

# The Universe at the Bottom of a Cereal Box

## Amy Sterling Casil

This novelette was originally published in the Fictionwise original anthology *Switch.Blade*, edited by the author. *Switch.Blade* featured “Connections,” by Matt Horgan, “Penny Lombard and the Heart Ken Found,” by Alan Rodgers, “Oh-Oh,” by Ron Collins and John C. Bodin, “Hell Week at Grant-Williams High,” by Vera Nazarian, “High-Stakes Test,” by James Van Pelt, “Nord’s Gambit,” by Tobias Buckell, “The Universe in the Bottom of a Cereal Box,” by Amy Sterling Casil, “Flunking the Assassin,” by Michael A. Arnzen, “Safe as the Dark,” by Lisa Silverthorne, “Why I Bring A Bag Lunch Now,” by Tom Gerencer — of which “Why I Bring A Bag Lunch Now” is the editor’s favorite.

*Switch.Blade* is still available via Fictionwise in all ebook formats.

Also featuring the high-quality digital art seen here: what a difference a few years and a Wacom tablet make!

The author also believes this story is best-described as “YA Larry Niven on Crack.”

The Universe at the Bottom of a Cereal Box

Amy Sterling

“I don’t care if you like it,” Shellie’s Mom said as she slammed two cereal bowls on the kitchen table. “You and your brother are eating breakfast together. Dr. Laura says it’s the right thing to do.”

Russell Truro looked over at Shellie through the greasy fringe of his rust-red hair and rolled his eyes. Ever since school let out for the summer Mom had one crazy idea after another to bring the three of them together.

“Cut it out, dickwad,” Shellie mouthed. Mom’s back was turned, so there was no chance that she’d see. As soon as Mom turned back, Shellie smiled sweetly at her.

“See!” Mom cried. “Your sister understands. Isn’t that right, Shellie?”

Shellie nodded.

“I hate you, Shellie,” Russell growled. Ever since his voice changed, he’d been experimenting with various tones and expressions that Shellie figured he thought were “mature” or “masculine.” Fat chance! No matter what he did, he couldn’t change the fact that he was a greasy, zitty ninth-grader with a sunken chest.

Shellie didn’t even have to say “Mom heard that.”

Eyes wide, Mom whacked Russell’s oily scalp and yelled, “Apologize to your sister!” Then she lifted her hand and peered at it, and looked back down at Russell’s head.

“Are you using Brylcreem?” Mom asked. “Is that the style now?”

Russell grinned, showing his awful silver teeth.

"He wouldn't know style if he got locked in the bathroom for six days with a stack of GQ's. He doesn't take showers, Mom," Shellie said in a calm, measured tone as she poured herself some orange juice.

"Eat your cereal before you drink the orange juice," Mom said.

"But orange juice tastes bad after cereal," Shellie said.

Mom's expression took care of that attempted resistance. Then she turned back to Russell. "You need to shower daily," she told him.

"But I do!" Russell cried.

This time, Shellie was the one who rolled her eyes. "Once a month," she mouthed.

"Shut up!" he retorted.

"I don't know how I can debate with you," Shellie said in crisp, clipped tones. "Your blinding intellect is just too much, Wussell."

"Shut your trap!" Russell grabbed the cereal box and filled a bowl to the brim.

"You can't put milk in now, Wussell," Shellie said. "It will spill. And I'm not cleaning it up."

At once, Mom turned, the corners of her mouth tight and wrinkled in grief and frustration. "I'm having a Power Bar on the way to work," she said in an agonized voice. "Thank you both once again for spoiling what should have been a lovely family meal."

Mom whirled and stomped toward the garage door before Shellie could say anything. Russell had already started to pour the milk in his cereal. Just as Shellie had predicted, the sugared miniature donuts bubbled over the top of his bowl and landed on the kitchen table with tiny plops.

"You're such a dick," Shellie said as she grabbed the box from him. "Now I have to clean it up."

"Now I have to clean it up," Russell mimicked.

"Wuss-ill," Shellie said. The box felt light — of course he'd wasted nearly all of it. "I was hungry, anus-face. Now there's like enough left for your stupid gerbil."

A quarter-cup of sugary O's spilled into Shellie's bowl, followed by a silver sealed plastic square.

"It's a prize!" Russell cried.

Shellie snatched the bowl from his clutches with blinding speed. "You got all the cereal," she said. "I get the prize."

"Shell-eee!" he whined.

"Russell, I swear to God, you act like you're three, not fifteen," she said.

He looked at her, pouting, as she fished the prize from the bowl and bit one corner.

"You'll break your teeth," he said in the tremulous growl that he thought sounded like Bruce Willis. Shellie had heard him practicing to the Die Hard movies a hundred times.

"It's just thin plastic," she said, then spit out the torn edge.

Slowly, Shellie tore the packet, making sure Russell saw the full effect. It wasn't that she cared about a cereal prize, of course. It was probably a plastic Scooby Doo hologram, or a Sponge Bob sliding puzzle. Even more likely, it was a cheap molded part to some weird toy that wouldn't be worth anything at all without buying fifty boxes of cereal to try to collect all the different pieces and assemble them.

"What is it?" Russell asked, his eyes greedy and wide.

"None of your business," Shellie said. There was another plastic packet inside the other, and she slit that with the edge of her fingernail.

It was a ring, made of some kind of iridescent plastic. No — it wasn't plastic. It had some weight to it, and it felt cool in the palm of her hand.

"Let me see!" Russell demanded.

"It's just a stupid ring," Shellie said, clamping the ring tight.

"I don't care," Russell said. "Let me see!" He scooted halfway around the table and grasped for her hand.

"Leave me alone, Plaque Creature," she said. She'd gotten way too close a look at Russell's mouth. She and Mom had both long since given up on warning him about what was going to happen when they finally took off his braces.

But Russell did get hold of the packet she'd discarded. He opened it and fished out a tiny booklet.

"There's instructions," he said.

"Like a ring needs instructions?" she asked.

"Ha!" he laughed, as he leafed through the booklet's tiny pages. "It says it's a Wormhole Key Ring."

"It is not a key ring," Shellie said. "It's a regular ring. It's not plastic, either. It's some kind of cheap, shiny metal."

Shellie opened her hand slightly and saw the metal glittering pink, purple and blue-green. It was kind of cool, she thought. It could even look like some kind of friendship ring from Hot Topic, she thought. In any case, it was one cereal prize Russell was never going to get his sweaty fingers on.

"It says it's a Imperium Wormhole Key Ring!" Russell cried. "Let me see it," he pled.

"No," Shellie said simply. "You ate the cereal, I get the prize. And that's —"

She got up from the table and held out her left hand. It was just a kid's ring, but Shellie's fingers were long and slender. She held out her left hand, admiring her nicely-polished dark blue nails, and slipped the ring on her left ring finger. The wedding finger! Ha! Well, some day, Shellie — someday. Maybe Billy would ask — maybe —

"Let me try it," Russell whined.

"When they get Icee makers in Hell, Russell," Shellie said.

Russell frowned. "I wonder what show that's from?" he said. "Imperium Wormhole? I never heard of that."

“If it is a show,” Shellie said. “Hard to believe you haven’t seen it. Maybe it’s from Grungedamn X-9000 or whatever it is that you watch all day and all night.”

“Gundam!” he cried.

“Oh, right,” Shellie said. “How could I forget?”

“No, they use different stuff,” Russell said. “They battle evil forces to save —”

“Russell, you’re fifteen. I can’t believe you still watch that crap. That’s for...”

Shellie began nervously twisting the ring. It was pretty tight on her finger, and it was beginning to itch.

“I have the instructions,” he said, holding up the tiny square booklet.

“For a ring?” Shellie asked again, still moving the ring around. If it didn’t quit itching, she’d have to take it off. And if it was off her finger, Russell had a much better chance of getting hold of it.

“It says to twist it three times clockwise,” Russell said. “Then it will unlock the wormhole.”

“Oh, right,” Shellie said. “I’m so —”

She twisted the ring again. Which way was clockwise anyway?

That way.

Imagine Russell, his greasy red hair blown back, mouth wide, face the color of new-thrown clay. This was infinitely gnarlier than any Gundam ever imagined.

Shellie became a silver girl, bathed in blinding all-colored light.

Russell watched as half their kitchen disappeared, along with Shellie.

“Shellie!” he cried. But it was already far too late. Just like it said in the instruction booklet, Shellie was on her

W O R  
M H O  
H O        L E        L Y  
S H        J        I T  
O U R  
N E Y

oOo

Shellie opened her eyes and grabbed her stomach, watching her fingers go right through her skin — her silver skin!

It felt like nothing — in fact, she felt like nothing, but she was conscious as the world swirled around her, like a cold, sickening mix of different Slurpee flavors in a giant cup. Only the cup was a tube that had no end, and the —

Swirling stopped, and Shellie felt like she was going to throw up, but she didn’t. And her body changed back from silver to its normal state, and even her L.E.I. jeans and green striped crop top reappeared.

“I didn’t even eat the cereal,” she whispered. All she’d had was half a glass of orange juice. How could she feel so sick?

“I fainted,” she said, blinking.

Where was Russell? Where was their kitchen? She was supposed to meet the Gruenwald twins at the mall in half an hour. It didn't look like she was going to make it.

Where was her pager? Upstairs on her dresser! She couldn't even —

“Welcome!” cried a booming, almost wet-sounding voice.

Shellie looked around again, blinking. She was having a horrible Willie Wonka dream. High above, she saw a glass ceiling made of octagonal panes. In the distance, a hazy purple form moved slowly out of a stand of weird trees unlike any she'd ever seen. Check — no, she had seen this type of thing before — those were definitely Willy Wonka trees. It seemed like the purple shape was what had said “welcome.” Now it was sort of hovering above ground and moving toward her alongside a brown river!

“I'm having a dream about making myself sick,” she said to herself. “I'm having a freaky dream because I passed out from some blood-sugar thing.”

“Welcome to the Imperium of Grundy!” the purple thing said. It was a lot closer now. “Welcome, Shellie Truro!”

“I really am going to be sick,” Shellie muttered, clutching her abdomen.

“Are you ready to play the game?” the purple thing asked in its damp, resonant voice.

Shellie squinted at it. Now it was halfway down the brown river through another stand of candy-fruit laden trees, crossing a pink patch of “grass,” and she could see it closely.

“You look just like that guy in Candy Land!” she cried. It wasn't Willy Wonka, she thought. Willy Wonka wore a three-piece velvet suit and his blond frizzy hair stuck out like he'd electrocuted himself and jammed on his top hat to cover up the problem. Willy Wonka sort of defined “bad hair day” and every time Shellie saw that movie, she felt a little better about her own unruly curls because there was like — no way — that it could ever get that bad. This guy was purple, fat, blobby, mottled and jelly-like — it wasn't even a guy at all.

It looked just like Plumpy, the hideous Candy Land thing. Shellie had babysat enough times that Plumpy's squat, distasteful form was etched into her brain. On the scale of Candy Land characters, Plumpy ranked right above the dreaded Mrs. Nut.

“If I'm going to have a nightmare while I'm passed out, why this?” Shellie wondered aloud.

“Three of our friends have paid to play a game with you, Shellie Truro,” the Plumpy-creature said. Shellie realized she was standing on a sort of proscenium, from which shining white stone steps led down into the Candy-Willy Wonka land. Somehow, she didn't want to go down those steps to get any closer to Plumpy or whatever he was.

But this being a dream, maybe her feet were just going to move anyway, whether she liked it or not.

She looked down at her feet, then back at Plumpy, as he began to heave his bulk up the right stairway, sort of floating a bit, then plopping back down, helping himself along by something that he extruded from his mottled purple midsection and making horrible noises that sounded just like... she couldn't think about it.

Plumpy's mouth extended from ear to ear, just like their neighbor's boxer. He was panting from the

exertion and he kept licking his lips with his bubbly-looking gray-pink tongue.

“Oh, my God,” Shellie said.

“Can you run fast, Shellie Truro?” the freak asked.

“I guess so,” she said, hardly believing that she was conversing with it — actually talking with Plumpy the Candy Land loser. She turned — there was nothing behind her but a blank wall. Moments earlier, that had been the stove in their kitchen — the refrigerator and the messed-up microwave. Shellie rubbed her eyes. Oh, right — like she was in some kind of blood-sugar coma, and rubbing her eyes was going to help.

“Here are our three friends,” the creature said, extending another thing from his midsection between lip-licks, clinging desperately to the frilly metal stair rail with the first extruded appendage.

“They have paid eighty million credits to the Imperium to play this game with you, Shellie Truro,” the creature said. “I assured them that this time, we had a healthy, quick and intelligent biped!”

“Biped?” Shellie said. But he had said healthy, quick and intelligent.

Three figures emerged from the nearest group of candy-bearing trees.

“Yes — as a sentient biped, you are ever so much more desirable than a quadruped, octoped, decaped and so-on,” Plumpy said.

“Why?” Shellie asked.

“Because your arms are free as you locomote, allowing you far more flexibility and even the possibility of self-defense!” Plumpy said, chuckling.

“Self defense?” Shellie asked.

“Yes,” Plumpy said. “You have a head start of —” and Plumpy paused here, “five of your minutes. Our friends here will not start hunting until that time. If you reach the far side of the enclosure and drink from the headwaters of our river,” and Plumpy gestured toward the brown stream, “You will be ‘home free’ and we will return you to your originating dimension through the wormhole.”

“What?” Shellie said.

“Time starts now,” Plumpy said. A moment later, he licked his lips, his horrible head swiveled all the way around to face the three creatures who’d emerged from the trees, and he made a nodding gesture, crying, “Go!”

Shellie looked at the three creatures. One was definitely a “quadruped” if she remembered her agriculture class correctly. He looked sort of like a piebald horse, but instead of one head, he had two that looked like long snakes with tiny human-like heads at the end of each, and he was holding some type of nasty-looking tube in his right “mouth.” There was a hump between his front shoulders. Maybe that was his “brain,” she thought. She remembered seeing a show where they talked about some dinosaurs having their real brains between their shoulders, with a walnut-sized ball of nerves in their tiny heads. Two-headed centaur, Shellie thought. How could a dream get this bad just from orange juice?

The second creature was definitely a “biped” and he certainly held a weapon. He had a mouth almost as wide as Plumpy’s, and his face was clay-colored and oilier-looking than Russell on an eight-day filth jag. Shellie grimaced; this thing didn’t even seem to have eyes. His greasy face was wrinkled like a Shar-Pei

dog. Maybe there were eyes somewhere in those folds. There seemed to be a nose somewhere in it, because he was wrinkling the wrinkles... snuffling. Mister Disgusting, she named this one.

The third figure seemed out of place. Plumpy the Candy Land refugee, the mangy double-headed centaur, and Mister Disgusting — but this was, well, she was sort of the wrong color to be a person, kind of a yellowish gold, but she seemed like a pretty lady. Shellie wondered how she got around like that without showing things that she should be keeping to herself — like, she just had two strips of fabric going straight up and down, barely covering her boobs. And some kind of biker-type chaps, only they were silvery gold, not black. But she wasn't the Good Witch, a biker babe, or Queen Frostine, the Candy Land heroine. She smiled up at Shellie with pointed National Geographic teeth. A quiver of arrows hung on her back, and a bow nearly as tall as she was slung over her shoulder.

“You can call me Diana,” the woman said in a high, clear voice. “And you should run now — you have already used up a quarter of your head start.”

Shellie frowned. A quarter? Let's see — that was a minute and 15 seconds — or was it a minute and a half? No, four times that would be six minutes, and Plumpy the lip-licker had said...

Shellie took a deep breath and began to run. She tore past Plumpy, shuddering as she heard his wet, disgusting grunts. He was so fat and so... diseased-looking.

Shellie ran past the two-headed centaur, who reared on his hind legs and said something in a high-pitched squeal; thank God she couldn't really understand. He was making smacking noises as he held that rod-weapon in his second mouth.

Mister Disgusting made nasty sounds, something like a laugh. And he was still snuffling.

The scariest one, even though she looked the most normal, was that Diana. Shellie didn't stop running, but she did back over her shoulder at the woman. She still had that sharp, pointy smile, and Shellie watched her slowly remove one of those long arrows from the quiver, then unslung the bow with an unhurried gesture.

“She's thinking of you as Plumpy,” the woman called back to the vile purple creature on the stairs. “Ha-ha — a perfect name! Greedy, fat, purple and degenerate. Plumpy!”

“My lady, my lady,” Plumpy said, his horrid chuckle echoing. Shellie turned away and ran as fast as she could, dodging between the weird candy trees.

Was it candy? It was hard to tell. It didn't smell like candy. The bright-colored “fruit” smelled somehow... medicinal. Maybe even like rubbing alcohol, or disinfectant.

“Half your time is gone,” Plumpy intoned.

Gee, thanks, Shellie thought. Mister Disgusting looked so out of control that he probably wouldn't wait for the time to be up to start after her anyway. What was she supposed to do? It looked like he had a laser cannon like the stupid things on that Gundam show Russell watched as he turned his brain into jello.

Shellie found an especially large tree with a gnarled trunk, and slipped behind it to catch her breath.

The Imperium... of Grundy? Plumpy the lip-licking freak? Eighty million “credits?” That would be a huge number of arcade games, even at one of the cheating, four- or five-credit a game ripoff places.

Shellie couldn't remember a Grundy in Candy Land. Nothing like that in Willy Wonka, either. This place resembled Wonka's kingdom, but it was a lot bigger. Shellie was already out of breath; she knew she

could do a six-minute mile, which meant that she... suddenly the bubbling brown stream just faded into the distance — like if Shellie ran all day, she'd never get there. Looking up again, she thought that the glass-paned dome would probably cover her entire town.

“This is bad,” she whispered.

“One of your minutes left,” Plumpy called, although his voice sounded more distant. The proscenium and the stairs looked pretty far away, Shellie thought, peeking back around the tree.

“Please let me wake up,” she said. “Please, please let Russell have a clue and call Mom. Call the ambulance. Please let this be some type of —”

“Forty-five of your seconds,” Plumpy said.

“Shut up, you big fat perver,” Shellie muttered.

She bit her lip and started running again.

“Time's up!” Plumpy cried. “Let the hunt begin!”

“That is so not fair,” Shellie said as she dodged between more of the bizarre trees. It couldn't have been forty-five seconds — more like five!

“I never said we would be fair, Shellie Truro!” Plumpy's voice boomed.

“I'm going to kick your big purple ass when I get the chance,” Shellie said. “You'll see!”

“I do not have an 'ass,’” Plumpy announced.

Shellie heard the wild cry that issued from the two-headed Centaur's free mouth echoing off the glass panes. And then a bright golden arrow whizzed right past her shoulder.

oOo

“I can't even eat candy before I die,” Shellie sniffled, looking around at the red and white-striped giant peppermints, the fruit-colored bubble blobs, and all the rest. She'd found another gnarled tree to catch her breath.

On the bright side, the two-headed centaur was slow and clumsy and Shellie could smell and hear Mister Disgusting from far away. So what if he was blasting the freakish candy trees to cinders with that Gundam-cannon?

So what?

Shellie looked at her right forearm. It would never heal right. It didn't hurt, not really. It had hurt at first, but now it stopped. She was in shock. She tried to remember health class. It was a third-degree burn. First degree was like a sunburn. Second degree was the skin layers. Third degree was all the way through the skin. There was no way that black, crusty stuff with weeping red underneath was anything but a third degree burn.

Thanks to Mister Disgusting. Thanks to Plumpy!

Shellie had started to think along the lines of getting that cannon away from Mister Disgusting. Somehow. If she climbed up in one of the trees...



She couldn't tell where that Diana was. That was the one that really scared her. Those arrows. That face — pretty until she smiled. Those sharp teeth.

Maybe the end of the brown river was closer. It was so hard to tell, looking up at that vast ceiling. Once the creeps caught up with her, she'd had to turn all kinds of different ways, and the whole place looked different.

Why hadn't she woken? Russell obviously had left her in a coma on the kitchen floor, going off to watch Gundam until he fell into another immobile stupor. Why had she fought so much with him anyway? Maybe if she'd just been a little nicer, he would have called Mom — done something! No, here she was stuck in this never-ending nightmare because she was in some kind of coma. Maybe she was dying on the kitchen floor, and she didn't even know it.

That was when Shellie started to cry.

A bright golden arrow streaked right toward her face; Shellie ducked, and it struck one of the giant peppermints hanging over her head.

The peppermint exploded in a shower of sparks. Shellie turned, throwing herself into a full somersault, catching a glimpse of Diana striding around a tree not twenty yards away, reaching back for another arrow.

Notching it.

Shellie looked up to see three low-hanging peppermints, each the size of a beach ball.

Peppermints didn't explode. They smelled minty, not weird, like rubbing alcohol or Russell's zit medication. She sniffed again. That wasn't exactly right. They didn't smell like... the gas station!

Shellie jumped and grabbed one of the peppermints with both hands. Her burned arm exploded with tearing pain. She hefted the mint, which felt weird and light, kind of like a beach ball, and tossed it toward the golden huntress, just as the bow sang and the arrow flew.

Right through the peppermint! And the whole thing went kaboom! It was like an Arnold Schwarzenegger movie. Or Die Hard.

Maybe Shellie wouldn't get any candy or get home safe, but that woman Diana's hair went up like one of her Mom's gel candles.

Shellie's eyes went wide — Diana turned madly, shrieking; the thin, tissue-like fabric of her sleazy outfit had caught fire.

"Run for the river!" Shellie cried. Well, if it was a dream, big deal, she thought. She really never dreamt violent dreams and she really didn't want to see this woman go up like a Roman candle. Just so long as she left Shellie alone — and Shellie could wake up.

It smelled like the time she put Mom's lighter to one of her fingernail clippings. Only stronger.

"Oh, no!" came Plumpy's voice.

"Run!" Shellie said. "It's right over there!" She stepped forward and pointed around the trees.

Shrieking, Diana the huntress threw down her bow, and arrows scattering, ran for the brown river.

"No! No!" Plumpy said again.

Shellie smelled Mister Disgusting.

The whole tree exploded behind her. All Shellie could do was crouch and try to curl into a tiny ball. The force of the blast sent her rolling in a somersault, and the heat scorched the small of her back.

Not my crop top, she thought. She paid \$25 for that crop top; one whole shift at Hot Topic.

Through slitted eyes, Shellie caught a flash of the golden huntress, flames licking all over her, jumping.

Diana's body arced, graceful and horrible at the same time.

"No!" Plumpy screamed in his echoing, wet voice. What was he doing? Flying overhead like a hot air balloon?

Maybe she could pop him and he'd explode like one of those incendiary peppermints, Shellie thought.

Diana's outstretched arms hit the brown stream. She dove, and flames streaked in all directions, like a hundred fiery snakes slithering through the water.

"Oh, my God," Shellie said.

A blast from Mister Disgusting's cannon showered her with hot dirt and pink blades of grass.

Nothing was going to stop him. Obviously. And where was that two-headed centaur?

A high-pitched squeal told Shellie where he was — to her right. Mister Disgusting was stalking closer and closer on the other side, his nose-fold snuffling, his big, ugly mouth making something like a laugh.

Shellie rolled again, and got her feet underneath her. Just like cheerleading camp, she told herself. Remember, how to get up — she flexed her thighs and she was standing. In a breath, she was running, dodging. Boom! Another peppermint exploded feet from her shoulder.

The centaur seemed to stop, turning around, its clumsy heads battling with each other. Shellie could not believe it, but one of the heads stretched in her direction, while the other whipped the opposite way — the one with the weapon. A tree behind the centaur started to shake, then fell all to pieces, bark first, peppermints last.

"Nasty," Shellie said, turning and running like mad.

Shellie nearly tripped over another fallen peppermint. Gritting her teeth, she planted one foot, and kicked it toward Mister Ugly, who was stumping along after her.

His big mouth cracked open and a high-pitched, desperate cry came out.

"Dang!" Shellie said. He was afraid of it! It slowed him down, long enough for her to spot another tree that she could reach if she tried hard enough. The flames had swept up and down the brown river as far as she could see, and the heat was terrible. It was some kind of oil river, she thought. Ha-ha, wasn't that funny? Back to when she was a little kid, and thought everything was candy. Everything bright and...

If those peppermints exploded, what did the fruit-colored bubbles do?

She saw a blackish, person-shaped thing in the river, too, just traveling down along the stream.

Oh, no, Shellie thought. But there was no time to feel sad about it.

She reached the tree, and got hold of one of the bright fruit-globes. Something was sloshing inside of it; Shelly was relatively certain that it wasn't juice. She was dimly aware of the deep throbbing burn on her forearm, and she felt pretty sick about the flapping shreds on her back — that was it for the crop top.

Mister Disgusting had done that.

“Eat this, you freak!” Shellie cried. And she dropped the fruit-globe and gave it her best soccer-style kick.

He made the same high-pitched cry, and he tried to dodge — but he was as fast as any fat fourth grader, and the fruit-globe slammed into his mid-section.

Shellie's mouth dropped. The fruit-globe tore through Mister Disgusting like he was jello, leaving a gaping semi-circle behind.

“Oh, my God,” she whispered. This time, she really meant it.

Mister Disgusting crumpled, falling to the weird pink grass, his remaining side flopping around horribly.

Inside Shelly's head, a little voice said, “there is no way, under any circumstances, that you could dream this, Shelly Truro. You always hated sci-fi. You never even watched Gundam. You drew moustaches with a grease pencil on that wrinkle-headed Star Trek guy on geeky Freddy's notebook. You don't barely even know what to call that two-headed horse thing! Centaur! Where'd you get that? You slept through Mrs. Stangbaum's mythology lessons. So how'd ya come up with that Diana name? Sure, maybe this is twisted Willy Wonka Candy Land, but...”

Mister Disgusting was mewling like a hurt kitten.

“Oh, sick,” Shellie said, even as she crept toward the fatally-wounded creature.

“I'm — I'm going to take your gun, okay?” she told him. “You won't be needing it any more.”

The slick gray flaps on his face parted and Shellie saw two pale, sad-looking blue eyes.

“I'm really sorry,” she told him. “I didn't know what that thing would do.” Well — you figured it would do something bad, Shellie, she told herself.

One of his hands reached up; she noticed he had only three thick fingers. Like a cartoon. Only not. Each had a square, thick nail almost like a piece of horn. The mewling noises grew faint.

“I am really, really sorry Mister,” she said.

Now she'd killed the huntress woman, Diana — made her into a human (no, not human, Shelly reminded herself, even though she seemed like a person) torch, and torched up that brown river. Drink that stuff? What did that sick freak Plumpy think she was? A retard who'd drink Drano thinking it was Kool-Aid?

And she'd killed Mister Disgusting, too. The X-Files creature.

The sad-looking blue eyes glazed over. The mewling stopped. Her hand trembling, Shellie reached over and did what she thought was the right thing. She drew the greasy, clay-colored fold over those sad eyes. It felt sickening, all soft and squishy. But it wasn't oily — more slimy. Same as when you were a little kid. You looked at something and you thought it was one way, and then you touched it and tasted it, and it was something totally different.

Like getting fooled by plastic fruit.

Or fruit-bubbles that were really deadly missiles. Or exploding peppermints. Or an incendiary chocolate river.

“A disaster!” came Plumpy’s voice.

Shellie looked over her shoulder, and sure enough, she’d been right. He was up there, hovering overhead like a big, fat purple helicopter. Only he didn’t have any blades, nor any motor she could see. It was just him, and he was like a living hot air balloon.

“Disgusting!” she cried. “I can’t make up my mind, Plumpy. I can’t decide whether to explode you with a peppermint, or cut you in half with a fruit... projectile.” Projectile! Now, that was something for Shellie to remember that word.

“Foolish girl!” Plumpy cried down at her, his voice echoing and bubbling like he was using a megaphone under water.

“I could just blast you,” she said. She had Mister Disgusting’s laser cannon blaster.

She aimed it at Plumpy.

“You can’t do that!” he cried. “I am an officer of the Imperium! You are just a —”

The two-headed centaur came trotting around the nearest trees.

“Oh, rats,” Shellie said.

Mister Disgusting’s blaster might have looked like some kind of sci-fi gun, but... there was nothing remotely like a trigger.

A button?

Shellie looked desperately for something — anything — and turned the barrel away from Plumpy toward the centaur.

He pointed his wand at her, while his other head snaked aimlessly around.

“Oh, stop that, she’s got the Gnignellian’s blaster!” the free head cried, in a girlish, high-pitched voice. Even so, Shellie felt it was male — um, it turned. Yeah, it was male unless things on its planet were really different.

The wand wavered, but didn’t turn aside.

Shellie ducked, and the lower remaining half of Mister Disgusting — the Gnignellian, she guessed — wavered the way the tree had, and exploded in horrible wet chunks.

“That’s awful!” Shellie cried. “What is that thing? Why can’t you use a normal weapon?” She almost laughed — normal? What was normal in this place?

“Kill her! Kill her!” Plumpy cried from above.

“No you don’t! You saw what I did to those other two. Do you want to end up like them?” Shellie asked the centaur.

The two heads twisted around each other. The free one faced the other, its big brown eyes blinking. It had eyes kind of like a gentle cow, Shellie thought. It was so weird-looking. The heads didn’t seem very

securely attached to its big, horselike body. Almost like they were afterthoughts.

And that big camel-type hump probably was its brain right between its shoulders.

“I’ll blast your hump!” she cried, aiming Mister Disgusting’s blaster straight at the hump.

“Nooooo!” shrieked the free head. The other one waved its wand hysterically.

“You’re not a very brave centaur, are you?” she asked.

“Kill her!” Plumpy demanded. “Don’t be stupid, Klorm. Go ahead and —”

“You stop that!” Shellie said, looking fiercely up at the malign purple zeppelin overhead. He’d had such a hard time getting up the stairs — maybe he’d been “gassing himself up,” she thought bizarrely.

Shellie’s finger touched something rough on the blaster’s grip. She pressed, but nothing happened.

“Dang,” she said, and rubbed her finger hard along the ridges she felt.

The thing went off, a bright red bolt exploding past Plumpy, streaking straight toward the glass paned roof.

“Oh, no!” Plumpy cried. The bolt hit the panes and ricocheted off as Shellie tumbled back.

It’s like Grandpa’s 20-gauge, she thought as she flew back and landed on her butt. Tomorrow she was going to hurt bad, and she’d be wearing long-sleeved shirts for months.

The centaur’s heads screamed and writhed as he tried to cover his hump.

The bolt shot down right into the river, setting off a good-sized blast that launched a wall of flame toward Shellie and the centaur.

“Run!” she cried as the fireball came toward them.

She looked over and saw that the creature was actually running beside her, his heads swiveling madly and screaming.

At a certain point, he tripped in the grass, and the wand went flying.

That was that for that, Shellie thought. He would probably just run off and hide, and all she had to do was take Plumpy out. Then she’d be —

“Guards! Guards!” Plumpy cried. “The human prey is on the loose!”

“Oh, shut up,” Shellie said as the fireball overtook her.

There went the rest of the back of the crop top.

But, thank goodness, the fireball had lost most of its force, and nearly all its heat. The centaur wasn’t so lucky; a brief glance showed him on his front knees, screaming. Why couldn’t she just wake up?

Shellie, because it’s not a dream.

This place, whatever it is, is real.

A Star-Wars type battalion of armored clones appeared on the proscenium.

“I can’t believe this,” she said.

Still blinking from the blast, she aimed her weapon back up at Plumpy.

“If you send those creeps down here, I’ll have to kill them,” she yelled up at him. “I’ll kill this two-headed centaur, I’ll kill them, and then, you sick freak, I’ll blast your big, purple cellulite butt!”

“Oh! Oh! Oh!” Plumpy cried.

“Who do you think you are, grabbing people out of their kitchens?”

“Oh, my!” Plumpy said. “Guards!”

“I mean it,” Shellie said. “I’m sorry about those other two, even if they were trying to kill me. What is this place?”

“You’re a dangerous, psychotic female!” Plumpy cried.

The centaur’s two heads were whimpering.

Shellie looked over to see most of its piebald coat burned away, pink skin showing beneath.

“I’m really sorry,” she told it. “That has to hurt a lot.”

The two heads nodded in unison. All four big brown eyes were filled with tears.

“Plumpy, that dude isn’t any hunter or killer. It’s just a big horse with two heads.”

“They paid eighty million credits to —”

“I know, blah blah blah to the Imperium of the Blah-de-blah. What’s your stake in this, fat boy?” Shellie asked the malevolent floater.

“The Imperium of Grundy provides the best personal entertainment in the galaxy,” Plumpy said.

“Guards!” he cried once more. The dozens of identical soldiers started marching down the stairs.

“Plumpy, those don’t look too scary. I bet I could —”

“Human female, surrender!” Plumpy cried.

“This is too disgusting,” Shellie muttered. She braced herself, rubbing the trigger ridges.

Plumpy’s vast, amorphous rear vaporized. He whipped around and around in rapidly widening circles, squealing.

“You are a gas bag,” Shellie said. “Well, live and learn.”

Soon Plumpy’s buoyancy was gone, and he plummeted rapidly, landing not far from the crying centaur.

The clone-guards stopped, frozen — Shellie had been right — they were mindless drones under Plumpy’s control.

Fallen Plumpy was a fraction of his former self, deflated and wrinkled on the bizarre pink grass.

“Happy now?” Shellie asked, standing over him with one hand on her hip, and the other holding the blaster’s muzzle a few inches from his nasty, quivering face.

Plumpy shook and trembled, and finally said, “No.”

“You’ve got some explaining to do,” Shellie said. “What is this place? How did you get me here? Who were those people and why were they paying you money — or credits or whatever — to kill me?”

“Foolish human,” Plumpy said in a bubbly voice. “You will never learn —”

“I’ll dissect you piece by piece,” Shellie said. “I have sharp fingernails and this purple skin of yours is mighty...”

Shellie grabbed a fold of Plumpy’s disgusting deflated flesh and tugged. It came away with an awful tearing sound.

Plumpy managed to shriek.

“I must be repaired,” he said. “I must be —”

“You won’t be anything after I get through with you,” Shellie said. “What are you doing kidnapping people at breakfast and starting some kind of alien Death Hunt Three Thousand?”

“Humans... are... made for harvesting.”

“You are so sick,” Shellie said.

“You are a strong human,” Plumpy said. Shellie realized that even with his injuries, the alien was trying to smile and lick his lips.

“Why don’t you try telling me where I’m at? I know this isn’t a dream. This is —”

“You are in an amusement dome of the Imperium of Grundy,” Plumpy said. “There is no escape.”

“You lied,” Shellie said. She looked over at the injured centaur, and felt her eyes narrowing. “You probably lied to him, too, and to the other two. Did they think they were hunting some kind of... animal... for fun? Did they even know it was real? That they could be killed?”

“That would be telling,” Plumpy said. “If you must know, the Imperium assures all of its customers that they are not hunting full Galactic citizens. Humans are a food-species, barely considered sentient.”

“Food species!” Shellie cried.

“Yes,” Plumpy laughed, then he choked up something nasty and blackish.

“You’re going to die,” Shellie said. “That black stuff looks bad.”

“My assistants will come and regenerate my body,” Plumpy said.

“That’s nice for you,” Shellie said. “I hope it hurts really bad.”

“Humans are violent and brutish, ruled by their primitive emotions,” Plumpy said. “It is justifiable that you be used for hunts and other entertainment.”

“What’s ‘other entertainment?’” Shellie asked, although she really didn’t want to know.

“Torture, organ removal and replacement, mind control, three-dimensional blood and plasma sculptures... you really are primitive, aren’t you?” Plumpy said.

“Disgusting!” Shellie cried. “Look, before you croak, hadn’t you better call someone to help your… what did you call him… customer? Or don’t you care? Isn’t he a full Galactic citizen?”

“Uh, well — yes,” Plumpy said. “I suppose —”

Shellie looked over at the centaur, who was now writhing in agony on the pink grass.

“If he dies, do you still get these credits? Doesn’t he have some family? What about those other two? Diana and the ugly guy?”

“The huntress is a full-blooded princess of the —” Plumpy’s hideous eyes widened. “Human monster!” he cried. “You will suffer all the tortures of the Imperium for what you’ve done. We must pay —” Then he cut himself short. Obviously his injuries had weakened his judgment. He was disclosing company secrets. Looking over at the centaur, Shellie knew that he had heard — and understood.

He managed to right himself and one of the two heads spoke.

It sounded like a little girl, and for some reason, Shellie almost laughed. After all that had happened, the giant, probably mortally-wounded horse with two heads had the voice of Mary Kate or Ashley Olson.

Maybe the two heads talking together would be like Mary Kate and Ashley.

“You must reimburse my family twice the bounty that I paid for this travesty,” the Mary Kate voice said. “And you must —”

“Enough!” Plumpy cried. “I know, I know.”

“How do I get back home?” Shellie asked.

“You cannot,” Plumpy said. “You will die if you drink from the stream, as you have probably already surmised. There is no escape at the end of the chamber.”

“You are such a butthead,” Shellie said, sitting and crossing her legs, resting her chin in her hand, balancing the blaster so it still aimed at Plumpy’s deflated head.

“What is butthead?” the Mary Kate voice asked.

“An extremely bad, stupid person,” Shellie told it. “I’m really sorry you got hurt, by the way. I’m not naturally a violent person.”

“We were told your species was bloody and terrible,” the creature said in its little girl voice. “We were told that it was like hunting Gnignellian tooth-worms, or Lorbian fire demons.”

“I’m just a teenage girl,” Shellie said. “I go to Rockport High, I’m off on summer break, I work part time at Hot Topic, and today I was supposed to go to the mall with my friends.”

“What is mall?” the centaur asked.

“A place where people shop, have fun, check out the other teenagers,” Shellie said.

“A social gathering hall?” the centaur asked.

Shellie looked glumly at the two heads. Maybe he wasn’t going to die. He seemed to have exuded some type of whitish, waxy material over his burns. Maybe he could heal himself. She hoped he wouldn’t die anyway. He had seemed the least threatening of the threesome. Almost like he really couldn’t hurt



anything.

“Kind of like that,” she told him.

“You have a... family?” he asked.

Maybe at the nether end of the galaxy, things still had families, Shellie thought.

“Yeah,” she said. “My mom, and my little brother Russell. I’ll never see them again, either.” How many times had Shellie wished that Russell would just disappear into another dimension? A thousand times — and now Shellie was the one who had, and she was suddenly so tired, and hurt, and she just wanted to cry.

So, she did, while Plumpy made horrible gas noises and the centaur’s brown-eyed heads watched, even though it wasn’t really a good cry. Shellie was forcing it.

“What is that noise you are making?”

“I’m crying, Centaur,” she said.

“What is crying? My name is not Centaur. It’s Klorm.”

“Pleased to meet you, Klorm,” Shellie said, sniffing. “Crying is something we do when we’re sad. And when we’re happy.”

“Oh,” Klorm the Centaur said. “I am sad, too. I am very badly hurt.”

“I’m sorry,” Shellie said again. “Like I said,” and she wiped her nose with what was left of her crop top, and that made her even sadder, “I’m not the type of person who likes hurting other people.”

“I am a Vrant,” Klorm said. “I am not a person.”

“Well, I know that. I mean, I didn’t know the name for what you — er — are, but I knew that —”

“What is teenager?” Klorm asked.

“A young person. Not all the way grown up yet.”

“Grigr!” both of the Vrant centaur’s heads cried in unison.

Shellie looked over at Plumpy — Grigr — what a name! Who’d think something like that up?

“She is lying, Klorm,” Grigr said.

“How did you come to bring her here? What sort of contracts were executed? Did she issue a nucleic acid print for —”

“Contract!” Shellie cried. “What are you talking about —”

“Silence, human!” Grigr, formerly Plumpy, said.

Shellie cleared her throat and aimed the blaster back at the crumpled purple form. “I guess you forgot who’s got the weapon,” she told him.

“Grigr, she is not a fully-grown member of her species! You set a child out in this maze.” Klorm hobbled toward the quivering purple mass.

“Humans are notorious for lies. They cannot be —”

One of the two heads swiveled toward Shellie. “You are just a child?” he asked.

Shellie felt her neck stiffening. “I’m seventeen,” she said. “I’m almost grown. I mean I work at Hot Topic and I buy my own clothes, and I’m saving up for a car, and —”

“You said you had some type of... school... was it? And a mother, and younger sibling?”

Shellie nodded. “Mom’s going to miss me so much,” she said. “Maybe even Russell will —”

“This is a terrible crime,” Klorm’s heads said.

“I assure you, everything’s in order,” Grignr said.

“Do you believe him?” Shellie asked the centaur, who picked up his silver wand in one trembling mouth.

“No,” the free head said. “Grignr lies.”

“Oh, oh, you do not want to say that,” Grignr said. “Surely you do not mean to provoke an... incident... between the Vrant and the Imperium. If you persist, Klorm, I shall have to take diplomatic measures!”

“The Vrant will take military measures against this place,” the free head said — it almost sounded funny coming in that thin, little girl voice. But the hurt brown eyes were full of anger and menace.

Shellie figured that the centaur meant it — and that he could back it up. What would an armada with giant wands like the small one do to this dome? Shellie didn’t want to think about it.

“Klorm, listen,” Grignr said. “Please — don’t be hasty. I’m sure a refund can be arranged. Just... “

“Shut up,” the centaur said. Then the free head nodded toward Shellie. “Climb on my back, dear,” it said. “The flesh is not burned there. You must ride on me past the guards. They will not harm me. They have already been imprinted with my genetic signature.”

“Guards, destroy them!” Grignr cried, vibrating but only rising a quarter of an inch.

“Do not be concerned,” Klorm’s free head told Shellie. “He’s —”

“I know,” she said. “Formerly full of hot air.”

And she climbed on the centaur’s back as delicately as she could, and rode past the armored clone guards on the back of the two-headed centaur.

oOo

Outside the dome, Shellie blinked against the brilliant light of two suns.

“Oh, my God,” she said. Before them lay a vast, flat plain. And at the far side of the plain lay a glittering city with spires that reached halfway up the sky. “This really is an alien planet.”

“It is the second planet of the Imperium’s main system,” Klorm said. “Some save for a lifetime to come here on holiday.”

“Holiday?” Shellie asked.

“Yes,” Klorm said. “I was on holiday myself. I am a member of the Oligarchy of Vrant. A junior

member, but a member all the same.”

“What does that mean?” Shellie asked.

“I am rich,” Klorm said. “And powerful.”

“Oh,” she said.

“You destroyed two others of similar status,” Klorm said. “I must credit you for being a great warrior, even if you are only a child of your species.”

“Wow,” Shellie said. “Like I said, I didn’t really want to hurt them. They were just —”

“Trying to kill you,” Klorm said. “I know.”

“Klorm, why are you helping me?”

“You are just a child!” the head exclaimed. “You should never have been there. How did Grignr deceive you? Did he —”

“It was the cereal box,” Shellie said. “I mean, the prize.”

“The what?” Klorm asked.

They were slowly making their way across the plain, which was strewn with sharp rocks. Klorm the centaur’s feet seemed solidly-hooved and strong. And the waxy white stuff over his burns seemed to have healed him.

“The cereal box. My Mom was making us eat breakfast together — me and Russell — I mean. And we were fighting over the prize in the cereal.”

“The prize? Cereal is a type of food?”

Shellie nodded, then realized that the centaur’s heads could not see her. She looked back and saw that the weird Willy Wonka land had been contained in a vast dome that gleamed brightly under the two suns’ light.

“Yes. It’s what... it’s something kids like for breakfast.”

“I see,” Klorm said. “And this... prize?”

“Cereal boxes come with prizes,” Shellie said. “Usually they’re stupid toys for little kids.”

“Ah,” Klorm said. “Do continue. What was this prize you and your fellow spawn were fighting over?”

“It’s still here on my finger,” Shellie said, showing Klorm’s second head the ring.

He pulled up short and reared back. Shellie nearly fell, struggling to right herself.

“A quantum ring!” he cried. “Aiiiiiii!”

Then he started running in circles.

“It’s just a ring,” Shellie said, clinging desperately to the centaur’s hump.

“You’re hurting my nerve endings,” he cried.

“I thought that was your brain,” she said.

“Yes, yes,” Klorm said. “Please —”

“All right,” Shellie said. “But calm down!”

“A quantum ring!” Klorm cried again. “Please, do not touch it, I beg you,” he said. “It will —”

“Will what?” A mischievous thought came to Shellie, and she reached toward her ring finger.

“No! No! We will be hurled through a wormhole to an unknown dimension. Please, I beg of you —”

“All right,” she said. “I promise I won’t touch it. So, the ring really did open a wormhole to that place? That’s what Russell said. He got the instructions. I got the ring.”

“Oh, Great Maker of Vrant,” Klorm said. “That gnigging gronting criminal Grignr has torn a hole in the fabric of the universe all for a few gnigging credits.”

“What does that mean?” Shellie asked.

“Nothing good,” Klorm said, his girlish voice flat and depressed-sounding. “But it will have to be put right before Vrant attacks the Imperium.”

“You’re going to attack this place?” Shellie asked.

“As soon as I get home, we’re coming back with an armada,” Klorm said. “After we figure out how to fix the hole that gronting piece of gnigness made in space and time.”

“If you fix the hole, can I get home?” Shellie said.

Klorm cleared one of his throats. It sounded like a kitten spitting up a hairball.

“Get home? Oh, yes! I didn’t know about the quantum ring before. Of course you can get home with that.”

“Thank God!” Shellie cried.

“Who is that?” Klorm asked. “I’m the one who rescued you. It is I who should be thanked.”

“That’s right,” Shellie said, smiling to herself. She tickled the quickly-regenerating fur atop Klorm’s nerve-hump. Both of his heads purred in pleasure, as he carried Shellie toward the shining city.

oOo

“Klorm, are you really a prince?” Shellie asked. “I’ve never met a prince before.”

“Well, perhaps,” Klorm said. “I am technically a junior oligarch. Of the Oligarchy of Vrant.”

“Ah,” Shellie said. “That’s like a prince though, huh?”

Klorm swiveled his free head and nodded it. “It is a position of privilege and honor.”

“In a weird way,” Shellie said, “This is kind of exciting.”

They had already crossed three quarters of the plain, and the city now loomed almost like a wall of shining glass spires that filled a third of the sky. Shellie couldn’t even guess how many people — no, she

thought — creatures or aliens — lived there. It made New York look like some little town out in the middle of West Texas.

“How many people — um — well, aliens live there?” she asked Klorm.

“Eight billion,” Klorm said. “Citizens. There are about twice that who aren’t citizens.”

“That’s, uh —” Shellie said. “More than ever lived on the Earth.”

“Well, you are from an unenhanced, unimproved segment of the galaxy,” Klorm said. “No offense,” he added a moment later.

“How many planets are there, Klorm?” she asked.

“No one knows,” he said. “But there are twenty-thousand worlds that are part of the civilized Colloquium. Although I must say now that the Imperium will probably be leaving the Colloquium. Morgh and Diana were also very high-placed from their worlds. Their people will also protest and perhaps join us in our assault.”

“Wow,” Shellie said. “You mean the golden lady — the one that —”

“Yes,” Klorm said. “Morgh was the one with the gray skin and —”

“Ugly face,” Shellie said. “I was calling him Mister Disgusting.” Shellie thought of those sad blue eyes and felt very sorry once more. No matter how mean he was, that ugly creature had been tricked, just like Klorm and the woman. They’d all been tricked.

“That’s all right,” Klorm said. “I didn’t like him much, either. Gnignellians are savage.”

“Yeah,” Shellie said.

“But even so,” Klorm said. “They would not approve of this, and all worlds will protest ripping a hole in time and space just for the purpose of —”

“Klorm!” Shellie cried. “Something’s —”

All around them, the ground had begun to boil, almost as if it was a giant pot of oatmeal instead of red rock and sand.

“Gronting gnigg!” Klorm cried, along with several other complex expressions that Shellie really couldn’t think how to duplicate.

“What’s happening?” she asked.

“The hole!” Klorm cried. Shellie looked back toward the distant glass dome — or, she saw with a terrible sinking feeling — where it had been. It was gone, and there was an awful, swirling black place where it had been.

“So much for Plumpy,” she said.

“I can’t —” Klorm said. He was swaying back and forth. Shellie looked down in horror to see that the very sand and rocks were being sucked from underneath them, and a terrible howling wind had begun. Sand was pitting her face, and Klorm was struggling onward, but —

“Klorm!” she cried.

“I can’t make it much farther,” Klorm said.

“I can tell,” she said. “That’s a — like a black hole, isn’t it?”

“It’s a wormhole in the process of enlarging itself,” Klorm said. “There’s nothing we can do. I mean, if we could get to a decent lab, look at how they calibrated that quantum ring — but this is just —”

Klorm fell flat on his belly, his heads writhing. Shelly nearly flew off, but somehow kept hold of his hump. He cried in pain, and she grabbed the nearest neck.

“Can’t — breathe —” he said.

“I’m sure,” she whispered. She could feel the whole surface of the planet being sucked away, and a horrible, draining cold unlike anything she’d ever felt before.

“I’m going to do what I did the first time,” she told Klorm.

“No!” he cried. “You don’t know what will happen. I mean, it could trigger a meeting of matter and anti-matter and we could destroy this whole quadrant. That ring is —”

“Russell said twist it three times clockwise. And I was just playing with it, and I guess that’s what I did.”

“Shellie, do not!” Klorm cried.

Shellie’s exposed back felt like it was freezing into ice chunks, and the world was spinning. Sand was etching deep grooves into her face. Surely they had only seconds before they joined the former Plumpy and his dome-kingdom in whatever that wormhole was leading to —

Only trouble was, Shellie simply could not remember which way was clockwise, and which way was —

She just twisted the ring, three times, as fast as she could.

oOo

Russell screamed like a girl.

“Omigod! Omigod! Omigod!”

“Just don’t pee your pants,” Shellie snapped, as soon as her mouth turned from silver to normal flesh and she could move.

Klorm’s heads shuddered and slipped from liquid silver to their former piebald, white-wax coated selves. The dark, soft brown eyes blinked around at Shellie’s kitchen, taking in the spilled cereal and milk, the discarded prize wrappers, and the tiny square instruction book.

“You must be the stable-mate to Shellie,” he said.

“A talking two-headed horse that sounds like Mary Kate and Ashley Olson!” Russell shrieked.

So then of course he peed his pants.

“Are you a two-headed camel?” Russell asked.

“You did pee your pants,” Shellie said in a disgusted tone. “You are so embarrassing, Russell.”

Russell looked down, then back up at Shellie and Klorm. His knees were actually knocking together.

She almost felt sorry for him.

“This is Klorm,” Shellie said. “He’s an alien prince and he rescued me.”

“Omigod, omigod, omigod,” Russell said. “I have to call Mom. Shellie, look at your arm! Your face is all dirty! And you’re shirt’s just like hanging —”

So finally he’d noticed that something had happened to her. “Don’t you dare,” Shellie snapped. “I’ve just gone through more adventure than in seventy-five Gundam shows, and you’re going to clean up that cereal mess and listen to what Klorm and I have to say.”

Russell’s metal-filled mouth worked silently as he gaped at Klorm, and finally, he said, “Okay, sis.”

“The sponge is by the sink, Russell,” Shellie said watching him grope around the kitchen. “You’d know that if you didn’t expect me and Mom to wait on you like you were a cripple.”

“What is cripple?” Klorm asked.

“A person who’s — uh — who has some kind of birth defect. Who isn’t physically able to take care of himself,” Shellie told Klorm.

“Ah,” Klorm said. “I forget all the misfortunes that happen on unimproved worlds.”

He looked toward Russell. “He appears to have voided some type of offensive fluid. Is this common among younger stable-mates? Sometimes it happens on Vrant. Only with the very young, though.”

“He peed his pants,” Shellie told him. “I guess that could be called voiding offensive fluid.”

“Shut up, Shellie! You’re the one who brought an alien freak back home.”

“Russell,” Shellie snapped, “I’m going to say this once. Klorm isn’t an alien freak. He’s my friend, and he saved my life.”

“And your stable-mate also spared my life,” Klorm said. “She is very mature and caring for a young creature from an unimproved, primitive planet.”

“Thank you,” Shellie said, stroking Klorm’s hump. Again, he purred.

“Oh, Jesus,” Russell said, finally finding the sponge.

“Who is Jesus?” Klorm asked.

“We never got to God earlier,” Shellie told Klorm. “I’ll tell you about both on the way to the mall.”

“The social gathering place you spoke of?” Klorm asked. “Shellie, we must work to get me back to Vrant. I feel that the Imperium’s second planet is gone by now, and perhaps their whole system, but the quantum ring appears to work somewhat. If I can find a scientific or research center on this planet, perhaps we can configure the ring to return me to my home planet.”

“There’s the instruction booklet right there,” Shellie said.

“That’s mine!” Russell cried, putting his hand over the tiny square.

“Russell!”

“Fair’s fair,” he said. “You got the ring, and I get the instructions.”

“Russell, will you wake up?” Shellie said. “This is a real alien. It’s not a presto-chango robot warrior or a cartoon. And he deserves to get home, same way as I did.”

“Yes, young stable-mate. I would like to return to my fields and palaces.”

“Palaces?” Shellie asked.

Klorm’s heads nodded. “I have seven,” he said.

“Wow,” she said. “Wait until my friends hear this!”

“It’s not real,” Russell said. “Maybe I’ll just throw the instructions down the disposal.”

“Russell, I’m going to kill you,” Shellie said.

“She means it,” Klorm said. “I’ve seen her with my own four eyes.”

“Oh, my God,” Russell said. The instructions were between his fingers.

“Russell, Klorm has a weapon that will melt down every Gundam you have. He can vaporize the T.V. He can vaporize the entire house!”

This was not precisely true, as both Klorm and Shellie had lost their weapons back on the long-gone plain when the wormhole had started pulling them in.

“The younger should respect the elder,” Klorm said.

“What do you know?” Russell said. “I should just —” and he started toward the sink, holding out the booklet.

“Russell Truro!” Shellie cried, leaping off Klorm’s back and grabbing Russell’s arm before he got two steps from the table.

She grabbed the booklet and it tore neatly in half.

“Oh, Russell,” she said.

“That is all right,” Klorm said. “I am sure we can put the halves back together.”

Russell shouted in despair as one of Klorm’s heads snaked over and snatched the remaining half from his fingers.

“You are not clean,” Klorm said in a disapproving tone as his other head sniffed and its nose wrinkled.

“Maybe he’ll listen to you,” Shellie said. “He sure won’t listen to me or Mom.”

“I took a shower Tuesday,” Russell said.

“Oh, my God,” Shellie said. “Which Tuesday?”

Klorm took the other half of the booklet in his second mouth and did something so quickly that Shellie couldn’t make out exactly what happened. Moments later, the booklet was whole again. Klorm extended his head, and she took it from his mouth.

“Now, let’s see,” she said, flipping the tiny pages. It looked just like a game handbook, just like any little piece of junk that came in a cereal box.



“Imperium Wormhole Key Ring,” she read. But it was impossible to decipher the pictured instructions. Obviously they’d been drawn by dyslexic alien creatures. “Turn three times clockwise,” she continued.

“What is clockwise?” Klorm asked.

“A clock is something we use to tell time,” Shellie said.

“You are so stupid, Shellie,” Russell whined.

“You know what?” Shellie asked her brother. “When I was trapped in that alien death match, I was actually crying because I thought I’d never get home to see Mom again. Or you, Russell.”

“Alien death match?” he asked.

“Yes, the Imperium criminal Grignr tricked her into using this quantum ring, which was placed illegally in your food container, mimicking the children’s prizes you were obviously accustomed to fighting over,” Klorm said. “And he tricked me and two other hunters who have now joined their maker into thinking she was a dangerous, wild and vicious creature deserving of being hunted down and killed.”

“Huh?” Russell said. “What’s he talking about?”

“Grignr was an evil alien who looked just like Plumpy in Candy Land. He’s dead now,” Shellie said.

Russell blinked uncomprehendingly, looking between Shellie and Klorm.

“That’s a clock,” Shellie said, pointing out the green daisy-shaped kitchen clock to Klorm.

“Ah,” Klorm said. “I had almost forgotten that such devices were part of primitive, unimproved cultures’ iconography.”

“Klorm,” Shellie said. “I love you, but could you be a little less denigrating of Earth? It is my home, after all.”

Klorm nodded both heads. “I am sorry, Shellie,” he said. “If you are confused about the instructions, perhaps you should closely observe the movement of the longer time-measuring element of that device.”

“The second hand?” Shellie asked.

“What else could it be, dimbo!” Russell cried.

“Shut up!” Shellie cried. But she watched the second hand as it moved around the clock.

“But I twist the ring clockwise as it faces me, or as the ring faces outward?” she wondered aloud.

“Perhaps we should reflect on this for a time,” Klorm said. “You are the one who used the ring before, not me,” he added.

Shellie nodded. “You could give me a ride down to the mall,” she said. “I can think about it on the way. There’s a really big clock there, too.”

“That clock’s been broken for three years, Shellie,” Russell said.

“You can come too if you want,” Shellie said, giving Russell the look that meant “shut up and shut up now.”

“But —” Russell said, looking down at his pants.

“You can change and take a shower,” Shellie said. “We’ll wait. That is — if you want to go.”

Klorm and Shellie waited. For some reason, Shellie didn’t care how she looked. After a moment, Klorm leaned down and cleaned the spilled cereal and milk from the table with both of his mouths.

“Delicious!” he cried. “If you see that... clock... will it assist you?”

Shellie nodded. “I think so,” she said.

“And then we can use the instructions and you may transport me home to Vrant? I will show you my castles, one by one.”

“That sounds incredible,” Shellie said, climbing once more on Klorm’s back and scratching his hump.

Russell started to climb on too, but Shellie got him to back off with a single glance.

“He’s been hurt,” she said. “He can’t carry both of use.”

“He sounds like a little girl,” Russell said. “How do you know he’s a he?”

“Girls know, Wuss-ill,” she said as they left the house and started down the sidewalk.

“Wait until Karin and Katrina get a look at you,” Shellie said.

“These are other stable-mates?” Klorm asked.

“They’re her girlfriends,” Russell said as he walked glumly behind. “They’re really stupid twins with hardly a brain between them.”

“Two? One brain?” Klorm asked.

“Don’t get any ideas,” Shellie said. “You’re my Vrant prince.” But she was smiling.

As they rounded the corner from Maple to Main street, the postal carrier came by in her little jeep. And swerved all the way over the curb and into the corner house’s mailbox.

And that was when Shellie knew for sure it had been no dream.

“Russell,” she said, leaning over Klorm’s broad, piebald back. “Don’t pee your pants. Okay?”

“Shut up,” he told her.

“Is this better than Gundam or what?” she chortled. “I don’t even like those type of shows!”

“What is Gundam?” Klorm asked.

“Don’t get him started —” Shellie said.

But it was another fifteen blocks to the mall. And Klorm was a curious creature.

As they got to the mall, Russell reached up and took Shellie’s hand to help her down.

“I’m glad you’re home,” he said.

At first, she was so surprised she couldn’t speak. “Me, too,” she said at last.

“You gonna tell Mom?” Russell asked. “I mean, the kitchen is still a mess and —”

“Are you nuts?” she said. “What am I supposed to say to her?” Russell was the most aggravating lower form of life known to man. But now she’d seen a lot of life never known to man, and there were a lot worse things. Shellie thought about that. And for some reason, that was when she really started crying.

- The End -