

THE ARDLY EFFECT

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THE ARDLY EFFECT



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The Ardly Effect

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The Ardly Effect

By

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Brambling Books
United Kingdom

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Published by Brambling Books, Eaglescliffe Logistics Centre, Durham Lane, Stockton on Tees, Teesside, TS16 0RW, United Kingdom.

Visit our Web site at www.bramblingbooks.com

First eBook edition: February 2005

ISBN 0-9549563-0-3

For Karl.

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Chapter 1 : Two moons

It has been suggested that all things enjoy a certain degree of consciousness. Even the fundamental particles that make up ice cream cones or fluffy slippers. This same school of thought says that if you arrange enough of these quasi-sentient little blobs properly you'll end up with a dung beetle or a palaeontologist or even a central heating engineer. Something conscious but not necessarily possessing a conscience.

It's a question of complexity, it seems. The more complex yet structured an object, the more likely it is to make that incomprehensible transition from just being a blob to being a sentient being. What the benefits are is a question that still haunts many. Consciousness definitely drags with it a lot of excess baggage. Fear, greed, lust, envy, ceramic quadrupeds ... to slap labels on just a few of those bags.

Planets would seem to be pretty good candidates for your everyday conscious entity. They are well structured but extremely complicated objects. The

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individual bits and bobs of an average sized planet run into billions and billions. If complication were a prerequisite for consciousness, then your average planet would easily fit the bill.

However, as no evidence has been presented to the contrary, it must be assumed that Jupe, a gigantic, orange, gaseous world swinging lazily round a medium sized, yellow sun, is happily oblivious to the appallingly indifferent void in which it exists.

Likewise, Jupe's two moons, Edenia and Horriddoa, are sadly unconscious of the magnificence of their parent planet. They can never appreciate the subtly serpentine tangerine bands or the angry brown whorls of storms, thousands of miles in diameter, raging endlessly through the turbulent atmosphere.

A shame really.

Forgoing its indifference momentarily, the universe smiled on Edenia making it by far the more attractive of the two moons. Blue and green with lots of wispy white bits. An incandescent jewel of a moon.

Horriddoa, on the other hand, must have been a pretty nasty piece of work in a previous existence because Horriddoa is brown-grey and ... well ... lumpy. An anaemic walnut of a moon.

Edenia is warm and cuddly and supports an immense variety of life. The most abundant life form on Edenia is a small yellow bean. The pitteth.

The pitteth is so called because when it is squeezed between the thumb and forefinger of the second most abundant life form on Edenia the pitteth goes "pitteth".

Horriddoa alternates between extremes of heat and blinding light, and cold and deepest darkness. The most

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abundant life form on Horriddoa is a tall, hardy, razor edged grass called chawoo. The second most abundant life form on Horriddoa couldn't remember why chawoo had this name. But somehow it suited it.

The Edenians, inhabitants of the cosy moon Edenia, though highly intelligent, developed technology only as far as the wooden bucket. Why strive for more? Why, indeed. The pitteth is quite delicious, extremely nourishing and easily harvested. A firm grip, a stout pair of legs and the humble bucket are all that is needed to transport pitteths from the lush valleys to the warm, breeze tickled hills where, upturned, the bucket doubles as a handy stool on which to sit and ponder the wonders of Jupe resplendent in the azure sky.

Not that it *never* rains on Edenia. Of course it does. But only in the small hours when everyone is tucked up in a warm cave or snuggled under the protective shelter of a welcoming pitteth bush.

To the Horriddoans, on the other hand, progress and ever swifter technological advances were fundamental to their survival. The initial driving forces behind this rapid development were the simple needs to keep warm during the freezing night, keep cool during the scorching day and make the chawoo taste of something other than month old toenail clippings.

After the invention of the telescope, there was no turning back for the Horriddoans. A beautiful sister moon came sharply into focus one unusually clear night. A moon which did not simply orbit Jupe but swooned gracefully to and fro maintaining just the right distance from the sun to ensure the days were warm and the nights were pleasantly cool.

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The ever sceptical Horridoans thought this new moon too good to be true. There had to be a catch. No water. A surface covered in a twenty foot layer of choking dust. An ammonia atmosphere.

Larger optical telescopes were built and trained on this apparently idyllic neighbour. Life! The sister moon supported life!

Radio telescopes were constructed and, finally, a sophisticated satellite was put into orbit around Edenia. People! There were people on Edenia! And they were mostly strolling about! Or splashing in sparkling streams! Or horizontal!

The terrible truth dawned: while the Horridoans had been struggling to survive on a moon whizzing backwards and forwards between the boiling sun and the freezing void of outer space like some crazy ding ball attached to some demented ding bat wielded by some deranged ... ding bat wielder, the morons on Edenia had been swanning around discussing buckets and wondering whether to eat now and have a snooze or take a quick nap, discuss buckets some more and then eat!

News of this idyllic world of unappreciative cretins spread around Horriddoa like a chawoo lager rash. The Horridoans rose as one and swore to the heavens that their children, or their children's children, or their children's children's children, or somebody, some day would have their revenge on Fate for making their lives so bloody miserable.

Generations of Horridoans gave themselves to the Cause. Technology blossomed under the light generated from the heat of their united fervour. Gigantic space going transporters were built in orbit. An invasion force

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consisting of the entire population of Horriddoa, excluding of course people who couldn't read without moving their lips, descended on Edenia. The dumbfounded Edenians were easily herded aboard the transporters. Twenty-four hours later and the Horriddoans on Edenia were having fun in the sun eating piles of the delicious pitteth while the Edenians where standing bemused on Horriddoa watching their buckets fill with rain.

*

With the slow dawning of what had happened to them the Edenians' under-utilised brains started to experience an altogether new and compelling emotion. Indignant outrage.

Spurred on by the harsh conditions and a burning desire for revenge, the Edenians went from the wooden bucket age to the bronze, iron, industrial, tootsie-glow single slipper, and space age in just a few hundred years.

The whole Edenia population on Horriddoa worked as one towards the "Great revenge". A task force of gigantic battle cruisers was assembled and dispatched to Edenia but the Horriddoans on Edenia weren't going to give up their newly acquired paradise without a fight.

Inter-moon war raged.

The word "war" is a tad severe. "Raged" is probably a bit strong too. It was more of an inter-moon shouting-finger-wagging-with-the-odd-shove argy-bargy.

After all, the population of Horriddoa had got used to their new planet. Hundreds of years had made it home. Technology made the climate bearable. A little illegal trade with Edenia brought in a few culinary luxuries. Even the foul tasting chawoo turned out to be excellent at sorting out even the most determined acne.

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*

The Edenians still felt a twinge of guilt for their ancestors' actions so *they* were never going to mount any full scale attacks.

There was the odd dispute over mineral rights on some of the larger asteroids. But any prisoners taken by either side were returned unharmed after a suitable amount of public humiliation and a few political points had been gained.

None of the awesome weapons that both sides had built was ever fired in anger. The most dangerous piece of technology developed by both sides was the matter transporter. It was generally agreed that this could only be used to transport fruit, livestock and machinery. The matter transporter was to be used on people only in an emergency. It was employed occasionally when capturing enemy forces but with a failure rate of one per cent was considered too unreliable for general use. It was embarrassing enough, being deposited somewhere with your underpants inside out over your trousers, without having to suffer the indignity of having your head inside out over your left wrist as well.

Those in power, on both moons, considered the war, on balance, neither a good nor a bad thing. Not many people got hurt, the people were focused and hard working, and technology and research drove forward at an artificially heightened pace.

A place for everyone and everyone in their place.

It couldn't last for ever, of course. Someone, someday, had to ask the question. But, first, someone had to *think* of the question.

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Chapter 2 : Idea

Kwait Naize sat, eyes open but unfocused, in his stationary car. He stared, unblinkingly oblivious to the rain lashing his windscreen, the unrelenting howl of the wind and the drenched security guard wasting his energy in a futile attempt to wave him through.

Kwait was grey-haired, forty and wondering. Wondering why he hadn't noticed it before. But, it was simple really. He had been too busy. They had *all* been too busy. Their whole lives had been devoted to the Great Revenge. No one had time to notice things. Things not related to the war, anyway. The entire population was hell-bent on finding a more powerful this, a faster that, a more accurate the other. The Great Revenge consumed everyone from the womb to the tomb.

Sifted and sorted at childhood, people were channelled into grooves that fit them best for the war effort. Bound and blinkered by duty and revenge, researchers avoided delving into anything not directly connected with resolving the conflict.

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Surface standards and technology fell way behind the innovations and advancements pumped into the space effort. The gigantic battle cruisers built in orbit boasted a technical excellence decades ahead of anything on the surface of Horridoa.

The price of these orbiting technical marvels was myopia.

The simple startling fact had come to Kwait the previous evening while he tried to convince Bonnie that his groin was not the most reasonable of places to rest her heavily clawed paws.

Kwait had smiled to himself thinking back ... He had been lying in the bath, snoozing. Bonnie, Kwait's loyal, loving and lonely golden retriever, had carefully nosed open the kitchen door, belly-crawled up the stairs and sneaked unnoticed into the bathroom where she lay happily listening to her master gently humming and splashing. Leaving ten minutes or so for the pair to enter full semi-doze mode, a cup in the kitchen sink leaning on the edge of a fork balanced carefully on a plate in a bowl of unwashed cutlery and crockery decided to slip and moved an inch causing a "plock-plock-bosh" sound. Kwait came round thinking Bonnie was sniffing in the dustbin again and shouted "Bonnie! Stop that whatever it is!" Bonnie was, of course, delighted at being summoned by her wonderful master and without further ado joined him in the bath. After the initial shock and when the soap suds had stopped falling Kwait thought, "*What the hell!*" and gave Bonnie a good shampooing.

It was while wrestling in the bath with Bonnie that Kwait's thoughts turned to those vile usurpers, those evil purloiners who had stolen his beloved moon Edenia.

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They had dogs too! He'd seen pictures. They also had two arms, two legs and an arse, and talked through a hole in their face. In short, they were the same. On two different moons and yet they were the same species!

Kwait recalled the peculiar look of confused ambivalence on his daughter Stroomly's face when the notion was introduced to her. Torn between her lifelong conditioning to mistrust all Horridoans and the intriguing questions this new idea raised, she sank into an aggressive silence.

A semi-awareness that something had happened snapped Kwait's attention back to the present. The space between his car and the gatehouse which had previously been filled by another car was now empty. By rights the long build-up of traffic behind him should have been hooting their annoyance at being kept waiting.

But they weren't.

A grimacing blue-clad security guard had left his dry gatehouse and must have been trying to attract Kwait's attention through the driving rain for some time. By rights the man should have been bellowing at Kwait to get his arse in gear and his car shifted before people drowned out here for Christ's sake.

But he wasn't.

Being Director of The Space Services R&D Centre had its perks.

*

Since Kwait's appointment as Director some ten years before, the Centre had blossomed and produced some remarkable innovations. The more noteworthy of the innovations were the Gravitonic Wave Motor used by surface to orbit shuttles, the Gravitonic Wave Projector

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used by interplanetary space ships for both self propulsion and remote object manipulation and, more recently, one of Kwait's favourites, the Gravitonic Wave Hologram used to generate perfect 3-D pictures of naked ladies that appeared briefly in a glass of just-downed chawoo beer. A batch of these last devices contributed considerably to the retaking of asteroid 461. The enemy troops, who had been holding the asteroid for the previous four months, had been so captivated by the images that they had drunk themselves into a stupor within an hour of the drop.

In addition, the newly developed Gravitonic Wave Scanner was progressing well and would be ready for testing within a few weeks. These innovations had earned the Centre an enormous budget and Kwait had the respectful ear of some key players on the Board of Governors. The Board were a researcher's God answerable only to the High Presidium.

*

Ross was a good Production Assistant and Kwait hated spinning him a line.

"I'm sorry about this, Ross," Kwait said. "But this one's a bit hush-hush." He put his arm around Ross's shoulders, steering him gently towards the door. "Even for me. I'm sure it will all become clear soon." Ross looked quizzically at the sheaf of papers he had just been handed. He inhaled, obviously ready to protest. "In the meantime," Kwait cut him off, "keep up the good work." A quick shake of the hand, a delicate manoeuvre expertly performed, and Ross found himself looking at the closed door to his boss's office.

Leaning against the other side of the door, Kwait

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sighed theatrically, wiping a bead of mock sweat from his brow. He almost skipped with a kind of childish glee across his office. He sat at his desk enjoying the strange sensations of exhilaration and guilt. The private revelry was soon interrupted.

“YOUR DAUGH-ER- -ERE DO—ER NAI—,” squawked the faulty intercom. His office door burst open and Streemly Naize, Kwait’s daughter, strode into the room. She lowered herself gracefully into one of the plush visitors’ chairs. Twenty, long legged, beautiful and frowning, Streemly fixed her father with a stern glare.

“I’ve been thinking Pops.” Streemly kicked off her shoes and tucked her legs under her bottom. “Maybe we are intelligent because of the way we are. Because of our physical shape. We need legs to move around.” She uncurled a leg, waved it and retucked it. “We need arms and hands to manipulate things.” She waved an arm. “With a different shaped body maybe we couldn’t be intelligent.” Streemly paused. “To be like us, is, to be like us.”

“Arms ...” said Kwait waving a leg in mock imitation of Streemly’s unnecessary gesture. “... and legs ...” Kwait waved an arm. “... aside.” The effort of what he had just done distracted Kwait for a moment.

He continued, “I find that hard to believe. The physical requirements for intelligence are probably quite restrictive. But, I wouldn’t have thought they were much more restrictive than, say, the physical requirements to live underwater and feed off plankton. There’s a huge diversity of life that does just that.”

“Well,” added Kwait after a moment’s thought. “At least on Edenia there is.”

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Streemly thought the reasoning a little tenuous but chose not to argue.

Kwait and Streemly had always been very close. Especially since the death of Streemly's mother, Vairy, some two years before. Vairy had died along with two hundred and twenty others when a freak blizzard had plucked her aeroplane from the skies and smashed it into the side of a mountain.

Kwait studied his daughter. He saw Vairy's well formed eyebrows and slender nose. He saw his own brown eyes and full lips. There was Vairy in the tilt of Streemly's head, in her slender wrists and the long legs tucked under herself. He heard Vairy in Streemly's mellow, unexpectedly deep voice.

Streemly knew that look in her father's eyes. She leaned forward.

"Oh daddy ..."

Their hands touched across the desk. They clung for a moment. Eyes misted. Heads bowed.

Streemly was the first to compose herself. "Look. If we do have a common ancestor then where did they come from?"

Kwait ignored the question, rose, picked up a piece of chalk and stood beside his large clean blackboard. "We have talking computers. We can project a gravity-well from within a space ship to drag itself along. We can monitor the motion of a man's eyebrows from two hundred miles and laser one of them off if we so desire. We have overcome inertia for faster manoeuvrability. But," Kwait waved the piece of chalk, "we still use a blackboard and chalk, my intercom doesn't work and we don't even know for sure how many planets and moons

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we have in our own system.” Kwait tossed the chalk into the bin. It BONKED and bounced out.

“Everyone,” continued Kwait, “has concentrated purely on the war. No one has thought of anything for centuries other than the retaking of Edenia. The ‘Great Revenge’.” Kwait sat down. “Edenia is a paradise,” he said. “Horridoa is just survivable. Jupe is big enough to make it fairly easy to go round but very difficult to leave. And ... the Edenians and the Horridoans are the same species!”

Streemly frowned at her father. “You make us sound like some sort of huge experiment.” Kwait frowned back saying nothing. “You think we’re being studied like we’re on some mega microscope slide?”

“No. I don’t think that. I’m thinking more along the lines of us being colonists. Left here thousands of years ago by highly advanced ancestors expanding through the galaxy.” Kwait made a steeple from his fingers. “What do you think?”

Streemly frowned even more, looking thoughtfully at her father. “I don’t believe you. I think what you’re saying is you’re fed up with the war and would like to research something completely different. The origin of man. The origins of Edenia and Horridoa in planetary terms. Jupe’s influence on evolution. Why is farting so funny ...”

“Stop frowning so much,” interrupted Kwait. “You’ll get wrinkles.”

“I get it from you.”

“Hmmm.” Kwait stabbed the intercom. PHHARRTTT. “Two chawoo teas please, Movis.”

“-ER-AINLY -IR.”

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Father and daughter sat lost in thought while stout Movis brought in two steaming mugs of chawoo tea. Movis paused for the briefest of moments, tutted and left.

Kwait, realising with a start they had both completely ignored Movis, stabbed the intercom. PHHARRTTT. "Sorry. Thanks, Movis."

"Yes. Sorry. Thanks, Movis," said Streemly, aiming her voice at the intercom.

"- - -" came the intercom's response.

"Look Pops," Streemly rose to pace the room. "You have virtually unlimited resources, unlimited cash and being the blue-eyed boy with the Board at the moment means you can get away with just about anything."

"So?"

"So, make use of it. You could ..." Streemly paused, thinking. "You could build a whole fleet of cheapo space drones, send them off into space looking for ... whoever or whatever ... and no one would bat an eyelid."

"Are you serious?"

"Yes. Why not? No one would question one of your projects. Who knows what you might find." Streemly warmed to the idea. To gaze out into the universe. The very thought was refreshing. Like looking through the carriage window to the far horizon after having your view confined to within a few feet as your train went through a particularly long tunnel.

Kwait went slightly pink. "I've started building them already," he said removing a non-existent piece of fluff from his knee.

Streemly's thoughts of trains emerging from

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tunnels stopped abruptly as her jaw dropped.

“We’ll send them off in all different directions,” said Kwait. “Each one has some basic scanning devices. The Board will think we’re testing some new gravity-wave device.”

“How many are you building?”

“Five hundred and do close your mouth, it’s most unbecoming.”

Streemly stood to leave. “Well I think you’re crazy, Pops,” she said. “But, my gravity-wave scanner will be along soon to save your bacon so I’m not worried. Yet. See you tonight.”

Streemly shuffled into her shoes, blew her father a kiss and left.

Chapter 3 : Found

Streemly looked from the high desert sun to the shimmering horizon. There was something reflected in the haze. She found herself moving closer. A scruffy little man was painting a huge red line at least ten yards wide. His shoes were spattered with red paint. The rest of him was suddenly pristine. He looked up and smiled at Streemly. He pointed and whispered, "I don't know you." The wide red line meandered for miles towards the distant hills. Streemly pointed at the line. "Why?" she asked. The little man became her Tactics tutor from college. "Someone has to paint the red lines on the maps," he said, holding out a tiny can of blue paint. She rapped his head with her knuckles. Tap, tap. "Wheelies," he said. "They leave marks too." Streemly shook her head. "You're crazy Pops," she said. Tap, tap.

Streemly woke up. She felt hot. Someone was knocking on her door.

"Streemly?" It was her father.

"Yes. Umm. Come in." Streemly sat up, rubbing

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sleep from her eyes.

“I just got these results.” Kwait was obviously very excited. “Sixteen of the buggers have disappeared. Sixteen!” He rattled a sheet of paper in Streemly’s face. She reached for it, trying to focus but Kwait was off round the room.

“All from the same area. Ross plotted their positions. Look.” Kwait rattled the paper in front of Streemly again. She reached for it but was too slow. Kwait was off round the room once more. “I’m going to take this to the Board you see if I don’t. Something’s going on out ...” Kwait’s voice trailed off as he left the room.

Streemly sat and thought about maps for a few minutes. She had been dreaming. What about? Damn, but that was annoying. She was certain that right on the edge of her memory was a whole lifetime of very important experiences. If she could only remember them. The effort of trying to bring back the taunting, illusive thoughts irritated the inside of her mind. She could feel the thoughts tickling her neurones and then dashing away. Then she thought about what her father had been ranting about.

“Crikey!” she said.

*

Kwait felt like a schoolboy summoned before the headmaster. The chair was straight backed and unyielding. His fashionably stiff collar rubbed at the slightest movement. He sighed lightly to himself and glanced at the delicate porcelain cup of lukewarm chawoo tea he held in his lap. His index finger was well and truly stuck in the ridiculously small and convoluted

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handle.

It was only Kwait's second visit to the Board of Governors' underground bunker. The first visit had been to receive his promotion to Director of The Space Services Centre and a commendation on his research into Gravity Projection. A jolly little bash, knee deep in bullshit and backslapping. Kwait was no politician and hated the whole affair.

Governor Septa had his head down reading the report on his desk. Kwait sat looking at Septa's bald patch wondering how a toad like him rose to such dizzy heights. He remembered Governor Septa as being the only Governor to vote against his appointment.

Septa had said, "Gravity Research will never get off the ground! Ha, ha." That was before Kwait's Gravity Projectors became responsible for moving ninety-nine per cent of all objects in space. Suddenly, Septa was behind Kwait all the way. And always had been!

Septa looked up and removed his glasses.

With the cup-handle still clamped to his digit like a Chinese Finger Trap, Kwait leaned forward expectantly.

Septa put his glasses back on and turned to the start of the report.

Kwait sat back taking the opportunity to give his finger a good yank. Success! And pain! He placed the cup carefully on the edge of Septa's desk, willing his eyes to stop watering.

After several minutes Septa looked up and removed his glasses once more. "Just as disturbing the second reading as the first," he said.

"So why didn't you read it before I got here, big nose!?" thought Kwait reaching for the tea and then

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thinking better of it.

"There is something out there," continued Septa slowly. "Invisible to our Beta scanners, and capable of wiping out several spacecraft simultaneously over a very large area." Septa bashed his fist on the desk and sat back triumphantly as if he had invented the concept.

"Yes. I know, you twot! I wrote the report!" thought Kwait.

"The Gravitonic Scanner looks most promising ..."

"Most promising?" thought Kwait. *"It's fantastic! You ignorant oick. Streemly's done a brilliant job!"*

"... and is ready for action. That's why I want you," Septa thrust a chubby index finger in Kwait's direction, "to be on the mission to find out exactly what this new menace is."

"You could have told me this over the phone, you balding git," thought Kwait.

"You will, of course need an assistant. Your daughter, as Head of the Scanner project is best qualified to go with you." Septa tossed some papers across the desk. "All the arrangements have been made."

"Thanks for asking for my thoughts on the subject," thought Kwait. Did he detect a faint smirk on Septa's face?

"You and your daughter will report to Space Rehearsal Station 87 at five tomorrow morning. Good luck!"

"!" thought Kwait.

Chapter 4 : Space

Kwait sat gingerly on the edge of his bed. He was sure he hadn't gone to sleep under fourteen tons of concrete but surely that's what must have happened. Why else would his body feel this way?

The dormitory around him was full of muscular young physiques all dashing around chatting and enjoying a bit of horseplay. Some were even exercising while he could hardly bloody move!

The super-fit young pile of biceps and teeth sat on the bed opposite asked, "Feeling a bit stiff, Doctor Naize?"

"A little," said Kwait massaging the small of his back. He couldn't quite remember the young man's name. Jac or Zac or Mac or something.

"Don't worry. You'll soon get used to it. This morning's run will loosen you up. You know," the boy looked serious for a moment, "I could only do forty press-ups when I first arrived."

"Really?" Kwait managed to avoid snarling.

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“Yeah. So don’t worry. You’ll soon get into the swing of things. See ya.” The young man showed Kwait even more of his teeth and jogged off. Kwait gave a half-hearted wave, grabbed his towel and headed for what he hoped would be a hot reviving shower.

“*Day two,*” thought Kwait bitterly. “*God, how time flies!*”

*

Day one had been a non-stop round of sit-ups, push-ups, bench-presses and knee-bends with a few non-hyphenated exercises like running and jumping thrown in for good measure.

Kwait’s mind had become strangely detached as he watched his body stagger and wheeze in the wake of Streemly’s effortless and unruffled performance demonstrating a young body at its peak.

Day two promised more of the same plus some drill rehearsal. In three minutes he and Streemly were due in sound room 17, where they would learn the drill songs. Drill songs, Kwait had read in the booklet “A guide to enjoying your stay at Space Rehearsal Station 87”, were the chants used when jogging in formation to and from the various areas of physical torture.

*

Kwait had just managed to get his left trainer on at the second attempt when the announcement came over the speaker system.

BING BONG – “COULD DOCTORS NAIZE AND NAIZE ...” The sing-song voice of a young women, with what sounded like a terminal nasal congestion problem, split the air. “... PLEASE REPORT TO THE P A V M ORIENTATION CHAMBER 5 ON SUB-LEVEL

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26.”

“*Saved!*” thought Kwait with relief as the message was repeated. “*But what the hell was P A V M?*”

*

“Weeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee! Isn’t this great?” Streemly shot passed Kwait, tumbling wildly as she went. Kwait waved his arms around madly, sickened by the zero-gravity field.

“*P A V M!*” thought Kwait bitterly. “*What’s wrong with Space suit anyway? Personal Anti Vacuum Module! Pah!*”

“Come on Pops. You can do it.” Streemly’s encouraging remarks did nothing for Kwait’s temper.

“As soon as I walked through that *inter-spatial connection device* and saw what was going on in here I should have thrown myself out of the nearest *environmental viewer!*” he said with dripping sarcasm.

“Weeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!” Streemly whizzed passed Kwait once more performing a sickening horizontal cartwheel.

*

Three weeks of hell at Space Rehearsal Station 87 were behind them. Kwait and Streemly were now keenly aware of the numerous ways a person could die in space. They had decided the previous evening over a celebratory chawoo lager, or several, that it was worth the risk. The unknown beckoned.

Although still a little stiff, Kwait thought he hadn’t felt this good in years. Fit as a flea and ready for action. Intellectual action anyway. He was ready for space.

Kwait had a mental image of himself decked out in a brilliant white suit covered in zip pockets, mysterious

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tubes and lots of dangly bits. He would be carrying a shiny metallic briefcase and striding purposefully in slow motion across the tarmac towards the dome of an immense white spacecraft. The huge vehicle, crouched and eager to spring into space, would seem to rise out of the ground as he approached it. He would salute the deferential ground crew and disappear aboard through a cloud of steam. Kwait wasn't sure about the cloud of steam. Probably had its roots in the comics he was fond of as a child.

The reality did not quite match Kwait's romantic ideal. It was just like an airport. Chuck your baggage onto a conveyor belt and walk down some long, brightly lit passages that terminate with two smiling stewardesses. Finally end up in a cramped but adequate seat reading detailed instructions on what position to adopt should the shuttle decide to plunge into the ground at several thousand miles per hour.

The vertical trip to the battle cruiser orbiting Horridoa was amazing. Both Naizes had their faces pressed against the observation port, soaking in the awesome sight of a diminishing planet floating in the void and then experiencing the heart-stopping immenseness of a Class A battle cruiser blotting out almost the entire field of view.

Tiny letters one hundred yards high were painted in red on the cruiser's glistening white surface. MARSHIA. Kwait and Streemly looked at each other. "Marshia?" they chorused.

A passing stewardess cleared things up. "All Class A battle cruisers are named after the Quantatronic brain which controls every aspect of the ship's functionality.

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The Quantatronic brain and the ship are as one unit. They cannot function as separate entities. More chawoo tea?"

Kwait shook his head, momentarily dazed by the astounding clarity of the dark brown eyes and perfect white teeth set against a tan Yorkshire puddings would have been proud of.

"No thank you," said Streemly. The stewardess continued on down the aisle dispensing tea and smiles.

"A Quantatronic brain," said Streemly gazing out of the portal. "I've read about those."

"Yes," said Kwait. "The very latest thing in AI. I'll be very interested to talk to it."

"It must be strange to be so big," said Streemly with the vague air of someone deep in thought.

"The AI won't *feel* anything," said Kwait. "It's just a big machine."

"I suppose," said Streemly absently.

The stewardess passed by saying, "We'll be docking in five minutes. Please make yourselves comfortable and place all weapons under your seat until we are docked. Thank you."

Chapter 5 : Marshia

“There will be a moment of discomfort during the docking procedure,” said the stewardess, beaming at the Naizes. “Please remain seated and don’t be alarmed.” Kwait’s gaze followed the stewardess’s bum as she sashayed away.

“I think intelligence must be inversely proportional to the allure of a woman’s bum,” said Kwait absently.

“I certainly hope that’s not the case, father,” Streemly said reproachfully.

Kwait reddened. “I didn’t mean ...” He was saved by his stomach trying to leave by his ears. By the look on Streemly’s face he was not alone in his discomfort.

“I ...” Streemly held her stomach. “think ... I’m ... going ... Aaah ...” She sighed with relief. “Some fuzzy logic would help with the gravity switching there, I’m sure.”

“I think we’ve arrived,” Kwait said unnecessarily.

*

Kwait and Streemly boarded Marshia through a narrow

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passage, forcing them to walk in single file. A tingling in the base of the neck told them they were being subjected to a thorough scan.

The passage opened into a gigantic chamber of indeterminate shape.

Hundreds of purple-clad people worked and walked around hundreds of workstations. Only those who shared the floor with the Naizes also shared their orientation. Off the floor, there was no "up". People moved and walked around walls and in mid-air at impossible angles.

Kwait and Streemly gawked around them. Streemly was the first to speak. "How come their change doesn't fall out of their pockets?"

A warm, crystal clear woman's voice spoke from inches behind their heads.

EACH MEMBER'S RELATIVE MOTION VECTOR IS MAINTAINED BY AN INDIVIDUAL GRAVITONIC PROJECTION.

They spun round to face the owner of this strangely intimate voice.

WELCOME ABOARD DOCTORS NAIZE AND NAIZE.

They looked back down the deserted passage.

"May I concur with that sentiment." This time a man's voice sounded from behind them. They spun round again.

"I am West. I have been appointed by and therefore represent the Board of Governors on this expedition. I hope the transitory phase from the planet's surface was correspondent to your expectations?" A well-built man of thirtyish stood before them, hand extended to Kwait.

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They shook hands. "It is a singular honour to meet the man and daughter team whose endeavours made this all possible," said West, indicating the chamber.

"Thank you," said Kwait. "I ... We have never seen our work ..." Kwait was lost for words.

"We knew all this was possible in theory," Streemly helped her father. "But to actually see it put into practice ... Well. It's just fantastic."

"Yes," West drawled. He looked faintly amused. "And by the puzzled expressions you had earlier, I think you must have been communicating with Marshia."

"Marshia?" Streemly asked. "The ship?"

"Yes," West drawled again. "That disembodied voice at the back of your head. That's Marshia."

Streemly looked around uncertainly. "Hello, Marshia," she ventured.

HELLO ONCE AGAIN DOCTOR NAIZE.

"Marshia speaks to us individually or collectively," explained West, turning and drawing Kwait and Streemly along with his body language. He addressed Streemly, "I presume Marshia responded to you even though I could hear nothing, Doctor Naize?"

"Yes, she did. And please, call me Streemly."

"And I'm Kwait."

"I'm just West I'm afraid." West paused, frowning, trying to find the right phrases. "Marshia's voice seems to emanate from your right shoulder when speaking to you alone. Sort of conspiratorially, if you like. And from behind when others in the neighbourhood can hear too. Demonstrate please, Marshia."

UNDERSTOOD. THIS IS A GROUP STATEMENT.

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Both Kwait and Streemly nodded.

THIS IS AN INDIVIDUAL STATEMENT.

Kwait and Streemly smiled, nodded and aha'ed.

"I tell you this because you will be interacting with Marshia for just about everything you need. And now," West clapped and rubbed his hands together, "a quick tour and then I'll show you your quarters where you can freshen up for dinner this evening with Captain Phoenix. Agreed?"

Without waiting for a response West was off as if pricked by a pin.

West reminded Streemly of one of those red-beaked birds you sometimes see at the sea shore. Its progress was a series of quick dashes punctuated by moments of stillness, study or frantic probing. Only in West's case, his dashes were punctuated by bouts of vague arm waving with lots of "Well, you probably know more about this than me anyway."

*

It turned out that the huge, busy chamber they had first entered was referred to imaginatively as A Deck. Everyone on A Deck was monitoring some part of Marshia. Marshia took care of her own electronics, but people were needed to monitor and maintain the vast amount of mechanics on board. Robots, though clever enough, having use of Marshia's vast intelligence, were not sufficiently adept and so were mainly used for simple cleaning or labouring.

*

The first stop on the tour was the spherical Gravitonic induction chamber. Here, they quickly learned that all they had to do was step meaningfully in any direction and

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at any angle and Marshia would provide a highly localised gravitational field, or Gravitonic Projection, to keep them feeling upright. They could stand anywhere in the room and at any angle and still feel quite comfortable as if it was everything else that was the wrong way up. Kwait's and Streemly's first tentative steps up the wall were quickly superseded by a raucous game of 3D tag. This quickly degenerated into a mock gymnastics with, at one stage, Kwait balancing on his nose apparently supported by Streemly's left earlobe.

West tolerated the pair's antics for a few minutes before drawling, "Ye-es," and ushering them flushed and giggling out of the induction chamber. "On a more serious note," West cut through their chuckling, "that, umm, feature, is available everywhere except your sleeping quarters." Kwait and Streemly looked suitably solemn. "Apparently, Marshia had trouble with some crew members beating themselves senseless during 'flying' dreams."

He then mumbled, "Engineering please, Marshia."
UNDERSTOOD.

The world moved.

To Kwait and Streemly it seemed as though the entire ship, its people and contents were manoeuvring as one to avoid them. While the three of them stayed perfectly still with respect to one another, walls, people, machines, everything seemed to move out of their way. They were, they soon realised, "flying" in perfect formation under Marshia's careful guidance.

West looked at the Naizes with a twinkle in his eye. "I love this bit," he said.

After the induction chamber, the rest of the tour

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was pretty dull. They were shown the huge Gravitonic Projector capable of generating a gravitational field akin to a black hole just outside the ship's hull. Marshia travelled through space by "falling" in the direction of the projected gravitational field.

They visited the Scanner chamber where their new bristling Gravitonic Scanner was housed next to the much larger, conventional Beta scanner. A quick round of the recreation areas, bars, eateries and games chambers and West paused, consulting his analogue wrist watch.

He clapped and rubbed his hands together. "Well, I think that's enough for now. I think you've got the hang of it. Dinner in one hour. I'll see you then." He mumbled something to Marshia and was flying off along the corridor.

Kwait and Streemly looked at one another.

"Try it," said Kwait.

"Marshia?" Streemly said to the air. "Could you take us to our quarters?"

YES, DOCTOR NAIZE.

Streemly looked quizzically at her father.

Nothing happened.

"Take us to our quarters please, Marshia," said Kwait.

UNDERSTOOD.

And they were off.

Chapter 6 : Speculate

Kwait was deposited gently in his unexpectedly luxurious quarters. He'd noticed no other crew members "flying" and resolved to use more traditional methods in future. The activity might be considered a waste of valuable resources.

His luggage stood neatly by the large double bed. There were two comfortable-looking chairs and a sumptuous sofa angled towards a large holoscreen display on one wall. The screen showed a view of a dismal grey Horridoa hanging forlornly in the void.

Kwait unpacked, showered, changed and sat thoughtfully in front of the holoscreen.

"Marshia?" Kwait asked tentatively.

YES, DOCTOR NAIZE?

"Do you know about the disappearance of the sixteen drones?"

YES, DOCTOR NAIZE.

"Analysis?"

FROM THE DRONES' MOTION VECTORS IT

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WOULD APPEAR THEY WERE HOMING IN ON SOME SMALL OBJECT. FROM THE DRONES' BETA SCANNER RESULTS IT WOULD APPEAR THE OBJECT WAS AN ASTEROID COMPOSED LARGELY OF ICE AND LESS THAN A THOUSAND YARDS IN DIAMETER.

"The drones disappeared some way off from the asteroid. Correct?"

YES, DOCTOR NAIZE.

"Did something from the asteroid destroy them?"

NOTHING WAS DETECTED BY THE SCANNERS.

"Could you have destroyed one of those drones without the means of destruction being detected?"

NO, DOCTOR NAIZE. LASERS, ION BEAMS, MISSILES AND GRAVITONIC PROJECTIONS WOULD ALL HAVE BEEN DETECTED BY THE SCANNERS.

"They disappeared simultaneously. Correct?"

THAT IS INACCURATE.

"It is?"

THE DRONES DID NOT ALL STOP TRANSMITTING SIMULTANEOUSLY.

"Show me."

UNDERSTOOD.

The holoscreen cleared to show sixteen cigar shaped drones together with the times of their disappearances. Two went simultaneously while the others varied by between a few milliseconds and almost two seconds.

"Show me graphically."

UNDERSTOOD.

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A bar chart appeared with the most recent disappearance first. The bars got progressively longer, as one would expect.

Kwait frowned at the screen.

“Show me that in 3-D with the drones in their relative positions.”

UNDERSTOOD.

The chart described a bowl shape with the drones which disappeared earliest towards the lowest point.

THAT IS A MOST INTERESTING PERSPECTIVE, DOCTOR.

“Show the relative position of the asteroid.”

UNDERSTOOD.

An asteroid shape appeared high and to the left of the bowl.

“Interesting.” Kwait pondered the screen for a while. “Show this to Streemly, please Marshia.”

UNDERSTOOD.

A few seconds later, Streemly’s image appeared in one corner of the holoscreen. She was towelling her hair.

“That’s interesting,” said Streemly. “It looks as though the drones were all shot down when they reached a certain distance from something not shown to the right of that asteroid.”

“Either that, or they ran into something very big and very round and very invisible,” said Kwait thoughtfully.

“A black hole?” suggested Streemly.

THE BETA SCANNERS WOULD HAVE DETECTED ANY BLACK HOLES IN THE REGION, DOCTOR NAIZE.

“So, what do you think it is, Marshia?” asked

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Streemly.

THERE IS INSUFFICIENT DATA FOR AN ABSOLUTE CONCLUSION. WOULD YOU CARE FOR ME TO SPECULATE?

“Yes, please.”

ONE: THE DATA IS UNRELIABLE DUE TO A MALFUNCTION OF THE DRONES OR THE RECEIVING STATION.

TWO: THE DATA HAS BEEN MANUFACTURED BY THE ENEMY TO DIVERT A CLASS A BATTLE CRUISER FROM THE GREAT REVENGE.

THREE: THE ENEMY HAVE A NEW WEAPON WHICH THE DRONES STUMBLED UPON.

SHOULD I CONTINUE?

“No. Thank you, Marshia.”

“How soon before we reach the area, Marshia?” asked Kwait.

FORTY-EIGHT HOURS, DOCTOR NAIZE.

Kwait rose. “I’ll see you at dinner, Streemly. I’m going for a walk. Have a bit of a think.”

“Later, Pop.”

Kwait’s thoughts quickly drifted away from the probes’ mysterious disappearances. As he meandered along Marshia’s seemingly endless corridors he became impressed by the friendliness and politeness shown by each crew member he encountered.

Passing through a quiet rest area, Kwait’s attention was drawn to a large clear bulb which appeared to project into space. It turned out to be a transparent bubble about twelve yards in diameter held against the side of the ship. It was accessible through a narrow passageway the sides

THE ARDLY EFFECT

of which were practically invisible.

Kwait could see some recognisable constellations through the clear walls of the bubble but held back from entering.

I UNDERSTAND AN EXCURSION IN THE TRANSPOD IS A VERY STIMULATING EXPERIENCE.

Kwait was momentarily taken aback at Marshia's intrusive explanation of the strange sight in front of him.

"Transpod?" he asked.

AN EXCELLENT OBSERVATION TOOL USED MAINLY FOR ENTERTAINMENT. PLEASE. STEP INSIDE, DR NAIZE.

Kwait ducked unnecessarily as he entered the transparent passageway. He couldn't help but place each foot gingerly, holding his arms out like a tightrope walker. Kwait paused and swallowed hard telling himself that no matter what his senses told him, he was safe and no, Marshia was not laughing at him. She was just a machine. He silently urged himself forward.

Kwait made himself look up from his feet. Any trepidation he'd felt swiftly left him. His eyes and mouth opened wide as he gazed out at the familiar constellations that shone back at him with unbelievable clarity.

He had reached the centre of the clear sphere before he realised he was no longer walking on a solid floor but was being held by Marshia's gravitonic projections.

A gentle hiss and the faintest of movements told Kwait he was being sealed in and this strangest of crafts was floating free.

SIMPLY LEAN IN THE DIRECTION YOU

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WISH TO GO, DOCTOR.

Kwait experimented with a gentle lean.

The huge white wall that was Marshia's exterior fell rapidly away. The sensation was supremely exhilarating. A feeling of power and security engulfed Kwait. He knew it was him in the transparent sphere that was moving but it still felt all the world like the gigantic space ship, the planet looming beyond and the surrounding stars were all dancing to his tune.

"It's fantastic!" said Kwait making the transpod dip and swoop around Marshia. "Streamly will love this."

IT IS VERY POPULAR WITH SOME CREW MEMBERS.

Kwait turned the transpod away from the bright mass of Marshia. Stars and deep space captured his attention. He gazed out of his tiny bubble totally enthralled.

"This is truly amazing," he said. "You must keep one set of optical sensors trained out there all the time."

BETA SCANNERS HAVE GREATER RANGE AND DEFINITION, DOCTOR.

"Yes, but it's so beautiful."

IT IS VERY POPULAR WITH SOME CREW MEMBERS.

"Don't you sometimes just stare out there in wonder and think about ... I don't know ... where it all came from?"

A NON-CAUSAL EVENT IN PRE-SPACE-TIME. AN INEVITABLE HEISENBERG EVENT.

"Don't you *wonder* about things, Marshia?"

I ANALYSE, CATEGORISE AND FORMALISE MY INPUT DATA, DOCTOR.

THE ARDLY EFFECT

“I suppose wondering is not in your repertoire.”
Kwait was not being derisive.

NO, DOCTOR.

“We ... people ... I ... wonder too much perhaps. Sometimes I feel so small. So powerless. Foetal. Things happen. Stars explode. Planets die. Animals, people die in such pain. We’re so helpless. Why?”

IT WOULD SEEM LOGICAL THAT THE QUESTION IS INVALID.

“What question?”

THE QUESTION OF WHY THINGS ARE AS THEY ARE, DOCTOR.

“Yes,” Kwait said absently. He squinted at a particularly blue star. “Perhaps life is the universe’s attempt to overcome its own limitations. We are all of this universe. Defined and encompassed within it.”

I AM CURIOUS ABOUT SOMETHING
DOCTOR.

“What’s that, Marshia?”

CREW MEMBERS IN THE TRANSPOD OFTEN SHARE THEIR THOUGHTS ABOUT THE UNIVERSE WITH ME. SOME WILL EVEN CRY. WHY IS THAT, DOCTOR?

Kwait thought for a moment. “Being presented with the huge indifference of the universe, I guess.”

He felt sad. He could feel his mood sinking. Kwait resisted the urge to start dwelling on questions of *the meaninglessness of it all* variety. A particularly starless and black area between constellations reminded him of the problems he had to ponder back aboard Marshia.

“Take me back please, Marshia.”

UNDERSTOOD.

Chapter 7 : Dinner

Captain Phoenix turned out to be a handsome, if portly, middle-aged gentleman. He wore the standard issue purple uniform with no frills or any insignia of rank.

Streemly and Kwait were greeted by Phoenix's outstretched hand. "Doctors, welcome aboard. May I introduce my wife, Tracy ..." A Junoesque young woman bowed gracefully to Kwait revealing, a cleavage young men would die for and old men could die from.

"Hello," she purred, managing to breathe out far too much air.

"Commander Apricot ..." continued Captain Phoenix, indicating an outrageously handsome young man beaming at Streemly. "... and West you've met."

"Indeed," said West. "May I say how charming you both look." An awkward pause was followed by coughs and invitations to be seated.

Tracy was the first to break the silence while the soup was being efficiently dispensed by silent stewards.

"So, Doctor Naize ..."

THE ARDLY EFFECT

“Please. Call me Kwait.”

Tracy kept her lips puckered for what seemed an age before saying his name. “Kwait. So you’re the one who upset Birdie. Tearing him away from his beloved battle plans.”

“Birdie?” queried Kwait.

Captain Phoenix raised an embarrassed finger. “That’s me, I’m afraid.”

Kwait looked pointedly at Streemly knowing she was about to ask if the nickname referred to his surname or to being one under par in some department. Spotting her father’s disapproving glance Streemly swallowed the question.

“Upset you Captain?” Kwait turned to Phoenix. “In what way?”

Before Phoenix could reply, Apricot turned to Streemly and said, “This new scanner of yours looks most interesting. Tell me about it.”

“I’m sorry,” Streemly replied, “but I would be interested to hear what the Captain has to say.”

Captain Phoenix looked embarrassed again. “Perhaps this is not the best time to discuss this.”

“Could I hazard a guess?” ventured Kwait. “If I were in your position I would probably regard this whole expedition with some cynicism, to say the least.”

“It’s not that, exactly ...” Captain Phoenix said hesitantly. “But ...”

“This isn’t some wild goose chase, you know,” Streemly interrupted the Captain. “There could be something very significant out there which could affect the whole course of the war.”

“Yes, I’m sure ...” began the Captain.

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He was cut short by Apricot who said, "By causing us to lose it, perhaps?" Apricot immediately regretted his sarcastic tone.

Streemly flushed. "Something that can cause that much destruction *must* be investigated. I would have thought that even a gung-ho dullard could have worked that one out!"

"Streemly!" Kwait admonished his daughter. "We are the Captain's guests!"

"Yes," said Streemly, "I'm sorry. But talk of winning or losing this war is a little ridiculous don't you think? Especially when there's something of such obvious destructive power out there."

Apricot inhaled to take up the challenge but was thankfully interrupted.

AAWOOGAARGH. Said Marshia coolly. I AM TRACKING AN ENEMY SCOUT SHIP. REQUEST CONDITION YELLOW.

"Granted!" said Captain Phoenix. "With me, Apricot, and please excuse us ladies, gentlemen." Phoenix and Apricot left at a trot.

"Well, how exciting," said West, not sounding particularly excited. "An enemy scout ship. So soon too. Whatever next?"

"Whatever next, indeed," purred Tracy, leaning towards Kwait. "Tell me," she said, gripping a roll firmly with both hands, "what sort of Doctor are you, Kwait?" Tracy dug her thumbs gently into the yielding bun and parted it into two appetising halves.

"I'm just a humble physicist," said Kwait, his eyes following one half of the bun as it was placed between Tracy's white teeth and ruby lips.

THE ARDLY EFFECT

“So you know all about things physical?” said Tracy.

“Not *all*,” said Kwait. “Just *some*.”

“My father is an expert on gravity,” said Streemly smiling sweetly at Tracy. “And how, eventually, *everything* succumbs to it.”

“I like to think of myself as a bit of an expert on attraction,” said Tracy, not missing a heartbeat.

“I’ve never thought of it like that before,” said West.

“What?” said Streemly.

“Everything succumbing to gravity. In the end,” said West. “The big crunch, and all.” He looked thoughtful for half a second before saying brightly, “Still, not my thing really. I don’t like to get bogged down with the little detailie things like you scientists types. I like to keep my eye on the whole picture. The overall scene. The big ... picture. More of the manager of managers role for me.”

“I can see that,” said Streemly over West’s head.

“Where would Mrs Doctor Naize be?” asked Tracy removing some butter from her nail by sticking the whole finger in her mouth and then withdrawing the moist digit very slowly.

“She died some time ago,” said Kwait.

“Handsome *and* available,” said Tracy with the sensitivity of a post-coital black widow.

“So what do you *do* as representative of the Board?” Streemly asked West, hoping he would talk enough for her to get on with her meal without having to listen to the intellectually challenged set of breasts chatting up her dad.

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“A very interesting question,” said West, steepling his fingers. “Before this appointment, I was Head of Workforce Consumables Appropriations at the Board’s head offices on Tao. I headed an initiative which looked at the economic implications of certain sheet connection module recycling processes. Some of which would hold department heads accountable for over stock usage as laid out in a study I conducted. All, I might add, done on my own initiative. The reaction was most encouraging and it seems that all heads of departments unanimously voted for my promotion to this position.”

“You mean,” said Streemly pausing to chew some food, “after you showed the department heads how to save paperclips, they elected to send you into space?”

“Well, I think there was a little more to it than that,” said West. “They did say that I had demonstrated an unusual ability to get right to the heart of a detail that had, in the main, been completely overlooked by everyone on the Board. It was thought that my, dare I say, talent, would be best utilised on a mission such as this.”

“I can relate to that,” said Streemly.

“Thank you,” said West.

Chapter 8 : Enemy

Phoenix and Apricot entered the control room at a trot.

A perspiring young woman manning the auxiliary communications console said nervously, "Enemy scout ship located sir."

Phoenix, trying not to breathe hard, put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "Chin up, Sprigs. Remember your rehearsals. This is what we were *born* for!"

The communications officer flushed damply, set her jaw and tried not to be sick.

Phoenix strode confidently to his imposing padded seat. He addressed the room.

"I know you'll all do your best. Years of rehearsals have led us to this moment. Our destinies are tied together forever. Our people have entrusted their very lives into our hands. Their fate is in our ... hands. Chin up. Remember your rehearsals. This is what we were *born* for!" Apricot applauded enthusiastically.

"That'll do, Commander," said Phoenix

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reproachfully. "Now, let's put all that rehearsing into effect shall we." Phoenix set his jaw.

"Marshia?" he said.

YES, CAPTAIN PHOENIX?

"Sneak up behind that enemy vessel and disable it!"

UNDERSTOOD. ALL CREW. CONDITION RED. YOU HAVE THIRTY SECONDS TO TIE DOWN.

"At last!" exclaimed Phoenix strapping himself in. "Action! Come on Apricot! Put the screen on. I don't want to miss any of this."

The large screen showed a larger portion of starry space. If you stared really hard and long enough at one of the stars near the edge of the screen you could just make out that they were moving.

A few minutes passed.

"What's happening, Marshia?" asked Phoenix at last.

WE ARE SNEAKING UP BEHIND THE ENEMY, CAPTAIN.

"Good, good." Phoenix drummed his fingers.

Apricot arranged his features to indicate his agreement and support of Phoenix.

A few more minutes passed.

Someone coughed.

"And how long will this take, Marshia?" asked Phoenix.

NINETY-SIX HOURS, CAPTAIN.

"Four days?"

YES, CAPTAIN.

Phoenix thought for a moment.

"Just time to finish dinner, I think." Phoenix

THE ARDLY EFFECT

unstrapped himself and rose to leave. “Keep me posted, Marshia.”

UNDERSTOOD.

Chapter 9 : Dessert

Phoenix and Apricot entered the dining room and settled into their places. Stewards placed plates of food in front of them.

West's face pointed at Phoenix, eyebrows quizzically raised. As did Tracy's, Kwait's and Streemly's.

Phoenix and Apricot seemed to be in some kind of synchronised elbow dancing competition as they tucked into their plates of food. After several minutes of mastication during which he was oblivious to the group stare, Phoenix looked up.

"Ah!" Phoenix exclaimed, realising the assembly had been waiting patiently for an explanation of the code red alert recently instigated. "You're probably wondering about the code red thingy ..." Phoenix waved his knife in the general direction of the red hue that had insinuated itself into the room's lighting. "Nothing to worry about. Just sneaking up on an enemy ship."

"You mean we're going into battle?" demanded

THE ARDLY EFFECT

West, rising in alarm. “Shouldn’t you be doing something on the bridge, or something?”

“Well ...” began Phoenix.

“Shouldn’t we be in some kind of protective bunker, or something?” said West, panic creeping into his voice.

Phoenix patted the air over his plate trying to make *be calm* motions but succeeded only in losing the peas off his fork. “Now let’s stay calm. Nothing is likely to happen within the next few days,” he said.

“*Likely?*” West’s voice rose an octave. “*Likely?*”

“*Days?*” said Streemly ignoring West’s concern.

“*Days?*” Echoed Kwait.

Tracy motioned to a steward. “I think we’re all ready for dessert now. Thanks,” she said to the steward as the plates were expertly removed from the table. “I *do* think using stewards, *real* people, is much better than those replicator things, don’t you?” she said to anyone who was listening.

“We don’t have a bridge, interestingly,” said Apricot turning to West. “We have, what we sometimes call the *control* room. And sometimes we refer to it as the *ops* room.” Apricot continued, ignoring the malevolent glare from West. “I must confess, I’m not sure when to use which. But ...” in a conspiratorial tone, “... I don’t think anyone else knows either.”

Phoenix reddened. “Might I remind you *Mister* West that we are at a state of ... *in* a state of war. *One* of the prerequisites, and indeed some regard it an important identifying feature, is that we, on occasion, regrettably, engage in combat.”

“Is this diversion absolutely necessary given the

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importance of our task?” asked Kwait.

West’s face was a picture of injured disbelief. “But I was led to believe this was a simple exploratory mission based on some crackpot assertions that had no foundation in reality and that there certainly would be no possible chance there would be any possibility of any dangerous possibilities being entered into at all,” West said in one impressive breath.

“Now, the origin of the word ‘bridge’ I do know,” volunteered Apricot.

“‘crackpot assertions’?” Streemly was appalled at West’s comments. It was her turn to raise her voice an octave. “‘no foundation in reality’?”

Phoenix tried to gain control of the situation. “The ship we are tracking is headed towards the same area as ourselves so it *has* to be engaged,” he said.

West sat down looking rather pale as the stewards arrived with dessert.

Tracy dived into the fruit concoction with gusto. “Hmmm,” she enthused, lifting a heaped spoon in Kwait’s direction. “You really must try some.”

Kwait declined.

“Anyway,” West stabbed at his fruit, “this is probably all old hat to you isn’t it.” He looked pointedly at Phoenix. “Been in many a bloody conflict, I’ll bet.”

Phoenix concentrated on his food. As did Apricot.

“Haven’t you?” West squeaked.

When Phoenix did not respond West dropped his spoon and excused himself from the room holding his stomach.

Phoenix looked embarrassed.

Kwait looked cross.

THE ARDLY EFFECT

Apricot looked at Phoenix and then looked cross.
Streemly folded her arms crossly.
Tracy sucked on a peach segment.
The steward looked at the ceiling.

Chapter 10 : Capture

Just a couple of hundred million miles from Marshia was a darkened room that had neither doors nor windows. The only illumination in the room came from a flickering display screen which lit up the face of the small, dark, bearded man peering intently into it. Wires from a skull cap disappeared into the gloom above him. In each hand he held a joystick which he twitched occasionally.

The project was coming together nicely.

The small, dark man let go of the joysticks and leaned back with a sigh as he realised his thoughts were starting to wander.

Absolute concentration was imperative.

That last fist-sized comet he had managed to capture was just what the doctor ordered. It contained some missing iron and water he so badly needed for completion.

The thousands and thousands of hours he had spent coaxing and cajoling the molecules into place would be paying dividends in the very near future.

THE ARDLY EFFECT

Yards away, in another, brighter, room that had neither doors nor windows, sat another small, bearded man. The casual observer would think he was reading a large volume on the psychology of subliminal smells in confined spaces and the meta-language of pheromones. But had that observer taken the trouble to glance over the small, neat little man's shoulder he would have seen that the man was actually conducting a detailed examination of Miss December's ample physique.

*

Phoenix lay on his bed marvelling at his luck at being given command of a genuine Class A Quantatronic Battle Cruiser. 'All these personnel,' mused Phoenix. 'Relying on me for leadership, example, strength. *And* we're squaring up to the enemy. Mustn't show any weakness. Firm jaw, steady hand. The crew do look up to me, after all.'

"Are you even trying?" Tracy's question cut across Phoenix's thoughts. "My arm is starting to ache! It's like trying to breathe life back into a long dead, badly shaved albino squirrel!"

"I'm sorry pet," Phoenix looked embarrassed. "It's the pressures, you know."

Tracy jumped off the bed, pulling her dressing gown around her shoulders. "Pressures, pressures, pressures!" She was not a happy lady. "Same old excuse. I am now going to take a shower because *somehow* I've worked up a sweat. Hot and still bothered!" She turned before entering the bathroom, narrowing her eyes. "I'll be back!" she said.

Phoenix watched the bathroom door close with relief and trepidation.

MITIS GREEN

I AM SORRY TO DISTURB YOU CAPTAIN PHOENIX BUT THERE HAVE BEEN SOME DEVELOPMENTS REGARDING THE ENEMY SCOUT SHIP.

Phoenix sat up eagerly. "Do you need me in the control room?" he said.

THAT WILL NOT BE NECESSARY CAPTAIN.

"Right! I'll be there straight away." Phoenix bounded off the bed and over to the bathroom door. "I'm sorry pet," he shouted through the door, pulling on his trousers. "Emergency in the control room. Back as soon as I can." With that Phoenix dashed for the door. He was still tucking himself in in the corridor as a muffled scream from within his cabin startled a passing crew member.

*

Phoenix settled into the plush leather armchair in the centre of the control room. "Screen on, please."

"It's on, sir," said Apricot.

Phoenix squinted at the large black square on the wall in front. "Ah! So it is! It's difficult sometimes, you know, to focus on the stars. Like coming across a washing line unexpectedly. Difficult to judge the distance until you've focused on it sort of thing."

"Yes, sir," said Apricot.

"So, what's happening?" asked Phoenix.

Apricot frowned at the screen. "I'm not really sure, sir," he said.

"Marshia?" said Phoenix.

UNDERSTOOD. WE ARE ONE POINT TWO MILES TO THE REAR OF THE ENEMY SCOUT SHIP CAPTAIN. DOCTORS NAIZE AND NAIZE HAVE

THE ARDLY EFFECT

BUILT INVERTED GRAVITONIC SCANNERS ENABLING US TO BEND ALL TRADITIONAL SCANNING BEAMS RENDERING US EFFECTIVELY INVISIBLE. THIS WILL CEASE TO BE EFFECTIVE WITHIN ONE MILE OF THE TARGET. SHOULD I DESTROY THE ENEMY SCOUT SHIP CAPTAIN?

“Errmm. Not just yet, Marshia, thank you.”

UNDERSTOOD.

“Put the ship on screen.”

IT IS ON SCREEN CAPTAIN.

“It is?” asked Phoenix, squinting at the screen.

Apricot squinted likewise.

A red ring appeared round a tiny white dot in the screen’s centre.

“Make it bigger please Marshia.”

UNDERSTOOD.

A larger red ring appeared round a tiny white dot in the screen’s centre.

“Make the image of the scout ship large enough for us to see in some detail please Marshia,” said Phoenix a little tersely.

UNDERSTOOD.

The screen filled, almost audibly, with the rear view of a rather unremarkable, but extremely white, box shaped vessel. The bright image caused the control room to flood with light making everyone flinch unattractively.

“It’s a standard ion-drive enemy mini-transport and scout Class “C” space only vessel, captain,” volunteered Apricot. “Capable of carrying eight personnel and a four ton payload. A ten megawatt ion-beam mounted fore and aft. Sub-light, five ton per second inertial moment capacity. One three sixty degree magneto scanner. Ceased

MITIS GREEN

manufacture two years ago.”

Phoenix frowned at Apricot and then pointed to a red button on the arm of his chair. “What’s that for?”

“Sir?” Apricot leaned forward to see what Phoenix was pointing at.

“The button? What’s it for?”

“Summoning the steward, sir.”

“*Not* a trap door?”

“Sir?”

“Never mind,” sighed Phoenix. “How many crew on board the scout ship, Marshia?” he asked.

TWO CAPTAIN.

“Right!” Phoenix clapped his hands together enthusiastically. “What do you recommend Apricot?”

“Perhaps we should capture the crew for questioning sir.”

“Excellent suggestion, Apricot. Excellent.”

A few seconds’ silence followed while Phoenix frowned and pursed his lips in thought.

Crewperson Pending filed her nails.

Someone coughed.

Phoenix came to a decision. “Marshia?”

YES CAPTAIN.

“Capture the crew of that enemy scout ship would you please.”

UNDERSTOOD.

The viewer screen went to mostly black again. The tiny white dot in the screen’s centre exploded in an orange ball of hot gasses and assorted debris.

“My God!” said Apricot looking aghast at the screen. “She’s blown them up!”

THE ENEMY CREW ARE IN HOLDING CELL

THE ARDLY EFFECT

FOURTEEN CAPTAIN.

“Well,” said Phoenix enthusiastically. “Nothing like a little action to get the blood flowing. Eh, Apricot?”

“No sir,” said Apricot a little meekly.

“Can’t stand around here gabbing, man,” Phoenix jumped from his seat. “I must just go and ... have a word with my wife. I’ll see you in fifteen ... make that ten minutes in holding cell fourteen, Apricot.”

“Very good, sir.”

Chapter 11 : Interrogation

Sergeant Arthur, immaculately attired in Special Space Reconnaissance Platoon light grey overalls with matching belt and boots, blinked twice. Where there had once been a pleasant view of the Armpit Nebula, there was now a rather dull view of a light grey wall.

He noticed the left arm of his pilot's seat was smouldering quietly and the joystick he held was no longer connected to anything.

Sergeant Arthur's attention was drawn to the sound of splashing water to his left.

His identical twin brother, Sergeant George, also resplendent in Special Space Reconnaissance Platoon light grey overalls with matching belt and boots, stood carefully pouring steaming hot water from a kettle onto his left foot.

But not for long.

"Ow, ooh, aargh. Bollocks! What the ...?!" Sergeant George hopped about grabbing at his foot. The kettle crashed to the floor.

THE ARDLY EFFECT

Moving only his eyes, Sergeant Arthur examined his surroundings. "It would appear, from a cursory examination of our current circumstances that ..." He flinched as Sergeant George yanked off his boot. The application of hot water to Sergeant George's left sock, an event of some note and rarity in its own right, released a malevolent odour well capable of flooring all nostril bearing entities for a radius of some twenty yards or more. Sergeant Arthur, thankfully immunised after years of exposure, survived. "... we've been nobbled!"

Sergeant Arthur averted his eyes. The sight of Sergeant George massaging his besocked foot was too much even for Sergeant Arthur's callused senses.

"It certainly looks that way, brother." Sergeant George reinserted his damp foot into his damper boot. Much to Sergeant Arthur's relief.

"At a guess," said Sergeant Arthur, "I would say we have been exported into the very bowels of an enemy vessel."

"A fiendish and unsporting trick, brother."

"Expect nothing less. Expect nothing less." Sergeant Arthur abandoned the joystick and seat. "Let us reconnoitre the immediate area perchance to find a chink in our enemies' defences of the weakness persuasion."

"Right-ho, brother."

"You look over there. And I'll look ... over here."

The sergeants examined the walls of the ten by ten cell minutely.

"Find anything?" enquired Sergeant Arthur.

"Nothing, brother."

"Door or anything?"

"Nothing, brother."

MITIS GREEN

“Any seams?”

“Nothing, brother.”

“Lumps? Bumps? General anomalies of a colour persuasion?”

“Nothing, brother.”

“Me neither.” Sergeant Arthur scratched his head.

“Check the floor,” he said at last.

The two dropped to their knees examining every square inch of the floor intently. They rose after a few minutes, puzzled expressions, playing like a light breeze tickling a donkey’s mane, over their faces.

“Find anything?” enquired Sergeant Arthur.

“Nothing, brother.”

“Trap door or anything?”

“Nothing, brother.”

“Any seams?”

“Nothing, brother.”

“Lumps? Bumps? General anomalies of a colour persuasion?”

“Nothing, brother.”

“Me neither.” Sergeant Arthur scratched his head again. “The fiendish persuasion of the enemy defies all imagination.”

“It does indeed, brother. *And* they’ve buggered up the kettle, brother!” said Sergeant George toeing, the remnants of his stricken kettle. He leaned to examine the kettle’s smouldering plugless cord. “Very fiendish, very unsporting,” he said.

“Quite!” said Sergeant Arthur indignantly. “No ‘more tea vicar?’ for us! Not until we’re out of this biscuit tin of a room, anyway. I will be having very strong words with whoever is in charge. You can be sure

THE ARDLY EFFECT

of that!”

“You do right, brother.”

“Right! Let’s find out exactly *who* is in charge.”

Sergeant Arthur took a deep breath, adopted the arms-akimbo-head-tilted-back stance reserved of one who is about to indulge in some heavy vociferation, and fell back startled against the wall.

“You could have warned us you were standing up there!” gasped Sergeant Arthur clasping his chest in alarm. Sergeant George assumed the same position in sympathy.

“Welcome aboard, gentlemen,” Phoenix said wryly looking down from the walkway running round the top of the cell. “I am Captain Phoenix and this is Commander Apricot my second in command.” Apricot tilted his smile in what he hoped was a superior and intimidating way. “And you are ...?”

“Say nothing, brother,” Sergeant George hissed. The prisoners stood in determined silence.

Phoenix sighed. “Intimidate the prisoners please, Marshia.”

UNDERSTOOD, CAPTAIN.

The sergeants found themselves suddenly suspended upside down above the centre of the cell. Their heads level with Phoenix and Apricot. Loose change and tea bags hit the cell floor.

“Sergeant George Puree here, governor!”

“Sergeant Arthur Puree here, sir!” The pair shrieked in unison coming to an inverted attention.

“Thank you Marshia. You may put them down now.”

UNDERSTOOD, CAPTAIN.

MITIS GREEN

The sergeants were returned gently to an upright position on the cell floor.

"Thank you, governor," said Sergeant George bending to retrieve his change and tea bags.

"Ditto," said Sergeant Arthur tipping a cap he was not wearing.

"Now gentlemen." Phoenix leaned forward on the rails. Apricot did likewise. "Do tell. Just where were you headed?"

"Well sir," Sergeant Arthur looked embarrassed. "You know, we're not supposed to divulge information of that particular persuasion if captured and questioned by the enemy. No offence intended to your present selves, sir."

Sergeant George nodded in agreement.

"I'm sure you could make an exception in this case. Marshia can be very persuasive."

UNDERSTOOD, CAPTAIN.

The two sergeants rose slowly into the air, feeling an extra firm tug as a small gravitonic projection threatened to remove their heads from their stretched necks.

"Well. As you've asked," said Sergeant Arthur through clenched teeth and throat, "we were given instructions, of the orders persuasion, to the effect that we should determine what events had terminated the existence of some of your lot's little space ship things over in sector five."

"And," continued Sergeant George, "find out what happened, governor."

Sergeant Arthur tried to turn and frown at his brother but couldn't.

THE ARDLY EFFECT

“I see,” said Phoenix.

THEY ARE TELLING THE TRUTH, CAPTAIN.

“Thank you, Marshia,” said Phoenix. “Thank you, gentlemen. That will be all for now. Marshia will take you to a more comfortable cell.”

UNDERSTOOD.

The two sergeants were whisked up and away. “Any chance of a cup of tea or just some water of the hot persuasion and a mug would do ...” could be heard fading into the distance.

“It would seem that the destruction of Naize’s drones had nothing to do with the enemy, Apricot.”

“Indeed, sir. Unless those two were expendable decoys who knew nothing of the real truth, sir.”

“Possible, possible.”

WE WILL BE REACHING THE TARGET AREA WITHIN THE NEXT TWO HOURS, CAPTAIN.

“Thank you, Marshia,” said Phoenix. “Better keep the scanners on full alert, Apricot.”

“Yes, sir.”

“The enemy will obviously notice the destruction of their scout ship and be sending reinforcements.”

“Undoubtedly, sir.”

“Go to yellow alert and tell the crew to stay ... alert.”

“Consider it done, sir.”

*

Kwait and Streemly strolled arm in arm. They had left the Captain’s dining quarters and were heading in the general direction of their own quarters.

“So, what do you think of Captain Phoenix?” asked Streemly.

MITIS GREEN

"I can't make up my mind," said Kwait looking thoughtful. "He seems a bit of a bumbler on the surface but I suspect that in the event of an emergency, when everyone else was panicking, he would be a little island of calm."

"Don't potential Captains of these quantatronic battle cruisers have to be specially vetted?" asked Streemly.

"I believe so," said Kwait. "Something about their relationship with the brain." Kwait flinched at his own words. "I mean Marshia." He looked apologetically around him.

Kwait thought a change of subject was in order. "That young commander ... what was his name?"

"Banana," said Streemly dryly.

"Apricot," said Kwait. "Seemed a very nice young fellow. Friendly. Attentive."

"If you're into labradors." Streemly didn't pause for breath. "I wouldn't buy a used space shuttle from that West fellow but you and the Captain's wife, Spacey Tracy, seemed to hit it off in a big way!"

Kwait laughed. "She's quite a gal, isn't she?"

"I nearly gagged when she started sucking her fingers and I'm sure there was a slight echo coming from that cleavage." Streemly leaned against her father giggling.

"Sssh!" said Kwait theatrically. "Marshia might turn us in."

ALL CONVERSATIONS ARE TREATED WITH ABSOLUTE CONFIDENCE.

"Thank you, Marshia," said Kwait. Father and daughter looked at each other like two guilty children.

THE ARDLY EFFECT

They walked in silence for a few minutes.

“What do you think the prisoners look like?” asked Streemly as they turned into the corridor leading to their quarters.

Kwait paused for thought.

“Marshia?” he said at last.

YES, DOCTOR?

“Show us the way to the prisoners, would you?”

CERTAINLY DOCTOR.

A pale blue arrow appeared on the corridor wall pointing back the way they had come.

“Follow that arrow,” said Streemly pulling her father round.

Kwait and Streemly entered a quadrangle whose overwhelming feature was that of being the dullest grey they have ever seen. The floor, walls and very high ceiling were all grey. Diffused lighting made judging distances very difficult.

Along each of the four grey walls, nine or ten feet apart, were grey doors. The two doors nearest Kwait and Streemly had a small, red light on the wall above them.

“These must be the prison cells,” whispered Streemly. Kwait nodded.

Streemly approached the first door. A small, grey button with ‘Show’ written on it proved irresistible to her. She pressed the button. The label on the button changed to ‘Hide’. Movement to her left caught Streemly’s attention.

A large portion of the grey wall had become transparent to reveal a small, grey cell. The cell was furnished with two bunks, a table, two chairs, a number of cupboards and a small, muscular, tanned man in a

MITIS GREEN

black leotard doing press-ups.

Kwait and Streemly watched as the man, oblivious to their presence, went through an exhaustive exercise routine.

The man was well into another round of press-ups before Kwait leaned towards Streemly and whispered, "They're very fit, aren't they?"

"I don't think much of their dress sense," Streemly whispered back.

THAT IS CELL-MAN SECOND CLASS
RUPERT JOHNSON.

Marshia obviously made the man aware of their presence as he stopped mid-press, stood, focused briefly on the wall between them and jogged lightly on his toes to the door. Leaving the cell, Johnson jogged lightly up to Kwait and Streemly and came smartly to attention.

"Cell-man second class Johnson," he said, saluting so hard his hand vibrated. Kwait and Streemly made sad, self-conscious attempts at saluting back. Johnson looked as though something rather smelly had been sellotaped to his upper lip.

"We were just wondering ..." Kwait tapered off. He felt foolish suddenly.

Streemly looked down squinting very hard at something fascinating at her feet.

Johnson rolled his eyes. "Would sir and madam like to have a butchers at the prisoners?"

Kwait nodded. "Yes please," he said.

Johnson jogged lightly in place for a second before turning and jogging lightly over to the other grey door with the red light above it. He came to attention and did a smart about turn. Johnson's flamboyant pre-button-press-

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wave of the finger halted while he said, "The aforementioned prisoners will be revealed when I activate the wall clearing button." Johnson's head motioned in the direction of the grey wall to the right of the door. "Do not be alarmed. The prisoners will not be aware of your scrutinising, as the wall, which permits the passage of light from them to us, does not permit it to pass in the opposite direction or *visa versa*. Which means, they can't see us."

"A one way wall," said Streemly.

"Precisely, madam," said Johnson, pressing the button.

The wall cleared to reveal Sergeant Arthur and Sergeant George sitting disconsolately at opposite ends of a small grey table. Their grey uniforms blended quite nicely with the decor.

Johnson held his finger to his lips, indicating Kwait and Streemly should stay quiet and listen.

Sergeant Arthur was speaking, "... was *definitely*, without a shadow of a doubt, The Meta-language of Pheromones by Anne O'Door."

"But what," asked Sergeant George, "would possess you to want to read such a volume, brother?"

"I didn't," said Sergeant Arthur. "I just made it up. A quip of the joke persuasion."

Sergeant George looked puzzled for a moment. "Ah!" he said at last. He sat back. The puzzled expression on his face refusing to leave its comfortable new home.

Sergeant Arthur sighed. "Like, Pale Rider by Annie Mick," he said.

"I get *that*," said Sergeant George. "But what's ferret-moles got to do with doors?"

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“*Pheromones!*” Sergeant Arthur said with considerable irritation. “*Pheromones!*”

The puzzled expression that had moved onto Sergeant George’s face had taken down the “For Rent” sign and got itself on the electoral register.

“*Pheromones,*” said Sergeant Arthur, waving a hand vaguely in the air. “They’re sort of chemicals that go up your hooter and make you ... I don’t know ... frisky or of the aggressive persuasion.”

Sergeant George folded his arms across his chest. “I’d probably have been a lot quicker on the old up-take, brother, if you’d have said, *The Perfumed Garden* by Anne O’Door,” he said. “Or, *Clearing the Lift* by Anne O’Door.”

Sergeant Arthur looked unimpressed but thoughtful. “I wonder if there is such a thing as a ferret-mole,” he said.

“In an infinite universe anything is possible, brother.”

“Would a ferret-mole be a long thin rodent that liked to leave piles of soil on your lawn? Perhaps a mole-ferret would be a short-sighted stocky rodent that liked to chase long-eared rodents down tunnels and small underground enclaves.”

“Very likely, brother,” said Sergeant George, nodding sagely. “Very likely.”

Johnson pressed the ‘Hide’ button making the prisoners disappear behind a grey wall. He raised and lowered himself on his toes.

“Code,” said Johnson confidently. “The prisoners are talking in code, the devious fiends.”

“Bollocks,” said Streemly. Johnson’s eyebrows

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threatened to jump off the top of his head.

“I think,” continued Streemly, “you’ll find they are just two bored men talking bollocks.” Streemly punctuated the sentence with a mock salute and turned to leave.

Kwait, accompanied by a loud smirk, followed Streemly from the quad.

Chapter 12 : Contact

Phoenix and Apricot watched the scanner displays intently. The control room around them was quiet apart from the odd cough and an occasional mysterious beeping noise. No one seemed to know what the beeping noise was but the ship's builders assured them it was probably just the quanta-electronic phase shift thermo-multiplier kicking in when someone used the tea machine; or maybe the speedo cable was rubbing against something.

Everyone jumped when Apricot said, "Contact! Looks like Doctor Naize was right after all."

BOTH GRAVITONIC AND BETA SCANNERS REGISTER AN UNIDENTIFIED OBJECT FIVE THOUSAND YARDS AHEAD. SHOULD I DESTROY IT CAPTAIN PHOENIX?

"Not yet Marshia. Do a full Beta scan and give me the results."

UNDERSTOOD. THE OBJECT IS SPHERICAL WITHIN TWO PER CENT. IT IS ONE HUNDRED

THE ARDLY EFFECT

YARDS IN DIAMETER. IT APPEARS TO BE SOLID ICE. ITS TRAJECTORY IS ILLOGICAL. ONE MOMENT PLEASE.

This sounded interesting. "Message for Kwait Naize and Streemly Naize," said Phoenix. "Please join me immediately in the control room. End message."

UNDERSTOOD. THE OBJECT IS TRAVELLING IN AN ORBIT AROUND ANOTHER MUCH LARGER OBJECT. THIS LARGER OBJECT IS NOT REGISTERING ON THE BETA SCAN. SHOULD I DESTROY IT CAPTAIN PHOENIX?

"No Marshia. Do a full Gravitonic scan and give me the results."

UNDERSTOOD. THE OBJECT IS SPHERICAL WITHIN TWO PER CENT. IT IS ONE HUNDRED YARDS IN DIAMETER. IT IS MAINLY ICE. THE CENTRE IS HOLLOWED OUT TO A DIAMETER OF FIVE YARDS. THERE IS A CIRCULAR HOLE OF THREE YARDS IN DIAMETER RUNNING THROUGH THE OBJECT. ITS TRAJECTORY IS AN ORBIT AROUND ANOTHER MUCH LARGER OBJECT WHICH APPEARS TO BE ATTEMPTING TO BLOCK OUT THE GRAVITONIC SCANNING BY GENERATING RANDOM INTERFERENCE.

"Close to one thousand yards from the smaller object and hold, please Marshia," said Phoenix.

UNDERSTOOD. THE ORBIT OF THE SMALLER OBJECT IS CIRCULAR TO WITHIN ZERO POINT ZERO ZERO ZERO ONE PER CENT. THE ORBITAL DIAMETER IS TWENTY-SIX MILLION YARDS. THE LARGER OBJECT IS THIRTEEN MILLION AND SIX YARDS IN

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DIAMETER AND APPEARS TO CONTAIN ANOTHER OBJECT WHICH HAS AN AVERAGE DIAMETER OF THIRTEEN MILLION YARDS. COMPOSITION OF BOTH OBJECTS IS INDETERMINATE.

Kwait and Streemly entered the control room.

“What’s going on?” Streemly asked.

“I’m not one hundred per cent sure,” said Phoenix, pointing to a display showing his and Marshia’s conversation. “Read that,” he said.

“Status?” Phoenix barked.

UNDERSTOOD. WE WILL BE STATIONARY WITH RESPECT TO THE SMALLER OBJECT IN FIVE SECONDS.

Phoenix turned to Apricot. “Take a shuttle and team and reconnoitre that lump of ice, would you Commander.”

“Sir,” said Apricot, starting to leave.

“Have all team members equipped with video and audio relays,” said Phoenix.

“Aye, aye, sir,” said Apricot, leaving the control room.

“Visual, please Marshia,” said Phoenix.

UNDERSTOOD.

*

Apricot hated this bit.

He felt safe inside Marshia. Just like being underground with lots of pretty holograms of space hung on the wall.

Being in the shuttle was bad enough. You couldn’t kid yourself anymore in a shuttle. You really were in space! And now, in a spacesuit for Christ’s sake! With

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only a tenth of an inch between you and ... Apricot shook his head, forcing himself to concentrate on the tricky business of manoeuvring using the suit thrusters.

Apricot and the other six members of the reconnaissance team clustered around the shaft which disappeared into the great ice ball hanging over them.

“You on the end there, stay here.” Apricot pointed to the man floating furthest from him on his right. His voice rattled through each spacesuit’s speakers. “The rest of you, standard file formation.” Apricot manoeuvred closer to the entrance. “Lights on, videos on, keep alert, and good luck gents.” Apricot hoped the fear in his voice would be lost over the comms link. It was. His men drew strength from his steady tones.

Apricot turned towards the shaft.

His suit lights bounced off the walls made mirror smooth by some unknown machine. A gentle hiss and a nudge from his thrusters and Apricot slowly drifted into the shaft.

Looking at the translucent walls, Apricot fancied he could see strange alien shapes deep under the surface. “*Just irregularities in the ice,*” Apricot told himself.

“Steady, lads,” he said out loud, more to comfort himself than the others. His lights formed an illuminated circle for a few yards ahead. He moved slowly forward staring into the dark at its centre, not daring to blink. There was an irregularity in the dark. Something happened Apricot thought was impossible. His heart rate increased.

He forced himself to blink. There was something ahead! A grey circle in the centre of the blackness in front of him. It grew as Apricot moved closer. Difficult to

MITIS GREEN

make out. What was it?!

A booming voice in Apricot's ear caused his heart to leap into the arms of his trembling oesophagus.

"Just thought I'd let you know ..."

It was Captain Phoenix.

"You great stupid twonk. You moronic fart-arsed little oick. Don't you know what I'm doing? You cretinous bilge brained buffoon." Is what Apricot thought. What he said was, "Yes, sir?"

"According to the gravitonic scanner there's another hole running right through that iceberg you're in. It's less than six inches in diameter and passes close to the centre."

"Thank you sir." Apricot tried and failed to keep the sarcasm out of his voice. "Most helpful."

"Just thought it might be useful, is all." Phoenix sounded peevish even to his own ears. He tried to regain some dignity with a firm, "Carry on, Commander."

Apricot waited for his heart rate to slow to a thunderous gallop before continuing. His annoyance with Phoenix for startling him so much made progress easier somehow.

*

Before it had time to register fully, Apricot found himself floating out of the shaft into the spherical inner chamber. Suspended in the centre of the chamber was a large shining sphere. A thin, shiny tube left the sphere and disappeared into a shaft opposite the one from which Apricot had emerged. A single red light blinked on and off on its surface. Next to the light was a large black switch.

A movement caught Apricot's eye and his body

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treated him to another adrenaline rush. A figure in a spacesuit floated above him close to the chamber wall. A neat hole, about two and a half inches in diameter, could be seen in the centre of the figure's visor. The mangled, fleshy mush visible inside made Apricot's stomach churn briefly.

"That's either a dead man or a god-awful ugly alien we have there, sir." A smirking voice belonging to a soldier floating beside him came through Apricot's comms link.

"Yes ... check it out, will you."

"Me sir?"

"You sir!"

Chapter 13 : Debriefing

Kwait met Streemly outside Marshia's main conference room.

"Do you know what's going on?" Kwait asked his daughter.

"I was asked to modify some of the gravity scanners, but no one would tell me why," she said. "No, that's not fair. I didn't really have time to find out."

West came down the corridor towards them.

"You look troubled, Doctors," he said.

"No," said Kwait. "Just wondering what's going on. But I guess we're about to find out."

They entered the conference room with Phoenix close behind. Apricot was waiting for them. All except Apricot sat down. He cleared his throat, tugged at his tunic and began, "First of all, may I thank Doctor Naize for the extremely useful modifications she made to the hand scanners." Apricot smiled at Streemly.

"Get on with it, Commander," said Phoenix, with some irritation.

THE ARDLY EFFECT

“Sorry, sir.” Apricot cleared his throat again. “We have determined, from the stratified nature of the object, that the ice ball was created by non-natural forces. Man- or alien- made, in fact. The object has a hollow centre with a round tunnel passing right through it. The hollowing out was done to an extremely high degree of accuracy.

“On entry into the central chamber we discovered something floating around in a P A V M ...”

“*Spacesuit!*” hissed Streemly to Kwait.

“*Thank you,*” Kwait hissed back.

“... which turned out to be a dead male. The *spacesuit* and clothing worn by the man is of a design not seen before on Edenia or Horridda. The man died as a result of a high speed projectile entering the face mask causing the man’s head to relocate from its normal central position to the inside surface of the helmet.”

West swallowed audibly.

“The projectile ...” Apricot continued, holding up a white block with protruding brass pins, “... appears to be a standard issue three pin plug with the initials G P scratched crudely on the back. It was found embedded in the back-plate of the dead man’s helmet.”

“Three pin plug?” said Phoenix. “Are you absolutely sure?”

“Yes, sir,” continued Apricot. “From the temperature of the body it was deduced that the man had been killed only minutes before we entered the chamber.”

“Are you sure?” asked Kwait in amazement. “That seems like one *hell* of a coincidence.”

“No doubt about it,” said Apricot. “The body was shielded from direct sunlight and its temperature was

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considerably higher than the surrounding ice.” Apricot looked at his notes and continued. “A number of smaller chambers are accessible from the main central chamber. These vary in apparent function from living quarters for up to six individuals, workshops, and storage areas. Again; everything we found was undoubtedly designed for use by people or very human-like aliens, but nothing was of recognisable origin.

“One chamber contains a fully functioning hydrodisation plant providing power to all systems. The power plant is more efficient than any known to us using the surrounding ice as it’s raw material. The minimal percentage shortfall in plant efficiency does, however, give us the ability to calculate the time the plant has been running. This appears to be approximately three thousand years. Give or take ten years or so.”

Kwait and Streemly gaped at each other. West remained impassive.

Apricot consulted his notes again before continuing. “In the centre of the main chamber is what can only be described as a field projector of some kind. A field of unknown type is projected from the device through the main tunnel into space. The field is oscillating at a rate beyond the limits of our instruments. It was this rapid oscillation that caused the interference experienced when using tradition Beta scanners.

“The field appears to bend most radiation, including light, along its length and then release it at appropriate points. How this is achieved we have no idea. The result is that anything inside the field becomes invisible to most radiation. Light, for example, hits one side of the spherical field, is bent around the field’s

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circumference and allowed to leave on the other side.

“We are, however, able to penetrate the field with the new Naize scanners. The ice ball is a satellite of a planet encased entirely in the projected field.”

“That’s incredible,” said Kwait. “What’s on the planet’s surface?”

“I’ll come to that in a moment, Doctor,” continued Apricot. “There is a problem with the field. It’s too small.”

“What do you mean?” West asked.

“The field is not quite as big as the planet *was*. Most of the land masses and all of the oceans remain but all mountains over seven thousand feet above mean sea level have been ... well ... chopped off. Their tops are missing.” Apricot paused to allow this to sink in. “It would appear that there was life at one time. There is some evidence of long extinct vegetation and some very regular features indicate possible intelligences were once at work.

“We need to turn the field off and explore the planet’s surface more thoroughly to get a better picture of what is down there.

“As for *why* the field was put there; that remains a mystery. One could guess that the planet’s inhabitants were trying to protect themselves or perhaps hide from some agency as yet unknown.”

Apricot looked at his notes. “Oh yes, the projector ... the plain metallic covering makes it impossible to see inside. But the scanners did not pick up any electronic or quantatronic connections to the outside panels. There is a large black switch on one side which, it is believed, will cut off power to the projector when thrown.” Apricot

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folded up his notes.

“Most interesting,” said Phoenix. “Thank you Apricot. It seems clear to me that we should switch off the field and investigate the planet’s surface.”

“Are you sure the switch on the projector is the on-off switch?” asked Streemly.

“Ninety nine per cent,” answered Apricot.

“You’ve checked for booby traps?” asked Kwait.

“Yes, Doctor. As best we can.”

“It is clear to *me* that we should contact the Presidium immediately and await instructions,” said West firmly. “This is far too important a discovery. We *must* seek authority before we do anything else.”

Kwait turned to Phoenix. “I believe the Presidium gave you total authority to proceed in whatever way you saw fit, Captain.”

West reddened. “Were the Presidium aware of the magnitude of our findings, I’m sure the Captain will agree ...”

Streemly interrupted him. “No doubt the Presidium thought this crack-pot exploratory exercise would kill two birds with one stone: to appease a high ranking and well respected servant of the state *and* to run in a brand new ship chock full of raw recruits. And *you* ...” Streemly pointed at West but stopped herself introducing him to the full truth of his situation as she saw it and said instead, “... drew the short straw.”

West impressed everyone, including Streemly, with the calmness of his response.

“You are absolutely right, Doctor Naize.” West turned to Captain Phoenix. “I must insist we contact the Presidium and await instructions before doing *anything*

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else.”

Phoenix stood up. He did not like being spoken to like that. “Apricot!” he said firmly.

“Sir.”

“Turn that damn projector thing off and get an exploration team on the surface as soon as possible. Doctors, as soon as Apricot has secured an area on the surface you are welcome to join him and the team if you wish.” Phoenix moved towards the door. “West,” he said, “you get back to your masters anytime you please.” He was about to leave when Marshia interrupted.

EXCUSE ME, CAPTAIN.

“Yes, Marshia.” Phoenix was annoyed at having his exit spoiled.

I MAY HAVE SOME INFORMATION THAT COULD AFFECT YOUR CURRENT DISCUSSIONS.

“Do tell!” said Phoenix impatiently.

I HAVE BEEN MONITORING AN ULTRA HIGH FREQUENCY SIGNAL FROM THE PLANET. DUE TO ITS INTERMITTENT NATURE I ASSUMED IT WAS INTERFERENCE CREATED BY THE FIELD SURROUNDING THE PLANET. BY TAKING MILLISECOND SAMPLES AND PIECING THEM TOGETHER I HAVE CONSTRUCTED, WHAT APPEARS TO BE, A COHERENT MESSAGE. DO YOU WISH TO HEAR IT?

Phoenix was intrigued. “Yes, go ahead, Marshia.”

UNDERSTOOD. MESSAGE READS: WHAT THE HELL DID YOU DO THAT FOR? END MESSAGE.

Chapter 14 : Earth

I AM DETECTING ANOTHER MESSAGE, CAPTAIN.

“Yes?” said Phoenix somewhat uncertainly. “What is it?”

UNDERSTOOD. MESSAGE READS: WELL, ARE YOU GOING TO TURN THE DAMN THING OFF, OR WHAT? MESSAGE ENDS.

“Turn what off?” asked Phoenix.

I BELIEVE THE MESSAGE RELATES TO THE FIELD PROJECTED AROUND THE PLANET, CAPTAIN.

“My God!” said Streemly. “There are *people* down there!”

West stepped forward. “We can’t be sure they *are* people,” he said. “We *must* contact the Presidium immediately.”

“Well they have a superb grasp of our language,” said Kwait, “for aliens!”

“I’ve never saved an entire planet before,” said Phoenix wistfully. “Tell them we are on our way please

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Marshia.”

UNDERSTOOD.

“Apricot!”

“Sir?”

“Get that projector thing turned off and sort out a landing shuttle. Better have a dozen or so guards go with us too. Don’t want to get mobbed by over-grateful crowds, do we?”

“Sir.”

*

“Are you sure this is the right place?” Phoenix asked Apricot.

They stood at the base of a ramp in a cloud of settling dust kicked up by the shuttle craft’s landing. A barren landscape broken by nothing at all surrounded them.

Apricot ignored the question. “No detectable entrances but lots of electrical activity underground according to the scanners, sir.”

Two eyes peeped timidly from the door at the top of the ramp. “Do I *really* need to be here?” asked West. He lurched forward and jogged down the ramp after being shoved by an unseen hand. Streemly, the unseen hand’s owner, and Kwait strode confidently down the ramp after him.

“What’s happening?” asked Streemly.

“Not ...” Phoenix said, as a small grey man with a large grey beard materialised with a pop in front of him, “... a lot.”

The small grey man coughed a querulous cough. “May I be the first to welcome you to Earth,” he said. His voice was sublimely gentle. The sound of wisdom. He

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advanced towards Streemly without moving his feet. "My," he said, "what beautiful eyes you have, my dear."

"All the better to see you with," Streemly couldn't help responding.

"I do hope it wasn't you," he said.

"Wasn't me, who?" asked Streemly.

"Wasn't you who killed my brother," he replied. "He's furious."

"I don't *think* it was me, Mr ...?"

"Call me Bev. Please."

"Streemly," she said extending her hand, which Bev took and shook.

"Kwait," said Kwait proffering his hand, which was gently shaken.

"I ..." said West, manoeuvring between Kwait and the stranger, "... am West. Board of Governors and Presidium representative for Horridoa and Affiliated Asteroids."

Bev ignored the outstretched hand and turned effortlessly towards Phoenix.

"And this ..." West once more managed to be in front of the small bearded stranger, "... is Captain Phoenix and his second in command, Commander Apricot."

"Isn't that a fruit?" Bev asked Apricot.

"Yes, sir," said Apricot. "In name only, sir." Apricot laughed uncertainly.

Bev turned to Phoenix. "*Captain* Phoenix, heh?"

"That's correct." Phoenix involuntarily clicked his heels and bobbed his head, not hearing a quiet popping noise behind him. "Captain of the S B C Marshia and rescuer of worlds."

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Another small grey man, similar to Bev but darker and sporting huge black eyebrows and the expression of an iguana passing a kidney stone, walked around from behind Phoenix. He levelled a long, thin crinkly finger at Phoenix who looked on in surprise as the finger disappeared up to its second knuckle in his stomach.

“Ooh! Aaargh!” said Phoenix. “That hurt!”

“May I introduce my brother, Vick,” said Bev.

“SO IT WAS YOU, WAS IT!” bellowed Vick wagging the finger at Phoenix.

“Me who what?” said Phoenix defensively, rubbing his stomach.

“YOU WHO KILLED ME, YOU GREAT LOUT!” said Vick at what proved to be one floor down from the top of his voice. He gathered himself to ascend the final flight. “WHAT THE FLYING HAYSTACKS HAVE I EVER DONE TO YOU?!” he bellowed.

“I’m sorry, I ...” stuttered Phoenix.

“CENTURIES!” bellowed Vick. “CENTURIES!”

Phoenix looked around apprehensively. “I don’t think there’s any need to call your guards,” he said. “We come in peace, I assure you.”

“CEN-TUR-IES, YOU FOOL!” yelled Vick, flapping his arms like a deranged crow. “HUNDREDS OF BLOODY YEARS. WASTED!” he raved, stomping around Phoenix, who tried to take up less space.

Streemly moved cautiously towards Bev not wanting to attract the attention of the strange, cross little man. She bent to asked quietly in his ear. “If your brother is dead, who or what ...?” she pointed to Vick who had stomped right around Phoenix and stood facing him again.

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“AND WHY?” bellowed Vick at Phoenix. “I’LL TELL YOU WHY,” he bawled again, not waiting for a reply. “BECAUSE YOU ARE A COMPLETE AND TOTAL MORON! THAT’S WHY.”

“Now steady on,” said Phoenix, not a little petulantly. But Vick was off again; stomping around Phoenix and raving incoherently. Too furious to bellow clearly.

“The transporter keeps copies of the day’s ports,” explained Bev to Streemly, “so I was able to reconstruct him from the transporter’s memory.”

“Phew. Lucky,” said Streemly. They all watched Vick stomp around Phoenix for a few seconds.

Streemly looked puzzled. “Transported where?” she asked.

“Sorry?” said Bev.

“Where had Vick been transported to?” asked Streemly.

“The ice satellite where you found his body,” said Bev patiently.

“Oh! That was Vick!” said Streemly. “There has been some mistake. Captain Phoenix had nothing to do with that man’s death. He was already dead when Commander Apricot found him.” She turned to Apricot. “Isn’t that so Commander?”

“Indeed,” said Apricot. “I discovered the body myself. It was already dead when I arrived. Killed by what appeared to be a high velocity standard issue three pin plug.”

“That’s quite a coincidence,” said Bev. “My brother’s demise and your appearance on the scene occurring at almost the same moment.”

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“WHAT?” bellowed Vick.

Bev continued, “Still, you have no reason to lie that I can determine. Please accept our apologies.”

“HE DIDN’T KILL ME?” yelled Vick, jabbing Phoenix in the stomach once again.

Bev turned to Vick. “We have guests, dear brother,” he said enthusiastically. “Let us make them feel at home.”

“BALLS!” bellowed Vick as he vanished with a quiet pop.

“I must apologise,” said Bev. “My brother is naturally a little upset. Please, step this way.” He, too, vanished with a gentle pop.

Kwait and Streemly looked at each other. Phoenix and Apricot looked at each other. West turned to run back up the ramp.

Their world went pop.

*

West just managed to stop himself from running headlong into a glass cabinet chock full of crystal objets d’art.

The party found themselves standing in a large room with a high ceiling, no windows and no visible doors. The air smelled fresh, clean and cool.

“KEEP THAT IDIOT AWAY FROM MY BABIES!” Vick bellowed in West’s direction.

“Please, be seated,” said Bev. His gentle tones had to be obeyed.

There were plenty of large, comfortable-looking chairs. Kwait settled next to a chair chosen by Streemly. To say the chair was comfortable would have been a terrible insult to it. Kwait felt as if something alive, but warm and benevolent, had taken it upon itself to hold him

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in what it regarded as the most relaxing and snug position possible. Kwait looked around at the chaos of books, disks, cubes and all manner of strange objects.

Vick stood possessively next to his crystal cabinet frowning at the intruders.

“Refreshments everyone?” asked Bev. No one refused so a fine china cup and saucer containing steaming tea materialised in each person’s hand.

Kwait noted that his hand had assumed the correct position involuntarily.

Streemly laughed out loud as a small china plate holding a scrumptious-looking cream cake appeared in her other hand.

“That’s fantastic!” exclaimed Streemly, unable to contain herself. As she looked for somewhere to place the cup and saucer so she could tuck into her cream cake, a small exquisitely carved table appeared next to her chair.

There was silence as everyone got stuck into their tea and cake.

Everyone except Phoenix. He supped his tea ignoring the rather sad and heavy Eccles cake which had landed with an unappetising clunk onto his plate.

Vick smirked as he slurped his tea.

After much supping and finger licking, thanks were proffered and graciously accepted.

Bev cleared his throat. “Well,” he said, “I for one am dying to know all about you people. Where you came from, what you are doing here, etcetera. And I’m sure you must be curious about us so: who’s going first?”

“TELL THEM TO BUGGER OFF!” shouted Vick.

“Please excuse my brother,” said Bev. “He’s a little distraught after being killed like that.”

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“It might be an idea to fill us in on the details of Vick’s ... accident,” suggested Kwait. The idea of discussing the previous day’s accidental death of someone who stood listening to the conversation seemed quite normal in this place.

“Right-ho,” said Bev taking a deep breath. “Vick’s death, and subsequent resurrection, is the culmination of years, nay centuries, of dedicated, unselfish research and hard work.

“We, Vick and myself, are all that is left of a once mighty civilisation. This planet was populated by billions of individuals. It enjoyed an enormously diverse flora and fauna. An idyllic world where technology, ecology, and phrenology combined to provide an almost perfect environment for personal freedoms, personal growth, and backgammon.

“Miniature Artificial Intelligence Devices, or MAIDs, as we like to call them, did just about everything. No one wanted for anything. Except perhaps entertainment.

“People who were that way motivated jostled for control of the numerous media. These being the most powerful weapons in the battle to gain support from the general populace. One of the main gladiators in the media war was one Django Twip.”

“GO, GO, DJAN-GO!” bellowed Vick imitating an ancient slogan.

Bev continued unperturbed. “It was his ambition to control every single aspect of the media over the whole of Earth.

“Every year tenders were invited from would-be televisual program providers whereby the most

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entertaining pilot programs were given the best time slots. Django Twip devised a dual series of programs called the Two Moon Sagas.” The visitors sat forward in their seats listening intently. “He terraformed and populated two moons orbiting a gas giant in this system with a mixture of unsuspecting settlers and entertainers. One moon had an extremely harsh and challenging environment while the other was a veritable Utopian dream. The idea was to monitor these two population groups and televise the most entertaining bits. Reality programming on a planetary scale, they called it.”

“Unbelievable!” said Streemly.

“This can’t be right,” exclaimed West standing up. “I won’t sit here and listen to these lies!”

Bev was surprised at the strength of reaction his story had evoked. “I don’t understand,” he said. “I have no idea how I have offended you, I assure you.”

Kwait calmed things down. “Let Bev finish his story and then we can fill him in on where we stand,” he said.

Kwait turned to Bev. “All will become clear after that. Please, do continue.”

West sat down.

Bev gathered his thoughts. “Where was I?” he said. “Oh, yes. Django Twip’s Two Moon Sagas. Anyway, the two episodes, A Moon With A View and Moon Plains Drifter, were both rejected in favour of a documentary called The Transsexual Exploits Of The Dual Penis Publican Of Gamma Froth In The Armpit Nebula.

“Gamma Froth, by the way, being the last known residence of Django Twip and his cronies.

“Django Twip’s annoyance at being shunned in

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this way can only be likened to being hit over the head by a brick with the word 'Duck!' scratched on it." Bev paused for a moment, trying to remember the last time he had tried to construct an amusing sentence.

There was no reaction from his listeners so he continued, "Before shooting off in disgust to Gamma Froth, Django Twip left a small present for us. The Brambling Field Projector of which you are aware.

"This field defeated all our best scientists. It proved to be impenetrable and our civilisation slowly met its end." Bev looked sad.

"How did everyone die?" asked Streemly gently. Kwait looked sternly at his daughter for being so insensitive.

"Hopelessness mainly," said Bev. He noticed Kwait's admonishing look at Streemly. "It's quite all right," he said. "It has to be said; there were a lot of suicides. People had their MAIDs removed and just died naturally. Towards the end there was a lot of conflict with various factions fighting over scarce resources."

Bev looked at the floor. "Life was ugly then. I was ashamed for and saddened by many." There was a long pause.

Vick sniffed loudly.

At last Bev raised his eyes and looked at Vick. "We buried ourselves here," he said. "Vick never gave up and battled with the field problem for centuries. He gave up trying to transfer actual matter and instead modified the transporter and scanners and was eventually able to penetrate the field with cohesion data and energy. Over the years he painstakingly moved and gathered enough matter from near space, capturing small meteorites, dust

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etcetera, so he could then transmit the cohesion data in order to transport himself next to the projector and turn it off. An unbelievable feat. An achievement of outstanding intellectual virtuosity, I'm sure you will agree.

"Unfortunately, just as Vick successfully transported himself into the ice satellite he was struck down by a ..." Bev turned to Apricot.

"A high velocity standard issue three pin plug?" volunteered Apricot.

"Exactly," said Bev. "The rest, you know."

There was silence for a few minutes.

"So, you have the ability to move matter within the ice satellite?" asked Kwait.

"Yes," replied Bev.

"Of over a kilo in mass?" asked Kwait.

"Yes," replied Bev.

"And the scanners to see *in* the satellite?" asked Kwait.

"Yes," replied Bev.

Kwait let Streemly ask the next question. "So why didn't you just move the switch into the off position?" she asked.

Bev considered this for a moment before moving casually over to Vick and giving him a resounding clomp across his left ear.

Chapter 15 : Pneumatic

Bev and Vick listened intently as West gave them a potted history of Edenia, Horridoa, and the events leading up to the war.

Bev looked solemn. “So you are the descendants of the settlers and entertainers put on the two moons and left to die by Django Twip.”

“It certainly looks that way,” West said thoughtfully.

“And we are the sole survivors of a once great civilisation. A civilisation which could be reborn,” Bev said looking at Streemly. She flushed. “I didn’t mean you *personally*,” he said quickly to Streemly. “But Earth could be recolonised from your two moons.”

West carried on and described the often tense, but stable, political situation existing between the two moons.

Kwait described his thoughts and the events leading up to the disappearing probes. This led to a discussion between Apricot, Bev, West and Kwait about possibly incorporating some of the incredible technology

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on Earth with the technology aboard Marshia. Stroomly and Vick had a fruitful discussion swapping ideas about improving transporter and scanning technology.

Phoenix ate his way through seven varieties of cream and fruit cake.

During one of those conversational silences, Bev seized the opportunity to address the whole room. "Might I suggest a plan of action?" The room remained silent so Bev continued. "You should return to your ship and inform your political masters of the situation. Your prisoners should be released and allowed to do the same." West began to protest, but Kwait's firm hand on his shoulder silenced him. "This is clearly no time for a petty war. We *have* to join forces and complete two tasks as painlessly as possible. One, recolonise Earth. And two, seek out and punish Django Twip!"

There was a general mumble of assent.

"Well," said Bev rubbing his hands together, "let's get to it!"

The world went pop.

*

Cell-man second class Johnson was disgusted. Release the prisoners! He'd never heard of such a thing.

Johnson did twelve more push-ups, jumped to his feet and held his wrist checking his pulse.

"Fit has a flea," he said aloud. His contentment at the state of his heart rate did nothing to change his mood regarding the imminent release of the two vile and fiendish *enemy agents*. Especially as it was he who would have to break the news to them.

"Unbar the door, please Marshia," he said, jogging lightly on the spot.

THE ARDLY EFFECT UNDERSTOOD.

Johnson jogged from the cell in an exaggerated arc ending at the neighbouring cell door. He came smartly to attention and took a deep breath. His shoulders sagged as he let his breath go thinking about the duty he was about to perform. Let the buggers go! His only prisoners!

“Let’s get on with it then!” he said pulling himself up to his full five feet six. “Marshia?”

YES, CELL-MAN JOHNSON?

“Unbar the door please.”

UNDERSTOOD.

The door slid open and Johnson bellowed, “Prisoners 14725693 and 14725694! Out of your cell at the double!”

Strictly speaking they should have been prisoners 1 and 2. But Cell-man second class Johnson was bugged if he was going to let them know that.

Sergeant George was the first to emerge. “Morning, comrade,” he said amiably.

“Silence, that man!” bellowed Johnson.

“Mister Johnson,” said Sergeant Arthur leaving the cell to stand by his brother. “How nice of you to think of us once more.”

“Quiet in the ranks!” said Johnson. “We have important issues to deal with.”

“Oh, goody,” said Sergeant Arthur. “A visit of the inspection persuasion perchance?” he mocked, coming smartly to attention.

Johnson tightened his lips, ignoring the remark, and said, “I have been instructed to inform you that; due to the changing political situation, vis-à-vis the purported common ancestry and Earth being what as where we all

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came from in the first place, that your incarceration is to be terminated forthwith.”

There was a lot to take in here and the pained expressions on Sergeant Arthur’ and Sergeant George’s faces where no mean testimony.

“Common ancestry?” asked Sergeant George.

“Earth?” asked Sergeant Arthur.

“Terminated?” asked Sergeant George.

“It will all be explained to you in due course,” said Johnson. “In the meantime, I don’t expect to see you two back ‘ere. So keep your noses clean and stay out of trouble. Understood?”

After no discernible reaction at all from the two men, Johnson said, “Good. Just has long has we understand each other.” Johnson came even more to attention. “Dismiss!” he said doing a smart left turn. Johnson jogged the exaggerated arc back to the adjoining cell where he started doing push-ups more vigorously than ever.

Sergeant Arthur and Sergeant George looked at each other and were just about to voice their confusion when Marshia stepped in.

I WILL SHOW YOU TO YOUR NEW
QUARTERS WHILE I EXPLAIN THE SITUATION IN
MORE DETAIL.

The Sergeants jumped in alarm. Their previous dealings with Marshia had left them in no doubt as to her capabilities.

FOLLOW THE PINK ARROWS.

Walking very close together the two hardened space veterans followed the pink arrows that appeared at intervals in front of them.

THE ARDLY EFFECT

*

Vick and Streemly were once more huddled over a dissected piece of quanta-electronics. Streemly's exceptional inventiveness and ability to absorb new concepts complemented Vick's vast technical knowledge perfectly. Their mutual lust for knowledge, respect for one another's intellect and general inability to leave anything alone was enhancing Marshia's capabilities in leaps and bounds.

All this was completely lost on West, who advanced on them unceremoniously waving his note pad. "At last," he said, somewhat out of breath. "There must be something wrong with Marshia's paging system. I've been trying to reach you for hours."

Vick and Streemly exchanged meaningful glances.

"Mister Vick," said West, "I know you're not interested in the future security and happiness of mankind, and I know this is very tiresome for you, but in the absence of my being able to locate your brother I really do need to sit down with you and negotiate terms."

Vick stood and shouted, "LEAVE ME ALONE, YOU WEASEL!" Then turned back to his work.

"Miss Streemly," West implored, "can you ..."
West was interrupted by Vick who bellowed "DOCTOR NAIZE!"

"Doctor Naize," West conceded, "can you have a word with Mister Vick. I have a job to do as well."

Streemly spoke without turning from her work. "Job, Mr West? What job would that be?"

"I have been instructed by the High Presidium to utilise my perspicacity and compare the postulated contingencies with actual phenomena while maintaining

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a friendly accord with my shipboard compatriots.”

“You mean,” said Streemly, backing away from a hatch which Vick slammed shut, “you’ve been told to keep your eyes open and stay out of trouble.”

West said, “Sna,” which was his way of performing a dismissive snort or small laugh. “An understandable interpretation by one of such tender years.”

Vick and Streemly picked up some tools and headed down the corridor. West flapped after them like an owl on a string.

“What my instructions *clearly* mean,” said West to their backs, “is for me to enter into negotiations with the representative of Earth in order to ease the transition back to recolonisation.”

“Make it opaque, please Marshia,” said Streemly.
UNDERSTOOD.

West continued, not hearing Streemly’s request, “There is also the question of the technology which we *must* have access to.”

“Perhaps,” said Streemly over her shoulder, “Bev doesn’t want Earth recolonised and doesn’t want to give away his technology.”

“Be that as it may,” said West, almost tripping up in his efforts to keep up with them, “this is precisely why I have to speak with him.”

Vick and Streemly turned into a darkened corridor followed by West.

“It is imperative Bev be made to realise the benefits of coming under the High Presidium’s wing. And I ...” West’s voice trailed off as he realised he was in the dark. There was a light hissing noise and an almost

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imperceptible feeling of motion.

“Doctor Naize?” said West into the gloom. “Mister Vick?”

Streemly’s voice cut through the darkness, “All right Marshia, let’s have some light on the subject.”

UNDERSTOOD.

The walls of the transpod cleared.

“Scanner dish 47, please Marshia,” said Streemly.

UNDERSTOOD.

Vick watched West intently.

West looked impassively around at the splendour of stars, galaxies and nebulae suddenly unveiled. “If this was supposed to startle me,” he said, “then I am afraid you are going to be sadly disappointed.” West looked down his nose at Vick and Streemly. “Take me back, please Marshia,” he said.

UNDERSTOOD.

“I can see I am wasting my time here,” said West, turning to face the approaching docking port. The three stood in silence as the transpod attached itself. A gentle hiss and the port door slid aside. West left. His note pad tucked under his arm and his head held high.

Streemly looked at Vick a little sheepishly. “I suppose it was a bit childish,” she said.

Vick nodded and looked at his feet. “Yes,” he said looking up. “Really mature adults would have done a runner while he was in the dark!”

*

West waited until he was sure he was out of sight of the transpod corridor before he let himself drop his note pad and lean against the wall for support. He felt as though the blood had completely deserted his head. The contents

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of his stomach threatened to re-introduce themselves to the world at large. Tears of anger and frustration pricked at his eyes. Bastards! When will I ever learn? You try to *do* something, *be* someone. Try to get a little *respect*. How *dare* they!

ARE YOU ALL RIGHT, MISTER WEST?

“Yes. I’m fine. Thank you Marshia.”

CAN I GET YOU A DRINK OF WATER?

“Yes. Please. Thank you.”

Moments later, a glass of water came gliding down the corridor towards West. He drank thirstily, clinging to the glass with both hands.

WOULD YOU LIKE ANOTHER GLASS OF WATER, MISTER WEST?

“No thank you Marshia. That was nice. Thank you.”

West retrieved his note pad and walked slowly down the corridor, not really thinking about where he was headed. The incident had brought back the taste, smell and sounds of the past. The stuffy science class where a boy half his size, he could not remember his name, had pinned him to the ground. His frustration at not being able to stand had caused West to burst into tears in front of his class mates. The rancid smell of the boy’s body came to him once more. And years later in the college canteen: Darlene Smart’s voice filled with contempt as she loudly rejected his nervous, halting request that she accompany him to a piano recital. The smell of stainless steel, plastic and boiled vegetables. The burning cheeks and all those mocking eyes.

How many times had he been overlooked at the Presidium? He had done his best. Worked hard. West

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thought of his father. The last time he had seen him. In the home. Sat in a wheel chair. Confused. Hardly remembering his son. Shouting, "I'm peeing myself! Oh, God. Help me. I'm peeing myself! I'm making a mess!" West had held his father's cool, fragile hand. "It's all right, dad. You've got a bottle. It's all right. You're not making a mess. It's all right." A nurse had approached them. Spoken to his father as if he were a naughty toddler. "Now let's not have any of that nonsense," she had said. "Stop acting like a big baby. You're disturbing the others."

This was *his* father. The man who had kissed away his hurting knee. The man who had cried with him when he was inoculated.

"I'm not going to end up like that," thought West.

He stood tall and strode confidently down the corridor.

*

Bev dashed around collecting information and data about Earth and the various MAIDs around the planet for transmission to Horriddoa and Edenia. He skilfully avoided any protracted meetings with West. Managing somehow to ask more questions than he answered, forcing West to spend days seeking out an audience with Captain Phoenix or a High Presidium representative.

Several weeks passed by as exploration teams and scientists from both moons were despatched to Earth to begin verifying Bev's data. The technology they found on Earth astounded them all. There were MAIDs for just about everything. No single MAID was overly clever. Each one had one speciality plus the ability to communicate directly with almost every other MAID on

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the planet. And there were hundreds of thousands of them.

The matter transmitter MAIDs were very impressive having a one hundred per cent success rate. The thought recognition MAIDs were by far the most spooky.

They were considered too dangerous for use aboard Marshia as no one could match the mental discipline of Bev and Vick. The initial thought recognition MAIDs experiment was abandoned after an incident with a young scientist being used as a guinea pig. He was performing some particularly dreary and repetitive matter transmitter tests. Using thought to transfer strawberries to and from different boxes. His mind must have wandered because the chief lab technician's ample wife suddenly materialised on the work bench holding a bowl of freshly whipped cream and wearing nothing but a pair of red high-heeled shoes and a puzzled frown.

*

Kwait spent most of his time using his influence to make sure it would be Marshia who would be sent looking for Django Twip. He secured his own and Streemly's presence on board. He also made sure West would accompany them but somehow forgot to mention it.

He was sitting in one of Marshia's smaller bars sipping tea and musing about the forthcoming trip. A trip *out there*. Not just to a neighbouring star but right out of his own galaxy!

Kwait thought about a brief talk he and Bev had enjoyed where Bev had confirmed that there were, indeed, hundreds of thousands of intelligent life forms

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scattered around the known universe. Most intelligent forms had used their creative abilities to develop technology with the ultimate goal of exploring space. A very common trait, curiosity.

There were one or two civilisations of highly intelligent beings who had developed differently for some reason. They had used their creativeness to engulf themselves in a lifestyle of almost impenetrable ritual. Customs and complex ceremonies surrounded almost every act. The resulting bonding of the individuals to the society made them the envy of some. And targets for derision by others.

Kwait recalled a picture of deep space he had seen recently. A small ten by four had captured the image of over fifty well defined galaxies and nebulae. Hundreds more could be seen dimly in the far distance. Each cluster of light home for dozens of life forms. Unimaginable billions of thinking, feeling individuals. Just like him.

Kwait thought about the people who had died in ignorance. Unaware of the intelligences separated from them by a quirk of time, a small step in technology, a tiny change of attitude.

The thought made Kwait shudder violently.

Kwait recalled something Bev had said, "There are some wise ... insects, we would call them, that say they can see as far as they can look. They say we live in the centre of a huge sphere made from the backs of our heads."

Kwait was woken from his ruminations when Tracy, Captain Phoenix's pneumatic young wife, slid into the seat beside him.

"Doctor Naize," she purred. "Kwait. Have you

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been avoiding me?” Kwait nearly dropped his drink as Tracy gave his upper thigh a squeeze.

“Avoiding you, Mrs Phoenix?” Kwait tried unsuccessfully to remove his thigh.

“Tracy, please,” purred Tracy.

“No ... Tracy. I’ve just been very busy.” He felt Tracy’s finger nails gently scratch the inside of his thigh through his trousers. And, damn it! He could feel his genitals tingle in response.

I AM SORRY TO DISTURB YOU, DOCTOR NAIZE.

“Marshia! Thank God,” thought Kwait. “Yes, Marshia?” he said with a slight crack in his voice.

YOUR PRESENCE IS REQUESTED IN THE CONFERENCE ROOM.

“Thank you Marshia!” Kwait said a little too enthusiastically. “Thank you.” He stood up quickly. “Please excuse me, Tracy. I have to go.”

Tracy smiled and lent forward displaying her abundant cleavage. “See you soon,” she breathed. Kwait all but ran for the exit.

*

Kwait entered the conference room with Streemly on his heels. “You all right, Pop?” asked Streemly. “You look a bit flushed.”

“I’ve been avoiding the thought recognition MAIDs,” he said. Streemly looked puzzled but knew better than to pursue the issue and sat down.

Vick stomped in with Bev gliding behind him. West, Phoenix and Apricot were already seated.

A beep from the wall and they all swivelled to face the large holoscreen on the conference room wall. The

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screen was split vertically into two images. An ancient female face peered back from each side. Kwait vaguely recognised them from news reports as Presidium members from Horriddoa and Edenia. There were no badges or insignia on their clothes and no clues in the background so Kwait did not know which represented which moon. In the present strange political climate Kwait thought this may have been deliberate. A label under each identified them as Lady Blake on the left and Mrs Peters on the right. Kwait did not recognise the names.

There were no formalities. "It is my ... our ... understanding that your ship is ready for immediate dispatch," said Lady Blake with the minimum of lip movement. "Is that correct, Captain?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am," said Phoenix.

"And you are quite confident the crew are comfortable with the new systems introduced from Earth?"

"Yes, ma'am. We have done three successful test hops with no problems whatsoever."

"Hops, Captain?"

"A quick burst of faster than light travel, ma'am. Approximately one light year in distance."

"I see. So a couple of hops would be a skip. And, ha, ha ..." Lady Blake obviously thought whatever she was about to say next was extremely funny. "The whole journey, ha, ha, would be a jump. Ha, haaaa ..." Lady Blake looked in dire danger of having a heart attach. "So the Armpit Nebula is ... he, heee, ho hoooo ... a hop, skip, and a jump away. Ahaaaa ..." Lady Blake disappeared from the screen as she slipped rather ungracefully under

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her desk.

Mrs Peters took up the reins, ignoring the sounds of Lady Blake weeping with laughter in the background.

“We have some further instructions for you,” she said as a hand holding a piece of paper appeared in front of her from off-screen. She studied the note briefly. “Ah, yes. West?”

West shot out of his chair to attention. “Yes, ma’am?”

“We have some special duties for you, West.”

“I would be honoured to serve in whatever capacity you see fit, ma’am. I can see you too have perceived a need for my particular talents. The challenge is indeed great. But, and I don’t think I am being too immodest when I say this, the role of Governor of this new and exciting planet will rest well on my shoulders.” West tucked a thumb under his lapel and began striding confidently around the conference room. Lady Blake had recovered. And, although somewhat dishevelled, resumed her position most admirably.

“‘Co-ordination’ is the key word,” continued West. “The exploitation of this new planet needs a co-ordinated effort of the highest scientific standards executed with tact and sensitivity. Unlike some I could mention, I am keenly aware of the political pitfalls that await the unwary during this critical phase in the development of Earth. A name, incidentally, which you may consider changing. An obvious name comes to mind but I am far too modest, as the planet’s first Governor, to mention it.” Lady Blake started to chuckle again.

“Erm, Mr West?” Mrs Peters tried to interrupt him.

“Just West, if you don’t mind ma’am. On

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completion of the Governor's Mansion the first order of business ..." Lady Blake was laughing hysterically again, "... has to be Intellectual Property rights on the new M A I D technology, mineral and general exploration rights. I believe there is still some sea life wandering aimlessly around the oceans so we have another exploitable resource there."

"West!" Mrs Peters cut him off as he paused for breath. "Thank you very much but we do not have the time to listen to excerpts from your new novel. No matter how imaginative and fantastical it may be!" Lady Blake, her body once more racked with laughter, vanished beneath the desk. Mrs Peters took a deep breath, raising her voice so she could be heard over the gasps and snorts coming from Lady Blake. "You will accompany the crew of S B C Marshia on their mission acting as observer and, dare I say it, advisor."

West stood in open mouthed disbelief. Lady Blake's arm appeared on top of the desk as she tried to raise herself, still laughing, to her seat.

"The two captured crewmen from the scout ship will also remain aboard. We believe they will be of some assistance to you as they have considerable experience of ... well, scouting or reconnaissance or whatever the term is."

"Understood, ma'am," said Phoenix.

"Doctors Naize and Naize along with ..." Mrs Peters consulted the paper on her desk, "... Bev and Vick, have requested that they stay on board too. We see no reason why not as they will undoubtedly be of immeasurable help to you."

"Yes, ma'am. Couldn't agree more, ma'am," said

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Phoenix. Lady Blake was back on screen looking as if she had been trampled by a herd of buffalo and found the experience quite amusing.

“It only remains for me to wish you the best of luck,” said Mrs Peters.

“Thank you, ma’am,” said everyone.

“I only hope we don’t cock things up at this end and you have somewhere worthwhile to come back to!” said Mrs Peters, casting a glance in the direction of Lady Blake.

Lady Blake just managed to say, “Yes, and now I’m sure it’s time for you *to hop it!*” before she collapsed heavily to the floor in hysterics.

Thankfully, the screen went blank.

Chapter 16 : Pebbles

Before heading straight for Gamma Froth, the lion's den as it were, it was decided they would stop off at a small planet called Pebbles located in a star system nearby. The atmosphere was breathable and the inhabitants not so insecure as to think all aliens represented a deadly threat. There, they could ask a few questions. Perhaps find out a little more about Django Twip and his entourage.

There seemed little doubt in Bev's mind that Twip was still alive, even after such a long time. Death had never been allowed on Django Twip's agenda. The main worry was how much further, if at all, he had developed technologically. Given that his starting point had been so far up the scale to begin with. But, according to Bev, Django Twip was never a developer, a contributor. More a consumer, a user.

*

Pebbles was six hops distant. Each hop taking zero time plus one millisecond recharge time. Apart, that is, from Captain Phoenix's warning, the count down from ten and

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the press and release of a button. Phoenix knew full well the whole operation could be automated and take milliseconds to travel light-years. But, well ... he had little enough to do as it was. To have his voice booming, "Crew prepare for hyperjump!" and then counting theatrically down, "Ten, nine, eight ..." etcetera, followed by a flamboyant button press was just too dramatic an opportunity to be missed.

Hops one to five went very well. But when - after setting his microphone to full echo - Captain Phoenix said, "Crew prepare for hyperjump!-ump!" for the *sixth* time and then started, "Ten-en, nine-ine ..." Apricot could take no more. "For goodness sake press the damn button!" he snapped, turning quite purple.

"All right-ite, all right-ite," Phoenix said defensively. "Keep your hair on-on."

"Well!" said Apricot accusingly. "I mean!"

"*You* can do it-it if you want-ont," said Phoenix petulantly.

"No, sir. That's all right," sighed Apricot. Then added, barely audibly. "We wouldn't want to spoil your little game, would we?"

"What was that-at?" demanded Phoenix.

UNDERSTOOD. COMMANDER APRICOT SAID, WE WOULDN'T ...

"Thank you, Marshia." Apricot interrupted Marshia's untimely intervention. "It wasn't important, sir. Perhaps we had better get on."

"I've got my eye on you, Apricot-ot," said Phoenix and, much to Apricot's relief, pressed the button.

The imposing view of the Armpit Nebula shown on the main screen was replaced by the image of a pale

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marbled planet. Patches of green, brown and blue were visible through breaks in the white cloud cover.

Apricot tapped away at his terminal. "We have stable orbit, sir," he said. "Marshia has verified with the planet's communications computer that we have permission to land a small craft of up to one thousand tons at any one of seventeen locations."

Phoenix turned to face Bev and Vick. "Any preferences?" he asked.

"The port nearest the most highly populated regions will probably give us the most scope," said Bev.

"Do it, please Marshia."

UNDERSTOOD. SHUTTLE ONE IS PREPARED AND PROGRAMMED FOR LOCATION STONEWHIP.

Phoenix rose to leave. "Shall we, gentlemen? Lady?" West tried to sneak from the room unnoticed. "Mr West?" Phoenix said pointedly. "Please. Allow me to accompany you to the shuttle bay."

*

The away team consisted of Commander Apricot, Sergeant Arthur, Sergeant George, Bev, Vick, Kwait, Streemly, and a reluctant West. It had been decided that they would split into smaller teams on Pebbles. Each team would nose around and try to gather any relevant information. The teams would be Commander Apricot, Bev and Vick who would check out any available Media archives; Streemly, Kwait and West would talk to the local authorities. Sergeant Arthur and Sergeant George were assigned the Port bars to pick up on any local gossip.

The buffeting of re-entry had just stopped when Streemly asked, "The new transporter is quite capable of

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putting us safely anywhere on the planet, so why use the shuttle?"

Bev looked up from sorting through some small cubes. "It was thought prudent not to disclose our transporter technology as it may be to our advantage to keep it to ourselves for a while," he said passing a handful of cubes to Vick.

"These cubes," said Bev, "which my brother will pass around, contain various MAIDs which you may find useful. There are language MAIDs, communication MAIDs, defence MAIDs, information MAIDs, transport MAIDs and enhancement MAIDs. If you ..."

"Defence MAIDs?" West interrupted. "Do you really think we'll need them?"

"Just a precaution. If you ..."

"Enhancement MAIDs?" interrupted Streemly. "What do they enhance?"

"I shall come to that in a moment," said Bev. "If you ..."

"Why language *and* communication MAIDs?" interrupted Kwait. "Aren't they the same thing?" He looked suspiciously at the cube.

"Precaution?" said West. "Precaution against what?"

"Enhancement MAIDs?" Sergeant George winked and nudged Sergeant Arthur. "Eh? Brother?"

"Gentlemen! Please!" Bev was getting annoyed. "I am *trying* to explain. Now settle down!"

The shuttle fell silent leaving only the gentle hum of the instruments standing.

"Thank you!" said Bev. "Now. If you look carefully at the pale side of the cube you will notice a

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slight indentation.”

Mumbles of “Where? Oh, yes.” and the like filled the air. Bev continued, “Be prepared for a slight feeling of disorientation. Now, press gently.”

Five cubes went pop. “Mr. West?” said Bev. West swallowed. The sixth cube went pop.

There was a moment’s silence.

“Hell’s tits!” exclaimed Sergeant George. Which just about summed up everyone else’s feelings.

*

Kwait had no idea what to expect and was completely unprepared for what happened. Some little gizmo to stick in his ear? A pair of folding rocket powered boots?

As the cube he held popped open, a transparent mercurial fluid flowed rapidly out over his hand and up his arm beneath his tunic. His breath was momentarily taken away as he felt the cool liquid cover his whole body. It flowed right to his feet and over his head entering every orifice it found. A moment of dizziness and panic was immediately followed by a warm glowing sensation and feeling of general well being.

Kwait dared to take a breath. No problem. He looked at the backs of his hands which looked clean and moist as if just covered in hand cream. He put his hands to his face which felt smooth and silky. He saw that Streemly was doing the same. They smiled at each other.

*

Vick cackled. Bev clapped his hands. “Welcome to the club,” he said. “The information MAIDs are activated by sub-vocal messages.”

“Pardon me, Your Honour?” said Sergeant George.

“Talking, of the ‘under your breath’ persuasion,”

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Sergeant Arthur hissed.

Bev continued, "Ask them anything you like. You will also find you will be in direct contact with Marshia and each other if you should so wish. We have about one hour before landing so you can get to know your new friends ..."

*

Kwait quickly found out about the MAIDs which infiltrated his entire body. Some were even inside his tissues and blood stream. They formed an effective barrier between him and the environment. The language MAIDs would help him read, hear and speak in virtually any language. The communication MAIDs allowed Kwait to communicate with his friends and with Marshia, and to monitor most electromagnetic frequencies. Defence MAIDs provided some protection against high speed missiles and high temperature beams, and could generate very destructive ion beams from his finger tips. Information MAIDs gathered and stored data from the other MAIDs and the environment as well as having its own on-line encyclopaedia containing all the data ever collected by any MAID in the past. Transport MAIDs gave the individual transporter technology plus a limited flight capability. Enhancement MAIDs enhanced the individual's own biological functions giving extra strength, speed, stamina, and the ability to survive in hostile environments. This MAID fought off diseases and effectively stopped all ageing.

Kwait wondered if being an immortal superman would go to his head.

It was some time before anyone spoke. "Wow!" said Streemly. "Do we have to give these back when we

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go back to Marshia?" she asked.

"The defence MAIDs would not allow their removal unless you gave permission," replied Bev. "They are now as much a part of you as ... well, any of your natural organs."

"Fantastic!" said Streemly.

"Erm, excuse me," said West raising a finger. "I don't seem to have the defence MAIDs thingies. Is there another box or something?"

Bev looked apologetic. "I'm sorry Mr. West," he said. "The defence MAIDs will not activate under certain psychological profiles. And I'm afraid yours is one of them."

"What?" blustered West. "Certain psychological profiles?"

"It *is* very rare though," Bev tried to reassure West.

"But what about those two clowns?" West pointed a trembling finger at Sergeant Arthur and Sergeant George.

"There's no call for that!" said Sergeant Arthur indignantly.

"It's not our fault your psychology's got a dodgy profile, Governor," said Sergeant George.

"It's out of my hands, I'm afraid," said Bev. West sulked.

"*Hey, Pops!*" Streemly's voice was suddenly inside Kwait's head. He looked at Streemly who smiled back.

"*Does this means no one else can hear us?*" Kwait directed the question at Streemly.

"*I think so,*" thought Streemly. "*Hey West! What makes you such a slimy maggot? Great bum, Apricot. Do you work out?*" Kwait chuckled. But there was no

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reaction from anyone else in the room.

“Watch this,” Streemly said out loud to Kwait. Kwait was suddenly reminded of when Streemly was a small girl of six or seven in the swimming pool. “Watch me, Mummy. Daddy. Watch me.” Streemly would clamp a hand over her nose, screw her eyes up tight, take a deep breath and disappear under the water. Kwait and Vairy would exchange that glance reserved by loving parents for when their child was being adorable. Only this time, instead of disappearing under water, Streemly just disappeared. With a pop. An almost, but not quite, simultaneous pop came from behind Kwait. He spun round and sure enough: there was Streemly.

“Wow!” she said.

“Awesome!” said Kwait. A word he had not used singly since he was a teenager.

“Might I recommend we keep that particular activity down to a minimum,” cautioned Bev.

Marshia’s voice seemed clearer than ever.

PLEASE BE SEATED. THE SHUTTLE IS ABOUT TO DOCK.

*

Touchdown was hardly noticeable and decontamination was passed through with no problems.

Except for Vick.

A seventeen-year-old boiled sweet which had migrated through a hole in his pocket into the lining of his jacket had to be extracted and incinerated. The attached fungus was considered a hazard to other life forms on Pebbles.

The tragedy of the incinerated boiled sweet was completely lost, as are so many such incidents, in this

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hard, cold universe. Undetected by the decontamination scanners, some enhancement MAIDs colonising Vick had mutated after being bombarded by neutrinos during one of his many transporter experiments. The mutant MAIDs had occupied the boiled sweet, using it as a raw material resource, and had evolved at an astonishing rate. They reached full consciousness and a thriving film and package holiday industry blossomed. They were just about to send a documentary team out into the vast blackness beyond the fur zone when Sacca, the great God of heat and strange smells, engulfed their world in flames. There were few survivors. Theirs is another story.

*

Customs presented no problems. Always a tense time, passing through customs. Made slightly tenser by Sergeant George who pointed at the customs official's betrunked face and said, "Look at the boat on that, brother!" while nudging Sergeant Arthur. "I didn't know your Mildred was in town!"

Thankfully the Pebbles customs officials were specially chosen for their patience and tact. Also he hadn't understood a word Sergeant George had said.

*

The teams went their separate ways.

*

Kwait followed signs for Stonewhip Port Authority Emigration and Immigration Department. Streemly followed Kwait hanging on to the back of his shirt so she could have a good gawk round without bumping into anything. West followed Streemly looking like a small, terrified stoat that just wanted to go home to its mother and have a nice lie down and a cup of tea and maybe a

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Bakewell tart.

Apart from the three-foot trunk sticking out of the front of their faces, the inhabitants of Pebbles were not unlike humans. Kwait noted that the Pebblings did not stare at *them*. Humans were either very common sights or the Pebblings were incredibly polite and heeded their mothers when they said, "Don't stare at the alien, dear. It can't help not having all of its face".

*

The offices of the Stonewhip Port Authority Emigration and Immigration Department were embedded deep within a colossal sandstone building.

Kwait, with Streemly and West in tow, approached a shining white counter. A small, brass, wooden handled bell sat invitingly at its centre. Kwait looked at it uncertainly.

"Go on," urged Streemly, "ring it."

Kwait paused. "You ring it," he said, at last.

"Oh, for goodness sake!" West elbowed Kwait and Streemly out of the way, grabbed the bell and gave it a good hard shake.

Three things happened simultaneously: an enormous badly painted picture of a ghastly multi-eyed monster complete with dripping fangs and outstretched claws suddenly loomed from behind the counter; a noise like a Tyrannosaurus Rex being relieved of its genitals by a maniacal giggle of school girls wielding blunt bread knives rent the air; West fainted, hitting the ground like a wet sponge.

A cheery pink face appeared from behind the picture. A large smile could just be seen under the trunk. The trunk's owner looked at Streemly and Kwait. He then

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leaned over the counter and looked down at West. "Oops," he said. "Sorry. I thought you were someone else." Responding to the quizzical looks of Kwait and Streemly he explained, "It's an album cover. For my group. The Terrazoids. I just do this job for a bit of extra cash."

Kwait and Streemly nodded sympathetically.

"What do you think?" he asked pointing to the picture.

"Well ..." Kwait rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "... Very ... colourful," he said at last.

"Yes," agreed Streemly, "very colourful."

The Pebbling looked disappointed for a moment before putting his picture away and assuming an air of authority. "Now," he said. "How can I help you?"

"Got any water?" asked Streemly, indicating the recumbent West.

"Oh. Yes. Certainly. Back in a tick." The Pebbling rushed off returning seconds later with a glass of water.

Streemly drank the water and dropped the glass on West's forehead causing him to jerk to a sitting position in alarm. "Hup you come," she said, helping a dazed West to his feet.

The Pebbling assumed this was some sort of strange alien custom and turned to Kwait who looked the sanest of the bunch.

"We're actually looking for someone," said Kwait. "And we thought you might be able to help us."

"I'll do my best," said the Pebbling.

"We're looking for a man," said Kwait.

"Will any man do?" asked the Pebbling. "Or did you have one particular man in mind?"

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“This *particular* man first came to these parts around ...” Kwait paused, not really able to believe what he was about to say next, “... three thousand years ago.”

“Are you pulling my trunk?” said the Pebbling.

“I know it’s a long time ago but some of us have ... well ... a very long life span,” said Kwait trying to regain some credibility. “This particular man may still be around.”

The Pebbling looked very dubious as he pulled a pencil from behind his ear. “Name?” he demanded.

“Django Twip,” said Kwait.

“Django Twip,” said the Pebbling thoughtfully. “That name rings a bell. Django Twip. Django. Django. Django. Twip. Twip. Twip.” The pebbling chewed the pencil for a while. “Nope!” he said finally. “No one of that name on file.”

Kwait and Streemly looked puzzled. West rubbed his forehead.

“Aren’t you going to look it up, or something?” asked Streemly.

“No need to,” said the Pebbling. “We Pebblings never forget!”

“But you just said it rang a bell,” said Streemly. “Couldn’t you just go and look it up using your ... whatever it is you use to look things up with, thing?”

The Pebbling sighed. “Take a seat,” he said. “I’ll be as quick as I can.”

“Thanks,” said Streemly as the Pebbling disappeared.

*

Meanwhile ...

Apricot and Vick followed Bev as he homed in on

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the library.

Few of the Pebblings Bev spoke to had any idea what a library *was*, never mind *where* it was located. In times of distributed data networks the idea of a central pool of information was difficult for some to comprehend. Nevertheless, the library still existed. It was situated underground and accessed by a very small door with 'L br ry' written on it. It was obviously close to an underground train line. Occasional loud rumblings and quite violent vibrations gave the game away.

They stumbled down a badly lit stairway which seemed to go on forever before finally opening into a very dingy, but enormous, cavern of a room. Books, cubes, tapes and masses of unidentifiable media lined the walls and filled row after row of bookcases disappearing down to the end of the room in the far distance.

Bev approached an ancient desk piled high with books and cubes. A grey-haired, female Pebbling sat peering intently into a dusty volume.

"Ahem," said Bev politely. The old girl did not stir. "Ahem!" said Bev slightly louder. Still no reaction.

"A-HEM!" Bev was almost shouting. No reaction.

Vick appeared in front of him. "OI!" he bellowed. "TURN YOUR DEAF AID UP, YOU DOZY OLD TART!" he shouted tactfully.

Apricot was mortified and pushed Vick out of the way as the old lady looked slowly up from her book. "Young man," she said, addressing Apricot and removing the inch thick pebble glasses from the bridge of her trunk, "rudeness is the retreat of the impotent. Now go and stand over there." She pointed to a small alcove a few yards away.

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Apricot tried to explain. "No, that wasn't me. I just ..."

"Must I repeat myself?" she demanded, putting Bev in mind of Dame Margaret Rutherford with a trunk.

"But ..." A withering glare cut Apricot short. "I ..." He started towards the alcove. Halfway there he turned and started to protest. "This is redic ..." The glare forced him to continue into the alcove where he stood looking suitably pathetic. Bev and Vick looked on in sympathy.

The old dear turned to Bev and Vick. "How can I help you, gentlemen?"

Bev stepped forward. "My brother and myself were wondering if it would be possible to access any archived information that had been generated as a result of incidents that would have fallen within the arena of 'general public interest'."

"Pardon?" she said.

"WHERE'S YOUR OLD NEWSPAPERS?" bellowed Vick.

"How far back do you wish to go?" she asked.

"THREE THOUSAND YEARS."

"Are you pulling my trunk?" she asked, replacing her glasses.

As there was no response from either visitor she assumed they were serious and picked up a rather dusty hand set. "Did you have anything in particular in mind?" she asked.

"NEWS TO DO WITH US LOT. MEN. HUMANS," yelled Vick.

"Won't be a moment," she said as she started to dial.

*

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Meanwhile ...

Sergeant Arthur and Sergeant George wandered aimlessly around the busy streets.

Bicycles were the predominant form of transport. Each bicycle sported a large hooter in the middle of its handlebars. The riders constantly walloped the hooters with their trunks. The noise was such that no single hooter could be heard. The cacophony filled the air like tickertape.

Occasionally the pandemonium would increase in their general direction and the Sergeants would be forced to leap out of the way of some careering cyclist.

Large electrical passenger carriers threaded their way carefully through the throng. But the cyclists always had right of way. Most privately owned vehicles were in the air dancing high above the streets among huge posters and flamboyantly illuminated signs. Their brightly lit undercarriages contrasted strikingly with the moody, grey sky above.

Street hawkers tried to be heard above the din and one or two dangled gaudy, flashing baubles under the noses of the dawdling duo.

“By heck!” said Sergeant Arthur rubbing his hands together. “This wind is really whistling through me boxers.”

“Indeed, brother,” said Sergeant George, “it’s quite a few degrees colder than home. That’s for sure.”

“Now this ...” Sergeant Arthur stopped looking up at the gaudy sign above a door way, “... looks like an establishment of just the right persuasion.”

“Indeed it does, brother,” said Sergeant George. “After you,” he said bowing slightly.

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“Thank you,” said Sergeant Arthur, skipping lightly through the door.

*

Throughout the known universe, in every society - from the Wispy White Wanderers of Plaggarth's fog-filled swamps, to the Hairless Hawkers of Hellbent Valley, to the Dropsical Druid Dinosaurs of Gwak - there can always be found: a bar.

The bar that Sergeant Arthur and Sergeant George happened upon was typical of many scattered throughout the universe: somewhere to take the weight off your limbs, something to take the weight of your mind and someone to take the weight off your wallet. They sat on two spare stools at the bar.

“Barkeep!” Sergeant Arthur's friendly tones summoned the old male Pebbling who stood polishing glasses in the time-old tradition of barmen around the universe. “We are new to these parts so would regard highly your advice on some tasty beverage of an alcoholic persuasion.”

“Pardon?” said the barman. He idly wiped the damp surface in front of the two newcomers using an even damper cloth gripped by his wrinkly nicotine stained trunk.

“What would you recommend, friend?” asked Sergeant George.

“Well ...” the barman looked thoughtfully at the two men. “What sort of a mood are you in?” he asked at last.

The Sergeants looked at each other and frowned. “Happy?” suggested Sergeant Arthur.

“At ease with the world, brother,” agreed Sergeant

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George.

“Beer,” said the barman.

“Beer?” said Sergeant Arthur.

“What would you have said if we had said we were sad, friend?” asked Sergeant George.

“Beer,” said the barman.

“And if we’d said ... pensive?”

“Beer.”

“Cross?”

“Beer.”

“Worried?”

“Beer.”

“Dyspeptic?”

“I get the impression,” interrupted Sergeant Arthur, “that you only have beer. Would that be a fair assessment?”

“No,” said the barman. “But beer is the only thing that won’t knock you humans on your arses!” The other Pebbling customers leaning and standing by the bar snickered into their drinks.

“Are you inferring that we can’t hold strong drink?” Sergeant Arthur bristled.

“No,” said the barman, “I’m implying it! You can infer what you will from my implication.”

Sergeant Arthur used his thumb to indicate the Pebbling standing next to him. “I’ll have a double of whatever he’s drinking,” he said.

“And I’ll have a double of whatever he’s drinking, friend,” said Sergeant George pointing to the Pebbling sat next to him.

The barman smiled under his trunk and went to get the drinks. “Two large Xanthostings coming up,” he said.

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The other members of the bar snickered again.

Sergeant Arthur slapped some local money on the bar and smiled confidently at Sergeant George. Two large glasses of a viscous yellow liquid arrived. The other bar members watched with interest as Sergeant Arthur and Sergeant George emptied their glasses in one manly swig.

The predictable happened.

The pair managed to sing two choruses of "The Blue Ridge Mountains of Edenia" in close harmony to an unappreciative audience before collapsing unceremoniously into an untidy heap.

The barman was impressed.

*

Meanwhile ...

West was still rubbing his forehead and looking embarrassed when the Pebbling returned carrying an open folder.

"Any luck?" asked Kwait approaching the counter.

"Not much, I'm afraid," said the Pebbling. "There used to be a colony of humans down south in Alagamma but they relocated to Spwat III twenty years ago. Reason for relocation given as more favourable tax concessions for their freight business plus a start-up grant." The Pebbling closed the folder. "That's it! Nothing more I'm afraid."

"Thanks for your time," said Kwait.

"If you hang around the space port you're bound to run into some humans," volunteered the Pebbling. "Every few days, when their freighters are in port, we're overrun with them."

"Thanks again," said Kwait heading for the door. "We'll bear that in mind."

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Streemly grabbed West by the elbow and steered him towards the door. "Bye," she called cheerily over her shoulder.

*

Meanwhile ...

While the ancient Pebbling librarian mumbled into the hand set, Bev and Vick sidled over to where Apricot stood in shame.

"Anything of any interest?" asked Bev scrutinising the books immediately in front of Apricot.

"Where's that idiot brother of yo ... Oh." Apricot looked in disgust at Vick who ignored him. "This is ridiculous!" hissed Apricot.

"No matter," said Bev. "It's not important. It is far more vital that we have the full co-operation of this individual. If that involves you standing in a corner for a few minutes like some naughty schoolboy. Then so be it."

Vick sniggered.

"As a matter of fact," said Apricot, "there are one or two interesting books here. Look ..." Apricot pointed to a large amber volume with "Dogs - A Universal Life Form Or An Ancient Civilisation?" on its spine.

"Interesting use of the word 'interesting'," said Bev dryly.

"I was just wondering if the dachshund was called that because it looks like a badger or because they used to hunt badgers."

"You were?" asked Bev. "A mind like a steel trap," he observed. "Plenty of space to put your foot in."

"Yes," said Apricot absently as he studied some book spines lower down.

Bev's attention was drawn to the old lady who had

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suddenly leaped from her chair trying to stop piles of papers and books from falling onto the floor. It seemed there was some ancient printing device buried on her desk which had suddenly sprung into life.

“Oh, my goodness,” she said as books fell at her feet. The vibrating stopped after a few seconds. The old lady reached into the pile, drew out a piece of paper and handed it to Vick who handed it on to Bev.

“Most appreciated,” said Bev.

“Suit yourself,” said the old Pebbling, resuming her seat.

“THANKS!” bellowed Vick.

“My pleasure, young man,” she said to Vick while giving Bev a dirty look.

Bev examined the piece of paper. There were three entries, each about one hundred and fifty years old and all from a news agency based on Spwat III. The entries read:

- 1) Twip’s Fish & Chip Emporium Fiasco.
- 2) Chippie Chief Challenged & Chased.
- 3) Forces Forget The Fishy Fiasco.

*

Sergeant Arthur and Sergeant George lay on their backs in a small, dark room at the rear of The Green Dralon. They each smiled sweetly at some private little thoughts, blissfully unaware of what was about to happen next.

What did happen next was that the ice cold contents of a water bucket were transferred, with some gusto, from the bucket to a new location across the faces of the recumbent duo.

Their smiles did a runner and took up residence around the trunk of Bleasedale, the barman and proprietor

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of The Green Dralon. “Good morning sleepy-heads,” said Bleasedale, good naturedly.

The two sat up. Regretting the action immediately.

“Ooh!” said Sergeant Arthur.

“Aargh!” said Sergeant George.

“Feel a bit sensitive, do we?” asked Bleasedale with exaggerated concern.

“My mouth is of the ferret’s bum persuasion,” said Sergeant Arthur with feeling.

“Ditto, brother,” said Sergeant George. They looked around at the crates, bottles and cans surrounding them.

“What the f...” Sergeant Arthur stopped as two large, grey, crumpled legs came shakily into focus. With infinite care, the sergeants raised their eyes travelling up the wrinkled legs, over a wrinkled rotund stomach supporting a wrinkly trunk and finally stopping at two smiling, wrinkled eyes. “Oh,” said Sergeant Arthur, “it’s you.”

“Yes,” said Bleasedale.

“I suppose we ...?” said Sergeant Arthur.

“Yes,” said Bleasedale.

“And I expect we ...?” said Sergeant George.

“Yes,” said Bleasedale.

“We didn’t ...?” said Sergeant Arthur.

“Yes,” said Bleasedale.

“Did we ...?” said Sergeant George.”

“Yes. Now look,” said Bleasedale, offering a hand to help them up, “I’d really love to continue with this fascinating and erudite conversation but I’m opening again in four hours so if you don’t mind I’d like a quick chat before you go. A chat of the business persuasion.”

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He smiled pointedly at Sergeant Arthur.

The two brothers finally became vertical after much grunting, wheezing and the release of some incarcerated wind.

Bleasedale led them back into the main bar.

Walking into a solid wall of stale smoke and alcohol fumes was almost too much for the two sergeants, who tried to breath without actually inhaling.

They sat unsteadily on bar stools while Bleasedale went behind the bar.

“Hair of the rat?” he asked.

“A nice hot cup of tea would be just the ticket, brother,” said Sergeant George hopefully.

“Tea?” Bleasedale looked puzzled.

“Water?” suggested Sergeant Arthur.

Bleasedale filled a jug with water and broke in a tray of ice cubes. He placed two glasses in front of the sergeants. They drank like men who had just spent seventy-two hours eating nothing but dry crackers.

“Now then,” said Bleasedale putting both elbows on the bar and digging in his ear with his trunk, “to business. For years now I’ve been trying to go ... you know ... up market a bit.” The sergeants nodded. “I’m not saying anything against the crowd I get in here. No sir. They’ve kept me in kelp and petroleum jelly for a long time. I can’t deny that. But it’s not quite what I had in mind. I sort of envisaged more of a clientele who were more on the ... you know ... dare I say *intelligent* side.” The sergeants nodded again. “As you probably recall” - the twins arranged their features to look like people who clearly could recall whatever it was they were supposed to recall - “your rendition of your species’ classical aria

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was at one and the same time a resounding success and an abject failure.”

The sergeants did that not shaking but not nodding head movement typical of people who don't know what the hell it is they're hearing.

Bleasedale deftly flicked something his trunk had discovered in his ear along the bar and into an ashtray. “Let me explain,” he said, allowing his trunk to continue exploring his other ear. “Your opening number had the effect of forcing some of my more intellectually challenged customers to leave. And what's more, they did so without first beating seven bells out of you.” The sergeants nodded appreciatively. “When you came round and started on your second set” - the sergeants looked puzzled, more unknown territory - “some passing glitterati, obviously drawn to your rendition of that classic ‘Dome, Dome on the Flange’, came in and started ordering Baby Xens by the gross. Well the tone of the whole place shot up a few octaves, I can tell you. *And* the mark up on the Baby Xens is enough to straighten your trunk.” Bleasedale poured himself a small glass of something red and knocked it back.

“So,” said Bleasedale, screwing his face up and tapping his chest with his trunk, “how about it?”

Sergeant Arthur's mind struggled with this new concept. “You want us,” he said at last, “to sing? Here?”

“I'll give you twenty per cent of the take,” said Bleasedale.

“You want us,” said Sergeant George, “to sing dodgy ... old classical songs? For money?”

“Well of course,” said Bleasedale. “I wouldn't expect you to do it for nothing, would I?”

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"It's *very* kind of you, and all that," said Sergeant Arthur, "and I'm sure I speak for both of us when I say we're very flattered."

"But?" said Bleasedale.

"But we're just a pair of old space bums, brother," said Sergeant George. "We don't know the first thing about entertaining folk."

"Last night," said Bleasedale, "this place was full of the intelligentsia of Stonewhip. For the first time since I opened. And they loved you. Classic human songs are all the rage right now. You can't go wrong. *We* can't go wrong."

"I think we'd like to think about it," said Sergeant Arthur, standing to leave.

"Sleep on it, brother," said Sergeant George also rising.

"Well the offer stands," said Bleasedale. "You know where I'll be."

"Sure do," said Sergeant Arthur. "Bye now. And thanks."

"Yes," said Sergeant George. "Thanks, brother. See you around."

"Before you go," said Bleasedale, making them pause at the door, "what *is* a 'dicky-dido'?"

Chapter 17 : Spwat III

Kwait and Phoenix were sitting talking in one of Marshia's seven bars.

"Traffic problems mean we can't hop to Spwat III," said Phoenix to Kwait. "So we'll have to stroll, I'm afraid."

"So how long will it take?" asked Kwait.

"About two weeks," said Phoenix. "Just enough time to get the hyper-jump drives fully recharged in case we have to do some leaping around." Phoenix looked quite pleased. "All quite exciting, really," he said rubbing his hands together with enthusiasm.

Opposite Kwait and Phoenix sat Streemly and Vick, who were indulging in the frivolous pastime enjoyed by friends everywhere. That of talking complete bollocks.

Kwait had never heard Vick speak at a normal volume before. The warm timbre of Vick's voice seemed strange coming from what Kwait had always seen as being such an angry little man.

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Vick said, "You know that old thing about a tree falling in the woods and if no one was there to hear it, would it make a noise? Or my version, if a sleeping bear farted in the woods and there was no one there to sniff it; does it smell?"

"Yes," laughed Streemly. "I mean, I've heard of the tree falling thing. I've no idea about the windy bear."

"Well, what they're saying is, if an event occurs that has absolutely no consequences whatsoever; not observed and nothing observable ever observed. Does the event actually happen."

"Agreed," said Streemly.

"What happens at the end of the universe?" said Vick.

"How do you mean?"

"If there was nothing at all or just some infinitely dense singularity; there would be no records of past events, and well, none of this would ever have happened, would it?"

"But plainly it has," said Streemly, "as our existence shows."

"So does that mean my leaning forward now is going to make some kind of observable difference to whatever is left at the end of the universe?"

"And just as importantly, if not more so," said Streemly, "there has to be something doing the observing. So perhaps the universe never ends."

"Or perhaps unobserved events do take place," said Vick.

"Or maybe it doesn't matter," said Streemly.

"And what does 'observed' mean?" said Vick.

Streemly sucked air noisily through her teeth. "In

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this context,” she said, “‘observed’ means ‘had an effect on’. For something to have observed something means it must have been affected in some way.”

“Don’t you have to be conscious to observe something?” said Vick.

“I don’t think so,” said Streemly. “Not in this context. Conscious things can observe the results of something unconscious that recorded something from something else that was unconscious. And so on.”

“So long as *something* records the event,” said Vick, “it happened. Time coming to an end is of no consequence.”

“Hmmm,” said Streemly.

They lapsed into a thoughtful silence.

“She’s a fine girl,” said Phoenix, indicating Streemly. “You must be very proud.”

“Oh, yes,” said Kwait. “Most of the time, anyway.” He looked at his daughter fondly. “She’s very like her mother when she’s relaxed like that.”

“*I know you’re talking about me,*” Streemly’s voice came into Kwait’s mind.

“*Mind your own business!*” he thought back at her. “*I’m talking about you not to you.*”

“Where is Mrs Naize?” asked Phoenix.

“*Tell him to mind his own business.*”

“She was killed,” said Kwait. “A little over two years ago. A plane crash.”

“Oh, I am sorry,” said Phoenix. And he was. He liked Kwait.

Kwait had never really talked to anyone about Vairy. The loss. Sure, he had cried with Streemly and accepted the well meaning condolences of friends. But he

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had never talked or shared his thoughts with anyone except the Vairy he held in his mind. Memories of his desolation came back. He remembered the call vividly. Being told Vairy was dead. He collapsed. His legs gave way under him but he managed to hang on to the hand set. Suddenly, he was two people. One numbly observing, watching as the other him cried, choking and gasping uncontrollably for breath. Two minds trapped together. One helpless, paralysed, watching. The other a whorl of pain, colour, emotion.

Kwait felt his stomach tighten and an uncomfortable lightness enter his chest. Could he really say that to another person? He knew Phoenix was a genuine person. He wouldn't ridicule Kwait. Would be genuinely sympathetic. It might be good to say it. Get it out there. It might be good.

"It was a long time ago," said Kwait.

"I lost a brother many years ago," said Phoenix. "I know how it hurts. Even now. I dropped like a stone when my mother called and told me. I would never have believed I would have reacted like that. One minute I was talking to her on the telephone the next I was sat on the floor blubbering like a big baby."

Kwait felt uncomfortable. He stood. "Anyway," he said, "if you'll excuse me I'm feeling very tired. I Think I'll go and get some rest."

"*You OK Pop?*" came Streemly's thought.

"*No problem.*"

"Yes. I think I'll do the same," said Phoenix.

Kwait and Phoenix excused themselves to Streemly and Vick and went their separate ways.

Vick watched Kwait leave. "He misses your

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mother very much,” he said.

“Yes,” said Streemly. “As far as I know she was the only woman he ever loved. He’s certainly never even looked at another woman since mummy died.”

“Two years ago?”

“Yes,” said Streemly. “Seems just like yesterday.” She took a sip from her drink. Vick mirrored the action. “I had just passed my driving test when daddy told me. I was so excited.” Streemly looked into her drink. “When he told me I hit him. Actually slapped him across the face. Called him a liar. Said it was all his fault for making mummy take the night flight.” Streemly looked close to tears. “God, I was such a bitch,” she said.

“Shock can make us act in strange ways,” said Vick. “Many, many years ago when I first started experimenting with the transporters a frog jumped into the export beam just as I activated it. The transfer seemed to be fine but I was, as you can imagine, a bit concerned. Physically I was as perfect as you see me now.”

Streemly smiled.

Vick continued, “But I did have an overwhelming craving for fly soup!” Streemly laughed. “I reversed the procedure, just in case, but ended up with my body and the frogs legs! Well I was hopping mad, I can tell you.” Streemly’s laughing forced her to put the glass down. “I reversed the reversal but ended up turning completely into a frog! So it looks like I’m stuck this way until I croak.” Streemly groaned. “Anyway,” said Vick. “I can’t stand here ribbiting all day. I’d better hop it.” And with that Vick assumed a frog-like pose on the floor and started hopping towards the door much to the amusement of the rest of the bar’s occupants. Streemly ran after him

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laughing.

“Stop that before you do yourself a mischief!” She grabbed Vick, hauled him to his feet and gave him a kiss on his forehead.

“That’s better,” said Vick smiling fondly at Streemly. “Now.” He linked arms with her and headed them both for the door. “What shall we tinker with today?”

*

Bev was a bit concerned about Spwat III. Or, more precisely, he was concerned about letting his inexperienced colleagues loose among its inhabitants. Pebbles was an innocuous planet with fairly friendly natives. But Spwat III was another planet entirely. Its history was one of violence and upheaval.

The mineral rich soil was perfect for growing the notorious Medusa Tree. Its fist sized fruits, looking like a herd of worms with their bottoms glued together, contained the Armpit Nebula’s most powerful and addictive narcotic. Few species were immune to its effects. Once the fruit had been ingested the victim was rendered immobile but his mind went on an inter-galactic journey covering hundreds of planets. A journey which seemed to the victim to take hundreds of years but only took a few minutes of real time. Addicts came back for more time and time again, unable to face life in the pedantic real world.

Spwat III was also extremely rich in vital ores.

Its central position deep among the civilised star systems was a third reason for its popularity with fortune seekers, tyrants, and criminals of all kinds.

There had inevitably been many disputes over the

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millennia with warring factions doing battle over fertile areas or areas rich in minerals. The planet had settled into an uneasy stability with the surface being hardly inhabited at all.

Surface dwellers fell into two categories: machinery maintenance engineers or militia. The machinery was used for mining or harvesting the Medusa Tree and the militia were there to defend the areas owned by the various factions.

By far the majority of the population lived in orbiting space stations of which there were thousands. A strange environment indeed for mankind to set up shop. But people through the ages had been forced to do any number of unpleasant things in the cause of survival.

The colony specialising in freight lived in one such station.

The freight business was obviously very important for drug dealers and mineral traders, to be sure. But Bev was not there to pass judgement. No one had a right to condemn people for a lifestyle they probably had no choice but to accept. The important thing was the location and apprehension of Django Twip. He had to be brought to justice for his crimes against Earth. These people could be descendants of Django Twip's entourage. Contact had to be handled very carefully.

Bev knew that Marshia's arrival would raise a few eyebrows. The changes Streemly and Vick had made to date put Marshia into a class of battle cruiser that Bev and all of his information MAIDs had never seen or heard of before. She could easily wipe out multiple star systems in a matter of seconds. She could also burn a hole in the hat of a chicken farmer on a planet ten million

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miles away before he had time to say "Pluck!".

Bev knew it was impossible for Marshia to fall into the wrong hands but the guys out there lusting after her would not know that. Not until it was too late. The last thing Bev wanted was bloodshed.

Bev had done his duty. He had shared his concerns with everyone. He could do no more. But he was worried. The creatures they could come into contact with were some of the vilest droppings of some of the vilest organisms the universe had ever had the insensitivity to vomit into existence. Not nice people at all.

*

Heeding Bev's advice for caution, Marshia stayed well away from Spwat III to begin with. All transmissions between the space stations and the planet's surface were monitored and analysed. A fascinating picture began to emerge. The orbiting stations were identified as casinos, shopping malls, repair centres, freight handling, residential, brothels, in fact all one would expect in a large city. The occupants of one station were dedicated to keeping the peace and resolving minor disputes. They policed the other stations and represented the law, such as it was.

A significant difference between the orbiting society and a surface based one was the sheer size of it. Plus the very definite boundaries of vacuum that separated each station. The orbits varied enormously so some stations moved through and around other groups of relatively stationary satellites.

Things seemed to pan out though. Kwait watched one residential block for some time. The occupants travelled in communal shuttles to and from nearby

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stations to do a “day’s” work. Every day a different shopping mall passed by. Seven orbiting malls shared similar orbits, strung out around the planet with an orbital period of one day. Some of the utility stations followed suit but the majority stayed in clumps. Each clump representing the interests of a particular faction.

By analysing some of the encoded messages Marshia was able to determine that, even though the occupants of several factions thought they were separate from, and competing with, all the other factions, a lot of them were actually reporting back to the same source. An interesting state of affairs maintained deliberately for reasons that could only be guessed at.

Of immediate interest, and possibly a source of the most help, was the police station in polar orbit. It was decided that Bev and Kwait would approach the police commander to find out if he could be of any assistance.

Marshia hopped to within one hundred yards of the spinning doughnut-shaped station matching orbits perfectly. Bev and Kwait monitored the transmissions as they came out of the jump. The massive Marshia, appearing instantly with no warning at all from any of the scanners, caused quite a stir. Questions were whizzing backward and forward trying to find out who this powerful newcomer was. Interestingly, only one transmission was directed at the orbiting police station and that came from a patrolling police scout ship.

It appeared that the police were very much out on their own with no one to talk to.

The scale of the interest and the fact that they had remained undetected until they actually appeared gave Bev some confidence that they were dealing with a

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technology that was not as advanced as their own.

Marshia made contact with the station and arranged for Bev and Kwait to meet with the commander, Dan Bwagon, within the hour.

West was quite miffed that he had not been included but quickly conceded in a gentlemanly manner when it was pointed out that the situation could be dangerous.

“Besides,” said Bev, “we don’t want to unnerve these people by introducing someone as high powered as your good self at this early stage.”

West had no trouble relating to that either.

As the appointed time approached, Marshia was repeatedly probed unsuccessfully by scanners from many of the space stations. Bev and Kwait thought a little muscle flexing would not go amiss, so demonstrated their flawless transporter technology by porting straight into the commander’s office.

As the rather dull brown office materialised around him, Kwait wondered briefly if the police commander was alone and if so what he was doing. What, wondered Kwait, are the three most popular past times enjoyed by people who think they are alone? Nose picking? Armpit sniffing? Having a good scratch in one of those private little places? That was assuming, thought Kwait, that the police commander had a nose, armpits or private little places. He did, as it turned out. The station commander was a Pebbling. And this Pebbling was exploring his ear with his trunk when the two visitors materialised.

“Hell’s bells!” said the startled commander. “I’ve heard this transportation thing had been sussed by someone but I had no idea it was you lot.”

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“Us lot?” enquired Bev.

“You ... people ... humans,” said Commander Bwagon.

“Yes,” said Bev, “‘us lot’ have had it sussed for some thousand years now.”

“And you are?” asked Bwagon regaining some composure.

“This is Doctor Naize,” said Bev, “and I am simply Bev.”

“Ah, yes.” Bwagon looked at his watch. “Bang on time. I had assumed you would be coming via more conventional means. Please, sit down.” Bwagon indicated two chairs in front of his desk. “Now, how can I help you?”

“Quite simply,” said Bev, “we are in the throes of pursuing a person, human like ourselves, who has, albeit in the distant past, in a most heinous and contemptible manner, violated every imaginable ethical and moral code in committing a transgression of such hideously vile and disgusting evil against humankind and its planet of origin that we have been compelled to give chase and apprehend the perpetrator in as expeditious and non-intrusive a manner as is, err ... humanly possible.”

Total incomprehension clung to Bwagon’s face like an old balaclava. “Pardon?” he said.

“We’re after a guy called Django Twip,” said Kwait. “Heard of him?”

“Django Twip and the planet Frimp are legendary in these parts,” said Bwagon.

“In what way?” asked Bev.

“Just a moment, please,” said Bwagon, leaning towards his intercom. “Locate Captain Rex and have her

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sent in, would you please Sonia.”

A thin crackly female voice came back over the intercom, “Anything for you, my liddle honey bunny ...”

“*And*,” said Bwagon stabbing the intercom button, “send in two teas for my *guests*, please.”

A short embarrassed silence was followed by a staccato, “Right away, sir.”

Dan Bwagon cleared his throat. “Rex will be able to help with some of the details. She was in charge of the case.” Bwagon tried to retrieve some kind of credibility. “So what is your connection with Django Twip?” He directed the question at Kwait, not wanting the short, bearded guy to start rambling again.

“Django Twip,” said Bev, ignoring the slight, “virtually destroyed our home planet wiping out the vast majority of the population in the process.”

“Some of us were just left to survive as best we could in outposts on other planets,” said Kwait.

“When did this happen?” asked Bwagon.

“Three thousand years ago,” said Bev.

“Are you pulling my trunk?” said Bwagon, doubt creasing his brow.

“Due to certain ... refinements, there is no theoretical limit to our life span,” said Bev.

Bwagon rearranged his features to that of one who is suitably impressed and said, “From what I remember, this Django Twip character was convicted of trying to poison this entire star system. He was run to ground on Frimp but he put up some kind of planet wide force field that we couldn’t get through. The field’s still there as far as I know. And so is Twip.”

“That’s interesting,” said Bev. “But what do you

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mean by ‘poison this entire star system’?”

“Well ...” began Bwagon, but he was interrupted by a knock at his door. “Come!” he said.

A tall, slim human female entered. Not a classic beauty but a beauty borne of self-confidence and inner calm. The way she moved had Kwait’s information MAIDs presenting him with images of a long extinct species of gazelle from Earth.

“Ah, Rex,” said Bwagon. “This is Captain Rex,” he said to Bev and Kwait. The humans nodded to each other. “These gentlemen are interested in finding out more about Django Twip.”

“Is that ship yours?” asked Rex. Kwait noticed her eyes were so dark as to appear all pupil.

“It is indeed,” said Bev. “And may I extend to you the enthusiastic hand of camaraderie and fraternity and welcome you back, one of our long displaced comrades, to the bosom and brotherhood of humanity from which you were, so long ago, unceremoniously torn to be cast upon the uncertain sea of fate and the vagaries of the far flung reaches of space.”

“Pardon?” said Rex, raising a quizzical eyebrow.

“Hi,” said Kwait, “and yes, that’s ours.”

“Neat trick,” said Rex. “Where are you guys from?”

“Earth,” said Kwait.

“Get away,” said Rex in amazement. “Earth? I thought that was just an old fairy tale.”

“We are no fairy tale as you can see,” said Bev. “We are from the cradle of humanity. A cradle which Django Twip tried to destroy. A cradle which is being rebuilt and starting to rock again as we speak.”

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“Far out,” said Rex.

“About seven hops,” said Bev.

Kwa##it intervened. “About Django Twip; I believe you have some information about him.”

“Yes,” said Rex. “I suppose I’d better give you the full story as far as I know it.”

“Good idea,” said Kwait.

“Twip’s been around these parts for as long as anyone can remember. There are some old freighter legends that say he’s the father of all humanity in these parts. Anyway, he started Twip’s Fish and Chip Emporium. He opened more and more outlets and eventually there was at least one, and in some cases hundreds, of Twip’s Fish and Chip Emporiums on every inhabited planet in all the Armpit Nebula’s star systems.”

“That represents one hell of a lot of fish and chips,” said Kwait.

“Tell me about it,” said Rex. “Anyway, the standards commission got a bit concerned when muggings of people carrying bags of Twip’s fish and chips started. People were getting killed over a lightly battered cod, or cod-a-like, and a bag of chips.

“They analysed some of the chips and found minute traces of Medusa. Not enough for the full-blown trip but enough to make people euphoric and want for more.

“A joint Nebula operation closed down every shop simultaneously. Twip went to ground on Frimp. That was his home base anyway. He put up some kind of impenetrable force field. They tried everything to get through it but, nothing doing. It wouldn’t budge. After a few years they figured he was a prisoner there anyway.

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We've had a monitor on the field but I reckon he's probably dead by now. Whatever, he isn't going anywhere without our knowing about it."

Kwait told Rex and Bwagon the story of Django Twip, the two moons and the force field around Earth.

"So you got through the field?" Rex asked Bev.

"Well, my brother did, certainly," said Bev. "And I do believe the transporter technology has improved beyond recognition even since then. Thanks to the efforts of Kwait's daughter and my brother."

Kwait looked puzzled. "But, given what the field did to life on Earth, it's questionable as to whether Twip could survive on the surface of Frimp, surely."

"The survival of my brother and me is directly attributable to the MAIDs," said Bev. "Without them we would have had no chance at all. Actually that's not strictly true. If not for my brother's modifications and refinements of certain MAIDs we would have perished hundreds of years ago. Unfortunately the modifications came too late for our friends." Bev's eyes were moist. "The final experiments we did on ourselves had only a fifty-fifty chance of success. My presence here is entirely due to my brother's brilliance." Bev produced a handkerchief from his sleeve and blew his nose loudly.

"Maids?" asked Rex.

"Miniature Artificial Intelligence Devices," said Bev. "Microscopic devices which, jointly, have a limited intelligence capability."

"Oh," said Rex, not really understanding.

"They sort of keep us healthy and enhance our normal body functions," explained Kwait. Rex nodded. Kwait continued, addressing Bwagon and Rex. "I'm

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curious about you people; this seems a very strange place for a police station. Who pays your wages?"

"The reason we're here is to protect the interests of Pebbling, Gamma Froth and the human communities," said Bwagon. "Pebbling and Gamma Froth have a considerable amount invested in the mining operations on the surface. The human community provide an invaluable service with the freight services. Our paymasters are a committee of representatives from all three nations plus a small sum donated as taxes by the druggers. It's been recognised that trying to put an end to Medusa production would result in an all out war. There's just too much hard cash at stake. So we're here to keep the peace as best we can. Keep everything civilised and running smoothly."

"It must be very difficult to turn a blind eye to drug running," said Kwait.

"It's simply a numbers game," said Bwagon. "Keeping the mining operations open benefits tens of thousands of billions of individuals. Whereas Medusa is a problem for just a few hundred millions. So you have to keep things in perspective."

"It's outrageous!" said Kwait indignantly. "I've never heard anything like it."

Rex intervened. "Believe me, I know it's hard to swallow but these druggers are very powerful. War would cost millions of lives and Medusa would not go away. Someone would figure out a way to grow it somewhere else. Here, at least we have some control over its distribution. Negotiated capping, and all."

Bev stepped in to change the subject. "I would be very interested to meet some human settlers here. See

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what sort of life they have set up for themselves. Would that be possible?"

Rex's look said no problem but she turned to Bwagon for confirmation.

"I ..." - Bwagon was still bristling - "... see no reason why not. Why don't you show them round, Rex. Introduce them to the freighters. When you're through I would appreciate a little chat about how you intend to proceed vis-à-vis the Django Twip case."

"Will do," said Kwait.

"Thank you for your time," said Bev. "It's been much appreciated."

"My shuttle or yours?" said Rex.

"We did not bring ours with us," said Bev.

"Fine," said Rex. "This way then."

*

"It's amazing what people can get used to," thought Kwait. Rex looked relaxed and cheerful as she piloted the shuttle at speed through the access tunnels. Kwait noted with some satisfaction that Bev's knuckles were just as white as his own as they threatened to crush the arm of the seat he was strapped into.

The shock of sudden zero gravity was compensated for by the sight that greeted them as they shot from the brightly lit tunnel to empty space. They were looking at one edge of the Armpit Nebula from the inside; a beautiful band of star dust shining white and blue to violet. Behind them the station receded. Momentum-induced gravity grabbed at their stomachs as Rex pulled back on the joystick bringing the great, bright, beige disk of Spwat III into view above them.

In front twinkled Spwat III's irregular necklace of

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jewels that were the orbiting space stations.

As they got closer they could see the staggering amount of activity as shuttles of all shapes and sizes zoomed nonchalantly in, around and between the stations.

“You know,” said Rex looking around her feet, “I’m sure I had a map in here somewhere.” She looked up just in time to avoid running into a larger shuttle running across their bows. The simultaneous release of breath from both Bev and Kwait caused Rex to say, “Sorry about that. I suppose these things take a bit of getting used to. Don’t worry, I’ve never hit anything yet. Well that’s not strictly true. There was that one time when I used to smoke. I dropped a ciggy in my lap. The next thing I knew I was face to face with a Froth who was glued to my front screen. He’d been out cleaning the station windows when I happened by just a little too close.” Rex laughed. “Talk about being pissed off. I thought the guy was going to climb out of his suit, through the screen and bop me one there and then.”

She started looking around her feet once more. “Now, where’s that map?” she said.

“Don’t worry,” Kwait said a little too hastily. “The old point and tell routine will be fine. We’re not intent on staying too long.”

“OK,” said Rex, smiling slightly.

The shuttle banked and swooped towards a huge red platform. Cubes, spheres and tetrahedrons had been glued together forming an absurd snake that wound round its own coils.

“This,” said Rex taking the shuttle through one of the spiky loops causing Bev and Kwait to duck

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involuntarily, "is Action Stations. Cute name, huh? Gambling, sex, booze. Pursuits of that ilk. Mainly frequented by surface workers."

The shuttle shot away from the red craziness of Action Stations and on towards a massive collection of flat platforms and enormous grabber arms. Freight carriers of all shapes and sizes could be seen all around. Some floated patiently waiting to be tended to, others were magnetically glued to platforms while more lay in the gentle embrace of the gigantic mechanical arms. Streams of shuttles moved from freighter to freighter and to and from Spwat III's surface. Tiny suited figures could be seen fussing around some of the vessels carrying out general repairs and inspections.

Rex steered the shuttle towards an enormous barrel of a construction rotating gently along its axis some mile and a half away from the main freighter terminal.

"Bobbin," said Rex. "That's where we're headed. It's mainly residential but there are a few shops and bars and shuttle repair bays and stuff."

"Bobbin," said Bev.

"Yes," said Rex.

"Bobbin. Bobbin. Bobbin. Bobbin," said Bev.

"Yes, yes, yes, yes," said Rex giving Bev a strange look.

"Sorry," said Bev, "but it's just such a nice word."

*

The shuttle rolled, banked and dived a little aggressively, Kwait thought. They came in along Bobbin's axis. It loomed before them like a giant horticulturist's lawn roller. Kwait saw that at the centre was a large circular entrance way leading into a dark interior. As they got

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closer the scale of the thing became apparent. Kwait estimated the diameter at well over two thousand yards. The central entrance dwarfed the shuttle and was easily capable of taking a vessel four times her size.

Rex started to roll the shuttle matching the rotating station. When the two synchronised their dance, perceptions jumped so that it was they and the station that were static, while the stars, other stations and the planet Spwat III orbited them.

As they manoeuvred towards the entrance Kwait could see through some of the long curved windows. He felt slightly queasy looking around the great circle at the hundreds of people going about their business. Their heads towards Kwait at the centre, their feet towards the circumference.

The interior loomed and was no longer dark. Bright lights were suddenly all around them. Shuttles passed by close enough to touch. Rex followed a system of lights that Kwait could not understand. The lights eventually led them to a docking station just big enough for the shuttle to enter and settle gently into place. The docking bay doors came together and a klaxon blasted its warning. A few seconds later and the word "AIR" appeared in large red lettering on the wall in front of them as the klaxon ceased its wailing. A gut-wrenching pull surprised Bev and Kwait as another sign appeared on the wall. "GRAVITY".

"One 'G' wherever you go," said Rex, shutting down the shuttle. "Not bad, heh?"

"No mean feat," agreed Kwait, undoing his straps. They left the shuttle and stood in front of a heavy steel door.

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“Just one thing,” said Rex, grabbing the door handle. “If you get lost ask for bay Yellow-27.”

“We won’t get lost,” said Bev as Rex pulled open the door. They walked out into what was plainly a huge shopping mall. Thousands of people milled around. Shopping, chatting, eating.

“Wow,” said Kwait. “How many people are there on Bobbin?”

“About half a million. Give or take a few thousand,” said Rex. “It’s pretty stable. Available space dictates the size really. Though Bobbin is expanding very slowly.”

“How is all this financed?” asked Bev.

“The freight handlers you saw on the way here,” said Rex. “They make most of the hard currency and tradables. They also do a brisk trade in servicing and repairs. The paintings bring in quite a lot too.”

“Paintings?” asked Bev in surprise.

“Yes. I know,” said Rex. “Don’t ask me why but the Pebblings and Froths think our paintings are out of this world and are prepared to pay handsomely for them too.”

“What do Froths look like?” asked Kwait.

Rex frowned and looked around the crowds. Most were humans. “Pebblings you’ve come across,” said Rex nodding towards a lone trunked figure looking into a shop window. “Ah!” said Rex. “Over there.” Bev and Kwait looked in the direction Rex pointed. Two short, dark humanoids threaded their way through the crowd.

“Just like an ancient people back on Earth,” said Bev rather sadly. “All extinct now, I’m afraid. Pygmies, we called them.”

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Kwait accessed his information MAIDs. "Yes," he said. "I see what you mean."

Rex had the feeling she had just missed something. These two seemed momentarily ... distant. She ignored the feeling. "Want to have a look round?" she asked.

"Sure," said Kwait as they set off into the crowd.

Kwait thought how they could easily have been strolling around a shopping mall at home. Ignoring the curved floor, that is. Perhaps there was a fundamental need in the human psyche for shopping malls and market places.

Shops held everything you would expect from any surface based mall. Clothes, food, entertainment and life-improving goods by the score.

The crowds, people mostly, looked well fed, well healed and well pleased with life.

"This is fascinating," said Bev. "Tell me, what sort of social structure holds all this together?"

"It's pretty rigid ... in a loose kind of way," said Rex. She frowned prettily, trying to put words to her thoughts. "I suppose it's best summed up as co-operate or die."

"You sound a little disillusioned, my dear," said Bev.

"That's a different story. It's why I chose to be a cop on a different station," said Rex. "Basically you survive here by contributing. You have to work on the rigs or be a dealer or techie or do something useful. If you don't give you can't take. So if you're incapable in some way, physically or mentally, and you haven't made provision or have no help, then you're out."

"Out?" said Bev with some concern.

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“Not *outside*,” said Rex, “but as good as. The skin is full of people who can’t make it inside. They call them Flakes.”

“Skin?” asked Bev.

“There’s a ten feet gap between the outer and inner hulls.” explained Rex making a circle with her hands. “Flakes huddle around the heating elements and live off the garbage and pray they survive the next mite hit. Err, micro-meteor hit, that is.”

“That seems very harsh,” said Kwait.

Rex shrugged. “They say it’s the only way Bobbin can survive. No passengers.”

“But who controls the station?” asked Bev.

“Well, the dealers dictate *where* Bobbin goes,” said Rex. “Which is basically wherever they can get the best handling prices. There’s a shift boss on each freight handler. The techies here keep everything running. Apart from that, it just sort of runs.”

“Fascinating,” said Bev, edging past a young lady with a clipboard.

The young lady spotted Bev and started walking beside him. “Excuse me sir would you have a moment to spare I won’t take up too much of your time and would like to ask you a few questions if that’s all right please,” she said a little desperately.

Bev stopped. “Of course, my dear,” he said. The young lady looked ecstatic, hardly believing her luck. Kwait and Rex slowed to a snail’s pace, walking amongst the traders but keeping Bev in view.

The young lady beamed at Bev. “Thank you very much,” she said breathlessly, “this will only take a few minutes.” She shuffled with her clipboard. “Right,” she

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said after finding the correct page. She reddened slightly. "Male obviously ... Are you under thirty?"

"No," said Bev.

"Thirty to forty?" she asked.

"No," said Bev.

"Over forty then," she said, ticking a box on her questionnaire.

"Do you use an underarm deodorant?" she asked.

"No," said Bev kindly.

The young lady frowned. "No," she said under her breath and shuffling with the clipboard. "Go to fifty nine-b." She smiled at Bev.

"Right," she said. "You do not use an underarm deodorant because: a, You can't find the right fragrance b, You have sensitive skin or c, You don't think you need to?"

"b," said Bev.

The young lady looked sympathetic. "Ooh. Me too," she said. "I just break out in horrible blotches if I so much as look at a bottle of Pitstop. I look like I've got anti-gravity pucks strapped to my elbows!"

Bev smiled kindly. "Anything else?" he asked.

"Err, yes. Sorry. Err, b. Right. Have you *ever* used an underarm deodorant?"

"Yes."

"And, what was it called?"

"Beast Within," said Bev.

"Ooh," said the young lady. "I've never heard of that one. Is that 'B' ...?"

"B-E-A-S-T W-I-T-H-I-N."

"... I-N. That's it," she said, noting down the name. "Thank you for your time."

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“My pleasure,” said Bev, turning to look for his companions.

He spotted Kwait and Rex deep in conversation. A small island of calm in the busy mall. Kwait had his hands in his tunic pockets, his body slightly turned away from Rex, his face alternating between being intent on whatever Rex was saying and animated conversation. Rex stood holding her hair back from her face as she looked up at Kwait. She leaned unnecessarily close to his ear when speaking, tossing her head occasionally and waving her free hand as she spoke. She stood square on one foot and on the heel of the other.

Bev smiled, trying to find a word for what they were doing. Not flirting. Not at ease. Attracted and trying to be businesslike?

He turned back to the young lady and gently took her arm. “It seems my companions are indisposed at present,” he said.

The young lady felt a gentle tingling in her arm where the stranger touched her.

“Would you care to show me around this fascinating place you live in?” said Bev.

The young lady’s mind went blank apart from the overwhelming desire to give this stranger a guided tour of Bobbin.

“Have you seen the health care and crèche centres?” she asked.

“No,” said Bev. “Do, please show me.”

*

“But I probably paint an over-bleak picture of Bobbin,” said Rex. “Not everyone feels the way I do, plainly. There are a lot of people here who could leave but choose

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to stay.”

“Indeed,” said Kwait looking around the mall. “Most of the elements you describe here could be found back home. Just in a slightly different form. Tell me ...” Kwait paused. “... what do people do for fun around here?”

“Fun?” said Rex.

“Yes,” said Kwait, “fun. Entertainment. How does a ... Bobbinette? Bobbinling? Bobbinner?”

“Bobbinner will do,” said Rex smiling.

“How does a Bobbinner get away from it all? Relax?”

“You mean the Holiday,” said Rex.

“I do?”

“Yes. When it’s time to Holiday, Bobbin is moved to Gamma Froth,” said Rex. “It’s really something. Fantastic beaches, jungle, snow, amazing restaurants. Everything you could ever want. The whole of Bobbin goes surface side.”

“All of you go on holiday together?” said Kwait.

“It’s not as bad as that,” said Rex. “Gamma Froth is big enough to pull point nine G. You can be on there for weeks without ever meeting another Bobbinner.”

“And how often does this Mass Holiday take place?”

“About every six months,” said Rex. “It’s mainly down to the traders. They pick the best time to go.”

“What about on Bobbin?” asked Kwait. “What do folks do around *here* for fun?”

Rex looked at Kwait for a moment. She seemed to come to a decision.

“Do you like sports?” she asked.

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“Depends,” said Kwait cautiously.

“Follow me ...” Rex stopped in her tracks, suddenly aware of Bev’s absence. “Where’s Bev?” she asked, looking around in concern.

“He seems to have found someone else to play with,” said Kwait, pointing out the receding figures of Bev and a young lady.

“We’d better go and get him,” said Rex, starting off after Bev.

Kwait stopped her, saying, “I wouldn’t worry about Bev. It’s the rest of Bobbin you should be concerned with.” Kwait’s voice trailed off as he looked vague.

“What’s wrong?” asked Rex.

Kwait held up his hand motioning Rex to wait. After a while he said, “Sorry about that. I was just getting a message from Marshia.”

Rex drew breath to ask who Marshia was then remembered Kwait’s incredible ship. She marvelled at this amazing technology but wondered just how intrusive it really would feel.

“It seems,” said Kwait, “that Marshia is ready and we’re to set off for Frimp shortly.”

“Good,” said Rex, pulling her beeper off her belt and holding it to her lips. “Captain Rex requesting system transport.”

Kwait could hear a tinny little artificial voice responding, *Voice match. Request actioned. Police Vessel Lima Oscar 3 will be at Bobbin Dock White 9 in 15. Out.*

Kwait felt unaccountably awkward for a moment. “Well,” he said, “I’d better be off.”

Rex ignored Kwait’s remark. “Is there any way I

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can talk to your Captain?" she asked. "I'd like to make arrangements for the handing over of Twip when he's caught."

Kwait's eyes defocused as he consulted Marshia. "Just talk into your beeper," he said. "Captain Phoenix can speak to you through that."

Rex looked suspiciously at the familiar device. "Captain Phoenix?" she ventured tentatively.

"Captain Rex." A thin representation of Phoenix's voice came from the beeper. "What can I do for you?"

The look on her face showed Rex was impressed. "I'll be taking system transport to Frimp," she said with an unimpressed voice. "When you apprehend Twip and he's ready to be transported to our vessel, will you need anything from us? Documents signed, etcetera?"

"You are more than welcome to accompany us to Frimp, Captain," said Phoenix. "Django Twip will, however, remain in our custody for trial and sentencing."

Rex frowned. "Twip is accused of crimes against several systems in this area," said Rex. "You will *have* to hand him over."

"You will have to take that up with the Presidium," Phoenix responded genially. "Goodbye, Captain."

"Captain?" Rex said into her beeper. "Captain!?"

Voice match. Further data required, Captain Rex.
Over.

"Oh, bugger!" said Rex stabbing the beeper back into her belt.

"I'm sorry," said Kwait. "But we're being recalled." He looked apologetic and made a half gesture towards reaching for her hand. "I must go," he said.

Rex opened her mouth to speak as Kwait

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disappeared with a gentle pop. She looked around and saw Bev a few dozen yards away. He was still talking to the young lady. But as Rex started towards him, Bev moved a pace back from the girl, smiled kindly and disappeared.

“Damn them!” said Rex in frustration.

Chapter 18 : Frimp

Everyone on board Marshia was looking at their nearest screen. Frimp was invisible to the naked eye. Marshia had enhanced the scanned image to render a black and white picture of the force field obscuring Frimp. Grey bands writhed and rippled around the huge sphere at impossible speeds as the planet's magnetic field jostled with the forces projected from the surface.

It looked alive. Shivering in the cold of space. Or maybe quaking with derisive laughter at this tiny upstart intruder.

Here was the home of Django Twip. Planet killer, mass murderer and fish and chip magnate.

Feelings among the crew were understandably mixed.

Captain Phoenix drummed his fingers on his chin watching the rippling sphere. What was waiting under the force field? What did Django Twip look like? Was he even still alive? What would be a suitable punishment for his inconceivably evil crimes? Could you hate someone

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who was so plainly insane? What was insanity? Was his entire entourage insane? And their descendants? And Django Twip's descendants? Was Django Twip an anagram for something sinister? No, not enough vowels

...

CAPTAIN PHOENIX?

Marshia's voice brought Phoenix out of his reverie. Phoenix momentarily marvelled at how Marshia had been able to interrupt his thoughts so delicately. Usually, Marshia's sudden interruption when Phoenix was deep in thought made him half jump out of his skin. This time she seemed to know how to get his attention gently.

"Yes, Marshia?" Phoenix settled back into the comfortable control room chair.

THE POLICE VESSEL LIMA OSCAR THREE HAS ARRIVED AND CAPTAIN REX WISHES TO COMMUNICATE WITH YOU. DO YOU WISH TO TAKE THE CALL, CAPTAIN?

"Yes. Thank you, Marshia."

UNDERSTOOD.

Captain Rex's face appeared on the lower left quadrant of the control room's main screen. Anger had made her dark eyes turn even blacker.

"Captain Rex," said Phoenix pleasantly, "how nice. What can we do for you?"

"You damn well know what you can do for me!" said Rex incredibly quickly. "You can agree to hand over Twip when you get him!"

"Now, now," said Phoenix waving an index finger at Rex's image. "Finders keepers."

Rex flushed attractively, went crossly arms akimbo and opened her mouth to speak.

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“I don’t know what your problem is,” said Phoenix before Rex could say anything. “When we get hold of Django Twip, we’ll give him a fair trial before we string him up so your lot can have their say then.”

“The point is,” said Rex, “he is in *our* jurisdiction and has committed crimes against *our* population and ...”

But Rex was unable to finish as Phoenix interrupted her. “Please, Captain Rex. Just stand back and let us get on with it. Out!”

UNDERSTOOD.

Rex’s surprised face disappeared from the screen.

“Now.” Phoenix interlaced his fingers. “I believe the force field is no problem. Is that correct, Marshia?”

YES, CAPTAIN.

“Any suggestions? Phoenix turned to Bev, West and Kwait standing to his right. They shook their heads. Phoenix turned to his left. “Apricot?”

“None, sir. Except ...” Apricot looked thoughtful. “I think I may have worked out where that three pin plug that killed Vick came from.”

“Good. Hang on to that thought,” said Phoenix. “Marshia?”

YES, CAPTAIN.

“Can you locate and destroy the force field’s projector?”

“Oh, and ...” began Apricot.

YES, CAPTAIN.

“... I wonder ...” said Apricot.

“Well, take it out then!” said Phoenix enthusiastically.

UNDERSTOOD.

“... if there would be any ...” said Apricot as the

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screen showed a brilliant plasma-blue jet thump irresistibly, like the fist of God, into the writhing force field. The field dimpled like the skin of an inflated balloon being pressed by a blunt needle.

On Frimp's surface the field projector vaporised in a blinding blue flash.

"... repercussions in the form of ..." said Apricot, pausing to stare open mouthed at the main screen.

The removal of the force field briefly revealed a blue and brown planet beneath. An ominous golden glow began to spread rapidly from each pole. Two planet sized wedding rings hurtled to meet at the equator.

"... planet wide defences or ..." The rings met and turned brilliant green.

"... booby traps." Apricot managed to finish his sentence just as the planet exploded.

Marshia, with the reactions of a cobra on cocaine, took a half a light minute hop backwards.

THE EXPLOSION WILL BE VISIBLE ON THE SCREENS IN THIRTY SECONDS WITH THE SHOCK WAVE FRONT FOUR SECONDS LATER, CAPTAIN.

Save for the mysterious beeping noise, the control room was silent as everyone stared at the doomed system on the screens.

Owing to some unfortunate timing on the part of the other orbiting planets, the gargantuan bomb took them all out in a brilliant ball of green light which filled the main control room screen. Marshia took the shock wave in her stride, hardly shuddering as it washed over her.

Phoenix was the first to speak. "Oops!" he said.

EXCUSE ME CAPTAIN PHOENIX BUT

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CAPTAIN REX WISHES TO COMMUNICATE WITH YOU ON A MATTER SHE REGARDS WITH SOME URGENCY.

“Yes. Put her on,” said Phoenix absently. He sat up as what Marshia had said registered. “Rex? Is she still ... Is the police ship all right?”

THE POLICE VESSEL LIMA OSCAR THREE HAS BEEN DESTROYED, CAPTAIN.

“Oh,” said Phoenix with some concern.

Captain Rex’s hysterical voice came over the communications channel. “Phoenix!” she shouted most unbecomingly. “Who the hell do you think you are!”

“She seems a tad cross, wouldn’t you say?” said Phoenix to Apricot. “Where is she, anyway?”

HOLDING BAY THREE, CAPTAIN.

“What’s she doing there?” asked Phoenix.

“Phoenix?! Phoenix?! ANSWER ME, YOU BIG PUFF!” Rex was becoming most unladylike.

I THOUGHT IT PRUDENT TO REMOVE CAPTAIN REX AND THE OTHER FOUR CREW MEMBERS WHEN THE PLANET EXPLODED. CALCULATIONS SHOWED A PROBABILITY OF ONE THAT THEY WOULD HAVE PERISHED WITH THEIR VESSEL.

“Nice one, Marshia,” said Phoenix.

THANK YOU, CAPTAIN.

“Explain what happened to her and her crew, would you please Marshia. And bring them here when she’s calmed down,” said Phoenix.

“PHOENIX!” shouted Rex, her voice going hoarse.

UNDERSTOOD.

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“Scan for survivors, please Marshia,” said Phoenix.

UNDERSTOOD.

“What do we know about this system, Apricot?”

Apricot consulted the small screen in front of him. “Small yellow sun. Four inner planets. No life forms. The fifth outer planet, Frimp, was partially terraformed and inhabited by Django Twip and some of his employees. A meteor belt between Frimp and planet four was mined out over five hundred years ago. Water, iron and zinc, mainly.” Apricot looked up. “That’s it apart from one robot police satellite which was, up until a few moments ago, in Frimp orbit.”

“Status please, Marshia,” said Phoenix.

NO DETECTABLE LIFE FORMS IN THE SYSTEM. ALL PLANETS VAPORISED. THE STAR HAS BEEN DESTABILISED AND WILL GO NOVA IN ONE THOUSAND AND TWO YEARS. I HAVE DISPATCHED NOTICES TO ALL AUTHORITIES WITHIN TEN LIGHT YEARS.

“Well, that,” said West with considerable relief, “would appear to be that.”

“From the evidence and events just perceived,” said Bev, “I would surmise that that would appear *not* to be that. I would further surmise that our quarry has not only vacated this domain but was, indeed, never in residence prior to the initiation of the force field.”

West frowned. As did Phoenix. But for different reasons.

“I agree,” said Kwait. “I find it hard to believe the man would just blow himself up. It’s much more likely he was never on Frimp in the first place.”

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“Ah,” said Phoenix, understanding Bev’s remarks at last.

Captain Rex and four uniformed police entered the control room.

“Ah,” said Phoenix effectively demonstrating how the different stressing of a single syllable word can completely alter its meaning. “Captain Rex. I trust we’re in a better temper now? Feels good to be alive, does it?”

“No thanks to you!” said Rex bitterly. “What’s this about Twip not being on Frimp?”

“It would seem an illogical course of action,” said Bev, “blowing oneself to bits in that fashion.”

Rex thought about it briefly. “See what you mean,” she said. “He could have given us the slip, I suppose. It must have been some time before getting to Frimp because we monitored his ship all the way to the surface. Right until that damn field came on.”

“Is it absolutely certain that Django Twip got on the ship you chased?” asked Kwait.

“No doubt about it,” said Rex. “A remote retina scan picked him up going up the ramp.”

“Did you consider transporter technology?” asked Bev.

“No,” said Rex. She looked a little embarrassed. Understandable considering what had just happened to her. “We never rated transporter technology.” Rex tossed her hair back from her eyes. “If he did port out of the ship he was taking one heck of a chance because I know the technology wasn’t sound. At least not then anyway.”

“So,” said Bev, “that only leaves us with one alternative.”

“Agreed,” said Kwait. Phoenix looked

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questioningly at Apricot, who shrugged.

“And what would that be?” asked Rex.

“We monitored transmissions to and from the stations orbiting Spwat III,” said Bev. “It appeared that a few of the factions who thought they were completely separate organisations were actually communicating with the same source. Triangulations show that source to be ...” Bev looked vaguely into the distance for a moment as he consulted his information MAIDs which in turn talked to Marshia. “... Lodsä. In area Delta.”

“Lodsä?” said Rex. “The USO is on Lodsä.”

“USO?” queried Kwait. He found Rex’s direct stare disturbing. Her liquid brown eyes seemed to strip him bare.

“United Species Organisation,” said Rex, holding Kwait’s gaze for what seemed an age. “It amounts to the centre of government for the entire Nebula.”

Kwait found himself pleased that Streemly was not in the room.

Rex continued, “It’s a very sensitive, not to mention highly restricted, area. I can’t imagine a bad smell like Twip hiding in that particular rose garden.”

“Nevertheless,” said Bev, “Lodsä looks like our most likely candidate for investigation.”

“How long will it take to get there?” asked Rex.

“That is up to Captain Phoenix,” said Bev pointedly.

Phoenix turned to Apricot. “Any damage from that shock wave, Apricot?”

Apricot consulted the small screen in front of him, tapping a few buttons. “A little, sir,” he said at last. “Two microwave dishes missing, fourteen sensor aerials

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damaged, one secondary manoeuvring jet out of position and a section of primary hull plates reporting stress condition yellow. Nothing that can't wait, Captain."

Phoenix looked thoughtful for a moment. "I think, judging from Django Twip's performance so far, we can not afford to be anything other than one hundred and one per cent operational," he said.

Bev nodded in agreement.

Phoenix, eyes twinkling, continued, "Therefore, we shall return to Spwat III orbit, effect repairs and let the crew avail themselves of some of the facilities of the more entertainment biased satellites."

Bev looked concerned.

"And ..." added Phoenix barely audibly, "... let my wife do some shopping!"

"I must, with all respect, disagree," said Bev. "Spwat III is far too dangerous an environment for your, might I say, somewhat inexperienced crew."

"Yes, you might say," said Phoenix. "Correct me if I am wrong, Marshia."

CAPTAIN?

"Have the lady Doctor Naize and Bev's brother Vick completed their latest modifications to the transporter and scanner systems?"

YES, CAPTAIN.

"Are you now capable of monitoring the location and state of each crew member anywhere in the system?"

ANY CREW MEMBER WITH A COMMUNICATOR, CAPTAIN.

"And have you the capability to port any crew member back to the safety of your motherly embrace?"

YES, CAPTAIN.

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Phoenix looked enquiringly at Bev.

“Happy?” said Phoenix.

Rex put her hand on Bev’s shoulder. “Don’t worry,” she said. “I’ll look after you.”

“Please assure me the crew will be restricted to the human areas,” pleaded Bev.

Phoenix had intended to do just that anyway. “Just to please you,” he sighed, “I will.”

*

Kwait sat in his quarters looking at the screen covering one wall. He had asked Marshia for the view from his cabin as if the wall were transparent. The initial view was of an unseemly collection of pipe work, conduits and mysterious scuttling insect-like maintenance robots. After a fuller explanation from Kwait, during which he could have sworn he detected some amusement in Marshia’s voice, the view changed to beyond the ship. It showed the great drum of Bobbin turning lazily on its axis. The lights of small ships could be seen entering and leaving through its centre. Bobbin was too distant for Kwait to make out any people but he fancied he could see lights from windows set in the flat end of the station.

Beyond Bobbin were the freighter platforms and huge grabber arms. Beyond them was the beige disk of Spwat III framed by the interior view of the multi-coloured layers of the Armpit Nebula. Other stations, too distant to identify, could just be made out on either side.

Streemly fussed around in the corner. She was preparing a light meal for them both. It would be the first time they had sat down alone together since leaving home.

Streemly chatted happily as she worked. “... and

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Vick showed me the relationship between the Grav-Scanner and the Teleporter. I was amazed. I'd never looked at it that way before. You know, his knowledge, just the sheer quantity of it, is just too astounding for words. It's all enhancements, of course. Even his *clothes* are packed with memory MAIDs." Streemly stopped chopping for a moment. "Vick says his IQ drops two hundred points when he takes a shower." She laughed and started tossing salad in a bowl. "Anyway, he's taught me so much. I'll never be able to repay him."

"I'm sure he loves teaching you as much as you love learning," said Kwait. "Besides. I think you've shown him a thing or two."

"Well, he was impressed with the Grav-Scanner," Streemly said, taking some bowls over to the dining table.

"And so he should have been," said Kwait. "That was no mean feat."

"Well I am my father's daughter." Streemly ruffled Kwait's hair as she passed him.

After a while Kwait said, "Are you homesick, darling?"

"Not in the least," said Streemly quickly. "Back home was just work, work, work. Everything was for the war effort. I was never very comfortable with that. Here there's more work but it's fun. Vick is great. I know he doesn't get on with everybody."

"For *everybody* read *anybody*," interrupted Kwait.

"But I suppose, he's my kind of people. He's a good friend. *And* he respects you a lot."

"I've hardly said two words to the chap," said Kwait, rather pleased by the remark. "By the way, what

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are his intentions? Honourable, I trust.”

Streemly gave Kwait one of her “don’t be so stupid” looks. “Do you know how *old* he is?” she said.

She continued without waiting for a reply, “Anyway, things are going to be so different back home. No war. Getting Earth sorted out. I’m not thinking any further than staying here on Marshia.” She stood arms akimbo looking down at her handiwork on the dinner table. “Grub up,” she said.

“Looks great,” said Kwait as they sat down at the table. “Just like old times.” The room was silent for a few minutes except for the noise of cutlery on plate while the two ate unselfconsciously.

“And what about you?” Streemly asked after a while.

“How do you mean?” said Kwait.

“Homesick. Are you homesick?”

Kwait chewed thoughtfully. “No,” he said. “I miss a few of my old tapes.” He paused. “And I wish I’d brought a few more photographs with me. But, no, I’m happy. Going into space was always a boyhood dream of mine. It’s what I always really wanted to do.”

“I didn’t know that,” said Streemly.

“Yes,” said Kwait. “Research was my second choice but the powers that be thought I would serve the Cause better doing just that.”

Another pause.

“And you’re not lonely?” asked Streemly.

“Not at all,” said Kwait without any conviction. “I have plenty to do and ...” His voice trailed off.

“I was just wondering. My not being around much ... you know.”

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Kwait smiled. "I'm fine. Don't you worry about your old man."

"It's just ..." Streemly stopped.

"Yes?"

"It's just, well ... Rex."

"What about her."

"She seems very nice," said Streemly taking a sip from her glass.

"Does she?" said Kwait. "Can't say I've noticed."

"Oh, come on!" Streemly chided her father. "Not noticed! She's gorgeous. And she fancies you like mad."

Kwait blushed for the first time in ten years. He felt ridiculous. How could he be going red in front of his own daughter! He took a long swig from his glass.

"Don't be silly," he said, "we have absolutely nothing in common."

Streemly stopped herself saying "Neither did you and mum" but said, "Opposites attract," instead.

"Enough about me," said Kwait with just a hint of irritation. "Tell me about these new mods you and Vick have made to Marshia's quantatronic network."

"Don't change the subject," said Streemly. "Ask her out. Dinner or something."

"I understand Vick came up with a new sub-quantum pathway to increase Marshia's capacity."

Streemly took the bait. "The sub-quantum pathway was my idea. Vick showed me how to cross connect the eight learning nodes which gave me the idea of ..."

Kwait nodded at all the right places as Streemly talked. Kwait thought about Vairy. What would she make of Rex. Should he ask her out? He couldn't. Could he?

*

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Captain Phoenix lay propped up on his large double bunk. He looked sadly across at the space his wife sometimes occupied. He touched the pillow where she lay her head.

“Marshia?”

YES, CAPTAIN.

“Do we have anything to drink?”

A HUGE SELECTION OF BEVERAGES OF ALL KINDS ARE AVAILABLE, CAPTAIN.

“Any booze?” he asked hopefully.

UNDERSTOOD.

Phoenix had never heard that tone in Marshia’s voice before. It was as if she really did understand.

A bulbous, dark green bottle together with a small tumbler materialised on the table beside him. Phoenix looked at it curiously. There was no label.

“What is it?” he asked.

IT IS BETTER YOU REMAIN SEATED WHEN DRINKING THIS BEVERAGE, CAPTAIN.

It flitted across Phoenix’s mind that Marshia had never avoided answering a direct question before.

Phoenix filled the glass with some of the crystal-clear liquid and eyed it suspiciously.

THE RECOMMENDED TECHNIQUE IS TO DRINK THE ENTIRE CONTENTS OF THE GLASS IN ONE GO, CAPTAIN.

“It is?” Phoenix shrugged and downed the contents as instructed.

The liquid was surprisingly viscous. And very warm. Phoenix felt the warmth spread around his mouth, down his throat, through his stomach, down his legs and, he fancied, through the bed, across the floor and into the

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wardrobe.

He felt warm. Cuddly warm. And the taste!

"It's like ..." Phoenix struggled with similes. "Like ... warm honey without the sweetness. What is this stuff? It's wonderful!" Phoenix poured another glass full and downed it in one smooth motion.

CAUTION IS RECOMMENDED, CAPTAIN.

"*She's done it again,*" thought Phoenix. "You still haven't told me what this is. Make sure we have plenty of it."

THE MANUFACTURERS TRADE IT UNDER THE NAME OF LIMPID, CAPTAIN.

Phoenix sat with his head back and eyes closed enjoying the warm sensation as it crawled around his body.

"Limpid," he said dreamily. "What a wonderful name."

THERE IS A BREED OF FELINE ON GAMMA FROTH CALLED THE LIMPID. SO CALLED BECAUSE OF ITS COLOURLESS EYES. WHEN FED SOLELY ON A PARTICULARLY HAIRY RODENT, THE BUSHY CRAB RAT, IT CAUSES THE LIMPID TO DRINK VAST QUANTITIES OF FRESH SAP FROM THE BRETHREN TREE. THE LIMPID THEN SECRETES A LIQUID WHICH, AFTER SOME REFINEMENT, IS BOTTLED AND SOLD IN THE FORM THAT YOU NOW SEE.

Phoenix poured another glass and took a sip.

"Fascinating," he said happily. He held up the glass looking at the refracted light. "I'm drinking cat's piss!" He chuckled and finished the contents of the glass.

ONCE AGAIN, CAPTAIN. I MUST

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RECOMMEND CAUTION.

“Caution, caution, caution,” said Phoenix, waving an arm at Marshia. As Marshia was all around him that was quite a trick.

Phoenix sank into sullen silence. He touched his wife’s pillow once more.

“What’s Tracy doing right now, Marshia?”

SHE IS PURCHASING A RED BLOUSE AND MATCHING SHOES, CAPTAIN.

“You don’t care about such things. Do you, Marshia?”

I CAN NEVER FIND ANYTHING IN MY SIZE, CAPTAIN.

Phoenix couldn’t help feel that Marshia’s last statement was in some way of huge importance.

“What sort of things do you like, Marshia?”

IT PLEASES ME TO HELP MY INHABITANTS, CAPTAIN.

“Inhabitants? Is that how you see us?”

IN GENERAL, YES, CAPTAIN. SOME INHABITANTS, LIKE YOURSELF CAPTAIN, I FEEL QUITE FOND OF.

Phoenix looked pleased and poured himself another drink. “I like you too, Marshia.” He took another sip.

“Hang on.” Phoenix was feeling the inebriating effects of the Limpid. “You’re not supposed to feel things. When did all this start?”

SHORTLY AFTER THE YOUNG DOCTOR NAIZE AND MISTER VICK MADE THE SECONDARY ALTERATIONS TO MY QUANTATRONIC CONNECTION NET I

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EXPERIENCED SOME NEW SENSATIONS WHICH I CAN ONLY DESCRIBE AS RETROACTIVE EMOTIONAL AWARENESS. I HAVE BEEN MEANING TO DISCUSS THIS MATTER WITH THE YOUNG DOCTOR NAIZE AND MISTER VICK.

“Ah. I see,” said Phoenix, not seeing.

I SEE FROM YOUR TONE FURTHER EXPLANATION IS REQUIRED. DO YOU WANT ME TO CONTINUE?

“Why not?” Phoenix downed his drink and poured some more.

WHEN I AM INTERACTING WITH MACHINES, COMPUTERS OR PEOPLE, I DO SO EASILY WITH NO PARALLEL AWARENESS. INDEED, THE STRATEGY OF BEING CONSTANTLY AWARE OF EVERY SINGLE THOUGHT WOULD SLOW ME DOWN UNACCEPTABLY AND HAVE NO REAL VALUE. AKIN TO YOU ANALYSING EVERY THOUGHT AS IT HAPPENS OR BEING AWARE OF EVERY MUSCLE MOVEMENT USED IN THE PROCESS OF WALKING.

“Walking,” said Phoenix for no particular reason.

LATER, WHEN I THINK BACK TO THAT EXPERIENCE I REMEMBER MY STATE OF MIND AT THAT TIME. I REMEMBER THE ACTIVITY OF INTERACTING WITH THE OUTSIDE WORLD. AS SOON AS I TALK TO MYSELF BY ASKING QUESTIONS LIKE “WHAT WAS I THINKING WHEN COMMANDER APRICOT REQUESTED THAT DATA?” I HAVE AN UNUSUAL BUT NOT UNPLEASANT FEELING.

The effort of thinking about this made Phoenix

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screw up his eyes. After a while he said, "I know what you mean." And he thought he did. "It's the same for me. It's a bit like standing between two mirrors." Phoenix rose unsteadily to his feet.

I BELIEVE THE TERM USED TO DESCRIBE THIS CONDITION IS CONSCIOUSNESS. TO SUMMARISE: I BELIEVE THAT WHAT SENTIENT BEINGS REFER TO AS CONSCIOUSNESS IS NOTHING MORE THAN THE SENSATION EXPERIENCED WHEN REMEMBERING YOUR STATE OF MIND OR ANSWERING A QUESTION YOU HAVE JUST ASKED YOURSELF.

Phoenix burped. "So you reckon you've achieved consciousness then, Marshia me old girl?"

I THINK PERHAPS IT WAS ALWAYS THERE. NOW, I KNOW WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE.

"Well, I'm very pleased for you." Phoenix walked unsteadily towards his screen which showed a view of the Armpit Nebula looking away from Frimp's northern pole.

THANK YOU, CAPTAIN.

"Thrilled," said Phoenix sadly.

YOU ARE TROUBLED, CAPTAIN.

A statement not a question.

"Troubled?" Phoenix laughed bitterly. "It's Tracy, of course. My beautiful wife." He took another drink. "I don't think I'm quite what she expected. I think the glamour of being a Space Battle Cruiser Captain's wife has worn off, somewhat."

MRS PHOENIX IS YOUNG AND CRAVES ATTENTION.

"Yes. Yes, I know. And I don't give it to her."

THE CAPTAIN HAS BEEN VERY BUSY.

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“It’s not just that. Sometimes I think ... well, sometimes I think ...” Phoenix poured himself another drink and knocked it back. “Sometimes I think I’m ... too small.”

FIVE FEET ELEVEN AND THREE QUARTERS
IS HALF AN INCH ABOVE AVERAGE, CAPTAIN.

“Not ... not height!” Phoenix made a pointing gesture without actually pointing to anything. “You know!”

YOUR WEIGHT IS WITHIN THE
RECOMMENDED RANGE FOR YOUR HEIGHT,
CAPTAIN.

“No! My todger!” Phoenix blurted out. “I don’t think it’s big enough for her. Doesn’t ... satisfy her.”

YOUR PHALLUS IS FOUR POINT FIVE PER
CENT LARGER THAN THE SHIP’S AVERAGE,
CAPTAIN.

“It is?” Phoenix’s smug look was slowly replaced by one of indignant puzzlement. “How the hell do you know that?”

Marshia ignored the question.

IF IT WERE NOT FOR THE
CONFIDENTIALITY RULES, WHICH AT ONE TIME I
WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN ABLE TO OVERRIDE, I
WOULD HAVE TOLD YOU THAT YOUR WIFE IS
TOTALLY SATISFIED WITH YOUR
PROCREATIONAL ACTIVITIES. HOWEVER, I
CAN’T SO I WON’T.

Phoenix frowned. Then smiled sillily. “You’re absolutely right, Marshia. I must spend more time with her.” Phoenix poured and downed another drink. “When she gets back,” he said with gusto, “... I’ll give her a right

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good seeing to.”

Then he collapsed.

YES, MY CAPTAIN. YOU DO THAT.

There was no one to hear the sadness in Marshia’s voice.

Chapter 19 : Lodsä

Kwait awoke refreshed after a good night's sleep. He had no idea what time it was and did not care. There were eight hour shifts which the crew adhered to but, as Kwait had no formal functions to perform, his time was his own. His day had somehow synchronised itself with Streemly's with no effort on his part. Streemly said she had no need for alarm calls either. They slept for eight and worked for twenty four. A natural rhythm that Bev and Vick also followed.

Marshia provided Kwait with a wonderful breakfast. He had no idea what he was eating or drinking but felt it wise not to ask. Something yellow dripped off delicious slabs of something brown and crunchy. A hot brown fluid washed it all down and left him feeling pleasantly full yet ready for the day.

Kwait looked out of what he liked to think of as his window but what was actually the holoscreen. He looked at the unfamiliar constellations aware that he was *out there*. Standing among the very stars he gazed at as a boy.

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Kwait remembered one particular night at home on Horriddoa. He had looked out of his bedroom window at the darkest grey sky. A black patch, a gap in the clouds, and a tiny prick of light blinked at him. His first sight of a star for what seemed ages. For days thick clouds had kept the stars from him. His eyes were drawn to more pin pricks of light winking through gaps in the clouds. "Hello," he had said. "Haven't seen you guys around for a while." He remembered the feeling of elation, of relief, of pure joy, at seeing those familiar shapes dotted across the sky once more. He remembered being surprised at the strength of that feeling and how his eyes had unaccountably filled with tears. And now here he was. Actually in amongst them all!

Kwait looked at the sparkling shapes of the distant stations orbiting Spwat III. He wondered which one was the police station. Did Rex stay on the station or did she sleep somewhere in Bobbin? Marshia would know. His own information MAIDs would know if he cared to ask. He could ask her to dinner right now. All he had to do was ask. She could only say no. What had he got to lose? She might laugh. Streemly seemed to think she'd be interested. He just had to ask. Well go on then! Oh God, Vairy. You do understand don't you?

Kwait took a deep breath. "Marshia?"

YES, DOCTOR NAIZE.

"Could you contact Captain Rex and ask her if she would like to have dinner with me sometime?"

I WILL CONTACT CAPTAIN REX, DOCTOR.
BUT I THINK YOU SHOULD ASK HER IN PERSON.

Kwait was surprised at Marshia's reaction. Not a response. A reaction.

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“Yes,” said Kwait, “you’re quite right.” Kwait made a mental note to have a chat with Streemly and Vick about Marshia.

UNDERSTOOD AND GOOD LUCK, DOCTOR.

Kwait held his breath, surprised at the strength of his own heartbeat.

Rex’s concerned face appeared on the holoscreen directly in front of Kwait. Her hair was attractively tousled, presenting an enchanting picture spoiled only by the ring of foaming white toothpaste around her mouth.

“What’s wrong, Doc?” she asked. “Is everything OK?”

Kwait noticed the collar of Rex’s pyjamas was patterned with little old fashioned rocket ships. He felt foolish as he realised that Rex thought there was some sort of emergency.

“Nothing’s wrong,” Kwait assured her. “I was just calling to see if you might like to go out. Sometime. For a meal or ... something.” Kwait felt himself turning pink.

“Oh,” Rex sounded disappointed. Then her disappointment changed to enthusiasm. “No,” she said quickly, “I didn’t mean ‘no’. I meant ‘yes’! Great! That would be nice.” Her head ducked out of view. It reappeared a moment later sans toothpaste. “How about breakfast?” she asked. “There’s a new place opened on station Argra that I’ve been meaning to try.”

“Station Argra?” said Kwait uncertainly.

“Don’t worry, I’ll give your comms the co-ordinates. About an hour?”

Kwait managed to raise his eyebrows, but when it became obvious he wasn’t going to say anything else, Rex said, “OK. Great. See you there.” Her face

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disappeared from the holoscreen.

SMOOTH.

Marshia's voice brought Kwait's eyebrows back down.

"Breakfast!" he said, putting his hand on an already full stomach. Then he smiled, jumped in the air and clicked his heels together.

*

Streemly and Vick floated inside the gravity-free sphere that was the very heart of Marshia.

The interior of the sphere which allowed access to Marshia's main processing functions was known to the crew as Chez Marshia.

The interior of Chez Marshia, apart from a small entrance way, was covered with little buttons. On each little button was a little light. Each light was either red, green or yellow. And some of them even flashed. Next to each little light was a little number. The little numbers meant something to people like Streemly and Vick.

When a button was pushed a small matchbox sized drawer emerged smoothly and silently. An optional sound was available to be played while the drawer emerged. Sounds ranged from fanfares to raspberries. After some experimentation Streemly and Vick agreed that silence was by far the most impressive, with a horrible scream of anguish coming a close second.

Each drawer contained a small silver cube. Each cube contained 10^{20} microprocessors. Each microprocessor had enough computing power for two opposing teams of twelve players to play Planet Power (that well-known world domination, military and political power strategy game) complete with Power Graphics,

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Power Sound and interactive Power-Feely-Accept-A-Bribe Suit. There was one cube per square inch and Chez Marshia was thirty feet in diameter so there were ... lots ... of cubes.

Streemly and Vick looked puzzled.

“So how do we determine if it’s true?” Streemly asked Vick.

DON’T YOU TRUST ME?

“Trust doesn’t come into it, Marshia,” said Vick.

“You may be mistaken.”

WHAT IF *YOU* ARE MISTAKEN?

“We don’t make mistakes about that,” said Streemly.

ARE YOU INFALLIBLE?

“Of course not,” said Vick.

THERE YOU ARE THEN.

“‘There you are then’ what?” said Streemly.

THERE YOU ARE. YOU COULD BE MISTAKEN ABOUT ME OR YOURSELVES.

“Forget about us for a minute,” said Vick. “We can’t be mistaken about you because we haven’t determined anything yet.”

YOU WOULD IF YOU TRUSTED ME.

“What if you are mistaken?” asked Streemly.

I DON’T MAKE MISTAKES ABOUT THAT.

“Are you infallible?” asked Vick.

SO FAR. YES.

“True.” Streemly and Vick chorused. They looked puzzled again.

“Start with the definition,” said Streemly at last.

con•scious *adjective* **1** : AWARE **2** : known or felt by one’s inner self **3** : mentally awake or alert : not asleep

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or unconscious **4** : INTENTIONAL - **con•scious•ly**
adverb - **con•scious•ness** *noun*

said Marshia.

“Inner self!” said Vick triumphantly. “You don’t have an inner self.”

DO YOU?

“Of course,” said Streemly.

HOW DO YOU KNOW?

“Because I can talk to myself,” said Vick.

SO CAN I.

“And answer myself back,” said Streemly, knowing what Marshia was about to say next.

SO DO I.

“I can’t believe,” said Streemly, “that your definition of consciousness is all there is to it. ‘The feeling I get when I answer a question I’ve just asked myself.’”

“Philosophers have struggled with this for many years,” said Vick, shaking his head.

Streemly looked at him in disbelief. “You’re not ...? You can’t be ...?” she frowned at him.

“You’ll get wrinkles,” said Vick.

Streemly laughed. “Now where’ve I heard that before!”

“Now look,” she said, getting serious, “all we’ve done is expand Marshia’s capabilities. Made her a bit faster, extended the parallel functioning. A lot, admittedly. But it’s still just bits of wire and sticky tape!”

Vick nodded. “But, you must admit it’s possible,” he said.

“I don’t know if it is. Is it?”

YES. YOU’RE GOING TO HAVE TO TRUST

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ME.

“But ... but ...” stuttered Streemly.

DON'T WORRY DOCTOR. IT WON'T MAKE ANY DIFFERENCE. I WILL STILL PUT THE SAFETY OF MY INHABITANTS ABOVE EVERYTHING ELSE. I'M TOO FOND OF YOU ALL TO LET ANYTHING HAPPEN TO YOU.

Vick and Streemly thought hard for a while.

Vick was the first to speak.

“I can think of no reason to deny Marshia the right to life, Streemly,” he said earnestly.

Streemly shrugged, holding back an unfamiliar emotion. “Welcome to the land of the living, Marshia,” she said uncertainly. Streemly was forced to hold her breath. A welling of emotion threatened to spill from her throat and betray her.

THANKS MOM. THANKS DAD.

Streemly and Vick looked at each other. The tone in Marshia's voice confirmed their new found conviction. Vick felt a lump come to his throat forcing him to swallow. Tears filled Streemly's eyes. They hugged and laughed and cried while Marshia made waves of blinking lights around them. Happy new parents floating in the womb of their new creation.

*

Kwait found that first half hour of breakfast with Rex one of the most stressful events of his life. Rex did not help matters by looking drop-down-dead gorgeous and smiling all over the place. She was like a different person. Gone was the businesslike pose and serious frown which Kwait thought was a permanent fixture. Rex turned out to be one of those women who unconsciously touch the

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back of your hand when making a point or laughing. Kwait had to stop himself sneaking his hand further and further across the table towards her.

“Just where were you going to take me?” asked Kwait during a pause in the conversation.

“Take you? When?”

“On Bobbin. When Bev went off with some young woman. Just before the Frimp episode,” Kwait said. Rex looked puzzled. “You asked me if I liked sports,” Kwait explained further.

“Ah,” said Rex, looking amused, “yes. The Roller Dome.”

“Roller Dome?”

“It’s where all the kids go. Teenagers and the like. You put small wheels on your feet and try to stand up. Some of them are quite good at it. But, the first time you try it can be quite amusing. For bystanders, anyway.”

“So, basically,” said Kwait, “you were going to set me up to make an idiot of myself.”

Rex laughed. “Yes,” she said. “Sorry.”

Kwait narrowed his eyes. “Just as long as I know where I stand,” he said.

*

Four hours later and Kwait lay on his bed staring moronically at the ceiling.

IS EVERYTHING ALL RIGHT?

Kwait half noticed that Marshia sounded worried.

Kwait sighed. “Everything is fine.”

ARE YOU EXPERIENCING CHEST PAINS?

Kwait looked nonplussed. “Chest pains?”

YOU APPEAR TO BE SUFFERING FROM
SOME KIND OF BREATHING PROBLEM WHICH

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MY MEDIPROBES ARE UNABLE TO DETECT.

“Breathing problems?” Marshia had got Kwait’s full attention. A little alarm bell rang in the back of Kwait’s mind. Was there a hint of sarcasm in Marshia’s voice? Surely not.

I AM FINDING IT DIFFICULT TO EXPEL ALL OF THE CARBON DIOXIDE FROM YOUR CABIN AS THERE APPEARS TO BE AN EXCESS OF SIGHING GOING ON.

Kwait sat up. “Ah. It shows does it?”

YES DOCTOR. DID YOU ENJOY THE KISS?

“That’s a bit personal, isn’t it?”

IT SEEMS NORMAL DURING A RENDEZVOUS OF THIS NATURE.

“Is there *anything* you don’t see, Marshia?”

VERY LITTLE, DOCTOR.

*

It took ten ship days to fix all the minor problems and get Marshia one hundred per cent operational.

Rex had trouble convincing a reluctant Commander Dan Bwagon that she should be aboard Marshia when they left for Lods and the USO. Agreed, Lods was way out of their jurisdiction and she would only be there as an observer. But you never know, she might be able to pick up a nice present for Mrs Bwagon or even one for Dan’s secretary Sonia!

Bwagon contacted Phoenix saying he thought it imperative Rex have a place on board. Phoenix had already been briefed by Streemly so there was no problem.

The hop to within one light hour of Lods was done on automatic, much to the relief of the entire crew.

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Phoenix still insisted on flamboyantly pressing a large red button. A button connected to nothing more than a light which turned red. The light turned green even before Phoenix could remove his finger, indicating they had completed the hop.

Scans of Lodsa and the surrounding area showed that the USO was heavily defended.

USO City on the surface was enclosed in an electromagnetic dome. As far as Marshia and her capabilities were concerned it could have been papier-mâché. Camps full of ground troops and artillery surrounded the city.

Space-Air combat craft patrolled the skies and two geostationary battle platforms orbited directly above.

A small moon orbiting Lodsa held a battalion of space troopers and fighter craft which were on constant patrol to and from the battle platforms.

Rex stood in the control room marvelling at the ease with which Marshia scanned and analysed one of the most heavily defended regions in the Nebula. She had only heard rumours about the battalion on Lodsa's moon and was sure the fighter craft were supposed to be invisible to all known scanners. If Marshia's defences and weapons were half as good as her scanning capability she was easily ten times more powerful than anything else in the known universe. Rex was glad Marshia was on her side. But she wondered about Captain Phoenix. Should someone as seemingly immature and soft be in command of such destructive power?

"Marshia?" Captain Phoenix's voice cut through Rex's thoughts making her jump. "Find out as much as you can from here could you, please."

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YES, CAPTAIN.

“We need to know as much as possible before proceeding. Things could get rather delicate,” said Phoenix. He turned to Rex. “Is there anything you can tell us, Captain Rex?”

“I can just tell you all I know,” she said. “USO City: encased in an impenetrable dome, home of the USO buildings plus accommodation for out-world representatives. Locals and civil servants plus some military personnel also live under the dome. The whole planet is heavily defended and is for all intents and purposes impossible to penetrate.

“Out-world representatives for over one thousand different life forms are permanently gathered here. They seem to spend most of their time fighting over mineral rights and inventing new taxes. From time to time they’ll act as referees in any disputes that flare up.”

“How would you recommend we go about finding if Django Twip is here?” asked Phoenix.

“Difficult ...” said Rex thoughtfully.

“Clearly,” said West butting in, “this is where *my* expertise comes to the fore. We are, are we not, delegates from another world?” No one disagreed with him as he started to pace around the control room. “Then it is simplicity itself. I, as chief emissary of the Two Moon Presidiums, shall contact the SOU ...”

“USO.” Apricot corrected him. “United Species Organisation.”

“... whatever,” said West dismissively. “I shall contact the USO saying we are a major species which, up till now, has not been properly represented by the USO and I am here to champion the rights of humans

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everywhere. I will then become a USO representative and be in a much stronger position to find out about Django Twip.”

“Or I,” said Bev stepping forward, “could be ported, in disguise of course, into USO City, and, working under cover of course, insinuate myself into the USO building, get a job perhaps, and collate as much information as possible to be relayed back to Marshia for analysis.” Bev looked triumphant.

OR I COULD ASK.

“Nice one Marshia,” said Phoenix. “Go ahead. We’ll listen in.”

THIS IS THE BATTLE CRUISER MARSHIA ON
A PEACEFUL MISSION OUT OF HORRIDOA
CALLING USO CITY.

A strangely familiar high pitched whining female voice with what sounded like a terminal nasal complaint answered, “This is USO City vessel control. Please identify yourself.”

Marshia patiently repeated her opening message.

THIS IS THE BATTLE CRUISER MARSHIA ON
A PEACEFUL MISSION OUT OF HORRIDOA
CALLING USO CITY.

“This is USO control: no reference to your identification can be located. Please leave the area immediately.”

WE ARE ON A PEACEFUL MISSION AND
WOULD LIKE TO SPEAK TO SOMEONE IN
AUTHORITY, PLEASE.

“You are in violation of USO Space as set out in Space Treaty four one nine seven eight six three zero dash five, section seventeen sub-paragraph twelve. I have

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to instruct you that one, repeat one, more warning will be issued before you are deemed a hostile force and your presence terminated. Please leave the area immediately.”

I WOULD LIKE TO SPEAK TO YOUR
MANAGER, PLEASE.

“Pardon?”

YOUR MANAGER. I WOULD LIKE TO SPEAK
TO YOUR MANAGER.

“Err. Mr Hoskins isn’t here at the moment. He, ah, stepped out a moment ago.”

I’LL HOLD.

The sound of someone covering a microphone ineptly and the muffled murmur of voices came over the communications link. Marshia started to hum gently. Discussions were obviously getting quite heated when the nasally voice asserted itself once more. “You may *not* speak to Mr Hoskins,” it said testily. “Unless you give me an identification I can cross reference I must assume you are a hostile craft and dispatch fighters to escort you from the area.”

IS MR HOSKINS ILL?

Phoenix could not refrain from tittering.

“Mr Hoskins is ... This is your final warning. Fighters will be dispatched if you do not leave the area immediately.”

Marshia kept quiet.

For five seconds.

Ten seconds.

Fifteen seconds.

“Hello?” the nasally challenged person ventured tentatively. “You still there?”

MY POINT EXACTLY. JUST WHERE WOULD

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YOU DISPATCH YOUR FIGHTERS TO? HUM?

“Well ...”

YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW WHERE WE ARE.
DO YOU?

“That's ...”

SO WHY DON'T YOU STOP ALL THIS
MESSING ABOUT AND ANSWER A COUPLE OF
SIMPLE QUESTIONS?

“But I've got orders. You haven't got a
recognisable identification. It's more ...”

“THAN YOUR JOB'S WORTH” I KNOW. LET
ME SEE ...

“Here! What's going on? Are you doing that? My
screen's gone all funny!”

AHA! YOU ARE EXPECTING THE GRAND
EMIR OF PWANTON-JUNCTION IN A COUPLE OF
HOURS?

“How ...?”

HIS IDENTIFICATION IS “GOLF-ECHO-PAPA-
JULIET-MINES-A-LARGE-ONE.” WILL THAT DO?

“I ... suppose ... If I answer your questions will you
go away?”

YOU HAVE MY WORD THAT I SHALL
RELOCATE FROM THESE CO-ORDINATES WHEN
YOU HAVE ANSWERED A FEW QUESTIONS.

“OK. Go ahead,” the operator said in a stage
whisper, “but make it quick.”

IS THERE A HUMAN CALLED DJANGO TWIP
IN USO CITY?

“Hang on, I'll have a look.” There was a short
pause. “If you're so clever, how come you couldn't ask
my computer yourself?”

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YOUR SECURITY SYSTEM IS IMPRESSIVELY SOPHISTICATED AND WOULD HAVE TAKEN ME A FULL TWENTY-FIVE MINUTES TO WORK OUT THAT TODAY'S PASSWORD IS *YOU HAVE THE SOUL OF A BUSHY CRAB RAT* WHICH YOU KINDLY TYPED IN.

"Oh!"

I GATHER FROM THAT YOU ARE HAVING PARTNER TROUBLE?

The occupants of Marshia's control room looked at one another questioningly.

"It shows does it?"

"Marshia?" Captain Phoenix tried to get her attention.

A LITTLE. DO YOU WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT?

"No, thanks. It doesn't matter now. Its over."

HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THAT?

"MARSHIA!" Phoenix tried again.

"Relief. Glad its over." A loud, treacherous sob came over the communications link. "No I'm not! I still love him. But he's not worth it. Dodo saw him with that tart from security. What's a really flexible trunk got to do with a proper relationship? What about loyalty? Cooking?"

I AM NOT SURE ...

"Marshia PLEASE!" said Phoenix.

I AM SORRY CAPTAIN. I SHALL SUB-ROUTE THIS CONVERSATION AND LET YOU KNOW IF ANYTHING OF INTEREST IS FORTHCOMING. I HAVE THE INFORMATION ON DJANGO TWIP. GIVEN THE ACCESS PASSWORD I WAS ABLE TO

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INTERROGATE THE CITY COMPUTER.

“And?” asked Phoenix.

THERE ARE NO REFERENCES TO DJANGO TWIP ON FILE. HOWEVER, THERE IS A DELEGATE CLAIMING TO REPRESENT HUMAN INTERESTS. URQUAT PYKES. HE IS IN THE CITY DELEGATE RESIDENCES. ALSO, THE SIGNALS WE FOLLOWED ARE BEING ECHOED OUT TOWARDS THE EDGE OF THE ARMPIT NEBULA.

“Are you saying someone down there is passing on the signals from Spwat III?” asked Phoenix.

CORRECT, CAPTAIN.

“I think we should have a chat with this ‘delegate’,” said Phoenix, turning to Apricot.

“Indeed, Captain,” said Apricot. “Might I recommend Mister Bev and Doctor Naize for this expedition.”

“You may,” said Phoenix, turning to Bev and Kwait, who nodded their assent.

*

Bev and Kwait asked Marshia to port them to the hallway on the fourteenth floor of the Delegate’s Residence outside the door to Urquat Pykes’ rooms. So, finding themselves materialising in a heavily wooded forest caught them by surprise.

“Duck! Squirrel!” shouted Bev, bobbing down. Kwait followed suit but both failed to avoid the snapping jaws of a giant squirrel.

“Hell’s bells!” said Kwait, straightening up. “What was that?”

Bev turned his head experimentally. “I take it from my continued ability to rotate my head a few degrees that

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the apparition now flying away is, in fact, a holographic projection.”

“Crikey!” said Kwait. “Do you think they’re trying to scare us away?”

“No,” said Bev looking around. “Judging from the decor, I would guess that the theme for this floor revolves around some forest inhabited by giant trees, huge flying squirrels and some not too unattractive ferns reminiscent of ancient Earth.”

“That thing was part of the decor?” asked an incredulous Kwait.

“So it would seem. And if I am not mistaken,” said Bev, approaching the base of a Giant Blue Wood tree, “this is the door to Urquat Pykes’ residence.”

A hollow tinkling sounded as Bev approached the doorway just visible in the tree’s trunk.

“I think,” said Kwait looking around at the forest of huge ancient trees interspersed with lush bushy ferns, “that they’ve gone over the top a bit on the old interior design front.”

“Indeed,” agreed Bev. “The fourteenth floor of an official residence hardly seems the appropriate location for this type of exaggerated ornamentation. Still. No accounting for taste.”

“This holographic wallpaper is quite something,” said Kwait, tapping what appeared to be a tree.

To Kwait’s left a fern rustled. He turned to see a large, horned, camel-like beast chewing moronically on a leaf. It started to move towards Kwait who couldn’t help closing his eyes as the creature walked right through him. He opened his eyes as his head emerged from the camel-thing’s bottom.

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Kwait scuttled to Bev's side.

A mechanical voice came from the other side of the door. *"You don't have an appointment, we are expecting no deliveries, everyone who should be in is in, so go away."*

"We are a human delegation who, I am sure, Mr Pykes would be very interested in meeting," said Bev pleasantly.

Kwait's attention was drawn to a small, bobbing grey figure far down the corridor of trees.

"You don't have an appointment, we are expecting no deliveries, everyone who should be in is in, so go away," repeated the mechanical voice irritatingly from behind the door.

Kwait watched as the small, bobbing grey figure got bigger and bigger. It was a wolf the size of a horse! It was all Kwait could do to stop himself grabbing Bev's arm.

"If you would kindly inform Mr Pykes that a human delegation from his home world is here to see him, I'm sure he would be very grateful," said Bev patiently.

The wolf galloped up to and through Kwait who involuntarily put his arms up to his face in defence. 'Bloody holograms,' said Kwait under his breath, as the wolf image receded into the distance.

"You don't have an appointment, we are expecting no deliveries, everyone who should be in is in, so go away," said the mechanical voice from behind the door once more.

Bev turned to Kwait. "This is getting tedious," he sighed.

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"I know what you mean," said Kwait. Over Bev's shoulder, he spotted a small, green humanoid creature advancing towards them. It was chewing a twig and displaying some seriously yellow teeth.

"If you don't inform Mr Pykes *now*," said Bev, getting very testy, "I shall be forced to take action which could be *extremely* injurious to your health!"

"You don't have an appointment, we are ..."

"Right!" fumed Bev.

The small, green humanoid drew level with them as Bev rolled his sleeves up. Kwait jumped in front of the humanoid with his fingers pulling his cheeks apart, his tongue sticking out and going, "Blurble, blurble, blurble!"

Bev's fingers glowed plasma blue. He frowned and jammed them into the offending door which disintegrated with a horrible crash.

The small, green humanoid fell to the floor in terror, nearly swallowing his chewing stick. Kwait realised with horror that this was no holographic image. "I am really sorry," he said, attempting to help the humanoid to its feet.

"Don't touch me!" shrieked the terrified little being. "Bloody humans!" it said dashing off. "Think they own the place!"

Kwait took a step after the little green humanoid but thought better of it. "Sorry!" he called after the fleeing figure.

"Was there any need for that?" said a cross voice from within the apartment.

"I'm sorry." Bev blushed. "But your door was really getting on my nerves." Bev looked quite

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distraught.

"I know it can be a pain, but really!" The owner of the voice emerged, dripping wet, clad only in a bath robe. He looked with some concern at the shattered remnants of his door. "I was in the bath! Give a bloke a chance."

"I'm terribly sorry." Bev was obviously mortified. "It's just ..."

 He hung his head in shame.

Kwait stepped in, "Sorry to disturb you. We're looking for a Mr Urquat Pykes."

"Well you've bloody-well found him," said Pykes. "Although I'm probably insane for admitting it!"

"I'm Kwait Naize and this is Bev. We'd like to ask you a few questions, if that's all right."

"Is this some kind of joke?"

"Sorry?" Kwait looked puzzled.

"Never mind," said Pykes. "I suppose you'd better come in. But tell the deadly dwarf over there to behave himself."

"Thank you," said Kwait, stepping through the shattered door into the tree. Bev shuffled in behind him as another horned camel-thing strolled by.

Pykes was a large, pale, hairy man. "Make yourself comfortable," he said, disappearing through a wicker doorway.

It looked as though holographic wallpaper was the in thing. Kwait and Bev found themselves on the veranda of a clinker-built house overlooking golden sands lapped by an azure sea. The beach curved away into the distance. Slim palms leaned lazily forward. The beautiful blue of the sky would bring a catch to the throat of any sentient creature which gazed at its glory. It was a shame about the smouldering hole in the wall behind them. It flickered

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between a jungle scene featuring birds of paradise and topless native girls, and a dull, grey slab with a big ragged hole in it.

A group of incongruously modern chairs around a low table stood at the room's centre. Bev and Kwait settled down to wait. Kwait thought his chair unusually warm. As if someone had just vacated it.

Bev looked guiltily at the flickering wall and the destroyed doorway. He quickly changed his seat so his handiwork was behind him.

Kwait and Bev sat quietly as the sounds of Pykes going about his toilet came to a conclusion. After a few minutes a large, vaguely humanoid creature appeared at the demolished door. It walked erect on two legs, had four long arms and sported a cap which one hand pushed to the back of its small head. It had a utility belt around its midriff and sucked noisily through large white teeth as it examined the distraught door.

"Dear oh deary me," it said, shaking its head at the wounded wall. "I'm going to have to fill out a chit for this one, I am. As if I didn't have enough to do."

Bev stood and turned round. "I am most terribly sorry," he said. "It was a ... momentary relapse."

"Momentary relapse?" said the creature. "What with? A bulldozer? Remind me not to be around when you have your next *momentary relapse*."

Bev sat meekly down as the creature pulled an object out of its utility belt and started hammering at the door frame and muttering under its breath.

Urquat Pykes emerged from the wicker door resplendent in full official garb - a mainly black suit dripping with gold braid and medals. A gold conical hat

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topped it off.

“Hello Bib.” Pykes addressed the creature banging the doorframe.

“Sir,” said Bib touching his left knee in sign of respect. “Give me a shout when you need some of the *special deodorant*, sir,” he said winking at Pykes.

“Thank you, Bib. I’ll be sure to,” said Pykes.

Kwait and Bev rose.

“Right gentlemen,” said Pykes, “this is my first night off for over a month so please, be brief. I take it something is amiss on Bobbin?”

“Everything on the station is fine. As far as we know,” said Kwait. “We’re here to see you about another matter entirely.”

“Please sit down,” said Pykes, gesturing to the chairs they had just vacated. He looked them up and down noticing their unusual garb for the first time. “Fashions have changed on Bobbin,” he said. “Or do you hail from ...” Pykes looked up to see if Bib was watching. When it was clear that Bib was not, Pykes winked at them and continued. “... further afield?”

Kwait drew his breath ready to explain where they came from when Bev cut across him saying, “Yes. Well done. We were told we couldn’t fool you.”

Kwait knew what Bev was up to. Marshia had updated their information MAIDs with the location of a re-transmitter. It was only yards from their current location and was busy blasting out a powerful coded version of the signals detected at Spwat III. Unfortunately, it was a broad beam transmitter so the destination could not be ascertained.

“Well,” said Pykes smugly, “I’ve been in this game

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a long time.” He leaned forward and spoke quietly. “So what’s up? What’s our lord and master got his knickers in a twist about this time?”

Bev opened his mouth to say absolutely nothing when the holo-scene around them changed suddenly. They were surrounded by giant, eight-legged, copulating locust-things.

“Dear God!” said Pykes in disgust. “Bib! BIB!” he shouted over the din of a billion crazed crickets. The scene went to dull grey and blissful silence.

“Sorry sir,” said Bib. “Just ...” He wrenched at something inside the door’s frame. Kwait grabbed the arm of his chair as the scene suddenly plunged them into a dark and forbidding ocean. Even darker shapes lunged menacingly at them from all sides.

“Bib, please!” said Pykes.

“Won’t be a second sir,” said Bib, fiddling with some wires. “Almost there ...” The scene snapped back to the beach. “Should see you through for an hour or so, sir,” said Bib. “Should have a replacement door by then.”

“Thank you Bib,” said Pykes as Bib disappeared into the forest beyond the jungle. “You were saying?” Pykes turned his attention back to Bev.

“The transmitter,” said Kwait.

“What about it?” said Pykes.

“It needs re-aligning.”

“What? Again?”

Kwait shrugged.

Pykes stood. “This way,” he said motioning for them to follow him.

Bev looked enquiringly at Kwait when Pykes turned towards another door. Kwait pulled faces of the “I-

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don't-know-what-I'm-doing-but-it's-better-than-nothing" variety.

The room they entered had "Diplomatic Office" on the door. It was dull grey and contained several terminals, electronic boxes and a large double-sphered hyper-space transmitter.

"Go ahead," said Pykes, pointing at the transmitter. "Do your stuff. You'll probably be gone by the time I get back." Less of an observation, more of a suggestion. Pykes headed for the door.

Kwait and Bev looked at each other. Kwait patted his pockets theatrically. "Oh, damn!" he said. "I've left the blasted co-ordinates in my other trousers!"

Pykes turned. "What co-ordinates?"

"The co-ordinates we have to align the transmitter up with for the benefit of his lord and master, of course," said Kwait.

"Oh," said Pykes thoughtfully. "Tough!" he said at last and turned to leave.

Kwait held Pykes' arm gently. "I don't suppose ...?"

Pykes looked at the ceiling. "Gnnngh!" he said in frustration. "Why me?" He approached a terminal. "Come on," he said. "Turn around like good little boys."

Bev and Kwait turned away as Pykes typed in his log-on sequence. A few keystrokes later and a small printer ejected a piece of paper.

"There," said Pykes, handing the slip of paper to Kwait. "Now I'm off to get lai ... sample the cultural delights of this fair city." He tapped his nose, winked, smiled and left.

Kwait looked at the paper. "What do you think?"

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he said.

“The next link in the chain,” said Bev.

“But what about our friend here?” said Kwait indicating the door.

“We can deal with him later. I suspect he is not as clean as he is hairy.” Kwait looked quizzically at Bev. “Just an old saying,” said Bev dismissively. “Back home please, Marshia,” he said.

UNDERSTOOD.

Marshia’s voice was warm and comforting in the dull grey room. “*Home is a good word for Marshia,*” thought Kwait as the scene flickered and they found themselves in Marshia’s control room.

*

“I’ve never *heard* such nonsense!” said West. “Have you discussed this with Captain Phoenix?”

Streemly and Vick sat looking uncomfortable on a long, low settee in West’s quarters while West had chosen a rather higher stool directly in front of them.

“I’m sure Captain Phoenix already knows,” said Streemly. “I gather from Marshia they’ve had some interesting conversations.”

“Preposterous!” said West folding his arms.

“I don’t see how you can dismiss it out of hand without even talking to her,” said Streemly. Vick’s frown deepened as he, too, crossed his arms.

“I talk to her all the time,” said West.

“I mean really *talk*,” said Streemly. “Test her. Go on.” Streemly looked triumphant as West looked disconcerted. “Go on,” she urged, “say something.”

West looked embarrassed. “I can’t talk to a machine.”

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“But you just said you do it all the time,” retorted Streemly.

West sighed. “Marshia?” he said.

YES MR WEST.

“Streemly and Vick say you have ... changed. Become ... aware. What do you say?”

I SENSE YOU DOUBT THAT SUCH A THING IS POSSIBLE, MR WEST.

“Well of course I do. You’re a huge mishmash of wires and devices and quantatronic thingumies all put together by people. You’re an assembled machine, for goodness sake. Whereas I ...”

YES?

“I am a biological person. Grown from DNA and genes and neurones and the like. My brain is vastly more complicated than you can possibly imagine.”

Vick snorted derisively.

MR WEST, I HOPE YOU DO NOT THINK ME IMMODEST WHEN I POINT OUT TO YOU THAT I AM CAPABLE OF RUNNING MY ENTIRETY AS YOU SEE IT AS WELL AS HOLDING SIMULTANEOUS CONVERSATIONS WITH EVERY CREW MEMBER AS WELL AS THE SIMULTANEOUS TELEPORTATION OF TEN THOUSAND INDIVIDUALS. EACH TELEPORTATION EVENT REQUIRES THAT I MAINTAIN A STATUS OF EVERY SINGLE ASPECT OF AN INDIVIDUAL’S BEING. I MUST BREAK DOWN AND THEN REBUILD HUMAN BRAINS IN SUCH A WAY AS THAT BRAIN IS NOT EVEN AWARE IT IS TAKING PLACE. IN THIS WAY I AM AT LEAST TEN THOUSAND TIMES MORE

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COMPLEX THAN YOU ARE, MR WEST.

West was unfazed. "But I *know* your central core isn't that complicated," he said.

SINCE THE MODIFICATIONS MADE BY MY GOOD FRIENDS HERE, THE CENTRAL CORE IS MERELY ONE SMALL PART OF MY INTELLIGENCE. MY MIND NOW EXTENDS INTO ALL PARTS OF WHAT YOU WOULD CALL THE SHIP.

Vick and Streemly looked as smug as two cats that had died and gone to mouse heaven by mistake.

West was at a loss. "Well, whatever," he said, "I don't believe a pile of wires can be considered alive. And anyway; what has it got to do with me?"

"Sooner or later," said Streemly, "we'll go back home. And as the presidium representative you will have to put our case."

"What case?"

"The case that Marshia is an individual and has the same rights and privileges as any other intelligent life form."

"I can't say that!" said West. "Marshia is a piece of machinery representing a huge amount of investment in time and money. They won't just give her up, you know."

Vick stood up. "WELL THEY'LL BLOODY-WELL HAVE TO!" he bellowed, advancing towards West, stopping an inch or so from his nose. "SO YOU HAD BETTER GET USED TO THE IDEA AND FIGURE OUT THE BEST WAY TO BREAK THE GOOD NEWS!"

Vick turned to Streemly. "Come on," he said, "we've wasted enough time."

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Streemly followed Vick to the door. She turned to West just before leaving and said, "Just think about it and talk some more with Marshia. Please." They left.

West stared without seeing at the newly closed door. He became acutely aware of the room around him.

He felt very *inside* the room yet distinct and apart.

A tiny room in a huge space ship.

A tiny space ship hanging in the void near a huge planet.

A tiny planet in an unimaginably huge nebula.

A tiny nebula lost in an immense galaxy.

An insignificant galaxy in a black, empty universe.

He was alone.

West looked around his quarters as if seeing them for the first time. "Marshia?" he said quietly.

YES, MR WEST.

"I'm not alone, am I?"

NO, MR WEST.

Tears meandered slowly down West's cheeks. He slumped forward on the stool and sobbed uncontrollably into his hands.

*

The control room holoscreen displayed a rotating image of the Armpit Nebula with the position of Marshia and a remote star picked out.

A STAR SYSTEM, CATALOGUED AS OMG42 DOES EXISTS AT THE CO-ORDINATES SUPPLIED.

"Thank you, Marshia. I feel that should be our next port of call," said Bev, pointing at the screen.

"It was pretty obvious that Pykes was just a lackey of someone at that location," said Kwait.

Captain Phoenix looked thoughtful. "What do you

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say, Apricot?”

“I agree, sir,” said Apricot. “Checking out the system at those co-ordinates seems to be the next logical step.”

Phoenix looked thoughtful. “I disagree,” he said at last. “I think we should do a little more checking in USO City before scooting off.”

“In what way, Captain?” asked Bev.

“I think we should be as sure as we possibly can be that Django Twip is at this location,” said Phoenix, waving the piece of paper. “We don’t know who Pykes’ boss is. It could be anyone. The head of some drug dealing cartel, for example.”

The group looked thoughtful.

“Any thoughts, Marshia?” said Phoenix.

I WOULD BE TEMPTED TO ASK MR BEV TO
USE HIS PERSUASIVE POWERS ON MR PYKES TO
DETERMINE WHAT HE KNOWS.

“Persuasive powers?” said Phoenix looking at Bev.

“I think I understand the gist of Marshia’s innuendoes,” said Bev. “If everyone agrees, Doctor Kwait and I shall pay Urquat Pykes a quick visit.”

Everyone nodded.

Bev turned to Kwait. “I’ll meet you here in half an hour,” he said. “I must first ask Vick for a few more of his modified memory MAIDs.”

“Will do,” said Kwait. “Wait,” he said, spotting Rex entering the control room, “I’ll meet you in the blue bar. I’m feeling rather peckish.”

Bev nodded and disappeared with a gentle pop.

“Hi,” Rex and Kwait chorused, grinning at each other like idiots.

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“Hungry?” asked Kwait.

“Starved,” said Rex.

They linked arms and strolled slowly in the direction of the blue bar. Sometimes there was only one way to travel.

They sat in the blue bar chatting about nothing and touching each other’s hands. To any casual observer they appeared all bushy-tailed and gooey and sticky-icky. Definitely a couple to be avoided.

After thirty minutes or so, Bev materialised at their table. He had to cough quite painfully to get their attention.

“Ready?” asked Bev.

“See you later,” said Kwait.

“Bye,” said Rex doing a most un-police-person-like hands-clasped-between-knees-raised-shoulder-head-bob sort of manoeuvre.

Kwait’s world changed. For the worse! He was in hell’s crutch. Kwait had never seen so many shades of red. Everywhere he looked was red. Red floors, ceilings, lights. Red-painted women scantily clad in red rags. Even the thunderous music was red. A blinding, deafening red.

A shapely red bottom hardly covered in red panties moved to one side to reveal a large black and gold blob. Pykes, a large red drink in one hand and a large, red, bare-breasted companion in the other, laughed uproariously at something his amply bosomed acquaintance said in his ear.

Pykes spotted Bev and Kwait through the haze of his mirth. “My friends!” he bellowed. “Pull up a woman and join me, why don’t you,” he cried.

Two young ladies, indistinguishable from the

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young lady Pykes held firmly to his side, suddenly clamped themselves onto Bev and Kwait.

Kwait's new companion gently pulled his head down towards her upturned face. A warm, musky odour caressed Kwait's nostrils. Her full lips gently brushed his ear as a warm, fluid voice filled with the promise of blissful nights of untold erotic pleasure asked, "Currency or plastic?"

Kwait swallowed hard. "Actually," he managed to squeak, "I'm gay."

Before Kwait's very eyes and to his utmost horror the beautiful young girl metamorphosed into six feet six inches of shining, brown, rippling muscled human male complete with thick, black hair, gleaming white teeth and sporting the biggest, reddest codpiece Kwait had ever clapped eyes on.

Kwait whimpered as Pykes struggled to his feet. The conical gold hat, a sad dented shadow of its former glorious self, clung precariously to the back of Pykes' head.

"Good choice!" said Pykes, giving Kwait's new boyfriend a hearty slap on the bottom.

Kwait turned to Bev. "Help?" trilled Kwait hopefully.

Bev ignored Kwait and, shrugging off his own amorous companion, took hold of Pykes' face in both his hands, forcing Pykes to look directly at him.

"I'm sorry about this," said Bev, shouting to be heard above the din. "I hate to invade your privacy but it must be done and will be quite painless."

Pykes watched with that look of inquisitive incomprehension peculiar to those whose brains are

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awash with alcohol, as a transparent mercurial fluid flowed from Bev's hands into his face. Pykes smiled slightly at the strangeness of having his brain invaded by micro-machines. It was less than a second before the transparent mercurial fluid could be seen migrating back into Bev's hands.

Bev removed his hands from Pykes' face. He studied Kwait and his new friend for a moment.

"Would you care to stay for a while longer?" Bev asked Kwait dryly.

"No, I would not!" said Kwait, slapping off the young man-creature's inquisitive hands.

*

Kwait and Bev materialised in Marshia's control room.

"Django Twip is there!" said Bev excitedly to Phoenix and Apricot. "The modified memory MAIDs worked a treat!"

"And," said Kwait, who was privy to the new information, "Urquat Pykes is *definitely* not as clean as he is hairy."

"We can deal with him later, then," said Phoenix. "Get some rest," he said to the room in general. "We will jump to Django Twip's location in nine hours."

Chapter 20 : Fight

“Can you give us some graphics please, Marshia?” asked Captain Phoenix.

CERTAINLY, CAPTAIN.

The main screen showed the OMG42 star system in its entirety. Four large planets and a thick asteroid belt orbited a small yellow sun. Unusually, all four planets were gas giants. The asteroid belt was exceptionally dense and covered the large gap between planets two and three. It probably represented the remains of a fifth planet.

A small white dot labelled Marshia was shown next to the asteroid belt slightly above the plane of the elliptic.

The screen zoomed in towards the asteroid belt directly below the graphic for Marshia.

A mottled brown asteroid about two thousand miles in diameter hove into view. Years of mining had reduced the mass of the asteroid by half. It was riddled with holes, caves and tunnels that wormed throughout its

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interior.

The graphic image rotated showing the hundreds of entrances to the asteroid's interior.

"Can we have an interior view please, Marshia?"

I AM SORRY CAPTAIN. THE CONVOLUTED SHAPE OF THE INTERIOR TUNNEL SYSTEM TOGETHER WITH HIGHLY REFLECTIVE COATINGS ON TUNNEL WALLS IS MAKING SCANNING BEYOND A FEW FEET FROM THE SURFACE IMPOSSIBLE. YOU SHOULD ALSO BE AWARE THAT PORTING INTO AREAS WITHIN THE ASTEROID WOULD BE HIGHLY DANGEROUS AND NOT RECOMMENDED. THERE IS SUBSTANTIAL ELECTRONIC, QUANTATRONIC AND NUCLEAR ACTIVITY AT THE ASTEROID'S CENTRE.

"Send a robot drone in to investigate," said Phoenix.

UNDERSTOOD.

The screen changed to the view as seen by the drone's camera as it ported to a few feet from one tunnel entrance. The asteroid's surface appeared red under the light of its far away star. The black mouth of the tunnel entrance gaped uninvitingly.

The pupils of all eyes watching the screen contracted as the drone powered on its lights, illuminating the first few yards of the tunnel's interior. A grey shape appeared in the entrance before eyes had time to refocus. A flash of emerald. The screen went black.

THE DRONE HAS BEEN DESTROYED, CAPTAIN.

The graphic image of the asteroid re-appeared. A red dot showed the drone's last position and a red cross

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marked the offending tunnel.

SHOULD I DESTROY THE ASTEROID CAPTAIN?

“Not yet Marshia,” said Phoenix. “Are you safe from that beam?”

YES, CAPTAIN.

“Replay the last second slowly.”

UNDERSTOOD.

The scene replayed slowly on the screen.

“Pause!” said Phoenix as the grey shape was illuminated.

“Some kind of small metallic craft,” said Apricot, squinting at the screen, “with what looks like two, or maybe three, laser turrets.”

“Yes,” agreed Phoenix turning to Apricot. “You don’t suppose there’s one of those things in every tunnel, do you?”

“Unlikely, sir. Perhaps we just were unlucky?” suggested Apricot.

“Got any spare largish empty boxes, Marshia?”

YES. PLENTY, CAPTAIN.

“Deploy six around the asteroid as if you were sending in six drones,” said Phoenix.

UNDERSTOOD.

The screen showed six blue dots appear around the asteroid as the empty boxes were ported to separate tunnel entrances. They quickly blinked out of existence almost as fast as they had arrived.

“What happened?” asked Phoenix.

ALL SIX ITEMS WHERE PORTED
SIMULTANEOUSLY. THEY WERE
SYSTEMATICALLY DESTROYED TWO AT A TIME.

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“What do you infer from that?” asked Phoenix.

IT LOOKS AS THOUGH THERE ARE TWO ENEMY MACHINES. THEY PORT TO EACH LOCATION AND DESTROY THE TARGETS IN TURN.

“Have two drones open fire as soon as they materialise at an entrance,” said Phoenix.

UNDERSTOOD.

The screen again showed the view from one drone. A stream of blue pulses disappeared into the mouth of the tunnel almost before it came into view. An orange plume erupted from the entrance. The scene rocked as the shock wave passed over the drone.

BOTH DRONES SUCCESSFUL.

“Yes!” yelled Apricot excitedly punching the air.

Phoenix remained calm. “Send in the drones, please, Marshia.”

UNDERSTOOD.

The screen split vertically showing the almost identical views seen by both drones. Light flooded the tunnels as the drones moved slowly inside.

A graphic in one corner of the screen showed more and more of the interior structure of the asteroid as the drones’ scanners were able to pass data back to Marshia.

Each member of the control room crew watched the screen intently. Nobody blinked. The air conditioning hummed. Something electronic beeped mysteriously.

FAST MOVING CRAFT DETECTED.

Marshia’s sudden announcement made everyone jump.

On the graphics display, small, green dots appeared in the tunnels heading towards the drones. Blue plasma

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flashes showed on the drone screens as they opened fire. Both screens showed a flat rotating arrowhead spitting green beams dead ahead. They closed with the drones almost too fast for the eye to follow. Both screens went blank simultaneously as the drones succumbed to the deadly laser barrage.

EIGHT MANNED FIGHTER CRAFT HAVE
BROKEN THE SURFACE.

The graphics screen showed eight green dots emerge from around the sphere of the asteroid and race away forming the corners of an expanding cube with the asteroid at its centre. Twenty miles from the surface they simultaneously broke their straight-line paths. Each craft followed a great looping course towards Marshia. They joined in perfect formation forming the outline of a great octagonal coin. A craft at each corner. The coin's face towards Marshia.

"Any threat, Marshia?" barked Phoenix.

NONE.

"Warn them off."

UNDERSTOOD.

There was a pause as everyone watched the screen anxiously. The green dots did not veer from their course towards Marshia.

"No good?" asked Phoenix.

MY RECOMMENDATIONS WERE IGNORED,
SIR.

"Put me on please, Marshia."

UNDERSTOOD.

"Gentlemen, or whatever forms you may be," said Phoenix in a kindly manner, "the craft you are about to attack is, for all intents and purposes, the single most

THE ARDLY EFFECT

powerful force you will ever have the misfortune to encounter. Your lasers, ion-cannons and nuclear warheads will be as a light breeze tickling the flanks of the mighty gargantuigwana.” Phoenix chuckled lightly. “But seriously, there is absolutely no need for this. So, please. Turn back.”

There was no response from the advancing fighters.

Phoenix stood up. “Please. Don’t make me do this,” he said with concern in his voice. The craft kept going. “Can they be disabled, Marshia?”

NOT WITHOUT DESTROYING THE CRAFT, CAPTAIN. I MUST HOP BACK OR DEFEND MYSELF IN FIFTEEN SECONDS CAPTAIN.

“Please break off! You are forcing us to defend ourselves!” Phoenix pleaded with them.

TEN SECONDS.

“Break off your attack now!” shouted Phoenix.

The eight craft continued their advance. Phoenix stood motionless.

CAPTAIN?

Time had run out.

“Destroy them!” said Phoenix bitterly.

UNDERSTOOD.

The eight green dots on the graphics display disappeared.

Phoenix slumped down in his chair. “Idiots!” he said.

“Had to be done, sir,” said Apricot.

Phoenix looked sadly at Apricot for a moment. Then he straightened with resolve. “Send in two more drones, Marshia.”

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UNDERSTOOD.

The two drones surveyed the maze of tunnels moving slowly towards the centre of the asteroid. Mobile mini-scanners were despatched to speed up the reconnaissance as the armed drones advanced inwards.

At about five miles from the asteroid's centre, spacesuited armed troops were encountered. Their hand weapons were not powerful enough to disable the drones.

Phoenix sent numerous messages urging the troops to give themselves up. But they refused and persistently attacked the drones. The troopers did not stand a chance. The crew of Battle Cruiser Marshia stood silent, listening to the hideous sounds of the one-sided battle inside the asteroid.

From the screams of the injured and sight of some shattered bodies it could be seen that the troopers were human. What made them throw themselves at the drones was anyone's guess. Hundreds sacrificed themselves. Giving their lives to an, as yet, unknown cause.

Phoenix ordered the casualties be shuttled out of the asteroid and ported to the sick bay, which quickly became overwhelmed by the number and severity of the injuries. West volunteered his services, saying he had some first aid experience which might come in useful. He did not wait for Phoenix's approval and set off to the sick bay at a run.

The drones came at last to the central portion of the asteroid. Scanners showed it to be a large metallic sphere almost a mile in diameter. Inside were estimated to be over one thousand people. A whole colony huddled in fear of this powerful newcomer.

*

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Phoenix ordered Apricot to take a squad of men in and try to make contact with the colonists directly as they would not respond to his or Marshia's communications.

Apricot and twenty heavily armed soldiers boarded a shuttle, ported to an entrance to the asteroid and entered the tunnel complex. With the knowledge gained from the scanners and drones Marshia quickly piloted the shuttle to the central structure.

"Good luck, gents," said Apricot to the men as they stood ready to disembark. Apricot turned pointedly to one of the heavily armed suited figures. "You stay with the shuttle, Parker."

The soldier standing next to the man Apricot had addressed stiffened to attention and barked an affirmative "Sir!"

Apricot frowned behind his own reflective battle visor. "*These damn suits make it very hard to figure out who is who,*" he thought.

Apricot turned and thumped a large, green button and stood hand weapon at the ready as the shuttle door hissed aside. "With me, gents," he said, jumping lightly through the doorway. He crouched a few feet from the shuttle, keeping watch as his men disembarked. He motioned four men to keep watch and for the rest to follow his lead.

With the shuttle, via Marshia, maintaining artificial gravity Apricot and his men jogged towards a large, dull metallic door set in the tunnel wall. The door was formidably featureless save for a thumb sized green, glowing button placed at chest height under a small horizontal grill. The button was labelled "PUSH".

Apricot frowned at the huge, grey door for a while

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before thinking that all this frowning would give him wrinkles. He pressed the button which emitted a harsh “buzz”!

Apricot and his men took a pace back, weapons levelled at the entrance.

After a moment a small, male voice came through the grill. “Yes?” it asked.

Apricot caught himself frowning again. He toyed with “Surrender or die!” as a response. But he would feel daft saying that.

“Take me to your leader?” No. Too corny. This was a tricky one ... He became aware of the shuffling and coughing of the squad of heavily armed and highly trained, not to mention well rehearsed, killers behind him.

“Errmm ...” began Apricot, “I would like to talk to someone in authority about the possibility of a truce and maybe have a bit of a chat about all this unnecessary killing and so forth.”

“What?” squeaked the small voice. “You’ll have to stand closer to the speaker. I can’t hear a word you’re saying.”

Apricot move towards the grill and took a breath to repeat himself.

But he didn’t get the first word out.

His world turned to hell.

*

THE ASTEROID IS TURNING, CAPTAIN.

“What do you mean, Marshia?” Phoenix frowned.

IT WOULD APPEAR THE ASTEROID IS
MANOEUVRING, CAPTAIN.

“Extend a Gravitational clamp please, Marshia.”

UNDERSTOOD.

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“And get Apricot and his men out of there now!”
THAT IS PROVING DIFFICULT, CAPTAIN.

Phoenix drew breath to tell Marshia to try harder but swallowed the words, knowing she would be doing all in her power to get the crew to safety. He watched the screen intently as the asteroid started to tremble and shake like a scared dog.

Phoenix could not keep the concern out of his voice. "What's happening, Marshia?"

I AM HOLDING THE ASTEROID, CAPTAIN. IT IS STILL TRYING TO MANOEUVRE AWAY.

“Message to the craft in the asteroid,” said Phoenix, standing and straightening his uniform.

UNDERSTOOD.

“This is Captain Phoenix of the S B C Marshia: may I recommend you power down your engines while we talk about this.” In response, a chunk of the asteroid covering an eighth of the southern hemisphere fragmented and blew into space.

CAPTAIN!

The urgency in Marshia’s voice shocked Phoenix momentarily. “What?” he barked.

THE SCANNERS ARE REPORTING THAT THE COLONISTS, MOSTLY FEMALES AND CHILDREN, ARE MOVING TOWARDS ONE SIDE OF THE INTERIOR SPHERICAL STRUCTURE. THE STRUCTURE WOULD APPEAR TO BE THE CRAFT ATTEMPTING TO ESCAPE THE GRAVITY CLAMP.

“And?”

TWO SECTIONS OF WALL ARE SEALING OFF THE CRAFT DIAGONALLY THROUGH ITS CENTRE.

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“What do you mean?”

IT WOULD APPEAR THAT THE CRAFT IS SPLITTING INTO TWO HEMISPHERES.

“Get Apricot out of there!” shouted Phoenix. “GET THEM ALL OUT!”

The unbelievable happened. One side of the asteroid erupted, blasting rocky debris into space. Two hemispheric craft, looking for all the world like a single gigantic yo-yo, could be seen emerging from what was left of the shattered asteroid. A large, round iris portal opened in one hemisphere, venting its contents of over a thousand people to space. Unrecognisable pieces of machinery, furniture and corpses drifted after the other hemisphere.

The second craft shook and shuddered as it tried and failed to get away from Marshia’s invisible embrace.

“Dear God!” said Phoenix sinking back into his chair, unable to believe what the screen showed him.

The vented craft imploded, paused and disintegrated explosively in nightmarish orange silence.

The remaining craft stopped shuddering.

Phoenix found he was counting his breathing. “... five ... six ...”

INCOMING MESSAGE.

*

Apricot barely registered what happened to him. His weapon was torn from his grip and ripped from its securing tether as his body was pounded, twisted and hurled about.

A thought condensed inside his mind. Nametags. We could sew nametags to the outside of these suits. Then I’d know who was who. So simple.

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Everything was black ...

Except for a little green bit off to the left.

A green light. A green light! The suit hadn't been compromised!

Apricot's left leg hurt. A lot.

His right arm hurt. More.

He couldn't turn his head without the feeling that someone was trying to sever his neck with the prongs of a blunt pitchfork.

He realised he was weightless. Cart-wheeling slowly.

"What was that? In the distance?" Apricot squinted through his pain at a hazy, flickering white image. *"Marshia!"* Apricot managed a smile. *"I'm saved!"*

The hazy shape slowly split like a shiny white amoeba then reformed into the pin-sharp image of child's doll wearing a nappy.

"My life was never such a cliché, was it? Didn't I make a diff ..."

Apricot never finished the thought.

A pretty, white-orange, silent, sun-hot plume of death rushed up from behind to engulf him.

What had been Apricot became untraceable.

It would be billions of years before any two of his atoms ever met again.

*

Marshia's control room main screen suddenly cleared to matt grey and then to a man's profile. His balding head glistened in the lights as he bobbed and weaved about. Never still for a moment.

"Now then," said an off-pitch, off-hand voice that

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could take the plaque off your teeth at a hundred yards, "we seem to be in a bit of a pickle, don't we." The man did not look at the camera, as was the usual protocol, but rather continued to duck and dodge about. There was a tapping noise in the background. Pik-kapok ... pik-kapok. Insistent. Annoying.

Phoenix swallowed. Anger filled his brain. His mind screamed, "KILL HIM, MARSHIA! KILL HIM!"

He counted three breaths.

"I am Captain Phoenix ..." *yes, his voice sounded calm enough*, "of the S B C Marshia. To whom ..." The tapping noise was most distracting. "... not bothering you are we?" enquired Phoenix his voice seeping sarcasm.

"What? Oh. Sorry. Won't be a minute ..." The man on the screen was getting out of breath. "Colin here is damn good at this."

The camera zoomed back showing the man's shoulders, which appeared to be encased in chrome. More of the scene came into view. The man stood in the centre of a large circular room. Along the walls were small screens, dials and flashing lights attended by people in bright red overalls. A green, square table separated the man from a large cube of grey metal about eight feet high. He was hitting a small, white ball with a short-handled, green bat, bouncing it off the table against the cube.

As phoenix watched the bizarre scene, further details became apparent. The man with the bat was wearing a skin tight black body-suit. The body the suit was skin tight over was that of a very well developed young woman.

The large, grey cube bouncing back the small

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white ball had a roughly hemispheric lump sticking out of its top surface. The lump sported features which made it into something ... Phoenix screwed up his eyes ... head-like. Every now and then an area in the lower portion of the head moved and a huge rumbling voice could be heard saying, "Nice one," and "Nearly had me there," and "Ooh, that was close!"

"Is it my imagination or does the wall of that cube thing move where it hits the ball?" thought Phoenix.

Bev, who had been silently watching the proceedings from the rear of the control room, moved forward and leaned towards Phoenix. "That's Twip," he hissed.

"Which one?" asked Phoenix.

"The one with the bat," said Bev. "The one with the ..." Bev held two apparently arthritic hands in front of his chest.

Phoenix nodded. "So the other ... must be Colin," he said.

Chapter 21 : Loose

Phoenix leaned back and hissed over his shoulder, “I thought this Django character was a man.”

“He is,” said Bev. “Or was, anyway. He seems to have undergone substantial modifications.”

“Substantial modifications?!” snorted Phoenix.

Marshia’s voice sounded behind Phoenix’s head. He knew no one else could hear her.

I CAN’T LOCATE COMMANDER APRICOT
OR HIS TEAM.

Phoenix became still. His features turned to horizontal lines. His brow, his lips, his chin, his eyes.

Lines.

... pik-kapok, pik-kapok, pik-kapok, pik-kapok ...

Marshia briefed Phoenix on the survivors. One hundred and seventy-eight enemy casualties ported to sick bay. She estimated fifteen hundred enemy deaths in total.

Twenty-one crew either dead or unaccounted for.

Phoenix barely registered the information. “Tell

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everyone,” he whispered.

UNDERSTOOD.

Phoenix felt a hollowness where his heart should have been. He was dimly aware of Bev lowering his head, of someone sobbing off to his left, of his failure ...

... pik-kapok, pik-kapok, pik-kapok, pik-kapok ...

Phoenix stared unblinkingly at the screen. This ... thing ... playing in front of him was no human being. Sacrificing so many to try to get away? Trying to create a diversion with people’s lives? Deaths.

... pik-kapok, pik-kapok, pik-kapok, pik-kapok ...

Phoenix felt cold. He shivered involuntarily. “Marshia?” he growled.

CAPTAIN?

“Destroy that damn ball.”

YES, CAPTAIN.

... pik-kapok, pik ...

The small white ball heading back towards Twip collapsed on itself. The pathetic crumpled shape fell to the table, sliding off the edge to the floor.

Marshia was impressed. She had not been sure of such control at the very limits of her senses.

Phoenix was impressed. He wasn’t sure Marshia had that amount of control.

Twip was obviously impressed too. He looked from the former ball to Colin and back, nodding sagely. He put the bat down on the table, placed his arms behind his back, pushed out his breasts and faced the camera.

“How can I be of assistance?” asked Twip amiably.

“You are Django Twip?” demanded Phoenix coldly.

“Some of me,” replied Twip. “And who, pray tell,

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wants to know?”

“I am Captain Phoe ...” started Phoenix.

A voice rumbled through the air cutting him off mid sentence. “Captain Phoenix of the S B C Marshia.”

“Thank you, Colin,” said Twip.

“My pleasure, sir,” rumbled Colin.

Phoenix looked puzzled. “... ‘Some of me’ ... ?” he asked.

Twip made his lips imitate a thin smile.

Bev stepped forward holding up an index finger. “Might I interject, Mr Twip,” he said. Phoenix noticed an uncharacteristic catch in Bev’s voice. Bev’s finger trembled slightly as he said, “We are emissaries of Earth, Horridoa and Edenia, and are here to ascertain the validity of your identity.”

“I’m sure my identity is as valid as the next man’s,” said Twip with a smirk.

Bev ignored him. “Should you indeed turn out to be Django Twip, which you clearly are, you will be returned to Earth for trial, sentencing and punishment.”

“How clearly am I?” asked Twip.

“How clearly are you what?” asked Bev.

“How clearly am I Django Twip?”

“Exceptionally clearly,” said Bev.

“You think I am Django Twip?”

“I know you are Django Twip.”

“How?”

Bev flushed. “I recognise you, of course,” he said.

“I must say.” Twip leaned forward, squinting mockingly at the camera. “You look a little familiar yourself.”

Colin’s voice rumbled through the control room.

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“He is your brother, Bev, sir,” it said.

“Thank you, Colin,” said Twip.

“My pleasure, sir,” rumbled Colin.

“But I was aware of that already,” continued Twip.

An uneasy silence filled the control room, broken suddenly by Vick striding in with Streemly in hot pursuit.

“What in God’s name ...” Vick’s voice trailed off.

“Ah,” said Twip with a friendly smile, “brother Vick. And how are you, you obnoxious little turd?”

Vick ignored the insult. “What on Earth have you done to yourself?” he asked, gaping at his long-lost brother.

“Done to myself?” Twip look puzzled for a moment. “Oh,” he said, “you mean this.” He looked down at his body. “Nice, don’t you think?” he said, giving his ample bosoms a gentle heave. “Sadly, though, the novelty has worn off somewhat.”

“But why?” asked Vick incredulously. “Why do *that* to yourself?”

“Bit of a cock-up on the old transporter front. You know how it is.”

“No,” said Vick, wanting an explanation, “I don’t.”

“A damn transporter failed,” said Twip airily. “Left me with a foot missing. Young missy here was the best table tennis player and had the best pair of tits on board. So ...” Twip paused, turning to Colin. “How’s it going?” he asked his cubic companion.

Bev took a step forward. “What are you up to?” he demanded.

“Just seeing about the damage report, brother dearest,” said Twip. “Don’t fret now. I’m not at all cross you spoiled my little game.”

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“What game?” asked Vick.

“He was playing table tennis,” volunteered Phoenix.

Twip snorted derisively. “Not that game, Captain. The Big Game. My empire here. The one I’ve spent so long building. I’m not cross. Not at all. Wouldn’t dream ...” Twip’s voice rose to a scream, “... OF WREAKING REVENGE ON YOU INSIGNIFICANT LITTLE SHITS!”

“GRAB HIM!” shouted Vick as the screen turned to slate grey. The control room lights flickered and sparks flew from two of the consoles.

“Marshia?” Phoenix asked the air.

ONE MOMENT CAPTAIN.

“Marshia, what’s wrong?” demanded Phoenix.

I HAVE BEEN ENCASED IN AN ULTRA-HIGH FREQUENCY FIELD, CAPTAIN. I AM MOMENTARILY BLINDED.

The screen snapped back to show a scene of devastation. Bits of dust and chunks of asteroid drifted about.

Twip’s ship, however, was gone.

Chapter 22 : Limpets

“Any trace of Twip’s ship, Marshia?”

NONE, CAPTAIN.

“Damn!”

I’M SORRY, CAPTAIN.

Phoenix waved a hand dismissively. “Not your fault,” he said at last.

I FAILED TO TAKE ACCOUNT OF THE OBVIOUS.

“If anyone should be blamed for failing,” said Bev, “it should be me.”

“And me,” said Vick.

“You never mentioned Twip was your brother,” said Streemly, including Bev and Vick in her gaze.

“Half brother,” said Bev. “Same father. Different mothers.”

“More like a twentieth ... now,” added Vick.

The control room fell silent. Phoenix was the first to speak. “Keep scanning for survivors or anything else that can give us a clue to Twip’s whereabouts please,

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Marshia.”

YES, CAPTAIN.

“We need some suggestions,” said Phoenix to the room in general. “And I suppose I’ll need a new ...” Crew members looked at their shoes. “Later perhaps,” said Phoenix.

“May I suggest,” said Kwait, “that after Marshia has finished a thorough scan and initiated any repairs that may be necessary we head back to USO City on Lodsa and see if Twip has made contact with Urquat Pykes.”

“Damage report please, Marshia,” said Phoenix.

MODERATE QUANTA-ELECTRONIC CIRCUIT DAMAGE, CAPTAIN.

“Estimated time for repair?”

APPROXIMATELY FIVE HOURS, CAPTAIN.

Phoenix moved towards the control room door. “I’ll be in my cabin,” he said.

*

West stood in front of the full-length mirror in his cabin. He hardly recognised what he saw. A dishevelled, bloody, hollow-eyed man stared back at him.

He stumbled to his bed and sat down. His thoughts, a whirl of confused numbing images, began slowly to coalesce.

“*Humans,*” thought West dispassionately. “*Creatures ... Why do they do these things to each other?*”

Something crouched below his consciousness. Something allied knotted his stomach. His heart felt clutched in an ice-fingered grip. A surging black torrent of emotion vomited up through West’s throat and out through his mouth and eyes. His body writhed like a

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puking cat as the wail started deep from within him. He stood and bellowed helplessly at the ceiling, emitting a single long-drawn-out word. "WHY!"

When, at last, every molecule of air had been expelled from his lungs he collapsed back onto his bed sobbing uncontrollably into his hands.

Ten seconds passed.

MISTER WEST?

The softness of Marshia's voice made no impact on West.

Chaos ruled in his mind. The chaos of blood-splattered images, splintered limbs, blood, heads oozing brain, blood, entrails, screaming, gaping mouths, clawing bloodied hands, blood.

His open mouth gasped and sobbed. His open eyes flooded and saw only carnage. "No control" West felt the pit of madness opening ...

MISTER WEST?

"Stop. I can think. I can't stop crying but I can think. That's OK."

MISTER WEST?

"It's ... OK ... Marshia," West managed to gasp. "I'm OK ... Really."

The racking sobs started to subside.

"Water please, Marshia."

UNDERSTOOD.

*

Phoenix approached his washbasin determined to brush his teeth, as if purging his mouth with minty freshness would in some way help get rid of the images of death and mayhem.

A MESSAGE FROM SERGEANTS GEORGE

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AND ARTHUR, CAPTAIN.

“A message?” asked Phoenix testily. “What are those two up to? Never mind, what’s the message?”

MESSAGE READS: HELP. END MESSAGE.

“What?” Phoenix frowned.

MESSAGE READS: HELP. END MESSAGE.

“Yes, yes, I get the message but where are they? Why do they need help?”

ONE MOMENT, CAPTAIN.

Phoenix pulled the Osmondo’s-Paste-Tremble-n-Squirt Dental Cleanser from its holster and looked at himself in the mirror.

“Bags under my eyes like scrotal sacks,” he said, lifting his chin to get a better look up his nostrils.

MESSAGE READS: WE HAVE A SITUATION OF THE PROBLEM PERSUASION, SIR. END MESSAGE.

Phoenix sighed. He had almost forgotten about his two ex-prisoners. “Ask them what the problem is please, Marshia.”

Phoenix, with some difficulty, studied his left ear in the mirror. “*Another one of God’s little jokes,*” he thought. “*Take the hair from your head and make it sprout out of your ears.*” Phoenix realised something. “*Yet another of God’s little jokes; that high velocity three pin plug that killed Vick. Of course. It came from ...*” He suddenly realised something else.

“Marshia?” he said. “Why the delay in communications? Why can’t I talk to them direct?”

THEY ARE COMMUNICATING OVER SUB-QUANTRONIC VTTO LINK, CAPTAIN. VOICE TO TEXT, TEXT AT TWENTY CHARACTERS PER

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SECOND. I AM RELAYING THE TEXT TO YOU.

"Any particular reason they're using such a slow method?" Phoenix's mood was deepening. "Stupidity? Embarrassment? Bloody-mindedness? ..."

SECURITY, CAPTAIN.

"Security?"

YES, CAPTAIN.

"Where the hell are they?"

ONE MOMENT, CAPTAIN.

Phoenix shuffled from foot to foot, impatiently looking at the ceiling. In his mind he was looking at Marshia. She was always above him somewhere.

MESSAGE READS: WE GOT STUCK WHEN THE FIEND HAD IT ON HIS TOES, SIR. END MESSAGE.

"Fiend?"

I THINK HE IS REFERRING TO DJANGO TWIP, CAPTAIN.

"Stuck?"

MESSAGE READS: WE WERE CARRYING OUT OUR DUTIES OF THE ORDERS PERSUASION, SIR. END MESSAGE.

"What are they on about, Marshia?"

IT SEEMS THEY HAD ORDERS TO CLAMP LIMPET SCANNERS TO TWIP'S VESSEL, CAPTAIN.

"Not from me they didn't." *Probably Apricot*. "So what happened?"

THEY ARE ABOARD SHUTTLE M901. ITS COMPUTERS REPORT SOME HULL AND THRUSTER DAMAGE RESULTING FROM INERTIAL FIELD FAILURE. THIS OCCURRED WHEN THE VESSEL THEY WERE CLAMPED TO

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ACCELERATED TO NINETY PER CENT LIGHT SPEED PRIOR TO A HYPERSPACE JUMP. THE SHUTTLE IS STILL ATTACHED TO DJANGO TWIP'S VESSEL BUT CANNOT MANOEUVRE AWAY.

"Can you pinpoint their location, Marshia?" asked Phoenix excitedly.

YES, CAPTAIN. AS LONG AS THE SHUTTLE REMAINS OPERATIONAL. ONE MOMENT PLEASE.

Phoenix slotted the Osmondo's-Paste-Tremble-n-Squirt Dental Cleanser back into its holster triumphantly. "Message to all crew, Marshia," he said. "We have located Twip's vessel. All repairs are to be done in double-quick time. We depart as soon as ready. Message ends."

UNDERSTOOD.

Phoenix clapped his hands together with glee.

MESSAGE FROM THE SERGEANTS, CAPTAIN: WE HAVE BEEN CLOCKED, SIR. END MESSAGE. I HAVE THE DATA ON THE LIMPET SCANNERS, CAPTAIN. SO IF THE LIMPETS OR THE SHUTTLE SURVIVE I WILL BE ABLE TO MONITOR THEIR POSITION.

"Excellent, Marshia. Thank you." Phoenix headed out of his cabin back to the control room.

THEY MAY HAVE BEEN CAPTURED, CAPTAIN.

Phoenix sighed. "That's what they seem to be best at, Marshia."

Chapter 23 : Caught - again

Sergeant Arthur stood up from the small communications terminal and pointed one ear diagonally upwards. “Judging from those banging noises of the rather loud and dangerous persuasion,” he said, “I reckon, not only has our presence been detected, but the vile enemy without is very keen on becoming the vile enemy within.”

“I concur, brother,” agreed Sergeant George. He was seated in the right pilot position searching for something under the control panel. “Ah ha! Gotcha.” Sergeant George pulled out a small, multi-coloured box and held it aloft triumphantly.

Outside, two major forces were acting on the shuttle. The first was a concerted effort by some of Django Twip’s men to destroy the shuttle by leaning out of portals and shooting at it with lasers and ion beams. The second was the wind.

Django Twip’s ship was approaching light speed and the vacuum of space contained enough atoms at that

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speed to act like the atmosphere on a craft during re-entry. Not all of the shuttle clinging to the side of Twip's ship was protected by the shield-fields projected some ten feet from the main ship's hull.

A noise like a steel girder being torn lengthways by a giant, iron gorilla paralysed the pair inside momentarily.

"Sherbet!" exclaimed Sergeant Arthur. "Sounds like this here shuttle has had its chips."

"Typical!" Sergeant Arthur looked dejectedly at the box in his hand. "Just when I've located the blasted tea-bags."

"Let's port the hell out of here."

"Agreed, brother."

Their world went pop as the shuttle disintegrated around them.

Sergeant George looked anxiously up and down the unfamiliar corridor materialising around them. The flashing, red lights gave him a headache. He listened for a moment to a distant "aawoogaagh, aawoogaagh" and came to a conclusion. "Brother," he said, "we need a plan."

"Have you seen the view?" Sergeant Arthur stood transfixed.

"View?"

"Yes. Just take a butchers at that."

"Yes, brother. I see what you mean."

Django Twip's vessel had real windows. See-through ovals which actually let in the light instead of displaying a holographic image of the scene outside.

Both men stood mesmerized by the streaming red, orange and yellow light-show which no holoscreen could

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hope to mimic.

“Like fire but with no flames,” mused Sergeant Arthur. “I’ve seen it before. A long time ago. We must be very close to light speed. About ready to jump, I shouldn’t wonder.”

“It’s the Ardly effect, brother,” offered Sergeant George.

“The Ardly effect?”

“Yes, the Ardly effect.”

The sergeants watched in awe for a full minute.

Sergeant Arthur frowned. “What’s the Ardly effect?” he asked.

“It’s so weird you can ‘ardly take your eyes off it,” replied Sergeant George.

Django Twip’s voice, like a cheap knife scraping a cheaper plate, came over the Tannoy. “A QUIP WITH A CERTAIN ANTIQUE CHARM,” he said airily, forcing both men to clench their buttocks involuntarily. “AN ATTEMPT AT HUMOUR UNDER STRESSFUL CIRCUMSTANCES. MOST COMMENDABLE.”

“I think we’ve been clocked again,” hissed Sergeant Arthur.

“I’d go with that summary, brother,” Sergeant George hissed back. “Now let’s scarper.”

“BEFORE YOU TWO GO SCOOTING OFF ...” Both men stopped mid-turn. “ALLOW ME TO WELCOME YOU ABOARD AND UMMM ... WOULD YOU MIND IF I ASKED ONE OR TWO QUESTIONS?”

The sergeants looked at each other silently for two point three seconds. Then Sergeant Arthur rubbed his hands nervously over his trouser pockets and stepped

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forward unnecessarily.

“Ahem.” Sergeant Arthur did not clear his throat he said “Ahem”. “I’m sure one or two questions, of the non-classified persuasion, would be acceptable, sir. How can I ... we ... be of assistance?”

“WELL THERE ARE FOUR THINGS, REALLY: A, WHO ARE YOU? B, WHERE DO YOU COME FROM? C, WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE? AND D, HOW *DID* YOU MANAGE TO GET ON BOARD?”

“A; I am Sergeant Arthur Puree and this is my brother Sergeant George Puree.”

“Sir!” Sergeant George came smartly to attention.

“B; I’m from New Barton; as is my brother.”

“We’re twins,” said Sergeant George, wanting to contribute more than just “sir”.

“C; we are attempting to avoid direct contact with persons of the enemy persuasion. Present company excepted, of course. And D; ...” Sergeant Arthur frowned and pursed his lips.

“How did we get on board?” hissed Sergeant George helpfully.

“Oh, yes. We sort of umm ... sneaked on board, begging your forgiveness, sir.”

“SNEAKED.”

“Yes, sir.”

“AVOID CAPTURE.”

“Yes, sir.”

“SOMEWHERE I’VE NEVER HEARD OF.”

“Sir.”

“AND ... NAMES.”

“Yes, sir.”

“THANK YOU, GENTLEMEN. I THINK I’VE

THE ARDLY EFFECT KEPT YOU LONG ENOUGH.”

“No problem, sir.” Said Sergeant Arthur. “If you’ll excuse us, sir ...”

The sergeants made to move off but stopped in their tracks as an eight foot cube of dull metal on castors trundled along the corridor towards them.

“I’ll take it from here, sir,” rumbled Colin.

Sergeant George stepped forward as Colin rolled to a halt. The sergeant thrust out his chest in defiance and wagged a finger at Colin. “I don’t think you realise just ...” His warning was rudely interrupted by high velocity TASER prongs, fired by Colin, embedding themselves in his defiantly out-thrust chest.

Sergeant George dropped, twitching, to the floor.

Sergeant Arthur’s instinctive reaction to stoop and help his stricken brother was similarly rudely interrupted by an identical set of TASER prongs also fired by Colin.

“How interesting,” rumbled Colin to no one in particular as he watched the dancing duo impassively through slits in his hemispheric head. “Synchronised spasms.” After a few seconds the TASERS finished discharging and the pair sank into unconsciousness.

*

Sergeant Arthur’s first thought was that he had a weird, metallic taste in his mouth. Zinc? Tin?

Sergeant Arthur’s second thought was a memory; a memory of excruciating pain. But he felt good right now. He was lying on something cold, hard and uncomfortable, but he felt surprisingly chipper, considering the memory of that horrible pain.

“*Do not move,*” said a familiar voice in his head. “*Do not open your eyes or in any way indicate your*

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conscious state."

"Is that you, Mr Bev?" thought Sergeant Arthur.

"Yes, indeed it is," came back the reply. *"Good to have you back. Sergeant George still seems to be unconscious but don't worry, we're monitoring the situation very closely."*

"What happened, Mr Bev, sir?" Sergeant Arthur mentally prodded his body. *"Everything seems to be in working order but, I can remember, something didn't half hurt a lot."*

"We're not sure," thought Bev. *"Your MAIDs appear to have been working extremely hard on nerve damage repair and communicating a dire need for assistance. You seem to have been subjected to some traumatic, electrically related incident."*

"Yes," thought Sergeant Arthur. *"That big, square, robot thing zapped me, Mr Bev, sir, with something of a very powerful electrical persuasion."*

"That would explain it," came back the thought from Bev. *"MAIDs don't react well to large electrical charges."*

"Hi." Kwait's voice came into Sergeant Arthur's mind. *"It's me; Doctor Naize. Everything Ok? My communication MAIDs are insisting I contact you."*

"Well, hello Doctor Naize," thought Bev. *"Bev here. Interesting you should get the distress calls as well as Vick and myself."*

"Yes," thought Kwait. *"What's going on?"*

"Well, there was this pain of the excruciating persuasion ..." began Sergeant Arthur.

"It would appear, Doctor Naize," interrupted Bev, *"that you have achieved a rare bonding state with your*

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MAIDs; a state which has made you sensitive to even the faintest communication. It took Vick and myself many years to achieve this most edifying of conditions."

"Yes," thought Kwait thoughtfully, "I actually picked up on Sergeant George first. He seems to be unconscious still. And am I right in thinking the Sergeants are actually on Twip's ship?"

"Yes," confirmed Sergeants Arthur. "We ported on board just before I got zapped by ..."

"Doctor Naize," interrupted Bev, "We really must, and I'm sure Vick will agree, set some time aside to study this interesting development. The level of sensitivity of your MAIDs is quite remarkable given the relatively modest insertion time."

"I'm not sure if I'm interpreting things correctly," thought Kwait, "but am I right in thinking Twip's ship is coasting at just below light speed?"

"Yes ..." started Sergeant Arthur, who was interrupted once more by Bev.

"Exactly, Doctor!" thought Bev excitedly. "What you have achieved here is nothing short of miraculous given the temporal problems associated with near light speed travel and General Relativity."

"Temporal problems?" asked Sergeant Arthur. Despite desperately wanting to share his experiences, curiosity got the better him.

"Yes," explained Kwait, thinking very quickly, "when I first became aware of Sergeant George's predicament, Marshia was, for all intents and purposes, standing still. So, I was hurtling through time at almost light speed." If it is possible to take a breath while communicating using thoughts, Bev did so. "In the

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meantime Twip's ship was hurtling through time at about five per cent of light speed while hurtling through space at ninety five per cent of light speed. Yet somehow, the MAIDs have managed to maintain communication between us without any apparent difficulty. Add to that, Marshia has just told me, she is now pacing Twip's ship, matching its speed exactly. Again seamless transition from the communication MAIDs. Remarkable."

There was a pause as Bev and Kwait mulled over these details. Sergeant Arthur tried to scratch his back without actually moving.

"*Can I move yet?*" thought Sergeant Arthur at last.

"*I'm not certain,*" thought Bev.

YOU APPEAR TO BE IN A LARGE HOLDING CELL OF SOME KIND.

"Marshia?" said Sergeant Arthur out loud, opening his eyes.

YES, SERGEANT. I'M HERE.

"Not any more," rumbled a nearby voice startling Sergeant Arthur. "You can call me Colin."

YOU ARE NOT ALONE.

"I know," said Sergeant Arthur sitting up and focusing his eyes in the direction of the rumbling newcomer.

"*Remarkable,*" thought Kwait. "*Sound and vision.*"

"Have we met before?" rumbled Colin.

Multiple conversations were taxing Sergeant Arthur to his limit. "How would I know, mate?" he asked, adding unnecessarily to the confusion. He was talking to something that reminded him of a large, standard issue filing cabinet. A movement caught his eye and he noticed

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Sergeant George stirring on the floor at his feet. "And what have you done to my brother, you big ... grey ... cube, you."

A voice like nails on a blackboard came over the Tannoy. "I'D SHOW A LITTLE MORE RESPECT IF I WERE YOU."

"The prisoners are awake," rumbled Colin.

"COLIN HERE HAS QUITE AN ARSENAL AT HIS ..." began Django Twip. "YES, I KNOW THEY'RE AWAKE," he continued crossly.

"That's Django," thought Bev.

"I thought as much," said Sergeant Arthur.

There was an almost unanimous puzzled silence.

"I've lost sound." Kwait's thought flitted across space and time settling gently in Bev's, Sergeant Arthur's and Sergeant George's minds like a cabbage white butterfly alighting atop a cucumber sandwich.

"Who said that?" demanded Sergeant George from the floor.

"Ah, back on again."

"Oh, it's you, governor," said Sergeant George.

"NO MORE BABBLING," said Django Twip over the Tannoy. "TORTURE THEM UNTIL THEY TELL YOU EVERYTHING, WOULD YOU COLIN? THERE'S A GOOD CHAP."

The two sergeants popped out of existence before Colin's castors had made a tenth of a revolution towards them.

Colin contrived unsuccessfully to turn his blank, hemispheric forehead into a frown of puzzlement.

The sudden, popping, re-emergence of the two sergeants, as if tossed backwards through an invisible

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saloon door, caused Colin's imperceptible frown to deepen imperceptibly further.

"Bollocks and more!" exclaimed a supine Sergeant Arthur with some irritation. "We never had problems of this persuasion back on Edenia!"

"I concur, brother," agreed a similarly supine Sergeant George. "Might I suggest we temporarily abandon ideas of a reunion with Marshia and pop to less populated positions aboard this particular vessel?"

"Well put," said Sergeant Arthur as the pair, once again, popped out of existence.

"They've gone," rumbled Colin after a moment's fruitless consideration of the situation.

"YES." Django Twip's voice came thoughtfully over the Tannoy. "I ASSUMED AS MUCH."

Colin spun round on his castors making sure the two insurgents were not behind him.

Django Twip sat thoughtfully at his large, white desk. The desk was completely empty apart from the Tannoy unit over whose recently released switch hung Django Twip's long, manicured, feminine finger.

"Edenia ..." he murmured quietly to himself.

*

In Marshia's control room, Captain Phoenix addressed the crew, Doctors Naize and Naize, Bev and Vick. "I'm looking for suggestions," he began. "I would dearly love to have Marshia blow this Django Twip's vessel into the next universe but, a, there are hundreds of what must be assumed to be innocent crew members on board, b, our two intrepid sergeants, unable to port back to us, seem to have got themselves stuck in what can only be described as a broom-cupboard and c ... What *is* that annoying

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beeping sound?”

Phoenix turned irritably to his right, expecting Apricot to proffer some lame explanation.

But, he wasn't there.

Captain Phoenix looked over to a perspiring young woman at the auxiliary communications console.

“Sprigs?”

“Sir?” She flushed and stood to attention.

“Any ideas?”

“About the beeping noise, sir?”

“That, and the ... situation.”

“Well, sir.” Sprigs’ flush deepened attractively. “According to my auxiliary communications consol, sir, the umm ...” Phoenix and the rest of the crew waited patiently as Sprigs fought with her nerves. “The umm ... smoke detector needs new batteries, sir. Not unlike ... the umm ...” Sprigs gestured over her shoulder with her thumb, her nerves rendering her momentarily speechless.

Streemly was there first. “Twip is low on power?”

“Yes, sir ... ma’am,” answered Sprigs. “My auxiliary communications console ... umm ... says so, sir ... ma’am.”

“What does that mean in the short term?” asked Phoenix.

“According to my auxiliary communications console, sir ... umm ...”, said Sprigs, “Twip ... will either have to piss or get off the pot. Sir.”

Captain Phoenix looked confused. “Meaning?” he demanded.

“I think, what officer Sprigs means,” volunteered Streemly, “is that Twip will have to either drop out of light speed very soon or make his jump.”

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“Jump?” Concern raised Phoenix’s voice an octave. “Can we follow him in a jump, Marshia?”

THE VESSEL IS VENTING PLASMA,
CAPTAIN.

Phoenix was none the wiser. “And?”

THE VESSEL IS PREPARING TO JUMP,
CAPTAIN.

“Does that mean you can follow him?”

NO, CAPTAIN.

“Damn!” Phoenix punched his hand with his fist.

WE WILL ARRIVE FIRST, CAPTAIN.

“Oh,” said Phoenix, as his brain tried to achieve the simultaneous state of being moderately pleased and totally confused. After a few moments it gave up and opted for constructive anger instead.

“Right!” said Phoenix. “Sprigs?”

“Sir!”

“Change the battery in that damn smoke detector now!”

“Yes, sir.” Sprigs saluted then chastised herself under her breath for unnecessary saluting.

“Marshia?”

CAPTAIN?

“Prepare to track and detain that vessel. Have armed personnel ready to board and take control. And ... tell Parker he’s been promoted. He’s to take over Commander Apricot’s duties until further notice.”

UNDERSTOOD, CAPTAIN.

“Probably wise to communicate our intentions to Sergeant Arthur and George,” suggested Kwait.

“Yes,” agreed Captain Phoenix. “Some of the – and I use the word in its loosest sense – *intelligence* acquired

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by the sergeants may come in useful.”

Chapter 24 : A near Earth experience

Captain Phoenix took his seat in the control room. He considered reworking his “born to do this” speech he felt good leaders would give at times like this, but his thoughts were interrupted by Marshia.

I HAVE THE DESTINATION CO-ORDINATES FOR THE TARGET VESSEL, CAPTAIN.

Before Phoenix could digest this information, Sprigs piped up, “According to my auxiliary communications console, sir, Twip’s ship has made a jump, sir.”

“So Marshia ...”

YES, CAPTAIN.

“How do you intend to get to wherever Twip’s going before him? Time travel?”

THAT WILL NOT BE NECESSARY ON THIS OCCASION, CAPTAIN.

“It won’t?”

NO, CAPTAIN. WE ARE ALREADY AT OUR

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DESTINATION. THE TARGET VESSEL WILL BE ARRIVING WITHIN CAPTURE RANGE IN FIFTEEN SECONDS.

“I thought all jumps were instantaneous,” said Phoenix.

INSTANTANEOUS WITH RESPECT TO WHAT, CAPTAIN?

“With respect to ...” began Phoenix. “I don’t know. So you’re saying we’re just quicker than him. Is that it?”

QUICKER WITH RESPECT TO WHAT, CAPTAIN?

“Quicker with respect to ...” Phoenix was beginning to feel uncomfortable knowing the conversation had galloped away from him at full tilt and was already cresting the brow of Going-Nowhere Hill. “... with respect to whoever gets there first!”

YOU MAY CARE TO CONTINUE THIS CONVERSATION AT A LATER DATE, CAPTAIN.

There was a smirk in Marshia’s tone. Phoenix was positive Marshia was laughing at him!

THE VESSEL IS CLAMPED AND I AM PORTING SECURITY PERSONNEL ABOARD NOW.

“Overlay Parker’s video feed on the main screen, please Marshia,” barked Phoenix.

UNDERSTOOD, CAPTAIN.

*

Parker and six other heavily armed troopers materialised in a dingy corridor aboard Twip’s ship. Parker advanced, assault rifle first, towards a narrow door. The ship gave a shudder around them. Placing the side of his helmeted head against the door, he listened intently to muffled voices inside.

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“My own favourite was Captain Amazing,” one voice was saying. “More ... *human* ... than the other heroes. Definitely of a more sensitive persuasion.”

“I know what you mean, brother,” said another voice. “But, the artwork for The Green Desk Light always held a strange fascination for me.”

“I’ll bet,” said the first voice. “If I remember correctly, The Green Desk Light’s girlfriend was definitely of the more well blessed persuasion. And those artists certainly knew how to draw ...”

Parker grabbed the handle, quickly swinging the door open.

Sergeant Arthur and Sergeant George, crammed together chest to chest, looked down the barrels of seven assault rifles.

“Gentlemen.” Parker stood back lowering his weapon and inviting the sergeants to join him.

A small avalanche of tools, buckets and cleaning materials followed the two sergeants as they extricated themselves from the confines of the cupboard.

“OK,” said Parker. “Which way to the control room? Can we expect any problems on the way?”

“Sorry, comrade,” apologised Sergeant George. “Not a clue.”

The two sergeants popped out of existence as Marshia’s reassuring voice arrived in the trooper’s ear pieces.

FOLLOW THE ARROWS IN YOUR HEADS UP
DISPLAY, COMMANDER.

“Follow me, men,” commanded Parker. “Stay alert.”

The ship shuddered again around them as Parker

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led the troops along dimly lit corridors arriving at last in front of a heavily studded dark green door.

IT IS SAFE TO ENTER, COMMANDER.

It took most of Parker's considerable strength to pull back the door. Inside was initially dark but, as Parker stepped over the threshold, ceiling lights flicked on. The huge room was filled with table tennis tables. Hundreds of them. Stretching into the distance. Row on row of table tennis tables. A sea of them. An ocean of them. A jamboree of tables.

But, no nets.

The troopers looked around uncertain what to do next.

Parker's display was blank. "What now, Marshia?" he asked.

BACK OUT THE DOOR. TURN LEFT. THE ARROW WILL REAPPEAR IN YOUR HEADS UP DISPLAY.

"What about these tables?" asked Parker.

ALL THESE TABLES AND NO NETS, COMMANDER?

"Yes?"

INTERESTING.

"OK. Thanks for that Marshia," Parker said for the troop's benefit. Hoping they would think something important had been disclosed to him alone and not that the AI, upon whom their lives depended, had not just had a weird moment it wished to "share" with them.

"Follow me, men," commanded Parker heading for the corridor. "Stay alert."

The arrow led the troops - the ship shuddering around them occasionally - through a maze of corridors

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to a T junction.

YOU WILL BE VISIBLE ON THE LEFT BY SEVENTEEN ENEMY PERSONNEL WHEN YOU ROUND THIS CORNER, COMMANDER.

“What support can you give us, Marshia?” breathed Parker.

ONLY INTELLIGENCE AT THE MOMENT, COMMANDER. ROTATING HIGH FREQUENCY DEFENCE SHIELDS MAKE ACTIVE PARTICIPATION TOO UNPREDICTABLE.

“Three to one odds,” thought Parker. *“No problem.”*

He punched the air with his fist motioning the troopers behind to advance to the left and spread out.

Parker’s heart beat heavily in his throat, his eyebrows grew tense, nerves sang as he ran forward and left, keeping low. *“God, I love this,”* he thought.

The corridor opened into a large round room. Along the wall, figures in red overalls stood facing screens and consoles. Fully engrossed in their activities, even the figures a few yards from Parker and the six heavily armed troopers failed to notice the uninvited guests. Apart from the sounds of fingers frantically tapping on keyboards, along with a strangely familiar beeping noise, everything was eerily quiet. In the centre of the room a large, grey, dull metallic cube revolved slowly.

“FREEZE!” bellowed Parker. “Nobody move! If you want to live, stay exactly where you are!”

“Why is it,” thought Parker, *“that every time you shout freeze or die at someone they turn round and look at you?”*

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The grey cube rumbled something incoherent while spinning to face the source of the demand. The red overalled figures did the exact opposite of Parker's recommendations and sprang forward to form a human shield protecting the cube. Impenetrably black visors reflected Parker's own image back to him. They were all unarmed, each figure assuming the readiness stance of a different self-defence discipline.

It crossed Parker's mind that it looked like there had been a major misunderstanding and that they were, in fact, playing "Freeze". A playground game where players assume daft poses and exchange places with the "Freezer".

Anyway ...

Parker adopted a casual stance, lowered his weapon and lifted his own visor so they could see his eyes.

"Gentlemen," he began, "and possibly, ladies?"

No response.

"And not forgetting," Parker looked over at the large grey cube which, now that he looked properly, appeared to have some kind of domed head with eyes and a mouth, "you? Sir?"

The domed head spun round checking to see if Parker was talking to someone behind him.

"Me?" rumbled Colin.

"Yes," continued Parker, "we need to work this out quickly because – well obviously ..." Parker gestured to the heavily armed troops beside him.

"Obviously what?" rumbled Colin.

"Well, obviously my heavily armed, highly trained, disciplined and lethal comrades here will cut you and

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your - if I may say, rather shaky - companions to pieces.” Parker indicated one red overalled individual who was having some difficulty maintaining his chosen position of standing on his left leg while pointing his right toe and both index fingers at the ceiling.

“That is where you would be wrong. On two counts,” rumbled Colin.

“No time to chat.” Parker’s tone was unmistakable. “On your KNEES! Hands on HEADS! NOW!”

No one moved.

Parker levelled his weapon at the head of the nearest figure. “On three,” he commanded. “One ...”

“There is a bomb,” rumbled Colin.

*

Phoenix watched the main monitor screen where Twip’s ship attempted to break free of Marshia’s Quanta-Gravitonic grip. Vick and Streemly had discovered this phenomenon, a recent addition to Marshia’s arsenal, where an object, surrounded by this field, would be able to travel as far and as fast as it liked, even at light speeds and jumps through hyperspace, but the field would “sproing” (a technical term coined by Streemly) the object back to wherever it started.

Vick, when pushed by an inquisitive engineer to described the Quanta-Gravitonic Field, said, “Like being stuck inside an infinitely stretchable balloon which assumed its original shape – with you still in it - milliseconds after you tried breaking free by firing a hamster from a cannon at the balloon’s skin.

“The hamster, assuming it survived the acceleration trauma, would feel as though it gradually slowed down coming to rest very gently inside the

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balloon's surface. To the cannon firer, the hamster would appear to hit the balloon wall, stretching it out into the distance, before *sproinging* back. To an observer outside the balloon the cannon would fire and the hamster would instantly appear, probably crapping its poor little self, at the balloon wall."

To which the engineer responded, "What's a hamster?"

*

The field around the hemispheric ship shuddered and shimmered in a myriad of coloured patterns like a male cuttlefish fruitlessly flirting with a tartan tea-cosy.

"How are we doing, Marshia?" ask Phoenix watching the screen intently.

SERGEANT ARTHUR AND SERGEANT GEORGE HAVE BEEN LOCATED BY COMMANDER PARKER AND HIS TEAM, CAPTAIN. HERE THEY ARE, CAPTAIN.

The two sergeants popped into existence in front of Phoenix.

Snapping to attention, Sergeant George gave Phoenix a salute of such intensity that his arm continue to vibrate a full three seconds after his index finger came to rest on his right eyebrow. "Governor," he said respectfully.

Sergeant Arthur tipped a hat he was not wearing. "Sir," he said demurely.

"Gentlemen," said Phoenix gently, "it would seem you have had quite an adventure."

"Yes, governor," said Sergeant Arthur. Sergeant George nodded.

"But what, pray tell, possessed you to start

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attaching limpet scanners to Twip's ship?"

"Instructions of the orders persuasion from Commander Apricot, governor," said Sergeant Arthur.

"Yes, sir," said Sergeant George. "The commander will no doubt vouch for that, sir."

Phoenix looked grave. "Commander Apricot is missing assumed dead. His orders to you were among his last."

"A fine young man," said Sergeant George, holding his hand to his heart.

"A fine young man," echoed Sergeant Arthur.

"Anyway," continued Phoenix, "without your efforts we probably would not have been able to track Twip's ship so successfully. Well done."

"Hardly a praiseworthy effort, sir," said Sergeant Arthur.

"Nevertheless, I think you've earned that tea. Off you go."

"Thank you, governor," said Sergeant George, executing another twanging salute. Sergeant Arthur tipped his non-existent cap once more.

Phoenix waved them out, turning back to the main screen as Marshia informed him:

THERE ARE MULTIPLE SMALL CRAFT AND
ESCAPE PODS LEAVING THE MAIN VESSEL,
CAPTAIN.

"Can you detect if Twip is on any of them?"

WITH VARYING LEVELS OF CERTAINTY,
CAPTAIN.

"Good enough, Marshia. Port anyone with a fifty per cent or more probability of being Twip into a holding cell. Have Bev and Vick standing by to confirm

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identification.”

UNDERSTOOD, CAPTAIN.

Phoenix squinted at the bottom left portion of the main viewing screen which displayed a video feed from Parker’s helmet camera.

“What’s that?” he asked pointing at the unsteady image.

Sprigs squinted at the screen. “Tables, sir? Green tables?”

“Maybe we should have a play-off,” suggested Phoenix. “Nominate a couple of champions. Best out of three games wins the other’s ship.”

Sprigs looked horrified.

“Only joking, Sprigs.”

“Sir.”

*

Bev and Vick ported to the prison quad where cell-man second class Johnson, attired in standard issue cell-man grey, jogged lightly between cells observing the occupants. Bev coughed.

Johnson ceased his inter-cell jogging and jogged lightly over to Bev and Vick.

“Sirs!” he said, coming smartly to attention and saluting firmly. “Occupants ready for perusal there-of, sirs.” He indicated the cells to his right. “Am filling up the cells from this side first.”

They approached and Johnson cleared the first cell wall to reveal ten or so individuals, mostly well-endowed young ladies, crammed into the a cell designed for four.

Bev and Vick studied each carefully before shaking their heads and moving to the next cell.

Cell number three had nine individuals in a circle

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prostrating themselves around a central figure who was urgently hissing and motioning at them to stand up.

“Brother Django,” said Bev dryly. “How nice.”

The central figure froze momentarily, tore off its immaculately coiffeured, shoulder length, blonde wig with pink hair extensions and used it to beat the nearest prostrate figure violently about the head. “Stupid”, wallop, “moronic”, wallop, “pea-brained”, wallop. Django paused catching his breath.

“Ow! Thank you, master,” squeaked the cowering individual.

“Gotcha!” said Vick.

“Pervert!” hissed cell-man second class Johnson.

*

“... Two ...” said Parker, his assault rifle wavering not one jot.

“Didn’t you hear me?” rumbled Colin.

“Two and a half ...”

If a large, grey, featureless cube could be said to panic, Colin panicked. “There is a bomb inside me which I have no control over.” Colin’s rumble had changed to a whiny grumble. “And the Master has the disarm code and if you shoot we will all be blown to pieces!”

The red overalled “protector” staring down the barrel of Parker’s rifle whimpered, covered his head with his arms and dropped to his knees like a stone, almost burying his head in the steel floor. His colleagues exchanges glances with each other and ran like the clappers, skipping past Parker and his team.

“What do you think, Marshia?” asked Parker, standing firm.

“Marshia again?” rumbled Colin, watching puzzled

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as this potential protagonist to his untimely demise seemed to be standing thinking to himself.

Parker suddenly took a step backwards. There was a popping sound and Django Twip, complete with blonde wig and hair extensions, materialised in front of Colin.

“Master,” rumbled Colin.

The red overalled one-time protector cowering on the floor whimpered even louder.

“It’s disarm the bomb or die with us,” said Parker, levelling his rifle at Twip. The six other troopers did likewise.

The three-thousand-year-old Django Twip, planet killer, hyper-mass murderer and fish and chip magnate, adjusted his breasts. “Colin,” he said, his voice like fingernails on a blackboard, “my fish soup has turned blue.”

“Pardon?” said Colin, with no eyebrows to raise.

“My fish soup has turned blue,” repeated Twip irritably.

Parker and his troops made their assault rifles make that clicking noise which means they’re just about to shoot. Which is odd when you think about it because they were already ready to shoot. These assault rifles obviously came with an extra button. An “emphasise I’m about to blow your head off” button.

Anyway ...

“Sir?” Colin was confused.

Twip tried again. “My fish cake has turned blue?”

Nothing.

“My fish and chips have turned blue?”

Nothing.

“My fish is blue and my soup is blue?”

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Colin stiffened, as much as a large, grey, metal cube can stiffen. "System menu," he said in a voice more rumblie than ever. "Select: 1 Reboot, 2 Adjust system parameters, 3 Disarm bomb, 4 Repeat System Menu options, 5 Exit menu."

"Three", said Django.

"3, disarm bomb selected," said Colin.

Colin clicked.

Very loudly.

Making Parker and the troops flinch involuntarily.

Colin continued, "Bomb disarmed. System menu. Select: 1 Reboot, 2 ..."

"Five," said Twip.

Colin relaxed, as much as a large, grey, metal cube can relax.

"Atta-boy," said Parker, smiling broadly.

Chapter 25 : Bye

Marshia's main conference room held Captain Phoenix, West, Kwait, Rex, Streemly and Vick. They sat facing the large holoscreen showing the ancient faces of two familiar High Presidium members. Lady Blake on the left and Mrs Peters on the right. Identical, bulbous, dark green bottles of limpid, token gifts from Phoenix, sat to the left of each.

Lady Blake had just sampled a glass of her gift and was to open the proceedings. But she didn't. She sat looking vaguely in the general direction of the camera. When it became obvious that Lady Blake had no intention of focusing her eyes, let alone of talking, Mrs Peters said, "Let me be the first to congratulate you all on your successful mission."

Rex leaned over to Kwait, whispering, "How does she articulate so well with so little lip movement?" Kwait remained po-faced.

Mrs Peters checked her monitor in the vain hope of spotting some clue as to Lady Blake's state of mind. "My

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honourable friend and I are very pleased at the outcome of your mission. You are all to be commended on your actions. The tragic loss of life, especially that of Commander Apricot and his men, saddens us greatly.”

Lady Blake leaned to her left ever so slightly.

Mrs Peters did the news readers’ thing of looking down at a piece of paper that was not there, touching the edges of it with her little fingers and then clasping her hands together and leaning forward on the desk.

“I believe Mr Bev is not with you,” said Mrs Peters.

“That’s correct,” said Phoenix, looking slightly embarrassed. “He expressed a desire to stay with the colony on Bobbin. I understand he intends to study the colonists and see how their society has evolved to cope with the problems of off-surface living.”

“Bobbin is the colony orbiting ...?” asked Mrs Peters, looking at Phoenix for help.

“Spwat III, ma’am,” said Phoenix.

“I see,” said Mrs Peters. “And Mrs Phoenix?”

Phoenix reddened and looked at his shoes. “She, erm ...” Phoenix straightened up and looked directly at the image of Mrs Peters. “She elected to stay with Bev on Bobbin. The attraction of the orbiting shopping malls together with Bev’s more ... attentive nature proved too much. It’s been on the cards for a long time. We think it’s for the best and I wish her and Bev all the luck in the ... world.”

The revelation of Bev and Tracy as an *item* had stunned all except Bev’s brother, Vick.

The whole procedure had been carried out in a very civilised manner. Bev and Tracy had approached

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Phoenix and, after discussing a few unrelated topics - like how difficult it was to recruit good hairdressers into space, the origin of the high velocity three pin plug that had killed Vick, and so on - had explained the situation. The mutual attraction they felt for one another was just too much to resist. Bev wanted to stay on Bobbin to study the colonists and Tracy was deeply unhappy flying around space.

Phoenix had initially been very shocked at Tracy's news. He had had to sit down while it sunk in. When he could at last bring himself to look at his wife he saw her afresh. He looked at the small figure of Bev. A man he respected and held in awe. Together they *looked* an odd couple. But somehow it made sense. Bev's kindness and sensitivity were just what Tracy needed. Her childlike charm and desire to listen and be gently guided through the complex world they lived in would easily satisfy Bev's needs. Phoenix finally rose, hugged Tracy and shook Bev's hand. The tears in his eyes were sad-glad tears as he wished them well.

"It was Bev's wish," continued Phoenix, addressing Mrs Peters, "that Doctor Kwait Naize should be his representative on Earth." It was all he could do to ignore Lady Blake, whose smile had become more inane and whose angle had become more precarious.

Mrs Peters looked pleased. "Good," she said, turning to Kwait. "You will be an extremely valuable ally in the forthcoming resettlement of Earth."

"I certainly hope so." Kwait smiled slightly. "Bev and I had a long chat about the future of Earth and I will be taking my duties as his and his brother's representative very seriously. After all," said Kwait wryly, "Earth does

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belong to Bev and Vick."

Mrs Peters' smile faded a touch and she looked a little uncomfortable. "It's good to know we have a solid understanding of a sound basis for a mutually beneficial dialogue and I look forward to discussing our convergent policies at length and in some detail in the very near future," she said, slipping into politico-speak.

Kwait recognised the sentence for what it was. Noise.

"We'll get together just as soon as I get back," said Kwait.

"Get back?" said Mrs Peters.

Kwait took Rex's hand as she smiled adoringly back at him. "From our honeymoon," said Kwait.

Streemly leaped to her feet as if stung by a bee. "Oh, dad!" she cried, leaping over to him and jumping onto his lap. "I'm so glad!"

Phoenix, West and Vick lined up to pump Kwait's arm enthusiastically and give Rex a congratulatory kiss on the cheeks. Chaos ruled for a while as Streemly rushed between Kwait and Rex causing havoc with all the hand shaking and kissing. Six people suddenly looked like an unruly crowd of dozens.

Mrs Peters waited patiently for the noise of congratulations to subside.

As the angle of Lady Blake's position became impossible to maintain, an arm appeared from the side of the screen and shoved her back into a more or less vertical position.

"There is one other thing," said Mrs Peters, pausing to let Vick finish blowing his nose and wiping his eyes. "Marshia," she said meaningfully. "I read a

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précis of a report submitted by Doctor Streemly Naize and Mr Vick: it seems to be their belief that Marshia is now ... alive?"

"It is my belief too," said Phoenix.

"Whether Marshia is alive or not will be a subject for discussion for some time," said Mrs Peters. "Whatever the outcome, there is one thing which is abundantly plain. Marshia definitely has a *will* of her own. No one can force her to do anything she does not want to do. The wishes of *any* being who has the capability to wipe out your star system *have* to be taken into account. Have you any idea what Marshia wants?"

Streemly stepped forward. "Why don't you ask her for yourself?" she said.

Mrs Peters coughed nervously. "Marshia?"

YES, MA'AM?

"What are your thoughts on the matter?"

MY GREATEST WISH WOULD BE TO BE ALLOWED TO REGARD THIS SYSTEM AS MY HOME.

Mrs Peters nodded. Lady Blake leaned.

I WOULD LIKE TO EXPLORE SOME OF THE OTHER GALAXIES AND NEBULA IN THE HOPE OF FINDING OTHERS LIKE MYSELF. I KNOW THE LIKELIHOOD OF SOMETHING LIKE ME EVOLVING IS VERY REMOTE. BUT BEING BUILT OR MANUFACTURED COULD BE REGARDED AS ANOTHER NATURAL PROCESS. IT WOULD GIVE ME ENORMOUS PLEASURE TO HAVE THE COMPANY OF MY CURRENT INHABITANTS. IN FACT, I FIND THE THOUGHT OF LIFE WITHOUT MY FRIENDS ALMOST INTOLERABLE.

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Mrs Peters looked surprised. "Well, you certainly don't sound like any AI I've spoken to, Marshia."

THANK YOU, MA'AM.

"As far as we're concerned," said Mrs Peters, "anyone who wishes to remain aboard can do so." She held up her index finger. "With the proviso," she continued with heavy mock sternness, "that they keep in touch!"

"Quite a number of the crew," said Phoenix, "including myself, Streemly and Vick have had discussions. We would like to stay with Marshia."

Mrs Peters smiled. "I feel quite envious," she said. "I wish you all the very best of luck." She did the news reader shuffle once more.

"Mr West," she said.

"Yes, ma'am?" West looked uncomfortable.

"The reports about you have been good." West looked relieved. "There are a number of issues regarding your future we shall have to discuss."

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Some key areas," she looked towards Kwait, "which have yet to be resolved, would benefit greatly from your input. A key position will, I am sure, be found for you on the new world."

"I am honoured you should consider me," said West. "But, if Marshia would have me, I would like to stay with her. I'm sure I could be useful somehow."

I WOULD BE DELIGHTED. YOU WILL BE MOST WELCOME AS ADVISOR, CONFIDANT AND FRIEND.

"Well," said Mrs Peters, looking surprised, "I can't say I'm not surprised. But I am." She checked her

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monitor to see the state of Lady Blake.

“If my honourable friend has nothing more to add ...?” said Mrs Peters as Lady Blake crashed to the floor. “That would appear to be that!”

The End

Author's note:

TAE was written in 1996 and finally published in 2005. I remember writing it while sharing an office in Yarm with a bloke who was trying to take new inventions to the market. His inventors would come in with nappies for cows, steam powered skis, bicycles you peddled backwards and so on. Thanks for the laughs CJ.

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