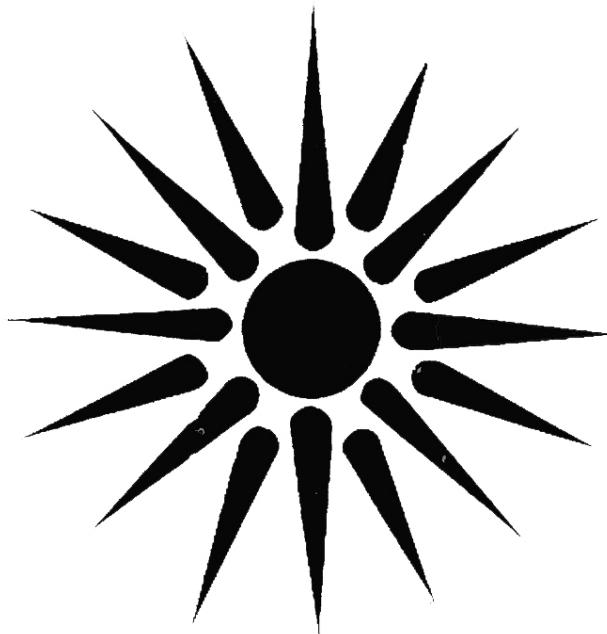


The Alien that changed the world

Part 5

Otsiron's Rise to Power

A novel



By Risto Stefov

The Alien that changed the world
Part 5
Otsiron's Rise to Power

A Novel

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FICTION - ADVENTURE

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Looking ahead

“Is it okay if I come with you to the grove tomorrow?” I asked Ukasnek and Ireva.

“Sure, why not?” replied Ukasnek.

“Any particular reason why you want to go with them?” asked Captain Orihci.

“I just want to look around and perhaps speak to Livè... I’m curious to see what she thinks of the situation she’s in now...”

“I’d like to punch her in the nose for lying to me... How could she lie to me like that...” interrupted Ireva.

“There’ll be no abusing the prisoners... And you,” looking at me, “you’d better take an extra universal translator with you if you want to talk to her... We confiscated all the translators and all other gadgets they had on them...” said Captain Orihci.

“No need, just bring yours, I’ll translate for you... I’d love to hear what she has to say,” said Ireva.

“Does anyone else have anything to say before we end the meeting? No? No one...? Meeting is adjourned...” said Captain Orihci and then turned to me. “Soon I’ll need to go to reserve that vehicle and a driver for you to take to the grove tomorrow. Do you want to come with me?”

“Sure, let me know before you leave and I’ll come...”

Before we left the conference room, Nagol came over and grabbed Ireva by the arm and said, “My dear, I don’t mean to overburden you but the trips we’re planning to go on we’ll have to depend on you for a lot more things than just flying us around and translating... We’ll need you to make appointments for us to see people, make reservations for places to stay, order food for us to eat... and other things like that... I think you’ll need some help. You should hire a

couple of assistants... One to run things locally and one to accompany us on our trips... What do you think?"

"That will be my first priority Sir, the moment we come back from the grove tomorrow and after I test my ship. Thank you for mentioning it to me... and please don't worry. I'll take care of everything..."

Right after that Nagol went over to Amih and said, "My dear, I promised to help you draft a list of questions to help you select that local political leader we need here... I'll do that for you before we leave and I'll have Otsiron and Captain Orihci look over the list to make sure we're all in agreement... But that's only part of your task... You will have to make appointments and prepare interviews and interview the prospective applicants... And, to be fair, you will have to interview everyone who applies... That may take a lot of your time... And like I told Ireva, you'll also need several assistants to help you."

"Thank you Sir, I appreciate your help and look forward to getting that list. But first I have to look into increasing the food supply for the soldiers... You know the thing Otsiron asked me to do... or I should say, I volunteered to do... Then I'll look for assistants. I'm good at that..." replied Amih.

After that Nagol came over to me and said, "You know, with us gone to other planets you will be alone here so let me tell you something that might be helpful for you in the days ahead. You know that this planet and all of us here mean nothing without you. It's your power and how you use it that put us on the map. Please be very careful how you use it. I know you're young and anxious to do things... and you want things to go your way but... for every action you take, no matter how small, there are consequences... for someone. What you did here recently changed the world in ways we can't imagine. You have great power and everyone will want to be your friend. You told me that yourself earlier but you have to watch who you make friends with... and what you do for them. So please be careful and always remember I'm here for you... I'm only a call away..."

“Thank you Sir. I know all this, I remember everything that Vaskot taught me... but it doesn’t hurt to be reminded once in a while... Thank you!”

At this point Captain Rolo came over and grabbed Nagol by the arm, ready to take him back to his quarters. But before he did that Nagol said, “Rolo, my friend, you look after this young man like he’s your own son. He means a lot to me... and please help him with whatever he needs...”

“Thank you Sir,” I said and they slowly walked away.

Was Nagol getting cold feet about his mission? What did he know that I didn’t? I’d managed to do fine so far. Why worry about me now?

I looked away and saw Captain Orihci waving at me.

“It’s time to go,” he yelled.

As we walked away he said, “Earlier I was talking with Nagol about what to do with the prisoners at the grove... and honestly... we have no legal reason to keep them here, especially the actors, you know, Madam Grooni’s so-called investigators, the wrestlers and the ship’s crew. We haven’t charged them with anything and I don’t think we have the authority to charge them either. I also spoke with Ukasnek and he had no idea what to do with them. If we don’t let them go soon, we’re liable to get charged with kidnapping. I need your help with this one...”

“Well Captain, it seems we have no legal authority to hold them but we should keep them here until the legal authorities do arrive to pick them up. Let them deal with them. I’ll speak to them tomorrow and see what they think we should do. Is that okay?”

“Yes! I’m relieved to hear you say that...”

“What about the berries? Are we going to purchase all of them from the farmers? And what will we do with them all? We can’t turn them all into rakia. We’ll need a factory to do that... And besides what

would we do with all that rakia? Sell it? We have all the gold in the world in this facility plus the gold in the other facility. We don't need money and we certainly don't need to introduce a beverage like rakia to the world. We are careful in how we consume it but it can easily be abused..." I said.

"I'm so surprised to hear you say that about rakia but I do agree with you. For now let's just make enough for us, and yes let's purchase all the berries and turn them into sweets. That way we can preserve them," said the Captain.

"Okay then, I'll tell the farmers to collect all of them... If they can't, because of labour shortages, I'll take the soldiers there one day and collect them as an exercise. They'll probably eat half of them anyway..."

The captain started laughing out loud, "You do know what happens when you eat a lot of fruit?"

"What happens?"

"You get diarrhea. Imagine those soldiers all getting diarrhea at once... they'll fertilize the entire grove..."

That got me laughing too so I said, "I guess the farmers will be happy about that... provided they survive the stench..."

"Here we are. This is the place where we book things. Let me go inside, get the vehicle reserved and then we can go home."

I sat outside for several minutes and saw hundreds of trucks going in and out of the place. I'd never realized how much effort it took to cater to a million soldiers.

Several minutes later the Captain came back and said, "Okay, let's get back now. Someone will come and pick you up right after breakfast tomorrow morning outside the main facility door. Do me a favour and tell Ireva and Ukasnek to be ready."

"Okay Captain."

“Do you have any idea what you’re going to talk about with Livè?” asked the Captain.

“Yes. She knows a lot about the super soldier project and can help us fight the propaganda waged by the central intelligence service that is trying to paint us as the bad guys. Nagol and Ilisa’s mission without evidence might not be enough to convince the world that we had nothing to do with the super soldier program, but if we can get Livè’s testimony we might be able to turn the tide.”

“What kind of evidence do you think she can provide?”

“Names, dates, places, suppliers, scientists, factories, people... She must know something. Most importantly she might know who sponsored the project. Information like that could spook some of the culprits associated with the project and lead them to confess their sins. Some may even want to make a deal with us; information for clemency.”

“Sounds good... See what you can dig up.”

When we arrived back at the facility we ran into Amih who was waiting for us. She was sitting on the ground beside the main entrance holding her face in her hands. We thought there was something wrong and rushed over to see what was happening.

“What’s wrong dear? Why are you out here, did something happen?” asked Captain Orihci with a tone of concern in his voice.

“Oh, this... It’s nothing... too many things on my mind... But that’s not why I’m here. I want you both to hear something...”

“What is it?” I asked.

“The boys in the tower have been monitoring the airwaves like you asked them to, and they recorded something that you need to hear. I asked them to make a copy for me. Come, I’ll play it for you on my portable device in the reception area.”

When we got there she said, “I didn’t get the entire report, just the essentials. If you want to hear the whole report you’ll have to go to the communications tower.”

“So what exactly will we be listening to?” asked the Captain.

“It’s a news report. The central security services are blaming Madam Grooni and Tolo for the destroyers being blown up. I’ll play it for you.”

When we got to the reception area she took us into a booth and closed the door. She reached up on the shelf, pulled out the recording device and pushed the play button.

“...We just spoke to the chief of the central security services and he confirmed for us that two of his agents went rogue, one called Madam Grooni, whose real name is Livè, and the other called Tolo, who apparently is her younger brother. According to the chief they were responsible for providing the enemy information that led to the destruction of our two destroyers, leaving us defenseless. According to the chief, Livè and Tolo were sent on a secret mission to learn more about our enemy but, it seems, instead of providing us with information they sold us out. They were the only two in that region who could have done this because they were the only two who knew the whereabouts and activities of our destroyers. The security services have now issued arrest warrants for them and all the others who worked with them. The penalty for this crime is death...” the report concluded.

“What do you think?” asked Amih.

“Can I get a copy of that report and a player? I’d like to play it for Madam Grooni tomorrow and see what she has to say...”

“Sure. You can have this one...” she said and handed me the device.

“As to what I think of the report? I think the security services don’t want those two going back, and if they dare go the security people will execute them before they can say a word. Of course we know what they’re saying is all lies, that’s how they operate. They want to

pin their disaster on someone and they found their candidates in Livè and Tolo. I'm not saying they don't deserve it but we can use this to our advantage..."

"How so?" asked Amih.

"Well, for one, it will make Madam Grooni think about her future... and after that, when she sizes up the situation, she might want to talk to us about protection in exchange for information..." said the Captain.

"She certainly wouldn't want to go back home and get arrested... That's for sure... but let me talk to her tomorrow first and see what she thinks. Especially after she listens to the recording... And thank you Amih for getting the recording and pointing it out to us. Also, please let the others know so we don't leave them out of the loop."

"You're welcome... I'll ask the others to meet me in the tower and have the boys there play the entire recording for them. It's only about half an hour long."

I didn't want to discuss this any further with anyone until I'd spoken with Livè, and the Captain agreed.

The next morning our ride arrived. It had four seats. I sat in the front beside the driver. It was an old woman looking rough and covered in dust. I felt awkward and said, "This must be different for you, driving us around..." Ireva translated.

"Yes," she said. "After this I have to go back and finish my work."

"But isn't this part of your work?"

"No!"

"Why not?"

"There's no one else to do my work... We don't have any people to spare..."

I felt sorry for her so when we arrived at our destination I reached into my bag and grabbed the few toiletries and clothes I'd brought with me to bribe Livè and gave them to her. She gave me a big smile and then drove off in a hurry.

"Another girlfriend, I presume..." said Ireva jokingly with a bit of sarcasm in her voice. But when I didn't reply she said, "I guess you like little people, huh...?" Again I didn't say anything.

At that point the farmer and his wife, who this land belonged to, came out to greet us. After Ukasnik spoke to them, they took us inside a big rundown room and sat us down at an old rickety wooden table. After Ireva told them that we'd purchase their entire crop of berries I figured they would be happy, but they showed no enthusiasm. They were happy about our visit and invited us to stay for lunch but that was it.

I wanted to know why they weren't happy about selling their crop so I said, "You don't seem to be too enthusiastic about us purchasing your entire crop."

"We need people, not money, besides we'll never be able to pick the entire crop; not before the berries rot. Certainly not with the people you sent us. Besides not having a vested interest in what we do here, they are completely useless. They get tired even before they pick a single bushel of berries. They are useless for this kind of work," said the old woman.

"I'm sorry things aren't working out for you but we just don't have the kind of extra hands you need. It seems there are labour shortages everywhere on this planet. What if we bring the army here and get the soldiers to collect your crop, would that be okay? You don't have to pay them either? What do you say to that?" I asked.

"That would be great... for this season... but it doesn't solve our problem in the future."

"I'll arrange for the soldiers to come here during their marching exercise the day after tomorrow, so please have your bushels, bins, transport equipment and whatever else you use ready..."

“Thank you... but we’re not prepared to do all that work in a single day... We don’t have the necessary equipment to store them in or the facilities to transport them...”

“We don’t have any place to store that many berries in the facility either...” said Ukasnek.

“Do you have any storage here on the farm?”

“Yes we do but even there we can’t accommodate the entire crop, maybe most of it but not all of it...”

“I’ll tell you what. Let’s fill your warehouse first and whatever remains you can deliver to us at the facility. I’m sure the soldiers will also eat some... maybe a lot...”

Ireva began to laugh... Then we all began to laugh at the idea. Imagine all those soldiers eating one berry never mind dozens of them. There’d be no crop left.

“That sound good,” said the old lady, “at least they won’t go to waste.”

“So let’s do that then...” I said.

“Will you be staying for lunch?” she asked.

“Yes... Thank you!” I said after looking at Ukasnek and Ireva. “But first we should speak with your new workers and see how they’re doing...”

“I’ll take you to them,” said the old man. “They’re back here...”

“I’ll start on lunch...” said the old lady.

When we got there we found them all sitting down under a tree. I looked at the old man’s face. He looked frustrated. “I told you people when you were done picking one tree to move onto the next one...” He then got a machine out, pointed it at the next tree and it

made a weird thumping sound and shook the berries off. They all fell to the ground. After he did that the old man shook his head, grabbed a bushel and began to collect berries.

“So Captain Otsiron and you, my dear Ireva, did you come here to gloat?” asked Livè.

“No Livè, or whatever your name is...” yelled Ireva. “We came here to witness your incompetence... It seems you’re not even capable of collecting berries...”

“That’s enough Ireva...” yelled Ukasnek and quietly said to me.

“That must have hurt...”

“We’re not here to make fun of you Livè. We’re here to let you know that we’re releasing you. As of now you’re free to go wherever you want. But you can’t leave the planet. You’ll have to stay here until the authorities from the central security services come to pick you up. Your ships have been confiscated. And as free citizens, from now on you’ll have to pay your own expenses for everything...” I said.

Livè was the first to jump and cheer with joy. Then everyone cheered except Tolo who said, “Where are we going to find the money to pay for everything? We have no money...”

“We’ll get paid for working here... We’re not working for free you know...?” replied Livè.

At this point the old man behind us started laughing.

“What’s so funny old man?” asked Livè.

“And how much do you expect to get paid for collecting less than a quarter of a bushel of berries a day, lady? Do you think that’s enough to pay for your food and accommodations, with some to spare?”

“I expect to get paid... I expect all these people to get paid. I demand it!” she yelled.

“Get them all out of here right now. They’re all fired,” yelled the old man.

“What about our money?” yelled Livè.

“Your money...? What money? All I have here is ten bushels of berries. That’s all you’ve picked the whole time you were here. You can have one bushel as payment. I think that’s more than fair... It’s generous. I’ll throw in the bushel for free if you get the hell off my farm right now. I’ve had enough of you...” said the old man angrily.

“You heard the man. You’re free to go and now you can go wherever you want...” said Ukasnek.

“Wait until my people hear about this treachery... I’ll have you all arrested and punished for abusing us... Especially you old man for your cruelty and for refusing to pay us... which is illegal and a punishable offence... You wait and see...”

“Okay Madam Grooni... we heard you, you’re right. Now march your butt out of here and take your cohorts with you. Go find yourself a place to stay until your friends come to get you,” said Ireva.

“Wait!” I yelled and everyone stopped. “I almost forgot. I have a message for you... from your friends...”

They all ran back to hear it. Ireva and Ukasnek hadn’t heard it yet either.

They all came over, including the farmer, and listened intently. When it was over Livè looked at me angrily and said, “You bastard... you set us up...!”

“I’m sorry Livè but this has nothing to do with me. This is all on you. You chose to play with the wrong people and I’m sure you’ve done a lot of backstabbing yourself during your time... I guess now it’s your turn to be stabbed in the back. Hell, what am I saying? You and your friends here and at the central security services were

planning to kill us all and destroy the planet. And you think I'm the bastard? Wait until the locals find out about this... There'll be no place for you to hide in this world ... You'll be lucky if you don't starve or freeze to death before your friends have a chance to get you."

"You bastard... You wouldn't dare!"

"Yes I would! Now think about what I said. You have one day to decide. After that you have three options, you can take your chances living here and making this planet your home, you can wait for your friends to come and collect you, or you can come to me and confess all your sins and beg for forgiveness. If I'm happy with what you say I might offer you protection. All of you think about your options and then when you're ready to commit come and see me at the facility. You have until tomorrow noon. If you're not there by noon, tomorrow afternoon I'll make an announcement to the people of this planet and tell them who you really are and what you were planning to do here. It would be unfair to them if I didn't tell them all that. Everyone deserves to know the truth... Do you understand?"

"Yes!" said Tolo. "But what do we do in the meantime? We have no food or shelter."

"Well you can eat grass and sleep outside for the next day or until your friends from the central security services come here to collect you..." said Ireva before she was interrupted by Tolo.

"You know what the security services will do with us...?"

"You work for them, what could they possibly do to you? I'm sure they'll offer you protection until you clear your names in court..." said Ukasnek.

"No they won't... The moment they come here they'll execute us."

"Why would they do that?" asked Ireva.

"Because they're afraid we might talk... Say something to incriminate them. We know a lot, not just about the super soldier

project but also about a lot of other illegal activities they've been conducting. Besides, they're not going to change their practices for us..."

"What practices? What are you talking about?" asked Ireva.

"Eliminating witnesses... You have no idea what those people are capable of..."

"Okay, enough! My offer stands, talk it over amongst yourselves and I'll see you tomorrow at noon. I'm going inside to eat lunch."

"Now get the hell off this man's farm... And don't think for a moment of breaking the law..." said Ukasnek.

"Take your stinking berries with you and leave my property. Go to the market and sell them. See how much you'll get for them and how much food that will buy you. We've been feeding you, sharing our scarce food with you and all you've done is give us grief. Go buy your own food..." said the old farmer.

After we went inside we found the old lady making lunch. Ireva decided to go and help her. Ukasnek and I sat at the table with the old man, hoping to have a conversation with him but we found he wasn't talkative. He would only answer questions and very tersely.

At one point he decided to talk and said, "I'm glad you got rid of those people... They were completely useless... They're not suitable for this kind of work. I hope you'll do something different and bring us some farmers, perhaps from another planet. I'm sure we can offer them a good life here. We need young people... to take over the farms from us..."

"Why do you care so much about what happens to your farms?" I asked.

"I don't know... It's been ingrained in us I guess... from when we were young. We were expected to take care of our land... that's what we do."

He paused for a moment then looked at me and asked, “Do you have children?”

“No.”

“You Miss, what about you? Do you have children?” he asked looking at Ireva.

“No but I know how my mother feels about me...” she replied.

“Why does she care about you... can you explain that?”

“I can give you many reasons but the only one that sticks with me is that she loves me...”

“I guess you have your answer. We love our land and we want it taken care of, even after we’re gone...”

“I understand...” I said.

“Let’s not get too philosophical about things... Now, let’s eat lunch. We call this food village food,” said the old lady and served us a ladle full each.

“Why do you call it village food...?” What’s in it?” asked Ireva.

“Everything that’s edible... all cooked together in one pot with salt and spices... We got accustomed to eating this way during the scarce times and now we eat like this all the time,” replied the old lady.

“It’s really good. It has a certain appeal, especially the hot spices in it. It reminds me of the foods we used to eat back home...” I said.

“In Ostikon, I didn’t know they had foods like this in Ostikon,” said the old woman.

At that point I had my mouth full so Ireva answered for me. “He’s not from Ostikon. He’s from another planet; a distant planet called earth.”

“Oh, that explains then why you have to translate what he says...” said the old woman.

After we ate our food we thanked the two old people for their hospitality and, before leaving, I gave them the rest of the goodies and other things I had in my bag, including the bag itself. We decide to walk back to the facility but before we'd made it halfway, our ride met us and took us back. Ireva went with Ukasnek to try out her ship and I went to find Captain Orihci who was anxiously waiting for me to return.

Rakia runs in Nelez

After I returned from the grove I found Captain Orihci in the reception area talking with Amih, trying to figure out how to increase the overall food production to up the food quota for the soldiers; especially with the current labour shortages we were experiencing.

As soon as she saw me, without me asking, Amih said, “I spoke to everyone about the news report and they all had a chance to listen to it in the communications tower.”

After I thanked her, Captain Orihci asked me how my trip to the grove went and about my meeting with Livè.

After I told them everything that had happened, Captain Orihci suggested we have a meeting to decide what to do with the berries, Livè and the rest of her cohorts.

At that point the Captain left to let everyone know about the meeting. I also left and went to look for Delche and Ori. Eventually I found them in Enai’s research lab, building the still to make rakia.

The moment Delche saw me he said, “I know it’s like putting the cart before the horse but we figured we should build the still now, test it and have it ready to put into production. That way we don’t have to worry about it later. It can sit here and wait for the fruit to ferment. Besides it’s an opportune time... We have nothing else to do...”

“That’s great... but why do I get the feeling that you’re apologizing?”

Enai and Ori cracked up laughing.

“Well, because I know how much you wanted to be here with us when we built it... But honestly, when I got the fever to build it I just couldn’t wait.”

“That’s okay my friend... Thank you for your honesty... But I do have a question for you.”

“What is it?”

“Actually the question is for Enai. Do you have space here to store some berries; a lot of berries, a press and a huge bin to ferment them in? I ask this because any day now we’ll start getting deliveries by the truckload.”

At that point all three of them exploded with joy, like little children being promised toys.

“Of course we do... This place has everything. However, you don’t need to bring the fruit here. We have a factory in the valley that has presses. All we need to bring here is the fermented juice, which we’ll ferment in the tank of one of the water trucks we use to deliver water,” said Enai.

“We can press the berries and put their juice in the tank and leave it outside. When the fruit is fully fermented we’ll distill the rakia from it in this still here,” added Delche.

“That’s great... It looks like you’ve thought of everything...” I said.

“The question now is, who’s going to do the picking and pressing and all that...” asked Enai.

“Well, Delche and Ori you should take charge of acquiring and processing the berries and turning them into sweets or rakia. My soldiers will pick them. Captain Orihci thinks we should turn most of them into sweets so that way we can preserve them...”

“Okay. When do we start?” asked Delche.

“The day after tomorrow... I’m taking the soldiers to the grove to pick the berries and after that they’re yours... You can find out from the farmers where to take them and how to get them processed. Please be sure to measure the quantity of berries you take so that

Captain Orihci can appropriately pay the farmers. Also, make sure the farmers are in agreement with what you take.”

“I’ll take care of the accounting...” said Ori.

“What do you want me to do?” asked Enai.

“Whatever you want my friend. I think your time is best spent here... managing things in the facility.”

After I’d told them all that, I also informed them that Captain Orihci had said that he wanted to hold a meeting...”

“When?” asked Enai.

“I don’t know... but I’m sure he’ll send someone to let you know well in advance...”

I could see that they were anxious to get back to building the still, so I told them I was going to the reception area and left.

On the way there I ran into Ukasnek and a smiling Ireva. The moment she saw me she took a run, jumped into my arms and gave me a big kiss.

“Wow...” I said. “What gives...? Have you been dipping into the rakia again?”

“I love you...” she said. “And your stupid jokes too...”

After she got off me she ran into the reception area looking for her mom and dad.

“She loves that ship... It responded to her like it was made for her. She was ecstatic...” said Ukasnek as we both walked into the reception area to find Ireva hugging and kissing her parents.

“So, I hear you like the little ship. I heard you like me too... and my jokes. In fact I heard you say you love me... Should I start

proposing now or should I ask your parents for their permission..." I said before I was interrupted by Ukasnek.

"Let her have her moment... She's been looking forward for this for a long time..."

"Okay, you're off the hook... for now," I said.

"We're meeting after dinner in the common room. Let the others know. I'll get Nagol, Aneleh, Rolo and Ilisa. See you later," said the Captain and they all left.

"I guess Ireva will be taking them to see her ship... and have some quiet time with them. Why don't we go and see Enai, maybe he'll scrounge some rakia for us," Ukasnek suggested.

"I just came from there. They're building the still, you know the machine to make rakia?"

"That should be interesting to see..."

When we arrived there we found Enai and Delche arguing.

"What's the hoopla all about?" I asked.

"They're trying to determine where to connect the incoming water supply to the cooling tank; top or bottom," replied Ori.

"Gentlemen, which end of the distillation pipe do you want to be colder, the top or the bottom...?"

"The bottom..." they both said at the same time.

"Then connect the incoming cold water to the bottom..." I replied.

"But the pressure from the water in the cooling tank will push the water right back out into the source," said Enai.

"Then, either put the cooling tank lower than your water source or use a water pump to push the water up."

“Okay, we’ll use a small water pump... I’ll go find one...” said Enai.

“Enai, before you go, Captain Orihci will be holding a meeting this evening in the common room right after supper. Please be there... all of you please be there...” I said.

“I will... Do I need to prepare anything...?” he asked as he began to walk away.

“No, just bring a bottle of rakia. Thank you...”

“The still is ready. We put some water in the pot and we’re ready to test it. The steam should rise through the hole in the lid of the pot and go up the pipe, down the distiller and out the spout at the bottom. Running steam through it should be sufficient to wash the pipes clean before we actually use the still to make rakia. As soon as Enai hooks up the cooling pump we’ll give it a go... First we’ll wash the pipe with steam and then we’ll do a run...” explained Delche.

“A run with what...? You don’t have any fermented fruit...”

“Yes we do, remember the bucket of fruit we got when we landed in the grove and the basket of fruit the farmers brought us the next day? Well, I’ve been fermenting all that and now it’s ready for processing...”

“You mean to tell me today is going to be an historic day here on Nelez for rakia?”

“I guess you could say that... Why not?” said Delche. Ori had a big smile on his face and looked excited.

“Will we be able to sample the stuff or does it have to rest for a while...? I know nothing about making this stuff...” said Ukasnek.

Enai came back with the pump and hose to connect to the water source and the return, which he suggested we dump in the sink.

“Turn on the power to maximum to boil the water, while I connect the pump and start filling the cooling tank,” said Enai.

“Do you think you’ll have enough time to do all this before supper?” I asked.

“Oh, yes...” replied Enai, and Delche agreed.

“Then let’s surprise everyone at the meeting with our first batch of homemade rakia...” I said.

A few minutes later we could hear the water inside the large pot boiling. I touched the pipe above it. It was very hot.

“Don’t touch that!” yelled Delche. “You’ll burn your hand...”

Moments later a thin string of cold water began to run out of the spout at the bottom of the distiller.

“We’ll let it run for a few minutes to clean the pipes...” said Delche.

After that Delche brought another pot. It was full of what looked like purple mud and smelled funky.

“This is the fermented fruit we’ll use to make the rakia,” said Delche.

Ori was the first to look at it and take a sniff. “I’m not drinking that... it stinks... It will stink no matter how much you boil it,” he said.

“Don’t worry, we’ll get used to it...” said Delche.

“How about we add some spices to it...?” suggested Enai. “That might take the smell away, or perhaps mask it.”

“I have an idea,” I said. “There’s a kind of grass growing under my ship which has a nice aroma. I noticed it there when I slept outside.

Why don't we go get some and boil it with the brew and see what happens..."

"No, it might ruin the batch..." said Delche.

"Nobody is going to drink that stuff anyway, I guarantee you... It stinks..." said Ori.

"What the heck... What do we have to lose? Go get some grass and we'll try it."

Ori and I went outside and I showed him what the grass looked like. We picked a handful and came back.

"Toss it into the pot," said Delche and he poured his slop on top of it. He then sealed the lid tight and turned on the heat. "We must watch it carefully now so that it doesn't overboil," he said.

"You're separating the distillation into three batches, right?" I asked Delche.

"No. It will all be rakia. One batch..."

"Delche, listen to me... You need to separate the stuff that comes out into three parts. The first part, which is poisonous, boils at a lower temperature. That needs to be separated. The second part, which is premium rakia, you keep and drink. The third part, which is also rakia, you keep and distill it again. This part smells and needs to be boiled again. You can boil it later, after you collect enough to fill the pot again..." I explained.

"I didn't know that..." replied Delche.

"Okay, but how do you distinguish the poisonous part from the good part?" asked Ori.

"You need measuring instruments... But since we have no such instruments, you'll let the liquid drip onto your finger and smell it. If it smells like flowers, it's poisonous. It's usually very little and takes only a few minutes to extract it. When the smell is gone you start

collecting the stuff in a new jar. That's the rakia you keep and drink," I explained.

"How do you tell the premium stuff from the regular stuff...?" asked Ukasnek.

"Same thing... You let the liquid drip onto your finger and smell it. If it smells like rakia you let it run... if it starts smelling pungent you start collecting it in a new jar... You should continue boiling your batch with the regular stuff for the same length of time as you did the premium stuff. If you boiled the premium stuff say for an hour then you should also boil the regular stuff for about an hour. That's the best you can do without any measuring instruments," I explained.

"So, what do you do with the poisonous stuff?" asked Enai.

"You can use it for cleaning... It kills germs so you can also use it to clean surfaces, wounds and sanitize things... But you mustn't drink it... It causes blindness."

By the time I was finished explaining, the brew had started boiling and Delche turned the heat down. Moments later a clear liquid began to drip out of the spout. Everyone suddenly became excited. Delche washed his hands and placed his finger under the drip.

"It feels so cool..." he said and smelled his finger. "I'll be damned... It does smell like a flower... and all these years I'd never noticed..."

All five of us kept going at it with our fingers for the next five minutes before Delche declared it no longer smelled like flowers and placed an empty jar under the spout. He then said, "So, this will be the stuff we drink, right?"

"That's right..." I replied.

For the next while we watched Delche sample the brew by putting his finger under the spout and smelling it while Ori recorded

everything that took place; how long it took, how much liquid came out and so on.

Eventually Delche said, “It’s starting to smell a bit different...” so we all took a turn smelling it and sure enough we had reached the third stage. After he put an empty jar to collect the rest of the liquid Delche said, “Let’s sample this stuff and see what we’ve made.” He took the jar with the premium stuff, which was a little less than he usually got from his still, and poured each of us some. “That’s not as much as I used to get from my batches...”

But after we each sampled the stuff, we agreed that it was clearer, purer, smoother and much more aromatic than Delche’s stuff. But it was also very, very strong and almost undrinkable.

“No one is going to be able to drink this stuff...” declared Delche.

“No problem Delche, we can fix it,” I said.

“How?” asked Ori.

“We’ll add some water to it...” I said.

“No, no, no...That’s one thing you don’t do... The best rakia maker himself told me that when I was in Macedonia...” Delche insisted.

“Delche, do you trust me?” I asked.

“With my life...” he replied.

“How strong do you want to make it?”

“As strong as my stuff...”

“Then find me a plastic stick or straw about 200 to 250 cm long and bring it here. Enai, you bring us a bottle of Delche’s rakia.”

“What are you going to do?” asked Ori.

“I’ll make a measuring device so we can make this rakia the same strength as Delche’s rakia... Obviously this rakia I much stronger and needs to be diluted.”

“I see...” said Ori.

Delche brought a plastic stirring device that Enai used in his lab, washed it and asked, “Now what?”

After Enai opened the bottle of rakia I dropped the stirring stick into the bottle. It sunk to the bottom and then popped up again. I marked the spot where the top of the liquid reached and made a notch on the stick with a knife. We then took an empty bottle and filled it about half-full of the new rakia and kept adding water until the liquid was touching the notch. Then we tasted it again...

“Damn, this stuff beats my rakia by a mile... in everything... I’ve never tasted rakia this good; not even in Macedonia... It’s clear, smooth, odorless and aromatic... I guess the grass gave it the aroma... Man I can’t believe this... We did make history today... in quality too,” declared Delche.

“I guess we did well, considering we had no measuring instruments...” I said.

“Just like the old masters...” said Delche. “Now I hope we can reproduce the process the next time we make a batch...”

“Don’t worry about that,” said Ori. “I recorded everything we did... That’s what good rakia makers do...”

“What are you going to call it?” asked Enai.

“Rakia of course...” replied Delche.

“You can’t call every concoction you make rakia...” said Ukasnek.

“You have a good point... If we experiment we can come up with all sorts of drinks... and you’re right we can’t just call them all rakia...” declared Delche.

“Call it ‘village rakia’...” I suggested.

“Why ‘village rakia’?” asked Ori.

“I ate some amazing food today for lunch at the grove. The woman who made it called it ‘village food’. It had everything edible in it including grasses and spices... It was a concoction of chance... just like our concoction here...” I said.

“Good enough for me... From now on we’ll call it ‘village rakia’... Any objections?” asked Delche.

No one said a word, except for Enai who reminded us that if we didn’t leave soon we’d miss dinner.

Delche turned off the power to the still and said, “I’ll clean this up later...” grabbed the bottle filled with the village rakia we’d just made and we all left.

We rushed to get there but by the time we reached the dining area our friends had eaten and left.

“If we’re going to make it to the meeting on time we need to get going now,” said Enai. So we filled our plates with food, grabbed utensils and hurried to get to the common room as soon as possible. When we got there Captain Orihci was preparing to start the meeting so I apologized for being tardy and for bringing food to the meeting.

“I’m sorry we’re late, it’s my fault, but we do have a surprise for you...” I said.

Everyone looked up at me, wondering what the surprise was.

“Let’s all have a bit of rakia first and I’ll give you the surprise,” I said.

Ireva and Amih grabbed some glasses from the cupboard and Delche poured a bit of rakia in each and handed them out, starting with Nagol.

“This isn’t rakia, it looks like clear water… It lacks the white tinge…” remarked Captain Orihci.

“What, now you’re an expert on rakia?” I said jokingly.

“I’d better be. I’ve been drinking this stuff for a long time…”

After everyone had a cup Captain Orihci raised his and said, “To the surprise…” and we all took a sip.

After making a lot of “hmm” sounds and pleasant remarks Nagol spoke first and said, “This isn’t like any rakia I’ve had before…”

Before he had a chance to say anything more I interrupted him, “Surprise, it’s homemade village rakia, made right here on Nelez with the berries from our local grove…”

Everyone erupted with joy, making all sorts of positive remarks and all at the same time. I couldn’t hear or distinguish what they were saying, except for Ireva who was laughing out loud. We all turned and looked to see what she was laughing at.

“I’m not laughing at the drink… It’s fantastic and I’m proud to have tasted the very first batch… and that it was made here on our planet… It’s historic… I’m laughing at the name ‘village rakia’…” she said, looked at me and added. “He named it, didn’t he…? He took someone else’s invention and got to name it… That’s what I’m laughing about…”

“How do you know he named it?” asked Captain Orihci.

“We had lunch at the grove today and guess what the food was called… ‘Village food’, of course… He stole the name from the old lady…”

At this point Enai piped up and told everyone the whole story of how the first batch of village rakia was made here. He told them that rakia was a Macedonian drink. Many didn’t know that. Because it

was a Macedonian drink, he told them, I had the right to pick a name for it. This sounded okay to everyone so we moved on.

The next item for discussion was Ireva's ship. After she gave us an update on how well it operated and how much she loved it, she asked that we give it a name; a nice name to reflect its purpose and to sound cool. At that point everyone went silent.

After several moments of silence Nagol said, "The Ambassador." She didn't seem happy with that and showed no enthusiasm.

I suggested "The Morning Star"... nothing.

Her father suggested "The Emissary"... still nothing.

"Well, it appears we're not going to get too far with the name today. Maybe you should pick the name yourself... It will eventually come to you..." said Captain Orihci.

"What's the place you come from called?" asked Ireva, looking at me.

"You mean earth?" I asked.

"No, no..."

"I think you mean Macedonia..., right?" asked Delche. "It's a beautiful place..."

"Yes, that's it... I will call her 'Macedonia'..." she said with a smile.

"Why thank you! You did that to honour me, right?" I asked mockingly, while feeling very proud that she'd chosen the name of my country for her ship.

"No! That name seems to bring you luck... Its flag is under your ship... right?"

"Yes?" I replied sounding a bit confused.

“You’re still alive, aren’t you?”

“That I am.”

“It might bring me luck too!”

“Okay, now we have two historic events to record today... Let’s move on to the next subject of interest... The berries...” said Captain Orihci.

I gave them an update on the berries. I basically told them that my soldiers would pick them and Delche and Ori would look after the transportation, storage and processing. I also explained the means by which they would do it. Everyone was happy with that.

Captain Orihci then went on to discuss the new report we’d received about Livè and Tolo from the communications tower.

Only Nagol had a comment. He warned everyone not to believe everything they heard in the news.

“If we believe what the central intelligence security service is telling us... that they will execute those two... we are more likely to surrender them. Everyone here wants those two to pay for what they did... But no one wants to get their hands dirty, right? So the logical thing to do is surrender them to those who are willing to punish them... And that’s what the central intelligence security service is figuring we’ll do. But we shouldn’t do that... Think about it for a moment. What makes us certain that they’ll punish them? What if they don’t? What if they give them new identities and send them to another part of our world to cause havoc and torment other people? Just like they did with Livè turning her into Madam Grooni and sending her here to torment us... Those two are experienced agents... And they are hard to come by. Think of the training they’d have to invest in again to replace them.... On top of that... if we surrender them to the security services we’ll lose our leverage... We’ll never be able to prove any of our claims of what happened here, no matter what we say. Those two aren’t only witnesses to what happened here... they’re trusted agents working for the

security services... People will listen to them... especially if they say what we say. We need to keep them here by any means possible...convince them to stay here... Think about it. And it would be excellent if we can get them to talk and tell us things we don't know... That's all I have to say for now.”

Everyone was surprised by Nagol’s comments but had nothing to add.

“No one? No one has anything to add...?” asked Captain Orihci.

“I have something to add,” I said. “But first let me say that, as much as I despise those two, I have to agree with Nagol. They are more important to us here alive than in the hands of the security services, dead or alive. We need them to back our story, to tell the world that we are telling the truth. And for that we need them to talk, but only Livè and Tolo and perhaps that other guy from the circus... The rest are of no use to us...”

“How are we going to get them to talk?” asked Captain Orihci.

“I have an idea of how we can do that...” I said. “But first let me tell you what happened this morning...”

After I told them what Ukasnek, Ireva and I did at the farm that the morning, I said, “I expect they’ll all be here tomorrow at noon, they’ll be hungry and cold and will want to make some sort of deal; so I think they’ll want to talk. Here’s what we should do. We should first separate Livè, Tolo and that other guy from each other. After that we should tell them that we’ll be interviewing each separately and, depending on the honesty of their answers, we’ll either reward them with a hot meal and a place to stay or leave them hungry and in the cold outside of the facility. What do you think?”

“Excellent idea...” said Nagol.

“I think Ireva should interview Livè and Amih speak with Tolo...; they’re less intimidating... Also they aren’t as well known as Captain Orihci, Ukasnek or Enai... The rest of us are aliens to this

world and nobody is going to believe anything we say anyway...” I said before I was interrupted by Amih.

“Me...? I don’t know what to ask?”

“Let me explain... We’ll prepare the questions ahead of time... but that’s not the point... The point is to get them to tell the truth about what happened here and record it. We already know the truth so we can tell if they’re lying. But more importantly we want to record what they say without them knowing it...”

“How?” asked Captain Orihci. “Won’t they suspect that we’ll do that anyway...?”

“Probably... but each of them will be thinking about what the others might say and from what we know, Livè will think that her brother is going to spill the beans. So she might talk and get a free meal out of it. Anyway, I don’t know what will happen but we should be ready for anything. I want hidden cameras and microphones placed in this room and the conference room to record everything they have to say. I suspect the other guy, the circus guy, doesn’t know anything but I’ll interview him myself anyway to see what he has to say. I also want that recorded. I’ll do it in our jail, openly, with all the others present, so please have a portable camera handy for that as well.”

“I’ll get on it right away... I’ll get my associates to help me...” said Enai.

“It’s getting very late... That’s enough information for one day,” said Captain Orihci. “I think everyone knows what to do so if there are no other questions I’d like to adjourn this meeting.”

No one had any questions so Captain Orihci adjourned the meeting and came over to polish off the remaining part of the village rakia.

“This is truly good stuff. I think you’ve outdone yourselves guys,” he said as he gulped down another glass.

“Dad... Please... Leave some for the little people...” said Ireva and grabbed a glass.

After she had a sip she said, “I have no idea what to ask Livè... How am I going to interview her?”

“We’ll help you ask the right questions... We’ll be in your ear at all times... right Enai...?”

“Yes Sir, we have a solution for that too... I’ll get on it and find the right equipment...”

I looked around and saw Captain Rolo taking Nagol away. They all waved at me and left.

For some reason I felt sentimental and gave Delche and Ori a hug. “I’m proud of you guys and I can’t thank you enough for coming here, to this planet, to be with me.”

Confessions of a spy

Early the next morning, one of the helpers from the reception area came to my door and kept banging until I opened it.

“What is it?” I asked.

“They’re here; all of them and I don’t know what to do. I’m alone in the reception area and everyone is still sleeping. I didn’t know who to call and you were the closest, so I came here.”

“Take it easy young lady, everything will be fine, don’t worry...” I said and followed her back to the reception area. When we got there what did I see? Our former prisoners all sprawled out around the reception area. Some were sitting down in the chairs and others were lying on the floor sleeping. At that point I asked the reception lady to go and get Ukasnek and Captain Orihci and let them know what was happening.

After she left I began to walk towards Livè who was standing beside the exit door. It seemed as if she had just entered the building as I arrived. She was holding her bare arms with her hands, trying to warm them and was shivering slightly. The moment I took my first steps the two wrestlers, who were closest to me, bolted away and fled to the other end of the reception area. That was odd behaviour I thought but then I remembered what I’d done to them in the ring.

“Don’t be afraid, I’m not here to start a fight...” I said but realized they had no translators and my words were alien to them. I always wore mine; one of the new ones.

“When I got close to Livè she said, “Well, well, well, if it isn’t the Grand Poobah himself and spat at me. I didn’t say anything. She looked pathetic. She had dirt all over her face, dead grass in her hair and her beautiful dress was torn in several places. She looked like she’d had fight with a cat and the cat had won. I wanted to ask what had happened but I realized that without a translator she wouldn’t understand me. But even if she had, she would probably insult me again.

By now everyone was off the floor and out of the chairs, looking at me. They were looking to see if I was angry after Livè had insulted me and spit on me. There was complete silence in the room. Then suddenly, I heard a familiar voice coming from the corner of the room. It was Tolo.

“I know you understand me, so please hear me out. Livè doesn’t represent us... Her opinions are her own... She’s not with us... We are here to surrender to your custody and we want to stay here. We can be useful to you... We’ve accepted the fact that we can’t survive alone, not here and not at home.”

I looked around the room and everyone except Livè seemed to agree. Livè leaned against the wall near the exit door, crossed her arms and legs, looked down and spat on the floor.

I wanted to say, “There’s the door Livè ... It’s open... get the hell out of here...” but I knew she wouldn’t understand me, so I said nothing.

Then, suddenly, I heard loud footsteps rushing towards the reception area. It was Captain Orihci and Ukasnek with half a dozen of his men. When they saw me there and were assured that nothing violent was going on they stopped running.

Ukasnek yelled, “You’re all under arrest for trespassing... You’re coming with us...”

At that point Ukasnek asked Livè to follow him. Captain Orihci went and spoke to Tolo in another language and Tolo went with him. I followed all the others to the jail. There we met Enai holding a portable camera in his hand. He began to record as we approached and when I looked at him I asked him, telepathically, what was the status of the recording devices in the other rooms? He told me everything was set up. His associates had to work during the night because he figured something like this would happen.

After all the prisoners were inside the jail, one of Ukasnek’s men closed the door and locked it.

“There’s no point in us being here...” said the same man who handed me the key and they all left.

“Well gentlemen, I see you all took my offer and came back, even earlier than I expected. Why?” I asked and Enai translated for me.

“Well, first of all, it’s really cold during the night on this planet, much, much colder than on our planet and we’re not used to the cold. Second, we all realized that we can’t survive on our own here without help. And third, we don’t want to go home in this political climate without knowing for sure what will happen to us... And I speak for everyone here when I say that... Put simply we don’t trust the security services...”

“I think we can find a place for you here. No one here believes you’re guilty of anything, but we do need to know what your involvement was with the security services; specifically yours...” I said to the man speaking for the rest.

“Well, I don’t know what to tell you except that they came to me one day and told me that the fines I had to pay for operating an illegal circus would go away if I did something simple for them. So I agreed... Why not...? I didn’t think the police would ask me to do something illegal, right? I guess I was wrong...”

“Did you know Livè and Tolo before you came here?”

“No...”

“They, who you said, came to you one day... Who were they...?”

“Well, they didn’t physically come to me... A man called me and identified himself as the Chief of the Central Intelligence Security Service...”

“Would you recognize his voice if you heard it again?”

“Of course... Then a few days later the gadget that substituted for a microphone, which Ukasnek confiscated, arrived with instructions on how to use it. I also received instructions on what to do and when

to do it... Basically, my job was to contact the Chief after you appeared in the ring and contact him again after you fell down... And I did. That's it. I had no idea they were trying to assassinate you..."

"How did you find out they were trying to assassinate me?"

"Rolo told us... He told us everything... He's the one who told us we'd be dead if we returned home because the security service doesn't like witnesses running around..."

"How well do you know the wrestlers and your ship's crew?"

"I know them well, we've worked together for years. I can vouch for them. They, however, don't know what they've done, what laws they've broken and why they're still here?"

"What about these other twelve guys, the paid actors..., Madam Grooni's so-called investigators?"

"I don't know any of them and they don't know us. They say they don't know what they've done... or why you have kept them here."

"Did they know Livè, or Madam Grooni as she called herself, before they came here?"

He looked around and they all shook their heads indicating no.

"It looks like they didn't know her but from what one of them told me, she was already on the ship when they boarded it to come here."

"What were they told their job would be when they arrived here?"

One of them spoke up and said something. Enai asked him to come up closer to the camera and asked him to repeat what he'd said, while recording him.

"The people who hired us said we would get our instructions from Madam Grooni, but all she told us was not talk to anyone... So that was our job. We didn't even talk to each other, except for the time

when we put on an act pretending to be emissaries from the various Galaxy Trader planets and having arguments and that kind of nonsense. Madam Grooni instructed us to do that.”

“Is there anyone else here who wants to say something, anything?” I asked.

There was silence...

“Someone will come here later and bring you breakfast. So please bear with us for a bit longer,” I said and Enai and I left and headed for the conference room to see what was happening with Tolo. When we walked in we saw Tolo and Captain Orihci having a nice talk. Amih hadn’t yet arrived. Tolo looked at us with his sad eyes wondering what we were going to do.

“Don’t worry about them. They’re going to interview Livè and just came here to see how we’re doing,” said the Captain.

“Livè isn’t going to cooperate but I will. I’ll tell you everything I know. I realized that my life isn’t worth living anymore... You’ve been nothing but kind to me despite all the things I have done. So I owe you that much.”

“Why wouldn’t Livè cooperate? What makes you say that?” asked the Captain.

“She told us herself... She thinks our boss is going to swoop down here any day now and save us... She’s a fool. She’s so stupid she believes her own lies...” he said and began to cry.

“Don’t worry, we will protect you here. No one can land here without us knowing...” I said.

“I’m not crying because I’m afraid... I’m crying because she is my sister... She is so evil and so caught up with the security service that she mutilated her face and body... She’ll never tell you anything...”

“Okay that’s enough, we’re leaving...” I said and Enai and I walked out.

“Did you get all that?” I asked Enai.

“Sure did...” he replied.

“We’ll show it to Livè and see how she reacts...”

When we walked into the common room Livè protested because we hadn’t knocked. She was sitting on one side of a desk and Ukasnek was standing, leaning against the wall, legs crossed, fiddling with his fingers and looking at the ground.

“Doesn’t anyone knock in this stinking place? What am I doing here...? What are you doing here...?”

“Relax Livè, we’re not here to harm you... We just want to ask you some questions... Do you mind if we record you?”

“You’ll record me anyway so why should I mind?”

“We just want to tell you that we’ve interviewed Tolo and now we want to interview you... That is if you allow us...” I said.

“What did that toad tell you?”

“Would you like to see?”

She didn’t answer.

“Show her anyway. I’d like to see...” piped up Ukasnek.

“Sorry, we don’t have a display...” said Enai nervously.

“Well, go and get one... please...” I said sounding annoyed.

We sat there in silence looking at one another. Ukasnek resumed his original pose and kept looking at his fingers. Occasionally I smiled at Livè but she kept giving me the evil eye.

At one point I said, “You’re such a beautiful woman. Why did you mutilate yourself so badly? No man will want to look at you ever again... Are you married by any chance?” That made her furious and she made a really terrible face; like a beast before it strikes. She was about to leap out of her chair and attack me but Enai suddenly flung the door open, again without knocking, startling her. She sat back down.

“Please give me a moment,” he said as he realized he’d forgotten to get a cable to connect the camera to the display. “I’ll be right back...” and ran out the door.

“Idiots... Fools...” she mumbled to herself, crossed her arms and legs and began to stare at the wall, ignoring me standing in front of her. We sat in silence until Enai returned and started running the recording. She watched it all and said nothing...

“So, your brother was right... You’re not going to cooperate... There’s nothing more for us to do here... We’re leaving... She’s all yours Ukasnek, do as you wish with her,” I said and we walked out. Ireva was standing behind the door.

“How long have you been here?” I asked.

“Long enough... I’m going in...” she said and, after quietly waiting a couple of moments, walked in. Enai and I stood there and listened.

“Oh, hi Ukasnek. Hi Livè...”

“What do you want...?” Livè asked in an angry tone of voice.

“I just came to see how the interview was going. Aren’t they here yet?”

“They came, they left...” said Ukasnek looking at his shoe.

“And?”

“And nothing... The Madam here won’t talk...”

“So what happens now?”

“I guess I have to figure out what to do with her. If I put her in jail I’ll have to feed her and look after her. I think I’ll drive her to the valley and surrender her to the robots; they could use the extra hands... I guess...”

“Do what you must. I’m going now...” said Ireva and began to walk away.

“Wait!” Livè yelled.

“Why?”

“I’ll talk to you... But not in front of him...”

Ireva went back and sat down on the chair facing Livè and said, “Why not in front of him? Whatever you tell me I’ll have to tell him anyway. I have to,” said Ireva. Livè crossed her arms and legs again and began to stare at the wall.

“Okay, okay.... Please Ukasnek, can you leave the room for a while... as a favour to me?”

“Fine, I’ll go and see how the prisoners are doing in the jail. And you’d better be here when I return...”

After Ukasnek had walked outside and closed the door Livè said, “I can’t talk to you here, I’m pretty sure they have the room bugged.”

“So what? What’s so important...? What are you going to tell me that is so important?”

“You’ll see...”

“Where do you suggest we go?”

“Let’s go to the conference room... That place is rarely used...” said Livè.

The moment we heard that, Enai, myself and Ukasnek, who were standing outside listening, quickly ran to the conference room and got Tolo, Captain Orihci and Amih out of there. We took Tolo to the jail and went to Enai's lab to watch and listen to what Livè was going to tell Ireva.

In the meantime, Ireva stalled Livè by asking her if she'd seen the interview I conducted with Tolo.

"Where was the interview conducted?" Livè asked.

"In the jail in front of everyone... He said some nasty things about you and about your boss... I found it hard to believe him... I couldn't understand how he could say such bad things about his boss and his own sister..."

At that point Livè opened the common room door and peeked outside. There was no one there. The two then rushed down the hallways and went to the conference room. Livè opened the door and looked inside. The lights were off. She then turned on the lights and the two sat in the far corner of the room.

"No one can see us here, even if they try..." said Livè.

"Okay, what is so important to tell me that you brought me all the way here?" asked Ireva.

"Not so fast, girly. First I want to know what my brother said that was so damning to me..." she asked.

"Well he said many things..."

What specifically did he say about my early life?"

At this point Captain Orihci ran to the jail and, wearing a micro communicator that connected to him with Ireva's ear, asked Tolo to tell him something about Livè's early life that no one else knew.

"Let me see now... Your earliest time in life... He did say something... What was it now... Oh yes, he said you were beaten up

by another girl... He said her name was Lali and she beat up you pretty good. That was the first time you met the security services. You said something to the officer which impressed him... As a result you became a prime candidate for their recruitment program and they came looking for you two years later.”

“And all this was recorded you say?”

“Yes... Otsiron and Enai recorded all of it on a portable camera. I saw them, I was there.”

“Okay, okay... I will kill the little bastard... He’s sealed my fate. I told him to keep his mouth shut but he didn’t listen. We would have been surrendered to the security services and we would have been fine.”

“What about the report we’ve heard that they were looking to arrest you and execute you?”

“Oh that! They wouldn’t do that to us.”

“You mean to all of you here?”

“No silly, I mean to me and Tolo. Who cares what happens to them. They’re expendable. They’ll find their way to heaven the moment they leave this planet... through an accident or something... They need to be silenced.”

“Tolo mentioned some nasty things about you and your boss. Is that true?”

“That we were lovers? We’ve been lovers since I was seventeen...”

“And how old was he?”

“Thirty six!”

“Livè are you nuts?”

“Maybe I am. So?”

“What other sorts of things were you involved in with him, besides being lovers?”

“His greatest pleasure was to kill Otsiron and I wanted to help him.”

“Why...”

“Because he constantly interfered with his plans... It started out with the destruction of the Karon fleet, then the humiliation of the captain of the first Galaxy Trader destroyer, then with the super soldier project... I can go on and tell you a dozen more things... Before I met Otsiron I thought he was some sort of super hero, but after I met him I changed my mind... He is an idiot and a fool... I think you feel that way too. He’s a clown... I just don’t know how he has survived this long... And Voskot was a bigger idiot for giving him that stupid ship. He has ruined everything... He has ruined my life.”

“I get the feeling that your boss is from Ostikon too?”

“Yes, all of us are from Ostikon. All these fools here, all they know how to do is trade... They have no idea how to protect their interests. They have relied on us, the Whites from Ostikon to protect them. The entire security service is run by agents from Ostikon. It has been that way for many years...”

“Wow, I didn’t know that. But the thing that really interests me the most is this damn super soldier project, which consumed my two brothers and my cousin Jess. What the hell was that all about? What happened?”

“Well, that one is quite interesting. It started out about ten years ago. The security services are excellent at gathering information but very weak when it comes to defending the Consortium. They rely heavily on the Galaxy Trader military... their ships... especially their destroyers. But when they were needed to do something it was almost impossible to get them. Year after year the service tried to get a budget and build its own force but they kept getting the same runaround... We already have a military, we don’t need another one.

But then, when your hefty friend succeeded in humiliating the Consortium's best captain, thanks to him we convinced the idiots to give us a budget... But it was a small budget. What could we do with a small budget? Well the eggheads decided to build a permanent force that would cost very little to build and operate, obey orders without question, work for free and be powerful... all at the same time, right? Is that insane or what...?! In other words something that was not possible. But then some idiot mad scientists took us seriously and began to work on what we later called the super soldier project. We wanted the project to be secret so we chose this sleepy, backwater planet to do it on. Unfortunately the two idiot brothers, to whom we gave the contract, had a falling out. They broke up their partnership and started working on the project independently. It became a competition for them... We didn't care how it was done or who did it; we just wanted our super soldiers. But then they started running out of money and asked for more. In the beginning we gave them some. Since the Galaxy Trader Consortium wouldn't give us any more, we turned to the pirates. We promised to leave them alone if they gave us some money and they did. When that dried up the two brothers came back for more but we said no... We'd already paid them too much and they had nothing to offer us at the time... No super soldiers. They tried to continue the project without our money but failed, so they resorted to stealing money, robbing businesses and banks. They built robots to replace the scientists and their manual labour. They couldn't get legitimate scientists because their work was considered shady. That worked for a while but they still needed more money so they kept stealing it. Eventually the competition for money between the two brothers became so intense they used their robots and super soldiers to fight one another and steal from each other. The fighting became so intense they left civilian casualties everywhere. We had to come down on them... We had to... We raided their facilities in order to shut them down... but they refused to give up. So we killed them thinking that it would all be over. But, as you know, it wasn't. The idiots had programmed their robots to continue their work, even in their absence... And you know the rest..."

"So you're responsible for this mess... I don't mean you personally but the security services..."

“Yes.”

“So, why didn’t you intervene and stop the robots from continuing the project?”

“Well, there were some people in the security service who felt we should continue this project, especially since it was being done for us for free by the robots. We figured that when the robots had created the number of soldiers we needed, we’d swoop in and take them over, except we hadn’t yet figured out how... And then your idiot buddy Otsiron comes in and ruins everything. Not only does he stop the whole super soldier creation process, he ‘somehow’ manages to take over the super soldiers... That sure made my boss furious to the point of becoming suicidal...”

“Why didn’t you tell the Ostikon authorities not to send all those soldiers here? Why did you allow them to sacrifice so many lives?”

“Are you kidding me? We needed about two to five million bodies to turn into super soldiers. We wanted to have a big army. Where did you think we were going to get the soldiers from? So we concocted an idea, which the foolish Ostikon government swallowed wholesale. First we signed a treaty with them to help each other should one of us be attacked and then we fabricated the fake war... We suckered them in... It was the biggest scam we ever pulled. That was going to serve a couple of purposes; create our super soldiers and at the same time deprive the Ostikon government of the new force that Princess Vieria had created. Very clever, eh? We also had help from the inside. We promised to elevate Princess Anelia to Queen of Ostikon in exchange for helping us. After that she did whatever we asked. We made sure she was placed in a good position in Asora’s government and she almost succeeded in fulfilling our plan... until that idiot Otsiron was brought back. Again he interfered and brought most of those soldiers back to Ostikon... And if I may add, he destroyed the rest when he blew up the other facility. You wouldn’t believe how much that angered my boss.”

“Moving forward to a short time ago when you called your boss, I mean when Ukasnek forced you to call your boss, to give him an

update after the wrestling match, why did you tell him that Otsiron was dead; when clearly he wasn't?"

"Sweetie, no one can make me do anything. So please don't even think I did it because Ukasnek forced me. I did it because I truly believed he was dead and we'd finally got rid of that menace once and for all..."

"And why did you tell your boss that your rescue ship had exploded above the planet, on its own... when it clearly it hadn't? It was shot down by Otsiron. According to your words it blew up because 'it entered the atmosphere too fast'..."

"Well, I overheard Enai say that it blew up because it entered the atmosphere too fast... and that's what I thought happened... It made sense... I was led to believe Otsiron was already dead... so who else could have done it?"

"There is one more thing that bugs me about all this..."

"What's that...?"

"The golden super ship... What was that all about and why did it fail?"

"I told you, my boss went mental and wanted guarantees that Otsiron would be dead once and for all... so he commissioned a sure fire way to do it and that was the golden ship. That project robbed everyone and still failed. Most of that project was bankrolled through King Rodot. He convinced every shady organization to donate money to get rid of Otsiron. After Otsiron destroyed his scout ship, you know the one that was sent to Nelez to pluck the gold out of the other facility, Rodot was convinced that Otsiron was a big problem and would become an even bigger problem if he continued to exist. In fact Rodot was so angry he wanted to kill Otsiron himself. After the ship was built he demanded that his son fly it; even though he wasn't ready."

"Why did your boss agree; I mean to allow Rodot to take charge of such an important mission?"

“Well, for one, Rodot came up with the money to pay for the ship, which by the way robbed his entire planet and most of the pirate enterprise, and the ship was supposed to be indestructible and idiot proof. Who would have thought that that idiot Otsiron would find a way to destroy it? This was the biggest surprise yet...”

“Have you been in touch with your boss since your arrest?”

“No! How could I? Ukasnek confiscated my communicator.”

“Do you think he’ll ever come here to rescue you?”

“Yes... eventually...”

“Let me ask you a different question. Why did you tell me all this? You know I’ll have to report it Ukasnek. And you know I have no authority to do anything for you...”

“I know that... I gave you information... That’s what you wanted, right?”

“Yes but I already knew everything you told me... You haven’t given me anything new...”

“That’s the idea. I want asylum on this planet in exchange for this information. Now go and tell your dad and Otsiron.”

“Okay if that’s what you want... But first we have to go and find Ukasnek, before he finds us and arrests us.”

On their way to the jail they ran into Ukasnek.

“Where have you two been? I’ve been looking all over for you. I missed my breakfast...”

“Oh you poor man... Now you’ll die of starvation...”

“You get out of here...” yelled Ukasnek to Ireva... “And you get in here...” he yelled at Livè after he unlocked the jail door. Soon after

that one of his men brought the prisoners their food. At this point Ukasnek left and caught up to Ireva who was heading for Enai's lab.

The moment she walked in she asked, "Did you get all that?"

"Yes, all of it... Thank you..." replied Enai.

"Now Enai, you should combine all the recordings, including the ones from Live's midnight conversations with her boss, and place them unedited into a single medium, make many copies and give them to Nagol to take with him," I said.

"And what will that do... She only told us what we already know..." said Ireva.

"This is evidence that will counter the propaganda and lies circulated by the security services about us and our involvement..." I said.

"Sounds good... It doesn't hurt to have such a recording but first let's discuss it with the others. How about we get everyone together after lunch and have a meeting in the common room," said Captain Orihci.

It's time to gather the crops

The moment Enai and two of his associates walked into the common room with a big display, Captain Orihci said, “Now that everyone is here, let’s begin the meeting. Thank you for coming. I invited you all here to bring you up to date on a number of events that took place this morning, to discuss what to do with our prisoners and to talk about picking the berries tomorrow and what to do with them. Is there anything else that we need to discuss today?”

Amih put up her hand and said, “I have been unable to find anything about how to increase the food production for the soldiers. Should we also be discussing that today?”

“No, not today, we’ll tackle that as a separate issue another time... Anyone else? No one? Okay let us begin. Otsiron, what happened early this morning? Please bring us up to date.”

I told everyone in detail about the prisoners returning and about the interviews we conducted. When I was done Captain Orihci asked Enai to play the entire recording, including Livè’s midnight discussions with her boss. After we’d watched the whole thing, including Amih’s interview with Tolo which I hadn’t seen yet, Nagol was the first to speak.

“This is amazing... There are a lot of things in there I didn’t know... What a crazy world we live in... This will blow many things out of the water. The Central Intelligence Security Service has been running both our worlds, wreaking havoc on all of us before our eyes and none of us had any idea... Wow!”

“I wonder how Livè’s boss will take the news when he sees this on every network in both our worlds...?” retired diplomat Ilisa asked.

“And to think that I was placed in charge of taking all those soldiers, our most precious young people, to the slaughter-house and was completely oblivious to it... It makes me sick, it makes me want to vomit...” said retired Admiral Aneleh.

“It’s all good but it means nothing if we can’t get this information to the people... It seems to me we’re still losing even when we are winning because the same bad guys still control the media and those who control the media control the message... The propaganda against us has been rampant... Even if we get this message out they’ll create ten other messages that contradict it... We’re fighting a losing battle... I think we need to change our tactics...” I said.

“Otsiron is right... We have been fighting all this time and winning but not making any gains... I think we need to hold back on this until our enemies commit to all their lies...” said Nagol.

“What exactly does that mean?” asked Amih.

“It means that we must provoke the security service to commit to telling more lies about us until they have no more lies to tell. Then we can go on the offensive with this recording...” said Captain Orihci.

“It seems to me they’ll still lie, even after they tell ten lies...” said Ireva.

“What do you mean by that, dear, give us an example...” said Nagol.

“They can always say we forced Livè to say those things...”

“But from what I heard, Tolo corroborated most of what she said. That should help, right?” replied Nagol.

“We have to do the best we can... They have the upper hand today... that’s unfortunate but it will be up to the people to decide who to believe...” said Ilisa.

“Well, those who are curious and want to know the truth will also look at the people telling the story... We have a lot of credible people here; diplomats Nagol and Ilisa, Admiral Aneleh, Captain Orihci, Captain Otsiron, Delche, Ori, myself, Ireva, Amih, Enai... What reason would we all have to lie...? Whereas the security services are known liars... no one trusts them...” said Captain Rolo.

“Captain Rolo is right. Maybe we should also each be interviewed individually and tell our side of the story... I lost two sons in this madness of theirs...” said Amih.

“We should do that anyway and record what we know before we start forgetting things...” said Captain Orihci.

“I think we should send the recording that we just saw to Ostikon too. There’s a lot of damning information there and they have the right to know too,” said Delche.

“I can help with that, we have contacts... We have Ruzha who can help us get the message on the air,” said Ori.

I looked at Rolo and Ilisa and saw sadness on their faces; they must be missing Ruzha a lot. Perhaps it was time to bring her here.

“I think so too. Ostikon is also a victim of this madness and needs to know the truth but, like Nagol said, we need to provoke the security services to commit to their narrative before we attack them with the truth. If we send the recording to Ruzha the security services there will intercept it and respond to it. They’ll come up with all sorts of lies... Captain Rolo and Captain Orihci are right, we should each tell our own story but to do all that we’ll need a professional producer and our own broadcasting system. We need to respond to the lies ourselves from here.” After pausing for a second I continued, “We need to bring Ruzha here...”

There was big smile on Rolo’s and Ilisa’s faces. Everyone agreed that we should invite Ruzha to come here.

“That’s a very good idea...” said Ori, “because I know our messages to Ostikon are always intercepted and we definitely don’t want the authorities to know what we’re planning to do.”

“That’s the best idea you’ve come up with today... I’ll make the request as soon as we’re done here,” said Nagol with a big smile on his face.

“What about our plans to fly to the various planets on our diplomatic missions? What happens to them now?” asked Ireva.

“We’ll still do that...” said Nagol.

“If I may add...” interrupted Enai, “we have a powerful transmitter right here in this facility that can reach the other side of our galaxy, even as far as Ostikon. It’s been turned off and is sitting there doing nothing. We can put it back into operation and do our own broadcasts from here. We can tune it to display our broadcasts on one of the public, pre-existing free channels. I’m sure it will be discovered by the people eventually.”

I looked around the room and it looked like everyone was in favour but before I said anything Captain Orihci said, “Yes Enai, please bring the transmitter on line and get it tuned to one of the free channels anyway. We can start using it right now and attract viewers... Please make it operational and see what happens... Thank you.”

By the time the Captain was done talking there were little conversations going on all throughout the room. I kept hearing Ruzha’s name being mentioned, especially by Rolo and Ilisa. Only Ukasnek sat there quietly.

To get everyone’s attention Captain Orihci yelled, “Ukasnek...” and everyone stopped talking. Ukasnek snapped out of his stupor and looked at him.

“Ukasnek, you haven’t said anything today, what do you think...?”

“I’m concerned... I don’t know what to do with the prisoners... I have no idea what to do with them; especially Livè... She gives me heartburn...”

“That’s a tough one Ukasnek...” said Nagol. “I sympathize with you... but you have to let them go... If we believe in the right to have freedom and in due process we must let them go...”

“Give them to me...” piped up Amih.

“Mom?” said Ireva.

“Give them to me and I’ll find things for them to do...”

“Like what?” asked Captain Orihci.

“Like... like... making announcements on the new channel you plan to open. Bibi has a nice voice. He can do that for you.”

“Who the hell is Bibi?” asked Captain Orihci.

“You know; the circus announcer guy...?”

The Captain shook his head and said, “I don’t want to know... Who is in favour of releasing the prisoners into Amih’s custody?” Almost everyone put up their hand. “Anyone against?” Only Ireva put her hand up.

“Why?” asked the Captain looking at Ireva.

“I don’t trust Livè...” she said.

“Don’t worry, I’ll read her the riot act... and a few other acts...” said Ukasnek.

“Okay then... Ukasnek release them sometime today... after you’ve read everyone the riot act... We don’t want it to look we’re picking on Livè,” said the Captain.

After everyone stopped whispering the Captain said, “And now about tomorrow and the berry picking job... Otsiron...”

“Thank you Captain. Tomorrow is a regular exercise day for the soldiers, but instead of marching to the valley we’ll march to the grove. We’ll march single file and as the soldiers arrive I’ll deploy them in groups a six per tree to pick the fruit after each tree has been shaken. I understand the farmers have ten shaking machines in total, among the five families. I want them all used. There should be a bushel available to each group of soldiers and a place to dump the

berries, preferably in a truck or trailer. Ukasnek, you, Ireva, Delche and Ori should go to the grove early in the morning and arrange things. Bring as many helpers as possible because the farmers don't have any staff. Let us know how many of you are going and we'll bring you your breakfast. Captain Orihci and I will lead the soldiers from here right after breakfast... Captain Rolo and whoever else wants to can come marching with us... Just remember we'll be walking all the way there. Amih, you get a number of your helpers and bring the food... Perhaps Captain Orihci can reserve a vehicle for you..."

"I'll do it myself, thank you..."

"Delche and Ori make sure you take a translator with you because you may find yourselves alone out there..."

"I'll take one of our young people from Ostikon who speaks both languages..." said Delche.

"Take two of them, one each... We need to expose these people to the outside world and this is a good opportunity... After the berries are collected and secured, Delche and Ori you look into how we're going to process them... Ask around... Captain Orihci, don't forget to bring money to pay for the berries and everything else..."

"It'll be gold. Ireva and Ukasnek you find out how the farmers want to get paid, by bushel or by weight and make sure you keep track..." said Captain Orihci.

"It would be easier if we pay them by the bushel... I'll take a farmer with me and count the bushels as they're emptied into the bins... So make sure the bushels are full, heaping full if possible..." said Ukasnek, which made everyone laugh.

"Are you going to allow the soldiers to eat berries? It would be a shame not to..." said Captain Orihci jokingly.

I knew where he was going with this so I said, "One berry per soldier, if that's okay with you..." and everyone cracked up laughing again.

“I’ll tell you what,” I said. “When you tell me we’ve picked enough berries to fill all the storage areas I’ll have the soldier eat the rest... How’s that...?”

“And what if they have to eat dozens and dozens of berries... Do you know what happens when they do that...?” asked the Captain.

“Oh for heaven’s sakes...” yelled Ireva.

“Be quiet dear... What happens...?” asked Amih.

“They have diarrhea...” I said.

“Oh my,” said Amih and everyone cracked up laughing again.

Even Ireva started laughing and said, “If you’re going to do that... let me know in advance so I can get the hell out of there... I certainly don’t want to be there when that happens...”

“Okay, okay... settle down please...” said the Captain. When they’d stopped laughing he continued, “Does everyone know what to do? Or I should say is anyone unclear about what they need to do? No one...? Okay then this meeting is adjourned...”

The next day when we were ready to march we found Amih outside the facility’s main entrance ready to drive the bus with everyone from our jail, including Livè and some others. She had breakfast for those at the grove in the back of the bus on carts. She was ready to roll.

I was going to say, “What the hell?” but she beat me to it and said, “I brought some extra plates for the farmers... Ireva told me how impressed she was with the lunch they’d given her a few days ago so I figured it was only fair to pay them back. And oh, I was about to leave but I realized I didn’t know the way. So I decided to wait for you.”

“Okay, we’ll show you the way... When you come to an intersection look back and I’ll point left, right, or straight...” I said.

The moment she said okay she started slowly rolling and who did I see towards the back of the bus? Everyone from our group, including Nagol, was waving at us... I looked at Captain Rolo and he said, "I was going to tell you but Nagol insisted I don't because he didn't want you to worry about him... He'll be fine..."

By this time the soldiers had started coming out of the main door so we started marching; following the bus slowly rolling in front of us and the soldiers followed us single file.

Midway up the hill Captain Rolo started falling behind. He looked like he was out of breath. "He's going to have a heart attack if we don't stop," whispered Captain Orihci.

I waved at Amih and she stopped the bus. I wasn't sure if she'd recognized my signal or if she was watching Captain Rolo struggle, but when we got there she opened the door and Rolo walked in panting and sat beside his wife. He looked outside and thanked us.

We continued climbing until we reached the crest. As we turned back and looked down... we could see the long line of soldiers still coming out of the facility's main door.

"My God, they look like black ants from here. This is quite an undertaking... To look after a million incapacitated human beings... It's mind boggling... I have no idea how we do it... I know why I'm doing it but I can't understand why you're doing it. This is my planet and these are my people... Three of those ants are my sons and my daughter... I'm doing it for them... but you? I don't know... just let me say I'm thankful that you are..." said Captain Orihci.

"We'd better get going... The soldiers are piling up..." I said and we started moving again.

"When Amih saw the farms we were headed for she left us behind and drove quickly to the destination. She parked beside the pile of bushels and began to offload the bus. By the time we got there she had given everyone their breakfast and they were eating standing up; looking at the long line of black ants coming down the hill. By the

time we got there the farmers, with help from our people, had shaken hundreds of trees. So, without wasting any time, I instructed the soldiers to grab a bushel and start picking. The first soldier picked up the bushel and held it while the other five followed, went to a tree and started picking. I had to show the first group how to do it and visually showed the rest. There were three trucks available to carry the berries to the storage area in the pressing factory. When one was filled it left and another one took its place. The bushels were filled full but not heaping full. That's how Captain Orihci wanted it. He didn't want the farmers to feel we were cheating them. Nagol kept shaking his head in amazement and laughing joyfully like a little boy. Ukasnek inspected each bushel before it was dumped into the back of the truck and clicked the counter which Enai had given him. This way there was less chance of making a mistake with the count. Ireva spent most of her time with the ladies, showing them various things on the farm. Amih kept an eye on Livè who was very quiet and didn't talk to anyone. The others, including Bibi, did what Amih asked them; like collecting and washing the dishes, working the shaking machines and driving the three trucks to relieve the drivers. When one of our ex-prisoners took a truck Delche or Ori and their assistant went with them. By the time all the bushels were used up we had about one hundred teams of soldiers working. I decided to park the rest of the soldiers on top of the hill and every hour or so I sent in new teams to relieve those already picking berries. I also ordered the soldiers to start coming out of every door of the facility and assemble at the top of the hill, otherwise it would take all day before everyone was out.

"All that was needed was about five hundred but no more than a thousand soldiers... I don't know what I was thinking... bringing everyone here..." I said to Captain Orihci.

"The trucks are going to be your bottleneck soon," the Captain warned. "Look down there... the soldiers carrying the full bushels are lined up waiting for a truck to arrive..."

"There's nothing I can do... We don't have any more trucks... I think we should continue working this way, skip lunch and go back for supper. We'll do whatever we can today and come back tomorrow and finish the job..."

The Captain and I then went up the hill to gauge how much work had been done and how much remained. We estimated that we would be able to pick less than half the grove by dinner time the way we were going.

“We should go down and talk to the farmers... See if they have any ideas on how to expedite the process...” Captain Orihci suggested.

“I know they have a local warehouse; that’s what they told us the last time we were here... But we have no more bushels...” I said.

We spoke to one of the farmers and he pointed us to the old lady who’d made the village food for us the other day. The moment she saw us she ran over and gave me a kiss as she pointed to the shirt she was wearing, which was meant to be given to Livè but I’d given it to her instead. She knew I didn’t speak her language and was surprised when Captain Orihci spoke to her in her language.

“Can we ask you a question?” asked the Captain.

“Please do... I didn’t know you were a local...”

“Born and raised... The young lady you gave lunch to the last time they were here is my daughter... She couldn’t stop talking about how good your village food tasted...”

“Well, I never knew that city folks like you could even eat poor man’s food like that, never mind like it...” Then she looked at me and said, “I know he liked it... He said it reminded him of home... somewhere out there... I forgot where...”

The Captain sighed and said, “As you can see we’re running a bit behind with the trucks... We have a lot of workers but no bushels to pick the berries in or a place to store them. The last time you mentioned to my friend that you had a warehouse... Can we store them there for a while?”

“Of course... We also have hand held carts... big ones... You will need two strong men to roll one of those. I think we have five of

them. We no longer use them. We can't roll them but you're welcome to use them.”

“Thank you... please show us...”

The old woman took us to another building.

“This is our warehouse and those are the carts,” she said and turned around and left.

The warehouse was huge and in front of it were parked the five wooden, two wheeled carts.

“How are we going to do this now?” asked the Captain.

“I looked at the carts. They looked like they could hold ten bushels each. There was no way two men could lift them even empty, but four probably could if each held a handle. Once upright they could be rolled on their wheels. But how could we empty them when they were full.

“There's got to be a way...” said the Captain, “but I don't want to go back and ask the old lady how... It would be embarrassing...”

“What are these rings on top of the handles?” I asked.

“Probably for hooks to lift them...” said the Captain.

When we looked up we saw four hooks hanging from the roof, connected to a piece of rail that led to the centre of the warehouse.

“I see how they do it,” I said. “They hook the cart, lift it, roll it to the centre of the warehouse and flip it over to offload it. Why don't we try it with an empty cart and see how it works.”

“You're the big guy, be my guest...”

I pulled the hooks down and attached them to the rings of one of the carts. Then I pulled on the rope hanging from a bunch of pulleys and was able to easily lift it off the ground. I pulled another rope that

took the hanging cart to the centre of the warehouse and then pulled on another rope but realized it wasn't attached. I brought the cart back and attached the end of the free rope to the front of the cart where I could see the rope marks. I sent it back again and was able to tip it over.

"Very impressive..." said the Captain.

After that we went outside and I called Nine and Enai's daughter to come down, only because I had memorized their numbers, and got them to roll out the cart. At the same time I showed all the others how it was done by imagery and invited teams of four to come down and grab a cart. After that I ordered teams of thirty to start collecting berries and load each cart. When all that was done we invited Ireva and the old lady to keep count of the carts being unloaded.

Captain Orihci said, "Our bottleneck now is going to be the shaking machines... Will they be able to shake enough berries to keep up with the pickers?"

"It will be supper time before the soldiers catch up to the shakers. Not to worry...", I said.

We continued to work like a well oiled machine way past dinner time and had almost every berry tree picked. Amih collected her party and was ready to go back. She was waiting for us for instructions.

When I got there I said, "You take everyone back and have your dinner, take the farmers with you, we'll finish picking the rest of the berries and join you soon. Captain Orihci, myself, Ukasnek, Delche, his assistant, Ireva, the old lady, the old farmer, the shakers, the drivers and the soldiers will stay behind until all the berries are collected and put into storage."

"Okay..." she said and started gathering everyone. By the time she was finished her bus was full to capacity. Captain Orihci also gave her the gold to take back. He said it had been a stupid idea to bring it with him; it was too heavy to carry around. I encouraged him to go

back with Amih but he refused. He said his place was here... I didn't argue with him.

We worked until it was almost dark, so I decided to dismiss part of the force and let the soldiers go home. I was sure they were tired and hungry.

The old farmer lady must have sensed that too and said, "Let those poor creatures go home and have their dinner and rest... We'll pick the rest of the berries tomorrow. There are less than one hundred trees left. We can do it... we are used to doing the work. We've done it for years..."

I looked at the Captain and he too was in agreement so I ordered the soldiers to march back home. The Captain and I emptied the last carts and, after the farmer lady and Ireva counted them, I closed the warehouse doors and waited for Delche and the other drivers to return... But before they were back Amih had returned with the bus.

"What are you doing back here..." yelled Captain Orihci.

"I came back to pick you up... Did you think I was going to let you walk back...? After working all day? C'mon everyone, I'll give you a ride back... We saved some food for you... Let's go and eat."

"Sorry dear, we can't," said the old lady. "The drivers aren't back yet."

While waiting for the drivers to return the old lady and Amih started a conversation.

"Is this young lady that I've been doing the counting with your daughter by any chance?" asked the old lady.

"Women and their gossip..." we heard the old farmer mumble.

"Yes she is. How did you know?"

"She has your eyes dear... And so does this one... This big one here beside your husband..."

“How did you know he’s my husband?”

“Well, if she’s his daughter and you’re her mother then he must be your husband... It adds up...”

“Yes, he’s my husband and the big one is also my daughter; they’re twins...” said Amih and began to cry...”

“Sorry dear, I didn’t mean to upset you... I lost two boys to this nightmare too...”

“You should come and get tested... I’ll try and find them for you...” said Amih sobbing.

By then the trucks had arrived and Captain Orihci went to get the drivers. I could understand why he left. Ireva was fuming...

I grabbed her by the arm and dragged her behind the building. She kept yelling and screaming, “You’re hurting me...!” and some of the people became concerned.

Amih said, “Let them go... she needs to be told... Someone has to do it... I just don’t have the heart...”

“You mean to tell me your girl doesn’t know? Oh, you poor dear...” said the farmer lady.

I grabbed her by both shoulders and she didn’t resist. “I know this wasn’t the time for you to find out you have a twin sister... but when is the right time? Your parents have been agonizing over this and your mother has been paralyzed with fear that you might find out and have a fit... If you were bit more understanding they wouldn’t have kept it a secret... But no...! You had to be hard headed and difficult...”

“You bastard, you knew about this and didn’t tell me?” she yelled and started hitting me as hard as she could. When I didn’t try to resist she stopped hitting me and began to cry on my shoulder.

“I’m truly sorry about this... I know it’s not your fault... I sort of knew she was my twin sister but wasn’t sure... I also knew my aunt couldn’t have children so I figured she was adopted... And if she was adopted why was she the splitting image of me? She knew she was my twin sister too ... We were both born on the same day... What pisses me off is that my parents wouldn’t tell me.”

“Because you’re a hard headed, difficult person to deal with and no one knows when you’re going to go off like a cannon...” I said.

She began to laugh and cry at the same time, “Now what?”

“Now we go back on the bus and you tell your parents you’re okay with it and then we’ll go home. Okay?”

“Okay.”

After we walked onto the bus she smiled at her mom and dad as she held onto me like she was glued to me and we both sat at the back of the bus...

I heard Captain Orihci ask Amih if she was okay to drive. She said she was and pulled away to take us home. On the way we passed the soldiers marching back home and I saw Ireva wave at her sister. “I’m okay with that...” she said, “Tell her I love her...” and then she put her head on my shoulder and kept it there until we got home...

When we got back Ireva hung onto me like we were newlyweds, making everyone wonder what had happened up there. When we went to eat Amih decided to tell everyone that Jess, or Nine as I called her, was also her daughter, her twin daughter and told them the entire story, which I think was meant for Ireva. When she was done I asked Ireva to say something herself and let her mom and dad know that it was no surprise to her and that she’d known all along. After she told them she ran over to her parents and said that she was okay with it and hugged them both. Then she came back and sat beside me.

I looked around and saw Livè standing in the corner by herself looking sad. The entire room was packed. Some people had to eat standing up. I looked at Nagol and Rolo. They looked tired but happy.

Captain Orihci stood up and said, “There’s one more item we need to discuss tonight and that is paying our neighbours, the farmers, for the fruit we collected today... Will Ukasnek and Ireva come up here and give us a count?”

“Please don’t bother...” said the old farmer. “We agreed days ago that your money was no good to us. We would like you to keep it and purchase necessities for the soldiers... We have a couple of sons among them... Once in a while we’ll need some clothes and medicine but that’s it. We would be grateful if you could provide us those things.”

After thanking the farmers Captain Orihci said, “That’s all I have to say... Now everyone please go home and rest... We’ve had a long day...” and sat back down.

At that point Amih stood up and said, “I’ll drive the farmers back to their homes. I still have the bus... If anyone else needs a ride please go outside and get on the bus. I would also like my daughter Ireva to come with me, in case I get lost getting there.”

“Oh Mom...”

A visit to the valley

Delche, Ori and I were sitting in the dining area discussing the day's events. Delche and Ori wanted me to go with them the next day to visit the warehouse and fruit press in the valley. Amih and Ireva had returned from driving the farmers back to their homes.

"Are you still here? What are you concocting now?" Ireva asked, looking at me.

"How was your trip?"

"Good... we're still in one piece. I'm not used to driving a big vehicle at night..." said Amih.

"Did you return the bus?" I asked.

"No, I still have it. It's outside... Why?"

"Delche and Ori want to go to the factories in the valley tomorrow morning and they want me to go with them. Would you mind driving us there?"

"Why does she have to drive you? Can't you drive yourselves?" objected Ireva.

I looked at Ori and Delche and they both shook their heads. "No..., none of us knows how to drive your vehicles..."

"The great Captain Otsiron can't even drive a bus..." Ireva said sarcastically and laughed out loud.

"You need to cool it a bit dear... I'll be happy to drive you there. What time?" asked Amih.

"Right after breakfast..." I said.

"Okay then. See you tomorrow. Come dear, don't pester the men."

"Thank you..."

“We should get going too...” said Delche.

“Can we sleep on the ship tonight? I want to contact Airam and see how she’s doing? I haven’t spoken to her for a long time,” said Ori.

“Sure, no problem... Is that okay with you Delche?” I asked.

“Okay... And Ori give my regards to her, or better yet let me say a few words before you send her the message...”

“Give her my regards too... And while you’re at it, tell her to contact Ruzha and let her know we’re planning to invite her to come here... Also tell her why. We want her to know before Asora asks her... I’m not sure if Nagol has contacted Asora yet but I’m sure he’ll do it soon.”

When we went inside the ship it smelled a bit musty so I left the hatch slightly open. Delche and I went straight to our beds.

The next morning I heard banging on the ship’s hull and a female voice yelling. I put on my translator and yelled, “Okay, hold your horses...”

It was Amih and she replied, “I don’t know what that means but you’re late for breakfast...”

I opened the hatch for her to come in and then yelled for Delche and Ori to wake up. When she heard that she said, “I’m going back now...” and left.

When we arrived in the dining area everyone was gone but Amih had saved us some breakfast.

“I’m really sorry for being late,” I said.

“I looked for you everywhere and when I couldn’t find you I went to your ship.”

“Is Captain Orihci okay with you driving us to the valley?” I asked.

“His only concern was that it’s a bit dangerous there with robberies and kidnappings but, hey, I have you to protect me...” she said and smiled shyly.

Delche and I looked at each other.

“Why don’t I take my guards with us and furnish you with firearms... Amih. Can you use a plasma pistol?”

“I’ve never heard of one; never mind use one... No thank you, I don’t want one...”

We walked back to my ship and while they boarded the bus that was parked beside my ship, I went inside, activated my guards and picked up three plasma blasters. The moment I stepped on the bus Amih floored it and said, “You have to show me the way...”

We looked at each other... and I said, “We don’t know the way... I thought you knew the way...”

“Never mind, I’ll follow the beaten path and it will take us there...”

After driving for a while we started seeing buildings, many buildings... I had the sinking feeling that we wouldn’t be able to find the warehouse and the press building.

Then Delche said, “That’s the warehouse where we offloaded the berries...” and Ori agreed.

Amih pulled the bus up to the building and asked, “Did you bring keys?”

“I have them...” replied Ori, got off the bus and unlocked the door. We all walked inside.

“That’s a lot of berries...” said Amih looking at the dark blue mountain in front of her.

“That’s less than half of them. We have even more at the farm...” said Delche and scratched his head wondering how we were going to process them. We looked around but the lights weren’t on inside so we couldn’t see anything.

When we were unable to find the light switches Amih said, “What now...?”

“We should take a stroll to the other buildings and ask around to find the owners of this building,” I said. There was a huge building on the other side of the street. It was the size of several football fields. There was no one at the front but we could hear machinery running and trucks going in and out at the back.

“Let’s go to the guardhouse over there and I’ll ask the guard...” Amih suggested.

When we got close we could see there was no one in the guardhouse.

“This is odd...? There should be people everywhere... Where is everyone?” asked Amih.

Her voice must have triggered something and a loud voice came over the outside speakers ordering us to leave the premises or we would be fired at. The loud noise startled my guards and they both pulled their weapons out. Someone came out, two doors to our left, and fired a weapon at us. My guards immediately returned fire and there was a huge explosion.

“We just destroyed a robot...” I said sounding distressed and told everyone to get down on the ground. More shots were fired from the distance. I was hit on my left shoulder. My leather uniform was burned through and my skin was smoldering. I quickly popped a vial of fire water into my mouth, ordered one guard to guard Amih, Delche and Ori and the other guard and I went to confront the shouters. I no longer felt pain but was amazed at how fast I could run. But still I couldn’t keep up with my guard who ran through the fire and destroyed three more of those robots. I caught up to my guard who now stood there quietly, like nothing had happened, and

using her radar eyes and ears looked and listened for more activity. There was complete silence, even the machines inside had stopped clinking. We got back to the others. Everyone was distressed but no one was hurt. Amih got off the ground and noticed the burn on my shoulder.

“You’re hit...” she said sounding worried.

“I’m fine...” I said while looking around. Then suddenly we saw people coming out of the building with their hands up. I ordered my guards, who were getting ready to fire, to stand down. When the people saw me they stopped cold. Amih, realizing they were afraid of me, stepped in front of me and told them not to be afraid. They started moving again. More doors began to open and more of them started coming out. They kept staring at the sky and raising their arms up; like they’d never seen the sun before. They were dirty and wore worn, threadbare clothes. They looked like prisoners who had just come out of a death camp. There were thousands of them, men, women and children.

“What is this...?” I yelled loudly.

“I don’t know...” yelled Amih panicking and started running towards the crowd yelling and screaming. Two men ran towards her and they embraced her. Amih was overwhelmed and passed out. They carried her over to us. Delche poured water on her face. She was delirious.

“Who are you?” I asked them in Macedonian. But since they had no translators they couldn’t answer me. Ori took his off, switched the language from Ostikon to Galaxy Trader and stuck an earpiece in each of their ears.

“Who are you?” I asked again. “And what have you done to this woman?”

“We are her sons,” said one, “and she is our mother. I think she is in shock,” said the other.

Amih was back, she was coherent but mumbling. The boys gave Ori his translator back. We stepped away to give Amih some time to recover. She again grabbed the boys in her arms. We looked around. Thousands of eyes were staring at us. They were silent. A lot lay down on the ground facing the sky, looking towards the sun. No one felt like saying anything. This was a travesty... The only thing that kept us sane at that moment was the thought that these people were finally free. But free from what? What were they all doing in there? Were they the labour force that processed the food that fed us and the soldiers?

I was sick to my stomach thinking about it. I almost vomited. "Look at them... they are skin and bones..." I yelled out loud without realizing it.

Amih ran over to see what was happening. "I know you're going to say my boys need me right now... But these people need me too. I'm the only one they can understand so please let me talk to them and find out what's going on..."

While Amih spoke with an old man, Delche, Ori and I went back to where the boys were, to keep them company. They kept staring at me.

"They are afraid of you..." said Delche. "They don't know what to make of you..."

"I think from what Ukasnek told me they were kidnapped by super soldiers..."

After a moment of silence I said, "I should be with Amih but I don't think I can stomach it. The horror these people have lived through. I suspect this is the factory that produces our food... Look at us and look at them... It makes me sick..."

We waited for almost an hour while Amih spoke to several of them. Almost everyone was now lying on the ground facing the sun, including Amih's boys.

Amih finally came back with the first old man she'd spoken to and said, "This is the most senior worker in the factory. He knows all the jobs and most of the workers. I asked him to come with us and tell everyone in the facility what has happened here. For now I convinced the workers to go back to work but they want to be relieved. They want to go and see their families... They're not willing to work for too much longer. I told them that we would find replacement workers for them soon... I know that was wrong of me given the labour situation here... But you guys are smart, you will find a way. I told them if they don't work, many people, millions will starve. They believe me... They don't want that on their conscience."

We headed back for the bus. "I can't drive you back... I just can't; someone else will have to do it..."

"I'll drive," said one of her sons. "If someone can show me the way..."

There was no one outside the facility when we arrived so we went to Enai's lab. There we saw Captain Orihci and Ireva talking with Enai.

"Hold me..." said Amih. "My knees are getting weak... I think I'll pass out again," and she started crying. Her two sons ran ahead towards their father and sister. Ireva recognized them first but wasn't sure... until she saw her mother hanging in my arms like a rag doll. It was a happy and sad reunion. I was surprised to see her sons hadn't lost their spirit despite what they'd gone through. The Captain immediately ordered everyone to assemble in the common room. I handed him his wife and the boys held onto her. Ireva looked at me with pride.

"Don't look at him... I found them..." exclaimed Amih. "But it was thanks to them for asking me to drive them there..."

We stopped walking to give them some space. "I should be feeling happy..." I said to Ori and Delche. "But I feel empty..."

“It’s called loneliness, my friend...” replied Delche and turning to Ori asked. “Did you make your call last night?”

“I did and got a response...”

“What did she say?”

“She said they were all fine and she would talk to Ruzha...”

“And?”

“Well, it’s all bad news. Since we destroyed the golden ship here, the Whites have been leaving the planet in droves and abandoning their businesses. Your restaurant has now opened a soup kitchen to feed the unemployed. The outlanders, our friends, have been hit the hardest...”

Just as Ori was finishing telling us, Ukasnek waved for us to come. It was chaos when we went inside the common room. There were loud conversations everywhere. While Captain Orihci was trying to gain control of the meeting I grabbed Ireva by her arm and said, “Go and get some work clothes for your brothers and the other man...”

At that point she noticed the burn on my shoulder and said, “What happened to you?”

“Never mind me... I’ll tell you later, now go!”

She spoke to her brothers and the other man and they followed her outside. When everyone had finally stopped talking Captain Orihci said, “Thank you for coming on such short notice. I felt it was important to bring you all here to let you know what has happened and what we discovered this morning.” He then looked at me but I shook my head no.

Amih saw that and stood up and began to speak. She told everyone everything that she knew. By then her two boys and the other man had returned all washed and in brand new work uniforms. Amih then pointed to the old man and asked him to speak.

“I don’t know exactly what to tell you... I don’t know what you want to know... I have worked in this factory since it was opened. The working conditions were okay; we worked short hours and had plenty of food to eat. But sometime after the robots took it over they forced us to work long hours, gave us less and less food and wouldn’t let us leave the factory or let anyone enter it. Many of us couldn’t endure the conditions and got sick. Some died. They were replaced with people the robots had kidnapped. One of the robots would go outside, grab the next person they found on the street and force them to work. Then the robots started going inside factories and grabbing people. We have worked under these conditions every day for almost a year now with no relief and no day to rest. I’m surprised we’re still alive...”

At this point Ireva came back into the common room, brought three of the new universal translators and asked the man and her brothers to put them on. The old man found his awkward but began to listen to it when Nagol spoke. He wasn’t sure what was going on when he saw how Nagol’s lips moved and he heard something else coming out of the earpiece. He was so distracted he kept missing what Nagol was saying.

Ireva stood up and said, “Give him some time, he’ll get used to it.” Then she turned to the man and said, “Don’t look at the man’s lips, just listen to the voice in your ear...”

After she sat down Nagol spoke again and said, “I’m truly sorry Sir, to hear what happened to you and your fellow workers in the factory, and sorrier that we didn’t find you earlier. But these people here will do their best to set things right for you and send you home to your families. But for now we will need your help to keep the food production going until we find replacement workers...”

“My dear friend, I’m a simple farmer and the last time I heard a stranger like you making promises like that was the day I left my farm and became a slave, working for machines in that factory... Please do whatever you need to do for yourselves but not for me or for my fellow workers... We will do whatever we need to do because we know many lives depend on us... But we can’t do it forever... That’s all I have to say about that... What would be

appreciated is if you would bring us some water to wash and a change of clothing. And when you find people to replace us we will train them. Now please take me back..." He then took the universal translator off and gave it back to Ireva.

Everyone was stunned by what he'd said and admired him for his honesty and courage. Ireva took him back to the factory in her ship. She went inside the factory and looked around. It was like a steam bath inside and the work they were doing looked dangerous. She went to open some windows but the old man stopped her.

"You'll make us all sick if you do that... We have gotten used to the heat..."

She looked sad and concerned when she returned. She walked into the common room, disrupting the meeting and went straight for her brothers and gave them each a hug. "We need to do something right now to help those people..."

The Captain asked her to sit down and opened the floor for ideas.

"We can appeal, on humanitarian grounds, to the Galaxy Trader government to get some help down here..." said Amih, smiling at her sons.

"That won't work... and even if it does and they do send people they're more likely to come here and erase the mess they made... Just remember who runs to the Galaxy Trader government... I wouldn't suggest that..." said Nagol. Ilisa agreed.

"I have an idea," I said. "We need to get people in here who aren't associated with the security services. The only person that I know who can do that is Asora; Delche's ex-wife and the President of Ostikon... But for that both Nagol and Ilisa need to get involved..."

"I'm sure Asora has her own problems..." said Ilisa.

"She will help us if we offer to help her in return..." I said.

"What do you mean?" asked Nagol.

“Last night Ori got in touch with Airam, Delche’s daughter in Ostikon and she told him that since the Whites, the elite people of Ostikon, began to leave the planet they abandoned their businesses and left many people in Ostikon without work. According to Airam, Ostikon is ravaged by unemployment, especially in the areas where the outlanders live; you know Delche’s people. I think we should bring some of them here. They can use the work and we can use their help. We have a lot of money and we can offer them more than fair wages and cheap or even free accommodation if we can find space in the abandoned buildings in the valley. Anyway, we can work out the details later but for now we need to contact Asora and make our appeal. What do you think?”

Almost everyone was screaming “Yes, yes, yes...” This is the first time that I’d seen Amih’s sons smile, as they hung onto their sister. At that point I felt it was important to reunite the entire family and telepathically asked their sister Jess, or Nine as I call her, to come to the common room.

“You have your answer...” said Captain Orihci.

“We’ll go to the tower right now,” said Nagol, “and make our appeal to Asora, as diplomats and as friends...” Then Nagol and Ilisa, joined by Rolo and Aneleh, left the common room. Moments after they left, Nine walked in which startled her brothers.

“Nine take your helmet off...” After she did that her blonde hair spilled onto her back as she stared at me with her beautiful green eyes. “Nine, meet your brothers and sister...” She turned and looked at them with a blank stare.

There was confusion in the brothers’ eyes. “It’s our cousin Jess... who turned out to be our sister.... I’ll tell you about that later,” said Ireva.

“What happened to her...?” asked one of the brothers. “Why is she like that?” asked the other.

“What!!!?” piped up Ukasnek. “Jess is your sister? Why am I the last to know? So this is a happy reunion then... Hey you guys... I hope you still remember me...” he said to the brothers. They ran over to Ukasnek and gave him a hug.

“Captain, why don’t you adjourn the meeting and spend some time with your family...” I said.

“Okay you guys, everyone out...” he said with a big smile on his face.

“Nine, you go with your sister and brothers and I’ll get you later... Just remember I can see and hear what she sees and hears, so you’d better be nice...” I teased.

“Who is that big guy and what’s that black blotch on his shoulder?” asked one of the brothers as they were leaving the common room.

“He’s Captain Otsiron. You don’t know him... He got shot today... but he’ll be okay... He always is...” said Ireva

“And what about those two good looking ladies standing behind him...?” asked the other brother.

“They are his guards...” replied Ireva.

“Lucky bastard...”

Ireva started laughing.

“Why are you laughing?

“They are machines, not women...”

“Oh?”

“Enough about me,” I yelled, “remember I can hear you all the time when Jess is near...”

“You’ll like him... You’ll fit right in with him...” Ireva told her younger brothers; talking about me.

While everyone else left, Enai, Delche, Ori and I remained behind. I decided this was a good time to take my guards and the guns back to the ship.

When I returned I said, “This was a good day for Amih. She couldn’t have asked for anything better...”

Enai sighed deeply thinking about his own daughter and pulled a bottle of rakia out of his lab coat. “I felt sad for my daughter but very happy for the Captain and his family, so I figured we should celebrate...”

“Where did you get the bottle...? I thought we didn’t have any more...” I said.

“And what made you think that?”

“You told me yourself...”

“No I didn’t...”

After he poured us some we discovered it was village rakia.

“Explain...” said Delche with a smile on his face.

“Well Delche, you said you were going to come back and clean the still but you never did...”

“Crap... I forgot...,” said Delche.

“Instead of dumping what remained in the still, I continued to boil it until the stuff coming out tasted like water. I then emptied the junk and boiled the second-hand rakia again and got premium rakia. This batch was even stronger than the one we’d made earlier so I added water to it and this is what I got. It’s not as aromatic as the first batch but its okay.”

“You should have added a bit of that smelly grass...” said Delche.

“I thought about it but wasn’t sure that it would work... I will know for the next time.”

“You’re not making it the next time... I am.”

“You mean you’re going to stand by the still all day and night?”

“You’re darned right... I’ve done it before and I can do it again...”

“Okay you guys, one of you can work during the day and the other during the night...” I said.

After that we sat there quietly sipping on the village rakia when Nagol and the others came in.

“We did our part... We left Asora a long message asking her to send Ruzha and as many people as she could transport. We told her we could use at least a thousand to begin with,” explained Nagol.

“I also contacted the army post where I worked before I retired and asked them to provide Asora with ships; at least one... to transport the workers here...” said Aneleh.

“I also sent a message to my old contacts and asked them to find a crew for Captain Orihci’s destroyer and the other ships. I’m sure there are layoffs everywhere and there must be a lot of crewmen looking for work now ...” said Captain Rolo.

“Where is everyone?” asked Ilisa.

“They left. The Captain took some time off to be with his family,” I said.

“Will you join us for a drink... to celebrate the return of Orihci and Amih’s sons?” asked Enai and poured some for Aneleh, Rolo and Ilisa.

Nagol didn't want any and said, "I'm happy for Amih and Orihci but rakia isn't good for my health at my age. I'd best stay off it..."

"Speaking of rakia, what happened with the berries today? Did you find the building with the press?" asked Nagol.

"We found the warehouse with the berries but not the press..." said Delche.

"Well, it couldn't be too far... It doesn't make any sense to store the berries far away from the press? The press is probably in the same building. Did you look around?" asked Captain Rolo.

"No... it was dark inside the warehouse and we couldn't figure out how to turn on the lights," replied Delche.

"Why don't we eat lunch and go back there and look around... Let's figure out how to press the berries before they rot. We should take Enai with us... He can drive us there... and figure out the lights. What do you say Enai?" asked Captain Rolo.

"I'd be happy to..."

"What's the hurry?" asked Ilisa.

"Well, once we get involved with the people arriving from Ostikon we won't have time for the berries and if we leave them too long they'll rot. I would like to see more rakia made if nothing else," replied Rolo.

"Rolo is right..." said Nagol, "you go right ahead but count me out." Aneleh and Ilisa also declined.

By now it was way past lunch time but after we'd discovered how our food was made, no one felt like eating.

When we arrived and got inside the warehouse we looked around. Enai figured out how to turn on the lights. He also discovered that the entire internal part of the warehouse was a machine for processing fruit.

“The berries are resting on a huge bowl shaped floor with a hole at the bottom which leads to a conveyor belt. When activated the conveyor belt carries the berries up to the press. The berries are washed on the way up and dropped into the press. When the press is filled to a certain level, the pressing begins,” said Enai looking at a schematic diagram of the machine’s control panel.

“Here are the instructions on how to operate the machine...” said Enai and began to read them out loud,

- “1 – Flush tank
- 2 – Activate conveyer and press
- 3 – Dispose of pressed material
- 4 – Repeat
- 5 – Initiate boiling
- 6 – Empty boiler
- 7 – Initiate cleaning...”

There was a push button and a light in front of each step except for number four. The lights were all off.

“Should we do it?” asked Enai.

We looked at each other with uncertainty.

“Do it...” said Rolo, “it’now or never...”

“I can’t believe how simple the process is? And it’s all automated,” said Delche.

“It has to be, otherwise the berries would rot, I guess...” said Ori.

Enai pushed the first button to wash the tank. We all stood there excited, waiting to see what would happen. The light came on. Then there was a loud click and we heard water pouring and splashing, then there was a gurgle and another loud click. The light went off.

“I guess the tank has been cleaned...” said Enai and pushed the second button. There was a loud winding sound, a loud click, water

splashing both on the conveyer belt and inside the press, water rolling out of the press and another loud click. Then everything went quiet. Then there was the sound of air blowing. Enai looked at the light. It was still on.

“I guess the machine is waiting for the washed berries to dry...” he said.

The winding sound started again and we heard berries falling to the bottom of the press. After that a siren began to sound and we could see the bolt, lowering the top of the press, turning. As it got past a certain point the siren stopped and we could hear juice flowing and being pumped into the boiler tank.

When the light went off Enai pushed the next button to dispose of the pressed berries. We heard a swishing sound to the left side of the press. A small door started to open and squashed berries began to fall. They fell into a bin as a solid cube. It was automatically pushed out.

“We need to empty the bin and put it back before we start pressing the next batch. Clearly this machine was built to be operated by a single person,” said Enai.

Delche and I went down a set of stairs and figured out where and how to empty the bin. When we returned and put the bin back Enai began to repeat the process.

“You know this will take hours...” Enai said.

“Well, what should we do?” I asked and then remembered I’d left Nine with Ireva.

“Well, one of you should stay here and operate the machine. I’ll have to look for containers to put the syrup in after it boils...”

“I’ll operate the machine,” said Delche.

“I guess I’ll stay with him,” said Ori.

“I guess Rolo and I should go with Enai...” I said. “But first I should look into how Nine is doing... It should only take me a moment.” When I thought of her I could see her looking at a piece of paper with writing on it but I couldn’t read the language it was written in. I then focused on Enai at the same time.

Without asking him he said, “The sign said ‘Please send her back’...”

“What sign...? I don’t see any sign...” said Rolo. I had to explain to him what we were doing. “Ohhh” he said and left it at that.

The moment Nine moved, Ireva moved in front of her face and said, “Please send her back to the barracks... She’s making our brothers feel very sad...” so I dismissed her immediately.

“This is one hell of a mess we’re in...” I said. No one asked what I meant by that...

Making new friends

After we'd left Delche and Ori at the factory, Rolo, Enai and I got on the bus and returned to the facility. There we found Amih looking for her bus. She seemed distressed.

"Where have you been?" she asked, sounding annoyed.

"We went to the factory to press the berries..." I said.

"What...?" she asked like she didn't know what I was talking about. Maybe she didn't.

"Never mind... How can we help you?"

"I need the bus to take my sons back to their work..." she said and started crying.

"I grabbed her in my arms and asked her what had happened.

"Things were going so well until they started asking questions about what happened to Jess and why Jess was like that. When I told them they became very upset and wanted to leave immediately. They demanded that we take them back into that hellhole. Why? I don't understand why? I thought they would be happy now that they were free and with us again. I told that them I was so happy that they hadn't been turned into super soldiers like Jess and they just snapped. I just don't know why... What did I say that was so wrong? I told them I would take them back, if that's what they wanted... I'd do whatever they wanted to make them happy... They said they wanted to go back..."

"Please Amih, don't cry, don't torment yourself... You didn't do anything wrong. They've been through a lot and it will take them some time to adjust. They don't know what happened out here... It's too much to handle everything all at once..."

"Please don't misunderstand me, I'm happy that I found my boys. I'm grateful that they are alive and well... I'm just disappointed the way things worked out. That's all."

“Please give it some time... Where are they now and can I talk to them?”

“They are with Ireva in the reception area. They are in the booth... They’re not ready to face people gawking at them.”

I marched straight into the reception area. Amih stayed back with Rolo and Enai. I hastily opened the booth door and told Ireva to get out, but she said she was staying. I slammed the door shut.

They looked at me and moved closer to each other. They were afraid of me... terrified. Ireva was sitting on the opposite side and made room for me to sit beside her. Then they started looking at my wound. It bled from time to time and the black streaks of blood had dried down my arm to my hand.

“I see you’re still wearing your translators so you should be able to understand what I have to say. Your mother tells me that you want to go back to the factory, with which I have no problem ... In fact I commend you for that... It’s very noble of you to want to help your fellow human beings. What worries me is that you’re upsetting your mother... She is out there crying her eyes out, not understanding why you’re abandoning her... in this manner. You should talk to her and tell her why you’re leaving... She’s acting like this because she’s your mother and cares about you. And not just about you... She cares about all of us... I’m a stranger to her but she cares about me more than most... She is the pillar in our community here. She has done more for the people here than anyone... And there wasn’t a day that passed that she didn’t ask about you. Never once did she abandon you...” I said and looked at Ireva. She nodded her head in agreement.

“You can go back but first I want you to make peace with your mother. I know it’s difficult, considering what happened to you... but we all had to go through that... I wasn’t born like this but I accepted my fate and moved on... and so should you. Your mother is precious to me... I have never met a person so kind and caring... Do you understand?!” I said the last part a little louder and heard Ireva sigh deeply. They looked terrified.

“He’s right you know... We only have one mom... Go out there and talk to her, make her feel good... Do the best you can. Don’t let the weight of the world keep you down. Take one step at a time...” said Ireva and escorted them outside to the bus.

When they got there Ireva told her brothers and her mother to get on the bus and asked the others to stay outside for a while and give them some time to sort out their differences. In the meantime she came over to me and grabbed my left arm and said, “I’ll go back and get you a new uniform and a medical kit to clean your wound...”

As we stood outside we watched mother and sons battle it out, voices raised, arms flying, tears flowing...

“She is a tough woman...” said Enai, “she’ll survive. I’ll bet you deep down she is happy to be yelling at them... She may have lost one but she still has three. I have none...”

We all stood there in silence. Ireva came back and offered me the uniform. I looked at her.

“Okay, okay, I’ll hold onto it until we find a place for you to change... Not that anyone would want to look at you naked...” she said and started washing my wound.

“I can’t wrap it until you remove your uniform... And since it’s one piece, I guess I will be seeing you naked.”

I didn’t say anything.

They stopped the yelling in the bus and each son took a turn to apologize to his mother and hug her; at least that’s what we thought they were doing.

Amih came outside and said, “I’m glad we got all that sorted out. I apologize for keeping you all out here. Now please hop on the bus and let’s go... Someone else drive...” Enai did it.

We all went with Amih to give her our support and dropped off her sons at the factory. But before we did that I took everyone to the press factory to show them what Delche and Ori were doing. After Amih introduced hers sons, even though Delche and Ori had met them earlier, Ori said, “We need to spend the night here... It will take all night and maybe part of tomorrow before we’re done processing the berries. Then we have to boil the juice. That too will take a long time and after that we have to put it in some sort of container or containers, which we don’t have.”

“Okay, I’ll go back and bring my ship here. We can sleep in it.”

At that point, seeing that we had things to do, the older son said, “We have to go now...” After giving their mother a hug, the two left in a hurry and crossed the road to the food processing factory. The rest of us, except for Delche and Ori, got onto the bus and left.

On the way back I asked Amih what had happened between her and her sons on the bus but all she said was that they had worked out their differences. “Did you threaten my sons?”

Ireva laughed out loud and said, “Those little bastards... They haven’t changed a bit... They used to do that to me... tell you I threatened them when I hadn’t...”

“Yes because you were a tyrant...” said Amih and laughed.

When we got back to the facility I went straight for my ship. Ireva followed me. I looked at her.

“You forgot already? I’m bringing your uniform and need to bandage your wound...”

“Oh,” I said as I punched in the codes to open the hatch. When we got inside she looked away while I put my new uniform on, halfway up, and then put the rest of it on after she bandaged my wound.

“This is a bigger sized uniform...” I said.

“It’s the same size... You probably lost weight... It’s better for you... More air will get in and you’ll stink a little less,” she said, grabbed my old uniform and ran out of the ship to the facility; waving goodbye as she ran.

I got to the factory faster... faster than it took me to shut the ship’s hatch. “That’s the only way to travel...” I said to myself out loud. I saw Delche standing by the door looking like he was eating something. Then I realized I’d forgotten to pick up our supper.

“We had no lunch and now we won’t have any supper... I forgot to get us some food,” I said and apologized.

“No problem... Tonight we feast on fruit... That’s what we used to do in Ostikon, right?” said Delche.

Ori came out too and we went inside my ship. “I just started the press. It will take several minutes to do its thing before I have to empty the bin again... I need to sit down for a while...” Ori said.

“Why don’t you take a break for a while and we’ll look after the press. Contact Airam and see what’s happening at home...” said Delche and we walked outside.

Delche pulled a couple of berries out from his pocket and handed them to me. They tasted delicious.

“I see you got yourself a new uniform... How’s your shoulder?”

“I’ll live...”

As I threw the berry pits out towards the street, I saw two figures coming towards us in the dark. “Ori, turn on the ship’s lights, grab a pistol and get out here...”

“No need,” one of them yelled. “It’s us, Haon and Nosam ... Amih’s sons... We met earlier...” one of them yelled.

“Ori cancel that order.”

One of them was carrying a tray full of food and the other one was carrying two, twenty litre white buckets with lids.

“We know you missed eating lunch today and probably didn’t eat supper either so we’re here with a peace offering,” said Haon, the older son.

“We also heard that you were in need of containers for the syrup you’re making. So we’ll give you all the containers you need in exchange for two containers full of your syrup,” said Nosam, the younger son.

“It’s a deal...” said Delche.

“We have a lot of syrup; we may need a thousand of those... Would you have that many...? And aren’t you going to get into trouble for giving them away...?”

“Hell no...! We’re the bosses now... we have a warehouse full of buckets...” said Haon.

Delche and I looked at each other and invited them into my ship. Delche picked up some empty jars from the shelf and had the boys fill them with food. We each ate one and the boys filled them again.

“We finally got our fill of food after you got rid of those robots...” said Haon.

“Are you going to have enough food for the soldiers and the facility workers?” I asked.

“Hell yes... It’s not that there is no food! There’s plenty of food... It’s just that the robots wouldn’t allow us to eat more or make more than what the quota requirements allowed. The portions of food we made were for regular folk, not for big guys like you or for hard working people like us...”

“So now that the robots are gone, who will manage the food factory?” I asked.

“We will. We always managed the food processing... The robots were there to keep us working and not slacking or running off... and to keep the quotas filled. We know what to do and are willing to do it... The only thing we want is shorter hours and some time off.”

“How long do your work?”

“Half a day, every day... in two shifts...”

“The old man said you don’t have water...”

“We have plenty of water... It’s just that the robots wouldn’t allow us access to it. We were short of water during the drought and the robots were told not to let us shower, but when the drought was over no one told them to let us have our showers back... so they continued and wouldn’t let us shower.”

“What was the argument with your mother today?” I asked.

“It was nothing... It was stupid... First we couldn’t understand why you hadn’t come to rescue us earlier... a long time ago... Then it was about the sister we had and didn’t know about... Then Jess stood there like a big doll ignoring us... The entire argument was stupid.”

“It wasn’t that your sister was ignoring you... Her mind was stripped of all her memories... She was assaulted in the worst way imaginable...”

“We know, Ireva told us later. She told us what happened to her and a million others like her. That angered me the most...” said Haon.
“And all this time we hated and feared people like her... not knowing that they were our brothers, sisters and neighbours... How people could do that to other people... I don’t know...”

“What happened, happened... We can’t change that... All we can do now is look forward...” I said.

“I agree with you...” said Haon and began to eat another jar of food.

After he was done, Delche and I took the brothers to the press area in the factory; allowing Ori to send his message to Airam. We emptied the pressed berries and started up the press again. When we were done we went outside and stood beside my ship in the dark.

“One thing that has been my concern is that the soldiers aren’t getting enough food,” I said. “Is there any way to increase their food supply?”

“Yes,” said Haon.

“Well, tell me more...”

“What we can do is use all the raw materials delivered to us. Right now we fill quotas. If more raw materials are delivered we just throw them out in the garbage. What we can do is process everything that is delivered and you can decide what to do with it. In other words, some days you will get more food than other days... It’s the same to us... In fact it’s easier for us to process everything... because it’s done automatically... than to measure the quantity produced like we do now...”

“Okay then, please do that... We will be eternally grateful to you... especially the super soldiers...”

“We would do anything for our sister if it makes her happy...” said Nosam.

“Ireva told us that you’re the only one that Jess listens to... She said you talk to her telepathically...” said Haon.

“Yes, that’s true... of the million soldiers we have here, she is the only one I can talk to telepathically...”

“You must have a special connection...” said Nosam.

“No, no no, he’s the great Otsiron... Remember what Dad used to tell us?” said Haon.

“Whatever your dad told you is probably not true... I only got my telepathic abilities after I was turned into a super soldier...”

“C’mon...! I saw how you leapt and ran like a demon this morning... I have never seen a human run like that before. Especially after you were wounded... I saw the robot shoot you and you didn’t flinch...”

“C’mon guys... I’m just an ordinary person... turned into a super soldier... You can ask Delche here...”

“No you’re not... Why aren’t you like Jess then?” asked Nosam.

“Something happened to the process... Something broke when the big robot was trying to make me into a super soldier...”

“No... You are a super human... Ireva told us...” said Nosam.

“No she did not!”

“Not in those words... but she did say you destroyed the big robot that made the super soldiers and we saw you destroy the robots that kept us prisoners... And on top of that Dad told us you outsmarted the best captain we ever had? Is that correct?”

“Please Delche, help me out here...”

“No thank you... But I can see that they are Ireva’s brothers... Good luck to you...”

“Okay guys enough...”

“Get to know him first... and you’ll find out for yourselves that he is an ordinary person like he’s telling you...” said Delche.

“What’s the atmosphere like in the factory...?” I asked.

“I don’t know what that means exactly but if you’re asking if we get along with each other, I would have to say that we support and look after each other. Most of the people in there are locals, simple

people... But they are most kind and loyal. They would give their lives for us... and us for them. We respect everyone and they respect us. That's why we wanted to come back here more than anything..." said Haon.

"What happened to your clothes?" asked Delche.

"One day whoever supplied us with clothes, stopped delivering..." said Nosam.

"Hey, I remember now. Ireva said you're the king of rakia. I didn't make the connection until I remembered Dad talking about you..." said Haon.

"How do you know about rakia? Do you even know what it is?" asked Delche.

"Yes we do... We used to sneak some from Dad's supply. Personally I found it disgusting... But the way people talked about it... it seemed special... So, imagine that... The day we were freed we weren't only reunited with our parents, thanks to you guys, but we also got to meet the great Otsiron and the king of rakia... all at the same time," said Haon jokingly; mocking us.

"Guys... You are nuts... just like your sister Ireva..." I said.

They started laughing. Nosam went inside the ship with his empty food container. When he came out they said goodnight and laughed all the way back to the food factory. They left their white buckets behind for us to fill with syrup.

"Ireva must have had a lot on influence on them when they were growing up. I'm sure their mother didn't instill this foolishness in them..." I said.

"I guess we have to fill those buckets with syrup..." said Delche and we went back inside the factory to see how the press was doing. When we returned Ori had finished sending his message to Airam and said he was going to bed to sleep. Delche and I spent some time talking about what would happen when people started arriving from

Ostikon by the thousands. One thing we agreed on was that the facility couldn't support them all. We were sure there was space to house them inside the bowels of the facility, since it was built to house a couple of million soldiers. But we wouldn't have enough food. We needed to find another source to supply us with food or drastically expand the current supply and production.

It was almost morning before we pressed our last berries and were ready to boil them. At this point we were preoccupied with what to do about making rakia and where we could store the syrup. We decided to boil this batch and worry about making rakia from the berries stored at the farm. Delche was hesitant for a moment but pushed the button to start the boiler.

After the light went on the boiler began to hiss, the hissing became louder with time and finally, minutes later, we heard rumbling sounds. The big boiler started to boil.

"I'm sure this will take a long time to complete. There's a lot of juice in there. All the water needs to be boiled out of it before we can call it syrup. I'm glad the process is automatic otherwise I wouldn't know what to do," said Delche.

It was getting lighter outside and we couldn't decide what to do. Do we go to sleep or plan how to bring the rest of the berries here from the farm? We went back inside the ship. After pondering for a while we decided to fly to the farm and assess the size of the job. Just as I was ready to close the hatch I heard a beep and saw a red flashing light emanating from Ori's communication's console.

"It must be from Airam... Should we listen to it...?" asked Delche.

"We'd better not... there might be some personal stuff there..."

"I can't wait... I'll wake him up..." said Delche.

"You don't have to, I'm awake..."

"Let's go," I said. "Give him some privacy..." and we went outside.

It didn't take too long before Ori came out to give us the news.

"All is well back home. Ruzha is coming and Airam was asked to recruit one thousand workers for us from the outlanders. Airam needs money and wants us to send her some with the ship that will bring Ruzha here when it returns. She'll be coming with a small group of experts... on what she didn't say. Oh yeah, if all goes well, Ruzha will be here in five days..."

"Yeah, she needs a whole day to pack her stuff. It only takes four days to get here..." I said.

"You haven't lived with a woman have you?" asked Delche sarcastically.

"Yes I have..." I said. "I spent some time with Nine..."

They both started laughing. Suddenly there was a rumbling sound. "Mother Nature, I hope that's not the boiler...?" yelled Delche and the three of us ran inside the factory. It wasn't the boiler; the sound was coming from outside. Seconds later we saw Amih's bus followed by three big trucks rolling into the driveway of the food factory next door.

"Good old Amih, what's she up to now?" asked Ori.

"Those are water trucks... we can use them to bring our berries from the farm here..." said Delche.

"Let's go and see what she's up to..." I said and we began to walk towards her bus.

"Ah good morning boys, nice to see you up early this morning... I brought the workers some clothes and water to wash. Have you seen my sons?"

"Yes we have, they brought us some food last evening and we had a nice chat..."

"How did they seem?"

“They are fine... but you have to stop doing things for them... unless they ask you to...”

“You’re right... sometimes I can’t help it...”

“They could use the clothing but won’t need the water. You can take the water to the farmers and replenish their supply... I remember hearing them complaining about not having enough water...” I said.

“Okay... Can you get my sons out here please?”

“Haon, Nosam... get you butts out here...” I yelled as loud as I could.

“Oh I see, they won’t talk to me but they’re on a first name basis with you...”

“Sometimes it’s easier to talk to strangers... It doesn’t mean anything...”

A man came out and said, “Can I help you Sir?”

“I guess they don’t understand Macedonian...” I said before Amih interrupted and said, “We want to see Haon and Nosam.”

“They’re sleeping Madam, would you like me to wake them?”

“No, please don’t... I have some uniforms here for the workers... who can I give them to?”

“I’ll send some boys out to pick them up...” he said while Amih showed him where the uniforms were.

“I could only get about one hundred... We’ve exhausted our supply. I’ll try to get you more as soon as I find out where to order them from ...” yelled Amih as the man started to walk away.

“Please don’t forget, we have women and children in there and they could use new clothing too ...”

“Okay...” said Amih, looked at us and added. “Where in God’s name am I going to get that kind of clothing? And did I hear him right? He said they have women and children in there? This is a tragedy... Guys I need your help...”

“We can give them some of our super soldier uniforms...” I said jokingly.

“I’m sorry but please this isn’t the time for jokes...” she replied, thought about it for a second and then started laughing... Delche, Ori and I also started laughing. The truckers driving the water trucks began to wonder if we were losing our marbles.

“We are pathetic, aren’t we...? Laughing at other people’s misery... But it is funny...” said Amih.

“I have an idea...” I said.

“That’s what I want to hear...” said Amih.

“Delche, what did the army in Ostikon do with the old uniforms when they replaced them with new ones?” I asked.

“They were sold to wholesalers and they are being sold at second hand clothing stores. Why do you ask?”

“They have clothing for women too, right...?”

“They sure do.”

“How about we buy several thousand uniforms and have them shipped to us?”

“We can do that. Ori send a message to Airam and order the uniforms in my name. We’ll send the money with the ship that’s bringing Ruzha here.”

Ori immediately ran into the ship to prepare a message.

“That’s fantastic... I knew I could count on you... Ruzha is coming? For real...? Oh Rolo and Ilisa will be thrilled. When is she coming?”

“In about five days...”

Moments later we watched the clothes being offloaded by a dozen young men wearing rags. When they were done the previous man popped his head out the door and yelled, “Thank you” and closed the door behind them.

“What now?” asked Amih.

“When Ori is done we’ll fly to the grove to see what to do about the berries. You deliver the water to the farmers...”

“Okay...” she said and went to speak to the drivers to let them know the plan had changed. As soon as she got back to her bus they drove off.

“What about the boiler?” asked Delche.

“It’s automatic; it can look after itself... It will stop boiling on its own...”

“I know that but what if something goes wrong...?”

“If it does, it does... nothing we can do about it...”

By now the bus and trucks had cleared out and were out of sight. We went inside the ship.

“You can fly there while I’m putting the message together, you don’t need me...” said Ori, so that’s what I did.

“By the grace of God, I thought an angel was coming to visit us...” said the old farmer lady after we landed in the yard in front of her warehouse.

Ori removed his translator and gave it to the old lady.

“We’re here to see about moving the berries from here to the press in the valley...” I said.

“Why would you want to do that? Besides, you can’t... How are you going to get so many berries out of the warehouse? We have a press inside but we don’t have the water needed to operate it.”

“That was a nice surprise...” said Delche.

“We do...” I said. “How much water will we need?”

“For that amount of berries, I would say about five to six truck loads.”

“We can do that... Where do you put the water?”

The old woman unlocked and opened the warehouse door and showed us the pipe. As we walked deeper into the warehouse she gave Ori his translator back and left. We were suddenly faced with a mountain of berries. There was a nice aroma emanating from them. We started looking for the control panel but before we had a chance to find it we heard Amih’s bus and the water trucks roll into the driveway.

“Did you ask the farmers where they want this water dumped?” yelled Amih.

“Yes, bring the drivers here and we’ll show them where to dump it...”

At that point I asked Amih to tell the drivers to bring one more load of water after they emptied this load and to leave one truck behind so that we could load it with berry juice for making the rakia.

“If you don’t need me anymore I’ll go back to the facility...”

“Thanks for everything... See you later,” I said and she left.

After the drivers emptied the water they went back to get another load. We went back inside the warehouse and found the light switch

and control panel. It was identical to the other one. We also found where to dump the pressed berries. After that Ori suggested Delche and I get some sleep while he worked the first shift processing the berries.

A few hours later Ori woke us up to tell us that the old lady had brought us a late breakfast or early lunch. When we got up we saw that the drivers had filled the tank with water and had left one of their trucks for us to fill with juice. Ori said the press was working fine and he was going to operate it for a few more hours so that we could get some more sleep.

About four hours later, after we'd gone to sleep for a second time, I heard a beep from Ori's console and went to get Ori to see what it was.

"Ori, there might be a message for you... your console just beeped."

While going in, Ori ran into Delche who said, "Why didn't you wake me earlier? I would have taken over for you."

"No problem, I'm doing okay..." he replied and went to see what the message was. It didn't take long before he came out and said, "I got a reply from Airam. She said she'll buy the uniforms and send some with Ruzha and the rest with the next ship that comes our way..." Then he went back into the ship to get some sleep.

"We've been pressing for six hours... What do you say we fill the tank of the truck with juice for our rakia... and see what the juice looks and tastes like?" said Delche.

"Do you know how to get it out of the big tank?" I asked.

"See that long hose with a nozzle at the end? It's attached to the tank."

I went back to my ship and got a couple empty rakia bottles. "Pour some in here and let's see what it looks like..." I said.

The moment Delche pressed the lever, black stuff squirted into the bottle. He stopped and said, “I’ve never seen juice look like that. It’s disgusting.”

“The berries are yellowish inside. The hose must be dirty... We should have cleaned it when we rinsed the boiler... Too late now...” I said.

Delche kept running the hose until the juice was clear. Then he poured some into the other bottle.

“Too bad we had to waste so much juice... But look at this... it looks like gold... Do you want to try some?

“Yes,” I said so he handed me the bottle. “It’s delicious... I estimate it has about five to ten percent sugar...”

Delche also took a slug and was in agreement. He then stretched the hose, climbed on top of the truck and started pouring. “Check at the back and make sure its not dripping.”

I went all around the truck and said, “I don’t see anything dripping...”

He kept pumping for about ten minutes before the tank was full. After that he sealed the lid and opened the tiny valve on top. “This is so it can breathe. The moment the juice starts fermenting it will start expelling air. All we have to do now is take the truck to the facility and patiently wait for the juice to ferment.”

“I guess we’ll boil the rest when we’re done pressing and turn it into syrup...” I said.

“Speaking of syrup, we mustn’t forget to go to the other place and give the boys their syrup and get our buckets...” said Delche.

Our first mission

Before we started boiling our batch of berry juice at the farm, we collected every empty jar and bottle we had in my ship and filled them with juice; some to give away and some to keep so Delche could experiment with making starter yeast to start the fermentation in case it didn't start on its own.

After we secured the bottles and jars we flew off and went to see how the boiling was doing at the press factory. Just as we got there we saw Haon and Nosam emerge from the food factory and head straight for us.

"I hear you were looking for us this morning..." said Haon.

"Oh my, oh my... Is this that famous ship...?" asked Nosam before I interrupted him.

"Yes, your mother was here. She brought some clothing for the workers... And yes, this is that famous ship... You saw it last night..."

"Okay, okay, no need to get defensive... It was dark last night, I couldn't see much..." said Nosam.

"What you got there? Is that rakia...?" asked Haon looking at Delche.

"Yes it is... I'll give you a bottle each if you bring us some food..."

"Go!" said Haon to Nosam, who ran back to the food factory.

"Let me try some..." said Haon.

Ori gave him a bottle.

"This isn't rakia, it's watered down berry syrup."

"That's rakia but it hasn't been made yet..." said Delche.

Haon scratched his head and said, “My brother doesn’t know what rakia tastes like so let’s play a trick on him...”

When Nosam came back he filled the unwashed jars we’d used the night before with food and said, “Can I have my bottle now...?”

“Mmm that’s good rakia,” Haon said.

Nosam opened the bottle, tried some and said, “Are you sure this is rakia? It tastes the same as watered down berry syrup.”

“Of course I’m sure!” said Haon and started laughing.

“Why are you laughing?” asked Nosam.

“Some day you’ll find out...” he replied and both brothers ran back to the food factory.

“We’ll have your syrup ready in a short while... will you come and pick it up?” I yelled.

“Yes, leave the buckets outside our door...”

“By the way, what are you going to do with the syrup?” yelled Delche.

“Sweeten our tea...” replied Haon before they both disappeared into the food factory.

When we went inside the press factory we noticed the light was off, which meant that the boiling was done. But the big boiler was still very hot.

“This may take days to cool...” said Delche.

“Will it be safe to empty some into the buckets?” asked Ori.

“I guess so... There’s only one way to find out...” I said and went and grabbed the nozzle, dragged the hose to the drain and let it run.

It was black and thick at the start but quickly cleared. The liquid coming out was hot.

Delche brought the buckets over and watched me fill them. “I guess the liquid thickens as it cools,” I said.

“If it thickens too much and doesn’t run we may have to reheat it to empty the boiler,” said Delche.

Besides being hot to the touch, the buckets were really heavy. I had to deliver them myself; they were too heavy for Delche and Ori to carry. When I got back Ori informed me that we had received a text message but he couldn’t read it. It was written in the Galaxy Trader language. I immediately contacted Enai telepathically and he told me what the message said.

“The message was sent by our communications tower. It’s an invitation from Captain Orihci, inviting you to attend a meeting to be held in the common room right after supper... which is in ten minutes.”

“How come they sent us a text message and not a voice message...? Don’t they know we can’t read your language?” I asked.

“I don’t know... When they couldn’t find you anywhere and your ship wasn’t here, they figured you had flown somewhere...”

“Well, for their information, we were pressing the berries at the farm... We’ll be there for the meeting...” I said and told Ori and Delche to start eating their supper while I flew back to the facility. I ate my food after we landed. Before we left my ship we took a few bottles of berry juice for the meeting; to celebrate with our friends the harvesting of our first crop. Amih and Ireva brought glasses out and served everyone.

Captain Orihci did the toasting, “To our health and prosperity... Let this be the first of many fruits we will gather here...”

After we all had a sip of the juice the Captain said, “I asked you all to assemble here because a number of developments have occurred

in the last couple of days... First and most important to my family and to our community, is that we found our sons and a large number of people who haven't yet been identified and we need to help reunite them with their families. Amih has volunteered to do that.

Second, we need to elect a governor to legally run the affairs of this planet. I have been doing this job unofficially and will continue to do it until we find our governor. Amih, with Nagol and Ilisa's help, will look for prospective candidates for both a governor and a local leader.

Third, Enai informed me that our transmitter is operational and we can begin to use it anytime we're ready. Amih has informed me that she found three volunteers to operate it; Bibi and two of our DNA machine operators, one from Ostikon and the other from one of our Galaxy Trader planets. One of his associates will train several people to work the controls and do the technical work. This is to start us out but we'll add more people as needed when we develop our programs.

Fourth, we were informed by the Ostikon government that they will send Ruzha here..." Cheering erupted and when everyone had stopped the Captain continued, "as well as experts to help us get organized. Later they will send us about one thousand workers as soon as they recruit them. Ruzha will be arriving in five days... The rest we don't know.

Fifth, we need new clothes for our workers in the food plant and for us here. Amih tells me that we have exhausted our local supply but we can purchase military uniforms from Ostikon... Is that right?"

"Yes, and they will be delivered here with the next shipment," said Delche.

"Oh good! Thank you for that Delche."

Sixth, Ukasnek has been our unofficial civilian protector here in this facility. I would like to extend his authority to the entire planet and make him our official protector. Any objections?"

No one objected.

Seventh, we have a very powerful army here and the mightiest ship in both of our worlds I propose that we adopt the ship and the army and make them the official defenders of our planet. I propose we appoint Otsiron as the supreme commander of our army...”

Cheering erupted again. “Any objections?”

No one objected.

Eighth, Nagol, Ilisa, Ireva and a couple of their assistants have been working very hard to make contact with other planets and open diplomatic missions. I’m happy to say that they have succeeded. Ireva made contact with the authorities of our closest planet and they were invited for a visit. They are leaving tomorrow morning after breakfast...”

“I expect it will be a short mission, since it’s our first and also we want to be here when Ruzha arrives; especially Ilisa, her adoptive mother, who is anxious to see her,” interrupted Nagol.

“Ninth, Captain Rolo has informed me that he asked his contacts in Ostikon to find and hire crews for my destroyer and for the other ships parked in the ravine.”

And for my final point, we will need to feed and house all these new people who will be arriving here. I believe we have space in the facility to house them for now and we will be looking to occupy the empty homes in the valley in the near future. But the problem we’ll have is finding enough food to feed them. I will ask my sons Haon and Nosam to look into it.

I will now open the floor for discussion. Thank you,” concluded Captain Orihci.

Ukasnek stood up and said, “Regarding food sources, we should look around our planet; especially around the other facility... There must be farms all around that facility... If we get enough workers we can start growing food there.”

“Yes, we should do that, as well as make an attempt to salvage the gold and whatever else we can find as soon as we get more people to help us...” replied the Captain.

“That’s a good idea...” said Enai. “We are running out of parts here. Soon we won’t be able to produce universal translators and I believe we will need many. So until we establish contact with our original suppliers, if they still exist, we need to find a source and quickly... It’s worth going to the facility as soon as possible...”

“Enai, you must know where the parts came from in the past and you still have access to your old records. Get some of those actors to help you... They’re sitting around doing nothing... Get them to make some calls and get your parts purchased. If they can’t deliver we’ll send Ireva to fly there and pick them up...” said the Captain.

I looked at Ireva. She smiled.

“Any other questions?” the Captain asked.

I stood up and said, “Tomorrow is march day for the soldiers. I’ll be marching them up the hill for a change. Should I have them armed in case Ireva gets into trouble?”

Captain Orihci laughed and said, “Why not... you know Ireva will get into trouble...”

“I resent that...” she yelled and smiled.

“No hot-dogging...” warned the Captain.

“Don’t worry Captain, she won’t do that under my watch...” said Nagol and laughed.

“Well anyway, good luck tomorrow and fly safely...” said the Captain.

“We will keep an eye on you from the observatory...” said Delche jokingly.

“They’re teasing you dear... Don’t let them intimidate you... You’ll do fine,” said Amih.

“Okay everyone, meeting is adjourned.... before it turns into a circus...” said the Captain and left.

The next day after breakfast I went to my ship and got out my portable communicators. I thought that it was about time we started using them. We almost missed a meeting yesterday. I gave one each to Nagol, Delche, Ori, Captain Orihci, Amih, Captain Rolo, Ukasnek, Ireva, Enai and kept one for myself.

“Turn them to channel nine when you want to talk to me or channel zero to broadcast to everyone. Keep them on at all times...” Ori showed everyone how to use them and assigned each a channel number.

There was very little fanfare with the sendoff because we figured they’d be back in a day or two. The moment the ship disappeared in the sky I called the soldiers to march. They assembled fully armed in the usual squares and just as we started marching Delche and Ori started to walk away.

“Where do you think you’re going?” I asked.

“To the observatory... Isn’t that what we decided yesterday?” replied Ori.

“Okay, keep me informed...”

By the time I turned around everyone was gone. “I guess you lazy buggers don’t like climbing up the hill,” I said to myself.

When we reached the peak of the first and lower hill I looked at the grove. The farmers still hadn’t picked the remainder of the berries. When we almost reached the top of the highest hill I got a call from Delche.

“Ireva just stopped moving at the outer rim of the planet’s atmosphere. What should we do...? Should we call her...?”

“No... you know how she hates being babied... If she has engine trouble I’m sure she’ll call us. Keep an eye on her for now...”

When the first group of soldiers reached the top of the hill I decided to stop the march and assembled everyone there. I had a feeling that it wasn’t engine trouble Ireva was having and sure enough I got a call from Delche telling me that two armed ships had just arrived and were approaching Ireva’s ship.

“They’re probably an escort...

A couple of minutes later I received a call from Nagol.

“I hate to bother you with this but we ran into a snag up here. Simply put, they refuse to let us go down to the planet.”

“Did they tell you why?”

“No but they’re upsetting Ireva...”

“You talk to them then and have Ireva translate...”

I figured this was a good time to get Enai to the observatory and see what he could see up there. Nine and Enai were the only two people I could make a telepathic link with and see through their eyes.

A couple of minutes after Enai arrived at the observatory I got another call from Nagol.

“It’s no use... they refuse to listen... What should we do?”

“You should turn around and come back home... But if you want to create an international incident I’ll shoot the ships down from here...”

“I want their attention... not their destruction...” said Nagol. “The funny thing about these guys is that when Ireva mentioned that we were from Nelez they couldn’t stop laughing... I don’t want to

waste your time with the details but basically because Nelez isn't a sovereign planet they don't believe we are legitimate..."

"Ask them one more time and threaten them with violence if they still don't let you go down..." I said.

"Are you kidding me?"

"No, with a threat like that they'll have no choice but to report it to the authorities..."

While Nagol was talking to them I got Enai to look at their ships and help me find them in space relative to the planet. When I looked through the telescope with Enai's eyes I saw a dark object that looked like a spec of dirt on the telescope's lens.

"What's that on the left side of the planet?" I asked.

"It looks like a small asteroid..." said Enai. "Are you planning to shoot it down? If you do that you'll hit the atmosphere and cause dispersion..."

While I was talking to Enai, Nagol called back and said, "I spoke to them but they won't budge... In fact they couldn't stop laughing after I threatened them..."

"I was just talking to Enai and he tells me there is a small asteroid on the left side of the planet. Can you confirm that?"

"Yes, we can see it on our magnifier..."

"Can I shoot that and cause some fireworks?" I asked.

"Sure, why not... That will get their attention..." said Nagol

"Tell Ireva to raise the ships shields to avoid being sprayed with debris and let me know when to fire."

The moment Ireva raised her shields the security ships began to fire at her. To them it looked like an act of aggression.

“The shields are up. The moment Ireva raised them they fired at us...” yelled Nagol in a panicky tone of voice.

Seeing that the two ships fired first gave me good reason to fire back. The soldiers were already aiming at the asteroid so I ordered them to fire. It was a powerful blast. In fact it was so powerful it could be seen from Nelez with the naked eye.

“Is everyone okay?” I yelled.

“Wow...” said Nagol. “The plasma was so bright I thought it was going to melt our ship.”

“What happened to the other ships?” I asked.

“They’re gone...”

“They were destroyed?”

“No, they just fled when they saw the flash and chunks of the asteroid explode.”

“What about the planet, did we do any damage to it?”

“I don’t know for sure... I did see flares in the atmosphere and a lot of debris burning up as it fell down to the planet. Half of the planet’s atmosphere lit up for a moment. I’m sure a lot of people saw that and are bound to be asking questions... Let’s hope those idiots that fired at us tell them the truth...” said Nagol.

“Fly back down... Forget about the mission. Let’s get together and listen to the planet’s broadcasts and see what they say about this...”

I marched the soldiers back to the facility and dismissed them. Many people in the facility had seen the fireworks and started asking questions. They wanted to know what had happened... What that bright light was on our neighbouring planet. I asked Captain Orihci to make a PA announcement and let everyone know. I also asked Enai to record the announcement and have Bibi broadcast it to the

world on our new transmitter. This would be our first and historic broadcast from Nelez.

Captain Orihci made the announcement and explained to the people step by step what had happened. Bibi added his own commentary before he broadcast it on our transmitter. Unfortunately reports started coming out, calling our report a pack of lies. There were claims that the weapon fired couldn't have come from Nelez because, according to our neighbouring planet's authorities, Nelez was a backward farming planet and had no such capability.

"Someone must be monitoring the airwaves..." said Bibi.

"How do you figure?" asked Nagol.

"We just went on the air for the first time about half an hour ago and we were picked up by the official networks. How? But by doing so they did us a favour without knowing it..." replied Bibi.

"How so..." asked Captain Orihci.

"What they didn't realize was that at this point we have zero viewers. So by quoting our public channel as the source of their story they gave us visibility. They introduced many of their viewers to our channel. In other words, they instantly gave us millions of potential viewers..."

"Many of their viewers will expect a response from us and will turn to our channel to hear it," said Captain Orihci and gave Bibi permission to continue the broadcast.

Bibi again went on the air and reiterated our position without challenging the claims of the other networks about us.

"Let them expose all their lies... Let's see how they explain what happened today... Are they going to again say that we're aliens trying to destroy their planet like they did before? And if they do who's going to believe them? Also if we were attacking the planet it will make no sense to anyone why we shot at the asteroid and not at their planet itself... Bibi, the next time you go on the air you should

ask that question. We'll press for answers until they exhaust every single lie they have," said Nagol.

"And imagine all the viewers it will bring us... The more they lie the less people will want to listen to them. People want to know the truth and we'll give it to them..." said Bibi.

"You're right Bibi, that's why it's very important to stick to the facts and ask the right questions. Let the viewers figure things out for themselves. Someone once told me, I think it may have been Voskot, wars are won with words and not necessarily on the battlefields. I think today we showed the people of our neighbouring planet that we have the might but now we need to convince them with words..." I said.

"We need to keep our message going... We need to give our viewers more and more information about what happened here but without revealing who was behind this tragedy. Those who committed the tragedy will certainly try and lie their way out. And the more lies they tell the deeper they'll dig themselves. But we need to do this systematically. We first need to talk about the suffering that took place here, how young people were kidnapped and turned into super soldiers against their will. What happened to their families... The pain and grief it caused... Amih, you lost the most here... You should do an interview and tell the people the story of how your children were taken away... and when Bibi asks who did this to you... you say the robots because that's all you know. Raise the curiosity of our viewers... make them want to know more... But all of this has to be factual and very innocent..." said Ilisa.

"I can do that..." replied Amih. "I've wanted to do that for a long time... tell someone about my pain..."

"We should also broadcast our interviews to the people in the facility, to inform them of what we're doing and I'm sure there are many here who'll want to tell their story," said Nagol.

"I have already interviewed about a dozen people myself and their stories are already written down; all one has to do is read them. I can

speak to them and I'm sure they will give me permission to broadcast their stories..." said Ireva.

"I have read those stories and I think we should start broadcasting them immediately and repeat them several times a day to cover a wider audience..." said Captain Orihci.

"I was one of the first people to discover what the robots were doing here and I have plenty of stories to tell..." added Ukasnek.

"Yes, you and Enai," said Captain Orihci. "Your stories should be told later, after we expose the kidnappings and the pain and anguish they caused. When people start asking what happened to those who were kidnapped then you can tell your story."

"Do we have any recordings of the lines of people waiting to be processed and the machinery and methods used to convert people to super soldiers?" I asked.

"Yes... I'm sure we do. I know I have recordings of the painful experiments we did. I'll get my associates to dig up everything we have," said Enai.

"We should use these recordings later, after we exhaust the interviews as part of the atrocities committed here. We should have Ruzha produce this part... She knows how to do it effectively; she captured the hearts and minds of all of Ostikon," said Ilisa.

"Okay then, let's get going. Ireva speak to those people and get their permission... We'll do whatever we can to keep the momentum going until Ruzha arrives," said Captain Orihci.

At that point I spoke to Bibi and his people. First I congratulated them on their successful start and then said, "It's best to do a rehearsal with the people you interview and record them. If they do well, then broadcast the recording. If they don't do so well, tell them what they are doing wrong and do the interview again... but always stick to the facts. No speculation... No assumptions and no conclusions. Also monitor their body language. The security services are experts in many things and will exploit every little

weakness in our reports. If you trust Tolo have him look over the recordings and have him give you his opinion,” I said.

As I said all this I didn’t realize that Nagol was standing behind me listening. When I was done talking he grabbed my arm and said, “Like my old friend Voskot, I too now feel confident that soon I will have a replacement. Very good my boy...”

“So what happened up there...?” I asked.

“I don’t know. According to Ireva, who made the arrangements with government officials, they were expecting us to arrive this morning. I thought it was kind of quick because usually requests like that take time and have to be sanctioned by almost everyone. But because we are from a Galaxy Trader planet, I figured we didn’t need all that scrutiny, hence the quick approval. I suspect after we made the arrangements someone must have looked at the roster and when they saw my name they changed their mind... but never made the effort to let us know... So they left it to border control to turn us back... Personally, I wasn’t disappointed... I’m a known rebel... and neither was Ilisa... But I can’t say the same about Ireva and her assistants... Poor girls... It was a bitter pill to swallow... What a disappointment... But that’s how you learn...”

“You said the guards were making fun of you when you told them who you were and what you wanted?”

“And how... Who knows what they were told about us... And it’s doubtful that they knew what kind of firepower we have here....”

“Did Ireva record her conversations with the ships when you were up there?”

“Yes she did... Every word of it! She even played the conversation for them, with the official she spoke with when she made the arrangements... He even gave her his name. This is so and so speaking, I don’t remember his name, he said before he spoke to her. We have the whole thing recorded...”

“That’s great... More ammunition for us... Ireva was wise to do that...” I said.

“I instructed her... to avoid misunderstandings... I’ve learned from experience. Most of the diplomatic problems we have are due to misunderstandings... mostly intentional... like this one...”

“Yes... which sometimes can lead to war...” I said.

“Speaking of war... I know I asked you to fire a warning shot to let them know we weren’t joking and not to be trifled with... but you should never use that weapon again, ever, unless you must...”

“Why?”

“I had no idea the kind of destructive power it carries. You can’t allow it to fall into the wrong hands. What I saw today scared the daylights out me... not for myself but for all of humanity... the innocent people in the world. You just nicked the planet’s atmosphere and grazed the asteroid and look at the destruction it caused... This war must be fought with words; not with your weapon... Imagine what could have happened if you actually hit the asteroid square on or the planet itself. It would have been the end of every form of life on its surface. So please, never use it again. Promise me!”

“I had no idea...” I said. “I was aiming for the centre of the asteroid. I guess when the beam hit the atmosphere it must have deflected slightly...”

“You were lucky this time... Thank Mother Nature...”

I sighed deeply and swore that I wouldn’t use the weapon anywhere near where people lived.

We stopped talking when we saw Ireva approaching...

“I know you weren’t talking about me...”

“How do you know that dear?” asked Nagol.

“Look at his face...”

“What’s wrong with his face?”

“He looks like he lost his best friend...”

“Actually we were talking about you... I told him how diligent you were in recording your conversation with those idiots up there. Would you be so kind as to make a copy for me...?”

“Yes Sir. We can broadcast that too and let everyone know that it wasn’t me that screwed up today...”

“I think you learned a valuable lesson today my dear...”

Making use of Madam Grooni

“It seems like priorities change from day to day around here, like the direction of the wind. We seem to be putting out fire after fire...” groaned Delche.

“You know this will create a whole set of new problems... this fighting with words... We don’t know anything about the problems facing the people here? How are we expected to fight with words...? Ori complained.

“Do you guys mind if I hang around with you?” Captain Rolo asked.

We all looked at him and at each other, feeling slightly sorry for him. He used to command a huge science ship the size of a city and visited many galaxies. Now he wanted to hang around with us...

“We would be honoured to have you in our company, Sir...” I said.

“Okay then... what are you guys planning to do? With all the excitement around us I’m getting kind of nervous and feel like doing something...”

“Well, we still have that berry syrup to take care of?” said Delche.

“What about the truck we left at the farm with our berry juice? Shouldn’t we also do something with that?” suggested Ori.

“Yes we should. We should bring it here and keep an eye on it... to make sure the juice starts fermenting... But how are we going to get it here? None of us knows how to drive...” said Delche.

“Can’t we find someone...?” asked Rolo.

“Are you kidding? We hardly have enough people to do the important jobs here... If we ask I’m sure we’ll be accused of abusing our privileges...” I said.

Delche laughed and said, “Get out of here...”

“I know what we can do. Let’s pay a visit to Livè and coax her into helping us... to drive us around... Nobody will mind if we borrow her...” I said and they all laughed.

“You must be a sucker for pain, my young friend... I must object to that... Nagol’s orders... He asked me to protect you... not torture you...” Rolo warned. After thinking about it for a moment he said, “Let’s do it anyway, what the hell!”

“Does anyone know where she is? Where we can find her?” I asked.

“So, no one knows...” I added after looking at their blank faces.

I started looking around for someone to ask. I looked in Ireva’s direction and she smiled back at me.

“No, not her... You’ll never hear the end of it... ask her mother...” said Delche.

“So, what do I do...? Go to her and ask, ‘Where does Livè reside?’ you know she’ll ask questions...”

“Ask her if we can borrow the bus, we need to go to the farm... something like that...” said Ori.

“Okay, I’ll think of something...”

When we found Amih she was arguing with another woman who we didn’t know. Amih paused for a moment and said, “Can I help you boys?”

“Yes,” I said. “Can we borrow the bus for a while...”

“Okay...” she said and went back to arguing with the woman.

“We haven’t seen Livè for a while... Do you know how she’s doing?” I asked.

“No, she spends almost all of her time in her room, 5C. Be so kind and pay her a visit and see how she’s doing.”

“We will... thank you,” I said looking at Rolo who was about to burst out laughing.

“Well gentlemen, we now have a reason to visit Livè,” said Rolo.

“Can we stop calling her ‘Livè...? It sounds so evil... and besides, she’s no longer Livè since she mutilated her face and body... Let’s call her Madam Grooni; it sounds more motherly... She reminds me of my own mother...” said Ori.

“Okay, Madam Grooni it is...” I said.

When we arrived at 5C, which wasn’t that difficult to find, I knocked on the door.

No answer... “Let’s get out of here...” I said.

Rolo knocked again longer and harder...

“GO AWAY!!!” we heard her yell.

Rolo knocked again and began to snicker. For a moment he looked like a big kid... A very big kid...

“I SAID, GO AWAY!!! Are you deaf...?” she replied.

Ori said something which my translator translated as, “Madam Grooni, may we have a moment of your time?”

“Well I’m impressed,” I said. “I didn’t know you could speak Galaxy Trader...”

“I don’t, just a few words...” he replied.

Something clicked and the door opened very slowly.

“Oh it’s you...” she said the moment she saw me. She looked surprised.

I handed her my spare universal translator, which she took and put on.

“What do you want...?” she asked.

I gently opened her door so that she could see all of us... Her reaction went from surprise to fear.

“I don’t see any guns, so you’re not here to lynch me...” she said in the Ostikon language.

“So you do speak our language...” said Rolo.

I laughed and said, “Do you really think we need guns to lynch you?”

“I suppose not... but then why are you here?”

“Well, Amih asked us to come and see how you’re doing...”

“Amih asked the four of you to come here and see how I was doing?”

“Not the four of us... just me... Well, the others are here to support me in case...” I said and laughed.

At that point she tried to slam the door shut. I stuck my foot out and stopped it. Then I grabbed her arm and pulled her out of the room.

“Oh my God, they’ll string me up and even worse... they’ll rape me... she screamed...”

Captain Rolo couldn’t help himself and started laughing.

“So it’s God now, eh! You have even forsaken your religion... Do you still have a soul?” Ori asked.

“Okay guys, let’s not get crazy...” I said but Delche had to throw in his own jab.

“The likes of you have murdered millions and ruined my life, and you’re worried about us raping you? You should be roasted on a spit...”

More worrisome than Delche’s words was the look on his face and the murder in his eyes. When Livè saw that she sobered up pretty quickly and stopped struggling.

“Stop that... Everyone please calm down...” I pulled Livè out into the hallway, looked at her and said, “We’re not here to harm you. Your God will take care of that; we’re here because we need your help...”

“My help, after what you did to me... you want my help?”

“Yes... and please tell me exactly what did I do to you?”

“Are you kidding me? You imprisoned me here and made my life miserable... for starters...”

“You mean I came to your planet, forcibly grabbed you from your family, changed your body so that you looked like a freak, stripped you of your memories, robbed you of your speech and every pleasure that life had to offer and condemned you to live like a vegetable?”

Delche started getting angry again and said, “I meant every word I said... You should be grateful to this man... because if it was up to me...”

“Okay Delche, that’s enough... We came here to make peace with her not to torment our souls... It’s what we do that matters... not her... Roasting her over a pit will change nothing but leave a big stain on your soul...” I said

“You’re right, I’m sorry for getting angry... She’s not worth it.”

“Now you listen to me,” I told Livè, looking directly into her eyes. “We need you to drive us to the farm where you worked for a few

days. You can do that or you can go back to the prison you created for yourself. It's your choice. I need your answer right now..."

She looked confused. Something in her evil brain was telling her to take the offer but her stubbornness was choking her. I got no answer, so a few seconds later I let her go. She collapsed to the floor like a sack of potatoes. No one looked at her as we started walking away. A few steps later we heard her choked up voice say, "Wait." It sounded like the meow of a cat. Everyone stopped. I turned around and went back. I offered her my hand and she took it. She looked confused. I pulled her up but her legs refused to support her. She was shaking like a bat. When the others saw what was happening they came over and helped me take her to her room. We put her on her bed and Ori brought her some water. She was completely out of it.

"Should we take her to the clinic?" asked Rolo.

"Wait..." said Delche, "I've seen this before... Give me a minute..." and he sped off out the door.

"Did we cause this?" asked Ori.

"Probably..." I said.

"She must have a medical problem... and we just exacerbated it..." said Rolo.

Delche came back. He must have run and was trying to catch his breath when he handed me the bottle of berry juice he'd brought back. "Get her to drink some of this..."

A cure for all ailments in a rakia bottle... I wanted to laugh but this wasn't a laughing matter. I sat her up on the bed and, while Rolo held her, poured some juice into her mouth. She swallowed it. I did that several more times. Delche said that it was enough and helped me hold her up. We walked her around the room until she could stand on her own. It looked like everyone felt sorry for her and was ready to help her. She noticed that. Moments later she looked at me and asked, "Where are we going?"

Rolo, Ori and I looked at each other. We were confused. Delche looked at us and said, “It looks like she has diabetes... You know a certain kind of disease caused by the body’s inability to produce or use insulin properly?”

We were still confused and shook our heads... We had no idea what Delche was talking about but Livè obviously did and smiled, thanking Delche for saving her life.

Rolo and I looked at each other; sure they were pulling one over on us.

“No one recovers from a debilitating problem like that, that quickly by drinking berry juice; unless it’s a magical juice.” I said.

“Well, you become a beast when you drink firewater... How do you explain that?” asked Delche

Livè came over and grabbed me by the arm and said, “So you have firewater?”

“Would you like to try some?”

“Hell no, that stuff will kill you... I mean me... Obviously it hasn’t killed you... yet...” she said.

After we’d all gotten on the bus Ori showed her the way and we ended up at the grove in front of the warehouse where our pressed berries were. Unfortunately we found the warehouse door locked.

“Madam Grooni, please go and get the old lady to open the door for us...” I said.

First she laughed. She must have found it funny that I called her Madam Grooni and then said, “Me... No way... The old lady hates me...”

“And who’s fault is that?” mumbled Delche.

“You’re the only one she can understand...” I said.

We followed closely behind her just in case the old lady decided to take revenge on her.

After she knocked several times the woman’s husband, the old farmer, opened the door. One look at Madam Grooni and he turned around and went back inside. We heard him say, “It’s for you...”

“I wonder who that could be...” we heard her mumble as she came our way.

“Oh, it’s you... What are you doing here?”

“These gentlemen here need you to unlock the warehouse door,” said Madam Grooni.

The old lady popped her head out and looked at us. She recognized me and smiled. She went back inside and got the key, opened the door and asked, “What are you going to do in here?”

“We’ll take the truck back with us...” I said and Madam Grooni translated.

The old lady looked around and said, “Where’s your driver?”

We looked at each other and then I said, “We don’t have one...”

“You fools... you came all the way here without a driver?” said Madam Grooni.

The moment the old lady heard her denigrating words she was ready to kill her. I shook my head ‘no’. “I’ll drive the truck for you... just give me a moment to tell my husband...”

I nodded in appreciation...

The old lady came back quickly, went straight to the truck and drove off.

“We need to learn how to drive,” I said to Delche as Madam Grooni sped to catch up to the old lady.

“We need to learn a lot more things... For starters, to stand up to that bitch...” replied Delche sounding furious.

She heard what Delche had said but ignored it and kept quiet, which infuriated me. I went close to her, sat beside her and calmly said, “I don’t care about you insulting me but the next time you insult my friends you will find yourself in a shallow grave... and no one is going to care... Do you understand?”

She didn’t reply but slowed down the bus and drove normally the rest of the way. When we arrived at the facility we found the truck in front of the main entrance. I asked Madam Grooni to get off the bus and come with us. Just as we neared the truck we heard a whistling noise that sounded like a missile was about to drop on us. Madam Grooni ducked and dropped to the ground under the truck. Delche laughed because he knew it was no missile; the berry juice had started fermenting and the escaping gas was making the hissing sound.

I offered Madam Grooni my hand and she took it. I pulled her out from under the truck and said, “On top of being obnoxious you’re also a coward...” she didn’t say anything but gave me a strange look “Lady, you’re one screwed up person...” I thought to myself.

By the time Madam Grooni was ready to resume walking, my friends had disappeared inside the facility. I looked back at her scurrying to catch up to me, as I sped trying to catch up to the others. It was like looking at an eighty-year-old woman running like a twenty-year-old; walking upright and looking like a stick wearing a nice dress. When she caught up to me she grabbed my arm and hung on to me, as if she was trying to stop me from escaping. When we arrived in the reception area we saw the old lady talking with Amih and getting very excited.

“What did you say to her?” I asked Amih.

“I told her about my sons... That I’d found them...”

The old lady then looked at me and saw Madam Grooni hanging on to my arm like she was my fiancée. She didn't know what to make of it so she spat on the floor in disgust. I unhooked myself from Madam Grooni and pushed her away. After she saw that the old lady turned to Amih and said "Please, take me to the factory..."

"I'm sorry but I can't at the moment, I'm very busy... Otsiron will take you, right?" asked Amih.

"Yes, it would my pleasure to take you..." I said in Macedonian and both Amih and Madam Grooni translated my words at the same time. The old lady smiled at me and gave Madam Grooni a dirty look. Everyone followed me as we left for the bus.

When we boarded I told Madam Grooni to drive, despite the fact that she didn't know the way to the factory. The old lady sat down last. She sat beside me. Madam Grooni managed to find her way by instinct... She was a good detective, I thought. I told her to pull into the factory driveway when we arrived there and we all got off the bus and went to the front door.

After I knocked hard on the door I yelled, "Haon, Nosam... get your butts out here..."

When they came out only Haon was wearing his translator. Realizing that he didn't have his, Nosam ran back and got it. In the meantime the old lady went on a tirade asking Haon questions.

"Please dear lady, slow down. I can't understand what you are asking..." said Haon.

"She lost two of her sons and she's wondering if they are here..." I said.

At that point Haon asked her a bunch of questions and the moment Nosam returned, Haon sent him back. A couple of minutes later, Nosam returned with two men much older than him. When they saw the old lady they ran to her. The rest was too sad to watch so we

turned our backs on them. The moment I did that Madam Grooni ran towards the old lady, ready to get into her business.

Haon stopped her and said, “Give them some privacy... Let mother and sons get reacquainted. They thought their parents were dead... killed by the super soldiers when the men were kidnapped from their farm...”

When we heard Haon talking we turned around to see what was happening. I saw him holding Madam Grooni back. I went over and grabbed her by the arm.

“Who is this old lady? Did she lose a child too?” Haon asked.

“This is Madam Grooni,” I said, “and no she didn’t. She has no children. The next time you see your mother, ask her about Madam Grooni.”

“Nice to meet you Madam Grooni...”

“Haon... don’t forget my buckets... We could use them right about now...” I said but wasn’t sure if he’d heard me because the old lady grabbed him and kissed him before she headed for me.

When she reached me she gave me a hug and said, “Take me home...”

She sat beside me again and kept squeezing my arm and sometimes laughing but most of the time she was crying.

“Soon you’ll become their folk hero... You’ll be known planet wide amongst the farmers...” said Captain Rolo.

“I just wonder what Amih told her about me... I had nothing to do with finding her sons...”

The moment we reached her yard she ran inside to tell her husband. Before she entered the house she gave us a strange wave goodbye and began to cry.

I told Madam Grooni to take us to the press factory. She couldn't wait to get the hell out of there. What did she think; that the old lady would come back out with a gun and shoot her?

"What's the hurry?" I asked.

"No hurry..."

"Slow down then..."

When we got there we found a pile of empty buckets outside the press factory door.

"What do you know? The boys delivered on their promise..." said Delche.

"And look at this... they left us food in this smaller bucket... but no plates or spoons..." said Ori.

There was a nice aroma coming out of the bucket when Ori opened it. At that point we heard Nosam yelling apologies from the distance as he delivered us a pile of plates and utensils. I asked him to stay a while but he said he was very busy at the moment and left.

After we ate Ori opened the factory door and we proceeded inside. Madam Grooni didn't want to come with us.

When I asked her why she said, "I'm not going in there with four men..."

"You have no choice. I don't trust you out here alone. Earlier I turned my back on you for a moment and you were right there in the farmer lady's business... Have you no compassion...?"

When she saw that I was coming for her she bolted inside. Delche went in and turned the lights on.

"Do you want to make yourself useful?" I asked her. She didn't answer so I told her to go and get an empty bucket and give it to Delche. She did that and then went back to where she had been

standing before. Rolo picked up an empty bucket to use as a stool and sat beside Delche. Ori took off the lid and Delche began to fill it with berry syrup. When it was full, Rolo pressed the lid on top until it snapped. I took the full bucket and placed it in the corner of the room.

When I turned around I barked at Madam Grooni, “What are you waiting for...?”

Without saying a word she went outside, got another bucket and handed it to Ori. Then she went outside again and got a bucket for herself, placed it near the door and sat on it. After that, while Rolo was pressing the lid on the full bucket, she handed Ori an empty one. We did this for hours. As we exhausted the empty buckets the boys brought more and left them outside. Then, when we were almost done, Haon came inside to see how we were doing. He brought the old lady’s sons with him to meet us. They looked a bit shy but were sincere. At one point one of them asked Haon to tell us not to discard the wash water that we’d used to rinse the tank, but instead to save it in buckets. They would come to pick it up later. When I asked why, the man explained that they wanted to use it to make tea with. At that point I asked Haon if they wanted some more syrup. When Haon asked them, their eyes brightened up. I told Haon that I wanted to give them all the syrup they could use but he said it was best to leave it here and he would come and get some when it was needed. We only had one key but he said it was no problem that he could cut another one if we trusted him. I gave him the key and he sent one of the old lady’s sons to make a copy.

After that, I laughed and asked, “Shouldn’t I trust you?”

“I wouldn’t...”

“I can always tell your mother if you abuse your privilege...” I said and laughed.

“What do you think, I’m a child?” he replied and laughed.

The old lady’s son wanted to know what I’d said that made us both laugh. When he told him he began to laugh too.

After the man returned with our key, I asked Haon to bring us many more empty buckets and load them on the back of the bus. When he asked what we were going to do with them I told him that we were going to do the same thing at the old lady's farm. Her sons then asked if we could give them a ride there and back so that they could see their father. I told them that we'd be happy to do that. I figured the old farmers didn't have a vehicle of their own and didn't want to impose on their neighbours.

By the time we finished pumping the syrup and had washed the tank, over two hundred buckets had been loaded on the bus. I asked why so many and one of the sons said that he assumed we had a full tank, and if not we should leave the remaining empty buckets at the farm.

When we arrived the sons ran inside the house and came right back to help us offload the buckets.

"I've never seen anyone work so hard..." said Captain Rolo.

"Neither have I..." replied Delche. "And I've seen a lot of people work, here and on other planets. When they were finished I told Madam Grooni to tell them to spend some time with their mother and father. When they went in their mother came out and invited us to have a meal with them. We accepted.

We went inside the warehouse and did the same thing here as we'd done at the press factory. We only took a break to eat. After that the brothers wanted to go back. While we worked emptying the syrup tank the old lady took them back and brought us a big bucket full of food from the food factory. We ate our dinner at sunset and left the rest for the farmers.

"It was almost midnight by the time we'd finished emptying the boiler and cleaning it. We'd filled about 120 buckets. After I moved them onto the bus I added another fifty-five empty buckets. That's how many Ori estimated it would take to empty the fermenting juice from the truck.

“I’d prefer to have the juice fermenting in the buckets inside where the temperature is constant and warm, instead of outside where the temperature falls down at night and stops the fermentation.”

When we got back to the facility everyone left and went to sleep. I slept on my ship that night; keeping an eye on the bus to make sure that no one stole our syrup... even though I knew no one would steal it.

Delche and Ori were there first thing in the morning, followed by Rolo and, surprisingly, Madam Grooni. I wanted to tease her but decided I’d better not. I was happy to see her there. I brought drinking glasses with me when I came out.

“What are those for...?” asked Delche.

“To sample the brew...”

“I wouldn’t do that...” warned Delche.

“Why not?” asked Ori.

“It will taste bitter and it will stink...” said Delche.

I went to the back of the truck and opened the tap slightly. A yellow, bubbly liquid dripped into my glass. I looked at it, sniffed it and had a sip. “It’s delicious...”

Delche made a face which made the others unsure. “Give me that...” Madam Grooni blurted and grabbed the glass out of my hand. She sniffed the liquid and took a sip. “It’s delicious...” she said with a genuine look on her face and gulped the rest down. “It’s truly delicious... It tickles the tongue,” she added and went to the tap and filled the glass again.

After we’d each had a glassful we had nothing but compliments about the taste of the partly fermented fruit juice, which convinced Delche to try it. After it passed his sniff test he had a sip and he too was surprised by the taste.

“We should take some to our friends...” suggested Rolo.

“Oh crap... interrupted Delche, “the bottles and jars are in my room... If this stuff fermented that much outside, imagine what’s happening inside the tightly sealed bottles and jars... Ori grab an empty bucket and let’s go and empty them... or they’ll explode... If they haven’t already...”

While they ran off to empty the bottles and jars we helped ourselves to more fermenting juice; only to be discovered by the others who brought their own empty glasses from the eating area.

“How did you know...?” I asked.

“We ran into Ori and Delche...” said Amih.

“This is truly amazing...” said Nagol after Rolo filled his glass.

When Delche and Ori came back they reported nothing had exploded but the stuff inside had fermented much more and was now starting to taste bitter So there was a limited time that the fermenting juice was drinkable after had it started fermenting.

“What’s that inside the bus...?” Ireva asked.

“Oh, that’s the berry syrup...” said Captain Rolo.

“Can we try some of that...?” asked Captain Orihci.

After I brought a bucket out, Delche opened it and used a clean glass to scoop some out and placed a spoonful or two in everyone’s glass. Madam Grooni was the first to drip some into her mouth. It was thick and slow moving but looked like liquid gold. When she started licking her lips everyone had to try it. I was surprised not only by its sweetness but also by its aroma.

“This is truly remarkable...” said Ilisa. “I have been to many planets and sampled their sweets but I haven’t tasted anything so delicious. I think I’ll go back into baking sweets if I can get some ingredients. It’s an old hobby of mine...” she added and smiled.

“I’d like to help with that, if you don’t mind... It’s about time I learned how to bake...” said Aneleh. “Someone else always did the cooking and baking for me...”

“Can I have a jarful of this stuff... to sweeten my tea?” asked Madam Grooni.

“Sure, why not...” said Captain Orihci.

“Can you make rakia from this stuff...?” asked Ukasnek.

“Probably...” said Delche, “we can try and see... We’ll need to add water to it and probably yeast.”

Enai brought a cart outside and, while he and his helpers lugged away the syrup, Delche, Ori, Captain Rolo, Madam Grooni and I emptied the fermenting juice from the truck into buckets. Ukansek poked holes on the lids of the buckets after they were filled to allow the gas to escape. When we were done we had filled 52 buckets. Enai and his crew took them to the lab where the still was. Delche estimated he could make the rakia in one to two weeks.

Ori did some calculations and said, “If the sugar content of the juice was five to ten percent and all of it was turned into rakia, we’d have 1 to 2 liters of rakia per bucket or 50 to 100 litres in total... That’s not a lot of rakia...”

“We’ll have to drink it sparingly... or use the syrup to make more...” I said jokingly.

All of a sudden, the berries that no one cared about a few days ago had became a desired commodity.

“We’ll have to pick the rest of the berries soon...” said Captain Orihci. “We should make a picnic of it.”

The picnic

It was decided to have the picnic the day before Ruzha arrived. The date was basically decided by Nagol who, rightly so, said the berries should be picked and processed before Ruzha arrived because we wouldn't have time after that and if we waited too long the berries would rot. That day was supposed to be more about picking berries and less about having fun at a picnic but Amih changed all that when she went to see the old farmer lady, who insisted on bringing her sons to the event. Amih thought it was a good idea and she wanted her children to be there too. Despite Captain Orihci's objections, figuring that this would disrupt the work schedule at the food factory, Amih spoke to Haon and Nosam and to the old lady's sons who agreed to come. While talking with them Amih also asked if they had the ingredients Ilisa required for making cookies and sweets. They had most of what was needed. Enai gave Ilisa access to one of the labs which had an oven and Ilisa, Aneleh and a bunch of young ladies got together and were busy making goodies for the picnic.

When word got around that Amih and the old lady had found their children at the food factory, many of the homeless volunteers who had previously arrived at this facility also wanted to come and speak with Haon and Nosam to see if any of their relatives were among the factory workers. Amih decided to take only two, provided they helped with the berry picking, because there was no room on the bus for more. The two women who were selected to come had made a list with names of the missing people. They would give the list to Haon and Nosam and ask them to look for the missing. There were fourteen names on the list.

When we saw the list we all felt nervous. I felt a sharp pain in my gut.

Captain Orihci said, "I wish you the best of luck... But please prepare yourselves for disappointments... Most of the people in that factory are local farmers..."

Early in the morning on the day of the picnic, before we assembled in front of the facility's main gate, Amih took Aneleh, Ilisa and

Ireva and the baked goods on her bus and drove them to the farm where the old lady had set up a couple of tables outside her front door. Amih dropped the women and goodies off before she went and got the boys.

When she arrived at the food factory the boys were ready to go. They brought with them a few buckets of food, plates and utensils as well as ingredients for making tea. After she dropped them off at the farm she came back to get us. I decided to bring Nine and Enai's daughter along. I wanted Nine to be with her family. And I was sure Enai would also appreciate it if I brought his daughter to the picnic. Those were the only super soldiers whose families I knew.

Surprisingly Madam Grooni and even Bibi came along. I don't know what Madam Grooni's excuse was but Bibi said, "Now that I have you all here, sometime today I would like to inform you of our progress with the information campaign..."

"We look forward to hearing about it," Captain Orihci replied.

The moment we arrived at the farm the old lady handed each one of us a basket and told us where to go picking berries. She wanted the berries picked first, before we were distracted by other things.

"My husband shook the berries off the trees yesterday. All you have to do now is pick them. When you fill your basket dump it into the big bin inside the warehouse. There aren't that many berries left to pick, so we should be done in a couple of hours. We'll have a late breakfast this morning, served with sweet, hot tea. So get going... The sooner we're done, the sooner we can eat..."

"She's a good motivator," I said to Amih. "You should hire her to work at the facility..."

"Maybe I will..." she replied and left.

"Well ladies..." I said to Nine and Enai's daughter, "you each have a basket, so do what I do..." and off we went picking berries.

Enai, who was right behind us, asked if he could join us.

“We would be delighted...”

Enai always wanted to be near his daughter but her inability to recognize him made him sad every time. There was a bit of commotion ahead of us and a lot of whispers. We all stopped to watch the old lady’s sons picking berries. They were so fast and good at their job that they put us all to shame. They were picking more berries than all of us combined. I guess they were far more experienced than any of us.

I looked around and saw Madam Grooni warming up to Bibi. She was saying something but he kept ignoring her. We got closer and I sent Nine to pick berries right behind them. She had a better sense of hearing than me so I was able to hear what they were saying.

Madam Grooni was asking Bibi, begging him in fact, to give her access to the transmitter but he refused. I spoke to Nagol about this on my way to empty my basket. Nagol was unable to pick berries. He found it very difficult to bend down. We didn’t want him falling but at the same time we didn’t want to rob him of his desire to contribute, so Captain Orihci appointed him supervisor of the operation to make sure everyone worked efficiently and put the berries in the big bin properly.

After he heard what I had to say he said, “You should give her back her communicator and monitor her communications. I’m sure the guy that she’s hoping will rescue her has already forgotten about her by now... It’s about time she found that out... Discuss it with the others and see what they think...”

A little later I saw Nagol talking to Captain Orihci. I went to see what they were talking about and heard Captain Orihci say, “We should, we don’t want either of them to think that we’re holding her prisoner... But I bet you the moment he hears her voice he’ll think it’s a trap...”

“That’s true because that’s how those security types are conditioned to think...” replied Nagol.

When the Captain saw me he said, “I’ll consult with the others and if they all agree we will give back her communicator and have Enai monitor her transmissions.

When I went back to pick more berries I told Enai what we were planning and he said, “I had a chance to examine her communicator and you won’t believe what I found...”

“Well, don’t keep me in suspense... What did you find?”

“I’ll tell you... I’m just looking for the right words... It’s complicated and ingenious... While she talks on the communicator she can also type a message, an undetectable digital message, which looks like noise on the monitoring instruments unless you’re looking very closely or you know what to look for. It’s ingenious... The one flaw it has is that it retains the text inside the communicator and has to be manually deleted in order to erase it. And from what I saw she hasn’t deleted any of the messages she sent while she was talking to him...”

“Do you still have those messages? Are they still in the communicator?”

“Yes... I’ll copy them the first chance I get...”

“If we have to, can you capture the digital messages with your equipment?”

“Yes, now that I know they exist and what the messages look like. I’ll have to make some modifications to my equipment...”

“Please do it... and let me know when you’re done...” I told Enai and then went back to tell Nagol and Captain Orihci, who was very interested to know, what else Madam Grooni was telling her boss while talking to him.

“Do you think they suspected we were monitoring their conversations...?” asked the Captain.

“They always assume someone is monitoring them, its standard practice in the spy business...” said Nagol.

“But they did reveal a lot of things we didn’t know about them and about this place through their conversations... Why did they do that...?” I asked.

“Two possibilities... One, they wanted us to think that they didn’t know we were monitoring them and two, they became arrogant and sloppy...” said Nagol.

“If they weren’t worried about us spying on their conversations then it makes no sense that she would want to use texts to secretly inform her boss,” I said.

“Now that I think of it that makes perfect sense... They told us things that we would have found out on our own anyway; to give us the impression that they didn’t know we were spying on them... On second thought I would say they were sloppy... Let’s leave it at that and see what’s in the texts...” said Nagol.

“I agree...” said Captain Orihci.

When the floor of the press was fully covered with berries Delche started the processing machine, which started with a big ruckus. Almost everyone ran inside the warehouse to see what was happening. There was nothing to see so Nagol directed them back to picking berries. All the berries were picked in two hours as the old lady had predicted. As each worker emptied their last basket, the old lady offered them a cup of sweet tea.

“This is really good tea, how do you make it?” asked Ilisa and Ireva translated.

“You need to ask Amih’s son Haon about that... he made the tea,” replied the old lady.

“It looks like piss to me... I hope it doesn’t taste like it...” whispered Delche.

“You’ve never had tea have you?” I said.

He didn’t answer but did try it and was impressed.

“Haon, tell them how you make the tea...” said the old lady.

Haon laughed and said, “It’s very simple... You boil a cup of water, you add a few of these leaves, more if you want it stronger, and then mix it. Remove the leaves with your spoon then add a few drops of berry syrup, more if you like it sweeter, and then mix it again. I like mine sweet... That’s it.”

“Where do you get the leaves?” asked Amih.

“An older man at our the factory gets them for us. His friends bring them here and leave them outside. He said they harvest the tea plants in the fall before they dry. They have to be harvested at the right time otherwise the tea will be bitter or will have no taste.”

“Can we get some of those plants for me? I’d like to try and make tea sometimes...” said Ilisa.

“I’ll get you some later today...” replied Hoan.

“I would like to get some too... I want to do an experiment...” said Delche and whispered to me. “I’ll add it to the rakia and make yellow rakia... And if it tastes okay I’ll call it piss rakia...”

“And if you add syrup to it you can call it sweet piss rakia...” I said and laughed.

After we drank our tea the old lady took our cups and gave us each a plate and spoon. Nosam then filled our plates with food from the factory. After we ate the food the old lady took our plates and spoons and gave us each a smaller plate and a fork. Aneleh and Ilisa then gave us each one cookie and a sweet. She gave the leftovers to the old lady who then gave them to her sons to take back to the factory. When we were finished eating the old lady took the boys and the plates and utensils back to the factory. While the bus was

gone Bibi gave us an update on what was going on with the “war of words” as it quickly became known.

“I’m not going to tell you everything... It will take all day... I’ll just tell you about some of the more important things that are happening... Every day we have been broadcasting something new about what happened here and how the people have suffered. We did this through interviews and personal stories. After we started broadcasting this kind of information the big networks began calling our stories lies and fabrications, which is what we expected. But, as a result, we have been gaining more and more viewers. People want to hear our side of the story and so they have turned to our network. I’ve also noticed all kinds of small broadcasters repeating our message and telling their loyal viewers not to believe the lies of the mainstream media and start thinking for themselves... In other words, there are people out there who have taken our side and are spreading our message. This is good and we need to keep it up... keep the momentum going... but, at the same time, I don’t know what else I can do from our side to advance the story. I have reached the limit of what I can do and I’ll need help soon...”

“I guess no one told you that we’re bringing in a professional journalist from Ostikon...” said Nagol as Ireva translated.

“I heard that someone is coming tomorrow but I know nothing about it...” he replied.

“Enai, do you have any more of those universal translators?” asked Captain Orihci.

“No but we are building more... We’ll need them for Ruzha and the others arriving here from Ostikon.”

At this point Madam Grooni stepped up and gave up her translator; the one I’d given her before. She gave it to Captain Orihci and he in turn gave it to Bibi and invited him to join us in our meetings.

When the old lady returned from taking the men back to the food factory, she brought two bundles of tea. She gave the big bundle to Ilisa and the smaller one to Delche. She thanked us all for coming to

pick the rest of the berries and for the picnic; signaling that it was time for us to go. She told Amih she would finish processing the berries herself, clean the press and leave the syrup in buckets in the warehouse.

During our ride back Ilisa told everyone that now that she had the tea and, if she could get more of the ingredients for making pastries, she'd be serving cookies and tea in our meetings.

Captain Orihci piped up and said, "I prefer rakia with my cookies... the sweet piss kind Delche is going to make for us..." After everybody had a laugh the Captain said, "Sweeter piss rakia for the ladies, especially for those who aren't sweet enough, like my daughter Ireva and Madam Grooni..."

"Hey, leave me out of your stupid jokes. I like my rakia just as it is without making it sweet..." objected Ireva.

"That was a nice thing you did today Madam Grooni..." said the Captain and everyone cheered. Madam Grooni stood up, bowed and sat back down again without saying a word.

Before we all got off the bus at the facility, the Captain asked Ukasnek to invite the people in our group, which now included Bibi, to a meeting in the common room an hour before dinner to discuss Ruzha's arrival and some other things.

When we assembled for the meeting Enai informed us that his people, the former actors who Madam Grooni had brought here, had found a parts supplier that was willing to sell us parts but we'd have to go and pick them up as well as pay with gold. We could only pay with gold they said. This was acceptable to us since that was the only currency we had. The parts supplier told our people that the former owners of this facility had used a credit system before the war but, according to the same supplier, they'd been ripped off by the former buyers. Ireva volunteered to fly there and pick up the parts, but later after Ruzha had arrived.

The next item on the agenda was to take a vote on whether to give Madam Grooni her communicator back or not.

Bibi spoke first, “Before you decide I just want to let you know that Madam Grooni came to me in the grove this morning and asked me to give her access to the transmitter. She didn’t say why she wanted access but, given her reputation, I figured it was for nefarious reasons. I don’t know her personally but I believe she is the cause of our problems with the security services. That’s all I’m going to say for now...”

After Captain Orihci thanked Bibi for coming forward with that information, he called on Ukasnek to give everyone an update on Madam Grooni’s activities.

“According to my people who have been monitoring her activities, Madam Grooni, on her own, doesn’t seem to be a danger to our community. She has been passive and spends most of her time in her room. Giving her back her communicator may open up opportunities for her to conduct clandestine activities of which we may not approve. Anyway, that’s my opinion.”

“She is a member of our community and she hasn’t been charged with any crimes. For the last few days she has been helping members of this group with their work and today she selflessly gave up her translator for the greater good and, as such, deserves to be treated with respect. I think we should give her back her communicator. If she abuses it, we’ll take it back. Does anyone else have anything to say about this before we take a vote?” asked the Captain.

Nagol stood up and said, “Captain Orihci is right, we can’t call ourselves a democracy and hold people hostage; especially since we have no proof that she did anything... Besides she deserves to be free... What happens after that is up to her...”

“Do we have the communicator here?” asked the Captain.

“Yes we do,” replied Ukasnek.

Enai brought the communicator to the front and gave it to Captain Orihci. The Captain then asked, “Those who agree that we should

give Madam Grooni her communicator back, please raise your hand...”

Everyone raised their hand.

“I guess it’s unanimous... Thank you for your understanding...Ukasnek, go and get Madam Grooni and bring her here...”

While Ukasnek was out getting Madam Grooni, Aneleh, Ilisa, Amih and Ireva served us sweet tea and cookies.

When Ukasnek and Madam Grooni came back, Madam Grooni said, “What’s so important that you had to drag me here...?”

“On top of helping members of this community with their chores, this morning you did a noble thing and gave up your translator for the greater good of this community and, as such, we have decided to restore all your rights as a citizen of this planet... Including returning your communicator... You’re free to use it and call whoever you want..., Okay?” asked the Captain.

“But you’ll be monitoring my calls, right?”

“You’ll be treated the same as everyone... You have my word...” said Ukasnek.

After she grabbed the device from Captain Orihchi’s hand she asked, “Can I go now?”

“Of course...” replied the Captain and she bolted out of the room.

The next item on the agenda was to discuss what to do the next day to prepare for Ruzha’s arrival. But other than preparing accommodations for her, which Amih and Ireva had already organized, there was nothing else to discuss.

“Ruzha might be a celebrity but she is an easy person to get along with...” said Ilisa.

“I suggest we ask Ireva to accompany Ruzha during her first few days until she acclimatizes to the environment here... Take her around and show her what we do. The reason I recommend Ireva is because she speaks the Ostikon language and she has the energy to do that. You will find that Ruzha is very dynamic in what she does and, believe me, she will quickly tire you out...” I said.

“If I’m correct, she used to be your girlfriend right?” replied Ireva.

“And how would you know that?”

“Remember the first time we met, on that water planet where we were hiding? I spent an entire night with Vel and Daf in your ship discussing your love life... And Ruzha was at the top of the list...”

“That is ancient history... I still think you’re the best candidate for that job...” I said.

“Oh, I get it... You think ‘why would a gorgeous woman like Ruzha would want a fat slob like you’, is that it?”

“Ireva, stop that... What has gotten into you?” yelled Amih.

“He should be the one escorting her...” replied Ireva.

“What makes you say that?” asked Amih.

“I met Ruzha when I attended school in Ostikon and she told me exactly how she felt about him...” replied Ireva.

“Ireva, stop being difficult... Do you want the job or not...?” asked Captain Orihci.

“I’d be honoured to be her escort... but.”

“No buts... you’re it,” replied Captain Orihci. Before he went on to the next item of discussion, Madam Grooni burst into the common room and demanded to be moved to the food factory so that, as she put it, she could serve her penance for the wrongs she had done in the past.

But before anyone had a chance to say anything, Captain Orihci said, “Ukasnek will take you there after he makes arrangements for your accommodation.”

“No, I want to go now...” she demanded and threw her communicator at Captain Orihci.

“Okay then... meeting adjourned... “Otsiron and Ukasnek please fly her there right now. Thank you...”

There was a worried look on Madam Grooni’s face when I got up from my seat and looked at her. She was probably wondering if I was going to snap her neck or throw her off my ship.

After we left the common room on the way to my ship she said, “This was your doing... wasn’t it...? You knew exactly what was going to happen when you handed me my communicator... You’re not human... I don’t know what you are... but you’re not human.”

“Dear Madam Grooni, you seem to cause your own problems but like to blame them on others... What is it with you...?” I asked.

“No one but you survived the super soldier transformation with your memory intact... No one but you has telepathic powers... No one but you can drink fire water and live to tell about it... What else do you want me to say...? That you won every battle you fought with this antiquated ship, even against the mightiest ships in the galaxy? And that you’re capable of blowing up planets with your mind...? And now you want to tell me that you’re a normal human being?”

“Lady, you can believe whatever you like...It wasn’t too long ago when you called me an idiot... Have you changed your mind?”

“You like to torment me... That’s why you haven’t killed me... yet... right?”

“Your boyfriend, for whom you mutilated yourself, dumped you... didn’t he? That’s why you’re so sour... And you want to blame me for that too... How much longer will it take for you to figure out that

your boyfriend doesn't care about you? He never did. He used you like he uses everyone else. He's a professional liar and user... He lies to everyone, including you."

"That's not true... He loves me... You don't know anything about him..."

"Do you think that a man who loves you would have allowed you to mutilate yourself like you did? Tell me what does he love more, you or his cause...?"

"Me, obviously...!"

"Lady, stop arguing... you're giving me a headache..." protested Ukasnek.

"I'm not doing anything to you..."

"My dear Livè, he allowed you to turn into Madam Grooni to serve his purpose, not because he loves you but because he found you to be a useful fool. You can't fault me for your own blindness and mistakes... Would you hazard a guess as to how many women your boyfriend is courting at this moment? You'll never escape his clutches until you face that reality... And if you think I don't care about you... Guess again..."

"Why would you care about me...? I've done nothing but make your life miserable..."

"My dear Livè, what you do reflects on you... What I do reflects on me... I think you have potential to do good... that's why I think you're worth saving. Now let's go inside the factory and see what the boys have to say..."

After I opened the hatch, Ukasnek escorted Madam Grooni to the front door of the food factory. After knocking several times someone came out. When the person saw me he went inside and got Haon.

"Welcome, what can I do for you?" he asked.

After Ukasnek explained the situation Haon was more than glad to take Madam Grooni in.

“We’d be happy to have you as part of our crew...” he said to her.

I took Haon to the side and again told him who this woman was and how capable she was of doing harm.

“We all know exactly who she is and what she’s capable of doing so after we go inside we’ll read her the riot act and then it will be up to her to find peace in this hellhole or suffer endlessly until she expires. It may sound strange to you, but how one lives here depends on how they accept their circumstances... Don’t worry we’ll help her find her way.”

“You have to be careful with her; she was trained to be deceptive...” I said.

Haon smiled at me, took Madam Grooni by her arm and escorted her inside the factory.

“God help them...” said Ukasnek. “I feel sorry for them but at least she’s out of my hands...”

Ruzha arrives

Early the next morning, even before the sun had risen, we were outside the facility looking up at the northeastern sky, waiting for Ruzha's ship to arrive. The area in front of the facility's main gate was filling with more people with every passing moment.

"Isn't this exciting? A celebrity like Ruzha is coming to our humble planet," I heard Amih say in the presence of Ireva, Aneleh and Ilisa. No one said a word as they kept scanning the morning sky. Ilisa, her adopted mother, looked more nervous than excited. Ilisa was a kind but private person. She was always courteous. Even though I was credited for discovering Ruzha and sending her on this path, it was Ilisa's hard work, perseverance, encouragement and love that had elevated her to fame. Not only was Ruzha good at what she did but she was also humble and never let her fame get in the way of loving and respecting the common people. She was regarded as a champion of the common people in Ostikon and from what it looked like from the big gathering, she was also known on this planet... Or maybe she was just a curiosity here.

"There it is..." whispered Ireva, who had the eyes of a hawk, while holding onto her father's hand tightly.

"It's just a star..." replied Captain Orihci.

"Stars don't move Dad..."

"You're right; it's getting bigger and brighter..."

The moment Ireva pointed her finger towards the sky there was a great gasp from the crowd and everyone went silent.

"I don't know why I'm getting so nervous..." said Delche who was standing beside me.

"It's mass psychosis..." I said which made Ori, who also stood beside me, laugh.

“Aren’t you nervous...?” asked Enai, who was standing behind me, after he tapped my shoulder.

“No...” I said, “Not while I’m hiding behind this big crowd.”

“I’m nervous and I don’t even know the woman... It must be mass psychosis...” Enai said jokingly, which made Ori laugh again.

By now we could see the outline of the ship and the silence gave away to whispers, which quickly turned to loud screams of joy.

Ireva made her hand signals and directed the ship to land. It thumped the ground gently and hissed as the hatch began to slowly open. The crowd in the back rushed forward to take their first glimpse of the celebrity from Ostikon. Two birds flew out before the hatch had fully opened. They turned out to be two flying cameras. The first two people to step out were the ship’s crew. I could tell by their uniforms. They descended to the bottom of the hatch and stopped. Then they stood at the bottom of the ramp and made space for the beautiful lady dressed in a white velvet dress with red and yellow patterns to pass. She smiled at Ireva who ran to embrace her. The crowd was going wild cheering. Ruzha was followed by two older men and four young ladies. The next person to greet her was Captain Orihci followed by Nagol, Aneleh, Ilisa and Rolo. At this point Ruzha looked around the crowd and focused her eyes on me, Delche and Ori and smiled at us from the distance.

After Ruzha was introduced to the people in the front rows she introduced the others in her entourage. I was surprised to hear that all four young ladies spoke the Galaxy Trader language and served as translators for the newcomers. Ruzha locked her arm around Ireva’s and took her around through the crowd, touching people’s hands as they stuck their arms out. When they had finished, Ruzha went back to Nagol, Aneleh, Ilisa and Rolo and, after a short conversation, came to see us. She greeted us in Macedonian starting with Ori, Delche and myself.

“It’s nice to see you again...” I said. She smiled.

“I’m surprised you recognized me in my massive, dark uniform...” I said and laughed.

She ignored my remark. It was obvious that she knew about my transformation into a super soldier and had probably seen photographs of me.

She looked at each one of us individually and began to cry. She gave us each a hug and gave me a kiss.

I looked at Ireva and she said, “She still loves you, you know... even though you look like a beast...” She said this out loud knowing that Ruzha didn’t speak Galaxy Trader and hadn’t yet been issued a universal translator. I smiled but didn’t say anything.

Moments later, just as everyone was going inside, Ireva took Ruzha by the arm and joined the others. Ori, Delche and I decided to stay behind. We kept looking at each other.

Delche was the first to speak, “I remember her from when she was a little girl. She has grown into a very beautiful woman...”

Our reminiscence was interrupted when Captain Orihci and a young man suddenly ran towards us looking serious.

“What’s wrong, what happened?” I asked.

“We just received a distress call from King Rodot...” replied Captain Orihci. He was interrupted by Delche who asked, “Who is King Rodot?”

“I’ll tell you later..., let Captain Orihci finish...” I said to Delche.

“King Rodot just called us asking for your help. Specifically your help... It seems one of the planets in his sector was attacked by an alien ship and it’s indiscriminately destroying everything...” said Captain Orihci.

“Rodot needs your help. He wants you to take your ship and destroy the intruder before he destroys the planet. He wants you to go as soon as possible!” said the young man looking concerned.

“You’ve got to be kidding! King Rodot wanted to kill me, now he needs my help? How do I know it’s not a trick?” I asked.

“He was serious and sounded very distressed when he made the call. He said his people had thrown everything they had at the intruder but without success. They couldn’t repel him. He said they need you and your powerful ship. He said that you are the only person he can think of who has the kind of power needed to drive the intruder out...I think he was genuine...” replied the young man.

“In any case, it would be good public relations if you go there. It should take you a day or two at most. If you’re not back in a couple of days I’ll come and rescue you,” said Captain Orihci and laughed.

“Yeah right... How are you going to rescue me...?” I asked jokingly.

“I’ll get my ship up in the air and come after you...” he said and laughed again.

“You have no crew nor the technical ability. How will you raise your ship from the graveyard?”

“I’ll find a way... It’s about time I do that...” said the Captain and walked away.

“You go back to your post while I tend to Ruzha and her crew...” I heard the Captain say before he disappeared inside the facility.

“Well gentlemen, I have no crew for this mission, would you like to be my crew... again? It will be like old times...”

“I don’t know about that... It’s been a long time for me...I haven’t been in a ship for a long time...” said Ori.

“No problem Captain, we’ll follow you, we’ll be your crew just like the old times...” said Delche and laughed.

“Anyway, how far is this King Rodot from here and do you know how to get there?” asked Delche.

“I have no idea... We’ll have to get the coordinates and all other information from the young man who was here,” I replied.

“Is the ship ready for flight?” asked Ori.

“Yes, I have provisions for about a month... I had it stocked up a while ago...” I said.

“I assume you also have rakia... We’ll need it... especially if it turns out to be a boring mission...” said Delche.

“Yes, yes, now go get your uniforms and meet me at the ship,” I said and left for my quarters.

I was the first to arrive at the ship. Moment’s later Ori arrived. He was alone.

“Where is Delche?” I asked.

“Delche went to get some maps and the coordinates from that sector...”

Moments later Captain Orihci, Ukasnek and Enai came to my ship.

“You’re not planning on leaving right now are you?” asked Captain Orihci.

“Yes we are. Ori and Delche are coming with me. The sooner we get this over the better.”

“Too bad this happened just when Ruzha arrived...” said Ukasnek.

“Please apologize to Ruzha for me for not being there...” I said.

“Well, good luck with the mission and be careful...” said Enai.

After that the three left and went back to the facility.

“You all think this mission is going to be a walk in the park...
Hmm, I don’t think so... It never is... When your enemy calls on
you to help him, he never has your interests in mind.”

“What are you trying to tell me Ori? That we shouldn’t go? I’ve
never run away from a challenge... you know that... We need to do
this... It’s in our nature. It’s the honourable thing to do...”

“I see you also have doubts... I can hear it in your voice...”

“I wouldn’t be human if I didn’t. Look Ori, we’ll go there, make our
presence known and if the task is too big we’ll turn around and
come back... it’s that simple...”

“I wish I could believe that...”

“What are you two arguing about?” asked Delche as he walked
inside the ship and took his seat.

We didn’t say anything.

“Look if you two want to argue, go outside. I have a lot of work to
do before we leave,” Delche said and started entering information in
the ship’s navigation computer.

In the meantime I ran diagnostics and took inventory of how much
fuel and ammunition we had left, while Ori tested the
communications channels and sent a message to Airam to let her
know that we were going on a mission.

Off on a mission

“The navigation computer has been programmed for our destination so you can proceed when you’re ready, Captain,” said Delche, looking at me.

“Anything you want to say to your daughter?” asked Ori, looking at Delche.

“Nope! Not yet, I don’t want her to worry...” replied Delche.

I immediately powered up the ship’s engines and we were off towards our destination.

“How long is it going to take us to get there?” I asked.

“Depends on our speed Captain, it’ll take about seven hours at maximum speed,” replied Delche.

After the autopilot was engaged I slowly pushed the stick all the way forward giving us maximum speed.

“So, do you still want to know who King Rodot is?” I asked.

“No!”

“Nope.”

“Neither one of you wants to know?”

“Nope!” replied Delche.

“Why not?”

“If I die I want it to be a surprise... Captain,” replied Delche.

“Same here...” said Ori.

“Okay then, I’m not going to tell you... and what’s with this ‘Captain’ all of a sudden?”

“When I wear the uniform I want things to be formal between me and my superior officer,” said Delche as he burst out laughing.

“Why are you laughing?” I asked.

“Why? Why? Because you didn’t hear a thing Captain Orihci said to you... You are going against a machine that is slicing a planet and you act like you’re going to a picnic. That’s why!” replied Delche.

“My sentiments exactly!” added Ori.

“It seems to me they scrambled your brain when they turned you into this mass and you can no longer think straight; risking our lives for a person who wants to kill you!”

“Like I said to Captain Orihci, if the fire is too hot we’ll turn around and leave...”

“Yeah, that’s what you say now but I know you better...” said Ori.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’ll never give up until you win or die... That’s what it means!” replied Ori.

“What, suddenly you’ve turned chicken?” I asked.

“I don’t know what that means but if you think I’m thinking only of myself, you’re wrong!” said Ori.

“Let’s change the subject, you two are giving me a headache!” said Delche, reaching for a bottle of rakia and cups. “Here, have a drink and both of you shut up...”

We flew in silence. It seemed like hours had passed. All this time something was bothering me... None of the information we were given made any sense. No matter how I looked at things, no matter how I analyzed it, I ended up thinking that this was a trap and we were going to be killed. And, given how Ori and Delche were

acting, I had the feeling they felt the same way. Why was that? I had no answers. Perhaps it was true or perhaps it was just battle jitters. In any case there was going to be a battle one way or another.

“Captain, we just received a message from the tower, Ruzha sent us her regards. She’s wishing us victory and a safe and speedy journey. She also wants us to hurry back... She has big plans for us... and... from now on, to call her Ambassador Ruzha. She was appointed Ambassador to the planet Nelez by the Ostikon government...” said Ori.

“That’s nice... Congratulations!” I yelled out loud

“No doubt on your endorsement...” said Delche.

“Delche, believe me I had nothing to do with it. You know she’s not only popular but also capable. You know she was an officer in the Ostikon military and served with your wife in the Ostikon government...” I replied.

“Does that mean she will be our boss...?” asked Ori.

“No one is going to be our boss, not her and not my wife... we are free men... and we will be freer after we get killed...” said Delche.

I didn’t say anything and we went back to being silent. Delche poured us another drink. After that they looked busy staring at their equipment and I stared out the window into outer space.

“We’re here Captain, the planet ahead is our destination,” announced Delche, breaking my trance.

After our ship stopped I said, “Let’s circle around the planet and look for that big ship.”

Just as I was about to say that there was nothing here, one of our sensors started squeaking.

We immediately looked to our left and there it was.

“It’s huge...” said Ori.

“Is that a laser under it?” asked Delche.

“I don’t know... I’ve never seen a laser before...” I replied.

“Don’t tell me it’s using a laser from this height... That’s impossible! Do you know how well the laser has to be focused? Never mind the distortion and amount of energy required to run it...? I’ve never seen anything like it...” said Delche.

“Well, it seems to be managing... So what do you guys want to do now?” I asked.

“The least we can do is talk to it...” replied Delche.

“Well Ori? Talk to it... on every channel in every language we have in our database,” I said.

Ori opened all channels and fired up the universal translator.

“What should I say to them?” asked Ori.

“Tell them hello from the little ship parked beside them. I don’t know... Think of something...”

A couple of minutes later Ori looked at me and said, “I got no reply Captain.”

“Let’s get a little closer... Talk to them again...”

“Still no reply, Captain.”

“How about we fire some plasma over it?”

“I wouldn’t do that Captain!” advised Ori but I fired one of the guns anyway.

“Still no response... Captain...”

“How in Mother Nature’s name can we get its attention?” I asked.

“Fire at it and see what happens...” advised Delche.

“Is that okay with you Ori?” I asked.

“Since when does it matter to you what I say?” was Ori’s response.

I fired at it but the ship absorbed the energy. I fired at it again and again it absorbed the plasma.

“Still no response Captain...”

“It’s like a mosquito biting an elephant... Not only that... we are feeding the beast each time we shoot at it... It looks like it is capable of absorbing energy,” I said.

“I don’t know what that means but I agree with you about the energy...” said Ori.

“I wonder how it would react if we fired a torpedo at it...” asked Delche.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you. It might fire back. We don’t know how it will react...” said Ori sounding concerned.

“Look at it. It has no doors or windows. It looks like an unmanned vehicle... like a drone,” said Delche.

“You’re right. Could it be an exploration drone looking for minerals and precious metals deep down in the planet?” I asked.

“It could be. And from the looks of it, it’s not slicing the planet; it’s boring holes in it. I haven’t seen the laser move at all. It just fires straight down, the entire ship moves slightly forward and fires again,” said Delche.

“Should I fire that torpedo? Maybe that will get its attention...” I asked.

“Sure, why not... but you’ll be wasting a torpedo... I bet you it will assume a moving rock or an asteroid hit it and won’t react...” replied Delche.

“Here goes...” I said and pushed the button.

“It’s a direct hit... Still no response Captain,” said Ori.

“I told you... It’s not only reinforced with a hard alloy surface, it has some sort of energy shield. The torpedo didn’t even touch its surface,” replied Delche.

“There is nothing more we can do. Let’s get the hell out of here...” said Ori.

“Not yet!” I said. “Let’s get in front of it and have a closer look at the laser. We should be careful not to get in its way.”

“It sounds good to me. And let’s take some pictures of it. Maybe someone in Nelez will recognize the ship and tell us what it is,” said Delche.

I flew the ship all around the object and took pictures. Then I stopped ahead of it and left some distance between us and it, in case it decided to jerk forward.

“What now?” asked Ori.

“Well, we came here to stop this thing... and we haven’t done that... so far,” I said. “Think of something, anything that we can do to stop it from doing what it’s doing,” I added.

“I’m surprised King Rodot’s ships haven’t arrived to assist us. I’m sure they know we’re here. They must have seen as by now?” said Ori.

“I’m sure they have and I bet you King Rodot is laughing his ass off looking at us fumbling around like the fools we are...” said Delche.

“What happens if I fire a torpedo at the laser?” I asked.

“The laser will instantly vaporize the torpedo...” replied Delche.

“What if I aim it at the lens where the laser comes out?” I asked.

“I can’t even imagine the complexity of what’s inside there, let alone know what will happen...” replied Delche.

“Should I do it?” I asked.

“Yes!” replied Delche.

“You know my answer... but then since when did you ever listen to me. If nothing happens can we go back to Nelez?” said Ori.

I flew the ship under the massive drone and fired a torpedo at the opening where the laser beam came out.

There was a huge flash of light that blinded me and I felt excruciating pain all over my body.

Recovering

I opened my eyes. The pain was gone but all I could see was white. I quickly realized that I was lying on my back in a bed, looking up at a white ceiling. I was naked but covered with a white sheet.

I turned my head and looked around. It was a large room but no one was there. I tried to speak but my throat was so dry no sound came out. I tried to cough but that too was a problem.

I must have made some sound because a man rushed in and started talking to me. He was wearing white clothes from top to bottom. I didn't understand what he was saying. I tried talking but I couldn't get any words out. He rushed out of the room and brought back a vessel with some sort of liquid. He handed it to me and made a motion with his hand. I didn't understand what he meant.

After thinking for a moment he took the vessel from me and put it on the table next to my bed. He then raised the head of the bed until I was lying in a sitting position. After that he brought the vessel back and tried to make me drink the liquid.

When I realized what he was trying to do I took the vessel from him and drank the liquid.

He spoke to me again but I didn't understand what he was saying. This time I was able to reply. I guess the liquid did its job in soothing my throat. I was able to speak.

I said "ne te razbiram" (I don't understand you) in Macedonian. It appears he didn't understand me either.

I then said "I don't understand you" in English. Again he gave me a blank stare.

We were going nowhere this way so I started looking around the room in hopes of finding my universal translator. I saw it sitting on top of my uniform on a chair in the corner of the room. I tried to get up but couldn't. Both my legs were wrapped in bandages. The man pushed me back on the bed.

When he realized what I was looking at he went and got it. The universal translator was off but the moment I shook it, it came back on. It was set for Macedonian-Galaxy Trader.

I said, “I am Otsiron, who are you?”

He smiled and said, “I’m your doctor. I see your gadget speaks Galaxy Trader. Lucky for you, I too happen to speak Galaxy Trader...”

“Doc I have so many questions to ask I don’t know where to begin,” I said.

“Go on ask... I will do my best to answer them...” he replied.

“First I want to start with my friends, where are my friends and are they okay?”

“Like you, they are both alive but badly injured...”

“Will they be able to recover and function normally?”

“In time... Yes.”

“How long have we been here?”

“Forty seven days according to the Nelez calendar...”

“FORTY SEVEN DAYS??!!”

“Take it easy now... You should be grateful you’re still alive after the spill you took. All three of you should be grateful...”

“Okay... Sorry Doc... What happened...? The last thing I remember was seeing a bright flash of light and feeling pain all over my body...”

“Well, after you torpedoed the laser mechanism the laser beam disbursed. Part of it hit your ship and part of it refracted inwards and

destroyed the laser's lenses. The moment the laser was damaged the big ship shut it off and left."

"What happened to my ship?"

"Well, your ship crashed... It crashed on the planet's surface... but it didn't..."

"What do you mean by that?"

"It slowed down very fast and landed before hitting the surface. I can't explain that," he said looking puzzled. "All three of you had passed out by then. I'm sure the laser hit rendered you unconscious... So I can't explain how your ship landed or who landed it..."

"The landing robot must have activated and landed the ship. It saved the ship and us..."

"Oh, no, no... Your ship wasn't saved. The laser cut a huge hole in the side before hitting your legs and your friends' backs. You were hit the worst but lucky for you, you were wearing that thick uniform... Your legs would have been completely burned."

"So, what happened to my ship?"

"Well, after you landed we came to rescue you. We entered your ship through the hole and after we opened the back hatch we brought you here."

"What happened to my ship?!"

"They took it away."

"Who took it away?!"

"The King's men."

"What are they going to do with it?"

“I don’t know I’m a doctor. My job was to save you and your friends... And I did that...”

“Sorry Doc, that ship is important to me... and not just me... to the people of Ostikon and Nelez.”

“I know that, your ship is also important to this planet... It saved us too...” he said but there was a worried look in his eyes.

“What’s the matter Doc?”

“Almost everyone here believes the big ship will return and take revenge on all of us... the moment it is repaired.”

“How do you know that?”

“Well, it happened on other planets. If the ship perceives us as a threat it will destroy us all before it starts digging again. And... you damaging its laser will be perceived as a threat...”

“So, what are you doing to prepare for its return?”

“My job is to make you well...”

“And?”

“I’m not supposed to tell you this but a friend of mine in the military, whose life I saved, told me the King has big plans for you...”

“What plans? Is he going to torture me for killing his son and then kill me?”

“No, no, no, you misunderstood me. He is planning to repair your ship and bolster your ship’s weapons so that the next time the big ship returns, you will be able to repel it or even destroy it...”

“Nothing can destroy that ship. Nothing that my ship has...”

“I’m no engineer but I think it can be done. Unfortunately we don’t have experienced pilots like you. The King truly believes in your abilities. Your ship is simply a tool, an instrument... If you save our planet, not only will he forgive you for killing his son but he, and all of us, will be indebted to you for as long as you live.

“So, should I assume that my ship will be repaired and returned to me...?”

“As far as I know, yes...”

“What about my condition... what’s wrong with my legs?”

“Your legs are fine. As soon as they heal from the last graft, I’ll take the bandages off... but you’ll have some scarring...”

“What about my friends?”

“Same...”

“Can I see them?”

“Yes, as soon as they wake up.”

The doctor then went and got my uniform and showed me the burn marks. The thick impenetrable material was burned crisp.

“It is truly a miracle that your legs didn’t vaporize...”

“You know I’m a super soldier and my body can take a lot of punishment.”

“Yes, how can I not know...? You’re massive...” he said and laughed out loud.

“Not you too? Almost all my friends on Nelez make fun of me. It’s not a laughing matter... I was made this way by force, against my will...”

“I know my friend; I didn’t mean to make fun of you... But you look comical...”

“Is there a cure for this? I mean a way to reverse it?”

“I’m sure a cure can be found but it may take years to find it, plus on whom can we experiment? Every single life is precious and I wouldn’t want to harm anyone...”

“You’re right Doc. The worst thing about this tragedy is that the memory of all those young people has been irreversibly erased... On top of that their brains are damaged.”

“I have no idea if those people can be retrained... I mean in a conventional way... I know you can talk to them telepathically... Maybe they can be retrained telepathically. I don’t know what to tell you,” concluded the doctor and started walking away.

“I guess we have to accept our fate and go on with life...” I said before he disappeared.

The ship is repaired

After sitting in the upright position in the hospital bed for what seemed like hours, I heard voices in the distance coming from the room to my left. They were women's voices.

Then I heard men's voices and as they came closer I recognized them. It was Delche and Ori speaking in Ostikon. I wondered who they were speaking to in Ostikon.

As the door to my room sprang open I saw Delche sitting in a wheelchair being pushed by a woman. A moment later Ori also appeared, sitting in a wheelchair pushed by another woman. Delche was smiling.

"You couldn't have been injured that badly if you're smiling," I said looking at Delche.

"We were badly injured alright... Thanks to your clever stunt... but that's not why I'm smiling," said Delche, who had been rolled to the right side of my bed.

"And you Ori? I see that you're not smiling... still looking as miserable as usual... How are you doing?"

"I'll live..."

The other woman parked Ori's wheelchair on the left side of my bed.

"So, why are you smiling Delche?"

"I'll tell you but first let me introduce you to our doctors."

He grabbed the woman's hand and said, "This one is mine and over there is Ori's doctor. They are both from Ostikon... In fact, she tells me that most of the professional staff here are from either Ostikon or from the Galaxy Trader planets. She says the pay here is good and she faces no restrictions... As to why I'm smiling? Well, this one

here said you're so ugly they must have thrown you out with the bath water when you were born..."

"Oh yeah? Is that so...?" I grumbled.

"It's true, that's what she said. I told her that you said she was beautiful and in response she said that you were sure damn ugly..."

"That's baloney; I've never seen this woman before in my life..." I said and smiled at her. She smiled back.

"When Ori told the women what Delche had said she slapped him on the head and leaned over and gave me a kiss.

I flicked my universal translator to Macedonian-Ostikon and said, "You are beautiful... Both of you are beautiful... These bastards here don't deserve you."

Both women said thank you and smiled.

"We know you from Ostikon. You were a hero and a celebrity then and so were these two guys. We were young and still in school when you first arrived and have been following your career since then. We know what happened to you. We both fled Ostikon when they introduced the massive draft. We escaped before they could nab us..." said Ori's doctor.

"Well it's a good thing too, you saved my friends and the three of us are very grateful to you..."

"Sorry we have to go... we have other patients to see..." said Delche's doctor.

"Another doctor will come to see you soon. He'll give you each a physical examination, remove your bandages and release you," added Ori's doctor.

After that the women smiled at us, walked away and exited the room through the same door they'd entered earlier.

I looked at Delche then at Ori and said, “Well, did your doctors tell you anything about what happened to us?”

“We didn’t meet our doctors until a few minutes ago...” said Ori.

“They told us that we were in a hospital and rushed us over here. Other than the bandages I have on my back, I couldn’t tell you what’s wrong with me. I feel no pain. We were hoping you could tell us... That’s the impression we got from those two women who rushed us here...” said Delche.

“All I was told is that we have been here for 47 days. My legs and your backs were injured when we blew up the laser on the big ship. Our ship was badly damaged and is now being repaired...” I said and was interrupted by two men entering the room. One was my doctor. I didn’t know who the other man was.

All three of us focused our eyes on the approaching men. I flicked the switch on my universal translator to Macedonian-Galaxy trader and bumped up the volume so that Delche and Ori could hear what the doctor was going to say.

“I see all three of you are here... Good... Let me have a look at your legs...” said the doctor then flipped the sheet that was covering my body, making sure my full nakedness wasn’t exposed, and took my bandages off.

“Your legs look much better than I thought... That’s good... You’re good to go...” he said and asked the man beside him to get my uniform and bring it to me. He told me to put it on while he tended to Delche and Ori who were already wearing the lower part of their uniforms and holding the upper part in their laps.

While the doctor was working on Ori I turned towards Delche and slipped my uniform on. There was a visible circular scar on both of my legs where the uniform had been scorched.

“Oh, Mother Nature...” I heard Delche whisper. “How is it possible that we are still alive?”

After I put my uniform on I got to my feet but felt unsteady. The doctor saw me.

“You’ll need to walk around for a bit and in a day or two you’ll be back to normal...”

“Thank you Doc. What about my friends?”

“They’re fine too. You can put your uniforms on as soon as I’m done removing your bandages and go with this man. He’ll take you to your ship...” said the doctor as he removed Ori’s bandages first, then Delche’s and left.

After Ori and Delche put on their uniforms, the man spoke to them in the Ostikon language. I didn’t understand what he said so I asked Delche, but because I had my universal translator on Macedonian-Galaxy trader the man understood what I had asked and answered me in Galaxy Trader.

“I work for the King’s security services and I was instructed to take you to your ship.”

“Thank you.” I was about to ask what our mission was but after I looked at Delche’s face, I decided not to ask. I knew there was something wrong. Delche looked very serious and his face had turned pale.

The man took the lead, I followed and Delche and Ori followed me. I noticed that the man was carrying a pistol under his coat. I figured if he made a move he’d have to shoot me first but before he shot me I would break his neck.

After we left the hospital we boarded a small ship, a shuttle, which took us to a desert beyond the plain, behind a tall mountain. There, on top of a low hill, sat a bright golden object that glistened like a star on a bright night.

“That there is your ship. I’ll drop you off beside it and you can test it and its weapons in that there tall mountain beyond the sandy desert,” the man said, circled around, landed and opened the hatch. Then as

soon as we had exited the shuttle he slammed the hatch shut and flew off.

“So this is what you get for helping these people. We have no provisions and no water... And if I can’t get inside the ship we’ll die of thirst and heat stroke...”

“That’s the least of our problems... We’re lucky he didn’t just kill us... I know that man. He was a rat in Ostikon; one of the worst rats that ever existed. He assassinated people and took pleasure in doing it...” said Delche.

“So, that’s why he took off in a hurry... If you recognized him, he must have recognized you and figured he’d best skedaddle before we killed him...” I said.

“I don’t know who he is... but please open the hatch before we get burned by the sun...” said Ori.

The security system in the ship hadn’t been altered and I was able to open the hatch in the usual way but the ship looked different. Its entire surface was coated with a very strong alloy, perhaps ten times stronger than before. I looked under it and noticed the Macedonian sun had been repainted and shone better than ever. Not much had been done to the inside that was visible, except for the hole that was patched with the golden alloy.

I looked at it and said, “Not only us... but the ship too... bears the scars of our misadventure...”

“Well, what next Captain?” asked Ori.

“Let’s test the ship and see what was done to it and how it performs...”

At that point Delche opened the hatch and went outside. We followed him.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I asked.

After walking away from the ship a dozen metres or so Delche said, “Before we do anything let’s check for listening devices and booby traps. I don’t trust these people. I’m sure they’ll want to know exactly what we say and do. When we finish our mission do you think they’ll let us go? Especially now that they have us in their hands...?”

“Good point. But how do we do that...?” I asked.

“Leave it to me,” said Ori. “If anyone tries to talk or listen to the ship, I’ll find out.”

“I can have the repair robot point out all the repairs that were made recently and inspect every one of them,” said Delche.

“What do you want me to do?” I asked.

“You can take inventory of our provisions and ammunition,” replied Delche.

After about an hour of searching we again went outside the ship to discuss the situation.

“It appears that nothing was changed in terms of the provisions,” I said, “but we’ve gained a number of torpedoes. They gave us a dozen or so new torpedoes. They appear to be coated with the yellow alloy. One is already loaded in the tube ready to be fired.”

“So far I’ve found six devices that emit frequencies. They could be listening devices...” said Ori.

“And I found an explosive device. This was the only device the robot found that wasn’t part of the ship’s repairs. I’ve seen one of these before. It’s designed to kill people but not harm the ship. What should I do with it?”

“Can these devices be moved without triggering them?” I asked.

“I guess...” replied Delche.

“So let’s take them out of the ship and leave them in the desert.

Delche worked quietly and carefully so as not to trigger the explosive device and took it outside. By pinpointing the frequencies being emitted, Ori found the listening devices and took them outside. They both ran tests again and declared the ship was clean.

“So the bastards not only want to listen to us but want to kill us too. I expect they would have killed us after we did the job and then kept the ship for themselves...” I said as I powered up the ship’s engines.

“If you mean the King’s security servant, I agree but I don’t think it was the King’s idea to kill us. As for the ship...? They wanted the ship out of commission a long time ago,” said Delche.

“I believe you,” I replied. “We and this ship destroyed their world so it’s understandable that they would want revenge...”

“Let’s get on with the tests before they start suspecting us of sabotaging their plan,” said Ori.

“I’ll bet you they already suspect that we’ve sabotaged their plan. Their listening devices have been quiet for too long and when they hear the ship’s engines roar and we fly away they’ll know for sure that we sabotaged their plan,” said Delche.

As I pushed the stick forward the ship took off very fast.

“I see they gave us a lot of power... that’s for sure,” I said. “I hardly touched the stick and look how fast we are moving.”

“Punch it all the way and see what this old lady can do...” said Delche.

“When we reached outer space Delche said, “In my estimation, according what the instruments say, it runs at least ten times faster...”

“It also runs smoother. I felt no vibrations at all,” added Ori.

“Shall we test the plasma guns?” I asked.

“Better now than in battle...” said Ori.

“What he said...” added Delche.

I fired the plasma cannons into outer space one by one and noticed that they weren’t only an order of magnitude more powerful but recharged instantly and I could fire them like machine guns.

“That is something... isn’t it?” I asked.

“I’m surprised they gave us that kind of power...” said Ori.

“No, they gave themselves that kind of power... In their estimation they were going to kill us and keep the ship for themselves... remember?” replied Delche.

“Let’s test the torpedo now ... What shall we fire it at?” I asked.

“How about you destroy that bomb and the gadgets we left behind in the desert...” said Delche.

I turned the ship around, aimed it at the junk we’d left behind and fired.

“Direct hit...” yelled Delche.

“That wasn’t so powerful?” I said.

“It appears the new torpedoes have a time delay, they don’t explode on impact. I’m sure the explosion was just as powerful as an ordinary torpedo, if not even more powerful, but it appears it penetrated half a kilometre inside the sand before it exploded,” replied Delche.

“What now?” asked Ori.

“Now, we go into space and patrol the planet. You contact them down there and ask what they want us to do,” I replied.

The battle

“Captain, I contacted the planet and we are being asked to turn on our long range sensors...” reported Ori.

The moment I turned them on we got two blips, one ahead of us and the other to our right.

“Well Delche, what can you tell me from this?”

“I don’t know... They are too far away to tell...”

“Ori, what if we open a channel and ask them to identify themselves?”

“In what language, Captain?”

“Well, try Galaxy Trader first...”

“The one to our right responded but not the one ahead of us, Captain.”

“Try other languages.”

“Same thing... Captain.”

“What did the one to our right say?”

“It wants us to identify ourselves.”

“Tell them it’s the Dragon Fire from Ostikon,” I said.

“No response Captain.”

“Okay, okay, one at a time... Let’s deal with the one ahead of us first then we’ll come back for this one.”

“Wow, that’s some speed Captain...” said Delche as I pushed the stick forward.

“Well, we don’t fool around here, do we?”

“It’s the same ship... It’s come back... as was predicted,” said Ori looking at the big ship ahead of us.

“Brace for impact! It’s powering its cannons!” yelled Delche.

I instantly swerved and flew out of the way. It fired two plasma shots at us but missed. I immediately flew behind it and noticed its cannons rotating, trying to target us.

“Did you see that?” I asked.

“Yes I saw that, we were almost pulverized. I’ve never seen such power!” said Delche.

“Not that... I mean the rotation of its cannons... It’s so slow we can outrun it. Did you notice that both cannons are rotating in the same direction...?”

“So what!?” exclaimed Delche.

“So, we can fly around it in circles and it will never be able to hit us.”

“Until it decides to reverse one of its cannons and pulverize us.”

“Stop your philosophical arguments and fire at it...” yelled Ori.

I fired one of my plasma cannons rapid fire but the ship, like before, absorbed the energy. Then I fired a torpedo, one of the new ones, but the ship just took it like a punch in the gut without flinching. At this point I realized the seriousness of our situation, especially when the second ship came into range. It was a huge warship. I was sure it was coming to aid the ship we’d just fired on.

“It’s a warship Captain and its powering up its cannons... we’re dead!” I heard Delche yell.

I instinctively pushed the stick forward and we flew off into outer space away from both ships.

We then saw a strong flash of bright light followed by a ball of fire.

“The warship didn’t fire on us, it destroyed the other ship,” yelled Delche, sounding puzzled.

At that very moment I thought of Captain Orihci and his destroyer and then I heard his voice.

“You can stop running now... you cowards... We were told your ship was destroyed and you were all dead but I didn’t believe them. I told you I would come to rescue you.”

“Thank you Captain, we’re grateful you did,” I replied.

“Same here Captain, we couldn’t have won this one without you,” said Delche laughing out loud.

“I’ve never been happier to see you Captain, thank you, you saved our lives,” said Ori.

“C’mon back, I’ve opened a hatch for you. Let’s celebrate...” said Captain Orihci.

I flew the ship inside the destroyer, through the same hatch I’d flown it in the first time we met Captain Orihci. He was there on the platform waiting for us and holding a bottle of rakia, from the new batch I assumed. He was surrounded by super soldiers... his entire crew consisted of super soldiers. His public announcement system was on and we could hear the King congratulating us and offering to join our alliance. He specifically mentioned me and had a lot of good things to say.

After we had a drink the Captain said, “Let’s go home now,” and ordered his crew back to their stations.

I couldn’t help but smile.

THE END