

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

# VEILED EMPYREAN

PART VII

A sense of shared reflection was almost tangible in the galaxy as Athlon hurtled towards Olympus. He felt at peace, as if his emotional wounds could start the long process of healing with Ananke's revelation as a salve. Exhaustion had been replaced with hope.

Sensing he was almost home, Athlon opened Yggdrasil and emerged into normal space, seeing Olympus glowing in the distance. He turned to see the repaired Olympic fleet, nearing the end of the long odyssey home. The drones flew in a wide formation alongside the Olympic ships with Areia and Hiratio in the lead. Athlon grinned as the first distant notes of Areia's song reached his ears.

Athlon felt Harmony's pride swell in his chest as they moved to take their place among the allies of Olympus. Areia hurried ahead to greet her father, and they took each other's hands for the descent on Olympus. Hiratio raised a hand to Athlon with a smile, and the Android nodded in return. It was time to introduce the drones to their new world.

Athlon opened his Ares Clef and joined Areia in song, allowing triumph to leap in his mind. Olympus turned its attention to the sky, its streets filling with people summoned by the music and excited to receive the returning heroes and new friends. Alethar landed first, setting his flagship down in the heart of Olympic City, followed closely by the drones. Olympians surrounded the site, cheering as Alethar stepped out of his ship. He waved quickly before dropping to his knees and kissing the surface of Olympus. It was very good to be home.

Noticing the drones were shifting uncomfortably nearby, Athlon put his arm around one and led him over to a group of human citizens. He introduced the two before nearly getting tackled by a

young girl who had rushed forward to hug him. The Android laughed heartily, letting the good feelings of the celebration fill him up. His plans could wait; now was a time to celebrate.

Hiratio started shaking every hand he could find, his insecurities evaporating as he felt the overwhelming welcome of the humans of Olympus. Athlon caught his eye and winked as he spread his arms wide, as if to say *Didn't I promise you would find acceptance?* Hiratio nodded as the same girl rushed to hug him as well, abandoning Athlon to wrap her small arms around Hiratio's metallic legs. As Athlon lifted off, he took in the grand scene below; the drones and humans had begun mingling all around the square in the shadow of Alethar's massive ship.

Nearby, Areia kissed Enison on the cheek as he emerged from his own ship, his large frame ducking the low ceiling as he walked down the boarding ramp into the sunlight of Olympus. He put one arm around Athlon's daughter as he closed all four of his eyes, turning his face towards the sun and letting it warm his face.

Thousands of Nereids poured into the city center next, surrounding the returning coalition. Enison knelt to let Cadence step on his hand, placing the tiny Indigo Priest on his shoulder. They moved off towards the drones, Cadence requesting they get close so he could glimpse the new people. Cadence felt a potential kinship with the children of Babylon, recognizing that they were both races that had lost their planets. Mary had already granted all Nereids citizenship on Olympus, but the adjustment to living on a world other their own was something Cadence believed could unite the two peoples.

Areia looked up to see Athlon gesturing towards her from above. She lifted off to join him in the sky, and they danced above Olympus with joy. Today, there was no war to fight. Friends were being made, and the galaxy was safe. Athlon opened himself to his song, and Areia joined him, thinking of her mother's memories of the celebration that followed the defeat of Zeus so many years ago. The Champions sped away from the city to circle the planet, sharing their music with the billions below. Like her favorite stories from history, a planet-wide party was breaking out.

As they flew, Areia watched Athlon. He was genuinely happy, something she had so rarely gotten to see. The Android was filled with glee as he watched the masses leave their homes to dance without care. He was truly alive as he felt the response the people had to his songs, and he

poured his happiness into lyrics for all to share. Children pointed up at the Champions as they circled Olympus, the Ares Clefs translating the androids' elation into music. Areia was giddy.

Far below, the crowds parted to let the queen through, followed closely by Maya. Mary ran into her father's arms, letting Alethar lift her off the ground in a huge hug as if she were still a little girl. She giggled, ignoring her royal status to join in the celebration. Today she was just a proud Olympian like everyone else. When Alethar put her down, she danced with Hiratio, laughing at his jerky motions before taking his hands and showing him how to move smoothly to the music.

Alethar dipped Maya backwards and kissed her passionately, making her squeal in surprise. Her eyes filled with affection as they smiled up at the face of her husband for the first time in a century. She was always amazed at how beautiful he was, like her memories couldn't hold a true image of the man she loved. After a long moment for herself, she patted Alethar on the chest and kicked off her shoes, hurrying to dance among the drones, moving between them fearlessly. Those who were shyly sticking together had been awkwardly watching their counterparts take their place along the celebrating masses; Maya clapped and swirled through them, encouraging them to join in. She scooped up a Nereid who performed some impressive moves on her extended palm, and the rest of the crowd followed her lead, offering their hands to Nereids, who hopped between human and synthetic shoulders, feeling welcome in the Olympic celebration. Soon there was no border between the three species, just a single audience basking in the music of the androids. The planet moved as one, cheering and waving as Athlon and Areia sped past them again and again, filling the skies with the perfect music for the occasion.

Athlon could hear the voices of the people, calling him to join the crowds below. Areia urged him to go, and she took off, changing the subject of her lyrics to focus on him. Athlon landed delicately in the square to huge cheers, nodding coolly and playfully gesturing for more. Mary emerged from the crowd and bowed, and the people inched closer to their Champion. The celebration reached a fever pitch as Olympus doted attention on the Android, energized by Areia's lyrics and cheering as Athlon began to move to the beat. Harmony quickly made her way up his shoulder and emerged to her own round of applause, and the two danced for their massive audience. Athlon whooped with joy as he accepted the attention, feeling invigorated by the love he was being shown.

Athlon started singing again, pouring braggadocious attitude into his own lyrics as Areia adjusted her tune to match. The people practically worshipped him, identifying their own emotions through his and screaming with pride at the opportunity to count him as one of their own. The most famous person in the galaxy loved them; their excitement boiled over and they rushed to their beloved Champion's side, hefting him high above their heads and carrying him through the streets. Athlon seized on the moment, singing a new song to the receptive masses and encouraging them to see their own greatness. He put his own bravado behind the citizens of Olympus and led them in chants of empowerment. As Athlon looked at the faces of the people cheering for him and his friends, he saw pure potential. They were all champions, he decided, heroes in their own right just beneath the surface. The Android felt as alive as he ever had, and held tight to the reminder that the galaxy was full of incredibly powerful beings, each capable of remarkable acts of courage and kindness. He wanted them all to see themselves in him.

Areia kept the party going for hours, dancing across the sky and associating the feeling with freedom. This was surely how things were meant to be. She studied the people below, carefully watching the interactions between the drones, Nereids and humans. They had all the momentum; her brain processed everything she saw and highlighted the opportunity before them. The losses of the war couldn't hamper their spirit, and the grief of yesterday was given no quarter by the elation of today. This energy was a huge source of power. Inclusion and unity were natural, she decided. This great wave of energy could be harnessed for lasting good. The future started now.

Areia finally slowed her Ares Clef and completed her final lap around the planet. It was time to talk with the leaders below and build something permanent. As Areia touched down, she saw Hiratio moving to meet her. She smiled to herself at the sight of him, feeling the now-familiar emotions of love bubbling in her stomach. They had grown close during the past months, working closely together to help Khawla as Byzantine made the transition from captive empire to sovereign world. Areia looked forward to her time with the drone, and sensed his strong attraction to her. They had come to value the other's point of view, and had made an excellent team in rebuilding the vital infrastructure of Byzantine that had been destroyed or neglected during the war. Khawla had even remarked on the budding romance between them, and had privately encouraged Areia to pursue the relationship.

Filled with ecstasy from the party, Hiratio swallowed his nervousness and met her with a deep kiss, something he had previously reserved for private moments. Enison whistled, and Hiratio shyly looked around at the crowd as they applauded the display. Athlon smiled to himself as he saw the pure joy on Areia's face, thinking of how proud Athena would be of her daughter. He glanced up at the darkening sky, raising an eyebrow as he imagined her watching the celebration. *Do you see what you've left me to deal with?*

As the people of Olympus slowly made their way back to their homes, happy and tired, Mary accompanied the leaders towards the palace. Alethar and Maya waved to the others, choosing to retire to their grand home nearby for the evening. Areia walked beside Mary, hurrying through her thoughts about the positive momentum felt across Olympus. Mary nodded along as she listened, putting one arm around Areia's shoulders. The queen had been having some of the same thoughts.

In the royal treaty room, the heroes of the galaxy sat around a large table, ready to work together to begin molding the future. Athlon took note of those present; Enison and Cadence, Mary, Areia and Hiratio. A Unity Arch came to life, projecting the image of Khawla at her place at the table. History was about to be made. Athlon smiled, quietly exiting onto a palace balcony. He looked out over the city, the sounds of distant celebrations fueled by younger citizens not ready to end the evening. He looked at the ruins of the Olympic archives, a black wound that had not yet been rebuilt. Athlon nodded to himself, feeling Harmony's slight surprise that he was pleased to see the rubble. It evaporated quickly as Athlon turned his gaze upwards to the white moon glowing in the night sky, sharing with his companion the idea still weaving itself in his powerful mind. Harmony joined the brainstorm, and they started devising a plan together in perfect silence.

Inside the palace, Khawla was building on Areia's framework. Enison and Hiratio were writing furiously on scraps on paper, nodding along with Khawla's grand ideas. What was being proposed was bigger than anything the galaxy had seen before, and its implications were pure and hopeful. Cadence paced up and down the table, adding his own thoughts as the idea snowballed and mutated.

Mary was thrilled. She could think of no other group of individuals she would rather see drafting the galaxy's path forward. She had been deeply concerned with what shape interstellar politics

would take in a post-Norn galaxy. Fearful that a long series of protracted civil wars would plague the thousand worlds of the former Caliphate, she had spent many sleepless nights talking to Khawla through the Unity Arch about what Olympus could do to promote a unified Byzantine Empire moving forward. Mary had also found that her abilities to see across space had disappeared. With the Empyrean destroyed, her link to Yggdrasil had been shattered. She was not used to being so limited in her perception; now only time could reveal what the future of the Byzantine expanse might look like.

The death of the Norn had done more than lift the direct threat of the Empyrean; the removal of the parasites had raised the veil of seclusion and fear that had been cast over trillions of people, making them suddenly aware of their place in the wider galaxy. The Norn's effect on time had been erased, and a collective memory seemed to be casting a light across the masses. The overwhelming fear of free thought had, in a way, been removed from the past as well as the present. The Norn's roots in the Caliphate sprang from inside Yggdrasil, and relied as much on a twisting of time to control the past and future of Byzantine as it did on manufactured deities and fear-inspiring texts. When Athlon broke the Empyrean, he had weakened the Norn's impact on Byzantine's history. The people of the former Caliphate were surprised to find themselves feeling awake without having slept. The connection to a sense of spirituality remained for many, but the zealous slavery to the commands of religious leaders seemed alien and distant. The people rejected their enforced self-destructive priorities, happy to move towards a society that respected life over faith. They shed the hateful shadow of the evil Norn to find their humanity reaching for the sun.

Now, as Mary watched in pride, Khawla announced that she believed she could lead the worlds of the Byzantine Expanse to a vote in favor of forming a new Galactic Union with Olympus and its allies. Discussion quickly focused on a constitution for the proposed Union, with Enison and Hiratio combining their notes into a first draft. Khawla and Mary added helpful points from their knowledge of political philosophy as the document took shape, and Cadence found Areia to be a like-minded visionary partner in anticipating the organizational needs of the government. Votes would have to be held, as sovereign worlds would have to choose to cede some authority to a Galactic Assembly in exchange for membership. Mary was prepared to sell the idea to the people of Olympus, and was confident that Thrace and Mesopotamia would follow their lead.

By dawn, Hiratio, Enison, Areia and Cadence had created a single document to be voted on. The constitution divided the government into two major branches; the Galactic Assembly would serve as the legislative body, and would consist of elected senators from every member world. The Indigo Order would serve as the judicial branch and provide the Galactic Union with a military and police force. Indigo Priests would enforce the laws passed by the assembly and serve as regional judges across the Union. The Indigo Order had already proven they were capable of such tasks, and Enison was confident that it could extend its responsibilities into a governing body across new territories. He insisted that the Indigo Order be allowed to choose a new world to serve as its organizational home; The constitution was being drafted on Olympus, and Enison wanted to avoid the appearance that Olympus was favored by the Galactic Union.

The constitution declared religious laws as void of enforcement on Union planets: religious practices were the right of any person to exercise, but no religion could act on any judgement of another's lifestyle as 'sinful'. Religion would be for the individual or individuals practicing only, and must not encroach on the desires or actions of any other. The philosophy of the new government would be based on recognizing equality for all people, regardless of belief system, species, race or gender. Personhood was the only qualifier for recognition and protection under the law. No lifestyle choice could be used to restrict the rights of a person so long as their behavior did not interfere with the unfettered rights to life and movement of another individual.

The highest ideal of the Galactic Union would be the defense and support of life. In the eyes of the galaxy, sentient life and free will were decreed as sacred. Desecration of that which was sacred was the only crime listed in the constitution.

The Indigo Order would hold responsibility for recommending new members to the Galactic Assembly for inclusion. The constitution listed three conditions for membership: any planet, solar system or interstellar body applying for membership must operate under a singular and universally recognized government. A majority of the population must vote in the affirmative to join, and the applying group must agree to the laws of the constitution. The Indigo Order would deploy an envoy to confirm the conditions were met before the assembly could vote to accept the new member. It would not matter how wealthy or impoverished any planet was; all life would be considered equally in their application to become part of the Union.

Money would be removed from society. Resources would be shared and directed by the Assembly. Any attempt to direct surplus resources to a senator's constituency would be grounds for impeachment. For the Union to work, absolute trust had to be fostered. Greed could not be tolerated; it implied the elevation of one person over the others, which was antithetical to the operating philosophy of the Union. Areia described the Union as the largest family the galaxy had ever seen.

As a final addition, the drafters of the constitution included a provision for a special Council of Sages. It was believed that there were certain individuals that surpassed the typical definition of leaders who held specific jurisdictions, and that their voice could be vital for the Union's success. Council members could not be compelled to engage in any government process, and could not be voted out of office. They would hold their positions for life, and would have the right to enter a vote on any legislation or decision before the Assembly. Khawla, Hiratio and Areia nominated three members: Enison, Maya and Athlon. Enison abstained from voting on the provision, and it was passed without reservation.

As Cadence drew up the final draft of the new constitution, Areia and Hiratio stepped out onto the balcony to take in some fresh air. Surprised to find Athlon gone, Areia took the opportunity to talk privately with Hiratio. She asked the drone how he was feeling now that he had arrived on Olympus, and Hiratio considered his answer carefully. He explained that he was amazed by the trajectory of his own life. A century earlier he had been a second class citizen on Babylon. He had witnessed a genocide and become a slave, accepted leadership of an endangered race, and was now shaping policy for the galaxy. He felt humbled by the respect and trust of the citizens of Dopinephrine, thinking back to his childhood when he had been taught that Babylon was the only habited planet in existence. The journey had been unpredictable and remarkable, and Hiratio was proud of the part he had played in moving the galaxy forward.

Areia laid her head against Hiratio's chest as she listened to his words. She loved his reserved passion. She decided he was a pure individual, a champion in his own right. His words revealed a deeply thoughtful person who took the time to make himself understood. And he had a sexy voice.

The android grinned mischievously and took Hiratio's hand. She lifted off quietly and Hiratio followed, letting her lead him upwards to another balcony. Areia scanned the adjacent room,



found it empty, and quickly hacked the security pad that held the door locked shut. Inside was a grand bedroom reserved for foreign dignitaries visiting the queen. Hiratio glanced around in the dark with a moment of hesitation, but any concern over getting caught was erased from his mind as Areia kissed him deeply. Fireworks went off in Hiratio's mind as the night breeze billowed through the fine curtains hanging across the door. Hiratio felt Areia's excitement and embraced the thrill of the moment, transfixed by her jade colored eyes and the pleasure of her touch. He wrapped his arms around her and fell with her onto the soft bed, their bodies blending in an expression of youth and love.

When Areia awoke, Hiratio was laying on his side studying her face. They smiled at each other and Areia giggled, pouncing on Hiratio and playfully wrestling him off the bed onto the floor with a thud. The drone feigned pain even as he laughed, and felt a happiness he had never before experienced. Their laughter died down as they stared into each other's eyes, and Hiratio found that he was overcome with clarity.

### **MARRY ME AREIA.**

Areia blinked. Then she smiled, kissed Hiratio, and squealed in delight.

**Yes!**

Hiratio chuckled and kissed Areia back. He hopped to his feet and led Areia out onto the balcony where the sunrise was peaking over the horizon. They held each other as the new dawn warmed their skin, taking in the beauty of Olympus. Hiratio made a mental note to speak with Athlon about the marriage before telling anyone else. Hiratio's respect for the Android was unequalled, and the drone believed Areia's father deserved to be the first to receive the news.

Hearing his name, Hiratio looked down to see Maya waving to him. He resisted the urge to be embarrassed, knowing there was only one assumption that could be made about his arms around Areia on a bedroom balcony at dawn. He gave her another kiss before hopping over the railing and gliding to the ground.

The drones had gathered around Maya, but she waited for Hiratio to arrive before speaking. The former Tree of Life had chosen a wide swath of land on the outskirts of Olympic City, and claimed it as the site of an enclave for the drones. Maya said that they would be recognized as

legal citizens of Olympus if they liked, and that while they were welcome to live anywhere they wished, the home she was proposing would be a permanent area where repair facilities and whatever type of living quarters the drones desired would be built. Sensing no objections, Hiratio took Maya's hand in his own, and thanked her profusely. He felt a calm triumph passing between his people as they felt the welcome many of them had feared would not be extended.

Hiratio lifted Maya carefully, and the drones flew to the site to see their new home. The Nereid refugees had built a spacious hostel nearby, and they hurried to greet their new neighbors. Cadence had already drawn up plans for a permanent home for the Nereids that would connect to Olympic City and replace the temporary structures that currently surrounded the popular hostel, and the drones instinctively offered to help them with the labor needed to build what they needed. Cadence accepted the offer and immediately asked Hiratio what kind of buildings the drones had in mind to service their own needs. Hiratio responded that he literally given it no thought; no drone had ever designed architecture before, nor possessed enough free will to plan for their futures. Cadence looked the drones over and started taking notes about what kind of facilities would be required to keep the complex machines in good working order. Maya closed her eyes as she felt the two fabrics of life converging. This was exactly what she had hoped for.

SCANNING for her father, Areia found his signature coming from Thebes, Olympus' largest moon. Areia left the palace for space, touching down near Athlon a few moments later. He glanced up at her and smiled, but Areia could see she had broken his concentration. She sat beside him on the rocky surface of Thebes, its surface cold and devoid of color. Ahead of them, Olympus glowed, sunlight glinting off the surface of the ocean.

### **What is it?**

Athlon took a deep breath. He squeezed Areia's hand and slowly repeated Ananke's words from their meeting in The Quintessence. He fell silent after saying that Athena had been declared alive, giving Areia time to absorb the news.

### **What can it mean?**

Athlon shook his head slowly, uncertain. He recalled Ananke's advice that Areia needed to search her memories. The Android glanced at his daughter as he suggested they attempt melding consciousnesses. Athlon's guidance could help direct the younger android through her earliest experiences, and help her remember the moments of her birth, but he feared the experience could potentially be traumatic, maybe even painful. Areia agreed nonetheless, and Athlon gave her a reassuring smile before placing his fingertips on either side of her head. Electricity hummed between his touch and her skin, summoning the unique link that would allow them to blend their minds into one.

Fear weighed on the minds of Athlon and Areia. They saw Yggdrasil, burning huge and endless in baby Areia's vision. Athlon could feel the fear and confusion of the infant as she turned towards her mother who was pulling the tiny android from her ravaged womb. The baby could feel the presence of the massive monster behind them, reaching to steal her mother away. Athlon had known fear many times in his life, but never as pure and overwhelming as the emotion he felt locked in Areia's memories.

Acting on instinct, the infant gripped her mother's chest for protection. Through the memory, Athlon felt Athena's own terror as she searched desperately for a way to protect her child. Death loomed in every direction. Her only thread of hope was aimed at the Android high above her, struggling to hold on to the perilously placed family. Baby areia closed her eyes and made a

wish. She did not have a vocabulary yet, but her desire was translated in Athlon's mind none the less.

*Take mommy somewhere safe.*

Yggdrasil lapped at Athena, splashing across Areia's small body as her connection to Athena was severed. Her father had taken hold of her, pulling her away from the maw as it swallowed her mother.

*PUT MOMMY SOMEWHERE SAFE!*

A nearly invisible tendril of white energy burst from the baby's forehead, speeding through the closing entrance into Yggdrasil and surrounding Athena. The Titan's realm tried to envelop her, but was repelled, and Athena seemed to phase in and out of existence, parts of her growing transparent in the cocoon woven by Areia's will. The shield of energy grew so bright that Athlon could no longer make out Athena inside it. Then it shot out of sight as Yggdrasil closed. Areia's memory continued as she turned in space and met Athlon's open arms. They were strong, and the baby felt her fear dissipate as her father carried her away from the nightmare.

Areia blinked around at the surface of Thebes as the connection ended. She shivered as the terror of the memory evaporated, and looked at Athlon. He took a deep breath, and a tear ran down his cheek, but he smiled weakly at Areia. Whatever she had done defied his understanding of her abilities, but clearly she was more powerful than he knew. The baby's instincts and love had shattered every limitation when she had seen her mother in danger. Athlon wiped away the tear and chuckled weakly as Harmony broke the silence with a victorious whoop. The Android looked up at the endless stars that were his playground. Somewhere, hidden among the stars, Athena was alive.

Athlon stood up quickly. He started pacing along the surface of the moon, collecting his thoughts before speaking, and then immediately scattering them again. He casually told Areia that he and Harmony were claiming Thebes as their home. Here they would build a grand citadel, within which they intended to curate a library. It would replace the Olympic archives, but would also be expanded to serve as the archives for the entire galaxy. It would contain complete records of every world that joined the Galactic Union, plus every world Athlon visited on the side.

Areia nodded, tried to keep up, and finally interrupted; what did any of this have to do with Athena?

Athlon grinned his widest grin. Thebes was where he was going to build the most comprehensive database of all time. Somewhere out there was a clue to Athena's location. Running the official archives for the only galactic union in history was a pretty great way to start looking.

Areia grinned back. It was perfect. She told him that they could ask the entire Union to look for Athena; they could comb the galaxy practically overnight—

Athlon stopped her. A Champion had once before gone missing, and Olympus had overreacted in the extreme. Good had come of the ensuing war, revealing the presence of the Norn and fertilizing the idea of an interstellar community, but it had been a war nonetheless. Athlon feared the galaxy wouldn't be able to resist the urge to tear itself apart looking for another lost android. The truth about Athena had to be kept secret. Building the archives on Thebes would also serve as cover for Athlon's search. There was nothing suspicious about a retiree traveling the galaxy as an archivist, now was there?

Areia couldn't help but match Athlon's sly grin. He was clever, and he knew it. Areia approved of the plan, and giggled as she thought of Mary's reaction when Athlon informed her that he was taking the moon. It seemed both crazy in its boldness and like the only rational plan she could imagine. With a low chuckle, Athlon and Areia departed the spartan moon to return to Olympus.

As they landed, Mary's voice was being projected from every speaker and personal computer in the city. The Indigo Order had tallied the votes of the Olympians, which now included all drones and Nereids in the galaxy; the planet had agreed to join the Galactic Union. Khawla applauded from a Unity Arch beside the queen of Olympus and announced in turn that Byzantine had decided to join as well. She read a list aloud, naming the hundreds of worlds that had also voted to unite under the new government. Mary showed her own list, which included Thrace, Mesopotamia, and over 400 additional planets allied with Olympus. The final tally showed 1153 founding members of the Galactic Union. It was even more than everyone had hoped for.

Enison set to work recruiting new priests to cover the huge section of the galaxy that was now unified under a single banner. Hundreds of new monasteries and Unity Arches would have to be built across the stars. He was filled with pride as he viewed an updated interstellar map on a wide viewscreen in the palace.

The people of former Caliphate worlds asked for a single alteration to the constitution; the Council of Sages was listed as including Enison, Maya and Athlon. The people recognized that the Android's Olympic name was Athlon, but billions of people had come to refer to him by another title. Taken from an ancient Byzantine legend, the people called Athlon *Cadmus* after a hero who had revealed the original great truths of life to the first people of the planet. Cadmus was seen as a great prophet who had guided the earliest generations of recorded history out of the darkness of prehistory and helped them organize into a flourishing civilization. Cadmus was synonymous with victory, and when Athlon heard that the name had been bestowed upon him, he was overcome with the honor. Hundreds of worlds considered it a sign of ultimate respect to apply the name to the man who had defeated the Norn. Cadence added the name to the constitution so that both Cadmus and Athlon were acceptable references to the Sage.

As Mary and Khawla discussed a schedule for a galactic signing ceremony, Hiratio approached Athlon and asked if they could talk. Athlon obliged, and the two flew to the roof of the palace. Athlon congratulated Hiratio on his leadership, and commended him on his bravery during the assault on Byzantine during the apex of the war. Hiratio nodded, but shifted his gaze back and forth. This was probably the most powerful being in the galaxy, and Hiratio was about to ask his daughter's hand in marriage.

Athlon noticed Hiratio's discomfort and fell silent, offering a gentle smile. He put one hand on Hiratio's shoulder, and the younger man finally met the Android's eyes.

**I'M IN LOVE WITH AREIA. SHE FILLS ME WITH A JOY I'VE NEVER KNOWN  
BEFORE. TO ME, SHE IS PERFECT. I'VE ASKED HER TO MARRY ME, AND I'VE  
COME TO ASK FOR YOUR BLESSING.**

Athlon blinked, and a lump formed in Hiratio's throat. For a moment he wished to be back on the battlefield of Byzantine rather than wait for the Android's response. He kept his eyes locked on Athlon's, refusing to let his nervousness show.

Athlon grinned. He scooped Hiratio up into a hug and spun him around before putting him back down. With a laugh, Athlon slapped the drone on the back and grabbed his hand, pumping it up and down.

WELCOME TO THE FAMILY DEAR HIRATIO.

Hiratio grinned as he shook Athlon's hand, relief washing over him. Athlon was overjoyed, and his face lit up with excitement. Harmony emerged from Athlon's neck and leapt into Hiratio's hands dancing and offering her congratulations. Harmony loved weddings.

Athlon furrowed his brow, pretending to be perplexed.

YOU'LL NEED A WEDDING RING.

It was true. Hiratio had never been to a wedding, and he found himself searching the records in his brain for a description of what was expected of him. Some cultures engaged in long recitals of memorized proclamations of dedication. Fumbling the words could result in the wedding being called off. Other worlds required the groom to undertake a year-long pilgrimage through dangerous jungles to retrieve the proper ore for the wedding ring. What would be demanded of him? Whatever it was would surely be worth it....

Hiratio's thoughts were interrupted by Athlon's extended hand. Floating an inch above his palm spun an amazingly beautiful ring. The drone found himself at a loss for words. He quickly realized that the ring must have been meant for Athena, and the generosity of Athlon's offer stunned him.

Athlon smiled with just a hint of sadness as he looked at the treble matter band. For the millionth time, he thought of his lost mate and the things she was missing. She deserved to witness her daughter's wedding.

With a gesture, Athlon invited Hiratio to take the ring. With deep reverence, the drone shifted Harmony into his left hand to take the silver band with his right. Athlon clapped him on the shoulder again, and extended his hand for Harmony to jump into. As she scampered up his arm he turned and flew off the roof, opening the Ares Clef to sing as he sped past the city's skyline. It was time to celebrate.

Less than a week later, the palace courtyard had been dressed in cheery decorations. Tables heaping with food and gifts lined the outer edge, and Maya chatted with Enison on one side of a low stage. Hundreds of guests sat in rows, and thousands of onlookers lined the street and filled the surrounding parks and walkways. A Unity Arch broadcast the proceedings across the planet and to scores of distant solar systems as the galaxy tuned in for the event.

Mary played hopscotch with some children nearby, pausing the game to gather them and call attention to the back of the courtyard as royal music began to play. Everyone's eyes were locked at the courtyard entrance as Areia came into view, practically glowing on her father's arm. The androids beamed at the excited crowds as they made their way down the red carpet that led to the stage, Harmony standing proudly on Athlon's shoulder. Maya had taken her place in the center, and Hiratio emerged to join her in meeting the young bride. As Areia stepped up onto the stage, Athlon kissed her hand and offering it to Hiratio. The drone took it as Athlon stepped aside, standing behind the groom with his hands clasped. Hiratio and Areia locked eyes with so much affection witnesses would later claim they could feel the love passing between them.

As Maya recited vows for the couple to repeat, Athlon looked out into the crowd. They were spellbound, practically holding their breath as the ceremony took place. Fathers hefted children on their shoulders, and women cried quietly into handkerchiefs. Nereids perched on the heads of drones to get a better view of the nuptials. On the Unity Arch, flanked by Byzantine officials, Khawla held her hands against her mouth as if she didn't trust herself to stay silent without their aid. The budding Galactic Union had paused the business of a trillion people to take in the celebration. No one wanted to miss the opportunity to say they had witnessed the event. Athlon's head swam at the magnitude of the crowd. He remembered reading once that every father thought of his daughter as a princess; his was somehow even more.

Hiratio slipped the ring onto Areia's finger, and the crowd exploded in applause. Harmony wiped away a tear and whistled loudly, touching Athlon's thoughts to congratulate him. Athlon



thanked her as Hiratio leaned in to kiss his wife. The crowd threw rose petals in the air as music began to play, signaling that the ceremony was over and the party had begun.

That night Olympus feasted. Nereid cuisine had been added to the huge selection of traditional Olympic foods, which reflected the influences of Mesopotamian tastes, a staple since the era of the Epsilon Invasion. One could hardly turn around anywhere on the planet without being offered some morsel or dessert. Harmony insisted on sharing a daffodil seed pie with Athlon, who laughed as she hopelessly tried to clean the sticky cream sauce from her whiskers. Drones did not eat, but that didn't stop Hiratio from catching Areia off guard long enough to smear vanilla icing from their wedding cake across her lips and cheek, drawing laughter from the crowd.

When the cake had been cut and eaten, Athlon began to sing. A hush fell across the people as Hiratio took Areia's hand and led her into the center of the dusked courtyard. They danced as Athlon crooned, the Ares Clef carrying the tune across the surface of Olympus and out among the stars. Maya and Alethar joined the newly weds on the dance floor, and soon half the planet had chosen partners to dance along with Areia and Hiratio. Love filled the air, and the voices of a galaxy full of citizens joined Athlon's beautiful ballad.

When the song ended, Athlon changed tune, increasing the tempo and bringing the party into full swing. The drones joined in, performing a synchronized dance that drew whistles and cheers from the audience. As Athlon brought the dance music to its height, Enison shocked everyone by leaping from his seat into the fray, breakdancing with impressive flexibility. Athlon clapped with the rapid beat as the always-serious High Priest spun on his head and contorted his body to the delight of everyone.

As the night wore on, Areia finally found a break between congratulations to slip over to where Athlon was kneeling. He was bending spoons with his mind for the entertainment of jubilant children, high on a combination of sugar and the knowledge that it was well past bedtime. Areia held back for a moment, watching the Champion of the Galaxy thrilling the kids with party tricks. This was a man who had faced the destruction of the galaxy at least twice, personally gone toe to toe with Lucifer himself, and possessed the ability to travel through time. Now he was drawing extra laughs from seven-year-olds by pretending it was taking *all his might* to bend a spoon.

With a hint that there was some ice cream left, Areia sent the youngsters hurrying off in search of more treats. She hugged Athlon for a long time, told him she loved him, and then asked if she could have a moment with Harmony. The Nereid stepped into Areia's hand as Athlon strode off in search of fresh champaign.

Areia sat on the ground cross-legged, letting Harmony down in front of her.

***I need to take the time to thank you. I don't know if you realize how important you are in all this.***

Harmony waved her hand dismissively, thanking Areia but insisting she was just playing her part. Areia raised her hand and shook her head.

***No, listen to me. Harmony, you hold him together. You hold us all together. When I woke up as a child in the middle of a war, you were the first person I saw. You were the one making sure I was ok. You were my teacher and my nurse. You did what my mother was not there to do. I believe she would be grateful to you, and touched by your instinct to care for me. Without you, dear Harmony, I would not be the person I am. I might not even be alive. I certainly wouldn't be enjoying this evening.***

Harmony's lip trembled.

***You've been with my father a very long time. I see how he relies on you, how he loves you. And I see how very deeply you love him. You are so often his conscience, his inner voice. You are his best friend. Please know that I recognize that, and that you have my eternal gratitude and love.***

Areia extended her hand and opened it to show Harmony the delicate chain she was holding. Hanging from it was the opal Areia had made from a fragment of Wulthaire as it burned in Yggdrasil, now compressed down to a size appropriate for a Nereid. She explained what the necklace was and offered it to Harmony, who wept openly as she lifted the chain from the android's palm.

***Now you can carry a piece of your home with you.***

Harmony placed the opal around her neck and admired it as the colors churned endlessly within the jewel. She wiped away her tears and met Areia's eyes, emphasizing her response.

*Thank you, thank you so much.*

*This is so precious.*

*But Areia, please understand:*

*I already carry my home with me.*

Areia smiled at that, nodding down as the Nereid wiped her nose. Harmony patted the opal and slipped in beneath her coveralls before stepping on Areia's hand, who carried her back to Athlon who was happily sharing champaign with the blue-skinned duke of Delin'ghar 4.

Returning to the stage, Areia declared her eternal gratitude to her friends and family, and thanked the galaxy for joining her on the happiest day of her life. With a flirtatious wink, she announced that she was ready to retire for the evening with her new husband. Hiratio playfully fanned his face before bowing to the crowds and following Areia into the palace where Mary had arranged for them to stay in the royal suite.

Athlon sat down next to Enison and Alethar, popping a fresh bottle of champaign and pouring generously into their cups. They loitered idly late into the night, interrupted only by the occasional well wisher enthusiastically congratulating the father of the bride. They talked about nothing in particular, and yet about everything one could imagine. They shared stories and made each other laugh with impressions, and smoked cigars from Alethar's breast pocket until they were utterly exhausted. It was a perfect night.

TWO weeks passed before the happy news came. Mary was meeting with Athlon in her office about Thebes, or more specifically, about Athlon's declaration that the uninhabited moon was now his. The Android explained that Thebes would henceforth be separate from Olympus jurisdiction, and would serve as his private home as well as the location of the new Athens Library, grand archive of the Galactic Union. Unwilling to say no, Mary was wondering aloud what the legal process of transferring Olympus' largest natural satellite into Athlon's possession would consist of when Areia burst through the door, Hiratio close behind.

Areia looked back and forth between Mary and her father with an expression that suggested she might implode before blurting out that she was pregnant. Hiratio grinned from ear to ear as Athlon leapt from his seat, putting one hand on Areia's stomach. Hiratio was babbling about how they hadn't been sure that it would even be possible, but that the pregnancy represented one of the most significant events in drone history. After every attempt at creating new drones had failed, Hiratio had been operating under the assumption that the current drone population represented the entirety of the species' potential. Areia's pregnancy completely changed the future of the synthetic lifeforms.

Harmony spent the next month in the almost-finished drone enclave, overseeing the pregnancy much as she had one generation earlier. Athena's pregnancy had taught her a great deal, but the addition of drone variables could present new challenges. Meanwhile, Athlon returned to Thebes to begin preparations for the building of his citadel. He chose a large area that straddled the twilight zone of the tidally-locked moon. That way the front of the citadel, which would house Athens, would remain in light while the distant back side of the tower would typically stay shrouded in the dark side of Thebes.

It took weeks for Athlon to fly all of the materials and tools needed from Olympus to Thebes. Mary had offered him use of the fleet to ferry the massive shipments in a single trip, but Athlon had politely refused. Thebes was his project, and he told her that he would find peace in doing the work himself. He needed to work through the things he had nearly done in his grief over Athena, and knew that she would be displeased with his irrational attack on the citizenry of Byzantine, simulation or no. Building the archives in her name was his way of redeeming himself; she cared deeply not just for people but for what they created. To preserve the galaxy's records and history in her name would be a healthy catharsis for processing her loss. Athlon had to admit to himself that he wasn't lying; knowing that Athena was still out there somewhere had

only gone so far in soothing the hole in his heart. He still felt a lonely anguish at her absence; building the citadel simply gave him a way to focus his sorrow. A small piece of him feared that without the ambitious project, the old rage would too easily resurface.

Between trips he always checked in on Areia; the baby developing in her womb was growing even more quickly than Areia had as an infant. Athlon noticed that on the rare occasions when Hiratio was not by Areia's side, he was working with the rest of the drones to complete the enclave. Mary had designed an education center that was being included in the construction. It would serve as the baby's school once she was born. Cadence had also taken to spending a lot of time with Hiratio and Areia, and he was overseeing a select group of Nereids to act as teachers in the education center. All drones would be able to go there to gain a deeper understanding of synthetic intelligence theory, a field that Nereids excelled at. No one had yet been able to exactly recreate the process used by King Nabu-Li'ber to build Hiratio and the rest of the drones; the spark of life that provided them with sentience remained elusive, but the Nereids were the best qualified engineers in the galaxy to unlock the mysteries of synthetic life.

One day, while Athlon was organizing his construction yard on Thebes, he was contacted by Harmony. Areia had gone into labor. All signs were good, but the baby was coming fast. Athlon sped for the planet below with a smile on his face. It felt like yesterday that he had been young and falling in love with his dear Athena; now he was about to become a grandfather.

Athlon came through the front doors of the enclave's medical wing to the sounds of Areia moaning. He hurried to her room, where half a dozen Nereids were following Harmony's snappy orders, bring her various scanning devices and changing settings on the myriad of machines monitoring the pregnant android. Hiratio offered Athlon a weak smile as he paced nervously in the corner, unsure of what to do but wishing to stay out of the way. Athlon barely had a chance to join him before the slightly electronic sounds of a baby's cries filled the room. Hiratio dashed to Harmony's side, lifting the infant so the Nereid could sever the metacord connecting child and mother. He moved to Areia's side so she could see the baby, which wriggled its limbs and quieted its wailing as it caught a glimpse of Areia's face. Athlon stared in awe; the first synthetic hybrid in the galaxy had just been born.

Areia summoned Athlon closer and raised the child for him to take.

## ***Meet your granddaughter: this is Sophia.***

Athlon lifted the baby, cradling her in his arms. She looked up at him with greenish eyes that seemed to shine with every other color around the edges. Athlon touched her nose with his hand. She bit his finger. Then she giggled.

Harmony was performing a full scan of the child, collecting a review of her anatomy. All of her life signs were stable, and her internal readings closely matched her mother's. She had plasma infused defense systems implanted behind her retinas, much like Hiratio, and an underdeveloped flight system. Harmony surmised that the drone's flight capabilities would develop further over time. Her brain was a unique combination of android and drone construction, and Harmony announced that the child would have remarkable processing and analytical skills. In her chest was a tiny compartment seemingly designed for a Nereid co-pilot. She had inherited Areia's natural capacity for an onboard companion.

Athlon spent the night with Areia and Hiratio, each taking turns holding the new baby. Areia was recovering quickly, and no anomalies in the child had presented themselves. By all accounts, she was healthy and happy. Areia and Hiratio decided they would take her home to their quarters in the enclave the next day to greet the well wishers who were already calling to ask when they could see the child. Athlon and Harmony would return to Thebes to begin formal construction on the citadel.

As the sun rose, the hopes of the drones rose with it. While not the procreation method they had envisioned, live birth had proven capable of bringing new life to their species. Hiratio had never been so relieved. With his daughter in his arms, he walked slowly to the first place he truly felt at home since his childhood. He had a family, and had secured a place that belonged to the drones, who were recognized as contributing members of their adopted society. Everything Hiratio had ever wanted was before him. He nearly wept with the validation his journey to Olympus represented.

With a final circle around Olympus, Athlon saw that all was well. The people of Olympus had found a new sense of normalcy. Athlon focused his hearing, listening in on his friends before withdrawing to allow the galaxy to grow on its own. Enison was welcoming a new drone into the monastery to study as an Indigo Priest. Mary was discussing a timeframe for the first official

session of the Galactic Assembly with Khawla. Areia was singing softly to a cooing Sophia while Cadence and Hiratio discussed new ways for the Nereid and drone communities to work together. Maya was giving a lecture of the rights of the individual to a class of drones who listened intently. Alethar was overseeing the decommission of his battered flagship, his soldiers standing at attention awaiting their new assignments in the reorganized structure of Olympus. There was nowhere Athlon was needed. He nodded at his own self assurances, urging himself to accept the stewardship of his thriving friends, and flew for Thebes.

AS the years passed, Athlon made progress on his grand project. The framework of the citadel was intact, and much of the interior work for Athens was complete. Some nights he spent singing with Harmony, exercising his deepest anger to the invisible audience filling the silent craters of Thebes. The people of the galaxy left him alone, seemingly understanding his seclusion. In his darkest moments, as Athlon's emotions slowly purged themselves, he invented reasons the masses might be angry with him. Perhaps everyone thought he was hiding out of shame, secretly agreeing that he should have been able to save Athena. These thoughts never lasted long, but their impact plagued Athlon's confidence.

Most of the time Athlon worked. Harmony assured him the project was a noble one, and he found great peace in the labor. He enjoyed the control he had over the materials, the broad vision that was completely in his domain. He had adjusted his original blueprint a dozen times, slowly perfecting the citadel as time ticked by. He became obsessed with making the tower aesthetically ideal. He imagined Athena watching his work, never quite satisfied with the result. One day he meant to bring her here, and on that day he wanted her to see his handiwork as nothing less than flawless.

Part building, part sculpture, Athlon kept tweaking his design until he could find no more ways to improve upon it. He stared at the final blueprint for days without blinking, his brain calculating every possible adjustment and how it would affect the rest of the citadel. Having maximized every benefit, he finally considered the outline complete and resumed the work of actually building it.

Athlon poured energy into his coordination subroutines. Every rivet had to be driven with equal force; each panel needed to be absolutely parallel with its neighbor. A deviance of a single micron was enough to make him rip a panel down in disgust and realign it from a dozen different angles. When it came time to install the first massive dura-glass window, it took nearly a week of adjustments for Athlon to approve of how it reflected the light from every conceivable point of view. Harmony patiently recalculated a thousand vectors until Athlon was pleased. She recognized that his obsession was his way of keeping his demons at bay. When they threatened to corner him, she helped him focus on the next challenge of the citadel's construction.

Athlon's dreams were tortured with precise evaluations of his perfectly-remembered first battle with Hades. His subconscious had identified nine possible ways he could have rescued Athena



from the mad god's clutches. He had come to see Athena's safety as his responsibility, and his lack of foresight as a personal failure. That obsession produced nothing but twinges of self-loathing. By applying the same energy to his craft, Athlon could defend against the dark corners of his mind that threatened to suffocate him if he focused on Athena's fate. And so Harmony worked tirelessly to help him create the citadel.

When the last piece of the exterior had been installed to Athlon's satisfaction, he stood back and admired his creation. The sprawling citadel rose thirty floors straight up with curves and lines that would have defied gravity in an atmosphere. The glass tower erupted from the center, shooting another 100 floors into the air like an avant-garde shard of crystal. On the 90th floor, a grand balcony extended out from the tower on the dark side, concealed from all public areas below. This was meant to be Athlon's private entrance to his home, which consumed ten floors above and below the balcony.

Branching out from the side of the citadel was a huge dome made of hundred-foot glass panels resting in a reinforced steel frame. From the front, it was barely visible, but from a few hundred feet to the left, it dominated the landscape, dwarfing the lower part of the citadel. It sat empty, but Athlon had big plans for the specially designed dome. On the opposite side of the citadel, a long space dock extended along the surface of the moon for shuttles and small craft visiting from other worlds.

Inside the massive airlock at the front of the citadel was a wide transport room. Once activated, the citizens of Olympus would need only to enter a publicly accessible transporter and designate Athens as their destination. The short hop to Thebes would pose no issue for particle transport beams, and was part of the reason this half of the citadel stood in the light, with an unobstructed path to the planet below. Beyond Olympus, visitors would have to take a ship to visit in person, but Athlon had plans to keep the entire written collection copied digitally for instant access from any computer. Artifacts and art pieces would be rendered in full detail for remote holographic viewing. Athlon intended to make most research possible for any citizen no matter where they happened to be in the Galactic Union, regardless of their ability to visit in person.

Athens contained roughly 20 million square feet of space dedicated to housing the collections of the Union's worlds. Without weather or changing climate to worry about, the internal environment could be completely regulated to maintain the perfect conditions for any material

or artifact. Athens was divided into multiple museums so that content could be organized based on the various liberal arts, and a central computer-controlled archive provided access and storage for the collected written works of the galaxy. Digital records were stored in a massive fail-proof data rod that constantly hummed with power, rising like a pole from the center of the archives and extending through an enormous shaft all the way to the top of the tower. It could be directly accessed from any floor.

A hundred square miles on Thebes had been covered in advanced solar panels to provide constant clean energy to the citadel, and Athlon had buried a network of backup generators beneath Athens in case of catastrophe. He ran through the long checklist in his mind as he surveyed his work. It had taken nearly a decade to complete, but finally it was finished. Everything was ready.

Before returning to Olympus, Athlon left Thebes for a very special trip. Pushing a special cargo container he had designed to resist the harsh energy of Yggdrasil, the Android travelled through time and space, emerging near Wulthaire fifty years before its destruction. He landed in a remote part of the jungle covering the Eastern continent and Harmony emerged to the familiar sounds and smells of her home world. She excitedly pointed out various flora which Athlon carefully harvested from the ground by the root. They loaded the container with plant life of all types, and a selection of entire trees. Thorough scans helped them locate and remove all animal and insect life not absolutely required for the survival of the plants, and when the container was full Athlon resealed it and lifted it back into space.

A few probes from the base of his skull raced back down through the atmosphere and attached themselves to the computer network of Wulthaire's capital city, where they uploaded a complete copy of the planet's historical records and collected writings to Athlon's brain. The probes sped back into space before they could be detected, self destructing harmlessly in orbit around the doomed planet. Harmony took along last look at Wulthaire, thinking of the hundreds of thousands of people living there. She closed her eyes, accepting that they could not interfere with the planet's fate and trying find comfort in the collection they had saved. Athlon gripped the precious cargo and sped off, touching down a moment later back on Thebes in the present.

Athlon lovingly planted the miniature jungle in the center of the dome dubbed the Ecosphere, which he had filled with a universally accepted artificial soil substitute. Then he walked into the

empty archives and connected himself to the Athens mainframe, downloading Wulthaire's archives into the library. It was the first addition to the citadel's collection; a living piece of Wulthaire would be preserved in the galactic archives for future generations.

Knowing it was finally time to return to Olympus, Athlon left his lunar home for the blue planet it orbited. He set down near the drone enclave, hoping to visit Areia and Hiratio before too many people noticed he had arrived. He was amazed at the size of the sub-city that stood before him; the drone enclave had grown into a dwarf metropolis that coalesced seamlessly into Nereid structures and the older human buildings of Olympus' capitol. A simple playground sat between two apartment buildings nearby, and Athlon walked towards it, attracted by the innocent sounds of children laughing.

Two human girls chased each other around a merry-go-round, accompanied by two pre-adolescent Nereids who leapt between the girls' shoulders whenever they neared each other. Athlon watched the display with awe; he realized he was not outside a refugee camp, nor was he seeing an unlikely friendship; he was simply watching four Olympian children at play in the city they called home. Athlon smiled at the prosperity the decade had brought.

The girls' mother walked over to Athlon. She stood a few paces away, watching the game in silence for awhile before she spoke.

"I saw the streak in the sky, and my little ones wanted to play with their friends anyway... I had hoped you would come here. I always dreamed I would get to meet you again."

Athlon turned to look at the woman. She wore simple garments; an overstuffed bag hung from her shoulders, and her sweater was slightly frayed around the wrists. Athlon didn't recognize her.

"I was much younger back then. About their age I guess. You were my hero growing up. You're theirs too."

The woman gave a little nod towards her daughters at the reference. Seeing that Athlon didn't know who she was, she reached into her bag and pulled out a dinged up school textbook. She opened it right to the page she wanted and handed it to Athlon.

'Learn like a Champion!!' read Athlon's handwriting. The page was worn, but the black ink was still crisp.

"That day meant the world to me. we were so scared when the terror attack began, but when you arrived my father told me everything would be ok. You gave us courage.

I know you probably hear this everyday, but thank you.

Thank you for never abandoning us, for always giving everything you have.

Its people like you that give me hope. Please don't ever give up on us."

Athlon opened his mouth, realized he could think of nothing appropriate to say in response, and closed it again. Finally he reached for the pen hanging from the strap of her bag, and added new text beneath the old words, imagining it being passed down from student to student.

'Nothing is more important than you.'

The woman's eyes glistened as she accepted the book back. She stared at the message for a long time before squeezing Athlon's arm and walking back towards the playground. Athlon watched her go before walking off towards the entrance of the education center, his heart full.

Inside he was met by an ocean of activity. Drones and Nereids were gathered together in a blended classroom listening to Maya give a lecture on the responsibilities of free will. Athlon noticed that many of the drones were girls, and all of them were young adults. He listened to Maya's words as she wrapped up her talk upon seeing Athlon at the back of the class. the students paired off before leaving, a Nereid climbing inside each drone near the shoulder, much like Harmony entered her cockpit in Athlon's chest.

Maya embraced Athlon and spread her arms out in a wide gesture as if to say,

*Look at how much you've missed!*

Athlon nodded, asking what he had seen.

Sophia grew so quickly. In her second year she took a mate, a nice young man with a talent for mathematics. They had four girls, all of whom grew as quickly as she had, and they each took husbands.

This class is made up of fifth generation drones.

You're a very old man you know.

Athlon chuckled at the last statement, barely believing what he was hearing.

Cadence and Hiratio encouraged integration between the first generation of Olympic-Nereids and the drones. The two species are practically symbiotic now. Young drones pair with Nereids early in life, and they learn and grow together. Almost every drone since Sophia lives with a Nereid companion.

When they reach maturity, the pairs are exposed to nanobots, cementing the bond between drone and Nereid for life. It's a beautiful thing, Athlon.

The two races embraced a codependence that has made both stronger.

It's as if fate intended them to become one people; even their bodies are designed to work together. Speaking of which. . .

Areia had appeared at the back of the room and rushed into her father's arms. Cadence stood on her shoulder, and Athlon recognized that they had been joined like Harmony and himself. The world had changed a lot since he had last been in it.

Areia led Athlon back to her home where Sophia was meditating. The female drone opened her eyes slowly, rising when Athlon entered. She still looked young to Athlon, and it was hard to remember that she was a great-great-grandmother. She had almond-shaped eyes framed with long lashes, and high cheekbones defined her face. Her head had a gentle egg shape to it; larger on top, like Athena and Areia, Athlon thought. There was a fierce intelligence in her gaze,

but her smile was soft and delicate. She was beautiful. An elegant Nereid with long white fur stood on her shoulder.

i remember you from the day i was born. it is nice to see you again, champion. i have watched your progress on thebes, and i commend your addition to the great galactic union. i should very much like to visit it when you consider it ready.

please don't think me rude but i am lost in my calculations. i admit i find social conventions confusing, but i promise to talk with you as long as you wish when i visit thebes.

Her voice seemed to cut right through Athlon, touching his deepest thoughts. There was something different about her. The union between Areia and Hiratio had produced a remarkable creature; she looked and acted differently than the other drone offspring Athlon had seen. Athlon nodded absent-mindedly as he studied her. Realizing he hadn't spoken, he opened his mouth but Sophia had already turned her attention to her Nereid companion, and Hiratio led Athlon away to show off the nursery he had designed. Sophia glanced back at Athlon as he left, and the Android couldn't help but feel like she was looking right through him, like she could see parts of the universe no one else could.

Hearing that Athlon was visiting the enclave Mary's envoy brought her to see him. She was no longer queen, having dissolved the position at the first meeting of the Galactic Assembly. Her title now was senator, the same as every legislative member of the Galactic Union's Egalicracy.

Athlon informed Mary that Athens was ready to receive Olympus' archives, and that the rest of the Galactic Union was welcome to send inventories of their collections so the library could prepare for their arrival. Athlon said that he was prepared to help with any transportation needs. Mary thanked the Android and returned to the palace to make arrangements, and Athlon took a deep breath before walking down the street towards the part of the city Cadence had said housed the majority of unjoined Nereids.

Athlon noticed the huge numbers of synthetic lifeforms that filled the streets and milled around the homes he passed. Many nodded at him in recognition, but none stopped to talk to him. There was no hero worship here, just people going about their lives. Athlon smiled as he reminded himself that he was on an Olympic street, walking through a community of synthetics where he was just one of many. It was a pleasant feeling.

As Athlon walked, the population slowly blended until Nereids made up over half of the people he saw. Humans and drones were still present, but as the buildings became smaller, Athlon knew he was nearing the area where the refugees of Wulthaire had settled. Soon the Android was standing before the enormous hostel that still housed much of the original group that had accompanied Cadence to Olympus. Athlon reminded Harmony what he was looking for, and Harmony slid down his leg and hurried into the Hostel. Athlon sat on the ground to wait, and watched a family walking down the street. The mother pointed at a selection of hats through a shop window, and the family went inside to browse the selection.

Lost in thought, Athlon started as Harmony tugged at the corner of his mind. He looked down as she emerged from the Hostel with a small crowd behind her. Harmony explained she had made Athlon's offer known to the crowd inside, and that these were the Nereids who had accepted. Athlon nodded and stood up, double checking with the collected Nereids that they could think of no one else who would like to build a new life elsewhere before heading back towards the heart of Olympic city to rendezvous with the shipment of archived materials destined for Thebes. Athlon and Harmony had agreed that like any good library, Athens needed librarians, and they certainly had the space. The entire citadel would require care in fact, and they had decided to present an open invitation to the displaced Nereids to move with them to the moon. Fewer had accepted the offer than Athlon had expected, a testament to their prosperity on Olympus.

Harmony had especially encouraged those who had escaped Wulthaire alone, and who did not wish to bond with a drone partner to consider the option. Athlon wished to offer those who wanted a different lifestyle the opportunity to live in the Ecosphere on Thebes. Most of the Nereids Harmony had located found city life lacking, and jumped at the chance to live in the natural environment preserved in the citadel's biodome. They would care for the contents of Athens, assist visitors, and maintain the Wulthaire plant life that Athlon had rescued from time.

Near the palace, Enison and Alethar were helping to load the salvaged contents of the Olympic archives onto a transport vessel. 197 Nereids gleefully streamed aboard, chattering about how good it would feel to climb a native tree again. Athlon sealed the door and watched the ship lift off before turning to bid farewell to his friends. He shook Alethar's hand firmly, playfully reminding him not to go starting a war the next time someone disappeared. Alethar chuckled, but they both knew that history could have had it no other way.

Enison hugged the Android before he had a chance to extend his hand. Pulling him close, the High Priest recited an Indigo proverb in his ear.

*He who suffers the greatest loss must choose his path carefully;  
the difference between loss and lost is a T in the road.*

Enison grinned at the play on words, but his eyes urged Athlon to consider the message. Enison slapped Athlon on the shoulder and took a step back, saluting as Athlon rose into the air. The Android watched the two men grow smaller on the ground below and thought of the task ahead. Athena was a proverbial needle in a haystack, and Athlon didn't have a magnet. He needed time and privacy; it was time to shrink his public image. The Champion didn't intend to return any time soon.

With a burst of speed, Athlon caught up with the vessel and led it to the new space dock on the right side of citadel. A docking walkway extended automatically from the huge building and suctioned over the ship's airlock, allowing the crew to begin unloading the archives. Athlon met the Nereids in the grand foyer of Athens, grinning as he gestured around at the room. The Nereids stared around in awe, appearing even tinier than usual in the huge space. Too excited to wait, he gestured to his new friends, ran for the side entrance linking the citadel with the Ecosphere, and led them to their new home.

Athlon stood back and bathed in the joyous reaction of the Nereids. They rushed across the ground to the small forest, already taking root in the artificial earth. They leapt through ferns and climbed the broad tree trunks, acting like children in an amusement park. They thanked Athlon and Harmony profusely, and looked up through the transparent roof of the Ecosphere to see Olympus glowing in the distance. For these individuals, the closest thing to paradise the



galaxy had to offer had been found. A life of peaceful study in the calmness of nature was exactly what they wanted.

Days turned into weeks as the residents of Thebes fell into a pattern. The days were busy, but there was a shared sense that important work was being completed. Ships arrived daily with priceless archives from across the stars, and Athlon watched Athens grow with pride. Visitors began arriving as citizens and scholars worked to learn more about the other members of the Galactic Union. Harmony led the first field trip on a tour, helping the students find what they needed for reports on various subjects. Officially she was both Director of Operations for Thebes and Chief Curator of Athens, but there seemed to be no end to her responsibilities. If someone had a question, Harmony was likely to have the answer.

Many Union members sent samples of their planet's flora, and the Nereids (which Athlon had taken to calling The Chorus) recorded all of the arrivals and researched them for potential conflicts with plants already placed in the Ecosphere. Once a plant or tree or flower was cleared, it was lovingly given a home in the Ecosphere where it added to the eclectic jungle that grew there. Within three weeks, the Ecosphere contained plant life from over 50 planets. A particular breed of conure was identified as a good natural steward of the many fruit-bearing plants in the forest, and Athlon agreed to have some introduced to the carefully balanced Ecosphere. The Chorus was quite fond of the playful birds, and took to naming many of the small parrots, which ate just enough of the fruits and seeds of the plant life to promote healthy growth.

Carved into the Wulthaire trees and nestled between thickets on the ground, the Nereids build homes for themselves. They rejected most technology outside Athens, choosing to live as their ancestors had on Wulthaire; homes built high in trees were connected with hand-woven rope bridges and vines that had been manipulated as they grew to form ramps and stairs. A village formed in the Ecosphere, far from prying eyes, where the Chorus of Thebes thrived. They became fiercely loyal to Athlon, and loved it when he was involved in the day to day work of Athens, but they also respected his privacy when he brooded in his tower. Few knew that more times than not, he was poring over the archives as they grew, searching for hints to Athena's whereabouts.

One morning as Athlon read in his penthouse he was surprised to hear a knock at the door leading to his balcony. He opened it, and allowed Areia and Hiratio into his home. Athlon noticed that the drone had been modified with upgraded systems, granting him greater speed

and increased durability. The young couple announced they were leaving Olympus to explore the outer reaches of the Galactic Union. The mission had an Assembly-sanctioned goal, but Areia was just excited by the opportunity to see new sights and meet new people. The female android had accepted the role of Guardian of the Union, and Cadence would be serving as the diplomatic envoy of the Indigo Order in first contact situations. It was a perfect pairing.

Athlon felt envy claw at his thoughts for a moment. The thrill of heading into the unknown was what he had always lived for, and he longed to watch the look of wonder in his daughter's eyes as she saw the magic of the galaxy. He considered tagging along, but instead hugged Areia and shook Hiratio's hand. He wished them luck, and followed them back out onto the balcony to see them off. The silver streaks of their thrusters painted the start of their journey in the sky as they moved towards the infinite unknown. Athlon watched them dance across the sky and disappear into the distance.

A thousand worlds stood united, their futures woven together in the name of equality and progress. Athlon sensed that the Caliphate war marked the end of one era and the beginning of a new, brighter one. Dopinephrine had agreed to become the best version of itself possible. Greed and domination no longer had a haven.

Athlon turned his gaze to the Dopinephrine Nebula cluster, hanging brilliantly in the sky. It was undimmed by the light of Olympus or its sun on the dark side of Thebes, which was precisely why he had chosen to build his home facing the blackness of space. It reminded him of Athena, and of their precious time together. Athlon smiled as he pictured her beautiful face, and let himself imagine flying with her through their nebula. He began to hum a tune.

From the top of his tower, the Champion of the Galaxy sang for his love.  
He had every tool the galaxy could provide him, and an endless reserve of determination.  
Athlon grinned.

He would not stop. He would not rest.

He would find Her.





*Veiled Empyrean* was written and compiled by Cory Constein  
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*Story and character development by Cory and Danielle Constein*

*For a world capable of embracing its potential*