ruzha had been received and aired on

channel 45. There was a lot of cheering from the outlanders but no big reaction from the government. A government spokesperson said that the government knew about the recording before it was aired and the soldiers were cheering Ostikon as a friendly gesture of solidarity. I advised Ori to forward the message to Captain Orihcei and tell him to air it in the Galaxy Trader planets or do as he saw fit.

We continued to play the cat and mouse game with the pirate ship for four days. During that time we had about a dozen close calls. Each time they came into range they fired their cannon at us. We were hit only once. I managed to dodge their cannon almost every time. They could see their cannon had no effect on us... yet they persisted. I never fired at them once. It would have been futile because we couldn't get a lock. They came and went like a flash.

Then, on the fourth day, it happened. Delche was right. We were attacked by a warship a little larger than ours. It was round, long and shiny. It looked like a bullet made of gold. From what Ori told us, its hull was made of a newly invented gold alloy that was about ten times stronger than our ship's hull. We didn't see the ship when it fired at us. As usual, the moment I heard the sensor alarm in my ship I ran to avoid the blast. I flew in a different direction each time to maximize our chances of avoiding being blasted. We didn't see the gold ship but we saw the devastation it caused. It had twice the cannon range as our ship and probably triple the power. It had six cannons, four in the front and two in the back, firing backwards. It also had two torpedo tubes, one in the front and one in the back. We had no chance in hell of outrunning or outgunning this ship. It could destroy us if we ran in front of it or followed it from behind. We couldn't get close to it without being destroyed. Even if we did there was no way our cannons could penetrate its hull; even if we fired all four cannons simultaneously.

We were all visibly shaken when we saw it and realized what it could do. The only weakness I saw in it was its pilot who seemed inexperienced and overanxious. He wanted to destroy us without giving us a chance to surrender.

"Well boys, it looks like our goose is cooked," I said as we watched him turn around and come at us again.

Then, even before he had a chance to straighten his ship, I flew under him and went in the opposite direction.

“Snap out of it guys, I need your assistance pronto! Delche be ready for a short hyperdrive jump on my mark. Ori open a channel and keep it open. Make sure everything is recorded... in case we survive.”

“I can’t calculate a jump that fast...” yelled Delche.

“Use the last jump you calculated.”

“Done!”

“Ready... MARK!”

“How far did we jump?”

“Not far. He’s catching up. He’s flying at an unimaginably fast speed.”

“Does he have hyperdrive?”

“Even if he did he wouldn’t be able to use it. Where would he go? He can’t predict which way we’ll go.”

“Thanks for that Delche. You gave me an idea. Keep the hyperdrive active at all times. Now try and figure out the range of his cannons and remind me every time he gets close.”

“Here he comes...” yelled Ori in a panicked tone of voice.

I flew our ship slightly to the left of his line of travel and did another jump.

“Captain, if he doesn’t kill us you will. These maneuvers you’re performing are very dangerous,” yelled Delche.

“Ori, speak to the man and ask him who he is and what he wants.”

After several tries Ori said, “No reply, Captain.”

“He’s coming up fast again... JUMP NOW!” yelled Delche.

“He fired at us but missed. It looks to me like he is inexperienced and flies like a raging bull. It must be frustrating for him. He has ten times the advantage over us and hasn’t hit us once...” said Delche sounding a little calmer.

“Boys, I have an idea...” I said.

“It’s about time!” yelled Delche.

“If we don’t have the firepower to destroy him, I know someone who does.”

“Delche, keep your eyes open and make sure to tell me when to jump. Ori, you keep talking to him and get him frustrated and mad. We’re going to hopscotch our way all the way to Nelez. When we get close... close enough so I can speak to the soldiers without a time delay, I’ll prepare them to fire simultaneously, just like the last time. See if we can blast him out of the sky, Okay?”

“Here he comes! JUMP!”

This time I swerved to the right. He fired his cannons multiple times, rapid fire straight and to the left.

“Captain, he’s responding. He sounds very angry but I don’t understand what he’s saying. I don’t know the language.”

“Just keep talking to him. If we survive we’ll translate what he said. Every time he misses goad him some more,” I said to Ori. I turned to Delche, who was looking at me speaking and said, “Delche, stay on the ball, our lives depend on you!”

“What do you think I’m doing...,” he said and yelled. “JUMP NOW!”

“He’s firing like a madman in all directions. What’s he trying to do? Now he’s yelling at the top of his voice,” cried Ori.

“How close are we to Nelez and how long will it takes us to get there?” I asked Delche.

“About half an hour.”

“That’s too long.”

“What if I create another jump, a longer one,” suggested Delche.

“Do you trust me with the jumps now? Make it longer but not too long to lose him.”

“Okay Captain.”

After we executed the first longer jump I figured I had enough time to contact the soldiers and get them outside and ready to fire. As soon as I made contact I instructed Ori to call the Nelez communications tower and ask them to turn off the automatic transmitter and not to interfere with the soldiers. I also asked Ori to leave a brief encrypted message for Captain Orihci letting him know what we were about to do.

We continued with the jumps until we came close to Nelez. On the way there I outlined my plan and asked Delche and Ori to trust me and not interfere in what I was doing because I needed to concentrate. Just before we reached the range of fire from the soldiers on the surface I turned off one of the ship’s engines and allowed the ship to fly erratically. When the soldiers had us in their sight I cut the second engine and allowed the ship to spin out of control making it look like we had engine trouble. Our assailant was coming at us fast and appeared in our sights. The moment I saw him I relayed that information to the soldiers and asked them to target the shining object behind us. I could see everything from Nine’s eyes. The soldiers had their loaded rifles aiming first at our ship and then at the shining ship. Then, when our assailant was close enough to fire on, I ordered the soldiers to fire. I yelled “FIRE” and then jumped our ship out of the way into space.

There was a powerful flash and a horrendous explosion. There was nothing left of our assailant except for his last screaming words, which were recorded in our communications logs.

I dismissed the soldiers and sent them back to their barracks.

“It’s time to go home boys,” I said. “I’m hungry as a dog, sleepy and could use a drink or two...”

“No one is going to believe what we went through... No one!” said Ori.

“But it will be one hell of a story to tell...” said Delche as we entered Nelez’s atmosphere.

A bitter welcome

We looked around everywhere as we descended towards the facility, but didn't see a single person; not even the usual welcoming committee in front of the main door.

"Where is everyone?" asked Ori.

"It's midmorning and this place should be buzzing with activity," I said as I put the ship down in the usual place.

"There's someone at the door," said Delche. "It looks like Enai. He's running this way."

"I'll open the hatch."

All three of us were off our seats and standing up when he walked in.

"What's going on Enai? Where is everyone?" I asked.

"Where do I start?" he replied, breathing heavily and stood there looking at us.

"Start somewhere! Don't keep us in suspense... Has something terrible happened?" asked Delche.

"Well, nothing that terrible... but Captain Orihci and Ukasnek have been arrested..."

"Why? Who arrested them?"

"These men who came in a ship demanding to know why we fired at their planet..."

"What? You'd better start from the beginning Enai and tell us everything you know."

"Well, two nights ago a ship arrived here late in the evening and landed back there in the valley. There was hardly anyone from the

facility outside so they grabbed the first person they found and asked him to take them to our leader. The man escorted two of them, both armed, into the dining area where Captain Orihci, Ukasnek and I had just finished eating supper and were having a drink of rakia. Without saying a word they nabbed us and took us outside to their ship. There were many of them standing around outside their ship. About a dozen were armed with hand weapons. One of them, a tall man, stepped forward and spoke to us. He first asked if we were in charge of this building. The Captain told him that we were. Then he wanted to know why we had been firing at his planet. He spoke in the Galaxy Trader language but we didn't understand half the words he was saying, which made it difficult to understand what exactly he was asking. We told him we didn't fire at his planet or any other planet for that matter. In fact we didn't know which planet he was from. He then pointed to the big planet. You know the one you had the soldiers aim at when the flash happened. When we realized that he was talking about that planet, we stopped talking and they arrested us. They demanded to know where the weapon is so I kind of panicked and told him you have it... and that you are currently on a mission and would be back soon. I didn't tell him when because I didn't know exactly."

"So, where are they now?" I asked.

"They're all in their ship sleeping. They sleep during the day because I think their daytime is our nighttime."

"What about the Captain and Ukasnek?"

"They're inside the ship also."

"Is there anything else that we should know about?" I asked.

"Well, they released me because I promised them I would deliver you to them. And if I don't, the moment you arrive, they'll kill the Captain and Ukasnek."

"Don't worry Enai. This is another problem we need to solve. You did the right thing."

“Thank you, and I am sorry.”

“A couple more questions... Did any one of them go inside the facility... and did they see the soldiers?”

“Besides the two who came to get us, no. And they haven’t seen the super soldiers.”

“One million of them marched outside this morning and fired their weapons and you tell me no one from the ship saw them? Not even their guards?”

“No, no one that I know of. No guards were posted. All the visors on their ship’s windows were closed... I assume they were all sleeping. The people from the facility, including myself, kept an eye on their ship from the windows on the upper floors and nothing in that ship moved.”

“Is the ship armed?”

“Yes, I saw one plasma cannon on the visible side. It looked like an add-on. A commercial ship retrofitted with weapons.”

“Why is there no one outside?”

“The people are afraid to go out...”

“Are the soldiers being fed and looked after?”

“To some extent but we’re running out of food. No food is being delivered from the valley. And we have stopped the DNA testing.”

“Enai, get back inside and tell the people to resume their work. Tell them we are here and will take care of the immediate problem.”

After Enai left, I sat down, took a long, deep breath and said, “It looks like there is no rest for us today...”

“And here I thought we would get a hero’s welcome...” said Delche.

“So, what now Captain?” asked Ori.

“Nothing about what happened here makes any sense. Who are these people and what do they want? Are they officials from the planet we shot at? Or are they thieves using the opportunity to rob us of our nonexistent weapon? Why are they so confident in what they are doing to not even have guards posted around their ship? Is someone from the inside working with them? I don’t think so! Because they would have known no such weapon exists. Why didn’t they react to the soldiers this morning? Is it true that they didn’t see them? Surely a ship like that has sophisticated monitoring equipment which would have spotted the soldiers, the latest flash and us landing. Like I said, nothing here makes any sense.”

“I agree with all that Captain. But there’s also the question of how could we have possibly hit their planet from all the way down here? The plasma would have dissipated long before it reached the planet,” said Delche.

“Not necessarily. This was no ordinary plasma coming from a single cannon. This kind of plasma was made of strands; each vibrating at a different frequency that would twist and twist and twist into a thin string, as thin as a pin as it traveled. And yes, until it encountered something solid it would travel forever in empty space. Theoretically...” said Ori.

“So it’s possible we could have hit their planet...”

“Yes Captain, but you saw the flash... The plasma was dissipated and couldn’t have reached their planet.”

“So, what are we going to do Captain?” asked Delche.

“Well, you and Ori should go inside the facility and stay out of harms way. I will go to their ship and find out who these people are and what they want.”

After protesting that they should be with me and that we were all in this together, I convinced them that they would be more useful to me if they weren't being arrested along with me. They agreed and left.

I thought I might need some protection so I released my guards and made sure they were armed. I locked my ship and went towards the visiting ship. On the way I could see people inside the facility looking outside through the windows. I guess they were curious... Was there going to be a shootout? Like in the old westerns back on earth? I stopped for a moment, smiled at the spectators and waved. Many waved back. I realized I was too tired even to smile. I hadn't slept much for four days and was irritable. In the state I was in, I wouldn't have gone to confront these people if they weren't holding my friends Captain Orihci and Ukasnek hostage. I would have used gun diplomacy... shoot first and ask questions later...

I popped a vial of fire water into my mouth for good measure, hoping it would sober me up and give me some energy. But all it did was made me angrier. When I got to their ship I punched its hull several times with my fist and yelled, "Open up, this is Captain Otsiron, the guy you're looking for. Open up or I'm busting in." I don't know why I said that but it was in Macedonian so I doubt they would figure it out anyway.

One of the ship's visors opened momentarily and closed quickly. Then I heard a hatch open on the opposite side of the ship and about a dozen armed men dashed out with their handguns pointing at me. Suddenly my guards, who were behind me all this time, drew their weapons and jumped in front of me. The tall man, who Enai had mentioned earlier, came out. He spoke to me but my universal translator couldn't make much sense of what he said.

"Who are you and what do you want?" I yelled loudly.

The man spoke again and said, "I government man from planet there... Why you shoot at planet?"

"I will tell you everything you want to know," I said, "under two conditions. One lower your weapons and two release my people that you're holding in there."

“Weapons stay. You drop weapons. I arrest you... you shoot planet...”

I ordered my guards to lower their weapons and stand aside so that I could see the man I was speaking with and said, “Okay, let’s be civil about this and tell me exactly what it is that you want?”

“You negotiate?”

“Yes. I’ll give you whatever you want if you don’t arrest me and if you let my friends go.”

“You pirate?” he asked.

“Maybe...” I replied.

“You give me weapon, I let you go.”

“Okay but I want to see my friends. How do I know if they are still alive?”

“See weapon then friends.”

“First friends then weapon.”

“Okay.”

Moments later both Captain Orihci and Ukasnek were escorted by armed men in front of me. They were shackled and gagged. While they were distracted looking at Orihci and Ukasnek, I placed my transmitter on my head. Enai must have seen me because everyone looking outside had disappeared from the windows and he’d turned off the portable transmitter.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Where is weapon!?” he yelled.

“Here it comes... be patient...”

Moments later all the facility doors burst open and the super soldiers in battle gear began to appear and circle their ship in multiple circles.

“What’s this!?” he yelled. “Now I kill you...”

“This is the weapon that fired at your planet. One million super soldiers. You wanted them now you take them.”

“I no believe you. I kill you.”

“I will show you proof if you want.”

“No! You trick me and I kill you all!” he said and I heard the ship powering up its engines and cannons.

At that same instant I had the entire force of super soldiers raise their weapons, lock them and aim at their ship. They made a hell of a racket and scared the hell out of them. My guards also reacted and raised their weapons.

“Now lower your weapons and turn off your ship’s engines. Let us settle this properly or I will have you and your ship vaporized.”

I then turned to the men pointing their handguns at me and yelled, “You, you drop your weapons...”

I could see the armed men shaking in fear but they didn’t drop their weapons. Maybe they didn’t understand what I said, so I made a hand motion.

Then suddenly, and without warning, they all ran back into their ship and it took off vertically, flying like a bat out of hell.

People started coming out of the facility and ran towards us but couldn’t get through the tight ring the super soldiers had created around us. I ran to free the Captain and Ukasnek who both were still shackled and gagged. My guards ran right behind me with weapons drawn. It was chaos everywhere. The first thing I did was remove

the gag from the Captain's mouth. Then I did the same for Ukasnek. Both were breathing heavily, trying to get some air. I then dismissed the soldiers and the crowd started to pour in.

I heard Enai yell, "Everyone stop and get back to work. The soldiers need to be fed. They have been without food for two days. I'm sure you'll see the Captain later. He'll make an announcement to let you know what happened. Go back to work now."

Everyone turned back except for Ireva, Amih, Delche, Ori and Enai who said, "I'll get a lock picking device to take those shackles off," and then he left.

"There were plenty of kisses from Amih and Ireva for the Captain and Ukasnek but none for us. Again I felt as lonely as ever and a bit insignificant. I blamed it on hunger and sleep deprivation. I stepped back to give them some space and joined Delche and Ori. They looked at me strangely for a moment, making me wonder if they could see how I felt.

Enai came back with one of his associates who supposedly was an expert lock picker. At least that's what Enai said when he passed by.

"Expert lock picker my ass... He's probably another pirate who learned the skill on the job," mumbled Delche.

"Ukasnek has a past with them. We should get him good and drunk one of these days and ask him about Enai and his associates and their past involvements. I'm sure he'll have a lot of stories to tell... given how he likes to brag," I said.

The moment Captain Orihci was freed he ran over to us and thanked us for freeing them without incident.

"Thank you for freeing us. These guys were threatening to kill us all, the entire facility, if we didn't surrender the weapon; a weapon we didn't even have. Both Ukasnek and I tried to tell them that, to convince them that we didn't have such a weapon but they didn't believe us... They refused to listen to reason... Thank you again..."

Ukasnek also thanked us and said he had to run. He hadn't been to the washroom for over a day. On his way into the facility he yelled, "See you in the dining area. I could use a drink."

"I don't know about you but I'm starved," said the Captain. "I could also use a drink or two."

When we started walking towards the facility we were joined by Enai, Ireva and Amih. I turned to Ireva and asked, "Did you miss me?" I couldn't help myself. But instead of Ireva, Amih answered.

"Of course we missed you. You're all part of our big family now. I'm so grateful you freed my husband and our good friend Ukasnek. Everyone in this facility is grateful for what you did. One of these days we should throw you a big party in appreciation... And by the way, it's nice to see you've got your guards back... The girls look good on you."

"Thank you," I said along with Ori and Delche.

The Captain was still in shock and didn't feel much like talking. He was trying to process what had happened. In fact no one wanted to talk despite the fact that there was so much to discuss; especially about our mission and what had happened here in the facility.

It was lunchtime when we arrived in the dining area but the food wouldn't be ready for another hour. The episode with the ship had disrupted everyone's schedule; including that of the cooking staff.

We all sat down at our usual table but no one wanted to talk. Their minds were on other things, including their jobs which they had neglected for almost two days.

The Captain was first to speak, "If it's okay with everyone I would like to go and have a rest. I haven't slept since those people arrived."

At the same time we all mumbled something similar and started getting up and leaving. When Ukasnek arrived most of us had left.

"Where is everybody going?"

“Some are going to bed and the rest are going back to work...”
replied Irena.

“Ah, good. I could use some sleep. I haven’t slept a wink in two days...” replied Ukasnek and then looked at me. “Please dock your guards in your ship. Don’t leave them active. The idea of having robots loose gives me the creeps.”

We each went our way without saying a word.

I took Ukasnek’s advice and took my guards back to my ship and deactivated them. I was too tired to walk back to the facility so I decided to sleep in my ship.

The next thing I heard was Ukasnek banging on the ship’s hull and yelling, “What’s the matter with you? Are you dead?”

I was laying face down in my bed just as I had been when I went to sleep and it was still daylight outside. So I wondered what was so urgent that Ukasnek would want me up. I tried to speak but couldn’t. After I cleared my throat I yelled, “What do you want? Let me sleep, I just got to bed...”

“You’ve been in there since yesterday noon. It’s almost noon the next day... What have you been doing all this time? Now get up and join us in the meeting room. The Captain has some news to share.”

I didn’t reply. Ukasnek started banging again until he heard me say, “Okay, okay, I’m on my way.”

I decided to skip the shower... for the fifth day. If they wanted me back that urgently then they would have to accept me as I was.

“You look like hell,” said the Captain when I arrived.

“And so do you,” I replied.

“Is this how you greet each other?” Amih joked.

“Mom, they’re men... This is how they greet each other all the time... And besides, why do you care?”

We didn’t respond to Amih’s comment.

The Captain then said, “Delche and Ori brought us up to speed on your mission while you were sleeping but that’s not why I asked you here. We received news early this morning that the investigative commission has been assembled and was dispatched yesterday. It’s on its way here as we speak. They will be arriving tomorrow morning. The tower will inform us of the exact time as they get closer. There will be thirteen of them; twelve representatives from the planets and one diplomat from the central government leading the group. I want everyone on their toes and prepared to answer all questions truthfully but without giving too much information. Don’t assume and don’t speculate. I want you ladies to prepare quarters for each and a common room where they can meet and conduct interviews. Also, have a server available to them at all times to bring them snacks and refreshments while they work. Unless they ask don’t let them wander around alone. Ukasnek, look after their security. I don’t want any incidents. And you,” he ordered, looking at me, “make sure you shower and shave...”

“After seeing the horrified look on Amih’s face, we all started laughing.

“I’ll get him back, don’t worry,” I said.

She shook her head and smiled.

“Okay then, any questions?” No one had questions so the Captain dismissed everyone and most went to the dining area to get their lunch. The Captain, Delche, Ori and I remained behind.

“I haven’t eaten in days,” I said, “but I don’t feel hungry.”

“I feel the same...,” replied the Captain.

Delche said, “Us too but we decided to eat breakfast anyway to get our energy back.”

Ori agreed.

“You went through a lot my friends and I want to express my deepest appreciation for what you did for us... and how you did it. That ship you destroyed would have been a menace to the entire galaxy. It would have changed things beyond recognition and brought our civilization to its knees. All joking aside, you did the world a big favour by getting rid of it,” said the Captain.

“What puzzles me Captain is whose ship was it?” I asked.

“The language the pilot spoke wasn’t from here and not from Ostikon...” added Ori.

“And just because we destroyed one ship doesn’t mean there aren’t any others like it...” warned Delche.

“I don’t know what to tell you guys but as of tomorrow our hands will be full, hopefully not with more crap, with our visitors. So, whatever needs to be done let’s do it today. Let’s go and eat anyway and head for the research lab... And by the way... the DNA testing has resumed and we’re past halfway done,” said Captain Orihci.

While we were eating the Captain said to me, “You look distracted. Is there something bothering you?”

“Yes,” I said. “I’m the only official representative from the Ostikon government here. Do I answer questions on their behalf even though I’m neither from Ostikon nor do I know anything of Ostikon’s involvement in this war? Is it even appropriate for me to do that...?”

“You have a good point. I think you should contact the Ostikon government and sort that out with them.”

“Ori, can you do that? Can you let Asora know what’s going on here? Better yet, ask her to send someone here, preferably a diplomat... Suggest old man Nagol, that’s the only person I trust besides Asora.”

“I’ll do it as soon as we get back to the ship...”

“Anything else bothering you?” asked the Captain.

I smiled and both Delche and Ori laughed.

When we got to the lab and told them that we wanted a message analyzed, Enai went and got one of his associates; the one who had modified my transmitter and universal translator to speak Macedonian. But when he arrived we didn’t have anything to give him to analyze.

“Where’s the sample?”

We looked at each other. Enai said, “Give him the message you want him to translate.”

“It’s audio and is currently in our ship’s logs...” Ori explained.

After a bit of rambling back and forth we finally decided how to do it. The associate gave us a receiving frequency and Ori and I went to the ship to transmit the audio message to him. After it was done I left while Ori remained on the ship to prepare and send a message to Asora.

When I got back to the lab, the message had been received and Enai’s linguist was attempting to identify the language. But lucky for us, Captain Orihci recognized the language. He’d heard it before. It belonged to a royal family on a planet located on the other side of the Galaxy Trader world. The message contained mostly swear words. There was nothing worthy in it, nor did it identify the pilot or to whom the ship belonged. So we decided not to pursue it any further at this time.

About six hours later, after we had our supper, Delche, Ori and I went back to my ship to check if Asora had responded and she had. It was a short message. After she answered our questions and agreed that someone from her government should be at the inquiry, she said she would be happy to send Nagol. But it would be up to him if he wanted to go. It was most interesting what she said after that...

“Something must have happened about a day earlier because the Whites are leaving Ostikon in droves and are disappearing. All of the Whites in my government have left their posts and disappeared, including Princess Anelia who basically unofficially ran my government and dismantled our military. If you know anything about this, please let us know...”

“Now why would the Whites run like rats?” asked Delche sarcastically and then answered his own question. “Because they failed to assassinate you... And sooner or later you will figure that out and come for them. You did promise them that... right?”

“I sure did! But still, we have no evidence that they were behind the golden ship...”

“Oh, come on... No one else around here has the knowhow or the resources to build such a ship. The alloy from which the ship’s hull was built is an Ostikon invention and not easy or cheap to manufacture,” said Ori.

“Let’s talk to the Captain before we answer Asora,” I suggested.

“You know what? You two go and talk to the Captain. I’ll prepare a report for Asora and send her our mission logs and let them have a look at the ship for themselves...” replied Ori.

We agreed.

The Captain also agreed that we should inform Asora about everything we know and let her decide for herself if the Whites were involved or not. As for Nagol coming here he said, “I haven’t heard that name for a long time. I’ve never met the man but I’ve heard many good things about him.”

After Delche and I returned to my ship, we helped Ori compile and send Asora the report. Since it was late at night and we felt too tired... and lazy... to walk back to our rooms in the facility, we decided to spend the night in my ship.

The investigative commission arrives

After we received the call early the next morning that the investigative commission's ship was arriving in an hour, the tower people ran around frantically informing everyone. By the time one of them came out to my ship, we were already dressed and looking prim and proper. We'd had showers and I had shaved. Delche and Ori wore their white, military uniforms with the Macedonian symbols on them. They even wore the medals given to them by the Ostikon authorities.

When we stepped outside my ship the place was teeming with people, waiting for the commission to arrive.

"Good morning Captain Orihci, Amih, Ireva, Ukasnek, Enai..." I said in the order they were standing waiting for us to join them.

They all said good morning. Amih looked at me and smiled; I guess because I had shaved as the Captain had ordered.

"They can land here in front of your ship... This would be a good place, right?" Captain Orihci asked, looking good in his Captain's military uniform.

"Since we don't have a landing pad, this is just as good a place as any as long as their ship fits here..." I replied.

"I assume it'll be a small ship... If not, we'll point them down there... to the valley."

After we joined the welcoming line I said, "This reminds me of my village back in Macedonia, on earth. Every time we had strangers visiting, the entire village would come out to welcome them..."

"Yes, we are a curious bunch... Not many government officials visit us here. Who wants to visit a bunch of farmers anyway, right?"

"We're not all farmers!" Amih piped up, looking spiffy.

Ireva came over and grabbed my hand and then grabbed my translator, placing it on my ear and whispered, “Where is your formal uniform, man? They’ll think you’re a farmer for sure dressed like that. No, no, I’m wrong... They’ll think you’re a gorilla in a suit. And the irony is you’re the star of this show. They came here to see the main attraction... and that would be you!”

“Ireva now isn’t the time for jokes... Go away or I’ll tell your mother what you said...”

Just as I said that, there was a huge outcry from the spectators yelling, “There they are...!”

The Captain stepped forward and gave the ship a number of hand signals and it began to descend in front of us.

After it landed there was a huge hiss and the engines cut out. There was silence in the crowd, with only a few whispers heard here and there. Then there was a loud “aah” from the crowd when a hatch started opening at the front of the ship and became a staircase when it hit the ground. It was beautifully decorated.

Then a tall, well-dressed older woman appeared at the top of the stairs. The Captain stepped forward and said, “Welcome to our humble planet Nelez. I’m Captain Orihci, Captain of the Galaxy Trader 2nd Destroyer.”

The woman then smiled and replied softly, “I am Madam Grooni, representative of the Galaxy Trader central government and leader of the investigative commission.”

She stepped aside and allowed the other twelve to step down as she introduced each of the investigators and mentioned what planet they were from.

After she was finished she came down the stairs and headed straight for me. “You must be Captain Otsiron.”

I smiled.

“And who is this lovely creature beside you?”

“Oh, this is my wife Irevia...” I said.

At this point Irevia’s face turned red but she kept smiling.... That will fix you, I thought to myself, for making fun of me.

Madam Grooni laughed out loud and said, “Congratulations. That’s nice. I didn’t know you were married?”

“We are not married,” I replied. “I’m just getting back at her for making a bad joke about me.”

“It’s nice to see that you have a sense of humour dear,” said Madam Grooni and turned to greet Irevia, Delche and Ori. I then introduced her to the others on my other side.

After that Madam Grooni grabbed me by the arm and said, “So you’re that brave alien from earth about whom everyone is raving...?”

I didn’t know what to say so I didn’t reply. I could see Irevia snickering, especially since Madam Grooni kept holding my arm tightly.

At that point Captain Orihci invited our guests to follow him to the reception area.

Even after we started walking towards the facility entrance, Madam Grooni was still holding onto my arm.

Irevia caught up to us and asked, “Madam Grooni did you bring any luggage with you?”

“Of course my dear, you can have it delivered to us once we’re settled in. You’re an unusually good-looking creature but you speak our language perfectly. Where are you from?”

I looked over at Irevia and smiled at her. She didn’t like that.

“I’m a native of this planet. I’m Captain Orihchi and Amih’s daughter.”

“That’s nice dear. That explains your looks... I’m also from this planet. Well, let’s say I was born on this planet... a long, long time ago. How much do you know about this planet... and about your family?”

“Practically nothing...”

After we arrived in the reception area the Captain raised his arms to get everyone’s attention. Ukasnek and Enai ordered the onlookers and locals, who had joined the procession, to leave and go back to work.

“Who are all these people?” asked Madam Grooni.

“They are the volunteers who do most of the work here to keep the facility functioning. Some arrived from other places and are waiting to find out the status of their loved ones who were abducted by the robots during the war. But most of them are people whose homes were destroyed by the war and they have nowhere else to go... Please hold off on your questions until after we settle you in... There will be plenty of time for questions later. Thank you!” replied the Captain.

“They are here to welcome you Madam Grooni. Some of these people have never seen anyone from our central government before and are just curious... Now please come with me and I will escort you to your room. You can let go of him now...” said Ireva.

After all our guests left, Captain Orihchi and the others came over and we all sat down.

“I really feel out of place right now. These people seem so strange to me... but friendly at the same time. That’s never been my experience on my planet...” said Delche.

“What about me? I got more attention from these people here than I ever did at home,” said Ori.

“Because both of you are aliens here, a curiosity just like me...” I said and smiled.

“You and your jokes, look at the way she was hanging onto you. And what was that I heard about you and my daughter?” asked Amih.

“I’m sure we will do fine, we just have to adjust to the new condition... living with government people...” said the Captain.

“You mean living on edge... like prisoners in our own homes...?” said Ukasnek.

“You’re all still pirates at heart... But don’t worry, I’ll protect you. You know I can because the commission boss is my new girlfriend...” I said jokingly.

Everyone cracked up laughing and couldn’t stop.

“What’s so funny? Are you laughing at me? You and your stupid jokes! You embarrassed me you know? I’ll get you for that!” yelled Irevia as she walked in.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were married...” Amih teased.

“Not you too Mom... You’re always the serious one...”

We cracked up laughing again and so did Irevia after she thought about it for a moment.

After we finally stopped laughing Irevia said, “We need to get their luggage out of the ship so that the crew can leave. They must be getting anxious by now.”

“Since we have no helpers at the moment, why don’t we all walk over there, get the bags out of the ship and let them leave,” suggested the Captain.

“How many people in the crew?” asked Amih.

“Why does it matter Mom?”

“I want to give them each a parting gift.”

“Three, four at most...” replied Captain Orihci.

“I’ll take six packages, just in case...”

The Captain led us into the ship and announced to the crew why we were there. But instead of pointing us to the luggage, the three young ladies kept staring at the Captain.

“Perhaps they don’t speak your language... Try another language...” I said jokingly and smiled at them.

“We understand him all right. Perfectly...” one of them said.

“Maybe you should meet his wife then, she has a gift for each of you,” I replied.

“It’s not what you think!” said the older one and introduced herself as the Captain and the others as pilots in training. “This is Captain Orihci... The famous Captain Orihci, Captain of a destroyer... Do you even know how prestigious that is? He’s a legend on our planet...”

At this point Amih pushed us aside, got in front of us and said, “These are for you, two each, now please show us where the luggage is because we need to go. We have work to do and I’m sure you need to go too...”

After we got the bags out and had waved goodbye to the three, Irena turned to her mother and said, “How rude of you Mom... It’s not like you... What’s gotten into you...?”

We were all curious to hear what Amih had to say but she said nothing. She just looked embarrassed and sad.

I went over to her, gave her a hug and said, “You’re among friends here and you have nothing to worry about...”

She started crying and said, “Imagine what bad things they’ll say about me...”

“They’ll say she loves her husband so much that she was ready to rip us apart... That’s what they’ll say...”

She broke out laughing and so did everyone else.

A number of volunteers arrived and wanted to know what the fuss was about.

“What are you doing here?” asked Amih. “Aren’t you supposed to be with our guests?”

“We were! They sent us to get their luggage. They need it to unpack their things...”

We moved out of the way and they took the bags.

“We should get back too,” said the Captain. “We should invite our guests to lunch. Amih, Ireva, go and tell the cooks and kitchen staff to prepare extra food and then set up another table, a big one in the dining area to seat us and our guests. Then tell the volunteers to bring our guests to the dining area at precisely noon. The rest of you should be there a little earlier.”

After Amih and Ireva had left Ukasnek said, “Are you sure it’s wise to eat with them?”

“Don’t worry Ukasnek it will only be one or two times, no more. The rest of the time we’ll have the servers deliver their food to the common room.”

Delche, Ori and I, expecting a reply from Asora, went to my ship to check. There was no reply.

“They should have replied by now,” said Ori. “They had plenty of time to examine the logs...”

“I’m more concerned about Nagol. Will he accept the assignment or not? Given his old age and now that he is with the Admiral.”

“I know Nagol a little better than you... He’ll jump at the chance... He admires you a lot. He told me you let him sit in your Captain’s chair and steer the ship... You’ve never allowed anyone else to do that,” replied Delche.

“I hope you’re right!”

“What do you think of that Madam Grooni? Isn’t she a funny one? I wonder how old she is and how many men she’s married in her lifetime? It looks to me like you might be the next husband on her list?”

“Delche, that’s not funny...!”

“It wasn’t funny when you did it to Ireva either but that didn’t stop you...”

“You heard that, eh?”

“Yeah but she deserved it, I think.”

“She sure did! Do you know what she said to me earlier, before the ship arrived? She asked, ‘Where is your formal uniform, man? They’ll think you’re a farmer for sure dressed like that. No, no, I’m wrong... They’ll think you’re a gorilla in a suit. And the irony is you’re the star of this show. They came here to see the main attraction... and that would be you!’ word for word...”

“No way man, that’s gruesome...”

“What’s gruesome?” asked the Captain as he, Ukasnek and Enai, holding a bottle of rakia, climbed the ship’s ramp.

“Wow man, you read my mind. I haven’t had rakia for such a long time I’d forgotten what it tastes like,” I said.

“I don’t know why but I feel nervous... I shouldn’t feel nervous but I do. I figured a bit of rakia might calm me down.”

“We all feel nervous, they’re government people...” said Ukasnek and Enai shook his head in agreement.

We stood around inside my overcrowded ship for a while until we finished drinking our first shot. After that we went outside and had a couple more.

“That’s enough for me,” said the Captain, holding the bottle.

“Leave that here...” said Ukasnek. “I don’t want to share it with them...”

The Captain sealed the bottle properly, went inside the ship and put it in the box with the green stuff. When he came out he said, “Let’s get back and face the music...”

Amih and Ireva had set the table and suggested the Captain sit at one end and Madam Grooni at the other. We did as they asked. The Captain sat at the end facing the entrance. To his right sat Ukasnek, myself, Delche and Ori. To his left sat Amih, Ireva and Enai. There was no one else from our side.

When they started arriving we all stood up and Ireva pointed them to their seats. When Madam Grooni arrived she ignored Ireva and came straight for me. She motioned to Delche and Ori to move over and she parked herself next to me, on my right.

I have to admit I felt ambushed and a bit angry but I didn’t want to protest so I said, “These gentlemen here are from Ostikon, they are guests here too ...” to which she replied.

“I know, they were your old crew and now they’re your new crew and they both speak Macedonian; your native language.”

I guess that shut me up quickly. I looked over at Irevva, sitting opposite from me, snickering and enjoying watching me squirm.

After everyone was seated Captain Orihci stood up and gave a welcoming speech and apologized that our eatery wasn't posh enough for the likes of them and that we had to serve ourselves. Also that we didn't have the fine assortment of pastries they were used to eating, etc., etc.

Then it was Madam Grooni's turn and she basically said that she was glad to be here, that this was her first assignment as an investigator and that everyone on her team was an experienced professional. She didn't mind the simplicity of the cuisine and the village type accommodations. After all it was temporary.

And I thought I'd put my life, we'd all put our lives on the line so that these people could rule over us? I must have been looking angry, very angry because suddenly Irevva started to look concerned.

"I would also like to welcome you all here and apologize for our shortcomings but we just came out of a war and we're still in ruins... We can't provide what we don't have..."

Both her mother and father looked at her with pride and so did I. Ukasnek was ready to jump on the table and dance but he restrained himself.

After Irevva finished talking I turned to Madam Grooni and said, "Your speech sounded more like that of a spoiled diplomat rather than a field investigator..." It was supposed to be a private comment but my damned universal translator blurted my comment out loud and everyone heard it.

Fortunately everyone pretended they hadn't heard anything except Irevva who said, "You've only known each other less than half a day and already you sound like an old married couple."

At this point Captain Orihci interrupted and asked our guests to form a line and showed them where to get their food.

Everyone on our side of the table was silent... for a while... but the tension was there... You could cut it with a knife.

“While still eating like she hadn’t eaten before and looking at her plate, Madam Grooni quietly said, “The Captain is my brother...”

Captain Orihci looked at her with a surprised look... more like a horrified look... After all, she was born on this planet and it was possible.

When she saw the expression on the Captain’s face she said, “Not you... You know, the other Captain, the Captain of the 1st destroyer. The one he humiliated and sent into early retirement... and is now the laughing stock on my planet and the butt of every joke... that Captain. He’s my little brother... He is a good man and didn’t deserve to be treated that way. And you, you sit here whooping it up, laughing, making jokes and enjoying yourself...”

At this point her team started leaving and was escorted back to the common room by Amih and Ukasnek. I guess Amih was embarrassed by the whole situation and didn’t want to hear any more. Ireva stayed behind. She was loving this... watching me squirm. I heard Ukasnek in the distance say, “That’s precisely why I said we shouldn’t have lunch with these people. They work for the government and you can’t trust them...”

“Is that true? You can’t be trusted?” I asked.

She didn’t answer.

“So, you think I humiliated your brother... and I did it on purpose... and I got pleasure from doing it! Is that right?”

“Yes! That’s right. That’s what he told me. Now I’m here... I came here to find out why... Why you did you do this to my brother?!”

“Before I tell you my side of the story, I want to ask you how much you know about your brother’s mission that day. What was he doing in Ostikon airspace, uninvited with a fully armed destroyer?”

“He was invited to go there by the Ostikon government! He was on a peace mission...”

“Come on lady, you’re a diplomat and old enough to know that you don’t send a fully armed military ship on a peace mission... Besides, the Galaxy Traders and Ostikon were already at peace. Your brother was sent there to destroy my ship because he was told it had become a menace. It was attacking their trading ships and causing all kinds of damage to their ability to trade with the Galaxy Traders. Ostikon didn’t have a military at the time so they needed assistance to get rid of that pesky ship and your brother was more than willing to accommodate them. But what your brother didn’t know is that what he was told was a complete lie. The little ship had nothing to do with the trade negotiations between Ostikon and the Galaxy Traders, but plenty to do with the way the corrupt elites in Ostikon were treating the people. You can say that the ship was leading the way to freedom for the people, out of the clutches of the upper class. The little ship was in their way of subduing the working class and had become a problem for them. So they found a patsy, your brother, to remove it for them. But he failed. My ship had nothing to do with trade and everything to do with keeping the peace while the little people tried to free themselves from the tyrannical Ostikon government. That’s what happened!”

“That’s a nice story... But that’s not what I heard!”

“Let me finish... I haven’t told you what they said to me and how they got me to confront your brother. Out of nowhere they sent me an urgent message saying that a very big armed Galaxy Trader ship was coming to attack and occupy Ostikon and it was up to me to stop it. I’m sure you know the rest of the story... If I have any regrets for what I did it’s for killing the pilot... of the little attack ship. But I couldn’t have risked being shot at. He would have attacked me, so I took him out first. Anyway, I tried to reason with your brother to back off. I even explained to him that he had been lied to but he refused to listen. Only after I completely disabled his ship and refused to finish it off, did he listen. Now, if I am the monster you’re making me out to be then why didn’t I finish him off? The least I could have done was disable his engines? I could

have torn up his ship piece by piece. Who was going to stop me? But I didn't! How do you explain that?"

After a long silence and a menacing look she said, "I'll have to talk to him again... We will resume this conversation later..." and got up ready to leave.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute... You can't leave... You need to resign right now! Your government promised me an impartial investigation... not a witch hunt. How can you possibly be fair and impartial when you came here on a personal vendetta?" cried the Captain.

"I am not resigning until I get to the bottom of this..." she yelled and stormed back to her quarters.

The Captain wrapped his hands around his head and said, "How much worse can this get? What are we, cursed or something?"

"Sorry Dad, I'm sure this too will blow over. We haven't done anything wrong. When the truth comes out we'll all be exonerated..." said Irevia looking at me.

"Sure, the truth... The truth never comes out... That's why the little people have to pay the price... Like my wife who spent most of her life in jail... for doing the right thing... for fighting for the little people's rights. Yeah, right!" said Delche looking depressed.

"I have to agree with Delche. Honour and glory belong to the dead and the corrupt... Not to the just and truth loving... I should know that!" added Ori.

"Come on people? What can they possibly do to us...? We have the legendary ship and we have one million super soldiers," I said.

The investigation begins

Things not only got weird between us and Madam Grooni, but also between Madam Grooni and her team of investigators. We heard they'd had a stormy meeting the day before in the common room, where Madam Grooni was asked to step down but again she refused on the grounds that the current war they were investigating was a direct result of my attack on her brother's destroyer. She claimed that this was the very first time a destroyer of that class had ever been defeated by anyone and that its defeat shook the entire Galaxy Trader consortium. That prompted the Galaxy Trader leadership to look for ways to bolster its military thus initiating the super soldier project. And as a result, in her opinion, I was the culprit who had started the war and this was why I needed to be fully investigated so that I could be charged with the crimes I'd committed. In her opinion I had attacked her brother's ship unprovoked, an attack that was never investigated, and according to credible sources from Ostikon my attack was never sanctioned by the Ostikon government. That's what the official report filed with the government said.

"Until I talk to my brother again, I don't believe a word he says! How can this one alien vigilante be telling the truth and the entire two worlds of Ostikon and the Galaxy Traders be lying? Don't you find that a bit ridiculous?" were the last words to her team before she stormed out of the meeting.

"I don't believe this... This is a nightmare..." exclaimed the Captain.

"Welcome to the world of politics Captain. Being in the military is easy... You get orders... You give orders... You follow orders... You examine facts. In the world of politics you lie and cheat... You compromise... You look the other way... You accept bribes... And the best of all is you're not accountable for any crisis or mess you create; including the decisions you make that involve the lives of millions of people like the super soldiers whose lives were sacrificed for some noble cause no doubt. And then when things don't go right you look for a scapegoat to pin it on... And that would be me!"

"So, how do we fix it?" asked Amih.

“My miserable days as a pirate were a lot less stressful than this...At least I knew where I stood...” said Ukasnek.

“What about me and my associates...? We did a lot of the devil’s work in this place and I’m sure they have a place in hell just for us...” Enai grumbled.

“You’re awfully quiet today. Well, how would you approach this Irevva?” asked the Captain.

“Well one thing is for sure, she admitted that the Galaxy Trader leadership in conjunction with the Galaxy Trader central government, no doubt, is responsible for the super soldier project and the crimes that were committed here for their noble cause...”

“It’s Ostikon all over again for me. Yet again I have become a pawn in someone else’s game...”

“We all have become pawns in someone else’s game! Dad, isn’t it about time you resurrected your destroyer? It’s time to fight back... And Otsiron here is right. We have the might. Let it work for us for a change.”

“Oh, thank you my dear,” I said jokingly.

“I don’t know how you can even joke in a serious situation like this?”

“The same way you can sing during a battle! You know you might die during a battle yet you sing, why?”

“Because I know what I’m doing and I’m doing it because I know how...” said the Captain.

“There you have it!” I said.

“What do we have?” asked Amih.

“We need to have lawyers, we don’t talk to anyone without a lawyer present,” advised the Captain.

“And since we have no lawyers on this planet... We talk to no one... Woo-hoo!” yelled Ukasnek.

“I don’t know about that. The commission has the authority of the central government,” said Enai.

“And this guy here,” pointing at me, “is the authority of one million powerful plasma guns... Let them make us,” replied Ireva.

“Isn’t tomorrow exercise day for the soldiers?” asked Captain Orihci.

“Yes it is!” replied Enai.

“So, let’s show them what kind of power we wield here,” suggested the Captain.

“We’re agreed then! No talking without a lawyer. Pass it on and let everyone know,” I said.

At this point Amih turned to me and said, “You were right after all, our central government was involved in this mess. They’re responsible for what happened to my sons. Do whatever you can to expose them for the creepy things they do. And all this time I trusted them.”

“Mom, not all people in the government are like that... and you shouldn’t trust anyone anyway unless you know them well...”

“Except for politicians and bureaucrats appointed for life... You don’t trust them...” said Delche.

“Well Ori, you haven’t said anything. How would you approach this problem?” I asked.

“Well, I think we are limited by our moral boundaries. I used to think ‘we the elite’ were gifts of Mother Nature and the outlanders

were the scum of Ostikon and deserved what they got, until I became one of them thanks to you. You made my tranquil fantasy life miserable... Now I don't trust anyone but don't belong anywhere either... And on top of that, neither side wants me... But I'm grateful to you for that... You opened my eyes to the truth. Truth is more important to me than any illusion. If the people here feel the same way and are prepared to handle the truth... If knowing the truth is important to them... and we have the power to give it to them, then let's give it to them.”

“Unlike the people of Ostikon, the people here are different. They've always been third class citizens and already know the truth of how it is to live under exploitation and humiliation. And even so, unlike my mother who isn't from here, the rest of us here are proud to be farmers and even pirates... We know we are the pillars that support the planets around us when it comes to producing food. Even though they hate us and exploit us for being simple people, we still support them. Ukasnek has taught me a lot about life here... how people really live... and I don't need Madam Grooni to remind me of that. She was born here too, in the same mud, but now she feels she's better than me. Why, because she chose to live elsewhere? To support the lies of her government which committed my brothers and all our friends and neighbours to a living hell? For the greater good I suppose?! What greater good? Whose greater good?” replied Ireva loudly, looking angry.

Unbeknownst to us, Madam Grooni was standing outside the door of our conference room and heard everything. She had been coming over to tell us that she'd spoken to her brother and wanted some clarification from us, meaning me, Delche and Ori.

When she abruptly opened the door without knocking, looking very angry, everyone, including me, was startled.

“I'm prepared to ignore everything you said provided you answer my questions!” she demanded.

“Not without a lawyer...” whispered Ukasnek.

“Now you’re resorting to eavesdropping on people?” asked the Captain.

“Yes, if that’s what I need to do to get some straight answers...”

“Okay, please sit down. If it’s about your brother, Ori and I will answer your questions truthfully. We have nothing to hide and nothing to fear. Besides, we were both there,” I explained.

“My brother confirmed what you said, that you had warned him that he’d been deceived and that you could have but didn’t blow up his ship... But why should I believe the rest...?”

“Because I can confirm the rest...” yelled Ori.

“Look, we can sit here and argue about who said what, who is lying and who isn’t... The bottom line is there is nothing you or your corrupt pals can do to me. I can just fly out of here and disappear any time I want to...”

“Why don’t you?”

“Because I have friends here who care about me and who need me. Besides, what’s in it for me to lie? Save my own skin? You know I’m untouchable... No one can land on this planet and cause me or my friends any harm...”

“I know that! You’ll blow them out of the sky before they even have a chance to land?”

“If you must know, I just destroyed the most powerful attack ship ever built. So don’t tell me I can’t do it. There are no challengers out there; not even your destroyers, that is, if they’re still even functional...”

“I know that!”

“So you know everything... right?”

“I also know how you defeated the so-called golden ship. Good move!”

“You know about the golden ship? How is that even possible?”

“What do you think, we sleep all the time? We haven’t kept an eye on you all the time you were here, you know. We have spies everywhere!”

“With all due respect Madam Grooni, the more you open your mouth the more I’m inclined to believe you’re here to cover up everything your government did and blame it on me. You’re just another patsy like your brother, being used to do the dirty work for the elite who want to get rid of me. Do I stand in the way of you finding happiness just as I stood in the way in Ostikon? And by that I mean in the way of the rats in both Ostikon and the ones running here to exploit your people?”

“How did you know that the rats from Ostikon were running here? No one knows about that!”

“I took an educated guess!”

“Yes, yes you are in our way. And yes the rats from Ostikon have packed up their bags and are coming here... since you destroyed their last hope... the golden ship. Ostikon is now free of rats.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Yes, and now you hold the balance of power here just like you did in Ostikon.”

“Why couldn’t you tell us all this when you first arrived? You could have spared us all this grief?” complained Captain Orihci.

“Because my good Captain, I wanted to know who I was dealing with: a rational thinker or a lunatic!”

“I suppose you’re talking about me... not the Captain,” I said.

“Of course I’m talking about you!” she snapped.

“And? What have you concluded?”

“I wanted to be sure I wasn’t being lied to by my handlers... But I guess I was! I turned out to be the fool! Also I wanted to join the winning side...”

“Is that it? The winning side?” asked the Captain.

“No silly, I’m just joking. I’m sick of all the corruption in the consortium and the central government and I want it cleaned up before I die. It seems that no matter how much these greedy bastards grab, it’s never enough. And they could care less about the little people. I want a clean conscience when I die.”

“That’s good to hear... That you’re on our side... You had us worried there for a while,” said Amih.

“I still don’t trust government people... Not until I know how well they can hold their liquor...” said Ukasnek.

“I know you have rakia here. I also know that you, Captain Orihci were partners with the rakia king in Ostikon. So you must still have access to it?”

“How did you know about that?” asked the Captain.

“I kept an eye on my planet. I also come from a pirate family you know. It’s in our blood...”

“Well, let me introduce you to the rakia king himself,” the Captain said pointing at Delche.

“No f**en way?”

“Madam Grooni, language please...” said Amih.

“I can’t bloody believe it...” yelled Ireva.

“Ireva, bite your tongue...” yelled Amih.

“One minute we’re arch enemies... then the next minute we’re acting like best friends! What’s going on here?”

“It’s called diplomacy my dear...” said Madam Grooni.

After we all stopped laughing the Captain asked Enai to bring a bottle of Delche’s best and Ukasnek to bring some food for us. Ireva and Amih went with Ukasnek to help.

“It could have as easily gone the other way... We could have started a war?” said the Captain.

While everyone else was gone, Ori and I left the Captain, Madam Grooni and Delche to talk and went to my ship to check for messages. There were none. It appeared as if Asora was either ignoring us or had other priorities to tend to.

When everyone returned the Captain filled our glasses with rakia and said, “To our new alliance! May it bring us peace and prosperity... and to our new friend Madam Grooni.”

“Madam Grooni, I’m really impressed with your ability to influence people. To make them mad at you one moment and make them love you the next. I was ready to kill you a few minutes earlier and now I love you like you were the grandma I never had? I’m simply impressed... Will you be my grandma?” asked Ireva.

“She could be... not your real grandma, I mean... but a long lost grandma... We all come from somewhere right? You should get a DNA test,” said Ukasnek.

“Yes dear, I can be your grandmother...”

“Can I call you Grandmarooni?”

“No, just call me Grooni. Grandmarooni makes me sound so old.”

“But you are old and proud of it...”

“Yes, but I never married and have no descendants of my own. I simply don’t know what it feels like to be a real grandmother.”

I looked at Irevia and could see that she was getting under Madam Grooni’s skin but Madam Grooni caught my eye and said, “You’ve been standing there quiet and smug. What, no more jokes? No more smart remarks? Where’s that cool handed heroic Otsiron everyone loves to talk about?”

“Oh no, not another Irevia!” I thought to myself.

“I don’t know what you’ve heard about me but I’m still that same peasant, shepherd boy from a village nobody has heard of. I don’t speak any of your languages... I’m not educated... And hell, I’m not even a properly trained pilot...”

“And yet here you are... You managed to defeat, even kill King Rodot’s only son. He was flying the golden ship, the most powerful ship ever built in the known universe. With all your shortcomings, how did you manage to do that?”

“So, you even knew who flew the golden ship... But I think we knew that too... Captain Orihci figured it out...”

“Impossible! No one knew that... No one but a few...”

“Captain Orihci recognized the swearwords and curses Rodot’s son left us before he died.”

“Compared to Otsiron, who by the way saved my life on many occasions, that guy was a terrible pilot and a terrible gunner,” Ori exclaimed.

“The fact that Otsiron has survived all this time means he must have some hidden talents. And as for King Rodot’s only son, we have yet to hear from the King. He was too proud to let another pilot fly the ship, a gift from the Gods... and too anxious to make his son a living legend... And with a ship like that... How could he lose? But

enough about him. I want to know more about the rakia king. What did you call yourself? Delche? What kind of name is that?"

"It's a Macedonian name. I was named after some king or hero of theirs..."

"He must have been a very good pirate..."

"No? I think he was a revolutionary..."

"Then no doubt he must have been a violent man, Anyway, I'm more interested in the man behind the rakia enterprise... the king and his empire. Are you here to start a company? Making rakia is legal here you know and I can help you establish a lucrative business. What do you say?"

"I can teach the locals how to make the stuff. That's not a problem. I'm not interested in starting a business. It's not in me anymore... All I want is a quiet life."

She burst out laughing and said, "What? Flying with this guy isn't exactly a quiet life?"

"Well he needs me, he needs us all... He has no navigator... And like he said, he can't even read the maps or the instructions on his panel... or the diagnostics on his computer."

"Don't you think going into dangerous battles with him is a risk to your quiet life? He might have been lucky so far but his luck will run out one day. You know that he has more enemies than you can imagine... And the more popular he gets the more they want to kill him. In some of my circles he's known as, 'The alien that changed the world'..."

"But why? He's not a bad person? He's not violent... he's not greedy... He is fair and wants to do right by the people, by all the people," claimed Ireva.

"The last point dear... No one in the elite circles wants that... I want that... and that's why I'm here. I dedicated my entire life to the

consortium and in the end, what do I have? Friends? No! Happiness? No! Family? No! I have money, lots of money... but it doesn't give me any comfort... Look at him! He has nothing... And even by his own admission he's not even a good pilot. But everyone not only knows him... but adores him. Even our military adores him... How ironic is that? Why? I want to have what he has..."

"And what's that?" asked Irevia.

"Fame and friends, but mostly friends..."

"And a miserable life... All alone and no family," said the Captain.

"No thanks, I already have that..." said Madam Grooni.

Everyone cracked up laughing. Those near to Madam Grooni patted her on the back.

"Then welcome to our misery," said Captain Orihci and poured us another glass of rakia.

"Tell us something about yourself. Irevia told me you're a local girl," said Amih.

"Yes, I was born here. My parents were both pirates and were killed during a raid. Our house was burned down. When it was burning one of the raiders heard me crying and ran inside and saved me. He went around looking for relatives but I guess no one wanted to claim me so when they left they took me with them. The Commander who led the raid took me to his wife who didn't... who couldn't have children of her own. She decided to keep me and the rest is history."

"How did you find out you were from here?" asked Amih.

"For one, the blonde hair and blue eyes... I kept asking my mother why I looked so different from her and even the other children in our community but she wouldn't tell me. Finally just before she died she told me. She told me everything but by then my life was well-established and, because of my good looks, I had climbed the elite ladder very fast... My father being in the military also helped. He

opened many doors for me. Sadly he died a long time ago too and I was left all alone with no one.”

“Did you ever marry?” asked Ireva.

“No! I didn’t find the right man...”

“Yeah, men can be so obnoxious...”

“My dear I understand how you feel, given our physical similarities... being persuaded to do things you don’t want to do. But unlike me, you’re surrounded by family and friends who love you. I have none of those things...”

Tears began to roll down Amih’s cheeks so she got up and gave Madam Grooni a hug.

Just then the conference door was flung open and a man from the communications tower burst in, prompting the Captain to bark, “Doesn’t anyone knock anymore?”

“What is it? Is my team looking for me?” asked Madam Grooni.

“No, no Madam Grooni... I have a message for Otsiron... which is a bit urgent.”

“What is it man, speak up!” yelled the Captain.

“There is an Ostikon ship on approach and the pilot is asking for Otsiron. What should we tell him?”

“Ori you go with the man and find out what he wants.”

“I must go also, my team is probably wondering where I’ve disappeared to. But if you don’t mind, come with me. I’ve made a bit of a mess with them and it would help me patch things up if they see solidarity between us.”

So off we went marching into the common room and walked right in on a big argument.

“What, are you trying to start a war between the planets? Leave the diplomacy and politics to me, your job is to do the inquiry and these people are here to assist you. So please prepare your questions and set up your interviews. When you’re ready we’ll start calling the witnesses. Just the facts... No speculation. No opinions.... Everyone has an opinion and a theory... We’re not interested in theories. Only the facts... You know what to do. Now go and do it... We’ll meet again tomorrow morning here at 9 sharp.”

“Very impressive, Madam Grooni...” said Irevia just as Ori walked in asking us to go outside and direct the ship to land.”

“Who is it? Who’s coming?” asked Delche.

“They didn’t tell me!”

“Did you ask?”

“Of course I asked. They said it was for security reasons?”

“Now who is so important that they didn’t want to be identified?” I blurted.

“Stop guessing man and let’s get out there and find out. Madam Grooni, are you coming?” asked the Captain.

“Is it royalty? I hope its royalty. I’ve never met any of the Ostikon royalty,” said Madam Grooni.

“Some people never change...” said Irevia quietly.

“Be quiet dear. Sometimes you talk too much...” Amih scolded.

While waiting for the ship to arrive Irevia grabbed my hand, pulled me to the side and whispered, “Let’s test those hidden talents of yours. How do we know that Madam so and so isn’t stringing us all along to reveal all our secrets... and all those things she told us aren’t lies, eh?”

“I guess we may never know... Or we will know when it’s too late... My motto is; don’t say anything that you don’t want others to know...”

“But there has to be some way of knowing if she’s with us or against us?”

“What does your gut tell you?”

“Huh? It must be an earth thing because my gut doesn’t speak to me. It only grumbles when it’s hungry.”

“When someone is ready to sacrifice their interests for yours, then you can call them a friend. When someone is ready to give their life to save yours, you know they love you... Like your parents.”

“I know all that. What you’re telling me is useless information...”

“Oh be quiet. Here comes the ship.”

The diplomat from Ostikon arrives

“It’s such a small ship...” said Irevva.

“This can’t be. It’s a small shuttle. I’ve been on one these before. It couldn’t have flown from Ostikon to here, not in such a short time... What’s going on here?”

As usual, Captain Orihci made his hand motions and the little ship landed in front of us and turned off its engines. Just as the hatch began to open Irevva said, “Wouldn’t it wonderful if Val and Daf were piloting this ship?”

“Be quiet you two... Someone’s coming out...” Irevva’s mom harped.

He was a big, tall man. He had to bend his head forward to come out of the door.

“I know that man...,” I heard the Captain say.

“I know him too...,” I said to Irevva excitedly. “He’s the Captain of the research... He was the Captain of the research vessel that took me back to earth... You know the one... He’s retired now.”

“I don’t know what you’re babbling about... There’s a second person coming out...”

“That’s his wife, Ruzha’s adopted mother. Wow...”

“Now we’ll have three Captains... And how will you address each other?”

“Look, look a woman is coming out pushing a wheelchair... She, she’s the Admiral... Nagol’s friend...”

“And who’s the old man sitting in the wheelchair?”

“That’s old man Nagol... Wow he came... But why didn’t they tell us they were coming?”

After they exited the ramp I stormed my way over there to be the first to greet them... but when I remembered what I looked like I stopped.

“Now what?” yelled Ireva who was running right behind me.

“They won’t recognize me... Not like this...” I said with a sad tone of voice. “You go and translate for your father. None of them speak your language...”

But they did. When Captain Orihci spoke his universal translator translated his words to Macedonian, which Nagol understood and translated to the others.

The first thing Nagol said after he’d gotten out of the wheelchair, which the tall Captain later pushed into the shuttle and returned with a number suitcases, was “where is Otsiron?”

“I’m here... Nice to see you again... I’m glad you came.”

“Why are you hiding behind this lovely young lady...? Come over here so I can look at you.”

“I wasn’t sure how you would react seeing me like this...”

“I already knew what you looked like... Even with my poor eyesight I could identify you... I saw you in the recording you sent us.”

After that he hugged me and passed me on to the Admiral, tall Captain and his wife, who couldn’t understand me because my translator was speaking to them in the Galaxy Trader language. But thanks to Ireva she translated for me to the Ostikon language.

While I was greeting the others, Nagol greeted Delche and Ori and then passed them on to the others. In the meantime Ireva said to me, “Now I know how you Captains will greet each other... In fact let me do it for you ‘fat Captain, that would be you, meet tall Captain, that would be the tall guy, meet normal Captain, that would be my father’...”

“Ireva, enough... Leave the poor guy alone so he can greet his friends in peace...” said Amih.

“Can’t you see I’m helping him? I’m translating for him...”

Then I heard Nagol say, “Let’s go inside. We’ll answer all your questions inside later. I need some rest now. It has been a long flight...”

At this point Amih and Ireva each grabbed Nagol by the arm and helped the old man walk into the reception area. Ukasnek and Enai disbursed the crowd and sent everyone back to work. Delche, Ori and I followed behind.

“Poor old man Nagol, his physical condition seems to be deteriorating. I haven’t seen him since his wedding... he looks worse than ever,” said Delche.

“He’s just tired...” said Ori.

“You mean to tell me he married the Admiral...?”

“Yes, just after you left.”

“How did Gen, his granddaughter, take it?”

“It opened up the opportunity for her to take over his hotel and restaurant business...”

“That’s wonderful... I must congratulate them...”

When we got close to Enai we stopped so I could talk to him. “This business with the universal translators was great for two languages but now we have three. Any chance we can add one more language? And please, do something about these cubes... put a string through them or something so that we can carry them around our necks. Do we need to carry them in our hands? I keep losing mine...”

“Not to worry Sir, we’ll have a new model out any day now. I’ll put a priority on it... It will be portable and will plug directly into your ears... Also, it will auto detect the language. All you have to do is select the language you want to hear...”

“That’s fantastic Enai, thank you...”

“Where is Madam Grooni, I didn’t see her out here.”

“She decided to stay behind as she wanted us to settle our guests first before she met with them...” said Delche.

“That’s unlike her I think, but what do I know about diplomatic protocols...”

When we arrived in the reception area I spotted Nagol sitting in a chair with the Admiral standing behind him, holding him by his shoulders. The two Captains, the tall and the normal were facing each other talking and occasionally hugging. Amih was talking to the tall Captain’s wife and Ireva was translating.

I walked over to Nagol. He grabbed my hand and said, “It’s so nice to see you again... After you disappeared I thought... we all thought we’d never see you again. When we found out you were still alive...? Well, let’s say we began to hope once again...”

“Congratulations, I heard you married the Admiral...”

“Thank you, her name is Aneleh...”

“What about the Captain’s name?”

“It’s too difficult to pronounce, so we call him Captain Rolo. Rolo means tall in our language. Ah yes, his wife’s name is Ilisa. She’s a local girl from Ostikon, a very nice and kind woman. She is very fond of you, especially for bringing Ruzha into her life.”

“How is...”

“We will talk later, our luggage has arrived... Give us a moment to settle in and rest and I will see you later...” said Nagol and left with the others.

Moments later they were all gone. Just then it occurred to me that Captain Orihci was talking with Captain Rolo in a different language. I don't remember blurting that out but Enai must have heard me asking so he said, “They were speaking in Captain Rolo's native language.”

“How do you know that...? And did I ask that question out loud?”

“I speak that language too... No you didn't ask but I heard your thoughts...”

“That's impossible...”

“You talk to the soldiers, right? So I'm one of your soldiers and when you think of me I can hear your thoughts.”

“That makes sense, I guess... And how long has this being going on?”

“Not long... Since you came back from your last mission... But I could only hear snapshots of your words... Just right now I heard your entire sentence...”

“Why didn't you tell me about this?”

“I'm sorry. I've been so busy with everything... I just didn't have the time...”

“You don't speak Macedonian so how can you possibly understand me?”

“I don't know... But your ability to project thoughts and words is becoming increasingly complex. I have to go now...” he said and left.

“I didn't hear you say anything about the Captains...” said Ori.

“Neither did I,” added Delche. “If he can hear your thoughts perhaps you can hear his? Imagine communicating with your minds... How cool is that? How close do you have to be to communicate? And is it instantaneous or is there a time delay?”

“Delche, you’re starting to sound ridiculous...”

“This scares you doesn’t it? Admit it!” said Delche.

“Wouldn’t it scare you? It’s a good thing I never said anything derogatory about him.”

“Call him. Ask him a question. See if he responds,” said Ori.

“Enai, calling Enai, are you there?”

“He said yes, you scared the hell out of me. You sound like a loudspeaker in my head.”

“Sorry Enai. Is that any better?”

“Yes! Much better... not so loud.”

“You realize that you can hear him too. Do you know what this means?” asked Ori.

“Potential for mischief...” said Delche laughing.

“Now he can order our rakia from anywhere...” Ori suggested and laughed.

Their laughter combined with my nervousness made me laugh too.

“Telling jokes again, eh Captain Fat?” yelled Ireva as she entered the reception area with her mother following right behind her.

“This girl will be the end of me...” muttered Amih quietly but we all heard her.

We were interrupted by Captain Orihci who said, “I was just talking to Madam Grooni and she told me she wants to meet our new guests from Ostikon in the common room as soon as they are settled in. And also get the kitchen staff to bring our food, food for everyone for lunch into the common area. You guys are also invited,” ordered Captain Orihci looking at us and then he left. Soon afterwards Amih and Ireva also left.

“So you’re Captain Fat now, eh?” asked Ori jokingly.

“That woman never learns... No other woman here is like that... Except of course Madam Grooni... Ireva must have picked up her bad habits in Ostikon...” said Delche.

“Speaking of the devil, she’s back... And who do I see with her? Her grandma, Madam Grooni,” I said quietly but my translator, which I’d forgotten to turn off, betrayed me.

“Ladies, what can we do for you?” I asked nervously, waiting to be slammed for my remarks. I hoped that Madam Grooni didn’t think I was calling her the devil.

“Tell me about your guests from Ostikon. Who are the big guy and the old man? I want to know a bit more about them before I meet them. Miss goody two shoes here couldn’t tell me anything... Maybe she doesn’t want to?” said Madam Grooni, sounding disappointed.

“Well? Tell her! I don’t know anything...”

“Surely you met the old man at the academy of languages, right? You met me there and you remembered me right?” piped up Delche looking at Ireva.

“Oh, that old man... Doesn’t ring a bell...”

“The old man is Nagol, old man Nagol. He was my teacher during the old days at the academy of languages. The woman with him is retired Admiral Aneleh who is now his wife. The big guy is retired Captain Rolo, Captain of one of our long range science vessels and

the woman with him is his wife ex-diplomat Ilisa. She's a nice woman," explained Delche.

"I hope you can remember all those names..." Ireva said to Madam Grooni.

"You will remember them for me dear. You will sit beside me and be my interpreter while I talk to our guests from Ostikon."

"It won't be for some time... Nagol is taking a nap..." said Amih as she entered the reception area.

"Do you know any of these people Amih?" asked Madam Grooni.

"No! No I don't. I may have heard about them from my husband but unlike the tall Captain's wife who traveled with him, I stayed home to look after our three children."

"Good for you Amih, and a fantastic job you have done..." said Madam Grooni.

"Oh, thank you. And I'm sure you'll get along well with my daughter..."

I heard Delche sigh deeply and I figured it was time for us to leave and separate ourselves from these women. I felt sorry for Amih.

"Sorry ladies, we have to go to my ship to check for messages... from President Asora, Delche's wife..." I said.

"Ex-wife..." said Delche as we started walking away.

"Don't listen to them. They're going drinking..." said Ireva.

"Why do I get the feeling they're trying to avoid us?" asked Madam Grooni.

"I'm coming with you..." yelled Amih and then said. "Tell your father I'm with them, drinking..."

As we walked away Amih grabbed my right arm with both hands and held onto me until we arrived at my ship. Delche had to tell her to let go of me so I could enter the codes.

When we got on the ship, the first thing Amih asked for was a drink. Ori got us glasses while Delche put his hand in the booze box and pulled out a bottle of the green stuff. Just as Delche tried to put it back Amih said, "I'll take that... And see if you can find some of the clear stuff..."

"You mean rakia?"

"Yes, yes, rakia."

After Delche poured her the rakia she added some green stuff to it and started to gulp it down.

"Oh, slow down... You'll get drunk," said Delche.

"I'm sorry! I don't know how you can take this abuse... I'm disgusted with all of it..."

"Please don't drink any more... We have an important function to attend..." said Ori.

"And besides, what will your husband think when he gets here and finds you drunk, stoned out of your mind with three guys?" I said and tried to pull the drink out of her hand.

And as luck would have it, Captain Orihci walked in on us and said, "Are you trying to get my wife drunk? And what are you planning to do with her after she's drunk?"

He sounded so serious and convincing that he scared the daylight out of me.

"He's trying to take away my drink! I want to get drunk. I can't take the abuse from your daughter and that old woman! Tell him to let go of my drink."

“Are you having a nervous breakdown dear?” asked the Captain nicely.

“Yes...”

“Please Amih, let go of the cup. I’m your friend... I’m trying to help you. Why do you even care what other’s say about me? They’re not rude to you... You’re a nice lady. Everyone likes you. And besides, Ireva is an adult now and she can say whatever she wants; none of which reflects on you... Please do this for me... Let go of the cup,” I pleaded.

She finally let go and then gave me a big hug.

“I came to get you,” said the Captain. “It’s getting close to lunchtime and we should head for the common room.”

Our first stop was the reception area where we found Ireva and our guests waiting for us.

“Where is Enai?” I asked. “He should be with us. He’s part our delegation...”

“Call him! Call him!” said Delche excitedly. “Watch this... you’re not going to believe it...”

“Calling Enai, calling Enai... You’re needed in the reception area. Come quick...” I said quietly with a smile on my face.

“What is this... a joke? It’s not funny!” said the Captain.

“Wait for it... Wait for it...” said Delche.

“And there he is!” said Ori.

“What’s so urgent?” asked Enai.

“How did you know to come here?” asked the Captain.

“He called me,” replied Enai pointing at me.

“I don’t believe it! It’s some sort of trick...” Irevia declared.

“Enough,” said the Captain. “Let’s take our guests to meet Madam Grooni and the investigative commission. We’ll talk about Otsiron’s magic tricks later...”

Captain Orihci knocked on the common room door. Madam Grooni opened it and everyone inside stood up. With Irevia translating, the Captain then began to introduce our four guests and the diplomatic mission from Ostikon starting with Nagol, his wife Aneleh, Captain Rolo and his wife Ilisa.

Madam Grooni was the first to greet them and then sent them around the table introducing each investigator and the planet they came from. When they were done the four sat on one side of the table with Irevia standing beside Nagol. Madam Grooni sat on the other side of the table facing Nagol and the rest of her team sat around her on her side of the table. Nagol pulled out a recording device and said it was customary to record these proceedings. Madam Grooni agreed and pulled out her recording device and placed it beside Nagol’s. Then she asked us all to leave except for Irevia who was needed to translate. One of Madam Grooni’s people closed the door behind us after we exited.

Standing outside the common room door, Captain Orihci scratched his head and said, “So that’s how it’s going to be eh?”

“I’d trust Nagol with my life...” I said.

“Us too!” added Delche.

“He’ll support our interests and for sure he’ll tell us if we’re in some kind of bind,” said Ori.

“So, what do we do now? Get drunk?” suggested Captain Orihci.

“You can do whatever you want. I’m going back to my post in the reception area after I get my food from the dining area. I thought we

were going to eat in there with them, but what do I know?" said Amih and left.

"We've been working on a mini, multilanguage translator in the research lab. We have a prototype working. Now that we have some free time why don't we go there and have a look at it," suggested Enai.

"Oh, is that how you did your little trick with this guy here earlier..., with the mini translator? Where is it hidden...?" asked the Captain pointing at me.

"No Sir! I don't know how but we discovered we can communicate through our minds... Just like he does with the soldiers... I have a chip in the back of my head just like them."

"Well, I have seen many things around here that are unbelievable so why not this too? It may come in handy some day... When we're in big trouble... right?"

"Right!" said Enai. I just smiled.

"Let's go and get some food first. We'll bring it with us," said the Captain.

After we got our food we took it to the lab with us. Enai sat us down in the back room around a small table and pulled out a bottle of rakia from a cupboard.

"So, you've been pilfering our rakia I see..." said Ukasnek and laughed. "I see you're still a pirate at heart..."

"No, I'm saving it for special occasions and for special guests..." replied Enai.

"Do you have enough cups, old friend?" asked Ukasnek, ready to jump up and get some from the dining area.

Enai pulled a bunch out from the cupboard and tossed them to Ukasnek who then passed them around after he filled them full of rakia.

“Wow... Are you trying to get us all drunk?” the Captain exclaimed.

“Why not...? I’d like to be drunk when I get screwed...” replied Ukasnek.

“Nobody is getting screwed... We have the big guy... who has friends with big guns...” said the Captain pointing at me.

“Well, do you want to see the gadget or chat all day?” asked Enai.

“Let’s eat first before we get really drunk... There’s plenty of time for the gadget...” Delche suggested.

After we finished eating and drinking, Enai brought a device that you could carry on your chest tied with a chain around the neck, with two ear pieces you could stick in your ears and said, “Who wants to try it?”

“Give it to the big guy,” the Captain suggested.

After he set the switch to Macedonian from the three languages available, Enai turned it on and handed it to me. “The rotary button sets the volume...”

After I hung it around my neck the Captain said, “Boy that looks nice with your badge hanging next to it. All you need now is to put your crown on your head and you can be the King of Nelez...”

“Guys please, let him try it first before you make fun of him.”

“Hey, that’s fantastic. Now you say something in Ostikon and see how it works,” I said and pointed to Delche.

There was silence...

“You’re sure quiet for a person who has something to say about everything...” said Ori in Ostikon.

“Good enough for me...” I said and gave the gadget to back Enai. “Fantastic job Enai, congrats... You deserve a medal for this...”

“Thank you Sir, but I don’t know how to interpret that... as sincere or a joke?”

“Enai, you’ve been hanging around the labs too long... Take it as a compliment. You’re truly a master of your craft,” said the Captain.

By now we were all drunk and asleep in our chairs when one of Enai’s associates walked in and said, “What are you all doing here? They finished their meeting a long time ago and Nagol has been looking for you.”

“We can’t be seen like this...” said the Captain. “Tell him we’re busy right now with other things and we’ll see him at dinnertime back in our conference room. Tell Amih to bring food and to invite Madam Grooni and Ireva; and only them.”

“Yes Sir!”

“How much time do we have until dinner?” asked the Captain.

“About three hours,” said Enai.

“Well, we have you to blame Ukasnek for this predicament...” said the Captain and pointed at Ukasnek snoring.

“The fun you can have with just one bottle of rakia,” said Delche. “Wait until I tell them how easy it is to make...”

“I know how to make rakia too... Why don’t we get Enai to build us a distiller and we can teach someone... with more time and passion... to make rakia for us here. What do you think?” I suggested.

“I’m with you brother...” said Delche and slumped forward. I looked around. Everyone was asleep.

Old man Nagol

“Sirs, please wake up... The Ostikon delegates are waiting for you in the conference room...” I heard a voice say through my universal translator. But when I opened my eyes no one was there.”

“I heard it too. It was one of those people from the tower...” said Enai. “They must have been looking for us...”

“Let’s get going...” yelled Captain Orihci and then mumbled something that sounded like, “...Indiscretions...”

“Is there something wrong Captain?” I asked.

“No, not really... I’m just not used to working like this... I lose focus easily... I like structure...”

“Like when you were out in space commanding your own vessel and everyone knew what they were doing... and did exactly what you told them...?”

“Yes, that’s it! I think you understand...”

The moment we walked into the conference room we were greeted by Amih who said, “You look like hell, what have you been doing? Swinging axes?”

I smiled at her and continued to walk past her. Nagol was sitting near the far end of the table and Irevva was standing beside him.

When he saw me he asked, “Where have you been?”

His voice sounded weak.

“I’m here now... Sir.”

“Let me have a good look at you... What have they done to you, my poor boy...?” he asked in Macedonian in the same weak voice but my universal translator amplified his words in the Galaxy Trader language.

“Don’t you think his looks are an improvement?” Irevia asked in the Ostikon language.

Nagol raised his tired eyes and gave her a serious, cold look that was meant to kill.

“She was joking Sir, we’re friends... Good friends... She was just joking...”

When I looked up Irevia’s face had turned white and her usual smirk had disappeared.

I grabbed her face and gave her a kiss on the mouth and said, “See, we’re friends...”

I then heard Nagol say, “Children...”

Those who didn’t speak Ostikon didn’t know what had been said and it looked like I was asking for Nagol’s permission to marry Irevia. Irevia stood there stunned... I bumped her to get her out of her stupor. She immediately moved away and went to her mother.

Madam Grooni, who was dying to know what had happened, stood up and asked, “Are they getting married or something? By now Irevia had explained what had happened to her mother and father and I could see Amih smiling. She was probably thinking to herself it was about time Irevia got what she deserved for being so smug.

After Nagol sat me down beside him at the head of the table he waved for Irevia to come over and translate for him. When she did he asked everyone to get rid of those horrid talking boxes and speak to each other face to face in their Mother Nature given voices. He then raised his arm up, pointed his finger at Madam Grooni and said, “I remember you!” Irevia translated.

“Impossible! I have never seen you in my entire life!”

“It bothered me all day long but I finally figured it out. It’s your voice.”

“What about my voice?”

“I remember your voice. When I was a student, a very young student, the youngest in the languages academy... I have a gift for learning languages quickly... the authorities made me listen to a voice and asked me what it said. I didn't know what it said because I didn't know the language... But I remember that voice. I think it was yours... They told me it was important to translate what the voice said because the person speaking it was an important diplomat from the Galaxy Trader government...”

“Interesting...”

“So Madam Grooni, was that really you?”

“The first time I was employed as a diplomat was in my late thirties... but that was a long time ago.”

“It appears, although you don't look it, you are even older than me...? Old enough to be my grandmother perhaps,” said Nagol smiling. The rest of us began to laugh. I could see Amih enjoying this. The women who had annoyed her were finally getting what they deserved.

After that I got up waved at Delche and Ori to come over and gave Admiral Aneleh a hug.

“I'm proud of you son,” she said.

I then hugged Captain Rolo's wife Ilisa, who gave me her usual beautiful smile, followed by Captain Rolo who lifted me off my feet despite my large body.

We all sat down. I was on Nagol's left and Ireva sat on his right. Nagol looked at me and said, “This man is very important to me... You just don't know how important he is... He has impacted our worlds more than you can imagine. And now I would like to bring you up to date on the events that have transpired on my planet. But first let me thank this man here for inviting me and for giving me the

opportunity to visit your world and make new friends. As much as I'd like to speak in Macedonian, his native language, I will speak in my native language to make things easier. Ori and Ireva will translate. Any questions before I start?"

Captain Orihci stood up and said, "As a representative of this planet and as a good friend of Captain Otsiron, allow me to welcome you all to our humble planet. We heard many great things about you, about all of you, and we're glad to have you with us. I'm sure we will form a lasting relationship that will bind our two worlds... Thank you!"

They all bowed to show respect. Delche, Nagol and Ori also clapped their hands in honour of me; the earth man... Because, as Nagol had said, that's how earthlings show respect and acceptance.

"I'll spare you the details about what I'm going to say. I'm sure they'll come up during the interviews which will become available for everyone to read. I'll start from the moment we found out Otsiron had disappeared.

Although no one was certain that he was alive or dead, we all trusted his promise that he would return after the war was over. We waited a long time but nothing.

Many began to believe he was dead, even our enemies, but not all of them. They knew how tricky he could be sometimes, so they began to prepare for his demise in case he was still alive. To make sure he had no help from Ostikon, they dismantled our newly formed military and began to work on secret projects.

Then suddenly one day we received a message, I believe from this facility, asking us to send DNA machines... The request came on behalf of Otsiron but still no word from him.

When word came that he might still be alive, his enemies began to accelerate the work on their secret projects. One of those projects was a warship; a very powerful warship. Its parts were manufactured in many places. Very few know what they are made of. The ship

was assembled on one of your remote planets, here in this sector of space.

It was an expensive ship... with an impenetrable hull. Otsiron's cannons couldn't penetrate it. They made sure of that. His ship's torpedo couldn't even scratch it... The hull was made of a very rare alloy about ten times stronger... It had twice the cannon range and three times the speed... I'll be here all day if I tell you all the advancements that were made on that ship..."

"Who sponsored this expensive ship? Who paid for its construction?" asked Madam Grooni.

"The Ostikon government treasury, Anelia and her sponsors, the rich in Ostikon as well as foreign funds were funneled in... I have no proof where the funds came from but it was a lot of money. Enough to build a fleet of destroyers... If anyone knows anything about this money it will be your Ambassador to Ostikon. He was neck deep in shady stuff before, during and after the war. But I speculate it was your consortium of planets that also paid for it. You should know that..."

"Yes! A lot of money was funneled into secret projects but I don't know anything about them. I wasn't privy to many things... Especially to classified military projects."

"We didn't know about any of these things either. We didn't know they were planning his demise until after a ship of that caliber was blown up over your planet and the architects who were planning his demise started fleeing our planet. When they were gone the people who worked on those secret projects began to spill the beans to save their own heads."

"Well, how were they planning to bring about his demise? Assassinate him? Have a duel with him... How?" asked Delche.

"I believe they were going to wait for him to come to Ostikon and ambush him when he arrived."

"So, why was there a change of plans? asked Captain Orihci.

“Well, when they saw the kind of power he wielded with the super soldiers, from that dreaded recording you sent us, they panicked and immediately accelerated their plans to destroy him and his ship here before he had a chance to bring his army to Ostikon. Then when the recording was shown on television on channel 45, the people of Ostikon went wild... expecting to be liberated. The little people, especially the outlanders, went wild. Panic became a pandemic among the elite and the very rich began to abandon ship. Almost all of them left and fled to this sector of space... I guess to set up shop here. Those who remained behind took serious action against anyone who tried to aid his return. No one from the side who supported him was allowed to fly in or out. They monitored all our communications and everyone was being watched. Even though I’m old, I was also being watched ever since you asked for me to come here in one of your communications...”

“Sorry about that! I’m surprised they didn’t attempt to assassinate you...” I said.

“They tried on several occasions... The last time they tried they thought they had succeeded. That’s how I was able to come here. My friends had a funeral for me with an open casket. I played dead well and had them convinced that I was dead. But instead of burying me in the ground, my granddaughter had me cremated. After I was placed in the oven, Captain Rolo rescued me and took me with him and Ilisa on vacation; on his old science vessel.”

“Didn’t they suspect you of being part of the conspirators, Captain Rolo?” Irevia asked.

“Yes they did... But I had prebooked my vacation a long time ago, so they allowed me to go?”

“And how did you manage to bring Nagol and his wife Aneleh without being seen?” asked Captain Orihci.

“I smuggled them... in big suitcases. Ilisa always takes a lot of stuff with her when we go on vacation. She’s also a diplomat... They’re not allowed to search her... They figured the suitcases were hers and

didn't bother to even inquire... Besides, I'm a former Captain of that vessel with a big reputation... No one was going to question what we had in our suitcases. We had requested two rooms... when we got to our rooms... Nagol and Aneleh took one and Ilisa and I took the other. We brought them food from the restaurant but they hardly ate anything..."

"How did you get the shuttle? Did you have to steal it?" asked Ukasnek.

"No. The shuttle is mine. It was retired when I retired. It was given to me as a parting gift. It's old but works fine... I told them I was going to that planet... you know the one... where Captain Orihci and his family lived. I set a course for there in case someone was monitoring us and we left. Then when the science vessel was too far away, we changed course and came here. Ruzha had given me the coordinates of this facility. She got them from Daf."

"How did you get Nagol and Aneleh on the shuttle without being stopped?" asked Captain Orihci.

"I just asked the tower to open the hatch and they let us out. No one even saw us leaving..."

"You poor souls, you went through a lot to get here... We owe you much gratitude..." said Amih.

"Now it's your turn Madam Grooni. What is your government planning to do with all the information your team is gathering? What more do you really need to know from these poor farmers that you don't already know? Are you here to put the blame on them for what your government has done?"

"Not that it's any of your business but they can do whatever they want with the information we give them. You have no proof that my government was involved in anything. Those who broke our laws and committed crimes will simply be prosecuted and punished. That's how it works."

“In theory...! But how does it work in practice? I know you’re here to support the interests of those who pay your salary but where do your loyalties lie...? And by that I mean your personal loyalties... I’m asking you this because the pendulum is about to swing...”

“Not that it’s any of my business but I could ask you the same question!”

“I stand where I always stood... beside the little people... We are all little people... But some of us somehow, for various reasons, get it into our heads that we are somehow bigger than others. Since I discovered him, and to this day, I stand behind this man... He has proven to me to be on the right side. I believe he not only holds the balance of power here but is the key to our future. He brought more desired change to my world in less than one year than we could have brought in many generations. My old friend Prince Voskot even gave him his mistress, this ship for which he gave up his chance of becoming king. Of all the people he knew in Ostikon... and beyond, he chose him to fly his thousand year old mistress. Why him? Because he saw something worthy in him...! Unfortunately Voskot died before he could see his results. You all know what Otsiron has done... Forgive me my friend for sounding like I’m boasting... I know how you Macedonians feel about boasting... but I had to say these things... Our world today stands on the edge of a precipice... and without you... I’m certain we will again fall back into the dark ages, for another thousand years. So Madam Grooni, this is where I stand...”

“As I already told Captain Orihci and Captain Otsiron I stand on the side of fairness. I believe in peace, law and order. But I’m afraid I have been deceived far too many times to believe mere words. But at the same time it’s difficult for me to find my way out of the labyrinth... Too many times I have heard government officials and even philanthropists say ‘for the good of the people’, and then they end up creating messes like this one with the super soldiers... My heart goes out to their families... And I dread to think what would have happened if it wasn’t for Otsiron who stopped this madness. I have to give you and Prince Voskot credit for making the right choice and to you, Otsiron, for doing the right thing... and for your

sacrifices. From now on I openly pledge my loyalty to you. And may God forgive me if I've made the wrong choice.”

Everyone was stunned, except for Nagol who had expected no less from her. We are all little people after all. Was all this genuine or just a show? I admire Nagol very much but I know nothing of his past. The same goes for Madam Grooni. Are they kingmakers or riders of popularity? To me it makes no difference. I'm just a simple person stuck in a complex situation. All I know is that I can do things that scare the hell out of many people.

“Now that we've gotten all that out of the way why don't you tell us something about our friends back in Osticon? How are they doing?” I asked.

Nagol took a deep breath and with a stronger voice said, “Where do I begin?”

“Well, you can start with your wedding to Admiral Aneleh...”

“As you know she retired the moment she came back with our soldiers with the aim of spending the rest of her life alone. But thanks to you, you brought her back to me and we decided to get married. That's it...”

Looking a bit shy Admiral Aneleh interjected and said, “Actually, it was my idea to get married. After many years of living alone he was too shy to tell his friends he had a girlfriend. That wasn't him... So I suggested we get married. That way he didn't have to squirm and tell his friends himself. His granddaughter Gen, as you call her, made all the arrangements and invited our friends. I can't say it was a small wedding but it was okay. He didn't want to travel anywhere, especially outside the planet. You know, with his health and inability to tolerate strange foods... Also being with me all the time took attention away from his business. He started neglecting his duties... Then when Gen was tossed out of the military, and I mean that literally, it's a good thing that Anelia didn't put a price on her head because she was probably afraid of you, I suggested she take over his business. She was thrilled... But he became bored and spent a lot of time advising President Asora. Poor Asora... she was

president in name only. She had the responsibility but no authority. The poor woman was also abused by the opposition..., sometimes even by her own ministers. She had lost the support of everyone. People didn't understand how she could be president and have no power to help them. I think her enemies wanted to humiliate her as much as possible. But she stood her ground... She refused to call you back to help her... She never believed you were dead... They would have paraded your dead body through the streets... But she figured whatever you were doing here must be important... She is better now. Since the rats started bailing she began to take control of the government... And now that she has some experience she knows what to do. I'm sure Ruzha will join her, the first chance she gets..."

"How is Ruzha doing?"

At this point Ilisa, Captain Rolo's wife stood up and said, "I'll answer that. Like Aneleh said, when Gen was kicked out of the military Ruzha was demoted to lieutenant and forced to work for Anelia's propagand machine. But she refused. Because she disobeyed Anelia she was charged with insubordination and they threatened her with court martial, which carried the penalty of death. I don't know what Anelia was thinking... How could a rebel like Ruzha help her? Ruzha was popular, very popular with the people. That's why Anelia wanted to exploit her. Come to think of it, Anelia probably wanted her dead and found a nice, legal way to get rid of her. I couldn't help her, even as an ex-diplomat... But Rolo here stepped in and asked them politely to let her go. Surprisingly they did. Rolo has many friends outside of our planet... I guess the rats didn't want to stir the pot too much..."

"What happened to Val and Daf? I heard they went back to school?"

"Yes," said Nagol, "but not as students... as teachers. The moment they were demobilized the academy of languages, my old school, took them back. They figured that, with the stories they had to tell, they would attract many young people to the academy and they did. It's sad that those two who'd done more than anyone on our planet to bring our soldiers back, didn't get any recognition. They were sent home like common soldiers with nothing to show for their sacrifices. But the soldiers they brought back, especially the sick

ones, will never forget their heroism and sacrifice. And I guess that's what counts in the end. But unlike us old people, they had no expectations of the military or the government. They are very happy telling their stories and entertaining the young."

"And you Captain Rolo, how's life treating you in your retirement?"

"Well, as you know, I'm not native to Ostikon and... Once a foreigner always a foreigner... When I was working I got to go places, meet other cultures, make new friends and sample all kinds of cuisine. Life was great... But everything has its time and retirement was inevitable. So after I retired, that was after you left Ostikon for earth, we spent much time getting to know Ruzha and establishing her career as a journalist. After that I decided to do some rakia trading. I bought rakia from Delche and sold it to Captain Orihci's associates... He was my primary contact. That is until the war broke out and I went bust... We all went broke... But I'm grateful to be here, to have been chosen by Nagol to go with him. I was tired of constantly looking behind my back and hiding in Ostikon."

"Why didn't you leave? Go back to your home planet? You could have taken Ilisa and left?"

"For the same reason you haven't left. All my friends are in Ostikon... Ruzha is in Ostikon... We couldn't have abandoned her..."

"I have lived an entire lifetime among people and in luxury, all kinds of people, but until now I never understood what real friendship meant. So Captain Rolo and Ilisa, do you mean to tell me you were prepared to suffer and even give your lives for these people? For Ruzha who's not even your daughter...?" asked Madam Grooni.

There was a resounding "Yes!" from everyone.

"This is a new concept for me..."

“You said you came from a pirate family. Being a pirate and all that is associated with pirating is in your blood... and friendship is a new concept for you? You also pledged loyalty to Otsiron. You know that this alone could have you killed? Are you prepared for that?” asked Amih.

I looked at Captain Orihci’s face. His eyes were wide open. He was surprised by Amih’s comment and by the way she stood up to Madam Grooni.

“Well, yes... I guess I have to learn that giving my word means something... I’m a diplomat not a soldier...”

“So according to you, your life is more important than that of a soldier who is willing to give his... or her life for the cause you support...?”

“That’s how the world works... right? We make the decisions they die...”

“Lady, you will never have any friends unless you’re prepared to make personal sacrifices. You can’t become famous and important at someone else’s expense. This is war and wars call for personal sacrifice. That’s what I think...”

I stood up and clapped my hands. Moments later Madam Grooni did the same and after that everyone stood up and clapped their hands. This was Amih’s victory. No one would dare intimidate her again.

After everyone sat down I remained standing and said, “Now if I may, I would like to say something...”

Everyone looked at me and Nagol said, “Of course... Go ahead...”

“I don’t know what pledging loyalty to me means... But I can assure you Madam Grooni by doing so you are committed to a cause that will make you many enemies... My enemies will now be your enemies... And there is no turning back for you... This isn’t a game we play here... and if we don’t work together and look out for each other, we will not survive. I’m not a hero nor do I want to be one.

I'm a simple person caught in a complex situation... of someone else's making... I don't want to be popular either... The only thing that keeps me moving are my friends who need me, who I don't want to see hurt and suffer. And what have I really done all by myself... to deserve being called a hero? I have done nothing without help... I have done nothing alone. So Madam Grooni, if you want to help me then you must be prepared to help my friends... Ukasnek here is the real hero. He almost died... He was cut to pieces when he escaped the fury of the robots while looking for Amih's sons who had been kidnapped from their home. His body was torn to pieces and he was barely alive when he gave me the information and, with Irevia's help, the coordinates to find the robots and destroy them. But he didn't do that alone either. He found Enai hiding in the forest. He told him what the war was all about and gave him the critical information that I needed to defeat the robots. Later, when I engaged the robots, Enai also helped me. In addition to saving my life twice he built the bomb that destroyed the lead robot, which ended to war. Not to mention the two young ladies who led the Ostikon soldiers to their escape from this planet. And what about these two... Delche and Ori? They guided my ship and fought side by side with me, risking their own lives... without giving it a second thought... not only one time but twice.

Dear Madam Grooni, if you want to help us then please use your influence to expunge Ukasnek's record so he can walk as a free man and make sure everyone knows that his heroic deeds and sacrifices helped end the war. If you do this, I'm sure you will have a friend for life... Enai and his associates also deserve recognition... Without Enai's help, I'm sure I would have been killed and the war would have still raged on. Without him and his associates the super soldiers would have gone mad and who knows what harm they would have done to the population here. Worse, their power could have been harnessed by some destructive, evil madman... Without Enai and his associates I wouldn't have been able to communicate with the soldiers... or with anyone here for that matter. After Val and Daf left I was mute.

And you my dear friend Nagol, as a diplomat your first act should be to recognize the heroic deeds of all my crew who fought with me side by side. Make a call to Asora and recommend that she do that

publicly. Ask her to reinstate Gen and Ruzha to their former positions... I'm sure Gen can hire someone to look after your business. She's a soldier at heart... You know that... don't rob her of that. Give her a chance to rebuild Ostikon's army and fulfill Prince Voskot's dream.

Please, do whatever you can and right the wrongs of the past. That's the only way the people will accept you and perhaps respect you, Madam Grooni.

Tell your people what we are really doing here. Tell those who are missing relatives to either come here or send us DNA and we will look for them. Their sons and daughters are in good hands here... Tell them that..."

Amih couldn't wait any longer so she jumped out of her seat and began to clap her hands.

After everyone was done clapping Nagol said, "I have to go, I need to rest... Good speech Otsiron... I'll do what you asked."

"I'll also do what you asked..." promised Madam Grooni.

"Before we go I would like to remind everyone that tomorrow morning at 9 o'clock we have our weekly march. We will be putting our super soldiers through exercises. Perhaps Otsiron will give a performance for us... something to welcome our friends from Ostikon," suggested Captain Orihci.

The great parade

“You sounded like a politician yesterday... And there, in front of your mentor...” Captain Orihci said. “How long are you going to be in that damn shower?”

“Nagol is a good man... He’s intelligent, wise and patient just like Voskot was. I would have been speaking Ostikon by now... and would have been a good pilot too... had I listened to Voskot. But... I never thought I would be here this long. I ignored most of what he tried to teach me. Did I ever tell you we went hunting together? We cooked the quarry in an open pit? He was vegetarian... but he humoured me. We even got drunk on fermented juice... on several occasions. I had no idea who he was at the time... that he was a prince and a pillar of his society. Not a peasant like me. He sure had a humble heart...”

“Let’s go! They’re waiting for us. Your buddy Nagol was out there early this morning. He was the first out... His internal clock must be screwed up with the difference in time.”

“Yeah, I can believe it... Nelez is like Earth. Ostikon is hell in comparison... Not just the long hours but the smells, the humidity, the heat...”

“I’ve never been to Ostikon... For that matter, I haven’t been to any planets except for a couple of them. I was in space most of the time.”

“How did you get to know Captain Rolo? I noticed you spoke to him in his native language.”

“He taught it to me. I met him on one of his expeditions when I was a boy. I was on vacation on the planet his team was exploring. He was just a cadet then. He looked very unusual... tall and thin like a stick... I made fun of him... He was fascinated by me when he found out I was a pirate. We became good friends...”

“Well, fate brought you together again... He could help you put a crew together for your destroyer... I’m sure he has a lot of contacts everywhere... Unless of course you plan to retire...?”

“I should talk to him about it...”

“Where have you been? This poor man has been standing here forever...” complained Amih.

“Someone should have told him what time it was...” mumbled Captain Orihci.

“Thank you for your support... last night,” said Ukasnek and gave me the thumbs up.

“Good morning Sir...”

“Oh, good morning my boy... It’s wonderful here... I never knew the air could be this clean and cool in the morning... I can’t get enough of it...” he said in Macedonian, looking into the distance and then turned to Ireva. “Please get me a chair my dear...”

While Ireva ran back into the facility to grab a chair Nagol said, “It’s my own fault for keeping myself isolated in Ostikon. I was given many chances to go away but I turned them down and made excuses. I never knew this planet was such a beautiful place...”

Thinking that Nagol was complaining, Amih kept whispering in my ear in her native Galaxy Trader language but I didn’t know what she was saying. Out of respect for Nagol we had all turned off our universal translators. I guess Nagol didn’t like them because they were so impersonal and monotone and also threatened his profession. They could easily replace people as translators and his old school, the academy of languages, would have to close down.

Nagol could see the worry in Amih’s face so when Ireva came back he sat on the chair and waved them both over. He said something to Ireva which she translated for her mother; bringing a big smile to her face.

It was nearing nine o'clock and Delche, Ori and Enai still weren't there. I decided to page Enai using my new method of communication... mind to mind.

"Enai are you there...? Please turn off the automatic transmitter, find Delche and Ori and bring them here. It's almost time for the soldiers to come out... And please bring that new... you know... Your prototype universal transmitter... I could sure use it right about now..."

Moments after I relayed the message to Enai he made an announcement to the entire facility and it seemed as if every worker came out to watch the parade. Ukasnek ordered the crowds to clear the doors and brought Madam Grooni and her team close to where we were.

The moment Enai, Delche and Ori arrived I called for the soldiers to start coming out and line up in rows of one hundred. As the doors burst open and black dots began to appear along the entire length of the facility, I could hear Nagol getting excited, laughing and cheering like a little boy. The soldiers were unarmed but still looked fearsome.

With my universal translator plugged in my ears, not only could I understand what everyone was saying but I could hear from a great distance. I discovered that it was directional too. I could hear further in the direction the gadget was facing... And I could adjust the volume.

I could see Madam Grooni's mouth moving so I turned towards her and listened. "Look at them...", she said. "What's the big deal watching soldiers run around and line up? They're all ugly like him... They look like an army of gorillas... At least gorillas have some intelligence... These things are all drones... Dummies..."

I became very angry and stopped listening. She was interfering with my concentration. At that very moment I decided she couldn't be trusted with anything.

I began to focus on Nagol and could hear him laughing and cheering. “Imagine how Voskot would have felt if he saw all this...? My granddaughter would be thrilled...” I heard him yell.

I then heard Ireva say, “Wait and see what they’ll do next, after they’re all outside...”

By the time all the soldiers were out, the line stretched halfway down the valley and was nearly invisible. To bring the soldiers closer I ordered them to form ten blocks. Ten perfectly arranged rectangular, black blocks. At least that’s what they looked like from this distance.

“Why are they standing there, why don’t they do something...?” I heard Madam Grooni complain. I couldn’t help myself. I wanted to know what she was griping about this time.

I yelled as loud as I could, “MARCH!!” They all dropped their right foot down hard on the ground in unison. They took another slow step and dropped their left foot hard. The ground began to shake and each step sounded like a torpedo exploding. As they came close they sounded louder and louder with each step. Nagol jumped out of his chair and was ready to run down towards them and greet them each individually, in person. Ireva and Amih grabbed him by his arms while Aneleh tried to calm him down. I saw Madam Grooni and her bunch run through the crowd in panic and head for the facility door where Ukasnek stopped them. When the soldiers came close to the crowds I yelled, “STOP!!”

“Where are you going?” yelled Ukasnek. “The show hasn’t started yet. Do us the honour and come back and watch the show.”

Madam Grooni was speechless... She had nothing to say. I went over to where they were and said, “You are all a disgrace... All of you!” But there was no one to translate what I’d said.

After that I went over to Nagol and said, “Sir, you give the order and they will do what you want.”

“I want to see them form the Macedonian star, the symbol of our new order...” he said.

And just as he said that the soldiers began to maneuver into position, creating the shape of the Macedonian star with their bodies.

“Now I can see why my granddaughter wants to be a soldier... There is nothing more thrilling than this.”

“Please,” the Admiral whispered. “You will give him a heart attack... you’re overwhelming his senses... He’s not used to this...”

After the soldiers created the Macedonian star, which could be seen from outer space, I stopped the march and took him down to the soldiers to see them face to face. I introduced him to Nine.

“This is my friend Nine, I named her that. Her real name was Jess. She was Irev’s first cousin before she was turned into a super soldier.

He touched her face and said, “She’s very beautiful... What’s going to happen to her...?”

“That I don’t know, Sir. I don’t know what to do about them and what’s going to happen to them...”

“It must weigh a lot on you...”

“Yes it does but I don’t know what to do. I take it one day at a time.”

“I would like to come with you on this march... But I don’t think I can walk far...”

“Give me a moment Sir,” I said and contacted Enai to bring something that we could carry Nagol in on the march. Enai responded instantly and brought what he called ‘the mobile throne’. When I told Nagol what Enai called the chair, he laughed like a child. At the same time I summoned Enai’s daughter and asked her and Nine to carry him. Enai decided to come with us.

“The worst and most painful thing about her is that she doesn’t even know me. I would do anything if she would just look at me... and know that I’m her father. I love her very much but she won’t reciprocate. I know she can’t... but it still hurts me like hell. Despite being their employee, an important employee at that, they still took my daughter from me and turned her into a mindless zombie. I can never get over that...” Enai said painfully.

“You poor man...”

At this point Nagol decided to hold the hands that were carrying him and after a while I could feel the satisfaction the two female super soldiers were feeling.

“They like that,” I said to Nagol.

“I have always had that effect on women...” he said jokingly.

“Would you like to hold your daughter’s hand?” I asked Enai.

“More than anything in the world,” he replied.

I then asked her to extend her hand to him and she did. She also looked at him. After taking her hand the poor man almost broke down with emotion. He cried uncontrollably.

“The poor man... I can understand how he feels... He has a lot of pent up emotions inside of him. I wondered what had happened to him in the past...”

“I don’t know and I don’t want to ask him right now. It’s too emotional even for me.”

When we reached the end marker I ordered the soldiers to turn around and go back to the facility while, at Nagol’s request, Enai, myself and the two soldiers carrying him stayed behind.

“I see children down there. They ran from the farms to greet the soldiers. Do they live here?” asked Nagol.

“I don’t know...,” I said, but according to Enai they do.

“You’ll have to bring me here someday... I want to see the children and visit with them.”

We then followed the soldiers on their way back. When we caught up to them, they were stationary in the Macedonian star formation, as I had instructed them. After we went past I dismissed them. Nagol kissed the hands of the soldiers that carried him and let them go. Enai didn’t want to let go but realized she would go anyway and drag him with her. He eventually let go. There was sadness in his eyes and everyone noticed.

“She is his daughter...” Nagol said in Macedonian to Delche and Ori, and then in the Ostikon language to Aneleh, Rolo and Ilisa.

Enai followed his daughter but then, before entering the facility, he turned right and went to his lab. She went back to the barracks.

“I’ll hate to see what happens when parents arrive looking for their children and find them like this?” said Captain Orihci.

“I just don’t know how I’ll react when I see my own two sons...” said Amih.

“Oh Mom, you see them every day. They’re alive and well... just like cousin Jess. As long as we have this guy here they’ll be fine...” said Ireva.

“You’re appreciating me more and more I see...?” I said.

“What’s going on with you two again...?” asked Nagol.

“Don’t look at me...” I said.

“I’m looking at you...” replied Aneleh. “There is no shame in speaking up... Just say you like the girl...”

“No, not her... Maybe her cousin Jess... But not her...”

“You’re breaking her heart... Saying things like that in front of her...” said Ilisa.

“Leave them alone...” said Nagol and looked at me. He smiled and then looked at Captain Orihci.

“We should get together with Madam Grooni and discuss the plight of these poor soldiers and see if we can do something for them...”

“Of course...” replied the Captain.

“Ladies you can go back now, the demonstration is over. Irevia please take the chair back with you...”

After they left I called Enai back and told them all what I’d heard Madam Grooni say to her people when we started the parade. I also told them I had decided I couldn’t trust her.

“I agree...” said Nagol. “Not until she proves herself... But at the same time she stands on the threshold between war and peace. We don’t want a war with the Galaxy Trader government or with the consortium. So we must tread lightly and keep her happy and busy; also make her feel important.”

“What if she is just sabre rattling to maintain a bad girl image to impress her sponsors to let her keep her job?” asked Captain Rolo.

“That’s a possibility too... But how can we know for sure?” asked Captain Orihci.

“We can’t...” replied Nagol.

“Perhaps we can...” I said. “We can attach a small listening device on her and monitor her communications at all times. I know she carries a portable transmitting device with her, which she uses to communicate with someone... with whom... I don’t know...”

“That’s not a good idea. I’m sure she’ll find the listening device and then what? She’ll either be furious with us for not trusting her or she

will play us. She's far too experienced and clever for that... I think she'll play us," said Nagol.

"There is another way... This way we can monitor both conversations; hers and whoever else she talks with. Remember how we caught the tower guy? Enai reminded us.

Captain Orihci, at this point, explained to the others how we found and caught the mole that was coordinating the assassination attempt on me by the pirates when I was shot in the back by the little ship.

"I'm sure she's thought of that and is probably using a well-hidden frequency and strong encryption..." said Ori.

"We can monitor everything here. We have very sophisticated military grade portable equipment that won't only capture and record messages but can decrypt any method used by the Galaxi Traders anywhere. I just need to know when she uses it and find the frequency," said Enai.

"That's impossible..." said Captain Orihci.

"What if we place a listening device in her room...? Until we figure out the frequency," I asked.

"I'm sure she checks for such devices before she makes her call... I would!" replied Nagol.

"Why not simply ask her to make a call... Say to expunge Ukasnek's record... And then look for the frequency when she does..." suggested Ori.

"Please, don't get me involved in all this... I'm already deep in trouble with the law," protested Ukasnek.

"We'll find something simpler then... that doesn't put anyone at risk," said Delche.

"Let me take care of that... And also put a watch on her. Every time she's in her room alone start monitoring all unusual frequencies."

“My device can do that too. It can exclude all known frequencies and just look for odd ones,” said Enai.

“Do it then...” ordered Captain Orihci.

“I need to get off my feet soon, I’m getting very tired...” said Nagol. The two Captains, who were standing next to him, grabbed him by his arms and escorted him to the eating area. The rest of us followed. The women, including Madam Grooni, were already there eating their lunch. They made room for us at their table.

“Drinking again eh? Is that why you told us to leave?” asked Ireva, looking at me.

“Sorry dear, my husband doesn’t drink...” said Admiral Aneleh, Nagol’s wife. “Young lady... I like you. You’re pleasant to be around but you don’t help yourself... or anyone... when you talk like that, especially to him... You’re not building any amicable relationship doing that... He is a person too and has feelings... Besides you’re too young to be sour like that...”

“Too young?! She’s old enough to be my mother...!” I said.

“You’re not helping...” said Nagol.

“It takes two... my dear Nagol...” piped up Aneleh.

“What did I miss?” said Enai after he arrived out of breath and was ignored by everyone.

“And you! You! If you calculate your age in earth terms... You’ll see that you’re old... enough to be my grandfather...” protested Ireva.

“Enough!” said Captain Orihci and turned to Nagol. “You told me you had something to discuss with Madam Grooni. This is as good a time as any.”

“Oh, yeah... I almost forgot... Today, perhaps after I eat, I’m planning to go to the communications tower to make some requests to my government in Ostikon... You know, about some of the things we discussed the other day... and I’m wondering if you want to come with me. I would appreciate your support and perhaps you might add something to my report on behalf of your government... What do you say? Maybe at the same time you can file your report...”

“I’ll come with you... And I’ll endorse your ideas... Why not? But as for filing any of my reports... I think it’s a little early... Don’t you think...?”

“By that I meant make a request to expunge Ukasnek’s record, recognize his efforts and things like that... It would mean a lot to him and to this team. Am I right?”

“Oh yeah, that... Yeah. I’ll see what I can do.

When the women finished eating, they all left together. Nagol and Madam Grooni left and went to the communications tower. We decided to stay with Enai who was still eating his lunch.

“Did you do it?” asked Captain Orihci.

“All done... I’ll let you know when something transpires... I’ll keep an eye on it...”

“Well, there isn’t much else for me to do here so I think I might go and do my rounds... I hope that woman doesn’t land me behind bars...” said Ukasnek and left.

“Maybe we should go and check out how the DNA project is going. It should be done soon. Did we ever decide what to do with the Ostikon staff and the Ostikon DNA machines when we’re done?”

We all looked at each other but no one had any answers. Captain Rolo piped up and said, “I haven’t seen your setup... Why don’t we go and have a look at it...?”

When we got there we found Amih, Aneleh, and Ilisa serving snacks and drinks and talking to the DNA machine operators. Moments later Ireva showed up and asked where Nagol was. Her father said that he and Madam Grooni had gone to the communications tower.

“And who is translating for Nagol?”

“I don’t know...” answered Captain Orihci.

“Men!” she muttered and ran off.

“I don’t know what the fuss is all about? Some of our tower people speak Ostikon. If not they’re smart enough to use a universal translator. Enai made sure we had enough of those to sink a ship...”

“Let it go...” said Captain Rolo. “She’s just trying to be helpful. I’m sure Nagol will appreciate her company. He’s a good man.”

Moments later Ireva came back with Nagol who looked a little disappointed.

“Sorry Sir, for sending you without a translator,” I said.

“It’s not that... just as I started making my report that woman stormed out. She said she’s been away from her team for too long and had to go back. She didn’t even give me the endorsement she promised.”

“Oh well... women...” said Captain Orihci and we all laughed.

Only Ireva didn’t find it funny.

Moments later Delche and Ori returned from talking to the Ostikon crew. No one had any idea what they were expected to do after the tests were done.

“I’m keeping the tall girl...” said Enai, “even if I have to adopt her... She is brilliant and very polite. She even admits that she is very unusual for a person from Ostikon... She believes she was either adopted or kidnapped from another planet,” added Enai and

laughed. “At least that’s what she tells me when I compliment her for being so smart...”

“Well, how do the other’s feel?” asked Nagol.

“Most want to stay... Hell, all of them want to stay... Even their parents and relatives tell them to stay... It is hell out there in Ostikon right now... They’d prefer to stay,” said Delche.

“I can attest to that...” added Captain Rolo.

“So, what do you say Sir?” I asked.

“Enai, can you find them work if they stay? They all speak your language, right?” asked Nagol.

“I sure can, I can even give them their own lab to work in. We have a big lab down this corridor that has been empty for a long time. They can use it...”

“I like them, they’re good people,” said Irevia.

“Maybe you can learn something from them then...” said Captain Orihci.

“And what is that?”

“To be polite...”

“She is coming with me... She’s had enough abuse for one day... The rest of you go and get drunk. I’ll see you tomorrow... That’s enough excitement for me for one day,” said Nagol and left holding Irevia’s hand.

“Aren’t you worried about your man running off with a younger woman, Admiral?” I asked Aneleh jokingly.

“Don’t you toy with me, young man... I’ll spank that big ass of yours. I outrank you and I’m military... Not a softy like him. I know how to kick ass... even a big one like yours...”

Delche was the first to crack up laughing and then everyone else started laughing.

“This is too much laughing for me. I’ll go tell the workers they have a home and jobs here...” said Enai.

“I feel like drinking... Hey Enai, before you disappear again, take us to the empty lab and bring us one of Delche’s finest... And cups... I’ll pilfer some food from the dining area and join you in the lab. Ladies are you coming?”

“No thank you...” said Amih. “The ladies and I are going back to the reception area... to do some real work. See you later...”

The jig is up Madam Grooni

The next day Ukasnek quietly knocked on my door. I barely heard the knock but since I was already up and dressed I stepped outside. He whispered something but I couldn't hear him. I turned up my translating device and asked him why he was whispering.

“It's still dark and people are sleeping...”

“So, why are you here this early in the morning?”

“It's your pal... Nagol... He's outside. He's been there for a while.”

“What's he doing out there?”

“I don't know. He's sitting in a chair looking at the sky...”

“Did you speak to him?”

“No!”

“Why not?”

“Because I don't speak his language and he doesn't like these talking cubes.”

“Okay thank you. I'll look after him.”

I took a chair from the dining area with me and went outside.

“Good morning Sir. How are you today?”

“Fantastic! I got my voice back, my appetite is up, the food is tasty and nutritious, the air is clean and cool. Analeh has good friends and is less annoying... What more could an old man ask for?”

“But why are you outside?”

“Oh, I want to greet the rising sun for a change and see how the first rays feel on my skin.”

“People in there think you’re crazy...” I said without thinking.

He laughed and said, “All my life people thought I was crazy... People thought my friend Prince Voskot was crazy... But you know better... Since when did you care what other people think anyway? Every society has its own rules... Who’s to say what’s crazy and what’s not? I want to enjoy the remainder of my life; crazy or not.”

“Okay Sir, I’m with you...”

“Now sit beside me here and face the sky... The sun is coming up...”

Moments before the sun came up Captain Orihci showed up with a chair in his hand, sat beside us and began to look at the sky. This reminded me of a movie I once saw back on earth a long time ago, when a man with a broken neck came out of the doctor’s office, looking up at the sky. To everyone watching it seemed like he was looking at something in the sky. Then, one by one, everyone started looking up at the sky...

Suddenly the first rays of the sun hit my face.

“Doesn’t it feel wonderful?” asked Nagol.

“Yes it does!”

“Tell Nagol we have news of what we talked about yesterday. Then after I’m gone, come to the new lab, the one we were in yesterday to discuss the details. I’ll get the others,” said Captain Orihci as he took his chair and left.

After I told Nagol what the Captain had said, he said, “Let us go then...”

I took both chairs and we left.

“Who brought the chair out here for you Sir?”

“I did it myself... I told you I’m getting stronger...”

When we reached the lab the door was open and everyone who was in on the caper was there. The moment we went inside Enai locked the door. He escorted us into a back room and turned off the lab lights. There was a whole pile of stretchers at the back of the large room that looked like morgue beds. Enai had some chairs arranged in a circle around a small table with a machine resting on top of it. Enai asked us to sit down and gave us each one of those new universal translators. I already had mine on so I stuffed the second one in my pocket to use as a spare. Enai showed us how to put them on, set them and adjust the volume. Nagol made no fuss about wearing one.

“Turn up the volume and speak softly so that your voice doesn’t interfere with your hearing... And..., just in case the walls have ears... What you are about to hear is very important.”

After Enai turned the machine on there was silence. “This is when the frequency was activated... at precisely midnight,” said Enai. “Now please listen...”

A male voice came on and said, “It’s about time you reported...”

Then Madam Grooni’s voice came on and said, “Well I had nothing to say until now...”

Captain Orihci said something excitedly. Enai stopped the machine.

“What is it Captain?”

“I know that voice... I know that voice! I’ve heard it before... It’s the voice of the central intelligence director... What in the hell is she talking to him for?”

“Enai, more importantly, how did you break the encryption code?” asked Ori. “It must have been hell.”

“Actually, I didn’t break anything. This is how I found the machine. The message had been automatically decrypted. The machine did it on its own.”

“So, you say the machine was set up to automatically decrypt one of your most secretive codes? Whose machine is this anyway?” asked Nagol.

“Now that I think of it... The machine belonged to the owner of this facility. After he was killed during the raid I collected his junk and gave it to the authorities. But I must have missed this machine. I didn’t even know we had it until I started cleaning up this place to look for space to set up the DNA machines.”

“Enai, listen to me carefully... Don’t let anyone know we have this machine... Not even your most trusted associates... Record everything you have in here onto a separate device and hide it. And don’t erase what you have on this machine... There could be evidence of a massive conspiracy here...” said Nagol.

“Don’t worry...”

“It would appear that the top spy agency in our consortium was in direct communication with the boss of this facility...” said Captain Orihci.

“Indeed! Enai start the machine again...” said Nagol.

The director said, “Do you now have something to report?”

“Well no, nothing of substance but I need to make good on something I promised. So I need your help.”

“How can I help?”

“Please expunge or make it look like you expunged the record of one named Ukasnek; a local hoodlum. It appears he is favoured by our target and it would please him if we did. Also do something to honour one called Enai who works here and his fellow countrymen. He too is favoured by our target.”

“I know Enai... I should say I know of Enai. He’s a traitor... But if it pleases you, I’ll do it... Consider it done. How is our target? Did you get to talk to him? Is he as clever as they say?”

“No. He’s an idiot; a buffoon. I have no idea how he lasted this long.”

“He must have help... What about the others?”

“They’re all clowns too. They don’t know anything. Now they’ve brought this old fool from Ostikon who thinks he knows me from a thousand years ago. Do I sound anything like Grooni? He thinks I’m Grooni because I sound like her. Half the time he can’t even hear. Can you believe that?”

“No, you don’t sound at all like Grooni. She was a kind old lady with a soft-spoken voice. I liked her... Too bad we had to bump her off to give you her persona.”

“Well, now they all think I’m her and they’re beginning to trust me...”

“Did you discover anything new... anything we didn’t know?”

“No, no, no. They don’t even know half the things we know. We’re wasting our time here. Just blow up the damn place with everyone in it and get it over with.”

“Not yet... How are the actors I sent with you working out?”

“Perfectly...! They’re tight-lipped and keep to themselves. The locals truly believe they are real investigators... They suspect nothing. I also have a tight leash on the actors, of course...?”

“Of course... Anything new with the soldiers? Can we salvage them? Did you find out how he controls them...?”

“No. He doesn’t know. They don’t know... no one knows... I’m telling you they’re all a bunch of idiots... Not worth our time...”

Send the two destroyers at night and bomb them out of existence... They don't monitor the skies... I don't think they even know how."

"Not yet. We have a request from King Rodot. He wants to take a shot at our target because he killed his son... He wants revenge... If he fails then we'll do it your way. I have control of the destroyers... I will dispatch them and the entire place will go bye-bye..."

"When were you going to tell me about Rodot? And now that you did, when and how is he going to do it?"

"He's sending his best assassins... Six of them... They'll come unarmed so as not to raise suspicion. They will then challenge our target to a duel and cut him to pieces... That's Rodot's plan..."

"What?"

"I know, I know, Rodot is a fool. He has never been outside of his kingdom but he thinks he knows everything... And get this, he assured me he will succeed... because... wait for it... His assassins have never failed him. Oh well, since we got into bed with him we'll have to humour him."

"I don't care about Rodot... I want to protect my own ass... I want to know when and how?"

"Early tomorrow morning before sunup... The assassins will surround his ship and wait for him to arrive... They won't be coming inside the facility so you have nothing to worry about. Just lay low... They'll surround his ship and block him from calling his troops. They have a blocking device... We gave it to them. They'll block his ability to call on the super soldiers to help him... and when they don't show up... the assassins will chop him to pieces... That's Rodot's plan."

"And what if he's inside his ship and doesn't want to come out?"

"He'll come out. When he sees they're unarmed, he'll come out. He won't know who they are. They will goad him until he does..."

Megalomaniacs like him welcome the challenge... to beat up on a bunch of hoodlums. Let's see how good he is..."

"But..."

"No buts... Stay out of the way... Call me when it's over... Anything else to report... while I still have you here?"

"Nope, can't think of anything else... Don't forget to do what I asked you... I want to make friends here and see them squirm when they find out how I screwed them. Livè... I mean Grooni, out."

"Base out..."

Enai turned off the machine and said, "That's it!"

"Oh my God... We are screwed..." yelled Ukasnek.

"Take it easy, man... Now that we know what they're planning we will screw them!" said Captain Orihci.

"It will be difficult without the power of the super soldiers..." said Ukasnek.

"Slow down, slow down... We will think of something... Give us a moment to think..." said Captain Orihci.

"Listen to me," said Nagol. "Let's be rational about this. Now that we know their plan we will deal with them. I'm sure Captain Otsiron will find a way to deal with them... I have seen him in action before. What's important for us now is to make sure what we know remains a secret. I guarantee you we will defeat them if we maintain secrecy. No one must know what we know and no one must act any differently than normal. That imposter is very clever and if she suspects anything she will ruin our plans... whatever they may be... You must keep this a secret from everyone... even from your wives... What do you think Otsiron?"

"Let's take things one at a time... Let's take care of the assassins first. While I fight them off I'll call on Nine to help me. When they

block me, Enai you figure out what kind of blocking system they'll be using to stop me. Once we get rid of the assassins we will analyze their blocking system and devise a method to counter it. We cannot afford to lose communications with the soldiers. We'll need them to blast the destroyers out of the sky... No offense Captain Orihci."

"Are you sure you can take on six assassins?" asked the Captain.

"Not me. My guards will decimate them... They'll eat them alive..."

"Oh yeah... Madam Garbage doesn't know about your guards does she...?" said Ukasnek.

"More importantly, King Rodot and his sponsors don't know about them... Or Rodot's sponsors don't want Rodot to know about them. In other words, they don't want him to succeed because one, they don't want him to take the credit and two, what reason would they then have to attack and destroy the facility and everything inside it? Otsiron is not their only target... They have a bigger mess to clean up. They want to give everyone a chance to eliminate Otsiron first and fail before they strike with the destroyers because there would be no other option... But why two destroyers...?"

"Because Otsiron's little ship can only attack them one at a time, while the second destroyer bombs the facility?" Captain Rolo said.

"One destroyer can easily do the job. And besides this is supposed to be a surprise attack... And even if we find out in time that we are under attack, what can that little ship do to defend us? Otsiron was able to disable the second destroyer only because he surprised the Captain. A destroyer's cannon range is unlimited compared to the little ship's cannons. Besides if he's lucky enough to avoid the destroyer's blasts, the local squadrons will eat him alive. There are hundreds of little ships inside the destroyer that will come out and attack him before he gets in range to fire," said Captain Orihci.

Oh my Mother Nature! They are planning to send both facilities to hell... Maybe even destroy everything on this beautiful planet. They want everyone dead... They want no witnesses... How much do you

want to bet they'll even kill Madam Garbage to cover their tracks?" asked Nagol.

There was silence in the room... It was a devastating revelation... Nagol's words shook us all to the core.

"We will find a way and we will stop them," I yelled.

Enai backed me up and said, "I have seen this guy work miracles and fight his way out of impossible situations... and he has survived. After all he was the one who stopped the war..."

"Like I said; one step at a time... Another thing we have to do is watch the skies... We haven't been doing that. Do we have the capability to do that Enai?"

"Yes we do... and some... We have sensor arrays that can spot a ship on the other side of the galaxy... But we found no use for them so we don't use them."

"Start using them Enai but make sure we don't tip our hand. Make it part of a new training program or something. If anything is detected report it immediately," I said.

Ori spoke up and said he would like to head such a program as part of a training exercise to teach Galaxy Trader consortium students how to watch the sky. There would be a big prize for the student who spots and reports the largest number of stars in a given time. The real aim of the program, however, was to remain a secret and would start immediately..."

At that point Captain Orihci began to look a little nervous.

"I know we can't stay here too long because people will get suspicious as to what we are doing, so we need to part ways as soon as possible. But before we go I want to summarize what it is we need to do.

1. Act normal wherever we go. Tell jokes and kid with Madam Grooni like nothing has happened. She thinks we're stupid so we should play our part...

2. Enai, prepare to monitor tomorrow morning's situation without looking suspicious. As far as you are concerned Otsiron, you will be attacked by a number of hoodlums whom your guards will take down. Don't call on the super soldiers. Enai, you monitor for unusual activity and see what kind of device they will be using to block his communication with the super soldiers. If such a device is found, hide it, like it was never there. We'll analyze it later.

3. Ori, go with Enai right now and get him to teach you how to use the sensor array. If anyone asks tell them you're preparing lecture notes for a student course on observing the stars... like we discussed... At the same time keep an eye on the sky for the destroyers.

At that point Delche piped up and said, "I'd like to work with Ori. He can't monitor the sky day and night by himself and we can't trust anyone else to do it. I'll relieve him until we get reliable people."

We all agreed that Delche should join Ori and the two should share the responsibility for monitoring the sky. Nagol also recommended that we don't tell anyone what we are doing.

After that we all left the meeting. We came out of the lab two at a time to avoid suspicion and made sure no one saw us exiting. After that Nagol and I went to the dining area and, even though we took a long time to get there due to Nagol's slow walking, we were the first to sit at our table. Moments later we were joined by the ladies, including Madam Grooni who had the others captivated with her stories which Ireva translated.

After we greeted each other with smiles on our faces Ireva said, "Did you know that this lady here," pointing to Madam Grooni, "served as a medic in the Aimez disaster and saved many people...?"

“Yes, I remember that disaster... We heard about it in Ostikon too. I was just a little boy when it happened. I didn’t know what it was but I can remember people being sad... very sad...” said Nagol.

“Imagine that... Our Madam Grooni is a hero...” said Amih.

“Yes, she has accomplished many things in her lifetime...” said Ilisa.

“And now she’s here with us, to help us...” said Admiral Aneleh, trying to fit in with the others.

This surprised both Nagol and I because Aneleh wasn’t that free in giving compliments; especially to pretentious people like Madam Grooni. We were also surprised by diplomat Ilisa not challenging her on the facts of the matter but we figured she was a guest on this planet and it wasn’t her place. All in all the fake Madam Grooni figured she had us all eating out of her hand.

The others began to appear in the dinner area in twos even before the food was brought in. The two Captains were involved in a serious conversation in Captain Rolo’s language when they sat down.

“What are you talking about Dad? You look so serious.”

“Politics my dear, he tells me the situation in Ostikon is really bad... I would like him to take up residence here with us... He really doesn’t have anywhere else to go... really...”

“And when was he going to discuss that with me?” protested Ilisa.

“It’s my fault Ilisa. I shouldn’t have brought up the subject. Anyway nothing is final... We were just exploring the possibilities you know...”

“Of course I would stay here with you... I would love to stay here. This is where we are really needed. I wouldn’t miss the opportunity... But once in a while I like to be consulted... so that

we can plan our future together... I know he didn't have any choice when he was active in the service but now he does.”

I looked at Nagol and noticed he was observing fake Madam Grooni's reactions and remembered what she'd said about him in the recording. But he maintained his cool, laughing when the others laughed and kept up with his image of the fool that she had painted him to be.

“Oh that's wonderful to have you here with us...” said Nagol when he was caught looking at fake Madam Grooni.

“Of course, I wouldn't have it any other way. You are all caring and wonderful people. I'm happy to be here with you and share my life's stories.”

Just then the kitchen staff began to deliver the food. We allowed the ladies to go first, even though Nagol and I had arrived there before them.

“What are you two chatting about...” asked Ireva when Delche and Ori appeared in the dining area.

“We're discussing our future...” said Delche.

“There isn't much for us to do here but we want to help. We're discussing what to do to help... to be useful...” said Ori.

“What are you good at?” asked Ireva.

“Exploring space... Traveling... Observing planets... stars... You know the usual kind of stuff. I've wanted to do that since I was a little boy,” explained Ori.

“Why don't you do exactly that,” said Madam Grooni but realized they were visitors here so she added. “I'm sure I can find something for you to do. I'm sure Enai has an observatory around here somewhere...” thinking to send them somewhere out of her hair. But when she realized that what she was offering wouldn't contribute much to our cause she added. “Start a school or

something... Bring the little children from the farms here and show them the stars and outer space. I'm sure they'll find it fascinating and they might even learn something..."

"An excellent idea... What do you think Captain Orihci?" asked Delche.

"I'm full of good ideas..." Madam Grooni interjected.

I could only imagine what Nagol was thinking.

"Yes, yes... if Madam Grooni agrees by all means..." replied the Captain.

"Of course Madam Grooni agrees... Hey you, big fellow over there... call Enai with your brain and ask him to come here immediately."

Then just, as I was about to contact Enai, he appeared in the dining area. Everyone stared at him with their mouths open.

"Wow, how did you do that...?" asked Amih.

"It's magic..." replied Madam Grooni and immediately went into a rant ordering Enai to find work for Delche and Ori as agreed, before anyone had a chance to say anything different. She wanted it to be her idea and no one else's.

Enai was completely confused so I used my mind trick and told him to agree to everything she asked for and that I would explain things later.

"Thank you for your idea, Madam Grooni. If that's what Delche and Ori want and if Captain Orihci agrees, I'll do that..."

"Yes, yes, that's what they want and yes Captain Orihci agrees... We already went over that. Now you three go and do it..."

Aneleh must have been looking at Nagol, figuring he was going to explode any second now so she suggested that they go back to work.

“Ladies, we should go back to work... They’re fully grown adults, I’m sure they’ll figure out what to do. Let them eat their lunch first... Let’s go Madam Grooni, tell us another one of those fascinating stories...” And with that all the women left the dining area.

“Thank you my dear... You read my mind,” said Nagol. “A few more seconds of that and I was sure I was going to either have a heart attack or strangle her...”

After we explained to Enai what had happened he said, “This turned out to be far better than we planned... And by the way, no one has to sit behind a screen to monitor the sensor array... Our system has an auto feature which allows a computer to watch the skies all around us via satellite and record everything that moves... I mean fast like a ship... and reports it to the operator. The computer compares frames and calculates the speed and trajectory of moving objects. I programmed it to record such activities and report them to us immediately via an audible alarm at the operator’s console or to this portable device I have in my hand, which now has been activated... I told you we have the best monitoring equipment in existence...”

“Okay, okay Enai... That’s fantastic... We don’t need to know the technical details... just teach these guys how to use it... And let me know if you spot anything big moving fast this way,” said Captain Orihci.

When Enai, Delche and Ori went to get their food, Nagol looked at me strangely.

“Is there something wrong, Sir?”

“Yes! No! I mean there is nothing wrong but when you spoke to Enai with your mind earlier I saw you weren’t wearing your crown. Well how in Mother Nature’s name did you do it? That’s one part... The other part is Enai doesn’t have a transmitter, right? Then how were you able to hear him?”

“I don’t know... Perhaps Enai might have an explanation...”

“Can you do that with the soldiers...?”

“No, Sir!”

“Yes you can... you did it yesterday when you told me they liked my touch. How did you know that?”

“I just knew... I could feel their emotions...”

We spoke at great length with Enai about this while we all toured the observatory but we had no idea how we had communicated. So Nagol suggested we find out. Everyone agreed that I should experiment communicating with the soldiers without the crown and see what happens. Or wear the crown turned off to give the appearance that I need it to communicate with the soldiers.

At dinner time, when the ladies came back to eat their supper, we spent time joking around and drinking plenty; giving the appearance that this was just another ordinary day.

Delche and Ori, once again, thanked Madam Grooni for her excellent suggestion and couldn’t stop talking about the tour they’d had and the telescopes and other equipment they saw.

Appearing to be completely plastered I said goodnight to everyone and stumbled my way to my ship.

“Aren’t you going with him?” Madam Grooni asked Ori.

“No!”

“Why not? He might fall or something...”

“Because that little confined space in there will stink to high heaven when he pukes all the rakia he drank...” said Delche as he tried to stand up and fell back into his chair.

After laughing out loud she said, “Some rokia king you turned out to be... You can’t even handle your own product.” And with that she got up and left. Everyone else followed.

When I saw everyone leave I contacted Enai and asked him to bury several monitoring devices around my ship and record the voices of the assassins... I watched him do it from inside my ship. When he left I activated my guards and placed them in high alert mode, which meant they would fire their weapons without hesitation or orders from me the moment I was threatened.

God favours us or maybe we're better spies

I didn't sleep most of that night. I couldn't... not because I was afraid or anything but because I was trying to figure out how to approach my impending problem, without revealing that I knew about it beforehand. I contemplated wearing battle gear in case I was fired at, but if I did that some people might wonder why... I contemplated hiding a firearm in my pocket... God knows I had plenty of those in my ship's armory. But everyone knows I don't carry arms. I contemplated letting my guards out alone to take care of business but again that would be out of character for me. I never send my guards out alone and rarely take them with me. Even having my guards follow me around would be out of character. Why would I take precautions unless I knew something was going to happen?

Everything was normal that day so I had to act normal, even if I risked being harmed.

I must have fallen asleep and was still sleeping when someone knocked on the ship's hull. After the third knock I decided to answer.

"Go away... My head hurts..." I yelled. I heard another knock so I yelled, "What do you want...? Go away..."

No answer, but another knock.

"Okay, okay, I'll open the hatch... come on in..." I said and ordered the guards to stand down.

I was buck naked when I saw a shadow approaching from the side of the hatch. It was a man, a short fellow. He was surprised when he saw me naked and stopped momentarily, giving me enough time to give him a kick in the chest and toss him out of my ship. When he fell on his back I purposely stepped outside naked to look around. I saw others running towards me while yelling something. I immediately ran inside my ship, reactivated my guards and put them on high alert. Later I would be say to Madam Grooni that, 'I had to activate my guards. I had no choice. I was being attacked'. That

would be my cover... The moment a couple of them tried to board my ship my guards pounced and fired at them, killing them on the spot. The moment the guy who'd fallen on his back saw them, he bolted. They went after him like blood hounds. One of them shot him in the back. My guards then ran after the others and killed all six of them in a matter of seconds. I had no idea that my guards could run that fast.

I jumped out of my ship, still naked, and started shouting, "Stop! Cease fire... Stop shooting... Everyone stop shooting..."

After the guards came back we went inside and I had them deactivated and back in their stations. I got dressed and went outside yelling, "What happened here? Who are these guys...? Does anyone know? This is a disaster..." I then looked closely at the guy who was shot in the back and saw a burn right through his upper body from his back and out his chest. He looked like he was shot with a cannon ball. I had no idea that those little pistols my guards carried were so powerful. People started running out of the facility to see what had happened. Among them was Madam Grooni.

"My poor boy, what happened? Are you okay? I ran out here the moment I heard the commotion..." she yelled while looking at the dead bodies.

Soon after, Enai arrived. He had people with him carrying stretchers. He too began to yell and ask what had happened and if I was okay.

When Madam Grooni saw Enai and his helpers ready to take the bodies away she yelled, "STOP!" Everyone stopped in their tracks. She then told the people to leave the scene.

"This is a crime scene, everyone leave the area NOW!"

While Madam Grooni was distracted I contacted Enai mind to mind and asked him if he'd found the device. He said yes, he'd seen it but hadn't retrieved it. From the recordings he took he said he knew what the device was and how it worked. They had used devices like that in the field in the past to disrupt communications. In that case I suggested we leave it where it was. He said it wasn't a good idea

because a device like that in Madam Grooni's hands might cause us grief in the future and we'd best find it before she did and destroy it. He had triangulated its position and told me approximately where it was and what it looked like. It was still transmitting.

"Hey Madam Grooni, this one here might still be alive... Shouldn't we take him to the hospital?" yelled Enai to distract her.

"No, not before I look at him..."

"Please look at him before he dies..."

When she went to look at the assassin I looked around and found the gadget. I stepped on it hard and heard it crack. I then casually went back to where I'd been standing before.

After she looked at the man she looked behind and saw me. I was still standing in the same spot where she'd left me. "This one is dead too..." she yelled

From there she went to look at the others, one by one. They were all dead. Then when she found the gadget she said, "Enai, you can take them away now."

She picked up the broken gadget and showed it to me. I didn't say anything.

"I reckon this is the weapon they threatened you with...?"

"I don't know... It doesn't look like a weapon to me. It looks more like a communicator..."

"This must be the weapon because I don't see any others... If this isn't the weapon then why did you sick your guards on them?"

"I don't know? I thought they were here to rob me, kill me or something."

"Those little guys...? Rob a big man like your? Ridiculous... But I'll tell you what. We don't have to report this because for sure

you'll be charged with six murders and your guards will be confiscated and melted down. Let this be between me and you. I'll cover for you, okay?

"If that's what you want... You're the boss..."

"You are damn right... I'm the boss and don't you forget it... I'm putting my life on the line here for you."

"What are you going to do with the gadget?"

"I am keeping it as evidence..."

"For what reason..." Why not give it to Enai to examine?"

"No, no, no... The less he knows about this the better... We need to cover it up..."

"In that case you shouldn't need it for evidence..."

"Okay, okay..." she yelled in a frustrated tone of voice and took a rock, put the gadget on the ground and furiously smashed it into tiny little pieces.

What Madam Grooni didn't know is that our voices were being recorded. We were standing on top of a recording device. In the meantime the two Captains, with help from Delche and Ori, had triangulated the landing location of their ship and, through Enai, had given me its location. All I had to do now was fly my ship there and intercept it... But how was I going to do that without tipping my hand? How was I going to explain that there was a ship there, let alone how I'd found it... without showing Madam Grooni that I had prior knowledge? I figured if the ship had no pilot, meaning that one of the guys who was killed was its pilot, the ship would be going nowhere. We just had to wait until someone "accidentally" found it. But if a pilot was on the ship, he or she would soon attempt to fly away, in which case I would have to go in pursuit and shoot it down. We just had to wait and see what happened.

“Madam Grooni, I’ve never seen these guys before. Do you think they’re locals?”

“How should I know? They must be locals or else how did they get here? There’s no ship or any other kind of vehicle... Did you see any? They’re probably local hoodlums from the farms...”

“I guess so... In any case we should let Captain Orihci and Ukasnek know to be on the lookout in case we get another attack. Let’s go and wake up the Captain.”

Dawn was about to break when we arrived at the Captain’s door. I hesitated before I knocked.

She immediately knocked hard and said to me, “This is an emergency... And all you care is about waking up the Captain?”

There was a muffled response coming from inside, “What is it? Is that you again, Ireva? It’s the middle of the night... Go away...”

“It’s me... We have an emergency situation, get dressed and get out here...” she yelled at the Captain and then looked at me and quietly said. “We don’t want you running out here with your ‘shlong’ sticking out like this guy here...”

“Oh you saw that... I am so sorry... I was completely distracted. I wasn’t even aware I was naked...” I said shyly.

“Don’t worry about it... Why is he taking so long?”

Her comment just confirmed to me that she’d been there all that time watching my ship to see how things would transpire.

“What’s wrong...? What’s the emergency...? asked the Captain, sounding surprised.

“Well... While you were sleeping your facility was attacked by burglars...”

“Burglars...?”

“Yeah, this guy claims he was attacked... Actually he claims he was ambushed... Maybe because they saw him running outside of his ship naked. I don’t know why he had to run outside naked but he did... I saw him outside naked, looking around when the supposed assailants ran towards him. He then ran back into his ship and sent his guards out after them... And I tell you, even though the supposed assailants were unarmed, his guards chased them and shot them in the back without a warning. I went out there, risking my own life to help him... There were six alleged assailants and all of them are dead... Were they all locals or not? That I don’t know. So Captain Orihci, I want you to go out there and post guards. I don’t want incidents like that repeated.”

“Okay, I’ll ask Ukasnek to post guards and investigate the incident.”

“There is really nothing to investigate. I examined the crime scene and it looks like his guards killed those men plain and simple. Who was at fault? I don’t know. They’re all dead now and they can’t tell us anything...so what is the point of investigating...?”

“Okay, you’re right. We would be wasting our time investigating...”

“Thank you Madam Grooni for reporting the incident and for your time... We will talk later. Will you join us at breakfast this morning?”

“Yes, I’ll be there...”

The Captain then left to look for Ukasnek while I went with Madam Grooni to wherever she was going.

Just as she was about to enter the common room she said, “You’re safe now. You don’t need to follow me around... Go back to your ship... or something... I’ll see you at breakfast in a couple of hours.”

This was my opportunity to get together with the others and assess the situation without being suspected of knowing anything. I went to see Ori and Delche first. Enai was with them and they were

monitoring King Rodot's ship in the forest. It was still there motionless.

"It hasn't moved since we spotted it landing hours ago..." said Delche.

"How long have you guys been here?"

"Since we left dinner last night... We've been here watching all night. The ship arrived a few hours past midnight," replied Ori.

"The assassins didn't come out until much later and activated the disruptor device just after they attacked you. The moment I saw the signal I instantly recognized it so I went to the upper floor windows and watched," said Enai.

"I guess you saw me come out naked, right? I had a bit of a dilemma there as to how to approach the problem without being suspected of having foresight."

"I figured as much. You gave us quite a performance. Anyone who saw you will think you're a coward now ..." said Enai.

"I don't really care... The important thing is that Madam Grooni thinks that I'm a coward. I gave her no reason to suspect anything else."

"Good...!"

"I'm telling you there is no one on that ship... We've been watching it almost since midnight and nothing has moved; not even a flicker of light... It's dead, dead, dead..." said Delche sounding frustrated.

"Delche, please don't frustrate yourself. If you're tired and sleepy go to bed, I'll watch the ship."

"And how are we going to explain to Madam Grooni why we're not there at breakfast?"

“Well then, let’s get the others together and decide what to do,” I said.

“I’ll go and get them...” Enai said and left.

Moments later they returned. Captain Rolo and Nagol were missing.

“What about...”

“I’ll inform Rolo later... You can inform Nagol. Now let’s not lose any more time. Let’s get this done before breakfast,” Captain Orihci said.

“I’ll handle this... I’ll run around looking for you and ask Madam Grooni if she has seen you and when she asks why I’m looking for you, and I’m sure she will ask, I’ll tell her that a child coming from the farms this morning saw a dead ship in the forest. I’ll take it to mean a crashed ship and that I am looking for you so that we can go to investigate it. How does that sound?”

“It will work...”

“What if she wants to go with you?” asked Enai.

“So what... I would prefer her not to be with us... to give us a chance to check the ship out without her... but if she insists let her come...” replied the Captain.

“I tell you what, why don’t I send Nine with you. With her at your side you can have protection in case someone is in there... and that will deter Madam Grooni from coming with you... I think she’s afraid of Nine...”

“Bring Nine here then...”

“No, not here... I’ll go to my ship and you, and whoever else comes with you, can come looking for me in my ship. That’s were Madam Grooni expects me to be. I’ll call Nine from there after you arrive. Since I know her better than any other soldier I’ll try calling her without the transmitter. I already know I can see what she sees and

feel what she feels... Enai, you prepare the most sophisticated monitoring equipment you've got and engage it when I call you... I want you to find out how we communicate. Does that make any sense?

“Yes!”

I then turned to Ukasnek and said, “Okay Ukasnek start running around looking for Captain Orihci. And you, Captain Orihci, look surprised when he finds you...”

“Where should I go?” asked the Captain.

“You should go and look for Ukasnek. Isn't that what Madam Grooni asked you to do earlier? Pretend you haven't found him yet.”

While Ukasnek bolted for the common room, Captain Orihci took a different corridor asking people if they'd seen Ukasnek. When Ukasnek reached the common room he burst inside panting like he was out of breath and said, “Has anyone seen Captain Orihci?!”

Being more curious than angry with Ukasnek for barging in without knocking, Madam Grooni said, “Speak up man, why are you looking for... you know... that Captain!”

“A boy... a farm boy... told me he saw a dead ship... I mean a crashed ship in the forest... Should we go and investigate it?”

“Are you sure it was crashed?”

“The boy said ‘dead’. I assume he meant crashed... Why else would he say dead if it wasn't broken up or in pieces?”

“Were there any dead bodies? How about living ones...?”

“I told you, I don't know!”

“Don't get snippy with me. I'm trying to help you... Ah, here is the Captain.”

After Ukasnek told the story again, Madam Grooni insisted she wanted to go with them.

“We can’t go there directly... Not before we scan the area for radiation. It’s best we send a super soldier with a tester since we have no robots... Radiation can be dangerous you know, even lethal. Let’s go find Otsiron and ask him to send a soldier.”

“I know where he is... He’s in his ship... Too traumatized I guess and probably drinking... I feel sorry for him.”

Captain Orihci should have asked, “Traumatized from what?” but he didn’t and Madam Grooni didn’t catch it.

When the three came close to my ship, Captain Orihci knocked on the hull. I didn’t answer. Madam Grooni then picked up a rock and smashed it against the hull and yelled, “It’s me... I know you’re in there. We need to talk to you...”

After Ukasnek explained what had happened, for the third time, I put my crown on and tried to call Nine. But instead, unbeknownst to them, I called Enai to turn on his monitoring equipment.

“This damn thing isn’t working, for some reason ...”

“Did you turn it on...” asked Madam Grooni.

I took the crown off my head and looked at the switch, grinned and said, “Ah, that’s what it was...” I then turned the transmitter on and off again and put it back on my head.

“Calling Nine, calling Nine...” I said. “She’s not responding she must be sleeping...”

“Well, wake her up... We haven’t got all day!”

I watched her eyes open and she looked around. She was looking for me, wondering where my voice was coming from. She realized that this was an unusual call and didn’t know how to react to it. I then sent her a suggestion to dress in battle gear and come to my ship. I

showed her the way with images. I realized this was going to be a little more difficult to do without the transmitter and the aid of the computer inside my chip, but I was determined to do it anyway. I still didn't know how we had communicated.

When Nine arrived Madam Grooni was not at all intimidated, even though Nine was armed with a big plasma gun that looked like a cannon.

"Let's go... Tell her to go... What are we waiting for...?" ordered Madam Grooni.

"You forgot to tell her to bring the radiation equipment..." the Captain reminded me.

"I'll contact Enai and tell him to bring some testing equipment, as well as a hazmat suit... Just give me a moment..."

In the brief moment I spoke with Enai, I found out that Enai also had no idea how we'd communicated... "It has to be telepathic..." he said. "What else could it be?"

Moments later Enai arrived and offered the hazmat suit to Madam Grooni.

"Why don't you wear it? You're the scientist..." she said to him.

"Oh, not me... There could be something else around there, inside the ship, that might be more dangerous than radiation... No thank you..."

"Give it to Ukasnek, he's the security guy..." said Madam Grooni.

"I don't know how to deal with things I don't understand..." replied Ukasnek.

"I'll take the suit..." the Captain said and put it on.

When they arrived at the site they found the ship intact but locked tight.

“The boy must have meant the ship was turned off...” Ukasnek said.

“It could still be booby trapped... and could explode if we touch it,” said Enai.

“Stand back!” the Captain said and followed closely behind Nine as she approached the ship’s hatch.

After Nine knocked on the hull a rumble was heard coming from the inside. The Captain yelled, “GET BACK! GET BACK! GET BACK!”

At that moment Madam Grooni bolted and ran back as fast as she could giving the Captain enough time to speak to the ship’s occupant in King Rodot’s language and tell him to speak to no one because there were people there sent by King Rodot to kill him if he spoke. He then asked the person inside to open the door. After he did, Nine pointed her rifle at him which scared him even more.

When Madam Grooni heard the hatch opening she ran back to be first to speak to the man. He was a small, frail man and probably had never been out of his home world before. Madam Grooni tried to intimidate him with threats but he said nothing.

“He must be mute or something... He has made no effort to communicate with us... in any language... Who is he? What’s he doing here all alone? Maybe he’s a refugee... Or maybe he’s a slave who has escaped... But one thing is for sure... He came here alone...”

“Well, I suppose you’re right. Something isn’t right with this fellow... But he doesn’t seem to be dangerous... What do you suggest we do with him...” asked the Captain.

“I don’t know... Perhaps we can send him back to wherever he came from... Then he won’t be our problem...”

“Well, why don’t we put him in jail...? That might loosen his tongue a little? And maybe he’ll tell us what his name is...”
Ukasnek suggested.

“Put him in jail... And the moment he decides to talk... in any language... let me know. I want to interrogate him.”

“Okay.”

While they were escorting the man back into the facility, they ran into Nagol and Captain Rolo and their wives who hadn’t yet heard about the incident that morning. Fearing that someone might ask the wrong question, Captain Orihci turned them away. He told them they’d found this man outside hiding in a ship and were trying to figure out what to do with him. In the meantime I arrived and took Nine and the others with me to the dining area.

“Hey, look Mom... It’s Jess. Good morning Jess... You still don’t recognize me, do you?”

“Good morning everyone... How’s everybody doing today...?” I asked. After we exchanged pleasantries I left Jess with the women and borrowed Nagol and Captain Rolo for a moment to talk to them. When we were alone I told Nagol and Captain Rolo everything that had transpired that morning. When we arrived at the jail, because Madam Grooni was there, Ukasnek had to once again tell the whole story about how we’d found the man. He made sure this story was disconnected from the earlier one when I’d been attacked.

“Just because he can’t talk you can’t put the man in jail! Since when is it illegal to hide in a ship or not talk? What if he has a medical condition and lost his memory... and doesn’t know who he is? What if he can’t hear or speak? Let him go now!” ordered Nagol, giving us a show in front of Madam Grooni.

“But Sir...?” said Captain Orihci.

“No buts... You’re in charge here. He is your responsibility now... Show him some kindness... Bring him to breakfast... he probably hasn’t eaten for days... Look how scrawny he is.”

“Okay I will, but first I’ll have Enai look him over to see if he’s healthy.”

“We’ll see you at breakfast...” said Nagol and we all left for the dining area while Captain Orihci and Enai headed for Enai’s lab where Captain Orihci interrogated the man and discovered that indeed he was the ship’s pilot and that he’d brought the assassins to Nelez. He didn’t want to leave the planet he said, after the assassins failed to return because he knew he would be executed. King Rodot had a reputation for eliminating witnesses. Captain Orihci instructed the man to keep quiet at all times and only speak to him in private and only when spoken to. The man agreed. Enai gave him some work clothes from the lab in case someone recognized the origin of his clothing. He now looked like one of Enai’s associates.

“Ah, you brought one of your associates with you to breakfast... How nice...,” said Amih when Captain Orihci, Enai and the stranger arrived.

But before the Captain had a chance to reply he was distracted by how I looked.

“What’s wrong with you?” he asked in an intense tone of voice. I was feeling ill from Madam Grooni and Ireva stroking Nine’s face and hands and other exposed parts of her skin. I could feel everything...and it made me feel sick.

“I can tell you what’s wrong with him... There’s no shame in telling them what happened...” said Madam Grooni

“What happened?” yelled Amih.

Madam Grooni laughed and said, “He was attacked by a bunch of local hoodlums this morning...”

“That’s not funny... Not funny at all...”

“It was funny alright... It was very funny when he ran outside naked to confront them. His ‘dong’ was hanging out... It was so small,

come to think of it... for such a large man. He thought he'd been attacked by one hoodlum but when he saw that others were coming after him, he ran inside his ship like a little girl... And get this... get this... He called on his girl guards to save him..."

"Is that true?" asked Admiral Aneleh, finding the story a bit embellished.

"Yes it's all true. But in my defense I didn't know how many there were..."

All the women laughed.

Ireva said, "Yeah sure..."

"The poor man... No wonder he feels sick," Amih said in sympathy

The food finally arrived and in all the commotion no one paid attention to the stranger... It was like he wasn't there and, more importantly, the morning's attack was downplayed so much that it became a comedy. Also, the connection between the alien ship, its pilot and the attack on me by the assassins was never made, thanks mainly to Madam Grooni who was turning out to be a master of cover ups. As for the alien ship... Ukasnek flew it and hid it among the other ships, between Captain Rolo's and Captain Orihci's shuttles.

"Amih please save some food for Delche and Ori. I didn't see them here this morning... They probably overslept," I said.

"I will..."

Revelation

After the women had left to get their lunch I sat beside Nine and watched her staring directly at the wall, emotionless. A certain kind of sadness came over me.

Captain Orihci, sitting opposite to me, noticed and said, “Send her back... You can’t help her. It breaks my heart to see her like that...”

“What a great tragedy... And such a beautiful girl...” said Nagol, and Captain Rolo agreed.

“I knew her well you know. Ireva and she used to play together when they were little. They used to run around in my garage constantly asking questions, ‘What’s this, what’s that...’ distracting me from my work... But I loved them. They looked so much alike, sometimes I couldn’t tell them apart...” Ukasnek said.

“That’s because they’re twin sisters...” blurted Captain Orihci.

“No way...”

“Yes, when they were born we gave one to Amih’s sister who couldn’t have children of her own... It was no big deal then... We all lived together anyway. Amih’s sister and her husband were very kind and helpful to us. We were very poor in those days and that was the least we could do for them... They wanted a child so desperately... It made them very happy.”

“Does Ireva know?”

“No and she must never find out... She’ll never forgive us for not telling her, especially her mother. Be quiet now, they’re coming back.”

“What’s wrong with you people? You look like you’re at a funeral... Aaah, are you still brooding about what happened to you this morning big guy? And I see you’re hugging my cousin again... She’ll protect you, don’t worry. Here, I brought her a plateful of food to eat. A big plate for a big girl...”

“Ireva, must you?” asked her mother and handed me the two plates of food she was holding. “Take them to Delche and Ori... After you eat...”

“Thank you... What about you?”

“Ilisa is bringing a plate for me...”

“You know what? Why don’t we all take our food with us and go visit Ori and Delche in the observatory. There’s plenty of space for us there... That way they don’t have to eat alone...” Captain Orihci suggested.

“Good idea,” said Nagol and Amih at the same time.

“Do we have to?” asked Madam Grooni. “I prefer to eat my food sitting down at a table like a civilized person; not standing like a pirate or worse like a farmer.”

“Are you taking her with you Captain Fat?” asked Ireva looking at Nine as we got ready to leave.

I looked at Nine and noticed she had already eaten all her food.

“Okay, I’ll take her off your hands,” I said and went over and grabbed her by the hand. The moment I touched her she gave me the impression that she was still hungry and wanted more food. This made me wonder how often the soldiers were fed and how much food they were given. I thought I should investigate that but not now. Now it was time to get my food. I wanted to get some more food for Nine but my hands were full. I was going to ask Ukasnek to get another plateful but I saw both of his hands were occupied. He was already carrying two plates. So I asked Captain Rolo. He said he’d take care of it. After I got my plateful I looked back and saw Captain Rolo carrying four plates full of food.

When I looked at him he said, “I wasn’t always a Captain you know,” and smiled. I noticed Nagol wasn’t carrying anything. Rolo must have been carrying one plate for himself, one for Nagol and the

two Amih had left on the table for Ori and Delche. I also noticed Enai carrying two plates. So I figured we should have enough food for everyone. I noticed Captain Orihci helping the stranger select his food. I guess he wasn't familiar with our cuisine.

Delche and Ori were thrilled to see us all there and to meet the stranger Captain Orihci brought with us.

The Captain said something to the stranger and we finally got to hear his voice. It was a young man's voice. He seemed happy but something was bothering him.

Pointing at Ori and Delche, the Captain told him these were the guys who'd spotted his ship and led us to find him.

We were all hungry. We'd been through a lot of activities that morning so we all started eating. We had to sit Nine at a table. I was afraid she would drop her plate.

I spotted Nagol looking at the stranger. He watched him for a long time. He could see the worry in his face. How he recognized that, I don't know. Finally, after we finished eating he said something to Captain Orihci.

"Our new friend doesn't seem to be content. There is some worry on his face. Is he all right?"

"Of course he is. He just doesn't know us yet. It's understandable..." replied the Captain.

But Nagol wasn't going to let it go. "Are you all right, son?" he asked, looking at the stranger and leaving no choice for the Captain but to translate.

After the man answered the Captain said, "Something is worrying him... That woman, the tall one with the fancy dress... He wanted to know what she was doing here and why were we friendly with her..."

"I think he's talking about Madam Grooni," interrupted Ukasnek.

“What about her?” asked Nagol.

At that point the stranger wanted to tell us something. The Captain translated. He talked for a long time and told us many things. One of the more important things he told us was that he knew of Madam Grooni. He said he didn't recognize the woman at first, but then when he saw her dress more closely he recognized it. It was a unique dress. He remembered it was given to her as a gift by King Rodot for 'services rendered'. But he didn't know what those 'services' were. The stranger was at the ceremony when she was given a medal, all sorts of gifts and, of course, that dress. The stranger's comrades in the resistance movement told him she was a bad woman who worked for Rodot's henchmen and was not to be trusted. From what he was told, she wasn't even from the Galaxy Trader planets. She was an outsider. He couldn't tell us where she was from... He didn't know.

“That woman is full of surprises... What next?” said Nagol.

“Maybe we should check her DNA?” suggested Enai.

“Maybe we should...” Captain Orihci replied. “But what difference would that make anyway?”

“Well, I think we should continue as usual and see what more we can learn about her plans for us and for this place,” I said.

“We could use the company and maybe a drink or two... if you guys have the time...” said Delche.

“I'll take Nine back to her cage and come back...”

“Cage...?” asked Nagol.

“Some call it 'station' some 'barracks'... I don't know what to call it,” I replied.

“I understand...”

“I’ll take the empty plates back and bring us a platter of meat... if there’s any left,” said Ukasnek.

“We are confident you will find some. Somehow you always manage to...” said Captain Orihci and laughed.

“I’ll go get the rakia...” said Enai and left in a hurry.

“I’ve never seen a man work so hard before... Now if he had a bit more sense of humour he would be a perfect man...” said Nagol and smiled.

“I heard that!” said Enai and everyone laughed.

After I got Nine back to her station I left her with a bunch of mental images of nature and a clear blue sky.

When I returned Captain Orihci was exchanging stories about hardship, with our new friend and translating them for the others. Both Ukasnek and Enai had returned and were waiting for me so that we could toast our new friend. His worry was gone and he looked happy. I assumed because the Captain had told him that we were no friends of Madam Grooni.

“Captain, you haven’t told us what it was like being kidnapped by those idiots who held you and Ukasnek captive in their ship for an entire day. You know who I’m talking about... when you and Ukasnek were gagged all that time and you couldn’t breathe...”

“Yeah, I’ll never forget that... And come to think of it, it was so stupid... They accomplished nothing. And how could they? The entire ship inside was gutted... It had no instrumentation, no navigation, no sensor array... They were flying blind...”

“What do you suppose they were trying to accomplish? Do you think it was a distraction for something else?”

“Sometimes the most obvious answer is the right one... They were simply stupid people... We shouldn’t have let them go,” said Ukasnek.

“Otsiron might be right. Perhaps someone was trying to distract him from concentrating on the mission... That would be my guess...” said Nagol.

“I think Ukasnek is right... Things aren’t always connected... They were probably space hoodlums looking for a big score...” said Captain Rolo.

“No, I still have to agree with Otsiron... Ask yourselves how was it possible that they didn’t see a million soldiers assembling outside their ship firing their weapons... How was it that they didn’t post guards, given the dangerous situation they were in? Were they all deaf, blind, stupid and trusting... all at the same time? I’m sure they were there to distract us or something. Except Otsiron spoiled their plans and they fled prematurely... Like he always says, ‘there is no profit in death’...” added Nagol.

“But as I said at the time, they wanted to meet with Otsiron... None of this makes any sense...” said Enai.

“So is this what you do all day? Solve problems?” asked our new friend.

“This is how we manage to get ahead of our enemies and survive...” said Nagol. “What is your name, by the way?”

“You can call me Tolo for short. My full name is difficult to pronounce. I too belong to a secret group that solves problems. We call ourselves the resistance and struggle against Rodot’s tyranny.”

“We now have a Rolo and a Tolo...” said Ukasnek and laughed out loud.

“I knew someone was going to say that...” said Captain Rolo and added. “Ukasnek you missed the most important point in that sentence...”

“Bah, I’ve heard them all... What do you think I’ve been doing all my life? I am the resistance... And I struggle against everyone’s

tyranny... But the question is, ‘what have I accomplished?’... It’s all a waste of time...”

“Your friend is right... You need a good plan and the means to carry it out in order to succeed. But before you do that you need to survive... And how would you survive without resisting and being smart about it... Like you guys here...” said Tolo.

“You’re very wise my friend, for a young man. You’ll be a good addition to our secret group but you’ll have to go through an initiation first.”

“Thank you...”

“Now have a drink of this stuff... very slowly... and tell us what you think...”

After he took a sip he made a face and said, “Very good. What is it?”

“RAKIA!” yelled Delche and one by one we all welcomed him to our group and told him our names, where we came from, what language(s) we spoke and what our rank or position was when we were active in the various services.

“Oh my, oh my... you’re not just ordinary people...” he said and casually put his drink to the side. I watched Nagol watching his every move.

When Tolo asked Delche and Ori what they were doing in the observatory, I answered. My friends found it odd that I would interject in something I knew nothing about but they didn’t intervene. They stood back and listened. They knew my instincts were working and trusted them.

“They are creating a new course for students. Some of the farm children here don’t know much about the outside world and, hell, some have never even been to school. So my friends here volunteered to teach them, because they care... Hell, who am I kidding...? They were bored stiff from having nothing to do. So

Madam Grooni, you know the tall woman with the fancy dress, suggested they do this. But you have to agree it will be good for the children.”

“Ah, that’s great...”

“What about you, Mr. Nagol. What do you do here...?”

“Well, I’m supposed to be here on a diplomatic mission from Ostikon... but... between you and me... I’m on vacation here with my wife and my friend Rolo and his wife. This big fellow here...”

“So you’re not really a resistance group are you? This is like a big game to you to keep you from being bored...”

“Something like that...”

“Well, it’s not all fun and games all the time... We do have to feed and exercise the soldiers and pay the workers...But we do get the chance to get drunk once in a while...” said Captain Orihci.

“That’s nice...” said Tolo, shook his head and squeezed his lips together.

“So what do you say? Do you want to join us? It will be a lot of fun...” said Captain Orihci.

“But we do have to tell Madam Grooni that you’ve got your voice back... We have no choice about that... If we don’t she’ll bore us to death with her stupid stories,” said Ukasnek.

“Okay I understand, but please don’t tell her what I said about her. In fact, don’t tell her anything except that I’m afraid that if I talk King Rodot will kill me. Or just tell her I told you my name and nothing else... And please, don’t leave me alone with her...”

“Okay... no problem...”

The moment we went to see Madam Grooni in the common room, Tolo became that timid man we’d initially met. He refused to speak

to her. This angered her and she ordered the Captain to make him speak.

“I can’t make him speak... You make him speak...” the Captain yelled.

“I don’t speak his language...”

“How do you know you don’t speak his language when he hasn’t spoken a word to you yet?”

“I assumed... Leave him here with me and I’ll make him speak...”

“And how did you know I can speak his language?” asked the Captain.

“You just told me he spoke to you... Why would you tell me he spoke to you if you didn’t understand what he said?”

“You have a point Madam Grooni and I apologize for speaking out of turn. Would you have any idea where he is from and what he’s doing here?”

“No and no... Now get him out of here.”

“Can we assign him quarters? I don’t know what to do with him?”

“Sure, sure do whatever you want...”

“Thank you, I hope to see you at lunch...” said the Captain and we left for the reception area where we met Ireva, Amih, Aneleh and Ilisa chatting.

“We have another customer for you dear,” said Captain Orihci to Amih.

“Oh, I thought he was one of Enai’s men?”

“No he isn’t... He’s a newcomer. He just arrived this morning. Find him quarters and remember... He doesn’t speak any of our languages...”

“Oh? What’s his name?”

“Tolo...”

After everyone laughed Captain Rolo said, “Not this again...”

All this time I was watching Nagol watch Tolo, with great interest. After the women took him away Nagol said, “Who wants to make a bet that he does speak our language perfectly...”

“How can you tell?” asked Captain Orihci.

“By watching his facial expressions... and how he reacted to our conversation... He paid close attention to everything we said and his facial expressions changed from time to time like he understood what we were saying.”

“What gave him away, Sir?” I asked.

“A couple of things; one, initially he appeared to be shy and timid and then, all of a sudden, he took over our conversation and started asking all kinds of questions... A timid person would keep to himself...”

“And the other?” asked Enai.

“Well, why would Rodot send a timid person here, who in fact knew Madam Grooni..., to lead an important mission like this and especially if he was part of a resistance movement. Rodot isn’t stupid. He didn’t become king because he’s stupid. He would have vetted his people; especially his pilots... and he would have sent the best and most loyal. Tolo had to be the leader of the assassins... Otherwise it makes no sense...”

“You have a point...”

“But there may be more... Why didn't he leave? Why let us capture him? Why give us all that information about Madam Grooni?”

“What do you figure he's up to?” asked Captain Rolo.

“It was as if he knew his mission to assassinate Otsiron was going to fail... Who would want his mission to fail?”

“Madam Grooni and her superiors?” suggested Ukasnek.

“No, not Madam Grooni... He wanted her out of the way and was probably hoping we would arrest her...” answered Enai.

“Gentlemen, all this is a distraction... I'm certain Tolo works for the Galaxy Trader intelligence service and he's here to deliver something... But the bosses upstairs don't want Madam Grooni to know,” said Nagol.

“But why?” asked Ukasnek.

“Because they want to bury all evidence and eliminate all witnesses, including Madam Grooni,” I said.

“Yes my boy. And how are they going to do that with one million armed soldiers pointing their guns at them...?”

“By blindsiding us with something... An explosion or a massive disruptor... Just before they send the destroyers to slice up this planet... And what better place to store such a thing than in his ship...” I said.

“You've got it! But all this has to be confirmed...” said Nagol.

“And that's what we will do... If only we knew what we're looking for... The door to his ship is wide open... we can get in and look around,” said Ukasnek.

“The ship could be booby trapped,” said Captain Rolo.

“Not a problem... If it’s a bomb we can detect it without going inside... If it’s a disruptor we’ll find it the moment it’s activated...” said Enai.

“Enai, you might as well start scanning for unusual frequencies and disruptor signals. Set your monitoring device to auto detect and see what comes up...” said Captain Orihci.

“I’ll do it right now...” said Enai and left.

Just as Enai left the ladies came back.

“Are you guys still here? Don’t you have somewhere to go...? Or something to drink...?” asked Ireva sarcastically.

“I could ask you the same thing...” replied Captain Orihci.

“What a nice man that fellow... You know, he was eyeing your daughter,” said Amih.

“And was she eyeing him?” asked her father.

“That scrawny guy...? Never... he’s not my type!”

“Who’s your type, this big guy here?”

“No...! No...! Heavens no...! Besides he’s too short for me... and he’s also fat! He’s perfect for Jess.”

“Well, if you squeeze him tight and make him scrawny like you then he’ll be twice your height...”

“Dad, I’m not talking to you any more...”

“Just go get him and bring him to lunch later and I’ll leave you alone. Deal?”

“Deal...”

After we left the dining area we headed to the observatory to bring Delche and Ori up to date on what had transpired.

“I guess we have to watch two wolves now... I wonder what the Madam will talk about with her boss tonight... I’m sure it’ll be interesting. I’d love to know what the connection between her and Tolo is,” said Nagol.

“You’re loving this... aren’t you Sir?” I said.

“Yes I am... Now I will have stories of my own to tell my granddaughter...”

“But isn’t she a little old for this kind of stuff?”

“Are you kidding me? Are you?”

“I guess not...”

After we brought Delche and Ori up to date I asked Enai if we should assemble in the big lab at midnight and listen to Madam Grooni’s report to her superior, live.

“No, absolutely not... We could blow our cover... I’ll listen to it and contact you if there is anything urgent. Ukasnek put a tail on Tolo and see what he does and where he goes. He has no gadgets on him so he’ll have to go to his ship or to the tower if he needs to make a call,” said Enai.

“I’ll do that right now...” replied Ukasnek and left.

“Delche and Ori, you should come to lunch with us today and make up some cockamamie story and let everyone know how you’re doing, before you know who starts to suspect something...” I said.

“Okay but what if the beeper goes off in front of everyone... what do we tell them?” asked Delche.

“I don’t know?”

“Give it to me, I’ll tell them someone is messing with my shuttle... and the alarm went off...” said Captain Rolo.

“Good cover...” said Captain Orihci.

“So that now everyone is up to speed let’s take a break so that I can rest for a while. See you at lunch,” said Nagol and he and Captain Rolo left.

“I’ll go too... See how my girls are doing... I’ll see you at lunch...” said Captain Orihci and left.

“Man, it’s like being inside a wasp’s nest... You never know when you’re going to be attacked and by whom. And it never ends...” complained Delche.

“Not too long ago Delche, you were complaining life wasn’t worth living because you were too bored and depressed... All you do now is complain that life is too exciting... Come to think of it, I’m no better... perhaps even worse... What happened to the good old days when our job was to go out and blow up things...? Remember the day we blew up half the Karon fleet? Lucky you weren’t there Delche... I wonder how many Barkons we killed that day? I still think about it... I wait for judgment day over that...” said Ori.

Siblings and rivals

On our way to the dining area Delche, Ori and I ran into Enai.

“Anything new?” I asked.

“Nothing so far... I’ve been thinking about what Tolo said about Madam Grooni. I mean about where she’s from and I’m curious to find out. I want to get something from her and test her DNA... Will you help me?”

“Of course...”

“We should get a strand of hair from her. That’s the easiest thing to get without being noticed.”

“Can you get DNA from a hair?”

“Of course...”

“How are you going to get a hair...? I’m sure someone as careful as her doesn’t shed hair... Or worse, she takes inventory of her hair every day... What are you going to do to distract her, kiss her or something...?” asked Delche.

“Maybe he can kiss her and when she’s distracted... and mad as hell... Enai can pull off a hair or two,” said Ori jokingly and laughed.

“That’s a good idea!” I said, but they thought I was joking.

When we reached the dining area Enai and I made sure that we sat beside Madam Grooni, one on each side of her. When Captain Orihci arrived he made sure Tolo and Madam Grooni were far apart from each other with plenty of space between them. The way those two behaved towards each another the Captain suspected they might lunge at one another. Madam Grooni was sitting at the end of the table and was visible to everyone. Sometime after everyone had sat down I looked at Ori staring at me and he started laughing.

“What are you laughing about now? What prank is Captain Fat going to pull this time that makes you laugh?” Irevia asked Ori.

Ori began to laugh even harder. Everyone suspected something was going down because Ori hardly ever spoke, never mind laugh in front of everyone. Enai was sitting on Madam Grooni’s left and I was to the right. I had a smirk on my face, I couldn’t help it. When Madam Grooni looked at me she knew something was going down. She never took her eyes off me as I innocently looked around. Then, just as I got closer to her, I grabbed her by the back of her head and gave her a big kiss on the mouth. She let out a short scream. When I let go of her she remained motionless. She was stunned... She kept staring at me with her mouth fully open; not believing what had just happened.

“Oh, ho, ho, ho, ho...Now I’ve seen everything...” exclaimed Irevia and started clapping her hands.

I stood up and left my chair... expecting Madam Grooni to retaliate with blows... I watched visible emotional changes on her face starting with shock, disbelief, anger and finally a smile.

By this time everyone was clapping their hands. When the clapping stopped Ilisa said, “That’s nice... It shows respect... In his tradition kissing a woman on her lips like that is the highest honour a man can pay her... so they tell me... Anyway, that’s what he told me a long time ago.”

“No, no, no, no... That’s not right... You see he got stung this morning... caught with his pants down like a coward and now he wants to demonstrate to his buddies that he’s not a coward, but a brave and daring macho man...”

“Irevia, stop that. Why must you be like that? Stop it. Didn’t you hear what Ilisa said?”

At that moment I took a couple of steps towards Irevia. She jumped out of her chair and was ready to bolt. But instead of chasing her I bent down and kissed her mother on the lips.

She immediately looked at her husband who said, “Hey, hey?” and smiled at her.

Being surprised Amih said, “Why did you do that?”

“I have much respect for you because you always stand up for me. You’re my hero.”

Her face turned red but luckily for her something else happened.

At precisely noon, something unexpected happened. Both Enai and I simultaneously fell to the floor and began to shake uncontrollably. The incident lasted less than about three seconds but it was very painful. Everyone thought it was part of the act and when they saw us stop shaking they were sure it was part of another prank. Enai and I looked at each other. We recognized what it was. The disruptor had been momentarily activated. We were certain of it. Hopefully Enai had captured it on his monitoring machine.

No one bothered to ask what we were doing. They were distracted by the arrival of the food.

I was the first to get my plate filled and sat next to Madam Grooni. Before she stood up to get her plate she smiled and tapped me on the back a couple of times. Ireva shook her head in disbelief. After Madam Grooni left Enai gave me the thumbs up, which meant he’d gotten the hairs. The rest of the afternoon was uneventful. Madam Grooni asked how Delche and Ori were doing with their project and if they were enjoying themselves being useful and serving their community. Tolo kept to himself and not once did he ask Captain Orihci to translate what was being said. Nagol too was quiet and never said a word about why I’d kissed Madam Grooni. He suspected we were up to something. One thing that Nagol did, however, was keep an eye on Tolo. Madam Grooni was also quiet which was very unusual for her.

Later I overheard Aneleh tell Ilisa, “She acted like she’d never been kissed by a man before.”

After we ate our lunch Enai went to his lab and checked his machine. The disruptor had indeed been fired for precisely one second. Apparently it only affected me and Enai. In Enai's estimation it wasn't on long enough to affect the soldiers. He figured it was only a test to make sure the device worked properly but short enough for us not to notice. It would be interesting to find out who would report the test results to their superior... Madam Grooni, Tolo, or someone else. In any case Enai found out that the disruptor was located inside Tolo's ship and had been activated from outer space. We made sure everyone in our secret group knew about this and were alerted to take precautions.

After supper that evening I told Enai I would sleep in my ship with my short range sensors on to keep an eye on Tolo's ship; just in case he tried something. Ori and Delche made sure they were seen walking to their quarters but later in the evening they went back to the observatory and watched the sky. They figured this was a critical time and wanted to be there in case something developed. I, on the other hand, was worried about being isolated from my soldiers by the disruptor and tried different means of communicating with them, but had no success. The only ones I could communicate with without the transmitter were Enai and Nine. It was, however, very difficult to communicate with Nine without my transmitter. This worried me a lot.

The seconds ticked away very slowly as we headed for midnight. I couldn't sleep. The only thing that kept me calm was that perhaps nothing would happen until those on the other side heard about the results of the disruptor test. And that wouldn't be until midnight or later. Once they were sure the test worked, at the first sign of the destroyers appearing, I was prepared to power up my ship and blow up Tolo's with the disruptor in it. But what if they fired up the disruptor before I had a chance to blow it up? That worried me... We needed to find another way of blowing up Tolo's ship without my or Enai's involvement. Captain Orihci, Ukasnek and Captain Rolo came to mind. If the disruptor was activated early, they would have to destroy Tolo's ship with their shuttle guns. But what if Tolo's ship had shields... and they activated when the disruptor activated...? The firepower in the shuttles wouldn't be sufficient to destroy the ship. There had to be another way. I figured we could

repair one of the facility's large defensive cannons... but that would take time and attract attention. I didn't know what to do.

I must have fallen asleep sometime during the night because the next thing I remember seeing was light shining inside my ship and hearing Ukasnek pounding on the ship's hull with his fist and yelling.

"Wake up you lazy louse...! Are you dead in there? Maybe he is... He couldn't still be sleeping with all this racket?"

"Okay, okay... Stop pounding... You'll dent my ship..."

"What the hell...? It's breakfast time... I could be eating my delicious breakfast... but instead I have to chase after you...!"

"Sorry..."

"I'm leaving now..."

I decided to contact Enai and see what had happened over night.

"Enai are you there...? Calling Enai..."

"Stop that... Stop saying 'calling Enai', you sound ridiculous."

"Where are you?"

"I'm at breakfast with the others. We're all here waiting for you, wondering where you are..."

"Did we get what we expected?"

"What do you mean?"

"Did Madam Grooni or Tolo contact their superiors?"

"Only Madam Grooni... I have it all. We'll listen to it after breakfast in the usual place with the usual people. Now get moving and get over here fast."

What the hell is going on I wondered. Why can't they eat without me? Then the moment I appeared in the dining area and got my plate, Ireva stood up and said, "Madam Grooni is here, Captain Orihci is here, his wife Amih is here, I'm here, Ukasnek is here, Nagol, Aneleh, Rolo, Ilisa, Delche, Ori, Enai and Tolo are here. Hmm, I wonder who's missing...? Oh yeah, Captain Fat is missing..."

"So, what's the big deal...?" I asked.

"What's the big deal...? My father has an important announcement to make..."

At that point Captain Orihci stood up and said, "As of last night the DNA testing program was completed. Every single soldier has been tested and catalogued. What we need to do now is begin testing against the relatives... Who wants to go first?"

All of a sudden Amih began to cry... She was scared... Afraid of what she might find... Not just about her sons but also about her daughter Jess. Ireva was sure to take the test herself and find out that Jess wasn't her cousin but her twin sister.

Realizing what was going on, to distract and without thinking the Captain said, "How about we start with Madam Grooni?"

Madam Grooni almost choked on her food when she heard that and said, "What?"

"Just joking... Testing is voluntary... Only those looking for their loved ones need to be tested. Enai, please make an announcement over the PA and direct the people who want to be tested to the machine in the reception area. Nagol, you may want to inform the Ostikon government about this and ask them what they want us to do with their machines... you know what I mean... Now let's finish our breakfast and go and congratulate the DNA testing crew for doing a fine job.

“How about we throw them a party?” suggested Amih, forgetting her own troubles.

“Okay then, you ladies go and prepare for a party while we go and see what to do about securing the machines,” said Captain Orihci.

Without being asked or told, Madam Grooni and Tolo both left alone and went their separate ways and disappeared.

I looked at Ukasnek and he shook his head giving me a positive signal that he had his men shadowing them.

We quickly disbursed as a group and visited the labs in smaller groups. I went with the Ostikon crowd and visited the Ostikon crew who seemed very happy that they were staying here. The others visited the Galaxy Trader group who had also requested to stay here on Nelez and the Captain granted them their wish with Enai’s consent.

“They will be able to work together with the Ostikon crowd,” said Enai, which made them happy.

When we were finished visiting we instructed both groups to clean the machines and prepare them for storage and after that report to the reception area. In the meantime we congregated in the new lab to hear what was in the recording.

“When Enai made sure we were all there he locked the lab door and turned off the lights.

“We can’t use this lab for too much longer. I promised it to the Ostikon crew. Maybe both crews can work here. It’s big enough...” he said and went to turn on the machine.

After about three seconds of silence a male voice was heard speaking, the same male voice we’d heard the last time, followed by Madam Grooni’s voice.

“Right on time... I like it when my agents are punctual... What do you have for me today...?”

“Good day to you too Sir... I hope you realize it’s the middle of the night here and I’m sacrificing my sleep for you. But I think it’s worth it... I have a lot of juicy bits for you tonight.”

“Start with the assassins... I assume they failed...? Our target was too much for them... as expected?”

“Are you kidding me? He turned out to be a coward... More of a coward than I expected.”

“What do you mean?”

“What I mean is he had his guards kill those idiots while he hid in his ship!”

“You mean he was expecting them?”

“No! He was completely clueless about what was happening. In fact he was so clueless he came out naked to see who was knocking on his hatch. I saw him. I watched the whole thing from a window inside the place.”

“You’re confusing me now... First you said he was hiding inside his ship and now you tell me he came outside naked... Which is it?”

At this point Madam Grooni started all over again and explained everything that had happened from the start to the end. She then told him how we’d discovered the ship and the pilot. She emphasized that we’d never made the connection between the assassins and the ship and that she was able to convince us that the assassins were local hoodlums. She also told her boss that Tolo never said a word about who he really is and left us thinking he’s just a refugee or something.

“In what language did he speak to them?”

“In King Rodot’s language... It appears Captain Orihci speaks that language.”

“And they never questioned that?”

“No! Why should they? They don’t know that the assassins were Rodot’s people. Nobody heard them talking, at least not Captain Orihci. And I already told you they think the assassins were local hoodlums.”

“Okay, okay... anything else to report?”

“No, not really...”

“Nothing?! What are you people doing there? What about Tolo’s ship? What happened to it?”

“They parked it in the junk pile with the other ships. They didn’t even close its hatch.”

“Did anyone go inside and look around?”

“No! Why? Is there anything special about that ship I should know?”

“Of course not! It’s just an ordinary run of the mill ship. We made sure of that so no one suspects anything.”

“Tell me, why did you send Tolo here? What’s his mission and why him? You know how I despise him. He is a nasty piece of crap trying to outdo me at every opportunity. I will wring his scrawny neck if he gets in my way... You know he can’t be trusted...”

“You should know... he’s your little brother... You’re both made from the same cloth... Except he is smarter and more devious than you...”

“He probably wants to bump me off and take my place in the agency...”

“Never mind him... Tell me more... anything else?”

“What? You want me to tell you that he kissed me today...?”

“Who kissed you...?”

“Our target kissed me on my lips... and I liked it. Are you jealous?”

“Should I be?”

“No silly. It was part of a game he was playing trying to prove to the others that he’s tough and fearless... after he’d crapped himself earlier that morning...”

“So what happened next?”

“Nothing, except he and that criminal Enai tried to pull another stunt on me.”

“What kind of stunt?”

“They both fell down on the floor during lunch and began to shake and vibrate like idiots... What they were trying to prove... I don’t know. But I was not impressed. Neither were the others.”

“You say they did this while eating...? It must be some earth thing...”

“Yes they did this precisely at noon and it lasted a second or two... But like I said, it was stupid.”

“What was Tolo doing all this time?”

“Eating lunch and hiding his ugly face from me...”

“Has he been back to his ship?”

“I don’t think so. Again with this ship... what’s in his ship...?”

“I told you nothing. He just hasn’t communicated with me... I’m concerned about him...”

“You still haven’t told me what he’s doing here.”

“You’re not telling me much so I sent him to keep an eye on things...”

“So you don’t trust me and you sent my little brother to spy on me...”

“No, I sent him to help you and keep you on your toes...”

“Look, there’s nothing for me or for him here. So why don’t you do us a favour and send a ship to get us off this planet... and then you can do as you wish with these people...”

“Not yet! I have one more request for you to oversee before I evacuate you. One of our clients wants to put on a show at the facility.”

“What kind of show...?”

“He wants to kill our target purely for glory but you mustn’t allow him to succeed. Here is how it’s going to go down. Your local tower will get a telegram from our client requesting to put on a show. You will tell the people there that you know the client and would be more than willing to organize such an event yourself. After the wrestling match is over a winner will be declared, who will then ask for a challenger from the audience. Your job will be to make sure our target is there and accepts the challenge. You must convince him to accept the challenge and it has to be a surprise... Do not warn him ahead of time...”

“You said you don’t want the wrestlers to succeed. What if they do? How do I stop them?”

“You should be able to figure that out on your own. If you can’t, ask your little brother...”

“Okay, that’s enough. I’ll do it.”

“You must call me the night before the match. I need to know where and at what time it will take place.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to be sure everything goes according to plan... in case you and your brother screw up and our target ends up dead prematurely... I want him for myself.”

“You mean you’re going to swoop in here and save us... and kill him yourself...?”

“Yes, I’ll have a fast ship standing by on the closest planet... If you’ve got nothing else to report I have to go. Give my regards to your brother.”

“You’re a bastard, you know...”

“Love you too... Base out!”

Enai turned off the machine and said, “That’s it... That’s all there was on the recorder.”

“That’s a lot...” said Nagol.

“And by the way, I ran the DNA test on Madam Grooni yesterday and you’ll never guess where she’s from.”

“Get on with it man. Don’t keep us guessing. Tell us!” snapped Captain Orihci.

Enai looked at Nagol and said, “From your neck of the woods. She’s from Ostikon and closely related to the Whites.”

“I should have known...” said Nagol. “She must have emigrated from Ostikon recently, bumped off your Madam Grooni, had her face and hair altered to look old like her and took her place. Disgusting creature...”

“Enai, you should do the same with Tolo... Confirm they are related. I’ll get you the hair. I’ll go see him after we’re done here.”

At that point I spoke up and said, “Before we go, I’d like to mention that I’m unable to communicate with the soldiers without the transmitter and I’m concerned what will happen if I’m incapacitated by the disruptor before I can act. We’ll need to put some other measures in place so that won’t happen...”

“Give me some time to test the signal that activated the disruptor and see what else can be done. Ukasnek can you obtain a portable plasma cannon and bring it here? But please, do it very covertly. We don’t want to tip off you know who.”

“I can get one quickly but it won’t be cheap...”

“I’ll give you the money...” said Captain Orihci.

“I’ll come with you and pretend to be the buyer to give you cover...” said Captain Rolo.

Nagol started laughing and said, “Look at you people... I’m amazed at your ingenuity. And what are you going to do Otsiron?”

“First, I’ll find a way to beat the wrestlers and then I’ll find a way to disable the disruptor; even if I have to blow up Tolo’s ship.”

“How are you going to beat the wrestlers? You haven’t seen them yet.”

“I have a secret weapon... its called fire water...”

“Oh yes, you can tolerate that stuff... But how are you going to blow up Tolo’s ship?”

“I’ll fly beside it and blast it with one of my cannons...”

“And what if it is booby trapped and blows up? You’ll destroy the shuttles for sure and maybe take part of the facility with it.”

“No, you’re not going to do that... I think Tolo’s ship might have a lot of valuable equipment in it which can be of use. We’ll find

another way to disable the disruptor. Give me some time to run a scan and see what else is inside that ship,” said Enai.

I could see Captain Orihci getting anxious to get moving.

“We’ve been here too long and we’d best get going before they send a search party looking for us...” said Captain Orihci and with that, like rats, two by two we abandoned the lab.

In the next few hours Captain Orihci got us a few strands of Tolo’s hair and we found out that indeed Tolo was Madam Grooni’s brother... not the real madam Grooni’s brother but the imposter’s; the one who calls herself Livè.

After that we ran tests on the signal that had activated the disruptor on Tolo’s ship and found it had come from the nearest planet. Because of the strength, or I should say the weakness of the signal, given the distance it had to travel, Enai estimated we could disable it by introducing a strong signal of white noise locally at the same frequency. And the nice part about it was that we could turn the noise generator on automatically with the same signal. Once the signal was fired from the adjacent planet it would turn on the white noise generator, which in turn would cancel the signal and the disruptor wouldn’t turn on at all. It was that simple but didn’t give me much confidence.

After that we ran a scan on Tolo’s ship, risking activating the booby trap but didn’t find one.

“Of course... How stupid of me... Ukasnek went inside and flew the ship from the original place where we found it to here and nothing happened. There was no booby trap...” said Enai.

But still Enai recommended that we only blow up the ship as a last resort, if all else failed. We decided to use the portable cannon, which we were going to install on the upper floor once Ukasnek acquired it.

“But what a shame it would be if we blow it up and lose all the technology that’s inside it,” said Enai.

When we returned to the reception area we found everyone there partying with all the young helpers from the DNA labs. Captain Orihci gave a speech and invited everyone for a mixed drink... rakia and the green stuff. Enai went and got several bottles of rakia and I picked up the box with the green stuff from my ship and brought it to the reception area to a cheering crowd.

What fun you can have with a little bit of alcohol and a crowd of jovial people.

Preparing for the big fight

It was a fantastic party. We got to visit with the youth from both Ostikon and the Galaxy Trader consortium, who viewed their home planets like we view our cities on earth. It was surprising how close they were culturally, given that they lived large distances apart.

“I love to sit here and watch young people mingle like they know each other... like they are from the same village. That’s what modern communication does... It bridges people together and makes the entire galaxy seem like a village...” said Nagol, sitting in his comfortable chair looking at a bunch of young women from both worlds mingling and conversing.

“Yes... That’s one thing I haven’t done; ingratiate myself into the cultures here. I know nothing about ordinary people’s lives, what they think, what they like, how they feel...”

“Why not...? You’re still young... You can still do that... Even I found happiness in my old age... Look at me... I’ve been hiding all my life... Son, don’t make the same mistake...”

“My biggest fear has been getting to know someone and losing them... You know people, evil people can make you do things, things you don’t want to do... because they can gain leverage over you if they know someone is important to you... Being tied with someone will give them that leverage... That’s why I avoid relationships.”

Nagol laughed and said, “I know that... Now you sound like me... I literally gave up on my granddaughter because of that... because I figured someone might hurt her to get to me... And it could have happened...”

“Maybe we are over thinking things. Thinking of all the things that might happen or that could go wrong in life stops us from enjoying life to its fullest.

“I have learned a lot of things over time; knowledge and wisdom are about the only things that I can impart to the next generation. But

nowadays no one seems to want to listen. I allowed my granddaughter to grow up without me and that was my mistake. We could have been close... But all she wants to do now is go off on her own... find her own world... make her own mistakes..."

"I guess people were always like that... until they were challenged... and then mistakes were made, sometimes regrettable ones but it was too late... People need to live their own lives... mistakes and all..."

"I could have helped my granddaughter avoid many of the mistakes she made, if only she had listened to me... But she didn't..."

"Not many people do..."

"You're about the only young man from your generation who understands how it is and precisely how I feel... No wonder Voskot liked you... But unfortunately, he also burdened you with all this responsibility."

"You make it sound like it's a bad thing..."

"I know what it is... but these young people here, the ones who throw glances at you once in a while, think differently of you... You're a glorious hero to them... They have no idea."

"I was like that... hell sometimes I still am... Aren't you?"

"Perhaps you're right. In the end, maybe it's your legacy that counts... That's how you get to live after you die..."

"Does it really matter what people think after you die?"

"I guess not... But it does matter what happens to you when you live... That's why I'm a bit concerned about you and this wrestling match business you're getting into..."

"How so...?"

“Less about the match itself and more about you... You know the ship that’s spying on us... from the other planet, the one we heard about in the report? You know, from Madam Grooni’s transmission? Have you thought about what sort of ship it is and what surprises it has for us...? Think about it! The destroyers can and will blow up the facilities, even slice up the planet but... what guarantees are there that you and your ship will be destroyed?”

“I guess I can survive if I decide to run while we’re being bombed...”

“That’s right! But how do they guarantee you won’t escape?”

“They’ll have to send someone to stop me... The ship...!”

“Son, I believe this time they may want you dead. Once you’re engaged in the match and distracted they’ll send their ship and kill you and then they’ll destroy your ship where it stands parked. Then they can send the destroyers and erase everything without a single worry. That’s how I would do it... and they could care less about rescuing Madam Grooni or Tolo... They are also witnesses who need to be eliminated...”

“Well, how are they going to stop me from flying off into outer space?”

“They’ll use a disruptor... and while you jump around like a fish out of water, the wrestlers will chop you to pieces if you’re still on the ground... or their ship will destroy your ship while you’re incapacitated trying to flee... It’s a perfect plan.”

“But what if I put them out of action first?”

“Well, you can put the wrestlers out of action but how are you going to put their ship out of action...”

“And how will those on the ship know I’m incapacitated and flopping around like a fish out of water?”

“They’ll know because they’ll be monitoring the situation and making sure the disruptor is operational.”

“What if we decide to disable the disruptor before they have a chance to activate it? Like right now for example?”

“In order for them to know that the disruptor is operational they’ll need feedback. They will need constant feedback to confirm it’s operational and that feedback will have to come from the disruptor itself. In other words, the disruptor must constantly tell them that it’s alive and well...”

“But as far as Enai can tell, the disruptor doesn’t emit any outward signals.”

“They must be monitoring it somehow. These people are professionals and leave nothing to chance.”

“Maybe we should reexamine it. I’ll talk to Enai after the party.”

Look, all this is speculation on my part... But it doesn’t hurt to explore every possibility and prepare for as many scenarios as possible. Of course we’ll all be here to assist you... But before we can do anything we’ll need to know what to do.”

Just as Nagol and I finished talking and resumed watching the young ladies mingling among themselves and throwing us a smile once in a while, Enai appeared with the smart girl from Ostikon.

“This one... he has you hooked young lady... He must like you a lot...” said Nagol.

“Yes he does... but it’s not like that... He admires me for my brilliance... so he says...”

“You’re pretty modest for a White person from Ostikon...”

“Well I’m from the new generation. I’m a product of the revolution...”

“What revolution?”

“Come on, Sir, you know what revolution... The revolution he started back on Ostikon some years ago...”

“You mean this big fellow here?”

“Yes...” she said and blushed when she looked at me.

“Can I borrow Enai for a couple of minutes?”

“Okay... no problem... I’ll go over there... and talk to those girls...”

“See I told you... even she gets tongue tied around you... You big hero!”

“What can I do for you Sir,” Enai asked Nagol.

After we explained to him what we’d been talking about earlier he said, “I did observe something unusual but I thought it was energy spikes emitted naturally... the kind the atmosphere sometimes emits randomly. Now that I think of it, they were originating from the same direction as if they’d been generated by a single source.”

“You’ve lost me Enai, give me an example...”

“Well, think of lightening strikes taking place in the distance. Each leaves an energy marker. The ones that are close leave stronger markers and those that are far leave weaker ones. In this case the energy markers were all of the same intensity... This is like lightening striking in the same place over and over again. But it was at random intervals... There was no pattern to it, but thank you for mentioning it. I almost missed it. I’ll look at it again and let you know what I find.”

“Enai, also look for multiple patterns and see if they are repeating... and if they originate from Tolo’s ship...”

“Will do... My lady is waiting. I have to go...”

“Thank you Enai...” said Nagol, looked at me and added. “And to think that this brilliant man was once a pirate...”

“How did you know that...?”

“Well my boy, I get all my gossip from Rolo and Ilisa. This bit of gossip came from Rolo.”

“That means that he probably learned all his skills on the job... Meaning he never went to school...”

“Didn’t you learn your skills on the job?”

“No, I graduated from the School of Voskot... except I was a lousy student.”

Nagol laughed, stood up and said, “I need to stretch my legs...” After he stood up he made a face and said, “My ass is getting sore from sitting... Old age is a bitch...”

After Nagol left I stood there all alone looking like a black boulder on stilts being stared at by girls half my age. It was awkward so I raised my hand to acknowledge their stares and was mobbed by them running at me and hitting my hand as they came by. I had my universal translator turned on and could understand everything they said. They had no translators... They hadn’t needed them... until now. So everything I said was greeted with a smile or a nervous laugh. They had no idea what I was saying. And because they didn’t understand what I was saying they figured I didn’t understand what they were saying. So they kept talking to each other like I wasn’t there.

At one point one of them said, “Did he really have sex with Val?”

Another one said, “Look at his size...”

A third said, “He wasn’t like that when Val and Daf were serving with him...”

At that point I said, “I’m surprised at you young ladies... Of all the things you could want to know about me, it’s if I had sex with Val? Well I didn’t, so there!”

Nagol heard that and said, “Just because they’re young and innocent, not to mention school smart, it doesn’t mean they’re not curious about other things. They are multi-faceted creatures with a lot of curiosity... Aren’t they lovely? And so the generational cycle continues... They are discovering things we older folk take for granted.”

Suddenly something else caught their attention and, like a swarm of bees, they fled.

After that Nagol escorted me back to the reception area and we joined our usual group and drank the night away until the rakia and the green stuff had dried up.

Someone in our group, I think it was Captain Rolo, said, “Where’s Delche... We need to make more rakia...” but by then Ori and Delche had gone back to the observatory. Captain Orihci, Captain Rolo and I decided to go and visit them to make sure all was well before we went to bed. When we got there Delche was talking about his daughter Airam and how much he missed her.

After we brought them all up to speed on what Nagol, Enai and I had discussed earlier, Captain Orihci asked them to keep an eye open for ships coming from the direction of the nearest planet. Ukasnek joined us a bit later and told us that both Madam Grooni and Tolo had remained in their quarters since after lunch. They avoided going to the party. After that I went back to my ship and, like I had the night before, kept an eye on Tolo’s ship.

The next morning Ori came over to my ship. He wanted to do some tests he and Enai were working on. He asked me to contact Enai telepathically and tell him Ori was ready to do the triangulation test. Ori said they were trying to verify the origin of the energy spikes which had continued to pulse randomly since Enai discovered them.

I felt a bit hesitant about contacting Enai so I paused for a moment after thinking about him. Enai sensed my presence and said, “I can hear you breathing down my neck... Does that mean Ori is there and ready to do the test?”

“Yes...”

“Turn on your spectrum analyzer and slowly rotate your antenna until you get maximum amplitude.”

“Done...”

“Now, let’s see if we’re looking at the same thing. When you see a pulse on your scope, tell me.”

“I see one now! Now!..... Now!”

“Yup, we’re looking at the same thing. Where does your antenna point?”

“Towards Tolo’s ship...”

“So does mine...”

“Now what...?”

“Now nothing... There’s nothing more for you guys to do. I, on the other hand, will try and recreate the signal emitted by Tolo’s ship. By the way, the pattern repeats every 47 minutes. It’s a long pattern but I can recreate it. All I have to do is record it in full. Then I can play it back at exactly the same frequency and intensity and replace the original energy spikes... And no one will ever know the difference... Okay?”

“Keep recording and watching the energy spikes in case their pattern changes...”

“I will but I don’t think anyone would go to that extent for a simple thing like this...”

“Okay, see you at breakfast...”

After that Ori and I went to the observatory to see how Delche was doing and from there the three of us went to breakfast. All the women were talking about at breakfast was the party..., last night’s party. Even Irevia was preoccupied with that... No smart remarks from her. Tolo was with Captain Orihci chatting it up. Madam Grooni and Enai hadn’t arrived yet. Ukasnek came over and sat beside Nagol, Captain Rolo and I. Delche and Ori sat on the other side of Nagol.

“I found that thing we were looking for. All I need now is the money to pay for it and for you, Captain Rolo, to pick it up. I still don’t know how to get it here, you know... without anyone seeing it...”

“The other day I saw you escorting the maintenance crew, hauling a huge container through the hallways... What were they hauling?” asked Nagol.

“They were delivering a replacement cooling unit. I don’t trust them going up there alone... I’m certain they’ll pinch something given the chance...”

“What did you do with the container?”

“It’s still up there. The cooling unit is still in it... There’re not coming back for it until the old one is replaced. They’ll be taking the old unit back for repairs in the same container...”

“Does the item you’ve acquired fit inside the container?”

“Yes... and some...”

“So use the empty container to bring it in...”

“I understand... thank you...”

“What are you all talking about... what container? What have you stolen this time...” asked Irevia.

We all laughed.

“Laugh all you want...” she said looking annoyed.

“Young lady you should have been the policeman...” said Nagol.

“There’s always an opening for detectives in my department... You’re welcome to apply...” said Ukasnek.

“Aw, you guys are no fun... Here comes Madam Grooni, I’ll go and talk to her...” she said and left.

“Look at that Madam Grooni, she runs like a cow. Why is she running anyway? Does she think there’ll be no food left for her if she’s late?” asked Ukasnek.

“People, people, can I have your attention! Stop and listen to me...” she yelled. The entire food line stopped and everyone turned their heads and looked at her.

“I have news... Good news! Great news... The circus is coming to your planet... I received a request from the owner of the circus, whom I know personally, and he asked me to organize the first performance here at our facility. You know because this is the most populated place on this planet... But that’s irrelevant...”

“Get to the point lady, we have to eat and go back to work!”

“Anyway, the circus will start with a wrestling match “North versus South” and two famous wrestlers will battle it out. The performance will be free and will take place outside the facility, just beyond those ships outside the main gate because of space restriction. This performance will be free and everyone is invited. It will start at 10 o’clock in the morning right after breakfast. The match shouldn’t take more than half an hour...**EVERYONE IS INVITED!** Thank you, carry on...”

“The least she could have done was check with me...” said Captain Orihci.

“Well, that’s her style...” said Tolo. “She never asks for permission...”

“That’s great Madam Grooni and thank you. We could use such a performance to cheer us up. I’ll make an announcement over the PA system and invite everyone...”

“Thank you Captain, I appreciate your help. By the way, you’re all invited and I would be very happy to see you all there.”

Everyone stood up and clapped their hands...

After we ate breakfast I grabbed a plate and filled it with food.

“Another plate Captain Fat?” asked Ireva sarcastically. But after realizing that Enai wasn’t there she added, “I know, I know... It’s not for you... It’s for Enai... He forgot to come and eat again... Ha, ha, ha...”

By the time she stopped talking we were all out of there and heading for Enai’s lab.

The moment we arrived, before we had a chance to say anything Enai said, “I’ve built the device. Well I’ve used an existing device and reprogrammed it to mimic the exact pattern Tolo’s ship is generating from the disruptor...”

“That’s great Enai but we have more pressing matters to discuss right now... We need to access the lab immediately. Is it available or have you given it to the students?” interrupted Captain Orihci.

“The lab is available. We can go there right now if you want...”

“Yes, lets go...”

When we had all arrived Enai locked the door and turned off the lights as usual and Captain Orihci brought everyone up to speed on what would happen the next day at 10 o’clock in the morning and asked for suggestions. Everyone looked at me.

“My biggest fear is being incapacitated. So whatever we do we must disable the disruptor, remove it from the ship if possible so that it can’t be activated,” I said.

“I can do that and replace it with my device so no one will know we’ve tampered with the disruptor. But a couple of things need to happen first; one, we need to go inside the ship which may be a problem if the ship is being watched... and two, we need to stay inside the ship for at least 47 minutes to synchronize the gadget with the disruptor. If we miss the first cycle we’ll need to spend maybe another 47 minutes. The cycle has to be precisely synchronized or we might risk being discovered,” replied Enai.

“I prefer to have Tolo’s ship completely disabled so that it can’t fly or fire its cannons. I know ships like that can be operated remotely and we don’t want to take chances,” I said.

“I’ll go inside with Enai and help him remove the disruptor. Once that’s done I’ll disable the ship by removing its fuel cells and power crystals. I’m familiar with its power and weapon’s systems. I used to repair ships like that,” said Ukasnek.

“Make sure you disable its back up power too...” said Captain Orihci.

“We’ll need cover to get inside... We can’t afford to be detected. Any ideas?” asked Enai.

“Yes... I can help with that...” said Captain Rolo.

“How?” asked Enai.

“You’re installing the cooling unit right above the ships, right? What if debris falls on the ships? It might cause damage. The ships will have to be cordoned off. I can do that. While I’m cordoning off the ships Enai and Ukasnek can sneak in and do their part.”

“I have a better idea for you that can solve three problems all at once...” said Nagol.

We all turned and looked at Nagol.

“First, Ukasnek and Rolo... you two go to the upper floor, remove the cooling unit from its housing and bring the housing outside, pretend you’re returning the old unit, load the cannon into it and bring it back here. Then have the crew take it to the upper floor and hide it. When you’re done hiding it have the crews replace the old unit. Rolo you stay up there and supervise the crews to make sure they install the new unit. Ukasnek come down to the ships and look like you’re helping us out. As soon as we cover Tolo’s ship you and Enai go inside Tolo’s ship and do your part. Otsiron and Captain Orihci will cover Orihci’s shuttle and Delche and Ori will cover Rolo’s shuttle. I’ll stand outside and make sure no one gets near the ships because of the danger of being hurt from falling debris. When the crews are finished installing the new unit, Rolo you let them go and make sure they’re gone. Wave down to me after they’re gone and we’ll wait until Enai and Ukasnek are done before we start removing the covers from the ships. Any tools or other materials used to do the job can then be hidden inside the cover material and taken away without being seen. The same goes for the items removed from Tolo’s ship. Is everyone clear on what they will be doing?”

“What if Tolo, or anyone else for that matter, shows up and start’s asking what we’re doing,” asked Ori.

“Captain Orihci will point to the upper floor and say we’re replacing a broken cooling unit and we don’t want anything damaged or anyone hurt from falling debris... and will ask them to stay back. The entire exercise should take no more than a couple of hours.”

“Because we’re pressed for time, let’s finish this job before lunch and meet back here after lunch,” said Captain Orihci.

And again two by two we left the lab. Enai went and got the covering material, hid his tools and gadgets inside it and got a bunch of volunteers to bring it outside. Ukasnek and Rolo rolled out the empty box, purchased the cannon and took it to the upper floor. Rolo called on the maintenance crew and started working on replacing the cooling unit. The rest of us did our part and the entire

job was done in 55 minutes. Ukasnek and Enai did their part and disabled both the disruptor and the power in Tolo's ship. It could neither start its engines nor fire its cannons. No one came to inquire about anything. Lunch too was uneventful. All that time the women talked about the wrestling match and how to organize it better. They never once asked where we'd been or what we were doing; not even Irevva. As usual, Tolo kept to himself and never once ventured out of his quarters, except when Captain Orihci went to get him for meals. God only knows what he was doing. Nagol figured he was deathly afraid of his sister bumping him off.

We met again after lunch and installed the plasma cannon first. We made it look like an exhaust pipe from the outside and a locked cabinet from the inside. The cannon didn't need to be connected to an external power source. It had its own internal power source as well as the capability to be activated, aimed and fired from a hand held remote control. Its primary target was Tolo's ship but it could be aimed at other objects. Captain Rolo was placed in charge of the cannon and was instructed to fire it only as a last resort.

While installing the cannon we discussed every possibility we could think of, for what might happen the next day before, during and after the wrestling match, as well as how to counter it. After we returned to the lab, so that there'd be no misunderstandings, I summarized some of the more important actions we were to take to cover the various scenarios.

“Ukasnek and Enai will run a scan for weapons on the visiting ship and confiscate all the weapons and dangerous materials they find. Enai will analyze the scans and determine what else is on that ship. All of the ship's personnel, passengers and crew will be asked to leave the ship and go to the match, escorted by Ukasnek's guards. Before they leave the ship everyone, including the wrestlers, will be searched for weapons and everything they carry will be inventoried. The guards must report anyone carrying a portable communicator to Ukasnek. Our guests will be escorted to their special table and watched at all times.

Enai will be my eyes and ears. He and I will be in constant telepathic communication and he'll inform me if anything unusual

happens. He'll tell me when the disruptor signal is activated so that I can fall to the ground and pretend I'm incapacitated.

Nagol will sit at the home team's front table and hold the medallion that unlocks my ship, my universal translator and the transmitter that I wear like a crown with which I communicate to the soldiers. Nagol you must keep these items well hidden at all times and make sure I get them the moment I need them. They are very valuable and I'm sure our enemies would love to get their hands on them; especially on my medallion and crown.

When I fall to the ground Ukasnek, you will run over to me and have your men keep everyone away from me. Put me on a stretcher and only allow Nagol to see me to deliver my items. Then have your stretcher carriers deliver me to the hatch of my ship. At that point Ukasnek you arrest the wrestlers and other visitors as well as Tolo and Madam Grooni on suspicion of conspiring to assassinate me. Then have them searched. Confiscate and catalogue everything you find on them.

Delche and Ori keep an eye on the sky, looking for ships coming in this direction from anywhere in outer space. The moment you detect anything, report it to Enai and head for my ship. I'll be laying there on the stretcher. We'll fly off to avoid being a sitting target.

Captain Rolo, if things don't go as planned, use the cannon to shoot down anything that attacks the facility or my ship.

Tonight, after we hear Madam Grooni's transmission, I'll move all the soldiers into the forest and hide them there. They'll be armed and ready to attack the destroyers if and when they show up. I don't know how we're going to do that at the moment, given that there are two of them, but I'm sure we'll figure it out. Once Delche, Ori and I are mobile and in outer space, I'll coordinate the attack on the destroyers. The tricky part will be what to do with the other ship; the small one supposedly coming to rescue Madam Grooni and Tolo. I'm sure we'll figure that one out too. Leave it to me.

The rest of you already know what to do. And remember, don't distract Enai... He'll be in constant communication with me and I'll talk to you and you'll talk to me through him."

"What happens if they have a second disruptor... say in the visiting ship?" asked Ori.

"Good question..."

"I'll shoot it down with the cannon... Make sure it's parked beside Tolo's ship in front of the cannon... I'll keep an eye on Enai. If he falls down I'll immediately destroy the visiting ship..." said Captain Rolo.

"They could send another ship during the night to deliver another disruptor... but that's unlikely. If they suspect anything they'll suspect we are closely monitoring the skies. The only ship that might be carrying another disruptor, as a precaution, will be the so-called rescue ship that will be arriving to rescue Madam Grooni and Tolo... That ship must be destroyed from the distance... before it has a chance to come within range of you Captain Otsiron. You need to shoot it down before it incapacitates you..." said Nagol.

"Thank you for that Sir... That's one thing I hadn't considered... Thank you!"

"That's why I'm here my boy..."

After that we left the lab again in two's and attended an uneventful supper and went to our quarters. I went back to my ship and replayed everything we'd talked about in my mind, making sure we hadn't forgotten anything.

Just before midnight we again gathered in the lab and anxiously waited for the call to be made.

The big fight

We arrived secretly two by two in the lab before midnight and anxiously waited for Madam Grooni to make her report. But I must say, for all the anticipation we were disappointed. She actually had nothing new to add. And her boss revealed nothing new except that he confirmed that they would send a ship to execute me during the fight. The only things he wanted to be sure of was that the fight would take place outside, it would start on time and I had to be there. There was no mention of any disruptor use or anything else for that matter. The attack ship would arrive, execute me and take Madam Grooni and Tolo and leave. Another thing he mentioned was that the destroyers would be dispatched right after it was confirmed that I was dead. How that would happen he didn't say. Nothing was said about the wrestlers, their handler or handlers, their ship's crew, or their ship. There was a lot left out of the conversation, especially the use of a disruptor.

When we'd finished listening to the conversation Nagol said, "This tells me that no one is leaving this place alive; not Madam Grooni, not Tolo, or any of the visitors... and certainly not any of us... They will even destroy our ships and shuttles so that no one escapes. The fact that they want us all, especially you Otsiron, outside tells me that they want easy targets for a quick elimination. For that they'll use a fast and powerful attack ship. I'm also pretty sure they won't attack until they are certain that you're incapacitated. In my estimation they won't even dispatch their attack ship until they're sure you're immobilized. They don't want to risk exposing their plans and you summoning the soldiers before they have a chance to hit us. In other words, we'll see no ship movement until they're sure you're down. And I'm inclined to believe they'll send a small, fast and powerful ship first to eliminate us before they send the destroyers."

"The question now, is how will they know for sure Otsiron is incapacitated?" ... asked Captain Orihci.

"Well, someone here will have to let them know..." said Nagol.

"Who...?! And how?" asked Ukasnek.

“Our most likely suspects are Madam Grooni who we already know has a communications device, Tolo, or the visiting ship’s passengers and crew. That’s why all of them need to be watched carefully. And that’s why they need to be arrested the moment Otsiron falls down.”

“But Madam Grooni doesn’t know about the disruptor... How will she know to call them when Otsiron is down?” asked Captain Rolo.

“They could be playing us... just like we are playing them... There is nothing unusual about assuming that we know everything... That’s why they’ll take every possible precaution,” replied Nagol.

We all looked at each other.

“Look, I’m only speculating as to what might happen so that we can be ready for it. None of this might happen... I don’t know what will happen for sure. Just do your part the best you can and hope that we win. Isn’t that right Otsiron...? You haven’t said a word tonight.”

“I usually look at trends and patterns but this is far more complicated than I expected...”

“But what is your instinct telling you?” asked Delche.

“We’ll win this fight. It will be a massive and complicated battle but we will win it... We will be victorious and we will change the political tide here just like we did in Ostikon...”

There was much cheering from everyone. I was surprised that they had so much confidence in me.

Nagol yelled, “Quiet, someone might hear us,” but no one cared. He whispered to me, “That was the right answer son. Now I pray to Mother Nature you’re right.”

After that we all snuck out of the lab. Some went straight to their quarters. Delche and Ori went back to the observatory. Captain Orihci, Ukasnek and I went to the furthest door in the bowels of the facility from which all garbage and food waste was disposed. This

door led to a dugout that carried liquid waste to the creek, which flowed downhill from the forest. At that time it was dry. There were three men looking through the refuse in the dump below but the moment they saw Ukasnek open the big door they fled in a hurry. Then when I saw Ukasnek wave his arm, letting me know that all was clear, I ordered the soldiers to arm and dress in battle gear and start to march fast down the dugout, up the creek and enter the forest. I then opened the many delivery doors along the far end where the trucks offloaded the food and let more soldiers out. I had to because it would have otherwise taken me almost a week to get everyone out.

When the march started the Captain and Ukasnek left to get some sleep. The exercise took almost all night. After it was over, there was no sign of the soldiers anywhere except for the tracks they left on the moist creek bottom. But there was nothing to worry about because, with the exception of a few foragers, no one went there. Very few could stand the smell.

When I got back to my ship I made sure all my vials were filled with fire water and placed in my left front pocket. I then began to run drills to position the soldiers in the right place so that when the time came they could fire at a target in the sky. I could see them through Nine's eyes.

I didn't sleep that night, I couldn't. By the time I was done placing the soldiers in position it was already dawn and the sun was coming up. I began to pace inside the small space in my ship. I went over everything that needed to be done... Then something occurred to me... How would we explain it to the people who take care of the soldiers when they came to feed them in the morning and didn't find them there? With everything else that was going on in my mind I began to panic.

I decided to contact Enai. He suggested we take it up with Captain Orihci who just happened to be conversing with Madam Grooni in the hallway. Before Enai spoke to Captain Orihci he overheard Madam Grooni telling Orihci that she wanted everyone from the facility outside before nine o'clock to welcome the visitors when they arrived.

“What about the soldiers... Who’s going to feed the soldiers...? When are we going to eat breakfast if we’re expected to be out there to welcome the visitors...?” asked the Captain.

“Oh my God! Are we all going to die if we don’t eat breakfast on time?! Look, this is very important to me... I don’t care if the entire planet dies of starvation... just be there... and make sure the big guy is there also. I want him sitting beside me...,” replied Madam Grooni.

“Captain, in that case you should make a PA announcement and order everyone outside before nine and ask them to bring chairs... It might be a long wait...” said Enai.

“Are you being sarcastic with me Enai? I’m in no mood for that today...”

“No, no, no Madam Grooni. I’m just concerned for the workers standing on their feet for hours. That’s all...”

After that Madam Grooni stormed back to her quarters. Captain Orihci made the announcement and people started going out in droves, hoping to find a place to sit with a good view. Ukasnek told everyone where the ship would land and where the performance would take place. All the women in our group, except Madam Grooni, were busy coordinating activities telling the helpers what to do and where to put what.

When Madam Grooni came back she sent Irevia to get me from my ship. I pretended to be asleep.

“Hey, Captain Fat? Too much rakia last night? GET UP AND GET OUT HERE!”

“Go away... It’s not breakfast time yet...”

“Have you forgotten...? The circus is in town and you’re our star clown...”

“Go away you make no sense...”

“Get out right now or I’ll have Madam Grooni drag you out...”

“Leave him be, my dear. I’ll have him out for you... don’t worry,” said Nagol just as he arrived.

I opened the hatch for him and let him in the moment Irevia stormed out of there. When he came in I told him what Enai had overheard Madam Grooni say.

“She knows more than she’s letting on...” Nagol said,

“How do you know?”

“Because she wants us all out of the facility long before ten so that if some workers get involved with the soldiers or preparing our food, they might not be able to come out for the performance. Should our enemies want to eliminate us it won’t be easy if people are indoors. In any case, let’s expect the worst and see what happens... Now let’s get out there before they start suspecting us of doing something...”

When we arrived at the “VIP” table Madam Grooni had me sit beside Irevia who was sitting beside her. She pointed to the seat and gave me a slight nod.

We sat there quietly for a long time until we heard whispers from the crowd saying, “The ship is here... There it is...” The time was just before ten. Captain Orihci appeared from behind us, walked through the ring to the far end and stopped in the open field. He then made some arm signals and directed the small ship to land beside Tolo’s ship. Suddenly hordes of people started coming from inside the facility and jockeyed their way for a spot around the wrestling ring. Ukasnek’s men surrounded the ship and waited for the guests to open the hatch. The Captain stepped in front of the hatch, followed by Ukasnek, and waited.

The hatch didn’t open until precisely ten o’clock. The two wrestlers, big men dressed in shorts, one in green and the other in red, stepped

out momentarily, waved at the crowd and went back inside. There was no reaction from the crowd. Even Madam Grooni didn't move or say anything. A man came out and greeted the Captain. The Captain pointed him towards the guest table. Ukasnek's people searched him. He had a communicator with him but no weapons. The Captain escorted him to the guest table and sat him down. The Captain sat beside him. Ukasnek and his people went inside the ship and came out with two people. They were the ship's crew. They too were searched and sent to the guest table. After that the two wrestlers came out. They were followed by Ukasnek and his people. The wrestlers stood at the bottom of the ship's staircase until the man sitting beside Captain Orihci took out his communicator and said something into it. A booming sound came out of the ship and startled everyone. It was the magnified sound of the man's voice welcoming the crowd to the event and introducing his wrestlers.

“At the far end wearing green... step forward magnificent South!”

The wrestler wearing the green shorts raised his right arm and ran to the far end of the ring.

“At the near end wearing red... step forward mighty North!”

After North stepped forward the announcer said, “The aim of this game is to push your opponent outside of the ring, marked by the white line; by any means possible... There are no rules... The one who crosses the line is out. The one who stays inside the ring wins the fight. Now everyone make your bets...”

After the two wrestlers walked towards each other and met in the centre of the ring, the announcer yelled, “Let the big fight begin!”

There was a lot of cheering from the crowd yelling ‘yay’ and ‘boo’ as the wrestlers pushed, pulled, bumped and flipped in an attempt to throw each other out of the ring. Then finally, at precisely a quarter past ten, South flipped North out of the ring. The crowd went wild cheering.

“We have a winner! South wins! Too bad North, better luck next time... Now, as has been our tradition, we would like to invite

someone from the audience to challenge the winner and try their luck... If they win we will give them a basket of goodies and the glory of being a winner... But rarely does anyone win... We'll give them the basket of goodies anyway for being a good sport," said the announcer.

At this point Madam Grooni stood up and yelled, "We have a volunteer here..." and pointed to me. While she was looking at the announcer I gave my stuff to Nagol for safe keeping and popped a vial of fire water into my mouth.

"Do you accept the challenge or will you prove to be a coward..." asked Madam Grooni loud enough for the entire VIP table to hear. Almost everyone, including Irevva, found Madam Grooni's comment disgusting. I could see it in Irevva's face.

I stood up and Madam Grooni yelled, "He accepts..."

In his booming voice the announcer then said, "What an unusual looking creature... Why are you wearing such a thick leather suit, son? Is that symbolic of something?"

But because I didn't have my universal translator, I didn't know what he was asking so I didn't answer; leading him to believe I was mentally challenged... At least that's the impression he tried to give. In the meantime Enai was telling me everything that was being said and what was going on behind me.

Suddenly Madam Grooni jumped up, "He doesn't speak our language... He's an alien from earth. Get on with the program..."

"Ah, I understand... Come inside the ring son..." the announcer said and waved me in.

The moment I entered the ring South attacked me from behind. He grabbed me by my back and tried to lift me up. I twisted hard and fast and he dropped me. I think I hurt his hand. I then grabbed him by his chest with one hand, lifted him off his feet and threw him away; way beyond the limits of the ring. The crowd was shocked and stopped yelling. Then North took a run at me from behind and

hit me square in the small of my back. I turned around, grabbed his leg, swung him around a couple of times and tossed him against South, slamming both of them against their ship. At this point the crowd went wild cheering me on.

“It’s time for you to fall...” said Enai. “The signal has been activated.”

At that moment I looked at the announcer. He was saying something into his communications device yet nothing was coming out of the booming speakers. I told Enai that.

“I believe it’s the announcer, not Madam Grooni or Tolo, who is feeding information back to those controlling the disruptor. The announcer must have told them when to fire up the disruptor and now he’s telling them that I’m down.”

The moment I fell on the ground and started trembling, Ukasnek’s people went into action arresting Madam Grooni, Tolo, the announcer, the visiting ship’s crew and the wrestlers. The people in the crowd didn’t know what was happening until Enai and his people came with a stretcher and carried me off.

Someone yelled, “Captain Otsiron is dead...!”

He must have seen me trembling and when I stopped he figured I was dead. Irevva, with tears in her eyes, made a strong attempt to penetrate Ukasnek’s security circle but was stopped. Ukasnek only allowed Nagol to get through after he told him that he had my stuff, including my medallion which I needed to unlock my ship and my transmitter which I needed to communicate with the soldiers. By then Delche and Ori were there and told me that the two destroyers were on their way as well as a ship, traveling at great speed, heading this way from the closest planet.

“We need to get up there fast if we’re going to stop that ship...” said Delche, at which point I entered the ship’s codes and opened the hatch.

“Good luck my sons... and happy hunting,” said Nagol with a sad look on his face.

The moment the hatch closed I pushed the joystick to its limit, which fired the engines with a huge boom and off we were into outer space in no time. When we leveled off we took a trajectory to meet the oncoming ship.

“We’re being scanned by the approaching ship Captain and its coming at us at an incredible speed,” yelled Ori.

“Get out of the way! Jump!” ordered Delche. I followed my instincts and did a short jump only to see a huge plasma blast in the last position in which we’d been standing.”

“What the hell was that?” I asked.

“We have no ship signature so they probably thought we were pirates and they blasted us to leave no witnesses...” replied Delche.

“Do you think they think they destroyed us?”

“Most likely...” replied Delche.

“So, how are we going to catch them now?” asked Ori.

“We’ll do another short jump and blast them when they slow down to enter the atmosphere...” I said and powered up all my cannons and loaded the torpedo.

“They’re already there... If we’re going to do this, do it now! Punch it!” yelled Delche after he entered the codes for another short jump, which took us close to the atmosphere.

The moment we stopped I locked the two inner cannons on the descending ship and fired.

“Direct hit... Both engines are off line but the ship is still descending and heading in a trajectory towards the facility. It appears to be aiming at the facility... All its cannons and torpedoes

are operational and will fire the moment the facility is in range before it crashes...” yelled Ori in a panicked tone of voice.

“No it won’t...” I said as I launched the torpedo and loaded another one into the tube. I then fired the other two plasma cannons to make sure there was nothing left of the ship to hit the planet’s surface.

There was a horrendous explosion and a fireball burned in the atmosphere, which could probably be seen from the closest planet with the naked eye.

“Any last minute transmissions from the exploding ship Ori?”

“None Captain... I don’t think they knew what hit them...”

“I think I should contact Enai and get an idea of what’s happening with the destroyers.”

“Enai, slow down... I can’t understand what you’re saying... Yes we’re still alive... You can’t get rid of us that easily... What’s happening with the destroyers? You say they’ve increased their velocity and expect to be here within an hour? We’ll intercept them... Don’t worry... Tell everyone to calm down. What’s that you said? Madam Grooni informed her boss that I’m dead? You heard that on the transmission she sent to him? You say you forced her to call him and tell him that? Well what did she tell him about the ship they sent to rescue her... the one that blew up in the atmosphere? You forced her to say that it blew up because it entered the atmosphere too fast? That’s brilliant Enai.”

At his point I heard Delche and Ori laughing out loud.

“Enai, don’t tell anyone outside of our secret group that we’re alive. Get Ukasnek to keep a lid on things and keep Madam Grooni and the others under arrest... and keep them off their communication devices. Also, keep an eye on the destroyers... Before I go, please turn off the local transmitter to the soldiers and let me concentrate in preparation for the greatest battle your world has seen! Of course I’m kidding...”

“The conversation is always abrupt with Enai... isn't it?” said Delche.

“Now gentlemen try to find the destroyers on our long range sensors and tell me how I'm supposed to tell the soldiers where to aim their guns...”

“I already have the destroyers on screen and have plotted their position, trajectory and time of arrival... The rest... I don't know...,” replied Ori.

“Delche...?”

“I could use some rakia right about now... I think better when I'm drunk...”

“Okay be that way... Your rakia will be vapour if we don't find a way to stop the destroyers...”

We sat there in silence while Ori counted the minutes before contact.

“See that silver planet over there? The destroyers will pass between us and that planet in several minutes... we'll be able to see them...,” explained Ori.

“And why are you telling us that...?” asked Delche.

“For something to do... Okay... I'm nervous here... I've never seen the Captain without a solution before... so that makes me nervous,” replied Ori.

“I have an idea... Delche, plot a straight line between the forest where the soldiers are and that silver planet...”

“Okay... Punch it...”

“That was fast...”

“We did a tiny jump... What now...?”

“Ori turn on my transmitter magnifier so I can talk to the soldiers from here.”

“Done...!”

“Now leave me be for a moment so I can contact them...”

A moment later I started talking to myself. “Ah, there you are... I found you sweetheart. You saved my ass before and now you’re about to save it again...”

“Talking to yourself, Captain...? Are you going loco?” asked Delche.

“Yes I am... But I’m doing it for your benefit...”

“Please don’t...”

“Ori, is there a way to make our ship glow brightly?”

“Glow? What for?” asked Delche.

“So that it can be seen from a distance...”

“We can leak some plasma and ignite it?” suggested Ori.

“Wouldn’t that blow us up?” asked Delche.

“Not in small portions...”

“Do it then...”

“I’ll need to activate the maintenance robot and program it to do that.”

“Do it fast...! We have no time to waste...”

“How often do you want the explosions?”

“Activate them manually on my command...”

“You have the manual triggers to the cannons. You’ll have to do it yourself, Captain.”

“Are we ready?”

“We are ready.”

“Look up here sweetheart... Look for the flash... Fire. Don’t be discouraged, look around until you find the flash. Fire... fire... fire... There it is... keep your eyes on that spot... I’m moving the ship a bit out of the way... Now sweetheart focus your eyes on the silver planet... Do you see it...? Yes you do... Now let me tell all your friends... Do they all see it...? Yes they do... if one sees it they all see it. Now get your guns ready and aim at the planet... You know what to do. You’ve done this before... Now let’s move our ship out of the way so we don’t shoot ourselves. Ori, estimate the destroyers’ arrival to the line between the soldiers and the silver planet and start counting down... I’m turning off the engines to avoid being spotted by the destroyers...”

“Done, Captain! The ships will be on target in 123 seconds. They’re moving very fast...”

“Now, shut down everything...”

“Stay with me Nine, stay with me... steady...”

“Ninety seconds...”

“Sixty seconds...”

“Thirty seconds...”

“Twenty seconds...”

“Ten seconds...”

“Fire... Fire... fire... fire... fire.....”

“Bull’s eye Captain... We got one... but we lost the other one... The explosion gave it cover and it changed course...”

“I don’t think so... The explosion made it visible for Nine... Follow it... follow it, follow it... fire... fire... fire... fire...”

“It’s trying to outmaneuver us Captain.”

“Fire...”

“Got him too Captain...” said Ori very quietly, like we were playing some sort of video game and we’d won.

The three of us couldn’t believe what had just happened.

“I have to call Enai and tell them to expect a flood of soldiers at the facility gates... I should dismiss them right now. The soldiers are tired, hungry and dehydrated... You know how difficult it must have been for them sitting in the forest covered in dry grass for hours without food or drink and not even a washroom break?”

“Hi Enai... I hope everyone is breathing easier down there? Did you see what happened out there? You say not only did you see it but you have it recorded... both the sensor and telescope data? We’re tired up here and need to come back down soon but before we do that I want to dismiss the soldiers and send them to the barracks for a well-deserved rest. Please make sure there is plenty of food for them... Order a couple of rations... They haven’t had breakfast or lunch... Make sure they are treated with utmost respect... Today they changed the balance of the world... They did what was impossible... Sorry I’m rambling... I haven’t had any sleep for several nights... Tell Captain Orihci to make an announcement and let everyone know we are alive and well... See you in a short while...”

“Don’t forget to dismiss the soldiers, Captain...” Ori reminded me.

“Like I could forget...”

“You already forgot didn’t you...?” said Delche.

“I still can’t believe what we did today... I think it will take years for it to sink in... We beat them... We simply outsmarted them. Nagol believes they knew everything... I mean they knew that we knew and they played us... but ended up being played. They had the upper hand... you know... But what I can’t understand is why Madam Grooni played us down to her boss? Calling us incompetent and stupid... It makes no sense...”

“Dismiss the soldiers...!” yelled Delche.

“Soldiers dismissed... and have a nice rest... What’s with you, Delche?”

“I can feel their pain... Ask your girlfriend if you don’t believe me...”

“Get out of here...”

“I just can’t stand you rambling... It’s all over... Let it go...”

“Okay, I’m zipping it up now... I’m not talking to you anymore...”

“Good!”

“I think I’ll land this thing over there on that hill and get some sleep...”

“What about... What do I tell the facility?” asked Ori.

“Tell them we’re tired and need some sleep... We’ll see them soon.”

Time for reflection

It was way past noon when we landed on the hill but we were too tired to notice the beauty of nature all around us. I activated my guards and we slept outside in the shade of my ship. It was hot but a cool breeze was blowing gently.

I don't know when we fell asleep but it was dusk when I was awakened by a growl. I jumped to my feet which made my guards stir. I discovered it was my own stomach. I looked around... Ori wasn't there. I asked my guards what had happened to him but they stood there like dummies... My voice woke Delche who swore at me and told me to go back to sleep. I told him Ori was missing. He looked at me strangely but then we heard a noise coming from inside the ship which distracted us.

"I hope that's Ori..." I said.

"Of course it's Ori... Who else could it be? He's probably hungry and scavenging for food. He used to do that in the night back home in my restaurant..."

"Let's go and have a look."

"You mean to tell me you left the hatch open while we were sleeping?"

"Yeah, what about it...? I wanted to air out the ship and take some of this fresh air back with us."

"What if a dangerous wild creature had gotten in?"

"My guards would have taken care of it and we would have had food to eat right now..."

"I'm hungry too... Let's get back before nightfall."

"Are you kidding? Leave this beautiful place without exploring it?"

“What? Are you getting cold feet or something? Who don’t you want to face, Ireva? She looked pretty worried about you lying on that stretcher looking dead. She’ll kill you when she sees that you’re still alive. Or is it Captain Orihci’s wife who will smother you with kisses...?”

I ignored what Delche said and yelled, “Hey, what are you doing in there...? You scared us to death. Here we thought a wild creature had gotten you, brought you in here and was eating you...”

“Yeah, right... Ha, ha!”

Take the bucket you dropped and let’s go exploring... We might find something edible in the bushes...”

“Why can’t we go just back home and have something to eat at the facility...?”

“Because it’s past dinner time and there’ll be nothing left to eat...”

“That’s not it... That’s not why he doesn’t want to go back,” Delche snickered.

“So, what is it?”

“He’s afraid of facing Ireva after what he did.”

“What did he do to her?”

“Oh nothing... Never mind... Give me that bucket and let’s go...”

After I closed the hatch we took my guards with us and headed for the nearest slope, which looked forested from where we were standing.

“I smell fruit...” said Delche.

“Then we should be able to find something to eat...” I replied.

It kept getting darker as we got closer to the forest. The entire valley below was forested except for one spot not too far away. There was an open fire burning in the middle of it. When we got close to the trees, we could all smell the fruit. It was intoxicating.

“What is it?” asked Ori.

“I don’t know...” I replied. “It could be olives, cherries, plums... or some other fruit unfamiliar to us...”

“I don’t know what olives are but I do know what cherries and plums are...” said Delche.

“Of course you would... you’ve been to Macedonia...,” I said.

“It’s some kind of fruit we don’t know about...” said Delche.

“How do we know it’s not poisonous?” asked Ori.

“Yeah right... Why would these people plant an entire forest of poisonous fruit?” said Delche.

“Pick some up from the ground and try it,” I said.

They were both hesitant... I picked one up and popped it into my mouth. I then growled and fell to the ground, prompting my guards to pull out their weapons and look around. My prank backfired on me. I had to get up to calm my guards before they began shooting and killing my friends.

“You’re a maniac you know? First you scared us to death and then you almost had us killed...” yelled Delche angrily.

“Here have some fruit... it’s delicious... and I’m sorry...”

“Mmmm, it is delicious... Not only that, it’s juicy... like a grape... and loaded with sugar... Do you know what I’m thinking?”

“Yes! You found the fruit to make your rakia...”

“You’ve got it! Now help me collect some in this bucket and we’ll take them back with us.”

“We can’t just take them... If these trees were planted it means they belong to someone. We would be stealing...” protested Ori.

“Fill the bucket half full and let’s go down there where the fire is and see if we can find someone. We’ll buy the fruit...” I suggested.

“With what?” asked Delche.

“Good point... We’ll ask if we can have it.”

“Why half a bucket?” asked Ori.

“Now look who’s getting greedy...”

“No I’m not getting greedy... I just want to know...”

“Delche, do you know?”

“Yes I do! Full means you’re trying to take advantage... half means you take what you need. The farmer will easily give you half a bucket because he thinks you’re in need but won’t give you a full bucket because he feels that you’re clearly trying to take advantage of him...”

As we got closer to the clearing where the fire was burning we could smell meat cooking and heard men’s voices.

“We don’t want to startle them...” said Delche and yelled, “hello there...” in the Ostikon language.

“First, we won’t startle them... They already know we’re here and probably have guns... Otherwise they would have run off and hidden... Second, you might as well speak to them in Macedonian. They won’t understand you...”

“And how do you suppose we talk to them then?” asked Delche.

“Hand signals...

Both Ori and Delche laughed.

When we came out of the woods and into the clearing we saw them sitting on logs around the fire. Something was cooking. My guards stepped ahead of us and pulled out their weapons. I pulled them back and pushed them behind us. I raised my arms up in the air as we approached. There were four of them and they did have guns... Primitive ones... When they saw me push my guards behind us, I think they understood that we weren't there to harm them. Seeing that we'd landed on the hill they figured we were aliens and in some sort of trouble. They waved us to sit and we did. My guards stood behind me looking at them. They looked menacing. The men kept staring at them.

“Macedonian mode,” I ordered and their menacing uniforms turned white with the Macedonian colours.

One of the men smiled and said a whole bunch of words. The only word I recognized was “Ostikon”. They must have figured we were from Ostikon when they saw the uniforms. We had no way of communicating with them since we didn't have our universal translators and we didn't want to climb back up the hill to get them. I decided to contact Enai. He wasn't able hear what the men were saying so we still couldn't communicate. After a while of contemplating what to do I asked Enai to tell me the words for, “We want to buy the berries but we have no money...” When I told them what Enai had said they looked into our bucket and the four men laughed and said something. I asked Enai to translate for me. He told me they said “you may have them for free”. The same man who'd spoken earlier pointed into the sky and made an explosion with his hands. I nodded yes, that it was us. I assume they'd seen the explosions earlier. They spoke among themselves for a while. The only word I understood was “Otsiron”; my name. I nodded yes and pointed at myself. The man then pointed at me and made an explosion with his hands. I nodded yes. At that point the man offered us some of their food. He grabbed a chunk of the cooked meat with his bare hands, broke it into pieces and offered us each a piece. I took my piece and graciously ate it making hand gestures

that it was delicious. He offered me more but I declined. I pointed to the other men in his company and he gave it to someone else. Delche and Ori held onto theirs. The man raised his hand up and down, I guess to encourage them to eat.

“You’d better eat it if you want to do business with these people... and be gracious about it,” I said. They both did and then we took our berries, waved goodbye and went back to my ship.

Delche examined the fruit and was pretty sure he could get it to ferment... But he needed some time to test it out to be sure.

“Wouldn’t it be a blast if we can start making rakia here? With my rakia making skill and Captain Orihci and Captain Rolo’s business skills we could sell it to the entire galaxy,” said Delche with much enthusiasm.

“Why? You need money? We have an entire warehouse full of gold...”

“Where is it? I haven’t seen a single coin... Have you?”

“Hasn’t Captain Orihci being paying you?”

“No! Has he being paying you?”

“No... well, we’ll have to change that...” I said, closed the hatch and dismissed my guards.

“I don’t feel good after eating that meat. Do you think it was loaded with bacteria?” asked Ori.

“No, we all ate it... There was nothing wrong with the meat... except that it had no salt. They probably prefer eating it that way... It was cooked well,” said Delche.

“You were both disgusted with how the farmer handled it... weren’t you?” I asked.

“And I suppose you weren’t?” replied Delche.

“I got over it. They offered us something they probably valued a great deal... I assume it would have been an insult not to eat it...” I replied.

“What about the dirty hands...?” asked Ori.

“If it was good enough for them, it was good enough for us... Stop belly aching... If it wasn’t for that meat we wouldn’t have eaten anything.”

“I guess you’re right Captain... Why do you suppose they laughed at you when you told them you wanted to buy the fruit in the bucket?”

“I told them I wanted to buy the fruit but had no money... Imagine how ridiculous that must have sounded to them. But I don’t think they laughed at that. I think they laughed at the idea that I wanted to buy a measly half bucket from the entire forest of fruit. Even asking to buy a truckload would have been funny considering how much fruit they have available.”

After a moment of silence I said, “Gentlemen, we’re about to land... Pick up your bucket of fruit and scam... I’ll sleep here tonight. Don’t tell anyone we’re back. Let’s sleep tonight for a change...”

After they’d left I shut the hatch and lay in my bed. No one disturbed me all night. I’m pretty sure the entire facility knew we were back but felt we deserved a good night’s sleep.

I must have overslept because the next day everyone from our close circle of friends was outside my ship waiting for me to wake up.

“Oh, come on... How long is he going to sleep? I don’t want that delicious roast to get cold...” I heard Ukasnek say as I opened my eyes and saw light.

After I opened the hatch the first thing I felt was a punch on my shoulder. It was Ireva.

“Don’t hurt yourself...,” I said to her then grabbed her by her waist, lifted myself on my tiptoes and kissed her hard on the lips. When I let her go she looked puzzled.

“What did you expect was going to happen, dear...?” asked her mother and gave me a hug and kiss. “I’m happy... we’re all happy to see you back in one piece...”

After all the women kissed and hugged me, the men greeted me with much admiration. Nagol grabbed me by the arm and, along with everyone else, escorted me to the common room. Delche and Ori were already there sitting down at the head table with a roasted animal, which looked like a pig, on a big platter.

The moment I looked at Delche he said, “We’ve already gotten our heroes welcome, hugs, kisses and all...”

Everyone sat down after I sat down and waited for me to say something.

“I’m sober, and when I’m sober I don’t give speeches... All I’m going to say is that we are grateful to God and to Mother Nature for being alive and still breathing today... And thank you all for the roast... it looks delicious.” I didn’t know what else to say or do so I sat there staring at everyone.

At that point Delche stood up and said, “Oh for heaven’s sake, give me that knife. Everyone, get a plate and line up. You first Sir ...” and pointed at Nagol. Everyone insisted I go next... and I did followed by Ori.

Just as Delche cut the last piece of meat for himself, there was a knock at the door. Amih stood up and answered it. It was a young lady from the reception area.

She told us that there were a bunch of men and women with a fruit basket looking for Otsiron and she wanted to know what she should do.

I was about to say, “Take the basket and thank them...,” but my instincts told me otherwise. “Bring them here...”

Amih looked at me surprised and said, “Okay, I’ll go get them...”

I asked the girl if she was hungry.

“I’m starving...” she replied.

“How many of you are in the reception area?” asked Delche.

“Two of us Sir...”

Delche grabbed a couple of plates, cut some meat and gave them to her. She left with a big smile.

“That smile alone was worth it...” said Delche, making an excuse for giving away our meat.

We all looked at him but only Nagol spoke. “I’m proud of you son...”

About the same time Amih returned with eight people, four men and four women and introduced them as farmers from the grove.

“I’ll be damned, those are the men we met last night...” exclaimed Delche.

“You’re right...” I said, stood up and asked Amih to invite them in.

One of the women said, “Sorry for disturbing your breakfast, we just dropped by to deliver a basket of fruit. We understand Otsiron is fond of our fruit and we’d like him to have a basket of it. A gift from all of us from the grove... We’ll go now.”

“Wait!” I said. “Amih, invite them in and translate for me please.”

“Thank you for the fruit. Please come in and have breakfast with us...”

“No, no... best we go...”

“How can we accept your gift if we don’t offer you something in return...?” I asked and looked at everyone. There was a smirk on Ireva’s face. I could only imagine what she was thinking... They had grubby clothes and dirty hands and faces and I wanted them to stay and eat with us?

“We best not... we’re not dressed for dining...”

“Amih, take these people to the washroom and let them wash then bring them back. Ireva, estimate their measurements and bring them some decent clothes.”

“We don’t have any...”

“We have work clothes... all kinds of them. Get them a couple of pairs each...”

It took only minutes for them to wash before Ireva had them dressed in work uniforms. In the meantime Delche explained to everyone how we’d met the men the night before. He then prepared a plate of food for each.

“Good thing we didn’t go for seconds... or we’d have eaten all the food...” said Delche.

“What do you have to say to that Otsiron...?” asked Nagol.

“I’ve never made enemies by offering people kindness... Nor did I get poor or starve by giving hungry people a portion of my food. In fact I got back tenfold from what I gave... and I have many examples to prove it...” I replied.

“Yes, that is a good thing... This entire planet is full of good people who will look after you well if you show them a bit of kindness...”

When our visitors came back they looked like different people. They all thanked us for what we’d done for them, with big smiles on their clean faces.

While we had them sitting down eating their food, wolfing it down which was typical of farmers and pirates, I sent Enai to get a couple of bottles of rakia and Amih to bring back some soap and toiletries; the kind she gives away to our visitors.

After the farmers had eaten I asked Irevia to translate for me so that I could ask them some questions. In the meantime, Amih gave them each a toiletry kit and Enai gave them one bottle of rakia to take with them and poured us each a drink from the other.

When he had finished I picked up my drink and said, “A toast to our new friends... and thank you for the berries. Please sip the drink very slowly because it’s very strong.”

After the farmers had a sip, the older man said, “I’ve had this before. It comes from Ostikon... made by the rakia king...”

I looked at Delche who looked at me sternly...

I decided not to say anything about him and instead said, “The reason we came to the grove last night was because we discovered that we can make rakia from your berries. This is why we wanted to buy some so that we could test it... But we didn’t have any money with us when we accidentally found your grove...”

“I don’t think you can make rakia from this fruit. It’s a wild berry that we use to make sweet water. That’s all, besides, who’s going to collect all those berries? We used to have people... now it’s only the eight of us... Eight old people... husbands and wives... How much can we possibly collect?”

“What happened to your young people? Don’t you have children and grandchildren?”

“Our children and our workers were taken away from us by the robots... Everyone was taken away... and since then they’ve disappeared. We don’t know where they are or where to look for them...”

“I’m sorry to hear that. We’ll try and help you find your people.”

“We can’t collect much fruit by ourselves... We need people. We just collect enough and sell it to buy food for ourselves... We can’t find workers anywhere. Almost everyone on this planet has either disappeared or works here in this building...”

“We can give you money... if you need some?” offered Captain Orihci.

“No, thank you... We don’t need it. We need people... young people to work the farms. We want to earn our own keep... We don’t want handouts. What are we going to do with money if we can’t find people to hire to work our farms? We’ve been on these farms for generations... and we don’t want to leave them.”

“How many people would you need to harvest your crops?”

“Besides the small gardens where we grow our vegetables, we have no other crops but the berries. We can’t work the soil by ourselves...” said the older man.

“We used to have twenty five people. We have cabins to house that many. The other women and I used to cook and clean for them... I would be happy now if we had half as many people...” said the older woman.

At this point I told Amih to take the farmers back to the reception area and bring them back when we asked for them.

“What do you have in mind?” asked Captain Orihci.

“We have the largest army in the world, but outside of picking the berries we can’t do much else with it...” I said and got a strange look from Nagol. “To help these people with their civilian chores...” and Nagol smiled. He was happy with my answer so I continued. “But we do have a number of prisoners in our jails who sit there and rot while we feed and look after them... How many prisoners do we have Ukasnek?”

“Last count we had twenty... Let’s see Madam Grooni and her bunch, that makes thirteen, her brother... that makes fourteen, the rat from the communications tower who betrayed us and the five from the circus... that makes twenty.”

“I have an idea... and I want everyone’s opinion on the matter...”

“You want to send them to the grove to help these farmers, right?”

“Well I couldn’t have put it any better. Does anyone have any questions or concerns...? No one? Really?”

“We trusted you with our lives... why should we stop now...?” said good old Amih.

“Mom I knew you would say that!”

“Daughter, what would you have suggested I say?”

“I agree with you...”

After everyone stopped laughing Captain Orihci put it to a vote. Everyone agreed. It was a unanimous vote.

“Bring the prisoners here Ukasnek...”

After we lined them up against the wall Captain Orihci told them what we were planning to do with them and asked them if they agreed with it. But at that moment someone from the communications tower burst in and told us there was news from the Galaxy Trader headquarters and it wasn’t good.

“Do you have the news recorded?” I asked.

“Yes Sir!”

“Then bring the recording and play it for us...” I said and he ran off.

“What about them?” asked Captain Orihci.

“Any news that affects us, affects them too... We’ll let them listen to the recording...”

The man came back quickly and the Captain asked him to play the news. It was an audio recording.

“Something terrible has happened and something even more terrible is happening right now. The unthinkable has happened. The day before, when not one but both of our mighty destroyers were obliterated in outer space... In our own space... with a weapon that was fired from another galaxy. This is unprecedented. It has never before happened in the history of our consortium. An invisible enemy hit us from afar and we have no idea how far they will take this. Everyone who is anyone is leaving this galaxy. Where are they going? At this time we don’t know. Even the newcomers from Ostikon, on whom we placed a lot of faith to protect us, are fleeing in droves. More terrible than that is that some of the Galaxy Trader citizens have risen to aid this new enemy and a civil war is about to erupt...”

“That’s enough... Turn it off...” I said firmly. I then looked at each prisoner sternly and said, “These people the reporter is reporting on are the very people you supported... Everything they say is a lie... But the truth will come out... I will make sure of that! And when it does, you will pay with your lives for your part. So now you have a choice, work on the farms and live... or face your executioner... And if you even think about escaping... or leaving this planet..., think again! Where will you go? Wherever you go I will find you. And just for the record, we all know what you’ve been up to and it’s all recorded... Madam Grooni, or should I say Livè, and you Tolo, Livè’s brother. We know that both of you are from Ostikon and that you both work for the central intelligence security services... and you Mr. Announcer, we have evidence on you to bury you multiple times,” I said. I looked at each of them individually and then turned to Amih and said, “Bring the farmers back.”

When the farmers returned Captain Orihci told them that these people were our prisoners, that they were criminals and couldn’t be trusted.

The older woman said, “Thank you, we’ll take good care of them...”

I told Captain Orihci to tell the farmers the crimes these people had committed and then I asked Ukasnek and Ireva to find vehicles to transport them to the grove.

After they made the arrangements and returned we ate lunch and assembled in the common room for more discussions.

“Before we each reveal everything we know about what happened here, I’d like to say that we have failed the people not only on this planet but in both Otsikon and the Galaxy Trader planets. From listening to the news report and talking to the farmers, I get the impression that we’re the only ones who know the truth about what happened here in this place and in the other facility. We failed them because we failed to inform them. We all assumed everyone knew what had happened. But we assumed wrong. The farmers certainly don’t know what happened to their children and obviously the reporter in the Galaxy Trader headquarters doesn’t know what happened here... and who really shot their destroyers on which they depended for protection...”

“An unknown enemy...that’s a joke...” said Nagol and began to tell his story.

Looking back

“First I want to sincerely apologize to you ladies for not sharing with you what I found out about Madam Grooni, Tolo and the circus announcer from the day they arrived on our planet to the day they were arrested. My reason for not telling you was to keep things secret and avoid accidentally letting them know what I knew... For example... about what they were doing here... What were they really doing here? They were preparing the way to erase all evidence of the existence of their failed super soldier experiment. They were here preparing to erase everything about the experiment and say that such an experiment never took place. But I couldn't tell you what I knew about that... I couldn't even tell you that they were imposters. I couldn't tell you that Madam Grooni, whose real name is Livè, originated from the Whites of Ostikon. We had her DNA tested when Otsiron kissed her that day in the dining area... That was a distraction for Enai to take a strand of hair from her. I couldn't tell you why she was sent here... That she was sent here by the central intelligence security services to see if the super soldiers could be salvaged before the facility and this entire planet was destroyed. I couldn't tell you that two Galaxy Trader destroyers would be dispatched to destroy both facilities and bury everything deep underground so that no evidence or witnesses would be left. We discovered all this when we tapped Livè's highly encrypted midnight communications with her boss. Then Tolo, Livè's brother, was sent here with the assassins to deliver the disruptor. The assassins were just a distraction... I couldn't tell you that Grooni and Tolo were brother and sister. And who would have believed me anyway. They hated each other. I couldn't have told you that Tolo, who delivered the assassins and pretended to be Rodot's pilot, spoke many languages... including ours... Now, about the disruptor... The disruptor is a device capable of rendering Otsiron and Enai, who have computer chips in the back of their necks, paralyzed temporarily. The disruptor was the intelligence service's ultimate weapon with which they were going to stop Otsiron... The device was going to be used to put him permanently out of existence so that they could destroy this planet unopposed. As you all know, Otsiron is the sole person who not only communicates with the super soldiers but has discovered how to use them as a mighty weapon of unheard of power. The disruptor was tested just after Otsiron kissed

Madam Grooni. You were all there and saw both Otsiron and Enai fall to the ground, having a momentary seizure. Our enemies had to eliminate Otsiron, not because he posed a danger to the world, but because he stood in the way of hiding their dirty little secret... their failed super soldier experiment... which consumed millions of lives and was about to consume this entire planet... and all of us here. So, I hope you can understand why so many things had to be kept secret for so long. Later, the circus and the wrestling charade were concocted as a distraction for a couple of reasons. One was to get us all out here in the open and make us easy targets for the central intelligence attack ship that would be sent to kill us. Thanks to Otsiron, Delche and Ori that ship was eliminated before it got here and could do any damage. Had it arrived, in addition to us, it would have also destroyed all our ships, shuttles and even Otsiron's ship, the Dragon Fire... so that no one could escape this planet alive and tell about it... You all saw that ship blow up in our atmosphere. It wasn't because it entered the atmosphere too fast, as Madam Grooni later reported to her boss... It was because Otsiron's ship blasted it out of existence. The second and more important reason why the circus and wrestling charade were concocted was to disable Otsiron temporarily and hold him in place long enough for the central intelligence attack ship to arrive and kill him. They disabled him because they wanted to be sure Otsiron couldn't call on his soldiers to help him. This last part of the job was left to the circus announcer. His role was to activate the disruptor that Tolo had delivered in his ship. The announcer did this when Otsiron was in the wrestling ring. He informed his co-conspirators in the intelligence services through his announcer's microphone, which doubled as a transmitter. The announcer told them to turn on the disruptor. When they did, Enai detected the signal and told Otsiron to fall down. When Otsiron fell to the ground the announcer reported this to the security services. Otsiron saw him with his own eyes. When Otsiron was on the ground he noticed the announcer speaking into the microphone but heard nothing coming from the speakers. At that point Otsiron was sure the microphone doubled as a transmitter. Then Otsiron reported this to Enai telepathically and they both concluded that the announcer was the eyes and ears of the intelligence services here on the ground. He was the one who told the intelligence services when to turn on the disruptor and when Otsiron was on the ground convulsing. With Otsiron down they figured it was now safe to

dispatch the attack ship to kill him and all of us, as well as dispatch the destroyers to destroy the facilities and every living thing on this planet. The appearance of the ships in outer space was confirmed by Delche and Ori who saw them coming. They saw three ships, the attack ship and two destroyers heading our way fast. Unfortunately for them we anticipated their actions correctly and managed to stop them. We beat them at their own game. We managed to stop them from disabling Otsiron by removing the disruptor from Tolo's ship without them knowing. We replaced it with a device that Enai built, which mimicked the disruptor's operation but without the disruption signal. We did that when we were installing the cooling unit on the upper floor. We used covers to protect our ships from falling debris. But the real reason for the covers was to hide our activities inside Tolo's ship. During that time Ukasnek and Enai removed the disruptor and replaced it with the fake disruptor mimicking device. Enai was also our eyes and ears with regards to the disruptor's operation during the wrestling match. In other words, as I said earlier, Enai telepathically told Otsiron to fall down and pretend to be struck by the disruptor signal. This way we not only kept Otsiron active but by him pretending to be disabled we had a good reason to arrest Madam Grooni, Tolo, the announcer and everyone else in their party as suspects in a caper to harm Otsiron. And, like I mentioned earlier, Ori and Delche confirmed that the ships we'd been looking for from the observatory for many days had been dispatched. Now, how those three managed to overpower the destroyers... that I don't know... Perhaps they'll tell you if we ask them. As for me... from now on no more secrets... That's all I have to say for now," said Nagol.

"So that's what all that sneaking around was about. The secret gatherings in the lab, the whispering... the disappearances in the middle of lunch and during the night... I knew you were cooking up something..." exclaimed Irevva.

"We would have kept you in the loop but you were too chummy with Madam Grooni... who, by the way, lied to you about... just about everything!" replied Captain Orihci.

"Well... well I admit that... but I didn't believe everything she said... I didn't believe she was older than Nagol... that's for sure..."

“She’s probably not much older than you. She had her physical appearance altered, not to mention she had the real Madam Grooni bumped off to acquire her persona. But from her character and mannerisms alone, you should have known she wasn’t from Nelez. The people from here aren’t like that. They are mostly good people...” said Nagol.

“I suppose that’s true but a lot of people’s mannerisms are learned, they’re not genetic,” replied Irevia.

At this point Captain Rolo, with his big voice, piped up and said, “I’m interested to know how you shot down the destroyers. How did your soldiers even find them with their naked eyes at such a distance, never mind target and hit them... No weapon in existence has that kind of capability...”

Delche, Ori and I looked at each other and laughed nervously. No one wanted to say anything because no one would believe us if we told them.

Finally Delche said, “Do you believe in luck...?”

Everyone laughed.

Captain Orihci looked at as and said, “It’s nice to think about the things that happened... But I’m interested to hear more about what Otsiron said earlier... ‘Us failing to inform our people...’ I thought about that and tend to agree. Maybe it’s time that we inform our people about what really happened here... assuming they don’t know. We found out because we came here... and because we know, we shouldn’t assume everyone else knows... We should start informing people about what we know... some of us like Enai, Ukasnek, Otsiron, for example, are first-hand witnesses... I know that this was officially supposed to be Madam Grooni’s job but, as you know, she failed,” said Captain Orihci.

“We have no such capability here. Outside of this facility, never mind outside this planet, we have no means of talking to the people directly. All we can do here is record our stories... Then we’ll have

to rely on the networks around the planets to broadcast them locally to the people. On top of that who do we send our stories to? We don't know anyone outside of here. It's a waste of time..." said Enai.

"How about we take our stories directly to the people and see who is interested... People who lost children and relatives might be interested... I'm sure they'll want to know what happened to them..." suggested Nagol.

"And how do we do that... The only worldly people we have here are you Sir and Ilisa... You're both retired and not from these planets..." said Captain Orihci.

"I didn't mean me or Ilisa when I said that..." said Nagol and laughed slightly.

"You're the only diplomats we have with experience ... Hell, you're the only diplomats we have... who understand our situation and sympathize with us," replied Captain Orihci.

Nagol looked at me. He knew how I felt about being suckered into somebody else's problems but asked for my opinion anyway.

"Otsiron, you haven't said a word today. What do you think we should do...?"

"I think you should do it Sir. You, Aneleh, Rolo and Ilisa should go on a road trip and tell everyone who is willing to listen. And you are right; everyone who has lost a child will want to know what happened... They deserve to know what happened... And you Captain Rolo, you should use the opportunity to recruit a crew for Captain Orihci's destroyer. I have the nagging feeling we'll need it... and soon."

"Thank you for having such confidence in us but who will take us? And how will we speak to the people when we don't speak their language?" asked Nagol.

"Take Irevia with you, she speaks both languages fluently..."

“Me?!”

“Yes you! You’re a qualified pilot too... you can fly them from place to place, even to other planets... and also translate for them...”

“Why me? You want to get rid of me?”

“No...? Why would you think I want to get rid of you?”

“Go dear, this is a great opportunity for you to do something for you... Something you’ve always wanted... to be a pilot,” said Amih.

“What, fly a shuttle? Are you kidding me?”

“No, no one said anything about a shuttle... You can fly Tolo’s slick, fast ship... That is if Captain Orihci and Ukasnek release it to you and with your mom’s approval,” I said.

There was a big smile on her face. “I will consider it then...,” she said, “and I don’t need my mom’s permission.”

“So what do you say Captain Orihci and Ukasnek...? Will you give Ireva Tolo’s ship?” I asked.

They both smiled and said, “YES!”

Everyone cheered. When the cheering stopped Enai said, “Everything in that ship has been shut down and needs re-initialization. Also Ukasnek and I should give it a thorough inspection to make sure everything is operational and free of booby traps.”

“No problem Enai, you guys do that...” replied Captain Orihci.

“I want to be there with you...” said Ireva, and her father agreed.

“We’ll be happy to be of service to Nelez on a diplomatic mission with Irevia at our side, of course, but it will have to be an informal mission because Nelez is not a sovereign planet...” said Nagol.

“Sir, with the firepower we demonstrated recently and if we get Captain Orihci’s destroyer out into space, every planet will want to have diplomatic relations with us... This is a great opportunity for you too... to make history. Everyone will want us to be their friend. I bet you in time this planet could become the centre, not only of the Galaxy Trader consortium, but also of Ostikon and its sister planets.”

“Oh, God help us...” said Amih quietly but everyone heard her.

“I’m just saying you know... It doesn’t have to be that way... All I’m saying is that what we have done here has gained world attention and it’s up to us how we make use of it...take advantage of it or not. One thing I can tell you is that we must not allow this opportunity to pass us by because our enemies will be back... and more prepared the next time...”

“Well said, thank you my boy...” said Nagol.

“It’s time for a break. Let’s all stretch our legs for a while, have supper and come back here for a drink. See you all back after supper,” said Captain Orihci and dismissed the meeting.

After most of the people had left, Nagol came over to me and grabbed my arm. Captain Rolo also came over and was about to say something when Irevia interrupted and said, “No more secrets... you promised us...” She then looked at me and gave me a big smile; the likes of which I’d never seen before from her. Then she left.

“You made her day... Hell you made her year... I have never seen her so happy... If I’d known that’s what she wanted I would have given her my own destroyer...” said Captain Orihci.

“I was eyeing Tolo’s ship myself... but I’m glad you gave it to her...” said Captain Rolo.

“So was I...” said Ukasnek.

“And what would you have done with a ship like that? Your pirate days are over my old friend...”

“I wasn’t thinking of keeping it for myself. I was thinking of giving it to her... She’s wanted a ship of her own since she was a little girl.”

“She got the ship she wanted without asking for it. That’s what matters. Now she can feel she earned it... Her father didn’t give it to her because she’s his daughter... Ukasnek didn’t give it to her because he promised her one a long time ago... And because no one objected to giving her the ship, we all gave it to her... She wouldn’t have wanted the destroyer... It’s not in her nature to destroy... She might appear to be tough on the outside but she’s a good natured person... a softy inside.”

I looked beside me and standing there were Ori and Delche, keeping silent.

“Well Delche and Ori... what do you have to say...?” I asked to bring them into the conversation.

“It’s Ostikon all over again... Remember what happened with Asora, my wife, during the crisis in Ostikon? Well it’s starting to happen here. It seems history is repeating itself and we seem to be in the middle of it... again,” replied Delche.

“We can’t ignore the similarities... I have to agree with Delche on this one Sir,” said Ori.

“Maybe... maybe not... What I see here is unfinished business that needs to be finished... Remember Mother Nature works in mysterious ways... patiently and very slowly... You must have faith... We all must have faith... We drove the evil out of Ostikon and it decided to land here. Now we must drive it out of here...” said Nagol.

“I didn’t know you to be religious Sir, but thank you for that...” I said.

“If we don’t go now we’ll not only miss supper but Ireva will likely accuse us of conspiring to keep secrets...” said Captain Orihci jokingly and we all walked out of the common room together.

Surprisingly, even though we’d left last, we were the first to arrive in the dining area. I paid particular attention to how the food was delivered and wondered how a small staff like this could cook and deliver so much food for so many people. When I asked, no one at our table knew. Captain Orihci then waved the last woman pushing the cabinet in which she brought the trays of food and asked her.

“I watch you every day deliver so much food with so few people and admire your effort and dedication... But how do you do it?”

“Our job is to take it out of the trucks and roll it out here. That’s it... Then we come back and take the empty trays, used plates and utensils and put them back in the trucks.”

“Who prepares and cooks the food?”

“It’s done automatically in factories down in the valley. We’re not allowed to go there but I assume they have dedicated robots that work around the clock.”

“What happens to the leftovers...?”

“We send them back in the cabinets... I’m not supposed to know this... but the robots chop the leftovers up into paste and feed them to the soldiers at the next meal...”

“Is that what they feed the soldiers? Slop...?”

“Pretty much... The food is already chewed for them... They just suck it out of the feed pipes.”

“How much do they feed them...?” I asked. She had no universal translator so Captain Orihci had to translate.

“One portion per meal, same as us...”

“No wonder they’re hungry all the time,” I said.

The woman started getting nervous and wanted to go so Captain Orihci thanked her and she left.

Then, as we got up to get our food, the rest of our party arrived.

“Where did you go? Are you having secret meetings now too?” I asked, looking at Irevva.

“Guess...?” she said with a big smile.

“You went to see the ship didn’t you...?”

“We sure did!”

I shook my head in amazement and went back to get my food. The moment I returned to our table, I told Ukasnek that the women had gone to visit Tolo’s ship and that it was imperative the ship be inspected as soon as possible.

“I’ll get Enai and we’ll get on it tonight. Tomorrow I have to go to the farm and see how the prisoners are doing. After that I’ll hand it over to Irevva.”

“Don’t forget to get the ship’s codes from Tolo...”

“That ship has no codes. It’s not like your ship. It only has a lock... and I cracked its combination remember? When you asked me to fly it to where it is now... I left it open on purpose so that anyone could fly it in case it got in the way...”

“I didn’t know that... Thank you.”

“I’ll change the combination and give the new one to Irevva,” said Ukasnek and sat beside Enai.

After Ukasnek and Enai ate their dinner they went to get tools and headed straight for the ship. The rest of us went to the common room for a few drinks... But no drinks were found. I told everyone Enai had an important job to do and couldn't get us any.

Ireva piped up and said, "Ukasnek and I are going to the grove tomorrow to check on the prisoners and, Dad, we'll need a vehicle. Can you get us one for after breakfast until lunch?"

"Okay, no problem... I'll also find you a driver who knows the way... Anything else dear...?"

"No Dad. But what do we tell the farmers about the berries... You know... the ones Delche needs to make rakia?"

Before the Captain had a chance to reply, Delche interrupted and said, "Oh yeah. I forgot to tell you... The berries we picked up the night before have already fermented and I'm sure in a month or so we can make the rakia. In the interim I'll need Enai's tools and assistance to make the machine to make the rakia."

"That doesn't tell me how many berries you'll need!" said Ireva.

"It depends on how much rakia you want?"

"Dad, can you help me out with this?"

"Tell them we'll let them know later... in a few days... a week at the most. We haven't decided yet. We'll have a meeting about this later. Ask them to save us a truckload for now. Okay?"

"Now that we're on the subject of food... I would like to recommend upping the food for the soldiers to a portion and a half per meal if possible. Can someone find out if we can do that?"

"I'll look into it..." said Amih.

"Would you have the time? I don't want to overload you with work. I know you have plenty on your plate..."

“Don’t worry about me. I have all sorts of helpers who will be eager to do that...”

“Any more items for discussion?” asked Captain Orihci.

“I have one,” I said. “We may need some transport ships, at least one big one. I think we have several of them parked in the valley where the destroyer is parked. It’s nice to have at least one operational in case we need to evacuate people or something.”

“Yes that would be a good idea except we don’t have the captains or crews,” said Captain Orihci.

“We do have Captains, two of them Rolo and Ukasnek... I’m sure Captain Rolo can muster a crew. What do you say Captain Rolo?”

“I can ask some of my retired friends... They’ll be more than happy to join us... I’m sure they’ve had enough of retired life by now?”

“Okay then... tell your friends we can pay them and there will be plenty of free rakia for them... Get some old guys for my ship too...” said Captain Orihci.

At this point Nagol raised his hand and said, “I thought you said Captain Rolo would be coming with us on our diplomatic missions...”

Captain Orihci and I looked at each other expecting the other would respond with an easy answer. But neither was prepared to speak. When Ilisa saw us struggling she came to our rescue.

“I don’t mind going alone... I’m sure Otsiron offered Rolo the chance to come with us to keep me company on the mission. I’ve been with Rolo on his ship and know how it is to be cooped up... So I don’t want that for him. He’s a free spirit and would be very happy if he was Captain again...”

We all turned and looked at Captain Rolo who indeed already looked happy.

“I think we have our answer...” said Nagol. “At our age happiness is one of the most important things in life. Now the question is, when do we start all these things...”

“It’s up to us isn’t it...?” said Ireva.

“If you all go off in all directions, then who will look after the affairs on this planet?” I asked.

“Why you of course... You’re the only one who can’t leave...” replied Ireva.

“I don’t mean the security of the planet... I mean the political and other day to day affairs. We’ll need to have a government, a small one, to look after law and order, build roads and bridges, collect taxes, issue permits... those sorts of things... We’ll also need a leader, a civilian who knows what they’re doing, to lead that government...” I said.

“You can be our leader...” Amih suggested.

“I mean the kind of leader who knows the real day to day problems of this planet and can offer fair and practical solutions... I can’t do that. That can only be done by a local person who understands the wants and needs of the local people, as well as has some idea of how the world works and how to deal with it. I’ll look after the security of the planet... as I’ve always done since I arrived here...”

“So how do we find such a person...?” asked Amih.

“Don’t look at me...I already have a job... in the diplomatic core...” said Ireva and smiled when I accidentally looked at her.

“What about you, Enai? You understand things more than most people. You can be our leader...” suggested Amih.

“I’m sorry my dear lady... I can’t even lead a half dozen educated men without having a yelling match with them... I’m sorry...”

“Amih, it’s not that simple...” I said.

“It seems nothing is...”

“The person needs to have the right qualifications... If they don’t, the job will destroy them... I made that mistake once before when I recommended Asora, Delche’s wife, for president in Ostikon. It destroyed her life... She left Delche and struggled because she didn’t want to be a quitter and disappoint me. I’ve regretted that ever since. We need to find a strong person committed to the cause of improving the lives of his people... a person who is willing to take on challenges...”

“I’ll tell you what... You tell me what those qualifications are and I’ll make sure to write them down and post them in the reception area and see who turns up. Maybe one day soon, we’ll have a person like that and we’ll elect them to lead us. Okay?”

“Deal...”

“I’ll help too...” said Nagol.

About this time Enai and Ukasnek returned and Ukasnek handed Ieva a folded piece of paper.

“What’s this...” she asked.

“The combination to your ship... We checked it out. It’s fine and ready for you. Tomorrow after we return from the farm I’ll take you flying and teach you one or two new things... things our old ships couldn’t do. I’m sorry you couldn’t be with us, we were in a hurry to get it ready for you...”

“Does it have cannons and torpedoes...?”

“No. And you don’t need them...”

“So what happens if we come under attack...?”

“I’m sure no one will attack you... Not as long as the big guy is alive and kicking...”

At this point Irevva jumped out of her chair and gave Ukasnek a big hug and kiss like she had in the old days before the war; when he'd taught her how to fly his old ship.