

## The Adventures of Christine and Tyler

### I. Queen of the Universe

On most days, Christine was perfectly happy being Queen of the Universe. Her workload was light, the pay was great and, most importantly, in her spare time she was able to keep an eye on, and have a little fun with, her erstwhile friends, family and associates back on planet Earth. Technically, she was subordinate to her son, Tyler, but they didn't have that much contact; and in any case, their relationship was much better than it had been in their Earth days.

Occasionally, her subjects asked her to adjudicate a controversy or settle a question, but because they were so incredibly agreeable and non-confrontational, that was very rare. She ruled a sophisticated and peaceful civilization which had amicably settled hundreds of star systems and worlds. Their science and culture were enlightened. Their worlds were as close to utopia as you could get; and as far as Christine could tell, they had only made two big mistakes in their long history.

The first mistake happened a long, long time ago. All of her subjects believed that eons ago they had done something terribly wrong. No one knew what it was, but the legend held that as a result of this unnamed and unnamable transgression, their god had abandoned them. He found them unworthy and just left. Split. He told them that some day they would venture out into the universe and find him. That would prove they were ready to have him return. He would be waiting for them somewhere.

Christine had always thought that was an interesting insight into the nature of her people. Their belief that when their god found them unworthy, he left and told them to come find him when they were ready for him to return, reflected the good natured passivity of her subjects. She realized that most folks back on Earth would have wondered why, if their god had been angry with them, he didn't kick them off the planet, or vaporize them, or drown them, or something a little more traditional and in keeping with the idea of how a god is supposed to behave. But her people had gotten a second chance. For all of their recorded history they had

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kept the legend alive, cherishing the complex pictogram design that their god had promised to leave for them somewhere out in the universe as a sign that they had finally found him when they came looking for him. Someday, they knew, they would embark on the intergalactic search to find their lost god. They had worked the symbol into their art and architecture and every native knew it and worshipped it.

Eventually, they decided that it was time to seek out their god and ask him to return. They were convinced that the heroic effort of scouring the universe would prove that they were worthy. They sent teams of scouts to search for the sign that would lead them to their god.

And that was when they made their second mistake.

By an incredible coincidence, the arrival of the alien search team in Christine's neighborhood coincided with the flourishing of her son Tyler's career as a serial graffiti 'artist.' Most evenings he was out late, festooning the area with his personal logo. He spray-painted it on fences, buildings, storefronts, bus shelters and rubbish bins. Christine had warned him to knock it off before someone complained. Nick, Christine's ex and Tyler's father, had told him that if he were caught, Tyler would pay for damages out of his own pocket. And even the policeman, who once caught Tyler in the act in the wee hours of the morning, asked him not to do it again.

Tyler's school was becoming concerned. His guidance counselor called Christine to tell her that Tyler had defaced the frontispiece of the school library's copy of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* with a brazen, multi colored version of his logo.

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Christine. "I'll replace it."

"That won't be necessary," said the counselor. "We're so delighted that Tyler likes literature. That's the important thing. We'll simply get a new one."

Unfortunately, or fortunately, depending on your point of view, Tyler's personal logo was identical to the symbol that the aliens had been searching the cosmos for. And when they saw Tyler's handiwork arrayed all over town, it looked to them like runway beacons and landing lights directing them to their goal.

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Ecstatically they messaged their home world, "Mission Accomplished," and set out making arrangements to effect the return of their god to his rightful place.

They managed to establish contact with Tyler by means of his omnipresent iPod; and Tyler, vastly amused by the entire proceedings, and delighted to have a host of powerful and anxious to please aliens at his disposal, played along. During that period Christine had been mystified by the sudden improvement in Tyler's grades. It had been just like him to get the aliens to do his homework for him.

The aliens were convinced that they had indeed found their god. Tyler's imperious nature was an important clue, especially his apparent disdain for what appeared to be the normal behavioral standards of the primitive civilization he had chosen to hide out in. Further, it was obvious that his mother worshipped him and did his bidding without hesitation. And just as the legend said, she was truly a font of great knowledge. They watched her at work and recorded hours of her discourses with her disciples. They *knew* they had found their god and his mother.

The aliens were a little frustrated by Tyler's seeming indifference to returning to their home planet. They thought that Tyler was testing them to ensure they were worthy of him, and the greatest test took place when one day Nick took Tyler on a male bonding weekend fishing trip and forbade Tyler to outfit himself with any of his usual technological life support systems such as cell phone and iPod. The aliens, unable to contact Tyler, became desperate and visited Christine while she was having a relaxing soak in the tub and enjoying a bottle of wine and an old Neil Diamond CD, as well as Tyler's extended absence.

Christine wasn't sure if it was the wine or *Holly Holy*, but at the moment the aliens intruded on her reverie, she had found herself in an exceptionally agreeable mood; and when they informed her that they wanted her and Tyler to accompany them to their home world where the two of them could be "worshipped properly," and called her "Queen of All The Galaxies" and "Empress of the Vastness of Space," among other things, she decided to take the offer.

## II. How The Aliens Found Christine and Tyler

St. Greck was adapting well to his new lifestyle. He had been the commander of the ship that found the god Tyler and his glorious mother. He was one of the first to initiate contact with them, and had personally seen to their safety and comfort on the journey back home from the wild planet of their self-imposed exile. As a result, Greck was hailed as a hero and a saint and now spent most of his time explaining Christine and Tyler's arcane ways to the rest of his people.

Greck's ship had been scanning a rather unpromising planet in a remote galaxy. Rough scans showed that the planet was overpopulated by a very unsophisticated sentient species that displayed a variety of antisocial and self-destructive behaviors. Greck's orders were to thoroughly scan the planet surface for signs of their god; and he needed to remind his crew of the strict protocol when they repeatedly encouraged him to abandon the planet and search somewhere more promising. Their legends told them that their god would not make it easy to find him, but they never expected him to be hiding in such an unlikely place.

As a result, Greck's first reaction when the sensor alarms indicated a positive sighting of their god's sign was to assume that the instruments were malfunctioning. He ordered a diagnostic check. "All systems nominal. Repeat, multiple sightings confirmed," the flight engineer reported.

The crew was overjoyed, but they weren't sure exactly how to proceed. The legend, while detailed up to that point, was vague on what needed to be done once the symbol was found. Throughout history, the theologians and scholars had pondered that question. And as so often happens in these situations, none of the scholarly material was even close to describing what actually transpired.

They had found the symbol in abundance. They scrutinized the area, but found no further evidence that it might harbor their god. All they saw were scores of the planet's inhabitants. Greck called a meeting of his officers, "No one ever said that it would be easy. Our god is obviously testing us further."

The science officer responded, "I think he may have assumed the form of one of these beings. We must mingle with them and learn their habits. I'm sure that the natural excellence and wonder of our god would shine through, even if he were in the form of one of those creatures."

"I'm not sure I like that idea," said Greck. "They might become suspicious. Or frightened. From our observations we know how apt they are to resort to violence when gripped by fear."

Just then Greck was hailed by the communications technician. "Captain. Please report. Important developments."

Greck and his officers hurried to the bridge where they found the technician peering into a scanning scope. As they entered, he looked up and spoke excitedly, his voice filled with awe. "I think I've found him, sir. It is the mark. On his most holy person."

The crew watched as Greck leaned in to study the image in the viewer and immediately straightened up. The crew had never seen him look the way he did. They had expected him to be transfigured by the sight of their god, but instead he had a look of shock, disbelief and not a little of what looked like disgust. He turned to the technician and said, "I agree, the mark is there. But do you really think it's possible *that* could be him?"

The other crewmembers took turns studying the viewer and all showed the same reactions. They observed a young being moving furtively down a darkened street. He was carrying a bag emblazoned with the Holy Sign in large black strokes. As if that were not proof enough, from time to time he stopped and inscribed the Sign on a wall or fence. It was as if their god was leading them to himself. But it couldn't be. The creature was repellent even by the standards of the planet's beings. His clothing was shabby, torn and unkempt. His hair was wild and he seemed to be suffering from some sort of skin disease. Various metal objects in his body glittered in the scanner's penta-lit image. Like all of the scanning equipment on Greck's ship, this one could detect physical as well as emotional energies and the emotional reading showed an unusual combination of torpor and aggression.

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“Maybe our instruments are unable to properly capture readings from our god,” the communications officer suggested. “His emotions and thinking are infinitely more complex than ours.”

“What should we do?”

“I say we go down and try to establish contact. Once he knows that we have found him, I’m sure he will explain everything to us.”

“I volunteer,” said the science officer.

“And I,” said the ship’s theologian.

Greck, at a loss as to how to proceed, agreed to the idea of a landing party.

On their return, Greck said, “That didn’t take long. What happened?”

They were radiant, and barely able to speak. “It is another test, but it is most surely our god. We made contact. He acknowledged our presence. He spoke to us.”

The landing party had recorded the moment of contact. The recording would become one of the holiest icons of their civilization once they got back to their home planet. For the edification of the crew, Greck had it shown in a continuous loop in the entertainment centre of the ship. It showed two shimmering silvery beings with large heads and almond shaped eyes standing in front of a shocked and surprised teenager. The ship’s computers translated his words into their language, so they weren’t actually hearing the voice of god, but at least they were hearing his words. When he first saw them, the youth started to run, but then the landing party said, “Hail O Most Holy One!”

In his short life, Tyler had been addressed in many ways, but never as ‘Most Holy One.’ That got his attention and he stopped. He wiggled his iPod earphones, confused because he heard the alien’s words through them. In English. He took a closer look and responded – the first words of greeting from their lost god, “Whoa, cool! Aliens, man.”

The theologian, overcome by emotion, was unable to speak, but the science officer said, “We rejoice that we have found you, Mighty One. What is your wish? May we conduct you to your home where your children await you?”

“Children? No way, man. Like you got the wrong guy.”

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“But King of the Universe, you left your sign for us. We have awaited this moment for millennia. Your children want only to worship you.”

“Like, are you for real? I mean, aliens? No way.”

“Yes, Light of the Cosmos. We are your children. We have searched the universe for you and now we rejoice that we have found you. We only want you to return to your home planet with us.” Brazenly, the science officer suggested, “You must be tired of living in these conditions, Exalted One.”

“Hey, man. What’s with the names? My name’s Tyler. I’m happy here. Could use a new plasma TV. LCD would be even better. But I’m cool. And I better get home.”

“Yes, Glory of the Heavens. We want to bring you home. And you will want for nothing there. May we conduct you to our ship?”

“So, OK. Let me get this straight. You *can* get me a plasma TV?”

“Certainly, Prince of Eternity.”

“Awesome. And you’re, like, from outer space?”

The science officer provided the coordinates of their home planet.

Tyler may have had a few vices, primarily secret, but he did not drink or take drugs. He knew he was experiencing reality and started to evaluate the implications of what he was hearing. Aliens, powerful enough to travel across space and talk through his iPod, were calling him their god and asking to worship him. Plus they’d offered a plasma TV. He considered the possibilities. “I never could understand astronomy. Like, could you like help me with my homework?”

“It would be an honor, a privilege and our duty, Lord of the Galaxies. We are here to serve you.”

“Totally awesome. How can I call you when I need you?”

The science officer gestured overhead, “We hope you will join us on our ship so that we may all go home, Delight of the Constellations.”

“Naw, my mother will kill me if I stay out all night.”

The theologian, who had recovered slightly, gasped in an awed whisper, “He speaks of the Holy Mother. *It is* the prophesy. This is our god!”

“Come back tomorrow after school, OK?” He turned and walked away.

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Back on the ship the crew were ecstatic. They had succeeded. It only remained for them to complete the remaining tests that their god Tyler would devise for them. He seemed to want them to know as much as possible about the planet where he had hidden because he asked them to learn about its history, culture and science with him. The theologian reminded them that again it was the prophesy, "And he shall teach us of his time in exile."

Greck counseled patience as the days passed and Tyler responded to their plaintive inquiries about returning to their home planet with "Whatever."

### III. Why Christine Said 'Yes' To the Aliens

Christine looked out at the view from her palace. The two suns of her people's home planet created amazing shadow and light effects and as she took in the ever-changing panorama, she felt her usual thrill of joy at the way things had worked out. She was happy, Tyler was happy, and her people were delighted.

She thought back to her days on Earth and smiled as she remembered having drinks with her friend Dianne shortly before she met the aliens. Dianne was probably the only thing she missed about Earth. She had always been there for Christine. Dianne was always ready to help when Christine was summoned to a parent conference at Tyler's school. Dianne would call her on her cell phone five minutes after the start of the meeting and pretend she was calling about an office crisis that needed Christine's urgent attention. The school counselors would always cut the meeting short, forget why they called it, and apologize for taking her time.

That evening she had been telling Dianne about her boss Jerry's latest outrages. "You know, in a real company I'd be a vice president, but he's got this thing about titles, so I'm 'Associate Team Enabler.' Don't ask me what that means."

It was true. Jerry thought that titles and organizational structures were excessively hierarchical, fundamentally elitist and promoted patriarchy. Accordingly, he liked to keep his organization "flat" and his peoples' titles egalitarian.

"Relax. Don't take it so seriously."

"I am relaxed. You know why? Nick has redeemed himself. Only infinitesimally, mind you. He wants to take Tyler up north for a fishing trip this weekend."

"That's great."

"Greater than great. A weekend of bliss!" Christine raised her arms over her head, luxuriating in the thought of solitude. And Tyler's absence. She turned back to Diane, "I'll kill him if he changes his mind."

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On Friday afternoon, Christine got the call she had been waiting for. It was Nick, saying that he and Tyler were on their way and would see her Sunday night. When she got home she saw Tyler's iPod and headphones on the kitchen table. She took that as evidence that he and Nick had argued about his taking it at the last minute and Nick had won. Obviously, Nick was taking the male bonding part of the equation seriously.

Alone, Christine had every intention of indulging herself. She made herself a decadent dinner and watched a favorite movie while she ate. After dinner, she decided to have a long soak in the tub, something she hadn't done for years. She found some ancient bubble bath, filled the tub, got a book she had been meaning to read, put her favorite Neil Diamond CD on "repeat" and settled into the tub with a glass and bottle of wine. She found herself truly relaxing for the first time in months.

Suddenly, she jerked awake. She must have been dozing because she had lost track of time. She felt a breeze, looked up at the bathroom door, stared and gasped. Then she screamed. Feeling completely vulnerable and helpless, she cowered in the tub, looking at the creatures standing in the doorway.

"Have no fear, Exalted Mother," said one of the creatures in a beautifully modulated voice. "We are here to worship you, not to harm you. And we urgently need your help."

Christine looked at the wine bottle to see how much she had drunk. Not enough to explain this. Two talking aliens.

"Greetings, Most Excellent," said one.

"We salute you," said the other.

Christine didn't answer.

"Great One, we need your most urgent assistance."

She wasn't sure exactly what was happening. At some primal level she was afraid, but the *attitude* of the aliens was so humble, and they were so respectful, that they didn't seem to be dangerous. *It must be the wine and the stress*, she thought. *You've been working too hard*. She couldn't think of anything to say.

"Please, Queen of the Galaxies. Will you help us?"

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Christine tried to sound stern. “What are you talking about? How could I possibly help you?” *Maybe I’m crazy. I’m talking to aliens.* Attempting to regain some dignity, she added, “Anyway, I don’t believe in extraterrestrials. And if you are here to worship me, you wouldn’t barge in on me in the bathroom.”

“It makes no difference, Glory of the Universe. We see your essence not your physical manifestation.”

Christine giggled. *I could get used to this. These guys treat me better than anyone down here.* She was sure she was having some sort of vivid dream.

“Our crisis is urgent, Empress of the Vastness of Space. We are unable to communicate with our Most Noble Lord. You must help us find him.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about. I can’t help you.” She picked up her book and opened it for effect.

“But you must, Revered Mother. You must bring back our Great God Tyler, your son.”

Christine was unable to suppress a snort of laughter. “Tyler? Tyler is no god. I assure you.”

“That is not correct, Exalted One. You see, Blessed Lady, it is the prophesy. He has left us his sign. He is our god.” The aliens produced a glowing hologram of the tag Tyler had been painting all over the neighborhood.

Christine stared. *Oh, no! Why, Tyler, why must you do these things to me?* It made sense in a bizarre way. These aliens were real. And they really thought that Tyler was their god. She refilled her glass. *What the hell do I do now?*

“And you are his Most Holy Mother. You will rule our world by his side. Our prophecy states, ‘He shall rule you and His Mother shall teach you.’ We have been observing you and attempting to understand your profound wisdom. Observe, Lady of the Stars.” Christine watched in horror as the alien played a holograph of her presentation at work entitled “Materializing Corporate Wide Cultural Synergies Through Negotiation of the Technology/Innovation Nexus.” They repeated back some of the impressive but content-free phrases she had sprinkled the presentation with in order to impress Jerry. They insisted that she train them to be “proactive in applying emerging technologies to enable our best and brightest,” to help them

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“explore our core values,” and “exchange in provocative learning exchanges.” They wanted to learn how to “map the conceptual framework onto the innovative cultural organization” and they wanted to know all about “metrics for mission critical innovation and sustainability.” They asked that she establish “learning roundtables,” and hoped she might institute a “Thought Leadership Innovation Award.”

One of the aliens said, “We have much to learn from you. We hope you will teach us The Empowerment. With you and our Lord to guide us there is no limit to what our worlds can accomplish.”

She held her head. “Tyler won’t be back for a couple of days. I don’t know how to reach him. You’ll just have to wait.”

The aliens sat down and appeared to go into a trance.

“Not here. Go away and come back in a few days.”

“Yes, Glory of the Cosmos. As you wish.”

The aliens vanished and Christine lay back in the tub. Her thoughts were pleasant as she imagined living as queen of the aliens. *No more Associate Team Enabler. Then she laughed, poor aliens, how are we going to get rid of them and convince them they’ve made a mistake?*

Her reverie was shattered by the phone. It was Jerry. On a Friday night. He wanted her to come in on Saturday and Sunday to work on their latest presentation. “It’s urgent. The board just moved up the deadline. Our careers are riding on this one. I need you here first thing tomorrow morning. The board is watching and it’s your ass if we screw this one up.”

Christine found herself missing the aliens.

On Sunday night, having worked through the weekend she had thought was to be her time to herself, Christine was in a foul mood. She wasn’t helped when Tyler returned from his trip. He, too, was in a shocking temper. “No more flatline fishing trips,” was his sole greeting as he stormed to his room.

For the rest of the week, it seemed that all Christine was doing was arguing with Jerry and snapping at Tyler. Finally, she made a decision. She knocked on

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Tyler's door, braving the seismic bass pulsations that emanated from behind the door and could have dissolved kidney stones.

"Yah?"

"Tyler, we need to talk."

The music stopped and the door opened. "Like, you got an appointment?"

"I'm serious. Tell me the truth. Have you been talking to aliens?"

Tyler became immediately defensive. "Yeah, right. You think I'm nuts or what?"

Christine held up her hands. "It's OK if you are. They came to see me too."

Tyler's body language told her that he was disappointed that she was in on the secret. "What have they been saying to you?"

"Lots of stuff."

"Have they talked about going away?"

"I guess so."

Christine and Tyler then had their longest and best conversation yet. They were like two rational adults discussing a very irrational issue. Tyler explained what the aliens had told him and shown him and Christine added her story. Christine wrapped it up by saying, "So, you want to try it?"

"Yeah. Sure. I've always wanted off this planet anyway."

The aliens, overwhelmed by being in the simultaneous presence of both Tyler and Christine, were barely coherent. In their excitement over Christine's announcement that they were ready to go 'home,' they even agreed to Christine's escape clause, which would let them return to earth if conditions were not satisfactory. Christine, unlike Tyler, worried what might happen if the aliens realized their mistake and she wanted a return ticket, so to speak. As they prepared for departure Tyler asked, "Mom, should we leave a note?"

Christine thought for a moment. "Naw."

#### IV. Tyler Achieves Enlightenment and Changes the Adolescent Paradigm

Although Christine adapted quickly to her role as the mother of a god, Tyler's adjustment was more difficult. He was bored. Christine was amazed because, based on his previous behavior, she would have thought that he would have thrived on lack of human contact. But Tyler had been deprived of the only things that lent meaning to his life – television, video games, the Internet and music. St Greck and Tyler's other worshippers were dismayed over his lack of responsiveness and were convinced that they were doing something to displease him. Finally they appealed to Christine.

"We are alarmed, Queen of the Galactic Interstices. Our lord does not respond to us. He refuses to speak. He displays anger towards us. What have we done wrong?"

"Nothing. Really. He is acting normally. He's never been big on social interaction."

"But it grieves us to see him this way. We await your wisdom, Lady of the Stars."

Christine had developed a very candid relationship with Greck and decided to tell him the truth. "It's like this. I think he is worried about the people on his old planet. Is there a way that we can arrange for him to observe them? That should keep him busy."

"Of course that is possible, Gift of the Cosmos. We did not arrange it because we thought you would not want to be reminded of such a dismal place."

"Fair enough. But I think it would make him happy."

Christine and Tyler had no idea what sort of technology they used, but Greck almost immediately provided them with interactive access to Earth. Greck explained how they could observe and intervene in Earth activities. Even Tyler was impressed. "Cool, man. You mean I could just melt the polar ice caps, like for the heck of it?"

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“Affirmative, Noble Lord. Would you like me to demonstrate?”

“No, man. I don’t want to touch nothing. Just let me watch, OK?”

“As you wish, King of the Universe.”

Christine was impressed at how seriously Tyler took the abilities that he had come to possess, but she was a little worried. The entire set up looked too much like a video game and she didn’t want Tyler to get carried away and accelerate continental drift or something like that.

Several weeks later Greck observed to Christine, “You were right as always, Holy Mother. All the people rejoice that our lord is happy and content. We bask in his good natured glory.”

Christine smiled at the thought of anyone calling Tyler good-natured. But Tyler’s ability to minutely study what was happening on Earth had truly changed him. “You know, Mom, things are a lot more screwed up down there than I ever thought. I hate to say it, but I think I was part of the problem. I can’t believe the jerks I used to hang out with.”

“What do you mean?”

“I thought I knew a lot of shit, but I really didn’t. And there is some stuff going on down there that really pisses me off.”

Tyler had only pulled rank on Christine once since he had been promoted over her, and that was when she told him to watch his language. So she winced but ignored his vocabulary. “Such as?”

“Such as Kyle. Remember him?”

“How could I forget?” Kyle had been the leader of the beautiful-people-in-crowd at Tyler’s school. Tyler had not been in the inner circle. Kyle’s parents were both lawyers, and their priorities had been their careers, their workouts, golf, tennis and sailing, skiing, their social life, their house, their condo in Colorado, their wine collection, coffee, their marriage and Kyle, in that order. Their idea of parenting had been to keep him quiet by indulging his every whim, and he had come to set the standards for dress, technology enablement, behavior and general coolness at Tyler’s school. He was the only kid who had a Platinum American Express Card.

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“He fooled us all. Even me. Like remember when I made a big deal out of getting those new tennis shoes?”

“Oh, yes.” Shortly before the aliens had appeared, Tyler had established that life as they knew it could not continue unless he had a certain pair of tennis shoes. As far as Christine could tell, they looked exactly like any other shoe. What distinguished them was their price and the menacing, genetically engineered sports figure who advertised them. Kyle, always ahead of the curve, had acquired a pair and they soon became *de rigeur* at school.

“But, you know, maybe it wasn’t Kyle who was screwed up. Maybe it was all of us. Kyle just bought all that stuff because his parents let him and he believed that if some famous person said you should have something, you should. For some reason, the rest of us just sort of followed along. We figured if Kyle was buying it, it must be cool. But now I’ve had a chance to see the big picture. Get it?”

“Yeah. The real big picture.”

“They think their little world is so important and it isn’t. I figure this is my chance to straighten them out. Greck told me I could do anything I want. Even melt the polar ice caps. I figure that’s a little extreme. But I’ll think of something appropriate.”

A few days later, Kyle was holding court in front of the gymnasium at school. He was showing off his new cell phone which had features many of his adoring fans had never heard of. “Anyone who’s cool has one,” he said confidently, turning it over in his hand, like a magician preparing a deck for a card trick. “Here, let me show you how I can surf the net.”

Just as the group leaned in for a closer inspection, Kyle involuntarily had an accident—an unfortunate instance of flatulence. To put it bluntly, he let fly a fart of seismic proportion. His sycophants fell back in horror, and for his part, Kyle was mortified. It did not do to demonstrate bodily functions in front of the masses, especially if they are adolescents. Hoping people would think someone else was responsible, he attempted to ignore it and went back to demonstrating the operation of the phone. This time a second, if possible louder fart resonated. And another.

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Kyle simply could not stop farting. In no time, the group was enveloped in a methane storm that could have held its own on Jupiter.

Forgetting even their primitive etiquette, Kyle's disciples scattered in an every man for himself stampede. It seemed like the vengeance of an angry god, and come to think of it, it sort of was.

Kyle eventually got over his flatulence problem, but not before he lost his hegemony as the arbiter and embodiment of cool and his parents discreetly transferred him to another school.

And Kyle wasn't the only person to have difficulty. For example, there was the strange incident involving Sean Walker's Toyota. As a result of largely illegal modifications, the car could be heard a mile away and the bass from the outsized stereo speakers could be heard almost as far. Sean spent his free time driving around the neighborhood and enjoying the adulation of the girls and the envy of the boys. Sean's car was the standard to which all other cars were compared and found wanting. Each day after school, with the engine and stereo operating at maximum volume, and with the top down, weather permitting, he would receive admirers in the street across from the school. Only blonde, slim and attractive girls were invited to go for rides.

One day, however, Phoebe Melnick threw her violin case into the back and extruded herself into the passenger seat, against Sean's will. The booming of the stereo abruptly stopped and the cessation of the tattoo caused everyone to look at the car. Accounts of what happened next were sketchy, but most witnesses agreed that they heard Sean repeatedly and hysterically scream, "Outta the car, dork."

In spite of Sean's protestations, Phoebe moved closer, like a ravening leukocyte bent on engulfing a pathogen, and the car stereo came back on. The "I love you/you love me" Barney theme began to emanate from the car at maximum volume and with a heretofore-unheard bass line.

Sean found himself powerless to stop the offensive tune until someone mercifully disconnected the battery. He also was unable to avoid Phoebe's amorous advances in full view of the amused gallery. The car was not seen around the school thereafter.

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A few days later, Greck approached Tyler. "Lord of the Cosmos, may we confer?"

"Sure Greck, what's up, man?"

"We sense your frustration with your old world. Now, perhaps you understand and forgive our uncertainty and hesitation."

"Forgive you? For what?"

"It is all in the ship's logs, Holy One. We did not believe that it was really you when we first saw your sign. Some of us counseled that we abandon the search on that horrid planet. That would have been unforgivable. But you understand, Prince of the Universe? It is an appalling place. How could you have stayed there among people so unlike your most sublime and holy essence? It is in keeping with your nobility that you hope to save them from themselves. We, your people, do not begrudge them your munificent attention."

"Thanks, man. You haven't seen anything yet."

Greck smiled, unsure if he was speaking to him or to the planet in the viewfinder.

## V. Christine Decides Enough Is Enough At Bapco

Initially, Tyler was secretive about what he was doing with or to the people on Earth, but eventually, his smug self-satisfaction got the better of him and he confessed all to Christine. Relieved that he hadn't caused any serious damage, Christine found herself amused and envious. And immediately her old boss, Jerry, sprang to mind. She remembered his serial insults, ostentatious incompetence and pompous irrationality. "Show me how to work that thing," she ordered Tyler.

Christine's observations told her that it was not wise for any of her former colleagues to mention her name in Jerry's presence. It was a sure-fire way to make him lose his usual newsreader demeanor, and start him fulminating on reliability and loyalty to the company. "I will never understand what happened to that woman. She was being groomed for great things in this organization. She was supposed to make a presentation at our Monday morning staff meeting and never showed up. And that was the day she was supposed to bring donuts, too. Talk about a career-limiting move."

Energized by the reminder of what she had given up in favor of deification, Christine went to work. The biggest challenge was whether to make Jerry's life miserable or try to improve the lots of her former friends. After brief consideration, she realized if she accomplished the former, she would also accomplish the latter.

Jerry had been busy. At the Friday morning staff meeting, his boss, the CEO, had asked Jerry to head up a "task force" to examine proposed changes to the company's Human Resources practices, including, among other things, job content and titles.

At first Jerry was aghast. He did not like titles. Everyone throughout the company knew that no one who reported to him had a title. And that was both confusing and amusing to them because Jerry had many titles. He was in fact Executive Vice President, Treasurer and Chief Financial Officer, Bapco Worldwide; Chief Operating Officer and by extension, Senior Executive Vice President and Director of Global Operations for Bapco, Ltd.; and, to his everlasting glee, Comptroller of the Western Hemisphere of Bapco Trading Enterprises, along with a

host of additional posts in various Bapco entities, all of which were printed on his business card and required the reader to turn it over in order to see all of his titles and, as he called them, “portfolios.” All of the people who worked for him were only allowed to put “Team Member” on their business cards; and if they had ascended to the dizzying heights of reporting directly to Jerry, as Christine had, they could call themselves “Associate Team Enablers.” Jerry felt that this arrangement improved productivity, collegiality and equality, and, to show his commitment to consensus, was fond of asking his “team members” whether they agreed, when he faced them across the expanse of mahogany and inlaid leather that was his desk, during annual salary reviews.

As a result, when the CEO announced the new project and Jerry’s proposed intimacy with it at the meeting, Jerry initially tried to fight it. “But sir, given the array of modalities available to deal with the HR transient, isn’t rigidity of structure contra-indicated? Would it not do violence to the underlying philosophical premises of our present speed to market orientated matrix organization?”

“If you’re trying to say you don’t think it’s a good idea, that makes you a minority of one, Mister. Read this.” The CEO slid a thick report from internationally known consultants across the conference table to where Jerry was sitting. “This says we aren’t competitive with respect to the New Workforce. We’ve got to change. Starting with people like you.”

His peers around the table smiled. Although they had the luxury of not reporting to Jerry, they had all been targets of some of his many political assaults and/or machinations and they loved seeing him being publicly humiliated.

Seeing which way the wind was blowing, Jerry said, “Well, sir, I couldn’t agree more. People are our greatest asset and if we aren’t working to attract and retain the best and the brightest, we may experience degradation in knowledge transfer and innovation across critical modalities and interfaces. I’ll make this my top priority, while, of course not prejudicing attention to any other pertinent matters.”

“Please do,” encouraged the CEO.

## The Adventures of Christine and Tyler

After the meeting adjourned, Jerry rushed back to his office, mortified that he had been humiliated in front of his peers. He decided to be proactive in order to save face and felt that the best strategy would be to present the CEO with a fait accompli vis a vis the whole project. That approach had worked in the past. Packaging the CEO's ideas and passing them off as his own was vintage Jerry behavior. Jerry wasn't sure if the CEO was too busy to remember that Jerry's proposals had been his ideas in the first place, or if he were just a little slow, but it always seemed to work and to elicit accolades such as "Great idea," and "Just what I'd expect from my idea man." He summoned Julie Simmons, Christine's replacement, to his office.

Julie was one of the few people Christine missed at Bapco, and for her part, Julie keenly missed Christine. Christine had been her mentor, protected her from Jerry, and helped her laugh at many of his outrages. When Christine disappeared, Jerry made a public show of "promoting" Julie. Effectively that meant that Julie would now do both her old job as well as Christine's. Jerry felt that nothing more than a modest compensation adjustment, and no new title were sufficient in the circumstances. The privilege of reporting directly to him was, in his view, sufficient reward.

Julie answered the summons and could tell that it was going to be bad news. Jerry was dispensing with his usual attempts at pre-programmed camaraderie. He remained seated behind his snooker table sized desk and did not invite her to sit down. Speaking *ex cathedra*, which, as Christine had pointed out, meant he pitched his voice at an even more nasal whine than usual, he slid the report across the desk as her.

"Read this. Put together an action plan. I want it Monday morning. First thing."

Julie knew that any protests about plans for the weekend were futile. It was easier to just write off the weekend rather than listen to one of Jerry's commitment lectures. She picked up the report and flipped through it. "But Jerry, this isn't a program, it's a strategic statement. We can't develop an action plan from this. We need to do research. See, right here in the executive summary . . ."

Jerry, gazing at the ceiling as if inquiring of the heavens why he was being subjected to such torments, said, "How many times must I tell you? The word 'can't' is to be expunged from your vocabulary." He favored her with an asthmatic wheeze that he thought would impress her as a sigh of disappointment with her attitude. "I did not say 'I can't' when the CEO entrusted this project to me this morning." This time, he used the Long Blink. "Your biggest problem, Ms. Simmons, is that you suffer from paradigmatic rigidity. You are unable to negotiate the nexus between the routine and the unexpected. *That*" he pressed his index finger into the mirrored surface of his desk as if pushing a button, "is the impediment which looms large for you. It militates against your further assimilation into the management array in this organization. Or perhaps anywhere, for that matter."

Julie assumed the appropriate posture of self-abnegation, which was necessary in order to prevent a further lecture on her "inability to deal with constructive feedback," which she had heard before. She picked up the report and said, "I'll see what I can do," and turned to leave.

"*Mizz Simmons.*" She turned back and looked at Jerry, his arms crossed, lips tightly closed. "Excuse me?" he asked. "That is not what I had in mind."

"I'll have it for you Monday morning."

"Very good. He fiddled with his palm pilot. "I have a breakfast meeting at half past six. I'd like to see it when I get in. By eight. And remember," he wagged an index finger at her, "I will be presenting it to the executive committee in the afternoon. I expect mission critical visual aids as well. Animation and sound are a sine qua non. You understand?"

"Of course."

Christine sympathized with Julie as she watched the exchange with Jerry. She fought the urge to simply lay him low with a thunderbolt.

Early on Saturday, Julie was amazed at how quickly the presentation came together. Saturday afternoon she put it on the server for Jerry to review and managed to have a relaxing Sunday.

Shortly after nine on Monday morning, Julie was summoned to Jerry's office. This time he got up when she knocked at the door. "Julie! I congratulate you. Your

report is excellent. It is of sufficient quality for me to forward it to the executive committee in advance of our meeting with no revisions. *That* is quite a feather in your cap, and I'm sure that accolades will redound when news of your exhibition of commitment is made manifest."

"Thanks."

After dismissing Julie, Jerry got an appointment with the CEO. He took in a hard copy of Julie's report and explained, "I spent the weekend noodling on this HR problem you raised the other day, boss."

"Yeah?"

"I am truly energized by the opportunities this presents and have taken the liberty of assembling a little strategy document that might help focus our deliberations."

"Good."

"In fact, I think that you will find that the results of my efforts will render further work nugatory. I do believe that we can move directly into the implementation phase."

The CEO diffidently picked up the report and scanned it. "How did you manage this? Did you work your staff all weekend?"

Jerry managed a convincing blush and self-deprecatory smile. He put his fingertips on his chest and cocked his head to one side while half shrugging. "No, sir, it was more of a solo effort. I didn't have time to brief them as to my vision, so I went ahead and handled it myself."

The CEO cocked an eyebrow. "Really? But we're going to need to build consensus on anything we do. Maybe we should have taken more time and gotten more people involved."

"Concur, sir. But I thought that for purposes of forward impetus and speed to market, a pre-emptive presentation of a solution might move things along more quickly."

"All right. Present it at our meeting this afternoon. You've got fifteen minutes. That's all I can give you. We can kick around next steps after we see what you're proposing."

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Jerry spent the rest of the morning in the boardroom rehearsing and making sure that the visual aid equipment was functioning. He called in Julie at one point to question her on the order of two slides, but otherwise spurned her offers of assistance. The only change he had made to her work was to modify the introduction. The result was, in his opinion, a tour de force of cutting edge management theory overlaid with just the right amount of practical, street fighting testosterone. He delved into the theory of organizations and the concept of workers and management and the utility of titles in “navigating the rich palette of our multinational, multicultural workforce/family.” He knew the CEO would love it.

The meeting convened and Jerry fairly squirmed in his chair, anticipating his presentation. Finally the CEO announced, “Jerry has come up with a plan to respond to the HR consultant’s report. Let’s hear what he has to say.”

Jerry stood up and moved to the console/lectern. He spent a few moments dimming the lights to achieve the proper atmosphere and then launched into his introduction. “As you know, in a dynamic organization, change is inevitable. It is the only constant. We are all change agents. We must change.” He paused for effect, spreading his arms pontifically, “But what is change? Change is a process. Indeed, change is the very flux of life . . .”

The glow of cell phone screens could be seen in the dimmed room as Jerry’s audience began discretely texting and checking their messages.

Their distraction was short-lived, however, when Jerry announced, “What I would now like to do is show you my assessment of our current state HR apparatus, and then map my vision for the future on to it. Ladies and gentlemen, I now present my vision for navigating the rich palette of our multinational, multicultural Bapco family. Attention, please.”

Most of the audience rolled their eyes and continued texting.

Jerry droned on, “. . . given the countervailing forces of globalisation, environmental ambiguity vis a vis the potential, real, practical, possible, impending, prospective, latent and, I hesitate to state with a certainty approaching unity, ineluctable impetus, momentum, force, thrust and general forward movement toward the likelihood, possibility, chance of, dare I say it, further upward inertial

pressure on our capacity for attracting the best and the brightest in to the Bapco family, is, in a word, increasing.

“This poses serious threats. For sans a continuing, ongoing, enduring, lifelong and,” he paused and held up two index fingers, “abiding commitment to attracting and retaining those very best and brightest, we will be found wanting. Our competitors will carry the day. Our customers will be bereft. And we, as a company will suffer greatly.” His voice broke with emotion. People started exchanging glances. Even for Jerry this was a bit much.

Completely carried away, Jerry continued. He wasn't sure where his eloquence was coming from, but it was truly flowing. “And now, thanks to the munificence, the perspicacity, the foresight, the discernment, the vision, of our CEO, it has fallen to me to rectify this matter. To seize the controls, as it were, of the stricken airliner, if you will, and pull it out of the power drive to destruction, immolation and doom to which it is hurtling, I daresay. You see, my most august colleagues, it is time for us to deal with the auxotrophic nature of our work force. Allow me to share my vision.

“I see us as moving, asymptotically, if you will, toward an increasingly totemic aesthetic. We must defease the tide of diaspora of our employees and I am convinced that mutatis mutandis, like any other management/staff cathexis in today's febrile, labile and etiolating world we will prevail. I, for one will not be a manqué in achieving *gemutlichkeit* in the truly *sui generis* Bapco landscape. I urge a cathartic move forward,” again he raised a warning finger, “with no ephemeral or insouciant battology. I feel that I have carte blanche to act.”

People were looking at each other. They were used to wondering what Jerry was talking about, but this time it was different. Even he didn't seem to know what he was saying. As he went on and on, Jerry became aware of whispers in the audience. Finally the CEO slammed his hand on the table. Jerry fell silent. “Jerry. What! What are you saying?”

“Excuse me sir?”

“We have no idea what the hell you are talking about.”

## The Adventures of Christine and Tyler

“But it’s all there. In the material. Here in the slides. May I draw your attention to the screen. . .”

Jerry’s presentation rapidly deteriorated as one after another, his slides, instead of showing the details supporting his presentation, began to show some very inappropriate pictures of things that Bapco’s human resource assets were not supposed to do on company time. One slide would have been bad enough, but the faster Jerry hit the ‘forward’ button, the more the images blurred into a montage of images that stretched the imaginations of the most peccadillo-prone members of the audience and far exceeded the bounds of good taste. Human beings of every size, shape and characteristic were doing the questionable, the improbable and in some cases what appeared to be the downright impossible.

The equipment seemed to have completely malfunctioned, and could not be turned off. Further, the sound track appeared to have been hijacked as well and sound effects that more or less matched the action on the screen boomed out of the surround-sound stereo system. Most of it involved people invoking Jerry’s name and asking for acceleration, deceleration, augmentation or attenuation of what he was doing. Yes, Jerry himself appeared as a hyperactive participant in many of the slides. Somehow, the sound feed bled into the building’s public address system, distracting, confusing and, ultimately amusing everyone in what Jerry would call the “Bapco family.”

Jerry completely lost his composure, smashing the remote control, wrenching plugs from the wall and the lectern, vainly rolling up the screen, as if the images might roll up with it. All the while, he was unintelligibly screaming about “a major malfunction.”

Mary Hughes, the Executive Vice President of Human Resources had covered her ears and closed her eyes.

Frank Bartlet, EVP of Sales and Marketing was falling out of his chair, laughing hysterically.

Sue Perkins, EVP, International, was weeping uncontrollably.

Roger McFadden, General Counsel, was taking notes furiously.

Hal Zimmerman, EVP of Engineering simply stared, unbelieving.

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And the CEO went ballistic. “Turn that damn thing off. What’s wrong with you? How dare you? In my office. Now! No. Turn it off first. What the hell is going on? Somebody turn that goddam thing off!

The sound and flickering images suddenly stopped, leaving a final image. You might have called it Jerry’s final benediction to the audience, as the camera appeared to zoom in ever closer on his quivering, naked bottom.

Jerry looked around the room, crazed and stammering, “It wasn’t me. No, it was me. But it really wasn’t me. Someone sabotaged the equipment. Really.”

Hal Zimmerman was helping the sobbing Sue Perkins out of the room while Bartlet fought to control himself.

“You have some explaining to do, Mister,” the CEO said in a shaky voice. And light years away, Christine high fived Tyler.

## VI. Meanwhile, Back on Planet Earth

For months after their strange disappearance, Christine and Tyler were a primary topic of conversation among the people they had known. The police, as the saying went, were baffled. The house showed no signs of forced entry and no signs of a struggle. It did not appear as if Christine and Tyler had taken anything with them. Christine's purse, cell phone and car were all left behind. The only thing Tyler seemed to have taken was his iPod. The authorities expediently attempted to resolve the matter by theorizing that Christine had fled with Tyler in order to acquire exclusive custody of the boy. That theory was quickly annihilated by the assertions of everyone, including Nick, Tyler's father, Diane, Christine's closest friend, and the counselors at Tyler's school. They all emphatically stated that if Christine had fled, it would most definitely have not been *with* Tyler. *From*, was the operative preposition. And the more reasonable theory.

But they were both gone without a trace.

The wildest theories came from Tyler's classmates who had earnestly told their teachers and the police about Tyler's weird behavior, which they frankly attributed to his dealings with aliens. No one could offer any proof, even though Jennifer Ragland made what she considered to be an airtight case involving Tyler's sudden improvement in scholarship as well as the seemingly overnight disappearance of his acne. She thought that there was just too much of an element of coincidence. The cops made the mistake of treating her like a bit of a celebrity, taking her out of class and giving her a ride downtown in a police car. As a result, a host of students came forward with stories which either corroborated or, more often, embellished Jennifer's. The police became alarmed at the transgressive behavior with the aliens that Tyler was being credited with, and when Dakota Przybowski entered into evidence a purported contract between Tyler and the aliens which involved, among other things, Tyler selling his mother to the aliens as a sex slave in return for superhuman powers, the police decided that they were on the wrong track and the case quickly went cold.

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Diane, Christine's friend, missed her and hoped that all was well. Christine had given her no hint of anything being wrong, other than her usual abundant complaints about her boss, Jerry, and, of course, Tyler. Christine wasn't the sort to run away, and deep down, Diane feared that Christine and Tyler had been the victims of a terrible crime.

Nick, Christine's ex, agreed with Diane, but much to Diane's surprise, he seemed convinced that Christine and Tyler would return safely some day. Accordingly, he refused to sell the house and had asked Diane, who lived next door, to keep an eye on the place while he would handle the yard work and any other maintenance.

The chief of police, acting on advice from the FBI, had finally advised Rick Sutherland, the detective assigned to the case, to clean up the files, write a summary report and move on to other more pressing tasks. Sutherland agreed, but he was one of those people who didn't like unresolved issues. He also didn't believe in extraterrestrials, so he was sure that the answer to the disappearance of Christine and Tyler was somewhere in the mass of data he and his team had accumulated. He decided to devote a weekend to going through it all one more time.

Saturday morning, he arrived in the "war room" that had been the headquarters for the search. His partner, less enthusiastic, and unhappy about the prospect of spending a summer weekend in a windowless room on a pointless project, had brought a dozen donuts and started the coffee machine.

"Right," said Sutherland, slapping his hands together exuberantly, "Let's get to it. I want to go through it again. Point by point."

"Sarge, I know you don't want to hear this, but we've done that before. Lots of times. What are we going to gain by this?"

Sutherland slapped his hand down on one of the many stacks of files on the table. "The answer is in here, Krensky. I know it. We just haven't looked at this thing from the right angle. What have I told you in the past? 'When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth!'"

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Sharon Krensky waved her hand in a 'whatever' gesture. She had heard that Sherlock Holmes quote too often to be anything but irritated by it. She occasionally reflected that it was a good thing that her boss wasn't a devotee of Agatha Christie. If he had constantly enjoined her to utilize her 'little gray cells,' she might have been forced to spatter his across the room with her service revolver.

But there was a bigger rift between Sutherland and his assistant over that quote; and it had to do with the definition of the impossible. Because Sutherland baldly rejected the idea of aliens, for purposes of his analysis, they fell into the realm of the impossible. And therefore that line of inquiry was eliminated. Sharon wasn't so sure. She didn't know if she intellectually entertained the idea of alien abduction as something that may have happened, or if she embraced the concept because of its emotional appeal. The idea of deliverance at the hands of aliens held a certain appeal to her. Especially when she was imprisoned in a conference room with her boss on a useless project for a weekend.

Over the course of the investigation, while Sutherland and the FBI had been looking for clues that proved their pet theories of a custody flight or a kidnapping or maybe murder/suicide, Krensky let her mind wander. There were too many really strange things about the case; and a lot of those things made Sharon think that if there *had* been an alien abduction, the abductees may well have gone along willingly.

Sutherland slid a stack of folders over to Krensky. "Here. These are the computer records for the cross checks to see if they might have taken on new identities. I'm sure we've missed something. Have another look."

Sharon sighed. Of all the theories they had entertained, the idea that Christine had fled with Tyler and reinvented new identities was the least probable. Sharon was a single mother and it didn't seem to make sense that Christine would want to make her life more difficult. From what they had been able to tell, Christine had wanted Nick to be more, rather than less involved. There was nothing in a review of the financial records to indicate that Christine might have had resources they could be living on. And most compelling, of course, were the descriptions of

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Christine's relationship with Tyler. They were identical and they all made it clear that Christine had not looking for more quality time with her son.

She was reluctant to raise the issue of aliens with Sutherland. Aside from the fact that he would berate her mercilessly for even mentioning it, she realized that she didn't have a shred of proof. All she felt she had were four things that, to her, made it worth thinking about. The four things were not compelling individually, and that was how Sutherland looked at them. He saw no relationship among them and therefore saw them as individually irrelevant. But Krensky asked herself whether they all might be interconnected.

First was the obvious fact that from the available evidence, there had been no foul play. The FBI profilers had been at a loss to explain the crime because Christine and Tyler did not fit any normal victim profile. There was no crime scene and the house had yielded no forensic evidence that a crime had been committed. There were no bodies, no sightings, no ransom notes, nothing.

Second, there were the bizarre, wildly inconsistent reports of unusual lights and noises on the night of the disappearance. None of it was hard evidence, but it was just one more unusual aspect to the case. One person said they saw blue lightning. Someone else saw multi colored flashes. A person out jogging swore he saw an inverted green cone over the house. Others heard loud jet engines. Some heard a high pitched whine and one person swore it was "the sound of wet paint being sucked up by a vacuum cleaner." Descriptive, perhaps, but useless.

Third, and most important to Krensky, was evidence about Christine and Tyler's behavior shortly before they disappeared. Christine's friend, Diane, had been thoroughly interviewed. Of course, the interviewers were anxious to find out if Diane had seen any evidence of stress. Was Christine nervous because she was planning to bolt, or had been seeing suspicious people or getting threats? Those were the sorts of things they were interested in. No one but Krensky thought anything of it, but Diane, the last person to see Christine, had repeatedly said that she had never seen Christine as relaxed, and she seemed excited about something. Krensky remembered Diane's unusual comment, "She seemed invigorated, like she was going on a nice long vacation. She wasn't worried about work for a change."

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Of course, the FBI took that as evidence that Christine was planning to “do a runner.”

But there were also the wild stories about Tyler. His teachers all talked about how in the weeks preceding his disappearance he had been a changed person. His grades skyrocketed. His acne cleared up. His stare was less vacant. His attitude was infinitely better and he seemed to be looking forward to things rather than exuding his typical torpid nihilism. His classmates went farther, asserting that Tyler himself had attributed his turnaround to assistance from aliens. The kids were all fairly vague on what exactly Tyler had said. “You know, it’s not like we believed him or anything. He was such a loser, that’s the sort of thing you’d expect him to say,” said Jennifer Ragland. Sutherland himself terminated further interviews of the students when he became convinced that they were competing to see who could tell the police the craziest story. Like when Cody Waldrip told them that he had been in Tyler’s room about a week before the disappearance and Tyler had conjured up three dimensional holographic porn films using some sort of heretofore unknown technology device; and some other kid started talking about a mysterious contract Tyler had supposedly negotiated with the aliens.

Of course Krensky didn’t believe most of what she heard, but she wondered how those stories got started.

The fourth factor was information that only Krensky seemed to think was important. As a result of the massive amount of police resources devoted to the case, there was a huge volume of isolated data--seemingly irrelevant recollections and unsubstantiated rumors. It was spread throughout the files and Krensky didn’t need to go through them again to know it. For example, one project had been to analyze all police reports for the weeks before and after the disappearance to see if any of the reports might in any way be tied to Christine and Tyler. It had yielded interesting results. There had been some highly interesting thefts in the weeks *after* the disappearance. In all cases the thefts were of minor and unusual things, but what made them interesting was that there was a link to Tyler or Christine. For example, the school librarian reported that a copy of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* had disappeared from her office.

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“Was it particularly valuable?” asked the investigating officer.

“No. In fact, we were about to give it away.”

“Oh. So why do you care if it was stolen?”

“Well, we can’t even really say that it was stolen. I mean, there was no break in and nothing else was missing. But I can swear that it was locked in my desk. And who would want to take a damaged book?”

“How was it damaged, ma’am?”

“Oh, you know that boy who disappeared? Tyler Fielding? He ruined it by putting his graffiti sign in it. Right on the first page. His mother offered to buy a new one.”

The police wrote off the burglary to someone just wanting a souvenir of the missing kid. Happened all the time. But there were other strange incidents and Krensky thought it was all very interesting.

## VII. A Gift For Lord Tyler

St. Greck was worried. For the first time in his life, and, as far as he could tell, in the history of his world, there had been a serious disagreement among his people and he had found himself in the middle of it. A debate about Tyler and his mother had started.

Greck continued to be the main conduit between Tyler and his celebrated mother and the people. As a result, he was expected to have a greater understanding of their ways. He relished the noble title that Lord Tyler had bestowed on him. "You're the Go To Guy, Greck!" But although he was considered the greatest authority on Christine and Tyler, there were so many things that he just didn't know. And people were starting to challenge him.

Part of the problem was that much of what they had to go on was based on complex legends that had grown up during the long absence of their god. Now that Tyler and his mother were back, people were attempting to reconcile the legends to reality. And they were finding gaps. Greck thought that should come as no surprise to anyone. The legends were vague and maddeningly silent on various key points, especially when it came to what Lord Tyler had been doing during his exile. But people wanted everything to be neat and tidy with no loose ends or unanswered questions.

The current controversy had arisen over a specific interpretation of one of the legends which implied that, during his exile, their god would chose a peaceful location where he could wait for them in quiet contemplation. But from their very first contact with Tyler and his mother, Greck and his people had been confused by Tyler's choice of such a grim planet. Greck's crew had actually questioned whether it was even worth scanning the planet for Tyler's holy sign when they initially spotted it. Some of them flatly refused to believe that their god could possibly have chosen such a world to spend *any* time on, much less the millennia the legends spoke of.

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There were other legends, Greck pointed out, which implied that their god would in fact select a violent and dangerous planet in order to test them and make finding him even more challenging. After all, he had expected them to embark on an intergalactic search to find him after they had been proven unworthy for their god to live among them. No one expected the search to be easy.

What further complicated the issue was the unusual things that happened after they were reunited with Tyler and his mother. First, although Tyler and Christine were hiding out on a wild and barbaric planet, they seemed to be relatively comfortable there. Indeed, it had sometimes seemed as if they hadn't wanted to leave. At the time, Greck and his team thought that was another test.

Then there was Tyler's unusual interest in the old planet once he had settled into his palace among them. He seemed at times to miss the old world, and although he never ceased to bless them with his munificent presence, he never seemed happier than when he was interacting with that world using the equipment Greck had provided. Even Tyler's mother spent considerable time gazing at the old world.

People began to debate the implications of what they were witnessing, and that is how the rift that Greck felt duty-bound to resolve had developed.

"Something is wrong," said one. "Nowhere does it say that our lord should be interested in any worlds but ours."

"Yes," said another. "I wonder if we have properly interpreted the legends. I always said that planet seemed too wild for our lord to inhabit. Why would he have chosen it?"

"I begin to fear that we have made a terrible mistake."

"Yes. He seems entirely too devoted to those savages. Look at the time he spends observing and manipulating them. Sometimes I think he is more like one of them than us."

"It can't be. I hope we haven't done irreparable damage."

Greck, in particular, feared the truth. As head of the expedition and Tyler's chief ambassador, he had the most to lose from a wrong decision. He went back to review the logs of his successful journey. Everything had been in accordance with

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established protocols and their best interpretations of the legends. Nothing seemed amiss. But they were now panicking, thinking that they had misinterpreted both the legends and Tyler's exact role.

"Why don't we ask him?" said one.

"No. If we are right, do you think he would tell us? And if we are wrong, it would be sacrilege. We are supposed to know these things. It might anger him. Or disappoint him."

"But if we don't act, it will only get worse."

"Why don't we approach his mother?"

"I think she is expecting us to figure this out on our own," said Greck. "Just the other day I was remarking to her how interested Lord Tyler was in the activities of that planet, hoping that she might provide an insight."

"What did she say?"

"Her response was inscrutable, as always." Greck assumed the posture of reverence that he took on when quoting Tyler or Christine, "'Yes, Greck. He knows it well. I wouldn't say he loves it, but he has great interest and curiosity about it. And there is so much that needs to be done there.'"

"Well that proves me right and you wrong, Greck."

Greck looked sad, "How can you even suggest that Tyler is not our own lord and god."

"The evidence is abundant. We have made a mistake. And you, Greck, are responsible. You should have known from the beginning," said the former ship science officer.

"You were with me on the ship. I didn't hear you raising any objections. I remind you that all of our words and actions are on record with the other most holy artifacts of that voyage. Shall we review *your* conduct?"

By the standards of their planet, this conversation was hostile. For Greck's subordinate to accuse him of making a mistake and for Greck in turn to threaten to publicly humiliate the subordinate pushed the very boundaries of decorum. Greck held up his arms, "Enough. We cannot continue like this. Lord Tyler should be a

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source of peace and tranquility for us. I will not have him creating dissension among us.”

“Then what do you propose to do?”

“It’s obvious. We must reluctantly admit that we were wrong. We thought that Tyler was *our* god. We have been unforgivably selfish. We blinded ourselves to the fact that he is the god for other people besides us. That is why he went to that other planet when he left us. And that is why he spends time helping those creatures now.”

“I concur,” said the science officer. “Lord Tyler has other worlds besides ours to worry about. You see. Those savages on that planet worship him just as we do. They need more of his time because they are so out of control. I believe that it is incumbent upon us to help him. It is another test. Does not the legend say, ‘He shall give you trials always?’ And did not his mother say the same thing?”

Greck reluctantly agreed. Although he had believed that they had been rescuing Tyler from the planet, he now had accepted that the evidence was there. Tyler was not exclusively their god. Greck could not forgive himself for missing the clues. He and his staff had continually kept the old world under close surveillance, hoping to learn more about the place and its wild people. They found that taking Lord Tyler had created a huge crisis. That was something they hadn’t expected. The legend said that Tyler would be hiding. They didn’t think anyone would miss him. But as they watched events on the planet after Tyler left, they saw it all. There had been a public outcry. People were devastated. “These must be his priests,” one of Greck’s aides said to him as they watched blue clad men moving about asking about Christine and Tyler. “See how they carry pictures of their holy countenances? They are searching for him just as we did. I think we have created misery.”

But now that Greck and his people agreed, they found themselves in a terrible dilemma. They could not bear to think that they were causing pain to another culture, no matter how primitive. At the same time, they refused to consider the idea of sharing Tyler with other people.

“In order to serve Tyler properly, we must understand more about that planet,” said Greck. “Go back and take another look at the holos we made of Lord

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Tyler before we made contact with him and his most glorious mother. We need to understand the role Tyler had played among these people. I think that book might be one of the keys." Greck produced a holo of Christine and a woman in conversation. The woman was showing Christine a heavy book which contained Tyler's holy mark. "We must get that book. It might help us to understand Lord Tyler's role among the savage people." A team was sent to retrieve the book as well as a variety of other items that Greck and his team felt might enlighten them.

As they analyzed the contents of the book, it became clear. The leader of the translating team approached Greck and broke down with emotion. "It is true, St. Greck. It is his holy book. We have studied it. It explains the bizarre behavior of these savages. Who are we to question Lord Tyler's ways?"

Another team was assigned to study what they thought were Tyler's priests. "I cannot understand their behavior. They don't seem to be doing anything positive. Maybe they are in shock, just as we were when he left us. Only this Krensky person seems to understand. I wonder if we should contact her and see if we can cooperate in some fashion. We could help her."

"No!" said Greck. "We dare not expose ourselves to those savages. Who knows what might happen?" Greck had never known such stress. He was being asked to make important decisions about things about which he had little knowledge and less understanding. He was afraid to approach Tyler and Christine for fear of failing a test. At the same time, his heart went out to the people of Tyler's old planet who he feared were missing Tyler him the way he and his people had missed him.

Finally, after a review of all the available information and interminable discussions, Greck's team agreed upon some fundamental points and a course of action. "Let these principles be enshrined until such time as we find them superceded by better knowledge," intoned Greck. "They will form the basis for our further dealings with Tyler and his mother."

Greck's entire staff had agreed to the principles. First, they accepted the fact that that by restoring Tyler to his rightful place they had inadvertently deprived a poor savage race of their god. At the same time, they must do everything possible to

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prevent Lord Tyler from returning to the barbaric planet. Third, by providing Tyler and his mother with interactive access to their old world, they were enabling him to see to the needs of all of his subjects and they must not begrudge him the time he spent dealing with the primitives because they needed more of his help. Fourth, and most important, to make Lord Tyler feel truly welcome and at home, they would incorporate the rituals of the barbaric planet into the program of worship for Tyler here.

### VIII. The World According to Greck

"Most Noble, may we confer?" asked St. Greck humbly.

"Greck, my man. What's doing?" responded Tyler, looking up from his holographic readout. In a particularly good mood that day, he had just been redirecting swarms of locusts away from settled areas of Africa into the wasteland of the Sahara.

"Delight of the Universe. It has now been six galactic sweeps since you have rejoined your people. As you know, that is an auspicious number for us. Our joy in your presence increases continually. You and your mother have restored peace and prosperity to our worlds. Of course it will never be possible for us to properly demonstrate our gratitude, but we have arranged a small festival in your honor. We have worked hard to perfect it. Your attendance and approval would make us ecstatic, King of the Galaxies. Can we intrude upon your most sublime excellence to grace us with your presence."

"Sure, Greck. Just tell me when and where."

"We must travel to Sector Zeta."

"Way out there?"

"Yes. It is the only place with sufficient room to prepare of festival of sufficient grandeur to celebrate your glory, Gift of the Cosmos. "

"Awesome."

"I will collect your most holy mother and we will embark at once."

Initially, Christine was thrilled to hear about the break in their routine. She had been worrying about Tyler--something she had gotten out of the habit of doing. Between the ego boost provided by the adulation of Greck and his people and the entertainment provided by manipulating events on planet earth, Tyler had been happy and content for most of their stay as deities in residence on their new home planet.

But lately he had been strangely taciturn. Recently, she had found him watching holos of the history of the Earth that Greck had provided. "Learning anything," she asked.

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"You don't want to know."

"What's bothering you?"

"This whole thing is getting to me. I just can't believe the way Greck and his boys misinterpret everything. If I fart, they assign a team to study my latest 'gift' to them."

"You always did have a tendency to exaggerate."

"No. Really. Look at this. Did you know that they think that the earth cops are our priests?"

"Really?"

"Yeah. It's crazy. They watch what's going on on Earth, just like we do. They saw the cops asking about us after we came here. So they figure that they must be priests. And it gets worse. They make a bad decision and then they draw bad conclusions from it. Look at this." Tyler adjusted the viewpoint so that Christine could see. It was a view inside a prison with orange clad prisoners being paraded between ranks of uniformed guards.

"Let's have the audio in English," said Christine.

Tyler flipped a switch and the well modulated voice was saying, "... and here we see a training school for new acolytes of Lord Tyler. They live in strict discipline as the priests oversee their training."

"Jesus," whispered Christine.

"I wish," said Tyler. "Mom, this is getting out of hand."

Unfortunately, the gala show that Greck and his people put on for Christine and Tyler did not make Tyler feel any better, and got Christine scared as well.

As they made the crossing to Sector Zeta, Greck had told them, "You see," he said, "this festival has multiple objectives. The first is to demonstrate our devotion to you and our delight in your presence. We hope to entertain you and show our feelings toward you. At the same time, we are grieved that we have deprived your people on your exile planet of your glorious presences. We do not know how we can ever atone for that sin. We just did not know that you had affinity for that world. We hope that by allowing you to still rule over them we have in some small way redeemed ourselves."

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“Don’t worry, Greck. There is no problem at all. Things are fine the way they are.”

“Again, I am delighted at your good natured equanimity with respect to our egregious behavior. In addition to honoring you, we also hope to show our respect for your people on the other planet. We have learned much from you and from watching them. The first part of the festival will show you what we have learned and, we hope, make you feel as if you are briefly back on that planet.”

“I’m sure it will be fascinating. And by the way, Greck. They call that planet Earth.”

Tyler and Christine were shocked when Greck led them to a building that looked like a stadium. Once inside they found that it was in fact a perfect replica of the Superdome. They were taken to the best skybox. “Please make yourselves comfortable. Your people are aware of your presence and will now send their felicitations.”

They felt the familiar sensation of comfort and caring and warmth that Greck and his people communicated to them through their emotions. This time, however, from such a huge crowd, the feeling was almost overwhelming and even Tyler seemed to be choking back tears as he said, “Wow, Greck, you guys really knocked yourselves out.”

Greck beamed. “Thank you, my lord. You may find the opening part of the festival somewhat boring. We had much debate about whether to subject you to it. It is more for the education of our people.”

“What is it?” asked Christine.

“You see, Mistress of the Galaxies, we have studied the planet, uh, Earth, you were hiding on for some time. Both before and after we made contact with you. We have learned much about how the people of that planet worship you. We will now demonstrate to our people for their edification and education.”

“But we don’t want your people to behave like people from Earth!” said Christine, afraid of what Greck might be talking about.

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“Oh no, my lady. We realize how primitive those people are. We understand that you must rule their world differently than ours. It is purely educational. Ahh, we begin.”

A group of Greck's people formed a procession from the visitors' dugout to a large platform and table that had been set up in center field. On the table was a thick book. One of the members of the procession began to explain to the crowd that the book was the code of law that Lord Tyler had given to the “savages.”

One of them picked up the book and was shown on the big screens around the stadium. “You see the holy book? It bears the mark of our lord Tyler!” The book was opened with due reverence and Christine gasped as the screens showed “William Shakespeare : The Complete Works” obliterated by Tyler's logo. It seemed like ages since Tyler's guidance counsellor had shown her the very same book in a parent/teacher conference that Christine had been unable to avoid. She gave Tyler a stern look and Tyler, trying to look innocent, simply lifted his eyebrows and shrugged. They both shook their heads in disbelief as the narration continued.

Christine stared, attempting to deal with her conflicted emotions. Part of her was horrified at what she was hearing. And part of her was fighting the urge to laugh hysterically.

Ordinarily, an in depth review of world history would have caused Tyler's ADHD to spring into overdrive. However, because Greck's people had recast human history according to their understanding of Tyler's direct involvement therein, he watched in fascination.

The aliens, using Shakespeare, news reports from Earth, and what they had seen and heard of life on Earth while they had been observing it, had pieced together an interpretation, for lack of a better word, of conditions on earth as created, moderated and ameliorated by Tyler and, to a lesser extent, Christine.

“Why are they talking so funny?” Tyler whispered to Christine.

“That's Shakespeare. Didn't you learn anything in school?”

“Turns out I didn't have to, did I?”

The alien who seemed to be the master of ceremonies was explaining that the holy book had foretold that Tyler and Christine would want to see this presentation.

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“For here in the book of Midsummer, Queen Christine says to Lord Tyler, ‘Shall we their fond pageant see? Lord, what fools these mortals be.’”

“You see,” interrupted Greck, “we believe that we understand your view of the earth people. You are more touched and amused by them than angered over their behavior. We hope you feel similarly towards us.”

“Actually, I find this program very interesting,” said Christine.

“Thank you, my lady. It required considerable effort for our scholars to tie everything together. There is so much allegory and fable in the Holy Book. We had to look at earth history to understand the subtle messages, but we see how it all is interrelated. Ahh, one of my favorites is starting now. This shows how the standards and principles for behavior of business and industry leaders are revealed in the Book of Macbeth.”

Christine and Tyler continually exchanged looks of disbelief as the program progressed. They learned how standards for parent/child relations were laid out based on the story of Romeo and Juliet. Greck explained, “Our historians view this story as an allegory about how parents should behave. We know that contemporary Earth parents are concerned about suicide. This Romeo and Juliet story admonishes parents to not put restrictions on their children. When Romeo and Juliet’s parents put restrictions on them, look what happened. We have also been happy to observe that many Earth parents are following your rule my lord. We note that in some places on Earth it is now illegal for parents to discipline their children or say no to them.”

“Thanks, Greck,” was all Tyler, totally confused, could say.

As Romeo and Juliet ended and Hamlet began, Greck turned to Tyler, “This one, my lord, frankly confuses us. Our scholars are undecided as to whether it is a guideline for how children should deal with their parents or whether it is intended to help business people learn how to make decisions. We have a team of scholars studying it to plumb its complexities.”

“When you figure it out, let me know, OK?” said Tyler as Christine shot him a “watch it” look.

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“Ah yes, Prince of the Cosmos. It will be a delight for us to hear your impressions of our interpretation,” said Greck.

Christine was beginning to worry that programming for the Food Channel might be governed by *Titus Andronicus* and at one point she leaned over to Tyler and said, “You just better be glad you didn’t vandalize the works of Sigmund Freud.”

“Who?”

The problem, Christine realized, was that to a large extent, the aliens were right. Greck and his people had attempted to synthesize what they observed from space, what they absorbed from reviewing all television programs and movies ever made, the history of the earth and its people as chronicled in libraries and data bases and, thanks to Tyler, what they read in Shakespeare. When you thought about it objectively, Juliet’s rebellion and disobedience toward her parents was fairly mild compared to what they must have observed when watching modern day family dynamics as portrayed by Hollywood. And if you thought about it, Macbeth was just a young upwardly mobile professional whose ambition got the better of him. Sure, maybe there was more cooking of the books than murder in the daily headlines out of the financial pages, but the general concept was the same. Only a people as naïve and desperate to believe could have made the illogical connection and leaps of faith that Greck and his experts had made.

Another thing that made the presentation interesting was Greck’s continuing commentary, which gave her insights into how the aliens had assembled a coherent, at least to them, view of earth history. After the Shakespeare presentation, there was a montage about what Greck called “major themes in the dynamics of history on earth.” He explained to Christine, “As you know, Princess of the Galaxies, these Earth people seem to have specific traits that continually manifest themselves in their behavior. Perhaps someday you will share your knowledge on this question. We are surprised that they haven’t attempted to expunge these characteristics from their repertoire of behaviors, after all, they are no way for civilized people to act. Perhaps they are fundamental characteristics, not learned. This one, in particular confuses us.”

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Christine looked down at where second base would normally be. She saw a holographic representation of Hebrew slaves building a temple in ancient Egypt. That view then morphed into rows of captive slaves being marched towards ancient Rome. Later there was a slave auction in nineteenth century Georgia.

“This is a consistent behavior in the history of this people. They continually attempt to exert domination over each other. The form of the behavior may change, my lady,” said Greck, “but the substance does not change. We don’t know why they perpetuate it, but we are becoming convinced that it is an innate behavior. After all, it has appeared in one form or another throughout the history of these people”

“But it is no longer prevalent.”

“True, Most Sublime Gift of the Universe, it is no longer prevalent in its original form, but it still exists. Here we see its modern form. The subjugated people submit more voluntarily than in the past. That is one of the reasons we sure that this behavior is hard wired into these creatures and cannot be expunged. Please observe.”

Christine at first was shocked to see a Miss Universe bathing suit competition followed by a show featuring people singing and being insulted by three judges. “What does this mean?” she asked.

“As far as we can tell, Mistress of the Universe, slavery has always existed on Earth. This is the modern form of it.”

Tyler, who had been watching and listening, suddenly groaned, “Oh no, mom. They’re right. There is no difference.”

“What is wrong, my lord. Does the presentation upset you?”

“No. Yes. No. It’s OK.”

“I can abort it. To be honest with you, we aren’t fully sure that we have correctly classified some of these behaviors. Here is one we aren’t sure about.” The next scene showed a group of well dressed young men and women seated nervously in a waiting room. The sign on the door said, “Recruiting Office – Wait Here for Interviews.”

“No, Greck,” said Christine. “I think you’ve gotten it just about right.”