

## LET THE GAMES BEGIN

A burst of laser fire scorched the wing of the Glieseian spacecraft as it made its retreat. The two Glieseians inside the craft breathed a collective sigh of anxiety just before their communication system crackled to life.

“I know you two under-bodied, oversized-brainiacs can hear me, probably without this comm setup,” Haa-Ringg growled. “If you think you’re lucky I missed you with those laser shots, think again! Those were warnings. Come poking around our planet again, and we’ll vaporize you.” Zerpall, the ship’s pilot, stole a glance at Mxpan, his Supervisor, in the seat beside him. Mxpan’s two large eyes stared straight ahead, oblivious to the pilot’s action. Zerpall skillfully manipulated the ship’s controls with his tiny, trunk-like arms, replacing the random zigzag pattern he had been employing during their escape with a more direct trajectory toward his home planet.

“If you, or any of your brainiac buddies, return to Tau Ceti, rest assured there will be no close misses of the craft in which *they will die*, vaporized in the vacuum of space, with no survivors to mourn the loss of their pitiful lives! Remember, *we have your DNA!*”

There was a sharp click. Sepulchral silence crept in and filled the void.

“*I don’t think our mission ended well,*” Zerpall offered after what he felt to be an appropriate interlude.

“*Your gift of understatement is legendary,*” Mxpan retorted. “*Why did you have to insult the leader’s companion?*”

Mxpan and Zerpall were from the planet known on Earth as *Gliese 581g*. The actual name of the alien planet transliterates at best from Glieseian as U77amed M\*\*n. The native population of *Gliese581g* is known around the Milky Way and neighboring galaxies as Glieseians—after the star that holds their planet in place. Telepathy is their preferred method of communication. Vocalizing thoughts, while possible, is considered primitive and far too slow.

“*How was I supposed to know that public comments on the physical characteristics of females are taboo on Tau Ceti? I was experiencing an unfamiliar emotional state at the time,*” Zerpall telepathed. “*I honestly thought—*”

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*“Everyone knows what you thought!”* the companion interrupted. *“How long will we be assigned as a team before you learn to filter thoughts before you broadcast them as auditory communication?”*

*“It was partly due to the strange libations served and partly due to a previously unknown brain chemical released in my cortex,”* Zerpall explained. *“Without prior experience with that chemical . . . On another note, before that incident, I thought our visit had been productive, didn't you?”*

*“Shut up and drive!”* was Mxpan's final retort.

# TAU CETI

## 126 Days Earlier

*“When you arrive at Tau Ceti, be certain that you immediately transmit the code programmed into your autopilot system to the Commander of the Planetary Defense Array.”* Overseer Fugz's delivered his telepathic communication with the strongest emphasis possible. It wasn't that he lacked trust in Mxpan and Zerpall—well, maybe that was part of the reason—but he had learned to emphasize standard protocols before sending any survey team to their destination.

*“Understood, Overseer.”* Twin bursts of neurologic energy arrived in The Overseer's consciousness as one.

The trip to Tau Ceti was without incident. Although nearly four light-years from Gliese, Mxpan and Zerpall made the trip in less than five months thanks to the Glieseians' advanced plasma propulsion system and their manipulation of the space-time continuum through constructs of physics known only to the Glieseians. The survey craft entered the two-planet solar system slightly before the agreed-upon date of arrival.

*“Lower all shielding and reduce all propulsive devices to zero thrust!”* the command from the Tau Cetian Defense Department echoed through the small bridge in the spacecraft.

*“We should transmit the code programmed into our autopilot system now,”* Mxpan telepathed. Because Zerpall had much more highly developed muscular coordination than his Supervisor, he always assumed the role of pilot on their missions. Mxpan was left filling the roles of navigator and communications officer. However, the hierarchy during travel between mission locations was short-lived. Mxpan regained his dominant, supervisory position in the partnership upon arrival at the assigned destination, an action he made at the first possible moment.

*“Let me respond audibly,”* Zerpall telepathed. *“They will be expecting that.”*

*“Very well.”*

“This is Zerpall, piloting a Glieseian survey craft. Our arrival is expected.”

**“Power down! Now! Or we will fire upon your craft!”**

“But you don't understand—”

A massive burst of energy that crippled its propulsion system truncated Zerpall's attempt at reasoning. In less than a second, the Glieseians were drifting helplessly in space.

“*You might want to send the code now,*” Mxpan suggested with his Glieseian tongue firmly in cheek.

“*I can't,*” Zerpall responded.

“*Why?*”

“*We've lost all outgoing transmission capability. However, it appears as though we can still receive incoming messages. I find myself impressed by the sophistication of the Tau Cetian technology,*” Zerpall telephated.

**“Prepare to be towed,”** the command from the military craft reverberated through the cabin.

Before the Glieseians could fire a thought between them, an attractive force began pulling the survey craft towards an enormous, at least in comparison to the survey craft, militaristic-looking ship. The observers sat as rigidly as possible while their ship was drawn through a huge hatch into a looming space dock.

“*Remember, we are here to view the impact of our technological assistance in improving Tau Ceti's defense capabilities against marauding pirates,*” Mxpan shot to Zerpall. Milliseconds later, the airlock door between the space dock and the vacuum of space slid into place, and the environmental systems restored a semblance of atmosphere to the docking area.

“*If our arrival and capture is indicative of their defense system, I'd say Tau Ceti is safe from any threat in this sector of the galaxy.*”

The hissing sound of their exit hatch opening startled both observers. They swung their oversized heads in the direction of the noise.

“I hope you didn't mind our technological display,” a stern-looking Tau Cetian officer said as she stepped through the door. “Oh, forgive me. You are the Glieseian observers we've been expecting, are you not?”

“We are observers,” Mxpan conceded. “I was impressed by how easily you disabled our propulsion system. Overall, I must say that your demonstration was very—”

“Impressive!” Zerpall blurted his way into the conversation. “Would you say that your new, um . . . I’m sorry, but I don’t know what to call your technology.”

“We call it Full-spectrum Anti-antagonist Immobilization Treatment.”

“That is a bit much,” Mxpan offered. “What is the short version?” He had analyzed enough planetary system transmissions to know that all military entities thrive on acronyms. (All relevant acronyms are provided in English for ease of readability.)

“FAIT. Pronounced like 'fate,' our word for the destiny of the vessel it controls.”

“If I may get back to my question,” Zerpall said. “Would you say that this system was the result of Glieseian technological assistance?”

The Tau Cetian flinched. The twitch of a grimace flashed across her facial features. Mxpan saw his subordinate had hit a nerve.

“What my partner is asking is if any of our suggestions might have been beneficial in creating the successful research pathway to your FAIT. Which, I might add, you have dramatically proven to be both successful and efficient . . . I am sorry, I did not get your name.”

“I appreciate the clarification,” was the emotionless acceptance of Mxpan's words. “I am Security Officer Haa-Ringg. My assignment is to accompany you to our planet's surface. Follow me.”

As the escort strode away, the two Glieseians took note of the speed at which the bipedal female moved. As quickly as possible, they released their safety harnesses and began the laborious extractions from their seats.

Physical movement was not Glieseians' forte. On any given day, Glieseians infrequently move more than ten to twenty meters by use of their own ambulatory systems. Their body composition is nearly sixty percent brain tissue, tightly packed into a cranial cavity and covered with a transparent bone case that allows others to view the size and number of convolutions of the brain inside that cranial cavity. Cranial convolution counting is a major social-status-determining ritual among the Glieseians, with “What's your C3?” a common question among friends.

So important is protecting the brain tissue that the facial features of the Glieseians evolved over the millennia into a mask-like covering. Made of material akin to the beak of predatory animals on other planets, the faceplate allows only minimal movement and atrophied facial expressions. The trade-off for the loss of emotional expression is maximum protection for the trillions of neurons behind it.

In direct opposition to their intellectual might, the remainder of the Glieseian anatomy consists of tiny, trunk-like arms with the three jointed fingers at the end. The appendages originate in a ring-like “body” that morphs into a slime-lubricated foot. It is the foot, located ridiculously near the base of the “skull” that is used as a mode of ambulation. Essentially, a Glieseian looks like a one-meter long slug hauling the half-a-meter tall head of a highly intelligent organism around.

Generations of selective breeding on the home planet produced a race whose method of motility consists of sliding across surfaces on a layer of viscous fluid. Fortunately, after centuries of slime-tracked living spaces, that selective breeding process combined with advanced genetic engineering succeeded in producing a lubricating secretion that oxidized quickly and left no trail of evidence. The disappearance of the slime trail without residue proved invaluable to Glieseians as they visited other planetary systems.

At a thought command from the occupant, the seat in which each Glieseian sat lowered itself until the cushion was level with the deck of the survey ship. The two began the long slither across the bridge to the door of the craft. Before they were halfway to the portal, their Tau Cetian greeter had returned to see what was causing the delay. She recovered her composure at the sight of the two mollusk-like observers. She wasn't quick enough.

“Do not fear us, Security Officer Haa-Ringg,” Zerpall said. “We have certain physical limitations,” he said, pointing one digit of a tentacle-like arm at his slimy foot. He then gave a very weak flex of his upper arm that brought the flicker of a smile to the Tau Cetian. “However, you may rest assured that our mental capacities function at a level at least ten orders of magnitude beyond our bodies.”

“What my colleague is trying to say is this: while we are slow movers, we are quick-thinkers.” Mxpan hurried the conversation along before Zerpall could say anything else that might be misconstrued.

The Tau Cetian soldier was visibly uncomfortable, but she refused to allow her discomfort to interfere with her duties.

“How are you at using stairs?” she asked.

“Perhaps you have a longer pathway comprised of ramps?” Mxpan asked delicately after shooting, *Be quiet! Never admit shortcomings!*” into Zerpall's brain.

“I'm afraid ramps are not an option. If you can make it down three steps, we can take an elevator to the bridge.”

“I'm sure we can accomplish that,” Mxpan said with far more bravado than belief. He nodded to Zerpall, and the pair started across the gangway from the ship's hatch to the catwalk that surrounded the docking area.

*“At the steps, you turn around and grab my hands,”* Mxpan telepathed. *“I will help you ease down the first level. Turn around and face away from the step. I will follow you down by easing into the back of your head. You slide forward slowly until I am on the tread behind you.”*

*“That's a great plan!”*

Mxpan's only response was silence. There was no further communication by voice or telepathy until they reached the steps.

Part one of the plan went off without a hitch. It took only seconds until Zerpall rested on the tread below the gangplank level. Part two was anything but flawless.

As Mxpan leaned into the back of Zerpall's head, Zerpall began slithering forward as planned. However, he soon discovered that the depth of the tread was only about half of what was required for two Glieseians to occupy one behind the other.

When he reached the edge of the step, before he could alter his course or relay his predicament, Zerpall cascaded down the remaining two stairsteps followed closely by Mxpan who ended his trip down the stairs perched unceremoniously on the entire left side of Zerpall's face.

Both Glieseians were mortified. Haa-Ringg snorted a smothered laugh. The good news was that the stairsteps were behind them in their journey to the bridge of the sentinel ship. They continued to the elevator and soon found themselves in the presence of the entire Command Crew.

“Security Officer Haa-Ringg reporting with detainees!” the female escort of the Glieseians to the bridge barked after snapping to attention.

“As you were, Lieutenant,” the ship's captain replied. She looked past her security officer at the Glieseians and continued, “I am Captain Ell-Nogg. Please accept my explanation for your unconventional arrival protocol. The plan to demonstrate the level of our preparedness in such a dramatic manner was a joint effort of our governmental and military leadership. The plan was flawlessly executed by my crew and myself. We thought it was the best way to introduce you to the advancements made to our planetary defense systems since your last visitation.”

“I must admit that we are indeed impressed by the level of sophistication to which you have raised your system. How much of the progress, if I might ask, do you attribute to our technological assistance?”

There was another awkward pause as the Tau Cetians cast furtive glances at one another. Finally, Captain Ell-Nogg gave a quasi-answer.

“I'd rather not speculate on that. It is a better question for the lead scientists and governmental officials you will be meeting in the morning.”

“Thank you,” Mxpan spoke, while simultaneously telepathing to Zerpall, *“I am concerned with the direction of this conversation. That was an obvious attempt to sidestep my question.”*

“I agree,” Zerpall inadvertently audibilized his response.

Mxpan rolled his eyes and shook his head ever so slightly. Ell-Nogg's confused expression at Zerpall's interjection was enough to convince him that his partner hadn't blurted out something that would be difficult to explain—at least not yet.

“Shall we proceed to the surface now?” Mxpan queried.

“Um . . . I mean, of course! Helm, take us to the spaceport. Half orbital speed.”

“As you command!” the helmswoman responded crisply. She entered a code into her workstation. The ship reacted instantly.

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After a night spent in rooms hastily retrofitted for the Glieseian physique and a breakfast of some nearly tasteless pasty material, two drone diplomatic aides picked up Mxpan and Zerpall—literally—with a cart. The brawny drones were all males whose only non-physical labor value was limited by Potentate edict centuries early. Common in various species throughout the galaxy, drones ensured continued genetic diversity as mates for female Tau



Cetians in all social strata. Wheeling the Observers into the elevator, across the hotel lobby, and into a waiting surface vehicle was the societal norm for drone participation in all circumstances.

*"I observed what appears to be sexual dichotomy among the ruling Tau Ceti population,"* Zerpall telepathed as they entered the transport vehicle. Glieseians are asexual beings who donate stem cells from a nondescript body organ to be grown into a clone. Alternately, the chromosome number of the donated cells could be reduced and replaced by an equal amount of a donor's genetic material.

*"As did I. The ruling portion is female. In dichotomous civilizations, females are responsible for providing unfertilized reproductive cells of some size. Known as eggs, they are most commonly ejected from the female reproductive organs at some point in the reproductive process. Procreation is completed when a male sex cell, a sperm fertilizes, unites with the egg."*

*"I'm glad Glieseians don't work like that!"*

*"My research indicates that we did reproduce via that form of procreation."*

*"Am I a male or a female?"* Zerpall asked.

*"You are neither. Our medical scientists of the past easily isolated the genes required for such activity eons ago."*

*"And removed them,"* Zerpall concluded.

*"Hardly,"* Mxpan responded. *"Even today, geneticists are unsure of the limits of any gene in an organism. The possible combinations of genes approach infinite in number. The genes in question were rendered latent."*

*"Someday, those latent genes could express themselves again."*

*"Don't stay awake worrying about that. It won't happen in our lifetimes. Focus on the task at hand."*

*"Roger that!"*

Partly because of the observers' telepathic discussion of sex, there was little small talk on the way to the meeting between the Glieseians and the Tau Ceti hierarchy. Mxpan and Zerpall telepathed about the deferential attitude of the Tau Cetian drones in all their interactions with non-drones of either race. The lack of discourse ended when the surface vehicle arrived at the designated meeting site.

*"This is an odd location for our meeting,"* Zerpall offered.

*“My thoughts exactly. This appears to be a military weapons facility.”*

“Greetings, Glieseian Observers,” was the salutation by a short but distinguished-looking female. “I am Gii-Hall, Planetary Potentate. I hope your accommodations were adequate.”

“Perfectly fine.”

“That’s good to hear. You are probably wondering what we are doing at a military firing range.”

Both Glieseians made gestures of assent.

“Let me introduce you to Roo-Lutt, the Officer of Rank in our military. She is better equipped to explain what we have planned than a politician such as myself.” With that, the woman gestured towards a perfect specimen of Tau Cetian military leadership.

The woman, who moved in their direction gracefully but purposefully, appeared to have been chiseled from a large, pale-green gemstone. Musculature, where visible, was precisely defined. The cut and fit of her uniform accentuated her status. Completing the militaristic vision was a rifle-like device she carried like a hunter might carry a shotgun.

“While I can't say I am glad to meet you, I do understand your interest in our technology and appreciate the personal attention we're receiving.” The voice echoed without acoustical assistance. There was no doubt that Officer of Rank Roo-Lutt was in charge of the event.

“First, I need your permission—no, let me rephrase that; I would like your permission to use something personal of yours in our demonstration.”

*“What could she be asking for?”* Zerpall flashed.

*“I am convinced that we will have to agree to her request to find out,”* Mxpan telepathed back. He then responded vocally to Rank Roo-Lutt. “Might I ask to what item you are referring?”

“I do apologize. It’s not an item. But it is *personal*. We collected DNA samples from your rooms and amplified them while you ate breakfast and traveled here this morning. We want to use your DNA samples as part of the scenario today.”

“I can think of no reason to deny that request,” Mxpan said. And that was true. Even with his immense mind processing at full capacity, he could think of no reason why his DNA would be of any value in any demonstration a military leader might be planning or any reason for denying its use.

“Excellent!” Roo-Lutt tapped a small device on her shoulder. “Proceed with the test setup.”

“Affirmative!” crackled back through the speaker on the communicator.

As the small crowd watched, males in electric carts hauled dozens of one-quarter scale spacecraft of various designs into the center of the large field before them. There seemed to be no pattern to the arrangement—spacing was irregular, apparently random. When the last soldier left the area, a command from Roo-Lutt activated some form of propulsive system, presumably in the spacecraft—they rose in unison then hovered at various distances above the surface of the landing area. A second command brought the fleet back to rest on the ground.

“Each Observer, please select one miniature in my fleet as your personal vessel,” the Officer of Rank directed. “Do not inform me which ship you choose.”

“I have made my choice,” Mxpan informed Roo-Lutt.

“As have I,” Zerpall said.

“Thank you. Now, if you would be so kind as to take these replicas—” The Officer of Rank stopped herself. There was no way either of the two Glieseians would be able to manipulate the mannequins into place in the ship they had chosen. Even if they worked together, the task she was requesting was insurmountable.

“Please don’t be offended,” Roo-Lutt said. “I seem to have committed a tactical blunder. I need the mannequins containing your DNA samples loaded into the ships you chose. Through no fault of your own, you are not able to complete that task.”

“If I might have a bit more reasoning for this requirement, I will be able to generate a solution to this situation that will be acceptable,” Mxpan responded without expression.

*Arrogant little mollusk*, the military, and civilian leaders thought to themselves. They were fortunate that without permission or knowledge of the precise frequency of the low beta waves of any species, Glieseians were incapable of reading another's thoughts. What they were unaware of was the deadly accuracy of Mxpan's conclusion—he could, in minimal time, devise a solution to any predicament.

“Gunnery Sergeant Suu-Plorr, explain the demonstration. Contact me after the mannequins are in place in all the miniatures,” Roo-Lutt ordered as she strode back to her bunker.

“As you command!” When the high-ranking dignitaries were gone, the gunnery sergeant went on. “A single mannequin will be loaded into each of the ships you see. The original intent was that only you would be aware of the vessels you had chosen. However, it will be enough that only you and I know which ships contain your DNA.”

“You have placed significant emphasis on our genetic material,” Zerpall said. “Will all the mannequins have equal amounts of DNA loaded into them?”

This question produced a puzzled look in reply from Suu-Plorr.

“I am assuming this test is a demonstration of the effectiveness of some piece of technology you developed to locate a specific DNA sample.”

The Tau Cetian gave a terse nod of agreement.

“Unless our samples are among a group of samples of equal size, your test results will be invalid because the protocol will be seriously flawed.”

“What my colleague is attempting to communicate is the necessity for only a single variable in your experiment,” Mxpan interjected. He could see that Zerpall’s choice of words, although accurate, was causing their hostess to take offense.

“Wait here!” Suu-Plorr moved away from the pair. She flipped open a belt-mounted communication unit and began a conversation when she was outside their range of hearing.

*“What are they going to do?”* Zerpall telepathed Mxpan.

*“I wish I knew. It appears as though they might have developed a technology capable of distinguishing one individual’s DNA over a distance,”* Mxpan shot back.

*“If true, that would be a considerable accomplishment.”*

*“That it would,”* Mxpan agreed. *“Although I am not sure of the value of that ability beyond search and rescue operations.”*

*“Or perhaps to identify a fugitive in a crowd or a kidnapped child,”* Zerpall responded.

*“All possibilities. Wait! Our docent returns.”*

It was fortunate for Mxpan that Suu-Plorr could not read the thoughts of another, or she might have regretted his descriptor of her.

“Our science team agrees with your assessment of the situation,” the Tau Cetian said. “We will be loading all mannequins with DNA samples of similar size to yours. Will that be acceptable?”

“Of course,” Mxpan agreed. “And thank you. I believe we interrupted your description of what the purpose of this demonstration is. Please, resume your explanation.”

“Once we have all the mannequins loaded into ships, Officer of Rank Roo-Lutt will return and commence the demonstration of the weapon itself.”

“Weapon?” Zerpall choked out. The idea of attending a weapons demonstration had never entered his mind.

“We were unaware of the use of technology we provided in weapon development,” Mxpan managed. “This is most irregular!”

“I don't know where the basis of this technology originated. I know that we intended to demonstrate this weapon for you since your Planetary Leadership informed our Planetary Potentate of your visit. I'm unaware of any restrictive agreements.”

“Since we are here, and you have gone to a significant amount of work in preparing this demonstration, we will acquiesce to your decision.” Mxpan turned and scanned the field of spacecraft. “I choose what appears to be a model of a Rigelian scout ship for my DNA sample.”

“Thank you. And your choice?” the sergeant asked Zerpall.

“If I might, I would like my DNA in any one of the several Tau Cetian ships currently resting on the turf.”

“Any one of them?” the sergeant asked.

“That is correct,” Zerpall acknowledged.

“Why? Why select one of our ships?”

“I am interested in the purpose of mannequins in miniatures of spacecraft. You might consider what I am doing as testing a hypothesis of my own,” Zerpall explained.

The Glieseians watched as the sergeant commanded a drone to place their mannequins into the respectively chosen ships. Then she directed a total of three drones to load mannequins containing Tau Cetian DNA into the remaining ships.

“We’ll be leaving now. I have no desire to be present when the Officer of Rank returns or when the demonstration is occurring.” The first drone announced as the last mannequin was loaded.

*“There is something odd about this society,”* Zerpall transmitted.

*“If you mean the two distinctly different castes, I would have to agree,”* Mxpan shot back.

“Are you satisfied now with the pre-demonstration conditions?” Roo-Lutt more demanded than asked. Although startled, the two Glieseians easily maintained outward composure. The only indication of surprise was the cessation of the observers' telepathic conversation.

“I am satisfied that our requests have been acted upon favorably. Thank you. Since I am unaware of the procedure planned during your demonstration, I am not willing to admit that I am satisfied that the modifications are adequate.”

“Fair enough. But, by the heavens, you are a tough sell!”

“I am known on Gliese for my abilities to sense what might be an acceptable position before entering—”

“—just about anything in his life!” Zerpall finished for his Supervisor.

“No one attempts to argue with a request from Mxpan about what are acceptable conditions for, or actions to be taken in a situation.”

Despite his irritation with Zerpall for interrupting, Mxpan could not stop the semblance of a smile of agreement from creasing his facial features. His subordinate was accurate in his conclusion.

The look on Roo-Lutt’s face was enigmatic. Mxpan chose to take the high ground and consider her a convert to believe in his abilities.

“Clear the area!” the Officer of Rank barked into her communicator.

“All personnel in the weapon's range prepare for the commencement of demonstration of the Specific Genetic Material Targeting System.” An electronically distorted voice blared commands from an unseen PA system. “Report to assigned bunkers immediately! I repeat: Report to assigned bunkers immediately!”

All visible Tau Cetians scampered to bunkers lining the outer edge of the large field. Last to move were Roo-Lutt, Gunnery Sergeant Suu-Plorr, and the Glieseians. They moved as quickly as Mxpan and Zerpall could manage to an

isolated bunker of significantly larger size than the others. As they approached, Zerpall noticed the thickness of its walls and windows.

“This bunker appears to be a bit more robust than the rest of the shelters.”

“Standard protocol for all dignitaries, both on and off-planet, includes housing them in our ultra-secure shelter for any weapon demonstration,” Suu-Plorr explained. “Planetary Potentate Gii-Hall and her aides have been inside since she left us earlier.”

“A wise precaution,” Mxpan said. Then he flashed to Zerpall, “*This is beginning to concern me more and more. What are they afraid of?*”

“Observers, if you would be so kind as to allow my aide-de-camp to assist you onto the ledge just below the windows, you will have a much better view from that vantage point.”

Although their dignity was a bit ruffled by being hoisted onto the ledge by a pair of sturdy soldiers, the end result was an excellent view of the entire field.

“How did you accomplish this panoramic visual effect?” Mxpan asked.

“Normally, that would be a proprietary secret of our opticians,” Gii-Hall answered. “However, we will be happy to show you the production facility later in your visit. We are quite proud of our advancements in manufacturing techniques.”

“Most gracious of you,” Mxpan said. “Rest assured that the process will remain an exclusive proprietary secret of Tau Ceti.”

“Unless you might consider licensing it to Gliese,” Zerpall added.

“*You cannot offer that option!*” Mxpan blasted into Zerpall’s cerebral cortex with enough volume that the subordinate’s head jerked slightly at the impact.

“Perhaps we might open some discussions with your leadership in the future,” Gii-Hall said. Mxpan relaxed a bit—it was clear that the Tau Cetians were not inclined to share their process.

“What is the optical flash brilliance your eyes can tolerate without damage to your photoreceptors?”

The question was unexpected and caught Mxpan in mid-thought.

Undeterred, Zerpall answered. “We have a light dampening eyelid and rapid recovery photochromatic pigments in our eyes. We can withstand a

flash of immense intensity—essentially any flash short of one equal to directly gazing into a nuclear reactor during fission is tolerable.”

“If you would provide us with details on the protocol for this test, we would be able to provide you with more accurate information.” Mxpan tried again to discover what secret the Tau Cetians were preparing to unveil.

“All in due time, Observer. All in due time,” Roo-Lutt promised. She directed her aide-de-camp, “Distribute protective eyewear to all in the bunker.”

“As you command!”

Male assistants distributed curved strips of tinted material. While the Tau Cetians affixed their eye protection to their heads, the same two soldiers who hoisted the Glieseians up to the ledge pulled the coverings over the observers' eyes and pulled the attached strap tight enough to keep them from sliding off their nearly flat faces.

“No need to take unnecessary chances, Observers. Can you see well enough with the lens in place?”

“Thank you for your concern on our behalf. These eye coverings will be adequate.”

“Gunnery Sergeant Suu-Plorr, commence the countdown to the demonstration. Broadcast to all bunkers and external area personnel!”

“As you command! The demonstration of the SGMETS will begin in fifteen seconds from my mark. Recheck protective eyewear. Launch the miniature fleet!”

At the command from the sergeant, the scale-model vessels rose in near unison and hovered in place at various distances above the ground.

“Fifteen seconds from . . . Mark!” the sergeant called out.

Both Glieseians stared intently out the bunker's window. The fifteen seconds seemed to stretch into fifteen minutes. Suddenly a sound, not unlike a giant cork escaping from a bottle of champagne, exploded through the weapons testing site. So closely did the intense flash of white light follow that the two sensory experiences melded into a single memorable event.

When the eyes in attendance recovered after the flash, one visual change in the scene was evident. All but two of the mannequins in the dozens of miniatures glowed a ghostly blue. The two spacecraft containing the



mannequins housing the DNA samples of Mxpan and Zerpall seemed to pulsate like fiery red-orange beacons.

“Targets identified, Ma’am!” the sergeant informed the Officer of Rank.

“Shall we proceed with the demonstration, Madam Potentate?” Roo-Lutt asked her governmental leader.

“Fire when ready!” Gii-Hall responded.

It wasn’t the verbiage that staggered Mxpan; it was the euphoric lilt in the Potentate’s delivery that sent shivers down his truncated spine.

“As you command! Eliminate the intruders!”

Simultaneous laser blasts burned through the distance between the ultra-secure shelter and Mxpan’s and Zerpall’s DNA repositories. Both the Rigelian scout ship and the generic Tau Cetian freighter glowed red-orange, briefly emulating mannequins inside. An instant after the burst of light, the atmosphere shattered as two plumes of fire expanded geometrically upwards, away from the other spacecraft in the sky.

Two Glieseian invectives passed telepathically between Mxpan and Zerpall. Mxpan was shaking. Zerpall was leaning forward, eyes wide, taking in the scene of the very specific carnage.

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The observers traveled back to the city in auditory *and* telepathic silence. The speed of determining hostile DNA and the specificity of the attack on the vessels containing that DNA stunned them both.

Once back at their quarters, Mxpan decompressed by immersing his body in a large bathing tub that he had filled with water and sugars from various sources, mixed with the protein powder Glieseians all carried as a slow-release energy source. The only visual evidence of his presence was the end of his snorkel protruding from the water. He knew he’d have a difficult time sleeping after this extreme feeding technique, but he wanted all possible brainpower to sort out the day’s events.

Zerpall, also decompressing, sat staring out the large window in the room that overlooked the city below. Almost like an automaton, he placed fruit, cheese, or bread in his mouth precisely every seven minutes. After chewing and swallowing each selection, his eyelids closed. In the darkness behind those eyelids, his brain churned out up-to-the-minute interpretations of the

mission. It was deep in the Tau Cetian night before the observers began their collective debriefing.

*"I am concerned,"* Mxpan initiated their telepathed discussion.

*"Me, too. What is the underlying basis of your uneasiness?"*

*"I do not like what the Tau Cetians have done with our technological assistance."*

*"But Supervisor Mxpan, the demonstration of the selectivity of the Tau Cetian weaponry, besides being impressive in and of itself, provides a practical way to limit casualties in conflicts. Use of the DNA comparison device, whatever it is, allows guaranteed targeting of only the selected opponent in a fairly large sample. That's desirable, isn't it?"* Zerpall completed his lengthy response in milliseconds.

*"Assuming the need for hostilities, yes. However, that they have developed this technique is not my underlying concern."*

*"I just lost your line of thinking,"* Zerpall responded. *"What concern might there be beyond misuse of our assistance?"*

*"The Tau Cetians do not appear to have misused our technological assistance."* When he felt Zerpall's thoughts encroaching, Mxpan blasted a collection of ideas in a single burst to his colleague.

It took nearly a full minute for Zerpall's brain to interpret the influx of ideas it had received almost simultaneously. When he completed his interpretation of the data, he jerked involuntarily—his head snapping into a position where his eyes were locked on Mxpan's.

*"Are you certain of your analysis?"* Zerpall asked unnecessarily.

*"As certain as I can be. We shall ask our hosts about my conclusions at our next meeting."*

\* \*

Both Glieseians were outside the elevator doors as they slid open the next morning. Although startled by the discovery, the drones assigned as drivers for the observers recovered their composure quickly. Moments later, a surface vehicle with four passengers headed to the Tau Cetian Military Command Post.

Communication between driver and passengers was forced and limited to superficial topics during the several-minute trip to the command post. The viewports were designed for tall humanoids not stumpy individuals with poor

vision. There was little visible evidence of the uniquely designed horizontal buildings with apparently random staggered lengths of sequential stories in each. After a much shorter than it seemed journey, both Tau Cetians and Glieseians were glad when the vehicle stopped, and everyone exited.

Zerpall and Mxpan were escorted to a moderate-sized meeting room furnished with a U-shaped table with a dozen chairs. Drones assisted them into raised seats that allowed their head height to approximate the height of a seated Tau Cetian.

The drones left.

*"Looks like we're early for the debriefing."*

*"I suspect not," Mxpan responded. "Except for our unanticipated physical peculiarities, I doubt anything we experienced here is outside a carefully constructed and implemented plan."*

*"You think they want us to wait for them."*

*"I do. In fact, I think this entire visit is designed to demonstrate the advanced level of both thinking and technological skill Tau Ceti now boasts."*

*"Why would they care about how we—"*

*"Enough for now. Here they come."*

"Good morning, Observers," Gii-Hall said as she led her delegation into the room and took the seat at the center of the closed end of the U-shape. Mxpan and Zerpall were seated to her immediate left, seats of honor for guests on Tau Ceti. Roo-Lutt took her place to the Potentate's immediate right, the traditional seat of the second in importance at a Tau Cetian formal gathering. Other Tau Cetians of apparent military and civilian rank filled the remaining seats at the table.

Both Glieseians responded appropriately to their hostess's greeting.

"I would like to hear your reaction to our little demonstration from yesterday," Gii-Hall said. "And I am certain that my Officer of Rank would be interested as well."

"Impressive display of selective targeting of combatants!" Zerpall blurted. "I can honestly report that we have never witnessed that level of control by any weapon system."

Mxpan closed his eyes. His body slumped. This was not how he hoped to begin the debriefing.

“While I agree in principle with my *subordinate*,” Mxpan began his answer with emphasis on his descriptor of Zerpall. “I must admit some confusion as to why we were purview to such a showcase. Nothing in our technological assistance is directly related to what we experienced. We are here to follow up on how our technology has assisted your planetary progress.”

“I beg to differ,” Roo-Lutt responded immediately. “Your technological assistance allowed us to expedite our interstellar capabilities by at least a factor of ten. By doing so, we discovered threats of which we were unaware. Thanks to our new friends on Alpha Centauri, contacted with the invaluable assistance of your technology boost, we were able to develop what we feel is a formidable planetary defense system!”

“Your logic is flawed.”

Mxpan’s statement brought a chilled silence to the room.

“I hope I misinterpreted your last statement, Observer Mxpan,” was all Gii-Hall said. Her tone left no doubt that the next words from either Glieseian were critical to any semblance of continued civility.

“While that is possible, I suspect the real issue lies in my forthrightness,” Mxpan proposed.

While the Tau Cetian Officer of Rank was still visibly upset by his evaluation of her remarks, the diplomat, to whom Mxpan addressed his last comments, was willing to hear more from her guest before passing final judgment.

“It may be that there is a moderate degree of accuracy in your assessment,” the Potentate hedged. “However, I urge caution on your part when selecting your terminology. I am certain that neither of us desires to instigate an interplanetary incident.”

“*I can see why she’s the Potentate*,” Zerpall shot his thought to his colleague. “*She is a skilled diplomat.*”

Mxpan responded with the briefest term of agreement possible in Glieseian telepathy. Then he continued his verbal delivery to the entire debriefing population. “I doubt that you will dispute my claim that Glieseians possess a very high level of intelligence and that we use it to benefit others as often as we are permitted that privilege.” Several around the table nodded in agreement. “As you all know, Glieseians are not warriors. Nor do we

advocate physical conflict at any level. We see our role in this galaxy as one of smoothing out rough places in both emerging and established societies. We accomplish our mission by providing guidance, mostly indirect, and ideas for technological improvements.”

“I will all attest to your willingness to assist,” Roo-Lutt interrupted. “What we,” here she paused and fixed her confederates with an icy stare before she continued, “Or, at least, what *I* would like to know is twofold: What right do you have to dictate what anyone does with your help after you give it? And what is your opinion of SGMTS, our DNA-targeting defense?”

“Both fair questions,” Mxpan said. “I begin with my answer to your first. We have no right to dictate what any society does with any information or technology obtained from any legal source.”

“Then why are you distressed by our demonstration yesterday?” Roo-Lutt interjected without invitation. “And, please don’t deny that you were distressed then and still appear to be now.”

“I will not deny truth at any time. Our distress yesterday was more about the implications of your ‘defensive’ technology than by the technology itself—which is my answer to your second question.”

“Even if surrounded by allies, we can target a specific enemy vessel. Consider the value of being able to strike with unerring accuracy at an enemy during a battle where vessels from several planetary systems are engaged simultaneously.”

“That is not the problem I perceive.”

“Then, what about a weapon designed to limit damage to *specified* enemy vessels even when surrounded by friendlies that offends you? What can you possibly find fault with in that scenario?”

“That will be adequate, Officer of Rank,” Gii-Hall admonished her military leader. She turned to Mxpan and said, “I am interested in hearing what causes your discomfort with our DNA-targeting weapon. Please elaborate.”

Over the next several minutes, Mxpan explained how the Tau Cetians’ idea and development of their device was genius. He compared their feat favorably with epic inventions elsewhere in the galaxy and beyond. As the entire assembly wondered what problem there might be with the defense mechanism, Mxpan began his critique.

“My concern is that any DNA may become a target.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t see how targeting specific DNA is a problem,” the Potentate admitted. “Indeed, that is the function of the system.”

“Whose DNA is the target?” Mxpan persisted.

“I am afraid you have now lost me completely.”

“How do you determine whose DNA is the target for your weapon’s guidance system?”

“I believe you have an implied answer to your question, Observer,” Roo-Lutt answered for her Potentate. “We only target the DNA of our enemies.”

“As you demonstrated,” Mxpan said. “Is that correct?”

“I really don’t understand your question,” Roo-Lutt admitted.

“You targeted enemy DNA in your simulation yesterday. Is that an accurate summation?”

“We targeted *Glieseian* DNA. And I fail to see—”

“I understand!” Gii-Hall shot to her feet as a realization hit home. “Who will determine who the enemy is and, therefore, whose DNA is the target?”

“Precisely.” Mxpan’s single-word response sent a chill through Gii-Hall’s soul.

It was obvious that most Tau Cetians in the meeting were not following this conversation. Gii-Hall looked to Mxpan. When he nodded his assent, the planetary leader explained her revelation.

“The question now posed by the Observer is one of morality. Who will decide what DNA is targeted? Before you reply with something trite, think of examples throughout the galactic history of genocide that began with the desire to rid a sovereign state or planet of its *enemies*.”

“Succinct and on target,” Mxpan complimented. “I suggest we revisit one of Roo-Lutt’s original questions posed to me before I continue my explanation.”

A judicial nod from the Potentate indicated her desire. The Officer of Rank shifted nervously. Even in her worst-case scenario, this was not how she had imagined the meeting proceeding.

“First, I agree that we Glieseians have no right, inherent or assumed, to dictate any other society’s actions. I have a much different opinion about one of your Officer of Rank’s answers.” Mxpan paused, not specifically for dramatic effect, although it did accomplish that, but more to take the

opportunity to direct his line of sight across the table and into the eyes of Roo-Lutt. When he was certain she was aware that she was his intended audience, he rephrased a question he had asked earlier.

“Whose DNA will be targeted?”

“Obviously, I don’t understand what you’re asking. Hasn’t this been asked and answered at least once already?”

“Let me be more specific,” Mxpan offered. “Who will determine the DNA sequences programmed into your weapon’s guidance system?”

Roo-Lutt looked to Gii-Hall for help. The Potentate sat staring vacantly through glazed eyes as she processed the implications of Mxpan’s question. Without warning, those glazed eyes blinked, her head jerked, and she sat bolt upright.

“By the gods! I’d never considered that!”

“I’m sorry, Ma’am,” Roo-Lutt lied. She knew the potential of every weapon in her arsenal. “I am a soldier. All this philosophical discourse is lost on me. You never considered what?”

“If I might provide my answer,” Mxpan interjected.

Numbly, Gii-Hall nodded her assent.

“I believe that your Planetary Potentate fears a rise to power of unscrupulous leadership who might choose to use the DNA-identifying function of your weapon to target personal enemies as well as, or along with, enemies of the people of Tau Ceti. History abounds with examples of despots who lumped personal enemies with those seen by all as enemies, thereby ridding themselves of opposition under the guise of civil defense.”

“Although a bit verbose, your answer is accurate in its essence.” Gii-Hall's tone was flat. She rallied herself. When she gave her next command, she was at her Planetary Potentate best.

“Before the end of this week, I will have a report from you, Officer of Rank, outlining, in detail, a protocol to prevent the scenario presented by Observer Mxpan from ever occurring.”

“Yes, Ma’am. But—”

“This is not a discussion, Roo-Lutt! If you *cannot* or *will not* provide such a protocol, I will see that my new Officer of Rank will be able and willing to do so. Do I make myself clear?”

The head of every Tau Cetian around the conference table nodded in assent—save one. Roo-Lutt’s head slumped noticeably. Mxpan noted the testimony of the high regard Gii-Hall held as Planetary Potentate.

*“Nicely done, Supervisor,”* Zerpall transmitted.

*“Thank you. And thank you for allowing me to follow my line of reasoning without interruption.”* Zerpall gave the slightest nod. Mxpan ended with, *“Do not get too comfortable or overconfident. You may still have an opportunity to respond in more detail to their demonstration.”*

Humility now a thing of the past, Zerpall’s body trembled in anticipation. He began mental preparation of his expanded response.

\* \*

It was the third evening on Tau Ceti for the Glieseians. A gala event was planned in their honor. It looked like the visit might be extended at least two days so Mxpan and Zerpall could assist with the creation of a fail-safe program to prevent, or at least severely limit, abuse of the DNA-identifier portion of the SGMTS by the military or civilian leadership of the planet. An unmaned transportation vehicle arrived and transported the Observers to their destination, a huge pavilion for housing dinners, dances, and deliberations of importance to the State. At the door, both Mxpan and Zerpall dismounted from their wheeled delivery carts.

The Glieseian surveyed each other.

*“You look very nice,”* Mxpan commented.

*“As do you,”* Zerpall replied in kind. *“And now we make our entrance.”*

*“Indeed.”* Mxpan looked up at the drone assigned to attend the door during the gala. *“I believe we are ready now. If you would be so kind as to open the door for us.”*

The Observers eased/slithered through the opening side-by-side.

At first, they went unnoticed, but once spotted, they became the center of attention of group after group as they progressed across the dance floor. They slid to a stop at the seating area where dinner would be served while the obligatory speeches and toasts with Tau Cetian beverages were interspersed. A sampling of local entertainment would close out the evening.

Their Glieseian novelty soon wore thin. Between speeches, the Observers entertained one another more often than Tau Cetians in attendance



entertained them. Thoughts shot back and forth—it was too noisy to speak or be heard.

After dinner, as the speeches were winding down, one of the entertainers attracted Zerpall’s attention.

*“Look at that female!”* he flicked his tentacle-like arm to his left. *“My research indicates that she is what is considered attractive by Tau Cetian standards.”*

*“Which one—Oh, my! She certainly is endowed in some noticeable anatomical areas.”*

The female in question approached Zerpall as thoughts flew between the Glieseian brains. Although their understanding of male and female was limited at best, they still found the anatomical variations, so different from their monomorphic species, oddly hypnotic. The Tau Cetian was the first to speak.

“I couldn’t help noticing you looking at me.”

“I . . . apologize if I have offended you,” was all Zerpall could manage.

“My heavens, no,” the female said through a giggle. “I am anything but offended by your attention. My name is Corr-Ness.”

“I’m Zerpall. Your physique is pleasing to my visual input center.”

“Abrupt, but flattering. Thank you. Tell me a bit about Gliese.”

With that simple request, Corr-Ness opened the floodgates of Zerpall’s jingoistic appreciation for his home. When the time approached for the evening’s entertainment to commence, Zerpall was still waxing eloquent about his home, his job as Observer, past adventures, and the potential for exploits while on assignments to assist other societies.

“Corr-Ness, you are on in fifteen,” a well-dressed Tau Ceti female announced as she approached the eccentric couple—attracted to the oddity in much the same way humans are often attracted to exotic species on Earth.

“Of course, Linn-Kluu.”

“You are an entertainer?” Zerpall asked in admiration generated by the Tau Cetian’s seductive influence.

“Indeed, I am,” Corr-Ness replied. She turned to Linn-Kluu and added, “May I introduce Zerpall. He’s an Observer from Gliese here to help us . . . Uh, I don’t know how,” she ended with another giggle.

“Our assistance takes many forms,” Zerpall interjected. “What we are doing here is assisting in several projects as requested by your government.”

“Sounds very exciting,” a fourth voice blasted its way into the conversation. “I don’t mean to interrupt, but I did hear Corr-Ness was performing next.” The voice that clearly *did* mean to interrupt added with emphasis, “By the way, I have admired your talent for several seasons now.”

“Why, thank you sooo much!” Sugary appreciation for the compliment seemed to ooze from the entertainer. “I do need to go and complete my final preparations. You understand, don’t you, Zerpall, darling? After all, I don’t look like this without some effort.” Without waiting for a reply, she spun around and sashayed away, tossing over her shoulder, “I’ll see you all after my performance.”

Uncomfortable silence morphed into a conversational void as Zerpall, Linn-Kluu, and the owner of the fourth voice looked around the room. Without Corr-Ness, the three strangers had nothing to discuss.

*“This is very awkward. Please assist me in extricating myself from these individuals.”*

*“I think not. You need to practice your interpersonal interactions,”* Mxpan sent back. *“I have observed that you tend to be somewhat abrupt and too forthcoming in these situations. Consider this an opportunity for growth.”* With that, he spun on the same apparatus provided to lift the Glieseians to a more appropriate height at the debriefing, and slowly motored away.

After sighing internally, Zerpall complied. He began his practice by introducing himself to the owner of the fourth voice.

“I am Zerpall from Gliese. I don’t know your name.”

“Wha—Oh, I mean, I am Jezz-Qurr. It is nice to meet you,” she lied.

“As is my meeting you.”

“I’ll leave you two to chat,” Linn-Kluu quickly cut herself out of the conversation. “I’ve got some preparations to complete.”

“Oh, are you also part of the entertainment?” Zerpall asked courteously. But, there was no response. Linn-Kluu was already some distance away.

“I think she’s more involved in staging these things than performing in them,” Jezz-Qurr said. She fixed a venomous stare on the departing Linn-Kluu and added, “I know that’s been her role in the past.”

“Um, I suppose it requires quite a large number of such individuals to plan and implement an event such as this.” Zerpall hoped that was a correct social observation.

“At least one hundred sycophants for this gala,” the Tau Cetian admitted while redirecting her vision in a panorama of the room. When she stopped her visual surveillance, she looked directly at Zerpall. “You’re quite the center of all this, aren’t you?”

Not knowing how to answer such a question, Zerpall offered what passed on Gliese as a crooked smile while he sent a silent plea to Mxpan. *“Please help me! I don’t know how to answer this female.”*

*“I think the smile was a nice touch. Talk about the entertainment.”*

*“It hasn’t started!”*

*“Then there are no restrictions on the discussion, are there? Vocalize!”*

“What do you think of the entertainment for this evening?” Zerpall dutifully turned the direction of his conversation.

“Well, that’s hard to say since it hasn’t started yet,” Jezz-Qurr replied sarcastically. After a beat, she added, “I suspect Corr-Ness will open and close the show. She is quite famous in her own right.”

“Oh, you’ve seen her perform?”

“Often. I would consider myself . . .” she paused, obviously thinking. “I guess you would call me a devoted fan of Corr-Ness and her company.”

“Company?” Zerpall had never heard the term used in conjunction with entertainment. Glieseians enjoyed entertainment privately and rarely included more than two individuals in an event.

“Yes, her *company*.” Jezz-Qurr began an explanation. “The people she performs with. It is common . . .”

Zerpall lost interest in Jezz-Qurr’s explanation. What he wanted was to intake fluid. Stress tended to dry out his Glieseian physiology, and, at the moment, he was more stressed than he had been in some time. When he finally caught sight of a Libation Station, he smiled involuntarily.

“Thank you,” Jezz-Qurr said. She saw Zerpall smile and assumed it was in response to what she considered a witticism she interjected into her description of Corr-Ness’ performance troupe.

*“I need fluid.”*

*“Then offer to escort the female to the closest Libation Station. You are doing quite well, in my opinion.”*

“I am very thirsty. Could we get something to drink?” Zerpall asked.

“That would be nice.” Although taken aback by the abrupt changes in conversational flow Zerpall initiated, he was, she had to admit, not a bad listener—especially for a male, or what appeared to be at least not female.

As the couple moved in the direction of the Libation Station, they continued their conversation. Zerpall asked, “What type of beverages are available this evening?”

“Pretty traditional fare, I’m afraid.”

“I have no experience with Tau Cetian libations. Perhaps you might, um, do me a favor and order for the both of us.”

“What if I start you with one of my favorites,” she offered.

Zerpall flashed his best Glesian smile as thanks, then slithered behind Jezz-Qurr to their destination.

Each Libation Station consisted of a narrow bartop, slanted downward, toward the back, to direct spills or other mishaps away from the customers. Older models employed males who mixed each concoction when ordered. An auditory ordering system took drink orders in current models like the one Zerpall and Jezz-Qurr approached. State-of-the-art computers mixed drinks and dispensed them behind the station walls. Customers retrieved their libations from cubbies that opened when a drink was ready. After they were served, the pair moved away from the station.

“What do you call this?” Zerpall asked. The flavor and the ensuing sensation it generated in his tiny body and oversized brain were mysteriously foreign.

Before his companion could answer, the Mistress of Ceremonies introduced Corr-Ness to the gathering.

*“Politely turn and observe your entertainer friend as you ingest your beverage,”* Mxpan directed.

Zerpall did just that. What he saw was another completely new experience. To the sound of applause and pounding musical rhythms, Corr-Ness entered. More correctly, she exploded onto the stage.

A brilliantly colored form-fitting cloak was draped around her, shimmering in the reflected lights of the large assembly room. Carefully

choreographed gyrations periodically caused that cloak to expose more than it covered. Whistles and applause alternately kept time with, or syncopated opposite to, the pounding beat of the music. It was obvious to Mxpan that there was more to the outwardly sedate Tau Cetians than met the eye.

Although provocative to Tau Ceti minds, neither the costume nor the dance movements elicited perverse or sexually aggressive sensations among the native population. None of what Corr-Ness and the backup dancers did on stage *should* have affected either Mxpan or Zerpall. However, *should* is a term that implies uncertainty. For reasons inexplicable at the time, both Glieseians found themselves captivated by the sinuous movements of the troupe.

*“I must confess that I am experiencing a most unusual feeling,”* Mxpan telepathed.

“I feel it, too,” Zerpall replied. However, because his most recent communicative exchange was verbal, and his beverage-effected pleasure center had control of his considerable brain, the words emerged as a husky sigh.

As the team leader, Mxpan should have cautioned his subordinate. But, his brain was filled with a similar fog as Zerpall’s, so there was no behavioral check. The wine served with dinner was more intoxicating than Glieseian physiology was accustomed to. Mxpan, having had only the dinner wine, had not reached the level of intoxication that his subordinate experienced. Thanks to his Libation Station drink, Zerpall was genuinely tipsy.

“She is a magnificent dancer,” Jezz-Qurr responded to what she thought was a comment from Zerpall to her.

“Her legs are very attractive.” Zerpall breathed. There was no vocabulary in the Glieseian language to describe Zerpall’s current experience. Far too many generations passed between the last time a Glieseian hypothalamus was as physically and chemically stimulated as Zerpall’s was. Glieseian terminology describing the feelings he experienced were discarded long ago. A short sentence, punctuated by breathless panting sounds, was all that emerged from Zerpall. Dopamine flooded the primitive regions in his brain. He felt euphoric and uninhibited.

“I was thinking more of her performance as a whole,” Jezz-Qurr clarified.

“Look how her body movements mimic the musical tones,” Mxpan transmitted.

“I don’t need the music, I need Corr-Ness!” Zerpall wheezed the words aloud.

Jezz-Qurr looked around her. She hoped no one else heard Zerpall’s totally inappropriate throaty whisper. She edged farther away from the Libation Station. Spotting a drone security officer, she signaled him to approach.

“I think our guests may require assistance in departing from these festivities,” she said in a stage whisper while pointing first to the obviously inebriated Zerpall then to Mxpan, who sat on his stool, jaws limp, staring fixatedly at the dancer. “I suspect our intoxicating beverages may be stronger than they are used to imbibing.”

After the briefest conversation with his superior, the drone followed her suggestion to intervene. By the time he and the drones assigned to the Glieseians arrived at the sides of the visiting dignitaries, Zerpall was calling out to both Corr-Ness and Jezz-Qurr while gesticulating madly with his tiny arms. Mxpan remained transfixed, oblivious to the events around him.

They were wheeled out of the gala with the greatest speed possible and attempts at the least possible attention. Unfortunately, the attention ended up being considerable since Zerpall was determined to “get close to that beautiful creature!” He shouted that he did not “care what her relationship is with the Potentate’s Protocol Drone who really loves only her  $\forall\Omega\emptyset\beta\Sigma$ ,” a substantially-sized female body part that is never spoken of in conversation at polite social gatherings.

The Glieseians’ exit was memorable and raucous.

\* \*

“How do we spin this in our favor?” Gii-Hall demanded of her cabinet members the morning following the gala. “If we don’t make a significant statement about the accusations of the Glieseian towards my Protocol Drone and that . . . *entertainer*, well, we all might be looking for new employment after the next election.”

“You think it’s that big of an issue?” asked Chief of Staff Kell-Tiff, the senior member of the cabinet.