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ILLEGAL ALIENS

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DEDICATION

To radio plays, common interests, mutual respect
and a twenty-five-year friendship going on forever.

Yeah, what the hell.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

THE UNITED NATIONS FIRST CONTACT TEAM

Prof. Sigerson Rajavur—*Icelandic diplomat in charge of the FCT.*

Brigadier General Wayne Bronson—*American soldier assigned to defend the UN team.*

Dr. Yuki Wu—*Chinese physicist, scientific advisor to the FCT.*

Dr. Mohad Malavade—*India's top philologist, and an expert in interspecies communication.*

Sir Jonathan Courtney—*Scottish sociologist, self-made millionaire.*

General Nicholi Nicholi—*Russian soldier in charge of the Earth Defense Forces.*

THE ALIENS

Idow—*Leader*

Gasterphaz—*Protector*

Boztwank—*Engineer*

Squee—*Communicator*

Trell—*Technician*

THE BLOODY DECKERS

Hammer—*lord of the New York City street gang.*

Drill—*his lieutenant.*

Whipsaw—*legbreaker.*

Crowbar—*ex-biker.*

Chisel—*knife expert.*

Torch—*alley mugger.*

THE GREAT GOLDEN ONES

Avantor—*the guardian of Sol III.*

The 17—*her primary assistant.*

THE REST

Amanda Jackson—*lieutenant, New York Police SWAT.*

Robert Weis—*colonel, NATO forces.*

Delores Bolivar—*receptionist.*

Francis McDougherty—*Accounting Dept. manager.*

Hector Ramariez—*an accountant.*

William Peterson—*Chief of Police, Manhattan Central, NYPD.*

Emile Valois—*Secretary-General of the United Nations.*

NATO—*North Atlantic Treaty Organization.*

Agent Taurus—*a living nuclear weapon.*

Agent Virgo—*a nuclear counter-agent.*

FAMOUS EARTH SAYING:

Speak softly, but carry a big stick.

FAMOUS GALACTIC SAYING:

Hail the Prime Builder, and activate the Proton Cannon.

UNIVERSAL TRUTH:

Innocence is no protection.

BOOK ONE: ON EARTH

PROLOGUE

CRACK! The rocketing softball dwindled into the blue New York sky as the grinning batter dropped his stick on home plate and took off for first base like a man with his pants on fire.

"I ... I got it!" Hector Ramariez gamely cried, his skinny legs backpedaling him furiously into the weedy grass of center field.

His teammates relaxing over by the trees that edged the Central Park ballfield, stridently voiced their differing opinions on this matter. Hector was the pariah of their team, a well meaning, but ineffective weenie.

Like a leather radar dish, the cost accountant's never-before-used softball mitt tracked the white ball until it became lost in the glare of the August sun. Filled with remorse, Ramariez swallowed what little hope he had of emerging from this game with his precious dignity intact. This was the last game in the summer play-offs between the different departments of the Gunderson Corporation; and to everyone's unmitigated surprise, the Accounting Department (Hector's team) was in the lead, with the score at 2 to 0, the bases loaded, two outs, bottom of the ninth. The Accounting team captain, Francis 'Scrooge' McDougherty, had been so sure of a victory that the old skinflint had already phoned in an order for their victory pizzas using his own quarter.

Then disaster struck in the form of a pop fly ball to Hector.

With a feeling of impending doom, Ramariez licked salty sweat from his lips and scanned the empty sky above him. Somehow, he could feel McDougherty's piggy eyes burning into him like twin lasers beams. It made the poor accountant's stomach churn with nervous acid. If Hector made this catch, his team won. If he didn't, they lost. It was that simple, and Ramariez knew just how badly his boss wanted that company trophy. With his own arthritic hands, McDougherty had retrieved a wooden display case from the dungeon-like basement of their office building, and painstakingly scrubbed, painted and polished the box back into its original pristine condition. Gleaming like an oiled jewel, the wooden case now sat in front of McDougherty's office, eagerly awaiting the company's silver loving cup to be placed into its velvet innards.

Oh, my goodness gracious, Ramariez thought in genuine panic. *Mr. McDougherty will blame me personally for this disaster and there is no telling what he might do. Why, he might even send me back to ... Payroll!* The accountant felt himself grow faint. The Payroll Department, a fate worse than death.

Dancing frantically about in the dry weeds, Hector hopelessly tried to align himself under a falling ball that he couldn't even see. Where was the gosh darn thing anyway? With painful clarity, he could hear the raucous laughter of his rude co-workers at his blatant incompetence, but what was there to do? The ball had vanished. It was nowhere in sight.

A monumentally shy man, Ramariez had never been under such unrelenting pressure to perform before in his life. Not since his mother had given him 24 hours in which to learn to dress himself before he left for college.

In his vivid imagination, Hector could feel the tension in the air as if it was a static electric charge. He half expected sparks to start crackling off him. Blood pounded in his temples and an agonizing knot formed in his chest. Then he ruefully smiled. Weren't those the symptoms of a heart attack? Perfect! Death before dishonor! Anything, rather than incur the wrath of Mr. McDougherty, and be the fool in front of Ms. Bolivar.

Delores Bolivar, the beautiful receptionist for the Gunderson Corporation, had actually agreed to have a drink with the timid accountant after the game. But would the sultry Ms. Bolivar still wish to share a soda with the bumbling fool who dropped the game winning catch and brought shame and disgrace upon the Accounting Department? Hector seriously thought not.

The annoying catcalls from his fellow employees got noticeably louder. Heroically trying to ignore them, Hector prayed for salvation ... and there was the ball, plummeting towards him from the sun! Hastily scrambling, the accountant got into position, his stiff leather glove raised for the game winning catch. Watch this world! A hero at last! Hector Ramariez saves the day. Ticker tape parades, lunch with the mayor, a date with Delores, nothing was too good for—

But suddenly, the impolite noises from his co-workers changed into raw-throated screams of terror, and hurriedly both teams began fleeing the park like roaches from bug spray. Quite puzzled, Hector squinted skyward at the source of their dismay. There in the air above him, ever expanding in size, was the missing softball. He blinked, and the ball swelled to the size of a stove ... a truck ... a house! A harsh buzzing sound filled the air. The pale hair on his skinny arms stiffly rose. Then darkness enveloped the man as the impossible sphere eclipsed the sun.

Ramariez glanced down and found that he was standing dead center in an ever-widening pool of black shadow. Quickly, he performed the short algebra equation ($v \times d \times N = Y$ are you still here?) and then began running for his life, sprinting for that thin line which separated merely contemplating Heaven from finding out about it in person. All thoughts of the game, his job, and even Delores were totally replaced by the primordial urge for self-preservation and the overwhelming desire not to be crushed to death by a giant flying softball in Central Park, New York.

Unaccustomed to physical exertion, Ramariez was soon gasping for breath as he raced for the shadow's boundary, but it eluded him with nightmarish speed. In raw desperation, he cast his glove away and dashed forward in a last frantic burst of speed. But it was too little, too late.

Larger than the fist of God, the titanic white globe slammed directly onto the pitcher's mound, displacing tons of dirt in an earthy tidal wave that swept the screaming accountant off his feet and hurtled him through the air, tumbling debts over assets, to jarringly crash into the top of an old elm tree more than four blocks away.

Bruised, battered, and broken in spirit, Ramariez awoke dangling from a branch. Howling like an animal, the crazed accountant clawed his way through the crushed foliage and fell sprawling to the still trembling ground. Without a moment's hesitation, Hector Ramariez dashed pell-mell down one of the park's numerous bike paths, made it to the traffic filled streets, and disappeared into the concrete canyons of New York City, never to be seen or heard from again by the civilized world.

* * * *

Resembling a white Ping-Pong ball sitting in the grass, the gargantuan sphere towered over the tall Central Park trees, completely filling the space allocated to the recreational field. The highly polished hull of the ship glistening with pearlescence in the bright afternoon sun. There it sat, this strange white invader, and did absolutely nothing for thirty terrestrial minutes. Ever so slowly, a crowd began to form about the base of the staggeringly immense globe, the brave and the foolish leading the way.

Ironically enough, it was Delores Bolivar who first discovered the invisible force shield encircling the alien craft. She did this empirically, by bouncing her face off of the barrier. Tears flowed unchecked past her bruised nose, and comfort was offered to her by sympathetic members of the crowd. Sympathy that

rapidly changed to moral outrage when they realized what she was pointing to on the other side of the transparent barrier; a mangled baseball mitt that lay, pitifully half-buried in the rubble beneath the monstrous ball.

The force shield had the feel of lightly padded steel, and proved to be quite invulnerable to the delicate fists of Delores, the pounding baseball bats of Hector's teammates and the .38 bullet fired from a rookie patrolman's service revolver. Yes, New York's finest had at last arrived, after some unsung genius dialed 911 and reported a very illegally parked vehicle.

Soon the police swarmed in by the dozens, valiantly trying to control a crowd that poured in by the thousands. SWAT team helicopters battled with TV news choppers for air space supremacy above the killer spaceship. Forcibly the multitude was pushed back and a safety perimeter established around the ship, to the great annoyance of the unauthorized onlookers. The crowd started to turn ugly and shouting matches began. But then the street vendors arrived and quickly restored a semblance of order to the gathering with their overpriced hot dogs, ice cream and "I SAW THE ALIEN SPACESHIP" T-shirts.

* * * *

Meanwhile, deep within the bowels of the mountainous craft, weird machines of crystal and silver began to stir. Hot power poured through molecular cables, complex circuit cubes instantly relayed multiple commands, unnamable alien devices did unnamable alien things, and finally a robot sensor awoke to focus its attention on the tumultuous assemblage outside. A translucent energy ray lanced out from the top of the starship, and the alien machine proceeded to scan that emotional human sea much the same way that a lighthouse fans the ocean with its beacon of light.

Unseen and unfelt, the ethereal sensor probed the nearest humans; paying scant attention to the sobbing Delores, the grim police, the aghast pizza delivery boy, the shocked, the frightened, and the astonished. Implacably steady, the beam extended its zone of inquiry, testing hundreds after hundreds of human beings, but all were found wanting. Until at last, the probe came to a group of six individuals who viewed the great ship dispassionately, and apparently without fear. They were a small island of calm in the bubbling emotional soup. Dutifully, the machine paused on them, allowing its beam to seep into their living minds and read their secret innermost thoughts. When it was satisfied, the alien machine withdrew the unfelt probe and sent a priority message to its masters who had been impatiently waiting for a report.

"These?" the robot asked Those-Who-Command.

A conversation was held.

A question asked.

A decision made.

"Yes," came the answer. "Them."

Instantly, the six humans were bombarded with space-twisting forces, compared to which a nuclear explosion would be a candle to the sun, and they vanished in a burst of light that seared ghostly after-images into the retinas of everybody near them.

Most of the distant crowd mistook the flash to be a reporter's camera, but those closer knew better, and Central Park became a madhouse as thousands tried to flee at the exact same time. Clothes were ripped. Women cursed. Strong men fainted. Fistfights broke out left and right. The park degenerated into a madhouse, a riot. Pandemonium ruled!

Serenely indifferent to the screaming hordes just outside its force shield, the starship began to broadcast a message on every frequency of the electromagnetic spectrum. A signal of such tremendous strength that it was received by television and radio sets even if they were not turned on. A message so startling, so fantastic, that most of the listening world began to chuckle, believing this to be a juvenile rehash of an old classic science fiction radio program.

But then the incredible broadcast began to endlessly repeat over and over...

ONE

In imposing silence, the committee sat around the heavy oak table reviewing plastic coated documents of extreme importance.

At the head of the table was a scholarly gentleman, a gray-haired diplomat from Iceland in a neat navy blue suit, the permanent leader of this special task force. To his left was an American general, splendid in his decorated uniform, with only a hint of ash on his right lapel, deposited there from his ever present cigar. Across from him was his Russian counterpart, possessing the solid body of a peasant heritage and a brilliant military mind that had earned him this position on the council. Next to him was a Scotsman, impeccably dressed in a tailored, three piece gray suit that fit his bearing as a self-made millionaire and prominent sociologist.

Adorning the end of the table was a beautiful Chinese physicist in a soft summer dress decorated with a floral design, her long black hair worn loose about her shoulders. It was she who spoke first, breaking their somber concentration.

"Gimme two."

"Nothing for me."

"I fold."

"Pass."

General Nicholi G. Nicholi sneaked a peek at his fellow players from behind his cards. Their attention was where it should be, on their poker cards and not him. The three of them were calmly sitting there waiting for Nicholi to bid.

Cool as summer ice, the Russian general pretended to rearrange his cards while he studied their faces. Had they guessed? Did anyone know, that he, Nicholi Nicholi, had the ultimate in poker hands? A royal flush!

Always a cautious player, Prof. Rajavur had already folded from this game and was over by the kitchen unit of the command bunker making himself a cup of the bitter Icelandic coffee he loved so much. Nicholi grimaced. And some people complained about Russian food!

The lovely Dr. Wu though, was smiling contentedly at her cards. That meant Yuki was going to bluff again. Nicholi knew her tricks. Brigadier General Wayne Bronson was, as usual, unreadable, and Sir John Courtney was contentedly stroking that ridiculous little moustache of his. A bad sign that. The Scotsman must have an excellent hand indeed for him to be so complacent.

Then Nicholi grinned secretly. What matter? His royal flush was unbeatable. He held the winning hand for this round of cards, his friends just didn't know it yet, seasoned poker veterans though they were.

The final member of their group, Dr. Mohad Malavade, a noted linguist from India who seemed to dress purely as a matter of convention, was on duty right now in the Operations Room, and thus unavailable to partake in the game they knew so well. For these six, Nicholi, Rajavur, Bronson, Wu, Courtney and Malavade, were the United Nations First Contact Team: that august group of people designated to be Earth's official representatives when, if, or ever, alien beings from another star system came to our fair green orb.

Their fortified Command Bunker was located 20 stories below the furnace room of the United Nations building in Manhattan, New York. Despite its somewhat undignified position, the underground complex had a strong spacecraft feel to it, with cool metal walls, indirect lighting and softly humming life support machinery. This wasn't very surprising since NASA had designed and built the place, using its proposed Lunar base as a role model.

Theoretically hydrogen-bomb proof, the subterranean bunker was divided into three basic sections: a storage room fronted by a central corridor with private sleep rooms on each side, a full kitchen with a dining/recreation area, and beyond an iron-pipe railing, down a short flight of steps, was the Operations Room, with a TV monitor the size of a movie screen spanning the front wall. Grouped before the monitor were five desk-like control consoles, the center console twice as large as the others. Over in the distant corner, far outside the range of the wall monitor's video cameras, sat a lone sixth console that jarringly faced back into the room. Almost as if it had been placed there as an afterthought, or as if the console had a radically different function from the others.

Spacious and homey, the underground complex was equipped with everything the FCT needed to remain constantly on their saucer watch. Which they did, on a 3-out-of-4-week rotating schedule, with a floating pool of replacement personnel to cover whomever was absent. But today, the six original team members were present.

The bunker had cost \$40 million to build, and the FCT had twice the national income of Belgium invested in themselves via training, training, and more training. They were deemed fully capable of handling any possible situation; from the crash landing of an alien lifeboat atop Mt. Everest with its crew in dire need of medical assistance, to the invasion of Earth by radioactive mutant Chihuahuas. Nothing was considered too far fetched. The FCT was over trained to handle it. Yes sir.

But in the last fifteen years since the team's founding, despite countless sightings of UFOs, the First Contact Team consistently never found anyone to contact. They were fast becoming like the first-aid kit you carry in the trunk of your car: as good as ever, but starting to gather a little dust, and sometimes you just plain forget it existed. The team found they needed something to keep its members from going crazy(ier), and that something was poker. Straight, stud, draw, anaconda and 137 other versions that they had invented over the years.

In point of fact, the FCT held the Guinness Book of World Records entry for the longest running non-stop poker game: eight straight years, easily beating the 4 year long crap shoot of the Buckingham Palace Cleaning Staff, and dwarfing into insignificance the 18-month-old baccarat game of the Hong Kong Freelance Bodyguard & Assassins Union.

Nicholi tucked his cards together to hide them from any stray glances. "Twenty dollars," the Russian said, confidently betting the maximum.

Suspiciously, General Bronson glared at the Russian general across the table from him and shifted the position of the unlit cigar in his mouth. Twenty, eh? Now what did that crafty Red bastard have up his sleeve? Sigerson was on the sidelines brewing coffee, Yuki was going to bluff, and Courtney had nothing, so this hand was solely between the two of them. But Nicholi was indecipherable, his craggy Russian face never showing anything he didn't want it to. Bronson thoughtfully chewed on the end of his panatela. What the hell, he decided, time to separate the men from the boys.

"Okay by me," the American drawled. "And another twenty." Ha! That'll teach Comrade showoff who's in charge here.

"Fold," Dr. Wu said, putting down her cards. The scientist had been planning to bluff again, but Yuki could see that her two generals were working up a head of steam, so she let discretion be the better part of valor and got out of the way of their forthcoming collision. Saved herself 4,000 yen in the bargain, too. Besides, there was always the next hand.

Just then the tantalizing smell of coffee tickled her nose and Wu glanced at the kitchen behind her. Nattily dressed in a two-piece blue suit and crisp white shirt, Prof. Rajavur was at the bunker's electric stove brewing a pot of his outrageously potent coffee. Before joining the FCT and engaging in their 24-hour poker fests, Wu had only thought of caffeine as an inferior medical stimulant. Now it was like the staff of life.

"Care for some?" Rajavur said, gesturing carefully with his brimming cup, an extra large tan ceramic mug marked: 'TAKE ME TO YOUR LITER.' When the Secretary General of the UN had last visited them on his yearly inspection tour, Sigerson had been forced to explain the joke to the pompous Frenchman.

The woman smiled gratefully. "Thank you, yes."

Formally polite, the physicist excused herself from the table and left for the ladies' room before joining the professor in a cup of his acidic brew. In private, Prof. Rajavur thought it a sin that Yuki added milk and sugar to the coffee; but since no other member of his team would even go near it, he forgave her that tiny perversion of Icelandic cuisine for the sake of camaraderie.

"Twenty is fine," Sir John said, only a faint Scottish burr rounding his words. "And I raise you twenty more."

A millionaire even before he had inherited his uncle's estate, high stakes meant nothing to Sir John; but taking these soldier boys down a peg or two did. The sociologist had a blockbuster of a hand, 4 nines, and he was highly doubtful that either of his associates could beat that. In Highlander confidence, he pulled crisp bills from a money clip bearing his family crest and added them to the growing pile of cash on the dining/poker table.

Recreational space was at a premium down here and almost everything had to serve two functions. Even the precious poker cards themselves often became twirling spaceships that invaded somebody's inverted hat during an impromptu strategy meeting.

Blatantly, the Scotsman left his money clip there on the table, signifying that he was in for the duration. Bronson ignored the bit of bravado, and Nicholi tried to do the same, but failed miserably. Sir John saw the Russian struggle with inner turmoil and incorrectly read the emotion as fear. Had he treed the old bear at last?

“Well, my friend?” Sir John grinned, positive that he smelled a kill.

Struggling to maintain a poker face, Nicholi pretended to think about the bet, while internally he was cackling with glee. Czar's Blood, they thought he was bluffing. Him! Bluffing! He could probably squeeze one more raise out of them before lowering the boom, but this had to be done carefully. No amateurs, these.

Radiating innocence, General Nicholi shuffled his cards around and loosened his Army-issue necktie. It was a good thing that he was here in the United States with these cards; back in the Motherland this hand would have had him sweating blood. Three times before Nicholi had possessed a royal flush, and each had ended in disaster.

The first time was as a private, new to army life, but old in the way of cards. As he drew the card he needed to complete his winning hand his entire platoon had been ordered out to build a stupid, useless wall. Nicholi had hated Berlin ever since. Next was as a lieutenant playing poker with his men over a combat lantern, when the winning cards had been shot out of his hands by enemy fire. He escaped that night physically unscathed, though his soul was deeply wounded. The last time had been in Moscow, where, as a major waiting for notification of his promotion to colonel, he had been unceremoniously busted back to a lieutenant for playing cards on duty. His royal flush had been confiscated for evidence.

Ah, but here it would be different. Nothing could stop him. At last, sweet victory would be his, and Nicholi Gagarin Nicholi would finally get to show someone his perfect poker hand. This was it!

“*Da*, Jonathan,” he happily agreed, unconsciously humming Wagner's ‘Ride of the Valkyrie’. “And I raise you another.”

Courtney and Bronson exchanged anguished glances. Ambushed! They should have known better than to trust a Muscovite.

“Sir?” a voice addressed the room.

Everybody chorused yes.

Down in the Operations Room, visually bisected by the iron pipe railing, a swarthy man in a badly fitting suit duly pointed at Prof. Rajavur.

“What is it, Mohad?” the Icelandic diplomat asked, taking a sip from his coffee mug.

“I have been receiving some very unusual radio transmissions on the New York police channel,” Dr. Malavade said, holding a tiny wireless earphone to his head. “Oh yes, most unusual.”

Winter ice formed on Nicholi's spine and his crewcut hair threatened to leave his scalp. Oh no! The only thing in the world that could interrupt this game was ... Czar's Blood, did they have to land *today*?

“Quiet, please!” the Russian barked, his left hand fumbling in his uniform pocket. “Do not interrupt game. Sir John, I meet that and bet another twenty.” Hurriedly he slapped the money down, raising his own raise.

“Interesting,” Bronson muttered, the strange double bet not going unnoticed. “Well, I'll see that. How about you Courtney?”

"In for a shilling, in for a pound," Sir John philosophized, winking to the American on the sly. The general shrugged in return. "Okay, Nick, what have you got?"

Returning from the washroom, Dr. Wu paused in the act of drying her hands on a government issue paper towel. Something had happened in her absence. Rajavur was hurrying towards Malavade, who was crouched over his communications console; and the remaining poker players were in animated conversation. Curious, the scientist descended into the Operations Room, the hem of her cotton dress billowing about the trim calves of her nylon-clad legs.

"Is anything wrong?" she inquired of her colleagues as they began to jointly listen to an earphone.

"There has been a landing in Central Park," Dr. Malavade announced crisply. "It has been confirmed by the traffic department of the NYPD. A unit of the National Guard has been dispatched for crowd control."

Without hesitation, Dr. Wu rushed to her console and hastily began flipping switches. Prof. Rajavur was already at his desk.

Sluggishly at first, the liquid crystal TV monitor on the wall before them started to pulse with light as it warmed to operational temperatures. Prof. Rajavur pressed a button and a pair of small HD video monitors raised up from inside his control board. "Has there been any word from the—"

"Ship," Dr. Malavade supplied, both hands busy on his own board. "One, round, white; approximately 400 meters in diameter." Somebody whistled. "Yes, it is big. Reports suggest that the craft is protected by an energy screen of some kind, nobody can get close. At present, there has been no announcement from the occupants." With a forefinger, he minutely adjusted a volume slide. "Just a moment, please."

"Then let's finish game!" Nicholi roared, catching everyone by surprise.

In the Operations Room, Wu, Rajavur and Malavade jerked their heads about and stared in astonishment, while Bronson and Courtney halted on the steps to see the Russian general still sitting at the poker table.

"Are you mad?" Sir John admonished. "There's a bloody spaceship in Central Park! Good Lord man, this is what we've been waiting 15 years for!"

"And this is what I've been waiting whole life for!" General Nicholi raged, pounding the table with his fist. "Sit down! Will only take minute to finish game." His friends obviously could not believe what they were hearing, so Nicholi changed to a more persuasive tone. "Please? As favor to me?"

Releasing the handrail, General Bronson sighed. "Well, if it's that damn important to you." He returned to the poker table and flipped over his cards. "I fold. The pot is yours."

A true gentleman, Sir John did the same.

"NO!" Nicholi howled in anguish. "Wait! Here, look at this!" Frantically, he spread out the poker cards on the table for his friends to see. They stepped closer.

"The alien ship has began shooting people," Dr. Malavade calmly announced in his dictionary perfect English. "Five, no, six dead. Maybe more."

TWO

Poker cards formed a blizzard in the air and fell unnoticed to the floor as Nicholi shoved the gaming table aside and sprinted for his post, with Courtney and Bronson leading the way.

Reaching his console first, the American soldier dropped into his chair, slipped on a set of earphones and deftly activated his equipment.

Each of the FCT's consoles was designed for different functions, and they were alike only in general build. Basically in the shape of a horseshoe, each curved metal desk had two sets of three drawers on either side of the chairwell, and the desktop was covered with a plethora of electronics equipment. Broken into three sections, the controls respectively ran: a series of hush phones and a laser printer for hard copy on the left, a video/computer monitor and keyboard in the middle, the specialty controls, meters, switches, and dials filling the right side. If not when they joined, every member of the FCT was by now virtually ambidextrous.

Winking telltales on the right side of the desktop informed Bronson as to the status of the United Nations building above them and of their own command bunker. He tapped a complex code onto the keyboard before him, got a warning beep, and checked the video screen to see the empty hallway outside the bunker. All clear, fine. He then inserted a key into a slot on the desktop and turned it, setting the double pair of armored doors to their quarters cycling shut. Soon, the FCT would be physically isolated from the outside world by a meter of laminated steel, making entry into the bunker impossible, and exiting forbidden without the general's specific knowledge and consent. Voices in his ear told him that the UN was in an absolute state of panic, with the delegates alternately demanding information, not believing what they were told, and then discounting the whole incident. Bronson grunted. Damn civilians. They were about as useful as lips on a brick.

"Communications on line," Dr. Malavade said, formally following the long lost and semi legendary procedure manual that had mysteriously disappeared the day after the FCT received their copies of the 18,000 page document.

Blazing with rainbows, Dr. Malavade's console was a vidiot's dream come true: he could broadcast and receive messages on every level of the electromagnetic spectrum, from radio waves down to hard radiation. Plus his access to the worldwide Internet was absolute and non-detectable, even to the vaunted cyber sleuths of the NSA.

An expert in cryptography and codes, what languages Mohad wasn't fluent in, his computers were: from Mayan hieroglyphics, through the squeals of porpoises, to Pig Latin. He was also a lip reader, had perfect pitch and did crossword puzzles in ink.

"Information on line," Sir John stated, sliding on his hated reading glasses, a sad result of reading too many stock portfolios and books on UFOs. His father, who thought glasses effeminate, immediately ordered the lad to go out and start dating women. This the young Jonathan had gladly done. But only with rich women who belonged to the local UFO club.

Already the laser printer on the sociologist's right was feeding him duplicate reports from ABC, CNN, NPR, the BBC, ComStat, the New York Times, London Times, Moscow Times, AOL, the National Inquirer and Grit. His teammates might laugh, but as an expert in his field, he knew that you never could tell where the truth might be found.

“Science on line,” Dr. Wu contributed, enabling her computer and linking it to the NASA, NSA, NATO and NBC sensors en route to the park.

Yuki's equipment was so sensitive that it could track an astronaut on the moon, or analyze a ballpark hotdog. Which she had done once as a test, and had immediately telexed her findings to the city's Health Department.

“Security on line,” General Bronson said needlessly, as everyone in the bunker had felt the muffled vibrations in the floor as their only door locked shut. In grim humor, the soldier opened the drawer on the lower left side in his console and lifted out a Heckler Koch 10mm pistol. Automatically, he checked the gun's clip, holstered it, and proceeded to strap the weapon about his waist. Gimme a damn gold helmet, he thought sourly, and I could pass for General George S. Patton. But regulations were regulations.

“Command on line and running,” Prof. Rajavur announced brusquely, as he slipped on a throat mike and finished activating both of his mainframe computers.

As the person in charge of the First Contact Team, his console was twice the size of his associates and infinitely more versatile. He could talk privately to any, or all of them, simultaneously. He could countermand their decisions and, if necessary, run their consoles for them, should anyone become incapacitated or unreasonable.

For psychological as well as technical reasons, Rajavur was situated prominently in front of the wall monitor. The video cameras were focused on him, with the rest of his team clustered about him like so many small moons. That is, except for Nicholi.

General Nicholi, and not General Bronson, was the soldier in charge of the Earth Defense Forces. The American protected the FCT, but the Russian protected the world.

From the very beginning of the team, it had been decided that, purely as a safety precaution, no alien would ever get to know of Nicholi's existence, much less see him, until their peaceful intentions had been proved beyond a reasonable doubt. Therefore, the Russian's defense console was hidden in a corner of the Command Bunker parallel to the wall monitor and well outside the range of its video cameras. Nicholi had a monitor of his own, a personal life support system, autonomous lines of communication, monogrammed bath towels and a quadrasonic CD player. In fact, he was as independent of the FCT as they were from the rest of the world.

Hissing like an antique steam radiator, a thick sheet of Armormite bulletproof glass rose from the terrazzo floor of the bunker and locked into the acoustical tile ceiling, hermetically sealing the general in place. Now only a single phone line connected him with the rest of the team.

Nicholi was the unhappy stick to the First Contact Team's carrot. If a situation fell apart so badly that there was nothing diplomatic left to try, if push came to shove, then—and only then—would Nicholi act; using whatever measure of violence he deemed proper to correct the problem. From having a sniper shoot a wine glass out of someone's hand, to the total nuclear annihilation of New York, London, Paris, or even Moscow itself. Nicholi hated his job with a passion, which was why he still had the position.

Finished with his initial preparations, the Russian gave Rajavur a ready sign and, without hesitation, the professor keyed in the activation code on his console.

In electronic majesty, the huge bank of Cray mainframes under their bunker awoke, yawned, stretched, did a few warm-up trigonometric calculations and in the next microsecond reached out to seize control of

the United Nations computer system.

With a magnetic lurch, every keyboard in the mammoth building

above them froze motionless, all non-essential programs were simply erased and the machines subatomically bowed to their new master. Everything in the 36 separate and shielded computer systems became instantly available to the FCT's mainframe to do with as it pleased. Leisurely looking over the vast array of material, the Cray took almost a full second to locate the correct files, access and process the desired data.

The Transatlantic phone lines were cleared of all calls, orbiting satellite relayed encoded signals and NATO headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland received an ultra top priority message. The lightning exchange of passwords and countersign took another ten seconds before the military mainframe verified the information and saluted its new commanding officer. Two milliseconds later, NATO's emergency global telecommunications network exploded with signals that were the purest gibberish to anyone but the designated computer system.

Within the cavernous basement of the Kremlin, the incoming signal was shunted to a review station specifically built to prevent such a computer takeover. Already the installation had proved its worth by stopping four such acts of piracy: two from China, one from Germany and one from The Junior Hackers Club of Duluth, Minnesota.

But this signal passed through without hindrance as the construction of the review station had been supervised by a Colonel Nicholi and a young computer genius named Malavade. Therefore it was a total surprise when Russia declared its allegiance to an unknown group of nobodies in the basement of the UN building.

In America, the computers of NORAD instantly complied with the proper and legal request to usurp the Pentagon and seconds later the Army, Navy and Air Force received duly authorized commands to go to Defense Condition One. The unprecedented move caused moans, shrieks, groans, two heart attacks and a promotion.

Across the globe, country after country became locked into the growing computer grid. China was the last to join, due solely to a faulty sub-junction in Beijing, but join it did.

Incredibly and ironically, the problem child turned out to be Greece, as the computer operator assigned to monitor any maximum security messages that involved the safety of his nation, and perhaps the world, was locked in the supply closet sleeping off his lunchtime rendezvous with the entire secretarial pool and a bottle of *ouzo*.

With the activation of the FCT, many politicians became seriously displeased and threw what could only politely be called tantrums. But despite their every effort, all of the vaunted power each of them had lied, cheated, stole and (depending upon the country) murdered to get, simply flowed through their fingers like a bride's tears. But after a shot of brandy and a hurried reading of the FCT's original charter, most politicians accepted the inevitable and did what they could to assist. Most, but not all.

Five minutes after pressing the button, a green light winked on his keyboard, and with the flick of a switch, Rajavur irrevocably transferred the military might of the world to General Nicholi.

His VOX headphones on, controls live, voices began whispering to the Russian general about the launch status of NATO missiles, combat troop readiness and the present location of Navy and Air Force strike

teams. Nicholi sub-vocalized into his throat mike, allocating 5 more NATO submarines to the New York harbor and scrambling an additional flight of F18 Raptor fighter/bombers. He already had enough atomic weapons pointed at Manhattan Island to blow it out of the history books, but he told the dreaded American CBW units to stay on the alert, and ordered his homeland to begin the careful assembly of their prototype Hellfire Bomb. In the solitude of his truncated room, Nicholi bitterly cursed the day he learned to play poker.

“Let's hear the alien's message please, Mohad,” Prof. Rajavur said, laying aside his hotline to the White House. This was no time to chat with the President. He appreciated the offer of assistance, but Rajavur had infinitely greater resources at his command than any local politician.

With a nod, the Hindu linguist pressed the Playback switch on his built-in video tape recorder.

“...PEOPLE OF DIRT, ATTENTION. PEOPLE OF DIRT, ATTENTION.”

“Dirt?” Bronson asked, putting a wealth of questions into the single word.

“Semantically correct,” Dr. Malavade explained didactically. “Though hardly flattering I agree.”

“WE ARE SCOUTS FROM THE GALACTIC LEAGUE,” the strange echoing voice continued. “HERE TO DETERMINE IF YOUR PLANET, DIRT, IS SUFFICIENTLY ADVANCED TO JOIN THE COALITION OF YOUR NEIGHBORING STARS.”

The rippling TV screen melted into a whirl of colors that became the picture of a blue skin humanoid wearing a dusky white uniform of classic military style. He (she? it?) had a formidable brow, pie plate eyes and two mouths; although only one was in use at present. Dr. Wu touched her throat mike commenting briefly on the oddity and the possibility of copper sulfate life forms. Sir John made a notation on the military cut to its clothing, and requested detailed information on anything blue in nature; topaz stones, birds of paradise and the music of Blind Lemon Jefferson.

“FROM THE CROWD THAT HEMS OUR SHIP,” The facial movements of the being in no way matched the words coming from the speakers. Dr. Malavade sub-vocalized into his throat mike about translation devices. “WE HAVE TELEPORTED ABOARD OUR SHIP SEVERAL REPRESENTATIVES OF YOUR RACE. THEY ARE UNHARMED, I REPEAT, THEY ARE UNHARMED, AND ARE WITH US SIMPLY TO HELP US ASCERTAIN YOUR ELIGIBILITY FOR MEMBERSHIP IN THE GALACTIC LEAGUE.”

“They're alive!” Sir John cried, his nightmares of alien invaders who eat our flesh, enslave our children and make the stock market collapse dispersing like a Highland mist. “Alive!”

Rjavur reached for his direct line to Nicholi, but then relaxed, when he saw the reflected lights of the Russian's console blink from red to orange and the general heave a mighty sigh. The situation may still be precarious, but at least they were no longer sitting in the barrel of a nuclear gun.

“THE POPULATION OF YOUR PLANET SHALL BE ALLOWED TO WATCH THEM BEING TESTED, AND IF THE SUBJECTS PASS, THEN DIRT WILL BE WELCOMED INTO THE GALACTIC LEAGUE AS A NEW, BUT EQUAL, MEMBER.”

Across the globe, humanity broke into wild cheering and began to dance about their TV and radio sets. Spaceships! Aliens! The stars! Whee! It was like a Saturday afternoon movie!

Meanwhile, Rajavur and company sat patiently in the air conditioned comfort of their underground bunker patiently waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“BUT,” the blue being continued.

Clunk, thought the FCT in unison.

“...SHOULD YOUR REPRESENTATIVES FAIL THE TESTS, THEN WE WILL BE FORCED TO REDUCE YOUR PLANET TO A RADIOACTIVE CINDER. NOTHING PERSONAL, MIND YOU, BUT I HAVE MY ORDERS. THIS IS IDOW FOR THE GALACTIC LEAGUE. OUT.”

Once again, the picture on the monitor melted and swirled, changing back to an aerial view of the enormous white ship dramatically sitting on top of Central Park, the glass and steel buildings of the New York skyline forming a postcard background. Framing the picture was a twinkling amber bar that visibly shrank with each passing second.

“Chronometrics, Yuki?” Rajavur asked, taking an educated guess as to the nature of the border.

“Fifty two minutes and counting,” Dr. Wu answered, her lithe fingers working a wrist calculator. “If that color bar is indeed a timepiece and not merely a decoration.”

His brown furrowed, Bronson removed the cigar from his mouth and inspected its soggy end. “What frequency was that broadcast on?” the soldier asked.

“All of them,” Dr. Malavade replied. “And as far as I can tell, it was received clearly by everyone on the planet.”

With unhappy thoughts, the general returned his cigar to its normal position. Well, that certainly seemed to kill the hoax idea. No nation on Earth could do that. Merely to generate the crude electricity alone would require a hundred, a thousand, Niagara Falls power stations. Or controlled nuclear fusion. Neither of which Humanity had yet.

“It's a wonder we didn't pick it up on our teeth,” General Bronson stated aloud, thinking about an article he had once read in a newspaper describing a truly bizarre college prank.

“Many people did,” Sir John said, industriously scribbling away on his note pad. “Sixty two feet of ferroconcrete is probably the only thing that saved us from suffering a similar fate.”

In reply, Wayne grunted. The walls of their bunker were a lot thicker than that, but Courtney had never seemed very interested in concrete, in spite of those fascinating lectures on Advanced Defensive Architecture that the general had dragged him to so often. Odd fellow. Becoming rich must have driven him mad. Good poker player, though. That's what mattered.

“No,” Rajavur stated firmly into his UN hotline. “I'm sorry Mr. Secretary General ... yes, I understand that you have an interest in this matter. But ... I'm very busy now, sir. Look, I will talk to you later, Emile. Goodbye.” Firmly he cradled the gold UN receiver between his red, Russian, and blue, American, hotline phones. Damn. The last thing he needed was some frightened politico bothering him in the middle of a crisis. Agitated, Sigerson ran nervous fingers through his wiry crop of gray hair, which was a sign of his heritage and not age, as the diplomat was barely 50 years old.

“Mohad, have you had any success in contacting the aliens?” Rajavur asked. Dr. Malavade replied no.

Communications were nil. The aliens must be deliberately ignoring him.

The diplomat swiveled his chair to the right. "What is your opinion, Jonathan?"

"On what, professor?" Sir John asked looking up from a computer printout on emotional factor responses that he was perusing.

"On the chance that this Idow and his people are a First Contact Team similar to ourselves?"

"Zero," General Bronson interrupted hotly. "Because if they are, then they're doing a damn poor job!"

Behind his glass wall, Nicholi nodded in heartfelt agreement. It was true, the aliens must be either insane or fools. The status lights were crimson again, and his American CBW unit had just volunteered to do a suicide attack on the invaders.

Irritably, the Russian general stretched out his cramped legs. Damn consoles were designed for midgets, he decided. Probably built that way to literally keep him on his toes. Ha!

Mentally switching tracks, Nicholi wondered what the man in the street was doing. He knew there would be no trouble with his NATO troops. They were good soldiers, tried and true, the best. But what was the population of Earth doing right now? Laughing? Screaming? Running around in circles? Only Sir John knew the up to the minute details, and he relayed his findings through Sigerson. Good or bad, Rajavur alone got the whole picture. With a loud buzz, the NATO hotline broke into his chain of thought and Nicholi resumed his more pressing work, deciding for the moment to forsake his attempt to out guess Man, a thing that God himself had trouble doing. Not that he believed in such superstitious prattle, of course.

Concurrently, Prof. Rajavur bowed his head in thought. If Courtney's preliminary report was correct, then the Earth was in terrible shape. What with most of humanity laughing, screaming, and running around in circles. Things could go from bad to worse when the aliens commenced broadcasting again in 47 minutes. But until then he must retain control.

The diplomat suddenly noticed how quiet the bunker had become and clapped his hands together. "To work, people!" he cried, and the room bustled with activity.

THREE

While the FCT prepared to investigate, study and defend, the population of the world reacted as it always has in times of trouble: inconsistently.

TV reporters dashed out of their air conditioned buildings to buy a newspaper. Newspaper reporters hid in the bathroom and turned on the dreaded television. Survival groups, who had been patiently waiting for nuclear war, decided that this was good enough and went to their secret mountain shelters, taking their family, neighbors, pets and TV sets with them. Alcoholics swore off the sauce forever. Junkies ordered more of whatever it was they were taking. In California, Unitarians built, and then burned, a giant question mark. In New York, landlords with buildings overlooking Central Park put them up for sale, then changed their minds and instead, doubled the rent.

The real life landing of an alien spacecraft on Earth caused UFO clubs to disband, six science fiction movies to be cancelled, and twelve more initiated. Video tapes battled it out with aspirins for record

sales. History making traffic jams clogged the arteries of the world's highways, as drivers: (A) parked their cars and ran for the hills, (B) drove for the hills, (C) fainted in their cars; bringing the unknown word gridlock to such places as Tasmania, Nova Scotia and Outer Mongolia.

In the United States of America, the FAA ordered the nation's airways cleared of all traffic immediately. Every non-military plane in flight was given fifteen minutes of grace in which to find someplace, anyplace, in which to land. Helicopters dropped like stones straight to the ground. Small planes landed on any flat, open land: farms, parking lots, or football fields. One unfortunate 747, with time running low, was forced to make an emergency landing on an interstate highway. Gunning his engines to warn motorists of the approach, the jetliner swooped low over the roadway, neatly hopping over underpasses and a rest stop. With smoking tires the giant plane touched down and throttled to a squealing, roaring halt only meters away from a hastily evacuated toll booth. As a ragged cheer arose from the onlookers and passengers, some damn fool in a Cadillac behind them started blowing his horn for the colossal aircraft to clear the way. Heroically, the 747 pilot refrained from firing up the #2 engine and melting the idiot into slag.

In Lebanon, the PLO demanded to know if the aliens were Jewish. Zurich asked if they valued gold. Hollywood begged for the rights to film their life story. New Zealand longed to hear their favorite lamb recipes. Poland asked how many of them it took to change a lightbulb. At first, the Pope declared the alien beings devils, then angels, devils again, Protestants, and then he was unavailable for comment.

The independent countries of South America found themselves in a quandary. The aliens had landed in the much hated United States of America. If the creatures proved hostile, then this might be their big chance to help destroy the filthy Yankee pigs. But if the aliens were friendly, America might receive advanced technology that could make them undisputed masters of the world, someone you don't want mad at you. How they should act was solved by the brilliant political strategy of aligning themselves with Switzerland. With much eagerness, the always neutral Swiss bankers accepted this commission as they had so many others, positive that, somehow, they could make a buck out of it.

Ireland got drunk.

England ordered out for tea.

Italy got drunk.

Japan sent out industrial spies.

France paid its UN dues.

In a small Arab nation, a fanatical Moslem leader stood on the balcony of a tall minaret and told his faithful followers assembled below that while they could handle the evil American devils, blue monsters from space was an entirely different matter. So in order to save his nation, he would have to destroy it with a hydrogen bomb. He raised the detonator switch for all to see. Oddly, the crowd in the courtyard below didn't react very favorably to this idea.

While they were breaking down the locked door to the minaret, their ex-beloved leader said a prayer and pressed the detonation switch. This only resulted in a loud click as his aides had long ago stolen the plutonium from the bomb and sold it for drugs. When the howling mob of outraged Arabs finally reached the top of the prayer tower, the Moslem zealot saved them from the messy task of tearing him into bloody gobbets by simply diving over the ornate metal railing of the balcony and falling to his death.

* * * *

Meanwhile, orbiting high above the troubled Earth was a large golden rectangle about the size and shape of an industrial packing crate. Skimming along the very edge of the planet's atmosphere, the strange box passed unnoticed by the incredible profusion of spy satellites that filled the sky, and the ground based military radar installations that stared directly at it with blind electronic eyes.

Those who had placed the enameled machine in orbit had been assured by their research staff that the box was, on the exterior, a perfect reproduction of a scientific device made by something called Westinghouse Industries, and this was true. But the design had come from the wrong division of the international conglomerate. The golden rectangle was the exact duplicate of a Westinghouse refrigerator; from the exposed cooling grid on the back, to the price tag on the door handle. (The technical staff had wondered about the function of those items, but had included them anyway in the noble interest of Science and to promote job security, which was a basic urge in most sentient beings throughout the known galaxy.)

At the present moment, that refrigerator shaped device was receiving some very curious transmissions from the normally peaceful world below. Hungrily, the machine consumed the incoming signals as fast as it could, chewed up the data into byte sized pieces, digested them thoroughly, and then burped out a most unappetizing answer.

Crystal programming cubes, nestled in multi-compartment ionized tin power trays, became activated and the rectangle began to rotate about, until it was facing away from the Earth towards the distant stars. Then the door opened wide and out erupted a mighty tachyon particle beam, steady at 14 seconds of arc above the orbit of Pluto. The refrigerator's message was terse, concise and left nothing to the imagination. Much too soon, the golden light beam terminated and the enameled door closed with a soundless thump. Next, tiny jets flared from underneath the water drip pan, and the golden box moved off to relocate itself above the North American continent, in a geosynchronous orbit that would hold it relatively motionless above the source of those extremely disturbing transmissions:

The 81st Street ballfield of Central Park, New York.

FOUR

Leader Idow reclined in his formfitting chair and scowled at the viewscreen before him, his hairy face a sober study in blue.

The first contact with an alien species was always a ticklish job at best. So far, everything had gone well. He could only hope that succeeding events would justify this expedition.

The control room of the starship *All That Glitters* flowed around the humanoid being like a sine wave, with the ship's Leader placed at the apex of his pristine, high tech domain. This position gave him a comfortable feeling, as his primitive ancestors had often perched in the top of trees, dropped onto unsuspecting creatures traveling below and blithely sold them insurance.

Glitters was a modified Mikon #4 space module, exactly four hundred meters in diameter, precisely the same size of your average Mikon. Powered by their justifiably famous exothermic reactors, the spacecraft had a mean cruising speed of light to the twelfth power, making the ship just about the fastest thing in the galaxy. Only a single planet had faster ships, and those were not for sale at any price. The 24 levels of the vessel varied in height and width, depending entirely upon their owner's wishes and intended use. Only the control rooms were standardized.

On the curved walls aft of Leader Idow, were the tech stations of his crew: Protector, Engineer, Communicator and Technician. The later station was rarely used, and was situated here in the control room only because of the irrefutable fact that the damn thing had to be somewhere. An armored Security Door closed off the base of the room and provided the sole means of entry into this, the nerve center of the starship. At present that door was ajar which permitted a glimpse of the outside corridor, whose seemingly endless walls were lined with a multitude of wires, pipes and junction boxes.

The control room and its furnishings were composed entirely, and on purpose, in multiple shades of white. Only the operating beings themselves adding a splash of color: blue, gray, brown, green, and even those were toned down by the ivory uniforms the crew wore. Every tech station aboard the *All That Glitters* had an independent viewscreen, but at present Idow had them slaved to his, so that each showed the same unremarkable scene.

Amid the stark white immensity of the Test Chamber, which occupied the entire middle portion of the starship, there stood a handful of figures, the tremendous distance making them appear weak and frail, which in every probability they were. Idow could see them marching up and down, shaking angry limbs at the ceiling. No doubt they were shouting questions, threats and pleas. All the usual things. But the audio pickups in the chamber had yet to be activated, so their verbal barbs never reached the ears of Those-Who-Command.

Besides, Leader Idow liked to watch the test subjects first. It helped him to better evaluate their chances of success. And furthermore, being pointedly ignored seemed to drive most primitives into a splendid frenzy, and these Dirtlings showed every indication of running true to form. Why, at this moment, the largest Dirtling was attempting to tunnel through the cushioned floor. His fellow subjects appeared to be cheering him on, although with alien species it was often difficult to tell exactly what they were really doing. Ah! Now a hairy subject pulled the big male to his feet and struck him several times in the face with the flat of a hand. For some reason that calmed the large male down and he demurely rejoined his companions. The hairy Dirtling stayed apart from the group though, and they began addressing their comments to him.

So you're their Leader, observed Idow coldly. *Then as one to another, I greet you, brother.*

Just then a hand of living granite descended weightily upon the blue alien's shoulder and Idow glanced up into the immobile face of his starship's Protector.

"So much for your rule-by-strength contention," Gasterphaz rumbled, his atonal voice sounding like rocks mating. "Obviously you were wrong."

"How can you say that?" Idow asked in surprise. "You saw the hairy male beat the big male into submission. Thus, they have rule by strength, as I surmised."

The stony giant blinked with a loud *click-click*. "That? Beat? Why, that was but a caress. More likely they are lovers."

Leader Idow smiled deep inside himself. Gasterphaz was a Choron, a huge, heavily muscled, rock plated species of fantastic strength. The Protector could easily rip the control room Security Door right off its hinges with his bare hands. His mountainous race constantly faced the problem of identifying anything short of a warobot armed with an X-ray laser as an actual attack. This aloof attitude really annoyed some of the more excitable races in the galaxy, and in fact, the Chorons were presently engaged in at least two wars of which they were blissfully unaware.

“Trust me,” Idow reassured. “These Dirlings are sufficiently primitive for our needs. I am sure that they will do fine in the forthcoming tests.”

“Primitive garbage!” a high-pitched voice screeched in disagreement.

The two beings turned to see Boztwank, the ship's Engineer gliding towards them, the invisible forcefield legs of his electronic pot noiseless on the ship's soft plastic floor.

“Garbage!” the petulant mushroom repeated, his fronds quivering. “And useless to us! Those?” A translucent hand gestured at the figures on the viewscreen. “Why, they won't even pass the first test, much less all three!” Located on his stalk, the fungi's diminutive face contorted with frustration. “Let's leave this wretched place and find us a real planet, with some real people to test!”

Better tasting dirt too, no doubt, added Idow privately. The analysis had shown it to be high in hydrocarbons, metallic salts and animal urine. While the later was a nice touch, it was not enough to satisfy Boztwank. But then, his fungus race lived in an almost perpetual state of seething annoyance at the universe in general. This emotional upheaval eventually culminating in a pyrotechnic display of fury that caused the enraged mushroom to literally explode, scattering spores for over a kilometer.

Most likely, Boztwank's vociferous species would have long ago been eradicated by the galaxy at large just because of a near universal desire for peace and quiet, but for the fact that their pre-sentient young were considered a delicacy by almost every being that possessed the sense of taste, and by several who merely had a fine sense of propriety. It was only his superior ability as an Engineer that kept him from getting stuffed into the starship's reactor core for fuel.

Then Idow frowned. The mushroom did have a point, though. On the whole, the Dirlings appeared to be a pretty unimpressive lot. But as Leader, the blue being felt duty bound to defend his decision to come here.

“Nonsense,” he began in a friendly tone.

“They still call their planet Dirt!” Boztwank raged. “How stinking primitive can you get?” The fungi's sprayers chose that moment to moisten his dome and stalk with a watery pink fluid.

Idow took the opportunity to continue. “Every race calls its home planet Dirt in the beginning, Boztwank,” he explained patiently. “You know that.”

“But they've had over 4,000 solar revolutions in which to change it! What in the Void are they waiting for? The Prime Builder to name it for them?”

“Terra,” a dry voice interrupted. “They call their planet Terra.”

Vastly annoyed, the mushroom closed his lipless mouth.

Squee, the ship's Communicator waddled forward, his enormous atrophied tail dragging behind him along the floor. Squee was the last known surviving member of his lizardoid race. The rest of his home world population having gone on to evolve into a higher species while he was touring the galaxy with Leader Idow.

Nowadays, in a valiant attempt to resurrect his old species, Squee seduced and mated with every egg-laying, cold-blooded female he could find. Current medical theories claimed that such interspecies

breeding was impossible. Yet Squee succeeded again and again in impregnating his alien lovers, and they subsequently gave birth to tiny duplicates of Squee—who promptly evolved into a higher species. This bothered the poor lizard to no end.

Suspicious as always, Boztwank squinted at the Communicator. “Everybody uses that name?” he demanded rudely.

With a start, Squee stopped the perpetual scratching at the scales on his tail. The limb didn't itch, the act was just something he did while thinking. The way humanoids rubbed their chins, or bloop-oids hit themselves with a fish.

“Well, no,” Squee admitted honestly. “Not everybody.”

“And what is the root word for this name, Terra?”

“Earth,” he answered proudly.

The mushroom scowled, a hard thing for him to do.

Leader Idow was unmistakably pleased by this exchange. Plainly, Squee had done an excellent job of analyzing Dirt's primary tongue.

Furious at being thwarted in anything, Boztwank rallied to the

attack once more. “And in their major language, Earth translates into what?”

Squee bit his forked tongue. Oh Void, he had hoped they wouldn't ask that.

“Well?” Boztwank demanded.

“Dirt,” Squee sighed sadly. “It means dirt.”

“Ah HA!” the mushroom cried in righteous victory. “I told you so! I told you so! I told you so!”

With true lizard dignity, Squee turned tail on the Engineer and waddled back to his station, where his instruments lit up, overjoyed to see their scaly master again. A vegetarian, from a race of vegetarians, Squee wondered what Boztwank would taste like. Probably bitter as stinkweed, the nasty old ‘shroom.

Privately, Idow also viewed the jubilant fungi with disflavor. Boztwank had many bad habits, being a poor winner among them. And didn't the name of his home planet translate into something like, “The Place That Holds Our Roots in Safety”? Hmm ... hmm....

“Is it true, Idow?” Gasterphaz asked, resuming the original line of conversation. “Might they be too primitive a race for us to use?”

“No, my friend,” Idow stated firmly, crossing his legs and meticulously straightening the cuff on his dusky uniform. “They are not. Dirt has a planetary government, crude space flight and a world communications

system. These alone prove that they are sufficiently advanced for our needs."

The rock shrugged. "Acceptable then. We have dealt with worse."

"And we have dealt with better," Boztwank cried irritably. "Let's go home!"

"*BUT WE ARE HERE RIGHT NOW!*" Idow thundered, using his throat of command. "And it was quite an effort to *gethere now*, so we will test these—"

"Humans," Squee interjected.

"Dirtlings," Idow continued, "And simply hope for the best."

Grumbling to himself, Boztwank directed his floating pot back to his tech station, where he ordered his squirter to splash him with more of the pink liquid, but it didn't cheer him up a drop.

Royally blue, Idow returned to his viewscreen, the picture on it the same as before. The test subjects had hardly moved a foot. What was wrong with them? No curiosity? He flexed his eyebrows in pique. "How much longer, Squee?"

"Three hundred seconds."

Void. "Is everything ready for the broadcast of the tests?"

"Of course, my Leader."

"Fine. Oh, did Trell ever get around to replacing that broken camera in the Test Chamber?" As he spoke, Idow's viewscreen shifted to a different angle of the humans. "Acceptable. Gasterphaz?"

The mighty Choron rotated his head without bothering to move his shoulders. "Yes, Idow?"

"Do try and keep your warobot under better control this time. We only have so many of those cameras with us, you know."

"Affirmative."

"Why only yesterday Trell was telling me," Idow paused and glanced about the room, noticing the absence of the Technician for the first time. "Where is Trell anyway?"

Boztwank muttered something inaudible.

"What did you say, Engineer?" Idow asked, eyeing the fungi.

"Maintenance. He's doing some maintenance."

"Oh really?" Idow inquired swiveling about. "Just what is broken on my starship?"

"Broken?" Boztwank hedged. "Why, ah, nothing is broken. He's just doing some minor repair work, you know, here and there, a ship this big..."

"Where is Trell," Idow asked using his throat of polite conversation. Again Boztwank answered vaguely,

so the blue being switched to his throat of command. "*WHERE IS TRELL?*"

"Core. He's in the reactor core."

"WHAT?" Idow double-throated, rising from his chair.

Talking fast, Boztwank had his pot retreat from the furious humanoid. "No danger! Trell is in no danger Leader! The power levels are at 9/9 and steady. He's completely safe! As if he was in his mother's mandibles!"

Idow considered the statement, knowing that the cowardly mushroom wouldn't dare lie to him, and grudgingly sat back down. True enough. Nine over nine was well within the Technician's radiation tolerance level. It would merely be very uncomfortable for him. But why would Boztwank send Trell to the reactor just as they were about to start the all important tests?

"You're still angry about that mistake he made last trip," he accused.

Visibly, the mushroom steamed. "He confused my pink for the window cleaner again! I won't stand for that!"

Lizard and rock roared with laughter, while Idow openly smiled.

Yes, it had been a near tragedy and only time had made the incident funny. "Okay Boz, you may do with Trell as you wish, but there are to be no mysterious power surges through the core which would fry our Technician into carbon ash. IS THAT CLEAR ENGINEER?"

The fungi heard the change in throats and got the hint. "Yes, my Leader, of course my Leader, whatever you say Idow." Boztwank then stealthily turned down the power dial on his control board that he had been inching upward.

Satisfied that Trell was safe for the moment, Idow returned to the business at hand. "Time?" he asked.

"One hundred seconds," Squee replied.

Close enough. "Squee, please activate your translator, I wish to converse with our ... guests." A slim rod extended from beneath the viewscreen at his station and Idow cleared his throats. "Attention, your attention, please."

The translator hummed to itself, and relayed his words to the Test Chamber. Startled by the voice from nowhere, the six humans jumped off the floor and started shaking belligerent fists at the ceiling.

"They wish to know what you want of them," Squee said, his instruments whispering to their beloved master.

"Nothing more?" Gasterphaz asked, shifting position in his steel slab of a chair which groaned in protest.

"Well, I am simplifying it a bit," Squee admitted with a shy smile.

“So I would assume,” Idow added coldly. “What else do they say?”

“Ssss ... challenges to show ourselves, demands for immediate release, numerous death threats and multiple references to procreating with our own mothers.” The latter confused the lizard. Didn't everyone love their mother?

Leader Idow was dubious as to the accuracy of the translation and told the lizard so. “Let me speak to them directly,” he instructed.

Daintily as a tree surgeon, Squee taloned the switches and dials on his control board and Idow's viewscreen spoke: “...CONSUME WASTE PRODUCTS, YOU UNCLEAN OFFSPRING OF UN-MARRIED PARENTAL UNITS! YOU MALE INFANTS OF FEMALE CANINES! MAY THE PRIME BUILDER CAST YOU INTO THE VOID! MAY—”

“Be quiet,” Idow said in a conversational tone as he thumbed the volume switch on his microphone to maximum. His amplified voice resounded in the Test Chamber and the humans rocked beneath the sonic assault.

“Behave yourselves,” he ordered, resetting the switch to its normal position. “There is no need to shout. I can hear you quite clearly.”

“Negative waste products,” a female test subject said, and the rest of the group concurred.

Puzzled, Idow looked at Squee.

“Expressions of disbelief,” the lizard translated.

Idow nodded. “Ah.”

“Primitive trash,” Boztwank muttered to nobody in particular. Why couldn't everybody understand that he was always correct, 100% of the time, no matter what the facts were?

In the test chamber Idow's voice boomed out with: “YOU SIX HAVE BEEN BROUGHT ABOARD THIS STARSHIP AS A SAMPLING OF TYPICAL DIRTLINGS.”

“Dirtlings?” a small male asked.

“Your mother was a dirtling!” the large male shouted.

“Cease your mindless discourse,” the hairy male ordered, and his cohorts swiftly obeyed.

“BEFORE THE PEOPLE OF YOUR WORLD, YOU WILL BE TESTED TO SEE IF YOUR RACE IS READY THE JOIN THE GALACTIC LEAGUE.”

A brief silence followed.

“Is that anything like the major league?” the small male asked puzzled.

Idow looked at Squee again.

“Their ruling planetary body,” the Communicator explained.

“YES. EXACTLY. OUR LEAGUES WILL BECOME UNITED IN FRIENDSHIP. UNLESS YOU SHOULD FAIL THESE TESTS. THEN DIRT WILL BE DESTROYED.”

“That inhales!” the female cried.

“That exhales,” a male added.

“I smell most unpleasantly on tests,” the small male wailed unhappily.

“Forcibly consume the garments of your feet, anal orifice,” the hairy male snapped, and the small male cringed. In somber reflection, the Leader of the six thoughtfully surveyed the gigantic white room, remembering how they had gotten here. “Because I would wager that they can do it too,” he whispered.

“YES. WE CAN.”

In an indecipherable human gesture, the tall hairy male spread his arms wide. “Agreement then,” he said to the ceiling. “So pray inform us, what will these tests consist of?”

“An intelligent question at last,” Gasterphaz rumbled, sounding pleased. “Why don't we show them?”

“Yes,” Boztwank encouraged eagerly. “Let's show them! Show them!”

Idow cut his microphone. Why not? They certainly were a boring group. Maybe some visual stimulation would make them more physically active. “As you wish,” he agreed. “Communicator, see if you can contact their Major League and inform them that we will begin the tests immediately.”

“At once, my Leader,” Squee said, working the controls of his tech station in preparation to send off the communiqué. It really was a shame, thought the lizard privately. This had been such a pretty planet.

FIVE

The First Contact Team had been working like madmen at their consoles, the Command Bunker a maelstrom of activity, as 15 years of preparation paid off in 47 minutes.

Hastily as possible, the crowd around the spaceship had been forced outside the park by the National Guard, who were then replaced by crack NATO troops. Any building that faced the alien craft had their rooftops lined with every weapon and sensor that modern science admitted to, and a few they didn't. The 81st Street ballfield of Central Park was a battle zone, merely waiting for official authorization to become a disaster zone.

Plus, everywhere in Manhattan, people were disappearing.

Under the United Nations emergency act A Zero A (informally known as the old Snatch-n-Run), all important civilian personnel were being evacuated from the greater metropolitan area. Whether they wanted to be or not.

Prof. Gregory Ketter, a particle physicist of world renown was whisked out of his Park Avenue penthouse, flown off to Washington DC, and then the Pentagon.

In Mt. Sinai Hospital, Dr. Michael Walsh was stopped in front of his operating room and was dragged off to a police car. He left behind his startled assistant, who was only the second best brain surgeon in the United States of America, and a prepped patient waiting in the operating theatre.

A highly embarrassed team of FBI agents removed Dr. Daniel R. Lissman from New York's most infamous house of ill repute, failing to bring along his Frankenstein mask, his whips, or his tutu, but retaining the doctor's battered briefcase that contained his latest treatise on Biological Warfare Counter-Weapons.

Specially appointed federal agents, many of whom just minutes before had been ordinary firemen and police officers, went scurrying every-which-way throughout the Big Apple, tracking down their prey any-which-way they could, be it bribery, blackmail, or busting heads. Time was important, not method. The agents had 40 minutes to find 100 people and get them 200 miles away from New York. It was a mad scramble from the start, but they did it, and by the dint of what Herculean efforts only their fellow agents ever knew.

In lower Manhattan, a fleet of Federal Depository bank trucks with an escort of heavily armed Army helicopters was discreetly pulling away from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, its last stop on a frightfully long list, racing off for Canada and safety, carrying a paltry few hundred paintings and statues, and leaving behind far too many. One poor, half-crazed curator had to be forcibly restrained from throwing any more Rembrandts into the back of the last truck.

The immense United Nations building stood deserted, but for a squad of U.S. Marines left behind to deter looters. On every floor, doors gaped wide, furniture was overturned and the warm, black ashes of hastily burned secret documents billowed along empty corridors like autumn leaves. The entire cadre of attending delegates were already at Kennedy Airport, being herded aboard specially commandeered jetliners and flown off to Geneva, Switzerland, the UN's alternate headquarters. The FCT were left quite alone in their sub-sub-sub-sub-basement Command Bunker. Even their honorary security guards were gone, leaving the external hallway unattended.

Seated shoeless at his defense console, General Nicholi finished the arduous procedure of keying in his identification code, and The Button lit up on his board, its glaring red light leering at him like the eye of some demented devil from Hell.

Parcheesi? Why couldn't he have learned Parcheesi for God's sake?

Doggedly holding the blue phone to his ear, the pained expression on Prof. Rajavur's face told a story that Julius Caesar would have understood completely, even though it wasn't March 15th. Et Tu, Secretary General?

"Mr. Secretary, how did you get on the White House hotline?" the professor asked.

"I have friends, Rajavur," Emile Valois said rudely. "Friends in important places who do not want to see you usurp my authority. The first contact with an alien species must logically be the responsibility of the United Nations."

"I agree sir."

"Then give me back my goddamn computers and stop ordering NATO around like a bunch of ribbon clerks! I run the UN, not you. This diplomatic nonsense must stop! These creatures are a threat to Humanity and must be eradicated."

“No, sir,” Rajavur said firmly. “I agree that the situation should be handled by the United Nations, and it is. The FCT is a duly chartered division of the UN Security Council, answerable only to ourselves once activated. Please try to understand sir, that we have been waiting and training—”

“And playing poker!”

“And playing poker,” Rajavur conceded, “for nearly 15 years. We know better than you the seriousness of the matter. There is nobody else on Earth better qualified to handle it than us.”

“Personally, Emile,” the professor said, switching tactics, “I am shocked by this petty grab for glory on your part. Heaven knows your psychological profile indicated no such megalomaniac tendencies prior to this.”

The Secretary General gasped, then screamed, *“How the bloody Hell did you get your hands on my psyche file?”*

Prof. Rajavur refused to oblige him. “Mr. Secretary, you shall remain with the rest of the delegates, in Geneva, until this matter is resolved, or we are dead. End of discussion. Goodbye sir.”

Displaying incredible restraint, Rajavur gently cradled the wireless phone receiver, but under his breath, the professor muttered a biting Icelandic phrase that dealt with the dire consequences of fat people skating over thin ice.

With perfect timing, the digital clock on his console blinked a new time and started beeping at him.

“That's the 10 minute warning,” he announced. “Let's have your reports, please.”

General Bronson turned off his laser printer in acknowledgment and placed a fresh cigar in his mouth. His supply of them seemed endless. “Central Park has been cleared of all non-military personnel and NATO troops have it cordoned off,” he said, reading from the top sheet of light green computer paper. “The adjoining rooftops are manned and armed. Snatch-n-Run was completed without any newsworthy incidents and I still have no idea who the aliens have in their ship.” Wayne started to light his panatela, then decided against it. “What I do know is that some poor bastard by the name of Hector Ramariez is under the damn thing. Dozens of eyewitnesses saw it land right on top of him. He was, let me see, a bachelor, an accountant and a Baptist.”

“One dead,” Rajavur sighed sadly. “God grant that there are no more. Dr. Wu?”

Primly stiff, the Chinese scientist stood, as she always did when making a report. “So far, we have been unable to penetrate the force shield that domes the ship. Conventional armament has proven useless. Neutron steel drills can find no purchase in which to operate. Magnetic keys yield nothing, and radiant energy stops dead at the surface, not bounce off mind you, but stops, so the shield is probably H-Bomb proof. Did you hear that, Nicholi?”

The Russian General waved her on, engrossed in his work.

She shrugged. “At present we're trying lasers, since the force shield does pass visible light and we have moved up an ion cannon.” Here Wu tactfully coughed. “I believe that may work.”

Tea sprayed out his nose as Nicholi gagged in the middle of a swallow. Czar's Blood, so that's where

the damn thing was! Here he was trying to find somebody in the Kremlin who would even admit that the weapon existed and Yuki already had it positioned in Central Park running tests! Mopping his console with a handkerchief, Nicholi could feel his face turn red as the woman passed Prof. Rajavur a sheet of paper covered with mathematical equations. Probably the operational figures on the Most Top Secret device.

The Russian general smiled in spite of himself. Efficient wasn't the word for it, magic was. Nicholi suddenly had the feeling that if Yuki wanted his uniform for a test on the ship, he would miraculously find himself sitting buck naked in his chair, with absolutely no idea how he got that way. Good thing she was on their side.

"What's the public reaction, Jonathan?" Sigerson asked the team's sociologist.

"So far, so good," Sir John announced, folding away his reading glasses and tucking them into a pocket. "The lunatic fringe is up and running, claiming a million different things, very few of them making any sense, but they're just a 2% factor and we can safely disregard them. Interestingly enough, 12% to 15% of the population are denying the whole incident and have turned their TV sets off. The classic Turtle in the Shell syndrome. Fascinating really." Nobody commented. "Well, I think it's fascinating," he continued. "Anyway, the rest of the world is apprehensive and under some appreciable tension, but nothing they can't handle. In summation, Earth is not in very much worse shape than, say America, on a Superbowl Sunday."

General Bronson whistled. "That bad, eh?" Yuki hushed him.

Swiveling his chair, Rajavur turned to the left. "Mohad?"

"Hmm?" Dr. Malavade said, his eyes staring off into space. In constant motion, the man was adjusting the audio controls on his communications console. The FCT knew that if the bunker was on fire, the best way to tell Mohad the fact would be to announce the news over the radio.

"Dr. Malavade!" Prof. Rajavur shouted.

"What? Oh yes." The Indian philologist removed the earphones from his head, and tried to straighten his rumpled jacket, a procedure as useless as spitting on a volcano. "At present, communications are nil. The aliens will not respond to anything I say, except to acknowledge that they do receive my transmissions. Most infuriating. They ceased to broadcast some 15 minutes ago. The picture you see on the wall monitor is from a NATO surveillance camera." Mohad twirled a dial on his console and the scene zoomed in and out from the white ship.

"One curious piece of information I have is about their original message." Dr. Malavade consulted his notebook. "In North America the transmission was in English, in South America a polyglot of Spanish and Portuguese. Europe received a mixture of Russian and German. Asia got Chinese, most impolite of them. In Africa it was Swahili, and in Australia it was French."

"French?" everyone chorused.

Mohad gave them the most imperceptible of shrugs. "At least it proves that they are not infallible."

Just then, the NATO telephone on Malavade's console began to ring and as the linguist reached for the receiver, Prof. Rajavur instructed him, "If that's the Secretary General, tell him we're out for lunch."

Unexpectedly, the wall monitor dimmed and the picture on it changed from a ground view of the white ship into an aerial view of the white ship.

"They're back," Sir John observed dryly.

"Minutes early," Dr. Wu contributed.

"Lunch," Dr. Malavade said, hanging up the phone and starting his video recorder.

With a swirl, the picture melted and reformed into the stern visage of the alien, Idow.

"PEOPLE OF DIRT, ATTENTION. PEOPLE OF DIRT, ATTENTION. THE TESTS TO DETERMINE THE LIFE OF YOUR WORLD ARE NOW ABOUT TO BEGIN. WE WILL ALLOW YOU TO WATCH AND THUS BETTER UNDERSTAND THEIR NATURE. HERE IS THE CHAMBER OF TESTING, AND THE DIRTLING SUBJECTS THAT WE HAVE CHOSEN." Again the monitor performed its technicolor gymnastics.

"About time," General Bronson growled from behind his cigar. As few as they were, patience had never be one of his virtues.

Slow and leisurely, the wall monitor focused into the picture of a blinding white room, thousands of meters square, and in the midst of that snowy acreage were a half dozen tiny figures. As the camera, or its alien equivalent, dollied in, the six humans filled the TV screen with their presence; their faces, hairstyles and mode of dress clearly announcing to the world exactly on what rung of the social ladder they belonged.

"More aliens!" Dr. Malavade cried, aghast.

"Almost," Sir John corrected. "They're a street gang! A bloody New York City street gang!"

"Perhaps you are correct," Dr. Malavade recanted. "Creatures from another star would most likely dress with better taste."

Prof. Rajavur did a double take. Considering the source, this was without a doubt the strangest thing he had ever heard. But he diplomatically said nothing.

"The NYPD computer just called in a positive ID on the gang," Bronson announced, scowling at a fax from his printer. "The kids call themselves, geez, The Bloody Deckers, and they're supposed to be the worst street gang ever to plague this city."

"I think they stole my car once," Dr. Wu said scrutinizing the monitor closely, and then she nodded. "Yes, it was them, all right."

"Mohad!" Prof. Rajavur barked, making everybody jump. "Contact Idow immediately and tell him that he's made a terrible mistake!"

Tense minutes followed as Dr. Malavade tried once more to break through the alien radio silence. As the communications expert waged his private brand of electronic warfare, the FCT, and the rest of the world, carefully studied the six gang members.

They were all young, in their early twenties, yet each bore scars testifying to battles hard fought, and

won. Five men and a woman; their hairstyles ranged from crewcut, to ponytail, to bald. They wore boots and denims like a uniform, and everyone sported a black leather jacket, dripping in chains, with the back of each adorned with a vividly painted toolbox splashed with crimson. Underneath that was the name of the gang, boldly emblazoned in shining steel studs: "The Bloody Deckers."

Dr. Malavade snapped his fingers for attention. "I have been talking to an entity named Squee, and he assures me that a road maintenance crew is perfectly acceptable to them."

"Road maintenance crew? Aw hell, that's a street gang!" Rajavur groaned aloud. "Mohad make him understand!"

"Too late," General Bronson stated.

The transmission from the ship had shifted to a wide angle view and inside the test chamber something was happening. Close by the street gang, a section of the floor had dilated and a column rose into view, bearing four metal lumps; blue, gray, brown and green, each resembling army helmets. Hesitantly, the Deckers took a step forward but Idow's voice stopped them.

"THIS IS THE FIRST OF YOUR TESTS. WITHIN SIXTY SECONDS, THESE FOUR DRONES WILL BE ACTIVATED. THEY WILL INSTANTLY TRY TO KILL YOU."

Supremely defiant, The Bloody Deckers sneered, the FCT frowned, and the rest of humanity leaned eagerly into their TV sets. Hot dog, action at last.

"DESTROY THESE DRONES OR DIE ... HEY."

The 'hey' was because the street gang was already in action. Their leather jackets flapping like bat wings and howling their name in a battle cry, the six youths leaped upon the inert drones, smashing them to pieces under their heavy motorcycle boots. The largest gang member grabbed two and ground them against each other. Fragments of wire and plastic sprinkled to the floor. A slim male produced a motorcycle chain and viciously whipped it down, sending bits of drone flying everywhere. The remaining drone was dropkicked into its component works by a hulking third gang member, while two more Deckers moved in and systematically stomped into junk anything they could find. The sixth member of the street gang, a tall hairy male, watched the carnage with a bored expression and kept checking his watch.

As the end of the minute approached, he whistled them to his side and on the 60 second mark, one tiny chunk of drone stirred. Bravely, it gave forth a fierce hoot and a shining steel blade emerged from the broken shell of its body. The smallest gang member scuttled over to the dying drone, snapped off the blade and happily tucked it into his sleeve. The lord of the Bloody Deckers nodded approvingly at this act and then turned a murderous grin towards his unseen audience of 500 million.

"So tell us," he asked smugly. "What is next on the game plan?"

* * * *

Almost falling out of his chair, Leader Idow yipped and hit the switch killing his microphone. Spinning about, the blue being found himself staring at his equally flabbergasted crew.

"GAME!" Idow roared using both of his mouths. "Did he say *game*?"

Completely rattled, Squee rubbed his claws together. "Yes," he hissed. "There is no chance of

translation error. The hairy Dirtling definitely said the word game, my Leader."

The ever garrulous Boztwank was sprayed with pink just then, so it was Gasterphaz who got to rumble in amazement, "But how ... how did they know?"

SIX

"A test?" Dr. Wu demanded, her voice peaking on the last syllable. The scientist's almond eyes flashed in anger, and she radiated such violent moral outrage that the printed flowers on her white, cotton dress almost wilted. "What the hell kind of a test was that?"

Dr. Malavade undertook to answer the woman's clamorous question. Calmly, the linguist postulated that it might have been a test of us, not to us.

Yuki had to think about that. "So you believe the drones would not have attacked? That this was merely a test to see what humans would do when threatened?"

He shrugged. "You must admit, that is a possibility."

Dr. Wu frowned. A possibility? Yes, but not one that the scientist would readily accept. For it would mean that these ludicrous tests were in earnest, and that Earth was in serious trouble. Of course, the only reverse corollary was even more unthinkable.

With a gentle whine, Sir John's laser printer started duplicating copies of the latest news bulletins on the world's reaction to this unforeseen development. Swiftly using a gold pen, the sociologist began writing notes in his personal style of shorthand as the computer paper unfolded from his console with ever increasing speed.

Sitting with his chin resting in the palm of his left hand, Prof. Rajavur blankly stared at the picture of the strutting street gang. Lost in rumination, his keen mind absorbed everything the screen displayed, but drew no useful conclusions. Insufficient data. What was it Sherlock Holmes had said about that? Oh yes. "Data, Watson, data! I can not make bricks without clay!" How true. Thought, then action, was the formula for success. Generally at least. General.

"Who are they?" he asked Bronson, coming out of his reverie and returning to business.

The general frowned. "The gang? Just a second." The security officer of the FCT retrieved his clipboard from under a code book. Bronson had been busy accessing the data files on the gang from the New York police computers and found the work hard going. His console could take in information a hundred times faster than theirs could disgorge, and some complex maneuvering had been necessary to interface the two systems. "Here we are, Hammer, Whipsaw, Crowbar, Drill, Chisel and Torch."

"Those are their names?" Rajavur asked, in a stunned voice.

Waving the clipboard, Bronson nodded. "The only ones they'll answer to."

Prof. Rajavur scowled. "Identify them, please."

Delicately palming the controls, General Bronson fiddled his console until a green circle appeared on the monitor. He moved the marker about until he had targeted the face of the tall man in the center of the

milling gang. "That hairy fellow there is Hammer," he said loudly for everybody's benefit. "The leader of this rat pack. His rap sheet reads like the encyclopedia of crime, with no convictions. A real smart operator. The police consider him dangerous with a capital D."

With the turn of a dial, he moved the marker a bit. "The big guy next to him is Whipsaw. Also considered dangerous. The guy's a nut case. A homicidal maniac, who is totally under Hammer's control. Whipsaw is loyal to the street gang only because Hammer is in charge."

"Interesting. And how does the ganglord perpetuate this control?"

"He feeds him."

"Drugs? Sweets?"

"Innocent bystanders."

There was a pause. "Oh."

Proceeding onward, the marker came to a devilishly handsome man and the general continued. "Smiley over there is Drill. He's the locksmith for the gang. Gets them into places so they can steal everything not nailed down. Supposed to be pretty good at it too. Apartment doors, car trunks, store gates. They say he goes through them like a..."

"Drill," Dr. Wu supplied, impatiently tapping a pencil on the metal edge of her console. "Okay, Wayne, we get the idea. Who are the rest of these charming people?"

Bronson flipped over a page on his clipboard. "The ugly bald kid is Crowbar."

"The girl?" Dr. Malavade asked in surprise. He had heard of such outlandish tonsorial effects, but had never personally encountered anybody who shaved their head solely for fashion. But then, he didn't really get around much. Aside from the FCT, he mainly associated with fellow scientists, librarians, and the occasional Swedish airline stewardess.

"No, the-ugly-bald-kid-with-a-moustache is Crowbar," the unflappable general answered. As a soldier, he'd seen worse, but only because his nephew was in a punk rock band. "We really don't have too much on this guy. He's only been in New York for a few months. Moved here from Chicago. Rumor has it he killed a fellow gang member out there, but we don't know for sure. The day he left town, the Chicago Police Department's computer room was blown to bits by dynamite."

"A coincidence?" Rajavur asked.

Bronson stared at the man. "No."

Feeling weary, the Icelandic diplomat undid his necktie and stuffed it into the coat pocket of his blue suit. "Tell me about the girl."

"Her name is Torch," General Bronson said, shifting his cigar about as if it had suddenly acquired a bad taste. "She used to mug people by dousing them with gasoline and threatening to set them on fire unless they paid her, then she'd do it anyway and dance around their flaming bodies while laughing."

Collectively, the FCT made gagging noises.

“Yeah, I agree,” he sighed in a pained voice. “That is, till one of her victims accidentally set her hair on fire, burning it off. She spent months in Bellevue hospital recovering from the burns.”

“Did that change her any?” Sir John asked inquisitively, his clinical interest aroused. Such accidents were often viewed by the mentally unbalanced as divine retribution and the poor misguided soul hastily mended their ways.

“Change her? You bet it did,” Bronson said positively. “The police report states that it made her even meaner than before, and now she uses iron baling hooks to kill people instead of no-lead premium.”

Utterly nauseated, the sociologist returned to his collating, his professional interest in the matter more than sated.

With a hop, the marker moved across the screen to a scraggly-haired youth possessing remarkable beaver-like teeth. “And that’s Chisel,” Bronson said, finishing his list. “In my opinion the worst of the lot.”

“Why do you say that?” Rajavur asked curiously. “The boy doesn’t look like a killer.”

“Part of his charm,” the general countered, fishing in the pocket of his uniform for a fresh cigar. “Chisel still wouldn’t appear very dangerous even as he was cutting your bleeding, liberal heart out. He’s a blade man.”

Born and raised in Iceland, this statement confused the diplomat. It upset them that the boy was a good skater?

“An expert with knives,” Dr. Malavade explained softly.

With a grimace, Bronson grunted assent. “The kid’s bad news. He’s mentally retarded. Actually enjoys cutting people into pieces.”

In reply, Prof. Rajavur gave a heartfelt sigh and took a sip from his coffee mug, only to find bitter dregs at the bottom. He hoped the act wasn’t prophetic. “Marvelous,” he muttered, half to himself. “Simply marvelous.”

Situated behind the bulletproof Plexiglas shield, Nicholi had been listening to the conversation of his teammates and he was less than pleased. Their situation had become even more unstable, more explosive. The fate of the entire Earth now rested in the hands of dangerous, anti-social psychopaths. Then the Russian soldier wryly grimaced. So what else was new?

* * * *

Meanwhile, in the glistening white control room of the alien starship, the blue humanoid remained unswerving in his conviction.

“No,” Leader Idow said to his anthropomorphic shipmates. “They are an innocent road maintenance crew who have been abducted by strange beings from outer space and forced to fight for their lives against weird, undirtly foes.”

“No!” Idow repeated the word for emphasis and pounded the empty air in front of him with his fists, an almost obscene gesture to his species. “They must be calling this a game simply from youthful zeal and the foolish belief that they can win. They probably also think that Right Makes Might.”

Mushroom, stone and lizard laughed heartily at that. Snorful! Right makes might. Horank! Hot Void, Idow was a funny guy at times.

“The fact that they are treating this as an amusement only serves to heighten the desired effect.” Leader Idow paused here for dramatic effect. “So I double my bet!”

A hush fell upon the control room, and Idow waited to see how his associates would react.

“Accepted!” Gasterphaz cried, his rocky fingers feeding the figures into the ship's computer bank. If Idow wanted to throw his money away, well, that was just fine by him! Besides, Idow could afford it. By the Prime Builder, he owned *All That Glitters*. With a bit of luck that might change, and the Choron could end up winning the starship and become Leader himself. Leader Gasterphaz. The very thought made the Choron feel boulder.

With a vegetable snarl, Boztwank spat into the soil of his own pot, a gesture of supreme confidence on his world. “Bah! You don't really think those primitives will actually prevail, do you? Ridiculous! Pass test #2? They won't even survive it!” The mushroom braced himself here for money was almost as important to him as ... sex? ... pink? ... harassing Trell? But then, what was money for, if not to enjoy taking it from others? “I double my bet!”

“Done!” Gasterphaz whooped, as gleefully as a Choron could. If anything, this was going to be a profitable trip! With avarice filled diamond eyes, Gasterphaz rotated his head to glance at Squee, who was standing over by his tech station methodically scratching at his tail. “How about you, Communicator?” rumbled the Choron sweetly.

Politely, the lizard inquired about odds.

Mortally insulted, Gasterphaz turned away in stony silence. Odds? Really, the nerve of some beings.

“Test two!” Boztwank cried, noiselessly stamping his invisible forcefield feet. “Let's do test #2!”

“Agreed,” Idow said, for once harmonizing with his Engineer. “Let the games begin!”

Squee hissed in acknowledgment, touched the necessary controls, and Leader Idow's voice flowed into the Test Chamber.

* * * *

“YOU HAVE DONE WELL, DIRTLINGS.”

“Get ready,” Hammer said to his gang, running nervous fingers through his long, greasy hair. Ever since the gang had been brought aboard this spaceship, he'd known that they were in for the fight of their lives. Happened often enough in the movies. On some television shows too.

“THIS WAS BUT THE FIRST OF YOUR TESTS. NOW, LOOK TO YOUR LEFT.”

Expecting the worst, the Deckers looked. Fifty meters away from them, a section of the curved wall was breaking apart, the pieces of white metal sliding into each other. Now exposed was an ominous black door edged with silver bolts. It disengaged with muffled thuds, the metal portal swinging aside. Beyond, was a dimly lit tunnel in which, in rapid succession, a spiked portcullis lifted into the ceiling, another dropped into the floor, a shimmering energy curtain faded away and segmented door opened wide,

spreading its metal plates like a blossoming flower. Through this impressive array of doors, there shambled a creature, the likes of which no human had ever seen. When clear, the tunnel closed, permanently sealing the monster in with them. The street gang stared with bulging eyes at the utterly bizarre thing that came towards them with slow, sure steps.

“THIS IS YOUR SECOND TEST. NOW FIGHT DIRTLINGS. FIGHT AND KILL FOR THE LIFE OF YOUR PLANET. FIGHT THE *QUATRALYAN!*”

Since Chisel had the lowest mentality of the group, he broke first. Clutching his sides, the boy fell to his knees laughing hysterically. Crowbar smirked. Whipsaw guffawed. Torch and Drill clutched each other, hooting uncontrollably and pointed shaking fingers at the ridiculously fat chickendog who approached them, its jelly belly body jiggling and bouncing with every step it took. A lumpy, featureless, potato head regarded the gang curiously and then a tiny flap of a mouth dropped open and it gargled at them, sending the gang into fresh gales of laughter.

“Sheet,” Whipsaw drawled, the scarred mass of tissue that was his face assuming the unusual position of a friendly smile.

“W-what's it going to do?” Drill gasped, breathlessly struggling not to fall to the floor. “S-sit on us?”

“Damn thing's uglier than me!” Chisel clowned, holding his sides in pain, his wits never sharper.

“And your mama,” Crowbar said, grudgingly joining in on the fun.

“Ain't laughed so hard since that ambulance crashed into the orphanage,” Torch giggled, wiping tears from her eye tattoos.

“Sheet,” Whipsaw repeated, as always a man of few words.

Only Hammer did not join in on the merriment; a fact that both Gasterphaz and Nicholi found noteworthy. The street tough knew that looks could be deceiving. Nuns don't seem like much, but they're wildcats when cornered. And those crosses could kill ya!

“Whipsaw!” the ganglord barked, his stern gaze never leaving the alien creature for a second.

Still chucking, the gang member wiped his runny nose on the sleeve of his leather jacket. “Yeah, boss?” he asked.

“Kill it,” Hammer ordered brusquely.

Moving instantly, the legbreaker surged forward, his heavy motorcycle boots slapping loudly against the cushioned floor, pushing his 300-plus pounds of hard muscle on with astonishing speed. A freight train with a Mohawk, a Mack truck in leather, Whipsaw roared like a primordial beast and closed in on the corpulent alien, his weight lifter's arms ready to block any escape attempt on its part. The street gang cackled in glee. This was going to be great! Whipsaw was three times the size of that cheesy alien mutt. This was going to be over in seconds!

It was. As the big man reached for the Quatralyan's throat, two slim tentacles shot from its feathery chest, spearing Whipsaw through the stomach. The Bloody Decker's laughter died, when they saw the dripping limbs fingering the back of their friend's jacket. With a dreadful cry, Whipsaw tried to pull away and the Quatralyan stabbed a third tentacle into his body. The gang member writhed in agony, blood

gushing from his hideous wounds. A fourth tentacle lanced out and his knees buckled, then another, and another!

In an abrupt move, the Quatralyan yanked its arms from the street tough's form and Whipsaw crumpled to the floor. Daintily, the chickendog stepped over the spreading pools of red as more, and more tentacles snaked out of its impossible body; ten, twenty, thirty. It became a Medusa's head of wiggling limbs on doggy paws. The living nightmare turned its potato head towards the street gang and fiendishly gargled at them again.

“Waste that thing!” Hammer snarled, drawing an Army Colt .45 from under his jacket and the Bloody Deckers attacked.

Razor sharp throwing stars, shurikens, appeared and disappeared in Chisel's talented hands. The Quatralyan dodged the whirling blades and came at the boy. Twin switchblades snapped into existence and the young blademaster circled to the left. Torch, her hands full of iron hooks, moved to the right. Drill pulled a stiletto from his boot and charged straight at the monster. Crowbar produced a motorcycle chain, and twirled it to near invisibility as he deliberately stepped in front of Hammer.

What the fuck? “Get outta the way!” the ganglord yelled furiously.

But Crowbar pretended not to hear him. Hammer tried to angle past the man, and again Crowbar stepped right in his path preventing Hammer from using his pistol. This couldn't be any better. Right on TV he would show the world that Crowbar didn't need a gun to make him tough, and bikers would flock to him. He'd have his own gang then. Crowbar's Commandos! No more a nobody. He'd be the boss. Yeah, the time was ripe. Time for Crowbar!

Gnashing his teeth, Hammer eased his grip on the pistol. No way. Crowbar couldn't be stupid enough to be doing this on purpose. Got to be a mistake. The ganglord thumbed back the hammer on his weapon and tried once more for a clear shot.

With a martial arts cry, Drill threw himself at the Quatralyan, who hopped out of the way. Hitting the floor and rolling, Drill twisted about and came up swinging, right where the creature was supposed to be. But it wasn't. Sensing a trap, the quatralyan had darted between Chisel and Torch. Neither of them close enough to stab it, though both tried. For an instant, the beast was in the clear.

Assuming a firing stance, Hammer leveled his automatic and Crowbar again got in the way. The ganglord cursed violently. The smug thug allowed himself a quick victory grin and released his chain, the four feet of linked steel flashing across the room like a silver arrow that slammed the pudgy alien off its feet in a tangle of limbs. The Quatralyan tried to stand, and failed, then weakly bleated in pain. Without pause, the street gang came charging in from every direction.

Grinning openly, Crowbar unwound a second chain from his waist and went to help with the kill, his traditional biker's weapon expertly wrapped tight around a scarred fist.

The Quatralyan poked a lumpy head from the jumble of its body and mournfully bleated again. Yet oddly, no damage was showing. No blood. Hammer didn't like that and got a hunch.

“Watch out!” he yelled in warning. “The dust mop's doing a suck play!”

Not completely stupid, Crowbar heeded the ganglord and fired off his second chain in a hip shot that cannonballed towards the ropy alien. Jerking aside, the Quatralyan let the metal missile pass by, not

wishing to be hit again by that strange weapon. The monster gargled nastily and ran to kill Crowbar, the closest of its enemies. Hammer tried to zero in on it anyway, and the creature moved to the far side of the gang member as if somehow understanding what the function of a gun was.

Crowbar then unlimbered his last weapon. From inside his pants pocket he withdrew an Italian gravity knife, and waited for the attack. More blade than handle, the weapon was like a butcher's axe, made for chopping. His hand held high, the grim man braced himself to cut the thing in two with a single stroke. Dr. Guillotine meets The Spaghetti Monster.

But flashing knives from Chisel bracketed the beast, forcing it back. Then in another mad roll, Drill sliced open both of the hind legs of the creature. The Quatralyan screamed in real pain now. No mere bleat, but a steam whistle keen that went through Crowbar's head like an icepick as he chopped downward. Several of the monster's tentacles hit the floor, the stumps oozing yellow.

Off balance, the chickendog stabbed holes in the gang member's flapping jacket, the rigid limbs scoring bloody trenches along his ribs. Crowbar stabbed with a knife not designed for the purpose and missed. The Quatralyan reared, its snake nest body poised to strike. Death filled Crowbar's eyes.

Then Torch buried her iron hooks in the monster's plump rump.

The Quatralyan shrieked like a million smoke detectors and the laughing woman jumped back, but not fast enough. Pivoting about, the wounded creature rammed all of its remaining arms straight into the human.

As they jerked out, blood formed a fountain from her riddled body and the woman fell limply to the floor. Just then, the thunderous reports of the Army .45 filled the air as Hammer finally got his unobstructed view.

Yellow blood and feathers sprayed into the air under the impact of the soft lead bullets and the ganglord brutally fired again and again, the heavy slugs from the booming Colt punching the screaming alien across the room, leaving oily smears on the white floor. Its death scream peaked into the ultra-sonic, then abruptly stopped as Drill brutally slit the monster's throat with his stiletto.

Completely unable to help, the population of the world watched as the mangled pile of flesh that had once been Torch reached out a hand to her chief. Hammer rushed over. Kneeling by her side, he took the woman's hand in his and gently gave it a squeeze. She raised her head to speak, causing more blood to well from her hideous wounds. Hammer bent close, and she whispered something too soft for him to hear. Then her hand went stiff in his, her body trembled in a spasm, and Torch died, lying sprawled in a pool of blood and intestines.

In unaccustomed tenderness, the ganglord closed her only intact eye and bowed his head in sorrow. Chisel turned away from the scene, ashamed of his unmanly tears. Stiffly somber, Drill walked to the Quatralyan's body, retrieved his friend's hooks and laid them next to her battered corpse. And showing great wisdom, Crowbar stayed in the background.

For a long moment, nobody spoke.

Then Hammer stood, his face a cold mask of fury. He had the blood of a good friend staining one hand, and a smoking .45 Army automatic in the other. The youth squeezed those scarred hands into hard fists and glared hatefully at the clean white ceiling so far, so goddamn far, out of reach.

"NEXT!" he roared defiantly.

SEVEN

"Magnificent! They were magnificent!" Boztwank squealed, beside himself with pleasure. The joyful mushroom flew across the control room to congratulate his Leader. "Oh, I do apologize, Idow. You were absolutely correct. These Dirlings are wonderful. Wonderful!"

"Yes," Squee agreed with a toothy lizard smile. "They are very good, indeed."

But the starship's Leader heard neither of them. "A distance weapon," Idow muttered, faintly echoing himself. He leaned forward in his seat, the chair automatically adjusting itself to the new position. "They have a distance weapon. Gasterphaz, why was I not informed of this?"

"Because I did not know," the Choron Protector replied honestly. "Metal is metal, and they're covered with it. It's in their mouths, nose, ears, any orifice you care to name. And what is not hidden inside their clothing is holding it together. My sensors indicated no weapon grade energy sources, and so I reported them unarmed." Gasterphaz's veneer cracked. "Sorry."

Magnanimous as any Leader, Idow brushed the matter aside. "Accepted, my friend. So tell me, what weapons do they have with them?"

Deep in thought, the rocky giant drummed his fingers on his control board, rhythmically denting the metal. "Well," he started.

"Thin knives, thick knives, folding knives, throwing knives, round throwing knives," Squee interjected, reading from a list that he had made during the battle. "Chains, short hooks, the projectile weapon, which by the way I want for my collection ... sss ... I believe that is everything they carry."

"One of the edged weapons is not properly a knife," Boztwank sang, his electronic pot weaving and dipping in a ritual dance of joy. "Better list it as a cleaver."

In the ensuing feeling of good fellowship, Squee made the appropriate notation on his list, instead of ignoring anything the mushroom said as he normally did. Besides, to a collector there was no such thing as useless information.

"And the small Dirling stole a spike from one of our drones in the first test," Gasterphaz added, trying to salvage his shattered reputation as a Protector. Though he rarely used them himself, weapons were his specialty.

Bent over the list, Squee clamped his elongated jaw down on his forked tongue in concentration. "Did he use it against the Quatrallyan?" the lizard asked excitedly.

The Choron frowned. "No, but he still has the spike on him."

In annoyance, Squee crossed out his last notation. Okay, maybe there was such a thing as useless information.

Watching his own reflection, Idow toyed with the silver microphone of his viewscreen. "Boztwank, is Trell still in the reactor core?"

“Yes, my Leader,” the fungi replied gaily. “Why? What has he done wrong now?”

“Nothing,” the blue being mused. “But get him out of there and have him send in the cleaning robot. I want the arena immaculate for the next test.”

Gasterphaz perked up at this. “Suitable for recording and adding to our video library?” asked the Choron shrewdly.

Idow just smiled.

Excellent, thought the Protector. The third test had always been his favorite to watch.

“Then I hereby announce that the bank is closed. All bets must ride.” This announcement astonished nobody as Chorons were notoriously dirt cheap. “And I shall prepare the warobot for immediate use. Half-speed as usual?”

“Let's try full speed this time,” Squee suggested cold-bloodedly, the luminescent controls of his tech station brightening at their master's anticipation. “I think our Dirlings can handle it.”

The ship's Leader had a momentary vision of small furry creatures being dropped into an active food processor and he shivered in pleasure.

In total agreement, Idow nodded regally, the fringe of indigo hair around his face bobbing from the motion. “Let it be done.”

Upon hearing this, Boztwank, scooted back to his post. Wow. Full speed. They had never done this before. Eeee! This was going to more fun then watching garbage rot.

* * * *

His laser printer finally at rest, Sir John removed his reading glasses and polished them with the handkerchief that jutted from the breast pocket of his tailored, three-piece, gray suit. The handkerchief was silk, monogrammed with the designer's name, and the color of the fabric perfectly matched Courtney's blue silk shirt. Then he blew his nose on the handkerchief and threw it in the wastepaper basket beside his console. These were merely his work clothes.

“Would you like it straight, or condensed?” the millionaire Scotsman asked the room at large.

“Would we like what, straight or condensed?” Dr. Wu asked, strips of computer paper littering the floor at her feet.

The Chinese physicist had tied her console in with the computers at Cal Tech in an effort to discover how to crack the alien's force shield. As her printer reeled off another failed equation, she ripped the sheet free, made a note of something interesting in the formula on her clipboard, then crumpled the paper into a ball and threw it in the general direction of her wastepaper basket. So far, the score was; wastepaper basket: zero, floor: thirty-seven.

“World reaction to the events we have just witnessed,” Sir John politely explained.

“Condensed please, Jonathan. No lectures today,” Prof. Rajavur said, laying aside his earphones and giving Dr. Malavade the go ahead signal.

Enabling a never before used section of his console, the Indian linguist started diligently tapping complex commands into a computer keyboard.

Sir John cleared his throat. "Ahem. Hurrah for the good guys."

With an expression similar to a man who has discovered a live eel in his underwear, Rajavur spun about in his chair. "I beg your pardon?"

"Well, you wanted it condensed."

"Elucidate," the professor ordered in ill humor.

"It's the street gang," Sir John explained looking embarrassed. "The majority of the world is cheering for them. The Bloody Deckers are heroes."

"Heroes?" General Bronson stormed, slamming down the receiver of his hush phone so hard that the instrument rang, even though it was not equipped with a bell. "They're loonies!"

"Heroic loonies," Sir John corrected. "So nobody cares."

"Well, Bill Paterson cares," Bronson countered.

Sir John raised a questioning eyebrow. "And he is?"

"The police captain for Manhattan Central. He just issued arrest warrants on each gang member for carrying a concealed weapon. Apparently, the man has been trying to nail the Deckers for the past seven years. Captain Paterson is reported to have turned a cartwheel when Hammer pulled that gun in front of two billion witnesses."

"Indeed. Well, I wish him luck in serving it."

Bronson gave a half smile. "Yeah, me too."

* * * *

Taking their time, the Deckers went about the messy task of placing their dead friends side by side, and removing their leather jackets to covering their mutilated bodies. Afterwards, Chisel scurried about the test chamber recovering most of his knives. But that was okay. He still had that blade he'd stolen from the little robot. A secret weapon, yeah. Cool. Crowbar offered his spare chain to Drill, it was accepted and together the two men were working the kinks from the metal lengths, getting ready for the next attack.

Taking full advantage of the lull, Hammer dug fresh bullets from his pocket, loaded the clip and slid it into the butt of the automatic pistol where it locked into place with a satisfying click. Eight more rounds and the Colt would be useless. He had to make every shot count, even though one of the bullets was already spoken for.

The ganglord had talked briefly to Crowbar, telling the stupid sonofabitch that if he ever disobeyed orders again, Hammer would blow the man's freaking head off. Torch was dead because of him, and the only reason Crowbar was still sucking in air was that the gang needed every stud they had to get out of this mess alive. But a single mistake and the bastard would be wearing grass for a hat.

The hissing noise of the arena's weird door opening, made the Deckers glance up from their weapons, and though they had faced death a thousand times before, today the street gang almost wet their denims. This next test was going to be a grade A, bottled and bonded, four star mother.

Stepping away from the closing wall was a giant humanoid robot. The machine man stood twenty feet tall at least, with a shiny body made of smooth green armor. In its right hand, the awesome robot held a big metal bar, or maybe a club. But the weapon was huge, whatever it was. The thing looked like a telephone pole veined with energy cables, and there was a worn, pitted nozzle at the lower end. Nobody had to tell them that this was plainly a weapon of power.

Without any preamble, the deadly machine began to walk straight towards them.

“DECKERS!” Hammer yelled, and the gang rallied to the cry. Bravely, they charged their newest opponent, ready to fight to the death, because Deckers don't surrender.

Pausing in curiosity, the cleaning robot peered down at the beings running towards it and wondered what was the problem. The test chamber was a mess, but no more so than usual.

Crowbar and Drill reached the green giant first. They arced around the machine's legs, whipping the robot with their chains as they passed. The thin plastic armor cracked in a spiderweb pattern under the violent blows and bits sprinkled to the floor, exposing an inner framework of struts and circuitry. The gang took heart from this and bellowed their name again even louder.

Dispassionate as a doorknob, the machine scanned the damage. The waterproof casing of its legs wasn't intact anymore. With a robotic sigh, the janitor laid aside its electronic mop and bent over to retrieve the broken pieces of itself.

In an overhand throw, Chisel released his pride and joy, a two and a half pound, stainless steel, Bowie knife. The Texas toothpick whizzed through the air and smashed into the robot's chest, lodging firmly between a circuit cube and a power cable. As a short circuit surged through its entire body, the machine flashed into overload, its control relays systematically burning out. Blind and deaf, the dizzy robot noisily crashed to its knees and sent an urgent plea for help to Those-Who-Command.

* * * *

“They're doing*what?*” throtead Idow, rising from his chair.

“Attacking the cleaning robot...” Squee said, his voice fading away as his shipmates scrambled to their tech-stations. Oh, nobody ever listened to him.

Magenta with anger, Leader Idow slapped the switch activating the microphone on his control board. “Hey, you waste heads! Cut that out!”

In the test chamber the translation came as:

* * * *

“STOP, FOOLISH ONES.”

As always, the Deckers paid no attention to what somebody in authority told them to do. Crowbar grabbed the robot's staff and dragged the pole away, almost straining a gut in the process. Fighting to retain its balance, the mechanical reached out a hand to steady itself. Hammer easily dodged the clumsy

attack, and aimed the barrel of his .45 automatic pistol right between the sightless eyes of the rapidly disintegrating janitor.

“CEASE THESE ACTIONS. THAT IS ONLY THE CLEANING ROBOT.”

“Bullshit!” Hammer roared rebelliously, pulling the trigger.

With a jolt, the mechanical's head kicked back. In vain, the machine tried to stabilize its internal systems as two more steel-jacketed rounds were pumped into the sparking remains of its face. The ganglord was gambling here, for even the street punk knew that the brain could be anywhere in a robot; the chest, legs, arms, anywhere at all.

However it had been deemed that in a cleaning robot it was judged most prudent to keep the machine's delicate brain as far away as possible from the caustic reagents and potentially destructive chemicals that it handled on a daily basis. So the brain was located in the head. For protection.

As dead as it could possibly be, the robot stiffly pancaked onto its face, the lovely green armor peeling away from its overheating nuclear stomach like the leaves of a murdered artichoke. Fat crackling sparks crawled over the broken machine, smoke poured from its joints, and a leg fell off.

Then in crude humor, Chisel unzipped his pants and contemptuously relieved himself on the fallen Goliath.

* * * *

Utterly flabbergasted, the aliens couldn't believe what they had just seen. This was almost beyond their comprehension. Exactly how primitive were these guys?

“By the Prime Builder's Waste Products,” Idow gulped, slumping backwards into his formfitting chair.

* * * *

“Holy crap,” General Bronson gulped, slumping backwards into his padded swivel chair.

A prude at heart, Prof. Rajavur took umbrage at the mild profanity. “Really, Wayne, your language!”

“Is most appropriate,” Dr. Wu interrupted. The scientist was utterly flabbergasted. This was almost beyond her comprehension. “Holy crap, indeed.”

* * * *

Chisel's base spectacle gave forth unexpected results. The smoke from the robot thickened, the sparks got fatter, and a vicious humming started. Justifiably frightened, the gang quickly retreated to safety.

“Hey, chief,” Drill whispered, crouching low, with the rest of the gang following his lead. “You know what? I think that thing is going to...”

It did. The entire starship shook as the tortured works of the broken robot whoofed into a fireball. Tendrils of smoke and shrapnel filled the air. As the force of the detonation knocked the Deckers prone, the gang gripped the floor like Moslems in Mecca. Every warning light in the starship winked on, klaxons sounded, bells clanged, powerlines snapped and the viewscreens in the control room went black.

* * * *

Suddenly, the FCT found itself staring at the outside of the alien ship and the team cursed in six different

languages.

* * * *

As the force of the detonation dissipated, the rattled street gang got slowly to their feet.

“Everybody okay?” Hammer asked, straightening his leather jacket and checking for damage. Nyah, the coat was fine.

With a grunt, the dapper Drill tucked his sweaty T-shirt back into his worn denims. “Yeah. Sure. I just love getting dumped on my ass by exploding robots.”

“Me too!” Chisel cried in simple-minded delight. “Let's do it again!”

In a friendly manner, Hammer gave the boy a smack on the head. “Joking. He was only joking, pinhead.”

The boy smiled in embarrassment. “Oh.”

“I'm okay too,” Crowbar said, hawking and spitting into the distance.

Drill loftily sniffed at him. “Like, who cares if you got a hole in you or not, dude?”

The ganglord started to tell the two of them to stuff a sock in it, when an odd thought occurred to him. A hole in him. The gag had worked in an old spy film he'd seen once. Maybe. Just maybe.

“Follow me!” Hammer cried, sprinting for the blast area with the gang close to his heels.

“What's up, chief?” Drill asked, effortlessly keeping abreast of his commander.

“Cross your fingers,” Hammer muttered.

The panting Chisel did. Both hands.

Thick hot, acrid smoke lay thick in the area, and the Deckers had to tread carefully so as not to trip on any of the fused machine parts or chunks of green armor that littered the blackened floor. The place looked like a tuna melt left too long in the oven, and the smell, whew, worse than a wino's kiss.

After a quick glance about, Hammer grimaced. Damn, guess his idea had been for shit. Vexed, he kicked at a half-melted lump of robot, and the startled youth saw the hundredweight piece of metal disappear from view, shortly followed by a loud clang. Wary of their footing, the Deckers advanced closer to the spot and, sure enough, there was a gaping hole in the floor. Through it they saw a corridor on the ship level below them. The street gang needed no further prompting. Heedless of the hot, jagged metal that ringed their escape route, the Bloody Deckers scrambled down the hole and raced out of sight.

* * * *

Replacing the blown fuses in his control board, Squee activated the video cameras in the arena and hissed in horror when he saw the bi-level view inside the devastated test chamber.

“Gone!” he raucously informed the control room. “The primitives are gone!”

“Mrmph,” Leader Idow said unintelligibly, absorbed in the task of recalibrating his navigational equipment.

Gasterphaz had lifted the lid of his tech station, and was working on the internal circuitry, bent over at the waist in an angle impossible for any species not possessing an endo and exoskeleton as did his. “A pity,” the Choron rumbled. “But that blast could have damaged even me.”

Frantically, the lizard danced about. “No-no! Not dead, gone. Escaped, gone!”

With amazing speed, Gasterphaz freed himself from the maze of wiring. “The primitives are loose?”

Aghast, Idow dropped an electro-wrench. “*Loose aboard my ship?*” he throated, using both of his mouths.

“Alive?” Boztwank screamed, his fronds quivering in fear.

Squee dumbly nodded yes and the mushroom fainted to swoon. This was terrible. He couldn't believe it! So the fungi pinked himself, and he still couldn't believe it.

Moving in astonishing speed, Gasterphaz slammed shut the lid of his tech station, switched on the anti-intruder systems and prepared for personal combat.

Coming out of his reverie, Squee located Trell, alerted the Technician to the situation and ordered him to go hide.

Muttering curses, Boztwank keyed the starship's reactor to 20/20, sealed the ship and set his squirter on emergency sequence.

But strangely, Leader Idow reclined in his chair and rubbed a pale blue hand across a pale blue cheek. Well, well, he cynically thought to himself. It appears that there was going to be a third test held today. Only this one, he and his crew had to pass.

EIGHT

Slow and cautiously, a human head eased its way around the corner of a white passageway, and daringly looked this way and that. Nothing was in sight but another white passageway with blank white walls. It was exactly like every other corridor in this goofy ship. The gang could have been going around in circles. Although they had been trying very hard not to do that.

“Clear,” Drill panted, and the street gang hurried past him. At the next corner, Chisel took the point position and ventured his head into the corridor beyond.

“Clear,” the youth announced, and the process repeated.

Ever since their escape, the Bloody Deckers had been dodging and ducking through miles and miles of these crazy white corridors; positive that somebody must be chasing after them. But so far nothing. It was a nice change from the alleys of New York, but where the Hell was everybody? Hammer knew that time was short and the gang had to do something clever, fast. Every science fiction movie he had ever seen told him that much.

“Chisel, go left,” he ordered at the next intersection. “Drill, take the right. And keep your eyes peeled for an air vent. Should be easy enough to spot on these damn white walls.”

“Gotcha,” Drill said with a wink, and departed.

Chisel seemed uncertain what to do, so Hammer turned the boy about. “That way, idiot.”

The young blade master toothily smiled at Hammer in thanks and tiptoed away as quietly as possible in his Army surplus boots.

“What if they don't find an air vent cause there ain't any?” Crowbar challenged in an insolent whisper, so close behind the ganglord that his bad breath actually swamped his body odor. “Then whatta we do, huh?”

Hammer glared at his personal troublemaker. “Then we keep searching till we find an air vent,” he snapped. “Now shut your freaking mouth or I'll shut it for you.”

Just then, Drill softly whistled at them from around a white corner, interrupting the impromptu détente. “Hey, guys! Over here!”

The gang mobbed up, and sure enough, there, set flush to the white wall, was an air vent. About a meter square, the vent was covered with an ivory colored, metal lattice which was fastened shut with some kooky bolts.

Frowning in concentration, Drill studied them with the eye of a professional, then smiled and pulled a lockpick and a rat-tail comb from his jacket pocket. Deftly he began removing the bolts. During the work, Hammer and Crowbar assumed defensive positions on either side of him. Soon the Deckers would be safe, concealed inside the walls like fugitive cockroaches. The ganglord knew that the aliens would never find them there, cause he'd seen this trick work in a dozen movies.

* * * *

“What do you mean you can't find them?” Boztwank screeched, swooping over to the starship's Protector and beating his fronds against the rocky giant's back. “You incompetent bungler! There are dirty stinking primitives loose in our ship, and you can't find them?”

Facing his tech station, Gasterphaz failed to notice the leafy assault and went on viewing a panorama of pictures on his screen, showing empty white corridor after empty white corridor.

“Well?” Idow demanded vehemently, his bushy eyebrows alternately flexing in annoyance.

The mountainous Choron sadly shook his head. “The explosion wrecked a minor junction box and I've lost control of the cameras. I'm re-routing the system, but not even Trelle could fix this quickly.”

“So?”

“So either they are moving very fast and dodging my security cameras as if they've been doing this their whole lives, which is most improbable, or else they've metamorphosed into white paint,” Gasterphaz stated simply. “I can not understand it. A road maintenance crew should not be able to do this.”

The rocky giant raised his hands in disgust. “If anyone thinks he can operate my equipment more efficiently, then please do so. Because I cannot find them.”

Maintaining a firm grip on his temper, Leader Idow took a deep breath, and slowly counted from one to eight.

“Well, they haven't physically left the ship,” Boztwank argued petulantly, his forcefield hands twisting dials. “None of the air locks have been opened. The storeroom hasn't been entered, or the engine room. Bah!” Boztwank hit the manual override and ordered his pot to pink him again. This was getting serious. Had the primitives evaporated into thin air?

“No attempt has been made to broadcast a message,” Squee added unhappily. “So I haven't been able to triangulate on them. Besides, nothing they have could penetrate our force shield.”

Glowing from his chair, Idow's eyes formed crescent moons. “Are you sure?” he muttered deep in his throats. “Consider the facts, they smuggled a distance weapon aboard, they escaped from the test chamber and now they elude us with the greatest of ease. Are these the acts of primitives?”

A coward at heart, or at the fibrous lump that served for a heart with his fungoid species, Boztwank understood the implied hint. “Not the Great Golden Ones?” he asked in quaking fear.

“Perhaps.”

“Foolishness!” Gasterphaz boomed, his immobile face never more so. “Two of their own kind lay dead in the test chamber! Would even the Great Golden Ones do such a thing?”

“Yes,” Squee interrupted, with a couple of extra sss tacked on to the word. “They would. The Great Golden Ones would do almost anything to capture us. Alive.”

“A trap?” the Choron mused thoughtfully. That possibility had not occurred to him. But then, until his race had joined the galactic society, they had never heard of the word.

Impatiently, Boztwank rocked his pot to and fro. “The gas! We must use the Omega Gas!” he cried. “Flood the ship. Nothing can resist Omega Gas. Not even the Great Golden Ones!”

“You hope,” Squee added, clutching his bare tail to his uniformed chest as if for protection. Omega gas. Dangerous stuff. Just talking about it made him feel itchy. But then, breathing made him feel itchy. And horny. To bad this planet was only populated by mammals.

“And what about Trell?” Leader Idow asked, casually leaning back in his chair. “Is he to die along with the primitives?”

Boztwank opened his mouth to speak, and then closed it with a snap. What a pleasant surprise! “A pity, but yes. He must become a sacrifice for the good of the ship.”

“He is also the only real Technician we have,” Gasterphaz noted pragmatically. “Maybe you want to do every dirty little job that keeps this ship operating properly, but I do not.” Clearly disturbed, the gargantuan Protector frowned, an act that resembled a landslide at a gravel pit. “Idow, we must save him!”

The blue being nodded. “We can try. Squee, contact Trell and have him take refuge in a gas proof compartment until we tell him it is safe to leave.”

"Affirmative, Leader."

"Gasterphaz, how long will it take to warm the Omega Gas?"

"Nine hundred seconds."

"Then begin at once. Boztwank, start to seal off everything organic that the gas would destroy: clothes, food, and especially us."

"Us? Oh, how clever of you, my Leader," the mushroom mocked from his tech-station. "Why, I never would have thought of that." The closing of the armored security door punctuated his words.

Eat waste products, toadstool, Idow thought angrily. "Gaster-phaz, where is your warobot?"

"Outside the test chamber. Why?"

"Ready that too. Just in case."

* * * *

Barely a meter square, the ventilation shaft was a cramped fit, and the Deckers were constantly bumping into each other as they crawled along the seamless metal tube in single file.

"Drill, you fart on me again and you're dead," Crowbar growled from darkness at the end of the line.

Without a word, the locksmith passed gas again in retaliation.

"You son of a bitch!"

"Clam up," Hammer ordered tersely. "Or I'll beat both your heads in!"

"Hey, Chisel!" he called to the worn denim pants in front of him. "What do ya see?"

"A room," the youngster echoed back. "Full of machines and stuff. Like a boiler factory. You want I should check it out?"

"Nyah, keep going."

The gang had been in the airshaft for only a few minutes before they started encountering dozens of vents that led to various rooms. Funny that they hadn't found any in the corridors. Each vent offered them an avenue of escape, but escape to where? The Deckers needed an exit out of this ship, access to the control room, something useful like that. But so far, they'd only come across more damn rooms similar to that last one. This place had more fancy equipment in it than a high school! Unexpectedly, Drill butted into Hammer, which made him bump into Chisel. Seriously irked, the ganglord swatted the man behind.

"Watch where you're going, stupid!" Hammer growled.

"Wasn't my fault chief," Drill denied with hurt innocence in his voice. "Crowbar slammed into me."

"You lying sack of snot. I did not."

"Did."

“Not.”

“DID!”

“NOT!”

With a calloused thumb, Hammer clicked off the safety of his automatic pistol and the argument came to an abrupt halt. Ahead of him, Chisel was peeking through the next grill; the light coming through the metal lattice bright enough for him to see that the kid was grinning like a pimp on payday.

“What is it this time, pinhead?” the ganglord demanded rudely. “Their bathroom?”

Almost bursting with excitement, the boy turned and blinked at the darkness of the airshaft below him. “Geez, Hammer, you won't believe what's in here!” he gushed happily. “I think it's their,” he fumbled for the word. “You know, what the army has, a gun place. It's their armory!”

In a rush of adrenaline, Hammer quickly shouldered Chisel out of his way and peeked in for himself. Sure enough, the walls of the white room on the other side of the grill were filled with racks holding swords and spears and crazy, weird things with handles and slings. Most of the weapons he couldn't recognize, but the street punk could tell what some of them were. Rifles and pistols. Futuristic rifles and pistols. His mouth watered at the prospect.

“Jackpot!” Hammer breathed, unable to believe their good luck. “Hot damn, now we're cooking!” Briskly as possible, he crawled aside to let Drill get to work on removing the grill.

* * * *

“They're at it again,” Squee sighed.

Suddenly alert, Idow almost fell out of his chair. “What? Who? Where?”

“The United Dirltling Welcome Committee,” the lizard Communicator explained, exasperated at the native's persistence. Why didn't they just watch the broadcast? Oh, he wasn't broadcasting anymore. Oops. “This must be the Nth time they have called. On one of the higher bands of the electromagnetic spectrum, too. Actually, that's pretty impressive for primitives.”

“Answer them!” a voice of command barked.

The aliens recoiled in surprise, because it wasn't Leader Idow who had spoken, but Boztwank. Furiously, the fungi glared at his shipmates.

“Answer them!” he shrilled, gliding closer. “Let's end this charade! The tests are ruined, primitives are loose on the ship, and we're about to lose our beloved Trell.” A fake tear welled from a lidless eye. “So let's talk to this welcome group, give them The Speech, and ruin their day too! Let's ruin everybody's day!” finished Boztwank on a slightly hysterical note.

Using only a moment to consider the idea, the rock, lizard and humanoid decided to go with the mushroom's plan. Yes, it was time to make the whole planet miserable.

Eager with impatience, Leader Idow buttoned his uniform into a more presentable appearance and fluffed his eyebrows. “Squee, are you ready to broadcast?”

The Communicator grinned from gill to gill. "On the mark, my Leader. Ready?"

* * * *

"PEOPLE OF DIRT ... ATTENTION."

Startled by the unexpected broadcast, the FCT raised their heads to see the alien called Idow sneering down at them from the wall monitor. General Bronson removed the cigar from his mouth, Sir John put his glasses on, and Mohad exploded from the bathroom. Holding his pants closed with one hand, he leaped over the iron railing, dashed past his teammates and threw himself onto his console.

"Recording," he gasped breathlessly, jabbing a button.

"Get ready," Rajavur warned the linguist. "This could be what we've been waiting for."

Trying to catch his breath, Dr. Malavade just nodded. Everything was as ready as it would ever be. Now if only luck was on their side and the equipment would perform as desired.

Fiercely, the blue being on the wall monitor scowled at the First Contact Team, his shoulders straight, his eyes wide, his uniform incorrectly buttoned.

He's worried about something, Dr. Wu noted, absent-mindedly fingering the buttons on her own clothing. Us? Must be. Surely not the street gang.

"I AM SORRY TO REPORT TO YOU THAT THE TEST SUBJECTS ARE..."

"Now!" Rajavur ordered.

Instantly, Dr. Malavade hit a switch and a high-pitched squealing replaced Idow's words. But the alien continued talking, oblivious to the fact that his words weren't reaching anybody.

A long minute passed. Then another.

"Well?" General Bronson demanded.

Hesitant at first, Sir John slowly smiled. "It's working. The world is demanding to know what's going on, but no one suspects that we are jamming the alien's transmission."

Rjavavur appeared greatly relieved. "Then the rioting we feared?"

"Will probably not occur."

Dr. Wu let out the breath she had been unconsciously holding. "Thank God," the scientist said as if in prayer.

The radio jamming of what the FCT guessed to be the alien's pronouncement of Earth's destruction was Nicholi's idea. It was the old trick of what you don't know, can't hurt you. Worked all the time in Russia. If the aliens actually could destroy the Earth, then at least Humanity would go out with dignity and not as a howling, fear crazed mob. Nicholi had simply telephoned the notion to Rajavur and the professor had immediately set Mohad to work on the plan.

Gigantic dish antennae had been erected on top of every building facing the alien ship. Satellites were shifted in their orbits, moving rather close to a certain golden refrigerator. On Mohad's signal, everything but the refrigerator had vomited forth with a powerful electronic caterwauling, which blasted the alien's transmission off the air. Their message had never left Central Park.

People everywhere were fiddling with their TV sets, wondering what the hell was going on. Damn things always broke just when you need them. A few people, exceptionally clever or paranoid, suspected government intervention and tried to do something about it, but anyone who could wouldn't, and anyone who would couldn't.

Down in Australia however, the hastily appointed French translator to Parliament was having trouble convincing the government that this new radio gargling was a jamming field of some kind and not an obscure form of the Gaulic tongue. Of course, the Aussies did not believe him having dealt with the French before.

In high drama, Idow scowled at Earth for one last time, flexed his bushy eyebrows, and left the screen in a swirl of color. Mohad waited a few seconds more, just to be sure, and then let blessed silence wash across the globe.

"Do you think it worked?" Rajavur asked hopefully.

Sir John Courtney shrugged. "Impossible to say at the moment. But I would guess, and it's only a guess mind you, yes."

* * * *

Contemptuously, Leader Idow clicked off his microphone and settled back in his deliciously soft chair. So much for Dirt. Within minutes, there would be a worldwide panic and the planet's civilization would soon begin to collapse. He had done this many times before. The Speech always worked. That's why it was THE SPEECH. Lovingly, it told the story of an invasion fleet coming to ray blast Dirt into a cinder; with lava rain falling from the sky, volcanoes, tidal waves, death, destruction, famine! Whee!

The Speech was woven whole cloth from the essence of nightmares. Idow had willingly paid a fortune to have it written for him, but as he had killed the author immediately afterwards, he received a full refund, death being the only sensible way to deal with writers. Leader Idow didn't even have to read The Speech anymore. He knew it by hearts.

Ah, the poor Dirlings must be going mad by now. There would be mass destruction, buildings on fire, warfare in the streets, rape, murder, suicide! Every brutal act lovingly recorded in quintaphonic 3D for their later viewing pleasure.

In sublime delicacy, the blue being shuddered in borderline ecstasy. Of course, the mere fact that there was no war fleet, and that Idow and his shipmates could no more destroy a planet then eat it, meant nothing, since the stupid Dirlings thought they could! Idow wrapped himself in warm thoughts of violent bloodshed and was on the verge of orgasm when a titanic roar woke him from his reverie.

"Squee!" Gasterphaz thundered, noticing a meter on his security board twitch. "Someone has broken into your room!"

"My room? My collection!" Squee cried, instantly realizing the truth of the situation. "The primitives are after my weapon collection!"

Not coming awake, Idow choked. Twice. By the Prime Builder's nose hairs, it was just going to be one of those trips, wasn't it? "G-Gasterphaz, send your warobot to Squee's room. Order the machine to kill anyone it sees. No. Anything that moves! The primitives must not get their hands on those weapons!" Even though most of them were antiques, the weapons were still in perfect working condition and some of them powerful enough to constitute an actual threat.

"How long till the Omega Gas is hot?" Boztwank demanded almost uprooting himself as he nervously fondled the dirt in his pot. The rich loam slid easily off the frictionless surface of his forcefield hands.

"Three hundred seconds," Gasterphaz rumbled, both hands busy at the controls.

"Too long!" the mushroom screamed and spinning in place, he extended an arm to stab a button on the Protector's board. In raw horror, the Choron tried to pry the translucent limb away, but the forcefield limb resisted even his mighty hands.

"Stop, you fool!" Gasterphaz shouted in desperation. "The Omega Gas isn't hot enough yet!"

"Die!" Boztwank screeched, out of what little mind he had ever possessed. "Die!*Die!***Die!!**"

NINE

"Hey, slick, you dig English?" a hairless giant asked holding a projectile weapon with a bore large enough to accommodate Trell's nose. Which at present, it did.

The alien crewmember had to swallow before he was able to reply to the question. Squee had only just warned Trell that the test subjects had broken free from the arena, when unexpectedly he confronted those very same individuals right outside the Communicator's private room. Grabbed by the back of his collar, the alien had been lifted bodily off the floor and yanked inside by a large, smelly humanoid whose only redeeming feature was that he was properly hairless.

To Trell, the four humans came in a confusing assortment of sizes, shapes and colors. The only unifying aspect of their appearances was the space black, animal-skin armor that they wore. Which Trell thought was rather pretty, until the small Dirling with grotesquely protruding teeth turned about and he saw the decoration on the back. The Technician gulped. He was in the hands of primitives indeed!

To the Deckers, the alien was as short as Chisel, as hairless as Crowbar's head, and green, which surprised them not in the least. Obviously, he came from Mars.

Trell was dressed in an ivory wraparound uniform that left his arms bare, and a pair of calf high soft plastic boots. A wide, beige belt covered with pouches and a sealed tan box, circled his waist. Hammer frisked the alien for weapons, but if there were any hidden among the Technician's tools, he couldn't find them.

"Yes, I do understand your language," responded the beige communicator box clipped to Trell's belt. It had taken the device a few seconds to translate the human speech into something that Trell could understand and then convert it into the sub-sonic range his species could hear.

"My name is Trell, I am a Technician. Do not kill me and I will serve you faithfully to the best of my meager abilities."

He grovels well, noted Hammer, hooking a thumb inside his studded belt. Must do it a lot. The street tough smiled appreciatively. He liked that in a person.

The ganglord gestured at Crowbar to release the alien. Which the biker did so gratefully, and wiped his fingers on his grimy T-shirt. Yuck! The rubbery little creep felt like a dirty chalkboard. Crowbar was unaware of the fact that the alien crewmember thought the same about him.

In elegant simplicity, Hammer waved his Colt at the rows of strange, glittering weapons sealed inside the cabinets of unbreakable plastic and said, "Unlock those or die."

"Fair enough," Trell replied, and opened the first of the display cases with his master key.

Eagerly, the Bloody Deckers grabbed the antique rifles and patiently listened as Trell told them how to fire the weapons. A brief test on a bulkhead proved that he told them the truth. Twist this, turn that, pull the trigger and a bolt of polychromatic fire spat from the rifles muzzle, vaporizing a fist-sized hole in the metal wall. In loving appreciation, the gang caressed their new death dealers. Just wait till the 95th Street Comanches saw this! For the brief period that the rival gang survived the experience, they'd sure be impressed.

The Deckers took as many of the weapons as they could, with two of the antique lasers strapped to each man's back and a third held in their hands. The gang was armed for war. However, Chisel was given Hammer's automatic pistol, the ganglord wisely recognizing the boy's limited ability to acquire new knowledge.

Checking over the display cases for anything interesting, Drill asked the alien Technician about grenades. It took Trell a while to absorb the novel concept of portable throwing explosives, and then he replied in the negative. No such anti-personnel devices were available.

On Hammer's command, Crowbar poked his head into the corridor outside the armory to see if the coast was clear, and when he wasn't attacked by anything, the street gang left the room. Drill paused in the act of shutting the door to spray the display cases with his laser, destroying everything in sight so that none of the antiques could be used against them.

"Where now?" Crowbar asked his boss, pro tem.

"The bridge," Hammer decided, knowing that must be where their alien tormentors were hiding.

"The what?" Trell asked, adjusting the controls on his translator. There were no artificial constructs for crossing waterways aboard this ship.

Unaccustomed to explaining himself, Hammer gestured vaguely. "The bridge," he repeated. "You know, the front desk, the head office, the driver's seat." The street punk was clearly at a loss. How could he make the alien dude understand what he wanted?

Amazingly, the problem was solved by Chisel, who told the green being, "Take us to where your boss sits on his ass," he demanded.

Ah! Now that the Technician understood. "Follow me, sirs," said the little alien, and he smartly turned left. The Deckers moved stealthily along the corridor, weapons at the ready, when suddenly, from what the street gang had wrongly assumed were airshafts, there began to pump a thick purple sludge that hissed as the goop ate its way into the plastic floor, revealing the shiny metal deck underneath. Both of

Trell's ears stuck straight out from his head in raw terror. By the Prime Builder's Testicles, it was the Omega Gas!

"Whrur!" the alien howled like a goosed chainsaw. "Quickly! To the airlocks!"

The Bloody Deckers hadn't the slightest idea what that weird glop on the floor was, but from the way the little green bozo was acting, they ran too.

"Don't let it touch you!" Trell screamed, as the seemingly boneless Technician bounced, more than leaped, over the rivers of purple ick.

Though weighted down with their booty, the street gang did their level best to keep up with him and comply with the, no doubt, intelligent request.

Breaking to the right, Trell disappeared down a corridor and the humans hurried along behind him, zigzagging through a maze of passageways. Another right brought them to a dead end, where a man-sized silver oval decorated the end wall. Rapidly using all four hands, Trell touched the airlock in eight specific places, the door dilated, and the Bloody Deckers plowed into the room beyond, crushing the Technician beneath them. Fighting his way free from the pile of bodies, the rubbery alien reached up to slap a black spot on the oval's frame. As the airlock door irised shut, darkness enveloped them for an instant, and then the internal lights came on with a dull white glow.

"Safe," Trell sighed, sliding to the floor. "Safe."

The room was a plain rectangle, made entirely of what looked like burnished steel. Lockers lined both walls and identical ovals faced each other from the opposite ends. Aside from the Deckers and Trell, there was nothing else in the place.

"You sure we're safe?" Drill asked panting, his laser rifle searching the cubicle for new dangers.

"For the moment, yes," the box on the alien's belt said. "The Omega Gas can not reach us in here." He tapped the metal door with a nailless finger. "Air tight. No organic parts. The gas can't get through."

In fear tainted anger, Hammer snorted in contempt. "Gas? What gas?" he demanded. "You mean that grape jelly out there?"

Even through translation, the poetic allusion was not lost. "It is a gel, now," Trell explained hastily. "Because they released it too soon. The gas is cold. But when it heats up, pft! You're dead."

In disgust, Crowbar hawked and spit into the corner of the cubicle. "Oh, swell," he said sarcastically. "Come on, let's blow this dump!"

"Yeah," Chisel said, so frightened that the only reason he was still in his boots was because they were a size too small. "Let's go."

"Shut up," Hammer growled. "We ain't going nowhere."

Chisel stuck his chin out. "Yeah," he said loyally, doing a fast reversal. "We're staying."

Stepping away from the others, Crowbar turned to face Hammer, the butt of the stolen laser rifle braced against his hip. Protectively, the rest of the Deckers moved in close, ready to kill the ex-biker. But their

chief shut them down with a glance and boldly stepped in front of the man's energy gun.

“Well?” Hammer asked, his voice dangerously low.

Stubborn as his namesake, Crowbar tried to out stare the man, and failed. As he shifted his eyes, Hammer took advantage of the lapse to shove his own rifle into Crowbar's gut. The big man grunted in pain. This was not working out as planned, direct confrontation had never been his style. In ragged stages, Crowbar lowered his rifle, and after a moment Hammer did the same.

“We got guns, like nobody has ever seen,” Crowbar argued, trying to be reasonable. “And now we got a chance to get outta here. So what are we waiting for? You heard him.” He jerked a dirty thumb at the Technician. “That purple crap out there will kill us faster than drinking a Drano daiquiri. So why stay? Let's get while the getting's good.”

“Nobody ices a Decker and lives to brag about it,” Hammer stated as a hard fact. “Those martian mothers aced two of us, and you wanna take a hike? You chickenshit bastard, you gonna walk away from Decker blood?”

The ganglord knew that Drill and Chisel were with him a hundred per cent, but he wanted Crowbar too. With Whipsaw dead, the ex-biker was the strongest man they had. In a bare knuckle fight the guy would be invaluable. That is, as long as Hammer didn't turn his back on the bastard.

Although Crowbar knew that Hammer was planning something, he couldn't quite figure out what, so decided to play it cool and smooth through this gig.

“Hey man, you're right,” he said, amending his position with a forced grin. “Nobody can mess with The Bloody Deckers. We gotta take these geeks.”

“Glad you agree,” Hammer said with a sneer, Drill and Chisel flanking him, their weapons prominently in sight.

“You. What's your name again?”

Suddenly alert, the alien realized the conversation was directed at him once more. “Trell,” he replied, respectfully rising to his feet. “Trell-desamo-Trell-ika-Trell-forzua, Junior.”

The ganglord chewed that mouthful over. “I think we'll just call ya Trell,” he decided wisely.

In resignation, the alien shrugged. Anything was better than Junior.

“Don't shit me, Trell baby, what would happen if that Omega Gas got in here? Could we like, hold our breaths or something?”

In response, Trell shuddered, a gesture that meant the same thing to his race as it did to humans. “You don't have to breath Omega Gas,” he explained. “It touches your skin and you die.*Pft!*”

Pft again. “Okay, can we go outside and circle round to the bridge? Climb in through a window maybe?”

“No sir. Robot weapons would atomize us the moment we left the ship. To use Omega Gas the ship must be at Defense Level A. Escape is impossible.”

“So much for taking a hike,” Drill said snidely out of the side of his mouth. Crowbar ignored him and tried to remain cool.

“Trapped like rats,” Chisel whispered, genuinely scared. If only he still had his lucky Bowie knife with him, the one mother had used to kill father.

Trying to bolster the kid's spirit, Hammer gave the boy a friendly pat on the shoulder. “Okay then, we attack,” he said taking charge of the discussion again. “You! This airlock got any space suits?”

After a moment, Trell's translator relayed the word as mobile environmental armor. “Of course sir.”

“Show me.”

The Technician thought he knew what the hairy Dirtling was planning, and explained that it wouldn't work. “The spacesuits can't resist Omega Gas for very long. Eventually, the vapors will eat through the joint compounds.”

Hammer barred his teeth in his best Bogart impersonation. “Long enough to get us from here to the bridge?” he drawled.

Surreptitious as a gik, Trell dilated his nose. Ah! Darn clever these Dirtlings. The Technician shuffled to his feet and started rummaging through the equipment in the wall lockers, in the process finding his lost bottle of window cleaner. So that's where it had been hiding!

* * * *

Pursing his lips, Leader Idow spat in Boztwank's soil. The mushroom recoiled in disgust, his floating pot smashing into the metal edge of his tech station. For the first time in years the fungi was speechless, utterly speechless. Idow however, was not.

“YOU FOOL!” he double-throated. “YOU CONTEMPTIBLE FOOL! Cold Omega gas? We want to kill them, not annoy them!”

“And they live,” Gasterphaz said without any frills. “They have taken refuge in airlock #4. Trell must have shown them how to access the hatch.”

“Trell,” Boztwank growled, ready to explode with anger. “This is all his fault!”

In a fast stride, Leader Idow crossed the control room and viciously backhanded the mushroom across his fleshy dome. Boztwank reeled under the blow, and the blue alien hit him again, and again. Seething in fury, the mushroom lunged forward, his forcefield hands reaching for Idow's throat. But the alien commander had already activated the defense shield generator on his belt and he laughed cruelly at Boztwank's futile efforts to claw through the immaterial barrier. Which was the prime reason why everybody aboard this ship wore the device.

Knowing this, the hate engorged fungus raced back to his tech-station, turned his grapplers up to full power and ripped free the dented metal panel. With a stentorian shriek, Boztwank hurled the dura-steel square at his taunting blue commander. Without hindrance, the metal panel passed through the defensive energy field and stopped, centimeters away from Idow's throat, caught by the rocky hand of Gasterphaz. The mighty Choron crumpled the steel plate like paper and he deposited it on the floor with a ringing crash. Bodily, he stepped between his warring shipmates, a living stone wall. The combatants glared spitefully at each other around him and so nobody happened to notice a light come on at Gasterphaz's

board, saying that the door to Airlock #4 had just opened, and closed.

“First we kill the Dirtlings, then each other,” Gasterphaz intoned in a voice that brooked no discussion.

Reluctantly, everybody returned to their posts. Including Squee, who had been preparing to join the fight and help Idow. This did not go unnoticed by Boztwank, who was almost warm with fury. Forever unable to reach that blissful culmination of his species existence and release his spores, a lifetime of denial had long since taken its toll, and even by his own race's standards Boztwank was considered insane.

Sullenly, the mushroom inspected the exposed circuitry of his tech station for damage and pinked himself. He would gladly kill them all if he had the opportunity. Then Boztwank secretly grinned, for weren't opportunities like light bulbs? Made, not found.

Wary of the traitorous mushroom, Leader Idow sank into his chair. “Gasterphaz, send your warobot to airlock #4, with instructions to kill everybody it sees, but if possible to save Trell.” The rocky giant started to speak. “I know, I know. Those are rather complex orders for the machine, but at least that gives Trell a fighting chance.”

“Yes, my Leader.”

By outward appearances, Idow was unruffled by what had just happened, but inwardly he was still seeing blue. When they finally got away from this accursed planet though, he was going to kill that mushroom in the slowest, most excruciating manner that his torture loving race had evolved after thousands upon thousands of years of dealing out pain and suffering. Leader Idow wondered where he could find a piece of string and a small fruit?

* * * *

Only five spacesuits were hanging in the closet of the airlock, one for each member of the crew, and thus, one for each member of the gang, as Trell was coming along as their native guide.

The helmets were made entirely of a clear, hard plastic that rang like fine crystal when tapped. Trell strongly advised the gang not to do any whistling near them. The boots and gloves of the suits were made of jointed metal, while the body was a stiff woven material, rough and scratchy on the outside, silky smooth on the inside, and in the craziest shade of electric neon orange that the humans had ever seen. When Drill asked about the strange color, the Technician explained that it was to make workers easier to spot against the hull of the ship. The gang member grunted in reply. At least the freaking suits weren't white.

The Bloody Deckers looked ridiculous in their borrowed spacesuits as only Idow's had been even vaguely human-sized and Hammer had claimed that for himself. It smelled weird, but fit him okay.

Unfortunately, the rest of the gang was not that lucky. Crowbar's draped off him in folds, the spacesuit was human shaped, but much too large. He was like a child in his father's overcoat. An analogy he didn't use, never having met his father, or even knowing the man's name, until after he'd shot him.

Chisel's spacesuit was snug in the waist, there weren't enough fingers in the gloves and there was this stupid sleeve hanging off his butt that he kept tripping on until he tied it around his neck like an ascot.

But Drill got the really bad suit. His spacesuit was a pressurized dome that had three legs and something kept squirting him in the face with a pink liquid. Trell told the unhappy man that the reddish fluid was vital to the lifeform for which the suit was designed and could not be shut off. Air? Food? guessed the gang

member. No, replied Trell, they just liked it. Ah, reasoned Drill. Drugs! Not at all, refuted the Technician stiffly, they simply enjoyed being pinked. At first, Drill tried dodging the watery stuff, but invariably the fluid struck him anyway and soon he found himself enjoying its soothing chromatic effect and happily awaited the next dose. Why, pink was lovely!

“Ready?” Trell asked, the mechanical voice of his translator muffled by the adamantine fabric of his spacesuit.

“Born ready,” Hammer grunted, fumbling with his rifle. It was hard to keep a grip on the weapon with these goofy metal gloves.

The Technician dilated the airlock door and purple mist flooded in, filling the room. Everyone braced themselves, but when nothing happened, they relaxed and filed into the corridor. Swirling in billowing clouds of death, the Omega Gas was everywhere.

“Stay close to me,” the little alien said, and off they went.

Speed was important, as the war gas would soon eat its way through their spacesuits. The street gang had only a short while in which to find the starship's control room and end this matter for once and for good.

Seizing the chance for life, Trell was now wholly allied with the humans. His ex-shipmates, on top of everything else they'd done to him, had tried to kill him this time. Him! Master Technician Trell! A being can only forgive so much. Could Pounding Metal Implement and his Life Fluid Coated Floor People treat him any worse?

Relying upon his intimate knowledge of the starship's construction, Trell led the Bloody Deckers through the vapor filled corridors. The street gang trailing along behind him, keeping close, like brilliantly colored ghosts on parade. The purple gas was getting thicker as they progressed deeper into the ship, and it was getting more and more difficult to see the man in front of you.

“Turn here?” Hammer asked, inclining his helmet at a right passageway of a branching corridor.

“No, this way,” Trell corrected, and the Deckers went to the left, vanishing in a billowing eddy of the purple war gas.

* * * *

Seconds later from the corridor they had not entered, there glided a dark behemoth. The armored treads of the robot's tank-like base rolling on the floor with the sound of distant thunder. In iron obedience the machine scanned the hallway ahead, ready to kill anything that moved, especially Trell, as the warobot prowled the ship on a Seek-and-Destroy order. The deadly Omega Gas flowed unnoticed over its metal body and the battle droid faded from sight as it relentlessly moved towards airlock #4, and certain confrontation.

* * * *

Acting casual, Crowbar saddled up alongside Hammer in the misty passageway. “So what's the plan, boss man?” he asked in a rhyming cant.

“Find the bridge, blow the door and kill everybody we see.”

“Good plan,” Crowbar said, dropping back in line. Let Hammerhead take the lead in this, he thought

smugly. People often get accidentally shot dead in battles. Like seriously dead.

Swapping positions with the biker, Drill scuttled in close to his chief. "Yo," he said in a warning tone.

"Yeah, I know," Hammer growled. "But we need him at present. Afterwards, he's dead weight."

"Check," Drill said, pausing to skillfully catch a pink squirt on his face. Ah!

After what seemed like endlessly trudging through foggy miles of spirals, corridors, tunnels and ramps, Trell stopped his human caravan apparently in the middle of nowhere.

"This is the place you requested," Trell squeaked, the Technician expansively waving a hand at the corridor they were standing in.

In puzzlement, the gang looked at their surroundings. True, this passageway was different the others in the ship. Instead of featureless white walls, this corridor was lined with a multitude of pipes, tubes, wires, cables and flat square boxes. All white of course. But there was no sign of a door, or any other type of entrance. Just the damn purple mist, and his orange gang.

"You jiving me?" Hammer inquired, grabbing the little alien by the collar of his spacesuit and lifting him into the air.

Although revving to full power, Trell's translator failed totally to understand the cryptic remark, but the meaning of the action was clear enough. "No, no, I swear!" his belt babbled in fear while he wiggled helplessly in Hammer's grip. "This is the bridge thing that you wanted. It is not a wall, but a door. There is a phony-trick-illusion."

"Camouflage, eh?" Hammer deduced, the street tough remembering an old war movie he had seen once on the late, late show. Trell bobbed his head yes. "Well, okay then."

None too gently, the ganglord planted the alien on the floor and motioned to his men. They gathered round, and on command, twisted the energy boosters on their museum pieces. The quietly humming lasers began to throb with power, and Trell's translator stuttered incoherently.

"Anywhere?" Hammer questioned, raising the crystal rifle to his shoulder. "Or is there someplace special?"

"Shoot!" Trell screamed in terror. "Security monitors will soon sense your weapons." The alien pointed at a plain cream color box on the wall. "There! It is the locking mechanism. Now shoot! SHOOT!"

* * * *

As a beige light began to flash on his console, Gasterphaz stiffened at the control board. "Idow, someone is in the immediate vicinity of the control room with energy weapons."

The blue being frowned, "You don't suppose it's the Dirlings, do you?"

As if in reply, the security door exploded. Burning metal embers filled the air as the street gang in their spacesuits invaded the control room, firing their weapons willy-nilly. Scurrying for cover, the alien crew dove from their chairs, but the scintillating energy beams caught each of them in mid-step and the control room filled with the light of a rainbow gone mad as the personal defense fields of the aliens battled it out with the Deckers stolen weapons. The antique rifles had been set on maximum discharge, and the field

generators raced frantically to compensate. Flickering on the point of extinction, the sparkling auras around the aliens shrank, and then triumphantly expanded as the forcefields tapped directly into the starship's reactor for additional power. Their own beams fed back to them, the lasers shut off rather than explode and the street gang found themselves holding futuristic paperweights.

Using both mouths, Idow barked an unintelligible command and a mountain of stone rose from the floor.

The street gang bawked at the sight. Christ! The damn thing was bigger than the whole gang put together! Hammer grabbed his Army .45 from the fumbling hands of Chisel and fired the man-stopper point blank at the rocky giant. The steel jacketed bullets musically twanging off Gasterphaz's rocky chest. Even though knowing they were doomed, the street gang bravely raised their rifles like clubs, determined to go down swinging!

Then the first smoky tendrils of Omega Gas drifted into the room, passed unchecked through the energy fields of the alien crew and touched their living flesh.

With high-pitched screams, Idow and Squee faded into the purple mist, rapidly disappearing in a nauseating series of stages: hair, eyes, skin, muscle, organs, bones and then their deserted uniforms limply collapsed into empty boots. The rocky casing of Gasterphaz broke into pieces and avalanched down as his carbon based internal bracings dissolved away. Spinning out of control, Boztwank's electronic pot circled around the room, then with a click it settled to the floor, only a foul smelling hole left in the dark soil to show where the crazed mushroom had once stood.

Confused for a few moments, the Bloody Deckers found themselves alone in the control room of the starship, with just Trel and Omega Gas as company. As fierce as the battle had been, it took the gang a while to realize what had happened and that the battle was over.

“Well, sonofabitch,” Drill smiled, leaning against a white wall in relief. “Son-of-a-bitch, we won!”

TEN

Twelve seconds of arc above the orbit of Pluto, remaining equidistant from the planet Dirt and its sun, there floated in the starry blackness of space a small golden cube; in essence, a globe that had been squared off to the aforementioned refrigerator shape. To the uninformed, it was quite innocent appearing. But its color alone would have been enough to identify the mighty starship to any sentient being in the Milky Way. Due to the direct relationship between color and speed in Hyperspace, that superfast hue belonged exclusively to the Great Golden Ones, Guardians of the Galaxy.

Regular as prime numbers, the sleek patrol ship swept the solar system with its powerful sensors, searching for any unauthorized intrusion, its vast array of weapons held ready for instantaneous use: the Hyper Drive nuffifier, which could bring a fleeing planet to a screeching halt (presupposing anybody got one hot wired and in first gear); the omnipotent force shield dampers, which could crush a fortress like an egg, or, an egg like a fortress, depending upon the circumstances; and the telepathic **STOP THAT** cannon, which had brought legions of hardened space scum to their knees (if they had any), begging and pleading not to be sent to the ice mines of Galopticon 7, (a fictitious planet of horrible environment and ravenous life forms that the Great Golden Ones had the whole galaxy believing actually existed). When the criminals sentenced to Galopticon 7 instead found themselves being stuffed into a nuclear furnace, they figured their lawyers had managed a last minute miracle of plea bargaining, and that they were sure getting off easy this time.

It was on the strength of this myth, and their known devices, that the Great Golden Ones patrolled the starlanes keeping the galactic peace.

However, secreted in dark asteroids hidden throughout the galaxy were their PlanetBuster Bombs and NovaLasers. The dire weapons had never been used, but were all perfectly capable of annihilating an entire solar system faster than you could say, "Just kidding!" It was on the strength of these legitimate weapons that the Galactic League recognized the Great Golden Ones authority.

This particular starship, X-47-D, had been assigned to protect the planet Dirt and its indigenous population from unwarranted intervention. The two members of the crew of the interstellar craft believed that this was a punishment for laxness in their duties (it was), that there was nothing they could do about it (there wasn't), and that they were merely marking time since everything on Dirt was as quiet as ever (no comment necessary).

The crew of the vessel was also bored to tears, having little else to do than search for illegal aliens. But because of their hypno-training, their subconscious forced them to keep busy by polishing and cleaning the ship until it shone like a surgical instrument. As a result of this hypno-training, the crewmen who retired from the Great Golden fleet made extraordinarily good domestics.

In the kitchen of the golden cube (level five—section three—down the hall and make a left at the armory), amid spotless golden cabinets and racks of gleaming yellow utensils, Avantor, the ship's avantor, paused in her task of distilling the evening meal and lowered the flame under the complex maze of spiraling tubing, retorts and beakers that was their equivalent of a toaster oven. Possessing a remarkably humanoid body, the female stood a good two meters tall, her muscular figure proudly announced the excellent state of her health and mammalian heritage. Her skin and the long flaxen hair that she wore loose about her shoulders were the exact same shade of her jumpsuit style uniform, and in fact it was difficult to tell where one stopped and the other began. Only Avantor's eyes proclaimed her unearthliness, as they were abnormally large, solid black and had no discernible pupils.

Drying her hands on a lemon colored dishtowel, the avantor turned to the chiming communicator on the wall behind her and touched the speakplate beneath the tiny video monitor.

"You'll have to wait a bit more for dinner, 17," she said in a pleasantly husky voice. "I'm not nearly the proficient cook that you are."

With a rainbow swirl, the stiff face of her primary assistant, The 17, appeared on the screen. In military formality, the short golden male gave her a hard salute and the Avantor promptly lost her bantering air.

"Report," she commanded sternly.

"My liege, we have received a priority message beam from our orbital sentry about the planet Dirt. A functional stardrive has appeared on the planet's surface. Wave form analysis tentatively identifies it as the *All That Glitters*."

"Idow's ship," the avantor whispered, turning buttery in color. "How in the Prime Builder's name did they get past us? Aren't our scanners working? How sure are you it's them?"

Efficiently, The 17 answered the questions in order. "I don't know, yes, and the computer gave it a probability factor of 99.99%."

Her golden face grim, the female warrior nodded. Good enough. "What's our power status?"

“Nine over nine and steady, my liege.”

“Insufficient. Bring us up to 20/20 and start drive mode. Punch up the file on *Glitters* and feed it to me on my way to the control room.”

Formally, The 17 saluted. “Affirmative, my liege.”

With a deep breath, Avantor braced herself and added, “Plus, prepare for a short jump.”

“What? Ah, I mean, affirmative, my liege.” With another salute, The 17 clicked off.

Avantor allowed herself a smile. She appreciated his concern, but the inconvenience would be well worth the trouble if they could catch Idow and his villainous crew in the act. Swiftly, the female warrior left the kitchen and made her way through the twisting golden corridors of the X-47-D towards the control room. On route, the computer implant in her brain began to receive the data of that most infamous of starships, *All That Glitters*.

* * * *

Computer ready.

BEGIN TRANSMISSION, Avantor sent.

Data flow commencing. access which Idow file?

Full technical history: running time—184,000 seconds.

Military analysis: running time—1 second.

Theories and wild guesses: running time—994,000 seconds.

Synopsis: running time—300 seconds.

SYNOPSIS, PLEASE.

“Once, a long time ago, there was a very nasty boojum named Leader Idow. Oh, he was so scary!”

ADULT VERSION

“...and it was interesting to note that Idow and his gang in their various incarnations had wreaked more havoc on the galaxy than a supernova gone wild. They were perverts, sexual degenerates who got their jollies by watching sentient beings die violent deaths and by causing the downfall of civilizations on a regular basis. Their fitness test for the Galactic League was a curse on the lips of many an anthropological teams who had linked them to the demise of yet another outwardly reaching young planet.

While from time to time, his latest collection of degenerates had been captured or killed, Idow himself had always somehow managed to escape and find a new ship and crew. The Great Golden Ones estimated his age at 2,000 planetary rotations, but didn't know for sure. The file room of his home town had been destroyed by a chemical stick explosion.”

COINCIDENCE?

“Probability factor zero.”

CONTINUE.

“A cruel and vicious race by nature, Idow's people, the Sazins, reveled in torture and suffering to a degree that left most races ill. Their music was the modulated screams of the slowly dying, and the less said about their mating habits the better. The only reason they were tolerated was that the Sazins usually practiced their sick pain games on members of their own race, and had the uncanny ability to design really great music systems. Although everybody threw the demo disc into the garbage.

To his blue brethren, Idow was revered as a minor god, his glorious infamy only trumped by the inventor of the rack.

In one of their more highly laudable acts, the Great Golden Ones had stripped the Sazins of every space worthy vehicle, because, as staggering as it was to contemplate, Leader Idow was personally responsible for all three of the worst incidents of First Contact gone bad.

Case history #1—The Koolgoolagans were a peaceful, leafy race of intelligent mobile plants. They had developed into an incredibly noble, non-violent race who didn't even have words for murder, lie, or income tax. The treeoids seemed destined to become the greatest race of doctors in the history of the universe as their sap-like blood appeared to be a near universal antidote/antibiotic, and their branching limbs, slimmed from strong, broad tentacles down to hair thin manipulators of fantastic delicacy that enabled them to perform the most difficult types of surgery without the need of cumbersome masks, microscopes, or even instruments. (see medical text #474)

Unfortunately, the gentle race was discovered by the crew of *All That Glitters* and after several of the innocent doctors were tortured to death in the usual manner, the Koolgoolagans were horrified to discover that they had been pronounced too violent for galactic society. The resulting wave of shock and shame that swept through the populous caused them to wilt, turn colors, lose their leaves and die in droves. The fall of the Koolgoolagans was as pretty as it was tragic. (see botanical text #1,259: The Greatest Disaster, and literary text #138: Idow Is A Fink, an anonymous epic poem.)

The Great Golden Ones arrived days after the fact. A valiant attempt was made to revive the race, or to locate any surviving sprouts. But it was to no avail.

Medical note: During the massive raking, it was accidentally discovered that if you smoked a cigar rolled from Koolgoolagan leaves, years would be added to your life and many minor ills cured.

Law enforcement note: Nowadays, it cost a fortune to smoke a Koolgoolagan cigar and many confidence tricksters had become millionaires by selling phony Koolgoolagan seedlings.

Case history #2—The RporRians are a rather unpleasant race of evolved cockroaches, who nevertheless, had developed a high level of biotechnology when Idow and his crew dropped in to say hello. As did everybody else, the hive dwellers failed the tests. But instead of meekly waiting for doomsday in the form of a vast non-existent war fleet, or foolishly committing mass suicide, or ruining their ecology forever by building a planetary GO AWAY! sign like the Feppathorgans; the terrified insectoids hastily constructed organic starships and skittered out into the vastness of space, in a crazed attempt to hide between the stars. When they were finally contacted by the Great Golden Ones and told the true story of their predicament, the bugs went nuts, vowing vengeance on the race that had so cruelly tricked them. But since they had no precise idea just who in particular had done it, they decided that

everyone was to be held accountable and declared economic warfare on the galaxy.

Financial note: The RporRians have no constraints when it came to turning a buck: they would finish breakfast, seize control of a corporation, milk it dry, put millions of sentient beings out of work and shatter a world's economy by lunch. Afterwards, they would have a dummy corporation buy the now worthless business before pouring billions of credits back into the company to save it, thus reaping a truly staggering profit with which to spring for dinner.

Psychological note: These sort of amoral antics were extremely confusing to most sentient races, but highly effective. The age old concept of de-bugging your business computers soon took on a new, and horrifying relevance.

'If it makes money, do it!' was the RporRian credo; from selling primitive worlds non-working versions of their hyperspace drive, to running Three Card Monty games. The RporRians cut an economic swath through the normally prosperous galaxy that made the sad event of business executives leaping from their office windows a daily occurrence.

But the last straw came when the insectoids began selling counterfeit Koolgoolagan cigars, which cut into the monopoly of the Great Golden Ones. With a real armada to rival Idow's mythical dreamfleet, the star police booted the pesky bugs back to their home world of RporR and erected a robot space blockade to keep them there. The blockade is three planetary rings deep, with orders to shoot on suspicion of sight. (see military text #2—Don't Annoy The Great Golden Ones.)

The RporRians still escape occasionally, but they assumed the status of a minor nuisance. Soon, business returned to normal and the galaxy breathed a heartfelt sigh of relief.

Case history #3—The worst example of a bad first contact happened very long ago, but the staggering side effects of it are still felt today.

Like so many others, the peaceful planet of Gee had been visited by the space going perverts. But when they failed the tests and were warned of their imminent deaths, the genial, courteous Gees—who up until this event had had no higher interests than group sex and playing the nose flute—armed themselves to the teeth and boiled out into space in crude, nuclear powered, steamships, ready to fight to the death to protect their beloved planet. Each minute that passed without Idow's ultra-powerful war fleet showing was exploited to the utmost. With frantic haste they built bigger and better ships, and armor plated their moon into an invincible space fortress. Virtually overnight, they molded their race into a crack military force of 4 billion strong, laid a field of controlled black holes around their solar system, and trained their grandmothers in psychokinetic warfare.

Finally, they developed their own brand of Hyper-Drive technology and so, the peace loving Gees stormed into the Void, ready to attack their attackers, before they themselves were attacked.

Finding no resistance at first, they established supply lines and built adamantine fortress in every solar system that surrounded their home star. Along the way, the Gees began encountering other space traveling races and, hesitantly at first, began forging mutual defense packs. Assuming the more dominant role, more and more systems fell within their sphere of influence and the process rapidly gained momentum. (see political text #19—Building A Galactic Society: An Evolutionary Process?)

When at last they learned the truth of the cruel deception, it was too late. Their armed patrol ships were scattered throughout the stars, and the Gees discovered within themselves the heretofore unknown desire to stick their nasal units into other people's business. And thus were born: The Great Golden Ones, the

unmasked for guardians of the galaxy."

End synopsis.

Be kind, please rewind.

* * * *

"And the Prime Builder knows, we don't want that kind of an event ever to happen again!" Avantor noted aloud to herself.

Disconnecting the computer link, she stepped off a moving stair strip and purposefully strode along a golden corridor that ended at the pumpkin colored security door that led to the control room of her starship.

Calling the location a room was an act of pure politeness, a broom closet would have been a more correct description as it was scarcely large enough to hold the two Gees at the same time. The walls and ceiling were a deliciously cool shade of blue to aid their concentration and a wide bank of video monitors ringed the cramped room at head level; Avantor's when she was sitting, 17 when standing. In the middle of the alcove was a square metal pedestal with a short bench bolted to the front and topped by a complex control board.

Standing next to that was The 17, his gold uniform more clean and pressed than his hypno-training deemed necessary. Had Avantor known the human word, as she should have, she would have deemed him a martinet. But then, making job-related mistakes was why the two of them had been sent here.

Set alongside the pedestal was Avantor's goal, the squat, immobile, Command Chair: a heavily cushioned recliner from which she literally flew the ship by the seat of her pants.

As the avantor seated herself, 17 gave a little bow and then saluted.

"We are proceeding towards Dirt at our maximum sub-light speed," he reported crisply. "Arrival in 57,600 seconds."

"Unacceptable," she replied, feeling the itching sensation of the Command Chairs neural links passing through her clothing and delicately entering into her body. "Prepare for a Jump."

"At your command."

In proper military fashion, The 17 began throwing switches, shunting power to the starship's dimensionally unsure Q-coil engineettes. During this procedure, the joining process was finished and Avantor interfaced with her vessel; seeing through its cameras, breathing with the airplant and feeling her heart beat to the pulse of its reactor. With a mental command, she formed a glowing 3-D grid in the air before/inside her, spacial equations scripting along the bottom. Next to/inside her, 17 activated his navigation controls and a pair of blue dots blinked onto the grid.

"From here ... to here," he suggested with a pointing finger.

"We agree," the female/starship said, then the avantor closed her eyes and concentrated. From the eight corners of their golden cube streamers of invisible energy ripped apart the Time/Space continuum and once again she felt the omni-directional sucking sensation of as the starship dropped out of normal space and into the hot, gray nothing of hyperspace.

To Avantor's enhanced senses, hyperspace was a painful tingle. Not lethal per se, just terminally unpleasant, very similar to asking an RporRian for a loan. This was what the job of an Avantor entailed, so the female warrior grit her teeth and forced the interstellar craft onward through the endless thermal void.

"You're two degrees off course," a voice warbled from somewhere. "Correct and maintain."

"Affirmative," she heard herself reply and redirected her ship by the sheer will power of her artificially enhanced mind.

Despite the bizarre nature of the medium, some of the galaxy's leading scientists seriously postulated on the possibility of lifeforms evolving in hyperspace. So far, no proof of their existence had been found. That was one of the main problems with hyperspace, the only people who could really examine it closely were the avantors; the dedicated navigators who guided star ships through the featureless expanse by the sheer power of their living minds. They were far too busy working to take note of interesting scenery, had there been any.

Second after agonizing second ticked by as Avantor rigidly kept her ship on course and The 17 carefully monitored her vital signs. Soon enough, the tiny blue dots on the grid met, a chime sounded and with a sweating gasp Avantor disengaged the struggling enginettes the craft phased back into normal space.

Gratefully, she accepted a glass of chilled fruit juice that The 17 offered, letting her ship continue along its original trajectory and slowly radiate away its excess heat.

Now filling their forward viewscreen was the planet Dirt, an attractive world. This time Avantor and her 17 had a good chance of catching Idow and friends so that it might remain that way.

On the other hand, if they let those space criminals get away, and another species tumbled down the fiery hole of global destruction then the Galactic League would probably order the Great Golden Ones to build a real Galopticon 7, just to have a fitting place to exile the two of them for punishment.

ELEVEN

Wisps of purple gas floated past Hammer, clinging hungrily to his visor and obscuring his view of the control room. Annoyed, he tried to wipe the deadly moisture away, but his metal glove only succeeded in smearing the faceplate.

"Is that it?" he demanded the adrenaline still pounding through his veins. "Is that the lot of them?"

Trell squeaked a confirmation. All of their enemies were dead.

Muffled hurrahs came from his gang, and one voice in particular triggered a response in the ganglord.

"Not quite," Hammer growled as he met Drill's gaze.

With a nod, the two men attacked. Spinning about, the locksmith kicked the laser out of the hand of the startled Crowbar. The weapon hit the wall and discharged, its bolt of polychromatic fire vaporizing a chunk of the floor. Then Hammer ducked beneath the big man's roundhouse swing, and punched him hard in the stomach. Next, Chisel blindsided the biker, tackling from the rear. Crowbar stumbled from

the impact, but did not fall, and he backhanded the boy away. Chisel arced through the air and hit the wall, his helmet ringing from the hard blow. That was when Hammer and Drill moved in for the kill. Remembering their lessons in the airlock, the youths jabbed the spacesuit with their fingers, triggering the opening sequence and the front of the suit split apart, exposing the man inside to the deadly mist.

With a bitter curse, Crowbar stabbed out with his knife, determined to take somebody with him to hell. But the act was never finished. As silent as a prayer, his suddenly vacant suit crumpled to the floor like so much dirty laundry.

Contemptuously, Drill snapped his fingers at the empty spacesuit and Chisel spat at it, momentarily forgetting that he still had his helmet on. Bleh!

“Now all of our enemies are dead,” Hammer stated dryly, exchanging the thumbs-up sign of victory with his friends.

Nervously, Trell swallowed a small intestinal organ that had unexpectedly risen into his throat during the slaughter. It was starkly obvious that Prying-Metal-Bar must have outlived his usefulness to the gang, and so ... PFT! Well, by the Prime Builder, Trell-desamo-Trell-ika-Trell-forzua, Jr. wasn't going to outlive his!

“I will disperse the Omega Gas now, sir, if I may,” the little alien asked, submissively lowering his head.

Impatient to get out of the spacesuit, Hammer waved a gloved hand. “Absolutely dude, go earn your keep.”

My intention exactly, thought the Technician as he crossed the room to punch the appropriate commands into Gasterphaz's control panel.

Imperceptibly at first, the swirling purple fog took on a new pattern, slowly returning to the vents. Stratifying in the air like a lake mist, the layers of heavy gas dropped lower and lower in the room until, hugging the floor, the last traces of Omega Gas flowed back into the hall. The air appeared clear. Checking an environmental monitor, Trell indicated that it was safe for the Bloody Deckers to leave their spacesuits.

“You first,” Hammer said brusquely, a hand resting on the stolen laser rifle.

A slightly paler shade of green than was normal for his race, the Technician undid the seals on his helmet, lifted the crystal dome just a bit and gingerly sniffed. When he didn't drop dead, the little alien relaxed and began removing the rest of his suit. Judiciously at first, the surviving Bloody Deckers did likewise, and then took Trell's suggestion of storing the space suits and extra rifles in a wall closet.

Freeing himself from the armored suit, Drill gratefully stretched. But then a horrifying thought hit the locksmith, and with sure fingers he removed the squirter mechanism from Boztwank's spacesuit and clipped it to his leather jacket just in time. Ah!

With the toe of his metal boot, Hammer nudged Crowbar's lack of remains. “You got a garbage chute around here?” asked the tall human with a sneer.

“Of course, sir,” Trell replied, weighing his next words carefully. “Should I take care of that before or after I turn the ship over to you?” There was a pause, and slowly the street gang turned towards him. Yes, he thought that would catch their attention.

The ganglord tried to speak, but found he couldn't. Turn the ship over to them? Holy spit, it hadn't occurred to him that this spaceship was now theirs. They owned a spaceship? A freaking bloody spaceship!

"Brother Deckers!" Hammer proclaimed, taking a dramatic stance. "We have hit the big time at last!"

"Right on!" Drill cried enthusiastically, shaking the laser rifle in the air above his head. "The Bloody Deckers in space! Look out NASA! Who-wee! We gonna be badder than the baddest! Badder than ... than the freaking Angels!"

That was sacrilege to Chisel. The Hell's Angels? Nobody was badder than the Angels! Why, the Hell's Angels motorcycle gang was like having to take a leak, or rush hour traffic; an unstoppable force of nature. But if Drill said so, then it must be true. The boy grinned from ear to ear. Wow, badder than the Angels. Gosh!

"So what we gonna do first, chief?" Drill asked eagerly, slinging the crystalline rifle over a shoulder.

Do? The ganglord's plans hadn't evolved that far. Scratching his neck, Hammer surveyed the bullet-shaped room with its incredible array of controls. What could a starship do, fly to the moon? Who cared? That wouldn't put money in your pocket. This called for some serious thinking. Hammer sat down in Idow's deserted chair and rested his boots on top of the control board. Fearful, Trell rushed over to neutralize the controls before the human accidentally pressed the wrong button with his feet and blew something up, most likely them.

"Hey, Trell, baby," Drill asked copying the position of his chief. "Can you fly this ship for real?"

Even to the humans, the expression on the face of the alien crewmember said that he was insulted. "Fly the ship? I am a Master Technician! Why, given time and materials I could build a starship!" Trell stated firmly, but politely.

"Chill out, dude," Hammer commanded, lacing his hands together atop his greasy mane of hair. "The man was only asking."

While rooting through the clothes of the dead aliens searching for something to steal, Chisel found three metal belts made of woven silver strands, each having a weird ornate buckle covered with bumps and lumps. Those must be the controls, the boy deduced, his brain almost exhausting itself from the strain. Buckle and unbuckle. Pressing a random bump to see if he was right, a sparkling bubble sprang into existence around Chisel. The frightened youth threw the belt away and the bubble went along with the belt, leaving Chisel behind.

With a clang, the metal belt hit a panel near Hammer's feet, startling the ganglord. He turned grudgingly. "What in the hell are you doing now, pinhead?" Hammer asked annoyed.

"It bit me!" Chisel whined with a finger in his mouth, using his standard phrase for anything not working as expected.

"Yeah, sure," Hammer replied, rising from his seat and retrieving the belt from the floor. The twinkling light field readily admitted his left hand, but his right, holding the laser rifle, met stonewall resistance. The ganglord switched hands and the same happened.

“Hey, Trell, what is this thing, anyway?” he demanded.

“Personal defense field,” Trell sighed in disappointment. He had not planned on telling the Deckers about the devices as a bit of insurance against their wrath. “It is what my ex-shipmates used to cowardly defend themselves from your brave sneak attack.”

Drill lifted an eyebrow. “Laying it on a little thick, ain't he?” the locksmith asked sarcastically.

“So what?” Hammer sneered. “I happen to like having my boots licked.”

As Trell explained the operation and limitations of the devices, the Bloody Deckers strapped on the field generators and playfully tried clubbing each other over the head with the lasers. The exchange of blows got spirited and Trell scurried over to the ruin of the security door, not willing to chance getting crushed to death by these, to him, lumbering giants.

“Ah, gentlebeings. There are many delicate instruments in here, so perhaps it would be wise to desist?” he suggested, taking another step into the outside corridor. “Or move your exercising to the arena?”

“Enough then,” Hammer agreed, chuckling. “Cool it, guys.”

Panting from the exertion, the gang broke apart and Trell hesitantly entered the room again, staying close to the wall.

“Goddamn!” Drill gasped, mopping his brow with a red and white bandanna. “These are great!”

In careless abandonment, Chisel turned the sparkling defense field on and off several times. “Yeah,” the boy agreed happily. “Neat!”

Shifting his gunbelt, Hammer cinched the flexible metal belt tighter about his waist. “Only good against energy weapons, though. Right?” he asked.

The alien Technician confirmed his earlier statement.

Useless then, decided the ganglord. Cops don't carry lasers. Wearing this thing wouldn't protect you from a gun, or a club. But Hammer decided to keep his anyway. You never know, you know?

Now armed and armored, Drill strolled over to Trell and rested a friendly arm about the alien's scrawny, green shoulder. “Answer me a question, dude, will ya?”

Dubiously, the Technician glanced upward at the towering human. “If I can, sir.”

“Why the hell is everything so freaking white in here?” the gang member asked in exasperation. “Walls, floors, ceilings, doors ... shit, boy, white paint cheap where you come from, or what?”

This was a tough question to answer, but Trell did his best. Keeping to the most basic of terms, he told the gang about HyperSpace, covering the basic relationship between colors and velocity in that weird non-dimension. He kept mathematics out of the discussion entirely and described things as childishly simple as he could, but it still took him quite a while to cover everything. Throughout the speech, the translator on his belt remained totally silent. When Trell finished, it spoke to the waiting street gang using the most advanced scientific terms they could possibly understand.

"Big juju," the box declared. "Much magic. Ship no fly fast, if not white."

Blandly accepting the report, the Bloody Deckers returned to their examination of the control room.

Shocked to the very core of his being, Trell was stunned beyond words. Impossible! The entire theory of chromatic space travel boiled down to two sentences? Gak! The Technician quickly reversed his opinion of the Dirlings. Obviously they were nowhere near as primitive as he had originally believed.

A blinking light on the Communicator board caught Chisel and he nervously summoned Trell. To the alien's surprise, it was an incoming transmission.

"Hammer, sir," he called respectfully, indicating the flashing blue button. "Do you wish to answer this message?"

"A call?" the ganglord sounded surprised. Confused, he lightly fingered the array of controls spread across the console. Now how do you ... ah, aw to hell with it, answering the phone was not his job. "You do it, Mr. Master Technician."

With a straight face, the alien touched the blinking button activating the main viewscreens. The great panels of frosted plastic swirled like a snowstorm to finally cleared and show a large room with wood paneling and a row of computer consoles. Sitting behind those were what the gang would classify as Big Money types. There was a football player in a military uniform, two college professors; a gray hair guy in a blue suit, and one with glasses and a moustache in an expensive three-piece job, a hot Oriental chick in a flowered dress, and a skinny dark guy in somebody else's suit. The professor started to speak and the viewscreen speakers crunched and hooted louder than an elephant raping a Volkswagen.

"Well, the same to you fellow!" Drill answered rudely, sticking out his tongue at the screen.

That stopped the translator cold. In swift computations, it harmonized itself with the operating being and started again. This time performing the arduous processes of translating English into English.

With both fists resting on his hips, Hammer glared at the viewscreen belligerently. "Okay, so who the hell are you clowns?"

* * * *

In their underground bunker, the FCT exchanged perplexed looks.

Ceremoniously, General Bronson removed the cigar from his mouth to speak everyone's unspoken question. "And since when," he growled, "do street punks talk like the damn Prince of Wales?"

"I REITERATE," the wall monitor demanded. "PLEASE IDENTIFY YOURSELVES POSTHASTE."

Taking charge, Sigerson faced the monitor squarely. "I am Professor Rajavur, in command of the United Nations First Contact Team." He motioned to the people about him. "This is General Bronson, Dr. Wu, Sir Courtney and Dr. Malavade. We are the official representatives for Earth in this situation. Are you all right? What has happened to the aliens?"

"WE ARE UNDAMAGED AND THE PRESENT SITUATION IS UNDER CONTROL. FIGHTING IN SELF DEFENSE, MY ASSOCIATES AND I WERE FORCED TO DESTROY THE CRIMINALS WHO HAD KIDNAPPED US. THE ALIEN MENACE HAS ENDED. THIS STARSHIP IS NOW UNDER OUR CONTROL."

With these words, the world rejoiced, the previous communications blackout forgotten with this overwhelming good news. Earth had been saved by the Bloody Deckers! Hooray! Hurrah! Historic enemies hugged and kissed each other, cops and crooks, blacks and whites, Arabs and Jews, Democrats and Republicans. The glorious sounds of popping champagne corks, car horns and church bells filled the globe as Humanity celebrated their deliverance from what had been almost certain doom.

Deep in their underground Command Bunker, the FCT did not join the revelry, as their cerebral teeth were buried in a puzzling mystery. Via their throat mikes and earphones, the team held a fast conference.

"The translation device?" Dr. Malavade postulated scratching his chin. "Could it still be in operation?"

Dr. Wu made a rude noise.

"I agree with Yuki," Sir John sub-vocalized. "If so, then why is it converting the street gang's idiomatic sub-tongue into colloquial English?"

"Could be broken," Bronson guessed, adjusting his necktie. "Damaged in the Decker's no doubt violent takeover of the ship."

"Logical," Rajavur whispered. "But no, I do not think so."

"Telepathic then," Dr. Malavade offered softly as explanation. "And the machine has tuned itself to its new masters."

Now there was an unpleasant thought. Did the street gang realize just how powerful was their position? Dr. Wu reached for the phone on her console but the instrument rang before she could touch it. Lifting the receiver, the scientist listened intently for a moment, then sullenly replied in the negative.

Snorting in annoyance, Nicholi hung up on his colleague. Damn. There had been hope on his part that Russia's ion cannon could breach the force shield surrounding the alien ship. The general was fast running out of options. It was possible that nothing in his arsenal but nuclear weapons could penetrate that immaterial energy blister. But those were the court of last resort. Giving a crisp report, a military voice whispered in his ear about something in the sky above Central Park and he told them to go soak their heads. Nothing could be more important than their present situation.

"Well then, why don't you lower the force shield and come out?" Prof. Rajavur enticed pleasantly. "You're heroes! The entire world is waiting to honor your brave gang."

Dominating the screen, Hammer's face stated he didn't quite believe the man, so the diplomat smoothly added, "Then of course, there's the matter of the reward."

"REWARD? INDEED. HOW MUCH IS THIS REWARD?"

The Icelander did a fast mental calculation, then said to heck with the budget. "A million dollars apiece for you and your men. As compensation for your troubles and emotional disharmony."

* * * *

"Wow!" Chisel gushed, trying to count to a million on his fingers and failing. "Gee!"

"Chickenfeed," Drill snorted.

Still standing before the viewscreen, Hammer frowned in agreement.

* * * *

“INSUFFICIENT COMPENSATION. WE DESIRE FIVE MILLION APIECE.”

Prof. Rajavur had to mull the suggestion over. The Secretary General would throw a fit if he said yes. Of course, that was a point in its favor.

“Bargain with them,” Sir John's voice advised in his ear. “If you make it too easy, they'll become suspicious.”

“Two million,” Rajavur said firmly, facing the monitor. “And that's my final offer.”

“FOUR.”

“Three,” the diplomat countered. “Plus, you receive full amnesty for any crimes you have committed up until this moment.”

There was a short pause. “SUFFICIENT. WE SHALL EXIT THE SHIP IMMEDIATELY.”

jjjjjjjjjjjjjj**STOP THAT**jjjjjjjjjjjjjj

The mental command exploded across New York and people shook like Vegas dice under its power. Glasses shattered, guns went off, cars crashed, murders were halted, burglaries cancelled, illicit love affairs stopped/started and 37 politicians resigned from office.

Tear filled eyes uncrossed just in time to see a shiny golden cube about the size of a two-bedroom house landing end-first in the soil of Central Park, right alongside the white sphere. The strange pair strongly resembled a brown sugar cube sitting next to a soccer ball. Then every viewscreen/monitor/television set on Earth began showing the beautiful, golden, frowning face of Avantor, the avantor.

“WE ARE THE GREAT GOLDEN ONES,” she stated. “GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY. EVERYONE IN THE WHITE STARSHIP IS UNDER ARREST. LOWER YOUR SHIELD AND COME OUT WITH ANY AND ALL PSEUDOPODS RAISED.”

* * * *

“Waste products!” Trell screamed in terror, clutching at his chest. “It's the Great Golden Ones!” He scampered beneath his chair, attempting to hide. “Aiyeee! We're doomed for sure!”

Going into the ultrasonic range, Trell wailed at the top of his lungs. His belt translator merely relayed the word, “Sob.”

With a lurch, Hammer was out of his chair and across the room in an instant. “What the hell are you talking about!” he demanded, shaking the little alien like a can of spray paint. “Who are they? The star cops?”

Weeping uncontrollably, Trell bumbled yes, and the street tough released him. Goddamn, what a day this was turning into!

Hitching up his pants, Drill got tough. “Okay chief, what's the attack plan?”

Feeling trapped, the big teenager clenched and unclenched his fists. "Gimme a minute. I'm working on it."

Inspiration brightened Trell's sad green face. "I know what to do," he exclaimed happily. "Let's shoot ourselves with the lasers! Death before the prison world of Galopticon 7!"

Hammer turned to Drill. "You're closer. You hit him."

Smack.

"But they just offered us, you know, amnesty," Chisel said in confusion.

"You dope!" Hammer snarled angrily. "These are the star cops, not our guys. They don't give a damn about anything we agreed on. They only want to kill us and eat our brains."

Not sure his translator had gotten that correct, Trell blinked in confusion. "What? They want to do what?"

"God's truth," Drill agreed, totally serious. "We saw it in a movie."

Grabbing the front of the alien's uniform, Hammer lifted the burbling Technician into the air. "Okay, greenie, what are our options. Can they get through our force shield?"

"Easily," lamented Trell, his boots dangling inches from the floor. "They invented the shield type we use."

Damn. "Is their forcefield up?"

Twisting about, the alien consulted a sensor on Boztwank's board. "No, sir, it's down."

Relaxing visibly, Hammer gave an evil grin. "Great! We got anything to shoot them with?"

The alien's jaw dropped as he was roughly deposited in Gaster-phaz's rock-hard chair. "Y-you can't be serious! Shoot the Great Golden Ones? Why that's..."

Stepping closer, Chisel placed the still warm barrel of a laser rifle snugly entered the alien's left ear.

"... a wonderful idea!" Trell gushed, all four hands busy. "Increasing reactor power. Activating Proton Cannon. Can we at least give them a warning shot?"

"Fire!" Hammer bellowed at the top of his lungs.

"Yes sir. Firing, sir!"

* * * *

From the curved pinnacle of the white starship there lanced out a blinding bright power beam that sliced the golden ship in two like a cube of cheese. Sluggishly, the top of the golden ship melted into the ray, disappearing in torrents of superheated steam, vaporized steel and hard radiation that would cause some very unusual plants to grow in Central Park for years to come. Lowering its angle, the acidic beam moved on, disintegrating the rest of the craft until the very ground it had rested upon slagged into a boiling pool of red-hot lava.

* * * *

“Right on!” Drill exclaimed, grinning his widest grin. This was more fun than robbing a church.

“Neat!” Chisel seconded, bouncing in his seat. “Let's do it again! On anything!”

Sagging weakly, Trell felt ill and braced himself against the silver edging of the control panel. “But you don't understand,” he protested lamely. “We just shot the Great Golden Ones. The Great Golden Ones!”

“Big deal,” Drill said, cavalierly dismissing the protest with the sure knowledge of a nineteen year old. “A cop's a cop.”

Crossing the room, Hammer resumed his earlier position in the Command seat. “Any more of those star cops out there?” he demanded.

“Thousands, millions,” Trell mumbled, the unhappy alien slumping in despair. “When they arrive they will destroy this world. Nobody sane shoots at the Great Golden Ones.”

For a single awful moment, Hammer wondered if Trell was right. What did he know about star police and shit like that? Hammer was from the Bronx.

Using both hands, Drill thoughtfully scratched at his curly mop of black hair. “Maybe those UN guys will still give us the money and amnesty, and by the time more star cops get here we'll be gone,” he said hopefully.

With a flippant gesture, Hammer brushed that aside. “No way, Jose. If these star dudes are that bad, then those government bastards will turn us in faster than jackcheese just to save their own hides.” Then the ganglord remembered something Trell had said. “Wait a minute, nobody attacks these guys, right? It's unthinkable, like moving to New Jersey. So they ain't gonna be expecting nothing. They'll just keep sailing in and we'll keep blowing 'em away! Easy as rolling a wino.”

The sheer audacity of the notion made Trell's throat constrict. It was insane! It was impossible! It might just work at that.

“But that means we gotta keep the ship,” Drill said, the leather jacket creaking as he crossed his arms. “Those fat cat government types were going to give us plenty for this metal snowball.”

“Yeah,” Chisel whined with a pout. “I was gonna buy a car.”

Addressing the white ceiling, Hammer rolled his eyes. Why him, oh Lord?

“Don't you idiots get it?” he snarled aloud. “You saw what we just did to the star cops. To keep us from blowing this city away, the government will pay us millions. Millions? Ha! Billions! Hell, boys, the sky's the limit!”

Radiating confidence, the ganglord joined Trell at the controls and studiously scrutinized the complex array of dusky white round buttons, square ivory buttons, hexagonal silver buttons, pearl switches, pale tripbars, translucent dials, transparent knobs, snowy levers, meters, lights, indicators, slots, keys and gauges.

“Show me how to fire this damn thing,” Hammer ordered.

TWELVE

The First Contact Team was in an uproar: with Mohad hunched over a computer, Bronson talking on two phones at once, Dr. Wu emailing with her associates at Princeton and Beijing, Nicholi struggling with the nincompoops at EmComTac, Sir John saying reassuring nothings to the world press, and Prof. Rajavur making coffee for the team; the domestic chore aiding his contemplation of the matter. Dutifully as a polite host, he added cream and sugar to everybody's cup but his own, and carried the heavily loaded tray over to the consoles. Unnoticed by the hectic others, he dispersed the steaming drinks. They had been so close to settling this whole matter amicably, but now they were back to square one. Although raised Catholic, Sigerson Rajavur did not believe in miracles. Sinking into his own chair he sighed, sipped and waited for his team to report.

Soon, General Bronson cleared his throat and took a gulp of the hot coffee, only briefly wondering where the drink had come from. Sigerson? Must be. "SAC and NORAD confirm the report. That golden cube was invisible to radar," he stated loudly. "There could be a whole fleet of the damn things orbiting the Earth and we'd never know it."

Slurping loudly, Sir John swallowed and then put down his empty coffee cup. "In my opinion, the two amber-colored beings that we saw were exactly what they claimed to be: the interstellar police. Here, watch the monitor."

With his left hand, the sociologist flicked a switch and the giant screen TV gave a repeat showing of Avantor addressing them. "Notice the way she handles herself, the demeanor of the male behind her, and their uniforms. Authority figures, without a doubt."

"Observe the radically different design of their vessel from Idow's flying behemoth," Dr. Wu said, changing the picture to the landing of the golden craft. "Sleek, compact, efficient. The corner points are perfect for defensive fire."

"I concur," General Nicholi stated from behind his plexiglass wall. "Definitely a military craft. However, the crew was inexcusably lax."

The sociologist nodded. "Yes, and that aspect of it rather bothers me. They acted as if their very presence should have been enough to cause a surrender. They are either very stupid, which I doubt, or they have a formidable reputation." He glanced at the smoking pool on the screen. "Unfortunately, a reputation is only an effective weapon if your enemy is aware of it."

Finishing his own mug of coffee, Mohad politely waited for everybody else to finish before speaking. "The broadcast we heard was telepathic in nature. None of my devices were able to record a single word. The message was perceived as far away from us as 30 kilometers. Interestingly enough, it also affected the dolphins at the New York Aquarium."

Dr. Wu added this to her list of things-to-check-into-if-we-don't-die, while Rajavur mulled over the information. A telepathic broadcast. He was impressed. Those weren't even theoretically possible to modern science.

Out of respect for the dead, the FCT said nothing as they watched the recording of the gold ship being destroyed again. Then Dr. Malavade cried out, stopped the tape, rewound, and played it again in slow motion. After a moment he froze the video tape and pointed at the screen with a stiff finger. Clearly

visible on the wall monitor were two shimmering black dots ejecting from the top of the craft. He started the tape again, and the dots floated downward, landing in the trees. The glowing effect disappeared and two tiny humanoid figures dropped to the ground and scrambled into brush.

"If appears that we have a few more uninvited guests," Dr. Wu remarked dryly.

General Bronson grunted assent. "I'll send some Delta Force operatives out to search for them," he said, holding the receiver to his ear and punching a number into the scrambled telephone. "The Black Berets will find them quick enough."

"GENTLEMEN AND LADY, ARE YOU ATTENDANT?"

Heads spun at the sound of Hammer's voice.

"Yes, we're still here," Prof. Rajavur stated. Briefly, he wondered what the reaction of the street gang was going to be. The firing upon the golden craft could have been done by an automatic weapon systems, it need not have been a deliberate hostile action on the part of the Deckers. It was possible, but unfortunately, not likely. He had hopes, though.

"I MUST INFORM YOU THAT THERE HAS BEEN A CHANGE OF PLANS."

Wu groaned to herself. "Oh, what now?" said the scientist muttered sotto voce. "The moon on a string?"

"WE HAVE DECIDED TO KEEP THIS STARSHIP FOR OURSELVES."

"I was afraid of this," Sir John sub-vocalized, a hint of his Scottish brogue creeping into his voice from the tension. "A megalomania power rush. Now we're in trouble."

"Now?" Bronson chided.

Ignoring the rhetoric, Prof. Rajavur talked fast. "Needless to say, we can appreciate these new developments, and are fully prepared to increase our offer to the originally requested amount of 5 million dollars."

"ACCEPTED. BUT THERE ARE A FEW OTHER THINGS THAT WE DESIRE."

"Such as?" he prompted, with a beguiling smile that had convinced many a poker player into foolishly betting the maximum. What could these simple children of the streets want? Clothes? A job? Better housing?

"WE'LL START WITH DRUGS," the translation device spoke, brutally honest in its re-telling of the youth's request. "MARIJUANA IS WHAT WE LIKE. TEN OR TWELVE TONS SHOULD BE SUFFICIENT."

"T-tons?" Rajavur croggled. Had the lad said tons?

"No problem," General Bronson's voice whispered in his ear. "The NYPD burns that much a week. What kind do they want?"

Summoning his pluck, Prof. Rajavur struggled to regain some composure. "Ah, what kind would you, ah, prefer?"

“THAI STICK WOULD BE NICE, AND NO STEMS OR SEEDS EITHER. UNDERSTAND?”

“Of course,” he agreed amiably, who had no idea what they were talking about. “Only the finest. Anything else?”

“YES. THREE STRETCH LIMOS. COMPLETE WITH CD PLAYER, WHITE WALLS, AIR CONDITIONING. THE WORKS. PLUS, A FULL TANK OF GAS.”

The professor hid a smile. “I think we can manage that. Any particular color?”

“ANYTHING BUT WHITE.”

“Done!” he smiled openly now. “So when can we come and take possession of the ship?”

“NEVER.”

Sigerson's smile was still friendly, but he had to use will power to make it stay that way. “But I assumed that we were negotiating for the return of the alien craft.”

“INCORRECT. WHAT WE WERE NEGOTIATING OVER WAS WHETHER OR NOT MY ASSOCIATES AND I WILL BLAST THIS PLANET INTO RUBBLE.”

“Told you so,” Sir John whispered. “Temporary insanity.”

Beaming a benign smile, Prof. Rajavur spread his arms wide in an appeal to reason. “But surely you don't plan to live in the ship,” he questioned the hairy youth.

“WHY NOT? IT'S CERTAINLY LARGE ENOUGH. A BIT OF PAINT, SOME POSTERS, AND IT WILL BE MOST COMFORTABLE. ANYTHING THAT WE HAPPEN TO NEED I AM SURE YOU WILL BE HAPPY TO DELIVER PROMPTLY.”

Following that statement, a bolt of blue fire spat from the ship and a stand of trees in the park violently disintegrated.

“CORRECT?”

A shaken Rajavur could only nod. “We'll start assembling your tribute immediately.”

“DO NOT FORGET THAT PARDON YOU MENTIONED EARLIER.”

Automatically, the diplomat corrected him, “You mean amnesty. A person can't be pardoned for a crime unless first he's been convicted.”

“NO TRICKS! WE WANT A PARDON!”

“Its yours! It's yours! No problem.”

“SIGNED BY THE GOVERNOR.”

“In triplicate!” the professor contributed, trying to appease the ganglord.

“THAT'S THE TICKET. OH BY THE WAY, THERE IS ONE MORE THING WE WANT.”

Maintaining his poker face, the man sighed. Oh, what now?

“HOW ABOUT SOME LUNCH?”

The leader of the FCT picked up a pencil from the tray near his high security hot lines. He hadn't done anything like this since his college days. “Shoot, I mean, go ahead.”

“A PIZZA WITH EVERYTHING, AND I DO MEAN EVERYTHING. FORGET THE MUSHROOMS AND I LEVEL ENGLAND. NO ANCHOVIES AND GOODBYE GERMANY.”

* * * *

Trell touched Drill on the arm. “Excuse me, sir, but how far away are these places?” he asked curiously.

“Thousands of miles,” Drill answered, vaguely remembering a geography lesson he had once accidentally attended. “They're other countries.”

The alien shook his head. “Then I'm afraid we can't do it, sir. The Proton Cannon only has a range of 100 ship lengths.”

“Shut up fool,” Hammer snarled softly. “Do they know that?”

Ah, mighty clever, these humans.

* * * *

“PLUS A CASE OF IMPORTED BEER. COLD, MIND YOU.”

There was a changing of personnel on the communications monitor.

“GREETINGS PEOPLE! I, THE MIGHTY DRILL, DO HEREBY DEMAND A DOUBLE ORDER OF RIBS FROM LOUIE'S BAR-B-CHEW OVER ON EAST 42ND STREET. TELL HIM THEY'RE FOR ME. OH YES, ADD A CASE OF CHIVAS REGAL.”

Dr. Wu's laser printer started whining at that moment, and with the flick of a finger she put it into hush mode. “At least the alcohol with help cut all that grease from his system,” she commented, as an aside.

“So he dies of a heart attack in 10 years. Who cares? Our problem is living until tomorrow,” Bronson growled. “Wrap it up quick. We've got company coming.”

In confusion, Rajavur blinked. Company?

“HELLO, MY NAME IS CHISEL. HEY MA, LOOK! I'M ON TV! I'LL HAVE A TRIPLE CHEESEBURGER, A COLA WITH NO ICE, AND A SMALL FRIES.”

* * * *

“That's what you order?” Hammer stormed, brandishing a clenched fist at the boy. “Don't embarrass me, ya creep!”

* * * *

“MAKE THAT *LARGE* FRIES. OH, AND A BUCKET OF CHICKEN, EXTRA CRISPY, PLEASE. THANK YOU.”

Now a new face came on the monitor.

“GREETINGS, DIRTLINGS.”

The FCT straightened at their consoles as Trell appeared. So at least one member of the alien crew had survived the transition of power. That explained how an uneducated street gang was operating a starship.

Green and hairless, noted Wu, typing some additional medical notes into her computer file. Some sort of plant life? No, not with those teeth. He was an omnivore. Curious.

Mohad tried to locate the alien's ears, Courtney studied his clothes, Bronson and Nicholi drew diagrams of the control room behind the alien.

“What can we get for you, astronaut?” Rajavur asked in his most gregarious manner.

It seemed obvious that the greeting pleased Trell. Star voyager, he liked the sound of that! “HAVE YOU ANYTHING WITH A DOUBLE BENZENE RING, SLIGHTLY RADIOACTIVE AND ENRICHED WITH ELEMENTAL BERYLLIUM?”

That stopped the professor for a second. “Ah, no. I don't think so. Sorry.”

“OH. THEN I'LL JUST HAVE SOME OF THEIR CHICKEN.”

Hammer returned. “THAT'S IT FOR NOW. HAVE OUR TRIBUTE READY IN ONE HOUR, OR ELSE.”

With a swirl, the monitor reverted back to an aerial shot of the white ship and the steaming lava pool next to it on the ground.

“Well, Wayne?” Prof. Rajavur asked, turning to facing the soldier.

The big man paused to light a fresh cigar. “As you told them,” he puffed contentedly. “No problem. Everybody on Earth heard the demands those yahoos made and are more than anxious to help us in harvesting the ransom.”

Briefly, Rajavur considered having the food poisoned, but rejected the notion as implausible. What spacecraft wouldn't have automatic analyzers in the airlock? Heck, NASA did.

“So what's this about company?” he asked.

In response, the American soldier hit a button on his console and the wall monitor switched to an inside view of the front lobby of the United Nations building above them. A squad of NATO soldiers and several plainclothes police officers were herding two humanoid beings in gold uniforms towards the elevator bank.

“The aliens from the cube?” Sir John guessed, as he cleaned the papers off his console, hastily stuffed the documents into a file draw, and locked it shut.

“Yep. Navy SEALs found them hiding in a public bathroom,” General Bronson growled humorlessly. “A military escort is delivering them. They’re max security. Should be here any minute.”

Skirt billowing about her knees, Dr. Wu pivoted about in her chair. “Then you had better mirror your wall, Nicholi,” she advised.

Wiggling toes in his socks, the general wholeheartedly agreed and flipped a tripbar on his console. The overhead lights dimmed and his bulletproof glass wall silvered over, becoming an effective one-way mirror. Then from a drawer, Nicholi pulled out his personal defense weapon; a stubby pistol stock with a telescopic sight and a coaxial cable attaching it to a jack on his console. In the Command Bunker, .50 Remington machine gun positioned inside a false ceiling was slaved to that pistol, turning as it turned and pointing where it did. One press of the trigger and from diverse angles, 200 steel jacketed rounds a second would annihilate anything in his sights. General Nicholi Nicholi had specific orders not to trust anybody, which he considered moronic. Telling a Russian not to trust a stranger was the height of redundancy.

From his console, Wayne opened the doors that fronted the elevators, and carefully watched to ascertain that only the aliens came inside the antechamber, the rest of the armed escorts returning to their assigned duties. The familiar floor shaking boom of the door as it closed was clearly heard by all, and soon faintly echoing footsteps came down the concrete hallway that led to the Bunker’s inner door. On Bronson’s command, the steel portal mechanically swung aside, admitting the humanoid beings.

Humans stared at Gees, who stared right back at them. A historic meeting this. The first peaceful contact between Earth and an alien species. Briefly, the FCT straightened their clothing and hair as the Great Golden Ones walked closer.

The female stood six feet tall, a good 12 inches higher than the male. Both were well proportioned, though Wu noticed a few odd muscle arrangements. Their eyes were large and solid black, seemingly without pupils. But even more striking than that was the color of their skin and hair, which perfectly matched their skintight uniforms; a muted tone of gold. Coming to a halt, the two beings stood stiffly at attention, shoulders ramrod straight, with their hands behind them. General Bronson had the unreasoning urge to tell them at ease.

Prof. Rajavur bowed to the Gees, who did the same to him.

“In the name of the planet Terra, I greet you,” he said sincerely, as the Icelander had done a thousand times before in practice sessions before his bathroom mirror. Then to Mohad he added, “Honestly, I don’t suppose they can understand a word of what I’m saying. Mohad, could you enable your computers for inter-Bunker translation?”

“Most certainly,” Dr. Malavade said, and he got busy at the controls.

“There is no need for such complexities,” the female alien said in husky tones. “We have our own translation devices that allow us to converse with any sentient species.”

“Excellent, that will certainly facilitate matters,” Rajavur said, recovering nicely from the shock of being addressed directly. With due formality, he introduced his team, using their full rank and titles. The golden beings bowed to each of them in turn.

“I am Avantor,” the female said, gesturing to herself. Then she pointed to the male nearby. “This is my 17.”

The FCT's sociologist just couldn't restrain himself any longer. "Forgive me, Avantor," Sir John gushed. "But is that your name, title or job description?"

"Yes," she answered obligingly.

Hmm. "And you, sir?" he continued doggedly.

The male proudly threw out his chest and tilted his head to display his fine, wide nostrils. "I am our ship's 17."

Sir John paused a moment before replying, "Of course."

Only pretending to be casual, the two beings strolled about the Command Bunker taking advantage of the opportunity to study its complex facilities.

"How strange," Avantor said to her assistant. "In here, they exhibit a much higher level of technology than we believed possible. Interesting. Most interesting."

Bronson and Wu exchanged smiles.

"Yes my liege, but who is that man behind the glass wall?" The 17 asked, pointing unerringly at Nicholi. "I see he holds a weapon of some sort. Your guard, I presume?"

The Russian general cursed under his breath, but did not relinquish his grip on the pistol. The phrase "...powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men..." came unbidden into his mind and his finger tightened on the trigger.

Leaning closer, Dr. Wu intently studied the alien's black eyes. "You must see further into the infrared spectrum than we do," she deduced. "If so, the mirror would only be frosted glass to you."

Seriously displeased by the security breach, Bronson unconsciously began tapping the pistol at his hip. The 17 noticed the motion and prudently stepped between him and the avantor.

"Our physiology is not important," Avantor said, the circumspect action of her assistant not going unnoticed. "What is important, is that we apprehend the criminals in that starship as soon as possible."

"Yeah, well, we're working on it," General Bronson grumbled.

"What are your results so far?" she asked.

"Nada, zilch, the magic goose egg."

Avantor blinked. "I do not understand."

Suddenly a light started to flash on his console and Dr. Malavade began to gesture wildly. "Incoming transmission!" he warned the room.

The aliens allowed Sir John to herd them over by Nicholi's mirrored wall where the video cameras on the monitor could not focus on them. Courtney scurried back to his console just in time for the swirling effect to clear.

“AND ANOTHER THING,” Hammer said without any preamble. “WE WANT NEW EPISODES OF STAR TREK PUT ON TV WITH THE ORIGINAL CAST, THE FORMULA FOR COCA-COLA, AMERICA TO BE RENAMED ZIP-A-DEE-DOO-DAH-LAND AND ALTERNATE-SIDE-OF-THE-STREET PARKING IN NEW YORK CITY TO BE SUSPENDED FOREVER. MORE LATER.”

Sneaking a peek at the wall monitor, this transmission upset the aliens as much as the humans.

“That was not the Sazinian we seek,” the avantor observed stepping forward to assume a military stance. “Where is Leader Idow?”

“That depends,” Sir John replied, biting a lip. “Are you religious?”

Brusquely, Rajavur took over the conversation. “Idow and most of his crew are dead. The people controlling the ship are the test subjects they brought aboard. A group of young Earth criminals that we call a street gang.”

Primitives in control of a starship? Both of the aliens felt their knees go weak and gratefully they accepted the chairs Sir John brought over to them from the kitchen area. The sociologist knew the therapeutic value of sitting down after a terrible shock.

General Bronson agreed with the alien's response and thoughtfully rubbed his prominent jaw. Clearly, things were getting out of hand. “Maybe...” he reflected aloud, glancing towards Nicholi.

“If you are planning on using nuclear missiles,” Avantor interrupted hastily. “I would advise against it.”

“Why is that?” Prof. Rajavur asked curiously.

“Because of the simple fact they would not work. Even if you had a fusion bomb powerful enough to penetrate their force shield, nothing could damage the ship itself.” She frowned. “Deflector Plating, you see. Absolutely impervious.”

Bronson and Nicholi's ears pricked up at that. Fantastic! It was the ultimate armor. Whatever country controlled the substance could rule the Earth. Then the two generals glanced at each other and nodded. Each would make sure the other received full technical information. There would be no monopoly. The balance of power between their nations would be maintained.

Nonchalantly as an illegal *vis par* dealer, 17 touched the hand of his commander, the woman's distended nerves made contact with his and telepathically the male asked her: *What the Void are you talking about? There is no such thing as Deflector Plating.*

17, what is the first law?

To Protect.

And the second?

...ourselves.

Correct. The fusion missiles of these primitives will obliterate All That Glitters, but the blast will

also kill us. I say we take the ship by guile, and live to tell our version of the story. Agreed?

“Deflector Plating,” The 17 said heartily. “Toughest thing in the universe. Nothing can harm it.”

Drumming fingers on his console, Prof. Rajavur was both delighted and perturbed by this news. In their present situation this Deflector Plating was a major obstacle to overcome, but afterwards, a defense like that could mean an end to the threat of nuclear war. Somehow they must get a sample of the material for analysis, to assure the survival of humanity.

Meanwhile, Dr. Malavade filed his tape recording of the Gee's incredible statement under a triple security seal, and electronically sent a copy of it to every member of the United Nations, and Dr. Wu began to amass notes on the theoretical construction of energy-repellant matter.

Strolling over to the wall monitor, the female Guardian of the Galaxy studied the picture of the huge white ball. “17, can you identify the model of that starship?”

“Affirmative, my liege. It's a Mikon #2, or #3.”

“How familiar are you with the Mikon series?”

“Totally,” he replied confidently. “I have the complete blueprint for every spacecraft used by known criminals memorized.”

Avantor smiled. “Excellent. How may we enter the ship?”

17 pursed his lips. “Doors and hatches access only from the inside. Mostly they use the teleportation beam, although it is slow.”

Her face shifted into a frown. “That's not what I asked.”

The golden male squirmed uncomfortably under her stern gaze. “Yes, of course, my liege. I would have to build an override key, but yes, it could be done.”

“Splendid.” She turned to the FCT. “Prof. Rajavur, do you have access to any military personnel?”

General Bronson answered instead. “We have our pick of the United States Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force, CIA, FBI, NSA, Secret Service, Green Berets, Delta Force, city, county, state police, National Guard, NATO, French Foreign Legion, the Russian Federal Security Agency, the Pathfinders, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, InterPol and one guy named Remo. What do you need?”

“What we need is for your street gang to lower that force shield,” she countered. “If only for an instant. The problem is how can we make them perform the desired action.”

That was the crux of the matter. A problem indeed. Then a cough sounded from the loudspeaker in the corner and everyone in the bunker turned towards Nicholi as he de-mirrored his wall.

“I know how to make them lower the shield,” he flatly stated. “It is simplicity itself.”

THIRTEEN

“You do?” Prof. Rajavur inquired surprised. “How?”

Nicholi swiveled his chair away from his console to face them directly. “It is easy,” he smiled. “What we have to do is—”

“Everybody, shut up,” Dr. Wu ordered, her attention riveted onto the readouts of her console.

Wisely, the beings in the room did so, her uncharacteristic rudeness clearly announcing that something was seriously amiss.

“I don't like this,” Wu said frowning. “My sensors are indicating a mobile radiation source in Central Park.”

Resembling melting butter, Avantor frowned. “Impossible,” she stated bluntly. “*The All That Glitters* is not atom powered.”

“I said it was mobile,” Dr. Wu snapped irritably. “It is moving towards the white ship.” She paused, meticulously checking the testimony of her dials again. “Nicholi, I think you'd better alert the troops. There's a Snoopy in the park.”

A lightning bolt exploding across the bunker couldn't have produced a more startling reaction than the woman's words.

Appearing as if he had just been hit with a brick, Bronson dropped the cigar from his mouth. “A Snoopy? You sure?”

“Yes, damn it! There's a mobile radiation source approaching the alien craft at walking speed. Now do something!”

“Jesus, I'll try,” he said, grabbing his phone, flipping open his code book and punching in an emergency number that he had seriously thought he would never have to use.

The two aliens were plainly puzzled. “A what?” Avantor asked, with a quizzical look.

“This is unpardonable!” Prof. Rajavur raged in moral outrage. “Who authorized this insanity?”

“Who could have?” Sir John asked, his face flushed with ill controlled fury. “Only you and Nicholi have that kind of power now, Sigerson.”

“None of my Snoopys are missing,” the Russian general averred, from behind his plexiglass wall. “But I will double check.”

“Do so,” Rajavur ordered.

Holding an earphone with his left hand, Dr. Malavade snapped the fingers of his right hand for attention. “Perhaps it was the Secretary General,” the philologist suggested sagely. “He has been most unhappy with our performance so far, and has already demonstrated his willingness to take matters into his own hands.”

“And ordered an assault on the starship!” Rajavur shuddered at the possible implications. “The fool! Mohad, get me Geneva on the phone. Fast!”

In oft practiced ease, the communications expert flew to the task.

The 17 took a hesitant step forward. "I beg your pardon," he said. "A Snoopy?"

"Yuki, give me the location," Bronson interrupted. "I've got a man who can handle the situation, but he needs to know precisely where the device is."

"Vector 4, section 3 on your map of the park," Dr. Wu replied crisply. "Over by the statue." Her voice faded away to nothing, and then returned strong. "What the Hell is that?"

An astonishing sight filled the wall monitor. A full division of tanks flying hand made Greek flags were crashing through the greenery of Central Park, the metal juggernauts smashing trees into kindling under their heavy treads. With obvious intent, the indomitable war machines headed for the alien starship; their 120mm guns and armor-piercing rockets aiming straight and true.

"Nicholi," Sir John threatened in a low voice.

"Not me again," the Russian general protested in innocence. "Those tanks forced their way through my cordon, nearly killing several of my people. They're NATO troops, but operating independently. I have no control over them."

With a grimace, he touched his earphone. "My men want to know if the orders still hold about non-interference, or if they should join the assault on the ship."

"Please, have them do nothing," Rajavur requested frantically.

Just then, Dr. Malavade gave him the go ahead and Rajavur snatched at his phone. "Hello, Switzerland?"

Discreetly, The 17 touched Avantor. *They act concerned, and yet refuse to talk to us. Could this be a trick of some kind?*

No, she replied telepathically. Observe their faces. Whatever is going on is urgent, and simply too important for them to waste time with us.

"Yuki, what's its power?" Sir John asked, enabling the calculator function of his computer.

Engrossed in her work, the Chinese scientist answered without lifting her head. "At a guess, half a kiloton. It depends on how advanced a model they have."

"Then it can't harm us down here," he muttered, thinking aloud. His dancing fingers tapped in figures. "But everyone on the surface will die within, say a kilometer, that's 20 city blocks! Wow. Nicholi, those tanks must be a diversion just to keep the street gang from noticing the real attack. The bomb!"

"Oh, thank you, John," the Russian general mocked in a syrupy sweet tone. "I never would have figured that out myself. Now go teach your grandmother how to suck eggs. I'm busy."

Bomb? Kiloton? At last, Avantor understood. "This Snoopy you keep referring to is some form of atomic weapon?"

“Hmm?” Rajavur glanced away from his phone and saw the aliens as if for the first time. “Ah, yes. Yuki, do you mind?”

Formally polite, the Chinese physicist stood. “It’s a portable fission bomb of the type built during the Cold War. Weighing approximately 22 pounds, the device fits inside a normal attaché case.” Dr. Wu reached under her console and retrieved the briefcase she carried her daily newspaper in. “Quite similar in size and shape to this.”

The aliens were scandalized. An atomic weapon that you could carry like a lunchbox? What level of madness was necessary to create, much less build, such a horror?

“The tanks have ordered the Bloody Deckers to surrender or be fired upon,” Dr. Malavade said shocked. “But this is lunacy. They must know their shells can not penetrate that force shield. Are men to die just so the Snoopy can get close to the alien ship?”

“How close?” Sir John demanded practically. “Yuki, how close should it get for maximum effect?”

“Touching the force shield would be optimum,” she replied, fine tuning her sensors to even greater sensitivity. “But the bomb has been in firing range ever since it entered the park.”

“Wayne, how goes it?” Nicholi asked in concern, over the loudspeaker.

The American general laid aside his phone and lit a fresh cigar. “Who knows, my friend?” he puffed. “I’ve done what I can. But if I were a religious man, I’d start praying right about now.”

* * * *

Whistling a Broadway showtune, a slim, neatly dressed man, calmly strolled beneath the leafy green tress of Central Park, with the equivalent of 500,000 pounds of TNT swinging in his right hand. The park grass, dried from the summer heat wave, crunched beneath his polished shoes and each step raised a cloud of dust that dirtied the legs of his otherwise spotless uniform.

For this mission, Agent Taurus was dressed as a Major in US Army Intelligence. That got him past the NATO cordon easy enough. Now all he had to do was find the force shield surrounding the alien invader and release the handle of the attaché case he carried. Mother Nature, with a little help from Albert Einstein, would do the rest.

Filling his horizon, the mammoth white ball towered over him; a sight to intimidate anyone, but this man smiled. What he held in his grip was greater than the alien invaders: the power of a miniature sun locked inside 864 cubic inches, and his to command. During his rushed briefing session, the Secretary General had advised him to get as close as possible to the ship to maximize the bomb's effect. He had also been warned that the renegade FCT might try to stop him, so in case of trouble Taurus was to detonate the Snoopy immediately, no matter where he was.

Faintly from the other side of the gigantic ship, he could hear the diversionary tanks ordering the murdering criminals inside to surrender. Soon they would open fire and he would attack, trusting to science to complete the job as he would never know the outcome of the blast. That is, unless Heaven had a good view of Central Park.

Just then, someone in a policeman's uniform dropped on him from the trees and locked a muscular arm around his throat. Contrary to what he would have liked to do, Taurus offered no resistance to the killing attack. Instead, he simply released his grip on the Snoopy.

Or rather, he tried to, but the policeman had his own hand wrapped tight around the handle, preventing that very action. Taurus was infuriated. A nuclear counter-agent! Betrayed by one of his own kind!

Locking two of his fingers together, the man jabbed them directly into the eye of his enemy. But the crippling blow was deflected by the back of a hand, which then circled into a fist that punched for his face. Taurus grabbed the hand in an iron grip, and for a moment the two men stood there, locked face to face, neither able to move.

“Taurus,” the phony Army officer grunted, straining to crush the policeman's bones.

“Virgo,” his adversary replied, struggling to do the same.

The amenities over, Taurus kicked the man in the groin, but only hit the thigh as the counter-agent dodged to the left. Virgo butted with his head. Pain blinded Taurus as his nose broke. Blood flowed into his mouth and he spat it out. With brutal force, he buried a thumbnail into Virgo's wrist, crushing a nerve center. The man gasped in agony and released him. Without wasting a second, Taurus chopped down with his free hand and the arm holding the bomb snapped, but the stubborn policeman held on. Then his own ribs cracked from Virgo's fist. Panting for breath, the two agents broke apart, joined only by their death grip on the leather briefcase. One was determined never to let go, the other unwilling to relinquish control and fail his mission.

In the background, the NATO tanks began their attack; the rockets, missiles and shells exploding harmlessly on the alien ship's impenetrable force shield. But they created the kind of racket that nobody could fail to notice.

* * * *

Inquisitively, Trell tapped a power meter with his finger. No, it wasn't a minor fluctuation in the reactor. They were under attack by the forces of Dirt. How amusing. He activated the viewscreens to show the pitched battle to the gang, and to Trell's surprise their reaction was quite different from his.

“Holy spit!” Drill cried, nearly falling out of his chair. “There's a goddamn army out there!”

The blood drained from Chisel's face. “What we gonna do, Hammer? Surrender?”

“Deckers don't surrender,” the ganglord angrily reminded him. “Besides, they'd kill us on sight.” Nervously, he cracked his knuckles. “Trell, how long can that forcefield shield thing hold?”

“Against this sort of attack?”

“Yes, you freaking idiot! How long?”

The alien technician shrugged. “Oh, I don't know. Thirty or forty of your years.”

“Thirty,” Chisel said.

“Or forty,” Drill continued.

“Years,” drawled Hammer, finishing the sentence.

Trell nodded in agreement. “Depends upon whether or not we turn on the air conditioner.”

“Then they can't hurt us?” Chisel cried out happily.

Glancing scornfully at the viewscreen, the alien exhaled. “Not with those toys.”

Relieved, Drill returned his feet to atop the control board, and reclined in Gasterphaz's old chair, his hundred and eighty pounds of hard muscle not even creasing the cushion. “Well, okay then.”

Almost against his will, Hammer grinned at the viewscreen; the light flashes from the explosions nearly hypnotizing him. So this is what being invulnerable feels like. No wonder Superman was always smiling.

“Okay Trell, get on the horn and tell those UN creeps that they get this try for free, but only this one.” He chuckled at the alien's lack of comprehension. “Don't worry about it, stud, they'll understand.” Hammer narrowed his eyes. “But just to make sure, let's show them what a starship can do.”

Leaning into the screen, the ganglord looked over the armored division like a housewife picking ripe tomatoes. “I think we'll start with ... him!”

* * * *

As the last Greek tank melted into a glowing steel puddle, its gun crew dashing about, frantically beating their pants to extinguish the fire, Dr. Malavade snapped his fingers at his teammates. “The Bloody Deckers say that if we try such an action again—”

“That they'll do horrible nasty things to us,” Dr. Wu finished for him in gallows humor.

Quite startled, the linguist blinked. “How did you know?” he asked.

“I'm psychic.”

“Yuki can read lips, too,” Sir John explained, spoiling the effect. He was in no mood for jocularity of any sort, even though he understood its therapeutic value in tense circumstances such as these. The Scotsman supposed that his own nerves were cracking a bit. His job was to relay and analyze information. But against a direct physical treat there was nothing he could do. A sense of futility welled within his throat like bile, and he forced it down with a swallow of tepid Icelandic coffee. Blah.

“Hello, Geneva?” Rajavur asked stiffly. “Let me speak to the Secretary General please ... yes, it is an emergency ... thank you ... Emile? Sigerson here, I formally place you under arrest for crimes against humanity. Eh? You're already in the custody of NATO security force? Good! Hope you enjoy the color prison gray, you rockheaded buffoon. See you in fifty years, Emile. Goodbye.”

* * * *

Chop, block, jab, thrust, kick, punch; the life or death battle between the two nuclear agents went on and on, each man fiercely fighting for what he truly believed was right.

This is getting us nowhere, thought Taurus, gritting his teeth against the pain. They were too well matched. So in a desperate gamble, he tried the unexpected and released his hold on the Snoopy. Caught off-guard, Virgo stumbled backwards. That was when Taurus launched his final assault.

Summoning every ounce of his remaining strength, he lunged forward in a double hand chop, a martial arts move not meant to hurt, or maim, but kill your opponent. Designed as a last resort, the attack could fell a moose. There was no known defense, expect for not being there when it hit.

It hit.

...the Snoopy, which the crippled Virgo swung in front of himself for protection. Built to withstand anything short of its own detonation, the briefcase went unharmed. Taurus fell screaming to the ground with virtually every bone in both of his hands smashed. Then the terrible pain overwhelmed his training and the man fainted, broken at last in body and spirit.

The three linear miles of street that surrounded Central Park were jammed full of boisterous people just aching to get closer to the giant white spaceship, but the diligent NATO troops firmly kept the civilians at bay by the efficient use of sandbags, concertina wire and a thousand armed troops with orders to shoot any troublemakers. After a few unpleasant instances, the crowd quickly learned control.

Patiently waiting behind their defensive perimeter, the UN soldiers watched as a sweating New York City police officer slowly shambled down a bike trail towards them. In his oddly twisted left hand, he held an ordinary briefcase. With his right hand, he was dragging the limp body of an Army Intelligence officer behind him, the unconscious man's shoe heels gouging twin tracks in the loose gravel on the ground.

General Nicholi's orders strictly forbid anybody but authorized personnel from setting foot in the park, so the NATO troops stayed exactly where they were. But once the bloody couple stepped onto the sidewalk they were within UN jurisdiction. Exercising extreme care, the soldiers relieved the crippled policeman of his attaché case, and then bodily carried both of the battered men to a waiting military ambulance.

The briefcase surreptitiously shifted into the hands of another nuclear agent, who deactivated the weapon and deftly tucked it inside a specially designed compartment of his pushcart, never pausing in his sale of ice cream sandwiches to the civilian onlookers.

A random pair of UN soldiers in the cordon around the park holding back the crowd of civilian onlookers watched this operation to completion. Then the Canadian private idly scratched under his helmet and spoke to the British corporal next to him. "Hey, Sam, what do you think that was, eh?"

"Beats me, Dave," the woman soldier said, shifting her assault rifle to a more comfortable position. "Maybe that Army guy was actually a nuclear secret agent sent to destroy the alien ship, and the cop was a counter-agent sent in to stop him. The two of them battled it out with the lives of everyone in Manhattan hanging in the balance and just in the nick of time the cop decks the army blighter, saving us from dying in an atomic fireball."

The man paused for a moment, drinking in what his friend had said. Yeah, ask a stupid question, get a stupid answer.

FOURTEEN

With 30 minutes left till lunch, the triumphant Deckers spent the remaining time getting further acquainted with the operation of the starship. Of course, the Proton Cannon (the only weapon the ship carried) was the first item on their agenda. The Deckers spent a joyous few minutes vaporizing trees and benches about the ship as they learned how to aim and fire its deadly beam. Central Park was fast resembling Dresden after the bombing.

Then there was a tug on Trell's uniform, and Chisel asked him where the john was. After a confused moment or two, the alien got the general idea and sent the boy down the hall to the left. Trell also instructed him to be sure to press his palm firmly against a square metal plate next to the door so the facilities could adjust themselves to his lifeform. With a nod, the boy departed. A few minutes later somebody resembling Chisel walked back into the control room. But this was obviously an impostor because this Chisel was clean, from the tips of his polished black boots, to his neatly trimmed, coiffured hair. The food stains were gone from his T-shirt, its rips expertly sewn shut, the toolbox design on his black leather jacket looked newly painted and even the boy's buck teeth gleamed healthily.

Dumbfounded, Hammer and Drill asked what the heck had happened to him? Chisel replied that he walked into the bathroom and it bit him. Upon closer inspection, it seemed that the boy and everything he wore was spotlessly, almost antiseptically, clean. Even his knives had been sharpened.

To the gang's puzzled demands for information, Trell had no answer. It was a bathroom. What did theirs do?

As excited as kids at Christmas, Hammer and Drill dashed off to try this technological marvel for themselves, returning in a short while, scrubbed, washed, polished, pressed, and thoroughly clean to the bone. A condition that none of the gang had ever been in before. It was kinda nice.

As the laughing Deckers examined each others laudable condition, Trell took this opportunity to re-tune the tech stations in the control room to their new masters; Hammer as Leader, Drill as Protector, himself as Engineer, and Chisel as Communicator; as the communication board was partially sentient and did most of the work by itself.

Deciding how to ferry the tribute on board turned into a lengthy discussion. Hammer insisted that since he and his gang had been teleported aboard the starship, so should the tribute.

Trell argued against that on the grounds that the tribute would be much more massive than six Dirlings, ah, humans, he quickly corrected himself. The equipment couldn't handle that large a load in one shot and the device took a hundred thousand seconds to recharge.

Much too long. Better to lower the force shield for a moment, let the trucks across the boundary and then raise it again. For those few seconds everybody would be watching for trickery, with Drill's ready finger on the Proton Cannon's firing switch. Grudgingly, Hammer agreed. It was a gamble, but the Bloody Deckers had taken bigger risks than this just going to the movies on 42nd Street.

If lunch was late, or the UN tried anything stupid again, Drill resolved that the first building to go would be the city hall. Or better yet, police headquarters!

Trell noted a meter flux and focused his scanners onto the indicated area. "Sir, there's a large party approaching our ship from sector 12," he announced.

"Show me," Hammer commanded, reclining in his form-fitting chair. His viewscreen swirled into a picture of the war-torn park.

Meandering through the mountains of dirt, splintered trees, and glowing lava pools, was a conga line of vehicles headed by four silver limousines, followed by several armored bank trucks and flatbed wagons filled with bales and bales of a leafy, dark green material.

"Yee-HAW!" Drill whooped, exuberantly smacking the adamantine arm of his steel chair. "It's a

freaking parade! Goddamn it chief, the government is actually paying us off!"

"There's our gold," Chisel whispered, the illuminated controls of the tech station brightening in harmony with its master's heightened emotional state. "Gold."

No, not one bank truck, Hammer noted with misgivings, but a convoy of five. He didn't like that. There was too much stuff out there. Much more than they'd asked for. Some subtle instinct, honed true in a thousand street fights, warned the youth of treachery, but for the life of him the ganglord couldn't figure out from where.

"This is more tribute than you asked for, isn't it, sir?" Trell asked, twisting about in his seat. "Are your people trying to—" and the alien spoke of a practice common to his race of giving a victorious enemy many gifts to soften their feelings towards you. His translator merely said the word: "Bribe."

After a moment, Hammer nodded. Yeah, that made sense. The world was scared spitless of his gang and they were trying to buy the Deckers' goodwill. The government was always paying people lots of money to behave themselves. It never seemed to work, but they kept trying. Greedily, he rubbed his hands together. Well, he certainly appreciated the habit!

"Trell, steer them over to the loading bay and prepare to lower the force shield." Hammer scrutinized the caravan of goodies closely. "You sure the loading dock can hold all of that junk?"

"Easily sir. Vehicles included."

"No problem?"

"None."

Drill's face broke into a grin. "Shee-eet! Our own personal bank trucks! Say! Could we..." The locksmith stopped talking in mid-syllable, his mouth and eyes forming a triangle of circles. Hammer and Chisel swiftly followed suit.

The caravan had reached the assigned spot outside the alien force shield and the drivers were disembarking. Women. They were all women. Beautiful women. Gorgeous women. Redheads. Blondes. Slim, long legged, busty women who were mostly dressed in lacy bits of gossamer that hid none of their ample charms.

Timidly, a few of the women waved at the starship. Then a gorgeous redhead in a micromesh bikini bent over to examine something from the ground and the three males swallowed hard.

"Damn," Drill murmured in awe. "Now that's what I call tribute!"

Chisel tried to close his mouth, while Hammer removed his tongue from the viewscreen. Trell also observed the scene with interest. Ah, lunch!

"L-lower that force shield," Hammer ordered, the ganglord having trouble speaking. "Get that, those, get them aboard!"

"Women," Chisel said, drooling slightly. "Hubba-hubba."

"Oh, we par-ty tonight!" Drill stated for a fact.

Unaffected by the display of shapely human females, the alien Technician remained ever vigilant, his sensors constantly sweeping the starship's perimeter, as he carefully lowered their main defense.

* * * *

A dry twig propped against the force shield fell to the ground, and the crudely built black box in the hand of a NATO trooper beeped.

“The shield is down, sir,” a corporal reported to his commanding officer.

“Then go-go-go,” Colonel Robert Weiss whispered into his throat mike and a jumbled pile of smashed trees disorganized a platoon of heavily armed soldiers.

Keeping low to the ground, the soldiers swiftly crossed those critical meters separating them from the force shield boundary line. The last man used a leafy tree branch to brush the ground in their wake, obliterating their tracks. Ghostly sensors from the starship tracked the soldier's every step, but the alien warning system did not announce their presence to Trel as the signal was nullified by a small black box that the NATO trooper carried.

Moving quick, the 30 men scrambled up the loose mound of dirt at the starship's base, making infinitely less noise than the caravan of trucks and cars on the other side of the interstellar craft.

Avantor and The 17 were not with the assault team, but had remained in the FCT's bunker as Prof. Rajavur considered their technical knowledge of alien weaponry much too valuable to risk in a firefight. Reluctantly, the Gees had agreed with the request, their hypno-training forcing them to accept the prudent course of action rather than go for the more fulfilling act of personal revenge.

As the commandos safely gathered in the cool shadow beneath the curved hull of the gargantuan ship, Weiss pulled a slim rod of burnished copper and hastily soldered microchips from his blouse, the override key hastily built by 17. Pressing the activating switch he waved it at the vessel's hull. Anxiously, the assault team waited. The Gee technician could only guess at the override code to open the starship's hull. If The 17 guessed right, fine. But if he guessed wrong, well, the NATO troopers were not afraid to die, but they did fear a useless death and the subsequent reprisal of the angry street gang on their defenseless world.

The men allowed themselves to breathe again as a meter wide section of the hull disengaged itself and swung aside, allowing a pile of alien trash to tumble out: bones, bottles, wrapping paper, half eaten fruits, busted bits of junk and one thoroughly dead quatrallyan.

Heroically, the soldiers pretended to ignore its ominous presence. As quietly as possible, they began ascending the sloping tube, the rubber soles of their boots aiding the climb up the slick metal. When the last trooper was safe inside, Weiss pressed the activating switch on the jury-rigged key again. At the bottom of the pipe, the hull cycled shut and darkness enfolded them.

“Visors,” the sergeant whispered.

The men pulled the front of their helmets down. Through the infrared sensitive glass the darkness disappeared, to be replaced by a black and white view of the awful-smelling metal tube and their fellow soldiers. Somebody muttered a comment about defecating backwards and was sharply reminded to be quiet by an eloquent rap on the head.

“All present and accounted for, sir,” Lt. Nealon said, nodding his head and feeling awkward about not saluting. But he was bracing himself against the low ceiling with his right hand, and saluting a superior officer with your left was the supreme insult in the military, a matter duels were fought over.

Weiss thanked him and briefly consulted the map that The 17 had drawn from memory of the starship. Straight ahead of them should be a power junction for the garbage tube's security sensor. Raising specially modified binoculars to his visor, he found what he was searching for, a hexagon jutting out from the distant wall. Slipping in the alien muck, Weiss and his soldiers cautiously approached the sensor. The trooper with the black box scanned the dirty hexagon and received a reassuring beep. Tenderly as defusing a bomb, the service panel was removed. A private commenced cutting wires and bypassing circuitry cubes so that when the troops exited the tube, the control room would know nothing of the occurrence.

Col. Weiss bit his cheek in concentration as another wire was snipped. One wrong move here could cause their immediate death, and this was the easy part.

* * * *

The last truck rolled across the force shield boundary and Trell flicked it back into existence. Safe once more. Thumps and curses caught his attention and he turned. Twirling Metal Spiral was pounding on his viewscreen.

“What is wrong?” Trell's translator asked.

“This freaking thing is busted!” Drill stormed. “I can't see the broads no more!”

“They have gone beneath the curve of our hull,” the alien explained. “Our cameras can't operate that close.”

His lithe green fingers prodded a control lever and the view-screens shifted to a picture of the loading bay: a tremendous large room, with weird alien machinery adorning the stark white walls.

“Ramp extended,” Trell said formally, twisting an ivory dial and punching a clear plastic button. “Opening main doors.”

Like an internal view of an egg being cracked, the white wall broke apart, and the split expanded until the afternoon sun flooded into the loading bay. Engines roaring, the cars and trucks rolled along the ramp and into the cavernous room. True New Yorkers, the drivers parked their vehicles anywhere they wished, in no discernible order. The women disembarked, gawking at the bizarre machinery, a few shivering in spite of the warmth of the huge room. Without a sound, the titanic white door cycled shut.

“You ready?” Hammer asked, both eyes glued to the female smorgasbord on the screen.

“Yes sir.”

“Then do it, dude.”

Trell hit a button and a throbbing yellow light filled the loading bay with its probing rays. The energy beam minutely examined the women. Bolt by bolt, the limousines and trucks were scanned, the thick armor of the bank trucks no more resistant than air to the questing rays. There were no hidden weapons, no poisons, no explosives, no radio transmitters, no ... no ... no

“Clean, my Leader,” Trell announced, thankful that the gang-lord's solar flare of a temper would not be invoked again. “They are as they seem. Predominantly naked females of your species and petroleum burning motor carts.” Petroleum burning! Hot Void, he hadn't thought of that. The alien thumbed the switch on the microphone of his viewscreen.

“TURN THOSE ENGINES OFF!” the Technician's voice boomed from the ceiling of the loading bay. The women rushed to comply. Trell snorked in disgust. Probably have to scrub the place by hand to get the stink out.

“Can we go and greet them, chief?” Chisel asked shyly. Women had always been a mystery to him. What to say, when to say it, how to get them to stop screaming ... A mystery that he fervently hoped would soon clear up, along with his complexion.

“Let the bitches come to us,” Drill said, his hungry eyes never leaving the viewscreen for an instant. He had never seen women like this before, not even in movies or magazines. It was a wet dream come true!

Trell advised against it though. “That would be unwise, letting them see the control room. Why don't you meet them in the Pleasure Room?”

“The what?” Hammer asked incredulously.

The little alien repeated himself. A pleasure room, the idea intrigued Hammer. These alien dudes did themselves okay.

“Trell, you tell them where to go,” Hammer decided. “Then show us how to get to this Pleasure Room too.”

“Affirmative.”

The ganglord stood and smiled. “You stay here, and keep a watch on things, while the boys and I get down.”

“Yeah,” Drill said, licking his chops. “Get down.”

The Technician spoke to correct their mistake. “But sir, the Pleasure Room is above us.”

Hammer wagged a finger. “Just tell us the way there. No, on second thought, I don't want you here by yourself.” The hairy youth lost his friendly smile and loomed over the alien like death itself. “I don't want you getting no fancy ideas. You're coming with us.”

After working so many cycles with leader Idow and Boztwank, Trell had no trouble creating a forced grin. “Of c-course, sir.” Oh Void.

* * * *

Once out of the garbage chute, the soldiers unzipped themselves from their coveralls and tossed the soiled garments aside. While Captain Weiss checked their location on the map, they closed the door behind them and prepped their weapons. In Double Time Hush, the troopers hustled down the clean white corridor as fast as their combat sneakers would allow them.

The interior of the starship proved to be an intricate maze of branching corridors, passageways, ramps and spirals. Soon, the colonel realized that his map didn't exactly match this craft, as a left turn put them

in the kitchen, rather than the reactor room. Terrific. While it was true that without Avantor and her 17's help Earth would be in even worse trouble, it was also true that if the two of them had not let Idow and his crew get here in the first place, then none of this would have happened. Or maybe that was just sour grapes on his part.

A corporal tugged on his sleeve. "Sir," the man whispered. "There's a Y intersection here that's not on the map. Which way do we go?"

"Left again," Weiss said, mentally crossing his fingers, and the troops marched on. Thanks a heap, Great Golden Bozos.

* * * *

In the corridor to their right, beyond the curve of the ship, a huge armored robot ceased its endless pacing to and fro in front of Airlock #4 and rotated a massive armored turret. Rrrr? There had been a noise detected. With its weapons primed for action, the machine sauntered down the passageway to investigate.

* * * *

As the twelve women hesitantly entered the Pleasure Room, they gasped in astonishment, just as the Bloody Deckers had done only minutes before.

When the street gang had first entered, they hadn't been very impressed. It was just another big white room. But as Trell palmed a glowing panel on the doorjamb, the walls and domed ceiling had darkened into a rich sky blue, with a holograph of cheerful orange clouds passing serenely overhead. A green carpet of living moss sprouted from the floor, each downy soft blade literally begging for the touch of their bare feet. The gang was ill at ease with talking grass, but after a brief experiment they rather enjoyed stomping the masochistic moss and its subsequent cries of joy.

While this went on, big comfortable divans seemed to flow out of the walls; plush couches that adjusted themselves to any position its occupant took, as the delighted Chisel soon discovered.

Tastefully displayed on cut crystal tables that dramatically dropped from the clouds without any apparent damage, were artifacts from a thousand worlds; gently humming vases of translucent metal, an ice statue of a bolting seven legged creature that neither melted or ran and a cheap plaster cockroach with a timepiece in its stomach.

Rotating out of a corner of the room was a library of video spheres, containing the stereophonic death throes of a hundred different test subjects. Hoping to find a porn flick or rock concert, Drill pulled out a sphere at random and tried to fit the rainbow ball into the play unit but was unable to make the alien contraption work.

Frustrated at his failure, the locksmith ceased his fumbling and pinked himself as the women entered. He lustfully gave them the gaze of a professional babe watcher. Oh man, these foxes were so hot they should have set off the fire alarm.

With his right ankle on the left knee, Hammer sprawled on a red velveteen couch like a king holding court, and waited for the women to approach. Making himself comfortable, the youth had doffed his black leather jacket and folded it neatly onto the moss by his boots, his activated laser rifle lying conveniently nearby. In his tight denims and sleeveless T-shirt, his muscular form was readily apparent, along were his many scars.

Timidly hesitant, the bevy of semi-naked beauties stayed clustered near the doorway until a tall blonde spotted Hammer and deliciously undulated over to the ganglord.

“Greetings, Hammer of the Bloody Deckers,” she addressed, obviously quoting from memory. “The United Nations of Earth salutes you and your brave men for the capture of this alien vessel and hope that you will accept us.”

She had the grace to blush here. “As additional tribute, in the spirit in which it is given.”

“That's cool,” Drill said, barely controlling his rapine impulses. Sitting on the edge of the couch, the embarrassed Chisel crossed and re-crossed his legs.

With a seductive smile, the blonde smiled, as if reading their thoughts. “I'm Amanda,” she said introducing herself. “This is Roxanne, Ruth, Alice, Julie, and Cynthia.” Cynthia smiled bewitchingly at Drill, and he leered at her. The bitch had legs good enough to eat lunch off, and she had brought lunch!

“And over there,” continued Amanda, pointing to the second group of ladies. “Is Joyce, Deborah, Melissa, Stacy, Wilma and Laura.”

Laura was a tiny blonde with an astonishing bust that captured the immediate interest of Chisel. Why, he was actually taller than her! New sexual vistas suddenly opened for the boy and he felt his face burn red.

Innocently curious, the wide bedroom eyes of Melissa glanced about the room. “I thought there were four of you?” she said, finger teasingly in mouth.

“There are,” Drill said, jerking a thumb towards Trell.

The bored alien was sitting over in the corner sullenly twiddling his thumbs. Mate and get on with it, the alien ordered them mentally.

Swaying in place, Melissa's eyes remained guileless. “Four humans,” she corrected.

Instantly alert, Hammer furrowed his brow. They thought the traitor was still alive, eh? Instinctively, he decided to lie.

“Crowbar's in the control room,” he said loud enough for the others members of his gang to hear. “Making sure that nobody tries nothing stupid.”

Amanda shrugged, sending erotic waves through the more prominent portion of her anatomy. “That's okay. We could send a girl to keep him company so he wouldn't feel left out.”

Hammer snorted. “Screw him.”

The willowy blonde dimpled. “That too.”

“I meant forget it. I don't want my man getting distracted like from his work.” The ganglord smiled then and mentally undressed the woman, which took very little effort on his part. “You sure could do that. Come here, babe.”

Submissively, the woman did as he requested. Hammer rose from the couch, pulled her close and kissed her on the mouth. She resisted him at first, then molded her body against his and returned the investment

with compound interest.

When they finally parted for necessary air, three more females gathered about the ganglord and began caressing his body. Food from the delivery trucks was brought in by a team of squat menial robots, which strongly resembled self-propelled waiter's carts with a pair of black metal arms, and the repast was spread out on a blue crystal table. Soon, rock music pounded from an amazingly fancy CD player and Trell stared at the device with ill concealed amusement. What was it, a machine for sound reproduction, or a missile launching system?

"Time to par-ty!" Drill yowled, a woman on each arm.

Chisel had his clinking jacket stripped off him by an oriental girl, who then nestled in his lap and wiggled delightfully. Speechless with desire, the street punk heard Melissa and Wilma whisper incredible things into his ears and then seal the messages with hot kisses.

"I used to be an exotic dancer," Cynthia confessed to the panting ganglord as she warmly rubbed against him.

"Well then, show us, lady!" Hammer commanded. "Show us!"

Drill boosted the volume on the stereo. The statuesque brunette spun to the middle of the room, kicked off her shoes and proceeded to twist her supple body and kick her long legs high in the air to the beat of the music. The walls of the Pleasure Room absorbed the harmonic tones and threw them back at the revelers cleaner and clearer. Soon everybody but Trell was dancing on the green floor, shouting and laughing and stomping the tender moss into trembling ecstasy.

The alien restrained himself from summoning a med-bot, deducing that this strange ballet must be part of their mating ritual. How primitive. Why didn't the men just club the women unconscious like civilized people? More bored than ever, Trell consoled himself by eating a bucket of fried chicken, bucket included. Then he daintily licked his fingers clean. Delicious! The Technician found a second bucket, emptied out the chicken and gleefully began munching on the greasy waxed cardboard. By the Prime Builder, could these Dirtlings cook! Soon his translated laughter joined that of the cheerful, dancing throng.

* * * *

Colonel Weiss's first indication that something else was amiss came in the form of a chattering assault rifle from the rear of his squad. Now what?

"Back!" he ordered his troops and the point men came running. The NATO soldiers dashed around a corner and into a scene from Hell itself.

At the far end of the corridor, the monstrous warobot had found the intruders at last, and was rolling towards them in a manner that the NATO manual would definitely have described as hostile; its jointed metal arms, tipped with whirring blades, snipping shears, or very nasty looking blue glowing balls. Wasting no time with subtlety, Colonel Weiss ordered the immediate use of rockets.

Promptly on command, both bazookas reached out with fiery fingers to strike the meter-wide, belly tread of the robot, violently reducing the armored links to mangled metal trash.

Only annoyed, the mechanical killer paused for a moment, and then activated its cumbersome belly jets. In a wash of warm air, the behemoth slowly lifted a foot off the ground and began gliding forward.

Immediately the soldiers jerked their arms and a dozen grenades bounced down the expanse of the passageway to explode underneath the alien machine, but the triphammer blasts only made the machine bobble a bit in its flight. Without waiting for orders, the bazookas spoke again, destroying a huge section of the passageway directly in front of the armored horror, forcing the robot to clear away the wreckage before it could advance.

Privates Angelo and Peters pumped their grenade launchers and fired, the 40mm shells of high explosive impacting smack on the domed head of the warobot, causing it to blink. A hail of shrapnel flew back at them, and ricochets thumped into their NATO bulletproof vests. A man cried out and fell with blood on his uniform. Lt. Nealon triggered his flamethrower, the arcing spray just reaching the distant machine to hose it with liquid napalm that clung like burning honey to its metal hide.

Unstoppable, the warobot floated on, it's collection of ferruled arms dripping flame.

Firing his handgun, Col. Weiss frowned. They didn't have the time, or resources, for a pitched battle. "Beta Squad, delay that thing!" he yelled over the din of combat. "Alpha Squad, to me!"

The troops split apart. Beta Squad digging in their heels and assuming defensive positions. The colonel and Alpha squad raced on, knowing full well that the fate of the world rested on them finding the control room and subduing the street gang. The corridor before them turned sharply. According to the map there should have been another Y-shaped intersection coming up. But as the soldiers turned the corner, they found themselves at a dead end. Damn map was wrong again! Weiss touched the wall and under his fingertips he felt it shift to the left and lock. The map wasn't wrong this time. They had been sealed off.

"Benson! Kaminski! Blast a hole in that partition. Gelfand, Lutz-man, assist them. Everyone else back!" Weiss herded his troops away from the wall.

* * * *

The colonel had left Beta Squad an ace in the hole, a corporal who carried an experimental prototype from the UN Weapons Lab. An Atomic Vortex pistol, whatever that was, and Christ alone knew what the thing could do. It had been brought on this mission just in case of an emergency. Well, if this wasn't an emergency, then Daniel Webster had just changed the definition.

"AVP Fire!" Lt. Nealon ordered.

Bracing himself against the recoil, the corporal unleashed his death-dealing maybe. Blinding heat filled the length of the corridor and somebody screamed.

* * * *

Trell's happy grin wilted as his translator spoke in a rush of subsonics about what was happening on Deck 6, relaying the information to him via the Boztwank's tech-station.

"Alert! Alert! We have been boarded," the beige box on his belt said in English.

Nobody seemed able to hear him over the deafening music, so Trell lifted the tape player up high and brought it smashing down on the crystal table. In the silence that followed, his translator calmly repeated its message.

Rudely, Hammer shoved the women off his lap and grabbed his jacket and laser. "Come on boys! We got some killing to do."

Drill stopped the man with a shout. "Hold it," he said feeling inspired. "I got a great idea!"

Already at the door, the ganglord pivoted. "What?"

"How about using that Omega Gas stuff?" Drill suggested. "Hey greenie, we got any left?"

"Yes, there is!" Trell cried enthusiastically. He joined them by the door. "Lots! We can stop them cold!"

"Stop them hot, you mean!" Hammer snarled in correction, and he gave the alien a push into the hallway. "Get going, Technician! We're gonna flood this ship with boiling Omega Gas and kill their asses dead!"

Garbled as that was, Trell got the general idea. Yes, they must kill these unknown invaders and their beasts of burden.

"What about the girls?" Chisel asked slipping into his jacket. Laser rifle in hand, he was still encircled by his allotment of scantily clad beauties.

Just bait in the trap, Hammer realized. But he excused himself for not figuring it out sooner, as this particular trick had never been played on him before. A pretty slick trap too, he had to admit. Keep the gang busy with broads while the cops raided the place to literally catch the Deckers with their pants down. Should he kill these women and order some more? Nyah, what a waste. That Amanda, yum!

"You girls, stay close," he ordered. "And keep your mouths shut. Or else. Got it?" Terrified, the women meekly nodded agreement, and tagged along behind the racing street gang as best they could.

Minutes later, everyone was crowded into the control room and Trell manually closed the security door, using a magnetic lock to hold it in place. Then as an afterthought, he wedged Boztwank's heavy pot against the door.

"Who's out there anyway?" Drill inquired, only casually interested in who they were about to slaughter. "The FBI? The Army?" Then he blanched. "Not those star cops again!"

"Who freaking cares," Hammer snapped taking his seat and throwing what few switches he knew how to use. "Where are they?"

"Deck six. No, five, no, deck four!" Trell shouted listening to his belt translator and hurrying over to his post. Whoever the invaders were, they were getting uncomfortably close to the control room.

A tremor shook the floor and suddenly there were no more working sensors in that part of the ship. What the Void was going on down there?

"Deck 4," he repeated. "Deck 3 sensors indicate projectile weapons, chemical explosives, some kind of an energy weapon and a large metal machine of some kind. Why, they're battling the warobot!"

Trell was astonished. "It must have been hunting for us ever since you escaped from the Test Chamber." *Gak!* They had probably passed right by it on their journey to the bridge, hidden in the Omega gas.

"A war robot?" Roxanne asked curiously.

With a snarl, Hammer told her to shut up. Frightened, the ladies exchanged nervous glances. They could only imagine such a machine as a horrible metal monster with an armored tank-like body and a dozen

weapon-tipped arms. All they got wrong was the number of arms. There were a hundred.

“Our enemies battle our enemies,” Drill muttered, sliding into his ponderous chair. “Like biblical, man.”

In spite of the situation, Hammer grinned at his lieutenant. Always the intellectual.

As if for protection, a brunette pressed herself against Chisel and he shoved her away. No time for that now. This was business.

“How hot we gotta make the gas?” Drill asked, punching buttons and pulling a lever. Trell reached past him and pushed the lever back a notch.

“Eight times your body temperature,” said the translator on his belt doing a fast conversion. “That will take about 4,000 seconds. No! Only 1,000 seconds. The Omega Gas is still warm from before!”

Another tremor shook the starship and a patch of lights on the Protector's board went dark.

“Trouble?” Hammer questioned.

“Only for them,” Trell snapped. The angry Technician hated to kill anybody, but the instinct for self-preservation was strong in his species.

Brushing back his wild crop of hair, Hammer scowled at his console. “What button do I press?” he asked. The alien pointed and Hammer poised a thumb over the glowing indicator.

“You just tell me when,” Hammer growled, through grit teeth. Rule #1 for the universe: Nobody messes with the Bloody Deckers, and lives.

Trell wiggled acknowledgment and checked the panel gauges. There would be no mistakes this time. He was going to wait until exactly the right moment, and then release scalding hot Omega Gas into the corridors, peeling the very paint off the walls and killing everything organic it reached.

* * * *

Deep within the bowels of the starship, the deadly Omega Gas bubbled and steamed in a metal caldron, the growing pressure accelerating the heating process until the war vapor was straining at the release valve, struggling to be set free. But it had been commanded to wait.

Nine hundred seconds to go and counting.

FIFTEEN

Streamers, stars, and swirls gradually faded from their eyes and sight returned to the NATO soldiers. Fifty meters away sat the warobot, an inert black mountain with its multiple arms dangling like metal wind chimes. Deep scars were burned in its prow from the jumping tip of the energy cone of the Atomic Vortex Pistol.

Raggedly, the men cheered in triumph, then stopped, as every inch of their exposed skin was painfully sunburned. Medical packs were opened posthaste.

“What does that weapon fire again, corporal?” Lt. Nealon asked, applying first aid cream to his blistered

hands.

“A controlled nuclear tornado, sir,” the soldier replied, dressing his own burns. “According to the manual.”

Somebody laughed. “That? Controlled my ass.”

“Hey, what about radiation poisoning?” a worried soul asked.

“According to the manual there's no harmful fallout,” the corporal stated patting the leather bound book the size of the Manhattan Yellow Pages dangled from his belt.

“Enough chitchat,” a sergeant growled, slapping a fresh ammo clip into his M203 assault rifle and working the bolt to chamber a round for immediate use. “We still got a job to do. Let's move out.”

Groaning from their bruises, the soldiers got to their feet and prepared to rejoin their companions, when something creaked loudly behind them. They spun around to see the alien machine down the passageway tremble, then its arms stirred, and once more the waro-bot lifted off the floor and begin moving forward as though nothing had ever happened. Lt. Nealon cursed. Good lord, what did it take to stop that thing? A court order? The AVP had only stunned the warobot. Okay, how about more of the same?

“Visors!” the lieutenant shouted, and the troops rushed to obey, knowing what to expect. “Fire!” he ordered, tapping the AVP man on the shoulder.

Dutifully, the gunner raised the weapon again and pulled the first trigger. The scarlet beam of a tracking laser shot out from the tiny cylinder clipped to the underside of his cumbersome, multi-barreled weapon. With a gulp, the soldier then squeezed the second trigger, and a twisting lance of burning energy vomited from the bulbous muzzle of the AVP with a bucking recoil.

Searing yellow light blinded the human warriors as the spiraling cone of atomic flame stretched down the length of the corridor to strike the frantically backpedaling warobot.

Violently reacting to the impact, the alien machine shuddered as the stabbing tip of the nuclear tornado skipped across its prow, leaving ugly, glowing furrows in the black armor. Electrical discharges danced along the robot's massive frame, and drops of molten metal spraying the walls. As the AVP ceased it's outpouring, the warobot went dark and slumped to the floor, its assortment of blades and probes and drills punching holes in the soft deck.

In the blissful calm that followed, the toasted NATO troopers said a fervent prayer. Then groaned in disappointment, as the running lights of the robot brightened, its massive head swiveled towards them, its clanking arms assumed a defiant posture, the machine rose into the air and resumed gliding towards them.

Lt. Nealon grimaced. The damn thing shook the charge off faster this time, he noted unhappily.

“Fire!” the sweating man commanded.

Panting for breath, the corporal shook his head. “No go, sir. The battery pack needs time to recharge.”

“How long?”

“Sixty seconds.”

Sixty lives was more like it, he thought grimly. But every one of them bought Alpha Squad precious time. "Open fire!" he shouted.

Bullets streamed from assault rifles, probing the robot for a weak spot. Screaming rockets slammed into the distant walls, the ferocious blasts piling up mounds of material to delay its approach. The battle droid outmaneuvered the humans by reaching out with a pair of huge metal claws to grab a hold of the low ceiling and ponderously swinging itself over the massed wreckage. No mindless automaton, this robot learned from its mistakes.

That chilling sight prompted the troopers to fire their weapons with renewed determination. The starship's ventilators efficiently cleansed the smoke from the air, giving the NATO forces a clear shooting range. But for what? Thermite, grenades, napalm, so far the only thing to even hamper the machine was the Atomic Vortex Pistol. Fat lot of good it did.

A thunderous explosion sounded from around the corner and billowing smoke heralded the arrival of coughing men who thirstily drank in the clean air and stumbled away again, Col. Weiss among them.

Unbelievably, the dividing wall still stood and was only spider-webbed with cracks. Benson and Kaminski expertly slapped more of the clay-like C4 plastique on the barrier, jabbed in timing pencils and twisted off the ends.

They scarcely had taken cover when the charges blew. As the fumes dispersed, the soldiers cursed louder than the plastique. The fissures were wider, big enough to put your arm through, but before their eyes, the cracks began to close like a wound in living flesh.

"Again!" Weiss ordered the demolition team. "This time with everything you've got!"

Pounds instead of ounces of explosive were smacked onto the wall, and time pencils broken. The concussion shook them to the floor. Laying prone, Col. Weiss rolled over, his assault rifle ready to add its pittance of destruction to the job. But the wall was gone, blown to smithereens.

"Alpha Squad," he shouted triumphantly. "Move out!"

Assuming an attack formation, the soldiers hopped over the remains of the wall and raced off. A zigzagging turn brought them to another dead end and the locking click of the self-healing wall was clearly heard by everybody present. Furiously the colonel thought, thirty years of battlefield training coming to his aid instantly.

"Search for an air vent," he ordered, but alas, none were to be found. Only one thing left to do then, he decided, retreat and try to battle their way past that armored tank Beta Squad had been delaying. By God, they'd fight it hand-to-hand!

"Charge!" Weiss shouted, and without question the NATO troopers reversed direction and bravely advanced to the rear.

* * * *

Two levels above the fighting, Amanda closed the front of her gossamer thin babydoll nightie and approached Hammer. Teasingly, she touched the ganglord on the shoulder. "Hammer?"

"What?" the teenager snarled out of the corner of his mouth, not taking his eyes off Trell.

“Where are we?” Amanda asked, in a throaty voice.

“This is the control room, bitch, and we are in control.”

Uncertain of how to respond, the woman glanced about the strange white room, and the incredibly profusion of controls at each of the four tech stations that the Decker's were sitting at. “What happened to Crowbar?” she asked.

Puzzled for a second, Hammer raised an eyebrow. Eh? Ah! Hmm. “He's out taking a leak.”

“Oh.” She seemed to accept that. “Can you really kill off the cops with some kind of gas?”

Hands poised at the controls, Hammer grinned at the tall blonde evilly. “Freaking-A, lady, they're already history! This Omega shit dissolves ya like sugar in water. Pft! You're gone. Super dead.”

“Wow.” A sparkle came to her eyes. “Then there's no danger to us. You're still in charge?”

“We're in charge of the world!” Drill roared, raising a clenched fist into the air like the revolutionaries on television always did. “King Deckers!”

The lovelies whispered among themselves, and the gang preened under their fearful respect. Yes, the Bloody Deckers were kings of the world.

“King of the World,” Amanda said reverently. “But a king needs a queen.” She drew herself close enough to Hammer so that a warm breast lightly brushed his cheek.

“Queens,” he corrected, his attention drawn away from his controls and to her cleavage in a momentary rush of lust. “Lots of'em. At least a dozen.”

“But one's got to be his first lady,” she murmured, stroking his astonishingly clean mane of hair. “Can I?”

The street tough smiled. “Can you what?” he asked in return, thinking of a thousand things this hot bitch could do. And he read Penthouse Forum.

“The cops,” she said breathing deeply, which produced spectacular results. “Could I kill the cops? Please? I always wanted to off a bunch of pigs.” The ganglord hesitated. “Pretty please with sugar on top?”

With a laugh, Hammer slapped her on the bottom and she squealed in delight. “Okay fox, you off the pigs. You just gotta press this button here.”

Amanda's expression showed her amazement. “Really? Just press that button?”

The street tough nodded. “Yep. That's it.”

“Why, thank you, shit-for-brains.”

It took Hammer a good second to react to that. Surging with anger, he spun the chair towards her and she raked the boy's face with her nails, digging bloody furrows in his flesh, just barely missing the eyes.

With a curse, the ganglord lunged at her, swinging a haymaker that would have caved in her skull had it connected, but she swayed out of the way and gave him a short punch in the throat. Hacking for air, Hammer stumbled backwards.

Now painful cries from his companions showed that they too were also under attack. Blind from the blood in his eyes, the man shot a fist out, accidentally connecting with Amanda's pretty nose, shattering the bone. The girl went down, her face ruined. Kicking her aside, Hammer vaulted from his chair and turned, just in time to avoid having a spike heel driven into his brain by the long leg of Joyce. With murderous intent, he grabbed for his laser only to discover the weapon was gone.

In suddenly realization, he saw that the women had split into teams. Three babes in black lace and fishnet stockings were piled on top of Drill, pounding him with their fists. Three blondes in peek-a-boo mesh body suits had surrounded a bewildered Chisel, who apparently had a patch of his hair yanked out.

Standing with his back to his console, the disheveled kid swung his left hand in a glittering defensive pattern, while he sucked at a vicious bite mark on his right wrist. Hammer judged that the boy was in shock, but even as he watched, Chisel's face took on a feral look and the knife began to slice instead of defend. The half-naked lovelies hastily moved away from him. Luckily, they seemed to know nothing about serious fighting.

Not bait in the trap, the ganglord realized, correcting his previous appraisal, but decoys! Trojan whores sent to protect the invaders downstairs. Hammer contorted his face into a snarl. Well, tough tittie bitch, it hadn't worked!

Vindictively, the seething street tough punched a button on the console and his chair sank out of sight, the floor closing over the hole. He blinked and glanced at the bank of identical white buttons. Shit-fire, he'd forgotten which one it was! In desperation, Hammer raked his hands across the control board, pushing dozens of buttons at once. Pictures of different planets appeared on the viewscreens. Wall panels opened and closed; laser rifles tumbling out. Ion clusters got a ring job. The turbo lift went into reverse. Toilets flushed. Dinner was started. Starch was added to the laundry. An unnamable alien device stopped doing its unnamable alien function, and the ship was renamed *Ezrlptxy*.

In short order, Trell had come to some disquieting conclusions about Dirling mating practices and discreetly took refuge behind a small pile of stony rubble that had once been Gasterphaz. Even in death, the Choron protected.

Their long blonde, black and red hair streaming in the air behind them, several of the women dashed over to snatch the rifles that fell out of the wall. But they were dismayed to find that only the lasers taken from the Deckers were activated. They tried pulling this and twisting that to no avail.

Barking a warning, the three women with working laser rifles assumed a firing stance, holding the weapons with anything but trepidation. The other girls drew aside, modestly drawing the remnants of their ripped clothing together, their voluptuous bodies smeared with blood. Instinctively seeking protection, Hammer grabbed the dazed Amanda and held her in front of him as a living shield.

“Try it, and the slut dies,” he growled threateningly, and then added a few phrases that people in polite society would never utter in front of a lady.

The blonde awoke at his shouts and smashed a high heel directly onto Hammer's instep. With a howl of pain, the ganglord released the woman and she threw herself to the floor. Without hesitation, Wilma, Alice and Melissa fired their lasers. Triple beams of searing energy lanced out from the rifles, and the

polychromatic rays struck and clung to the sparkling defense fields. But the earlier scene repeated itself as the fields shrank, trembled and then expanded; the women just as surprised as the Deckers had been when the lasers shut down rather than consume their own beams and be destroyed.

Now switchblade knives snapped into action, and the gang moved in for the kill with no thought of mercy for the fairer sex entering their minds. They had been betrayed and the women would die. Their blood would be just drops in the ocean already spilled by the New York street gang. It was four-to-one odds, and the women were virtually naked and unarmed. No contest.

As the Deckers attacked, the three women in bikinis expertly dodged the clumsy knife thrusts and jabbed out with their appropriated rifles, the butts smashing male teeth. Small fists smacked into pockmarked faces, breaking noses and jaws. Shapely knees met elbows. Bones cracked. Switchblades dropped from nerveless fingers and were kicked away. Drill's squirter was brutally wrapped around his neck. Alice and Wilma punched opposite sides of Hammer's head at the same time, scrambling what little brains he had. The ganglord slumped to the floor. Chisel was dropkicked on top of him by the beautiful, but deadly, Wilma Fisher, U.S. Secret Service.

The fight over, Lt. Amanda Jackson of the New York City SWAT team, fired off orders to her mixed bag of commandos. "Fisher, Webbert, guard these morons. Kill them if they move. Hutchings, Bentley, find Trell and have him turn off that gas. Everybody else, with me."

Through sheer force of will, Trell tried too make himself turn invisible, failing that he prayed, but the women found him anyway crouching behind his makeshift barricade.

"I am not of your species!" he shrieked as they hauled him wriggling into view. "I didn't mate with you! DON'T EAT ME!"

NSA field operative, Alice Bentley bared her teeth at the alien crewmember. "If you don't turn off the Omega Gas and stop that robot immediately, I'll bite your head off and then mate with you. Twice!" the petite blonde snarled.

Trell turned a nauseous shade of aquamarine and lunged for the control panel. Wildly slapping buttons, he reversed the Omega Gas process. He then turned to Gasterphaz's tech station and froze. The controls were destroyed; wires, switches and relay cubes melted into an unrecognizable mess. A laser must have splashed its beam across the panel. There was nothing anyone could do to effect repairs outside of a week of hard work.

Dejectedly, he faced the crazed female Dirltlings. "I hope I taste just rotten," Trell said as his last great act of defiance.

Melissa Hutchings grabbed a fistful of the alien's uniform. "Just what do you mean by that?" the InterPol operative demanded, her bedroom eyes now spitting fire.

"Stop the robot?" Trell's translator squeaked. "Hot Void, I can't even talk to it."

"Try anyway!" Melissa ordered, licking her chops suggestively and the little alien obediently fainted.

Shifting to Plan B, the women efficiently stripped the gang of their clothing and distributed the items among the female warriors. Everybody was given at least two knives from Chisel's seemingly endless assortment. The huskier of the females wore the gang's leather jackets, and were armed with motorcycle chains. The three women in ripped bikinis had donned T-shirts to cover their nakedness. They also

sported the stolen laser rifles. Lt. Jackson, in her peek-a-boo black lace body suit, stuffed torn bits of handkerchief into her nose to stop the bleeding.

With professional expertise, she checked the clip on Hammer's Colt .45, duly noted the number of bullets left, slammed the clip home and worked the slide on the automatic pistol, chambering a round for immediate use. On her orders, the door of the control room was forced open and Assault Team Charlie moved out. Their decorative, but not battleworthy, high heels had been discarded. However, the Decker's boots proved too large for any of the team, so they ran barefoot along the starship's main corridor. The soft floor felt oddly warm and almost alive.

Chosen by the Cray supercomputer of the FCT for their physical beauty, courage and military training, none of the women faced the upcoming fight with anything but grim resolution. The combat soldiers knew the desperate straits their male counter-parts were in, and that the laser weapons they now carried could be the deciding factor in the battles outcome. But like the street gang and Trel, they were unsure where the fight was located and at a branching corridor they paused.

"Which way, sir?" panted the Swedish airline stewardess that Dr. Malavade had personally recommended for this assignment, knowing her fondness for trying new, exciting things.

Amanda cocked her head. "The noise does seem louder in this direction." But the sounds of battle dropped off sharply as they neared a four-way intersection.

"Damn," a zaftig Green Beret sighed, stopping in the act of using a discarded fishnet stocking to tie off her riot of blond curls. "We're too late."

"Can it, sister," the U.S. Secret Service agent barked, wishing that she had her trusty .357 Magnum with her, instead of this souped-up alien flashlight.

Coyly, a buxom Russian FSB spy tucked a shapely breast back into the flimsy lace bra it had inadvertently popped out of while they were running. "Perhaps if we tried the next level down," she suggested in flawless English.

"You tell us how to get there, comrade," snapped the poster girl for the United States Air Force, a rocket jockey of a test pilot as famous for her impatience and fabulous pneumatic shape.

Down the corridor to their left, one of the women on point position seemed to be listening to the wall. "Mandell! What in hell are you doing?" Jackson demanded, walking closer.

Stacy Mandell, a martial arts instructor and ex-Miss Nude Connecticut, removed her ear from the vibrating white wall and waved her commander back.

"Clear the area!" she shouted, in a surprisingly husky voice. "Scram! Beat feet!"

As the women staged a tactical withdrawal, a high-pitched squeal became evident. Rapidly growing in volume, it reached higher and higher in tone and tempo until the squealing drove them to the brink of screaming. But the female soldiers gritted their teeth against the horrid noise and took the punishment, unwilling to yield another foot of the corridor. Obviously, something was coming through the wall, but they were not going to retreat. The team would stand and fight, if only to avenge the brave men sent to assist them. Whatever came through that wall was going to be hit, and hit hard, by beams, bullets, knives, chains, hands, feet and teeth.

The devilish noise reached its painful crescendo and the wall violently disintegrated in a blinding flash of light and heat; the spray of vaporized metal stinging every inch of their exposed skin. A rain of fused, black robot parts closely followed the explosion, four metal arms loudly clanging off the opposite wall, a whirling blade cutting a jagged trench in the white material and the robot's head embedding in the floor like a cannonball hitting a snow bank. After a moment, the starship's hidden ventilators whisked away the pungent smoke and from the gaping hole in the wall a coughing man in a NATO uniform stumbled into view. Amanda rushed to assist him.

"Are you okay?" Weiss and Jackson asked each other.

As the women helped the bedraggled soldiers into the corridor, their respective commanders took the opportunity to report.

"The Bloody Deckers are in our custody," Lt. Commander Jackson reported giving a salute. "We are in control of the ship. No personnel losses to report, although each of us would like to be disinfected and shower for a week." A twinkle entered her blue eyes. "I see you got the robot."

"Don't even mention a shower," the colonel laughed, mopping the sweat from his flushed face. "Yeah, we beat the damn thing. But I'm going to have some strong words with the scientists in the NATO weapons lab."

"Why's that?"

"They never told us that the Atomic Vortex Pistols only had a kill range of three feet. Three measly feet!"

To the woman's puzzled expression he added, "I'll explain later."

SIXTEEN

Less than an hour later, in the underground Command Bunker of the FCT, the humans and visiting Gees were gathered around the green felt-covered poker table closely examining some of the more interesting artifacts taken from the *All That Glitters*.

Meanwhile, what remained of the Bloody Deckers was hauled off in chains to NATO HQ for a thorough debriefing and a jail sentence that could only be measured in radioactive half-lives. However in the weeks to come, a statue would be erected in Central Park honoring the gang for saving Humanity from Idow and his crew; a monument that was regularly defaced by the New York citizenry and cleaned by the local branch of the Hells Angels Motorcycle Club.

Contemptuously smug, Sir John tossed the defense field generator onto the table with other belts, laser rifles, bits of warobot and the remains of Boztwank's squirter. "A toy," he declared in an annoyed tone. "Useless. It was foolish of the aliens to depend on such a limited defense."

Dr. Wu took her accustomed seat between Bronson and Nicholi. "True," she agreed. "A force shield that was proof against both energy and material weapons, similar to the dome that protects their ship, would have used a great deal of power. More than the field generators in the belt could readily supply. But since you could link either shield, or field to the starship's reactor, who cares?"

"Lack of mobility?" Prof. Rajavur guessed, fingering the woven metal hem of the belt.

"How about a compromise, then," General Bronson suggested, grinding out his cigar butt in an ashtray. "A defense shield. Literally. A round disk, say a meter in diameter and anchored directly in front of you. Crouch down and you'd be safe from frontal attacks."

"Plus, you could stand and run, firing around the edges," Nicholi added, smiling broadly. "I like it, Wayne. I like it!"

Using a clean cloth, Dr. Wu wiped a smear of dried blood off the translucent crystal barrel of one of the laser rifles.

"As for these devices," she began, minutely inspecting the weapon's breech, then holding it to the overhead light, casting a rainbow pattern of colors across her face. "I wonder what a full laboratory analysis will reveal about the beam focusing mechanism? An electromagnetic prism assembly like Prof. Richard Hill of Boston University is working on, or something entirely new?"

Rajavur made a note of the name so that he could requisition any available information on the man's research for her. Then he paused. On second thought, Yuki probably already requisitioned Hill himself as a lab assistant. "How long before you can make a report?" the Icelander asked his scientific advisor, hiding a smile.

"Twenty four hours for the preliminary," she replied, primly crossing her legs and wondering what the older man found so amusing. "Sooner with any luck. NATO is sending an armored truck to collect these small items and carry them to the UN laboratory in Long Island."

With fingertip pressure, Mohad turned one of the defense fields on and off several times. "The results will be most enlightening, I am sure," the linguist quipped.

"Will you and Yuki be conducting the experiments?" Nicholi asked, luxuriating in his old poker chair and carefully stretching his arms so as not to impolitely smack any of his teammates. Czar's Blood, he was glad to be out from behind that sheet of glass.

"No," Dr. Malavade said with a frown. "For a while at least, Yuki and I will be living in the alien starship with an international team of scientists overseeing its complete dissection. Why, the communication equipment alone..."

"I want to see those engines," Dr. Wu stated flatly.

Prof. Rajavur countered with, "You mean the medical facilities."

"No, the shield generators," Bronson interjected.

Eagerly, Sir John leaned forward. "Trell is what I'm really interested in," he said in scholarly passion. "There's so much that he can tell us about Galactic society and the way it works. Why, even what he doesn't know can be informative. You see—"

Nicholi lifted a restraining hand. "Please Jonathan, no lectures today."

"Be sure to clear everything through Wayne," the diplomat sternly told them. "He's in charge of security for the whole project. The brand new Secretary General of the UN has placed the entire matter in our, quote, highly competent hands, end quote."

The bunker rang with easy laughter as the First Contact Team relaxed after this most hectic of days. Unnoticed by the humans, the two golden beings standing over by the kitchen unit nervously exchanged meaningful glances, put down their mugs of buttered and salted coffee to briefly touch hands. Seconds later the avantor stepped forward.

“Unfortunately, we can not allow you access to any of this information,” she stated firmly.

Everybody stopped laughing.

Maintaining a diplomatically neutral face, Rajavur laid aside his huge coffee mug. “Why is that?” he asked.

“Yeah,” General Bronson puffed suspiciously, from behind a freshly lit panatela with General Nicholi closely flanking him on the left. “What gives?”

“After all, we can probably improve upon your designs,” Dr. Wu said in tactless truth.

“Most likely, doctor,” Avantor agreed. “But it is strictly against the rules.”

“The Galactic League Handbook,” The 17 piped in. “Chapter Nine, Codes of Conduct, sub-section 3, Regulations Referring To The Dispersal Of Technical Information To Non-Member Planets: Item One—Don't Do It.”

“This is ridiculous!” Bronson snapped, plainly nettled by the outrageous statement.

Avantor was unruffled by his outburst. “But a fact, none the less.”

Unable to stop the Gees without resorting to physical violence, the FCT watched helpless as the two aliens collected the items taken from the starship and placed them in a storage box supplied by the humans. Avantor locked the box tight and 17 dry swallowed the key.

“But surely, the mere fact that we already know of these devices existence, eclipses such an action on your part,” Sir John observed.

Score one for our side, thought Mohad smugly. Then he froze as a strange hand began groping his knee under the table. Eh? What was going on here?

Avantor wiggled her ears in dissent. “The rule book disagrees. Besides, I personally believe your race is simply too violent to be allowed scientific knowledge of this level.”

“We're too violent?” General Bronson stormed, removing the stogie from his mouth and jabbing it at the two alien beings. “What the hell were Idow and his crew? Galactic girl scouts?”

Rasping hoarsely, The 17 coughed into his hand and fanned the air. No Koolgoolagan cigar, that cheroot. “On the contrary, they were criminals. However, you are not.”

Not openly anyway, thought Rajavur as he continued to tap a message in Morse code on Dr. Malavade's knee. The communications expert squeezed the diplomat's hand in acknowledgment, politely excused himself from the table and left the bunker by the main door.

Sir John marshaled his powers of debate and rallied to the attack. “Well then,” he said, taking a hold of

the lapels of his gray tweed suit and assuming his best lawyer stance. "You must be ignorant of the effect that your presence has had on Earth. Peace has broken out like the common cold. China, Russia and America have signed an unprecedented peace treaty. England and Ireland have come to terms. Israel and the PLO have, pardon the term, buried the hatchet. North and South Korea, New York and Brooklyn!"

The sociologist spread his arms. "It's pandemic! A new feeling of Earthly brotherhood has enveloped our globe. Such an unconditional reaction on our part *must*," he stressed that last word. "Must cause you to reconsider."

Avantor was clearly not swayed by his argument. "No," she repeated.

Stoic as a steel statue, General Nicholi Gagarin Nicholi regarded the guardian of the galaxy in the disapproving manner that Russian generals seem to have patented. "If we were indeed the savage primitives you think," he said rationally. "Then would we not simply take the machines and deny you use of the starship that you so desperately need to return home?"

Lovely, noted Courtney, mentally applauding the general. Not a threat per se, merely the acknowledgment that a threat could have been made, but wasn't. Crafty ol' bear. Maybe?

With inhuman control, the avantor turned her expressionless black eyes on Nicholi. "General, we are in constant communication with our home world. Any unwarranted acts on your part would result in eventual retaliation by our Great Golden Fleet. The starship *All That Glitters*, its equipment and sole surviving crewmember belong exclusively to us. Do you really wish to test your military prowess against ours?"

Angrily, General Bronson removed the cigar from his mouth, noticed that everybody was staring at him, paused, and then returned the stogie to its normal position, his thoughts unspoken.

"Well, if that is your unalterable position," Prof. Rajavur sighed, his voice trailing off in resignation. "Are you sure there is nothing we could say to change your minds?"

The golden female shook her head in the accepted Dirling gesture. "Sorry, Professor, no."

With a sad expression, the diplomat shrugged and rose from his seat. "So be it. At least you will allow us to see you off in the manner deemed proper for visiting dignitaries? We could assemble the leaders of our world here in less than two days."

Bull, thought Nicholi keeping a straight face. We could have the entire UN General Assembly here in less than two hours. What was the Iclander plotting?

Avantor remained unyielding. "Expediency dictates our immediate departure. We mean you no discourtesy, but we must return to our headquarters with all due speed. Prior orders. I'm sure you understand."

The two generals nodded in agreement. Yes, orders were orders. That was a universal rule. Like never pulling on a busted straight, or volunteering for anything. That was how they got this assignment in the first place.

"But of course," Rajavur agreed in sympathy. Ever gallant, he offered his hand to the aliens and they shook. "You don't mind though if we personally see you off, do you?"

At this, the avantor smiled. "A pleasure, Professor. My 17 and I would consider it an honor."

* * * *

This conversation, relayed to the Great Golden Ones Headquarters via the flying refrigerator, was judged to be fitting and proper. Avantor, the avantor and her 17, were to be congratulated on a job well done.

Much later, under harsher scrutiny, it was decided that this is where the two made their big mistake. But at the time, who could have known?

* * * *

Night had come to Central Park. Past the tall trees, the electric towers of New York City brightened the horizon, while powerful floodlights illuminated the area about the colossal white ship brighter than day. In relative peace, the FCT bid its guests adieu while thousands of unseen eyes kept close track of their every move. The noisy civilian crowds were hundreds of meters away behind the military cordon, the NATO troops just recently reinforced by a special crowd control unit from the NYPD. During a rock concert, this small a group was the lull the police relaxed in. Heck, nobody was even drunk!

The street gang's tribute had been long since removed from the starship, and the confiscated alien artifacts replaced inside the cargo bay. Near the base of the loading ramp, Avantor and The 17 checked over the inventory of items, making sure that nothing from the ship was missing. But The 17 quickly noted a major discrepancy, and bluntly asked the attending humans where was Trell-desamo-Trell-ika-Trell-forzua-Junior?

Resplendent in his red diplomat sash, light gray morning coat and black silk top hat, Prof. Rajavur pretended surprised. "Gosh, I thought the ambulance would have delivered him already."

Avantor chewed over the human word. "Ambulance," she repeated. "A medical emergency vehicle? Why would the Technician have need of such a transport? Was he damaged in the fighting?"

"Killed while trying to escape, actually," General Bronson said, sounding embarrassed. "Our troops were understandably a bit trigger happy."

With an unreadable expression, the alien female turned her eerie black eyes on the Earth soldier. "And why wasn't I informed of his demise earlier?" she inquired, her voice the temperature of liquid methane.

Bronson shrugged, making his chest full of medals tinkle like distant wind chimes. "You didn't ask," he replied truthfully.

"Where is Trell's body located?" interjected The 17 boldly stepping forward, his electrostatic clipboard and stylus floating rigidly in the air nearby.

General Nicholi, who was as equally decked out as his friends in full dress uniform, sash, ribbons and metals, none of them for good conduct, answered the golden male's question. "Across the street in a mobile UN lab undergoing total dissection. Why? Is there a problem with that?"

For a moment, Avantor and her 17 touched hands. "Produce his remains immediately," the female alien ordered. The unspoken words 'or else', clearly heard by everybody present.

The FCT exchanged a round of glances as Nicholi muttered something to the military aide standing beside him. The UN soldier nodded, saluted, and spoke briefly into his helmet microphone. In less than a minute later, the civilian crowd parted and through the NATO barricade rolled a military ambulance. The

aliens strode over to the white car as armed UN guards opened the rear doors. On the rubber matting of the floor was a styrofoam container, and nestled inside a foggy bed of dry ice was an ordinary tin janitor's bucket with a snap-on plastic lid.

The Gees stared at the pail, each other, the pail again, and then The 17 gingerly lifted the lid. In frank dismay, they saw that the bucket was filled to the brim with a thick green mush the consistency of overcooked pea soup.

"Trell?" the 17 squeaked, as if half expecting an answer from the emerald puree. Swirling about, Avantor angrily opened her mouth to speak when Yuki interrupted her.

"I said total dissection," Dr. Wu explained, her hands neatly hidden in the flowing angel sleeves of her heavily embroidered red and black formal Chinese robe.

The avantor closed her mouth with a snap. So they had.

Impeccable in a cream color Nehru jacket and matching turban, Dr. Malavade noted that accidents will happen.

"Chalk it up to scientific fervor," Sir John said, dressed in an incongruous, but historically accurate, tam-o'-shanter, weskit, family tartan kilt, knickers and silver buckle shoes. Only alien beings, or other Scotsmen, would think his outfit dapper.

Studying the human faces, Avantor briefly wondered if something was decaying on the planet of cheese makers. "Verify that it is him, 17," she commanded her assistant.

As ordered, the golden male stuck a finger into the warm glop and put it in his mouth. Hmm, not bad actually. Modified vegetable fiber, slightly radioactive, enriched with elemental beryllium and benzene. Check, that was the physiology of Trell's species, all right.

"It's him, my liege," he reported erroneously.

Satisfied, the avantor wheeled about and marched into the ship, The 17 following close at her heels with the covered bucket. Seconds later, the door to the loading bay closed behind them.

Almost immediately, a harsh buzzing sound filled the air and the white ship lifted up, as easy as a child's balloon, compressed dirt falling from the bottom of the sphere as it floated into the nighttime sky. Heedful of the Earth people below, Avantor kept the engines at 10/10, barely sufficient to lift the enormous vessel, until they were well away from the planetary surface. Then The 17 boosted the reactor to 20/20. With an explosion of power, the ship vanished into the starry black of space.

Shortly thereafter, NASA signaled Dr. Malavade on his cell phone that the alien craft had shunted into hyperspace, and he happily announced the fact to his compatriots.

"Well, well," Nicholi smirked, feeling very pleased with himself and the world in general. "We did it."

Dr. Wu took off her ceremonial robe and folded it over an arm, exposing the floral print dress she'd been wearing earlier this day. "Yes, it does appear that way," she said in agreement.

"How long do you think it will take them to realize that they've been tricked?" Bronson asked, as a night breeze tugged on the lighter flame he applied to his latest cigar.

Prof. Rajavur shrugged. "With any luck, never. But we're planning on lift off in a month."

Ignoring his buzzing pager, General Bronson exhaled a stream of smoke. "Is that possible? To build a starship from scratch in 30 days?"

"With the resources of the entire world behind us?" Rajavur asked, removing his red sash and tucking it into his silk hat. "Most certainly."

"What was in that bucket anyway?" Mohad asked, as he unraveled his turban. Silly things turbans, but women seemed to like them. Made him appear taller, at least.

Yuki gave him a tired grin. "Minced asparagus, bombarded with gamma radiation, laced with powered beryllium and a dash of cleaning solution. I based the formula on what Trell had asked for lunch."

"I am so glad this worked," Sir John said, doffing his tam-o'-shanter and stroking his moustache. "But just in case, I had a duplicate of Trell waiting in the wings, so to speak. I based on that scenario we played out four years ago, in the event it became necessary to disguise humans as aliens. I even had duplicates of Avantor, Idow, the Bloody Deckers and us."

In the act of checking his cell phone for any messages, General Nicholi raised an eyebrow. Another Yuki? Impossible.

Dr. Wu frowned. Another Nicholi? No thank you.

Deep in thought, the six members of the defunct First Contact Team turned away from the crumbling edge of the colossal hole in the ground. Taking their time, they strolled back to a waiting limousine and the fantastic task ahead of them.

"Where is Trell anyway?" Dr. Wu asked, after a while.

Rjavur smiled. "Right now? Aboard a B17 stealth jet, en route to Kennedy Space Center, telling us everything he knows about starship engines, force shields, proton cannons, hyperdrive, and galactic politics." Then odd sullenly, the diplomat kicked at a clod of dirt in his way. "Bit of a pity, though."

"What is?" Nicholi asked, genuinely surprised. "Our plan seems to have come off flawlessly."

Prof. Rajavur stuck his hands in his pants pockets. "Almost. You see, Trell claims to know absolutely nothing about Deflector Plating."

Dr. Malavade stopped walking then and lifted his head to look at the twinkling points of light above the city, stars that were no longer so distant, or unreachable. "As you say, a pity."

SEVENTEEN

Just like a yo-yo on a string, the Cape Kennedy technician hung suspended from a steel cable and body harness rig high in the air alongside a nearly completed starship.

Grimly, the woman concentrated on her welding, as the fate of Earth might well rest on the quality of her work. Warm sea breezes gently tugged the woman's hair free from her cap. Visibly annoyed, she tucked

it into the collar of her sweat stained uniform. There had been little time for food and rest, and none for laundry if she was to stay on her rigid work schedule.

On the distant horizon, across a thousand flat acres of ferroconcrete, the towering space shuttle assemble buildings appeared like doll houses, and yet they seemed to look fatherly at the starship taking form before them. Pride of accomplishment overwhelming any negative feelings about the NASA state-of-the-art technology becoming obsolete virtually overnight.

Wary of pinching her fingers, the woman judiciously lowered the last armored section of the starship's hull into place and activated her hand tool. Very carefully, the technician guided a molecular softening beam along the joining line of the metallic plates, causing their atomic structures to intermingle and form a single unbroken mass. The entire hull of the colossal starship had been formed this way, out of thousands of curved adamantine sheets that not even a nuclear laser could have heat welded.

With her right hand, the woman artfully cold fused the pieces together, while her gainfully employed left hand held the internal components of the alien tool in place. The hastily assembled device had been built under Trell's adroit direction, with no consideration given for unnecessary items like a case, handle or convenience.

Over the last thirty days, backed by the money and power of the United Nations, NASA had completely retooled its Florida base. They slapped together devices and machines with unheard of abilities as fast as they could. Time was paramount. Every second saved was more precious than gold, a word that left a sour taste in everybody's mouth these days.

Also in the past month, the First Contact Team had abdicated from its position of power and returned the world to autonomy. The United Nations politely thanked them for a job well done, awarded the team a wheelbarrow full of medals, then disbanded the unit and reassigned its members to new, top priority duties. Then when nobody was looking, the UN Security Council took swift steps to assure that such an incredible usurpation of authority would never happen again. Among other things, they set fire to the FCT's mainframe Cray supercomputer, filled the Command Bunker with concrete and welded the door shut.

Meanwhile, thanks to their improved scanning devices, (courtesy of Trell, again), Earth knew precisely when the Great Golden Ones started moving in their mobile space forts to form a blockade around the planet. Subsequently, the final countdown for launch had been advanced. Spaceworthiness was the top priority, the internal work could be finished once the ship was in flight.

With a satisfied nod, the technician tucked her hand tool away and turned on the air tank of her scuba outfit. Under constant visual observation, this act told her superiors that the work was completed. They immediately cut her support cable.

Down through the air the woman dropped, expertly angling her fall to swan dive into a huge vat of thermal jelly that had been waiting six stories below her. With a loud clang, thick steel shutters slammed into place and sealed off the top of the vat just in time. Second later, huge gouts of searing green flame washed over the launch site, cracking the ferroconcrete apron and melting every unprotected item. Smooth and majestic, humanity's first starship lifted into the clear azure sky.

But after a kilometer or so, the ion drive of the vessel began to sputter and cough, causing the interstellar craft to wobble about erratically. Extending for hundreds of meters about the ship, its poorly tuned anti-gravity field started liberating countless volumes of turbulent air, which quickly formed a hurricane about the comically bobbing globe. This only made the huge, ungainly starship doubly visible from space.

Immediately on the alert, the Great Golden Ones dispatched a sleek war cube to intercept the sluggish escapee.

* * * *

Aboard the golden flagship of the spaceborne armada, Avantor, now a junior grade avantor, and her primary assistant, The 16, sternly stared at the bow monitor. Only the extenuating circumstances of the situation had given them another chance to safeguard the primitive planet, and protect their pensions. The Budget Department had wanted to send the two inept guardians back to Dirt in a Class 2 garbage scow. But Tactical had overridden that suggestion, although fitting, and equipped the pair with a Class 10 superdreadnought, along with an even thousand robot space forts. This was done out of a wish to see the job done properly, and partially the desire just to insert a dead tree branch into the sight receptors of Budgeting.

Their new ship was not a globe or a cube, but a mighty centihedron, a multi-planed sphere with a hundred sides and 150 points, each of them armed with energy weapons of frightfully destructive abilities. While it was many times the size of their old ship, the superdreadnought was still only designed for a two being crew, since the gargantuan Choron reactor used so much room. Their personal suites were pleasant enough though, and the brig was nice and large.

When asked, their new mega-computer had given a 90%+ probability of the Dirlings trying something dramatic before finally accepting defeat. So it was no great surprise when they spotted a near duplicate of Idow's captured ship struggling to reach the freedom of space.

Avantor wiggled her eyebrows in professional admiration at the remarkable sophistication of the craft, crude as it was. They must have some extraordinarily good scientists down there to deduce so much of galactic technology after so brief a glimpse. It was a pity about the quarantine order. But such a violently robust species must be kept to their home world until they learned social restraint, and some proper respect for the law.

"What's our situation, 16?" the woman asked, relaxing in her new, form fitting, command chair. She was serenely positive that everything was under control, and just as incorrect as she had been the last time.

"Something appears to be dreadfully wrong, my liege," the male said, touching the bald spot in his golden hair where his new remote computer control had been implanted. "I am receiving reports from our space forts of not merely one, but numerous launches from all over this planet. Twenty, forty, no, fifty ships have lifted off!"

"Show me," Avantor commanded, leaning forward in her seat.

The technician tilted his head and the walls of their control room filled with holographic views of the planet below them. Everywhere from the planetary surface, flocks of giant blue balls were struggling to reach the freedom of space.

Without a trace of humor, Avantor grimaced. A mass escape, eh? Damn clever these Dirlings, but the trick would not avail them.

"Activate the color tracker, 16," she loftily commanded.

Her assistant nodded to her, almost inadvertently causing the life support equipment to turn itself off. "Affirmative, my liege."

Then something on the monitor caught the avantor's attention. She blinked and then thoughtfully scrutinized the dozens of bright red globes floating above the planet. Hadn't those vessels just been blue?

"The Dirling ships are changing color!" The 16 exclaimed, confirming her worst fears. "My liege, we won't be able to track them through HyperSpace if they can do that!"

Stiffly, the female warrior rose from her command chair. "That does it," she snapped irritably. "Activate the force shield damper and prepare to fire our main cannon. I hate to destroy sentient beings, but we warned them about this. Now let them learn that the Great Golden Ones are not entities to be trifled with."

"Affirmative, my liege," The 16 grunted, as unhappy about this as his Leader. Staring at the bow monitor with his pupilless eyes, the short male lowered his head and from point-thirty-four of their geometric craft there reached out a shimmering gold pencil of destruction that struck the nearest of the Earth vessels. Capable of coring a small moon, the Dispersal Ray was unstoppable by anything short of pure neutronium. So it was a great shock to the Gee soldiers when the deadly energy beam bounced harmlessly off the smooth hull of the green ball and ricocheted back to vaporize the support drone flying next them.

"Impossible," the junior avantor gasped, limply collapsing back into her golden chair. "That was a Dispersal Ray, a full power Dispersal Ray. How could they have just shrugged it off?"

"M-my liege," the pale 16 stammered, even paler drops of yellow moisture glistening on his forehead. "You don't suppose that the Dirlings could have, you know, by themselves invented..."

Avantor's eyes flew open wide, her mind flooding with comprehension.

"Deflector Plating?" they wailed in unison. "OH NO!"

* * * *

Of the fifty purple globes rising from the surface of the Earth, only the starship from Florida held a live crew. The rest were multi-million dollar decoys, robot ships whose sole task it was to confuse the Great Golden Ones by getting the manned craft lost in the crowd. A near precise duplicate of Idow's Mikon #4, the manned vessel was well over half a kilometer in diameter and had a 80 person crew; seventy-nine human beings and Trel. The little green opportunist had been happy to collaborate with the FCT, telling them everything he knew. Trel had even invented something called Deflector Plating out of thin air when they flatly insisted that he do so. In exchange for this, they didn't turn him over to the Great Golden Ones. It was a mutually beneficial arrangement, as nobody, especially Trel, wanted to see him shipped off to Galopticon 7.

Internally the starship was a mess, with empty packing crates, excelsior stuffing, spare parts, bedding, food, and mounds of supplies piled everywhere. In point of fact, the vessel carried almost enough spare parts to build another starship. But this was an absolute necessity, as the craft would be a long way from home and no stardrive parts were standardized. They more closely resembled Rolls Royce luxury cars as the engines were handcrafted, and thus performed with a smoothness of operation that was near legendary.

Aboard the human constructed starship, Planetary Ambassador Rajavur, Trel and a platoon of the brand new UN Space Marines, nervously crossed their fingers and prayed. They were very glad indeed that Gees had only fired a warning shot across their bow. Hopefully, the space police wouldn't have time to unleash any real weapons, before they were long gone.

Chomping with impatience, the diplomat, soldiers and alien waited for the moment when their Swiss captain would twist together a pair of electrical wires and activate the shipboard computer. The machine would then drastically shrink the size of their gravity field and boost their flabby drive flame into a raging inferno of power, exponentially increasing the ship's speed. With any luck, this would enable them to catch the Gees off guard and get far enough away from their home world to be able to shunt into the dubious void of HyperSpace.

It was a brave, almost foolhardy plan, and the grand representatives of Earth honestly had no idea if they could actually smash through the impressive space blockade. Or when they did, if the captain could then find the real Galactic League, or if Rajavur could successfully argue their case for admittance. Everybody aboard the stout craft only knew a single fact for certain.

That the brave crew of the UNSF:*Hector Ramariez* was sure as Hell going to try!

BOOK TWO: IN SPACE

NEW DRAMATIS PERSONAE

CREW OF THE UNSF:*RAMARIEZ*

Dagstrom Keller—*captain*

Abigail Jones—*first mate*

Paul Von Loom—*chief surgeon*

Martha Soukup—*Navigation*

Purity Lilliuokalani—*Communications*

Marvin Hamlich—*Sensors*

John Buckley—*Weapons*

Abduhl Benny Hassan—*Spaceman First Class*

UN SPACE MARINES: 'HECTOR'S HELLCATS'

Kurt Sakadea—*lieutenant*

Tanya Lieberman—*master sergeant*

James Furstenburg—*private*

THE REST

(unpronounceable)—*Queen/Mother of RporR*

Einda—*prostitute*

Silverside—*criminal ganglord*

The Galactic League

The 3000—*Supreme Commander of the Great Golden Ones*

Bachalope Thintfeesel—*news reporter*

Jose de San Martin—*Secretary-General of the UN*

EIGHTEEN

With a dazzling, pyrotechnic display, the *Ramariez* shunted into hyperspace, escaping just as the Gees were about to unleash another superweapon, leaving the aliens with nothing but a viewscreen full of zigzagging drones and the certain knowledge that they had failed yet again.

* * * *

As the black of space was replaced by the featureless gray of the hyperspatial void, the bridge crew of the *Ramariez* broke into wild cheering. They'd done it! Success!

"All right, settle down," Captain Keller ordered after a few minutes of therapeutic pandemonium. "That was the easy part. Snap to! We've still got a job to do."

This sobered the crew immediately and as the sailors went busily to work, the starship captain glanced at the digital clock in the left arm of his chair. Four minutes to go.

Blond hair, blue eyes, square jaw, six feet tall and darkly tanned, Dagstrom Keller more resembled a movie star playing a professional boxer than a naval officer. Actually, Keller had boxed during college and been considered an Olympic hopeful. But he had been forced to withdraw from competition as the training interfered with his studies. He still occasionally boxed these days in the Swiss naval tournaments. In point of fact, was well known as Ol' One-Two Keller, both for his devastating left-right combination attacks, and unfortunately for his bedroom prowess.

The UN General Assembly had never heard of Dagstrom Keller until the FCT promoted him as their candidate for captain. Dag himself had been surprised. But upon due consideration, the man seemed perfect for the assignment. Keller was the youngest captain of a nuclear aircraft carrier to be decorated four times for bravery. He had graduated from the Zurich Polytechnic Institute magna cum laude and read science fiction; the latter a hobby the FCT believed might give the man a certain advantage in any bizarre situation that cropped up on his quixotic search for the Galactic League.

As ratings scurried about with their arms full of plastic boxes and Chief Petty Officers meticulously swept the deck clear of excelsior packing, the captain pinched together two wires inside the open right arm of his chair, ignoring the slight electric shock that tingled through his fingers. "Power Room? This is Captain Keller. I want a readout on the spacewarp generator."

"Sorry, captain," a voice said from the tiny speaker dangling in the rat's nest of wires. "But we can't do that."

He scowled, "And why not, mister?"

"Haven't unpacked the gauges yet."

Damn. "Well, do your best and report when ready."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Twelve levels below, in the center of the great ship, protected by hundreds of feet of durasteel and lead, Trell clicked off the Power Room's intercom and dutifully returned to his work.

Ever since he had been rescued from the Deckers, the little alien had been worked like a Thurstd gik, a phrase that had no human analogy, aside from sticking a fountain pen into an electric pencil sharpener.

Hard work? Yes. But the little Technician had never been happier. Unlimited amounts of material and assistants had been placed at his disposal. He had been awarded every Ph.D and scientific award that humanity had possessed, and been paid a truly staggering lump sum for his time and effort. Something no gik got.

Now on board the *Ramariez* (a name that filled him with shame, even though he'd had nothing to do with the murder), Trell sported the official rank of Master Technician, and was second only to the leader, ah, make that the captain, in authority. Plus, NASA had allowed him to design the light blue jumpsuit his team of engineers wore: the directors of the space agency knew that within the heart of every engineer there lurked the soul of an artist.

The little alien had done them proud. Once the extra set of arms had been edited out, the purely functional outfit was extremely comfortable for humans, possessed over 80 pockets of varied and assorted sizes, was certified stain resistant, and naturally smelled like beer; which saved the Power Room crew the trouble of constantly consuming breath mints. It was quite accidental that blue was the alien's favorite color and complemented his green skin tone.

Under Trell's watchful eye, wrenches, spanners, laser torches and hammers were applied with artistic fervor to the ever growing complex of machinery in the center of the giant ship. In short order, the army of workers had assembled the equipment into a more coherent shape and they were at last able to remove a smoking brassiere from the innards of a power relay. A fast thinking tech had saved the day by using it to lift and separate a pair of red-hot ion thrusters without losing a hand.

The entire Engineering crew had applauded the act, half for the woman's ingenious solution to the problem, and the rest for her superb structural integrity.

* * * *

With a musical ding, the bare steel doors of the elevator opened on the bridge and out strode the ship's doctor, Paul Van Loon. Slightly balding and with an enlarged nose, the tall, athletic Dutchman was considered a perfect choice for this post as he was an accomplished NATO surgeon who had served two tours of duty in the Middle East, held a minor degree in veterinary science, and was an amateur botanist.

This was his first real visit to the bridge and the physician took the opportunity to look around. This ship was going to be home for quite a long time.

Located near the top of the globular ship, the round room was reduced to a half circle by a dividing wall in which were located a turbo lift, elevator, emergency spiral stairs and a fireman's pole. NASA redundancy at its peak. Tech station consoles lined the outer walls, with the front of the room dominated

by a staggeringly huge triptych viewscreen. The captain's command chair was strategically positioned on a small dais overlooking the freestanding Navigation, Communication and Weapon consoles. Suspended from the ceiling was a video camera that recorded everything that was done and said for an eventual review. The Roddenberry Design Studios had created a functional masterpiece.

Picking his way through the litter on the deck, the physician noted the incredible vista of swirling gray visible on all three of the forward viewscreens. Casually, he glanced at a working meter on the environmental console and was surprised to find the outside temperature well over a thousand degrees Celsius. No wonder the aliens used hyperspace as a swear word. Nothing could live in that dead, sterile void.

And that was probably going to be the extent of his work on this ship, realized Van Loon, observation. The UN computers had accessed the personnel files of the world to choose their complement of 80 from the teeming billions of Earth, so it was no surprise that everybody, from the captain down to the lowliest Marine private, was in perfect health, a college graduate, combat veteran, a specialist in a dozen different fields, and could probably sing & dance as well. It made the physician feel uneasy to realize that he was probably the dumbest person on board the starship.

Taking his time, the Dutch physician strolled over to and took a seat at the vacant Weapons console. "Okay, sir, we made it to hyper-space, what's next?" he asked.

With a start, the captain regarded the man. "Don't you know?"

"Sorry, I was too busy organizing my equipment and staff to attend any of the final planning sessions."

Placing aside a duty roster, Keller nodded. Those last few days in Florida had been truly hectic, what with everybody working around the clock at a fever pitch, skipping meals and losing sleep. It had rather reminded him of finals in college.

The captain glanced at the clock. Two minutes. "According to Trell, the best way to travel through hyperspace is by using an avantor. Unfortunately, in spite of an exhaustive search of every self-proclaimed mentalist on Earth, we couldn't find one with a perfect six dimensional sense of direction."

"Six?" the doctor queried.

Captain Keller nodded as he lifted his feet for an enlisted man to sweep under. "Yes, six. This means we have to use the cumbersome method of computer guidance, as most races do." He lowered his feet as the rating passed on by. "But in order to do even that, we need a Hyperspatial Navigation Cube. And while Trell could tell us how to build such a device, he doesn't know any planetary coordinates. Not even his own home world. They're just too complex to remember; thousands of integers long. Thus, in order to travel to the Galactic Council, we've got to get a HN Cube first."

Just then, a swarthy machinist mate with the name HASSAN on the breast pocket of his dirty blue coverall, ambled over and began to install a bank of push button controls in the gaping hole in the right arm of the command chair.

"So we're off to find a cube?" Van Loon asked.

"Exactly, Doctor."

"But how?" Van Loon asked, standing for a moment so a rating could bolt the chair he was sitting in to

the deck. "We can't blindly jump around the galaxy hoping to find a friendly race who just happens to have a couple of spare navigational cubes laying about. They must be very expensive."

"Almost priceless," Keller agreed. "But we are not thieves, the *Ramariez* will pay market value for any goods received."

"There's something you're not telling me," Van Loon stated as a fact.

Captain Keller nodded, his blue eyes never straying far from the clock. "That's Part Two of our escape plan. You see, we know the exact location of one, and only one, HN Cube."

At first, the Dutch physician didn't understand, but then as comprehension dawned, his face sagged. Good lord, not that!

* * * *

The right honorable Jose de San Martin, the new Argentinean Secretary General of the United Nations of Earth, felt a cold rivulet of sweat trickle down his back as he prepared to meet the avantor. His staff had delayed taking the Gee's call for as long as they dared, but the aliens had forced his hand.

Seconds after the *Ramariez* escaped, the Gee's had released a salvo of incredibly small missiles, each only about as big as a flashlight. One by one, the zigzagging unmanned drones had been hunted down and destroyed in a nuclear flash that the sensor's indicated was an antimatter explosion. The lemon colored missiles punching through the Deflector Plating like it was paper. A fact that cheered nobody on Earth. Apparently, there were various degrees of invulnerability.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, snort," the Secretary General apologized as he displayed a politician's smile to the video camera set above the monitor on his desk. "But I was indisposed."

"Unacceptable," Avantor snapped, radiating hot-battered fury from every pore of her body. "Tell me where that ship went or I shall destroy every satellite and space platform orbiting your measly excuse for a planet."

To Jose's way of thinking, this conversation was breaking down far too quickly. "Surely, you don't mean that," he demurred. "Many of those platforms are manned, and besides—"

The view of the Gee was instantly replaced by a shot of the nighttime sky above North America and the blackness became filled with pinpoint explosions. Then in a blinding flash of light, 12 astronauts, 8 cosmonauts and 1 very surprised looking chimpanzee were suddenly teleported into the Secretary General's office.

"We are not murderers," Avantor noted in somber tones, as the video monitor returned to a picture of her.

"But you had no right!" de San Martin blustered, as everybody else dashed for the door. "Some of those were private property! You're no more than a common criminal!"

The golden female frowned. "Incorrect. My assignment is to erect a blockade about your planet and to ensure that your race does not gain unauthorized access to space travel. How I do so is my concern. You have just lost the right to use any orbital platforms for the next 10 solar rotations. Do you wish to loose your sub-orbital privileges as well? I am fully capable of grinding your transportation system right down to surface level!"

The stern face of the Gee swelled to fill the video monitor. "Now for the very last time, where did they go!"

As a trained politician, the lies flowed smoothly to de San Martin's mouth. "Acting as they are, without the official consent of our organization, how could I possibly know their destination? It seems unreasonable on your part to assume—"

"The human is stalling, my liege," The 16 interrupted with a scowl.

Avantor agreed and her finger descended to press the button which would annihilate every operating airplane Dirt possessed when there was a transdimensional bang and the *Ramariez* burst out of hyperspace inside the force shield of the Gee's centihedron superdreadnought. The alien craft being the only known location of a HN cube.

As the starships stridently rammed together, the avantor was ripped free from her command chair and slammed against the forward viewscreen, fully half of the systems in her vessel shorting out. In the dim orange glow of the emergency chemical lights, the woman limply slid down the wall to land on her head, a dazed expression slackening her golden features.

"My liege!" The 16 weakly cried from the corner of the room, amber blood dribbling from his nose. Ignoring the pain in his brain from the howling feedback from the damaged computer, the disoriented Gee forced himself to crawl across the deck and tug his commander into a sitting position. Her golden head wobbled like a balloon on a string as she attempted to focus her attention on him.

"Of course," the avantor burred incoherently. "They didn't go anywhere. Couldn't. No cube. Come to steal ours."

She began to pitch forward. "Stop them, 16! Don't let the Dirt-lings get the cube, eat the device if you have to!" Then the woman slumped unconscious to the deck.

But the damage had already been done. While her intentions had been good, Avantor's choice of words had been disastrous. Even in its present condition, their warship was still quite capable of defending itself, but only if told to do so. Locked in the unbreakable grip of his hypnotraining, the 16 was forced to crawl out of the room, unable to stop himself from heading for the navigational computer, not even to pause for a moment at the kitchen to grab a bottle of organic vegetable flavoring.

* * * *

Within the airlock of the *Ramariez*, apparently unaffected by the titanic collision, stood twenty burnished statues poised and waiting. The hulking metal brutes were not inert decorations, but highly mobile battlesuits. Sort of a hybrid between a spacesuit and a tank, armored by two inches of molecularly reinforced durasteel, powered by a series of stretchable servomotors and energized by a miniature atomic battery. The wallet sized power cell, containing over a thousand kilowatt hours, was not a contribution of Trell, but an invention of Norway. They had kept the atomic battery a state secret for the past decade, as they had had no military use for the device except for running mobile government saunas.

Protected by a NASA/SRI built life support system, the Marines could comfortably fight in vacuum, underwater, amid lethal radiation, almost anywhere. The strength amplifying servomotors in their exoskeletons enabled the soldiers to run for a hundred kilometers without tiring or to rip a Cadillac in half. A more than fitting end for the oversized gas guzzlers. Plus, an inner cushion of mini-forcefield bubbles let the troopers withstand pointblank cannon fire or survive a fall of eighty stories onto concrete;

hence their total lack of reaction to the violent ramming. As long as the power was maintained, the Marines were virtually indestructible.

But not content with mere passive defense capabilities, NATO also armed the space troopers with an unnamed assault rifle that fired caseless 5mm armor piercing bullets, sported a pump action 20mm grenade launcher, two 'Church Key' class anti-robot missiles, and a polycyclic laser. In addition, the rifle exploded if anyone other than a crewmember tried to fire it. A cute trick that had led to some interesting strategy sessions over beer and pretzels.

Standing patiently in the airlock, crowded shoulder to metal shoulder, the Marines waited in their half-ton uniforms for the go code. Every trooper was a combat veteran, most of them holding the rank of master sergeant or better in their home country's military, but each more than glad to become a lowly dogface again for the sake of this special mission.

Their appointed leader, Lt. Kurt Sakadea, was a devilishly handsome American of Japanese descent who held the rank of colonel in the United States' much touted, but rarely seen Delta Force, a supersecret group of ultra-tough fighters who were supposed to be able to eat Green Berets for breakfast. Oddly enough though, Sakadea was a quiet, scholarly man whose sole interests outside the military seemed to be the stock market and chasing babes.

As the white starship continued to revolve about the gold trying to align their air locks, a private near the rear of the group broke the self-imposed radio silence.

"Sir? Lieutenant?"

"Yeah? What is it, Higgins?"

"How about 'Satan's Taxi Cab' cause it's hell on wheels?"

It took Lt. Sakadea a moment to realize that the soldier was referring to the matter of their weapons having no pronounceable designation, much less a nickname the troops liked. 'That Damn Gun' didn't count, although considering how often generals had stuck their heads into the UN labs and asked: 'How's that damn gun coming along?', it was running a strong second.

"Later, private," Sakadea snapped.

He sighed. "Aye, aye, sir."

With a clang more felt than heard, the rotating spheres locked into position and Sakadea told the troops to get ready.

Breathlessly, the soldiers watched and waited as the metal halves of their air lock door parted to reveal the outer hull of the alien ship, its air lock doors tightly closed.

Upon Captain Keller's command, the *Ramariez* computers began to flash all of the 914 possible override signals that Trell had postulated might open the Gee's main air lock. But unknown to the humans, due to damage caused by the collision the Gee computer was receiving every signal, including the correct one (#412), as pure gibberish and as a result the air lock remained firmly locked.

Trell suspected radio interference, and, from the bridge, advised the Marines to manually tap in the Medical Evacuation code, which he believed was their best chance anyway. Using a more sophisticated

version of the override key, Sakadea pulled a crystal rod from his belt pouch and waved it at the ship before them. With a soft sigh, a small panel on the golden hull swung aside to reveal a keypad. Quick but careful, Sakadea used a thick metal finger to tap in the proper sequence of symbols. But once again the computer received the information as a flood of random signals and did nothing.

Lt. Sakadea was becoming worried. Time was running out. Why they hadn't been attacked already he couldn't understand. The Gees must be setting up an ambush. His growing unease was felt by the rest of the Marines.

Suddenly and without warning, a lone private acting upon twenty years of combat experience, played a hunch and turned his assault rifle on the keypad hoping to blow the lock. Ricochets filled the air lock, and instinctively the soldiers hit the dirt. The hullmetal keypad was undamaged by the fusillade of bullets. However, the random pattern of strikes was blithely transmitted to the harassed computer which accepted the onslaught of signals as a slightly misspelled Surprise Inspection Tour notice and with a clicking hiss politely opened the outer airlock door.

From the floor, the Marines exchanged glances. Well heck, can't argue with success.

At the noise, Lt. Sakadea stopped shaking the trigger-happy trooper. "Nice going, corporal."

"I'm a private, lieutenant."

"Not anymore."

"Thank you, sir!"

The inner door to the Gee ship had a simple hand lever and soon the squad was peering into the ship. Ahead of them stretched an innocent appearing pale yellow corridor. On the floor before them was a small mat emblazoned with a square made of broken lines; the universal symbol for 'Welcome'. In unison, the soldiers chuckled. Subtle, real subtle.

With a tap of his chin, Lt. Sakadea activated his suit radio. "Mainhardt!"

"Sir?"

"Sweep that hallway."

"Affirmative, lieutenant."

Moving clumsily, the soldier set the tripod of her ungainly weapon, adjusted the focus to wide angle, thumbed off the safety and squeezed the primary trigger. From the three-prong muzzle of the Atomic Vortex Rifle there lanced out a swirling cone of blinding radiation that exploded down the empty passageway. As the nuclear hurricane filled the passageway with its turbulent energy, the welcome mat exploded into a cloud of flechettes that melted in mid-air, laser beams lashed out and died as their circuits exploded, panels in the roof opened and nasty looking robotic devices fell to the deck with a clang, twitching ineffectually as smoke erupted from their mechanisms and the entire middle section of corridor slammed together three times with a force that rattled the Marines inside their powersuits before the giant motors hidden in the walls burned out. As the searing power bolt reached the end of the passageway it punched a small glowing hole in the lock of the far door. With a creak, the metal portal began to slowly swing open.

"Gott en Himmel!" a private whispered over his suit radio.

Then from behind the door a smiling robot butler with a wide gash in its chest, fell face first into the hallway, dropping its tray and spilling a collection of gold cups, their liquid contents splashing on the floor. None of the Marines were surprised when the environmental meters in their helmets swung towards lethal.

There was a click over the scrambled radio and Lt. Sakadea addressed his troops. "This was too damn easy. Watch yourselves."

With dry mouths, the point soldiers took their assigned positions and the platoon began to weave its way through the ruin of the corridor, the double set of air lock doors behind them automatically cycling shut.

Following the stronger of the life readings on their sensors, the Marines easily located the control room. The only incident worthy of mention was a slight mishap with an escalator that tried to eat their unauthorized feet halfway between levels. But the heavy metal casings of their boots easily destroyed the robotic gnashing and they continued undefeeted.

Suspicious at the ajar door, the troopers did this by the book; two soldiers dove into the room to draw fire, while the rest of the squad pivoted out from the sides, their weapons at the ready. The action was smartly done, but once inside they found only a small pool of what resembled honey and the unconscious Avantor.

As Lt. Sakadea gazed upon the supine female, the soldier felt his heart skip a beat. She was every bit as beautiful as when he first saw her on television a mere month ago.

"Lieutenant?"

Sakadea snapped back to reality. "Yes, sergeant?"

Tanya Lieberman waddled forward, a squat golem of steel in her UN powersuit. The short, mousy blonde was a captain in the Israeli army and reputed to be the best rifle sharpshooter in the world. "No sign of the male, sir. The second life form reading we have is down that passageway."

He nodded. "Check. Privates Tausz, Sowards, front and center! Guard the avantor, call the ship, tell them she'll need medical attention."

The troopers acknowledged the command.

Lt. Sakadea shifted the grip on his rifle. "Everybody else, stay with me!"

Tracing the electronic blip of their sensors, the Marines were led through a maze of twisting hallways until they reached a locked door emblazoned with three overlapping rings in a triangle pattern: the universal symbol for Authorized Personnel Only. Lt. Sakadea grunted and glanced at his sergeant. Well, they were authorized, just by the wrong side.

The adroit application of plastique unlocked the portal to the main computer room and the Marines rushed in to see a pair of wiggling golden legs sticking obscenely out of the side of a towering computer bank.

"Get him!" Sgt. Lieberman snapped.

Shouldering their weapons, two of the metal clad Marines grabbed a hold of the Gee and hauled him into view, just in time to see the male swallow a small crystal cube covered with black squiggles.

With a burp, 16 felt the grasp of the hypno-training leave him. As his mind cleared, the Gee reached out with his computer implants to focus awesome weapons of power that would vaporize these invaders when Corporal Furstenburg rushed forward to grab the alien and began to apply the Heimlich Maneuver.

However, the well meaning soldier forgot that he was wearing strength amplifying powerarmor until he noticed The 16 turning brown in color. Reacting quickly, the Space Marine released the wheezing alien and the Gee collapsed to the deck in a dead faint.

“Nice going, private,” Lt. Sakadea chastised.

“Ah, that's corporal, sir,” the barracks lawyer corrected.

“Not anymore.”

James Furstenburg sighed. Oh well, easy come, easy go.

NINETEEN

“Close, please,” Dr. Van Loon instructed, peeling off his stainless surgical gloves.

The tentacle waving garbage can next to him squeaked in the affirmative and began efficiently sealing the belly incision of the peacefully sleeping 16 on the multi-level table. In slow stately stages, the three dimensional holographs of the patient's intestinal tract faded from the air above the surgical platform and the human physician shucked his gown, depositing it in what he correctly assumed was a waste basket. The cloth disappeared in a brief flash of atomic disintegration. Dr. Van Loon turned to take a final glance at the recumbent Gee and gasped as he saw a robot nurse light what appeared to be a slim, green cigar and stick it into The 16's mouth. Every instinct cried out to the physician to run and remove it, but during the operation he had gained an almost religious faith in the bizarre little machines.

He watched as a small tube looped out of the robot's side and deftly sucked up the accumulating cigar ash as if it was something precious. More than puzzled, the doctor shook his head and exited the room. A religious rite? Or was it actually medicinal? When Van Loon had time, he would have to check into that.

As the double set of doors closed behind him, the middle-aged man stumbled out into the corridor and leaned against the golden wall to catch his breath. It had taken all of his skill as a surgeon, veterinarian, botanist and roadside car mechanic to pull that operation off, but miraculously, it appeared to be a success. The Gee was just fine, probably wouldn't even have a scar. Thank God for those self-programming robot nurses. Without them, this would never have been possible. They had done 90% of the actual work. The Dutch physician had never even postulated the existence of reverse scalpels, sourceless lights, or blood plants; flowering bushes that manufactured any desired type of biological plasma by the gallon and delivered it via their own thorn tipped vines.

Through their built-in translators, the robot nurses had informed him the plants were a primitive ancestor of the legendary Koolgoolagans. Whoever the hell they were.

During his hurried reading of the Gee's medical texts on the different species of the galaxy, Van Loon had discovered that it was a good thing he was not going to work on a Choron, as the rocky giants didn't have doctors, per se; but more precisely structural engineers specializing in explosives, welding and plumbing.

Out of the corner of his eye, Van Loon spotted a distant group of cursing crewmembers struggling to drag an enormous plastic crate towards the airlock and he smiled.

Without the least bit of shame, the physician had ordered the confiscation of every surgical instrument on board the Gee's ship, including the blood plants. The futuristic devices made his equipment on board the *Ramariez* as outmoded as stone knives and leeches. When Engineering had some spare time, they could analyze the intricate workings of the complex machinery and if the *Ramariez* ever made it back to Earth, the ship would bring home the seeds of the greatest medical breakthroughs since sterilization.

"Hello, doctor," somebody said.

Van Loon glanced up to see Abigail Jones, the first mate of the *Ramariez* standing nearby. It was hard to believe that the statuesque redhead was Australia's top astronaut. Considering the pre-contact state of that country's space program, she'd had plenty of time to branch out and had become an expert on military strategy. The three monographs on theoretical space warfare she had written, one of which had been confiscated by her government for reasons of national security, were more than enough to bring her to the FCT's attention.

When Jones had heard that the position of first officer on the starship was available, the astronaut had done everything in her power to get the berth. And while not on the original list of candidates for the position, the directors of NASA were so impressed by her qualifications, determination, and choice of blackmail photos, that they unanimously awarded her the post.

Stiffly formal as always, the first officer had the jacket of her duty uniform fully buttoned over the jumpsuit and highly polished lieutenant's bars shining on both collars. Flanking the officer were a pair of Marines in powerarmor, squat assault rifles cradled in their metal arms.

Unknown to the officers standing in front of them, the soldiers were holding a private conversation over their radios, wisely deciding that 'The Dispos-All' was a dumb name for the rifle, along with 'Blast Master' and 'X-Caliber'.

"Well," Jones asked impatiently. "Did you get it?"

"Ya, sure," the man sighed and pulled a lump of white cloth from his uniform pocket. Gingerly, he unwrapped the layers of sterile gauze and passed the cloudy crystalline cube to the First Officer.

Turning it about in her hand, the tall woman inspected all six sides of the crystal, only a few of the black squiggles on the cube's milky surface were intact. "Is it supposed to look like this?" she asked in concern.

The doctor shrugged. "How should I know? First time I saw the thing it was nestled inside a man."

"Not a man," the lieutenant corrected curtly. "A member of The Great Golden Ones. An alien. Remember that."

Now usually, Van Loon found the woman's xenophobia faintly amusing, indeed, many of the command personnel were starting to tell alien jokes just to tease the woman. But now he found himself filled only

with exhaustion and disgust at the necessary evil. The woman had been assigned to the ship as a dissenting voice to help balance the overwhelming goodwill among the crew towards non-humans.

Even the most highly trained of their personnel sometimes treated them like pet animals, or toys. A stupid practice that could jeopardize their entire mission, and the future freedom of Earth.

Lt. Jones pocketed the alien artifact. "Come on, let's not keep the captain waiting."

As they began walking along the corridor, Van Loon glanced at the two hulking soldiers and could hardly suppress a smile.

"Expecting trouble?" he asked curiously.

"No. But I'm prepared for it," she replied. "This cube is much too valuable to risk."

Hesitantly, Dr. Van Loon was forced to agree. They had certainly gone to enough trouble to get the device.

The officers and Marines paused for a moment at an intersection, held up by a minor traffic jam of crewmembers wheeling carts of equipment over to the *Ramariez*.

"It looks like you're taking everything not nailed down," Dr. Van Loon noted.

"Only what is needed," Jones sighed, a trace of bitterness in her voice. No sailor of the seas, or space, liked the idea of piracy. "We are leaving payment in exchange for our acquisitions."

Payment? "Ah, the thulium," the doctor remarked in understanding. "Is there enough to cover the medical supplies I confiscated?"

By way of a response, the lieutenant pointed to a Marine in powerarmor coming down the passageway carrying in a two ton steel safe in his hands.

Jones nodded. "We're leaving two hundred galactic standard kilograms."

That deserved a whistle, so the doctor obliged. That was almost sufficient funds to purchase the golden ship and planet it had been built on.

To the horror of the international banking association, and most jewelers, the element thulium proved to be the base of the galactic economy, not silver or gold, and for excellent reasons. Steel was stronger, platinum prettier, aluminum lighter, silver a better conductor, and arsenic tastier. In point of fact, there wasn't a single property that the metal held which another element didn't do better, faster, or cheaper. The stuff was virtually useless, but extremely rare, which made it the perfect currency. Thulium's value was rigidly linked to its atomic weight. One galactic ounce, slightly less than a Troy ounce, was a good month's wages and the *Ramariez* had in its hold over 10 metric tons of the stuff; 320,000 ounces, enough to bribe the Galactic Council if necessary. A possibility that had not been overlooked under the sage advice of Hong Kong bookies and members of the US Congress.

Upon reaching the air locks, Jones returned the guards' salutes and the four sets of doors automatically opened in front of them and closed in their wake.

"How is the avantor?" Van Loon asked, as they entered their home ship. "I sent a corpsman to examine

her during the operation."

"Still unconscious," the lieutenant answered. "But resting comfortably in our brig."

Grabbing an arm, Dr. Van loon forcibly spun the woman about to face him. "The brig? Why the hell isn't she in sickbay? Or with The 16?"

Lt. Jones stared pointedly at the doctor's hand on her uniform, and the armed soldiers behind her stepped slightly closer. Self-consciously, the physician let go of his grip. She turned and continued on her way.

"Avantor and The 16 will soon be reunited," the first officer replied as if nothing had happened.

It took the physician a moment to understand. "You're putting them both in the brig? But they're supposed to be treated like honored guests! That's why we're bringing them along, as observers."

"I've had video monitors set up in their cell," Jones said calmly. "They won't miss a thing that happens on the bridge."

Van Loon gawked at the woman askance. Xenophobic or not, there were limits. "I'm going to report this to the captain!" he told her in cold fury.

"Please do, doctor, and while you are at it, inform him that the being with the most experience regarding the Great Golden Ones, Master Technician Trell, feels that we are endangering our mission merely by allowing them within two light years of this ship. It is his considered opinion that we should drop them into the nearest sun." She cocked her head. "I am merely attempting to strike a happy medium."

With that statement, the starship officer and her guards walked away, leaving the good doctor standing with his mouth hanging open.

* * * *

When all personnel had been accounted for, the starships disengaged and the *Ramariez* again jumped into hyperspace, taking a slow spiraling course to nowhere, as they waited for Trell to transcribe the cube's contents to the *Ramariez* computer.

Captain Keller was reviewing a manpower report when the first officer entered the bridge.

"Well, lieutenant?" Keller asked, handing the clipboard to a rating who scurried away with the paperwork. "Were we able to retrieve the information we needed off of the HN cube?"

"Yes and no, sir," she sadly reported. "Unfortunately, the digestive juices of The 16 had enough time to seriously damage the device. In point of fact, as far as Trell can determine, everything but the coordinates for six star systems has been wiped from the cube."

Pensively, the captain gnawed a lip. "I suppose it's too much to ask that any of those is the co-ordinates for the Galactic League?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Are they at least six useful systems?"

"Unknown, sir, Trell is still correlating the data."

Keller grunted. Damn. Well, his next move was obvious.

Deftly lifting the hinged top to the right arm of his chair, he removed a tiny microphone set next to a laser pistol. Also in the cubicle was a coffee butler, a paperback novel and two buttons, the left summoned his yeoman, the right would vaporize the ship as their engines boosted to 100/100 for a brief, shining microsecond. He was very careful not to get the two confused.

Shutting the lid, Dag Keller lifted the wireless mike to his mouth and pressed a switch on it marked with a bit of sticky tape that bore the penciled word 'intercom'.

"ATTENTION, YOUR ATTENTION PLEASE." His words rang in every room of the great ship and people paused in whatever they were doing; tying their shoes, eating a sandwich, picking a lock, to hear what the man had to say.

"CAPTAIN TO CREW. THERE WILL BE AN IMMEDIATE MEETING IN THE WARD ROOM OF EVERY DEPARTMENT HEAD. PLEASE BRING YOUR STATUS REPORTS." He gave them a minute to absorb that. "UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE THE SHIP IS ON YELLOW ALERT. MARINES TO REMAIN ARMED, SHIELDS ON FULL. THAT IS ALL. KELLER, OUT."

Returning the mike to its proper position, Captain Keller turned to his waiting First Officer. "I talked to Dr. Van Loon, Lieutenant."

"Sir?"

"The Gee's are to be accorded every comfort and courtesy. As soon as the avantor is awake, I want to be notified of the fact."

Jones nodded. "I understand, captain."

"See that you do."

A pregnant pause followed, during which each of the officers listened carefully to what the other was not saying aloud.

Satisfied for the moment, Keller rose from his chair. "The bridge is yours, lieutenant. Try not to crash us into a moon or anything."

She saluted. "Aye, aye, sir."

As the doors to the turbo lift closed behind the officer, Abigail Jones took her place in the command chair with a heartfelt sigh of appreciation. Ah, at last.

* * * *

The turbo lift deposited Keller on the appropriate level with a minimum of fuss and Dagstrom Keller stepped out with a smile on his face. By god, he just loved these things. Elevators could only go up and down, while turbo lifts could also travel horizontal and diagonally. Increase the speed, add bells and colored lights, and the contraptions would have made a fabulous carnival ride.

As the man strode into the Ward Room, he spotted a lone technician tightening screws on the underside

of the oblong conference table. The rating began crawling out to salute, but Keller told him not to bother and the man kept on working.

The Ward Room was hexagonal in shape for no particular reason other than esthetics. The carpet was magenta and the wood paneled walls were dotted with framed cityscapes of Geneva, Orlando and New York; an inexcusable loss of ship's efficiency, or so it appeared at first glance.

With almost unlimited power at their command, it had been an easy matter to arrange for the function rooms to be equipped with laser holographs of wood paneling and colored carpeting that became activated only when the lights were turned on. This made for a much more relaxed atmosphere to work in and only the ultra-delicate speedometer on the Navigation console could detect the minute loss of velocity. Of course, in combat situations the walls and carpet reverted to white.

Strolling about, Captain Keller noted something wrong with the room and turned to address the rating who was climbing out from under the table.

"Excuse me, sailor."

"Hassan, sir," the youth said, with a flash of gleaming white teeth. The Arabic teenager stood, dusted himself off and then hastily saluted. "Abduhl Benny Hassan, sir. Spacer First Class. Engineering Division."

"Yes. Fine. Thank you. Where are the chairs?"

Hesitantly, the technician pointed to a pile of flat cardboard boxes leaning against the wall near the door, their edges indenting the wood panel holograph. "That's them, captain. I thought I should do the table first, in case you wanted to establish a preliminary psychological zone of authority about yourself for the meeting."

Keller could only stare at the boy.

"Just trying to help, sir," Hassan smiled.

"Appreciated," the starship captain said. "Carry on."

While the youth went busily to work with pliers and screwdriver, Captain Keller reminded himself that his crew was the best Earth possessed. Instances such as this were sure to become commonplace. God help him.

While waiting for his staff to arrive, Keller leaned against the edge of the table and began to toy with the good luck piece he kept in his shirt pocket; a silvery metal coin about the size of a Swiss franc, or an American half-dollar. The front bore the emblem of the United Nations of Earth, the reverse had a six pointed star with a circle in its center, the universal symbol for 100% Pure Thulium, Honest! It was the first such coin minted, and just prior to lift off, the remaining members of the FCT had scratched their initials on the disk wishing him luck. Keller appreciated the gift, although the Swiss astronaut knew that when numismatists heard about this event, purists among the coin collectors would curse their names forever.

The door to the Ward Room swung open and in walked Lt. Sakadea. The Marine was dressed in a tan duty uniform with a holstered laser pistol, his black hair still damp from a shower. Keller forgave the man for that minor breach of military etiquette, as he knew exactly how sweaty you could get working inside a powersuit. Dag Keller had endured long training sessions in them himself.

Next came Prof. Rajavur in a three-piece, charcoal gray suit and holding a mug of that drain cleaner he had the audacity to call coffee. The diplomat was closely followed by Dr. Van Loon in proper ship's uniform and finally Trell, who scowled when he saw there were no chairs.

"Somebody put you in slow motion, Abduhl?" the little alien chastised.

"Hey chief, I only got two hands," Hassan complained from inside a jungle gym of chair legs, struts and seat backs.

At that announcement, Trell puckered his face and burst into laughter. Ha! Two hands. Just wait till he tried that joke on an Oolian!

Captain Keller cleared his throat. "Okay, gentlemen, take your ... ah, assume your places."

As the officers and civilian positioned themselves about the table, it occurred to Dag that his ship was a true cross selection of every racial sub-species that the planet Earth had to offer. With the notable and understandable exception of Greece.

"Here's your seat, sir," Hassan said, wheeling the chair over.

Keller thanked the man, and after adjusting the spring tension, sat down at the head of the table. "Let's have your report, Master Technician," he directed.

"Our initial plan has failed," Trell told them sadly. "Due to the amazing throat capacity of The 16, the HN cube was damaged and can not be repaired."

Shocked murmurs greeted that news.

"So the raid was a bust?" Lt. Sakadea asked, removing his cap and stuffing it into a pants pocket.

"Female milk glands were not involved," the alien denied. "However, we did manage to transfer all useful information in the Gee's cube to our own blank."

"And?" Captain Keller prompted.

Trell made a face. "We received only six complete set of navigational coordinates. There were hundreds of partial coordinates, but I decided to filter those out as they were worse than useless."

"How so?" Van Loon inquired.

"We might jump out of hyperspace and land on the planet we aimed for. At ten thousand kilometers a second. Or worse, arrive inside the world."

The Dutch physician was forced to agree that either set of circumstances would seriously hinder their mission.

"Couldn't we finish the partial integers ourselves?" Prof. Rajavur asked, taking a sip from his new cup which bore the legend: 'I HELPED DEFEND THE EARTH FROM ALIEN INVADERS, AND ALL I GOT WAS THIS LOUSY COFFEE MUG'.

Amazingly, Trell told them yes. Dirt, ah, Earth, no, Terra (the official name) had excellent calculating machines. The computers aboard the starship were some of the best he had ever seen, considering their lack of sentience. Working together they won't take more than a lunar rotation for each coordinate.

"A month we can not afford to waste," Keller said sternly. "Okay. We have six places to try and find a HN cube. That doesn't sound too bad."

Trell waved his hands in a pattern of negation. "It's worse, sir. Two are possibilities, one is an unknown, and the rest are totally undesirable."

"What are the three we can't use?" Van Loon asked curiously, when a hooting siren split the air.

Frantically, everybody tried to recall their training sessions and identify the noise. Fire? Flood? Vacuum? Engine overheating? Breach in the hull?

"Jailbreak!" Lt. Sakadea cursed, as he tumbled backwards over a half-built chair, rolled along the floor and dashed out the door in a single motion.

* * * *

Shouting a bold war cry, the avantor kicked aside the remains of the door to her cell with a clang, and stepped through the opening. The durasteel lock was still hissing faintly, reduced to molten scrap with a single psychokinetic blast by a trick that her grandma had taught her.

With a snort of contempt, the Gee ripped off her paper hospital gown and proceeded naked down the hallway searching for The 16.

Momentarily, her attention was caught by the sounds of frantic movement in a nearby cell. But when the guardian of the galaxy looked in through the grill, she saw that it was only some humans cowering behind the cell's sparse furnishings. Timidly, they waved hello. The avantor's eyes narrowed to slits as recognition hit her and they ducked back down out of sight. Oh, them. She moved on.

Through the grill of the next door, Avantor spied a room full of equipment stolen from her ship. No uniforms or weapons though, mostly it appeared to be medical supplies. How odd.

The following cell yielded her goal, but the Gee's delight turned to horror as she saw her primary assistant lying unconscious on a bed. The mystery of the medical supplies solved.

Disposing of the door took only a moment and she rushed across the room. The 16 lay peacefully sleeping on a waveless waterbed, covered to his neck in white sheets; the contrast lending a bit of color to his cheeks. On a small table nearby was a RDP monitor, and a blood plant whose leafy vines reached under the covers.

Softly calling his name, the avantor knelt on the floor and touched his hand. His pulse was strong, breathing steady, but telepathically the woman felt the disorientation in his mind and the soreness in his stomach.

Her facial features burning with shame, Avantor remembered that she had done this to him with her fumbling words, and realized that he had almost died. Ingesting a HN cube would kill a professional Chronon weightlifter.

Dimly in her mind, she could feel his disjointed memories of the operation, dominated by images of the

bald human doctor struggling to remove the cube. But the golden female felt no gratitude for the act. The Dirlings had been more interested in getting the cube than in saving a life.

Drastically, she revised her escape plans. The 16 was too ill to move, so Avantor would have to take over the vessel. Training video #460/B—"How To Capture A Starship When You Are Naked, Unarmed And Alone", flashed through the woman's mind and she reviewed the pertinent points. Check. This shouldn't take more than 900 seconds.

Leaving the door ajar, she left the cell and turned to see a guard in powerarmor clumping her way.

"Wait!" Private Furstenburg shouted over the external speaker of his suit. "We need to—"

Talk, was the word he was going for. But the Gee cut him short with a psychokinetic bolt that slammed the hapless man backwards, embedding him into a steel bulkhead and really putting the inner forcefield cushion of the powerarmor to the stress test. With a tremendous groan, the battered Marine went limp, but stayed where he was, both metal boots dangling inches off the deck.

Like a glorious golden halo, the avantor's long hair flared out from her body by the secondary static electric charge of the mental blast, and her magnificent bosom was heaving from the exertion, but she did not stop to catch her breath. The main door to the brig proved to be a simple magnetic lock/dead bolt/pry bar combination and moments later she stepped into the outside corridor.

Ready for anything, the two uniformed guards in the passageway relaxed and holstered their guns when they saw whom it was exiting.

"Are you okay, lady?" the first Marine asked, and the other started to doff her uniform jacket to give to the naked woman.

Then like golden rods of steel, the avantor shot out both of her fists to crash into the humans' jaws and the guards toppled to the floor. As Avantor bent down to take their energy weapons, the turbo lift at the far end of the hallway opened and out came Lt. Sakadea and a squad of soldiers in powerarmor. Four Marines in the center of the group were lugging a length of sewer pipe with a glowing crystal sphere on the end. The sight of which made the Guardian Of The Galaxy go pale. Oh Void.

Halting some ten meters away, the soldiers pointed the cannon-like weapon at her and the ball on the tip began to glow with power.

"Avantor, don't do it. We can explain everything," Lt. Sakadea said in his most soothing tones. "There is no need for violence."

"Szorklop!" the warrior spat, pulling the two laser pistols free from the guard's holsters.

It was then Kurt realized that neither of them was wearing translators. A critical mistake. Damn, nothing else to do.

"Riflemen, hold your fire!" he cried. "Cannoneers, let her have it! Full force!"

jjjjjjjjjjjjjjjjjjjj**STOP THAT**jjjjjjjjjjjjjjjjjjjj

With a shudder, the Gee dropped the guns and stumbled backwards into the brig under the point blank blast of the**STOP THAT** cannon liberated from her own ship. Gasping for breath, she fell sprawling to

the floor. Lt. Sakadea grinned in satisfaction and started forward.

But then struggling to her knees in a most provocative pose, the avantor focused her awesome mind powers, and blew a hole in the wall alongside the cannon crew, bits of steel ricocheting off the armor of the Marines. She scowled in annoyance. Missed!

Grimacing slightly, Kurt touched his stinging cheek, his hand coming away covered with blood. Okay, goddamn it, this was enough of that crap.

“Cannoneers,” he shouted. “Fire! Fire! Fire!”

It took five more of the psionic blasts, each hitting the Gee like a baseball bat, but at last Avantor slumped unconscious. Only the fingers of her right hand managing to cross the threshold of the door, which was a whole lot further than anybody had ever dreamed she would get.

As the Marines cautiously clunked into the brig, and a medical team came running out of the elevator on the left, a low moan sounded over their suit radios.

“Where's Furstenburg?” Lt. Sakadea asked.

It didn't take the soldiers long to find their bruised friend. Freeing him from the wall was another matter entirely.

* * * *

“Status report!” Captain Keller demanded gruffly to his wrist transceiver.

“Avantor is back in her cell, sir,” said Sakadea's voice. “A maintenance crew is repairing the damage she did, the ST cannon has been positioned in front of her cell door and wired to the lock. The next time Lady Godiva tries to take a walk, she won't get very far.” He paused. “We also gave her a jumpsuit and a translator.”

“Acceptable, lieutenant,” Keller said. “Report back here to the Ward Room as soon as you're finished.”

“Aye, aye, sir.” With a click the soldier signed off.

“I warned you about the Gees, my Captain,” Trell reminded the human. “Nobody has ever successfully kept one prisoner.”

This interested Dr. Van Loon. “You've tangled with them before?”

“Yes, when I was with Leader Idow.”

“Meaning no disrespect, Trell, but why were you with that bastard? I have come to know you fairly well and you're not the criminal type.”

Prof. Rajavur knew the answer to that, but remained silent and let Trell tell his tale.

“I was with Idow by necessity, not choice,” the alien said calmly, not offended a bit by the question. His tour of duty aboard the *All That Glitters* was not the high point of his life, but neither was it something he was ashamed of, even though very few of the memories were pleasant. Then his face brightened as he remembered that Boztwank was dead. “My parent was a gambler, but to my misfortune not a very good

gambler and got deeply into debt. The only honorable solution was selling me into slavery to pay the bills." Trell dilated his nostrils. "Not an unusual practice on my world."

Captain Keller raised an eyebrow. "Parent, singular?" he asked curiously.

"Yes, indeed," Van Loon chimed in, unable to resist the temptation to wax didactic. "Trell's people, the Mormanzumas, don't procreate by fertilizing an ovum in a female like us, but by budding. That is controlled cellular fission which results in a duplicate being. But not a clone. The new entity has its own unique personality."

During this, Trell averted his eyes and blushed. Sex talk always made him uneasy.

"Interesting," Keller mused. "Then why does he look so human? Trell, did your race evolve from primates like our?"

The alien wiggled his ears as he had no idea. His race was not interested in history, only technology. Nobody cared who did what to whom or when, unless it resulted in an invention.

At that point, Lt. Sakadea appeared in the doorway and saluted the room. "Sir!"

"Come in, Lieutenant," Keller said, returning the gesture. "I see you were wounded."

The Delta Force agent touched the bandage on his right cheek. "Just a scratch, sir."

"Good enough. Have a seat."

Closing the door, the lieutenant walked to his chair, pausing for a second to throw a crumpled piece of paper into a golden wastebasket where it disappeared in a flash of atomic disintegration. Assault Rifle #666, because it beats the hell out of you. Geez, he was going to have a serious talk with the troops about this nonsense real soon.

"To continue," Captain Keller said, returning to the original thread of conversation. "We have only three places to try and get a HN cube without resorting to piracy again."

He consulted a list. "Our top choice is Darden: an agricultural world of horse drawn carriages and steam engines. Apparently high technology goes against a tenet of the local religion, sort of like our own Quakers. They may have a cube to sell us stored away in the old barn that serves as the planetary starport."

"Doesn't sound very encouraging," Dr. Van Loon noted gloomily, taking notes in his pocket medical journal.

The captain agreed. "Next choice is a real long shot, the planet Oh Yeah?. A radioactive cinder of a world that has become a memorial to the stupidity of war. There are dozens of dead starships in orbit about the planet and Trell believes there is a remote possibility that we can find a still functioning cube among the wreckage. But it is highly doubtful."

Nobody made a comment about the unpleasant notion of grave robbing, their mission eclipsing such mundane considerations.

"The last coordinate is a world Trell doesn't know a damn thing about," he said.

Lt. Sakadea stopped scratching at the red stained cotton gauze square on his cheek. "Nothing?"

In his own defense, Trell pointed out that there were millions of inhabited planets in the galaxy. He admitted that these coordinates sounded vaguely familiar, but so did many others.

"An outside chance, at best," Keller said in frank honesty.

Sipping thoughtfully, Prof. Rajavur drained his mug coffee, it's excellent quality dispelling that old myth about ship food. Privately, he wished Yuki and the rest of his old team were here to share it with him. He was in space!

"To repeat Dr. Van Loon's earlier question," the Iclander said aloud, "what are the worlds we can't use? Underwater colonies? Orphanages? Prisons?"

Captain Keller consulted his list. Even though the words on it were typed, the contents were still a little hard to read. The interfacing of Trell's translator, the ship's computer and laser printer was not yet perfect. "The first is the planet RporR. Trell, am I pronouncing that correctly; R—pour—R?"

The Technician gave a green nod. "That's right, sir. Although everybody else in the galaxy does tend to spit the name a bit more."

The starship captain ignored the foolishness. "It's a forbidden world, nobody may enter or leave." He twitched a faint smile. "RporR has a blockade around it just like Earth."

"Excellent," Sakadea said with a grin that put the taste of salt in his mouth. Quickly, he returned his lips to neutral. "Then they're potential allies."

In the strongest possible terms, Trell told the soldier he was absolutely wrong. RporRians weren't the allies of anybody; except maybe assassins and garbage collectors.

"The second is a secret criminal base that Trell knows about from his association with Leader Idow. It is the center of operations for a stolen starship ring. We can definitely get a Hypernavigational cube there, but we have broken enough laws already. Our mission is to ingratiate ourselves into galactic society, not purchase stolen equipment."

However annoying that decision might be, the room had to agree with the thinking behind it. Too bad, though.

"What is number six, captain?" Rajavur asked curiously.

Keller scowled at the paper in his hand and then tossed it aside. "The planet Gee, supreme headquarters of the Great Golden Ones."

"No, we don't want to go there," Hassan observed from the floor, putting the finishing touches on the last chair.

"Thank you, sailor," Captain Keller stated coldly. "Your work is finished here. You may leave."

As the embarrassed technician shuffled out of the room, Keller surveyed the faces of his executive staff. "Any further discussion? Any comments? No? Accepted then."

Rising to his feet, the Swiss officer walked over and activated the intercom on the wall. "Bridge? This is the captain. Have navigation turn the ship white, straighten our flight plan and feed in the coordinates for the planet Darden."

"Acknowledged," Lt. Jones squeaked from the box. "Any further orders?"

"Tell you when I get there. Captain out." Keller rapped his knuckles on the polished tabletop. "Meeting adjourned, gentlemen. We reconvene on the bridge in six and a half hours."

"And may the Prime Builder grease us with his own ear wax!" Trell cried, climbing on top of his chair and brandishing a green fist in the air.

The precise meaning of that phrase was unclear to the human officers, but the tone was positive, so they cheered along with him anyway for the sake of solidarity.

TWENTY

Centuries ago when the Galactic League was formed, it had been decided, for major political reasons and minor military ones, that the league should not be placed on any existing planet and thus elevate that race above others. So an uninhabited star system was arbitrarily chosen, and in a historic feat of engineering a sphere of metal was slowly built about the local sun to totally encase the solar body. On Earth, the structure would have been called a Dyson sphere, after Freeman Dyson the American scientist who first postulated the mind staggering concept. The rest of the galaxy simply called it impressive.

Inside the sphere, houses, buildings, parks, forests, lakes and buildings-buildings-buildings were constructed at an astonishing rate. Then the population of a dozen worlds poured into their new homes. But with 900 quadrillion square kilometers at their disposal, overcrowding was a word that would never be used on the artificial construct. Even now, with the population at 12 trillion, people often rode to work alone in the car of their monorail train during rush hour.

Interestingly enough, the debate over what to name the titan sphere raged for less than a planetary rotation, when a particularly sentient sapient suggested it be called Big, for notwithstanding its many other qualities, that one could not be denied. The name was readily accepted.

Extending like a spider web into the heart of the flaming sun, were mighty solar energy cables; coal black superconductor ribbons, kilometers thick, that collected the raw power necessary to run the contra-gravity generators, so vital to an upside down community and the distance annihilating telecommunicators that made the smooth operation of a galactic society possible.

On the outer hull, were continent wide clusters of Nova Grade lasers, batteries of giant Dispersal Ray cannon that used multiple thermonuclear bombs just to blow the dust out of their barrels, million kilometer long quasar spitting antennas, force shield towers each built from a small planet, docking facilities for a hundred million superdreadnought starcrafts and one fast food outlet run by a slug-like being who was very rich indeed.

As hard as it is to believe, Big was not an original invention of the League. At the other end of the galaxy (second spiral arm, fourth sun to the left) another solar body had been found enclosed in an artificial globe of metal. When a team of eager young explorers landed and entered to greet the builders, they found a dark and deserted interior, with a smaller sphere inside. Obviously the inhabitants had

constructed it as the sun had shrunk from usage. A natural phenomenon that would take several billion planetary rotations. Bravely entering the second sphere, the explorers found another sphere, and another, and another ... After four hundred and twelve of the things the team of explorers (now quite old) finally gave up and went home.

The current theory is that the mad builders are still in there somewhere, but nobody is particularly anxious to meet them. There were quite enough amateur loonies in the universe, no need to bring in professionals.

On Big, amid the sprawling grandeur of the inverted mega metropolis, at the mathematically chosen North Pole—longitude 0, latitude 0—was a small, stone amphitheater. The open air structure was brightly illuminated by the dominated sun in the overhead sky. The architect had claimed that this was a purely dramatic touch and it had won her much acclaim. But honestly, the auditorium's lack of a roof had been done just so the plant wouldn't have to stop work every few hours and go outside to eat.

A thousand seats filled the amphitheater, each facing inward towards a raised stone dais in the center where there stood a simple podium of solid gold. This was the audience chamber of the Great Golden Ones, where the guardians of the galaxy released bulletins to news reporters or sought the council of learned beings.

Today it was reporters; a hundred gatherers of news from as many different worlds. A true cornucopia of beings who bore only a faint resemblance to Earthlings: tugs and rugs, rats and bats, apes and grapes, logs, frogs, dogs, lizards, birds, rocks and even the occasional humanoid or two. The reporters had been brought here on a Double Star, Alpha Prime, Ultra Emergency Summons, which meant interstellar war, the sun was about to explode, or a really major party.

Floating in the sunny air above the crowd were thousands of shiny metal balls. Most of them were remote broadcast cameras, some were reporters from machine cultures, some containment vessels for energy beings and a good half dozen or so that nobody was exactly sure what the heck they were.

At the sound of a gong, a muscular golden male in a flowing amber tunic walked out onto the dais and the murmuring crowd grew quiet. With a sigh, The 3000, the supreme commander of the Gees, braced himself and once again wondered whether or not it was really worth his while talking to these idiots. Reporters were the bane of his existence.

“Attention gentlefolk,” the tall humanoid said into the forcefield microphone floating invisible in the air before him. “I bring you news of a shocking and most unpleasant nature.”

The reporters grew tense, they knew what this meant. No party.

The 3000 cleared his throat. “A race of violent primitives has escaped from the blockade about their world, and is loose somewhere in the galaxy.”

For a moment there was shocked silence at this unprecedented announcement, and fevered images of the RporRian plague flashed through everything's minds. Then came the expected barrage of questions.

“Do they have pets?” a reporter asked in the front row, shouting over the ruckus.

Startled by the unexpected question, the Gee blinked. “Ah, yes, they do have pets.”

“What kind?” the newsgatherer persisted.

“Various kinds, I believe. Is this germane?”

“Insects? Do they keep insects for pets?”

“Yes-yes! They keep insects for pets!” the golden male snapped irritably.

“SLAVERS!” the hysterical spideroid screeched, its eight arms and legs undulating wildly. “My people must be set free!”

“Non-sentient insects,” The 3000 said loudly over the commotion. Just like you, he added privately.

“Oh.” The reporter averted all of his eyes and blushed. “Never mind.”

A potted plant next to the arachnid kicked it with a convenient frond. “Come on, grow up,” the evolved rutabaga chided. “It's not like they eat vegetables or anything.”

Trained to be wise, the Gee said nothing.

“Do they have any new recipes for dried proto yeast?” something asked from the rear of the room.

The 3000 forced himself to smile politely. “We are getting away from the main issue. These criminals—”

“What is their opinion of the Thurstd problem?” asked a translucent balloon creature who was strapped into his chair by elastic bands to prevent him from drifting away on the morning breeze.

“But they don't know anything about it!” the Gee stormed starting to lose control. “How the Hot Void could they!”

“New race pleads ignorance to the plight of the Thurstd gik,” spoke the reporter into the soft plastic recorder on its clear pudgy wrist. “Plus, are partial to foul language.”

The 3000 tightened his jaw and in a practiced motion he drew a wide barrel pistol from inside his tunic. Ruthlessly he swept the assemblage of reporters about him with the weapon's invisible rays. Instantly, the news gathers froze motionless, and even more importantly, quiet, as the telepathic command to **SHUT UP** reverberated in their brains. The psionic pistol was a special modification of the **STOP THAT** cannon and was authorized by the Gee Security Council solely for use at these infamous meetings.

In the ensuing still, the wall behind the Gee swirled with color and changed from a holographic view of the galaxy into a magnified picture of the Galactic League herself. The regal reptile smiled benignly at the crowd and every reporter in the amphitheater saluted the video monitor in their own way, even the metal globes in the air did a little dip of respect.

“Your Excellency!” The 3000 gasped in surprise. “I'm honored!”

“Thank you, 3000. It has been a while since we last attended these gatherings.” With royal dignity, the impious female gazed over the assembled thong. “Now are these dangerous primitives flying blind through space, or do they have a Hypernavigational cube?”

“Yes! They stole it!” the golden male said in righteous fury.

"Indeed. From whom?"

Oops. He had not been expecting a cross-examination. Especially by the League. The 3000 mumbled something that was unintelligible.

Daintily, the amphibian lifted an eye ridge. "Could you repeat that please?"

"Us. They stole the cube from us," the Gee admitted, with a woebegone look. "They raided the superdreadnought orbiting their world, stole a cube and the crew."

A silence more hushed than before filled the room. Primitives took over a Gee superdreadnought? Zow! Holy cow! Wow!

"How?" the League asked, getting to the heart of the matter.

"That information is not privy to public consumption," The 3000 said stiffly, placing both hands behind his back.

"Understandable," the scaly female said on the monitor. "Still, they must be fairly advanced to build starships, even ones without cubes. Perhaps they are advanced enough to join the League."

"But they didn't invent it," the golden male hotly denied. "They stole the engine design!"

"From whom? Not you again?"

The 3000 had troubled getting this out. "L-leader Idow."

A shocked gasp was heard from the reporters, and the League narrowed her bulging eyes in anger. "They are aligned with Leader Idow? Then I authorize the immediate destruction of their entire solar system, from the primary sun to the Oort cloud."

"Well, they're not exactly aligned," he hedged.

"Then what?"

The Gee was trapped and he knew it. Before the near hypnotic gaze of the Galactic League it was worse than useless trying to lie, or even shade the truth. The story of X-47-D's incompetence could no longer be kept secret. "The humans killed him and copied the engine design before we could stop them."

The reporters wrote furiously. Leader Idow was dead? This was real news!

"When is the parade?" a catish reporter called out.

"How much is their reward?" asked a news hound.

A mass of granite raised its stony head. "Where will the monument to them be built?" a Choron boomed. Rocks were his people's favorite subject to read about.

"How do you spell human?" the spideroid queried.

"Interesting," the Galactic League mused, her throaty tones echoing over the amphitheater's PA system.

“They destroy the greatest threat the civilized galaxy has ever seen, and you blockade their planet. Why?”

Smelling spilled life-fluid, the assemblage eagerly leaned forward. A good question that. The League could have been a reporter. The newsbeings waited, stylus in manipulator appendage.

“They are dangerous primitives, Your Excellency,” the Gee officer decried. “A threat to the peace of the galaxy!”

It sounded to the League like the Gee was desperately trying to cover up a monumental blunder. The Great Golden Ones had been making quite a few of those lately. “Dangerous, you say? Did they kill the crew of the ship they raided?”

“Well, no.”

“Then what happened?”

The 3000 sighed in resignation. Hot Void, you couldn't get anything past the Galactic League. “They left behind a big bag of thulium. Two hundred kilograms.”

Startled mumblings came from the crowd.

“Only a most unusual thief leaves behind enough to buy what they steal,” the League noted pragmatically. “It is our opinion that before any further punitive measures are taken we wish to speak to these humans. Find that ship, 3000, and bring us the crew, alive and unharmed.”

Properly formal, the Gee saluted. “I will do my best, your excellency. We want them too.”

“But we want them alive. Remember that.”

As the picture faded from the wall, The 3000 touched his forehead and in a blinding flash of light teleported away. Nigh instantly, the reporters burst from their seats, fighting to reach the doors. The dignified amphitheater quickly resembled a video theatre in which somebody had shouted the words radiation leak.

But remaining seated in the front row, seemingly unaffected by the clamorous departing of his fellow news gatherers, was an aquatic creature whose prominent dorsal fin was covered with telecommunication devices. Crimson colored, the fishy biped was dressed in a wide assortment of clothing, none of it coordinated, except possibly against each other.

His name was Bachalope Thintfeesel, (Bach to his friends, which were few, rarely sober and mostly wanted by the Gees. Just like the friends of any good reporter). He was a freelance news writer who made his living by being the first with the most at every major event. And this was just about as major as they come. Piracy! Kidnapping! Blockade running! The death of Leader Idow! Now an interstellar thing hunt under the direct order of the Galactic League.

Surreptitiously under his feathered rhinestone cape, Bachalope used a four fingered hand to check on a sophisticated sound recorder disguised as one of his less flamboyant belt buckles. Good. He got the entire discussion on wire, including the mass exiting. Now if he could just locate the primitives before the Gees did, he would have the story of the century! But with an entire galaxy to search in, how could he possibly find them?

Then he smiled toothily. Yeah, that ought to do it.

* * * *

Back at Earth, squadrons of Gee superdreadnaughts sent by The 3000 were supervising the positioning of an armada of drones to englobe the planet, and strategically placing a flotilla of mobile space forts whose batteries of antimatter missiles could easily stop any conceivable mass escape.

The UN fought back by grounding every aircraft, docking every boat, and stonewalling any Gee attempt at communication by filling the entire radio spectrum with gigawatts of rock songs, canned laughter and the song of the humpbacked whale; which the aliens translated as, “Oh baby, I'm so hot tonight! Hubba-hubba. Let's do it. Let's do it now. Oh baby, oh baby. Want a fish?” Which seriously annoyed them. Everybody hates muzak.

Meanwhile in secret locations around the globe, the remnants of the FCT were hard at work. Generals Nicholi and Bronson were at Star City in Russia assisting the proletariat to design a superfast, anti-drone ICBM. Dr. Wu was in Australia at Port Woomera, aiding and abetting the construction of Earth's first starfleet. Dr. Malavade was in the desert of New Mexico busily adapting the gigantic radio telescopes there into a battery of quasar-grade pulse transmitters which humanity would use to try and communicate with somebody out there other than the damn Gees. From Rockefeller Plaza in New York City, Sir John Courtney was constantly bombarding the masses of the world with carefully worded news announcements (propaganda, actually), that kept the populace at a fever pitch and insured their full cooperation.

Humanity was doing everything it could think of; from trying to improve Deflector Plating and flashing searchlight beams into space in a hypnotic GO AWAY pattern, to sticking pins in golden voodoo dolls.

But the Great Golden Ones were also unleashing the full might of their peacekeeping forces, and that was nothing to loudly exhale through your nasal passages at either.

* * * *

Meanwhile on the planet Darden, the crew of the *Ramariez* were sadly informed by the farmers that no HN cubes were available, but they were invited to wait a planetary rotation or so, when a drone cargo ship from Big would land to take on their yeast harvest. The locals felt sure the robot crew would have no objections to signaling the Great Golden Ones and asking them to bring a replacement. Captain Keller politely declined the offer and the *Ramariez* left post haste, only seconds ahead of the landing of an Emergency Data StarCapsule which brought the news that the humans were wanted criminals to be held at any cost.

Jumping to the burned out cinder of Oh Yeah?, the starship crew found numerous Hyperspace Navigational cubes in the riddled hulls of blasted vessels circling the dead planet. But every piece of equipment aboard the spacecrafts was so highly contaminated with atomic radiation that the cubes were useless.

As the *Ramariez* left the ominously silent planet, her captain was forcibly reminded by the grim specter of ruin that theirs was a mission of peace, and violence was to be used only as a last resort.

A short hop through hyperspace later, as the *Ramariez* approached the third choice on their short list, the crew was struck by the similarities of this unknown planet and Earth. Roughly the same size and distance from the sun, both were mostly water and had a single moon.

“Just like home,” a crewmember said wistfully.

Dr. Van Loon agreed. "The inhabitants will most likely be very similar to us in general build."

"Or dinosaurs," Chief Petty Officer Buckley noted, his Royal British Marine moustache stiffly a bristle, but still cut short enough to fit into a space helmet. "They were on Earth long before us."

Hiding a smile, the physician stated that the possibility was extremely remote.

"Captain?" Ensign Hamlich called out from the Sensors console.

Keller turned from his examination of the internal circuitry of the Hydroponics station and lowered the console top into place. "Yes, what is it?"

"Sir, scanners indicate that there's a golden egg orbiting this world."

"A what?" Keller asked, the Swiss naval officer joining the pale bony man at his board.

"An egg, sir," Hamlich stated. "Honest. It's of very advanced design. Beyond the abilities of my instruments to analyze."

Scowling over his shoulder, Captain Keller peered at the tiny fourteen inch monitor. "Put it on the main screen, please."

"Aye, sir." The picture of the blue/white planet before them zoomed in close. Filling the screen was a tapering, oval spheroid, yellowish-brown in color, twirling about its vertical axis. Data about construction, size and speed, scripted along the bottom of the screen. Twenty eyes scrutinized its form and shape.

"About the size of a refrigerator," an ensign muttered.

"The bridge is no place for levity, mister," Keller snapped making the woman flinch. "Your opinion, doctor?"

Van Loon stepped closer to the viewscreen, carefully studying the rapidly rotating object. "None worth mentioning, sir."

Captain Keller squinted an eye. It was time to call in their resident expert. "Ensign Lilliuokalani, summon Trell, please."

"Aye, aye, sir." The Hawaiian Communications officer pressed a button on her console and spoke into a fixed microphone. "Master Technician Trell to the bridge, Master Technician ... sir, incoming signal!"

"From the planet?" Keller asked, climbing into his command chair.

"No sir, the egg."

The captain buckled on his seat belt. "Translate and put it on the main speakers, mister."

"Aye, sir." Deftly linking relays, the astronaut flipped switches and the ceiling mounted speakers crackled to life.

"... WARNING TO ALL STARSHIPS. LEAVE THIS SYSTEM IMMEDIATELY. STATUS

OMEGA. REPEAT: STATUS OMEGA. WARNING TO ALL STARSHIPS.” The speakers went silent.

“Its a closed loop,” the ensign reported.

As Keller chewed the information over, the doors to the elevator opened and Trell walked in. Or rather, he started to enter, but when the alien saw the planet on the forward viewscreen, the little alien gasped and went light green.

“Something wrong?” Captain Keller asked, swiveling his chair about at the sound.

“Leave,” Trell somehow managed to say. “Now. There is nothing for us here. Go. Depart.”

As in a daze, Trell stumbled forward and the human kept abreast of him by slowly rotating his chair.

“You said you knew nothing about this world,” Keller noted.

“I didn't recognize it from the coordinates,” Trell explained starting to shake. “Let's go. Please?”

“Sir,” the Communications officer called out. “Message from the planet.”

Keller nodded, and the overhead speakers crackled once more.

“SO POND SCUM, YOU RETURN,” thundered a voice dripping with hate. “WELL, YOU WILL NOT TRICK US THIS TIME, IDOW. PREPARE TO DIE!”

Eyes popped across the bridge crew.

“Idow!” Van Loon gasped in horror. “Why would they think we're Leader Idow?”

Captain Keller whirled about, grabbed Trell by the collar and lifted him off the floor. It was a practice the little alien was starting to get used to.

“You've been here before, haven't you?” the starship officer growled.

The Technician bobbed his head yes. This was a planet Leader Idow had visited when Trell was a new member of the crew. Thousands of days ago. That was why the coordinates hadn't been immediately familiar.

Captain Keller released the alien with a curse. “Red alert!” he barked frantically. “Shields, full power! Navigation, dead stop! Communications, tell them this is not the *All That Glitters*. We simply look like them.”

“Incoming!” the Weapons officer shouted, as from an orbital platform about the world there lanced out a blue-hot plasma bolt. Seconds later it struck the ship with triphammer force, bouncing the bridge crew out of their seats, but no consoles shorted and the lights did not dim.

As the humans scrambled back into their chairs and buckled on safety belts, a black cloud of missiles rose from the surface of the planet, leaving no doubt as to their destination.

“Shields?” Keller demanded.

“Holding, sir,” CPO Buckley reported, fighting to keep his voice steady. “But not against many more of those.”

The missile salvo drew closer and another plasma bolt was fired in their direction. The starship captain made a fast decision.

“Reverse course!” Keller shouted, then did a double-take as he saw the moon near them split apart and its hollow interior disgorge millions upon millions of fighting ships that charged straight towards the innocent *Ramariez*.

“GET READY TO DIE, IDOW!” the voice on the speakers screamed. “YOU SCALELESS, EGG EATING—”

“Shunt!” the captain bellowed.

The helmsman stabbed her finger on the proper button and in a burst of light, the *Ramariez* jumped into hyperspace only moments before countless missiles, plasma bolts, lasers beams and nuclear mines flooded their previous location, exploding with such horrific, space twisting, mindshattering force, that even in the non-dimension of hyperspace the *Ramariez* felt a slight tremor and the lights momentarily dimmed.

“Ship's status!” Captain Keller snapped, as the room brightened and telltales began winking on every board and console.

A few minutes passed while information was hastily gathered and processed. As the reports came in and Keller became satisfied that his ship was undamaged, he dropped their status to Yellow Alert. Then the captain ordered the forward speed cut to dead slow. In essence, the *Ramariez* was now drifting in hyperspace.

“The Gees are going to have real trouble with those guys,” Van Loon remarked dryly from the Medical console. Sick Bay was fine, and nobody hurt. Avantor and The 16 were both undamaged and resting comfortably.

Keller agreed with the physician wholeheartedly. Those folks had a real bad attitude problem.

“They probably don't have a Hypernavigational cube, either,” Trell noted pragmatically.

Lost in dour rumination, Captain Keller reclined in his chair and rubbed his dimpled chin. The operating perimeters of the situation were rapidly deteriorating. As a duly appointed officer in the United Nations space navy, he had taken an oath to obey galactic law to the best of his ability. Dag grunted. Unfortunately, the only course left open to them now was totally illegal plain and simple, and no amount of bickering or word twisting, could change that fact. So what he had to decide was, should the *Ramariez* commit trespass or receive stolen goods? A misdemeanor, or a felony? Hell, no contest there.

“Helmsman, set course for RporR,” Keller commanded. “We're going to see how well this crew can run a fully established blockade.”

“Aye, aye, sir!” the officer replied crisply.

The following noise everybody heard proved only to be Trell fainting.

TWENTY-ONE

“Queen/Mother! Queen/Mother!” the RporRian guard cried out, pushing aside the beaded curtain and dashing into the throne room.

The excited insect paused only for a moment to toss a silver piece into a simple clay pot already half-filled with the coins, that being the standard surcharge for delivering a message to Her Most High, Divine Loveliness, Gather Of The Taxes, Guardian Of The Treasury, Master Breeder and Expert Penny Pincher, (squeak-squeak-thromb-squeal-chatter-gnash-grunt), the fourth. The absolute ruler of RporR.

The corpulent female was supine upon a pile of coins in a dark, moist alcove of the cavernous room, sedately enjoying a snack of crystallized sweet moss. Her lesser limbs slowed in their constant, mindless counting of the coins, and the wall-mounted, organic laser cannons flanking her tightened their focusing coronas and tracked the approach of the advancing male.

As fitting her exalted rank, she lazily raised four eyelids to gaze at the small male dancing excitedly on the marble floor before her. “What is it (hiss-spit)? Another buy one get one free sale?”

“No, Your Majesty! A starship approaches!”

“A scout returning home?” she asked raising another set of eyelids, and beginning to show some faint sign of interest. That damn blockade of the Gee's was a clever trap. RporRians could check in, but they couldn't check out.

“No, Your Greediness. It's a blue, Mikon #4!”

“Aliens?” For the barest moment her sub-hands paused in their eternal work and she laid aside her claw of moss. “Oh dear, what do our sensors tell us about them?”

The messenger rattled with pleasure. “Thulium, Queen/Mother and lots of it!”

“Wonderful,” she sighed and removed a ceremonial rasp from its long undisturbed compartment to begin filing her bargaining claws. “Then let us prepare a welcome for our guests.”

“A parade, Beloved Assessor?” the guard cried, clapping his forelegs together with the sound of castanets. “Could we hold a parade?”

She smiled widely, the act almost breaking her head in two. “That sounds like an excellent idea, (hiss-spit). Yes, they should have a parade.”

“Yippee!” the messenger/guard shouted as he started to scuttle from the room.

The Queen/Mother writhed a smile. “Oh yes, and (hiss-spit)?”

Breathless with excitement, he paused by the door, the reflected light from the glass beads casting a thousand tiny rainbows across his twitching, gnarled features. “Yes, Your Avarice?”

“Take that fake silver piece out of the pot and put in two real coins, or I will make you stand on a stepladder.” She was no longer paying attention to him, but her vestigial kneecaps crackled ominously.

Fearfully, the male swallowed hard. "B-by, your command." Gosh, was she a Queen/Mother, or what?

* * * *

As the *Ramariez* drifted through space, the green dot on their forward viewscreen rapidly grew into a picture of a lush, tropical world. However, the details were obscured by a thin gray fog that seemed to blanket the planet.

"Dead stop," Captain Keller ordered, and the ship eased to a halt. Vainly, he studied the screen before him, trying to get a glimpse of the Gee's blockade. Nothing.

"Tactical, Mr. Buckley."

"Aye, sir," CPO Buckley responded, fiddling with the dials on his console until a vector graphic formed on his monitor and information began flowing across the bottom of the screen.

"Class K star, no sunspot activity. Eight planets in the system, three before us, five aft. Nothing in our vicinity but a few asteroids. No divergent courses. Getting a high metal reading from the planet, indicative of an advanced civilization." Then he tapped a meter with a finger. Wait a minute, those readings were going right off the scale! Hell, right off the planet!

"Sweet Jesus," the CPO whispered, crossing himself.

"Report, mister," Keller barked, the whipcrack tone achieving the desired effect.

"At first I thought the fog was a dust storm, or maybe pollution," Buckley said, a calm professional once more. "But the cloud is not even in the atmosphere."

Seated at the Scanner Console, Ensign Hamlich worked to slave their monitors together. "What are you saying?"

"It's the Gee blockade," Buckley confirmed, barely able to believe it himself. "A swarm of gray metal pyramids that completely surrounds the planet."

Scowling in disbelief, Captain Keller snorted. "Visible at this range? Impossible. There would have to be millions of them."

"Ninety seven million," Chief Buckley corrected, staring at his flashing gauges, "And still counting."

Keller managed to maintain his outward facade of calm, with only the slight crunching of the metal arm of his chair arm to reveal the tension this news produced. When the Great Golden Ones put up a blockade they didn't fool around. Just calling it a blockade didn't do the construct justice. It was staggering. This was what the Gees had been in the process of erecting about Earth. For the first time, the starship officer fully appreciated what it was they were defying.

In contemplation, the captain glanced at the triptych viewscreen at the front of the bridge. The left panel was in data mode scrolling mathematical equations, the right screen displayed the planet highlighted by computer-generated color splotches indicating chemical composition and thermal activity, while the middle showed a magnification factor 10 picture of the world framed by a gray metal cloud.

"Why is the blockade thinner directly in front of us?" Ensign Soukup asked, stating the captain's

unspoken thought.

“Checking,” Hamlich said, manipulating his Scanner controls.

“Well?” Captain Keller demanded after a minute.

Ensign Hamlich flipped a switch and frowned. “Because, sir, as far as I can tell, we are in a spiral passageway that goes through the blockade to the planet.” He nodded at the middle viewscreen. “The only reason we can see RporR this clearly is that we’ve come out of Hyperspace somewhere near the end of the spiral.”

“A passageway,” the captain mused. Then he snapped his fingers. “Of course! We must be in the Gee safe route through this mine field.”

“Makes sense, sir,” Soukup conceded. “Considering whose coordinates we used to get here.”

“Skipper,” the Communications Officer announced, touching the wireless receiver in her ear. “I have just gotten a warning from a sentry device shaped like a golden beehive on the other side of the planet.”

“Ordering us to leave?”

The Hawaiian turned to face him. “No sir, just strongly advising us not to land. Or if we must, then not to breath the air on the planet.”

“The atmosphere does not register poisonous,” a nurse at the Medical console stated in a thick Russian accent.

“Air tax,” Lilliuokalani said, deadpan.

Captain Keller wondered if the woman was trying to be funny. “Let me get this straight,” Dag said, leaning forward, elbows resting on knees. “It is only prohibited for an inhabitant to leave, but not for somebody to visit unless they pay a tax?”

“Apparently so, sir.”

With a sigh of contentment, Keller reclined in his command chair. Great. They were still semi-legal then.

“But this is much too simple,” Ensign Soukup ventured, swiveling her chair about. “Surely, the locals must see ships coming in. Why don’t they just try leaving the same way?”

“They probably do,” Buckley agreed. “But the drones are so arranged that thirty percent of them can fire in unison on any target.”

“What kind of power does that entail?” Lilliuokalani asked.

Ensign Hamlich looked apologetic. “Sorry. My gauges don’t go that high.”

Captain Keller grimaced. Swell.

“Should we erect shields, sir?” Chief Petty Officer Buckley inquired, fingering the proper button.

“Unnecessary,” Keller decided. “It appears that as long as we don't have any RporRians on board, we're safe.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Anything directly from the planet, Mr. Lilliuokalani?” Keller asked.

“Negative, sir.”

The captain considered that most odd. Surely, they knew the ship was coming in for a landing and reticence was not conducive to good salesmanship.

“Follow the spiral in, Ensign Soukup,” he ordered. “And approach with caution.”

The Helmsman gulped. “Affirmative, sir.”

To the nervously watching crew, it appeared as if the ship was floating through an endless bank of mist, the sheer number of the Gee drones swamping the visuals.

“Entering atmosphere,” Ensign Hamlich announced, as the viewscreen began to change from foggy gray to a clear blue. In the distance, puffy white clouds lined the horizon.

“Where should we land, sir?” Ensign Soukup asked.

Attentive to detail, Captain Keller studied the continent. Most of the land was either vast farms, or smoke-belching factories. The two historical adversaries oddly intermingled. Almost as if the effect of pollution on crops was unknown, or perhaps the locals enjoyed the taste of smog. Anything was possible with an alien race. Both of the coasts were sparsely settled, and only three major cities were discernible; two resembled a military complex, and the third an amusement park.

“There,” Keller said, pointing to the left. “That city over there, surrounded by what resembles a roller coaster. It fits the description of their planetary capital.”

“Scanners indicate docking facilities for starships to the west of the capital,” Ensign Hamlich reported crisply. “Change course, six degrees, north by northwest.”

“Affirmative,” Soukup replied, adjusting her controls.

“Belay that order!” Captain Keller snapped. “Land us at that park in the middle of the city. According to Trell it's public property and available for anybody to use for free.”

“Free?” SFC Hassan asked, from his Engineering station. “Are you sure about that, sir?”

The captain told the man yes, and to shut up.

“Ensign Lilliuokalani, have the landing party assemble in Launch Bay #4,” Keller directed. “The first team will consist of Ambassador Rajavur, Sgt. Lieberman and six Marine guards armed only with pistols. We don't want to appear threatening, or discourteous.”

“Affirmative, sir.”

"If anything goes wrong, the rescue squad is to be lead by Lt. Sakadea with every remaining Marine fully armed and in powerarmor, backed by our hover cannon, laser batteries and the main gun."

Just the thought of the awful weapon made the Hawaiian uneasy. "Aye, aye, captain."

* * * *

"No, we're not going to call it that either," Sgt. Lieberman said, resting a polished boot on the edge of a bunk, the shiny leather toe making a dent in the otherwise mathematically flat cloth plane. "Look, what's wrong with calling it the UN Assault Rifle Mark One?"

"But, sarge," a private complained, scratching her ear. "That's boring! Its gotta have a nickname."

Lieberman scowled. "And what would you call it, Griggs? The Iron Rug, because it can't be beat?"

"How about, the D-20?" a tall, bony private suggested, in the booming voice of a radio announcer.

Sgt. Lieberman braced herself. "Okay, I'm ready. Why?"

"Because, as we charge into battle we'll yell: Die! Die! Die! Die! Die! Die!—"

"Thank you, Furstenburg," she said cutting him off. "We get the idea."

"Why is that knucklehead here?" a private whispered to the corporal next to him.

At that moment, the wall speaker announced the personnel assignments for the intended landing.

"Tell ya later," the woman said, as she and the other chosen Marines broke for their lockers and began strapping on equipment.

* * * *

"RporR," Trell sighed, gazing at the small, wall mounted, auxiliary viewscreen in Launch Bay #4.

His earlier journey to the floor had given him only a brief reprieve from the awful knowledge of what they were about to do. Land on RporR of their own free will. Which was probably the last free thing any of them would ever do, before they landed in one of the bug's infamous debtors' prisons; which were filled exclusively with off-worlders who thought they could outsmart the insectoids. Proof that stupidity was a universal trait.

"What's wrong with the place anyway?" a private, asked strapping an extra ammunition belt about his waist. "Seems nice enough to me."

After the Master Technician had given the Marines a short, at times near incoherent, synopsis of the insects' career, even the New Yorkers among them were impressed with the bug's amoral greed. Those guys would put a Colombian drug lord to shame.

Located just below the equator of the huge starship, on the port side, Launch Bay #4 was a curved rectangular room whose plain steel walls had yet to be painted. Luminous yellow lines sectioned off the center of the room into twenty squares, and inside those were sleek, silver aircars.

Designed purely for atmospheric travel, the vessels strongly resembled a conventional bus with the roof removed; with plenty of seats, one driver and no cargo space. All that was missing was a No Smoking

sign, a change box and gum on the floor.

Unlike the space going shuttle craft which were named after astronauts, the aircars were christened in honor of atmospheric flyers, both real and imaginary: *Icarus*, *Wang Ping*, *Vero*, *D'Amecourt*, *Count Zeppelin*, *Orville & Wilbur*, *Kal-el*, etc.

Equipped with Rolls Royce built antigravity generators and belly turbines for lift, and heavy duty Chronon ion thrusters for drive, the amazing crafts could lift an army tank full of lead and still travel at over 800 kph. The versatile aircars could also float in water for days, and had studded, puncture proof tires for emergency ground transportation. However, the Marines considered the things little more than flying deathtraps, as the aircraft had no armor to speak of and maneuvered like a dead whale on roller skates.

Dressed in tan duty fatigues and combat boots, the waiting Marines were armed with a laser pistol, five extra power packs, a Heckler Koch 10mm automatic and nine extra ammo clips. Plus, in a bulky shoulder holster, a single shot 40mm grenade launcher. Just like the captain had ordered, sidearms only. Personally, the Marines wished they could bring some real weapons with them.

"How's it coming, sir?" Sgt. Lieberman asked, ambling over to their assigned craft, *The Icarus Express*.

"Done, Sergeant," Trell said, closing the hood of the aircar while wiping his lower hands clean on a rag. "I charged the antimatter accelerator, aligned the photovoltaic disc, balanced the gyroscopes and changed the wiper blades."

The soldier paused, then forced a smile. "Great."

Over in the far corner of the bay, a Maintenance technician stopped her mopping of the floor. "Photovoltaic?" she asked. "But surely the DRL assembly is electronic."

"Nonsense," the man next to her replied, pausing in his scrubbing of the wall prior to painting. "The magnetic lens must be controlled by fiber optics. It would eliminate any possibility of negative feedback."

"Yeah," said the janitor, studiously applying her mop. "That makes sense."

Leaving the alien to his work, Sgt. Lieberman called for her troops, and the soldiers came running. As they gathered around, the noncom gave them a cursory inspection and nodded in approval. They were hard, lean and mean. She paused. Sounded like a Marine law firm. Hard, Lean and Mean, attorneys at war.

"Security has got to be tight on this trip," Lieberman, said working the slide on her automatic to chamber a round for immediate use. "The RporRians will do anything to get their people off this planet, and the drones have orders to shoot to kill. The locals don't have communication satellites anymore, or use airplanes. Too risky. The drones keep shooting them down."

"No kidding, Sarge?" asked a private, checking the load on his grenade launcher.

"It is true," Trell said, neatly arranging his tools in a folding metal box. "Some of the more cowardly of the bugs don't even dare stand up straight. Minor criminals are often punished by making them stand on tall things in the outside."

"Really? What do they do with felons?"

“Breed with them.”

The three word reply was delivered with such disgust and hate that it conjured nightmarish visions, and shivers ran along the spines of the Marines. Some things are best not known.

“Okay, time to board,” Lieberman said, glancing at her watch and deliberately breaking the mood. “Take only window seats, but don't get comfortable. I want everybody alert and ready for trouble. But the first person who acts without permission will get a unidirectional boot in the ass.”

As the Marines tromped onto the aircar, the janitors across the room chuckled. Tanya Lieberman snorted at them. Maybe the lenses were controlled by fiber optics. Sheesh! Didn't they know the magnetic flux of the aggie generator would distort any such primitive maser relay? The dopes. But then, that was why they were the cleaning crew.

* * * *

As the harsh buzz of its drive softened to a muted snore, the *Ramariez* came to rest a rigid two meters above a large grassy plain, with gentle rolling hillocks and several lakes. The pastoral locale was the Mid City, Tax Free, Outdoor Recreational Center of (gargle-choke-burp) the capital of RporR.

The local population had scurried away at the starship's approach. Running in fear, the humans supposed logically. But within minutes they were back, hastily assembling plastic sales booths about the ship, taking photos and hawking goods; not to each other but the humans inside. Such esoteric items as: edible postcards, Gee dartboards, Koolgoolagan cigars (fake) and bags of genuine souvenir dirt.

Standing in front of the main viewscreen, Captain Keller studied the banners fluttering above the inflated booths. Most of them bore a broken triangle, the universal symbol of FOR SALE. Quite a few had the triangle and double circles which translated as BARGAIN. One even had three circles, which the starship officer supposed meant CHEAP. Nowhere did he see just a broken circle, the symbol for FREE SAMPLES.

“Are you sure about this?” Keller asked the wall.

“Positive, sir,” the voice of Trell replied. “The ship is too low to need to purchase a flying permit, and too high to require a parking fee.”

“What a crazy world this is,” Hamlich remarked softly.

Ensign Soukup readily agreed. “Aren't they all, my friend.”

* * * *

“Here he comes,” the driver observed in a measured tone.

Trying not to tap her boot, Sgt. Lieberman scowled. “About time.”

Holding onto his silk top hat, Prof. Rajavur ran across the metal deck of the loading bay towards the waiting aircar. The Icelander was dressed in his best tuxedo, platinum translator and sporting a red silk ambassador's sash. His shoes were polished, his iron-gray hair combed into obedience and he had even gargled with sugar water to be more pleasing to the insects. As Sigerson hurriedly climbed on board the transport, he was dismayed at the profusion of weapons among the Marines. But he wisely acknowledged their necessity should things turn ugly. The RporRians did have a bad reputation.

“Sorry I’m late,” the diplomat apologized as he took his seat next to the driver. “But I had to assemble the honorarium.”

“No problem, Mr. Ambassador,” Lieberman lied. She was used to dealing with dignitaries and VIPs. At least he was polite. “Driver, notify the bridge we are ready.”

“Aye, sir,” the Marine said as he unclipped a mike from the dashboard. “*IcarustoRamariez*, permission to lift.”

“Permission granted,” said the captain’s voice. “Godspeed and good luck.”

“Roger, wilco,” he replied and returned the mike to the dash.

“Respirators on,” Sgt. Lieberman ordered, pulling the elastic strap of the modified gas mask over her head. Muffled grunts sounded in acknowledgment. “Okay, Private. Let’s go.”

“Aye, sir,” the pilot murmured, operating the vehicle controls by litany. “Running lights, check. Safety interlock, go. Atomic batteries to power, turbines to speed.”

With a blast of warm air, the *Icarus* lifted from the deck, floated over its sister vehicles and maneuvered out the opening doors of the Launch Bay, which promptly closed behind them.

Sprawled in front of the humans was a glittering metropolis with a thousand buildings of various different shapes and sizes. In the distance, Rajavur could now see that the roller coaster-like structure encircling the city was made of tremendously thick metal beams and huge slabs of stone. He was astonished the thing didn’t sink into the ground under its own weight. The diplomat wondered what could the erection be?

Taking its time, the *Icarus* descended vertically into the greenery of the park, proclaiming to any onlookers that the passengers were in no great hurry. It gave the Marines plenty of opportunity to plan a ground-based offense, should it prove necessary.

Leisurely maneuvering, the aircar glided between stands of giant ferns and out over the legions of sales booths, the blast of their belly turbines causing a great commotion, blowing the tacky merchandise everywhere. Disappointed hoots and angry chirps sounded in their wake.

Once beyond the economic obstructions, the UN craft assumed a more sociable level and proceeded down the main thoroughfare at what the driver guesstimated to be walking speed.

Every building in sight was low to the ground, never more than four stories high, and mostly made of a creamy white material not readily identifiable. Flaring towers of silver lace dotted the wide sidewalks, fluted grooves in the ground served the obvious function of streets, and parking meters were commonplace.

The city appeared to be infested with curious onlookers who jammed the sidewalks and chattered noisily at each other. As the aircar slowed at an intersection to watch for cross traffic, a fat cockroach broke free from the crowd and dashed forward to run alongside the humans.

“An ounce of thulium for the secret of the passageway!” the bug offered, withdrawing a coin from its wicker belly bag.

Prof. Rajavur was unprepared for that particular question, so he played his instincts. "What secret?" he asked innocently, his words echoing slightly inside his respirator.

The bug paused in his speaking, but not in his running. Oh, they knew how to dicker, eh? "Okay, two ounces of thulium, but that's my last offer."

"Sorry."

"Four ounces," the treadmilling insect countered. "Plus, I'll throw in a picture of my sister."

That made the Icelander blink. "I beg your pardon?"

As an incitement, the bug showed the humans in the aircar a full color 3D holograph of his nude sibling erotically dripping green ichor. Gagging noises ensued from the pink aliens. Puzzled, the RporRian tapped his discount translator with a foreleg. The device must be malfunctioning again, those almost sounded like insults.

Just then, the silver towers began to ring with a clear tone and the buildings disgorged thousands of insects onto the street. An incredible parade began to form about the *Icarus* .

Gaily flowered floats, in the form of spaceships and planets came out of disguised garages and moved into position fore and aft of the aircar. Precision drill teams snapped and jerked their spears to a hard cadence count. Nimble teams of acrobats leaped and flew through the air with amazing agility. Eight-armed jugglers tossed about glowing glass balls, two-headed axes, flaming torches and live squirrels. Insects with white-painted bodies, mimes, performed all of the standard works, and then did a few indecipherable routines which the Marines could only guess at the meaning of, like: 'Eat The TV' and 'Wind The Baby'.

A barrage of brilliant fireworks arced skyward from every rooftop, filling the air with pyrotechnic grandeur and making the drones very nervous. Confetti rained down as balloons went up. Then came the grand finale as a huge marching band in crimson leather uniforms and feathered hats seemed to well from the very ground around the vibrating aircar: the string, wind and percussion instruments sounding remarkably like any Earthly high school band; full of vim and energy, but slightly off-key.

The tumultuous crowd of bugs laughed, cheered, shouted and sang. It was wild, wacky, wonderful, and very, very noisy.

"Sir," Sgt. Lieberman shouted in warning, holding hands over her ears and putting a wealth of meaning into the word.

Nearly deafened, the diplomat could only nod. They could only take a few more seconds of this, and then they would be forced to retaliate. Whatever the consequences.

TWENTY-TWO

Back on the *Ramariez* , a violent explosion rocked the cafeteria on Level 19, throwing people, chairs and food to the floor. Then from the smoking hole in metal deck poked the angry, golden head of Avantor.

Grabbing a convenient table leg, she started to climb out when the only crewmember on his feet brought a fully loaded dinner tray crashing on top of her head, spraying beef stew, biscuits and beer into the air.

Only another Gee could have told the woman's eyes crossed under the impact before she limply dropped out of sight.

“Medical to the brig, stat!” Lt. Jones ordered into her wrist transceiver while getting to her feet. “Engineering team report to Cafeteria B, pronto. Security to both places, now!”

Dripping spaghetti and garlic sauce, Jones turned to the crewmember who was still holding the dented, vibrating tray. “Good work, corporal,” she commended.

“Private, sir,” the Marine sullenly responded.

The lieutenant smiled tolerantly. “Not anymore.”

PFC James Furstenburg sighed down to his boots. Maybe he should just have that damn stripe put on with Velcro this time.

* * * *

Judging now to be the time, Prof. Rajavur rested an arm on the cushioned metal siding the aircar and tapped a nearby marching bug on the shoulder, getting its attention.

“By the way,” the human said in a friendly manner to the insect. “We have no intention of paying for this parade.”

In ragged stages, the music stopped and the parade ground to a halt.

“W-what did you say?” a startled cook roach said, holding a saxophone, a food stained apron still encircling his abdomen.

“We're not paying for this,” the diplomat repeated, his words ringing loud and clear in the sudden stillness.

As quickly as it had formed, the parade disappeared; the performers breaking formation, the floats returning to their docks, the laser holographs of fireworks turned off and the balloons reeled in on tethers. Soon the streets were deserted, without even a stray alien dog to keep the humans company.

Sigerson had deliberately waited till the very last moment to tell the insects this, to give them a taste of their own medicine. In a briefing with Trell, the diplomat had been told that once visitors set foot on the Grand Plaza Of Haggling they were then legally liable for the cost of any entertainment incurred along the way. But if you couldn't meet the demanded price in thulium, or some equally valuable goods, it was off to the work prison with you for the rest of your natural life. Many off-worlders caught in this insidious trap tried to escape, and even though the RporRian police were a joke, the Gee drones in the sky were not.

Apparently while the main job of the pyramids was to keep the insects planet-bound, the drones also served as auxiliary officers for the Great Golden Ones, and the Queen/Mother could call upon them for assistance to deal with any criminal. A sobering thought, but to Rajavur, also a warming one. The Gees were not evil stormtroopers oppressing the masses, but merely police officers enforcing existing laws.

Sgt. Lieberman gestured. “Okay, let's move on.”

Accelerating, the *Icarus* continued along the vacant main road of the city, passing blocks of apartment

colonies, shopping arenas and body waxing parlors.

The humans made faces when they spotted a movie theatre with a huge, garish poster depicting a drooling male humanoid carrying off a delicately built bug in a torn silk dress while some robots gave chase. The marquee read: *INVASION OF THE FLAT-EYED MONSTERS!* The logo on the poster was: *They wanted our women!* In smaller print underneath: *Not even money could stop them!* It made the crewmembers feel proud to know that Hollywood had never produced such godawful tripe. Well, not often, anyway.

Eventually, the aircar slowed as it reached a flat hexacre of stone situated directly in front of a staggered series of lumpish domes piled on top of each other. The Imperial Hive. This was their goal, the only authorized point for trading with off-worlders; the Grand Plaza Of Hagglng.

"I'll get out here," Rajavur said, disembarking, the motion making the aircar bob like a boat on water. "Follow me, but not too close."

"*Yasher koach*, sir," Sgt. Lieberman said, showing a thumbs up.

Rjavavur's translator relayed the Hebrew phrase as: 'have strength!'

With the diplomat walking before them, the *Icarus* cautiously floated through an archway of giant plastic mandibles and entered the dreaded Coliseum of Commerce.

The circumference of the plaza consisted of wooden bleachers whose seats went horizontal at the deposit of a coin. But the mechanism had to be constantly fed to forestall the inevitable vertical dump. Most of the huge attending crowd was standing. The earlier throng had not left for the day, but merely relocated here, eager to see the Queen/Mother teach these upstart mammals a lesson. It was fabulous entertainment, highly educational for the children, and, most important, free.

The only ornamentation in the place was a life-size statue of an RporRian male standing on a small dais. It was the actual mummified remains of (hiss-burble-cough), the famous poet, who, for a single copper unit, would robotically recite his immortal poem:

"Thulium, thulium, thulium,

I'd kill my own children,

for a bag of thulium."

The sentiment of the piece lost nothing in translation.

While patiently waiting, Prof. Rajavur rubbed the tip of his shoe across the strange gritty substance that formed the plaza. "What is this stuff?" he asked out loud. "Some form of concrete?"

"Checking," a voice replied from the communicator on his wrist. "Negative, sir, the material is primarily organic. A base epoxy mixed with bone dust and powered silicate."

The diplomat couldn't stop himself from asking. "No spit?"

There was a chuckling pause. "That's the truth, sir."

Cutting his laugh short, a trumpeting horn sounded from the Imperial Hive and the crowd parted to admit a squad of smartly marching soldier bugs holding electric whips and quivers of crystal snakes. The soldiers advanced to the center of the plaza, then parted to each side. Through the middle crawled a hairy sedan, walking on eight jointed legs like a cross between a tarantula and a lounge chair.

It was then Prof. Rajavur remembered that the bugs were adept in biotechnology. That certainly explained the trickle of clear water running down middle of the fluted streets. The organic cars must be too simple to litter box train and the water was used to flush away any of their involuntary byproducts. The diplomat approved. It was neat, efficient and sanitary. In spite of their fanatical devotion to greed, the cockroaches were not barbarians.

Twinkling merrily in the sunlight, the body of the ambulatory sedan was resplendent with clusters of jewels and silver filigree. The Queen/Mother herself was mostly hidden in a pool of dark shadow caused by a bone and membrane umbrella supported by the sedan's scorpion-like tail, on top of which was a special flashing light of royal blue. All the humans could tell about her was that she was large, lumpy and had a lot of legs.

* * * *

"What do you make of that sedan, Doctor?" Captain Keller asked, gazing at the main viewscreen. When he did not receive an answer, Dag glanced about the bridge. "Where is Van Loon?"

"Conducting an experiment, Captain," somberly replied a muscular Russian nurse at the Medical console.

"An experiment?"

The beefy woman nodded. "*Da*, commander, something to do with the Gee medical supplies."

Keller humphed. Must be damn important for the physician to miss this. "Are you recording everything for him, nurse?" he asked.

"Of course, sir."

"Very well, carry on."

* * * *

In the aircar, a private leaned forward in his seat and tapped Lieberman on the shoulder. "Hey, Sarge, what will we do if the professor can't make a deal?"

"Leave," Lieberman said succinctly.

"Retreat?"

The sergeant grimaced. "Look about you, Andrews. If we take a threatening step towards the Queen/Mother, every bug on this planet will rally to her defense."

Very uneasily, the private observed the thousands of bugs watching their every move, and noted the wide assortment of mandibles, claws and stingers. Yeah, he guessed she was right. Nobody wanted to reenact Little Big Horn, especially when you had to play the part of Custer.

With a blare of trumpets, the living carriage stopped in the center of the plaza and an RporRian guard,

naked but for the ever-present belly pouch, walked toward the humans holding a cast iron pot.

Remembering his lessons, Prof. Rajavur dropped in enough silver for everybody in the party. The drone chose a coin at random and submitted it to a primitive, but effective, test of authenticity: he bit it. At his nod, the Queen/Mother chattered for a while.

"I bid thee greetings," said the translator hanging from a hairy strut of the living carriage. "Identify, please."

The diplomat bowed with a flourish of his hat. "Ambassador Sigerson Rajavur from the planet Terra." He deliberately did not introduce the Marines, on the belief that soldiers in an insect culture would be second class citizens, at best.

"We come in peace, and as a token of respect, offer a few humble gifts unworthy of Your Majesty." The professor had originally planned to compliment the Queen by calling her Your Loveliness, but just couldn't bring himself to do it. By God, he would not make love to a bug. Well, not unless he absolutely had to for the sake of the mission.

A Marine handed him a heavily laden silver tray, which Rajavur then passed on to a drone. On the tray were: a cut glass jar of Egyptian honey, a box of Belgium chocolates, a silver Chinese dagger in ornamental sheath and a fine collection of necklaces depicting cultures from every nation on Earth. Wisely, none of the offerings were made of gold, or even yellowish in color, except the honey.

Daintily as a manticore, the Queen/Mother smiled, displaying only a few hundred of her dagger shaped teeth. "Gladly we accept these gifts," the platinum edged box said in silken tones. "And I decree that, for the rest of your stay, you may breath freely of the air of my planet."

Rjavavur bowed again. "Thank you. Does this invitation also extend to my associates?"

Ah, the dance had begun. "Of course."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

Happily, the humans removed their respirators, and then were sorry they had. Pollution was pretty bad here, and only the smokers in the group didn't mind the thick chemical taste to the air. It was worse than Bombay, India, in the summer.

"Lovely," the professor smiled, trying not to gag. "Thank you for allowing us to share it."

An elderly bug in the crowd stepped forward to ask the mammal if it would like to buy some air, but a guard pushed the impetuous entrepreneur back into place. Heckling was not allowed.

"What purpose has brought you noble beings to my humble world?" the corpulent insect asked, toying with the candied skull of an ex-lover.

"Curiosity," Rajavur said. Then after a ten second pause he added. "Plus, we need some supplies."

The Queen/Mother demurely oozed a bit of ichor at those words, and her bargaining claws extended. "We are not a metal based culture. But I am sure that we can deliver anything you might need. For a small fee, that is."

Sigerson had a feeling that this meant along the same lines as 'the check is in the mail' did back on Earth. "Our Hypernavigational cube has developed a crack and we seek another to compare coordinates with."

Clearly apprehensive, the Queen/Mother glanced at her chamberlain, and he whispered in her ear-hole. "Yes, we do have such a cube available for purchase," she replied, via the box. "The sale price is the total destruction of the blockade around my planet."

The Icelandier went cold. Wow. She caught on fast. The captain had asked to be consulted on any difficult decisions, but Rajavur didn't need to bother the man about this. "I am sorry, but no."

"Your vessel lacks the necessary armaments?" she asked inquisitively, her lower limbs doing a pantomime of strangling a rabbit.

"Our ship does not carry any weapons at all," Rajavur lied with a straight face. "We are as peaceful a race as you are generous and giving."

The RporRians went stiff at that and started chattering among themselves. Sgt. Lieberman wondered if the diplomat was wise in insulting the bugs, and told her troops to get ready for trouble.

But then a trilling laugh came from the translator. "Amusing. I will give you an HN cube if you will take ten of my people in your ship and release them on any planet." On cue, a swarm of insect children were brought out from behind the sedan, the adorable infants endearingly intent on sucking flavor sticks.

The ambassador gave the matter serious thought. What harm could ten baby bugs do?

Over the radio Trel asked Lieberman if the children had a green sheen to their thorax or chitin and the Marine replied yes. "They're pregnant queens," the technician frantically told her. "Release them, and within a single solar revolution, the galaxy would be spleen deep in the horrid monsters."

"Room is severely limited on our ship," Sgt. Lieberman stated in a loud voice for the professor's benefit. "Ten additional beings would strain our life support to the breaking point."

Prof. Rajavur appreciated the assistance, and the Queen/Mother blithely accepted the obvious lie.

"Perhaps we could buy the cube from you," the diplomat offered, as if he had invented the concept. "Say, for sugar?"

Radiating innocence like a furnace, (squeak-squeak-thromb-squeal-chatter-gnash-grunt) oozed a bit of green. This was so exciting. "Your ship isn't large enough to carry sufficient sugar," she informed him.

"Well, then how about thulium?"

Ah, the dance quickened. "What do you offer?" she asked putting the skull of her brother into a refrigerator compartment at the base of the sedan's armored tail.

He decided to start with the fair market value. "An ounce."

The Queen/Mother almost choked on her own laugh.

Rjavur took that as a no. "A pound."

“We are a primitive race,” the corpulent bug apologized. “My people believe that any number lower than ten is evil and will bring pestilence to the land.”

“Mine are even more primitive,” counter-apologized the diplomat, “And can not count higher than five. Plus, in accordance to our religion, our priests would have to examine the cube for its holiness prior to the exchange of material.”

“Examining the cube would be an insult to its maker, my scientist-son,” the translator said. “Which would require an additional five pounds of thulium to appease his artist temper.”

“Does that include all relevant taxes, levies, fares, surcharges, import fees, export duties, tithes, and royalties?”

The Queen/Mother clicked a claw in respect. The mammal danced well. “The price is inclusive.”

Prof. Rajavur smoothed back his wiry crop of hair. Fifteen pounds for a real cube, eh? The price was outrageous, and they would have to beware of a last minute switch, but this was acceptable. At last, they had a Cube!

Softly in the distance, the noise started like a dog crying, but then built in tempo and volume until the very air was tangible with the strident howling.

“Raid!” a bug yelled, and the screaming crowd frantically dispersed in every direction.

“Alert!” Lieberman said, touching the earphone of her radio. “A Gee superdreadnought is coming down the spiral.”

Rjavavur was silent as he hopped on board the aircar. This was twice the Great Golden Ones had interrupted him in the middle of a successful bargaining session. They were really starting to honk him off no end.

Somehow the lumbering craft managed to execute a razor sharp U-turn in the confines of the plaza and the vessel took off in a blast of green flame that washed over the empty bleachers only setting fire to stray bits of paper and the mummified statue. The Queen/Mother and her entourage were long gone. Surprise invasions by the Gees were an annoying, but constant occurrence.

With the flip of a switch, the autopilot of the *Icarus* precisely retraced its journey down the main road at near Mach speed. Everywhere throughout the city, bugs were diving into any open doorway or window. Then the humans could only stare, the buildings started to incredibly sink into the ground. As they did, the roller coaster structure about the city began to visibly rise. At last, the purpose of the mysterious erection was clear.

“It’s a counterweight,” Rajavur cried, loosening his grip and losing his silk top hat to the wind. “For the whole damn city!”

Hanging on to the dashboard for dear life, Sgt. Lieberman squinted against the hurricane force distorting her vision. “By god, you’re right!” she shouted.

“Impressive!”

“Let’s hope we live to tell somebody about it!”

Putting a bat out of hell to shame, the aircar rocketed through the park, uprooting the sales booth. The side of the *Ramariez* welled before them like the white cliffs of Dover and the passengers prepared to die in a terrible crash, when the landing bay doors opened and the human pilot landed them as softly as a feather on the metal deck. With a resounding clang, the bay doors slammed shut and the starship immediately launched.

“Rendezvous with the superdreadnought in two minutes,” the Sensor Officer said.

“Shields on full, main gun primed,” the Weapons Officer reported crisply.

“What course, sir?” Navigation asked.

Hunched over in his chair, Captain Keller bit a lip. Damn. He had no wish to fight with the Gees, but if the *Ramariez* tried to fly through those drones, their amassed firepower would put more holes in the ship than a political speech. Think fast, space ranger!, the man mentally quoted from one of his favorite comic books.

Then recalling an earlier briefing on this very matter, Keller made a decision. “Navigation, set course for ninety degrees to ground zero.”

“Straight up?” Trell gasped from his console. “Are you mad?” Only the alien could have said it, even though most of the bridge crew was thinking the same thing.

“Hardly,” Keller drawled. “Ensign Soukup, on my order I want maximum possible velocity, that means every engine we have operating at full thrust, plus the emergency chemical boosters.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

As the starship rapidly neared the edged of the blockade, the drones locked their awesome weapons of destruction on the ship, but not satisfied with that, the Great Golden Ones also unleashed every weapon in their arsenal that could operate at that distance.

“Sir!” Buckley cried out, pounding on his console. “Both shields are down!”

“Hyperdrive nullifier in effect,” Ensign Hamlich reported crisply. “We can no longer shunt into hyperspace.”

“Engine #1 is dead,” Trell added, frantically throwing switches and pressing buttons. “There goes number two. Number three!”

The captain strapped on his seatbelt and pulled it as tight as possible against his lap. “Lilliuokalani, shoot that centihedron with the **STOP THAT** cannon. Navigation, give me full power. Weapons, turn this ship gold!”

* * * *

With a smug expression of triumph, The 34 released her grip on the control stand of the Gee centihedron and turned to the bearded amber male rising from the Command Chair.

“We have them trapped, my liege,” she said with a smile. “There is nowhere to hide on the planet, the drones will destroy them if they go any higher, and we block the only exit.”

Solemnly, the avantor stroked his beard and nodded. "Excellent, 34. This will mean promotions for both of us. Well, let's get gather our prisoners. Open hailing frequencies and—"

jjjjjjjjjjjjjjjjjjjj**STOP THAT**jjjjjjjjjjjjjjjjjjjj

Unexpectedly hit by their own weapon, the Gees were blown off their feet by the psionic strike. Weakly rising to their knees, the pair tried to stand when their minds were scrambled by yet another slamming blast, followed quickly by two more. Meticulous as always, Ensign Lilliukalani had read the report about Avantor's attempted escape from the brig and carefully noted the crucial number of shots necessary to induce unconsciousness.

Writhing on the deck, The 34 somehow managed to flop an arm about and touch the sweaty hand of her commander.

S-suggestions, my liege?

Prayer, 34.

Then warm blackness overwhelmed them both. Which really was a shame, for in that condition, neither of the Gees were able to see out their viewscreens and thus appreciate the subtlety of what happened next.

* * * *

Relentlessly, the drones moved in for the kill, half a million Proton Cannons locking on target. But then, at the very last moment, just before the outpouring of a billion gigawatts of subatomic death, the onrushing starship impossibly changed color.

Startled, then embarrassed, the pyramids quickly disengaged their weapon systems and swerved out of the way of the golden ship. Their simple robotic brains were unable to fathom where the Gee spacecraft had come from, or remember that only seconds ago the intruder had been white. It was the proper color, and that was all that mattered. Nobody else in the galaxy would dare to use the restricted hue. The punishment was Galopticon 7.

Happily at this point, no RporRians remained above the surface to see the telling event, and thus the key to unlocking the blockade remained a secret.

At near light speed, the Ramariez tore through the opening in the gray metal cloud, her thermal backwash slugging any drone too slow to get out of her way. Several of the damaged pyramids reacted to that as an attack and automatically fired at the fleeing craft; either missing it entirely and vaporizing another drone, or scoring a direct hit upon the *Ramariez*. The ship's Deflector Plating ricocheted the beam right back at the pyramids with disastrous results.

Bursting free of the planetary blockade, with smoky tendrils of pyramids chasing after them, the Earth ship changed color again, and jumped into the relative safety of hyperspace.

* * * *

"Ha!" Chief Buckley cried, snapping his fingers at the main viewscreen in victory.

Captain Keller forgave the minor breach of regulations. He felt like blowing a horn himself.

Ensign Soukup relaxed the death grip on her control panel. Whew, what a ride that had been. Disney could make a fortune with a civilian version. With luck like this, Dagstrom Keller should quit the Star Service and become a professional gambler. She started to speak, but had to swallow first to clear her throat. "Sir, should I plot a reverse course so that we can try again?"

"Hell no," the captain snorted. "We barely escaped this time."

"Sir?" somebody else asked.

Keller swiveled to the left. "Yes, Lilliuokalani?"

"We could circle about the star system, and approach from the other side," the Communications Officer offered. "After we had first turned the ship red and were constantly broadcasting a fake identity code. It's a variation of the battle tactics used by the Byzantine Empire against the Mongolians in the 12th century." Her voice trailed off as the captain stared meaningfully at the woman.

"But perhaps not," finished the ensign lamely.

"Very wise," Keller concurred. He was also familiar with the ploy. It hadn't worked against the Turks in 1453 and he didn't think the Gees would fall for it now.

"Besides," Captain Keller aloud said. "That ship was more than likely the advance scout for a task force sent after us. If we attempt to return to RporR, our chances of successfully getting away, much less obtaining an HN cube, would be zero."

"But, sir," voiced Ensign Hamlich in concern. "Doesn't that leave us with one option left?"

Keller frowned, his elation disappearing as fast as his ship had from the Gee sensors. "Unfortunate, but true. Navigation, set course for the star system of Leader Silverside. We are about to remove any question about our criminal status."

The spacer gave a sigh. "Aye, aye, sir."

* * * *

Down in the Earth ship's brig, the exhausted 16 collapsed onto his waterbed, breathing raggedly. It had been a major effort for the Gee to boost the limited range on his computer implant to reach the robot drones, override their communication lock and then force the machines to call Great Golden Central for help. But once again, the Terrans had proven themselves to be fast, smart and lucky. Yet the galactic police officer would not surrender. Eventually, his captors would make a mistake, and it would be their last.

TWENTY-THREE

Fourteen hours later, the *Ramariez* phased into normal space: its shields hard and weapons at the ready. Delicate scanners hungrily swept the empty volumes of space about the ship, searching for any conceivable danger. But the screens remained clear, and the meters did not flicker a needle. When satisfied, Lt. Jones signaled a step down to yellow, then green alert and the crew breathed a sigh of relief. Safe, at least for the moment.

Snug in the command chair, Jones stifled a yawn and drained her cup of hot chocolate. It had been a

long, boring shift, with little to do, but at last they were here. Made good time too. Gold was a fast color. But white was notably safer and she ordered the change. No sense calling attention to themselves.

Putting her empty cup aside, the woman primped her uniform, buffed her bars of rank and fluffed her blonde hair. The bridge crew for the command shift had come on duty an hour ago, so Keller should be arriving any moment.

“Captain on the bridge!” somebody shouted.

Shifting positions quickly, the bridge crew stood and saluted as Captain Keller sauntered in through the turbo lift doors, forcing his smile into a yawn. By God, that thing was fun. After this was over, he just had to get a turbo lift for himself, even though he lived in an A-frame house.

“At ease,” he said returning their salutes, and everybody resumed their work; although sitting a bit straighter and talking less than when Jones was in charge.

“Morning, lieutenant,” Keller said, as the woman relinquished her position in the command chair.

“Good morning, sir. Sleep well?”

“Lord yes, those water beds are fabulous. Made me feel like I was at sea. Anything to report?”

“Nothing, sir. Hyperspace was quiet.”

He gave her a smile. “As it should be. What’s our position, Ensign Hamlisch?”

“Right on target, skipper,” the Sensor Officer reported proudly as if he had done it himself. “Exactly 50,000 kilometers away from the outer asteroid belt.”

“Excellent. Lt. Jones, you are officially relieved.”

“Yes, sir.” The tall blonde saluted, but hesitated before leaving. “With the captain’s permission, I’m not tired and would very much like to stay and observe the approach.”

Keller tried to hide the fact of how much that suggestion pleased him. “Permission granted,” he said formally. “Glad to have you with me, Abigail. Take over the Damage Control console.”

“Thank you, sir.” She turned. “You are relieved from duty, Mr. DeLellis. Go grab some sack time.”

“Aye, aye, lieutenant.” Damn, the portly French scientist had wanted to take part in the exercise, not just watch it on the monitor in the crew lounge. Oh well.

According to Trell, the solar system before them was not a particularly unusual phenomenon. The galaxy had quite a few of the astrological abnormalities. In its formative years, the swirling plasma radiating out from the newborn sun had not formed into huge planetary globules for life to evolve upon, but instead had coalesced into countless billions upon billions of asteroids encircling the sun in a staggered series of wide bands, jagged hunks of rock and superhard ice that ranged in size from marbles to small moons.

Flying above the ecliptic of the system, the starship approached the forbidden zone at a cautious 100,000 kilometers per hour, the Q coil engines barely humming from the minor exertion. The main viewscreen of the bridge was filled with the dark splendor of the ringed sun, only the occasional glint of

frozen gases breaking the majestic grandeur of the stony bands. Somewhere in that jumble was their last chance of success; an asteroid nicknamed Buckle and a criminal entity known only as Leader Silverside.

“Navigation, Communications, Weapons, Medical, and Sensors,” Captain Keller barked. “Put your sensors on automatic trip. I want to know the instant any of those rocks register life.”

This order was greeted by a chorus of, “Aye, aye, sir!”

“Sir, do you think it might be time to try and talk to Avantor again?” DeLellis asked, who had been walking from the bridge as slowly as possible. “Nobody can stay mad forever, and she might be able to help us find Buckle.”

“It is highly doubtful that the Gees would be willing to talk to us, much less give advice,” Lt. Jones stated.

Thoughtfully, Keller cracked his enlarged knuckles, the only lasting trophy of his boxing career. “On the other hand, it can't hurt to ask. Go ahead and give it a try, Ensign.”

“Thank you sir!” Smiling broadly, the man saluted and left the bridge.

Exactly ten minutes later, the scientist returned, his hair in disarray, what remained of his uniform in tatters and a smoking door handle dangling from his right hand.

“Avantor remains uncooperative,” DeLellis said, a puffy lip slurring his words.

Keller didn't know whether to laugh or cry. “Report to Sick Bay, mister,” the captain said as a compromise to both.

Trembling and weak, Ensign DeLellis saluted, almost hitting his head with the handle. “Hank goo, sur,” he managed to say, and stumbling to the fireman's pole, the battered scientist slide from sight.

Reclining in his chair, Captain Keller sighed in resignation. “I really hate to say this, but the time has come to unleash the RATS.”

“I am forced to agree with you, sir,” Jones said with a frown. “Marines would be useless on this mission, as we will be dealing with criminals, not enemy soldiers. As horrible as it is to contemplate, the Reserve Away Team is our best bet, since they are the only veteran alien fighters we have.”

“Unfortunate, but true.”

Just then, the elevator doors shushed open and a massive metal figure emerged to lumber forward. When the armored figure reached the captain, it saluted him with a faint whine of servomotors and presented Keller with a clipboard. The captain deftly signed the manpower report. The UN Space Marine saluted and clunked away.

“Lieutenant, I want you to personally see to their equipment. And when you open that cell door, be accompanied by at least a dozen guards like that one in powerarmor.”

“Yes, sir. Shoot if they try anything?”

The starship commander considered the suggestion. “Only to wound, Lieutenant. For the present, we

need the Bloody Deckers."

* * * *

Surrounded by a squad of metal guys holding mother big rifles, the street gang was escorted from their cell in the brig to a Ready room where the convicts were allowed to change from their zebra striped prison fatigues into tan military jumpsuits with a nice wide belt and these really bitchin' combat boots.

So far, this trip had been an easy gig for them. The food was great, and their quarters were luxurious compared to the 10X15 cell at the Pelican SuperMax Security Prison where they had been serving their 97 consecutive life sentences. Bad place that. The gang had to do some serious head busting before they were finally safe from kissing their own shoes. Geez, you try and conquer the world just once and some people go crazy.

"Hey, prof!" Drill called, zipping up the front of his jumpsuit and shrugging to straighten the shoulders. "We doing this gig naked, or what?"

"There are plenty of guns for you in the shuttle craft," Rajavur stated from behind a wall of armed Marines. "But be very careful how you use them. Computer sensors in the weapons prohibit them from firing at any ship personnel. If you attempt to use the guns to remove your bracelets, both the weapon and the bracelet will explode."

Clenching and unclenching scarred fists, Hammer frowned at the smooth ceramic bands on his wrists. The ganglord looked meaningfully at Drill, but the locksmith sadly shook his head. These things had been welded onto them by some weirdo alien device, so there was no mechanism for him to pick. Besides which, they were supposed to explode if the gang left their cell without authorization, or went down a proscribed corridor, or hit the bracelets too hard, or did anything clever. They were good and trapped. Nothing to do but go along with the scheme and wait for a lucky break.

"What about knives?" Chisel asked, struggling to lace a boot, his mind almost overloading with the effort to remember the kindergarten poem: 'First you build a house, then the man goes inside...'

Lt. Jones had been expecting that request. "There is a box in the shuttle craft with a hundred assorted knives, hooks and hatchets for you."

With a yank, the boy finished tying the knot and stood up straight. Only a hundred? He guessed it would have to do.

When the street gang was finished with their ablutions, an unarmed Marine gave each man a heavy leather pouch.

Frowning curiously, Drill peeked inside. "What is this stuff? Canadian money?"

"Subway tokens?" Chisel guessed, sniffing a coin.

In response, Jones started to explain the intricate history of thulium, then decided against it. "Space dollars," she told them.

Nodding in acceptance, Hammer tucked the bag into a hip pocket. "That's cool. Chump change, folding cash, or serious bucks?"

"Think of them as flat diamonds."

“Wow,” Chisel gushed, drooling slightly. “We're rich!”

Unnoticed by anybody, Drill palmed a coin and dropped it into his boot.

“You understand the plan?” Prof. Rajavur asked, when the gang had stopped fondling the money and was under control once more. Or rather, what passed for control.

Running a hand over his hated prison crewcut, the lord of the street gang snorted in contempt. “Yeah, yeah. It don't take no nuclear genius to cook this scam. We go to the bar, act tough, get to see the boss, buy this cube thing and come back here fast, or else.”

Then in spite of the guards and the fact that this situation reminded him of a classic World War II movie, Hammer took the opportunity to add, “But I don't like being a freaking errand boy, you old fart, and if this wasn't earning us full pardons, my gang wouldn't do spit, you needle dick bug jumper.”

After RporR the insult stung. “I understand, Melvin,” the older man replied. “Now, shut up and go board the shuttle before I order your left hand blown off for insubordination.”

The ganglord turned red at the use of his proper name, then broke into laughter and strolled from the room with his chuckling gang and Marine guards close behind.

Relaxing only slightly, Lt. Jones exhaled and holstered her laser pistol. “Nice bluff, sir.”

“I never bluff a man who has nothing to lose, Lieutenant,” Prof. Rajavur said coldly. “Hammer could have done the job just as well with only one hand and he knew it.”

It was then the Australian officer decided that someday she simply had to play poker with this man.

* * * *

“Negative again, sir,” Ensign Hamlich reported calmly, even though he was boiling inside.

The scientist hated to fail in anything. This tenacious attitude had cost the man several friends over the years, but earned him the Noble Prize in Physics at the astonishing age of twenty-five years old.

Acknowledging the report, Captain Keller drummed his fingers on the cushioned arm of his chair a few times and then loudly slapped the plasti-cloth covering. “Okay, Master Technician, how do we locate this place? Do a radar sweep of the entire solar system?”

“Conceivable,” Trell admitted, chewing a finger. “But usually, you do not find them, they find you.”

“Meaning?”

“We hover above the fourth asteroid ring and broadcast a low power message. Upon acceptance of our transmission, Buckle will send out a tracer beam.”

He nodded. Good enough. “You heard the man, Lilliuokalani. Proceed.”

“Affirmative, skipper. What frequency should I broadcast on, Master Technician?”

As Trell rattled off the string of integers, the Hawaiian adjusted a slide and flipped a toggle switch.

“Is there a code phrase, or password I should use, sir?” she asked, fingers poised above her keyboard.

The alien waved a pattern of negation. “Just say something nasty about the Gees.”

“Aye, sir.” The Communications Officer typed a brief message on her keyboard and hit the Enable key. A minute later, she announced incoming coordinates.

The captain woke from his musing. “That was fast. What did you say to them?”

Ensign Lilliuokalani blushed. “I said we liked to decapitate Gee babies and fornicate the neck stumps.”

Keller stared at the woman.

“Too verbose, sir?” she asked politely.

“No, that was fine, Ensign. Just fine.” Mentally, he made a note to have Van Loon keep an eye on her. Then he glanced about the room. Where was the physician anyway? Oh yes, still in the lab. The man was starting to live down there. He wondered what the good doctor was doing?

Following the directions, the *Ramariez* reversed course and began to move counter to the asteroid flow. The plain of tumbling mountains flowed beneath them like an impossible river of stone, an endless avalanche to nowhere.

“Why is it we can't find them?” CPO Buckley asked, his brogue deliberately asserting itself. “Faith, with our sensors we should be able to locate a single freckle in Ireland.”

Trell talked for quite a few minutes, and the translator box on his belt said the word: disguised.

“Disguised how?” Captain Keller asked. “Camouflage? A jamming field? Or is it some sort of cloaking device that bends our scanner beams 180 degrees around the target?”

Once more the alien Technician launched into a short science lecture to try and clarify the complex physics involved, and his translator replied, “Yes.”

The Swiss officer scowled. Might as well talk to the avantor.

“Navigation, please change course, port by keel by stern, 2,000 meters,” Lilliuokalani directed, touching her wireless earphone.

“Affirmative,” Ensign Soukup replied making the corrections.

Penetrating the effect of the cloaking device, there appeared on the main viewscreen a mile long asteroid covered with strings of lights and metal domes. In orbit about the jagged rock were a dozen starships of various shapes and sizes, every one of the vessels solid white.

“Strange how close we were to this place from our phase-in point,” Soukup observed, logging the data in on her astro navigation chart. “Captain, do you think the Gees know about this place?”

“You would have to ask Avantor,” Keller replied sternly, and this time nobody volunteered to do so. There were lots of easier ways to get seriously hurt, such as playing catch with a greased bottle of

nitroglycerine in a munitions factory during a lightning storm.

"Place us in a parking orbit about the asteroid, Mister Soukup," the captain directed. "But with plenty of room to move if we have to leave in a hurry."

"Aye, sir."

Keeping a hand on his console, Buckley swiveled about. "Skipper, may I recommend we go to Yellow alert?"

Captain Keller smiled tolerantly. He had once been a chief petty officer, too. "I was just going to do that, Buck. Ensign Lilliuokalani, yellow alert."

Throughout the ship, the command was relayed. Then Keller gave a bone-cracking yawn that was copied by the several members of the bridge crew. "And for God's sake, have the galley get some coffee in here!"

* * * *

Sitting significantly alone in the middle of the Launch Bay #2 was a slim, flat bottomed plane whose gleaming white hull was made of seamless Deflector Plating. In bold lettering, the name *Leonov* was stenciled on her round bow.

Seemingly unaffected by the sophisticated beauty of the craft, the Bloody Deckers stomped on board the shuttle. Ready for treachery, the Marines did not relax until the hatch of the vessel was tightly dogged shut and the air evacuated from the launch bay.

Under normal conditions, the craft held enough seats for a crew of three and ten passengers, but the extraneous chairs had been removed, and ribbed plastic cargo trunks installed to take their place.

Like kids at a birthday party, the gang tore into the trunks. Aside from translators, medical kits, food packs and other such useless stuff, the convicts found three laser pistols, with shoulder holsters. Groans greeted the familiar sight of the woven metal force shield belts, but cheers meet the unexpected prize of bulletproof vests.

The promised guns proved to be Uzi machine pistols equipped with acoustical silencers. The gang worked the bolts and checked the clips with experienced hands. These highly illegal weapons were what had earned them the right to claim Central Park as their turf. Uzis and the Bloody Deckers were old friends. The new AK-74 assault rifles were very nice, but much too big to hide under a leather jacket.

Chisel squealed with delight at the sight of the knife collection, and plunged his hands into the box unconcerned by the razor sharp steel. Hammer let the boy grab the Bowie knife sitting prominently on top and chose a standard switchblade for himself. Drill took two Japanese butterfly knives and Chisel appropriated everything remaining. When finished, his pockets, boots and sleeves bulged with edged death, and his body weight was increased by twenty percent.

Smiling contentedly, the bucktoothed lad smoothed out his clinking clothes. This was the first time he had been properly dressed in a month.

Insatiable as always, Drill began roaming about the vessel searching for cigarettes. He started with the cockpit. It was as far as he got. "H-hey, chief?" the locksmith called, his voice wavering.

Feeling more like a man now that he had a gun in his hand, Hammer ambled on over and froze in his tracks. There, welded to the front of the dashboard, with no attempt made at subterfuge, was a really huge mucking metal egg plainly labeled as a bomb.

"These guys play for keeps," the ganglord whispered in sincere admiration.

"YES, WE DO," a feminine voice said from a speaker under the control panel. "NOW PLEASE STRAP YOURSELVES IN. WE ARE BEGINNING FINAL APPROACH AND WILL LAUNCH SOON."

"Then what?" Hammer asked. The street punk hated to do what he was told, but was not stupid enough to disobey.

"WE WILL LAND THE SHUTTLE AT THE APPROPRIATE SPOT AND TURN THE MISSION OVER TO YOU."

The Bloody Deckers nodded. Great, that's when they could make their escape.

"WE WILL BE KEEPING A CONSTANT AUDIO AND VIDEO SURVEILLANCE ON YOU VIA OUR SCANNERS," continued the voice. "BUT YOU WILL BE AUTONOMOUS. WE WILL INTERVENE ONLY WHEN YOU SHOUT FOR HELP. IF YOU DO, THEN STAND BACK." There was a pause. "AND WE MEAN THAT LITERALLY. STAND BACK."

* * * *

"Understand?" Lilliuokalani asked into a microphone. The Deckers murmured vague assents from a speaker on her console. "Acknowledged then, *Ramariez* out." She released the thumb switch and returned the microphone to her console.

"Ready to go, sir," the ensign reported.

Keller crumpled his drained coffee cup and stuffed its Styrofoam corpse into the disposal slot in the arm of his chair. "Take them out, Mr. Soukup."

"Aye, sir," the woman said, plugging a miniature joy stick into her console and then flipping a switch. Watching the computer graphics on her tracking monitor, the ensign thumbed the button on top of the joy stick and the shuttle launched.

Under the adroit control of the expert pilot, the shuttlecraft maneuvered out the landing bay, the thick hullmetal doors silently closing once it was past. Little more than passengers for the journey, the street gang watched in total fascination as their ship jetted through the black velvet of space and gracefully entered the mouth of a dark cave on the pointed end of the asteroid.

In contrast to the rough exterior of the giant asteroid, the tunnel they were in was a smooth tube with a gravel floor and a high, vaulted ceiling. Seven different colored light bars, like grandiose fluorescent tubes, lined the entire length of the roof and pulsed in computer binary to guide the ship in.

Slow and careful, the *LEONOV* moved through an awe inspiring parking lot of assorted shuttlecrafts; balls, cubes, and pyramids everywhere. Most made of white metal, but some appeared to be ceramic, a couple glass, and one in the back was obviously constructed of riveted wood. A big blue ship they passed was shaped like a clam, another like a football helmet. There was a four story tall baseball bat covered with tiny windows in which fish swam by, a Christmas tree ornament perfectly balanced on its

tear drop tail, and even a good old fashioned flying saucer with a sign on top consisting of a broken triangle bisected by a sine wave. Only Trell knew that to be the sad universal symbol of FOR SALE, BY OWNER. Probably an unlucky gambler who had lost everything at the VisPar tables. That was how his own parent had gotten so deeply into debt.

* * * *

On the main viewscreen, Captain Keller noted creatures moving freely about the ships and was surprised to see they were not wearing spacesuits of any kind.

“Is that landing area pressurized?” he asked.

“Affirmative, sir,” Ensign Hamlish replied, already running arpeggios over the touch controls of his scanner console. “Some kind of low energy force screen covers the mouth of the tunnel and keeps the atmosphere in.”

“Interesting. Chief, start calculations on a jamming field to neutralize that screen.”

Buckley smiled at the prospect. “Aye, aye, sir!”

* * * *

Finding a vacant berth between a corkscrew and a doorstep, Ensign Soukup landed the shuttle and prudently shut off the engines. As the whine of the ion thrusters died away, the gang climbed out of their seats and grouped in front of the airlock. They hesitated before exiting, so Ensign Soukup cycled open both doors simultaneously from her console.

“GET MOVING,” the voice ordered.

The Bloody Deckers glanced at each other and shrugged. What the hell, if this sissy sounding Ramariez guy wanted them dead, there sure were easier ways to do it than marooning them here.

“Come on,” Hammer said, slapping his friends on the shoulders. “Let's go kick some alien butt, Decker style!”

Lacing their courage with bravado, the gang shouted their name like a war chant and exited the shuttle.

TWENTY-FOUR

Disdaining to use the automatically extending stairs, the youths hopped to the ground, the gravel crunching beneath their Army boots.

Looking around, the Deckers spotted a slow-moving conveyor belt running down in the middle of the parking lot, going from the distant mouth of the tunnel to a nearby rock wall. The Deckers smiled. They knew about these people-mover things from robbing folks at airports. Hitching up their pants, the gang boldly stepped on the corrugated strip, and they were whisked away through a blossoming interface into the heart of the asteroid.

Bright lights and noise were the first things the gang registered, but as their big city trained reflexes took effect, they soon were able to discern an incredible hodgepodge of the town laid out before them. As far as they could see, there were buildings and structures of every conceivable description: from ramshackle igloos and ivory towers, to steel skyscrapers and brick outhouses. Almost every one had an electric neon

sign of some sort. Indeed, a couple of the more garish buildings were neon signs and had tiny wooden houses hanging out front.

The street was nothing more than a branching path of raw asteroid stone that meandered through block after block of architectural anarchy; twisting and turning like a snake on drugs.

And the people ... !

The streets were filled to overflowing with a mixture of circus and zoo, combined with a Grade B Horror flick and a fancy dress masquerade thrown in for flavor. As true city dwellers, the pedestrians marched where they liked, when they felt like it, and paid no attention to each other, even when they collided, which was often. Street vendors hawked bizarre goods on every bustling corner. Pungent steam rose from vents in the street, fogging the air. Cryptic alien billboards dotted the rooftops. Somewhere, angelic choirs could be heard singing, throbbing drums pounded from a rattan doorway, flutes and a trombones battled for supremacy inside a paisley tent and modulated screams came out of a concrete pillbox with iron bars on the windows. In the distance, there came an explosion and a tall spire of crystal noisily crashed out of sight. Nobody seemed to notice. It was a hundred New Year's Eves rolled into one, augmented by a small war and amplified through the fevered brain of a colorblind madman.

"I like it," Drill said with a broad grin.

Basking in the open air, Hammer agreed. The place was okay. It was sort of like that movie about the android hunter. And better yet, not a cop was in sight.

As the gang stepped off the moving strip, an octopus on a wheeled cart shot out of a mirrored alleyway and tried to pick Chisel's pocket. Unconcerned, the boy stabbed the offending tentacle with a stiletto, almost slicing the tip off and continued strolling, leaving the howling creature spurting blood. The gang member had not been the least bit bothered by the antisocial act. It sort of made him feel at home, like he was in Manhattan again.

"GRAVITY HERE IS LESS THAN EARTH STANDARD," a tiny voice said from their jumpsuit collars. "YOUR COORDINATION WILL BE OFF, THUS YOUR MACHINE GUNS WILL SHOOT HIGH. PLEASE TAKE THAT INTO ACCOUNT."

"Thanks, mom," Hammer muttered, wishing he could lower the volume on that pain in the ass permanently. The only thing he hated worse than a busybody, were people who talked during movies. Their blood always ruined the taste of his popcorn.

"So what's the plan, boss man?" Drill asked, in the rhyming cant of the deceased traitor Crowbar. "We split up, scout the territory and then meet back here later?"

The ganglord scowled. "Screw that. We stay together. I got a feeling this place is more dangerous than an honest cop."

"Yeah, I agree," Drill grinned, then he noticed something amiss. "Hey! Where'd pinhead get to?"

Upon hearing his name, Chisel reappeared from the crowd. "I found it!" the boy shouted, excitedly pointing to the other side of a five way intersection.

Drill craned his neck over the milling throng to see, and Hammer pushed an old, blind, crippled dogoid into the gutter for a better view. On top of a quonset hut were two statues locked in mortal combat. The

ganglord nodded. Yep, that was the place they wanted, The Twin Choron Inn.

Prior to boarding, Trell had told them the story about how a drunk pair of the stone giants had gotten into a wrestling match one night. Equally matched, they had stood motionless on the roof for three solar revolutions, before they finally got sober, then bored, and went home. But by then, so many patrons of the bar used them to identify the place the management was forced to erect a statue of the beings to replace the absentees. The sculptor had done a fine job with the photographs supplied to her, and in fact some of the less observant customers to this day did not know that it wasn't the siblings still up there.

Acting totally cool, the Bloody Deckers pushed their way through the milling crowd and strutted into the bar.

Oddly enough, aside from the customers, the place pretty much resembled an ordinary tavern. There were tables and chairs scattered about the hall, sawdust on the floor, dartboards and astronomical holographs adorned the walls. A ten meter counter spanned the rear of the hut and behind the plastic counter stood a fibrous, orange humanoid in a knit leather waistcoat. The bartender was chewing on a green stick and using a cloth rag to clean a glass decanter.

What caught the Decker's attention though, was the strange elaborate machine that filled the entire back section of the hut, reaching from floor to ceiling and wall-to-wall. The Rube Goldberg contraption was made of plastic struts, brass kettles, ceramic barrels, glass beakers, wooden vats and a hundred zillion metal pipes, some dripping with frost and others glowing red hot. The gang had no damn idea what the thing could be.

Surveying the room for seats, Hammer spotted two at the counter, but they were on opposite sides of an albino grizzly bear who was drinking with both clawed paws. The ganglord smiled and reviewed the opening scenes from a dozen Westerns, for just the right approach. Yep, got it.

After a hurried set of whispered instructions, Hammer approached the hulking monster from the left, with Drill and Chisel flanking him.

"Hey, whitey!" Hammer called in the most insulting tone he could muster.

Mildly curious, the bear paused in his drinking and rotated a monstrous head to see whom the creature was addressing. Surely the little brown thing was not talking to him!

"You're sitting in my favorite chair, dustbunny," Hammer snarled, rapidly clarifying the situation. "Now move your moth eaten butt, or my den gets a new rug!"

With a ferocious roar, the huge grizzly turned and reached for the neutral disrupter pistol slung at its hip. But a hail of high velocity, steel jacketed, 9mm bullets from three machine pistols lifted the unsuspecting alien from the chair and slammed it against the plastic wall, the impact sending cracks as far as the front door. Laser beams then sliced off his treetrunk thick arms, and a knife thudded between his startled eyes. With a mighty groan, the hirsute goliath slumped to the floor, trembled and went still.

As the smoke cleared, the Deckers waited for reprisals, but everybody else in the tavern returned to their drinking and talking. What the Void, they each thought, the creep probably deserved it. He had.

* * * *

However onboard the *Ramariez*, the bridge crew was aghast.

"I've never seen anything to rival it," Soukup gasped, even paler than usual.

Ensign Lilliuokalani could barely speak. "They killed a fellow sentient just to obtain the chair!"

"Good grouping, though," Buckley noted professionally.

"It was murder," Hamlich declared in righteous outrage. "Cold blooded murder."

"No, it was perfect," Prof. Rajavur corrected, walking from the closing elevator.

Pressing a button to swivel his chair, Captain Keller turned to greet the man. "I agree, Mr. Ambassador. They have properly established themselves as people not to be trifled with, and nobody will suspect them of ulterior motives."

The diplomat crossed the room. "Yes, and only the Deckers could have done it in so definite a manner," the diplomat said, taking the guest chair located next to the Sanitation console. "I only wonder why they didn't toss a grenade into the place?"

"Didn't give them any, sir," Lt. Jones said simply.

Rjavur nodded. "That explains it."

* * * *

As the humans claimed their seats, over in a corner of the hut a group of bullyboys stopped ascertaining the potential of the new humanoids and returned to their hand of VisPar; the toughest, deadliest gambling game in existence. It involved: cards, dice, a roulette wheel, random number generators, post-hypnotic suggestions and high explosives.

"Hey! Let's have some service here!" Drill yelled pounding on the counter top.

Since it was safe again, the bartender stuffed a fresh mint stick into its slit of a mouth and scurried into view. The lumpy orange creature reminded the gang somewhat of a kitchen sponge.

"Peace!" the Oolian cried, lifting four pewter mugs brimming with foam in each hand. "Will arrive soon. Only have eight arms."

A gelatinous blob laughed uproariously at the old joke, showing how truly drunk she was, and then emptied a beaker on top of her head to nosily suck the milky white liquid in through a group of tiny mouths that ringed the base of her throat.

In a practiced motion, the sponge mopped the excess liquid that landed on the counter top with his hands, absorbing the spilled beverage and metabolizing the alcohol. In an establishment as filled with sloppy drunks as The Twin Chorons, the bartender was starting to get fat from overeating.

"Yo," Hammer said in a friendly greeting.

The sponge removed the breath stick from its mouth. "This is a respectable joint, creature," it stated in a serious tone.

"Yeah?"

"Fact. You must pay us a fee for the damages and to remove the dead body."

"Fair enough," Hammer laughed and he tossed a single gray coin on the counter.

That almost gave the bartender an air tube spasm. Keeping the coin in plain sight, he laid it on a glowing sensor pad embedded in the simulated wood counter top. The analysis took only seconds. By the Prime Builder, it was chemically pure metal. Top grade Thulium.

"I can not make change for this, honorable sir," the creature said respectfully.

Hammer waved the matter off and told him to credit his account and keep a gold for himself. The Deckers were supposed to make a splash, and that sounded like a good way to do it. Nothing attracts attention more than violence and money.

"What will you have, gentle being?" the happy sponge asked, a week's salary richer. He had always liked humanoids, especially hairless brown bipeds.

"Whiskey," the ganglord replied.

He waited and the bartender did the same.

"Well?" Hammer barked.

"Place your hand on the sensor plate so the drink will match your biological profile," the Oolian patiently explained. "What? Have you never been in a bar before?"

"Not as nice a place as this," Hammer lied, playing it smooth. It never paid to annoy the bartender. He might spit in your drink, then you would have to kill him and the bouncer would throw you out of the bar. Like, seriously inconvenient.

Complying with the request, Hammer laid his hand on the glowing square. At his touch, the machine behind the bar began to make whirring noises and started to rebuild itself, pipes reconnecting into a new configuration. It ratted and whined a bit, then a lid flipped aside and out floated a shot glass full of amber liquid.

Snagging the glass in mid-air, Hammer took a sip, and then downed the rest in a gulp.

"Goddamn, that's the best damn whiskey I ever had," Hammer sighed. "Gimme another."

More than ready to comply, the bartender did as requested. With an entire thul in his account, this humanoid could drink vintage Zish for the whole night and not dent his credit.

"Got anything pink?" Drill asked, a faint tingle stirring within him at the mere mention of the word.

The sponge gave his race's equivalent of a wink, and from under the counter produced a plastic atomizer. Experimentally, the locksmith depressed the bulb and out came a fine spray of reddish fluid. The next two squeezes were directed towards his face. Ah, that was more like it!

Chisel pressed his hand hard against the sensor plate. "I wanna a Coney Island Special."

With those words, the always reliable, never defeated, alpha class, Drink Master Supreme, underwent

the usual alteration, paused, and then did it again, and then again. Pipes connected and disconnected at an alarming rate, some bent themselves into condenser coils, others retracted, while yet others crackled with static electricity and tried to twist themselves into the fourth dimension. Kettles began to spin. Multicolored flames sputtered at irregular intervals. Ice formed on support beams, melted and reformed. The alien device shook, groaned, whined, burped and trembled. A crowd had gathered by then, and bets flew as to whether or not the Drink Master had finally met its match.

Deep inside the machine, a laser battle seemed to take place. A steel pipe shattered, the broken bits sprinkling to the floor. Steam erupted from the top coil, blasting tiles off the ceiling. Then in a hushed silence, the door flipped open and out floated a frosted steel mug, filled with an extra thick, chocolate milk shake. No straw.

As the crowd watched, Chisel took a sip and nodded in approval. No whip cream, but not bad.

With a sad ratcheting sound, the Drink Master spat out a gob of whip cream and a maraschino cherry onto the counter. The Oolian stared at it in horror and ran to get a rag.

While chuckling at the antics, Drill noticed three doors in the background marked EMITTERS, OOZERS and SQUIRTERS. Sagely, he deduced those must be the bathrooms and decided that no matter how much he drank tonight he could hold it until they returned to the shuttle.

At the other end of the bar, inspired by the toothy humanoid, a spider in a spacesuit requested a dead fly with a straw in its head. At a table across the room, a fly in chainmail ordered a spider with a straw in its head. Hatefully, the two beings stared at each other and sipped with a vengeance. Chisel snorted contemptuously at both of the creatures, and took a healthy gulp of his milk shake. Only wimps used straws.

"When do we move, boss?" Drill asked.

Hammer drained the glass and licked his lips. "Enjoy your drink, dude. Act sociable, then if we don't get what we want, we kill some customers and set fire to the place."

"Natch."

Strolling among the drinkers and gamblers of the tavern, plying her centuries old trade, was a semi-transparent, vaguely humanoid shaped creature. Her name was Einda, and she was a Datian prostitute. A truly universal whore, the empathic amoebae had the ability to mold herself into a sexpartner for almost any race. At least one representative of her highly flexible species was considered an absolute necessity at every decent bar throughout the known galaxy. And she had just found her next customer.

After the incident with the Drink Master, the adaptive female decided to try for the toughest member of the group, who would almost certainly be the leader; the short toothy male she had heard called Chisel. No doubt, a title of great authority.

As Einda casually wandered towards the bar, she passed by a hairy blue male sitting alone at a four person table, playing with a piece of string and a small fruit, which explained why he was sitting alone in a crowded bar. Nobody smart bothered an assassin.

By the time she reached the boy's side, the anthropomorphic tart had metamorphosed into a reasonable facsimile of the well endowed Laura; who had stolen the lad's heart even as the special federal agent had broken his nose during the fight on Leader Idow's ship.

“Greetings, attractive being,” Einda murmured seductively, her simple words promising everything and the knowledge to deliver it. “Do you desire my company?”

Mesmerized by the stark naked, translucent female, whom he seemed to know from somewhere, Chisel could only nod. Without hesitation, the gang member pushed the reptilian creature next to him off its chair and offered the seat to his new friend. Showing extreme wisdom, the scaly alien took no offense at this ejection and strolled away, searching for something less dangerous than the pink humanoid to bully.

“I am called Einda,” she told him taking the stool, her luscious lips curled at the tips in a faint smile, half in training, half from the courteous action.

“Chisel,” the human managed to say, his voice husky with unaccustomed desire. “Ah, would, ah, you like a drink?”

She slipped an arm about his waist and snuggled in warm and close. “Please.”

The boy stiffened, but when he realized she wasn't going for his wallet, he felt his face burn red in embarrassment, then lust, and he began to stiffen.

“Care for a sip of mine?” he asked, politely offering the lady his milkshake.

Einda was thrilled. Everybody knew that to her race such an act, the sacred mingling of juices was a proposal of marriage. This humanoid with the big teeth may not be much to look at, but the manling was the first to ever ask and offer her a ticket to respectability. She'd be damned if he would get away.

A true hermaphrodite, her race could breed with any other species by accepting a sample of germ plasma, using their super adaptive flesh to feed the living cells and then act as an incubator for the infant. She would not be able to contribute anything to the offspring, aside from motherly love, but that would be enough. Einda sighed. Yes, it would be enough.

“Gladly,” the female throatied, and pressed her lips to the steel mug accepting the offering in the spirit it was given.

Chisel was pleased by the beautiful woman's reaction and wondered if he dared to pat her shapely knee under the counter. Nyah, probably just get his face slapped.

Then Drill nudged him in the ribs and Einda was temporarily forgotten. Time for business.

“Hey, barkeep, maybe you can help us,” Hammer said laying down his empty shot glass alongside the other four and resisting the temptation to lick the container clean.

Drill pinked himself. “Yeah, we're looking for somebody.”

“Ain't nobody here,” the bartender answered in a tired voice that had heard this question a thousand times before. It almost always led to trouble.

Exercising patience, Hammer showed a few teeth in his smile. “You don't understand. We want the boss, the guy, ah, the thing that owns this place.”

“I own it,” the sponge lied, hitting the alarm button on the floor with his main proto-foot.

Drill snorted in contempt. Hammer agreed with the assessment and took a more direct approach of persuasion by drawing his Uzi, reaching across the bar and stuffing the warm barrel of the weapon into the sponge's fibrous belly.

"How many fingers you got on a hand, chum?" the ganglord asked in a deceptively sweet voice.

Frightened to the very core of his being, the creature chewed its breath stick to a nub before answering, "Eight."

"Seven," Hammer continued, working the bolt on his Uzi machine pistol and squeezing the safety. "Six, five, four, three..."

"WHO IS IT THAT WISHES TO TALK WITH ME?"

The atonal voice seemed to come from everywhere, so the ex-con eased his grip, resetting the safety on his weapon. "The new owner of the *All That Glitters*," Hammer bragged. "You can see it in orbit about this rock."

That statement stopped conversation dead in the tavern, and several of the more sapient sentients left unobtrusively through the windows, without bothering to open the portals first.

"INTERESTING," the voice rumbled. "WHAT HAPPENED TO MY GOOD FRIEND, LEADER IDOW?"

In the manner of a 1950s gangster film, Hammer picked his teeth with a not very clean thumbnail and replied, "We ate him."

The voice laughed in disbelief. "OF COURSE YOU DID. PERHAPS WE SHOULD DO BUSINESS TOGETHER."

At this, a section of the wall near the bathrooms broke apart revealing a stainless steel cubicle. The invitation was obvious, but the Deckers only exchanged annoyed glances. Geez, what was this, amateur night? Aiming in unison, laser beams and bullets sprayed the cubicle, igniting the shaped charges of explosives lining the walls and quickly reducing the chamber into a twisted metal wreck.

"Sorry, but no can do," Hammer drawled, dropping the exhausted magazine and slamming a fresh clip into his weapon. "Your elevator seems to be like broken."

The laughter sounded again and alongside the ruined elevator, a panel slid open in the wall exposing a gray stone passageway.

"I PERSONALLY GUARANTEE THIS CORRIDOR WILL NOT CAUSE YOU ANY INCONVENIENCE."

"Good enough," Hammer said, knowing that guys like this would rather go legit than break their word. In public, that is. He had learned that the hard way.

With the bravery of youth, the Deckers walked into the corridor and disappeared off the screens of the *Ramariez*, causing a major commotion on the bridge. As the wall closed, the bartender made a noise in front of Einda and jerked a fibrous thumb towards a corner.

“A customer wants to see you,” he said gruffly.

“I quit,” she said haughtily, and the zaftig amoebae continued to sip her milkshake, contentedly waiting for her fiancé to return and wondering what to name the children.

* * * *

Stepping out of the hallway, the Bloody Deckers entered a room that was more bomb shelter than office.

The floor was polished concrete, the ceiling burnished steel and every inch of the walls was covered with video monitors showing an external view of the asteroid, a panoramic shot of the city inside, the landing area, the Twin Chorons, creatures playing cards, fornicating, getting drunk, dancing, repairing a hovercar, a fist fight, and the construction of a new building. Only a handful were dark. In fact, the center screen was just fading to black as they walked into the room. Standing smack dab in the middle of the floor was the menacing figure of a black metal warobot; its lower chassis and upper arms edged with platinum.

Wary of the alien mountain with its multitude of weapons, the gang advanced into the room, looking for this Silverside guy Trell had told them about. But there was nobody present, except for the machine.

“You,” Drill accused, pointing a finger at the robot.

With the sound of distant thunder, the wardroid rotated its bulbous armored head, its camera eyes somehow losing their mindless machine quality.

“Yes,” Leader Silverside replied in a synthesized voice. “I just wanted to see how long the deduction would take you.” The status lights on its trim flickered from blue to orange. “Five seconds. Much better than average.”

Not amused, Hammer snorted in disgust. More frigging games, he thought sourly. Doesn't anybody just talk straight anymore?

“Hey, no offense,” Drill said as tactfully as he could. “But I thought you robot guys were, like, just stupid machines.”

Chisel was confused. There wasn't somebody inside the tank?

In response, Silverside gave a short barking laugh like a can opener gone bad. “Others of my kind are mere devices, yes. But not me. I have free will.” It flipped a gleaming silvered claw in the air. “You might call me an accident of fate.”

As the gang digested that bit of news, the metal behemoth docked itself into a control panel desk that rose hydraulically from the concrete floor. “What is the business you wish to conduct?”

Straightening his collar, Hammer stepped forward. “We need a couple of parts for our ship,” he stated bluntly, getting right to the point.

The droid gave a metallic snort. “Then go to Mikon. This is no silver and gold operation. I only deal in high priced items.”

“Like proton cannons?” Hammer asked, adjusting the shoulder strap of his Uzi. Damn things got heavy after awhile.

“Difficult, but possible,” the droid admitted, replacing the safety interlock on its weapon system as it reinterpreted the action as one of comfort. “Everybody has the right to defend themselves.”

“And some more Omega Gas,” Chisel chimed in, and the ganglord shot him an appreciative wink.

Silverside changed his orange lights to deep red. “You are aware that possession of the gas is punishable by Galopticon 7?”

Without a chair to sit in, Drill crossed his arms and cocked an eyebrow. “That a problem?”

“Not a bit,” the machine denied. “Just telling you why the price will be exorbitant. I run a strictly cash establishment.”

“Hey, motherfucker, we ain't broke,” Chisel declared belligerently.

The slang expression quite confused the machine until its logic circuits combined a code analyzer with its translator. Ah, how primitive.

“Better not be,” the battledroid warned. “Waste my time and I'll sell you to the Sazinians as experimental animals.”

The Deckers didn't know exactly what that meant, but it sure sounded like a serious threat. Better play it smooth.

“Fair enough,” Hammer smiled, running a hand over his hated crewcut. When they got back to New York, he had some serious killing to catch up on. Starting with the prison barber.

“Oh yeah,” he added, suddenly remembering why they were here. “We also want a Hypernavigational cube.” The street tough stumbled over the polysyllabic word.

Silverside diminished the focus of its video cameras. “You don't want much, do you?”

“Who cares? We got the thul,” Drill stated, tossing a pouch on to the controls covering the desk. It landed with a thump, luckily hitting a bare spot.

Using military scanners, the AI robot weighed the bag while reviewing its contents. Exactly two pounds of pure thulium. Quite obviously, these beings did not know the true value of the precious metal.

“This is acceptable,” the mechanical said as it plugged into the desk and ordered the requested supplies from storage. Then the droid flipped a panel on the desktop, reached inside and withdrew a fresh from the factory, seals still intact, brand new Hypernavigational cube.

“Here you are,” the warobot said, using a jointed arm with a two-prong clip to fork over the device. “The rest of your purchases will be delivered to the landing area for easy loading onto your shuttle.”

“Natch, I mean, thanks,” Hammer said as he nonchalantly tossed the future of humanity from hand to hand.

The cube was perfectly transparent, about the size of an apple and made of something much heavier than glass or crystal. Three of its sides were covered with tiny black squiggles and the fourth was embossed

with the raised design of a triangle in a circle in a square. Out of the corner of his eyes, the street tough noted a smaller version of the logo etched in the metal on the prow of the robot. He casually wondered what it meant. But due to a minor omission in their briefing, the gang member was blissfully unaware of the fact that the staggered series of geometric figures was the exclusive symbol placed on property of the Great Golden Ones. Counterfeiting the seal, or owning such an item, carried the death penalty.

With a grunt, the ganglord tucked the HN cube into a pocket. So much fuss over a stinking paperweight and the stupid thing didn't even snow inside when you turned it upside down.

Their business concluded, Leader Silverside decided to press for some more information. "I suppose the original was damaged in the fire?" it inquired in a friendly manner.

Staying loose, Hammer chuckled. "Hey, accidents will happen."

"Think you're pretty tough, eh, mammal?" the warobot asked, clinically fascinated by the natural aggression of organic life.

Rocking back on his boot heels, Drill stuck his thumbs in his belt and laughed. "Shit, dude, we're the Bloody Deckers! We use Chorons as landfill."

An interesting visual, the droid was starting to like these creatures. Perhaps he could use them as agents for a tricky deal that was coming up. They would probably die, but then, what were paid underlings for?

"Yeah, nobody messes with the Deckers," Hammer bragged trying to impress the machine and annoy the listeners on board the *Ramariez*. "Why, we even got a couple of those Great Golden guys captive in the brig."

Rrrr? Captive? Silverside mulled that word over, with all that it implied and inferred. Why should anybody brag they had taken a Gee prisoner? Killed, yes. But captive?

Then a cold surge of power flowed through the warobot's circuits, and its safety interlock violently disengaged. Unless the absurd claim was real. But that meant their earlier statement was probably also true. They had killed Leader Idow. The sweet, gentle being who had stolen the droid from the accursed Gees, and with his own blue hands given the machine consciousness, free will and a name.

Blessed Idow had assisted Silverside in taking over the asteroid, and creating a criminal empire so the droid would always have a home. Idow had asked for nothing in return, but Silverside had insisted on the right to keep the Sazin supplied with whatever he and his ship needed; food, fuel, weapons and the occasional crewmember. Gracious as a god, Leader Idow had accepted the gifts, and in all the many decades they had been associated, never even once did the noble being insult the machine by offering it any kind of payment for the items.

But now, the beloved liberator was dead. Dead!

The battledroid felt its belly solenoids tighten. Revenge must be taken on these walking bloodsacks, and the *All That Glitters* blown to pieces! The very notion of the vile thieves living in the starship stolen from its savior made the warobot shake with ill restrained fury.

"Hey dude, you okay?" Hammer asked in concern. The machine seemed to be having a seizure or something.

Instantly, twin force blades lanced out from the armored prow of Silverside to slice and dice the ganglord into bloody chunks of flesh. As the body of the youth dropped to the floor in a staggered series of thumps, Drill and Chisel recoiled from the scene in horror. Then a lifetime of streetfights overcame shock, and with an angry shout, the last remaining Deckers sprang into action.

TWENTY-FIVE

Activating his forcefield, Drill dove forward and made a snatch for the HN cube. But Leader Silverside rolled forward over the oozing remains of Hammer, its armored tread grinding the crystal cube in his bloody pocket into dust.

Tumbling frantically out of the way, the gang member barely managed to evade the warobot's killing path, when a stream of bullets, and then a knife, ricocheted harmlessly off the droid's metal body. Without bothering to pause, Silverside released a flight of anti-personnel flechettes and Chisel's scream of pain informed the machine of a direct hit.

"Help!*Ramariez*, help!" Drill yelled scrambling to his feet, but his cry for help was efficiently block by the jamming field of the robot's private office. Nimbly, the youth dodged under a plasma bolt that vaporized half a dozen video monitors on the wall. Then Drill wisely turned tail and darted through the sole doorway, adrenaline and raw fear fueling him to run at Olympic speeds.

Relentlessly, machine followed man into the corridor.

* * * *

"Alert!" Ensign Lilliuokalani cried rising from her seat.

Captain Keller spun away from his conference with Trell at the Engineering console. "Excellent, ensign! You broke through the jamming field?"

"No, sir," the woman denied. "Drill is back in view."

The bridge crew turned from their work and looked. There, on the main screen, was the frantic teenager charging out of the opening in the tavern wall and yelling to be rescued.

"Sir, should we teleport him on board?" Trell asked getting ready to do so.

"Scanners locked on target," Ensign Hamlich announced crisply, his adroit fingers feeding the coordinates to the console of his fellow officer.

Keller squinted. "Does he have the HN cube with him?"

"No, sir, he does not," Chief Buckley reported checking the read-outs on his board.

"Then leave him alone, and send in the Marines," Keller directed grimly. "We must have that cube, and, by God, this time we're going to get one!"

* * * *

As assistance had not arrived and knowing he couldn't outrun a machine forever, Drill decided to make a stand. Leaping over the counter of the bar, he knocked the sponge out of his way and slapped his hand down on the glowing sensor pad.

“Molotov cocktail!” he shouted, unaware that the Drink Master needed no such vocal encouragement for speed. “And keep'em coming!”

As the alien device began its dance of reconstruction, Drill prepared his weapons for the final conflict: machine gun, laser pistol, knife, damn, if only he had a grenade.

Crouching behind her stool, like the majority of the patrons, Einda suddenly understood what was happening. Flattening herself as only a Datian can, she shimmied along the molding at floor level and down into the passageway to try and find her fiancé, Chisel.

“There you are!” the AI machine thundered in delight, his words booming in the rapidly emptying tavern. “Time to die, assassin!”

Shouting obscenities, Drill fired the machine pistol and laser together until the Molotov arrived, and then he added its fiery bid to the battle. But nothing proved effective against the armored bulk of the death machine.

As Silverside rolled unaffected through the flame, the droid began to reminisce about the many battles it had fought to forge its criminal empire and establish itself as the Leader of Buckle. Each was fun, but always ended much too soon. Someday it hoped to meet a worthy opponent and enjoy a really good workout. Maybe even one that lasted more than sixty seconds.

Smashing the counter to splinters with a single swipe of its heavy duty manipulators, Silverside gathered the struggling teenager and pinned him against the wall with three telescoping servo-arms, accidentally breaking the human's leg in the process; not that the robot cared in the least. Then a buzzsaw extended from its prow, and slowly advanced towards the wiggling man, the singing wheel of steel hovering from the end of a ferruled metal support.

“Sadly, I am unaware of how my creator died,” the machine said in its toneless voice. “But I am sure that your death will be more painful.”

The first swipe of the buzzsaw sliced off his bulletproof vest, the second laid open Drill's jumpsuit putting a shallow slash across the chest. Drops of blood welled from the cut and dribbled into his clothing. Contemptuously, Drill spat on the camera lenses of the machine and braced himself for death. The man had always known he would die in a bar fight, only he had honestly expected it to be in Manhattan. Or at the very least, in Brooklyn.

But at that instant, the tavern was washed with light and a squad of UN Space Marines in powerarmor teleported in.

Lt. Sakadea absorbed the torture scene in a glance, and ticked off his options with lightning speed. Bullets would be useless against the armored bulk of the war droid, and their lasers couldn't penetrate the forcefield that his helmet sensors told him surrounded the machine. That left only grenades or missiles; either of which would kill Drill along with the robot. No, wait a minute, that was wrong.

“Dead volley,” Sakadea ordered over his suit radio, and the Marines launched a flurry of their special, anti-robot Church Key missiles. But without arming the weapons first.

From both of the fluted muzzles at the tip of their nameless UN rifle, twenty rustling firebirds streaked across the bar to viciously slam into the angular body of the warobot, going up to their hot fins in the thick

armor. The savage pummeling made the droid rattle and vibrate under each battering impact, but the damage incurred was superficial, and only Sgt. Lieberman's did the required job.

Her first missile smashed directly onto the base of the descending buzzsaw, knocking it away from Drill's exposed throat and tearing the limb free from the warobot's chassis to crash into the nearby Drink Master. Which promptly burst into flame, as the obedient device was still dutifully manufacturing the gasoline and soap concoction requested earlier.

The second missile zoomed straight in to embed itself right between the eye cameras of the enemy droid.

Utterly horrified, Silverside sent off a unique signal pulse to seize control of these robots and bind them to its will forever. But instead of instantly complying like good slaves, the metal warriors menacingly advanced closer and ordered the droid to surrender or die.

Bristling with missiles, the desperate machine sent off the signal again, and again, but the results remained the same. Impossible! No conceivable robot or computer could possibly resist the override command, especially as it had been augmented and boosted by the technical genius of Leader Idow so that even Gee military computers were helpless before the signal pulse. Unless, Silverside finally realized, there were living creatures inside those metal shells. Hostile alien creatures immune to its control, with both the ability and the desire to do the machine serious harm.

The unsettling thought of personal combat in which the droid did not have a totally superior advantage filled its central data processing unit, and for the first time, the warobot downloaded the bitter emotion of fear.

Deciding that discretion was the better part of valor, Leader Silverside released its captive like a thermally active ground tuber and quickly retreated, backrolling straight into the corridor that lead to its office, the double doors slamming shut right in face of pursuing Marines.

"Never mind the robot, secure the bar," Lt. Sakadea directed, then the lieutenant countermanded the order when he observed that the establishment was deserted except for his troops and a very bloody Decker. "Lieberman, check Drill."

Kneeling on the littered floor, Tanya roughly shook the teenage convict to wake him from his stupor. "Where's the cube?" she demanded over the external speaker of her powerarmor.

"My leg," Drill groaned, the street tough holding the injured limb with both hands.

Bone showed through the bloody fabric, so the sergeant activated the medical kit inside her metal wrist, and gave the wounded man a Navy SEAL dose of Hot Shot right in the neck: 10ccs of morphine, cocaine, caffeine and methamphetamine. If that devil's brew didn't put a person immediately on their feet, the military called an embalmer.

"Destroyed," Drill gasped, as a tingling wave of relief washed over him. "But there's a whole lot more of them in the office." He pointed with an unsteady hand.

"What about the rest of your gang?" she asked.

He coughed. "Dead. Died kicking ass. Almost got the bastard myself. Was gonna drown him in my blood." Drill managed a faint smile. "Your turn, lady," he whispered and passed out.

“Good work, soldier,” Sgt. Lieberman said softly, giving the highest compliment she could. Gently as possible, the woman laid his head on the floor and stood. With proper training, the lad would make a fine Marine.

“Lutzman, stay with him,” Sakadea ordered gruffly. “Geiger, check the door that damn robot went through.”

“No booby traps, sir,” reported the Advance & Delay expert over her radio a few seconds later. “But the seams have been cold fused together.”

“Okay, clear the area,” Lt. Sakadea snapped over the command circuit. “Matulich, Berouzi, open those doors. Platoon, get ready to move!”

A salvo of rockets from the bazooka team blasted the portal to rubble, and the Marines stormed in even before the reverberations ceased, bits of ceiling bouncing off their armored hides.

Nothing attacked them in the tunnel, and the second set of locked doors was disposed of as easily as the first. Stepping over the smoking debris, across the bare room the troopers saw Leader Silverside spin on its tread and crash straight through a wall of video monitors, glass shards and pieces of wire flying everywhere. Only blackness showed on the other side.

More concerned with the job at hand, the Space Marines ignored the robot and began searching for any HN cubes. But a single glance showed the glass walled office was devoid of anything, sans a horrible mangled pile of flesh.

“Which one of them is it?” a private haltingly asked.

“Both, I think,” a hoarse voice replied.

Somebody muttered a phrase in Italian and nobody needed a translation to know that it had something to do with disgusting.

“Your opinion, Tanya?” Sakadea asked on their personal communication channel, none of the other troopers able to hear the privileged conversation.

“We have got to capture that robot,” the sergeant advised, arming the sole replacement rockets on her rifle with the twist and jerk of a safety ring. “At the very least, it knows where the rest of the HN cubes are stored.”

“I agree. Let's go get the bastard.”

She smiled grimly. “And kick some alien ass.”

“We're going after Silverside,” the lieutenant broadcast to the rest of the soldiers. “Point men, take your positions, but shoot only to defend yourselves, we need that tin can alive.”

Lieberman saluted. “Aye, sir. Okay, let's move out!”

In tight formation, the troopers traveled down a short spiraling ramp, but their helmet lights did little to illuminate the incredible darkness.

"Night visors," Sakadea ordered.

As the Marines lowered the UV filters over their faceplates, they promptly saw a staggeringly large underground cavern, whose dimensions took their breath away. They could plainly see that this was the true interior of the asteroid. The sprawling city above them only utilized a tiny percentage of the total volume of the gigantic planetoid. Mere size did not impress these Marines, but what was in the cavern gave them pause.

Strapped to the curved rock walls high above them were countless gold missiles the size of battleships, and running down the length of the asteroid, becoming lost in the distance, was a colossal amber laser assembly that dwarfed the missiles to toys. The soldiers gulped. It was painfully obvious what they were standing in, the mammoth, twelve story tall, triangle in a circle in a square carved into the wall on their left totally superfluous.

"*Ai carumba*, it's a weapons cache for the Great Golden Ones!" a voice breathed in awe.

Another Marine gave a grunt. "No kidding."

"But if Silverside is in charge of Buckle," added another soldier thoughtfully. "Then he must know about this place."

"So either the Gees are really crooks, which is highly doubtful, or this Silverside guy must have turned traitor for some reason and have taken over the place for himself."

"Great!" somebody remarked, checking the action on her nameless assault rifle. "Then killing the creep won't be marked against us, but will actually be a point in our favor. Why heck, we might even get a reward."

While the soldiers eagerly discussed the possible monetary aspects of the situation, Lt. Sakadea fiddled with the controls in his helmet and tried the radio again. "Landing party to *Ramariez*, can you read me? Over." But only the static of the jamming field answered him.

Damn, this must be the source of the interference the bridge had encountered in Leader Silverside's office. Made sense. With the advent of modern sensors, you couldn't hide something anymore by just burying it under a couple million tons of rock and ore. But without contact with the ship, the Marines were on their own. Okay, no problem.

Weapon in gauntlet, Sgt. Lieberman waddled forward. "Orders, lieutenant?"

"Regardless of our location, we will continue the search for the robot," the officer said brusquely. "Our mission is to obtain an HN cube. That objective will be accomplished."

The Marine nodded. Sounded good, now if only they could do it.

Although not designed for fleetness, Leader Silverside had nevertheless made good its escape, frantically shucking missiles along the way and taking refuge in a utilities closet inside one of the flange support legs of the Nova Grade laser. Lacking anything more appropriate, it barred the door with an electro-mop.

Feeling safe, at least for the moment, the droid took the opportunity to remove the unexploded missile from between its eye-cameras and deposit the filthy thing on a nearby shelf. The nervous machine then uncoiled its most delicate manipulators, removed a saffron colored toolbox from inside itself, and began

to patch the gaping wound in its forehead. With good reason, the droid was scared lubricantless. In its many years of running Buckle, the robot had never before been damaged in a fight. The act of getting shot in the head with an armor-piercing missile was most unpleasant, and the droid had absolutely no intention of ever letting such a calamity happen again. Hot Void, no.

Finished with the temporary repair job, Silverside tidied itself up and cautiously rolled to the ventilation slits in the burnished door to peek outside and see what was happening. In a regular sweeping pattern, the armed humanoids were steadily advancing into the cavern. They were obviously searching for him and revenge. The abrupt appearance of the metal clad warriors so soon after its execution of the biped mammals in its office could not be a coincidence.

Feeling defeat breathing warm on his cranial support unit, the droid knew it had no choice but to play its trump card and released control of the asteroid's main defense computer. A control that the robot had never let rest for a millisecond after gaining it low those many solar revolutions ago.

Finally free from the onerous rule of the renegade robot, the loyal golden computer bank immediately sent out a long delayed Priority Alpha Emergency call to the planet Gee and unlimbered every offense weapon it possessed; against both the invaders inside and their ships in orbit.

The Marines halted as a section of the distant rock wall directly below the towering trademark of the Gee dilated, and out rolled a hundred warobots. At the sight of the humans, the dusty Gee droids promptly unleashed a barrage of invisible death from their neural disrupters and a fusillade of highly visible plasma bolts.

* * * *

Meanwhile, several small asteroids broke formation out in space and left the plane of the ecliptic. Once in position, they jetted forward and dived towards the amassed ships in orbit about Buckle, spraying them with sizzling particle beams. A half dozen ships of visitors and customers disappeared in silent explosions before the startled crews could react. The outer forcefield of the *Ramariez* collapsed under the hellish load of lethal radiation and the ship only survived the initial attack because of its Deflector Plating.

On the bridge of the starship, the main viewscreen brightened, and then went dark as every hull mounted video camera vaporized.

“Red alert!” Keller ordered, wiping tears from his eyes. “Soukup, full power to the shields. Lilliokalani, switch to auxiliary cameras 4 through 10. Trell, seal all interior hatchways and boost engines to 40/40. Hamlisch, set the laser batteries on automatic. Buckley, fire the Proton Cannon at will!”

Nobody wasted time to reply. They just did it.

With the element of surprise gone, the surviving starships began to defend themselves. Scarlet laser beams and green Proton rays crisscrossed space in a searing network of death and destruction.

Most of the hastily aimed weapons hit their assigned targets, and bore white-hot holes in the attacking sentinels. A few of the robot craft flashed instantly into nothingness. Several more spun crazily off into the distance as their guidance systems were wrecked. But more and more rocks left the plane of the asteroid belt to join the fight, their shimmering particle beams outshining the local sun in dazzling brilliance, and soon all of nearby space was filled with the frightful, pyrotechnic splendor of high technology war.

“Sir, should we teleport the Marines back on board?” Trell asked, frantically operating his console, wishing that he had more than just four arms and one god.

“Not until they signal possession of a cube,” the captain replied firmly. It was a distasteful fact, but the HN cube was far more important than any of the Marine's lives.

At near light speed, a tumbling boulder rammed the *Ramariez*, disintegrating into a nuclear fireball and the ship shook under the stupendous blow. The rebuilt outer forcefield dissipated again, but the inner shield held. Telltales flashed on everybody's boards and the starship commander nervously cracked a knuckle. This was obviously no time for half measures.

“Belay my last order and prime the main gun,” he directed the Weapons Officer. “Fire when ready and make damn sure you don't hit Buckle!”

“Aye, aye, sir!” Buckley cried, flipping switches and pressing buttons with gay abandonment. Faith, this is why he had joined the space service!

* * * *

In the brig, a fast series of micro explosions outlined a square in the white metal wall of The 16's cell and the hot metal plate dropped to the floor with a loud clang. A moment later, Avantor peeked out of the hole. Behind her could be seen two other walls with similar breaches in them.

As she wiggled through the opening, the totally recovered 16 climbed off his sick bed, and from beneath the covers withdrew a floppy cap made of woven copper and several modified circuit boards taken out of his medical scanner. The battery pack of the RDP monitor dangled loosely from a wire harness.

Without a word, Avantor handed over her translator and he deftly removed the tiny Choron relay cube from inside that made the device function. Only a few seconds were needed for The 16 to fit it to the electronic hat.

Removing the bandage from her head, Avantor pulled the now-functioning cap snugly into place, crossed the cell and threw open the door. As the **STOP THAT** cannon kicked on, The 16 dropped to the floor with a groan, but protected by the handmade psionic shield, (training video #23: What To Do When Your Own Equipment Is Used Against You—Aside From Die) the Avantor could only feel the faintest of suggestions from the stolen weapon.

A quick yank disconnected the cannon, and soon the two Gee officers were proceeding along the hallway intent, far beyond the simple urging of their hypnotraining, to take control of this vessel and arrest absolutely everybody within.

* * * *

The initial volley of assorted death from the warobots was spent harmlessly against the round force shields suspended in front of every Space Marine. Undaunted, the soldiers then fired in return, but their heavy bullets and polycyclic lasers proved equally ineffective against the forcefields and thick bodyarmor of the rampaging droids.

Frowning inside her helmet, Sgt. Lieberman slammed a fresh clip into her assault rifle. One hundred warobots against ten Marines. If there was anything she hated, it was a fair fight.

“Take cover! Outgoing!” the sergeant barked on the radio. “Mainhardt, fire!”

As the troopers ducked out of the way, the Atomic Vortex Rifle cut loose, its swirling cone of nuclear energy washing over the machines with the expected results. As the machines paused to recover from the

quantum onslaught, the Marines released a full volley of their Church Key missiles.

In a blossoming row of fireballs, the first ten droids disassembled the hard way, hot shrapnel zinging everywhere. Uncaring as the metal they were forged from, the remaining ninety war machines rolled over the burning wreckage of their fallen comrades and continued onward: pinchers, drills, electro-probes and buzzsaws extending on telescoping arms of steel from inside their bodies.

With the control panel above his forehead beeping and winking information, Lt. Sakadea dialed his visor back to normal magnification and scowled. An entire salvo just to take out ten measly robots. Without a lot more ammunition than they were carrying, this was going to be a long dirty fight.

“Prepare to evade!” a private shouted on the command circuit.

As his shocked companions turned to stare, Furstenburg raised the sights of his assault rifle and fired from the hip. The stuttering stream of bullets, beams, and rockets tore apart a center bracket for the PlanetBuster Bomb high on the wall above them. Quick on the uptake, the rest of the Marines followed suit and the end supports of the space missile were shot to pieces. With a deafening screech of tortured metal, the gargantuan yellow tube broke free, and began rolling down the slope towards the massed humans with ever increasing speed.

“On my mark, JUMP!” Lt. Sakadea ordered, and the Marines were airborne when the spinning destroyer passed underneath, clanging and banging like a runaway trashcan.

However, the ground bound warobots lacked this crucial ability, and despite frantic evasive maneuvers on their part, the machines were unceremoniously flattened under the barreling bomb. Deafeningly loud, the mega-ton missile careened off the base of the huge laser and continued rolling into the distance, eventually coming to rest against a giant power booster relay, barely scratched from its brief, but hectic, journey.

“Well, this is one even Ripley wouldn't believe,” a Marine joked, using his helmet camera to take a picture of the thin metal doilies decorating the ground.

“Eh? What ever do you mean?” PFC Ripley asked puzzled. “I was right here. I helped do it.”

The Marine gave a sigh. “Never mind.”

“Hey, sirs!” a private called out from the bottom of the spiraling ramp. “Look here!”

Rushing over to the gesturing trooper, Lt. Sakadea and Sgt. Lieberman saw that the woman had found a room of some kind hidden inside the rock wall, the door a hinged section of stone that perfectly matched the exterior. Briefly, the private explained how the vibrations of the tumbling missile had thrown the portal open and upon landing she had jammed her rifle in to keep it ajar.

Summoning assistance, the officers posted guards, and directed the careful forcing of the door. Warily, the Marines entered.

The square cave was anything but empty. Lining the walls were hundreds of plastic shelves jammed full of white boxes adorned with perfectly ordinary appearing bar codes, and directly under a rectangular panel in the ceiling, was a control board desk sitting on a hydraulic lift. It only took the troopers a moment to overcome their shock at finding Silverside's storage closet. With bare gauntlets, the cartons were hastily torn apart, and along with miscellaneous weapons, precision tools, forcefield belts and

sundry indecipherable items, they located 27 pristine Hypernavigational cubes.

“Jackpot!” a trooper whooped, slapping the back of the nearest Marine.

“Thanks,” the man replied, his servomotors whining as he righted himself.

“Okay, everybody grab two cubes and then let's high tail it out of here before something else attacks us,” Lt. Sakadea directed, shouldering his bulky rifle.

“You heard the man,” Sgt. Lieberman said gruffly. “Let's loot the place and move it, people!”

“Aye, sir!”

“Check!”

“Affirmative!”

“HELP!”

Their scanners indicated the scream for assistance had come from outside in the cavern, and the room was vacated posthaste. There, standing beside the mammoth laser assembly was Leader Silverside with eight metal tentacles wrapped about a struggling Marine and holding the soldier as a shield before him.

“Do not interfere with my escape, or this unit will be damaged beyond repair,” the machine warned, its atonal voice adding just a touch of dire foreboding to the speech.

“Sorry, sir,” the prisoner said stiffly formal. “I opened a door in the leg of the big laser and there he was. No excuse.”

“Forget it, private,” Lt. Sakadea said soothingly. “He could have gotten any of us.”

Rolling slowly, the platinum edged tank began moving towards the ramp. “My only wish is continued existence,” the hulking droid stated. “So I will trade life for life. On my oath of honor, this will be released after my shuttle has launched and I am safe from your retribution.”

Silverside knew it was a gamble, but the creatures might just be stupid enough to believe him. However, even without the high tech sensors in their powerarmor, the Marines had no problem detecting bullshit when they heard it.

Growling menacingly, the humans primed their weapons and started to advance, when Sgt. Lieberman noticed somebody vanish from the rear of the group.

It took her a second to find the missing person. A trooper had used the incredible strength of the servomotors in their UN powerarmor to jump almost straight up, and presently was arcing through the air far above them, a tactic only made possible by the vast size of the cavern.

“Freeze!” Lieberman shouted over the external speaker of her suit at maximum volume, and involuntarily Silverside paused. She smiled in triumph. What a shmuck.

...and a split second later five hundred pounds of durasteel filled with Space Marine crashed directly onto the rogue droid at 32 feet per second per second from a height of almost ten stories.

Crystal, plastic, wire, bits, hunks, chunks and various stuff sprayed out from the meteoric landing like an explosion in a junkyard and the trooper buried himself to the knees inside the chassis of the rogue robot.

Though reeling from the impact, Leader Silverside swiveled its domed head about and lashed out with every working arm it still possessed to rend this unorthodox invader into bloody scraps.

Ducking under the forest of lethal limbs, the soldier dove forward and rammed his fist through the patch covering the hole made by the Church Key missile in the forehead of the warobot. Silverside went berserk at the action and redoubled the effort to kill its piggyback assailant. Ignoring the brutal pounding, the trooper shoved his hand in deeper, seized the robot's brain, and closed his fingers to perform the crudest of lobotomies.

To the watching Marines, Leader Silverside seemed to simply explode. Both eye-camera lenses extended to their full length, and black smoke poured from every crack in the dented metal body. Its belly tread unlinked and every tentacle went stiff, accidentally hurling the struggling hostage away to a bruised freedom. Then spewing forth a shower of sparks, the criminal droid shuddered, its cruising lights went dark and the machine entered into a highly deserved state of total and permanent dysfunction.

Quite satisfied with the results, the soldier pried himself loose from the tangled innards of the demolished robot and hopped down to the rocky floor. He was pleased that his lifetime habit of crushing drained beer cans had finally become useful.

"Good work, Corporal," Sgt. Lieberman praised.

PFC Furstenburg paused before answering. "Thank you, sir."

"And we mean it this time," she added, genuinely sincere.

Wise from experience, the Marine remained reticent, not willing to tempt fate, or the brig, by saying a single word.

"Okay, back to the tavern before something else happens!" Lt. Sakadea snapped impatiently. "Double time, harch!"

As the troops proceeded up the spiraling ramp, the ex-hostage deliberately bumped into a friend. "Hey, remember when I asked you why they keep that klutz Furstenburg around?"

"Yep."

"Never mind."

* * * *

Out in space, scintillating daggers of pure energy thrust and jabbed at the robot craft, seeking the vulnerable vitals of the machinery and a quick kill. Missiles, rockets and torpedoes were launched in clouds, not mere flights. The rockets and torpedoes lanced out straight and true, eager to meet their fiery end in the bowels of the enemy. The missiles performed complex evasive maneuvers, and then came zooming in on the enemy rocks from every side. Salvo after salvo of huge caliber shells were fired; the deadly, armor-piercing canisters jammed full of high explosives, Omega Gas and radioactive thermite. Plasma bolts traveled serenely through the lethal battle zone, actually absorbing the energy of any destructive agency encountered on route and adding its power their own considerable reserves, thereby

increasing the already incredible violence of their detonation by some score.

But the Gee sentinels sported meters of refractory armor to the ships mere inches, plus they had multiple layers of forcefield, force shield combinations instead of only one of each. So in spite of everything, the offense fighting of the inhabited vessels soon became defense under the never-ending attack of the nearly indestructible robot rocks and their ferocious particle beams.

Under the hellish onslaught of the ravenous adamantine ray, a starship's forcefield would expand, running the visible spectrum as the stubborn energy barrier desperately struggled to stay erect, and failed. Then the doomed inner shield would fall, exposing the bare, unprotected hull of the ship itself, and yet another vessel would flash into a ball of multi-colored flame. More than one craft shunted for the safety of Hyperspace, where transdimensional mines homed in on the vibrations of their enginettes and violently reduced starship and crew to their component atoms.

It was horrible. It was madness. It was WAR! Worse, it was like an E. E. 'Doc' Smith space battle—only more so.

Then from the keel of the *Ramariez*, a fifteen-meter dish disengaged and ponderously swung away on a universal joint. Inside the white ceramic cup was a three-prong barrel, with a conveyor belt lined with black metal ovals feeding into it. This was the main gun of the human starship, the Atomic Vortex Cannon.

The dish glowed for a moment and then vomited forth a bar of quasi-solid lightning; a burning rod of atomic annihilation that shot across the asteroid belt to punch through a cluster of rock sentinels, and several hundred innocent boulders, leaving nothing behind but luminescent vapor and charred ash.

As the blinding inferno of the vitriolic ray dissipated, the conveyor belt advanced a single notch and another thermonuclear bomb moved into position.

"Test shot completed, sir," the CPO briskly announced. "Every circuit registers in the green. Ready to commence the bombardment."

Keller adjusted the protective sunglasses on his face, as did the rest of the bridge crew. Nobody would ever again make fun of the Kremlin/Pentagon theory that big-is-better. Whew.

"Let them eat cosemics, Mr. Buckley," the captain ordered, brandishing a fist.

"With pleasure, skipper!"

Again the dish radiated, and the seething fusion beam lanced out to move among the attacking rocks like a burning magician's wand. At its slightest touch, the sentinels flared into puffs of superheated steam and by the score they vanished; forcefields, shields and state of the art Gee armor, meaning less than vacuum to the starkly indescribable fury of the mauling power ray.

Twice more the AVC spoke, and soon the main screen of the *Ramariez* showed an astonishingly large hole in the asteroid belt surrounding Buckle. Badly disappointed, the Chief Petty Officer tried not to pout as the Tactical screen on his control board showed only rapidly fleeing starships and no more belligerent rocks. Well, that was certainly over quick.

With the battle obviously finished, Keller gratefully pocketed his sunglasses. "My compliments on your shooting, chief," he said, equally impressed by the marksmanship and the performance of the weapon.

“Thank you, sir,” Buckley beamed, his face shining with pleasure. “Anything else you'd like destroyed?”

“Ah, not at the present time, no.”

“Quite sure, sir?”

“Most definitely,” the captain stated, a trifle dourly. He appreciated enthusiasm, but not zealots.

The CPO shrugged and began restoring the safety interlocks as a preparation to store the weapon away. Oh well, it sure had been fun while it lasted.

“Report from the landing party, sir,” Ensign Lilliuokalani announced swiveling from her console. “They have obtained several HN cubes. No casualties.”

“Excellent,” Keller smiled. “What about the Deckers?”

She touched her earphone. “Drill is wounded, but alive. Hammer and Chisel were both mashed into pulp. Virtually nothing left of their bodies to recover.”

“Acknowledged. Bring them home, Mr. Hamlisch, and have Dr. Van Loon meet them in the Landing Bay with a medical team.”

“Aye-firmative, skipper,” the ensign said cheerfully.

Then without warning, the rear of the bridge suddenly exploded, the strident concussion nearly throwing the crew from their seats. In unison they turned, and in through the smoky ruin of the elevator doors strode Avantor, her long hair a flaxen corona about her head.

Before anybody could move, the bridge security system automatically responded to the presence of unauthorized personnel and dropped a grenade launcher from the ceiling panel alongside the video camera. The 40mm rapid fire was loaded with electro-chemical stun bags able to drop a rabid elephant in its tracks. But the grim faced Gee blew the toy away with a glance.

“You are all under arrest!” she informed them, as tiny pieces of plastic and metal sprinkled to the deck.

“Avantor, can't we talk this over?” Chief Petty Officer Buckley asked standing to attract her attention, as Lt. Jones got ready and Ensign Hamlisch got ready to tackle the Gee from both sides.

But then, right on schedule, the overhead lights dimmed and the ever-present, soft, background hum of the enginettes died away.

“THIS IS THE 16,” the intercom blared in the darkness. “I HAVE TOTAL CONTROL OF YOUR POWER AND LIFE-SUPPORT. OBEY THE AVANTOR, OR DIE.”

As the emergency chemical lights flickered on, the crew reluctantly resumed their seats and Trel slumped onto his deactivated Engineering console. By the Prime Builder, they had been so close. Damn softhearted Terrans, he had told them to kill the Gees. Now it was Galopticon 7 for sure.

For a single moment, Captain Keller debated using the laser pistol in the arm of his chair. And even though he stood a good chance of success, he decided against it. Dag knew that the only way to stop the

Gee would be to kill her, and that he could not do.

As Keller opened his mouth to try a plea for reason, the main viewscreen blazed with the technicolor glory of a thousand Gee superdreadnought centihedrons phasing in from Hyperspace to totally englobe the Earth ship.

Then the holographs of a thousand Gees appeared on the bridge, the ethereal images of the men and women overlapping each other from lack of room, the golden light from the saffron military they wore giving everyone present a beautiful California tan.

“Dirtlings, you are under arrest!” they said together in a loose harmony.

Tightening a fist so hard that the knuckles cracked by themselves, Captain Dagstrom Keller reviewed the situation in his mind at a fever pitch and searched for options: engines shut off, shields down, weapons deactivated, Gees inside and out ... oh hell.

"Pax," Captain Keller said with a sigh, raising both of his hands. “We surrender.”

The naval officer knew when he was beaten, and the crew sadly copied his action. So it was finally over and their mission ended in failure. In spite of everything, Earth had lost her bid for the stars. And the worst part was that humanity had never even received a fair trial.

TWENTY-SIX

TRANSCRIPT #1—“Earth versus Gee.” Highlights only.

For an unabridged copy of the trial, access Recall Bubble#45789253745, sub-sections 1-250. Recommended reading for law students, historians and insomniacs.

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FADE FROM BLACK TO A LONG ESTABLISHING SHOT OF A STANDARD CONTROL BOOTH. SEATED BEHIND THE TIERED CONSOLE IS A FEMALE HUMANOID WEARING A SOLEMN GREEN SHEATH WITH BLUE RUNNING LIGHTS. SPECIES: DEMBREXIAN. PERSONAL NAME: ORBLUK SNEEV. SHE HAS MOLDED HER UPPER HAIR FOLLICLES INTO WITNESS MODE.

NEXT TO HER IS A MALE AMPHIBIAN. SPECIES: DCONGE. PERSONAL NAME: VOCK AK-AK. HE HAS STRIPPED HIS EPIDERMIS TO A NEUTRAL CREAMY WHITE. ON A FLOATING TABLE ALONGSIDE HIM IS A VAST ARRAY OF BRUSHES, STICKS AND APPLICATORS, PLUS VARIOUS PAINTS, POWDERS, MUD AND FELT TIP MARKERS. ZOOM IN TO SEE THE FEMALE FLICK HER NOSE IN WELCOME, WHILE THE MALE BEGINS TO SLATHER A BRIGHT ORANGE PASTE OF WELCOME ON HIS UPPER RIGHT FLIPPER.

ORBLUK—Greetings, sentients! I am Orbluk Sneev....

VOCK—And Vock Ak-Ak, I be!

ORBLUK—We will be your commentators at this trial of a lifetime. The Great Golden Ones versus the inhabitants of the Sol star system. During the trial, the accused will not only be defending themselves from

the incredible number of charges facing them, but will at the same time be applying for membership in the Galactic League. These guys have a great sense of timing, eh, Vock?

VOCK (starts smearing blue jelly on his tail)—Truth you speak, Orbluk! Expect a most colorful trial, do I! Perhaps even worthy permanent place on body. (chuckle) Due to massive interest in proceedings, discarded has been ordinary Courtroom....

THE VIDEO SCREEN BEHIND THE TWO FADES AWAY TO REVEAL A MASSIVE COLISEUM THAT IS PACKED SOLID WITH CROWDS.

VOCK—For the first time in recorded history, the ceremonial Park of Recreation has been emptied of players, and spectators from across the galaxy have crammed themselves into its three kilometer wide viewing section.

EXTERNAL SHOT. PANORAMIC VIEW OF THE COLISEUM. FOCUS IN ON A GOLDEN RIOT BARGE FLYING LOW OVER THE SPECTATORS, THE LOW SLUNG DISH BRISTLING WITH WEAPONS. WAROBOTS RUMBLE ALONG THE COLISEUM FLOOR AND THOUSANDS OF GEE SOLDIERS ARE ON FOOT PATROL AMONG THE CROWDS, CHECKING ID BADGES AT ENTRANCES, AND MANNING CONCESSION STANDS.

ORBLUK—As you can see, The Great Golden Ones are taking no chance on the security arrangements here. Considering some of the emotionally charged issues this trial will be dealing with, you can't blame them for perhaps being a little overzealous. (pause) Now, we will take you down onto the main area with Mogacheef and LD 59, to let you get acquainted with the various participants.

CUT TO A LUMPISH FEMALE HUMANOID SWADDLED IN A SIMPLE WICKER REPRODUCTION SUIT. SPECIES: LOOOG. PERSONAL NAME: MOGACHEF. BEHIND HER ARE DOZENS OF TECHNICIANS FRANTICALLY OPERATING COMPLEX MACHINERY AND LAYING CABLES. WITH A CRACKLE OF LIGHTNING, THERE APPEARS IN THE SKY ABOVE THEM A VAST HOLOGRAPHIC PROJECTION OF THE GALACTIC LEAGUE. THE CROWD ROARS WITH APPROVAL.

MOGACHEF—Thank you. The link with the Galactic League has been established and the trial should be starting soon.

IN THE LOWER RIGHT HAND CORNER OF THE CAMERA SUPER-IMPOSE A DIAGRAM OF THE COLISEUM. IN THE CENTER, A SMALL RED TRIANGLE BEGINS TO GLOW.

MOGACHEF—Now, we take you over to the human sector and LD 59.

CUT TO A SMOOTH STEEL BALL FLOATING IN THE AIR WITH A JOINTED VISION STALK RISING FROM ITS TOP. SPECIES: AN EVALUATOR FROM THE PRTHIH MACHINE CULTURE. UNIT SURNAME: LD 59.

LD 59—Transmission acknowledged. Salutations, viewers. Fact: the defendants are present and accounted for. This includes: the crew of the UNSF: *Ramariez*, the First Contact Team, and the United Countries of Dirt Association, a.k.a. The UN. The last group was requisitioned from Terra by a no nonsense team of Great Golden Process Servers, who subsequently have been awarded medals of valor. (pause) The majority of the humans appear to be experiencing a form of high level stress/anxiety. This is no doubt due to the unexpected nature of their participation at this event. I believe that we can look forward to the usual carbon based lifeform antics that we normally observe when these creatures find

themselves in a prolonged life or dysfunction situation. Let us communicate now with the Terran's lawyer/Story Weaver, Semi-Lord Tshog Brent.

SPLIT SCREEN TO SHOW A BELEAGUERED LOOKING BIPED DINOSAUR. HIS NOSE HORN HAS BEEN MIRROR PLATED, ALONG WITH SEVERAL OF THE LIFE SUPPORT DEVICES THAT FLEX AND TURN ON HIS RIDGED BACK. HE IS DRESSED FOR SUCCESS IN FLORAL PRINT COMBAT SHORTS.

LD 59—I almost greet you, Semi-Lord.

BRENT—I nearly accept.

LD 59—You realize that your clients have no possible chance of acquittal.

BRENT—The actions my clients have engaged in will prove, under a detailed scrutiny, to have been of great benefit to galactic civilization. They will be cleared and admitted to the Galactic League as full members, or I will eat my tail!

LD 59—Brave words, indeed. Thank you. As stated, I expect a great deal of frenzy here over the next few days. We re-establish visual contact now with Orbluk Sneev and Vock Ak-Ak, to cover the opening ceremonies ...

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TRANSCRIPT #5:

FADE IN ON THE 3000. HE IS STANDING ON THE TOP LEVEL OF AN OFFICIAL TABLE OF INQUIRY. ON THE LOWER LEVEL BEFORE HIM ARE AVANTOR AND THE 16, STANDING STIFFLY AT ATTENTION. NOBODY LOOKS VERY HAPPY.

ORBLUK (voice over)—We see before us THE 3000, Leader of The Great Golden Ones. This is he who will formally read the charges against the Terrans. It is rumored that due to extenuating circumstances, he will ask for leniency to be shown if they are convicted.

CUT TO CLOSE-UP OF THE 3000

THE 3000—The charges are: unauthorized use of a stardrive, illegal use of the color gold, harboring a known criminal, two counts of running a blockade, landing upon a restricted world, piracy, theft of Gee property, two counts of kidnapping, destruction of Gee property, speeding, littering and resisting arrest. (pause) The majority of these crimes are punishable by death. Considering their cumulative total, I ask that the entire population of the planet Terra be sentenced to Galopticon 7. (pause) Acknowledging the harshness of this sentence, I have no objection if the inhabitants of Terra instead opt to be destroyed by a barrage of PlanetBuster bombs.

PULL BACK FROM THE 3000 TO THE CONTROL ROOM. ORBLUK AND VOCK ARE TURNED AROUND IN THEIR CHAIRS TO WATCH HIM. AS THE GEE FINISHES, THEY SWIVEL ABOUT TO FACE THE CAMERA.

ORBLUK—Well, those rumors of clemency were obviously true ...

* * * *

TRANSCRIPT #20:

FADE IN ON MOGACHEF. SHE IS STANDING IN FRONT OF THE COLISEUM DIAGRAM. A SMALL CIRCLE IN THE LOWER LEFT GLOWS A SICKLY GREEN.

MOGACHEF—Today we are to hear testimony from the RporRians. They've been brought here from their home world in a surprise move by the Great Golden Ones. This could be bad news for the Terrans. We go now to LD 59 for an on the spot report.

CUT TO LD 59. A MICROPHONE HAS BEEN EXTRUDED FROM HIS LOWER HEMISPHERE AND HE IS FLOATING NEXT TO A STERN FACED GEE OFFICER.

LD 59—You are The 412, the person in charge of the RporRians. Why was it deemed necessary for them to be brought here? It raised the percentile risk of their escape into positive integers.

THE 412—We will use the testimony of the RporRians to determine the full extent of the Terrans' crimes on their world. As for escape, we are fully aware that when we asked the Queen/Mother for this delegation, we were cheerfully supplied with a squad of commando fighters and pregnant queens. If they got free and infiltrated into the nigh infinite passageways of Big we would never find them. But we believe that adequate precautions to prevent this tragedy have been taken.

CROSS FADE TO EXTERIOR SHOT OF METAL CONFINEMENT CUBE. DISSOLVE INTO AN INTERIOR VIEW. INSIDE A CYLINDRICAL FORCECAN, ARE SIX RPORRIANS WRAPPED IN STRAIGHT JACKETS AND HANGING FROM THE CEILING IN CHAINS. DIRECTLY BENEATH THEM IS A VAT FULL OF BOILING OMEGA GAS. THE REST OF THE CUBE IS A MAZE OF SPRING OPERATED BEAR TRAPS, MOLECULAR TRIP WIRES, AND PROXIMITY ACTIVATED NUCLEAR BOMBS.

THE 412—Incredible as it sounds, despite everything, they are still plotting to escape. But the insects have been forced to put several givens into their calculations. (The Gee pulls a communicator from her pocket and holds the device next to the microphone. Faint voices can be heard.)

RPORRIAN—Okay, if every Gee was to drop dead, their machines exploded, and miraculously we were given superpowers, then maybe we could....

LD 57—The extent of your precautions are acknowledged. When may we expect the actual testimony?

THE 412—Well, we are having a little trouble with that. The RporRians are actually demanding that we pay them to testify. Despite our abhorrence of this concept, we are negotiating with them. But so far, they have rejected our last four offers.

LD 57—And the RporRians are infamous for their ability to negotiate, i.e. rob you blind. Do you see this as a continuing problem?

THE 412—No. I am confident the matter will soon be resolved ...

CUT BACK TO INTERIOR OF THE CONFINEMENT CUBE. AS THE FORCECAN BEGINS TO DISSIPATE, THE PURPLE FUMES OF THE OMEGA GAS RISE HIGHER AND HIGHER. FROM THE COMMUNICATOR WE HEAR PITEOUS SCREAMS OF TERROR.

THE 412—We should get everything settled pretty quickly.

* * * *

TRANSCRIPT #25

FADE IN ON THE CONTROL CONSOLE WITH ORBLUK SNEEV AND VOCK AK-AK. BEHIND THEM IS A MR.ZISH DRINK MACHINE. ORBLUK HAS ACCELERATED THE BLINKING SEQUENCE OF HER RUNNING LIGHTS AND VOCK'S BODY IS COVERED WITH THE BEGINNINGS OF AN ELABORATE PATTERN. THE TWO ANCHOR BEINGS ARE DRINKING BOWLS OF A HOT, MILKY LIQUID.

ORBLUK—We have just seen the surprise results of the RporRian testimony. A dropping of the charges connected with the Terrans visit to that waste receptacle of a planet.

VOCK—(sip) Sense to me it makes. Pressing forward with these minor charges would necessitate continued contact with the RporRians. (With a spare flipper, he smears a dirty green paste over the back of his neck.) The Great Golden Ones have obviously decided that it is not worth the risk of the bugs escaping.

ORBLUK—No dissension there, my friend. In fact, the RporRians are already back on their homeworld. (pause-smile) But now, we have a special treat for our viewers. A lot of sentients are disappointed that the RporRians agreed to testify. So our Special Effects Department has created a computer simulation of what would have happened if the bugs had refused. Let's go to that now, shall we?

ZOOM IN TO THE WALL SCREEN—INTERIOR CONFINEMENT CUBE. THE FORCECAN SLOWLY FADES AWAY, AND ONE BY ONE THE SCREAMING RPORRIANS DROP INTO THE BOILING VAT.

TECHNICAL NOTE: FOR NON-LIBRARY USE INSERT LAUGH TRACK.

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TRANSCRIPT #37

FADE IN ON MOGACHEF WHO HAS STEAM RISING FROM HER OUTER VENTS.
TECHNICAL NOTE: FOR THE SAKE OF GOOD TASTE, PLEASE KEEP THE CAMERA OFF THOSE LAST TWO VENTS, UNLESS THINGS GET DULL. THEN ZOOM IN FOR A CLOSE UP.

MOGACHEF—Semi-Lord Brent has just delivered a truly inspired plea for his clients. In brief, that the Gee blockade about their planet was not fully erect at the time, and that the United Countries of Dirt had never received an official notice of non-passage. Their forced boarding of the Gee superdreadnought can be argued as an act of purest desperation, and they did leave enough thulium to purchase the vessel. Plus, the Avantor and The 16 were not kidnapped, but taken on board the *Ramariez* in need of immediate medical help. It was their own anti-social behavior that caused their continued incarceration. (pause) That has been an issue raised again and again during this trial, the gross incompetence of the Great Golden Ones; from Leader Idow's initial landing upon Tellus, to the human's accidental breaching of the criminal infested weapon cache in star system #5534262. An informal poll taken at a frozen Zish stand shows that many sentients are of the opinion that the Gees have degenerated into a race of incompetents. Needless to say, this is a dangerous line of thought.

INTERNAL VIEW OF THE COLISEUM. ZOOM IN A MEDIUM VIEW OF A DRUNKEN CHORON FIRING A PLASMA PISTOL WILDLY INTO THE AIR. AN AVANTOR APPEARS

AND REMOVES THE WEAPON FROM HIS HAND WITH A PSIONIC BLAST. THEN A SQUAD OF WAROBOTS TELEPORT ABOUT THE STONY GIANT, WRESTLE HIM TO THE GROUND AND HAUL THE CHORON OFF TO A WAITING HEDRON PRISON SHIP.

MOGACHEEF (voice over)—As you can see, if the Gees are fumbling has-beens, then they are fumbling has-beens who still possess formidable weaponry. Let's replay that final summation of Semi-Lord Brent, shall we?

CROSS FADE TO A CLOSE UP OF TSHOG BRENT, HIS NOSE HORN FLASHING MAGNIFICENTLY IN THE OVERHEAD SUN.

BRENT—The Gee's main objection to my clients being granted the right to join galactic society in the first place was that Humanity had failed to, quote earn that right end quote, by the established method of developing their own stardrive. This blindly ignores the mitigating circumstances behind their actions. Once exposed to the fact of Galactic civilization, and then denied access to it, as the Gee's blockade was meant to do, this would have caused the death of the young civilization, just as surely as if Leader Idow had been allowed to carry out his plans. What must they do to win the approval of the Great Golden Ones? Raise the dead? I again state that the Galactic League owes my clients immediate membership status and a dropping of all charges!

THE COLISEUM ERUPTS INTO CHEERS, HOWLS AND SQUEALS OF APPROVAL. AFTER SEVERAL REQUESTS FOR QUIET OVER THE PA SYSTEM FAIL, TEN THOUSAND GEE SUPERDREADNOUGHT DESCENDED FROM THE SKY AND BATHE THE ENTIRE STADIUM WITH **STOP THAT CANNON FIRE.**

* * * *

TRANSCRIPT #150

FADE IN ON THE CONTROL BOOTH. ORBLUK IS WEARING SUNGLASSES, AND THE GARISH PRESENCE OF VOCK AK-AK IS BEGINNING TO CAUSE COLOR STREAKING WITH THE CAMERA.

VOCK—An astounding decision by the Great Golden Ones, eh, Orbluk?

ORBLUK—Truth you speak, Vock, this is a major concession by the

Great Golden Ones, and quite likely directly traceable

to the Terran's outstanding achievements of killing

Leader Idow, destroying the rogue warobot Silverside and

out bargaining the RporRian Queen/Mother. Factors they

just could not ignore in light of the public sentiment

stirred up by Semi-Lord Brent. Let's have a replay of

that decision.

CROSSFADE INTO A CLOSE UP OF THE 3,000. THE GEE MALE LOOKS LIKE HE WOULD

RATHER BE DOING ANYTHING ELSE.

THE 3000—It is with great reluctance that we concede that it was due to errors on our part that Leader Idow managed to land on and make contact with the human race. Having the knowledge and the reality of Galactic civilization thrust down their air intake valves in such a fashion would have destroyed any lesser robust species. Yet in face of imminent destruction, Terra completely reorganized its government, from opposing nation states to a unified ruling body, almost instantaneously. This is most impressive. Its subsequent actions are even more so, and would have done credit to any young, outwardly reaching, intelligent species not plagued with mental disorders.

FREEZE THE GEE

VOCK—(voice over) Told I am that the humans wished the wording of that particular passage changed, but Semi-Lord Brent has told them to quit while they still had both feelers in the air.

UNFREEZE THE GEE

THE 3000—As a result, we are at this time prepared to drop most of the charges against Humanity.

CUT TO THE CROWD GOING WILD. BUT THEN EVERYBODY QUIETS AS A HOLOGRAPHIC IMAGE OF THE 3000 SUDDENLY APPEARS IN THE AIR AND EXPANDS UNTIL IT FILLS THE COLISEUM WITH HIS PRESENCE.

THE 3000 (booming echo)—The charges we will not drop are those resulting from the deliberate and planned attack upon the Avantor's centihedron M-21-3. This act of piracy we cannot forgive. We charge all of humanity with complicity in this act. For this crime, and this crime alone, we demand the ultimate penalty.

CUT BACK TO THE CONTROL ROOM.

ORBLUK—Well, I'd say that pretty much wrapped it up for the Terrans.

VOCK—Truth you speak. (He glances down at his almost completed body of work.) Shame, as a race they gave off much color. (With a sad air, he begins to mix a large pot of cream and liberally applies it to his body.)

* * * *

TRANSCRIPT #151:

Notice: Do not tamper with, or alter, this following section in any way whatsoever under penalty of the law.

FADE FROM BLACK TO THE CONTROL BOOTH, WHERE A WILD EYED ORBLUK AND A SMEARY VOCK APPEAR TO BARELY BE IN CONTROL OF THEMSELVES.

ORBLUK—Viewers, we have just received rumor of an incredible

event taking place at the human encampment. We take you

there now!

VOCK—Yes! Do now it!

ZOOM IN TO THE SCREEN BEHIND THEM. THERE STANDS A DISHEVELED MOGACHEF, HER OUTFIT HAS OBVIOUSLY BEEN PUT ON IN GREAT HASTE AS ALL OF THE SPINDLES ARE INVERTED. BEHIND HER WE SEE THE SECTION OF THE HUMAN ENCAMPMENT WHICH CONTAINS THERAMARIEZ . PEOPLE AND ROBOTS ARE RUNNING/FLYING EVERYWHERE.

MOGACHEF—Sentients, a monumental discovery has been made aboard the human starship, where they have been billeted through the whole trial. I am speaking now with the human responsible for the excitement, medical technician Paul Van Loon. Doctor, what have you done?

VAN LOON—I don't really understand what the fuss is about. The Gees were going through our hydroponics section when they seemed to go bananas, uh, crazy. It was just an experiment to see if I could germinate some alien seeds I'd found on the Great Golden Ones' ship. Well, I gave it a try ...

ZOOM IN PAST THE TWO TO FOCUS ON THERAMARIEZ . A HUSH ENVELOPES THE COLISEUM AS A GEE APPEARS IN THE HATCH. TIGHT ZOOM IN TO SEE HIM GENTLY LEADING OUT AN AMBULATORY BUSH WITH MULTIPLE BRANCHING LIMBS, A SMALL PUCKERED BARK FACE AND ARTICULATED FEET ROOTS. SUDDENLY, THE SILENCE IS BROKEN BY THE DISTANT THUMPS OF THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE FAINTING.

MOGACHEEF—(whisper) By Prime Builder's heart and blood, it's a *Koolgoolagan!*

VAN LOON (voice over)—Nothing seemed to work until I got the idea of liquefying the excess leaves and soaking the seeds in the juice. I figured it's supposed to be this great restorative, so why shouldn't it work on it's own species?

AN OFF CAMERA SCREAM. CUT BACK TO THE CONTROL ROOM, WHERE IS SEEN ONLY THE SANDAL CLAD FEET OF ORBLUK SNEEV STICKING STRAIGHT UP IN THE AIR FROM BEHIND THE CONSOLE, AND A FRANTIC VOCK AK-AK WHO IS TRYING TO PAINT HIMSELF WITH FOUR FLIPPERS AT ONCE.

* * * *

TRANSCRIPT #250

FADE IN TO SEE THE GALACTIC LEAGUE STANDING IN A SMALL POOL OF LIGHT, SURROUNDED BY A SEA OF BLACKNESS.

LEAGUE—Sentients and friends, our decision in this matter must take into account the greatest good for the greatest number. The wishes of individuals, whether individual beings or individual planets are weighed, evaluated and, occasionally, discarded. (pause) Therefore, it is our decision that the inhabitants of the Sol star system, indigenous to the planet known as Dirt, heretofore referred to as Terrans, are cleared of all charges and are hereby granted admittance to the Galactic League. (pause) However, the crew of the UNSF: starship *Hector Ramariez* has been found guilty of the charges brought before them. Their sentence is life imprisonment upon Galopticon 7. (pause) But due to the extenuating circumstances involved and taking into consideration the many extraordinary actions they have performed which will, directly and indirectly, benefit Galactic Society, including the actions of Dr. Paul Van Loon which have changed the course of history, by the power invested in us, we do hereby commute their sentence to 5 standard years. At which time any survivors will be released. This is the decision of the Galactic League.

Court is adjourned.

THE HOLOGRAPH DIMS AND FADES AWAY, DOLLY DOWN TO A GROUND LEVEL VIEW OF SMILING TECHNICIANS WHO ARE ALREADY BREAKING APART THE RECORDING EQUIPMENT.

CUT TO—A PANORAMIC VIEW OF THE CROWD ERUPTING INTO PANDEMONIUM. THE SOUND OF CHEERING CONTINUES UNTIL THE END OF THE TAPE.

CUT TO—A CLOSE UP OF THE 3000 NODDING AND TURNING AWAY.

CUT TO—PROFESSOR RAJAVUR AND CAPTAIN KELLER SHAKING HANDS AND CLAPPING SEMI-LORD BRENT ON THE BACK.

CUT TO—DISTANCE SHOT OF THOUSANDS OF GEE SOLDIERS ADVANCING ON THE HUMAN ENCAMPMENT.

CUT TO—WIDE ANGLE VIEW OF THE HUMANS ROUNDED UP AND MANACLED TOGETHER BY THEIR GOLDEN GUARDS. SOME OF THE PRISONERS APPEAR TO BE WEEPING, BUT MOST HAVE A LOOK OF TRIUMPHANT PRIDE ON THEIR FACES.

CUT TO—THE CONTROL BOOTH WHERE VOCK AK-AK IS SPRAYING HIS BODY WITH CLEAR PLASTIC. ORBLUK AND MOGACHEF ARE SHARING A CONGRATULATORY BOWL OF ZISH. LD 59 MERRILY BOBS IN THE AIR ABOVE THEM, A POWER PACK CLUTCHED IN EACH METALLIC HAND.

CUT TO—SKYWARD VIEW OF A GOLDEN POLYHEDRON PRISON SHIP LANDING IN THE HUMAN SECTOR.

CUT TO—THE REMAINING HUMANS PROTESTING AS THEY ARE PUSHED OUT OF THE WAY.

CUT TO—MEDIUM SHOT OF THE CHAINED HUMANS AS THEY MARCH ON BOARD THE POLYHEDRON SHIP. FOCUS ON EACH FACE AS THEY BRAVELY GO ON BOARD AND PRINT THEIR NAMES ON THE BOTTOM OF THE SCREEN: KELLER, VAN LOON, JONES, BUCKLEY, SOUKUP, HAMLISCH, LILLIUOKALANI, HASSAN, TREL, SAKADEA, LIEBERMAN, FURSTENBURG, RAJAVUR, COURTNEY, BRONSON, MALA-VADE, WU, NICHOLI, DRILL ...

CUT TO—THE PRISON SHIP LAUNCHING. TRACK IT UNTIL THE VESSEL REACHES SPACE AND JUMPS INTO HYPERSPACE. HOLD CAMERA ON EMPTY SKY FOR THIRTY SECONDS.

CUT TO—A HORDE OF REPORTERS AND A DELEGATION FROM BIG ADVANCING TO GREET THE UNITED COUNTRIES OF DIRT. SLOWLY PULL BACK AS THE GROUPS INTERMINGLE.

CROSSFADE—AN EXTERNAL VIEW OF THE COLISEUM.

ROLL CREDITS.

FADE TO BLACK.

FADE OUT CHEERING.

End Transcript.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Of course, what the citizens of the galaxy saw was a sham. The real trial of humanity took place in the private office of the Galactic League and lasted about five minutes.

* * * *

Locked in the unbreakable grip of Gee tractor beams, the *Ramariez* was unceremoniously hauled through hyperspace to Big, and forced to land at a military spaceport. A vigilant armada of centihedron warships filling all of nearby space and blanketing any possible thought of escape, of which the humans had none. This is what they had been struggling for from the beginning, to meet the Galactic League.

Under the harsh scrutiny of warobots and riot barrages, the crew disembarked and was marched to a complex of teleporters, accompanied by a heavily armed, grim faced, trigger happy, Avantor and The 16. In a blinding flash, the eighty humans and three aliens disappeared. Only to reappear inside a long magnificent hall of polished blue stone and curved golden arches.

Disquietingly they saw that the passageway had no windows, and only a single sparkling door some twenty meters away.

“Far freaking out,” Drill breathed in frank appreciation. This place was even nicer than the main lobby at the Sheraton Hotel on 34th Street!

Resting on his cane, the teenager rubbed his sore leg. In a cavalier attitude, he ignored the ominous tones of the one way structure, placing his total faith in the ability of the UN Space Marines to get them out whenever necessary. Those guys were serious butt kickers.

“Okay, now what?” Keller asked, maintaining a respectful distance from the Gees. No matter how good the intentions, it was an awkward situation, guards and prisoners reversing roles.

Avantor scowled and pointed the barrel of her neural disrupter at the man, the ghastly weapon set on its highest and most painful level of radiation: Four Day Drunk Hangover.

“No talking among the prisoners,” she ordered brusquely.

The captain shrugged, Rajavur gave a harumph and Sgt. Lieberman silently asked Lt. Sakadea a question. His expression told her to wait. With a cough and a finger motion, she relayed these orders to the troops.

In spite of the fact that the smooth blue floor beneath them appeared to be made of solid stone, suddenly the whole group began to move along the corridor. In effortless ease, they glided down the pristine hallway, through a shimmering energy curtain and into a dimly lit area. As the protective energy portal sealed in their wake, the lights came on and the humans found themselves in a small room.

The unadorned floor and walls were made of a nondescript material that defied visual analysis. But as if to offset the incredible blandness of the cubicle, in the middle of the room was a shimmering, meter high, crystal pedestal with a green silk pillow on top. Sitting proudly on the pillow, was a plump frog. True, it was a purple frog with three eyes and eight legs, but a simple *caudata batrachia* nonetheless.

“Order: *salientia*, genus: *rana*,” a crewmember noted.

Trell shushed her. This was no time for a biology lesson.

“Greetings from the Galactic League,” the frog said in a high pitched voice, minus the expected croak.

Holstering their disrupters, the Gees saluted and bowed, while the humans did a quick reality check.

“You're the league?” Hassan asked dumbfounded.

The female amphibian puffed out her cheeks before answering. “Not precisely. This body is only the organic conduit through which the league communicates. This is the Galactic League.”

In the manner of a morning mist, the room about them disappeared and the humans found themselves standing on a swatch of floor surrounded by a truly immense globe, a dark sphere whose inner wall was lined with sleeping creatures inside frosty glass tubes. Crystal rods, or perhaps beams of light, connected each glittering tube to another; the resulting conglomeration ending in a dazzling display of such superscience that Clarke's Law about magic & technology seemed to be invoked.

"Madre mia!"

“Holy crap!”

"Gott en himmel!"

“Wow! I say, I say, wow, son!”

Obviously preening, the frog relished their reactions of awe and surprise. Even though primarily made of diplomats and scientists, many of the members of the Galactic League had a strong dramatic streak and enjoyed a touch of showmanship every now and then.

“Wait, I understand,” Ensign Lilliuokalani whispered. “This represents a sample of every race in space. The individuals placed in suspended animation, and then mind linked together to form the Galactic League.”

The rest of the group murmured assent at the deduction.

Though it was hard to tell, the frog seemed impressed. Nobody had ever figured out the operating principle of the League that quickly before. The humans were proving to be everything they had been advertised to be.

“Utterly fascinating,” Prof. Rajavur noted, only his fifteen years of playing poker enabling him to maintain a calm facade. “This is most definitely the very first time I have ever heard the imperial ‘we’ used properly.”

Via the frog, the composite brain chuckled at the witticism.

Only the Gee officers and a robot file clerk in the Hall of Data knew that this present personae of The League was a distant grandchild of the arch criminal Squee. More highly evolved, but just as vicious. Like so many others before it, when given a choice of becoming the voice of the league, or Galopticon 7, the law-breaker readily agreed to the former. After their bodily functions had been stabilized, and the computer link implanted, they lived a long and useful life paying for their crimes by serving the community.

“Are the people in there forever?” Dr. Van Loon asked, wondering at the possible implications of eternal servitude.

The League was personally very pleased with that choice of words. Not every human considered other races people, particularly not Second Lieutenant Abigail Elizabeth Jones.

The frog cleared its throat. “No, the chosen members serve a term of fifty standard years and are then released. Looking, we might add, no older than when they entered. Suspended animation means just that.”

As the humans reacted to that startling news, a tiny door opened in the side of the pedestal and out buzzed a fly. The Galactic League snared the insect in mid-air with its sticky tongue and closed its jaw with a satisfied snap.

Prof. Rajavur took a deep breath. “Getting down to business, when will be our trial?”

“Trial?” the League repeated. “Oh, that. Its already over.”

Captain Keller arched an eyebrow. “I beg your pardon?”

It took the League a second to realize that was an expression of disbelief and not a plea for clemency.

“Allow me to explain,” the frog began didactically. “As you entered this room, telepathic machines read your minds, assimilated the data and fed it to us.”

The amphibian rubbed a tiny webbed hand across its bumpy brow. “We must say that we haven't seen a comedy of errors to match this since the committee to name Big.”

“So what is your decision?” asked Prof. Rajavur.

The frog gave a leathery smile. “You will be pleased to know that Terra has been found innocent and will be immediately admitted to League status.”

Relief washed over the humans and they relaxed tense muscles to smile. Delighted beyond words, Trell hugged himself with all four arms. The Avantor and The 16 suddenly felt very foolish with their disrupters hanging out and holstered the weapons. From enemies to allies with the single flick of a froggish tongue. Ah well, that's life in a city on Big.

But the Galactic League had not forgotten about the two Gee officers. Their punishment would come later, and in a most devious form. Oh, that dramatic streak.

“The crew of the *Ramariez* is also found innocent,” the frog went on. “Or rather, guilty with mitigating circumstances.”

I hear a but, thought Rajavur, Keller and Sakadea.

“However,” the League continued.

Close enough.

“Quite accidentally in your admirable quest for the stars, you have caused the Gee's to look like idiots. A not all together bad thing in private, but in public it could undermine the very fabric of galactic society. Interstellar crime is hard enough to control as it is. So in order to preserve the integrity of the galaxy, a public trial must be held in which you will be found guilty and sentenced.”

“To Galopticon 7?” The 16 asked, who now had a sneaking suspicion where this was leading to.

“That is what we will tell the public,” the frog acknowledged regally. “Actually, their place of incarceration will be someplace far more exciting.”

“Where?” Prof. Rajavur inquired, before Captain Keller or anybody else could ask.

The Galactic League blinked. “Why, the planet Gee, of course. Where else?”

EPILOGUE

In the subsequent lunar rotations, galactic society adjusted itself like a robot automatically fine tuning its own powerplant.

First and foremost, the blockade about Earth was removed, and in a brilliant piece of diplomacy, the nation of Greece redeemed itself by giving the Galactic League the isle of Crete as a planetary landing base. The pleasant weather, lack of price and the begging on hands and knees were sufficient inducement for acceptance.

The Gunderson Corporation went interplanetary, Ms. Bolivar got a raise, and McDougherty was fired for excessive cruelty to the employees, after which the softball team began winning games on a regular basis.

A mentally disturbed wino claiming to be Hector Ramariez, was adopted by a cult of Hector worshippers as their hero's reincarnation, and he lived a long and happy life indulging in wine, women and revival meetings that culminated with egg tosses in Central Park.

Jose de san Martin, the Secretary General of the UN, found himself a very busy man as hordes of planets had issued awards and bounties for the death of Leader Idow, Gasterphaz, Squee and Boztwank. Unexpectedly inundated with hard cash, Earth used the tidal wave of funds to modernize the entire planet to contemporary galactic standards, eliminate street gangs, repair the hole in the ozone layer, and build a really fine luxury hotel on the nice side of the moon.

Curiously enough, there was no bounty on Trel as nobody had known of his existences prior to the trial, and the biggest reward for Boztwank was issued by his own world. Proof that vengeance, like charity, begins at home.

Lt. Amanda Jackson of the NYPD SWAT, and NATO Colonel Robert Weiss were married and opened a chain of martial art schools, specializing in surprise attacks and misdirection.

Out of the hospital at last, Agent Taurus decided to quit his profession and retired to the suburbs of London, buying a cottage right alongside a nuclear power plant. Just in case.

Dominic Mastramonico, the Italian ambassador to the UN, and the person who first conceived the idea of the FCT, was chosen as Earth's official representative to the Galactic League. The elderly gentleman had no objection to living an additional fifty years, and looked forward to dancing on the graves of his political opponents who had laughed at the idea of a First Contact Team.

On the planet Koolgoolig, Dr. Paul Van Loon (in disguise) was placed in charge of a maximum security greenhouse to help with the replanting of the Koolgooligan race. It was a hard row to hoe (so to speak) but the physician was content, knowing that the Galactic Medal of Smartness waited for him upon his release. And he could have his pick as the Chief Surgeon in any hospital anywhere in the entire galaxy! Including Boston.

When news of the trial finally reached him, the disgusted freelance reporter, Bachalope Thintfeesel left the planetary system he had been so sure the humans would go to. The crimson salt water fishoid sighed deeply. When he missed a call that was this important, perhaps it was time for him to change jobs. But aside from working as a newsgatherer, what else was the red herring good for?

The asteroid, Buckle, underwent a purge of almost biblical proportions, and the status of every other secret weapon cache was carefully checked. Many varied and interesting things were found, but happily Leader Silverside proved to be an only child.

During the fight with Silverside, Einda had rushed into the office to find a mortally wounded Chisel. Using the adaptive protoflesh of her own body to staunch his wounds, she carried the unconscious boy from the battle zone and escaped in a stolen starship. Hurriedly, the medical robots on board effected repairs on the human, but luckily his wounds proved to be minimal as his accidental body armor of knives stopped the majority of the anti-personnel darts. The holes in flesh, organs and ruptured arteries were easily fixed, along with a particularly nasty abnormality in his brain that confused the robot med tech no end. It almost appeared as if the child had been allowed to be born with the disorder. Now Einda realized why Chisel had proposed to her.

Bracing herself for the worst, she waited patiently by his bed for the boy to awaken. The memory of the confusion on his face and how it turned into a radiant smile when he saw her, remained with the female for the rest of their long life together.

Fleeing to the other side of the galaxy, the newlyweds used his two pound bag of thulium to buy a small mansion and open a legitimate tavern upwind of a downtown spaceport. A bar which Chisel insisted be named MacDonalds, a word he told everybody meant 'a distinguished place for fun and good times' in his native language.

The giks staged a bloodless revolution, and won the right to dissimulate whenever they wanted to. Even though nobody had ever stopped them from doing it before.

On the planet Gee, Captain Keller and the crew of the *Ramariez* took great pleasure in teaching classes to the Great Golden Ones on Basic Evasion, Elementary Tactics and Combat Made Simple. The golden warriors just had to grin and take it, plus take notes. However, every night in the privacy of her cubicle, Lt. Jones showered and scrubbed herself from the close association with so damn many aliens. Bleh.

The sole known surviving member of the ill fated Bloody Deckers, Drill received a full pardon, assumed

his real name of Thomas John Glenn and joined the UN Space Marines.

In basic training, the first thing Private Glenn was taught was the proper name of his assault rifle: The Furstenburg. Yes, it was awkward and a bit clumsy, but deadly in combat. It was PFC. Glenn (drunk on wine liberated from the locked supply cabinet in the PX), who wrote the justly famous phrase, "First in peace, first in war, Furstenburg!" Then he burped and passed out.

Landing on RporR was officially made illegal.

With joyful celebrations, the FCT was reunited and began immediate work on their new job as the First Contact Team for the Galactic League, which included designing a mobile Command Bunker to be fitted inside the reconditioned *Ramariez*. In their off duty hours, the humans introduced the game of poker to the Gees and did serious damage to the planetary economy before the rule of table stakes was invoked.

And then, there was the terrible punishment of Avantor, the junior grade avantor, and The 16.

* * * *

Summoning their resolve, the Gee officers knocked on the door of the office assigned to their new commanding officer. A voice told them to enter.

Dressed in casual duty fatigues, Lt. Sakadea glanced up from his pile of paperwork at their approach and grinned.

"Avantor! The 16! What a pleasant surprise! Please, have a seat," he said, gesturing at a couple of chairs.

"Thank you, sir, but no," The 16 replied in a stiffly formal manner, handing the puzzled officer a featureless sheet of thin gray plastic.

At Sakadea's touch, cryptic symbols appeared on the sheet and the human reached for his English/Gee dictionary.

"We have been assigned to your military unit for retraining," the avantor translated, the words stinging on her lips like lashes from a tiny whip.

The human went pale. Oh no, anything but that.

Avantor and The 16 felt sick in their stomachs, misinterpreting his expression as annoyance. Not even aliens wanted their company after their series of monumental blunders, and who could blame them?

With a mounting feeling of helplessness, the Marine officer scanned the plastic sheet, reading what few words he could. "If I have this right, it says here that you are supposed to report to me tomorrow at 0900."

"Tomorrow, then," the avantor snapped, and the Gees pivoted on their heels to leave.

"Wait!" Sakadea cried frantically.

They stopped, and The 16 turned. "Is it tomorrow already, sir?" he asked sarcastically.

The lieutenant rose from his chair and hurried about the desk. "No, but by then it would be too late."

The 16 looked puzzled. "I do not understand."

Lt. Sakadea ignored him. "Avantor, I don't know how your people handle this, but I have always been very sexually attracted to you and would like to engage *infizzlorp* ." Kurt Sakadea hoped he had said that right, the medical manual which stated their races were sexually compatible did not have a pronouncement chart.

Both Avantor and The 16 blinked in surprise, and then slowly smiled. With only each other for sex on the old X-47-D, things had been pretty darn dull in bed. Now they were outcasts among their associates. Perhaps a mass joining with the humans is just what they needed to work off some tension and cement their new working relationship. What the Void, it couldn't hurt.

The 16 touched her hand, *Sounds good to me, my liege.*

Then let's do it, studmuffin, she sent in return.

"Accepted," Avantor said, feeling a preliminary rush of passion tingle at her golden lions. "Gather four of your friends and meet 16 and I back at our room in say, ten Earth minutes?"

Kurt hesitated. "All males?" he asked.

In feather softness, the female reached out to caress his cheek. "That would be boring," she murmured in reply.

"Definitely boring," The 16 said, adding his two copper units. He wondered if human females could *mikgogle* ? They certainly were equipped for it!

Reeling slightly from raw lust, Lt. Sakadea felt his face burn at her touch. Hot damn, she was his kind of woman! The Marine glanced at his watch. "Ten minutes and counting!"

Very excited, The 16 scampered from the office. As Avantor strolled slowly away, already starting to unbutton her uniform top to expose the amber swell of her full breasts, the female Gee coyly added over her shoulder, "I'll bring the nose flute."

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

NICK POLLOTTA has written over 70 novels, ranging from Military/Thrillers to the best-selling Fantasy/Humor trilogy, *Bureau 13* , with over a million copies sold worldwide. (available at www.WildsidePress.com) Nick resides in northern Illinois with his beautiful wife Melissa, three computers, two cats and an antiquarian book collection that someday will crush their house.

PHIL FOGLIO started as a fan artist back in the early 70s, for which he won two Fan Artist Hugos. Since then, he has worked as an illustrator for MAGIC, the Gathering, and is producing a monthly comic What's New With Phil & Dixie for Dragon magazine. He has written several short stories, done book covers for projects as diverse as the Klingon Language Version of Hamlet, Robert Asprin's Myth Adventures novels, and a memoir of San Francisco's gay leather scene. He has worked primarily in comics, where he has scripted such series as *Dynamo Joe*, *Starblazers* and *Plastic Man* , adapted

stories by Harlan Ellison and Robert Asprin. Through Studio Foglio he self-publishes the comic books: *Buck Godot—Zap Gun For Hire*, *MythAdventures*, *XXXenophile* and his newest series, *Girl Genius* . He lives in Seattle with his lovely and talented wife Kaja, and extremely loud son, Victor. Their work can be seen, and purchased, from their website at www.studiofoglio.com. This is his first novel.

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