







S

pace is vast. Time is vaster.

Space-time is vastest of all.

The great ship shuddered as it penetrated the hole in the space-time fabric.

On the Command Deck, an excited voice was heard: "We're exiting the time knot now, sir!"

There was no applause. There were no sighs of relief, no jovial backslaps, no frat-boy cheers.

This was not NASA on a near-Earth shuttle mission.

This was the NSEA *Protector*, at the far, far edge of the known universe. The members of the crew barely looked up from their control and status consoles, allowing themselves only a few quick smiles and brief nods.

Every crisis in deep space is unique, but this was not the first crisis they had come through together. Nor was it to be the last.

"We're alive," Tech Sergeant Chen reported from the Generator Room.

"We made it. Commander, we made it!" cried Lieu-tenant Laredo, the young navigator/gunner. His boyish (indeed, he was in fact a boy of nine) enthusiasm was the closest thing to excitement on the Command Deck of the kilometer-long starship.

The ship's chief advisor, Dr. Lazarus of Tev'meck, muttered a traditional oath of his wise and ancient reptilian race: "By Grabthar's hammer, we live to tell the tale."

A familiar expressionless voice broke in: "ALL SYSTEMS REGISTER FUNCTIONAL." It was the ship's computer, whose expressionless voice revealed its digital source.

"All systems are working, Commander," repeated Tawny Madison, the ranking female officer, whose skin-tight uniform did little to conceal her biological origins. "Commander?"

Only the Commander of the *Protector* seemed less than pleased by the ship's narrow escape.

Captain Peter Quincy Taggart's rugged, handsome features were thoughtful as he gazed around the Command Deck. His eyes were fixed on something far distant—or deep within. He seemed more interested in his thoughts than in the inky vastness of space on the view-screens, or the numbers scrolling across the control monitors.

"I don't like it," he said finally.

The other crew members looked at one another, surprised. But they knew their captain. His instincts were legend ... and law.

"It was too easy. Look for ambient energy fields."

"All normal, sir!" said the eager young Malaysian navigator/gunner, who was almost too small for his grav-chair.

"Check again, Laredo."

"Yes, sir. I... wait. Oh no!"

Laredo's face darkened. His radar console was lighting up. A few dots here and there—

Then hundreds.

The other crew members stared, transfixed.

"They're everywhere!" said Laredo. He turned to look at Captain Taggart, as if seeking solace in that chiseled, calm visage—the only sure thing in a universe rapidly collapsing into chaos. "There are time knots opening everywhere, sir!"

Dr. Lazarus broke in, his usually calm, reptilian voice betraying his alarm. "IMPACT NOW, Commander!"

BAROOOM!

The alien advisor's instincts, free from the chronological constraints of our own, had anticipated correctly. As usual.

"A trap!" said Tawny Madison, her eyes bright with either fear or excitement—or both.

"We're surrounded, Commander," said Lazarus. "The entire Five-K Ranking is out there."

Captain Taggart's eyes quickly scanned the monitors and faces of his crew. "Our plasma armor?"

Lieutenant Laredo gulped, then answered in a small voice: "Gone, sir."

BAROOOM!

A second blast rocked the ship. The crew members held tightly to the arms of their specially molded grav-chairs.

The ship's computer droned: "STRUCTURAL DAM-AGE AT SIXTY-EIGHT PERCENT."

"We're getting major structural damage!" Tawny said breathlessly.

Tech Sergeant Chen came on-screen to report: "It's a core meltdown, sir." His next remark addressed the question in the Commander's eyes. "And it can't be stopped."

Was this the last voyage of the NSEA *Protector*, the flagship of the galactic fleet? Captain Peter Quincy Taggart turned to the trusted advisor who had guided and accompanied him through literally hundreds of inter-stellar crises. What he saw in the eyes of his alien friend did not please him.

"Commander"—Lazarus spoke slowly—"surrender may be our only option."

Taggart shook his head decisively. "No! Never give up! Never surrender!"

The shapely Tawny Madison looked up from her con-sole, her breasts heaving with anticipation or alarm—or both. "The reactor has eaten through four levels, sir! Six levels! The ship is disintegrating!"

Laredo's small, deft fingers were poised over the ship's controls, ready for action. "Your orders, sir?"

Captain Taggart took a step forward. Two ...

Laredo repeated his question: "Your orders, sir? Your orders!"

The answer, when it came, was as terrifying as it was unexpected:

"Activate the Omega Thirteen."

The crew of the NSEA *Protector* exchanged terrified glances. But no one spoke. The Commander's orders were riot to be questioned, Not now—not when their very survival depended on an untried and untested de-vice that unleashed the most awesome power in creation, a power that might even ...

But there was, thankfully, no time for hesitation, no time for second thoughts.

There was a confirming nod from Lazarus and Lieu-tenant Laredo pressed a button on his console.

A trapdoor appeared in the exact center of the Com-mand Deck.

Laredo pushed back in his padded chair. His eyes, and the eyes of all the crew members, were on the Com-mander as he approached the trapdoor.

The Command Deck was silent.

The recycled air was still.

Only one person was breathing. Taggart.

A low moan was heard as the trapdoor slid open.

Revealing ... nothing. A black hole, not unlike the one the NSEA *Protector* had just fled through to escape the time knots. Empty.

But not empty for long.

The low moan rose to a piercing whine as a chrome, steel, and plastic device—*unlike any other ever built*—rose slowly out of the hole. The Omega 13 was midway in size between a jukebox and a slot machine. All its tubes and conduits were external and transparent.

On its side was a long chrome lever.

The crew looked on as the Commander wrapped his strong fingers around the lever ... and pulled.

Lazarus watched with the intelligent fatalism of his warrior race.

Tawny's face was taut with tension or terror... or both.

Laredo waited for more orders, or the end of the uni-verse, whichever came first.

Sergeant Chen, on the viewscreen, admired the device that was about to save or destroy them all.

Even the Commander backed up a step after pulling the lever, as if fearing the forces he had just unleashed.

His face flickered as if he were about to disappear.

Which, indeed, he was.

And which, in fact, he did.



A

wesome!" whispered a voice. "Excellent!" whispered another as the ship and its entire crew disappeared—revealing not the black immensity of space, but the scarred and dented surface of a movie screen.

Fade to white . . . reel number 435... studio copy-right ... tickticktick

"In-credible!" cried a voice over the whine of the projector. Murmurs and whispers grew to shouts and cheers.

Sobbing, too, was heard. Tears of joy or sorrow—or both—hit the cola-stained floor.

The theater was filled with people, mostly men, many more than slightly overweight. Some were pimply teens, others graying boomers. But all shared the visionary, slightly dazed look of the dedicated *Galaxy Quest* fan.

For this was the Tenth Annual *Galaxy Quest* Convention, dedicated to the show that had run only a few seasons but that had garnered legions of loyal fans in reruns ever since its cancellation.

While cheers and applause filled the theater, a man in uniform sprinted down the aisle and up onto the stage.

He was about thirty, a nondescript if vaguely appealing-looking young man, perfectly (and happily) ordinary except for the *Galaxy Quest* uniform he wore, like many of the others in the theater.

He smiled to acknowledge that he knew it was not him they were cheering. Then he raised a hand to quiet the audience.

"Well, there you are!" he said. "You are the first people to see the lost *Galaxy Quest* Episode Fifty-two two-parter since it was originally aired in 'eighty-two!"

More cheers, screams, and whistles.

"As most of you know, no concluding episode was filmed when the series was canceled, so the episode was never included in the syndication run. Let's hear it for Travis Latke, who actually rescued the footage from the studio garbage. Can you believe that?"

A bespectacled young man in a too tight *Galaxy Quest* uniform stood and took a bow.

More cheers and whistles—these only slightly less enthusiastic.

"And now," said the emcee, "for the moment you have all been waiting for..."

"Guy!"

The emcee turned and saw a figure in the wings. It was one of the convention organizers, separating the fingers of his hands as if they were coated with bubble gum, and he was trying to get it off.

The emcee realized that he was receiving the signal for *stretch*. "But first," he said resourcefully, "what is a hero? Let's take a look at a few more clips."

He looked up hopefully toward the projectionist at the back of the auditorium.

Meanwhile, behind the screen, another drama was being played out.

"Where the hell is he?"

Lieutenant Laredo's voice was deeper than it had been in Episode 52. He had barely looked Malay at the time the show was produced: now he looked like what he was—a slight and somewhat argumentative African-American actor.

Tommy "Laredo" Webber was looking at his watch, shaking his head. "An hour and a half late! An hour and a half!"

His still-curved shipmate peered through the curtains at the audience. The lines had deepened on her face, but she still looked great in her *Galaxy Quest* uniform.

"This is great!" said Gwen "Tawny" Demarco with unconcealed disgust. "They're going to start eating each other out there."

"Oh, and did you hear?" Tommy said to Gwen. "He's booked another fan appearance without us!"

Gwen let the curtain close. "You're kidding! When for?"

"Tomorrow morning, before the store opening."

"The guy is terminally selfish!" said Gwen.

"He ate my sandwich," a calm voice announced. Fred Kwan looked up from the postcard he was studying and

delivered this news in the same unexcited tone he had used to announce meltdowns and alien attacks as Tech Sergeant Chen of the *Protector*.

"What?" Tommy and Gwen asked together.

"A month ago," said Fred. "He ate my sandwich."

"And he ate Fred's SANDWICH!" Tommy announced indignantly to all who were listening.

Which no longer included Gwen. She was standing in the doorway of the tiny backstage dressing room, watching one of her colleagues glue a scaly rubber "prosthetic" to the top of his head.

"Oh Alex," she said. "Get away from that thing!" She couldn't understand why he made himself more miserable by studying himself in the mirror.

"Dear God," lamented Alexander Dane in a rich British accent. "How did I come to this?"

"Not again!" Tommy rolled his eyes at Gwen.

"I played Richard the Third!"

"Five curtain calls ..." anticipated Fred.

"Five curtain calls!" Alexander affirmed. "I was an ACTOR once, damn it! Now look at me. LOOK AT ME!"

In the mirror, he grimaced at the lizardlike prosthetic that covered the top of his head like a scaly purple pan-cake.

"Settle down, Alex ..." said Tommy.

Alexander stood up. "No! I can't go out there. I won't say that ridiculous catchphrase one more time. I won't! I can't!"

The others reacted with the weariness of people who had heard it all before. Many times.

"At least you had a PART!" said Gwen. "You had a character people loved. My *TV Guide* interview was six paragraphs about this body suit. About my legs!"

Fred and Tommy looked at her and then at each other, each raising an eyebrow as if to say, *So?*

"How did I perfect my trademark pose?" Gwen mimicked, cocking a hip in self-parody. "Nobody ever bothered to ask me what I actually DO on the ship."

Fred held one finger to his head in an imitation of thought. "You were the, uh ... Wait, I'll think if it!"

Gwen was not amused. "I repeated the computer. 'It's getting hotter, Commander!' 'The ship is disintegrating, Commander!' Nothing I did EVER affected the plot, not ONCE. Nothing I did was ever taken seriously!"

Tommy had had enough of other people's complaints. He held up one hand like a traffic cop. "Excuse me? I'm an African-American playing a nine-year-old Malaysian named Laredo! HELLO?"

"Hello!"

They all turned, startled. The rear stage door swung open and the Commander walked in.



M

y friends, your commander has arrived. Am I too late for Alexander's panic attack?"

Jason Nesmith, as handsome in real life as he was on the screen, walked over to the dressing table, where Alexander Dane was scowling at the image of Dr. Lazarus in the cracked mirror.

"Apparently so." Jason inspected a mole on the British actor's neck. "That's irregular; you should have it looked at."

He scanned the rest of the room, his eyes roving from Tommy to Fred's postcard.

"A 3-D optical illusion. Those things are cool. Speaking of which ..."

His eyes lingered on Gwen.

"Gwen, you look spectacular!"

A chill fell over the room. Four pairs of eyes (five counting Dr. Lazarus's in the mirror) stared accusingly. Jason's puzzlement was genuine. "Oh, what did I do now?"

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Meanwhile, on the stage, the emcee was continuing to stall. Between clips he reminisced, offering fulsome praise of the show and all those who had clutched it to their hearts.

"Sure, the rocks looked hollow and the sets moved whenever anyone bumped into them. But we didn't care!"
WHIRRRRRRRRRR...

On the screen above and behind him, Commander Taggart was carrying the limp body of his alien advisor, Lazarus, while ray guns flashed and spat around them...

WHIRRRRRRRRRRRR...

On the Command Deck, Tawny and Laredo frantically punched buttons, firing weapons and arming plasma shields, while the viewscreens flashed with laser fire and hurtling rocket fighters ...

"For those four seasons, from 'seventy-nine to 'eighty-two, we the viewers developed the same affection for the crew of the NSEA *Protector* that the crew had for each other."

The emcee scanned the audience, recognizing half of them personally and the other half as kindred souls.

"These weren't just adventurers exploring space. These were friends!"

Backstage, Tommy's fist was an inch from Jason's nose. "You said we do appearances together, or not at all!"

Jason shook his head patiently. "I didn't say that. I said, 'Wouldn't it be great if we could always work to-gether?' That's what I said."

Gwen rolled her eyes. "Incredible!"

Tommy was more direct. "You are so full of shit!"

Jason shrugged. "A few fans built a little set in their garage. I come in for an hour at most before the Van Nuys electronics store opening. It's a nothing."

"How much of a nothing?" Gwen asked, her voice dripping sarcasm. "Not-enough-to-split-five-ways kind of a nothing?"

Suddenly she, Jason, and Tommy were all bathed in bright light.

They turned.

Alexander "Lazarus" Dane was skulking out the back door, reptilian makeup and all.

With Jason in the lead, they all ran to the door, tackled him, and dragged him back, kicking but not screaming.

Uh-oh! The emcee feared the worst, hearing the scuffle in the wings. Then he smiled as he got a thumbs-up and saw a familiar face straightening his uniform.

"Okay, here we go! Let's hear a warm welcome for crack gunner/navigator Laredo—Tommy Webber!"

A clip of Lieutenant Laredo appeared on the screen, muttering "If it's got quantum rockets, I can fly it!"

Tommy bounded onto the stage, his face split by a wide smile. The crowd cheered.

"Ship's Tech Sergeant Chen—Fred Kwan!"

The screen showed the engineer, his hands lost in a pile of parts, muttering "Give me a stick of gum and a hairpin, and we're on our way."

Fred strolled out with a casual wave and the crowd went wild.

The cheers managed to drown out the sound of falling chairs and kicks as Gwen and Jason wrestled with Alexander backstage.

Gwen caught her breath as Jason finally pinned the exhausted English actor to the ground. "Alex, you can't just leave!" she said.

"Oh, can't I? Watch me!"

"Come on, old friend," said Jason.

"Friend!" the rubber-helmeted actor spat. "You stole all my best lines! You cut me out of Episode Three entirely."

• • •

"And now," came the voice from the stage, "the beautiful shipmate Tawny Madison—Gwen Demarco!"

The screen showed a curvaceous Tawny, listening to the ship's computer say "ONE HUNDRED DEGREES AND RISING" before announcing "It's—it's getting hotter, Commander!"

Appreciative leers and whistles greeted Gwen as she hurried out, flustered from the wrestling match with Alexander.

She forced a smile as she took her place with Fred and Tommy behind the emcee.

"And now," continued the emcee, "the commander's advisor and closest friend ..."

The clip showed a split-screen image of Dr. Lazarus. On the left he was mild-mannered, thoughtful, wise. On the right he was a savage beast, tearing into a foe with blood dripping from his claws.

"... his peaceful nature ever at odds with the savage warrior inside him, after witnessing the massacre of his entire species as a boy ..."

"You WILL go out there!" Jason hissed in Alexander's ear as he bent his arm backward.

"I won't! And nothing you say ..."

Jason released him and tried a new tack. He whispered the words that are sacred to all who ever trod the boards. "The show must go on."

"Damn you!" said Alexander, straightening his uni-form and turning toward the stage. "Damn you!"

"Dr. Lazarus of Tev'meck!" said the emcee. "Alex-ander Dane!"

Alexander strode onto the stage, bowing deeply with the grace of the trained Shakespearean, as Dr. Lazarus on-screen solemnly intoned, "By Grabthar's hammer, you shall be avenged!"

Cringing as he heard himself speak, Alex took his place beside his shipmates at the rear of the stage.

"And finally, my fellow Questarians, the brave Com-mander of the NSEA *Protector*, Peter Quincy Taggart... JASON NESMITH!"

Jason walked out onto the stage, a spotlight following him.

"Unbelievable!" Tommy whispered to Gwen. "He rented a SPOT?"

Jason raised one fist, encouraging the fans—many of whom were now standing—to chant with him and with his image on the screen:

"Never give up! Never surrender! Damn the reso-nance cannons, full speed ahead!"

"And don't forget," the emcee said. "The Commander and his crew will be signing autographs on Imperial Decks B and C near the soft-drink machines."



C

onventions are peculiar. Sci-fi conventions are even more peculiar.

And *Galaxy Quest* conventions are the most peculiar of all.

The lobby of the convention center was filled with people dressed like the stars of *Galaxy Quest* and the aliens, enemies and allies, they had encountered on their myriad voyages through the universe. Tawnys of every shape and size, some rather less shapely and more siz-able, Sergeant Chens of every race and ethnicity, Lare-dos who were fifty-nine as well as those who were nine, reptilian Lazaruses, wildly variable in stature and gen-der, united only by the prosthetic plastic pieces perched on their wonderfully wise and warlike alien heads.

Less common, as if by some agreement or courtesy, were the Commanders. It was as if only those with a certain air of authority dared assume the role. (Though there were a few whose hesitant voices or shambling steps betrayed them as impostors; or rather—since they were unsuccessfully imitating an actor—impostor im-postors.)

The lobbies and hallways of the convention center were filled with cliques and clutches of eager fans, all mingling and gossiping, trading trivia and comparing notes.

"Yeah, I used to be Gark'nor of Ang, but I got a rash from the chest pads. So now I'm Sacnod from Episode Five, which is fine, except the transducer pinches when I sit down."

"I bought this Lazarus head at an auction on eBay..."

"My son wanted to be the Commander, and I said wait a few years until..."

Enter, into this colorful melee, a group of perfectly costumed but somehow peculiar-looking *Galaxy Quest* fans. Here were uniforms flawlessly cut. Here were util-ity belts and beepers of uncanny detail, magneto-pistols that looked real enough to blast, badges and braids that gleamed with authenticity.

If the fans who wore them—four male and one fe-male—were less similar to the actual *Galaxy Quest* stars than the other fans, it was because they were maybe a little TOO perfect. Bright eyes, shining skin, neither young nor old—but somehow, well, generic.

This group of perfect *GQ* fans made their way through the throng without raising an eyebrow (or even a ten-tacle)—since the great virtue of the *Galaxy Quest* role-playing subculture is its tolerance. Everyone gets to play their favorite character. No one is excluded, no matter how imperfect.

Or perfect.

The perfect fans passed another group of five, whose leader—dressed of course as Captain Taggart—was examining a scale model of the *Protector* with serious intensity.

"The tail fin is concave, not convex! The proton re-actor is where the influx thermistors should be, and... my God! Is this Testor's blue-green number six on the hull?"

The owner of the model, who had expected only praise, blushed with shame, or anger—or both.

"This is a complete abortion!" the serious fan said, dropping the model as if it were filthy.

Ignoring this mini-drama, the perfect fans moved through the crowd. They were looking for something. And when they saw Jason Nesmith, dressed as Commander Taggart, signing autographs on a stage at the front of the convention hall, it was clear they had found it.

The five stopped.

Their eyes shone with wonder.

They stared as if staring at a god.

Jason was not the only original *Galaxy Quest* star signing autographs.

Also at the front of the hall, on a slightly lower platform, the other stars sat at a long table—signing and muttering among themselves as usual.

"Is it me?" Tommy asked, while scratching *Laredo* on the programs thrust in front of him, "or does his table get higher at every convention?"

"Hey, Fred," said Gwen, busily signing her loopy, cursive *Tawny*. "You don't see the 3-D yet?"

Fred was still studying the card, ignoring the fans lined up in front of him. He looked up, perplexed. "Three-D?"

Alexander was looking even more miserable than usual. One of the many fans dressed as Dr. Lazarus stepped up and thrust a photo at him, then saluted with crossed fists.

"By Grabthar's hammer, by the suns of Warvan, I shall avenge you."

With a groan, Alexander signed the program and thrust it back at the fan.

The next fan was already halfway through his salute. "By Grabthar's hammer, by the—"

Before he could finish, Alexander snatched his program, signed it, and thrust it back.

"Next!" he called out loudly—and somewhat rudely.

The *next* was not, however, a Lazarus. Or even, strictly speaking, a fan. It was a nondescript if vaguely appealing young man of about thirty, dressed in a generic *Galaxy Quest* uniform.

"Hi, everybody," he said.

Tommy was the first to recognize the emcee who had introduced them in the theater. "Hey!" he said. "Thanks for the nice intro, uh..." He searched his memory for a name.

The man supplied it. "Guy," he said, holding out his hand. "You probably don't remember me, do you?"

Tommy looked at him blankly. So did Gwen and Alexander. (Fred was still studying his 3-D picture.)

"I was on the show in 'eighty-two. Episode Thirty-one? Got killed by the lava monster before the first commercial? Crewman Number Six."

The blank looks of incomprehension were replaced by blank looks of ritual politeness.

"Oh, right," said Gwen.

"Sure, Guy!" said Tommy.

"Listen, I was wondering—would you guys mind if I sat in today? See if anybody's interested in an auto-graph? You never know."

"Sure, Guy." Gwen moved her chair over to make room behind at the table. "If you can stand the excitement."

Two more Lazarus fans were approaching the table, eagerly greeting Alexander in his guttural "native" tongue.

Alexander responded with a frown. "Don't make me get a restraining order," he growled.

Meanwhile, the five perfect fans were making their way toward the front of the hall, where the autographs were being signed.

They were no longer quite perfect, however.

The left hand of one of them was flickering.

As it flickered, it began to look less like a hand and more like a claw with seven long blue tentacles.

The leader of the five caught his eye.

The fan with the flickering hand-claw looked down. He rapped a small box like a beeper on his belt.

The hand-claw stopped flickering and became a hand again.

The five moved on through the crowd, unconcerned. And rightly so. For if anyone had noticed what had happened, they hadn't thought it was anything unusual.

Galaxy Quest conventions are SUPPOSED to be weird, after all.



G

wen looked at Guy as if to say, *See?* Guy looked back at her forlornly. His dream had come true—he was sitting with the original *GQ* cast, as one of them.

But his dream had turned into a nightmare. No one remembered his character—not even, truth be told, the original cast.

Fred had set aside his visual puzzle and was fielding questions from a young fan. It was in fact the serious fan who had rejected the model earlier.

"My name is Brandon, Mr. Kwan," the fan said. "Here's my question: in Episode Nineteen, when the re-actor fused, you used an element from Leopold Six to fix the quantum rockets. What was that called?"

"Bivrakium," said the actor/engineer without a moment's hesitation.

"And the blue sheath it was encased in?"

"A bi-thermal Krevlite housing," said Fred.

Brandon made an entry into his palm computer, then replaced it on his utility belt. "Thanks!" he said, and left, with his group on his heels.

Guy was impressed. He leaned over and asked Fred, "How do you remember this stuff?"

"Oh, I make it up," Fred replied. "Use lots of *Ks* and *Vs*."

A male fan sidled up to Gwen. "I'm a big fan, Ms. Demarco," he said, handing her a picture to sign.

Gwen looked at it, then looked up at the fan. A pimply teenage boy. "You really expect me to sign a naked picture of myself? This isn't even my body!"

"Yeah, well..." the fan stammered. "Normally with fakes it's like, recycle bin. But this one's really good!"

He looked at her pleadingly.

With a sigh, Gwen started to sign.

"Could you not write over the ... thanks!"

Finally!

A fan approached Guy.

Guy picked up a pen and held it poised while the fan eyed him quizzically.

Guy decided to help him out. "Episode Thirty-one," he said.

No response.

"Killed by the lava monster?"

The fan curled his lip and turned to Tommy. "Laredo, could I get your autograph?"

Guy shrugged, trying to hide his disappointment.

Gwen gave him a pat on the shoulder.

She looked up behind her to the platform where Jason was holding forth to a group of fans who listened, spell-bound.

What an egotist, she thought, watching him. *Hard to imagine we were once friends—and even more.*

• • •

"On the one hand," Jason intoned in his best Com-mander voice, "if I had moved an inch, the beast would have killed

me. On the other hand, my crew was in danger."

A spellbound young fan leaned forward worshipfully. "How did you know what to do?"

"Without a crew," said Jason, "I'm not a Com-mander."

The fan seemed dazzled by this insight. To lighten the mood, Jason clapped him on the shoulder and made a joke: "And we all know what happened to that beast on Enok Seven!"

The fans all grinned; all nodded in unison. "We sure do!" they chorused.

Watching from below, Gwen shook her head apprecia-tively. "You gotta admit, they love him," she said.

Tommy agreed. "Almost as much as he loves him-self!"

"I'm glad you asked," Jason was saying loudly, in response to another question from the crowd at his table. "To me, the most important qualities of a Galaxy Ex-plorer are loyalty—"

"To camera center," whispered Alexander. "No matter whose shot you are blocking!"

"—leadership," continued Jason.

"First to craft service," said Tommy.

"—and determination!" finished Jason.

"To play scenes shirtless because the ladies do love Commmander Furry!" said Gwen.

The four, plus Guy, collapsed into laughter as Jason continued his monologue.

Even Jason occasionally grew tired of constant adora-tion.

His eyes roved over the hall.

The usual crowd.

The usual fans.

The usual shipmates below.

And Gwen. Beautiful...

As usual.

But what were they laughing at? And why was she—

"Excuse me!"

Jason looked *up* to *see an intent-looking young fan* in a Commander's uniform. It was the serious fan, Bran-don, with his *GQ* club arrayed behind him.

"Commander," Brandon began, "please settle a dis-pute that my crew and I are having. In 'The Quasar Dilemma' the Sentient had taken control of the ship's guidance systems. However—"

Jason stood and cut him off. "Excuse me, guys!"

Brandon watched, embarrassed and confused, while Jason brushed past him, leaving the table.

The boy turned to his friends behind him and pro-tested: "I hadn't even gotten to the relevant conundrum!"

Finally!

Gwen was tired of the leering male fans. But here was a shy young girl.

Gwen leaned forward welcomingly.

"Miss Demarco? In Epsiode Fifteen, 'Mists of Delos 5'?"

Gwen nodded, trying to remember which episode that was.

"I got the feeling you and the Commander kind of *had a thing in the swamp when you were stranded* to-gether. Did you?"

Gwen blushed slightly, then shook her head deci-sively. "The Commander and I NEVER had a thing."

"That's her story," said a deep, familiar voice.

Gwen and the girl both looked up to see Jason stand-ing over them.

The girl giggled and slipped away

Gwen stared at Jason, irritated. "What!"

"You smiled at me," Jason said.

Gwen rolled her eyes. Since there were no more fans around, at least in her immediate vicinity, she got up from the table and walked away.

Jason followed. But he got only a few feet before he was stopped.

"Commander, I must speak to you!"

The fan who had stopped him wore a perfect *Galaxy Quest* uniform. With him were four other Questarians, also in perfect uniforms.

Amazing! They look more like the real thing than we ever did, Jason thought to himself.

"It is a matter of supreme importance," the leader was saying. "We are Thermians from the Klatu Nebula, and we require your help."

"Thermians, right," Jason repeated. Gwen was disap-pearing into the crowd. He tried to follow her, but the fan grabbed his arm in a surprisingly strong grip.

"I beseech you to come with us, back to our ship," said the fan. "A great many lives hang in the balance."

Jason managed to pull away. "Right," he said. "If this is about the thing in the morning, you can hammer out the details with my agent, but make sure I have a limo from my house. They jammed me into a Toyota the last time I did one of these things."

The perfect fan looked perfectly confused. "I... cer-tainly ... but. . ."

But Jason was gone. "Catch me later, okay?" he called back over his shoulder.

Jason caught up with Gwen halfway across the floor. He took her arm and spun her around dramatically.

"Crewman Madison, I'm sorry! Whatever I do next, I have no control over. It's the mist of this strange planet. It's filling my head with such *thoughts!*"

He leaned over for a kiss. Gwen even found herself kissing back—until she opened her eyes and saw the fans watching, delighted by the impromptu show.

She pulled away.

"It was cute when I didn't know you," she said, and stalked off.

Jason winked at the fans—trying to pretend that her rejection didn't hurt. Then he ambled off toward the men's room. *As long as I'm here...*

The urinals were all occupied, being used by four Mank'nar beasts in full alien regalia, side by side.

Jason found an empty stall. He needed a moment alone anyway.

He was inside when the "beasts" left, and two people entered.

"You're right," one said, laughing. "What a freak show! This is HILARIOUS! The actors are like, we've done WHAT for twenty years?"

"Yeah, what's-her-name is still wearing those fake cans. And the tech guy, Sergeant Chen. Complete burn-out!"

They sounded like teens. Jason tried not to listen, but he was stuck. And he couldn't leave the stall—not now.

"Did you hear Nesmith up there? Pathetic! He actually gets off on these nerds thinking he's a Space Com-mander!"

"And the others—they HATE him. Did you hear them ragging on him? 'Commander Furry!'"

"He has no idea he's a laughingstock. Even to his buddies."

There was a burst of sound from the hall, and then silence, as the door swung open and then shut.

They were gone. Jason flushed the toilet, then washed his hands.

He examined his face in the mirror. It showed no trace of the emotion he felt.

Good. He dried his hands and left, to assume once more the responsibilities of his station in life.

• • •

"Commander, as I was saying ..."

Brandon was back, in his rumpled cheap imitation Commander uniform, with his "crew" arrayed behind him.

"Yes ... ?" Jason tried to look attentive, tried to hide his disgust, weariness, and despair.

"As I was saying, in 'The Quasar Dilemma' you used the auxiliary of Deck B for gamma override."

"Yes ... ?"

"But on-line blueprints indicate Deck B is independent of the guidance matrix."

"So ... ?"

"So we were wondering where the error lies."

Brandon and his crew crowded closer so they could hear the answer from the horse's mouth.

The horse was tired. The horse was sore.

Jason pushed his chair back from the table. "It's just a television show, okay?"

"Yes, but—"

"That's all. It's just a bunch of fake sets and wooden props. Do you understand?"

Brandon dropped back a step. "Yes, but we were wondering—"

Jason stood up and his voice took on steel. "There IS no quantum flux and there is no auxiliary! There IS NO GODDAMN SHIP! Do you get it?"

The hall fell deathly quiet. Jason realized he was yell-ing. He looked around and saw that all eyes were on him—including the eyes of his actor/shipmates at the table below.

He turned and walked out of the hall, brushing past Brandon—who was doing his best not to look as humiliated as he felt.

The day was done. *Thank God*, Gwen thought as she cooked dinner and simultaneously talked on the phone with one of her "shipmates."

"I don't know, Alex," she said. "Jason's never gone quite this far before."

Alexander was in his own small apartment, applying spirit gum to the edges of his lizard scalp. "I've said for years that he's mentally unstable."

Carrying the phone, Alexander crossed to the refrigerator and opened it. Nothing except some foul-smelling cheese. He sniffed it cautiously.

"Nothing to eat in this place," he growled.

"Why didn't you stop at the market?" Gwen asked.

"I still haven't got this bloody thing off!" Alex said, tugging at the lizard pancake glued to the top of his alien head.

"You could order something in," Gwen suggested.

"A boy comes to the door," Alex explained.

Gwen shrugged, giving up. She preferred talking about Jason anyway. "I don't know. It just wasn't like him!"

"Yes, poor Jason!" Alex said sarcastically, unwrapping the cheese. "As we speak he's probably out somewhere talking rubbish to a roomful of hangers-on. While I sit here eating Christmas cheese in spring."

Not exactly.

At that very moment Jason was sitting on the edge of his bed, sipping scotch from the bottle and flipping through the channels on his TV.

He paused on an episode of *Galaxy Quest*—one of the endless reruns that kept the show alive.

"As long as there is injustice ..."

Jason took another hit of scotch, and recited the lines along with himself:

"Whenever a Targathian baby cries out, wherever a distress signal sounds among the stars ..."

The bottle was almost empty. Jason killed the last few drops.

"We'll be there! This fine ship and this fine crew. Never give up! Never surrender!"

On the screen Captain Peter Quincy Taggart peered defiantly at the stars, his jaw steeled with resolve—and the remnants of youth.

On the bed, Jason Nesmith closed his eyes as the empty bottle fell with a thud to the floor.



D

ING DONG! Jason opened his eyes and saw that it was morning.

He groaned and closed his eyes again. What a hang-over!

DING! DONG!

Who could it be so early?

Jason rolled out of bed, still groaning, and pulled on his robe. He staggered to the door and opened it.

Was this a nightmare? There were five—count 'em, five!—*Galaxy Quest* fans in perfectly pressed uniforms, all standing at attention. As Jason blinked, hoping the nightmare would go away, they all gave him the *Galaxy Quest* salute—in perfect unison!

BAM!

Jason slammed the door and began to navigate back toward his rumpled bed.

DING DONG!

He opened the door again. This time he was less sleepily uncomprehending and more openly unfriendly.

"What... Do ... You ... Want?" he inquired in deadly tones.

The leader of the five stepped forward. He looked vaguely familiar.

"Sir, I understand that this is a terrible breach of pro-tocol. But please, I beg you, hear our plan."

Jason stared at him coldly.

"We are Thermians from the Klatu Nebula. Our peo-ple are being systematically hunted and slaughtered by Roth'h'ar Sarris of Fatu-Krey. Sarris wants the Omega Thirteen. However, our past efforts in this regard have been nothing short of disastrous. The flames... the death..."

The fan looked troubled, but he composed himself. "Please, Captain, you are our last hope!"

Jason stepped back. He was about to shut the door again, for good, when the fan made one last plea.

"We have secured a limousine."

A limo. It almost rang a bell...

Then Jason remembered the personal appearance he had promised for this morning, the one that had angered his colleagues. "Oh, right!" he said. "The thing with the thing. Come on in. I'll get some pants on."

Soon the five perfectly dressed, perfectly composed *Galaxy Quest* fans were standing politely at attention in Jason's room, watching while he fished around for his clothes and dark glasses.

"Commander," said the one who appeared to be the leader, "I am Mathesar. Standing here in your presence is the greatest honor we could ever have hoped to achieve in our lifetimes."

"Thanks, appreciate it," said Jason. He was on the floor, peering under the bed. "Has anyone seen my other shoe?"

• • •

Moments later Jason was in the back of a rented Lincoln limousine, speeding through traffic.

On the seats beside and across from him, the five perfect fans were eyeing him worshipfully. Jason wondered if it was his imagination, or a side effect of the hangover, that all five looked exactly alike.

Maybe it was just the hangover. He tried closing his eyes behind his dark glasses.

It didn't help.

"Sir," said one of the fans. "I am Neru, senior requisition officer. Before we travel to the ship, please let me know if you have any requirements. Weapons, documents, personnel. . ."

"I could use a Coke," Jason muttered.

Neru nodded and made a note.

"Sir," said another of the five. "I am Teb."

Jason nodded. *Teb. Whatever.*

"I would like to explain the history between our people and the Sarris Dominion in greater detail. In the five million years following the great nebula burst our people were one . . ."

Jason tuned out the fan's droning voice and studied the female across from him. She was perfectly formed. But was she taken?

The fan sitting beside her was silent. "What about him?" Jason asked. "Doesn't he talk?"

"His translator is broken," said Teb.

As if to demonstrate, the "silent" fan said something, but it came out in a wail—like a screaming baby inside a bagpipe—

"Okeydoke!" Jason said, to shut him up. He turned back to Teb. "So listen, I had a late night with a Kre-morian Fangor beast, so I'm going to shut my eyes for a bit. But go on, I'm listening to every word."

But he was snoring before Teb managed to complete another sentence.

• • •

Jason opened one eye, then the other. It was true! The perfectly formed female fan was leaning over him, looking most fetching.

How long did I sleep? he wondered. He was no longer in the limo. He was leaning back on a low sofa covered with a smooth material softer than cloth and smoother than leather.

The hangover was gone. He felt almost... okay.

"I'm sorry to waken you, sir," she said. "I am Laliari. Your presence is requested on the Command Deck."

"Laliari... Command Deck," muttered Jason. He was holding his dark glasses in one hand and a half-empty can of warm Coke in the other.

He stood up and put on his glasses.

The floor was vibrating—a low rumble.

Quite an elaborate setup, he thought as he followed Laliari through a lens-type door, into a long curved hall-way.

"Sir, Sarris has moved the deadline," she said over her shoulder. "We are approaching his ship at the Ni-delta now. He wants an answer to his proposal. I understand you have been briefed."

Briefed? "Yeah, I got most of it in the car," Jason said. "He's the bad guy, right?"

"Yes, sir, he is a very bad man indeed," she said, hurrying down the corridor. "He has tortured our scientists, put us to work in the gallium arsenide mines, captured our females for his own demented purposes—"

"Okay," said Jason. "I've got the picture. You have pages—or you want me to just go for it?"

"Pages?" Laliari gave him a blank look. "I'm not sure I..."

"Script pages," Jason explained. "Never mind. Let's see what old Sarris has to say for himself."

Just then Mathesar approached down the corridor, with the other perfect fans.

"Commander! Welcome to the *Protector II*. Perhaps you would like to don your uniform."

Jason looked down at his wrinkled slacks and rumpled sport shirt. "Mind if we skip that?" he said. "I have to get back pretty quick for this thing in Van Nuys."

The perfect fans, in their crisp uniforms, looked disappointed.

"As you wish," said Mathesar. "Come this way."

They started toward a lenslike door. Another crew member came running up. "Sir!" he cried. "It's Sarris! He's *here!*"

Jason nodded and followed Mathesar through the door.

Cool! he thought. The Command Deck looked exactly like the one on the television show—only better.

The cardboard and papier-mache had been replaced by plastics and synthetics. The air was cool and smelled fresh, not like the stinky old TV soundstage, which had indeed smelled like a ship that had been in space too long.

All this, put together by a bunch of screwy fans! "Not bad," Jason commented as he was led to the Commander's grav-chair. "Usually it's just painted cardboard boxes in a garage."

The fan in the next grav-chair looked familiar. But then, they all looked familiar!

"Sir, I am Teb," he said, jogging Jason's memory of the ride in the limo. "We apologize for operating in low power mode, but we are experiencing a reflective flux field this close to the galactic axis."

"No problem," said Jason, looking for a place to set his Coke. "This thing got a cup holder?" Another perfectly uniformed fan approached. "The situational analysis, sir," he announced, saluting crisply as he handed Jason a clipboard.

Jason took it and shrugged. "What's your name?"

"Glath, sir," the excited fan stammered.

For Glath, a faithful crew member—Captain Peter Quincy Taggart, Jason signed with a flourish and handed the clipboard back. "There you go!"

Looking only slightly confused, Glath backed away, saluting.

The fan in the navigator's grav-chair (Tommy's old spot) spoke up. "We're approaching in five ticks, sir! Command to slow?"

Jason looked toward the forward viewscreen, where the stars were moving by in a most familiar, and uncan-nily realistic, manner.

"Sure," he said. "Set the screen saver on two."

"Sir?" The navigator looked confused.

"Sorry, sorry," said Jason somewhat wearily. "Didn't mean to break the mood. Slow to mark two, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir!"

This display is pretty sophisticated, Jason thought. The stars slowed to a stop, and a ship appeared on the screen.

It was impressive—a vicious-looking alien craft, cor-rugated as a crab's back, covered with evil-looking noz-zles, pizzles, muzzles, and spouts, and decorated with demonic graffiti. Incredibly ugly, it was topped off with a hideous gargoyle figurehead.

These kids have better special effects than the studios had when we were doing the show, Jason thought.

He didn't know if he should welcome that or not. While he was considering it, a gruff voice broke into his reverie.

"I see fear! That is expected!"

The voice resonated over the speakers. The view-screen showed a green toadlike giant with jagged black teeth and a metal hand.

Jason stifled a yawn. *New special effects, but the same cornball aliens.*

"And they bring a new Commander. Such a cowardly species—not even your own kind! No matter, here are my demands."

Whatever, thought Jason, trying to hide his boredom.

"And I would suggest, Commander, that you think well before speaking a word, because these negotiations are... tender. And if I do not like what I hear, there will be blood and pain as you cannot imagine."

Whatever, thought Jason, taking the last sip of his warm Coke. He checked his watch. *Wouldn't do to be late to the affair in Van Nuys. And it was less than two hours away...*

"First," roared Sarris, "I require the Omega Thirteen. And second—"

"Okeydokey," Jason muttered, turning to the gunner/ navigator sitting in Tommy's usual grav-chair. "Let's fire blue particle cannons full. Fire red particle cannons full. Fire ganner magnets left and right. Fire pulse cat-apults from all chutes. And here..."

He stood, and handed the perplexed gunner/navigator the empty Coke can. "Throw this thing at him, too, killer."

And without waiting to see if the streaks rocketing through space were going to hit their target, he left the Command Center.

Mathesar and several other fans ran after Jason. They caught up with him just outside the lenslike door.

"Commander!" Mathesar asked breathlessly. "Where are you going?"

Jason pointed to his watch. "Home."

"Home? You mean ... Earth?"

"Yeah," Jason said. "Earth. Time to get back to *Earth*, kids."

He started down the long curved corridor. In the Com-mand Center behind him, the explosions were rocking the enemy ship, lighting up the viewscreens with deadly flashes.

Jason paid no attention. He was looking for the exit. *Where was that limo?*

Mathesar ran alongside him. "But, Commander... the negotiation. You fired on him!"

"Right," said Jason, not breaking his stride. "Long live—what's your planet?"

"Theramin."

"Long live Theramin. Should I take a left here?"

"But what if Sarris survives?" Mathesar asked.

"Oh, I don't think he will," said Jason. "I gave him both barrels."

"He has a very powerful ship," said Mathesar. "Per-haps you would like to wait and see the results of—"

Jason stopped and put one hand on Mathesar's shoul-der. It felt strange—almost scaly.

"I would," said Jason, "but I'm REALLY running late and the 134's a parking lot after two o'clock. But listen, if that guy gives you any more trouble, just give me a call."

Looking grateful, Mathesar produced what looked like a small cellular phone. "An interstellar vox," he said, handing it to Jason.

"Thanks." Jason nodded, slipping it into his pocket.

Mathesar wiped away a tear. He reached out for Ja-son's hand, then pulled him into a hug.

A very strange-feeling hug ...

"How can we thank you, Commander! You have saved our people!"

"It was a lot of fun," said Jason. "You kids are great. But now ..."

"This way," said Mathesar.

Jason followed him into a room with a high circular ceiling. At the center was a red disk the size of a flat-tened basketball.

Mathesar led Jason to the disk, shook hands once more ... and left.

"Wait!" Jason called. "Where's the car?"

No answer. There was no one else in the room. Jason was standing alone on the disk.

Which began to glow ...

A clear shield rose around it, encasing Jason in a clear, bullet-shaped coffin. At the same time the ceiling began to open like a lens, revealing a clear field of stars. Too many stars.

And too real. Far too real.

Jason began to pound on the clear shield as it rose toward the opening.

He began to scream as it rose faster and faster, into the field of stars.

His screams were lost in the immensity of space as the stars flashed by, faster and faster...

Meanwhile, in a galaxy far away, a suburban garage door stood open.

A small group of *Galaxy Quest* fans sat huddled on the Command Deck of their "NSEA *Protector*"—a collection of cardboard boxes, painted backdrops, old TVs, tubes, and hoses.

It was Brandon and his crew. Their uniforms were shabby and ill fitting. The amateurish quality of their surroundings was echoed in the dejection on their faces. It had been the longest morning of their lives.

They had even rented a limo. But the Commander had never shown.



C

ommander No-show! That's what Gwen was thinking as she surveyed the computer-store parking lot in Van Nuys. But what did she care? Who needed Jason Nesmith, anyway? Guy had joined them, since the contract called for five.

A small crowd was gathered around the mini-scale mock-up of the NSEA *Protector* where she and Guy, Fred, Tommy, and Alex were passing out leaflets.

Some of the crowd looked familiar—she had probably seen them at yesterday's *Galaxy Quest* convention. Never mind. Questarians (as they called themselves) were nothing if not interchangeable.

"Take it from us," Gwen announced to the tiny crowd. "We've been all over the universe!"

"And beyond!" improvised Guy.

"But we've never seen space-age values like these—" chimed in Fred.

"—here at TechCo Electronics Superstore!" continued Tommy.

Silence.

They all turned toward Alexander, who was scowling. Gwen nudged him.

"By Grabthar's hammer, what savings!" Alexander finished, releasing a handful of balloons with a look of galactic disgust.

Down in the crowd, Brandon and his friends were admiring the scale-model *Protector*, trying to forget their earlier disappointment.

They were dressed, as usual, in full *Galaxy Quest* regalia. But it might have seemed, to a sympathetic observer,

that they had lost a little of their glow, a little of their enthusiasm.

And it might, in fact, have been true.

Brandon was checking the appliances on his utility belt when he was struck down by a strange, disheveled-looking man running through the crowd.

OOOMPH!

They both fell, scattering equipment, keys, and change all over the pavement.

"Commander!" said Brandon.

Jason didn't answer. He didn't even bother to look at the young man he had hit. He was on his hands and knees, picking up his stuff.

"My apologies!" said Brandon. When there was no answer, he took on a more serious tone. "Commander, apparently we had some miscommunication regarding this morning's scheduled voyage and your agreement to..."

Jason still didn't answer. He stood and looked around wildly, until he located Gwen and the others on the stage. He ran off toward them, clutching his possessions in his hand.

Brandon's friend Kyle helped him to his feet. "He dissed us AGAIN, Brandon!"

Brandon brushed off his uniform, trying to hide his disappointment. "He probably has some important busi-ness to attend to."

"Bull!" said Hollister, another of Brandon's crew. "Maybe we should just start a *Star Trek* club."

Silence fell. Brandon's eyes were cold and steel was in his voice.

"Don't EVER say that to me again!"

Five sets of eyes watched Jason approach the small makeshift stage.

Four angry sets of eyes, and one admiring—Guy's.

"Do you know what time it is?" asked Alexander. "Why did you even bother to show up?"

Gwen noticed his rumpled clothes, his bloodshot eyes. "Jason—are you all right?"

Instead of answering, Jason pointed to the sky. "I was there," he said. "Up! There!"

Fred and Tommy stared at him. Alexander and Gwen stared at him. Not one was curious. All were angry.

"They came to the convention," Jason said. "I thought they were fans, but they're not. They took me up to their ship..."

Tommy looked at Fred and rolled his eyes.

"They're called Thermians or Thatians, I don't know. I was a little hungover ..."

Alexander looked at Gwen and rolled his eyes.

"What they built... it's incredible! I fought this man, this THING, called Sarris. I kicked his ass!"

Gwen looked at Tommy. Alexander looked at Fred. All four rolled their eyes.

"They have these pods. One took me through a black hole and left me off back here on Earth. In my back-yard!"

Fred was trying not to laugh. Tommy wasn't even trying.

Jason stopped. He managed a smile. "I know! I know what you're thinking. But I can prove it. Look! They gave me this."

He searched through his pockets and produced the interstellar vox. Its red light was blinking furiously.

The others all reached into their pockets and pulled out their own voxes. All had blinking red lights.

"Yes, but can you talk to people in SPACE on yours?" Jason put vox to mouth: "*Protector*, this is the Com-mander. Come in, *Protector*]"

Alexander turned to Gwen. "God, what an ass."

"Come in, *Protector*!" Jason yelled. "COME IN, *PROTECTOR*!"

Tommy had had enough. He rolled up his sleeves. "That's it! It's go time!"

Gwen grabbed his arm. "Don't do it, Tommy. He's not worth it."

Jason wasn't getting through. He examined his vox. A sticker on the back read PROPERTY OF BRANDON WHEEGER.

"This isn't mine! Wait..." He looked around, re-mem-bering. "Where is that kid?"

"You know," said Gwen, "it's one thing to treat us this way. But how can you do this to your fans?"

Jason was about to answer when he saw a familiar face—or rather, a familiar figure—hurrying through the crowd toward the stage.

"Laliari?"

The shapely Thermian was flanked by two crewmen, also in uniform. "Begging your pardon, Commander," she said. "We come with news. Sarris lives. He was able upon your departure to make an escape."

Gwen and Alexander, Fred and Tommy, all looked at her and then at one another. *Huh?*

"However, he has contacted us," Laliari went on, "and he wishes to surrender. We humbly implore you to re-turn with us, to negotiate the terms."

Jason looked from Laliari to his old friends—his crew. His eyes were shining.

"They want me back! I.. I want you all to come!"

Fred and Tommy backed up a step. Gwen and Alex-ander stood their ground. All were slowly shaking their heads.

"You have to come with me! It'll be the most amazing experience of your lives. We're going to negotiate an alien general's surrender in SPACE! You have to... guys! Guys?"

The three men were walking away, shaking their heads in disgust. Only Gwen remained.

Jason grabbed her arm. "Gwen! You know me. I'm a lot of things—but I'm not crazy!"

Gwen pulled her arm free and walked away with the others, shaking her head.

All systems go!

In an unused corner of the shipping warehouse, Jason adjusted the uniform Laliari had brought him. He smoothed the braid near his commander's insignia, ad-justed his utility belt, carefully picked a piece of lint off the sleeve of his tunic.

Then he turned to Laliari, who stood waiting with her two companions. His eyes were shining with excitement as he followed her to the red disks on the warehouse floor.

"I'm ready," he said.

At the other end of the store, the original *Galaxy Quest* crew was filing into the employees' lounge that had been provided them as a dressing room.

Their mood was dark. The afternoon had been strange. Jason had always been a pill, but he was getting weirder and weirder.

"You should have let me hit him," Tommy muttered.

"I don't know, guys," Gwen said. "I mean, he almost looked *sincere!* I know, it's bizarre ..."

Fred's response was more practical. "I think we should have taken the gig. I mean, who knows the next time he'll ask us?"

Alexander stopped before taking off his plastic lizard headpiece. "You mean, you think he was talking about *a job?*" They all looked at one another.

Of course!

Seconds later, still in uniform, they were running through the aisles of the electronics store. Customers and employees watched in amazement, stepping back out of the way.

Studs Blitz had been busy ignoring the whole thing. Aliens and spacemen, it was all boring to him. Idiots running around in *stupid* uniforms. *He just wanted to do his job.*

He was busy stocking VCRs on a high shelf when someone grabbed his ankle.

He looked down into the most beautiful pair of brown eyes he had ever seen.

"Commander come through here?"

He nodded, speechless, and pointed toward the back of the store.

Maybe that sci-fi stuff isn't so stupid after all, he mused as he watched her run down the aisle in her tight uniform.

At least they know how to dress ...

The *Galaxy Quest* crew members got to the loading dock just as Jason's pod was shimmering off into interstellar space.

Laliari was still there, however.

She smiled as they ran in and skidded to a stop.

"We're coming, too!" Gwen told her breathlessly.

"Wonderful," said Laliari. "The Commander had me continue transmitting in the hopes you would change your mind."

She unclipped the vox from her belt and spoke into it. "*Protector*—requesting four interstellar pods for im-mediate departure."

Tommy rolled his eyes at Gwen. *These fans!* But Gwen wasn't responding. Instead she was staring at the red disk that had appeared under her feet.

"Guys!" she said. "Guys!"

Similar disks had appeared under the feet of the three men.

Alexander tried to step off his, but it followed him. "What in the world ... ?" he exclaimed.

"I look forward to meeting you all in person when we arrive at the ship," said Laliari. "End of transmission."

She shimmered and disappeared.

"A hologram..." said Tommy. He was starting to look frightened.

So was Gwen. Alexander was still trying unsuccessfully to step off of his red disk, which was starting to glow. Only Fred was calm, looking slightly dazed, as usual.

"Oh my God!" cried Gwen as the bullet-shaped shields rose into place around all four of them. "Oh my God!"

A

few seconds later, or millions of years, depending on the time scale used, two, then three, then four glowing pods appeared on a floor of a transport dock somewhere in interstellar space.

Each pod unfolded to reveal a humanoid biped.

A terrified humanoid biped.

Gwen, then Tommy, then Guy, then Alexander...

Their eyes were wide open, reflecting the wonders and horrors they had seen as they had been whisked through space at a high multiple of the speed of light.

Their teeth were chattering.

Their hands were shaking.

They looked at their surroundings, and then at one another. Gwen was about to speak, when suddenly ...

A lens-shaped door slid open.

A wet, slithering sound was heard approaching the door.

Tentacles appeared, followed by their owners—five drooling, slimy alien monsters.

The aliens approached the humanoids, who began to scream after the manner of their kind. Then one of the monsters looked down at a mechanism on his utility belt.

"Oooops!" he said. "Crewmen, your skins. Activate your E-skins!"

The aliens all flipped switches on their belts. Their forms immediately became human—appearing as perfect (but generic) *Galaxy Quest* crewmen and crew-women, in full uniform.

"Our most sincere apologies," said a crewman. "We forgot about our appearance generators!"

Just then Jason appeared in the doorway. His face was split by a huge, warm smile.

"You CAME!"

His crewmates eyed him silently, still paralyzed with fear.

"Okay," Jason said, trying again, "who wants the grand tour?"

The scream that had been building in Guy during his journey across the universe, which had been doubled at the sight of the tentacled Thermians, finally burst forth:

"AAAAAIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIII!"

Jason was unfazed. "Okay, Guy. Anyone else?"

Another pod appeared. Another humanoid was inside. The last of the crew had arrived.

Fred stepped off his disk with his usual slightly dazed expression. "Now, that was a hell of a thing."

He looked at his still-trembling crewmates, and asked Jason, "What's the matter with them?"

Moments later, after the others had recovered their wits, at least partially, Jason gave them a tour of the ship.

Fred and Jason led the way.

Gwen, Guy, Alexander, and Tommy shuffled along after, like patients recently released from a hospital. They shook their arms, still stiff from their journey through space.

"Just keep shaking it out," said Jason. He tossed each crew member a stick of gum. "Have some gum, it helps."

Tommy unwrapped his gum with shaking fingers. "Wh-where are we?"

"Twenty-third quadrant of gamma sector," said Jason. "I can show you on a map."

There was a sound of approaching footsteps, and Tommy's face froze. Guy, Gwen, and Alex froze with him. *What if it was another group of tentacled aliens?*

But it was a perfectly humanoid group of *Galaxy Quest* crew members in uniform. One of them, apparently the leader, wore a warm smile.

"Welcome, my friends! I am Mathesar. On behalf of my people I wish to thank you from the deepest places in our hearts."

He reached out to shake all their hands.

"Dr. Lazarus! Lieutenant Madison! Young Laredo, how you've grown! Tech Sergeant Chen! And ... uh ... uh?"

"Crewman Number Six," said Guy as he shook Mathesar's hand. "Call me Guy."

"You know us?" asked Gwen, astonished.

Mathesar answered with a soft chuckle. "I don't believe there is a man, woman, or child on my planet who does not. In the years since we first received your ship's historical documents, we have studied every facet of your missions, technologies, and strategies."

Alexander lifted a lizard eyebrow. "Historical documents?"

"Yes," said Mathesar. "Eighteen years ago we received transmissions of the first. It continued for four years, and then stopped, as mysteriously as it had begun."

Tommy laughed. "You've been watching the show—" Then he grimaced as Jason elbowed him in the ribs. "The historical records? Out HERE?"

"Yes," said Mathesar. "In the last hundred years our society had fallen into disarray. Our goals, our values had become scattered. But since the transmission, we have modeled many aspects of our society from your example, and it has saved us. Your courage, teamwork, friendship through adversity ..."

Gwen, Fred, Alexander, Guy, and Tommy all exchanged glances. Only Tommy, however, rolled his eyes.

"In fact," Mathesar continued, "all you see around you comes from the lessons garnered from the historical documents."

"THAT'S why you built this ship?" Gwen asked, amazed.

"It's ... incredible," said Guy, looking around at the curved walls.

"This?" Jason said, amused. "You call this a ship? This isn't the ship. This is only the star port for the ship."

He grinned and pressed a button on the wall. "You want to see the ship?"

A door lensed open and the still-dazed crew members followed Jason and Mathesar into what seemed to be a small waiting room. A bench faced a broad, curved window, which opened onto a curved metal wall.

Jason motioned for them to sit down. They sat.

The waiting room was actually a small transport shuttle. It began to move immediately, slowly, smoothly.

It cleared the wall and a few stars came into view. Only a few, for obscuring them, filling the entire window was ... the enormous NSEA *Protector II*.

Alexander was the first to speak. "Oh my God. It's real!"

Real indeed! The kilometer-long ship that they had seen only in models was in front of them—streaming with lights, impossibly huge, powerful, beautiful, floating in space.

Gwen could scarcely catch her breath. It was like an immense piece of jewelry. "All this from watching the"—she caught herself just in time—"the historical records?"

Mathesar nodded proudly. "Yes. And from your supplementary documents, of course."

He motioned to one of his crewmen, who reached into a backpack and pulled out a handful of brightly colored books and boxes.

Fred looked through them: THE OFFICIAL GALAXY

QUEST BLUEPRINTS—NSEA PROTECTOR, VIRTUAL GALAXY QUEST—THE CD-ROM EXPERIENCE, and on and on ...

Fred handed them to Tommy, who leafed through them, shaking his head, then passed them to the others, who all began to laugh as the shuttle approached the *Protector*.

Jason smiled with *(hem)*. Only Mathesar and his Thermian crewmen didn't get the joke. They looked on, puzzled, as the shuttle approached the docking port on the side of the immense ship.

The interior of the *Protector* was every bit as impressive as the exterior. The Thermians all saluted as the original *Galaxy Quest* crew strode down the long corridor toward the Command Center.

The women especially, Gwen noticed, all saluted "the Commander" and smiled seductively. Except for Laliari. She seemed more interested in "Tech Sergeant Chen," judging from the shy glances she was casting at Fred Kwan. And the shy glances he was returning.

Rooms off the corridor were filled with mysterious equipment, gleaming instruments, and busy, uniformed crew members.

"The medical quarters are to the left," said Mathesar as they hurried past an open door.

Tommy caught up with Jason. "What the hell is going on?" he whispered loudly

"Jason," said Alexander, "what have you gotten us into?"

"I don't believe this," said Gwen, joining them. "It's insane!"

Only Fred seemed unconcerned—though he was clearly still impressed. "Wow, these floors are REALLY clean," he said admiringly.

Jason seemed as cool and collected in real life as Captain Taggart had been on the small screen. "Calm down, everybody," he said. "We're just here to negotiate General Sarris's surrender."

Alexander lifted a massive lizard eyebrow. "Just?"

"Weapons storage ..." said Mathesar as they passed another open room.

"It's perfectly safe, I promise," said Jason.

"Maintenance facility ..." said Mathesar

"Jason," said Gwen, "this is crazy! We should get out of here!"

"Situations Room," said Mathesar. "Dining hall..."

Jason turned and walked backward, facing his crew. "You want to go home? Fine. Say the word, and we'll all go

home and feed the fish and pay the bills and fall asleep in front of the TV—and miss out on THIS. Is that really what you want?"

He stared. They stared back.

"Anybody? Gwen, look at where we are! Alex, this is the role of a lifetime! You want to LEAVE?"

No answer.

Mathesar stopped at a doorway. "The main barracks," he said.

Inside were two hundred perfect, generic Galaxy Quest crewmen standing at attention.

"At ease," said Jason, and walked on toward the Com-mand Center.

Alexander followed, shaking his head. "Like throwing gasoline on a fire!"

He looked at Guy, who was smiling ear to ear. "What?" he demanded angrily.

Guy shrugged. "I'm just jazzed to be on the show, man!"



T

he Generator Room," Mathesar announced as a large door lensed open.

He led the small group onto a catwalk overlooking a glowing, pulsating orb with a rough, rocky texture. Techs scurried around it, turning dials and checking displays. Their uniforms were all like Fred's.

"Our Beryllium Sphere, of course," said Mathesar. "I hope, Tech Sergeant Chen, that this all meets with your approval."

Fred Kwan ran his hand along a copper tube and examined his fingertips. "Fine," he said with authority. "Real clean."

Three techs approached along the catwalk and motioned to Mathesar. Excusing himself, he huddled with them for a moment, then returned to face Fred.

"Tech Sergeant Chen, I am sorry to ask this of you so shortly after your arrival. But members of our reactor staff have a question they find most pressing."

Fred held out his hands as if to say, *Give*.

A tech stepped forward. "Sir, we have had unexplained proton surges in our delta unit. They cannot be verified on the subfrequency spectrum, but appear on the valence detector when scanning the Beryllium Sphere. We are unable to resolve this problem and were hoping that you would be able to advise us."

Everyone turned to Fred—Jason confidently, and Guy with something resembling awe; Alexander with a disgusted look as if to say, *The game is up—at last!*, and Gwen with a mixture of hope and dismay. Tommy, of course, rolled his eyes and tried—unsuccessfully—to suppress a giggle.

Fred stared at the Beryllium Sphere, scratched his chin, and after a long silence asked the tech, "Uh... what do you think?"

The tech stammered nervously. "That possibly ... th-the valence bonds have shifted bilaterally ... ?"

Fred nodded. "And what does that mean?"

The tech fought back panic. "What does that mean? Yes! I see! Yes ... it means ... perhaps ... the bonding molecules have become—covalent!"

Fred smiled smugly. "Covalent. Right! So ... ?"

The tech smiled. "So our solution is to introduce a bonding substrate—a two-molecule compound sharing a free electron—and bombard the ions with their reflective isotopes!"

"Okay!" Fred raised a thumb.

"Okay!" echoed the other techs.

"Of course!" said one. "It's so obvious!"

"Tech Sergeant Chen," said another, "you are a ge-nius!"

Jason beamed as Fred waved off the praise, averting his eyes modestly. Mathesar held out his hands to the techs as if to say, *See? We're in good hands here!*

Then the Thermian turned to the still-stunned crew of humans. "Now I suggest that you rest before we take the ship out of dock. These crewmen will take you to your quarters."

Tommy was still rolling his eyes. But this time it was with pleasure.

He had his own room—and now his escort was load-ing his arms with toys. Only these were REAL toys!

"Here is your valence shield," said the Thermian. "Your vox. Your magneto-pistol. We know you prefer a sensitive trigger. Is there anything else you require?"

"No, no, I'm good," said Tommy. "Thanks."

The Thermian crewman saluted and started to leave the room.

"Oh, wait!" said Tommy. He had almost forgotten! He dug into his pocket and found a crumpled dollar. "Here you go."

The Thermian crewman looked at the dollar, per-plexed, and left, lensing the door closed behind him.

Alexander's escort, Quellok, was appearance-enhanced to look like a Mak'tar of Tev'meck. In other words, he, too, wore a scaly purple pancake on his head. As he led Alexander toward his room, he gushed: "Dr. Lazarus, I hope I am not breaching protocol, but... I am so very humbled to stand in your presence!"

"To be sure," Alexander muttered impatiently

"I have studied your missions extensively. And though I am Thermian, I have lived my life by your philosophy, by the code of Mak'tar."

"Well, good, that's very nice," muttered Alexander. *Where was that room?* He was tired, he had to use the bathroom. And he'd had quite ENOUGH of fans. Even alien fans.

But Quellok wasn't finished effusing. "By Grabthar's hammer, Dr. Lazarus, I—"

"Don't!" Alexander stopped him. "Don't do that. I'm not kidding."

"I'm sorry, sir, I was only—"

"Just DON'T."

"Yes, sir." Quellok stopped and a door lensed open. "Your quarters, sir."

Alexander peered in.

The room was a barren gray cube, totally empty of furniture.

"This is it?"

"Yes, sir," said Quellok. "Marvelous, isn't it? Com-pletely distractionless."

Alexander was not amused. "Where's my bed?"

Quellok pushed a button and six large spikes rose from the floor, like a malevolent thicket of steel.

"Just as on your home planet, sir," he said proudly. "If I may say so, sir, it took me three years to master the spikes, but now I sleep with a peace I never thought possible."

Alexander grimaced. "And the bathroom?"

Quellok pushed another button. A door lensed open, revealing a small alcove containing a curious and hide-ous device.

Alexander studied it as the Thermian explained. "The use of your waste facilities was strangely absent from the historical record, so we had to extrapolate purely on the basis of your anatomy."

"I see," said Alexander. The thing was about the size of a toilet, but festooned with stirrups, spikes, tubes, and handholds. It looked more like a medieval torture device than a sanitary facility.

"You're quite complicated, sir," the Thermian said brightly as Alexander Dane studied the "loo" with mounting discomfort and dismay.

If every crew member's room reflected his or her per-sonality, Gwen's was the nicest. Feminine, efficient, beautiful, practical, and a little extravagant. Like herself. She had just taken a shower in the elegant Italianate bathroom when there was a knock at the door.

"It's Jason!"

"One minute, I'm—"

The door lensed open, and Jason slipped in..

"Hey," said Gwen, holding her tunic in front of her, "I'm dressing!"

"Oh, come on," said Jason, closing the door behind him. "It's not like I haven't..."

Gwen finished dressing. Irritation at his arrogance fought with the excitement she felt about their situation. She decided to let bygones be bygones as she turned to face him.

They looked at each other, savoring the realization of what was happening.

Gwen was the first to smile.

Jason followed suit. "Yeah, I know!" he said.

"I just can't believe it," Gwen said. "Any of it. Look at this room! They designed it based on the Tauran Plea-sure ship from 'historical document' "—and here she rolled her eyes—" 'number Thirty-seven!"

She admired herself in the mirror. The Thermians knew how to fit a human body, at least the female kind.

"Oh, and listen to this," she said, looking up at the ceiling. "Computer?"

"YES?"

"What's the weather like outside?"

"THERE IS NO WEATHER IN SPACE."

Jason looked pained, but Gwen giggled. "I never get tired of that joke!" she said.

"Let me try," said Jason. "Computer?"

There was no answer.

"Computer!"

"It only answers to me," said Gwen, sitting on the luxurious bed.

"But I'm the Commander!" Jason insisted.

Gwen shrugged and studied her perfect nails. "On the show I talk to the computer and repeat what it says. So that's what they built."

Jason had more important things to think about. "C'mon," he said, taking her hand and pulling her toward the door—which was already lensing open, anticipating their move. "We're wanted up on the Command Deck."

"Wait!" Gwen stood her ground. "When are you going to tell them?" The door hesitated, then closed.

Jason looked confused. "Tell them? About...?"

"About who we are!" Gwen put her hands on her hips and stared him down. "Don't you think they are going to be PISSED?"

"Are you kidding?" Jason looked at her with amazement. "I'm not going to tell them."

"Well, you have to tell them," said Gwen. "What if something happens? We're *actors*, not astronauts. We can't do this stuff!"

"It's not the stuff," said Jason. "I mean, anybody can learn the STUFF. The important thing is the COMMIT-MENT. Ninety-nine percent of anything is just committing to it."

Gwen shook her head. "Ninety-nine percent of ACT-ING is commitment," she said, heading toward the door. "Acting! Stella Adler never manned a resonance cannon, she taught ACTING."

"Hey! Where are you going?" Jason asked.

Gwen held out her hands as if to say, *Isn't it obvious?* "We have no right to do this. They deserve to know."

Jason jumped to his feet. "Gwen! Gwen, c'mon, wait. No!"

Just then the door lensed open.

Laliari entered, carrying a glowing electronic pad the size of a clipboard.

"Lieutenant Madison!" She saluted. "The females of the ship have requested your imprint for archival purposes at the proposed Tawny Madison Institute for Computer Research."

Gwen's eyes softened as she placed her palm on the device. It whirred and clicked.

"The Tawny Madison Institute," she repeated in a dreamy voice.

Jason watched, grinning. *Got her!*

"Well, maybe we could stay a little longer," Gwen allowed. She brushed past Jason into the corridor.

There they met up with Tommy, then, at the next corner, Alexander, Fred, and Guy.

"What's going on?" Tommy asked. "Why are they calling us to the Command Center?"

"I think we're about to exit the spaceport," said Jason, taking his natural place in the lead.

"That should be something to see!" said Guy, taking his natural place, far to the rear...



T

he Command Deck of the *Protector* was a reproduction more perfect than its original. The monitors, the digital displays flashed, the mysterious but familiar controls awaited only hands to operate them.

The viewscreens showed the star dock and, beyond it, the immensity of space.

Following Jason, who was following Mathesar, the original *Galaxy Quest* crew members—plus Guy—filed in and stared at the empty grav-chairs, wondering when the show was going to start—

"If you would all take your positions," suggested Mathesar.

—then realized that *they* were the show!

"Oh, yes."

"Right!"

"Yes, of course!"

Jason took the center position. Flanking him on either side were Tommy and Alexander, then Gwen and Fred.

Even Guy found a grav-chair.

"Look," said Tommy, tentatively touching the dial at his station. "This *thingy!* I remember I had it all worked out. This was forward, and back was—"

"Commander," Mathesar said from the doorway. "Some of the crew have requested to be present at this historic event."

Jason nodded.

Mathesar motioned behind him, and crewmen started filing in.

And filing in.

And filing in.

Soon there were at least fifty Thermian crewmen standing around the Command Deck in a silent, worshipful circle, watching the *Galaxy Quest* actors' every move.

"No pressure, huh?" Tommy whispered to Guy. "I'm glad I'm not the Commander!"

As if he had heard him, Jason straightened the braid on his sleeve, looked around the room, and gave the familiar order: "Okay, Laredo, take her out."

Everyone turned to look at Tommy.

"Excuse me?"

"They designed the ship from watching you," said Jason. "So ... take her out, Lieutenant!"

Tommy stared down at his familiar but still-mysterious control panel. There was a circular dial that seemed to be for steering, and a lever that might have been a throttle. At least that's what he had always imagined.

"Right," he said. "Okay, yeah ... sure."

He pushed the lever forward.

The floor shook. A low rumbling was heard in the distance.

Tommy pushed the lever forward a little more ...

The rumble grew louder.

The ship started to move.

"Oh my God!" said Tommy. "Oh my God."

The sides of the dock began to slide away on either side as the ship eased out toward open space.

Tommy pushed the throttle forward a little more.

"More to the right," Guy whispered. "Stay parallel—"

"Hey!" said Tommy. "You want to drive?"

Guy shut up.

Gwen and Jason were both watching the walls of the dock recede.

The left wall was a little close.

Closer.

Tommy spun the dial to the right.

Too late—

CRRRRUUUUNNNCH!

The ship shuddered.

"Oh shit," Tommy muttered.

There was only one thing to do. He pushed the throttle forward even farther.

SSCCRRRAAAAAAPE!

The ship shuddered again, then slipped free, gliding into open space.

Tommy's sigh of relief was echoed around the Com-mand Deck.

"Very good, Lieutenant," said Jason. "Forward mark two."

Tommy smiled. That was easy. He pushed the throttle forward another notch and acknowledged:

"Mark two, Commander."

The *Protector* was under way!

Not long afterward, the crew and their admirers were in the mess hall, celebrating.

Mathesar held a glass aloft as he made a toast. "To our brave guests. Few in this universe have the opportunity to meet their heroes. We are blessed to count our-selves among them."

Ignoring his fellow actors' grimaces, Jason responded in kind. "Whenever a distress signal sounds among the stars, we'll be there, this fine ship, this fine crew..."

"Pulease!" whispered Tommy.

"Shhhh!" cautioned Gwen.

"Never give up, never surrender!"

Everyone clinked glasses. One of Mathesar's crew-men turned to Tommy. "We are sorry about the instrumentation, Lieutenant Laredo. There must have been a malfunction in the steering mechanism."

Tommy set his jaw sternly. "Just see that it doesn't happen again!"

"Yes, sir," said the crewman. He turned to Gwen. "How are you enjoying your food, Lieutenant Madi-son?"

Gwen had to wait a moment before replying. Her mouth was full. "It's fantastic," she said. "French is my favorite."

"Yes," said the Thermian crewman. "We programmed the food synthesizer for each of you, based on the regional menu of your birthplace."

He turned to Alexander. "Are you enjoying your Kep-mo bloodticks, Dr. Lazarus?"

So that's what they are, thought Alexander, looking with revulsion at the insects swimming in his bowl. "Just like Mother used to make," he said as politely as possible.

Guy smiled and took another bite of his hot dog. Across from him, Laliari and Fred were feeding each other, arms linked. *Lucky dog!* thought Guy.

An hour later the feast was over. But the after-dinner speaker droned on.

"The beast roared," said Jason, "as I plunged in the knife again and again ..."

Gwen's eyes were drooping shut. Her shipmates Fred and Tommy were both snoring. Alexander was awake, waiting for a chance to interrupt Jason ... and shut him up.

The Thermians were listening with rapt attention. And so was Guy!

"I held on for dear life," said Jason, "as it thrashed about, and that was the day I learned that a Klive Serpent bleeds red."

He looked around the room at the shining eyes of the Thermians, and finished with a flourish: "What price man? What price man?"

Alexander saw his chance to interrupt. He turned to Mathesar. "Tell me, this Sarris bloke we're flying to meet. What is it that he wants, exactly?"

Mathesar's voice grew grave. "For years, Sarris has plundered the resources of our planet. Our people, our technologies. We built this ship in order to find a new planet to settle, one far away from Sarris."

Alexander tried to ignore the insects climbing out of his bowl.

"We are not a people accustomed to confrontation. We are scientists. This ship was our salvation."

Alexander crushed a tick and dropped it back into his bowl.

"But," Mathesar went on, "Sarris found out about our plans just as we had completed construction of the *Pro-jector II*. He heard about the device—the Omega Thir-teen."

Guy, who was listening, looked puzzled. "The Omega Thirteen. Why does that sound familiar?"

"The lost footage," Gwen whispered. "At the conven-tion. The mysterious device in our last episo—I mean, historical document."

"What is it?" Tommy asked Mathesar. "What does it do?"

The Thermian held his hands out, and up. "We don't know."

"But—you built one, right?" Gwen asked.

"We built *something*," broke in Teb, "from the blue-prints and what references we could find on your Internet. Our computer neural nets made educated guesses in areas where we were uncertain. So there is actually much about the device that we don't even understand. We were hoping you could enlighten us."

Jason tried to appear knowledgeable. "Well, it's a de-vice that we, uh ..."

He looked to his shipmates for help. All he got were blank stares.

"... discovered on an alien planet. We don't know what it does, either."

Tommy was practical, as always. He turned to Teb. "Why don't you just turn it on and see?"

"Too risky," said Teb. "It has at its heart a reactor capable of generating unthinkable energy. If we were mistaken in our construction by even the slightest mis-calculation, the device would act as a molecular explosive, causing a chain reaction that would obliterate all matter in the universe."

This seemed to please Alexander. "Let me at the switch."

Jason scratched at his still-heroic jawline. "Mathesar," he asked, "has Sarris seen the ... historical records?"

"No," said the Thermian. "Thank God he has not!"

"Then how did he find out about the device?"

Mathesar hung his head in either shame or sorrow— or both. "Our former commander was ... not strong."

It was Jason's turn to be surprised. "Former commander?"

"I'm sorry," said Mathesar. "You deserve to be shown."

He motioned to a crewman, who nodded to another, who pointed at another, who rose and pushed a button on the wall.

A viewscreen slid into view.

An image appeared on it, blurry and loud with static.

"This tape was partially demagnetized when it was smuggled off Sarris's ship," Mathesar explained.

"Oh dear," said Gwen.

The static was resolving into an image.

A Thermian, in its "natural" tentacled form, was strapped to a metal board. Each of the creature's many limbs was secured by a different chain or clamp. And each was twisted in a different direction.

"Ugh," Tommy whispered.

"Originally, one of our own tried to lead," said Mathesar.

Sarris appeared on the viewscreen, holding an electronic remote control as if it were a whip.

"Is that all?" Sarris asked in a low voice. "You have no more to confess to me? No? After three days of this, you still require incentive?"

"No!"

Sarris punched the buttons on the remote. The device holding the Thermian began to move, to pull, to twist, to snap and destroy ...

"I say again," the tortured Thermian gasped, "I have told you all I know. To my shame, I have told you everything. If you have any mercy within you, please let me die!"

"Oh, I shall," said Sarris, still toying with the remote. "When I grow weary of the noises you make, my little plaything, be assured, you shall die!"

More static. The picture faded out, but not the sounds: the screams, the tearing of flesh, the cracking of bones.

Silence fell over the mess hall. Gwen, Alexander, Tommy, Fred, and Guy all sat staring—first at the screen, then at Jason.

The new Commander.

Who was frozen in horror.



O

On the way back to their quarters, the original *Galaxy Quest* crew discussed what they had seen—and heard.

"We're leaving, Jason," said Gwen. "We're leaving now!"

"Let me think," said Jason. "I need time to think."

Alexander reacted in mock astonishment. "He wants to THINK?"

Tommy was shaking his head. "No, Jason. That's a wrap! There's nothing to think about!"

Running to catch up, Guy struggled to make himself heard. "Listen," he said. "I'm not even supposed to BE here. I'm just Crewman Number Six. I'm expendable. I'm the guy in the episode who dies to prove that the situation is serious. I'm leaving NOW!"

But how? As he was looking frantically for a door-way, some way to return to the transport pods, Mathesar came running down the corridor.

"Commander!"

Jason stopped. Surrounded by his shipmates, he turned to face the Thermian. "Mathesar, I need you to prepare pods for my crew."

"Your crew?" Gwen stared at Jason. "What about you?"

Jason was about to answer her when Mathesar broke in. "Begging the Commander's pardon, sir, but we can-not launch pods at the moment. Sarris will surely deto-nate any pods leaving the ship."

"Sarris?"

"Yes, sir, he's here now. Your presence is requested on the Command Deck."

Jason followed Mathesar, in a rush.

Fred headed for the Generator Room, and the others all followed Jason toward the Command Deck.

The Command Deck was empty again, as it had been the first time. The *GQ* crew eyed the empty grav-chairs.

"There's nobody here," said Gwen. "Jason ..."

Jason knew what she and the others were thinking. "Mathesar," he said, "maybe we should get some of your crew up here."

"I thank you," said Mathesar, "for your consideration to our pride. But while my people are talented scientists, our attempts to operate our own technologies under tac-tical simulation have been disastrous."

Jason shrugged and glanced at his crew. They all took their places.

Mathesar leaned over Gwen's shoulder and pressed a button on her control panel. "I have raised Sarris on zeta frequency," he announced.

"Uh, great," said Gwen sarcastically. "Thanks!"

"Still, Mathesar," said Jason. "Your crew may none-the-less be helpful in certain—"

He was interrupted by a terrifying vision.

The image of Sarris suddenly appeared on the Com-mand Deck's forward viewscreen. Sarris was even uglier than before, with a metal eye patch and a long raw scar across one scaly cheek.

"We meet again, Commander," he growled.

"Yes," said Jason. "Uh... hi, Sarris. How are you doing?"

"Better than my lieutenant," said Sarris, with a sar-donic grin. "He failed to activate my ship's neutron ar-mor as quickly as I'd hoped on our last encounter."

Sarris held up the grisly head of an alien, impaled on a spike.

"Right," said Jason, clearing his throat. "Well, listen ... I'm sorry about that whole thing. It was kind of a misunderstanding. I'm sure we can work this out like reasonable people. How's the, uh ..."

Jason pointed to his eye. Sarris pointed to his own metal eye patch.

"Is that going to heal up? God, I hope so. I feel just awful about that."

Sarris scowled. "Deliver the device now, or I will de-destroy your ship."

"Listen," said Jason, "I'd like to, but frankly, I'm not even sure where it is, or even—"

Sarris cut in. "You have ten seconds."

Jason held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. "All right! You got it. You win."

His shipmates looked at him in alarm. Was this the Jason—the Commander—they knew?

"I'll deliver it now," Jason continued. "Just give me a minute to set it up."

With a flick of his hand across his throat, Jason sig-naled for Gwen to cut the transmission. Then he turned his back to the viewscreen and faced his shipmates. His voice changed—taking on the familiar steel of command they all knew from the show.

"All right, now, nobody panic," he said. "I've dealt with this guy before, and he's as stupid as he is ugly."

"Jason ..." Gwen began tentatively.

"We're going to fire everything we've got at him, all right?"

"JASON!"

Ignoring Gwen, Jason pointed at Guy, who was sitting at a console decorated with images depicting weaponry and armaments. "You just keep pushing those buttons, Guy, and send everything at him, okay?"

Guy nodded. "Okay, but—"

"All right," said Jason, turning to Gwen. "Put me back on with him."

"I'm trying to tell you," Gwen said. "You ARE on with him."

Jason turned and saw the giant, green froglike image of Sarris, still on the screen. Still scowling.

"Perhaps I am not quite as stupid as I am ugly, Com-mander."

Jason turned to Gwen. "I made the *cut line* gesture! You nodded okay!"

"I thought it was the *we're dead* gesture! I was agree-ing. Like I KNOW where the hold button is!"

Jason turned back to Sarris's image. "Listen, Sarris, you can't blame me for trying!"

"Of course not," said Sarris, almost cordial. But vicious ...

"Guys!" Guy pointed excitedly at his monitor. "Red thingy moving toward the green thingy! Red thingy moving toward the green thingy!"

"What?" Jason rushed to Guy's screen, where a red blip was about to merge with a green blip.

"I think we're the green thingy," said Guy.

"A present for you, Commander," said Sarris from the viewscreen.

"Shit!" said Jason. "Turn," he said to Tommy. "Gun it. Get us out of the—"

BAAAARROOOOOOM!

The whole ship shook with the impact. The crew members were tossed out of their grav-chairs. The lights flickered and dimmed.

Sarris's image flickered, too—and disappeared.

The Command Center was dark. The dim lights of the monitors gave a ghostly glow to the crew's faces as they all scrambled back into their grav-chairs.

On the forward viewscreen, streaks of light could be seen issuing from Sarris's ship ... and heading straight toward the *Protector*.

"We've gotta get out of here!" Jason said to Tommy.

"Where?" Tommy looked at the blinking lights on his console.

"Just go!" said Jason. "Damn it, punch GO!"

Tommy punched the biggest, reddest button he could find. He pushed the throttle lever forward.

The ship groaned and began to move.

On the forward viewscreen, Sarris's ship grew larger.

Larger...

LARGER...

Then it was gone as the *Protector* streaked past it. Then it reappeared as a blip on Gwen's monitor.

"They're turning," Gwen said. "They're coming after us!"

BAAAARROOOOOOM!

Another blast rocked the ship. And then another— .

BAAAARROOOOOOM!

The lights flickered again. There was a smell of smoke.

"THE SHIP IS SUSTAINING STRUCTURAL DAMAGE," said the ship's computer.

"Guys!" said Gwen. "We're sustaining structural damage!"

"Faster, Tommy," Jason ordered. "Get us out of here!"

Tommy pushed the throttle lever forward. "It's as far as it goes!"

"They're still behind us," said Guy, whose screen showed the same blip as Gwen's.

"We should have a turbo," said Jason, scratching his jaw. "I'm always saying 'activate turbo boosters,' right?"

"Could be this," said Tommy, finding a green button below the throttle lever.

He pressed it.

The ship began to vibrate. The crew all looked at one another, attempting grins of relief... short-lived grins of relief.

"THE ENEMY IS MATCHING VELOCITY."

"The enemy is matching velocity," Gwen repeated, right on cue.

"We heard it the first time," said Alexander.

"Shit!" said Gwen, slapping herself on the side of the head. "I'm doing it. I'm repeating the computer!"

Suddenly an image of Fred appeared on the view-screen. He was in the Generator Room, surrounded by scurrying techs.

"Hi, guys. Listen, they're telling me that the generators won't take it. The ship's breaking apart and all that. Just FYI."

The viewscreen went blank.

"We've got to stop!" said Alexander.

Jason shook his head. "We stop, we die. Keep holding the thruster down, Tommy!"

"You don't hold a thruster down!" Alexander protested. "It's for quick boosts."

Jason turned on him. "Like YOU know!"

The ship groaned and creaked. There was the smell of smoke, the sound of breaking glass.

A klaxon began to scream.

RAPARAPAPAPARAPAPA!

"I remember that sound," said Gwen. "That's a BAD sound!"

On the forward viewscreen, Jason saw what appeared to be a cloud, obscuring a patch of stars. "Maybe we can lose them in that cloud!" he said. "I don't think that's a cloud . . ." Gwen observed.

And it wasn't.

As the ship grew closer, the cloud resolved into a gigantic cluster of small octahedrons, each the size of an eight-sided basketball.

They slowly rotated as they floated in space.

"Mathesar," said Jason. "What is that?"

"It's the Tothian minefield," said Mathesar. "Leftover from the Great War of 12185."
Alexander threw up his hands. "May I get the check?"
"THE ENEMY IS GAINING," the computer announced.
"They're gaining on us!" said Gwen.
The minefield was getting closer and closer.
"Do your best, Tommy," Jason urged.
"Oh God!" said Tommy.
BLAM! The first mine hit. Then the second:
BLAM! And the third:
BLAM!
Tommy frantically twisted the "steering" dial.
BLAM!
BLAM!
"Could you possibly," Alexander suggested, "try not to—"
BLAM!
"—hit—"
BLAM!
"—every—"
BLAM!
"—single—"
BLAM!
"—one!"
BLAM! BLAM!
"They're drifting toward me," said Tommy. "I think they're magnetic!" BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!

On board Sarris's ship, the pursuit slowed.

On the screen, Sarris watched the *Protector* disappear into the mine cloud, its position illuminated by lethal flashes, its path marked by a trail of shattered metal as pieces were blasted off the ship.

"Continue forward, sir?" asked Sarris's new lieutenant, Lathe.

Sarris shook his head. "Patience, Lieutenant Lathe, Patience."

The *Protector* raced through the minefield at top speed, shuddering and shaking. Pieces flew off, detonating other mines. A trail of magnetic mines followed the ship like ducks following their mother.

The lights flickered; gas, smoke, and steam escaped from every seam as the ship took hit after hit.

On the Command Deck, Jason stood over Tommy.

"We're almost through!" he said. "Come on... hold!"

"We have to stop!" yelled Alexander.

"The front armor is gone!" Gwen screamed. "Just slow it down a little!"

"No!" said Jason "We're almost through!"

BLAM! BLAM!

New explosions rocked the ship. Rivets popped out of the ceiling and fell to the deck like hail.

"Don't be insane," said Alexander. "Stop!"

"Keep going! Keep going!" cried Jason, in his most authoritative voice.

Tommy spun the dials and pushed the levers helplessly. "What do I do? What do I do?"

There was a loud grinding noise.

And then—sudden silence!

"What happened?" Alexander asked in a suddenly calm voice.

"The engines are dead," Tommy replied. He, too, sounded almost calm. "We're drifting .. ."

"Are they behind us?" asked Jason.

Both Guy and Gwen studied their monitors.

"I don't think so," said Gwen. "Wait. They're not behind us... but something is!"

"What?"

She pointed to the rear viewscreen.

The brood of magnetic mines that had been following them was now bearing down on the rear of the ship, faster and faster.

"Down!" Jason yelled, as he hit the deck.

BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!

The lights went out again.

The monitors flickered and died.

On the forward viewscreen the stars could be seen spinning as the ship, helpless, blind, blackened, and scarred, tumbled through space, end over end over end...



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arkness. Silence.

And then a groan. And then another.

The dim light of the spinning stars as it filtered through the portholes showed shapes picking themselves up, moving about the Command Deck.

Jason crawled across the floor, looking for his crew.

The first one he found was Gwen. "Are you all right?" he asked.

She nodded, sitting up and holding her head.

"Where's Tommy?"

Gwen pointed to the corner, where Tommy was lying in a twisted heap.

"It's broke!" he moaned, touching his twisted arm. "Oh God!"

"I'll take him to medical quarters," said Mathesar, who was dusting off his uniform. He picked Tommy up and led him through the door, into the long, darkened corridor.

Alexander followed. As he passed Jason, he saluted mockingly: "Go into the cloud!"

"Alex!" said Gwen. "Where are you going?"

"To see if there's a pub."

Gwen and Guy turned to Jason, their uniforms torn, their faces covered with soot.

Less than an hour later the crew was gathered in the ship's Strategy Room.

They sat around a conference table, in the glow of the emergency lights.

Tommy was wearing a metallic cast.

Alexander was sipping a blue drink from a tall glass.

The computer was in the middle of a damage assessment.

"FORWARD THRUSTER SHAFT, EIGHTY-SEVEN PERCENT DAMAGE. LEFT VECTOR GUARDS, NINETY-SIX PERCENT DAMAGE. LEVEL-FIVE STRUCTURAL BREACHES IN QUAD-RANTS Thirty-two, Thirty-four, Forty, Forty-three, Fifty-eight..."

"And the engines?" Jason broke in.

"Computer," demanded Gwen. "What about our engines? Why don't we have power?"

"THE BERYLLIUM SPHERE HAS FRACTURED UNDER STRESS."

Gwen turned to Jason. "It's the Beryllium Sphere. It's fractured."

"Can it be repaired?" asked Jason.

"Computer, can it be repaired?" asked Gwen.

"NEGATIVE. THE BERYLLIUM SPHERE WILL HAVE TO BE REPLACED."

Gwen looked at Jason. "We need another one."

"Shit," said Guy. "The Beryllium Sphere. That's bad!"

A look from Jason shut him up.

Alexander set down his glass and turned on Jason, who sat at the head of the table.

"You broke the ship. You broke the bloody SHIP! I told you, you don't hold down a turbo. You push it once, maybe twice, for speed, but you don't HOLD IT DOWN!"

Jason ignored him and spoke directly to Gwen. "Do we have a replacement Beryllium Sphere on board?"

She looked up at the ceiling. "Computer, do we have a replacement Beryllium Sphere aboard?"

"NEGATIVE. NO RESERVE BERYLLIUM SPHERE EXISTS ON BOARD."

"No," Gwen said to Jason. "We don't have an extra Beryllium Sphere."

Tommy looked up. "You know, that's really getting annoying. Repeating everything."

Gwen glared at him. "I have one job on this lousy ship. It's stupid. But I'm going to do it. Got it?"

Tommy held up his hands in surrender. "Sure. No problem."

Just then the door to the Strategy Room lensed open, and six Thermians came in, led by Mathesar.

Guy looked at Tommy. Alexander looked at Gwen. *Uh-oh!*

They all looked at Jason. *Uh-oh!*

But the aliens immediately fell to their knees at Ja-son's feet.

"A thousand apologies!" Mathesar said.

"What?" Jason stood up, confused.

"We have failed you."

"What ARE you talking about?"

"We have seen you victorious in many more desperate situations," said Mathesar. His voice was thin with sor-row.

"The fault must lie with us ... with the ship."

Gwen looked from the prostrate Thermians to Jason. *See?* she said with her eyes. *We must tell them the truth.*

Jason got it. And agreed.

"No, listen, Mathesar," he said. "It's not your fault. We're ... we're ... uh ..."

He trailed off, unable to bring himself to finish.

Gwen took over. "We're NOT the people you think we are," she said firmly.

Mathesar looked from her to Jason. "I don't under-stand."

Alexander stepped up. "Mathesar, don't you have television on your planet? Theater? Films?"

"The historical documents of your culture? Yes, in fact we have begun to document our own history, from your example."

"No!" Gwen said, breaking in excitedly. "Not histor-ical documents! They're not all historical documents." She looked at Mathesar and the other Thermians plead-ingly. "I mean, surely you don't believe *Gilligan's Is-land* is a ..."

Mathesar and his companions exchanged sad glances. "Those poor people!" said Mathesar.

"Hoo boy!" Tommy rolled his eyes.

Gwen tried another tack. "Does no one on your planet behave in a way that is contrary to reality?"

Mathesar and his companions looked confused. They huddled together briefly, searching for the right words.

"Ah," said Mathesar, brightening. "You mean 'decep-tion' ... 'lies.'"

"Well, sort of," said Jason.

Mathesar spoke eagerly. "We have become aware of these concepts only recently, in our dealings with Sarris. Often Sarris will say one thing, and do another. Promise us mercy and deliver destruction. It is a concept we are beginning to learn at some great cost."

He paused and scanned the *Galaxy Quest* crew.

"But if you are saying that any of you could have traits in common with Sarris ..."

He laughed, and the other Thermians joined in. "You are our protectors! Our heroes! You will save us!"

Gwen and Jason exchanged worried looks. This was more difficult than they had imagined.

Tommy stifled a laugh, and Guy shrugged. He half-way believed it himself.

Only Alexander was ready to respond. He was just about to explain the whole thing from start to finish when a viewscreen lit up the Strategy Room.

Fred's image appeared, projected from the Generator Room. He looked unworried, as usual.

"Hey, Commander," he said. "We found some Beryl-lium on a nearby planet."

Gwen broke into a smile, and Jason gave a quick thumbs-up.

"We might be able to get there if we reconfigure the solar matrix in parallel for endothermic propulsion. What do you think?"

"I—uh—well, yes, absolutely!"

Fred turned to the two young techs standing beside him. He peeled two gold stars off a sheet.

"Correct! A gold star for you, and a gold star for you!"

A few hours later the *Protector II*, already repairing it-self with its legions of nanotech maintenance modules, was swinging into orbit around an Earth-like planet.

Inside the ship, the *Galaxy Quest* crew members were filing into a small surface lander, preparing to descend.

Quellek handed Alexander a device the size of a palm-held computer or a paperback book.

"Dr. Lazarus, here is your surface mapper. I have pro-grammed it to the coordinates of a Beryllium Sphere of sufficient density."

"Thanks," said Alexander, clipping it to his utility belt.

The Thermian's eyes misted over. "Good luck on your mission, sir. By Grabthar's hammer, by the suns of War-van, I wish you—"

"Whoa!" Alexander stopped him with a single finger, held up as a warning sign. "What did we talk about?"

"Right," said Quellek. "Sorry, sir."

Minutes later the original *GQ* crew was crammed thigh to thigh on a cold metal bench while Tommy piloted the little craft down through the planet's atmosphere toward the still-unseen surface.

Guy looked nervously out a porthole at the swirling mists.

"I changed my mind," he announced. "I want to go back!"

Alexander looked pained. "After the big fuss you made about not getting left behind on the ship?"

"Yeah," said Guy. "But that was when I thought maybe I was the crewman who stays on the ship and something is up there and it kills me. But now I'm think-ing I'm the guy who gets killed by some monster five minutes after we land on the planet."

Jason spoke up, with the voice of command. "Guy, you are NOT going to get killed on the planet, okay?"

"Oh, I'm not?" Guy turned on Jason. "I'm not? Then what's my last name?"

Jason looked genuinely confused. "Your last name?"

"Yeah! What is it?"

Jason shrugged. "I don't know."

Guy looked simultaneously triumphant and disap-pointed. "See? Nobody does. Do you know why?"

Jason had a suspicion but pretended he didn't. "Why?"

"Because my character isn't IMPORTANT enough for a last name. Because I'm going to DIE five minutes in, so why bother to come up with a last name for me?"

"Guy, you HAVE a last name!" Gwen said. "We just don't KNOW it."

"Do I? DO I? For all you know I'm just Crewman Number Six."

Guy rose to his feet, agitated. "Okay, it's Fleegman. Guy FLEEGMAN! There. Now I'm a whole person. I can't die! FLEEGMAN! THEY CAN'T KILL ME NOW, CAN THEY?"

Jason shut him up with a slap across the face.

Guy sat down, still hysterical. "See? I'm the hysterical guy who needs to be slapped, and then I die."

Alexander yawned and looked out the porthole. "Are we there yet?"

Much has changed in aviation and space flight since the Wright brothers first rose off the surface of humankind's legendary home planet, Earth.

Flight, whether across galaxies or oceans, has been made simpler and safer. But one maneuver still remains complex and dangerous, requiring split-second timing and years of training.

The landing.

The negotiation of that variable but unforgiving line between flight and nonflight, the crossing of that invis-ible frontier, demands of every pilot his best—especially on an unknown planet.

The *Protector's* tiny surface lander broke through the clouds and descended toward a rocky plain covered with jagged boulders.

It hit with a bump between two jagged boulders—and the *Galaxy Quest* crew members inside burst into a spontaneous cheer.

Jason clapped Tommy on the shoulder. "Fine job, son."

Tommy blushed. "Autopilot," he muttered.

PSSSST!

Fred was opening the hatch.

Guy jumped to his feet.

"What are you doing?" he shouted. "You don't just open the door! It's an alien planet! Is there air? You don't know, do you?"

Fred stuck his head out the hatch and sniffed.

"Seems okay," he said, with a shrug.

Guy sighed, shook his head—and took a deep breath.

Jason was first down the ramp, followed by Alexander, who studied his mapper while Fred, Guy and Tommy, and Gwen climbed out of the lander.

"Which way, Alex?" Jason asked.

"This way!" Alexander started up a short hill between two jagged boulders—

Then stopped and turned around, colliding with the others who were following him.

"No, this way!"

They all fell in behind him.

"You were holding it upside down, weren't you?" said Tommy.

"Shut up," Alexander told him.

"You know"—Tommy looked over his shoulder to the rest of the crew—"with the makeup and everything, I actually thought he was smart for a second."

Alexander turned on him. "You think you could do better, 'Laredo'?"

Tommy raised a fist. "Hey, watch that 'Laredo' shit!"

Guy watched with dismay, shaking his head. "We're * screwed. We're SO screwed!"

"All right," Jason broke in. "Let's all settle down. If we're going to get through this, we're all going to have to

exercise some self-control."

"Self-control!" Gwen laughed. "That's funny, coming from the guy that slept with every Moon Princess and Terrakian slave girl on the show!"

Jason looked at her searchingly as they threaded their way through the boulders.

"Did it ever occur to you that if you had been a little more supportive you could have held on to me?"

Gwen stopped in her tracks, unsure whether to be offended or amused. "I could have held on to YOU?"

Alexander gave her a gentle push. "We're really going to do this HERE?"

The rocks got bigger. The shadows darker.

Jason stopped the crew with a raised hand. He looked around nervously. "How much farther?" he asked Alexander.

Alexander studied his surface mapper. He measured something on the tiny screen with two fingers, then held them up. "About this much."

"What's the scale?" asked Jason impatiently. "Is that ten miles? A hundred miles?"

"THIS much!" said Alexander, holding up the two fingers as if they contained the answer.

The rocks got even bigger. The shadows even darker.

Jason went first and the crew followed, single file.

From the rear there was a shout, followed by a grunt, a groan, and the sounds of a scuffle.

"It's got me!" Guy yelled.

The others turned, alarmed.

Guy was on the ground. Something had his foot and he was struggling to pull it free.

"See? FIVE MINUTES! I told you!"

Jason ran back and helped Guy pull his foot free—from the small crevice in which it was stuck.

"Something grabbed me," Guy protested. "I know it did!"

"Easy, son," said Jason, clapping him on the shoulder. "It's just your imagination. Hang tough."

Gwen watched, amused. "You're playing your good side," she said to Jason.

"Don't be ridiculous!"

Alexander joined in. "Note the sucked-in gut."

"Sleeves rolled halfway up the biceps," added Tommy, with a nod.

"It's the rugged pose," agreed Fred.

Jason was about to object again when he heard... something.

He raised a hand for silence.

There it was again! Faint whispers ... weird scurrying sounds...

"That's it!" said Guy. "That's what's going to kill me!"

Jason moved to the head of the line, trying to hide his own nervousness. "Let's just pick up the pace a little, shall we?"

Jason crouched behind a boulder at the top of a ridge, waiting for the others to catch up.

He was smiling.

Below, in a clearing among Che rocks, was an abandoned camp. Wind whistled through ruined shacks, fallen scaffolds, and rusted equipment.

In the center of it all was a large glowing boulder, shimmering with untapped power.

"There it is," said Jason as his crew joined him. "The Beryllium Sphere!"

"Must be some sort of mining facility," said Alexander.

"Where are the miners?" asked Gwen.

Guy joined them, out of breath. He took one look and said, "Something BAD happened here!"

"Will you relax?" pleaded Tommy.

Gwen pointed. There was movement below!

A small blue creature emerged from one of the ruined buildings. It was a biped, almost humanoid.

"Look," said Gwen. "Will you look at that!"

It tiptoed to a muddy pool of water, and knelt down to drink. It was joined by another—and another—

"They look like little children!" whispered Gwen.

"Could they be the miners?" mused Alexander.

"Sure," said Fred. "They're like, three years old."

"MINERS," said Alexander, "not MINORS!"

Fred was puzzled. "You okay, Alex?"

"I don't like this," said Guy. "I don't like this at all."

Gwen disagreed. "Oh, they're so cute!"

"Of course they're cute NOW," explained Guy. "But in a second they're going to turn MEAN and UGLY somehow, and then there are going to be a million more of them!"

As if on cue, another of the small blue creatures emerged from the ruins and headed for the pool. This one appeared to be injured. It was dragging one leg.

"Aaaaw," said Gwen. "It's hurt!" She stood up and waved. "Hi! Hi there, little guy!"

Guy grabbed her and pulled her back behind the boulder. "Jesus!" he said, shaking his head in disbelief. "Didn't

any of you guys WATCH the show?"

The other blue creatures saw the injured one, and began chattering in an alien tongue:

"Gorignac! Gorignac! Nak! Nak!"

"Aw, look," said Gwen, who was still in her motherly mode. "They're helping the hurt one!"

And indeed, the little blue creatures had left the pool. They surrounded their injured mate, chattering and cocking their heads to one side sympathetically ...

Smiling impossibly wide smiles ...

With razor-sharp teeth!

"Gorignac! Nak! Nak! "

With that, they pounced on the injured creature from all sides. Mutterings and screams were heard, then a geyser of blood spurted into the air. This was followed by a satisfied chorus of slurping, chewing, swallowing sounds.

Jason and his crew looked on, horrified.

"I am SO SICK of being right!" muttered Guy.

"Let's get out of here," said Gwen. "Before one of those things kills Guy."

She stood, and the others joined her, ready to flee back down the hill.

Jason stopped them with a lifted hand. "We gotta get that sphere, or we aren't going anywhere."

They all hesitated—then nodded reluctantly, and gathered around him.



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It's right," said Jason, "here's the plan. First, Fred, we need a diversion to clear those things out of the compound."

Fred nodded.

"Then," Jason continued, "Gwen, Alex, Fred, and I go down to get the sphere. Tommy, keep a lookout, and if any of those things come back, give a signal. Guy, you set up a perimeter."

Gwen scratched her head. "Why does this sound so familiar?"

Tommy held up a finger. " 'Assault on Voltareck III,' " he said. "Episode Thirty-one, I think."

Guy flinched. "We're doing Episode Thirty-one?"

"Whatever," said Tommy. "The one with the holo-gram. The wall of fire."

"How the hell is Fred supposed to project a holo-gram?" asked Gwen.

Guy broke in: "We're doing *Episode Thirty-one*, Jason?"

"It doesn't have to be a hologram," Jason said to Gwen. "Just a diversion."

Guy grabbed Jason's sleeve. "Jason, *are we doing Episode Thirty-one or not?*"

"It's a rough plan, Guy," Jason said, pulling his sleeve free and straightening the braid. "What does it matter if we're doing Episode Thirty-one or not?"

"Because I DIED in Episode Thirty-one!"

"This is ludicrous!" said Alexander. He pointed to Jason. "Why are you listening to this man? Must I remind you that he is wearing a costume, not a uniform?"

No one answered. They were all wearing costumes, after all. Even—and especially!—Alexander.

"He's no more equipped to lead us than THIS fellow," Alexander continued, pointing to Guy. Then he added: "No offense."

Tommy glared at Alexander. "You have a better plan, Alex?"

Alexander surveyed the scene below. "As a matter of fact, I do. Look at their eyes. They're obviously nocturnal. Come sundown, they will go into the forest to hunt."

Forest? Gwen wondered. She had seen nothing but rocks.

"So?" Jason asked impatiently.

"So, our plan is simple," said Alexander. He pointed at the sun. "Wait for nightfall instead of mounting an insane assault in full daylight simply because we did it that way in Episode Thirty-one."

Guy, Gwen, and Fred looked from Alexander to Jason, who shrugged: *Why not?*

They all sat down and waited for sunset.

Guy, especially, looked relieved.

Two hours later the *Galaxy Quest* crew was crouched on the ridgetop, waiting for the assault to begin.

The sun, smaller than Earth's and only half as bright, was setting behind a mountain range in the distance. Alexander stood and gave a quick hand signal. Jason and the others fell in behind him, prepared to head down the hill—When a sudden burst of light hit them from behind.

They all turned, stunned and immobile, like deer caught in headlights.

Behind them the planet's second, primary sun was rising, bathing the ridgetop, the rocks, and the abandoned mining camp in a flood of yellow sunshine.

Alexander studied his twin shadows on the ground, sheepish.

Jason stepped forward into command. "As I was saying—Fred, we need some sort of diversion. Some sort of hologram or optical illusion."

Fred held up his hands, completely lost. "A... ho-logram?"

"Never mind," said Jason.

"I'll think on it..." Fred offered.

"Jason, look!" said Gwen.

She pointed down into the camp, where nothing was stirring.

"They're gone!" said Tommy.

"Where'd they go?" Guy asked. "Back inside?"

"I don't know," said Gwen.

Alexander was appalled. "Nobody was *watching?*"

Jason stepped in, his voice oozing command. "All right! Gwen, Alex, Fred—follow me. Guy, set up the perimeter. Tommy, you keep a lookout. Make a signal if they come back."

"What kind of signal?" Tommy asked.

"Anything!" Jason said impatiently.

"Okay, I'll do this." Tommy cupped his hands over his mouth and made a barely audible crow call: "Caw, caw, caw!"

Jason looked pained. He tapped the vox on his utility belt. "Tommy, we have these."

"Oh, right," said Tommy. "Sorry."

"Let's go!" said Jason. He started down the hill, knees bent, head down, ready for action. Gwen, Alexander, and Fred followed at a stroll.

Tommy and Guy were on the ridgetop alone.

"You have no idea what a perimeter is, do you?" Tommy said.

"Not a clue," said Guy. "You?"

Tommy shook his head. "I think he just likes pointing at things."

Jason was into rock and roll.

First the rock.

And then the roll.

In full action mode, Jason made his way down the hill, first hiding behind a rock...

Then hitting the dirt and rolling across the open space to the next rock.

Then crouch down, hit the dirt and roll.

To the next rock.

Gwen, Alexander, and Fred strolled along casually behind him.

"How does the rolling help, actually?" Gwen asked, trying to stifle a laugh.

Jason brushed himself off and crouched behind the next rock.

"It helps," he said grimly.

"Where's your gun?" Gwen asked innocently.

Jason checked his utility belt. His magneto-blaster had been lost somewhere between a rock and a roll.

Alexander raised an eyebrow. "It helps!" he whispered scornfully.

Finally they reached the abandoned mining compound. There were no more rocks, and Jason decided to stop rolling.

A metal door creaked in the wind. A bloody spot on the ground showed where the blue creatures had played out their cannibalistic drama.

Except for a few scurrying insects, the place seemed deserted.

"Those blue things ate everybody here?" Gwen wondered aloud.

"It doesn't make sense," said Alexander. "Surely they could have fortified the compound against those creatures."

Fred paused in front of a battered metal console containing several video monitors. Most of them were broken, but one was intact.

Fred hit POWER and a picture came up.

It was a dust storm, with blurred figures running through it. Mayhem and panic. *Are these the miners?* Gwen wondered. *What are they running from?*

In the background, tremendous crashes could be heard, like the footsteps of a giant.

One of the miners thrust his—or her—face at the video. It was wrapped in a bandanna, with only terror-filled eyes visible.

"Gorignak! Gorignak! "

The screen went blank. The *Galaxy Quest* crew stared at one another and then at the spooky ruins all around them.

"Anybody want to wait around to find out what a *Gorignak* is?" asked Jason.

No way! Four heads shook in unison.

"Then let's do this!" Jason said, setting his jaw and leading the way toward the Beryllium Sphere.

Gwen giggled. "Clenched jaw ..." she whispered to Alexander.

"Will you stop riding me?" Jason demanded without looking back.

Meanwhile, up on the ridge. Tommy was scanning the scene with binoculars.

There was Jason and the others.

There was the Beryllium Sphere.

And that was it—no blue creatures.

So far, so good, Tommy thought.

"I know what it is," Guy said behind him.

"Huh?"

"I know what it is," Guy repeated. "It's not what's ON the planet. It IS the planet."

Tommy grunted noncommittally and continued scanning the abandoned mining camp.

Jason and the crew approached the Beryllium Sphere. They started rolling it toward the hill that led down to the lander.

"There's a life force here," Guy rattled on. "The blue things—did you see how they moved?"

"Whatever," said Tommy. He was sick of Guy and his constant paranoia.

"They were careful," said Guy. "Quiet. Like they didn't want something disturbed."

"Oh shit," said Tommy.

"What?" Guy reached for the binoculars.

Tommy handed them over. He didn't need them to see the blue creatures emerging from the abandoned buildings.

Grinning. Their grins all gleaming teeth, like rows of razors on display.

"C'mon, push!" Jason urged. "Never give up, never surrender."

"Oh, shut up!" Alexander, Gwen, and Fred chorused as they pushed the big Beryllium boulder toward the slope.

Suddenly they all froze.

They were surrounded. Blue creatures on every side, hiding behind the rocks, lurking around the corners of the buildings.

"Caw caw!" said Tommy over Jason's vox.

"Spare me!" sighed Alexander. As always, he was amazed by his shipmates' stupidity. It was almost as depressing as the fate that surely awaited them from the razor-toothed monsters closing in.

KARRANG!

A rock shattered from a magneto-pistol blast.

KARRANG!

Another one melted.

The blue creatures scattered in all directions.

Jason and the crew turned to see Tommy and Guy approaching at a run. Tommy was examining his magneto-pistol.

"Sorry," he said. "It just went off!"

"Good work, Tommy!" said Jason. "Now let's go!"

All together, they managed to tip the Beryllium Sphere over the edge of the incline.

It started rolling downhill toward the lander.

The crew ran after it.

Jason brought up the rear. "Don't look back!" he yelled. "DO NOT look back!"

Gwen couldn't resist. She looked back over her shoulder ...

And saw hundreds of grinning blue creatures, coming down the hill in an alien-wave attack.

Choking back a scream, she hurried on after the others.

The Beryllium Sphere rolled easily down the hill to the lander—and stopped in the sand.

Pursued by hundreds of blue creatures, the crew rolled it up the ramp to the door.

It barely made it through the opening—then partially blocked the door, leaving only a narrow crack.

Gwen pushed Guy through the door, then squeezed through herself.

Tommy followed her through, into the lander. Alexander and Jason were last.

"Go ahead," Alexander offered.

"You go first," said Jason. "There's no time!"

"Oh, of course, I forgot," said Alexander, with a sar-donic mock bow. "You have to be the hero, don't you? Heaven forbid anyone else should get the spotlight once. Oh, no, Jason Nesmith couldn't possibly—"

Jason shut him up with a short, sharp right to the jaw—and caught him as he fell.

Then he pushed Alexander through the door. Behind him he could see a grinning mob of blue creatures, coming up the ramp.

"Tommy, I'm in!" Jason shouted as he crawled through the narrow opening. "Push GO now!"

Tommy pushed GO, and the door started to slide shut.

But Jason *wasn't* in. Not quite. He felt cold, blue hands on his ankle as he was grabbed and dragged out—

Just as the door closed!

Gwen saw the whole thing through the porthole. "Oh my God, Tommy! Stop! Stop!"

"I can't," said Tommy. "It's on autopilot!"

Fred and Guy joined Gwen at the porthole as the lander started to rise. They watched in horror as Jason disappeared into a swarm of blue arms and grinning tooth-filled mouths.

Alexander sat up, shaking his head. "He knocked me out, the son of a bitch!" He looked around the lander.. "Where is he?"

"Down there!" said Gwen, choking back a sob.

Alexander looked down and saw the blue mob, drag-ging Jason off toward certain doom.

He shook his head. "Oh, right! Of course! It's always about him, isn't it?"



J

ason looked up. He saw happy, toothsome smiles.

The blue creatures were about to combine their two favorite activities: killing and eating.

And he was the honored guest!

"Help!" he yelled. He saw the lander disappearing into the clouds.

"Oh no," he said.

"*Gurupicallitak*—what do you suppose it is?" whis-pered one of the blue creatures.

"*Hukilimanifrak*—don't know, but it looks like a child!" said another.

"*Pakalakapoon*—what should we do?" asked still an-other.

"*Frementowakaprom*—hit it with a rock, then we'll eat it!" suggested yet another.

Still yet another raised a rock over his/her little blue head. Jason closed his eyes and tried to think of a prayer.

He didn't see the shadow darkening all the blue crea-tures.

He didn't see them turn around and start to run.

But he heard their panicked cries: "*Gorignak! Gorig-nak!*"

"*Gorignak?*" Jason opened his eyes—then hurriedly closed them again in sheer terror.

He had thought nothing could be worse than the blue meanies.

He was wrong.

The lander slipped smoothly into the docking bay of the *Protector II*, in orbit far above the mayhem on the planet's surface.

Gwen was the first to exit.

She was greeted by three of the Generator Room techs and Teb.

"We got the sphere!" she said. "But the Commander's down there with a bunch of cannibals! Teb, reset the lander. We're going back down!"

Tommy shook his head. "That thing's not going to get us down there fast enough. Face it, Gwen, he's dead."

Gwen was fighting back tears. Suddenly her face brightened and she turned to Fred.

"Wait! Fred, what about your thing? You know— 'Digitize me, Sergeant Chen!' "

"You mean the Digital Conveyor," said Fred.

"Of course!" said Guy. "We'll just zap him up here with the Digital Conveyor."

"Do we have one of those, Teb?" asked Tommy.

Teb and the techs all nodded. They ran off down a corridor, and Gwen and the others followed. Only Fred looked skeptical.

But then, Fred always looked skeptical.

• • •

As they ran down the corridor, following Teb and the techs, Alexander touched Gwen on the shoulder.

"You said 'the Commander.' "

"What?" Gwen asked.

"Back there. You said 'the Commander' is down there with a bunch of cannibals. You didn't say 'Jason, the actor.' You said 'Commander.' "

"No, I didn't!" Gwen protested.

"Yes, you did!"

"I heard it, too," said Tommy.

Gwen gave them both an exasperated look. "Is this really the most important thing we could be talking about right now?"

Once, as a kid, Jason had had a dream of a monster somewhere between a pig and a dinosaur. Now it was standing over him, its massive pink jaws drooling with anticipation.

He closed his eyes, but that didn't do any good. It didn't go away.

"*Gorignac! Gorignac!*" chanted the blue creatures as they scampered around in a circle, torn by two conflict-ing desires—to run as far away as possible; and to watch the delightfully gruesome feast that was about to take place.

"Gorignac yourself!" Jason muttered as he scrambled to his feet and reached for his magneto-blaster.

And remembered, even before his fingers touched his empty holster, that it was gone.

Jason tore off his shirt and snapped it at the pig/lizard like a whip.

snap! snap! snap!

Gorignac seemed singularly unimpressed. Jason didn't blame him. *There's a reason*, he thought, *that laundry isn't considered weaponry.*

Suddenly the red light on his vox began beeping. "Ja-son, can you hear me?" It was Gwen! "Yes, yes! Im here!" *snap! snap! snap!*

"Thank God!" said Gwen.

She was in the dimly lighted Digital Conveyor Room of the *Protector II*, watching Jason fight the pig/lizard on a viewscreen. Alexander and the others were at her side.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Yeah. But I've got Gorignac staring me in the face. I think I can take it, though."

snap! snap! snap!

"Jason," said Gwen, "we're going to use the Digital Conveyor to get you out of there."

snap! snap! snap!

"The Digital Conveyor? Do you mean Im going to get sliced into molecules and sucked up there in a thousand pieces?"

"Right," said Fred matter-of-factly.

"I'll take my chances with Gorignac!" said Jason.

The giant pig/lizard snapped at Jason's shoulder. Ja-son dodged and threw a rock at it.

The laundry thing was losing its effectiveness.

"Jason!" Gwen protested. "We've GOT to get you out of there! It's perfectly safe—isn't it, Teb?"

Gwen immediately regretted asking. She had forgot-ten that Thermians never lie. Not even a little.

"It has never been successfully tested," said Teb.

"What did he say?" asked Jason, who was searching for another rock to throw.

"Nothing!" said Gwen. "Hold, please."

She switched off her vox and turned to Teb, a mixture of exasperation and hope in her eyes.

"Theoretically," explained the Thermian, "the mechanism is fully operational. However, it was built to accommodate your anatomy, not ours. Our actual hands are six-fingered and jointed ninety degrees to yours."

He smiled and pointed at Fred.

"But now that Tech Sergeant Chen is here, he can operate it. It was designed by watching his motions in the historical records."

Those damned "historical records," thought Gwen. *They are our doom—and our only hope.*

Everyone was staring hopefully at Fred. Above him on the viewscreen, Jason was battling the pig/lizard, with increasing valor but diminishing success.

"Well," said Fred, beginning to sweat, "I mean, I can't... I can supervise of course, but..."

Alexander spoke into his vox. "Jason, we're going to test it!"

Far below, on the planet's surface, Jason hurled a piece of the planet's surface—another rock—at the pig/lizard. He'd given up on the shirt entirely.

"Okay," said Jason. "Test it on what?"

"How about the pig/lizard," Tommy suggested.

"Hey" said Jason, "I was doing all right with the pig/ lizard."

If that's doing all right, mused Alexander, watching Jason backing slowly toward a cliff, *I'd hate to see what doing poorly looks like!*

Fred sat down hesitantly at the control panel. Teb and the techs watched, gasping with pleasure.

"I'm sorry!" Teb said, blushing. "It is very exciting to see the master at the controls. The operation of the Digital Conveyor is more art than science."

This was NOT what Fred wanted to hear. He tried one lever, then another. Crosshairs appeared on the viewscreen.

Fred moved a dial and the crosshairs zeroed in on the pig/lizard's massive head.

Fred flipped a switch, pulled a lever. It was all guess-work ...

Far below, on the planet's surface, Jason threw a rock and missed entirely.

It wasn't his fault.

The rock was heading straight and true for the pig/ lizard's snout when the snout began to shimmer.

Then the entire creature began to shimmer.

And then to fade.

And then it disappeared entirely!

"No sweat!" Fred announced happily as the pig/lizard disappeared on the viewscreen.

Aren't we forgetting something? thought Alexander. He looked toward the receiving platform in the Con-veyer Room, which was awash with a strange, shim-mering light.

The light resolved into molecules as the pig/lizard was reconstituted on the platform.

The crew and the techs all held their magneto-blasters at the ready. But they weren't needed.

"Yuck!" said Gwen.

The creature was inside out. Its entrails dragged the floor as it squealed in agony.

"What? What?" asked Jason, who could hear the squeals over his vox.

"Nothing!" said Alexander.

"I heard something!" said Jaxon. "A squeal?"

"Oh, no, everything's fine," choked Gwen. She was trying not to throw up.

"But," protested Teb, who was incapable of deception, "the animal is inside out!"

"I heard that!" said Jason. "It's INSIDE OUT!"

Just then the monstrous mess on the platform ex-ploded with a nasty wet POP, spraying entrails and scales and blood all over the Conveyor Room.

PLORP!

"It exploded!" Teb exclaimed.

"What?" said Jason. "Did I just hear that it came through INSIDE OUT, and then it EXPLODED? Hello!"

Gwen pushed a button on her vox. "Hold, please."



H

ello?" Jason shook his vox. Nothing. He looked up at the rocky ledge above him. The blue creatures were still running in frantic circles, chanting "*Gorignak! Gorignak!*"

"Wait!" said Jason. "The pig/lizard is gone. Why are they still yelling about the pig/lizard?"

They were just as puzzled on the ship. "Turn on your translation circuit," Tommy suggested to Teb.

Teb nicked a switch, and the chants of the blue creatures were suddenly intelligible: "Rock! Rock!"

On the viewscreen, Jason was backed up against a cliff. The rocks immediately behind him were bulging, rippling, moving, like a muscle being flexed.

"Jason," Gwen said into the vox, trying not to panic, "I don't think the pig/lizard WAS Gorignak ..."

• • •

"What the hell are you talking about?" Jason asked Gwen impatiently. He shook his vox; maybe he had mis-understood.

Then he heard a grinding sound behind him.

He turned and saw an arm, and then a leg, both the size of tree trunks, form from the rock and emerge from the cliff wall.

"Oh, darn!"

A rumbling sound filled the air as the monster tore its body loose from the rock. Boulders and gravel fell like rain as it took a step.

"Guys! Digitize me!" Jason yelled.

The monster took another step, separating from the cliff with a terrifying rumble of mineral birth.

Jason took a step back.

The monster took a step forward.

CRUNCH!

And another.

CRUNCH!

"Guys!"

Far above, in high orbit, Fred was holding his head in his hands.

"Come on, Fred," said Gwen. "They based it on YOUR hand movements!"

Fred shook his head. "No way! Didn't you see what happened? What is WRONG with you? It's ME, guys! He is gonna DIE! Why are you all LOOKING AT ME?"

Jason ran.

The monster walked.

The problem was, there was nowhere to run to. No-where to hide.

The rock monster was forcing him farther and farther up a narrow box canyon.

"Fred's no good, Jason," Alexander said on the vox. "You're going to have to kill it."

"Kill it? Well, I'm open to ideas!"

Tommy broke in. "Go for the eyes. Like in Episode Twenty-two."

"It doesn't HAVE eyes!" said Jason.

"The throat," Tommy offered. "The mouth. Go for its vulnerable spots."

"It's a ROCK!" Jason exploded. "It doesn't HAVE vulnerable spots!"

"I know!" said Guy, trying to recall all the episodes he had seen. "You construct a weapon! Look around. Can you

form some kind of rudimentary lathe?"

"A LATHE?" Jason sputtered. "Get off the line, Guy!"

The monster's shadow fell across Jason. His back was against the wall of the cliff. He was between a rock and ... a rock.

"Alexander!" he screamed into the vox. "You're my advisor. Advise me!"

"Hmm," Alexander mused. "Well, you have to figure out what it wants. What's its motivation?"

"It's a damn ROCK monster. It doesn't HAVE mo-tivation!"

"That's your problem!" said Alexander. "You were never serious about the craft."

"The craft?"

"Acting!" said Alexander. He closed his eyes to con-centrate. "I'm a rock ... I just want to be a rock ... still... peaceful... tranquil..."

Gwen and Tommy watched in horror. There was no more hideous spectacle than an actor *preparing*.

"Oh, but what's this ... something's making noise ... no, not noise, no!... MOVEMENT! VIBRATIONS!"

But Jason was listening.

"Make the vibrations stop ... they go straight into me like a knife ... I must CRUSH the thing that makes the vibrations..."

"Am I crazy?" said Jason. "Or do you actually have something there?"

He reached down to pick up a handful of pebbles—

But too late! The rock monster picked him up by the scruff of his neck.

It held him up, dangling, over its enormous granite mouth filled with gravelly teeth.

Jason threw the rocks at an overhang on the cliff.

They hit the overhang, which dropped onto a patch of gravel, which knocked loose a stone, which dislodged a rock, which slammed into a small boulder, which scoured loose a small avalanche, which rattled down to-ward the floor of the canyon.

The rattle grew to a rumble, which grew to a roar.

The monster, looking distressed, turned toward the noise ... and dropped Jason.

Who landed on his feet and watched, grinning, while the growing avalanche buried the monster under a pile of gravel and rubble, rock and dust and sand.

The vox was making a weird noise. Jason checked it out.

It was cheers, coming from the Conveyor Room of the *Protector II*, where his shipmates had been watching the whole drama on the viewscreen.

The cheers were short-lived, however.

The rock pile was moving.

Jason watched in horror as the monster re-formed, larger and more hideous than ever. Instead of killing it, all he had done was to make it bigger!

He stood perfectly still, but it made a beeline for him.

CRUNCH!

CRUNCH!

CRUNCH!

"I'm not moving or making noise," Jason said. "Why is it coming after me? I... oh no!"

He put his vox on his heart—and the sound was mag-nified.

babbabm! babbabm! babbabm!

"It hears my heartbeat!"

Jason started running again. The monster was right behind him.

"Fred? Fred, can you hear me?"

"Yeah ..." The voice on the vox was weak, tentative.

"You've got to digitize me! It's up to you!"

On the ship, Fred was staring at the mysterious controls of the Digital Conveyor.

"No, Jason, I'll mess it up," he muttered.

Jason's voice was almost calm. "You did this for four years on the show. You can do it now. Put your hands on the controls."

Do it! Gwen prayed silently. But she knew better than to say it out loud and break the spell.

It was all up to the Commander—to Jason.

Fred put his hands on the controls—then pulled them away.

"That was the show. I'm not that guy."

On the surface, the monster was picking up speed.

STOMP!

STOMP!

STOMP!

With every step, Jason grew more terrified, more ex-hausted—and more determined to win Fred over.

"Not that guy? I knew a Fred Kwan who never went up on a line, a Fred Kwan who never missed his mark."

"That's not me anymore, man!"

"It IS, Fred! You just stopped trying. You're going to do this. I believe it with all my heart. You're going to save my life!"

• • •

"You're going to save my life!"

On the ship, Jason's words rang through the Conveyor Room, emanating from both the the vox and the view-screen. The door lensed open and Laliari slipped in. While Teb explained to her what was happening, her eyes scanned from Jason on the screen, to Fred at the con-trols.

Two heroes...

"I am?" Fred asked, rather unheroically.

"No doubt in my mind!" said Jason, backing up, step-by-step. A shadow fell over him as the rock monster raised one great, granite fist—

"Digitize me, Fred!"

Everyone in the Conveyor Room held their breath as Fred's fingers hesitated one last time—then flew across the controls.

On the viewscreen, the fist came down as Jason ducked, and shimmered ...

And disappeared.



T

here was a shower of light on the receiving plat-form of the Conveyor Room—the area that had just been cleaned up by the techs, who had mopped out the gore and hosed down the blood.

A shower of light—and in the center of it...

A baby.

No, a full-grown man.

But he was half-naked, curled up in the fetal position, as if expecting a blow.

"I see you managed to get your shirt off," said Al-exander. His usual disgust was tinged with a certain grudging affection.

Jason opened his eyes.

There were Tommy and Gwen and Guy, looking re-lieved.

And there was Fred, his hands still shaking, at the controls of the Digital Conveyor.

Jason got up, dusted himself off, and walked over to shake Fred's trembling hand.

"I did it," Fred said.

Jason nodded. "Welcome back, Fred."

Fred glowed with pride—especially when he caught Laliari looking at him with obvious admiration. He was just about to speak to her when Jason broke the spell.

"All right! We've got the Beryllium Sphere hooked up?"

"We are back to full power," said Teb.

"Pods and engines?" Jason asked.

"Fully operational," said Laliari.

"Okay!" Jason smiled. "Raise the Command Deck, Teb. You guys can drop us off and still get back to your planet in time for supper!"

"Oh, no, sir," said Teb quietly. "We have—no reason to go back."

"What do you mean?" Jason demanded in his most jovial voice. "You don't want to see your friends, your families?"

"We are all that is left," said Teb, dropping his eyes.

A hush fell over the room.

"Oh..." Jason looked embarrassed. "I didn't real-ize ..."

There was a long and awkward silence as the original *Galaxy Quest* cast members looked at the Thermians and realized how much they had lost.

Then Teb broke the spell by announcing, "I have raised the Command Deck."

Jason nodded, glad to resume the brusque tone of au-thority. "Mathesar, we're on our way to the Command Deck," he said.

There was no response.

"Mathesar? Come in, Mathesar. Where is everyone?"

On a hunch, Gwen stepped forward and activated the viewscreen. It showed a grotesque, dark, looming shape which she instantly recognized with horror as Sarris's ship—lying alongside the *Protector!*

Her gasp was echoed by cries of fear and dismay.

She frantically punched the buttons controlling the ship's internal video scanners.

The viewscreen showed Sarris's uniformed thugs swarming through every sector of the ship.

Command Deck.

Mess hall.

Generator Room.

"No! No! No!" yelled Tommy.

Jason headed for the door, shouting, "We've got to get out of here! C'mon, hurry!"

But before he could reach the door, it lensed open— to reveal Sarris himself, flanked by a dozen of his thugs.

Magneto-blasters drawn!

Gwen, Tommy, and Alexander stopped in their tracks. Fred, Laliari, Teb, and Guy bumped into them from behind.

Only Jason kept going.

"Listen, Sarris, just hold on!" he said as he confronted the alien face-to-hideous-face.

WHAP!

Sarris backhanded Jason brutally, sending him flying into the wall. Jason tried to get to his feet, but six thugs surrounded him, kicking methodically from all sides.

The other six held their magneto-blasters on Gwen and the other crew members, who watched, helpless, as their commander was pummeled into unconsciousness.

Sarris's techs had converted the *Protector's* Level C bar-racks into a long tier of steel-barred cells.

Teb, Quellek, and the other Thermians watched help-lessly from their cells as Sarris's thugs dragged Jason down the long corridor. He was black-and-blue.

Sarris followed. He alone seemed to be enjoying the spectacle.

Jason, still dazed from his beating, stumbled.

Sarris prodded him with an electronic device. He punched a button, and Jason's body twisted in pain.

"If you cannot walk, Commander," Sarris said in a smooth cruel baritone, "I suggest you crawl."

The Thermians banged on the bars of their cells, eager to help. But there was nothing they could do.

There was nothing anyone could do.

Jason fell and Sarris prodded him again. He tried to get to his feet, but failed.

He crawled toward the end of the corridor.

A white door lensed open.

Screams echoed down the hall...

Protector's Medical Center had been converted into a torture chamber.

To his horror, Jason saw Mathesar strapped to a gleaming metal rack. For some reason he still retained his human appearance—perhaps it made it easier—or more fun—for Sarris to torment him.

His arms and legs were shackled, and every corner of his body was wired to a different fiendish-looking elec-tronic device.

In spite of his hopeless situation, his eyes lit up when he saw Jason.

"Commander, thank God you're alive!" He turned to face the giant froglike thug standing in the doorway. "Now you will face justice, Sarris."

Sarris just laughed. "At every turn you demonstrate the necessity for your extermination! The qualities of your species ... ridiculous optimism, like little children. Building, always building. But what you spend years to create, I take from you in days!"

He turned to Jason, who was pinned between two uni-formed thugs.

"Do you wish to save this creature's life, Com-mander? And the lives of your crew?"

Jason nodded. "Yes."

"Then tell me one thing. What does it do?"

"What?" Jason was genuinely confused.

"The device—the Omega Thirteen!"

Jason shook his head. "I don't know."

Sarris reached down to the table and twisted a dial. Mathesar writhed in pain, trying not to cry out.

"Is it a bomb?" Sarris asked as he turned the dial up another notch. "A booby trap? Tell me!"

"Stop, please!" said Jason. "I really DON'T know!"

Sarris was displeased. He turned to his thugs. "Prepare a tear harness for the female."

Jason turned and saw Gwen being dragged through the door. The others herded in behind her.

"No! I swear I don't know! Please!"

"Do you think I'm a fool?" Sarris asked. He shook his knobby finger in Jason's face. "Do you think I don't know that the Commander knows every bolt, every weld of his ship?"

Gwen was fighting valiantly—and fetchingly—as the guards dragged her to a table.

"But I'm not... I'm not the Commander!" Jason said.

"Wait!" Sarris turned from Gwen, interested. "What did you say?"

"Please, don't hurt them, it's not their fault!" said Jason. His voice took on a new tone, as for the first time he found himself telling the truth. "I'm not the Commander. I don't know anything."

Both Mathesar and Sarris looked at Jason with new interest—and alarm.

"Explain," said Sarris.

Jason looked at Gwen. "Gwen. The show. There's no choice. Do it!"

Gwen looked up at the ceiling. "Computer, play the historical records of the *Galaxy Quest* missions."

The viewscreen lit up with the opening of the first *Galaxy Quest* episode. The actors were shown, freeze-framed, as the credits rolled, intercut with shots of the *Protector* speeding through interstellar space.

Sarris watched for a full minute before realization dawned on his malformed face. He smiled.

He looked down at Mathesar, strapped to the torture rack, whose eyes were bright with hope as he watched the viewscreen.

And Sarris roared with laughter.

"Oh, this is wonderful! Wonderful! I have treated you as a foe ... but no!"

He took Jason by the arm.

"You have done greater damage to these poor fools than I ever could have. Bravo! Bravo!"

He pushed Jason forward until he was standing over Mathesar. "Tell him."

Jason hesitated, his face red with shame.

"Tell him! This is a moment I will treasure. Explain to him who you really are!"



G

wen and Alexander held their breath. Tommy and Guy groaned with embarrassment.

Fred hid his face in shame.

Jason stepped forward and spoke in a clear voice.

"My name is Jason Nesmith." He turned and with a gesture included the rest of his crew. "We are all actors."

Sarris broke in. "He doesn't understand. Explain as you would to a child."

Jason tried again. "We pretend. We ... lie."

"Yes!" said Sarris. He stuck his huge hideous face a few inches from Mathesar's. "You understand THAT, don't you, Mathesar?"

Mathesar looked up at Jason, bewildered.

"I'm not a Commander," said Jason. "There is no National Space Exploration Administration, no NSEA. There is no ship."

Mathesar tried to move his arms, but they were pinned. With his chin, he pointed toward the viewscreen, where the *Galaxy Quest* credits were still rolling.

"But there it is!"

"A model," said Jason. He held his two hands a foot apart. "Only as big as this."

Mathesar was still not convinced. "But inside, I have seen—"

"Sections of rooms made of plywood," Jason said, shaking his head sadly. What a shabby business, the de-struction of dreams! "Our Beryllium Sphere was painted wire and plaster. The Digital Conveyor was Christmas lights—decorations. It's all a fake."

The Commander's image was on the viewscreen, in a heroic freeze-frame pose.

"I'm not him," Jason said. He looked at Gwen. "I'm a nothing. A nobody."

Gwen was about to speak. Then she changed her mind. Something very like a tear fell from the corner of her eye.

"But why?" Mathesar asked.

"It's difficult to explain," Jason said. "On our planet we pretend in order to entertain."

"Entertain?" Mathesar stared. The beginnings of comprehension were beginning to show in his face. It was not a pretty sight.

"That's how I make my living," said Jason. "Pretend-ing to be somebody else. Pretending to be Captain Peter Quincy Taggart. I'm so sorry, Mathesar ..."

Mathesar looked away. Something had gone out of his eyes. They were dull and flat.

"Now you know!" said Sarris gleefully. "This entire world you've concocted. All based on nothing. Your be-liefs, your hopes—all a dream! A wisp of smoke."

He caressed the remote in his hand.

"Now there is only pain."

Jason hung his head. Gwen wiped away another tear. Even Alexander looked dismayed.

Sarris turned to his lieutenant. "Lieutenant Lathe, I must confess I am beginning to feel a bit foolish myself. Chasing across the universe to obtain what is, I am now certain, a bauble of fiction."

Lieutenant Lathe nodded in apparent sympathy—or what passed for sympathy among Sarris and his thugs.

"Tell me," Sarris continued. "How best to obliterate this vessel? I would like nothing to remain!"

Lathe was eager to help. "The core could be hard-wired to overload without much effort."

"Sarris," Jason broke in. "What about Mathesar's crew? What about my crew?"

"You're right," said Sarris. "Much too easy a death for the trouble you have all caused me. Lieutenant, open a vent on Level C and let the outside in a bit for our Thermian friends."

"What about my crew?"

"Release them, Sergeant," Sarris said to one of the two guards holding Jason. "Into space—take them to the air lock!"

Enraged, Jason lunged for Sarris, but he was easily restrained by the two guards.

Sarris smiled. "I guess an actor is not the same as a Commander after all."

The voice of the ship's computer was strangely flat, con-sidering the dramatic message it was delivering.

"CORE OVERLOAD. EMERGENCY SHUTDOWN OVERRIDDEN. CORE IMPLOSION ESTIMATED IN NINE MINUTES."

"There's a core overload," Gwen began. Then she saw Jason's face ... and shut up.

What's the use? she thought as the guards hurried them all through the corridor toward the air lock. *We're all going to be vacuum dust before the ship explodes anyway.*

They were all silent: Gwen and Jason, Alexander and Guy, Fred and Tommy. They had all seen pictures of people who had died in the vacuum of space. They looked like doughnuts, puffed up, with their blood ves-sels bursting through their skins as their bodies exploded and tried to turn themselves inside out.

Not a pretty sight.

Not a pretty thought.

Not a pretty death.

They reached the air lock. The two guards opened the inner door.

"You two," said the sergeant, picking out Jason and Alexander. "Go."

"Well, how does it feel, Jason?" Alexander taunted angrily as they were shoved toward the door. "Was it worth it? Hundreds of innocents to die because of you. How does it feel?"

"Get in!" ordered the guard.

He pushed them through the door.

"Hundreds dead!" Alexander continued. "All so you could play at being the Commander! You've murdered us all, you egomaniacal son of a bitch!"

"Shut up!" Jason shouted. "Just shut up, you purple-skinned monstrosity!"

Alexander lunged at Jason, grabbing his throat.

Jason grabbed back, and the two fell back outside the airlock door, into the corridor, grappling with one an-other.

The two guards gathered around, laughing, enjoying the fight.

Alexander got in a blow, then another. But Jason was stronger and more experienced. He grabbed the

"purple-skinned monstrosity" by the collar of his tunic and lifted him off the floor, drawing his arm back for a knockout blow.

Alexander cowered in fear.

The guards pulled in to watch the knockout.

Jason swung—and spun around as he did, smashing his fist into the face of the nearest guard.

Alexander showed only a moment's surprise, then quickly caught on and smashed his elbow into the face of the other guard, who was reaching for his magneto-blaster.

The gun fell to the floor. Both guards dove for it, and Jason quickly slammed the door on them.

Fred stepped forward and pushed the airlock release button.

HHHHHHHHSSSSSSSSSS!

Through the door they could see the guards, grasping their throats as the outer door hissed open ... and they were both sucked out into the icy, inky, airless emptiness of space.

"Hmm, a bit sticky," Fred said, releasing the airlock button. "I'll get one of the techs up here with a can of WD-40."

Alexander looked at Jason and snarled. "Purple-skinned monstrosity?"

"I was staying in character," said Jason. "How about 'egomaniacal son of a bitch'?"

"Naturalism," said Alexander. "I see you got to win the fight."

"I had the shot," said Jason with a shrug.

"Guys!" Gwen pointed to a nearby bank of security monitors. One labeled LEVEL C showed Sarris's uni-formed thugs straining to turn a huge valve wheel. Then it showed debris and dust rushing toward the vents as the air was released into space. Then it showed Quillek, Teb, and the other Thermians banging desperately on the bars of their cells as their air got thinner... and thinner... and thinner.

Jason was already running up the corridor. "Let's go!"

Racing against time, the *Galaxy Quest* crew (plus Guy) ran for Level C, checking the magneto-blasters on their utility belts. Would they work? Would they know how to use them?

Jason was doing his usual combat routine—racing to every corner, checking each turn before motioning for the others to follow.

Only this time it made sense. There were Sarris's pa-trols to avoid.

Jason edged along a wall, then motioned his crew back—BACK! Into a darkened alcove.

Just in time!

THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP

A squad of Sarris's thugs raced by, their metal boots hammering on the floor.

"CORE IMPLOSION IN FOUR MINUTES."

Gwen looked up, uncertain. Jason saw what was on her mind. "Go ahead, give it a try, Gwen."

"Computer, shut down the core!" she ordered in her best Tawny voice.

"UNABLE. MEMORY CHECKSUM INVALID. CORE SYSTEMS HARDWARE DAMAGED."

Gwen shook her head, looking defeated. Jason's voice took on a new ring of authority. "All right, guys! Gwen and I are going to have to get to the core and shut it down manually. Fred, you and Guy need to find that valve and close it. Alex, see if you can get the prison doors open in case Fred and Guy can't get to the air valve."

"Right." Fred and Guy headed down one corridor, Alex down another.

"What about me?" Tommy asked. "What do I do?"

"Practice driving," said Jason as he and Gwen headed for the Generator Room.

Tommy watched them go. *Practice driving?*



G

wen followed Jason. They slowed at every corner, looking out for Sarris's uniformed thugs.

But the corridors were clear, leading deeper and deeper into the bowels of the great ship.

"So," said Gwen. "We get to shut down the neutron reactor, right?"

"Right."

Left, then right. Jason led her around a corner, then down a short ladder. His combat mode was impressive. But Gwen had other things on her mind.

"Uh ... I hate to break it to you, Jason. But I don't know how to shut down a neutron reactor."

When he didn't respond, she went on: "And unless you took a Learning Annex course I don't know about, I'm pretty sure you don't know how to shut down a neutron reactor either!"

"No, I don't," admitted Jason. He patted the vox on his utility belt. "But I know somebody who does!"

. . .

Several hundred thousand light-years away, plus or minus a block or two, Brandon was in his upstairs room. He was in regulation *Galaxy Quest* uniform, gluing a piece onto a plastic model of the *Protector*.

There was a knock at the door.

A humanoid biped appeared. "Brandon, did you take out the garbage?"

"Mother, I'm quite busy. The O-rings for my booster unit came broken in the mail."

"Come on, Brandon! Don't make me keep asking you!"

"Ten more minutes, Mother, I promise."

The humanoid shut the door.

Brandon studied the model with a sigh.

Then he heard an unexpected sound.

It was the interstellar vox on his utility belt.

Is this a joke? he wondered. The thing wasn't supposed to actually *work*.

"Hello?" said a tiny, tiny voice. "Is anyone there?"

Brandon stared at the thing, then looked around the room for signs of a practical joke. He even looked under the bed. But there was no sign of any member of his *Galaxy Quest* fan club.

He put the vox to his lips and spoke into it tentatively.

"Hello?"

Several hundred thousand light years away, plus a block or two, Jason nodded to Gwen. "Got him."

"We accidentally traded vox units when we bumped into each other at the store opening," said the tiny voice on Brandon's vox.

"Oh, I see." Brandon stared at the vox. Could this be real? Was this the man who had stood him up, and then humiliated him?

"What's your name, son?"

"Brandon."

"Brandon, I remember you from the convention. You had a lot of little technical observations about the ship. And I spoke sharply to you."

"Yes, I know," said Brandon. "And I want you to know that I thought about what you said. I know you meant it constructively, but—"

"It's okay," said Jason. "Listen ..."

"But I want you to know that I am NOT a complete braincase, okay? I understand completely that it's just a TV show! I KNOW there is no ship, no Beryllium Sphere, no Digital Conveyor. I mean, obviously, it's all just—"

Jason broke in. "It's real, Brandon. All of it, it's real."

Brandon never skipped a beat. "I knew it! I knew it!" His face lit up with joy.

"Brandon, the crew and I are in trouble and we need your help."

Brandon sat down at his computer. His face was shining more brightly than his monitor.

Sarris loved his work.

War. Murder. Mayhem. Whatever it was, if it was worth doing, it was worth doing right.

Torture, for example. Like gourmet cooking, it took time. It required patience.

Sarris was enjoying the slow, painstaking—and pain-giving—process of destroying Mathesar, body and soul, when there was a knock at the door.

The door lensed open, and Lieutenant Lathe entered.

"General, your transport is ready for departure."

Sarris turned to leave. Only a few minutes before the ship blew.

He smiled at what was left of Mathesar on the table.

On the viewscreen, he saw Mathesar's Thermian crew members, passing out in their cells from lack of oxygen.

He felt a glow of pride as he hurried out, after his lieutenant.

A job well done!

• • •

Tommy wasn't the type to follow orders. Especially Jason Nesmith's orders.

But what else was there to do?

He peeped into the ship's Media Room, making sure it was empty. It was.

He slipped in. The tiny room was filled with videos. A complete library of *Galaxy Quest* episodes—or rather, historical documents.

He slid his fingers along the cases on the shelf until he found the one he wanted.

Duck, run.

Peek.

Duck, run ...

Now that Jason was gone, Alexander could assume his commando mode to slip through the corridors, avoiding Sarris's uniformed thugs.

It would never do to have anyone see him, Alexander Dane, imitating a second-rate performer like Jason. It would be humiliating. But as long as he was alone...

Duck, run.

Peek...

But what was that? Alexander heard a noise behind a door to his right.

He tried the door. It was unlocked.

Crouching and raising his fists for battle, Alexander flung the door open.

It was like looking into a mirror. The creature behind the door had also assumed the distinctive Mak'tar battle stance.

Then it smiled. "Sir! It's you! Thank Ipthar!"

"Quellek!" Alexander dropped his fists. "What are you doing in there?"

"Hiding," said the enthusiastic Thermian. "I avoided capture using the Mak'tar stealth haze. Where is every-one?"

"Come with me," said Alexander. "I'll explain along the way."

Far below, in the bowels of the ship, Jason and Gwen turned a corner and stopped.

The sign on the wall read LEVEL R, HALLWAY 5.

Jason spoke into his vox. "Brandon, we're in Level R, Hallway Five. What now?"

Several hundred thousand light-years away, plus or minus a block or two, Brandon was inserting a CD into his computer.

The logo came up on his monitor: *GALAXY QUEST* CD-ROM. TECHNICAL SYSTEMS.

"Okay," he said, scrolling through the complex blue-prints and 3-D cutaways of the ship. "There's a hatch on the port wall. It leads to a system of utility corridors."

Jason looked up and down the corridor. "There's no hatch," he said, frustrated. "There's no hatch!"

"Wait," said Gwen. She ran her hand along the wall until she found a concealed button.

She pressed it and a small hatch slid open.

"Okay," said Jason. "We got it."

"Go on in," said Brandon. "I'm going to contact Kyle."

"Kyle?"

"From the *Galaxy Quest* fan club. He knows the utility tunnel system better than anyone alive."

/ believe it, Jason thought, as he crawled into the tunnel, then turned to help Gwen.

A few clicks of a mouse, and Kyle's video image appeared in its own window on Brandon's computer monitor.

"Hi, Brandon. That you? What's up?"

"No time for pleasantries, Kyle," Brandon snapped, adopting the no-nonsense tone of the Commander. "We have a Level Five emergency. The Commander needs us to get him to the core and shut it down before it implodes."

"Oh, okay," said Kyle. He was more interested in the nude picture of Tawny Madison that was downloading onto his monitor.

"You've got the utility-systems walk-through, right?"

"I have Sectors One through Twenty-eight," said Kyle. *Why was the picture so slow?* "I think Hector has the upper levels."

"We'd better get everybody on-line," said Brandon. "And Kyle ..."

"Yeah?"

"Stop downloading porn. Your frame rate is unacceptable."

"I am NOT downloading porn!" Kyle insisted, even as he clicked SAVE on Tawny's picture.

Fred and Guy were hurrying down a long corridor, checking the sector numbers as they ran by.

"Okay," said Fred. "Sectors Thirty-eight... Thirty-nine ... Forty. This is it!"

They skidded to a stop.

"The environmental systems are in here. All we have to do is shut off the valve."

They peered through a window. There was the circular wheel that had released the air from the prison cells.

And it was surrounded by at least a hundred of Sar-ris's uniformed thugs!

Guy looked at Fred. *All we have to do?*

In the Media Room, Tommy was having fun. Sort of. He was watching reruns of *Galaxy Quest*, fast-forwarding to the sections where the ship dodged and weaved through space.

Here it was dodging a huge—and obviously papier-mache—monster.

Here it was slipping between a very phony planet and its even phonier rings.

And here was Laredo, coolly working the controls.

Tommy imitated himself, mimicking his own piloting moves.

"Pedal to the metal, Commander," Laredo said on-screen.

"Pedal to the metal, Commander," Tommy said in the Media Room, in unison with his younger self.



R

Right! Now left!

Right!

Gwen and Jason switchbacked through the lower corridors, guided by Brandon's voice on Jason's vox.

"Okay, now left at the next turn. Past the oxygen units. Make a right there."

Right.

"Then go through the antimatter vent!"

"Okay," said Jason breathlessly. "Okay, now what?"

"Now make a right," Brandon told him. "You'll see a doorway that opens onto the Central Manufacturing Facility."

The bowels of the ship."

Jason made the right. Gwen followed.

They opened the door. Their faces glowed red. Their jaws both dropped at the awesome sight before them.

"It looks like Dante's Inferno!" said Gwen.

They were overlooking a huge chamber filled with scaffolding, conveyors, catwalks, and elevators. Glowing rivers of molten steel and plastic flowed past robot arms and hammers—all designed to replace and repair any part of the ship.

"Who's Donny?" asked Jason.

"Commander, do you have a camera?" asked Bran-don. "I'd love to see this in person. All they ever showed on TV was a wall here and a machine there. I don't know why they never showed the whole thing."

"We never had the budget for this!" said Jason.

"Okay," said Brandon. "Do you see a door marked 'Core Unit'? It should be at the far end, to your left."

Jason's eyes tracked along a narrow, winding catwalk, past swinging hammers and flying sparks, to the door:
CORE UNIT.

"I see it," he said.

"That's where you want to be," said Brandon.

Jason looked at Gwen. Gwen looked at Jason. *We're supposed to go through that?"*

They squared their shoulders resolutely and started on their way.

Alexander and Quellek checked the doors, one by one.

Finally!

Quellek motioned to Alexander—they looked through a tiny porthole into the Level C prison corridor.

It was a horrible scene.

Since the environmental control valve had been opened, almost all the air had leaked out into space.

Many of the Thermians were already unconscious, slumped over in their cells. Others were tugging ineffectually at the bars.

Alexander tried to open the door.

Locked!

"They're dying!" said Quellek. He banged on the porthole, trying to signal his friends. "They're dying!"

"Here!" Alexander led Quellek to a console leaning against a nearby wall. "Help me tear this loose. We can use it as a battering ram!"

Quellek nodded happily at his hero and picked up one end. Hope restored!

"Don't worry, Quellek, it'll be okay," Alexander said. To himself he added: / *hope!*

"We've got to get that valve closed!" said Fred. "Their oxygen must be almost gone by now!"

"I'll go in," said Guy. "I'll create a distraction. I have this!" He held up the magneto-blaster he had taken from the guards at the air lock. "I may be able to hold them off long enough for you to get at the valve."

Fred shook his head. "It's suicide."

Guy shrugged. "I'm just a glorified extra, Fred. I'm a dead man anyway. If I'm going to die, I'd rather go out a hero than a coward."

Fred grinned. "Maybe you're the plucky comic relief, Guy. Ever think of that?"

Guy hadn't.

Fred patted him on the shoulder. "Besides, I just had a very interesting idea ..."

Sarris stood at the observation window of his ship, idly watching a drifting piece of space debris.

Lieutenant Lathe rushed in and saluted. "General, I have just received word that the Commander of the *Pro-rector* and his crew have escaped from custody. Their whereabouts are unknown."

"What?" Sarris turned on the transport chief, his eyes cold with rage. "I ordered the guards to send them out the air lock!"

The tumbling piece of space debris grew closer.

SPLAT!

A body hit the window, like a bug on a summer night. Sarris saw his guard's face, frozen in horror. "Find them!" the alien general shouted.

"But, sir," Lathe protested. "My men! The core im-plosion is not reversible!"

Sarris was unmoved. His voice took on the chill of death. "Find them!"

Duck.

Run.

Duck.

Run.

Made it! Jason and Gwen both smiled queasily and exchanged high fives. Jason looked back at the rotating robot arms that had almost clobbered them.

"We've cleared the robot arms," he said into his vox. "Now what?"

Several hundred thousand light-years away, in his up-stairs room, Brandon consulted his advisors.

He had logged onto a conference video call, and his entire *Galaxy Quest* club was in virtual attendance—occupying individual tiny windows on the screen of his computer.

Katelyn, the only girl in the club, filled out her Tawny Madison uniform a little too much below, and not quite enough above. But this was no time to be nitpicking ...

"Okay, Brandon," she said. "As I calculate it, the shortest route is down the ladder near the quark accel-erators."

"I concur," said Kyle from his window.

"She's right... very good!" echoed the others.

"High five, Katelyn!" said Brandon, slapping his screen.

The others did the same.

Virtually the same, anyway.

The ladder part was easy.

At the bottom, a beam made a narrow bridge across a pool of molten metal.

Gwen looked at Jason and gave him a thin smile. *You first, Commander.*

Jason started across. "Brandon," he said into his vox.

"Yes, Commander?"

"In case I die, there's something I have to know."

"Yes, Commander?"

"What exactly does the Omega Thirteen *do*?"

"This is a fiercely debated topic on the Internet news-groups," said Brandon. "Most believe that it is a matter collider, a bomb capable of destroying all matter in the universe in thirteen seconds."

Gwen started across the beam after Jason. The glow-ing molten liquid below was broken by huge bubbles. They looked like hungry mouths.

"But you don't?" Jason asked.

"No," said Brandon. "Myself and others are con-vinced that the Omega Thirteen is a matter REARRAN-GER, converting all molecules to their state thirteen-seconds previous, thus effecting a thirteen sec-ond time jump to the past."

Kyle broke in on the transmission. "But again, Bran-don. If all molecules were rearranged, then *everyone* would be back in time thirteen seconds—"

BLAM! KA-WHANG!

A magneto-bolt flashed by. Gwen ducked and almost fell. Jason pulled her to safety on the catwalk, and crouched down beside her, out of sight.

Sarris's uniformed thugs were at the door, leveling their weapons. Searching for a target...

"Okay, guys!" Jason whispered into his vox. "Guys?"

But the club members were too busy with their debate to hear him.

"No," said Katelyn, "because the brain of the person who triggers the Omega Thirteen is not affected, so THAT person still has his memory after the time jump. And everything is as it was—a chance to redeem a sin-gle mistake or misstep."

"Thank you, Katelyn," said Brandon. "Excellent!"

"You're welcome, Brandon," Katelyn said in what she thought of as her most seductive whisper.

"BRANDON!"

Jason's voice was imperious. "Time to go!"

"Yes, Commander!" Brandon brought his attention back to the map on his screen. "You're almost there! Just go through the chompers and over the pit."

"Chompers?" Gwen asked.

Jason pointed. Ahead of them was a gauntlet of hiss-ing hydraulic hammers. They slammed down within inches of the catwalk, in an erratic but rhythmic se-quence.

"Fuck that!" Gwen whispered.

BLAM! BLAM! KA-WHANG!

Two shots from behind changed her mind. She ducked as low as possible, moving toward the catwalk, while Jason fired back with the magneto-pistol he had taken from the guards at the air lock.

BLAM! KA-WHANG!

Sarris's thugs ducked. They were slowed ... but still coming.

"Brandon?" Jason shouted into his vox. "How do we get through this thing?"

Brandon was already on the case. On his conference line, he asked, "Hollister, do you have the sequence yet?"

In another suburban house, another club member was watching a *Galaxy Quest* video, viewing and then re-versing the same sequence over and over.

On the TV, a cheaper cardboard version of the "chom-pers" was pummeling an alien who was chasing Com-mander Taggart. The hammers struck, and the alien slipped and fell into the molten metal.

Hollister reversed, looked at his *Galaxy Quest* watch, and spoke into his computer mike.

"Okay, Brandon, the sequence is two-two-four, two-three-eight, two."

"You're sure they repeat exactly like that?" Brandon asked. "It's sort of extremely important!"

Important indeed, thought Jason, who was listening to the exchange on his vox while he dodged the Sarris thugs'

blasters and studied the rising and falling hammers.

"What *is* that thing?" Gwen demanded. "It serves no useful purpose to have a bunch of CHOPPY CRUSHY things in the middle of a catwalk!"

"Gwen ..." Jason tried to pull her down, out of the way of the blaster shots.

"We shouldn't have to do this! It makes no sense! Why is it **HERE**?"

"Because," said Jason, "it was on the show."

"Well, forget it!" Gwen shouted defiantly. "I'm not going. This episode was badly written!"

BLAM! KA-WHANG!

They both ducked.

"Commander," said Brandon, "you and Lieutenant Madison will have to go through the crushers one at a time, in three-second intervals. Tell me when the first crusher hits the bottom of its arc."

"Okay—now!" said Jason. "But—"

"Wait another two seconds, and then go," said Brandon.

"Are you sure ... ?"

"Lieutenant Madison, GO!" said Brandon.

Gwen hesitated. Jason pushed her. "Go!"

"Now you, Commander," said Brandon. "Go!"



R

un!" "Stop!"

"Left!"

"Right!"

Gwen dove between the falling hammers as Brandon called out instructions, based on Hollister's timing of the old video.

So far, so good, Jason thought, as he followed her. But the error margin, small as it was, seemed to be growing.

On one sequence, Gwen's sleeve got caught, and she barely had time to pull it loose—before a falling hammer obliterated the space where she had stood only seconds before.

Jason dropped the magneto-blaster out of his holster. He made the mistake of trying to rescue it—and pulled back his hand just as the pistol was being pulverized.

And the last of the chompers was behind them. They were about to congratulate one another when ...

"Flame jets. Up!" said Brandon.

"What?" Jason pulled Gwen out of the way just as searing flames shot across the catwalk, singeing her hair.

"Whoever wrote this episode should DIE!" Gwen muttered.

"This way!" said Jason, opening a small door.

He pulled Gwen through and the door closed behind them.

They were in total darkness.

"What the hell!" said Jason. "Brandon! Where are we?"

"Don't know," said Brandon. "This part of the ship is completely undocumented."

"Great!" said Gwen. "Just great!"

The shouting and shooting in the bowels of the ship was unheard in the upper levels.

Here all was peace and quiet.

And quietest and most peaceful of all was the Digital Conveyor Room.

Fred and Guy entered, and were surprised to find Lali-ari. She had hidden here from Sarris's thugs.

They explained the situation to her as they locked the door behind them.

Guy and Laliari watched with mounting anticipation as Fred sat down at the control panel. Fred was his calm, unruffled self again. "This should be interesting," he said.

He adjusted the coordinates. The monitor showed a lumpy shape that resolved itself into the shape of a giant.

A rocky giant.

It was the rock monster, still enraged, stupidly stum-bling across the planet below, looking for the soft crea-tures that had infuriated him with their noise and vibrations.

Fred got the monster in the "upload" crosshairs of the Digital Conveyor. He connected the "download" end to the ship's Environmental Systems Room.

He grinned at Laliari and she grinned back.

All systems go.

Fred pressed button D.

For "digitize."

On the unnamed planet far below, a shambling monster began to shimmer and then to disappear.

At the same instant, in the Environmental Systems Room of the *Protector*, the thugs guarding the atmos-pheric release valve looked up to see a huge, shimmer-ing, angry monster materializing in their midst.

It fell to the floor, crushing several thugs. The rest screamed and rushed for the narrow door.

Fred, Guy, and Laliari watched on the viewscreen. Fred's smile widened as the rock monster crushed and swatted and thrashed and squashed thug after thug.

"It's the simple things in life you treasure," he said,

Laliari looked at him adoringly.

Fred stared back... and they fell together in a wild embrace. As they kissed passionately, Laliari's human form and her Thermian form flickered in and out...

Guy caught a glimpse of what seemed like tentacles among their thrashing limbs as Fred and Laliari sank to the floor, tearing at each other's clothing.

"Okay," Guy said, embarrassed. "Time to go. Hey!"

The clinch was getting hotter and hotter.

"Oh, my! Get a room, will you?"

On the viewscreen—which no one was watching—the rock monster chased Sarris's thugs out of the Environ-mental Systems Room, and down a corridor to the outer hull of the ship.

They turned, trapped, and fired their blasters ineffec-tually as the monster rushed them.

Scattering thugs like bowling pins, the monster crashed through the hull of the ship and spun off into space.

"*Trakahau gra fuyter!*" the monster exclaimed hap-pily as it sailed off through the emptiness of outer space, into infinity.

"Sweet tranquility at last!"

Oooieewwee! ooooweee!

"HULL BREACH! HULL BREACH!" the ship's computer announced.

While the self-repairing hull sealed itself, Fred and Guy raced to the now empty Environmental Systems Room.

Together, they spun the great wheel, closing the valve that was draining the air from the prison area on Level C.

On the wall, the dial moved from minus toward nor-mal.

Meanwhile, Quellok and Alexander had almost broken through the sealed door into the prison area.

The readout of the wall was moving from minus to-ward normal.

"Sir! The pressure is normalizing!"

"Open!" Alexander commanded, as the door crashed inward.

He ran down the corridor and pulled a switch marked

EMERGENCY.

All the cell doors opened at once.

The Thermians inside were rising to their feet, gasp-ing for air. A few staggered out.

"We are saved!" they shouted. "He has saved us!"

Alexander blushed, preparing to feign modesty.

"Commander Taggart has saved us!" the Thermians cried. "Long live Taggart!"

Alexander shook his head and muttered, "It's just NOT fair!"

But there was no time for regrets—or envy. "Quel-lek!" Alexander called out. "Let's get back to the Com-mand Deck!"

Quellok was helping his shipmates out the door, into the corridor. He nodded on hearing Alexander's call, and started toward him, when—

BLAM! KA-WHANG!

One of Sarris's thugs was at the far end of the corri-dor, firing a magneto-blaster! Quellok's chest turned bright red. He looked down, horrified, and began to fall. "I'm shot!" "Quellek! Quellok!" Alexander caught him in his arms and pulled him back, out of the doorway. He bent down and quickly opened Quellok's tunic—and winced when he saw the gaping wound. Closing his eyes for a moment to concentrate, he summoned all his acting ability to hide the truth. "It's not so bad," he said, "We'll get you to Medical. You'll be fine." Quellok shook his head. "I don't think I'm going to make it, sir!" "Don't talk like that, son," said Alexander. "We're going to get you fixed up." Quellok wasn't listening. His eyes were glistening as he said, "It has been my greatest honor to serve with you. Living by your example these years, my life has had meaning. I have been blessed. I... I..." He grimaced in pain. "Don't speak, Quellok," Alexander told him, his voice thick with emotion. "You'll forgive my impertinence, sir," said Quellok weakly. "But even though we had never before met, I always considered you as a father to me." He choked and blood appeared at the corner of his mouth. Alexander looked into his eyes and took his hand. "Quellek," he said, choking back tears, "by Grab-thar's hammer, by the suns of Warvan, you shall be avenged!" Quellok's eyes opened one last time. With a contented smile, he fell into that darkness that awaits all creatures, human and alien. A cry of pain ripped from Alexander's throat and tears of rage mixed with tears of sorrow on his cheeks. The tears were real. Alexander stood. He saw Sarris's thug reloading at the end of the corridor. The thug fired ... BLAM! KA-WHANG! Alexander didn't even bother to duck. He felt, for the first time, the true depth of Mak'tar rage as he began to move down the corridor, slowly at first, then faster and faster, his eyes burning with desire for vengeance. BLAM! KA-WHANG! The guard fired again. And again. BLAM! KA-WHANG! But by now Alexander was upon him, throwing him to the floor and roaring like a carnivore—his roar almost drowning out the thug's last pathetic words: "Mother..."



D

arkness. Emptiness.

Then ... something.

"Brandon!" said Jason. "I found a wall."

"Good!" Brandon sighed in relief. "That means you are at the blast tunnel. Now use the computer to open the blast sections in sequence."

Gwen was standing right behind Jason. She looked up, sightlessly, into the darkness.

"Computer, open the first blast section."

A thick block of wall groaned and slid straight up, admitting a dim light.

The tunnel revealed was only about ten feet long.

"Computer," said Gwen, "open the second blast section."

Another section of wall raised, revealing still more tunnel.

THUD THUD THUD!

Sarris's uniformed thugs were approaching. Their footsteps sounded as menacing as gunshots.

Jason took Gwen's hand and started to run through the blast tunnel, while Gwen chanted orders that streamed upward like prayers.

"Computer, open sections fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen..."

Jason dragged her through them as they opened, one by one, like a cabdriver hitting the lights on a long avenue.

Except this cabdriver was being chased!

The final block of wall rose open just in time for Jason and Gwen to slide under it. They found themselves in a small, round room with a console in the center.

On the console, an amber light was blinking, faster and faster.

"DETONATION IN SIXTY SECONDS," intoned the ship's computer emotionlessly.

"Sixty seconds," Gwen repeated.

"Okay, Brandon," Jason said into his vox. "I think this is it."

"Okay, lift the flap," Brandon told him from his sub-urban bedroom several hundred thousand light-years away. "There should be two wires."

Jason lifted a metal flap to reveal two wires, one brown and one blue—labeled BROWN WIRE and BLUE WIRE.

A wire cutter was placed conveniently beside them.

"Oh," said Gwen. "I remember this show!"

"Commander," Brandon asked, "do you have wire cutters?"

Jason had to laugh. "As a matter of fact, I do. So which one—"

BLAM! KA-WHANG!

Sarris's thugs were at the door. Two of them. "Raise your hands! Now!"

Ooops, thought Gwen as she raised her hands. / *guess I should have closed the blocks behind us.*

"FORTY-FIVE SECONDS, FORTY-FOUR SECONDS, FORTY-THREE..."

Jason raised one hand and reached for the wire cutters with the other. "Listen, hold on ONE SECOND while I clip a wire. Then we'll talk."

BLAM! KA-WHANG!

Jason raised both hands.

"You don't understand!" said Gwen. "The ship is going to explode!"

The taller of the two thugs shook his ugly head, a sly look on his foul face. "The general warned us of your tricks."

Gwen studied his remarkably unsavory visage. He seemed to be in charge. "You must be the smart one," she said, with what she hoped was a winning smile. "And so tall!"

Swaying with what she hoped was a trans-species seductiveness, she moved between the two uniformed thugs.

Jason watched, astonished ... and a little jealous.

The shorter of the two things raised his blaster, but Gwen brushed it aside with a fingertip move she had seen in an ancient Bette Davis movie. "Relax. This is between me and handsome here."

She raised her hand to the head thug's head "May I?"

Without waiting for an answer, she began to stroke the tendrils that passed for hair. "Mmm, so soft!"

The second thug protested again. "Gar, our orders are to kill them."

"In due time," Gar answered. His eyes were closed, like a cat's. His tendrils were undulating under Gwen's touch.

"Gar!" said Gwen. "Is that your name? It's always been one of my favorites."

Gar opened his crepuscular compound eyes and stared at her with undisguised, unfathomable, and distinctly unhuman lust.

Gwen shuddered. And smiled.

The second thug protested once again. "Gar, this is sick! It is as if to seek pleasure with an animal..."

Gwen flipped a dismissive thumb at him while continuing to stroke Gar's tendrils. "He's not too popular with the ladies, is he? Maybe he could leave us alone for a while. Just you and me."

Gar's answer was as cold as his smile. "No, alien slut. On my planet, we share."

He reached for her and motioned to his partner. They both began to move in on her.

Jason started to lunge, but Gwen was already in control.

"Computer," she said, looking up at the ceiling, "we're going to need some privacy. Close Blast Section Twenty-nine, please."

THUMP!

The section fell, instantly crushing both of the thugs.

Jason grimaced ... and smiled.

Gwen knelt down to examine the blue-black goo that was oozing from under the block. "See?" she said to Jason, over one shapely shoulder. "Nobody takes me seriously in this thing."

She spoke to the goo. "Now how are you feeling?" she asked. "Do you take me seriously NOW? DO YOU?"

Jason watched admiringly, then turned aside. He had other things to do.

"FOURTEEN SECONDS, THIRTEEN SECONDS, TWELVE..."

"Okay, Brandon," Jason said into his vox. "Which wire? Brown or blue?"

No answer.

"Brandon?"

• • •

"Brandon?"

The voice came over the vox in the upstairs bedroom, but there was no one to listen.

Brandon was downstairs, taking out the garbage.

His mother stood watching, her hands on her hips.

"Mother!" Brandon protested as he wrestled with the first of three large cans. "I cannot stress the severity of the Commander's predicament!"

"I know, honey," she said. "And don't forget the re-cyclables."

Gwen looked on nervously as Jason moved the wire clippers from the blue wire, to the brown wire...

"Which was it?" she asked. "Which wire did you cut that day? I can't remember!"

"FOUR SECONDS, THREE SECONDS, TWO ..."

Jason smiled. "It was the color of your beautiful eyes," he said as he clipped the brown wire.

The counter stopped at TWO.

Relieved, Gwen returned his smile. "I can't believe you used to get me with lines like that."

"Used to?" Jason teased. He set down the wire cutters and turned to go.

But something was bothering him.

It was the TWO.

He touched the two wires together briefly, moving the counter to ONE ...

Gwen gasped—then laughed. *Always grandstanding!*

She took his offered hand, and they ran off to find the others.

All was confusion and dismay on Sarris's ship.

"Sir!" said the alien general's intelligence officer, gen-uflecting with the elaborate obeisances of his kind. "The core detonation sequence on the *Protector* has been aborted."

"Impossible!" Sarris allowed himself a few delicious moments of rage before continuing. "Impossible! Lieu-tenant, lock a complement of implosion missiles onto the *Protector*. Blow her apart!"

"Yes, sir," said the munitions officer, saluting with the intricate displays of respect of his kind. "Right away."



J

ason and Gwen found the upper levels of the ship in chaos.

The Thermian crew members were hunting down the remnants of Sarris's uniformed thugs, capturing and dis-arming them before mercilessly squirting them out of the air locks.

And in the center of the action, striking mighty blows, dealing out death and destruction like a Viking berserker... was Alexander.

He had taken on the rage and fighting spirit of his character as he bounced thugs off the walls like pool balls—
CRACK! SPLAT! THUD!

Ugh! thought Gwen. *7s this Alexander Dane, who took five curtain calls as Richard the Third? Of course! He's in character as Lazarus at last!*

"Alex! Alex!" Jason said, grabbing his friend's arm. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," said Alexander, with a faraway look in his eye. "Good was done this day!"

"Okay, whatever," Jason shrugged. "Let's go, buddy. They can take it from here."

He dragged Alexander away from the fighting and they began to search for the rest of their *Galaxy Quest* shipmates.

"Anybody seen Tommy?" Jason asked as Fred and Guy joined them from a side corridor.

"Right here!"

Tommy was waiting in the doorway to the Media Room. He joined them and they all followed Jason at a run.

"Fred, get to the Generator Room! We've got to get the plasma armor up before Sarris finds out we've aborted the detonation!" Jason shouted.

"WARNING. ENEMY MISSILES LAUNCHED."

"They've launched," Gwen repeated.

"I think Sarris has already found out!" said Guy as he followed Jason and the others toward the Command Deck.

Moments later the original *Galaxy Quest* crew members were at their familiar battle stations on the Command Deck of the NSEA *Protector*.

"Forward view!" commanded Jason.

Sarris's hideous ship, spitting missiles, filled the viewscreens. Streaks of deadly light were seen heading straight toward the *Protector*.

"Armor up!" commanded Jason.

"Plasma armor engaged," said Guy.

And just in time ...

BAROOM! BAROOM!

The ship was rocked by the blast. But not injured! Guy was smiling proudly.

"Okay, Tommy," said Jason. "Go! Lose 'em! Into the mines!"

"Into the *mines!*" Guy, Gwen, and Alexander all asked at once.

"Pedal to the metal, Tommy!" said Jason.

Tommy grinned at the familiar phrase. His hours of watching the old videos had given him new confidence. "Pedal to the metal!" he confirmed, pushing the throttle levers forward.

"Oh God!" Guy whispered.

The forward viewscreen was filled with a cloud, no a galaxy, of small deadly mines.

Getting closer and closer...

Lathe looked at Sarris. Sarris looked at Lathe. "Follow them!" said Sarris. "Into the minefield. Go!"

The viewscreen on the Command Deck of the *Protector* was filled with mines, which seemed to be rushing at the ship, though in fact it was the ship that was rushing through the cloud of mines.

It was just like before. Only different.

This time there were no hits. The ship was *missing* the mines.

Tommy was bent over his controls, delighting in his newfound piloting skills.

"Doing good, Tommy!" said Jason. "Real nice!"

"Thanks," said Tommy. He was like a jockey. Small, concentrated, and intense.

"You think you could get any closer to those mines?" Jason asked.

"Closer?" Tommy thought Jason was joking at first. Then he smiled as realization dawned. He twisted the steering knob a few more degrees to the left. "I can try!"

Gwen looked at the two in alarm. "What are you do-ing?" She looked to Alexander, Fred, and Guy for sup-port. "What are they doing?"

• • •

"I've lost them!" said Lathe, Sarris's sinister sidekick. "The magnetism of the minefield is disrupting our in-struments."

Sarris was not pleased.

"Wait! There they are, General!"

"Get back on their tail," Sarris ordered.

"I can't sir!"

Sarris was DEFINITELY not pleased. "WHAT? Why not?"

"Because," said Lathe, "they're coming right at us."

Sarris was finally pleased. *The fools!* They could never match his armament face-to-face, mano-a-mano, or ship-to-ship.

"Fire at will!" he ordered.

BAROOOM!

The *Protector* was rocked by missile blasts, but Tommy kept the heading straight and true.

BAROOOM!

"We're getting hammered," said Guy. "Return fire?"

"No," said Jason. "Keep all energy to the armor."

As the two ships approached closer and closer on their collision course, Sarris's arrogant image appeared on the

viewscreen.

"Well, isn't this adorable," he taunted. "The actors have decided to play war with me!"

"Sarris's ship is accelerating toward us at mark two," said Gwen.

"Accelerate to mark four, Tommy," snapped Jason.

"Mere actors!" said Sarris. "It's embarrassing, really. I shan't tell this story when I return home."

"He's accelerating to mark six!" said Gwen.

Jason pointed to Tommy. "Mark twelve!"

The viewscreen toggled to an overview:

The two ships roared toward each other, ripping apart the emptiness and silence of interstellar space with a crescendo of noise, speed—and imminent collision!

• • •

The viewscreen toggled back to Sarris. His beady eyes were like chips of ice from the moons of Pluto, where the cold often dips below absolute zero.

"I will remind you," he said. "I am a general. I have seen war and death as you cannot imagine. If you are counting on me to blink, you are making a very deadly mistake."

"Let me tell you something, Sarris," Jason responded. "It doesn't take a great actor to recognize a bad one. You're sweating."

And it was true. Jason watched the drop of sweat drip off the alien's burly, barbarous brow, onto his knobby nose.

Jason smiled.

"Forward FULL!" Sarris shouted.

Gwen tugged at the sleeve of Jason's tunic. "Armor almost gone!"

"Ten seconds to impact," Alexander reported coolly. "Nine, eight..."

"You fool," said Sarris, recovering his composure. "What you fail to realize is that without your armor, my ship will tear through yours like tissue paper."

"Yeah," said Jason. "And what you fail to realize is that... I'm dragging mines."

Sarris's eyes lit up with horror as he realized he had walked—rocketed, actually—into a deadly trap.

"Oh, no!"

Gwen turned to look at the rear viewscreen. The *Protector* was towing a growing cluster of mines, like deadly ducks.

She turned to Jason, astonished—but not really. "I never doubted you for an instant!" she proclaimed. And it may even have been true.

"Tommy," Jason commanded. "Ninety-degree turn to port."

Everyone held on to their grav-chairs as Tommy twisted the dial. Rivets popped and bulkheads groaned as the great ship suddenly changed direction.

The mines weren't so agile. They continued straight on toward the alien warship.

Sarris screamed: "No! Turn! No!" What seemed to be his last moments of life were in full view on the viewscreen as he dove for the deck.

The original *Galaxy Quest* crew members (plus Guy) all winced as the mines ripped the alien warship into a million pieces, sending fragments in all directions.

The moment of silence for their adversary lasted about a millionth of a second.

Then Jason raised a clenched fist, and the long corridors of the *Protector* were filled with joyful noise as the cheers from the Command Deck were echoed by the Thermians throughout the ship.

"Yes!" said Gwen.

"Yeah!" said Tommy.

"Damn!" said Alexander.

"We did it!" said Guy.

The door lensed open and Mathesar limped in on metal crutches.

He was still in his human form, with casts and band-aids on every limb.

"Mathesar, you're alive!" said Jason. "Thank God."

Mathesar nodded, and gingerly sat down. Then he stared at Jason and began to laugh.

Jason's smile faded. "What are you laughing at?"

"Your cleverness!" said Mathesar. "The ship is a model... as big as this ..." He held his two hands a foot apart. "A very clever deception indeed!"

Gwen and Alexander looked at Mathesar, and then at each other. Speechless.

Mathesar folded his hands and relaxed. All was right with his world. He was a believer to the end.

Tommy mercifully broke the silence. "Set a course for home, Commander?"

"You can do that?" Jason asked.

Tommy shrugged. "It's point and click. This thing practically flies itself. We will have to go through that black hole, though."

Black hole? They all looked up at the viewscreen.

There it was, like a whirlpool of nothing—an inky blackness even blacker than space. A vortex of void.

Jason looked around the Command Deck. "Anyone have any objections?"

Alex, Gwen, and Guy all exchanged glances . . . and shrugs. They had been through it all. What was left to fear? "Let's do it, Tommy!" said Jason. Tommy put his hand on the controls and looked up. "Commander? Call me Laredo." Jason nodded and squared his already square shoulders. "Mark twenty—into the black hole, Laredo!"



A

s defined by Stephen Hawking, a black hole is a singularity in space-time, a collapsed star with gravity so powerful even its own light falls back into it.

No one knows what it is like inside a black hole, since no light, no energy, or matter of any kind—and therefore no information—can ever escape.

Therefore we have no idea what it was like for the crew of the *Protector* as they hurtled through the black hole.

Did the hull creak and groan? Did rivets pop? Did windows shatter?

Did Jason regret his decision? Did the others regret their faith in their commander?

Did the stars themselves wink temporarily out of existence? Did time reverse itself and molecules dance like bugs on a pond?

We'll never know. We don't even know how the *Protector* managed to get *out* of the black hole, once it had gone in. Since no information can escape a black hole, that information is, by definition, unavailable.

All we can do is take the word of the original *Galaxy Quest* crew (plus Guy) that it was indeed "pretty weird." And rejoin the crew as they emerge safely on the other side.

"We're out!" Gwen cried happily.

"We're alive!" said Guy.

"We made it!" said Tommy. "Commander, we made it!"

"By Grabthar's hammer," intoned Alexander. "We live to tell the tale."

Even the ship's computer had come through. The entire crew breathed a collective sigh of relief on hearing that toneless but strangely soothing voice: "SYSTEMS REGISTER FUNCTIONAL."

"All systems are working, Commander!" said Gwen, with a twinkle in her eye, surprised to find that she was actually enjoying repeating after the computer.

"How fast are we going, Tommy?" Jason asked.

Tommy stared at the digital displays and analog dials on his console. They were a blur.

"Pretty fast," he said.

Jason looked up at the viewscreen. There was "Old Blue Eyes," the Earth—getting larger and larger by the minute as the *Protector* hurtled toward it.

"Jason," said Alexander, "there's one troubling thing." Before we entered the black hole, my instruments detected a strange energy surge from Sarris's ship, similar to—"

Jason cut him off with a raised hand. "No time to worry about that, Alex. Tommy, let's get this thing slowed down before we hit atmosphere. Gwen, see if you can calculate a reentry point. Guy, get down to Medical and make sure the injured are secured. Also, let's—"

He stopped as the Command Deck door lensed open.

Fred stepped through. He was walking with a slight limp, and he had a strange smile on his face.

"Fred, what are you doing up here?" Jason asked. "You should be in the Generator Room until we ..."

Fred drew his magneto-blaster and leveled it at Jason.

Jason looked confused. "Fred ... ?"

Fred fired.

BLAM! KA-WHANG!

Jason staggered backward, then looked down at the bloodstain spreading across his chest.

He staggered forward, grabbing at Fred—then fell. As he collapsed to the floor, his hand brushed the appearance generator on Fred's utility belt.

zZZAzzZZAPppPAAA!

Fred's form flickered, then faded, reverting to its true appearance—

Sarris! Scarred and bloody, but still alive.

And still deadly!

With a broad smile on his vicious visage, Sarris raised his magneto-blaster pistol and fired.

BLAM! KA-WHANG!

Tommy went down, sprawling across the console while his hands pushed the throttles forward.

The engines roared!

BLAM! KA-WHANG!

Mathesar went spinning into the wall, his crutches fly-ing.

Jason pulled himself to his knees. He was weak from loss of blood, He could barely believe what he was see-ing.

The show had never ended like this!

Gwen rushed toward Jason but Sarris saw her and—

BLAM! KA-WHANG!

She fell in a heap.

Noooo! Jason moaned, turning her over. Her side was bloody ... a direct hit. Her eyes flickered ... and died.

Nooooo! Jason struggled to stand.

Alex reverted to his warrior nature and rushed Sarris, roaring with carnivorous rage.

BLAM! KA-WHANG!

He was hit in the neck. He fell...

The floor shook. Harder and harder.

Jason looked up at the viewscreen.

The *Protector* was hitting the earth's atmosphere, and far too fast. They were only seconds away from a crash. Even Sarris was frozen in terror, watching the approach of doom.

"Mathesar... ?"

The Thermian groaned. "Yes, Commander?"

He opened his eyes and saw Jason, struggling to stand in the center of the Command Deck.

Jason swayed. He clutched the back of a grav-chair. His voice was weak ... almost inaudible. But it still had the unmistakable steel of command.

"Activate ... the ... Omega Thirteen."

Mathesar crawled to Tommy's console and pushed a button. A trapdoor appeared in the exact center of the Command Deck.

Overhead, the viewscreen showed a familiar American coastline. The wind screamed and the ship shook as it plunged through the thickening atmosphere toward certain destruction.

The trapdoor slid open.

A chrome, steel, and plastic device—*unlike any other ever built*—rose slowly out of the hole. The Omega 13 was midway in size between a jukebox and a slot machine. All its tubes and conduits were external, and transparent.

On its side was a long chrome lever.

Jason reached for the lever. Weak from loss of blood, he wrapped his fingers around it.

He turned to say good-bye to his shipmates. But those who weren't already dead or passed out were watching the forward viewscreen.

What had been a planet, then a continent, was now a city. Skyscrapers, concrete, streets filled with innocent people ... getting closer and closer...

Summoning all that was left of his strength, Jason pulled the Omega 13 lever.

The world went white.

And then ...

BAAARRRRROOOOOOOOM!

W

e're out!" Gwen called out happily. "We're alive!" said Guy.

"We made it!" said Tommy. "Commander, we made it!"

"By Grabthar's hammer," intoned Alexander. "We live to tell the tale."

Jason looked around the Command Deck, then looked down at his chest. It took him a moment to remember where he was, what was happening.

Everyone was alive; everything was as it was thirteen seconds before. The Omega 13 had worked!

"SYSTEMS REGISTER FUNCTIONAL," intoned the ship's computer.

"All systems are working, Commander!" said Gwen, with a twinkle in her eye.

The earth was on the viewscreen—getting larger and larger by the minute.

Tommy was staring at the spinning dials on his console. "We're going pretty fast, Commander," he said. "Should I slow down?"

Jason got up and started walking quickly toward the door.

Tommy looked after him, surprised. "Jason, we're going pretty damn fast! Shouldn't I—"

"Jason?" asked Gwen.

Jason ignored them. He reached the doorway just as Fred lensed through, strange smile and all.

Fred's smile disappeared as Jason's fist hit his jaw dead center, sending him flying across the deck.

He hit a chair, spun, bounced off, striking his appearance generator. He shimmered and flickered, and hit the floor as—

Sarris!

Alexander and Gwen stared, confused.

Tommy and Guy stared, confused.

"Everybody stay put," said Jason, his voice calm. "Tommy, slow this thing down. Gwen ..."

Behind him, Sarris opened one eye. With a snarl, the unvanquished alien struggled to his feet and pulled his magneto-blaster and—

WHACK!

He was hit upside the head by a metal crutch.

He staggered backward. Mathesar limped forward with a satisfied smile.

Jason brushed past Mathesar with a nod. "I'll take it from here," he said as he dove at Sarris, and the two started punching away at each other.

"Oh my God, Jason!" yelled Tommy.

On the viewscreen, the *Protector* was hurtling straight into Earth's atmosphere at startling speed.

"We're too heavy," Jason grunted, as he struggled to get Sarris into a chokehold. "We'll hit the earth. We've got to release the Command Module!"

"Commander, at this speed?" said Guy. "It is most dangerous!"

"You're going to have to trust me on this!" Jason yelled as he twisted Sarris's arm behind his back. "Re-lease the Command Module!"

Gwen got Fred on her monitor. "Fred, get to C Level now," she yelled frantically. "We're separating!"

Fred—the real Fred (or rather a digital representation of the real Fred)—shrugged unconcernedly.

The *Protector* began to separate just as it hit the wispy outer fringes of Earth's atmosphere.

The main body of the ship skimmed the stratosphere and bounced upward, as a stone skips on a pond.

The Command Deck and the top levels (A through C) separated into a smaller, streamlined module, and dove straight down ... into the thick soup of clouds.



O

nly a few hundred miles away, less than a light-second actually, Brandon's parents were enjoy-ing a lazy Sunday afternoon.

As always, they spent Sunday with the *Los Angeles Times*.

Brandon's mother was working the crossword.

Brandon's father was reading the sports page.

In the background, the television chattered on, un-heard. A familiar picture appeared, even though no one in the room paid any attention to it.

It was a still of Jason Nesmith in his *Galaxy Quest* uniform.

"Has *Galaxy Quest's* Space Commander Jason Nesmith checked in or checked OUT? Jim Dapperson reports from the *Galaxy Quest* convention in Pasadena ..."

Jason's picture was replaced by a reporter in front of a convention center. A group of *Galaxy Quest* fans, some of them in uniform, waved dispiritedly at the camera from behind him.

"Hi, Marsha, it is the third day of the *Galaxy Quest* convention, and Jason Nesmith and his *Galaxy Quest* crew are no-shows at this event, much to the disappointment of the Questoids gathered here."

He held out his mike to a fan dressed as an alien warrior.

"We just really feel let down," said the fan. "I mean, the show is about sticking with your friend no matter what, and ... we feel abandoned."

He reached behind his mask to wipe away a tear. "It's hard."

The reporter leaned in closer with the mike. "Do you think he's in outer space?"

The fan drew back. "Are you mocking me?"

"Heh-heh," said the reporter. "Digitize me, Marsha!"

The news report cut back to the female anchor, who laughed the familiar anchorwoman's TV laugh.

Brandon's mother shook her head. She worried about her son. It was a harmless hobby, supposedly, but...

As if in response to her thoughts, Brandon appeared in the doorway in full *Galaxy Quest* uniform, with two boxes under his arm.

"Wait!" said his mother. "Where are you going with those fireworks?"

Brandon spoke breathlessly as he hurried toward the door. "The *Protector* got super-accelerated coming out of a black hole and it just hit the atmosphere at mark fifteen, which is pretty unstable of course, so we're going to help Laredo guide it in on the vox ultrafrequency carrier."

He paused and saw his parents both staring at him uncomprehendingly.

"The Roman candles are for visual confirmation," he finished.

"Okay, hon," said his mother, returning to her crossword. "Dinner at seven."

Brandon nodded and ran out the door.

Brandon's father looked at Brandon's mother.

She shrugged. "At least it's outside."

They both went back to the *Times*, not noticing the TV anchor who had just been handed a printout. "We interrupt this broadcast to report that an unidentified object has just entered the earth's atmosphere ..."

"Honey?" asked Brandon's mother.

"Yeah?"

"What's a six-letter word for 'dense'?"

Traffic is bad.

California traffic is worse.

And Southern California traffic is the worst of all.

The people jammed on the 134 were so blinded by road rage and dazed by road boredom that they didn't even notice the spacecraft that came flashing down over the Hollywood Hills. The few who looked up and saw it were either envious, or glad that *something* was mov-ing, or both.

A woman in an SUV was talking to her pet groomer on her cellular phone when she got a rogue signal.

"Hold course, Laredo!"

"I'm trying, Commander! Everything's a blur. But as long as I stay locked to that vox signal—"

A female voice broke in: "Tommy, those lights!"

"I see them, I see them..."

Something streaked overhead.

The woman shook her phone. "Mario, are you still there?"

Brandon had never stood so straight and tall.

He and the other members of his *Galaxy Quest* club stood in a line along Rose Boulevard in Pasadena, right outside the convention center.

Each one held a Roman candle in one hand and a vox in the other.

The Roman candles were shooting sparks into the twi-light.

The voxes were blinking faster and faster.

"Ooooooh!"

Something was coming.

"Aaaaahhh!"

It appeared over the horizon—a spaceship.

Brandon recognized it immediately as the front third of the *Protector*—the Command Module.

It was slowing, but still moving fast.

Brandon led the cheer as the module touched down on the street between the two parallel lines of fans.

Slowing, but still too fast!

It slid along the street, sending up a shower of sparks.

It was heading straight for the convention center!

The fans jumped back out of the way as the Command Module bounced up over the sidewalk, slid under the WELCOME SPACE TRAVELERS banner—and headed right for the convention center's wall of windows!

Inside, the emcee was mounting the stage to deliver his third (and hopefully final) apologetic speech, explaining that the crew of the *Protector* had unfortunately not been able to make it.

He looked out on a sea of bored and disappointed fans. "They could have at least called!" he muttered to himself as he picked up his mike.

Suddenly the crowd's expressions changed from bore-dom to ... terror? Anticipation? Horror? Delight?

All of the above.

The emcee turned just in time to see a gigantic space-ship come crashing through the wall of windows.

He dove to the floor.

• • •

The sound of breaking glass died out.

The dust settled.

The emcee opened one eye, then the other.

Jutting through the window, and onto the stage, was the graceful curved nose of a spaceship Command Mod-ule, bearing the familiar NSEA logo.

A door opened on the side of the ship.

The emcee stood up, brushing off his pants.

A familiar figure emerged, looking dazed and con-fused.

There was a ripple of applause as the fans who had hit the dirt all stood up.

The emcee grabbed his mike. "Lieutenant Laredo— Tommy Webber!"

The ripple became a roar.

A woman staggered out and stood beside him. Her uniform was in tatters.

"The beautiful Tawny Madison—Gwen Demarco!"

More cheers. A man climbed out of the ship. The emcee searched his memory and drew a blank.

"Uh ... another shipmate!"

The crowd fell silent as Guy gazed out over the crash site, looking confused. Then a smile appeared on his face, growing wider and wider. "I'm alive!" he said. "I'm the plucky comic relief!" he announced to gales of laughter. "I'm the plucky comic relief!"

The emcee blinked. The next crew member was fa-miliar—but he was not alone. With him was a creature even more beautiful than Tawny.

"The ship's Tech Sergeant Chen—Fred Kwan! And... a friend?"

Fred and Laliari both accepted the cheers of the fans, then ducked behind the ship for a kiss.

The next crew member to appear in the hatchway was greeted by a huge roar even before being announced by the emcee: "Dr. Lazarus of Tev'mek—Alexander Dane!"

Glowing with pleasure, Alex stepped to center stage. He held up one hand for silence. He was just about to speak when ...

CRASH!

Alex turned and saw Sarris, standing in the open hatchway of the ship, aiming his magneto-blaster at the crowd.

When a thousand people gasp at once, it makes a sound like a giant zipper, closing off all hope. Then the room fell deadly silent once again.

Sarris grinned, then grimaced—

Then fell forward, collapsing in a bloody heap.

Behind him stood Jason. His shirt was torn, his chest and arms were scratched, and in his hand he held a bloody dagger, dripping blood.

Sarris's dagger.

Sarris's blood.

The dagger rang like a bell as Jason flung it to the floor. Then he stepped across the alien's hideous body, to stand beside his friends and shipmates.

"Commander Peter Quincy Taggart!" the emcee announced over the cheers and roars of the crowd. "Jason Nesmith!"

Jason took his place with the rest of the crew (in the center, of course) and held up all their hands as the applause washed over them, bringing tears to all their eyes.

Except for Jason's. His eyes were busily scanning the room.

Finally he saw who he was looking for. Brandon and his *Galaxy Quest* club had just entered the hall at the rear.

Jason crossed his fists and raised them high.

Brandon returned the salute, his eyes shining with pride.

There was one more piece of business to take care of. Jason turned and grabbed Gwen. He took her in his arms and dipped her down for a passionate kiss.

Then he saw something out of the corner of his eye.

Sarris! The alien was struggling to his feet, magneto-blaster in hand.

With one swift movement, Jason dropped Gwen into Tommy's arms and grabbed the blaster from Tommy's belt. He hit the floor and rolled upstage, drawing Sarris's fire.

BLAM!

KA-WHANG!

Jason rolled to his feet and fired one shot—

KARRANG!

—hitting the alien square in his massive chest.

Sarris jolted back, looking down, surprised at the smoking hole in his chest.

The crowd froze, holding its breath for a second that seemed an eternity. And then—

BAROOM!

—Sarris exploded, spraying the ceiling, the walls, and the crowd with alien body parts, large and small.

No one complained. Everyone was too busy cheering.

Except for Gwen. She was seeing stars as Jason finished the kiss he had begun. She had a silly smile on her face when Jason released her and turned to face the cheering crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" the emcee announced. "Once again, Commander Peter Quincy Taggart... Ja-son Nesmith!"

While Jason held up his hands and led the fans in one last cheer, Gwen turned to her old friend Alexander. "He always has to make the big entrance," she whispered.

Alexander smiled. "By Grabthar's hammer, this is true!"

His shipmates and the fans all smiled with him. Actors and audience, united in the triumph of tolerance, peace, and love.

Except at the back of the hall, where two fans were arguing bitterly over a piece of memorabilia that had fallen to the floor between them.

Sarris's head. Almost intact, and certain to fetch a pretty price on eBay.

A few months later, or seasons, depending on your point of view, a young man sat in front of a TV.

A very young man. Five, maybe six at the most.

A new show came on. Bright colors, the latest special effects.

GALAXY QUEST: THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

The same stars were introduced, twenty years older but just as competent, as resolute: Tech Sergeant Chen, Dr. Lazarus, Tawny Madison, Laredo, Captain Tag-gart...

And a couple of new ones: Guy Fleegman as Crew-man #6, and Laliari (What was that last name?) as De-lilah Moon.

The Protector flashed past, heading for adventure among the stars.

The very young man raised his fist: "Never give up, never surrender ..."