

## White Pawn To F4

*“Suffering is a universal condition, but the degree to which you suffer is a choice.”*

–Goetic Credo

Tyler waited patiently while their negotiator consulted the General. It wasn't unusual for the military to be both present and active in negotiations, but a high ranking official like the General was a bit unprecedented. Tyler remained calm despite this breach in protocol.

He had never met this negotiator before, but the man seemed similar to all the others he had dealt with: stupid and indecisive. Oh well, it would be over soon, and Tyler could return home for much needed rest. This was his fourth negotiation in as many months, and the travel wore on him.

He was the Chief Negotiator for the Outer Galactic Commonwealth, a collection of systems bound together in a common goal to protect their worlds from the encroachment of an aggressive race known as the Litteran. Their aggression was only eclipsed by their stupidity, but they were fierce in battle and possessed considerably advanced weaponry despite their more primitive disposition.

Many assumed they simply conquered and integrated whatever technology they could find. It was possible a species could adapt and evolve on the backs of others, but no one knew whether this was how the Litteran had operated. They were a mysterious people from unknown origins with unknown purposes.

At one moment they could be the staunchest defenders of free trade and species equity before changing into a maddening swarm bent on genocide. Tyler had dealt with them for over thirty years and still didn't understand them. What did they ultimately want? Galactic domination? Total conquest? It was impossible to discern.

The body he'd inherited was a Yan'quin named Hela Trork. The Yan'quin people had founded the Commonwealth, and their home world was the rightful seat of the Commonwealth Council and Military Protectorate. The Council was governed by chosen representatives from every Commonwealth world with all possessing equal votes.

Individual worlds were governed independently from the Commonwealth, but only within the confines of Commonwealth Law. Some worlds held onto old governmental regimes while others moved to a more democratic form that mirrored the Commonwealth Council.

As he continued to wait, he thought about his home world, Tac'twin, and the famous oceans that occupied so much of its surface. His home in the capital city of Pat'cul sat perched on a cliff overlooking the crashing waves of the Serd Ocean. He shook those thoughts aside as movement from his counterpart signaled a return to the business at hand.

Ironically, they were negotiating for a system neither wanted. The more primitive inhabitants hadn't yet joined the Outer Galactic Commonwealth or been subsumed by the Litteran Empire. Tyler was sent to protect the people, something he found more and more necessary as the Litteran appeared on the brink of a rampage.

As the Chief Negotiator, he was bound by the ethical and moral teachings of the Goctic Credo, a nearly religious tenet created thousands of years earlier by a Yan'quin government determined to end violence and bring peace to a troubled world. Since then, they had spread the Goctic Credo to all the worlds in the Commonwealth, resulting in an upwelling of peace.

He was responsible for the interpretation of the Goctic Credo, allowing changes only as needed for new situations. It was a complex philosophy based on the immutable sanctity of life. Life was to be protected at all costs, encouraging it as necessary, defending it without question.

And so here he sat, waiting for the Litteran negotiator to return to the table so they could protect this new species. The man's name was Nasneth and he was as ignorant as they came. He wasn't versed in the current holdings of either empire, knew nothing about the people whose world they were on, and barely understood the economic ramifications their aggressive moves had caused. Needless to say, the negotiations progressed slowly, and it might be some time before Tyler saw his home by the ocean once again.

His adversary was of medium build, soft features, and insipid eyes. He looked like a cow waiting for someone to tell him which grass to eat. They were a smaller species than the Yan'quin, but possessed incredible strength in their compact forms. Tyler likened them to a cross between an overgrown goat and a salamander.

The salamander face was without hair, but replete with a set of horns curving back to sharp points. Underneath their clothing, the body was covered in a coarse hair similar to that of a goat. Their colors ranged from white, brown, red, and tan—some even mottled. Compared to Yan'quin, they looked like farm animals.

He had to check himself as his thoughts strayed. The Credo was explicit in refusing to label any life based on appearance. Their importance was in their life, not their form. He tried to keep that in mind while he waited. Apparently, the General had received communications that were holding up the proceedings.

Tyler felt relatively secure despite the military presence. He traveled with his entourage of guards, staff, and personal assistants that were a normal part of the Chief Negotiator's world. It was a posh lifestyle, but he didn't begrudge himself the luxury considering the good things he'd accomplished in his short tenure.

Until recently, the balance between the Commonwealth and the Litteran had been easy to maintain. But now, the Litteran deployed a new weapon that no one could figure out was mechanical or biological. They were monstrous creations containing heavy armament and massive shielding to protect whatever was inside. Some said they were a new species while others claimed they were robots. Whichever, they posed a clear and present threat.

One sat idly by the great door of the local palace. It remained motionless as if turned off, and Tyler saw no signs of life. Perhaps it was a robot?

Adanni intruded on his musings. *More likely a combination of the two.*

The alien had selected the Yan'quin world from memories of an earlier time. Back then, they ran an empire consisting of only two systems. Now, the Commonwealth boasted three hundred and ten times more species. With so much behind the Commonwealth, you would think the Litteran would never bother to attack, but they constantly did.

This time, they'd destroyed a cargo ship containing relief for the drought this planet currently experienced. So far, they had provided no reason for the unprovoked

attack, and despite Tyler's pressing, Nasneth wasn't forthcoming. Tyler assumed the man didn't know why they had attacked the ship. That was common for Litteran negotiators—kept in the dark like mushrooms.

Still, sometimes you could get things accomplished despite their stupidity and lack of information. He eyed the General who talked animatedly behind a privacy shield. It didn't matter. If they were going to attack, the General would have left already. Something was happening, but Tyler couldn't figure out what.

*Maybe it is like Jolring?* Adanni offered.

Jolring had been an outer world ready to join the Commonwealth despite a Litteran blockade. Tyler had nearly succeeded in negotiating the withdrawal of the Litteran ships when it all went to pot because a smuggler tried to break through the blockade. Though the smuggler had been destroyed in his ridiculous attempt, the Litteran accused the Commonwealth of espionage because of the incident. Jolring was still recovering.

*Let's hope not.* Tyler replied quietly.

The General finished his communications and walked towards the table, passing Nasneth as if the man didn't exist. "These negotiations are over. I can guarantee safe passage for one hour."

*Damn it, it was Jolring!* Tyler thought desperately, taking the General's words at face value.

*This is one of those times when I don't like being right.* Adanni said.

*Yeah, me too.* Tyler said as he stood from the table to leave.

His guards took up positions around him and were ready to usher him out of the palace by force if necessary.

The monstrous machine by the entrance had come to life and lights illuminated a very real set of weapons suddenly alerted. Tyler hoped no one started to shoot until they were out. The captain of his guard was already signaling the ship to prepare for lift off, but Tyler was afraid they might not make it.

One hour was hardly enough time to ready the ship, board it, and fly into protected space behind their military armada. His staff was already buzzing on communication devices, signaling the rest of the entourage to meet them at the ship. Some might not make it, especially those sent to negotiate with the locals to join the Commonwealth. It would be close.

\* \* \* \*

The gentle vibrations as the ship left the ground filled Tyler with hope they'd made it. It had taken too much time to collect everyone while preparing for their departure, and the General's hour had passed before they lifted above the city.

The Yan'quin ships moved into defensive positions as more Litteran ships appeared out of hyperspace. This was going to get ugly fast, and Tyler didn't want to be around to see the results. He peered out his small window and watched several fighters take up positions alongside his ship. It wasn't much, but better than nothing.

They'd left only one person behind, but the experienced negotiator had assured Tyler he'd be safe under the custody of the local magistrate. Tyler didn't want to lose Pacmur, he was one of the most promising Associate Negotiators he'd trained in years. He was one of the rare ones who managed to survive negotiations with the Litteran, and Tyler hoped this would be another one of those times.

The fighter out Tyler's window suddenly veered off as flashes streaked past the ship from sub-orbital Cruisers. The Captain fired the ship's rockets to blast through the atmosphere into the relative safety of their fleet. They'd been escorted by two destroyers which could be devastating when forced into battle. Their sleek white hulls protruded with a vast array of armaments capable of taking down large vessels nearly twice their size.

A direct hit on their shields rattled the ship as it struggled to find space. The Negotiator's ship was a beautiful vessel with sleek lines, posh interior, and defined its occupants as people of wealth or power. However, its minimal shielding and lack of significant armaments put it at a huge disadvantage in a combat situation.

Additional strikes shook the passengers as the barrage intensified in an awesome display of power. Another direct hit sounded the alarms, but everyone remained calm after years of experience negotiating in conditions such as these. The ship was sturdy, but Tyler calculated it could only withstand a few more direct hits before it succumbed.

*Strange beings, these Litteran.* Adanni said calmly through the hail of fire.

*Just figured that out, did you?* Tyler quipped.

*I understand why Jolring went astray, he observed, but the Litteran didn't even have a blockade here. Strange.*

*I'll make sure to mention that astute observation in my report.* Tyler replied through gritted teeth as another hit tossed the ship temporarily back towards the planet.

Adanni laughed. *You are not nervous, Earthling, are you?*

*Let's just say I feel more comfortable when my feet are on the ground.* Tyler replied as the ship's trajectory flattened, an orange glow from the external engine pods indicating they were still in the upper atmosphere. *Come on!*

Another direct hit, and Tyler was thrown hard against his restraints. The crushing pain shooting through his back. Several others screamed or grunted.

*Only one or two more before we are toast.* Adanni concluded.

*You sound as though you're happy about that!* Tyler accused. *Don't you like this life?*

*While I admit I was the one to pick this destination, Adanni said, I had a very different world in mind.*

*Well, too bad.* Tyler replied sarcastically. *Evolution's a bitch!*

*Indeed!* Adanni agreed.

Suddenly, Tyler was thrown back in his seat as the Captain made a last ditch effort to expend their remaining fuel to reach the safety of the ships. They wouldn't be able to land, but the destroyers were experienced recovering damaged fighters during battle. They were in for a ride.

After what seemed like an eternity, the engines sputtered and gave out. They'd reached a high velocity, and it took them far afield of the enemy fire. The planet dwindled behind them as fighters took up positions around the Chief Negotiator's ship once more. They'd made it. Now they only had to wait for a larger ship to recover their runaway vessel.

Tyler relaxed against his restraints, his hands releasing the arm rests he'd merged with. He winced from the pain in his mid-section, a sure sign of damage from the last blast. It was a small price to pay for life.

*Well, that was the most excitement we've had since Jolring.* Adanni concluded. *Which is why I tire of this life.*

*Sorry to disappoint you, thrill junky, but I am happy where I am.* Tyler said with finality.

He and his Onyalum partner had forged a decent relationship after all the turmoil they'd been through since that fateful day they'd merged together on Earth. Tyler had come to terms with his fate and looked forward to more worlds where he could help in whatever capacity possible.

For the most part, Adanni was willing to sit back and enjoy the ride. On occasion, Tyler turned over control to the alien, especially in tight negotiations. Despite his nefarious background, the Onyalum had a wealth of experience that had helped move them to the position of Chief Negotiator.

In the last thirty years as Hela, Tyler had been a devout study of the Goctic Credo and felt more attuned to its philosophy than any other he'd been exposed to during his unusual life. He understood the Credo inside and out and knew this was why he'd been chosen to assume the position of Chief Negotiator.

He'd even corrected several misleading questions the interviewers had asked about the Credo before he'd been appointed. To this day, he didn't know if the faulty questions had been staged or real, but his correct responses sealed the deal.

He'd taken Hela's life with a desire to disentangle himself from his past. He learned to control his emotions and kept a professional distance between him and those around him. He avoided all forms of personal relationships, even turning down offers of sex from Interns and Acolytes wanting to gain favors. He couldn't blame them for trying and never sought retribution against the misguided youths. Those offers were steadily decreasing as Hela aged.

As always, Tyler's healing powers kept the man youthful, but the stressful lifestyle took its toll, evident every time Tyler looked in a mirror. He loved his new life, and he wasn't going to change it because his alien friend grew bored.

*What do you mean, grew bored?* Adanni mocked.

Tyler ignored him.

\* \* \* \*

As the Chief Negotiator's ship made its final approach into Pat'cul, the capital city of the Outer Galactic Commonwealth, he felt a stirring of homesickness. The metallic spires of the great city glowed brilliant yellow under the afternoon sun, and the effect was like a phoenix fire burning within this seat of power. The Yan'quin home world lived within an outer ring of their galaxy, and its influence had extended many light years in all directions over a thousand years as they exported their democratic ideals, guided by their Goctic Credo.

Tyler looked forward to a much needed soak in his pool sipping the exquisite nectar these people made from a local fruit. It was one of his few indulgences in a life nearly religious in its abstinence.

Since becoming a negotiator, he'd learned hundreds of relaxation techniques to help maintain balance during heated negotiations. He promised himself a round of these before soaking in his luxuriously heated pool overlooking the sparkling blue waters of the ocean. He'd made sure to put off debriefing the Jus'tician, the official ruling body for all negotiators, until after his rest. He could easily send one of the

Associate Negotiators, but considering the severity of the incident, he knew he should be the one to present their failure.

The ship came to a rest, and Tyler heard the satisfying clunk signaling the elevator was dropping them below ground to the gated entrance. Fortunately, as a government ship, they would bypass the usual security prominent within the Commonwealth's most active spaceport.

*Rank has its privileges.* Tyler thought.

*So it does, but you rarely take advantage of them.* Adanni complained. *I hardly think preferred parking is such a great privilege.*

*Fine,* Tyler countered, *you go wait through security with the rest of the beleaguered travelers.*

*If only I could.* Adanni moaned. *How about inviting that promising young Acolyte for dinner? She seemed pretty shaken by the incident—surely sage advice from the exulted Chief Negotiator would put her back on track! You could even show her some new relaxation techniques.*

*Very funny.* Tyler replied. The alien constantly tried to get Tyler into sexual trysts, but Tyler adamantly refused as he remained pure.

*Pure?* Adanni laughed. *After everything you did on Gamel?*

Tyler ignored the bait. *Stop, Adanni, or I might really get upset.*

The Onyalum backed off, but not before issuing a mental whistle as the young acolyte approached. She bowed respectfully before speaking.

"Sir," she began with a quiver, "I am most upset at the results of your negotiations." She paused, searching for others listening to her confession. "I must admit the incident has shaken my sense of purpose."

It was expected with an Acolyte. She was in the final phases of training and needed field experience to prepare her for her first negotiation. Usually, most Acolytes would never face anything more severe than a Commonwealth trade agreement, but she ranked high in her class, landing her this coveted assignment to his team. He was grateful for her honesty.

*Surely, she is coming on to you, Tyler.* Adanni said boldly. *Let's invite her home.*

*Please, stop.* Tyler demanded.

*Suit yourself, but I think you deserve a little R&R after what we went through.*

"Do you have any plans this evening?" Tyler asked the young woman. Despite his innocent intentions, he had to admit she was attractive.

She appeared nervous from the unexpected question. "Uh, no, I guess not, sir."

"Great," Tyler said with a smile, "you will be joining me at my house for dinner tonight. I'll clear it with Lomin."

She smiled impishly, a twinkle in her eyes from the prospect of dining with the Chief Negotiator. "Very well, sir, I look forward to it." She moved away to help the others unload.

*That's what I am talking about!* Adanni said excitedly.

*Stop.* Tyler cautioned. *This is purely professional, I assure you.*

*Hey, whatever helps you sleep at night.* Adanni replied, undeterred. *I am just happy we'll have someone other than you at home. Please say you'll let me have some time with her?*

*We'll see.* Tyler replied. *Perhaps during dinner.*

*And after dinner?* Adanni asked.

*I will take your advice and teach her some relaxation techniques.*

*Hmmmm.* Adanni purred suggestively.

\* \* \* \*

After clearing the dinner with Lomin, the young woman's Associate Negotiator advisor, Tyler returned home with express instructions not to be bothered by anyone, including the Jus'tician. He'd taken care of several personal items before preparing for his dinner with the young Acolyte.

During these later phases in training, it was easy to lose Acolytes after investing so much time and money. Until they became Associate Negotiators, they were not bound to remain in the program and could leave at any time. In fact, a recent look at the data suggested the percentage leaving prior to finishing the program was on the rise. As Chief Negotiator, Tyler didn't appreciate the trend. Perhaps he could persuade her to stay.

He set a fine dinner menu with his chef before researching new relaxation techniques an Acolyte would not have yet seen. Laying the foundations for future negotiators was a responsibility he took seriously. He was the defender of the Goctic Credo and had to ensure it survived for a new generation to take up the fight to protect life.

After consulting the *Bantu Manual of Physical and Mental Exercises*, he located a suitable technique that would bring her back to their side of thinking. Although all the Bantu techniques required the person to be unencumbered by clothing, he felt confident he could maintain a professional distance. She needed strengthening in her resolve, and the Bantu techniques were the most effective for empowering someone.

He quickly showered and finished off his preparations with an elegant robe. He grabbed a glass of the sweet nectar called Hoc'cin and retired to his office where he spent the remaining hours catching up on correspondence. Most he forwarded to his Associate Negotiators with instructions or advice, but a few he addressed himself.

He became lost in his work until his house manager interrupted him with news the young lady had arrived. Tyler thanked him as he finished a last minute note to the Ambassador of Jeallspin about upcoming trade talks. With a final seal from the Chief Negotiator, he fired the note off before leaving the office.

As he entered the living room, an elegantly dressed Mir Aslu bowed deeply. Her beauty was not wasted, and he had to remind himself to keep it professional.

"Please, this is my home and we can dispense with formalities." He grabbed her hand and helped her up from remonstrations. "You may call me Hela and I will call you Mir for the evening."

"Thank you, sir, I mean, Hela." She blushed from the faux pas.

"See," he encouraged her, "it is not as hard as it seems, Mir."

Tyler led her into the dining room where a first course awaited. It was one of the wonderful, cold soups his chef, Pac'wer, was so famous for. Outside cooking for the Chief Negotiator, the man ran a culinary college in the city. It was remarkable Tyler had hired the man at all, but he made sure the Chef was well compensated and had all the freedom to manage his school. With Tyler gone so much of the time, it worked out to everyone's advantage.

He helped Mir into her seat and took his own at the head of the table. She looked nervous by the array of tableware but finally picked the correct soup spoon.

Tyler smiled. "This is one of Pac'wer's most famous soups. He won't even sell the recipe to a conglomerate who has pressured him for years." Tyler took a sip, relishing the exquisite spices and flavors that invaded his palate. *Bravo, Pac'wer!*

"It is incredibly delicious." Mir said as she spooned another bite into her mouth, a small drop dribbling down her chin. She blushed, wiping it with her napkin. "I am so sorry, sir, I have broken protocol with my behavior."

She looked as though she would die from the mistake. He smiled, quickly coming to her rescue. "If this were a formal dinner with heads of state, I might reprimand you. But this is our time, and we mustn't always observe protocol. They are rules to negotiate by, not necessarily rules to live by."

"But my teachers tell me we mustn't forget the teachings of the Credo." She said through tears. "I just can't seem to get into my role, sir."

She wiped her eyes and Tyler took pity. Clearly the instructors were being far too rigorous in their attention to etiquette. Didn't they understand what the practice of Bantu suggested, if not demanded, turning away from the Credo when one was not negotiating?

"I think you are being too hard on yourself, Mir." He offered. "After dinner, I will show you some new Bantu techniques that will help alleviate your fears and concerns. We mustn't be slaves to our work. After all, the Gothic Credo stipulates life is more important than anything else. Let us enjoy our lives tonight, and our work will take care of itself tomorrow."

She smiled, wiping the last tear from her cheek. "You are one of the wisest men I have ever known, Hela, I guess that is why they chose you to be Chief Negotiator."

"Or, maybe it was who I knew." He followed his pun with a wink, and she laughed as she caught on.

The rest of dinner revolved around discussions about school and the current thinking in instruction. She claimed the instructors were far more interested in mechanical memorization of the Credo and techniques without understanding the overall picture in negotiations. Tyler was disturbed by what he heard and was happy he'd invited her to dinner. Apparently the school needed some re-education of its own.

Despite earlier suggestions that Adanni take over during dinner, Tyler held back as he was having a most enjoyable time. Both were laughing at a joke she'd heard at school about a Vak Diplomat and Litteran Negotiator that had them doubled over. By the time they'd undressed for Bantu training, Tyler felt a bond growing between them.

*Keep it professional.* Adanni warned. *I've seen this side of you too many times.*

He ignored the warning but took stock of his emotions. She was attractive, bright, and had a promising future ahead of her. What were his intentions? Was it attraction or simply a desire to watch her succeed? He couldn't be sure after so many celibate years.

He walked her through the various moves and stretches that pulled every fiber of their bodies in ways that caused pain, and through it all, he closely eyed her beautiful body and elegant movements.

Yan'quin were slender, tall creatures with nearly hairless bodies and skin that reminded Tyler of a dolphin's from Earth. They possessed the normal two arms and legs so common in intelligent species, but the feet held no visible digits after evolving over millions of years. As a species, they were over half a billion years old,

and much of the former animal had atrophied. They had four fingers, a thumb, two ears, a tiny nose, and a moderately sized mouth containing a normal complement of teeth.

The skin was a rich tan color, turning slightly white on the abdominal region. They possessed a vestigial ridge along their neck that often stretched to the small of their back. Tyler liked the regal creatures, and watching her bend and stretch did have an impact on his male psyche. He would have to be careful.

He stared into her eyes, a dark color not quite black but not quite brown. She smiled, standing up from the difficult move they'd just completed. Both sweated from the exertions, and the light glistened on her skin in a most dazzling way. He snapped out of his admiration before grabbing towels.

As far as sexual organs went, very little was different between the Yan'quin and humans. The one exception was the lack of mammary glands as Yan'quin reproduced through eggs instead of live birth. It gave males and females a very similar appearance to those outside the species, but standing there naked, his prominent male feature stood out in stark relief.

"Let's retire to my pool and relax. I'll fetch some Hoc'cin to enjoy while we soak."

She nodded, heading to the veranda to wait while he went to the kitchen to fetch a fresh bottle. He felt strange and couldn't suppress the feelings despite Adanni's warnings. Though he continued to ignore the alien, Adanni's words haunted his every move. What were his intentions?

Could he convince her to stay in the program? Perhaps she wanted more from life, and the stress of a negotiator did not appeal to her. She'd excelled at Bantu exercises, so relaxation was not her problem. She obviously was going through that final phase where so many were lost as they truly grasped the new life they were about to undertake.

He poured two glasses and slipped into the pool next to her. "Here, this will help you relax."

"I have been drunk before, Hela." She said with a smile.

"Well, that was not exactly what I meant." He said, concerned.

"I'm sorry," she apologized, "I am assuming too much and forget my place."

He laughed. "No, you haven't." He assured her. "Even the Chief Negotiator has been known to get drunk on occasion. Once, when I was just an Associate, it was with a diplomat from Carachel, and he was trying to hook me up with one of his harem."

"What did you do?" She asked.

"Well," Tyler continued, happy she was focused on the story, "after I pointed out the physical aspects made such a venture nearly impossible, he finally relented."

"They are not built like us?" She asked, surprised.

"Oh, no, they are," he admitted, "but they are about one third our size."

She nodded uncertain before laughing as she took his meaning. "I would imagine that might have placed your negotiations in jeopardy, I mean, had you gone through with it."

"Big jeopardy." He said with a grin, the pun making her laugh once more. "You see, Mir, life as a negotiator does not always have to be strict and professional. Don't get me wrong, one must follow the Credo if one wants to succeed in negotiations, but

not every instance can be covered by the Credo. That is why we take so much time to ensure every Acolyte sees so many negotiations before they try their own.”

“But how do you know when we are ready?” She asked timidly.

“We don’t.” He admitted. “But usually, when an Acolyte tries their first negotiation, they know whether they are ready or not.”

“Watching you and Lomin has been a wonderful experience, and I wouldn’t trade that for the world, even after what happened on Yazu. It’s just, I don’t know, watching you both makes me seem, unworthy.”

He laughed, and she frowned from his outburst. “No, Mir, I am not laughing at you, I am laughing at the fact you came to the same conclusions I did when I was an Acolyte.”

“What do you mean?” She asked, pouting.

“My advisor was one of the greatest negotiators to never be appointed to the Chief Negotiator position. In later years, he claimed he turned down the offer. Anyway, after watching him do so well in negotiations, I felt completely inadequate to the task and nearly quit.” He drained his glass. “But he told me words I will never forget.”

She grew excited by the prospect of learning wisdom from the great one. “What were they?”

Tyler smirked. “He said, there is always another negotiation.”

She looked puzzled. “What does that mean?”

“It means, no matter how much we try, we may not always win, but we will always have another chance. That is the life of the negotiator. Never give up, but never let the failures get you down.”

“You mean like Yazu?” she asked.

“Exactly.” He confirmed. “The Litteran broke those negotiations, and we made the right move leaving as fast as we did. I understood we had lost that round but I am confident we will have another chance. Even now, Pacmur is still working on bringing those people into the Commonwealth. Even if we lost to the Litteran, we may yet win the negotiation.”

“I think I understand.” She said with uncertainty. “Thank you, for inviting me to dinner.”

“I hope you’ll stay a bit longer.” He offered.

“Oh, yes, I would love to.” She said excitedly. “Lomin says I can catch up on my work tomorrow.”

*Good man, Lomin.* Tyler thought happily. He was enjoying a rare opportunity to socialize in a profession that normally demanded protocol. He may be opening the door to more than a professional relationship, but at this point he began to believe it was time to lower his fences.

*You could do worse.* Adanni commented coldly.

They remained in the pool for another hour, listening to the crashing waves below a sky full of stars. The bright glow from the Nembahar Nebula, a leftover from an ancient galactic collision, illuminated the evening sky until it set in the west. It was one of the most relaxing evenings Tyler had enjoyed, and not once had sex come into play. Perhaps there was hope for his salvation.

\* \* \* \*

Breakfast the following morning was bright and cheerful, and Mir admitted she'd slept better than any time since entering the negotiator program. Tyler imagined his luxurious accommodations were better than the awful dorms Acolytes were typically housed in. Still, at this point in her training, she was staying in an Acolyte suite in the downtown area, definitely a step up from the dorms, so he accepted her gratitude humbly.

He'd slept well despite turbulent dreams about making love to Mir. He felt certain it was Adanni getting back at him for the evening he had to watch, but he was still intrigued by the idea.

The two enjoyed a wonderful meal Chef Pac'wer had left for them before the man ran off to attend to his school, and they both ate in silence, reading periodicals to keep up with current events. It was a nice, quiet time, and Tyler had the urge to ask her to move in. Having her around was almost intoxicating, and he fell easily into a pleasant routine by her side. She was not quite half his age, but already showed a remarkable depth of maturity in dealings with his staff.

*You're not talking marriage, are you?* Adanni mocked.

*Don't be silly, I simply like her company.* Tyler countered.

*I am sure you do!* The alien said bitterly.

*Look, Tyler argued, she only has another year as an Acolyte before she is recommended to an Associate position. After that, she could become a permanent part of my staff. After all, Lomin will probably gain Executive Negotiator at his next review, so I will need another Associate to fill his place.*

*And what if he asks her to leave with him and join his staff?* Adanni asked.

*Please, who would she choose?* Tyler rebuked.

*She might surprise you.* Adanni warned.

Tyler had to admit, Lomin was a lot younger and still had a great career ahead of him. It would almost make more sense for her to follow him rather than the top of the top. Then again, if she wanted to learn from the best?

They rode in silence in his automated ground car, a large vehicle connected to the city grid, and he searched wildly for some pretense to have her over again. He knew his schedule would be busy for the next week, but after that he planned on taking personal leave to relax and travel. Would it be appropriate for him to ask her along? Probably not, Acolytes were generally not given personal time during their tenure, and Tyler wondered if this, too, might be cause for the dismal graduation rates. He made a note to discuss it at the next Jus'tician meeting.

Once they arrived at Negotiator Hall, she excused herself while he headed to a debriefing with the Jus'tician about Yazu. They wouldn't appreciate the Litteran betrayal, but would be happy Pacmur was still negotiating on the Commonwealth's behalf. They had a chance.

The negotiator ruling body was comprised of the most senior Negotiators within the field and held the true power. Although the Chief Negotiator was the defender of the Goctic Credo, his only power was a veto against changes that went against the Credo. He was like a Supreme Court, overruling laws instituted by the Jus'tician. Still, it was an amicable relationship, neither overstepping their bounds.

The main difference between his position and the Jus'tician's was he still had to work. He was given a full raft of negotiations to pursue while performing his administrative duties. This was the main reason the Jus'tician was filled with senior members of the profession. Their work schedule was easier. His own predecessor sat

on the Jus'tician, and it was a great relief to have someone who'd been in his shoes sitting judgment.

He briefly met with his staff, a pang of regret Mir was not there, before heading to the Jus'tician Chambers. They would be completing the morning roster and would be ready for refreshments and private meetings with the Chief Negotiator.

As he walked down the flights to the underground facility, another relaxation technique he learned long ago, he thought through what he would tell them. He didn't know why things had fallen apart on Yazu, but he was certain it had nothing to do with the General. Clearly, someone else had pulled the plug on the proceedings, but why and who?

No one really knew anything about the command structure of the Litteran, so it was difficult to know who sat on top, if anyone. For all they knew, they could be a loosely affiliated association of individual military groups and this was why they changed their minds so often. It would be hard to pull all the separate bands together to form a cohesive policy towards the Commonwealth. Still, they didn't really know and maybe there was a single entity behind the actions. *A stupid entity!* Tyler thought bitterly.

He pulled wisdom from the Gothic Credo and tried to surmise the real motivations behind the Litteran. Was it possible they thrived on chaos? Maybe they grew bored during peaceful times and were looking for ways to shake things up. The odd thing was their actions rarely resulted in direct benefit to their own empire. They would stand strong for minimal gains while willingly giving up great resources or tactical advantages. This was why they were considered stupid by most within the Commonwealth. Deadly, yes, and stupid.

He entered the Jus'tician Chambers to salutes from the decorative guards in the corridor and took his rightful seat overlooking the circular table of the Jus'tician. They were just finishing review of a new piece of legislation and were about to dismiss the young negotiator who had presented it. Tyler pulled up the legislation on his viewer and looked it over.

It was a proposal to lift the ban on bribes during certain forms of negotiations. Many of the worlds within the Commonwealth operated under such exchanges of personal goods and services, but it was banned for negotiators to use such techniques. They could offer trade concessions of property or rights, but they were forbidden to bribe the negotiating party personally. It was a good ethic to retain, and Tyler felt certain the Jus'tician would deny the proposal like so many times in the past.

The Executive Negotiator who petitioned them bowed formally before leaving the chambers, completing the last of the morning roster. They would briefly break before getting down to business.

Tyler nodded to several members as they stood and stretched. Not everyone on the Jus'tician or in the negotiator field was Yan'quin. In fact, a larger percentage of their new recruits came from other worlds and species. To date, the Jus'tician was composed of fifty percent Yan'quin and fifty percent other species within the Commonwealth. Some Yan'quin found this disturbing, especially since their home world had created the Commonwealth, but Tyler found such ideas racially biased. Still, many Yan'quin youth spurned the very organization that made their way of life possible.

Tyler watched the procession of onlookers and press leaving the chambers as a tight-knit group of military advisors marched in, taking seats around the Jus'tician table. He eyed one individual in particular, a man he'd never seen attend these debriefings. Something about the way he looked disturbed Tyler, and it took a moment before he realized the man was intelligence.

You could never miss them in a crowd of military types. While most in the Military Protectorate were commanding and austere, the intelligence types rarely looked directly at you but always around as though something was about to happen that only they knew about. It was obvious the man was one of them.

As a negotiator, he hated the need to work so closely with the Protectorate Intelligence Office, but knowledge was power in negotiations, and they needed all the power they could muster. More than once, the Protectorate had provided vital information that had made the difference between peace and war. They were a necessary evil, but Tyler bridled with past memories of Poolto that flew in the face of the Goctic Credo.

The Protectorate was no different. They did not follow the Goctic Credo and were ready to do battle at the drop of a hat. In their minds, the best negotiations started with tactical advantage. After that, it was an easy matter to subdue the opposing party into seeing your way. It was a strange carryover from an earlier age of Yan'quin empires, but one they had come to terms with.

Tyler took his eyes off the man as Sherla Tre approached his vaulted seat.

"Hela, so good to have you back." She smiled warmly.

Tyler loved Sherla, she was a voice of reason in any situation, and though her calm demeanor seemed almost inappropriate for a negotiator, it was that same demeanor that had made her one of the most successful negotiators on the Jus'tician. She was warm, sweet, and always brought a smile to any negotiation, and it was this disarming charm that helped her win arguments. In fact, most on the Jus'tician wouldn't decide something until Sherla weighed in on the issue.

"Exulted Negotiator," Tyler bowed his head, "your beauty still inspires."

She smiled. "I guess some of me must have worn off on you." They laughed.

"I was most disturbed by the incident on Yazu." She said in a low voice. "In fact, the military is here to brief us on other troubling events that have been unfolding. It is most wonderful you have returned home, Chief Negotiator, I sense real trouble building."

"You fear the Litteran will rampage?" He asked quietly, happy the press was gone.

She grimaced. "Or worse."

She walked away for a much needed break and Tyler sat back wondering about her ominous words. What could be worse? Galactic war? A rampage usually entailed skirmishes along the borders between the empires, but full out war brought most of the Commonwealth under the threat of invasion. Would it actually come to that? With the Litteran, anything seemed possible.

He knew many in the military warned the skirmishes were nothing more than ongoing tests of the defenses of the Commonwealth, and that ultimately, the Litteran wanted nothing more than total domination. If that were true, then Pacmur might never return from Yazu. Suddenly, Tyler realized how lucky he truly was to escape. He eyed the intelligence officer one more time and wondered. What would they reveal?

It took a while longer before everyone settled down and proceedings got underway. There was no delay as they looked to the Chief Negotiator to divulge what had happened on Yazu. Tyler obliged, outlining everything about the negotiations, omitting nothing. He even put forth his theory the General had been acting on external orders, and the Jus'tician looked at each other knowingly after this admission.

"What is it?" Tyler asked, confused by their reaction. "You know something?"

Deft Kinenen, Leader of the Jus'tician, fielded the question. "What does the name Daneshan mean to you, Chief Negotiator?"

Tyler dug through memories but drew a blank. "Nothing. Should it?" He asked.

Deft nodded to the military contingency. "We'll let them explain."

The new intelligence officer Tyler had eyed earlier stood to approach the Jus'tician. "Good afternoon, Exulted Negotiators, Chief Negotiator, I am Adjudicon First Rank Monfa Auta of the Protectorate Intelligence Office. The name Daneshan has become a common term recovered in intercepted Litteran communications we've deciphered. We currently do not know whether this is a person, an entity like the Council, or a planetary system. However, considering the nature of the communications intercepted, we believe this to be the power behind most, if not all, of the Litteran actions.

Tyler's eyes grew wide. "So there is something behind them." He agreed.

"We now believe so, Chief Negotiator, but we still cannot determine what or who it is." Adjudicon Auta replied crisply.

"And on Yazu?" Tyler asked.

The young officer looked nervous, but finally answered. "Yes, the name was intercepted, Chief Negotiator."

*Interesting.* Tyler thought. *A leader among the fools.*

*Fools that have consistently kicked your butts.* Adanni reminded him.

"And why is this just now being revealed to the Chief Negotiator? This is vital information that may have helped us numerous times." He scowled at the military advisors who remained distant while ignoring the question.

The young officer answered. "Until Yazu, Chief Negotiator, we just weren't certain of the intelligence. It would have been woefully wrong to have misled you before we really knew."

Tyler liked the young man's brashness, but he was missing the point. "You do not make that decision, I do. You give us all the intelligence you have, and the negotiators decide whether it is pertinent or not." The young man bristled from the admonition, but remained silent. "What other information has been withheld?" Tyler demanded.

"Hela, please." Exulted Negotiator Kinenen urged. "Getting upset will not serve our purpose."

Tyler knew the man was right, but he didn't like being left in the dark. He thought about all those negotiators in the field right now who might be at risk because they didn't know this vital piece of datum. He would make sure they found out. "Very well, what else do you have to report?" He asked the young officer.

"Nothing at this time, Chief Negotiator." Adjudicon Auta said as he resumed his seat.

Tyler scowled. It had always been a tenuous relationship between negotiators and the Protectorate. Military types could be so distrustful. “Where does this leave us?” He asked the Jus’tician.

Sherla spoke, her calm voice soothing ruffled feathers. “It leaves us hoping our Chief Negotiator can find the truth about Daneshan before peace is destroyed forever.”