

D O P I N E P H R I N E

VEILED EMPYREAN

PART III

SIX cloaked ships sped silently towards the home world of the infidels, living sinfully in blasphemy against God's sacred laws. The pilots opened their shared comms and began to pray in unison, asking one last time for the blessing of the holy trinity of Empyrean, to guide their transformation into martyrs for the great Byzantine Caliphate. Pride and excitement filled their minds as they thought of the devastating effect their explosive cargo would have on the soft targets of Olympia, a city that epitomized the unholy attitudes of the belligerent enemy.

The pilots spoke to one another to remind themselves of their just fury at the pit of degenerates known as Olympus. The fiends had used thievery and trickery to amass great riches while spitting in the face of God with their brash displays of wealth and hedonism. They traded chastity and submission to the Almighty for pleasures of the flesh and freedom of expression. The very existence of the culture of Olympus was an abomination, and purification by fire was the final duty of the faithful.

The unsuspecting planet grew before the six small ships, now mere minutes away from impact with the symbol of the pilot's hatred. Their resolve was supreme. They prepared themselves for paradise, looking forward to the loving arms of God's Empyrean and the rewards that would come with it. They hurled insults at the world before them, and began accelerating for their final descent when a yellow tear appeared in space behind them. Confused, the jihadists began scanning the region, only to be rattled by a speeding silver streak that slipped nimbly through their tight formation.

The Champion of Olympus had arrived.

Athlon came to a stop in space between the cloaked suicide bombers and the planet below. He had already opened a channel to the Olympus government, and now found himself talking with a sleepy bureaucrat monitoring incoming transmissions. Athlon smiled as he calmly gave his name and asked if he could please be patched through to the Queen. There was a long silence before Athlon cleared his throat and asked the man to kindly act with all haste. There was a crash and some muffled noises from the other end, and Athlon chuckled as the bewildered fellow fumbled with his console excitedly stammering his apologies as he activated the proper protocol.

My niece is never going to believe this!

Fifteen seconds passed as Athlon tracked the incoming ships, which quickly adjusted their formation to slip past the Android. Athlon was completely focused on stopping these men however, and his incredible senses had little trouble picking up faint body heat signatures through the thin hulls of the small ships. Athlon pinpointed each pilot and locked his tracking sensors on their locations, highlighting the rest of their crafts in his vision.

**YOU GUYS KNOW
I CAN SEE YOU RIGHT?**

Athlon waved at the invisible ships and listened as their heartbeats quickened.

Mary spoke in Athlon's head, less than a minute passing since Athlon's emergence from Yggdrasil. The Android explained the situation, informing the Queen of the impending attack. Mary brought Olympus to high alert, and initiated emergency procedures to defend the planet. Ships were scrambled and sped towards Athlon's position.

Athlon called on the attackers to halt, telling them their mission had come to an early end. They screamed insults at him and maximized their speed. The situation had become a race.

Athlon's scanners showed him the heavy payloads carried by each ship. The devastation of an impact would be extreme. Not entirely sure how well he could stand up to the strength a detonation, Athlon nevertheless moved into the path of the nearest ship.

Athlon desperately wanted time to try and explain everything he had learned about the Norn and the true history of the Byzantines, but he knew a few moments of talk wouldn't reverse the resolve of the fanatics. The Android thought of his unborn child, and was grateful his offspring wouldn't witness him taking these lives, no matter how justified. He found that he was terrified of the child seeing half the things he had done over the centuries; he didn't feel guilt over the lives he had taken, yet he wanted to preserve the innocence of his son or daughter for as long as possible. Athlon hoped it would be many years before the child would know what its father was capable of.

Athlon reached forward to catch the ship rushing towards him. His brain made millions of calculations as he searched for a way to disable the craft without destroying it, hope still fueling his desire to spare every life he could. His thoughts were scattered as the ship exploded on impact, shrapnel and fire sending the Android reeling through space disoriented and stunned. The explosives were powerful, but Athlon's construction remained intact. The force of the blast registered as more than enough to level a wide swath of the city being targeted. Athlon blinked at the incredible force, regained his bearings, and flew towards the next ship.

It felt crude, but Athlon turned himself into a defensive weapon, speeding headlong into the makeshift missiles, taking the massive impact and then sending full power to his thrusters to correct his path as he rushed to return to the fray. Olympic ships came into view, seeing the Android spinning past them awkwardly as he took out the third attacker. They lit up the sky with a torrent of disrupter bolts, firing blindly in the direction of the blasts, a blindfolded escort for the metal man using his body as a shield to protect the blue planet now looming huge before the frenzied pilots.

Athlon called to the friendly vessels to disperse, noticing that one was veering dangerously close to the path of one of the three remaining suicide bombers. He hurried to put himself between the Olympian and Byzantine ships, but was sent careening off course as the fourth attacker collided with the Olympic craft. The resulting explosion damaged several others, and the final two ships weaved through the Olympians. Athlon struggled to catch up with the remaining two pilots; the Olympian vessels had been evaded, and nothing was left standing between the suicide attack and the vulnerable planet. The fifth and sixth ships aimed for the now-visible city of Olympia, and Athlon called Mary to evacuate.

With seconds to spare, Athlon caught up to the fifth attacker, gripping a pylon attached to its stern and slowing it considerably. After a moment, the pilot detonated his own craft, and Athlon was thrown by the powerful explosion. He screamed across his comms as the last ship sped through the lower layers of the atmosphere. Seconds later, a massive explosion appeared in the heart of the city.

Athlon sped for the site of destruction, recognizing the point of impact as the Olympic archives, adjacent to the royal palace. Alarms screamed across the city, and part of the palace crumbled into the street below. As Athlon landed, he saw mass chaos as people staggered away from the destruction. Wounded lay in the street, and bodies were strewn everywhere as fire consumed the palace.

Athlon pulled people from the debris as he fought through smoke and crumbling stone to find Mary. She was being escorted through the shaking halls by the royal guard, all coughing as thick smoke filled their lungs. Athlon's eyes lit up brilliantly as he led the way to relative safety outside. Mary collapsed to her knees and coughed violently as her guards tried to help. She waved them off, making herself stand up and turn to Athlon. As she sputtered she forced out a single word as she pointed at the devastated building next door: *Maya*.

In a flash, Athlon disappeared into the burning archives. He forced himself not to think about the irreplaceable history that was disappearing around him as he struggled through the collapsing building. Strange lights flashed in the thick smoke, and Athlon cycled through various scanners in search of something that would illuminate his way. A hand grabbed his shoulder and he spun to face it, but no one could be found. Ice gripped Athlon's spine as he called out into the thick smoke, hearing his voice echo eerily down the buckling hall. He told himself the smoke must be causing some sort of digital hallucination as it assaulted his components... he could have sworn the echo of his voice was calling out Athena's name.

Part of the ceiling collapsed behind him, shaking Athlon back into focus. Tuning his sensors to detect traces of wildcrafting energy, he located Maya, somehow alone and alive in the building. She was close, but breathing shallowly. Athlon made his way forward quickly, knowing she would die without immediate access to fresh air.

As he approached her, he detected thousands of micro fractures in the ceiling. In a moment he was on top of Maya, lifting her in his arms and punching through the wall. A burst to his thrusters carried them into the safety of dim light on the street outside as the archives collapsed behind them.

Maya gasped for air between violent coughs as Athlon hurried her away from the falling rubble. A medical team rushed to meet them, taking Maya from the Champion and placing an oxygen mask over her mouth and nose. She took Athlon's hand and met his gaze, thanking him as her breathing began to normalize. Athlon smiled at her beautiful face and wiped a black smudge from her cheek before lifting into the sky to survey the damage.

The death toll would surely reach the hundreds, but the devastation was mainly contained to the palace and archives, both of which had been mostly evacuated with moments to spare. Athlon's ears caught conversations across the central region of the city: it seemed Maya had been helping the remaining citizens in the archives out of the building when she had succumbed to the smoke. Once again her spirit filled Athlon with hope.

The city had been spared the worst of the attack, but the hatred of men had still succeeded in striking at the heart of Olympus. Athlon wished he had been just a little faster; he was tired of merely saving most of the people who needed him. His thoughts lingered on the perverse desire of some to harm the many. Surely the Olympians and the Byzantines were not so different they couldn't find more things to bring them together than keep them divided. Athlon looked forward to revealing the cancer of the Norn to the caliphate.

His thoughts returned once more to Athena, and the development of their child. He hurried back towards the surface of Olympus to help with clean up efforts. The sooner he could return to the fleet the better. The strange emotions from the archives clung to the corners of his mind, and he could not shake the feeling that he was missing important moments by Athena's side.

HIRATIO leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. A drone stood before him in his ready room onboard *The Daedalus*. The report the officer had just delivered confirmed Hiratio's deepest fears about the future of his species: the synthetic race had finally exhausted its resources and knowledge in the quest to replicate the success of King Nabu-Li'ber and Queen Semiramis.

The drones had dedicated every person not manning the ship to developing a female drone. Recreating the sentience found in the original Babylonian drones had remained elusive, as had creating a viable synthetic womb that could create life based on the organic process found in virtually every known intelligent lifeform in the records carried by Alethar's fleet.

Athena and Harmony had worked extensively with Hiratio's engineers every step of the way. Athena had gladly submitted to constant scans in the hopes that her own pregnancy might offer the secret to synthetic conception and birth, but to no avail. Final upgrades had been completed on all drones, but the victory felt empty as Hiratio confronted the fact that no new drones could be created. They were ready for battle, but any loss would shrink their numbers permanently.

Hiratio knew whispers of dissent had found breeding grounds in various corners of the ship. It was nearly impossible for the drones to keep secrets from one another given their constant connection to one another through Athlon's probe network. Frustration at Hiratio's decision to dedicate nearly half of the last store of Babylon's unique resources to upgrades for the current population bothered some of the crew, and they were doing less every day to hide it. Hiratio worried that an insurrection might occur. This news would certainly not calm the growing tempers onboard.

Hiratio dismissed the messenger and called Athena. She arrived after a few moments, Harmony perched on her shoulder. Her stomach was swollen with her pregnancy, and she appeared tired as she sat down slowly with a smile. Hiratio returned the expression, and asked how she was. She nodded, and told her friend that she longed for Athlon's return. Harmony was closely monitoring the rapidly developing baby inside her, but every day held the potential of a new surprise as the unique child grew. The weeks since Athlon's departure had been filled with many questions and few answers. Athena was the first female android in history, and so much of her impending motherhood was mired in mystery. Athena missed her mate, and craved his companionship during their baby's growth.

Hiratio nodded and tried to be empathetic, but his own problems laid heavy on his mind. He would gladly accept her uncertainty if it meant also gaining her life-giving potential. He told Athena of his worries, and they talked for a time about the future of the drones. Hiratio feared they were doomed to eventual extinction, especially in the face of the battles ahead.

Athena told Hiratio that he must not tie the destiny of his people solely to the ability to reproduce. Life should never be defined by its ability to create a progeny, but by the attitudes and actions of the extant. Hiratio nodded at this, his eyes thoughtful.

The drone thanked the android for her time, gave Harmony a mild grin, and then rose from his seat. It was time to resolve this issue now, before it could cause any real conflict. Hiratio stepped onto the bridge, and met with an eventless status report. No enemies on scanners, nothing to report. Byzantine was almost a full day away, and the Olympic fleet was scheduled to continue its convoy back to hostile territory. Reports of Enison's attempts at diplomacy had been coming in for some time, but he had been met with nothing but continued hostility from the Caliphate. Hiratio could imagine only war waiting for them when they arrived.

Sitting in the captain's chair, Hiratio opened his mind to the drones, asking them to join in collective communication with him. He felt both sadness and anger from many of his fellow drones as he explained that their last hope for creating more drones had passed. The rare materials of their home world had been exhausted, and there were no immediate prospects for gathering anything similar. True warfare would begin in a matter of hours, and odds were high that some drones would be lost in the conflict as they fought alongside their Olympic brethren.

Hiratio was surprised to feel a few drones bristle at his choice of words. A sense of rage followed, and Hiratio fell silent as several drones seized the opportunity to make their thoughts heard. The histories of the major species the drones had come across in the quickly expanding galaxy beyond Babylon were plagued with warfare. A few minutes in the records stored on *The Daedalus* revealed two massive civil wars on Olympus and nothing but conflict between the Olympians and the Byzantines. The drones had agreed to help Olympus in its war with the Caliphate, but it had already cost them their only source for the materials that might have allowed them to expand their population. The drones had agreed together to the sacrifice, but now they wondered what would become of them once they had served Olympus' purpose. What

would the surviving people of Babylon do after the war? They were now a people with no home and no way to grow their citizenry.

Hiratio acknowledged these concerns, but called for hope. The drones would not be forced to stay together if they didn't want to. Some could surely settle on Olympus if they desired; Hiratio believed Athlon and Alethar would help them do so. Others could explore the galaxy or build homes elsewhere. Perhaps unforeseen opportunities to make new drones would present themselves with the help of Olympian scientists. Hiratio reminded the people of their planet's role in the conflict currently facing Olympus; Babylonians had at least in part caused the troubles that separated Athlon from his people, drawing the Olympic fleet through Caliphate space. The drone pleaded with his brothers to remember that isolationist attitudes had nearly caused their extinction once already. Was it not better to cast their lot in with friends who could help them carve out a history they could be proud of?

The Daedalus trembled suddenly, and a bright light filled the main viewscreen. Alethar's voice filled the bridge as he directed the fleet to halt and fall into a defensive formation. The drones dropped their conversation instantly, flowing seamlessly back into their duties. Hiratio ordered the image enhanced, and the anomaly filled the screen.

Churning energy poured from nowhere into space. Athena appeared on the bridge in a flash, her stride full of purpose and strength. Hiratio thought she barely resembled the tired woman he had met with minutes earlier. She was a warrior, and the sudden activity so close to Caliphate space had replaced her weariness with resolve.

Hiratio returned his attention to the screen as the churning ball of energy ahead erupted. Colors and light splashed across a wide swath of space, growing larger and more violent by the second. Barely a moment passed before the fleet saw a hole forming from the center of the bubbling energy. It grew before them, and through it they could see Yggdrasil laid bare. The twisting colors transfixed Hiratio for a moment, but he was shaken back to attention by Harmony, yelling at him to reverse the ship. If Yggdrasil began leaking into normal space, devastation would surely engulf anything it touched.

Before the fleet could move, something massive began to emerge. It looked like it had once been a man, but had grown in size several thousand fold. Flesh hung from bones in some

places, and Athena could see several of the man's ribs exposed as energy fell from his body like fog from liquid nitrogen. Fear filled her as he stretched ancient muscles and turned his black eyes towards *The Daedalus*. Burning hatred accented the most exhausted face Athena had ever seen. She stared at the monstrous being and felt his gaze pierce the ship's hull and lock with her own. Athena felt tiny as she took a step back, her lips trembling at the evil she could feel in him.

Khawla entered the bridge, barely noticed by the others. She gasped as she looked at the screen, and her voice cracked as she cried out.

HADES!

The monster felt his prey, focusing on Athena like a laser. He moved slowly, as if he was breaking rust from his joints, and headed towards the warship, suddenly small and flimsy by comparison. Athena's hand found the bump of her baby as icy fingers touched her soul. Unspeakable terror filled her mind, blocking everything else out. She was drained of curiosity. She had no questions. Every piece of her was filled with the same thought.

Do anything to protect the child.

MAKESHIFT vigils had filled the streets of Olympus. Candles and pictures had been clumped together on corners and around the scar that marked where the palace and royal archives had stood only a few hours earlier. The emergency had subsided, and all citizens had been accounted for. The dead had been identified, and funerals had been scheduled. Olympus had reacted quickly, and now poured through the city in a show of defiance. Many wondered if another attack could be imminent, but the people refused to hide. They turned their faces to the sky and watched as the dusk fell on the dark day.

Maya and Mary had been reunited, and Athlon touched down to greet them near an emergency tent covering a simple desk for the Queen to use as she coordinated the medical and military efforts to offer assistance in the aftermath of the attack. Indigo Priests patrolled the streets, helping people reconnect with lost loved ones.

As Athlon considered the spirit of Olympus, he noticed mass movement heading down the trafficless boulevard towards the palace. Thousands of people were approaching the Android. As they drew close, they began to chant his name, and Athlon blinked back at a clapping Mary as the crown surrounded him and lifted him on their shoulders.

Citizens cheered as they hoisted their hero, excitedly talking about the great legend of the Champion, now with a new chapter they all been witness to. A young Mesopotamian girl handed up a school textbook and a pen to Athlon, asking for an autograph. Athlon peered down at the glossy pages, seeing old photographs from the war with Pyke, the defeat of Zeus and Athlon's subsequent election as King. The book described many of Athlon's adventures, and he smiled as he realized children were learning about him in history class. He carefully printed his name in the margin, careful not to write over any of the text, and then laughed silently at himself as he added, 'Learn like a Champion!!' in smaller text. He handed the book back and winked at the girl as the crowd carried him forward.

Confidence filled the Android. He was so very loved by the people of Olympus, and they believed in his abilities. He knew he could keep them safe. He looked up at the rapidly darkening sky, and gazed at the Dopinephrine nebula cluster, brilliant as ever over the blue planet. Athlon was glad he had gotten to visit home. He felt centered, ready to face the Caliphate, his old quirky self recalibrated after a strange century of time travel and evolution on a distant planet.

Athlon rose above the crowd, carefully adjusting his thrusters to avoid the fragile humans below. He opened the Ares Clef and was met with huge cheers as he sang to Olympus. He circled the planet once, offering his music, an unorthodox concert now as much a part of the Legend of Athlon as his tendency to come flying to the rescue when the planet was in deepest need. The Android sang of peace and perseverance, and felt almost no animosity among the people below towards the citizens of the far away Caliphate. They refused to paint all Byzantines with the brush presented by the fanatics who wished to harm the innocent. Athlon could have cried with joy; he knew the true enemy was the Norn, and that any conclusion to this war would likely result in huge amounts of refugees from the Byzantine world, displaced when the scheming trio was brought to justice. The devastation of the afternoon already felt like the past, and Olympus slept soundly that night.

Athlon returned to the now empty street, and sat with Mary and Maya under the bright night sky in the shadow of the charred palace. Mary hugged him for a long time and then kissed him on the cheek. Athlon grinned at her, noticing for the first time that wrinkles had begun creeping into her warm face. He thought she looked like her mother.

The next hour was filled with Athlon's recital of everything he had learned from Ananke in the Quintessence. Mary listened carefully, her expressions showing relief that the Caliphate was not made up simply of trillions of people who wished to do what the suicide attackers had, grief that many of them did, and horror at the revelations of the Norn and Pluto's transformation into Hades.

Maya remembered Pluto as her favorite uncle during the age of ancient Olympus, and was deeply saddened to hear he had in fact been captured and tortured so many years ago, still languishing beneath the Empyrean, forgotten by his family and home. Athlon and Mary shared her sympathy, and Athlon hoped that the events of the future would present a way to help the lost Olympian.

A security briefing had to begin, and Mary rose, hugging Athlon again and offering him congratulations on Athena's pregnancy. She looked forward to meeting the child, and told Athlon she would spoil the young android mercilessly when they met. Athlon chuckled as Mary left, the disciplined air of her position returning to her voice as she spoke to an aide.

Maya leaned forward and met Athlon's eyes. She asked him to share his thoughts. Athlon felt an old comfort wrap around his brain, like a blanket of security and trust that warmed him whenever Maya gave him her attention. He felt loved, cared for like a child is cared for by a parent.

Athlon found himself describing his feelings for Athena at length. He confessed his worry that he would be an unsuitable father, that the child needed a more stable environment than the adventuring life its parents were accustomed to. Maya smiled at this, saying simply that a child's place is always with her parents. Athlon nodded, considered the statement, and then looked up at the former Tree of Life. She winked and grinned as Athlon's jaw fell open.

They laughed as Maya assured him that the child was indeed a girl. The infant life already had an incredibly strong presence in the galaxy, and Maya said she could feel the power of the child. Athlon was overjoyed.

Maya guided the conversation back to Athena, and Athlon said he couldn't stop thinking about his mate. He told Maya he wanted to be by Athena's side for the rest of the pregnancy. His love for her was pure, and he knew his place was by her side. As he listened to himself, he realized Maya was making him voice what he already knew he felt. Suddenly he made a decision. He turned to look Maya in the eyes, and asked her excitedly if she would marry the two androids once they returned to Olympus together. Maya grinned with pure joy at Athlon's request, and fished around in her pocket for something.

*I've been waiting many years for you to ask dear friend.
Your life is clearly bound to hers, and your union will only grow
stronger in the years to come.
I would be honored to provide the ceremony.*

Maya found what she was looking for, and produced a stunning ring from her pocket. It was crafted from pure treble matter, and it seemed to hum with energy. Maya offered it to Athlon

and he lifted it carefully with his mind, stunned by its simple beauty as he spun it gently before his eyes. Maya explained that she had crafted it as a gift for Athlon, convinced the time would come when the two androids would wish to celebrate their love with ritual. She told Athlon she was proud of him, and told him to take the ring and propose.

Athlon slipped the ring onto his own finger for safe keeping and started to stand up, more excited than ever to return to Athena and their baby girl. Maya put a hand on his arm, and asked him for a few more minutes. There was another matter she wished to discuss.

Maya told Athlon that she could feel the energy of the drones humming in the fabric of life. She knew their future would be full of challenges, and she wanted to help. She proposed starting an enclave on Olympus that would be open to the descendants of Babylon. Maya would help guide them as they entered the broader society of the galaxy, and ease the new relationship between biological and synthetic life. She asked Athlon to propose the idea to Hiratio, and he instantly agreed. Athlon could not be happier as he embraced Maya one last time. He remembered her brush with death earlier in the day, and was grateful she had survived. The galaxy would surely be a much darker place without her immeasurable love and compassion.

The sound of quick foot falls reached Athlon's ears and he turned to find Mary running towards him, her aides hurrying to keep up. She called to the Android with one hand holding a half folded headset to her ear.

The fleet was under attack. Hazy descriptions of a strange anomaly in space had reached Olympus, and Enison was reporting high speed assault craft leaving Byzantine in the direction of Alethar's convoy. Threats and renewed declarations of war were being transmitted from the Caliphate military command. Battle was moments away.

Athlon was out of sight in seconds, a distant yellow tear in space flashing in the sky over Olympus as he hurried into Yggdrasil.

**YOUR BLASPHEMY HAS AWAKENED ALMIGHTY HADES.
YOU MUST BE ANOINTED IN FIRE IN THE NAME OF GOD.
YOU WILL BE ERASED FROM THE GALAXY FOR YOUR WICKED WAYS.
PREPARE TO DIE, INFIDELS.**

The voice dripped with hate as it reached Alethar's ears onboard the fleet's flagship. Hades loomed ahead of them, moving towards *The Daedalus* off Alethar's starboard bow. Enison was transmitting images of nimble Byzantine Lancers moving in a long formation towards his position at high speed. Danger in every direction. A battle they were not quite prepared for. Alethar smiled.

He opened a channel and called the Caliphate out. He projected confidence and assured them he was looking forward to the fight. He disconnected and rubbed the back of his neck. He opened another channel to the rest of the fleet, declaring it was time for battle. He ordered his ship forward, and opened fire on Hades, hoping to pull his attention away from the smaller *Daedalus* carrying Athena, Harmony and the drones. Fire exploded against Hades' body, but he didn't even flinch, gliding towards *The Daedalus* with increasing speed. The hole in space remained open behind him, and intense heat was coming from Yggdrasil, threatening to destroy any ship careless enough to get too close.

The rest of the fleet flanked Hades and opened fire on him from both sides while Hiratio moved *The Daedalus* backwards in an attempt to maintain the gap between themselves and the God of the Underworld.

Hiratio turned towards Athena, all but cowering under Hades' gaze. He went to her quickly, asking if she was alright, feeling more afraid when he saw the expression on her face than he did at the appearance of Hades himself.

HE'S COMING FOR ME.

Hiratio put his hands on her shoulders but she didn't look at him. The drone tried to reframe her statement. Hades was coming for all of them.

**NO HIRATIO. IT'S ME HE WANTS. HE'LL RIP THE SHIP APART TO GET ME.
I CAN FEEL HIM COMING.**

Byzantine Lancers came into sensor range, setting off an alarm on the bridge. Hiratio stepped towards the viewscreen to get his first glimpse of the new ships. They rolled away from the hole into Yggdrasil, and sped towards the fleet. This was happening too quickly. He turned back to Athena, and found that she was gone.

Harmony was pleading with Athena to stop. The android was striding through the corridors to the nearest airlock, refusing to stop no matter what Harmony said. The Nereid was monitoring the transmissions to and from the fleet. She held up her tiny pad, declaring that Mary was reporting Athlon was en route. She begged Athena to wait for Athlon's arrival, insisting the baby would be at greater risk in a battle.

Athena took Harmony gently from her shoulder and looked down at her small friend. The android explained that in space she would be able to fly separate from *The Daedalus*, giving her the maneuverability to dodge the monster while simultaneously reducing risk to the drone population. She had to fly towards danger to keep her baby out of it. Harmony refused to give up, demanding they wait for Athlon, insisting he would find a way to destroy Hades. Athena gave Harmony a weak smile, and handed her to a passing drone.

**TAKE HER TO THE BRIDGE WDN'T YOU? GET THIS SHIP AWAY FROM THAT THING
AS SOON AS YOU GET THE CHANCE.**

**AND WHEN MY BOYFRIEND SHOWS UP,
PLEASE TELL HIM I WOULD APPRECIATE A HAND.**

Athena stepped quickly into the airlock, sealed it behind her, and then opened the outer door, letting the vacuum pull her into space before she engaged her thrusters. She sped straight for Hades.

Alethar and Hiratio filled space with disrupter fire as the Byzantine Lancers came into range. Several exploded brilliantly seconds before the Lancers opened return fire on the Olympic fleet. An officer pointed out Athena to Alethar and he cursed loudly. He maintained fire on the Lancers, but directed the rest of the fleet to attack Hades. He would be damned if Athena or her child would be harmed while there was a perfectly good war fleet at his disposal.

Athena swallowed her fear as she rushed towards Hades. She waited until she was scant yards from the creature before speeding upwards over his head. Hades swung his arm trying to catch

her, but grabbed nothing as Athena dodged the attack. The android turned to see the battle as Hades spun to face her. She watched *The Daedalus* moving back into place with the fleet formation, Hades seemingly unable to move his icy stare from his prey.

Hades raised his hands, gaining flexibility as he shook the long imprisonment from his bones. Athena dodged another swipe from the huge god, but with less room to spare. She felt the baby inside her kicking, bewildered by the sudden surge of activity taking place around her mother. Athena's lip trembled as the stakes of this battle hit her for the thousandth time.

An explosion rocked one of the Olympic ships and it broke up a moment later, spewing fire and soldiers into space. Lancers dove to avoid the explosion as they passed beneath the fleet, looping upward quickly and firing on the less agile ships from behind. *The Daedalus* broke ranks, creaking as Hiratio pushed the ship to turn and face the Lancers. Disrupter fire split the Lancer formation in half before Alethar's flagship could even turn. The Byzantine forces were dropping fast; Olympus' fleet would soon repel this attack.

Hades extended one arm towards Yggdrasil, summoning a stream of orange and blue energy towards himself. Alethar prepared to call a retreat, but Hades was only interested in Athena. The android was still ducking and diving around him, sometimes only a few inches ahead of his grasping hands.

Hades gathered the energy of Yggdrasil in his hand and aimed his palm at Athena, who moved closer to Hades, waiting for a blast to engulf her. Instead, Hades drifted backwards towards the hole in space, as if to retreat. Athena continued flying in a tight pattern around Hades' head, denying him a target. It took all of her focus just to keep the terror at bay and resist the urge to speed away from her foe, knowing that would make her a sitting duck if he intended to hurl Yggdrasil at her.

A thin yellow tear appeared in space high above the artificial entrance into Yggdrasil, and Athena grinned as tears came to her eyes. *About time.*

Athlon tried to take in the overwhelming violence playing out below him as he exited Yggdrasil. His brain raced from object to object, informing him of everything that was happening and settling on Athena, staying close to Hades as the monster crept back towards his hole. Fear and

desperation surged in Athlon's mind, and he was moving towards them before any coherent decision had formed in his mind. He watched in horror as Hades twisted in space and dove into Yggdrasil, Athena struggling to put distance between herself and the transfixing chaos churning below.

Alethar breathed a sigh of relief as he saw Athlon arrive, and then cheered as Hades disappeared into Yggdrasil. He couldn't see what Athlon could from above: the gaping hole remained open, and Hades was staring up at Athena, the force of his mass reentering Yggdrasil working like an undertow tugging on all matter above the break between realms.

Hades sent a blast of Yggdrasil's energy up into regular space as Athena pushed her flight motivator past its safety limits just to gain a few inches of altitude. It wasn't a typical weapon; Hades was using the heavy chaos to exert extreme force on Athena, dragging her small body towards him. Athlon was speeding downwards towards her, hot tears forming in his eyes as he watched her struggle. He had to use his thrusters to slow his descent, knowing if he caught up to Athena with too much velocity he would knock her into the boiling cauldron greedily trying to swallow her up. It broke his heart every time he had to fight against the force that was carrying him towards her.

Athena was shutting down her own systems to divert power to her thrusters, leaving only her womb and brain online. A silent alarm told her she was about to burn out her secondary thrusters, but she pushed on, instinct and fear guiding her actions more than anything else. Still she was losing ground.

Athlon changed tactics as he calculated that his window to catch and carry her out of harm's way was disappearing. As she slipped towards oblivion, Athlon reached out with his mind, finding the treble matter making up her body and grabbing hold. He fired his entire flight system in the opposite direction, and her descent slowed, but she was still in danger of being engulfed. Athlon poured power he didn't know he had into his thrusters, an epic tug of war playing out between the Android and Hades, with Athena as the prize.

Athlon roared as his body began groaning under the opposing forces pulling on him. Athena's body was under even more stress, and Athlon started to worry she would be torn apart before he could pull her out. Still he was losing the battle, and he lifted his head to look down at Athena.

With Yggdrasil filling his view behind her, time seemed to slow. Athena met his gaze across the hundred feet between them, and saw the strain in his face. She knew he had no more strength. There was no way he could overcome the force of the Titan's Realm, and no way he could close it without first letting go.

Athena forced a weak smile as she gazed into the eyes of her love.

NO...

She touched her belly, searching for the seam where her torso was split into two pieces of armor.

NO!

Athena ripped her stomach apart, tearing her body open to Athlon's utter horror. Gasping in pain, she reached inside and pulled her baby daughter from her gravely damaged body, white light and sparks pouring out of the wound.

Reaching the threshold of the entrance into Yggdrasil, chaos convulsed as it tried to absorb the mother and infant teetering between dimensions. The baby opened its eyes and looked up at its mother, and began growing rapidly as time twisted incomprehensibly. Within seconds she was passing from toddler to child before Athlon's eyes, growing at an incredible rate. Athena lifted her offspring away from her and found Athlon's gaze once more.

I LOVE YOU.

Athlon clenched his teeth as tears splashed from his eyes, screamed at Hades with pure rage, and then made the hardest decision of his life.

Athlon let go of Athena, instead gripping the young android that had come out of her. Athena fell into Yggdrasil, and the hole in space snapped shut, sudden silence replacing the roar of the raging inferno that had filled the region.

The child rose through space into Athlon's arms, shiny and new. She still glowed with a faint light, and Athlon wrapped her in his arms as he sobbed.

Athena was dead.