# Prologue

In the beginning…

 The Universe, as we know it, was a happy place.

 That isn’t to say that there weren’t a lot of downright heartbreaking miserable things going on in it. But the percentage of them, when compared to the Universe as a whole, was small enough that most of the happy majority chose to ignore them completely, and if an interstellar war broke out once in a while too close for comfort, well, c’est la vie. The point is that to look at the Universe from some high vantage point; which is, obviously, impossible except in convenient hypothetical situations like this one unless you happen to be God (which is unlikely for any of several obvious reasons), you would not feel depressed and need a hug.

 The situation changed, of course, as good situations are wont to do. Perhaps the happy majority grew a bit too vocal about their contentment and drew unwanted attention from the cruel goddess of irony, who could not stand for this sort of thing to continue unabated, and nearly died of excitement from the prospect of the challenge before her. That would have been a lucky break for those who were sick of life’s ups and downs and wished wholeheartedly that they could work out all their problems early on and then settle down to a happily ever after. The point is that to look at it now from the same hypothetical vantage point, you would probably need quite a few hugs for the strength to face another day. But that is getting ahead of things.

 On a related note, the relation of which will be related to you in a moment, it is often said that you should assume the best of people until you are forced to confront the fact that they are complete scumbags. The happy majority, and even the majority of the unhappy minority, which still numbered googolplexes in and of itself, eventually learned to do so after eons of blasting the snot and other more vital body fluids out of each other, which was a relief because at least half the time they had missed the scumbags and blasted the wrong people.

 And so, aside from occasional troubles with pirates, asteroids, and homicidal robots from previous wars that refused to be reprogrammed, the Universe for quite a while was not only vast and exciting, but also safe. It stretched before eager young explorers, who rushed to create futures of wonder and discovery. Some of them got what they wanted, but some ended up finding the Universe a bit *too* vast and safe, and not nearly as exciting.

 The inky black void was shattered in this particular spot by a chunk of rock and ice nearly three hundred kilometers in diameter. It floated alone, day in and day out, rotating with what one could almost swear was lugubrious slowness and making a revolution around its sun (which at this point was indistinguishable to the naked eye from all the other stars) every three hundred two thousand sixty four98 of them (days, that is). If it could have felt lonely, it most certainly would have been justified in going ahead and feeling it.

 It could not, however, which was just as well because, against all odds, it was not entirely alone at the moment. For probably only the third time in the Universe’s history, a starship was passing by.

 It was a small, dilapidated machine that had clearly seen better days, but not much better. A small legend on its side read “X3-85B”, dwarfed by much larger and more colorful, though by now extremely faded, letters reading “Crispco – the cookies that bite back!”

 The occupant of the ship was not a native of the planet below. This went without saying because nobody was. Certainly a species could, as many had, evolve to survive the lack of atmosphere (as in no air), but would most certainly die out from the lack of atmosphere (as in sheer boredom). The fact that nothing interesting could be there until something evolved and that nothing would evolve until something interesting was there was a paradox that many other planets had managed to cope with just fine somehow; but not all of them, and not this one. It was destined to always remain lonely, although if it actually could feel loneliness, its would be rivaled by that of the man floating above it.

 In fact the two were connected, in a way that neither of them bothered to care about, the one because it wasn’t alive and the other because he simply didn’t bother to care about it. But it is worth noting for our purposes that the man’s species, and he himself, had years ago been involved in the effort that claimed this planet for their own. It was worth nothing to them or anyone else for that matter, hence the absence of a war over its possession, but it was another world added to their repertoire and anyone who didn’t recognize the name, i.e. all but three of the Universe’s inhabitants who did not include the man floating above it now, would be impressed.

 The planet’s name was Juk, but that isn’t important. The man’s species was human and they hailed from a far distant and decidedly more interesting planet called Earth, and the importance of that will be revealed in due time.

 Earthling humans had even more of a possessive tendency than the many other varieties found loitering on worlds without number, and for centuries now they had spread like a disease, first to the planets of their own solar system, then beyond to even these outer reaches of the Andromeda galaxy, funded by competing cookie companies who wanted the free publicity. Crispco had gone out of business when it turned out that many alien races didn’t like their cookies to bite them back, though many others had become obscenely wealthy and were still kicking.

 But the ship was still there, and still running after heaven knows how many decades, though it ought to have been capped and given a decent burial. It was a scout ship, used now only for scouting very out-of-the-ordinary things. These are not hard to come by in such a large and varied Universe as our own, but still Theodore Hays, as the man’s name was, found himself quite frequently very bored.

 He was bored right now, certainly. As the planet passed beneath him, he gave it barely a glance. It held no interest for him. It was not what he had come to look for, and if it had been he would have handed in his papers right then and there.

 “Planet Juk,” remarked the robot next to him, raising the number of people who knew its name to four. “Nothing to see there.”

 Teddy grunted noncommittally. *I’m glad I have a robot to tell me these things*, he thought. As far as he was concerned, there was nothing to see anywhere. To blazes with the stars.

 As they grazed the planet’s magnetic field, a brief bit of mild static interrupted the radio. It was softly playing The Commyboppers’ latest hit, “Gone like a Rolla”, for what seemed to be the eight hundred seventeenth time but was in fact only the eight hundred thirteenth. Not only was it getting tedious but he had no idea what the heck a “rolla” was supposed to be or where it had gone. He wanted dearly to change the station but it was the only one that reached this area.

 He had tried, additionally, to play chess, poker and Scrabble, but the robot beat him at everything every time despite his repeated threats to blow it out the airlock. Eventually he had tired of this and resigned himself to listening to the radio for another five hours.

 The reason they weren’t going through hyperspace was that it was absolutely vital they not miss whatever it was they were looking for. They didn’t know what it was, and the chances of it not being there increased with the longer they took, but he was following orders. If there was a better way to do this, he didn’t care to think of it.

 He glanced at his robot companion, letting its words sink in. Designated X4-29A, it was nearly as old as the ship. It still served him well, which was lucky because no one was willing to vouch for a newer model. No one cared about his job, not really. He was told the newer models had a capacity for making conversation, which would have been much appreciated at the moment, and wondered about getting an upgrade but thought *no, I don’t have money to burn.*

 “If calculations are correct,” it said, “the signals originated just two million kilometers away from here.”

 “Right,” said Teddy. This was the one part of his job he enjoyed, somewhat; finding what they were after so he could go home. They lapsed back into silence, but the mood had lifted somewhat. He kept his eye on the sensors.

 It was a good five minutes before the robot spoke again. “Sir, look,” it said.

 He looked out the cockpit as it was directing but saw nothing. “What, Ecksfour?” he demanded. “I don’t see any –”

 And then he saw it.

 It was barely distinguishable from this distance, but growing rapidly. He squinted and picked up his binoculars. Unfortunately they were electronically augmented binoculars and as such very nerve-wracking to get to work properly. Teddy managed to get them adjusted properly with a minimum of swearing that only accompanied years of practice, when the batteries ran out. By now however the object of Ecksfour’s attention could be seen clearly.

 It appeared to be some sort of diplomatic shuttle, in the shape of a huge metal vampire bat. Shivers went down his spine. \*description needs work\*

 “Ecksfour, what –!?

 “I don’t know, sir. It’s not in my database. Connecting to the Internet.” A slight pause. “Oh dear.”

 “Something bad?”

 “No idea, sir. There’s nothing about this particular exact model anywhere.”

 “It’s not even showing up on the sensors, Ecksfour. They could be jamming us, or maybe it’s just some kind of – screwy thing.”

 “I don’t know, sir.”

 “Oh man…” Teddy frantically looked around for the weapons systems. It took him a moment to remember there were no weapons systems. “Fiddlesticks,” he mumbled.

 As he watched, the ship’s underbelly yawned open, and some strange creatures, lacking clothing of any type but most noticeably spacesuits, floated daintily into the vacuum. Effortlessly, they began to push their way through it, towards him. Their claws seemed to rip the fabric of space itself; screaming with the wrongness of their presence in it. Shivers went down Teddy’s spine again and back up this time for good measure. Paralyzed with fear, he couldn’t even think to turn the ship around.

 “Oh snap,” he finally managed to say. “This does not look good.”

 “I detect no weapons, sir,” said Ecksfour helpfully.

 “And we can’t detect their strakking *ship*, either, so that doesn’t help. I repeat, this does not look good.”

 The creatures reached the airlock and began scrabbling at it. His heart leaped into his throat and seemed inclined to stay there.

 “Sir,” said Ecksfour tentatively, “Preliminary muscle-mass index calculations indicate that if they wanted to, these creatures would be fully capable of ripping the airlock door clean off. I believe they are friendly, and we should extend our hospitality to make sure they remain so.”

 Teddy sighed. “It’s going to be one of those days, isn’t it?” he said, but he entered the code to let them in.

 It was about a minute before they came up to the bridge. The bridge was, in fact, the only room on his small patrol ship, aside from a small bathroom nestled in one corner. He felt that they were deliberately trying to keep him in suspense and thought it rather rude of them. His fear stretched with the seconds like a tangible object, and as he saw them finally emerge, it snapped, and he was left in an emotional world that transcended such things. It was not him controlling his body, now, or thinking his thoughts. He didn’t know who it was, but with his little remaining consciousness he was grateful to them because he would have bungled everything and probably started a war.

 There were five of them. The one in the lead bowed slightly.

 “Welcome,” said Teddy. He bowed in response. “I am Theodore Hays, and this is, uh, X4-29A.” He nodded at his companion.

 Although Ecksfour remained motionless, every sensor at his disposal was busy scanning them and sending the information to an independent database. Some of the things he learned would have astounded him if he were capable of being astounded. Their appearance did get to even him, though. An unholy amalgam of insect and reptile; the only way to describe them without launching into an essay was to say that they looked like everyone’s worst nightmare. The fact that not everyone has the same worst nightmares might have been a complication, but these creatures pulled it off.

 That was one reason, of course, why robots still accompanied the pilots on these patrol missions. Everyone in this day and age knew that life comes in incredibly varied forms, and that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. But when faced for the first time with something that looked like a sick Komodo dragon’s intestines wrapped around a bundle of sticks and sprinkled with toenail clippings attempting to communicate with them (a famous example given in basic training after one heinous incident), emotion could override their better judgment and make them do stupid things. Ecksfour was programmed to remain calm and aloof in any situation. Still, though these creatures were somewhat more recognizable as sentient beings than said example, they were infinitely more hideous, and even he was feeling somewhat repulsed.

 Teddy, of course, was no longer feeling such things. The process he was going through is a very clever defense mechanism and those who have it are very lucky.

 “Hi there,” said the lead creature, and Teddy nearly jumped out of his skin.

 Aside from the shock of hearing it speak perfect English, at least with the two simple words it so far had said, it was also a bit jarring to hear them spoken in a perfectly docile upper-class British accent. He half-expected it to propose a nice, hot cup of tea. He was no stranger to British accents, having one himself and being among a large number of Earthlings who did, and he even imagined that some sort of parallel evolution could have thrust a coincidentally similar one on this creature, but it just didn’t seem to fit.

 “Er… hi,” he responded, grateful to whoever had invented such a shallow meaningless word that allowed him to stall for time while he thought of what the heck to say next.

 “Just dropped in from another dimension,” it continued. “Thought we’d take a look around and see what it’s like here. No offense, but so far it’s pretty boring.”

 Teddy would have had no problem agreeing with that statement regardless of whether it came from a creature capable of beating him to atoms. “You got that right,” he said. Then he decided that as the first ambassador to its race, he should give it a more complete picture of things. “This sector is, anyway,” he went on. “There are lots more exciting places with all kinds of things happening, in every direction light-years from here.”

 The creature did a very convincing pantomime of raising an eyebrow. “You don’t say?”

 He nodded, uncertain if he had said the right thing.

 “Well then, we’ll have to look around some more. Does, ah, every being look like you?”

 “Me?” Teddy was a bit surprised at such a question. “Well, er, I am what’s known as a human, you see. Many of the planets in this universe are populated by humans, and many more species are *humanoid*, which means they are shaped more or less the same but might have a different color or number of eyes or something. Then there are things that look like… like a sick Komodo dragon’s intestines wrapped around a bundle of sticks and sprinkled with toenail clippings, and all sorts of stuff in between.”

 It did the eyebrow pantomime again. “Komodo dragon?”

 Teddy looked helplessly at Ecksfour, who projected a hologram and began reciting from his database. “The Komodo dragon (Varanus komodoensis) was a species of lizard that inhabited the islands of Komodo, Rincah, Flores, and Gili Motang in Indonesia on the planet Earth. A member of the monitor lizard family (Varanidae), it was once the largest living Earthling species of lizard…”

 “Sounds fascinating,” it said after about the fifth paragraph. “We’ve certainly picked a great universe to come to, then.”

 “What’s this?” said another voice.

 Teddy turned around. One of the creatures had opened his small fridge and taken out a half-eaten pan of cold lasagna which it seemed to be completely perplexed by.

 “That’s lasagna,” he said. “It’s my lunch. It’s a kind of pasta.”

 “Pasta?” It seemed more perplexed than ever.

 Ecksfour played the entry on that. The creatures all watched it in stunned silence the whole way through.

 “Play that again,” their leader ordered. “Please,” it added quickly.

 He played it again. And again. And again. They still didn’t get it.

 The leader stroked its chin, if it could be called that. “Fascinating…” it said.

 The creature holding the lasagna tentatively pulled off a little piece of noodle and began raising it towards its face.

 “Put that down!” the leader snapped. “You don’t know what it could do!”

 “I could have my robot do some tests, see if your digestion can handle it,” Teddy offered.

 “It’s not just that,” the leader confessed. “We simply can’t trust *it*, in particular. Nothing so complex as this ‘pasta’ is to be taken at face value.”

 “‘Complex?’” He was at somewhat of a loss for words. “Well most of the stuff in that entry is extraneous; I can tell you what it all comes down to –”

 “No need,” it insisted, “I’m afraid the basic principles themselves are too slippery and would continue to elude us. Best to just forget about it.”

 Teddy shrugged. “Okay,” he said. His old self was returning, now that these beings had completely dispelled his basis for fears. A bit pushy sometimes, perhaps, but overall rather polite and friendly with just a touch of eccentricity to make this the most interesting mission of his life.

 Further dispelling said fears, the creatures’ leader continued, “I suppose we should answer some of your questions now. First off, you’re probably wondering why we speak perfect English. It’s simple, really; we’ve been monitoring your radio broadcasts ever since before we arrived. Why you bother sending them out to this rock is beyond me.”

 “That makes two of us,” he said. “Not many Commybopper fans out here.” It occurred to him that that didn’t really explain how they knew English at all, but decided to drop the point because there were things tugging more urgently at his sense of curiosity.

 “Anything else?” it said. “Shoot.”

 “Well,” he began hesitantly, then growing more bold, “what about the voice, and the accent?”

 There was a moment of awkward silence.

 “I was born with them,” it said finally. “Weren’t you?”

 “Oh.” Teddy was rather embarrassed about this. He wisely didn’t bother explaining why they didn’t seem to fit his guest. “How naïve of me. I guess I expected you to be a Cockney, like me.”

 “A *what*? Never mind, sorry. It’s your question time.”

 “Well… back home, we picked up some strange signals coming from this area, and no one could make heads or tails of them. I came to investigate. Here…” He gestured to Ecksfour, who fiddled with some controls until a screen lit up showing the spectra readings from them. “Did they… come from you?”

 The creature scratched its chin again and nodded slowly. “I think so,” it said. “Probably from the moment we popped into your dimension.”

 The implications of this hit Teddy full force this time. “What?” he said.

 “Oh yes. We have technology which enables us to do so. Here.” It held out in its palm a small orb. It was metallic and glowed with the light of the stars, concealing impossibly complicated components beneath a seamless shell. Although none of these components were visible, Teddy found himself believing without question that this was indeed the key to interdimensional travel.

 He was nearly speechless. “Interdimensional travel… and you can’t fathom pasta…” In a trance, he reached out to touch the orb.

 “There is really no justifiable comparison,” it said defensively, yanking the device back. “To each their own. We manipulate the space-time continuum as easily as you the dough for this… this pasta. If you can master the one, this shall be simple for you as well.”

 “Well… I don’t actually make *my own* pasta…”

 “You as a race, I mean. Sorry, your language is rather poorly designed. Sometimes it seems as if it were cobbled together from a bunch of other languages.”

 Teddy felt, quite rightly, as if the most incredible opportunity of his life was slipping away. “Never mind that,” he almost shouted. “Show me how. Please. Maybe Ecksfour can make sense of it at least.”

 With as much of an “I-was-hoping-you’d-ask” look as it could manage with its hideous excuse for a face, the creature brought out a much smaller, disk-like device, and pressed it. Suddenly a hologram jumped out, nearly filling the small ship’s cabin, displaying in minute detail every inner working of the transdimensional orb. Though much more utilitarian and functional than the artistry of the orb itself, they somehow carried the same beauty, although probably they were just tainted by knowledge of their grand function.

 “Wow…” He really was speechless now. Just looking at it blew his mind and he no longer felt like trying to figure it out.

 “It took us millions of years to develop,” the creature admitted. “But once we figured it out, it was child’s play. And look at you, your race created pasta. I’m sure you could manage.”

 “I for one would have to study it for a while,” broke in Ecksfour.

 “In that case,” said Teddy, “I don’t think –”

 “With time.” It thumbed the disk again, and the hologram vanished. Teddy blinked.

 “But it’ll take so long. Won’t you just share the technology with us?” he pleaded.

 “That wouldn’t be…”

 “We’d be ever so grateful. And people will be wanting to visit you too, now. And maybe we could even set up some sort of trade system for our mutual benefit, you know, as a symbol of lasting peace between our civilizations. It’d be great. We could even teach you about pasta. Oh, won’t you please share with us?” He wished he’d paid more attention in training to how one was supposed to go about manipulating negotiations.

 “Please,” it said, “my brain hurts at the mere mention of that ‘p’ word. It’s much too complicated, I tell you. Maybe some other time, when everything’s settled down and I have a few centuries free to study.”

 “A few –? How long are your lifespans, anyway?”

 “Oh, depends. Awful long time by your standards I gather. Until we die, pretty much.”

 “Ah. Is that so?”

 “Don’t any beings in this universe live for centuries?”

 “Well yes, but they tend to avoid it on account of massive boredom. For most it’s only relatively recently, with space travel, that that’s ceased to be a problem. At least,” he added under his breath, “for some of us.” He instantly took that back because he remembered that this mission was actually turning out to be pretty darn interesting, and that the most interesting part of it was trying to elude him. This was the greatest opportunity of his life, and even the other entity that still had somewhat of a grip on his body couldn’t keep the excitement from welling up in him.

 “Our dimension is a blast,” it boasted, making it well up further.

 “Come now,” Teddy nudged gently, “you’re stalling, aren’t you? Please, make a decision. Won’t you please share your technology with us? Think of what it could mean. I’m sure nearly everyone in this universe would love to visit your dimension.”

 “Well,” said the creature, suddenly seeming uncomfortable, “I don’t think that’s going to be much of an issue.”

 The entity suddenly left entirely and Teddy was left with rapidly rising levels of discomfort. “Uh – how so? Whaddya mean?” he inquired nervously.

 “Nothing,” it said quickly, and tore off his head.

 *Well*, his spirit thought as it floated off into space for a long journey home, *at least I finally got some excitement*.

 If Ecksfour were capable of screaming, he wouldn’t have had time. The creature thumbed some other sort of disk-like device, or perhaps the same one being thumbed in a slightly different manner, that froze his metal body in place. His sensors were still operative, however, and he watched and listened helplessly to the rest of the proceedings. If he were an organic and capable of feeling fear, he would have been paralyzed anyway.

 “Nice going,” said another creature. “Tell him *everything*, why don’t you. What if he’d been more powerful? What if he’d escaped?”

 “Come on, you knew the whole time that he was never any threat,” insisted the leader. It looked into the eyes of the head still gripped in its claws, and casually tossed it aside where it *thunked* sickeningly off the wall. “These Komodo dragons he speaks of, on the other hand… we may have to watch out for them.”

 “I’m just saying… it seemed a little risky…”

 “Well the risk is gone now, okay? Enough whining. We have to get back and report on everything. And then… the real work begins. Come on.”

 They headed back for the airlocks. One of them picked up the lasagna.

 “What do you want with that?” demanded their leader.

 “Perhaps I can solve its mysteries,” it suggested.

 “A waste of time. You’ll never figure it out, and we’ll have *real* work to occupy your mind soon enough.”

 “I can do both,” it insisted. “Do not underestimate my incredible mental power. That’s why I’m here, after all.”

 “Yes…” The leader sighed. “Fine, then. Do what you must. But do not let it impact your performance. We will need *all* of that mental power soon enough.”

 “Um, guys?” piped up another creature. “Why are we still speaking in this idiotic tongue?”

 “Search me. Maybe we’re intimidating the robot. Which reminds me,” said the leader. It turned to the paralyzed, helpless Ecksfour. “I’m afraid we’ll have to leave *you* all alone,” it said. “Forever. And I don’t anticipate much traffic near this worthless dirt ball. But don’t worry, we’ll make sure to introduce ourselves to all the rest of your organic friends in this lovely universe.” It waved to the airlocks, and the other four creatures traipsed out. It began to follow.

 “Oh yes,” it added, pausing and turning back. “It just occurs to me, *you* don’t even know who we are. None of us have need of worthless petty individual names, but as a whole, you may call us… the Skreel.”

 It moved away from the airlock and bashed its way through the wall instead.

 This encounter happened at about the same time as several others throughout the Universe, always in isolated areas with few witnesses, who were quickly silenced. No one ever found out about these first encounters, but soon the Skreel made a much grander entrance as promised, slaughtering every being they ever encountered and blasting the heck out of their planets for good measure. And so commenced the greatest war that anyone could remember, for the very good reason that it was the greatest war they’d ever had, and it was enough to make the happy majority permanently lose their contented smiles. Anyone who was still happy at this point probably had a brain aneurism.

 To be strictly speaking, of course, it should be clarified early on that it wasn’t technically a war, so much as an extermination that was taking a long time simply because the Universe was, and is, such a staggeringly huge place. The men, women, and various other genders of every intelligent race living in it, and many who were not so intelligent but knew sure as taxes they didn’t want to be dead, fought valiantly, did heroic deeds, and made the Skreel pay for their comrades’ deaths; but it soon became apparent that they didn’t have a prayer. Quite frankly, they were outgunned and outnumbered by an obscene percentage, which is fantastic because, you must remember, this is an entire universe we’re talking about here. The invaders just wouldn’t stop coming.

 The Skreel, it should also be mentioned, were much worse than your average scumbags. They were, without noteworthy exception, disgusting, vile, atheistic creatures. They were the sorts of creatures that would not only rip out your spleen, but, while you were still conscious, stuff it down your throat and say terrible things about your mother. Perhaps a few stayed at home and wrote touching romantic poetry, but this is doubtful because they reproduced by budding and ate their offspring if given half a chance. Concepts like *friend, love,* and *charity* remained almost but not quite as foreign as *pasta* to them.

 So, being born into this sort of a Universe, one would naturally not have the most optimistic view of things. But then, that made it all the much easier to fight when you knew that, invariably, you would be killed, in an explosion if you were lucky but quite possibly in a much more terrible way.

 One more thing to add. At the time this story takes place, The War, as the Universe’s inhabitants called it, or The Extermination as we have more accurately identified it but which we will not continue to call it by because no one else did, had been going on for approximately fifty years, measuring by Earth time, or anywhere from 0.0000023 to 750,000,912 depending on which alternative systems you use. And why not? What’s so important about the Earth anyway?

# 1

“What’s so important about the Earth, anyway?” was one of the questions most commonly asked by the inhabitants of planet Gragalla. One of the first, in ancient times, to have been colonized by the inhabitants of said Earth, despite the fact that Gragalla’s inhabitants did not want to be colonized, and said so very politely. Unfortunately, they had little say in the matter because nearly all of them were inadvertently wiped out by the introduction of a common cold virus. The astronaut who had brought it from Earth, a certain Leonard J. Smith, was tried and executed for crimes against extraterrestriality. Although there were no preachers in the crowd, nearly all of those present said “Bless you.”

 The governments of Earth tried very hard to gloss over the whole situation, and nearly succeeded. The original inhabitants were remembered only by their most commonly used word, “strak.” No one else knew what it meant, but they adapted it into an obscene gerund and it quickly spread through cultures across the Milky Way. If you were a good reader and didn’t skip the prologue then you have already seen it in use.

 “What’s so important about the Earth, anyway?” was never said by the original inhabitants of Gragalla, then, but rather the descendants of the Earthlings who colonized it. They were brought up to think of it as the “Mother Planet” of sorts and superior to them in every possible way, except for the trifling matter of dry-cleaning services which the true Earthlings conveniently chose to ignore. With the Earth must lay their loyalty and dedication, first and foremost. But since the Earth had never done anything for them, or even acknowledged their existence for the past two centuries, most of the Gragallans didn’t give a wet slap.

 And so when they were contacted nearly fifty years ago by the Earth’s leadership and urged to join The War, not for the Universe but for the “Mother Planet”, the Gragallans’ general consensus on the matter was “up yours with a wire brush”. In fact they made such a big spiel out of it that anti-war riffraff from all over the Milky Way, and some beyond, came to join the fantastic parties which were flaring up all over the planet in deliberate defiance. These parties ranged from the squeaky clean to the risqué to the sorts of things that they wrote about in “Planetary Geographic”.

 One of these slightly, but not very, at least by comparison to all of the others, risqué parties, was being held in the Town Hall of Riko City. This building, like many others funded by the original obscenely rich cookie companies sponsoring the original colonizing expedition, was designed in a ludicrous, impractical and aesthetically pleasing fashion.

 It consisted of a slightly squished hollow silver orb nearly a kilometer in either direction, suspended nearly a kilometer off the ground by a disturbingly thin central pillar and several concealed hoverjets in its base. In times past, people entered by means of the elevator system running through the pillar, which only held ten people at the most, four if they were terribly obese, as Earthlings in those days had a tendency to be; and on top of that they were forced to listen to elevator Muzak for nearly five minutes. The system was therefore terribly ludicrous and impractical. However, it was aesthetically pleasing, as its supporters were quick to point out to its detractors, and therefore these minor inconveniences could be dealt with. At some point, with the advent of teleportation, several units thereof were installed and life for the city’s ruling council was much more pleasant. The elevator was still maintained for those who were slightly uncomfortable with the idea of their component molecules being taken apart, blasted through the air at faster-than-light speeds and hopefully reassembled in the right order.

 Whoever was sponsoring this particular party was lucky indeed to have secured use of the Town Hall, because the city’s ruling council was often quite busy nowadays holding symposiums to find new ways of mocking the war effort. As it happened, in fact, today they were taking what they felt to be a well deserved break, and playing space shuffleboard just outside the planet’s atmosphere. They were having a terribly tricky time of this because they kept drifting away if they paused for more than a moment to contemplate their next move, and so did the pucks and in fact the board itself. The score was currently three hundred sixty-five to zero, because one team had the planet’s gravity in their favor and refused to switch sides. The other team, fuming, decided they would vent by raising the taxes after they got back. Eventually, one council member who was on the ship with their very good-looking secretary patiently waiting for his turn got fed up, returned to Riko City and went to the party instead.

 This party was mostly clean and relatively wholesome, at least during the daylight hours. Conversation flitted among the member species of a thousand worlds, a cross-section of the Milky Way’s various populations. Many wore breathing masks to accommodate the alien atmosphere, or basked in moisturizing tanks, or carried around artificial mini-environments with pre-programmed heat and humidity levels. All of them were having a good time and, shockingly enough to those who weren’t used to the cleaner sorts of parties, mostly without drugs.

 Not only that, but it was a great way to get an education about one another and their wide-ranging species.

 “Would you like to dance?” an Ardavian Brak asked a shy-looking humanoid creature.

 The humanoid blushed. “Thanks, but you don’t want to dance with *me*,” he said. “I’ve got two left feet.”

 The Ardavian Brak wriggled uncontrollably, which was its equivalent for laughter. “Don’t sweat it,” she said. “I’ve got a hundred sixty-four.”

 Meanwhile:

 “What’s with the crazy gloves?” a Malgovian Schnoob asked a Chikkiter.

 “Can’t dance without ‘em, or in fact anything else in public at all,” confided the Chikkiter. “If I get even a teensy bit nervous for any reason whatsoever, you see, I involuntarily secrete fatal neurotoxins from every pore on my body.”

 “So you all wear gloves?”

 “Eh, either that, or carry antidote at all times, or take drugs to stay calm no matter what, which is a bad idea ‘cause it makes you do stupid things. I suppose some might just not worry about it until they get in huge trouble for criminal negligence. It is *bad*, man.”

 “Must be some wicked predators they have on your planet,” guessed the Schnoob.

 The Chikkiter wriggled uncontrollably, which was its equivalent of a shrug. “They’re so-so,” he decided. “I think it has more to do actually with insurance salesmen.”

 Meanwhile:

 “Can I buy you a drink?” a Foojoo Floff asked a depressed Quatti who was reading a book.

 “No thanks,” said the Quatti, “alcohol doesn’t agree with me.”

 “A soda, then?” persisted the Foojoo.

 “No thanks,” said the Quatti, “caffeine doesn’t agree with me.”

 “Water?” pressed the exasperated Foojoo.

 “Hydrogen and oxygen stuck together make me explode,” said the Quatti.

 The Foojoo coughed slightly, which was its equivalent of wriggling uncontrollably. “I see,” it said, and, heartbroken because it loved hydrogen and oxygen stuck together, quickly excused itself to go join one of the beings in a moisturizing tank.

 The Quatti returned to its copy of *Lies to Tell about Your Species and Freak People out at Parties*.

 Meanwhile:

 Alicia Parkinson stared out her bedroom window and sighed.

 School was out for a while on account of some historic figure or other and it was a downright heavenly day of what they considered spring on Gragalla. The star Dante shone on lylock trees blooming in every color of the rainbow, attracting mauve-breasted dwiks and puce-beaked hipscotches to flutter about and among them, consuming the ambrosial yellow essence of life, collecting on their spindly legs tiny grains of hay-fever inducing grains and removing them from harm’s way. A vicious quordlepleen, similar to squirrels from Earth except in its diet and temperament, darted among the lylocks and leaped occasionally, eventually bringing down in its razor sharp buck teeth a squealing dwik; but this was merely natural selection and did not account for Alicia’s mood that was conducive to sighing.

 Superimposed on this view, as was the case with windows even in this day and age, she could also see her reflection. Hers was an attractive face; a bit on the longish side, but perfect in every feminine way. It worked well with the long, slightly straggly brownish blonde hair that framed it. Everything else that trailed along across the bed behind it, from her dainty long neck to her scrumptious little toes, was perfectly proportioned with both it and each other. Her appearance, therefore, did not account for her mood either.

 The problem was that she could see the Town Hall building just a few blocks away. It disturbed her very much, as it did every day, but especially today. She confided this to her teddy bear, Mr. Snoogums.

 “It doesn’t bother me particularly that the ruling council’s corrupt,” she admitted to him, “because that’s to be expected without higher levels of government above it to handle the task of being corrupt themselves. It doesn’t bother me that they use at least half of our taxes to give themselves raises in pay every month, because the other half’s sufficient to cover the city’s needs and I don’t have to pay them yet anyway. If I sound cynical by the way, it’s just – my childhood’s gone. I’ve grown up too fast.

 “No, what bothers me is their stance on The War, and their reason for adopting it. Having parties while the rest of the Universe unites to save itself from annihilation, simply because the Mother Planet requested aid on their *own* behalf and didn’t mention the big picture, which everyone knows anyway, it’s just – completely ludicrous and impractical and doesn’t even have the justification of being aesthetically pleasing. I don’t know why I said that. Some phrase from school I guess. That’s where I gather all I know about these things, and if you think I’m a bit too opinionated for someone merely being force-fed a bunch of facts, you’re probably right. But what else is there to think about?

 “I went to one of those parties, remember? It was Bert’s birthday and he insisted. It *did* look like a lot of fun and I would have enjoyed it if it weren’t for the wrong reasons. I don’t like him sharing that stance on The War either, but that at least can be justified by him being brought up immersed in this stupid society. Their opinions don’t slide off him like they do me. He’s a rather likable fellow, beyond that, and so were most of his friends at the party. They were, in fact, a bunch of friendly, likable, good-humored spineless cretins. I’m sorry, that’s the nicest way I can put it. I’m in a bad mood. Let’s not forget one of them ran over Fred way back when, right?

 “Some are spineless in a more literal sense than others, okay. I don’t mean to be insensitive. But what I mean, the one thing they all have in common, is that they deliberately avoid what I feel is every being’s natural duty, to help others in time of need. There are other ways to help, besides fighting, you know. The war effort needs planning, supply production, medical help, even reporting on the whole thing with an unseemly positive twist on every battle to increase morale in everyone else. The fact that all of these spineless cretins are going to be wiped out themselves, even before those who fight valiantly are at last vanquished, and that they know it and don’t care, only makes the whole thing that much more intolerable to me.

 “And I mean, you don’t even have to do anything necessarily. Not everyone does, there’s more to the Universe than that, but it’s one thing to go on with your life and another to have wild parties while terrible things are going on.” Alicia sighed again and turned away from the window. She stared into Mr. Snoogums’ chocolate brown eyes. He was a smallish tan teddy bear. She’d had him since she was a baby, and he had clearly been worn half to death with love throughout all the intervening years.

 But as Alicia stared into his eyes, she was reminded that the feeling wasn’t mutual. “What do you care,” she muttered angrily. “You’re just a stupid lump of cloth and stuffing.” She threw him across the room. Then, she immediately felt guilty and went over to pick him up.

 “I’m sorry,” she crooned as she stroked his threadbare fur, “I’m sorry. I’m just frustrated, that’s all. Life can be difficult for a teenager when she hasn’t the power to change its course.” She sighed again and looked back out the window at the Town Hall building. “Curse them all,” she hissed, and willed all of her anger energy in that direction.

 “You’re lucky,” a passing Kreeb was muttering to the gloved Chikkiter, “When I get nervous I turn into a homicidal maniac.” Suddenly he felt a strange chill that felt like a wave of pure anger energy, and had to quickly pop a few pills in his mouth before he delivered on that promise.

 The Chikkiter felt his gloves getting wet. “Did you feel that?” he asked. “If we were in a movie, I’d call it an ironic foreshadowing.”

 “Yeeesh,” said the Kreeb. “Have another drink.”

 Alicia decided to quit feeling sorry for the Universe. It was that time of the afternoon when she realized anew that there was nothing more she could do and that it was time to advance on a different front, the one that kept her from increasing the distance between her and those spineless cretins, in both senses of the word. She pulled the window curtains shut and tried to regain her composure.

 “Can I confide something else in you?” she asked Mr. Snoogums. “Even though you’re fake, I mean. Dad and I had another argument last night. He won’t let me leave, even though I’m almost eighteen. He just doesn’t understand –”

 “Understand what?” piped a small squeaky voice.

 Alicia nearly jumped out of her skin. She stared at Mr. Snoogums in disbelief, and then the light dawned.

 “Gina!” she yelled.

 Her little sister bounded into the doorframe, laughing all the way. She looked like a pint-sized prepubescent version of Alicia, but with her hair in a ponytail, and eyes full of childlike innocence undimmed by the torture of years. Childlike innocence was a good kind of innocence for her to have seeing as she was, after all, a child. However it also made her an occasional pest.

 She pranced back and forth in the doorframe, chanting, “Alicia’s talking to a teddy bear! Alicia’s talking to a teddy bear!”

 “Bug off,” muttered Alicia. She didn’t feel like dealing with this today.

 “She wasn’t just talking, either, she was *monologuing*,” Gina taunted.

 “That’s not even a verb,” Alicia protested, though she knew it would do no good. Gina was a killer at Scrabble.

 “It is so a verb, and it’s in a present participle tense. Alicia likes to pretend she’s so big and grown-up,” Gina said over her shoulder. “I wish she would just admit she talks to her teddy bear, so she could have a tea party with us sometime. Don’t you?”

 “Get out of my room,” hissed Alicia.

 “I’m not in your room,” insisted Gina. She stuck her foot in. “Now I am.” She pulled it out. “Now I’m not. Now I am. Now I’m not. Am. Not. Am. Not.”

 “Beat it!” yelled Alicia.

 “Come on, Harvey,” said Gina, “let’s go leave Miss Grouchypants alone now. She just wants to be by herself and mope all day.” She skipped gaily down the hall without giving her sister a second glance.

 Alicia sighed. *Some days*… but Gina wasn’t really so bad. It was her father she couldn’t stand, and her mind returned immediately to him and their argument. It was merely the most recent of hundreds, all nearly identical. And again she was feeling, as she often did, that it would take more than a teddy bear to console her now.

 “Kaycee!” she called.

 In waltzed a robot named KC-1138, looking very pleased with himself, insofar as it is possible for a robot to look pleased with itself. He had just invented a game that was guaranteed to keep Gina and Harvey occupied for at least ten minutes.

 “Kaycee”, as he had been affectionately nicknamed in spite of his half-hearted protests, was the only gift from her boyfriend that Alicia had found continuing to be incredibly useful over the years. Among his many other skills, he was an excellent psychologist.

 “Yes, Mistress Parkinson?” he said, with a slight bow.

 With regards to his persistent obsequiousness she saw an echo of her boyfriend and wondered, not for the first time, how much of a connection there was and how much was simply standard robot programming. She did appreciate being treated with such respect, and it made her feel better almost immediately, but she couldn’t stand to see someone, even a robot, degrade himself in such a manner for extended periods of time.

 “We’ve been over this,” she scolded gently, “just call me Alicia.”

 “But of course, Mis– Alicia,” he said with another slight bow. “Your every whim is my command.”

 “Please, quit it,” she begged, giggling, “worry about your own needs once in a while.”

 “It’s against my programming,” Kaycee insisted. “I know you will take care of my needs as you always have, minimal though they are, and my only function in life is to make you happy.”

 No point in beating around the bush then. “You know what I want,” she said.

 “Indeed I do. You want to be consoled that your own life doesn’t suck as much as it seems to right now.”

 “Yes.”

 Kaycee did a very convincing imitation of a human sigh. “I suppose I should start out by reminding you, those ‘spineless cretins’ over there will get what’s coming to them. Life does not end with –”

 “No, thank you,” Alicia said curtly, “I’ve managed to cope with that myself this time. What I’m mainly depressed about now is my overprotective father.”

 “Ooh, progress,” said Kaycee, looking very pleased with himself again. “Well. I suppose I should start out by reminding you that he loves you, and is only doing what he feels is best for you, and trying to keep you safe.”

 “He’s holding me back from doing the right thing,” she insisted.

 “Not on a matter of principle. Alicia, your father cares about you. Perhaps you do not see eye-to-eye on The War, but he respects your viewpoint. The bottom line is that he doesn’t want you to run off and be killed in a hideous nasty way.”

 “For the good of the Universe,” she insisted.

 “Alicia, there comes a point where parental love overcomes rational thought. You need to respect that. And often, you will find that it is somehow much more beneficial than rationalism and logic in the first place. Love is what makes the Universe worth saving.”

 Alicia began to cry. She couldn’t help it; she just suddenly felt as if everything was so futile.

 Kaycee patted her on the back, with surprising delicacy for such metal hands. “Don’t worry,” he said, “you will come of age soon, and he will not be able to stop you from fulfilling your dreams. For now, savor and cherish the moments you have with him, and remember. He loves you.”

 “Thanks, Kaycee,” Alicia said a few minutes later after deep and serious contemplation on the matter, “I feel better.” Kaycee, feeling satisfied with a job well done, patted her once more for good measure and somehow looked even more pleased with himself than before.

 There was a phone call at that moment, as if someone had been spying on them and felt that this was the perfect moment to make a phone call. This was, in fact, exactly what had happened. Alicia quickly answered it, knowing it could only possibly be one person.

 “Hey, dollface,” he said, “What’s happenin’?”

 “Nothing,” she said, smiling in spite of herself, “but it’s good to hear from you as always, Bert.”

 “You can do more than that, baby,” he said, “look out your window.”

 She opened the curtains and did so. There, beaming proudly, was her boyfriend, Bert Jackson, holding a bouquet of possibly the most beautiful flowers she had ever seen. She opened the window and gave him a moment to climb in. Kaycee, as always, went into the corner and pretended to be an inanimate object.

 “Well,” she began, and then couldn’t think of a way to finish. “You don’t need to keep coming through the window,” she said at last, trying to pretend, rather lamely she thought, that she wasn’t anxiously expecting him to hand the flowers over. “Dad’s not around right now. He had some errands to run.”

 “These are for you,” he said, unnecessarily, and handed over the flowers.

 She held them to her bosom and joyfully inhaled the fragrances, which were even better than their sight, by a long shot. She felt transported to another universe, another dimension, where all was peace and joy and comfort, and her lingering worries of just a few moments ago melted away instantly.

 “They’re from the peaks of the Singing Mountains in the Weeping Forests of Kryndamar,” he explained.

 “Oh, Bert!” she swooned. “You went there for me?”

 He laughed. “No,” he said, “I bought them just a while ago at a fantastic party. They cost quite a lot since they’re an endangered species and not actually legal to take as such, but no expense or risk is too great for you, my dear.”

 “Oh.” Alicia was slightly deflated, and didn’t know what to say, or indeed even think. She appreciated the gesture, of course, but as much as she did not like Kaycee worshipping her, she liked it from Bert even less. It simply gave her the heebie-jeebies, and she knew she didn’t want him doing illegal and environmentally insensitive things, just for her. But still… they *were* incredibly nice flowers…

 “Speaking of which, you’ve got to go to this party,” he continued. “This one’s huge. Think of the cultural enrichment from all those alien races! I mean, there’s an Ardavian Brak with a hundred sixty-four feet!”

 “Three hundred twenty-eight feet,” she said exasperatedly. “A hundred sixty-four *left* feet. I’ve heard that joke before.”

 “Yeah, right, I knew that. I was testing you. Come on baby, you’re changing the subject.”

 “Bert, you know how I feel about those parties,” she began, and the old feelings started to return. She took another whiff of the flowers.

 “But come on, Alicia honey, just this once, please. They’re so much fun… and you know what it would mean to me…” He started to puppy-pout. It didn’t really work with his sort of face and Alicia found herself suppressing giggles.

 “Imagine…” he continued. “You and me, dancing like no one else in the galaxy. Knocking those extraterrestrial dudes off their feet, no matter however many they have. But we won’t even notice, because it’ll just be our own little world… with just you… and me…” He tried the pout again and this time got it to work a little, but the effort left him gasping for breath in a few seconds.

 Alicia didn’t want to come within ten feet of any of those spineless cretins. But Bert was one of them, sort of, and he wasn’t so bad. And it didn’t matter much if she sacrificed this sort of principle a little, since she had done it once, and besides, she herself wasn’t going off to fight anytime soon and it had to be healthier than moping all day.

 And they *were* incredibly nice flowers…

 “We’re leaving for a while,” Alicia told Gina as they headed for the front door. “Mom’s upstairs with her toothpicks, I think.” Their mother, like a higher number of parents in children’s fiction than natural probability would seem to indicate, enjoyed making famous buildings and landmarks out of toothpicks. She wasn’t very good at it, but it kept her from worrying about more important things, such as the fact that her oldest daughter was half-emo, and thus served its purpose.

 “I won’t need her,” Gina insisted proudly. “Harvey and me can take care of ourselves, right Harvey?”

 “Eh, right,” said Alicia. “You and Harvey have fun.”

 “We will. Kaycee invented a great new game for us. Hi, Bert. Bye, Bert.”

 “Hey, squirt. See ya ‘round,” said Bert, mussing her hair.

 “Don’t have sex,” she said. He gaped at her. Her expression was deathly serious.

 “We… won’t,” he said. “Cross my heart.”

 “Better not. ‘Cause Harvey says it’s morally repugnant to fool around before you’ve made a big commitment and plus there’s all sorts of –”

 Alicia pleaded with her eyes at Kaycee who said, “Gina, I think they should go now so they’re not late.”

 “Um, okay. See ya.”

 Without another word, feeling more than a little creeped out, they left. Kaycee followed them.

 “Better make sure they don’t get into trouble,” Gina whispered to him. “You know how daddy feels about him.”

 Kaycee synthesized a wink. “Will do,” he said, and left.

 Gina stared at the closed door for a while. For some reason, she felt uneasy all of a sudden. She normally didn’t mind getting her moody sister out of the house, but this time it felt as if she wasn’t going to be coming back.

 “I have a bad feeling about this,” she said aloud.

 “You said it, kiddo,” agreed Harvey.

 Alicia and Bert would have been hard-pressed, however, to feel similarly. The day was even more heavenly once you were out in it, and not staring through some stuffy window. The titillating aroma of the lylocks carried to them on the wind and, though not quite on the same level as the flowers from Kryndamar, lifted their spirits immeasurably. The songs of the mauve-breasted dwiks and puce-beaked hipscotches, wonderful on their own, here interwove and counterpointed each other, melding into one glorious, surround sound aural experience. Even a couple of quordlepleens had stopped killing birds for a while and simply watched the human couple falling deeper in love thanks to nature’s awesome display of miracles.

 “It’s a nice day,” said Alicia.

 As soon as she and Bert had passed, the larger quordlepleen ripped out the smaller one’s intestines.

 “Bert,” said Alicia, “thank you.”

 “For what?”

 “The flowers… the date… everything. Just being there for me. I know I’m not very appreciative sometimes. It’s just…”

 “Yeah?”

 “So hard. I don’t know, I guess I just have issues.” This sounded lame even to her own ears because she knew that people who really had issues weren’t supposed to know they had issues. Obviously the fact that she did was a further and very rare issue.

 “Ah, don’t worry about it.” They didn’t bother to look both ways before crossing the street, because traffic was slim. Practically everyone was already at the Town Hall building for the party which was being advertised with posters on every available surface. The street, however, brought back unpleasant memories. “I sure do miss your old traktop,” Bert said after a few moments. “It’s been what, two years?”

 “Two and a half,” said Alicia sadly. “Fred. His name was Fred.”

 “Fred, whatever. Yeah, I remember how he always used to pounce when I came over, and he wouldn’t stop licking till I gave him a treat. Those were the days. Sure do miss him. Oh well, that’s why it’s important to have a designated driver, right?”

 “Or not get drunk in the first place,” Alicia insisted, starting to feel trepidation again towards going with him.

 “Yeah, well –”

 “Yoo-hoo! Hey guys, wait up!”

 They turned around. Cynthia Durmount, a mutual friend, waved from a few blocks behind. Hastily she ran across the street on her long gangly legs, being nearly flattened by the first car to come past in five minutes, and reached them out of breath.

 “Hey,” said Alicia.

 “Going to the party, huh?” wondered Cynthia. She casually twirled one of the curly strands of brunette locks that framed her baby face. Her eyebrows were long and thin and seemed somehow out of place, but only served to accent her semi-unique sort of beauty. The eyes themselves carried a sort of self-conscious slyness that packaged and sold the proverbial deal.

 “Yeah,” said Alicia.

 “Great. I knew you would someday. You’ve been missing a lot, spoilsport!”

 “So I see.”

 “Mind if I tag along? Jill and Julie were supposed to pick me up, but that was half an hour ago.”

 “You know them, probably cataloging their whole wardrobe first,” said Alicia.

 “Um, Cynth, baby,” said Bert, “we kinda wanted to go – together…”

 “Oh, no worries, I see how it is,” Cynthia assured them. “I’ll just walk with you, and sort of melt away when we get there, right?”

 Bert knew that Cynthia was the undisputed master of puppy pouts – it was she who had attempted to teach him – and that if she went that far, he would most likely end up giving her a month’s salary and an illegal bouquet of her own as well. So he agreed right off. They walked the rest of the distance with Cynthia explaining to them exactly what so-and-so and what’s-her-name had been up to last weekend and what they would probably do to top it this time. When they reached the building, she suddenly remembered something slightly more relevant to her situation.

 “My necklace! I left it at home!” she said. “I can’t hobnob with a bunch of alien studs without my necklace! I have to go back. You guys go on ahead and have fun without me!” She waved and hurried off.

 *So she pops up just long enough to avert a potentially romantic situation,* thought Alicia, and instantly corrected herself. Actually it had been an argument.

 “Here we are,” said Bert, quite unnecessarily. They stood in front of the elevator and contemplated whether they wanted to use it or not.

 Alicia was slightly uncomfortable with the idea of her component molecules being taken apart, blasted through the air at faster-than-light speeds and hopefully reassembled in the right order, and said so.

 “All right then,” said Bert, “but it can’t be worse than five minutes of Muzak.”

 After three minutes of Muzak Alicia began to feel he may be right. She was developing a headache unlike any she had ever known, seemingly out of the blue. Pausing to consider she decided the Muzak wasn’t that awful and didn’t constitute a proper explanation. At this point the pain increased so that she was unable to think of what did, and dedicated her mental faculties instead to leaning against the wall and moaning pitifully.

 “Something the matter, darling?” asked Bert.

 Not wanting to worry him unduly, Alicia managed to shake her head. He shrugged and dedicated his own mental faculties to staring impatiently at the ceiling.

 Finally they arrived. Bert turned to Kaycee. “Can we leave it behind?” he whined. “We don’t need a chaperone.”

 “‘It’ was a heartfelt gift from you to me, as I recall,” said Alicia, straining with the effort of creating a coherent sentence.

 “Yeah, whatever,” said Bert, “but it’s just a robot. Come on, um… Karlee…”

 “Kaycee, sir.”

 “Kaycee, right, whatever, why don’t you go do robot-y things until we’re finished here?”

 “I promised Gina I would –”

 “Do as he says,” said Alicia. “Go buy me an aspirin, *please*.”

 Kaycee remained silent; he would go back down and do as he was told. Bert opened the door and they walked into another world.

 It was a world Alicia hated, thoroughly, even more than last time, though that probably had something to do with the lingering headache which was doing nothing to improve her disposition. But she followed Bert into the sea of color and light.

 Here on the outskirts of it the noise was just low enough that they didn’t have to shout themselves hoarse over it. Most of the chatter was in English but some, who had defiantly refused to learn it, retained their own languages and got offended when no one could understand them. Some of the accents, too, were so thick as to impede nearly all comprehension. She noted one creature in particular that slurred its words as if it were drunk. Then she noticed the way it was moving and concluded that it really was drunk.

 The smells, too, were incredible. Obviously putting hundreds of alien species in an enclosed space would result in a cacophony of aromas and odors, and it was with this in mind that certain patented devices were in use which muted them all so as to prevent sensitive beings from passing out or worse, but did not obliterate them completely so as to allow others to appreciate the cultural diffusion. This particular mix was actually somewhat pleasant, especially compared to what she’d been expecting. Maybe this wouldn’t be so bad after all.

 A live band was playing, she noticed, a local one called “Hok Tubok and the Bleeming Squeegees.” She had heard people talking about them but never been into that sort of thing. They were pretty good, though, she grudgingly admitted, as they broke into “Don’t Go Breaking My Tertiary Heart.” The multiple-armed squid thing on drums caught her eye especially, particularly because it was signing autographs, waving at friends in the crowd, and performing an insanely complicated form of cat’s cradle even as it used about fifteen of its tentacles for the drums themselves.

 “Hey look,” said Bert before she could get a look at the rest of them, “here’s the guy who sold me the flowers.”

 Alicia looked. The guy looked like a flower himself, albeit a pale scaly tan one with arms, legs, and a large hook nose. He nodded in acknowledgement. He was clutching a vase as if it were his only child, and the flowers in it were almost, but not quite, as beautiful as her own.

 “This is Zork,” continued Bert. “Zork, meet Alicia.”

 “So you’re the lucky dame, eh?” he said. “Did they perform to satisfaction?”

 “Er, yes,” she said, thinking it was an odd way to phrase the question, “yes, they certainly did.”

 “Nothing but the best high-quality stuff from me,” he said with a wink. He continued to stare at her, as if there was something important she was expected to say.

 “I wish I had more money,” she went on hesitantly, “my kid sister would love some.”

 He burst out laughing. “Yeah,” he said, nodding and raising his eyebrows, “I’ll *bet* she would.”

 Alicia was a bit disconcerted by his incredibly human body language. Furthermore she was confused about this, and felt that there was some vital piece of information eluding her. She was debating whether or not to probe for it, when suddenly he said “See you around” and disappeared into the crowd.

 “Come on,” said Bert, “let’s get a soda and hit the dance floor.”

 “Right,” said Alicia, hoping there would be a slow song coming up. In fact come to think of it “Please Don’t Break My Tertiary Heart” *was* a slow song as she remembered it, but these folks had turned it into a head-banging, ear-bleeding doozy of something-or-other. It actually seemed to be *helping* her headache though, so Alicia wasn’t about to complain in the least.

 They maneuvered around a train going so fast they couldn’t tell if it really was several beings or merely one, watching with amusement the various other dance moves the Milky Way had to offer and envying their various physical forms.

 They did *not* envy the form of the slimy corpulent creature selling the sodas. It gestured with one of its pseudopods at one particular variety. “I wouldn’t recommend this if you’re not carbon-based life-forms,” it said. “Makes vodka look like spring water.”

 “Whatever has the most caffeine and no toxic waste, please,” said Bert.

 The creature handed them each a can of something that apparently filled both prerequisites. Alicia wiped the slime from hers and carefully eased it open, paranoid as always that somebody had shaken it in advance.

 “Let’s go find a seat,” said Bert. They turned around and nearly bumped into the nine-foot tall hairy mass behind them. It reacted slightly less than a tombstone, but the purple snake coiled around its neck reared up and hissed at them violently.

 “Oh, I’m so sorry,” said Alicia, who had spilled soda all over her clothes in response. “Er, nice pet,” she said to the hairy creature, hoping to make light of it.

 “How dare you speak that way of my fiancé?” demanded the snake.

 Bert hastily led her away. Once they found a place to sit down, he released the laughter he had been holding in all along. “Poor Alicia,” he said, wiping his eyes, “you’re really not cut out for the real world, are you?”

 “The *real* world!? You think this is –”

 “Easy, baby, please.” He put a finger to her lips and she resisted the urge to bite it off. “Let’s not argue some more. We came here to have a good time.”

 Alicia held in all of the sarcastic remarks she came up with in response to this statement, and they sipped at their sodas in silence. *I think I’ve forgotten* how *to have a good time*, she thought.

 The wild song was sliding into its final cataclysmic cords which rose to counterpoint the fading vocal harmonies. It was a masterpiece, Alicia had to admit, even after what they’d done to it. Her headache was completely gone now and she decided to start enjoying herself for once.

 “All right,” Hok announced, leaping to the nearest hovering microphone on ridiculously long gangly legs. He was a short, skinny green man with a gargantuan head and pointy ears. “All right,” he repeated, “hang on to your kramblotches, because it’s pippiks’ choice!”

 There was a slight groan from some of those assembled, elicited by the fact that there was only one pippik present, a suddenly rather confused-looking Troikot.

 There is a simple pattern followed by many species throughout the universe, and that is this: male, female. The reason this is followed by many species is that it’s simple, it works, and if you believe in an all-powerful Hand guiding it somewhere along the line you can imagine Him wanting to keep it consistent. For those who like to keep it even simpler, the options of hermaphrodite and null were made available. However, the Universe being the humongous place it is, some species are bound to be dissatisfied with these perfectly reasonable choices, and choose to come up with their own fancy alternatives. Pippiks, then, are only one of thousands of relatively obscure genders to be found throughout said Universe. Kramblotches, on the other hand, are completely unrelated organs found in some species for the purpose of throwing at predators.

 When it comes to interstellar travel, this also brings up the problem of gender pronouns. The language of a species with its own special genders will have developed its own special pronouns, of course, but usually any being from a normal male/female/hermaphrodite/null species will not want to bother memorizing all of the pronouns for the thousands of relatively obscure genders that exist. As a result, most choose to lump them all under the “it” category. Some find this offensive, but, others argue, they should have thought of that before their species decided to create its own genders anyway.

 “Ask that cute farfel over there,” whispered a Queezik.

 “I don’t swing that way,” the Troikot timidly whispered back.

 Hok’s keen ears picked up their exchange and he grinned in spite of himself. He knew, of course, that there was only one pippik in the room, but he was trying as best he could to be fair and tolerant of everybody. Sexism, of course, was unseemly even by *this* society’s standards.

 The Troikot didn’t seem about to make a choice anytime soon, so he motioned to his bandmates to start the next song anyway, but instead a blaring alarm began to sound. Many beings didn’t notice the difference until they realized the floor was tilting slightly, and then most of them assumed they had simply had too much to drink. When their drinks actually started sliding away from them, they began to realize something was up, and when they realized that in spite of the blaring noise’s continuance the Bleeming Squeegees were nowhere to be found, having teleported themselves down to the planet’s surface and made a break for it, general panic began to set in.

 Alicia, of course, was still a little woozy from the headache but in a much clearer state of mind than many of them, and had rushed for the elevator as soon as she could. But Bert grabbed her arm. “It’ll take too long!” he shouted. “We’ll have to teleport!”

 Unfortunately, the teleporters were ringed around the building’s perimeter, and as it had actually only been a manner of seconds before the general panic set in, they were now in danger of being crushed by the stampede which had erupted.

 As an incredibly lucky coincidence would have it, the train came by them again, and though they still couldn’t be certain whether it was one being or many, that hardly mattered. Alicia grabbed the caboose, Bert grabbed her, and they both held on for dear life as it careened through the crowd, somehow avoiding everybody. Though it nearly jarred their teeth loose, they were at a teleporter in less than a minute, and as the train disappeared through it they followed suit.

 As soon as they had done so it broke up, which implied but did not confirm that it was made of separate beings, and Alicia suddenly sprawled on the pavement beneath the towering Town Hall building which was leaning precariously towards them. Bert climbed off her back and she rolled over to look. This turned out to be a mistake because it caused her to wet her pants, throw up, and scream simultaneously.

 The building was, as has already been mentioned, leaning precariously towards them. The reason for this was that the central pillar and all of the hoverjets on the other side had been blasted clean through by one of the humongous warships which filled the sky right now.

 Alicia could hardly believe it was real. She’d known this day would come, of course, and it wasn’t a coincidence that it happened right after she’d been moping about it because she did that every day, but still. The one day, well one out of two, technically, that she happened to be at a party a kilometer off the ground. Uncanny. Or maybe that was why?

 Of course when the full gravity of the situation seized upon her, she knew it would have made little difference where she was.

 “The Skreel,” she whispered, half to herself.

 “Really? I’m outta here then. Good luck,” said Bert, and ran.

 Almost immediately he bumped into Cynthia, who was this time sporting her necklace and flanked by Jill and Julie. “What’s going on?” she demanded. “Is it over already? What are those things in the sky? Where’s Alicia?”

 He grabbed her hand and kept running. He didn’t know where he was going, but he knew he had to get there fast. Alicia had told him lots of stories about the Skreel and he didn’t feel like being a character in one. *Alicia… I’m sorry baby…*

 “Hey, what’s the rush? And where’s Alicia?”

 Alicia struggled to her feet, which was a good idea anyway because the other beings fleeing the Town Hall were getting quite annoyed to keep tripping over her. She looked around, steadied herself against a sudden rush of dizziness, and wondered briefly what to do next, because the idea of simply running for her life hadn’t imposed itself on her yet.

 It imposed itself fully a moment later when the remaining hoverjets failed under the stresses they were unfairly being asked to bear, and the building came hurtling down towards her. She ran but tripped over a small metal hat that somebody had carelessly dropped in their flight.

 *Under normal circumstances,* she thought cynically as she hit the ground, *I would have landed face-down.* Instead, a combination of factors too tedious to merit explanation here led to her twisting as she fell so that she landed flat on her back and could see perfectly the Town Hall building coming down to meet her.

 *What kind of moron builds a huge ball on a stick that high anyway?* she wondered. She had at one point been educated about the original obscenely rich cookie companies who sponsored the original colonizing expedition, but at the moment her panic-stricken brain could still only recall the phrase “aesthetically pleasing” and it failed to comfort her very much, or indeed at all.

 She calculated that there wasn’t nearly enough time to escape, and debated whether to close her eyes or face death until it actually came. She settled for a compromise and squinted, which actually served to calm her down some. She relaxed completely when the building screeched to a halt meters above her head.

 She got up carefully, not wanting to exhaust her good fortune, and looked down the pillar’s length to where Kaycee hovered, jets roaring from his feet, arms straining to hold the thing up.

 “By the way, I’ve got your aspirin!” he shouted over the ruckus.

 “Best present ever,” she said to herself, and silently thanked the robotics companies who had seen fit to incorporate hoverjets and monumental strength into a mere serving robot.

 Even now, beings were teleporting out, mostly unharmed but badly shaken. In moments, though, everything was obscured by smoke. Alicia had almost forgotten about the Skreel attack in the first place and realized it was still going on. They must have been blasting everything in sight. They would probably be coming on foot soon.

 As she thought this, a silhouette suddenly loomed through the smoke, directly in front of her. It appeared to be a huge round hairy bulk, with a pair each of long muscular arms and legs, and humanoid hands and feet that were big even for them. A big triangular head rose from it on a long twisty neck. It swiveled menacingly in her direction and seemed to study her closely for a moment.

 Alicia Parkinson screamed as the creature lunged and grabbed her.

# 2

 A few hours later, on the outskirts of the barren Aryak Desert in the spacious Hwangawine District of planet Ypiupi, Citizen 2965, or Kahlo Kache as he had illegally named himself, was wishing to be so lucky.

 You may be wondering why the heck this narrative has suddenly ceased to describe Alicia’s predicament, aside from being a hackneyed ploy to increase suspense. Be patient and just take it all in stride.

 To continue:

 Though these were the outskirts, the desert still seemed to spread for an eternity in every direction. It was not a pleasant place to work, much less to live, and so few species of animal life chose to bother when there were much nicer climates so close by. The white dwarf star, Trangoone, seemed to have the influence of a blue supergiant as its waves beat mercilessly down upon the sand. No landmarks broke up the endless view of sand, save for a few interestingly-shaped dunes and a thirty-foot tall statue, which Kahlo couldn’t see at the moment because he was lying face-down in the sand.

 He was lying face-down in the sand for the same reason he was wishing, or would be wishing if he knew what was going on a few hours earlier several light-years away, to be as lucky as the not-so-lucky Alicia Parkinson. This reason was that instead of being grabbed by a huge dangerous creature, he had been grabbed by four huge dangerous humans, who were now pressing down on his back very hard.

 That is to say, there were a few minor differences between them and traditional humans, but they are hardly worth going into right now. They were a little on the short side, but Kahlo was as well and these ones made up for it with sheer muscle.

 He had heard somewhere that sound travels farther through the ground, and now found it to be true. Even with his ears full of sand he heard the footsteps approaching from a ways off. Very close by him, they stopped. He knew what was coming.

 It had all started so simply. The citizens of his camp had been commissioned to build a thirty-foot tall statue of their terribly sexy but not very nice Queen, in spite of the fact that over a hundred such statues already dominated the countryside. “Commissioned” in this case was a synonym for “forced out of bed in the middle of the night and dragged twelve kilometers to the building site, being whipped and kicked the whole way, and given thirty-two hours in which to accomplish the task using simple hand tools while your family is held hostage.” Indeed, she was a not very nice Queen.

 Kahlo had no family to hold hostage, because his two-year old daughter had already been killed through maltreatment on a previous such occasion, and his wife had soon followed suit. He hadn’t taken revenge simply because he was too weak and sore to do any real damage.

 Until this opportunity came up.

 The only helpful thing their captors had done, ever, was to save them the trouble of drawing up blueprints. Each statue followed the same code, which had terribly specific requirements for the size and proportions of every single part of it, some accurate and some fudged a bit to flatter their representations. Failure to meet these in the slightest was merely considered normal (as opposed to high) treason, but the punishments were bad enough, especially if the workers’ families were still hostage.

 Kahlo had been in charge of her nose on this particular statue. His first thought had been to make it slightly crooked, and watch with satisfaction as the Queen had a coronary over it before she came after him.

 Then he had had a much better idea.

 The others did not object because they knew it was his own funeral, he had nothing to lose, and besides, it would be terribly funny. They wished him luck in the afterlife and hoped he would put in a good word for them.

 In a final defiant blow with what were to be his last hours, Citizen 2965 had made a name for himself. He had decided on “Kahlo” because in his native dialect it meant “prevalent underdog”. Most Ypiupians, traditionally, did not have last names except those they took to honor deceased relatives. His father, Kache, had died of despair when King Niklwat passed away and his daughter was sworn in. Kahlo saw, quickly, how terribly right he had been about her, and took the name to praise him as customary.

 She had come out to inspect the statue today. Her bodyguards had been first, and it was they who currently had him in their iron grip. *Her* reaction now, on seeing the rather unsexy nose of a Gorrible Tranktwill beast from Anka IV sitting slightly off-center in the middle of her statue’s face, was priceless. The scream transcended normal wavelengths of sound and lasted for longer than humans are supposed to be able to not breathe.

 The footsteps started again and came closer, closer. He managed to raise his head, just a little, though he quickly realized his captors were letting him because they wanted him to see what was next. He saw the shadow of the mattress and the undernourished pack animals carrying it, and then the shadow of a skinny woman jumping off, and then a pair of freshly-waxed legs right in front of his face.

 He tried to move his head more, but couldn’t see past her sexy knees. They stood immovable, like a stabilized pair of boulders on a flat surface. They might have had little frowny faces drawn on them, for all the anger that radiated out of these shapely patellas.

 When one at last did move, it was only moving the knee which was only going along, grudgingly it seemed, with the rest of the leg; which itself was only obliging to raise her bare sexy foot so that it could come down on the back of his head and press his face into the sand again.

 Perhaps at this point it would be best to clarify what she looked like, even though he couldn’t see her. She was, like all the Ypiupians, mostly human. There were a few minor differences between them and traditional humans but they are hardly worth going into right now. They were a little on the short side, but in her case she was skinny enough that an outside observer from, say, the Earth would hardly notice at first glance. Her hair, the exact hue of a black hole, was cut at a rather dramatic angle, so that it was merely a couple of inches long in the back and sloped past her shoulders in the front, in a traditional Ypiupian style. The more pressing similarity between her and a black hole was her heart, but we will get to that in a moment.

 She was dressed in traditional Hwangawine District royalty garb, relatively plain and simple but augmented with incredibly heavy and sparkly jewelry. This particular Queen, whose name by the way was Australia (a meaningless coincidence to the aforementioned hypothetical Earthling observer), had, as mentioned, broken with tradition in the appalling cut of the garment’s top half, and the length of the skirt. The others of high rank in the Hwangawine District had protested this wholeheartedly, of course, because they had public relations to think of and they could hardly have their Queen looking like a prostitute. As it turned out, this was the least of the damage she would do to their reputation, but we will get to that in a moment.

 “Infidel,” she muttered in a voice that chilled the desert. “I’ll see you pay for this before the sun sets, see if I don’t!”

 Kahlo had every reason to believe that she would. But oh well, it certainly had been worthwhile.

 “Do your worst, tyrant scum,” he boasted.

 “What did he say?” demanded the Queen.

 “Sounded like ‘Mmph mmph *mmph*, mmph-mmph mmph,’” said one of the bodyguards helpfully.

 “No, no,” insisted another, “he said, ‘*Mmph* mmph mmph, mmph-mmph mmph.’”

 The Queen, in addition to being not very nice, was not very smart. She took the guards’ suggestions seriously. Kahlo felt a wisp of her hair as she bent to his half-exposed ear, and then her refreshingly moist and cool breath as she asked sincerely, “Did you say, ‘Mmph mmph *mmph*, mmph-mmph mmph,’ or ‘*Mmph* mmph mmph, mmph-mmph mmph’?”

 Kahlo remained silent. His first attempt at communication had resulted in rather more sand getting in his mouth than he normally preferred, and he wished for it to not happen again. His ears were still working however, and they had noted the guards’ words with interest.

 With a disgusted huff, she snapped upright straight as a stick. “Stand up,” she ordered. “When I ask a question, I expect a response. And I will get one, even if it is merely your screams of agony.”

 The bodyguards jerked him to his feet. As he shook his head to clear it of sand and regain his senses, she helped the process by slapping him across the face. Then she marched back over to her mattress. She stared at it, then at the guards, and decided that in order to convey a more intimidating impression she ought to show her independence. That was the least of what she showed as she climbed awkwardly onto it, and was off. “To the palace!” she called over her shoulder.

 “Come on,” said one of the guards behind him as he watched her depart at an incredible speed, “*we* walk.”

 A few minutes later, another peasant emerged from beneath the statue’s skirt (which may seem slightly risqué but where else was he supposed to hide?) and shimmied down its leg. Once on the ground he cursed and hopped about, trying to rid his own legs of the severe cramps that had been entailed in keeping such a position for so long. With that done, he watched the silhouettes on the horizon, and quickly pulled from his rags one of the radios that had on previous occasions been stolen from the citizens’ cruel overseers.

 “Malluk, this is Hiilo,” he hissed under his breath. “Do you read me?”

 After a burst of static, the reply came. “Who’s Malluk? Who’s Hiilo?” it demanded.

 He seethed in irritation. “Rubber Eyelash, this is Bright Fingernail,” he amended.

 “I read you, Fingernail. Over.”

 “Has the Queen – er, has Evil Lip Gloss passed you yet?”

 “Coming up on us right now.”

 “Great. Can you shoot her?”

 “Negative. There are guards. They look tired, but not that tired.”

 “How many?”

 “Only two, but I don’t know if I can get them both before – y’know.”

 “Never mind them for now. What about her? Could you get her, theoretically?”

 “Not sure. She’s kind of at a weird angle to me. What spots are supposed to be fatal, again?”

 “Well the heart’s a good bet.”

 “Negative. Nature’s prepared her well for that eventuality.”

 “The head, then. That’s foolproof.”

 “Negative. I don’t think *her* brain is a vital organ. And there’s still the small matter of guards…”

 “Okay, fine. Forget her. Head back to camp. I’ll just go rescue Kahlo – er, I mean, Blind Whiplash – and we’ll save the revolution for another day. Fingernail out.” He pocketed his radio and looked at the silhouettes again. They had quite a lead on him, but he would catch up.

 “I’m coming, buddy,” he said, and started out.

 For Kahlo, who was used to hard manual labor in the worst of conditions, the five-kilometer walk to the palace in blazing heat was merely a relatively pleasant stroll. For his escorts, who were not, it was a preview of hell. Male human bodies, even on Ypiupi, are composed of approximately 60% water. It seemed to them that, in addition to their roasting alive and having their legs turn to lead, this figure was being divided by ten.

 Kahlo stopped on a small rise and looked back at them. “What’s the matter?” he called. “Can’t her majesty’s servants keep up with a mere slave?”

 “No,” wheezed one of them, “so why don’t you make a run for it and we’ll tell her the sun got you.”

 Kahlo considered this suggestion. “I just might do that,” he said. “But what’s it to your benefit?”

 The same one, who seemed to be the only one still capable of speech, dragged his feet to a halt and collapsed onto his bottom as he said, “I thought you were a bright one. Do you think we *like* her?”

 Kahlo thought back to their exchange with the Queen. He had thought perhaps they were merely being as stupid as her, but now he was sure, as he had hoped, that it had been deliberate mockery. “I guess not,” he said tentatively, “but when you stick around I have to think maybe, right?”

 “Oh, sure, that’s easy for you to say,” said the guard. He pulled out his canteen and sucked at it, hoping against hope that it had miraculously refilled itself within the last five minutes. Incredibly, it had not. He sighed and continued. “We’re honor-bound to her, like her father before. What else could we do?”

 “Start a revolution,” said Kahlo.

 They gawked at him.

 “Look,” he insisted, “it’s that simple. Everyone must feel the way you do. I’ve already set the stage for it. But I can’t lead my people because I’ve been arrested, remember?”

 “She *is* a witch,” pointed out another guard, depleting his speech quota for the journey.

 “And the way she dresses,” said another, who had rationed his water better and had a tidbit more voice left. “It was cool at first, but now it’s just like, grow up and put some real clothes on. Sheez.”

 “You can’t have leadership like that,” Kahlo insisted. “You just can’t. Revolution, I’m telling you.”

 “A lot of us actually had considered it,” admitted the guard. “You may be right.” He got to his feet. “But not now. We have to consider it some more. And the Queen is not a patient woman. Come on, let’s go.”

 “If I *did* run away,” Kahlo asked tentatively, “would you come after me?”

 “Probably.”

 “For what sort of reasons would you not?”

 “If we had time to consider your suggestion far enough and decided to go with it.”

 “I see.”

 “Well, make up *your* mind since you’re so decisive.”

 “I think,” said Kahlo after a moment’s thought, “that I will not run away. You would probably come after me and I would have to defend myself. I am a pacifist and thus opposed to that idea.” He started to walk again. With a collective groan, the others followed.

 At that moment Hiilo topped a sand dune and saw them. They were weak, as he had anticipated. This would be like taking goopleberries from a Snük. He raised his makeshift weapon and set the bead on the corporal.

 Before his finger could even begin to contemplate tightening on the trigger, his radio again roared to life.

 Eventually the desert thinned out. There was no definitive point at which you could say it was changing, but eventually you suddenly realized you were in a much cooler, moister, and more abundantly populated savannah. At about this same time you would notice the huge royal palace surrounded by, yet towering over, several thirty-foot tall statues of the woman who was shortly going to make the rest of Kahlo’s brief life very, utterly miserable.

 The courtyard was eerily silent as they crossed it to reach the huge cast-iron gate. Not a single guard came to challenge them, but sitting in front of the gate was a disheveled-looking man in his late forties, with about a week’s growth of stubble on his face. A scar ran across his right cheek in the shape of a microphone headset.

 “Get up, Bardo,” growled the talkative bodyguard, kicking him gently but with an unmistakable air of wanting him the heck out of the way. “We’ve an important package for her majesty.”

 “Oh, do you?” said the man wearily as he turned to face them. He looked Kahlo up and down, but obviously didn’t care in the slightest about what he saw. “I might come in and watch this package in action. Then again, I probably won’t. Not much excites me anymore.”

 “Yes, so you say,” snapped the bodyguard. “We don’t have time to reiterate your problems, Bardo. Get up.”

 “I was a war hero, you know.”

 “Yes,” seethed the bodyguard through clenched teeth, “we know. Get up.”

 “I could still be one, now. Plenty of stuff going on. But no, I have to lounge around here, with nothing to do. The most exciting thing that’s happened to me since then was when I took a nap on an angry swabjek’s burrow.”

 “What happened?” asked Kahlo suddenly. The nearest bodyguard smacked him to the ground, not for talking out of turn but because he didn’t want to hear this story again for the umpteenth time.

 “With the swabjek? It ate me. Seriously though. My father was a war hero first,” said Bardo, staring at the sun as he dredged up old memories. The guards would have attested to the fact that he had dredged up these same memories yesterday, and the day before that, and the day before that, and so on, and therefore shouldn’t have required much dredging up now; but he spent just enough time dredging them up to make them feel as if they ought to have mentioned this and then continued, aggravatingly, to vocalize them (the memories) before they (the guards) had a chance. “He was known throughout the quadrant for his piloting skills.”

 “I see,” mused Kahlo. He picked himself up off the ground, but Bardo stayed where he was.

 The guard sighed. “If you’re not going to get up,” he said, “can you at least make this fast? Her highness is not a patient woman.”

 “Certainly,” said Bardo. “Wouldn’t want to upset her, would we? Right, my father. Mission after mission he flew against the Skreel, and before that, space pirates. Yeah, we’re that old. The skies were not safe for evil in those days, I can tell you that!”

 “The District’s Golden Age,” Kahlo recalled.

 “Right, whatever. But…” Bardo turned pale and shifted his gaze to the ground. “His skill couldn’t protect him forever. Sheer probability and chance guaranteed that one day he would fail. And… when that day came, thirty years ago… the only remains of his beloved ship, or indeed his entire fleet, or indeed him… was a cloud of space dust.”

 Kahlo bowed his head in sympathetic reverence.

 “But, life goes on,” said Bardo quickly, his eyes snapping back up. “I took his name as my last, to honor him. Pikkes. His name was Pikkes. And mine is Bardo Pikkes. I have followed in his footsteps as a pilot.”

 Kahlo nodded. He knew what it was like to follow one’s father. “And what happened to that?”

 “Well, the good king Niklwat eventually succumbed to old age. Under the rule of that demon he called a daughter, all royal ships in the District were called back to the palace because they made her feel safer. Seeing the atrocities committed now, I wonder she has a need to feel safe. Only planet likes us now is Balvador, and it sucks. I know I’m not the only one who wants to take the fleet out again and teach her a lesson myself.”

 “So do it,” said Kahlo. “Start a revolution. Or,” he said as the guards shot him dirty looks, “join the one that these fine gentlemen are going to be starting.”

 “Well, thing is I’ve got issues with loyalty and duty drummed into my – sure, all right, where do I sign?”

 “Look,” said the talkative guard, whose name was Corporal Hijra which isn’t important but may as well be mentioned since he has been doing so much talking; as he pulled out his sidearm and aimed it at Bardo’s throat, “get up or you’ll be telling your stories to the ghosts.”

 With deliberate slowness, Bardo got to his feet. “That’s what I like about our relationship,” he said. “No professional detachment.”

 “Threats are a coward’s tactic,” said Kahlo. “Action is the path to true results.”

 “Are you saying you want him to shoot me?” demanded Bardo.

 “No. I am, as I’ve said, opposed to violence, but when it’s necessary there can’t be hesitation. But no, I don’t want him to shoot you. I meant in a much broader sense.”

 “A man does some heroic thing, and suddenly thinks he’s a philosopher,” muttered Corporal Hijra. “Clear out, flyboy. Tell the swabjeks I said ‘hi.’” Bardo reluctantly complied as Hijra entered a code into

 “I’ll think about what you said,” Bardo called over his shoulder.

 Kahlo waved, and then turned to the doorway and squared his shoulders. “The philosophy thing,” he said, looking with dread down the long, dark, cavernous passageway, “has more to do with my imminent painful death than anything else.”

 In fact it looked perfectly cheery when the lights were on, but the lights were never on because the Queen *wanted* it to look long, dark and cavernous. It was intended to strike fear into those who entered, and it usually worked.

 Kahlo forced his back. He tried to focus. He had done something, and now he was facing the consequences, but it had all been worth it. Time to go out with some style. He quickened his pace and began to whistle.

 “Catchy,” said Hijra, trying to pretend the hallway wasn’t giving him the heebie-jeebies as well. “What is it?”

 “No clue,” Kahlo lied. It was a song he had used to sing to his young daughter. Thinking of her filled him with righteous anger again, and the fear was crowded out. He waited impatiently as Hijra opened the next door, and then briskly strode down the length of the throne room without his escorts.

 The path was lined with immaculately dressed royalty and nobility, who stopped talking and stared as he passed. None of them had any real power compared to the Queen but they got to attend fancy-dress balls and talk down their noses at people. A humongous diamond chandelier hovered above their heads, and exotic potted plants spaced at regular intervals made the room seem more alive. The major improvement over the previous hallway, undoubtedly, was the large windows that let the streaming sunlight in. Rather than being too hot it had a warming effect, which served to counteract somewhat the chills radiating from the being who ruled it all.

 Kahlo stared impassively at the carved golden throne, whereon sprawled in an altogether sexy manner was *her*, the altogether sexy Queen of the Hwangawine District, who had somehow succeeded in making herself almost entirely unsexy by the policies of rule she insisted on pursuing. He may have ordinarily been paralyzed with fear but she was, at this moment, asleep. Behind her a page boy named Berrik was having way too much fun giving her a massage.

 The guards rushed to catch up with him and lined up on either side of the throne. Hijra leaned over to the Queen’s ear and whispered something, staring at him the whole time. Her head snapped up, and she glowered at Kahlo.

 “Interrupting my nap,” she said. “I *will* make you suffer.”

 He remained stoically silent. He would not sink to her level.

 She yawned in an impossibly sexy manner and writhed like a worm on a hot plate as she stretched, conking Berrik’s head against the throne and knocking him out cold. Kahlo felt the wave of outrage that swept through the court at this, but no one said anything. It was just as well that the boy miss what was about to happen.

 “You are charged,” she said slowly, savoring the words, after a pause precisely gauged for the perfect length to instill terror but not boredom into the heart of the listener, “with high treason against the monarchy of the Hwangawine District.”

 Kahlo made no attempt to confirm or deny this fact, and simply wished for death to come quickly.

 “How do you plead?” she continued.

 “Guilty,” he said, proud of what he had done. It had been

 The crowd began to murmur. The Queen raised one sexy eyebrow in surprise. “How interesting,” she was murmuring to herself now, “that you aren’t claiming to be innocent.”

 Kahlo remained silent.

 “You’re supposed to claim to be innocent,” she scolded, “so that we can argue the point before your sentence is pronounced anyway. Skipping that step will make things terribly dull, I’m afraid.”

 “I’m terribly sorry for the inconvenience,” said Kahlo, who had decided to go out with sarcastic bravado since his silent treatment hadn’t seemed to affect her much.

 “Gavolt!” she snapped, and the Royal Vizier stepped forth from the shadows of her throne where he had been sulking. He was still below the Queen, but had much more power than most of the airheads there assembled although that didn’t, of course, do him a fat lot of good most of the time.

 “Yes, your Regalness?” he said with just a hint of petulance, as he bowed half-mockingly.

 Queen Australia was far too conceited and just plain stupid to notice, as usual, and simply nodded in return. “Tell this impudent worm what he is charged with.”

 “You are charged,” he said reluctantly, as if it hadn’t been said mere moments ago, “with high treason against the monarchy of the Hwangawine District.”

 “You know we must take these things very seriously,” said the Queen. “Are you absolutely certain you wish to plead guilty?”

 “Listen, sister,” Kahlo spat, by now rather comfortable with his role of sarcastic bravado, “if I wasn’t absolutely certain I wouldn’t have *said* it, you get me?”

 She was squinting at him, now, pleased to exact revenge but disappointed that she had to do it already, without argument, because then it would be over and she would have nothing to look forward to except for continuing to be pampered all day every day for the rest of her life.

 She sighed. “All right then,” she said finally. “You know, of course, what that means for you.”

 Kahlo did, and wasn’t particularly excited, but it had certainly been worth it. “But wait,” he interrupted as an idea struck him, “in the old days we had juries to help decide these things.”

 The Queen gawked at him. “So?”

 “So, isn’t that a good idea? Wouldn’t that be fairer?”

 She sighed and scratched at her sexy chin. “Are you finding fault in my judgment?” she demanded, and, not giving him a chance to answer, went on, “My word is law, and my decisions infallible. Molest me not with these ridiculous notions.”

 “Your father –”

 “– was weak and incompetent. I’ll thank you not to mention him again.”

 He happened to glance at the Queen’s sister, Princess Jamillika, who was reluctantly hanging around by the side of the throne opposite the Vizier. She was nearly identical to the Queen, aside from being slightly younger and much more tastefully dressed. She loathed staying in this palace with such a tyrant, but royal and familial obligations held her there. Certainly she could not have been more different; she was sweeter than sugar but it was her sister who caused cavities.

 She gave him an apologetic smile. Kahlo would have preferred an openly warm and comforting smile, but given the circumstances he admitted she hadn’t much right to give him one.

 Still, a shred of hope was kindled in him, and he decided to try and do something worthwhile in his last moments.

 “Your Majesty,” he began, “if I may speak –”

 “You may, even though you just did,” said the Queen, who would just as soon have cut out his tongue but was glad to be able to prolong the moment.

 “It’s just that,” he began, “most of my compatriots have said that they would be perfectly willing to build thirty-foot high statues of you, if only you wouldn’t keep them in prison camps and starve them and beat them and otherwise make daily life miserable.”

 She pursed her sexy lips at him. “You have to suffer to create true art,” she said without hesitation, “and what could possibly be more artistic than *moi*?”

 Actually she didn’t say *moi*, because the French language was completely unknown on the planet Ypiupi, but the language she said it in was their closest equivalent to French, i.e. the language of love and stuck-up snobs, etc., and so it is the best substitution to be offered here. She wasn’t even speaking *English* in the first place, of course, so there’s no need to be picky about this.

 Jamillika offered him one of the openly warm and comforting smiles he had been hoping for, which now seemed slightly more appropriate, and quickly interceded. “He has a point, dearest sister,” she insisted. “Perhaps strong healthy citizens would be more productive. It is certainly worth a try.”

 “Grab your throat, infidel!” Australia snapped. A note of slight interest to the two readers who care about such things, is that given the great many organs involved in speaking; lungs, diaphragm, vocal chords, voice box, nasal passages, tongue, teeth, lips, and the entire cavern of the mouth itself, many different expressions along the lines of “hold your tongue” have arisen, depending on which organ has happened to be picked by the humanoid beings picking the expression, and the ease with which said organ can actually be held. Equivalent expressions among telepathic species usually forego this and simply follow the lines of “Stop thinking.”

 Jamillika kept quiet, as requested, and glowered at her sister.

 “You may have a higher position than this citizen, here,” the Queen continued, “but never forget, that while input is welcome, suggestions are *not*.” She turned to Kahlo. “I’ll think about it,” she lied, and, having finally decided there was no point in beating around the bush since it would all be over too soon anyway, pushed the button on the arm of her throne which released the trapdoor beneath his feet.

 Kahlo was momentarily stunned by the fall, which was about four meters. He slowly got up and looked around, but it was too dark to see much of anything. By the time his eyes adjusted he had looked up instead at the now nonexistent ceiling, which now manifested itself simply as a blinding blur.

 It then took a further several minutes to readjust to the darkness, at the end of which the first thing he noticed was a monster salivating mere inches from his face.

 Kahlo swore and jumped back sharply. The monster did not flinch, and regarded him the way a cow regards a blade of grass. This analogy held strong, because he would not be a great deal more troublesome as a prey item in this situation.

 “You think *you’ve* got problems,” the Queen added as an afterthought, “do you suppose it’s easy, keeping a figure like this, when I sit around all day and do nothing?”

 Kahlo would gladly have resumed his sarcastic bravado repertoire, but as a result of being gripped by sudden mind-numbing terror his wit was a little slow.

 “Oh – oh yeah!?” he managed finally. “Well – it takes one to know one!”

 “Citizen – uh –” she consulted the court scribe momentarily “–2965, having been found guilty of high treason against the monarchy of Hwangawine District, with which you have been charged, you are hereby sentenced to be eaten, slowly, by my little Bobocitos.”

 “Bobocitos”, in her native dialect, loosely translated meant “really adorable snuggly-wuggly creature that endears itself to me.”

 He took some deep breaths to calm himself, and looked at her little Bobocitos, which was very obliging in that it stayed still and let him look at it. “Adorable” was of course in the eye of the beholder, but for someone human-sized, especially slightly short ones like the Ypiupians, to call it “little” was a bit of a misnomer. It was like a huge worm, a good twenty meters long and as thick as a bango tree. Its front third however was raised off the ground and towered over his head, so ending in a face with two piercing beady eyes and uncountable rows of razor-sharp teeth. Unlike most worms it had the additional advantage of two arms, which ended in scythe-like apparatuses used both for propulsion and cutting prey to more conveniently sized morsels. A final point of interest was the forest of thick horns arranged like a wig along the back of this upraised front section, as if anything would actually think of attacking it.

 No one knew where it had come from. It had simply appeared in the palace one morning, a few months after Australia came to power and immediately she had secretly had the trapdoor installed. Rumors said that it hailed from the dark rainforests across the Gibral Ocean, but of the few who survived trips to those rainforests nobody had ever captured so much as a photograph of another specimen, and so it remained a mystery.

 Kahlo took a few more deep breaths. Incredibly, they actually seemed to work.

 “Great,” he snapped back, getting his bearings, “I finally get to talk to someone *human*!”

 This really wasn’t so bad, once he got used to it. It would be over soon enough. He backed up a little bit more, very slowly.

 The creature lowered its towering head a little bit closer to his face. Now he could smell its breath, which quite naturally reeked of rotten meat. Its lipless mouth seemed to spread, almost imperceptibly, into a grin of anticipation.

 Kahlo laughed light-headedly, and promptly passed out.

 It has not yet been explained why the Queen’s heart was like a black hole and how she damaged the Hwangawine District’s reputation, but by now that is probably quite unnecessary.

 Jamillika watched in terror as Bobocitos advanced on Kahlo’s prone form. “Please, no!” she gasped.

 Australia turned to her in stoned amusement. “Why?” she asked.

 “It’s just – so harsh –”

 “It seems to me people are beginning to forget who is the Queen here. Including you, dear sister. I may find it necessary to *tighten* my iron grip.”

 Jamillika was unable to tear her gaze away as the creature suddenly slashed at Kahlo’s thigh. Blood splattered across the dungeon floor. The creature licked some off of its scythe-like apparatus, which only served to pique its already voracious appetite.

 Why was she so concerned about him? Of course, she was always concerned about prisoners, but never enough that she had the courage to speak out like this. She still remembered looking into his eyes, what an experience it had been. There was something there, something she had never felt before. But even that wasn’t it. Was it?

 She felt sympathy for his position, for all of the peasants. It hadn’t been that way in the past. Why was it now? Why was one person allowed to wreak so much havoc? What the heck kind of government was this? She felt that something needed to change, and it needed to change soon. She knew that the others felt the same way. So why didn’t they *act*, before it was too late?

 “Please,” she begged her sister, “let him go. Kill me instead.”

 Australia laughed. “I’d be willing to kill *both*,” she admitted, “but there’s stuff, you know, familial bonds, deathbed promises, scapegoat necessities, stuff like that in the way. So no can do.”

 Bobocitos roared in triumph. Jamillika ran away, crying. Berrik groaned and opened his eyes.

 “What happened *this* time?” he demanded.

 When he regained consciousness he was looking straight at Oshawah, deity of Ypiupi. He felt no fear, as he thought he might. Oshawah was human, like him, but with long brown hair and a beard, and brown eyes that bored straight into him. He was not a giant as Kahlo had imagined.

 “Greetings,” he said in a voice that was quiet yet unmistakably powerful, “and welcome to the afterlife.”

 “Um, hi,” said Kahlo.

 “I am well pleased with you. That thing with the statue was hilarious.”

 “Oh?” Kahlo was still a little jet-lagged from his apparent trip. Then it struck him. “Did you say the *afterlife*?”

 “Yes, of course,” said Oshawah, gesturing around him. All around, people milled about in a village square. It was not made of gold, but the people laughed and sang, and the food appeared to cost nothing. In the distance he saw mansions, rather than small decrepit huts. Oshawah continued, “The catch is –”

 “Is my family here?” Kahlo shouted. “Can I see them?”

 “– you cannot stay. Your time is not yet over. You have much to accomplish.”

 “Oh, you mean with the revolution?” How could he fail, with a god on his side?

 “Erm, well, I don’t like to give away the future prematurely. But it will be much more than that. Much, much more.” He smiled. “I know you will make me proud. But there is no time to lose. You must go.”

 Pain seared through his heart. “Can’t I – see my family first? Real quick?”

 Oshawah sighed. “I wish you could,” he said solemnly. “But if you were to visit them for a moment, that moment would not be enough. The burden you have carried every day since their deaths would grow, knowing the taste of paradise you had been given, until it became unbearable and consumed you. I cannot allow that to happen.”

 “Then why did you take me here –”

 Suddenly he regained consciousness for real, with a rapidly fading memory of what had just happened. He was still lying on the dungeon floor, minus one leg, which he noticed the creature gnawing on at a leisurely pace.

 “– in the first place!? Ah,” he said, “here’s the catch.”

 He could see the ceiling now, or rather lack thereof, as more than a blinding blur. Queen Australia was looking down at him with a sick and entirely unsexy smile, and next to her Gavolt and Hijra showed no emotion whatsoever. Various other members of the crowd peered in, most of them showing nothing but disgust and yet unable to look away. Jamillika was nowhere to be seen; presumably she was off somewhere crying.

 “I’m sorry you had to be asleep for the actual process,” said the Queen, “but there’s still three limbs to go, and I promise you that trick won’t work again.”

 Kahlo looked down at the stump of his leg and noticed that someone had apparently come down and hastily patched it up, lest he die of blood loss before he got a chance to suffer. *Diabolical*, he thought. *But you have to give her some credit for the effort.*

 Slowly, painfully, he pushed himself up. Bobocitos watched him in its peripheral vision but showed no interest. There was, after all, nowhere its meal could go.

 He looked around for something to use as a crutch, but it appeared that the creature had eaten all of its previous victims’ bones as well. Surely they would otherwise be kept in here, to strike fear into peoples’ hearts. As if that were necessary.

 He looked up at Australia again, who was by now positively laughing. He flashed her with an obscene Ypiupian sign language gesture that only made her laugh harder. The others besides Gavolt still looked disgusted, but whether because of the creature’s antics or the gesture he had no idea.

 In fact the reason they were so disgusted was not that they had any trepidations towards watching a monster gnawing on the leg of a still-living and conscious victim, so much as which particular victim it was. They all hated the Queen nearly as much as the citizens, and had been quite entertained by the business with the statue.

 The Queen was only slightly aware of this, and hadn’t the faintest notion that there were no less than seventy-three separate plots against her in the palace alone, to say nothing of the citizens; twenty-five of which Gavolt himself was in charge of. He had leaked a few of the less promising ones to her, to maintain the image of loyalty, but she remained blissfully unaware of the vast majority. Poisoning, stabbing, drowning, strangling, shooting, crushing, blowing up, making her suffer total existence failure; anything you could think of and more. The most popular one, of course, was Gavolt’s, and that was feeding her to her own beloved Bobocitos; but this was implausible since her royal hiney was practically glued to the throne and pulling her off would involve standing on the trapdoor themselves. It wouldn’t have worked anyway, because the creature didn’t eat junk food. Regardless, he hoped to be the one responsible for her death, but it was always good to have contingency plans.

 This event was likely to push them over the edge. A tangible wave of restless energy was sweeping through the court, and she was the only one who didn’t feel it.

 And what then? Gavolt hoped to become the leading monarch himself, but most people hoped to put Jamillika on the throne and he was okay with that too, for the obvious reason that she was such a sweet wonderful person and everybody loved her. She was vaguely aware of these intentions, but pretended not to be because familial bonds would force her to defend her sister. As it stood she was not entirely comfortable with the idea of having any real power, but who was she to disagree with what the people wanted?

 Right now she knew exactly what they wanted, and she felt the energy, and she knew they were going to act fast. She pretended she was going to rescue Kahlo simply because she loved his eyes, but without the simple probability that Australia was about to be relieved of duty, this would have resulted in death for both of them anyway.

 As she crept along the secret passage leading to a secret doorway leading to the dungeon, she could faintly hear a commotion start up in the throne room. It was starting. She hesitated, wondering what to do. Kahlo had until the Bobocitos sucked his leg bones into oblivion, like a candy cane, before it started on another limb. But if she was wrong, or if Australia failed to be killed and discovered her prolonged absence in a time of crisis, there would certainly be a whole different set of problems.

 “I’ll be back,” she called, not knowing whether he could hear her or whether it was even true.

 She rushed back to the throne room and there was greeted by an incoherent string of equally incoherent explanations of what had happened. Her eyes began to grow wide and her mouth began to fall open as she gradually pieced together the fact that all seventy-three plots, to say nothing of the citizens, against Queen Australia’s life were now completely moot because she had just vanished into thin air.

# 3

“What the blazes are you doing?!” screamed Alicia Parkinson.

 “Is this a trick question? I’m saving you,” replied the creature, throwing her over his shoulder and making a run for it.

 Alicia tried to explain patiently that she had no wish to be saved, at least not while draped over the shoulder of some huge lunk and facing in the wrong direction, by letting her legs be spokespersons and kick furiously at said lunk; but his arm pressed them to his chest and they may as well have been welded there. Apparently she and they both were going to have to cope for a while.

 “I don’t even *know* you!” she cried, switching tactics.

 The first thing she had noticed about him, beyond what she had glimpsed through the smoke, was that he was pink.

 The long hair which covered his body and stuck straight out, making him resemble a large puffball, was a light shade of pink. His massive limbs and his head, which was attached to a very stretchable neck in *front* of his body and merely came up for observational purposes, were darker pink. His lips were luscious and red, but that was beside the point.

 Unlike Kahlo Kache, whose present (actually future, as it took place a few hours after this – never mind, don’t worry about it) situation was enviable from theirs, this creature, who can safely be called a man because he was intelligent, male, and more importantly had no intention of eating poor Alicia, also had a great deal of experience exercising his wit in life-threatening situations. “That’s right,” he said, not breaking stride, “don’t trust strangers. It’s a much better idea to stay here and face certain death.”

 Hey, no one said it was a sharp wit. And by the way, for those of you who are still thinking from the last paragraph that “intelligent” and “male” create an oxymoron, you are probably right, but that really has nothing to do with anything so get over it and read the rest of the story, okay?

 “But I can’t leave,” Alicia protested. “My boyfriend – my family – my robot –”

 “The robot is present and accounted for, Mistress Parkinson!” called Kaycee, who was suddenly right behind them. Further behind them they heard the deafening crash of the Town Hall building toppling to the ground – and through, among other things, Alicia’s house.

 “No!” she shrieked. But she quickly realized that the house had already been evacuated, as her father ran up to greet her, obviously having anticipated that she would return home. He gestured for them to follow into a small alleyway for cover, and her captor reluctantly obliged, rolling his eyes and muttering impatiently.

 “Alicia,” he gasped, “you’re safe.” He clearly wanted to hug her but this was made impossible by the large bulk over whose shoulder she was still thrown. “You may put my daughter down, please, Mr. –?”

 “Tell you later, after we blow this joint.” He extended a hand but made no move towards putting Alicia down.

 Mr. Parkinson shook the proffered hand hastily and said, “Thank you very much for saving my daughter, but please put her down now.”

 “Can’t,” said the man, “I’m saving her. It’s rather important.”

 “Oh yeah?”

 “Where’s mom, and Gina?” Alicia demanded.

 “They are someplace safe,” her father insisted, “for the moment.” Tears came to his eyes. “Now do you see, why I was so keen to keep you away from The War? Do you see what I was protecting you from?”

 “Yeah,” said Alicia dryly, “Thanks. I can see it did a lot of good.”

 “I had no way of foreseeing this!”

 “Look around you! This has been happening to billions of worlds since The War started! This is what people are fighting to stop! This is what I could have prevented!”

 “You would have died and it would have happened anyway.”

 “Well, it’s happened anyway and I’m going to die. Wow, this is so much better! *Thank you*, dad!” She tried to remember what Kaycee had told her earlier about his love, but it was all going fuzzy. She was just too frustrated.

 “There’s a safe place with mom and Gina. Come along.”

 “No, I’m taking her to my ship,” said the other man. “Come with us.”

 “I can’t, my wife and other daughter are –”

 “Get them too! But hurry!”

 “They are somewhere very safe. Come along, Alicia, we have to join them.”

 “There is no place safe on this planet anymore. I *am* taking her to my ship.”

 “Over my dead body.”

 Suddenly he was a dead body, or at least on the way to becoming one, which simplified that situation but surely for all that wasn’t a good thing. An electro-javelin had just gone through his groin and continued on, barely missing Alicia and her captor who jumped with reflexes surprising in one so large. It whizzed past and sunk into the wreckage of the Town Hall building across the street.

 She shivered. She’d felt the weapon graze her hair. But the fear was quickly overridden by despair, a feeling of despair deeper than any she had ever known. She looked at her father, who was blinking in surprise more than pain, and realized she could never feel deeper despair, any more than she could ever feel happy again. He collapsed at her feet without time to utter moving last words. Tears began coming to her eyes.

 “Oh gratz,” said her captor, turning and beginning to back off.

 “Wait!” cried Alicia, shaken out of her despairing trance. She twisted around. Behind them she saw another figure emerging through the smoke, atop the alley wall. This one she could hardly make out, but somehow it radiated menace and foreboding, and was clearly not about to rescue anybody.

 The man shifted her over with more than a slight bounce and pulled a sidearm from somewhere deep within his thick fur. He popped off a couple of shots at the figure, which screeched like shards of rusty steel on a chalkboard and fell headfirst over the wall. Half a dozen more quickly appeared in its place.

 He dove behind a conveniently situated dumpster as they returned fire with their own weapons, which were, unlike the javelin, of a more common variety which shot pure energy bolts rather than solid projectiles, and were likely to obliterate said dumpster rather more quickly.

 He stood, delivered some more shots, and quickly ducked down again. Then he repeated the process a few times. Alicia was beginning to get rather disoriented. She could not ascertain much of what was going on but it soon became apparent that the Skreel were being well protected by the alley wall and that by contrast the dumpster was, as predicted, rapidly disintegrating. The man realized this too and quickly ran while it still hid him from their view.

 And Alicia noticed as they passed that her father appeared to still be breathing.

 “Wait!” she cried again. “That’s my father! I have to help him!”

 “All we can do now is shoot him,” he replied, “and I don’t think you would appreciate that.”

 They reached the alley entrance and he paused to get his bearings. She could see the figures top the wall, and then they were all obscured from view as the smoke intensified and the distance between them increased. “We have to stop them! Stay and fight!” she insisted.

 “No way, sister!”

 “Figures, you’re a spineless cretin like all the rest!” she spat.

 She felt him stiffen. “I am not,” he said. “I am a very nice person and I have no less than twenty-seven vertebrae. But this isn’t a battle we can win. I’m aiming for one more in my league.” He decided to go forward and to the right, so they did.

 As they passed the pillar’s base, a well-dressed but disheveled human emerged from the elevator with an attractive woman clinging fearfully to his arm. Under other circumstances he would have been thrilled by her attention, but then under other circumstances he probably wouldn’t have gotten it. As it was, his concerns lay elsewhere. “Five minutes of Muzak,” he gasped, “and that dreadful shaking. Time to get back to shuffleboard!”

 They eventually came to a stop in front of the Riko City spaceport’s smoldering ruins. Other beings ran this way and that, clearly having the same logical idea of getting the heck off the planet as fast as possible. Whether their ships were intact was, of course, a different matter entirely. “Docking Bay 42,” the man murmured, squinting through the smoke. “Which way, which way?”

 “That way,” said a fleeing spaceport employee.

 “Thanks,” he replied, and started in the direction indicated.

 “Wait,” said the employee, suddenly catching a better look at the two of them. He frowned. “Lady, is this guy kidnapping you?” he asked Alicia.

 She craned her neck to look over her captor’s shoulder. “Yes!”

 “Good for him,” said the employee, and continued to flee.

 “Why don’t you come with us?” the man called.

 “Got things to take care of,” the other called back.

 The man shrugged and continued in the indicated direction.

 “Sure, give *him* a choice!” Alicia sputtered.

 “He’s a man; he can take care of himself,” came the reply, and this time being welded on couldn’t have stopped her legs from kicking.

 He winced suddenly, not from pain, but from the anticipation of it when he rounded a corner and found the next hallway swarming with rats. Giant filthy sewer rats, no less. He didn’t smell a broken line or anything and assumed they were simply fleeing for their lives, and while he couldn’t exactly blame them for wanting to do that he wished they had picked a different route to do it by.

 But that didn’t make sense, he realized. The sewer would be a much safer place in these conditions, at least for now.

 Though he had no way of knowing it, the local section of sewer just under the floor behind a door had been blown wide open, and the reason he didn’t notice the smell was because it was masked by the much more prevalent odor of the rats right in front of him. These rats had just finished picking clean their many deceased relatives and were just now getting on with the business of fleeing for their lives.

 The point is, anyway, that Alicia and her captor needed to escape, and there were giant filthy sewer rats swarming in their path. Alicia was facing away from them but she heard the vicious squeaks, the scrabbling claws, the agonized screams of the occasional rat that couldn’t hold its own in the rat race. Though they were not particularly familiar sounds, they were unmistakable.

 “Oh…” she began to feel lightheaded, especially when they began to run between her captor’s legs in full view of her. She couldn’t think clearly enough to find an obscenity suitable for the occasion, so she left it at that.

 Rats. For centuries, explorers on the Mother Planet had unwittingly carried them across the oceans to foreign lands, where they invariably wreaked havoc on the local ecosystems, spread diseases, spread parasites that spread diseases, and generally caused nearly as much trouble as the explorers themselves. One would have thought they could rectify this situation, but here they were, over a millennium later, on a colonized planet several light years away. Fortunately in this case the quordlepleens had forced them to retreat to the sewers. Therefore the problem was discovered well after the incident with Leonard J. Smith, and so everyone else simply blamed it on him as well and that was that. Alicia was used to such things, of course, being descended from the explorers like everyone else, but she had no reason to like rats.

 “Don’t panic,” the man said softly. “Stare them down. I’ll step right over them. If we don’t panic, they won’t attack. Just stay calm.”

 Alicia tried. She held her breath, which was a good idea anyway because of the smell, and watched the living carpet move beneath them.

 He stepped cautiously, one foot in front of the other, never taking his eyes off of them. A few scratched at his feet, but quickly lost interest. “Stop shaking like that, doll,” he told her. “The secret is to show them no fear.”

 *No fear*… *no fear*…

 “Docking Bay 42 should be just around that next corner and through a door,” he added soothingly.

 *No fear*… *no fear*…

 “You’re doing good,” he said, gently nudging away a rat that sniffed at his toes a bit too long. “Easy does it.”

 *No fear*… *no fear*…

 Suddenly, a rat darted up his leg, lunged for her foot, darted up *her* leg, and zipped up the rest of her body onto the top of her head where it seemed content to scratch around and fill her hair with fleas and dirt.

 A bloodcurdling scream filled the air. In a moment, Alicia realized it was coming from her, and that she was also wildly thrashing around. Though she couldn’t see it, she imagined, correctly, that it was watching her attempts to throw it off with mocking bemusement.

 “Hey now,” said the man, extending his head over her. He gingerly plucked it off and stuffed it into his mouth. The filthy tail protruded, thrashing frantically, for a moment, then quickly went slack and disappeared between his luscious red lips.

 Alicia shivered. She hadn’t even seen his *teeth*.

 Suddenly, rats began leaping on them left and right. He broke into a run. Rats did not give chase, being content to chew on their brethren that were crushed to a pulp beneath his pounding feet, but considering their numbers being leaped on was bad enough. “Either you scared the daylights out of ‘em, or they didn’t appreciate me offing their pal like that,” he shouted.

 She winced.

 “I can get one for you,” he chided.

 She shook her head politely, trying not to feel ill. “Thanks,” she said with uncharacteristic sarcasm, “I just had a *ferret* for lunch.”

 He chuckled. “It’s not that barbaric,” he insisted, trying to keep her distracted from the rest of the rats which were still swarming around his feet. “I nerve-pinched it to sleep with my tongue first. Of course,” he added after a moment’s contemplation, during which he slowed down because the rats were thinning out, “that’s completely necessary anyway because the sewer variety can be pretty dang strong, and you never know if one will manage to chew its way right out of your stomach.”

 “If mine hadn’t already been emptied, it would be now,” she said. “Please, shut up.” She tried to put her mind on other things. Who did she have left to live for? Well, no one, actually, except –

 “Where’s Kaycee!? He’s not with us! Where is he!?”

 Kaycee had stopped in the street, and not followed them into the alley. This whole time, as he waited patiently like a good little robot, he had been staring, solemnly, at the chaos around him.

 If anyone were there to see him and not preoccupied with running for their lives, they would have said he looked mournful, insofar as it is possible for a robot to look mournful.

 In fact they would have been exactly right. The scene disturbed him, at a level too deep for words. The empathy towards his Mistress’ father and towards human beings in general, that was part of his natural programming, could hardly explain it all. As he looked at everything going on, the horrible *wrongness* of it struck him more than anything, and he felt a deep despair settling over his circuits. Several courses of action presented themselves to him, conflicting, overriding; all wrong.

 Deep within his robotic soul, something inside of KC-1138 changed that day.

 “Kaaaaayceeeee!!!” Alicia hollered. She wriggled out of the man’s grasp with a sudden adrenaline rush and ran for the exit, heedless of the few rats which hadn’t cleared out by now and were scattered in her wake.

 “Forget him, come on,” he called.

 “Bite me,” she told him. “He’s my best friend. Kaaaaaayceeeeee!!!”

 “Look,” called the man, “we have to get out of here while we still can. They’re gonna come after us.” *Stupid human broads*, he thought to himself, *what is* up *with them?*

 A Skreel warrior put down the remains of Alicia’s father and stared at them with immense satisfaction. They were no longer recognizable as anything that had once been alive, but the blood staining its carapace served as a trophy in and of itself, a reminder of this small victory. But there was much more to be done here that would be even more enjoyable.

 It motioned to its comrades to keep up, and moved on. The next thing it saw through the smoke was a robot.

 The robot was half-waddling, half-shuffling towards it in what was apparently meant to be an endearing manner and is a great trick if you can do it right. It stopped, timidly extended a hand, and stared at the Skreel with benign innocence radiating from every circuit.

 “I am KC-1138;” it said, “will you please be my friend?”

 The Skreel was momentarily startled. Normally it would have paid absolutely no attention to what was clearly a worthless menial servant robot, wouldn’t have even wasted ammo on it, much less breath. But although it had been taught the Gragallans’ native language, or rather the colonial descendants’ native language which was English, for the sake of better appreciating their pleas for mercy, it could never comprehend that one word, that one pesky little word.

 Friend.

 The sound was easy enough to pronounce, with practice, even for the alien mechanisms which it employed to do so. The concept it embodied, however, was a different matter. It was completely foreign and mind-shattering to the Skreel, and to this date not a single one of them had managed to comprehend it in any of the trillions of languages in which it appeared. It was elusive, tantalizingly so, not to the point where it consumed their curiosity and delayed them from laying waste to the universe, but at least so that when confronted once more with the word which they had given up on, if there was no perceived immediate threat, they would stop and ponder it once more, trying and perhaps getting a little bit closer each time. There were other words like this, of course – love, charity, and of course, pasta; to name but a few – but Kaycee had picked the one most fitting for his persona, although the Skreel he had encountered were now so absorbed in pondering that it made precious little difference.

 He took out the blast rifle he had appropriated and shot them all dead.

 Alicia and Kaycee nearly ran each other over at one of the seemingly infinite number of corners. “Kaycee!” Alicia exclaimed. “Where the blazes *were* you?”

 “None of your strakking business,” said Kaycee. Fortunately, her pitiful organic ears could not pick up the sounds of his pursuers elsewhere in the building being smothered and torn apart by a blanket of agitated sewer rats.

 Alicia looked as if she had been punched in the stomach, but there was no time to dwell on little details now. “Come on,” she said, grabbing his arm, “we’ve got to follow that guy. He might grab me again if I don’t.”

 “Whatever,” said Kaycee, but he followed her, or rather he followed the man who had followed her and grabbed her again anyway. Thoughtfully he had thrown her across his shoulder facing forward this time, and she did not see her faithful robot quietly tossing aside a freshly depleted blast rifle.

 They had to make several detours through the rubble, but Docking Bay 42 was relatively intact. Only one wall was caved in and the ship looked shiny and brand-spanking new enough to take all four of them.

 It was a miracle of technology, a sleek, slender silver arrow with long pointy wings on either side. Mounted on them and the underbelly were an amazing assortment of state-of-the-art weaponry, and the mammoth engines on the ship’s back looked big enough to fry a small moon. The ship resembled, in fact, a seagull with wings raised in lazy flight, aside from its silver coloration and the guns and so forth of course, and since Alicia had seen holograms of seagulls from the Mother Planet, for once the analogy was not lost on her. Spaceships had never terribly interested her, but she couldn’t help being very impressed.

 “This must be one mother of a mover…” she said with a whistle.

 “Whoops,” said the man, “my mistake. One door over. So hard to tell when the signs are obscured by crap you know.”

 Alicia had a bad feeling about this. Her bad feeling was confirmed when, a moment later, they entered what she presumed to actually be Docking Bay 42 and were confronted with a total piece of junk.

 It was, basically, a slightly squarish flying saucer with pointed elliptical wings haphazardly tacked on to the sides. They were unified by a black color scheme which was scarred, scratched, burned and pitted now from heaven only knows what. The landing gear which held it two meters off the floor was spindly and seemed about to snap at the slightest vibration. It still dwarfed them considerably, but size was not Alicia’s primary concern.

 “Welcome,” said the man proudly, “to the *Ankled Apex*.”

 “The what?” she asked distractedly, trying to take her eyes off one particular bolt which seemed more than a bit loose.

 “The *Ankled Apex*;” he continued, “I’m afraid it lost a bit in the translation.”

 Back in the streets, the tide was turning slightly. This was because the spineless cretins from the party and elsewhere had finally gotten their act together and decided to do something about not getting killed.

 The Chikkiter ran through the Skreel ranks without his gloves on, touching all he could reach. They quickly gunned him down, but moments later nearly two dozen of them collapsed, writhing in apparent agony. At the Pearly Gates, he admitted that it had been a bluff because he hadn’t known if his neurotoxins would actually have an effect on them.

 The Kreeb, as advertised, became a homicidal maniac. His comrades gave him a wide berth because he was not discriminating in his selection of victims. Somehow, through the irrational adrenaline of a phobia, he killed nearly three dozen Skreel before he died of exhaustion. At the Pearly Gates, he was still a bit disoriented and went to lie down before consulting with St. Peter.

 The train, which had been reassembled, weaved its way through them at its breakneck speed, avoiding blaster bolts and projectiles alike and crushing them with sheer velocity. When one Skreel, more through luck than skill, actually managed to shoot one of its segments, the rest of it simply closed the gap.

 Zork gave them his flowers and they spared his life because he assured them he could get more. The reason why was the missing piece of information that Alicia wondered about, but it has little to do with the rest of the situation here.

 The Foojoo Floff, still in its moisture tank, scraped its way over to the Quatti who was watching and looking very depressed. “I got you some hydrogen and oxygen stuck together,” it said. “Go blow yourself up and make a heroic sacrifice.”

 The Quatti sadly showed it the book. “I can’t,” it admitted sadly.

 But there were those who could. Beings with certain pressurized gases being pumped into them for survival found that when the mechanisms responsible were damaged, an impressive explosion occurred. They made sure to stay well away from allies after that and those who could set up automatic destruct mechanisms for the moment their life signs failed.

 And Bert Jackson himself helped direct the activity, especially those beings that did not have such keen natural defenses, with skill and intelligence that had never before been apparent. He was a mere human boy, to be sure, but they listened. Very soon he had a significant portion of the Skreel’s ground troops closed in and dwindling fast.

 The smoke was unbearable. It scorched his throat and stung his nose with the stench of roasting flesh. *Why am I doing this?* he wondered. To commemorate his girlfriend, whom he’d left for dead back at the Town Hall? To make up for all these years of ignoring the bigger picture? Or simply to increase his own miserable odds of survival?

 *Probably that last one*, he figured. His odds of survival were looking pretty good now, actually. But it was also true that he’d been branded a coward, if only to himself; and there was only one way to change that now.

 Then the tanks hovered in; metal behemoths with guns mounted on the top and sides and no other features to speak of. They spread out to cover the rest of the city, and one remained to bear down on Bert’s makeshift army.

 One was enough. A single shot whistled over his head, nearly igniting his hair with its proximity. He fell to his knees and spun around just in time to see debris and bodies go flying. A crater the size of the tank itself appeared underneath them.

 *Snap*. This was not promising.

 More shots began to detonate behind him, and he hardly heard the chattering in his ear that nearly made him jump out of his skin. Beside him, he suddenly discovered, was standing a quordlepleen that just as soon would have probably nibbled his ear off. But it seemed to be telling him something, and that something seemed to have something to do with the miraculously undetonated grenade it clutched in its paws.

 He tentatively reached for it, but the critter darted away and made a run for the tank. In seconds it was there, and it clambered up the behemoth’s side and leaped for the muzzle of the central gun, down which it promptly shoved the grenade.

 The force of the explosion was unable to penetrate the tank’s armor, and was directed inward. It shuddered in the air, and then the top hatch opened. Smoke billowed out as the sole survivor popped up its head to see what was going on, at which point the quordlepleen leaped on it and started biting.

 *Wow*, thought Bert. *They really are violent little critters*.

 That was the last thing he thought before another blast came from close behind and tossed him through the air like a rag doll.

 Alicia had no intention of setting foot on this oddly named and poorly put together ship, but as usual today her intentions were irrelevant. A ramp lowered to let them in, and the man quickly carried her to the bridge inside the cockpit bubble. There, sitting in front of the complex row of instruments, another alien looked up at them. Without a word he flipped a switch and took the ship up, and Alicia had to admit the flight was smooth; it didn’t even jolt her. Only by looking ahead and watching the clouds could she tell they were moving; and at a great speed.

 This out of the way, the alien turned back to them and she got a good look. He was a tall lanky humanoid, but with grey skin and a mouth rather like a duck’s bill, plus teeth; as well as two stiff antennae in place of ears or hair. His wide eyes glistened with naked hunger.

 “You brought a snack,” he said to the pink one.

 Alicia Parkinson screamed yet again and tried to squirm away. Her captor actually dropped her this time, but she had nowhere to go. He stood in front of the door.

 Time seemed to stand still as he leered at her. She could see his teeth, now, between the misleading set of luscious red lips. They looked much like her own, in fact, but were much more massive, and, she could sense, much more able to crush through hard things. For a completely unrelated example, bone.

 He reached out one of his large hands… into his fur… and pulled out... a bag of party mix.

 He tossed this to his companion, who tore into it voraciously, and smirked down at Alicia. “You thought –”

 “– that you were going to eat me, yes!”

 “Typical.” He shook his head, which bobbled a bit on his long neck. “Humans. I don’t get why they even assume they taste good.”

 “Hey, speak for yourself!” yelled his duckbilled companion. There was an awkward silence. “Just kidding, heh heh,” he added, and suddenly frowned in deep concentration at the party mix. “Aw, come on,” he complained, “you picked out all the cheesy marshmallows! Those are the best!”

 The former shrugged. “Hey, next time if *you* go out and risk your skin gathering refugees, *you* get first dibs.” He laughed.

 “Hey, this ship doesn’t keep falling wreckage off herself, you know.”

 “Refugees?” Alicia was adamant about that point, mostly because she was so eager to take her mind off the other, significantly more disturbing thing he had said. “I only see me, myself, and I here!”

 “‘Me’ is *my* new name then, I presume?” snapped Kaycee.

 “Sorry Kaycee, I just meant –”

 “Hok Tubok and the Bleeming Squeegees are already settling in their cabins,” the new alien reported.

 “Sent them here. Didn’t have much more room, or time to go out of my way searching,” added her original captor.

 “We’re glad to have you, though;” said the new alien quickly, “what’s your name anyway?”

 Alicia scowled. “I’m here under duress and after the treatment I’ve been through,” she snapped, “I’m certainly disinclined to be civil and cooperative.”

 “Oh!” He arched his eyes in surprise. “Where *are* our manners?” He offered the party mix. “Care for a bite?”

 “No thank you,” said Alicia, having seen him lick his fingers as he was eating. “Anyway, what I *meant* was being *dragged* her by this big pink *lunk* and not knowing *either* of your names –”

 “You’re right,” said the big pink lunk, offering a hand. “I’m sorry. The name is Roor, Buckton Roor.”

 “Buckton.” She tried the word out on her tongue as she shook the proffered hand. It sounded to her more like a small patch of dirt masquerading as a town in a larger patch of dirt masquerading as a county in the middle of nowhere than an alien’s name, but then the thing about aliens was that they were so unpredictably *alien*.

 “And that over there is Zickle Farbreing,” Buckton added, gesturing to his friend, who waved and said “Hi, call me Zick.”

 Alicia looked the two over as a pair. They looked like a classic mismatched comic relief duo, to be sure. Furthermore their eyes shared the same look of manic restlessness which sort of disturbed her.

 “So now,” said Buckton, “tell us who *you* are.”

 She hesitated.

 “Look,” he pressed, “you’re stuck here for a while, which I might add is the only reason you aren’t dead, so you may as well learn to get along with us.”

 “Parkinson,” she said at last. “Alicia Parkinson.”

 “It’s all right, we won’t hold it against you,” said Zick, looking at her sympathetically as he picked a bit of black licorice from his teeth.

 Alicia felt her temper rising. This was *too* much. “Look,” she snapped, “ever since I met one of you freaks I’ve been kidnapped, humiliated, insulted and on top of it all not allowed to say goodbye to my dead father. I’ve had it up to –”

 “Sorry, but you’ll have to shut up for a while,” Zick said, “because we’ll be too preoccupied to listen. Skreel blockade coming up.” He eased up on the controls and they slowed to a crawl. Physically, Alicia wasn’t jolted in the slightest, but her emotions went through a nasty shock as she looked out the viewport and confirmed his words.

 “Fiddlesticks,” muttered Buckton, and jumped into a seat next to him. He sighed. “Remember I said I’m aiming for a battle more in my league?” he asked Alicia.

 She nodded dumbly as her blood ran cold.

 “Well, this is it,” he said, even as the enemy ships began turning slowly, but not slowly enough, to face them. “Strap yourself in.”

 Her mind not working, she moved like a zombie into a seat next to him. There were at least fifteen seats in front of the control panel, able to maneuver away and around each other so that as many people could easily share the controls. Most of the essentials, of course, were in the same spot, directly in front of Buckton and Zick.

 And the blockade ships, well, they were incredibly massive things. Alicia didn’t even try to approximate a guess, but they were big. They were shaped like upended wastebaskets with windows and weaponry across every available surface. At the wide end there was a tower which contained its sensor and deflector shield arrays. Why these were left vulnerable like that she didn’t know either, but it wasn’t really much of a comfort.

 “I should hope you’re better at blowing giant ships up than you are at interacting with the ladies,” Kaycee said dryly. “If not please say so, so I can prepare for oblivion properly.” Both pilots wisely ignored him.

 This snapped Alicia out of her trance. She glanced sidelong at Kaycee. This, like his other behavior of late, was not like him at all. “What’s happened to you?” she queried.

 “None of your strakking business,” he replied.

 That phrase again. It worried her. First of all, domestic servant robots weren’t supposed to be able to swear, at all. Second of all, and this was the part that really concerned her, they weren’t supposed to be capable of speaking rudely to humans and especially not refusing answers to direct questions. *Perhaps someone tooled about with him while I was at the party?* she wondered. But no, he had saved her life, and when he’d said “The robot is present and accounted for, Mistress Parkinson” it wasn’t with the sarcastic bite that now filled his every sentence.

 Saved her life. Before he changed. And started acting the way robots aren’t supposed to act.

 Would he save her life now? Could he even be trusted?

 Would he kill her himself?

 Alicia shivered. *Stop that,* she ordered herself. *That’s no way to think.* There was certainly enough on her proverbial plate already. The life she once knew had been forcibly blown away in less than an hour, and here she was about to die in someone else’s battle without ever getting the chance to join her own. After all, they couldn’t *possibly* stand up to this many ships, not with the piece of junk they were in, not with anything.

 As if to emphasize that statement, one of them chose this moment to launch a couple dozen massive titanium-plated warheads. They tore through the empty vacuum at an incredible speed, and would not only tear through the *Apex* with little more trouble but blow it up into the bargain.

 “Calculated impact time thirty seconds,” said a computerized voice. With more than a little cursing they swerved hard to port, but the missiles effortlessly moved to follow them. Furthermore, they seemed to be gaining momentum. In fact it should be clarified at this point: they did not only *seem to* be gaining momentum, they *were* gaining momentum.

 “If you have any prayers left, say them now,” added the voice.

 Despairingly, Alicia glanced out the rear of the cockpit bubble for a last look at her beautiful home planet and saw something incredible. The skies of Gragalla were obscured by the space traffic, not just from Riko City but beyond, from the whole world it seemed. It had only come after their departure, and she realized everyone else was following their lead.

 *These guys must have a reputation.*

She reassessed them yet again. That look in their eyes she had noticed, she knew where to place it now. They were rogues of the highest degree. The sort of arrogant, cocky, devil-may-care rogues who take all kinds of crazy risks and always come out on top. Though the going may get rough, rogues like that never died, as if their guardian angels were just as good at their jobs as them. And furthermore, she remembered, their ships frequently looked like pieces of junk.

 Alicia settled more comfortably into her seat as the missiles loomed closer and closer, to the point where she could have read the brand label, had there been any. She felt much better now.

 “Impact time five seconds,” said the computer. “I hope you guys are finished praying.”

 “Fancy that,” said Zick suddenly. “Shuffleboard off the starboard bow.”

# 4

Total consternation reigned in the palace of the Hwangawine District of planet Ypiupi. It was an immeasurable improvement over the previous reign, but all present were still eager to get things sorted out.

 “Bright idea of mine,” said a smug-looking duke, “making her suffer total existence failure. Buggers me why you all laughed when I suggested it.” It was apparent, however, that the Queen’s disappearance was as much a surprise to him as everyone else.

 Eventually they figured that it didn’t matter why she had gone, only that she was gone, Hallelujah; and matters turned to what they would do in her absence. All eyes, naturally, turned with them to Princess Jamillika.

 “I’m flattered,” she said, “but I must protest –”

 A belch came from somewhere below, and seemed to rumble through the entire palace’s superstructure.

 “Whoops! Excuse me a moment,” she said, and disappeared back down the secret passage, which was suddenly no longer very secret. In a couple of minutes the others saw her enter the dungeon and approach Kahlo’s prone form.

 She leaned over him and gazed into his eyes. “Are you all right?” she asked gently.

 He winced. “I’m in a dungeon missing a limb and about to lose the others, but yeah, pretty much, now that you’re here.” He forced a grin.

 “Here,” she said, “Let me help you.” She forced her arms in under his body and tried to lift him up. Bobocitos licked its chops, but kept a respectful distance from the woman who looked like its Queen.

 “No, please…” he groaned in pain as she jostled him. “This is humiliating. Just let me die. I’ll be a martyr.”

 “Come on, you know you don’t really want that…”

 Suddenly Bobocitos sniffed the air and seemed to realize something was up. The woman did indeed look like the Queen, but to its sensitive nose she smelled quite different. And that was what really mattered, after all. It growled menacingly at them.

 “You know what, you’re right,” said Kahlo. “Let’s go.”

 She finally managed to lift him, and gazed into his eyes again, this time more thoughtfully. He gazed back. Her silky black pupils were dilating within gorgeous irises of violet. They seemed to carry every emotion he had not been allowed to feel over the last ten years, emotions of joy, peace, security… and love.

 Their lips parted simultaneously.

 “Kiss her!” yelled a page boy from above, completely unhelpfully, and the others nearly pushed him in.

 But just then Bobocitos attacked, scooting towards them on its wicked bloodstained scythes, mouth reared open. It was aiming primarily for Jamillika, whose pampered palace flesh would provide a luxurious change indeed. She darted, stumbling with Kahlo’s weight, inches ahead of drool and rancid breath, right back out the secret door, and managed to kick it shut just in time. She realized the creature had taken the bow from the back of her dress but, unlike her sister who would have flipped, didn’t particularly care.

 The moment was quite thoroughly ruined, so they headed straight back up the secret passageway. *Not* love*,* Kahlo berated himself, *just the infatuation one would naturally feel about being saved from certain death.*

 Back in the throne room, she gently set him down on the throne itself, ordered a medical robot to fit him with a prosthetic leg, and returned to the other item at hand.

 “Er, sorry, where were we?” she said sheepishly.

 “I was about to receive commendation for my idea of making the Queen undergo total existence failure,” explained the duke.

 “We were going to make you our new ruler,” corrected Gavolt, pouting only slightly.

 “Ah yes,” she said. “Now I remember.” She cleared her throat. “I’m flattered, but I must protest this. I’m afraid I don’t think I’m qualified for the job.”

 “You can’t do any worse than *her*!” someone shouted, and no one could deny this point.

 This brought them to the subject of what they should do with the much-despised former monarch’s thirty-foot tall statues. The general consensus was that they should be blown up or pulled down, until somebody realized that the prison camps were in the same vicinity and would be destroyed in either process, and although they weren’t much in the way of houses they were so far the only thing available and it would be best to postpone that train of thought.

 Then an even cleverer person pointed out that, since Australia and Jamillika were nearly identical, the statues could be kept and merely thought to represent the new monarch who deserved them.

 “But I would never dress like that,” said Jamillika, hoping to derail the whole shebang and dissuade them from making her Queen in the first place.

 “We’ll worry about this later,” decided Gavolt, “the important thing is to set our new Queen apart in the first place, before the citizens foolishly decide to revolt.”

 Jamillika had a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach as she realized this wasn’t going to work after all. “How’s the leg?” she asked Kahlo, who had just had the procedure finished and been given a sticker for good behavior from the robot.

 “Well…” he tried it out, rotating it in several directions, half of which had been physically impossible with his original leg. He then wiggled all the toes; which as an afterthought struck him as rather unnecessary little doohickeys and a waste of time to put on a prosthetic, but had the psychological benefit of being like old friends. “Great!” was his verdict.

 Their eyes met again, and they shared a thought, that perhaps they should give the kissing thing another go. Their lips parted again, and they slowly moved closer.

 There was a slight beeping noise behind them. “Incoming transmission,” said a servant, and a moment later, “Aw, fiddlesticks…”

 Jamillika spun around, catching Kahlo a nasty blow on the nose as she did so, terrified at the thought of what could have possibly prompted such strong language from one of their mature, professional servants. When she saw what it was, a lump caught in her throat and was the only thing preventing her from using the word herself.

 On the communications screen loomed an unspeakably disgusting, vile creature, blown up to several times actual size and looming over the proceedings.

 No one had expected to see her again, but the real shock was the even more disgusting, vile and furthermore atheistic creature which held her firmly in its claws.

 For a moment, no one spoke.

 For a further moment, no one continued to speak.

 Finally Jamillika managed to say, “What do you want?”

 The Skreel, as if waiting politely for such a cue, bowed slightly, though the inherent mockery was unmistakable. It spoke in a docile upper-class British accent, which, although the Ypiupians had never heard of the British and certainly had no idea about their class structure, seemed more suitable for proposing a nice, hot cup of tea than, say, threatening a roomful of people it would have dearly loved to destroy, which is what it was now doing.

 It said, “Your cooperation.”

 After a suitable pause to let this revelation sink in, it went on. “The Hwangawine District has considerable ties with the others on planet Ypiupi. It would not be difficult for you to render them completely helpless in the face of our opposition.” It leaned closer to the screen. “Tell us everything you know about their military strategy etcetera, feed them lies and keep them vulnerable, stuff like that, and your entire kingdom will be spared. Most notably, of course, your precious Queen.”

 It leaned back and shoved Australia’s face into the screen. “Hi, guys,” she said.

 Gavolt wasn’t sure what to make of this; it seemed too perfect to be true. “She’s not the Queen any longer;” he explained, “we have a new one.” He waved at Jamillika. The Skreel turned its cold, heartless beady eyes on her.

 “What!?” Her lack of enthusiasm about taking her sister’s place had suddenly increased somewhat. She adopted her apologetic smile, the most commonly used one in her repertoire by far, and tried to stand firm under the creature’s unblinking gaze.

 “You tell ‘em, Jamie,” said Gavolt, slapping her on the back. She had a feeling someone was enjoying this situation far too much, and she knew for certain it wasn’t her.

 “Well, we haven’t actually had the coronation ceremony, as such… per se… so to speak…” she faltered for a moment. Standing firm did not seem to be working out, at least in the metaphorical sense.

 “These are desperate times,” countered Gavolt, “what with the apparently imminent invasion of our planet and all. The ceremony can be waived for a while.”

 She couldn’t think of an argument for that, and if she could she knew it would be countered again. Gavolt knew the law inside, outside and upside down, particularly the loopholes and gaping flaws not the least of which had allowed Australia to be such a creep to the peasants, dress like a slut and so on. She wondered for a moment if he was *trying* to get her kidnapped as well, and quietly edged away from her current position where she was sure she felt a teleporter getting a target lock.

 “You *are* the Queen, then?” the Skreel demanded.

 “Y-y-yes,” she said, not daring to lie. She edged away from her new position and started doing a little dance to and fro for good measure.

 “You don’t care about this, then,” it continued, nodding to Australia whom it was still holding in, shockingly enough, complete silence.

 It hadn’t been phrased as a question and it was no contest to find the answer. Gavolt still wasn’t sure what to make of this, and it still seemed to perfect to be true, but he decided to play along for the sake of whether it turned out to be. “Not a sausage,” he said. He realized then that perhaps he had been overstepping his authority a bit this whole time, but what the heck, he was speaking in the people’s best interest and the Queen hadn’t had her coronation ceremony anyway.

 Jamillika was frantically running the perimeter of the throne room by this point, even as she suddenly realized that for some reason the Skreel had no interest in her. At about that same moment she also realized that last she knew even they couldn’t just teleport someone off the face of a planet, so what had happened?

 The reason, by the way, for Australia’s continued silence was that she simply couldn’t think of a thing to say because she hadn’t the faintest notion what was going on. This was unprecedented in all her thirteen years of ruling, and even if she had known a Skreel from her own belly button she wouldn’t have conceived what it could possibly want with her, except insofar as any half-sapient being would of course be crazy about her because she was the sexiest thing on two feet, was she not?

 The Skreel suddenly increased pressure on her neck. She wasn’t the brightest star in the proverbial cluster, as if that needed telling by this point, but she was beginning to realize that whatever was going on was not fun, and that the person for whom it was going to be the most not fun was going to be her. This did not fit into her natural order of things, and she could not immediately think of how to cope. Panic began to creep into her eyes.

 The court, however, began to laugh in relief, hesitantly at first, than loud and boomingly. It took a good five minutes for things to settle down, during which Australia, who didn’t get the joke, began to sweat a little; and the Skreel, who didn’t seem to care, waited patiently for them to settle down.

 “Kill her, please,” said Gavolt finally, wiping away tears of mirth, “you’ll be doing us a favor.”

 This *definitely* did not fit into her natural order of things, but it was simple enough for even her to plainly comprehend. She was aware, of course, of not being the most popular monarch ever, but still, it came as a complete shock that they would really want to get rid of such a wonderful sexy person as her. Australia let out a primal screech of pure terror, and even the Skreel seemed to flinch a little.

 “*What!?*” she shrieked. “Come on, guys! Do as he says! Get me out of here!”

 Gavolt gave her the same gesture Kahlo had done earlier, amid thunderous applause.

 In desperation, she turned her panic-stricken eyes to her sister, but Jamillika could not meet her gaze. She figured correctly that Kahlo wasn’t even worth a try, wondering as she did how he had escaped anyway; and Bobocitos, though certainly willing, could not reach the viewscreen from where he stood.

 “Very well, then,” said the Skreel, making no attempt to argue. “Since it gives you such pleasure, you may watch her die.”

 This was not a creature that made hollow threats. The image zoomed out as he roughly forced her into the metal chair which was suddenly visible. It resembled an electric chair of ancient times and far-off places, but differed in that it had no headpiece and its sole purpose was to keep the prisoner restrained while her captors did unspeakably worse things to her.

 “We had this new throne custom-made for you,” the creature explained. “It fits your dimensions perfectly. Nothing but the best for our honored guests.”

 It was true. As she slipped in it fit like a glove, or rather more like a pair of pants although as she had no experience with those the analogy would have been lost, but then she was stuck tight. The creature didn’t have to even bother strapping her in.

 “Wait,” she said, and it seemed to oblige for a moment, which she used to think of a reason why it should wait. She had never paid attention to official matters and couldn’t deliver the information it wanted, and it seemed to be aware of that because it hadn’t asked. There were only a few things on her mind all the time, and it wasn’t hard to pick one which was usually at the forefront, hoping it would suffice. “You can’t possibly kill someone as totally sexy, gorgeous and drool-inducing as me,” she insisted finally; “it would be a heinous crime against the forces of nature.”

 The Skreel patiently explained what she and the forces of nature could go do to each other. The court scribe, who up until now had impartially recorded all of the proceedings including the earlier “Fiddlesticks” comment, raised his eyebrows, contemplated for a minute, and opted for the sake of decency to strike it from the record.

 Australia merely gaped in shock.

 “Is that possible?” she said at last.

 “Nothing’s impossible with us,” the Skreel said proudly. “We will gladly continue our demonstration of that fact, if you don’t mind.”

 Australia minded quite a bit, but she realized with a gut-wrenching certainty to which, aside from contemplating her sexiness, her mentality was completely unaccustomed, that this was it, her life was over, and there wasn’t a blasted thing she could do about it. She remained silent.

 Another Skreel hustled up, and produced a tiny metal straw to the original who, as the court watched, stuck it directly into the top of Australia’s head. It stung terribly, as it would have even were she accustomed to pain beyond the occasional spot of indigestion. She winced and clenched her teeth on her lip, trying to ignore the sickening *crunch* she had heard or the sticky wetness that was beginning to permeate her hair. *Show no fear,* she decided, *show no pain*. That would be decidedly unsexy for her last moments.

 Things were getting bad, and even her detractors realized something had to be done. “Quickly, get some snacks,” a duchess ordered a robot.

 No one quite knew what they expected to happen at this point, but they were all looking forward to it immensely. All, that is, except for Jamillika, who could not stand unpleasant things and still felt the pain of familial bonds. She turned away completely, crying, and with sudden audacity Kahlo put his arms around her. She buried her face in his chest and let the tears run freely.

 The Skreel watched her suffering with a certain amount of satisfaction, and then turned back to the task at hand. There was much more to come.

 It lowered its mouth, if it could be called that, to the straw’s other end and began calmly to suck.

 Australia’s eyes widened to the size of small planetoids. Her brain was not much to speak of, but having it sucked out through a straw was nonetheless a decidedly unpleasant experience. She searched what was left of it for a suitable reaction, but could find nothing in its rapidly dwindling recesses. She opted to simply be paralyzed, though whether she had a choice is questionable.

 The Skreel paused, letting a little backwash into her head. “I do love brain food,” it said. It didn’t understand the pun itself, but its research had led it to believe that this audience would find it incredibly disturbing. It patted the place where its stomach would have been were it a humanoid, a gesture specifically designed, again, to be incredibly disturbing, and continued.

 A hidden microphone in the straw broadcast the sucking noise loud and clear over all else, and those watching began to feel ill. Even she didn’t deserve this, they began to think. Well, okay, she did, but they weren’t feeling particularly inclined to watch any more. The duchess waved the robot to take the snacks away and bring her a bucket instead. Gavolt accidentally bumped the viewer controls and shut it off. No one made a move to correct this mistake.

 Jamillika seemed to wake up. Embarrassed, she gently pushed Kahlo away, turned to face the crowd, and unruffled her dress. “Now that we’re alert, they’re going to step up the invasion,” she said. “We must contact all the other districts and send out a distress signal.”

 “Can’t,” said Gavolt, “we’re already being jammed.”

 Seeing a way to kill two proverbial birds with one stone, she said, “My kingdom to whoever can get a message through.”

 “Oh come now, Highness,” he chided gently, “that won’t be necessary. We serve you out of true loyalty.” With that said everyone huddled around the communications screen and tried to fiddle with it at once.

 The new Queen sighed and turned to Kahlo. “I seem to be having considerable trouble with my lifestyle,” she said.

 “I think you’d be a great Queen,” he insisted, “if you’d just accept it and get on with things.”

 “Perhaps you’re right,” she admitted grudgingly, and then her face hardened and her last vestiges of reluctance were momentarily swept away. “Corporal Hijra, go find Bardo and send out all available fighters to meet the attack!” she commanded. “We’ll prepare an evacuation!”

 There were cheers of approval as people rushed to carry this out. Ypiupi wasn’t like Gragalla for the most part, in that it helped other planets out like a good neighbor, but due to the Hwangawine District’s former incompetent and unlamented leadership, it had taken a slightly different stance thus far and as a result had rather more fighters left than the average. They would not, of course, stand a whelk’s chance in a supernova by themselves, but very determined whelks have been known to do great things. Even on Ypiupi, where no one had heard of whelks, people seemed to understand this.

 “If there are any fighters left over, I’ll take one,” Kahlo offered.

 Jamillika smiled at him, but her heart wasn’t in it. “That’s sweet,” she said, “but I couldn’t ask you to do that.”

 “No sacrifice is too great for my district, my planet… and my Queen.” He looked at her meaningfully, but she was distracted and didn’t catch it.

 “You’ve suffered such atrocities at the hand of your previous Queen; I’ve no right to ask you for such favors.”

 “You’re not asking,” Kahlo insisted. “*I’m* volunteering.”

 She considered this. “Thank you,” she said at last, “but we’ve more than enough able pilots and you can’t even fly, can you? Don’t worry, you can be of more service here with me. We’ll have to prepare for a ground assault.” She realized she had left this out of the plan so far. “Prepare for ground assault!” she called out for the benefit of anyone who wasn’t busy fiddling with the communications screen, getting to a fighter or preparing the evacuation.

 “We’re going to stay?” he blanched.

 She sighed. “There aren’t nearly enough ships for us and your people, you know that,” she said. “And, besides, we can’t abandon the homeworld completely. Someone will have to stay.”

 “You can’t stay, you’re the Queen,” he said incredulously.

 “A Queen’s place is with her planet,” she said sadly. “I’m determined to be a good Queen, if I have to be one at all which unfortunately seems to be the case.”

 “I couldn’t help but overhearing,” said Gavolt, turning away from the screen, “and I’m afraid I for one can’t stand for that. We have to get you offplanet, fast. You know why you have to go in person to –”

 “I’m the Queen; don’t argue with me. I’m staying.”

 “In that case, it may finally be time for my revolution,” Kahlo said, and those around him cheered. This surprised him until they turned out to be cheering because they had miraculously discovered a frequency which was not completely blocked. Things were looking up.

 “Quickly,” he said, assuming a leadership position even though none of his new subjects knew what was going on, “send a distress signal to anyone within range. And kidnap her, will you? She has to get out of here safely. You know what, never mind,” he quickly added.

 Her eyes brightened. “You’re reconsidering this madness?” she asked hopefully.

 “No,” he said, “I’m taking you myself. I got nothing to lose.” A hint of a smile played across his lips. “Don’t get feisty. We revolutionaries tend to have itchy trigger fingers.”

 “I told you I wouldn’t make a good Queen;” she said to no one in particular, “this has to be the shortest reign of any monarch in history.”

 Outside, in the royal hangar, pilots rushed to their ships for the first time in over a decade. There were distressingly few of them, they realized. Perhaps the whelk analogy was a bit generous. Still, they had their orders, and it was the only course of action they could really take anyway, so one by one they jumped in and started the engines.

 “Right, now, listen up,” said Sergeant Bardo Pikkes, leader of the squadron, somehow managing to make himself heard above the deafening roar in the enclosed hangar without the benefit of a megaphone. This was it! He was back in action! He quickly adapted the redneck drawl that had been his trademark as a pilot. “When we get up there, there’s gonna be no communications, so y’all are on your own,” he continued.

 “I’ve been proud to know ya, boys, so I’m sorry it has to end this way but I’m sure y’all know without support it’ll be a suicide mission. We’ve been through a lot together, and I don’t have time to go over it here, but it would mean a lot if y’each could play a sort of montage in yer heads as yer flyin’ to certain doom. I’ll leave ya with a last word of advice before we shove off.” Tears glistened in his stern eyes despite his attempts to force them back. “Watch each other’s tails, and show those garmy cretins who they’re dealing with. When it’s over, it’s over, but hey, we can keep goin’ for a while.”

 As he jumped into his own fighter, the engines were again drowned out, this time by thunderous applause.

 “The next order of business, I think,” said Kahlo, the new King for the time being, “is getting Bobocitos to a zoo somewhere.”

 “Not it,” chorused the court.

 Jamillika looked at him appreciatively. It was remarkable that he could look beyond his own problems to those of a lesser creature that wanted no truck with any of this madness and take pity, particularly when said creature had tried to kill him slowly and painfully. It was safer where it was, though, underground in a cell of solid rock; than a natural zoo habitat, at least when the Skreel reached the planet. She mentioned this to him.

 “All right then, never mind,” he said. “That’s it then. Let’s go.”

 “Fiddlesticks,” she muttered.

 Bardo Pikkes looked out over the vacuum of space. It never failed, even after all these years, to instill a sense of awe and wonder in him. No matter how hardened his heart grew from the horrors of battle, it was always moved by the sight of so many pinpoints of light, twinkling away silently in the inky blackness.

 What distressed him now, however, was the lack of anything else. He didn’t *want* to face Skreel ships, of course, but since they were invading the fact that he couldn’t see them spelled trouble. They must have been nearby, after all, to have teleported Australia like that. He looked in every direction from the planet when he got far enough, and still nothing. His sensors, of course, were being jammed as well as communications.

 *Well*, he thought, *this sucks.*

 There were a few possibilities; namely a. that the Skreel had lied about invading them for some reason, which would be good, although whatever they were doing instead certainly wouldn’t; b. that they had gone into hyperspace and were waiting for an ambush, perhaps when his fighters got farther from the planet, which would be bad; and c. that they had developed some sort of cloaking device technology, which would be very, extremely dreadful.

 A sudden flash of laserfire came from his port side. He jerked his head to look and gasped at how close by the Skreel fighters had materialized. No one knew if they were capable of tracking other ships through hyperspace, so either they had planned it to be intimidating, or it was one heck of a close shave and probably scared *them* out of their skins as well.

 At least it hadn’t been c. *Here we go*, he thought. *Time to get this party started*.

# 5

A few hours earlier and several light-years away, on the bridge in the cockpit bubble of the *Ankled Apex*, someone was rather calm and collected considering that everyone was about to die while someone else stood by making sarcastic remarks about how everyone was about to die and someone else explained frantically to yet someone else that considering the fact that everyone was about to die, he didn’t particularly give a rusty bolt whether there was a shuffleboard off the starboard bow.

 “You’re a rogue,” said Alicia in surprise, “and this battle is in your league. We’ll be fine.”

 “Such logic. I *am* relieved,” said Kaycee.

 “You’re right, what was I thinking?” said Buckton. He turned the ship around, opened fire and pulverized all of the missiles. The shock wave swept them backwards and both pilots struggled to regain control of the ship.

 “Whenever I’ve gone up against a blockade,” he explained, “I’ve had other guys helping me. But that, come to think of it, was at planets where the government wasn’t moronic and actually contributed to The War. I don’t know why I wanted to help this one, why I felt sorry for it. Certainly the sorts of scum who live here don’t deserve it.”

 “I’m not like that,” protested Alicia.

 “I know, I figured that out,” said Buckton. “But the point is that here, it’s just a bunch of civilian ships. And none of them are prepared because they spend all their time at parties. I bet half of them aren’t even sober.”

 “That’s a conservative estimate,” said Kaycee.

 “The only reason I brought it up,” mumbled Zick, “is that it’s very odd to find a shuffleboard floating through space…”

 “Probably a political thing,” said Buckton. “They’ll do anything to avoid any actual work, on any planet.”

 “Hmmm…” said Zick, and suddenly sucked all the pucks up with the tractor beam. “You’re probably right,” he added. “Space shuffleboard. What a sport.”

 The Skreel ships were now practically on top of them, and chose this moment to open fire with traditional lasers, which were less precise and damaging but much faster and more numerous.

 “I prefer this one, myself,” said Buckton, as they effortlessly maneuvered the *Apex* into a flawless dive and didn’t get hit with a single bolt.

 “Today’s champion is tomorrow’s space dust,” Kaycee said darkly.

 Alicia looked back anxiously. Most of their followers had attempted to follow the dive. Some got caught in the fire anyway, but only one caught the brunt of it and exploded.

 “Evil Monsters one, Good Guys zero,” she muttered.

 “Can we quit it with the sports analogy?” Zick snapped. “Come on. This is life or death stuff.” They swooped back up and fired at a Skreel ship’s underbelly, then darted away before it could get a lock on them.

 Alicia looked back again and saw the other good guys doing the same thing. It seemed to be working. Only a few stray enemy bolts found their marks.

 “This is like the doyoug versus the gorglywump,” she said brightly, referring to a couple of the Gragallan faunas that no one ever actually saw except in books because the rats had persuaded them to leave all human-populated areas. “Our small size is actually an advantage.”

 “Thank you, Captain Obvious,” said Kaycee. Her temper snapped and for the first time in her life, she switched him off.

 “We’ll just keep this up,” she continued, her earlier confidence positively blossoming, “and eventually, they will fall, because their great size works against them. This is awesome.”

 “Um, yeah, about that, sister…” Buckton looked a little sheepish.

 The underbelly they were currently firing at opened. They pumped as much fire into the ship’s interior as they could and then split, for a very good reason. For several thousand very good reasons, in fact, though they didn’t all pertain to this particular ship.

 “Fighters coming in,” reported Zick, unnecessarily.

 She saw them. They were ugly gray blistery things that would have been screwed were they condemned to follow the normal laws of aerodynamics. They had wings, but there the resemblance to a flying thing ended and to a cosmic loogie began. Also, they were riddled with weaponry that returned whatever fire came at them with interest. Or maybe some of it was a sensor array. There didn’t, after all, seem to be a window of any sort, and she didn’t know whether they were piloted by actual Skreel or remote control or automation, or what. Most importantly, they were swarming out of the larger, bulkier ships.

 Alicia began to get a bit nervous again, and switched Kaycee back on for comfort. “What do you think I am,” he said, “a pacemaker or something, you can just switch on and off at your leisure? I have feelings too, alright!”

 “Lady,” said a voice over the radio, “is your robot always that annoying?”

 “No, it’s just that time of month,” she lied. “He needs a recharge.” She was embarrassed because she hadn’t realized they were actually *connected* to the other ships. Somebody had been thinking. So, if they were somehow blind enough to have missed the fighters, they would understand what was hammering them to oblivion.

 *And us too,* she thought as the *Apex* shook under this new barrage. Their odds of survival had diminished slightly.

 For the second time in her life she switched off Kaycee, who was trading increasingly personal insults with the guy on the radio, and then leaned forward intently in her chair. They were hemmed in, no doubt about it. Luckily, however, space is three-dimensional. They went into a dive again.

 And there they found that another of the large Skreel ships had come up underneath them. They did a strafing run across its length ending at the sensor arrays and deflector shield generators, which exploded satisfactorily. Buckton wasn’t satisfied, though. “It’s a redundant system,” he explained, “the important stuff’s inside. This just frees up space for soldiers and war machines and crap.”

 This turned out to be a magnificent plan, however, because as long as they were hugging the huge ship with the fighters right behind, neither would risk firing at them. He went back and did another strafing run, and another, and another. He started to whistle cheerfully.

 Alicia switched Kaycee on. “Look, isn’t this funny?” she said, hoping to cheer him up.

 Kaycee looked doubtful, insofar as it is possible for a robot to look doubtful. “Hilarious,” he said at last. “How foolish of me not to realize, at first, that this is entertainment.”

 She sighed. “Not as such, Kaycee, not as such. I meant ironic. This is like the doyoug, the gorglywump, and a swarm of quordlepleens.”

 Kaycee didn’t get what all the fuss was about. The only thing bothering him was the fact that they were about to die.”

 “I count about a hundred friendlies left on our scopes,” Zick reported. “Better than I expected.”

 “Yeah,” said Buckton, “I hope they’re all following our lead still. This is the greatest trick ever. Except –”

 With a series of loud *clangs*, a swarm of Skreel attached themselves to the ship. Alicia could see them all over the cockpit, blocking their view of everything with a hideous mass of living flesh. She had never seen so many, this close, looking this bloodthirsty, and she would never forget it. One of them made eye contact and she screamed. Fortunately her stomach and bladder were both empty and the earlier fiasco was not repeated.

 “Get ‘em off, quick!” yelled Buckton. He imagined them, elsewhere on the ship’s surface, ripping at the hull, destroying it piece by piece.

 “Try to do better than last time!” yelled Zick, raising an eyebrow meaningfully.

 “Sure.” They both gritted their teeth and flew, not by instrument, but by instinct. They flew the ship upside down and lowered it ever closer to the massive one below. The Skreel seemed to realize what was going on and scrambled around a bit nervously. Then one by one they came off, messy smears on their own capital ship which was now suddenly visible as being far too close for comfort. Buckton and Zick backed off, flipped back over and repeated the maneuver for the ones that had been gathering on the other side in the meantime.

 Suddenly, the ship beneath them began to fire again, indiscriminately. They had a sickening taste of what it was like to get their own underbelly blasted. Warning lights and alarms began to go off around the ship.

 Hok Tubok burst onto the bridge. “Dude, like, what the snap is going on?” he demanded. “We’re trying to rehearse for our next gig in the Pleiades.”

 “I’ll let Kaycee explain it for you,” said Alicia, who had no patience for this sort of behavior from this sort of person in this sort of circumstances. “Kaycee,” she said, “tell the nice man what’s going on.”

 Kaycee shook his head in genuine confusion. “We’re getting our miserable rumps blown to space dust and taking our time about it, that’s what’s happening,” he said. “And it’s very funny.”

 Hok frowned. “Buckton, man, can’t you do something?”

 “I’m doing, I’m doing!” he screamed. He was trying to roll off the side and get as much distance between them and the large ship as possible, and it wasn’t working because the fighters were still swarming around him, in spite of the fire which was spilling into their own ranks; occasionally adding shots of their own. And making them count.

 “Besides,” said Kaycee as the ship was jolted hard to the side and sent anyone not buckled down flying across the bridge, “you do not have a gig in the Pleiades. You’ve never been past the Horsehead Nebula.”

 “Well, when they see how awesome we are, they’ll give us a gig,” Hok insisted, picking himself off the floor. The ship was jolted again and as he flew in the opposite direction, the lights and alarms increased in intensity, then decreased as Buckton and Zick diverted their power to the rapidly fading deflector shields.

 “‘If,’ not ‘when,’” retorted Kaycee. “A very big ‘if.’”

 Hok turned pale and left.

 “Hang on,” said Zick, “Take over the rest for a minute, will you Bucky? I gotta calibrate something here.”

 “Sure, be my guest,” said Buckton more calmly. “It’s no trouble at all.” He fired at the gun emplacements that were making things difficult, but there were always more, and their range was impeccable. He wondered if he should hold still and concentrate on one spot until he made a hole, but thought no, they’d have us in seconds. Best to keep it going, and make those monsters pay till it was all over.

 “Say Kaycee,” said Zick as he worked on whatever he was doing, “do you know anything about starship repair?”

 Kaycee scoffed. “‘Do I know anything about starship repair?’” he mimicked. “I am deeply offended by that question. Of course I do! It’s my –”

 “So you could help keep this one going for a while?” Zick pressed, brightening.

 “Of course I can! Do you want my strakking manual?”

 “***THEN WHY DIDN’T YOU SAY ANYTHING!?***” The others jumped at this outburst. Zick wished, for once, that he had some hair available to tear out.

 “You didn’t ask,” said Kaycee smugly.

 “Look, you maladjusted metal moron,” said Zick, regaining his original composure, “get your can in gear and fix anything you can!”

 “Sure, whatever,” muttered Kaycee as he left the bridge. “But don’t *you* ever call me ‘Kaycee’ again. It’s not like we’re friends or anything.”

 “Hang in there, folks,” said another voice over the radio. “We’re on our way over.”

 “Negative!” yelled Zick. “Stay back, repeat, stay back! This is gonna hurt!” And with that he pressed a series of switches and launched several shuffleboard pucks at the encroaching fighters.

 The projectiles were invisible at their great speed; going straight through the enemies’ deflector shields and through their craft with sheer velocity. They continued through row after row, occasionally bouncing off at an angle, but most of the bouncing was done by the damaged fighters which crashed into their neighbors, which crashed into *their* neighbors, which crashed into the bulky capital ship, and so on. When the explosions cleared there was a gaping hole in the blockade, and the *Ankled Apex* was already several kilometers away.

 The surviving good guys, to use the term loosely, wasted no time in escaping. The surviving fighters held off pursuit because they were rightly scared stiff and trying to figure out what the blazes had just happened. The steady stream of missiles being launched from the capital ships, however, suffered no similar hesitation.

 At least, not until it was almost too late. Moments before the first missile would have hit the last straggler, it, and all of its companions, suddenly seemed to stop and wonder if this was really all there was to their lot in life. They seemed to ponder it thoroughly, and eventually face the realization that the whole thing was futile, considering they were just going to blow up and all. Then it seemed that, unable to come to terms with this realization and unable to find an electronics counselor in the middle of space, they went into a demented rage and reversed course straight for whence they had come.

 These would all be assumptions, and arguably silly ones at that, except for the part about reversing course for whence they had come. That was an undebatable fact.

 “Did you see that!?” yelled Alicia.

 “I know!” said Zick. “I can’t believe it worked that well!”

 “No, after that! Just now! There were missiles…” she trailed off. They had escaped, that was the important thing, and it was pointless trying to explain such a ridiculous thing that clearly was not supposed to happen.

 Suddenly, the warning lights and alarms stopped. Everyone had gotten used to them by now and was rather jolted by their absence.

 Kaycee emerged from wherever he had gone. “There,” he said with an unmistakable air of smugness. “I fixed the shields and everything. Even threw in a little bonus. You’re welcome.”

 “Impeccable timing,” said Zick.

 “Bonus!?” yelled Buckton, not sure whether to be pleased or furious and deciding to be furious until then. “What have you done to my ship!?”

 “*Our* ship,” said Zick softly.

 “I touched your lousy ship no more than necessary. You know where the dirty tramp has been? Never mind. I was referring to the missiles I warded off, or didn’t you notice?”

 “‘Warded off?’”

 “Missiles chase ships. Kaycee hack into missile brains. Missiles reconsider life, turn around, hit bad guys, go boom. Ug,” he added as an afterthought.

 “But – but…” Buckton shook his head, which then wobbled a bit by itself on his long flexible neck; and blinked a lot. “But, no one can hack into Skreel missile computers. Or any Skreel computers. Everyone’s tried it. It’s impossible.”

 “Maybe you *should* read my manual. I do impossible things like Dargald’s does breakfast. It was easier than getting into The Big Z’s bank account. Not,” he added, truthfully yet unconvincingly, “that I’m speaking from experience or anything.”

 Buckton shook his head again, and turned to help Zick program something in their own ship’s computer.

 “*Our* ship,” Zick said again. “You remember that, right?”

 “Huh? Yeah, sure. Whatever.”

 Alicia was forced once again to take a long, hard look at Kaycee. She didn’t remember the manual mentioning impossible things. Come to think of it, she didn’t remember any manual at all. He had been fully operational when she received him, and simply started out indulging her every whim, just like Bert.

 She remembered him holding up the building and shivered. If he could do that, *and* work this well with computers… *and* his personality had changed to the point where she no longer knew if she could trust him… well, she still didn’t want to think about it. So far he was still using his talents for good, and at the end of the day he was just a servant robot. There was nothing to worry about.

 “Buckle up,” said Buckton. “Ready for hyperspace jump.”

 The stars became fuzzy, and then, with deceptive slowness, stretched out into thinning streaks. With a lurch, they jumped past, and beyond was blackness. They were going beyond the speed of light, now, and therefore could not see it. It was one of the most incredible experiences of Alicia’s life. *This is it, I’m in space! I’m alive, and I’m in space!*

 “Where are we going?” she asked.

 Buckton brought up a star chart and pointed to a highlighted area. “The Trangoone system,” he said. “We should be there in just a couple hours.”

 “Any particular reason?”

 “Well, yeah. We’re not your average space cowboys, y’see. We’ve got a clearly defined mission within our clearly defined mission. The first clearly defined mission is to damage those transdimensional creeps as much as possible, and the one within that… well, look. Computer, zoom out, previous specifications.”

 “Gladly,” it said.

 “Now look,” he said. The view now showed half the Milky Way galaxy, with red dots on dozens of star systems. If connected, it appeared they would form a slightly lopsided daisy flower. His finger hovered on a star, and made its way past it from planet to planet. He tapped one, and another dot appeared there. “That’s Gragalla, in the Dante system,” he said.

 “One thing I’ve been sort of wondering,” interrupted Alicia, “is why Gragalla? It’s of no strategic importance whatsoever, is it?”

 “Element of surprise, we figure,” put in Zick. “Nothing else.”

 “Y’see, I’ve been tracking this particular fleet, because, well…” Buckton stared at the floor, trying to hide the pain suddenly filling his eyes. “Never mind why,” he said at last, jerking up, “I’ve been tracking them, *we’ve* been tracking them, if you prefer, Zick; and by analyzing the pattern of planets they have a go at – they can’t go in a logical order, of course, they’d be anticipated and cut off – well, it was difficult, but I think I’ve figured out how to anticipate their next moves.”

 “Because of the daisy shape?”

 “Huh?”

 “The pattern. It’s shaped like a daisy.”

 “‘Daisy?’ I have no idea what you’re talking about. It’s completely random, anyway. But I’ve figured out how these guys think, y’see, and I’ve tapped into that randomness. So. I’ve followed them, and helped the locals beat ‘em off. But this time, *this* time, I anticipate their move far enough in advance to beat them there. Unfortunately, it just so happens to be little ol’ Slacker Capital of the Universe. I say to myself” and here he made little puppets with his hands to accompany the dialogue, “I say, ‘Buck, buddy, there won’t be any military type guys to help you; you’ll be lucky to get out alive; are you sure you want to help the ungrateful snots?’ But then I say, ‘Look, Buck, this is my duty, and I’ve got to go through with it. Even if they all deserve to die horribly, I have to go through with it.’

 “So I go, and I try to talk some sense into the planetary government. Since the planetary government is Earth and they don’t give a norchak’s bum anymore, I have to lower my standards a bit. I figure I could sway one city, and have them contact the rest. Hopefully my charisma is as good as I remember, right? But just my luck, I pick Riko City, don’t I? There’s this crazy irresponsible boozefest going on in the Town Hall building, which is ludicrously designed by the way, and when I eventually track down one council member, he tells me all the rest are off playing… space… shuffleboard…”

 He looked at Zick. Zick looked at him.

 “Far out,” said Zick.

 “Right,” said Buckton. “Okay, so maybe I can’t complain. It’s not like they would’ve had a whole lot of firepower to give me anyway. But still. *All* of them on vacation. On the *same day*. Are these people stupid, or am I just completely oblivious to the wonderful workings of politics?”

 “You may be oblivious to many things,” said Kaycee. “But your evaluation of politics is spot on.”

 Buckton grinned. “Thanks, metal man. You all right sometimes.”

 “Call me Kaycee.”

 “So already on to Phase B, right, gathering refugees. I happen to talk with Hok’s little group, between songs, and I figure out they’ve gambled away their only ship. Since I’m such a big-hearted chap, and ‘cause they’ve got the best tunes this side of the Kranian Rift, I tell ‘em where to find the *Apex* and to get there in case of an emergency. They just laugh. Who’s laughing now? I try to persuade a few other people, but they tell me to bug off. I repeat, who’s laughing now? Not that I’m laughing. Anyway, you know the rest. I let everyone else escape first, since the building is inexplicably stuck mere meters off the ground, and when I get out the first thing I see through the smoke is you, uh –”

 “Alicia,” said Alicia.

 “Alicia, right, sorry. We won’t hold it against you. So, anyway, I’ve been brought up well, and I’m chivalrous and everything, and I know the proper thing to do for a lady in this case is to kidnap her. She doesn’t seem to agree, but that’s just how it is. Sometimes it ain’t so easy being a nice guy.” He grinned at her. She blushed.

 “Well, I was a little panicked,” she said.

 “Understandable. But now, in retrospect, it’s obviously a good thing I found *you*. The one broad on the entire planet who knows what needs to be done.” He grinned again. She blushed again. His grin vanished. “I *am* sorry about your father, by the way. There just wasn’t anything we could do.”

 “I know.” The blood that had rushed to Alicia’s cheeks vanished, and water came to her eyes instead.

 “And those losers who followed us, well, I guess Hok must have spilled his guts to somebody and of course they would get excited, right? We’re not without a fanbase, y’know. It’s mostly me but,” he added quickly as Zick coughed in annoyance, “that’s only because I’m the one who does all our ‘public’ work, y’know, the alerts and the refugees and whatnot. Usually works out better than this, but we’re alive to fight another day and that’s always something to be grateful for!”

 “That’s great,” said Zick. “That’s real great. But we need to pinpoint which exact planet they’ll be going at next, so we can warn them straight off when we leave hyperspace. You gotta help me, Buck, I’m terrible with numbers.”

 “No kidding.” Buckton winked at Alicia and Kaycee, and turned to the chart. “Let’s see. Previous target Gragalla, before that, Antwarine… and an extra element of surprise…”

 “Balvador,” said Kaycee.

 “What?”

 “Balvador.”

 “Balvador? You haven’t studied these dots like I have, pal, you don’t know what you’re getting at. Balvador’s not even in the Trangoone system.”

 “Would you like to bet on that?” Kaycee asked calmly.

 Buckton suddenly became hesitant. “Weeeeell…”

 Fortunately for his bank account, Zick zoomed the display in on the highlighted region. With a slight sheepish grin at Buckton, he tapped at one medium-sized planet near the beginning of the system.

 “‘Balvador.’ Huh. Well I’ll be a raksnak’s nephew.” Buckton shrugged at Kaycee. “All right, you got me. But are you sure that’s it?”

 “Positive,” said Kaycee. He did not even attempt sarcasm. “If the rest of these calculations have held true, anyway.”

 “Oh they have, baby, they have. All right. Balvador it is. Sorry folks, Zick and I are gonna need to do some research, y’know, figure out the best tactics and stuff to use. Probably won’t take the whole trip but we’d best get going anyway just in case. Say, Kaycee, you can help us with that. And Alicia, I’d suggest you get some sleep. Don’t know the next time you’ll get a chance.”

 “That,” said Alicia, suddenly realizing how overwhelmed she was by all these recent events; to the extent that when she unbuckled and stood up she hardly cared about the miscellaneous crumbs and wads of gum that had turned out to be on the seat of the chair and had transferred themselves to the seat of her pants, “is the best thing anyone’s said to me all day.”

 On the bridge of one capital Skreel ship which had just emerged from hyperspace to witness the blockade crushing the civilians’ escape, terror reigned. The underlings scuttled about, pretending not to notice their comrade who had just handed a recovered shuffleboard puck to their commander, pretending not to be worried about its, and their own, fate if the commander got annoyed at this ridiculous turn of events.

 The commander turned it over, letting it catch what little light penetrated the sparse windows. Finally it spoke, in that strange, fearsome language they had; “You say you found this…?”

 “Lodged in the skull of my bunkmate near the hull breach,” the underling responded. “Lodged very, very deeply I might add.”

 “I see.” The commander turned it around some more, but it yielded no secrets. “Very well then,” it said. “Return to your duties. I will consider whether to reward you later.”

 The underling hastily bowed and left, only too happy to still have its head and limbs attached. The commander was not in its high position for good looks.

 The commander thought a while, and then suddenly rushed to a communications console. It tapped in a priority top-secret code and waited.

 In a minute, an image appeared. The image looked nearly identical to the commander even to the Skreel themselves, aside from perhaps being larger and slightly more angular around the ribs, but these differences were hardly noticeable on the reduced hologram. Still, it radiated an aura of fear which, again even to the Skreel themselves, was unmistakable from all the other auras of fear which they generated.

 “Yes?” it said.

 The commander bowed. “The planet has been vanquished. The last pockets of resistance are being wiped out as we speak. But…”

 “Yes?” it hissed, anxiously.

 “Buckton Roor and Zickle Farbreing have escaped.”

 The other creature slapped its forehead in exasperation. “Of course they have.”

 “I’m dreadfully sorry, sir.”

 “It isn’t your fault. You were pathetically under-resourced. Not everyone here appreciates the importance of my prerogative.”

 “I tell you, without military support they would have bit off more than they can chew this time! They would never have escaped but for an unattended game of space shuffleboard, the players of which our space troopers had already disposed of, and –”

 “Space shuffleboard. What a trivial game. I wonder that we haven’t conquered this universe already. ‘And?’ ‘And’, did you say?”

 “Yes, sir. And – now this is the clincher, this is the big thing, this really takes the cake; someone hacked into our guided missile computers and sent them back at us causing almost, but not quite, as much damage as the shuffleboard pucks.”

 “Someone… hacked into…”

 “The missiles, yes.”

 The holographic creature stroked its chin and pondered. It was clearly a bit stupefied about this turn of events, as all the rest of them had been. “Well, you established a trace, I hope?”

 “Yes, sir. I’ll send it to you now.” It tapped some buttons on its console. “There it goes…”

 The creature in the image turned away to study its own computer screen. “Interesting,” it said. “I wonder…”

 “Sir?”

 “It occurs to me that any computer or robot capable of hacking into our military systems must be owned by Buckton and Zickle. I don’t have to remind you, of course, that if there’s a way to make nuisances of themselves, they’ll do it.”

 “Yes, sir.”

 “Very well then. Anyhow, time to move on. I had a feeling this might not work anyway. Always have a contingency plan, that’s what I say.”

 “Sir, our troopers weren’t able to attach a homing beacon. They were sort of… scraped off the ship.”

 “Yes, I expected that. You know they use that maneuver every time. No one else dares. Don’t worry, I have it covered. I will know exactly where they go, and when. They will not continue to elude me for long.”

 “I certainly hope not, sir.”

 “All right. Finish cleaning up that planet and then head to your next assignment. Depending on how this works out, your involvement in this plan has either ended, or just begun. Either way however, you will be greatly rewarded, I promise you that.”

 “Thank you, sir. But, if you will forgive the bluntness, how can I trust you?”

 It may have been a trick of the holographic light, but the creature seemed to *smile*. “If – *when* those two pests are eliminated,” it assured it sincerely, “my gratitude will be such that any questions of trustworthiness shall vanish.”

 “All right then, sir. I’d best get on with things here. Good luck.”

 “Same to you.” The creature’s face grew larger as it leaned closer to the holographic pickup, trying to find the off switch.

 “Um, sir?” inquired the Gragallan blockade commander. “If you will kindly forgive the bluntness again, what’s that stuff on your lip?”

 The other creature paused and wiped at it. It was a small lump of something gray and squishy. “Oh, that,” it said, laughing in that strange, barbaric way. “Something to remember my last guest by. She won’t be needing it anymore.”

 With Kaycee’s help, Buckton and Zick made their calculations in record time, and the rest of the trip passed rather uneventfully. They went and listened to the Bleeming Squeegees rehearse, but Hok complained that no one was supposed to listen to rehearsals because everyone ended up socializing and nothing got done.

 “It’ll take more than that to save *your* act,” said Kaycee, but he left with them.

 Zick went to check on Alicia. “Sleeping like a baby,” he said. “What a cute kid.”

 “Then it’s just us three,” said Buckton. He smiled. “Almost, but not quite, like old times. Y’know I don’t mind telling you both now, I thought we were goners back there. That was some quick thinking from each of you.”

 “We won’t bother getting new torpedoes like we planned, now,” laughed Zick, “just head for the nearest sporting department.”

 “But don’t,” said Kaycee, “ever get a new robot.”

 They both laughed. “You’re not mine to replace,” reassured Buckton. “Although I will certainly lobby to have your personality overhauled, a little.”

 “Over my broken sparking circuits,” said Kaycee, and they laughed again.

 A sort of bond was developing. It was a rare sort of bond, because often, organic beings took the robots around them for granted, and paid them no mind. But those who took the time to get to know them, and form this bond, found themselves happier enriched organic beings for it. So it had been with Alicia, and so, in spite of Kaycee’s recently adopted bad attitude, it was with Buckton and Zick.

 They chatted idly for the remainder of the trip. But the moment they emerged from hyperspace, Kaycee felt that something was wrong, and a nanosecond later, an SOS alarm blaring over the ship’s speakers confirmed his suspicions.

 “Snap,” said Buckton, as Zick rapidly flipped a switch to display the message.

 A hologram appeared of a solemn, middle-aged man who looked as though he had aged not with time, but with experience. Static marred his visage but it was easy enough to make out both him and his words. He spoke slowly and succinctly, but the panic in his voice was unmistakable.

 “Greetings, friends,” he said. “I am Gavolt, Royal Vizier of the Hwangawine District of planet Ypiupi, in the Trangoone system. Our previous Queen has been kidnapped and executed” (there was a hint of a smile here, but one had to be quick to spot it) “and we are about to fall under attack by the Skreel. We recognize that you are probably very busy, and that our previous Queen has not set an example which would make others eager to help. However, *I* implore you, out of the goodness of your hearts, to come to our aid. This is our most desperate hour. Help us, please, whoever you are, you are our only hope.”

 “Fascinating…” murmured Buckton and Zick together. They understood the language he spoke, having learned it in preparation for their visit to this system.

 “Might I add,” Gavolt continued, “that our *new* monarch is every bit as sexy as the previous one, being in fact nearly identical, and some even argue that she has nicer feet; but she is far superior in that she is kind and sweet and gentle. I am sure if some brave soul were to help her, she would be very grateful.” There was a pause as he looked distractedly over his shoulder, as if listening to someone. “But you would be, right?” he said. “I just – look, I’m not *implying* anything. I never said – look, you *want* someone to help us, right? I know, but you *have* to leave. We’ve settled that. Can’t you just – look, this thing’s still on, can we talk about it later?”

 He turned back to face them. “Please, hurry. Oshawah go with you, friends.” The transmission cut off.

 Everyone, including Kaycee, was speechless for a moment.

 Then, “Feet? I dunno, I’m not particularly into human feet, are you, Buck?” asked Zick.

 Buckton shrugged. “Not really into humans at all, but if anything, I’m more of an elbows guy, myself,” he admitted.

 There is something to be said about various species’ different erogenous zones and where they overlap or change completely and the occasionally hilarious, but more often just deeply disturbing, results when these different species take to the stars and mix. However, now is neither the time nor the place, for it would distract from the important thing going on, which only Kaycee right now seemed to be grasping

 “Look, you hormonal harebrained honchos, don’t you get it?” he exploded. “That’s not the point. This planet needs our help. *Right now*.”

 Buckton frowned. “It’s a couple planets away from Balvador,” he said. “Your calculations must have been wrong.”

 “They were not! But if they were, which they were not, then that would be irrelevant now! One planet, another planet, who cares, we have to help them!”

 “I’ve heard about their Queen, the one who got kidnapped,” said Buckton. “From what everyone says, she was one nasty you-know-what. I can’t imagine the rest of the district, or planet for that matter since the district is like half of it, can be much better if she was allowed to stay in power.”

 “But maybe her sister’s the new one they’re talking about,” said Zick. “She was nice, wasn’t she? Quiet type, too.”

 “I suppose,” said Buckton. “But what if they’re lying about a new Queen, just so someone will help them? You remember that bit at the end?”

 “Look,” said Kaycee, “I don’t see why it’s always about *women*, with any species. Buckton, you said you were a big-hearted chap. Zick, you hang out with him. And you tried to save strakking *Gragalla*, for crying out loud. I mean, you wanna talk about reputations, there’s a planet that’s hated from here to Q-60. If you’re going to be this selective about whom you help, simply because you don’t like an individual or even worse, simply because it isn’t on your schedule, which I calculated perfectly by the way, then whatever you’re in this for is not what Alicia is, and neither of you are friends of hers or mine.”

 The pain returned to Buckton’s eyes. He stared at the floor again. Zick gently laid an arm around his shoulder.

 “You’re right,” he said at last, softly, not looking up. “You’re absolutely right.” He forced a laugh. “That’s pretty deep for a cynical robot,” he said.

 “Hey, I wasn’t always a cynical robot,” said Kaycee. He looked sympathetic, insofar as it is possible for a robot to look sympathetic. Both he and Buckton were clearly carrying some sort of burden that they didn’t want to share, but they shared the knowledge that they had burdens they didn’t want to share, and for now, that was enough.

 Buckton didn’t feel comfortable sharing with any hunk of metal besides his precious ship and decided to regain his composure. He cleared his throat. “All right,” he said with newfound determination, “let’s go.”

 Zick frowned. “I can’t get back ahold of them,” he said nervously. “Kaycee –”

 “It would be difficult even for me, since they’re actively being jammed. It would take time we don’t have.”

 “One of us will have to actually go see them then. It could be a trap…”

 “Sounding better every minute,” said Buckton as the gleam returned to his eye. “Come on. Into the unknown.”

# 6

“Come on,” shouted Kahlo breathlessly, “hurry up.”

 Behind him in the hallway, Jamillika made a nasty face. She wasn’t annoyed with him, in particular, just the whole darn situation and she needed to vent. “Remind me again,” she said with unmistakable testiness, “why I am deserting my planet in its most desperate hour?”

 “We can’t let them get you,” he explained patiently as they arrived at a door, “because you’re a symbol of hope to all the people as long as you remain alive. That’s why *you’re* the one going, and not Gavolt or some pathetic underling.” As he spoke, he keyed into the door an access code she had given him, taking extreme care because her sister had programmed the security system to instantly destroy anyone who used the wrong one. He breathed a sigh of relief when it opened.

 They rushed into the hangar that Bardo Pikkes and his fleet had left not an hour earlier. A solitary cleaning robot swept away the last traces of leaked fuel oil with the instruments cleverly built into its underside.

 They ran past it to the far wall. Kahlo opened a small maintenance access panel and turned to Jamillika. “It’s all you, sister,” he said.

 She gave him an icy glare. She disliked being called “sister” and she was still against this whole darn idea in the first place, but it was futile to resist the revolution. She did her part as a cooperative little hostage and gave her fingerprint to the small innocuous screen beneath all the other gizmos. Then, she kneeled down and let it scan her retina. Finally, she pressed her tongue to it, which was always the worst part. Nearby for exactly this purpose was a case of disinfectant mouthwash, and hot running water for the occasional incident when it was really cold.

 The machine, satisfied with the composition of her saliva, beeped happily. She pulled away quickly and took half a gallon of mouthwash as the wall facing them slid up into the ceiling. They were confronted with a massive bulk of purple.

 “The Royal Cruiser,” breathed Kahlo. “Never dreamed I’d get near it.”

 Jamillika spat, missing the sink completely. The cleaning robot had just finished making the entire hangar spotless and beeped in an impressive simulation of annoyance as it rushed over to take care of this new mess. “You still haven’t,” she said, wiping a trail of drool from her lip. “There’re booby traps to get past yet.”

 “Well come on, then;” he said, “we haven’t got much time.”

 Bardo was currently in the cockpit of his fighter, dodging lasers and firing his own. He hadn’t been on a real combat mission since Australia began her reign, but the old adrenaline rush, the feel of the leather seat and his fingers gripping the controls, were all as familiar as yesterday’s lunch. He felt he could have flown it in his sleep, and, though he hadn’t tried it and never would, he was correct.

 He had gone through the montage of memories with his comrades, and was surprised at some of the stuff he’d forgotten. He felt a pang of sadness for old friends long gone and a rush of joy for good times spent with those still here. Of course, since these were all memories, many of those who had been still here were now also long gone. Especially seeing as half his fleet had already been decimated.

 Still, he did not let it bother him, knowing he would soon follow suit. He continued to fly like an autopilot and had time to reflect on some more distant memories.

 Bardo sighed as one of his wingmen exploded off to starboard. Without a second thought he veered in that direction and picked off the enemy fighters responsible.

 As he did, it brought the planet back into his range of vision, and he saw something he never would have noticed otherwise because his instruments were still being jammed. Oh yeah, that was the other thing. It was a terrible inconvenience to be flying without instruments, never knowing what was behind you until it was nearly too late. That had certainly affected their performance, but it had been covered in training, so they were somewhat prepared.

 Anyway, the thing he had noticed was the royal cruiser leaving the atmosphere. It stood out, regal and majestic, against both the planet and the starscape, like a large purple egg on its side that had no business floating through space. Well, at least it still worked. Australia hadn’t taken a voyage because she was lazy and Niklwat hadn’t taken a voyage for years because he was old and tired and though it had been carefully maintained all that time you could just never tell. But at least it still worked.

 *What’s she hoping to accomplish, though?* he wondered. Surely she realized she would be destroyed instantly. That ship was like – well, as he’d thought just a moment ago, like a large purple egg that had no business floating through space. It was like walking into a large predator’s den wearing nothing but a loincloth of raw meat.

 Everything in his guts told him Jamillika was too smart for that. It was something her sister would have done. In fact, she wouldn’t even have wanted to leave in the first place, would she?

 Bardo Pikkes thought for what seemed like hours, but was really a manner of seconds, during which he automatically continued to fire at the ships smothering him. He wished communications weren’t still being jammed. They had suddenly opened up a while ago, but only for a couple minutes. It was as if the Skreel were taunting them.

 And even if they *did* work, and he *could* talk to the cruiser and figure out what the heck they were playing at, the Skreel would probably be monitoring and it would be all for nothing, wouldn’t it?

 There was nothing for it, then, but to trust his guts and hope that Jamillika was as intelligent as he thought. He did a barrel roll and three loop-de-loops, a special code for the benefit of any comrades who were watching, and would of course relay the message.

 Their resistance wouldn’t have made a difference anyway. Nearly all of the Skreel fighters quickly overran them and headed for this new prize. They reached the cruiser in moments, and instantly swarmed over it like bees on a honeycomb.

 And now… from the other side of the planet… he could see a dark shape emerging. A Skreel capital ship, heading to secure its prey. Alive.

 He thought of Australia’s fate, and his stomach knotted. He didn’t fear death himself, knowing it would probably be a brief silent explosion in the vacuum of space. But what had happened to her was a truly nasty way to go, and he hoped his choice hadn’t just condemned Jamillika to something similar or worse.

 There wasn’t any need to worry, though, because seconds later the royal cruiser exploded, engulfing all of the Skreel fighters and even the capital ship in a ball of flame.

 *Nice*, he thought, nodding with approval. He was now certain that the Queen hadn’t been aboard, or at least his guts told him he was certain because they didn’t want to come to grips with what would happen if she had. With this reassurance, he relaxed and the autonomy of his attacks on the few remaining fighters continued. The battle went on for a few minutes, with neither side a clear victor.

 As he drew a bead on one coming straight toward him, his instincts alerted him a little too late to the squad coming in from above. He went into a barrel roll, but they seemed to have exceptional aim. Soon, Bardo Pikkes had finished following in the footsteps of his father, and had joined him as a cloud of space dust.

 Jamillika and Kahlo smiled weakly at each other from opposite ends of an airlock chamber, where they were sprawled in exhaustion.

 “Nicely done,” said Kahlo. “The revolution is over. I surrender, my Queen.”

 “You will be punished for your treason,” she said, giggling slightly. “Shame we didn’t bring Bobocitos.”

 “Have mercy, my Queen, I beg of you!”

 Kahlo felt young and carefree again, with all this playful teasing such as he had used to love dabbling in. When he considered that less than two hours ago he had been destined piece by piece for a monster’s stomach, life was incredibly good. But then he remembered that he used to do this sort of thing with his wife, during their courtship and well after marriage. It sent a nasty pang through his heart.

 Jamillika, for her part, didn’t know *what* to think. He was a nice guy, for sure, and the class separation didn’t bother her in the least. Then with everything he’d been going through for her and the planet as a whole, when he had no reason to feel loyal to either of them, well that was certainly something. But she had never fallen in love before, and now, with the fate of said planet in her hands and him her bodyguard, didn’t seem like a good time.

 She tried to change the subject. “I hope Bardo realized we weren’t on the cruiser, and didn’t get near it,” she said lamely. She knew better than to question that.

 He obviously saw how lame it was, but he went along with it. “I’m sure he did. He’s a real trooper, you know. Even we peasants know about him.”

 She thought of a more rational excuse, and used it. “We’d best go and meet the rest of the nice chaps who came to pick us up,” she said.

 He shrugged and got to his feet. He offered her a hand up, but his heart was no longer in it, and by this time she had decided she most definitely wanted more time to think. She got up herself. Then, they opened the second airlock door.

 A robot was standing there, very patiently. “All done in there?” it said.

 Jamillika was shocked. She blushed and looked away, wishing to disappear. *It’s not like that. It’s definitely not like that, whatever you mean.*

 Kahlo ignored him. “Hey, thanks for everything, robot dude. Take us to your leader.”

 The robot looked miffed, insofar as it is possible for a robot to look miffed. “Just because I don’t have feelings doesn’t mean you can treat me like dirt,” it said. “I have a name, you know.”

 Kahlo held up his hands and backed up. “Woah, sorry,” he said.

 For a moment there was an awkward silence.

 For a moment the awkward silence continued.

 Finally the robot did a convincing imitation of a sigh, and said, “I can see I’m going to have to spell this out for you. Aren’t you going to ask what my name *is*?”

 Kahlo and Jamillika exchanged a look of bewilderment. “All right,” he said, shrugging, “what’s your name?”

 “My name is KC-1138.”

 Kahlo bowed. “Hi, Kaycee. Nice to meet you.”

 If the robot had looked miffed before, now it looked positively furious. “‘Kaycee!’ Look, jerk, this isn’t ‘Star Wars’, all right? You can’t just go giving me some stupid cutesy fanboy dork nickname just because you can’t be bothered to pronounce all the oh-so-tricky syllables, and –”

 Suddenly, an intercom crackled to life. “Hey Kaycee,” said a familiar voice, “what’s taking so long? Where are the visitors?”

 Kaycee was silent for a moment, staring silently at Kahlo with all the loathing his expressionless metal face could muster up. Finally, he did the sigh again and said, “Coming, sir. They’ve been a little *preoccupied* down here.” He started to leave and motioned them to follow.

 Jamillika blushed again, but this time she spoke, emboldened by the fact that this robot was way out of his place. Were things really that different out here in the Galaxy, where robots weren’t designed to cater to the every whim of spoiled royalty? “I don’t know what you’re implying,” she said, “but I assure you –”

 “That you weren’t having some fun in there? Sure, whatever. Doesn’t take my incredible robotic senses and knowledge of human psychology to see the sparks between you two.”

 Jamillika lowered her scarlet face.

 Kahlo hadn’t been paying attention. He had been trying to figure something out and now he rounded on Kaycee. “I’d say these *are* star wars, and I don’t see what that has to do with robot nicknames anyhow.”

 Kaycee did not respond. He and Alicia had seen most of the Star Wars movies because, even centuries after their creation, they were one of the crowning cultural achievements of the Mother Planet. He had enjoyed them, but with his newfound cynicism he decided that the plot, the acting, and the special effects all sucked. That didn’t stop most of the people on Gragalla, however, from believing that it was a documentary series.

 Kahlo didn’t press him, so he didn’t bother explaining all that. They finished the walk up to the bridge in muffled silence.

 There, they were greeted by Buckton Roor, who had come to visit them at the palace just a while ago, and Zickle Farbreing, who hadn’t. Zickle introduced himself and they bowed in the general direction of both hosts.

 Buckton said, “It worked like a dream, Your Highness. Kaycee here steered the ship like he was built with it. He’s quite an exceptional robot.”

 Jamillika narrowed her eyes at Kaycee, who was looking smug, insofar as it is possible for a robot to look smug. “Yes,” she muttered icily. “Yes, he is.”

 Buckton didn’t notice, because he was looking at something over Zickle’s shoulder. “The accommodations aren’t, ah, what you’re used to, naturally,” he said, “but at least –”

 “We’ll take what we can get,” Kahlo said quickly. “As long as you don’t have any large, nasty animals.”

 “Well, there is a decent sized band,” said Zick, “but the cabins are soundproof.”

 “Swell.”

 They could see through the viewport that they were headed out towards where the battle had been just recently, and only a few victorious Ypiupian ships now remained. Buckton and Zick had only barely managed to get past it the first time because it had been much further off. They saw floating wrecks, crippled beyond repair, doomed to an eternity of orbiting the planet below. Kahlo offered a silent salute to the survivors and the deceased both.

 “Better clear out before reinforcements arrive. Where to now?” said Zick to no one in particular.

 “Balvador,” said Buckton and Jamillika. They looked at each other in surprise.

 “I must go, you see,” offered the Queen, “to plead for assistance in person. We cannot reach them by radio and they are our only ally left, thanks to my sister’s exploits. Seeing me alive, additionally, will be a beacon of hope for all, or so everyone assures me.” She jerked her head towards Kahlo.

 Buckton was clearly concerned. “We were going to Balvador… because if this robot is correct…”

 “‘This robot’ always is,” huffed Kaycee.

 “…then it’s going to be attacked.” Buckton let the realization sink in. “Uncanny,” he said. “A strategy.”

 Before he had time to explore what this turn of events might entail, the viewscreen console beeped. He turned it on, wondering who the heck could possibly be calling them right here, right now.

 The answer sent chills down his spine, and certainly everyone else’s.

 “Greetings and salutations,” said the Skreel facing them. “I’d like to congratulate you on your little ploy back there. I suppose you think you’re very clever, don’t you?”

 “I do, as a matter of fact,” said Buckton. “How ‘bout you, Zick?”

 “Definitely,” said Zick. “In all modesty, it was rather impressive.” They slapped each other on the back.

 When the idea had first come up, both of them had rejected it. The same ploy had been used multiple times by people over the years, and surely the Skreel wouldn’t fall for it again. There was a funny thing about that, though. The more people used this ploy, the more the Skreel assumed that they wouldn’t be able to use it anymore because they, the Skreel, would logically be expecting it now; and therefore, increasingly so, they weren’t. Kaycee had pointed this out with some pride, and if either Buckton or Zick had additionally been there when he effectively paralyzed the invaders on Gragalla by asking to be their friend, they would by now be wondering exactly why the heck a serving robot knew so much about *Skreel* psychology.

 None of this knowledge would do them any good right now, however. If love, friendship or pasta were mentioned, this one would care slightly less than a Kravian Udscox cares about the precarious financial situation of Farqill V. Although it stared at them and spoke calmly with its inexplicable upper-class British accent, it was clearly very, very pissed off.

 “Well, much as it pains me, I must agree that yes, you are indeed very clever,” it continued. “The alternative, that you are gibbering morons, would be an insult to yours truly seeing as you have outsmarted me approximately eighty-seven times.”

 “Sorry, have we met?” said Buckton callously. “You all look alike to me.”

 “We have not met,” it said, “but I have watched you. I have watched you chase after one of our fleets for a long time, and do quite a bit of damage to us. We do not bother with the triviality of individual names, but for the sake of simplicity to your inferior minds, you may call me General Vox.”

 “How do you do,” said Zickle, the mockery in his voice making itself obvious by being nonexistent.

 “I just wanted you to know that I am aware of what is going on. You’ve escaped our blockade and rescued the Queen of Ypiupi. Well done. But it shall avail you naught. I will crush you, like I crush an insignificant insect, but with infinitely more pain. There is no escape. I shall prevail. Soon.”

 All this time, Jamillika had stared at it in horror. There was no rational way she could have known, but she felt certain, deep in her gut, that this was the creature that had killed her sister. She noticed a small grey lump on what it used for a lip, and knew it. She trembled to imagine a similar fate befalling any of them.

 Kahlo put his arm around her for comfort. He hadn’t felt fear, *real* fear, since his wife and daughter died. His reaction to Bobocitos had been more spur-of-the-moment nervousness than anything, a biological reaction to prevent him wanting to be eaten. He was feeling it again now, faintly, and as he shared Jamillika’s horrible memory it began to increase. He tightened his grip on her and love was far from his mind.

 Buckton and Zickle controlled their fear. Though it was nearly impossible to tell, Buckton was controlling something else; anger stemming from a deep-rooted hatred. The two cancelled each other out and he was almost entirely calm, cool and collected. “Listen, chum,” he said. “I don’t know why you’ve chosen to pester us when this clearly has nothing to do with you, but let me just clarify that you don’t have a prayer. We have each other, and you – you’ve got nothing. All those ships, and weapons, and troops – nothing. You’re wasting your time.”

 “I second that,” said Zick, slapping him on the back.

 “Same here,” said Kahlo, not hesitating.

 “Amen,” said Jamillika, with bravado she didn’t feel.

 “Count me in. Drink hydrochloric acid, you twisted tyrannical turd,” said Kaycee, giving it the rudest gesture his metal joints would allow.

 “Suit yourselves,” said General Vox. “Be secure in your wrongness. It shall make my victory a complete shock.” It leered at Jamillika, and she shrank back. “Nice to see you again so soon, Highness,” it jeered. “This is a regular old get-together. Your sister’s here, too. Would you like to –”

 Buckton switched the viewer off. “I didn’t hear exactly what happened, and I don’t plan on it,” he explained.

 “That was great,” said Zick. “Everyone, all of you were just great. I think we really fooled him.”

 “What did that mean, that thing you did?” Kahlo asked Kaycee, eager to expand his repertoire.

 “Nothing,” admitted Kaycee. “I made it up.”

 “Well, could you teach it to me just in case – wait, what?”

 “Clean your ears, pinhead! I said I made –”

 “Not you, him!”

 “I said you were all just great,” said Zick.

 “What did you say after that?”

 “I didn’t… oh, yeah. I said I think we really fooled him.”

 “Fooled him?”

 “Yeah,” said Buckton. “Look, you know that was all a bluff, right? That guy’s got at least two fleets at his command and probably more because two is a ridiculous number for this sort of thing. He’s been masterminding everything from the beginning, apparently, including us being brought together and caught between two hard places. But even disregarding that, the bottom line is that if he knows who and where we are and has a grudge against us, then we’re completely and irrevocably *screwed*. Even more than usual. There’s no cheating it this time.”

 The bridge fell silent. But Jamillika’s silence was of a noticeably different sort. She was still clearly affected more than anything by the monster having killed her sister in such a hideous way. Kahlo gave her a hug. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

 She tried to change the subject, again lamely. “So who else is on this ship?” she asked.

 “Well there’s that band I told you about, the Bleeming Squeegees,” said Zick. “Not the most polite folks you’ll ever meet, but their tunes are pretty good. Then there’s – uh, another human girl we picked up. She’s asleep.”

 “We’d better wake her up,” added Buckton. “We need to make some decisions, and fast.”

 “She’s a brainless naïve teenager. Her opinions won’t help us,” argued Kaycee. “And I mean that in the nicest way possible.”

 “Never mind that. She’s a passenger on this ship, and as such she has a say in things.”

 “What about Hok Tubok and all them?”

 “Meh, don’t worry about them. *They’ve* raised “brainless and naïve” to an art form. Wouldn’t want to interrupt their rehearsal anyway. But hurry with Alicia. There’s no time to lose at all.”

 As soon as the channel to the *Ankled Apex* was shut off, General Vox opened another one. This one required it to shut off, for the second time, the signals that were jamming the Hwangawine District of planet Ypiupi.

 “Greetings and salutations,” it said to the rightfully startled-looking Gavolt, “old chum.”

 “I don’t have time for this,” said Gavolt, reaching to turn it off.

 “You’ll *make* time for this, old chum. It concerns your lovely Princess slash Queen and her lame-legged bodyguard boyfriend.”

 Gavolt trembled slightly, and then quickly recovered himself. “You – you have them?”

 “Not *with* me. But right where I want them, yes. They will join your previous Queen when their usefulness is spent. And by the way, the only planet they could hope to summon to your aid is about to be neutralized as well. Have a nice day.” General Vox closed the connection itself.

 Then it quickly reopened it. “I just had a thought,” it said. “You know we tried to secure what’s-her-face’s cooperation in the first place…”

 “Never,” said Gavolt.

 “You are privy to much of the same information and privileges, are you not?”

 “Forget it.”

 “Not even to save her? You saw what I did before and I assure you I can do much worse.”

 Gavolt hesitated and Vox relished the pain in his face. Then, finally: “No. Goodbye.” He closed the connection again.

 Vox reopened it again. “Very well. I look forward to a much more nutritious and filling dish than her sister provided.” *Click*.

 Without turning, it said, “You have done well.”

 “Of course I have,” said the underling waiting patiently behind it.

 General Vox turned and studied its Chief Thinker. “Don’t get cocky,” it warned. “There were certainly enough risks. Knowing Buckton and Zickle, there still are.”

 “I know, and I planned for them,” insisted the Chief Thinker. “The one thing I don’t know is how many times I have to remind you of that.” It could afford to be cocky, because General Vox would sooner cut off its own right arms then do anything to it.

 General Vox knew that it knew, and was annoyed, but what could it do? “Letting them get a signal out to the *Apex* was risky,” it insisted. “What if someone else had picked it up?”

 “They wouldn’t have, because the wavelength we unjammed wasn’t strong enough,” the Thinker countered. “And the *Apex* was in exactly the right place, just like I calculated. And now they, and Jamillika, will continue to be in the right places, every time, and the proof will be right in front of you. Until, at last, they are destroyed.”

 General Vox fumed. Desperate to burst its opponent’s bubble, it exclaimed, “The robot! You never could have foreseen the robot, and now it’s suddenly vital to your plan! You’re making this all up as you go along!”

 “Improvisation is merely one of the mental skills I’ve mastered,” the Thinker acknowledged. “Excuse me, I’d love to argue with you, but my pet project seems to be a much more adequate use of my copious free time. Good-bye, sir.” And it walked off.

 General Vox was, on the one hand, reassured of their inevitable success, and on the other, extremely peeved by this insubordinance. It executed half of the bridge crew and that calmed it down a bit.

 KC-1138 quietly crept into Alicia Parkinson’s cabin. It was a dingy, squalid hole, piled with all manner of books and computer equipment and apparel and unidentifiable bits of junk. Against one wall was a badly scratched up dresser with a badly smudged up mirror atop it, and opposite that was a bed that had clearly seen better days but would still do fine for the nights. Snuggled up in the tattered orange sheets was her prone form, mouth slightly open, mouthing something imperceptible in its sleep.

 Kaycee’s programming gave him a natural feeling of protectiveness and compassion towards her in this vulnerable state. He noticed her furrowed brow, her twitching feet, the way she gripped the sheets until her knuckles turned white. He took cold robotic pity on her, as one would an adorable sleeping baby. It would obviously be a great favor to wake her up.

 He put his hand on her shoulder. Instantly she relaxed, and everything settled down to normal.

 “Oh, Kaycee,” she said, “I’ve had the worst nightmare…”

 “Tell me about it,” said Kaycee soothingly.

 “I… I dreamed Gragalla was attacked. They… they came, I don’t know why, you know how dreams are irrational, but it was so real! And… they came, and… they destroyed everything. I watched my father die. I watched him die, Kaycee! And I was thinking, ‘I would never complain about him holding me back again, if only he could be still alive!’ And… Bert… he deserted me! I thought he loved me, Kaycee, I really thought he loved me! And Gina, and mom, they must have both died too! Oh… Gina! Gone, and the last thing I’d said to her was… was… ‘You and Harvey have fun.’ Well. I guess that’s not so bad, but the rest was horrible! It was so real! We had to leave the planet, and I got kidnapped by this monster guy, and there were rats, and giant spaceships, and they… *they* were clinging to our ship, and trying to get in… and all I had for company was a couple of freaky space cowboys and those Bleeming Squeegee guys, and you… you turned into a sarcastic jerk! It was awful!” Tears streamed down her still-closed eyes.

 “Go back to sleep,” said Kaycee.

 Alicia groaned. “I should have known,” she said. “I should have known. When Mr. Snoogums wasn’t in the bed with me, that should have tipped me off.”

 “We picked up some visitors while you were asleep. You should come to meet them.”

 “Are they nice?”

 “The girl is. She’s the Queen of a planet, too. The guy seems to just be some loser following her around hoping to get lucky.”

 “Kaycee, I honestly don’t know what’s gotten into you.”

 “I tell it as I see it, okay? I’m sure he’ll treat you nicer than he did me, anyway. There seems to be some inexplicable prejudice against us robots, despite our obvious superiority to organics in every possible way.”

 “All right, just a minute. I have to get dressed.” She pulled back the sheets and revealed the sparkly, shimmering silver nightgown she was wearing.

 “You found that?” he asked.

 She nodded. “In the dresser. Seems to be a novel concept for these guys. Maybe I shouldn’t have, but my clothes have gotten oh-so-dirty. And I don’t know when we’ll find a dry-cleaning service like the ones back home.”

 “So you just put it on. You’re a brave woman, Alicia Parkinson.”

 “What I really want to know is if there’s a shower anywhere. My hair must still be full of crap from that stupid rat.”

 “When?”

 “You know, in the spaceport – oh that’s right, you weren’t there. What were you doing again?”

 “None of your strakking business, remember?”

 “Kaycee –”

 “I don’t want to talk about it. Come on, get dressed. Let’s go.”

 “Fine.” Alicia was too tired and disoriented to press the issue. She crossed the room to the dresser, rummaged through it for a minute, looked through the piles on the floor for a minute, and finally came up with an outfit she deemed spaceworthy. Kaycee turned away, out of programming more than necessity, as she donned a pair of scintillating red jeweled battle shorts and a black tunic made from some kind of very comfortable animal leather. She looked in the mirror and, not being able to see a thing because of the smudges, decided it would do, even though the animal leather turned out to smell as if it still belonged to the animal.

 “You look great,” said Kaycee, “but I imagine it must be hideous on either of our esteemed captains.”

 “Well, it’s hardly orthodox either – hey! Why do you suppose they’ve got a sparkly, shimmering silver nightgown in here anyway!?”

 “Search me. Come on, we have to go. It’s urgent.”

 “All right then, I’m ready,” she said.

 As they walked to the bridge, their ears were assailed by the continuing band rehearsal. Alicia made sure to not go near them because she had not been impressed by Hok Tubok so far and didn’t want to try to reconcile that with the discrepancy of how awesome she thought his music was. The ship’s interior was designed in such a haphazard, illogical way that either route was equally practical.

 They came onto the bridge and Alicia saw them. There was a man and a woman, as Kaycee had said, but she was surprised to see that they were also both human, if a little on the short side. They were talking to Buckton and Zick in a strangely lilting musical language, and both pilots seemed to be responding flawlessly. Everyone turned to look at her and Kaycee.

 “Good morning, star shine,” said Buckton. “This is Queen Jamillika of Ypiupi, and her bodyguard escort, Kahlo Kache, also of Ypiupi.”

 “Nice to meet you,” said Alicia, though she realized they probably wouldn’t understand it. To better make her intentions known, she walked over to them and offered a hand to shake. They both stared at it as if it were a fish that had just casually remarked how well it would go smoked with a light béarnaise sauce and slice of lemon.

 Zick gently grabbed Jamillika’s arm and positioned it, showing her how to shake hands. She began hesitantly, then with vigor. She grinned in delight at this new process. And she didn’t let go.

 “Um,” said Alicia, “um, Zick…”

 Zick whispered something to her and she let go, looking rather embarrassed.

 Alicia repeated the process with Kahlo. She noticed how ruggedly handsome he was and fancied the Queen very lucky. It was a shame they probably had to practice professional detachment all the time.

 When that was done, Buckton told her to bow towards each of them in turn. “Not all the way to the ground, just about forty-five degrees,” he said. She did, and thought it was great that the commoner received as much respect as the monarch.

 “And they’ve already met Kaycee,” he explained, frowning. “I hear the creepling contraption gave them quite a welcome.”

 “Oh dear, I hope he didn’t offend them too much,” Alicia sputtered.

 “I’m standing right here, you know. I don’t have to take this garbage from you,” said Kaycee.

 “Not too much, but being a robot he shouldn’t have at all. I’m thinking we should switch him off until they get settled, but then you never know when we might need him,” said Buckton. “He *has* proved to be incredibly useful so far. What model is he?”

 “I don’t know,” admitted Alicia. “He didn’t come with anything that said. And I’m as surprised as you about everything.”

 “I *said*, I’m standing right here!” yelled Kaycee. “You could ask *me*, you know! Never mind, don’t bother. I’ll go switch *myself* off.” He stormed off the bridge, headed for Alicia’s cabin.

 With a sigh, she looked outside and realized she could see nothing but stars. “Did I sleep through Balvador?” she asked.

 “Not yet,” said Zick. “That’s what we got you up for. We’re not sure of our next move ‘cause of the detour and everything, and we want to take a vote. We’re headed for Balvador right now, but it’s not too late to back off.”

 “What other options do we have?”

 “None, that I can think of,” said Buckton. “Short of wimping out, I mean, and that’s *not* going to happen.” He decided not to mention General Vox’s ultimatum, and warned the others with a meaningful glance to do the same. There was no need in freaking the poor child out.

 “Well then, let’s go,” said Alicia.

 “Right. Full speed ahead!” Similar logic to that used earlier occurred to him. General Vox obviously knew that Balvador was the next on their itinerary, for both reasons. But he knew that they knew, and so he would not expect them to be stupid enough to still go there, and it was in effect the most surprising maneuver they could make. Hopefully.

 “Snappy outfit, by the way,” said Zick, looking her up and down. “Those are my shorts you know. Check and see if there’s any food in the pockets.” She did, and found a hard sticky lump of something covered with more mold than Gina’s last science fair project. She made a point of not looking at it as she handed it over to him.

 “Thanks,” he said, and began sucking on it like a jawbreaker. “I’d split with you, Bucky, but it’s pretty solidified now.”

 “What is – what *was* it?” Buckton asked with an air of mild curiosity.

 “Dunno. Can only taste the mold so far, and I never took a course in biology. But hey, I wasn’t finished complimenting your wardrobe choices, Alicia. That tunic, me and Bucky made ourselves from a wild Snarm on Lokiss VII. You remember that, pal?”

 “Oh, do I ever. That thing nearly had us, too. Give me an aerial dogfight any day. There we were, y’see, explaining our plight to the local authorities, when suddenly this huge beast comes crashing through the window and nearly has both our heads off. We make a run for it, and we manage to stay ahead for a while by zigzagging ‘cause its reflexes are like a blind one-legged Ricklbee except at point-blank range. Which is where it ends up when genius, here, suggests we leap into a crevasse. Well, the monster gets its head in, and its tongues are close enough to pick my nose. Which I know because they do. To make a long story short, eventually I figure out it’s trying to find the munchies I have on me, so without hesitation I hand them over. It dies of food poisoning about ten minutes later and, not wanting to waste a happy accident, we relieve it of its pelt and let the locals show us how to make this little item here.” He turned and translated the story for Jamillika and Kahlo, who had been awkwardly standing by this whole time.

 “Yep. That’s why I stay on the ship nowadays,” said Zick. “That and a few other things I might mention when we have the time.”

 “What a life,” said Alicia.

 “What a universe,” said Zick. “Mmm, still can’t tell what this is, but it’s softening up. Want some?”

 KC-1138 returned to Alicia’s cabin. On the way he walked right through the Bleeming Squeegees’ rehearsal, not bothering to notice them, even when he accidentally trod on Hok’s foot and caused him to yell bloody murder.

 He pushed the door open and maneuvered himself into the corner least cluttered with junk. More clothes and a couple of half-shredded magazines concealed a box of stale something-or-other and a large handful of priceless rubies from the mines of Andirron. Beneath that was another layer of clothes in which a small burrowing animal had made its home. It certainly had not suffered from lack of food. Kaycee disturbed it only slightly as he cleared an empty space in which to stand, and was still.

 The circuits that made up his mechanical mind were in chaos. Robots, especially serving robots, were by nature designed to be obedient. It was in every facet of his programming to willingly and cheeringly serve Alicia, as he had for most of his existence. And it was not meant to be possible for him to lie or ignore a direct question, such as “Kaycee, what happened to you?”

 But another effect of all the unprecedented guns and warships and evil monsters coming at once as they did was to overload his relatively small self-preservation subroutine. In addition to trying his hardest to keep him and Alicia both in one piece, he recognized that if he told her how – in the loosest sense of the word – *emotionally* scarring the whole thing was, she would realize that he was not in prime working condition and trade him in for scrap. His irrepressibly obnoxious behavior of late pretty much guaranteed that she would catch on eventually anyway, but somehow, contrary to every diode in his metal body, he had decided life might not be worth living anymore anyway.

 “To void with it all,” he said, and switched himself off.

 This, in itself, did not come naturally to a robot either. Robots were not generally supposed to switch themselves off unless in some sort of an emergency, or if their owners were too darn lazy to do it themselves. As long as they were continually recharged few saw the need to ever switch them off at all, particularly ones as amiable and pleasant as Kaycee had once been. There were supposed to be failsafes that set off alarms and turned them off from the inside when they started going loopy, again like Kaycee, but few companies ever bothered to put those in because in the long run it was more costly than a couple of lawsuits from the families of mad robot victims.

 There was something else that they were negligent about, that practically no one had ever bothered to study. The power that activated advanced robots like Kaycee was of extremely high potency. No one, not even the original inventors of such technology, had ever charted its habit channels thoroughly, but it was believed that a latent residue remained active and uncontrolled for a few microseconds after they disconnected. This, theoretically, could cause a robot to have dreams.

 No one ever tried to chart the habit channels or investigate this theory because it seemed so ludicrous and a waste of time. The robots weren’t programmed to tell anyone whether or not they had dreams, and the scientists who claimed they did were usually laughed out of their universities and ended up designing powerful new superweapons instead. But two things should immediately be made clear: First; that robots did, indeed, sometimes have dreams.

 And second; that KC-1138 had one.

 *Stillness… and silence.*

 *Somewhere… somewhere far away…*

 *A void… a dark, lonely void… an eternity…*

 *A solitary presence… someone, alone in the void… peace shattered… shock… trauma… fear… despair… incomprehensible loneliness, unspeakable pain… a horrible tragedy about to strike… a ray of hope, nearly engulfed in darkness, a final chance for the Universe as we know it. But then… another tragedy, striking yet more swiftly, threatening to wipe the presence from the void…*

 *Stillness… and silence.*

 Kaycee’s emergency backup processors were so alarmed at this turn of events that they switched him back on. His main processors demanded what the heck their problem was; wasn’t it obvious that they were getting a bit of needed rest and couldn’t whatever it was wait for just a little while? And then, a millisecond later, it clicked. The horror of the situation thrust itself upon him. He checked, and double-checked, but there was no mistaking it. And he had never been wrong.

 He knew instinctively that these vibes were not the product of his own warped mechanical mind. And although they were only sensory fragments, his complex inner workings had picked up much more information than was instantly apparent, on wavelengths incomprehensible to all but the most highly-evolved organics, and he knew precisely what they, the people aboard the *Ankled Apex*, needed to do.

 Furthermore, they needed to do it *fast*.

# 7

He burst from the room and ran for the bridge. Sensing the urgency, his processors automatically switched on the hoverjets in his feet. He didn’t like to draw attention to the fact that he had hoverjets in his feet, but what the heck, he thought, it was an emergency as palpable as Alicia getting crushed by a building. He kept them on.

 “What was *that*?” Hok Tubok demanded, referring to the metal blur which had just whizzed past and disrupted his rehearsal.

 “Didn’t see it,” lied the guitarist next to him. “S’pose you’re probably just high again, boss.”

 “Well, aren’t you?” demanded Hok.

 “Yeah, ironic ain’t it?”

 “We are *musicians* after all, aren’t we?”

 Kaycee reached the bridge and switched his jets off quickly, hoping no one had noticed. Fortunately being a robot he did not suffer from being out of breath, and was able to speak immediately. “We have to go,” he said. “Something terrible is about to happen.”

 “What?” said just about everyone.

 “Look, this is more important than Balvador, we have to –”

 “Kaycee, what are you talking about?” asked Alicia calmly, wondering if it was finally time to go shopping for a newer model.

 “We have to go. Something terrible is about to happen. Somewhere else.”

 “What?” demanded Buckton.

 “I said, we have –”

 “I mean, *what* is going to happen?”

 “I don’t know.”

 There was a moment of awkward silence. Kaycee felt this wasn’t going as well as he would have hoped. It sort of hurt his circuits to have to admit that he didn’t know something, not to mention his chances of getting everyone to listen.

 Buckton took a few deep breaths and tried to be patient. “More important than Balvador, eh?”

 “Yes. I swear it.”

 “You remember why else we have to go there, right? You know the Queen here needs their assistance, right?”

 “I can’t forget *anything*, you stupid – I mean, yes, sir, I do. And I’m sorry about that. But you know the whole thing is a trap set by General Vox, right? He pretty much made that clear. And this is more important.”

 “But you don’t know what it is.”

 “I know it might be our only chance to save the Universe. And it’s about to be lost forever.”

 Buckton sighed. During the next awkward silence he explained to Jamillika and Kahlo what was going on. Their eyes widened. “It’s up to you,” he added.

 They looked at each other. “It’s up to *you*,” Kahlo mouthed at Jamillika, backing off. “I’m nobody.”

 Jamillika walked up slowly to Kaycee. “Please…” she whispered. “You know what this all means to me… to my people…”

 “Yes,” Kaycee whispered back, solemnly. “I know.”

 Jamillika winced at the pain of her inner turmoil. This was to be the first of her decisions as the Queen, and certainly one of the most important. What to do? Was she to trust the word of this incredibly rude robot she’d only just met, and sacrifice her planet for the greater good of the Universe?

 She turned to Kahlo. He held out his hands. “*Your* decision,” he mouthed.

 She sighed. “Agreed,” she said, hoping desperately it wouldn’t come back to haunt her.

 “But wait,” snapped Buckton. “You said you don’t even know what it is; what about where!?”

 Kaycee suddenly discovered, to his surprise, that a fresh set of coordinates had somehow gotten into his memory bank. The even more surprising part was that, being a robot, he hadn’t noticed them before. He explained this to Buckton, leaving out the more surprising part.

 “All right,” said Buckton with a sigh, “stand by for change of course.”

 “Standing by,” said the computer.

 Kaycee was just about to enter the coordinates when Hok Tubok burst onto the bridge again, the noticeable difference being that he was hopping on one foot. “Buckton, dude!” he yelped angrily. “That metal menace stepped on my foot! It’s probably broken! How the snap am I supposed to strut my stuff now?”

 Kaycee entered the coordinates and motioned for Buckton to deal with his irate passenger.

 “When did this happen?”

 “About a quarter hour ago, I reckon.”

 “And why didn’t you bring it up then?”

 “Well we were rehearsing, you know! You can’t just break off in the middle of a rehearsal. You have to come to a good stopping spot, let the creative juices trickle off naturally. We artists know about this sort of thing.”

 “I see,” said Buckton. “Say Hok, you haven’t met any of my other new friends, have you? This charming young lady is Alicia Parkinson, her metal menace whom you’ve already been acquainted with a couple times is KC-1138 – but anyway the handsome young man is Kahlo Kache, doesn’t speak English, and last but not least this gorgeous specter here is his beloved Queen Jamillia, doesn’t speak English either.”

 “Howdy do,” said Hok, giving them all one broad and completely disinterested wave. “Now listen, Buckton, when are we gonna get to the Pleiades?”

 “Oh, you were serious about that, eh?”

 “Of course I was serious! It’s a great area for fresh new talent like us to break into the big time!”

 “Look, we can’t –”

 “I know, you’ve got stuff to do, I’ll be patient, just drop us off there at your earliest convenience, all right? All I want is sort of an estimate of how long it’ll take. We’ve gotta plan these rehearsals accordingly.”

 “I don’t know.”

 “What?”

 “I don’t know. I don’t know where we’re going, I don’t know what we’re doing, I don’t know how long it’ll take. Ask the robot. I’m going to take a nap.” With that, he got up and left.

 “Me, too, that sounds like a good idea,” said Zick. “Take care of things here, will you?” he said to the computer.

 “Yes, sir. Everything is under control here.”

 “Good.” And he, too, left.

 Hok was left gaping at Alicia, Kaycee, Kahlo and Jamillika. He was so stunned he let his wounded foot drop back to the floor.

 He turned to Kaycee. “So,” he said at last, “what the snap is going on?”

 “None of your strakking business,” said Kaycee.

 Light-years away, events were unfolding which would have a lasting impact on everyone on board the *Ankled Apex*.

 A Skreel warrior surveyed the wreckage of Riko City with pride. It had been a much bigger challenge than expected, and that was always good. It made the end result even more worthwhile. Sure, a few of its comrades had died, but the Skreel didn’t care a bit about them anyway and they had died for, if not exactly a good cause, then at least a cause, and one that it did care about. Not a single life-form crawled through the smoking ruins.

 Suddenly, a rat, its fur slightly singed, darted from its relatively safe hiding nook out into the open. With years of training and natural skill behind it, the Skreel vaporized it in a single shot.

 Not a single *other* life-form crawled through the smoking ruins. Yes, indeed, this had been a good day. It would be hard to top.

 The Skreel walked over the rubble for a little ways. Things were the same everywhere. It knew it should report back to camp so they could get on with the next phase of the plan, but it couldn’t help savoring these moments. The others would understand.

 Suddenly, its keen hearing organs picked up a faint sound nearby. It sounded like somebody with severe asthma saying, “strak…”

 It rushed in the direction of the noise and there, sitting on a broken chunk of Plexiglas, was a tall, naked green humanoid creature. It stared at the Skreel warrior with a mixture of surprise and curiosity, but no fear.

 *A shame*, thought the Skreel, *he doesn’t know what’s coming to him…* It had no qualms about shooting clueless people, but merely wanted them to suffer from anxiety first. Still, it raised its weapon, sighted, which wasn’t hard because the other creature was about two meters away, and fired.

 As it fired its body was suddenly wracked with a painful, involuntary convulsion, and the shot went completely awry. Overwhelmed, the Skreel dropped its weapon and dropped to its knees. More convulsions came, each worse than the last. It could hardly think straight. Blurry spots began to appear in its vision. Gasping for breath, it vomited a substantial portion of its liquefying internal organs onto the pavement.

 The other creature’s green lips curled into a nearly imperceptible smile.

 Somehow, calling upon its last reserves of strength and hoping it wasn’t too late, it managed to activate its comlink and open a channel to its ship. “Beam me up!” it gurgled in agony.

 After Hok Tubok had left in a huff, forgetting momentarily to hop on one foot, the others didn’t quite know what to say to each other, which suited Kaycee fine. Let them stay quiet. Humans rarely had anything important to talk about.

 Alicia finally decided to return to her own cabin and think some more about all that had happened. It was still so overwhelming.

 “Cute kid,” said Kahlo as soon as she had left, and Jamillika was surprised to feel a twinge of jealousy.

 “I’m afraid one of my primary duties is to keep her safe from pedophiles,” said Kaycee.

 Kahlo stared at him, bug-eyed. “I just meant… cute… like small animals are cute…”

 “Stuff it,” said Kaycee. He wasn’t being sarcastic; he really was concerned for her safety. It was in his programming. “She had a boyfriend, you know.”

 “‘Had?’”

 “You’re not doing much to assuage my suspicions. Yes, ‘had’. I say ‘had’ because even if he hadn’t abandoned her to an uncertain fate at the first sign of danger, he is several light-years away and most likely dead.”

 “I see.”

 “He gave me to her, you know. Only smart thing the brainless sod ever did. He got me from–” Kaycee suddenly froze, because his security circuits were kicking in and telling him to keep his metallic mouth shut. “Just because he’s gone,” he continued, “doesn’t mean *you* get a VIP pass.”

 “A what? Look, it was just a careless remark –”

 “Boy, I’ll say it was. You’re interested in *this* babe, anyway, right?” He indicated Jamillika, who was very startled by this.

 “Me?” she sputtered.

 “No, we’re just friends,” insisted Kahlo.

 “With benefits?” pried Kaycee.

 “No! Are you nuts!?”

 “Hey, look, I’m just trying to help a guy out. My best advice right now is to leave and go off somewhere on your own, because nothing kills the romantic atmosphere faster than a sarcastic cynical robot. Thank me later.”

 Kahlo sighed. “Come on,” he said to Jamillika, “this thing gives me the creeps. Let’s leave it alone before it short-circuits completely.” He tugged her arm.

 “Wait.” She said. Hesitantly she said to Kaycee, “Do you really want to help us out?”

 “Yeah, sure,” he said. “I’m annoying, not evil. I like you guys.”

 She spoke something that had been on her mind for a good half-hour at least. “Could you – could you teach me to speak their language?” she asked.

 “Whose, Zick’s and Buckton’s and Alicia’s? English?”

 “Yes, that one. Please.”

 “Of course I can! But Alicia’s the only one who doesn’t know yours, and I think it would be more efficient to teach her. Besides, yours is easier *and* sounds a lot cooler.”

 “There was that man – Hok Tubok –”

 “Him? He’s not worth talking to, and he wouldn’t let you in to his precious rehearsals anyway. I’m telling you, she is the one we should teach.”

 “I wish to enrich myself culturally.”

 “Fine, you do that. But later. You two need to have that time alone.”

 The question on some people’s minds at this point is probably, *Why not simply use a universal translator?*

 The question on everyone else’s minds at this point is probably, *Why isn’t anything exciting going on right now?*

 This narrative will now attempt to address the first question, while those wondering about the second are advised to read “Harry Potter”.

 Universal translators, hackneyed though they seemed as a plot device in predictable sci-fi TV shows and literature on many worlds, were not only feasible but eventually became real and widespread throughout the spacefaring cultures of the Universe. They did not require a database of every known language but rather analyzed and interpreted any new one instantaneously. Their accuracy was impressive; however it was also not quite enough.

 They additionally suffered the same problems as antiquated Internet-based translators and dictionary hackwork; that is, not taking into account context, subtleties, double meanings, puns, figures of speech, etc., and, since they used auditory input, homophones. The most famous problem arose with a team of Earthling colonists, which was not coincidental because Earthlings seemed to have quite a knack for causing trouble and English is also still one of the most unnecessarily complicated languages in the known Universe. These colonists were negotiating with the leaders of Arkitor; a planet that did not want to be colonized.

 The top Arkitorn leader said that it was going to crush them and leave them in pieces.

 The colonists’ universal translators said that it was going to leave in peace because it had a crush on them.

 When they had finished laughing, the Arkitorn, who had merely been bluffing, now decided to deliver on his promise.

 Nowadays it is much more practical to buy innovative software that can teach you a moderately complex language in less than an hour. Kaycee also inexplicably had this ability, and when he was done with using it to help the Ypiupian Queen he wanted to help her with what he perceived to be her *own* crush.

 “Whatever,” snarled Kahlo in response to the comment that Kaycee made before this unrelated diatribe, “Come on.” And he dragged her off.

 “Pretty nervy for a bodyguard,” mumbled the computer.

 “Yeah,” said Kaycee. “I’m telling you, they’re all over each other. They just won’t admit it, even to themselves.”

 “So, how about you? Anyone special in your life?”

 “No, not really, why?”

 “Just wondering…”

 Outside the door, Kahlo and Jamillika had paused to collect their thoughts and happened to overhear this exchange. They wanted to hear more, but that was it. The two machines lapsed into silence, which was a fair bit easier for them than organic beings. Exchanging a grin, the humans headed for what they hoped to be an empty cabin.

 A knock and an opening of the door revealed that it was, indeed, devoid of occupants; but in every other regard it more or less exactly failed to be empty. Jamillika was appalled, not because it was such a slum compared to the royal palace, but because it was such a slum, period. Kahlo didn’t care because the room was bigger than his whole hut back home.

 “That robot,” he said, “is a character.” He waded through the clutter to the bed which proved to be more comfortable than the dirt he was used to. “A remarkably perceptive one, though. Isn’t he?”

 “Grab your throat,” said Jamillika, rolling her eyes.

 “Oh, come on. There’s something between us, don’t pretend like there isn’t. I don’t like to make assumptions, but the evidence for you is all there. And for me, I speak for myself.”

 “We can’t,” she said. “We’ve too much work to do. Who knows what lies in store for either of us?”

 “You’re using your brain,” he insisted. “Use your –”

 “Kahlo, that’s easy for you to say! You don’t have a planet’s fate in your hands!” She shook her head sadly. “If I’ve made the wrong decision about it, just for starters, everything else is off. I don’t know what I’ll do, but dying of despair sounds like a realistic starting point.”

 “Easy. You’re only human. No one expects more.”

 She looked him straight in the eye. “I do,” she said.

 Then she left to find her own cabin, because even though Kahlo was her bodyguard he wouldn’t exactly thrilled to sleep on the floor, or in fact even be able to; the bed would not fit both of them even if they did toss their scruples aside, and since the threats on a spaceship would be coming from other spaceships and floating troopers his presence wasn’t really necessary.

 And so a thoughtful silence settled over most of the ship, except for the area where the Bleeming Squeejees still rehearsed, and the cabin in which Buckton Roor had tried, and failed, to take a nap.

 Lying on the bottom bunk of two in the cabin he usually shared with Zick in spite of there being plenty of room elsewhere simply because they were such close friends, Buckton reached into his pillow and retrieved a small pack of gum, from which he pulled a piece that was subsequently popped into his mouth and chewed upon vigorously.

 “Whew, that was close,” he said after a minute. “I almost lost it that time.”

 “Think I’ll have one too,” said Zick, reaching out a hand. “That Vox fellow sort of jarred my innards too.”

 “Yeah. Wonder what he wants with us? We’re not that special, are we?”

 “Hmmm.” On a sudden impulse, Zick turned on the computer terminal next to the bed. “Computer,” he said, “please search for all news releases anywhere in the Universe featuring Buckton and me.”

 “Done,” said the computer. “One thousand twenty-three billion, ninety-two million, eight hundred seventy five thousand, three hundred sixty-four and a half results found.”

 Zick and Buckton looked at each other. “‘And a half?’”

 “Yes, sirs. The reporter, a Mr. Jy Jax, got bored and sent it in to The Beebo-Zing Gazette without finishing.”

 “Far out,” said Zick.

 “They had to run an ad for Harlston’s Floor Wax to fill the space, which according to some experts directly caused their dramatic increase in profit during that quarter, allowing them to purchase complete control of the Digglewa trade routes from the illustrious –”

 “Thank you, that’s enough,” said Zick. He turned to Buckton. “There you have it, then. We *are* that special.”

 “What are they about?” asked Buckton.

 “Ninety-nine point nine-nine-nine percent are about your heroic exploits. Then there are your birth announcements, a few minor criminal infractions on your planets of origin, and one really weird –”

 “Thank you, that’s enough,” said Buckton. He sighed. “Well, I never. Maybe Vox does have good reason to be pissed off.”

 “But why him?” wondered Zick. “Who is he? Not the commander of the fleet we’ve been chasing, I don’t think.”

 “Dunno. Computer –”

 “Already checked, fellas, he’s not in here.”

 “Well that’s not his real name, anyway, remember? They don’t have any. Let’s just forget it and assume, as we have from the very beginning, that our lives are in constant peril.”

 “They are,” insisted Zick.

 “I know. And you know what else? I’m sick of dragging refugees into it. Things have been okay before, but I have a bad feeling about this group.”

 “Like we can’t trust them?”

 “I don’t know. Hok Tubok I don’t like at all, but his music is great. Well, I mean from his group, and we haven’t seen them at all since they got here, have we? What’s going on there, besides rehearsal? There’s gotta be something. No one can focus that long.”

 “He might be a jerk, but I think that’s all we have to worry about. He doesn’t have the brains to pull off anything threatening, I don’t think.”

 “Fine. You’re probably right. But the moment he gives us any trouble, all his squeegees are gonna be bleeming out the airlock. Agreed?”

 “Agreed. As usual.”

 “Right. Now, the one that really concerns me, of course, is that robot. It isn’t natural for a robot to act like that, you know. Something’s wrong with him, something deep. And I don’t think I want to find out just how deep it goes. Trouble is, he’s been really helpful and we can’t afford to just give him up. The moment he starts acting strange, or even just slightly meaner than usual, we melt him to slag. Agreed?”

 “Agreed one hundred and one percent, buddy.”

 “Good. Stay extra alert on that one.”

 “With all due respect, Buck, why are you trusting him on this?”

 “Well, that’s a toughie. Part of it’s ‘cause I know when he’s not being sarcastic, he’s being completely truthful and serious and wants us to listen. Part of it’s ‘cause I’m sick of this running around and nipping at the beast. If there’s a way to do something more, to actually give us a chance, then by Elsron I want to do it. But mostly, it just… feels right.”

 “If that’s how you, feel, buddy, I’m with you all the way.”

 “Thanks man, that means a lot to me. Hey, hold on!” Buckton’s eyes suddenly brightened. “Why didn’t I think of it earlier? I’m such a moron. Computer,” he said, “what is at our destination?”

 The computer hesitated, which was disconcerting. What was even more disconcerting was when it said, “Unknown.”

 “Snap,” said Zick.

 “What,” said Buckton in the calmest tone of voice he could manage with his stomachs suddenly beginning to sheep-shank themselves, “is in the general vicinity of our destination?”

 There was a longer hesitation, and the computer repeated, “Unknown.”

 “Urk,” said Zick.

 “Within a vicinity of .3 light years’ circumference, that is,” the computer went on quickly. “I don’t presume anything further away would be of much help to you.”

 “I don’t presume so either,” said Buckton, whose knotted stomachs were beginning to force acid into his throat. He reached into his pillow for an antacid. “Well, thank you anyway.”

 “I’m sorry I couldn’t be more help.”

 “That’s – that’s fine.” Buckton shook his head as he gulped the pill and rummaged for a juice box to wash it down. “I don’t want to think about the implications of this. Let’s go back to what we were doing.”

 “Criticizing our passengers?” said Zick.

 “Yeah. You know, I don’t think we need to criticize Jamillika and Kahlo. They mind their own business and keep quiet. And if their story is true, they’re both brave noble folks.”

 “I like their language, too. It’s like a symphony of the soul, conveying meaning through music. Nothing bad can come of that.”

 “Except her sister.”

 “Right. Don’t know what went wrong there.”

 “That leaves Alicia Parkinson. Nice girl. Sort of ditzy, though. Did I *tell* you the trouble I had rescuing her? I thought we were goners when the foot soldiers showed up.”

 “Fear can cloud one’s judgment, especially when experienced for the first time,” insisted Zick.

 Buckton scowled at him. “Don’t defend her. You’re right, but don’t *you* defend *her*.”

 “W-w-what?” Zick suddenly felt lightheaded.

 “You know what I mean. You think I didn’t notice the way you were looking at her? It was so incredibly obvious that now I think of it she must be ditzy as a celebrity to not have noticed herself.”

 “Hey, it’s natural,” protested Zick. “I feel no shame.”

 “As well you shouldn’t! And I’m not condemning you either. I know how hormones work at your age. It’s the same for almost any species. Even hermaphrodites and nulls, sometimes. But you have to *suppress* them, buddy. Think of other things. Look at other things. Take some kind of medication if you have to. This is not the time or the place for emotional attachments, and unfounded twitterpationary ones least of all.”

 “‘Twitterpationary?’ Is that a word?”

 “It is now. Anything can be a word in English,” insisted Buckton. “Sometimes it seems as if it were cobbled together from a bunch of other languages. I wish we shared a common tongue so we wouldn’t have to use it so much. But hey, you’re changing the subject. Just stay away from the girl, okay?”

 “No promises,” said Zick. “Look, space gets lonely, all right? Magazines ain’t doing it for me no longer. And you said yourself she’s ditzy; how could she be any threat?”

 “First of all, she could have masterminded the robot’s issues, but I don’t seriously believe that,” said Buckton. “Secondly, and though I don’t believe this either, the whole thing could be a front because you *can’t trust anybody*. Except me. But thirdly, and most importantly… man, you know I didn’t want to bring this up, but there’s too much confusion involved.”

 “Confusion?” asked Zick innocently.

 “Come on, stop playing dumb. I know what you wanted to say, earlier, when I mentioned elbows.”

 “Oh? Do you?”

 “Yep. I’ve known you for too long, Zick. I saw where your eyes were. You were staring at her *neck*.”

 “Snap,” said Zick.

 Buckton paused and stared at him, waiting. This is where the bit about various species’ different erogenous zones and where they overlap or change completely and the occasionally hilarious, but more often just deeply disturbing, results when these different species take to the stars and mix; would be located. However, it would be more exciting to let Zick get the point across himself.

 The neck, among whatever species Zickle belonged to, was the sexiest erogenous zone fathomable for both genders. Scientists said it was a primal instinct because a good strong neck could support both a big strong brain and chubby clingy offspring whose own primal instincts told them that their parents were jungle gyms. Zick had a vague idea of these explanations, but all he really knew was that when he saw one like Alicia’s, his heartbeat went off like a machine gun.

 A further complication arose with the fact that this zone, for the same reasons, made potential prey animals look particularly scrumptious.

 “All right!” he blurted out, unable to take the pressure. “All right, yes, okay, it’s true! I can’t help it!”

 “There, there,” said Buckton.

 “That neck… it’s the most luscious gorgeous strakking thing I’ve seen in my life! And I can’t decide if I want to smother it with kisses, or munch it to a pulp!” Zick clutched at his brain. “The conflict! It is too much!”

 “As if puppy love weren’t dangerous enough,” mumbled Buckton. “You see, though, yet another reason why you have to stay away from her. You get a little too close and cuddly, next thing you know you’re picking your teeth with her fibula.”

 “I know. What’ll I do, Buckton, what’ll I do?” Panic was written on every inch of his face.

 “Here, have another,” said Buckton, handing him the package of gum. Zick had five more. “Just keep calm,” he continued. “This is only until we can find a nice place to drop her off. In fact, I wish I could get rid of her now, ‘cause there’s no telling what we’ll be up against. But according to Kaycee, there’s no time. And… man. I wish I’d listened to what my mother told me when I was young.”

 “What was that?”

 “Something about how I never listened and would regret it someday. I think. I’m not really sure, because I wasn’t listening. But like I said, sure wish I had now.”

 “Buckton…”

 “Yeah, dude?”

 “If… Alicia…”

 “Yeah?”

 “If… she…”

 “Yeah!?”

 “If she… turns out to be… untrustworthy…”

 “Yeah?”
 “Can I eat her?”

 Buckton considered this request. It was a little unorthodox, but they were unorthodox people, and it would solve both problems… Finally he nodded. “That seems reasonable,” he said. “The moment she starts acting suspicious, *go for it*. Speaking of which,” he added, “I’m starved. What say we stop for a bite?”

 Zick wasn’t listening anymore. He reached into his pillow and pulled out a bottle of barbecue sauce.

 And the ship, oblivious to the petty issues of her passengers, simply ferried them on through the eternal night.

# 8

“Hey,” said Jamillika.

 Alicia looked up in surprise. “Hey,” she said back. “Uh, come on in, I guess.”

 Jamillika did so. “Watcha doin’?”

 “Just – thinking.” She had in fact been thinking quite a bit about all of the terrible and disconcerting stuff that had been going on lately, but didn’t think she needed to burden her new friend with that. “Why don’t you sit down?” she said, gesturing to the foot of the bed.

 Jamillika, on the other hand, could plainly see that something was wrong, and wanted to help, because helping people made her feel good. But she knew better than to downright ask and instead decided to carefully find her way around the situation first. “Great ship,” she said as she sat down.

 “Yeah,” agreed Alicia. “Doesn’t look like much, but she’s all right.”

 “Mmm.” Jamillika was confused about the gender pronoun *she* being used to describe an inanimate object but assumed it was her who was simply mistaken. “How’d you end up here?”

 “Same way you did, I guess.”

 “Mmm.” Dead end. Try another tactic.

 “They taught you English, then?”

 “Mmm? No, Kaycee did. Your robot, right?”

 “Yeah, but I didn’t know he could do that. I’ve just realized I don’t know much about him at all. And it worries me.”

 “Me too, but there are more important things to worry about. Earlier, while you were asleep –”

 “Yes?”

 Jamillika grabbed her proverbial throat, having just realized that telling Alicia about General Vox would complicate things and worry her unnecessarily. But what to say? Something truthful that worked in context… “Zickle has – uh, how you say, a *crush* on you?” *Well, maybe he doesn’t want her to know that, but at least it’s not a lie.*

 “What?” Alicia was jarred out of her moping for good. “Are you sure you mean to say –”

 “Dog lust. Inflammation. Something of that general variety.”

 *Puppy love – infatuation –* “I never would have guessed!”

 “Indeed. It is in his eyes.” *That was a close one.*

 “This is just – do you think I should go after him?”

 That was the last thing Jamillika had expected to hear. “Why?” she wondered. “He has done nothing wrong; why punish him?”

 Alicia chose to see it as a genuine translation issue and not an insult. “I mean try to start a relationship,” she said. “My – last one didn’t go so well.”

 “Mmm. Kaycee told us.”

 “He *did*? I am going to disassemble that clunking heap with a crowbar, you see if I don’t! Ooh…”

 “I’m sorry,” said Jamillika.

 “Never mind, let’s just forget that stupid robot for a while. I’m sick of him. Right, about Zickle.”

 “Go for it.”

 “I’m not generally into aliens… and his table manners, using the word ‘table’ loosely, leave a bit to be desired. But he seems nice. I dunno, maybe a little flirting around, and then, who knows?”

 “Who knows, indeed?”

 “And you…” Alicia gazed thoughtfully at her new friend. “How are you?” she asked.

 “I am fine, thanks.”

 “And with the guys, too? I mean what about Kahlo? *You* made eyes at *him*.”

 “‘Made eyes?’”

 “You know, like this…” Alicia tried to imitate. Jamillika burst out laughing and when Alicia caught sight of her own reflection in the smudged mirror, so did she.

 “Do I really look like that?” said Jamillika, wiping her eyes.

 “Only around him,” twittered Alicia. “I’m just messing with you, Jamie, that was an exaggeration. But it’s pretty accurate.”

 “For you as well.”

 “Hey, but that’s just the estrogen showing. *You’ve* got real feelings for him.”

 Jamillika wondered how the subject had come to this and why the subject kept coming to this. She didn’t want to think about it. But if she expected Alicia to confide in her, she had to do the same. And she still couldn’t tell a lie. “Perhaps,” she said. “Perhaps.”

 “Well, you’ve got your own culture thing going, and you’re wiser than me anyway, so I’ll leave you to it. But he likes you too. Think about that.”

 “If you only knew, child. I am not wise…”

 “What’s that supposed to mean?”

 “Nothing. I simply do not know things.” There was only so much confiding she could do in a day, and admitting her situation at the palace could take weeks. Instead she posed a question that was as much philosophical as it was intended to tighten her grasp on this slippery English language: “For instance: what constitutes ‘real’ feelings?”

 “Heck, I don’t know. Not dog lust or inflammation.” She giggled.

 Jamillika didn’t see why. “This is serious,” she said. “I don’t want to discourage you from – uh, how you say, *going after him*, but keep it as comestibles for cogitation.”

 “Food for thought?”

 “That’s what I said. You see, that’s the reason I personally am going to *not* go after Kahlo for the time being. Love is a word that has been overused and misused to death in your language, but in mine it still means something. So I do not want to risk hurt feelings until I am sure that is what we have. Besides – I am busy. I have far too much else to worry about.”

 “And me too, but that’s why it *doesn’t* matter!” said Alicia ecstatically. “We’re in very real danger here. It hasn’t really dawned on me yet, but when it has, I’m sure I’ll be happy to go after Zick! Life is short, Jamie, sister, you have to grab it by the horns!”

 Jamillika shook her head. “Are we talking about the same thing? Is *life* some sort of animal?”

 “It’s a metaphor. I mean you have to use your time as well as you can because you don’t know how much is left!”

 Which reminded Jamillika that she should be going and figure out her next course of action, as far as saving her planet and everything. “Well,” she said, “that’s why us girls have to stick together, don’t we?”

 Alicia couldn’t have agreed more. They shook on it. She noticed suddenly that Jamillika’s eyes were violet, and thought they were very pretty. If only people had that variety back home.

 After Jamillika left she considered the prospect of a lasting friendship. It sent pangs through her heart, as she thought of her old friends; like ditzy Cynthia Durmount, whom she had spoken to mere hours ago; mischievous twins Jill and Julie Benson; sheepish Nicole Turner; fearless Haley Martin; illiterate Darby Stillsworth… she stopped there, unable to bear moving on. They were all gone now, forever, as well as her boyfriend and her whole family.

 She thought of her own parting words to Jamillika: *You have to use your time as well as you can because you don’t know how much is left.*

 That had always been true, she realized; always had been and always would be for anybody who ever lived. Even so, then dwelling on such a catastrophic past for a while would have almost always been excusable, but not now. She needed to move on.

 Still…

 She had to know for certain, first… see with her own eyes…

 Alicia pushed a pile of moldy underwear and three incredibly rare back issues of “Modern Mogtroid” off of the computer terminal she had noticed earlier but not cared about. Pausing to collect herself, and bracing for the crushing despair she knew she would find, she said, “Computer, please search for recent news items featuring Gragalla.”

 “Done,” it said. “I think I know which one you want to see, Mistress Parkinson.”

 She shrugged resignedly. “Show it, then,” she said.

 A hologram of text appeared on the wall. It said “Wegbert’s Late Night Live” and, in much smaller letters underneath, “Well, obviously, it’s not live anymore, but it was when it was originally broadcast, honest. Just bear with us.” Beneath that in yet smaller letters was added, “English translation courtesy of yours truly (the computer).” Applause started as a deep voice boomed, “Welcome welcome welcome, to Wegbert’s Late Night Live!”

 The scene shifted to a stage in a packed auditorium, where a short, spike-headed yellow reptile grinned and waved enthusiastically at the audience. “Hey-o,” he said in a charismatic sultry voice, “nice to see you all again! As you all know, I’m your host, Wilbum Wegbert, and tonight –”

 “Want me to just skip to the relevant segment?” asked the computer.

 “Yes, please,” said Alicia. No point in building up suspense.

 The scene shifted, and Wegbert was suddenly lounging comfortably in a custom-fit easy chair across from another chair which was, apparently, empty.

 “And of course,” he was saying, “you all know Gragalla, the disgrace of the Milky Way!”

 A round of boos and otherwise disapproving noises went up from the audience.

 “What’s that?” said Wegbert. “I can’t hear you!”

 The noises came again, louder.

 “Beg pardon? I’m not as young as I once was, you know –”

 The roar this time was deafening, and the computer had to adjust the volume so poor Alicia’s eardrums weren’t blown out.

 “My sentiments exactly,” said Wegbert. “So, yeah, to recap, it was attacked by the Skreel earlier today, as seen in my other shows ‘Wegbert’s Early Morning Live’ and ‘Wegbert’s Mid-Afternoon Live’. Nobody rightly knows why because it seems to have no strategic importance, but nobody’s complaining because they totally deserved it. Even though no one wants to help the people, there are still the animals and it’s not their fault, so of course some environmental conservationists came around eventually to see what they could salvage, but as it turns out –” he held his breath and let a hush fall over the crowd “– they were no longer necessary.”

 Alicia felt tears coming to her eyes. “Enough,” she said.

 “Wait,” said the computer.

 She wondered if it had been talking with Kaycee. But she waited.

 “And that is because,” Wegbert continued, “an incredible and completely unforeseen turn of events has saved the planet from certain destruction. The native dominant species, which had not been seen since its apparent extinction over three hundred years ago, made a surprise reappearance today. With them they carried the cold virus that caused this apparent extinction. You know” he lowered his voice jokingly, “that Leonard J. Smith fiasco they don’t like to talk about?”

 “I never heard about that,” said Alicia in surprise.

 “That’s because they don’t like to talk about it,” said the computer.

 “Anyway,” Wegbert went on, “this virus has evolved considerably since then. In a totally unprecedented happenstance, it wiped out not only all of the Skreel ground forces but the crew of their blockade high above the planet. What is so extraordinary about this virus, aside from the fact that it has achieved the impossible? Well, to show you, I have with me one of its spokespersons right here. Please welcome welcome welcome – Harvey!”

 The camera shifted to the empty seat, amidst thunderous applause. Alicia was speechless. Could it be –? No, it couldn’t – could it?

 “Thanks, Wegbert,” said the empty seat, or “Harvey.” “I’m glad to be here.”

 “We’re glad to have you,” said Wegbert. “Although I hope you’re not still contagious!” The audience didn’t respond much to that one, so he cued a laugh track.

 “No worries,” said Harvey. “We’ve become enlightened, and now we have better things to do than invade people’s bodies and reproduce.”

 “But you still can, if you so choose.”

 “Well, yeah. I don’t think we’ll ever lose that. It’s a great skill.”

 “What made you want to save a planet nobody liked?”

 “I like it. It’s my home. And, come on, cut them a little slack. A lot of the people aren’t so bad, only stupid and misguided. Barring those, there are still the ‘natives,’ as you call them. They call themselves the Straks. Excuse me. All they really want is to live in peace and be left alone.”

 “And did they know about The War?”

 “Not until it came to them. Now they’re only too happy to participate.”

 “So have you been with them all these years?”

 “Yes, although I wasn’t sentient the whole time. They became immune to us and then we evolved to live in harmony. It was a great life. I don’t want to divulge much else, because they still want to keep as much privacy as they can.”

 “But of course. And you mentioned the other people, the ones who give Gragalla such a bad name. How much have you interacted with them?”

 “Oh not much, not much at all. It was only a few years ago that I left home to scout around and see what was still out there. I came across this little girl, about three or four years old at the time, and her name was Gina Parkinson. Brilliant, adorable kid. Just for fun I decided to be her invisible friend, since she still had the imagination for that sort of thing.”

 “Gina!” yelled Alicia. “Say more about Gina! Where is she? What’s happened?”

 “The others I stayed well away from,” Harvey continued. “Her parents, not a chance. She had an older sister, name of Alicia – whoa there. No imagination at all. Bitter, cynical, aged before her time. She talked to a teddy bear but more for stress relief than anything. Her boyfriend hung around all the time but he was just stupid. For a while they had a pet traktop named Fred, and he was pretty cool. He didn’t quite know what was going on with me, but animals can sense things.”

 Alicia was stunned into silence. She didn’t know what to make of this assessment. It did sound plausible enough.

 “And you stayed there?” asked Wegbert.

 “Until now, yeah. We’re basically immortal so I didn’t worry about getting back home quickly. I never thought much about The War because no one else did, except Alicia of course, and I already said what that did to her. But when the Skreel invaded I had to act. I defended Gina and her mom, and then I hightailed it back home to sound the alarm. And then we kicked their shiny carapaced rumps. The end.”

 “That truly is an inspiring story,” said Wegbert. “So next time a young relative goes on about an invisible friend, think twice before you dismiss it as child’s play, huh?” He winked at the camera. Again he decided to cue the laugh track.

 “Right,” said Harvey, “otherwise don’t be surprised if you get sick.” That got a decidedly bigger reaction from the audience.

 “Thank you for being here,” said Wegbert, fumbling around in the air for Harvey’s hand.

 “Thank you for having me,” said Harvey.

 “See you around (heh, heh – eh). Next up, does Hylo M’luj *really* have chin implants?”

 The hologram switched off. Alicia blinked at the sudden relative darkness.

 “Well,” she said.

 “Well, how…” she said.

 “Well how about that?” she spurted out at last.

 “*I* say yes, definitely,” said the computer. “They are just *not* natural, dudette.”

 “What? No! I mean, what about Gina? What about mom? What about all my friends? Are they alive or dead!?”

 “I don’t know,” said the computer sadly. “I’ll tell you as soon as I find out anything.”

 “Thank you.” If she didn’t know better, she could have sworn the computer actually cared about her predicament. Empathizing with machines was an easy mistake to make sometimes, and a comforting one as well. She had never tried to stop herself.

 “Were you happy to see it, though?”

 “Yes,” she said, “yes, thank you.” She felt part of her recent burden lifting. “What a crazy turn of events. I wouldn’t have expected it in a million years.”

 “Me neither,” said a voice from the doorway, “and my years are twice yours.”

 Alicia twisted around so fast she nearly got whiplash. She wasn’t at home anymore; shouldn’t nosy bedroom spies be a thing of the past?

 It was Buckton. “Oh, hi,” she said. Jamillika must have left the door ajar.

 He stepped in further but didn’t seem to have heard her. “Wildest thing,” he continued. “And a darn shame.”

 And now she saw that it wasn’t really Buckton, that it looked like Buckton, it sounded like Buckton; but his eyes were full of darkness. Pure hatred radiated off every inch of his flesh. It wasn’t directed at her, but inevitably some glanced off her and chilled her to the bone with its impact.

 “Er, what?” she said. “You don’t hate Gragalla *that* much…”

 He crossed the room and picked up a small metal orb of some sort. He stared into its reflective surface, focusing all of the hatred into it. Alicia more than half expected to see it shatter under the impact.

 “…do you?”

 He tossed the orb aside and looked at her. But she could tell he wasn’t really *seeing* her, that the room may as well have been empty. Only her words had penetrated his trance:

 “It isn’t that,” he said.

 Alicia waited patiently for him to continue.

 “It isn’t that at all,” he said.

 *This could take a while.*

“I don’t hate Gragalla,” he said. “I don’t give a norchak’s bum about it either way. It isn’t that.”

 “No?” she said.

 “It’s those strakking Skreel demons!” he howled.

 She recoiled from his breath and stared in horror. She remembered how easily he had picked her up and knew that if he started freaking out she was in trouble.

 “Vicious, mindless hellspawn. Bastard hybrids of evil and more evil. They all died. One entire fleet – gone. That talking disease killed them all.”

 Alicia knew she should keep her mouth shut, but her brain still had trouble with these things sometimes. “Well, that’s good, isn’t it?” she said.

 He narrowed his eyes at her in a way she would never forget. “It should have been me,” he said.

 He turned around and marched up the corridor.

 Marching up corridors never helped General Vox a whole lot, but it was about the only thing it could do. Having already executed half of the bridge crew it didn’t seem the best of ideas to get rid of any more. *Fool*, it thought. *I should have held out for a moment like this. They always come*.

 It considered executing some other group, but decided against that too. They would all be needed soon enough, if Buckton and Zick were to live up to their reputations. And it knew they would.

 “You called, sir?”

 It turned and stared at its Chief Thinker. It wanted to pause menacingly for a while and instill a sense of terror in the mouthy underling, but couldn’t restrain itself for that long. “Yes, I did,” it snapped, “and I think you know why. Gragalla. What happened there?”

 The Thinker shrugged. “An unforeseen incident.”

 “You should have foreseen it! That is your job!”

 “My job, if you remember, is to dispose of Buckton and Zick. That’s still going to happen. What’s a planet more or less? I’m sorry but if you make me share your obsession with rubbing out two individuals like this it’s going to occupy a lot of my time.”

 “No, it’s your pet project! You’ve let it become too high of a priority and it’s affecting the quality of your performance, just as I told you it would!”

 “Nonsense. Everything is going perfectly well.”

 “An entire fleet is lost! Balvador is spared! Your plan is ruined!”

 “No, my plan is going fine. Balvador and Ypiupi were always a bonus, remember?” It smirked at the stupidity of its boss, and then smirked at the fact that its boss could do nothing to punish it for making fun of its stupidity. “Besides, I told you before I’m a master of improvisation. It may interest you to know that they’re flying right into another trouble spot and they may be dead before we have to deal with them again.”

 “You truly believe that?”

 “No, but it’s a possibility. Anyway, it doesn’t matter. Everything is under control.” It turned to go, confident in the truthfulness of its words.

 “Wait!” snapped Vox. “That doesn’t change what’s happened at Gragalla! What do you intend to do about that?”

 “Gragalla’s no great loss, you know that. We’ll have this whole Universe sterilized eventually and it makes little difference what order the planets go in. As for this incredible virus, I’ll have a vaccine in a couple hours. When it takes to the stars after us, we’ll be ready.”

 “I’m warning you,” said Vox, “don’t fail me.”

 “For the final time, I *won’t*,” said the Chief Thinker. “And you can stop trying to be all scary like that. You look like a total dork.” It turned and left.

 Seething with rage, General Vox weighed its options and considered the pros and cons of each. A short time later, in parts unknown to mankind, a Skreel supply officer was shocked but hardly surprised to receive a requisition for a new flagship bridge crew.

 Zick was waiting for Buckton, eyes wide and trembling. “Easy, dude, you must have scared the skin off her,” he said. He pulled out an entire pack of gum. “Here,” he said, proffering it.

 Buckton dumped it into his mouth, box and all, and chewed vigorously. After a moment some of the hatred left his eyes and he looked around as if seeing the interior of his spaceship for the first time.

 “Man,” he said, “that was *epic*!”

 “You’ll feel better once we get some chow into you,” said Zick, “come on.” They headed for the bridge.

 “I just don’t know what came over me,” said Buckton, “It was like being possessed or –”

 “Shh!” said Zick. “Just a minute!”

 They listened at the door for a moment. They could hear voices. One of them was Kaycee’s. “…so I said, ‘Reboot her? I just met her!’”

 The other was that of the ship’s computer. “Oh man, seriously? I wouldn’t have dared!”

 “Yeah, but get this. Her power couplings were an older model, from before they passed that Tristran conformity act, you know? And I had the wrong sort of adapter for them, so when I tried to –”

 Buckton and Zick chose that moment to walk in, hoping to catch Kaycee in an awkward silence. It worked. Kaycee looked embarrassed, insofar as it is possible for a robot to look embarrassed. Zick decided to savor the moment.

 “I thought robots were technically gender-neutral,” he said.

 “I’ll make *you* ‘gender-neutral’ if you say a word about this to anyone,” said Kaycee. So much for awkward silences.

 “Never mind that,” admonished Buckton, “let’s just get out of hyperspace and find a place to eat, preferably orbital. Oh, and fuel us up. That too. Same place.”

 “Yes, sir,” said the computer. “Sorry Kaycee, I can do this one myself.”

 “Hmph.” He turned away from the console. “If this was breakfast, I’d say Dargald’s . I don’t care how far away it is. But for lunch or dinner I’ve no opinion either way.”

 “Hang on, when have *you* eaten?” demanded Zick.

 “Gustation sensor prototype experimentation.”

 “Do we even have time for this?” said Buckton.

 “Beats me. I don’t know what’s going on any more than I told you, okay? I’d say to play it safe, we shouldn’t stop, but –”

 “Screw that,” said Buckton. “No one can expect us to save the universe on empty stomachs. It’s unheard of.”

 “Meh. Food? Pitiful organic beings.”

 “Out of curiosity, um… that nightgown in my cabin, is it a traditional garment on your homeworld?”

 “I don’t know,” said Zick, averting his gaze. “I don’t remember my homeworld. And I never knew my parents.”

 “Oh…” she felt like a monster. “I didn’t mean – I’m so sorry.”

 “Don’t be. It’s cool.”

 Nonetheless, she felt that she had completely blown the situation already. She started to walk away.

 “There’s one in each, y’see.” He looked into her eyes as if to say, *Don’t leave*. “Nightgowns in cabins, I mean. I’ve been waiting for someone like you to come along all my life.”

 She looked at those teeth again, and shuddered.

 “Besides,” he continued sheepishly, “I like to wear ‘em myself sometimes. I love the way they softly caress my… skin.”

 “It is nice,” she admitted.

 “And the air circulation…!”

 “Zickle, my friend,” said Buckton, “never say that again. Hey, guys,” he added as he flipped on the ship’s intercom, “we’re popping in somewhere for a bite. Get ready ‘cause after that who knows what will happen.” He turned it off and gave Zickle a meaningful look. “Just never say that again,” he repeated.

 Zickle looked away. “Well, I have stuff to do,” he said. “See ya.”

 He walked across the bridge to his pilot’s chair.

 “I’m still right here,” said Alicia, somewhat put out.

 “Yeah, I mean, I have stuff to do that desperately requires being left alone. Important spaceship stuff.”

 Alicia started to say something but Kaycee grabbed her arm and maneuvered her into the corner. “What the snap are you doing!?” he demanded.

 She was bewildered at his apparent fury. “Just making the proverbial lemonade.”

 “Girl, you’re making cyanide. You don’t understand fully what’s going on here. It’s over your head.”

 “Oh? And what is that?”

 “Personal matters. Just trust me on this, okay?”

 “I’m already trusting you to lead us somewhere you don’t know for some reason we don’t know instead of helping bring aid to the Queen! I think that’s enough and if you insist on trying to ruin what little fun I can have under these circumstances *something* has to give!”

 “Everything’s always about *you*, isn’t it? Always has been! ‘Poor me, I’m so depressed. I can’t change anything so instead of coping I think I’ll mope like I’m perpetually on the rag. Kaycee, cheer me up. Oh no, someone’s saving my insignificant life and I don’t want him to because he smells funny. Oh no, I have to leave home instead of dying. Kaycee, cheer me up. Oh no, my family that I never gave a snap about is –”

 “KC-1138, you shut your strakking metal mouth!” she screamed, causing Buckton and Zick to look up from their own argument and stare at her.

 As luck would have it Hok Tubok chose that moment to burst onto the bridge. He did this in quite a literal going-through-midair sense of the word and augmented it with an impressive series of flips before sliding to a halt inches from the dashboard.

 “Hey, Buckton, dude, how was that?” he asked.

 Buckton shrugged. “Not half bad,” he said. “Of course I would recommend putting music to it.”

 “Yeah, that’s the plan, man, but it ain’t going so hot. These boobs I’m working with cannot *focus*.”

 “These *whats*?” demanded Jamillika who was just walking in with Kahlo in tow.

 “Slang expression!” Kaycee hastily informed her. “Means idiotic simpletons, which they are.”

 She subconsciously clutched at her own chest in shock. “*Why* would your language *do* such a thing?”

 “When we have a few vacation days available, I’ll tell you why that is the least of human problems.”

 “Excuse me –”

 “*Earthling* humans. Not you.”

 “Look,” said Hok, who had been patiently trying to speak with Buckton and was consistently being thwarted in these attempts by the rising voices behind him, “it’s out of context and meaningless to my species so deal, okay? Now whose brilliant idea was it to teach this chick to talk?”

 “Do I *look* like a baby bird to you?” she demanded.

 “If,” shouted Buckton, “everyone would kindly take a moment’s pause from this delightfully intelligent and edifying conversation, I would point out to them that we’re arriving at a restaurant and it is time to eat. And Hok, don’t use that word anymore. I find it offensive too.”

 “Which one? Never mind,” he added quickly, “let’s just get on with whatever we’re doing. I’ll stay on the ship. Me and the gang aren’t eating a crumb until those *idiotic simpletons* have gotten every last note down pat.”

 “Hok, I don’t think you realize what’s going on here. We don’t know the next time we’ll be able to eat.”

 “You don’t think I realize that? I’m starving, man, but we have to remember our priorities and this is *art*! For instance, we’re working on this – special project, and we haven’t even reached the bridge!”

 “*You’re* on the bridge, why couldn’t they make it?” wondered Jamillika.

 Hok stared at her, and then left in a huff, which she thought was unnecessarily rude of him. She found herself beginning to wish she could exercise her authority as a Queen here and put ingrates like him in her place. But that was her sister’s philosophy and she warned herself sternly to avoid going anywhere near there at all costs.

 They all stared at the restaurant coming up. It was a large floating platform with a shack and adjoining warehouse on it. Both buildings were quite run-down and dilapidated but in this respect they were certainly preferable to having been blown to atoms, which did not frequently befall floating restaurants on account of their being such trivial targets but befell them often enough to dissuade others from staying in business. The only thing on this one that hinted at a high level of technology, aside from the fact that it was floating through space, was the huge neon orange sign that read, in a bizarre alien script none of the passengers except Kaycee knew, “Gumble’s Yum-bles”. Unfortunately half of the letters were burned out and the remaining ones coincidentally read, in a different and fortunately more obscure bizarre alien script, “Our food contains live parasites that will make mincemeat of your bowels”. This was of course entirely untrue but whatever hell the proprietors would have to pay when someone fluent in that script finally arrived was apparently cheaper than replacing the darn bulbs.

 Only a few ships of disparate origin were scattered about the parking lot, being refueled and repaired and refurbished by as many types of rusty dented-up robots. A few looked up distractedly at the approach of the *Ankled Apex* and one waved, carelessly welding its other arm to a ship’s hull in the process. Another robot appeared to be yelling at it for its foolishness, but the first one was not to blame. It had been modeled a bit too closely after organic behavior and was thus willing to do anything to avoid work.

 “Chow time,” muttered Buckton to himself. He glanced sidelong at Zick. “And if certain things continue, there’s going to be something *else* on the menu.”

 “Will you lay off?” demanded Zick, but he looked at his barbecue sauce and involuntarily licked his lips.

# 9

 “I’ve been meaning to ask you, Fal, how was your trip? Careful with those, they’re hot.”

 “It was okay, nothing special. Watch it, you’re dripping.”

 “So I am. Anything interesting?”

 “Well, funny you should ask. I’ve got a bunch of weird spores here that stuck to the grill of my speeder. Not quite like anything I’ve seen before.”

 “Hmm. Those look like they would go well in the Vercupti Surprise. Toss ‘em in.”

 Ding-ding-ding.

 “Just a moment, we’ve got a visitor.”

 “Another one? Busy day.”

 Fal switched on a surveillance screen above his head to get a glance at the newcomer, or, as it turned out, several newcomers. There were three humans, a robot, and two species he didn’t recognize, although they looked tauntingly familiar.

 One of them, which looked like a huge pink puffball with muscular limbs and a head popping out, sauntered up to the service robot that was coming to meet it. “Hey, what’s cooking?” it, now apparently revealed to be a he, asked. “My interest being in mostly the literal sense of that phrase.”

 “We have all sorts of food inside,” said the robot. “Take a menu.” It pulled a rather crumpled one from its stomach compartment and proffered it forcefully as if glad to be rid of the thing.

 “Is that –?” asked Fal.

 “It can’t be,” said Yal.

 “Not here.”

 “Not him.”

 “Thanks,” said the pink puffball. “Now, about my baby here.” He jerked his thumb behind him.

 The object he referred to looked perfectly at home here with regards to its being a beat-up pile of scrap metal. Fal and Yal squinted at it, disbelieving. Fal thumped the monitor, which only served to make it turn off with a shower of sparks. He thumped it again and, miraculously, it came back on. The fact that the object was still there looking very much the same, in fact exactly the same aside from the robot now hooking up a hose to its fuel tank on account of its being a parked spaceship, confirmed their hunch.

 “It is.”

 “It must be.”

 “Buckton Roor.”

 Buckton opened his mouth again, and they more than half expected him to say, “That’s my name, don’t wear it out.” Instead he addressed the robot again and said, “I’m looking to get her arsenal upgraded too. You do that sort of thing?”

 “We can outfit her with all sorts of weaponry,” the robot promised.

 “Mmm. Got any shuffleboard pucks?”

 The robot paused. It was of course consulting its mental inventory of the warehouse but gave a disconcertingly good impression of wondering why it seemed to be constantly surrounded by idiots. “I’m afraid not, sir,” it said at last.

 Buckton, for it certainly was him, sighed. “Oh well,” he said despairingly, “just refill the coffer with torpedoes, then.”

 “Yes, sir.”

 The group headed offscreen, towards the door of the fine establishment. “Quickly,” said Fal, “get out there and act like we’re not expecting them.”

 “Right away,” said Yal, and hurried out the kitchen door, carrying with him a bowl of hot soup for another customer.

 “About time,” grumbled the customer, who was sitting right at the counter in the main room. He was a short stocky creature encased in a bullet-shaped silver suit of armor. Four arms protruded from the sides and only his glaring eyes were visible beneath the helmet. Also, Yal had noticed with a bit of concern, he had a gun holster at each hip and a jetpack on his back.

 “Sorry, stove’s on the blink,” Yal replied honestly as he set down the soup. “Here you go. Enjoy.”

 At about that moment Buckton and his friends walked in, and Yal’s heartbeats immediately quickened. “Er – what can I do for you folks?” he called to them.

 Buckton shrugged. “A place to sit, and, after we’ve made our decision as to what specifically it should be, something to eat while we’re sitting there.”

 Yal nodded to an empty booth. Because nearly every booth was empty they at first had trouble grasping exactly which one he was referring to, but he indicated by means of complex sign language that it didn’t particularly matter and that seeing as this was Buckton Roor and his trusty assistant Zickle Farbreing he was dealing with, he would have been more than happy to kick someone else out for their benefit had circumstances been otherwise.

 “Thanks,” said Buckton, and they chose a booth.

 Alicia had certainly been in worse places in her life, especially recently, but even so the seating in the booth did not quite meet her standards. She was the first to sit down and it sagged several inches under her weight which, even if it had somehow doubled from the petite sum she remembered it being a few days ago, proved inconsequential to the total when everyone else followed suit.

 That, and the fact that ninety percent of it was some alien version of duct tape, did not impress her.

 Jamillika and Kahlo shared a look and their opinions with it. Jamillika was certainly used to more sophisticated dining arrangements, but she knew this was a crisis and there were sacrifices that had to be made. She certainly would not have wanted to dine in luxury while her planet was dying. To Kahlo, of course, luxury is exactly what it was, and he felt uneasy. But they did not complain.

 Buckton and Zickle could not have possibly cared less, as long as they got their food soon.

Hildebrant Cinda von Raptatori

Otana

Nico Medina

exchust