



Jarzen Tadel

Echoes of Freedom
Book One

Robert Jacobi

JARZEN TADEL

ECHOES
of
FREEDOM

By

Robert Jacobi

Book one in the continuing saga

To my family
They sustain me!

JARZEN TADEL - ECHOES OF FREEDOM

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Acknowledgments

To my mother, Ruth Elizabeth Jacobi:
Thanks Mom, for teaching me to read.

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CHAPTER ONE

ELAPSIS

The sun shining through the open window caused Jarzen to stir and greet the day. He went to the west-facing window of his fourth story loft and looked out on acre upon acre of crops flourishing in the fields of the Tadel's family farm. Jarzen then went to his east-facing window, shading his eyes against the rising sun. He looked down on the marina, to his way of thinking, the most beautiful sight in all the world. The water in the bay looked like a shining slice of aquamarine glass.

While hardly noticing the wonderful view, Jarzen carefully checked the skies for ominous clouds or any other signs of impending bad weather. Jarzen was excited. Today was his nineteenth birthday; he was to spend the day fishing; and the evening with Sharasta, the love of his life.

The sun was well above the horizon when Jarzen, his father Ormal, and two of his brothers Hazan and Rachio, finally got the family's eighty-five foot fishing trawler, the Lady Mia underway. Having convinced his father to spend a second day fishing for red fish and silver darters; Jarzen triumphantly told his brothers when they arrived. They were returning to the outer reef where the fishing had been very good the day before, bringing them home early with a full hold.

The Tadel Clan, as Jarzen's mother often referred to the family, was fairly typical of the peaceful, prosperous planet Elapsis; mother, father, and lots of children. Jarzen was the youngest of seven, with three older brothers and three older sisters.

The Tadel family was more prosperous and a lot more industrious than their neighbors; most of whom either farmed or fished. The Tadel's farmed and fished. Jarzen had a great passion for fishing; while he farmed with reluctance; a trait he shared with his father.

Life on Elapsis was good; the soil was rich and fertile and would grow anything. The oceans and bays teemed with fish, ensuring a good catch on almost every trip. At nineteen, Jarzen thought life couldn't be better. With his brothers all eager and able farmers, Jarzen could already see himself as Captain of the Lady Mia and head of the family's fishing fleet.

Jarzen's thoughts of the future were interrupted by Hazan and Rachio, who were in a heated argument about the unpredictable, unforgiving weather on the open ocean. Rachio was again stressing it had only been two weeks since the Milters' ship; with all hands, had been lost at sea in an Ion Storm.

"We should fish close to the coast today. We are testing our luck; it has been over two weeks since the last Ion Storm." Rachio bemoaned. He was certain the Ion Storms would soon return. Bad enough to be storm caught in sight of land. The outer reef was a two-hour sail, with none of the coves or small islands that dotted the coast, which could be used for shelter in case he was right.

Ormal called an end to the discussion. He ordered Hazan and Rachio to hoist the main sail as the Lady Mia was coming out of the harbor; Ormal wanted to be ready; so the first

offshore wind would fill the sails.

* * *

Lemosk, Jarzen's oldest brother, came upon a scene of great confusion and excitement when he arrived at the village herd pens around mid-morning; though none of the excitement was centered on the upcoming afternoon auction.

Two different groups of excited beast herders were telling and retelling their story of lights in the late night sky. They were certain Elapsis would soon be visited again by the friendly off-worlders in their space ships. The off-worlders last visit had been a quarter season ago, and everyone remembered the trading. They were terrible traders; however, their trade goods were of excellent quality and eagerly traded for. Ormal had said it had seemed more like stealing than trading, as the off-worlders gave much greater value in every trade than they received.

Lemosk was devastated; he had spent the past five seasons perfecting the selective breeding of his all-purpose ranch mount---a cross between a large and powerful draft animal and the leaner, long-legged, quicker, much more surefooted mounts---the hill people used to round up their herds. This new breed could do both tasks all day without tiring.

Lemosk's frustration grew as all anyone wanted to discuss was whether the off-worlders would return. Lemosk was certain his new breed would be very popular if he could get anyone to come to his assigned area of the auction barn to try out the beasts. Lemosk had invested a lot of time and many trading credits into the development of, to his way of thinking, an exciting new breed. With twelve mares and two stallions still at home; Lemosk was counting heavily on selling the twenty-one mares and seven stallions he had brought to auction.

Ormal had been supportive of the time and money Lemosk had put into his breeding program. With a good price for his animals and the complete sale of all the beasts he had brought to auction, Lemosk could pay the two-day workers who'd helped him and still show a substantial profit.

All but overwhelmed; Lemosk gave in to a sense of complete failure as the hour for the start of the auction approached, and in spite of his best efforts, he had not been able to interest anyone into even looking at his new breed. The family farm could stand the loss, as the farm itself was very profitable. The soil in the Tadel's valley yielded the best harvests in both quality and quantity of any crop planted, ensuring that the Tadel's produce always brought the best price.

Rachio's six-year-old orange-fruit orchard was producing larger crops every year as the trees matured. The orchard alone would have made any family farm profitable, as the popular fruit and its juice were in demand.

Even Hazen, after only three seasons, was beginning to show a profit with his special project crop: a fibrous bloom from a plant thought only to grow in the warmer climate of the southern continent of Gelon. The fibrous bloom was highly sought after. It was spun into a strong, yet soft thread that could be woven into a cloth with many uses, from clothing to carpets.

Ormal, carrying on the long-held Tadel family tradition, required each of his sons on their twenty-first birthday to choose a special project that would enhance the family farm or fishing business. Lemosk, the oldest son and the first to begin a special project, had yet to benefit the family business, while both his younger brothers' projects were actively increasing

the family's wealth.

* * *

Aadon Quzarian, Fleet Admiral of the Tar-Que invasion fleet of Elapsis, had called the final meeting of his fifteen warship ship captains and the ten generals who were to command the ground assault.

“This will be an invasion like no other. In some respects more difficult than a typical invasion,” warned Quzarian. “We must capture the population, their towns, fishing villages, farms, and ranches with minimal destruction of property or people.” Rising to his feet, Admiral Quzarian continued, “What I tell you now is the Federation’s most closely guarded secret. As you are all painfully aware, our home world; Tar-Que’s atmosphere has been damaged beyond its ability to ever completely regenerate itself. Add to that the depletion of almost all natural resources, and we are desperately in need of a new home world.”

“Elapsis is to be our new home world.” Pausing to add emphasis, Quzarian locked eyes with each of his commanders. “The inhabitants of Elapsis are to be a slave population. Because Elapsis will be our new home world; no weapons of mass destruction are to be used, no matter the obstacle.” The admiral paused, appearing to be lost in thought, and then picked up where he left off. “In a typical invasion, we would bomb the capitol cities and all military installations before landing our invasion forces. We would avoid centers of industry and commerce, saving them for capture. Elapsis has no government, no capitol cities and no military; the rustic towns and villages serve as the centers of commerce and provide what little social and cultural life there is. The patriarchs of the large family farms and fishing village communities are as close as Elapsis gets to any form of leadership, and that prestige devolves from the accumulation of land, animals, ships, and trading credits.”

“We have identified ten major areas of commerce on four of the five major continents of Elapsis. Arriving again disguised as traders; we will simultaneously land our invasion forces in all ten of these rural centers. The invasion force will spread throughout the surrounding countryside with crate upon crate of what will appear to be trade goods; all weapons will be kept out of sight. Our troops, posing as traders; will begin good-natured trading. We will give great value in every trade, feeding natural greed, putting the locals at ease. We will stop trading at sunset, and set up camp sites, telling the Elapsons it’s our custom to never trade after dark.

“At sunrise the following day, the invasion will commence. The traders will end their ruse; they will round up all the citizenry. Our troops will quickly break up every family unit; the troops will separate the men from the women, everyone over the age of twelve. Children will also be separated from their family. This division of the family is critical; it is our best option for gaining peaceful and complete control of the population. Families that submit will be reunited, and failure to peacefully comply will result in the destruction of the family unit with the death of troublemakers.

Examples will have to be set; however, they are to be public and kept to a bare minimum. I cannot stress this enough. The people of Elapsis are essential to us; they will feed our people for the next five to ten years, possibly much longer.”

* * *

Jarzen was at the helm, sailing back from a great day of fishing. The hold was overflowing with more than two tons of fresh fish. Rachio was the first to sight an Ion Storm on the horizon. He angrily crossed the deck, walking right into Jarzen, knocking him off balance; then he pointed towards the storm, and said. "I hope you're happy; you've just gotten us all killed."

"We aren't dead yet, and I for one won't go down without a fight." Turning to his father, Jarzen's mind was on escape. "Father, do we run for home or down the coast?"

Looking at the Storm, with no hesitation, Ormal ordered a run for home. "If it's a fast-moving Ion Storm, it will overtake us no matter our course. If we are lucky, we will make the outer banks, if not the marina itself."

The Tadel's family marina was a protected three quarter-circle carved out of sheer rock, the result of some long ago disaster that had faded into fable and legend in the Elapsis of today. With walls that towered fifty to seventy-five feet over the tops of the tallest masts, the sheltered marina provided complete safety from the harsh winds of even the worst Ion Storms. Ormal ordered every piece of sail the masts would carry to be rigged. He advised his sons to secure the boat and themselves in preparation for a fast run for home or for the uncertain fate of sailing into the teeth of an Ion Storm.

There were grand stories of seaman who had been caught in an Ion Storm and lived. They told incredible tales of winds so strong they ripped sails from the rigging and snapped off masts; winds capable of blowing men off their feet and in some cases overboard, never to be seen again; and seas so rough that the storm-tossed boat was actually pushed back or sideways; of wind-driven rain and hail so fearsome that they left welts, broke glass, and reduced visibility right down to the end of your nose.

Then there was the lightning, oh the lightning; as spectacular as it was violent, as magnificent as it was destructive; lightning possessing all the power of the universe. One bolt as thick as a man and traveling from the cosmos, all the way down to strike land or sea or boat, the next bolt; an awesome spider web illuminating the entire sky, turning night into day. The resulting thunderclap, a tremendous sonic boom which reverberated across the sky, a deafening explosion that would rumble all the way to the horizon; thunder and lightning, the perfect partners. The sound and light display, the wind and rain, the awesome storm fury generated by an Ion Storm, were all constant reminders of pure power and impending death.

As the winds picked up, the Lady Mia seemed to fly just ahead of the Ion Storm. It was obvious that the Ion Storm was gaining; the waves were beginning to wash over the bow on every tack. No one spoke. Each Tadel was deep in his own thoughts and doing everything in his power to aid the Lady Mia in her desperate run for shelter.

As quickly as the Ion Storm appeared, it disappeared. The violent wind calmed, the raging ocean settling into a familiar friend with gently rolling swells. When the Lady Mia righted herself, Jarzen realized just how far over the wind had held them during their desperate run. His father looked at him, smiled and said, "That was the strangest Ion Storm I've ever seen; Jarzen, take us home."

Jarzen's mind returned to normal thoughts, he sorted many and settled only on the most positive, such as: If things hadn't already improved enough, the outer banks were now visible.

It was early in the day. The Lady Mia's hold was full. Today I'm nineteen, and tonight I will be with my beloved Shara, the most beautiful girl in the entire province.

* * *

Coming into the harbor, the lack of usual activity was blatantly obvious; there was no one available to help them moor the Lady Mia and unload the day's catch. At the wheel, Ormal ordered Jarzen and Rachio onto the pier to handle the mooring lines. Still seeing no one, he dispatched Rachio to the Harbor Captain's office and Jarzen to the Anchor and Oar, the local tavern, in search of people and information.

Ormal crossed the threshold of the family's fishery, searching for the day workers and fish cutters who would unload the Lady Mia and prepare the catch for market. Hearing laughter and loud excited conversation coming from behind the fishery, Ormal headed for the sound of the gathering.

Iferio and his twin brother Sifer, Ormal's first cousins and the overseers of the family fishery, were engaged in a very animated discussion with the entire work force looking on. Sifer was expounding on the wonderful opportunities that would present themselves to the wise and well-prepared who would trade with the off-worlders, should they return. No . . . when they returned in the morning.

Ormal was greeted with excited assurances of the certain return of the off-worlders. Ormal called Iferio to bring the day workers to unload the day's catch. Instead Sifer offered Ormal a mug of stroda and tried to settle him on an empty crate. Sifer was shocked back to reality when Ormal asserted himself as the head of the family fishing business by insisting that Sifer, Iferio, and all the day workers immediately unload and process the day's catch or tomorrow they would all need to seek other work.

"The off-worlders," Ormal told them, "may or may not return; however, the Lady Mia is loaded with fish. And a single ship's hold filled with fish is worth a fleet of ships with empty holds . . . or the rumor of the off-worlder's possible return."

After mustering the day workers to unload the Lady Mia, Iferio approached Ormal with the serious suggestion that he would be wise to close the fishery on the following day in anticipation of the off-worlder's return.

Ormal, seeing firsthand the jubilant attitudes and firm opinions regarding the imminent return of the off-worlders by his workers, family included, reluctantly agreed to the unplanned day off. Rounding up his sons, he set off for home filled with his own memories of the off-worlders last visit. Try as he might; Ormal could not put out of his mind what bad traders, an otherwise obviously intelligent people had been.

No people with the intelligence and sophistication required to travel the stars should make such bad trades; it simply made no sense. The off-worlders, no what, had they called themselves? Ah yes, the Tar-Que. Well, if the Tar-Que were returning, possibly it was to get even. Maybe they had discovered how badly they'd been cheated in almost every trade they'd made.

Ormal and his sons arrived at home to find the same excitement and giddiness they'd encountered at the fishery; so much so that the preparation for the evening meal and the celebration of Jarzen's birthing day weren't finished. Everyone was all-abuzz about when the off-worlders would return and how long they would stay. Would the trading be as exciting and rewarding as it had been on their last visit?

Sensing that his kin had lost sight of their values; Ormal called an impromptu family meeting. "The Tar-Que may or may not return tomorrow; right now we must get on with our lives and the evening meal, as well as the preparations for Jarzen's birthing day celebration." Ormal sternly admonished all present. "If the Tar-Que do return; no one in the Tadel family

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is to take unfair advantage of them in the trading. Only fair trades will be allowed; we are not a tribe of wandering wagon traders.”

* * *

Berdeen and his daughter Sharasta were the first to arrive for the evening meal and the upcoming celebration. Many others who were beholden to the Tadel family would also be in attendance this evening. As the first overseer and Brew Master of the Tadel family brewery; Berdeen had brought a special brewing of aged Stroda, which had been in the keg for as many full seasons as Jarzen had been alive.

Jarzen had hoped to whisk Sharasta away so they could be alone. Instead he was drafted to help Berdeen unload the kegs, and then his mother ordered him to the family-bathing chamber.

“Jarzen, you have been fishing and working the nets all day. Please give those of us who love you the opportunity to be near you without being overcome by the aroma of hard work.”

“Mother, please you’re embarrassing me.”

“Well, Jarzen, just because you reach the age of independence today, you don’t have to prove it by clearing out the house with the smell of ripe sweat. Now, off with you; your guests are already arriving.”

With a smile on his face and a shrug of his shoulders Jarzen assured Sharasta that he would be right back. In the bathing chamber, Jarzen found Lemosk sitting on the edge of a bathing tub; holding his head in his hands.

“Lemosk, what’s wrong? You look like you’ve lost all that you own.”

“Jarzen, this is the worst day of my life. I didn’t sell any of my beasts at auction today.”

“Lemosk, no one bid on any of your beast?”

“Worse than that Jarzen, they cancelled the auction, as everyone was heading for their homes in hopeful anticipation of the off-worlders return.”

“Then all is not lost, you still have your animals to sell, and sell them you will, all of them, at the very next auction.”

“Jarzen, I had to borrow trading credits from mother today to pay off my day workers. In six seasons I have yet to turn a single credit in profit; this may turn out to be my second failed special project. Rachio and Hazan are both making substantial contributions to the family business, and I, the oldest son, have yet to contribute even one single trading credit to the family treasury.”

“Lemosk, that is just not true, your special project may not have paid off yet. However, your very insightful management of the farm has made us the most prosperous family on the entire continent. It is very uncharacteristic of you to mope and feel sorry for yourself. Get dressed and come to my celebration.”

“Jarzen, please forgive me; Happy Birthing Day. Sitting here wallowing in self-pity, I had completely forgotten.”

“Lemosk, there is nothing to forgive, so long as you help me celebrate my coming of age.”

* * *

When Jarzen and Lemosk returned to the family’s celebration dining hall, a roaring fire was in the oversized hearth. As Jarzen surveyed the room, it appeared that everyone he knew

must be here; his entire family, as well as many who were beholden to the Tadel family. He quickly spotted the old aunts and uncles plus his forbearers who had a place of honor by the fire. Jarzen remembered fondly, the many hours he had spent with them learning to read, write, and to do his ciphering. He was very thankful for his ability to cipher; it was an essential skill he used every time he went fishing, to navigate, to determine course and speed, and to safely bring himself home.

Jarzen roamed the room, receiving his congratulations and being reminded, it seemed, of his entire life. He kept looking for Sharasta, but she was nowhere to be found. When the time arrived for everyone to take their place at the great table for dinner; Jarzen spotted Sharasta seated next to her father at the other end of the table. It seemed they wouldn't be spending much time together, at least not until after the celebration dinner was over.

* * *

“Admiral Quzarian, we must move the fleet away from the planet, this incredibly strange Ion Storm is wreaking havoc with all ships' systems: shields are out, weapons systems are erratic, sensors are off-line, this storm is beginning to disrupt environmental control. Sir, if you don't act now; you may not have a fleet to invade with.”

“Very well, Captain Velip, order all ships to rendezvous at point Zebulon. Have all ships run system-wide diagnostics and report readiness to me within the hour.”

Returning, reports in hand, Captain Velip cautiously approached his irritated Commander-in-chief. “Admiral, all ship captains have forwarded their damage reports to me; repairs are under way with proper priorities set. It will require five solar days to complete the necessary repairs, which appear to have been caused by the ionization of almost every ship system, with similar damage occurring on all of our ships. Sir, we must postpone our 'trading invasion' until all repairs are complete.”

“Captain Velip,” contradicted the Admiral, “a delay of five solar days is not acceptable; I will reschedule the invasion for sunrise the day after tomorrow.”

“Admiral, is that wise? How can crippled ships launch and support an invasion?”

“Captain, we are not attacking Copan. The Elapsons have no military, and they are beyond contempt for their trusting nature. I find it hard to believe that no one has beaten us to this undefended prize just waiting to be won. We will invade according to plan, at dawn the day after tomorrow.”

“Admiral, I have been comparing damage reports with the other Captains. We have never seen the kind of ship-wide damage we sustained from what has to be considered very limited exposure to a naturally-occurring phenomenon. Quite frankly sir, we are all very concerned. We want to contact the Federation High Council for instructions before we commit ourselves to any plan of action. This storm has raised the serious question as to whether or not Elapsis will be a suitable new home world.”

“Captain, you and your confederates leave the planning and the thinking to me. Just carry out your orders. And for the record; I am unaccustomed to having my orders questioned. If you want to finish this campaign as a ship's captain, you'd better learn that lesson now.”

* * *

Jarzen had just finished saying goodnight to a large group of his departing guests when his father asked him to bank the fire and turn out all but the overnight lamp. In a moment of

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confusion, Jarzen looked around to find that with his father going upstairs; he was totally alone in the celebration hall.

Some celebration . . . Jarzen had been unable to spend any time with Shara, the one person he had wanted to spend all his time with. Well, tomorrow was a rest day and he would find a way to spend it with Shara.

* * *

It was well past mid-morning when Jarzen, having slept himself out, woke to a quiet house. He lingered in bed, there being no urgency to rise, as he had the entire day and no responsibilities. He thought of Shara; he indeed did have something to do. Rising and quickly heading for the bathing chamber, he traipsed through an empty house. No matter. He was certain if he ran into anyone, they would have some boring, mundane task for him, and he wanted to be away to the brewery as quickly as possible.

On his way back to his room, Jarzen went through the main kitchen, hoping to find something to appease his hunger. There had been mountains of food at his celebration, although he was only now realizing that he had eaten very little, having to officiate as both the guest of honor and host. On the back of the bakers stove sat a small pot of porridge. Quickly filling a bowl and going to the cooler for some juice, Jarzen inhaled his breakfast and returned to his room to finish dressing.

Arriving at the brewery a short time later, Jarzen had to conceal his anger when he learned that Shara had gone into town with his mother and sisters. Was his mother trying to keep Shara away from him? No, he could not bring himself to believe that; his mother liked Shara.

Shara's mother had died in childbirth when she was only a toddler and Mia had become a surrogate mother to Shara. Shara and her father were often included in family outings and events. Shara was only seven days older than Jarzen, so they had been raised together, sharing the same toys; they were even fed off the same spoon.

Bidding Berdeen farewell, Jarzen started for home, then he decided to go into the village in search of his mother and Shara. Just as quickly, he dismissed the idea. He was, after all, an independent man now; it would be unseemly to go into town chasing after his woman. He would go home for a proper lunch, and then proceed to the Lady Mia to repair the torn sails and work on the stressed riggings.

Arriving back home, he was surprised and pleased to see the shopping party was already home, and they were in the midst of preparing lunch. At the first opportune moment, Jarzen separated Shara from his sisters and asked if she had any plans for the afternoon.

"Jarzen, I had hoped to spend the day with you. When I arrived here this morning, your mother told me you were still asleep and she and your sisters were on their way to town. Your mother invited me to accompany them, so off to town I went."

"Shara, you should have had my mother wake me."

"When I asked when she thought you would rise, Ensura told me, you were the last one to go to bed. She wasn't sure of the time, but she had noted the arrival of the bakers before the last guests left."

"Shara, why then; didn't you wait until I awoke?"

"Jarzen, it did not seem proper for an unspoken-for young woman to be waiting for a man to rise from his bed, when all his family was gone from the house. But about this afternoon, I would still like to spend time with you. Did you have anything special in mind?"

“Shara, I thought we could take the small sail boat, and go to Aza Beach.”

“Aza Beach, that secluded place,” Shara smiled, “whatever would we do there?”

A somewhat perplexed Jarzen said, “We could go shelling, and hold hands, walk on the beach, I don’t know, maybe go for a swim. We could be alone together.”

“A swim sounds great. I wish I had known; I didn’t bring my swimming garment.”

“Shara, we don’t have to swim, but we do need to talk”

“Talk, Jarzen, talk about what?”

“Shara, you’ll have to wait, ‘til we get to Aza, then we’ll talk.”

* * *

Slipping away after lunch, Shara and Jarzen went to the marina to launch the Sea Spray, the fifteen-foot, single-mast boat on which Jarzen had learned to sail. Lowering the Sea Spray from its davits and hastily settling Shara, Jarzen pushed off and raised the sail, which was quickly filled by the ever-persistent breeze blowing seaward across the harbor. In minutes they reached the open sea and were swept down the coast, almost as though the wind and sea were as eager as Jarzen to reach Aza Beach.

It was a beautiful day, and they were making a quick passage. The wind was too brisk to allow much conversation, and Jarzen had to focus on the tiller. He did not want to be blown too far offshore and get caught in the southern current.

They reached Aza Beach in record time; surely the quickest passage Jarzen had ever made. Making a straight-in run for the beach, Jarzen dropped the sail a short distance from shore just as the keel hit sand. Jarzen hopped over the side, settling the bow firmly on the beach. Taking the anchor line as far up on the beach as it would allow, he firmly secured the anchor in the sand.

Turning seaward to assist Shara from the boat, he saw her on shore and coming to him. Propelling herself into his embrace and looking up into his eyes, Shara kissed Jarzen as she had never kissed him before. A long and urgent kiss that all but overwhelmed him; slowly pulling herself away from the kiss but not out of his embrace, Shara said, “Jarzen, you wanted to talk to me?”

Jarzen was totally conflicted and confused by a flood of new emotions, feelings and urges, the likes of which he had not known existed. Bringing himself back to the moment, Jarzen again heard Shara asking him, “You wanted to speak with me?”

Hearing himself stutter and stammer, “yes . . . I . . . I . . . wanted to . . . I . . . I . . . need to . . . say something . . . important,” composing himself, Jarzen said, “Possibly we could talk as we walk?”

Gazing into Shara’s eyes, he relaxed his embrace. He took her hand in his hand and started for the ocean’s edge where the waves were gently lapping against the shore. Jarzen then directed them down the coast.

Jarzen began, “As you know Shara; yesterday I celebrated my coming of age.”

Shara agreed, “Yes I am well aware of that; I was, after all, an invited guest.”

Clearing his throat, Jarzen continued. “Shara, we have spent our entire lives together. And I want to declare that the love that I have for you is so overpowering. And I want to state that the love I have for you, well; I know it is not a brotherly kind of love. For I know well that kind of love. My love for you; is the love of a man, for a woman.”

Sharasta suddenly stopped, and tugging on his arm while still holding his hand, she pulled Jarzen into her embrace and lavished him with kisses ending with a very long kiss, a kiss that brought rushing back all of those feelings, emotions, and urges that had only just started to sort themselves out.

Responding to Shara's passion with eager hands searching for the closeness that only Skin-to-skin contact can provide . . . Jarzen allowed himself to be captured by the passion and carried away to a place he'd never even dreamed existed.

Descending from a euphoria that encompassed every fiber of his existence, Jarzen realized that he still held Shara's warm responsive body in his arms. Caressing her, Jarzen proclaimed, "That was truly incredible, and if possible, I love you even more now than I did before."

"Jarzen, I feel the same, I love you completely, and I don't ever want this day to end."

Gently caressing Shara's very responsive nude body, Jarzen lovingly brushed back a wayward strand of her beautiful dark brown hair, which had fallen across her face and ardently kissed her again. Feeling Shara's response re-intensified all of Jarzen's desire, and once again they made love on Aza Beach. The second time, while not as energized by the years of pent-up lust, was still driven by an intense longing to merge themselves into one being.

Their naked bodies still completely entwined, the young lovers shared one more very passionate kiss, then Jarzen separated from Shara, and propping himself up on his elbow, Jarzen gazed into Shara's beautiful dark brown eyes, and asked. "Sharasta Bracada, will you consent to be my Life-Mate?"

"Yes, oh Jarzen, yes-yes-yes!" Was Shara's immediate response.

Following another passionate kiss, Jarzen rose, offering his hand to Shara; he pulled her to him for yet another long passion-filled kiss.

Looking around, they found they were surrounded by a ring of their hastily-discarded clothing. Finding themselves completely covered in pink powder sand. Jarzen said, "It looks like we'll get that swim after all."

Shara's quick retort was; "I still don't have my swimming garment."

Gazing with great appreciation at Shara's beautiful naked body, Jarzen stated, "If I could have my way, you're as dressed now as you would ever be."

"Jarzen that is just like a man, to want his woman naked, close at hand, and ready to fulfill his every wish."

"What's wrong with that? Shara, my love, it sounds like paradise to me."

Taking Jarzen firmly by the hand, and planting a very wet kiss on his lips; Shara led Jarzen into the calm, warm water for a swim.

Completely free of sand and invigorated by the refreshing crystal clear water; Jarzen pulled Shara into his arms for yet another round of intense kissing, and just as suddenly Jarzen began pulling Shara back to the beach.

Shara gasped, "Jarzen, what's the rush?"

"It's late afternoon, and we must sail back against the wind. Shara, I must get you home."

"Get me home? Jarzen, we're grown adults; we've just committed ourselves as Life-Mates, Jarzen, there is no need to rush for home."

"Shara, there is great need. As our tradition requires, I must ask your father's blessing of our union and then present you to my family as my intended Life-Mate."

"Jarzen, have no fear on that count. My father heartily approves of you and he knows

well my true heart's desire. We've both been eagerly waiting for this day."

* * *

Sailing back was every bit as difficult as Jarzen had expected. The mighty wind, which had given such a quick passage to Aza Beach, was now exacting its payment. Jarzen estimated that if he were to straighten out all of their tacks, they would have traveled four times the one-way trip.

Arriving home just before sunset, with practiced skill, Jarzen eased the Sea Spray into her slip, attached the mooring davits, then quickly hoisted her from the water, making fast all lines. Taking Shara by the hand, the young lovers set off for the brewery to speak with Berdeen.

* * *

Captain Velip was on his way to the Admiral's office, which was located just behind the bridge, when he was paged to report to the Admiral. Knocking on the door just as the page ended, he responded to the Admiral's command to enter. Fully prepared to report on fleet readiness status Captain Velip was interrupted by Admiral Quzarian who looked up and commented on his very swift arrival. "Captain, were you hovering in the outer passage way?"

"No Sir, when you summoned me, I was already on my way to your office to give you an update on the repairs being made to all ships."

After reviewing all the reports and verifying the readiness status of each ship in the invasion fleet; Admiral Quzarian fixed Captain Velip with the stern look of command and recapped. "All ships are able to move under their own power; all minor systems are back on line; every ship has restored environmental and transporter control. Sensors, shields, and most of the major weapons systems are still down; however, that will pose no problem since they aren't needed for the up-coming action."

"Admiral, I know I am out of line, and I will probably end up in a pain amplifier; but I must point out that our ships are still defenseless and blind. How can we hope to launch and support a successful invasion? There is a chance that our ships could even run into one another. Finding precise beam-down locations will be next to impossible, and we have no weather reports. Sir, I hate to even think what another storm would do to us in our present weakened condition. Without shields, you could lose the entire fleet."

"Captain Velip, what I tell you now is a closely-guarded secret. It will never be discussed outside my office. The hard truth is, we are out of time and we must invade. The Eco System on Tar-Que is failing. In less than one solar year; Tar-Que's Eco System will be unable to sustain our people. We must begin the transfer of our entire population to Elapsis in seventy-five solar days. In just thirty solar days we must secure the planet and be ready for the city builders, their materials, and the enormous work force, a second invasion, if you like, of over two million robot workers. Each phase of our tight timetable is dependent on the timely completion of its predecessor.

The architects and engineers will go in with the second wave of today's invasion." The admiral continued, "Can you visualize the scope of what must be done? We have been studying Elapsis for over five solar years; everything is well planned. We have already selected the sites for our cities and centers of industry; we have learned our lessons well. We will not abuse and destroy our new home world. And for the record, I have changed my mind about your constant challenging of my orders."

“Sir, in spite of my last statement; I have already learned that lesson.”

“Captain, when you think it appropriate; I want you to question my orders, but only in the privacy of my office. Captain, your challenges have brought this all-important campaign into a more proper perspective. This tame invasion has been far too easy, providing me with little or no challenge, its tremendous importance notwithstanding. I have been performing like a robot using no creative thinking, which seems to be epidemic and may pose the greatest threat to our success against the Emarc.

Captain, regarding the invasion, our ships will be able to see each other; we will set our orbit low enough so we can transport our troops using landmarks on the planet; in the unlikely event you still don't have our sensors back on line. The invasion will go off as scheduled in just over fourteen solar hours.”

“Admiral, can we be ready to relocate our entire population in just seventy-five solar days?”

“Captain, we must. Moving nine billion people will be the greatest endeavor in the history of the Universe. Just imagine we have a ten-month window, which means we have to move over nine hundred million people per month. That's over twenty-two million people per day. We estimate that the total native population of Elapsis is just under sixteen million, and on a planet three times the size of Tar-Que. What a waste of space.”

“Admiral, do we have enough ships to complete the move?”

“As I said, this invasion has been in the planning stages for over five years. We have finally found a use for Tar-Que's third moon. We have been secretly building giant transport ships on Atel for the past four years. As soon as these transport ships, which were designed to land and take off from a planet, are finished, they are being concealed on the dark side of Atel until they are needed. The ships are being built one hundred at a time; the ones under construction now will bring us up to twelve hundred, more than enough to get the job done. The ships under construction now will be finished within the month. They will have just enough time to generate sufficient atmosphere before they are needed. These city-size ships are little more than space-going warehouses. No weapons, limited shields, but they do possess Star Drive engines. Each ship is large enough to hold one million people and most of their personal possessions.

Our biggest problem is loading and unloading the ships. Our best computer models predict twenty-five solar hours to load and eighteen solar hours to unload. To achieve that, we have increased our special relocation robot work force to over a million bots. We were not expecting to make this move until we had defeated the Emarc; however, as Tar-Que's environment started to completely shut down, we had to accelerate our timetable.”

“Sir, how can we hope to simultaneously safeguard the migration of our people, defend Tar-Que, and wage an intergalactic war?”

“We will do it, Captain; because we have no other choice. We believe Tar-Que can protect itself for some time to come. Our planetary defenses have been impenetrable so far, and we have made tremendous improvements to the planets defense screen. We have added new orbital, platform-based, weapons systems. When the migration is complete, the atmosphere should regenerate enough for us to use Tar-Que as our primary base of military operation. Without the relocation of our people, the atmosphere would never have been able to regenerate to a usable level. The major problem, for a long time, has been the daily addition of new pollution and the overwhelming use of what little atmosphere was being restored.”

“Admiral, do the Emarc know of the migration of our total population?”

Jarzen Tadel

“We don’t think so captain. But at some point this will become an impossible secret to keep.”

* * *

Berdeen observed Jarzen and Sharasta arriving at the brewery still arm-in-arm; smiling like two sun-struck day workers.

Unable to contain his own excitement, he lunged down the steep front steps to greet them. With a smile that became a broad grin, he shouted, “Is it good news?”

Jarzen, straightening his shoulders and rising up to all of his inches, he formally addressed Shara’s father. “Brew Master Bracada, I am in love with your daughter Sharasta and she is in love with me. I have asked her to be my Life-Mate and she has consented. As is our tradition; I have come to ask for your blessing.”

“Jarzen, you have made Sharasta and me very happy; you have my blessing. Yes, you definitely have my blessing, you both do.” Taking Sharasta and then the startled Jarzen into his excited embrace and then Sharasta again, looking into her moist smiling eyes, he burst out, “Sharasta, your mother would have been so happy, so very proud.” With his exuberant congratulations completed, Berdeen invited the young couple into the selling room for a toast to their union. Jarzen was much honored to note that Berdeen was serving his excellent new beverage. Although he hadn’t as yet settled on a name for it, it was either to be the blood of the grape or juice of the vine. Berdeen was truly honoring them, by serving from the first pressing of six years back.

This wonderful day had somehow slipped away from Jarzen. When Shara and Jarzen arrived at the Tadel’s ancestral home; the house was quiet, Jarzen realized that everyone had gone to bed. Jarzen asked Shara if she thought he should wake the house. Sharasta, knowing that the next day was to be a workday, felt it was unfair to deprive everyone of a night’s sleep. Sunrise came soon enough. Jarzen agreed. Though not looking forward to another round trip to the brewery, he told Shara he would take her home.

With a mischievous grin on her face, Shara said, “I don’t believe that will be necessary. You would only have to come for me again early in the morning, for if we don’t share our news before the end of breakfast, we will have to wait for the evening meal.”

“But, Shara, where will you sleep?”

“In light of the afternoon we spent at Aza Beach, I will sleep with you, in your bed. You know Jarzen; until we can build a place of our own within the family compound; your room will soon be our room anyway.”

“Shara my love, what do you mean by soon?”

“Jarzen, I do love you, and I think you really love me, too.”

“Shara, of that, you can be certain. My love for you knows no limits.”

“Then I see no reason to wait; we should be joined on this week’s day of rest.”

Taking Shara into his arms for a quick kiss, Jarzen led her up the back stairs to his loft. Arriving in his room, Jarzen lit the small lamp and started to disrobe, with Shara following his example. Crossing to Shara, taking her into his arms for a passionate kiss, Jarzen noticed that he was still a little sandy. “Shara, it might be a good idea if we made use of the family bathing chamber. I need to use the facilities; and we can get at least a quick soak to wash off the remaining sand.”

Shara meekly said, “Jarzen, I have neither a robe nor a bath sheet.”

Teasing her with her own words, Jarzen said, “In light of the afternoon we spent at Aza Beach and you still with no swimming garment, well, I guess you’ll just have to go as you are.” Taking Shara by the hand, Jarzen gently tugged, and then he led her down the back outside stairs to the family-bathing chambers. A truly remarkable place, there were eight small tubs, each able to easily accommodate two adults and four larger tubs capable of holding four adults. The most remarkable pool of all was a natural hot spring, which could easily accommodate up to twenty-five adults. Water from the hot spring was circulated to all the other tubs and could be mixed with cool water to satisfy the bather.

The people of Elapsis weren’t modest, and it was quite natural for families to all use the same bathing chamber together. This custom was easily expanded to include friends and overnight guests. As a rule, people would not parade in the nude to the bathing chamber; although if they did, it would not be a cause of great concern. For the most part, everyone took a bath sheet or robe with them; still, it was not uncommon for it to simply be carried; especially after coming home sweaty and dirty from a long day toiling in the fields or working the nets.

Arriving in the bathing chamber, Shara confessed an urgent need to also use the facilities. The semi-private partitioned multi-fixture room was conveniently located in the adjoining chamber. Ushering Sharasta ahead of him; she went directly to the nearest fixture, following her in, Jarzen began to use an adjacent fixture.

“Jarzen, whatever are you doing?”

“Why, I’m going to the bathroom; can’t you tell?”

“Jarzen, I’m in here now!”

“Two major firsts for you in one day; you became a loved woman and then you answered nature’s call at the same time as your lover. Shara, not having six brothers and sisters has spoiled you. You’ve joined a very large family so you’ll get accustomed to it quickly enough.”

Finishing together, and returning to the bathing chamber, Shara inquired, “Does it make any difference which tub I use?”

“We won’t be using a tub. We have the entire chamber to ourselves; let’s use the pool.”

Leading the way, Jarzen showed Sharasta how to acclimate to the hot water and where to enter the pool. Jarzen’s eyes and mind returned to Shara’s exquisite nude body. “Shara, if you’d like, I’ll be happy to wash you, if you’ll return the favor.”

Kissing Jarzen, Shara accepted the luxury of being bathed by another until Jarzen’s ministrations began to titillate. As Jarzen bathed Shara, he really marveled for the first time at how beautiful she was. What a beautiful, firm, strong, feminine body she had. Her beautiful soft, smooth tanned skin, her firm breasts, not too small and not too large, her narrow waist and; he thought, there’s that word again, her beautiful round firm hips and bottom, leading down to very shapely legs. Her long, dark brown hair that matched her dark brown eyes, her cute nose, delicious lips and Jarzen was very thankful that the lower half of his body was under water and out of sight.

When her bath was finished, Shara favored Jarzen with a great kiss, and then she washed his muscular back. She noted that he was only inches taller than she, which meant that when she turned her head slightly up and he turned his head slightly down, their height facilitated their great kisses. Yes, they were great kisses.

Finishing his back, Shara worked her way around to the front of Jarzen’s body giving him a quick kiss; she washed his strong arms, chest and flat belly. Plunging her sponge into the pool for more water, Shara encountered Jarzen’s very firm manhood just below the surface

Jarzen Tadel

of the water, which was opaque in the dimly lit chamber. Looking into Jarzen's eyes as she continued her ministrations, Shara teased; "I believe you are enjoying your bath even more than I enjoyed mine." Taking Shara into his embrace, Jarzen smoothly changed from being bathed to making love; and they made love all through the night, finally falling asleep in each other's arms.

* * *

At first light, Mia, always an early riser came into the bathing chamber to discover Jarzen and Shara asleep on a spread bath sheet. Everyone in the family knew they were in love and would eventually be joined, but this was not the way. By making enough noise to wake the sleeping lovers; Mia wondered were they lovers? Then sobering, and giving herself a small shake; she answered her own silent question. The evidence was before her eyes; of course they were lovers. The clanging bucket caused Jarzen and Shara to sit up. Trying to blink the sleep from his eyes, Jarzen heard his mother's stern voice asking him to explain himself.

Standing in his mother's presence and pulling Shara up with him; still trying to blink the sleep from his eyes, Jarzen mumbled, "Mother, it's not what you think," he heard himself saying.

"Jarzen, explain yourself. Why are you and Sharasta sleeping in our bathing chamber and why are you both naked?"

A stammering Jarzen says, "Mother, Shara and I went for a sail yesterday."

Interrupting; Mia asks; "And what does that have to do with this morning?"

"Mother, I'm trying to explain, if you'll stop interrupting." Then Jarzen blurted out the entire story. "Yesterday I asked Shara to be my Life-Mate, and she said yes, after receiving Berdeen's blessing; we arrived here to find everyone asleep. Deciding to tell everyone at breakfast, rather than waking the house at mid-night we went to my room to sleep; only to discover that we were still sandy from the beach. As you know, I can never keep track of my bath sheet, and with Shara not having one, we came down naked for a quick bath before going to bed."

Not missing a beat, Mia said, "And spent the entire night here, instead?"

"Mother, I guess we were more tired than we thought."

"Jarzen . . . I shouldn't wonder."

"Mother, please."

Mia, all smiles said, "Well, get a quick swim, the both of you, I'll get you each a bath sheet. I don't want the whole family to get this wonderful news with you two wearing nothing but smiles." With that she stepped forward with tears in her eyes, and taking one of them in each arm, gave them each a vigorous hug and a kiss on the cheek. Stepping back, Mia stated, "This won't be the first time you've had a bath together . . ."

Jarzen interrupts, "Mother, you have to believe me when I tell you; until yesterday when we pledged ourselves, nothing like this has ever happened before."

"Jarzen, I bathed the two of you together all the time when you were children. I only stopped because of Sharasta's growing fascination with your manhood. Now both of you into the tub; I'll be right back."

With Mia gone from the room, the young lovers dove into the hot spring. Surfacing, Jarzen happily stated, "That went far better than it had any right to." Pulling Shara in for an affectionate kiss, he acknowledged, "I'm pleased that you're still fascinated by my manhood." Mia returned with the bath sheets before Shara could respond.

Jarzen Tadel

“One more quick plunge,” she said, “and then out you come.” Climbing out of the hot spring, Jarzen took the bath sheets and handed one to Shara. He began to dry himself, only to receive a swift slap on his backside from his mother that echoed throughout the entire chamber. “Jarzen, there is no time to dry off here; dry off on the way to your room. I don’t want anyone else in on this morning’s little secret, and I owed you that whack on the bottom.” Calling up the back steps after them; Mia announced that she’d bring Sharasta a clean dress.

Arriving in his room, and energized after their encounter with his mother, Jarzen took Shara in his arms, kissed her and told her he loved her. A short rap on the open door as she passed through and Mia was in the room, dress in hand. Finding Shara and Jarzen still kissing caused her to ask Jarzen, “Shouldn’t you be dressing? Don’t you have an announcement to make?”

* * *

Entering the large family kitchen, Shara and Jarzen found everyone quietly eating breakfast. Jarzen looked to his mother, who only shrugged. It then occurred to Jarzen that his mother was one of the planet’s best secret keepers; she had told no one. Clearing his throat while pulling Shara to his side and putting his arm around her waist, Jarzen interrupted. “If I can have everyone’s attention; I have an announcement to make.” All eyes were on the young couple as Jarzen announced that he and Shara had committed themselves to each other as Life-Mates. With cheers still resounding in his ears, Jarzen held up his hands for silence, he then informed his family that they would publicly take their pledge as Life-Mates on the upcoming rest day. The entire family joyfully embraced and congratulated the happy young couple.

When the well wishes petered out, Jarzen told his father that he wanted to work in the family fishing business. “With all of my brothers already working the farm and with Lemosk branching out into ranching; I have to go into fishing if the family is to maintain its dominance in the fishing industry.”

Ormal embraced Jarzen, telling him he had hoped he would take up fishing, because as the planet’s population grew, so would the market for fish. He went on to tell Jarzen that five of his cousins, all older than Jarzen, had been recruited to work the Lady Mia. Ormal also mentioned that the family owned other boats, which should be fishing daily. Jarzen was devastated; he had hoped he was in line to replace his father as captain of the Lady Mia. With five older family members going into full-time fishing, his exuberance was badly shaken. Noticing his son’s ashen color and pained expression, Ormal remarked, “Jarzen, you don’t act as though you have just received the answer you were looking for. You have my blessing to go into full-time fishing.”

“It’s not that father; I was wondering who would captain the Lady Mia?”

“Jarzen, you know I’ve always captained the Mia.”

“Father, weather permitting, I intend to fish full time. I plan to fish every workday, and I know you can’t be away from the farm that often. Can you?”

“Jarzen, I see your point,” Ormal replied. “We will have to pick the best man for the job; don’t you agree?”

Concerned and somewhat dejected, Jarzen answered, “Yes, father it’s very important to select the best man for the job.”

“Then that settles it; after two solar weeks of intensive training for the new crew, I’ll step down, and you will replace me as captain of the Lady Mia.”

Jarzen Tadel

Breakfast behind them, the happy members of the Tadel family each set about their day's work. After returning Shara to the brewery where she worked with her father, and the brewery's growing work crew. Jarzen set off for the marina to work on the Lady Mia's damaged sails and riggings. Once again, deep in thought about how fortunate he was and how wonderful his life was, Jarzen diligently set about his repairs. His life was perfect: he had the woman and the chosen work of his dreams.

* * *

Captain Velip, approached the admiral, and said, "Admiral Quzarian, all ships report their readiness to begin the 'trade invasion'."

"Then by all means let the invasion begin; it's high time that we took possession of our new home world." With the order given, groups of troops posing as traders with large quantities of trade goods simultaneously began arriving all over the planet. The traders were dressed as before in garb similar to what the Elapsons wore, and if the trade groups were larger on this visit, no one appeared to notice. With the sensors operational again, the 'traders' were being transported to every town, village, and large settlement on the planet. From these primary beam-down sights, smaller groups set off to cover all the previously identified smaller farms and ranches.

* * *

Jarzen had been at work long enough to have removed his sleeveless shirt vest and still work up quite a sweat. When he heard excited shouts and saw people running from place to place, he leaned over the side, hailing some exuberant fishermen who were passing by on the pier. When he inquired what was going on, with enthusiasm they yelled, "It's the off-worlders, the traders; they are back, loaded with trade goods and eager to trade."

That suited Jarzen just fine, for it just so happened his mind had been on a proper gift for Shara to commemorate their Life-Mate Joining. What better gift than something from this technologically advanced people? All of their trade items were of good quality, with many made of indestructible materials the Elapsons could no longer produce.

Jarzen's---great, great, great---great, great, great---grand sire had often spoken of a time many generations before when the Elapsons had had a great space fleet and were themselves technologically advanced. That was then and this was now. The pace of life on Elapsis seemed perfect to Jarzen, although a unique, valuable gift for Shara would be wonderful.

Upon reflection, Jarzen realized he actually owned very few possessions; his parents and the family business provided everything he ever needed. This revelation caused Jarzen much distress. How could he get a special gift for Shara with nothing to trade? The only thing he produced, the only thing he owned, well, sort of owned, was fish. The family had an entire warehouse of salted and pickled fish ready for market. He had helped in the catching; surely he could trade a few barrels of his own fish?

Finding Sifer inside the fish market, with what appeared to be all of his personal possessions laid out on a gutting table, Jarzen boldly approached. It was time to find out if being Ormal's son had any value. His father was, after all, the undisputed head of all of the Tadel family businesses.

"Sifer, I need two, no make it four barrels of pickled, no salted fish, please have them brought to the Lady Mia right away."

Jarzen Tadel

“Jarzen, whatever do you need with four barrels of salted fish?”

Jarzen looked Sifer squarely in the eye---all the while wondering if he indeed had any status---and responded. “I plan to use them as trade goods. The Tar-Que have to eat, and I have nothing else of value to trade.”

“Then Jarzen you are in luck; the traders are on their way here, even as we speak. I will have your four barrels brought here and we will greet the traders together.” The last barrel had just arrived as the traders entered the fish market.

Sifer was so nervous he could not speak, so Jarzen stepped forward, extending his hand in the traditional greeting, and said, “The people of Elapsis welcome the traders from Tar-Que.” The first trader came forward, took Jarzen’s hand, and stated they were pleased to be on such a lovely planet with such a friendly people. Then he asked if they were interested in trading.

The trading went very well, with everyone on both sides satisfied with the items given and the items received. On the way home Jarzen became concerned that his father would judge that he had taken unfair advantage of the Tar-Que. He had traded four barrels of fish---a staple in the Elapsons’ diet but hardly a valuable trade item---for the most extraordinary things. He had three wonderful gifts for Shara, a gift each for his mother, his father, and for Berdeen, and for himself the most amazing belt knife he’d ever seen.

Arriving home early, he thought of the unfinished work he’d left behind; his guilt further fed by the fact that he was the only one at home. He had completed a great many repairs, and was confident he could finish the rest of the repairs in one more day. Besides; his father had not told him to prepare to go fishing in the morning.

Jarzen knew his father would spend at least one week in port training his cousins, if not more, depending on their experience, and making repairs was good training. Feeling better about himself, he headed to the kitchen for a snack before taking his treasures up to his room. He planned to give his parents and Berdeen their gifts after dinner. He would also give Shara one gift after dinner, saving her other gifts for when they were alone in his room. No, that was incorrect; it was now their room.

Around the dinner table that evening, all anyone could talk about was the return of the Tar-Que and the amazing trade items they had acquired. Rachio told everyone---even though the Tar-Que had not been specific---they had indicated they’d be here for an extended period of time.

* * *

When Shara and Jarzen were alone in their room; Jarzen presented Shara with a silver handled hairbrush with a matching hand mirror and the most exquisite necklace and brooch she had ever seen. Shara loved her gifts, especially the necklace, but her duties had kept her at the brewery all day. She’d been unable to get Jarzen a gift. Taking Shara in his arms and kissing her as he removed her dress, he turned her toward the wall mirror. “There, now we can both admire your new neckwear.” Turning back into his arms, Shara kissed Jarzen and playfully tumbled him into bed. They made love and fell asleep in each other’s arms.

CHAPTER TWO

INVASION

Jarzen and Shara were roughly dragged from their warm bed at gunpoint. The pre-dawn twilight found them surrounded by armed men, when a soldier carrying a bright lamp and preceding someone who was obviously in charge entered their room. "I am lieutenant Datoe, of the Tar-Que invasion fleet; you are all to consider yourselves prisoners of war."

Jarzen said, "Prisoners of war, what are you talking about? We're not at war."

"You're right about that. The war is over and your side lost." When the laughter died down, the lieutenant ordered his men to get the prisoners dressed and brought down stairs.

Shara had been inching behind Jarzen out of the direct line of sight of the strange men in her room. Not yet fully used to the idea of being naked in front of the other Tadel family members, this was just too much. Handing Shara her dress, Jarzen appeared to be having the same reaction.

Finally clothed, the young lovers were roughly pushed out of their room toward the stairs. Arriving on the first floor, Jarzen saw his mother and sisters, still in their nightclothes, huddled together in the family's celebration hall; his sisters were all crying, his mother standing tall and defiant. Shara was roughly separated from Jarzen and pushed towards the women. Jarzen went wild; he charged the soldier who had pushed Shara, knocking him down; diving on top of the soldier, he began to pummel the man. A rifle butt to the head quickly subdued Jarzen.

* * *

Coming to, Jarzen did not know how long he had been unconscious or how he had gotten to the grassy field out in front of the main house. Looking up, he saw his father bending over him---with his brothers and many family friends---all men looking on.

Still somewhat dazed, Jarzen anxiously asked, "Father, what has happened? That lieutenant said we were prisoners of war. Father, there was no war? Farther where is Shara, is she all right? Where is mother?"

Trying to rise, he was restrained by his father. "Jarzen, lie still, you have a nasty bump, with an open wound on the back of your head. You know about as much as we do. Jarzen LIE STILL NOW; I'll add what I know, it seems the 'Tar-Que traders' were the first wave of an invasion army; they were joined overnight by the second, much more substantial force. It does appear we lost a war we didn't even know we were in."

As if only now regaining his memory, Jarzen again blurted, "Father, what has happened to Shara, to mother, and to the other women?"

"It seems part of the Tar-Que plan requires separating the women from the men. Jarzen, can you move your arms and legs?"

“Yes, Father, I’m alright.” Trying to sit up, Jarzen was overcome with nausea. “What has happened to me?”

“Jarzen, we’re not sure, we have no details. You were simply dragged out here unconscious and dumped on the ground. We were told to warn you; troublemakers will be executed.”

Weighing in for the first time, Rachio said, “Jarzen, what foolish action did you take to provoke our conquerors and get your head bashed in?”

A confused Jarzen shaking his head, said, “I don’t remember?”

“It had to be fairly serious,” Rachio asserted, “judging by your condition when they brought you out. Are you still trying to get us all killed?”

Ormal’s stern voice cut through the developing argument. “Rachio that will be quite enough; the last thing we need now is a family squabble. Jarzen concentrate; you must try to remember; it may be very important for us to know.”

“Father, I am trying. Oh, wait; now I remember. As Shara and I arrived on the first floor, I had my arm around her. A soldier pushed his way between us, and then he shoved Shara towards mother. I knocked him down, and then dove on top of him, flailing away. The next thing I know, I’m lying on the lawn with you leaning over me.”

Stepping forward, Hazan asked, “Father, do prisoners of war have any rights?”

Shaking his head from side-to-side Ormal answered, “I don’t know, Hazan. If we do, they won’t be many, and they definitely will not include attacking our captors.”

Rachio, his voice filled with anger, shouted, “Look, Father, a large group of our women being herded like beasts. It looks like they’re coming here.”

Their captors, who had loosely ringed the men, now closed in with their guns menacingly pointed, and ordered all the men to their feet and to line up two abreast. The women passed by with their heads hung low---many were sobbing---as they were driven into the Tadel’s family compound. A soldier blew his whistle to get everyone’s attention. He told the men they were being moved to the marina.

Jarzen, who had to be helped to his feet, was trying to pull out of his brother’s grasp. He was loudly demanding an explanation from their conquerors as to why they were being separated from the women, and why they were being moved? Ormal snatched Jarzen back and told him to settle down before he got himself shot.

It was late afternoon when their captors delivered the men to the marina. The men were told to settle themselves wherever they wanted. As long as they caused no trouble, and did not try to leave the marina, they would not be harmed.

Ormal collected his sons and Berdeen, and headed for the Lady Mia; she was set up to easily berth a crew of eight, and he knew food and water were on board. As Jarzen was being helped up the gangplank, Ormal could be heard greeting Sifer and Iferio, with their rush of questions, for which no one had any good answers.

The two main questions on everyone’s mind were: What happened to prisoners of war? And when would they be reunited with their families?

Rachio pointed out that the mouth of the harbor and both of the roads leading to the marina were well guarded. Ormal ordered food to be prepared, and then he went to the captain’s cabin for a keg of stroda he always kept on board. On his return, he handed the keg to Berdeen to do the honors. Ormal suggested to everyone that they settle in, and remain calm until they learned their fate. “I don’t think our captors plan to kill us. If they had wanted us dead; we would already be dead. I fear they have other plans for us; in time we might even

prefer death?" That sparked a lively discussion as to what plans the Tar-Que had for the planet and its captive population.

No one got much sleep that night. Just after sun-up, the ringing of the marina storm bell alerted everyone. The men were ordered to report to the fisherman's social hall for an announcement. Filing in, they were ordered to take seats on the haphazardly arranged chairs.

A different kind of soldier--- judging by his splendid uniform---a high-ranking officer appeared on the stage, and a hush settled over the room. "I am General Torgat, the commander of the occupation army and the military governor of this province. We will tolerate no civil disobedience, nor will we tolerate the disobedience of any Tar-Que orders. The only punishment for trouble-makers is death."

"We are pleased to announce that we have conquered your entire planet without firing a single shot; it was more like rounding up farm animals than an invasion. We have tried to anticipate some of your questions. Let me begin by defining your status: each and every Elapson is to consider themselves a conquered slave of the Tar-Que Federation." There were many mutterings and murmurs across the room. Holding up his hands for silence, General Torgat continued, "This does not have to be a bad thing; life can go on pretty much as it has in the past if you follow your orders, do your work, cause no trouble, and create no problems."

At this point there were a multitude of outbursts from the assembled men.

"What about our wives and children?"

Another shouted, "I thought we were prisoners of war?"

"Why have you invaded our planet, we never did anything to you?"

"What do you want from us?"

Angry men rose to their feet, waving their fists and demanding answers.

Raising his hands for silence and not getting it; General Torgat nodded to another officer standing to his left; a dozen armed men quick-marched onto the stage with guns, menacing the men seated in the front row.

When silence fell over the room; General Torgat continued almost in a whisper, "A similar display of insurrection will result in the immediate execution of every man seated in the front row; another will take out the second row, and so forth. To continue, if you willingly comply with your orders, you will be reunited with your families. Dissidents will see their families disbanded and scattered across the planet; trouble makers will be executed. There will be no prisons or work camps; the entire planet is your prison. The only punishment for any and every offense is death by execution. Why did we invade your planet? Because we could. What are we going to do with your planet? You no longer have a planet. Elapsis; or should I say, New Tar-Que is our planet, our new home world. There are tables in the back of the room, you are to line up, we must take a census to find out who you are, who you are related to, what kind of work you do, and where you live. The judging of willing compliance starts now. Those who cooperate will soon have their lives back, albeit with a new master. Those who do not comply will simply disappear."

When his forms were complete, Jarzen was ordered to return to the Lady Mia. Leaving the meeting hall, he hurried to catch his father. Jarzen knew his father would have a plan; he had to know what it was. Trotting up alongside his father Jarzen asked, "Father, how are we going to regain our freedom?"

"Jarzen, I don't believe we can."

An angry and confused, Jarzen said, "Father, I have no intention of being anyone's slave. Father, we can fight. We must do something."

Jarzen Tadel

“Jarzen, what we have to do is face the facts. We have no weapons and the Tar-Que have our women and children. For now Jarzen; we have to survive. I’m still adjusting to the idea myself, but I believe it’s better to be a live slave than a dead patriot.”

“Father there must be something we can do. I refuse to accept slavery.”

“Jarzen I will think on it; but for now we must take the Tar-Que at their word. If you or anyone in our family causes trouble; their actions may get us all killed.”

* * *

“Good morning to you Admiral Quzarian.”

“Good morning General Torgat, how goes the occupation?”

“Sir, it’s taking too long to reunite the families and resettle the people. The children are our major problem; they cannot take care of themselves, and there are so many of them. They are crying all of the time. They are always hungry, and Admiral, the smell is just awful, and it has only been four days.”

“General, I will give orders today to immediately return the children to the care of the women. How goes the building of the compounds for our troops?”

“The construction goes very well; the slaves’ cooperation is all we could have hoped for. However, our troops---especially the officers---are not happy. Many of the Elapsons---I’m sorry sir, I meant the slaves---have very beautiful homes. Like our country estates or hunting lodges back on Tar-Que, spacious, warm, and comfortable. Several of the senior officers do not understand why they are not being housed in the homes of the conquered.”

“General, we have twenty-six days until the city builders arrive. Get your staff under control, or I’ll be rotating senior officers up here to spend some time in a pain amplifier. There are no automated Argo-farms on Elapsis and no time or resources to develop them; we need the slaves to feed the entire planet for the next several years. They know how to do it. Just increase their production and put them on a standard galactic solar week. And, General, have those compounds finished by the end of next week. If you fall behind, put your troops to work. I need the slaves farming and fishing within ten days, and I need them up to one hundred percent capacity twenty-six days from today; anything else, General?”

“Yes Sir, there is; I need additional clarification. I am well aware that we are to supervise the farming and ranching, to watch for any signs of sabotage; are we to closely supervise the fishing as well?”

“I will leave that up to you, General; although it does seem rather difficult to sabotage fish . . . if there’s nothing else general, Quzarian out.”

“Admiral, Sir . . . Sir. Macars, our connection has been terminated. I’ll retain your unanswered questions for my next appointment with the Admiral.”

“General, if we are to resume the fishing in less than ten days some of our questions must be answered now. Are we to go on these fishing trips? Our troops are fearful. No one has volunteered to go to sea; even many of the slaves are afraid of their ocean. And, sir, under what rules will the slaves fish; how are we to judge the fishing? And that boy captain; what were these people thinking? Who makes a boy a captain?”

“Boy captain? Colonel, explain yourself.”

“Sir, the headman, Ormal’s youngest son, a boy of nineteen, is captain of the largest, fastest boat in the marina. He’s driving everyone crazy with requests for parts and supplies. He relentlessly pesters and makes demands of every officer he sees to be reunited with his new bride.”

Jarzen Tadel

“Wife; a boy of nineteen is a ship’s captain with a new wife?”

“Yes sir; just married and just promoted to captain of his boat. On Elapsis, a boy is considered a man at nineteen solar years of age.”

“Colonel, who promoted him?”

“Sir, he was promoted by Ormal, the headman of the province.”

“Colonel, from our brief meetings; Ormal seems like a sensible man. If he promoted the boy, then it must be all right. The boy, does he have a name?”

“Yes sir, I have it here . . . it’s Captain Jarzen Tadel; he allows just Captain Jarzen.”

“Captain Jarzen?”

“Yes sir that is how he said he was to be addressed.”

“Colonel, he is a slave; the use of his first name is more than sufficient.”

“Yes sir.”

“As to the fishing colonel, the slaves are to leave at sunrise, and return at sunset, or earlier if the boat has a full load of fish. As to supervising them, I don’t see the need. Where can they go? We control the entire planet and how can you sabotage a fish? They are to fish eight days in ten, and any day with no fish or a poor catch will be counted as a rest day. Colonel, we could use the fish now; you are to resume fishing five solar days from today . . . if not sooner.”

“Yes sir. Sir, Captain Jarzen said if he could see his wife---wind and weather permitting he’d be ready to fish in the morning---and he has promised a full hold of fish.”

“Colonel, as I said; we can use the fish. Let him go out tomorrow, and colonel, if he returns with a full hold of fish, he is to be allowed to see his wife.”

* * *

Receiving the news completely energized Jarzen. He would do anything to be with Shara, he would serve any master. However, his crew did not share his enthusiasm. Apanthus, bitterly complaining, proclaimed. “We are not ready to go to sea.”

“The Lady Mia is,” Jarzen countered. “The sails and rigging are repaired better than new and there are no holes in the nets.”

Still not persuaded, Apanthus growled, “The boat may be ready, captain, but in my firm opinion, the crew is not.”

“Yes; I, Jarzen Tadel am captain of this vessel; I alone decide when we are ready to go to sea. Batis has two seasons’ experience, Enser and Hapeau almost a full season each; only Rebus and you, Apanthus, have no experience; you will learn on the job. The best way to become an experienced fisherman and boat handler is to go to sea and fish. The Tars are afraid of the sea; they will leave us alone so long as we come home with a full hold of fish. For a slave that may-be as good as it gets.”

Apanthus, ten years older than Jarzen, was still not convinced. As he started to renew his challenge, Jarzen sternly told the older man, “Apanthus, if you’d like, no, all of you, hear me. If any of you won’t take my orders, say it now. I will replace you, and you can find other work.” When no one spoke up; Jarzen continued to instruct the crew, “Well then, all hands prepare the boat. We leave at sunrise for the outer reef, and an early return with a full hold.”

* * *

When the Lady Mia returned around mid-afternoon, the hold filled with fish, Jarzen

was pleased with the day's fishing. The crew had performed well except for Apanthus, although he had appeared willing enough to be taught. The Tars were very pleased with the magnitude of the catch; the size and variety of the fish equally impressed them. The catch unloaded, and the Mia washed down from stem to stern, they were well prepared to go out the next morning. Jarzen sought out the captain of the guard for his special travel pass, and then he was off for home.

Arriving home, all the women had questions about their menfolk. Greeting them cheerfully enough, Jarzen assured them that everyone was in good health. They were eager to be reunited with their families. Jarzen assured them he was certain it would only be a few more days. The men were in submissive compliance with the Tars' orders. What choice did they have with no weapons? They would cooperate to be reunited with their families.

Pressed for a more definitive time and date, Jarzen could only answer that when the troop's fortified compounds were completed, he felt the families would be together again. The Tars had made it clear to the men, that while their people were building and getting resettled, it would be the slaves' job to feed everyone on the planet. If all of the Tars were not properly fed, the slaves would go hungry. Jarzen had been looking for Shara amidst the pressing crowd of over two hundred women who were being held at his family home. He finally spotted his mother, and he told the women he had no more news and that he was on urgent business, which apparently appeased them.

"Mother, how are you holding up with so many house guests?"

"Not funny; Jarzen; Mia pulled him in for a long hug, and then she asked. "Your father and your brothers are truly alright?"

"Yes mother, we all are; it's just the separation that's hard to endure; the Tars are making a point, and driving it home."

"The Tars?"

"Yes mother, that's how the men are referring to our conquerors."

"I expect a nick name was inevitable, at least that one shouldn't offend them to much if they overhear it. Jarzen, I also assume you are looking for Shara? She's been working at the brewery every day with about twenty of the women; it turns out the Tars like stroda. She is due home any time now; it's just before curfew. It will be a shame if you miss her."

"Mother, I'll not be missing her; I'm here for the night."

"Jarzen, how is that possible?"

"The Tars also like fish. I've been a good boy. I made our conquerors very happy with a full hold of fish. A night off is my reward."

"Very interesting, even though; it's what I've come to expect from the Tars."

"Mother, there is a little more to it than what I've told you; it could also be about the Tars wanting to call my bluff and shut me up. It does bode well that with me having won the day; the Tars have honorably kept their word."

"They are a strange lot," his mother agreed. "Nevertheless, honorable is a term that applies. With two hundred women, no men and no children, you can only imagine what went through our minds. The Tars have behaved like honorable macars, thank the Creator. I can tell you; we had a few sleepless nights. Jarzen, I'm so addled, what can I be thinking? There is no place for you and Shara to be alone here."

"Mother, I still do have a room here. This is still my home; isn't it?"

"Not with two hundred houseguests, you don't; overnight there isn't even any floor space left. I brought Shara, your sisters, and eight others into my room; your loft is sleeping

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about a dozen. Jarzen, if you are willing to risk it, your only chance is to go to the brewery, and spend the night in Shara's room. Should you meet her on the way, get yourselves back there before dark. If you're quiet, and without a light, the patrols will never even know you are there. Be careful, and give my love to your father and your brothers; now be on your way. Oh Jarzen, I almost forgot; tell the men that all the women are fine, and the children will be here tomorrow."

Nearing the brewery, Jarzen saw a large group of women coming down the front steps. Not seeing Shara, he ducked out of sight and let the women pass. He had answered all the questions he cared to. Not seeing Shara, Jarzen knew she would still be inside cleaning or straightening something. As soon as the way was clear, he made a dash for the front steps, taking them two at a time. Shara was not alone; his sisters Ensura and Heka were also there. After a fond greeting, and assurances that all the men were okay, Ensura had the good sense to half push, half pull Heka out the door and down the steps toward home, leaving Shara and Jarzen alone.

As Jarzen was closing the door, he could hear Ensura telling Heka to hurry lest they find themselves out after curfew. Turning to Shara, and taking her into his arms, Jarzen told her of his mother's grand plan for them to be alone. After a long, urgent kiss, he laughed as he confessed his need of a bath after a hard day of fishing. Wearing a huge grin, Jarzen said, "It seems as though we spend a great deal of time trying to get clean enough to work up a lustful sweat together."

"Jarzen, your mother may have planned better than she thought; the primary bathing chamber is behind the brewery, set into the granite hill itself."

Shaking his head as he chuckled, Jarzen said, "That seems like a long way to go, when you live over the selling room in the brewery."

"Jarzen, my father likes the no longer used; warehouse manager's second-floor brewery residence, which has its own bathing chamber. The Brew Master's actual residence reminds him too much of my mother and staying in the brewery allows him to remain close to his work. My father and I take many of our meals together; however, for the past four years; I have actually lived alone in the Brew Master's residence."

With a small lamp, Shara led Jarzen through the long, dark aging warehouse, which was filled with hundreds of barrels of stroda. Then they went up a flight of stairs, across an elevated walkway and down a flight of stairs. Shara extinguished the light and led Jarzen out into the dark of night.

"Shara, where are we? I can't see my hand in front of my face."

"Keep your voice down; we are almost to the residence. I told you it was built right into the granite hill." Once inside, Shara put flame to a larger lamp, which presented a warm, richly appointed room that was indeed carved right from the bare rock.

"Shara, is it wise to light the large lamp? My mother spoke of patrols."

"Jarzen, it's safe enough. With the storm shutters in place and the drapes drawn, no light escapes. I stayed here the night before last, as I needed to be away from all those sullen women with their unanswered questions, their crying, and their moping."

"Shara, my love; are you saying you did not miss me, perhaps, cry and wonder what the future held?"

"Jarzen, I cannot believe how much I missed you; my pillow must be put out into the sun to dry every day. Then having to deal with the overwhelming emptiness; as well as fearing

the worst for our future. I never did come to terms with whether I could go on without you; but I refused to feed my self-pity and that of the other women by joining in to see who was the most miserable.”

Jarzen pulled Shara close against his strong eager body; he kissed her and tried to reassure her about their future. He was surprised when she broke their embrace.

Shara smiled up at him; first things first. “I too need a bath; I’m covered in brewery dust. And I am starving; we get no lunch break. Let’s bathe, then eat, refreshing ourselves; leaving the rest of the night to pleasure each other.”

Passing through the kitchen, Shara loaded Jarzen down with bread, hard cheese, and smoked fish as she gathered up fresh fruit and a jug of stroda, all the while still balancing the lamp. Leading the way to the bathing chamber, Jarzen became more impressed with the residence as they passed through each room. His biggest surprise was the bathing chamber itself. It was very large, with two single tubs, a tub that would easily hold a family of six, and beyond that a natural hot spring almost as large as the one in his family’s bathing chamber. Setting down the lamp and her portion of their dinner, Shara deftly removed her dress and dove into the hot spring. Jarzen had been staring at the night sky, through what appeared to be a natural opening in the rock. Hearing the splash from Shara’s dive; Jarzen quickly joined Shara in the pool. Jarzen came up from behind her, and asked as he nibbled on her ear, “Who washes who first?”

Their bath complete, the young lovers sat on the steps in the shallow end of the hot spring and talked while they fed each other. Finally; Jarzen asked where the bath sheets and the bedchamber were.

As they dried each other, Shara invited Jarzen to see one of her very favorite sights. She dimmed the lamp and led him to the natural skylight. The night sky was filled with so many stars; it seemed you could walk from one to the next. Taking Shara into his arms Jarzen joined her in marveling at the wondrous spectacle, just as a shooting star burned its way across the cosmos.

“Shara, this is a truly inspired sight. As a sailor, the stars are very important to me, but this, just for the pure enjoyment. If I did not have other more compelling desires, I could watch the stars all night.”

“Why not have it both ways?” Tugging Jarzen by the hand, Shara took a large thick quilt from a nearby cabinet; after spreading the comforter on the thick sward, Shara pulled Jarzen down to her, and they made love and watched the stars all through the night.

* * *

“Admiral Quzarian, General Torgat is here to present his briefing.”

“Thank you, Tanea, please send him in.” The admiral crossed the room, his hand extended in the less formal greeting than the customary salute. “General Torgat, how goes life on the planet?”

“New Tar-Que is a marvelous planet sir. With the air so bad on Tar-Que the last few times I visited home, I spent all of my leave indoors; but here it’s just the opposite. Admiral, you should really come down for a good look around; you’ll be impressed and a day off on the planet will do you a world of good.”

“Thank you, General; I’m sure you are right. However, my orders require that I remain safe and out of harm’s way on board the Gunard---until the Federation High Council is convinced---I will be in no danger. I don’t know whether to be flattered or insulted; do they

think me invaluable or feeble?"

"I can assure you Admiral; no one thinks you are feeble; so it must be that you are invaluable."

"Are you up for a promotion general?"

"Sir; I beg your pardon?"

"Relax general. When you go fishing for compliments like I just did, it's always embarrassing when you get them."

"Admiral, in all sincerity, you are indispensable. With the war effort against the Emarc, and the resettlement of our new home world, we can ill afford to lose you."

"Thank you for saying so, general; I do what I can. General, let's move on to your report."

"Yes sir, after only fifteen days on the planet, the province and the population are totally under our control, with no major problems and no executions required."

"General that's excellent! It's been the same everywhere else except for Grippa, a mining village and farm community in the central mountains of the southern continent of Gelon. What's the construction status of your troop compounds?"

"Sir, obviously none of the slaves had never seen prefabricated buildings. They were also totally unaware of Glasscrete; however, they are willing workers and they took direction well. Fabrication was close to being on schedule when a company of construction robots arrived. Overnight all six compounds--the commissary, the transporter station and my command bungalow--were up, which allowed me to advance my timetable and resume farming and fishing five days early.

The families of our slaves have all been reunited. I began reuniting after only five days, and by the tenth day we had all of the families back together."

"General, are you certain the slaves fully understand what will happen if they don't completely comply with our orders?"

"Yes sir, they know. I might add that your plan has been brilliant."

"General, I thought we had dispensed with the compliments?"

"No flattery sir; just facts. Admiral, I am the veteran of eight other planetary invasions, each more trouble than the one before; here it has been almost a vacation. Following your instructions to the letter, we have neither taken nor destroyed any of the slaves' property; they are living in their own homes again, and their women have not been violated. They are treated fairly, and we grant every request that does not interfere with the master plan. They are farming and fishing almost to maximum capacity. They understand their new role and are meeting the formidable task, almost willingly."

"That's what concerns me the most general; why would they subordinate themselves so completely? Is it possible this subservient behavior is just to lull us into a false sense of victory, while they plan a revolt?"

"Anything is possible sir; but I sincerely doubt that that is the case. The Elapsons are realistic if nothing else. They appear to possess an extra quotient of common sense. They are aware of their situation, and have accepted it because they have no other course of action. It is self-preservation blended with an incredibly strong sense of family that persuades their cooperation, pure and simple."

"General, I hope you're correct; all of our advance research bears out this result. Nevertheless, I want you to remain extra vigilant. We are way beyond totally committed on this project. Nothing can go wrong. We can afford no setbacks."

“I am ever vigilant sir. Let me reassure you the slaves are abiding by the curfew. They are holding no mass meetings. They have accepted their fate; and life hasn’t changed that much for them. I have even left their old hierarchical system in place.”

“How so General; please explain.”

“As you know sir; the Elapson have one headman, one dominant family in each province that everyone else looks to for guidance, help, and permission to make changes. These headmen receive a small tithe, approximately three percent, of everything that is produced, from everyone who is beholden to them in the entire province. It’s a lifetime repayment for the headman’s favors, patronage, and aid when needed.”

“And general, they do this willingly? The gladly pay extortion for life?”

“The Elapsons don’t see it as extortion admiral; they see it as their duty and as a sign of respect to their patrician.”

Muttering under his breath, a thoughtful admiral said, “Truly a strange people.”

“Sir, having spoken with several of the other governors, it would appear that by accident, I stumbled on to a wonderfully simple plan for dealing with the slaves.”

“What would that be General?”

“Take Telmar, for example. As in the past, the slaves bring their needs to Ormal, their hereditary headman, and he deals with them, seldom involving me.”

“General, are you saying that leaving the civilian hierarchy in place has greatly facilitated the administration of your province?”

“Yes sir, it frees me from having to deal with the day-to-day lives of almost a million slaves spread out over the five million square miles of the province.”

“General, please share this plan with all your fellow Provincial Governors, and provide a copy of the program to this command.”

“Yes sir. Sir, Ormal, the headman of my province, asked me a question for which I have no answer. He wants to know how his people can regain their freedom.

“General, he asks a very interesting question; over which I have lost considerable sleep. The long-term solution of what to do with the slaves of Elapsis has not been decided. As I see it, we have three choices: we can exterminate them when we no longer need them; we can relocate them to another planet; or we can allow them to petition for citizenship on New Tar-Que.”

“A difficult decision, sir; although; I’m of the firm opinion, if they serve us well, it would be prudent to allow them the opportunity to earn their freedom. It will afford us an additional, very effective incentive to maintain their loyalty.”

“General, it sounds to me as though you are becoming personally interested in the slaves, but even as free men they would never be more than a subculture.”

“Admiral, they are a very likable, loyal people. If they do their part in the master plan, it is my assessment that they will have earned the right to petition for citizenship, subculture or not; possibly as free agricultural citizens?”

“General, there is that very credible possibility; their continued good will is essential to our overall success.” Thinking out loud Quzarian continued, “It certainly requires substantial consideration; it wouldn’t be the first time that we took in another race as citizens.”

* * *

Six days after his meeting with Admiral Quzarian, General Torgat was summoned to an emergency meeting on board the Admiral’s Flagship, the Gunard. Arriving in the admiral’s

conference room from the transporter station, Torgat was puzzled to see most of the other Provincial Governors.

Immediately after the arrival of the last two Governors, Admiral Quzarian entered the room, motioning for the assembled room full of half-risen men to remain in their seats. Appearing troubled the admiral got right down to business.

“Macars, we have suffered a catastrophe, and I’m astounded to have to report an unforeseen and unbelievable setback. As you have only just recently learned yourselves, the relocation of our people had been kept a secret from all but an extremely select group of our top scientists, essential members of industry and the High Council. Last night on the evening vides, the Federation High Council presented a well thought out, exceedingly factual explanation of the irreversible failure of the atmosphere on Tar-Que and the only viable solution. Within hours of the broadcast there were riots in the streets, massive demonstrations against the relocation and the High Council. Millions of troops who are badly needed elsewhere in the war have been recalled to Tar-Que to restore order. The worst part of my report is the magnitude of the defiance; it’s placed at about seventy percent of the population.” The admiral held both hands up for silence and speaking louder, continued.

“Macars, macars, please hold it down, with the entire group speaking all at once we will accomplish nothing; I am looking to this group for a solution of this problem.”

Lieutenant Texla entered the room. Stopping behind the admiral, she bent and whispered something in his ear; he nodded, returning his attention to the group, he said. “I must take this call.” In his absence, before leaving the conference room, the admiral ordered his senior staff to discuss only probable solutions to this new problem.

When the admiral returned to the conference room, which quickly hushed to silence; he informed his officers things at home had not improved. Even with the addition of over thirty million combat-hardened troops who were sent to Tar-Que to support a home guard of over twenty million troops; plus an equal number of civilian police; peace and order has not been restored.

“Macars, we invaded this planet with a force of only fifteen ships of war, ten mega troop transports and seven and one half million officers and troops, the absolute minimum number we believed could get the job done. Now we are being asked if we can spare any troops. How can they ask seven and a half million troops to conquer and control sixteen million potentially hostile inhabitants, when they need more than seventy million troops to control our own people? Does anyone else see the irony in this?”

“Sir, if I may?”

“Yes, General Torgat, please proceed.”

“Macars, speaking for my province alone, we have things so well in hand with this completely docile population, I believe I can get by with two hundred thousand troops, freeing up five hundred and fifty thousand to return home.”

“General Torgat, I’m looking for realistic solutions. At all costs, we still must hold this planet. Our people may not like the solution, never the less, they will have to face the inevitable facts. Tar-Que will soon be a dead planet”

“Admiral, I assure you I have no death wish and I’m not misreading the situation in my province. The troop level I suggested will be sufficient.”

“Very well; how about the rest of you; any surpluses among your occupation force?” Not to be outdone, each Provincial Governor also agreed to give up the same number of troops; only the admiral’s good sense prevented that severe a reduction of the occupation forces. He

instead required that each commander retain the most experienced two hundred and fifty thousand troops, with at least forty percent being women. The daring new plan freed up five million troops to return home.

The admiral again turned to General Torgat. "You got us off to a good start General, anything else?"

"I have one thought, and two questions which may lead to suggestions."

"By all means, general, share your thought."

"Sir, I strongly suggest that we begin to resettle those on Tar-Que who wish to leave immediately. If my math serves me, thirty percent of the people have accepted the inevitable; that's two point seven billion people, a good start."

"What are your questions general?"

"Sir, I suspect the morale among the troops and the home guard is very low. Would it not be prudent to assign the troops we are returning home to as many different installations as possible? They have seen what a paradise Elapsis/New Tar-Que is so they can give first-hand reports, reassuring everyone---military and civilian---of how much better off we will all be on New Tar-Que."

"Go on, general."

"Sir, how ethical do we have to be in getting our people to relocate?"

"General, do you have something underhanded in mind? Please share it with us."

"Just this sir; it would seem we need to get our people's minds off protesting and on to surviving."

"If running out of breathable atmosphere and suffocating doesn't bring up thoughts of survival, what will general?"

"Admiral, our people have lived with bad air and bad weather for so many years, most people may not even believe that their life is in danger. We need to get them focused on something they do fear; the Emarc Alliance."

"Exactly what did you have in mind?"

"Once order is maintained and the willing have been relocated; we leak a report about a pending invasion from the Emarc."

"General, they won't believe it. The people are well-acquainted with our strong planetary defenses."

"Sir, we can work on the story, but that's my second thought."

"Admiral."

"Yes, General Zobar?"

"The cover story could be a new weapon, possibly a planetary defense breaching system for which we have no defense."

Admiral Quzarian was pleased by the outcome of the meeting, even though it produced only one other usable idea. Captain Velip, the commanding officer of the admiral's flagship, the Gunard, suggested that every citizen be offered the choice of coming to New Tar-Que; or of relocating to one of the other fifteen planets in the Tar-Que Federation.

The meeting adjourned, and as everyone headed to the transporter station, the Admiral asked General Torgat to remain behind.

* * *

Shara woke with the sun already high in the morning sky, and she tenderly kissed Jarzen awake, which always aroused him. "Jarzen, we've overslept the day, and are already in grave

Jarzen Tadel

trouble with our new masters. Jarzen, we shouldn't, ooooh Jarzen, we have to report; we---are---in---so---much trouble.”

“Shara, we don't know how much trouble we're in or when we may be allowed to see each other again. I'll not waste this opportunity to love you.”

After making wonderful, passionate love, Shara became more concerned when Jarzen, seemingly still in no hurry, took them for a swim, and then to the kitchen for some breakfast, all the while kissing and fondling Shara's exquisite body. Returning to the bath chamber, it was obvious to Shara that Jarzen intended to make love again.

“Jarzen, is it wise to further anger the Tars, by being even later than we already are?”

“Shara, I couldn't care less about the Tars, you're here, I am here, and we're dressed for love. We may be slaves; but we are in love. I will make love to you wherever and whenever I can. I love you more than life itself; nothing, including being a slave, will ever change that.”

It was mid-morning when Jarzen arrived back at the marina, a shorter trip, as the brewery was halfway between the marina and the Tadel family compound. He had carried his special travel pass in his hand, but had only been stopped by one patrol. Being late and fearing the worst, Jarzen was greatly relieved when they sent him on his way without comment. Upon his return, Jarzen reported to the captain of the guard. “Captain Arcon, I'm sorry to be late. I was with my wife. I don't have a good excuse. I can't promise it won't happen again.”

“You may be sorrier than you think. General Torgat authorized me to repeat our offer. He even extended it to your entire crew. About one hour past sunrise I informed your crew of the good news. Did you know that four of them have wives? Jarzen, I venture to say that you are fast becoming, in the eyes of your own crew, the most despised man in the province.”

“Captain Arcon, a large part of my tardiness was the result of having no private place to visit my wife. Giving my crew shore leave will only present them with the same problem.”

“Jarzen, I don't believe it will be a problem today. Keeping your crew from killing you may be a bigger problem.”

“Captain Arcon, we will be taking you up on your offer. Notify the fishery and please give some thought to the privacy issue for my crew.”

“Jarzen, it's past mid-morning. Just how late do you plan to return? Jarzen you do remember this offer requires a hold filled with fish or it's no deal.”

“Arcon, we will be back by late afternoon, with a full load of fish.”

Boarding the Lady Mia, Jarzen was immediately set upon by his crew. Holding up his hand for silence, he ordered them to make immediate preparations for getting under way. “We can chew the rope under way, to your stations men, there are fish waiting to be caught.”

As the Lady Mia was passing through the mouth of the harbor, Jarzen turned her north and the first offshore wind filled the sails. Assembling his crew, Jarzen apologized for being late, explaining why and receiving complete absolution when he pointed out that they were going to have the very same problem, except that he had charged Captain Arcon with coming up with a solution. Hapeau, the only single member of the crew; reminded everyone that they needed a full hold, and it was nearly mid-day. He asked, was Jarzen making a vain effort?

Jarzen was as anxious to successfully conclude their bargain, as anyone on his crew; he proffered a risky scheme of win or lose with no middle ground.

“We sail north along the coast for two hours, put out all our nets, and then we make a long lazy turn for home. If the nets are empty, we come home empty. If the nets are full, we trim sail, tie off the helm, and everyone hauls in the nets. Once the nets are in, we raise sail

Jarzen Tadel

with a short trip to the marina, as the southern current should have dragged us back down the coast all the while we were pulling in the nets.”

Apanthus---while not completely in accord with the plan, although he wanted to see his wife---asked with slight confusion, “Jarzen, if we get caught in the southern current, won’t we get swept far out to sea, and pushed far down the coast? And didn’t you say it was very dangerous to fish in the southern current?”

“Apanthus, you are listening and learning. You’re correct, only we will neither fish nor get caught in the southern current, which does run much closer to the coast north of the marina. While not actually entering the southern current, we will be close enough to it to catch fish and be drawn back down the coast under short sail. To actually lower our nets inside the southern current, would cause the nets to wrap around or pass the boat, and would quite probably result in the destruction of the nets. My plan’s only risk is whether there will be fish for the nets or just empty water.”

As luck would have it, the nets were so full of fish it took nearly two hours to pull them in. The trick being to keep on enough sail to stay just ahead of the current, while not making the drag on the nets so heavy they couldn’t be hauled in. Even as the last net was still being hauled in, Jarzen sent Enser and Apanthus to hoist all the remaining sails. Jarzen then turned the Lady Mia almost directly west for the marina. Only five hours after leaving the harbor, Batis called out land ho. The Tadel family marina tower and pennant were sighted. Jarzen cautioned the crew to remember to boast that their successful trip was the result of blind luck on the part of men eager to see their families. “We went out, we lowered the nets, we caught fish, and we returned home early.” Jarzen kept the crew busy on the short return trip to the marina by reminding them shore leave would begin when all the work was completed.

Captain Arcon, arriving on the pier as the Lady Mia was tying up, voiced his laughter. “Back so soon? Jarzen, I never figured you for a quitter.”

“Whatever are you talking about? We’re only back early because the hold is full.”

“Nice try Jarzen; however, I’ll have to see the fish before you’ll be allowed to see your women.”

“By all means, please come aboard, and verify our catch. By the way, did you resolve the privacy issue? Batis, remove the hold hatch cover for the captain.”

An astonished Captain Arcon asked, “Jarzen, how is this possible?”

Jarzen, his face full of smiles responded, “Blind luck on the part of lonely men.”

With a huge grin on his face Captain Arcon laughing out loud, and said, “It’s shore leave for everyone; and yes Jarzen, I did resolve the privacy issue.”

“Arcon, that’s great; please share the details.”

“We have allowed the families of your crew to return to their own homes, including Hapeau’s parents.”

“What about my father and my brothers?”

“No, not yet, but if things continue going so well; we will reunite everyone by the end of the standard galactic week.”

“Captain Arcon, Why is my family being singled out?”

“Actually, only your father is being held in abeyance, and that’s because of his leadership role in the province; in any event, your home is still full of the displaced.”

The work gang was coming aboard to unload the fish, as Jarzen’s crew went ashore. Spotting Berdeen, Jarzen pulled him aside. “I had shore leave last night and I got to see Shara. She’s fine; she asked me to tell you she loves and misses you. Captain Arcon tells me everyone

Jarzen Tadel

will be returned to his or her own homes within a few days. I have shore leave again tonight. There is no privacy for us at my father's house, as my room is currently sleeping twelve women. Shara and I ended up spending the night in the Brew Master's residence. We were going to start working on a place of our own before the invasion. Now it looks as though we will be moving back into my room when everyone has been returned to their own homes. Until then I was wondering if we could share the Brew Master's residence with you?"

"Jarzen, I make my home in the unused warehouse manager's quarters on the second floor over the selling room. When the warehouse manager's position was eliminated years ago, Shara and I moved in. When Shara was old enough, she moved back into the Brew Master residence. She has lived there alone, until now, that is, for the past four years. Why don't the two of you just move into the residence, and make it your home for the foreseeable future? After all, the brewery and the residence belong to your family; I'm just the Brew Master."

"Berdeen, are you sure it won't inconvenience you? The residence does come with the Brew Master's position."

"Jarzen, under the circumstances, it's the sensible thing to do. I welcome you both, and with me living over the warehouse, I'll never be a nosy neighbor."

* * *

Arriving at the brewery with good news, fresh fish, and fresh produce, Jarzen was pleased to see that everyone was packed up and ready to return to their own homes or to their temporary quarters in the Tadel's family home.

Taking Shara into his arms for a loving kiss, Jarzen said, "With your permission, you have a new permanent roommate."

"Very amusing Jarzen, I am only interested in one roommate, and you know him."

"In that case, I really do have good news. It will still be a few days until everyone is returned to their own homes and it turns out my family will be last. I asked your father if we could use his home, the Brew Master's residence. He told me to ask you. Your father told me it was your home . . . not his. Your father was great. He even went so far as to suggest that we move in here for the foreseeable future."

"Oh, Jarzen, could we really? It would give us the privacy we will never achieve at your family's home; I'm still not comfortable being naked in front of them, especially, your brothers."

Seeing the women out and locking up, Jarzen and Shara took a gravel path that ran along the side of the long warehouse. Making the final turn behind the warehouse, Jarzen was able to appreciate the incredible stonework that had been used to close up the entrance to the natural granite cave. The large front door was covered by a small thatched overhang, with two large matching windows framing the entrance. Lovely as it was; it did little to prepare Jarzen for the wonders on the inside. Almost every spacious room had a natural fireplace carved into the bare rock. There was a massive sunroom and three enormous bedchambers. Proceeding to the kitchen, Jarzen lit the fire under the baking oven; he then put the prepared fish on a rack in a large roasting pan with some water and an ample assortment of the vegetables he had brought. He finally placed the cover on the pan and slid their dinner into the oven.

Calling for Shara, Jarzen was surprised and pleased to find her soaking in one of the large family tubs, in what was his favorite room in the house. Removing his clothes, he joined Shara in the tub. Tenderly bathing each other, they talked, really talked to each other, for the first time since their trip to Aza Beach. Their conversation covered many topics: their love for

each other, their future, and their families; if they should start a family of their own. Jarzen proclaimed he was certain that would probably take care of itself; considering their passion for each other and Shara's continued fascination with his manhood. So much had happened in the past seven solar days, it was difficult to sort it all out. Their weighty discussion was all but overwhelming them. Time had gotten away from them until the aroma of their dinner interrupted their dialogue.

Deftly leaping from the tub, Jarzen ran into the kitchen to rescue their dinner. Finding everything cooked to perfection, he invited Shara to join him. Shara pointed out that they were dripping water everywhere, and they should dry themselves off, and then take their dinner into the dining room. Following Shara to the armoire where the bath sheets were kept, Jarzen's eyes were firmly fixed on Shara's erotically swaying nude backside. Jarzen noticed the setting sun shining in through the natural skylight, his gaze focused on Shara and the quilt. Eating was somehow completely pushed from his mind; dinner would have to wait. He selected and spread one of the large quilts on the lawn. He held out his hand, Shara smiled and joined him. Together, lustfully aroused; they made fiery love as the setting sun's last rays shining in through the natural opening in their new home added its heat to their passion, while it baked their bodies.

Over the next two weeks their lives settled into a familiar pattern, that neither of them wanted to change. They spent most of their time together in each other's arms, in the bathing chamber, gazing out into the night sky, and making love. During the first twenty three solar days in their new home, they had only used two rooms: the kitchen and the bathing chamber.

On the first rest day after everyone had been returned to his or her own homes, a small private ceremony was held in the Tadel family's celebration room. Attended only by family and a few close friends; Jarzen and Shara made their public pledge as eternal Life-Mates.

* * *

Life on Elapsis/New Tar-Que had settled into an uneasy rhythm. The slaves did their work and the Tars; well, they really didn't do anything. The Elapsons had completely accepted their hopeless situation, which had left their lives almost exactly as they were before the invasion, except for the substantial increase in food they were required to produce. It would have been difficult for an outsider to recognize that they were watching masters and slaves in Tmeria. Almost daily the slaves were given more leeway and received less supervision.

On the sixteenth day after the invasion, there was tremendous activity at the Tar-Que compounds. Troops were packing and moving, going somewhere, but where? Jarzen arrived about an hour past sunrise, his new self-selected report-to-work time. He went directly to see Captain Arcon to ask what was going on. The Tar-Que had decided to keep the slaves in the dark regarding the troop strength reduction, and the reason for it. So Arcon gave out the misinformation cover story, which was even being given to the Tar-Que troops.

"We have far more troops in the province than are needed, so we are transferring the surplus to a training area on the continent of Kleet."

"Arcon, Kleet is a twenty-day sail from Tmeria."

"Jarzen, on board one of our transport ships; it's only a one-hour trip."

"Arcon, how large a reduction is taking place? It looks like everyone is leaving."

"Jarzen, don't be getting any insurgent ideas; it only looks that way. If you look closely; you'll notice we are simply reassigning the remaining troops to maintain consistent

troop strength in each compound. We still have enough troops in the province to put down any uprising, and reinforcements are only one hour away.”

“Arcon, Arcon, calm down, I was just curious. I’m not planning a revolt. With Admiral Quzarian’s offer of our freedom and Tar-Que citizenship in ten years, there is no need; New Tar-Que is still my home planet.”

Every day new equipment was delivered, installed and the slaves were trained how to properly use it. Large motorized machines that made plowing and harvesting easier and allowed the same number of slaves to farm one hundred times the land that they were accustomed to farming, in the same amount of time, with less physical effort. Colossal ships arrived and were set down on the planet. In actuality, they were automated processing plants where the produce, livestock, and fish were now taken. Robots with many different functions arrived daily: builders, maintenance and repair, and material handlers, and ship, after ship, after ship of building materials.

The officers all seemed a little on edge, and they took a greater interest in the activities of the slaves. The troops complained about the additional patrols they had to make; other than that, things were pretty much the same as before. Aside from that and the constant state of change; life on New Tar-Que was peaceful.

* * *

The Ion Storm hit in the middle of the night with a fury that surpassed anyone’s ability to put into words. The Storm’s ragging winds, with gusts well over three hundred miles per hour; the pounding rain that came as walls of water which forced its way into every crack and crevice. Thunder so forceful that it shook the ground, rattled the doors and windows of every dwelling, and the lightning which turned night into day, terrified the Tar-Que far more than it did the Elapsons. The Elapsons at least knew about the Ion Storms; they knew what they were capable of doing. The destruction of structures, even the land itself was vulnerable, as well as the deaths the Ion Storms often caused.

The Tar-Que had no first-hand knowledge of an Ion Storm. They had limited exposure to one Ion Storm from a thousand miles above the planet in space. The discharged energy from that Ion Storm had forced them to flee orbit to escape the devastation on board all of their ships. That one encounter had done nothing to prepare them for being completely enveloped by an actual Ion Storm. True to pattern, without warning the Ion Storm blew itself out around midday. Instead of reporting for work when the Ion Storm was over, the slaves set about seeing to the injured, people first, then the animals; finally they began to repair storm damage to structures, fences and crop rows.

By the time the Ion Storm abated, General Torgat was an angry, frightened bundle of nerves. He had had no advance warning from the meteorologist monitoring the planet from space. His troops were in disarray, with thirty-seven dead and over three thousand injured some seriously. Add to that the fact that the slaves had failed to report to work, and there was plenty of work for them to do.

Construction robots were sent for as the troop barracks had suffered considerable damage. Broken glass was everywhere, as many of the buildings had lost all of their windows. Roofs were damaged and some were completely blown off. When the windows started to blow out, many of the troops panicked, in some cases fleeing the remaining safety of the prefabricated buildings whose structural integrity could withstand winds over four hundred

miles per hour. Those troops exposed themselves to the full force of an Ion Storm, which accounted for the death toll and the injuries.

As soon as order and discipline were re-established, General Torgat sent an armed platoon to the Tadel's family residence to arrest Ormal and bring him before the general.

A now purely angry general demanded of Ormal, "Why didn't you warn us about the terrible Ion Storms that plague New Tar-Que?"

Shrugging his shoulders, Ormal said, "General, as far as I know there is no way to precisely predict an Ion Storm. During daylight hours sailors and farmers watch the skies for dense dark purple clouds, which usually precede an Ion Storm. There is absolutely no warning for night storms. Every native of Elapsis is well aware of the storms . . . General, I thought you had people on your space ships watching the weather, as well as everything else that goes on down here."

"Ormal; you just accept these terrible Ion Storms as a fact of life?"

"General, on Elapsis they are a fact of life, and general; you know how practical we Elapsons are at accepting the inevitable."

"So Ormal, let me see if I have this straight; you're telling me we'll experience these Ion Storms without any advance warning?"

"General, I know of no way to foretell the arrival of these storms; all you can do, is keep a watchful eye on the clouds."

"Ormal, how many of these Ion Storms does the planet get in a year?"

"General Torgat, as to how many Ion Storms the planet endures per annum, it varies. I can only tell you that on Tmeria and in the surrounding coastal waters we get about forty Ion Storms per year."

"Forty Storms per year . . . all like the one we had last night?"

"No general, that was a below-average Ion Storm and a storm of short duration. I myself have lived through Ion Storms that raged for three solar days and nights with intensities two to three times the intensity of last night's Ion Storm."

"Watch the clouds? Watch the clouds! That's no way to predict the weather. Ormal, when the Ion Storm was over, why didn't the slaves report to work?"

"General, there's always lots of clean-up after an Ion Storm. We must tend to injured, man and beast, repair the damage to buildings, and remove the debris. General everyone pitches in on after storm clean up and repairs so that we can get on with our lives; we must always be ready for the next Ion Storm. During the storm season we sometimes get two or three Ion Storms in a single week."

"Ormal when is the storm season?"

"General, during the summer months; the hot weather seems to feed the conditions that breed these Ion Storms; this year's storm season is just beginning. General, I'll tell you this, over the next four solar months we will have to deal with thirty to forty Ion Storms, and many of them will be far worse than last night's storm."

CHAPTER THREE

CONSTRUCTION

Thirty solar days from the day of the Tar-Que's invasion, an endless convoy of mammoth transport and cargo ships began arriving on New Tar-Que. The Elapsons occupied less than five percent of the planet's total land mass and only had viable communities on four of the five continents. The Elapsons built their communities where the land was flat and fertile and always near water; using just two percent of the available coastlands. This accommodated the Tar-Que's master plan as though it had been pre-arranged. The Tar-Que used entirely different criteria in the selection of sites to locate their cities; as it was necessary for the slaves to feed the Tar-Que, their war effort, and themselves, the less disruption to established communities, the better.

The Elapsons saw many of these large intergalactic space ships as they passed low in the sky on the way to a landing site on the other side of Semtrek Mountain. If the giant ships came in too low over the valley, the people they passed over---Tars or slaves, even the animals would be adversely affected by the ship's repulsion beams---the powerful beams that facilitated the landings and lift-offs of the giant cargo ships.

The freighter captains, an undisciplined bunch, while attempting to get a better view of the planet and the slave settlements; thought it was extremely funny to watch people stagger and fall as they passed low overhead on the final approach to their landing sites. The effects of the repulsion beams were temporary and thought to do no real harm. Personal injuries were rare. The repulsion beam caused falls to occur in slow motion, at less than fifty percent of actual body weight. Vertigo, and the complete loss of muscular motor control, which caused the falls, abated within minutes of the beams passing. Fortunately, the repulsion beam was confined to the area just below the ship.

After General Torgat's repeated demands that the transport ships not travel low over the valley were ignored; the general sent for the freighter fleet captain, a civilian who refused to report as ordered.

Enraged, the general ordered an armed patrol of assault troops to personally invite Freighter Fleet Captain Clepar to report as ordered. The result was an armed standoff as the fleet captain's security forces were ordered to intervene and would not allow the fleet captain to be removed from his flagship. Nor would they allow the general's pinned-down troops to leave the ship until they laid down their weapons and surrendered, which they refused to do.

When the general was contacted for additional instructions, he told his troops to carry out their orders, even if they had to shoot their way out. He wanted Fleet Captain Clepar in his office and the consequences be damned. After a brief but deadly firefight, Fleet Captain Clepar put in a frantic call to Fleet Admiral Quzarian requesting immediate assistance from space marines.

When Fleet Admiral Quzarian received the desperate call for help; he was deeply involved in a planning/strategy session that had been going on for six hours with no end in

sight. The admiral and his top strategist were planning a coordinated assault on the Emarc home planet and the stronghold planet of Copan, to coincide with the lift-off of the first thirty city ships of emigrants from Tar-Que to New Tar-Que.

After having the message repeated for the third time, the admiral stood up from the conference table so abruptly he up-ended his chair. Storming into his office, he barked to Lieutenant Texla to get General Torgat on the vidlink immediately.

“General, I have Captain Clepar on another channel. He is demanding assistance from space marines to save him from you. What’s going on down there?”

Relaying the situation as quickly, objectively, and concisely as he could, the general recounted the chain of events over the past three solar days.

“Call off your shock troops and immediately report to me on the Gunard.” The call ended so quickly that the general was left talking to a blank vidscreen. Opening Captain Clepar’s channel, his voice laced with anger, the admiral ignored the captain’s plea for help and ordered him to also stand down his security forces and report immediately to the admiral on the Gunard.

Arriving in the transporter room on the Gunard at the same time, the adversaries only glared at each other, until Captain Clepar finally acknowledged the general. “Good morning, General Torgat. Do you know the way to the admiral’s office?”

“Follow me,” was General Torgat’s terse reply.

Arriving at the admiral’s office, Lieutenant Texla ushered the combatants in. Coming to attention in the presence of Admiral Quzarian and waiting to be put at ease, as was the custom, both officers were startled when the admiral tore into the general.

“Who do you think you are, sending an armed patrol to arrest one of my junior officers?” Captain Clepar’s mental smirk was wiped away with the emphasized term junior officer. “And you captain, it’s obvious you weren’t thinking at all refusing a summons from the Provincial Governor. . . . Then you continued your recalcitrance with armed resistance, creating a standoff that resulted in the death of two of your own security people. Captain, if you don’t want to live out your life in a pain amplifier, you will respond to Provincial Governors. Captain, if you want to keep your command, get that ragged collection of space rovers under control. I don’t want to hear about any more low flyovers of occupied territory. Macars, you have no idea of the gravity of the meeting this foolishness has interrupted. You are both dismissed.”

Leaving the admiral’s office, the general turned to Captain Clepar. “Captain, you’re lucky Admiral Quzarian is so busy, and has resolved this so decisively; if you were under my command, I’d have had you shot.” With that bold pronouncement, the general turned and headed for the transporter room.

Arriving back on the planet, the general had a message waiting for him from Lieutenant Texla; Admiral Quzarian was coming for an inspection tour in the morning.

* * *

The admiral’s party arrived an hour past sun up: three special reinforced ground cars, twenty-four members of the elite guard with their armored transport vehicles, and an Information Nets Documentary Crew from Tar-Que, plus the ever-present Lieutenant Texla.

General Torgat had just sat down to his breakfast when a knock came on his door. Answering the door himself, he was surprised to see the admiral and the lieutenant standing at

his entryway. "Good morning, Admiral Quzarian, Lieutenant Texla, you're early; please come in. Welcome to the Governor of Tmeria's Mansion."

"Good morning, General, are you ready to begin my inspection tour?"

"Admiral, I was just sitting down to breakfast. Have you eaten? There's plenty."

"General, we had breakfast in the officer's mess before coming down, but please enjoy your breakfast. I will have a cup of whatever you're drinking; it smells great."

"By all means sir, Lieutenant Texla? It's a local beverage brewed from the ground beans of the docar plant; the slaves simply call it docar. Be careful it's served very hot. I find it provides quite a jolt in the morning, very stimulating. Sir, about the Clepar incident, you have my most sincere apology."

"General, don't concern yourself; I understand completely. If he had refused a summons from me, I would've had him shot."

"Believe me, sir, it crossed my mind. I had to stop those flyovers, my troops were angry enough to take matters into their own hands, and the slaves were refusing to work. We have a good situation with the slaves; and I'll be spaced before I'd let that space rabble destroy the rapport we have developed. We have not had one single incident of disobedience from the slaves, a fact I still find difficult to reconcile. I'm determined to keep the good will of the slaves at all costs."

"General, I'm very concerned when I hear you make those kinds of statements. They are slaves, servants of the Federation. I won't have you coddling them; they need to know their place."

"Rest assured admiral, they know their place, and they have accepted it. Your inspired offer of freedom and citizenship after ten years has done a lot to cement their loyalty---yes sir, loyalty---that's definitely the correct word."

"I hope you're not mistaken. They still have a critical role in the success of the relocation, and the continuance of the war effort. Critical, very critical. . . . We could neither relocate our people nor continue the war without a dependable food supply."

"Sir, more docar; how about you lieutenant; can I warm you cup? Admiral; how goes the preparations for the relocation of our people?"

"With seventy-five million ground troops on the planet, order has finally been restored. We made over ten million arrests. Unbelievable! Captain Velip's suggestion of allowing the relocation choice to all sixteen worlds in the Federation has greatly helped to calmed down the dissidents.

Your suggestion to disperse the five million troops we sent, eyewitnesses from New Tar-Que, has done even more good and it will continue to, as more and more people talk to the returning peacekeepers. Starting tomorrow, we are planning to video beam stories home on a daily basis, which is something I plan to set up today. General, I'm ready to start my tour."

"Yes sir, I'm looking forward to it. You are, of course, familiar with the design of my command bungalow: two bedrooms, two baths, kitchen, dining room, office, great room, conference room, and half empty. I'll show you around the garrison first, and then it's off to the marina."

The admiral was quite impressed with the marina; although the fishing fleet was already out to sea. The Tadel's family fish-processing facility was now just a long, wide corridor leading to one of the automated food processing centers. The Tar-Que had cut an extensive tunnel through the marina's rock retaining wall to allow placement of the processing plant. On the other side of the marina wall there was a large, flat plateau of unused land, which provided

the necessary access for the transport ships to land when they came to retrieve the frozen cargo pods of fish. The construction robots had also laid track that accommodated rail cars from every berth on the pier all the way to the processing plant. They had also introduced mechanized shovels that greatly reduced the time necessary to empty the holds of fish.

With thirty boats fishing every day, Jarzen had expressed concern to his father that they'd soon catch all the fish in the Ocean. Ormal assured him that with fifty-five percent of the planet being covered by oceans, a fact he had just recently learned from General Torgat, there was little danger of a shortage. The general also told Ormal that as soon as the people of Tar-Que had all been resettled---in just over ten more solar months---large sea-going factory ships would be brought to New Tar-Que. These large ships, which in fact were floating, automated processing plants, would go to sea and fish for four solar months at a time. These ships worked with a fleet of smaller fishing boats that followed the schools of fish, which resulted in tons of fish being caught and processed daily. Ormal reminded the general of the Ion Storms, and he agreed the storms would need to be considered.

As the tour continued and the admiral interacted with the slaves, he began to understand the general's affinity for these people. "I want to commend you on how well everything looks general, on how clean everything is. I gave you no notice of my visit, which assures me it always looks this good."

"I can take no credit for the pristine landscape, admiral. As you see it today, so it was when we first landed. The Elapson are in sync with the planet. Remember sir, this was an agrarian society before we arrived. The Elapsons take care of the planet and their habitats; it's in their nature to do so, one of many things we could learn from them."

"General, what other lessons can we learn from our slaves?"

"An incredible sense of family, for one sir; the family unit is the linchpin of their society. Often five or six generations live in the same house, or in the case of the Tadel, within the same compound. An innate honesty---had we not conquered the Elapson within hours of our arrival, our trading invasion would have failed. The Elapsons actually felt they were taking advantage of us in the trading. They are willing to bargain hard for a good trade. Amongst themselves, for it to be considered a good and fair trade, both traders have to feel that they gave and received value for value. Rather than cheat us, the Elapsons were willing to walk away from a trade. Another lesson we could learn is respect. They respect each other, they respect each other's property and possessions, and they respect the planet. They coexist with the planet."

"General, doesn't everyone coexist with the planet they live on?"

"No sir, we don't. We live off of a planet, abuse it, we use it up. We've done it to countless planets, including our own Home World, Tar-Que. . . . We really need to learn this lesson, before we despoil this beautiful planet."

"General, learn this lesson from the Elapsons, as well; if you can't protect what you have, someone will take it away from you."

"Sir, I am fully aware of that. When I look into the eyes of the Elapsons, I can see that we have taught them that lesson well.

Interestingly enough general, on a daily basis we are finding evidence, which suggests that the Elapsis civilization may pre-date ours by over forty-five thousand solar years, and that they once were technologically advanced. A humbling thought, at just over twenty thousand years old, we Tar-Que considered ourselves to be one of the ancient races."

The inspection party arrived at the Tadel's family compound at mid-day. Mia warmly

greeted General Torgat; she was much honored to meet the great Fleet Admiral Quzarian who lived in space. She invited the entire inspection party to stay for lunch, which sent all the women in the compound rushing to the kitchen to prepare a banquet for over thirty guests who had already arrived.

While lunch was being prepared, Ormal showed the admiral, the general and the info nets documentary crew around the compound, including the incredible views from Jarzen's four stories high bedroom.

Lieutenant Tanea Texla, a strong, athletic, proud woman who lived in a male dominated society---although there was supposed to be complete equality---decided to join the women as she was interested in their view of life on New Tar-Que, before the invasion as well as the time since. Of particular interest to the lieutenant was the level of dominance and equality between men and women, and whether it had changed since the invasion.

Returning from the tour of the compound, and being even more impressed with the slaves than he had been before; the admiral confessed his admiration for what Ormal had accomplished, and all without sophisticated technology.

Upon the completion of their tour of the barns, stables, and mills, they were graciously greeted by Mia, who told Ormal that lunch was ready, and then she led the way into the large family celebration hall.

Addressing Ormal, the admiral said, "My primary reasons for making this inspection tour was to find out why the slaves--no, that term no longer seems appropriate, let's change it to the locals, or possibly the natives. Ormal, do you have a preference?"

"Why yes sir; the Natives would be much preferred over the slaves."

"Then the Natives it shall be. In any event, I was curious as to why such a seasoned professional soldier like the general has become such an active advocate for the Natives. I have discovered the reason first-hand, and you may now consider me to be an advocate as well. You are a remarkable people."

"Thank you Admiral Quzarian; and I'd also like to thank you for the offer of restoring our freedom and federation citizenship after ten years. No one likes being a slave, the owned property of another, even worse; knowing that your children and all future generations will never know freedom, very demoralizing."

"Admiral Quzarian, General Torgat has explained our role in the relocation to our world of the Tar-Que population and that our citizenship is based on our ability to feed everyone. You may rest assured the incentive is sufficient and will be ever foremost in our minds. Admiral, we will earn our citizenship."

"Ormal, what you and the general have achieved here is remarkable. I may come to you with a great favor to ask. If the need arises, can I count on you?"

"Admiral Quzarian, if I may be of service to you, General Torgat or the Tar-Que Federation; it will be my honor to serve."

Lunch was impressive: large trays of sliced meats, poultry, and cheeses, fresh-baked still warm bread, and many fresh vegetables and sliced fruits. Beverages consisted of stroda, herbal teas, and deep-well spring water. The Admiral surprised everyone when he asked for a cup of docar, which was promptly provided.

"Mia my compliments on a wonderful lunch; I cannot remember when I have so enjoyed a meal. Far superior to anything served on the Gunard."

Mia was pleased at such high praise. "Admiral, I'd like to invite you join us for dinner any evening; provided I have advance notice, for a meal that would make this hastily put

together lunch pale by comparison.”

The admiral graciously assured Mia he would take her up on the invitation, in the near future. The remainder of the inspection tour was conducted from the ground cars and encompassed the brewery, the village market and cultural center, and miles and miles of driving down dirt roads looking at the many different crops flourishing in the fields, including fourteen of the nineteen vegetables grown from seeds brought from Tar-Que. While not indigenous to Elapsis, all of the transplanted vegetables were favorites of the Tar-Que and were flourishing on New Tar-Que.

Returning to the general’s quarters just after sunset, the general invited the admiral to stay for dinner, and to even spend the night, as the bungalow’s second bedroom was never in use. The general was well pleased when Admiral Quzarian accepted, for he had been sincere in recounting the admiral’s value to the Federation. He knew the admiral needed some time off to rest and clear his mind. New Tar-Que was just the elixir the admiral needed. The general wondered if he could interest the admiral in a day of fishing; something he himself would like to do.

Sitting in a comfortable, oversized chair, the admiral gazed into a raging fire in the bungalow’s great room. He was deep in his own thoughts as he sipped a cup of docar, for which he had developed a great liking. Seeming to speak to the fire, he murmured, “General, what is your first name? We have fought a great many campaigns together over the years, and I don’t even know your first name. Mine is Aadon.”

“Bramos is my given name, Sir.”

“When we are outside a formal military setting, I insist that you call me Aadon.”

“Admiral, I am extremely honored by such a privilege.”

“Nonsense Bramos, you have more than earned it. Of all my commanders, your province is the best managed. You have the least amount of problems and by far the highest level of cooperation from the Natives, evidenced by the amount of food processed. You were also right about my needing some time off, and about the conquered people of Elapsis.”

“About taking some time off sir, I’d like to keep you here, recharging yourself as it were, for at least one more day. I’ve wanted to spend a day or two fishing on the ocean. Sir, I respectfully insist that you strongly consider coming along.”

With the incredible decisiveness of a brilliant military commander, the admiral instantly agreed to the fishing expedition. “Bramos, no one can know, I seriously doubt the Federation High Council would approve. How are we going to accomplish this bold adventure?”

“I will send word to Jarzen. We will meet him at the marina at one hour past sunrise to accompany him on a day’s fishing.”

“Is Ormal’s youngest son the best choice? I’ve been told he is only nineteen.”

“Aadon, Jarzen has eight years of experience at sea, and the Lady Mia is the best boat in the marina. Jarzen has never come back without a full load of fish. He is the only captain with whom I will entrust your life. The prospect of a day of fishing and the physical activity involved has me thinking about retiring early. I’ll just send word to Jarzen before retiring. Good night Aadon, please don’t stay up to late.”

* * *

Admiral Quzarian and General Torgat arrived at the marina well rested and refreshed, after a good night’s sleep and a hardy breakfast. The admiral was flattered by the obvious

Jarzen Tadel

sense of sincere honor Jarzen displayed and by the awe and respect in his speech every time he spoke to his esteemed guests. After being put at ease by both the admiral and the general, Jarzen, rising to the occasion, began to function as a ship's captain. He instructed his guests in at-sea protocols and safety procedures. He suggested the best vantage points to occupy on the sail to and from the fishing grounds, and during the laying, and the retrieval of the nets.

With the orientation and briefing completed, Captain Jarzen ordered all lines singled up and the gangplank brought aboard. The order was given to cast off and raise the jib, the sail that would ease them away from the pier and across the bay to the ocean access.

Everyone on board was startled when Captain Arcon arrived with an armed squad of troops, ordering Jarzen to lower his sail, toss the mooring lines back on the pier, and prepare to be boarded.

Admiral Quzarian leaned over the side and asked the captain on whose orders he was commandeering the vessel. "Admiral, Captain Velip of the Gunard relayed a message from the Federation High Council that we were to prevent you from making this dangerous voyage."

"Nonsense, captain; return to your duties."

"Admiral, please, I have my orders; you must come ashore, sir."

"Captain; it's good that you know who I am. I'm giving you another order; return to your duties."

"Admiral, what am I to do about the call from the High Council?"

"Let me worry about the High Council; report to Velip that you just missed us, because you have. Captain Jarzen, let's go catch some fish."

"Yes sir. You heard the admiral, men, let's go catch some fish." Waving to the bewildered Arcon, Jarzen headed the Lady Mia towards the open sea. The wind was favorable, the sky clear and the waters reasonably calm with gentle swells. Because of his precious cargo, Jarzen decided to fish within sight of land, so he headed for the Inside Passage, a wide channel that ran between a chain of eleven islands. At this time of the year the fairway, a two-hour sail from one end to the other, abounded with spawning bluefish, which came to feed and procreate in the calm shallow water. They should have a full hold just after midday and be home early.

Jarzen was eager to impress his guests, but he decided to just be himself and pay close attention to every detail of the day's fishing. Adding an extra element of excitement, Jarzen had Hapeau rig handheld fishing poles for the admiral and the general, who were having great fun catching fish after fish by their own skill and effort. The Lady Mia returned to the marina with a full hold just before mid-afternoon. The admiral and the general were profuse in their thanks for the great day of fishing and the hospitality of Jarzen and his crew. Jarzen, sensing that both men truly had had a great day, invited them to go fishing with him again, as often as they wanted. The high ranking military commanders enthusiastically accepted the invitation with firm resolve, promising they would go fishing again soon. Hapeau further surprised the happy fishermen when he presented them each with the biggest fish they had caught by their own effort, completely cleaned, gutted, and ready for the oven.

As the crew was tossing the mooring lines to handlers on the pier, Captain Arcon returned, looking very apprehensive. "Admiral, I have a call for you from the High Council; you can take the call in my office."

"From the entire High Council?"

"Yes sir, from the entire Council."

"Inform the councilors I have taken a day off. I will contact them in the morning."

"Admiral, please, sir."

“Carry out your orders Captain.”

“Yes sir.”

“Bramos, what say we take Jarzen and his crew to the local tavern for a drink of that other remarkable brew? What’s it called? Ah, yes, stroda.”

“That’s a wonderful suggestion sir; I could use a day off myself. Although checking out the Native fishing industry first hand may not qualify as a day off. Sir, I believe it to be very important work. Aadon, if you think it wise to put the High Council off until tomorrow, I’ll invite Jarzen and his crew.”

“Bramos, as I told the captain, let me worry about the Federation High Council; please do invite our hosts, for this has already been an extremely memorable day, even though it’s only half over.”

Jarzen and his crew were truly flabbergasted. They did, however, graciously accept. After a quick wash up and hasty hair brushing, the crew accompanied the two happy fishermen to the marina’s local brew house, the Anchor and Oar. Jarzen insisted on buying the first round, but the admiral claimed the honor, only to have to relent when he realized he had none of the local trading credits. After the first round, the crew, to a man, begged off with a variety of excuses, leaving only Jarzen to entertain his guests. Feeling like a fish out of water, Jarzen ordered another round with the proviso that he too would soon have to be getting home.

“Jarzen, we’ve only just arrived; what time is it?”

“Admiral, it’s nearly dinner time.”

“Jarzen, don’t you have a chronometer?”

“I must confess, I don’t even know what a chro---chrono, what you said is.”

Smiling the admiral said, “Jarzen, a chronometer is a remarkable device you can wear on your wrist; or in a larger size place on a table top or hang on a wall. With a chronometer, you always know what the time of day is, or how long it took you to accomplish a task.”

“Very interesting,” said Jarzen. “On New Tar-Que, we Natives keep track of the day by dividing it into segments: sunrise, sunset, daylight time, which we simply refer to as day or after sunset, which we refer to as night. For more precise time placement, we use mid-morning or midnight, noontime or midafternoon. Some also use meal times and just before or just past one of the parts of the day or night I have already referenced.”

“Jarzen, how do the Elapsons measure distances?”

“Sir, we use a man’s body; the smallest measurement is a thumb’s width, then a hand’s width, five thumbs equaling a hand, next an arm’s length, with five hands equaling an arm. Next is half a body high and then a full man’s body high, which we refer to as body high or a body’s length, which also is the same as two full arm lengths. From there it’s just multiples, like three thumbs high or four hands wide or six bodies long.”

Still grinning, the admiral said, “Remarkable, and more than accurate enough for an agricultural world.”

“Admiral, what is an ag---ri---cul---tural world?”

“It’s a world where the primary industry is growing crops and raising livestock.”

“That definitely describes New Tar-Que; well, at least it used to. Admiral, general, it has been my honor to spend the day with you, but it’s getting on to dinner time, and I must be going. My crew and I would really like it if you would go fishing with us again; by your leave; sirs, good day to you both.”

“Bramos,” declared the admiral, “these people are charming and good natured. I can truly understand why you have such an affinity for them; I feel it too. I guess we should be

getting underway ourselves; without trading credits, we can't buy any more drinks.”

“Aadon, we don't buy drinks from the slaves, we drink for free.”

“Bramos, that doesn't seem fair; we, all of our forces planet-wide; should pay our own way; please see to it. And let's also switch the Natives to federation universal currency. In any event, I've had my limit. Let's return to the bungalow.”

Back at the general's bungalow, Lieutenant Texla was waiting for them.

“Admiral Quzarian, I am ordered to tell you that a channel has been held open to the Federation High Council since your boat returned. Sir, I am further ordered to tell you that you are to activate the link the minute you return.”

Entering the conference room and leaving the door open, the admiral activated the vidlink; he could see all nine members were in attendance, and waiting for him.

Councilor Trevin started his tirade the instant the admiral greeted the members, with many of the other councilors putting in their portion. After about two minutes of this babble, the admiral held up his hand for silence. Not getting it, he turned a few dials and created a terrible feedback loop into their communication system. That silenced the councilors leaving them all with their hands over their ears.

Tuning out the feedback and restoring the volume to a proper level, the admiral addressed the members.

“Mecars and macars, please accept my resignation effective immediately. I intend to take my retirement now and I will settle here on New Tar-Que.”

Trevin jumped to his feet, as did his fellows. “Now admiral, there is no need for dramatics; if we can just all calm down.”

“Honorable Councilors; first you question my ability to make decisions, then to accuse me of theatrics. I have served the Federation faithfully for forty-two years . . . two years past my legitimate retirement. I will not be treated like a disagreeable child. General Torgat can replace me here; he is more than qualified. Someone else can be elevated to Supreme Fleet Admiral, and Commander In Chief of all the Federation's Armed Services; I recommend Admiral Zalark.”

“Admiral Quzarian, please calm down,” implored Trevin. The admiral turned his back and paced away from the screen. Turning abruptly, he charged toward the over-sized screen and continued.

“It was never intended for any one man to have the power, authority, and responsibility that you have thrust on me. An elected High Council of nine has governed our Federation for over fifteen thousand years; and that's as it should be.”

Councilor Trevin still on his feet, pleaded with the admiral. “Admiral, please, we were only concerned for your safety. We're still not convinced it's safe for you to even be on the planet; let alone risk your life on the planet's dangerous ocean. You could have been killed; what if one of those terrible Ion Storms had found you at sea?”

“Councilors, we were in capable hands during our fishing trip, and we were never in any danger.”

“Admiral, please, at sea on a vessel skippered by a nineteen-year-old boy?”

“Captain Jarzen may be only nineteen years old; he is never-the-less an experienced ship's captain, a man in every sense of the word. Honorable Councilors; it's of no consequence. Your problem has been solved; you have my resignation.

Let me bring in General Torgat and I'll make the introductions all around.”

“Admiral, please don't be so hasty. We can all see you are still firmly in command

and control of this or any situation. No harm has come from your fishing adventure. Admiral, please remember your safety is our primary concern. The Federation needs your guidance and leadership now more than ever. Please reconsider.” At this point all of the councilors were speaking at the same time---all saying that the admiral must reconsider his resignation---and he must remain in command of the Armed Services. He must continue to coordinate the war against the Emarc and prepare the new home world for the mass migration.

Again holding up his hand for silence and instantly getting it; Admiral Quzarian relented. “If it is truly your unanimous wish that I remain; how can I turn my back on the Federation? However, I am not a child and I will not be treated like one. I don’t ever want my judgment questioned again. If you ever have reason to doubt me, just replace me. I serve at the pleasure of the Federation High Council and the people of Tar-Que. But let me reassure you; while I will take what I consider to be no unnecessary risks; I will no longer be treated like a fragile treasure. I will come and go on the planet as I please. I refuse to be a prisoner on the Command Battle Carrier Gunard. If this is acceptable, I will recant my resignation.”

After receiving assurances and thanks for continuing to serve the Federation from all nine High Councilors, the vidlink call was ended.

Returning to the living room with a bounce in his step and a smile on his face the admiral proclaimed, “I’m starved; Bramos, let’s prepare our fish. Lieutenant Texla, would you care to join two successful fishermen for dinner?”

Bramos responded, “Aadon, our fish are already cooking and I had the chef brew some docar. Sir, I apologize for overhearing your call, and some call it turned out to be. . . .”

“Nonsense Bramos, no apology is required. I do know how to close a door. I intended for both you and the lieutenant to hear the call. I never want to go through anything like that again.”

Still amazed at what he had witnessed, Bramos said, “Sir, if I hadn’t seen and heard for myself how you handled the Federation High Council, I doubt I would have believed the story.”

“There will be no story general . . . lieutenant. What you overheard is a state secret and will never be discussed by either of you, ever, general, not ever. What I did was very necessary; the entire Federation High Council needed to be put back in touch with reality. Many of the problems we are experiencing on Tar-Que can be laid directly at the feet of the High Council.”

“Sir, am I hearing you right? Are you saying the Federation High Council is doing a poor job of governing the Federation?”

“Yes lieutenant, that’s exactly what I’m saying. Not making a decision is often as bad as making a bad decision; the High Council has become far too dependent on me, when they bother to ask for direction. Many issues and problems that are their sole province have been left for me to decide. It all started innocently enough. The High Council would come to me for advice or to coordinate initiatives. Before I had realized it; I was for all intents and purposes running the entire Federation. Under our form of government it’s not the place of any one person to have that much power or authority, and that’s as it should be.”

“Aadon, when I told you how important I believed you to be to the Federation, I was sincere. However, I really had no idea; you are the Federation.”

“From a decision-making standpoint, to some degree you may be correct. Bramos you’re going to help me change that.”

“Admiral, why would you change it? Sir, I am not suggesting you do away with the Federation High Council, but to guide it; especially while we are at war.”

“Bramos, therein lies the trap. Before you know it, I’m either a Dictator or I’m

perceived as a threat by the Federation High Council; in which case I'm dead."

"They wouldn't dare sir. In any event, Aadon, they could never get to you; you're the most protected man in the Federation. The military would turn them out if they tried. Believe me sir; those in control in the military would protect you at all cost."

"Bramos, my good friend, don't you understand? I serve the Federation, I am its procurator. I don't want to dominate it. I never could; I would take my own life first. And don't ever underestimate the members of the High Council; individually they are very powerful. They can each be ruthless when necessary. Collectively they could govern the universe. As for being safe; anyone can be eliminated if the incentives or rewards are large enough. Enough of this . . . no more speculation, especially on this dangerous subject; I'm still having a great day and I don't want it spoiled."

After enjoying the fresh fish they had caught themselves, great camaraderie, and two jugs of a beverage that Ormal had left for them--he'd called it the blood of the grape--the admiral again spent the night in the general's guestroom. On this night; Lieutenant Texla, as she often did, shared his bed.

Returning to the Command Carrier Gunard before the general was even out of bed, the admiral was making plans to visit the other four continents, one day on each, starting today. He assembled a shore party of ten ground vehicles, a full company of the Elite Guard, one hundred and twenty officers and troops. The admiral and his much larger party departed after an early breakfast. The admiral's planetary inspection was all business with no time spent on pleasantries or social events of any kind.

As sketchy preliminary information had indicated, the planet's other nine provinces were not nearly as efficiently run as Tmeria. The strained relationships in the other Provinces of New Tar-Que were what you'd expect to find on a conquered planet: master and slave, with the slaves begrudgingly providing what was required, and the masters using a very heavy hand to force the slave's compliance.

Only on the sparsely settled continent of Kleet were things considerably ahead of schedule. The relocation of all Tar-Que industry was complete. The fifth continent: Kleet---with a landmass of twenty-five million square miles---was to be New Tar-Que's center of commerce, industry, science, and education. Over one million construction robots had been working around the clock to relocate the Tar-Que's new war machine. The final phase was nearing completion.

In a single day one construction robot could do the work of six mortal workers. When factoring in meals and other breaks, lost time due to socializing and shoddy work, the equivalent workload was actually one robot doing the work of twelve humans in a single solar day. The robots, if properly directed, made no mistakes; and they needed no rest breaks. A radium isotope designed for two years of continuous labor before needing replacement powered the robots. Elaborate computers controlled by master architects directed the robot construction workers, with all work checked by other computers operated by even more sophisticated androids.

During the admiral's visit; it had been decided to roundup and then resettle the estimated four thousand people who roamed Kleet; to the southern continent of Gelon, which has the largest landmass on New Tar-Que, ninety-eight million square miles. It was also decided to accelerate the timetable and bring in the more sophisticated factory worker and material-handling robots who worked in the semi-automated factories.

The day after he returned from his inspection tours, the admiral suggested to the High

Council that all non-war-related industry and their factories be dismantled, and then sent immediately to New Tar-Que to be remanufactured in the now functioning factories on the new home world. These remanufactured materials could be instantly reused to further accelerate the building of cities on New Tar-Que.

“Councilors,” reminded the admiral, “it has been an integral part of our plan from the outset to facilitate the construction of our new home world by using the easily recyclable building materials that presently comprise the factories and buildings we are abandoning on Tar-Que. This had been decided and agreed to months ago. We do not have the time needed to mine new raw materials, process them and fabricate those materials if we hope to complete the relocation in the next ten months.”

Councilor Trevin meekly said, “Admiral Quzarian, you don’t fully appreciate the tenuous calm we are now dealing with on Tar-Que. To begin the dismantling now would surely result in the immediate return of the riots and protests.”

“Councilor Trevin, we are far beyond the point of no return, even if we wanted to change our minds and remain on Tar-Que, which is not an option. . . . The atmosphere will not sustain our population. A fact you are well aware of.”

“Admiral, there are those who believe if we move all industry to the new world and resettle only those who wish to resettle, that the planet could sustain those who remain.”

“Councilor Trevin that is not the case and you know it. Your failure to follow the well thought out plan will result in the destruction of our race. It will be a toss-up as to who kills more of our people, the Federation High Council or the Emarc.”

“Admiral, that is totally uncalled for.”

“Councilor Trevin, please assemble the entire High Council. I will call you back in one standard hour; we must settle this today.”

The admiral’s return call found the entire High Council assembled and embroiled in a heated debate. They were split with five for following the agreed-to plan and four who wanted to either wait, or at the very least alter the plan. Failing to break through the din and establish any meaningful communication, the admiral resorted to his volume feedback procedure. With silence restored, Admiral Quzarian addressed the council. “Councilors, it is imperative that we resolve the relocation of our people issue right now. It is the opinion of the Combined Military High Command Council; with which I am in complete agreement. If we’re not going to follow the elaborately worked out plan you have all agreed to . . . then we need to immediately sue for peace with the Emarc under whatever terms we can negotiate.”

The councilors were all on their feet screaming at the monitor and the image of the calm yet very serious admiral.

“My dear councilors, the Combined Military High Command Council is firmly convinced that with our population choosing to remain on the planet and die of asphyxiation, our ground troops as well as the men and women of the space fleet will all want to return home to die with their families.”

With order more or less restored, Trevin turned to the vidscreen. “Admiral, you can’t be serious? We will never surrender to the Emarc. The military will follow their orders; an all-out effort to end this conflict is what’s needed.”

“If that were possible, we would have already done it. Hiding from the problem, trying to temporize and mitigate the inevitable outcome dooms our people to extinction. If it is your desire to abandon the approved plan, then let’s at least be realistic about the outcome. As a race we will probably not survive, as a great galactic power, we are finished! You can’t have

it both ways. Every computer model we have run, and we ran thousands, all had the same conclusion. We either proceed with the grand plan or we prepare to be the executioners of our race.”

Councilor Morgena, who it turned out, was the main obstacle to proceeding with the original plan, and who had persuaded three other Councilors into accepting an alternative plan, rose to address her fellow Councilors and the admiral. “High Council members, I call for a no confidence vote and the removal of Admiral Quzarian as the head of our military. Further, we have new computer models that predict with all of the industry relocated and a population reduction to five billion inhabitants, the total relocation will be unnecessary. Again I call for a no confidence vote. Do I have an affiliate, so we can vote?” Looking each of her fellows in the eye, going once around the table, Morgena shrugged and sat down saying. “I can see you’re all committed to following the military blindly into abandoning our hereditary home world. Do as you like. My nearly four billion followers and I are hereby serving notice; we have no intention of leaving Tar-Que or of traveling eighteen solar days at light speed to be pioneers on a strange New World on the other side of the star system.”

Councilor Trevin rose and turning to face Morgena, with the words sounding overly harsh even to his own ears, he shouted, “Then you have doomed us all. Morgena, you and the four billion citizens you have misled will all be dying together in about eleven months. Worse, you will make it impossible for us to continue to use Tar-Que as our primary military stronghold. I charge you with high treason, and giving aid and comfort to our enemies. I here and now call for a vote of removal and the immediate arrest of Councilor Morgena. Do I have an affiliate?” The answer, swift and vehement, was sounded in unison by five councilors. Addressing his fellow councilors again; Trevin reminded them that removing a councilor from the Federation High Council required a unanimous vote of the remaining eight councilors.

* * *

While still seated at the vidlink, the admiral put in a call to General Torgat, advising him that he would arrive in the morning and wished to meet with him and Ormal at one hour past sunrise. The general assured the admiral that he, Ormal, and a fresh brewed pot of docar would be waiting in the conference room in the morning.

When the admiral arrived and the pleasantries were dispensed with, the admiral poured docar for everyone, inviting the macars to join him at the conference table. “You are both aware I conducted a planet-wide inspection tour. I must again commend you both. The continent of Tmeria, and in particular the Province of Telmar, was all that I could have hoped for. The rest of the planet is not doing nearly as well.

“I am here to ask both of you to take on tremendous additional responsibilities of a planet-wide nature. General Torgat, I intend to install you as Planetary Administrator with absolute power over the other nine military governors. Ormal, I plan to appoint you the Native Planetary Liaison and Civilian Regent over all agricultural aspects of the Planet.”

Sitting up at attention, the general interrupted, “Admiral; Aadon, I’m humbled by your confidence; you can depend on me.”

Ormal, with a bewildered expression on his face, locked eyes with the admiral and clearing his throat; he nodded in the affirmative.

Continuing, the admiral smiled, then he said, “Don’t thank me yet. I’m taking advantage of both of you. You will instruct your counterparts’ planet-wide in the implementation of the very successful programs and management styles you have used to excel

in your present responsibilities. There is much work to be done; you both have many bad habits to break and some harsh attitudes to change. The total and complete relocation of the population of Tar-Que is well underway and we're not ready.

Macars, with your help; I firmly believe we can still achieve our final goal. You will work side-by-side and province-by-province with the general providing any convincing that needs to be accomplished. General, I'm assigning two full companies of the Elite Guard to be your muscle on the planet.

Ormal, your new position ranks you equally with the nine Provincial Governors and they are sure to resent it. It is also appropriate that I grant you and your family your freedom. Additionally, it gives me great pleasure to bestow Federation Citizenship on you and your entire family. Please provide me with a complete list of your family members at your earliest convenience. Ormal, on the planet you will be subordinate only to Bramos. Ormal, in light of our new relationship, please call me Aadon."

Ormal nodded again, he smiled, and said, "Aadon, I am very honored, by being called to serve, and my entire family's freedom . . . words of thanks and appreciation fail me, thank you, thank you very much. By granting me the honor of using your first name, the task must be larger and even more difficult than you're letting on."

Replacing the smile on his face with a serious expression the admiral agreed. "It is; we currently have enough food processed and stored to feed about ten billion people for three months. That's twenty percent of the food we wanted to have on hand when our people start arriving in thirty-four solar days. Half that food has come from Telmar, so you can see the size of the task I have set for you. Ormal you are here and now empowered to take whatever measures you deem necessary to get food production on the remainder of the planet up to the levels of Tmeria. Both of you; immediately bring insurmountable obstacles to my attention.

General, you can expect some stiff resistance from the more intractable governors; do whatever is needed to get them on board. For the Tar-Que, feeding our people should be enough incentive. For the Natives, the opportunity to regain their freedom should suffice, but for some reason; I fear both our peoples will need more convincing. I must leave you macars now; work on your plan of action. Bramos, I have sent all of my inspection reports to your aide. The Tar-Que Federation is counting on you both to succeed and to do so quickly."

After the admiral left, Bramos and Ormal congratulated each other, and then the two planetary troubleshooters went to work reviewing the admiral's inspection reports. The general also insisted that Ormal call him Bramos.

* * *

When the admiral returned to his office on the Gunard, Lieutenant Texla told him Fleet Admiral Berlain Zalark had called and requested a priority one call back. Admiral Zalark was the Squadron Commander of the Eighth Fleet, which was responsible for guarding the Tar-Que Home World region of the galaxy and the entire Elap Sector.

Proceeding directly to his office, he activated a secure military vidlink channel and returned Zalark's call. As the picture cleared, he could see his old friend; the tired, worried look on his face spoke volumes. "Berlain, my old friend, how is the war treating you? I trust the reason for this call is not as grim as that pained look on your face."

"I'm fine Aadon. The fleet is safe, and we're in firm control of our sector. The war as you know is still in a standoff-mode. The reason for my concerned look is beyond belief.

Councilor Trevin and five other councilors called me early this morning to request two covert special assault teams.”

“Berlain, how did you respond?”

“I asked why they needed two assault teams. Councilor Trevin informed me it was for official council business. He said the teams would receive their orders directly from him and report directly to the council itself until the assignment was completed.”

“Berlain, what’s the status of the request?”

“Aadon I stalled; I informed Trevin I would check the status of our assault teams and get back to him. I can’t understand why six council members would need the Federation’s most highly trained covert assassins, and two complete teams at that. It can’t be for anything legal. Can you shed any light on this request? And Aadon, do you have a recommendation as to what I should do?”

“Yes, to both questions. Berlain, as to what you should do; you have done it in contacting me. I will relieve you of the obligation of responding to Trevin. The reason is a lot more complicated, and once again, my old friend; I take you into my confidence. Things on Tar-Que are not going well. The High Council continues to misread our people and they have failed to gain planet-wide support before implementing their program. The relocation of our people to New Tar-Que is an unmitigated disaster.”

“Aadon, how can that be? Everyone is well aware of the failing atmosphere. It’s relocate to New Tar-Que or die; surely they have made that clear?”

“Berlain, it’s such a simple, straightforward concept; it does defy all logic, and yet over four billion of our people just don’t get it. The rest of our complacent, disgruntled population’s attitudes range from merely not being happy about the forced move; to being so angry that mere words fail them.”

“With all of the planning, the research, and the computer models, Aadon, how could the Federation High Council have failed to convince our people?”

“Berlain, the High Council is so familiar with the problem and so far detached from the people they didn’t factor in the difficulty of moving nine billion people out of their comfort zone. Add to that the now evident fact that Morgena is an idealist always in search of a compromise. Goron is an opportunist, who sees this as an opportunity to grab additional power. And Blintax is a fool who is always trying to be all things to all people. The High Council is split six for the relocation and three against. And that’s only in the past solar day; yesterday it was five for and four against.”

“Aadon, I still find it hard to understand,” Berlain bitterly asserted, “with months of secret meetings and grand scheme planning; why are these misguided rogue councilors only now expressing their opposition?”

“Berlain, that is a question for the cosmos; I certainly don’t have an answer. I do have a probable scenario for the request of assault teams. Yesterday, in my presence, Trevin tried to remove Morgena from the High Council. He was unable to get the needed votes with Goron and Blintax either voting no or abstaining. It seems likely Trevin has decided to eliminate Morgena and probably Goron, leaving Blintax, by far the most popular of the three, to either twist alone in the wind; or the more likely outcome to seek cover by abandoning his thoughtless position and siding with the majority.”

“Sir, we cannot allow these assassinations to take place. But preventing them may create an even larger problem for us. By the Creator, Aadon, it would put us in direct conflict with the High Council. Sir, are we looking at a military take over?”

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“Berlain, I don’t think it will come to that.”

“Aadon, you have more than enough support within the military to pull off a bloodless overthrow.”

CHAPTER FOUR

PASSAGE

With the call from Zalark still occupying his thoughts, Quzarian prepared himself for his call to Councilor Trevin. He hoped he'd sounded convincing when he told Zalark he had no interest in participating in an overthrow of the Tar-Que government.

He certainly would not lead one. Still trying to come to grips with how things could have gotten so far out of hand, he taxed all of his mental abilities to find an equitable solution. He decided on having lunch before making his call. After lunch he felt he could stall no longer.

If the admiral was surprised to find Councilor Trevin and his co-conspirators in the council chamber so early in the morning, he did not let on. As the vidlink picture focused to clear, he saw surprise and concern on six faces.

“Good morning, Councilors; this is an encrypted secure military channel. Are we also private on your end?”

Trevin responded, “Admiral, we are definitely private; always private on this end.”

“Councilor Trevin, should this communication be between just you and me, or should I address the entire council?”

“Admiral, you may address your remarks to all of the council members present. We are assuming you have been in contact with Admiral Zalark.”

“Yes Councilor Trevin, and Admiral Zalark no longer has any part in this ‘plot’.”

“Now, hold on, Admiral Quzarian, you have no reason to take that tone or to cast aspersions on us. I am especially troubled by your use of the term plot.”

“Councilor Trevin, esteemed council members, if this is going to be a productive meeting, we must to be candid with each other. I felt compelled to make this call. I insist on knowing why you requested two covert assault teams to be completely under the control of the Federation High Council.”

Trevin spoke up, “As we advised Admiral Zalark; that is official council business.”

“Councilor Trevin, since when has assassination become a function of the governing body of the Federation? Let's stop all of this verbal jousting. Covert assault teams have one primary function. They kill our enemies, as you are all well aware. Councilors; we have a serious problem: the Military High Command Council feels that the Federation High Council has greatly over-stepped its authority.”

“The only reason you have not suffered the decisiveness of a council overthrow; is because I refused to let it happen.” declared Admiral Quzarian.

“So now your foolish machinations have also put me at risk. If I cannot resolve this problem and get the resettlement of our people underway in the next two solar days; my subordinates may select someone else to lead in my stead and proceed with the overthrow of the Federation High Council. I could even be assassinated.”

“Councilors, since assumption is the order of the day, I can only assume you failed in your attempt to remove Morgena. I'm pleased to note you are at least still following the

inviolable guidelines of governing, as set down by the Founders of the Federation.”

“Admiral, in twelve solar days we must begin loading the first thirty ships. Morgena and her supporters have derailed the years of planning and hard work that has gone into saving our people. We must take this drastic, decisive action. We have no other choice. The relocation of our people must begin on schedule. To save our people, we will do whatever is necessary; I’m very serious . . . whatever is necessary.”

“You haven’t answered my question, Councilor Trevin, so I’ll answer it myself. You plan to assassinate Morgena and Goron to open up their seats for election. You believe this will bring Blintax back into line and get the relocation underway. Am I correct?”

“Yes admiral, yes that is quite correct. Even you can see the need for this necessary, if unpleasant, solution. We must remove this otherwise insurmountable obstacle now or we’re all doomed. You always seem to be one step ahead of us, can’t you and the military see we have no other choice?”

“Trevin, there are always other choices. I will not allow you to murder two members of the Federation High Council. The request for covert assault teams is denied.”

“Well, then, admiral, we are all doomed! This meeting will mark the end of our race and its fifteen thousand seven hundred and fifty-four glorious years of conquest. Do you have any thoughts on what we will say to our people?” Trevin continued. “How can we tell them they have just killed themselves? I guess it really doesn’t matter what we say; they won’t believe us in any event. Admiral, there is so much misinformation out there; the people believe whatever lets them sleep at night.”

“Trevin, I hope I’m more than one step ahead of you, for if I’m not, well then; we are in fact, all doomed. This is what I’m proposing to the High Council for its approval. First, we will detain Morgena and her confounded confederates on Admiral Zalark’s flagship for two standard galactic weeks; we’ll call it protective custody.

The cover story will be that I have uncovered a plot to assassinate them, and I’m moving them to the safety of the flagship under power given to me by the War Powers Pact. They will be held incommunicado, which will surely enrage Morgena. When they are released; I will need to be defended by all six of you, with no quarter ever given. Morgena can be vengeful.”

“Admiral Quzarian that is a truly brilliant idea.”

“Thank you councilor, and the best part, it’s based on fact. My second idea is even more outlandish, and may not succeed. I myself will address the planet live from New Tar-Que tonight on the evening vides. Get the word out about my address, but give no details.

Just notify the information nets that Admiral Aadon Quzarian, Supreme Fleet Admiral and Commander in Chief of all Federation Military Forces will address the entire planet live on the evening vides. Get as much advance coverage of my address as possible and arrange to have my address replayed, as often as you can, over the next solar week.”

“Admiral what will you say?”

“Councilors, I need to end this call so I can flesh out some thoughts I have running through my mind.”

“Admiral, you’re not going to mention anything about our desperate scheme, are you?”

“Of course not councilor; it ever happened!”

“Admiral, you won’t mention the overthrow?”

“That is a treasonable act; it never happened. Just watch tonight and see for yourself. I want your honest reaction; it may even shock you; as I trust it will shock everyone else.

Mecar, macars I must close this call now. Good day to you all.”

Gazing at the blank vid screen, the admiral was considering the enormous responsibility he had just taken on himself. He instructed Lieutenant Texla to order him a pot of docar and to reschedule all of his appointments for the rest of the day. He then told her to send for the senior communications officer and to find the infonet crew on the planet, and have them in his office in one standard solar hour.

When the infonet crew and the communication officer arrived, Aadon was pleased with the work he had done in only one hour. He explained why he had sent for them, then he placed himself completely in their capable hands.

With his broadcast only an hour and a half away, the admiral ordered an early lunch, and then headed to his stateroom for a shave and a sonic shower. He then donned his best dress uniform, complete with medals. His goal was to open the floodgates of relocation. His message would either succeed or fail; of that he was certain; there would be no middle ground. Aadon was taking an incredible, yet very calculated risk. The infonet crew’s producer suggested a setting, which provided a spectacular view of New Tar-Que behind the admiral through the large observation optical lens. After checking the quickly arranged set, the producer remarked that it was shame that they were so far above the planet. The admiral immediately ordered Captain Velip to change their orbit from ten thousand miles to one thousand miles above the planet until the broadcast was complete. The producer and his crew were delighted with the closer view of the planet; it was awesome. As the appointed time approached, the admiral took his seat; he looked squarely into the camera. Taking his cue, the admiral smiled a sad smile when the small red light began blinking on the video camera, then he began his remarks.

“Good evening, fellow citizens of Tar-Que. For those of you who may not know me, I am Fleet Admiral Aadon Quzarian, Supreme Commander in Chief of all Federation Armed Forces. I come into your lives tonight to bring you an ominous report. For the first time in my forty-two years of service to Tar-Que . . . I must report that the Armed Forces of Tar-Que have met an obstacle we cannot surmount.

The obstacle is the people of Tar-Que. . . . There has been a great controversy raging on Tar-Que, as to whether or not the atmosphere is failing or will fail. While I can personally assure you that the atmosphere of Tar-Que is in fact failing, and ten months from now anyone still on Tar-Que will be dying by slow suffocation; the military will not force any Tar-Que Citizen to leave the planet.

As a Free Citizen of Tar-Que it is your right to commit suicide; if that is your choice. Even though the people of Tar-Que are famous throughout the galaxy for never giving up; for deploring and therefore never committing suicide; as free citizens the decision is up to you.

The Military High Command Council has estimated that four billion of you have already made this cowardly choice, which has created a tremendous problem for the military. As our grand plan to relocate our people begins to unravel; it has become painfully obvious we are no longer able to save all nine billion citizens of Tar-Que. We estimate we will be able to save only three billion. We considered a plan to first save only citizens related to members of the military. Regrettably, with nearly half a billion men and women in uniform, there were too many relatives. Some members of the military have volunteered to return home to die with their families. The Military High Command Council is diametrically opposed to this, as far too many of our best and brightest volunteered. Our final solution is a weighted lottery system. Everyone on Tar-Que will be entered in the lottery using your Federation ID Number; because

we are at war, for every member of your family in the military, your number will be entered again.

We are asking the four billion who have already chosen to remain on the planet and die to log in this evening and delete your ID number. This will give the remaining five billion a better chance of being saved.

The first ships will leave in twelve solar days. Ten days from today; we will begin drawing thirty million numbers per day. Everyone whose number remains in the lottery must be ready to leave the planet within one solar day of being selected. Those participating should put their affairs in order and begin packing for the migration. If you are not ready when your ship leaves, you will be left behind to die with the four billion.

On behalf of the military, I would like to extend a sincere thanks to the four billion for their sacrifice . . . for their choice of death over relocation. Had you not chosen to sacrifice your lives by remaining on the planet after the atmosphere fails; the odds of being saved would have been only one in three. I wish all of you success in the Lottery of Life; Admiral Quzarian signing off from our new home world on the paradise planet of New Tar-Que.”

As the picture faded on the confident, smiling Admiral Quzarian, he turned to those present and asked, “In absolute honesty, what do you think the reaction will be?”

Lieutenant Texla was the only one to speak up. “Admiral, I know I have already been relocated; haven’t I? Even so, I felt great fear about the possibility of not being selected in the lottery.”

“Do you think I have succeeded in making a lot of people feel angry and left out?”

After Texla’s proclamation, everyone present echoed her sentiment. The admiral was extremely irritated at not being able to pursue this discussion, when word came; Councilor Trevin was on the vidlink, demanding to speak with him.

A frantic Trevin shouted at the vid screen, “Admiral, was that your grand plan to save our population? Your goal was to save all nine billion; you have just consigned six billion of them to death. Have you lost your mind? No wonder you didn’t want to share your plan with us; we would never have approved it. Admiral, we were looking to you for a positive solution to the most colossal problem to ever confront our people. Admiral the council believes you have made the problem even worse. What position do you have in mind for us to take? How are we to respond to your address? Did you even consider the position you have put us in? Admiral, should we mobilize the peacekeepers?”

“Councilor Trevin, calm yourself. I don’t want the council to take any action at this time. Be unavailable for comment until the start of the business day tomorrow. Let’s see how many of the four billion remove themselves from the lottery. We need to wait and see if there will be riots and protests before we can respond. It’s know-your-enemy time; it’s time to gather intelligence. Then we will know how to proceed. And yes councilor, I have thought out your position. I have run best and worst case scenarios. I even ran a few which address the middle potential. We will just have to wait it out until we can gauge the people’s reaction. Councilor Trevin, I certainly hope it’s vastly different from yours. Just sit tight and hope for the best. Tomorrow will tell us how I did; will it be business as usual or total anarchy? Good evening, councilors, and good luck to us all. . . .”

Being much too anxious to sleep; Aadon put in a vid call to General Torgat. “Bramos, would you mind an overnight guest?”

“Aadon, sir, I had hoped, I’d made it clear. You were to consider the Governor’s Mansion your planet-side home; come and go as you please.”

“Relax Bramos; you have made that abundantly clear. I guess I’m just looking for a sounding board, and I wanted to give you some warning. I’ll join you within the hour.”

Arriving at the bungalow, Aadon found Bramos standing on the front porch with a large goblet of the blood of the grape; Bramos had told Ormal it was called wine throughout much of the Galaxy.

“Solo tonight? I was sure you’d have brought Lieutenant Texla along.”

Accepting the proffered glass of wine and taking an appreciative drink, the admiral declared, “Tanea is not what I needed tonight. I really need to talk; however, I could be forced to have another glass of wine.”

“Aadon, let’s get off the porch, sir; I left the wine in the great room. And I’ve taken the liberty of starting a fire.”

After removing his jacket, Aadon settled into a large overstuffed chair, and then he held out his glass for a refill. He regarded the crackling fire; he let its warmth permeate his very being. He felt renewed by the fire, drawing energy from it, or was it the wine, or both? No matter, Aadon felt better just being on the planet with a trusted friend.

Bramos observed his roommate staring into the fire and beginning to relax as he sipped the last of his wine; he poured himself another glass. Then he, too, was captured by the allure of the fire, its warmth, its power, and its potential to devour, its ability to put things into perspective.

Without words the bond between the two comrades in arms seemed to fill the entire room. Realizing his glass was empty, Aadon turned to Bramos. “Any more wine?” His glass refilled, the admiral began to share the thoughts going through his mind. Ostensibly speaking more to the fire or to himself than to Bramos, at length he paused asking. “Am I making any sense at all?”

“Aadon, I’m honored you have taken me so completely into your confidence. When you called to say you wanted to talk, my mind went into overdrive trying to determine what you wanted to talk about. I knew it could not be my new responsibility, as it gets underway tomorrow.

There are so many pressing issues; I finally resolved to stop all of the conjecture and wait until you arrived. I had no idea you kept so much bottled up inside, or that you were involved in so many areas of governing that should be the province of the Federation High Council. As to whether or not you were making any sense? I’m still trying to process all the information you have just presented; most of which, I was totally unaware you were even involved in.”

“Bramos, Councilor Trevin just blamed me for exterminating six billion of our people; what if he’s right?”

“No need to worry on that count. Aadon, I saw your address on the vid. I’ll be extremely surprised if anyone removes their Federation ID Number. You have accomplished your goal; the only problem I see is how you are going to miraculously save everyone after all. However, if you were trying to put everyone in direct contact with their own mortality, you succeeded beyond your wildest expectations.”

“Bramos, I truly hope you have the right take on my address. Trevin thought it was an unmitigated disaster. He wanted to mobilize the peacekeepers to handle the riots he was certain I had instigated.”

“Aadon, I don’t know Councilor Trevin personally, so I can’t speak to his frame of mind. That said, having spent thirty-six years leading troops into battle, I feel confident I do

know what motivates people. Your speech was a call to action, a wakeup call; we had better get ready for the relocation.”

Having finished three jugs of wine and talking until the early hours of the morning, it was well past mid-morning when Lieutenant Texla arrived at the bungalow to discover both of the seasoned warriors still in their beds. Ordering breakfast for them, Tanea first roused the general and then went into the admiral’s room. “Aadon, you need to wake up. Councilor Trevin has called three times this morning. It appears to be good news.”

“Good news, you say? What good news?”

“I’ve roused you both and ordered your breakfast. It must have been quite a night; you slept in your clothes. The councilor can wait until you’ve had a shower and some breakfast, I packed a bag for you and brought a pressed uniform down with me.”

“Tanea, you’re a life saver. It’s good news, you say?”

Shortly before mid-day the Aadon put in his call to Councilor Trevin.

“Where in the galaxy have you been, Admiral? I’ve been trying to reach you all day. Your address to the planet was a phenomenal success.”

“I’m sorry you had difficulty reaching me. I was in closed-door meetings on the planet to review the final arrangements for the arrivals of the first thirty city ships in just over thirty-two solar days. How many removed their numbers from the lottery?”

“I don’t know how you knew Admiral, but almost none of them did. Only eighteen million numbers were removed, and ninety-one percent of them were people over one hundred and thirty years of age. Admiral, what’s our next move?”

“To keep the lid on until the first ships depart.”

“This is no time for humility admiral, the council doesn’t believe we can keep this a secret. We want to go public with the strong patriotic response to your address.”

“We have achieved our goal councilor; the last thing we want to do is wave the flag and take credit. The people will see right through that and we’ll be accused of duplicity. We could lose the victory we’ve just won for our people. Councilor Trevin, this must not look contrived; it must come as a huge surprise to us. The four billion were not being patriotic; they were only serving self-interest. All we have accomplished was to get their attention. Councilor, we have just put them in touch with their mortality, nothing more and nothing less.”

“Admiral, this is not a secret we can keep. Your address is being dissected by the infonets; they are asking specifically about the four billion.”

“The council should be unavailable for comment for two more days. Answer every request for information with, ‘we are evaluating the results and are not yet in a position to answer questions.’ The council should get busy working out plans to save more than three billion of our people.”

“Admiral, surely you know our original plan is sound and still doable?”

“Yes councilor, of course; however, that’s not what I’ve just said. Everything is changed now that the four billion have chosen life. We must be seen to be working to the exclusion of all else to revive our scrapped master plan so we can save everyone. Also, with Morgena and her cohorts still in protective custody, the council must remain secluded in their quarters at government house; only prepared releases will be given out. If it becomes necessary for the council to be more accessible, or to answer questions, Trevin, you will represent the united council and handle whatever you must.

We all need to be thinking of how we are going to deal with Morgena when she is returned to the planet. She is certainly going to be a problem. . . . When the cargo ship leaves

day after tomorrow, I want all the advance industrial teams as well as the advance engineering teams and their families on that ship, we need them here now.

I have also instructed Admiral Zalark to make his fastest long range Vapar scout ship available for departure tomorrow; I need Patrax Master Cletus Gadric and his teams here immediately. We are beginning to encounter a great many things we cannot explain.” Without delay begin disassembling all abandoned factories, warehouses, and buildings, and then ship those materials to New Tar-Que as quickly as possible.”

“Can do, Admiral. You mentioned unexplainable things; anything dangerous?”

“Councilor, they encompass new minerals and ores, archeological discoveries and never-before-seen chemicals; we just need Gadric here now. Warn the Patrax Master that a quantum star drive engine powers the scout ship, and that the engine is still a military secret. His trip will take only two solar days instead of the eighteen days the city ships require with their singularity star drive engines.”

“You are certain, admiral, when our people begin to arrive, everything will be ready for their immediate resettlement?”

“Absolutely certain. Councilors, we all have a great deal to do; if there is nothing else, I’ll end this call. Continued good luck to us all, Quzarian out.”

* * *

Jarzen and Shara were the last to arrive at his father’s house for what was being referred to as a very important family dinner, which had been hastily arranged at the last minute. As they entered the house through the kitchen door, they could hear laughter and conversation in the family’s celebration hall.

Jarzen was surprised to see his entire family, including aunts and uncles, even cousins. He had expected only his parents, brothers, sisters, and their families. He was even more surprised to see Berdeen, who was motioning for Shara and him to take the two unoccupied places at the table next to him.

Ormal rose to address his extended family. “I have marvelous, extraordinary information to share with you. I have been given my freedom . . . I have been made a Citizen of the Tar-Que Federation; and so has everyone in my immediate family.”

Rachio, who had become even more rebellious, and was never satisfied with any situation involving the Tar-Que asked. “Father, what does that mean?”

“Rachio, everyone . . . it means we are no longer slaves. We have all the rights and privileges---of a citizen of the Tar-Que Federation---but there’s more. Because of our cooperation and willingness to accomplish our responsibilities and because of the great work we have achieved on the Continent of Tmeria---especially all of your efforts in the valley of Telmar---I have been elevated to the post of Native Planetary Liaison and Civilian Regent of New Tar-Que. I’m to oversee all agricultural aspects of the planet; my new title will be Regent Tadel.”

Rachio, appearing to be the only one present who still had his tongue; asked again, “Father what does that mean? Are we now the overseers of our own people? Father, how can we become what we despise?”

Mia rose and turned on her son, noticeable anger rising in her voice. “Rachio, our goal has not changed; we still seek freedom for all of our people. This is just the first step toward that goal. Your father is now in a better position to make it happen. You should be happy for him; you should be happy for all of us.”

Shara tentatively raised her hand to be acknowledged. “How wonderful; does the offer also apply to the immediate family of joined Life Mates?”

“Yes Shara, happily it does; so both you and your father are also free citizens of the Tar-Que Federation, as well as all children born to a Life-Mate joined couple.”

Clutching Shara’s hand, Jarzen rose to ask, “Father, how does this affect our daily lives?”

“Jarzen, we must still provide enough food to feed all of our people, but now we are our own masters again. We can come and go as we please, and we can even benefit materially from our labors.”

With a snarl in his voice, Rachio asked, “By feed all our people, do you mean the Tars? And father, from whom do we benefit, from our own people? Being exempted from the curfew and travel restrictions is a great reward; they aren’t even enforced anymore.”

When it was obvious Rachio intended to leave the gathering, Ormal ordered him to take his seat.

Staring with contempt at his father, the anger dripping from every word, Rachio proclaimed, “I will not accept my freedom on the backs of our friends and neighbors. I will not become an overseer for our Tar-Que masters, and I will have nothing to do with anyone who does.”

“Rachio, we are now free Tar-Que citizens, part of the Tar-Que Federation, as all our people will be someday,” Ormal declared. “You need to accept that as a fact. And our responsibility to feed everyone hasn’t changed. As a free man, if you decline to accept your freedom, that’s your choice. But Rachio be warned, if you do anything, and I mean anything; to put the rest of us at risk, son or not, I will sentence you to life in the mines of Grippa, on the southern continent of Gelon. Rachio, I warn you, don’t try me. I will allow no one to jeopardize the gains we have made.”

“Father, mother, all of you; I can’t understand how you can view this as a victory for our people, for our family,” shouted Rachio.

Speaking in a sad and softer voice, Ormal went on, “Rachio, I fail to see how a son of mine could be so bitter, so short-sighted. I must take this as a personal failure on my part. Be that as it may; I caution you again to take my warning to heart; please don’t test me. Rachio, you are excused from this happy family festivity; please leave now.”

The encounter between Ormal and Rachio cast a sullen cloud over what should have been a cheerful celebration; however, after Rachio’s departure the family did begin to revel in having regained their freedom.

At the conclusion of the after-meal treats, Ormal took Lemosk, Hazan, and Jarzen into his office. “My new responsibilities will require my traveling all over the planet. I will be away nine days for every day I’m home. The major responsibility of managing the valley will fall on Lemosk. I’m counting on the three of you to set an example for our people. Your work must remain beyond reproach.”

“Under no circumstances are you to lord our freedom over our people. Just be yourselves. The less visible change there is the better for all concerned. On a more somber note; while I hate to ask this, I feel I must. Keep Rachio out of trouble; he is still my son and your brother.”

* * *

Admiral Quzarian sat deep in thought at his desk on the flagship Gunard, gazing out at

Jarzen Tadel

the Tar-Que's new home world; as he contemplated the events of the last few days. He knew Bramos and Ormal had come up with a good plan to maximize their efforts and get the quickest increases. They were visiting the provinces in ascending order, those needing the least modification first, on down to the dismal failures.

* * *

Patrax Master Cletus Gadric had successfully arrived and his teams had moved right into their newly constructed Institute for Higher Learning, which had been built on the residential side of Kleet. Gadric's team was already evaluating the wide variety of enigmas that the construction of the new cities had to date unearthed.

* * *

Back on Tar-Que the Federation High Council was holding up its end. The councilors had the citizenry ready for the first lottery drawing. The first sixty city ships were already on the planet. Morgena was due to be returned to the planet in five solar days. Trevin assured Admiral Quzarian that the council would keep her in line.

The war with the Emarc was still at a standoff, with neither side doing anything to upset the stalemate; but plans had been set in motion which would soon change that. Aadon was both congratulating himself and wondering what his next obstacle would be. Returning to the reports on his desk, the admiral sent for Lieutenant Texla. "Notify all ship captains that their presence is required for a meeting in the Gunard's conference room at zero nine hundred tomorrow morning. If there's nothing else, how would you like to spend the night on the planet? With Bramos away we will have the bungalow all to ourselves."

"Let me get these messages out and pack an overnight bag; then I'm all yours."

"Tanea, pack light. For what I have in mind, you won't need a large wardrobe."

* * *

Jarzen was proud and pleased to see the Ocean Que get underway as scheduled. The Tadel's now had five boats fishing every day. The Ocean Que and her three sister ships were not as large or as fast as the Lady Mia; at eighty-five feet, the Mia was the largest and fastest boat fishing from the Tadel's Telmar marina.

The fifty-five foot Ocean Que's oversized hold would accommodate one and three quarter tons of fish, close to the two and a half tons the Mia held. Seeing the Ocean Que round the harbor entrance, Jarzen boarded the Lady Mia which was just waiting his arrival to get underway. Giving Apanthus the order to cast off, Jarzen announced that they would fish close to the coast today; he wanted a full hold and an early return.

Apanthus deftly handled the Mia; he had progressed at an incredible pace. With Batis, Enser, Rebus, and Hapeau all captaining their own boats now, Apanthus had also earned his promotion, he was now first mate of the Lady Mia. He had progressed rapidly, and had demonstrated a talent for passing on what he had learned to the new crew members, of which there had been four or five every week for the past two solar months. Jarzen had launched the Tadel's four beached fishing trawlers as quickly as each one was repaired, repainted, outfitted, and provided with a trained crew. The four Trawlers were identical---all fifty-five feet long

Jarzen Tadel

with a single mast---which would accommodate a mainsail, forestaysail, jib and flying jib. Jarzen had taken out the forward crew's quarters to enlarge the hold. The addition of the four trawlers would increase the Tadel's production to over fifty tons of fresh fish, being caught and processed every week, with nearly seven tons still going into the local fish market. Before the Tar-Que arrived, the Lady Mia generally fished one or two days per solar week, putting two to five tons of fish into the local market. The Tar-Que peacekeepers were very fond of fish, which had become a main staple in their diet since arriving on New Tar-Que; their own oceans and seas had long ago been fished out. The other twenty-three boats of varying size that home ported at the Tadel family marina were providing a hundred tons of fish per week, with eighty percent going to the Tar-Que processing plant.

Captain Arcon had told Jarzen the plant could process ten tons of fish per hour; it could process the entire week's catch in one solar day. The Tar-Que certainly did things on a grand scale, Jarzen mused.

Lemosk was doing a fine job; for all intents and purposes he had managed the families' agriculture business without assistance for the past two seasons. His only new responsibility was to sit in judgment or mediate when the need arose.

Rachio had been very quiet since his eruption at the family gathering. He did his work, but always went off by himself afterwards. Everyone went out of their way to be nice and to try and include him. He would just shrug and walk away. Of all of his brothers and sisters, Jarzen felt the least kinship with Rachio, who had always been a troublesome loner. Shara had been after him to invite Rachio for dinner, but Jarzen wasn't sure if he wanted Rachio as the guest the first time they ever used the dining room.

* * *

Admiral Quzarian and Tanea had spent a wonderful evening together in the bungalow, returning to the Gunard only an hour before the meeting with the ship captains. Back in their professional military mode, the lieutenant asked the admiral what the meeting was about and if she needed to provide anything. The admiral had imposed only one rule for their night on the planet: no Federation, space fleet or planetary business talk allowed.

The admiral responded, "Yes, get a message off to Bramos. I want him to tighten up on the training and physical conditioning of all the peacekeeping troops on the planet. Our people start arriving in twenty-seven days. I don't want the Tar-Que people to think that we came here and went on holiday.

"As for today's meeting of the ship captains, the meeting will pertain to war games and battle exercises I plan to initiate in the next few days. It seems with little to do---our ground troops, the space marines, and space fleet personnel---have become complacent. We are still at war, even though it may not seem like it."

"Sir, Bramos has requested we find three retired generals. He's provided their names and their last known locations. His intention is to appoint them as provincial governors in provinces with the worst problems."

The admiral's meeting with the ship captains went well, and he left the captains to divide into opposing forces and prepare the final battle strategies each side would use in the upcoming war games.

Returning to his office, the admiral found a message from Patrax Master Cletus Gadric requesting an appointment as soon as was convenient. The admiral immediately activated his vidlink, putting in a call to Patrax Gadric, who was seated at his office desk examining some

obscure artifact when the call came in. "Patrax Gadric, I can see you this afternoon, if that will be convenient."

"Thank you, Admiral. I will leave now."

As the screen went blank, the admiral couldn't help but chuckle out loud; it was quite unusual for anyone to end a call to him so abruptly. However, Patrax Master Cletus Gadric was regarded as both the most highly educated and the most intelligent person in the Tar-Que Federation. In his eighty-four years he had earned his Patrax Credentials in medicine, physics, astrophysics, quantum mechanics, robotics, architecture, marine biology, chemistry, nuclear chemistry, nuclear fission, nuclear fusion, nuclear mechanics, nuclear emulsion, quantitative analysis, quantum electrodynamics, geology, meteorology, archaeology, and botany.

The admiral could neither understand why anyone would have wanted to master all of those disciplines nor how they would be able to remember all of that information. Bringing Gadric in early had been a good move. He and his teams were certainly earning their keep. It was hard to believe that one hundred and twelve scientists could wade through and digest everything that had been discovered in the past fifty solar days in just four solar days.

The admiral could only guess as to why the Patrax Grand Master had requested an appointment. Inviting Tanea to join him for a quick lunch, he asked her to be present in her official capacity during his meeting with Gadric.

Upon returning from lunch, Gadric and his three top aides were waiting in the admiral's outer office. Admiral Quzarian led them into the conference room and after the introductions were completed, the admiral asked if the Patrax Master and his team were settled in and if they needed anything.

With a wave of his hand, Gadric dismissed the question and announced, "Admiral, we're being astounded at every turn. This planet is a treasure trove of minerals, chemicals, ores, and archaeological discoveries. We hardly know where to begin. I do suggest we contact the master architects immediately. On Tar-Que we construct our buildings to heights of five hundred galactic meters. We did this to accommodate our large population on a comparatively small landmass. We suffer no shortage of usable land here. We suggest we build no structure over twenty-five levels, and most no higher than five levels. By our calculations we have over one hundred and fifty times the usable land on just the four continents where we plan to settle our people. Further; we confidently submit only five billion of our people will actually come to New Tar-Que."

"Master Gadric, although the rumors that we will not be able to relocate all of our people were necessary; however, they are nothing more than false rumors. We can still relocate all our people to New Tar-Que."

"Yes, Admiral, of that fact I am fully aware. You may not know that it was I who worked out every detail of the plan and time table you are currently using."

"Patrax Master Gadric, everyone has been led to believe the Federation High Council had devised the relocation plan."

With another wave of his hand, Patrax Master Gadric mumbled Trevin's name somewhat in disgust and went on, "One of the most interesting mysteries confronting us is the unearthed architecture; the anthropological ramifications are absolutely astounding, amazing and beyond belief, if they are confirmed."

"Master Gadric, please explain."

"Not at this time, Admiral, not at this time," the older man absently replied.

“Master Gadric, our people start arriving in twenty-four solar days. The first twenty ships lift off in just four solar days; I must know is it safe to proceed?”

“Safe, yes admiral, absolutely safe; however, it may turn out to be more of a homecoming than anyone thought. Admiral, we would like to obtain the use of ten thousand construction robots to do some excavating for us.”

The admiral found it very interesting that the Patrax Master almost always spoke in the plural unless he was identifying an area where the credit was solely and indisputably the result of his personal brilliance. In those instances he boldly took his due credit without modesty or hesitation.

“Master Gadric, where are you planning to excavate?”

“There is considerable evidence to suggest that we’re not the first to select many of the building sites we’ve chosen. Admiral, we want to do some extensive exploration at all of the sites where construction has yet to begin. It’s a scientific shame so much construction has already been completed. When the first indications of a considerably advanced civilization were discovered; we should have been brought in immediately.”

“Patrax Gadric, are the rumors true? Are you now able to offer confirmation that this ancient civilization is over ninety-five thousand years old?”

“Yes, Admiral, and that’s only the first page of the story. Give us one solar week to prove our theories and we will give you a complete report on our findings. Can we have the robots?”

“Certainly; I will have Master Architect Boma contact you regarding the robots and your recommendations on spreading out the cities rather than building high and tight. In light of the Ion Storms, that is probably a wise change.”

“Admiral, I’m eagerly looking forward to an opportunity to see one of these Ion Storms first hand, to begin exhaustive scientific studies on this supposedly unique-to-this-planet, meteorological event. By the way, Admiral; who do you think developed quantum star drive?”

“Your question would indicate the answer . . . Patrax Grand Master Gadric.”

“Absolutely correct; it was yours truly. Admiral, I’ve taken up enough of your time; I thank you.” With that, the Patrax Master offered his handshake, nodded, and left the conference room, followed by his three top aides, who had not uttered one single word between them during the entire encounter.

* * *

Bramos and Ormal had already visited four of the nine provinces, presenting and implementing their directives to achieve increased productivity and more cooperation between the Tar-Que conquerors and the conquered Natives.

Their requirements were accepted with some reluctance; however, it was made perfectly clear everyone was going to be evaluated on their ability to succeed. Lack of significant progress, even mediocrity, would be regarded as failure . . . and failure would bring about swift and severe consequences. That had been made very clear.

It had also been repeatedly pointed out that it was in everyone’s best interest to assume the proper attitude and take personal ownership of the assigned responsibilities. With the promise of their return in eleven solar days, and the offer of help sooner if requested, they departed for the city of Grippa, on the Southern Continent of Gelon.

* * *

Arriving in Grippa, it was immediately obvious; all of the reports being sent to the admiral bordered on being pure fiction. Conditions were deplorable, the troops were undisciplined, and the countryside was strewn with litter and garbage.

Grippa was the largest settlement on the southern continent, with over two million people living in a four-thousand-square-mile area. Grippa was centrally located on Gelon, just west of the Eromakan Mountains and spreading out along both banks of the Anjou River. The mines of Grippa produced the best ores of iron, copper, manganese, and nickel, plus many other softer ores not currently used for anything.

The presence of the impressive Elite Guard sent the Natives scurrying for cover; even the local peacekeepers made themselves scarce. As they entered the city, the admiral's emissaries were struck by the stark contrasts to what they had seen in the other provinces they had visited.

Although none were on a par with Tmeria, Grippa didn't seem to belong on any Federation Planet. Turning down a wide avenue heading towards General Zobar's headquarters, the planetary troubleshooters were confronted by a scene that troubled them both and greatly angered Ormal. A disheveled group of about thirty peacekeepers was quite literally driving---as you would herd beasts---a group of over eighty Natives. The Natives were chained together, they were bruised and bloody, most were nearly naked, some were naked; they were being driven by whips and stunners.

General Torgat ordered a halt to his convoy; he dispatched Captain Chanis to bring the officer in charge of this detail into his presence.

Captain Chanis approached an unkempt lieutenant, and after a brief conversation, the lieutenant started to turn and walk away. The Captain's reaction was sudden. He grabbed the lieutenant, spinning him around, he struck him alongside of his head. In one smooth motion, the captain grabbed the man by the right wrist. Circling under his own arm, he had the man's arm pinned painfully behind his back. With his left hand, the captain grabbed a handful of the lieutenant's hair, he then steered him toward the planetary troubleshooters.

Captain Chanis reported, "General, this is Lieutenant Brax; he is in charge of this detail."

"Lieutenant Brax, this is Regent Ormal Tadel; I am General Torgat, Planetary Administrator. What are we witnessing here?"

"General, I'm just following my orders."

"Whose orders lieutenant and what are those orders?"

"General Zobar's orders to round up and detain troublemakers for termination."

Stepping forward, Ormal joined the discussion. "Lieutenant, what have these people done to be sentenced to termination?"

Looking at Ormal with obvious disgust, he remained silent. The lieutenant was shocked back to reality when General Torgat struck him so hard that he sagged in Captain Chanis's hold; the lieutenant would have gone down if not for the captain's vigilance.

"Lieutenant, you're trying my patience. Answer the Regent's question, and be quick about it."

Regaining his stance---though still in Captain Chanis's hold---Lieutenant Brax looked squarely at the general and said in a low voice. "The crimes are various: refusing to work, violating the curfew, stealing food, and disrespect to peacekeepers."

Even though Ormal was doing a slow burn; he took a step back and allowed General Torgat to continue the interview.

“Lieutenant, those charges don’t warrant termination. No one else will be terminated without a signed order from me.” Pausing, he turned to Ormal, shaking his head. Turning back he demanded, “Explain stealing food.”

“If the slaves don’t work, or if they don’t meet their daily quota, they don’t eat; those are General Zobar’s orders.”

“Lieutenant Brax, have your troops unchain these Natives immediately. Then give them clothing, food and water, and see to their wounds. They are to be detained, in the shade, until you return. We’re going to see General Zobar. Captain Chanis, if you would assist the lieutenant while he instructs his troops, then load him into your ground vehicle; we will proceed directly to the Provincial Governor’s headquarters.”

Arriving at the large, stone inn General Zobar, against standing orders, had seized as his headquarters, they went directly inside. General Torgat approached the slovenly captain seated behind what had been the inn’s reception desk.

“Captain, I am General Torgat. Where is General Zobar?” Slowly rising, he saluted General Torgat, and then he said, “General Zobar is unavailable and not to be disturbed.”

Captain Chanis hopped over the desk and struck the disrespectful officer, knocking him down. Snatching him from off the floor, he slammed him into the wall. In a very calm voice he said, “Answer the general’s question; where is General Zobar?”

Struggling and desperately trying to pull free of Caption Chanis’s ever tightening grip, the captive captain seemed to acknowledge that a continued lack of cooperation would surely bring on a more severe beating. Through gritted teeth the captain answered, “General Zobar is in his apartment on the second floor; he left orders not to be disturbed by anyone.”

“Captain Chanis, if you would join us.” General Torgat and Ormal started for the stairway. Chanis took the lead, ascending the stairs two at a time, his squad of Elite Guard close behind. Arriving on the second floor landing, Captain Chanis proceeded directly to the sounds coming through the third door down the hall.

Finding the door locked, the captain kicked it in, and entered the room. Stepping to one side, Bramos and Ormal entered into a scene of debauchery that dumbfounded them both. Present in the room were nine young naked girls. General Zobar was in bed with three of them, engaged in a sexual union with a girl who looked to be about fifteen years old.

Quickly recovering from the shock of what he saw, General Torgat ordered Captain Chanis to arrest Zobar. Motioning to his squad, the captain dragged the under arrest general who was still unaware of the presence of the emissaries off of the young girl, thrusting him toward the guardsmen.

Zobar, finding his tongue, demanded to know the meaning of this intrusion. He began calling for his own guards.

General Torgat asserted himself, “Zobar, you are under arrest, you are relieved of your command, and you are removed as the Provincial Governor of Gelon. You will be sent immediately to Admiral Quzarian on the Gunard, for discipline and punishment.”

“Captain, take Zobar as he is. He will never again be allowed to disgrace the uniform of a soldier; put him in chains and transport him to the Gunard.” Turning to Lieutenant Brax, General Torgat asked, “Where is the communication center?”

The beaten lieutenant eagerly led the way back down the stairs to a small room behind the reception desk, opening the door. The general proceeded directly to the vidlink, to put in

a call to Admiral Quzarian.

“Aadon; I am ashamed to wear the same uniform as Zobar.” General Torgat was so upset that he was visibly trembling.

“Compose yourself, Bramos and give me the details.”

“I’m composed; I’m just completely embarrassed before Ormal. And I’m angrier than I can ever remember being. Aadon, Grippa is a complete disaster. I just pulled Zobar off a girl who looked to be fifteen, in a room full of naked young girls, nine of them.”

Bramos took a deep breath and continued, “As we speak he’s under arrest and on his way to you. He incarcerates and executes the Natives on frivolous charges; the damage here will take a long time to repair. Aadon, any word on the status of the retired generals I requested; have they been found?”

“All three have been found; they were very pleased to be sent for. I’m having them transported on a Vapar scout ship that leaves later today; they will arrive in two solar days.”

“Well, sir, that is good news. I’ll have to remain here until they arrive and can be thoroughly indoctrinated. This will surely set us back at least ten days.”

“Bramos, we don’t have ten days. You must leave tomorrow to remain on your schedule; there are still four provinces to visit on just your first round.”

“Sir, how can I leave? This place is a total and complete disaster. You name it; and it needs to be addressed. We’ll have to start over from a position of fear and mistrust much more pronounced than when we first invaded Elapsis.

“Stick to your schedule, general. I have the perfect man to assume command of Gelon. He can even train your new governors when they arrive.”

“Who, sir?”

“Captain Velip. He is brilliant, fair, and fearless, he has a powerful presence, and he is well versed on everything we are doing on New Tar-Que; in addition to being imbued with compassion and a double quotient common sense.”

“Are you sure, sir? He’s merely a ship’s captain.”

“This may come as a slight blow to your ego, Bramos; however a ships’ captain is more than qualified to command any planet-based garrison. And Captain Velip is heads and shoulders above most other ship’s captains. I will have him on the planet, shortly after the noon meal.”

“You know the captain far better than I do, sir. After that endorsement I’ll be glad to have him. I still don’t know how I can face Ormal.”

“Bramos, Ormal is a wise man. Did he witness Zobar’s arrest?”

“Yes Sir, he did.”

“Bramos, did he see how incensed you were?”

“Yes sir.”

“Ormal will be fine . . . both of you just get busy setting things right.”

“Aadon, I strongly recommend that you send a security force with Captain Velip, or I can leave a company of my Elite Guards. In addition to retraining the provincial security force; things are so bad here he may need them to preserve his own life.”

“Thank you, Bramos; keep your Elite Guard. I will send him down with a contingent of Space Marines. I do want Velip safely back in ten days. I’ll talk to you again after dinner.”

Admiral Quzarian sent for Captain Velip and his executive officer, Commander Devera. When they entered, the admiral crossed the room to greet them. Gesturing towards

the conference table, the admiral said, “Macars, please take a seat. We have a serious problem on the planet, and I need your immediate assistance.”

“Admiral, would the problem have anything to do with General Zobar arriving on the Gunard, naked and in chains?” asked Commander Devera who was trying to contain a smile, which now resembled a smirk.

“Zobar is no longer a general. His province is a disaster and he evidently had his own private slaves. Nine young girls he apparently used for sex, morning, noon, and night. And that is just the top of the pile. His troops are demoralized and undisciplined. The Natives have been abused, imprisoned, executed, and they have been put out of their homes. They’ve had their women raped and taken as sex slaves. That’s what General Torgat has uncovered in his first two hours in Grippa.” Admiral Quzarian keyed his intercom. When Lieutenant Texla answered, he instructed her to send for the commander of the Space Marines and the Chief Marshall at Arms.

Turning back to his officers, the admiral went on, “Velip, I need you to immediately take command of Gelon, to assume the mantle of Provincial Governor. Plan to be there for ten days. I need you to shape up our troops. I need you to get the Natives back to willingly producing food and to go back to work in the mines. It is imperative that Gelon produce up to its potential, none of which is happening now.

Commander Devera, you are hereby promoted to the rank of captain. I need you to assume command of the Gunard, and this will be a permanent promotion. Present candidates from all ships, senior officers to fill your spot as executive officer by noon tomorrow. Let’s swiftly settle that position as well, and then you can focus all of your attention on getting ready for the war games.”

Both captains offered their thanks for the admiral’s confidence; however, Captain Velip felt he had just suffered a terrible loss, so he asked. “Admiral, does it not make more sense for me to take over a well-run province, sending an experienced Provincial Governor to Gelon?”

“Don’t sell yourself short Velip. I need a take-charge problem-solver; trust me, you are the perfect man for the job.”

When Admiral Quzarian would have gone on; and Captain Velip wanted very much to continue this discussion, the Chief Marshall arrived. “Ah, Marshall Rida, what’s the status of the prisoner Zobar?”

In response to Marshall Rida’s answer, the admiral nodded, then ordered Zobar be consigned to a pain amplifier and set to terminate in ten days, after which his still unclad body was to be unceremoniously jettisoned into space.

Admiral Quzarian was certainly living up to his reputation for being a harsh taskmaster. Under the circumstances and considering what was at stake; Zobar may have gotten off easy.

Marshall Rita had just taken his leave, when there was another knock on the door. It was Colonel Gouti, the commander of the space marines.

“Colonel, come in. I believe you know everyone. I will need you and a battalion of your Space Marines ready to deploy planet-side in four hours. You will be under Admiral Velip’s command; you will assist him in restoring civilian order and in retraining and shaping up the ground troops on Gelon. Colonel, this will not develop into an intra-service rivalry. I want you to take me very seriously. I’ve just sentenced Ex-General Zobar to ten days and death for creating this mess. You and your marines will be on the planet to solve problems, not create new ones. You will serve as Admiral Velip’s muscle and as his personal bodyguard.

Colonel; I am holding you personally responsible for Admiral Velip's safety. Do I make myself-clear?"

"Crystal clear, Sir."

"Thank you, colonel. You are dismissed." Admiral Quzarian rising and extending his hand to Captain Devera, the admiral presented a small wooden box containing the coveted solid gold command badge, that only ship's commanding officers were privileged to wear. Smiling, Admiral Quzarian said, "Captain Devera, honor it always, and make me proud. Captain, you have a list to prepare, you may take your leave."

The all too brief ceremony found the two admirals still on their feet. "Admiral Velip, you also have my sincere congratulations, please be seated."

"Thank you, Sir. The boring pace of an orbiting peacekeeper has certainly been altered, although I'm still trying to catch up on the day's events."

"Denzar, your promotion has been in the planning stage for some weeks now." Admiral Quzarian smiled and continued, "I've only had to accelerate the plan as a result of the set back Zobar's created. Your promotion to Rear Admiral was scheduled to take place next week. The only thing I hadn't planned on was having to send you planet-side for ten days."

"Sir, are you sure I'm the right man for this job?"

"Yes Denzar, you are the right man. General Torgat had the foresight to request that I rescue three retired generals from a slow death by boredom earlier this week. They will arrive in two solar days."

"I need you to restore order, set things on an even keel, and shape up our peacekeeping forces on Gelon. Zobar has created a terrible mess; he condoned terrible atrocities against the Natives. You are to correct all of that. You will have a free hand to solve this problem."

"Thank you for your confidence sir. I will restore order and get the Natives back to work."

"Admiral Velip, I have no doubt of that. However, I fear Zobar won't be the only peacekeeper to forfeit his life as a result of the mess he created. You may have the distasteful task of publicly executing some of our officers or troops. If you deem it necessary to regain the trust of the Natives, do it."

"Velip, for the next two days, do nothing but damage control. When the Generals arrive, get them involved in everything that needs to be done to administer Gelon. At the end of your ten days on the planet, you will elevate the general of your choice to Provincial Governor. Then you will return to me to assume your new role on my staff."

"Sir, are you certain you want me to appoint the new Provisional Governor? Isn't that General Torgat's decision?"

"Normally, yes, but under the circumstances, your personal appraisal will bear more weight than Torgat's. Excluding Torgat and myself, no one on New Tar-Que has a more comprehensive understanding of what must be accomplished here than you. Our people start arriving in twenty-three days, at a rate of thirty million per day; despite Patrax Master Gadric's opinion."

"Patrax Gadric has a different opinion? Can you share it with me sir?"

"The Patrax Master believes only approximately five billion of our people will actually relocate to New Tar-Que. He firmly believes the remainder will immigrate to other worlds within the Federation."

Quzarian smiled at his newest admiral, and said, "As I'm sure you know Velip, it was your brilliant idea to allow our people to select their resettlement site from all federation

planets. As to your new assignment on my staff, you will be personally responsible for coordinating the arrival of all the city ships and transports. You will allocate the completed and available cities and dwellings to the ships as they arrive. As of today, we can house just over one billion of our people. I am being assured by the time the first city ships arrive that number will be up to three billion, and will never fall behind a ready surplus of three hundred million. We have estimated it will take one solar day to unload each city ship. We have twelve hundred city ships, when the city ships are unloaded they will be returned to Tar-Que, each ship will make eight or possibly nine trips. You will also have to deal with ten transport ships per day.”

“Admiral, how large a staff will I command?”

“Denzar, I believe you are starting to grasp the scope of your new job. You will have a staff of twenty-five line officers, and four hundred and fifty administrative support personnel.”

“Sir,” Admiral Velip trying to get his mind around the size of his new assignment asked, “where will my headquarters be located?”

“You will remain on the planet; the facility will be finished later this week. Start thinking about your line officers, solicit volunteers and prepare a list, you can have almost anyone who is not presently a ship’s captain or executive officer. You will go in with the Space Marines in just over three hours. You know how to reach me if you need to. General Torgat will be your commanding authority for the next ten days. You better start packing, good luck Admiral Velip; make me proud.”

“Yes sir. I will sir . . . and thank you again sir.”

* * *

General Torgat put in a call to Admiral Quzarian just after the evening meal. “Admiral Velip and his space marines have arrived. I must admit he’s a ball of fire. He is out visiting each garrison compound and laying down the law.

Zobar’s fate is rapidly becoming common knowledge; I’m confidently certain that will motivate our people to get back in line. At one time---not too long ago---this was a disciplined military division.”

Continuing his report General Torgat changed subjects, “Ormal has already reached out to the Native leaders. Admiral, I’m sorry to report that his counterpart here and both of his brothers were executed by Zobar. The local headman has two surviving grown sons who were in hiding.”

“Ormal has also sent for his eldest son Lemosk to come and assist them with the transition into their new responsibilities. He strongly believes, and the way I see it, Admiral, rightly so; that having a free Elapson on site, who is now a member of the Tar-Que Federation will go a long way towards bringing the local Natives around. Things are even worse here than I had first thought. I’d like to strangle Zobar.”

“Bramos, Zobar will spend the rest of his life in a pain amplifier, and then he will be discarded into space with no military honors. I am concerned about your bringing Lemosk to Gelon. Will that make the defiant son the temporary headman of Tmeria?”

“No, Aadon, it will not. He would have normally ascended, but Ormal is readily adapting to our ways and has put his wife in charge, with Hazen assisting her. Mia is a formidable woman, and it will only be for a couple of weeks.

Jarzen Tadel

As you know sir, our biggest problem will be winning over the Natives; getting them to produce to their maximum potential; they have been horribly abused and are extremely rebellious. If they had weapons we would be fighting a guerrilla war on Gelon. With over two million people on the continent, they could have probably put a hundred and fifty thousand soldiers into the effort.

Aadon, with Admiral Velip in command, I do feel confident about leaving tomorrow as scheduled; although I'm uneasy over what we may find in the four remaining provinces. Gelon was only thought to have production problems; what we found sir, was a total and complete shock. . . .”

The next few days passed in a blur; the tempo on the orbiting ships as well as on the planet had picked up dramatically. The war games were set to start in four solar days; they would last for ten days. The promotion of two senior officers and the transfer of twenty-five others had the ship captains on all fifteen warships orbiting New Tar-Que scrambling to stabilize their commands. The complacency of the past few weeks was replaced by a real sense of urgency. Admiral Quzarian was well pleased; the shakeup of his command had generated a great many positive improvements.

CHAPTER FIVE

ARRIVAL

Word of the successful lift-off of the first thirty city ships spread through the fleet at the speed of light.

The Natives in the larger provinces who interacted daily with the Tars were also excited by the news, although they were not quite sure why.

On their planetary inspection tour Bramos and Ormal were about to finish their preliminary trek around the ninth province; tomorrow would complete their first visit to each province. With only one province to go, they agreed, the problems and solutions were similar in eight of the nine provinces, with Grippa being a special case.

If the findings were consistent tomorrow, Bramos and Ormal were confident they could pull off the desired outcome. The planetary trouble shooters had also agreed to take two days off before resuming round two, the first follow-up visit. The three retired generals had arrived and Admiral Velip had put them right to work. He spelled out the priorities and allowed each general to select his own challenge.

It had been twelve solar days since Admiral Quzarian had been in contact with the Federation High Council; he had been dreading his next contact on several counts. His sense of duty demanded action; he put in a call at a time he felt certain he would find all of the councilors in session. When the image sharpened, he was surprised to see only Trevin and two others present in the council chamber.

“Good morning, macars. I thought I’d find the full High Council in session.”

“Good morning, Admiral Quzarian. We just broke for an early lunch. We are having trouble filling the one million seats for day three’s lift-off. We will be doing some stumping this afternoon to get the count up.

We were very concerned over the outcome of the so-called diversionary attacks against the Emarc. Admiral, the council thought you would be commanding the attack yourself, and that it would be a massive assault---including ground forces---on both Emarc and the stronghold world of Copan. What we’re reading in the after-battle intelligence reports indicates that it was some sort of quick fly by attack. The report indicates the attack did very little damage and that Fleet Admiral Zalark was actually in command.

“Councilors; I don’t know where you picked up the impression; I would be in Emarc controlled space. I’m personally supervising the preparations on our new home world. As to our attack; it was referred to as a diversion; for a reason. It was intended to focus the Emarc Alliance’s attention on themselves and their own defense, thus ensuring they would not be paying too much attention to what we are doing, in point of fact, the launching of the first thirty city ships. We attacked Emarc with four hundred ships for two solar days. On the return trip, we bombarded Copan from high orbit for fourteen hours. After Copan, we withdrew to a safe quadrant of space being held by the remaining one hundred ships of the very small fleet you gave us to work with. The Federation High Council is well aware that to invade Copan will require a fleet of fifteen

hundred war ships, nine hundred support vessels, and twenty-five million ground troops---bare minimum---a resource you have been unwilling to provide. To successfully invade Emarc will require an even larger force.”

“Admiral; who was in command of the attack?” Trevin asked sarcastically.

“Councilor Trevin, I may not have been sitting on the bridge of any of the ships in Emarc Space. Nevertheless, I planned the attack. I am in command of our forces. I remained in constant contact with Fleet Admiral Zalark, during every phase of the attack. Fleet admiral Zalark had the honor of leading our assault, which I might add came off as planned, with our forces sustaining no loss of personnel or ships. We pulled over fourteen hundred and fifty Emarc Alliance ships back to their own space. Moreover we destroyed ninety-one of their ships and damaged thirty-four others.”

“Admiral, we are not criticizing; it had just been hoped that we would have achieved a more strategic victory.”

“Councilor Trevin, if it’s strategic victories you are looking for, take the leash off and let me do my job. I will give you victory after victory and put an end to the war I have been waging for the past nineteen years of my life.”

“This is a discussion for another time, admiral. In fact; once we get our people relocated; you may be required to deliver on that often-repeated request. . . .”

Wearing a huge smile, the admiral said, “Councilor Trevin, I look forward to that day.” Still smiling the admiral asked, “I am curious about Morgena. What was her reaction to being whisked away for safekeeping in space? Has she asked any probing questions about the assassination plot?”

“Admiral, she has been an enigma to us all since her return. She is attentive in council, she participates willingly, and she is placid and cooperative. It’s unsettling, not at all what we were braced for. Morgena has made no demands nor has she asked any probing questions; I believe she reasoned it out on her own. Add to that her larger disappointment. It’s as though with her power base of four billion citizens choosing life, the fire has gone out of her. It is possible she is sincere and has accepted the inevitable. In any event, we keep her under close scrutiny. When the High Council relocates to New Tar-Que at the beginning of the seventh month, rumor has it she isn’t coming. She has selected one of the other fifteen worlds as her new home planet. As for her weak minded co-conspirators; admiral, it’s gone as you predicted. Without her leadership, they sit in council and willingly submit to the majority.”

“That’s good news councilor; we’ve enough on our slate. It’s a blessing not to have to deal with divisiveness and play petty political games during such a critical time.

Councilor Trevin; I’ve been mulling over what you said about the difficulty in filling thirty ships with one million citizens per day. Patrax Master Gadric is absolutely certain only five billion plus or minus a few hundred million of our people will relocate to New Tar-Que; he believes the other four billion will resettle to the other fifteen worlds in the Federation, as is their right. If he is correct by even half, it’s a potential problem. Councilors, I suggest we investigate this possibility and plan accordingly. Fortunately, most of the other Federation Worlds are capable of taking in large numbers of immigrants; nevertheless, it will still require planning and some rushed new construction.”

“Excellent suggestion admiral; it does shed light on some of the sketchy and confusing information in our more recent intelligence reports. If there’s nothing else, I’ll close this call. Oh, by the way admiral; I know how self-sufficient you are, but please call in every other day or so; we do value and benefit greatly from your advice, Trevin out.”

* * *

It was late in the day when Bramos finally returned to the bungalow. If he was surprised to see the admiral, he didn't let on. "Greetings Aadon. Something sure smells good; is there enough for two?"

"Welcome home, Bramos; I was expecting you. According to the cook, dinner will be ready in another quarter solar hour."

"Well, then, I've time for a quick shower and an opportunity to be out of this badly soiled uniform." Heading towards his room, already beginning to disrobe, he remarked, "Aadon, my head is spinning, I've got so much to tell you, but with your permission, it will keep until after we've enjoyed a relaxing dinner."

Emerging refreshed by his shower and dressed very casually, Bramos joined Aadon at the table. Dinner concluded, sprinkled only by casual conversation, Admiral Quzarian adjourned to the great room, where he put a match to the waiting wood laid in the hearth and took his customary seat facing the fireplace.

"General, you've kept me in suspense long enough; out with your report, down to the smallest detail, please."

"Aadon, much of it you already know. By-the-way sir; have you had any contact with Governor Velip?"

"No not a word; and you?"

"Not a word, Aadon. I didn't want to appear to be second-guessing him, so I left it for him to contact me. You chose well; your new admiral is an extremely self-sufficient man. Aadon, traveling around this planet has been a remarkable experience. I visited the construction sites and the completed cities. They are amazing. Expansion and after-the-fact redesign caused every master-plan city-design mistake we had on Tar-Que. Then the original design mistakes were compounded yet again by more expansion and redesign. All of those inconveniences have been designed out of our new cities.

Ormal and I plan to take off the next two days, but I'm certain Ormal will be out scouring the countryside with new eyes. We saw so much and most of it was good.

The measures we implemented when fully carried out will bring eight of the provinces fully into line; at this point, Grippa is still a problem. Fortunately none of our other provincial governors came even close to creating the mess Zobar left us. His insanity, combined with appetites of lustful debauchery, has set us back immeasurably. Grippa is a festering wound that will require considerable time and patience to heal. I'm still not certain how things were allowed to get so out of control."

"Bramos, if there is blame to be claimed, since it happened on my watch, the blame is mine, and mine alone," the admiral flatly stated.

"Your watch, yes. However, sir, I'd heard stories. I either did not want to believe them, or I felt they were not my responsibility. In any event, Zobar was senior to me by half a year. It would have been an extremely bad career move to question him, especially without first-hand knowledge or hard proof."

"Bramos, what kind of stories did you hear, and from who?"

"Aadon, I thought you weren't looking to spread the blame, sir."

"Bramos, you know me better than that. The fault is mine. Only, well, I had heard nothing; I'm just curious what others might have known."

Jarzen Tadel

“Rumors sir, of executions, even stories about his women, were about, only nothing even close to what we actually found. Had I known about his sex slaves’ sir, I would have turned him out sooner, the consequences be damned.”

“Bramos, we were dealing with a battle hardened professional soldier. How could anyone even guess he would be capable of such behavior?”

“Of course you are right, sir. However, it’s shameful that a brother officer was even capable . . . it diminishes us all too some extent. Rest assured nothing like this will ever happen again. Because of your wisdom, I will have the time to make certain that none of the Provincial Governors are so independent or so unsupervised as to allow them to abuse their power.

Aadon, there is one other surprise development. General Romd, from the Province of Aver on the southern tip of Gelon has asked to be relieved and transferred to an active combat unit. He told me that baby-sitting slaves was no job for an old soldier; he wants to command a combat division.”

“I have granted his request. As soon as Admiral Velip finishes his indoctrination of Generals Eptem, Bertes, and Tesem, I’ll slot one of them in Aver. By and large Romd did a competent job, a little heavy-handed perhaps, but his troops were militarily precise and the Natives were in no way abused.”

* * *

Jarzen awoke on his back with Shara’s head resting on his chest and shoulder, with half her body covering his. Looking up into the morning sky, Jarzen was immediately alert. Through the natural skylight he could see the ominous, low, fast-moving violet clouds, and high in the sky; were the large dark billowing gray-purple clouds that always accompanied an Ion Storm.

Gently sliding his hand down the curve of Shara’s back and affectionately patting her firm, round bottom, he whispered, “Shara, Shara my love, we have Ion Storm Clouds. I must get to the marina.” Shara rolled off of Jarzen and on to her back, and then looked up at the familiar portent of eminent disaster. Jarzen was up and dressing. This would be the first morning the young lovers did not start the day with a physical affirmation of their love. Shara briskly rose and dove into the deep end of the hot spring pool, traveling its length underwater to the shallow end, where she quickly exited using the hand carved steps. She called across the pool to Jarzen, “Can you make time for breakfast?”

Jarzen, pulling on his sleeveless shirt vest, shook his head. Shara circled around the pool to the linen armoire for a bath sheet; as they passed; Jarzen reached out and pulled Shara’s firm wet feminine body to him. “Jarzen I’ll get you all wet,” Shara playfully said between kisses.”

“I’ll dry. ”He pulled her closer for an impassioned kiss, shaking an impotent fist at the impending Ion Storm. “If I can, I’ll be back before the storm hits.”

Jarzen left for the marina at a dead run. Running past Apanthus, at the entrance to the marina, Jarzen gasped. “Ring the storm bell, ring it long and ring it loud.” Never breaking stride even as he ascended the steps to Captain Arcon’s office, Jarzen burst through the door, panting hard. “Ion Storm.” Working hard to fill his straining lungs, having run all the way to the Marina, Jarzen huffed and puffed. “Put . . . out . . . the . . . alert . . . and . . . call . . . Master Gadric; he’s eager to see an Ion Storm.”

The peal of the storm bell propelled the captain to quick action, activating the vidlink to all stations, while addressing Jarzen, the captain asked. “Will it be a bad storm?”

Jarzen Tadel

Jarzen nodded, and said, “By the look of the clouds, that would be my guess. I’ve got to look to the fishing fleet. I’ll return if time permits.”

Jarzen was pleased with the hurried, yet efficient activity going on all over the marina. The large storm fenders were being double-secured to every boat, fore, aft and amidships. The sails were furled and securely lashed to the masts; all hatches and portholes had been battened down. Mooring lines were being double upped and lengthened to compensate for the anticipated storm surge.

The Tadel family marina was without a doubt the safest harbor on the planet. Because of its limited opening and towering walls, the high velocity winds, which always accompanied an Ion Storm, and did much of the damage, could not easily reach the boats. The storm surge was the biggest worry for the boats in this marina; although the storm fenders and relaxed mooring lines usually sufficed.

But there was no protection from the lightning. When it struck, the damage was wholesale; if your boat was not struck, you thanked your lucky star and went fishing.

With the boats prepared, most of the men were leaving the marina; they still had to secure their homes before the storm arrived. Jarzen stopped by Captain Arcon’s office to ask if the alert had been given out in time and if Patrax Master Gadric had responded. Receiving an affirmative answer, Jarzen reported that the marina was as ready as possible. Jarzen urged Arcon to remain indoors, and then he took his leave.

Starting for home, Jarzen was conflicted. Whose home was he going to? For in actuality he had two homes. No, that was no longer true; his home was with Shara in the Brew Master’s residence.

Then he reminded himself that there were over sixty people living on the Tadel family compound. Surely, his father had already secured everything in preparation of the storm; with that settled, his decision was made. As Jarzen approached the brewery, which was halfway between his father’s house and the marina, hard rain from the leading edge of the storm had caught up to him. He ran as fast as he could in the torrential downpour, along the entire length of the long warehouse. He noted that both of the storm shutters on the front of the solid rock residence were closed and well secured. Entering the residence, he called out to Shara and was greeted by great aromas coming from the kitchen and Shara, who tangibly expressed her pleasure at his having made it home; if barely ahead of the storm. Kissing Shara with rainwater dripping off his nose, Jarzen laughed. “Now it’s my turn to get you wet. Sure smells good in here, how long till we eat? I haven’t even had a mug of docar.” Steering Jarzen towards the bathing chamber, Shara offered to help him out of his wet clothes, as they had half a solar hour until lunch would be ready.

* * *

Patrax Master Gadric, and a team of fifteen scientists, including the senior meteorologist from the Gunard, arrived via transporter in a self-contained mobile research bunker that had been designed to study weather conditions on alien worlds. The mobile science station had been positioned facing the ocean on the high plateau cliff just north of the Tadel

Family marina. The weather lab had its own reactor to provide all the power it needed plus a large surplus.

Master Gadric instructed his technicians to activate main power; during transport they used only stored energy cell power. Gadric settled himself in the command chair; then he gave the go-ahead to bring all systems on line. Putting action to word, Gadric opened the blast shield, which

protected the forward facing over-sized optical lens during transport; it could be closed whenever conditions dictated.

Hearing the anchoring lasers fire, he could feel the anchoring rods boring into the solid rock they had settled on. When Gadric looked out at the approaching Ion Storm, he was not satisfied with the view: just a gray wall. He then increased the optical lens magnification by a factor of ten. This brought the Ion Storm---still about twenty minutes from landfall---up close and in their faces. The Tar-Que's top-scientists were watching a tempest of the first magnitude; storms within a storm. Even at this distance, the approaching Ion Storm was beginning to buffet the science station. Lightning strikes too numerous to count appeared to be attacking the Ion Storm. The facility engineer advised Gadric; the mobile weather station was securely anchored. After ascertaining that the standard four-corner anchoring system had been employed, Gadric ordered the mid-section anchors implemented as well. The four corner anchors were rated to handle winds in excess of four hundred miles per hour. By adding the four mid-section anchors the rating rose to being able to withstand winds up to one thousand miles per hour plus tidal waves. Not knowing what to expect; Gadric was taking no chances.

As the Ion Storm prepared to make landfall, Gadric's adrenaline kicked in; he felt both exhilarated and foolish. What was a man his age doing blazing the trail into the new frontier? Most men his age had been retired for twenty-five years. He admitted to himself he could never retire as long as the universe kept offering so many fascinating mysteries to be puzzled out. An Ion Storm making landfall, unleashing its violent fury, rescued Gadric from his reverie.

All of his senses were put into overdrive by the Ion Storm's aircraft hazard winds, and the gusts---the wind shear---magnificent. The rain was like no rain he had ever experienced: a cloudburst, a swamping, streaming, flooding cascade, it was a virtual waterfall from the Ion Storm.

Vibrations that shook the entire bunker were all they could experience of the thunder, which was amazing considering how well insulated and soundproof the lab was. The lightning was familiar, yet very different from any other lightning Gadric had studied on over two dozen dissimilar planets. Meteorologist, scientist, and technicians were completely absorbed, burying themselves in their work: scanning, recording, tracking, logging readings, compiling a precise account of every aspect of the storm, checking storm performance history archives of storms on different planets for similarities, patterns, and commonalties. This Ion Storm was all Gadric had hoped for and more; yet he felt insulated in his bunker; he felt he was missing the real storm.

* * *

Shara and Jarzen were driven out of the bathing chamber soaking wet as soon as he had finished his bath. Their private window to the cosmos---the open-air skylight that had given them so many romantic nights of stargazing---was now a gaping hole in the roof. The torrential rain was flooding the bathing chamber, which was on the verge of flooding the residence itself.

Then Shara remembered---a seldom used drain---a watercourse her father had put to use to discharge a surplus of rainwater six seasons past, during what everyone said had been the rainiest season in anyone's memory. If they could only find and open the drain's discharge outlet, the bathing chamber would drain off its surplus of water.

Shara could not remember if the drain handle was inside the bathing chamber, or accessible only from the outside. Searching along the back wall of the chamber in the nearly knee-deep water and finding no drain; Jarzen told Shara he was going outside to check for the drain handle on the

exterior wall. A visibly shaken Shara seized Jarzen by the arm pleading. "Let the water rise. I'll not risk losing you over a little water."

"Shara, I'll be fine; you won't even have to deal with wet clothes when I return."

Shara, all color drained from her face, said with a tremble in her voice, "In order to get to the outside of the exterior back wall, you have to walk up the steep north access to the top of this stone hill dwelling. Then you must traverse the slippery wet rock hill the complete length of the house and bath chamber, going down the even steeper back side of a wet slick stone mound. If you go, it's very likely after the storm we will find your bent and broken body at the bottom of a sheer drop that's twice as high as the tall mast on the Lady Mia. If you truly love me, you won't go out in this storm."

Overwhelmed by Shara's anguish and concern for his safety, Jarzen turned from the wall, intending to assure Shara he wouldn't risk his life over a small flood, but stepped instead into a sump well and discovered a large handle. Trying the handle, which did not budge, Jarzen braced himself, pulling with all of his strength, and the handle jerked free, sending him headlong into the now knee-deep water. Righting himself and rising, the dropping water level was already evident. The drain pipe, large enough to accommodate both of a man's closed fists, was draining profuse amounts of water every minute. The standing water would soon be under control. Crossing to Shara, taking her into his soaking wet embrace, he said, "After you entreaty, I would not have gone outside in this storm. Problem solved; let's get dry. And I'm still hungry."

The Ion Storm, one of the more memorable storms of recent recollection raged for two days and two nights. Jarzen and Shara settled in the great room in front of a crackling fire, basking in each other's love. They nestled together, talking as they always did, about anything and everything while the Ion Storm raged all about them.

Shara and Jarzen were inside what might be the safest dwelling on the planet. Jarzen suddenly remembered he had borrowed a book from Captain Arcon, and he invited Shara to read it with him. Being a literate people, the Elapsons could read, write, and do mathematics, but they had no printed books. Reading was used for farming, cooking, tallying, and for hand-written public notices.

* * *

Master Gadric, fast asleep in his command chair with its many consoles, control features, and activation functions, was suddenly alert and sitting upright. He willed himself awake and tried to determine what was wrong. Looking around his lab, he saw the duty crew, just as they should be: bent over their terminals lost in thought or working to evaluate the volumes of data they were collecting.

Turning his attention to the forward observation lens, Patrax Gadric was startled to see the sun shining; the Ion Storm was gone. Speaking to no one in particular, Gadric asked, "When did the Ion Storm terminate?"

An astrophysicist looking up from his console replied, "Just now, without warning. We're only recording normal weather readings now. There are no residual particles of charged ions, or anything else to suggest we just survived an incredible Ion Storm. It will take us weeks to digest all the data we recorded; and the energy readings are completely off the scale. If that energy can be harnessed, one storm could power the largest city on Tar-Que for a solar month."

Gadric gazed out the optical lens deep in thought; he was certain the data they had collected would pose as many questions as it answered, but he still felt he had missed the real experience of an Ion storm. Activating the command chair's vidlink, he requested he be transported to the

Jarzen Tadel

marina; Gadric knew his team would prepare the lab for transport back to the Gunard. Confirmation of his confidence in the team could be felt in the vibration of the anchoring rods being withdrawn from the bedrock, which had securely held the mobile lab in place throughout the Ion Storm.

When Gadric arrived at Captain Arcon's office, he noticed everyone was calmly going about their daily business. It was as though the Ion Storm had never happened. Greeting the Captain, Gadric asked about their weathering of the storm; if there had been any significant damage. The Captain was pleased to announce that the marina had come through the Ion Storm--their fifth and the worst so far this season---with very minimal damage.

Gadric wanted to speak with the Native fishermen; he especially wanted a conversation with anyone who had been out on the open ocean during an Ion Storm.

As Jarzen entered the office, Captain Arcon was explaining as far as he knew no one caught at sea in an Ion Storm had ever survived. "Jarzen, I'm correct, right, there are no survivors from ship's caught at sea during an Ion Storm?"

Looking from the captain to his guest, Jarzen answered, "Yes, that's basically correct, although the day before your people arrived, my father, my brothers and I had a very narrow escape. Sailing for all we were worth, we were caught by the leading edge of an Ion storm. I was preparing myself to be hurled into the void, and just like that the Ion Storm was over. An experience I never want to repeat."

"Patrax Master Gadric, let me introduce you to Jarzen Tadel, the youngest son of Ormal Tadel. Jarzen is the captain of the Lady Mia, the pride of this marina. Jarzen, please meet Patrax Grand Master Gadric, the most esteemed intellectual in the entire Tar-Que Federation. Patrax Master Gadric, has mastered most of the sciences."

"Captain Arcon, you flatter me. Jarzen, it's a pleasure to meet you. I'm doing research on the Ion Storms. May I ask you some questions?"

"Patrax Master Gadric, it is I who am flattered. I'd be honored to answer any questions I can. I was just on my way to check over our fishing boats and the docks; can we talk as we go? I'd be happy to give you a tour of the Lady Mia."

"Very acceptable Jarzen; then we can get out of the good captain's way. I'd very much like to see the pride of this marina."

After the tour of the marina and the Lady Mia was complete. Patrax Master Gadric's unending quest for information showed no signs of letting up; so Jarzen aimed the Patrax Master in the direction of the Captain's cabin. Master Gadric was amazing; he was so deep in thought Jarzen was certain he had noted little during the tour. Patrax Gadric probably couldn't even find his way topside. Each question answered, posed two new questions.

Jarzen discovered he enjoyed the questioning; it made him think about many things he had always taken for granted. Many of his answers led to questions he would like to ask this learned man. Just as Jarzen was about to ask a question of his own; Patrax Gadric rose. He profusely thanked Jarzen, asking if he could return the following day. The Patrax Master reminded Jarzen of a question he had asked early on, for which Jarzen had no answer, but had promised to get answered; then he took his leave. Without indecision, Master Gadric left the Captain's cabin and departed the ship with no hesitation, as though he had spent his life on board. He had been paying attention after all, in fact doing two separate things at the same time.

Jarzen spent the rest of the day talking to everyone he saw. Finally he went to his father's compound to query the revered older members of his family, especially his great, great, great, great grand sire. He'd even talk to his father if he was at home.

Jarzen Tadel

Jarzen delayed his departure from the marina the next morning as long as he could; he finally decided Patrax Master Gadric was only being polite when he said he would return. He was, after all, a busy man with very little time to spend talking with young sea captains. On his return to the marina about mid-afternoon, Jarzen saw Master Gadric strolling down the pier in his direction.

Jarzen had spent the day mulling over the previous day's session and wondering if he had done something to put off the Patrax Master; or if maybe the answers to his questions had been of no value or no interest to the very serious scientist. As soon as the mooring lines were secured, Jarzen instructed Apanthus to take over; he then left the ship to greet Patrax Gadric.

"Greetings Master Gadric, I have an answer to yesterday's question," Jarzen called out. "I spoke with as many people as I could; especially the old. No one could ever remember an Ion Storm forming over land. However, as many come ashore as stay at sea, and no one knows why. Does this information help you?"

"Immeasurably, Jarzen. May I ask for some additional help? We have charted your planet. We know where the land is and how much of it there is. We even know how many and how high the mountains are. We know how much of the planet is covered by oceans and bays, but we don't know how deep the water is, where the reefs are, or where the shallows and the deep troughs are. When priorities loosen up, we will survey the oceans, but just now I can't justify moving the ocean survey to the head of the ever growing priority list. So if you could share your knowledge of the currents and depths of the waters off Tmeria, it would be greatly appreciated."

Jarzen quickly assured Master Gadric he'd be honored to share any information he possessed about the waters off of Tmeria, but he was completely taken back when Gadric asked if he could come now. Somewhat conflicted, Jarzen answered that he could come now, only come where? Gadric had been walking them down the pier toward the waiting ground car in which he had arrived.

"To my research facilities on the continent called Kleet."

Jarzen stopped in his tracks; and he was quick to point out that Kleet was a twenty day sail if you had favorable winds all the way.

Master Gadric laughed, and said. "But first to the transporter station at General Torgat's compound." Gadric then told Jarzen it would take them longer to drive the short distance to the general's compound, than it would take for them to transport to Kleet.

Over the next two solar weeks Jarzen spent more time with Patrax Gadric on Kleet than he spent fishing. He was amazed that he could spend the day on Kleet and the night with Shara on Tmeria. He had gotten Master Gadric to go fishing with him one day, and was very surprised when the Patrax Master showed up three days later with six researchers and a dory full of equipment.

* * *

It was only two days before the first thirty city ships from Tar-Que were scheduled to arrive; Jarzen and Gadric were just finishing a refreshment break when Jarzen inquired if he could ask a question. Gadric stated it seemed only fair and that he would be happy to provide answers for as many questions as Jarzen wished to ask.

Jarzen was curious about the city ships. "How do you simultaneously move one million people? How can you feed them, where did they sleep, and what about toilet chambers? What did the passengers do for entertainment during an eighteen-day trip across the solar system?"

With a broad grin on his face, Patrax Gadric explained that the city ships were so named because of their huge size and their ability to transport so many people with most of their possessions in one trip. This facilitated the people moving right in to their new homes, creating a viable city in a single day.

The ships were comprised of one thousand auditoriums, each seating one thousand people in over-sized reclining chairs referred to as travel couches. The passengers took their seats, the chambers were sealed, the lights lowered and the chambers were pressurized. The occupants were all put in hibernation sleep for the trip, to be awakened one hour before landing at their new homes. The city ships had no sleeping quarters, no feeding facilities, and limited sanitation facilities, because they weren't needed as the passengers were only awake for two hours of the trip. Their personal possessions were off loaded in cargo pods, which were delivered to their new homes, and completely unpacked and setup by robots on the day they arrived.

Jarzen nodded as though he understood, so Gadric suggested they finish their project: the precise placements of the depth of the waters off the northern coast of Tmeria. Gadric had asked Jarzen to check his notes for accuracy.

Gadric noticed Jarzen was having difficulty with the notes, so he suggested Jarzen read them out loud so Gadric could help him decipher his hand writing. As Jarzen stumbled over almost every other word . . . Gadric slapped his forehead. He crossed the room to a locker, removing a sophisticated hand-held scanning device. He scanned Jarzen, checking the readings and rescanning, Gadric muttered. "I'll be destroyed."

Calling to his assistant, Patrax Codor, Gadric pulled Jarzen by the arm from his chair, and said, "Call Admiral Quzarian; inform him to clear his schedule. I'm on my way up."

Bursting into the admiral's office with Jarzen in tow, Gadric waved to the admiral, poured himself a cup of docar, and then dropped into the nearest chair, shaking his head, while staring at the floor. Jarzen was pleased, Admiral Quzarian had remembered him, and greeted him like an old friend, with a warm handshake. As usual, the admiral quickly returned to business.

"Gadric, what is so important, that you suggested I clear my schedule? We're down to the final finish on preparations for the arrival of the first thirty city ships. I hope you're not wasting my time, which frankly, right now, is in very short supply."

"Admiral, for over two solar weeks now I've owed you a promised report on our findings and conclusions regarding the incredulous archeological discoveries which Elapsis keeps grudgingly offering up to us in tiny teasing pieces. I've avoided making my report admiral, because I could not prove my conclusions. Each discovery only added more pieces to the puzzle, but no conclusive proof. Well, now I have the proof and proof positive it is. Now I can validate my findings."

"Gadric, I still have no idea what you're talking about."

"I know, admiral, I know. Please; send Jarzen to Bio Med for a complete body scan. Please, admiral, just humor me." Turning to Jarzen, Gadric said, "The body scan is completely painless, Jarzen; please comply."

The admiral instructed Lieutenant Texla to personally take Jarzen to Bio Med for a full body scan, Jarzen looking as confused as the admiral willingly complied. Gadric took over the admiral's call to Bio Med and requested a full body scan and DNA strand comparison. The physicians were to look specifically for similarities and anomalies between Jarzen's physiology and Tar-Que physiology.

An irritated admiral said, "Gadric, I've reached the conclusion of my patience. Gadric, I demand a complete explanation---in laymen's terms---if you'd be so kind."

“Admiral, I can now prove Elapsis is the home world of the Tar-Que people.”

“Gadric have you lost your mind? I am well aware that New Tar-Que is our new home world. I commanded the invasion.”

“Let me rephrase admiral; Elapsis is our planet of origin. We are without a doubt the direct descendants of the Elapsons, which I alluded to at our first meeting; when I said this might be more of a homecoming than anyone thought.”

The admiral walked the length of the room and back, then he took the chair directly across the table from Gadric. Catching Gadric’s eyes; with a stare that could bore holes, the admiral demanded, in a voice laced with awe. “Gadric, are you serious? How can we be the descendants of Elapsis? Where is your proof?”

“Jarzen is my proof . . .” Holding up his hand to forestall whatever the admiral was about to say, Gadric went on; only now seeming to sober to the conclusion he had so recently reached. I’ll give you the short version. Almost daily, we were finding relics and other artifacts with basic designs similar to items found on Tar-Que. Some of these devices are still in use today, only the unearthed items on Elapsis are much, much older, predating our civilization by tens of thousands of years. The basic design was unmistakable, only refined use and evolution had necessitated minor changes, but not in every case; some items are identical.”

A frustrated admiral interrupted, “Master Gadric, I have yet to see your proof.”

“Admiral, I’m getting to it . . . Jarzen has been helping me chart the depth of the ocean off Tmeria. When I asked him to verify my calculations, reading from my notes he mispronounced every other word. At first, I thought the poor boy just couldn’t read. Then it hit me like a hurtling comet hits a planet; even though he mispronounced the words, I still understood him.

What I was experiencing was a remarkably slight lingual shift. We were speaking slightly different versions of the same language, so close as to be inconsequential. Only trying to pronounce from the unfamiliar written word showcased the difference.”

“That’s your proof? Gadric, you’ll have to do a lot better than that.”

“No, no, admiral, that’s not my proof. I used a handheld scanner to check for the translation chip we inject as a necessary gift to the people of worlds we deal with who don’t possess that level of technology. No chip. I found no chip. The Elapson and the Tar-Que were basically speaking the same language.”

Lieutenant Texla and Jarzen returned from Bio Med at this point. The admiral asked the lieutenant to reschedule the rest of his day, put in an Alert One Call to all Provincial Governors, and take Jarzen for a comprehensive tour of the Gunard.

“Sir?”

“Tanea, please, you have your orders.” With a shoulders shrug and a yes sir, the lieutenant took Jarzen by the arm, escorting him to the outer office.

General Torgat was the first provincial governor to respond to the Alert One Call. Without any form of the customary military greeting; Admiral Quzarian immediately asked, “Bramos, on the day we invaded Elapsis, did we insert translation chips into the Natives?”

Sensing something important was unfolding, General Torgat, in a very matter of fact way responded, “Admiral, I don’t know. I know we brought them with us. I will find out if they were used.” As the other governors responded to the Alert One Call, the answers were basically all the same. General Torgat’s return call followed his first call by mere minutes. “Aadon, I’m confused. The translation chips are all here in storage. They weren’t used; sir, I don’t understand.”

“Bramos, how quickly can you get to my office?”

“I’ll be there in five minutes sir.” General Torgat’s answer found Admiral Quzarian looking at a blank screen. Bursting into the admiral’s office, flush of face and breathing hard, the general arrived in just under four minutes. Panting out the words General Torgat asked, “What’s happened, sir?”

Admiral Quzarian, with minimal input from Patrax Master Gadric, quickly recounted the relevant details. All three men were quite shaken; they sat in bewildered silence for a prolonged period of time, until finally General Torgat heard himself mutter, “Does Jarzen know? Do any of the Natives know?”

With a glance, the admiral passed the question to Patrax Gadric, who responded, “I don’t see how they could; I’ve only just put all the facts together myself. The bigger question is, do we tell them or do we keep it a secret?” Before the admiral could voice the answer he was still trying to formulate, he was interrupted by the arrival of the Chief Physician, Patrax Ormon.

Beckoned to enter the office, the chief physician closed the door behind him, addressing the admiral, he said, “Sir, is it safe for me to assume you sent me a perfectly healthy Native boy to confirm something you already knew?”

The admiral asked, “What would that be, Patrax Ormon?”

“That the boy is a very healthy Tar-Que?”

Speaking up again the admiral asked, “Is he a Tar-Que?”

A somewhat confused chief physician answered, “Why yes, admiral, he is. There were two slight DNA variances; but the boy is definitely a Tar-Que.”

Gadric crossed the room and held out his hand for the report, examining the findings; he asked the chief medical officer who on his staff knew about this examination and the findings.

Receiving a quick answer. Authoritatively, Master Gadric then began issuing orders to the Chief Physician. “Treat this as a state secret; delete the complete record and all test results. Inform your staffs that on pain of death, under no circumstances are they to ever discuss this incident. Thank you, Patrax Ormon; you are dismissed.”

Appealing to Admiral Quzarian with an inquisitive look, and receiving no succor; Patrax Ormon bowed and affirmed, “I will see to it personally.” He left the admiral’s office.

Shaking his head, Gadric said, “The Elapsons could bear our children admiral, and we can bear theirs. I am talking normal Tar-Que children, not mixed-breeds. Aside from the two variances, the DNA is a perfect match. The two variances Patrax Ormon referred to are an enhanced gene that should enable the Elapsons to live seventy five to one hundred years longer than the hundred and forty something year maximums we currently achieve. On a more disturbing note, the Elapsons use twice as much of their brain as we do. That’s twice the twelve to fifteen percent we use. They should out score us on intelligence exams by two hundred points.”

“Gadric, how can that be?” asked General Torgat. They’re just a bunch of simple farmers and fishermen.”

“General don’t confuse a lack of education and technology with a lack of intelligence. The Elapson may not use it, but they are the superior beings. The original model, if you will, from which we descended.”

At this point, Jarzen and Lieutenant Texla entered the admiral’s office. The two old warriors looked as though they’d been caught with their pants down when Jarzen entered the room.

Sensing the awkwardness and growing discomfort in the office, Patrax Master Gadric happily said, “Jarzen, I guess we owe you an explanation. As you and I were working in the lab today it occurred to me that in just two solar days, the first citizens of Tar-Que would arrive on New Tar-Que. I wondered what would happen when our two populations meet, become attracted

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to each other and commence to procreate. It occurred to me, we did not know what would result. So I brought you to the Gunard to find out if our races are biologically compatible.”

“Master Gadric, didn’t General Zobar demonstrate our peoples were physically compatible?”

“No, Jarzen. Zobar only proved that we could pleasure each other like rutting animals. No offspring resulted from his debauchery. Up to now it’s only been our military personnel on the planet; orders, strict military discipline, and military justice control them.”

“Our civilian population is controlled by no such restrictions, and I had only just realized my predecessors on the planet hadn’t considered this potential problem. I’m very happy to report the tests were all positive. A union between our races will produce happy, healthy normal children, certainly good news. You’re a very handsome, robust people. I’m certain our races will eventually commingle.”

“The admiral, the general, and I want to test about fifty additional Elapson from all around the planet to validate our findings.” Turning to the admiral, with a look, Master Gadric entrusted him with the testing and imperiously ended the day’s session, informing Jarzen that because it was late in the day, he would have him transported directly to the brewery, while he would return to his research facility on Kleet.

Still standing after Gadric and Jarzen had left the office and beginning to feel a little silly, Admiral Quzarian motioned toward the table, grinned at the general and said, “Gadric dissembled like a seasoned politician. He certainly developed a plausible explanation on the spot. We have a good cover story; the only question is what to disclose and to whom.”

“Aadon, why don’t you pass it off on the High Council? I’d like to see the look on their faces when they find out they ordered the invasion of the Tar-Que’s planet of origin.”

“Bramos, you have an evil side I’ve not seen before; I rather like it. In any event, I plan to sleep on my decision, and then dump it on the High Council. Do you have any fresh fish at the bungalow? I’m going to rescue Tanea from her reports and bring her with me for a day of rest before our people start arriving the day after tomorrow.”

The next day, fifty more randomly selected Natives were medically tested; their primary selection criterion was being in close proximity to a transporter station. To maintain secrecy, Patrax Ormon conducted the tests himself. Jarzen’s test results were duplicated and positively confirmed.

When Patrax Gadric personally reviewed the test results, everyone tested had the same enhanced longevity gene. The tested Natives also showed an intelligence advantage over the Tar-Que, although none of them as pronounced as Jarzen’s. Most showed an advantage of half again the Tar-Que norm.

Admiral Quzarian, interrupted his day off to take a call from Master Gadric, he received the verified test results verbally; with all of the pertinent known facts being downloaded to his office workstation. After reviewing all the data, the admiral put in a call to the Federation High Council. He assured the councilors that New Tar-Que was ready for tomorrow’s arrival of the first thirty city ships. With the advanced preparations continuing ahead of schedule; especially with the number of future city ship departures being decreased from thirty to twenty city ships sailing for New Tar-Que on a daily basis.

The discussion next addressed the alarming fact that the passenger lists for ships going to the other member worlds of the Federation were growing at a troubling pace. It was determined that this development should have been expected, because the option to choose which Federation planet to relocate to was part of the incentive compromise. It was agreed to monitor the interest

for the moment with only one action being taken; to immediately establish the maximum number of emigrants each Federation world could accommodate.

Those issues settled, Admiral Quzarian told the Federation High Council about Patrax Master Gadric's discovery. He provided the evidence that New Tar-Que was actually the original home world of the Tar-Que race. After some discussion, it was decided to make this fact a closely guarded state secret, at least for the time being.

* * *

The momentous day of arrival was at hand and everyone was excited; everyone except Patrax Master Gadric, who merely took it in stride as the expected outcome. Patrax Gadric was waiting for Jarzen when he arrived at the marina and without a preamble of any kind; Patrax Gadric invited Jarzen to join his research team.

Jarzen, both flattered and overwhelmed at being asked . . . hesitated. What possible contribution could he offer the team? Being reassured that his sharp intellect, insatiable curiosity, combined with his knowledge of the planet---especially its oceans, and his first-hand knowledge of the Ion Storms---stood him in good stead.

Gadric further tantalized Jarzen by telling him he wanted to take him on as an apprentice student, something he often did when he found someone possessing a sufficiently keen mind. Gadric even included Sharasta in the invitation, as he wanted Jarzen to move to Kleet so he would be readily accessible. Gadric slept little and when he wasn't sleeping he worked. Jarzen wanted more details on the work he was to do but he had to settle for Master Gadric's proclamation: "I work on what interests me, and you will assist me." Jarzen promised an answer on the morrow, telling Master Gadric he was very interested. It was a good thing the Lady Mia had a surplus of crew, with two trainees on board. As once again as was now happening more and more often; Jarzen sent the Lady Mia out captained by Apanthus. Jarzen returned home to share his good news with Shara.

A messenger from Master Gadric interrupted Shara and Jarzen from their noon meal and weighty discussion. The Patrax Master would send a ground car for them at the five o'clock hour. Shara and Jarzen were to be transported to Kleet to dine with the Patrax Master. By the time the young couple finished their lunch, they had exhausted their speculation concerning what Patrax Master Gadric had in store for them. They were certain he had more in mind than just feeding them dinner. Shara and Jarzen were certain; the Patrax Master would try to entice them into accepting his offer; he was leaving nothing to chance.

To Order the entire book just visit my web site: www.robertjacobi.net or your favorite eBook seller; the Jarzen Tadel Series is available almost everywhere eBooks are sold. I am confident you will enjoy all of my books; Thank You, Bob Jacobi.