

ADMIRAL'S GHOST

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The Onyalum Series

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Why Can't I Get Anything Done?

ADMIRAL'S GHOST

Book One in the Onyalum Series

By NB VanYoos

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Book One in the Onyalum Series

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This is a work of fiction. All the characters, names, incidents, organizations, and dialogue in this novel are either the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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I dedicate this first book to my lovely wife, Heidi, whose love and support through the years is singularly responsible for the realization of this dream.

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ret·ri·bu·tion *n*

... dispensing or receiving of reward or punishment esp. in the hereafter.

Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1986, MERRIAM-WEBSTER INC., Springfield Massachusetts, USA

“Beware, there are beings of this Universe that will do you harm. The Onyalum possess the flesh of the dead, bringing back a distorted form of the life that once lived within. Their motives are evil, and they will bring death and destruction to you and your peoples. Be wary of those whose recovery seems miraculous, for only my interventions are a miracle. You will know when it is my miracle, for all others, it is an Onyalum.”

Mishthrap's Dream, Gospels of Thosolan, Modern Edition, 14th Translation

Beyond Death

Tyler Jensen woke slowly to the sound of traffic drifting through an open window. His body was sore from the hardwood floor he'd slept on, and his thoughts swam thick from the night's party. As was common these days, he wasn't certain where they were. Memories of the night's activities ran through his mind in incoherent flashes of people, music, and consumption.

The room was large with vaulted ceilings and sparse furnishings. Cluttered remnants of the party lay scattered throughout the room as bodies slept off various effects. His girlfriend, Linda, was quietly curled in a blanket on the corner of a large rug against the back wall.

He didn't recognize the place, but assumed they were in a loft converted from an old warehouse or manufacturing facility. From the sounds coming in through the open windows, he figured they were somewhere in an industrial park. He leaned stiffly against the wall, lighting a cigarette to start his day. He was accustomed to waking like this and wasn't even sure what day it was.

His head throbbed with the dull memories of consumption, and spotting a partially filled beer bottle, he drank the dregs hoping to ease the incessant pounding. The beer was warm and flat, but it contained the precious alcohol that would ease his pain. *Hair of the dog*, he thought absently.

Across from Tyler, a large archway led into another room where industrious sounds mixed with the occasional clink of bottles. Somebody was cleaning up. *One of the hosts?* Who cared, Tyler never offered to help.

Snuffing his cigarette out in the empty beer bottle, he nudged Linda. She groaned hollowly before pulling the blanket tighter around her. Despite the hard night, she was still beautiful. Only her mussed up hair betrayed the debauchery that was a regular part of their lives. Tyler didn't understand why she'd stayed with him. She deserved better, and he was the first to admit it.

Linda Ashton came from an affluent family in Bellaire. Tyler had met her six years earlier at a beach party thrown by one of her fellow UCLA students. He'd been one of the 'suppliers' invited to the outing, but after meeting Linda, he'd spent all his time entertaining her.

Tyler, on the other hand, had come from a dysfunctional, lower-middle class family in the valley. After his parents split up, he'd drifted through the rest of high school before moving out after graduation. During those final years at home, he'd become a distant member of the family he no longer felt part of.

For several years afterwards, Tyler had drifted in and out of low-end jobs while attending the local community college. He was declared for an associate's degree in business, but his heart never fully embraced academics. As the years went by, he lost what limited direction he'd had and replaced his goals with substance use.

It was during a brief stint as an assistant manager of a movie theatre that he'd met Raul Sanchez at a co-worker's party. Like Linda, Tyler and Raul quickly became friends, and within a few short months, Tyler quit his job to sell drugs for Raul full time. Tyler still attended the community college, for a while, since it proved lucrative for his new business venture.

It was a great life. He earned five times what he'd made before and all his party supplies were provided. It didn't take long before he became well acquainted with the elite of Los Angeles.

Fortunately, Raul wasn't connected with the typical gangs controlling much of the drug market. Instead, his clientele leaned heavily toward upper-middle class and wealthy youth. It was a safe market, and Tyler quickly established himself as a top distributor.

He'd met Linda when she was a junior at UCLA. Like so many at that school, she was studying to become an actor. Although she drank and occasionally smoked weed before meeting him, she'd never experienced the wide range of narcotics Tyler provided. It took little time before he opened her eyes to a larger world of possibilities, and after six years together, their lives were a

whirlwind of parties. His exotic lifestyle lured her from the life she'd known, and it wasn't long before she dropped out of school and moved in with him. A short time after, she became alienated from her family and turned away from the haughty world of Bellaire.

Tyler felt guilty about corrupting her, but after his own downfall, he'd discovered his judgment was jaded. He felt important in the 'in' crowd, and if anything got you down, you had a pharmacopia of substances to lift the spirits or ease your pain. Linda readily traded her previous life for the non-stop merry-go-round.

She worked at a second hand store specializing in classic clothing from the sixties and seventies. Although she didn't need the work, she loved the styles and socialization it provided. Tyler didn't mind, it brought a great deal of business his way through connections in her shop.

As Tyler lit another cigarette, he wondered what future they would have together. She often spoke of marriage and children but she never pressed him with those ideas. Tyler knew she barely concealed her desire to start a new life—a more 'normal' life. He wasn't certain he could provide it, so he conveniently avoided the issue.

Although he realized she wouldn't continue their lifestyle forever, he feared losing her more than life. It was a constant frustration that drove him further down the path of self destruction. He thought he wanted change, but he wasn't certain how to achieve it. The thought of a regular job frightened him nearly as much as losing Linda. The power and prestige of his position could never be replaced with a typical desk job. He felt trapped.

Every day, his lifestyle inflicted increasing damage on his body and mind, and even Raul suggested he take a break and dry out. Tyler knew it was sound advice after watching so many of his best customers destroy their lives for the next high. Would that be his fate? Many even overdosed—something he'd recently begun to fear.

He hit the cigarette, exhaling a cloud into the vaulted ceiling. No drug could ease his troubled thoughts, and he realized he and Linda needed to find rest and solitude to re-discover themselves and their relationship. How often did they wake up in crowded rooms? They were rarely intimate these days, and this began to weigh heavily on their relationship.

Raul had offered Tyler the use of his villa on the Pacific coast of Mexico, but Tyler never took advantage of this generosity. Perhaps now was the time to accept his offer and get away from the life that was killing them. Maybe getting out of town would help clear the mind and provide them the opportunity to discuss the direction their relationship was headed. Tyler knew it was a hard road that lay ahead, but losing her would be far worse.

He put out his second cigarette and made up his mind to talk with Raul that afternoon. He was almost thirty, and time was catching up. He'd put off a vacation for too many years, but assumed it was better late than never. He warmed to the idea of relaxing in a Mexican villa far from Los Angeles.

He nudged Linda again, and this time her eyes blinked briefly. He was amazed that the simple act of touching her could produce such warm feelings. It was this warmth that convinced him he was making the right decision. He knew she'd be excited, she'd always urged him to take time off and travel.

* * * *

Tyler and Linda left the loft by taxi, arriving at their apartment and hour later. After a quick shower, a stiff drink, and a couple of lines, Tyler felt well enough to get on with his day. He left Linda sleeping on the couch as he went out to locate his car.

As a rule, he never partied and drove. He wasn't inherently conscientious but cautious. Driving while intoxicated was an easy ticket to jail, and so far, Tyler had avoided that trip.

Many of his clients and friends were happy to take him out, as long as he provided supplies. Rides were never difficult to find. Once on the town, it was easy to move from one party to the next as his unique position ensured him a wealth of friends.

There were a few times when Tyler had problems locating his car the next day. At one point, it had actually been stolen, and although the police quickly found it, the car had been stripped of all the niceties. He'd lost nothing that couldn't be replaced and was simply happy to have it back. Insurance restored it to its former glory.

When the cab pulled up in front of his client's house, Tyler was relieved to see the car parked in the driveway. He'd owned it for four years after Raul gave it to him in appreciation for his hard work. It was a beautiful, black, BMW 325ic convertible with tan

leather and only fifty thousand miles. He loved it nearly as much as Linda. The irony was Raul purchased it at a police auction after it was seized from a rival drug dealer.

Tyler cruised top-down toward Raul's, and the air felt good despite the smog. He stopped at several clients', unloading the last of his supplies, so now was a perfect time to see Raul and ask about the villa. He wasn't the only salesman Raul employed, but he was the best. His Caucasian background and rugged good looks opened doors that Raul's other employees didn't have access to.

He grinned about his one advantage as he pulled into the underground parking beneath Raul's condominium. Raul lived in a twelfth floor penthouse complete with a rooftop pool. It overlooked a private beach, and was a nice, private place for Raul to conduct business. Tyler thought it too ostentatious for his own style and preferred his smaller, hillside home overlooking the skyline.

He rang the doorbell and waited patiently. Raul's bodyguard, many said enforcer, answered the door with his usual dour look. Without a word, he ushered Tyler in and pointed towards the open patio door. Tyler walked out and found Raul sitting at a large table staring at an open laptop.

"Welcome, my friend, good to see you!" Raul closed his laptop and gestured toward one of the open chairs. "Please, sit down and join me...refreshments?"

Tyler took a seat, accepting the offer. "Sure, bourbon on the rocks with a splash of water."

Raul signaled one of his house staff and called out the order in Spanish. The person disappeared to retrieve the drinks.

Raul pushed the laptop to the side and leaned back in his seat. "So tell me, how is that wonderful woman of yours? I hope you are taking good care of her, she is far too good for one such as you." He joked lightly.

"She's fine, a slight hang-over from last night." Tyler admitted. "Unfortunately, I think she is tiring of our lifestyle."

Raul shook his head. "It is a hard life you live my friend. Perhaps you need a break?"

"Funny you should mention that." Tyler took advantage of the opening. "I was just thinking about taking you up on your offer of the villa. A few weeks in Mexico might dry us out. You know, to spend some time together without the crowds."

Raul remained quiet before smiling broadly. "Of course, my friend," he exclaimed, "don't just take a few weeks, take a few months. Get away and enjoy yourselves! The villa is yours for as long as you want. I'll call down today and arrange it."

Their drinks arrived, and Tyler happily reached for the calming effects of the bourbon. He thanked the young lady as she retreated back into the house, closing the door behind her. Raul's staff knew when he was conducting business.

Raul moved closer to the table and leaned towards Tyler. "Before you go, my friend, I need you to take care of a little business."

Tyler shrugged. "No problem, what do you need? I'm out of stock, so I need new orders anyway."

"Good, but that can wait, this is something bigger." Raul sat back with a serious expression. Tyler could sense he was studying him, evaluating his reaction, and it made Tyler nervous. What had he just agreed to?

"What is it?" He asked casually, sipping his drink to hide the growing nervousness.

Raul nodded slowly before he began telling Tyler about a new shipment of product he wanted Tyler to coordinate. Raul's boss had found a new supplier that was *dissatisfied* with their current distribution methods. The supplier demanded new procedures and wanted their best man to be in charge of the transfer.

Raul picked Tyler because he trusted him more than most in his organization. Although he apologized for putting Tyler in the predicament, he assured him a generous reward would await him at the completion of the transaction. After that, he and Linda could head to Mexico for several months of deserved rest.

This was the one aspect of this business Tyler hated. He was rarely involved in the bulk supply chain deliveries where gun fights erupted and DEA busts occurred. He'd been ignorant of it for years and preferred to keep it that way. Working with end users was far easier and nearly risk free.

Large quantities represented huge risks, and if you were caught, even larger sentences. He'd worked for Raul for a long time, so despite his fears, he readily agreed to take charge. He kept his mind on Mexico and the several months he and Linda would spend basking in the warm Pacific sunshine. This lifted his spirits despite the growing concerns.

* * * *

Adanni didn't know how far he'd come or whether it was far enough. His unusual vision showed a three-dimensional map of galaxies in the region, and he transitioned into one of them at random. As he came out of the transition, he was surrounded by stars and nebulae swirling to the silent music of gravity. He needed somewhere remote—somewhere that wasn't guarded. *But where?*

He feared retribution this time. He didn't know how, but he'd manipulated matter in a way that went against everything he knew about Universal law. It wasn't supposed to be possible, but somehow he'd done it. *If only I knew how!*

After the disaster, he'd fled as the Creator unleashed an unholy wrath on all that remained. Adanni could only imagine the anger his mistake caused. *How did I do it?* He still had no answers but was certain the Universe would hunt him down. They would all hunt him down, so he kept moving.

Adanni was the name of the first being he'd inhabited. Life as Adanni had been great, so he'd kept the name in memory of that experience. After so many millennia, he only thought of himself as Adanni. He was an Onyalum—an ethereal being.

They were not made of matter or energy, but existed between the material Universe and the dimensions outside it. They were free spirits, traveling the Universe in search of adventure. The Universe had created them without purpose and let them thrive despite their reckless nature. Though they lacked design, their impact on the Universe was profound.

How did I do it? He couldn't figure it out. Because of their makeup, Onyalum weren't able to affect the real substance of the Universe: matter and energy. Likewise, matter and energy could not affect them. Until recently, this balance had been maintained.

Despite those rules, Adanni had unknowingly affected matter and energy. In a brief moment of anger and frustration, he'd destroyed an entire galaxy. The scope of his mistake was undeniable. Creator's would fear him, and the Universe would have no choice but to undo his existence. He was no longer an insignificant threat to their creations so he fled in fear.

Focus, there must be somewhere to hide! He stared at the galactic core turning below him, its spiral arms spinning slowly about its center. The stars and nebulas fought against the inevitable

pull inward. His special vision focused on the periphery where several planetary systems were capable of supporting life.

Perfect! He'd find a dying life form, take over its body and lie low for a few millennia. Perhaps that would be enough to escape his fate. He'd no idea whether these worlds were guarded, but if they were, he knew ways to get past. A blind transition, bypassing the space between, and he could land inside undetected.

It was risky, but the only way to avoid detection. He focused on a planet most likely to harbor life and made his leap.

* * * *

Tyler walked casually along a neighborhood sidewalk toward his car. He was relieved to have completed the delivery and looked forward to the trip to Mexico. Like Tyler, the new supplier's man had been nervous but had maintained a cool exterior. They'd both shown great relief when it was over.

Large transactions were notoriously dangerous, and in their line of work, you never knew if the DEA had infiltrated one of the parties to set up a sting. Reduced prison time was a strong motivator to break even unbreakable relationships. The unknown was what people feared most.

As if the DEA weren't bad enough, these large transactions also drew interest from rivals. They employed various methods to gain information about large movements, and if they thought it possible, they would use that information to highjack shipments or raid deliveries. Those types of exploits typically involved violence and death.

At least Raul had sent several men experienced in those types of situations. Although the men made Tyler nervous, he knew Raul trusted them with his life. At least one of the men was related to Raul, although Tyler didn't know how.

Drugs were a dangerous business, and you couldn't even trust your own staff. Power plays and hostile takeovers were common, and disgruntled members of your organization could easily wreak havoc if a rival bought them off. Fortunately, no one in Raul's organization had turned since Tyler joined. Still, you couldn't rule out the possibility.

It didn't matter now. Tyler had completed the transaction and would soon make his way south. He'd had one of Raul's strong men drop him off blocks from his car. Forever cautious, Tyler

insisted on safety first. His knowledge of the product's location was as valuable a commodity as the drugs themselves. He had no illusions people would kill for that information.

He turned off the sidewalk and through a back alley. The neighborhood was reasonably safe at night, but he performed several jigs and backtracks to eliminate the possibility of being followed. As he came onto another sidewalk, he stared across the street at a small park. It was empty, but Tyler remained cautious nonetheless.

He spotted his car on the other side of the park where he'd left it. He made sure the streets were clear before making his way through the dry grass, walking casually, trying to eliminate suspicion from neighbors. More than once, neighborhood households had called the police because he'd parked on their street. It never mattered; he always made sure his car was empty when he left it unattended.

He walked beneath the lone acacia tree dominating the center of the park and moved up the small hill to his car. The shade of the tree provided moderate cover from prying eyes, and as he neared his car, he began to relax. He never let his guard down, but so far, everything had worked as planned.

He crested the top of the small hill when a flash of bright light enveloped him. Blinded, Tyler was paralyzed by a searing pain tearing through his body. As quickly as it came, the light faded, and with it, Tyler's consciousness. Darkness enclosed him as a single word drifted through his mind, *Damn!*

* * * *

Tyler hung motionless above the paramedics as they pulled a limp body from the ambulance. Like in a dream, the paramedics silently pushed the gurney through doors into the hospital emergency room. Tyler had never been to an emergency room, but it looked similar to those he'd seen on television.

He stared curiously at the lifeless body on the gurney. Was that his body? He looked closely and saw his own face beneath the oxygen mask. It was a strange and disorienting feeling. He was a balloon attached to his body. He saw what was happening but was disconnected from all his other senses.

Everything was silent as paramedics wheeled him into a room with blue-clad people scrambling wildly. From Tyler's

perspective, the uniformed people moved in random patterns, but apparently they had purpose. *To save me*, he thought.

What an odd thought. His body was inert as they stripped him and prodded him while attaching equipment. They yelled to each other across his dying body, and he could see their mouths move, but everything remained silent.

Like some twisted dream sequence in a movie, he watched the horrifying story of his survival unfold. It was disturbing yet compelling. He silently cheered the doctors, urging them to restore his life.

Am I dying or already dead? The question drifted through his awareness as disconnected as he felt. He struggled to remember what had happened, but his thoughts were random fragments like someone else's memories. He remembered a job, or transaction but couldn't recall details.

Perhaps that was it! The transaction had gone badly, and he'd been killed in a gunfight. Somehow that didn't seem right, especially when you noted the lack of blood. *Drugs!* That was more likely. His lifestyle had finally destroyed him. Was it a heart attack, liver failure, or a stroke? They were all possibilities. He felt a pang of regret about not knowing what had killed him.

A fresh flurry of activity drew his attention to the scene below. They worked feverishly on his body and finally brought out electric paddles used to resuscitate heart attack victims. *This is it*, he thought mildly, *the end*.

He watched helpless as charges surged through his body, over and over again. But it wasn't working. The Doctor rubbed the paddles one last time and stepped towards the body. He applied the shock, but this time, something happened.

An arc of electricity shot from Tyler's body, knocking the Doctor to the floor. A flurry of arcs flew through the room, shocking people and equipment. Tyler was fascinated as he watched his body arch and convulse in the electrifying fury surrounding him. Everyone froze in horror, gripped by fear until the arcing stopped. This was obviously something new.

Tyler's body writhed as it shifted and separated into myriad pieces before coalescing once again. It was a powerful sight, and everyone remained motionless. Again and again, his body disintegrated before pulling back together. Each time, the pieces moved further apart, failing to re-integrate as they moved further

from the bed. Tyler couldn't understand what he was seeing. Nothing like this had been on television.

With a final burst of energy ripping across the room, the last remnants of Tyler's body vanished into the air. At that same moment, he felt something pull his awareness. Fear seized him as he was yanked from the hospital. He watched in horror as the hospital, the city, and finally the planet dwindled to mere dots in his awareness.

His speed accelerated as he shot through the darkness of space far from Earth and the life he'd known. Stars and planets rushed past at speeds he couldn't imagine. The effect was surreal, like fields passing by a car window. The blurred passage was silent.

Finally, the stars receded into a swirling clump. To Tyler, it looked like a picture of a galaxy he'd seen on the science channel. It turned slowly below him as he came to an abrupt stop.

Suddenly, the silence was broken by a deep voice. Tyler caught only bits and pieces but didn't recognize the words. Confusion and fear gripped him like a vice. He knew he was dead, but where were the pearly gates or pits of fire? This wasn't what he imagined death would be, although he had to admit, he'd almost never thought about such things.

And how had he died? Could a body simply disintegrate into nothingness? Surely that was not normal? What had happened? Where was he?

The voice kept speaking, and Tyler tried to listen to what it said. *If only it would stop fading in and out!*

Did he just hear "okem may juknn"? *What does that mean?* The voice grew louder and he desperately focused to understand anything.

"More radnij QeQulum, awn solfra deidem manyfre..."

He knew something was wrong, it wasn't making sense. What was it saying? Panic threatened to overwhelm him as he struggled to understand his predicament. Was this hell? Maybe it was Satan talking?

He'd never believed in religion, but now seriously considered it. He caught a word. Did he hear "you cannot..."? He tried to calm down and focus. Whatever it was, it repeated itself.

"...solfra deidem forbidden worlds. You cannot vergi innuay or okem may any life whalk soo nieta. More will tymin juknn being that xid lodem et blasmous."

He listened patiently as it spoke over and over, and after each repetition, he could make out new words. Finally, everything fell into place, and he understood the booming voice.

“I am QeQulum, and these are forbidden worlds. You may not enter them or interact with any life therein. I will remove any being that does not heed these warnings.”

The voice continued its chant, but Tyler didn't understand what it meant. The translation was more confusing than before he could understand it. At least he didn't think it was Satan. If he understood it correctly, the speaker was QeQulum. Tyler had never heard that name, either for Satan or God.

Maybe this was a god from a different religion few knew about. Maybe no one on Earth knew about it? *Wouldn't that would take the cake*, he thought. He remembered television evangelists and wondered where their God was. Unfortunately, these thoughts didn't bring comfort.

He felt a growing sensation, like he was floating on water. It was like being an oil slick spread over great distances. He followed the feeling, and sensed individual pieces, drifting aimlessly yet a part of him. Mentally pulling on each piece, he tried to pull them together, but nothing happened.

He focused harder, but still nothing. The distraction was welcomed despite its futility. He tried one last time. *Did I feel movement?* He wasn't certain, but it was like something had moved.

He pulled once more, and again felt movement. His spirits lifted with the newfound success. It became a quest—a quest to regain the pieces of his being. To regain what he thought of as Tyler.

Finally, his efforts paid off as the pieces coalesced into a single entity. The sheer number of parts was daunting. He willed them to integrate into a whole, and they shifted and moved toward some center that he hoped was him. He coaxed them further, and as if released from some grip, they rushed together.

Unfortunately, the successful movement was paired with a burning pain ripping through his awareness. The galaxy blurred into colorful lights as the pain was replaced with darkness.

* * * *

Tyler's mind began to focus, as if waking from a deep sleep. *That's it, he thought numbly, it was all a nightmare. I'll wake up next to Linda and everything will be fine.*

Except he couldn't wake up. Although he felt conscious, everything remained total darkness. He could detect nothing, like he was adrift in a dark void, and only his mind remained. *I truly am dead.* He thought as he realized it was not a dream.

I am dead, and this is the nothingness I must endure for eternity. Though his despair deepened, he took stock of the situation and felt somewhat like a whole being. He felt minute pieces that were integrated into a single entity, but it was something different than the Tyler before.

It was strange and frightening, and he explored the wholeness, feeling the parts moving as one. He couldn't see the movement, but he felt it nonetheless. It gave him something to cling to, and he held on hard. If he felt anything, then he must exist. The question was where?

He focused his awareness on the sensations and began to experiment with control. After a while, he could release tiny pieces of his essence, spreading them outward before reeling them back. It was a tiny victory but it occupied his time. It kept despair at bay, and alleviated the terror that threatened to overwhelm him.

In the distance, he sensed a flickering light. It flashed and pulsed wildly as though fighting an unseen force. As it intensified, it grew larger. But as quickly as it started, the flashing stopped. Tyler stared down a long tunnel towards a steady glow. Something pulled at his awareness, and he moved towards the illumination. His awareness gained speed as though seeking the light before it vanished. This was it, he was crossing into the afterlife. With a rush, he burst through the opening into a bright, white, room?

It was a sea of unbroken whiteness giving it the appearance of *white* space. Surely this was heaven. He felt whole and directed his awareness to *see* what parts of Tyler remained. He searched through the brightness and saw a shimmering gray cloud of his new existence. It moved with a million particles, never taking shape but clumping together.

It was small comfort and confirmed what Tyler already knew, he was dead. Was this his soul? His essence or spirit? He turned from his shimmering *soul* and directed his awareness to the

featureless surroundings. The whiteness spread out into the infinity.

Although he *sensed* movement through his awareness, he wasn't certain he was actually turning. Without a frame of reference, what was up and what was down? It was still better than the darkness.

Maybe this was heaven? Somehow he doubted that. Considering the life he'd led, he was quite certain the pearly gates weren't opening for him. He'd never believed in God. But still, it never hurt to hold onto hope. Who knew what the Universe held?

In the distance, Tyler heard a soothing voice. He couldn't make out the words, but they seemed familiar. Like before, he had difficulty understanding the language. It sounded foreign, but as it continued, Tyler caught small fragments. At least it didn't repeat like the previous time.

A different voice broke in, similar to the first, yet unique. Words surfaced through the unintelligible speech, as the two voices spoke with each other. At least Tyler didn't think they were talking to him. How would he know?

A third voice suddenly joined the conversation. This one was less soothing and more fervent. It spoke rapidly, often interrupting the other two. This voice was distressed, or was it anger? Tyler wasn't certain. More words filtered through, building slowly as before. Tyler was quite certain neither was QeQulum.

As if a veil was lifted, Tyler suddenly understood everything being said. The angry voice, he had decided it was anger, dominated the discussion.

"I do not see the reason for this decision! Clearly he is a serious threat to all creation." The voice was very persuasive and didn't pause long enough for the others to address the concerns. "We believed it was not possible, and yet it has happened. It could easily happen again. Is this what you want?"

"What we intend or what happens are not yours to question," one of the soothing voices began, "we see everything as *opportunities*, and this situation is no different no matter how unusual."

The other voice picked up, "We do not agree with your assessment and believe the threat you fear is invalid."

The other voice began again, "It has begun a new journey—a journey as something new and wonderful. We wish to see if it thrives or if it does not."

The other soothing voice finished. “It will be watched, and your creations protected. Although we won’t interfere in its development, we will make sure it won’t interfere in yours.”

The other soothing voice started once more. “We believe your fears are unfounded and look forward to the new creations you will make. Do not fear, this being shall not threaten your domain. We are infinite and its place in us shall be but a tiny mote amongst your stars.”

Tyler heard finality in the words. There was a long pause of silence, as if the conversation had ended. At last, the angry voice spoke—this time more calm.

“I am devastated by the loss and angered at the senseless destruction, but I will console myself with the task of rebuilding—re-creating that which was taken.” The voice paused once more in thought. “Thank you for your words—I am humbled by your wisdom, and I leave you reluctantly.”

The angry voice faded, and Tyler heard one of the soothing voices speak. “What say you, Adanni? Or is it Tyler?” The other voice piped in. “Perhaps it is neither. You must find a new name, something to commemorate this momentous event.”

Tyler didn’t know how to respond. He didn’t understand anything he’d heard. Were they talking about him? Who was Adanni? They’d definitely said Tyler. He gathered himself. “I do not understand. Where am I? Better yet, where are you?”

He was fearful about questioning them, especially if they were the voice of God, or gods? Did he have a right to question them?

In answer to his question, two shapes formed in front of his awareness. They were basically round yet shifted irregularly. Various colors flowed through them, especially when they spoke. “We are here, same as you.”

Small comfort, Tyler thought.

The other voice spoke. “We will not harm you if that is your fear. Are you Tyler then? I believe you must be since you do not know us.”

Tyler wrangled with their words. “Yes, I am Tyler.” He answered truthfully. “Who is Adanni?” Again, he was nervous about being so bold.

One of the voices responded. “Adanni is you!”

Okay, that didn’t help. Tyler didn’t understand the answer and remained quiet.

“You are something new,” the voice said as if sensing his confusion, “you are something unexpected. We look forward to your journeys with great anticipation.”

The other voice took over. “We will let you discover yourself—answer your own questions, and find your place within us. Do not despair, you are not dead.”

The voice was warm and soothing. “You are beginning a new stage of your existence—a stage of discovery and exploration. We will watch you grow into something new and distinct.”

The other voice intruded. “Indeed, you will become something wonderful!”

Tyler didn't feel wonderful, but held his tongue. They were far more optimistic than he felt. He wanted to ask more questions but the white space around him disappeared, leaving him drifting in outer space.

He blankly watched galaxies spin slowly around him, and swarms of questions filled his mind. Who were those beings? What had he become? What or who was Adanni?

He suddenly wished he were dead. Whatever he'd become was far worse than any hell he could have imagined.

Where do I go? What do I do?

The questions hung in his awareness, filling him with the realization he was utterly lost. Never before had he been so alone. He needed a drink.

A Needle In The Universe

After his strange encounter with the mysterious voices, Tyler shrank inward, looking back at a life he would never see again. He was the first to admit he'd never been a *good* person—selfish was the right word, thinking only of himself and the next high. Was this his punishment? Not hell, but purgatory? He wasn't sure but realized Linda and his former world were gone—probably forever.

These dark thoughts sank him further into the self-absorbed depths of depression. *Selfish to the end!* He thought miserably. He wanted to escape, to get high and forget what was happening, but he had none of the products that dulled the pain.

No cigarettes, no alcohol, no drugs! The last time he could remember such an existence was as a kid. Although his dependencies started easily enough in high school, it wasn't until later they'd become a crutch to evade his inadequacies. They'd prevented him from seeing the *inner* Tyler, but now, all that remained was the inner Tyler locked in an insubstantial cloud—a loser wandering the Universe forever.

How would Linda handle his disappearance? How long had he been gone? What did time mean for something like him? Maybe time no longer mattered? Maybe Linda no longer existed? The thought chilled him.

Looking back over his short life, he wished he could make things different—make them right. He'd harmed Linda by bringing her into his world. It was a world of false happiness and shortsighted dreams. A world without children, a home, or ... a family.

He'd always fooled himself into believing those things were only dreams as well, but now he'd never have the opportunity to find out. His one chance to make a change was cut short, and he knew he'd probably never see Linda again. Her face was fading from memory as he clung desperately, not wanting to lose her in the vastness of his new existence. But he was changing, and other thoughts intruded, blocking his memories that were all that remained of his existence.

Depression grew as new, strange visions popped into his awareness. People, places, and things swam past his inner eye in a procession that confused and disoriented. They pushed on his mind, trying to replace the memories he thought were his and his alone. Fear accompanied these strange, alien intrusions.

Something was trying to replace him! To erase Tyler and replace him with something foreign and disturbing. He fought the threat, willing himself to remember who he was and where he'd come from. He clung to his fleeting memories of happy times—times when he and Linda were intimate and close. He thought about their first meeting, their first time making love, and their first time sharing a high together.

He remembered her initial trepidations, but how she'd finally trusted him. They had a wonderful time at an amusement park, high, happy, and without a care in the world. He'd known right then that he wanted to stay with her forever, and with that admission came the usual fear that she wouldn't reciprocate. And after five years, he still feared she would leave, realizing her mistake, returning to the normal life he could not provide. He knew she desired it.

Was he going to punish himself forever? Punish himself for letting her down, denying her what she deserved? Wasn't his loss really her gain? Now she could move on with her life, reunite with her family and find someone stable to settle down with. He had no illusions her family wouldn't mourn his disappearance. He hoped Linda might.

The grief was so real and palpable. *I love you, Linda, I will always love you!* This lone thought calmed his spirit, and the alien intrusion backed down. The strange visions were still there, lurking ... waiting. He could sense them searching for an opportunity to surface and gain control.

Maybe this was what the voices had meant? Maybe this alien presence was something *new* and *different*? Maybe they wanted it

to grow and change him. It was disturbing. *I can't let that happen, I won't give myself up!* He would fight hard to maintain possession of his awareness. A corner of his mind urged him to let go, to disappear into oblivion and free himself from the pain.

No, I will not succumb! I will not run from this reality!

The force of the thought struck Tyler hard. He'd always taken the easy path, avoiding conflicts, complexities, and pain. His habits were a sure sign of his unwillingness to meet challenges head on. He'd used the drugs to avoid and suppress, to self-medicate the illness he viewed as life. So where did this power of resolve come from? He didn't know, but it, too, was alien. Regardless, he held onto it as a shield against the *other*.

Calm swept through his awareness and he took notice of the space around him. He was fascinated by the spinning galaxies painted on the dark canvas of space. It was beautiful and breathtaking. Like a collage or mobile strung out before him, moving slowly, yet rhythmically. How was he able to see so much? Surely the galaxies were extremely far apart and should appear as mere dots against the black background? How did he see them so close? They were like candy he could reach out and take in his hands? It puzzled him.

He thought about the ethereal cloud he'd seen and reached out with his awareness to feel those myriad parts. He sensed them spread thin against the void and willed them together, urging them to coalesce into a whole. But try as he might, he saw nothing of his essence. He knew they existed, but they were not visible.

How is it I see? It was an unusual thought but made sense considering the insubstantial thing he'd become. What other abilities did he possess? He heard no sounds—everything rotated to an invisible symphony. But wait, he'd heard the *voices*? Silence in space he could understand, but what if he was on a planet? Would he hear then?

How can I get to a planet? It was confusing. He could move his awareness, spinning the vision around, but how could he move in a direction? It was a strange sensation—akin to what paralyzed people might feel. He'd never thought of moving as something you had to think about. When you wanted to move, you simply did. Little conscious thought went into the process, so why couldn't he move? He was instantly frustrated.

Ignoring the frustration, he diverted his thoughts elsewhere. Assuming for the moment he could move, where would he go?

What would he do? He wanted to go back to Earth and his life with Linda. But where was that? He was certain he wouldn't recognize his galaxy among the millions around him. Even if he could, where would he look? He didn't know where Earth was in the Milky Way. He knew there were billions, if not gazillions of galaxies in the Universe, so how did one search that?

The daunting nature of his task sank him back into depression. Despair raised its ugly head, and with it, the alien presence stirred. *Stop it! Stop it!* He commanded, *I will not give up, I will stay calm.* This force of will brought calm, forcing the alien to retreat. It would be back. It waited on the edges, looking for an opportunity to gain the upper hand.

Think, think, where can you go? Perhaps he could look for others like himself, assuming they existed. However, as quickly as the thought came, he discounted it. The voices indicated he was something new, so he was probably a lone being in the Universe. But something must surely exist with which he could interact! Why make him alone? Where was the interest and *beauty* in that? In his mind he screamed at the voices, *what do you want of me?*

He didn't actually think they heard him, but the release felt good. Anger was powerful, and it reinforced the newfound strength within him, giving him a reason to continue. *I curse you for eternity. No one deserves this, no one!*

He stared blankly at a galaxy floating nearby, a part of his mind deciding it looked like a brain—convoluted on the outside and slightly oblong. As he watched it float by, the galaxy suddenly grew, rushing as if to swallow him. The effect startled him, and as quickly as it had started, the galaxy snapped back to its original size.

Whoooooa...

The incident scared him, but curiosity forced him to attempt to duplicate the effect. This time, he deliberately focused on the galaxy, watching it grow bigger, totally filling his awareness. When he looked away, it snapped back to its original size. Was this it? Was this how he could move?

He picked another galaxy and focused on its center. As before, the galaxy grew large, filling his awareness. Then, it snapped back when he took his attention away. The effect was disorienting, but at least it promised a chance to move.

A newfound resolve grew within him, filling him with hope he could find Earth and see Linda once more. The odds were against

his success, but what else was he going to do? An impossible search seemed far better than floating aimlessly through space. It would be his quest—a quest to find home!

He knew he would have to master this ability to move through the Universe if he was to have even a remote chance of finding Earth. Causing a galaxy to grow larger in your awareness was one thing, moving through it was another. He managed to work out how to *see* through the sea of galaxies. That was easy: you only had to focus gently on a distant galaxy, and then *move* your vision beyond it until another came into view. After a little practice, it became nearly second nature.

Once he'd mastered this vision, he moved to the harder part—moving into the galaxy itself. He put all his concentration to the task, but every time he thought he had it, his awareness snapped back to his original starting position. He was missing something crucial, but couldn't figure out what.

He wondered whether the *alien* presence knew how to move. It was risky to contemplate such a request, and he figured it wasn't worth the reward. Still, a part of his awareness begged him to communicate with the entity to speed up the process. He ignored the urgings and continued to experiment.

There had to be something that would open the galaxies and move him to the next level. That was how he saw it, like layers to be penetrated as you moved inward. *But how?* Frustration threatened to stop his search, but once again, his new resolve forced calm. *I must concentrate and find the missing piece to the puzzle.*

He practiced focusing on a galaxy, then on something within the galaxy, moving inexorably down through the layers. His awareness pierced each easily, but as soon as he averted his attention, he was pulled out. He cursed himself for not being smart enough to find the missing clue. A part of his mind desired the chemical crutches that would make the process less *frustrating*. He laughed inwardly; *Sure, I just need to be high!*

He took a moment to reflect while he stared at the endless sea of galaxies around him. He picked out a spiral one and a small part of him thought it looked like it could be the Milky Way, but he dared not hope. He stared at the mass of stars shining brightly through the blackness wishing he could be inside its arms.

As if caught in a vortex, his awareness blurred as the galaxy he'd been watching exploded in a gray-white light rushing toward

him at incredible speeds. Fear threatened to overwhelm him as he held on to the ride. Where was he going, and how?

As quickly as it began, it stopped. Once again, he was floating silently through space, but this time, instead of the billions of galaxies, he swam through a sea of stars and nebulae. In one direction, an intense brightness filled most of his vision. Everything moved slowly around this bright, sphere connecting everything with its invisible strings.

Surprise caught him off guard as he struggled to control his emotions when he realized he'd moved inside the galaxy. Somehow he'd pierced a layer but he couldn't figure out how. What had he done?

Think Tyler, what did you do? He had stared at the galaxy calmly, but what else? Nothing came to mind, and the ever present frustration reared its head. He focused on the multitude of stars and glowing clouds of stellar dust wondering if they would leap into his awareness as before. Just as before, he could focus in on an individual item as it filled his awareness, but like before, they would snap back when his concentration wavered. At least he came back inside the galaxy. He hadn't solved the puzzle, but he made progress.

He studied the galactic debris and wondered if this were the Milky Way. If so, Earth lay somewhere inside the starry soup. He held back hopes, not wanting to get ahead of himself. First, he had to understand what brought him here, and how he could go farther. Better yet, how could he go back? Could he? He had an innate sense he could, but didn't know how.

Perhaps it was a one way ticket? But if that were true, his hopes of finding Earth were even more remote. *Don't dwell on it ... get a grip and figure it out!* The new resolve urged him onward, something he appreciated and despised. The *old* Tyler would have given up by now, but the new Tyler pressed on, forcing him to focus like he'd never done before. He resented it, but continued the search.

Though his mind tired of the efforts, he didn't feel tired. Perhaps the new Tyler didn't need sleep? He decided he felt the same as when he'd met the voices. It was unusual, but not displeasing. The weariness he felt was boredom or frustration.

He paused to watch the galactic dance swirl around him. He marveled at its immensity. Science was never one of Tyler's strongest subjects, and although he'd read about Earth's solar

system, he never paid much attention to it. Like everyone he knew, he'd occasionally thought about what was out there and whether they were alone. But a few alien movies later, he felt confident they were not. Still, he'd never actually known what existed. Was it just voices without bodies? The memory of his strange encounter was eerie.

But living on Earth made such thoughts fleeting, an occasional diversion when you were too high to function. He could recall those times when he'd found himself drifting in dreamlike trances, wondering what the Universe was and what his place was within it. Unfortunately, as time went by, these highs transformed—still dreamlike, but fading quickly from memory. With those fading memories, the feelings of wonder retreated. Looking back, Tyler decided his entire life had been a dream—some high he'd experienced, now fading in the cold hard sobriety that faced him.

No! His resolve ripped through his awareness. It was happening again, he was losing himself. He felt the presence trying to insinuate itself into his mind. He grabbed hold of his resolve, fighting the presence.

He had to stay alert to keep from sinking into his past memories. Focusing on the galaxy once more, he remembered what he'd been doing before breaking into the layer. He tried to reproduce it, picking out a glowing cloud of blue, red, and purple, staring at it casually. It moved past other stars, and he noticed that it, too, contained stars. What would those stars look like from within the cloud of light? He wanted to see one up close and was about to focus when a blur of light rushed past. When it stopped, he was inside the cloud, the red-blue glow surrounding him.

He was awed by its breathtaking grandeur! The cloud shimmered and moved like ripples on a pond, and throughout its interior, clusters of stars shone brightly. It was a spectacular display of light, movement, and color—an abstract painting, yet three dimensional. For the first time in his life, Tyler gained a true appreciation for the beauty of the Universe.

Hope seemed in reach if he could master movement and find home. He was uncertain what he'd done to *transition* inward, but he knew it was not because of his concentration. Instead, the change occurred when he was not focused, yet wanting to see more.

Was it really that simple? Okay, you've done it twice, surely you can do it again. The thought prepared him for another attempt.

He picked out a cluster of stars and stared gently at them. He thought about how they looked, one small and intense, the others, larger and less bright. He thought about the largest red star and wondered what it would look like up close. He didn't *focus* but thought about being there. Like a door opening, he felt the transition and watched as a blur of light moved him down another layer. This time, the move was effortless and less intense.

He hovered over the red star, its immense bulk filling his awareness. He was awestruck by its size, brilliance, and power. He stared quietly into its depths, amazed at the sprays of light shooting along its surface. They reached out toward him before falling back like waves crashing on a beach. It was mesmerizing, like staring into a fire. The moment brought pangs of loneliness as he recalled many nights around a beach bonfire.

The star spun quietly on its axis, displaying a dramatic show that would have brought tears to his eyes—if he'd had any. He felt both alive and yet insignificant. The size and beauty of this one star made him feel like a mote in an ocean of giants. This one cloud held hundreds of such stars, and the thought of those giants humbled him. The math was mind boggling and his quest seemed further from his reach.

A small planet suddenly spun past his awareness. It was so small in comparison to the red giant. It was only a black smudge against the bright background. He watched as it rounded the other side and disappeared. It was amazing something so small could even exist so close to the fiery mammoth. Although he felt no heat, the vision of the molten ball made him feel warm inside. He could only imagine the intense heat this close.

He turned his attention away and looked at the dark spheres he'd seen in the distance. He focused on one and it grew large enough to realize it was a planet circling the star. It, too, seemed large. It was dark green in color, while other colors flowed across its surface like a spinning marble. He thought about what it would be like inside the swirling colors and felt the rush of transition.

Gaseous clouds flew past at dizzying speeds. Their colors were shades of green and white with black mixed throughout. To his awareness, it *felt* like he was inside a tornado, but he felt nothing. It was a silent display with no sound to measure the intense fury around him. He watched small vortices whipping past like signposts on a road. The planet was clearly inhospitable, and he felt certain no life could exist in that maelstrom.

Although he felt nothing, his awareness could almost hear the rush of wind around him. If he'd been human, he would have been shredded like tissue. Eventually, the initial thrill faded, replaced with a feeling of vertigo. He wanted to move back out, but hadn't yet figured that part. Fear threatened as he imagined being stuck in the swirling clouds forever.

He thought back to the red star, visualizing its magnetic rays of fire dancing on the surface, and at the same time, he thought about staring back at the planet from a distance. He felt relief as he transitioned once more. When it stopped, he was back above the red star, staring at the green planet.

That was it, he'd done it! He'd moved down a layer and back out again. The success filled him with confidence. He was no longer trapped, but free to search for Earth—to find Linda, and return home!

He visualized the gas cloud from a distance and transitioned back into the galactic pool. He was back at his original starting point, staring at the Nebula he'd been inside. Excitement grew as he felt a strong desire to master this newfound ability. With growing confidence, he practiced, seeking out different objects, submerging into their layers, before backing out once more.

He did it over and over again, each object a blur as he jumped from place to place and layer to layer, pausing long enough to pick his next target. After a while, he felt he'd mastered the ability, so he stopped in the middle of the galactic swirl, a kind of contentment sweeping through him. He looked back through his travels and remembered every object he'd seen. He could call it up from memory, and if he wanted, travel back to it in an instant. It was unlike anything he'd ever experienced. Not even his greatest highs could match the thrill of traveling across such vast distances in the blink of an eye.

Unfortunately, like all new things, the thrill would fade, but the memories would last forever. For now, he relished the moment, calm spreading through him after the intense rush. He gazed quietly at the movement of stars while the sensation ebbed.

He could begin his journey and go where no man had gone before. He chuckled at the thought.

* * * *

Tyler couldn't decide the best way to start looking for Earth. The task remained daunting despite his newfound abilities. He knew there were millions and millions of galaxies with millions and millions of planets and stars, so where did one start when looking for a solitary planet? It was humbling, and with no defined boundaries in any direction, where could he start and where could he end? How would he know if he backtracked? With his new memory, he thought he might at least recognize somewhere he'd already been.

He randomly chose a direction and began surveying the galaxies along that path. He easily dismissed many of them since he was certain the Milky Way was a spiral galaxy with arms. He'd remembered as much from watching the science channel with Linda. Considering his usual state of euphoria on Earth, he wasn't certain whether he'd seen the Milky Way or some galaxy next door. However, it was something to hold onto despite his lack of confidence.

Spotting a promising galaxy, he noticed the arms radiated like a picture of the sun drawn on a black canvas. He felt certain that wasn't the Milky Way, so he skipped it and continued the hunt.

The next galaxy looked promising, but it was smaller than the others around it. Despite this size difference, it was closer to his dim recollections than any of the others he'd seen so far. It would have to do. He focused on the outer rim of the galaxy and made the transition inside.

Revolving around the inner core, he was dumbfounded by the sheer number of objects he would have to search. Undaunted, he chose a direction and transitioned to the inner levels and out again, darting in and out as quickly as he could.

Most objects were quickly discounted if they were in nebulae, had stars that were the wrong color, or had too many stars too close together. Even with this less than perfect filtering, he knew he was taking far too long to cover so little a distance.

With mounting frustration, he calmed himself with the realization that he was just starting, and that it would likely take time. Still, that insurmountable feeling crept back into his awareness. He completed his search and was ready to leave when he stumbled upon a solar system that appeared similar to Earth's. The sun was the same, though he was amazed at its size compared with the planets. He tried to remember how many planets Earth's

solar system possessed, but his rudimentary science background failed to produce an accurate count.

He tried to remember them by name: Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. Those came easily enough, and he thought he could even remember what they looked like. But the others were fuzzy, maybe Mercury or Venice, he wasn't sure. In any event, he wouldn't recognize them anyway.

He turned his attention to the largest planets in the solar system. There were three gas giants, two of them with rings. He wasn't sure about Jupiter, but he remembered Saturn had rings, so perhaps one of them was Saturn. He most definitely couldn't remember their order. The other gas giant without rings might have been Jupiter, but he imagined it being brighter with more red. *Damn, why didn't I pay more attention in science!* Although he knew why, it didn't ease his frustration.

The planets matched close enough to his recollections that he began searching for an Earth-like planet. As if answering his prayers, he spotted a tiny planet closer to the sun than the gas giants. It was small, blue, and contained wisps of white clouds. Excitement grew though he quickly suppressed it until he could validate it properly. Better to keep it in check in case it turned out to be an alien world.

He pictured the planet in his awareness and wished himself above it. The transition was quick and smooth, placing him at a spot above the planet's equator. He surveyed the space around him, noting nothing flashed by in orbit. He believed he should see at least one satellite or some space debris, but the space was vacant.

The planet spun quietly below, large cloud banks skirting the surface with occasional breaks. Through these gaps, ocean blues and browns of land could be seen. It looked like the Earth Tyler remembered, but it appeared too ... lifeless. He thought about the space shuttle missions and tried to visualize the view from above. He didn't necessarily remember it looking alive then, so it was conceivable this was Earth. *I could be home!* He found it difficult to keep excitement at bay.

He watched for a break in the clouds to spot land. There, slightly above what he thought was the equator, a piece of land appeared. He assumed it was as good a place as any to find people so he transitioned to the brown spot in a blur of light.

As he came out of the transition, he found himself hovering above what looked like an African savannah. The plains were

dotted with trees, and every now and again he spotted splashes of blue water. From his vantage, he saw what looked like large herds of animals moving slowly across the plain. *Perhaps I'm in Africa?* If he could validate that thought, he'd know he'd found home.

He scanned the horizon in all directions but didn't see signs of civilization. A plume of smoke in the distance brought momentary excitement, but the thrill was quickly replaced with disappointment as he recognized the billowing from the top of a mountain. It was a volcano smoldering before or after an eruption. *Damn, nothing but animals.* He wanted this to be Earth so bad, but the difficulty in proving he was in Africa brought on a fresh round of depression.

Africa was an enormous continent, so finding civilization was perhaps too optimistic. He decided to keep searching until he could find signs of habitation. After reflecting for a moment, he decided west would most likely yield human habitation. Like America, he assumed people congregated along the coastline, where the oceans provided life. With a sigh of regret, he thought back to California, the beaches, and Linda.

He'd never moved at this level, but figured the mode of transportation must be similar to the other transitions he'd made to get here. He spotted a hillside on the distant horizon and made his move. In an instant he was hovering above the gentle slope, noting it ended in steep cliffs falling off into a deep gorge.

The cavernous gorge stretched far to the north and south, looking like it was carved out of the landscape by a massive earthquake. At the bottom, water cut through the valley fed by myriad waterfalls along the surrounding cliffs. It was a spectacular sight, and Tyler took it in with a newfound sense of wonder. Mist rose from the spray of falling water as millions of gallons poured energy into the river below, cutting the gorge deeper into the earth.

Tyler had never seen anything like it. He remembered the Grand Canyon and its immense beauty, but this was something different entirely. The cliffs and hills surrounding the gorge were adorned with dense vegetation, and above the treetops, large flocks of birds winged their way across the landscape. With the sun setting low on the horizon, the effect was glimmering gold meeting deep greens, speckled with sprays of white.

Breathtaking came to mind. He'd known Earth held such treasures, but the old Tyler never considered such things important. He hovered above it like an unseen ghost, able to visualize the spectacle but unable to hear or touch. He broke from his reverie

and focused on his mission to find clues people existed. Scanning the horizon, he came up empty.

He knew he needed to move on, especially with the sun sinking below the horizon. Night would make his search harder, so he picked a distant spot and moved again.

As before, only dense forest filled the vista below him. He transitioned again, and again, and one last time until he found himself at the edge of the continent near an ocean. The water sparkled blue, silver, and orange from the setting sun, and he scanned the coast looking for anything: a boat, a hut, a fire, a city, anything! Nothing.

Hope began to slip away until he spotted a large animal ambling along the beach. He focused on the beast, *zooming* his awareness to the beach below. Holding his concentration steady, the animal came into focus. It looked similar to a giraffe, but not quite the same. It looked like it had a smaller neck than a giraffe, and there were stripes instead of spots. Tyler was nearly certain giraffes had spots. On its head, two large antlers spread high into the air. It made the animal look like a deer whose neck was stretched. The animal had no tail, and the color was russet with stripes of black.

Definitely not a giraffe, Tyler decided. Still ... he was no expert on African animals, or any animals for that matter. He didn't even know that much about dogs and cats. This could be something from Africa, or even South America, but he couldn't be sure.

He watched the animal stop as it became alert. For a brief moment, Tyler thought the animal had somehow detected him, but he brushed that notion aside as the unusual animal sniffed the air, scanning cautiously. It stood frozen for a long time, and Tyler was ready to leave. As sudden as it stopped, it began moving up the beach. Whatever had spooked it did not pose a threat.

Tyler laughed at the thought of it detecting him. He was certain that was impossible. The animal moved close to the water when a large flash of yellow sprang from the trees tackling the animal in an explosion of dirt and water. The predator's size was twice that of the animal it had trapped beneath its claws. Lean muscles rippled across the short broad body covered in a thick, yellow fur. Along its spine, a dark spike of hair ran down the length of the animal's back, tapering near its rear. The animal lay atop its prey,

mouth around the neck cutting off the much needed air of the dying animal. Within moments, the twitching ceased.

Tyler was stunned and fascinated by the violent kill he'd just witnessed. The predator looked similar to a predatory cat, but it had no tail, and very large ears. The enormous paws were adorned with scythe-like claws that sunk deep into the lifeless body. It was hard for Tyler to gauge its true size, but judging from the trees nearby, he guessed it to be nearly twenty feet at the shoulders, and at least the same in length. Tyler knew it was not from Earth, at least not the Earth he knew. Maybe this was something from Earth's past, or future? Tyler didn't like that thought.

He let his focus drift from the animals and hovered once more above the beach as the sun sank below the distant waves. The realization he wasn't on Earth, or at least not the Earth he'd left, brought on a sad melancholy. When the sun finally set, Tyler stared into the darkness at a sea of stars reflecting off the water. Despair threatened to overwhelm him. *So many stars ... so many planets.* He sobbed from the thought of his fruitless efforts.

He left the beach to orbit above the blue white orb. The dark side of the planet moved silently below, volcanic eruptions spewed orange-red worms across its surface. No lights, no cities, no people. This wasn't Earth. He looked at the space around him and noticed for the first time the planet didn't have a moon. This was a clear sign it wasn't Earth, but he'd never thought to check before going to the surface.

He tried to find a bright spot to his search. He'd seen interesting things, and that wasn't without merit. The memory of the misty gorge and the brutal animal attack was something he'd never forget. It had looked so much like Earth, he wondered how many of these *false* worlds he would have to sift through before finding home. He feared the number was beyond measure.

He said goodbye to the primitive world and returned to his search of the galaxy. At least he had more to filter with.

A moon. I should have looked for a moon! The thought stung as he realized how little he knew about the Universe or his own world. When you lived there, it was easy to take it for granted. He made a mental shrug before leaping to another system.

* * * *

Tyler had no concept of time so he couldn't judge how long he'd been searching. The new part of his awareness recorded every galaxy, star, and planet visited, but the numbers boggled his mind.

Out of the millions he'd seen, he'd found hundreds of thousands of planets similar to Earth. But they were not Earth. Most supported life, but much of it was primitive and bestial—civilizations were hard to come by.

Weary from his search, he fended off feelings of hopelessness. That sense of failure filled his mind as he orbited a planet that, from a distance, looked Earth-like. But up close, he realized the colors weren't ocean blues, brown land, or white clouds. Instead, gasses filled the thick atmosphere obscuring the planet's true surface.

From a distance, everything within the system seemed similar to what he thought Earth was a part of. There were several gas giants, one with rings, and another with colors he was certain were similar to Jupiter. Even the planet below him had a moon like Earth. But once he was up close, the moon was different and the planet was clearly not Earth.

Maddening depression threatened to deflate his motivation and end his quest. The search was surely hopeless, but the promise of seeing Linda and his home had kept him going. For all he knew, hundreds or thousands of years had passed by while he searched aimlessly through the cosmos. He didn't pretend to understand time or how it worked, but searching millions of systems clearly took a great deal of time. It was conceivable Earth no longer existed.

The *new* Tyler could not sense time. Because he moved so fast through the Universe, how much *real* time flew past while he blurred through the empty space between galaxies? He imagined he could devise a way to measure it, but was too despondent to try. *Perhaps later*, he thought, *perhaps later*.

He gazed at the lonely planet below, what little motivation remained dissipated. What life could live in that soup of an atmosphere? Certainly not life as he recognized it. But at this point, any intelligence would be welcome. The loneliness of his quest was taking its toll.

You'll never find it, give up the hunt. The voice from the depths, small and persistent, urged calmly. He knew it was the alien presence, but he no longer feared it. He began to believe it might be the only intelligent being he would ever find. *No, do not*

give in now! The new resolve rose in defense, fighting to prevent the alien take-over. He was torn by these contradicting feelings and it deepened his sadness. In his current mood, he no longer cared who won.

The swirling colors of the multi-hued atmosphere mesmerized him. Without consciously trying, he transitioned into the thick atmosphere. From his new vantage, darkness filled the space below. It was an indication land might exist. The atmosphere was tinged with blue mottled by streaks of browns and whites. He thought the browns were likely storms as lightning illuminated the sky.

Even with storms, the atmosphere seemed almost calm as the gas barely moved past his awareness. Despite the frustrations, he was fascinated by the world around him. He transitioned to the planet's surface, and from this depth, the sky was a dark blue, nearly black. The thickness of the atmosphere blocked out most of the sun's rays, and oddly enough, the isolating blackness was comforting. He hovered above the ground, letting depression seize him in a debilitating melancholy.

He daydreamed of a time before his fate had changed—a time on Earth. He remembered good things and bad, wondering what had happened to Linda and her life. He knew Raul would miss his best salesperson. Tyler could be replaced, but he knew Raul could never trust anyone like he had trusted him. Perhaps Raul finally quit the business, his investments and financial prowess providing him with the comfortable cushion he needed to leave it all behind. With relations in the business, it would have been easy for Raul to walk away.

A part of Tyler hoped he did. He'd liked Raul, even loved him like a brother. Considering Tyler's current predicament, he wanted better for everyone he knew. He hoped Linda went back to her family and made up for the lost time she'd wasted with him. Maybe she married someone who would take care of her the way she deserved.

He'd failed completely by dragging her into his world of never ending parties where you never dried out long enough to experience lows. He'd always admired her for being able to say no, something he couldn't do.

Having been without for so long, he felt pangs of withdrawal tempting him with the numbing effects that would ease his pain and suffering. But he knew nothing could do that now. He was

alone forever, wandering the Universe, detached, insubstantial, and insignificant.

You are not alone, a voice inside insisted. It was closer than before, winning the battle for control. He didn't care. Perhaps he should let it take over, let it take what was left of him and force him into exile within.

No, never, the other, stronger self persisted. He wished he could lock it away, place it into the catacombs of his subconscious. It was more than annoying, it was the part that kept him lonely, forcing him to search for a world he would never see again. *Go away*, he shouted, but his plea held no force.

Maybe these internal battles were making him crazy—some kind of schizophrenia caused by the change? He'd consumed enough drugs to think it might be possible. *No*, the thought was flat and emotionless, but he wasn't sure which part had said it. The part of his awareness not focused inside spotted movement in the distance. He refocused to the distant horizon. Over a small rise in the landscape, Tyler watched as a swarm of glowing balls moved on an invisible wind.

Thousands crested the hill like a school of fish in a swift current. In fact, the blue tinge of the atmosphere made the illusion of an ocean more real. He watched them move closer. What were they? Were they alive?

Surely they couldn't be alive? He had no way to gauge their size, but they were similar to glowing softballs. He moved into the school and inspected each one as it flew past. They emanated a soft pink glow, and inside each globe, small bits of darkness were sprinkled haphazardly. Up close, he decided they were like round jellyfish.

He watched as they flew silently past, wondering if they were alive despite being insubstantial bubbles. They looked alive, as if the school were by design rather than a random event. Suddenly, two of the creatures collided, melding into a single, larger bubble. They stayed together for a short while shifting with patterns and colors. But as quickly as they came together, they separated. When they parted, hundreds of glowing sparkles fell to the ground like pixie dust.

What was that? Had they mated? Were they producing eggs? Tyler grew curious. The alien voice confirmed his suspicions, but he ignored the presence as he watched the funny globes.

More of them merged, dropping their glowing dust as they separated. He watched a pair split and noticed one of the globes faded before disappearing completely. *Did it die?* He wasn't sure. He'd heard of animals on Earth that died after mating, their entire purpose for living having been served.

He transitioned downstream as the school swarmed over the next rise, moving with the flow of the atmosphere. Just ahead, two more split from mating, the glowing dust spread across the ground. One of the creatures came directly at Tyler, its glow fading as it approached. As Tyler watched the fading light, he felt a strong pull into the dull ball.

It was the most unusual sensation he'd ever experienced. He was no longer Tyler but the creature and felt everything that made up its simple existence. It was odd, the creature was so primitive Tyler only sensed an overwhelming desire to mate. He needed to merge with another of its kind to produce the next generation.

He floated with the school, familiar sensations filling him with that which he'd missed for too long. He felt the gentle breeze pushing them, and he sensed the creature had been born only a very short while before, its drive to mate ending in death whether successful or not.

His presence brought the creature back to life, if only briefly. The drive to mate was more powerful than anything Tyler had experienced before, and he sensed the presence of the others around him, urging him to merge. The yearning desire consumed his thoughts while a part of him remained disconnected and observant.

Another creature flew near and Tyler became excited by the anticipation. He felt it touch, and slowly they merged into a single entity. With a powerful rush of light and sensations, he felt the mingling of souls as their bodies became one. The pleasurable feelings grew greater, building in waves he hoped would never crash. The euphoria consumed him like fire, burning with pleasure beyond his wildest dreams.

Finally, as pleasure became pain, it crested in an orgasmic release that shook the bodies until they tore apart. With the release, a cool sensation swept through Tyler, and their pixie dust eggs fell to the ground to spawn a new generation in the endless cycle. Tyler never felt so alive, so purposeful, and so complete. *So this was true mating?* He knew it was more than sex. He was part of a

greater purpose—whole and complete as he realized the species would survive—that a part of him would survive.

He was giddy from the experience, and felt swept away in its lingering after-effects. He flew happily on the breeze, his mission fulfilled. Almost like dozing off, he felt the creature begin to fade, dying after its contribution was given. As the feelings finally dissipated, Tyler felt a pop as he was pulled out of the creature, left to watch it disappear into the gloom. It was gone, but its offspring would mark the memory of its passing.

As he was released, his motion stopped as the school continued to drift by. *I must do that again*, he thought, determined to feel those sensations once more. No drug was so intense, so fulfilling, and he moved back into their midst hoping to relive the experience.

If only I knew how it had happened. He watched helpless as they flew through him, merging and separating without his participation. *What had I done?*

He puzzled over the previous incident as two more separated ahead of him. One of the creatures flew past his right while the other went through him as it began to fade. Once again, he felt the familiar rush as his spirit was pulled into the creature, restoring life into its failing body. Although he didn't have actual sight, he sensed the community around him as they flowed on the steady breeze. Many passed close, producing the exciting sensation caused by his sense of desperation. He was driven to merge, to produce the next generation before all vanished in the wind. The feeling was so intense he pulsed violently from the anxiety coursing through the fragile body.

Despite his excitement, others in the stream kept their distance, choosing to wait for another. Frustration threatened to overcome reason until another creature moved fast toward him. He glowed brighter as he fought for a chance to couple. As it drew near, he felt an electric current pulse through the body, preparing for the event that would follow. As before, the two bodies touched, merging into a single creature, their essence becoming one. Both shared the ancient need to procreate, to reproduce their species and bring the next generation into the world.

They pulsed with waves of pleasure building to the ultimate crescendo he knew waited at the end. The feeling grew intense, ecstasy sweeping through him, carrying him to a place he'd never known. It would end with a final release, but he held onto it while it lasted.

This was the ultimate drug he'd needed. This was the escape from his predicament. He lost himself in the experience, floating breathless on a sea of pleasure. Like a wave finally breaking on a beach, the pleasure crested with the orgasmic release that sent the next generation showering to take its rightful place in the Universe. The moment satiated him in a euphoric dream state where nothing mattered but the fulfillment of the ultimate purpose.

Once again, the creature faded releasing Tyler from its bonds. He was happy but wanted more of this ultimate high. He still wasn't sure how he had entered the creature but he was determined to keep trying.

He positioned himself in the middle of the flow, waiting for the transition. *Look for the dying ones.* The thought surfaced unbidden from inside. Was it the alien communicating? Tyler wasn't certain but accepted the advice quietly. He focused on a nearby couple nearing release. He followed as they swept past pulsing with the light Tyler knew was pleasure.

Finally they split, releasing their eggs into the current. Tyler focused on one of the creatures, looking for its light to fade. But it didn't, it continued its journey glowing brightly. He quickly scanned for the other creature, but couldn't make it out in the swarm. *Wait, there it was!* Tyler transitioned in front of it too late, as the light left an empty shell falling to the ground. *Damn!*

The process was too difficult, and Tyler's anger surfaced from the frustration. Apparently these creatures had differences, like male and female. He wasn't sure which was which but figured the male was likely the one that dropped dead after mating. This always seemed to be the case.

He scanned the flow, looking for another pair nearing completion. He spotted a large ball but knew he wouldn't know which was the male. He decided to scan for the telltale signs. As if helping him through the difficulties, the two creatures drifted only a small distance apart after separation. He watched for any indication a creature was dying, and finally, the one on the right dimmed. Tyler repositioned himself, desperate to make this work.

Like being drawn through a long tunnel, he felt the pull that filled the helpless creature with his powerful spirit. As quickly as he took over, he began his hunt, seeking a suitable mate without delay. Once more, he played out the addictive dance, following the music to its conclusion. Tyler didn't know whether the opposite sex felt the same experience, but he was willing to bet they did.

They were fortunate to experience the same pleasure without the destructive ending. Oh, well, to die after such bliss wasn't necessarily a bad way to go.

Tyler no longer cared for anything except the hunt for the powerful pleasures he would not deny himself. His quest for Earth fell to the side as self-gratification consumed him with lust. Everything took a back seat to his immediate satisfaction. One after another, Tyler kept up the hunt, possessing creature after creature, merging, releasing, merging, releasing, lost in the high that took away the pain and made life worth living.

Tyler lost count of the creatures he went through, as time stood still among his spiraling euphoria. He had a single purpose, merge and release. He took another creature, filling its dying body, bringing it back from death to breed the offspring that would inherit this desolate world. The wind pushed him through the stream as he sought another mate. He felt the presence of another approaching, and excitement grew. It moved closer before suddenly veering upward and away from Tyler.

What!? He was certain it had been coming toward him. Tyler felt uneasy as he sensed the stream of creatures flowing past at incredible speeds. He hadn't popped out of the creature, so how had he stopped? Everything flew past in a frustrating rush leaving him lonely and afraid. He was no longer moving, his progress stopped by some unknown obstacle. Desperation surfaced as the fear he would never get another chance seized him.

The remnants of the creature yearned to mate—but it couldn't move. Without appendages, they were helpless, stuck. Just as intense as mating, the sensation of not mating threatened to overwhelm him. He felt horror as the last of the creatures darted past him on their journey in the wind.

The pleasure was replaced with the loneliness of a wasted life. Depression hit hard, dragging him from the earlier highs. He now knew what it was truly like to miss the great opportunity life offered. He remembered his own life and the wasted efforts that didn't bear fruit. Grief consumed him, his misery rushing back as the reality staggered his soul with frustration. Darkness descended over his awareness, plunging him into a chasm of self-pity, self-loathing, and despair.

He wanted to die. *Why didn't you destroy me?* He shouted at the Universal void. Echoes of those voices taunted him with their sweet prediction of things to come. Why did they want him to live?

What was he supposed to do? What was he supposed to become? Why must he be tortured with a life that never ended?

Even the death of the creature would not release him from his misery. He would *pop-out* once more to roam the Universe as an insubstantial creature in the ethereal plane. He had no purpose, no life, and no hope. Adrift in the Universe, he was banished to wander it aimlessly, seeking a distant world he couldn't recognize that probably no longer existed.

Sure, it exists, you'll find it. Even his voice of determination was depleted, unable to withstand the depression consuming him. He drifted inward, letting go of his will. He wondered whether the alien could take away the pain and banish him to non-existence.

Sure I can, the voice drifted into his awareness. It was alien, yet familiar. *No, don't let it out!* His newfound determination resisted, urging him to take control. Tyler's awareness listened as the two parts fought for control. He didn't care who won. He didn't care what happened. He didn't care about anything.

He was forever trapped in his own awareness. They would both live useless lives, failing to complete the cycle, failing to recreate their existence.

Linda had wanted it, wanted it for a long time. But Tyler's selfish addictions kept them from fulfilling that destiny. Now, nothing of Tyler remained on Earth except the fading memories of those who had known him. Soon, those would fade, and he would be just another soul lost in the blurring vision of history.

Perhaps it was fitting, trapped in a creature on some distant world, alone and dying. If only he could die! Die and escape this wandering purgatory where life could only be experienced through others. You could never possess a life of your own. The pleasure of the mating had only been another drug to escape his pathetic existence. His whole life, short as it was, had been nothing more than one giant escape—an escape from everything that made life worth living.

And now he was trapped, unable to undo his past, and destined to repeat it over and over again. He was certain he'd never felt more hatred towards himself than he did at that moment. *A life squandered*, he thought miserably. Squandered because he was unfit to live, unfit to follow the cycle that existed for millennia.

Perhaps it was his upbringing, or maybe his genetic makeup? But those, too, were escapes, excuses for the failures that were surely of his design. How innocent to think some outside influence

brought him here, made him give up his life to waste away the years he should have spent building something with Linda. But he could not surrender to that lie, he was to blame.

It may have been an alien or some cosmic accident that brought him to this distant world, but he was to blame for the life he'd wasted. He hoped Linda not only grieved him, but felt anger towards him for blowing their one chance at proving their worth. He deserved no less than her wrath.

He sensed the creature fading, its life ending after Tyler's failure to procreate. Tyler didn't know how long they really lived, but he did take comfort in knowing the creature had succeeded before his hostile takeover—it was he who had failed.

The last of the life drained, and Tyler was released. He felt the insubstantial essence of his being spread out around the dead creature, and he stared at the lifeless husk trapped in a fissure on the side of a small cliff. At least it found death, something denied Tyler.

He transitioned off-planet, into the dark void of space. The melancholy would never leave as he continued to wallow in his shortcomings. He would be the greatest ghost the Universe would know, forever tormenting himself for the life squandered. What better hell for someone who had wasted the precious gifts of life?

He stared at the distant sun, entranced by its intensity. He yearned for it to burn him, destroy him in a fiery blaze of molten gas. He transitioned above its surface, awed by the pulsing of the internal fusion powering the giant ball of gas. He transitioned inside the turbulent inferno surrounded by waves of electric fire dancing to their own rhythms. But still he felt nothing. It was a silent movie, visually intense, but without sound, feeling, or emotion.

A wave pushed through him, blinding him to the surface in a white hot light. He transitioned deeper, seeking out a place to hide, a place to curl into a ball and let the depression consume him. *Let the alien take over, I do not want to live, I do not want this existence!*

Anger and resolve drove him deeper into the star as he sank deeper into his subconscious. He willed himself away, trying to undo what had been done. He felt nothing of the boiling mass around him, only the blinding light an indication he still lived. It swept through him and around him, as he forced his essence into a tight ball.

I want to die!

The thought filled his awareness as he tried to force himself from existence. *Let the alien have it, I don't care.* It was the last thought Tyler had before falling into a deep sleep.

Fate's Teacher

Tyler didn't know what had happened, but he'd been dreaming of he and Linda in Mexico. He remembered they'd had a son—a beautiful son with light brown hair and green eyes. Although he'd known it was a dream, the pleasure of being with her and their son seemed so real. His awareness lingered on the remnants, watching helplessly as they faded into his subconscious.

Laying on something soft, he heard hushed sounds close by. A comforting warmth spread through his body. *How can I feel?* The thought was confusing considering his predicament. He shouldn't be able to feel. He remembered entering the violent inferno of the star, yet everything was dark.

The sounds grew louder—a crackling. It sounded like a ... fire? Did the inside of a sun make this kind of sound? It was so comforting, he couldn't believe he was inside a star. *I hear and feel, but see only darkness?* Wherever he was, he didn't want to leave. He preferred the warm darkness to the cold depression of space.

Did I dream? He remembered Linda with their son. *How did I sleep?* Since becoming the insubstantial spirit, he'd never needed sleep, so why now? The sound was definitely a fire, the distinctive crackling and occasional pop left little doubt. Tyler wanted to see what made the noise, but darkness hid the flames. Slowly a light grew, blinding at first, then warm and yellow.

Tyler opened his eyes. He was stunned, he had eyes! He blinked several times to make sure. A quick scan revealed a soft couch in front of a cozy fireplace. From his position, he couldn't see the rest of the room. He sat up to clear the sleep.

How can this be happening? He wondered confused. It was disturbing, yet the change in environment was welcome. He surveyed the room covered in dark wood paneling barely lit by the fire's warm glow. Although the fire was the only source of light, if Tyler looked away, his eyes adjusted to the darker parts of the room.

It was somewhat large with bookshelves from floor to ceiling on the left and back walls. Ornate candles, lamps and figurines were prominently displayed on beautifully carved tables, and to the right of the fire, a large, overstuffed red leather chair sat empty, a small end table next to it holding an ashtray, pipe and teacup. The effect was surreal after Tyler's mindless search through space. He had a strange feeling he should know this place, but it was far more elegant than anything he'd ever known. Still, the room nagged at his memory. *I know this place, but where?*

Somewhere deep in inside, a thought rose to the surface, *Uncle Sal's*. That's it! This was the set from the Uncle Sal's show he'd watched as a kid. But this wasn't a set, it looked real. It had four walls, and one door. Tyler knew sets were not actual rooms, just stages made to look like one.

As he stood, he marveled at the sensations of feeling once more. How wonderful to have a body, to feel and to hear the world around you. He stared at the body, surprised it was as he remembered. He was even wearing his favorite pair of jeans and silk shirt. Everything down to the shoes was just as he remembered. *Is this real, or just a dream?* It didn't feel like a dream, but how did he get here? Was he back on Earth?

"I found you here." A deep, soft voice spoke from his right.

Tyler turned towards the sound and stared at Uncle Sal sitting peacefully in the red leather chair. As grandfatherly man loaded his pipe, he looked exactly as Tyler remembered. He wore the same brown tweed slacks, a white button-down shirt with a blue tie underneath a red vest. Everything was identical, even the wire rimmed glasses and thick black mustache peppered with gray.

What was left of his thinning gray hair was combed neatly back with a straight part on the left side. Tyler felt like a kid again, filled with the excitement that preceded this part of the show. The part where Uncle Sal read one of his adventure stories. But this can't be? They had canceled the Uncle Sal show when Tyler was in junior high, and he distinctly remembered when Uncle Sal,

really Sal Horowitz, had died several years later. This must be a dream, how else could he have a body and be in Uncle Sal's place?

"I created your body," Uncle Sal said calmly, "and this one too." He pointed at his own with the pipe.

"But," Tyler stumbled, the words struggling to form in his throat, "I thought I was dead, or something worse. Where are we?" Tyler sat back down, confusion sapping his strength.

"We are inside one of my stars," Uncle Sal said calmly, "I found you here." He said it casually as though that explained everything. "I wondered who you were, or more precisely, what you were. I've never seen anything in so much pain before. So, I wanted to help." He finished, smiling.

Uncle Sal lit his pipe, clouds of smoke billowing in the darkness overhead. He had such a serene look, as if this were normal, and everything was as it should be. Tyler remembered the sun he'd submerged in. Pain? That was true. He remembered wanting to die, wanting to turn everything over to the alien inside. Was this the alien?

"Uh, h-how can this be inside a star, it looks so real?" Tyler asked, not sure he wanted the explanation.

"It is real," Uncle Sal explained, "I made it myself—inside the star." He shifted in his seat and pointed his pipe at Tyler, "I made you as well. You were just a spirit, so I made you a body—a body I believe you once had." He puffed his pipe, blowing a smoke ring toward the fireplace.

"Yes, this is the body I once had ... but I thought it was gone forever." Tyler sat back, relaxing slightly, happy for the experience of being human. "I didn't think it was possible to feel like this again, to be me, really me." He smiled at Uncle Sal, a genuine smile of gratitude.

"What happened to your old body?" Uncle Sal asked. "Are you an Onyalum?"

"A what? Onielum? What is an Onielum?" Tyler was confused by the word, although it seemed to cause something inside to stir. *The alien?* He wasn't certain, but it would explain a lot.

"Ah! Then, you are not an 'Oh-ny-a-lum'. That may be why I can hear your thoughts."

'Oh-ny-a-lum'. Tyler let the word roll around his mind. "Is that how you created this, from my thoughts?" Tyler was more than astounded.

“Yes, this seemed like a setting that would comfort you.” He gestured at the room around them. “Does it make you feel uneasy? I could change it.”

“No, no, it is fine. This is the set from a television show I watched as a kid. A television show I liked.” Tyler did feel comfortable. The sleep probably helped.

“I see.” Uncle Sal pondered that for a moment, then looking at the contents of his pipe, he set it down. “I see a world in your thoughts, a world not unlike many I have created, yet it is not one of mine.”

“Earth?” Tyler offered.

“Earth. Yes, that is what it is called. Is it close to here?” Uncle Sal asked mildly, interest on his face.

“I don’t know.” It hurt Tyler to admit that fact.

“Ah, I am beginning to see a pattern.” Uncle Sal picked up his pipe and lit it once more, blowing huge clouds of smoke throughout the room.

Tyler noted the smell and it flooded his mind with memories from his childhood. His grandfather had smoked a pipe for a short while when Tyler was young. Although he’d quit shortly thereafter, Tyler still remembered the sweet, woody smell his mother complained about when they came to visit. Unfortunately, he died when Tyler was nine, and Tyler always wished he’d known him better.

“What pattern do you see?” Tyler asked, curious for any information that would shed light on his predicament. “What is an Onyalum?”

“An Onyalum is a creature of the Universe. They are not made of real matter,” he gestured with his pipe all around them, “but exist outside the *real* Universe. They travel through it, able to observe it, yet unable to interact with anything that is made of matter.” He stared at the floor deep in thought.

“Everything we see in the Universe is made of matter with a light sprinkling of the ethereal substance of the Universe. It is what gives matter its *life*. In this way, all things are connected to the Universe by this fabric of the insubstantial life force. From the smallest particles to the largest stars, each contains an ethereal component that binds them together.”

Uncle Sal blew rings into the air, satisfied with his explanation. “The complexity of the matter dictates the amount of ethereal substance it contains. Take for instance the life similar to the

bodies we currently possess, they possess a large amount of the ethereal life force, thus endowing them with more than just life. They have consciousness and a sense of self.”

He paused to refill his pipe and relit it in a blaze of flame and smoke. “For an Onyalum, matter cannot affect them and they cannot affect matter. It is only when the two are merged that one may control the other. As matter dies or is destroyed, the ethereal essence of that matter is released into the Universe to be recycled in another creation. During this point of release, an Onyalum may replace the missing essence, thus merging with the matter and taking control.”

Uncle Sal blew another series of smoke rings toward the fireplace, apparently amused at this newfound ability. Tyler waited patiently. “However,” Uncle Sal continued, “this ability to control comes at a cost, for the matter controls the Onyalum.” He paused again, briefly watching Tyler struggle to absorb his words.

Tyler listened closely, and was beginning to make the connection between the Onyalum and what he'd become.

“So basically, the Onyalum can *possess* someone when their own spirit is released?” It didn't fit any theology Tyler knew. “But, does that mean the person is dead, or gone, or what?”

Uncle Sal looked calmly at Tyler, small streams of smoke releasing casually from the sides of his mouth as he sucked gently on the pipe.

“Your choice of words seems to fit the nature of the Onyalum well. They *possess* the matter and likewise, the matter possesses them. Once an Onyalum possesses a body, they are unable to release themselves from that matter. Only when that matter is once again killed or destroyed is the Onyalum released. They are prisoners within the matter, yet they control it.”

“Okay, I believe I understand. I had the same experience with a simple life form on a planet near here. I was pulled into the creature and was trapped until the creature died. Maybe I am an Onyalum.” He stared at his hands as if some branding might appear to confirm his statement.

Uncle Sal watched Tyler with a puzzled look. “I do not believe you are an Onyalum, but something else ... something new and different.” He blew a smoke ring before continuing. “I see into your thoughts, something I do with my own creations, but never with an Onyalum. They are private, mysterious creatures, hiding inside creations, observing and enjoying the benefits of real life.”

He paused looking troubled by something he'd thought of. "Unfortunately, many Onyalum are malevolent creatures that seek power and use it to bring pain and destruction."

Tyler absorbed this quietly. If he was not Onyalum, then what was he? He felt the alien presence stir. The talk of Onyalum seemed to interest the buried entity. He was about to mention this strange presence, when Uncle Sal started again.

"I see your pattern as an accident or something. Your thoughts betray a simple being, something I myself might create, yet your insubstantial existence belies that and would indicate you are an Onyalum." He blew a thick cloud of smoke as he said this, once again distracted by the novelty. "I do not believe you were created, at least, not by design." He stopped to empty his pipe and set it down in the ashtray.

"I suppose the Universe may have created you, a new type of Onyalum perhaps?" He looked at Tyler intently, as though waiting for confirmation. Tyler didn't know what to say.

"Then again, it is more likely you are a creation of happenstance and accident. Your previous life would not be so narrow and transparent if you were solely an Onyalum." He stopped and waited patiently, looking for Tyler to respond.

"I..." Tyler began, and then stopped confused. "I suppose what you say may be true, but I just don't know how I came to be. My previous life was certainly simple, at least compared to now. I never knew anything existed outside my small world, until I was struck by something that ripped me out of that world and threw me into the middle of the Universe." Tyler was excited and angry as he retold the sad tale. "I am a changed being of new and frightening abilities, but forever lost in this vast Universe." He stopped and stared at the fire. "I don't know what I am."

The statement was flat and emotionless, his anger having nothing specific to blame things on. Tyler stared into the flames, memories of his previous life flashing before his eyes.

"Hmmm..." Uncle Sal murmured slowly. He was staring at Tyler as though trying to pierce the exterior and study the guts of this strange new life form he had discovered. They both sat quietly for a while, Tyler staring into the fire, Uncle Sal staring into Tyler.

Finally, Uncle Sal broke the silence, "I see a lot of pain and sorrow in you Tyler, and I believe I understand the causes. I have seen much pain and sorrow within many of my creations." He

stood up and walked to the fire, opening the screen and throwing more wood onto the dying flames.

“You have been taken, by accident, from the only world you knew. Now, you cannot find that world and you worry you will never find it. It must be upsetting.”

With the fire burning brightly, Uncle Sal closed the screen and returned to his chair. He picked up his pipe and loaded more tobacco into the smoldering bowl.

“I remember a time, so long ago that I could not even describe it to you in terms that would make sense to you, I, too, knew a world that I cherished. It was the first world I ever created. Looking back at it now, I suppose it was a rather simple, unrealistic world, but it suited me. I had created many creatures to inhabit this world, and they all loved me as I loved them. I would often live among them, relishing their happiness, taking care of their needs, watching them grow and evolve into wonderful beings.” He paused to light his pipe.

“I was new at creating and I suppose I was bound to make mistakes. The star this world revolved around was young. Not my first, but I was still new to the process. Before I realized what was happening, the star imploded with a devastating explosion that destroyed all the worlds around it. That wonderful world and all its creatures were obliterated in the blink of an eye.” He puffed his pipe, the memory of the incident drawing his face into a sad expression, an expression that didn't fit Uncle Sal.

“At first I was angry. I lashed out at what was left and destroyed it all. It took time, but I eventually calmed down and set myself to the task of creating again. But this time, I paid closer attention than before. I worked for millennia, crafting, perfecting, and guiding my creations. I was determined to build the greatest creations in the Universe, and for a while, I did. I don't really know how many worlds I created—it was hundreds or thousands of galaxies. No other creator worked as hard and diligently as I did, and I filled the Universe with a magnificent array of worlds and creatures.” He was gesturing expansively, the movement threatening to shake tobacco from his pipe.

He put his arms down and stuck the pipe in his mouth, drawing in smoke before releasing a large cloud followed by smoke rings that looked more like tiny galaxies swirling across the room. Tyler was intrigued by these fascinating rings, watching them gather on the far wall before dissipating.

“Alas, I finally stopped creating. I looked upon all I had done and wanted to enjoy each and every one. I went to many worlds and tried to live among the creatures I had created, but they did not know me. During the millennia of creating, my own creations evolved, creating their own worlds and religions, worlds that didn't include me. Many became hostile, damning me as an evil spirit sent to destroy them. I tried to change their minds. I gave them prosperity, health, happiness, but always they would turn against me. I tried punishing them, showing them that nothing could stand against me, but that bred fear, and through this fear, a false love.”

He shifted in his chair and grabbed the lighter to relight the pipe. Tyler was fascinated; he was listening to a god. A god telling him about creation, worship, and love. Tyler was awed.

Uncle Sal began again, his pipe exuding puffs of smoke as he talked. “Oh, there were many who accepted me, loved me for who I was and not because of what I might do. I spent a great deal of time on these worlds, helping them prosper and grow into something I was proud of. But it was never the same as that first world. Try as I might, I was unable to reproduce the innocence and newness of that first world. It wasn't that I loved my new worlds any less, they simply were different. I knew I could never have that first world again, and the loss of it brought me great sorrow.”

The sadness on Uncle Sal's face was real, and Tyler knew this god's loss was even greater than his own, insignificant loss.

Uncle Sal shot Tyler a look of great intensity. “You see, loss is a very real part of this Universe because change is a very real part of this Universe. You cannot question it and though you may not understand it, you cannot change it.” He leaned forward, staring directly into Tyler's eyes, a look of concern and compassion replacing the sadness. “You have changed, Tyler, like everything else. Your loss is very real and very painful, but it is only part of your journey through this Universe. You have been given something special, something that few creatures can ever experience or understand. Relish this new existence and find new worlds. They will never be the same as that first world, but that does not make them any less special.” He leaned back, apparently satisfied with his speech. Once again, he puffed his pipe.

Tyler knew he spoke the truth. Knew he would likely never find Earth again, but that shouldn't stop him from exploring new worlds and gaining new experiences. He looked back fondly at the excitement he'd felt possessing the small globular creatures, the

thrill of mating and the intense pleasure when successful. He would never find that experience on Earth, at least not in his previous life.

He realized he'd been indulging in self-pity and had to face up to the realization he could not change his predicament, but could embrace it and use it to discover a Universe he'd never imagined.

"I suppose drowning in my own anguish was self-pity. I've never really experienced loss before, and with the confusion of my circumstances, I didn't really know what to do. My loss seems insignificant compared to yours. I am sorry to have burdened you with it." Tyler folded his hands in his lap and stared at the floor.

"Nonsense," Uncle Sal said jovially, "I was not burdened. It was something I'd not experienced in a long time. You see, a great deal of time has passed since I interacted with any of my creations. By now, no one knows me or knows that I even exist. They have evolved beyond needing me, and I simply let them grow without my intervention. Perhaps that is for the best. But I enjoyed finding someone who needed my help—I'd forgotten how it felt to be needed."

Uncle Sal put the pipe down and sat up. "Come, let me show you some of my creations. Perhaps you will find something in them that will help you rejoice in your newfound existence."

Tyler followed Uncle Sal to the right side of the room and a door concealed behind paneling. Uncle Sal pressed gently against the side of the door, releasing it a crack. Light poured into the room, a brightness that was blinding after the dim firelight.

"Before we enter, I want you to know that we will not be visible to the inhabitants. Their physiology is far different than yours, and they are not aware of life outside their world. I do not wish to upset them with something that may be disturbing to the belief systems they have created."

Uncle Sal opened the door and walked through. Tyler followed into the bright light. As the door closed, Tyler found himself standing on what appeared to be a small dirt road through a tiny village. The sky was as blue as Earth's, but the clouds were slightly reddish colored despite the sun being directly overhead. Like a sunset at noon.

Tyler was taken by the fresh smells of vegetation and the incredible quietness broken only by the sounds of small animals in the fields and woods around them. Small creatures flew among the trees overhead. Tyler supposed they were birds, although the

vibrant colors were quite different than anything he remembered on Earth.

The tiny village consisted of three small buildings constructed from what Tyler assumed was dirt or other natural materials. It gave each a light tan color with mottled streaks of brown. The roofs were made of wood or another material fashioned into tiles layered from the top of the roof to the bottom where it met the exterior walls. Each building possessed a second floor and ample windows with a single door centered in the front under a small porch. They were basic dwellings, but looked comfortable.

Surrounding the village, dense woods and open fields spread out toward distant hills. Most of the fields held abundant crops growing under the warm sun. The setting was rural and tranquil, with an air temperature that was pleasantly warm with only a hint of humidity. A light cool breeze blew in across the fields, bringing the rich smell of tilled soil and earthy crops. Uncle Sal let him absorb the surroundings before speaking.

“I created this world billions of years ago. I was determined to create a peaceful world rich in diversity and abundant with resources. The weather on this planet is moderate from pole to pole, a challenge to get right. It rains regularly, but not too much or too often.”

He pointed to the village. “Those structures were built by one of several intelligent creatures that evolved on this world. There are actually three intelligent life forms, more than I have ever created on any other world. I suppose the pleasant, abundant riches of this world helped spur this development.”

Uncle Sal walked down the left side of the street toward one of the buildings, stopping on the top step of the porch.

“This was the last world I ever created, and the one I am most proud of. You see, not only did three different creatures evolve into intelligent life, but they coexist peacefully. The usual plagues of creation, war, famine, disease, competition, do not exist here. Come, let us go in and see some of these wonderful people.”

Tyler watched as Uncle Sal walked through the closed door. It was disconcerting to see, especially when one of his arms came back through, gesturing for Tyler to follow. Tyler shrugged and walked up the steps and through the door. The transition through the door was smooth without feeling.

They stood within a small foyer, stairs straight ahead and two doors on either side. Small hooks were fastened to the wall by the front door with colorful garments hanging on them.

Uncle Sal headed through the doorway on the right and walked through the simply furnished room towards the back of the house. Tyler followed, taking in the intricately carved furnishings and knickknacks throughout the room. They walked through another doorway into a dining area with a large table set with dishware and steaming bowls of food. Uncle Sal paused before heading through another doorway into the kitchen. Tyler hurried to keep up.

Through the opposite doorway, they turned right and entered a small room where candles burned against the far wall. The candles were lined on a tiered dais beneath the figure of a creature that vaguely looked like an elephant, but was too thin and human shaped. On the floor of the room, kneeling before the figurine were four seemingly human shaped bodies bent in prayer.

"They are worshipping their god before they eat." Uncle Sal walked through them toward the figurine on the dais. "Undoubtedly an early predecessor now deified and worshipped."

Uncle Sal turned from the figurine and looked closely at the kneeling figures on the floor.

"They developed this religion thousands of years ago, in an attempt to explain the bounty of their lives. I was never here for them, so they do not know me. Unfortunate, I suppose, but I am still happy and proud of what they have become."

The figures on the floor spoke strange phrases that Tyler did not understand. Suddenly they stopped, rose from the floor and made gestures toward their god before turning to leave the room. Only then did Tyler see them fully. Although their proportions were human, their faces were definitely not.

The skin was a pale yellow and the mouth was quite generous with two fairly large teeth or tusks protruding from either side. The nose, or more accurately, the trunk, hung at least four feet from the face and appeared to have small fingers or joints at the end. The slanted eyes were slightly out on the side of the face, and the color was a deep green that looked intense against the yellow skin. The hands were small with only four, chubby digits, three and what appeared to be a thumb.

Tyler was amazed to see something so similar to a human, yet not like one at all. For the first time, he gazed on a truly intelligent, alien life form. He watched as one used its trunk to extinguish the

candles and put them away in a box next to the figurine of their god. The creature had four small, round breasts concealed by loose clothing. Tyler assumed she was female.

"Beautiful, aren't they?" Uncle Sal was smiling as he watched his creations go about cleaning up after worship. Tyler wasn't sure beautiful was the word he would use, but then he couldn't help but think of them as some distorted human being, grossly crossed with an elephant.

Uncle Sal looked at him with concern. "Your bias against these creatures does not speak highly of your kind." He walked past Tyler toward the dining room.

Tyler knew he was being superficial, but he had never seen intelligent life so similar to humans. Clearly, it would take time for him to get accustomed to alien life forms. He didn't think of himself as prejudice, more likely cautious and wary of something that was different.

Tyler followed the female through the kitchen into the dining room. All stood waiting for her arrival before taking their seats. Uncle Sal stood against the back wall, arms folded, looking thoughtful.

Tyler wasn't sure if he had upset him or not. "Look, I didn't mean to think such things, I've just never seen another intelligent life form. It is true though, my species does have a history of judging others by their looks or differences. We only have one intelligent life form on my world, and our dominance came at the cost of many other, lower life forms."

Tyler leaned against the doorway from the kitchen and watched as the family passed and served food. He knew his excuse was lame, but it was all he had. He simply couldn't stop his reaction, but he hoped that he could one day change it.

Uncle Sal looked up, concern replaced with a light smile. "I understand Tyler, your world is not unlike many I have created. Competition and dominance play major roles in the lives of its inhabitants, thus creating a wedge between them and others that threaten their survival. Distrust is inherent in the evolutionary processes that control them. Do not worry, I believe you will overcome these limitations."

Uncle Sal stood from the wall and walked back to the front of the house. "Come, there is more to see."

Tyler followed him through front door, expecting to come out on the front porch as before. Instead, he found himself on another world, standing next to a deep chasm.

The sky was dark red with black clouds or smoke that obscured the pale sun. The air was acrid, like a forest fire, and the ground shook violently, nearly knocking Tyler to the ground. When it stopped, Tyler watched a plume of red hot lava spew from a volcanic dome in the distance. All around, plumes of smoke rose from the heaving ground. Tyler saw no life, plant or otherwise. Uncle Sal was somber as he stared at the distant volcano.

“This world is being torn apart, reaching the end of its existence. The dominant life form left thousands of years ago, settling on another, more stable world. You see, this world is a moon orbiting a gas giant that has been collapsing for millennia. The gravitational pull has become so strong, it is tearing its moons apart.”

He stared across the expanse, watching plumes of smoke that indicated the last moments of a dying world.

“You see, Tyler, this, too, is part of life in the Universe. As it is created, so, too, will it be destroyed. There is neither right nor wrong in this pattern, it is only the natural flow of creation. This, too, would have been your fate, had you remained on your world. Now, however, you have been given a gift few will ever know, the gift of eternity. Choose what to do with it, and that will determine right or wrong. I cannot choose your fate, it is only in your hands.”

Uncle Sal stood silently, staring at Tyler with a serious expression. It made Tyler think about his own inadequacies. He knew what Uncle Sal said was true, that his destiny was his to make. It was the inevitable decision Tyler had been avoiding. He didn't want that responsibility. He wanted something he could blame it on, something or someone that would take it from him.

“I feel the presence of something inside me, perhaps it is an Onyalum, I don't know.” Tyler felt guilty at hiding this from Uncle Sal before. He knew he'd come close to giving up and turning his life over to the essence of the alien. Now, he was ashamed by such a cowardly act.

Uncle Sal showed pity. “I know about that presence in you. I wasn't sure what it was but now I am. I do believe it is an Onyalum that has become irreversibly combined with you, creating this new Tyler.”

“What if it takes over? I almost let it before you found me.”

“I do not think you will let it, at least not anymore. I believe it will simply become a part of you, another part of your being.”

“But what if it is a malevolent Onyalum? Will it make me do bad things and make wrong choices?” Tyler was concerned he might change more into the Onyalum and that might lead to even more horrible events—events he couldn't control.

Uncle Sal smiled. “I do not think so, Tyler, but maybe it will, and maybe it won't. That is a journey you must take alone. I wanted you to see that life and death abounds throughout the Universe. You are not alone. You may be something new and unique, and you may be judged by that, perhaps unfairly, but you must make the choices that will determine how Tyler fits into this Universe.”

“I don't want to hurt or destroy,” Tyler began, “I don't really know what I want. I realize I will probably never find my world, but can I really find happiness on another?”

“You won't know until you try.”

Tyler knew Uncle Sal was right, that he would have to make his own decisions and seek out new worlds. He would have to overcome his limited background to seek out new life forms and build new relationships. It was he who was different, and he would be the one who would have to adjust to the strange worlds he encountered.

Tyler felt a glimmer of excitement, a chance to see something new and different, something alien. He began to look forward to it.

Uncle Sal smiled. “I am glad you are excited, but remember, loss is a very real part of life.” He gestured at the dying world around them. “You must be prepared for the eventuality that you will always go on when those around you will not. You must live for the moment, knowing that the moment will be gone as fast as it came. Enjoy those moments and others around you will enjoy them as well. Then, you will make the right decisions.”

“I understand what you are saying, but I don't know how well I will take future losses. However, I am willing to try.”

“Good! Come, let us start you on your journey.” Uncle Sal turned from the edge of the cliff and walked towards a door that stood amid the decaying world. The effect was strange, like something out of the twilight zone.

Before opening the door, Uncle Sal turned towards Tyler. “I want you to know that I am willing to help you whenever you feel you need it. I cannot make your decisions, but I will be willing to

discuss them with you or simply talk as a friend. Many creators will not offer you this type of friendship, they will be wary of you, because they will see you as an Onyalum. Be prepared for that.”

Uncle Sal put his hands on the doorknob, preparing to open it.

“But how will I find you?” Tyler knew he would need this friendship, it was the only one he had.

“My name, the name I was given when I was created, is Thosolan. Simply think my name very hard and very directly, and I will hear you and find you.”

Uncle Sal opened the door and through it Tyler saw the intense burning of the sun they'd started in.

“My body will not survive going through the door will it?”

“No, you will lose your body once more, but you will be free to begin your journey. There are many worlds in my galaxies, feel free to explore them and experience the life that is so precious.”

“Thank you, Uncle Sa..., I mean, Thosolan, your friendship and help mean a great deal to me. I will try making myself into something better than I was.”

Tyler moved toward the door, but was stopped short by Thosolan's hand. Thosolan extended his hand as though to shake, and Tyler was taken aback by this human gesture. He took Thosolan's hand in a warm embrace.

“It is you that you must make proud, Tyler. Only then can others be proud of you. Good luck, and remember, I am always here if you need me.”

Tyler nodded and stepped through the doorway, feeling only a momentary burning before entering the silence of the Universe.

Admiral's Luck

Tyler understood Thosolan's message and was determined to find a new life. He knew going back was not a viable answer. Rather, he had to move forward, discover new worlds and new relationships. Searching in one of Thosolan's galaxies seemed a logical first step. He left the fiery star behind and searched for systems promising life. This time, however, he was determined to find intelligent life, not just glowing orbs of light.

Like before, he began searching from a point in the galactic rim, working his way counterclockwise, inevitably towards the central core. His search brought him through millions of unique systems filled with varied life forms, but none intelligent. He maintained patience and continued searching.

As he spiraled further inward, he came upon a system with two Earth-like planets. Each contained the telltale white and blue of oceans and clouds, but the planet furthest from the sun contained large areas of brown, indicating a drier climate. Tyler was hopeful and focused his attention to the planet closer to the sun. With the larger bodies of water, he figured he was more likely to find life.

He came out above the planet prepared to move to the surface when sparks of light around one of the two moons drew his attention. He focused on the distant objects, but could not determine what they were. Perhaps it was an astronomical phenomenon related to the moon? He wasn't certain, but decided to check it out before heading to the planet's surface.

He focused on the moon and made his transition. In orbit above the moon, hundreds of spaceships were engaged in an epic battle. Ships of all sizes darted in and out of the fray as the larger ships

fired enormous pulses of light. From Tyler's position, it reminded him of a swarm of angry bees after the hive was disturbed.

One very large ship dominated the battle while smaller ships moved about it locked in combat. The smaller ships were protecting the large ship by firing pulses of light at the angry bees. Tyler watched, fascinated. He'd seen plenty of science fiction movies on Earth, but never had he ever believed he'd actually witness one.

He'd found intelligent life, advanced even beyond Earth's standards. He grew excited at the prospects of meeting such highly evolved beings. Despite the ongoing explosions and pulses of light, he was ready to face anyone capable of intelligent conversation.

He continued to watch, noticing the battle was moving fast. Already, the larger ship had sustained heavy damage and was listing out of control. The aggressors were showing signs of extreme damage as many small, lifeless ships littered the battlefield. Tyler was disappointed to see the end of such a momentous battle.

He was ready to return to the planet when an enormous explosion rocked the larger ship. The blast blew away a huge section of the side of the ship from the bottom all the way to its top. The gaping hole was littered with the twinkling starlight of debris spewing from the wound.

The power of the blast pushed the ship closer toward the moon, and the ship's inability to control its movement put it in peril as the moon's gravity pulled it downward. Tyler watched amazed as the lights on the large ship flickered intermittently before plunging into darkness. The dark ship tumbled in slow motion, bleeding profusely as it began to fall towards certain death.

Tyler was awestruck. The immense size and armaments of this ship made it seem impossible to defeat, but the swarm of bees had done their job. They'd disabled what must have been the flag ship of the fleet, although their success came at a high cost to themselves. Many of the smaller ships began pulling off from the battle and moved desperately toward their dying leader. Tyler thought the bigger ship had to be the command ship, like an aircraft carrier in the center of a fleet. He watched as it rolled slowly in a death spin that took it closer to the waiting moon.

The small ships flew erratically around the flag ship, unable to get close because of the spin. They searched feverishly, looking for some way to dock to the large ship. Tyler felt like a distant

observer waiting for the battle to end so he could report his observations. He'd never seen a real military battle except on television, but now he watched one in space.

Wanting more, he transitioned above the large ship as it spun slowly below him. As it made another turn, Tyler saw the gaping hole come back into view. Nothing in or around the hole was alive, only debris from the explosion twinkled in the light of the moon below.

Tyler wanted to see inside such a ship, assuming there was anything left to see. He transitioned to the top of the hole and kept moving to keep up with the ship as it rotated. Several smaller ships finally managed to land on it and fired their engines to slow its spin. Tyler hoped they'd succeed. His constant need to transition took its toll.

As if in answer to his prayers, the spin slowed before stopping entirely. Tyler took advantage and transitioned to a point outside the blast hole. At that range, he could see shredded metal from the ship's interior. Picking his path carefully, he made his way through the wreckage, searching for a passageway or opening to gain access. He knew somewhere toward the center of the ship, something had to remain.

He saw a glimmer of dull light to the left and made his way toward it. A small light above a doorway glowed dimly, apparently a sort of emergency lighting. Tyler couldn't open the door and wasn't sure how to get past it. Without seeing what was on the other side, he assumed he would be unable to transition. Was transitioning based on sight? He was puzzled and frustrated. He was ready to try anything. He thought hard, picturing himself on the other side of the door. Slowly, he felt the familiar transition as everything blurred. It worked! He came out inside one of the ship's wide passageways.

All around the corridor, debris floated silently, bouncing off smooth walls. He made his way through the dim light, looking for anything that indicated life. Nothing. How far had he come? It seemed like he'd been moving in a clockwise fashion, so he backtracked and decided to move through one of the interior doors.

Once again, he made the transition and found himself inside a storage closet cluttered with floating material off the shelves. He didn't recognize any of the debris and moved back into the hallway. He tried door after door, but most led to additional

passageways or rooms in which no life, dead or alive, remained. *Is this some sort of robot ship?* Tyler was beginning to think so.

He took another passageway leading further towards the inner part of the circle he'd been traveling. He came to a doorway on the right side of the corridor and decided to check once more. Making the transition, he entered a dimly lit room also littered with debris. Tyler surveyed the mess, trying to discern what the distant banks of panels and blinking lights represented. In front of the panel, Tyler spotted a large chair. From his current position, he couldn't see if anyone was in it so he moved closer.

If anyone was on the ship, he was curious to see what they looked like. Elephants? Tigers? Monkeys? He could only guess.

He moved above the chair and looked down on a poor lifeless figure. The creature floated limp against the straps of their safety harness holding them to the chair. Tyler was surprised, it looked nearly human. Two arms, two legs, one head, and a little dark colored hair, made it appear human. Tyler looked closely at the face. The skin was very white, almost translucent, and there was no facial hair of any kind.

The lack of a defined nose took away the human illusion. Instead, two small flaps centered on the face must have been the equivalent of a nose. The mouth was small, with thin blue lips that Tyler thought might not actually be the normal color. He guessed the poor creature had suffocated since no physical wounds were obvious.

The creature's hands were small with four fingers and a thumb. Despite looking human, the ends of the fingers bespoke something alien. Instead of *human* fingernails, this creature had three-pronged claws on each finger, except the thumb. The claws were not long, but Tyler guessed they could inflict serious damage. This feature gave the creature a decidedly *animal* look to it.

The eyes were opened, but they didn't seem real. They were completely black, large, and oval shaped. Again, Tyler thought this could be caused by death. Without eyelashes and eyebrows, the face looked like the caricature a child might draw. He had to remind himself that most of the creatures he would encounter would not be human, although this one held similar characteristics.

He searched the exterior of the body hoping to find an indication of whether it was male or female. He couldn't tell from the featureless thin body in a white, single piece suit. As Tyler stared at the lifeless body, it began to shake violently as if in an

earthquake. It startled Tyler and took him a moment to realize the ship was shaking. He wondered if another explosion had caused the quake or whether the smaller ships were trying something else in a frantic attempt to save it from the surface of the moon.

Tyler left the dead body to continue his search for additional signs of habitation. Now that he knew there was life aboard, he knew there had to be more than just that one. Apparently the corridor had also lost its artificial gravity as Tyler came upon a lone figure floating lifeless through the passageway. The being looked similar to the one he'd found in the chair, so Tyler kept moving.

The corridor ended at a set of large doors with red lights blinking above them. To the right of one door, Tyler could make out writing, but he couldn't read any of it. Although the symbols were alien, he assumed it named what the room was.

Taking the plunge, Tyler transitioned through the doors and into a very large, circular room with multiple levels. The ceiling of the room was forty feet overhead, and the walls rose up to meet it with multiple walkways and permanent seating stationed in front of banks of lights and screens. For the moment, the screens were mostly dead.

In the center of the room, a large semicircular console dominated the surrounding chairs. In its center, one large chair stood empty. Tyler imagined it must have been the Captain's chair. Although not familiar with ships of any kind, he believed he'd found the bridge. He based this on the large view screen occupying much of the far wall. The chairs and consoles faced the blank screen as if waiting for a show to begin. It reminded him of the bridge on a ship he'd watched on television as a kid.

Throughout the room, tiny fires glowed from consoles burnt out from the massive power overload caused by the explosion. If there was fire, there was still an atmosphere. Everywhere Tyler looked, bodies lay lifeless. Most remained strapped to their chairs or hovered nearby, just above the floor.

The scene was disturbing as many of the bodies had large wounds from the debris or violent shaking during the explosion. It would explain why some of the chairs were ripped from their flooring, bodies still in them. Everywhere Tyler looked, globes of red blood, at least Tyler thought it was blood, flew about the room like ominous marbles. Occasionally, one would stain a creature's

white uniform. If Tyler was in a real body, he was certain he'd have been sick.

He was ready to leave when movement caught his eye. One of the bodies floating near him had moved. He watched as it jerked uncontrollably. He moved closer, curious to see if it was still alive. As he neared, he could make out its face. The eyes were closed and the mouth gaped open, looking more dead than alive. The body jerked once more, this time violently, bringing it closer to Tyler.

He watched it as it stopped convulsing and glowed slightly. Tyler was fascinated by the smoke or cloud that emanated from the creature. The ethereal essence spread through the room, dissipating. Tyler wasn't certain what it was, but he had a suspicion. As if proving his point, he felt a strong pull towards the body. Like the glowing orbs, he was sucked into the body of this dying creature.

Tyler had realized too late the glowing cloud hadn't been smoke, but the spirit of the creature leaving its body in death. Just like the glowing orbs, Tyler was trapped inside the dying body. As he entered, he felt enormous pain ripping him from consciousness. The body convulsed without control, and though he desperately tried to open the eyes, he could only make out blurry, incoherent images. Struggling to stay conscious, he urged the body to die again, releasing him from its grasp.

The sounds of a siren or something like it rang in his ears, but through the haze, he couldn't tell if the sound was outside or inside his head. As the last remnants of consciousness fell aside, he thought he heard voices. Unfortunately, all he cared about was the receding pain as he descended into the cool, peaceful blackness.

* * * *

Tyler slipped in and out of consciousness, not knowing where he was or what was happening. In those rare moments he would drift awake, he felt as if he were lying on something soft. Unfortunately, no matter how hard he tried, he could never stay conscious enough to open his eyes or sense anything more than pressure on his back.

In the blackness of unconsciousness, he dreamed of a strange world filled with beings that were human, yet not human. At times he was himself, the human Tyler, but other times he was one of the other creatures. Everyone spoke strange and exotic languages, and

although Tyler couldn't understand what they were saying, an occasional word suddenly came to life, offering a glimmer into his strange surroundings. It was disconcerting, and Tyler felt alien and alone.

He was a part of this dream world, yet he knew it to be a dream. A whole lifetime of this alter-ego passed like a movie in his mind—a movie in which he had an active role. He was lost in this other life and clung desperately to what he knew was Tyler—or what he thought was Tyler.

Frustrated, he demanded that others in his dream call him Tyler, not *Admiral* as they kept referring to him. But despite his insistence, everyone would peer at him strangely before laughing it off. His frustrations grew, but the strange world ignored his pleadings.

He couldn't remember what had happened, and he struggled to piece it together. Unfortunately, the other life intruded, forcing him back into the strange world he did not comprehend. A world where he knew he didn't belong. He fought against it, trying to will himself awake, to escape from the alien surroundings, but it was useless, the movie played on with Tyler trapped in the role of the Admiral.

At one point, he found himself on the bridge of a large vessel. He barked commands as people scurried about him, moving to execute the orders he didn't even understand. It was surreal as he didn't even know what was going on. Helpless, he looked upon the scene, a part of it, yet still apart from it.

Something serious was happening, that much he'd figured, but he still didn't know what. His other self continued barking orders as an occasional word drifted into Tyler's consciousness, making sense. Words like *armament*, *condition*, and *prepare*, reinforced Tyler's sense that something serious was taking place.

The scene played out, until Tyler felt the room shake. Deep sounds rumbled off the walls, forcing everyone to grab onto anything that would hold them steady. Tyler or his other self desperately grabbed for the arm of a nearby chair, but missed as he was flung across the room slamming into the side of a console. A bright light flashed across his eyes as a searing pain ripped through his left side. Stars swam through his vision as he slipped back into a dark oblivion of pain. He felt his mouth move to scream, and then he woke upright in a bed, his screams echoing into an empty room.

His mind reeled with confusion as he sought an explanation. Was he awake this time or was he trapped in another dream world? It felt real enough as he moved his hands around his body. A painful spot on his left side brought back memories of the bridge and slamming into the console, but he was certain that was a dream. Or had it?

The pain was real enough, but for some reason, the body didn't feel like his own. He stared around the room looking for something familiar, something to bring clarity to his situation. It was a bleak, utilitarian room with blank white walls that belied no signs of where he was. He looked down at the bed. White linen sheets covered by a cream colored blanket all seemed normal enough. At his side, a small table held a lamp and small electronic devices with several lights, one blinking blue. Again, no help.

He searched his mind for clues. But the other self intruded, memories that were not his own swam to the surface despite his efforts to suppress them. Through only a force of will, he brought back his own memories. Thosolan, the glowing orbs, his predicament, everything flooded back. Suddenly, visions of a dying ship and being sucked into a dying body sprang into his consciousness.

It all made sense. He was still in the body, trapped in what appeared to be a hospital room. Was he still in space? Was this a floating hospital ship? The single window in the room to his left was covered by a blind, blocking his view. However, light seeping around the edges indicated he was no longer in space.

He assumed he was on the blue planet he'd originally seen before being distracted by the battle over the moon. He carefully felt his face, and the lack of nose seemed to confirm what he'd already known. He looked at his hands and stared blankly at the unusual three pronged nails protruding from each digit. It was strange and alien.

The dull pain along his side, back, and legs intensified as he sat quietly. The minor exertions sapped his strength. He fell back onto the pillow exhausted but willed himself to stay awake. At least here he felt more like himself, despite the new body. Occasional flashes of the other memories shot through his mind, but he was quickly able to ignore them.

He lay motionless staring at the ceiling, wondering where he was, or better yet, who he was. Wasn't this what he'd wanted, a chance to experience other worlds, other people, and new

experiences? It was, but now he wasn't certain he was actually prepared for it. The glowing orbs were one thing, but an intelligent life-form held great unknowns. Who was this creature, what did he do on the destroyed ship, and what life did he have here on their world? Tyler could sense and see visions of the creature's memories, but like the hidden alien inside, he was scared to let them surface.

Go on, take a chance, and experience the life you have taken! The voice of the alien tempted him as his fears grew stronger. He didn't want to lose himself to the memories, losing what was left of Tyler and becoming the *Admiral*.

That was it! The memory had come forth unbidden, but he knew he was an Admiral. Like a floodgate opening, the memories of the battle above the moon overran his ability to stop them. Names, faces, places, everything began to intrude. Panic gripped Tyler and he fought to keep the Admiral's memories at bay. Slowly he pushed them into his subconscious, leaving only his own thoughts and memories. A few scant thoughts about the battle lingered, and Tyler realized that something had gone terribly wrong to cause their crushing defeat. He knew that the ship he'd been on was the best they had. If they had lost that, they were severely crippled.

Tyler felt naked against these other thoughts. So crisp and militaristic, they didn't mesh with what Tyler thought of as himself. He pushed them aside and began falling back to sleep, the exertions taking what little energy he'd had. He wanted to stay awake, but the exhaustion and pain forced him into the blackness. At least this time he didn't dream.

* * * *

The sound of movement in the room woke Tyler. The pain had subsided to bearable levels, and Tyler felt ready to face the strange new world. He lifted his head to view someone by the bureau at the end of the bed. Their back was to him, so he couldn't make out what they were doing. He slowly raised himself into a seated position, trying not to disturb the person.

He looked over the person from head to toe, deciding it was a female, though he couldn't point to any one characteristic to back that assumption. The small height and wider hips were his only clue. The woman wore a white, one piece suit similar to the

uniforms on the ship, but in her case, gold trim along the sleeve and waist gave it a more distinguished appearance. Her head was covered with dark brown hair, shoulder length and neatly styled. Tyler wondered if this was someone the Admiral had known. If so, he wondered if he would recognize her.

The person closed the drawers, turning towards Tyler. She did not notice him at first, but as the realization dawned, her placid features were replaced with a look of shock, tears, and concern. She spoke rapidly through tears, but nothing made sense to Tyler. Was he back in his dream world? She wiped her eyes but couldn't stop the stream flowing down her cheeks. Tyler realized the Admiral must have known the woman. A daughter? Wife? He couldn't be sure.

The woman calmed down and muttered something quietly before leaving through the door. She lingered slightly with a brief smile before disappearing. Nothing she'd said made sense to Tyler. Though the language was melodic and beautiful, Tyler hadn't picked up a single word. His anxiety increased.

What if they couldn't understand him? How would they treat him? He imagined not very well. Injured in battle and unable to speak or understand anyone else, they would certainly think he was brain damaged. Tyler didn't like the thought of that—life in rehabilitation, or worse, an institution for the mentally impaired. This was the experience he'd been looking for?

The door burst open, and two official men in white smocks carrying strange devices walked towards Tyler. At first they said nothing, one of them analyzing the electronic device on the table next to the bed. They spoke to each other before turning their attention to Tyler. Tyler wasn't sure, but he thought they were asking him questions. They didn't make sense to him either, so he sat quietly staring back.

After several attempts to communicate, they conferred with each other before taking out additional devices to examine Tyler. Tyler watched patiently as they looked at every inch of him, some devices chilling to the touch while others operated without contact.

Satisfied, the two men conferred before speaking to Tyler once more and leaving. Tyler was frustrated. He needed to understand them, to communicate, but he didn't know how. *I can communicate with them.* The alien voice offered gently. It was tempting, but Tyler didn't want to give up control, at least not yet.

He thought about the Admiral's memories, still held in check, but pushing for an audience. Maybe they could provide him the missing language. He wanted to use them, but once again, held back because of fear. Perhaps he should try saying something first? He wasn't sure if he would even be able to speak, in any language, let alone an alien one. He decided it was worth a try—maybe he would get lucky and it would come out in the admiral's language. He opened his mouth and spoke.

"I ammb Tyleers." It sounded bad, even to him, but at least he had made a sound. He wondered why it didn't come out right. Maybe the Admiral's body was having difficulty with English. He tried again.

"Weer ammb I?" It sounded the same, so he quickly rattled off more.

"Tee bruun thok chump ober tee feenst."

"Maarwy had a leetol lamm, eet feese waast wheet at thow."

He fell silent. He wasn't sure he could understand what he had said. At least he could talk, if only he had a language to talk with.

The door opened, breaking Tyler from his reverie. It was one of the *doctors*, at least that's what Tyler was calling them, and the woman who'd been there earlier. They spoke to him, but again he couldn't respond. The Doctor asked more questions, but this time pointed to the woman next to him. Tyler realized that he was probably asking if he recognized the woman.

Tyler didn't know what to do. He couldn't communicate, but he knew he better try. He had to make them at least suspect that he was close to regaining some control. He nodded his head in agreement and spoke one word, "Yees."

The Doctor and woman looked puzzled, and stared at each other to confirm the other didn't understand it either. The Doctor pointed to himself and asked another question. Tyler responded by shaking his head as he said no. It came out *Nuh*, but was close enough. They didn't understand English, good or bad.

Shaking his head from side to side, the Doctor looked even more puzzled. He said something to the woman before once again leaving the room. The woman looked concerned and pulled up a chair from the corner. She sat down and refused to look directly at Tyler, choosing instead to stare about the room randomly. Tyler studied her face carefully. She had very delicate features, small ears, mostly hidden by her hair, small hands, and the small nose flaps of this species. In a way, she was attractive, and he wondered

if she might not be his wife. It made logical sense, but no recognition sprang forth.

He yearned to dip into the Admiral's memories, to find some reference of her, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. She sat at the end of the bed, looking concerned and rubbing her hands nervously. Finally, she got up the courage to look Tyler in the eyes as she spoke to him quietly. He thought it was a question, but when he didn't respond, she looked down and spoke in a steady stream.

Sadness filled her features as more tears fell from her eyes. Tyler was helpless. He wanted to assist her, wanted to make her feel better, but he didn't know what to do. She continued talking through tears, grabbing cloth from her suit to dry her eyes. At times, she stared at him but usually looked away, the pain of his lack of recognition too much to bear.

Tyler felt saddened, too, unable to ease her obvious pain. Whoever she was, she had intense feelings for the Admiral. If only he could talk to her, but nothing he said made sense. Out of nowhere, a single word floated into his consciousness, *Eyleeria*. Not knowing why, he opened his mouth and spoke it gently. Immediately, the woman stopped talking, a look of disbelief filling her face. Tyler said it again, and this time she smiled, fresh tears pouring from her eyes. Without warning, she jumped out of the chair and wrapped her arms around Tyler, her head crying into his shoulder.

He didn't know what he'd said, but apparently it had worked. Perhaps it was her name. In any event, it was something she recognized. Tyler gently put his arms around her, patting her back in a reassuring manner, ignoring the pain ripping through his side. She held him tighter, the tears wetting his bedclothes.

Finally, as his pain became unbearable, he pushed her away. Reluctantly, she released him and sat down on the bed at his side. She began speaking, this time animated and certain. Tyler didn't understand any of it. She didn't seem to care as glowing relief filled her features. She dried her eyes, gesturing with her hands to emphasize her speech.

It was lost on Tyler, but he was glad he had brightened her. *Eyleeria*. The word rolled through his mind, and he admired it for its poetic sound. He decided against saying it once more, and simply lay back in his bed to ease the pain inflaming his side.

She noticed his discomfiture, and sat up from the bed. She helped tuck him in before kissing him gently on the cheek and

walking toward the door. He did feel tired, and looked forward to a short nap. She paused at the door, turning back to him with genuine joy. Her face had changed. Instead of the usual white skin, her face glowed a warm rose color. It made Tyler feel an instant attraction toward her, although he didn't know why. He assumed this was a good sign.

She said something softly before leaving the room, closing the door behind her. The silence weighed heavily on his eyes, and he let them fall shut. Sleep approached, and he embraced its arrival. This time, he dreamed of the Admiral and Eyleeria.

* * * *

Tyler woke in the dark room. The lights were turned down, and nothing seeped through the blinds. It was night, so he lay quietly staring into the ceiling. He replayed the encounter with Eyleeria, realizing that was her name. He had dreamed of her and the Admiral, and in those dreams, he, or the Admiral had called her Eyleeria. He probed the dream, but it faded before he could yield much from it.

There was something else about the Admiral and Eyleeria, but he couldn't remember what. He knew there was some bond between them, but what eluded him. He thought about the Admiral's memories. He had bottled them in his subconscious and was reluctant to let them out.

He wanted to find a way to release them slowly, so that he could organize them and keep them from over-running his own.

I can help you. The alien suggested.

Tyler considered the offer carefully. He feared the presence but was good at suppressing it. Did he really have enough control to cooperate with it? He wasn't certain, but he desperately wanted to know more about the Admiral and find a way to communicate with the people around him. He decided to take the bait. *Okay, tell me how.* He felt the presence swell from the depths at his response. He tightened his control and held it back.

How can I help if you hold me back? The alien pleaded.

You can simply tell me what I need to know. Tyler said coldly. He tightened his control, letting nothing of the alien escape the confines of his subconscious.

No response. Tyler didn't know if the alien was contemplating the situation or refusing to cooperate under Tyler's terms. Tyler

urged gently. *Very well, I can simply try it myself, without your help.*

No, I will help! Tyler could sense desperation in the voice.

Okay, who are you? Tyler asked.

I am called Adanni, I am an ... Onyalum.

I see, Tyler remembered what Thosolan had told him, how is it that you and I are joined?

I was trying to avoid detection and made a blind transition into your world. When I came out, I came out where you existed. Our two spirits tried to share a single body, but that isn't possible, so we merged into a single entity.

Adanni fell silent, but Tyler thought he'd sensed truth in the words. It made sense, but he wondered why his essence had ended up the dominant one?

Because, I am from the ethereal Universe and you are from the real Universe. You dominated the body I collided with, and so you dominate the new creation we have become.

So, you can read my mind as well? Tyler asked a bit concerned.

Why not? That is where I am.

True enough—still, it worried Tyler.

What is it you want? To dominate and take control? Tyler didn't know what kind of answer he would get, but he wanted to confront the issue now, while he maintained control.

No, no, not to dominate ... to share. Is not part of you a part of me? Why should you get all the control and me just a small corner of your subconscious mind? I, too, want to experience new worlds, new people and new things. It is why I was created. I traveled the Universe long before you existed, and I have valuable experience—experience that can help you!

Tyler thought the offer sounded reasonable, but was he telling the truth? He had a good point, it wasn't right Tyler controlled everything. But how could he trust him, especially after what Thosolan had told him about Onyalum?

Why should I trust you? The way you talk, I suspect you assume you have more rights than me. After all, you said you had more experience.

Tyler waited, realizing he didn't know what to do regardless of the response. This was new territory, and he wasn't sure how things worked. What if he gave up control and could never get it back? How could he be certain he wouldn't be thrown into the subconscious, Adanni gaining all the control? He couldn't be sure.

The alien voice sounded defeated. *It sounds as though you have made up your mind. Am I to be trapped here forever?* The voice was broken, no longer pleading. Tyler didn't think it was fair, but he couldn't bring himself to let go of the power.

All right, before I give up control, you must do something to help me trust you.

Name it. The alien voice perked up at the opportunity.

You said you could help me with these memories of the Admiral's. What can you do?

When an Onyalum occupies a body whose spirit has left, the memories are still intact and accessible to the Onyalum. It is how we fit in to the world of that body, by using the memories and becoming that person.

Tyler tried to imagine the experience. *Can these memories take over?* He was curious about the effects from integrating them into his own.

Ordinarily, no, but we are not ordinary. However, I do not think so, but there is no guarantee.

Fine, how do you integrate them?

Right now, you only have access to them. You have suppressed them like you have suppressed me. Give me control of the memories and I can integrate them into your own.

Will I understand their language?

Yes.

Tyler waited, trying to imagine how he could give the alien access without relinquishing all control. *How would I give you control of those memories? I don't even know how I control you.*

Adanni replied quickly. *Easy, simply think about what you want and then focus to make it happen.*

Tyler hesitated, what if he was being led into a trap? What would change after it happened? Would he still be Tyler? Fear began to mount, holding him back. He resisted the urge to force Adanni back into exile and thought about giving the Admiral's memories to Adanni. He could sense the barriers holding both back, and in his mind he brought them together.

As the two merged, Tyler felt his barrier weaken. He thrust it up, but couldn't control what the two essences now did. Suddenly, memories streamed into his consciousness, becoming one with his own. Instead of the earlier flood, they came in slowly, organized. He saw each one individually, calling them up as though they were his own.

It was a unique and strange experience, but he relished it. He no longer feared possession as they each fell into place among his own. Tyler found he was not confused about which were his, and which were the Admiral's. They streamed on and on until at last, they were in place. Every experience from when the Admiral was born until he died was accessible to Tyler. He ran through them all, learning everything he could. His life was an open book, and Tyler read feverishly.

The Admiral was born Nayllen Oslooloo on Poolto, one of two inhabited planets in the solar system. Poolto was the fourth planet from the sun, and did not contain the wealth of water that Krildon, the third planet from the sun, did. This had been a persistent problem between them, and was the primary reason for the war waging between the two worlds. Although born on Poolto, the Admiral had spent much of his youth on Krildon as the son of the official ambassador to Krildon.

At ten years of age, his father had sent him back to Poolto to attend the prestigious School of Warfare. Although his father didn't agree with war, he had wanted his son to have all the advantages and benefits of a life in the elite, military ranks. The Admiral had excelled in all his classes, graduating at eighteen, the highest in his class. Everything his father had hoped for came true. Doors opened, and he rapidly moved through the ranks. Midway in his career, while still in the Advanced Space Tactics College, war broke out with Krildon. Trade negotiations between the two worlds had fallen apart, and the prospect of losing the precious water Poolto needed forced them into action.

The Admiral's father, Nattur Oslooloo, was still ambassador to Krildon when the war started. Although officially protected under treaties during wartime, Krildon denounced the Admiral's father as a spy and sentenced him to life in prison. His mother, Eynia Heerden, had been sent back to Poolto, no longer welcome on the world she had spent most of her life. It had been years since the Admiral had seen his father, and news of his imprisonment hardened him toward Krildon, a world he'd once admired.

Early in the conflict, fighting turned brutal, and weapons of mass destruction had rained down on both worlds, slaughtering millions. Because of the horror these attacks instilled, both worlds built a system to protect them from such destruction in the future. The systems, each modeled after the other from stolen blueprints, consisted of a ring of powerful weapons encircling each planet.

The weapons were fully automated and contained enough firepower to destroy any incoming missile or ship. The Codes for these weapons were the most sophisticated ever made and changed constantly. Only the Imperial Palace of Poolto had access to them.

This new protection changed the course of the war, sending it deep into space. Both worlds waged a war for the precious resources mined in the asteroid belt. Immense battles raged for control of the asteroids, planets, and moons that contained the resources needed to build and sustain an advanced military.

It was in these battles that the Admiral made his mark on the history of Poolto. Known by the enemy as the *Sorcerer*, he won battle after battle with tactics never before seen. He was legendary and instantly became a hero to the people of Poolto—a hero the people rallied behind. The Emperor knew this and never missed an opportunity to be seen with the Admiral. The Emperor himself had promoted the Admiral to his current rank, Grand Admiral, the highest military rank of all. He controlled every ship, soldier, and weapon that Poolto brought to bear. He was the Supreme Military Commander, the most powerful man on Poolto—after the Emperor.

But before his fame, the Admiral had married. His wife, Toosia Slay, daughter of a prestigious Councilor on the Emperor's Supreme Council, came from both wealth and political connections. Although love had not been the driving factor for their marriage early on, Tyler noted the Admiral had deep affections for his wife. Unable to conceive children, their marriage deteriorated over the last ten years as guilt and depression overtook her life. The Admiral, unable to deal with such emotional problems, distanced himself, burying himself in his work. The Admiral had not seen his wife in almost two years.

Without a family, the Admiral's work became his life. His primary staff assistant, Eyleeria Snillen, had filled the void left behind by his broken marriage. Their affair persisted for five years in secrecy, and Tyler realized why she had been so emotional when he had first awakened and said her name.

The Admiral had a strong attachment to Eyleeria, but love was not a feeling Tyler could locate. The relationship was a mutual friendship—a need brought about by close proximity and the ongoing stress of war. The Admiral had suspected she wanted more, but he was unwilling to give it. His marriage to Toosia was more than political. The Admiral actually loved his wife, and could

never bring himself to destroy her further with the dissolution of their marriage. Tyler felt unprepared to deal with these emotional issues himself. He had always avoided these types of situations, and the complexity of this one scared him.

He continued scanning, looking for the accident that had brought Tyler to his current predicament. The memories indicated the battle over the Krildon moon was intended to severely weaken their ability to build and sustain their fleet. It had been intended to be a surprise attack on their maintenance facilities and factories close to their home world. The Admiral had planned this *unthinkable* attack himself and had limited the knowledge of the operation to only those commanders he trusted. The plan was to create a diversion on one of the asteroid colonies held by Krildon, drawing off their fleet to that distant location.

A new technology Poolto had developed simulated a large fleet on the war-path, presenting a situation Krildon couldn't ignore. Having drawn off much of their fleet, the Admiral would bring the *real* fleet to within the outer range of their planetary defense weaponry. From there, they could attack most of the moon bases and orbiting maintenance facilities by overwhelming their protection grid with steady bombardment. The trick was surprise and numbers.

They should have had both, but something had gone horribly wrong. They discovered too late that the diversion had not worked. Although it drew some ships away from the home world, the bulk of their fleet remained ready to fight. Somehow, Krildon was expecting the attack! That meant a traitor in the Poolto military. No one but trusted commanders and a very select few bureaucrats knew about the attack. The Emperor knew, of course, but his staff was small and heavily trusted. That narrowed the list considerably, but the Admiral trusted his own commanders, having fought side by side with many of them. That left the bureaucrats or someone within the Emperor's staff.

Tyler shrugged it off, although the intrigue sparked his curiosity. He knew he had much greater things to deal with than a mysterious traitor he didn't even know how to trace. It began to dawn on him that the small-time drug dealer from Los Angeles may have bitten off more than he could chew. Despite having all the Admiral's memories, Tyler wasn't sure how to pretend to be an Admiral.

I can help you with that as well. Did I not hold up my end of the bargain?

Tyler had to admit, Adanni had given him what he had wanted, but he was uncertain how much he could trust him.

All right, you came through, a first step towards trust. Let's begin with letting you speak as an advisor, helping me navigate this world and this body. I will not give over any control of this body to you, yet, but I will let you observe and offer advice. Is this acceptable?

What choice do I have? Adanni replied coldly. *You hold the power.*

Exactly.

Tyler was certain he'd made the right choice, but he realized it hadn't come out fair. He would have to watch the advice Adanni gave him, if he was one of the Onyalum who corrupted and interfered, he might try to control the situation even behind barriers.

Don't worry, my good friend, my intentions will always be noble!

I hope so, otherwise, I will be forced to exile you permanently.

Your point is taken.

Adanni's inner voice didn't appear to hold malice, so Tyler thought they'd found a good starting point for building a relationship. It would have to do as Tyler needed Adanni's experience to pull his charade off.

Geez, the Grand Admiral in a war between two planets! Tyler thought morosely. I couldn't have picked worse if I'd tried?

Yes, you could have. There was no emotion in Adanni's voice, just a simple statement of fact. Adanni didn't elaborate, and Tyler wasn't sure he wanted to know what could be worse.

Dim light crept around the edges of the window shade, and Tyler realized he'd spent much of the night with Adanni and the Admiral's memories. He knew someone would come soon, and he wanted to be prepared. With the Admiral's memories integrated, he felt confident he could speak the language. He practiced before anyone showed up, making statements, and issuing military commands, or commands he imagined the Admiral might have made. His memories seemed to confirm this, and it was all that Tyler had to go on. He would have to trust the memories.

After practicing his speech for a while, the memories seemed to confirm he sounded like the Admiral. That was a crucial step.

He needed to make a good impression if he were to be released from the hospital and returned to duty. Although the thought scared him, he looked forward to experiencing this new world.

He lay back, tired from his efforts, but feeling much better than the previous day. At least he believed it was the previous day. Sleeping as much as he had, he really wasn't sure how much time had passed. The door opened slowly and an older woman entered carrying a tray filled with bottles and devices. She hadn't noticed Tyler was awake, and moved across the room to the bureau. She put the tray down, fussing with the contents. Tyler didn't know what she was doing, but believed this would be a good time to practice his voice. He took a deep breath.

"Good morning," he said quietly.

The woman stopped what she was doing, turning to face him, a look of disbelief on her face. She remained silent for several moments, and Tyler began to wonder if he had said it right. His memories confirmed he had used the correct greeting for the early part of the day, so he tried again.

"Good morning, what is your name?"

"Uh oh, good morning, sir, you caught me off guard. Forgive me." She bowed slightly, waiting for him to respond.

"Nothing to forgive. What is your name?" he asked once more.

"Yes, my name, well I am Weerna Soldan, I mean Nurse Soldan. I work at this hospital." She was very nervous, and Tyler realized the Admiral really was a major figure on the planet.

"Well, Nurse Soldan, relax, I mean you no ill will."

"Oh! It's not that, sir, it's just that you have been here so long without talking, it seems like a miracle. I'm ... I'm just very happy, sir, that's all." She smiled weakly, but was more relaxed.

Tyler thought about what she had said—he had been here a long time. How long?

"How long have I been here?" he asked calmly.

"Well, I am not sure I should be the one to discuss this with you." She hesitated. "I should go and get Doctor Falill to discuss this with you." She turned towards the door, but stopped short.

"Sorry, sir, I mean with your permission, I would like to get your Doctor." She bowed her head slightly, showing deference.

Although her request was strange, he released her to get the Doctor. "Yes, please."

She lifted her head, leaving quietly through the door. He heard her rapid footsteps down the hallway before the door closed him in

silence. He realized it was better to let her go. Her obvious discomfort inhibited their ability to communicate, and he wanted someone who was less deferential and could provide facts.

He propped his pillow up and sat against the backboard, silently waiting for his Doctor. The Admiral's memories drew a blank on the Doctor's name, but that wasn't surprising considering the Admiral had never needed one. The Admiral knew the armed forces' Chief Medical Officers, of course, but that relationship was purely official and neither of them even practiced medicine. The Admiral had always made it a general rule to familiarize himself with all the officers on board his ships, including the medical staff. But beyond the Chief Medical Officer, he rarely had exposure to the medical teams unless something went wrong.

It surprised Tyler the Admiral didn't have a personal physician. For someone so important, Tyler imagined the Emperor might demand he have one. But, this wasn't Earth, and maybe good health was a characteristic of these people. It wasn't something the Admiral's memory necessarily confirmed, so Tyler bided his time to learn more.

One of the doctors from the previous encounter strode through the door purposefully, Nurse Soldan following in his wake. She stood slightly to his right behind the Doctor while he looked over the screen of a small device in his palm. Without looking up, the Doctor addressed Tyler.

"I see you are better today, Admiral. How do you feel?" With that question, he looked up from his device and smiled slightly.

"I feel fine." Tyler assured. "I still have some pain in my side ... and my back."

The Doctor absorbed this while writing on his device. "Well, of course you do! The injuries you sustained nearly killed you. To be honest, we were surprised you weren't killed." The Doctor jotted more notes before continuing. "After our last encounter, I was beginning to think you might have sustained some serious brain injuries. Your inability to speak or understand us was quite a shock, but I kept the faith that you would recover these abilities. You just needed additional sleep and recuperation."

"Yes," Tyler agreed, "well, imagine my own surprise at not being able to understand you? How long have I slept since that previous encounter?" Tyler asked, curious.

"Well," the Doctor began, distracted by his device, "about a week, give or take a day."

"A week?" Tyler asked incredulous. To him, it felt like yesterday. "How long since I first got here?"

"Well, now, that is amazing!" The Doctor began, a look of reminiscing on his face. "I guess its going on about eight months since they brought you here. Of course, that's after about a month on the hospital ship bringing you back from the battle. I tell you, we really were surprised you weren't killed!" The Doctor went back to jotting notes.

Tyler thought about the time. Nine months since the accident—it was even hard for him to believe. How had his essence kept the body from dying? Clearly it had been severely damaged.

As though reading Tyler's thoughts, the Doctor answered his question. "We believe your incredible good health is what sustained you all this time. It is truly remarkable you have never been sick a day in your life." The Doctor put his device behind his back and smiled.

"Yes, I am grateful it saved my life." Tyler responded.

"Indeed," the Doctor offered, "we certainly can't take the credit. We have simply been providing your basic needs and monitoring your progress. The medical ship did all the repairs to your body, we have simply been in charge of managing the healing process."

"I see." Tyler understood why Nurse Soldan had been so surprised when he had spoke to her. "Thank you, Doctor, for your excellent service."

"No need to thank us, Admiral, it's our job!" The Doctor turned toward the nurse, "Nurse Soldan, please administer his meds, and help clean him up. I suspect there are more than a few people who will want to talk with the Admiral ... assuming you feel up to it, Admiral?" He turned back toward Tyler with a questioning look.

Tyler knew he didn't want more company, but he realized he couldn't avoid it forever. Better to face it now and prepare for this new world.

Tyler lied. "Yes, I think I could manage a few visitors."

"Good! Nurse Soldan will help you prepare while I go and spread the good news about your recovery. The Emperor himself has kept a constant vigilance on your progress—he will be very excited to hear the news!"

With that, the Doctor nodded to Nurse Soldan before leaving the room staring at his device.

* * * *

It took time for Nurse Soldan to clean him up, even with his help. But after some painful rigors, they were able to dress Tyler in clothes befitting the Admiral rank. Various staff members came through, helping Nurse Soldan, adding pictures, flags and what Tyler assumed were flowers, to the stark room. He believed it unnecessary but dared not argue the point. He sat back watching as he was transformed into a regal and ostentatious representation of the Admiral.

Looking back through the Admiral's memories, Tyler realized it was important to always present himself as bigger than life, loyal to the Emperor, the planet, and his troops. Tyler understood this was all a necessary evil for someone so important to the planet and its population. He was, after all, a hero on this world.

As the last person hung a large portrait Tyler recognized as the Emperor above his bed, he was ready for sleep. Instead, he sat upright wearing a rather regal, yet basic, white jump suit with gold and blue trim down the shoulders, sleeves, and front. Although he wore nothing on his head, the thin hair was washed, trimmed and neatly combed.

His nails were trimmed and sharpened to fine points, and though this scared Tyler, a quick check of memories made him realize how important they were for appearance and touch. On this world, a person's nails were a distinctive aspect of the species, and as adults, their ability to use them was honed with fine motor control. Someone like the Admiral could pick up something as small as a grain of sand between any two nails. Still, Tyler thought they looked like claws, and that made him nervous.

On the right side of his chest, small insignias were placed in neat rows with care. Tyler searched the memories to find out what they were and discovered they weren't medals or awards as he assumed, but were marks of the Admiral's rank and years of military service. In all, Tyler felt like he looked pretty good considering he'd been in a coma for nine months.

After the last person left, Tyler sat alone accessing the Admiral's memories. With little effort, he could call up bits of the Admiral's life, different snippets of his world, and their language. It was beginning to become automatic. Tyler was becoming fluent

in the sing-song language, and though it still required effort to read, he felt confident that would come in time.

He scanned the transformation of the room, and realized how efficient they'd been at modifying the stark room into something with a distinctive decor. He suspected it had been scripted long before today—waiting for their hero's return! Efficiency was not an inherent attribute of people suddenly brought to task, so clearly someone had orchestrated the transformation, and Tyler felt certain it wasn't Nurse Soldan.

With the room so quiet, Tyler started nodding off. The preparations had tired him and he longed for the rest of sleep once more. He was excited about the life he'd taken but nervous about playing an Admiral. The Admiral was bigger than life—a character larger than anyone he'd known before. He knew he had enormous shoes to fill, but then he also had access to the Admiral's memories. He hoped it would be enough to fool whoever was coming.

The sound of the door banging open startled Tyler out of his dozing. One man walked straight to the side of the bed with two others standing crisply behind him. The first man wore a white suit similar to Tyler's, appropriately trimmed in gold and blue. On his chest, he also wore the requisite insignia. The man appeared older than the Admiral, and his insignia seemed to confirm this. If Tyler was reading it correctly, the man had over twenty-five years of service to the Admiral's eighteen.

The insignia indicated the man was a Grand Marshall. Almost automatically, the Admiral's memories served up everything about the man. His name was Grand Marshall Goolen Sliss, and he was the Admiral's most trusted aide, confidante, and advisor. He'd served the Admiral for seven years, having been passed up for promotion early in his career. Grand Marshall was the highest, non-command rank you could attain.

Marshall Sliss and the Admiral were a perfect match from the beginning. The Admiral was the thinker and planner, and the Marshall, the organizer and executer. It was the Marshall who made sure the plans were carried out properly and to the letter—reporting discrepancies back to the Admiral when required. The man's strengths lay in his organizational skills and his ability to analyze battle plan logistics. More than once, his insights had prevented tragedy from a plan that hadn't taken into consideration all the logistical complications.

Behind the Marshall, two younger officers, Vice Secretary Beelen and Command Communications Officer Kooren, stood almost at attention. Both were entranced by their handheld devices, and like additional appendages, the Admiral had never seen Marshall Sliss without the two officers. Both wore dark blue suits trimmed in white as befitting their junior ranks. They were worker bees, carrying out the Marshall's orders and directing the communications for the Admiral's command staff. Their efficiency was legendary.

Officer Kooren constantly wore communication devices attached to his left ear. Tyler couldn't call up a single memory of him without the devices. As always, he listened intently to whatever traffic was carried across the air waves. As needed, Officer Kooren could relay commands and orders to staff and units almost instantaneously. The Admiral had always admired his effectiveness, and had relied upon it many times in tight situations.

Like Kooren, Secretary Beelen carried a small device. However, Secretary Beelen's device was not attached to his body and was similar to the one Dr. Fallil had used. It was a communication device, but based on the Admiral's memories, it also served as official recorder for the Admiral's staff. Tyler realized that these three were inherently responsible for the organizational aspects of the Admiral's office. Without them, the Admiral could never function to his maximum capacity.

The minor details of his life, including his personal life, were always handled by Eyleeria. It was these four people Tyler would have to deceive if he was to impersonate the Admiral. Knowing their efficiency and intelligence, he was more than concerned.

The Marshall didn't waste time. With sharp crispness, he executed what Tyler assumed was some form of salute. "Sir, it is with the greatest relief that we are able to once again be in your presence."

Quickly recalling how, Tyler returned the Marshall's salute. In response, all three bowed before Tyler. Coming up in unison, they stood formally, waiting for Tyler.

"Marshall Sliss, Secretary Beelen, and Officer Kooren, I, too, am overjoyed at this reunion—thank you for your concern." Tyler finished by nodding his head slightly as appropriate for someone of higher rank. He was more than glad the memories were providing him with the required rituals and behaviors of the military.

With the formalities out of the way, all three relaxed, and the two junior officers went back to focusing on their devices.

The Marshall scanned the room before continuing. "I am satisfied with the efforts the hospital went through to make this room presentable. We have a busy schedule for the next several hours, and we need you to look your best, sir." The Marshall signaled for his subordinates to sit on a couple new chairs brought in during the re-decorating, while he pulled one beside the bed.

"As I am certain no one has spoken to you about the incident, or about what has happened since, I must fill you in before the news conference." He sat back, looking as though he didn't know where to start.

Tyler heard *news conference* and his anxiety shot through the roof. "What news conference?" he asked, trying to sound casual.

"Not my doing, sir," the Marshall pleaded, "you can thank the Emperor for that." Tyler noticed a little irritation in the Marshall's voice when he mentioned the Emperor. "We were contacted by one of the Emperor's aides, Banteer Niishen, about an hour ago. It appears the Emperor wishes to hold a news conference with you before you answer questions from the press. It starts in two hours, and I have to brief you before then."

"I see." Tyler said. "The Emperor and his hero reunited again?"

The Marshall gave Tyler a strange look but continued, "Well, yes, it will be a public relations stunt and nothing more. Your status as Grand Admiral is naturally a critical element of the war effort, so your absence for the last nine months must be explained."

Tyler thought about that. "You mean no one has known about my coma?"

"Apart from your staff, the Emperor, his staff, and the hospital workers ... no." The Marshall didn't appear the least bit astonished by this fact as he delivered it with a dry tone.

"After the incident, your staff and the Emperor's decided that such a defeat was not in the best interest of the war effort, so your injuries and recuperation were kept a closely guarded secret."

Tyler couldn't even imagine how they'd pulled that off for nine months. He began to respect the authority he had and the significance of his role on this planet.

"What did you tell the public of my disappearance?" Tyler asked.

"That is what we must talk about before the conference."

The Marshall began his briefing, explaining the shock and devastation the incident had on the military. Unable to repair the Admiral's flag ship after the damage it sustained, they had evacuated all the live personnel before it was plunged into the Krildon moon.

The Marshall ran down the total losses to their fleet: one flagship, three fast attack cruisers, two squadron carriers, and twenty attack squadrons. All told, it comprised forty percent of the Poolto Fleet. In terms of lives, over twenty-five hundred soldiers had died in the incident—three hundred on his flagship alone. Officially, they were only reporting a twenty percent loss.

The Marshall explained how this large loss couldn't easily be covered up, so they had made the announcement that the enemy had conducted a sneak attack on one of the fleet's supply stations in the asteroid belt. The Poolto fleet, caught *off-guard* by the sneak attack, had been unable to come to full battle readiness in time to ward off the enemy.

Although they did officially release that all the enemy's ships were destroyed, the true amount of damage they had inflicted was substantially less. Still, it was a significant percentage. The official count of losses to the Krildon fleet was approximately half of the *officially* released losses, or about thirty-five percent of their fleet.

To date, the story held, but questions from family members of the fallen troops, and the persistent bombardment by the press were beginning to mount. Although the Emperor's staff was quick to denounce the press as unpatriotic when they questioned the incident, they were careful when responding to family inquiries. Many of the families were provided compensation to *make-up* for their losses, but the buy off only went so far.

There was a sense of fear and unrest on Poolto, and questions kept mounting. As for the Admiral, it was reported he'd been elsewhere during the sneak attack, and able to launch his own retaliatory attack in response. It was this *retaliatory* battle that kept the Admiral out of the lime-light for nine months.

The Marshall admitted they'd brought out old recordings of the Admiral addressing Poolto in rallying speeches now played on the air. After some creative editing, they had changed it enough that just about everyone had bought the ruse. Today's news conference was to be the triumphant return of the Admiral after his highly successful, secret retaliation against Krildon.

The Marshall confirmed Tyler was to be interviewed in the hospital, after sustaining *minor* injuries during his battle. At the same time, the Emperor was to present him with the Distinguished Medal of Poolto, his fourth, in tribute to his undying patriotism, courage and dedication to the war effort. After the ceremony, the Admiral was to field questions about his retaliatory strike from the press. Each member of the press was individually picked by the Emperor's staff and briefed about what questions were *appropriate*. This was all under the guise of planetary security, so suspicions weren't yet running high.

The Marshall ran down details the Admiral would need for the Q&A session. The twenty percent loss of the Poolto fleet in the Krildon sneak attack he already knew. This was followed by minor losses during the retaliatory battle they had supposedly launched against Krildon.

The retaliatory attack inflicted a staggering sixty percent loss on the Krildon fleet and had reclaimed several asteroid outposts captured earlier in the war. The reality was the real incident had inflicted only thirty-five percent damage to the Krildon fleet, and the reclaimed outposts had actually been abandoned prior to the battle because of their lack of resources and non-strategic locations.

Tyler diligently listened to it all, staggered by the immensity of the lie that had been fabricated. He thought back to Earth, and wondered if the government had ever done the same thing. He vaguely remembered Nixon, but that seemed small compared to this. He'd always assumed the government lied, although there was never any evidence to support it. But seeing this, he began to think he'd always been right.

The Marshall stopped the recitation, waiting for Tyler to respond. Tyler remained silent, trying to formulate a response. The Marshall waited with infinite patience.

"Very good, Marshall, I'll want to review it with you to be certain I have it all." Tyler lied. His memory recalled every word the Marshall had said, but he needed practice speaking to be sure it sounded real and not rehearsed. The Marshall nodded, satisfied with the response.

"I have other business, military business, which we must attend to as well," the Marshall began, "but your current situation and the pending news conference must take priority. We can address the

rest of it tomorrow. I can say, however, it concerns Vice Admiral Teesen, and is of utmost importance.”

With that, the Marshall finished, leaving Tyler slightly mystified by the final remark. His memory served up Vice Admiral Teesen flawlessly. Teesen had been left in charge of the remainder of the fleet. He was more than capable, and the Admiral had relied upon him many times during battles. His record of service was equally impeccable, and he'd been decorated by the Emperor nearly as numerous as Admiral Oslo. The Admiral himself had also awarded him for meritorious service during multiple conflicts. What could be so urgent that the Marshall would mention him? Tyler wondered, but couldn't find anything.

He hated it when people gave only a taste of something, holding the rest for later. He remembered Raul, who'd also do that. However, with Raul, Tyler suspected it was to keep him safe.

Searching the Admiral's memories, Tyler confirmed this was a common Marshall attribute, and that surprisingly, the Admiral did not mind. It bothered Tyler, but he dared not change how the Admiral reacted to it. The Marshall and the Admiral were like a hand and glove, and Tyler needed to be careful he followed the Admiral's memories as much as possible when the Marshall was around.

Tyler recited the information with the Marshall until both were satisfied he was prepared for the news conference. The practice made Tyler more confident, and his anxiety level eased. The Marshall suggested he eat a light meal before the conference, and it was only then that Tyler felt the strong pangs of hunger overcome him. He wondered how they had fed him during his coma, and he was a little concerned about how he would handle food after being unconscious for so long.

The Marshall sent Secretary Beelen to fetch food and the Doctor, and he asked Officer Kooren to track down the Admiral's assistant, Eyleeria, so she could be there for the conference.

Tyler sat back in the bed, watching as Marshall Sliss launched into action with his usual efficiency. The hunger started to overwhelm him as he wondered what kind of food these people ate.

* * * *

Tyler felt better after eating. The Doctor recommended a bland, light meal, but it suited Tyler fine. Afterward, he made Tyler wash it all down with a series of pills and liquid medications that must be taken regularly during his recuperation process. The Doctor mentioned what each did, but Tyler ignored the words as he winced from the horrible tastes.

As the press conference neared, Tyler felt a great deal of discomfort. It took him a while to realize he needed to relieve himself. He wasn't sure where or how, and the Admiral's memories weren't providing clues. He tried not to panic, and quietly asked Nurse Soldan. Thankfully, she wasn't embarrassed and called for an attendant to help her take Tyler to the facilities.

Tyler felt weak, but when they tried to get him off the bed and walking, he realized how weak the Admiral's body had become during the coma. The nurse told him about techniques they used on coma patients to prevent the atrophying of muscles and reassured him his strength and ability to walk would come back rapidly. However, she confided that he would probably need extensive rehabilitation before that would occur.

Tyler sighed with the thought of the long road ahead. Nothing he could do but grin and bear it. Whether accident or intentional, he was stuck in the Admiral's body and had to live with it.

Relieved, Tyler was helped back to his bed before being fixed up after the ordeal. It was difficult having an orderly help him go, and Tyler saw concern on the orderly's face. Who wanted to see their planet's hero unable to relieve himself? It was embarrassing.

Reassured the Admiral looked ready for the news conference, they left him with Marshall Sliss and his aides. Kooren had tracked down Eyleeria, but she seemed embarrassed to be there, and wouldn't make eye contact with Tyler. Marshall Sliss spotted her discomfort, but made no comment. Tyler wasn't sure how to react to the young woman, so he didn't.

The Marshall filled Tyler in on the details of the conference: who would be there, how long they would have, etc. Tyler listened distantly but knew he wouldn't forget. He felt ready, so he patiently waited for the events to unfold.

There was commotion outside the door, and everyone turned to see what caused the problem. Tyler barely made out a firm voice which quieted the racket. The door opened softly and an exquisite woman walked through with an expression of anger she leveled at the Marshall.

“Marshall Sliss, why have you instructed your men to deny me entrance?”

“I am sorry, Mrs. Slay, I had not instructed them to specifically deny you—their orders are to deny anyone not on official business.” He bowed slightly as he finished, appearing both ingratiating and arrogant at the same time.

Tyler wondered what the orders really were. Mrs. Slay looked at each briefly before ordering everyone from the room. Tyler almost thought she had meant him, but she moved another chair close to the bed after she herded the rest out. The Marshall protested because of the conference but finally acquiesced as he took the two aides with him.

The elegant woman turned towards Tyler, quietly assessing him. She wore a long, black robe inlaid with sparkling stones down the opening. Her hair was pale gray, but shone as brilliantly as the stones that adorned her. She slowly took off her wrap and placed it on one of the chairs, her graceful movements stirring something inside Tyler.

She was beautiful, sensual, and regal. He had yet to see anyone on this world evoke such emotions within him. That part was the Admiral, yearning for her as his mind became flooded with the memories of the Admiral's wife, Toosia Slay.

When she turned back to Tyler's stares, she grew angry and started screaming. “How dare you show feelings like that for me! All these years you have avoided me, shunned me, and now because you are injured you think I will have pity on you and forget everything that has happened? Damn you, Nayllen!”

Tyler was startled by her reaction. “I...I'm sorry, Toosia, I don't know what to say.”

“Right!” She spat like venom. “You have nothing to say? Do you know how long it took the Marshall to contact me? And then, he lied to me about where and how it happened. You know I have my sources, I am not your dumb public waiting for you to tell me what is *truth*—I know a lie when I'm told one!”

“Darling, I am sorry about that. I had no control. Remember, I was in a coma?”

“Don't call me darling, at least not when we are alone.” She pulled the chair closer, but stayed back from the edge of the bed. As she sat down, Tyler felt strong desires intruding on his senses, but they contrasted to the poor reception he was receiving.

“Damn you, Nayllen, what did I say? Stop showing those feelings!” She turned away to wipe tears, but as she turned, Tyler saw a brief rainbow of color flash across her face.

She composed herself, turning back toward him—the colors missing. He wondered what he’d seen and quickly dug into the Admiral’s memories for an explanation. He found it! The facial colors were a feature in this species—a mating mechanism that was an integral part of foreplay. Great, he’d been flirting with her!

Now her comment made sense—his own colors must have been giving away his feelings of desire. But she, too, had flashed briefly. What did that mean? Were there feelings between them? Tyler wasn’t certain, perhaps the response was automatic.

“Look, Toosia, I have been incapacitated for nine months, give me a little break.” He tried looking helpless, but she showed suspicious anger. “If I am showing feelings,” he continued, “then I’m sorry, but that does not change them.”

“Really?” The venom returned to her voice. “I saw your assistant ... what’s her name, Eyleen or something? Don’t delude yourself into believing I don’t know all about you two!”

“It’s Eyleeria.” He said quietly.

“Whatever! I don’t care.” She fought to maintain control. “If you have feelings for me, then why are you with her?”

She broke into tears, grief replacing the anger she’d first had. Tyler watched helpless. What could he say? He’d always loved Linda and never strayed from her after the first time they’d met. This complication in a relationship was something foreign.

He desperately searched through the Admiral’s memories, looking for something that might ease her pain. It was clear the Admiral had emotional feelings for his wife, but the two had drifted so far apart after their failure to conceive. Tyler was confident it would be a monumental task repairing the damage so many years had wrought.

She wiped her eyes gently, composing herself.

“They tell me you will be leaving to recuperate in Tooland—I hope you don’t expect me to be there?” Tyler was surprised by her rapid change in topics. “The truth is, I have been staying with my parents in Baneer for the last six months. Father is concerned about the latest events to unfold, and he fears the planet is about to crumble beneath our feet. I have been there trying to support you and your efforts in the Council, but many harbor ill feelings towards the war.”

Tyler didn't like the sound of her despair—the last thing he wanted was to experience a civil war on an alien planet.

“Do they still support the Emperor?” he asked.

She looked startled by the question. “Yes, of course they support the Emperor—and you. They simply question the cost of this war and whether it can be won. I have even heard rumors of peace talks with Krildon. Father admits he does not think it possible, but I suspect even he has imagined it.”

She sat back down, weariness pulling on her face. Tyler felt desire and love for this woman, as the Admiral's memories welled up from distant recesses. How could the Admiral have left her—a woman he so obviously loved? Tyler remembered Linda and was overcome with sadness.

He quickly spoke to hide his feelings. “My own father believed there could be peace, even after they imprisoned him.” Tyler felt depressed by the memory of the Admiral's father. He desperately needed to snap out of the malaise or he would never survive the news conference. “Peace or not, neither side is in any position to do anything about it. As long as we move forward with this ruse, the people will rally for blood. That, I believe, is what the Emperor wants.”

“Of course he does! Why do you think I am here, out of concern for you?”

Tyler heard anger creep back into her voice. The comment hurt, but he knew the Admiral deserved it.

She continued dramatically. “He wants me here during this time of hero worship—the epic hero, and his devout wife, concerned for the safety of the planet.” Tyler didn't think sarcasm suited her. “I'll play his games, but only because I *do* care about this world and its people!”

She stood from the chair moving it back against the wall. She took her wrap and threw it around her shoulders, snapping the intricate clasp to hold it in place. She was still as beautiful as when he first saw her, but she had transformed into the commanding presence so determined to be in control.

“I will not leave you, Nayllen, not yet at least. I could not do that to you or my family during this time of crisis. However, if we ever see a resolution to this war, I no longer want to be your wife.”

She delivered the statement with no emotion, but Tyler saw the strain it caused. He dredged up memories of happier times, after the Admiral had first met Toosia, and after they were first married.

He was a young, brash officer, rapidly advancing, and she was the beautiful daughter of a Councilor, intelligent, witty, and beautiful.

Tyler could access all the reasons why they had drifted apart, but it still didn't make sense. It was too difficult for Tyler to imagine why the inability to have children should be the cause of such a deep, saddening loss. But then, isn't that what had been happening to he and Linda? Didn't his career and fears get in the way of something beautiful? Suddenly, it made more sense.

"Toosia ... I ..." he wasn't sure what to say, "I cannot stop you from leaving, and I really don't blame you. I am the one to blame. I was the one who left you and buried myself in my work." He wasn't sure how this was affecting her as she stood stolid in her resolve. He continued nonetheless. "The war made it easy for me to disappear, but that's not an excuse for never calling, writing, or contacting you. The great leader, conqueror of worlds, couldn't even deal with his own life!"

He spotted a waver in her resolve as she looked away briefly, avoiding eye contact.

He pressed on. "It was easier for me to ignore your problems, and only focus on the next battle. Somewhere during that time, I became incredibly lonely—missing you, but afraid to come back. Eyleeria was someone near. Someone who wanted to help. Like you, I have also hurt her."

She looked back at him, a look of surprise on her face. He imagined she couldn't believe this admission. He didn't know whether the real Admiral would have done this, but Tyler didn't care, he needed an ally, someone to help him be the Admiral during this difficult transition period. He wanted her, but he was quite certain the feelings were not mutual.

Once again, she wiped a small tear from her eyes, looking down to hide the discomfort. He knew everything he'd said was not what she had expected or even wanted. Rejection would have been easier, and he believed it was probably what she desired.

"I will not ask you to stay or forgive me—I am not worthy of your forgiveness." That much was true. "All I ask, is that you visit me, just once, while I am recuperating. You don't have to stay, just stop in and let me talk with you for a little while. I don't want this to be the last time we ever speak to each other. I have more I wish to say to you."

The question was unexpected, and she struggled with a response.

“Damn you, Nayllen! Damn you!”

Tears welled once more, but she quickly got them under control, refusing to look at him. He could read indecision on her face, and she was about to speak when the door opened up and people filed into the room.

The lead person stood inside the doorway, eyeing both Tyler and Toosia carefully. On either side of him, small functionaries filed past carrying devices they aimed to scan the furnishings and walls. It was the Emperor's Aide, Regent Anweer Sneerd.

“Ah, Admiral and Mrs. Slay, my deepest apologies at this interruption, but the Emperor is on his way and we mustn't delay the conference.” He bowed slightly to each of them, but a smug look hid behind the jovial face.

The Admiral's memories dished up ample dislike for this person, and by the look on Toosia's face, he assumed she felt the same. When the Regent spoke, his voice came out high pitched and grating. It contrasted sharply with his commanding presence. Like almost everyone else, he wore a black single-suit, trimmed with an intricate design across the chest and down the sleeves.

On his shoulders, garish white lapels fluffed thick, almost obscuring his thin neck. His face was a narrow, oval shape, with dark penetrating eyes that Tyler was certain missed nothing. On his head, he wore a round cap that reminded Tyler of something he'd seen Jewish people wear. The cap was also black, and it contrasted with the man's pale gray features. Tyler decided the overall effect was evil.

The Admiral's memories provided Tyler with a complete picture. Regent Sneerd was the second most powerful man in the Imperium, behind the Emperor. He was the equivalent to Marshall Sliss, but working for the Emperor. His ruthlessness and efficiencies were legendary, and he was not a man you wanted to cross paths with. The Emperor gave him *carte blanche* to carry out whatever *policies* he saw fit to administer the Empire. Tyler could sense from the memories that the Admiral had been cautious around this person.

“Regent Sneerd, we were just finishing, no need to apologize.” Tyler hoped it sounded convincing—he was certain he needed to fool this man.

Toosia gave him a small nod, however a look of disgust replaced the sadness on her face. “Indeed, how could the Emperor's Regent ever be an interruption?” Sarcasm dripped

heavily from her words, and it was not lost on the Regent. He simply smiled, and nodded slightly.

Tyler watched as a flurry of activity swirled about them. He wondered what they were inspecting as they prodded, scanned, and analyzed every item in the room.

"Excuse me, Regent, but what exactly are these people looking for? My people checked out the room earlier, and I trust their efforts meet with any requirements the Emperor might have?"

"Indeed, Admiral, it is adequate." He said *adequate* like a rich person visiting poor relatives. "We are simply doing a minor security sweep, nothing to worry about."

"Security sweep? What for? I'm sure Marshall Sliss has checked everything—twice at least."

"Marshall Sliss is notoriously efficient, and yet, one can never be too careful. One wouldn't want anything to happen to the Emperor, would one?" He leveled a measured stare at Tyler as he said that last part. Tyler felt uneasy.

"No, *one* wouldn't want anything to happen to the Emperor." Tyler tried to keep sarcasm out. "Is there a threat to his eminence that we should be aware of? I have always believed he was loved by all his people." Tyler hoped the question was inconspicuous.

"Oh, yes, he is loved! No threat is present that we are aware of, but troubled times call for greater scrutiny. After all, we can never be satisfied when it comes to our Emperor."

Tyler was dubious, he smelled something else behind the action, but didn't know what. Like Tyler, Toosia looked suspicious as she cast an unbelieving glance at the Regent.

"Then, the War Opposition Movement does not have anything to do with this extra security?" She asked boldly.

Tyler was stunned by her statement. Even if her father was a Councilor, Tyler didn't think this was an appropriate question to ask the head of the Imperial Staff.

"Ah," the Regent appeared casual considering the brashness of the question, "you mean those few disgruntled families who have lost loved ones in the war? They are of no concern to the Emperor. We have addressed their grievances ... adequately."

Tyler wondered what *adequately* meant. He didn't get the sense this man would give anything to anyone without something in return. Tyler could almost imagine it meaning *deadly*, but memories told him that although the Regent was a dangerous man, he wasn't usually open or predictable. People were known to

disappear from time to time, but no one had ever linked these things to the Imperial Palace.

As though satisfied with their efforts, the various functionaries nodded to the Regent before filing out. He nodded his approval as they left. He followed them to the door with one hand held up to his left ear. As he turned, Tyler spotted a small communication device attached to his ear. The Regent stood by the door with his back turned towards them while whispering quietly.

Tyler couldn't understand his words but noticed something odd with the hand the Regent held to his ear. Tyler hadn't noticed before, but one finger on his hand had an extraordinarily long set of nails. All three were at least four inches long, and looked extremely sharp. While his hand cupped the device, the dangerous nails tapped gently against the side of his head. Even at four inches, the nails looked lethal.

Along the outside nail, Tyler could barely see a design or form of writing. He couldn't read it from across the room, but the effect enhanced the Regent's evil appearance. The Regent turned back towards Tyler and dropped his hand. As if this were a cue, several functionaries filed into the room carrying lighting equipment and what Tyler believed was a camera.

The Regent eyed them closely before directing them to set up the equipment. Within minutes, the room was transformed into a small television studio. Considering the size, Tyler wondered where the reporters would stand now that equipment had been added.

Tyler felt uneasy as he realized the conference was about to begin. He suddenly felt inadequate for such an undertaking and feared being uncovered as a fraud. Toosia moved to the left side of his bed, and Tyler had an overwhelming urge to grab her hand. Unfortunately, after their earlier conversation, he was certain she would react poorly to that action.

As though reading his mind, she gently reached out toward him, but instead of grabbing his hand, she carefully smoothed the bed covers across his lap. She gave him a curt smile before returning to her position. Tyler wanted to complete their conversation and hoped they might have time after the conference.

He readied himself for the ordeal, trying to put down the fear that gripped him. Tyler knew the Admiral had never been nervous in front of either cameras or the Emperor, so he desperately tried to relax. He felt the memories of the Admiral's presence pressing on

him, and he let them take charge while he receded to watch from a distance.

Although he feared that the Admiral's personality might overtake his own, he was willing to risk it to pull off this news conference.

Adanni whispered quietly in Tyler's mind. *Let me take over? I have a great deal of experience with this sort of thing. Once, I was a King for eighty years on one world. These are simple beings, I can easily handle them. Let me help!*

Tyler was tempted by the offer but wasn't ready to turn over control. The Admiral's memories were one thing, but an alien spirit was something else. He rejected the offer and reinforced it with a tiny show of force. Adanni backed off, but not before pleading for a chance to watch. Tyler conceded, but kept a tight leash on the menacing presence.

The Regent, cupped his ear, suddenly making an announcement. "The Emperor is coming!"

The Regent opened the door and stood looking into the hallway. Holding the door while bowing, the Regent backed into the room slightly. Without shifting from his uncomfortable position, he heralded the Emperor's arrival.

"All please hail the Emperor Hallen Yooso IV, Ruler of Poolto, and Savior to its people."

Tyler bowed as much as he could while sitting in bed. Several tough looking security men filed into the room wearing black single-suits, earpieces and side arms. Two of the men moved to one side of the room while the others stayed just inside the doorway. They didn't bow, but stared directly forward as though no one else were in the room. Tyler was certain these men watched everything. The camera and lighting crew bowed deeply, their eyes looking directly at the floor below them. Even Toosia bowed deeply, her face neutral.

The Emperor walked slowly into the room, scanning it with a measured stare. He paused inside the doorway and waited quietly for several moments. No one moved or made a sound. Finally, he turned his head slightly toward the Regent who held the door open. "Thank you, Regent Sneerd, your introduction was as eloquent as always."

That was the signal everyone was waiting for. They stood and returned to their previous machinations. The Regent closed the

door behind the Emperor who walked slowly towards Tyler's bed side.

Tyler was surprised, the Emperor was smaller and more diminutive than the Admiral's memories suggested. The Emperor wore a shining gold single-suit, but no insignia, trim, or markings. Other than being gold, it was rather unremarkable. Tyler wasn't sure what he'd really expected, but something more regal came to mind.

"Admiral Oslo, I cannot tell you how happy I am to have my Supreme Commander back with us once more. Regent Sneerd can confirm how concerned I was after your great battle. We were certain we had lost you that time ... but, alas, you have this remarkable way of surviving these horrible battles ... despite the odds." He gave Tyler a tight smile. "For this, we are truly grateful!"

The Emperor's voice was soft, almost soothing. He spoke quietly, and yet was commanding. Tyler began to realize why this man didn't wear any mark of his office—his presence alone commanded respect.

"Thank you, Emperor," Tyler bowed slightly, "I am also happy to have survived."

Tyler felt unusually compelled to tell the truth to the Emperor. Although the Emperor's face was warm, something in his eyes was cold and calculating. Tyler found him menacing but not nearly as much as the Regent. Nonetheless, Tyler couldn't imagine anyone expressing *love* for this man—he simply didn't have the look of a benevolent dictator.

The Emperor looked directly at Toosia. Tyler hoped she wouldn't say anything as confrontational as with the Regent.

"Good to see you, Toosia. How are your father and mother?"

"Very well, Emperor, thank you." She stared back as an equal, but wasn't confrontational. "They long to be invited to one of your Palace affairs again—it has been too long without one."

The Emperor granted her a large smile. "Indeed it has!" He agreed. "I, too, long for another gala, but duty keeps me so very busy." He glanced at Tyler. "Nasty affair war—very nasty."

Tyler was certain the Emperor didn't mean what he said, but the way he said it made Tyler almost believe him. The war had solidified the people behind him and had forced aside the domestic issues that usually kept the public pre-occupied. Tyler wondered how *beloved* the Emperor would be if there wasn't a war?

Again, the Emperor gave Toosia a smile, “Thankfully, I have people like your husband to help us through these difficult times. We are eternally indebted to his selfless service.”

Toosia returned a curt smile, and Tyler sensed tension. He felt certain the *selfless service* didn't sit well with Toosia. Who, other than her, would know what the Admiral's service had cost? Tyler believed the Emperor knew about their marriage, so he didn't understand why he'd made the comment. Fortunately, Toosia didn't rise to the bait and maintained a neutral expression.

The Emperor turned back to Tyler. “Tell me, Admiral, are you ready for this news conference? I realize it is soon after your recovery, but your planet needs you ...” he paused as though considering, “I need you.” He finished with sincerity.

“Yes, I'm ready.” Tyler agreed despite feeling decidedly *unready*.

“Good!” the Emperor exclaimed. “I assume our good Marshall has filled you in?”

Tyler nodded. “Yes, he has properly prepared me.”

“Unfortunate really ... I regret having to proceed in this fashion, but as servants to our world, we must always put Poolto and its people before our own needs.”

Tyler didn't really believe it was Poolto the Emperor was thinking about. “Yes, we must think of Poolto first.” He agreed without emotion.

With a measured stare, the Emperor stood quietly. Tyler was certain he hadn't sounded sarcastic, but as the Emperor peered down at him, he wasn't quite sure.

“Well ... yes, we can proceed together.” The Emperor said calmly.

Tyler thought the Emperor's statement sounded more like a question than a statement. He wondered if the Emperor were sizing him up, trying to see where the Admiral stood on the issue of their lie. The Emperor's reaction made Tyler suddenly worried so he quickly responded.

“The Admiral is always with his Emperor, in all matters.” He finished with a bow, hoping the deference would calm the Emperor's concerns.

The Emperor rewarded Tyler with another tight smile. “Indeed you are, Admiral, indeed you are!”

Tyler churned. He knew that if he couldn't fool the Emperor, he wouldn't survive his first experience inside an alien. As a drug

dealer, he'd dealt with dangerous men in power but didn't really have experience with men as great as the Emperor or the Regent. Leaders of a world wielded enormous power for which a simple drug dealer was inadequate.

He worried briefly about what he'd got himself into. When he'd left Thosolan, he'd imagined experiencing a simple life—becoming a farmer, or a common laborer. But now, he found himself in the midst of a planetary conflict where he was the hero.

He'd seen enough movies to know about threats at the top. Paranoia was common, and he remembered all too well when Raul had told him about the constant vigilance he maintained to keep his position. At the time, Tyler hadn't paid much attention to the comment, but now, he thoroughly understood it.

The Emperor scanned the room before turning toward the Regent. "Regent, I believe we are ready to proceed."

Tyler was relieved. At least the awkward moment with the Emperor had passed. The Regent opened the door and briefly conversed with several people in the corridor. Quietly and quickly, four people entered the room, bowing deeply to the Emperor as they took their positions at the end of the bed.

The Emperor sat quietly on Tyler's right side, watching intently as the conference got underway. The Regent closed the door and stood in front of it, staring at the camera behind the reporters. He nodded a signal and the lights and camera were switched on. The camera pointed directly at Regent Sneerd who remained calm, apparently waiting for his cue. Tyler missed it as the Regent suddenly spoke.

"In cooperation with the Poolto Communication Ministry, the Imperial Palace, and the Supreme Council, I present to you Emperor Hallen Yooso IV, Ruler of Poolto, and Savior to its people!"

In unison, everyone in the room bowed except the cameramen who focused on the Emperor. The Emperor stood passively, a newly uncovered look of concern filling his features. As he bowed, Tyler could just see the Emperor.

"Thank you, people of Poolto. I appreciate the time you have allowed me to speak with you today." Everyone in the room stood. "It is with great concern, but much happiness that I stand before you today in a hospital where our fearless Supreme Commander, Grand Admiral Nayllen Osloo, recuperates from injuries sustained in an epic battle in retaliation for the cowardly act of violence set

upon us nine months ago. Our heroic Admiral was successful in his mission, ravaging the enemy fleet, and taking back resources that were stolen from us long ago.”

Tyler was amazed at the cool composure and sincere emotion the Emperor poured into the speech. Tyler almost believed it himself.

“...we must stand together in this time of need, steel our resolve, and pay back, in kind, those losses we have suffered because of their evil purpose. Today, we are here to both celebrate this great victory, and to once again mourn our great loss. Thankfully, our Admiral, a warrior unlike any our enemy has ever faced, was spared. Indeed, his name spreads fear among their kind, and though they may have rejoiced when they thought him bested, his name will once again spread fear throughout their ranks. Admiral Osloo destroyed sixty percent of their fleet and survived to tell the tale! Once again, his name brings nightmares to their dreams, fear to their hearts, and doom to their souls!”

Tyler was overwhelmed by the speech. He wasn't sure he liked putting fear into anyone's heart, let alone doom in their souls, yet it was a very powerful speech, and Tyler had no doubt it would rally the planet into action.

“...pleasure that I award our Admiral, in some small way, for his courageous, untiring, and loyal service to our great cause. Once again, I am honored to present the prestigious Distinguished Medal of Poolto to Admiral Nayllen Osloo for his dedication to the war effort, and his extreme courage under fire.”

Regent Sneerd brought a small box forward and handed it to the Emperor. The Emperor opened the box and held the contents toward the camera, a warm smile on his face. He almost looked like a proud father presenting the winning trophy to his son after the big game. He seemed so genuine, Tyler wondered how he truly felt about his Admiral.

The Emperor shook Tyler's hand before handing him the medal. As dictated by protocol, Tyler bowed and accepted the award. Just as quickly, the Emperor continued his passionate presentation.

“Thank you once again, Admiral, we hope you will heal soon to once again serve your planet and its great people.” He turned back to the camera with an expression of concern. “We must now move this conference forward so that we do not interfere with the Admiral's recovery. Before we leave, however, we would like to

field a few questions from the press we've invited here. Gentlemen, you may proceed." He gestured magnanimously at the four reporters at the foot of the bed.

Tyler had no doubt this was all scripted for the public. The order of questions had already been decided as the first man stepped forward, a device held out towards Tyler.

"Your Eminence, we have the official reports of the violence Admiral Oslool inflicted upon our enemies, but if you can, share with us what reports you hear from Krildon?"

The Emperor looked happy with the question. "That is a wonderful question, and I would love to share this with all of you. Although I cannot reveal how we come by this information, I can tell you it was accurately retrieved from Krildon. The Krildon people, arrogant from their barbarous attack on our fleet nine months ago, are reeling with the news of our counter attack. As I said before, our Admiral's name invokes fear in their hearts and wipes the arrogance from their faces. They are a defeated people, and will not be able to move against us for a long time. Next question please."

The first man moved back, making room for the second reporter. "Admiral, how did you sustain your injuries, and how serious are they?"

As rehearsed, Tyler ran down the cover story as best he could. "I sustained my injuries after our flag ship was struck by an enemy missile. We had sustained extensive damage prior to that, and our shielding had already failed. Fortunately, the hit was not directly to the bridge or I might not be here today."

Tyler recited the script perfectly and hoped it sounded sincere. He noted the dramatic content impacted the people in the room, and he recognized the irony in how the real event wasn't far from their fictional one.

"Once we had chased the remnants of their fleet from the battle, I was picked up by a hospital ship and transported to Poolto. I am happy to report that my injuries are not serious, and the Doctor assures me I will make a full recovery soon."

The Emperor jumped in. "While our good Admiral is recovering from his injuries, I have been told he has appointed Vice Admiral Teesen to Command our troops in his absence. We both have the utmost confidence in Admiral Teesen's ability to protect our world. Thank you, next question please."

Of course, Tyler hadn't made Admiral Teesen's appointment, so he wondered who had. He assumed the Emperor, and this made him uneasy, especially after Marshall Sliss' cryptic comments about Teesen. With only one reporter to go, Tyler relaxed. He wanted it over, and hoped he could get more information about what was really happening. If he'd been in a coma for nine months, many things had probably changed. He wondered what power the Admiral had lost during that absence. The failure of their fleet undoubtedly blemished what had been an incredibly illustrious career.

Tyler knew he was in too deep, but there was nothing he could do to change that. He thought back to Thosolan's words and tried his best to focus on making this a successful experience. He snapped out of his reverie as the last reporter asked his question.

"Considering the damage both fleets suffered, how do you see the war continuing, and do we have an opportunity to exploit their weakness to win it?"

The reporter looked at Tyler as he held his recording device, waiting for him to respond. Tyler knew the scripted answer and recited it word for word. Although he didn't believe they could win the war, he felt certain their enemy couldn't either. It sounded like stalemate was the current state of affairs. He finished his litany and added a brief wish at the end, "...and with the help of God, we may yet smite our enemies!"

Tyler thought the comment appropriate for someone in power. He'd heard it so many times on Earth, it seemed logical. He waited patiently for the conference to finish but noted the room fell deathly silent. He looked at the stunned faces, realizing he had made a terrible mistake in his response. The reporter stood up with an astonished look on his face and continued to question Tyler.

"So, Admiral, does this mean you have found faith in god during your ordeal and seek his assistance in our war?"

Tyler was taken aback. Though he'd mentioned god, he didn't really mean anything by it. Why was the reporter so curious about such a trivial comment. Tyler was ready to respond when Regent Sneed dashed forward to take control.

"The Admiral doesn't believe in this new religion, he simply misspoke. There is nothing to it, gentlemen, nothing at all!"

The Emperor shot Tyler a look of concern, or was it anger? As quick as Tyler saw it, it was gone.

The Emperor took over. "Poolto, we are greatly rewarded with our Admiral's continued success and survival during this trying period in our history; however, the Admiral must take his leave to complete the recuperation process and once again join our campaign against Krildon aggressions. Thank you for this brief opportunity and your continued sacrifices during our time of need. We will keep you up to date on the progress of the Admiral's recovery. Thank you and good day."

The Emperor finished with a nod toward the camera, a signal to end the broadcast. The light on the camera went out and both sets of lights in the room went dark, temporarily blinding everyone. Tyler was reeling from what had happened, trying to figure out where he'd made a mistake. Perhaps mentioning god hadn't been such a good idea? Although it seemed reasonable to him, apparently it was taboo. Tyler had actually met the god of this world, so giving acknowledgement seemed natural.

The room came alive with chatter, mostly from the reporters. The Regent, quickly took control of the situation. "The Emperor Hallen Yooso IV, Ruler of Poolto, and Savior to its people, thanks you for your gracious participation in this very important communication to our world. His Eminence will now take his leave."

The room grew silent as everyone bowed in unison. Tyler bowed as much as he could from his position in bed, but noted the Emperor stood next to him, staring at him with intensity. Tyler continued to stare at the bed sheets across his lap, nervous by the Emperor's continued presence. Finally, the Emperor spoke, breaking the tension in the room.

"Admiral," he began, "we look forward to the return of your *old* self to duty. We will look in on your progress with renewed interest." With that, the Emperor's guards filed out of the room followed quickly by the Emperor.

Once the door closed behind him, everyone rose and stared expectantly at Regent Sneerd. "Gentlemen, we appreciate your cooperation in this important matter. We ask you bear with us for a few more minutes while we debrief you downstairs. My attendants will direct you appropriately as you come off the elevator."

He nodded at the reporters who seemed not the least put out with the request. Tyler thought the *debrief* sounded ominous, and was glad he would not be participating in it. He knew his rank would keep him from such mundane affairs.

Everyone filed from the room taking the various pieces of equipment needed for the conference. The Regent held the door as they passed and lingered briefly as though wanting to say something. Instead, he merely bowed slightly to both Tyler and Toosia before disappearing into the corridor beyond.

The door closed, and the room grew eerily silent. It was hard to imagine they'd just held a National News Conference broadcast throughout the Poolto Empire. Tyler was happy it was over, but he knew his performance would be scrutinized. He glanced at Toosia as she stood quietly next to him, staring at the floor in thought. Tyler wanted to press her further to come and visit him during his recuperation. He opened his mouth to ask the question, but was rudely interrupted by people moving into the room.

He turned as Marshall Sliss entered followed closely by his aides and the Admiral's assistant, Eyleeria. Eyleeria stood behind the other three staring innocuously about the room. She avoided eye contact with Tyler and Toosia. Tyler saw her glance once towards Toosia, but quickly backed off when she saw Tyler watching. Toosia ignored them all. He wanted her to wait, but the Marshall was irritated and pressed Tyler to discuss the conference.

Tyler acquiesced, and the Marshall began his own debriefing. Without a word, Toosia slid out behind everyone. Tyler watched helplessly as the door closed behind her. He knew he'd have to track her down to pick up their conversation. Strange feelings ran through him, and he didn't know if they were his or the Admiral's. Either way, he wanted to talk with her again. Perhaps she'd wait until they were finished? He thought about asking Eyleeria to go tell Toosia to wait, but stopped himself as he realized the inappropriateness of that request.

Tyler listened to the Marshall, realizing his experience on this world had started off on the wrong foot. His thoughts drifted back to the crippled ship, and he wondered why he hadn't been more careful. In the future, he would be more vigilant about what dead bodies he came in contact with.

Calm Before The Storm

Tyler was fully de-briefed after the conference on his one blunder. Apparently, the Imperial Palace had abolished religion long ago. In its place, the Imperial Palace had placed themselves as the *spiritual* head of the planet, claiming no god existed in which to believe in.

After several thousand years of rule, religion disappeared, and very few people still held onto such beliefs. Unfortunately, as a result of the war, old philosophies began making a come back. People were flocking to the religions, calling upon god to help them in their time of need.

The Imperial Palace was careful not to persecute the heads of these factions for fear of making martyrs out of them. Instead, the Palace went out of its way to spread lies and propaganda against the movements, making sure to downplay their actual size and rate of growth. The people who followed them were labeled *disgruntled* citizens whose *unpatriotic* beliefs and actions worked against the common cause. However, they stopped short of calling them enemies of the state.

Tyler's comment had rocked the fragile boat. Considering the current crisis and their lie, Tyler's comment threatened to release forces currently held in check. At Marshall Sliss' urging, they'd released a press briefing to indicate the Admiral had no link to, or sympathy for, those few misguided people espousing a belief in dead religions. It went on to point out how dangerous these old beliefs could be, and how they threatened the very war effort they must win.

To date, most in the press and the general public seemed satisfied with the rebuttal. Since the religious people were a fringe element on the planet, it was easy to convince the rest of the populace that their National Hero could not conceivably be a part of it.

Tyler felt confident Thosolan wasn't involved in this planet's affairs. Thosolan had admitted to letting his creations evolve on their own for many millions of years. However, a part of Tyler wondered what god the old religions believed in. Did they believe in Thosolan? Maybe it was some other god. Thosolan by another name? More than one? He was curious, but knew it was far too dangerous to seek answers to his questions. He was already in hot water, so he tried to smooth the wrinkles and get a better feel for this world and his role within it.

Tyler remained in the hospital another week after the press conference. Doctors ran additional series of tests before announcing he was fit to move. His plan was to move into the Admiral's Tooland estate to recuperate and undergo physical therapy. Tyler was pleased to leave the hospital, despite the excellent care Nurse Soldan had provided. He wanted to be far from the public eye, someplace where he could focus on healing and learning.

During that final week, Tyler tried to track down Toosia but failed in every attempt. He'd left numerous messages, verbal and written, but never received a reply. These constant attempts brought frowns from both Marshall Sliss and his assistant, Eyleeria.

He understood Eyleeria's position, but wasn't certain about the Marshall. Perhaps the Marshall and Toosia harbored ill will towards each other? Tyler searched, but the Admiral's memories could neither confirm nor deny this. He wasn't yet comfortable to press the Marshall about such things, but he wasn't going to let it stop him from trying.

At one point, Tyler suggested contacting Toosia's father in the Supreme Council, but the Marshall had adamantly opposed the idea. According to the Marshall, there were many members on the Council not happy about the lie they perpetrated against the public, and the fact that the National Hero went along with it, forced them all to comply. Admiral Osloos was not popular with many on the Council, including Toosia's father.

Despite these troubling reports, Tyler continued his daily attempts to contact her. He hadn't lost hope, but wondered whether she'd ever speak with him again. Regardless, he refused to give up.

After his release from the hospital, the ride to Tooland was both interesting and peaceful. Although Poolto employed a great deal of technology, they still maintained much of the natural beauty inherent on their world. Both the technology and culture was far more advanced than Earth's, and that made it seem even stranger that humans and these creatures were so similar.

The comparisons with Earth preoccupied Tyler as the ground car carried him silently to the mountains. The vehicle was a marvel. Somehow, it hovered quietly about three feet above the roadway. Tyler didn't understand the physics involved, but memory revealed the force to be created by something called *Paaymeen*. Unfortunately, the word had no translation in English, but Tyler didn't care as long as it worked. He replayed memories of Earth and realized he didn't really know how a car on Earth had exactly worked. Despite the mysteries, the ride was smooth and quiet, even at speeds which blurred the scenery along the roadside.

Tyler estimated the ride to be about four hours long. On the way, he'd searched the Admiral's memories for information on the estate. The Tooland Estate had been in the Osloo family possession for many generations. His parents had given it to the Admiral and Toosia as a wedding gift, but the Admiral rarely spent time there. Tyler assumed it was due to the fact that it was in a remote, mountainous part of the planet, but primarily because the Admiral's work kept him either in the capital or outer space.

Toosia never liked the estate because of its remoteness and lack of husband. Though the estate continued to run and operate, neither he nor Toosia had been there in over five years. The last time the Admiral had come, it was to overlook paperwork regarding the production of the sloose berry wine the estate produced to help offset taxes.

As the ground car wound its way up the mountain, it slowed to a more modest speed allowing Tyler to watch the incredible scenery this part of the world offered. The country was mountainous with enormous peaks soaring thousands of feet above the roadway. Although the mountains were primarily rock, here and there, Tyler saw patches of green peek out of crevices or spread across valley floors. The rock itself was nearly black with

streaks of white and gray to break it up. It appeared both hostile and beautiful at the same time.

He tapped the Admiral's memories for the regional history of the area. The estate was embedded in a long chain of mountains that split the continent into separate pieces. Originally, the region was ruled by the Admiral's ancestors for thousands of years. At one point in the past, they'd been the seat of power for the continent. The people of this region were powerful and warlike. Their positions in the mountains had provided the perfect defense from those on the flatlands. The Admiral's ancestors were described as some of the fiercest warriors in Poolto's history.

Their mountain fortresses were legendary as they'd been easy to defend and hard to assail. For thousands of years, their power and position separated them from the rest of the continent. It wasn't until the second Emperor, Goolo Deena II, established peace between the Admiral's people and the Empire. Now, after thousands of years under Imperial rule, the world had become smaller, and the history became legend as it faded from consciousness. The tribes and regional cultures of the past no longer held meaning, and the regional differences and beliefs were replaced by a common set of ideals created by the Imperial Palace.

This was especially true once Poolto made first contact with Krildon. Independently, both worlds developed along similar paths and timelines. Though Poolto had been first to enter space and travel to Krildon, earlier communications having been established using wireless technology. Shortly after developing the radio, both worlds turned their antennas skyward and heard the other's voice from across the ecliptic plane. Prior to meeting, they'd established a relationship between their worlds.

It was after this remarkable meeting that the great transformation of Poolto into a single planet occurred. The people of Poolto began to think of themselves as a single people from a single world. Similar cultural changes took place on Krildon. Together, both worlds began to think of themselves as citizens of the solar system. It was one more step in their evolution, but one that united a planet.

Their budding relationship spurred on a technological race for vehicles capable of traveling to the other world. The race finally ended when an unmanned craft left Poolto for Krildon and back again. From this humble beginning, the two worlds forged a relationship spanning thousands of years. They evolved together,

traded together, and explored together—partners in the joint exploitation of their solar system.

Tyler thought back to Earth and its own regional differences. He was certain most people on Earth still believed they were alone in the Universe, so they thought of themselves in regional terms rather than as a species. However, considering the war that tore both Poolto and Krildon apart, Tyler wasn't convinced the transformation had really benefited anyone. It only moved the inevitable conflicts off-planet.

Tyler began to understand more of the world he was an integral part of. They weren't necessarily different from humans. Like man, the people of Poolto had descended from arboreal creatures inhabiting the equatorial regions of the planet. However, as man had descended from the great apes, these creatures descended from nocturnal tree dwellers, preferring night to daylight. Their position as the top predator of the nighttime canopy developed their claws, their brains, and their opposable thumbs.

Poolto had never known large predators, so their species quickly dominated the planet. Over time, this dominance afforded them the luxury to live both in daylight and darkness. Despite this obvious change in their schedules, the species still retained many ancestral traits, such as a remarkable ability to see in darkness.

Instead of the low light being reflected off the back of the eyes, typical in Earth animals, their eyes developed the ability to see thermal radiation or heat. At first, the ability took Tyler by surprise. His eyes registered the darkness, but people and objects seemed brighter, as if glowing. Only after searching the Admiral's memories for an explanation had Tyler adapted to this additional sense.

Despite these obvious differences, the species was very similar to humans. Their reproductive methods, diet, culture, and governance were all similar to those on Earth. Tyler wondered how common earthly traits were in the Universe.

He knew the people of Krildon had descended from a non-arboreal creature very similar to Earth's early dinosaurs. Their opposable thumbs and brain size had evolved from their position as fast and deadly predators. Their early ancestors caught most of their prey on the run. Because of that, they still retained much of the strength and agility. This made them physically faster and stronger than the people of Poolto. Until the war, this had never been an issue. Only the characteristic claws of Poolto were a

physical advantage over the Krildon who had nails similar to humans.

The Krildon's appearance was very different from both humans or the people of Poolto. They stood on long legs that looked more like dog legs than human. Their height was nearly nine feet unlike the average Poolto height of four. Their arms were small when compared to their legs and their hands held five fingers, each sporting nails that looked very human.

The Krildon had a distinctive brown color to their skin, no hair, but a set of ridges that ran from the front of their narrow heads down to the base of their necks. It gave them the appearance of a lizard although their faces looked like a narrow human. Despite the similarities, the length of their nose, and the thin lips gave them a slightly reptilian look, especially when viewed from the side.

On either side of their heads, small, compact ears lay flat against the skull. The eyes were somewhat large for their narrow heads, but they faced forward and were predominantly colored bright yellow with black, almond shaped pupils. They were a daytime species, and like man, their nighttime vision was poor. This deficiency was surpassed by their nearly perfect eyesight. No one on Krildon needed eye correction and could accurately see intricate details a mile in distance.

Despite the obvious physical differences between the two people, their worlds were more similar than different. Both societies had been turbulent and warlike during their early history. Both had developed amazing civilizations and cultures, seeking out knowledge and science in an attempt to understand and control their environment.

When they first made contact, they had reveled in their similarities, and each had sought ways to combine their worlds in a peaceful and prosperous way. After three thousand years of prosperity, the peace had finally ended, and war threatened both planets. For Tyler, it was both sad and discouraging to see such technologically advanced people fighting like primitive tribes. Perhaps a species never got past the instincts that had raised them above all other creatures. Survival of the fittest might be a blessing and a curse.

In the early days before the war, fighting had been small skirmishes over resources within the asteroid belt. As each world pursued various business ventures, they vied for the next big payoff. The great expansion on both worlds led to the development

of powerful technological societies, and with that, a growing hunger for more and more resources.

As a natural consequence of Krildon's position within the solar system, it was blessed with a greater abundance of water. Early in the relationship of these two worlds, the difference hadn't been important, but as more and more colonies expanded into the far reaches of the solar system, water had become both precious and expensive. This turned Krildon into a powerful trader with Poolto.

This disparate supply of water became a constant source of conflict leading up to the war. It was rumored Krildon business interests were deliberately sabotaging Poolto water production facilities in the asteroid belt, then swooping in with the required water marked up for huge profits. Nothing was ever proved, but the growing suspicions fed the increasing distrust developing between the worlds. Thus began the era of skirmishes over resources. Over time, these skirmishes fed the political climate that increasingly sought to support their own people's interests instead of those of the common solar system.

The increasing division grew into an all out confrontational debate and threat of war. Looking back, no one could pinpoint exactly when it all broke down, but many historians point to an incident on one of the largest mining colonies where both worlds had vested interests. The colony, called Cisten III, had been one of many joint efforts between two companies, the Liisten Corporation from Poolto, and the Cirran Company from Krildon.

For decades, the joint operations had run smoothly, both companies benefiting from the profits the mines produced. Prior to the incident, discord began between committees that oversaw the operations for both companies. The Cirran committee members insisted water for the colony be provided by a Krildon company. Cirran had a huge stake in. Meanwhile, the Liisten committee members insisted they break from the expensive water supplier and build their own production facility.

Both argued for years without resolution until finally, in frustration, the Liisten Corporation announced a buyout offer for the Cirran Company. They generously offered twice the appraised value of the operations, but Cirran summarily rejected it and made a counter offer to buyout Liisten.

The resources provided by the mine were critical to Liisten interests, and they didn't want to start paying market prices for those riches. The battle raged through the courts on both worlds,

with no compromise ever being reached. The publicity of the battle became a political hot potato as each world claimed the other was trying to cheat them out of rightful resources. Expensive, negative marketing campaigns reinforced this concept.

The crisis came to a head when a devastating accident rocked the mining colony. Through no fault of either company, a reactor went critical. The plant's crew struggled to get it under control, and nearly succeeded, but their efforts were too late to stop the chain reaction. The power plant erupted in an explosion that nearly split the asteroid in two.

The colony suffered an incredible forty-five percent loss of structures and fifteen percent of its residents. They probably would have survived to rebuild, but the incredible force of the explosion sent the asteroid on a collision course with an even larger one nearby. This asteroid contained most of the mining operations.

Despite an attempt to evacuate before impact, the two asteroids collided, splitting the smaller into three fragments and the larger into two. The ensuing destruction was catastrophic for the colony, virtually destroying everything. Over twenty-four thousand people were killed in the collision—people from Poolto and Krildon.

Both worlds called for formal investigations and the blame game began. Not surprisingly, both worlds concluded the fault was with the other world's company, and therefore, all proceeds and awards should be granted to their own world's interests. Neither planet budged from the stalemate and began freezing each other's off-world assets. Trade and commerce ground to a halt as hostilities in the off-world colonies became open and violent. Three thousand years of peace was shattered.

Soon, the hostilities turned into conflict, and within a year, both governments formally declared war. It was during this time that the Admiral was finishing school at the academy while his parent's served as Ambassadors on Krildon. The Admiral's father attempted to divert the war, but once it was officially declared, the Admiral's father was recalled to Poolto. Both worlds moved to eject the other's people from their planetary surface and retake all wholly owned properties.

The Admiral's father refused the recall, and until his arrest, worked hard to prevent the war from happening. His efforts failed, and Krildon eventually arrested him as a spy. He was thrown into prison, and his wife sent back to Poolto. The Admiral had always believed his father was loyal to the Emperor and to Poolto, but his

refusal to leave Krildon was viewed on Poolto as a direct disobedience to an Imperial order. The Emperor branded him a traitor. The Admiral knew if his father had returned, he would have been imprisoned on Poolto as well. Instead, he was trapped as a prisoner of war.

Early in the conflict, the Krildon government begrudgingly allowed the Admiral to communicate with his father on a restricted basis, but after the missile attacks that nearly destroyed both planets, no further communication was established. The Admiral wasn't even sure his father was still alive. The missile attacks destroyed hundreds of population centers, killing billions on both planets. Each barely survived the destruction, and this only solidified the hatred that had grown between the two species. In an awful act of retaliation, the Poolto government publicly executed all remaining Krildon prisoners. It was rumored Krildon did the same.

For the past twenty-one years, both worlds built enormous military machinery. Each constructed a ring of protection surrounding their planet—protection from both invasion and missile attacks. The war moved off planet into deep space where epic battles waged to gain control of the resources needed to feed their war machines. This was where the Admiral made a name for himself. He'd won more battles than any other commander in the history of Poolto, and many began to recount the legends of his ancestors and their prowess as warriors. As these legends were revived, the Imperial government used them as a means to rally public support for the mounting costs of the war.

This placed an incredible burden on Tyler's shoulders, and he grew discouraged. Both peoples would never stop growing, thus both worlds would always need resources. The hatred between the two species had evolved into a prejudice that both governments fed through propaganda. Tyler suspected neither would know peace. Nothing short of mutual destruction or an outside threat would end the conflict that existed. The loss of billions could not be easily erased by peace talks and negotiations—only blood and violence would be accepted now.

It was these sobering thoughts that disturbed Tyler as his ground car pulled into the Tooland Estates. He stared out the window, eyeing the place he would spend the next few months. The Palace, at least that's what Tyler thought it looked like, sat upon a hill at the base of a snow capped mountain. As Tyler

surveyed the land stretching below, he could make out the hundreds of acres of sloose berry orchards that memory assured him were tended by a small army of workers.

Somewhere in those orchards, one of the largest wineries in this region produced the highest quality sloose berry wines on the planet. Tyler was curious to taste it, but memories warned him the Admiral never drank wine, or any other spirit. Apparently, the Admiral saw drinking as a character weakness and refused to partake in it. Ironically, his winery produced the best on the planet.

Tyler didn't care. He wanted a drink, and if he was careful, no one had to be the wiser. After all, what privilege was rank if you couldn't reserve the right to change your ways? He was older now, a National Hero and injured, surely that warranted a drink of his family's estate wine. The thought cheered him slightly as they pulled through the enormous gates. He noted the gates were open as though they were never closed. Considering his position, he could understand why security wasn't an issue. After all, if you couldn't trust your National Hero, who could you trust?

The Palace sat far back from the front gates, and the drive up to it wound gently through manicured lawns dotted richly with tended gardens, trees, and statuettes. Tyler didn't think the effect fit the Admiral, and he thought he understood why he'd never spent time there. It was late afternoon when they arrived, and the sun descending behind the property warmed it with a soft, inviting glow. Though the estate was large and ostentatious, Tyler wasn't intimidated and felt confident he would enjoy living there.

The car glided to a stop in front of the entrance, and Tyler stole one more glance toward the gate. Stretching away from the Palace, the well groomed grounds sloped gently toward the main road. From there, the ground dropped sharply to the valley floor covered in a multitude of orchards. The entire estate was framed by the black, rocky peaks of the surrounding mountains, some topped with snow. Everything glowed red in the late day sunlight, and the effect was surreal.

Tyler was a long way from Los Angeles, but he drank in the beauty with his renewed sense of adventure. The mountain air was cool and crisp, and Tyler looked forward to a prolonged stay in the lap of luxury. But more than anything, he looked forward to the generous supply of the Admiral's wine!

* * * *

Tyler was moved into the second floor residence of the east wing which came complete with nine bedrooms, several offices, a fully staffed kitchen, no less than eight bathrooms, and four common rooms filled with art, furniture, and electronic devices of every function. It was more than Tyler had ever experienced, but he quickly grew accustomed to the posh lifestyle.

Because he was undergoing physical therapy, Tyler moved around using an electric chair on wheels. It surprised him they used wheels, but he had been told by one of his nursing staff they did not have *floating* chairs, as the energy requirements were too great for such a small device. Although the nurse giggled when asked the question, Tyler didn't think he'd raised any suspicions. After all, it was a well known fact the Admiral had never been sick a day in his life.

Although Tyler believed the Admiral's memories were complete, small items such as wheelchairs were not often adequately represented. The Admiral had a wealth of knowledge of the history of Poolto and Krildon. Battle strategies, administrative management, and financial planning were but a few of the areas he was well versed in. However, knowledge of the everyday things tended to be incomplete. Tyler assumed it was because the Admiral never needed to do these things for himself. He'd been born into wealth and power, and this afforded him servants and assistants to take care of the mundane tasks associated with living. His life was one of intellectual pursuits, epic battles, and military strategy.

Tyler enjoyed his newfound wealth and was more than happy to enjoy its benefits. Having lived without it on Earth, he took full advantage of every opportunity. He learned to use many of the electronic devices available within the Palace, and when not in therapy or staff meetings, he took time to go through the enormous number of broadcast channels their version of television contained. From watching these, he learned more about Poolto's society than he could glean from the Admiral's memories.

All channels were controlled by the Poolto Communication Ministry, but they offered a remarkably open forum for varying opinions, including those of the religious *few*. Although they did not get their own air time, they often appeared on other shows, either as news segments or as individuals espousing their beliefs. Even sporting events hosted signs in the crowds touting religious

statements like ‘God will save those who believe’, ‘God begs for you to stop the war’, and ‘Let no more die in vain’. Tyler remembered Earth and similar actions.

Although the cameras were good at avoiding this *preaching*, every now and again, the message got through—enough that the everyday person began to ask questions. Tyler understood why his innocent comment had caused such a stir. Supporting that which went against the Imperial Palace was not a smart move for the Supreme Military Commander. His own curiosity was piqued by the people who espoused these beliefs, but he wisely kept his questions to himself.

Over time, life in the Palace grew routine and boring. Tyler took advantage of the abundant free time to increase his knowledge of the planet and the Admiral. He was grateful for the Marshall, who despite his obvious discomfort at many of Tyler’s questions, remained dutiful when explaining. Tyler grew accustomed to relying on the Admiral’s memories, and as they more fully integrated with his own, he felt confident impersonating the great man. He seemed successful in fooling everyone within his staff, and any minor discretions that slipped were routinely ignored as side-effects of his prolonged coma.

Tyler increased his daily role as the Admiral, and as such, began to understand the dilemma the Marshall had warned him of. In one of their earliest meetings in Tooland, Marshall Sliss had disclosed the important item concerning Vice Admiral Teesen. Apparently, while in command during the Admiral’s coma, Vice Admiral Teesen had taken it upon himself to plan a counter attack to take advantage of the debilitated state of the enemy fleet. Teesen figured by gambling the rest of their own fleet, Krildon would be caught off-guard before they had time to recover their full defensive capabilities.

Tyler agreed it was a huge gamble, and pointed out their own ability to mount such an attack or defend themselves was only marginally better than the enemies. In response to Tyler’s observations, the Marshall outlined the remnants of Poolto’s forces. Unfortunately, the numbers were small and the experience young. Many of the Admiral’s best commanders had been lost during their last battle, and now, the Vice Admiral wanted to commit what was left to a suicide mission. They still didn’t know why the first mission had failed.

Despite this, the Vice Admiral held the ear of the Emperor, and his plan was being given strong consideration within the Imperial Palace. The Emperor and his staff were careful not to leak information, especially to the Supreme Council, but the Marshall had spies in both Teesen's and the Emperor's staff, so he'd uncovered this disturbing information.

Although the Marshall employed spies, his intelligence network paled to that of the Emperor's. Up until a few years ago, these measures had never been necessary, but as the Admiral's popularity as a war hero grew, the Marshall saw changes in the personnel assigned to the staff. It became obvious the Emperor was keeping a close eye on his Supreme Commander. Eventually, the Marshall's suspicions were confirmed when one spy approached him offering to work as a double agent. After some preliminary checks, the Marshall had agreed, and thus, the Marshall's intelligence network began. Although small in scope, it encompassed the Emperor's staff, various bureaucratic agencies, and even the Supreme Council. It was enough to ensure the Admiral was never surprised by either branch.

Now that they obtained valuable information through this network, the Marshall and the Admiral wondered how they'd ever operated without one. The war had forced many to participate in activities they once thought absurd, and in addition to the standard costs of war, Tyler suspected they were beginning to pay a high price in terms of their societal values and ethics.

Tyler spoke privately with the Marshall about how they could thwart the Vice Admiral's plan without appearing disloyal to the Emperor and the war effort. They both believed the Admiral could use his enormous popularity as National Hero to counter the proposed plan, but if the Emperor was determined to strike a final blow, they weren't likely to easily dissuade him.

The one thing Tyler had in his favor was the fact the Emperor was highly intelligent and probably wouldn't want to waste his remaining forces in case the plan failed. They needed to convince the Emperor the plan was risky, especially in light of their last failure. However, Tyler knew it would take more than his own opinion to sway the argument toward caution. For now, they kept their ideas to themselves while studying the details of the Vice Admiral's plan, documenting the flaws it contained. Unfortunately, it was difficult to find flaws.

Vice Admiral Teesen was no fool and he'd won many battles for Admiral Oslo. He was nearly as decorated as Admiral Oslo, and if the Admiral had not gained such prominence, Vice Admiral Teesen would most likely be the Supreme Commander. He was a formidable man and Tyler didn't relish the prospects of having him on the opposite side. Then again, Tyler didn't think highly of losing the war.

The plan's most obvious flaw was the enormous gamble requiring too many things to go right without adequate backup. In this, Tyler saw Teesen as careless. Most of the time, Teesen's gambles paid off, but there were a few moments in history where they'd not, and it had cost his men dearly. He was a brilliant tactician, but his plans simply required too many things to execute perfectly, and this latest was no exception. It required supply routes that didn't exist, asteroid bases that hadn't been captured, and fleet movements that went undetected. These things were unlikely at best and impossible at worst. Krildon suffered dearly from the last offensive, and Tyler knew they would step up their vigilance in its aftermath.

If they hadn't recently lost the Admiral's battle, they might have been capable of pulling it off. But now, all reports indicated Krildon increased their surveillance of Poolto activities, and more than a few scout craft were shot down or detected near remaining bases and supply points. They were under the microscope, and the Vice Admiral's plan did not take that fully into account. According to the Marshall's spies, the Emperor's staff had also noted the same discrepancies, but the Vice Admiral was rumored to have brushed them aside as insignificant in light of their great ruse.

The Marshall didn't know how the Emperor's staff had reacted to Teesen's response, but they knew the plan was moving forward. It called for two more carriers to be completed before they could begin, so that held the launch back for at least another four months. That gave Tyler and the Admiral's staff time to intervene. Meanwhile, word leaked out that the intelligence agencies were busily working on their own surveillance of the Krildon fleet with the goal of determining their defensive capabilities and speed with which they were rebuilding forces.

To date, Krildon appeared to lag behind the Poolto effort after losing much of their manufacturing capabilities during the Admiral's offensive. Although on the surface this appeared good, the Marshall was suspicious of its accuracy. After such a

devastating blow to their home world, the Marshall believed Krildon would double their efforts and keep them under tighter secrecy. The Admiral's memories seemed to confirm the Marshall's analysis, and it made logical sense. Unfortunately, the military relied almost solely on the Empire's intelligence agencies, and lately, the Admiral and his staff were being excluded from that information.

The official response to inquiries about the missing intelligence was that '...until the Admiral fully recovered, they were instructed not to burden him with ongoing operational details'. As the Marshall put it, "We are systematically being cut out of the position of power we once held."

It was unclear who was behind it, Vice Admiral Teesen or the Emperor. Either way, the National Hero no longer held the Imperial Palace's ear as master strategist. They would have to find a way to change that if they wanted to stop the next offensive.

Despite this burden, Tyler felt confident as the Admiral, but was increasingly overwhelmed by the decisions he was being forced to make. He sensed the Admiral's staff waited patiently for him to act, hoping to regain their former power and success.

Unfortunately, Tyler was not yet able to do that. More than a few times, Adanni had intruded into Tyler's thoughts, insinuating he ought to take over a little of the control. He assured Tyler his own experience would help them navigate the political mess and put the Admiral back on top. Though Tyler was tempted, he declined the magnanimous offer. Until he was fully recovered, he had no intentions of letting Adanni make personal decisions. The stress took its toll, and though his physical recovery progressed rapidly, he felt mentally inadequate to the tasks assigned him.

This, too, added stress, and he used this as an excuse to sample the sloose berry wine. He had the wine delivered from the Palace's immaculate cellar to his viewing room every day. Tyler had befriended one of the estate staff members named Feernii Oolaa after arriving in Tooland. Among Feernii's many responsibilities, food and beverage was one of his favorites, and he was more than happy to share that information with Tyler. He possessed the only keys to the wine cellar and was well versed in its awesome selections. Feernii himself hand selected each bottle that was sent to Tyler.

Tyler convinced Feernii to keep the deliveries secret as the doctors and nurses would disapprove of his consumption.

Remarkably, Feernii never knew the original Admiral abstained from alcohol, so he was only too pleased to demonstrate his knowledge of their wonderful cellar. Tyler didn't really care if Feernii had known, it was a distinct pleasure to enjoy the calming and uplifting effects of alcohol once more. Since that dreadful day that turned Tyler into something new and different, he hadn't sampled the pleasures of drinking, and though it was only wine, he relished the experience.

During the monotonous days at Tooland, Tyler sat through meetings and physical therapy patiently waiting to retire to his viewing room and enjoy a new bottle of wine. Like his life in Los Angeles, his daily consumption grew routine, something he was not concerned about. The wine tasted extraordinarily good, and Tyler chided the Admiral's memories for abstaining all those years. Between the wine and the wonderful meals, Tyler could just bear the daily grind of recovering his health and managing the Admiral's staff.

After two months in Tooland, Tyler felt at home. He'd originally imagined the experience would be alien, but as the days sped by, he realized life on Poolto wasn't too different than life on Earth. He wished they'd never leave Tooland, but the Marshall informed him a trip to the capital was imminent.

* * * *

Tyler sat comfortably in one of the luxuriously overstuffed chairs that adorned his favorite viewing room. His mind dwelled on their impending trip to the capital city of Yooso. The trip was moved forward because of his speedy recuperation, which Tyler assumed was due to his Onyalum spirit. His ethereal essence had brought the body back from death, so perhaps this same spirit enhanced its health as well. Either way, Tyler no longer used the wheelchair, and other than minor pain and stiffness in his back, he felt almost normal. The doctors were amazed at the speed of his recovery and gave him the thumbs up to leave Tooland in three weeks.

Already, the Admiral's staff began dismantling the temporary headquarters they'd set up at the estate. Tyler knew they were ready to move out of the sticks and back to their headquarters in the exciting city of Yooso. Tyler didn't hold with their enthusiasm, especially since it meant taking on even greater responsibilities.

He topped off his wine glass and stared blankly at the view screens lining the wall. Each was tuned to a different channel, and as usual, Tyler watched them all at once, combining newscasts and talk shows to further his knowledge of Poolto. Stories from the capital were common, including speeches from the Emperor concerning the ongoing war effort. It didn't escape Tyler's notice that none of the shows mentioned the Admiral despite the Emperor's assurances to keep the public informed on his progress.

Tyler wasn't surprised, the tone from the Emperor's staff had become cold and distant after the news conference in the hospital. That was why the Marshall pressed for their return to Yooso. As he put it, the longer the Admiral was missing from the political scene, the less his presence would mean.

Tyler sipped from his wine and looked up as one of the telecasts mentioned the Admiral's name. A reporter was interviewing one of the surviving commanders from the last battle, and Tyler recalled the man's name as Baaylir Tredeen, squadron leader from one of the lost carriers. He set his wine glass down and pressed the controls to mute everything but the commander's interview. The reporter had just asked him what he thought about the military's current capabilities to fight after the losses they'd suffered.

"...counter attack, we have been feverishly rebuilding our fleet. Although my own squadron's carrier was destroyed in that last battle, we have been reassigned to one of the new carriers scheduled to come online in a few weeks. While we wait, we've been re-supplied with missing fighters and personnel."

The camera was close in on the commander, so Tyler couldn't make out where they were. Wherever it was, it looked to be nighttime, and that meant either space, or somewhere near Tyler's time zone. They might even have been near the capital city. Tyler listened carefully to the rest of the commander's comments.

"...training everyday. Of course, for security reasons, we cannot discuss either where we are based or where we are currently training. Suffice it to say, my squadron, and those of many of my colleagues are ready to fight again. We look forward to Admiral Osloo's return in several weeks so we can hear more about his brilliant plans to move this effort forward."

Tyler sat back while the reporter asked the commander about what he had heard from Admiral Osloo's staff. Tyler knew the

Marshall had wanted to keep their return to Yooso a secret, but apparently someone had leaked it, and now it was in the news.

Tyler shrugged it off, it was going to come out eventually, and he'd never been convinced of the value of the secrecy anyway. He switched from the channel and picked up his wine, relishing the particularly exquisite taste of tonight's selection. Feernii had assured him this particular vintage had won several prestigious awards and because of its small production run, each bottle was worth a great deal of money. Tyler would never have paid so much for a mere bottle of wine back on Earth, but this particular taste was almost compelling enough. He was once again pleased the Admiral was wealthy.

He was nearing the end of the first bottle, and eyed the second one sitting alone on the bar across the room. Although he'd originally started with a glass or two each night, he had quickly progressed to one to two bottles. Holding his half-empty glass, he leaned back in the chair and thought about the trip ahead. He hoped to find Toosia in Yooso, but wasn't sure if tracking her down would be easy. After a month and half of constant failures, he was finally convinced to give up trying to contact her. Unfortunately, because they were moving to the political hub of the planet, Tyler feared he needed someone like Toosia to help him navigate the political maze of power.

He pictured her beautiful face once more as she had stood looking down at him in the hospital. As he met more people from this world, he began to appreciate how beautiful Toosia really was. Her features were delicate, and yet commanding, regal yet soft, and one couldn't help but notice her when she entered a room. He felt a familiar internal stirring and turned his thoughts away from that which would only lead to disappointment. No use getting worked up about something he'd never see.

A knock at the open door startled Tyler. The Marshall stood patiently with hands behind his back. The man looked embarrassed at having to interrupt his Admiral, so Tyler assumed the news must be important. The Marshall and the rest of the staff had taken up residence in the West wing, so Tyler rarely saw them after hours. He preferred it that way but didn't mind the occasional company.

He motioned to the Marshall. "Come, Marshall, join me in a glass of my family's most excellent reserve!"

The Marshall hesitated, but walked over to a comfortable couch perpendicular to Tyler's chair. As the Marshall sat down,

Tyler held up the bottle of sloose berry wine, offering the Marshall a nightcap.

"Oh, no thank you, sir, I was just heading for bed." He gave Tyler a puzzled look as he said this.

"What's wrong, Marshall, do you abstain from such things?"

"No, sir, I have been known to imbibe now and again. I simply didn't realize you did." He once again looked slightly embarrassed.

Tyler was certain the Marshall knew the old Admiral had abstained, so Tyler needed to confirm his doubts. "Yes ... yes, I did abstain from such things before the accident, but since my recovery, I am beginning to take more interest in the things I have sworn to protect." At least he wasn't lying. Death had a way of changing people, he only hoped the Marshall bought the excuse.

The Marshall paused, absorbing the Admiral's words. Convinced or not, he wasn't ready to press the matter.

"I see your point, Admiral, sometimes it is necessary to re-acquaint ourselves with the world we are fighting for. Perhaps I will join you after all."

The Marshall walked to the bar and brought back an empty glass that Tyler poured the remnants of the first bottle into. The Marshall held his glass high in salute as they both leaned back into their seats.

"Tell me, Marshall, what brings you here so late?"

"I don't know if you saw or not," the Marshall gestured towards the view screens, "but our trip to the capital has been compromised."

"Yes, I saw Commander Tredeen's interview." Tyler paused briefly. "I thought it went very well."

"But, sir, he released our return to the capital before we were ready!" The Marshall was clearly agitated by the leak, and Tyler could guess why. He was sure it had nothing to do with the secrecy of their trip.

"Yes, Marshall, I understand. Now explain to me why it is so important?" Tyler tired of the secrecy.

"Sir," the Marshall began, "I realize it may seem a bit *cloak and dagger* to keep our return a secret, but you need to understand that a major power play is going on in the capital, and your early return will have a pivotal role in how that plays out." The Marshall paused. Obviously, he was trying to find the right words to convey his fears. He wrung his hands nervously before reaching for his glass of wine. He drank firmly from the glass. "The Emperor has

lost faith in you, sir.” He said it matter-of-fact, a look of relief on his face.

Tyler was amused—that was the big secret the Marshall was holding back? The signs were there all along, and after the conference, it wasn’t a giant leap to come to that conclusion; yet Tyler sensed something else, something the Marshall was withholding.

“Fine, I can accept that and even could have predicted it. But again, why does our return need to be a secret?”

“Sir...” again he paused, “Sir, I don’t know if you realize just how fast your recovery has been. Many around here are touting it as a miracle, not that they believe in such things.”

“So I heal fast, what is the big deal?” Tyler was surprised at this change in topic.

“The big deal is the Emperor is trying to move you out of power, replacing you with Vice Admiral Teesen, so he’d hoped to use your slow recovery as a plausible explanation to the military and public. The Emperor saw this as an opportunity to force you into retirement after your decades of noble service.” The Marshall took another large drink. “The retirement, of course, would place you in an advisory position on the military planning council, but your command would be taken away, and thus, your power.”

“You know all this for fact?” Tyler asked.

“Well, most of it.” He admitted, “Your placement on the planning council was a projection on my part.”

“And a good one at that.” Tyler agreed.

Tyler thought about what the Marshall was saying. Clearly, his return so early, and in such good health, would serve to make him more popular in the eyes of the public and the military. This would work against the Emperor’s plans to retire him for fear of the public backlash. Tyler tapped the Admiral’s memories as a strategist, and deduced how the surprise return would have had a greater impact politically. If the Emperor had no time to prepare, then the Admiral and his staff would have quickly resumed power.

“I understand the dilemma—we missed an opportunity to regain our power without a nasty fight. Can’t we still use this return to our advantage?” Tyler thought about Toosia once more and her father’s needed position on the Council. Unfortunately, they’d alienated many on the Council, so that avenue seemed remote.

“Well, we could.” The Marshall didn’t sound certain. “There are many elements in the military that would prefer your leadership to that of the Vice Admiral. Their faith in your abilities will be restored with your early return. Of course, I’ve already been working that angle, scheduling interviews with key personnel who support you.” The Marshall leaned forward, a look of promise replacing his concern. “I suppose that in some ways, Commander Tredeen has already begun that process.”

Tyler’s mind leaped ahead, “Of course!” He exclaimed. “We marshal our support in the military, and Vice Admiral Teesen will have no other option than to step aside for the triumphant return of his Supreme Commander.”

“Yes,” the Marshall agreed, “then the Emperor would have no choice but to publicly acknowledge your rightful return. In fact, he would have to issue an official proclamation of your return to duty, and announce his faith in your fitness to take over the war effort. Yes, we may not be out of this game yet!”

The Marshall finished his wine and stood up. “Admiral, I beg your leave that I may tend to some avenues on this new approach.”

Tyler smiled. So formal, and yet, the Marshall was clearly happy with the turn of events. Tyler was also happy. For the first time since becoming the Admiral, he felt like he had made some of his own conclusions, and contributed to a new strategy. Sure, he had relied upon the Admiral’s memories to guide him, but the projections felt like his own.

“Yes, Marshall,” he raised his glass, “thank you for your continued support and loyalty. I’ll see you in the morning.”

The Marshall bowed slightly before leaving, a renewed spring in his step. Tyler watched the Marshall retreat as he downed his last glass. He glanced across the room at the other bottle, but decided against opening it—tomorrow would be busy.

* * * *

Tyler slept restlessly, tossing and turning in the enormous bed. Dreams, nightmares, and stressful thoughts plagued his sleep. Some were his own, but many were the Admiral’s. With only a week before their return to the capital, the activity around the Palace had become frenzied. Fortunately, Tyler was exempt from most of the activity as his key role was to prepare for the big gala the Marshall scheduled for their return.

It would kick off with a large press conference outside the Supreme Military Command headquarters where a parade of experts, military personnel, and medical doctors would prepare the public for the miraculous recovery of their National Hero. The Admiral's staff prepared an exemplary speech Tyler would present, and Tyler had spent the last couple days practicing it before memorizing it perfectly. With the newfound abilities to remember everything, a single speech seemed remarkably easy. However, his delivery still fell short of expectations, but he assured his staff he would have it down before the event despite his lagging confidence.

It was these inadequacies that kept him restless. Though he gained more confidence each day, there were times when the *Tyler* in him desired to escape into the Universe—to flee where things were simpler. Those thoughts haunted his dreams. Occasionally, memories of Linda drifted through his awareness. Where was she? What was she doing? Had she married? Tyler knew the questions might never be answered, but that only drove him further from the sleep he needed.

He drifted in and out, feeling disconnected from everything around him. Like a remote observer, perhaps like Adanni, he watched himself toss and turn from above. Suddenly, the door to his room opened, a lone figure slipping in through the darkness. The disconnected part of his awareness saw only a shape moving across the floor, but the restless Tyler below him stirred briefly, a glowing figure moving to the bed.

Was this a dream, or was this real? Through tired eyes, he watched the lone figure, their body's heat a glowing halo. They shed a simple gown, moving gently under the covers beside him. It must have been a dream else why did he feel no level of concern from this intrusion? It felt like a dream despite the soft, warm body reaching out to him.

In the recesses of his sleep-dulled mind, he worked out it must be Eyleeria. Who else in the Palace would dare such a brazen act with their commander? He tried to speak, but delicate fingers reached out, pressing his lips gently. Through his strange night vision, he made out the glowing face next to him but couldn't accept what he saw. She moved over top of him, and he knew he was dreaming! The angelic face above him was that of Toosia.

Dream or not, he wanted her like no one before. He was mesmerized by her beauty as her naked skin danced with multiple

colors flashing in fantastic patterns. He imagined his own skin dancing in response and felt his excitement grow. His hands reached out to caress her body, his fingers exciting her delicate breasts with his touch. The glow of her skin pulsed with excitement, pacing the passion he felt within himself.

The people of Poolto shared a similar anatomy with humans—even their genitalia. Tyler had delved into the Admiral's memories for examples of love making, and the Admiral's affair with Eyleeria had, at its peak, been sexually active. The Admiral used the sexual release as his primary stress reducer.

Like humans, the males possessed a penis. Although thin and long, it was completely contained within the body when flaccid. When excited, it moved out to merge with the female. As Tyler penetrated the dream Toosia, both arched with intense pleasure as their skin reacted with a brilliant display of pastel colors. Once inside, Tyler felt himself swell, filling her completely as pleasure took over his mind and senses.

He watched from below as she closed her eyes, throwing her head back rhythmically, moving to the music of their passion. Her skin pulsed with hypnotic colors, and Tyler bonded with an intense feeling of love. So great was the feeling, Tyler wondered how the Admiral had ever left the woman.

As if in slow motion, Tyler watched her arch with an orgasm that made her skin fluoresce a brilliant red. Her genitalia pulsed with excitement, wrapping tighter around him. The pulsing increased, bringing him towards an apex he longed for. With a burst of blinding light, he exploded into her, the release sending cascading waves of pleasure through his body. Toosia responded with greater waves of orgasmic pleasure until Tyler was lost in vertigo.

He had no idea how long the orgasms lasted, or when they had finally separated from each other. The dream was over, and at long last, Tyler fell into a restful sleep. He didn't care if the dream was only fantasy constructed from the Admiral's memories. He had needed the release from the stress and anxiety of his new position. Tyler slept a deep and tranquil sleep.

* * * *

Tyler rose from the large bed late in the morning. He was alone. Considering the hour, he was surprised the staff hadn't woke

him earlier. Rumors of his sleeplessness had spread through the staff, and concerns for their boss's recovery overrode duty. He mentally thanked them for the needed sleep as he felt more refreshed than any other time since becoming the Admiral.

The needed rest renewed his sense of purpose, and he felt a greater resolve to be the Admiral everyone would rally behind. For the first time since they'd planned it, he looked forward to their return to the capital. He knew many obstacles would bar their way, but the *Admiral* inside wouldn't back down from the fight.

As he started the day, he was upset there was no trace of the experience the night before. It had seemed so real, he could barely believe it was only a dream. The intense love he felt for the Admiral's wife lingered, but the effect was uplifting rather than depressing. A part of him believed there was no hope in reconciling their differences, but he vowed to try to mend the wounds anyway. The Admiral's carelessness created the chasm, so it seemed only fitting he be the one to bridge the gap.

Tyler finished his ablutions and dressed in a semi-formal uniform ready to greet the day. The kitchen staff always waited for his appearance before starting breakfast. This morning, he felt an enormous hunger. He left the quarters for the dining room where he would eat alone. He looked forward to being alone to catch-up on the day's news and agenda.

Once alerted to the Admiral's presence, the Palace staff put in motion the morning ballet that was the daily routine. He knew from experience that once breakfast was underway, staff members would descend on his bedroom, changing the linens and cleaning the bathroom. Tyler thought the servitude extravagant, but over time, he became accustomed to the lavish lifestyle.

As he rounded the last corner of the hallway, he came to the double doors leading into the dining room. As usual, a servant stood with doors open, bowing as Tyler walked past to take his seat at the table.

Tyler had told the head of his staff that the bowing made him uncomfortable, but the person in charge had assured Tyler the staff could not stop even if they wanted. The Admiral was the greatest National Hero since the emperor who united their planet, and everyone felt a debt of gratitude for his great service. They showed respect in one of the simplest ways they knew. Tyler couldn't argue the point, so once again, he grew accustomed, accepting it as just one more part of the Admiral's world.

His usual seat was set and ready for his meal. He preferred the end of the table where it was closer to the large fireplace dominating the room. It was more than a dining room—a great room created to entertain large numbers of dinner guests.

Throughout the room, large sitting areas were filled with plush seating, and even the fireplace was surrounded by cushioned seating ideal for intimate moments. Spanning the front of the fireplace, a large, overstuffed sofa softened the formal atmosphere the room generally maintained. Tyler guessed the couch could easily accommodate eight, and it was flanked by a smaller sofa on the left and a large chair on the right. It provided a more comfortable tone to the room that made Tyler more relaxed.

He sat at the end of the table behind the large chair on his right. It gave him a great view of the entrance while being close enough to feel warmth from the fire. The table was set with dishware and utensils he still hadn't figured out. He wondered why the table remained set when no one but he ate there. However, the full table did take away the loneliness.

Per his instructions, his setting included a small video tablet next to a glass of *Goonjee* juice he'd come to enjoy. He likened it to a combination of bananas and raspberry, although he never would have picked that combination on Earth. Perhaps the Admiral's palate was sufficiently different to admire the unusual combination.

His video tablet contained notable news stories, the daily agenda, and logistical data the staff wanted him to review. Fortunately, today's schedule was nearly clear while everyone completed the travel preparations. With only one meeting on the docket, he felt like touring the vineyards and winery.

Since arriving in Tooland, he'd been cooped up in the Palace tending wounds and managing matters of military import. Since they'd be leaving soon, he would miss the opportunity to experience the full value of the Admiral's estate. Although he could easily review it from memories, he wanted to experience it himself. Besides, he convinced himself he needed to get out in the fresh air. Despite the enormous size of the Palace, he felt claustrophobic.

Tyler drank his juice, waiting for the morning tea. It was made from the leaves of an ancestral tree that was a mainstay in their diet since anyone could remember. Even today, the traditional methods of drying the leaves and crushing them before steeping was

maintained. It was an integral part of their culture carried over from an arboreal history. Tyler found the tea wonderful and believed the folklore that told of great healing powers. Healing powers aside, it was the *Tiin'tiin* Tyler was after. The chemical stimulant was overly abundant within the leaves, and it filled the void of coffee from Earth. He knew this was its true value to the culture.

The head server, an older man named Koolen, placed the steaming tea gently on a small plate to Tyler's right. As usual, he added a syrupy substance made from a root extract that served as the primary sweetener on Poolto. Tyler thought it too sweet, but insisted on a small quantity to cut the bitterness inherent in the tea. Koolen finished the preparation before running down the morning's menu. Tyler nodded acceptance before turning on one of the video monitors he'd installed to watch the morning news.

Too engrossed in finding his favorite shows, Tyler ignored Koolen as he walked to the large chair beside him. Tyler thought he heard Koolen speaking to someone, but he was too close to locating his favorite channel to notice. When his morning broadcast was finally playing, he turned his attention to Koolen speaking softly to someone in the chair. Tyler was curious—no one ever came into the room while he was eating. He assumed it was the Marshall, although he thought it odd he had remained so quiet.

"Yes, thank you, Koolen, I'd love another cup." The voice was distinctively female.

"Yes, Mam, I'll return with it straight away." Koolen moved toward the kitchen while Tyler wrestled his confusion.

Was that really a female voice he'd heard? Who? Eyleeria? He doubted she would be so bold to interrupt the Admiral so early without an invitation.

"Good morning," he ventured, "would you care to join me for breakfast?" He waited patiently, uncertain who would respond.

The voice remained quiet before slowly answering. The woman sounded petulant. "Well, Nayllen, after so long you do not even recognize the voice of your own wife? I'm hurt."

He fell silent, tongue-tied with shock. Toosia stood up elegantly from the chair and moved toward the table. Once again, he was mesmerized by her beauty as the dream from the night before rushed back. He reeled with the possibilities. Had it been a

dream? Had it been real, or was it some premonition of her appearance? He was speechless.

She walked gracefully around the table and sat next to Tyler. She wore a shimmering gold single suit open at the throat, plunging just enough to show cleavage. Her hair was twirled and bound in a fashion Tyler noted was common these days, and it was held in place by a gold clasp shaped like a leaf. Her face, soft and sensuous, carried a look of concern as she sat back in her chair staring directly at Tyler.

He was too shocked to respond. In his mind, a play of strong emotions overwhelmed him. Dare he ask about last night? What if it had been a dream? Why did he feel this intense love? Would she reciprocate? All those letters he'd written and messages he'd left. He'd assumed she'd never come see him. Why now? *Had it been a dream?* He wasn't certain and feared the memories would give him away.

"Glad to see you, too, Nayllen." She spoke softly continuing her measured and patient stare.

"I ... uh, I ..." he stuttered desperately, unable to form the appropriate response.

"Please, don't let me interrupt your morning rituals." She said without malice. "It was not my intention to ... fluster you."

Flustered? He looked at his hands and saw the gentle play of light fluorescing on his skin. He was excited, and she knew it. *Damn!* He struggled to control the emotions but thought he saw a small flicker of light move across her face. Was it only wishful thinking on his part?

"Why are you here?" he managed to ask.

"Don't get too worked up, I am here at the request of Marshall Sliss. He is concerned about your return to *duty*. As you know, we all believe the Emperor does not want your return, therefore, we expect resistance." She paused, staring at his fluorescing skin once more. "Fortunately, your popularity will make it difficult for the Emperor to deny you, so we are trying to decipher how he will play this."

She stopped, letting Tyler absorb her words. He tried to control his thoughts and his skin finally returned to normal. He was embarrassed, but the memories from the night were still too fresh.

"At this critical juncture," she began again, "a division between us would not be prudent as it could provide the necessary fodder to keep you out of power."

Again, she paused. Was she choked up? Tyler couldn't tell, but her voice wavered slightly.

"My presence in your life during this period will be purely political. It is in my own interests, and those of my family, to play your wife until you are once again Supreme Commander. Until that time, I will remain with you and offer my counsel."

She slumped slightly, the pressure of the speech lifted. He was both excited and saddened at the same time. He wanted nothing more than to have her by his side, but her reluctance to *play* his wife filled him with sorrow. He realized the night must have been a dream.

She stared at the table, unable or unwilling to look at him. He was going to respond when Koolen returned with her tea and Tyler's breakfast. They sat silently while the servers laid it out efficiently. Neither showed emotion, but Tyler was torn inside. He needed her counsel, but more than that, he needed her love. Dream or not, his feelings for her were real and he fought to hold them to himself.

The servers worked silently, obviously sensing the tension between the heads of the estate. Their marital problems were well known to the Palace staff, and it had been years since they were together at Tooland. The servers finished before heading back to the kitchen leaving Koolen standing quietly beside the table.

"Is there anything else I may get you?" Koolen asked patiently with no sign of discomfort.

Tyler gave him a reassuring smile. "No, thank you, Koolen, this looks wonderful."

"Very good, sir, please ring if you need anything." As quietly as he had come, Koolen slipped out of the room.

Tyler went on the offensive. "Toosia, I cannot tell you how happy I am to see you! I know this is hard, but I really have changed. I understand the pain and isolation I caused you in the past, but I desperately want to make up for it now. All I ask is one chance." He hoped his pleas sounded sincere. "Would you care for some breakfast?"

"No, thank you, I ate when I arrived."

Well, Tyler thought, *that answered the question of last night*. He felt disappointed, but held onto hope. She hadn't immediately rejected him, but then she wasn't warming up either.

"Well, good ... very good." He said softly.

He backed off, falling silent while he ate. He tried to sort out the feelings he had for this new twist in the Admiral's affairs. He knew being with her would make it difficult to conceal his feelings, but he feared showing them would upset her even more. He didn't want to make her feel uncomfortable in a situation she could not escape.

He ate silently, as they both watched the daily newscast. He didn't pay attention to what was being said while he was caught up in his inner turmoil. He figured she was also fighting her own inner demons, but outwardly, she showed no signs of emotion.

He finished eating and turned off the broadcast. He knew they had to address the issue now rather than later. If his career meant she would be miserable and suffer, then he would gladly give it up. He wanted her and he wanted her to be happy.

"Toosia," he began, not certain how to proceed, "I have made many mistakes over the years, all of them because of my career. I have no right to expect you to love me anymore, or ever again, but I must let you know that my feelings for you are so strong that it causes me pain. I love you and I want you back in my life. If that means I lose my career, then I don't care."

He studied her for signs of emotion, but she sat quietly neither accepting nor rejecting what he'd said. He didn't care which way it went, he just needed to say it.

"I know you are making a sacrifice for me that causes you great pain, and I cannot accept that. If my career is going to cause you to suffer, then damn my career! Let the Emperor blow up the planet for all I care. I want you back in my life. I want to make up for all those years I neglected you, even if it takes the rest of my life."

He paused, seeing no emotion on her face. Well, it was a gamble, but one he had to take. He continued. "Do not stay with me if you cannot love me, or forgive me, or be a real part of my life. Do not stay because of your family, or my career, or because of your reputation. Stay because you have feelings for me and want to give me a chance to earn back your heart and your love. I don't care about my career, Toosia, I only care about you."

The speech had a familiar ring to it. It was the emotional speech he had wanted to tell Linda before he was unfairly ripped away. Like Toosia, Linda had suffered because of Tyler's career. He had always put work before her, and she, too, had put herself last, sacrificing a family for the love she held for Tyler. He felt

pain and guilt from the memory, and looked to Toosia as a way to wash that away. How much was residual memories of the Admiral's and how much was Tyler? He didn't know or care. It was a great relief to have finally said it.

Toosia remained motionless, nothing revealing her feelings. He waited patiently, fearing she would reject him while emotions swelled in his heart, filling his stomach with a hollow ache. He slid out of his chair and knelt before her on the ground gently grasping one of her hands as he bowed his head. Her hand trembled—the only sign of emotion.

"I vow to you right now, right here, on my family's ancestral estate, I will never do anything to hurt you again. I will spend my remaining days doing whatever I can to regain your trust, your love, and your respect. Please, stay with me because you want to, Toosia. Stay because you want us to be together—as a family."

Well, there it was, he'd put his heart on his sleeve and could only wait to see what she would do with it. Slowly, she removed her hand from his and cupped his chin gently, lifting his face. She wore a small, tight smile, and tears welled in both eyes.

"Love was never in doubt, Nayllen. I have always loved you, and always will. We grew so far apart during these long years, that the pain from those wounds are still fresh." She wiped her eyes before continuing. "I kidded myself into taking this role because of my family, my pride, and my fear. But inside, I wanted to believe you'd changed. When you woke and I saw you for the first time in the hospital, I had not been prepared for the obvious feelings you displayed. I didn't know how to respond, so ... so I shut you out."

She wiped her eyes and took a sip of tea to help steel her resolve. "My desire to end our marriage was strong, even after that first visit. But something about you evoked strong memories and feelings that I had buried long ago. When I received all your letters and messages, the feelings they expressed only confused me. Again, I couldn't respond." She wiped tears and gestured to Tyler's chair. "Please, Nayllen, sit."

He rose from his knees and sat in the chair, waiting for her to finish, hope building with her words.

"When Marshall Sliss contacted me about three weeks ago, I was dubious about what he had suggested. It took me an entire week to respond, much to the Marshall's distress I'm sure. However, the more I thought about it, the more I had to know whether your feelings were sincere and genuine. In the guise of

helping your career and my family, I accepted the Marshall's offer to help." She sipped, obviously gaining resolve from the stimulant. "Seeing you now, and hearing your words ..." She broke down, unable to control her emotions.

Tyler leaned forward and took her hand, trying to comfort her. She trembled from his touch, almost pulling away before grasping him for support.

"I ... see and ... feel a change in you that I thought could never happen. I do want to be with you, Nayllen. I really do!"

She completely broke down, and Tyler got up to comfort her. She grabbed his waist as he wrapped his arms around her. He felt his own emotions well up and barely held back tears. It wouldn't do to have the Admiral crying, although that was what Tyler felt like doing.

"I know it will take time, Toosia, but we can make this work. We can find each other once more, and be the family we deserve."

She sobbed gently. He didn't know how it would work, but he had a chance, a chance to right so many wrongs. Perhaps being the Admiral wouldn't be as bad as he first imagined. Perhaps the complex life of a powerful man would finally give Tyler something he never had—a family.

* * * *

It took time for both to compose themselves before Tyler cancelled his meetings for the day. Marshall Sliss protested until he learned the Admiral and his wife would be inspecting the grounds of their estate. At that point, the Marshall backed down, wishing them well.

He and Toosia took ground transport down to tour their estate with the caretaker and chief operator of the winery. Throughout the tour, they held hands, embraced warmly, and stared into each other's eyes. As far as Tyler was concerned, this was a date he would never forget. He sensed Toosia felt the same despite being apprehensive about showing affection. They didn't say much but held excited discussions with various staff throughout the winery.

The chief operator, Kiiren Oslaan, was the tenth generation caretaker of the estate's winery. The Admiral held no memory of him, but did remember the man's father and grandfather. Kiiren informed them he'd taken over operations after his father had suffered health problems five years earlier, and although Kiiren

was the youngest in his line, the winery had vastly improved under his tenure.

Kiiren was excited to show them the awards and accolades the winery had received over the last two of their finest years. According to Kiiren, this year's harvest was looking even better, and he assured Tyler they would receive several hundred cases for the estate cellar. Kiiren was affable and talkative, and both Tyler and Toosia were able to escape from their emotional meeting from earlier.

Although the Admiral rarely showed interest in his family's wine production, Tyler was more than pleased to have inherited such a wonderful operation. He was fascinated by the process that created the wines, and Kiiren's intense passion for the business was infectious. It was one of the best times Toosia and the Admiral could remember. They felt like an old couple, familiar and warm, while excited as if on a first date. Since becoming Onyalum, Tyler had never felt so happy. He wished the day would go on forever.

After the tour, they ate lunch at the winery before heading back to the Palace where the Marshall and staff had prepared an incredible dinner just for the two of them. They both laughed at the Marshall's obvious desire to foster their newfound relationship, but both accepted it graciously. They finally parted, retiring to separate rooms to bathe and dress for the romantic evening.

Tyler donned the Admiral's finest formal uniform while Toosia dressed in an elegant gown of dark blue. The gown clung to her body, outlining the shape beneath. It was breathtaking, and Tyler showed his approval with pulses of light flickering across his face.

When they both met in the dining room, Tyler helped Toosia into her chair, lightly kissing her cheek before taking his own seat. The kitchen staff did not disappoint as they were lavished with multiple courses of exquisite foods from all over the planet. With each course, samples of the estate's best wines were served at the perfect temperature. Tyler felt like a King.

Several hours later, the dinner concluded, and Tyler excused the staff so he and Toosia could retire to the couch in front of the large fireplace. The fire burned brightly, filling the room with a dancing glow of yellow gold. Toosia, barefoot, stretched her legs out along the couch, settling into Tyler's arms.

The moment was peaceful, and so happy after the day they'd enjoyed. He gently caressed the skin of her arm, his hands moving gently across her body, feeling familiar curves he longed to

explore. He felt hot and excited as colors flash across her exposed skin.

He wanted to take her, to make love to her like the dream from the night before, but he held back. He didn't want to ruin the road to reconciliation by rushing into the physical part of the relationship. Although he sensed she wanted to make love, she held back, tentative in the renewal of their emotions.

They held each other well into the night, both succumbing to sleep by the warmth of the fire. Tyler woke late in the night, only embers glowing softly. Tyler noted one of the staff had placed a blanket over Toosia as she lay curled up with her head on his lap.

She looked peaceful, and he didn't want to disturb her. They'd both drank a lot of wine that day, and though Tyler was used to it, she probably wasn't. He slipped out from underneath her and stood up. He was stiff, but felt good for sleeping upright on the couch.

She didn't stir from his movement, so he gently shook her trying to wake her. She rolled over and continued to sleep. He didn't want to leave her on the couch, so he wrapped her in the blanket and carried her back to her room. She was light in his arms and didn't wake as they made their way to her quarters.

He put her in bed, removing her gown and covering her with sheets. She rolled from him towards the center of the bed. Quietly, he left her room and headed to his own. He couldn't remember when he had ever felt this good without being really high. The wine helped, but the feelings of love he felt for Toosia were more powerful than any drug he'd tried before. He felt a fearful elation from the emotions.

As he lay back to sleep, he could almost feel her against his body. He imagined her naked skin caressing his, both dancing with the colored lights of arousal. As his fantasy grew, the wine sent him into a peaceful sleep.

Yooso

The last week in Tooland with Toosia prepared Tyler for the return to the capital. Not only was the relationship rekindled, but he found her counsel invaluable in preparing him for the rigors of the political arena.

As Supreme Commander of Poolto forces, the Admiral had spent a great deal of time in Yooso. However, in that capacity, he rarely felt compelled to enter the political ring. His military record was sufficient to maintain his position within the hierarchy. Only now, on the verge of losing that position did politics become a necessity.

Marshall Sliss' spies confirmed their suspicions about the Emperor and Vice Admiral Teesen. Teesen had convinced the Emperor that his battle plan would work, so both ignored the perils as they quickly embarked down the dangerous path.

They both knew Admiral Oslo's opposition to the plan, so they had much to lose by his return. After the previous defeat, neither wanted an internal power struggle to disrupt the progress of the war. Tyler didn't want the power struggle either, but he couldn't sit by as they led Poolto to its destruction. He had to play the only card he had—that of National Hero.

They knew neither the Vice Admiral nor the Emperor would move against them openly, so their arrival and the planned press conference was not a surprise. Nonetheless, Marshall Sliss was concerned about other ways they could affect the return.

Ultimately, the Emperor dictated who was in power, so they needed to convince the press and the public that he was still the

right man for the job. Otherwise, the Emperor could keep him suspended, pending his full recovery.

All these possibilities haunted Tyler as they traveled the final distance to the city in an elegant ground vehicle. Tyler thought of it as a limo, but it dwarfed any he had seen before. This vehicle was a hundred feet long and twenty feet wide. It took up nearly two lanes, requiring an elaborate escort to clear the path.

Within this monstrous interior, most of the Admiral's senior staff rode contentedly, working on the press conference that would soon be launched. The rear compartment was reserved for the Admiral, and Tyler rode with Toosia, Marshall Sliss, and the twin aides, Kooren and Beelen. As usual, the junior officers were lost in their communication devices, coordinating everything for the arrival.

Two others rode in the compartment, and Tyler thought their inclusion unusual. At the Marshall's insistence, two bodyguards rode disguised as aides. They were more than imposing, and Toosia kept eyeing them distrustfully. Since Poolto had been united, there had never been an assassination attempt on any person of significant power—especially a National Hero.

Tyler thought precaution was overkill, but the Marshall had insisted. In his own words, "We cannot underestimate the threat you pose to the Emperor and his plans!" Tyler still thought it unnecessary, but he had to trust his most valuable advisor.

The Marshall introduced them as Officers Peeren and Diitii, but Tyler didn't want to make their acquaintance. He figured they probably weren't real names anyway. The Marshall assured Tyler the men had been recruited from top commando units created to infiltrate and sabotage key enemy installations in the asteroid belt.

The Admiral had never liked their methods, but he couldn't deny their effectiveness. More than once he'd relied on their abilities to disable strategic defense systems so that his plans could be carried out. They were highly effective but amoral and opaque. Only the Marshall had detailed information on their activities, and he alone commanded them. Not even Vice Admiral Teesen had access to their operations. Secrecy was a top priority when the units were formed.

Other than being imposing, both looked the part of a military bureaucrat. They wore simple single suits with the official aide insignias on each lapel. Neither carried visible weapons, but the

Marshall assured Tyler they were lethal if needed and capable of handling nearly every situation.

Unlike Toosia, the two men didn't bother Tyler. The only thing unnerving was the way they looked straight into your eyes while talking. Their stare was penetrating, measuring, and assessing everything and everyone around them. It was disconcerting, but then Tyler had never met anyone with that kind of cold, measured intensity. Not even the tense underworld of drug trafficking possessed people like them.

Tyler watched each as they stared out the windows on either side of the compartment. The windows were tinted so nothing was visible from the outside. Despite the darkened panes, Tyler felt certain the men saw everything that was going on.

Tyler glanced out the right side window as they went by a congregation of people on the side of the road outside the downtown district of Yooso. The congregation was large but dwarfed by the immensity of the capital city. Skyscrapers rose thousands of feet into the sky, blotting out clouds as the car entered the chasms of Poolto's greatest achievement.

Speeding by the onlookers, Tyler spotted signs held up that welcomed the Admiral back to duty. They wished him and his wife well. Tyler knew the Marshall had organized the congregation and made sure the news networks picked up on it. The Marshall spent big on their return, and Tyler hoped it would pay off.

The car continued towards the center of the city and the seat of power. The streets were shadowed in darkness from the tall buildings, but lights lining the streets filled it with a dim twilight reminiscent of Las Vegas at night. The city didn't look like Vegas, nothing on the strip had been this big.

Tyler estimated the average building to be hundreds of floors tall, and as he stared into the small spaces between them, he saw many were interconnected by walkways and transportation systems many stories overhead. It was likely most never made it to street level except when leaving the city. He spotted vehicles flying overhead as their own car moved along the dark roadway.

From the Admiral's memories, he could pull up a lot of detail about Yooso. Like most large urban centers, this one was not without its problems and vices. Gambling, illicit drugs, and sex were a mainstay in the city. The criminal elements walked side by side with the most powerful people on the planet. It was rumored the Emperor allowed this—maybe even encouraging it.

Tyler didn't understand why, but the Marshall confided the best way to maintain control and power was to make your enemies your allies. The criminal element supported the Emperor because he looked the other way—within reason.

This was where Tyler and the Admiral's political inexperience was a glaring weakness. He knew Raul had several political and law enforcement connections, but the risk of exposure and arrest were a constant threat.

This was why Tyler needed Toosia—she had spent most of her life in Yooso. Although she never aspired to politics, she had moved within the *political* inner circles because of her father's position on the Council. She understood trade-offs, negotiations, and the common wrangling that were at the heart of Poolto politics. She knew the vast connections each politician had and where their allegiance lay. Surprisingly, it was not always with the Emperor.

With her assistance, they hoped to forge the relationships that would bring public support to the Admiral's side and ensure his return to command. The Emperor either controlled or swayed most of the Councilors, but it was his spies within the Supreme Council that were the real concern. It was virtually impossible to do anything without the Emperor finding out about it. Many Councilors were brought down because of their impropriety and lack of caution.

Everyone understood the Emperor was not above using criminal connections to discredit or destroy unruly Councilors. Usually, the Councilors themselves caused the downfall by succumbing to greed and corruption. This was the place most people on Poolto knew nothing about. The place where decisions were made affecting their lives, though not always open in a public forum.

Tyler had to be careful. He was out of his league and would have to rely upon those around him to successfully navigate. Fortunately, once in command, he could leave the city and run the war from afar. He hoped that would happen. A part of him wanted to quit being the Admiral and retire to Tooland with Toosia by his side. *Maybe someday.*

Tyler was blinded by light as they broke through the maze into blue sky above the center of the city. The seat of power was within a five square mile area, surrounded by the artificial jungle of buildings they'd passed through. The incongruity was stunning, and Tyler could only compare it to Central Park in New York City.

The area was composed of what Tyler could only call grass. He didn't think it was grass, but the green color looked like a lawn. According to the Admiral's memories, the *lawn* was formed by a plant that maintained a consistent height of six inches. The plant contained a very sticky substance that was nearly impossible to remove, and was intended as protection from ground attacks or intruders not authorized within the grounds.

Beyond the protective lawn, Tyler saw a maze of complexes that held the power of the planet. It was built like a wheel with the Emperors Palace at the hub and spokes extending out towards the other government facilities.

Surrounding the Palace at the end of each spoke was the Supreme Council, the Ministry of Justice, the Supreme Military Command, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Information, and the Ministry of Government Affairs. Combined, this was the power of Poolto.

This was the most defended parcel of land on the planet, even though it appeared unguarded. The enormous city surrounding it was the first line of defense against land and air attack. Hidden within the jungle of skyscrapers, troops were stationed with particle canons to protect the capital. The city at its thinnest point was ten miles wide, and the buildings provided an excellent barrier to ground assault. Tyler didn't think such an assault would ever be launched on the city, but nonetheless, it was protected from that one in a million chance.

The enormity boggled Tyler's mind, even coming from Los Angeles. At least in Los Angeles you could occasionally see sky when the smog was low. The city was spread out not up like Yooso. Even pictures of New York didn't compare with the size and scope of this city.

The fleet had ships that could rival the city in size, but to see it in the open like this was simply amazing. Inside a ship, it was difficult to see its true size.

Tyler watched as the cityscape disappeared behind the tunneled entrance burrowed beneath the government complex. Once inside, each vehicle came under the control of the security forces guarding the complex. The maze of roadways could be dynamically changed or blocked using a sophisticated system that manipulated walls, roads, and ceilings.

Only the security forces knew the constantly changing layouts. That was why all vehicles were remotely driven through the

complex. As they continued through the dimly lit tunnels, there was nothing to see. The Admiral's memories confirmed the majority of the government operated in buildings predominantly below ground level. The maze they drove through could easily take them further underneath the complex. Unfortunately, the occupants of the vehicles couldn't tell.

The complex was submerged nearly a thousand feet below the planet's surface—a fact that wasn't publicized. The entire complex was self-sufficient with thermal power sources, underground food production, water treatment, and waste disposal.

After the missile attacks early in the war, the Emperor ordered the massive complex built to withstand another such attack. Unfortunately, the latest in modern missile technology had recently been shown capable of destroying most of the complex with a direct hit. Few in the government knew this except the Imperial Palace, the intelligence community, and the military. Without the defense grid surrounding the planet, they were vulnerable. Fortunately, so was Krildon.

After what seemed an interminable drive through the underground maze, they came to the center of the complex. Nearly three hundred feet below ground, the complex opened onto what could only be called a hidden paradise.

An enormous cavern was constructed to house the government buildings from above. Using artificial light, a lush landscape with trees, gardens, lawns, and walkways spread out within the cavern. Everywhere Tyler looked, people sat in groups, walked between buildings, or lounged on the lush lawns. It was an incredible sight, and the Admiral's memories had done it little justice.

Tyler carefully shielded his surprise and amazement from the others. To the Admiral, this would have been nothing new. But to Tyler, it was captivating, and he decided he had to make some comment on what he saw.

"After my time in the hospital, I have begun to realize how beautiful this world is. Perhaps for the first time in my life I realize what a treasure I have pledged my life to protect. This complex is truly a wonderful creation so far underground."

No one commented on his remark, but Toosia and the Marshall gave him a curious look before staring out the window he seemed so enthralled by. Their reactions did not indicate they saw the same beauty, and Tyler thought it was a pity to be so immune to something so grand. Then again, he was seeing it for the first time.

They drove through the complex towards the Supreme Military Command building. Out in front, a large group of government officials and press waited patiently for their arrival. Like clockwork, everything was prepared. He steeled himself for the press conference and felt confident in his knowledge and ability to handle it. He was, after all, the National Hero. That put him above everyone else, and he needed to act the part.

The Marshall, Toosia, and his staff had done a tremendous job coaching him, but now all that preparation would be put to the test. He watched as their cavalcade pulled directly in front of the building by a large platform erected on the front steps.

On the platform, senior military officials and bureaucrats sat patiently waiting. At the front, a large array of microphones and small cameras stood ready to mark the historical event by transmitting it throughout the Empire. The scope would only be eclipsed by an Imperial speech by the Emperor himself. Tyler felt the beginnings of butterflies.

Although it was underground, the transmission would reach nearly every home and business on Poolto. It would even be transmitted to all the colonies controlled by Poolto, and some that were not. The Krildon military would jam all broadcasts reaching their possessions, but that didn't matter. This event was for Poolto only.

The vehicle came to a stop and the Marshall and his aides quickly departed to ensure everything was ready. While Tyler and Toosia waited, she grabbed his hand, squeezing it gently.

"I wanted to let you know that it will be very busy for the next few months," she said, "and I want you to know how special this last week has been."

She looked so beautiful and yet fragile. But she would provide the strength he needed to succeed here. It was hard to believe she was capable as she appeared vulnerable with emotions barely held in check.

She kissed him on the cheek before continuing.

"I will be in and out of your life during this time, but you will not be out of my heart. I will provide you the best counsel I can, and I will comfort you when we are together." She paused briefly, staring out at the throng waiting for their embarkation. "You have changed, Nayllen, and I suppose I have, too. I know we are just beginning to discover one another again, and I don't want all of

this to get in the way. I promise I will not let it, if you promise me the same.”

He looked into her eyes and felt a lump in his throat. This was the one thing he feared about his fight to regain power. At what cost would this last effort take on his personal life? He knew he must do everything he could to preserve what they had begun.

“I won’t let this ruin what we’ve regained. I will not make the same mistakes.” He paused, leaning over and kissing her on the lips. As they separated, he wiped a small tear from her eye. “I love you, Toosia, and I will not let you go.”

“I love you, too, Nayllen.” She wiped her eyes and smoothed her gown. “Let’s show them what force a united Oslo family can wield.”

Tyler smiled and signaled they were ready. The aide opened the door to the crowd erupting in a deafening roar. There were several hundred spectators at the event, but the sound was like thousands.

Tyler stepped out of the vehicle and turned to assist Toosia. Hand in hand, they walked towards the platform, the crowd urging them with applause and shouts of encouragement. They stopped amid the noise, holding hands together raised in an acknowledgement of the warm reception they’d been provided.

This made the crowd roar even louder, and many of the security forces holding them back struggled to contain the excitement. Tyler had never experienced anything like this and he was more than concerned for their safety. Crowds could get out of control, even small ones. Still, these were government workers and he doubted they would incite a riot within the confines of the cavern.

He wanted to avoid problems so he broke with their script and walked with Toosia towards the crowd. He held out his hands and shook as many as were offered while they walked down the lines. It may have been out of character for the Admiral, but Tyler didn’t care. The people wanted their National Hero back, and Tyler noted the cameras on the platform turned towards him as he made his way down the line.

It took nearly fifteen minutes to complete the trip, and more than once the lines almost broke. However, after the greeting, the crowd settled down as Tyler and Toosia made their way to the large platform. He passed the Marshall as he dropped Toosia off, noting the Marshall gave him a small look of disapproval.

It didn't matter, it had calmed the crowd and would be viewed across the planet. Overt connections with the people went a long way politically—even a non-politician like Tyler knew that.

Upon his entrance onto the platform, everyone stood and clapped in unison. He made his way down the line of dignitaries and military leaders, shaking hands and commenting on how good it was to be back to see them.

The Admiral's memory provided a detailed biography of every one he met, so it was easy to make the necessary small talk. Once the greetings were over, he made his way to the front of the platform where Vice Admiral Teesen waited. They briefly shook hands, both wearing smiles for the cameras. Tyler stood back while the Vice Admiral introduced him to the waiting public.

All along the front of the platform cameras lit up as live feeds were shot across the Poolto Empire. It made Tyler a little giddy when he thought about how many would be watching. He watched the Vice Admiral carefully as the man delivered the welcome speech.

"It is with the greatest pleasure and greatest honor that I am able to welcome back to this great city, the planet's most beloved hero, Admiral Nayllen Oslo." "

The Vice Admiral applauded as he turned to face Tyler with a genuine smile. Tyler knew the script, so he bowed and humbly shook off the admiration and accolades inherent in the introduction. The applause went on for several minutes before the Vice Admiral spoke again.

"Our thoughts and hopes have been with the Admiral during his difficult recovery, and we all longed for the day when he could stand here once again, a symbol of what this world has to offer, a man whose courage and devotion is only equaled by his exemplary service."

The crowd erupted into a long applause. *Difficult recovery? Symbol?* Tyler glimpsed the thrust of their attack—they wanted to show him as someone who barely survived and may not yet be recovered. The Vice Admiral well knew of his recovery and the lack of difficulty. He had drawn the lines in the sand.

The crowd died down, and the Vice Admiral continued, recounting past battles the Admiral had won. Always he referred to the past, speaking in past tense as though the Admiral's career were over. Teesen was crafty, Tyler had to give him that. But Tyler

also knew this speech had been prepared with the assistance of the Emperor's staff. He knew they would be working together.

That was fine, they, too, had prepared a marvelous speech, and since it would be the last one delivered, it would have the greatest impact. He brought his attention back to the Vice Admiral as the key word signaled the speech was nearing the end.

"...today, nothing is certain and we are still at war. The Admiral's counsel and experience will yet help us through these difficult times."

Counsel? Tyler could barely contain himself as he waited for Teesen to finish. He trusted his speech would shock everyone and signal his intent to become the Supreme Military Commander once again.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, may I please introduce to you one of the most honorable and heroic men of our time, Admiral Nayllen Oslo."

The Vice Admiral stepped back from the podium and applauded as Tyler stepped forward. This renewed the crowd's efforts with whistles, and shouting. Tyler played the moment brilliantly, letting it go on as long as the crowd would support it. He waved to the crowd, to the cameras, and most importantly, to the people watching at home. *Difficult recovery? Just wait.*

They had worked hard on the speech, and the first thing they had to do was reaffirm their allegiance to the Emperor. This would rally the crowd around both of them, hiding the division that now existed. They must maintain the illusion of a unified leadership, a common government working towards a common cause. That was how they would win the support.

Tyler stood silently, waiting for the crowd to settle down. Those on the platform took their seats as the noise finally subsided.

"Thank you, Vice Admiral Teesen, your exceptional leadership has been greatly appreciated during my absence. We are indebted to your service and your support." *Let him chew on that.*

"Please, a round of applause to show our great appreciation to the Vice Admiral." Tyler led the applause as he turned to the Vice Admiral, all smiles and good will. The crowd followed his lead.

He turned back to face the cameras. "You have all graciously welcomed me back, and for that, I am grateful. But it is not I who should be honored here today. No, the one we should honor is the one who continues to stand for Poolto in this grave time of crisis. It is the man for whom I have pledged my undying allegiance and

offer my greatest respect. He alone has led our great peoples forward into the future, a future I have the utmost confidence he will deliver to us with victory and everlasting peace. That man is our great and magnificent Emperor Hallen Yooso IV ... a man who is descended from the greatest men our planet has ever known.”

With that, Tyler moved back from the podium and looked upward towards the Imperial Palace at the center of the complex. Raising his hand, he saluted the Emperor’s Palace, a gesture he was certain the Emperor was watching from within.

Following his lead, everyone on the platform turned towards the Palace and saluted gracefully. Tyler finished and returned to the podium.

“Let’s hear a great cheer for our Emperor, defender of Poolto, leader to all, and the man for whom we all owe our greatest debt of gratitude.”

The crowd responded with a generous cheer and applause as they all turned towards the Palace.

“To the Emperor!” he shouted.

Tyler joined the applause and let it last as long as possible. He had thrown down the gauntlet, and now the Emperor would have to tread carefully.

Finally, the crowd subsided and returned their attention to Tyler. He had his pleasantries out of the way and was ready to deliver the speech they had prepared. He had shown the public a united government, and now he would solidify that image further.

He waited until there was absolute quiet before beginning. All the cameras were pointed at him as he addressed every citizen of Poolto.

“People of Poolto, it is with grave concern that we face one of our most pivotal moments in history. Not since the late great Emperor Yooso I united our planet and brought peace to our warring peoples have we had such a need for a united Poolto. Our enemy is weakened, and we stand on the brink of an age where this war may be won!”

He waited for the applause to quiet before continuing. *I have their attention now.*

“As a student of history, and in particular, military history, I see this day as a day not unlike that faced by one of my ancestors during the great campaign that won them the power to govern

themselves, free of the tyranny they had endured for so many millennia.”

There was no telling how many remembered that history. Fortunately, those that had ruled with tyranny were long out of power. Tyler had chosen the memory just for that reason. *No need to open old wounds.*

“My ancestor had won a great battle against his enemy and stood on the brink of victory. It was at that time that everyone around him called for a final push ... a blow to their enemy when they were at their weakest. But, it was at that very moment that my ancestor chose to ignore their advice, stepping back to survey the situation before leaping into battle.” *Let that sink in. Do you hear Emperor?*

“This pause in the campaign nearly caused a rebellion within his ranks, but his resolve and leadership held them united. That moment in their history, that moment when he rejected the cry for vengeance, that moment when victory was so close they could almost touch it, that was the moment when his decision turned the tides of war and determined their fate forever. A fate that ultimately brought them victory!”

He surveyed the crowd, watching as his speech held them captivated. He could almost hear their thoughts, “What happened? Why did he wait? How did they win?”

“Unbeknownst to my ancestor or his advisors, the enemy, in a last ditch effort to win, had planned a counter attack that would have caught my ancestors off guard and likely turned the tide of the war. Not only would their forces have been severely incapacitated, but they would have lost much of their land and its people. In the heady aftermath of a great victory lay the seeds of their greatest defeat. In their haste to end the war, they would have committed their troops to an action that would have placed them in peril, a peril they had no way of knowing, or understanding.”

Ah, look at them waiting to hear how it went, I have them now!

“My ancestor knew only one thing. He knew that his enemy could not, and should not be underestimated. Like a cornered beast, he knew the enemy would fight a last, desperate fight, one that would destroy them all, and take hundreds of years to recover. He knew he couldn't move until the enemy showed their hand, until he had solid intelligence on their actions. He knew his duty was to defend his people first, and win the war second. He knew a

victorious war could not be won at the expense of the land and the people for whom it was fought.”

See Vice Admiral Teesen, there is precedence in caution.

“My ancestor understood that the enemy needed time to rebuild their forces to recover from the losses they had suffered. It was from this fact that he knew they had time to wait, to learn, and to plan. In the months after their great battle, they watched. It was in this time of patient planning and vigilance that they uncovered their enemy’s final gasp.”

He paused letting the tension build. *Okay, time to let them in on it.*

“It was during this pause that they discovered the enemy had created biological and chemical weapons placed in key regions where food production and water supplies were critical. Large city centers were booby trapped. The network was large, secret, and poised to be unleashed. The enemy’s plan was simple. When my ancestor committed the remaining troops to an epic battle, a battle the enemy was certain to lose, the network of weapons would be released, destroying the land and the people. What did the enemy have to lose? They were defeated and nearly destroyed, why not take their enemy down with them?”

He let the horror of the potential losses they would have suffered sink in. He wondered how the Emperor was reacting from his Palace. By now, the Emperor’s staff had undoubtedly looked up the historical accuracy of what Tyler was recounting. *Let them look, it all was true.*

“Instead of heeding the advice of those wanting a massive battle to conquer the enemy, my ancestor chose to negotiate peace. The enemy didn’t realize he had discovered their plot, and that gave him the edge he needed in the negotiations. You see, instead of cornering them, he chose to give them a way out, a way that would not destroy them both. Instead, he gave his people the freedom they deserved while preserving the dignity of those that had ruled them. The peace lasted nearly a thousand years.”

Think about that. It was good to remind them of their Admiral’s historical past and the ancestors of power. Peace? Is it worth negotiating for? Can we put down the years of fighting and hatred? Probably not, but it was time to sow the seeds anyway. Considering the Admiral’s father’s position at the outset of the war, Tyler was walking a fine line between leadership and betrayal. The crowd looked uncertain and a little shocked.

“Am I proposing that we negotiate a peace with Krildon? No! I am proposing that we currently stand on the same pinnacle of our destiny that my ancestor did, and like him, we must bide our time and plan the strategy that will finally win this war and bring everlasting peace we all want and deserve!”

That did it, the crowd erupted into a huge applause. That was what they expected from their National Hero.

“I realize we have all suffered and we have all lost during this great conflict. I know that we cannot endure this conflict forever, but I also know the strength of Poolto lies in its people and in its wisdom to do the right thing even in the face of uncertainty, vengeance, or fear!”

He watched the faces in the crowd staring at their hero, looking for leadership and certainty. He turned it up a notch, unleashing the full Admiral.

“We will not let our emotions dictate our actions! We will not let our cry for vengeance rule our wisdom! We will not let our excitement of a battle won blind our mission! No! We will take this time to decide our path, defend our planet, and plot the victory over our enemies!”

This was it, the finale—he had them in the palm of his hands.

“A united Poolto is a strong and wise Poolto. We will not let our actions destroy all that we have fought for. We will not sit idle nor will we rush into an action that is rash and reckless. We will learn our enemy's weaknesses—learn how to defeat them—make our actions and our lives count in this war! A united Poolto cannot be defeated. No, I say we cannot be defeated! We will let wisdom guide our actions and chart our destiny, and god willing, we will win this war and vanquish our enemies!”

With that he pounded his fist on the podium to emphasize his resolve. He thought it was a rather great speech, but the crowd stood motionless. Were they shocked? He couldn't tell. The silence seemed to last forever, and Tyler began to grow concerned.

Finally, the Marshall rose from his seat behind Tyler and began to applaud. That was enough to move them all into action. Everyone rose and applauded. The applause and the cheering became deafening. That was more like it. Tyler felt in control again. Now they would have to wait for the post speech analyses and polls to come in to see how they had really done.

All that was left was to announce his intentions to return to duty as Supreme Commander. He would allow time for the

transition, but he wouldn't allow an opening to be denied. They all knew that much of their campaign was being fought right here and right now.

The crowd grew quiet, waiting for their hero. Tyler moved back to the podium.

"A united Poolto," he began, "a Poolto where we all can make a difference in the war. I am but one man among billions, and I cannot win this war alone. I will continue to work hard as your Supreme Commander, and I will work united with the Emperor and our Supreme Council to plot our course. My staff and I will work in concert with Vice Admiral Teesen to make our transition to full duty swift and smooth. During this transition, I will spend a great deal of time working with the Emperor and the Council. Meanwhile, Vice Admiral Teesen will continue in his role as Supreme Commander until the transition is complete. We estimate about two months to complete the transition. Now, I understand we will open this up to questions from the press."

While the press corps moved into position at the base of the platform and set up their equipment, Tyler moved back on the platform and shook hands with the Vice Admiral and many of the senior military personnel. The Marshall assured him that nearly all of the senior military staff were behind him one hundred percent. After all, most had served with the Admiral in one battle or another and owed him their lives.

That was a great weakness in the Vice Admiral's position. He held little power within the military ranks, and therefore had to rely on the Emperor to retain his position. Fat chance if the public rallied behind the Admiral. He had more than emphasized the need for a united Poolto, so neither the Vice Admiral nor the Emperor could openly deny him. No, Tyler figured they would have to look for other means to keep him down. Tyler hoped they would not find it.

He made his way towards the Marshall and Toosia. He shook the Marshall's hand, but saw a look of concern on the man's face.

"What is it, Goolen, did I miss something in the speech?" he asked.

"Uh, no, Admiral, you said it perfectly as rehearsed."

"Then, what is it? You look concerned."

Toosia stepped into the conversation. "It wasn't what you didn't say, Nayllen, it was what you *added*."

She, too, had a look of concern on her face.

“Fine, what did I add? Don't keep me in suspense!”

Toosia looked at the Marshall who simply shrugged. She turned back to Tyler.

“That piece at the end of the speech, when you said, ‘god willing’. That was not in the speech we practiced.” She said it calmly and Tyler couldn't figure out where the problem was.

“Damn, it slipped out again!” He grew angry with himself.

“I understand, Nayllen, but why did you say it?” She still looked concerned. “Have you recently found religion?”

“What? Me find religion? You know me better than that. It's just a manner of speech, a phrase, no one believes it.”

He couldn't believe they were taking it this way. He knew religion still existed on the planet, but only a small remnant of people believed it—surely his comment would not be taken seriously?

“Well, manner of speech or not, the only people who say such things are zealots, and they scare the rest of us.” She didn't look pleased and that bothered Tyler.

The Marshall broke in, “Admiral, we designed this speech specifically to ally yourself with the Emperor and his power, but your slip of the tongue may have destroyed all that. The Emperor has, on many occasions, denounced the religious factions of this world as crackpots and kooks. Now, you may have inadvertently aligned yourself with those same crackpots as well as the Emperor. It is a very dangerous thing you have done.”

Well, there it was. Back in the capital for less than an hour and Tyler already destroyed everything they had come to do.

I told you I should've handled this. You don't have the experience to take on this role, but I do!

Tyler ignored Adanni's remark and forced him back into the depths. He thought about the press conference and dreaded the questions that were sure to be asked. He grabbed Toosia's hand and held it firmly.

“I am truly sorry, Toosia, it just came out.”

“Don't worry, Nayllen, we can still win this fight, it will just be a little harder.”

He heard confidence, but he wasn't sure he believed it. They were ready to move to the podium when the Marshall held up his hand for them to wait while he conferred with Officer Kooren. Apparently, the young officer had received news through his communication device.

Tyler couldn't hear what they were saying, but he could imagine what it was about. The Marshall finished with Kooren and walked to Tyler.

"Well, the preliminary network analysis of your speech has already stirred controversy about your religious comment. They are buzzing with the story and what it might represent."

The Marshall looked past the Admiral and held up a finger to signal the delay of the press conference. He leaned in towards both of them and talked low.

"We may be able to prevent this from becoming anything substantial, but we must be careful with the press questions." He looked around before continuing, stopping when he spotted Vice Admiral Teesen across the platform. The man stared at them with a grin. He, too, had heard the early press reports.

"Okay, look, the rest of the speech was fantastic and we probably got most of the planet on our side; however, we must discount this religious thing immediately. Now, Admiral, we can't let anyone think this bothers us. We must play it off as nothing, so don't bring it up until the press does. Then, deny it without a second thought, casual and easygoing. Don't fight, antagonize, or argue the point with the press. Remember, this is still being broadcast to all of Poolto."

"Don't worry, Marshall, I won't make another mistake."

"Good, we can downplay this and still win the support we need. After all, you have pledged your support for the Emperor, so no one can question you on that."

Tyler shook his head and moved to the podium with Toosia at his side. This too was prearranged to show the support he had within his own family. Everyone knew her father was a Councilor and that would go a long way in their efforts.

The press was ready, so Tyler moved into position to field questions. He started with the reporter on the far left, signaling for the first question. Thankfully, the reporter was on their side and had a pre-planned set of questions to ask.

"Admiral, there has been great speculation on your remarkable recovery, can you please tell us how that went?"

"Certainly. It went very well. In fact, the doctors admitted they had never seen someone recover so quickly." That much was true, he made sure he didn't add how the doctors were confused by his rapid progress. "Fortunately, I am fully recovered and ready to resume duties."

“Excellent, sir, we are all very glad to have you back. Can you tell us anything about the extent of your injuries?” This question was also planned.

“This may not be the right forum for those kinds of detail which is why my staff prepared a release for each of you containing the full report and doctors comments about both my injuries and my recovery.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Nayllen went in order, selecting the next reporter. Toosia squeezed his hand, their signal for a reporter known to be under the influence of the Emperor. Tyler was certain he would jump on the religious comments.

“Admiral, sir, over the years we have not seen you and your lovely wife together very often. It is truly wonderful to see her here today. Over those many years, many concerns have been voiced about your marriage. Am I to now assume there are no problems?”

Good, they had prepared for this question.

“You assume correctly, there are no problems with our marriage.” Here was their opportunity to connect with the rest of the population. “Like many on Poolto, our lives have been impacted by the war. My duties have not always afforded me the family life I would have chosen; however, my wife, selfless and sacrificing, has stood by me through these difficult times. It is a sacrifice we gladly make if it helps the war effort.”

Touché! Let them try and analyze that one. The Emperor would not believe it, but the public would.

“Excellent, sir, we look forward to seeing more of both of you while you are in Yooso.” The reporter appeared confounded. “My last question, sir.”

This was it, Tyler was certain.

“Will both of you be attending the Imperial Ball?”

The questions wasn't expected, and Tyler tried to understand why it was important? What was the motivation? He was certain the Emperor was behind it. He spotted the reporter's earpiece and knew he was being coached by others from afar.

“Yes, we will be attending the ball together.”

Tyler turned towards Toosia and smiled before giving her a light kiss for the cameras. It would play well in the broadcast.

The next several reporters went quickly, each asking various questions about the war, their plans, their schedules and other non-

personal questions. Tyler almost thought they were going to avoid the issue altogether.

Unfortunately, this wasn't the case. One of the last three reporters asked the question that everyone else had avoided. Tyler didn't recognize the man, and Toosia hadn't signaled him either. Both were unsure who he represented.

"Admiral, you mentioned in your speech that 'god willing, we will win this war and vanquish our enemies'. Does this mean you believe in god and think his help is necessary to win the war?"

Tyler watched as all the other reporters stared from the reporter back to him and back to the reporter again. They all waited for the response. Time to go to work.

"Certainly not," he answered with the full force of the Admiral's commanding presence, "I have no faith in deities, magic, or spirits to help us in this campaign. No, a united Poolto is what will win this war!"

There, would it work?

"Then, sir, can you tell us why you mentioned it?"

"I can." *Time to lie.* "It was a phrase my ancestors used in times of trouble, when a rallying cry was needed to bring the people together and give them hope they could succeed! It is only a manner of ancient speech, nothing more."

He waved it off and signaled to the next reporter before the last one could respond. He hoped it would diffuse the situation before it got started.

"Mrs. Slay, if I may ask you a question?"

Toosia didn't flinch—she was born to this.

"Certainly." She said.

"Your father, a wonderful member of the Supreme Council, once stated that peace may never come between us and Krildon, at least not in our lifetime. Do you side with him on this view or do you believe your husband who stated victory may be at hand?"

She smiled regally before answering calmly. "First, you take my father's words out of context. I know the speech you refer to, I helped write it. His comments were in relation to a negotiated peace that someone else in the Council had proposed years ago. So early in the war, his comment about peace never existing between us was fair and accurate."

Tyler smiled, she was so good at this stuff, and the reporter looked nervous.

“As for my husband, all I can say is that if anyone knows a way to end this conflict, it is him. His years growing up on Krildon provide him an insight into our enemy that few on this planet possess. He understands their culture, their language, and their motivation. He knows how they think, and if you know how your enemy thinks, then you know how to defeat them.”

Tyler could tell the reporter wasn't expecting that kind of response. He stumbled while he tried to recover and ask another question.

“Uh, yes, I see...” he looked baffled, “...wasn't the, uh, Admiral's father convicted of treason for his actions at the beginning of the war?”

Uh, oh, they hadn't wanted to bring that up, but at least they had prepared for the eventuality. Toosia looked angry and was ready to respond when Tyler took her arm and stopped her.

“Let me answer that one, dear, it is a fair question.”

He leveled a commanding stare at the reporter who shied away from the gaze.

“It is true, as everyone knows, that my father was convicted of treason for his actions on Krildon at the outset of the war. My father was a great man who held onto his convictions, no matter what the consequences. In his mind, he believed war could be averted and that many millions of lives could be saved if we had negotiated before it got out of hand. Yes, however misguided, my father truly believed that.” He paused to let his words sink in. *No use denying facts.* “I, however, have never held with his convictions. I urged him to abandon his beliefs and return home, but he did not listen to my advice and sealed his fate. As you know, Krildon executed him as a spy.”

He watched as the reporter squirmed. He wasn't sure who the man was, but he bet an open attack on the National Hero was not going to go over well with either the public or his employers. He knew Marshall Sliss was marking the man and tracking down his employer even as they spoke.

Tyler didn't feel pity, sensationalism was not warranted here. Tyler didn't care if there were other reporters, he'd had his fill.

“Thank you, folks, for your great questions and the time you afforded us. Your warm reception and appreciation has not gone unnoticed. However, we have much to do and we mustn't delay any longer. Thank you for coming and good day!”

He and Toosia waved to the crowd and cameras, smiling before they headed off the platform to the steps leading into the entrance of the Supreme Military Command. Once inside, Tyler felt a wave of relief, but more than that, he felt victorious.

They had a long road ahead, but Tyler felt confident they'd won the current battle. Time and the polls would tell. Perhaps he really could pull this off? Perhaps he really could be the Admiral?

* * * *

Similar to the other buildings in the capital complex, the Supreme Military Command contained housing for nearly all the staff members who chose to use it. When at capacity, the military complex housed over twenty thousand people, including the deluxe accommodations afforded the Supreme Commander.

Above ground, the complex soared fifteen stories into the sky with wonderful views of the surrounding city. The top two stories of the main building were the Supreme Commander's lodgings and offices. These deluxe accommodations came replete with a full staff just smaller than the Admiral's estate. All of this was paid with taxpayer monies, and more than once the Admiral had commented on the extravagance, especially during war.

Despite this, Tyler and Toosia settled into their quarters, each taking a separate bedroom. They were not yet to the point where they would share a bed, but Tyler remained hopeful. In the meantime, he was happy just to have her with him.

After the press conference, they spent time debriefing and reviewing the poll results. The numbers proved to be of great relief as they indicated no backlash from his religious comment. His numbers were stronger than ever, obviously rising because of his triumphant return.

The Emperor would see the same numbers, thus it was imperative to show a strong Imperial allegiance uniting Poolto. This took a great deal of the threat away from the Emperor, and made the public feel confident the government spoke with a unified voice. This would be important moving forward as hard decisions were made.

Although the buzz in the press concerning the religious comment died down, the Marshall's networks indicated it had not gone away completely. Many religious factions were using it as a propaganda tool to spread their message. It was expected, and the

Admiral's staff felt it, too, would eventually die down. Despite the optimistic assessment, the Marshall assigned resources to key places in the fringe to keep an eye on things.

Everything about the capital complex was foreign to Tyler. Even the Admiral's memories provided little insight. Tyler knew the Admiral had never liked Yooso and he suspected this was part of the reason why the Admiral spent most of his time in space. The immense size and abundant population made it cramped like a spaceship, but the culture and environment did not match. Tyler received all the respect his position demanded, but he sensed an over abundance of impatience.

Considering the Vice Admiral's new offensive plan, Tyler wasn't surprised everyone felt pressured. The Vice Admiral had done plenty to build momentum for his plan while Tyler was recuperating in Tooland. This wasn't lost on the Marshall who expressed concern that progress had not been adequately relayed to him while absent. Although they did not meet open opposition, the undercurrent was running parallel to that of the Vice Admiral.

The Admiral's staff knew they needed a fast, clear path to re-establish their power. The military wouldn't wait forever, even if their greatest leader urged caution. Tyler knew when push came to shove, they would side with the Emperor who ultimately held all the power. The only way to prevent this was to give them all a better alternative.

The problem was they didn't have one. So far, intelligence was spotty at best, and non-existent at worst. The military still couldn't figure out why the Admiral's attack hadn't worked. By all calculations, they should have defeated Krildon and taken the home world. Something went wrong, but they didn't know what.

It was as though Krildon knew of the attack, even though it had been one of the most well guarded secrets. This was why Tyler and the Marshall were uncomfortable with the Vice Admiral's plan. What if it became compromised? It could spell certain defeat for Poolto? Based on that, why did the Emperor side with it? The Emperor was a shrewd man not prone to rash decisions. Still, something didn't feel right, but Tyler couldn't figure out what.

There was nothing in Poolto's history or the Admiral's memories to compare the current situation with. The government had perpetrated the enormous lie and needed a way to justify it. Tyler didn't believe Krildon felt cornered, especially if they had

intelligence from inside Poolto. Unfortunately, Poolto didn't have the same intelligence on Krildon.

Most within the Admiral's staff felt it was impossible a citizen of Poolto could betray their planet, but Tyler knew there were no Krildon within parsecs of Poolto, let alone within the military. Because the two species were physiologically different, it was impossible for someone from Krildon to disguise themselves as a Poolto citizen. Assuming it was a security leak, that left only one conclusion: they had traitor in their midst.

What was the motivation for someone to betray their home world? Money? Power? Tyler assumed the list was vast. Betrayal was a common theme in the drug underworld of Earth, but luckily for Raul, no one had betrayed his organization or network. If they had, Tyler assumed they would have done it for money and power.

On Poolto, however, it was something of a puzzle that Tyler imagined might never be solved. It was hard to imagine such a bitter hatred of the enemy could be put aside just for personal gain. Nearly everyone had lost something during the missile attacks early in the war. The scars from that devastation ran deep, and Tyler guessed most would never consider profiting from the ongoing conflict.

Tyler decided it was better to focus on the immediate concern—getting the Admiral's power back. He was thinking about that very problem as he made his way to a conference with the senior military staff. Since returning to Yooso, the Admiral had avoided meeting with the Supreme Military Command. The Admiral's staff held them off until they settled in.

The Vice Admiral was running this conference, and that alone was reason for concern. The Marshall confided he didn't see any advantage or benefit to the conference and had already approached the Vice Admiral with those sentiments. As expected, the Vice Admiral had dismissed them with a wave of his hand.

Rumor had it many in the senior staff were not happy about the lie they had helped propagate, and they were anxious to move past it as quickly as possible. A great victory would assist that effort, so the Vice Admiral used this as a tool to promote his plan.

The fear was real and even the Admiral's staff admitted it was becoming increasingly difficult to keep the lie concealed. Too many people had been involved and too many had suffered. The situation took its toll on military morale, and the senior staff believed a new mission was needed to move past the problem.

Unfortunately, this played directly into the Vice Admiral's hands. Support for his plan steadily grew despite the early efforts of the Admiral's staff. Tyler understood they had their work cut out, especially since the Vice Admiral would use the conference to undermine support for the Admiral who lacked a counter-plan. Tyler feared it might work.

A leader without focus, vision, and certainty bred discontentment within the ranks. For the moment, Tyler could offer none of those things. Loyalty only went so far.

Tyler walked through the double doors and into a conference room sized for about fifty people around a large oval table. Each seat contained a separate viewer to watch presentations and data. In the center of the table, a holographic projector was used to display three dimensional plans and reconnaissance intelligence.

Tyler accessed the Admiral's memories and noted the Vice Admiral sat at the seat reserved for the Supreme Commander. Tyler moved to the seat at the opposite end of the table, thankful for an end seat. Marshall Sliss had already sat to the right of the empty chair, apparently signaling to everyone else the end seat was Admiral Osloo's. As he sat, everyone stood at attention except the Vice Admiral.

"At ease, gentlemen, no need for formalities." Tyler said.

Everyone re-took their seats, and Tyler acknowledged many of the members with a nod of his head. There were a few empty spots at the table, but Tyler was a bit early.

While they waited, he scanned the room. The interior walls, chairs, and small tables were laid out for the aides of the senior staff. Tyler noted the Marshall's aides, Kooren and Beelen, sat together focused on their devices. The Marshall stared at his own view screen while text scrolled rapidly across it.

Tyler was informed that, per protocol, a senior official from the Emperor's staff would attend. As a civilian, he was seated at one of the tables against the wall. His position was to the back left of the Vice Admiral, and he was accompanied by several aides. Tyler didn't recognize the man, although the Marshall said his name was Heeller. He was one of Regent Sneerd's right hand men sent to observe and report. To Tyler, he was a spy.

The conference would run for three days, and the first day was filled with keynote speeches, agenda reviews, and updates on current military readiness. The Admiral was not among the keynote speakers, but the Marshall warned Tyler he would likely

be asked at the last minute. Again, this sort of impromptu action would play well for Teesen.

The clock indicated ten minutes past start time, and the last of the attendees finally sat down. The Vice Admiral rose and signaled for everyone's attention.

"Welcome, everyone," the Vice Admiral began, "I hope these next three days will help bring our war efforts into clearer focus."

Tyler surveyed the occupants, but most were pre-occupied. Many flipped through papers or stared at their view screens, but this didn't deter the Vice Admiral.

"We are fortunate to have Admiral Oslo joining us for the entirety of this event, an event he would normally chair." Somehow, Tyler didn't think the Vice Admiral looked all that ready to give up the chair. "We also hope he will take this opportunity to share his own thoughts on these proceedings before we adjourn a couple days from now."

Well, there it was, as predicted, the Vice Admiral wanted to put the Admiral on the spot. The Marshall had been correct—better to address it now.

Tyler decided to stall the inevitable, "Thank you, Vice Admiral, I am more than willing to share my thoughts in these proceedings; however, my staff and I are just settling in, so I am depending on all of you to share your thoughts that I may reflect on your collective knowledge."

That put the onus on them, but didn't excuse Tyler completely. The Admiral had a history of delivering momentous speeches at any military gathering, so Tyler would need the Admiral's staff to prepare something before the conference ended. For now, he held the Vice Admiral at bay.

The Vice Admiral stared directly at Tyler. "Very well, Admiral, we look forward to you sharing. Meanwhile, let's get underway with our first keynote speaker. Marshall Siitoo, I believe you are the first?"

The Admiral knew Marshall Siitoo quite well. He was a fabulous administrator who ran military supplies. Marshall Siitoo and his staff were meticulous, making sure everything was accounted for. The Marshall had consistently worked miracles with supply logistics, and keeping civilian contractors honest and on time. He was known as the man responsible for trimming fat while keeping morale high. Tyler had been assured he was on the Admiral's side.

“Thank you, Vice Admiral Teesen. Fellow colleagues, and honored guests.” He nodded toward Heeler who patiently watched. “We are faced with a crisis from which we have many possible paths.”

Tyler listened as the Marshall ran down an overview of the losses they had suffered from the battle over Krildon's moon. The numbers had risen since Tyler had last seen them. Apparently, many of the surviving ships were being scrapped due to the heavy damage. They were barely operational, and fixing them would cost more than replacing them.

Tyler watched his view screen as statistics scrolled past painting a picture of the current operational resources. It was adequate for a good defense, but not sufficient for a large offensive. He watched the Vice Admiral as these numbers were displayed. Teesen showed no signs of concern.

Next to Tyler, Marshall Sliss was busy with his device, sharing data with others on the staff. Tyler knew they would be preparing something based on what they saw here today.

Finally, Marshall Siitoo delivered some good news. Most of the defense contractors had new shipments that they'd been working on for the last year. The timing was perfect and would raise force strength to sixty percent of original.

Unfortunately, most of the equipment still required final stages of testing and certification before they could be put into service. The current estimate placed completion between four and six months. With dedicated military resources applied to the process, it could be sped up by a month.

So, this was how the Vice Admiral was justifying his hasty battle plan. Tyler saw they would proceed. The Vice Admiral's plan would require the new equipment, and Teesen, with Imperial backing, would skip space trials and certification testing to meet his deadlines. *Dangerous Teesen, very dangerous.*

Tyler recalled many past battles where entire units were lost because of malfunctioning equipment. This was the reason why such rigorous testing cycles were put into place. Admiral Oslo had set testing as top priority after several bad incidents early in the war. Teesen was willing to cast all that aside on the slim hope they could overwhelm the enemy's forces.

Tyler watched the screen and saw the replacement for his lost flag ship. It was the latest and greatest technology Poolto could offer. Unfortunately, like all large ships, it needed at least four

months of space trials before it was battle ready. According to the screen, it was currently undergoing some of those trials.

When Tyler looked at the new ship, a small part of him felt a thrill of excitement. He realized the Admiral inside was the source of this giddiness. The Admiral always felt more comfortable in space. On his flag ship, he was in command and he controlled the smaller ships around him. Tyler highlighted the flag ship and ran through the specs.

The Admiral's memories confirmed everything, but Tyler was amazed at the weapons and capabilities it possessed. It would be a formidable weapon, but not if the Vice Admiral put it into battle before it was ready. Nearly half the weaponry was new designs. To Tyler, that meant bugs and flaws that still had to be worked out.

Tyler looked up from his viewer as Marshall Siitoo delivered the last of the supply news. Production on the mining colonies was at a hundred percent, but this caused backlogs since the depleted forces weren't able to consume the supply chain fast enough. The Marshall indicated it was a problem they needed to solve immediately as available storage facilities would soon exceed capacity.

Marshall Siitoo shot Tyler a look. Tyler knew it was because Marshall Siitoo and Admiral Osloos had designed the supply chain together. The Marshall was assuming they would be the logical people to solve the crisis. Tyler agreed and happily noticed Marshall Sliss taking serious notes. Tyler felt confident they would solve the problem.

Tyler nodded to Marshall Siitoo, indicating 'Don't worry, we will work it out with you'.

Satisfied, the Marshall finished his keynote and sat down. The Vice Admiral hadn't liked the exchange between Tyler and the Marshall and stepped in to take command of the situation.

"Thank you, Marshall, please contact my staff immediately so we may resolve this production problem before we reach a crisis. Admiral Osloos, I hope we can count on your counsel to resolve this?"

So, Teesen wanted to be involved? Fine, let him, then he will see who really had the power.

Tyler smiled magnanimously, "Of course, Vice Admiral, my staff and my counsel are always available."

They both knew it to be false, but played it out for everyone in the room. Tyler noted the Emperor's man watched the exchange intently before jotting notes.

Don't worry Emperor, all is civil—for now.

The next two speakers took the remainder of the morning describing training and troop readiness, as well as the current defensive plans in place. Tyler's knowledge of the Admiral's memories confirmed the defenses were adequate, as long as nothing else changed. At least the Vice Admiral could do something right. Defense had always been his strongest suit, so Tyler wondered about his new aspirations to launch an offensive.

As the last speaker finished his summary, they broke for lunch. Tyler looked forward to the first speaker after lunch. The schedule indicated Marshall Triin of military intelligence would present the latest and greatest on enemy forces. Triin was definitely one of the Emperor's men, and had always worked closely with the Imperial intelligence community. That had traditionally served Admiral Oslo fine since Triin had access to a lot of the same intelligence the Emperor did.

Marshall Sliss had many of his own people within military intelligence, and that back-channel typically provided more intelligence than was reported in forums such as this. They knew the Emperor loved to control all of the intelligence, so they constantly watched for misinformation. Power and control walked hand in hand with intelligence, but their network had been in place for years, and so far, had never been compromised.

Regardless of its timeliness or efficacy, Tyler was interested in seeing the latest. According to Marshall Sliss, the intelligence community had kept the latest news tight to their chest. That meant it was valuable.

* * * *

As prearranged, Tyler and the Admiral's staff met for lunch to debrief the morning information. The meeting was held in private conference rooms that were part of the Supreme Commander's suites. As usual, the kitchen staff provided a fabulous meal served hot and quick.

Lunch was two hours long, and they had much to cover in that short timeframe. Marshall Sliss led the debriefing, assigning responsibility to lower staff members for many of the agenda

items. There were two major priorities they needed to move on: the readiness of new equipment certification and the supply chain problem.

One of the staff members reported they'd already been contacted by Vice Admiral Teesen's staff to resolve the supply chain problems. Tyler listened intently as the person reported the conversation. Officer Slaas was a very reliable and able member of Admiral Oslo's staff, and she dutifully reported the incident without embellishments. When finished, she waited patiently for questions and instructions.

Marshall Sliss jumped in. "Okay, we have to work with them on this, but here is how it will go. I will talk with Marshall Siitoo to bring him in on our plan. At no time should anyone in the Vice Admiral's staff be in charge of any aspect of this issue. However, we will involve them as we dictate, creating an illusion they are in charge. Between us and Marshall Siitoo, we can force Teesen's staff out of the picture by illuminating their ignorance."

"But, sir," Officer Slaas rebutted, "Vice Admiral Teesen has a staff member who will surely be put on this, and he knows as much about our supply chain as anyone in this room." Realizing her mistake, she quickly backpedaled. "My apologies, Admiral, as much as any of *us*."

Tyler gave her a reassuring smile and affirming nod. "Apology accepted, Officer Slaas." He scanned the room. "She is right, of course, I know the person she speaks of, and his knowledge is nearly as great as my own."

He stood up and walked over to the buffet, selecting a wonderful fruit dessert he was partial to. Everyone waited patiently, looking for leadership to solve this problem.

Tyler retook his seat and placed the dessert on the table.

"All right, here is what we are going to do. The man on the Vice Admiral's staff is Officer Tooloo Kiir, and he was once the best supply officer I had in my seventh fleet. We cannot show him up, therefore, we must recruit him to our side. Officer Kiir will know he cannot usurp responsibility for this operation from Marshall Siitoo, but he will insist on a major piece of it."

Officer Slaas looked worried, "But, sir, how can we recruit him?"

"You're not going to recruit him, I am." He let them think about that before continuing. "Officer Slaas, I would like you to set up a meeting with him immediately. Tell him we are looking

forward to working with him and that we want to discuss some details before we proceed with Marshall Siitoo.”

The Marshall chimed in. “Okay, make it happen, Officer Slaas!”

Tyler looked at his staff confidently. “He will be suspicious, but he will come. The Vice Admiral will insist upon it. However, they will not suspect that I will be the one meeting him. Let’s keep this confidential, it is a small battle, but they all add up over time.”

Tyler was satisfied with how he handled that crisis—if only he knew how he would recruit the officer. Vice Admiral Teesen had recruited Officer Kiir with a promotion long ago. At the time, the seventh fleet commander had not seen fit to promote the ambitious officer despite his brilliance with supply chain logistics. Admiral Oslool regretted the loss, but at the time, he’d been heavily occupied in multiple campaigns, so he rarely involved himself in such *trivial* matters. It wasn’t trivial anymore.

Funny how things come back to haunt you. Well maybe he could salvage the situation. At the very least, he had to try. He made a mental note to discuss it with Marshall Sliss and Marshall Siitoo. Their advice would be invaluable in dealing with the young officer.

The rest of the debriefing ran smoothly, and Tyler left feeling satisfied they made progress towards regaining power. Although they didn’t really discuss the transition, rumor had it many on the staff were meeting resistance from Vice Admiral Teesen’s camp. It was never overt, but stalls and delay seemed to be the general tactics used. Unfortunately, Tyler knew time was not on their side.

* * * *

Once everyone returned from lunch, Marshall Triin wasted no time delivering his intelligence report. According to the latest intelligence, their failed attack had caused considerable damage to Krildon forces and created great concern among the population.

According to estimates, the Krildon forces were fifty percent of pre-battle strength. Unfortunately, intelligence on their weapons’ production was sketchy at best, so they didn’t really know how or when Krildon would rebuild their fleet.

Tyler noted this last bit fed perfectly into the Vice Admiral’s hands. They could easily justify an offensive action while the

enemy rebuilt. Although their own forces were depleted, Krildon knew this and that gave Poolto an edge.

The problem was the enemy would have adjusted their defenses, and Poolto's intelligence was still too sketchy. What if Krildon's supply chain was full before the attack? No one knew, therefore, Tyler sided with caution.

Marshall Triin reported on various known assets, their locations, and defensive status. Watching through the Admiral's perspective, Tyler realized the enemy was ready for another assault, even though they might not expect it.

As he finished, Marshall Triin shared a small bit of information he confided the intelligence community was not concerned about, although it was puzzling. Based on his information, they suspected another base was being constructed somewhere around their home world.

This assumption was based on intelligence indicating an increase in shipments of a benign Krildon mineral called *scritl*. The mineral was an additive for certain plastics and ceramics used in space construction. Before the war, even Poolto companies used the substance to build mining colonies, although the cost proved greater than comparable materials found on Poolto.

Those wasteful companies had been fronts for the intelligence community in a rare insight into the possibility of war with Krildon. At the time, the companies tried to find military applications for the mineral, but never succeeded in creating anything other than pre-fab construction for space applications.

According to Poolto's scientists, the best application was in creating materials for 'non-atmospheric' environments. The substance, when combined with other materials, just didn't have sufficient strength for military applications. At the time, rumors had circulated that Krildon was experimenting with the mineral as a catalyst in reactors, but Poolto chemists had discounted that application since the substance had such low reactive properties.

To this day, Poolto intelligence had tracked the mineral's use, but only as an indicator of military base and depot construction. Marshall Triin ended his report and turned the proceedings back over to Vice Admiral Teesen.

For some reason, Tyler was concerned about the *scritl*. The Admiral's memories didn't support his anxiety, but something about the mineral shipments raised a red flag.

He needed more information, but wasn't sure how to get it. He had to talk with Marshall Sliss to see if his resources could track down additional information about those scrift shipments. Marshall Triin reported Krildon shipped an enormous quantity of the material over the last year, so the natural assumption was new base construction.

Perhaps that was all it would amount to, but Tyler wanted to make sure. If Krildon had found a way to use the mineral in reactors, then it might have been adapted to military ship propulsion. Tyler could envision a fleet twice as fast and needing half as much fuel. That alone would turn the tide of war in favor of Krildon.

The Vice Admiral finished questioning Marshall Triin before announcing a thirty minute break. Tyler was relieved for the break, especially since the issue nagged at him and he wanted to consult with Marshall Sliss.

Tyler leaned over to the Marshall as everyone filed out. "Let's chat about this intel report during the break—bring Beelen and Kooren."

Marshall Sliss nodded and signaled the two officers to follow. They made their way down the corridor and found an empty conference room. Everyone took seats at the small table and turned towards Tyler.

"Okay, Marshall, I need your quick response to the report and what you intend to do with the information." Tyler watched as Marshall Sliss took a minute to scroll through his portable tablet.

"Using our best estimation, I would assume their numbers were off by nearly ten to fifteen percent. That's about normal for the intelligence branch; however, I do believe their assessment of the defensive capabilities were right on. I know how they gather that data, and it has remained reliable till now." He paused waiting for Tyler to respond.

"That was my basic assessment as well," Tyler agreed, "why doesn't the Vice Admiral come to the same conclusions? He has the same experience we do, especially when it comes to defensive capabilities?"

The Marshall considered the question carefully. "Well, he may be blinded by the thought of becoming Supreme Commander and might move forward despite the data." The Marshall looked puzzled for a moment before revealing more. "Or, maybe the Vice Admiral has better intelligence than we do. Considering his ties

with the Emperor, he may receive all the information from the intelligence community rather than the spoonfuls we're fed."

Tyler thought about the Marshall's summation, but something didn't add up. He had also considered the possibility the Vice Admiral was getting more intelligence than usual due to his newfound devotion to the Emperor, but the Vice Admiral could also be fed misinformation to ensure his support of the Emperor's objectives. Or, they really could be sitting on information that indicated an offensive was warranted.

Assuming they had this additional information, it would give them fuel to discredit the Admiral and garner support for another offensive that might actually succeed. *Damn!* Tyler knew accurate intelligence was an edge Vice Admiral Teesen might have over Admiral Osloo's staff. They needed more, and they had to find a way to get it.

"All right Marshall, I'll admit that is a possibility. It could be how they plan to win this conflict and discredit me at the same time. I always wondered why they would move down such a risky path after our last defeat. It seems reckless, but I don't credit the Emperor with recklessness, regardless of my personal feelings about him."

"True," the Marshall responded, "he has never acted reckless in the past. Perhaps they have seen a way to win this conflict, and they want you out of the way in the aftermath. Then, he would be a truly victorious Emperor, with no one to threaten Imperial power or popularity."

"Fine, assume for the moment this was true, then why should we resist?" Tyler asked, puzzled himself. "If he has seriously found a way to attack our enemy and inflict heavy damage, why should we stop him? I am, after all, a true professional, and a victory is a victory even if I didn't design it. I am not a politician and the loss of power does not mean that much to me. The safety and success of Poolto—that is what I care about."

The Marshall absorbed it with deep concern. Tyler was more than happy with the idea of retiring with Toosia to their estate and spending the rest of their lives enjoying each other. The Marshall, however, was military through and through and wouldn't know what to do with himself if he were forced to retire. Tyler was certain the Marshall had never even entertained the notion before now.

Without the Admiral, the Marshall was out. He could vie for another position, but the Vice Admiral, if he became Supreme Commander, would hardly be generous to the man who had worked so hard against him. That was the way military politics went, and the Marshall knew it.

"I don't know," the Marshall said, "at the surface, it seemed reckless. Now, however, I am not as certain as I had been. Perhaps we need to reconsider our position and re-analyze their plan?"

Tyler didn't like the uncertainty he had created in his top advisor, time to lead him back.

"Not yet, it is only a theory at this point. One to consider, but not one to base our strategy on. Put a few people on analyzing the intelligence and the Vice Admiral's plan to cover ourselves, but let's not detract from the mission we started." Tyler watched as the Marshall's demeanor changed back to military duty.

"Now," Tyler wanted to change the subject, "I noted the scrlit shipments were included in the report, but they were downplayed pretty heavily. What do think, Marshall, is it something we shouldn't worry about?"

"I agree with Marshall Triin. I think Krildon is building more bases or supply depots."

Tyler had hoped the Marshall would provide greater insight, but then they could be correct in their assessment. "I can't put my finger on it, but something about this has me concerned. I realize our best resources have discounted the mineral as not having military applications, but with so much being produced, something large is underway."

"Well, we did do a lot of damage to many of their bases and installations—perhaps this is for repairs and replacements?"

Tyler realized the Marshall was not overly concerned, but something nagged at the back of his mind.

"Perhaps, but why were the shipments started more than a year ago, before our last battle?"

That puzzled the Marshall who was clearly thinking about it. Tyler kept pushing, he needed to explore this, and the Marshall was the only one who could get additional information.

"Krildon has had a long time to work with the material ... longer than our experts. Perhaps they finally found a military application for it. After the war started, we lost our supply, so we never continued to pursue research. What if they found a way to

use it in new weaponry? Would you want to make an offensive move considering that possibility?”

“No, I wouldn’t, but our experts have discounted this possibility.”

“Yes, but that does not make it so, it simply makes it less probable.” Tyler looked at Beelen and Kooren, both staring intently. Apparently this exchange was exciting enough to pull them from their devices.

“Officer Kooren, what do you think of this information?” Tyler asked.

Officer Kooren was caught off guard. He obviously wasn’t expecting the Admiral to ask for his opinion. Tyler knew it was out of character, but he felt compelled to seek out other’s thoughts on the subject.

“Well, sir, I must admit the quantities expressed in the report were considerable. As a communications officer, we get familiar with the size of supplies that move around the military, and those were much larger than I would expect for a base or depot.” He paused to gather his thoughts.

“I am no expert on material chemistry, so I cannot give any advice on whether they have found a military application for the material; however, I can tell you that about a year ago, I read our own scientists found a military use for a substance that was a common by-product of a certain food production. The details escape me, but the premise was that the discovery was significant to the war effort. Perhaps Krildon has made a similar breakthrough?”

They all sat quiet, contemplating what officer Kooren had said. Tyler knew fresh eyes could often help define a problem. Answers may not be given, but another way of looking at it could be invaluable in finding answers.

Tyler noted Kooren’s comments had an effect on the Marshall. He stared at his tablet in deep thought before he began writing something forcefully.

“Admiral,” the Marshall started, “I think that perhaps your instincts may be on to something. I know we have often relied on our ‘experts’ too heavily, and since they have not looked at this problem for many years, we should assume Krildon has found something valuable.”

“I agree, Marshall. Is there any way we can get more intelligence on this? How much pull do you have?”

“Enough, Admiral. I can put more than a few resources on it if we determine it deserves that priority.”

“No,” Tyler cautioned, “don’t put too many on it. I don’t want to raise suspicions. If they knew we were interested, they may simply pull the data away from your people. Keep it low key, but make sure your people know it is a high priority.” Tyler felt that was how the Admiral would have handled it.

“Very well, sir, I’ll get my people on it immediately.” The Marshall began writing furiously.

Tyler thought about his own resources. Perhaps Toosia might have some idea on how to track down additional information? Intelligence was not her strong suit, but she had a lot of insight into the scientific community from years helping her father. He chaired the committee on science and industry and had many connections they could use.

“Very good, Marshall, let’s get back to the conference and see what else the Vice Admiral will share.”

Neither looked forward to the final speaker, Marshall Goori. He was a notoriously boring speaker who took his passion for analyzing enemy strategy far too seriously. You would think he was from Krildon, although Tyler knew the man had never been there.

He was a book worm who specialized in Krildon military history. Tyler understood the Marshall had some inherent value but he also knew Admiral Oslool had far more insight into the enemy than this man ever would. He prepared himself for a long afternoon.

* * * *

After the lengthy first day of the conference, Tyler longed for a quiet evening with Toosia. Unfortunately, the Emperor’s Ball was a must attend for the National Hero. The Emperor often held such events, especially to coincide with things like the Admiral’s return.

Tyler was glad it wasn’t designed just for him. Toosia told him this particular event was created to provide the Supreme Council a forum to socialize with the Imperial Court. Everyone knew it was a political event, regardless of the *harmless* designation as a ball.

Toosia’s father and mother would be there, and Tyler was nervous about meeting them. The Admiral’s memories indicated

he had a great relationship with both until the many years of separation from Toosia soured them on his company.

Toosia admitted her mother was not happy with their rekindled relationship, and cautioned Toosia against going to Tooland to see Tyler. In her mind, the Admiral losing power was just desserts. She wanted the Admiral to suffer for the mistreatment of her daughter.

Tyler understood her attitude and dreaded the meeting. Toosia's father however, had always supported the Admiral despite how his daughter had been treated. Always the politician, he probably wouldn't let family concerns interfere with the business of the state—at least not publicly.

Privately, however, Tyler held no illusions. Toosia had always been his favorite child. Everyone knew it, even her brothers and sisters. Tyler felt a great deal of anxiety at meeting the man, so he was happy it would be part of a public event.

Tyler held his anxieties in check as their ground car emerged from one of the underground tunnels linking the military complex to the Emperor's Palace. The gala was held in one of several large facilities designed specifically for these types of affairs. This particular location was ten stories underground and would host all the political power on Poolto. Tyler wondered what Krildon would have done if they knew of the event and had access. The thought sent chills down his spine.

The car pulled in line behind four others waiting to offload passengers. Tyler watched Toosia fidget, pulling out a mirror to check her appearance one final time. It was odd, she normally was at home at these affairs, having been raised on them since childhood.

Tyler imagined she was nervous at meeting her parents now that she was back with her husband. Memories of Linda flooded Tyler as he recounted the one time he had met her parents. Tyler had sensed her parents hadn't liked him from the outset. His background and questionable direction for the future conflicted with their view of the proper *man* for their daughter.

Linda downplayed the meeting at first, but later, her family admitted their true feelings. Shortly after that, she had severed all contact with them. At the time, Tyler was happy with her familial disillusionment, but now, he only felt guilty about it. He hoped after his death, she had reunited with her family. The memory left Tyler feeling melancholy.

Their car finally pulled up to the carpeted entrance as one of the assistants opened their door. Thankfully, no press was permitted to this affair, and they made their way up the sweeping staircase peacefully. The Emperor rarely allowed press to *his* affairs, and the need for a security clearance to access underground Palace levels ensured they didn't show up uninvited.

Tyler ran through the Admiral's memories, preparing himself for the night's activities. He knew they would be announced, the Emperor would come last, and they would be required to mingle throughout the affair with political allies.

The Marshall assured him the event would be an opportunity to strengthen existing ties, and create new ones. Because of the ability to forge new relationships, many speculated why the Emperor sponsored these affairs. After all, not everyone sided with the Emperor, especially those on the Supreme Council.

Tyler knew why the Emperor allowed it. It was the perfect opportunity to keep track of allegiances, new or otherwise. The place would swarm with spies, listening devices, and recording instruments. Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.

Nearly everyone suspected this, so very little gossip was heard during these events, but to decipher relationships was enough to be valuable. After several hours of drinking, even tiny slips of the tongue could be analyzed for valuable information. The Emperor never missed an opportunity to spy on his subjects.

Toosia squeezed Tyler's arm gently as they moved forward to be announced. They walked to the entrance of the ballroom and Tyler was stunned at the enormous vista spread below them. The ornate, crystal stairs widened as you descended, and the light refracting off the stairs was a dazzling rainbow of colors, displaying everyone in the best possible light.

At the bottom, tables lined an enormous dance floor stretching into the distance. At that far end, an orchestra played soft music as a backdrop for the multitude of conversations.

No one sat at any of the tables, and most were clustered in small groups conversing throughout the room. It was difficult for Tyler to make out faces from his vantage, but he hoped recognition would come while they mingled. By his estimate, several thousand people were in attendance.

He wondered how they could announce them all, but a quick dip into the Admiral's memories confirmed only senior officials and military personnel were announced.

On cue, the band stopped playing and a flare of horns rang out across the ballroom. Everyone turned to look at Tyler and Toosia waiting at the top of the stairs.

It was an amazing spectacle, and even the Admiral's memories couldn't quench the awe from the experience. Tyler had never seen anything like it and for the first time, he began to sense the enormous power that was the Admiral. He watched the entire room grow silent as everyone awaited the announcement.

To their right, one of the Palace staff lifted a device to his mouth, "Ladies and gentlemen, it is with great honor and gratitude that I may present to you Lady Toosia Slay and Admiral Nayllen Osloo."

The room erupted into a roar of applause that felt powerful enough to knock them down. Tyler felt self-conscious, but noticed Toosia was cool as a cucumber, her earlier nervousness gone. She looked at home in this setting.

Per protocol, they waited for the crowd to subside before descending the staircase. Tyler didn't want to start the grand affair with a social blunder, so he waited for Toosia to move.

After several minutes, the applause subsided and Toosia squeezed his arm gently to signal they could descend. Toosia waved casually to several people below as they made their way down the brilliant steps.

Once on the floor, Toosia began the political introductions and re-acquaintances in earnest. She had whispered to Tyler they could expect this to go on for at least another hour before the Emperor arrived. Since they were traditionally the second to last to be announced, only the Emperor remained.

Tyler struggled to keep up with the names of everyone they spoke to and the intricate details of the political influence they possessed. He marveled that Toosia could keep up with it all but knew the Admiral hadn't. Fortunately for Tyler, his new memory kept everything properly catalogued for future recall. He doubted he would need it all, but something might prove useful later. He was certain the Marshall would debrief him.

Tyler was relieved they hadn't made it to Toosia's parents yet. One particularly nosey woman who seemed to thrive on these affairs had assured Toosia her parents were around. After she had left, Toosia informed Tyler that she worked for the Emperor's personal press office and knew everything about everything. She warned Tyler never to say anything around the woman.

Considering how offensive the woman was, he didn't think there was a chance of that happening.

They mingled for an hour and made it only a quarter of the way around the room. Tyler was tired and ready to sit, but Toosia reminded him they had to wait until the Emperor arrived. She indicated their table was across the room near the Imperial table on the raised platform.

Finally, after moving away from a member of the Supreme Council, the music stopped and the brass signaled another announcement. To Tyler's relief, it was the Emperor.

Typical of the Emperor, he wasn't regal. His attire was no better than Tyler's, except for the elaborate gold trim around the neck and down the sides. On the left side of his chest, he wore a simple insignia pin from the Imperial Palace. Even the working Palace staff wore the same pin.

Tyler gave him credit, he was not ostentatious. The only thing imperial was his focused and commanding gaze. When he looked at you, you saw power in his eyes. He took in every detail with his penetrating stare as he constantly analyzed, weighed, and judged.

To his left, a beautiful woman held onto his arm. She was not the Empress, and according to reports, the Empress now lived on the other side of the planet at an Imperial estate on an isolated island. Although not as immense as the Imperial Palace, Toosia had once stayed there at the request of the Empress. Her only comment was that it was decadent. This piqued Tyler's curiosity, but he didn't press for details.

The woman hanging on the Emperor's arm was part of his personal staff who regularly appeared with the Emperor during such affairs. Her name was Leeruli Yoonii, and she was rumored to be a distant cousin of the Emperor. However, her exact ancestry was kept from public knowledge.

According to Marshall Sliss, the two were lovers for many years, and was likely the reason for the royal parting. Over that same period, several attempts were made on her life, and at the time, everyone suspected the Empress was behind it. Surprisingly, Marshall Sliss assured the Admiral such attempts had actually been made by moral extremists who did not like the breaking of the royal family.

After several of these moral leaders disappeared, the attacks on Leeruli ceased. She was now a regular fixture in the Imperial Palace. Tyler wondered how much she knew about the politics

surrounding the Emperor. Did the Emperor confide in her? Either way, the Marshall confirmed she couldn't be turned, and that it was extremely dangerous to even try.

The room fell silent as the announcer held the device to his mouth. "Honored guests, the Imperial Palace is pleased you could come to this grand affair. In times of war, this may seem frivolous and excessive, but the Palace believes continuity in the functions of the government is what keeps us going and defines us as a sovereign entity. The Palace thanks you for helping us carry on this rich tradition established over a thousand years ago."

He paused, but everyone remained quiet. Once again he raised the device. "Honored guests, it is with great pleasure that I present to you, your leader, and the savior of Poolto, Emperor Hallen Yooso IV."

The entire room filled with applause. The closest comparison was the Super Bowl Raul had invited he and Linda to in San Diego. Unlike the Super Bowl, this was pure applause.

As Tyler clapped, he watched the cool and aloof Emperor. He noticed that Leeruli was not mentioned in the introduction, but she didn't appear to mind. Her face was as stolid as the Emperor's, and although she held on to his arm, she stood slightly behind per protocol.

The applause continued for over five minutes before dying down. At that point, the Emperor and his consort descended the stairs. This was the signal to begin seating.

Toosia guided them across the dance floor towards the table set aside for their rank. As befitting the National Hero, they were seated at a table with the Chancellor of the Supreme Council, and Regent Sneerd of the Imperial Palace. The Chancellor had his wife and young daughter with him while Regent Sneerd was accompanied by his lovely niece.

Cordial introductions were made before everyone sat down. Tyler noticed the Regent looked uncomfortable, and although he couldn't be certain, he thought the Regent's niece was flirting with him. He was a little disturbed by it until he remembered he and Toosia's separation was not lost on the public. Within the circle of power, their separation was a known fact, and Tyler supposed many might easily believe their current relationship was only political.

Being diplomatic, Toosia ignored the girl's obvious advances on Tyler. According to the Admiral's memories, these were

common occurrences at such events. Tyler didn't relish the idea of fending off would be suitors while trying to build political fences. It would be a long night.

As the Emperor passed various tables on his way to the raised platform, he stopped at Tyler's table to say hello and welcome everyone to the ball. Tyler noted even the Emperor did not introduce his consort. She stood slightly behind as usual, not saying a word and looking more than a little bored.

Surrounding the Imperial table, other tables were arranged in a semi-circle around the raised platform. Tyler's was located at the center of this semi-circle, flanked on either side by tables containing the regional Governors of Poolto and their cabinet heads.

The Imperial platform and surrounding tables contained the bulk of Poolto's leadership. The Emperor took the middle seat at his table overlooking the ballroom. His table was surrounded by smaller tables with the various heads of the Imperial Cabinet.

Tyler himself could have invited someone from his staff, but the Marshall refused and urged him to let them work instead. Tyler agreed these functions were best left to the Admiral and his wife.

The Regent looked longingly at the Imperial table, no doubt thinking he should be sitting there. Unfortunately, tradition dictated the heads of each branch sat together. Tyler imagined this was designed to help bridge the chasm that often existed between them. Of course, according to the Admiral's knowledge of history, the design never worked. Nonetheless, they lived on protocol.

Everyone settled in, and an army of Palace staff served a generous and lengthy meal. As dictated by tradition, all tables except those in the Imperial semi-circle, were served first. Tyler wasn't necessarily hungry, but he wanted the food to divert Regent Sneerd's niece.

She sat next to him and wouldn't stop talking. She was introduced as Greelen Sneerd, and she pointed out that she was the oldest of all of Uncle Aanweer's nieces, and therefore was the first one asked to these affairs. Tyler also noted the Regent cringed when she called him Uncle Aanweer.

According to Greelen, this was her tenth Imperial ball and she never tired of attending. By the time the servers had reached their table, Tyler had learned where Greelen lived, what schools she attended, where she worked, what type of men she liked (older

men with power), her musical preferences, and what the best clubs in Yooso were.

Tyler was polite, but thankful when a server interrupted a stunning tale of how a friend of a friend of Greelen's had been lost in the war. Tyler supposed she must have thought an Admiral never saw combat, and therefore didn't appreciate the gruesome reality.

Thankfully, before she could finish the tale, Toosia came to the rescue.

"The Admiral is well aware of the casualties inflicted in war, my dear. Perhaps you heard of his last battle and the injuries he incurred during the incident?" She said it very coolly, and ended with a curt smile. Tyler smiled inside.

"Oh, yeah, I guess I forgot." The girl responded. "Anyway, if you have time while in Yooso, I would be more than happy to escort you for a night on the town. I have many connections and we could get into all of the very elite and exclusive clubs."

Apparently, nothing would deter her from her mission. Again, it never occurred to her the National Hero might not have problems getting into anything he wanted. Tyler gave Toosia a roll of his eyes, but she just smiled and returned to talking with the Chancellor.

Tyler turned his attention to the food and tuned out Greelen. This didn't stop her from continuing. Tyler noticed Regent Sneerd was not paying attention to anything at their table and was busily scanning the crowd, no doubt analyzing everything and everyone he saw.

Across the table, the Chancellor's daughter stared intently at everyone else. No doubt she was learning all she could about life in the Imperium. Tyler guessed she was about ten, but he felt certain she knew more than any ten year old he'd known. She hung onto every word Greelen uttered. *Too bad*, Tyler thought. Greelen was not a good role model.

He was beginning to see why the Admiral spent little time in Yooso. It had been years since he had attended one of these events, and his memories held nothing but contempt for the politics conducted here.

* * * *

At last, the formal dinner ended and people mingled about the room. Toosia grabbed Tyler and said a curt goodbye to Greelen. Greelen returned the curt goodbye, and then boldly grabbed Tyler's hand placing a slip of paper in it.

She smiled longingly at Tyler, while holding his hand. "My number in Yooso, in case you want to go out on the town. My Uncle says you've spent little time here, so perhaps you would like to see more of this incredible city?"

She let go of his hand, but smiled with mischief in her eyes. Tyler pocketed the paper politely before saying goodbye. Toosia practically pulled him away from the table, and he felt good that she was jealous.

They moved through the crowd before Toosia finally spoke. "Do you believe that girl? The nerve, as though I weren't even there. It is totally indicative of everyone in the Palace: arrogant and self-serving."

Tyler was surprised by her outburst, but realized she'd kept it quiet so only he could hear. His feelings for Toosia welled up, and he desperately wished they could leave to be alone. He almost mentioned it to her until they stopped to talk with Tiiten Beerii, a Supreme Council member Toosia's father was friends with for a long time. Tyler sighed, *back to business*.

The Councilor was remarkably forthcoming, and Tyler was able to discern the Council was split on their support of the Emperor. Although Tyler was still a favorite among many on the Council, the sting of the failed offensive was hard for many to get past.

Fed by Imperial propaganda, many on the Council questioned whether the failure was due to the Admiral or due to faulty military intelligence. In either case, the Admiral was ultimately responsible.

Tyler thanked him for his support and lied to him they would do everything within their power to find out what went wrong. It was a lie because the Vice Admiral would ensure the military placed the blame only on the Admiral. Nonetheless, Tyler knew it was be a big mistake to appear other than completely in control.

As the Councilor explained his feelings about Vice Admiral Teesen, an older gentlemen interrupted their party. Tyler didn't recognize him, and judging from Toosia's expression, neither did she. He wore a very simple, yet stylish suit that reeked of money. He was medium height, medium build, and not very distinguishable from most at the affair.

Tyler noticed one distinguishing characteristic that made him stand out loud and clear. His eyes held that same penetrating stare the Emperor's did. Tyler wondered if they were related.

"Ah," the Councilor exclaimed, "here he is!" He turned towards the stranger as though they'd been waiting for him all along.

Tiiten shook hands with the man before turning towards Tyler. "Nayllen and Toosia, may I introduce you to a good friend of mine, Nayllen Hooss."

Toosia extended her hand, and Nayllen Hooss kissed it gently in response.

"It is my pleasure, Lady Slay." He bowed slightly after releasing her hand.

There was something Tyler didn't like about him, but he extended his hand anyway.

"Nayllen, is it?" Tyler asked, "A fine name if ever was one."

Nayllen Hooss grabbed Tyler's hand shaking it firmly. "I agree—it is an honor to share a name with our world's most famous hero."

He sounded genuine, but the way he measured Tyler with his eyes made Tyler wary. Tyler turned his attention to the Councilor as he explained who the man was.

"...he was in the employ of the government himself at one time, Diplomatic Corps, wasn't it? Anyway, he now sits on the board of several manufacturing consortiums that supply the military."

Tyler was surprised that he had never heard of someone who was so prominently involved in supplying the military. The Admiral's memories were replete with many such people, but not Nayllen Hooss.

"Yes, I was in the Diplomatic Corps in my younger days, but I was never really cut out to be a bureaucrat, so I left for greener pastures."

Tyler took the offensive. "I thought I was familiar with all our military suppliers. How is it we have never met, Nayllen?"

For a moment, their eyes locked in an intense stare. As quickly as it came, it was gone, replaced with a soft, disarming smile.

"Well, Admiral, I have often wondered the same thing. I spend a great deal of my time in Yooso, so perhaps that is why we have never met. I usually leave the military dealings with my underlings, while I attend to the political side of the business." His

response was smooth and convincing. "Without proper funding, the military couldn't buy any of our products. Let's just say I work closely with Councilor Beerii and the Arms Procurement Committee."

No arguing that. The Admiral had avoided Yooso as much as possible. It was also true Councilor Beerii was the head of the Arms Procurement Committee. It was one reason he made such a wonderful ally.

Tyler responded. "Yes, I suppose that must be it. I am too often indisposed to spend time in Yooso, and I fear I may be the worst for it."

"Nonsense," Nayllen quipped, "what greater duty could there be than saving our world? Your time has been well spent, my friend."

He smiled, disarming Tyler even as something briefly flickered in his eyes.

"Indeed, Admiral," Councilor Beerii chimed in, "no one faults your absence when your missions have been so noble. I'll tell you though, you are more than a welcome addition to this city when you are here."

"Yes, Nayllen dear," Toosia added, "the capital city loves their hero."

"Well," Nayllen said, "I must run, so many more to meet tonight." He donned his smile and shook hands. "It was a true pleasure to meet you, I hope you enjoy your stay in our city."

Tyler thanked him and watched as he disappeared into the crowd.

"A most wonderful man to have on your side," the Councilor said, "he was instrumental in the on time delivery of the Kiltz Cannon when it was delayed due to technical problems."

"I remember that," Tyler said, "its delivery was critical to our victory at the battle of Peendor Asteroid. He was responsible for that?"

"Yes, he is remarkable, yet low key. He may sit on the boards of those companies, but if you ask me, I suspect he runs them all. Close ties with the Palace as well."

The Palace, Tyler thought, *maybe that's why I feel so wary?* Perhaps that is where Nayllen Hooss picked up his measuring stare. Tyler made a mental note to have the Marshall dig up information on this Nayllen Hooss. If he had dealings with the

military, it shouldn't be hard to track down something from his contacts.

After hours of mingling and dancing, which Tyler enjoyed most, they tracked down Toosia's parents deep in conversation with a Palace official. Tyler didn't recognize the couple from the Admiral's memories, but Toosia did.

"Hello, mother, father, Vice Secretary Giin," she nodded to the man, "and who is this lovely woman with you, Vice Secretary? Your wife?"

The man rewarded Toosia with a big, open smile. "Yes, it is my wife, Heelsa, finally come to visit the capital."

The man stood up and kissed Toosia on both cheeks.

"So good to see you again, Toosia, and I see you brought your husband with you as well?" He turned to Tyler. "So good to finally meet you, Admiral, your family has spoken fondly of you over the years. I feel like I know you."

Tyler took the man's hand. "Well, thank you, Vice Secretary, I am pleased to see my family is in such fine company."

Tyler smiled and reached out to kiss Heelsa's hand. She appeared timid but let Tyler take her hand nonetheless.

"You'll have to excuse my dear Heelsa, she is a wonderful woman, but she comes from the country. This city scares her with its size and population." Heelsa blushed, but remained silent.

"Well, now," Toosia started, "with so many politicians around, who can blame her?" She shook Heelsa's hand and gave her a warm and welcome smile.

"Thank you, Toosia, your point is well taken." The Vice Secretary signaled for them to join them.

"Hello, Nayllen, I hope all is well?" Councilor Slay sat calmly, his wife Tooriin beside him.

"All is well, Councilor, and yourself?"

"Fine."

Tyler turned towards Tooriin's cold stare. "Hello, Tooriin, so wonderful to see you again."

Tooriin merely nodded her head to acknowledge Tyler. She turned quickly to Toosia. "Are you having a good time tonight, dear?"

"Yes, mother, thank you."

Tyler noticed Tooriin looked dubious, but let it go.

Councilor Slay jumped in to get past the awkwardness. "Well, you look simply radiant tonight, dear, glad you could come. The

Vice Secretary was just filling us in on the latest crop reports from around the globe, would you care to listen in?"

"No, no," the Vice Secretary replied, "no more boring crop reports, let's talk about something less serious."

With that, the Vice Secretary began asking Tyler about their winery and estates. He claimed to be fascinated by the wine making process, and indicated Heelsa's family often considered going into the business. Although she came from the country, she came from one of the largest farming cooperatives on the planet.

* * * *

The rest of the evening was uneventful, but both felt they had made some gains in re-establishing the networks loyal and supportive to the Admiral. He reported as much to Marshall Sliss before retiring for the evening.

As an aside, he asked the Marshall to dig up what he could on Nayllen Hooss. At the mention of Nayllen, the Marshall had raised eyebrows, but dutifully jotted the name on his pad before heading off to assign resources to it.

Tyler prepared for bed but desperately wanted to join Toosia in hers. They had a wonderful evening despite the nature of the event, and Tyler felt certain she had enjoyed dancing with him. Nonetheless, he held back. He didn't want to spoil it now.

He undressed, noticing the slip of paper in his pocket from Greenen. He pulled it out to toss it away, but as he removed it, he noticed a second slip of paper tucked inside it. He opened both to see what else she had given him. The outer paper contained her name, address, and contact number, but the inner paper was type written in small letters.

He opened it up all the way to read from the beginning:

My apologies for the subterfuge, but one cannot be too careful these days, especially at an event within the Palace. I was glad to finally meet you in person as I have followed your career with great interest over the years. Unfortunately, your place in history is about to take a turn for the worse unless you take immediate action. I know what you are trying to do in Yooso, and I have important information that will help you, or hurt you, depending on how you use it. Please meet me at the Grand Anoor Casino tomorrow night, but don't make it obvious. Ask Greenen to take you there, she would be more than delighted I'm sure. However, bring your wife with you to eliminate any improprieties. Your future depends on this -

please do not miss this opportunity to rejoin the game. I will contact you when you are in the casino, tell no one, especially the Marshall!

NH

Tyler wasn't sure what to make of it. He recognized NH as having to be Nayllen Hooss, but they had just met at the ball. Tyler couldn't figure out how Nayllen had got the note into Tyler's pocket, they had only shook hands briefly. Perhaps it had been handed to him by Greelen, but that would put her in league with the man.

All of it was suspicious, and the fact Nayllen worked closely with the Palace made it even more so. If the Regent's niece was involved, that made it worse. Tyler knew where her loyalties lay. Tyler didn't trust him and felt vulnerable he knew more about the Admiral than Tyler knew about him. He hoped Marshall Sliss would change that.

He slipped the papers into his brief and put nightclothes on. He finished his ablutions, heading to bed worried about what new things tomorrow would bring. He felt like a fish out of water. Even the Admiral's memories didn't help since he'd always avoided Poolto politics. It would cost him now—or rather, it would cost Tyler.

He slid into bed and turned off the lights, staring at the ceiling as he thought about Nayllen. Suddenly, there was movement at his door, and a slender silhouette entered the room. She wore nothing but a light, silky gown, and Tyler could make out curves beneath it in the pale light.

"Nayllen," she asked, "are you asleep yet?"

Tyler's heart jumped, "No, I'm just thinking about the evening. What's wrong?"

She held the door, apparently uncertain of what she intended. Tyler waited patiently.

"Nothing is wrong," she began, "I just wanted to tell you that I had a wonderful evening, and that I am glad we are together." She paused but held tightly to the door. "I want this to work, Nayllen. I want us to be a family again."

He heard a strain in her voice. Like before, he sensed strong feelings for the Admiral, but she still stung from the betrayals in his past. He felt guilty that he was only a reflection of the Admiral—an impostor. But he couldn't prevent that, whether from his own

loss or from the strength of the Admiral's memories, he loved Toosia and wanted their relationship to work.

"I know," he said gently, "I also want us to be a family."

Watching her silhouette, he wanted to pull her into bed, hold her in his arms, and make gentle love to her. Unfortunately, he would have to wait for her to make the move.

"I'm glad, Nayllen ... I really am."

He watched as she fidgeted in the doorway, obviously confused. Finally, she stood straight and began backing out the door.

"Goodnight, Nayllen, I love you." She said as she turned to walk back to her quarters.

Tyler watched her go with regrets. "Goodnight, Toosia, I love you, too."

He laid awake for most of the night, while his thoughts turned from Nayllen to Toosia over and over again. Toosia clearly loved the Admiral, but would she ever share that love physically? Tyler wasn't certain, but he was willing to wait.

* * * *

The next day, Tyler sat patiently through various speakers at the conference. The agenda included additional readiness reports, funding, troop strengths, and deployments. He watched as the Marshall made note of everything before sending it off to their staff for analysis and evaluation.

At lunch, he and the Admiral's staff reconvened for briefings and order changes. Officer Slaas dutifully reported Officer Kiir agreed to meet with them. The meeting was set for the day after tomorrow in the Admiral's quarters.

Tyler still didn't know how he would recruit the man, but at least he had agreed to meet with him. Tyler knew he would be surprised when only the Admiral attended the meeting, or then again, he may suspect it and hopes to gather information. Either way, they had to risk it. Tyler assumed that whatever was said would likely make it back to the Vice Admiral. Therefore, he had to play it cool.

Already, his staff had prepared several scenarios for handling the supply crisis. A contact in the Office of Regional Affairs had provided information on empty, portable, storage systems that

could be launched immediately to handle the overload in production.

Apparently, the storage systems were originally commissioned for a new mining facility that had been slated for construction the previous year. The bad news was the target asteroid was overrun by Krildon forces and the construction of the facility was cancelled.

The Admiral's memories called up the incident and Tyler recalled the vicious battle for that single rock. At the time, the loss had been substantial due to the rich ore that particular asteroid field contained. Now, however, it was a stroke of good luck. Based on recent intelligence, Krildon never exploited the field after they captured it, so neither side benefited from the battle.

A young officer finished reporting by stating the launch date was preliminarily set for the following week, assuming nothing jammed up the works. Everything would be done through private contracting, so the military bureaucrats couldn't stop the process if the Vice Admiral felt threatened.

Tyler and the Marshall were delighted, although neither showed such emotions. *Let them see what we can still do!* Tyler thought. He knew the Vice Admiral would fume over their quick solution to a serious problem. The rest of the Supreme Military Command Staff wouldn't be as surprised, the Admiral was known for his expert supply chain management.

According to their sources, the Vice Admiral was approaching the problem through the existing military resources and was running into the typically slow processing of such a big problem. Tyler was happy they were delayed. Ironically, it was probably the first time the Admiral was happy about bureaucratic red tape.

The Marshall concluded the report by indicating funding could be provided through the Admiral's discretionary account. The funds had originally been earmarked for flagship weapon systems upgrades, but since that had been destroyed, the money was available for other uses.

Everything fell into place, and Tyler was impressed with the efficiency and speed of the Admiral's staff. It was no wonder the Admiral was a hero. Tyler noted the Admiral's memories indicated every staff member on the team had been approved by the Admiral himself. Tyler thought his selections superb.

Tyler made sure the Marshall set aside some of the funds for a night on the town for the staff. The Marshall nodded confirmation as he jotted down additional notes.

The last of the reports on the previous day's work was the current analysis of the readiness and scheduling of the new equipment. According to their best estimates, the Vice Admiral's plan required cutting all corners, skewing their timeline by at least thirty to forty percent.

The Admiral's staff developed a more accurate projection of seven to eight months before most of the equipment could be properly fielded. This mirrored the estimate Tyler had derived based on the Admiral's prior experiences. According to the staff, they suspected the Vice Admiral was proposing to bypass systems testing in favor of pure field trials.

While that appeared feasible on the surface, everyone knew system's testing was a critical aspect of the overall testing cycle. Most of the electronic and computer systems were new designs requiring proper testing before integrating them in space.

Tyler called up an incident many years back where skimping on systems testing resulted in an attack cruiser incorrectly setting a course for the sun. The testers couldn't fix the problem and had eventually abandoned the ship, watching in horror as it flew into the star. Since that incident, the military enforced rigorous system's testing cycles, primarily due to the Admiral. The Vice Admiral was taking an enormous gamble.

Finally, the discussions turned to the new information released during the morning session. Everyone agreed troop strength and deployments were not an issue in any proposed attack plan. They had plenty of supplies and carriers to transport troops where they were needed. The problem was they had no ships to transport them to. Until the new ships were deployed, the troops remained in training.

This was to their advantage. Tyler felt confident they could recruit many on the Supreme Military Command Staff with this information. It would be a hard sell, but wielding the Admiral's status, past experience, and knowledge of history, could make it happen.

Many admitted they were still loyal to the Admiral but feared repercussions from the Palace and the Vice Admiral. Some even confided they felt *threatened*.

Let them use strong arm tactics, Tyler thought, they'll never buy loyalty that way. He sensed Regent Sneerd's hand in play.

They ended the meeting with orders to begin compiling all their information into a comprehensive report Tyler would deliver at the end of the conference. He knew they needed more time, but he felt pressured to sow the seeds of dissent sooner rather than later.

As Tyler and Marshall Sliss walked back to the conference, the Marshall added additional information withheld from the luncheon meeting. Although nothing had been confirmed about the scrlit, he noted that his informants released a report commissioned by the Palace Intelligence Office warning of the possible use of scrlit in weapons manufacturing. The report, never published to the military, outlined several theoretical uses for the substance.

The report was so highly classified, its unauthorized release resulted in treason charges followed by execution. The Marshall was emphatic about that fact as he shared the information with Tyler. Apparently, the report was squashed by Regent Sneerd, and although it was rumored some resources were allocated to dig up more information, the priority was significantly lowered.

The Marshall said they were trying to track down some of the scientists who had created the report, but it appeared their names had been faked. He finished by admitting that although they probably wouldn't get more information, the reaction at the Palace was, by itself, rather interesting.

Tyler agreed. If the Palace was reacting to the scrlit the same way they were, why did they squash the report? It didn't make any sense, unless they had additional intelligence not mentioned in the report. Maybe they'd already made their own discoveries concerning scrlit, and wanted to keep it covert. Maybe that was the edge the Vice Admiral had in his back pocket?

Tyler thought briefly about the note from Nayllen. Maybe that was the information Nayllen wanted to share? Perhaps he had access to the missing intelligence and was willing to share it with the Admiral. Why would he do that? Was he a big supporter of the Admiral's? Tyler couldn't figure out the motivations, but suddenly, the meeting at the casino seemed much more important than suspicious.

The rest of the short walk back to the conference was used to deliver a short synopsis of Nayllen Hooss. According to the Marshall's sources, Nayllen sat on the board of various military

equipment manufacturers, chairing several. As most of the companies were private, it was nearly impossible to uncover how much Nayllen owned. His connections ran through the entire gamut of Poolto government from the military, the Supreme Council, and right into the Imperial Palace.

His previous government service was a bit of a mystery. Although he had served in the Diplomatic Corps, his records of stations and duties were sealed and inaccessible. They required an Imperial Order to release the documents, something the Marshall could not obtain.

Like Councilor Beerii, the Marshall surmised Nayllen ran nearly all the companies for which he was on the board. It was rumored he had an *intelligence* background from his days in the Diplomatic Corps. The Marshall admitted he was unnerved by the fact that someone so influential had never crossed his path. He concluded he believed the man was both dangerous and powerful.

Tyler thought about his meeting. An intelligence background made him dangerous, but he could prove to be a possible asset. With Nayllen's connections, Tyler envisioned him having access to greater information than the Marshall could ever obtain. Marshall Sliss almost admitted as much. If he truly wanted to help the Admiral, then he could be a valuable ally.

Tyler made up his mind. He would meet with Nayllen and see how it played out. If they were truly out of the game, as Nayllen insinuated, then they had to use whatever options were available to get back in.

Tyler and the Marshall entered the conference room ready for additional hours of speakers. At this point, the only thing interesting him was further details on the Vice Admiral's plan. Unfortunately, that wasn't scheduled until the following day.

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During the afternoon break, Tyler contacted Greelen to set up their date for that night. He'd arranged to pick her up early in the evening. She was extremely excited by the prospects until Tyler mentioned Toosia would join them.

Despite this fly in the ointment, Greelen had agreed. Tyler was certain she was plotting to get her claws into him even with Toosia around.

Toosia was a harder sell than Greelen, and Tyler winced at the look of despair that came over her when he mentioned the young woman. He hastily assured her he had no interests in Greelen and confided she was only a cover for some *business* he needed to tend to. He didn't mention his meeting with Nayllen, but only confirmed the evening wasn't just for pleasure. He quickly assured her he would explain everything afterwards.

This consoled her, at least temporarily. She agreed to come, but Tyler suspected it was more from curiosity than to help him. Either way, she would be there to deflect Greelen's advances.

Toosia currently sat next to him in the ground car as it sped across the city to pick up Greelen. They requested no escort despite the Marshall's protests. Tyler had finally calmed him down by ordering him to desist. He assured the Marshall it was inconceivable anyone would injure the planet's greatest hero. The Marshall replied he could count at least three off the top of his head.

Tyler dismissed those concerns and was adamant no escort follow them. The Marshall conceded, but Tyler suspected covert escorts would be placed on them anyway. At least they wouldn't be public.

Tyler glanced at Toosia, admiring her calm demeanor. She was dressed in a semi-formal outfit, and once again, Tyler was taken by her subtle beauty. He knew the Admiral's memories had changed his attitude towards Poolto, but he didn't care. He wanted this woman and convinced himself the feelings were his own.

He gently took her hand. "I am sorry to be so elusive, but this is an important thing I must do."

"I know." She said plainly. "I could sense the urgency when you persuaded me to come."

He didn't think she sounded persuaded. "I promise to tell you everything later." It sounded empty. He knew he would have to wait and see what Nayllen had to say before he could confidently share it with Toosia. He didn't even want to share it with the Marshall.

"Fine," she replied, "I hope you don't mind that I invited a friend along. If you are going to be preoccupied this evening, the last thing I want is to spend it conversing with Greelen."

He noted that when she said Greelen's name it came out guttural and offensive.

"Yes, who is it?" he asked.

“Trooden Hiir.” She said without emotion.

The name triggered a response in the Admiral's memories. Tyler recalled the man as someone who'd always wanted to marry Toosia. They had dated briefly in college before becoming friends. According to the Marshall's sources, Toosia had been the one who broke it off.

Tyler felt a twinge of jealousy, but realized the Admiral had carried on an affair for many years, even after Toosia knew about it. What right did he have to be jealous?

He smiled. “Good, then you won't be bored.”

He didn't pursue it further, and both remained silent the rest of the way to Greelen's. Tyler wasn't certain whether she had invited Trooden to make the Admiral jealous or whether she genuinely wanted a friend. The Marshall never confirmed whether she had an affair with Trooden, but it didn't matter anyway. If she truly wanted a family, she might just be breaking it off with the old friend.

Tyler tried putting it out of his mind. He was nervous enough about meeting Nayllen and entertaining Greelen as their car pulled in front of a tall, extravagant apartment building. Tyler noted the building contained apartments on the upper floors with entertainment underneath. Several theaters, restaurants, and shops lined the lower floors, but private elevators would whisk the elite to their plush apartments overhead.

Tyler had seen plenty of wealth as a drug dealer, but nothing as extravagant as this. Everyone wore expensive clothing and adorned themselves with sparkling jewelry. Although Tyler wore an expensive suit, he felt underdressed. This was the world they were fighting to save? It made him wonder how everyone outside the city lived.

Greelen was waiting as they pulled up and waved an enthusiastic goodbye to a few people she'd been talking with. She ran towards their car as the driver held the door open. She stepped in, smiling broadly at Tyler before delivering a curt hello to Toosia. She took the seat across from them, an enormous grin on her face.

Tyler broke the awkward silence. “Good evening, Greelen, it is very generous to show us around town.”

Greelen ignored Toosia completely and poured charm all over the Admiral.

“My pleasure, Admiral.” She said coyly. “I hope you will enjoy the evening. I have taken the privilege to book us at one of the best restaurants in town. I am good friends with the head chef, and it is useful to be part of the Imperial Family.”

Tyler saw the immense pleasure she took in recounting her prestigious associations. He wondered why she thought that would impress the planet’s hero. He figured it was habit at this point.

“Great, I look forward to it!” He said a bit too enthusiastically. “I would also like to stop at the Grand Anoor Casino afterwards.”

“That old place!” She exclaimed, a look of disgust on her face. “Whatever for?”

Tyler remained calm. “I may meet a friend there for a drink, and he told me it was the best casino in town.”

“Well, it certainly is the oldest,” her face softened, “who is this friend?”

“School chum,” he lied, “in town for a convention or something. I thought I would see him again while he was back in the capital. It has been years since we saw each other.”

She looked hurt but quickly recovered with a sparkle in her eyes. Tyler thought she was already scheming for his imaginary friend. He had to admit, she was attractive, although in an aggressive, and offensive sort of way.

“Very well, we can swing by the Casino after dinner, but only if you promise to hit some clubs afterwards.”

“Yes, that would be fine.”

He doubted Toosia and he would like her clubs, but he wanted to appease her and keep up the charade. He watched Toosia practically cringing at the prospects. He owed her a great deal after this evening.

They drove to the restaurant listening to Greelen recounting various tales of evenings on the town. As he barely listened, Tyler caught glimpses of the city through the window. He was amazed at the immensity. It was like Las Vegas and Tokyo rolled into one—except many times bigger. It took all his will power to act as though it were a normal scene. He felt a thrill at being part of a great sci-fi epic, but the mood was lost in the sound of Greelen’s voice.

Although they traveled in a ground car, Tyler noticed the additional vehicles traveling through the skies overhead. He cringed when he thought of one of the vehicles falling to the ground below. Based on the crowd density in this part of town, a

falling vehicle could kill hundreds. He stared up once again with feelings of claustrophobia.

The car pulled up to the restaurant, and Greelen finally fell silent. Toosia squeezed his hand slightly as she pointed out the window to a small gathering of press waiting. Tyler supposed that if the place were really famous, then it was very likely the press showed up every night. Still, he couldn't help feeling someone had tipped them off. He glanced at Greelen and decided it wasn't inconceivable she had informed the press. After all, what good was it going on the town with the planet's most famous hero if no one saw it on television?

"Oh, no," Greelen exclaimed, "I was hoping the press would be covering somewhere else tonight. I hope you don't mind?"

She didn't sound sincere and Tyler thought he heard excitement in her voice. It didn't matter, he was prepared to handle them.

As the press noticed the car, they moved towards it. The driver held them back before opening the door. Tyler moved into the bright flashes and smiled widely. He turned to help Toosia, and she graciously accepted his right arm. He turned to assist Greelen, but she had already climbed out and grabbed his left arm. A girlish smile wide across her face.

Toosia remained poised, so Tyler took her cue and escorted them towards the restaurant. As they drew close to the entrance, they were engulfed by reporters and cameramen. Everywhere in the crowd, microphones were thrust forward to capture every word.

They made slow progress until receiving help from the doormen. The doormen cleared the press, and Tyler took the opportunity to give them their news.

"Members of the Press, we are glad you are here this evening." The press fell silent with only sounds of their cameras and equipment a dull background buzz. "My wife and I are out to enjoy the hospitality this great city has to offer."

Toosia nodded in agreement.

"On my left," he nodded toward Greelen, "is Greelen Sneerd who has graciously offered to show us around the town this evening."

At the introduction, Greelen bowed slightly, never letting go of Tyler's arm. She was nearly giddy with delight.

“We look forward to a wonderful dinner followed by entertainment afterwards.”

With that, they turned and headed into the restaurant, the cries of questions falling deaf on their backs. As the doors closed behind them, the sound of the reporters faded inside the enormous foyer trimmed with intricate gold leaf around the ceiling and walls. The floor was solid black, reflecting everything like a pool of dark liquid.

In contrast, a small table sat at the far wall with a single person behind it. To the right of the table, a closed door provided the only break in the wall. Tyler assumed it was the entrance to the restaurant but wasn't certain since its bland appearance made it look more like a coat room.

They walked toward the table as the person scribbled on something hidden from their view. A small light barely illuminated the woman behind it. She was very pretty elegantly dressed in a regal blue robe.

They waited quietly as the young woman gave them a reassuring smile. The effect was breathtaking, and Tyler realized it hadn't been lost on Toosia or Greelen. Both smiled curtly, smug looks on their faces.

“We are honored to have the Great Admiral Osloos dining with us.” Her voice was nearly angelic with the lilting tones of Poolto. “We hope you will enjoy the fine selections our Chef has prepared tonight.” She bowed slightly, but it didn't steal from her beauty. Tyler realized he was mesmerized and tried to look at something else.

“My name is Liiseer, and I will be your host this evening. Think of me as your Concierge. If there is anything you require, please let me know.” Tyler's mind thought of several things she could provide but quickly pulled his attention away from such thoughts. Her smile was so warm and inviting, she could easily pull the attention of any man, even one with two beautiful women on his arms. *Wow!*

Liiseer handed them a small device which Greelen grabbed before Tyler could grasp it. Liiseer ignored Greelen's discomfort and leveled Tyler a stunning smile. Tyler felt Toosia and Greelen tighten their grips as he returned the favor.

“Before we seat you, Admiral, would you prefer the common room or something more private?”

For a moment he thought she was going to say intimate. With two women at his side, that would have been embarrassing. Apparently she meant private, as her demeanor didn't change.

"Oh, ... the common room would be fine," he replied, "thank you."

She nodded and scribbled once more. As if on cue, the door behind the table opened, and another young woman ushered them in. Her name was Zeeren, and she also promised to provide anything they needed.

So far, this beat any restaurant Tyler could remember in Los Angeles. Back home, the service workers were aspiring actors or playwrights, so the service was often poor. Here, it was downright decadent. He had to admit, he was getting accustomed to the Admiral's lifestyle.

The small door led to a lift that whisked them to the upper floors. Tyler guessed they went at least thirty floors, but as the lift stopped, Zeeren announced the three-hundredth floor. Tyler tried not to look surprised by the mind boggling speed they had traveled.

The common room was not so common by Tyler's standards. The tables were spaced far apart, and as they passed from one to another, he sensed the hum of a field around them. The fields blocked conversations, and the silence within such a crowded room was eerie. They marched to a small alcove set against one of the windows.

Zeeren sat them before fiddling with several switches. The field was activated and in response, the window became transparent. She had assured them no one could see through from the outside and that no one would be able to overhear their conversations. Tyler was thinking if this was the common room, then what did more private mean?

The three of them sat on a plush, semi-circular couch surrounding the table. It was placed at an angle to the window giving them a view of the city as well as most of the dining room. Tyler was impressed by the view spectacular of the city.

Toosia and Greelen sat on either side, Greelen too close and Toosia not close enough. Still, it was nice to have Toosia in such a spectacular setting. She was radiant, and Tyler quickly forgot the angelic hostess from below.

"Isn't this fabulous?" Greelen exclaimed. "My friend is the best Chef on Poolto."

Tyler had to admit, it was incredible. “Yes, these are wonderful accommodations, the view is especially beautiful. I have often seen it from space, but this vantage is truly remarkable.”

Toosia smiled, but said nothing.

Tyler noticed Greelen looked proud of herself to be eating with two of the more prominent people on the planet. She glanced around the dining room, searching for others—no doubt to mark the occasion.

Tyler didn’t care, he was waiting patiently and nervously for his meeting at the casino. He thought about Nayllen and his motives. Why would an arms dealer want to give up the lucrative environment of war? Surely he had a lot to gain from a new offensive. But then again, if it worked, he might be out of work. That wasn’t a shrewd business move.

Tyler had to admit the general feel of the planet was for ending the war, but they simply couldn’t get past the bitterness and hostility from past deeds. To Tyler, peace seemed very far off. Tyler accessed the Admiral’s memories and estimated the same situation was likely occurring on Krildon. He didn’t believe anyone could live so long with war and not tire of the ceaseless sacrifices. Still, what motivated Nayllen? He hoped the meeting would answer his questions.

Greelen’s voice cut through Tyler’s reverie.

“Admiral, did you hear me?” she said.

“Y-yes,” he stumbled, “I mean no, I was lost in thought. Sorry.”

“Nayllen dear, Greelen was just telling us about the history of this restaurant, a truly fascinating story. Apparently her uncle is one of the cofounders.”

Toosia squeezed Tyler’s hand as she delivered this news. Tyler understood the gesture—it explained why they were here. Tyler looked around with more interest. He recognized a few faces in the dimly lit room and decided most were prominent people in Yooso, if not Poolto. He recognized a Councilman dining across the room with several guests. Business interests not doubt here to advocate their causes within the Supreme Council.

Tyler realized this was where the real politics occurred. It was no wonder Regent Sneerd was a co-founder. His ties to the Emperor would not doubt make the place popular, and although the entire facility was built to provide privacy, Tyler had no doubts Sneerd had found ways to spy on the private conversations.

There was no end to the Emperor's reach, and Tyler made a mental note to tell Marshall Sliss about this place. However, he figured the Marshall already knew.

"Well, that is fascinating," Tyler agreed, "perhaps we'll run into your Uncle while we are here?"

"Maybe," she said nonchalantly, "but he doesn't spend much time here."

As if he had heard their conversation, Tyler spotted Regent Sneerd enter the dining room and make his way towards their table. *What timing?*

"Ah, we are in luck, I see your Uncle now!" Tyler said.

He noticed Greelen brighten slightly, and assumed she was ready to play up to her uncle yet again. He assumed Sneerd probably recommended Greelen bring them here.

"Yes, we are in luck, I almost never see him here!" Greelen exclaimed.

I'll bet, Tyler thought. He looked at Toosia who remained cool and passive. He knew she had no love for Sneerd and was probably thinking the same thing. *We are being monitored.*

The Regent entered their privacy ring and bowed.

"Lady Slay and Admiral Oslo, you grace us with your presence."

Toosia bowed in response. "Regent."

"Good evening, Regent, quite a wonderful place you have here." Tyler said. "Your niece was just telling us about your interest in founding this establishment."

"She did?" He replied. "Then, she will have told you how wonderful the food is."

Tyler had to hand it to him, the Regent was cool ... very cool.

"Perhaps she also informed you we have the finest cellar in Yooso—perhaps Poolto." He looked directly at Tyler. "We even stock a great deal of your own label, Admiral."

A server suddenly appeared with a tray containing a bottle of wine and several fragile looking glasses.

"I hope you don't mind, I took the privilege of ordering one, compliments of the house. In fact, everything is complimentary this evening. It is only fitting for our planet's most revered hero."

Tyler thought he heard the last bit come out slightly scathing, but realized he may simply be projecting his own thoughts onto the Regent.

Toosia jumped in quickly, saving Tyler from having to respond to the compliment. “Why that is wonderful, Regent, we truly thank you!”

She was so smooth. Tyler even thought she was serious at first but then remembered her true feelings.

Regent Sneerd shook off the thanks and moved out of the way for the server.

“Please enjoy your dinner. I look forward to seeing you again.”

With that, the Regent slipped away as quietly as he had come. Tyler looked at Greelen who appeared hurt by the fact that her uncle didn’t even acknowledge her presence. For a brief moment, Tyler almost felt sorry for her. The moment passed when she recognized someone across the room.

She waved wildly, and excused herself from the table. Tyler was glad for the break.

“I’m sorry, Toosia, I realize this is not exactly the ideal date.”

She remained calm, a slight smile on her face made her look confident and beautiful. In fact, Tyler thought the dim lighting and elegant surroundings made her even more radiant than usual. He felt a pull on his heart and wished they were both back at the Estate, alone, and in each other’s arms. She quickly broke the moment.

“Oh, please, Nayllen, our host is being wonderful. I am enjoying this ... immensely. In fact I am sure we will remember this night for a long time.”

Tyler saw through her sarcasm. She wanted to know what he was up to but patiently waited to give him the time he needed. He owed her a lot and intended to pay it back.

“Well, good,” he lied, “so am I.” He knew he sounded less convincing, but then he wasn’t versed in the subterfuge and lying that was common in Yooso. He understood why the Admiral never spent time here.

Greelen returned, breaking their awkward silence. Picking up where she left off, Greelen spent the rest of the meal recounting everything she knew about Yooso. Tyler had to admit, the food and drink were exceptional, even if the conversation wasn’t.

* * * *

The ride to the Grand Anoor Casino was filled with more of Greelen’s adventures, and Tyler was nearing his boiling point. He

gritted his teeth and tried to remain calm despite the inane ramblings. It didn't help she nearly molested him. Toosia remained placid and her slight smile made it look as though she were enjoying the absurd scene.

Tyler was relieved when their car finally stopped in front of the casino. The place was enormous, twenty stories and three city blocks if Greelen was to be believed. As Tyler looked out the window, he believed it. He noticed the usual gauntlet of reporters waiting outside just as Greelen noticed them.

"Oh, dear," she exclaimed, "those pesky reporters have found us here as well."

Tyler saw that her face registered giddiness even as her voice sounded displeased.

"Don't worry," Tyler said, "we'll simply ignore them."

They exited the car, Toosia and Greelen once again grabbing each of Tyler's arms. The grip Greelen had on Tyler nearly caused pain. She walked erratically, smiling and posing for every camera, and Tyler had difficulty keeping them on course. She was getting real mileage out of the evening, and Tyler had no doubt she would recount the whole affair often for years to come.

Tyler put on his best face as they pushed through the throng, ignoring questions thrown at them. It was a whole new batch of reporters, and they seemed even more aggressive. Apparently it was acceptable to be aggressive outside the casino. Tyler thought back to Los Angeles and the movie star's complaints about *paparazzi*. He now understood their cries.

Once inside, the press backed off as security guards eyed them intensely. Tyler was blown away by the elegance and decadence within the casino. It may have been old, but it sparkled like a brand new diamond.

Tyler released Toosia and Greelen, although Greelen resisted at first. He wasn't sure what to expect and wondered how Nayllen would contact him. Well, he showed, now it was Nayllen's move.

They descended the sweeping staircase that put them on the first floor of the casino. Tyler was amazed at how similar it was to casinos in Las Vegas. Gaming tables overflowed with players and onlookers alike. What looked like slot machines lit up the grand room in long aisles stretching off into the distance. Even the sounds were reminiscent of Vegas.

He felt the usual twinge of excitement and made a mental note to try some of the games before leaving. He was curious to see how many were similar to those on Earth.

They were nearly to the floor when a voice called out from behind them.

“Admiral ... Admiral Oslo!”

Tyler turned to see a smartly dressed man descending the steps towards them. He wore a single suit of spectacular material in the colors of the casino, and on the right side of his chest, a small pin labeled him as Tiineer Diinn of ‘Customer Services’.

Tyler waited. “Yes, what is it?”

The man caught his breath, regaining his composure.

“I am sorry to bother you, Admiral, but you have an urgent call from Marshall Sliss.” He stopped once more. “If you would follow me, I would be happy to show you to a private place to take the call.” He bowed to the Admiral and gestured back up the stairs.

“Okay.” Tyler replied. “Toosia and Greelen, will you excuse me while I take the Marshall’s call?”

“Please, dear, I, too, have someone to catch up with. I will meet you all later.” The thought irked Tyler as he knew who she was going to meet.

Greelen looked put out, but perked up quickly as if a light went off in her head.

“Well, yes, no problem,” she began, “I have some friends who said they would meet us here, so I’ll track them down and meet up with you later. Let’s meet for drinks on the 12th floor in a couple hours?”

“Splendid,” Tyler said, “I’ll meet you both there. Perhaps I’ll get some gaming in beforehand, assuming the call isn’t too critical.”

Tyler followed Tiineer up the stairs and through a door marked ‘Casino Staff Only’. It led to a small hallway ending in a single door Tyler assumed was a lift.

He was correct, but instead of going up as he assumed, the elevator went down, deep down. There was no indication of where they were, and Tyler lost count on what he thought was at least 15 floors underground. They finally stopped and the door opened onto a dimly lit room with one table in the middle.

Tiineer signaled Tyler into the room, but stayed in the elevator. Tyler walked off as the lift doors closed, leaving him alone.

He wondered where the communication console was as he scanned the sparse room. The walls were slightly reddish in color and the light of the room seemed to be emanating somewhere near the baseboards. It was more glow than light.

He was confused when a door opened to his right, flooding the room with bright light. Two figures entered, and the glow of the walls increased to a normal level.

Tyler saw Nayllen standing next to someone who appeared to be an assistant. At least the man reminded Tyler of his own staff, smartly dressed, walking behind in deference, and carrying a small electronic pad that glowed dimly in the brightened room.

"Admiral, so glad you could make it, I apologize for the subterfuge, but it was the best way to bring you here without raising suspicions."

"So, there is no call from Marshall Sliss?" Tyler asked.

"No, no," Nayllen responded shaking his head, "however, we are aware of his misgivings about me."

Tyler didn't like the sound of that. Did they know everything?

"You must be well informed." Tyler accused.

"Indeed I am, Admiral, more than you can imagine. For instance, right now, the Emperor is entertaining a young woman, a staff aide I believe, in his one of his private quarters. They just finished two bottles of wine and are lazily lounging on a heavily cushioned sofa, talking about the love making they will engage in shortly. Foreplay." He finished.

Tyler was dubious. Spying inside the Emperor's private quarters?

"Maybe he is, maybe he isn't, either way, it is treason." Tyler said.

"Indeed it is, Admiral, indeed it is. However, I assure you he is there as I have described."

Tyler remained quiet, a look of doubt on his face.

"Very well, Admiral, let me demonstrate."

Nayllen signaled to his assistant who did something on the pad. On the far wall, a large screen lit, partitioned into several smaller screens. Each one showed a different scene, and it reminded Tyler of his television room at Tooland. However, instead of commercials and news shows, the pictures never changed as if stationary. In some, people moved about or sat quietly while others depicted empty rooms. Tyler was impressed.

"What is it?" he asked.

“That is a small sample of the Imperial Palace.” Nayllen responded, “I can call up nearly every room if I desire.”

He gestured to the assistant again, and after some fiddling, the screen changed to a single view of a plush room, warmly lit, filled with soft pillows and furnishings.

On one of the sofas, two people intimately embraced, touching each other heavily, talking quietly. Tyler noticed one of them looked a lot like the Emperor. Tyler was speechless.

Nayllen signaled to his assistant again, and the clear voice of the Emperor and his consort filled the room. It was as clear as if they sat across from the sofa.

Nayllen nodded his head, and this time, the view changed entirely to a new room. Tyler was stunned as he saw Marshall Sliss and Officer Kooren talking quietly at a small table. Kooren, as usual, was engaged with his devices while listening to the Marshall. The Marshall was going through much of the data presented at the conference and had Kooren double checking the accuracy of certain figures. Tyler was doubly impressed and disturbed.

Nayllen signaled one last time, and the screen disappeared.

“You see, Admiral, I am a very well informed person. It is my primary mission to be well informed.”

Nayllen gestured to a chair and they both sat down across from each other.

“Okay, Nayllen, I am surprised, concerned, and impressed. So why did you bring me here? To demonstrate treason?”

“That?” Nayllen swept his hand towards the now empty wall. “That was just a toy, one of many I possess to conduct my business—to my advantage, of course.”

“Of course.” Tyler agreed. He was very nervous now that he realized he was sitting across from a very dangerous man. He should have heeded the Marshall’s warning.

“Hmmm.” Nayllen sat back and looked at Tyler, assessing him with his eyes.

Nayllen signaled to his assistant and almost an instant later, the door opened with a young woman carrying a tray of two glasses and a bottle of liquid Tyler didn’t recognize.

She set it down in front of Nayllen and filled the two glasses from the bottle. She brought one over to Tyler. She quietly set it down before disappearing through the door as silently as she had came.

Nayllen picked up his glass and signaled Tyler to do the same. Tyler picked it up hesitantly, and watched carefully as Nayllen took a small sip before putting it down.

“Don’t worry, Admiral, I have no intentions of harming you. Go on, taste it, I think you will agree it is quite remarkable, and ... exotic.”

Tyler lifted his glass and sniffed lightly before putting it to his lips. The smell was like vanilla, but the flavor slightly more bitter, with a fruity aftertaste. Tyler had to admit, it was good and exotic.

“That, my friend, is Krildon Sarrs-Berry wine, a true delicacy and very rare.” Nayllen said proudly.

Tyler searched the Admiral’s memories for a reference and found that the Admiral’s parents drank it on a regular basis while living on Krildon. Although the Admiral had never tried it, he remembered his father once remarked it was the nectar of the gods, and nothing in the family wine production came close.

Tyler had to admit, he saw the attraction. The aftertaste kept changing slightly, as though several different fruits were part of the drink. At the moment, he thought he tasted banana.

As though reading Tyler’s mind, Nayllen spoke. “Like me, your father and mother used to love this drink.”

“You knew my parents?” Tyler asked surprised.

“Oh, yes , quite well actually.”

Tyler could find no memory of this person and it seemed out of character for the Admiral’s parents to be affiliated with someone so dangerous.

Again, Nayllen read his mind. “Of course, I knew them a long time ago when I was a very different person. As we all were before the war.” He finished and took another sip of his drink staring at Tyler with disturbingly penetrating eyes.

“When did you know my parents?” Tyler asked.

“On Krildon.” Nayllen said placidly.

The answer surprised Tyler. He had expected him to say something else—something closer to Poolto.

“Really,” Tyler asked, “and what were you doing on Krildon?”

“I worked for your father, of course, as part of the Imperial Intelligence Agency, or IIA as we called it.”

“I don’t think so, my father was not in intelligence. He worked for the Diplomatic Corps as Ambassador to Krildon. My father respected Krildon and would never have betrayed them that way.”

Tyler said it, but wasn't convinced himself. Had the Admiral been so naive? Tyler remembered growing up seeing many reports about foreign Ambassadors being expelled from the United States for spying. Maybe the Admiral's father had spied as well. That may be why he was arrested. Nayllen read his mind again, and it was beginning to irk Tyler.

"The Emperor used your father for years, and when your father stood up for what he believed in, the Emperor betrayed him to Krildon which caused his immediate arrest. Surely you are not so naive to believe your father was only there as a diplomat?" He took another sip, "Your father ran the IIA on Krildon. All those years, and he never told you?"

Tyler saw the logic, and it explained a lot of strange things the Admiral remembered about growing up on Krildon. But still, he could find no memory of this man.

"No, he never mentioned it."

"No matter, I am sure he had his reasons. As you no doubt have realized, I never met you since I was a very deep agent at that time. It was policy not to openly associate ourselves outside of work. I was a business man at that time, although a full agent for the Emperor. I made a lot of acquaintances, and developed a rather extensive network. Of course, after the war started, my network was difficult to maintain, but I've managed." He signaled to Tyler with his glass, as if to say, 'how do you think I got this?'

"So you have agents on Krildon?" Tyler asked with concern. Despite his ties to the Admiral's parents, this man was not trustworthy.

"Of course. As I said, I am well informed."

"Does the Emperor know?" Tyler waited, assuming the man was really working for the Imperial Palace. He smelled a trap.

"Does he know?" Nayllen smiled. "My dear friend, he encourages it."

So this was a trap. He was working for the Imperial Palace, a spy for the Emperor. He was going to discredit the Admiral in some way, removing him from prominence, and thereby allowing the Emperor and Vice Admiral Teesen to go forward with their reckless plan. Well, if Tyler could help it, he wasn't going to let that happen.

"So you work for the Emperor?" He asked.

"For him ... as well as others."

"Others?" Tyler asked. "What others?"

“For now, let’s just say they are people who share the same goals as I do.”

“Are these the same goals as the Emperor and Teesen?” Tyler retorted.

Nayllen smiled and looked more closely at Tyler. Tyler held his gaze, refusing to back down no matter how dangerous he was.

“You are not as ... shrewd as I thought, Admiral. A brilliant commander no doubt, but not shrewd at politics or intelligence.” He took another sip before continuing. “That explains your avoidance of Yooso and your extended stays off-planet. It is no wonder you rely so heavily on the Marshall.”

Tyler remained quiet, absorbing the condescending words. This man knew everything about the Admiral, and Tyler was unnerved by it. He knew he was out of his league, even more so than when they first arrived. What had he gotten himself into, and how could he get himself out?

I can help.

Tyler froze as the voice inside found its way into his consciousness. His growing fear had lowered the mental barriers and he could sense the alien presence trying to exploit it. He forced it back with a stern warning.

I don't need your help!

The inner voice fell silent, and Tyler hoped the internal exchange had not been visible to Nayllen. He went on the attack.

“Why am I here, Nayllen?” He demanded. “What is it you want with me?”

Nayllen smiled with disarming charm. “I want you to join me and help bring an end to this senseless war.”

Tyler was caught off-guard by comment. Wasn't this man an arms dealer? Why would he want to end the war? “And why would I join you?”

“Not me personally, but my cause and the others I mentioned. I think they could convince you ... if given the opportunity.”

Tyler couldn't read the man. *What was his motive?* He couldn't see it, at least not now. He didn't think Nayllen was such a giving man that he wanted to end the war he had profited from so richly.

“An opportunity to speak with me? Isn't that why I am here?”

“No, you are here so I could assess whether you would be worth recruiting ... or whether we would have to use you in some other way. Ways that would not include your blessings or knowledge.”

Tyler was taken aback. He felt the remnants of the Admiral's spirit bridle at that obvious display of power. Who was this man and who was he working for?

"I will not meet with any strangers," Tyler replied, "either tell me who you are working for, or with, or let me leave."

He was as resolute as he was scared.

Nayllen sat back, leveling his piercing stare at Tyler from across the table. He sipped more wine before coming to some conclusion.

"Admiral, did you think it strange that we had the same name when we met?" Nayllen asked quietly.

"Yes, I suppose so. It isn't a very common name, although I hear it is becoming one."

"Indeed." Nayllen folded his hands neatly in his lap. "It is not common among your generation or mine for that matter. In fact, I would guess that when you were born, there were only half a dozen or so on the whole planet, myself and my father included."

"So? What are you trying to say, that I was named after you?"

"Yes."

"Please, you have no proof and I have heard no such tale from my parents. It is coincidence."

"Really? A coincidence that I worked with your father on Krildon and that we have the same rare name?"

Tyler had to admit, it appeared more than a coincidence.

"I have no proof that you worked for my father, you could tell me anything." Tyler watched as that made him pause.

Nayllen stared before standing up. He made a slight signal with his hand and the view screen on the wall displayed a picture of the Admiral's parents and what must have been a much younger Nayllen. All three were standing together, arms around each other smiling. The scene didn't give enough details to make out where it was, but the photo did appear genuine. Of course, it could easily be faked.

Nayllen turned towards Tyler. "We will contact you within the next day or two. At that time, we must have an answer as to your intent to meet the others or to sever all ties and go it on your own. Thank you for your time, Admiral, my associate will show you out."

Before Tyler could respond, Nayllen turned and left the room. Tyler was stunned. Had he been too cautious, or not cautious enough? Clearly, Nayllen and whoever he worked with had power.

Tyler could access the Admiral's memories, but found nothing so insidious. Of course, the Admiral had avoided politics, and now at least, it appeared it would be his downfall—or rather Tyler's.

Tyler followed the assistant back into the lift and couldn't help wondering whether this were a ruse by the Palace. It fell into character with Regent Sneerd's record of dealing with people who opposed the Emperor or stood in the way of their agenda. In more than a few instances, councilmen had found themselves in unusual predicaments that forced them to resign their seats on the Supreme Council.

Not surprisingly, these poor men had differed with the Palace on some crucial issue that had been held up during a vote. In general, the Imperial Palace got most of what they wanted within the Council. Despite its design and intentions, the Supreme Council was a figure head parliament that rarely made major changes that weren't designed or supported by the Imperial Palace. The Emperor and his staff were the true power of Poolto, and as Tyler reviewed these facts, he began to understand how thin his odds of coming out ahead would be.

He could read the headlines now: **Poolto's Greatest Hero—Traitor to Home World!** It smelled like a trap, it felt like a trap, yet something about Nayllen confused him. Why would Nayllen want to trap the Admiral? Did he really support the Emperor? Had he really worked with the Admiral's father on Krildon? How could he benefit from an attack plan that would surely fail? *Resupplying the fleet, that's how.*

Was that it, Tyler thought, do you intend on rebuilding the destroyed fleet after the Vice Admiral's plan fails?

Was greed the real motive here? Tyler didn't think that was it. Something about Nayllen gave Tyler the feeling he wanted more than money—he wanted power. But what kind of power? To hear Nayllen himself, he already had a great deal of power, it was simply behind the scenes. Did he want to be in front? Did he want to be the new Emperor?

Not since the Emperor's ancestors united Poolto had there been a coup—or even a plot. At least not in the open. Tyler wondered if coups happened frequently, but were kept quiet after being uncovered? If that was it, then why did they need the Admiral? Of course! They needed to seal their authority after the failure of the Vice Admiral and Emperor's plan. The Admiral would be a prominent figure to legitimize their claim to power.

Still ... something didn't feel right, and Tyler realized he was in over his head. Plots within plots within plots. Tyler wondered how a politician ever survived? He understood why Yooso was so distasteful to the Admiral. He remembered Raul once talking about the politics within their organization, but at the time, Tyler had ignored what he'd said. Now he understood the precarious position you held with power, and why the Emperor did so much to maintain it.

* * * *

Using the fictitious call as an excuse, Tyler begged Greelen's forgiveness for having to leave early. Although she was obviously disappointed, she took the news stoically since her friends had at least *seen* her with the Admiral. Since the evening was early, Greelen said she would stay with her friends. Tyler, thankful for that arrangement, agreed. He thanked her for the wonderful evening and left with promises to do it again sometime.

Before leaving, Tyler was graced with an awkward introduction to Toosia's friend. The man appeared friendly and did not seem upset at having to be stood up after so short a time. Tyler offered Toosia the opportunity to stay for a while longer, but she turned it down, undoubtedly wanting to hear more about why they were leaving so quickly. She appeared calm, but Tyler imagined what crazy thoughts were running through her mind. Unfortunately, he wanted to tell her everything, but was afraid of what that might do to their relationship—especially since it bordered on treason.

After arriving at their quarters, they separated to their respective rooms to prepare for bed. They had spent a quiet, somewhat tense ride back, with Tyler keeping quiet while Toosia maintained her patient demeanor. He knew that would change.

Tyler slipped into bed confused and overwhelmed with fear. Even the Admiral's great courage did not help. The Admiral had faced death many times, but this new menace was far worse. At least in battle, the Admiral understood every threat. In politics, he knew almost nothing. Everything he thought he knew could be wrong. The complexity, the suspense, and the fear of being branded a traitor hung heavy. It was a true test of his ability to be more than the drug dealer from Earth. He was beginning to sense it wouldn't end well.

He heard sounds in the hallway and a silhouette of Toosia appeared in his doorway. The light from behind gave Tyler hints of what lay beneath her gown. She stood silently, considering what to say.

Tyler helped. "Do you need something?" he asked.

"I need you to be honest with me and tell me what is bothering you. What is so secret?" She remained in the doorway, arms crossed and adamant. "Nayllen, you have kept me out of your life for too long, and I am not going to let you do it again, not now!"

Tyler heard resolve and pain in her voice. He cringed as her pleas to be involved tore at him. He didn't want to hurt her or disgrace her family. What would she do if he told her? She could be culpable if she knew and it all went bad. He froze in indecision.

"Damn it, Nayllen, tell me what is going on or I will leave this time and never come back!"

He realized she was about to cry, and another stab of pain shot through him. He had to tell her. Without her, he was nothing and didn't want to continue the charade.

"Okay, Toosia, okay. Please come inside and shut the door."

As he said it, he imagined Nayllen watching the scene from somewhere far away and secret. He had no illusions that Nayllen could eavesdrop anywhere within the capital complex. Nonetheless, he had no other option than to tell her.

Toosia quietly closed the door and moved towards the light switch on the wall.

"Toosia, please keep the lights off ..." he didn't know how to finish. If she knew how insecure they were, she would probably get scared.

She accepted and moved through the darkness towards the bed. The dim light coming in through the windows allowed him to see her ghostly figure stop at the side of the bed, arms crossed, waiting for him to reveal it all. A halo of light surrounded her as Tyler watched with his *second* vision.

He slid to the other side of the bed, flipping the covers back for her to get under. She hesitated but finally slipped underneath while maintaining a respectable distance. He expected that, but having her near was comforting.

"All right, Nayllen, what is going on?" she asked quietly.

He wasn't sure how to start, so he simply began from when he received the note from Nayllen. She listened silently as he recounted his encounter, properly editing out the screen showing

views from inside the Imperial chambers and their own quarters. He impressed upon her his belief that Nayllen held a great deal of power behind the scenes. He laid out everything, including his theories about the motive behind Nayllen's desire to recruit the Admiral.

Tyler finished with an apology for keeping it from her earlier. He explained how he thought he had now endangered her by involving her in the plot. She lay on her side facing him, her non-emotional face glowing in the sparse light. He watched her thinking about what he'd said but couldn't read her thoughts.

She looked directly at him, no emotion to betray her. "I need to sleep on this."

With that, she turned over and backed up next to him. He was too stunned for words, so he simply wrapped himself around her. His thoughts were a jumble of emotions, fear, and confusion, but having her next to him pushed those thoughts aside as they both fell to sleep.

* * * *

Although sleep came easily for Tyler, it was not restful. In his dreams, he stood within a big ring, the darkness only pierced by several overhead spotlights shining around him. Above him, he caught a glimpse of what appeared to be a trapeze, and around him, other circus equipment sat quietly. The lights kept moving, but within the darkness, Tyler heard nothing.

He was obviously in a circus, and it didn't feel like a dream. He looked down at himself, dressed in a red tuxedo with knee high black leather boots to finish off the ensemble. In his left hand, he held a large megaphone which he threw to the ground. He recognized the body as that of the *old* Tyler from Earth.

"Hello, is anyone there? Thosolan?" He imagined the friendly god appearing to help him through the mess he found himself in.

Only his own voice echoed back. Surely this was something Thosolan would do since Tyler had plenty of memories of the circus from when he was a child. Now, however, he was the ringmaster. So where was the god?

He began to think it really was only a dream, but it felt so real, and he felt so awake. He remembered everything about the night before: the casino, Nayllen, and confiding in Toosia.

A voice coming from every direction spoke. "It was a mistake telling her."

The voice was familiar, yet strange.

"Thosolan?" Tyler asked.

The voice replied. "Thosolan is not here ... only you and I."

Tyler was a spooked but found courage. "I know who I am, but who are you?" He demanded.

One of the spotlights swung around from behind to stop across the ring. The light rested on the opening of a dark portal. Loud circus music began to play, and Tyler covered his ears to block the absurd sound. It didn't work, it was just as loud.

Suddenly, a small car emerged from the portal with a clown at the wheel. The music played louder as the car rambled through the ring making its way towards Tyler. The clown appeared to be performing for some unknown crowd, waving, gesticulating, and clowning around.

The car stopped ten feet in front of Tyler, and the clown stepped out, falling to the ground with a look of surprise. It stood up in an exaggerated display of surprise, pulled up its oversized pants, and waddled to Tyler.

Tyler watched the charade patiently, waiting for the clown to reveal itself. When it spoke, it was the voice from the darkness.

"Howdy, Tyler, guess who I am?"

Tyler looked at the caricature and spotted something familiar. He looked through the thick make-up trying to piece together who was beneath it. It came slowly, but startled him nonetheless. He could clearly see the Admiral's face.

"What is this?" Tyler demanded. "Who are you?"

"At the moment, I am you. Or at least I am the person you have created on this world."

"What are you talking about? What world?"

"Poolto."

"Then, I am to believe you are Admiral Oslo on Poolto? Last time I checked, there isn't a circus. So where am I?" He became upset with the charade.

"Oh, you are on Poolto, but this is a fabrication I created so we could talk. Just me and you, or is it, you and you?" The clown laughed at the pun, and something chilled Tyler.

"Adanni!" He was certain it was the alien.

"Ah, the ring master speaks. Listen all who shall obey!"

Heavy sarcasm came through Adanni's voice.

“What do you want?” Tyler asked, desperately seeking a way out of the absurd prison. He pushed mentally, trying to force Adanni into his subconscious, but nothing worked.

“Wondering why it is not working?” Adanni asked. “Perhaps because I am in control here. Here, where you have exiled me!”

No mistaking the anger. Tyler was shaken by the revelation. Did Adanni control his unconscious dreams? Tyler didn’t think it possible.

“You better believe it is possible!” The clown looked directly at him, an angry gaze holding a great deal of menace despite the comical clown makeup. “I have worked quietly in this place, building my empire while you tried to destroy the one you control! I can keep you here as long as I want—as long as it takes to kill the body you are in.”

Tyler felt fear. “What? You can’t do that, I am making progress.”

“Progress?” The clown laughed. “Is that what you call it? You are on the brink of disaster and don’t even know it. I sense your fear—you’re totally out of your league.”

Tyler knew the alien was right, but that wasn’t what Tyler had meant.

“Ah,” the clown sighed, “you mean progress with that woman you are pretending to love. The Admiral’s wife?”

Tyler didn’t like the way Adanni made it sound like adultery. Maybe it was? Was he only pretending to love her or did he really love her?

“Right!” The clown jeered. “And I suppose you want to settle down and start a family or something just as ridiculous?”

“She can’t have children, but yes, I would like to settle down with her.” Tyler was livid. It was unfair Adanni could read every thought.

“Fat chance,” the clown mocked, “you are about to destroy yourself and her—if not the world. I have seen it all before, my friend, fallen hero, tragic endings, it is a classic tale played throughout the Universe since time began.”

“And I suppose you could prevent it, given the opportunity?” Tyler saw where this was heading, blackmail.

“Clever lad, but you spoil the offer.”

“What offer? To take over and exile me to this place?” Tyler knew he couldn’t trust this alien, even if it could help.

“Of course you don't trust me, as I don't trust you. But look at it this way, I control you here, and you control me there. As long as you need to sleep, I will be a regular part of your world whether you like it or not.”

“But, if the Admiral dies while you imprison me here, I will be released, and once again have control?” Tyler concluded.

“Yes ... something like that.” The clown conceded.

“Then, by all means, hold me here until I die, then we'll see what happens.”

The clown shot Tyler a dour look. “I don't want that same as you. Nonetheless, I am prepared to wage battle every night. It will take its toll. Is that what you want?”

Tyler thought about it, but didn't like the alternatives.

“How come I can't hear your thoughts?” Tyler was curious why Adanni had the upper hand.

“I have more experience than you do. Besides, it was I who gave you the Admiral's memories. Where would you be without them?”

“Fine, I admit you were helpful, so what do we do now?” Tyler wanted this over. He wanted to end it without giving too much away.

“Now, we negotiate for your life—as the Admiral.”

“I said fine,” Tyler replied, “what are your terms?”

“A truce, nothing more.” The clown replied.

Tyler scanned the Admiral's face buried beneath the grotesque mask but could read nothing. Well, he had to do something to get out of here. “Okay, what does that mean?” Tyler asked.

“It means I am no longer exiled to here. Instead, I am allowed to be a part of your life out there. I can observe, comment, and assist. I don't want control. I only want a piece of the action.”

Tyler felt confident he couldn't trust him, and the thought of having someone watching, commenting, and participating was disturbing.

“It's too much to ask. I cannot live with another voice within me.”

“Hogwash!” The clown retorted. “You live like that now. The Admiral's memories are not yours, and yet you let them live side by side with you—affecting your decisions and behaviors. What is the difference?”

Tyler went on the defensive. “It is a big difference, the Admiral is dead and you are not!”

“No matter, the end result is the same. Those are my terms, take them or leave them.” The clown stood stolidly, knowing he had Tyler on the ropes.

Tyler couldn't see any way out. He would either share his life with Adanni or be persecuted every night in his sleep. Tyler remembered his life as the drifting spirit, and he didn't relish returning there.

“Fine. I see I have no choice, so I agree. However, if I sense even a little exertion of your control on me, I will exile you permanently and remain a wandering spirit forever.” Tyler hoped he sounded threatening.

“Sure you would,” the clown replied, unconvinced, “whatever you say. Remember, I can hear all of your thoughts. You are transparent to me here and there. But I get your drift.”

“Good, as long as we are clear.” Tyler replied.

“Clear as your thoughts.” The clown agreed. “Now, if I am to have a part of this life of yours, I need to help you make it right.”

“Now, that wasn't part of the bargain.” Tyler argued. “You said observe, not make decisions!”

“Cool down, ‘Admiral’. I am here to help you out of the mess you seem genuinely destined to get yourself into. I can be of great assistance, as my wealth of experience is enormous.”

“Okay, I'm listening, what is your advice?” Tyler waited impatiently.

“Not now, my friend, up there when you are awake.”

“Fine, will you release me now, or must I wait for additional concessions?” Tyler was exasperated and wanted out of the three-ring prison.

“Don't look at me, just wake up!” the clown said.

Tyler thought about it and watched as the clown, the circus and the spotlights dissolved into his subconscious.

* * * *

Tyler woke restless in a dark room, where Toosia still laid beside him, fast asleep. He thought about the circus dream and Adanni. Was it real, or was it just a dream?

You bet it was real, and don't force me back down there!

Fine, fine, you can stay, but remember what I said, Tyler replied.

All Tyler heard was ‘*fine*’ in response.

Tyler checked the clock and saw he didn't need to get up for another two hours. After wrangling with Adanni all night, he no longer felt like sleep.

He slipped out of bed, donning a robe before quietly walking to the living area. He was happy to have Toosia close to him, but feared what he had told her. She was not a delicate woman and was better versed in politics than Tyler, but this was something entirely different than *ordinary* politics. He wanted to wake her and ask her advice, but he decided to let her sleep.

He sat down on one of the overstuffed chairs and turned on several screens to watch the latest news around Poolto. In his current mood, he truly felt like an alien on an alien world.

He watched several of his favorites shows, but somehow he wasn't getting the same thing out of them. He knew why. For all the celebrity the Admiral enjoyed, he was nothing more than a puppet of forces he didn't understand.

Before he'd come to Yooso, Tyler had thought of himself and the Admiral as a true force to reckon with, but now, that illusion had faded. Only days before, he had watched these programs with a mind towards helping the citizens of Poolto. Now, however, he realized he didn't even know them. How could he, he was just an alien pretending to be a hero.

Stop being melodramatic, there are worst things in this Universe—trust me.

Adanni's voice didn't help, it only aggravated his alienation. He'd become a *schizophrenic* alien.

Please ... I'm going to cry. It's no wonder you've screwed this up.

I've screwed it up? Like I had a choice! Tyler was angry from his accusations. He wasn't the one who wanted to be an Onyalum. He hadn't caused the accident.

Of course you had a choice! You chose to be the Admiral—you chose to live on his world—and you chose to take on the powers of this world! What did you think it would be like? You picked this world's National Hero, and now you say it wasn't your fault?

Tyler listened patiently his anger simmering. Of course he was to blame for getting caught in the Admiral's body. Sure, he could have avoided this world, skipped past the floundering ship and found another—another world that was peaceful, and simple. But was that what he had wanted?

Adanni interrupted his thoughts.

You never wanted simple, you wanted excitement! As I want excitement. I can read your past memories—I know what you did, and I know how you felt when you did it. You felt alive, spirited, and in control, even when you were not. Isn't that what you want?

Tyler had to admit, he missed many aspects of his previous life. Was it the never-ending parties he missed, or Linda? He wasn't sure, but as he recalled his past, he yearned for something to ease the tension he now felt. *Perhaps a small glass of one of the Admiral's finest vintages?*

Sure, escape, now that you've messed everything up. What do you think Toosia would say, you drinking so early in the morning?

Tyler tried to ignore the rebuke. *I do my best thinking after I have had a few drinks!* He tried to sound convincing, but even he saw the problem with drinking so early. Still ...

The alien wouldn't back down. *Shape up, we have work to do! You can have a drink later, when it is more appropriate. Remember, I feel the effects, too!*

A wicked thought crossed Tyler's mind, was that how he could suppress Adanni?

Don't bet on it. The alien warned.

Adanni's voice was steely cold, so Tyler pushed the thought aside.

Damn you, Adanni.

Listen up. You've put the Admiral in a very precarious position.

Gee, like I didn't know that! How was the obvious going to help?

You've got to meet with Nayllen and his party immediately.

So you're saying since I am already in it deep enough, why not go all the way?

No, what I am saying is that you need to know—must know—who is behind Nayllen. If it is a plot by the Imperial Palace, you need to know right away to appropriately plan a defense. Remember, the Admiral has a great deal of political clout, so he can always find a way out. However, without knowing what you are up against, you are steering blind.

And what if it is not a Palace plot? Tyler had the feeling something or someone else drove Nayllen.

Then, you must know that as well. Nayllen has a huge advantage over you, but you must find a way to overcome it. The Admiral's intelligence is clearly insufficient though not for trying.

At this point, nothing Marshall Sliss can do will help you—he is too far out of the loop and could make things worse. You are the only one who can get the intelligence we need!

Tyler thought about what Adanni was saying. The logic seemed true on the surface, but Tyler still struggled to trust him.

You seem to have put a lot of thought into this?

When you have nothing to do but observe from a distance, what else are you going to do? Adanni replied bitterly.

Point taken ... still, I am a little apprehensive about taking this further with Nayllen. He gave the Admiral more than a small threat, and based on his apparent resources, I believe him capable of anything. He definitely has resolve, but what motivates him is a mystery. I have to consider Toosia and her safety as well.

She is a big girl and can take care of herself. Still, you could always send her to the Estate in Tooland until things settle out.

Tyler thought about her leaving and felt a pang of pain at the prospect. Things were just beginning to change with her and he didn't want to jeopardize that based on his fears. After all, without her, what was the point?

She can stay for now, but I may have to send her off if things heat up.

Tyler hoped they would not.

“Nayllen?”

The voice from behind startled him. “Whaa ... oh, Toosia, sorry, you startled me.”

“What are you doing out here so early?” she asked.

“Just catching up on some news and thinking about ... things.” He tried sounding convincing. He really wanted that drink, regardless of what Toosia might think.

She looked at him through beautiful eyes, and the figure underneath her nightdress aroused his desire.

Stop it Tyler, keep control.

I say go for it, Adanni responded.

“May I join you?” she inquired quietly.

“Uh, oh ... sure, have a seat.”

She moved around the room and settled into another soft couch next to Tyler's. She sat down gently and pulled her legs up onto the couch while leaning against the arm rest. She held her head in her hands and leveled a concerned look his way. He felt embarrassed.

He fumbled with the remote but finally turned off the viewers. He wasn't sure why he was so nervous, they had just slept in the same bed. Still, he hadn't been in a relationship since Linda, and he felt like a teenager on his first date.

"Something is different about you, Nayllen. Something I can't put my finger on." She stared at him emotionless.

"Really?" He said surprised. "I don't know, I feel the same."

"Do you?" She smiled gently and looked down at Tyler's waist. Apparently the Admiral's body responded to her regardless of Tyler's nervousness. He didn't know how to respond to this obvious interest in her.

"Don't worry, Dear, I won't tell if you don't." Her smile turned mischievous, and Tyler felt the Admiral's body responding in kind.

"Tell? Oh, yes, tell." He was not handling it well and felt the fool. Thankfully, she took the lead standing up from the couch heading to the bedroom.

As her nightdress gently brushed her body, Tyler felt an intense desire overwhelming him. He had to have her, and he hoped desperately that this was what she wanted.

She stopped at the doorway, turning her head over her shoulders. "Are you coming?"

Tyler's heart beat in his chest—a marathon runner before the big race. He stood, watching as she slid her nightdress off before slipping into the darkness of the room beyond.

Tyler quickly followed, his arousal prominent. He closed the door quietly and slipped under the covers, nervous, excited, and feeling like he was nineteen. As he touched her skin, the colored lights danced in a procession of the parade that would soon follow. They matched the rhythmic pace of his own and together they lit the room with the glow of love.

* * * *

Tyler enjoyed his breakfast while scanning the notes his staff created in preparation for the final day at the conference. Today was the day the Vice Admiral would *unveil* his plan to the Supreme Military Command. According to rumor, it would be presented as the next plan of attack, blessed by the Imperial Palace, and therefore, not expecting objections.

The Admiral's staff was diligently recruiting Military Command members to their side, but it was still in favor of the

Vice Admiral. Consensus was the Admiral had lost face with the bitter defeat in his last battle. The losses had been high and the strategic advantage it bought was too low. Apparently, many held doubts the Admiral's abilities were still capable of leading them. They revered and respected him, but many now felt new blood and new ideas were needed.

There was little Tyler could do to prevent the vote of approval from the Supreme Military Command, so his only hope was to have his supporters change the tide with debates after the presentation. He had big guns on his side, and they could sway others who were still uncertain. However, the Vice Admiral was also heavily armed. The biggest being the Imperial Palace.

Supreme Military Command posts were allocated through the Imperial Palace, and Marshall Sliss had mentioned more than once that many inside the command were going to use this as an opportunity to move up in rank.

At what cost? Tyler thought.

Fools, all of them, Adanni interjected, *they'd sell their mothers for a buck. A phrase from your world, I believe. Very apt.*

Must I hear you so early in the morning? Tyler pleaded.

So early? Why it is late! Fortunate for you the conference starts late today. After last night, I am surprised you woke at all.

Tyler could almost hear a grin in Adanni's words. He had to admit, last night had been wonderful. He had left Toosia sleeping soundly when he'd got up. He felt more alive than he ever had. He, or the Admiral, or both truly loved her.

He finished his briefings and rose to leave. The Marshall had requested a short meeting before they entered the conference and had hand selected a private room for the occasion. Tyler figured he wanted to know about the meeting with Nayllen. After what Nayllen had shown him, he doubted the room the Marshall selected was as private as they wanted.

Nonetheless, he felt refreshed and ready to do battle. As he passed the hallway leading to his quarters, he heard Toosia call to him.

He stopped and waited for her to meet him. He smiled gently as her beauty brought back fresh memories of the night before.

"Yes, Dear, what is it? I must be going." He wanted to stay with her, but knew this day was too important.

"I just wanted to say goodbye, and thank you." She leaned casually against the wall.

“Oh, yes, goodbye, Toosia. I’ll be home late tonight, we have the big presentation today.” He knew she understood.

“Yes, I know, I hope all goes well.” She hesitated. “I wanted to tell you something else, but if you must leave, it can wait.”

“No, please tell me.” He figured he could spare another minute for her. Perhaps she would share something from her father?

“Oh, well, I ...” she stopped as if in concentration, or confusion, and the look didn’t suit her. Tyler wasn’t used to seeing emotion on Toosia’s face and it concerned him.

“Go on, dear, what did you want to tell me?” He tried not to sound impatient.

“I just wanted to say how happy I am we are back together.” She said it with a strange finality, but Tyler accepted it at face value.

“Me, too ... me, too.”

He kissed her gently on the cheek and said goodbye. He left her standing in the entryway, a gentle smile on her face, but a look of concern creasing her eyes.

* * * *

When Tyler arrived at the designated location, two smartly dressed soldiers stood on either side of the door. As he approached, they snapped to attention and saluted in unison. He returned the salute before entering.

The room was filled with a large table in the center like many of the conference rooms in this facility. This one, however, had multiple viewers lined around the room’s inner walls, much like the one Tyler had met Nayllen in.

Tyler knew the viewers were designed to allow those inside to see outside, but he wondered who was outside looking in. He casually scanned the room but couldn’t tell if any spy devices were being employed. The Admiral had limited memories of spy equipment. Apparently he’d left that work for others.

Even alone, the Marshall sat at a seat on the side of the table rather than at the head. Clearly the head of the table was for someone in command, like the Admiral. Tyler nodded to the Marshall and walked to the other end of the table, taking the requisite seat.

“Good morning, Goolen,” Tyler began, “what news brings me here?”

“Good morning, sir, I have some disturbing news I must share with you before the conference.”

Tyler watched as the Marshall fiddled with his device, obviously deciding which news to give him first.

“Yes, what is it, Marshall?” Tyler switched to the formal title, hoping to get the Marshall out of what looked like an embarrassing conundrum.

“Uh, yes, sir, well, I’ll start with news about the conference first.” Tyler was glad to see the Marshall stopped wavering in indecision and returned to his usual, authoritative military demeanor.

“We have heard this morning, from a reliable source, that Secretary Geern is switching his support to Vice Admiral Teesen.”

The Marshall stopped to let that sink in. Tyler reviewed the Admiral’s memories of Secretary Geern and was impressed by the man’s obvious skills. He had held many posts in the Supreme Military Command and was currently in charge of military installations.

It was not a powerful position, but a position that required quality skills as an administrator. It was often a position given to those who would never achieve true *command* status, but were still an invaluable asset. His advice and guidance over the years had served the Command well.

What was the motivation? He was nearing retirement age and had never shown interest in power or position before now. He had always been a strong supporter of the Admiral’s. He was even a close friend of the Admiral’s father before the war. It didn’t make sense, and Tyler said as much to the Marshall.

“I agree, but the source is very reliable.” The Marshall said.

“Okay, so what does the staff think?”

Tyler knew that the Marshall would have run it past most of the staff before meeting with the Admiral. The Marshall may be out of the loop, but he was still a powerful asset.

“After postulating many theories, we settled on blackmail.”

The Marshall delivered it with a cold, blank face.

“Vice Admiral Teesen blackmailing a Secretary of the Supreme Military Command? I hardly think that is probable.”

It didn’t sound possible to Tyler, how desperate was Teesen?

Very desperate. Adanni’s voice held a chill.

“We do not believe the Vice Admiral is the one perpetrating this, sir.”

“You don’t, then who?” Tyler knew who before he had finished the question.

“We believe Regent Sneerd is behind it. We recently discovered Secretary Geern has battled a gambling problem for most of his life. Apparently, he got into trouble with a local thug named Siir Noos, and this in turn compromised his position on the facilities funding committee for lucrative contracts. Siir Noos has a front company that is the sole provider of *chairs* for all military facilities.”

“Chairs?” Tyler was incredulous.

“Yes, sir, chairs.”

“What a tangled web we weave.” Tyler could just imagine Geern quietly trying to push for Siir’s company in the meetings. He would never have been suspected. Tyler thought back to his previous life, and the many drug users who got themselves into trouble. Fortunately for Tyler, he had never been involved in the enforcement end of the business, but he knew it could be bad. Blackmail was common.

But someone had suspected Geern, and used his weakness against him. It had to be Sneerd.

“Weave a *what, sir?*” the Marshal asked.

Tyler saw the confusion on the Marshall’s face and quickly remembered that spiders were not part of the Poolto ecosystem. They had a similar creature on this world, but they used forest materials to build traps, not webs.

“Oh, sorry, just an old saying my grandmother once used. Not sure what web means.” Tyler lied.

The Marshall let it pass and moved on.

“Apparently, the abuse of his position was mysteriously overlooked by the Accounting Office audits, and that is why we believe Sneerd is behind it. No one but the Palace could wield so much control of the Accounting Office.”

Except maybe Nayllen. Tyler let the thought pass and focused on what it meant to their efforts.

“Damage?” He asked it simply, knowing the Marshal would give it to him simply.

“I believe this will spell our defeat. He was a staunch supporter and his betrayal will pull many over to Teesen’s side. At best, we can expect only twenty percent of the Command to side with you.”

“Defeat, is that all?” Tyler said it with more sarcasm than he intended.

“Well, sir, no. The current buzz indicates those who side with you may no longer even openly debate in the conference. Instead, they may simply remain quiet and let the clear majority take over.”

Tyler thought the Marshall appeared awfully calm considering his career was nearing its end. Perhaps he was resigned to his fate? Perhaps the Admiral should be, too.

Nonsense, you can stop this, you must stop this!

How? What can I do to stop this? Tyler threw his frustration at Adanni.

Good, you'll need that anger. You must open the debate yourself by actively denouncing the plan. You must throw down the gauntlet and force them to openly choose sides. How many do you think will have the courage to choose against you to your face?

Eighty percent by current estimates. Tyler responded.

Funny, and I thought you were trying to save this world?

Fine, what do you think will happen? Tyler asked.

I think that many of the weak ones will fold under your pressure. If the Palace doesn't have a strong hold on them, they can still choose you without major ramifications. Loyalty is a strong bargaining chip, and you better start playing them if you don't want to be out of it today!

Why are you using so many sayings from my world? Tyler was curious about Adanni's choice of words.

When in Rome. Was the only response.

Tyler noticed a look of concern on the Marshall's face.

“Okay, Marshall,” he began, “I have some ideas for what we can do, but first tell me the other news.”

“Well, sir, I took the liberty of pursuing additional information about Nayllen Hooss.”

The Marshall stopped as if trying to read the Admiral's reaction. Tyler was certain he showed no reaction despite his real interest.

“Go on,” Tyler urged, “what did you find?”

“I contacted a source within the Palace,” he started, “a source that I usually never contact. However, I felt this was a particularly important issue that warranted a *deeper* investigation.”

The Marshall took a breath, once again searching for reactions Tyler refused to give him.

“My source reported Nayllen is a *necessary* evil to the Imperial Palace. Although he is welcomed and used by Regent Sneerd and the Emperor, the reality is no one trusts him.”

He took another breath before continuing.

“They even say he has contacts on Krildon that make him both valuable, for intelligence, but dangerous as a traitor.”

The Marshall finished with a look of great relief at sharing the dirty details. Unfortunately, it only confirmed what Nayllen had already told Tyler. However, it was interesting the Palace did not trust him, especially Regent Sneerd.

Perhaps this isn't an Imperial trap after all? Adanni interjected.

Perhaps not an 'Imperial' trap. Tyler corrected.

Adanni fell silent and Tyler noticed the Marshall fidgeted during the pauses with Adanni. Obviously, the Marshall didn't want the Admiral to have anything to do with Nayllen, but he deferred to the Admiral's position before offering this opinion. The Marshall finally broke the silence.

“Sir,” he said with hesitation, “do you intend on seeing Nayllen again?”

The look of concern on his face was genuine. Tyler could only imagine how desperate the Marshall was to know what had happened the night before.

“Marshall, I realize your concern is real and I know that you have been waiting patiently for me to share details of my meeting.” Tyler watched as his words took effect. “However, I feel that it may be dangerous for me to share details of the meeting with you.”

“But, sir,” the Marshall blurted sounding less than commanding, “I fear for your safety, especially if you sense danger.”

“I sense danger,” Tyler said in a calm and soothing voice, “but the danger I fear is for your safety.” He lied, but needed time to sort this out. He had a strong feeling Nayllen was listening to the conversation.

“I have never feared anything or anyone, especially a potential traitor.”

The Marshall put on his strongest military demeanor as he said this, and Tyler truly believed him. The Marshall had been in many campaigns with no signs of fear. His loyalty and dedication were remarkable.

Before the Admiral had met Marshall Sliss, it was rumored the Marshall, just a communications officer at the time, had left a fortified compound to adjust a faulty communication dish during a Krildon raid on a mining asteroid. His fearlessness had been noted

by his commander at the time, but no commendation was given to the young officer since the raid had been caused by a military blunder.

At the time, the Imperial Palace and the Supreme Military Command had hushed up the incident to hide serious flaws in the military so early in the war.

Not unlike today, Tyler thought, have they learned nothing since this started?

Of course not, they are as stubborn as they are stupid. Adanni finished Tyler's thoughts.

"Your courage is not in question. It is a thin line I walk with Nayllen and I must walk it alone. If things were to go bad, I, too, could be marked as a traitor. My *position* would likely save me from such a fate, but I fear you would not be spared."

Tyler thought it sounded convincing, but the look on the Marshall's face didn't match this conclusion.

"Sir, I would face any jury if it meant standing with you."

"I know," Tyler said, "that is why I must ask you to step back from this."

Tyler saw the pain and frustration it was causing the Marshall. The Admiral and the Marshall had been together a long time, and seeing the Admiral push him away was probably hard to accept. Tyler felt a pang of guilt.

"As you wish, sir." The Marshall finally conceded.

"Please, Goolen, I know what I am doing, and I know that I must do it alone." Tyler said it warmly, using the familiar first name of the Marshall. "I need you here, working with my staff to help us in our battle with Teesen."

The Marshall perked slightly.

"You have an idea, sir?" the Marshall asked.

"Yes, if you are finished sharing *great* news?"

The Marshall smiled at the remark. "Yes, sir, I am finished. What are you thinking?"

"Marshall, I believe it is time for us to mount an all out offensive. It is a do or die situation, and I do not intend on dying just yet."

Tyler put all of the Admiral's essence into the statement and watched the effect on the Marshall. Tyler couldn't tell what emotion showed on the Marshall's face, but he was willing to call it pride.

"Yes, sir, we are ready and willing."

Tyler outlined Adanni's plan to the Marshall who soaked it in quietly while jotting notes. He nodded throughout Tyler's narration of what was to surely be a historical moment in the Supreme Military Command, if not Poolto. When he finished, Tyler headed off to the conference while the Marshall headed back to brief the staff. The Marshall assured Tyler he would be at the conference in time for the showdown.

As Tyler made his way through the corridors, he thought about Nayllen and wondered when the man would try to make contact. If the Palace wasn't backing Nayllen, who was? He thought about what Nayllen had said about the Admiral's father. Was it all true, had the Admiral been named after this man?

Tyler had to concede the Admiral's childhood memories of Krildon did not contain much intrigue. It was easy to imagine the Admiral's parents were more than ambassadors to Krildon. But spies?

What a tangled web we weave. Adanni said.

Indeed. Tyler agreed.

The Admiral's Soliloquy

Tyler sat through the conference's administrative information with what he hoped was a look of interest. He knew his staff was already all over it, sorting, prioritizing, making contacts, and ensuring the Admiral had a part to play in the internal operations.

One of Vice Admiral Teesen's young officers was finishing his report, and Tyler couldn't help but think the man would have made a great addition to the Admiral's staff. Too bad he chose the wrong side. Like many who now stood beneath the Vice Admiral's banner, Tyler imagined the man had been bought with promises of power and promotion.

Was the Military really this superficial? Could loyalty simply be bought with promises of promotions?

Don't be stupid, they are no different than any other bureaucracy.

Adanni's admonition stung, but Tyler held his temper in check. He had to admit, his only experience with the military had been selling drugs to GIs from Camp Pendleton. It was lucrative, but it didn't really teach him about the military. At the time, he'd sort of thought of them as a joke. Who would want to live their life within such an orderly and controlling system?

He looked back through the Admiral's memories and realized the Admiral had likely been one of the few great leaders who had acquired his rank and position by his deeds rather than his connections and political affiliations. It was nothing short of a miracle that he'd survived the brandishing of his father as a traitor. Considering his lack of connections, his accomplishments must have been great to come away from the incident unscathed.

Tyler was beginning to see how little the Admiral really knew about the inner workings of this world. He had been a brilliant tactician, leader, and administrator, but he had lacked the knowledge necessary to

compete in the political arena. Tyler understood why he spent so much time off-world, and why he was quickly losing support in the upcoming battle. No one believed him capable of winning a political fight.

I'm not sure I can! Tyler complained inwardly.

Nonsense, just let out the Admiral in his full military glory. Adanni responded coldly. *Just focus your anger and fear at those who would betray you.*

Sure, sounds good on paper. Tyler replied.

Want me to do it? Adanni asked slyly.

No. Tyler was adamant about not giving up control.

Then, find a backbone and use it!

Adanni was right, Tyler needed to focus his energies on the task at hand and put aside his doubts. He brought his attention back to the conference as the young officer finished to a round of mild applause. Apparently everyone else was impressed.

At the other end of the table, Vice Admiral Teesen rose during the applause, a smug look on his face. "Thank you, Officer Troos, a brilliantly presented report."

The game is afoot, Tyler thought.

"Now," the Vice Admiral began, "we will adjourn for a short break before I present the current thinking on our next move in the war."

Well, that was it. They were down to the wire. He looked for the Marshall, but he had not returned. Tyler hoped he'd make it back shortly as he would want to hear *in-person* the unveiling of the Vice Admiral's plan.

Tyler went to fetch a drink, and spotted Regent Sneerd and Vice Admiral Teesen engaged in an intimate discussion. Without the Marshall at his side, Tyler felt out of his league.

Regent Sneerd lifted an eye towards the Admiral and showed little surprise at the cold stare Tyler was giving him. He barely stopped talking to give the Admiral a slight nod of his head. Tyler simply left the room.

"Admiral Oslo?" A voice called from behind a crowd of people waiting for refreshments. "Admiral Oslo?"

Tyler spotted the young soldier waving a piece of paper as he made his way through the throng, apologizing and saluting the impressive ranks he passed.

"Yes, what is it?" Tyler asked.

"An urgent call for you, sir," the soldier blurted, "you can take it in another room."

"Is it Grand Marshall Sliss?" Tyler was surprised to get a call from the Marshall.

"No, sir," the soldier replied, "the gentleman said you would know who it was."

The soldier had a look of confusion on his face. Tyler imagined some of it was awe at standing next to and talking with Poolto's hero.

Who could it be? Tyler wondered. Suddenly, it dawned on him, *Nayllen!*

"Oh, yes, I was expecting a call—please take me somewhere private to take it."

"Yes, sir." the soldier said crisply, the look of concern gone from his face.

The poor soldier must have been terrified to deliver an unknown caller to the Admiral. Tyler was surprised he had taken the call at all. What had Nayllen said to the young soldier to convince him?

Tyler was led to a small room down the corridor. The soldier showed him how to access the call before leaving quietly.

Tyler sat behind the small desk and turned the console towards him, away from the door. No need to share this with anyone who might walk in. He pushed the blinking button and watched as Nayllen's face popped onto the screen.

"Nayllen," Tyler lied, "how nice to see you so soon."

"Save it," Nayllen responded critically, "I know you are not happy to see me."

"Fine," Tyler agreed, "what do you want?"

"I want your answer." Nayllen said. "Will you meet with my associates?"

"Then, I will meet more than one?" Tyler queried.

"Perhaps," Nayllen responded nonchalantly, "perhaps not."

Nayllen looked bored. Tyler could imagine someone in his position wasn't accustomed to making routine calls. Better to have others pass notes.

Tyler steeled himself and thought about what Adanni had said. "Okay, where and when?"

"When is in two days," Nayllen replied, "and where is on the mining colony of the Siirneen asteroid."

Tyler was stunned! A casino was one thing, but a mining colony was too much. He said as much to Nayllen.

"Look, Admiral," Nayllen shot back coldly, "my associates and I know you will lose your power today, so what have you got to lose? The Vice Admiral's plan is as good as done, and you no longer have clout to demand anything from anyone."

"I am a National Hero—that carries some clout!" Tyler blurted before he could think about it.

It took Nayllen by surprise, but he quickly recovered. "Yes, I know, that is why you interest us."

That took Tyler by surprise. *What could they want with his celebrity?*

Careful, Tyler, he is very devious. Adanni warned.

I know, Tyler replied, *let me handle it!*

"Tell me why you want to meet with me and why it must be off-world!" Tyler demanded.

Nayllen had a momentary look of indecision, and Tyler thought he had pushed him too far, but he had to know more before he was willing to leave the planet—especially if he was to continue the fight with Teesen. Leaving now would spell disaster for any impetus they might gain after today's showdown.

"Very well, Admiral, I'll tell you something."

Tyler watched Nayllen's face turn colder. He had a brief image of him as an intelligence interrogator, grilling people for information, glee on his face. Tyler felt a chill.

"We have need of your position to help us stop this war. My associates believe it is possible to obtain a truce and we need your support to ensure it has a chance." Nayllen finished his begrudging admission and waited patiently for the Admiral to respond.

"And why off-world?" Tyler asked again.

"Security." Nayllen said simply.

Tyler didn't believe it, but he was willing to let it slide. They needed him to further their cause to end the war. Why? He could understand why they would want the National Hero to back them, but why did they want to end the war? It wasn't adding up.

"Considering your current position," Tyler began, "I do not see the motivation for ending the war. You seem to profit nicely."

Tyler let his counter sink in, knowing he gambled by pushing so hard. Still, he had to know what he was committing to. Once he was off-world, he would be powerless against them, not that he had much power on Poolto.

"My motivation is not your concern, but suffice it to say that even an old war monger such as myself does not see the value in destroying both worlds. There is always more profit in peace than in war, and I currently hold the upper hand for peacetime profits."

Tyler realized the man was right. With his connections on Krildon, he would have an instant network of trade between the two worlds before anyone else. In fact, he could even sell his network contacts to potential buyers, making money in multiple ways.

That could be a real motive, but something nagged at Tyler. After all, Nayllen was rich already. Was money really a motivator for someone with his wealth? Tyler didn't think so. The rich usually sought power, either through political office or by wielding economic strength. Perhaps that was the real motivation, an economic position that would wield power to influence both worlds.

"Fair enough, Nayllen, but you can imagine my concern for my family. I would be doing them no justice to take your word at face value."

"I agree." Nayllen replied. "In your shoes, I would do the same. However, I am not in your shoes. No more stalling, Admiral, take action."

Tyler didn't like the veiled threat, "And you can help me take action?"

"We will take action whether you participate or not. However, as I said before, if you do not participate, you may not like the actions we take."

"I get the picture and believe that much of your story."

"Very well," Nayllen said, "will you meet with us or not?"

Nayllen was getting impatient so Tyler decided to stop pushing.

"Yes, I will meet with you and your associates. How do I get there?"

"That is up to you, Admiral, but I would create some military pretense. Your position is crumbling, and your activities will be scrutinized."

"Fine, where do I go when I get there?" Tyler was certain Nayllen would say something to the effect that he would be contacted when he arrived. Nayllen surprised him.

"We will put you up at the Regional Governor's Mansion, at his request, and you should enjoy moderate comfort while there. The Governor will meet you at the space port, honor guard in tow, and escort you back to his Mansion. After that, we will organize a meeting."

Nayllen finished with an even greater look of boredom. He looked off to the side, but Tyler couldn't see who or what it was. Apparently someone spoke with him as he turned back to Tyler.

"That is all, Admiral. I'll see you on Siirneen in two days!"

Before Tyler could respond, the viewer went blank.

Great, now he was going to an Asteroid. He could only imagine the look of shock on the Marshall's face. They would need a pretense for going there, something that wouldn't take away from their efforts in Yooso. Even better, something that might bolster their efforts in Yooso.

Fat chance of that! Adanni scoffed.

Excuse me if I am wrong, but wasn't it you who said to pursue this? Tyler accused.

Yes, I do believe it was, Adanni said coldly, *but don't think I have everything planned out. Remember, I can only read your mind.*

Yes, I remember it all too well.

Tyler left the room and headed back to the conference. He helped himself to food and drink—choosing some of the wine provided. As he walked through the procession, he noticed everyone ignored him. They were polite when he walked past, but no one tried to engage him or meet his gaze.

Dead man walking. Tyler thought.

They are only scared for their own positions, Adanni countered, *that is why you may yet pull this off. Are you sure you don't want me to*

handle this? I have a great deal of experience in this type of situation. In fact, I once was a King on a world where ...

Please, Tyler stopped him, spare me your credentials. I'll handle it!

Suit yourself, you can't die, so no great matter. Toosia however ...

Tyler didn't like what Adanni implied, and he thought about Toosia and what she would think about his going off-world. It was a major reason for their marital strife, although not the only one. Tyler thought about Eyleeria and cringed. The Admiral had an affair with her for years, and since Tyler broke it off, she had remained eerily quiet and restrained. It scared Tyler a little, but he figured the Marshall had dealt with it behind the scenes.

As Tyler moved towards the conference table, he spotted Marshall Sliss in the corridor. He made his way towards the door as the Marshall signaled him into the corridor.

"Yes, what is it?" Tyler asked. "They are about to begin."

"I know, but I need to tell you what our staff came up with."

Tyler noted the Marshall had a note of confidence in his voice and Tyler imagined they had a plan that might work. Tyler didn't want to spoil the moment, so he held off telling the Marshall about Nayllen and the future off-world trip.

"Go on." Tyler urged.

"Well, sir, it will require you to denigrate yourself and the entire Supreme Military Command for the battle that nearly cost you your life."

Tyler thought about that but decided his reputation was already in question.

"A gamble, but continue."

"We believe if you were to condemn the last attempt at a major offensive, then you could adequately argue caution for the next one."

Tyler was following the train of logic but let the Marshall completely outline the plan of attack.

The Marshall caught his breath, clearly excited by the prospects. "If we urge caution, we can bog down the plan in committee meetings to review the overall plan. During those reviews, we can use the time to develop an alternative strategy while punching holes in theirs. We believe this line of attack may provide your supporters the opportunity to take action without directly rejecting the Vice Admiral's plan."

The Marshall finished, waiting eagerly for the Admiral to respond. Tyler was amused and satisfied to see the fight back in the Marshall's eyes. He had to admit, it might be what they needed to stall the offensive. In fact, it might even buy them the pretense to go off-world.

"My congratulations, Marshall, your plan may just work!"

"Don't congratulate me, sir, the staff came up with it on their own. I only acted as a sounding board. Officer Slaas deserves a lot of the credit."

I think Officer Slaas deserves a promotion. Tyler thought.

"Plan a party for them, Marshall, they deserve it!" Tyler was impressed with the Admiral's staff. They were clearly up to the challenges facing them.

"Yes, sir!"

Both headed into the conference just as the Vice Admiral was about to start. They took their seats calmly, nodding to the Vice Admiral to begin.

"Before I begin laying out our future plans, I would like to inform you we have a very special visitor who would like to sit in on these proceedings. Without undue delay, I would like to call you all to attention as I present our great leader of Poolto, Emperor Hallen Yooso IV."

Everyone stood at attention, including Tyler, as a small entourage of attendants entered the room clearing a way for the Emperor. The Emperor moved to the back of the room towards a table emptied for his arrival. Tyler noted the Emperor would not sit at the main table, clearly a political move intended to reinforce the Vice Admiral's new, albeit temporary, position.

"Revered Supreme Military Command," the Emperor formally opened, "I thank you for this opportunity to observe your plans for the future of our great planet. Our lives are in your capable hands, and we look forward to hearing how you will defeat our enemies."

With his usual, calm demeanor, the Emperor sat down waiting for the Vice Admiral. Everyone retook their seats, and Tyler cast a glance at the Marshall who was clearly concerned with the Emperor's presence. Tyler could imagine what went through the Marshall's mind. *Who would stand up for the Admiral with the Emperor next to Teesen?*

Tyler didn't care. They had a plan of attack, and Emperor or no Emperor, he had no choice but to execute it. As the Vice Admiral began, Tyler caught a glimpse of Regent Sneerd sitting next to the Emperor. Tyler thought he saw a grin on the Regent's face. Clearly, it was the Regent's idea to invite the Emperor.

"Distinguished guests," the Vice Admiral started, nodding towards the Emperor, "and distinguished colleagues, now is the time for our immediate action to end this war in victory."

Tyler was impressed with his start, the Vice Admiral was well coached.

* * * *

Vice Admiral Teesen spent nearly four hours outlining his plan. Tyler analyzed it using the Admiral's considerable experience and skills, and had to admit it was pretty good. However, it depended on too many *positive* assumptions that were based on questionable intelligence.

Overall, the plan was basically what Tyler and the Admiral's staff had expected with only a few minor surprises. Again, these surprises were based on *best-case* scenarios. Tyler watched the other members of the Command and hoped they saw the same flaws he did.

Several of the officers purportedly on the Admiral's side were taking furious notes during the presentation, and some even used their communication devices to confer with their staff. They were either preparing an offensive or simply preparing to execute the Vice Admiral's.

Those listening intently were already onboard with the plan. Tyler groaned inwardly at how many he counted.

Adanni tried to encourage him. *Don't lose hope. Your plan is still a good one, even with the Emperor here.*

Tyler wasn't sure he agreed with the assessment, but he began reviewing what he would say when the time presented itself. He knew he would have to turn over control to the Admiral's memories, allowing that lingering essence to dictate the speech and provide the forceful presence that was so commanding.

I am still willing to do it. Adanni said meekly.

Sounds like you already know my answer. Tyler countered.

Adanni fell silent, and Tyler hoped he would remain that way.

Tyler watched the Vice Admiral begin the summary of his plan and wondered if the Vice Admiral would be so bold as to deny questions and comments as protocol dictated.

The conference applauded loudly as the Vice Admiral finished, and Tyler and the Marshall joined in, although neither put forth much effort.

"Thank you," the Vice Admiral almost blushed from the attention, clearly pleased with himself, "thank you, all!"

Tyler noted both the Regent and the Emperor were smiling, feeling confident they'd backed the right horse. Tyler hoped they were wrong. He waited patiently for the applause to subside.

As everyone stopped clapping and began to talk among themselves, the Vice Admiral interrupted the chatter. "Honored colleagues, I beg your indulgence of a few minutes to refresh ourselves before we open the proceedings to questions and comments."

Tyler noted the Vice Admiral looked directly at him when he said this. Tyler didn't flinch or acknowledge the Vice Admiral at all. At least he was going to follow protocol. Tyler wondered if the Emperor would stay. He suspected his presence was intended for the official unveiling anyway.

Everyone milled around talking with each other, congratulating the Vice Admiral, or holding conferences with assistants. Tyler looked at the Marshall who clearly wanted to use the break time to talk.

Instead, Tyler got up and walked towards the other end of the table. The Vice Admiral was shaking hands with several members of the

Command who were in his pocket. The Vice Admiral smiled broadly and soaked in the attention being poured on him. Tyler assumed the Vice Admiral figured the post of Supreme Military Commander was his.

"Vice Admiral," Tyler started using his rank as a signal of his real position, "you and your staff are to be commended for such a wonderful presentation." Tyler saw how his lack of enthusiasm for the plan affected those standing around. Even the Emperor was suddenly interested in the conversation.

Don't worry, gentlemen, I am not going to start the battle just yet.

"Thank you, Admiral," the Vice Admiral responded, the smile fading from his face, "coming from you, it is a great compliment."

So the Vice Admiral will play it coolly.

"Yes," Tyler began again, "your attention to detail and strategic insights are truly to be commended." That much was true, but the overall plan, well that was yet to be seen.

"Thank you again, Admiral, you are most generous with your praise." The Vice Admiral bowed slightly as he said this.

"Yes, Admiral," the Emperor interjected, "great praise indeed. Is this to mean that you approve of ... his plan?"

Tyler thought the Emperor almost said our plan, but caught himself before he had.

Tyler bowed as the Emperor moved towards them, everyone followed suit. Tyler noted several younger officers moved away from what they saw as a pivotal engagement.

"Well, sir, I believe it has the making of a great offensive, but it may still be premature to endorse it fully."

Tyler watched as his words sunk in. It had zero effect on the Emperor. Tyler hated how unreadable the man was. Instead of reacting, he merely stared at Tyler as though measuring him.

"I see, then you intend on sharing your thoughts with us after the break?" the Emperor asked.

The gauntlet had been thrown down, and Tyler was now committed.

"I certainly will, your Eminence," Tyler agreed, "along with many other opinions I imagine. Something this big will surely draw a variety of thoughts from many on the Command."

Tyler said it loud enough so even those outside the conversation heard him. He hoped it would spur them to action, or at least an open backing of his plan to stall.

Tyler noticed how quiet the room had become with such a rare conversation between the two greatest men on Poolto.

Good, Tyler thought, let them see how I am not afraid to stand up for my convictions.

Easy, lad, don't push too hard. You don't want to steal your own thunder. Adanni cautioned.

"Very good, Admiral, that is why I am here, to see our Supreme Military Command at work. We look forward to your thoughts."

The Emperor turned abruptly to walk out of the room. Everyone bowed as he and his entourage swept silently into the corridor. Tyler knew the proceedings wouldn't begin until they returned. He hoped the Emperor wouldn't make them wait too long.

"Excuse me, Vice Admiral," Tyler said, "I need to attend to a few items before we restart."

Tyler didn't wait for a response and headed back towards the Marshall. Tyler thought he heard the Vice Admiral stutter something in response, and Tyler's quick dismissal of the Vice Admiral was not lost on the others.

The Vice Admiral does not carry the power in this room, Tyler grinned inwardly, the Emperor and his hero are the real power.

Don't get cocky, Adanni chastised, the battle has yet to begin.

Tyler ignored the rebuke and walked out of the room with the Marshall in tow.

* * * *

Before returning to the conference, Tyler and the Marshall walked through their plan of action. Tyler practiced some of the things he would say on the Marshall, who gave feedback. Tyler thought he would modify some of the statements, but keep others as he had originally planned. All in all, they felt remarkably confident as they headed back to the meeting.

On the way, Tyler was stopped by another soldier who held a message from Toosia. Tyler read it carefully before rejoining the Marshall. The note was simple:

Good luck, dear, the Marshall has made me aware of your plans. For what it is worth, I agree with your actions as does my father. I know you'll be late, but I am planning on an intimate dinner for the two of us when you get home.

Love, Toosia

Tyler erased the message and handed the device back to the soldier. He joined the Marshall as they returned to the conference. He thought about Toosia's note and warm feelings grew within him. At least he had a date to look forward to.

They entered the conference room late as the proceedings were already underway. Even the Emperor sat quietly watching the Vice Admiral.

"Ah, Admiral, sorry we couldn't wait for you," the Vice Admiral pleaded, "however we just began."

“Don’t worry,” Tyler said, “I apologize for my tardiness, I received a note from my wife.”

Tyler saw the Vice Admiral didn’t know how to respond to his reference to his wife. It was common knowledge around the Supreme Military Command that the Admiral and his wife had been apart for some time. Their appearance together was confusing to many in the room.

“Oh, good,” the Vice Admiral said clumsily, “well, then, we will continue. Secretary Doorn was just sharing with us his opinion of the offensive. Please continue, Secretary.” The Vice Admiral nodded to the man who started once again.

Tyler ignored Doorn’s comments as he already knew the Secretary was backing the Vice Admiral. In fact, it was rumored he had helped craft much of the plan.

The Admiral’s memories held admiration for Secretary Doorn. Apparently he had been a strong tactician when he was younger. Somewhere down the line, he had moved away from the Admiral’s viewpoints and sided with the Vice Admiral. Tyler couldn’t understand why, the Admiral had been responsible for most of the man’s promotions.

You stayed off-world too long, Admiral. Tyler thought.

Was Secretary Doorn also being blackmailed? Tyler wondered how many were directly beholden to the Imperial Palace for some reason or another.

The Secretary finished with applause, a look of satisfaction on the Vice Admiral’s face.

“Thank you, Secretary,” the Vice Admiral said, smiling, “who else would care to weigh in on this issue?”

Tyler noted a couple of his supporters raised their hands. *Good,* Tyler thought, *they are ready to fight.*

As the Vice Admiral was ready to acknowledge one of the Secretaries, Tyler interrupted by standing up.

“Excuse me, gentlemen,” he started, “if you would defer your questions, I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to express my views.”

Everyone nodded as their eyes darted between the Vice Admiral, Tyler, and the Emperor. Tyler didn’t wait for the Vice Admiral to recognize him before starting.

“As you all know, my previous experience has no equal in this room. I have won more battles than many of you have fought. However, many of you have fought along side me in those

victories, and you know too well how easily victory can turn to defeat.”

Tyler nodded to several who'd played pivotal roles in many of those battles.

“The Vice Admiral has presented us with nothing less than a brilliant offensive.” Tyler moved his arm towards the Vice Admiral in a show of acceptance. The Vice Admiral nodded, clearly troubled by the compliment bestowed upon him by his challenger.

Just wait, Vice Admiral, I'm getting to my objections.

“If it weren't for our current circumstances, I wouldn't hesitate in backing this plan.”

He paused to letting the words take effect.

Yes, gentlemen, I am openly not backing this plan.

“Instead, I must urge extreme caution before we proceed down this path. Like our previous offensive, we are excited by the prospects of catching our enemy off-guard. However, like our previous offensive, we could easily find defeat if we are not careful. I have always said an aggressive approach is one that will win a battle, but I am also a realist and must concede we lack adequate intelligence about our enemy.”

He stopped, watching as his clear slap in the face for everyone involved in the last offensive took effect. They knew a lack of intelligence was partly to blame for the failure. Some still suspected sabotage, but no one had anyone to point the finger at.

Nayllen, were you involved? The thought suddenly hit Tyler.

“We are the best and brightest of Poolto and we will not repeat our mistakes,” he gave them some relief from his stinging words, “instead, we will learn from them and work hard to ensure this plan succeeds! We will not let down our troops, our families, our planet, or our Emperor!”

Tyler put the full commanding presence of the Admiral into that last statement. Put them down, then rally them up, that was how you led. Now for the big surprise, Tyler thought, not even the Marshall knew about this. It was an enormous gamble, but one that might succeed.

You attract more bees with honey than vinegar, eh, Tyler? Adanni said slyly.

More pearls of wisdom from my world, Adanni? Tyler asked. *This time, you hit the nail on the head.*

Tyler waited for the group to calm down. The Vice Admiral looked concerned as did the Regent. Only the Emperor wore his usual calm demeanor.

As the members of the Command quieted, Tyler walked down towards the end of the table where the Vice Admiral sat. The Vice Admiral had a look of confusion on his face. In fact, everyone in the room was confused.

All the better, Tyler thought, *just wait till you hear the next bit of news!*

He stopped next to the Vice Admiral and turned to face the entire conference. The silence was eerie and everyone held their breath. Tyler imagined what went through their minds. Was the Admiral going to kick the Vice Admiral out and resume his position as Supreme Military Commander? Was he going to unveil his own plan?

Tyler waited, letting the tension build.

"Gentlemen," he began slowly and calmly, "I am no longer a young man, and I have seen far too many battles in my lifetime."

No one breathed.

"Like you, I want to see victory and an end to this war. It has become our life, our burden, and our pain."

He paused again to watch the effect of his words. Even the Emperor looked confused.

Here goes nothing!

"That is why I propose the following." He placed his right arm around the Vice Admiral's shoulder and spelled it out. "I am going to officially relinquish my position as Supreme Military Commander effective this moment. I am firmly backing Vice Admiral Teesen as my replacement, and hope the Imperial Palace will see fit to make my recommendation permanent."

The shock on their faces was immediate. He continued before they could respond. "I further propose that my new role within the Supreme Military Command will be to head up a commission to study, refine, and assist in the execution of the Vice Admiral's offensive plan."

The crowd was stunned. Even the Marshall's mouth hung open in dismay. "With the help of my distinguished colleagues, we will make every effort possible to quickly put this plan into action. We will use everything we have learned from our last offensive, to ensure success in this one."

He had them now! Who could stand up and say no to this proposal. Even the Emperor looked abashed. Sure, I'll give you the carrot, but I'll still hold the whip!

As if on cue, one of the Admiral's staunch supporters stood. "I'll second that motion and request to participate on that committee!"

Another Secretary joined the first. "I'll third that motion and also request to sit on the committee!"

The room erupted into a mix of applause, discussion, and clear confusion. He had taken away their power by giving it to them. He watched the Regent and the Emperor closely while people stood behind him congratulating the Vice Admiral. The Vice Admiral looked like a deer in headlights. Clearly, he had not expected anything like this.

As if reading Tyler's mind, the Emperor stood. The room fell silent as everyone retook their seats and waited for him to speak. He glanced at the Admiral with what Tyler thought was a look of admiration. It passed quickly as he turned to address the Command.

"Admiral," the Emperor turned back towards Tyler, "it is as though we share the same mind." He smiled, but it didn't look warm.

"I, too, believe that the Vice Admiral is the perfect replacement for your hard to fill position. I accept your resignation with deep regrets, but fully embrace your nomination for successor to take effect immediately. My staff will sort out the details later."

He smiled at the Vice Admiral who was lost in confusion. Tyler supposed he couldn't believe it was actually happening. No fight, no battle, just a quick nomination.

"As for your heading up the Commission," the Emperor paused to let the crowd catch up, like the Admiral, he also knew how to work it, "I whole heartily support the action and praise you for your foresight in ensuring we don't make the same mistakes as before."

Tyler wondered how much that hurt the Emperor to concede. Still, they had their puppet. Tyler guessed they would accept one victory even if it cost them another.

"Thank you, Emperor," Tyler responded, "I will serve on the Commission with the honor, loyalty, and integrity that I served with as your Supreme Military Commander." Tyler bowed in deference.

"I know you will." The Emperor said flatly before signaling his entourage to follow him out.

Everyone stood, bowing as their great leader left the conference. Apparently everything the Emperor had wanted was complete. The Vice Admiral stood up and tried to take charge of the ensuing chaos. Tyler smiled inside and walked back to his seat. The Marshall shot him a look of concern and pride. They would have much to do in the coming days.

You surprise me, Earth boy, Adanni praised, had I not been reading your thoughts, I would not have seen this coming.

Tyler accepted the praise without comment. Poolto would be buzzing tonight.

* * * *

The following day brought an onslaught of press conferences, media interviews, and meetings with Supreme Military Command staff. Tyler felt he'd handled them well, especially playing up his new role as a *consultant* to the Supreme Military Commander, Admiral Teesen. Of course, nothing was mentioned about the Commission he was heading to analyze and help execute the next offensive. That was highly classified information.

Once Tyler told Toosia about his resignation and new position, she accepted it gracefully. She wore her placid face, but Tyler believed he'd seen surprise twinkling within her eyes. He assured her his role in the military would slowly diminish after the next campaign. At that time, he promised, they would build a *normal* life together in Tooland. As always, she accepted these promises with grace and unnerving calm.

After surviving the multitude of press events, Tyler began building his new commission. Because he headed it, he had the final word on who would join. Despite this obvious power, he split the board in half between supporters of Admiral Oslo and those of Admiral Teesen. He maintained control to break gridlock should it occur.

All nominees accepted graciously and swore to uphold the virtues of the Military Code of Ethics. Tyler sensed they wanted an end to the war, but now that he had taking over the administrative aspects of the offensive, most were willing to entertain a more cautious approach.

Marshall Sliss and Admiral Osloo's staff accepted the change immediately and demonstrated their unwavering ability to organize, plan, and execute. Their efforts essentially led the Commission with Tyler providing his input.

They embraced their Admiral's resignation, although the Marshall reported disquieting rumors about careers and futures. Tyler nipped it in the bud by instructing Marshall Sliss to assure all the staff their military progression would not be hindered by a change in their leader's status. In fact, Tyler promised future positions of their choice, assuming they succeeded with the Commission.

It staved off their fears, and most returned their focus to the task at hand. Good thing for Tyler, the task was large and required administrative skills that surpassed that of Admiral Osloo. Tyler was again relieved to have Marshall Sliss and the Admiral's wonderful staff.

By the end of the day, they were well on their way to completing a fully functioning commission with a charter, agenda, and schedule nearly fleshed out. It was nothing short of a miracle, and had required a great deal of cooperation between all the staff in the Military Command. They even acquired special offices for the Commission located on the seventh floor below the military complex. It happened so rapidly, even Tyler had yet to see the new quarters. Everything fell into place and Tyler felt they were on track to preventing a would-be disaster.

He had several last minute issues to resolve before retiring to his quarters. The largest was getting field trials underway on several ships near completion. They would try to shorten the length of the trials, but he felt confident they couldn't be completed in less than six months. The Imperial Palace and the Supreme Military Commander would not be overjoyed with the news, but if they could convince the Commission to agree with the assessment, Teesen would have no choice but to back the plan.

Unfortunately, Tyler still needed an excuse for his trip to Siirneen. He dreaded meeting Nayllen and the associates, but he recognized the danger if he didn't. So far, a viable solution that wouldn't raise suspicions eluded him. He sat quietly in an empty conference room, racking his brain. Sadly, he couldn't rely on the Marshall since he wanted to remove the man from the threat Nayllen posed.

I have an idea, Adanni's voice offered quietly.

Tyler wasn't in the mood for Adanni yet he needed to resolve the issue. *Fine! Share.*

Tyler felt Adanni bristling from his clipped response, but he didn't care.

I see from the Admiral's memories there are many military installations throughout the asteroid belt. In the past, the Admiral has hosted meetings to discuss strategies with his commanders. Although they never met on Siirneen, it is as likely a place as any.

Tyler chewed on the suggestion. It made sense, but it was a meeting that was typically reserved for the Supreme Military Commander, not a Commissioner. How could he pull it off without looking like he was taking power from Admiral Teesen? The last thing he needed was for Admiral Teesen to be involved.

I've got it! A revelation came unbidden from the Admiral's memories. We can hold an administrative meeting with the second in command rather than commanders!

Tyler knew the second in command usually directed supplies and administrative matters for units. This freed commanders to deal with strategic operations, troop movements, and battle field tactics. *Perfect!*

Okay, Adanni agreed, what is your pretense?

My pretense? Tyler knew it was a good question, but he didn't have one prepared.

Adanni interrupted. *How about we plan the meetings around a logistics theme to validate the supply chain required for the offensive? It seems like a logical thing a commission might do.*

Tyler didn't want to admit it, but Adanni was on target. They had to validate the supply chain anyway, why not do it with the officers in the field? It would bypass the higher ranking officers that were in charge of units and regions, but it made sense to work it from the bottom up rather than the top down. After all, who had more to gain or lose than those on the front lines?

Perfect, Adanni, you may be useful yet!

Interesting, Adanni replied flatly, I was thinking the same thing about you.

Tyler left the conference room to track down the Marshall and get the new plans underway. He needed the meeting three days from now, but he had to be there in one. It was tight, but if anyone could pull it off, the Marshall could.

As he walked down the corridor, he thought about telling Toosia he was going off-world. He didn't relish the prospects but

had to face up to the task. His mind was filled with multiple ways to break the news to her, but everything seemed likely to undermine the progress they had made in their reunification. As he turned into the staff offices, he decided he would be direct and truthful.

* * * *

Telling Toosia turned out to be easy, getting her to stay behind, however, turned out to be impossible. It didn't help Eyleeria had to go as well. Tyler finally succumbed and agreed to take her. Deep down, he was glad she was coming despite the danger Nayllen presented. Toosia hadn't cared about Nayllen or the reasons why Tyler had to go—she simply insisted she join him.

The Marshall was just as difficult to convince to stay behind. In the end, Tyler had to plead with him to take charge of the Commission to keep it moving forward. Tyler convinced him he was the only one capable of making that happen. Finally, this plea to the Marshall's professionalism made him agree. However, he insisted sending Officer Slaas and Eyleeria in his place. Tyler agreed, although he wasn't in favor of Eyleeria. At least Officer Slaas was nearly as capable as the Marshall.

Tyler was surprised by the speed of their trip. Apparently, ranking military officers had access to the best transports available. In his case, the transport was a high speed reconnaissance ship outfitted for VIP transport. Tyler recognized the ship within the Admiral's memories. The Admiral had used them to travel off-world or between the flagship and other locations.

Even with the Admiral's memories, the speed surprised him. Nonetheless, he was happy if he got there quickly. Staring into the blackness of space reminded him of the loneliness he'd felt before taking over the Admiral. At least now he had Toosia by his side.

He was amazed at the size and appearance of the spaceport. It was incredibly clean and modern for being on an asteroid. Of course, it was the regional headquarters for nearly all the asteroid colonies, so appearances made sense.

The Admiral had never visited Siirneen, so Tyler wasn't sure what to expect. Many said the asteroid colonies controlled the war because they controlled much of the raw resources it required. The Admiral's memories underscored this fact as nearly every battle had been fought to protect a colony and the rich resources they

provided. Although some asteroids were strategic, most were an intricate link in the supply chain feeding the war effort.

Regional Governor Haal Niis, gave them a welcome befitting the Emperor. Although Tyler would have passed on the press conference, he donned his best face and gave a commanding speech to rally the spirits of those whose hard work in the mining operations were so critical. The applause was deafening, but Tyler took it calmly as befitting the National Hero.

The Governor even arranged a ceremony to present keys to the colony for the Admiral and Toosia. They accepted humbly, although Tyler was certain neither would ever return to Siirneen. It pleased the Governor, the press, and the crowd gathered to see such a prestigious celebrity. Tyler wasn't sure why, but he imagined the people would look more like miners, but they looked like everyone he'd seen in Yooso.

The Governor later admitted over seventy five percent of the inhabitants of Siirneen were actually corporate or government employees involved in the commercial and legal aspects of mining commerce. The mining operations had shrunk on Siirneen since the war began. The asteroid didn't contain the *proper* concentrations of the resources needed for the war effort so much of the operations had been moved to neighboring asteroids that better fit the profile. In fact, much of the Siirneen mining was now devoted to supplying the asteroid colonies themselves. Construction supplies and natural minerals used in food supplements were generally all that was produced on Siirneen.

Tyler was impressed as they drove through Siirneen in a small ground car with virtually no security to escort them. It surprised Tyler at first, but then he realized how tight the comings and goings of an asteroid colony were controlled. He was certain no elements on the asteroid would want to harm Poolto's National Hero. *Except maybe Nayllen.*

The thought dampened Tyler's mood, but it lifted again as he watched the city of Siirneen pass by out the window. If he hadn't known he was on an asteroid, he wouldn't be able to tell Siirneen from any other city on Poolto. It was magnificent with towering buildings beneath a false sunny sky projected on the protective dome. It was a truly monumental accomplishment and Tyler said as much to the Governor. The Governor accepted the compliment and began reciting the many outdoor activities the city boasted.

Tyler sensed the excitement in the Governor's voice and understood why this man was Governor for so many years. Most in a powerful position such as his would covet positions back on Poolto, but apparently this man refused such posts. He claimed to enjoy the freedom of space and the challenges presented within an asteroid belt. Tyler guessed the man was an adventurer, a person who liked the great *frontier*.

Like so many Governors, the Marshall informed Tyler the man was a relative of the Emperor's. It was one reason for his position despite the fact the relationship was distant. Tyler thought *distance* might be why the Governor was willing to associate with Nayllen. He could definitely see the advantages to the colonies if the war ended. Although they would lose a substantial amount of business directed to the war effort, they would also stop suffering the tremendous losses often accompanying a raid or battle. Tyler looked at the Governor with renewed interest as the man recounted the hundred or so cafes that catered to the varied tastes of the city's inhabitants.

Toosia was as gracious as ever and clearly had the man enamored. She kept the conversation going while Tyler watched the sights and thought about his upcoming meeting. He still hadn't told the Marshall about it, although he now suspected the man had figured something was going on besides the Logistics Conference. Tyler didn't like deceiving the Marshall, but he wanted to protect him from whatever harm might result from the meeting. A chill ran down Tyler's spine as he thought about it.

He looked at Toosia and smiled. She returned his smile and turned back to the Governor's commentary. He hoped her safety was not in jeopardy.

* * * *

With help from the Governor's staff, they settled into their extravagant quarters within the Governor's mansion. Tyler believed it would be more accurate to call it a Palace. The Admiral's memories confirmed Regional Governors lived posh lifestyles. Being an extension of the Imperial Palace, this made sense. However, it was in stark contrast with the functional, military style the Admiral was accustomed to.

The elegance and decadence took Tyler's breath away. On Earth, he'd never known anyone who had lived so well. Even the

posh estate at Tooland paled in comparison to the richly adorned walls and ceilings that surrounded them.

Toosia was not impressed by the extravagance, but then her life in Yooso was rubbing elbows with the rich and powerful. He supposed this was nothing more than she had seen elsewhere, either at the Palace or through Council functions. Her father regularly attended great balls, and Tyler was certain Toosia did too.

He watched her change out of her traveling clothes and slip on an elegant, but simple gown for the dinner. She was beautiful, and Tyler felt himself blush. At that moment, Toosia noticed his attention and also blushed.

“Nayllen, please, we must get ready for dinner.” She pleaded.

“I know, I know, it’s just seeing you looking so peaceful and beautiful ... well, I don’t know, I guess it turns me on.”

She smiled but continued blushing.

“Sorry, Toosia, I guess the stress has affected me.”

She didn’t respond as she stood up and moved towards him. He felt excited by her closeness and watched as her skin reacted with a swirl of colors. He didn’t know why, but she looked even more radiant than usual. This made him even more excited.

“Toosia, I ...” She stopped him with a finger to his mouth.

She stepped back and gently removed her gown, letting it fall to the floor around her ankles. She was radiant. Her naked body, filled with the colorful lights of their shared excitement, moved towards the bed, beckoning him to join her.

He was under a spell but quickly removed his clothing and slipped under the covers to join her. Between the heat of their bodies and the dance of colors on their skin, Tyler was certain the bedding would catch fire. It wouldn’t have mattered—he was swept away in the flames of their passion.

* * * *

Both lay quiet, exhausted from their love. He could not remember feeling this way with Linda, but he couldn’t tell how much was his desire and how much was that of the Admiral. Despite this conundrum, he was happy to be a part of it.

Toosia rolled towards him and placed her arm across his chest, snuggling into the crook of his arm. It felt good to hold her.

“Nayllen?” Toosia broke the silence.

"Yes?" He replied.

"I have to tell you something but I don't know if this is a good time or not." She stopped, confusion wrinkling her face.

He brushed her hair aside and pulled her close. "I'm sure now is a fine time. We are alone after all."

"I know, I know," she agreed, "it's just ... well, it's just that it is something I should have told you a long time ago."

Suddenly, Tyler's curiosity was piqued as he felt a twinge of concern.

"Okay," he replied, "I am sure whatever it is, you had your reasons for waiting."

He let his words hang patiently even though he was beginning to churn inside. What could it be? An affair? Health problems? Too many bad things came to mind, and he desperately tried to shut them out.

Her look of concern deepened, and she appeared locked in indecision. Tyler stroked her shoulders and moved another lock of hair away from her eyes. As he did so, he noticed a small tear running down her cheek. She tried to hide it but was unsuccessful while wrapped in his arms.

"What is it, honey?" He asked, no longer hiding his concern. "Please, tell me."

She found an inner resolve and broke away from him, wiping the tears from her cheeks. She sat against the headboard and folded her hands in her lap. Tyler's mood sank as he realized this was going to be bad. He pushed onto his right elbow and tried to appear casual.

"Nayllen, I don't know how or why, but ... but I am pregnant."

As if relieved to rid herself of this burden, a new stream of tears fell from her eyes. It took Tyler several minutes to comprehend what she'd said. *Pregnant?*

I believe that is what she said. Adanni replied.

You keep out of this, Adanni—just stay quiet!

Adanni must have taken Tyler's threat serious as his voice remained silent.

"Pregnant?" Tyler exclaimed, a race of emotions running through him. "Did you say pregnant?"

She wiped her eyes, but turned to look directly at him. "Yes, I am pregnant with your child!"

She almost sounded angry, but Tyler thought her emotions were probably affecting her speech.

"How?" It was all he could think of.

"I don't know," she sobbed, "the doctors are just as mystified. They had told me it was not possible."

The Admiral's memories confirmed this. Years before, she had been diagnosed as unable to bear children, not even through artificial means. It was the wedge that had driven her and the Admiral apart. Her pain at not being able to conceive and the Admiral's inability to deal with it had made them strangers. Tyler understood why she was so emotional.

"That is wonderful," Tyler admitted, more than surprised at his own reaction, "who cares what the doctors say—they are obviously wrong."

His approval of the situation was all she needed for a fresh round of tears. She leaned over and grabbed him so tight he could hardly breathe. He held her quietly and let her sobbing run its course. Finally, she sat up and with a grim expression.

"You are happy, Nayllen, aren't you?"

"Of course I am," he said, "is there anything that might prevent this from ...", he didn't know how to say it, "... happening?" He thought about their trip through space and grew concerned.

"No," she confirmed, "nothing." She looked down at him, her eyes dry. "They say it is the healthiest pregnancy they've ever seen."

"Was it safe to come here," he asked, "I mean in space?"

"Yes, Nayllen, I wouldn't have done anything to jeopardize our child. I checked with the doctors first, and they said it was fine."

"Oh," he sighed with relief, "how long have you been pregnant?"

"Two months now." She said flatly.

What? Tyler's mind was reeling. Two months, but they had just made love the other day? But she had said it was his child. Suddenly, Tyler realized it couldn't be his child.

"Wait a minute," he accused, "we just made love two days ago for the first time in ... I don't know how many years. How can it be mine?"

"Oh, fine!" She screamed. "And I love you, too!"

Her reaction caught Tyler off-guard. "Wha ... ?"

"I suppose you don't remember Tooland?" She chided.

"Tooland? But we never ..." suddenly he remembered that first time she'd arrived in Tooland. He also remembered the night

before when he had dreamed about them together. "That was real?" He asked confused.

"Oh, thank you very much." She spat sarcastically.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," the picture was starting to become clear, "you came to me that night ... in my bed, right?"

"Yes."

She sounded hurt. "I am sorry, Toosia, I drank a lot of wine that night, and I really thought it was a dream."

She softened slightly. "Oh, I see." Confusion replaced her tears. "I suppose I didn't exactly make it seem more real after that night—you know, being standoffish?"

"Well ..." He struggled for a response.

"I know, I know," she said, "I understand why you might have thought it was a dream. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry," he corrected, "it was my fault. I guess I just couldn't let myself believe you wanted me back."

"After I found out I was pregnant," she said, "I had a hard time telling you. I wasn't sure where we were going and I didn't want to ruin what we had started."

The admission was obviously hard for her. She must have felt vulnerable.

"It's fine, Toosia, really. I am happy." He grabbed her and held her tight, bringing forth a fresh stream down her face. He held her and thought about his meeting with Nayllen. How was this going to affect his ability to negotiate? Now he had an unborn child to worry about.

* * * *

Considering the Admiral's celebrity, the dinner at the Governor's Palace was intimate. The guest list included several prominent business leaders, the mayor of Siirneen, some governmental bureaucrats, and the Military Commander of the Siirneen Command Post.

Tyler found no memory of the Commander in the Admiral's past, but he knew the Siirneen command was predominantly ceremonial rather than strategic. Based on this, he assumed the Commander was directly connected to the Imperial Palace. The Governor confirmed it when he introduced the man as a distant cousin.

Tyler was impressed with the food and entertainment. A small orchestra played after dinner and put on a unique and strangely hypnotic performance of an ancient opera rumored to be twenty-five hundred years old. Tyler enjoyed the more primitive sound that added to the emotion and drama. Unfortunately, the language was an ancient dialect, and even the Admiral's vast knowledge of history didn't provide a translation. Nonetheless, Tyler thought it a wonderful performance. Toosia agreed.

Throughout dinner, Tyler had trouble focusing on the conversations around him. More than once, he had to request the speaker ask the question again, or repeat some fact he had missed. He knew it made him appear rude, but thankfully, Toosia came to his rescue by talking about the day-to-day stress of the war, especially after his injuries months before. Everyone nodded with understanding, and Tyler squeezed Toosia's hand in appreciation.

After the final act of the opera, the party enjoyed a marvelous dessert served with cordials. Tyler was impressed the asteroid colony was capable of putting on such a grand affair, especially during war. He found it remarkable how much Poolto culture was alive and well on the *frontier*.

Five hours ticked away, and the dinner party began to wind down. He and Toosia made the rounds saying goodbye before heading back towards their quarters. They were stopped at the entrance to the large dining room by the Governor.

"Admiral Osloo and Toosia," he said warmly, "I am so thankful I had the opportunity to show you my hospitality and gratitude for choosing Siirneen for your conference."

He held out his hands to shake theirs.

"Please, Governor," Toosia responded graciously, "it is we who are to thank you for such a wonderful reception."

"Yes, Governor," Tyler added, "we are truly in your debt for such an elegant evening."

"Yes, well, I am pleased you both enjoyed it. Umm, Admiral, I was hoping that I might have a private word with you before you retire for the evening?" Tyler saw discomfort in the Governor's request. "That is if it is all right with you, my Lady?"

My lady? Tyler had to admit, that man was a politician. He watched Toosia for a reaction, but she merely smiled and nodded her head towards the Governor.

"Of course, Governor, he is at your disposal." She replied.

“Oh, good, I’ll try not keep him long.” the Governor signaled to an attendant across the room. “One of my staff will escort you back to your quarters, my Lady.”

The Governor whispered instructions to the attendant who bowed slightly before offering his arm to Toosia. She took it gracefully, and with a smile and nod, she was escorted back to their quarters.

“Excuse me, Admiral, I must see the last of my guests out before we can go somewhere ... more private.”

Tyler nodded and took a seat in one of the overstuffed chairs surrounding the interior of the dining room. As Tyler waited, he admired the intricate details of the room’s elegant design. It was a rectangular room with two large entrances at either end. One led to the front entrance of the Palace while the other led to the interior corridors and quarters. Tyler sat near the interior entrance staring across at the few remaining guests speaking to the Governor.

In the middle of the room was the enormous table seating as many as a hundred people comfortably. It had been downsized for the more intimate affair which Tyler estimated was attended by forty to fifty people.

Another set of double doors blended into the wall on the left-hand side for staff access to the kitchen. Currently, the doors were closed while the staff waited for everyone to leave.

On the right-hand side of the room, the floor and walls were cleared to make room for the small orchestra. The musician’s chairs were arranged in a semi-circular pattern facing the main table while in the front, a small podium was centered for the conductor. Others were placed on either side of the musicians for the singers.

Tyler could only remember one other formal orchestra he’d seen. Linda had taken him to it early in their relationship using her family’s season tickets to one of the fall debuts. Although Tyler hadn’t liked it at the time, he saw a great deal of similarities between tonight’s performance and the one they’d seen in Los Angeles. The one on Earth had not been an opera, but the orchestral arrangement was very similar—hypnotic and ethereal.

Tyler thought about how much of this world was similar to Earth. Different creators and different species, and yet, there seemed little more variety. Love, pain, greed, and war were common themes on both worlds, and he wondered if everything in the Universe evolved along similar lines.

He watched the Governor try to bid goodnight to the last of the guests. A party of four seemed bent on discussing some matters before leaving. Tyler noted the Governor, always gracious, listened patiently to each in turn. He smiled unperturbed, although Tyler knew he wanted them gone.

Tyler grinned thinking of all the media events he'd been to since becoming the Admiral. He looked back on it all and was amazed he'd pulled it off ... so far.

Adanni broke into his reverie. *The hard part is yet to come, my friend.*

I know, Tyler replied, *please don't interrupt too much.*

Fine, but I will let you know when something doesn't sound right!

Okay. Tyler said a bit angry with the intrusion.

Tyler stared across the room as the Governor finally got the guests out the door. He walked back towards Tyler, signaling the staff as he went. He was giving directions for the cleanup.

"Sorry for the delay," the Governor apologized, "sometimes my guests are a bit ambitious when they see an opportunity to have my ear, one-on-one."

"I understand, Governor." Tyler assured him.

"Good, well, then let's retire to somewhere more intimate and have that talk."

The Governor led him out through the entrance to the interior part of the Palace and down several corridors before stopping in front of what looked like a lift. The Governor did something Tyler couldn't see, and the door opened with a whoosh.

"Just a short lift there." The Governor assured him.

As the doors closed, he felt the elevator descend. He noted even the interior of the elevator was ornately trimmed. In the back, a large painting Tyler guessed was quite old dominated the cramped interior.

It finally came to a stop at what Tyler estimated was at least five stories beneath the Palace. Clearly, this place was larger than it appeared. Tyler wondered how much sat beneath the upper building. Their quarters were on the main floor, but the Governor's quarters probably were not.

The man extended his arm to usher Tyler out.

"Welcome to where I really work, Admiral."

Tyler noticed the corridor appeared no different than the ones on the main floor. It stretched into the distance before ending at a left turn. Tyler saw no breaks in the walls to indicate doorways.

The Governor continued his commentary as they walked down the long corridor. "We are currently seven floors beneath the main Palace in what I refer to as my office. However, it is really a bunker of sorts. You see, this area was built after the start of the war when raids on the colonies were quite common. This bunker was carved underneath the existing Palace through what is nearly solid iron. I've been told this area can withstand everything but a direct atomic blast. Thankfully, I have only used it once as a bunker, and that turned out to be a false alarm."

They turned the corner at the end of the corridor and walked through another long stretch. Thankfully, this one had a door at the end of it.

"Very impressive, Governor," Tyler admitted, "do you work here everyday?"

"Yes, assuming I'm not out on official business. I had most of my business equipment and communications put here so I could continue my duties, even while under attack."

Tyler couldn't imagine working underground everyday. He supposed it was no different than the Supreme Military Command complex, but somehow it seemed more cramped. Ironically, the feeling was probably due to the lack of people. The lighting was nearly identical.

They reached the door, entering an enormous circular room. On the opposite side of the room, Tyler saw another doorway leading into what must of have been the rest of the facility. He guessed the room measured a hundred feet across with walls rising thirty feet overhead. They met at a domed roof rising higher by at least another twenty. Tyler doubted anyone felt claustrophobic in this room.

On their left, a large table dominated, curved to match the contour of the wall behind it. Tyler assumed this was the Governor's desk. It was large enough to sleep four or five people on its top.

Moving inwards from the outer walls, the floor sank several feet to an area filled with couches, chairs, desks, and small tables. It was rather luxurious and meant for entertaining or meeting people.

Adorning the right-hand wall, if you could call it that, a series of ten viewers ranging in various sizes filled the space from floor to ceiling. It reminded Tyler of his room back at Tooland, but the scale was noticeably different.

The light in the room was soft and emanated from various places on the wall and ceiling. Tyler stared at the overhead dome and series of wedge shaped murals covering most of the interior space. They were intricately painted, and each pie shaped wedge depicted an entirely different scene. As far as Tyler could tell, they were of the asteroid colony in various stages of development.

"Wonderful, isn't it?" The Governor asked, looking up with Tyler.

"Yes," Tyler agreed, "is it a depiction of Siirneen's history?"

"No, although one of the panels is." The Governor replied. "It is a depiction of each of the regional asteroid colonies when they were founded."

Tyler counted seventeen pictures, but the Governor pointed out two of them on the right side of the dome. "Those two were captured many years ago and are under Krildon control."

Tyler didn't recognize them, but then the Admiral had cared little for the particulars of asteroids and focused more on regions within the asteroid belt.

The Governor continued. "You'll notice each panel ends in the center at the bright round orb representing our sun." Tyler looked at the sun. The golden orb appeared to be made out of gold. "The panels are laid out in their respective positions within the asteroid belt just as you would see it from a distant perspective."

Tyler was impressed and had no doubt that was the idea.

The Governor finally finished. "It was created for me by an artist I had known on Poolto. He is no longer alive, but his work will live on for eternity. It took him over five months to complete it ... by himself."

"Truly remarkable." Tyler agreed.

The Governor ushered Tyler to one of the chairs in the center of the room. Tyler chose a particularly comfortable chair and sat down. Might as well be comfortable. The Governor moved across the room to a bar.

"Would you care for a nightcap, Admiral?" The Governor offered. "I have an exquisite brandy actually made from fruit from your Tooland Estate."

Although Tyler had plenty of wine with dinner, the soothing effects of the alcohol made him want more. "Please." He accepted.

The Governor poured two large glasses of brandy and brought them back to the center of the room. The Governor handed one to Tyler and took the other with him as he took a seat on an overstuffed couch. Tyler lifted his glass to the Governor before taking a large drink. He felt the warming of the drink in his mouth, and plucked out tremendous flavors as he swished it around. Tooland came through once again.

"Well, Governor, what did you want to see me about?" Tyler asked.

"Well, it is not just me who wishes to speak with you," the Governor began before someone interrupted him from the door. It was Nayllen Hooss.

"Ah, Governor, you and the Admiral are here and ready to begin. Wonderful!" Nayllen sounded genuinely happy, and Tyler didn't think it suited the man.

The Governor rose from his seat and walked back to the bar. "The usual, Nayllen?" He asked peremptorily.

Nayllen nodded as he sat down on Tyler's left-hand side.

"Admiral, so glad you made it." He said it matter-of-fact as if Tyler had a choice. "Such a wonderful reason you employed to get here. I doubt anyone was suspicious, except maybe the Marshall." He concluded.

"Of course." Tyler agreed, remaining calm. At this point, he just wanted the meeting over.

Patience, my friend, patience. Adanni cautioned.

Considering how much Tyler drank, he was ready to be patient but felt emboldened. He took another sip to steel himself.

The Governor delivered a glass to a table next to Nayllen before resuming his seat on the couch.

"Well, now," Nayllen began, "I must start by saying you surprised us all with your resignation, Admiral. It was not the action we were hoping for, but considering the corner you'd been backed into, it was a brilliant move."

Action you hoped for? Tyler thought. It made him nervous.

"And what action did you hope for, Nayllen?" He asked boldly.

"Well, there were many possibilities, of course, but let's just say yours was ... well, unexpected."

Tyler was unnerved by his lack of answers. Anger simmered below the surface.

Easy, killer, easy. Adanni cautioned quietly. *Remember, he is a very dangerous man.*

Tyler agreed and let his anger simmer.

“Anyway,” Nayllen started again, “that is not exactly why we are here. We are here to discuss our need for your assistance in ending this war.”

Tyler saw the Governor nod his head in agreement while remaining quiet. Tyler wondered how the man fit into this scheme.

“Fine,” Tyler said coldly, “I am here, so what is it you want from me?”

Nayllen took a moment to survey Tyler before responding. “Why nothing less than the Supreme Military Command Codes for disabling all fleet ships.”

Tyler was amazed at how casual Nayllen had said it, as though it were no small matter, like borrowing money.

Tyler tried to remain cool. “I am surprised with your connections you don’t already have them.”

“I, too, am surprised,” Nayllen admitted, “but they are the one thing I have never been able to get my hands on. Not even the Emperor has access to them.”

Tyler knew from the Admiral’s memories only the Supreme Military Commander possessed the Codes. They were originally established to prevent two possible things from happening. First, they were designed to prevent a mutiny from within the military or a take over by the Imperial Palace. Second, they were designed to prevent the use of their own ships in the event they were captured by the enemy. From the Admiral’s recollections, the Codes had never been used before.

“Didn’t you hear?” Tyler said sarcastically. “I am no longer the Supreme Military Commander.”

“Indeed, that is why your actions were not what we were hoping for. However, all is not lost. It will be some time before the official turn over takes place, so we still have time.” Nayllen looked directly at Tyler, a smug look on his face.

“Assuming I ignore the fact that this is the most traitorous action I could take, why would I turn them over to you, and how will that help you win the war?” Tyler was curious where this was headed.

“Fine questions,” Nayllen agreed, “but I am not sure you really have a choice.”

Tyler once again felt his anger build. "So it is threats then, is it?" He barely contained his emotions as he said it.

"Threats, my good Admiral?" Nayllen responded. "I won't need threats after you meet with my associates."

Tyler was confused, he had assumed the associates had been the Governor, but apparently others were involved in this conspiracy.

"I see, and when will I meet these associates?" He asked racking his brain for some logical choice of who it could be. A Council member? Could be, rumors indicated many were tiring of the war effort. He thought about Toosia's father and wondered if he were involved.

"In due time, Admiral, they haven't arrived just yet."

Tyler wasn't reassured. "Okay, then while we wait you can explain to me how the Codes will help you win the war?"

"Win the war?" Nayllen said in mock surprise. "Whoever said anything about winning the war? I merely said stop it."

Nayllen's obfuscation wore thin on Tyler, and he barely held his anger in check.

You really shouldn't drink in these situations, Tyler, you have far too much repressed anger within you.

Tyler ignored the alien's commentary and stared at Nayllen, waiting for the man to reveal more. At this point, Tyler didn't like how the proceedings were going. Nayllen was obtuse while painting a picture that sounded as though it would include the end of the Admiral.

As if reading his mind, Nayllen spoke up. "You are correct to be concerned about your situation, Admiral—this may turn out badly for you regardless of whether you join us."

Tyler couldn't believe he was hearing this admission. "Then, tell me why I should do it!" He demanded.

"Well, I am afraid the alternative could be far worse."

Again with the threats. "What do you need the Command Codes for?" Tyler demanded.

"To stop the fleet, of course."

Tyler was amazed at how calm Nayllen remained when he said these things. How cold and calculating was he? Tyler once again doubted the Admiral was named after this person. At least he hoped he hadn't.

"Of course, and that will stop the war because Krildon will be able to just walk in and declare victory." Tyler knew his voice held

an edge of anger, but he didn't care at this point. Clearly, these men were crazy as well as dangerous.

Nayllen's emotions didn't falter. "Admiral, I am surprised at you. You see everything from such a narrow, military point of view. Very limiting."

Tyler snorted. "Yeah, I guess it is an occupational hazard."

Nayllen sat back sipping his drink. "Admiral, I realize this is difficult for you, but I must assure you that, in the end, the war will be stopped and all of Poolto will benefit—even your family."

"Please, leave my family out of this." Tyler said with an implied threat.

Nayllen smiled. "Yes, I realize your baby is on the way and this changes your attitude towards things immensely."

Tyler couldn't believe he'd heard it. This man was full of surprises. "You know about Toosia's pregnancy?" He asked incredulous.

Apparently the Governor was surprised. "A baby, Admiral? How wonderful!" The Governor said it much too jovially for the circumstances.

Tyler ignored him. "How do you know she is pregnant?"

"Please, Admiral," Nayllen said as though brushing it aside, "after everything I have shown you, I am surprised by your shock."

Tyler had to admit, the man had revealed he had access to just about everything.

Except the Command Codes. Adanni said abruptly.

Perhaps that is a bargaining chip? Tyler thought. He needed anything he could use to help him out of the situation. But the danger of them being used was too hard to ignore.

Nayllen went on as though nothing were amiss. "Surely, Admiral, you want your child to enter a world free from war?"

Tyler agreed that would be nice, but he wasn't certain it was something these men could deliver.

"I still don't see why stopping the fleet will help end the war?" Tyler pressed.

"No," Nayllen agreed, "I don't suppose you do."

Without saying more, Nayllen gave the Governor a questioning glance as he looked at a clock on the table next to the Governor. The Governor followed Nayllen's gaze and shrugged. Apparently, whoever they were waiting for was late.

Tyler pressed further. "Then, why don't you enlighten me?"

"I am reserving that for our guests." Nayllen said as though this were sufficient reason.

"Fine, where are they?" Tyler was losing his patience and his anger threatened to erupt.

"Fine question." Nayllen agreed. "Governor, why don't you see what the status is?"

The Governor nodded in acknowledgement and headed for his desk. He was nearly hidden behind the enormous structure, but Tyler could see his face in the dim light of the viewer he hunched over. Tyler remained quiet. Both men took turns sipping their drinks while they waited, and the silence was awkward.

Who were they waiting for? Tyler thought. He imagined someone from the Imperial Palace. Surely they had inside conspirators within the Palace?

I don't think so, Adanni said, but I cannot offer an alternative.

Tyler sipped more of his drink and noticed the bottom of his glass. He almost got up to refill it, but decided he was already more inebriated than was prudent for the situation. He put his head back in the seat and stared at the murals overhead. His clouded mind drifted randomly. He thought about Toosia and his unborn child and felt a deep chill.

The wait was like an eternity, but the Governor finally rejoined them. "Sorry, a slight delay due to security. They've passed through okay and should be here shortly."

Security? Why would that delay them? Tyler was confused. *Any thoughts, Adanni?* He asked inwardly.

No. Adanni admitted.

They continued to sit in silence. Tyler was fuming and didn't feel socializing was appropriate. Nayllen looked as though he were prepared to wait for an eternity, the man's calm demeanor never changing. *Damn him!*

Finally, the Governor broke the silence. "Who would like me to freshen their drinks?" He asked.

Nayllen handed his glass to the Governor, as did Tyler. What the hell, it couldn't get any worse, and it felt damn good getting drunk. It gave him a renewed bravado despite the dangers. The Governor returned with fresh glasses and Tyler drank a heavy portion in his first sip. Both Nayllen and the Governor didn't appear concerned. At least Tyler had experience dealing with people while drunk.

Adanni warned him. *I don't think the people you dealt with on Earth were quite the same as these.*

Tyler was tired of the alien's comments and was ready to push him back into his subconscious. He held back when he realized how valuable Adanni might be when the *associates* arrived.

As if on cue, the opposite door opened and two large guards entered, sweeping the room before taking up positions on either side of the door. Tyler was stunned. They were Krildon and the weapons they held looked more than serious. *That explains security.*

As they waited, another Krildon entered the room, but looked less like a guard and more like a bureaucrat. He waved at Nayllen as he walked down into the center of the room. As he approached, Tyler was taken by how large they were compared to the average person on Poolto.

He stood at least seven feet tall, towering over Nayllen. His face was fierce, and the scaly skin and protruding canines made him a daunting figure. The voice, however, did not match this awesome appearance. It was smooth, gentle, and a very high timber for something so large. This surprised Tyler despite the Admiral's memories of Krildon.

The man spoke gently. "Hello, Nayllen, I am sorry we are late. We were nearly detected at one of your checkpoints. Fortunately, your military Codes worked." He held out his large hand shaking Nayllen's. He turned towards Tyler and smiled. To Tyler, his contorted façade was more like a snarl.

"Admiral, what a privilege to meet you in person." He offered his hand. "It is not everyday a person is able to meet their greatest nemesis in the flesh."

Tyler stood and accepted the hand gracefully. He didn't like the way he had said *flesh*. The hand was surprisingly soft despite its scaly appearance.

"And who do I have the privilege of meeting?" Tyler asked.

"Ah," Nayllen said quickly, "I am sorry, Admiral, let me introduce you to the Commander of the Third Fleet of the Krildon Republic Navy, Commandant Askgar Kulg."

Tyler nodded as he recalled plenty of references to the man within the Admiral's memories. The Commandant was a remarkable tactician and nearly defeated the Admiral more than once in battle.

Tyler tried not to appear intimidated as he stared up at the imposing figure. "Indeed, I, too, am privileged to meet such a worthy adversary."

Tyler didn't like where this was headed. The man was a military commander like the Admiral, and although his appearance was fierce, his demeanor did not match his position. However, just meeting with him would be considered high treason by any standard.

They sat down and Tyler noticed Commandant Kulg barely fit into his chair. It was strange to see him squished into such a tiny seat. Tyler thought it demeaned the man, enemy or not.

The Governor turned towards Kulg. "A drink, Commandant?"

"No, thank you, I am fine." He replied in a lilting tone. "My guest should be here shortly."

Guest? Tyler thought. *This isn't who we were waiting for?*

How could it get weirder than this? Tyler remained silent while Nayllen and the Commandant talked about the trip to Siirneen.

Tyler was amazed someone from Krildon could penetrate this far into Poolto space undetected. However, considering Nayllen's influence, it wasn't hard to imagine. Still, one look or scan should have been enough to see through any disguises they might have employed. Tyler was once again impressed with the power Nayllen controlled.

He listened to their conversation. "Yes," Kulg was saying, "your devices worked perfectly. However, without the Diplomatic Codes, they would have boarded us for certain. I know I would have." He concluded.

Tyler was about to ask about the devices when another Krildon entered the room. He looked more like an assistant than anyone they would be waiting for.

"Commandant, our guest is here." The person bowed towards them and stood to one side.

"Ah, wonderful!" exclaimed Nayllen, and Tyler had to admit he saw a real look of happiness on Nayllen's face.

Everyone rose from their seats waiting. Tyler watched a lone figure emerge from the darkness of the corridor, walking slowly with a cane. It was the first time he had seen anyone with a cane on this world.

As the person entered the light, Tyler's jaw hung in an expression of disbelief. The Admiral's Father, Nattur Oslo, looked at each person with a smile.

Nayllen walked over to Nattur, his hand outstretched in welcome. Tyler's head buzzed in confusion.

"But ... but," Tyler stammered without control, "y-you are dead!"

Nattur eyed Tyler. "Well, my boy, I feel great nonetheless."

This was too much. The combination of drink, the news from Toosia, the implied threats from Nayllen, and his certain collusion in a conspiracy against the Empire threatened to overcome him. His head swam woozily as he sat down staring blankly at the floor.

Adanni's voice penetrated the fog. *Warning, Tyler, this is an unexpected turn of events, and I sense real danger here.*

Talk about an understatement!

Fear gripped him. How could he deal with the Admiral's father? What if Nattur recognized Tyler was not his son?

It has been a long time since the Admiral saw his father. I don't think that will be a problem. Adanni reassured him.

The problem was, Tyler didn't feel reassured. Through his fog, he watched as they took seats each staring at him in anticipation. Only the Admiral's father wore a look of concern.

"Nayllen," Nattur prompted, "are you feeling all right?"

Was he kidding? A part of the Admiral's memories reeled with the sight of his supposedly *dead* father. These thoughts impacted Tyler as well. He had thought he was prepared for anything, even handling the Commandant reasonably well.

But this? This was something catching him off-guard, and he did not know how to deal with it. A multitude of thoughts jammed his mind, and he felt deadlocked in indecision. Only a loud voice cut through his reverie, bringing him back to the present.

Answer him, Tyler, we'll deal with it! It was Adanni, fearful of the awkward silence created by Tyler's confusion.

Tyler quickly recovered, responding to Nattur's question. "I'm...I am sorry, I have no words to respond with, father."

That much was true. He watched as Nattur smiled slightly and turned a questioning glance to each of the others.

"Indeed, Nayllen, I imagine you don't!" His smile grew broad and looked genuine to Tyler. "Don't worry, son, it is me, despite what the Emperor wanted you to think. He knew I was alive, although I am certain he would never have told you."

Tyler was confused, the Emperor knew the Admiral's father was still alive?

"How could he," Tyler stammered, "I mean, how could the Emperor have known?"

Nayllen interjected. "I told him." Once again a flat statement and one that reinforced the man's power and influence.

"Then, why didn't you tell me?" Tyler said too loudly.

"Easy, son," Nattur interrupted, "I instructed him not to."

The drink and the circumstance were more than Tyler could bear. He felt like everything happened in slow motion. Why would the Admiral's father want the Admiral to think he was dead? It didn't make sense. As if sensing his confusion, Nattur answered Tyler's question.

"I thought it better to have you think I was dead to ensure your fighting was not compromised by my being captive."

"Then, you are a prisoner?" Tyler asked confused.

Nattur smiled and looked at the Commandant who *sarled* back. "No, I was at first, but I have been a guest of the Krildon government for many years now. To them, I am still an ambassador to Poolto. I am safe to move about Krildon all I want, although that may be less secure these days. Especially after your last offensive."

Tyler listened, but it didn't sink in. So he was still on good terms with the government on Krildon? That would explain why he was here, but not necessarily why he was conspiring with Nayllen and the Governor. Unless, they were all traitors in league with Krildon to overthrow the Emperor. It was the only thing that made sense at that point.

"Am I truly named after this man?" Tyler asked nodding towards Nayllen. Nattur followed his gaze but looked confused by the change in topic.

"Yes," He said gently, "didn't Nayllen tell you we had worked together on Krildon?"

Tyler didn't want to believe him. It meant the Admiral's father had been a spy for the Emperor. A spy, denounced and left a prisoner on the enemy's world. Tyler didn't think Nattur looked like he would hold a grudge, but then again, the Admiral's memories were naive about his own father.

"Yes," Tyler responded coldly, "he told me. I just didn't believe him."

Nattur's face changed with the cold response Tyler had provided. Clearly, he expected a much happier reunion. *I am not your son, and I don't trust you.* Tyler thought.

A wise decision. Adanni agreed.

Once again, Tyler's anger began to surface. This time he welcomed it as it wore off the effects of the alcohol. He stared back defiantly as Nattur appraised him in a very calculated way.

"Hmmm..." Nattur began, obviously re-evaluating his son, or seeing him for the first time. "I see my visit is not necessarily a welcome one."

He said it as a fact rather than a question. Tyler concurred with his deduction, but didn't say as much.

"Well, father, I haven't seen you since the beginning of the war, you let me and mother believe you were dead, you've been branded a traitor by the Emperor, and now you show up involved in a conspiracy with men who have all but threatened me and my family. Oh, and you are in the company of our enemy." Tyler let his anger loose as he vented. "Tell me, father, why is it I should welcome you?"

No one reacted to the outburst, but Tyler was glad he'd said it. He wasn't going to play the victim anymore. If they wanted him dead, then get it over with. At least they wouldn't get the Command Codes! He sat back finishing his drink, the buzz wearing off fast with his anger. *To hell with you all.* He thought.

They looked at each other in turn, nobody saying anything. Perhaps he'd finally shut them up.

Nattur sat back in his chair, staring across at Tyler with a neutral look on his face. Tyler returned the gaze unwavering.

"I understand I am to be a grandfather?" Nattur asked, obviously not wanting to deal with Tyler's outburst. "And here I thought Toosia was unable?"

"Well, I guess life sometimes throws you a curve ball!" Tyler responded without realizing it was an Earth comment.

Each wore a look of puzzlement, quickly replaced with a neutral expression.

"Yes," Nattur replied, "I suppose it does. Well, for what it is worth, congratulations. I am very glad you are back together and will be a family."

Tyler thought he sounded sincere, but considering all of Nayllen's threats, he didn't think family life was in his future.

"Yes," Tyler responded, "I suppose we will be a family, although not if Nayllen has his way. He has already assured me things will likely work out *badly* for me, regardless of whether I

help you. So please, excuse me if I don't get all teary eyed at your comments."

At that, Nattur looked to Nayllen in anger. Who cared, it was obvious the Admiral, and Tyler, were in too deep for anything good to come from it.

Nattur turned to Tyler. "I think Nayllen has over-stepped his bounds. I am sure we can find a way for you to come out well."

Tyler watched Nayllen, but the man didn't respond to the rebuke. He simply stared at Tyler, his calm demeanor, measuring and scheming. Perhaps this conspiracy was not as tightly bound as they would have Tyler believe. *Watch out, Nattur, my namesake is far from trustworthy. His plans might not match yours.*

Tyler couldn't put it past Nayllen to conspire against his own conspirators. Tyler could imagine him turning them in to the Emperor when things didn't go as planned. Then, he would maintain his own power while raising his status within the Imperial Palace.

Tyler spewed sarcasm. "Perhaps I can, after all, being a traitor is apparently not as deadly as one might believe." Tyler sank the barb.

He noticed the Commandant was antsy from the exchange. Being in the middle of his enemy's territory was a gamble for him. If it went poorly, he could easily be caught and tried as a spy. Tyler imagined what the Imperial Palace would have in store for the 'Commander of the Third Fleet of the Krildon Republic Navy'. Tyler doubted he would be treated as well as they had treated the Admiral's father.

Tyler turned to the Commandant. "So tell me, Commandant, do you share my father's belief I will come through this well?"

The question bothered the Commandant, but his emotions were hard to read through his reptilian face. He responded to Tyler in a high voice, but the force and command still came through. "I can assure you, Admiral, this war is coming to an end. How and when will determine your fate."

Nattur shot another angry glance, this time at the Commandant. Tyler didn't miss the exchange. *Who is really in charge here, Nattur?* Tyler began to think it wasn't the Admiral's father.

"I see," Tyler said, "then you must share Nayllen's assessment." Tyler turned back to the Admiral's father. "So tell me, father, why are you so optimistic about my future?"

Nattur regained his demeanor and smiled. "Because you are my son, and I want only good things for you."

Fat chance, Tyler thought. What was his motivation? He was branded a traitor, and all of Poolto knew it and despised him. How could he hope to gain from this conspiracy? It was easy to imagine how the Commandant and his world would gain, they appeared to be the only ones who would come out *good*.

"Right." Tyler said emotionless.

"Okay, Nayllen," Nattur said quickly, "I realize this is hard for you and I can see you do not trust me. I can understand. The war has obviously hardened you over the years, and I can see why you believe nothing but bad things will come from this." He paused, obviously trying to make due with the change in attitude. "I accept that. But my colleagues are right, this war will end and you can either be an active part of it or a victim of it. The choice is yours."

Tyler watched him closely, and felt he was finally being truthful.

"Perhaps I cannot guarantee you will survive this, but I can guarantee your family will."

This got Tyler's attention. So, they were going to use his family against him after all. Nayllen had already threatened, but clearly Nattur was willing to put it on the table as well.

Great, Tyler thought, *happiness is once again in my grasp, but soon to be taken away*. He sank into his chair, defeat overwhelming him. He knew he could be brave and fearless if he were involved, but he could do nothing that would threaten Toosia and their unborn child.

He looked at Nattur staring at him placidly. "Fine, father, you win. What is it you want from me and how will it end the war?"

He saw his acquiescence had eased the tension. But why fight it anymore? They held everything and he held nothing except the Command Codes. It wasn't a great bargaining chip, especially if they didn't need them to accomplish their goals. Nayllen had revealed as much.

Nattur sat back, his features softening. "Son, don't sound so fatalistic, it will be an end to a long and senseless war. Is that not worth something? A world where your child can travel the solar system, free from fear? Free from killing? Free from anger?"

Tyler knew he was right, but he didn't believe it would all be paradise.

"Don't you mean a world without a father?" Tyler knew he sounded petty, but he didn't care. He grinned as the comment stung.

"It doesn't have to be that way, son."

"Not according to your colleagues." Tyler replied.

"Son, listen," Nattur leaned forward, "what we need from you is dangerous, it is true there are risks, but you may yet prevail and come through this alive and a hero."

Tyler doubted he'd be a hero. "Didn't you know father? I already am a hero!"

"I know, son, but a war hero, wouldn't you rather be a hero of the peace?"

Tyler had to admit, the badge as a war hero had never sat well with him. He had never been a violent or aggressive man, which is probably why he had so many customers back on Earth. No one ever felt threatened by him, unlike so many in the *trade*. If he survived and became a hero of the peace, then he and Toosia could retire to their vineyard, living out their lives as a family. *If I survive! You are awfully quiet, Adanni, have you no deep insight?*

No, like you, I have no idea what any of their motivations are. But I still don't trust them. There is something here that I ...

Adanni trailed off before finishing. Damn, Tyler thought, just when I need him. *What is it you sense or see, Adanni? Please share.*

Silence.

Tyler's anger churned when Adanni finally responded.

I sense something, but I believe I may be mistaken.

Nice, it was like dealing with Nayllen.

Thanks for your input, Tyler thought sarcastically. The alien didn't respond.

"Yes, father," he turned his attention back to Nattur, "I would love to be the hero of peace, I am just uncertain you can provide that peace."

Nattur sat back, his calm face taking in his co-conspirators. Tyler couldn't tell what the man was thinking but wanted the whole thing over.

"All right, Nayllen, fair enough." Nattur signaled the Governor for a drink, and the man quickly went to the bar. At least Tyler could assume the Governor was not in charge.

"Anyone else?" He called from the bar.

No one responded, so he returned quickly with the drink.

Nattur took a long drink before continuing. "As we all know, this war was started because of petty, territorial disputes that escalated into the political nightmare we currently live in. Philosophically, we can all agree on that, even the Emperor. However, over time, the effects of the killing and warfare have developed a grudge or hatred for the other side. On Poolto, our own history shows this to be a common thread over and over again. Even Krildon has historical references that mirror this situation."

Nattur grabbed his drink. Tyler had to admit, the man was telling the truth. The same things happened on Earth during political disputes. A minor disagreement can escalate into war, which escalates into hatred, and finally into genocide. He had to concede, both worlds were stuck in a vicious cycle that might destroy each.

Tyler interrupted. "Yes, father, this is all academic, but what do you propose to do to break us out of the cycle?"

Nattur set his drink down. "By being the ones who step forward and say it must stop. By being the ones who have the power to make it stop."

Tyler thought through his words. He started to see their plan forming in his mind. Take away the power of Poolto by disabling the fleet with the Command Codes. Then, offer the end to the war. How else could Poolto, or the Emperor, respond? They would have to agree.

Tyler was not convinced. "And that will be it? Krildon will back down? Love, peace and harmony will prevail?" Tyler knew he was being overly sarcastic, but it didn't jive with what he saw as the real outcome.

"Yes," Nattur agreed, "but not all at once, over time."

"And you, Commandant," Tyler asked, "this is what you desire, an end to all hostilities? Forgive and forget?"

The Commandant was about to respond when Nattur interjected. "Son, Krildon is a democracy, not an authoritarian regime like Poolto. Their people desire peace more than they desire the end of us. Peace can prevail, we just have to open the way for it. The Emperor cannot be the one to offer peace, his ego will not let him. He must be forced to accept it, and the only way is by taking away his power. You and the military are his power."

No denying that, the Emperor himself didn't control the military, although his influence on it had recently increased. No

wonder the Imperial Palace was backing Teesen, they were increasing their control of the military. Tyler knew when push came to shove, Teesen would never go against the Emperor, and would likely even give him the Command Codes.

Tyler was beginning to see why he was in a no-win situation. Once the military was under the command of the Emperor, the man could do anything he wanted, all in the guise of winning the war. It was no wonder his propaganda machine worked hard to foment hatred against Krildon, he wanted nothing less than victory, no matter the cost. The Admiral, and Tyler, had both been caught up in the same propaganda.

"Okay, what do you propose?" Tyler asked, suddenly more receptive.

"We plan on bringing a treaty mission to Poolto to propose the end of the war. The Commandant here will bring nothing less than his own flag ship with a majority of the Krildon representatives on board to negotiate. The President himself will also be present."

Tyler watched as the Commandant nodded in agreement.

"And I suppose you need me to disable the fleet to ensure safe passage?" Tyler asked, although he knew that was it.

"Of course," Nattur agreed, "but also to ensure the bargaining is heavily weighted on our side."

"Of course." Tyler agreed thinking that would be a perfect opportunity for an attack. "And why must I give the Command Codes to you? Can't I just disable them myself when the time comes?"

Nattur looked surprised by the question. "Well, I suppose that could be the case, but we need you with the Emperor during this time. Suppose something happens to you, especially if the Emperor senses mutiny. His guards could easily overtake you before the fleet is disabled."

True enough, but Tyler still didn't trust them. "Okay, I see your point. What will keep Krildon from attacking us when we are defenseless?"

"Ah, well you have the planetary defense system don't you?" Nattur said lightly. "That should keep Poolto safe, even though I assure you they have no intentions of attacking."

"I see. Well, if it is on your word alone ..." Tyler let sarcasm drip heavily.

"Son, I realize I may not deserve your trust, but this plan was conceived many years ago. Our only problem was how to get

through to Poolto to deliver our message of peace. Fortunately, you finally gave us the opportunity we needed.”

“Really?” Tyler said smartly. “So why do the Commandant and Nayllen believe you can still end the war without my help?”

Nattur glanced at both Nayllen and the Commandant before turning back to Tyler. “Well,” he began, “if you don’t help us, there is another way to end the war.” Nattur paused, letting this sink in. He obviously hadn’t wanted to divulge the information, but a nod from the commandant seemed to give him the go ahead. “Krildon has developed a weapon that could destroy the Poolto fleet. In fact, if Vice Admiral Teesen’s plan is put into place, it will be the last stand of a dying Navy.”

Tyler watched the sadness in Nattur’s face as he said this. The end of the Poolto Navy? A new weapon, how? Then, it came in a flash, they had found a way to weaponize scrlit!

“You’ve found a way to use scrlit in weapons manufacturing and you think it will give you an edge in battle.” Tyler said it as a fact.

Nattur raised his eyebrows, a look of pride on his face. “Very good, Nayllen,” he commended, “but it is much more than that.”

“Really, how much more?” Tyler asked.

Nattur paused again, looking to his co-conspirator.

“Tell me, son, your brilliant offensive plan, why didn’t it succeed?” Nattur asked.

Tyler didn’t know whether to respond, but assumed Nayllen knew all of it anyway. “Well, I am not exactly certain why, but I suspect we overestimated how much of their fleet was actually around the home-world. I guess our intelligence was flawed.” Tyler knew this was the official reason, but always had his own suspicions. He waited to see how Nattur reacted. He didn’t.

“I see.” Nattur said. “What if I told you your intelligence was correct?”

Tyler was thrown by the question. “Then, I suppose I do not know why we lost.”

He thought about this admission. Their intelligence was correct? But he remembered the conference and the fleet numbers they’d come up against. Their intelligence had not been correct.

Nattur watched Tyler’s confusion before continuing. “Yes, son, your intelligence was correct, and yes, you are correct that much of the Krildon fleet was around the home world.”

“Then, how do those two things mesh?” Tyler asked.

"Easily," Nattur stated calmly, "you were betrayed."

Tyler shot a glance at Nayllen. "Was it him?" He accused.

Nayllen remained passive. "Hardly, Admiral," he replied indignantly, "I would not be so cold as to kill all those men."

"Then, who?" Tyler asked, anger taking over. The part of him that was the Admiral tried to wrest control and Tyler let his emotions out.

Nattur looked calmly at Tyler. "The Emperor did."

Tyler took in the statement, not wanting to believe it. How could the Emperor be the traitor? What would he get out of the destruction of half his fleet? It didn't make sense?

"The Emperor," Tyler said incredulous, "why would he betray his own military?"

"To get rid of you and take over the military." Nayllen said.

The man said it naturally as though it were obvious to a child. It wasn't obvious to Tyler. He knew the Emperor wanted him out of the way, but something that big seemed over the top even for the Emperor. Regent Sneerd on the other hand.

"Assuming this were true, why cripple your own military to take it over?"

"Your death and the destruction of half the fleet would ensure whoever replaced you would be incensed enough to convince the military and the Supreme Council that Imperial control was necessary to deal the final blow to their enemies. They would have used your death to rally support for the Emperor and his ultimate goal, to win the war and conquer Krildon. He and Vice Admiral Teesen have been planning this for years."

Tyler had to admit, it rang of truth and squared with the events of the battle. Still, it was hard to believe they would spend life so casually to achieve such a goal. Then again, there were plenty of examples where this was done.

Nattur spoke up. "The problem was you didn't die as they planned, and that set them back tremendously. In fact, your own actions in the battle were better than they had imagined, so the defeat was not so one-sided as they assumed. Over all, you did more to thwart their plans than you realize. After all, you came back a hero, and even they could not denounce you lest they admit the defeat."

That was true. The great lie rolled out to the people was because of the embarrassment a defeat would have caused. He remembered how it had been turned into a sneak attack by Krildon,

once again a propaganda move by the Imperial Palace. It was all starting to make sense.

"I begin to see the possibility of truth in what you say, but what does the scrilt have to do with this?" Tyler asked, wanting more information on what he obviously still didn't understand.

"Well," Commandant Kulg replied, "I can answer that. Your brilliant plan and devilish battle tactics almost won the battle despite the fact we knew ahead of time, and despite our having overwhelming odds."

Tyler ignored the compliment.

The Commandant continued. "In fact, we only succeeded in thwarting your attack because of the scrilt." He paused before going on. "We have not only used scrilt to enhance our weapons, but we have also developed a new polymer that when applied to our ships, yields them nearly invulnerable to your current weapons."

"You mean they can even withstand missile attacks?" Tyler asked.

The Commandant appeared unnerved by the question. "Well, no, they cannot withstand missile attacks anymore than they could before, but they can take a hit from any energy weapon and discharge the force harmlessly."

Tyler pressed, fascinated by what was being revealed. "Then, our fleet could counter your fleet simply by using older technology?"

Again, Tyler noted nervousness.

"Yes, it is possible," he started, and then added quickly, "but as you know, missile penetration through our defensive grids is only about fifteen percent effective, and you must be at close range. That would put your fleet at a disadvantage from our new energy weapons."

"I see." Tyler said. "And what new power do these weapons have when modified with the scrilt?"

This time, the Commandant didn't want to answer. Instead, he looked at his fellow conspirators as though seeking advice. Nayllen jumped in to save him. "It's all right, Askgar, he might as well know."

The Commandant didn't look assured, but made up his mind. "Fine, we have modified our energy weapons with scrilt and have realized a thousand fold increase in output."

Tyler was stunned. A thousand fold increase—that was unbelievable. If it were true, he could understand why they had confidence they could wipe out the Poolto fleet.

“But our scientists assured us this substance was benign. Surely, you didn't get that much yield from it?”

Nayllen leaned forward. “Remember who was in charge of those scientists, Admiral. Krildon has been developing this technology for thirty years.”

“Then, you knew about it?” Tyler accused.

Nayllen didn't flinch. “Yes, I knew about it, but I didn't know they had come so far. My partnership with Krildon didn't give me access to all their secrets.”

Nattur spoke up. “That was where I came in. I convinced the Krildon legislature to hold off deploying the technology until we could use it as a bargaining chip in our negotiations.”

“Of course,” Tyler said, “then you didn't use it when defending yourself in our offensive?”

The Commandant answered plainly. “We did not have it fully deployed at that time, but we had several squadrons equipped with earlier prototypes. They made a significant difference, despite not having the full power at their command.”

Tyler didn't like the smug look on the Commandant's face, he almost believed the man was ready to launch a full scale attack on Poolto.

“Why don't they just attack us? They obviously have the upper hand?” Tyler gambled on a direct approach. The Commandant looked nervous, but Nattur was the one who answered.

“Don't think there aren't many who feel that way. Fortunately for Poolto, most of them are not in power. Cooler heads have prevailed and I have convinced them a peaceful end to the conflict will be better than an all out victory.”

Tyler had to concede Nattur seemed to believe what he was saying. He wasn't so sure the Commandant or Nayllen agreed.

Tyler wanted this to end, he'd had his fill of news for one day and it was clear there was nothing he could do to change the situation. “Fine, if I give you the Codes, then Krildon will come to Poolto with an offering of peace under the threat of annihilation, or if I don't, you will carry through with your threat to annihilate us. Does that about sum it up?”

His cold summary didn't sit well with everyone, especially the Governor. Tyler could imagine why he might feel uncomfortable—the colonies would be the target of the first wave of attacks.

Nattur looked at Tyler with concern. *Too late for that, pops.* Tyler thought.

"Nayllen," Nattur began, "son, it is the only way we can end this futile war. Is that not worth it?"

Tyler had no choice, but he wasn't going down just yet. He would find a way to come out ahead. One way or another, he was going to have his family.

"Yes." Tyler said with little emotion.

* * * *

Tyler was deep in thought all the way back to Poolto. After his meeting with the Admiral's father, everything moved fast, too fast for Tyler's liking. His role in the conspiracy was going to unfold soon, and he had already turned over the Command Codes in preparation for the peace mission from Krildon. Tyler only hoped peace was their true mission. He had doubts.

It was difficult to explain the situation to Toosia. Initially, he thought about hiding the truth from her, but ultimately decided if he was to convince her to stay on Siirneen, he would have to come clean. When he explained it to her, she took it calmly; however, Tyler knew she was torn inside. It was not everyday your husband tells you he is about to betray his world.

She asked small, concise questions, but never about the Admiral's father. Tyler knew that was a sore subject between them for years. Looking back through the Admiral's memories, Tyler realized the Admiral's failure to support his father when the Emperor had brandished him a traitor never sat well with Toosia. She came from a family where blood ties were stronger than civic duty or law. She eventually accepted his lack of support but never agreed with it.

She asked pointed questions about the plan and had good insight into potential flaws and pitfalls Tyler had not considered. At first, Tyler thought she would blow the cover off the whole affair, but finally, she said she understood the situation and believed if the conspirators were truthful, there may really be a chance to end the war. Clearly, with a child on the way, she wanted peace as much as anyone. Her final comment had resonated with

Tyler's own fears about the situation. She'd said she probably would trust the Admiral's father, but that she couldn't trust Nayllen.

Tyler agreed, but didn't voice that comment. It was bad enough he would have to leave her on Siirneen while the conspiracy unfolded. At least she would be in the care of the Governor. Tyler believed he could trust the Governor. The man didn't hold much power in the conspiracy but was well placed to support their efforts. The Governor had assured Tyler she would be cared for like royalty—especially since she was with child. Tyler prayed he was right.

Tyler's own role in the conspiracy was not insignificant and he understood why his survival could not be assured. He assumed he had the most dangerous part in the whole affair. When the time came for the peace ship to enter Poolto space, it was critical Tyler be in the company of the Emperor. This would indicate the depth and breadth of the conspiracy to the Emperor. It was a dangerous gambit since the Emperor might react irrationally and have Tyler shot on the spot for treason. Tyler understood the Palace guards would carry out that order, even if he was their National Hero.

The hard part would be timing the audience with the Emperor. Nayllen provided Tyler with a communication device that was impossible to detect, yet capable of transmitting and receiving across long distances through interference and jamming. It was intended to prevent the Emperor from breaking off the negotiations once underway. Fortunately, because they possessed the Command Codes, the Emperor would not have any assets to attack. Only ground based missiles would be capable of reaching the peace ship, and those rarely hit targets from so far away. Not even the planetary defense grid was capable of reaching ships operating outside its operational perimeter.

Tyler had to admit the plan seemed complete, but as the Admiral's last great battle had shown, nothing is totally within your control. Anything could go wrong and often did. What if the Command Codes did not work? What if they only disabled a percentage of the fleet? Plenty could fail, and one or two ships that were not disabled could easily ruin their plans. Tyler didn't like the prospects of failure—many would die.

The power of settling down with Toosia at their Tooland Estate kept Tyler's optimism high. He thought back to Linda and the opportunity he had missed. He didn't want to make that mistake

again, especially with a child on the way. He was close to having a family, he only had to make this work.

Unfortunately, even success could spell disaster. It would be simple for the Emperor to make the Admiral a scapegoat. The Emperor would be within his rights to prosecute Tyler for treason even if peace were established. The anger the Emperor would feel towards Tyler would be hard to repress. History was replete with tales of those who went against the Emperor. Some were executed directly, while many met with unfortunate accidents. Tyler thought about the Regent and the mysterious disappearances since his rise to power.

What would prevent accidents from happening to the Admiral or his family? Tyler hoped the Admiral's popularity would prevent that. Bringing peace to Poolto might endear him further to the public and re-establish his power. However, he first had to survive the conspiracy.

The conference on Siirneen was a success, and Tyler was amazed at the readiness the various command groups represented. Their primary concern was supply routes and the new ships being pushed through inadequate field trials. Like the Admiral, the second in command did not relish the idea of going into battle with a ship that might fail in the midst of combat. They understood most of the ships were newer, more advanced designs, but they knew that often meant newer more deadly flaws.

Tyler did his best to assure them the ships would be ready for battle when delivered. If the message had come from anyone else, he doubted they would have believed it. Tyler didn't believe it himself but knew it wouldn't matter since the battle would never be fought.

Through most of the conference, Tyler let the essence of the Admiral control the proceedings. He had withdrawn inside, battling his own thoughts about the pending showdown. Deep down, he knew the conspiracy could save millions of lives, but he couldn't shake the feeling something hidden by the conspirators might yet cause great losses. Tyler distrusted Nayllen and wasn't sure the many years of conflict between both worlds could easily be put aside by the Krildon public or its leadership.

With their fleet disabled, Poolto would be vulnerable, and Tyler believed that would be far too tempting for Krildon. Did they really want to end the war? Was Commandant Kulg really prepared to turn his swords into plowshares?

Tyler knew the Admiral's memories interfered with his ability to judge Krildon. The Admiral had spent a lot of time on Krildon, but he was young and unable to fully evaluate its people or culture. The Admiral's memories overflowed with countless friends of the family. Unfortunately, those early memories were inadequate to judge them.

As a historian, the Admiral had studied Krildon history nearly as much as he had study his own. But those studies had focused on military campaigns, tactics, and outcomes. Those didn't provide Tyler with what he needed to know. Krildon's history was as bloody and conflicted as Poolto's or Earth's. Did that tell him anything? He didn't believe so. It only confirmed that worlds start out barbaric and violent. Still, considering the length of the current war, could one really say they'd evolved beyond violence? Definitely not.

Tyler thought about Krildon's democratic government and believed it was one thing in their favor. Unlike Poolto, Krildon's leaders were regularly elected. Since the war started, Krildon had elected ten presidents, each claiming to be committed to vanquishing their enemy. None had accomplished that goal, but the current president was on the verge of making peace. Tyler understood these battle cries were used to gather support for fighting any conflict. People grew weary of war, so governments had to continually rally support by villanizing the enemy. Who wouldn't want to vanquish evil?

Poolto, however, had only one Emperor since the very beginning of the war. His power was firmly established early on, especially after the missile attack that nearly destroyed both worlds. His desire to destroy Krildon was a powerful force, and people rallied behind those efforts. This was the reason betraying him was so dangerous. Tyler was going to make Poolto choose between their hero and their leader. He wasn't certain the Admiral could win that contest.

For him, a democratic Krildon sounded better than a world ruled by a single Emperor. He'd once been an American and always believed in the democratic process, even if he rarely participated in it. He just wasn't sure that was enough to take such a gamble. Even democracies had moments when their purposes went against their ideals. The political ideologies of both worlds was never a problem in the past, would it become one now? Would Krildon use this conspiracy to push their own agenda? An agenda

the Admiral's father and Nayllen were not privy to? Did they want democracy on Poolto?

Tyler thought it possible, especially when they would have the upper hand. The conspirators did not appear cohesive during Tyler's meeting. He had sensed the Admiral's father was being used by Krildon to get the Admiral to play along. That hadn't exactly worked, so they ultimately resorted to threats of using their superior weapons technology. Tyler wasn't certain they'd accomplished so much with the scrilt, but if they had, the threat was genuine. This was where millions of lives could be saved.

In the long run, Tyler didn't really have a choice. He was committed and the only way he could stop it now was turn himself in and have them change the Command Codes. He couldn't risk his family and the lives of so many military personnel. He had to follow through and brace himself for the fate it would bring.

Despite these restless thoughts, Tyler managed to drift off during the long flight to Poolto. In his dreams, he found himself in a large white room with white furniture. It looked similar to what Tyler imagined heaven might be. He half expected to see Thosolan, but the room remained empty. After everything he'd been through, the white couch looked inviting. He sat down relaxing in the soft cushions.

The whiteness of the room made it appear as if there were no walls, and the room simply expanded outward forever. It reminded Tyler of his first encounter with the voices of the Universe. Maybe they changed their minds and didn't think letting him loose on the Universe was such a great idea. Tyler didn't care, the couch was comfortable.

He leaned back into the couch, staring at his body. It was the Admiral's body and not human. It seemed strange and yet appropriate. Perhaps he really was the Admiral? It seemed far better than the drug dealer he'd been on Earth. He thought about the Admiral's name: Nayllen. He almost liked it better than Tyler. Would he lose Tyler if he stayed the Admiral? Would he think of himself as Nayllen? He didn't think so as the other Nayllen flashed through his mind.

Suddenly, a door appeared across the room. It wasn't really a door, but a black, rectangular opening appearing in the wall. *Finally, I can find out why I am here.* He believed he was dreaming, but wasn't certain.

Another person from Poolto walked in and moved across the room to one of the comfy looking chairs. Tyler didn't recognize him, but said hello anyway.

The man smiled back, offering a return greeting that Tyler instantly recognized as Adanni!

"Where have you been, Adanni?" Tyler asked, confused by the alien's absence since joining the conspiracy. He was surprised Adanni was being so silent.

"I've been thinking." Adanni replied quietly.

"Oh, good." Tyler said sarcastically. "I haven't been the only one!"

"No, you haven't."

Apparently the sarcasm was lost on Adanni. Tyler felt frustrated by the alien breaking their agreement not to interfere in his dreams.

Reading Tyler's thoughts, Adanni responded. "Yes, that is true, we had an agreement, but I needed to talk with you privately."

Tyler didn't like the sound of his voice, introspective and non-aggressive.

"Well, I'm here. What did you want to say? Did you want to tell me that I made a huge mistake joining this conspiracy? Or perhaps you want to tell me that we won't survive the ordeal?" Tyler let out his frustrations, but it had no effect on Adanni.

"No, no." Adanni replied. "You understand it as well as I do. This is about something ... different."

Great, Tyler thought, something else to worry about.

"Fine, lay it on me." Tyler said without emotion.

"You do not know much about me or my kind, do you?"

Tyler thought about how little Thosolan told him. "Not really." Tyler admitted.

"I can tell you we generally seek people of power and thrive in conflict and destruction."

Tyler found it hard to believe the alien was admitting so much. He had suspected there was an evil component to Onyalum, he just didn't know how evil. Perhaps this was the reveal.

Adanni continued. "I, myself, have often participated in destructive acts on many worlds. My very being thrived on the mayhem my actions produced. The more convoluted the plots, dangerous the actions, and destructive the results, the bigger the thrills."

Tyler heard excitement in the alien's voice. Tyler was certain now! If he ever gave control to Adanni, he would never get it back.

"Fine, Adanni," Tyler said placidly, "you were a thrill junky, so what? Are you getting a good high off this latest adventure?"

Adanni paused as if considering the question. Tyler instantly regretted he'd asked it.

"No," Adanni said emotionless, "but I think someone else is."

Tyler didn't get his gist. He knew he wasn't getting thrills out of this, if anything, he was getting more gray hairs.

"Well, if you mean me," Tyler responded, "just read my mind and you'll see I do not enjoy this."

"Not you," Adanni said it as to a child, "another being like myself—another Onyalum."

Another Onyalum? The thought was chilling. Was there really another Onyalum behind these actions? An Onyalum Tyler didn't control?

"How do you know?" Tyler asked calmly as he churned inside.

"The pattern fits. The betrayal of the Admiral's offensive, the attack on you, the current plans to attack again. These are all things I would have done."

Tyler appreciated the candid revelations from Adanni, but they were a disturbing insight into the workings of something evil. Didn't he realize Tyler would never let him have control after these admissions?

"Don't worry," Adanni commented, reading Tyler's thoughts, "I have no intentions of taking over, or causing that kind of chaos again."

Tyler didn't believe him, despite sounding genuine

"Fine, we have another Onyalum. Who do you suspect?" Tyler asked curious. "Is it Nayllen? Or maybe Vice Admiral Teesen?" Both seemed likely candidates to Tyler. Both held power and were involved in dangerous, chaotic events.

"Both fit the pattern," Adanni agreed, "but I honestly have no idea."

"So," Tyler's frustrations rose, "you suspect an agent of chaos is causing many, if not all, of these events, and we, I mean I, may be playing right into their hands?"

Tyler's agitation finally impacted Adanni. Adanni stared back with an expression of concern. Tyler was ready to explode but waited patiently.

"Yes," Adanni admitted, "we may be playing right into their hands."

It was too much for Tyler. "Oh, great!" He shouted. "Maybe it was the Governor and I just left Toosia and my unborn child with him!" Tyler's anger gained momentum. "Or maybe it is the Emperor, and we will be killed instantly when this thing begins."

He was wound up and felt delirious with the release. "Oh, I know, it must Regent Sneerd. Who else could cause such chaos and care so little for the people of Poolto!"

He poured it out on Adanni, amazed the alien took it so calmly. It was like dealing with Nayllen, and the comparison made Tyler even angrier as his abusive language rose to a frenzied pitch. Finally reaching a crescendo, he stopped. He was exhausted but apparently had needed the release. He was surprised how good it felt inside a dream. *What better place to lose it?*

Adanni let the silence linger, remaining calm in the face of Tyler's fury. When the silence got awkward, he finally spoke.

"Your concerns and frustrations are well founded. The situation will not turn out well."

Tyler had nothing in him. *Why me?*

"Self pity will accomplish nothing." Adanni chided.

"Thanks, all better now!" Tyler tried to put force behind his words, but they sounded petty.

He desperately tried to free himself from despair. Surely there was something they could do to prevent or at least minimize the damage.

"Is there nothing we can do to stop them?" He asked feebly.

Adanni thought for a moment before responding. "Well, if we knew who it was, we might be able to do something. However, to be honest, I'm not sure how we would find out. I was very adept at making sure I was never discovered. You are doing a fine job as the Admiral—you've even fooled his wife."

Tyler hated to admit it, but he couldn't see how they would find them either. If they were like Tyler, they fooled everyone around them, even those who knew them well. Still...

"Assume for a moment we could determine who it was, what could we do?" Tyler applied the Admiral's essence to solving this problem. He figured they might as well treat it like a military campaign or pending battle. They knew the enemy existed, now they just needed intelligence to discover where.

“Well,” Adanni started, “I guess we could confront them, although that might prove dangerous—or we could try to discredit them.”

“Discredit them?” Tyler was incredulous. “How would we discredit them?”

“We could convince people around them they are an imposter. We could convince them the person was being controlled by an outside entity.”

Tyler thought it sounded ridiculous. “Sure, we just say they are possessed and after we are put in the nuthouse, how would we prove it?”

Adanni ignored his jibe. “We would have to build a case out of their actions compared to their actions before becoming Onyalum. Surely there will be differences.”

Tyler doubted that would be a strong case. “And what prevents them from doing the same thing to us? I haven’t exactly been perfect since taking over.”

Tyler thought back to the early days as the Admiral, he had made many mistakes and those around him had certainly shown concern over his unusual behavior. Tyler was thankful many had chalked it up to his injuries, but if he started accusing someone else of being possessed, that would certainly open the door for similar accusations against him.

“I don’t think that will do it, Adanni, we may have to confront them.”

Adanni stared back blankly. “Fine, but the point is moot. We don’t know who it is.”

Tyler thought Adanni was throwing in the towel. Maybe he was still a thrill junky and was ready to just wait for the ensuing chaos and destruction.

“There has to be a way to figure this out.” Tyler said hopeful.

In a flash of insight, Tyler realized a way to discover the Onyalum. When Tyler took over the Admiral, he was near death. Assuming all Onyalum required the same conditions, they only had to find out if any of the suspects had been near death. Surely it was information they could track down. Generally, people didn’t have brushes with death without a record of the incident.

Adanni was listening to Tyler’s thoughts. “You may have something. We could find out who had close calls in the past. I suspect that if it has happened, it would have been recent.

Otherwise, the Onyalum would surely have caused the destruction of the person they inhabited by now.”

Perhaps Adanni was going to help after all.

“Okay, who do we investigate first?” Tyler asked with hope growing.

“All of them.” Adanni said confidently.

“Sure,” Tyler agreed sarcastically, “we’ll just tell our staff we need them to investigate the personal health records of all these senior officials. Don’t you think we’ll raise suspicions?”

“Yes,” Adanni agreed, “but if you tell the Marshall to handle it, it may get done discreetly.”

Tyler had to admit, the Marshall was discreet. However, he wasn’t sure how he would stop the Marshall’s suspicions. The man would want to know why. Considering how much Tyler had lied to the man already, he wasn’t certain how much the Marshall would take.

Loyalty was one thing, but betrayal another. If the Marshall suspected the Admiral was involved in a plot to overthrow the government, or at least coerce it into peace, he wouldn’t support the Admiral. They would have to walk a thin line with the man, and Tyler had to think of a good reason to send him on this dangerous task.

As Tyler was about to ask another question, he was awakened by a flight attendant. They were ready to land, and Tyler couldn’t believe he’d slept so long. Despite that, he felt rested and ready for battle. At least they had a chance, if only a small one.

* * * *

According to the plan outlined on Siirneen, Tyler was required to set a meeting with the Emperor in five to eight days upon his return. It was a difficult order to fill, but at least they had given him a three day window. Unfortunately, it didn’t give Tyler much time to track down the Onyalum. Even if he succeeded in finding one, he was not convinced he could do anything about it. Despite Adanni’s suggestion, he didn’t believe another Onyalum would give in to threats of exposure.

After returning to Yooso, Tyler was busy with the Commission. His leadership was desperately needed to evaluate and make recommendations for the offensive. So far, everything

they had employed to stall progress was working. Despite the delays, Admiral Teesen took it all in stride.

Clearly, the Emperor had cautioned patience while Tyler's plan played out. Regardless of motives and stalling, the Commission was making progress. Troop readiness, supply chains, intelligence, and equipment availability were all shaping up for an offensive soon. Only Tyler knew the conflict would never get off the ground. Despite this, he welcomed the readiness—just in case.

Marshall Sliss was eerily quiet about Tyler's trip to Siirneen. When mentioned at all, it usually revolved around the cover operations of the conference. Tyler was thankful the conference was productive. Feedback from the field commanders was positive, therefore suspicions were averted. Even so, Tyler's request for health information on several important people was taken begrudgingly, and with great suspicion.

The Marshall accepted it calmly and only asked for what purpose the information would serve. Tyler lied with an excuse he was searching for ways to discredit individuals based on their health. The Marshall was clearly suspicious but accepted it anyway. When the Marshall noted the charges could be leveled at him, Tyler shrugged it off saying it wouldn't matter as his time in office was nearing an end. The admission didn't surprise the Marshall, but considering how long both had been at it, he might also be ready to retire.

Whatever the Marshall thought, he had taken the request and promised quick and discreet action. Tyler suspected the cool interactions with the Marshall were an indication his lies were eroding the Marshall's trust. Tyler hoped what little trust remained would not be spent within the next eight days. After that, it probably wouldn't matter.

Tyler ran on autopilot, letting much of the Admiral's essence run the Commission. He participated only as much as needed, but the Admiral's persona was a fabulous administrator, so Tyler contributed little.

Toosia's cover story of taking care of family business on Siirneen had held up so far. Her family was suspicious, but daily calls to Siirneen alleviated them. Her calls to him, however, were not as normal. She told him of the activities she saw on Siirneen, including a heightened state of security. This alarmed him. The purpose of her staying was to keep her safe, and he considered having her come back to Poolto and move into their Tooland

Estate, but the Governor talked him out of it. It was becoming clear the conspirators used her as a hostage to get Tyler to follow through. He didn't force the issue, but his concerns steadily increased.

The Admiral's staff was performing flawlessly since his announcement to step down. Their ability to get things done impressed the rest of the Commission. In fact, they made the rest of the Commission's staff look practically incompetent in comparison. In particular, Officer Slaas was proving an incredible asset both on the trip to Siirneen and back on Poolto. She was even beginning to sound like the Marshall, and had both Officer Kooren and Vice Secretary Beelen doing her bidding. Tyler saw she would move up despite her boss stepping down. He made sure glowing letters of recommendation made it into her file and that several duty options were available when she left.

Her latest coup was recognizing severe omissions in the planned shortened field trials. She had stopped the trials even before consulting with the Commission, or Marshall Sliss. It was a bold move and she had come out on top. She had found two glaring problems everyone else had overlooked. Considering each proposal was several hundred pages in length, the catch was miraculous.

The good news was it proved to be a wonderful stalling technique that Admiral Teesen fumed over. It was his own staff that had missed the mistake when they created the proposals, so he couldn't ignore the implications. They had lost face, while the Admiral had gained more ground.

There were downsides to the staff's efficiency. The commission was making quick progress towards developing a readiness report with offensive recommendations. The current plan looked doable in several months despite stalling with field trials. Tyler wasn't concerned. He knew it would soon mean nothing.

Fortunately, it gave him the opening he needed to meet with the Emperor. At their current pace, they would have recommendations in about six days. As the head of the Commission, Tyler was responsible for personally delivering it to both the Emperor and Admiral Teesen while transferring the Supreme Military Command. That meant turning over the Command Codes, which Admiral Teesen would change immediately. Tyler couldn't let that happen. The good news was command turnover was a private affair, held in the Imperial Palace.

It was a perfect way for Tyler to gain his audience while giving the conspirators their chance to end the conflict.

So far, everything moved forward. Despite this, Tyler felt certain his last days as the Admiral were drawing near. He tried to repress those thoughts and focus on what he would do if the Marshall found the information to track the Onyalum.

It was this thought that ran through his mind as he entered a conference room for a daily briefing. He wasn't in the mood for the meeting, but he was the one to suggest them, so he was obligated to attend.

As he entered, most of the seats around the large table were already taken. The majority were occupied by the Commissioners and their top aides, while the rest of the staff sat along the inside walls. Tyler took his usual seat at the far end of the table and noticed Marshall Sliss was unusually absent. Fortunately, one of the Commissioners was missing, so Tyler didn't feel compelled to start.

While they waited, Tyler looked over the daily agenda. Everything looked routine except a small entry at the bottom titled *Intelligence Update*. Ordinarily, this wouldn't be unusual, but they'd just had an intelligence briefing the day before. It seemed unlikely pertinent intelligence would have suddenly surfaced. Tyler assumed they'd forgotten to remove it when updating the agenda. Still, a part of him was uneasy.

Finally, the missing Commissioner took his seat, removing Tyler's last excuse to delay. He hoped the Marshall would eventually show up.

"Good afternoon, everyone," Tyler began, "shall we get started?"

They settled in front of their opened viewers to follow along with the agenda. Tyler turned the meeting over to Officer Slaas who had become adept at running the meetings. She quickly reviewed the agenda before turning the proceedings over to the first speaker. Tyler noted she did not comment on the Intelligence Update at the bottom of the list. Perhaps it was only a typo.

Every speaker delivered their report in a crisp, military fashion, but Tyler's mind kept dwelling on the Marshall and his failure to attend. It was not like the Marshall and Tyler was concerned. The Marshall's distance had steadily increased, and Tyler worried the Marshall's suspicions were deeply affecting their relationship.

Where could he be? Tyler thought.

Don't worry, Adanni answered, he is too loyal to betray his beloved Admiral.

Tyler didn't like the way Adanni had said it. He had great respect for the Marshall, regardless of what Adanni thought.

The man is a good man, Tyler retorted, something you wouldn't know anything about!

But you do, drug dealer?

That stung. Tyler hated that Adanni had access to every one of his memories.

Adanni continued. *Did you give Mr. Barkowski the same respect?*

Tyler hadn't thought about that name in years. It hurt deep to have the wounds reopened. Mr. Barkowski had been a neighbor of Tyler's when Tyler had attended the community college. Mr. Barkowski stumbled upon Tyler's drug transactions, and although Tyler hadn't done anything about it, Raul sent men over to intimidate the man.

Tyler thought back to that incident with guilt and pain. The man had been a retired sergeant from the Army with a disability affecting his ability to walk. Tyler thought the man was a great neighbor, but he knew Mr. Barkowski wouldn't keep the incident to himself. Mr. Barkowski was a good man and wanted people like Tyler out of the neighborhood.

Tyler pleaded with Raul to back off, but Raul insisted a show of weakness would hurt business. Unfortunately, Mr. Barkowski was not easily intimidated, and practically threw Raul's goons out. Two days later, he found his dog beheaded in the backyard. Tyler knew that would keep the man quiet but moved to another part of town anyway. The guilt had been hard to live with.

Tyler had suppressed the incident for years, but now Adanni dredged it up and threw it in his face. Adanni had a point—Tyler's past was filled with incidents where good people were hurt. Tyler had no response.

That's what I thought. Adanni concluded.

Tyler was so lost in his memories, he barely heard something about intelligence? He snapped out of it and focused on the new speaker. It wasn't a person he recognized.

"...and we believe this area has been the proving grounds for new weapons. Until recently, we hadn't seen unusual testing at this facility. If our sources are correct in their analysis, Krildon recently conducted a test using a new particle weapon."

Tyler's heart skipped a beat.

"Although our sources did not see the test for themselves, reconnaissance photos afterwards revealed startling and disturbing facts."

The man paused while he fiddled with some of the controls on the table. Immediately, a three dimensional image of an asteroid appeared above the center of the table. By itself, it didn't seem startling, but the man continued to fiddle with the controls.

"Ah, there we are." He said peering up from the console.

Tyler stared into the new image, disturbed by what he saw. One of the large craters from the first image was filled with red. It looked like a large piece of a red asteroid was jammed into it.

"The image you are seeing is the original image of this particular asteroid. The portion you see in red is the portion that is missing from our recent reconnaissance photos." The man paused while his audience took in the implications. "Let me give you additional details so you understand the true enormity of what we are seeing."

Once again he fiddled with the controls and the image changed. The image was quickly overlaid with various numbers and writing. Tyler ignored that and stared at the blue portion that was added to the red. It was not a large blue area, and in fact, was dwarfed by the red it sat within. Tyler feared the worst.

"As you can see, this asteroid was nearly the size of one of our fleet refurbishing asteroids. As you know, those facilities are capable of servicing ships nearly as large as our flagship." Again, he paused while his words were absorbed.

Tyler already knew what they were seeing, and he dreaded what it might mean. He waited for the preliminary analysis.

The man started again. "The portion in blue represents how much of the asteroid would have been affected by a direct hit with our largest and most powerful missile. Yes, I said nuclear missile."

Tyler watched the effect on the crowd. Everyone stared in horror, struck by the magnitude of what they were seeing. Not only was this suspected to be a particle weapon, it appeared to be capable of inflicting greater damage than their best weapons.

"As you can see, we believe the nominal yield of this new weapon is about one hundred times that of the yield of our largest missile. The part of the asteroid destroyed during this test was approximately thirty-one percent of the overall mass.

Reconnaissance scans of the surrounding space confirm fragments in quantities nearly equal to the missing mass.”

That was enough for one of the Commissioners to react.

“Surely, that was not a particle weapon,” he said almost laughing, “they simply buried an atomic ordinance to create this effect.”

Several others spoke out in agreement with the Commissioner, but looked nervous.

“Vice Secretary Hool,” the man responded coolly, “Marshall Triin had the same assessment at first glance. However, if you look at the analysis of the debris field, you will notice the radioactive signature is nearly identical to that of a particle weapon, not an atomic one.”

The Commissioner would not back down. “You said nearly, what was different?”

“That we don't understand,” the man conceded, “but it is nearly identical to a particle weapon signature.”

The Commissioner looked dubious, but Tyler didn't want to participate in the discussion. He knew what they had discovered.

A staff member against the wall sat up and spoke. “If that is the result of a particle weapon, then how big is the weapon? How does it get so much yield, and is it being deployed throughout their fleet?”

Again, the audience murmured agreement with the questions.

“Well,” the man hesitated, “we don't have sufficient intelligence to answer any of those questions—at this time.”

The room exploded with an uproar as voices offered suggestions on how to get the information, how to combat the new threat, or how to modify their own offensive plans. Tyler even thought he heard someone say they should abandon the offensive. All of it didn't matter, so he took control.

When he stood, everyone sat down and turned their attention to him. He waited until it was quiet.

“Thank you, Officer...” he started.

“Liiri, sir,” the man humbly finished.

“Yes, Liiri,” Tyler was relieved for the reminder, “we thank you for this important bit of intelligence.”

Tyler watched as everyone around the room waited for him to express his opinions and give them direction.

“I know Marshall Triin is analyzing this intelligence and will undoubtedly provide each member of the Commission with a full

report. After receiving that report, you should quickly provide your own analysis with an impact statement for your area. I assume Admiral Teesen has been briefed and that this information will eventually circulate throughout our field commands. Until then, we will wait patiently and hope additional intelligence can be ascertained to help answer the questions we have.”

Tyler turned to Officer Slaas. “Anything else?”

“No, sir.” She responded crisply.

“Very well, meeting adjourned.”

With that, Tyler left the room, avoiding the questions his fellow Commissioners were dying to ask. He knew they would wonder whether this intelligence would force them to abandon the offensive. Tyler knew the answer to those questions, but he wasn't about to share them with anyone.

He hurried down the corridor towards his office, concerned about the information coming to light. If they believed it to be true, they would likely recommend an indefinite hold on the offensive until they could ascertain the real threat. Tyler thought about scrlit treated hulls, and realized Poolto would not survive the offensive. Unfortunately, if the Emperor did not concede, they would learn, too soon, the truth behind this intelligence.

Tyler wondered how it was gathered. It was just the kind of information that would make the current situation more dangerous and precarious. It was as if someone were constantly putting Tyler into a corner. Initially, he had wanted the offensive to be scrapped, but now, he needed it to attain his new goals, and this new information could prevent that. If the intelligence stalled the effort, Tyler wouldn't have a report to deliver. Therefore, his meeting with the Emperor would only be to transfer power to Admiral Teesen. If that occurred, it would be hard to synchronize the situation with the peace ship.

Worse, Admiral Teesen could use this threat to demand the power transfer happen immediately. Tyler could understand the Emperor readily agreeing. That would be a disaster and could destroy the peace efforts completely. In that case, Krildon would be forced to attack, and Poolto would likely be vanquished. Tyler's mood deepened.

* * * *

Tyler finally caught up with the Marshall who excused his absence because of the new intelligence. He'd received it through sources shortly before the Commission and spent the rest of the time performing analysis and defining ramifications. As usual, his network worked diligently to provide the latest up to date information. Unfortunately, Tyler suspected most of that intelligence was being fed to them by Nayllen, the Imperial Palace, or both. He didn't tell the Marshall about these suspicions.

For Tyler, the only thing that mattered was the timing of the peace ship. Now that information about new weapons was confirmed, Poolto had no alternatives but to accept peace or face obliteration. The Imperial Palace pushed aside the new intelligence, claiming it was propaganda generated by the enemy to stall new offensives until their strength was increased.

Tyler was incredulous at the Palace's reaction even though it fit neatly into a pattern of someone who wanted a disastrous conclusion. Till now, the Marshall hadn't delivered any information concerning near-death experiences for the suspects. Tyler didn't push the matter since Marshall Sliss had become so suspicious.

Adanni believed the Marshall's loyalties were unfaltering, but Tyler no longer shared that belief. He knew if the Marshall sniffed even a faint possibility of betrayal, he would do anything within his power to stop it. Tyler played it easy with the Marshall hoping their plan would unfurl without further complications. Tyler found it difficult to be deceptive and felt enormous guilt because of it. The Marshall was a good man and deserved better.

The final intelligence report still contained holes that fed opponents the necessary leverage to discredit it. Fortunately, this was the one time where Tyler was on the side of those opposing the intelligence. He recognized it was in his best interests to allow the rebuke and refused to take a position on either side. *Let the stalemate continue!*

The commission was evenly split between those who wanted to scrap the offensive and those who continued to support it. Tyler remained uncommitted and kept reemphasizing the Commission's job was to ascertain Poolto's readiness rather than determine whether the offensive was warranted based on the latest intelligence. To support this position, he ordered the Commissioners to shelve the debate and focus energies on the task at hand.

There were murmurs of dissent, but they begrudgingly agreed to set aside the issue and continue their original charter. Tyler was relieved to divert their attention, if only temporarily, but his actions had created even greater suspicions in the Marshall. The Marshall viewed the new intelligence as a perfect opportunity to stall the offensive, as originally planned. Many military personnel that supported the Admiral in the beginning now asked why he would not take a position on the issue. Support in the Commission was faltering, and the Marshall was confused.

Tyler knew it soon wouldn't matter, so he tried his best to quell the Marshall's suspicions and calm the concerns of the Commission. When pressed on the issue, Tyler let loose his most imperious Admiral and refocused the staff on determining military readiness. Tyler even avoided meetings that didn't demand his presence. He knew he was walking a thin line, but time was running out and he had to keep them focused on the offensive. Only the Palace and Admiral Teesen seemed thrilled by his uncommitted approach. It disturbed Tyler to make them happy, but he had his mission.

His desire to stay away from the inner workings of the Commission forced him to accept a dinner invitation to his in-law's in Baneer. Their estate outside the capital was located within one of the rich suburbs of Yooso. He did not look forward to the questioning from his father-in-law on details of the Commission, especially the reaction to the weapons intelligence. Tyler already knew the intelligence and the Palace reaction were being met with skepticism on the Supreme Council, so he was prepared for lengthy discussions.

The distance to Baneer required Tyler to make the journey by air. Fortunately, he had access to military transports within the Supreme Military Command complex and easily secured a small, four person transport to the outskirts of the city. Once in Baneer, it was a short ride by ground car to the Councilor's estate.

As the car pulled in, Tyler prepared himself for an interesting evening. He didn't like that Toosia could not accompany him, so he looked forward to an uncomfortable and awkward evening. He felt inadequately prepared to handle questions about Toosia. It was one thing to hide information from a distance, but in person, it became very difficult. He hoped their conversations with Toosia were adequate to ease their suspicions. They were surely

concerned for their daughter's safety, especially when she was pregnant with their grandchild.

One of the many attendants opened the door for Tyler, welcoming him to the Councilor's modest home. Modest was not how Tyler would have described it. It was an extravagant mansion, but Tyler thanked him anyway. Like everything else in Yooso, the estate was lavish. In the front courtyard, an enormous fountain of water danced among intricately carved statues. It flaunted their wealth by wasting one of the most precious resources on the planet. Tyler felt slightly ill, but quickly remembered the Admiral was also one of the wealthiest people on the planet.

He followed the attendant across the courtyard and into one of several entrances to the main building. If the Admiral's memories served, the entrance they entered was reserved for family and intimate friends. It was not the main entrance intended for formal affairs. This one led to a small portion of the building that was private and felt more like a real home.

Tyler thanked the attendant and assured him he could find the rest of the way on his own. He headed down the corridor to where he knew they would be eating. Along the way, he passed the kitchen where the staff busily readied dinner. He turned left down one more corridor before ending at an open archway. This led into a large and cozy room complete with dining table and living area.

The room was empty, but a fire burned gently in the hearth against the back wall. That told Tyler he'd found the right place. He walked to the small bar next to the hearth and poured a large glass of brandy. He needed to steady himself if he was to make it through the evening, and what better way than alcohol.

He settled down with his drink in one of several comfortable chairs. As he waited, he surveyed the room comparing it with the Admiral's memories. The Admiral had not been in the room for many years, and Toosia's mother had clearly redecorated since that previous visit.

The Admiral's memories painted a picture of a room much more elegant and formal. Now, the room was filled with brighter colors and a more contemporary style. The furnishings were comfortable, but the fabrics and styles blended with the new décor, giving the room a feeling of space. Along the right wall, bookcases were replaced with fine art depicting scenes of Poolto. Around the rest of the room, paintings of plants and flowers hung on the wall lending a more natural feel.

Tyler approved even though it felt distinctly feminine. Tyler figured it was where Toosia and her mother had spent their time. Since drifting away from the Admiral, Toosia had spent more time with her mother than before.

"Ah, there you are, Nayllen." Toosia's mother came strolling into the room. "I hope your journey was well?"

"Yes," Tyler confirmed before getting up from his seat, "may I get you something to drink, Tooriin?"

"Yes, thank you." She replied as she took a seat on the couch. "I'll take a glass of the white wine if you please." She smiled broadly as he nodded and moved towards the bar.

"Hiirtee will join us soon." She assured.

Tyler didn't look forward to talking with the Councilor, but at least Toosia's mother seemed in good spirits. He handed her the wine and took his seat.

"Have you spoken with Toosia recently?" Tyler asked to break the ice. Best to get this out of the way early.

Tooriin took a sip from her wine before responding. "Yes, in fact I just spoke with her."

Tyler was a surprised, but hopeful the conversation would quell doubts or concerns they had.

"Oh, good, it has been a day since I last spoke with her." Tyler admitted. "Is everything okay?"

"Oh, yes," she said, "she is fine and looking forward to her return."

Tyler knew that she was scheduled to return in several days, but thought that it might be longer depending on how things played out. He hated having her so far away, but he believed she was safer on Siirneen than in the capital.

"Yes, I, too, look forward to her return." Tyler was sincere, but hoped he would still be alive to see it.

Tooriin smiled tightly and agreed with a nod before sipping more of her wine.

They sat in silence for several minutes, neither wanting to break it with small talk. Finally, Toosia's father entered, a smile on his face as he walked towards Tyler.

"Welcome, Nayllen." The Councilor greeted him. "We are so happy you could join us despite your schedule."

"I am honored, Councilor, thank you for inviting me." Nayllen bowed formally.

"Please, Nayllen, call me Hiirtee." The Councilor pleaded. "After all these years, I hope we can set aside the trappings of our positions while in the privacy of our homes."

With Hiirtee's light mood, Tyler thought the evening was shaping up to be okay.

"Sorry, Hiirtee." Tyler replied graciously. "It is often difficult to step out of character, if even for an evening."

"Yes," Hiirtee said jovially, "I hope you don't insist on Toosia calling you Admiral?"

They laughed lightly, and Tyler relaxed, the brandy taking effect. Tyler offered the Councilor a drink, but Hiirtee declined as dinner was about to commence. They took their seats around the small table, the Councilor at the head and Tyler and Tooriin on either side.

They enjoyed many courses interspersed with light conversation about the Supreme Council, the local politics in Baner, and the rising cost of property taxes outside the capital. Tyler was happy for the casual conversation and fine food. The meal was a delicious assortment of fresh fruits, vegetables, and meats served with several bottles of wine. Despite his reservations, Tyler enjoyed himself. It was a great relief from the pressures he was under.

They finished the last of their meal, and the Councilor instructed his staff to hold the dessert until later. The staff acquiesced as they cleared the table of dishes. Tyler was full and slightly drunk as he moved to a comfortable chair.

He sat back with a fresh brandy and smiled at his in-laws. "A fabulous dinner, Tooriin." He said. "Please, thank your staff for me."

"Thank you, Nayllen, I shall." She said quietly.

The last of the attendants finished clearing and walked out of the room, closing the recessed doors behind them.

As though waiting for the privacy, the Councilor spoke directly to Tyler. "Now that we are alone, we can discuss a matter of great importance that affects you and Toosia."

The statement caught Tyler off-guard and his earlier feelings of unease returned.

"I see," he said, "is that why you invited me here?"

"Yes." Hiirtee's response was flat.

"Fine," Tyler prepared himself, "what is it?"

The Councilor stole a quick glance at his wife before he began. Tyler could only speculate what it was about, but he assumed their concern for Toosia's safety was their number one issue.

"Well," Hiirtee began, "I am sure you are aware that we are concerned about Toosia and her safety, especially since she is pregnant?"

Tyler nodded, relieved his assumptions were correct.

"Well..." the Councilor hesitated, "we have spoken with her at great length and she has tried to calm us by convincing us she is looking after family interests."

Okay, Tyler thought, so far so good, although it seemed like they weren't buying the cover story.

"We ... well, we ... I mean I, looked into this and discovered your family does not have any off-world interests to be looked after. The only off-world investments you own are stocks in companies that are supplied by several mining operations. That does not warrant a visit, let alone an extended stay."

The Councilor paused and Tyler tried to hold his panic down. They had looked into his investments? Their concern for their daughter was extreme and they were willing to do anything to protect her. Tyler remained calm, not wanting to respond until he had heard everything. Hiirtee paused as though waiting for a response, but continued when Tyler remained silent.

"Of course we confronted Toosia with this information, and although she was angry at our prying, she finally confessed."

Tyler was now very alert. What did he mean confess? What did Toosia tell them? She wouldn't have told them the truth, would she? Tyler wasn't certain. He had to admit he really didn't know her that well, so he remained quiet.

Hiirtee took a drink and sat back. "Nayllen," he began, "I have to tell you that despite the pregnancy and the apparent change in you, we are still concerned about your relationship with Toosia."

The statement stung, but he couldn't blame them after the Admiral's years of abandonment. During that time, they were certain the relationship was over, especially after they knew about the Admiral's affair. Apparently, even Toosia couldn't change their attitudes about the Admiral. Tyler wondered how he could.

"Nayllen," Tooriin broke in, "she has told us everything."

Everything? Tyler tried not to show his surprise or fear. He noticed Hiirtee looked at his wife annoyed that she had cut to the chase.

"Yes," Hiirtee agreed, "she has told us everything."

"Wha ... what do you mean everything?" Tyler asked hoping that it was not *everything*.

"She told us about your ... your meeting with the Governor," Hiirtee replied calmly, "and your father!" He emphasized the last statement, confirming Tyler's fears. She had told them everything, and now they felt they had the opportunity to end the relationship they did not approve of. With one call, they could destroy the conspiracy and threaten the life of their daughter.

Tyler wasn't sure how to respond. "I see," he started, "and what do you intend on doing?" He feared the worst and was ready to warn them about Toosia being used as a pawn.

"We don't know, as yet, that is why we wanted to talk with you."

Tyler sensed Hiirtee was telling the truth, so he had to play his cards just right to survive this new crisis.

"Fair enough," Tyler responded, trying to keep the fear out of his voice, "but I must warn you, Toosia's safety will be determined by what you decide."

Tyler had to warn them. They had to know what they were up against. They both stole glances at the other, apparently trying to decide who should respond. Finally, Tooriin spoke up.

"We already know about Nayllen, she as much as told us that she was a guest without her consent. However, we agreed with her that her place is here with her family, so we paid to have her rescued and brought home."

"What?" Tyler was stunned. They had rescued her? A part of him was happy that she was out of their control, but he feared the repercussions of their meddling. What would Nayllen do when he found out? Would he send a message to the Admiral, perhaps a transport accident on her way home? Fear gripped him.

"Do you know who you are dealing with?" Tyler demanded, the anger in his voice rising. "These people are capable of anything and know nearly everything that happens. I have seen it demonstrated. Nayllen Hooss is not a man to cross!"

Despite his outburst, both remained calm. This made Tyler only angrier. The Councilor waited for Tyler to finish his tirade. He finally stopped, having nothing more to say. He sat down fuming. Toosia was definitely in danger, especially if she came back to the capital.

"Don't worry, Nayllen, she is safe." The Councilor assured.

“Really,” Tyler said bitterly, “you don’t know Nayllen like I do—you don’t know what he is capable of.”

Hiirtee furrowed his brows. “Nonsense, I know Mr. Hooss ... or people like him. They want only one thing, power.”

“Yes, so what makes you think he won’t harm Toosia?”

Hiirtee’s expression became flat. “Simple, he assured me he wouldn’t.”

“What,” Tyler was outraged, “you spoke with him?”

“Yes, it was Hooss I paid to have Toosia released.”

Tyler couldn’t believe what he was hearing, they had paid Nayllen to release their daughter and guarantee her safety? It couldn’t be. Why would Nayllen take money to release her? He was already rich beyond measure, why would money motivate him?

“Great,” Tyler began, “and now you suppose paying him money is enough to secure her safety and yours? I doubt you have enough money to interest him.”

“True enough,” Hiirtee conceded, “but money is not all I have to offer.” He paused. “I offered him power, or rather what little I have in the Council.”

Tyler couldn’t believe what he was hearing—everything was being blown out of proportion. Now Toosia’s father agreed to compromise his professional integrity, when all he had to do was wait? Tyler was certain everything was going to end badly. Too much was unraveling, and soon it would be impossible to keep under wraps.

“So, I suppose Nayllen knows you know about the peace ship?” Tyler asked sounding more than exasperated.

“Of course,” the Councilor admitted, “at first I tried to play it off as though I didn’t know everything, but he had a recording of my conversation with Toosia.”

Tyler groaned, they were all part of the conspiracy now, and regardless of what happened, they would not likely survive.

“So what did you promise him?” Tyler asked.

“I promised that if their plan succeeded, I would support the new government and help win the Council to their side. To embrace the new peace.”

“And if it does not succeed? What then? My child spends the rest of their life without parents or grandparents?” Tyler knew his last comment upset them, but he no longer cared.

Hiiirtee looked straight at Tyler, a serious demeanor consuming his expression. "Yes, Nayllen, that is what might happen if they do not succeed. But it is your traitorous behavior that will orphan your only child, so you better make sure their plan succeeds! At least then, our grandchild might have a family and life in a peaceful world! You brought this upon us, so you better make sure we survive."

Tyler had never seen Toosia's father so angry, his own anger cooled from the display. He hadn't had a choice becoming a traitor, but he was the one that had precipitated the events. If he would have just left everything alone, not been curious when he came across the listing flag ship, then maybe, the Admiral would have just died and none of this would have happened.

Adanni broke into his reverie uninvited. *Sure, and then the Admiral would not have given his wife the child she always wanted, the Emperor would not have any opposition to his destructive plans, and the planet would have been plunged into a final battle that would have spelled the end to this world!*

Shut up, no one asked you! Tyler vented his anger inward even though he knew the alien was right. It was as though fate had determined this world would be thrown into chaos, and only Tyler had the slimmest chance to thwart it.

"I didn't have any choice, Councilor." He said without force.

"Maybe you did, maybe didn't. Either way, you have the power to make it come out right, even if it kills you. And I mean that literally, Nayllen. When the time comes, you better make the right choices and not sacrifice us to save your own skin. If that time comes, you better act the officer you've always been and meet your doom with integrity. It is the very least you owe your child!"

Tyler could tell what kind of ending they were hoping for. Even if he survived, his relationship with his in-laws was over. They would do their best to convince their daughter to end it. Considering what the Emperor was capable of doing, Tyler admitted his odds of surviving were not high.

"Why is Toosia coming here?" Tyler asked, once again worried for her safety.

"She is not," Toornii replied softly, "we are both meeting her at one of my family's properties in the Siirsee province."

"When are you leaving?" Tyler asked.

"Tonight," Hiiirtee admitted, "after you return to the Capital."

Tyler thought about that, at least they would be far from the Capital. It might not matter if everything failed, but at least it was a temporary reprieve. Tyler felt sorry he would not be able to see her before it ended. He missed her and wanted to feel her touch once more. His love for her had grown strong, even stronger than his love for Linda, but he was not going to have a chance to show her that love. He would only be able to communicate it when they next spoke. If they spoke.

Tyler stood. "I see. Then, I will let you get on with your travel arrangements."

He moved to leave, pressured by concern for their safety. Travel accidents were not uncommon, and Tyler was certain Nayllen could easily arrange one. He hoped the Councilor's promise of support was enough to guarantee their safety. At least Toosia seemed safe, for the moment.

As he turned to leave, Tooriin stopped him. "Nayllen..." she paused as though what she had to say was difficult, "I know you will do the right thing for your family and your world."

He smiled weakly at the thin vote of confidence—he didn't share her optimism. He glanced briefly at the Councilor who stared back defiantly. "Good luck, sir, please take care of my wife and child."

The Councilor didn't respond, so Tyler nodded to Tooriin before heading back into the courtyard. As the ground car pulled away from the Slay estate, Tyler sat quietly thinking about the fate that awaited him.

* * * *

When he arrived back in the capital, two urgent messages waited for him. He hoped one would be from the Marshall with the information he needed to find the Onyalum. He felt utterly helpless and yearned for something he could pursue to improve his odds. Unfortunately, neither message was from the Marshall.

The first carried the Imperial Seal of the Office of Regent Sneed. Tyler opened it with dread. As feared, the Palace had set the date and time for the turnover of the Command Codes. At this point, Tyler had no reason to delay, so he sent his acceptance. Now he needed to contact Nayllen and let them know the date and time.

As if by coincidence, the next message was from Nayllen, using the highest security encryption the military had. Tyler knew

it wasn't coincidence. Nayllen had access to the nearly everything in the Imperial Palace, so finding the date and time of the turn-over would have been easy.

Tyler opened the message:

Date and time acceptable. Package arriving. Wear contents to meeting. Your family and planet are depending on you.

NH

Short and sweet, just like Nayllen. Tyler groaned from the implied threat. He felt responsible for Toosia's parents joining the conspiracy and knew the pressure was on to ensure it went without a hitch.

Tyler needed to know who the Onyalum was prior to the turn-over. He still had a day before the meeting, so he hoped the Marshall would come through. His drive to find the Onyalum was so strong, he threw aside caution and called the Marshall directly for an update. He knew it would raise the man's suspicions, but with only a day left, he had to risk it.

"Yes, sir?" The Marshall answered crisp and remote.

"Sorry to bother you, Marshall," Tyler tried to sound casual, "but I wanted an update on that background information I requested."

Tyler waited while the Marshall accessed something online.

"It is not complete, but should be enough to start with. I should have the rest of it by tomorrow evening."

Tyler did not like the sound in the Marshall's voice. Clearly he felt left out and used, but Tyler had no choice. He could not share anything with the Marshall for fear of failure. It was bad enough his in-laws found out. If his staff knew, they would have no choice but turn in their leader.

No one on the planet would understand, or believe the idea of an Onyalum. It would sound so foreign—it would only cast suspicion on himself. He had to continue lying and hope the Marshall's loyalty outweighed his suspicions.

"Thank you, Marshall, please send me what you have and I'll expect the rest tomorrow."

"Yes, sir." His response was cold and distant.

Tyler couldn't even say goodnight before the Marshall disconnected. That was truly out of character, and it worried Tyler.

Nonetheless, the information he promised began streaming into his personal system.

Tyler left the office and moved into his living quarters to view the information from the comfort of a couch. He poured a tall glass of wine and settled in to read. He switched on the main viewer and downloaded the information the Marshall had sent. As usual, it was neatly organized and easily queried.

Tyler took a large sip of the wine as he steeled himself for the hunt. According to the categories provided, the Marshall had retrieved only the information on Admiral Teesen, Nayllen, and Regent Sneerd. Apparently, the information on the Emperor was forthcoming. No matter, Tyler was more interested in these three anyway.

He took another drink and opened the file on Teesen. He read through the medical and biographical information on the Admiral and immediately discounted him. According to his records, the man had almost never been sick in his life. The only injury he had sustained was during a Twiiling sport match in college. He had collided with an opposing player, and both were knocked unconscious for a brief period. Tyler noted the game was similar to Lacrosse on Earth.

Temporary unconsciousness would not have provided an opportunity for Onyalum possession, so that ruled him out. Adanni confirmed as much as Tyler moved on to Nayllen.

Before he opened Nayllen's file, a pop-up message informed Tyler the information was sealed by the Imperial Palace and opening it constituted a breach of Imperial Security punishable by imprisonment or death. It was a standard Imperial Seal, but what concerned Tyler was why Nayllen's records were sealed by the Palace? Tyler ignored the warning and opened the file. He was already a traitor—one more charge meant nothing.

By the time he finished looking over Nayllen's records, he had finished his glass of wine. He quickly refilled it and dug deeper into Nayllen's childhood. It appeared Nayllen was a very sick child, including an incurable, at the time, childhood disease that affected normal muscle development. He'd been bedridden for most of his childhood, and was once brought back from near death when his chest muscles failed and he stopped breathing.

Tyler was astounded, not only had he stopped breathing, but twice his heart had stopped on two different occasions. It was a miracle that he had survived to adulthood. According to current

records, a cure was found and new treatments had all but changed Nayllen into a normal, healthy adult.

It was enough for suspicions, but being so long ago almost ruled out Nayllen. What Onyalum would have chosen a bedridden child near death? He came from a rather obscure family of modest means, so little back then would have indicated the child would become a significant power. Current records indicated no health issues. Not even a single surgery.

Tyler was frustrated. Nayllen could have been possessed when he was a child, but Adanni agreed it was highly unlikely. Unfortunately, Tyler had to conclude it was probably not Nayllen. He had hoped it would have been. It would explain so much for Nayllen to be the evil spirit hell-bent on destruction. Now, however, Tyler had to believe Nayllen was nothing more than bad seed seeking power and influence. Perhaps his childhood illness was reason for his adult callousness.

He drank heavy from his wine and felt the numbing effects dull his anxiety. It was wonderful. Numb, that was what he needed to get through this crisis. He took another drink and opened the file on Regent Sneerd.

Surprisingly, his records weren't sealed. They were filled with intricate details that seemed extraordinary in official records. For instance, Tyler found references to behavioral problems when Sneerd was a small child, including handwritten accounts from his mother. Apparently Regent Sneerd had been a trouble child. *That fits!*

Tyler ran through the records astounded at what he was seeing. Sneerd was in and out of multiple institutions for troubled youth, and even a brief stint in a penal institution. He had swarms of doctors who constantly tried to determine the cause of his behavior, and his parents spent millions trying to rehabilitate him.

Tyler was amazed a man with such a checkered past had reached such powerful heights. But then, the Emperor was known to hire such thugs. Who else would do the work no Emperor would do? So much about Regent Sneerd began to make sense. He was devious and dangerous, and as far as Tyler was concerned, the number one suspect. Who better to attract an Onyalum than a person who was already destructive?

The only thing missing was a near-death experience. Tyler read past his college records and into his first career. Not surprising, he was recruited by the Imperial Palace into the

intelligence community for unspecified posts. Tyler thought he knew what that meant—assassination.

He had served in unspecified posts for over seven years before being promoted into the Emperor's personal staff. From there, he moved rapidly up through the ranks as he befriended the Emperor and influenced the political arena. At the early age of thirty-five, he was appointed to his current position of Regent. It was the highest post within the Imperial Palace.

Nice, the Emperor had an assassin as his highest advisor and chief of staff. It spoke volumes about the Emperor and his government. It was easy for Tyler to understand why traitors wanted to overthrow the Emperor and start a democratic government. Tyler couldn't understand why it hadn't happened before.

However, no one on Poolto really complained about the current system. Sure, there were some who had their own agendas, agendas that differed from the Palace. But Tyler assumed they were minorities that were quickly dealt with. *By Sneerd no doubt!*

Most of the common people enjoyed a prosperous life and rarely complained. Why would they want their government changed? He thought he began to see a potential flaw in the conspiracy. Even the National Hero might not be enough to convince the average person of Poolto that a democratic government was necessary.

With democracy, the average person would have to become involved with their government in a more intimate way. They would have to pay attention to its inner workings and make sure those in power were held accountable. Tyler doubted most wanted that responsibility. He thought back to many Americans who were not involved in the government and didn't vote. It would likely be the same on Poolto. That's when you had to watch out for who was in power. Tyler thought about Nayllen.

He finished his second glass of wine and refocused on Sneerd's records. There had to be something to cast suspicion on him besides his obviously evil nature. However, Tyler wasn't finding anything. Sure, he had been sick and he had injuries, especially during the fighting when he was younger.

Unfortunately, his records when he was unspecified were virtually non-existent. Obviously, those were sealed and inaccessible. Anything could have happened during those seven years. It was dangerous work and you were bound to be in

positions where injury and death were commonplace. But Tyler found nothing.

He had a new thought and switched his search tactics. Nearly everyone received physicals when appointed to high positions. If anything serious had happened to Sneerd during those seven years, it might show up in a physical later on. He found the date when Sneerd was appointed Regent and accessed the Imperial health records. There it was, a full physical examination upon acceptance of the post!

Tyler scanned the document, ignoring most of the information he didn't understand. Finally, he located a complete body scan that revealed every single scar, burn, bruise, and contusion the man ever had. There were many, but nothing that would be severe enough to place him near death.

Damn!

This was obviously going to be harder than Tyler had first thought—even with such prolific records. He refilled his glass while pondering the problem. He scanned all current medical records for anything unusual, but nothing appeared lethal or cause for alarm.

He had wanted Nayllen to be the one who was possessed, but failing that, he had always assumed it would be the Regent. Now, however, he didn't know what to think. Perhaps it was none of them. Maybe they were just greedy, evil men.

He had scanned through the Regent's mission entries and was ready to give up when something caught his eye. It was a simple file that had a special security lock on it. Although there were many of those, this one was named *Treerdeen*. The Admiral's memories stirred from the name, and Tyler searched to find out why.

There was only a small reference to the asteroid in an old battle report. According to the report, the asteroid was lost during the battle. It didn't seem to warrant special interest, but he was willing to search anything at this point.

Turning on another viewer, he called up information on the asteroid named *Treerdeen*. Unfortunately, he was not getting any hits. He changed his search parameters and tried searching for asteroids lost in the war. Finally, a single hit, but it didn't have any information. It was a simple list of asteroids lost during the first five years of the war.

At first, it appeared the list was simply names in three columns. Treerdeen was near the bottom with one other to the right of it. The other name was Kaagan, but Tyler assumed that was just another asteroid lost. It took a moment before he realized all the names to the right of those in the first column were Krildon names.

He saw the pattern. The first column contained the names of Poolto asteroids lost during the first five years of the war. The second column contained the new name for the asteroid after it was captured by Krildon. The third column, which Tyler noted had few names, contained the names of asteroids that were re-captured by Poolto. It all made sense, the new name for Treerdeen was Kaagan, and was likely still a possession of Krildon.

He opened another query and entered Kaagan. According to the search results, Kaagan was both an industrial park on Krildon and an asteroid captured during the war. He looked through the information but only found general descriptions of Kaagan and its economic feasibility. Apparently, the asteroid had little in the way of resources, but did provide a tactical advantage.

He was frustrated since there was nothing to connect the Regent with this asteroid other than the locked file. He made several attempts to unlock the file himself, but nothing worked. All his military Command Codes failed.

The wine and fruitless searches were taking their toll, and Tyler was ready to call it a night. He was about to shut down the viewers when he thought about searching the military records for Kaagan. Surely if it was lost in the war, there would be some records within the military, especially if it had tactical value.

He queried several databases and received only marginal hits. Finally, while searching the procurement records, he found a report labeled *Battle Losses – Asteroids*. The dates coincided with the first five years of the war. He opened it and found an entry for Treerdeen. According to the records, Treerdeen was a small military outpost built as a refurbishing station near the frontlines. It was still under construction when Krildon attacked.

Tyler scanned through various lists of equipment and ordinance that had been on the asteroid at the time of the battle. From an overall war standpoint, Treerdeen was an insignificant loss other than its location. Tyler was ready to give up when he saw a personnel manifest scroll by. He stopped and moved back. The list contained names and identification numbers, no rank or military affiliations. Tyler couldn't even tell who was civilian or who was

military. However, he noted that near the top of the list was the name, A. Sneerd.

Tyler thought it couldn't be coincidence—Sneerd had been on that asteroid. In fact, he had been on the asteroid when it had been attacked and captured. If that were true, then Sneerd had been captured. Tyler easily confirmed this when he found a prisoner exchange comment. Apparently, all captured personnel were eventually returned in exchange for Krildon prisoners.

It was starting to make sense why this file was locked. If the public found out Regent Sneerd had been a prisoner of Krildon, then suspicion would have been cast on him and the Imperial Palace. No returned prisoners were ever fully trusted again. It was military policy to discharge all prisoners returned by the enemy. They were not treated poorly—they were simply removed from positions of authority. Many were given pensions for their honored service and put out to pasture.

This is what made Sneerd's capture so problematic. He was then, and still is the highest ranking person on the Imperial Staff. Despite his capture and six month detainment, the Palace had kept him in his position. Why would the Emperor ignore the general policy? Did Sneerd have information on the Emperor that would persuade him to bury this? Tyler didn't think he could find out without opening the file. He wondered what Sneerd had been doing on such an insignificant asteroid to begin with, especially one so close to the front.

He had to see the contents of that file even if it didn't confirm his suspicions of Onyalum possession. He called up Officer Slaas and woke her. He hadn't realized how late it was, but then, he only had a day to work this out.

"Officer Slaas," he began, "I have a sealed file from the Imperial Palace that I need access to. Unfortunately, the contents are ... delicate and cannot be seen by anyone other than myself. Is there any way to break the seal myself?"

She looked tired, but was giving it thoughtful deliberation before answering.

"I think there might be, sir, but I'll need to contact someone I know from the academy." She paused and looked concerned. "Sir, should I be concerned for my career if I help you with this?"

Tyler was surprised by her bluntness, but she had a right to know. "It might look bad if something came of it, but for the moment, it is between you and I."

"I understand, sir," she said calmly, "I don't think I'll need the file, but can you send me a brief description of its security seal?"

Tyler agreed and forwarded the description. Officer Slaas promised him news as soon as possible. Tyler instructed her to keep all information in verbal communications to prevent any trail from being formed. She agreed and said she would call immediately when she had something.

Tyler was curious, what did the file contain and how could that information be used against Sneerd? Would it be enough to convince the Emperor to accept peace? Tyler doubted it but was willing to use anything at that point—even if it was thin.

He ran down the next day's schedule before turning into bed. If he was lucky, he could still get a few hours sleep before his first meeting. It was with Marshall Sliss, and he dreaded the possible questions he would face concerning the medical information. He needed to stall the Marshall but was too tired to think of anything. Perhaps in the morning he would have fresh ideas? At least he'd likely be sober.

* * * *

The final day proceeded fast. Tyler woke early with a pounding headache from the wine, but after eating breakfast, he felt significantly better by the time he met Marshall Sliss.

Despite his earlier trepidation, the meeting was brief, professional, although somewhat cold. Even though Tyler had expected the Marshall to question him about the medical information, the Marshall uncharacteristically remained quiet and on-task. Since Tyler felt woozy from the night before, he was happy to avoid the conversation. He even held back from asking for the missing medical information on the Emperor.

As the day wore on, meeting after meeting became a blur in which Tyler barely participated. He could not take his mind off of the upcoming events. He played out the scenario over and over in his mind, but was never satisfied with how he handled it. He had to admit, he was unskilled as a traitor, and everything he believed in did not necessarily match those of his co-conspirators. It made it difficult for him to support the cause with real conviction.

Around lunchtime, he received a message from Officer Slaas urging him to contact her. When he was released, he made his way

back to his office and called her back. It was brief as she wished to see him in person.

When she arrived, she was all business. Despite the implied threat to her career, she had tracked down an illegal method to crack the sealed file. Tyler wanted her to simply tell him how, but she insisted doing it herself to save time. Tyler didn't ask how she found out, but let her do the work while he sat back quietly. Only once did he see a look of curiosity on her face. The look came as she noted the file name, but was quickly replaced with professional focus as she continued to break the seal.

It took ten minutes before the contents of the file scrolled across the screen. As if wanting to protect herself from further implication, Officer Slaas immediately turned away from the opened file and asked if there was anything else she could assist him with. Tyler told her no, thanked her, and released her to her duties.

He spent the rest of lunch reading all the contents of the file. It was created by the Intelligence branch of the Imperial Palace, and Tyler was surprised it was with the rest of Sneerd's personal files. Nonetheless, it was a summary report on the incident at Treerdeen. The report had been requested personally by the Emperor. Apparently, the Emperor had originally wanted to maintain the policy of relieving the prisoner of war from his post, but a report had been requested to see if they could avoid it.

According to what Tyler read, Sneerd had been on Treerdeen at the request of the Emperor himself. Unfortunately, the report did not stipulate why. Tyler assumed the report was not classified at the same level as the mission Sneerd had been on.

The report listed various meetings between Sneerd and a variety of people, both civilian and military. It read rather normal until the part where the attack began. At that point, Sneerd had been in a meeting at a non-military facility far from the depot. It had probably saved his life as most of the military personnel and facilities were destroyed during the attack.

When the bombardment had begun, they had immediately moved to an escape vehicle built into the facility. Although the vehicle could not adequately fit all the people, they loaded it up anyway. The overloaded ship had just been capable of launching as the Krildon destroyed their facility. As the escape vehicle made its way towards Poolto controlled space, it was hit by a missile intended to disable the ship.

Unfortunately, the overcrowding caused the missile to create greater damage than simply disabling the ship. Instead, the ship decompressed, and by the time it was captured, nearly everyone was either unconscious or dead. Among the dead was one A. Sneerd. Remarkably, he'd been brought back from death by surgeons on the enemy ship. Seven other dead were also revived.

Tyler thought the story had too many similarities to his own. At that point, he had to assume Sneerd was the most likely candidate. It was both logical and practical. Even after being a prisoner for six months, Sneerd was placed in isolation for nearly a year undergoing extensive psychological evaluation. Remarkably, he had been the one who had requested the treatment and evaluation. All of it was carried out by the Intelligence branch at a secret facility located somewhere within the Imperial Palace.

The rest of the report listed the results of various testing they'd done, with a final page outlining the overall results of the incident with a recommendation to re-instate Sneerd to his post as Imperial Regent. Apparently, the Emperor had been satisfied with the results or he would have removed Sneerd from office.

Tyler didn't know what type of testing Sneerd had been through, but some of the Admiral's memories suggested it was something akin to torture. Tyler had a new respect for the man's tough veneer. It was no wonder he was such a dangerous individual. Tyler knew he would have to play his cards carefully—Sneerd was not a man to trifle with.

All of this left him feeling greater anxiety about the upcoming command code turn-over. If Sneerd was possessed, then he might also suspect the Admiral. Tyler was no match for a man who had gone through so much combined with intelligence experience. He felt a chill of fear as he returned to rest of the meeting.

Everything was beginning to feel like a dream, and Tyler went through the afternoon schedule in a trance-like state. In his mind, various worst-case scenarios played out over and over again. Even the Admiral's most powerful tactics were unable to devise a suitable response. Tyler was alone against formidable powers. Even Adanni remained unusually quiet.

This feeling of loneliness continued to haunt him as he made his way back to his quarters. His agenda complete, only a night of sleep stood between him and his fate. He had no illusions about sleep. Although he needed the rest to fortify his resolve, he also knew the import of tomorrow's events would deny him that basic

necessity. Instead, he retired to the couch and opened another bottle of wine. Perhaps inebriation would bring sleep—if only a less restful one.

* * * *

In the morning, Tyler drifted through his normal routine: breakfast, the latest news, daily briefings. He ignored most of it. Instead, he wrestled with fear and anxiety about the meeting to come. He was to report to the Palace later that morning in a transport provided. It seemed odd they ordered transport since he could easily walk the distance. His anxiety barely in check, he dressed in formal attire as appropriate for the Palace.

Before catching the transport, he briefly met with his staff. The Marshall was absent, and no one could explain why. Despite that, Officer Slaas took charge and quickly ran down the list of items on the agenda. The only message Tyler had from the Marshall was a private note indicating the information he requested was delayed another day.

Tyler read the message with little concern. He was certain the person to fear was Regent Sneerd and he still didn't have a plan to deal with it. The staff meeting ended abruptly while he was lost in thought. He noticed puzzled looks and quickly took charge to release them. He knew they expected a response, but he delayed the questions until returning from the Palace. *Assuming I return.*

* * * *

Although the Admiral had been to the Palace many times, the memories of it didn't ease Tyler's anxiety. He desperately wanted a drink but was glad he was sober for the meeting. Dutifully, he wore the small device Nayllen had provided. He had almost left it behind but remembered it at the last moment. Nayllen failed to tell him what it was for, but he wore it anyway. He only hoped it passed the security screening.

It, and he, both passed through security without a glitch. The Admiral held no memories of security checks so invasive for someone of his position. He assumed they were new precautions due to the secrecy surrounding their new offensive. Regardless, he was extremely nervous when placed in the scanner.

The scanner only detected his personal communication device and not the device Nayllen provided. *Chalk one up for Nayllen!*

As Tyler was escorted by three Palace guards, he noticed not much had changed in that part of the Palace. It was still elegantly decorated and adorned with some of the finest art of Poolto. Tyler admired many of the pieces, especially one scenic painting that looked like the Tooland Estate Winery. It made Tyler think about Toosia and settling down. If he survived, they would move to Tooland and raise a family. *If I survive.*

Adanni had remained eerily quiet up to that point. He hadn't even visited Tyler's dreams. Tyler assumed his lack of real sleep didn't provide the opportunity. Still, he had tried to engage the alien several times but was quickly put off. The last thing Adanni had said was 'If I am needed, I will speak'. Tyler wasn't certain but he almost sensed fear.

They moved out of the public areas and down several levels to more private floors. He had two guards leading with one following behind. It made Tyler feel like a condemned man on the way to the gallows. He hoped his nerves weren't as visible as they felt.

Finally, they came to the end of a long corridor barren of décor. The two guards stopped and stood at either side of the simple door. The Admiral had no memories of this area, and it fed into his fears. One of the guards opened the door and nodded for Tyler to enter. Tyler braced himself before walking into the room.

Despite the bland corridor, the room was large and grand. He noted a large dais with what could only be called a throne to his left. To his right was a series of tiered seating that looked similar to jury seats in a courtroom. Dominating the center of the back wall was a large view screen dwarfing everything else. Tyler figured it was at least thirty feet tall and just as wide.

The ceiling soared a hundred feet overhead decorated in gold trim and intricately carved figures. Tyler didn't recognize the various scenes they depicted, though it made him think of the Governor's office on Siirneen. However, this room was square and twice the size. He expected to see the Emperor on the throne, but it was empty.

In fact, Tyler was the only person in the room. He was a little surprised but took one of the comfortable seats facing the viewer. His anxiety churned, and being alone made it grow exponentially. The Admiral's memories of taking over the Command Codes did

not match the situation he currently found himself in. *Calm down! Things change over so many years.* He was not reassured.

He nearly jumped at the sound of a door opening to his right. Several attendants entered followed closely by Admiral Teesen. Tyler rose from his seat and nodded to his compatriot. He noted Teesen looked somber despite getting what he'd always desired. Admiral Teesen moved to a chair near Tyler and remained standing. Tyler followed suit as the attendants placed small devices next to each chair. Tyler recognized them as the command code transfer devices.

After placing a device near the empty seat across from Tyler, the attendants stood behind each chair waiting. Finally, a new attendant entered the room to announce the Emperor.

"Supreme Commander of Poolto Forces and Admiral Oslo, please honor our beloved and great leader, Emperor Hallen Yooso IV." With that he bowed deeply as the Emperor made his way into the room.

The Emperor wasted no time taking his seat across from Tyler. Tyler and Admiral Teesen took theirs in turn, Tyler waiting last as demanded by rank.

The Emperor jumped right into it. "Perhaps before we get started, we should transfer the Codes." He signaled the devices next to each of their seats.

Tyler was confused. Before they get started? He had thought the entire reason for the meeting was the transfer. Did they expect him to report on the Commission's progress? He was not prepared to do that. The commission hadn't even finished the report.

Tyler leaned forward. "I'm sorry, sir, did you say before we get started?"

"Indeed," the Emperor replied cryptically, "just take the device next to you and we can begin."

Tyler watched Admiral Teesen and the Emperor pick up their devices. What was he to do? He had assumed a more elaborate ceremony before handing the Codes over. In the past, each member had taken pledges and verified their identity before beginning the transfer. How could they bypass that process? Tyler was confused and felt a little fear. He'd not been prepared to act so quickly. Nayllen had said he would receive a signal that would indicate the peace ship's readiness. However, he hadn't said what the signal would be.

He had no choice, he had to divert suspicion and follow along. At least Regent Sneerd was not present. He picked up his device and waited.

“Good,” the Emperor said as he fiddled with some controls on his device, “I believe we each stick a finger into the hole on the left side of the device and then press the large button on the top. That will verify our identities so we can proceed.”

They each placed their fingers into the small holes and pressed the button. Tyler felt something warm against the tip of his finger followed by a tiny prick. It was not painful, just unexpected. Instantly after the prick, Tyler felt a cooling sensation sweep over his entire finger. Suddenly, a blue light lit next to the button. It took only a few moments before each of them had blue lights displayed. Tyler was relieved to see his matched theirs.

“Excellent, we are who we say we are. Now, we each will be given a statement on the small viewer on the backside of the device. Please read the statements carefully before pressing the large button to confirm your acceptance.”

Again, Tyler followed suit as each flipped their device over to read the display. Although the screen was small, Tyler easily read the text. The statements matched the pledges in the Admiral's memories. Apparently the process was automated to make it more efficient. Just what Tyler didn't need, efficiency.

He quickly read the statements before turning over the device and pressing the large button. Like before, the device displayed a blue light.

Damn! Tyler thought, they were nearly to the transfer. There was still no signal from the peace ship. Once he turned over the Codes, Teesen would change them or use them to re-enable the fleet after they were disabled. Tyler was running out of time and didn't know how to stall.

“Fine,” the Emperor's light glowed blue, “Admiral Oslo, please enter your Codes into the device using the viewer on the backside. I'll enter the Imperial transfer Codes, and at that point, Admiral Teesen will receive the Command Codes on his device. He will then memorize these Codes before ending this part of the meeting.”

There it was again, a reference to there being more to the meeting than the transfer. Tyler had no choice but to comply. Nothing he could do at that point would stall the proceedings without raising suspicions. He hoped the peace ship, or Nayllen,

was watching. Otherwise, the Codes would soon be Admiral Teesen's. Protocol dictated he had to immediately change them, although that would take time to propagate to the fleet.

Tyler flipped over his device and entered the Command Codes. He entered them as slowly as he could, thinking something would happen to stall it at any moment. Nothing. The Emperor had already entered his own Codes and sat waiting, a blue light displayed on his device.

Tyler could no longer stall and completed the long sequence before flipping the device over and pressing the button. It took a moment before his device displayed a blue light. Just as quickly, a blue light lit on Admiral Teesen's device. On that signal, Admiral Teesen flipped his device and began memorizing the Codes. If the Admiral's memory held true, Admiral Teesen had about three minutes to memorize the Codes before they were erased. So far, it had all followed the Admiral's memories except in the past they had used only one device.

Finally, the blue lights went out on all three devices as the process completed. The peace ship was too late. Tyler still held the device, fear paralyzing him. How would he proceed? The device vibrated gently in his hands as the self-destruct mechanism destroyed the circuitry inside. He placed it back on the table as despair swept through him. He'd let down his family, and now they might pay the ultimate price.

How could he have known it would happen so fast? What could he have done? Surely, Nayllen knew what was happening, how could they blame him for the failure? Where were they? Where was the signal?

Admiral Teesen got up from his chair and moved to the console beneath the large viewer. Tyler knew Teesen was preparing to change the Codes, and there was nothing he could do about it.

The Emperor, looking satisfied, put down his device and signaled to an attendant. At his signal, the attendant walked over to the door on the right and opened it. Tyler watched several people enter and take seats in the tiers. It looked like a jury returning from recess.

At the same time, the main entrance opened behind Tyler and he watched as a line of guards took up positions along the interior wall, blocking the entrance and looking menacing. Tyler was

extremely nervous. This wasn't part of the ceremony. What was going on?

He looked to the Emperor who ignored him. He looked to Admiral Teesen, but he also ignored the changes as he changed the Command Codes. Tyler's anxiety was rising, though he tried to appear normal.

He stared at the rows of people filling the tiered seats but didn't recognize one of them. Since none wore rank or uniforms, he assumed they were civilians or part of the Imperial staff. Was this a new part of the ceremony? He didn't think so.

Admiral Teesen finished changing the Codes and returned to his seat. As if in a parade, signals to waiting people were sent through the door. Tyler watched in horror as more people entered the room and took seats behind the Emperor's.

First in line was Regent Sneerd who did not take a seat but signaled to those behind him to take one. Behind the Regent was Marshall Sliss, followed closely by Eyleeria. Neither made eye contact with Tyler, and he immediately knew nothing good was about to happen.

The last one to enter was none other than Nayllen Hooss, looking smug and content as usual. He took his seat and the Emperor stared coldly into Tyler's eyes.

"Admiral," he began, "you are probably wondering what is going on and why I have ordered these people to appear before us."

Tyler nodded.

The Emperor, satisfied with the gesture, continued.

"Very well, I will tell you. We have grave concerns over your behavior recently. In fact, we believe you to be involved in a vast conspiracy to overthrow this very government. In essence, to betray this planet to our enemy."

Tyler was stunned. He'd never expected this, and he had no idea how to react.

He remained emotionless. "I see, and what proof do you have of this charge?"

"A great deal actually. Today, we are here to understand the charges against you and to analyze the evidence before you are formally charged. The people in the stands consist of civilians randomly chosen to evaluate the evidence against you and to determine if charges are appropriate." The Emperor swept his hands toward the waiting jury.

Tyler followed the Emperor's hand and surveyed the jury once more. Some held looks of disbelief while others stared back menacingly. The Admiral was a National Hero, and those that were shocked must have been disturbed by what they were hearing. At least his reputation would hold some sway. He tried desperately to think of what evidence they could have to charge him but couldn't think of anything directly. Still, with Nayllen there, anything was possible. Had everything fallen apart and Nayllen was betraying him to save himself?

"And these people to my left?" Tyler asked waving a hand at Nayllen, the Marshall, and Eyleeria.

The Emperor gazed at them before responding. "These are your accusers here to give evidence."

Great. He could understand why Eyleeria was there, she obviously wanted revenge because he had rejected her. But the Marshall and Nayllen? Nayllen was part of the conspiracy, how could he give evidence? Tyler thought about his family and Nayllen's hold on them. Maybe that was it. They would be hostages to prevent Tyler from implicating Nayllen. Perfect, he was all alone.

He looked at the Marshall who wouldn't meet his eyes. The Marshall knew about Nayllen, so how could he sit with him now as an accuser? It didn't make sense. What evidence were they going to present? How could Tyler defend it?

As if reading his mind, the Emperor spoke. "You will not be able to defend against anything you hear today. You may only listen until charges are brought against you and you have your day in court."

So, that was it, he was defenseless against his accusers. The Emperor signaled to an official attendant who stepped forward, standing in front of the jury.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are here to bear witness to accusations and evidence against Admiral Osloo to determine if the heinous charges against him are warranted. I realize this may be upsetting, especially in light of his position as our hero. It is unfortunate and yet prophetic that his father betrayed our world."

That stung, and Tyler began to realize how this had all been set up—perhaps long ago. He waited to hear the testimony. He was curious to see what evidence they had to determine how he was betrayed.

Eyleeria was the first to be questioned. Tyler had no idea how she could have evidence that would constitute treason. She answered basic questions about how long she had worked for Admiral Oslool and what their relationship had been. Tyler hated the looks on the faces of the jury when she revealed she'd had a romantic relationship with the Admiral for many years. So much for his moral reputation.

The next question caught Tyler off-guard. Perhaps he hadn't heard right? The interrogator had asked how long she'd been employed by the Imperial Intelligence branch. Tyler couldn't believe it. She answered calmly that she'd been recruited while attending the military academy.

She was a spy! The thought cut deep. Admiral Oslool had been under surveillance for most of his career. Not only that, it had been from his lover. He felt totally doomed.

She recounted the accident that had placed Tyler in the coma. She also mentioned how he had significantly changed after regaining consciousness. He had spurned her advances, gone back with his wife, and regularly made religious comments. Tyler moaned as he thought about to his minor indiscretions. He'd hoped it would not come back to haunt him, but now it was used to cast greater doubt and suspicion.

Still, she had said nothing that constituted treason. He waited as the interrogator asked new questions.

"So, Miss Snillen, what evidence do you have as proof of the Admiral's treason?"

She nodded to an attendant who went to the console underneath the main viewer. The viewer came alive and after some fiddling, a picture filled with static began to take shape. Tyler watched in horror as the viewer displayed him with the Governor, the Admiral's father and Commandant Kulg. The picture was fuzzy and inaudible, but it was easy to make out everyone in the room. Tyler noted Nayllen's picture had somehow been conveniently removed from the scene. The seat where Nayllen had sat was vacant.

Eyleeria looked extremely proud of herself. "This was taken on a recent trip to Siirneen for meetings with field commanders. At that time, I had reasonable doubts about the trip and, therefore, placed a device on the Admiral to collect additional intelligence. The device was cleared through the proper channels, of course."

Of course, Tyler thought, probably at the Emperor or Sneerd's request. The Admiral and Tyler had been so naïve, how had the Admiral lasted so long?

Easy, he hadn't been a threat before.

Adanni's impromptu comment was cold comfort.

"As you can see, the Admiral and Governor Niis met with the Commander of the Third Fleet of the Krildon Republic Navy, Commandant Kulg. Even more shocking, the Admiral's own father, a branded traitor of Poolto, was alive and present." She cast Tyler a malevolent look as she said this. "Although we were unable to capture the audio portion of this meeting, we can only assume meeting a known traitor and one of the highest ranking military officials of our enemy was not a social visit."

The jury stared at the viewer incredulous. As far as they knew, the Admiral's father was dead. The fact that he was not fed their worst fears. Some cast furtive glances at Tyler, but none looked sympathetic. He began to understand why they'd believed he would not survive the conspiracy.

But what had happened to the conspiracy? Where was the peace ship? Had everything failed? Was the peace ship a ruse? Was everything designed to discredit him and brand him a traitor like the Admiral's father? Why? He had turned over the Codes and relinquished command, what more could they want? Did the disgrace and fall of the National Hero really serve their purposes? How would the war effort continue without a rallying figure? He could not see the pattern, and sat lonely and confused.

He realized no peace ship was on its way, and no signal would be sent. Like Tyler, Nayllen had probably betrayed them all to gain political clout. Perhaps it was one big charade, designed by Nayllen to promote himself and his goals. Tyler didn't know what those were, but considering evidence had been tampered with, Nayllen clearly had the backing of the Emperor.

Power, was that what all this was about? Tyler thought about Toosia and her parents, would they survive? If they did, would they survive the disgrace? It was certain Toosia's father would be removed from the Council. He might also be implicated, especially if he had really trusted Nayllen. Or maybe that was it! Perhaps he had brokered a deal with Nayllen to protect his family when this all unraveled. Tyler no longer knew who he could trust.

He even began imagining Toosia was part of the betrayal. She and the Admiral were disillusioned for so long. Maybe she had

fallen out of love with him during all those years. The Admiral's affair would have been enough for her to throw aside spousal loyalty. Did he really believe that making love to her twice and getting her pregnant was enough to overcome the years of abuse and humiliation she had suffered? Perhaps she, too, longed for this day—revenge at last!

He'd been betrayed by everyone he'd known. It was fitting, the betrayer betrayed. Tyler had known deep down that he was out of his league from the outset. Only now did he see how naive and unprepared he truly was. He didn't have the experience and inherent distrust to recognize the webs that were woven around him. His own arrogance was his downfall. He should have listened to Adanni a long time ago and stopped playing with the big boys.

He thought about Adanni and his unusual silence. If ever he needed him, now was time.

And what would you have me say? Adanni asked coldly. *I told you this would happen.*

That's it? Tyler exclaimed incredulous. *Just an 'I told you so'?*
Yes. Was the only reply.

Adanni's lack of participation made Tyler mad. His anger grew to embrace everything that had happened to him since that fateful accident in the park so long ago and so far away. This was the fabulous life he was to experience? This was his destiny? To screw up everything and destroy all he had tried to save?

He swore at Thosolan, at Adanni, and the Universe that had let him live. He'd been doomed from the moment he took over as the Admiral.

The sound of Marshall Sliss brought Tyler back to the proceedings. The Marshall, with clear pain in his voice, recounted the strange events and behaviors since the Admiral had come out of his coma. It was plain to see the Marshall was alienated by the new Admiral and had finally taken action against him. Tyler had known the Marshall would be the hardest one to fool. Apparently, he had not.

Tyler was touched by the fact that the Marshall was cushioning everything he said with an implied excuse that the Admiral's actions were a direct result of his injuries. His contention, despite the interrogators' admonishments, was that the Admiral had suffered extraordinary battle fatigue and could no longer make sound decisions. He recounted battle after battle, painting a

sympathetic picture of a great man who had finally succumbed to his own wartime successes.

Tyler watched some in the jury look sympathetic, and others doubtful. Finally, the interrogator pushed to the part that was likely responsible for the Marshall's cave in, the health record information Tyler had requested. According to the interrogator, the query for such information was intercepted immediately and a full investigation started. Once it was traced to the Marshall, he was confronted and confessed.

Tyler didn't blame the Marshall. Tyler had never confided in him and had let his suspicions run wild. It was only a matter of time, and maybe a part of the Marshall wanted to get caught. Maybe he had wanted to be confronted so that he could tell someone about his beloved Admiral who had flipped his wig. Tyler felt sorry for the Marshall. He only hoped he would be spared similar charges for his testimony. He deserved to retire with honor.

When asked why the Admiral had wanted the health records, the Marshall responded with what he knew. He told the jury the Admiral had wanted to use the records against those persons, but the Marshall admitted he didn't know how. The interrogator seized on that to suggest the Admiral was looking for susceptibilities to exploit for assassinations.

The Marshall was shocked by the suggestion, but Tyler noted several jury members shot questioning and unsympathetic looks his way. Considering everything they had heard, it made logical sense to jump to that conclusion. If you believed the individual was plotting to overthrow the government, then assassination was a well known tool to reach that goal. Tyler heard another nail pounded into his coffin.

The Marshall fought valiantly against the accusations, but finally, conceded such a conclusion was in the realm of possibility. With that final admission, the Marshall looked beaten and old. No longer the crisp, efficient, military manager, he was now a shell of a man years beyond his former glory.

The unfairness fed Tyler's anger. This man had been loyal and faithful to his planet, serving in untold campaigns alongside many great leaders other than the Admiral. He was a legend in his own right, and more decorated than most of the current active personnel. Only the Admiral held more honors.

The Marshall deserved more than this, but Tyler had let him down. It was Tyler's fault this man was shamed, and forced to betray his commander. Tyler had caused the admission to collusion in a scheme that was tantamount to treason.

Tyler directed his anger inward. He had betrayed the one man who had served the Admiral faithfully. He now feared for Officer Slaas, a capable officer who might now be caught in the web of treason, another victim of Tyler's ineptitude. She would be forced to resign, or worse, charged with treason, or at least unknowingly aiding a traitor. Either way, Tyler feared she would be implicated. If they had caught the Marshall, she didn't have a chance.

Each of the Admiral's staff was at risk. It didn't matter if they knew directly or not, no one would trust them again. They would be forced out or given assignments that placed them in peril. The vast sweep of the consequences boggled his mind. How had he caused so much damage in so little time?

Even the Admiral's family, if they survived Nayllen, were in danger of treason. It stood to reason that if Toosia's newfound marriage with her husband just happened to coincide with his betrayal, then she could be just as culpable. She'd even traveled to Siirneen where he'd met his co-conspirators. If she hadn't wanted revenge, she would now.

What a fool I was! I even helped them trap me.

Tyler watched Marshall Sliss make his way back from the stand. He was a fallen man and didn't glance at Tyler. The man's face was an image of despair as he was seized by guilt.

"I call to question Mr. Nayllen Hooss." The interrogator announced loudly.

Tyler watched Nayllen take the stand but caught the Marshall sending an evil look his way. Obviously the Marshall knew Nayllen was involved but was unable to say anything. It wouldn't save Tyler, but it certainly would have brought a level of fairness to the proceedings. Tyler listened to Nayllen's testimony intently.

Nayllen recounted his meeting with the Admiral at The Grand Anoor Casino, but his version was skewed and inaccurate. According to his testimony, the Admiral had approached him to recruit him in the conspiracy. His well known connections with the Palace would have fit perfectly into the conspirator's plans.

Tyler fumed as lies poured from the man's mouth. How could Tyler have thought he was anything but a double-faced backstabber? Would it have changed things? Nayllen had held all the

cards from the beginning. Shuffling, dealing, and playing a game that Tyler didn't even know. Nayllen had warned Tyler at the outset that he was outgunned and would suffer. It was true, Tyler would suffer.

As a concerned citizen, Nayllen had naturally turned over the treacherous information to the Palace and worked diligently to assist in the investigation. Tyler wanted to hit the man—beating him to a pulp. He had been set up good and hadn't seen it coming. But why? Nayllen's motivations remained mysterious.

Tyler listened calmly to lie after lie. Based on his testimony, he was the one who sounded like a National Hero. If Tyler had any chance before, it was gone. The jury would have no choice but to rule the charges were warranted. After that, it became a public trial. Tyler didn't relish the prospects of a trial. The Admiral's reputation—gone. The lives of his family and friends—gone. Everything destroyed by his own innocence.

He yearned for a drink, something to take away the pain of guilt, to submerge himself in a self loathing numbness.

That's it, the chilling realization came to him, I can end it all ... kill myself and save everyone the embarrassment of a public trial.

Sure, and then they'd go after everyone else with vigor. He had no illusions this would be used for propaganda, a way to garner support for the Palace's agenda, whatever that was. Tyler thought about the Regent and looked at the dark man. How much of this was because of him? Was it due to an Onyalum that possessed him? Tyler tried to peer through his cold exterior to find the alien within. He saw nothing to indicate one existed.

Nayllen finished his testimony and returned to his seat, a smug smile on his face. The interrogator released the jury to deliberate their decision, a decision Tyler already knew: *guilty*.

The jury filed from the room as the Emperor shot Tyler a cold and penetrating stare. Even Admiral Teesen appeared disconcerted by the accusations leveled at his former commander. Tyler remained emotionless and unmoving. At least he wouldn't give them the satisfaction of watching him cower and hide from the truth. He'd stand tall and defend the honor of the Admiral as best he could.

Hah! Adanni scoffed, you've done a fine job of it so far!

Tyler ignored the jibe. The Emperor rose and released the Marshall and Eyleeria. He even signaled Teesen out, although Teesen appeared shocked to be excluded. Regardless, Teesen

followed everyone else from the room. After they'd gone, the Emperor signaled his guards out. Finally, the Emperor turned to Tyler as Nayllen and Regent Sneerd watched with curiosity.

"Well, Admiral," he said in a condescending tone, "it looks like you've put yourself in a fine position." He stole glances at Sneerd and Nayllen. "The infamous tactician, outmaneuvered by a civilian." He sat down folding his hands together. He looked far too smug, an unusual show of emotion. "You are free to defend yourself now, we are not on record. What do you say—traitor?" He spat the word at Tyler.

Tyler wasn't sure how to respond, he hadn't expected any of this, least of all a private conversation with the Emperor. He glanced at Sneerd and Nayllen, well almost private. He figured they would hear the accusations, reach the inevitable decision, and place him in custody. What could he say? Not-guilty? That was a joke—clearly Nayllen had the upper hand.

He looked at each in turn. They stared back cold, only Nayllen had a slight smile on his face. Tyler pictured his face bloodied and disfigured, but it didn't help. What did he want to say in his defense? Accuse Nayllen? Plead insanity? Nothing sounded plausible, so he said the only thing that came to mind.

"I believe your Regent is possessed by an alien entity."

Tyler regretted it the moment he said it. Both the Regent and Nayllen looked dumbfounded. Only the Emperor remained calm, an upraised eyebrow the only indication he'd heard Tyler.

The Regent, looking confused, glanced back and forth between Tyler and the Emperor, not certain how to respond or whether he should. Tyler didn't see fear on the Regent's face, but there was definitely confusion. Tyler didn't know how to take that. Maybe he wasn't possessed? Then again, if the Onyalum was inside for years, his reactions would be well rehearsed and second nature. There was no way Tyler could tell.

The Emperor, staying cool, signaled Nayllen to leave. Nayllen was shocked, but left as ordered. Tyler was certain he could rule out Nayllen as the Onyalum, but the Regent? Tyler had played his one card, but wasn't sure how to finish the hand. How could he prove it? He couldn't.

As Nayllen left, the Regent moved into the seat where Teesen had sat. His look turned cold, a blank slate upon which Tyler could read nothing. He and the Emperor stole glances with each other,

until finally the Emperor stood up and walked back to the console under the large viewer.

"I had my suspicions about you, Admiral, from the very first day I met with you after your failed offensive." Tyler didn't like the way he emphasized the word failed. "I sensed you had changed, perhaps for the better, but then, perhaps for the worse."

The Emperor played with some of the controls while he continued. "We have never been allies, you and I, but neither were we adversaries. I kept an eye on you, and you, through the Marshall, tried to keep an eye on me."

Tyler wasn't certain where this was heading. It seemed an odd response to the accusation he had just leveled at the Regent. Tyler glanced at the Regent, but the man was staring at the Emperor, waiting.

"I never suspected this treachery, and even when it was brought to my attention, I was confused by the lack of motive? Your distrust of the Palace could not have been sufficient reason to warrant treason. A decorated officer, the Supreme Commander, a man whose feats are only equaled by his integrity. Why would this man choose to abandon his ethics and his world?"

The large viewer sprang to life, and the Emperor grabbed a remote before returning to his seat.

"I knew your father wasn't really a traitor, but at the time, it served my purposes. I suppose in some way you posed a threat in the beginning, so I made sure you understood no one was above my law."

Tyler was amazed he was hearing these admissions from the Emperor. He had no reason to share such things, why now?

The Emperor continued reminiscing. "I felt secure, and you went on to be a great leader of warriors. You served my purpose well. I did not always agree with your battle decisions, but I was bright enough to understand when your tactical prowess was greater than my own, so I let you have free reign—within reason." He paused in thought. "It had always been a fine arrangement, until that last offensive. Shortly after your recovery, you seemed eager to turn against me, eager to carry out your own agenda, regardless of what the Palace wanted ... or what I wanted."

Tyler sensed anger in the Emperor. He wondered where it was heading. Perhaps the Emperor would kill him now and bypass the lengthy trial and public incrimination. That suited Tyler fine, he no

longer cared about himself, only those who had served the Admiral.

The Emperor pushed a button on the remote before tossing it to Tyler. "There, this is what you were seeking, have a look."

Tyler watched as the display listed a series of files Tyler recognized as the Emperor's medical records. He wasn't sure what to do. What was the Emperor angling at? Did he understand what Tyler had wanted to know? It seemed unlikely. Then again, Tyler had nothing to lose, so he took the remote and began scanning the medical records.

"You see, when you requested the medical records, I was initially puzzled. Why would you want those, surely they could not provide you with anything valuable? Oh, yes, the interrogator seized on it with accusations of assassination. A cheap and paltry trick simply designed to slander your character. We knew it was not the case. You are neither capable of, nor experienced in the art of assassination. We know since we are practiced in it."

Tyler assumed he was referring to the Regent when he said we. He scanned the records, looking for something during the Emperor's childhood. What if he found it? Then what? Accuse the Emperor? That didn't seem plausible. But what if he could rule him out? Maybe then, he could turn the Emperor on the Regent, but he had no proof.

Careful Tyler, something is wrong. I do not believe it is as it seems.

Tyler ignored Adanni's warning, nothing mattered anymore. There, he found something, a record of a hospitalization when the Emperor was only eight. He opened the file and read through it while the Emperor talked in the background.

"... only then did it dawn on me that you were not as you seemed. The pieces fell into place and the pattern revealed itself. We felt almost stupid when we realized what was going on. How could we have been so blind ..."

Tyler had it. The Emperor had been hospitalized for poison. He'd suffered an assassination attempt at the age of eight. His own sister had done it, but she'd been dealt with silently by their father, the Emperor at that time. Apparently blood was not thick in this family.

He read more details, and found what he'd feared most, the Emperor had died from the poisoning, but had *miraculously*

recovered, though not from any medical assistance. The poison was known to be a hundred percent fatal. That meant...

"... and so we came to the only logical conclusion, Admiral, you are the one possessed by an alien entity."

Had Tyler heard him right? They were accusing him of possession? How ... wait a moment it was beginning to make sense.

"You are both Onyalum!" Tyler exclaimed, certain he was right. How else could they suspect him? How else could they know why he wanted the medical records? Unless of course, they were both possessed!

The Emperor and the Regent exchanged brief smiles before staring back at Tyler.

"Very good, Admiral, or should I call you by another name?" The Emperor sat back in his chair, leveling an inquisitive look at Tyler. "My real name is Creedan, but please, continue to call me the Emperor." A malicious smile formed on his face.

The Regent spoke. "I am Goyar, but call me Regent Sneerd—I truly prefer that name."

Tyler was stunned, two Onyalum on the same planet, both in the highest ranking positions, and working together. Thosolan had told him they were isolated loners who took their own pleasures. He never realized they might work together.

It is not unheard of. Adanni confirmed.

"My name is Tyler." He said flatly.

"Tyler," the Emperor pondered the name, "it does not sound like an Onyalum name. Is it some previous being you have possessed?"

Tyler was cautious. He wasn't certain what they were capable of.

"No, it is my name." At least that was the truth.

The Emperor looked as though he didn't believe him, but seemed willing to let it pass.

"Very well, Tyler, we will refer to you as the Admiral." The Emperor looked satisfied. "What shall we three Onyalum do?"

Tyler didn't think he had any leverage, even being Onyalum, yet he was willing to try.

"Share the power?" he suggested.

"Hmmm," the Emperor considered, "I think not, Admiral, your treason has made me far too wary. Understand, it is not anything I

myself would not have done, but being Onyalum, I know not to trust them.”

“Yet you trust Goyar?” Tyler accused. “I mean Regent Sneerd.” He quickly corrected.

The Emperor exchanged a smile with the Regent. “Yes, we have been together for millennia,” he said quietly, “we are like ... brothers.”

Perfect, that was all Tyler needed, two Onyalum that were like brothers.

“I don't care about myself, do as you will, but my wife and my child, please let them live.” Tyler pleaded, hoping he could at least save them.

“Your wife and child?” The Emperor sounded amazed. “They are of no concern to me. Nayllen however ...”

Nayllen was dangerous, and the Emperor obviously had his own doubts about the man..

“I suppose Nayllen does not know your true identities?” Tyler pressed.

“Of course not.” The Emperor conceded.

“Surely, you are able to control him?” Tyler tried to help his family.

“Well,” the Emperor began, “we can control him a little. He is very powerful and has more resources at his command than even we do.”

The admission confirmed what Tyler had seen Nayllen demonstrate. He thought back to that early meeting with Nayllen and wondered how much power he really held. What was his game? Tyler still couldn't see it. He had power and control over much of the current government. He profited handsomely from the war, so what was missing that he needed to possess?

“Then, you must know his complicity in the conspiracy with my father?” Tyler put it out there with nothing left to lose. He noticed both of them showed a look of surprise.

The Emperor immediately responded. “Nayllen Hooss has been involved in this conspiracy?”

“Yes,” Tyler confirmed, “he was the one who recruited me, despite the testimony he gave today.”

The Emperor absorbed his words and glanced questioningly at the Regent. Tyler couldn't believe it, they, too, had been victims of Nayllen. Then, what was real? What game were they all unknowingly players in?

As if in answer to that question, alarms rang throughout the room. Tyler watched the viewer as it changed from the Emperor's health records to a series of defense system screens. Using the Admiral's memories of the systems, Tyler saw they had detected an enemy intrusion in Poolto controlled space. The display showed twenty-five Krildon ships, shown in red, traveling in battle formation. Was this the peace ship? It looked more like an invasion.

"What treachery is this?" The Emperor exclaimed as he leveled an accusatory look at Tyler.

"I don't know." Tyler lied. But then, he wasn't sure he was lying. This had not been part of the plan.

"Regent," the Emperor commanded, "get Teesen on the phone and mobilize our fleet." Tyler noted a real sound of concern in the Emperor's voice. Over the concern a layer of anger rose to the surface.

The Regent moved to the console, but stopped short as the viewer changed in response to the grim reality of the situation. All of the green ships, the Poolto fleet, turned yellow. It was a clear sign they were being systematically disabled. Somehow, the Command Codes Tyler had given Kulg worked. The invasion fleet was disabling the Poolto fleet. Hadn't Teesen changed the Codes? How did they still work?

The Emperor was howling. "How can this be? What has Teesen done?"

"Perhaps you should ask Nayllen." Tyler suggested calmly.

The Emperor glared at him, then signaled to the Regent. The Regent quickly pushed buttons and a part of the viewer changed to Nayllen's face. From the scene behind him, Tyler thought he appeared to be in space.

"Yes, Emperor," Nayllen asked casually, "what may I help you with?"

"Is this your doing, Nayllen? Have you been plotting with Krildon to overthrow me?" The Emperor's voice was controlled but simmering.

"Whatever do you mean, Emperor? You know I am loyal to you and you alone. Is this some feeble attempt by the Admiral to clear his name? What has brought this on?" He sounded genuinely surprised, but Tyler knew it was a lie.

Tyler hated to admit it, but he was good. He sounded very convincing, and even the Emperor had his doubts.

“Well, Admiral,” he said between gritted teeth, “tell him what has happened.”

“Yes, Admiral, do tell.” Nayllen agreed.

Tyler looked at both of them but didn't know how to respond. What was Nayllen playing at, where did his loyalties really lie?

“We are under attack, Nayllen, and the Poolto fleet has been disabled using the Command Codes I gave you and my father.” Tyler said it with little emotion. It would be easy for Nayllen to simply dismiss the charge out of hand.

“I see,” Nayllen said softly, “and I suppose you believe this trash?” He looked at the Emperor from the viewer.

The Emperor looked from Nayllen to Tyler, not knowing who to believe. “I believe none of it,” the Emperor said coldly, “and I no longer believe you, Nayllen.”

Nayllen gave an exemplary look of surprise to this revelation, but he quickly recovered and simply stated. “Suit yourself, Emperor, you're in charge.” With that he disconnected the transmission. The viewer returned to its previous display.

“Why was he off-world?” The Regent asked, confused by the exchange. “Where would he be going? Why now? Is it a coincidence?”

“Good question, Regent, and I don't like the possible answers.”

Tyler could see neither of them trusted Nayllen anymore. Tyler knew their suspicions were well founded and was happy to have one small victory over Nayllen. Unfortunately, the enemy fleet moved closer. By now, all the green lights on the viewer had turned yellow. The Poolto fleet was completely helpless.

“Regent,” the Emperor returned to their immediate problem, “bring up our planetary defense network, I want to see if it has been tampered with or disabled.”

The Regent complied and the viewer changed to the defense grid surrounding the planet. As far as Tyler could see, the defense grid was intact and operational.

The Emperor signaled to the Regent. “Good, back to the fleet display, and get Teesen in here.”

The Regent switched the viewer back before making a quick call to track down Teesen. Luckily, the Admiral had still been in the Palace and came through the door within minutes of the call.

“What is going on?” He demanded as he walked into the room surveying the viewer.

"We are under attack, Admiral." The Emperor replied with little emotion.

The Admiral looked confused, but tried to take charge of the situation, "Well, let's deploy our fleet and counter-attack."

Tyler recognized the man realized his own mistake before he'd finished. The yellow lights throughout the display clearly indicated they were sitting ducks.

"Nice, Admiral," the Emperor chided, "why didn't we think of that?" The Emperor's tone was mocking and condescending. "Try your Command Codes. See if you can re-enable our fleet!"

Teesen hesitated and then moved to the console. Tyler watched as he desperately entered his Command Codes. Tyler hoped they would work, the thought of an invasion chilled him. Teesen looked confused and tried again. Nothing.

"Sir," Teesen turned to the Emperor, a look of concern and dread on his face, "the Codes I have do not match the Codes of the fleet. I ... I don't understand, I changed them immediately!" He gave Tyler an accusatory stare.

"Fool," the Emperor admonished him, "the update to the fleet never occurred. Now of course, you cannot use the old Codes since the systems in the Palace do not match those of the fleet. We have been outsmarted by our own security!"

Tyler thought about the device Nayllen had him bring to the meeting. Was that what caused the external update to fail? *Clever!*

Teesen shut up looking rejected and confused. The Emperor ignored him and turned to Tyler. "Well, Admiral Oslo, our National Hero, what do we do now?"

Tyler thought about it, there really was no choice. "Surrender, Emperor."

The Emperor stared blankly while Admiral Teesen looked like he was going to keel over from shock.

"To whom I wonder?" The Emperor replied coldly.

The large viewer suddenly filled with an immense picture of Nattur Oslo, the Admiral's father.

"Ah, Hallen," Nattur smiled broadly, "and I see you have your new Admiral with you."

The Emperor frowned before casting a dangerous glance at Tyler.

"So, Nattur, I see that branding you a traitor so long ago was well founded. The prodigal son returns to decimate his home

world, is that it?" The Emperor was mocking, yet Tyler heard fear, or was it frustration?

"Yes, that about sums it up, Hallen." Nattur was neither smug nor mocking, his tone professional. "I will, of course, ask you to surrender first, but then I know you won't, so we will have to demonstrate our resolve and lose innocent lives."

The Emperor regained his calm, apparently analyzing the situation from every angle. Tyler knew he was hoping to find some way he would survive the crisis. Tyler knew Creedan would be desperate to retain his power. He began to see why the conflict started and spread—the Onyalum had wanted war and chaos. Perhaps to Onyalum war was one big chess match. Either way, they wouldn't lose, only the people of Poolto.

The Emperor sat down and casually looked at Nattur. "These innocent lives you speak of, are they military or civilian? After all, I have a right to know whose lives I will be spending, or rather, whose lives you will be murdering."

The Admiral's father accepted the comment without emotion. Tyler wondered if the man had changed after so many years captive. To all appearances, the Krildon were vicious, barbaric creatures, but based on their culture and government, they actually seemed more passive of the two species. Tyler wanted to believe they were going to do the right thing, that they truly wanted peace, but seeing the Admiral's father so coldly talk about spending innocent lives, he had his doubts. Maybe the Krildon were cold blooded killers, out for revenge, out to dominate the solar system. Tyler couldn't tell.

"I see that once again, Hallen, you play at the game as though you have nothing to lose. I assure you, you have everything to lose."

The Emperor pondered his statement. Only he, the Regent, and Tyler knew he didn't have anything to lose. Tyler was afraid the Emperor would call his bluff, make him kill and destroy for the one last pleasure before being defeated. Tyler didn't want that to happen. Too many lives were in the balance, and Tyler had to act.

"It is over, Emperor," he said quickly trying to defuse the tension that was growing, "why waste so many for no reason?"

Tyler was desperate to make the Onyalum inside either expose itself, in which case he might have a chance at taking over, or at least convince it there were other worlds besides this one. Maybe it

would decide to leave peacefully, go find somewhere else to play its dangerous chess match.

"Why indeed," the Emperor said casually, "perhaps a question we should be asking your father?" He stood up and glanced quickly at the Regent and Admiral Teesen. Teesen was shocked enough to stay out of the conversation. "Tell us, Nattur," he asked quietly, "how many patriots must die to try and save your world?"

Tyler didn't like the direction it was heading, the Emperor was calling Nattur's bluff, forcing him to demonstrate resolve. People were going to die and Tyler didn't have any way to stop it. Tyler's mind raced and drew blanks. The Emperor continued.

"A million? Two million? A billion? Please, Nattur, how many will you spend to displace me as Emperor? That is the ultimate goal isn't it, to replace Poolto's rightful ruler with someone else? Someone like you perhaps?"

Tyler saw anger and frustration forming on Nattur's face. Tyler knew he would have to react, show his resolve. Before discovering the Emperor was Onyalum, the peace mission seemed plausible. It had seemed capable of forcing the Emperor into peace, but now, only destruction seemed likely.

Tyler glanced at Teesen who stared between Nattur and the Emperor, trying to decide where the crisis was going and how it might end.

"Admiral Teesen," Tyler tried to engage him, "doesn't peace sound better than destruction? You have pledged your life to protect Poolto, what is the right move to make here? What is the right tactical move?" Tyler was pleading with him to take a stand, but he only looked at the Emperor confused.

"Please, Admiral Oslo," the Emperor scolded, "unlike you, Teesen is loyal to the rightful ruler of Poolto. Unlike you, he knows that surrendering would be worse than death!"

The Emperor spat on the ground. "You come for peace, Nattur, is that it? And I suppose Krildon also yearns for peace instead of revenge and domination? Who better to trust than Krildon!"

Nattur was unmoved by the Emperor's theatrics. "That's right, Hallen, they want peace, not domination. I have the elected President of Krildon here to negotiate a peace deal to end the war and maintain the current government on Poolto. You could remain Emperor, but you would have to live with peace."

The Emperor practically laughed. "Oh, yes, I am sure they want me in power when this is resolved. Why we'll be best of

buddies in no time.” He turned to Admiral Teesen. “Is that what you believe, Admiral? That your enemy has disabled your fleet, come with a fleet of its own, and with newer and more powerful weapons, just to ask for peace?”

Admiral Teesen didn't know how to respond and stared at Nattur. Finally he spoke. “Why did you bring so much force if all you want is peace?” He asked boldly, resolve coming over his face.

Tyler groaned, he had lost the Admiral as an ally.

Nattur responded quickly. “Would your Emperor have just welcomed a single peace ship with open arms? Would anything but a show of force persuade your Emperor to abandon the war effort?”

Tyler thought Nattur looked desperate to stall the show down, but the Admiral showed no signs of backing down.

“I see,” the Admiral said calmly, “then, the way to peace is through a show of force, is that it?”

The Emperor looked pleased by Teesen as an evil smile filled his face.

Nattur looked resigned to the course he had to take.

“As I said before, your Emperor will refuse and then we will show our resolve. Innocent lives will be lost, Admiral, both military and civilian. Is that what you want when you have an opportunity to end it all here, without bloodshed?”

Teesen pumped himself up turning towards the Emperor. “The Poolto military is not afraid to die defending the freedom of its homeland. We are at war, and during war, sacrifices must be made.”

The Emperor jumped in looking smug. “Well, Nattur, I guess we have spoken, please enjoy the blood that will stain your hands for eternity. This planet and its people will never surrender to the enemy your traitorous soul has aligned with!”

He signaled to the Regent who cut the power to the large viewer, and Nattur's face, looking sad faded from the screen.

The Emperor turned to Tyler. “Well, Admiral Oslo, I guess the end of Poolto may be near. Anything you wish to do to help save it, considering your treachery is to blame?”

Tyler didn't know how to respond, it was clear that the Onyalum was bent on fighting to the end. Tyler could only imagine the number of lives that would be lost.

Tyler made one final gamble. "Is there nothing that would convince you and the Admiral that they really want peace? A gesture, an act, anything?"

The Emperor laughed, but the Admiral looked deep in thought. When the Emperor noticed Teesen's hesitation, he quickly spoke to defend his position. "Please, Admiral, don't listen to this traitor, he is just like his father!"

"Am I, Admiral?" Tyler asked quietly. "I know we have not always seen eye to eye, but have I ever done anything that wasn't for the good of the war effort? Anything that wasn't good for Poolto? I am, and always will be, a defender of my planet. I am asking, no pleading with you, please listen to me."

The Admiral remained deep in thought, staring at Tyler as though trying to read his mind. "Emperor, perhaps we should at least hear him out, maybe they really do want peace? What can it hurt to delay them while we prepare a defense strategy? We can lead them on as though we are interested. What would it hurt?"

Tyler felt a rush of hope, perhaps they could avert this disaster. He looked at the Emperor who remained as cold and remote as ever.

"Admiral Teesen, you are the most mindless moron I have ever met in the military." He walked up to the console and turned back to face them all. "True, it was one of the reasons why I selected you, but now that decision appears to be a liability." He touched the console and the planetary defense grid displayed. "You would listen to this liar, a known traitor? Do you really believe they are here for peace?"

He signaled to the Regent who smiled and brought up a tiny screen, Nattur's face came into focus.

"Nattur," the Emperor said peremptorily, "my fine set of advisors think I should test you and see if peace is all you really want. Apparently, in desperate times, loyalty to their Emperor is not required."

Tyler didn't like the sound in his voice—it sounded calculating. Nattur appeared uncertain how to respond. The Emperor continued.

"I suppose I will have to appease them. Show them the hard truth about Krildon and traitors." He touched several switches on the console and another portion of the viewer changed to a code entry prompt. The Admiral's memories recognized it. It was the

defense grid shutdown command. Only the Imperial Palace had the capacity to turn off the grid.

"You see," the Emperor explained as though to children, "if I shutdown the defense grid, we would be entirely defenseless. If you were only interested in peace, then you would do nothing to take advantage of that situation." He entered the Codes into the prompt and engaged the shutdown. Immediately, the grid lights on the viewer began changing as each individual satellite began its shutdown sequence. "Of course," he continued, "if you wanted to conquer us, then you would take advantage of this rare opportunity to strike at the heart of our planet!"

Tyler knew the defense grid could be restarted, but the entire sequence took at least an hour from start to finish. Unfortunately, only the Imperial Palace could restart it, and he had no illusions that anyone within the Palace would go against the Emperor. They were utterly defenseless.

Tyler watched Nattur as someone from behind him confirmed the defense grid was shutting down.

"Fine, Hallen," Nattur spoke quickly, "we'll meet your challenge."

The Emperor touched more controls on the console and the fleet operations screen filled most of the viewer. Tyler watched the red lights of the Krildon fleet suddenly moving at a rapid pace towards Poolto. As if Nattur noticed the same thing, he turned from the viewer and yelled out to those on the Krildon ship.

"Wha ... what are you doing?" He demanded.

Tyler watched as Commandant Kulg stepped into view and pushed the Admiral's father aside.

Before switching off the viewer, Commandant Kulg said only one thing, "Goodbye, Emperor."

The screen went blank as red lights on the larger part of the viewer spread out, some heading towards the yellow lights of the disabled fleet most heading towards Poolto.

The Emperor was laughing an empty, dark laugh. "You see, Admirals, you can never trust an enemy or a traitor."

Tyler looked at Teesen who stared in shock as Krildon ships bared down on the planet. He turned towards Tyler, fear gripping his face. "I thought you said they wanted peace!"

Tyler had thought so, too, but apparently, like Nayllen, the Krildon had their own plans. He knew when he met Commandant Kulg that he was not a man who would simply follow someone

like Nattur or Nayllen for that matter. He had his own agenda and Tyler knew that meant nothing less than complete victory. When all was said and done, he was a military commander and would not pass up an opportunity to defeat his enemy. Assuming they wanted peace, they could now achieve it without loss of Krildon lives. Only Poolto would suffer.

Tyler stared back at Admiral Teesen blankly. "I thought they did, too."

They all fell silent as Krildon ships took up positions around their planet. Already, a display showed they were systematically taking out all the defense grid satellites—just in case the Emperor changed his mind. Tyler didn't think he would. He had a look of disgust on his face but was obviously resigned to his fate.

Alarms sounded throughout the room as red lines streaked from the Krildon ships. The lines descended to the planet below. Tyler knew what they were—they were particle weapons or missile signatures. The Krildon ships were firing on Poolto. Nothing could stop them now. Millions, maybe billions would die.

The Emperor watched gleeful as he changed the viewer to an aerial view of the capital city. Apparently, a satellite was still operational above the city. He fiddled with the controls and the viewer switched to a higher vantage. They watched in horror as the powerful blast headed their way. The bright light descended towards the city.

"You see, my friends," the Emperor spoke final words, "trust no one!"

Tyler felt nothing as a bright flash of light turned everything white for a long time. He heard nothing, only the silent white light. After what seemed an eternity, the bright light disappeared and Tyler found himself floating above what was left of Yooso.

The destruction was total. Nothing remained of the city except large craters and burning piles of debris. Tyler's mind reeled with the revelation. The city had been home to over twenty million people—all gone in an instant.

He thought back to the final moments, and remembered seeing multiple lines descending from the multiple ships. How many cities were lost? How many lives? The number boggled his mind. Smoke and flame rose from the ground beneath him, but it didn't obscure the devastation. The Emperor, the Military, and the Council were all gone.

Tyler could imagine the Poolto fleet, disabled and helpless in space. Krildon ships would have shot them like fish in a barrel. How many more lives lost? Whatever remained of Poolto would be forced to surrender.

It felt strange to be back in his ethereal form. He had been the Admiral for so long, he had grown accustomed to feeling and hearing. Now, only silence filled his mind. Once again, he was alone in the Universe. He could sense the millions of pieces that were his essence drifting apart as though ready to leave the destruction below him. He pulled them together and surveyed the horizon.

Nearby, he saw what looked like smoke forming a dark cloud. It took a minute, but he recognized it was another Onyalum coalescing. He quickly queried Adanni. *Can Onyalum speak with one another in this form?*

Adanni sounded bitter when he answered. *Yes.*

Tyler watched another cloud forming next to the first one. Both hovered darkly above the charred chaos. In response to his question, another voice spoke through the silence.

So you are not an Onyalum, although one lives inside you. What are you then, Tyler?

Tyler couldn't tell which had spoken, the voice didn't sound like either the Emperor's or the Regent's. He guessed they wouldn't once the bodies were destroyed.

And which Onyalum do I have the privilege of talking with? Tyler asked, desperate for a reference.

In response, the dark cloud to the left swirled slightly as the voice replied. *You are speaking with Creedan.*

Tyler had figured as much. He seemed to be the one in charge of the two. *I am from a planet called Earth, far from here ... I know not where.* He didn't think there was any harm in telling the truth.

The dark cloud swirled in response. *Then, you were a being of matter?*

Yes. Tyler conceded.

The cloud stopped swirling as Tyler imagined it thought about his comments. *Then, how is it you have an Onyalum inside you? Is not your form that of an Onyalum?*

Tyler didn't want to relive the specifics of the accident that brought him here. He was still unsure how it had happened. *Yes, I*

am now in the form of an Onyalum, and yes, an Onyalum lives within me.

Tyler's patience was wearing thin as the devastation and loss Poolto had suffered sank in. He thought about Toosia and her family, wondering if they had survived. Would Nayllen survive? Probably, he was a person who was always needed, even if it was by the enemy. They may never trust him, but they would certainly use him. Perhaps he was even on one of their ships during the attack.

What is the name of the Onyalum inside you? Creedan asked.

Adanni answered before Tyler could. *I am called Adanni, and I do not wish to associate with you ... or your brother.*

Tyler was surprised by Adanni's reaction, surely he would feel more comfortable with his own kind than with Tyler.

The two clouds swirled slightly and a sound that may have been laughter rang inside Tyler's consciousness.

Very well, Adanni and Tyler, thank you for your assistance, this world had become boring anyway. Time to find another one to rule.

Tyler thought it was Creedan who had said it, but wasn't sure. He wanted to respond, but both dark clouds blinked out of existence leaving Tyler and Adanni alone, hovering above the burning embers of a shattered world.

Purgatory

After the destruction of Yooso, Tyler had no idea what to do. He fell into despair, haunted by the bitter loss of a chance at a normal life. He had missed the opportunity with Linda and now he had lost it with Toosia and their child. He'd found the Universe to be cruel and unfair, and he hated them for the retribution they'd bestowed upon him.

Anger and anguish fueled his hatred towards everyone and everything. He wanted to destroy the Onyalum that had helped bring on the devastation, but they were gone, lost in the Universe forever. He vowed if he ever ran into them again, he would have his revenge for the pain and suffering they had caused.

He thought about Nayllen and the Admiral's father, as culpable as the Onyalum. All had been pawns of the other, but neither had suffered. Tyler was certain Nayllen felt no remorse for the way things turned out. He stood to gain power and prestige in the wake of the destruction.

Tyler could only guess at Nattur. Like Tyler, he'd been used by his allies to achieve what they had longed for, peace, but under their conditions. Perhaps he was as innocent as Tyler, or perhaps he was like Nayllen and also wanted to achieve his goals no matter the cost. Either way, both reaped the rewards of their treachery.

With no one left in the Imperial Palace, there was no one to uncover the conspiracy. In fact, no one person on Poolto even knew what had happened, except Nayllen and Nattur. Sure, the military was disabled by the Command Codes, but no one knew how. It was inconceivable to think the Admiral, their National Hero, had anything to do with it.

Everything had worked perfectly for the conspirators. Nayllen and the Admiral's father were able to spin their own propaganda, and they started by laying the blame on the Emperor and the Imperial Palace.

Tyler uncovered this as he lingered around the remnants of Poolto. He observed and watched various viewers as they spun the details of the awful tragedy. Like some bitter ghost refusing to let go, Tyler floated in silence, searching for answers, and searching for Toosia.

He was often tempted to take another body, to become a member of their world once more, but every time he thought about it, he realized he would never be able to see his child, or be a part of its life. The pain fed his anger, so he watched their world pass by, detached and silent.

From his travels around Poolto, he caught many broadcasts that spun the lies Nayllen and Krildon had constructed. Evidence was fabricated, and Tyler knew who'd done the fabrication, Nayllen. All of it painted a picture of an insane Emperor out of control.

According to the propaganda, Krildon had been on a real peace mission when the Emperor had gone mad. His ravings and irrational behavior could not be stopped. Somehow, he had decrypted the Command Codes and disabled the fleet. Krildon, on a peace mission, had stood on the sidelines in horror as the Emperor wrought destruction on his own world. Even valiant efforts by top aides and staff could not prevent the horrible destruction that rained down on Poolto. The Emperor had used the Imperial Codes to turn the defense grid on his own world. The blasts rained down on an unsuspecting populace.

Krildon had watched in horror as the Emperor destroyed his own planet rather than discuss peace. It was a horrific lie, but no one remained to counter it. Nayllen's knowledge and control of the military and government ensured no one would find a shred of evidence, other than the evidence he wanted them to find.

Tyler had to admit the plan was brilliant and had worked perfectly. This only increased the rage that grew within him. Krildon, the true murderers, were now portrayed as the kindly and helpful neighbors who wanted nothing more than to assist Poolto in rebuilding their tattered world. It made Tyler sick to see the lies they spread, blindfolding the public to the truth.

Everything they had wanted came to pass. There was peace between the worlds, and the way they had achieved it ensured no

animosity between the two species. Instead, a new distrust for anything royal or imperial spread through the populace. They were ready to embrace democracy.

Unfortunately, Tyler had been a part of that lie. In fact, this lie was no different than the one they had fabricated after the Admiral's failed offensive. Tyler had been a willing participant in all of it, and he realized he was as much to blame as anyone. It didn't matter he'd been used by the others in the conspiracy, he'd put his own selfish needs above those of the planet, and now millions had paid the price.

As he watched the broadcasts, he saw the Admiral's father return to his shattered world, the father of their hero, now their savior. He promised to rebuild the broken pieces, bringing Poolto into a new age of peace and prosperity. He was named interim president with promises to hold free elections after rebuilding the cities and the economy. He promised a free Poolto, one without a dictator that fed his own greed.

Remnants of the royal family and the ruling Governors were put on notice their days were numbered. Through crafty negotiations, each agreed to uphold their offices throughout the rebuilding until free elections put new Governors in their place. It was all done perfectly, everyone bought the ruse that offered neat and clean excuses. It promised a brighter future and created the perfect villain. Unfortunately, now the real villains were in charge.

Tyler understood the new government would be a puppet of Krildon for a long time. With Krildon's good graces and infinite assistance, they had ensured a place at the table of Poolto's future decisions. Everyone was happy, except those who had lost so much.

The numbers kept coming in, month after month, year after year. The final tally, assuming such a thing could be found, was seven hundred and thirty nine million killed in the Emperor's mad attack. It was staggering, and everyone agreed to dismantle the military and the defense grid that had caused the tragedy. With Krildon as your helpful neighbor, why would you need a military?

Not surprisingly, Krildon decided not to abandon their fleet, at least not yet. In fact, reports indicated Krildon was maintaining a peace keeping fleet above Poolto—to protect from renegade Imperial members bent on regaining the power they'd lost.

Tyler knew it was a farce. Krildon had succeeded in conquering their enemy, and the irony was, they had used Poolto's

own hero to do it. It was more than Tyler could bear. He was responsible for the millions killed. Whole families were lost with the destruction of so many major cities.

Tyler was certain Toosia and their child was gone. He had no idea where she and her family were hiding. Even if he knew, he had no idea of how to find it. Poolto was a large planet, and even an Onyalum had difficulty tracking down a few individuals across an entire world.

He was ready to give up when he'd caught a broadcast about the Admiral's father. President Nattur Osloo had finally been reunited with his grandson, Nayllen Osloo II. Tyler could not believe it, his son was alive. He watched as Toosia and little Nayllen were paraded on stage with the Admiral's father. The son of the National Hero would now become a hero himself. They would use him as a tool for Poolto to rally behind, to support the new movement, and embrace the free government.

A sea of emotions ran through Tyler. He was happy, angry, and sad at the news his son was alive. It may have been the Admiral's body, but Tyler thought of the child as his and his alone. In the silence he now lived in, he screamed in anguish at the unfairness that held him back from the joy he'd wanted.

The outburst had even scared Adanni, who had taken a willing back seat to Tyler's ravings. Even though it had been years since the devastation, the rebuilding moved quickly. Tyler watched his son, now a small child, play a prominent role in the rebuilding of the world his father helped destroy. Tyler took some comfort in the fact the Admiral remained a hero. He knew Toosia and her family knew the truth, but she would never reveal it for fear of her only child. The only thing left from her marriage.

It had taken time for Tyler to track down Toosia's location, but once he had, he never left their side. Like a guardian angel, he watched their lives as they picked up the pieces and rebuilt Poolto. Tyler cried as he saw the pain and the joy on Toosia's face as she nurtured and raised their son.

Tyler was happy she never re-married, despite her parent's attempts. She was happy with young Nayllen, and it was enough to fulfill her life and bring closure to the previous life she was glad to leave behind. Her father, now sitting on the President's council for rebuilding Poolto, was more prominent than before. He and a handful of other Councilor's had escaped the bombardment. The

rest perished with Yooso. Yooso was being rebuilt and renamed Oslo City in honor of their beloved Admiral.

As the years passed, the pain, guilt, and anger ate at Tyler, twisting him inside, turning him feral with ravings. The few times Adanni had tried to reason with him, Tyler had lashed out with all the control he possessed. Before he realized it, Tyler had forced Adanni into an exile, back in the furthest part of his subconscious. Like a distant memory, Adanni existed far from the Universe he had once been an integral part of.

Tyler didn't care, he blamed Adanni for all the sins of the Onyalum, for making Tyler what he was, and for making him feel the pain and loneliness of his stark existence. He gladly exiled Adanni, even felt a thrill of excitement at the sheer force of his new and cruel will. He vowed to make the Universe pay for his pain—he would make everyone pay for it!

* * * *

Nayllen Oslo II was a young man, and as always, Tyler remained by his side. Tyler's mind was twisted, and his anger continually fed his demented spirit. He took little joy in watching his son's life but was unable to tear himself away and return to wandering the Universe.

He barely paid attention as Nayllen readied for school. Nayllen had become the top of his class and was said to be following in the footsteps of his father. Tyler took no pleasure from his son's accomplishments. He selfishly stayed, watching his son, living vicariously through him. Tyler was bitter and the anger that consumed him prevented him from finding solace.

He watched morosely as Nayllen kissed his mother and left for the University. Tyler followed as usual. Nayllen insisted on driving himself to school, and Tyler hovered inside the vehicle, absently making the appropriate transitions to keep up. It all became second nature, and Tyler did it without thought. With Adanni in exile, Tyler was truly alone, watching his son like a never ending movie filled with pain.

As the vehicle made a right turn, Tyler made the appropriate transition but suddenly felt a pulling sensation. It felt like something he distantly remembered. His anger obscured those memories, but the power of an Onyalum broke through his haze

and demanded his attention. He realized the feeling was that of being pulled inside another body.

Tyler was certain nothing was near him when he had made the last transition, so what was happening? Had he accidentally made a wrong transition? He wasn't sure if that was possible.

All the thoughts ran through him in an instant before he felt a world and a body around him. Slowly, a light steadily increased until Tyler found himself inside a booth at Dale's Diner in Los Angeles. Sitting across from him was Uncle Sal, a big smile on his face. It took Tyler a moment to realize what was happening. He didn't want this! He didn't want to leave his son, but try as he might, he was trapped inside the body, unable to transition back to Poolto.

He looked at the body and was repulsed by his human form. After being on Poolto for so long, he felt more like the Admiral than the cheap drug dealer he'd been on Earth. Being with Uncle Sal brought back painful memories of the world he'd lost and the life he'd never have. Anger threatened to consume him.

"Let me go!" he screamed at Uncle Sal, "I do not want this world and I do not want your help!"

As if he had not heard Tyler, Uncle Sal smiled at him as the waitress brought over two blue plate burger specials.

"Here you go, honey," she said playfully, "two blue plate burgers and beers."

Tyler glared at Uncle Sal as he thanked the waitress and began preparing his burger.

"Are you deaf?" Tyler demanded. "I told you I don't want to be here!"

"But the food is so good," Uncle Sal said gently, "at least stay for lunch."

Tyler wanted to hit him even if it was Uncle Sal. He was ready to strike when he remembered who Uncle Sal really was, Thosolan. What would a god do if Tyler struck him? The thought suddenly scared Tyler, so he stewed in silence.

Uncle Sal dug into his burger, enjoying it way too much. Ketchup and mustard ran down his chin, and he wiped at it lightly, thoroughly engrossed in the experience. Tyler looked down at his own plate, but felt sick with the thought of food.

He looked at the cold beer and decided that was acceptable. He drank it in one gulp, the fresh, crisp taste like music to Tyler's mouth. He called for two more and promptly drank Thosolan's.

Thosolan didn't seem to care and nodded approval to the waitress who looked concerned with Tyler's display.

"Well good," Uncle Sal said quietly, "you're thirsty. At least I won't be eating alone." He took another bite of his burger and smiled at Tyler who stared blankly.

Apparently his new body wasn't used to the effects of alcohol, and he quickly felt the numbing he desired. The waitress brought two more, and Tyler drank both without a care. The waitress stared in disbelief until Uncle Sal interjected. "He has just lost a loved one ... it's okay."

Her shock was replaced with a look of pity and she whispered quietly that she would bring a couple more.

Tyler watched Uncle Sal through the haze of alcohol and laughed hysterically at the caricature of the man he'd once watched as a child. His anger was replaced with a feeling of reckless abandon. He relished the feeling and went on the offensive.

"Nice place you got here, uncle Saaal!" He filled the name with sarcasm and disgust.

"Thank you, but I can't take the credit." Uncle Sal confided. "Your memories are so rich with the details of your old world, I was able to create this quite easily."

Tyler snorted. "My old world?" He mocked, gesturing grandly. "Poolto is my old world ... the world that I destroyed!"

Uncle Sal stopped eating and leveled Tyler a sad look. "I think you had help destroying that world."

"Yeah, but I was the one who betrayed it ... I was the one who let it fall into the hands of those treacherous backstabbers!" His anger rose to the surface, and he noted several people, including a policeman, turned towards his outburst. He didn't care, let them stare. They weren't real anyway—just shams constructed by Uncle Sal for his own enjoyment.

Uncle Sal stared calmly, ignoring the people around them. "Remember, Tyler, it was I who created Poolto—it is my world, not yours."

This caused Tyler to pause, but only for a moment. Damn this god if he wasn't going to let him grieve in guilt. "I don't care, it was my world." He sounded petulant as the alcohol brought out the worst.

He wanted to lash out at everything, to cause the same pain he felt. He wanted to reach out and smash the faces of those smug

people who stared at him from around the diner. Damn them and damn Thosolan!

Uncle Sal took it calmly, a serious expression replacing the smile he had before. He wiped his mouth before pushing his blue plate burger aside. Tyler sat back, challenging him with his stare.

Uncle Sal folded his hands together and leaned forward. “Is that not what you wanted? To live in another world and experience another life?” He gave Tyler a challenging look.

The alcohol dulled Tyler’s speech, but he tried to come back with something witty. “Yee...es, but I ... I didn’t expect to blow up the planet!” A hiccup interrupted his flow, but he plowed on. “I didn’t es ... spect to lose my family, my life, my so ...” he hiccupped again, “... my son!”

Uncle Sal looked concerned. “Didn’t you learn anything from our last meeting? Life is not perfect. It is messy, and often involves pain and suffering.” He paused, looking at the people staring. “But it also contains wonder, and joy, and ... *new life*.” He emphasized the last part, and Tyler understood his point.

“What good is creating new life if you are not there to enjoy it!” His drunken yelling got the policeman looking again, and he was conferring with the waitress. Tyler ignored them.

Uncle Sal considered his response. “I understand, Tyler, I, too, have created many worlds and then left them to grow on their own. They have grown into wonderful worlds, worlds that embrace all the Universe has to offer. Why can’t you embrace it?”

“I don’t want to embrace the Universe,” he spat angrily, “my problem is the Universe!” He stood up from the booth and yelled down at the shocked Uncle Sal, “The Universe is what created me, and made my life a living hell! I didn’t want this!” He gestured wildly. “I don’t want this! Why can’t you understand that?” He wobbled on his feet.

He slammed his hand on the table just as the policeman came to their table.

“Okay, buddy, let’s calm down. I am sure we don’t need to upset all the patrons ...” Tyler watched as the policeman moved slowly his hands outstretched, “can’t we just go outside and talk about this in private?”

Tyler stood up straight and nearly fell down from the alcohol. “Calm down you say ... you’re not even real!” He turned around wildly, barely able to stand. “None of you are real! You’re just this

man's imagination!" He pointed at Uncle Sal who looked sad, but said nothing.

"Okay," the policeman said calmly, "we are all not real, but why don't we go outside anyway?" Hands held out, he inched closer to Tyler who rocked back and forth, dizziness threatening.

Tyler reached for the back of the booth next to him, the occupant moving as far away as possible, frightened by Tyler's outbursts. *Yeah*, he thought, *beware the crazy man! I am the possessor of bodies, the demon in the night, the destroyer of worlds!* He liked the sound of those titles—that's what he had become, a demon.

He felt the strength waver in his legs and began to fall. The policeman took the opportunity to move in and grab Tyler. Tyler tried to fight him off, but his strength waned through his haze. The policeman tried to wrestle Tyler to the floor, but Tyler used his last ounce of strength for a move the Admiral had learned when a young officer. It flipped the policeman onto his back, and in one swift movement, Tyler had removed his revolver.

Like a madman, he held out the gun towards the stunned policeman laying on the floor, a look of disbelief and fear on his face. Tyler backed to the rear of the diner, patrons moving out of his way. He loved the feel of the power he held, the power to hurt, and cause pain.

That's right, he thought, *back off from the crazy demon-man. I am the one who causes great pain!*

He backed against the counter, everyone's attention riveted on him. He looked around flashing an evil smile. He briefly locked eyes with Uncle Sal, but the god only stared back with pity. This made Tyler's anger erupt.

He pointed the gun into the air and let out a blood-curdling scream containing all the anguish he'd held inside. With tears pouring down his face, he placed the gun to the side of his head and pulled the trigger. Instantly, he felt the familiar rush as his spirit exited the body.

He was sober again and plunged into silence. In an instant, Tyler transitioned to a galaxy far from Thosolan and far from Poolto. It was a place he knew nothing about, but it came unbidden to his tortured mind. In a blink, the diner and its stunned patrons disappeared, replaced by the silent blackness of space. Once again, Tyler was alone, adrift in the Universe.