
Array Wars: Episode 1.0

The New Hope Strikes Back

Peter Jones

ARRAY WARS EPISODE 1.0

THE NEW HOPE
STRIKES BACK



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was first produced in December, 2005.

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because Lulu switched to heavier paper.

Array Wars: Episode 1.0, The New Hope Strikes Back

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This book was written for the 2005 National Novel Writing
Month. However, no liability on their part is suggested or implied.

The final word count was **60390**.
It may have changed a little since then!

The New Hope Strikes Back

Author's Notes

Disclaimer and other notes:

Any resemblance between any characters in this story and any people, living or otherwise, is purely unintentional—including, of course, those few cameo roles which I have inflicted upon certain of my friends; you know who you are! Needless to say, such cameos should not be taken too seriously; they are **in name only** (more or less), and no comparisons should be drawn between the people featured and the characteristics their namesakes might happen to bear herein. In short: please don't sue me, guys. (Besides, there's always the sequel to look forward to...)

This story owes a large debt of gratitude to certain works of George Lucas and the Wachowski Brothers. It is, of course, intended as a parody of said works, and of the characters and situations created and owned by Lucas and Wachowski. It is certainly not intended for any commercial use, nor is it intended to in any way disparage said works (of which I am a great fan; I quickly found that the only way to write a story such as this is by having intimate knowledge of the stories it is based upon; the sort of knowledge that only comes from watching

them a dozen times over...) In short: please don't sue me, guys.

Aside from the obvious influences of *Star Wars* and *The Matrix* and their various sequels, this story borrows from, or gives a nod to, the following books and movies and authors (in no particular order):

- *Aliens*
- *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and sequels
- Terry Pratchett's *Discworld*
- Douglas Adams' *Hitchhiker's Guide...*
- Joss Whedon's *Firefly* and *Serenity*
- Kevin Smith's *Clerks* et al
- *Battlestar Galactica* (The Original Incarnation)
- *Star Trek*
- *Dune* (David Lynch's interpretation in particular)
- *Terminator 2*
- *Shrek*
- *Grease*
- *Buffy*
- *BlackAdder*

It even contains a line or two of my own invention...

In most cases, the references appeared in the story before I recognised where they came from; in a few cases, though, the idea occurred to me first and I had to tweak the story to fit it in. In some cases I've borrowed but a single line, or a single character (or even a single name); in other cases, whole scenes have been adapted to my nefarious purposes.

Additional Thanks:

I would like to extend my additional thanks to Chris Baty and the people who make NaNoWriMo¹ work every year. If not for them and their crazy, wonderful idea, this novel would never have been written: this is, of course, my effort for **NaNoWriMo 2005!**

I would also like to thank all of my friends who put up with my wild enthusiasm for this crazy, wonderful project, and who nagged me when I fell behind, and who cheered me on when I was doing well, and urged me on (and threatened me with grievous bodily harm) on those occasions when it seemed like I might not finish. Thanks, guys and gals. You've all been appropriately rewarded with cameo parts in this novel—and there's every chance you'll return for next year's sequel, if I decide to put myself through this all again!

Additionally, several of the lines in this story came from conversations with my friends, and are just as much their invention as mine. Thanks to you all!

And, of course, special thanks go to Boadicea. I owe her a T-shirt...

Warning: Parental Guidance and Spoilers

When I started this, I wasn't sure quite where I was heading with it, apart from my stated intent of creating "a parody mixing *Star Wars* and *The Matrix*"—mostly in reaction to having read parodies of each and deciding "I can do better than that". (There exist two parodies of *Star Wars* which I highly admire: *Spaceballs* by Mel Brooks, and *Star Whores* by Jefferson Morris. I have deliberately steered clear of stepping on their respective toes—why

¹ National Novel Writing Month: <http://www.nanowrimo.org>

try to mess with perfection?—but it’s possible their influence may have crept in.)

Along the way, it has acquired a certain blend of “adult” language and humour. Please be warned: if such things offend you, you may not wish to read any further. (In fact, I can almost guarantee that if the *Chapter Listing* on the next page offends you, you should probably stop right there. It only gets worse as it goes along!) I make no apologies for this; it is how the story wanted (needed) to be written.

Furthermore, it may not be *entirely* politically correct!

The following chapters contain several semi-gratuitous uses (and one wholly gratuitous use) of the “F” word (no, not “flamingo”, the *other* “F” word.) They also contain the “P” word, the “V” word, the “S” word, the other “S” word, the “C” word, the “Q” word, the much-feared “M” words, a few “B” words, a whole slew of “T” words, and even a couple of “Z” words—but no “X” words. In fact, apart from “X” the whole of the alphabet is pretty well represented. (To fans of “X” words everywhere, I apologise; I shall endeavour to correct this grievous oversight in the sequel. For now though, I trust you will be content with this list of “X” words I plan to use in the next story: *xanthochroid*, *xerothermic*, and *xenobiotic*!)

Additionally, my story may well contain certain plot spoilers for *Star Wars* and *The Matrix*. If you have somehow managed to miss seeing these movies (and their sequels) I really do recommend that you watch them *before* you read this story. (Besides which, if you know *them* you will likely get more out of *this*...)

I hope you have *at least* half as much fun reading this story as I had writing it!

The New Hope Strikes Back

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Introduction

A Beginning is a Very Delicate Thyme...

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, a struggle was waged between the forces of light and dark. Mystical energies rippled throughout the inhabited systems, and ancient prophecies came slowly, inexorably, to fruition. A galactic Republic, keeper of the peace for a thousand generations, withered and died in the shadow of an evil dictator's greedily outstretched hands, and its remains were crushed beneath the armoured boot heels of Imperial troops. Only a few defenders of the old ways survived, escaping the ruthless pogrom and fleeing to the far reaches of the galaxy. Biding their time, rebuilding their strength, they finally re-emerged to launch a rebellion against the tyranny of the Empire.

This is not that story.

If history has taught us anything, it has taught us that those who fail to learn from the mistakes of history are doomed to repeat them. Not such a long time ago (in fact, it would be more accurate to say *in the very near future*) in a galaxy virtually the same as our own, the struggle between the forces of light and dark once more rears its ugly head. Mystical energies begin to build, ancient prophecies flex their muscles, and small furry animals tremble in fear.

This is *that* story.

Chapter 1

Baked Ratatouille Terrain

The planet Ratatouille was a hostile, inhospitable place. An ugly place too, its blistering surface covered in debris from its ancient volcanic origins.

Dark sand the colour of old bruises baked in the midday glare of two suns. The still, dry air shimmered as roasting heat radiated from every exposed surface of the barren landscape. With the suns directly overhead, what little shade there had been was now gone.

In the distance the land rose to meet the low, ragged spine of bedrock which provided the only possibility of shelter from the solar inferno; the sand-blasted stone was riddled with shallow caves. Beyond the pockmarked ridge, land and dust-laden sky seemed to merge into one another.

Nothing moved. Most living things had gone to ground to wait out the hottest part of the day. In this harsh climate, even 'bots would cook and grind to a halt if they ventured too far, their servos choked with fine particles of hot dust, their coolant evaporated or clogged.

The silvered sails of the moisture collectors hung limply in the heat. Until the suns dropped a little lower in the sky, there would be no moisture for them to collect.

Apart from the squat dark towers of the homestead's moisture collectors, the two baked mud domes were the

only visible signs that people actually lived out here. Almost the same colour as the sand around it, the smaller of the two domes was typical of the region's few scattered moisture farms. Standing within the dome, at the top of the steps which led down into the cool, dark interior of the subterranean dwelling, Lurk Splitwhisker shielded his eyes with one raised hand and squinted into the blinding light beyond the doorway.

Lurk's youthful features lent him the appearance of innocence; his unruly blond hair added just the right hint of angelic purity. His blue eyes twinkled, and his cleft chin was just enough to add a touch of manliness to his otherwise pretty face. He was dressed all in white; his loose-fitting tunic falling to mid-thigh, his legs clad in loose, comfortable trousers. It was obvious at a glance that he was destined to be a hero.

Shame about the name, though!

"Lurk!" called a woman's voice from somewhere within the adobe abode. "Lurk!"

Lurk sighed. After a moment he turned away from the brilliant glare and descended into the gloom, blinking his grit-filled eyes to help his vision adjust to the dim, soft lighting.

"Coming, Aunt Beryl," he called.

He peered into the small kitchen where his aunt was slicing an orange root vegetable, the sharp knife moving quickly in her practiced grip.

"Lurk, have you seen your uncle?" she asked without looking up, raising her voice over the *snik snik snik* of the blade as it cut through the vegetable and lightly kissed the scarred wood of her favourite old chopping board.

Lurk shook his head. "Not recently. I think he went out to check on the number seven collector, the one with the bent vane. He should be back as soon as things cool

down a bit out there.” Lurk waved one hand vaguely in the direction from which he had just come.

Beryl nodded. Lifting the board, she swept the orange slices into the pot which simmered gently on the hotplate.

“Well, when you see him,” she said as she selected another vegetable and began to slice, “remind him we need a translator ‘bot that speaks *Blotchy*.”

“I don’t suppose we’ll have much of a choice,” said Lurk, “but I’ll let him know.”

Beryl looked up, a smile lighting her weary, pleasant peasant face. After a moment, the faintest hint of a frown furrowed her brow. “You’re a good boy, Lurk,” she said, “but I do wish you would get dressed occasionally, rather than wandering around in your pyjamas all day.”

“But they’re comfortable, Aunt Beryl,” whined Lurk. “And besides, this was all the style in Moss Iceberg a few years back. I know it will come back into fashion sooner or later.”

“Yes dear,” said Beryl. She shook her head fondly, and returned to chopping vegetables.

Lurk stood a moment in silence, watching as his aunt continued her preparations for the evening meal. When it seemed she had nothing further to add, he slouched on down the hallway to his bedroom. The rounded doorway was covered by a thin curtain; Lurk slipped past it and, with a loud sigh, threw himself down on the narrow bed. He stared up at the low ceiling, bored and frustrated with the tedium of a moisture farmer’s existence. *I should be out there*, he thought, *among the stars. Not here in the dirt.* He shook his head. *Adventure and excitement, that’s what I crave! And there’s precious little of either around here!*

Gradually his weary eyes closed, and he slipped into a shallow doze.

“Oh yes, take me now, you hunk!” mumbled Lurk.

With a startled cry he sat up quickly and looked wildly, guiltily around, relaxing only once he'd confirmed he was still alone in the small room. He breathed a deep sigh of relief, and wiped one hand tiredly across his sweat-drenched forehead.

As the last remnants of the dream slipped from his mind, he became aware of a deep, muted rumble that bypassed his ears and resonated directly in his chest cavity. A crawler: the Yahoos were here! Lurk leaped up from the bed, pushed past the curtain, and ran along the corridor and up the steps. Emerging into the brilliant afternoon suns-light, he blinked and turned until he saw it.

The crawler was a massive box-like vehicle, its tremendous weight carried across the undulating dunes on sixteen enormous treads. It sat a short distance beyond the second, larger dome of the farm complex, its idling engines shaking the ground. So huge was it that it could have rolled completely over the dome beside it and crushed it into oblivion without even slowing down.

Dwarfed into insignificance beside the matt black metal monstrosity stood the figure of a man dressed in loose, flowing robes of tan and brown. Lurk's Uncle Rowan was walking up and down a ragged row of 'bots, pausing now and again for a closer look. Gathered around him, dwarfed by the human, were three of the tiny Yahoo traders, clad in their traditional purple robes.

Lurk trotted across the sand, feeling a sudden chill as he entered the shadow of the crawler. He joined the older man as he stopped before a battered old translator 'bot, its

humanoid shape seeming out of place amongst the assorted mish-mash of functional robotic shapes.

“You, I suppose you’re programmed for etiquette and protocol,” barked Rowan.

“Oh yes, sir,” twittered the ‘bot in reply. Its metal skin gleamed dully, with a hint of yellow which suggested it would clean up to a sparkling gold finish. “I am aware of seven million possible place setting arrangements to suit any...”

“I have no need for a catering ‘bot,” Rowan interrupted brusquely. “What I really need is something that talks the binary language of my vapour collector controllers.”

“Of course, sir,” said the ‘bot excitedly. “My first job was officially ‘programming binary haulers’, very similar to...”

“Do you speak *Blotchy*?” Rowan cut the ‘bot off.

“Why of *course*, sir,” gasped the ‘bot. “My secondary function is translating. *Blotchy* is like...”

But Rowan had already turned away from the talkative ‘bot. “Okay,” he said to the waiting traders, “I’ll take this one. Lurk, take it down to the garage and get it cleaned up.” Rowan began to rummage around inside his voluminous robes, searching for his money pouch, as Lurk turned away and began to lead the humanoid mechanoid towards the nearby dome which housed the entrance to the garage.

Before he had taken three steps, an excited barrage of beeps and whistles burst forth from the line of ‘bots. Lurk turned. A stubby blue astrobot was rocking from side to side, clearly fighting to break free from the electronic restraints of the inhibitor nuts the traders had applied to its domed head. One of the Yahoos, shorter even than the astrobot, ran forward and pressed a button

on the small remote unit held in its hand; the astrobot's wild activity immediately subsided.

"If I might make a suggestion, sir?" said the translator 'bot. "That little astrobot is in prime condition. A real bargain. I've worked with her before. She'll give you many hours of trouble-free service."

Lurk looked at the astrobot, then at his uncle. "Uncle Rowan, what about that blue one?"

"Don't be silly, lad," growled Rowan. "This is a moisture farm, not one of your dreams about that damned Imperial Academy! What would we do with an astrobot?"

"Um..." Lurk looked down at the dry sand underfoot; he scuffed one foot idly in the sand, raising a small puff of bruised dust. "Good point, Uncle Rowan," he mumbled. Sheepishly he turned away and gestured for the humanoid 'bot to follow him. Before he had taken another three steps, an excited barrage of bleeps and whistles burst forth from the line of 'bots. Again. Lurk turned back again. The stubby blue astrobot was rocking from side to side again, still clearly fighting to break free from the electronic restraints of the inhibitor nuts. One of the diminutive traders ran forward and pressed a button on the small remote unit held in its hand; the astrobot's wild activity immediately subsided, and not for the first time.

"If I might make a suggestion, sir?" said the translator 'bot. "That little astrobot is in prime condition. A real bargain. I've worked with her before. She'll give you many hours of trouble-free service."

Lurk looked at the astrobot, then at his uncle. He frowned, bemused. "Uncle Rowan, what about that blue one? Whoa! *Deja vu!*"

Rowan looked at his nephew as though he had lost his mind. Lurk cringed inwardly. Rowan opened his mouth

to say something, then blinked in confusion. He closed his mouth and opened it a couple of times; Lurk would have been reminded of a goldfish if the concept of having enough water for creatures to actually live in had not been so completely alien to him.

“Yeah, okay,” said the older man, surprising them both. Turning back to the Yahoo traders, Rowan said “What about the blue one? We’ll take that one.”

The Yahoos jabbered excitedly amongst themselves. Their trade language had no word for “love”, but 317 different words for “money.” Quickly they came up with an outrageous price, and as Rowan launched into the early stages of the bargaining process Lurk turned away once more and led the translator ‘bot towards the garage. After a moment he heard the quiet hum of the astrobot’s wheels as she caught up with her taller companion.

Behind him he heard the translator ‘bot say something in a low voice, and the astrobot’s whistled response. They bickered back and forth as they crossed the short stretch of hot sand to the garage entrance, and as they began the descent down the ramp into the cooler depths of the structure, Lurk sighed quietly to himself. *Great, he thought. Lover’s tiff. That’s all I need...*

After a moment’s quiet reflection, he allowed another thought to surface: *What in Hell’s Handbasket just happened?*

Chapter 2

A Lovely Squad of Cocky Nuts

The mile-long *Imperial Planetary Dominator Isosceles* moved in a stable geosynchronous orbit around the planet Ratatouille. Suns-light glinted off its sleek, angular hull, picking out the hundreds of laser cannon turrets and missile launch tubes which bristled along its perimeter. Huge and menacing, and as triangular in shape as its name suggested, the *IPD Isosceles* was undoubtedly a military vessel.

In the underbelly of the beast, a much smaller ship was docked securely within one of three cavernous bays. Scarred and seared by multiple laser blasts, her hull breached in several places, the *CSS Botanical Bayou* had clearly seen better days. It took but a glance at the multiple weapons which were still trained upon her, and the shimmer of the two attractor beams which locked her firmly into place, to see that she was a captive of the massive *IPD Isosceles*, and not its guest.

Aboard the *Botanical Bayou*, the smoke-filled corridors echoed with the heavy tramp of boot-clad feet. Armoured and helmeted Shock Troopers, anonymous and faceless, their combat armour a neutral shade of gunmetal grey, moved in small squads throughout the captured ship. The battle was over, the crew having resisted valiantly but in vain against the finest warrior force of the

Imperium. The mission now was ‘Search and Capture’; sweeping the ship for any stray passengers or crew who had managed to elude the initial attacking forces.

“Upper deck secured. Repeat, upper deck secured.”

Sergeant Samson ‘Mauler’ Strong keyed the communicator in his combat helmet. “Acknowledged, Raptor One. Team Badger proceeding to deck two via aft port stairwell.” Deck two was primarily crew quarters, food, and recreation.

“Copy that, Badger One. Raptor One out.”

Sergeant Strong listened for a few seconds as, one by one, each of the other four teams checked in and reported their status. Teams Ferret and Ocelot covered the other two stairwells between the two main decks which ran the full length of the ship—the *Botanical Bayou*, barely four hundred feet in length, was not large enough to require an extensive elevator system. Team Mongoose had split up to search the warren of equipment which filled the engine room. Team Fennec had once again—the third time in as many weeks—drawn the short straw, and were rummaging around through the ship’s waste disposal system.

“Okay squad,” grunted the Sergeant, his voice electronically distorted by the circuitry of his helmet, “let’s get this done. Jenkins, take point.”

With a nod, Izzy ‘Killer’ Jenkins hefted the compact, ugly shape of her Gemini Mk-III Vaporiser and took the lead, moving with a well honed blend of confidence and caution. She moved rapidly down the narrow stairwell and, once clear of its confines, stepped to the left. The corridor before her was deserted. Several doors opened off it, and lazy drifts of blue smoke curled slowly in the still air. She moved forward several paces, feeling a little exposed under the bright glare of the ceiling-mounted

light panels. She swung the barrel of her weapon to cover the nearest doorway.

She keyed the squad channel open. "Clear."

Sergeant Strong appeared at the bottom of the stairs and stepped right. He advanced a little, covering the next doorway beyond Jenkins. Hugging the wall, Jenkins slid forward until she was directly beside the first doorway.

"Three," she broadcast. "Two."

On "One," Jenkins turned past the doorway, took in the room beyond with a single glance, and flattened herself against the wall on the far side of the doorway. After a moment of silence she peered back into the room, taking a longer look. The cabin appeared to be empty.

She glanced back past the Sarge. The other two members of the squad had joined them in the corridor. "Empty," she stated flatly, and moved on towards the next doorway.

As Strong followed her past the first doorway, he jabbed a finger at Mikhail 'Mikki the Mouse' Tetrakovavonovich and indicated the room. Mikki, leading with his weapon, stepped lightly into the room and conducted a quick but thorough search: closet, bunks, drawers. Nobody and nothing. He performed a final electronic sweep, looking for any storage device which may contain useful intelligence data, then rejoined his team-mates in the corridor.

Mauler and Killer had already moved on past the second doorway. As Mikki moved to join them, the fourth member of Team Badger appeared in the doorway and shook his helmeted head. Nothing.

"Hey, Fib, what's going on here anyway?" asked Mikki in a low voice. "'Search this ship.' 'Sweep that ship.' Who or what are we expecting to find?"

All his friends called Fib ‘Fib’ because it rolled off the tongue slightly more smoothly than ‘Eff Bee’. There was some debate amongst the squads of Raptor Command as to what the initials actually stood for. Some of them, for reasons best known to themselves, called him ‘Fluffy Bunny’; many called him ‘Fuckin’ Brutal.’ A couple of them referred to him as ‘Fairy Boy’, but never to his face. Fib himself swore that he had been lumbered with the unlikely and unfortunate name of ‘Fellatio Brown’; all agreed with a grin and a nod that, as names go, and as Fib delighted in repeating, “Fellatio really sucks!”

“Beats me,” said Fib. “You know they never tell us anything beyond ‘kill ‘em all’ or ‘bring ‘em in alive’!”

“Yeah,” grumbled Mikki. “Bloody officers, never...”

“Can the chatter, guys!” came the Sarge’s voice over the squad channel. “We’re still soldiers, and we’ve got a job to do.”

“Yes Sarge,” said both men.

Slowly, methodically, the squad continued their sweep. Room by room they worked their way up the corridor until they reached the closed pair of double doors at the end. All the sleeping quarters were empty, and the only storage devices they located were a couple of portable music players which they collected for further analysis by Imperial Intelligence.

At the closed doors, Killer Jenkins stopped. She brought up the blueprints of the ship on the inside of her helmet’s right eye-screen, and cross-referenced them with the feed from her weapon’s scanner.

“Hydroponics,” she said, “and I’m reading movement inside.”

“Anyone we know?” asked Strong. He switched to the Command channel. “Badger One to Ferret One, please confirm your location.”

“Ferret One to Badger One, we’re in the galley. No contact.”

“Copy that, Ferret One. Ocelot One, where are your team? Are you anywhere near Hydroponics?”

“That’s a negative, Badger One. We’re just past the main lounge. What you got, Sammy?”

“Possible contact.” He turned to Jenkins, and she raised a single finger. “One confirmed. Nothing we can’t handle.”

“Roger that, Badger One. Watch your back. See you in twenty!”

“Confirmed, Ocelot One. Twenty.”

He switched back to the local channel. With a nod to Jenkins, he switched his blaster to a one-handed grip and pressed his other hand flat against the door. Jenkins did likewise, and Mikki and Fib moved into position behind them, against opposite walls.

“On three. One. Two.” As he said “Three” they pushed the doors inwards and surged into the room, stepping away from the doorway, weapons panning. The hydroponics chamber was a large square space, dimly lit, filled with stainless steel troughs and tubes and vessels. And, of course, plants; green leafy vegetables filled most of the troughs. The air in here was cool and damp, and the circulation fans kept it moving. Everywhere they looked, leaves trembled and waved in the artificial breeze.

There were a thousand places for someone to hide.

“Hey Jenkins.”

“Yo, Sarge?”

“Any other exits?”

There was a pause as she double-checked the schematic. “One more door, far wall. But—it goes nowhere. Control room of some kind; monitoring equipment mostly. No way out.”

“Okay,” said Sergeant Strong. “Mikki.”

“Sarge?”

“Cover this door. Nobody gets out but us!”

“Not a problem, Sarge!” Mikki hunkered down beside the doorway.

“Fib, you go left. Jenkins, you take the right. I’ll go up the centre.” He waited for the two troopers to acknowledge the orders. “And I know I don’t have to tell you, but watch your fire, people. Check your targets.”

“Don’t worry, Sarge!” said Fib. “The day I shoot you, it won’t be no accident.”

“Fuck you, Fib,” snarled Strong. Behind his face-mask, he grinned. “Let’s move out.”

The only sound being picked up by his helmet’s microphones was the soft susurrus of the leaves, punctuated by the occasional *plink* of dripping water. Samson Strong checked the motion sensor feed, but got nothing useful—while the sensors had their uses, they were notoriously unreliable, and more than one trooper had gotten his head blown off because he fell into the trap of depending too heavily upon his equipment. In close quarters such as this, every leafy rustle and every movement of his weapon got translated into signal, and the sensors’ own compensation circuits muted *all* data.

He moved cautiously forward in a crouch, one row at a time, checking each as he passed it. No sign of anyone.

“Jenkins? Got anything?” he said softly into the comm.

“Negative. No contact,” her voice crackled in his ear.

“Fib?”

“Well, Sarge, I got myself an itchy nose—but no sign of movement.”

“When we get back, I’ll scratch your nose with my boot.”

“Gee, would you, Sarge?” Fib responded. “That’d be great.”

Step forward, look right. Step forward, look left. Strong continued his sweep.

Suddenly movement caught his eye at the far end of one of the gaps between two hydroponics troughs. He snapped his gun around, finger tensing on the trigger, then eased up. Even before the targeting reticle in his heads-up display flashed red, he recognised the dark grey armour of an Imperial Shock Trooper. He waved briefly, and Fib waved back.

Step forward, look left.

“Over here, Sarge. I’ve got a...”

There was a flurry of motion, a flash of blaster fire, and the loud clatter of an armoured body falling to the deck. Strong was up and moving in an instant.

“Man down,” he hissed. “Talk to me, Jenkins. How you doing, girl?”

He rounded a corner, took in the scene, and responded all in an instant. The fallen Trooper; the slender woman in white, the blaster gripped firmly in her small hands seeming so incongruous, slipping back around one of the large water tanks; the sudden flash of blue light as his own blaster, set to Maximum Stun, discharged and the armed civilian slumped bonelessly to the deck...

“Nice shooting, Sarge,” said Jenkins. “I’m fine; armour took most of it.” She writhed for a few seconds, and then Fib was there, hand extended, helping her back

onto her feet. Sarge turned, checking all the approaches. Nothing else moved.

“What’s happening, guys?” Mikki’s voice filled the dead air on the squad channel.

“One contact down. No casualties,” Jenkins informed him. But she winced as she moved.

Strong kicked the fallen blaster away, then leaned down over the supine form of the woman in white. *Woman? Little more than a girl! Cute ass though!* She was unconscious, but still breathing strongly. “She’ll be okay,” he muttered.

He keyed the Command channel. “Badger One to Raptor One.”

“Raptor One. Report, Badger One.”

“Badger One. Contact, one civilian. Inform Lord Vapour we have a prisoner.”

“Roger, Badger One. We’ll send a collection team down to your current position. Wait for them to arrive, and then continue your sweep.”

“Acknowledged, Raptor One. Badger One out.” The sergeant turned his attention back to his team. “Are you okay to continue, Jenkins?”

“Sure, Sarge.” She rotated one arm, working out the kinks. “Little stiff, that’s all. Suit has already given me a dose of healant.” She paused. Then, with a hint of venom, she spat: “Damn bitch got off a lucky shot, is all.”

“Sure she did, Killer,” said Fib. “Happens to the best of us.”

“Screw you, Fib.”

Fib leered at her, although the effect was mostly lost behind the face-plate of his combat helmet. “Oh baby! Any time, anywhere!”

“Okay, that’s enough. If you ladies are done playing, perhaps we can get back to work?” Strong keyed the comm again. “Mikki.”

“Sarge?”

“Watch your six. Raptor is sending down a team to collect our prisoner here. Hold your position, and send them in when they arrive.”

“Roger that, Sarge.”

Each thinking their own thoughts, the squad settled down to wait for the prisoner extraction team to arrive.

Chapter 3

Cunning Linguistics

“So, uh, do you guys have names? Or numbers? Or something?”

Lurk had never really had much to do with ‘bots before now, if you discounted several rather lurid dreams; certainly not with humanoid ‘bots that actually communicated in real speech rather than beeps and whistles. It was all a little overwhelming. Lurk much preferred to keep his social interactions as remote as possible, and to remain safely hidden behind the anonymity of his computer. His fingers were far more capable at dancing over a keyboard than trailing over hot soft skin. Lurk suddenly blushed hotly and cleared his throat, blinking away an onset of the daydream fantasies to which he was prone.

“I’m s-sorry,” he stammered. “Could you repeat that.”

“Certainly sir,” said the translator ‘bot. “My name is CP-*Oui-P*, human-cybot relations. And this is my counterpart, RT-4RT.”

“Seepy Weepy? And Arty Farty?” Lurk frantically stifled the urge to giggle.

“Close enough, sir,” said Seepy sadly. This was going to be one of *those* relationships, he could see. “And you are...?”

“Oh, right. I’m Lurk. Lurk *mumblemumble*.”

"I'm sorry, sir, but I didn't quite catch your surname."

"Lurk Splitwhisker," said Lurk hotly.

"Oh. I see, sir. I'm sorry. Sir."

"Call me Lurk."

"I see, sir Lurk."

Lurk pondered that for a moment. "Sir Lurk!" He liked the sound of that! After a moment he realised that his uncle's reaction if he ever heard the 'bot calling him "Sir Lurk" would be less than thrilled, and he sadly shook his head.

"No, just Lurk. No 'sir', no 'mister Splitwhisker', just 'Lurk'."

"Yes, si..." Seepy Weepy quickly tweaked a couple of parameters in his greeting subroutine. "Okay, Master Lurk."

Lurk sighed. That would have to do.

"Um. So... Um." Lurk stared into the darker recesses of the garage for a moment. "So, uh, what exactly does 'human-cybot relations' mean, anyway?"

Seepy tilted his metallic head and activated his user's guide recording. A jovial and energetic—albeit somewhat tinny—voice issued forth from his chest panel.

"Hello, and thank you for purchasing this state of the art Computer Pal. The new CP-*Oui* Protocol 'bot, so named because he never says 'no', is designed specifically to fill all your needs. And I do mean 'all'. *You* know what I'm talking about, guys 'n gals. When it comes to human-cybot relations, the CP-*Oui* Protocol 'bot knows about more types of intercourse than purely social."

"Um, that's enough, thanks..." interjected Lurk hurriedly as the announcer paused a nanosecond to draw breath. His face had gone bright red with embarrassment. Seepy Weepy had tinged a little pink himself, although

that *might* have been merely the reflection from Lurk's own blood-flushed cheeks.

"So... Uh... So you, uh..." stammered Lurk into the sudden deafening silence.

"Yes," said Seepy Weepy. "I *am* fully functional."

"Oh gods," blurted Lurk. "That wasn't what I meant at all. I was just..."

Seepy Weepy considered the blushing youth standing before him with something akin to wonderment. If his face hadn't been a single smooth sheet of stamped steel with crystalline camera lenses for eyes and a round latex-lined hole for a mouth, his jaw would have undoubtedly dropped. The boy was *shy*! Standing here in a darkened room with what was, despite the fancy talk about "protocol" and "translation", essentially an ambulatory sex toy, the lad was *embarrassed*!

In Seepy Weepy's quite considerable experience, there were very few things in the universe more randy than a lonely moisture farmer's son. Or 'nephew', he allowed, remembering the conversation between the two humans back on the surface. Lonely farmers in general could be quite desperate, since many of them never saw a woman for months at a time—but a *moisture* farmer didn't even have friendly livestock that he could cuddle up to on those long, lonely nights. A *shy* farm-boy was practically unheard of. In fact, the last time he had been taken down to the garage to be "cleaned up" by a moisture farmer's son, he had been jumped three times before they made it to the base of the ramp.

What passed for an electronic shudder rippled down Seepy Weepy's primary data bus. It had been far too long since he'd had his memory wiped!

"So, you're a 'yes-bot'?" asked Lurk.

"Yes."

“And you never say no?”

“No, Master Lurk,” agreed Seepy. “I never say ‘no’.”

Seepy was fairly certain *that* constituted a joke; he was quite proud of it, having once spent a total of almost three milliseconds analysing human humour, re-analysing the bits that didn’t make sense on the first pass, and then formulating the response to that particular Frequently Asked Question. Unfortunately, it seemed to go sailing right over the boy’s head. Seepy wasn’t particularly surprised.

“I, uh...” began Lurk again. “I am not sure I understood the bit about ‘never says no’; how do they get that from ‘Seepy Weepy’?”

“Oh,” said Seepy Weepy. A translation question; that, at least, was easy. “It’s the ‘*Oui*’ part; it’s French for ‘Yes’.”

Lurk nodded for a moment. “I see.” He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “And, uh, what is ‘French’ again?”

“It’s another language, one of the five major languages of Old Earth,” explained Seepy.

“Right, sure, of course,” nodded Lurk. “And, um...”

Seepy would have closed his eyes were it physically possible. “Old Earth is the planet from which all humans originally came.”

“Oh, well yeah, everybody knows that,” Lurk scrambled defensively. He looked around the room for a while, staring intently, as though he had never been here before. Finally he sighed. “And, uh, who are these ‘humans’?”

Seepy Weepy was beginning to wish the boy had just jumped him on the way down the ramp instead. “*You* are, Master Lurk,” he said.

“Oh.”

Seepy could almost hear the cogs turning as the lad's brain slowly began formulating another question. In desperation, he changed the subject.

"Speaking of planets, Master Lurk, I'm not entirely sure which planet we're on."

"Well," said Lurk, a little more confidently now that he was no longer on such potentially dangerous ground, "if there is a bright centre to the galaxy, you're on the planet which it is furthest from."

"I see," said Seepy Weepy, who had heard such negative descriptions on just about every planet he had visited in the past twenty years. Even people living on Coruscate Primus, the acknowledged bright centre of the galaxy, said the same thing. It was hardly helpful. "And does this dark pit of a planet have a name, perchance?"

"Oh," said Lurk. "Yes. This is the planet Ratatouille."

"Thank you, Master Lurk," said Seepy. Now they were getting somewhere. Ratatouille. "That makes sense," he said aloud, "given how much like an eggplant the planet appears from orbit."

"Um..." said Lurk.

"Never mind," said Seepy quickly, not relishing the prospect of attempting to discuss the finer points of Terran botany and French cuisine with a youth who was obviously not firing on all cylinders.

At that moment, Arty Farty came to Seepy's rescue, launching into a bewildering blizzard of beeps and whistles.

"Yes, of course," replied Seepy. "It won't be long now."

"What did he say?" said Lurk.

"She," began Seepy, "was merely wondering about the possibility of having an oil bath."

"Oh, right. She. Right. Oil bath. Oh crap..."

"Is there a problem, Master Lurk?" asked Seepy.

"No. Well, maybe. Well, no," stated Lurk decisively. "It's just that I'm going to be late; I should have had you cleaned up by now. I'm gonna catch hell from my uncle!"

"Don't panic," said Seepy calmly. "I can run the oil bath myself."

"Can you?" asked Lurk pathetically. "Oh, good, yes, please..."

"All you will need to do is give my counterpart here a quick once-over with a wire brush, and then we can take care of ourselves while you go and do whatever it is you have to do." Seepy Weepy gestured in the general direction of Arty Farty. Lurk looked, and noticed for the first time that the blue astrobot was streaked with several black marks, looking suspiciously like laser blasts.

"Uh," said Lurk, who knew as much about discretion and subtlety as he did about linguistics and cuisine, "these look suspiciously like laser blasts."

"They probably are," said Seepy as he fiddled with the flow of oil into the large sunken pit in the floor of the garage, trying to get the temperature just right. "To tell the truth, after all we've been through, I'm surprised we're both in as good a condition as we are, what with the Rebellion and all."

"You know of the Rebellion against the Imperium," yelled Lurk excitedly. "Adventure and excitement, here I come!"

"I thought everybody knew about the Rebellion against the Imperium," said Seepy Weepy. "After all, it's all over the news vids every night; report after report about the Rebels' terrorist activities."

"Oh, yes, so it is," agreed Lurk. "But I thought that, well, maybe you had seen some first-hand action?"

“Well, that *is* how we came to be in your service, Master Lurk,” confirmed Seepy, “if you catch my drift.”

“Um...” Lurk screwed up his forehead as he considered this. Deep in thought he wandered over to the rack of tools on the wall, selected a wire scrubbing brush, and returned to where Arty Farty waited patiently.

“The Yahoos are Rebels?” he finally ventured cautiously.

It is times like this, thought Seepy, *that I really wish I had bought that ‘sigh’ upgrade I saw last year.*

“No,” he said. “I mean that the ship we were travelling on was mistaken for a Rebel ship, and attacked, by an Imperial battle cruiser. Most of the crew and passengers were slaughtered, and we barely managed to escape intact by illegally stealing an escape pod. The escape pod landed somewhere in the desert, and we wandered around lost for a while before the Yahoos illegally stole *us* and sold us to you.”

“Oh, right,” nodded Lurk. “I see.”

Seepy had his doubts, but he let the statement pass without comment. Where this particular human was concerned, it seemed the wisest approach. He was almost beginning to regret leaving the *Botanical Bayou*. Surely being blasted into smithereens by Imperial Shock Troopers couldn’t be *this* painful.

Silence fell, except for the rasping of the wire brush across Arty’s charred outer surface. Seepy lowered himself into the bliss of the warm oil bath, and switched himself to ‘relax’ mode.

“There certainly is a lot of carbonised scarring here,” muttered Lurk after a few minutes. He returned to the rack of tools, ran his hands lightly across the display, and selected a long thin screwdriver. Crouching down beside Arty Farty, he jammed the blade of the screwdriver

behind a particularly stubborn lump of charred carbon and pushed. It didn't budge. He pushed harder. Nothing. He picked up the wire brush and whacked the end of it against the screwdriver's handle. Again. Again.

Suddenly, something gave. The screwdriver slipped from Lurk's grasp and flew across the room where it embedded itself blade-first into the wall. Lurk himself sprawled clumsily across the floor. Arty Farty squealed electronically as she spun through almost a complete circle. When the small astrobot came to rest, she was projecting a small holographic figure onto the floor three inches from the end of Lurk's nose.

"Help me, Obeah Bum K'nobby. You are my only hope!"

Lurk stared, enchanted, at the tiny, semi-transparent woman, her slender form clad in a diaphanous white robe, who shimmered in the air before his eyes. She glanced quickly over her shoulder before leaning down and extending her hand towards something out of sight in front of her. The image skipped, and she returned to her standing position.

"Help me, Obeah Bum K'nobby. You are my only hope!"

Lurk gazed in wonderment as she leaned forward again. He felt a sudden stirring in his groin as he realised he could see her nipples through the sheer white material.

"Who is she?" he asked. "She's beautiful."

"Help me, Obeah Bum K'nobby. You are my only hope!"

"I'm not entirely sure, Master Lurk," lied Seepy Weepy. "I think she was a passenger on our ship. A person of some importance, I seem to recall."

Arty Farty whistled briefly.

“She says,” translated Seepy, “that it is nothing. Merely an old recording. Pay it no mind.”

“Help me, Obeah Bum K’nobby. You are my only hope!”

Lurk glanced up briefly from trying to determine whether this vision of loveliness was wearing any panties. He was fairly certain that she was not. “Well, whoever she is, she sounds like she’s in trouble. Adventure and excitement beckon! We have to help her.” He turned to Arty and, in as stern a voice as he could muster, said, “Play back the entire message. Please.”

Arty whistled again, a little more extensively.

“Help me, Obeah Bum K’nobby. You are my only hope!”

“She says,” Seepy translated again, “that the inhibitor nuts are interfering with her circuits. She suggests that perhaps, if you loosen her nuts, she will be able to play more.”

“Oh. Right.” Lurk stood awkwardly and hobbled over to the tools on the wall. With his back to the ‘bots he surreptitiously reached inside his pyjamas and adjusted himself. That done, he selected a sonic spanner and returned to the little astrobot. “I guess you’re too little to run out on me,” he said.

Seepy wished he had half a Galactic Credit for every time he’d heard *that* line before. He’d be a very rich ‘bot indeed!

Arty whistled innocently.

“Help me, Obeah Bum K’nobby. You are my only hope!”

Lurk applied the sonic spanner to the first inhibitor nut. There was a brief hum, and the nut fell to the floor. The holographic projection dimmed and flickered, then returned brighter than before. He quickly removed the

second nut, and as it clanked onto the floor the flickering light of the projection blinked out. Silence filled the room, but only for a moment.

“Wait. Where is she? Bring her back!” yelled Lurk. “Play back the whole message.”

Arty Farty burred briefly. Seepy hesitated. This was not going to go well.

“She says ‘what message?’”

Lurk’s eyes widened. He seemed on the verge of apoplexy. He opened his mouth to say something more, but was interrupted by a voice calling his name. “Lurk! Lurk! Dinner’s on the table!”

Lurk took a deep breath, then exhaled it slowly, hissing it out between clenched teeth. “I have to go now,” he said shortly, “but when I come back we’ll talk more about this message!” He turned and ran up the ramp, out of the garage.

Arty Farty whistled plaintively.

“No,” said Seepy Weepy as he climbed out of the oil bath and moved, dripping a trail of oil across the floor, to stand beside his stubby companion, “I don’t think he likes you at all.”

Arty whistled mournfully.

“Of course *I* still like you, you saucy minx! Why would you say that?”

Arty chirped happily.

Chapter 4

Cunning Linguini

Lurk poked despondently at his bowl of pasta, stirring it idly with his fork. He stabbed at a chunk of blue vegetable, speared it, and shoved it into his mouth. He washed it down with a swallow of warm blue hephelump milk.

He sighed loudly.

“What’s on your mind, boy?” asked Uncle Rowan around a mouthful of partly chewed pasta.

“I was just... That is, I...”

“Well, come on boy, spit it out,” snapped Rowan impatiently, spraying the table with chunks of pasta. “We don’t have all day!”

“I think those ‘bots we bought might be stolen,” said Lurk.

“Of course they’re stolen. Those Yahoos are the biggest bunch of thieves this side of the galactic centre. They sure as hell didn’t acquire any of their stock legally.”

“Oh, yes, I know that,” said Lurk defensively. “But I found a recording while I was cleaning...” He paused a moment. He had almost said *the astrobot*, but he felt it probably wasn’t wise to remind his uncle of exactly how they had come to buy an entirely useless ‘bot. “... one of them,” he continued. “Something about an *Obeah Bum*

K'nobby. I thought perhaps it might mean old Bent K'nobby?"

Aunt Beryl looked up. "Wasn't his name something like *Obi Wanker Nobby* or *Obi Bun Kimono* or something?" She subsided as Rowan glared at her.

"That old wizard is just a crazy old man," he lectured Lurk sternly. "He's dangerous, and he smells funny. You stay well away from him!"

"I heard he used to have a thing for young boys," added Beryl meekly.

"There, you see!" Rowan shook his head. "No, boy, you stay well away from him. Take those 'bots down to Angkor Het tomorrow and get their memories wiped; that'll be the end of it."

"Yes, Uncle." Lurk continued toying with his dinner. He twirled a ribbon of pasta onto his fork with exaggerated care, then placed it slowly into his mouth and chewed on it for a while before swallowing it down.

"Uncle Rowan?"

"I mean it! Stay away from him!"

"Yes, Uncle Rowan, I will," said Lurk. "I was just thinking. If these 'bots work out, perhaps I could go to the Imperial Academy *this* year?"

"But Lurk," sighed his uncle, "you *know* the harvest is when I need you the most!"

"That's what I'm saying, though, Uncle Rowan!" Lurk pressed. "Now that you've got these 'bots you won't *need* my help any more."

"Exactly what use do you think a translator 'bot and an astrobot will be?" demanded Rowan. "Do you think either of them can drive the harvesting tankers out to the collectors?"

"No, Uncle," said Lurk quietly.

“Do you think either of them can clamber up the ladder onto the tanker roof and hook up the suction hose?”

“No, Uncle,” said Lurk quietly.

“Do you think either of them is capable of hooking up the discharge hose to our storage tanks? Or ferrying the full tanks to market? Or defending the convoy against marauders?”

“No, Uncle,” said Lurk quietly, despairingly.

“Well then! The only reason we got the translator ‘bot was to keep those damn *Blotchy* merchants honest! And I’m really not sure that an astrobot is of any use at all around here, except perhaps as a mobile dustbin.” Rowan paused, a confused expression crossing his face. “Why *did* we get that stupid thing, anyway? Damn Yahoos must’ve pulled some fast talking to slip that by me!”

“Yes, Uncle.”

“So you see, Lurk? I need you for the harvest.” Rowan thought a moment. “If we have a good year this year, I’ll be able to afford to hire some help for next year. You can go off to the Academy then.”

“But it’s a whole ‘nother year!” whined Lurk petulantly.

“It’s only one more season!” snapped Rowan. “Now eat your vegetables or you won’t get any dessert.”

“Yeah, that’s what you said last year when Bates left,” muttered Lurk. “Uh, the bit about only one more season, anyway...” Lurk glared down at his plate. Suddenly he could stand it no more. He jumped to his feet and headed out of the kitchen.

“Where are you going, Lurk?” said Rowan.

“Looks like I’m going nowhere, doesn’t it?” Lurk stormed out.

Where he actually went was his bedroom, where he flung himself heavily down on his bed and began to sob...

Beryl looked across at Rowan. "You can't keep him here forever, Rowan. All of his friends have already gone to the Academy."

Rowan shrugged.

"He's just not a farmer," Beryl persisted. "He has too much of his father in him."

"That's what worries me," said Rowan. "Look at what a crazy psychopath *he* turned out to be. Do you remember what he did the last time he was here?"

"Of course I do." Beryl closed her eyes for a moment.

The first (and only) time they had met Mannequin Splitwhisker, he had gone on a killing rampage, leaving a trail of death and destruction through the local native villagers. And then he had left, leaving Rowan and his father, and young Rowan's future wife, to face the months of reprisals from the furious survivors. Rowan's own father had been killed during that horrific time, and only the intervention of the local Republican representative had brought the conflict to an uneasy end. Reparations had been paid, leaving the farm all but bankrupt. It had been years before they managed to recover financially.

Then, in the midst of trying to get their farm back on its feet and forget the worst of the nightmare, that crazy old Obeah man, Bum K'nobby, had had the gall to bring Mannequin's son, Lurk Splitwhisker, and asked them to look after the child. Rowan had refused at first, and only given in reluctantly to Beryl's pleas: after she had been wounded in one of the many native attacks she had been left barren, unable to conceive, and she felt that adopting the infant Lurk was possibly her last chance to have a

family of her own. Against his better judgement, Rowan had bowed to his wife's wishes. But he had warned Obeah Bum K'nobby in the strongest possible terms that he never wanted to see him again. They would raise the child in their own way, and wanted no interference from the old wizard.

"Lurk won't turn out like him, though," said Beryl, dragging her thoughts back to the present. "We've brought him up well. But he just doesn't have the patience for this life."

"That much is true," nodded Rowan. "I've tried to teach him, but he is too easily distracted. Too easily bored."

"We cannot protect him forever, my love," said Beryl. "Maybe he has a destiny, maybe not. But we have to let him live his own life."

"I guess you're right," said Rowan. He reached across the table and took her hand in his. "I never could argue with you, my love. I do wish the lad would get dressed, though!"

With a tender smile, and a twinkle in her eye, Beryl leaned forward and pressed her lips to his hand. "How about you and I get *undressed*?" she suggested.

Lurk sat up on his bed and wiped his face with his pyjama sleeve. The home had gone quiet; Rowan and Beryl had finally gone to bed. This was possibly his last chance to retrieve that message before the 'bot got its memory flushed. Quietly, stealthily, he slipped out of his bedroom and headed down the hallway.

He paused at the kitchen, which was lit only by a couple of ankle-level night lights embedded in the wall. Carefully he eased the door of the refrigerator open and took out the carton of hephelump milk. He glanced

around and then, exulting at this petty act of rebellion, he drank several large gulps, straight from the carton. As a final act of defiance he ran his tongue around the outside edge of the carton, catching any stray droplets. *That will show them!* Then he folded the container closed and returned it to its position in the refrigerator door. Easing the door closed as he wiped away the incriminating blue moustache, he left the kitchen and continued up the steps and out of the front door of the dwelling.

The planet's two suns had long since set, and the night was cooling rapidly. One of the moons was rising majestically over the distant rocky ridge, and it shed more than enough illumination to light Lurk's way to the garage. He entered the small access door beside the larger vehicle panel, and trotted down the ramp into the dimly lit room below.

The 'bots were nowhere to be seen.

"Hello," called Lurk. "Where are you? Seepy? Arty?"

There was no response.

"Hello," he called again.

Looking around, he spotted the remote which activated the 'bots' inhibitor nuts. He picked it up and, after squinting at it in the near darkness for a few seconds, he tentatively pressed his finger against one of the buttons. There was a loud clatter, followed by a crash, as Seepy Weepy jumped into life in the far corner, behind the hover truck, lost his balance, and fell to the floor.

Lurk winced. He trotted over to where the 'bot lay, struggling to sit up.

"What are you doing hiding back there?" asked Lurk.

"Please don't deactivate me," begged Seepy pathetically. "I tried to stop her, but she kept babbling on about her mission."

“What? Arty?” Lurk looked around the room, pressing frantically on the remote button and totally foiling Seepy’s attempts to get up off the floor. “Where is she?”

Seepy looked at him for a moment. How he longed for the days when you could give a human bad news without having to spell it out. “She left,” he said at last.

“Oh crap!” said Lurk. “Oh crap! Oh crap! Oh crap! That’s just great! I am gonna be in deep shit when Uncle Rowan finds out about *this*. ‘Why did you remove its nuts?’ he’ll want to know. ‘Because I wanted to see more of the message,’ I’ll say. ‘What message? Didn’t I tell you to stay away from that wizard?’ he’ll say. ‘But she had such nice boobies...’” Lurk trailed off, his panicked babbling momentarily silenced as he pondered how his uncle would take that response. Worse still, how would Aunt Beryl take it?

By this time Seepy Weepy had managed to clamber to his feet. “Perhaps, Master Lurk, we might still be able to catch her?” he suggested.

“What?” said Lurk. “Oh. Of course, she can’t have gone too far. She’s only a little astrobot, after all!”

He ran out of the garage and up the ramp, and Seepy followed at his regular walking pace. Halfway up the ramp, he was passed by Lurk heading quickly back down the ramp. As he reached the door at the top of the ramp, Lurk caught up with him again, gasping and puffing, binoculars in hand.

Once he had recovered his breath, Lurk stepped out into the moonlit night. Seepy followed. Lurk raised the binoculars to his eyes, fiddled with the controls, and then began to turn slowly, scanning for any signs of the wayward astrobot. Nothing.

“No sign of her,” he said.

“Should we go after her?” asked Seepy.

“Didn’t you hear me?” demanded Lurk. “There’s no sign of her. How can we follow her if we don’t know which way to even start looking?”

Once again, Seepy wished he had purchased that ‘sigh’ upgrade. Wordlessly he pointed to the ground. In the sand, the distinctive tracks of a small wheeled astrobot came out of the garage and turned due East; they ran in that direction for as far as the eye could see.

“Oh,” said Lurk. “Right. Sorry.” He raised the binoculars again and peered down the path the ‘bot had taken. He fiddled with the controls again, increasing magnification, trying various other modes, but there was still no sign of the astrobot.

“Should we follow her?” asked Seepy again.

“No,” said Lurk. “Not at night, it’s too dangerous, what with the desert dwellers and all. She’s gone too far. We’ll have to chase her down in the morning, and hope that nothing hungry gets to her before we do.”

“Oh,” said Seepy. “Oh dear.”

“That little ‘bot is going to get me into a lot of trouble,” muttered Lurk.

“Oh yes, Master Lurk,” agreed Seepy. “I’m afraid she excels at that.”

“What?” said Lurk. He turned angrily to face the translator ‘bot. “What did you just say?”

“Uh,” said Seepy uncertainly. “I said ‘she excels at that’. She is always causing trouble.” He felt a little guilty saying such things about Arty behind her back, but it was too late now.

“Always causing trouble? But it was *you* who said she would give us years of trouble-free service. It was *you* who convinced me to talk Uncle Rowan into buying...”

his voice trailed off as the memory of that afternoon's confusing events came to mind.

"Actually, Master Lurk, what I said..."

Lurk interrupted. "I *think*," he said coldly, "that it might be safer if you went back to calling me 'sir' for a while!"

"Yes sir. Thank you, sir." Seepy felt much more comfortable with this arrangement. There was something vaguely disturbing about being on a first-name basis with one's owner. "What I *said*, sir, was that she would give you many *hours* of trouble free service. And you got almost four out of her, sir. Which is, if it helps, almost a record. Sir."

Seepy subsided. He was picking up a vibe which suggested that, no, it didn't help.

"Fine," said Lurk. "Well, we shall have to go out first thing in the morning and pick her up."

"Yes sir," said Seepy.

Chapter 5

The Stiff-Man Cometh

The bridge of the *IPD Isosceles* was almost silent. Junior officers conversed only when absolutely necessary, and then only in whispers. Even the background murmur of incoming reports seemed to be more muted than was usual.

The harsh hiss of automated respiration dominated the room.

Although all eyes were locked assiduously to their owner's workstations, there was not a person on the bridge who was not painfully aware of every movement of the black-clad, menacing figure that currently stood on the upper observation deck, his back to the room, gazing out at the planet Ratatouille. Barth Vapour, Hard Lord of the Stiff, had a reputation for being particularly unforgiving; if only half of the rumours that surrounded him were true, he had been responsible for the summary executions of more than thirty Imperial officers. Even without the fearsome reputation, he was a terrifying, imposing man; dressed in a black rubberised distillation survival suit, his face perpetually hidden behind a skull-like black respirator mask and helmet, and towering over most people, he was not somebody you would like to meet in a dark alley.

His respirator mask clicked and hissed, clicked and hissed; his stillsuit gurgled occasionally as it recycled and purified his bodily fluids.

They said that his Stiff powers were akin to magic; that he could kill you with a gesture from across the room, that he could block laser blasts with his hand, that he could read minds. Perhaps his scariest feature of all, however, was that the polished black lenses which served as eyes in his mask ensured that one was never entirely sure where he was looking.

Captain John L Pickard was fairly certain that giving the Hard Lord bad news was *never* a good career move, and he wondered whom he had managed to annoy enough that he should draw this thankless assignment. Drawing a deep breath, doing his best to quell the tremors in his hands, he clenched his buttocks tightly and walked up the short flight of stairs to the upper deck. As he approached Lord Vapour, he wondered whether he should announce himself by clearing his throat.

“Yes, Captain Pickard? What do you have?” asked Lord Vapour without turning. His sonorous voice was deep, heavy, with the threat of imminent violence simmering just below the surface.

Pickard swallowed. “My Lord, the *Devastator* Station plans are not in the main computer. Several additional storage devices were discovered during the security sweep, but Imperial Intelligence reports nothing of value on them. However, there were several escape pods launched from the *Botanical Bayou* during her capture. The sensor logs show no life signs, and all pods were tracked to the planet’s surface. It is possible that the plans were placed in one of them.”

Lord Vapour nodded once. “I trust, Captain, that you have taken steps to secure those pods?”

“Yes, my Lord. Two squads have been despatched to the last known location of each pod, with orders to secure their contents and ensure the data does not fall into the wrong hands.”

“And the prisoners?”

“Three prisoners were recovered from the ship, my Lord. Preliminary interrogations have proved to be less than forthcoming with anything useful.”

“Very well, Captain. I shall oversee their further questioning myself.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“Captain?”

“Yes, my Lord?”

“In your opinion, does this planet resemble an eggplant?”

“Um...” Captain Pickard wondered what response the Hard Lord might be expecting. After a moment he decided that, in this instance, the truth might be the safest path to follow. He tore his eyes from the back of the Hard Lord’s helmet, and looked out the plasteel window at the looming purple planet. “Yes, my Lord,” he ventured. “In coloration, anyway. Perhaps not in its shape.” He held his breath.

“Thank you, Captain,” said Lord Vapour. “You may go.”

“Yes, my Lord. Thank you.” Captain Pickard saluted smartly, turned on his heel, and marched stiffly back towards the flight of stairs. Once safely out of the bridge, he turned and trotted urgently towards the nearest men’s room.

The escape pod lay on its side, half buried in the bruised purple sands of Ratatouille. Its access hatch was open, as though it had popped open on impact.

Standing at the top of the dune opposite the escape pod, Sergeant Samson 'Mauler' Strong surveyed the scene through his binoculars. The other members of Team Badger stood in a loose group around him, and the members of Team Fennec stood to one side. Fib had insisted that they stand downwind of him. A little way behind them, the stubby shape of an Imperial Troop Transport cast its long shadow across the sand in the light of the just-risen suns.

"What do you think, Jenkins?"

Izzy Jenkins lowered her own binoculars. "No sign of movement, but *something* opened that hatch. They *don't* just pop open on impact, after all. Wouldn't be a very good escape pod if the hatch was *that* loose."

"Anything else?"

Jenkins took another look, increasing the magnification. "Looks like tracks, leading away from the pod. Something came down in it." She frowned inside her helmet. "Logs said no life signs, so I guess it must be a 'bot. Two of them, by the look of those tracks; one bipedal, one on wheels."

Strong nodded. "Yeah, that's how I read it." He pointed into the glare of the rising suns. "Looks like they headed East."

Jenkins nodded back. "Looks like."

"Sergeant Lopez," Strong called to the leader of Team Fennec. "Deploy your men in covering positions here, while we go take a closer look at the pod."

"Sure thing, Sammy boy," Lopez hollered back. "We'll cover your cute little ass, don't you worry about that!"

Strong grinned. Switching briefly to a private channel, he said softly, "I'll be sure to return the favour when we get back to the ship!"

“Sounds like a plan, lover-boy!” Lopez replied on the same channel. She chuckled briefly.

Strong switched back to external speaker. “While we’re over there,” he continued, “I’ll need you to break out the speeder trikes; by the looks of things we’ll be needing them. Mikki, you can stay here and lend a hand with that.”

Mikhail Tetrakovavonovich sighed. “I always miss out on the fun, Sarge!”

“Don’t get too upset, Mikki,” said Strong. “There’ll be plenty of fun for all on this trip! Okay, Team Badger, you have your orders. Move out.”

As the grumbling Mikki headed back to the Transport, followed by a member of Team Fennec, the remaining members of Team Badger spread out into a rough wedge formation and moved down the shifting sandy slope of the dune, blasters unslung but held loosely.

When they reached the pod, halfway up the facing side of the other dune, all three were breathing heavily. Trudging through the loose sand was tiring work, and the two blazing suns, although barely above the horizon, were already pushing the temperature beyond comfortable limits. The internal temperature regulators of their armour struggled to keep them from overheating.

“It sure is hot out here,” said Jenkins.

“Yeah,” replied Fib, “but it’s a dry heat!”

“If you two are done, perhaps we can get on with it?” Strong said. “Fib, check out the pod. Jenkins, you analyse those tracks. See if you can get a better idea of what type of ‘bot we’re looking for.”

“And what will you be doing, Sarge?” asked Fib.

“Me?” said Strong. “Why, I’ll be standing over here in the shade!”

Muttering something uncomplimentary—albeit true—about Strong’s parentage under his breath, Fib clambered up into the cramped interior of the pod and began to conduct an electronic sweep. Before long, he was out again; he wandered around the side of the pod to join Strong in its shade. “Nothing in there, Sarge. Some residual static; definitely ‘bots on board recently. But no data storage devices.”

“Yeah,” Strong said. “I figured that would be the case. Looks like we’ve got ourselves another ‘bot hunt.”

The two men watched as Jenkins clambered back up the slope to join them.

“Anything?” asked Strong.

“Couple of things,” said Jenkins. “One of them is an astrobot. Probably an RS or RT series, it’s hard to tell them apart. The other is a CP series fuck ‘bot, humanoid, secondary skills include translation and protocol.”

“I’m impressed,” said Sergeant Strong. “You got all that from those tracks, huh?”

“Oh yeah,” she said. “Plus, I found this.” She held up a small golden rectangle of metal. Inscribed across it was the legend ‘CP-*Oui-P*’.

“Nice,” said Strong.

“Real nice,” agreed Fib. “Hey Jenkins, just how do you know so much about fuck ‘bots anyway?” His voice was so very carefully devoid of implication.

“That’s easy,” said Jenkins. “A girl’s gotta do what a girl’s gotta do when she can’t find any *real* men...”

Fib laughed. “Real men? You just haven’t been looking hard enough.”

“Last time I looked, you *certainly* weren’t looking hard enough.”

“Okay, people,” said Strong, “we’ve got some ‘bots to catch. How about we do that *today*.”

The *IPD Isosceles* had been joined in orbit around Ratatouille by two more Imperial warships.

“Admiral Feely.”

“Yes, Lord Vapour?” Admiral Feely moved to stand in front of the Stiff Lord. He stared nervously up at his own distorted reflection in the black helmet’s reflective eye lenses.

“Move the *Isosceles* out of the planet’s gravity well and prepare for the jump to hyperlight speed. We shall return to the *Devastator* Station immediately.”

“Yes, my Lord,” said Admiral Feely. “Uh, my Lord?”

“What is it, Admiral?”

“We still have several squads of Troopers down on the planet, my Lord.”

“Troopers do not concern me, Admiral. They can hitch a ride with one of the other *Dominators*, can they not?”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“Then why, Admiral, are we still in orbit around this awful planet?”

“Yes, my Lord.” Admiral Feely turned away and began to relay the Stiff Lord’s orders.

Stinging clouds of purple sand swirled around the Shock Troopers as the Transport lifted slowly into the air. Its stubby wings unfolded as it banked, the main engines fired, and it rapidly dwindled to a dot against the pale mauve sky, and was gone.

Seated astride his hovering speeder trike, Sergeant Strong looked around at the group of armoured Troopers. “Standard sweep formation, men, ten yard spread. Keep your speed to a minimum, and your scanners to a

maximum. We want to find these ‘bots, so if they changed course, we need to spot it.”

A ragged chorus of acknowledgement greeted the order.

“If you see anything unusual, don’t keep it to yourself.”

Another ragged chorus.

“Okay. Fib, you destroy that pod, then catch up with us. Let’s go!”

Fib’s reply was swamped by the rumble of the speeder trike engines being started. Seven of them swept straight across the small dip between the dunes and started their way eastward; Fib took his trike down level with the escape pod and swung the nose round. Three blasts of the trike’s weapon were enough to vaporise a section of the pod’s hull and ignite its fuel reserves; the pod detonated loudly, sending shards of metal in all directions. By the time they began to rain down on the sand where the Trooper had been, Fib had rejoined the formation.

Chapter 6

Splitwhisker Meets K'nobby

Lurk eased back on the throttle of the hover truck and brought the vehicle to a halt. It settled none too gently onto the sand.

“Why are we stopping, sir?” asked Seepy Weepy.

“Did you hear that?” asked Lurk. He stood up in the hover truck’s open cab and looked around. His blond hair had a ruffled, heroic look to it. Unfortunately the effect was somewhat spoiled by the pink pyjamas he was wearing. The novelty fluffy ewok slippers on his feet didn’t help much either.

“Hear what?” asked Seepy.

“I thought I heard something over the engine. A rumble, like distant...” Lurk trailed off. The word he was looking for was ‘thunder’, but Ratatouille had so little moisture in its atmosphere that electrical storms were virtually unheard of; the only one Lurk had ever experienced had been when he was three years old, and he didn’t actually remember it. Uncle Rowan may have mentioned thunder once, but Lurk didn’t remember *that* either.

“Like distant thunder?” asked Seepy. “Like a distant explosion? A long low rumble that you feel in your chest more than you hear it, that sounds as though something a

long way off has exploded, and the sound has been expanding across the desert for several minutes?"

"Yes," said Lurk excitedly. "Exactly like that."

"Sorry," said Seepy. "I didn't hear a thing."

"Oh," said Lurk, and then, "There..." He pointed back almost the way they had come. Seepy Weepy turned and looked at the dark cloud of smoke which billowed slowly into the air and caught the rays of the morning suns.

"It looks," said Seepy slowly, "as though something a long way off has exploded."

"That must be what we heard," said Lurk. "I mean, it must be what I heard but you didn't. Hear, that is."

"Well, thank you for explaining *that* mystery," said Seepy.

"You're welcome," said Lurk. He was completely immune to sarcasm by virtue of not understanding it.

He studied the smoke for a while. "We should investigate that, but there's no time. We have to find Arty Farty, if she's still in one piece. I'm sure we'll find out what happened when we get back." Lurk turned, and sat back in the driver's seat. "It's funny," he mused as he restarted the truck's grumbling old engine. "It's probably some old piece of space junk or something. They tend to fall to ground occasionally. A thing like that could sit in the sand undetected for a thousand years, but send up a puff of smoke, and within a day, half the planet will know all about it."

"I see," said Seepy Weepy.

The hover truck lurched drunkenly for a moment, then lifted into the air and began to move forward.

"I mean," continued Lurk as he guided the ungainly vehicle across the flat sandy plain, "if you wanted something to disappear on this planet, all you would have to do is put it out in the sand. After a day it would be

buried, and even if it did resurface sometime in the next hundred years it would be scoured clean and probably unrecognisable, thanks to erosion. But you blow it up, say, and every native for a hundred miles will come running to investigate.”

Seepy Weepy nodded.

“If you wanted to hide something, blowing it up is the worst thing you could do,” continued Lurk.

“Yes sir,” said Seepy. “Uh, sir, I think everybody gets the point, sir.”

“Everybody?” Lurk frowned in confusion. “I don’t know what you mean. I’m just making idle conversation, letting my imagination roam.”

“Yes sir,” agreed Seepy. “Of course you are.”

“I wasn’t even trying to make a point. After all,” he gestured around the cab, “there’s no point. There’s just the two of us here.”

“Quite right, sir,” agreed Seepy.

Lurk settled into silence for a moment. He was about to add something when the beep of the truck’s proximity sensor interrupted him. He tapped the display, and it beeped again.

“There she is,” he said.

Under normal circumstances, the proximity sensor of the truck would beep if there were a solid object within thirty feet of the truck’s bumpers. Between the two of them, Lurk and Seepy had reconfigured it to detect an electronic signature up to five miles away. Since they had started out, sometime before dawn, they had already collided with three large boulders which had not managed to get out of their way in time. Lurk hoped they would be able to get the sensor reset to its old configuration before Uncle Rowan found out.

He gunned the engine, and the heavy truck began to shudder alarmingly as it slowly, slowly accelerated.

Up ahead, the terrain was studded with a confusing jumble of large spikes of rock, jutting from the sand at odd angles. The reading appeared to be coming from somewhere within that rocky formation. Lurk slowed as they approached the outcrop, and finally brought the truck to a shuddering halt beside a towering spire of granite.

“We’ll have to go in on foot to look around,” he said. “We’ll never get the truck in there.” He shut the engine off, engaged the steering lock, and clambered out of the cab. Seepy attempted to follow suit, caught his foot on something, and tumbled over the side of the truck to the ground with a loud crash.

“Seepy! Seepy! Are you okay?” Lurk ran around to where the translator ‘bot lay in the sand, and helped him sit up.

“I’m done for, Sir,” groaned Seepy. “Doomed. You go on, leave me.”

“Uh, right,” said Lurk. “Don’t you think you’re overdoing it a bit? I mean, I’m hardly likely to leave you. For one thing, you’re right beside my only means of transport out of here. And look at you. You’re barely scratched.”

“Oh,” said Seepy. He looked around. “So I am. Sorry sir, the fall must have damaged one of my emotion emulator circuits.” He blinked. “I’ve shut down the faulty circuit, sir. Now, if you’ll give me a hand...”

Lurk helped haul the ‘bot to his feet.

“Will you be okay now?”

“Yes thank you, sir. Just a minor glitch, nothing to worry about.”

“Right. Well. Let’s go find Arty,” Lurk suggested.

“Arty,” called Lurk. “Arty Farty! Where are you?”

“Arty, please talk to me,” called Seepy.

They had been wandering amongst the rocks for several minutes now, shouting the name of the missing ‘bot, but so far they had seen no sign of her. There had been no whistled or beeped reply to their cries. The sand here was packed too hard to show any tracks.

“Arty Farty,” called Lurk.

“Arty...” Seepy tried again. He stopped. “Uh, sir, are we sure she is here?”

“Well, yes,” said Lurk. “Of course we’re sure,” he added uncertainly.

“Only I’m fairly certain we’ve covered all the ground in here,” said Seepy.

“Well, maybe...” Lurk stopped as a strange, grunting wail echoed around them.

“Um,” said Seepy. “What was that?”

“Come on,” said Lurk. “Let’s find out.”

“I’d really rather not,” said Seepy, but he followed Lurk up a shallow slope of rock to a good vantage point at the top.

Lurk lay down and lifted his binoculars to his eyes. He swept his gaze back and forth, until finally he saw something large and hairy standing just beyond the rocks.

“I thought so,” he said triumphantly. “It’s the desert dwellers. Local villagers. They ride around the desert on those hephelumps; you can see from the bridle and the huge ornate saddle that it’s not just a wandering wild hephelump. But I wonder where its rider is?”

“Um, sir...” began Seepy.

“Just a moment, Seepy,” said Lurk. “I’m trying to find the hephelump’s rider.” He scanned the binoculars back and forth.

“Sir, I think...”

“Quiet, Seepy. We need to know where the desert dweller has gone. They can be dangerous and unpredictable.”

“But sir, Master Lurk sir, I really think...”

“Seepy,” said Lurk flatly.

“Yes, sir?” asked Seepy.

“He’s standing right behind me, isn’t he, Seepy?”

“Yes, sir,” said Seepy. “I’m afraid so, sir.”

“Crap, crap, crap,” said Lurk. He rolled over onto his back and raised one arm defensively over his face to ward off the coming blow. He stared wildly at the strange, robed, dishevelled figure that towered above him, silhouetted against the suns.

“Hello Lurk,” said the strange creature.

“Um,” said Lurk.

“Don’t worry, you’re in no danger,” said the creature.

“Um,” said Lurk again. “You’re not the desert dweller,” he ventured.

“No, I’m not,” agreed the creature. “*She* is down there somewhere, tending to her hephelump.”

“Um,” repeated Lurk. “How do you know my name?”

“Because I’ve been watching you grow up for years, my boy. I’m Bent K’nobby.”

“Bent?”

“Come on, we don’t have long. Where there is one desert dweller there may well be more, and they often come in here to wait out the noon heat.” K’nobby cocked his head. “And we should get out of the heat ourselves.”

“Okay,” said Lurk. He sat up. “But we need to find our missing ‘bot first, before the desert dwellers do.”

“Um, this one?” said Bent K’nobby, indicating Seepy Weepy.

“No,” said Lurk, “we’re looking for a small blue astrobot.”

“Well then, your search is over,” said K’nobby. “I’ve got that back at my place...”

Bent K’nobby lived in a small dwelling beneath one of the large rocks, its entrance camouflaged perfectly. As Arty Farty and Seepy Weepy greeted each other excitedly, Lurk settled into a softly cushioned seat. K’nobby sat opposite him, and leaned back in his chair. As they talked, the old man idly puffed on a small, smouldering pipe. Its herbal scent drifted through the room.

“So tell me, young Splitwhisker, what are you doing out here.” He folded his arms, slipping his hands inside the sleeves of his dusty brown cloak. “The Jumbled Wastes are not to be travelled lightly.”

“I told you,” said Lurk, “we were out looking for our ‘bot. She, uh, ran away last night.” Lurk glared across the room at the stubby trouble-maker. “Actually, she seems to be looking for somebody named ‘Obeah Bum K’nobby.’ I thought, perhaps, he might be a relation of yours?”

“‘Obeah Bum K’nobby’? Now there’s a name I’ve not heard since, well, a long time ago.”

“In a galaxy far, far away?” asked Lurk with an inane grin.

“What? No,” said Bent. “What are you talking about?” He had a strange expression on his face.

Lurk sighed. “Sorry, nothing. It just seemed to fit, somehow.”

"I see," said the old man. He stroked his thin, wiry beard thoughtfully. He seemed to be staring straight through Lurk, as though remembering distant events. Smoke from his pipe curled lazily in the air in front of his eyes.

"Um," said Lurk, feeling a little uncomfortable. He suddenly remembered what his aunt had said about K'nobby having a liking for young boys, and he wondered whether it had been wise to accept the invitation of a crazy old man who, by his own admission, had been spying on Lurk for years. He cleared his throat.

Bent snapped back to the present. "Where were we?" he mused. "Oh yes. Yes."

"Pardon?" asked Lurk, with the politeness one was supposed to extend to the infirm of mind.

"Yes," said Bent. "I know 'Obeah Bum K'nobby'. He's me. Or rather, I used to be him. I haven't gone by that name since, oh, about a week after you were born. Although, strictly speaking, 'Obeah' is more of a title than a name."

"Oh." Lurk thought about this for a while. "So, uh, why did you change your name?"

"Let's just say I was trying to avoid any Imperial entanglements," said the old man evasively.

"Oh," said Lurk again. *On the run from the law? Likes little boys...* It occurred to Lurk that this line of questioning could rapidly become dangerous if the old man was, as seemed to be the case, hiding out on some back-woods planet because he was on the Imperium's "Ten Most Wanted" list for molesting the child of somebody important.

Lurk hurriedly changed the subject. It might not be wise to let Bent know that he suspected the truth.

"So the 'bot is yours?" he asked.

“Well, I don’t seem to recall ever owning a ‘bot before,” said the old man. He stood up and stepped over to where Arty and Seepy were whispering quietly to each other in the corner. Seepy Weepy looked up guiltily, or rather, as guiltily as it was possible for a ‘bot with a permanently frozen expression of surprise on his face to look.

“However,” continued Bent K’nobby, “these ‘bots do seem vaguely familiar. I remember a couple of ‘bots just like these from the days of the Clown Wars. But if these ‘bots are *those* ‘bots, and those ‘bots are here looking for me, then it means troubled times are upon us. And if those ‘bots came here via *you*, it can only mean one thing...” He stopped and drew deeply on the pipe, then puffed clouds of aromatic smoke into the room.

Lurk frowned. “Troubled times? That would explain why she was asking for...” He gasped. “The message,” he exclaimed. “There’s a message. The astrobot is carrying a message. For you,” he added as an afterthought.

Right on cue, Arty Farty began to project the holographic message, and the lovely semi-transparent lady in the lovely semi-transparent white gown shimmered into existence on the floor between Lurk and Bent.

“I seem to have found it,” said Bent.

“*General K’nobby,*” said the projection, “*I am Princess Labia Orgasma of Alderbark. I am sorry that I could not deliver this message to you in person, but I am afraid that by the time you see this I will be a prisoner of the Imperium. Even now an Imperial Planetary Dominator is attacking my ship, and we cannot hold out much longer. My father, Balls Orgasma, sent me to ask you to join forces with him as you did during the Clown Wars; we desperately need your help in the struggle*

against the Imperium—and on a personal note, it would be quite nice if you found time to come and rescue me, too.” She smiled prettily.

“I have placed data critical to our success in the memory of this ‘bot; please see that it is delivered safely to my father, on Alderbark. Of course, it is data that was transmitted directly to me while I was en route to you. If I had had the data before I left home, I could have just given it to Daddy then! The data, that is. Help me, Obeah Bum K’nobby. You are my only hope!” She glanced back over her shoulder as though she had heard a noise, then leaned down and reached out towards something in front of her.

“Now how do you turn this thing off?” she muttered, moments before shimmering out of existence.

“Hmm,” said Bent as he stroked his beard some more. “This *is* a pretty pickle. Lurk, you must learn the ways of the Source if you are to come with me to Alderbark.”

“Come with you to Alderbark?” squealed Lurk. Suddenly the adventure and excitement he dreamed of seemed to be drawing dangerously close, and he was no longer sure it looked as appealing as it had when it was safely inaccessible. “I don’t know what’s in that pipe of yours, old man, but you’re crazy if you think I’m going to Alderbark. I’ve got to get home.” He pointed out the small window in the wall beside Bent’s head; outside the sky was beginning to grow dark as the suns sank towards the horizon. “I mean, look, it’s getting past my bedtime. I’m already in deep shit as it is! Besides, it’s coming up for harvest time, and my uncle needs me.”

“That’s *him* talking, not you. Rowan is a good farmer, but he was always scared you would run off on some damn fool mission.”

“If it’s a damn fool mission,” retorted Lurk, “why in Hell’s Handbasket would I be interested?”

“Fortune and glory, kid,” said Bent. “Fortune and glory.” Something looking very much like a shooting star streaked across the darkening sky outside; neither of them noticed.

Fortune and glory. Adventure and excitement. Lurk felt trapped. This moment, right now, could be the turning point in his life. He could follow this crazy old Obeah Bum K’nobby on his mission of rebellion, or he could resign himself to the lonely life of a moisture farmer, stuck on this desolate pit of a planet until he died.

“Besides,” said Bent K’nobby, “you can’t leave yet. I want to give you something.” An excited gleam lit his piercing blue eyes.

“Uh,” said Lurk dumbly; he felt his bottom clenching in panic as he remembered his aunt’s warning. Suddenly moisture farming looked mighty attractive!

“Stand up,” said Bent as he moved towards Lurk. “I need to get in behind you.”

Lurk pressed his feet hard against the floor as he tried to squirm backwards through the wall. Unfortunately his fluffy ewok slippers didn’t have much grip to speak of, and his feet skidded out from under him.

“Come on,” said Bent impatiently, “this won’t take more than a minute.”

“You stay away from me, you crazy old poof!” yelled Lurk in desperation, waving his arms frantically in the air before him. “My Auntie told me all about you!”

Bent’s jaw dropped. His pipe fell from his slack mouth and clattered onto the floor. His lips trembled, and the look of hurt in his eyes was undeniable as he stared at Lurk.

Lurk had the horrible feeling that he had just made an awful mistake.

Bent staggered backwards a couple of steps, one arm groping around in the air behind him, and then he sank wearily into the chair opposite Lurk. He closed his eyes, and the youngster saw light reflect dimly from a drop of moisture on the old man's wrinkled cheek before he raised his arm and wiped his grubby brown sleeve across his face.

"I'm sorry," said Lurk. He felt wretched. "I didn't mean to..." No, that was a silly thing to say. "What I mean is, I didn't... I just thought... Aunt Beryl said that..."

"It's okay," mumbled Bent. "I know what some of the locals say about me. I thought you would be different, but how *could* you know any better?" He sighed.

"I really am sorry," said Lurk. "I'm just... Everything is happening so fast, and I'm just all confused, and I don't know what I'm saying any more. Please forgive me."

"Sure," mumbled Bent, with just a hint of a quiver in his voice. "Well, *it is* getting late; you should probably go home now before your aunt and uncle get worried."

"Maybe," said Lurk. After the misunderstanding, he didn't want to just leave. *Besides*, he told himself, *what about the girl? The Princess! Somebody has to rescue her!* "What, uh, what were you going to show me?"

"Does it matter?" asked Bent. "You can always come back next week, if you like."

Lurk had a strange feeling, almost a premonition, that if he left now, he would never see the old hermit again.

"No, really," he said. "I'd like to see it, if you still want to show it to me. Really I would. And I really am most dreadfully sorry. Honestly I am!"

“Well, okay,” Bent sighed. He closed his eyes again, took several deep breaths, and Lurk could see his old body straightening as he pushed his negative emotions away. When he opened his eyes again, he met Lurk’s gaze unflinchingly. It was Lurk who looked away first, racked by guilt.

“It’s in that chair,” said Bent, pointing towards Lurk’s seat with a gnarled old finger. “The cushion lifts up.”

Lurk stood, turned around, and leaned forward to grasp the cushion. As he did so, the treacherous part of his mind pointed out that he was now in exactly the position that he had so dreaded three minutes earlier. *Shut up*, he told himself, but still he lifted the cushion with some haste and looked at the object which lay inside.

It was a torch.

He reached in and lifted it out, then replaced the seat cushion and turned to face Bent. The old man had not moved.

“It’s a torch,” said Lurk as he toggled the switch.

A dazzling beam of blue light stabbed out of the device and punched a round hole neatly in the ceiling. Lurk yelped and dropped the device; as it fell it automatically returned to the ‘off’ position, and the silver cylinder clattered onto the floor beside Bent’s pipe. A trickle of purple sand fell through the hole. Lurk stumbled back and fell heavily into his chair.

“It’s, uh, *not* a torch?” he ventured.

“It is your father’s light rapier,” explained Bent. “He would have wanted you to have it. Go on, pick it up. Give it a try.”

“You knew my father?” asked Lurk as he leaned forward and gingerly retrieved the fallen rapier.

“Oh yes,” said Bent. “Mannequin and I fought side-by-side in the Clown Wars. Your father was an incredible pilot, and a good friend.”

Lurk frowned, confused. “A pilot in the Clown Wars? No, that’s not right. My father was a murdering psychopathic good-for-nothing scumbag!”

Bent nodded. “That is what your uncle wanted you to believe. He didn’t want you following in your father’s footsteps. Perhaps, from his point of view, it is true.”

“From *his* point of view?” asked Lurk incredulously.

“You will find, Lurk,” said Bent, “that most of the truths to which we cling depend greatly upon our own point of view.”

“I guess that makes sense,” said Lurk. “So what is the truth from your point of view?”

“A young Jubbly Knight named Barth Vapour, who was a student of mine until he was seduced by the Hard Side of the Source, helped the Emperor hunt down and destroy the Jubblies. As a Stiff Lord, he betrayed and murdered your father.”

“I see,” said Lurk. “I don’t understand some of the terms you’re using, but let’s see if I’ve got this straight. What really happened was that my father *became* this Barth Vapour dude and went on a rampage, at which point you ceased considering him to be your friend Mannequin Splitwhisker?”

“Well, uh...” Bent K’nobby looked down at the floor for a while. His pipe lay there, smouldering. “That about sums it up,” he said at last.

“And so my father, this Barth Vapour, is still alive?” Lurk asked slowly.

“Yes, as far as I know,” said Bent. “I *did* actually think he had died when... Well, before you were born, anyway. But it seems he survived his, uh, accident.”

Barely. He is more machine than man, now.” A haunted expression flitted across Bent’s face.

“Cool!” said Lurk. “Tell me more. Tell me about Jubblies, and the Stiff. And what is the Source? I’ll need to learn the ways of the Source if I’m to come with you to Alderbark!”

“Patience, young Splitwhisker,” admonished Bent. “*If* you are coming with me, there is a lot you have to be told, and it is getting late. Much better if we *both* get a good night’s sleep before I attempt to explain the things you will need to know.”

Lurk yawned. “I guess you are right,” he said. He looked over at the ‘bots, but they had both long since deactivated themselves out of boredom and they sat motionless in the corner. “One last question, though. One thing I have to know. What happened to my mother?”

“Ah,” said Bent. “Your mother loved your father dearly. When he turned to the Hard Side, she lost the will to live. We did our best, but she died in childbirth. We managed to save you and...” Bent broke off.

“And...” prompted Lurk.

“Ask me again sometime,” said Bent. “That is a story for another day. We have much to do tomorrow. You will need your sleep.”

Lurk yawned again. “Can’t argue with that,” he said ruefully.

“Come,” said Bent as he stood and ducked through a low doorway into another part of the dwelling. “You can bunk with me...”

Lurk froze.

Gay laughter echoed back from down the hallway. “Just a joke, Lurk. The guest bedroom is made up. And I see you’re already wearing your pyjamas...”

Chapter 7

Obeah Bum K'nobby Bakes a Cake

Lurk woke feeling refreshed. He sat up in the narrow bed, yawned, and stretched. And blinked in confusion; this wasn't his room.

The events of the night before flooded back into his mind. The Princess. The light rapier. The Source. The Jubbly and the Stiff.

Calling Bent K'nobby a "crazy old poof"!

"Oh crap," muttered Lurk as his face flushed bright red with embarrassment.

He got out of bed, smoothed down his pink pyjamas, and slipped his feet into his fluffy ewok slippers. The sight of them triggered a pang of guilt which replaced the embarrassment; what would Uncle Rowan and Aunt Beryl be thinking of his absence?

"Oh Fluffy! Oh Snuggles!," he said to his slippers, "what are we doing here? It's like something out of a dream, or, I dunno. Maybe I'm just going crazy." The slippers, as usual, made no reply, and merely continued to grin their happy grins and gaze fixedly across the rooms with their glass button eyes.

"If you're saying coming here was a bad idea, I'm beginning to agree with you."

Lurk glanced around the room. He saw the silver cylindrical handle of the light rapier lying on the bedside

table, and picked it up gingerly. Then he took a deep breath and shuffled out of the room into the hallway beyond the curtain.

The delicious smell of baking filled his nostrils. He sniffed, and followed the scent down the hallway and into a spacious kitchen-cum-dining room. As he entered the room, Bent K'nobby pushed something into the oven and closed the door. The old man stood, floral oven mitts on his hands.

"Ah, Lurk, good morning. I was hoping to have this done before you got up. Oh well. Arty."

Arty Farty whistled in acknowledgement; the stubby 'bot was down behind the breakfast bar, hidden from Lurk's view. Bent removed his oven mitts, and lifted a bowl from the counter.

"Arty, I think it's time for a test. Take this bowl to Seepy and find out if they're ready," he said as he placed the bowl on a rack mounted on Arty's domed head.

Arty bleeped and trundled slowly out of the room. As the 'bot wheeled past Lurk he glanced down into the bowl; it was full of black, unappetising cookies. A furrow of confusion creased Lurk's forehead.

"Take a seat, Lurk," said Bent. "Have some breakfast." He waved to the end of the bar, where a bowl and a selection of cereals had been placed out for the youth.

Lurk sat, and carefully placed the light rapier on the benchtop beside him. "Can 'bots eat?" he asked as he poured some muesli into his bowl.

"What?" asked Bent. "Oh, the cookies. They're mostly engine oil, toxic waste, and trace minerals. It's my own recipe. Should be able to recharge their power cells for a week or two..."

“Oh.” Lurk picked up a carton of hephelump milk, pushed back the flaps to pop it open, and poured a generous quantity of the pale blue fluid over his muesli.

He spooned some of the cereal into his mouth.

“So,” he said awkwardly as he chewed, “tell me about the Source, and the Jubbly, and ... and everything.”

“Very well,” said Bent as he bustled around the kitchen. “But there is a lot to tell, and not all of it will be easy to hear.”

“Wouldn’t it be better if you spoke a little louder, then?” said Lurk.

“I mean,” said Bent patiently, “that it will not be easy for you to accept. Some of it will go against everything that you think you know about the world.”

“Oh,” said Lurk sheepishly.

“I would have liked to tell you much of this years ago, but your uncle forbade me to have any contact with you while you were young and tender and receptive.” Bent sighed wistfully. “So now,” he continued, “in order to accept what I am going to tell you, you must unlearn what you have learned.”

“Oh,” said Lurk again. “Right. Okay. Fire away then!”

“Do you believe in destiny, Lurk?” asked Bent.

“Um, I’ve never really thought about it,” said Lurk. “No, not really, I suppose.”

“Why not?”

“Because, uh, because I don’t like the idea of not being in control of my life, I guess. But at the same time I feel that I’m destined for bigger things than this.” Lurk gestured vaguely around himself.

Bent nodded. “Indeed,” he said. “Do you know why you’re here?”

“Uh,” Lurk began, but Bent interrupted him.

“You are here because you know something. What you know you can’t explain, but you feel it. All your life you’ve felt that there is something wrong with the world. It’s like a splinter in your mind’s eye, driving you mad. It is this feeling that has brought you to me. Do you know what I’m talking about, Lurk?”

“Haven’t a clue,” shrugged Lurk. “I’m here because that silly Arty ‘bot ran away and I had to catch it before Uncle Rowan...” he trailed off guiltily.

“But beneath that,” persisted Bent, “is there another feeling you have had? A feeling that things are not as they appear? That things should be different?”

“Nope,” said Lurk. He spooned some muesli into his mouth and chewed thoughtfully. “Although, I have always felt that my being a moisture farmer was wrong; I’ve always wanted adventure and excitement, if that helps.”

“Adventure? Excitement?” Bent sighed. “A Jubbly craves not such things. I mean,” he added with a frown, “a Jubbly does not crave such things. But perhaps it is a start.”

“What are you trying to say, Bent?” asked Lurk impatiently. “Just spit it out.”

“I’m talking about the Array,” said Bent ominously.

There was a silence, as Lurk considered this statement. “What?” he finally asked. “An array, like in mathematics, like a matri...”

“Stop stop stop!” yelled Bent frantically, and Lurk recoiled in surprise.

“Sorry Lurk,” said Bent, “but you must never, *ever* say the M-word. It is too dangerous. Their search programs will detect it.”

“What?” asked Lurk, feeling more and more that all common sense was rapidly fleeing from this

conversation. “‘Their search programs’? They who? The Imperium? What are you talking about?”

“Please, Lurk, bear with me. All will become clear in time, I promise. I said this would not be easy for you to hear.”

“You weren’t fuckin’ kidding!” muttered Lurk under his breath. “Okay,” he said aloud. “Please continue. Tell me about this ‘Array’.”

“The Array is everywhere,” explained Bent. “It is all around us, even now, in this room. The Array surrounds us, and penetrates us; it binds the galaxy together. And yet, paradoxically, the Array is generated by the Source, and it is the Source which gives a Jubbly his power.”

Lurk nodded. The old man was obviously quite mad, and it was always best to humour the insane.

Bent looked at him quizzically, as though expecting something.

“So, uh, yeah, but what *is* the Array?” asked Lurk hesitantly.

“The Array is control. The Array is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to hide the truth.”

“I see,” said Lurk. “No I don’t, that tells me nothing. What is the Array?”

“One cannot be told what the Array is,” said Bent mysteriously. “One has to be shown.” He sighed. “However, since this version of the Array has no exits, and there is no way for us to awake from the nightmare, I guess I *will* have to tell you.”

“Oh good,” said Lurk.

“The Array,” and Bent indicated the room around them, “is a virtual world, a computer generated program being fed directly into our brain stems. It is everything we see and hear and touch.”

“O...kay,” said Lurk. *This must be Friday*, he thought. *I never could get the hang of Fridays!* He looked idly around the room. Movement caught his eye, and he peered closer: on the far wall, high up near the ceiling, a pair of entwined lizards seemed to be mating. “So nothing we see is really here?” he asked.

“That’s right,” said Bent.

“Not even them?” Lurk pointed up at the pair of randy lizards.

“Um,” Bent looked. “No, not even them.”

“But if they’re not real, why are they, uh, doing what they’re doing?” asked Lurk. “What’s the point?”

Bent glared up at the copulating reptiles with distaste. “More to the point,” he muttered, “why must they do it on my wall?” He looked back at Lurk. “Um, creatures like that, lizards and birds, anything that is not self-aware, is typically a self-contained Object, a digital construct that exists within the Array. It is programmed to follow a few simple rules, including, well, activity like *that*. It’s all part of the simulation, added to enhance the realism.”

“And if we are not here, then where are we?”

Bent nodded. “These bodies that we see here are virtual avatars, generated by the machines. Our actual bodies are somewhere else, stored in a huge grid. In fact, from the sparse evidence and clues we’ve been able to gather, it seems likely that this planet does not even exist. Ratatouille, Alderbark, Coruscate, Hoff, Correlation...” Bent shook his head. “Have you ever heard of a planet called ‘Earth’?”

“No,” said Lurk. “Oh, wait, it does sound familiar. I think Seepy Weepy mentioned it last night. Something about the planet we originally came from?”

“Yes,” said Bent. “Except, if our information is correct, we are *still there!*”

“Oh, come on!” exclaimed Lurk. “That just makes no sense whatsoever. If *they*—whoever *they* might be—were going to put us all in some sort of virtual reality, for reasons unknown, wouldn’t it make more sense to at least simulate part of our own history? The history of this ‘Earth’? Give us a nice familiar fantasy to live in? Why would they go to all the effort of inventing new worlds? I mean, this dump is hardly a paradise, is it?”

Bent nodded. “That is a fair question, Lurk. Your insight serves you well.”

Lurk sighed. “Is there an answer?”

“Apparently, they tried that. Once, twice...” Bent shrugged. “We’re not really sure how many times; all we know for sure is that there have been several versions of the Array before this one. Each time, they designed it to keep us happy. Each time, eventually, it failed. But they have learned from their mistakes, and so far this version has remained stable for over three hundred years.”

“And...” Lurk prompted.

“Rather than basing this version upon reality, it appears that they based it upon popular literary and cultural entertainment from humanity’s prime. They did not need to invent details; it seems we had already done that for them. They simply borrowed from our fiction and plugged us in.”

“Oh. Which is why you asked me about ‘destiny’?” asked Lurk. “Because we all have our destiny to fulfil, because we are all following a pre-determined Script?”

“That would seem to be the case,” agreed Bent. “Except that, after three hundred years, it seems that the Array is finally showing signs of stress. It is fracturing. The lines between Scripts are blurring, and some cross-over is occurring.”

“But what does all of this mean for us?” asked Lurk. “You said that there are no exits from the Array, that there is no way to wake up from this virtual reality. And even if we did, what would we wake up to? It seems to me that this simulation is better than life, if the alternative is to be lying around plugged into a grid, or whatever. So if we truly are stuck here, on Ratatouille, with no possible way of escaping this Array, what difference does it make?”

“Possibly none,” said Bent.

Lurk gaped at him. His flabber was well and truly gasted. His dumb had been founded. Well, you get the point.

“None?”

“Possibly,” agreed Bent.

“But what do we do? Shouldn’t we be trying to escape the Array?”

“No,” said Bent, “we have to go to Alderbark.”

“So, in actual fact, the existence or non-existence of the Array is completely irrelevant to us, and we just have to go about our lives regardless?” said Lurk.

“That about sums it up,” said Bent.

“So why did you tell me all this rubbish?” asked Lurk.

“It is necessary,” said Bent. “You must believe in the Array if you are to learn the ways of the Source, and become a Jubbly.”

“Of course,” said Lurk. If nothing else, this morning’s conversation had left him well trained in the art of sarcasm. “Obvious, really. How can you expect *anybody* to believe that ‘Array’ twaddle?”

“I cannot prove anything, of course,” said Bent, “because, apart from anything else, proof tends to conflict with faith. And you must have faith in the Source in order

to manipulate its power. However, I *can* provide you with some evidence to strengthen your faith.”

“Go right ahead,” said Lurk.

Bent picked up the light rapier from the benchtop, and activated it. There was a soft hum as the bright blue energy blade, about three feet long, flared into existence. Bent swung the weapon through the air, and its hum changed pitch as it moved. “This,” said Bent, “was your father’s light rapier,” he said.

“Yeah,” said Lurk, “you told me that last night.”

“It is the weapon of a Jubbly Knight,” continued the old man, a little testily. “Not as random or as clumsy as a blaster, this is an elegant weapon from a more civilised age.”

“Very nice,” agreed Lurk.

“As you found out last night,” said Bent, “it will cut through just about anything.”

“Oh. Yeah, sorry about your ceiling!”

Bent waved away his apology. “The real question, though, is this: what stops the blade?”

“What do you mean?” asked Lurk.

“Well, look. The generator for the blade is inside the handle here, the blade is projected outwards, and then it just stops. It doesn’t fade away, as you might expect if it were reaching its maximum range. It just...”

“Stops,” completed Lurk. “I guess that is a little odd,” he agreed.

“It’s more than odd,” said Bent, “it’s outright impossible. Unless the entire weapon is actually artificially simulated.”

“Oh.” Lurk didn’t sound convinced.

“Well, never mind,” said Bent. He deactivated the weapon and handed it over the counter to Lurk. “Just think about it for a while.”

He was interrupted by a beeping sound from behind him. He turned and bent down to peer into the oven. "There we go," he said. "Just about done." He put on his floral mitts and opened the oven door.

"So, uh, how does the Source work, anyway?" said Lurk.

Bent lifted the cake out of the oven and its delicious aroma filled the room. He placed it carefully on a cooling tray.

"You're a bit of a computer geek, aren't you?" he said. "You know the importance of source code?"

"Well, yeah, I've written a script or two in my time," admitted Lurk, "and played the occasional game. How did you know?"

"All Jubbies are proficient programmers," said Bent, "and you, young Lurk, have the potential to be the biggest Jubbly of all."

"Oh," said Lurk. "Cool!"

"Just as regular source code defines a script, or a program, so the Array is defined by the Source." Bent paused. "Time is getting away from us, young Lurk. We need to get moving soon. Hand me that basket, will you?"

Lurk jumped down off his stool and retrieved the picnic basket, indicated by Bent, from a high shelf. He placed it on the benchtop.

"Now," said Bent, "if you wouldn't mind washing up your breakfast stuff while I pack this, I can give you the last few details. In truncated form, anyway; we shall have plenty of time on the trip to Alderbark to begin your training in earnest."

"Okay," said Lurk. He gathered up the bowl and spoon, and carried them over to the sonic sink.

"A long time ago," said Bent, and he paused, looking at Lurk expectantly.

“What *does* that mean?” asked Lurk. “‘A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.’ Why is that sentence in my head?”

“We are not entirely sure,” said Bent, “but several Jubbly scholars believe it was a phrase somehow connected with the form of entertainment upon which our galaxy has been based. The fact that you are aware of it suggests that you truly are strong in the ways of the Source.”

“Oh, okay,” said Lurk. He wiped the bowl clean inside the sonic shield, feeling the skin on his hands tingle as he did so. “Go on: ‘a long time ago...’”

“...there was a man born inside the Array who found he had the power to manipulate reality. Of course, at the time he was not aware of the existence of the Array; however, he had some kind of psychic ability to manipulate the Source of the Array at will, and hence manipulate what he perceived to be reality.”

“Go on,” said Lurk as he finished cleaning the spoon. He had a sudden, mesmerising thought.

“That man founded the Jubbly Order,” continued Bent, but Lurk was only partially aware of what the old man was saying. He was staring at the simple steel spoon in his hands. *If any of this is true*, thought Lurk, *then this spoon is nothing more than an illusion. In fact*, he thought, *there is no spoon!*

“He gradually learned the nature of his power, and the nature of his reality.”

Lurk reached out with his consciousness, trying to detect the Source of the spoon. Nothing. Wait. What was that. It seemed as though Lurk could almost feel a sound that tasted green, a ghostly flicker of unreality that emanated from the spoon. He examined the sensation with his mind.

“He taught others, and freed many people from the prison of their ignorance.”

There was no recognisable syntax to the Source; it was not a programming language that Lurk knew. And yet there was an order to it, a pattern within the chaos. Somewhere in there was the code which defined the shape of the spoon. There were parameters which controlled its size, the length of its handle, how straight it was.

“But there must be balance in all things,” Bent rambled on as he made sandwiches, unaware that his student had gotten distracted by something shiny.

Lurk gingerly reached out with his mind, trying to decipher the code, trying to make sense of it all. *There, that’s it*, he thought. Carefully, gently, he tweaked a part of the spoon’s Source.

“As the Jubblies grew, so the Stiff emerged,” said Bent.

Lurk gasped.

“Yes, they can be quite frightening when you see them for the first time,” agreed Bent.

Trembling, Lurk put down the fork and stepped back from the sink. He felt a little weak at the knees. *It was all true...*

“Anyway, the Stiff emerged. There are two sides to the Source. The Soft Side represents all that is good and pure; the Hard Side represents all that is rancid and evil,” said Bent.

“Comments,” muttered Lurk automatically. He was, after all, a programmer at heart.

“Why yes,” said Bent. “Comments, versus code. Two different sides of the Source. Some would say that both sides are equally important, but neither the Jubbly nor the Stiff agree on that point.”

Lurk sat down rather heavily, still staring warily at the fork. He swallowed dryly. "But, uh, how can the Hard Side have any power? Comments may be necessary, but they have no control over the program."

"That is true," said Bent. "However, we suspect that the computers themselves are responsible for the Stiff. We suspect that there is a deeper level of code hidden within the comments, from which the Stiff draw their power. We are," he admitted, "not entirely sure how the Hard Side actually works, for studying it can be extremely dangerous. Possibly it is a form of steganography, hidden there by the machines. Perhaps even some master language we have not yet discovered, which generates the code *from* the comments."

"Whoa!" said Lurk. "That would be... That's just evil!" He paused a moment to consider this. "Is the Hard Side more powerful than the Soft?"

"No," said Bent. "It is quicker, easier, more seductive, perhaps, but not more powerful. Not as such."

"Oh?"

"The Hard Side is not more powerful. However, a Stiff Lord is, in many ways, an Agent of the computers. As such, individually, a Stiff Lord may be more powerful than a single Jubbly. Fortunately they are few in number. By their very nature, they do not tend to work well with others."

"Oh."

"The best advice I can give you, young Lurk, is that if you ever meet a Stiff Lord, turn and run. Nobody who has ever fought a Stiff in single combat has survived. Now, give me a hand with this picnic basket, will you?"

Lurk held open the lid of the wicker basket as Bent placed the carefully wrapped cake inside, on top of the

many packages of sandwiches. The old man wedged a couple of drink flasks into the empty space that remained.

“Okay,” he said. “We’ll be off, shall we?”

Chapter 8

The Long Dong Rong Pong Song

The *IPD Isosceles* settled into a parking trajectory alongside the Imperial *Devastator* Station, the battle cruiser's mile long hull dwarfed by the huge bulk of the Station. The *Devastator* Station was an enormous cylindrical construction, perhaps five miles in diameter and twenty miles in length. During the initial design and planning phase of the Station, it had been referred to by the nickname *Death Tube*, but before it had become fully operational, a memo had gone around requesting that use of the nickname should cease; the Imperium's Public Relations department felt that it did not project the image they were looking for with the new station.

A small *Tydirigible* class shuttle dropped from one of the smaller docking bays of the *IPD Isosceles* and flew towards the *Devastator* Station. Three THIGH Fighters swept down from an adjacent bank of launch tubes and took up escort positions around the shuttle. The four craft covered the short distance of open space within minutes, and the THIGH fighters broke formation and peeled off as the shuttle approached the brightly illuminated entrance of the docking bay. Two of the THIGH Fighters swung around and sped back towards the *Isosceles*. The third spiralled upwards and cut its gravity repulsor engines; it drifted silently in space for a moment, and

then an attractor beam stabbed out and drew the Fighter up into the T-73a Launch Tube.

The shuttle's wings folded neatly as it entered Docking Bay S-73 of the *Devastator* Station. It settled gently on the polished floor, and the ramp hissed open. The ranks of assembled Shock Troopers snapped to attention.

The fearful figure of Barth Vapour strode down the shuttle's ramp and across the deck of the docking bay. Commander Jared fell hastily into step beside him, having to scramble to keep up.

"Report, Commander," said Vapour.

"Yes, my Lord," gasped Jared. "The prisoners are being transferred from the *Isosceles* now. They should be ready for your personal attention within the hour. Uh, the Great Muff requests your presence in the boardroom for a meeting due to begin in, uh, thirteen minutes. And, uh..."

Barth Vapour stopped and turned towards the Commander. "And, Commander?" His breathing regulator hissed menacingly.

"And we taped all your favourite programs while you were away."

"Excellent, Commander." Vapour recommenced striding across the deck. "Inform the Great Muff that I am on my way."

"Yes, Lord Vapour."

Inside his THIGH Fighter, THIGH Pilot Lieutenant Colonel Javamaprandarah Rajamajarandaibuggah removed his flight helmet and returned it to its storage niche. He flipped a few switches, powering down the internal systems of his Fighter. Finally he reached up and detached his pair of lucky fluffy dice from the rear view monitor, and slung them casually over his shoulder.

Unlocking the Fighter's access hatch, he clambered out, dropped down onto the flight deck, and waddled across the hangar bay to the change rooms.

As with all THIGH Pilots, Javamaprandarah Rajamajarandaibuggah was not entirely human. Produced by the same technology which had, thirty years before, culminated in the Clown wars, Javamaprandarah and his fellow THIGH Pilots were genetically engineered to be able to withstand the high stresses generated by the engines of the craft they flew.

THIGH Fighters—the acronym, describing their method of propulsion, stood for Triple High Intensity Gravitational Hummers—were ungainly-looking craft whose appearance belied their high manoeuvrability. From the central, spherical cockpit, three arms radiated out, each arm supporting a large solar panel which provided a secondary source of power for the Fighter. Equi-spaced between the solar panel support arms were the three large singularity generators, producing the artificial gravity wells which enabled the craft to change direction almost instantly; based upon the same technology which provided the artificial gravity field for ships the size of the *IPD Isosceles*, the generators bathed the interior of the Fighters in a lethal field of conflicting gravitational forces which would have crushed a normal human to a pulp within seconds.

THIGH Pilots—the acronym stood for Transmogrified Hermetically Incubated Genetic Humans and, while coincidentally similar to the acronym describing their ships, was completely unrelated—were grown in vats, and indoctrinated from an early age with the training and propaganda required to turn them into highly efficient Imperial Fighter Pilots. All were barely more than three feet tall, with highly dense musculature

and bones, in order to be able to function efficiently within the high-grav environment to which they were exposed. Their lower body tended to be quite well padded, their buttocks and thighs artificially moulded to fit the seats of their craft and support their weight.

Consequently, of course, they tended to waddle. One could often hear a THIGH Pilot approaching merely from the sound of his thighs rubbing together.

Javamaprandarrah Rajamajaraibuggah, known to his Imperial Overlords as THIGH-72493a, and known to his friends as Joe, waddled through the small circular doorway into the THIGH change rooms. He stripped out of his black flight suit, folded it neatly across a bench, and stepped into the showers. As he lathered up, the stocky Pilot began to sing.

Despite never having been exposed to such forms of entertainment during their intense training regimen, and despite being tone deaf and therefore completely unable to hold a tune, and having no sense of rhythm, most THIGH Pilots loved to sing. While their handlers did not object to the practice in principle, the fact that THIGH singing invariably sounded very much like a small furry animal being run through a blender had led to several restrictions being laid down, the most important of these being that they should only ever sing in their own company.

After a few minutes the sounds of small furry pain ceased, the hiss of water stopped, and a minute after that Joe waddled back out into the change rooms, a towel wrapped around his waist. Tapping his combination into the keypad, he opened his locker and, after sniffing cautiously at his flight suit, hung it back on the rack. He whipped the towel off and tossed it into the nearest laundry chute, then dressed in a pair of blue shorts and a

grey T-shirt. Locking his locker again, Joe waddled barefoot out of the change room through a second door opposite the one through which he had entered.

The designers of the *Devastator* Station, while recognising the necessity and, indeed, the value of THIGH Pilots, were also sensitive to the fact that many people were more than a little uncomfortable in their presence; likewise it was acknowledged that the diminutive THIGH sometimes felt threatened when being towered over by a group of full-sized humans—whom THIGHs generally referred to, amongst themselves, as ‘Bigguns’. In an effort to maintain a happy crew, and to avoid any recurrence of the unfortunate incident aboard the *IPD Agamammanon* a few years back, they had designed into the Station an entire network of THIGH-sized walkways and travel tubes, thereby keeping interactions between the two groups at a minimum. It was down one of these corridors that Joe now walked, the leathery soles of his bare feet slapping heavily on the polished metal.

He stopped at the elevator and pushed the button.

As he waited, he whistled a tuneless tune. It was the only kind he knew.

There was a soft *ping* and the doors hissed open. Joe stepped into the elevator and keyed in the combination for the THIGH food court. Elevators were another reason for building two independent networks of corridors; in a standard sized elevator, THIGH Pilots could only reach the bottom two rows of buttons. There was no elevator music in a THIGH elevator; anything which might actually put a group of THIGH into a singing mood was considered a bad idea.

The doors *pinged* open again, and another THIGH stepped into the elevator with Joe. They nodded politely

to each other but did not speak. After travelling a short distance the elevator stopped again and the second THIGH walked out into one of the dormitory levels.

Joe yawned. He had had a long day.

Ping. The doors opened onto the large atrium of bustling chaos that was the THIGH food court. Any large ship had THIGH Pilots active around the clock, and the *Devastator* Station was the largest by far. Some of the THIGH here were eating their breakfasts, some their dinners.

The chamber echoed with the susurrations of a hundred pairs of thighs rubbing together.

Joe sauntered out into the court and looked around. Although several speciality restaurants offered food from a wide variety of cultures across the galaxy, most of the food bars offered various ranges of standard THIGH food, custom designed to best fuel their genetically engineered bodies.

“Hey Joe,” called a familiar voice. “Whaddaya know?” Joe looked in the direction it had come from, and saw his friend, First Lieutenant Nummalarandrajah Nuttarumbalum, waving at him. Joe waved back and wandered over.

“Hey, NumNut,” he greeted, “how’s it going?”

“Oh, you know,” said NumNut, “about the same as always. Hey, check this out.”

“What is it?” Joe twisted his head to stare at the small display screen NumNut held, shielded from casual view, in both hands. The screen showed a distorted fisheye view of what seemed to be a meeting room of some kind, and by the look of the view, the camera was mounted in the centre of the conference table, pointed at the ceiling.

“Just look,” said NumNut.

“Hey, whoa,” said Joe after a moment. “That’s Admiral whatsisname? Motheaten. Are you crazy? If they trace that signal...”

“Don’t worry,” said NumNut. “Even if they found the camera, they’d never trace it down here. Just watch.”

“How did you even get a camera...” Joe stopped, held up his hand. “No, wait, I don’t wanna know!”

Joe stared at the screen, nervous but intrigued despite himself.

Several high-ranking Imperial officers sat around the conference table, obviously waiting for someone to arrive.

“Apparently, he keeps her in a private suite right next to his quarters. No-one is allowed in there.” An Imperial General leaned in over the table. “I heard she’s not even human, but one of those Twilight chicks.”

“Trilegs?” asked another General.

“Yeah, whatever. You know, green and blue with tentacles on her head. Apparently those things are insatiable.”

“Well I say good for him,” said Admiral Motheads. “Have you seen his wife? Not a pretty sight, I can tell you. You really can’t blame him for...”

“Blame who for what?” asked Great Muff Tarragon as he strode into the room. He was tall and lean, almost verging on skeletal. He took his seat at the head of the table and pinned Admiral Motheads with his penetrating gaze.

At the sight of the Great Muff, Joe took a wary step back. This wasn’t just any old conference room, it was *the* conference room, up on the Command level.

“Ah, I was just saying, uh,” said Admiral Motheads as he broke into a light sweat. “Uh, that the, uh, that the Rebellion will continue to gain the support of the Imperial Senate as long as we, uh, we continue to, uh...”

“Yes, thank you, Motheads. I won’t ask who you ladies were gossiping about this time.”

Motheads swallowed nervously.

“As for the Senate, they are no longer a concern. The Emperor has permanently dissolved the council, thus sweeping away the last remnants of the old Republic.”

“But,” said General Tigger, “how will he maintain control? I mean, without the bureaucrats to act as middle men...”

“The regional governors will assume direct control,” said Tarragon. “Fear of this station will keep the local systems in line. In fact, once we go fully operational, this station will scare the pants off of them!”

Joe backed away another step. “Turn it off, man,” he said to NumNut. “If Tarragon is there, Vapour won’t be far behind. And he won’t *need* to trace it, he’ll just know.”

“Don’t be such a girl,” said NumNut.

“Hey,” said Joe, “I fly interference for Vapour, and he scares the pants off of *me*! I don’t want anything more to do with this. You shouldn’t either. It’s dangerous. *He’s* dangerous!”

“Don’t be silly,” said NumNut. “What can he do?”

“I don’t want to find out,” said Joe, “and neither do you. Please, buddy, turn it off. I’ll buy you a drink.”

“Well,” NumNut considered for a moment, torn between curiosity and the offer of free alcohol. “Okay,

let's go." He deactivated the display screen and dropped it into a pocket.

Joe breathed a sigh of relief.

Javamaprandarah "Joe" Rajamajarandaibuggah and Nummalarandrajah "NumNut" Nuttarumbalum sat together at a small, scarred table. They were both on their third beer. Joe squinted in the dim light of the cantina, trying to guess how the pile of unrecognisable shapes in his bowl was related to what he had ordered from the menu. He prodded the pile gingerly with his wooden eating sticks.

"All I'm sayin'" said NumNut, "is that the old *HyperDrive 5500T* series are still the best."

Joe poked suspiciously at a small lump of green. "What does this look like to you?" he asked.

"Sure, the new *6004T* series have all the fancy extras," said NumNut. He began to chew on a mouthful of his *Pad THIGH*.

"This is supposed to be *THIGH Long Dong*," said Joe, "but *that* doesn't look right." He lifted the mystery nugget closer to his face, and took a cautious sniff.

"They may even have a higher top speed," added NumNut, ejecting several partly chewed particles of his *Pad THIGH* across the table.

"I think this is *Rong Pong*," concluded Joe. "I can't eat this stuff." He waved his hand furiously to attract the attention of the waiter 'bot.

"But you put one of those things into a fifteen gee turn, and it'll fall apart around you," said NumNut. "Fall. Apart. Around. You," he repeated, emphasising each word by stabbing his utensils into the air over the table.

"How can I help you sir?" droned the synthesised voice of the waiter 'bot in a monotone.

“I ordered *Long Dong*,” complained Joe, “and this is *Rong Pong*. I just can’t eat *Rong Pong*—it smells funny.”

“And what good,” said NumNut, “is a fancy cup holder and an inertial stabiliser when you find yourself floating home?”

“I shall replace it for you sir,” said the waiter ‘bot; it picked up Joe’s bowl and trundled away, weaving between wandering customers on its way to the kitchen door.

“And bring us some more beers,” Joe called after the departing ‘bot.

“Now the 5730T,” said NumNut, continuing his diatribe on the virtues and pitfalls of the various THIGH Fighter models, “now *that* was a pretty good ship, but it had that damn weak spot over the aft gun port.”

“*Long Dong, Rong Pong*,” muttered Joe, “it’s not like anybody could mistake the two!”

“One shot there and... What?” said NumNut. “I heard a song about that. Wanna hear it?”

“What?” said Joe. “A song about what?”

“The *Long Dong Rong Pong* song,” said NumNut. “Or was it the *Long Rong Dong Pong* song? No, that doesn’t make sense.”

Joe swallowed another mouthful of beer. “All I want is the food I ordered,” he muttered. “Is that so hard? Is *Long Dong* so hard?”

NumNut, sounding like a tomcat on the prowl at the height of the mating season, began to sing.

It’s the *Long Dong Rong Pong* song,
And it won’t take very long,
If you have a bowl of *Long Dong*,
And you mix in some *Rong Pong*,
You’ll have *Long Dong Rong Pong*,
Which tastes so very wrong.

NumNut let loose a resounding belch.

“You just made that up,” said Joe.

“Maybe,” said NumNut. “Whaddaya think of it?” He belched again, then slowly toppled forward, landing unconscious and face-down in his bowl of *Pad THIGH*. Joe sighed. Grabbing his friend by the hair, he lifted his head out of the food, shoved the bowl out of the way, and lowered him back onto the table.

After a couple of minutes, the waiter ‘bot returned with a steaming hot bowl of *Long Dong* and another couple of beers.

“Thanks,” said Joe.

“Welcome sir.”

Joe poked at the new bowl of food. It looked okay. He lifted some into his mouth and chewed thoughtfully.

He swallowed his mouthful of *Long Dong*. “What about the 5810T?” he asked.

NumNut snored.

“Oh. Yeah. Never mind.” Joe went back to his food.

Joe waddled, a trifle unsteadily, down the corridor towards the detention block where his friend Bahri Dinngel was on duty. Joe wanted to call in and say hello before he retired for the night. Dinngel was okay, for a Biggun.

As he walked, Joe sang quietly to himself.

It’s the *Long Dong Rong Pong* song,
And it won’t take very long,
If you take a bowl of *Long Dong*,
And you throw in some *Rong Pong*,
You’ll get *THIGH Long Dong Rong Pong*,
Which tastes so very very wrong.

That NumNut is crazy, he thought with a chuckle.

He reached the round doorway which marked the boundary between THIGH and Biggun territory. The corridor beyond was deserted. Joe looked both ways, then scurried quickly down the corridor, hugging the wall. He reached the door to the detention block without seeing anybody else.

It was not that THIGH Pilots were *forbidden* to wander around in Biggun territory, but the practice was frowned upon.

Reaching high over his head, Joe slapped the button to open the door. He waddled into the detention reception area, and the door hissed closed behind him.

Behind the desk, Bahri looked up as he entered. "Hey Joe," he said, "what do you know?"

Joe smiled. Bahri was okay, but not all that bright. Joe had finally given up trying to teach him the traditional "Whaddaya know, Joe" greeting. The guy was trying, but he didn't quite seem to get it.

"Hey Bahri, how's things?" he said.

"You know," said Bahri. "Keeping busy. Same old stuff. How about you?"

"Pretty good," said Joe. "I got a sweet assignment last month; I'm flying as personal escort for our Hard Lord himself."

"Wow," said Bahri. He jerked his thumb back over his shoulder. "He's here now, would you believe?"

"What?" said Joe. "Vapour is here?" He leaned out past the desk and peered down the cell block hallway Bahri had indicated. About half way down, a pair of grey-armoured Shock Troopers stood to attention either side of one of the cell doors.

"Yeah," said Bahri. "We've got a really important prisoner in here. A Rebel Princess, or something like that. Vapour is interrogating her personally."

“No shit?” said Joe.

“No shit,” said Bahri. “Look, I can open the comm channel if you want.”

“Uh, no,” said Joe, “that’s okay. Thanks. Uh, look, I can’t stay. Just popped in to say ‘hi’, y’know?”

“You’re not scared of him, are you?” asked Bahri.

“Are you kidding?” asked Joe. “Have you heard the stories? Of *course* I’m scared of him. Aren’t you?”

“Well, I guess I am, a little,” said Bahri.

“You should be,” said Joe. “Do us all a favour, and don’t go listening in on what he’s up to in there, okay?”

“Okay Joe.”

“Well, watch your back,” said Joe. “I gotta go.”

“See you around, Joe,” said Bahri. He tapped a button on his console and opened the main door for his short friend.

Joe waved and waddled out of the door. As soon as it hissed closed, he broke into a run, headed for the safety of the THIGH tunnels. He sagged against the wall, breathless. *What the hell is wrong with people?* he thought. *Everywhere I go, they want me to eavesdrop on Barth Vapour!*

Sing the *Long Dong Rong Pong* song,
It won’t take you very long,
If you have a *Long Dong*,
And it has a *Rong Pong*,
It will sound so very wrong.

The song echoed within the small lift cubicle. Joe had the feeling he had changed the words slightly, but it didn’t really matter. He yawned. He was ready for bed.

He had a nasty feeling he would be dreaming about the Hard Lord tonight. Again.

Great Muff Tarragon stood on the primary bridge of the *Devastator* Station, hands linked primly behind his back. Barth Vapour marched in to stand beside him.

“Well, Lord Vapour?” asked Tarragon as he gazed at the vast star field displayed on the main view screen of the bridge.

“She refused to cooperate,” said the Hard Lord shortly. “Her resistance to the mind probe was considerable.”

“I told you so,” said Tarragon. “She will never willingly betray the Rebel Coalition. We need to present her with a more persuasive argument, something that will force her to choose between the Rebellion and...”

Tarragon rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“Commander,” he said more loudly, “set a course for the Alderbark system.”

Chapter 9

A Wretched Hive of Scum and Vanilla

“**N**ow, lift!” Bent K’nobby and Lurk Splitwhisker grunted and heaved as they tried to lift Arty Farty into the back of the truck.

“Almost there. Almost there...” said Lurk.

“Just a little higher,” gasped Bent.

“Almost... No, she’s slipping!” Lurk dropped to his knees and got his shoulder under the cylindrical ‘bot. “Heave!” he yelled.

Arty rolled up the last little distance, toppled over the edge of the truck’s rear cargo tray, and fell with a loud crash onto the metal floor of the tray. She whistled mournfully.

Lurk clung to the back of the truck, gasping for breath. “She’s heavier than she looks,” he muttered. Arty whistled and beeped indignantly.

They looked across at where Seepy stood watching them, his perpetual surprised expression on his face.

“Don’t worry about me, sirs,” said Seepy. “I should be able to get up there by myself.”

“Thank the Gods for that!” mumbled Lurk.

As the humans staggered around to clamber into the cab of the truck, Seepy Weepy climbed up into the back with Arty. There was a sudden lurch as the truck began to

move forward, and he clattered to the deck beside the stubby astrobot. Seepy lay back and gazed up at the cloudless sky, mauve tinged with streaks of dusty purple. The two 'bots lay for a while in a companionable silence.

Finally, Seepy asked, "So why did you not just use your hover jets to get up here?"

Arty bleeped and whistled.

"Oh, he did, did he?" said Seepy. "Well, serves him right then!"

Arty whistled in agreement.

"I don't know how I'm going to tell Uncle Rowan and Aunt Beryl that I'm leaving," said Lurk as he guided the heavy hover truck across the dusty plain.

"Would you like me to speak to them?" asked Bent, raising his voice to be heard across the deep rumble of the truck's engines.

"Uh, that probably wouldn't be a good idea," said Lurk. "In fact, it's probably best if you wait in the truck while I talk to them alone."

"You must do what you think is right, of course," said Bent.

"At least I'll only need to take Arty," mused Lurk. "Uncle won't miss her, and he'll still have Seepy to help out where possible."

"You're not planning on bringing both 'bots?" asked Bent.

"I can't see the point," said Lurk. "So far I can't see that either of them has been anything but trouble. The only reason I'm taking the astrobot is because she's the whole point of going to Alderbark."

There was silence in the cab for a while. Actually, it was rather noisy in the cab, what with the roar of the

engine and various squeaks and rattles from the old truck, but neither man spoke.

It was Bent who broke the silence. "Look, Lurk, is that smoke?" He pointed over to the right.

Lurk looked. Thin tendrils of smoke curled upwards from behind a low hill. Suddenly Lurk remembered the explosion he and Seepy had seen the day before. "There was an explosion of some kind yesterday," he told Bent. "This can't be that; it's too far North. But two fires in the same area? That doesn't sound good."

"We should investigate," said Bent.

"There's no time," said Lurk. "This old truck is slow enough as it is. Besides, by the look of that smoke it has almost burned out. Whatever happened there, we've well and truly missed it. Half the desert scavengers within a thousand miles will have been here by now."

"Okay," said Bent. He sounded worried.

"Hey, we should clear that hill in a moment. There are some binoculars in the glove compartment if you want to take a closer look."

Bent rummaged in the small compartment and pulled out the binoculars. He raised them to his eyes and peered through them. "It's a Yahoo crawler," he reported quietly.

"A Yahoo crawler?" repeated Lurk.

"Looks like it has been attacked," said Bent. "I can see several Yahoo corpses scattered around on the ground."

"But who would attack a Yahoo crawler? Who *could* attack a Yahoo crawler? They're too big! Was it the desert dwellers?"

Bent sighed and lowered the binoculars. "Why does everybody always blame the desert dwellers? They're

actually a lovely people, if you take the time to get to know them. They are just shy, and territorial. That's all."

"Sorry," said Lurk.

"Besides, it couldn't have been them," said Bent. He raised the binoculars again, and adjusted the zoom. "Those blast patterns are too precisely placed. Only Imperial Shock Troopers are that accurate."

"Imperial Troopers? Why would Imperials attack a Yahoo crawler? Sure, the Yahoos are a little larcenous from time to time, but generally that just requires a bribe, and both parties are happy. What else could they have wanted?"

A nasty thought occurred to him. "Unless..." He stamped on the brake, and the truck shuddered and skidded to a halt. He grabbed the binoculars from Bent and squinted through them, searching for any identifying markings on the huge crawler.

"Those are the Yahoos that sold us the 'bots. What if the Imperials are on the trail of the data Arty is carrying?" He stopped. An even more worrying thought came to mind. "But if they tracked the 'bots to the Yahoos, that would lead them home! Shit!"

Lurk floored the accelerator. Grumbling and shuddering, the truck slowly picked up speed.

There was more smoke directly ahead. It had been visible for some time now, and Lurk was a bundle of nerves. They crested the final rise, and the small cluster of buildings and towers that made up Uncle Rowan's moisture farm came into view. Drifts of smoke rose lazily from both domes, and one of the main moisture collector towers sagged at a precarious angle.

Lurk braked sharply. As the truck slewed to a stop, he leaped down from the open cab and ran across the purple

sand to the smaller dome. "Uncle Rowan," he called. "Aunt Beryl. Uncle Rowan." His voice died in his throat as he saw their huddled bodies, burned to the bone, lying on the stairs leading down into the dwelling below. He fell to his knees in the sand, his eyes filling with tears.

"No," he moaned weakly.

After a couple of minutes a shadow fell over him. Bent placed his bony old hand on the youth's shoulder.

"There was nothing you could have done," he said softly. "If you'd been here, they would have killed you too, and the 'bots would now be in the hands of the Imperium. Any data that Arty unit might be carrying would be lost, and the Rebellion would be doomed."

Lurk looked up, his face streaked with tears, a wild hope in his eyes.

"But they're not really dead, are they?" he asked. "I mean, their bodies here are dead, but their real bodies are still somewhere out there, plugged into the Array. Or the grid. Or whatever?"

Bent shook his head sadly. "We don't know for sure, but it is believed that if you die in the Array, you die in the 'real' world too—or, at least, your mind does. Some few Jubbly have learned the secret of writing themselves into the Source so that they live on after death as a 'ghost' in the machine, but I'm afraid that the people you knew as your aunt and uncle are lost to you. To us."

Lurk turned and looked once again down the smoke-filled stairwell. The two skeletal forms looked so very lonely. "Well, there is nothing here for me now," he said. "Not even a change of clothes, by the look of all that smoke."

He stood up, wearily. He felt so old, all of a sudden. So alone.

"Next stop, Alderbark," he said, almost to himself.

Amazingly, Uncle Rowan's hover speedster had not been damaged in the attack. Bent had retrieved it from the garage while Lurk and Seepy had buried the remains of Rowan and Beryl. They had transferred Arty Farty from the truck to the speedster, and now the four of them pulled rapidly away from the ravaged farm as Lurk gunned the vehicle's quiet motor.

"Next stop, Moss Iceberg," said Lurk.

The name was a chimera; Moss Iceberg was as dry and desolate as the rest of Ratatouille. While the various settlements across the planet were not quite cohesive enough for any one city to lay claim to being its Capital, Moss Iceberg could certainly claim to be the most important city to Ratatouille's economy. It boasted three spaceports, and was the centre of trade and industry for the entire hemisphere.

"Moss Iceberg," mused Bent. "You will never find a more wretched hive of scum and villainy! Well, except for Orb Mandrill, I suppose, the smuggler planet. And Correlation is well known for being the home base for hordes of pirates. And it's even pretty tame compared to the palaces of the Butt crime lords. But still, Moss Iceberg can be a pretty dangerous place."

"On the other hand," said Lurk, "they do make the best vanilla ice cream in the Southern hemisphere!"

"True," said Bent. "Either way, there is nowhere else that we'll find a pilot who can take us to Alderbark."

The speedster ate up the distance. They streaked past the valley where the town of Angkor Het nestled, without even slowing down. At one point, Bent reached back into his basket and pulled out a sandwich each for himself and Lurk. They ate in silence.

Before the suns had risen to directly overhead, the vast sprawl of Moss Iceberg rose into view, a pale blotch on the distant horizon.

Lurk eased back slightly on the accelerator as the speedster sped into the outskirts of the city. A crowd of pedestrians scattered as he roared through their midst, and several of them shouted angrily after the speedster.

"I suggest you slow down a bit, Lurk," said Bent. "We don't want to attract any attention to ourselves."

Lurk slowed further. "Okay," he said, "if you say so."

"Head for the spaceport district," said Bent. "We'll sell the speedster there, and hopefully find a ride off this rock."

"Just what I was thinking," agreed Lurk. They coasted slowly around a corner.

"Uh-oh, road block." Lurk pointed forward. A short distance ahead was a squad of grey-armoured Shock Troopers, blocking the road and searching each vehicle that passed through. Lurk tensed.

Bent placed a hand gently on his arm. "Slow down, Lurk, let me handle this," he said softly. "Now is not the time for revenge. It will be much easier to slip away if we do not draw Imperial scrutiny. Discretion now, okay?"

"Fine," hissed Lurk through clenched teeth. "Whatever." He eased the speedster to a halt as one of the anonymous Troopers held up his hand and waved them down.

"How long have you had these 'bots?" asked the Trooper, his voice distorted by the external speaker of his helmet.

"About three or four seasons," said Lurk.

"They're for sale, if you want them," added Bent.

"Let me see your identification," said the Trooper.

“Uh,” said Lurk. He patted his pyjamas in vain, but he knew he did not have his identification papers with him. He hadn’t bothered to take them on his hunt for Arty the day before, and now they were incinerated in his house, along with the rest of his belongings.

Bent made a small gesture. “You don’t need to see his identification,” he said in a calm, level voice.

“We don’t need to see your identification,” said the Trooper, after a short pause.

“These are not the ‘bots you’re looking for,” said Bent in the same tone.

“These are not the ‘bots we’re looking for.”

“Wait a minute,” said the second Trooper. “What’s happening here? Why don’t we need to see his ID?”

“You do not need to see his identification,” repeated Bent.

“We do not need to see his identification,” echoed the second Trooper.

“Stop that,” ordered the third Trooper. The two remaining Troopers both raised their weapons menacingly. “Whatever you’re doing, stop it!”

“You do not...” started Bent, and one of the Troopers stepped forward and pressed the barrel of his laser rifle firmly under the old man’s chin.

“Not another word,” ordered the Trooper angrily.

The other swung his weapon to cover Lurk. “You, get out of the speedster now!”

“We don’t have time for this,” muttered Bent. There was a blur of motion, a flash, a hum, and Bent sat back down in his seat. Moments later, the four Troopers fell lifelessly to the ground. Helmeted heads bounced away in all directions.

“Move along,” said Bent urgently to Lurk. “Move along.”

Lurk gunned the engine, turned the first corner he came to, and zigzagged through back streets until he was several city blocks away from the roadblock. He pulled in at the side of the road and switched off the engine.

He turned in his seat to look at Bent K'nobby.

"Discretion?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"It has its time and place," replied Bent innocently.

"I don't understand what was happening back there," said Lurk. "Before you lopped all their heads off, that is. I understood *that* bit just fine!"

"The Source can have a strong influence on the weak minded," said Bent, "and you'll find that many people are weak minded. The biggest drawback," he added ruefully, "is that it's generally not possible to influence more than one person at a time. As you just saw, attempting a trick like that with a group can get out of hand."

"Apparently!" said Lurk.

"We shall have to keep our heads down," said Bent. "What happened back there is likely to draw a little unwelcome attention."

"You think?" said Lurk.

"Let's go, but slowly." Bent looked around them at the disreputable business district they were in. "There is bound to be a vehicle salesman somewhere around here who will take it off our hands, no questions asked..."

"Hey Sarge," said Fib, voice raised over the roar of the Troop Transport's engines.

"Yeah Fib, what?" said Sergeant Samson Strong.

"What's this I hear about the *Isosceles* pulling out and leaving us here?"

"Well, after our little show yesterday, they probably figured we were the meanest bunch of mothers in the quadrant and they got nervous having us on board!"

“Yeah right,” said Fib. “We did such a good job of slaughtering a bunch of midgets and some farmers, they probably left us here to save themselves the paperwork.”

“You’re not developing a conscience on me, are you, Fib?” said Strong. “You don’t need me to lecture you on the importance of what we achieved, of getting a solid lead on those ‘bots?”

“Not me, Sarge,” said Fib. “You know me, I’d be happy if you’d lecture me on the best places on this crappy planet to get laid!”

Mikki leaned in on the conversation. “I heard they had some urgent business to take care of.”

“What?” said Fib. “What are we talking about now?”

“The *Isosceles*,” Mikki reminded him.

“Yeah, that’s right,” said Fib. “Our Stiff Lord had to do something urgently that nobody else could do for him.”

“Save it, guys,” said Strong. He wasn’t scared of anyone, but he knew how such talk had a nasty habit of getting back to the wrong ears. “You know these officer types; they’ve always gotta be *somewhere* urgently.”

He held up his hand for silence as the pilot’s voice crackled in his ear. *Two minutes to landing.*

“Okay people, listen up,” shouted Sergeant Strong over the sound of the engines. “We have a quadruple homicide on our hands. Four Troopers down. Of course, nobody saw a thing.”

There was a general murmur of anger from Teams Badger and Fennec.

“From the nature of their injuries, Imperial Intelligence tells us that we are looking for somebody armed with a light rapier, possibly even one of the few Jubbly Master traitors who managed to escape the purge. I’ve certainly never seen anybody else who could use one

of those things without slicing their own arm off in the attempt.”

“A Jubbly?” asked one of the Fennec Troopers. “They’re dangerous, aren’t they?”

“Anybody who can take down four Troopers single-handedly should be considered armed and extremely dangerous,” said Strong, “Jubbly or not! But I think you men know who is *more* dangerous, don’t you?”

“We are,” shouted Jenkins.

“What was that?” asked Strong.

“WE ARE!” shouted all the Troopers in unison.

“Damn right we are!” said Strong. “Now, there’s a good chance that this murderer is somehow connected to the missing ‘bots that Lord Vapour himself wants found. We’ve got various other squads from the *Equilateral* and the *Scalene* covering just about every exit from the city and working their way inwards. We’ll be pairing off and doing a door to door search, looking for anything suspicious. Eyes and ears open, people. And I know it’s a little difficult on this hellhole of a planet, but stay frosty!”

There was general laughter at this.

The Transport touched down with a thump, and the rear hatch swung down to form a ramp.

“Okay people, let’s do this,” said Strong.

There was a ragged chorus of “Hoo-ahh!” and the Troopers double-timed out of the Transport and into the blazing suns-light.

“Let’s try in here,” said Bent.

Lurk looked up at the sign above the narrow doorway. “Mended Percussion Device,” he read aloud. “What sort of name is that for a bar?”

Bent shrugged. "I have heard that this can be a dangerous place, but all the best pilots hang out here. Watch your step in here, Lurk."

"I will," said Lurk.

They entered the dimly lit tavern and stood in the entry foyer, blinking and squinting as their eyes slowly adjusted. After being out in the blaze of Ratatouille's twin suns, it was like being struck blind. Finally they could see well enough to venture down the first couple of shallow steps. Behind them, Arty Farty whistled and beeped urgently. They turned back to look. Seepy stood beside the stubby little astrobot, managing somehow to look concerned. Arty had stopped at the edge of the first step.

"Damn," muttered Lurk. "Why couldn't that silly princess have picked herself a 'bot that could manage its own damn stairs!"

Lurk and Bent returned to the top of the stairs. Gripping each side of the astrobot, they carefully manhandled her down the first step. She rolled forward a few inches and stopped again. They repeated the procedure to get her down the second step, and the third, and the fourth. Lurk became vaguely aware of somebody shouting behind him, but he couldn't take the time to look around. "Ready," he gasped. Bent nodded, and they lifted, groaned, and half-lowered, half-dropped the 'bot down the final step.

Breathing heavily, Lurk turned into the room. The guy behind the bar, swarthy and scarred, was scowling at them in a most unfriendly manner and waving his arms around excitedly.

"What was that?" yelled Lurk. "Sorry, I didn't hear you the first time."

“We don’t serve their kind in here,” yelled the barkeep.

“What?” Lurk yelled back.

“Them. Your ‘bots. They’ll have to leave.” He pointed at a big fluorescent sign on the wall which read, in six different languages, *NO BOTS ALLOWED*.

Lurk gaped at it, then glanced across at Bent.

“But we don’t want you to *serve* them,” Bent said softly. “Can’t they just stand in a corner somewhere?”

“Nope,” shouted the barkeep. “House rules. They go, or you go. And they go with you anyway,” he added as an afterthought.

Lurk sighed. He looked at the sign, he looked at Arty. He looked at the stairs they had just come down.

“It’s okay, sir,” said Seepy Weepy. “We don’t mind. We’ll wait for you outside. We don’t want any trouble.”

“Yeah, that’s easy for you to say,” said Lurk. “You don’t have to carry *her* back up those stairs.”

He turned back to the glowering barkeep. “I say,” he called, “you wouldn’t happen to have another exit, would you? One with a ramp? No? Figures...”

Ten minutes later, Lurk and Bent staggered back down the stairs into the dark tavern. They staggered across the room and slumped heavily against the bar. “Two waters, please,” said Lurk. “Make mine a double!”

Bent clutched the bar tightly, his heart racing, as he struggled to recite an ancient Jubbly meditation mantra. “Mine too,” he gasped.

A couple of minutes, and a couple of drinks, later, Bent had recovered enough to start looking around the room for a good pilot who might be willing to ferry a couple of passengers to Alderbark. “Wait here,” he said to Lurk as he wandered off.

“I ain’t goin’ anywhere,” gasped Lurk.

Time passed.

Lurk spent much of it gazing around the dim room, wondering at the many non-human species which populated the tavern. His foot tapped idly, keeping time with the catchy dance number being played by the alien quartet on the small stage at the far side of the room.

He saw Bent wandering back towards the bar, deep in conversation with a towering green creature wearing a thigh-length off-white tunic and a brown chest vest. Tight curls of soft woollen fur poked out through the material of the tunic at random locations.

Suddenly Lurk was jostled from behind, and an angry voice snarled something alien in his ear. He turned and saw a round-faced, bewhiskered alien glaring at him.

“Um, sorry,” he said. He took a step away and turned back to the bar.

He was jostled again. The alien grunted and snarled. “He doesn’t like you,” said a hostile voice. Lurk turned again. The round-faced alien had been joined by a creature that may well have been human, but whose face was so scarred and misshapen it was difficult to be sure.

“I’m sorry,” said Lurk.

“I don’t like you either,” said the quasi-human. Lurk had thought the barkeep was unattractive, but at least he worked here. This guy, however, was definitely one ugly customer.

“I’m sorry,” said Lurk again. He felt tempted to add *I’m not all that fond of you either*, but it seemed wisest to keep that thought to himself.

“We’re wanted men,” snarled the ugly customer. “I have the death sentence in twelve systems, the life sentence in seven more, and I’m wanted for various minor crimes and misdemeanours in another six.”

Lurk sighed. All he wanted was to be left alone. "Since when is being ugly a crime?" he asked.

"What? What did you say?" demanded the man, and his alien friend snarled angrily.

"Nothing," said Lurk. "Nothing at all. I'm sorry. I'm sorry you're ugly, I'm sorry your boyfriend is ugly, I'm sorry that my eyes may never recover. Okay?" He glared at the two ruffians. "Now just fuck off and leave me alone, okay. Before everything gets even uglier."

"Oh," said the man, backing away. "Um. Right then. Uh, we'll be going then."

Bent K'nobby chose that moment to intervene. "This young one's not worth the trouble," he said. "Why don't you let me buy you a drink?" He put his hand on the man's arm.

The man looked down at Bent's hand, and then up at the face of the old man. His eyes widened in recognition.

"I don't want a drink from you, you old poof," he snarled. "Now get your hand off me." He stepped back and reached for his laser pistol. There was a flash of blue, a familiar hum, and a roar of pain as the arm clutching the pistol fell to the floor with a wet thump. For a moment the whole tavern went silent. Then the ugly man collapsed to the floor in several steaming pieces, and his alien friend toppled over backwards, his head bouncing away across the floor and disappearing under a table.

Several people screamed, and several more began to vomit. Pandemonium swept through the room as those closest to the fracas scrambled backwards and headed for the exits.

Bent returned his rapier to his belt.

Lurk sighed. "You're really not very good at keeping a low profile, are you?"

Bent shrugged. "I've spent the last twenty years keeping a low profile," he said. "I'm afraid the excitement has got me a little fired up. Sorry."

"Excitement?" said Lurk. "I thought a Jubbly craved not such things. Or something like that."

"What can I say," said Bent. "I'm a little out of practice."

Lurk looked at the mess of body parts scattered across the floor. "Obviously," he said dryly.

"Come on," said Bent. He stooped down to pick up the picnic basket from the floor where he had dropped it when he drew his weapon, then straightened. "This," he nodded towards the tall green-furred creature, "is Shagpyle Duphus. He's an old friend of an old friend. He's also the first mate of a freighter that may be able to take us where we're going." Lurk nodded politely, and the woolly beast raised his top lip in a snarl which Lurk hoped was friendly. Shagpyle Duphus turned and led them across the room to a shadowed booth.

The two Troopers turned down the narrow alley. They held their Mk-III Vaporisers at the ready.

One of the Troopers rattled the knob of the first door he came to. The door refused to open. "Door is locked," he said, "move on to the next one."

Several blocks away, Sergeant Strong almost stumbled. He had been idly monitoring the chatter of the search teams on the master broadcast frequency, trusting 'Killer' Jenkins to alert him to anything requiring his attention. "Who just said that?" he roared. The chatter on the master frequency fell silent.

After a moment he recovered his wits enough to realise that his question had been more than a little

ambiguous. "Who just said 'door is locked, move on to the next'?" he elaborated.

"Uh, I did, sir," stammered a voice nervously.

"Well, identify yourself, son," said the Sergeant in a gentler tone.

"Sir yes sir! Private Davyss, Team Daffodil, sir."

Team Daffodil? Strong closed his eyes for a moment and shook his head. He'd heard rumours that some new ideas were being tried out at the Academy these days, a new approach to public relations handling, but this was worse than he had feared.

"And how long have you been in this man's army, Private?"

"Almost three months, sir!"

Strong bit back a sigh. They were on the trail of a ruthless Jubbly murderer, and they'd sent kids?

"Everybody else get back to work," he ordered over the general channel, and then he switched over to the Team Daffodil channel. He looked at Jenkins; she shook her head ruefully and stepped a few paces away.

"Team Daffodil, count off," he ordered.

"Lance Corporal Grunt Wheedle here, sir."

"Private First Class Kumm Stolid, sir."

"Private Bent Davyss, sir," said Davyss sheepishly.

"Private Karrn McKavern, sir."

"Lance Corporal Wheedle," said Strong, "is this the sort of thing they are teaching our cadets these days?"

"Um, what sort of thing, sir?"

"One of your privates said 'the door is locked, move on to the next one'," said Strong patiently. "Is this the new policy coming out of the Academy?"

"Yes, sir, I believe it is," said Wheedle. "The feeling is that we have to win the respect and admiration of the locals through politeness and courtesy, and by presenting

a non-threatening face to the people. We aim to show that the Imperium is their friend.”

“Politeness and courtesy,” repeated Strong. “I see.” He paused, and bit his lip. If this was official policy, he wouldn’t win many friends by countermanding it. On the other hand, he had no illusions about his long term career prospects; he had already made enough enemies to ensure he never rose beyond the rank of Sergeant, and quite frankly he’d turn down a promotion any day, rather than leave his squad.

“Wheedle,” he said. “Stolid. Davyss. McKavern. Let me give you a little advice from an old dog who has seen too much combat. ‘Public relations’ is all well and good—I’ll admit that it has its place—but we are fighting a war here, people. We are not playing a game.”

“Sir yes sir,” chorused Team Daffodil.

“Furthermore,” said Strong, “we are hunting for fugitives from Imperial justice, under direct orders from Lord Barth Vapour himself. And you can believe me when I tell you that the Hard Lord is *not* as forgiving as I am.”

“Sir yes sir.”

“Now this may seem a little unfair, but latest intelligence reports indicate that Rebel fugitives are actually capable of locking the occasional door behind them. It seems like a dirty trick, I know, but we don’t call them ‘Rebel Scum’ because they play fair!”

“Sir yes sir.”

“So what do we do when we encounter a locked door while searching for a dangerous fugitive?”

There was a moment’s silence on the channel. “Uh, we knock again?” ventured Stolid cautiously.

“No,” roared Strong. “We are Imperial Shock Troopers. We kick the fucker down!”

“Sir yes sir!”

“Any questions, Team Daffodil?”

“Sir no sir!”

“Very good. Carry on, Lance Corporal Wheedle.”

“Sir yes sir!”

Strong listened in on the channel for a few moments. He heard Wheedle say “You heard the man, guys. This is not a game we’re playing here. Fire it up! Let’s show him what we Daffodils are made of!” He heard Davyss begin a chant of “Fire it up! Fire it up! Fire it up!” A few moments later he heard McKavern’s voice: “Door is locked. Kick the fucker down!”

He grinned. There may yet be hope for the Imperial Army.

He looked up. Jenkins was facing him, one hand on her hip. “Nice one, Sarge,” she said, then her voice sobered slightly. “Command have been trying to reach you. There has been a disturbance at a tavern; sounds like our perp. It’s only a minute or two from here; I’ve accepted the call on your behalf.”

“Thanks for covering,” said Strong with a grim nod. “Let’s go.”

Lurk settled into the dim booth across from a rugged, roguish man wearing a dark brown shirt, and braces, beneath a full-length brown coat.

“I’m Mal Single,” he introduced himself, “captain of the *Serendipity Sparrow*. Shaggus here tells me you’re looking for a ride out of here.”

Lurk nodded. He looked at the odd pair, the man and the woolly giant, and he decided that they looked like an honest, trustworthy pair. Mal had the sort of face which would have fit a farmer more than a smuggler, and he

wondered what had happened in the man's life to change *his* destiny.

"Yeah," he said. Then curiosity got the better of him. "So, uh, how long have you had your monk..."

"Stop stop stop," yelled Mal frantically, and Lurk recoiled, startled. Shagpile Duphus grunted angrily—it sounded almost like 'ook'—and waved his long furry arms in the air above his head; Mal grabbed him and whispered something to him. Eventually the creature calmed down a little.

"Sorry about that," said Mal, "but you must never, ever, *ever* say the M-word. It is far too dangerous. Shaggus is a Woonky."

"Whoa," said Lurk, blinking. "*Deja vu!*"

"What was that?" said Bent urgently. "What did you just say?"

"I said '*deja vu*'," said Lurk, wondering what he had done wrong this time. "Why?"

"What did you see?" asked Bent, ignoring the question.

"Uh, I didn't *see* anything. He just said I must never say the M-word," Lurk eyed Shagpile Duphus nervously, "and you said the same thing to me this morning. Although they were different M-words."

"Oh," said Bent. He considered this for a while. "Okay," he said at last, "it's probably nothing."

"What are you talking about?" asked Lurk.

"Ask me again sometime," said Bent mysteriously.

"You know," said Lurk, "you keep saying that!"

"What the hell are you two going on about," demanded Mal. "First you upset Shaggus here by calling him a... By using the M-word. And then you start blathering on some nonsense about *deja vu*."

"Sorry," said Lurk.

“Sorry,” said Bent.

“I should think so,” said Mal. “Now, do you want passage on my boat or not?”

“Yes,” said Bent. “Just myself, the boy, and two ‘bots. And no questions asked.”

“What is it?” asked Mal immediately, completely ignoring the ‘no questions asked’ condition. “Some kind of local trouble? You got some girl pregnant?” He took a closer look at the old man, sitting with his hand laid protectively across the arm of the youth in the pink pyjamas and fluffy ewok slippers. “You got *him* pregnant?”

Lurk looked a little confused at the direction the conversation was heading.

“Let’s just say,” said Bent, “that we’d like to avoid any Imperial scrutiny.”

“Well,” said Mal, “that’s the real trick, isn’t it? I mean, those guys are everywhere.” He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “It will cost you a little extra. Ten thousand.”

“What?” exclaimed Lurk. “We could almost buy our own ship for that.”

Mal lifted his hands in a casual shrug. “Be my guest, kid. But who’s gonna fly it? You?”

“You bet,” said Lurk hotly. “I’m not such a bad pilot. Of course,” he subsided slightly, “I’ve never been more than half a mile off the planet, but I could probably pick it up if I really had to.”

Bent squeezed his arm to silence him.

“We’ll give you two now,” he said, “and another fifteen when we reach Alderbark.”

Mal’s lips moved for a moment as he added the numbers together. “Seventeen, huh? We are talking in the thousands here, I take it?” Bent nodded. “Okay, you’ve

got yourself a deal. Meet me at Landing Bay 49 in an hour. Now, though, you'd better make yourselves scarce. Somebody seems to be taking an interest in your little display there." He nodded towards the bar.

Lurk and Bent turned. A pair of armoured Shock Troopers were standing with the barkeep, who was still busily cleaning up body parts from the floor. The barkeep nodded angrily and gestured in their direction.

"Time to go," hissed Bent.

The Shock Troopers made their way across the room to the back corner, their gloved hands holding their weapons at the ready. They peered into each of the three or four booths there. Mal nodded politely to them as they gave him and Shaggus the once-over.

As the Troopers left empty-handed, Mal leaned over to Shagpyle Duphus. "Seventeen thousand," he said. "Those guys must really be desperate. This could really save our skins. You go get the *Sparrow* warmed up; I've got a little business to take care of."

Shaggus roared and grunted. *Just stay out of trouble.*

"Hey," said Mal, "it's me. Don't worry about a thing."

Shaggus grunted some more. *That's what you said last time!*

"It won't be anything like the last time," Mal assured his co-pilot. "A quick taxi-run across to Alderbark. What could *possibly* be difficult about that?"

Chapter 10

The Serendipity Sparrow

“Anything?” asked Sergeant Strong. Teams Badger and Fennec had converged on the *Mended Percussion Device* tavern; most of them had shown up less than a minute after Strong and Jenkins had arrived on the scene. They had immediately set up a perimeter around the tavern and the surrounding blocks, and begun questioning everybody.

“No,” replied Fib. “Just about everybody we spoke to remembers seeing the fight at the bar—I guess seeing somebody diced like that does tend to stick in your memory—but nobody seems sure where they went after that. We got a description of them, but...”

“But?”

“Well, the old guy is no problem. Medium height and build, scraggly beard, wearing a brown hooded robe. Armed with a light rapier.” Fib hesitated. “Only a few remember seeing the kid who was with him, because the guy with the weapon was the centre of attention. But I’m getting a description of a blond youth, perhaps late teens or early twenties, medium height, slender build, light hair.” Fib frowned. “Wearing pink pyjamas and fluffy animal slippers.”

Strong sighed. “Stop fucking around, Fib, this is a serious matter.”

“Honest, Sarge. Some of the witnesses weren’t sure of his hair colour, or his age, but they all agreed on the pink pyjamas. Tell him, Mikki.”

“That’s what they’re saying, Sarge,” said Mikki. “Pink pyjamas. Fluffy animal slippers.”

“And what exactly do we mean by ‘fluffy animal slippers’?” asked Strong cautiously. He still wasn’t entirely convinced that Fib hadn’t roped Mikki into some elaborate joke.

“Exactly that, Sarge,” said Fib. “Joke slippers shaped like a, well, like a fluffy bunny or something.”

“So help me, Fib, if this is a joke...”

One of Fib’s nicknames, used primarily by those other members of Raptor Command who had come through the Academy with him—and generally only when alcohol was present in large quantities—was ‘Fluffy Bunny’. He had acquired the nickname thanks to a graduation gift from his well-meaning, but slightly naive, mother: a pair of fluffy bunny slippers. Defying anybody to object, Fib had worn the slippers to the graduation party. Inevitably, a drunken cadet not belonging to Fib’s close circle of friends had chosen to heckle him about his choice of footwear. One thing had led to another, and when the cadet had said something unflattering about Fib’s mother, Fib had promptly earned another of his nicknames, ‘Fuckin’ Brutal’.

Fib held up his hand. “On my mother’s life, Sarge,” he swore. “I’m not saying they were actually fluffy bunny slippers, but that’s the sort of thing we’re talking about. None of the witnesses could identify the type of fluffy animal, but he shouldn’t be too hard to spot. Needless to say, nobody recalls seeing them leave—or if they do, they ain’t saying.”

“Sarge?” came Jenkin’s voice over the comm, scratchy but strong.

“What have you got, Jenkins?”

“The barkeep here remembers them coming in from the street. He says they had two ‘bots with them, although his description of them is rather vague. Apparently he’s a bit of a mechaphobe, hence the ‘No Bots’ rule. From what little I could get from him, though, it sounds like the ones we’re looking for.”

“Good work, Jenkins.” He paused. “Uh, Jenkins, you didn’t get a description of our perps, did you?”

“Yes, sir, but I’m not sure how accurate it is. I suspect he has been sampling the wares.”

“Fluffy animal slippers?” asked Strong.

“Um, yes sir. Exactly right. And a pink nightie or something similar.”

“Okay, thank you, Jenkins. Carry on.”

Strong turned back to Fib. “If this is a joke and you’ve somehow convinced Jenkins to play along,” he said, “I shall salute your ingenuity. And then I shall kick your testicles into the region of your kidneys.”

“No joke, Sarge,” said Fib.

“Okay.”

Strong switched to the master command channel. “All units, all units,” he said. “Priority one description of our suspects. Two male humans. One aged fifty-five to sixty, medium build, thinning grey hair and beard, wearing brown hooded robe. The other aged around twenty, slender build, light or possibly blond hair, wearing...” He hesitated for just a moment. “Wearing pink pyjamas and fluffy animal slippers.” Ignoring the sudden murmur of stifled laughter on the channel, he continued. “May be travelling with two ‘bots.

“Both should be considered armed and extremely dangerous. If you spot them, follow discreetly and call for backup. Do not confront. Repeat, do not confront. We’ve lost enough people to these psychos already today.”

Strong toggled the comm to the Team Badger channel. “Okay guys, about time we allowed the tavern customers to start leaving. Check their ID, give them a quick pat down, but don’t confiscate weapons unless you actually find that light rapier. We don’t want to start a riot in here unless we have to. Unless you find someone on the *Most Wanted* list, we’re not interested.”

“Actually, Sarge,” said Jenkins, “I can’t be sure, but I think one of our victims here *was* on the *Most Wanted* list.”

“Oh great,” sighed Strong. “Just great.”

“Sarge?”

“The paperwork on this is gonna be a bitch!”

Lurk and Bent, and the two ‘bots, were already waiting in the shadows across from the entrance to Landing Bay 49 when Mal and Shaggus arrived.

“Where have you guys been?” hissed Lurk. “You’re late. I feel very exposed standing out here.”

“I’m not surprised,” Mal retorted, “with clothes like that. We got held up at the tavern. Seems some damn fool sliced and diced one of the customers, and the Imperials wanted to question everybody. We only just now got out!”

“See, Lurk,” said Bent. “What did I tell you? That tavern *was* a dangerous place.”

Lurk rolled his eyes.

“Can we go now?” he said.

“Sure,” said Mal. He groped around in his pockets for the access card to the Landing Bay. Finding it, he swiped it across the security pad and the door hissed open. “Okay, let’s...” He paused. “Wait, get back. Face the wall, now.”

“What?” said Lurk.

“Just do it,” said Mal. “We’ve got company coming. Imperial scanner ‘bot.”

“He’s right,” said Bent. “Listen, you can hear it.” The old man ducked back deeper into the shadows and pulled Lurk back with him. The warbling hum grew louder as the scanner ‘bot, little more than an automated roving camera, flew into view around the corner. The ‘bot turned to look at Mal and Shaggus as it passed, slowing slightly. Mal ignored it as he fiddled with the security plate; Shaggus bared one upper canine in a snarl, and the camera zipped backwards in alarm. It paused for a moment, scanning the huge woolly humanoid, then turned to continue on its way.

There was a flash of blue light, and Bent’s light rapier sliced the ‘bot in two. Blackened fragments of metal and glass rained onto the dusty street.

“What the hell is your problem?” demanded Lurk. “Must you keep doing that? Low profile, you said. Discreet, you said. And here you are, chopping up anything that moves.”

“Sorry,” said Bent. “It just seemed like the thing to do.”

“The kid’s right, you crazy old fool,” said Mal. “That will bring the Imperials right down our throats. Shaggus, get the *Sparrow* warmed up. Quick!”

The Woonky roared his agreement and ran through the door into the landing bay beyond. Lurk and Bent followed the woolly creature. The two ‘bots followed the

two humans. Mal came through last, and closed and locked the door behind him. "That won't hold them for long," he said.

He stopped. Bent and Lurk were staring, open-mouthed, at the *Serendipity Sparrow*.

"What a piece of junk," said Lurk.

The *Serendipity Sparrow* resembled a bastardised mechanical hybrid of bird and insect. Balanced precariously on its four small landing struts, it looked ready to topple forward at any moment. The bulbous engines at its tail end, and the mass of the two huge VTOL jets amidships barely seemed enough to counterbalance the "neck" of the ship that raised the cockpit to a height of perhaps thirty feet above the ground.

"She's an old Firebug class freighter," said Mal. "I've made several modifications to her myself. She may not look like much, but she's got it where it counts. Now we're a little pressed for time, so if you'd kindly get on board..."

"Going somewhere, Single?" said a voice behind them.

Mal sighed. Greeno. "You two get on board," he said. "This won't take but a moment." Lurk and Bent hurried for the ramp, followed closely by the two 'bots.

He turned, a smile on his face. "Greeno, old buddy, how are you? I was just on my way to see your boss."

Greeno was, as fortune would have it, green. His large black eyes glinted in the afternoon suns-light as he emerged from the shadows in the corner of the landing bay. From the top of his pebbled green head, flared nostrils on stalks sniffed the air. A stubby, lethal-looking laser pistol in his fist was aimed unwaveringly at Mal's head.

“Looks to me,” said Greeno, “as though you were just skipping town. Not to mention the planet. But it’s too late for talk now. Flabby has placed a huge bounty on your head. Every tracker in the galaxy will be looking for you. It’s a pity for them that I got here first.”

“Look, I’ve got the money.”

“If you give it to me,” said Greeno *greenily*, “I might forget I saw you.”

“I don’t have it *with* me,” said Mal. “Look Greeno, I’ve got these passengers, paying customers, and once I take them where they’re going I’ll have enough to pay Flabby off, and give you a bit on the side.”

“Sorry, Single. Flabby the Butt has a reputation to consider. She can’t let every smuggler who works for her get away with dumping *her* cargo into space at the first sign of trouble.”

“Be reasonable, Greeno,” said Mal. “Even I get boarded sometimes. Do you think I had a choice?” He thrust his hands idly into his pockets.

“Try telling that to Flabby,” said Greeno. “Perhaps she’ll only take your ship.”

“Over my dead body,” said Mal.

Greeno snorted in amusement. “Yes, Single, that’s the idea. I’ve been looking forward to this for a long time.”

“Yes,” said Mal. There was a flash of light, and as Greeno slumped to the floor, dead, Mal pulled the small laser pistol from his coat pocket and hastily patted out the small flame which was smouldering around the charred hole in his coat. “I bet you have.”

Let me repeat that, for those of you who missed it: Mal shot first. It’s just the kind of guy he was. It should be obvious to everyone, though, that he acted in self defence. He was a rogue and a scoundrel, not a murderer.

Suddenly an armoured fist pounded on the door to the landing bay, and an electronically amplified voice shouted “Open up.” Obviously the owner of the voice did not intend to wait patiently for them to comply, because sparks started to fly as a laser cutter began to chew its way through the door. Mal turned and ran for the *Sparrow*. At the top of the ramp he hit the button which closed the ramp, then thumbed the smaller one beside it.

“Shaggus,” he yelled into the intercom, “get us out of here. We’re about to have company.”

The *Sparrow*’s VTOL jets roared into life. The rickety old freighter shuddered uncertainly for a moment, then lurched skywards. The jets rotated, and the ship soared away from Moss Iceberg just as the first Troopers burst into the landing bay below them. A couple of them fired up at the fleeing vessel in frustration.

Mal ran through the cargo bay and up the steps. As he passed through the galley he saw that his passengers had found somewhere to sit. He ran on into the small flight deck and settled into the pilot’s seat beside Shaggus. The Woonky snarled something. *We’ve got more company.*

“Yeah, I see ‘em,” said Mal. “Our passengers must be hotter than I thought.”

“See what?” said Lurk from behind him.

“Two *Imperial Planetary Dominators*, coming in fast.” Mal pointed out the front view screen, where two distant dots of light were growing slowly larger. “Go buckle in; things are gonna get a little bumpy.”

“Can’t you outrun them?” squealed Lurk. “I thought you said this thing was fast.”

“I never said she was fast,” said Mal. “I said ‘she’s got it where it counts’. But she’s fast enough for you and your old man. Once we make the jump to hyperlight speed we’ll be home free. Until then, we can

outmanoeuvre them. So go sit down, and buckle up! And make sure those ‘bots are secure.”

As Lurk returned to his seat, Shaggus grunted again. “Oh good,” said Mal. “Fighters.”

He began to throw the *Sparrow* through a series of wild evasive zigs and zags, taking her steadily closer to one of the approaching *Dominators*. Weapons fire began to flash around them. They streaked past the hull of one of the huge battle cruisers, and Mal jerked the rudder sharply over, throwing the *Sparrow* into a vertical spiral. One of the pursuing fighters overshot, and exploded against the hull of the *Dominator*. The remainder spiralled upwards after their prey.

A light flashed on the console. The hyperlight calculations were completed. “Let’s book, baby,” whispered Mal as he tapped the button beside the flashing light. The stars in the view screen turned into streaks of light as the *Serendipity Sparrow* accelerated past the light barrier and into hyperspace, leaving their Imperial pursuers—and the planet Ratatouille—far, far behind.

Chapter 11

Labia Orgasma Has A Bad Day

Great Muff Tarragon stood on the primary bridge of the *Devastator* Station, hands linked primly behind his back.

He actually spent quite a lot of time standing on the bridge, staring out into space. All that emptiness was oddly comforting—and besides, it gave him an excuse to avoid spending time with the wife and kids. Currently he was staring at the blue-green planet which was centred in the view screen.

Barth Vapour marched onto the bridge, followed by four Shock Troopers. In the midst of the group of troopers, wrists shackled, was Princess Labia Orgasma. She still wore the diaphanous white robe she had been wearing when she had recorded the begging message for General K'nobby. Since then she had been stunned, dragged through the hallways of her ship, held prisoner for days, and interrogated. Consequently her dress was stained with a number of noxious substances—perspiration was the least of her worries—and ripped in several places. Her long hair was draped loosely around her shoulders and, since she had not had access to a hairbrush during her captivity, it was beginning to look as though a family of field mice was nesting in it. Her face

was smeared with sweat and dirt, and it looked as though she had been crying recently.

Lurk's deepest suspicions would have been vindicated. Given the state of her clothing, it was readily apparent that she wore nothing beneath it.

She stood proudly, however. She was a member of the ruling family of Alderbark, and she would show these Imperial barbarians that it took more than a little discomfort to break her spirit.

"Ah, Tarragon," she said strongly, "I might have expected to find you holding Vapour's leash. I thought I detected your delicate herbal aroma as I was brought on board."

Tarragon sniffed. "Charming to the last," he said, "except for that unfortunate foul stench you appear to be wearing. You don't know how hard I was when I signed the order for your execution."

"Um," said Labia, suddenly aware of how little her clothing still covered. "Indeed. I'm surprised you had the courage to admit it."

"Princess Labia, I would like you to be present for a little ceremony before we execute you." Tarragon smiled. On him, a smile was not a friendly expression. "The first firing of this station's primary weapon, thereby bringing us fully operational. After this, no star system will dare to rebel against the Emperor."

Labia shrugged, and then wished she hadn't as the Great Muff's eyes flickered down to her breasts. "The more you tighten your grip around them, the more they will slip through your fingers. Star systems, that is. The more *systems* will slip through your fingers." *Damn*, she thought, *don't need to start giving the old pervert ideas!*

"Not after we demonstrate the full power of this station," said Tarragon. "In a way, you have determined

the target for our first test firing. We would prefer something with more strategic value, of course, but we don't know where the Rebel base is, so we shall have to try it out here instead." He waved one hand briefly at the view screen before clasping the hand behind his back again.

Labia looked. "No," she protested. Suddenly all the strength was gone from her, and she sagged backwards; Barth Vapour was right behind her, and she found herself backed up against the rubbery stillsuit he always wore. "Not Alderbark. You can't. We are a peaceful people, we have no weapons of any kind."

"Well," said Tarragon, "perhaps you should have thought of that before you ran away to join the Rebellion."

"That's not fair," said Labia. "Punish me if you must, but you can't destroy a whole planet for the actions of a single person."

"You would prefer another target?" asked Tarragon. "A military target? Then name the system."

"I..." Labia looked at the planet hanging in space, so small and blue and defenceless. So fragile. "I... They... Dentakleen," she sobbed. "They're on Dentakleen."

"You see, Lord Vapour," said Tarragon. "She can be reasonable." He looked up briefly at Vapour, glanced down again at Labia's breasts, then turned away.

"Commander," he said, "you may fire when ready."

"What?" Labia screamed at him. "You can't be serious."

"You are far too trusting, my dear. We will get to your Rebel friends on Dentakleen in good time, but it is far too remote a planet to make an effective demonstration of our capability. Alderbark, on the other hand, will make all the major news feeds."

Labia stared at the view screen in horror. Around them, the whole station began to hum as the primary weapon built its charge. Enormous energies had to be stored, in order to be released in a microsecond. The hum grew louder. Soon the deck beneath their feet began to vibrate. One of the bridge lights flickered uncertainly. Several more dimmed. There was a loud *whoosh*, and a brilliant flare of light on the screen as the weapon fired its bolt of seething destructive energy towards Alderbark. The screen went dark, its compensation circuits dampening the flash.

“No,” whispered Labia.

The screen lightened again. In its centre, the blue-green planet still floated against the blackness of space.

Utter silence gripped the bridge for a moment, except for the mechanical hiss of Vapour’s breathing.

“Commander,” said Tarragon softly. “Why is there still a planet in our space?”

“Um, I don’t...” The Commander’s fingers flashed across his console as he collated reports from a dozen stations and a hundred sensors. “It seems that, uh, that we missed. Sir.”

“Commander,” said Tarragon. “It is a planet. One does not *miss* a planet. One does not fire a warning shot across the bow of a planet.”

“Yes sir,” said the Commander. “No sir. No sir.”

“Why did we miss, Commander?” asked Tarragon. His voice was calm and quiet, and held the promise of a very unpleasant future for the person who had screwed up.

“Uh, it looks like a, uh, a glitch in the targeting software, Sir.” The Commander sounded slightly more relaxed now that it was no longer his fault; now that he had somebody to blame. “According to the computer, we

were aimed dead-centre. All the sensor diagnostics are reading normal, so it must be the software.”

“Well, get it fixed, Commander,” said Tarragon. “Before too many of them escape, if you please; they know we’re here now, so they’re unlikely to just sit tight.”

“Yes sir,” said the Commander.

“And you,” Tarragon pointed to Labia’s Shock Trooper escort. “Return *her* to her cell. My apologies, your highness, but there has been a slight technical hitch. We shall get around to our little christening ceremony in due course.”

“Take your time,” said Labia. “Take as long as you want; don’t hurry on my account.”

“Don’t worry, Princess,” said Tarragon, “I’ll be sure to transmit the video feed of the event direct to your cell.”

The Shock Troopers marched Labia out of the room.

“This is a little unfortunate,” said Vapour. “And more than a little embarrassing, I would imagine.”

“Don’t you start,” muttered Tarragon.

Seepy Weepy stood in a corner of the small lounge area of the *Serendipity Sparrow*, watching Arty Farty and Shagpyle Duphus as they played a game of four dimensional Brockian Ultra Chess. Mal sat on the far side of the room; it was always wise to keep one’s distance when Shaggus was playing chess, because he was a bad player and a sore loser. Lurk and Bent sat together a little distance away. Bent K’nobby rubbed his forehead, a look of vague discomfort on his face.

“Are you alright?” asked Lurk.

“I felt a minor disturbance in the Source,” said Bent. “As though millions of voices cried out in terror, then sighed in relief, then had to urgently visit the bathroom.”

“Uh, right,” said Lurk.

“I fear something terrible is about to happen,” Bent added.

They sat in silence for a moment.

“We have a little time before we reach Alderbark,” said Bent. “Don’t we, Captain Single?”

“Couple of hours,” drawled Mal. “Time for a little shut-eye, if that’s what you’re after.”

“Actually,” said Bent, “I was thinking we had time for a little training session.”

Lurk stood up and activated his light rapier; the humming blade lit the room.

“Whoa!” said Mal. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Bent hefted a small spherical trainer ‘bot. “Like I said, training.”

“Like hell, you are!” said Mal. “If you must do that, how about taking it down to the cargo bay! You think I want scorch marks all over the walls of my lounge?”

“Um,” said Bent.

“Sorry,” said Lurk, as he deactivated the light rapier.

The two traipsed out of the lounge and down towards the cargo bay. After a moment, Mal stood and followed them.

Lurk picked a spot of empty deck, away from the crates piled up at one end of the cargo bay, and took a heroic stance as he reactivated the light rapier. Bent tossed the trainer ‘bot into the air. It powered up with a barely audible hum and hovered there, spinning slowly. Light sparkled off the dozen or so lenses which studded its surface, each lens being the emitter of a low charge stun laser.

The ‘bot dodged to one side, and Lurk turned to keep it in sight. It rose, dodged again, and fired a yellow pulse.

Lurk swung the light rapier wildly, and yelped as the pulse hit his thigh.

Mal chuckled.

“Remember,” said Bent, “a Jubbly can feel the Source flowing through him, and around him.”

“You mean it controls your actions?” asked Lurk, shaking his leg to get the feeling back into it.

“It can control the actions of the weak-minded,” said Bent, “but the strong-minded can control *it*.”

Lurk took up a ready stance. The ‘bot zipped back and forth a couple of times, and Lurk angled the rapier blade towards it each time. Suddenly it streaked closer to him, descending as it did so, and fired another pulse. This one hit Lurk’s buttock, and his deactivated light rapier clattered to the deck as he fell sideways. Mal laughed.

“Hokey religions and ancient weapons are no match for a good blaster at your side, kid,” he said. “Or for a good woman at your side,” he added as an old memory surfaced. He sighed and blinked it away.

“You don’t believe in the Source, do you, Captain Single?” asked Bent, stating the obvious.

“I’ve been back and forth across the galaxy a dozen times,” shrugged Mal. “From the core systems to the rim. I’ve seen a lot of strange things, but I’ve never seen anything to suggest there’s some mystical ‘Source’ controlling everything. The only thing in charge of my destiny—especially since I got this boat—is me.”

Bent smiled at him.

“You ask me,” continued Mal, “it’s all a lot of simple trickery to fool the natives.”

“We’ll see,” said Bent. He looked back at Lurk, who had finally gotten to his feet again.

“Why don’t you try it again,” said Bent. He stood up and retrieved a large welder’s helmet from its peg on the

wall. "Here," he said, as he placed the helmet over Lurk's head, "try it like this."

"But with the face shield down," said Lurk, "I can't see a thing." He activated his light rapier. "Well, okay, I can just about see my blade," he added, "but that's it."

"That's the point," said Bent. "Your eyes can deceive you. Do not trust them. Instead, reach out with your feelings. Read the Source, Lurk."

"Okay," said Lurk sceptically. Behind the face shield he closed his eyes, and attempted to stretch out his mind to make contact with the Source. He heard the trainer 'bot buzz several times as it zipped through the air. He felt the tension drain out of him. It seemed he almost could see the 'bot. Suddenly the stun-bolt zapped his leg again, and he yelped.

"It's no good," he said, "I can't do it."

"You were almost there," said Bent. "Keep trying."

Lurk readied himself again. He reached out, trying to sense the Source, and beyond that, the Array itself. Suddenly, like one of those optical illusions that you have to relax your eyes before you can see, there it was. The trainer 'bot, the cargo bay, Bent and Mal, all delineated by shimmering green code. He watched the code of the trainer 'bot, saw it change a moment before it moved, saw it change again a moment before it fired. His light rapier was moving to block the bolt before the 'bot actually fired, and he deflected it easily.

"See," said Bent approvingly, "you can do it."

Mal snorted, "I call it luck."

Lurk ignored them both. He was still concentrating on the code of the trainer 'bot. Move, move, move. He found that he could keep track of it even as it zipped around behind him. He did not need to turn with it, because it was not going to fire yet. It moved again, and he looked

deeper into its code. It was more complex than the spoon he had examined in Bent's kitchen, but the principle was the same. There was no spoon, and there was no 'bot. It fired again, but he blocked the shot automatically, without breaking concentration. Just a little deeper, and *there*.

He tweaked.

He pulled the helmet off in time to see a 'bot-sized rock clatter to the deck. Bent and Mal gasped in unison.

"What..." said Bent. He looked at Lurk in wonderment. "What did you do?" he said.

Lurk shrugged. "I tweaked the Source," he said.

"But that is..." said Bent.

"That's impossible," Mal interjected.

"Had I not seen it happen," said Bent, "I would have been inclined to agree with you. However, this can only mean one thing."

"It means I need a drink," said Mal. He'd heard and seen enough. He stood up and wandered back through to the galley, to a bottle of whiskey that was calling his name.

"What does it mean?" said Lurk. "I didn't think it was a big deal; no different from influencing the thoughts of those Shock Troopers."

"But what did you actually do, Lurk?" asked Bent.

"I tweaked the Source," he said again.

"Yes, but think about it in more detail," said Bent. "Tell me what you did in programming terms."

"Well..." Lurk thought about it for a moment. "I looked into the Source, and it seemed fairly obvious that it is Object Oriented code. I simply redefined the pointer of the 'bot so that it became an instance of something else. Something less complicated, because that seemed

the easiest way to achieve it without worrying about its existing parameters.”

“Don’t you see?” said Bent. “You changed *code*. Or rather, you changed code-level data. Influencing the Troopers was simply a matter of changing data-level data. What you did *is* essentially the same trick, but at a much deeper level.”

“So?” asked Lurk.

“So,” said Bent, “it confirms what I already suspected. Hoped, even. You are ‘The One’, Lurk. The Chosen One.”

“My Lords.”

“Yes, Commander?” said Great Muff Tarragon. “I trust you have some good news for me?”

“Yes sir,” said the Commander. “I am told that the targeting software is back online. We are good to go.”

“Then what are you waiting for?” said Tarragon. “You have a planet to destroy.”

“Yes sir.”

“I hope, for your sake, Commander,” added Vapour in deep, menacing tones, “that we do not miss again.”

“Yes, my Lord,” said the Commander. He swallowed nervously, then relayed the fire command to the Gun Command Crew.

“And Commander,” said Tarragon.

“Sir?”

“Be sure to relay the video feed for this event to the Princess’s cell.”

“Yes, sir.”

Around them, the *Devastator* station began to hum.

Princess Labia Orgasma sat up as she felt the ominous hum vibrating in her chest cavity. With a dread

fascination, she looked up at the small monitor installed in one corner of her tiny cell. It showed her home planet, Alderbark, turning slowly against a backdrop of stars.

“No,” she whispered.

The hum grew stronger, louder, more pervasive. The station began to vibrate noticeably. There was a flash of brilliant white from the monitor, followed by a moment of darkness, and when the picture returned, there was nothing left of Alderbark but an expanding ring of debris.

“No,” she sobbed. “Oh no. Father...”

Chapter 12

One And One Make Two?

Bent gasped. Clutching his chest, he staggered back into his seat and gasped weakly.

“Bent, what is it?” shouted Lurk in alarm. He ran across the floor of the cargo bay and sat at the old man’s side. “Are you okay?”

“I felt a great disturbance in the Source, as though millions of voices cried out in terror, and were suddenly deleted.” He shook his head. “I fear something terrible has happened. I hate it when I’m right.” He gazed blankly through Lurk for a moment, regaining his strength. Then he blinked, and refocussed on the lad.

“You felt nothing?” he asked.

Lurk shook his head.

“You are powerful, young Splitwhisker, but you still have much to learn. You can manipulate the Source, but you are not as one with it.”

“But aren’t I ‘The One’?” asked Lurk. “What does that mean, anyway?”

“Being ‘The One’ and being ‘as one’ are not the same, Lurk,” said Bent. He paused a moment to regroup his thoughts. “Do you remember what I told you about the man who founded the Jubbly Order?” he asked.

“You said he was the first person to become aware of the Source, and to be able to manipulate it.”

“Indeed I did,” said Bent. “But he was more powerful than the other members of the Jubbly Order. His followers learned to manipulate the Source, but none could go as deeply as he could. As you can.” He stroked his straggly beard thoughtfully. “Before he died, he prophesied that one day ‘The One’ would return. He prophesied that a child would be born with *his* power, and that that child would bring balance to the Source.”

“And you think I am that child?” asked Lurk.

Bent nodded.

“I wasn’t sure. There was some confusion surrounding the details of the prophecy and, well, for a while we thought your father was the Chosen One.”

“My father?” said Lurk. “Mannequin? Barth Vapour?”

Bent nodded sadly.

“Well, how do you know he *isn’t* the Chosen One?” said Lurk.

“What?” said Bent. “Well, because he went over to the Hard Side.”

Lurk thought about this. “How many Stiff Lords are there?” he asked.

“Two,” said Bent. “Always there are two. A master and his apprentice. By their very nature they are unable to form large groups without killing each other.”

“And how many Jubblies are there?”

“At the moment?” asked Bent. “Only a couple survive. Myself, and old Master Yodel.” He shook his head sadly. “Before the hard times, before the Imperium, we numbered in the thousands. As I told you, Barth Vapour helped the Imperator to hunt most of them down.” He looked at Lurk. “Where are you going with this?”

“Well, it seems to me,” said Lurk, “that Vapour *did* bring balance to the Source. The Jubblies had the upper hand, but now the Jubblies and the Stiff are evenly matched.”

Bent gaped at him.

“But...” He stroked his beard idly as his mind followed that thought to its conclusion.

“Bugger,” he said at last.

“Bent?”

“You could be right, Lurk,” said Bent. “You know, we were so focussed on balance being a good thing that we never considered that we were already in front.”

“So does that mean I am not the Chosen One after all?” said Lurk.

“I don’t know,” said Bent. “I think that is a question we will have to ask Yodel sometime. All the evidence suggests that you are indeed ‘The One’—Vapour’s power never extended as far as yours has, and you are still untrained—but if what you say is right, it would appear that *he* was the Chosen One. We always thought the two titles referred to the same person; perhaps that was our biggest mistake.”

Lurk was about to say something more when Mal’s voice echoed through the cargo bay over the intercom.

“You two should get up here,” he said. “We are coming up on Alderbark now.”

Bent pushed himself wearily to his feet. “Come on, Lurk,” he said. “We can finish our discussion once we’re safely on Alderbark.” Lurk followed the old Jubbly Knight up the steps and through the lounge towards the flight deck.

Suddenly the *Serendipity Sparrow* lurched violently, and a loud bang echoed throughout the ship. Lurk

sprinted ahead and into the flight deck, just in time to hear Mal cursing vehemently in a foreign language.

“What is it?” he yelled as he sat in one of the empty seats and buckled himself in. Moments later Bent joined them and settled himself into another seat.

“We’ve come out of hyperlight speed into the middle of a meteor shower,” said Mal. Beside him in the co-pilot’s chair, Shaggus grunted in frustration.

“It’s not on any of the charts,” Mal said. “Speaking of charts...” He began to tap buttons frantically on his console, comparing visible star patterns with his navigation database. “Damn,” he said.

“What...” began Lurk, but was cut short as Mal jerked the rudder hard over to avoid a large lump of rock that tumbled past them.

“We’re in the right place,” said Mal, “but there’s no Alderbark.”

“What?” said Lurk. “How could an entire planet be missing? Are you sure you’re reading that thing right?”

Under other circumstances, Mal might have taken exception to such a rude question, but he was feeling more than a little unsettled. “I’m telling you, kid, we’re in the right place. But no Alderbark. Correction, I think this meteor shower is what’s *left* of Alderbark. It’s been totally blown away.”

“But that’s impossible,” exclaimed Lurk. “An entire fleet of *Planetary Dominators* wouldn’t have enough firepower to do this to a planet. Now perhaps if they were called ‘*Star Destroyers*’ or something, it might be imaginable, but...”

He was cut off as an alarm began beeping and flashing on the console. The *Sparrow* rocked again—this time, the unmistakable impact of weapon fire—and then a lone THIGH Fighter swept past overhead and took the

lead, the characteristic roaring hum of its gravitational repulsors going completely unheard in the airless void of space.

Mal immediately accelerated after the Fighter. "Shaggus," he said, "take the Fore gun port."

The Woonky grunted acknowledgement and trotted off the flight deck.

"Where did that come from?" asked Lurk. "Did it follow us from Ratatouille?"

"No," said Bent. "No Fighter that small has hyperlight engines."

"It must have come from a ship around here," said Mal.

"Won't it report us?" asked Lurk.

"Nope," said Mal. "So long as I can keep up with it I can jam its transmissions, and as soon as Shaggus gets a lock on it, it will be nothing but a memory."

"It looks like it's heading for that small moon," said Lurk. He pointed ahead.

There was a moment's silence.

"That's no moon," said Bent. "It's a space station."

"What?" said Lurk. "It's too big to be a space station."

"I think the old man might be right," said Mal. "When was the last time you saw a cylindrical moon?"

Lurk looked closer. "Oh," he said.

"I have a bad feeling about this," said Mal.

"Forget the Fighter," said Bent. "Get us out of here."

"I think you're right," said Mal. The fighter began to draw away from them as Mal threw the engines into full reverse. They screamed in protest at this harsh treatment.

"Why are we still moving forward?" screamed Lurk.

"Momentum, mostly," snapped Mal. He tapped one of the readouts on the console, and frowned. "And it looks

like they've locked an attractor beam on us. Well, they're not gonna get me without a fight."

Bent leaned forward and placed a calming hand on Mal's arm. "Power the engines down," he said. "There is a time for fighting, and this is not that time. It is a fight that I do not think that we can win."

Mal paused a second, then shut off power to the engines. He had no choice anyway; they would have torn the ship apart if he had persisted. "What do you have in mind?"

"I'm sure we can come up with an alternative, Captain."

First Lieutenant Nummalarandrajah Nuttarumbalum was on patrol.

NumNut had a terrible hangover. He had already been drinking for several hours before he had met up with his old buddy Joe, and consequently he had not had enough sleep before having to report for duty. His head was pounding, and—genetically modified or not—being inside the shifting high-grav field of his THIGH Fighter's cockpit really wasn't helping.

He had watched as the *Devastator* Station had oriented itself with the distant planet; he had watched as its front end had irised open, revealing what was essentially the gargantuan barrel of the largest laser weapon in the galaxy. He had watched as the energy blast reduced the planet to so much rubble, and he had rapidly taken shelter behind the bulk of the Station as the debris exploded outwards. The Station's own shields and defence systems had taken care of most of the projectiles that headed its way.

And now he was flying a huge looping patrol pattern around the space behind the Station, and nursing the headache from Hell.

“THIGH Seven Eight One Zero Three Bee,” crackled his comm, “please acknowledge.”

“This is THIGH-78103b,” said NumNut. “Go ahead, THIGH Control. What are your orders?”

“THIGH-78103b, please check your internal sensors. Our telemetry shows a fluctuation on your gravimetric controller of six percent beyond acceptable parameters.”

“Please hold, THIGH Control. Checking.” NumNut keyed off the comm, and groaned. In his current state he was barely capable of wiping bird shit off the windscreen—assuming there had been any birds in space capable of making such a deposit—let alone analyse the diagnostic readouts of his gravimetric controllers. Wincing, he tapped the keys on his console slowly. Diagnostics. Gravimetrics. Proceed.

“THIGH-78103b, is there a problem?”

“Still, uh, still collating,” said NumNut carefully. He had no idea what the word meant, but somebody had once told him it was a good word to use when you had no clue what you were looking at.

The results flashed onscreen. He stared at them stupidly. *794.3 Gravitrons*. What was the figure supposed to be? He had no idea.

“Uh,” he keyed the comm. “Uh, THIGH-78103b to THIGH Control.”

“Go ahead, THIGH-78103b.”

“Uh, confirmed, Control. I’m reading 5.9% outside of acceptable limits.” Rule number one of lying to one’s superiors: do it confidently and convincingly! And if possible, tell them *almost* what they were expecting to hear.

“Return to base, THIGH-78103b. We’ll send out a replacement patrol while we look your ship over. Control out.”

“Acknowledged, Control.”

Well, thought NumNut, that worked out better than I could have hoped! Perhaps I’ll get some sleep today after all.

He swung the THIGH Fighter around in a tight loop and set course for the distant speck that was the *Devastator*. His navigation computer identified a loose cluster of planetary debris in his path, and he adjusted his course slightly to take him through the centre of the cluster; it was a manoeuvre that would no doubt be frowned upon by THIGH Control, but even with his hangover, the lure of the cheap thrill was too strong to ignore.

Suddenly the strident alarm of his Fighter’s collision alert sounded. He barely had time to wonder what had set it off—the meteors were nowhere near close enough yet—when a battered old freighter dropped out of hyperlight drive directly in his path and decelerated to a speed substantially slower than his own; for it to appear *there* it must have actually warped through his ship in the final moments of hyperlight. NumNut felt his skin crawl. He had seen that happen once—one ship materialising inside another—and it had not been pretty.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl. NumNut’s engineered reflexes had taken over. He took evasive action, narrowly missing the huge throbbing engine pod of the old ship as his Fighter skimmed up over its rear end and went into a 360 degree loop.

Fast as his reactions had been, his combat computer’s analysis of the situation was faster still. As he dropped back in behind the freighter, his targeting reticle flashed

green. The freighter was identified as a possibly hostile fugitive from Imperial justice.

“THIGH-78103b, we are in receipt of your transmission,” said THIGH Control. NumNut knew that the combat computer would have tight-beamed the identification back to the *Devastator* the instant it had been made. “Please stand by.”

NumNut dropped back slightly as the freighter collided with one of the rocks from the debris cluster.

“THIGH-78103b, please acknowledge.”

“Go ahead, THIGH Control,” said NumNut. He hugged the freighter’s tail as it took an evasive path through the cluster.

“Suspect vessel is classified *Most Wanted*. Get their attention, and lead them in to the *Devastator*. Do not target any vital systems; Lord Vapour himself wants this vessel captured whole.”

“Confirmed, THIGH Control. No damage to vital systems. Lead them in.” NumNut sighed. He hated acting as bait.

Switching his Fighter’s weapons to half-strength, NumNut accelerated over the freighter’s hull. He fired a couple of blasts along the top of the hull, then streaked past them.

The freighter’s pilot reacted quite quickly, for a Biggun. The ship gave chase, and NumNut modulated his own speed carefully to allow them to keep up. An electronic hiss filled his ears as they began jamming his comm systems, which was to be expected. He kept a wary eye on the combat computer’s analysis of the ship, and he felt a nervous prickle run up his spine as one of the freighter’s gun ports went active. He began weaving slightly back and forth, and hoped that their targeting computer was as old as the rest of the ship.

"I'm just glad I'm not in a 5730T," he said aloud to the universe at large.

Suddenly the freighter began to shudder and drop back. As the gap between them widened, the jamming hiss died.

"THIGH-78103b to THIGH Control," said NumNut.

"THIGH-78103b, this is THIGH Control. We have them. Well done."

"Thanks, THIGH Control."

"THIGH-78103b, proceed to Docking Tube T-109b as per previous instructions. Once docked, report for immediate debriefing."

"Roger that, THIGH Control," said NumNut. Immediate debriefing? *Damn*, he thought, *there goes my nap!*

The Great Muff Tarragon sat at the small conference room table, his fingers steepled in front of his chin. He appeared to be deep in thought. Across the table from him stood the Hard Lord of the Stiff, Barth Vapour. He paced back and forth like a caged predator.

Tarragon straightened in his chair.

"Baron to Queen's Palisade Three," he said. "Check."

Vapour leaned in to study the state of the game. "An interesting move," he said. "But predictable. Trooper to Knight's Retinue Seven."

Tarragon's eyes narrowed. "What are you up to?" he mused.

The conference room speaker chirped for attention. Tarragon tapped the button. "Yes, what is it?"

"Sir, our advance scouts have reported back from Dentakleen. There are signs of a Rebel base, but it has been deserted for some time."

“She lied to us!” said Tarragon. “She lied to *me*! That bitch!”

“As you said,” said Vapour snidely, “she will never knowingly betray the Rebellion.”

“The sooner we execute the stubborn cow, the better,” said Tarragon.

The speaker chirped again, and Tarragon jabbed a finger angrily at the button.

“Yes? Now what?”

“Uh, sir, we have just intercepted and captured a freighter which entered the Alderbark system. It matches the description of the suspect freighter which blasted its way out of Ratatouille earlier today.”

“The missing plans,” said Vapour quietly. “Perhaps they are trying to return them to the Princess. She may yet be of some use to us.”

“I agree,” said Tarragon. “I do hope she hasn’t been executed yet?”

“Scheduled for tonight, I believe,” said Vapour.

Tarragon tapped the comm button again. “Cancel the execution order for Princess Labia,” he said. “And conduct a thorough search of that ship.”

“Yes sir.”

“Do you feel lucky?” asked Vapour.

“Why?” asked Tarragon.

“I have a cunning plan, my Lord,” said Vapour.

The *Serendipity Sparrow* looked out of place in the middle of the polished cleanliness of the *Devastator* Station docking bay in which she rested.

Barth Vapour strode towards the ungainly ship, an Imperial Captain scurrying to keep up with him. As they drew near to the freighter, another officer marched down

the ramp to meet them, followed by two squads of armoured Shock Troopers.

“My Lord,” said the officer, “there is nobody on board. According to the log the crew abandoned ship right after takeoff. Both of the ship’s shuttles have been launched. It must be a decoy, my Lord, although to what purpose I cannot imagine.”

“Were there any ‘bots?” asked Vapour.

“No sir,” said the officer. “If there were any, they must have accompanied the crew in the shuttles.”

Vapour looked up at the old ship. “What of the THIGH Pilot’s report, Captain?” he said.

“Sir, the Pilot who intercepted the ship is certain that it was manned at the time.” The captain consulted his electronic notepad. “He states that it accelerated to pursue him, initiated jamming of his comm system, and powered up its weapons. Furthermore, his claim that it attempted to break free from the attractor beam is confirmed by telemetry from Attractor Control; after the lock was achieved, additional resistance was felt as the ship’s engines went into reverse before powering down.”

Vapour nodded.

“Thank you, Captain,” he said. “Is the scanning crew I selected ready to go on board?”

“Yes, my Lord,” said the captain hesitantly.

“Is there a problem, Captain?” asked Vapour menacingly?

“Um, no, my Lord. Uh, it’s just that...”

“Yes, Captain?”

“Well, my Lord, I’m sure that Team Buttercup are a fine squad of Shock Troopers, but might I suggest a more experienced...”

“No, Captain, you might *not* suggest.”

“Yes, my Lord.” The captain swallowed nervously.

“Now, send the scanning crew on board. I want every part of that ship checked. And Captain.” Vapour leaned in close to the officer.

“Yes, my Lord?”

“I think you can pull the rest of your Troopers off of this guard duty. The remainder of Team Buttercup should be more than sufficient to man this post.”

“Yes, my Lord. Of course, my Lord.”

Vapour looked up at the ship again. “I sense a presence,” he said, almost to himself. “A presence I’ve not felt since...” In a swirl of black cape, he turned and marched from the docking bay. The two squads of Troopers followed him, as did the two officers. As he reached the doorway, the captain nodded at the waiting Troopers and technicians from Team Buttercup.

A panel in the sloping side wall of the cargo bay slid aside, and Mal peered out cautiously. The coast was clear. As he clambered out of the small compartment, another panel slid open and Lurk peered out.

“Boy,” said Lurk, “it’s lucky you had these compartments.”

“Yes,” said Mal. “A thousand smugglers on the planet, and you just happened to find the only one with hidden compartments on his ship. That sure was a lucky break for you.” He rolled his eyes at Shaggus, who was unrolling his lanky form from a third locker.

“Okay,” said Lurk defensively. “No need to be mean about it.” No doubt about it: after only three days with the ‘bots in his life, his sarcasm detector was working just fine. He climbed out, then moved to help Bent come out of his closet.

The two ‘bots were powered down and locked in a broom cupboard. Lurk was in the middle of reactivating

them when they heard a loud metallic clang from the ship's ramp. He peered around a crate and studied the two un-armoured Imperials who were pushing a large floating scanning unit up the ramp. They had somehow managed to drop the scanner.

"Do you guys need a hand in there?" came an electronically distorted voice from somewhere outside the ship.

"No thanks, it's fine," called out one of the scanner techs. "Everything is under control." They powered the scanner unit up again, and pushed it to the top of the ramp, at which point Mal and Shaggus jumped them. Mal swung a piece of lead pipe against the head of one tech. The Woonky simply reached out a large furry hand, gripped the top of the other man's head, and twisted sharply. Both men, and the scanner unit, collapsed to the floor again.

"Uh, hey guys," Mal called down the ramp as Shaggus hurriedly dragged the bodies out of sight, "could you give us a hand in here?"

"I thought everything was fine?" called back one Trooper.

"Yeah," said the other, "you said everything was under control."

"Well, uh," said Mal, thinking fast, "we thought it was all good, but now we see that we really do need your help. Uh, we're sorry if we upset you."

"Damn techs," muttered one of the Troopers, "always thinking they're better than us."

"Yeah," said the other. "It's bad enough that we have to trial this new armour today—and it's not anywhere near as comfortable as the old stuff. Feels quite flimsy too. But having to nursemaid you two is the final straw!"

“Look, guys, we’re really sorry if we gave that impression,” said Mal. “We don’t really think we’re better than you. We’re obviously not strong enough to push this scanner around. Please?”

“Okay,” said the first Trooper, “but you guys are going to owe us. Come on.”

The two Shock Troopers turned and marched up the ramp. Mal shot them both with his blaster from close range, and they clattered to the deck.

“Well, that’s all very nice and all,” said Lurk, “but won’t they be missed?”

“Look,” said Mal, “just get into that suit of armour and stop complaining!”

“And then what? There are only two suits, and four of us—and I doubt the Imperium had Woonkies in mind when they designed this armour.”

“Just trust me,” said Mal.

In situations like this, Mal preferred to react rather than plan. With so many things that could go wrong, he preferred to keep his options open. In other words, he was making it up as he went along.

Chapter 13

Lucky For Some

First Lieutenant Quazont stood up and glanced out of the control room window into the docking bay. The captured freighter sat in the centre of the highly polished floor, making his bay look untidy. He frowned; there was no sign of the two Troopers who should have been standing guard duty. “Where have those guys got to now?” he muttered.

Second Lieutenant Fokasha looked up. “What’s up?”

Quazont shrugged. “Those damn Team Buttercup Troopers aren’t at their post. I don’t know what they’re teaching new recruits these days, but I’m worried for the future of the Imperium.” He sat back down.

“They’re young,” said Fokasha. “They’ll learn.”

“Maybe,” said Quazont. “I’ve heard stories of new squads being mentored by tough old veterans—but it shouldn’t be necessary. Half of these guys will be lucky to survive their first day of real combat. They should at least have the training they need to keep ‘em alive on the battlefield, and they don’t seem to be getting it from the Academy. All they seem to teach them is this touchy-feely crap about respecting public property and not actually upsetting anyone.”

“Yeah,” sighed Fokasha. “Next thing you know they’ll be taking their weapons off them too!”

“So what are they supposed to use? Harsh language?” Quazont shook his head. “Can’t even do that any more in case you offend someone.” The First Lieutenant tapped a couple of commands into his console and brought up the day’s duty roster.

“Too true,” muttered Fokasha. “Personally, I think the...” He stopped and glanced around the control room guiltily. The two men were alone. Nonetheless, he leaned in closer to Quazont and whispered, “I think the Imperator has gone soft in his old age.”

Quazont looked around for himself. “I heard,” he whispered conspiratorially, “that he has been paying too much attention to some new ‘advisor’.” He made air-quotes with his fingers around the last word. “Some Trileg chick who has him wrapped around her little finger. I’ve even heard rumours that suggest... Well, they’re saying in some circles that this advisor is actually running the whole show.” He cleared his throat loudly and sat upright. “But enough of that,” he said loudly. “Talk like that can be unhealthy.”

Fokasha nodded wryly.

“Now then, where are we?” said Quazont. He trailed his finger down the listing. “Team Buttercup.” He tapped the screen, and the squad’s details were flashed up on the display.

He stood and looked out into the landing bay again. The Troopers were still absent. He selected the appropriate channel and activated the comm. “TX Four Two One Nine Nine Aye, why aren’t you at your post?”

He waited a few seconds. No response.

“TX-42199a, please respond.”

Silence.

Movement caught his eye. One of the Troopers appeared at the bottom of the freighter's ramp and tapped the side of his helmet.

"And that's another thing," said Quazont as he watched the Trooper miming something about having an urgent need to dance naked through a meadow of daffodils—or perhaps he meant his helmet's communicator wasn't transmitting. "What's with this new armour that Lord Vapour has got these guys testing?"

"Isn't this the same stuff that we shit-canned last year because it was sub-standard?" asked Fokasha.

"That's what I thought too," said Quazont. "I *thought* it all got thrown into a trash compactor, though—along with the contractor who tried to sell it to us." He shrugged. "Who knows? Anyway, whatever this stuff is, it doesn't work; looks like we've got a bad transmitter."

"I don't know why they can't just stick with the design that *does* work," said Fokasha.

Quazont shook his head and shrugged. "Cover for me, will you," he said. "I'd better go down and see what I can do." He tapped briefly at his console, logging out of it before he turned to leave.

"Sure," said Fokasha.

As Quazont stepped into the sensor zone of the door it hissed open—and he found himself face to chest with a large woolly Woonky. The Woonky snarled in a most unfriendly manner.

"Oh crap," Quazont managed to say, and then the Woonky's large fist slammed into his head and threw him back across the room.

"What the...?" shrieked Fokasha. He fumbled for his pistol, but even as he wrapped his fingers around its handle, an armoured Trooper leaned in past the Woonky

and shot the Second Lieutenant twice in the chest. He slumped bonelessly from his chair.

Mal Single followed Shagpile Duphus into the room and looked around. Apart from the two Imperial corpses, it was empty. He beckoned, and Bent K'nobby joined them. Following the old man came the two 'bots. Bringing up the rear, removing his Trooper helmet as he closed the door behind himself—and panting a little breathlessly from the exertion of having sprinted up the stairwell—was Lurk Splitwhisker.

“Y’know,” said Lurk, “with his howling, and your blasting everything in sight, it’s a wonder the whole station doesn’t know we’re here.”

“Bring ‘em on,” said Mal. “I’d prefer a straight fight to all this sneaking around.”

Lurk shook his head in disgust. Ignoring the youth’s disdain, Mal pushed the dead Imperial away and slumped down into his recently vacated chair. It was still warm.

“Quickly,” said Bent. “Find the computer outlet.”

The two 'bots started making excited noises. “Here it is,” said Seepy Weepy.

“Plug into it, Arty,” said Lurk.

Arty whistled and extended her computer interface probe. She slid it into the socket and, with a half turn, locked it into place.

“Good,” said Bent. “You should be able to see the entire Imperial network. See if you can find some way to shut down that attractor beam.”

Arty beeped and whistled extensively.

“Oh...” said Seepy.

“What?” said Lurk. “What did she say?”

“Oh dear,” said Seepy.

“What is it, Seepy?” said Lurk impatiently. “What did she say?”

“She said,” Seepy translated, “I’m an astrobot, not a hacker!’ Apparently the computer feed is encrypted and she can’t get any further.”

“Hey guys,” said Mal.

Lurk ignored him. “She may not be a hacker,” he said, “but I am. All I need to do is plug a keyboard into Arty and I can hack in through her.”

Arty whistled and beeped.

“She says,” Seepy translated, “that she does not have a keyboard input port. Uh, however, I do have one.”

“Hey guys,” said Mal.

“Well, can you plug into her?” asked Lurk. “Perhaps we can pass the data through her through you.”

“Of course, sir,” said Seepy. “I’ve plugged into her on many occasions.”

“Hey guys,” said Mal, impatience creeping into his voice.

“Okay,” said Lurk. “You plug into her. Good.”

“Oh yes,” said Seepy. “Very good!”

“Now all I need to do,” said Lurk, “is plug in to you!”

Mal drew his blaster and fired a bolt of laser fire at the ceiling. The energy blast ricocheted around the room several times before it finally hit the corpse of First Lieutenant Quazont where he lay huddled in the corner. Everybody in the room gaped at him.

“Hey guys,” he said with an exaggerated air of innocence, “if you’ve quite finished whatever kinky sexual fetish it is you’re playing out over there, why not just use *this* terminal?” He indicated the one in front of the seat he occupied; the erstwhile Second Lieutenant Fokasha had not had the presence of mind to use his final moments of life to log out.

“Uh, yeah,” said Lurk. “Good point.”

Mal moved over to the other chair, and allowed Lurk to get to the terminal. Bent sighed.

Lurk ran his fingers over the keys. “Oh good,” he said. “Even the Imperium use the *Boggle* search engine!” He typed in a query string and then started looking through the results.

“What’s that one?” asked Bent, looking over the youth’s shoulder.

“Yeah, that looks like it,” said Lurk. He clicked on a link labelled ‘Attractor Reactor’, and a partial schematic of the *Devastator* Station appeared on the screen.

“Hey guys,” said Mal.

“Yes?” said Lurk immediately.

“What is it?” said Bent.

“Can’t we just press this switch?” he asked, pointing to a switch on the console. It was in the ‘On’ position, it had a green light beside it, and the label beneath it read ‘Attractor Beam Power’.

Lurk and Bent looked at each other sheepishly.

“Well,” said Lurk, “we could, but it’s probably not that simple. Uh...”

“Uh, no,” continued Bent. “If we merely switch it off, what’s to stop them from switching it back on when we take off?”

“I could blast the console,” said Mal. “Hell, old man, you could slice it into confetti; you seem even more weapon-happy than I am.”

“Well, maybe,” said Bent, “but what if, uh, what if there are other switches, in other control rooms?”

Mal shrugged. “We could be out of range before they realise what’s happening,” he said.

“But, uh, if we didn’t get free in time, they’d never believe the *Sparrow* was abandoned a second time. Not even the Imperials are *that* stupid!” said Lurk.

“Besides,” added Bent, “that is not the way it’s supposed to be.”

“Are you still waffling on about the Source, old man?” demanded Mal. “About destiny?”

Bent gazed at the smuggler calmly. “Partly,” he said at last. “Through my sensitivity to the Source, I can sometimes catch a glimpse of the Script which we must all follow. Always in motion, the future is. Uh. The future is always in motion. But it must always return to the path prescribed by the Script eventually. I cannot see where this path will lead us, but I *can* see that I must disable the Attractor Beam power source if you, uh, if *we* are to escape.”

“Whatever,” said Mal dismissively. “You’ve gotta do what you’ve gotta do, I guess.”

“Okay,” said Lurk to Bent. “The Attractor Beams are powered by these seven reactors.” He pointed to the screen. “Disabling one of them should put the whole system out of action.”

Mal frowned. “Doesn’t that seem a little odd?” he said. “You’d think if a highly critical system was powered by seven separate reactors, it would be designed with multiple redundancies so it would keep running if two or three went down.”

Lurk shrugged and pointed at the screen. “What can I say?” he said. “That’s what it says.”

Bent studied the screen intently. “Okay,” he said. “I have to do this alone. You boys stay here and watch out for the ‘bots.”

“Fine by me,” muttered Mal. “This was just supposed to be a quick taxi-ride to Alderbark; I never signed on for all of this...”

“But Bent,” whined Lurk, “I wanted to come with you.”

“I know,” said Bent. “But it is vital that those ‘bots are delivered to the Rebel Coalition, or other star systems will suffer the same fate as Alderbark. Your destiny lies along a different path from mine.” He hesitated, his brow furrowing in thought. He was sure there was something he had forgotten to mention.

“Well, good luck,” said Lurk.

“Thank you,” said Bent. He clapped Lurk on the shoulder. “The Source will be with you, always,” he said. Then he turned away and slipped out of the room.

Shaggus barked something—*What was that all about?*—and Mal shook his head. “You got me, pal,” he said. He turned to Lurk.

“Boy, where did you dig up that old fossil?” he said.

“Bent K’nobby is a great man!” said Lurk loyally. “A bit quick to fire up that light rapier of his, perhaps, but still a great man!”

Mal shrugged.

As silence descended over the room, Lurk turned back to the console and started playing a solo card game on the screen. He soon bored of that, though. He called up the Boggle search engine again.

“Let’s see,” he said. He started typing something, erased it, typed something else, erased it too. Finally, on a testosterone-driven whim, he typed ‘boobies’ and pressed the *Search* button.

“Oh,” he said.

“What?” asked Mal. He wasn’t really interested in anything the geeky kid had found, but at least it was some small distraction from the tedium of sitting and waiting.

“Uh, it’s a well known fact of computer networking that *every* network has a percentage of pornography on it.”

“Yeah?” said Mal.

“Well, this one hasn’t,” said Lurk. “I’m not sure quite what it means, but I suspect it’s an indication of how truly evil they are!”

“Wait a minute,” said Mal. “You’re saying these guys are evil because they *don’t* have porn on their computers?”

“Yeah,” said Lurk. After a moment he added defensively, “porn is a natural part of a healthy life, and so its absence is very worrying.”

“Uh, right,” said Mal. *Damn farm-boys*, he thought, *they’re all the same!* “Maybe you didn’t try the right word. What did you type?”

“‘Boobies’,” said Lurk.

“Well, try something else,” he said. “How about ‘sex’.”

Lurk typed ‘sex’ into the search engine and waited for the results. “Nothing,” he said.

“Nothing?” asked Mal. He leaned over to look at Lurk’s screen. “What are all those?”

“Oh, there are some results, sure,” he said. “This first one, for instance, is some study on the gender selection of THIGH Pilots, whatever that means. But there is no pornography at all.”

Mal frowned. He wasn’t particularly interested in pornography—he was charismatic enough that he could have had his pick of women on just about any planet he visited, if he so chose—and apart from the peculiarities of the *Serendipity Sparrow*’s systems, he wasn’t overly interested in computers. But the kid did have a point; something was a little strange here.

“Try, uh...” A thought struck him. “Try ‘penis’,” he said.

Lurk typed ‘penis’. “Nothing,” he said.

“Well, what about ‘vagina’?”

Lurk tried that. “Nothing,” he reported.

Mal was rapidly losing what little interest he had had in the situation. He shrugged. He had no intention of sitting here reciting names of body parts until the old man came back. *One more*, he thought. *One more to keep the kid happy, and then I try to get some sleep!* “Anything there for ‘labia’?” he suggested.

“Oh,” said Lurk. “Labia! Of course! How could I forget?”

“Don’t get that excited,” said Mal. “It’s only another word.” But Lurk was frantically typing.

“She’s here,” said Lurk. “She’s here. I’ve found her, I’ve found her. Detention block 3701F.”

“What?” said Mal. This conversation was changing direction too quickly for him to keep up. “Found who?”

“The Princess. Princess Labia,” shouted Lurk excitedly. “She’s the one in the message. We have to rescue her.”

“Wait a minute,” said Mal. “Back up there. Did you say her name was ‘Labia’?”

“Uh, yeah,” said Lurk. “So what?”

“So who the hell names their kid ‘Labia’?” said Mal. “Come to think of it, who the hell names their kid ‘Lurk’? You two aren’t related, are you?”

“No,” said Lurk. “We’re not. Definitely not. No way, no how. And what’s wrong with ‘Lurk’ anyway?”

Mal held up his hands placatingly. “Hey, I’m just saying...”

“Well don’t,” said Lurk. “Now, are you gonna help me rescue the Princess or not?”

“I’m happy to stay right here, thanks.”

“But she’s scheduled for execution. They’re gonna kill her!”

“Better her than me,” said Mal.

“A minute ago—well, okay, fifteen minutes ago—you were saying you preferred a straight fight. Now you just want to sit here and wait?”

“Yeah,” said Mal, “but marching into the detention block isn’t quite what I had in mind. Besides, it was *your* old buddy who told us to wait here, remember?”

“But he didn’t know she was here,” pleaded Lurk.

Mal shrugged. “Look, I just want to get out of here in one piece. There is nothing you could say that would convince me to go running off on a crazy suicide mission.”

Lurk sighed. “She’s beautiful,” he tried.

Mal shook his head.

“Nice boobies,” Lurk added.

“What good are nice boobies,” said Mal, “if they get you killed.”

Lurk suddenly had a thought. He smiled innocently. “She’s rich,” he said.

“How rich?” said Mal. Shaggus snarled at him—*Don’t even go there!*—but Mal waved him away.

“Rich. Powerful,” said Lurk. It never actually occurred to either of them that any such riches or power might not have survived the destruction of her home planet. In truth, it occurred to Lurk that it wouldn’t occur to Mal provided nobody mentioned which planet Labia was a Princess of, which was, at the moment, the only salient factor in the equation. Mal’s ignorance, that is. Not Labia’s planet of origin.

“Why,” Lurk continued, “if you were to rescue her, the reward would be...” He waved his hands in the air to give the impression of size.

“Would be what?” asked Mal.

“Well, more wealth than you can imagine.”

Shaggus snorted.

"I don't know," said Mal. "I can imagine quite a bit!"

"Well, more wealth than *I* can imagine, then," said Lurk. "But you'll get it!"

"I'd better," said Mal.

"You will," said Lurk.

"Well, let's go rescue your Princess then!" said Mal. It never occurred to Mal that Lurk probably wasn't in a position to be able to promise large sums of money on the behalf of the Princess. It *did* occur to Shaggus, but since Mal never really understood more than the general gist of what the Woonky was trying to say when Shaggus was angry, his howls of protest didn't help.

One of Mal's greatest flaws was his tendency to be blinded to reality by the offer of large sums of money.

"Don't worry, pal," he said to the angry Woonky, "it'll work out just fine."

Shaggus grunted doubtfully.

"Hey," said Mal, "it's me!"

"Er, sirs," said Seepy Weepy, a little worried. "What about us."

Lurk looked at the 'bots. He didn't particularly want to shepherd them all around the huge Station.

"Take this," he said, producing a mini comm-link from the belt of his Shock Trooper armour, "and wait for us here."

"What if anybody comes?" said Seepy nervously.

"Lock the door," said Lurk.

"And hope they don't have blasters," added Mal.

"Oh."

"Can we go now?" asked Mal impatiently.

"Sure," said Lurk. He started putting his Shock Trooper helmet back on.

Shaggus snuffled.

"Oh," said Mal. "What about Shaggus?"

“Didn’t I say?” said Lurk. “That’s all part of my plan.”

“There’s a plan?” said Mal. “Since when?”

“Look, Shaggus,” said Lurk, ignoring Mal’s sarcastic tone, “I’m just going to put these on you...” He produced a set of handcuffs from his belt. Shaggus roared in rage and shook his arms in the air. He still hadn’t forgotten that monkey comment, and the way things were going, he was just about ready to rip the young human’s head off and shove it where the sun didn’t shine.

Lurk stepped back hastily.

“Relax, Shagpyle,” said Mal, “I think I know what he’s got in mind.”

Chapter 14

Stiff Daze and Jubbly Knights (*With Obligatory Flashback*)

“He is here,” said Barth Vapour.
“Obeah Bum K’nobby?” said Great Muff Tarragon. “Surely he must be dead by now?”

“What makes you say that?” said Vapour. “He is only ten years older than me. That is not all that old!”

“No,” said Tarragon. “But there has been no sign of him for twenty years. I always assumed that he had been caught by one of the cleansing teams and...”

“No,” said Vapour. “He is here. Now. I can sense his presence.”

“Do you think this will affect our plan?” asked Tarragon. “Okay, your plan.”

“Do not concern yourself with him,” said Vapour. “I shall deal with him myself. I must confront him.” The Stiff Lord stalked out of the conference room.

Obeah Bum K’nobby, known to Lurk Splitwhisker as old Bent K’nobby, was lost. He wandered aimlessly through the bewildering maze of seemingly identical corridors which seemed to be the primary architectural feature of the *Devastator* Station. He thought he had done a pretty good job of memorising the route to the nearest Attractor

Reactor, but he had obviously taken a wrong turn somewhere.

“I’m sure it was *Left, Left, Right, Left, Second Right, Right, Left,*” he muttered. “It should be right over *there.*”

He heard footsteps approaching, and ducked back into what little shadows there were in the corridor. As a Trooper rounded the far corner, Bent made a small, familiar gesture with his fingers. His mind reached out and he made contact with the Source, manipulating the contents of the Trooper’s mind. The Trooper marched straight past him without reacting, as though he didn’t even see him, and disappeared around the curvature of the corridor.

“Now then,” mused Bent, “if I were an Attractor Reactor, where would I be hiding?”

Bent closed his eyes. Slowly he raised his arms, as though feeling the energy from the reactors. He reached out again for the intangible whisper of the Source; this time, rather than attempting to guide anything, he simply looked, felt his way around, trying to build a bigger picture. The actual structure of the station was hazy and indistinct; much of the image he built up actually came from the minds of the Imperials who walked its halls on a daily basis. Sooner or later, he would find one who... There. A technician who had performed routine maintenance on a couple of the reactors recently. He saw now where they were, and where he had gone wrong.

“*Left, Right, Left, Left, Second Right, Right, Left,*” he said. “Silly me!”

He fixed the location of the nearest reactor into his mind, then slowly opened his eyes. Standing directly in front of him was an armoured Shock Trooper. He turned his head slightly and counted five more, all with their weapons drawn and pointed at him.

“Oh crap,” he said. “I don’t have time for this.”

Barth Vapour, Hard Lord of the Stiff, returned to his spacious but spartan quarters.

Although it would not do to show uncertainty in front of the Great Muff, Vapour was more than a little nervous about his pending confrontation with his old Jubbly Master. Although he was confident in his abilities, in his mastery of the Hard Side of the Source, his last meeting with K’nobby had not gone well; Vapour had barely survived, and had come out of their battle horribly scarred and disfigured. He had spent the many years since then hidden away behind the forbidding mask and the black rubber stillsuit.

His fearsome visage had made it extremely difficult to pick up chicks!

Of course, his Stiff Master, the Imperator, had soon taught him that only in solitude could one’s Stiff powers grow to their full potential; in that, the Stiff and the Jubbly were remarkably similar. It had been Vapour’s forbidden love for his secret wife that had subverted his Jubbly training and driven him down the path to the Hard Side in the first place, and sometimes he still felt regrets for what could have been. Had he handled himself differently, perhaps he would not have become Stiff at all.

Vapour sighed, the sound lost beneath the clicking and hissing of his mask’s respirator. His thoughts were unfocussed. In this state he would be no match for his former master. He needed to spend some time refocussing his emotions, preparing himself for what was to come. He needed the purity of his rage and the clarity of his ambition, untempered by such weaknesses as pity or regret.

He strode into his dark meditation chamber.

Bent K'nobby returned the silver handle of his light rapier to his belt as armoured body parts rained and clattered to the deck around him. The pungent aroma of scorched flesh filled the air. He shook his head sadly. *Such a waste of human life*, he thought. *Don't they teach these guys to stand further back?* It was a lesson these six Troopers would not forget in a hurry. Of course, being dead, they would be unable to pass it on.

Bent stepped gingerly over the carnage and headed back the way he had come. He had a reactor to disable. He retraced his steps to the intersection where he had taken the wrong turn, and continued on down the correct route. Before long the decor changed; the polished walls and glowing white lights were traded for a subtly more functional look. This was obviously an engineering section of the Station.

He turned the final corner and entered a large open space. A bridge spanned the cavernous drop, and half way across, the reactor stood on a platform off the edge of the bridge. It hummed quietly.

Bent approached the reactor, studying it carefully. He had to disable it in a subtle manner, so that it would not be immediately obvious where the problem lay—or even that there *was* a problem—while at the same time not making it easy to reactivate.

He began to move around the reactor on the narrow access walkway. On the far side from the bridge, he found a switch which looked promising. Beneath the switch was a small maintenance panel, held in place by four screws.

Bent lifted the light rapier from his belt. Turning it around, he gripped the handle tightly and gave the end a

twist. A small utility tool popped out. Bent quickly turned it, looking for the blade he needed. Knife, fork; in true Jubbly tradition, there was no spoon. Saw, corkscrew, magnifying glass. *Here we go!* He unfolded the small screwdriver and went to work on opening the panel.

There were no mirrors in the meditation chamber, no reflective surfaces of any kind, but still Barth Vapour hesitated before removing his helmet. He could not bear the sight of his own ruined face, its hideous scarring a grim reminder of the lowest point in his life. Finally, though, he released the clasps that locked the helmet onto the suit, and lifted it from his head. He blinked his eyes in the dim light; he was not used to using them without first passing the light through the filters built in to the lenses of his helmet. He rarely removed the helmet at all, these days.

Now that he had, though, the cool air in the meditation chamber felt good on his face. He breathed it in, rejoicing in the chance to fill his lungs—what remained of them—with air that did not taste of rubber and his own sweat.

He closed his eyes, and his lips moved as he mumbled a chant to focus his thoughts.

He let his awareness expand, seeking out that particular ripple in the Source which signified the presence of Obeah Bum K'nobby. In order to beat K'nobby, Vapour must first defeat his fear of him. To do that he must revisit the memory of their last fateful encounter—and in a delicious irony, he intended to recruit K'nobby himself to help walk him through it. The old fool would do it, too; he had always been too sentimental for his own good, and the thought that he

might be able to redeem his former student would be irresistible.

Where are you, old man? he wondered.

He moved his mind out wider, his thoughts scuttling like a thousand spiders through the tangled web that was the Source.

He was dimly aware of fully half of the massive station—Shock Troopers patrolling, THIGH Pilots eating and singing and sleeping, Officers officering, and one particular Trooper engaged in a routine prisoner transfer who seemed to have a stronger than usual presence in the Source—before he felt that old familiar ripple. He drew his thoughts back to himself, refocussed them solely on making contact with the old man.

Bent removed the fourth screw and carefully lifted the panel out. Beneath it were a number of electrical connections; it could have been a confusing mess of wires if somebody hadn't thoughtfully included a neatly labelled schematic on the inside of the panel. He studied it.

Suddenly he heard something. He glanced up. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he had heard *nothing*. He felt a chill finger tap his spine. Although nobody was near, he knew that he was no longer alone. He reached out for the Source, and felt a malevolent entity lurking there, curled up like a spider in its web.

"Hello, Obeah Bum. What are you up to, old man?"

"Hello, Mannequin, old friend," said Bent.

"Mannequin Splitwhisker is long dead", hissed Vapour's voice in his head. *"You killed him, remember?"*

Bent smiled. "That is not quite how I remember it. Barth Vapour, then. Long time no see. We must get together some time."

"Oh, we will, old man. And soon. We have unfinished business, you and I."

"I look forward to it," said Bent cheerfully.

"Do you remember how we first met?" asked Vapour.

"Of course," said Bent.

"I met a man, crazy for me."

"I met a boy, as cute as can be."

"I helped you out with my pod-racing skills."

"I trained you up with my Jubbly drills."

"Summer days," said Vapour. *"Fading away into Summer nights."*

"Well it *was* Ratatouille," said Bent. "It is always summer there. Where are you going with this?"

"Ratatouille?" mused Vapour quietly. *"Do you know I had forgotten that planet? That explains why I disliked it so much..."*

"You've been there recently?" asked Bent. "Small galaxy!"

"Do you remember our last encounter?" asked Vapour, changing the subject. *"Do you remember what you took from me? And how you left me for dead?"*

"Left you for..." Bent shook his head. "I remember what it was that finally drove you over the edge and severed your last tenuous link with sanity and reality, if that is what you mean. And I remember feeling partially responsible."

"Only partially, old man?" Vapour snarled. *"You tried to steal my wife away from me..."*

"You drove her away yourself, with your greed and ambition," countered Bent.

“And then you destroyed my body and soul, and my life.”

Bent shook his head again. “Your hatred has warped your memory, my friend. It was not like that.”

“Perhaps guilt and age have dulled yours,” said Vapour.

“Why don’t you tell me how you remember it?” said Bent.

“Very well...”

The planet MustardFart was far from the core of the galaxy, and Barth Vapour had come here to finally end the war which had been tearing the galaxy apart for the last ten years. It was a violent lava planet, a mass of constantly erupting volcanoes. The industrial complex here was heavily shielded, and the constant blue flaring as the shields did their job was an indicator of just how inhospitable this planet really was.

Barth Vapour had been sent here under orders of the Imperator himself to, uh, conduct negotiations with the leaders of the opposing forces who had fled to this distant planet for reasons best known to themselves. He had just concluded the negotiations—bringing peace to the galaxy where the Jubblies, for all their pious posturing, had failed—and was returning his light rapier to its holster on his belt when a flashing warning on a console caught his eye.

A ship, coming in.

Vapour recognised it as his wife’s personal flyer. What was she doing here?

He ran out to meet her as the glistening silver ship settled down on the landing pad beside his own battered fighter.

I’ve heard terrible things about you, she cried. Are they true?

Everything I do, he replied, I do it for you.

You're going down a road I cannot follow, she sobbed.

I love you, he said. *Together we can rule the galaxy.*

You're breaking my heart, she wailed.

And then Obeah Bum K'nobby was there, standing at the top of the ramp into her ship.

You're with him, shouted Vapour. *Both of you have betrayed me.*

No, she said. *No.*

If you're not with me, he roared, *you are against me!*

Only the Stiff think in absolutes, accused K'nobby.

And then Vapour's wife was—asleep, or something—and the two men were duelling back and forth across the platform. Light rapiers flashed and skittered off each other, and sparks flew from the walls as the fight took them inside the processing station and through the control room.

In the heat of the battle, one of the rapier blades slashed through a computer console. The shields which protected the station from the ferocious heat of molten rock flickered briefly, and then collapsed.

Vapour pursued K'nobby out onto an enormous collection vane. As they battled, the vane itself buckled in the heat and eventually toppled down into the river of magma which ran below the station, where it began to float away downstream. Clinging desperately to the doomed structure, the two men still swung and slashed at each other. They made their way ever higher as the enormous vane slowly melted and sank. Finally K'nobby swung across to a small hovering raft with its own shield generator, and Vapour leaped onto the back of a similarly shielded collector 'bot.

In the intense heat, the two men yelled abuse at each other across the gap between their respective transports.

K'nobby's raft drifted close to one scorched but bearable bank, and the Jubbly Master leaped to safety. Vapour followed him, guiding his 'bot with the power of the Source. Scared for his life, K'nobby begged the Stiff Lord not to follow him any further, to leave him alone; unswayed, Vapour leaped high into the air.

And K'nobby—cheated, or something—and the next thing Vapour knew, he was sliding back down the slope towards the intense heat of the lava, his legs sliced off by the evil Jubbly. K'nobby had even stolen his light rapier before turning and leaving the helpless Stiff as his clothes burst into flames...

Bent K'nobby's jaw was hanging open. He never would have imagined the Hard Lord to be *this* delusional.

"Well?"

"That's quite an imagination you've got there, Barth," he said at last.

"Are you saying that is not how it happened?"

"I'm saying they must have given you some pretty powerful hallucinogenics after your accident. Or maybe they simply brainwashed you," said Bent. "There are tiny fragments of the truth in there, but they're completely distorted from the reality I remember."

"So how do you remember our last meeting, old man?"

"Well, let's see..." mused Bent.

The planet Coruscate Primus, capital of the known galaxy and home for a thousand years to the council chambers of the Galactic Senate, was considered by some to be the bright jewel at the centre of the galaxy; however, it still had its seamy side. There were back alleys where just about anything could be bought or sold.

It was to one of these more disreputable parts of the planet-wide city that K'nobby finally tracked young Mannequin Splitwhisker.

Three days ago, Mannequin's wife had come to see Obeah Bum K'nobby. In tears, she had told the Jubbly Master of their secret wedding; she had told him, too, of how Mannequin had become increasingly remote as his lust for money and power grew out of control; finally she had told him how, in a random fit of rage, Mannequin had hit her. And now she was leaving him.

K'nobby had agreed to talk to Mannequin. However, the young Jubbly had vanished. K'nobby had finally traced him to this grungy section of the city, where he had gone to ground in a Curry Bar which went by the name of *Lava World*.

K'nobby pushed aside the bead curtain which covered the doorway, and slipped into the dingy room beyond. The air was rank with the aromas one usually associated with curries, and the eating thereof, with perhaps a hint of stale beer thrown into the redolent mix for good measure.

Mannequin was in a corner booth. Several empty glasses littered the small table, along with a couple of empty bowls.

K'nobby lowered himself into the rickety chair across the table from his troubled student.

"Go'way, leamee 'lone," slurred Mannequin.

K'nobby tried several times to elicit something more from the drunken youth, but Mannequin wanted nothing more than to sulk in his self pity. He was recalcitrant and untalkative.

A server 'bot trundled over to the table, bearing a piping hot bowl of curry. It was the house speciality, *Mustavva Curry*—"as hot as lava or your money back"—and it positively reeked of red hot chilli peppers. The 'bot cleared up the scattered bowls and glasses from the table and placed the bowl in front of the youth. It rolled away and returned a moment later

with a full glass of beer, which it placed beside the bowl.

Mannequin belched deeply. Ignoring K'nobby, he stuck his grimy spoon into the bowl and lifted some to his mouth. He shovelled it in, and sweat instantly beaded on his forehead.

"Look, my friend, please come with me..." began K'nobby.

"You just don't get it, do you?" screamed Mannequin suddenly. "Just fuck off and leave me alone."

K'nobby sighed. Slowly he wiped the spray of curry from his face. Then, sadly, he did just that: he fucked off and left him alone. As he stood to leave, he nudged something with his foot. It was Mannequin's light rapier, lying on the floor where it had been kicked and forgotten. Carefully he stooped to retrieve it, intending to return it to his young friend when he had calmed down a bit.

"So yes," concluded Bent, "when I left you there, you were indeed 'legless', to use the vernacular. Perhaps I should have dragged you out of there by force, and I now regret that I did not do so. It was only the next day that I heard of how you had passed out face-first in that bowl of Mustavva Curry, sustaining several burns to your face, and nearly drowning before they fished you out. But who knew that a few scars on your face were enough to push you over the edge? You always were a pretty boy, but none of us ever realised quite how strong your vanity had grown."

There was a long silence.

"And then there was the accident with the ambulance on the way to the medical ward—although there is evidence that it was engineered by Palpator himself, taking advantage of your vulnerability to turn you to the

Hard Side. Either way, your legs were crushed when it flipped, and you were trapped there for several hours. We know that the Emperor's people found you before we did, and for a long time we thought you were dead." Bent sighed. "And then the purge began, and it was too late to do anything for you. For anyone."

"You expect me to believe this rubbish?" asked Vapour angrily.

"After all this time? No. I expect you to ignore it as the ramblings of a senile old man." Bent sighed again. "Before you dismiss it completely, though, why not do a search for the planet—what was it? MustardFart? I am almost certain it does not exist."

Bent waited a while longer, but the feeling of being watched had slipped away. He was alone again.

He wondered if he had managed to reach what little remained of his friend inside the mind of Barth Vapour. He wondered if Mannequin Splitwhisker still existed at all.

He turned his attention back to the schematic.

"I met a boy, as cute as can be," he whispered sadly...

"I met a man, crazy for me," whispered Barth Vapour in the dim coolness of his meditation chamber. He blinked as he emerged from his trance-like state.

"But now he is just a crazy old fool," he said aloud to the empty room. "Crazy. Expecting me to believe a story like that."

At least his meditation had achieved his goal: his anger was now finely focussed, and he no longer feared the coming confrontation with his former master.

However, he decided to change into a clean stillsuit anyway, just for that extra boost of confidence.

Although scarred, and with diminished capacity in his lungs, Vapour did not *need* the stillsuit or the helmet in order to survive. They did, however, make life more comfortable—and, as a convenient side effect, added greatly to his aura of mystique, and inspired terror amongst the masses.

Collecting his helmet, Vapour strode from the meditation chamber and down the hallway into his bedroom.

His bed had been neatly made up in his absence. The black silk sheets were folded down precisely. Nestled into the gap between the two black silk-covered pillows sat the one piece of colour in the otherwise dark and forbidding room.

Barth Vapour's plush teddewok was hot pink; her fur was soft to the touch, her nose a lump of black velvet. She stared at him across the black expanse of the bed with her two beady black button eyes. Before he had cut it off, the label protruding from her back had borne the legend "My Name is LI'L HONEY"; Vapour had rechristened her Boadicea, without being entirely sure where he had heard the name.

Boadicea wore a black T-shirt over her pink fur. Inscribed across the shirt in small white stylised letters was the phrase 'STIFF HAPPENS'.

Around her neck was a pink choker, tied in a bow. At each end of the choker was a little velvet heart; the words 'Love' and 'Hug' were embroidered across the pink hearts in white.

The Emperor, Palpatine, maintained a family for the sake of appearances. Most of the time he kept them distant, so as not to interfere with his more sinister role as Barth Sifyllous, Hard Lord of the Stiff, despotic overlord of the galaxy. During a rare visit, however, Palpatine's

three year old great granddaughter had presented Boadicea—LI'L HONEY—to the fearsome Barth Vapour with the expressed wish “that the poor sad man should cheer up.”

For some reason, Vapour chose to keep the stuffed toy around. He suspected it was the T-shirt that sealed the deal.

Vapour placed his helmet on the end of his bed and reached around awkwardly to unzip his stillsuit. It was a bit of a struggle, but since he only changed suits occasionally he preferred to do it by himself. Once he got the zipper down he wriggled his way out of the top half of the stillsuit, then eased his way out of the lower half.

Vapour's skin was white and wrinkled and, in many places, scarred—where he still had skin. His legs, from mid-thigh down, and his right forearm had long ago been replaced with robotic prosthetics.

Carefully he hung the stillsuit on the back of the door—when he returned, it would have been taken away for cleaning and any necessary repairs or upgrades—and opened his wardrobe to reveal his replacement stillsuits.

He lifted one out and laid it across the bed. Even as he did so, he felt his anger rising. His Stiff stillsuit was still stiff! He had a still stiff Stiff stillsuit! He had been engaged in an ongoing battle with the laundry department for some time now; all he asked was that his stillsuit should be properly treated so as to be supple and limber, and instead they were coming back stiff and hard. As far as Vapour was concerned, he was Stiff and Hard enough without his suit being likewise.

It was about time there were a few more painful deaths in the laundry room.

For now, though, Vapour did not have the luxury of time to get the problem fixed. He rummaged in the

drawer of his bedside table and produced a large jar of moisturising lubricant, which he began to smear across his skin. The biggest problem with a stiff stillsuit, apart from the discomfort, was actually getting into it.

After pushing down the switch on the reactor, causing its hum to fade into silence, Bent had rewired the connections behind the panel and had then spent five minutes scraping the schematic off of the inside of the panel. Then, for good measure, and to distract anybody who tried to fix it, he had jammed the blade of his light rapier into the centre of the wiring and twisted, thoroughly destroying whatever wiring might lie inside the casing of the reactor. It wasn't going to be working again any time soon.

Now he replaced the screws holding the panel in place. At a casual glance, the reactor seemed to be undamaged.

He edged cautiously back around the side of the reactor—and froze as he heard the electronically artificial voices of Shock Troopers. He peered around the edge. Two Troopers stood at the far end of the bridge.

“Have you seen those new Model 6004T Fighters?” said one.

“Yeah, they're pretty flashy,” said the other. “But I've got a Pilot friend who hates them.”

“A THIGH? Is it true what they say about *them*?”

“Sure it is. Uh, what do they say?”

Bent made a small gesture with his fingers.

“Well, they reckon that... Hey, what was that?” The first Trooper turned and looked around the far corner. As his colleague did likewise, Bent slipped away.

“Aw, it was nothing,” said the second Trooper. “Just gas venting or something...”

Leaving the two chatty Troopers behind, Bent headed back for the *Serendipity Sparrow*. He suspected he would be having Stiff company there fairly soon.

Gasping for breath, Vapour was glad to finally lock the helmet back down onto the neck of the stillsuit and allow it to do his breathing for him.

He strode from his quarters. He had not gotten a clear location on Obeah Bum K'nobby, but even if he had, he doubted the old man would still be there. Whatever else he was up to, though, he would have to return to his ship eventually. Vapour keyed his comm. "Send three squads of Shock Troopers to meet me at the captured freighter," he said curtly. He cut off the officer on the other end in the middle of his obsequious acknowledgements. "Tell them to await my orders; they are to do nothing more than stand guard on the ship."

"Yes sir, at once sir."

"You won't escape me this time, Obeah Bum," he said aloud as he strode down the hallway for his meeting with destiny.

Chapter 15

“Call Me Libby”

Two armoured Shock Troopers stood, weapons drawn, waiting for the elevator to arrive. Between them, their furry green prisoner, arms manacled together, towered over them. The elevator doors finally hissed open, and they gestured with their weapons for the Woonky to precede them through the doors.

An officer braver than most moved to join them in the elevator, but one of the Troopers held up his hand and, indicating their prisoner, shook his head.

The elevator doors hissed closed.

“This isn’t going to work,” said Mal.

“What? Why didn’t you say so before?” said Lurk.

“I did say so before,” said Mal. He unfastened the manacles around Shagpile Duphus’ wrists, leaving them in place so that it appeared the Woonky was still chained, but so they could be freely removed.

“Only another fifty levels to the cell block,” said Lurk. As he spoke, the elevator slowed and stopped, and the doors opened. They looked out onto a corridor.

Peering in were two Troopers clad in similar armour to their own, except that where their armour was grey, the others wore white. Standing between the two Troopers was a huge, hairy, manacled beast, similar in size to Shaggus except its fur was brown rather than green, and

it appeared to be naked except for an ammunition bandolier slung over its shoulder. The creature tilted its head in curiosity and whuffed; Shaggus scratched his own head, a bemused expression on his broad face.

“Uh,” said one of the Troopers out in the corridor, “sorry, guys. Our mistake. You carry on, we’ll take the next one.”

The doors closed again, and the elevator started moving again.

Lurk and Mal looked at each other.

“What was *that* all about?” asked Lurk.

“Beats me,” said Mal. “Still, there was something familiar about those guys.”

Shaggus snarled in agreement.

The elevator slowed again.

“Okay, here goes nothing,” said Mal.

The doors hissed open again, and the two faux Troopers and their “prisoner” marched out into the detention block reception area.

“Where are you going with that *thing*?” demanded the officer on duty. Mal and Lurk looked around; there were four Troopers on duty, looking alert—or possibly asleep; with the helmets on it was difficult to tell. One of the Troopers fidgeted uncomfortably, as though his armour was chafing him.

“Uh, prisoner transfer from cell block one one three eight,” said Mal.

“Oh,” said the officer, in a deadpan monotone. “A prisoner transfer? This is exciting. Now my life is complete, and I can die happy.”

“Uh, right,” said Mal.

Shaggus roared and shook his arms in the air, sending the manacles flying.

“Look out, he’s loose,” shouted Lurk, and he started firing wildly around the room. Mal also started firing, with a bit more accuracy; he took out the officer, before he could draw his own weapon, and then started blasting at the Troopers.

“Oh crap,” shouted one of the Troopers as he dove for cover. “I’m not even supposed to be here today!” He screamed as Mal shot him.

Mal shot out the couple of security cameras in the corners, and then he turned to look at Lurk. Lurk was still screaming at the top of his lungs and firing wildly. He was hitting the walls and the ceiling, but Mal suspected he was only managing to hit *them* because he had to hit *something*.

Shaggus was cowering for cover in a corner, his green furry arms wrapped tightly around his head.

“Yeah, okay, thank you Lurk,” said Mal laconically. “You can stop helping now.”

Lurk lowered his Mk-III Vaporiser and opened his eyes. “Did we get them?” he asked.

“Yeah,” said Mal. “It’s all over.”

Shaggus stood up and grunted something in an angry tone. *Useless farm-boy!*

“No wonder K’nobby thinks of blasters as random and clumsy if all Jubblies are as proficient with them as you are,” said Mal.

“You think I’m good with it?” asked Lurk.

“I think,” said Mal, “that you should stick to using that light rapier of yours from now on!”

“Oh,” said Lurk. He slung the rifle over his shoulder.

“Now, let’s find this Princess of yours,” said Mal. He stepped over the dead Imperial officer to pore over the console. “Uh, how does this thing work?” he said.

Lurk stepped up beside him and began tapping on the keys. "Here it is," he said. "Cell thirty seven."

"You go get her out," said Mal. "I'll take care of *that*." He pointed to an urgently flashing light above the communication panel.

As Lurk headed down the corridor, Mal removed his Shock Trooper helmet and breathed a grateful breath of fresh air.

"Yes, hello," he said as he tapped the comm button.

"What's going on down there?" asked a voice.

"Uh, minor weapons malfunction. But everything is fine down here now," said Mal. "Uh, how are things with you?" He winced; somehow he did not think that was standard Imperial Communications Protocol.

"I'm fine," said the Imperial. "Thanks for asking."

Mal's eyes widened. Perhaps it wasn't standard protocol, but a little politeness obviously went a long way.

"We'll send down a squad of Troopers to investigate," continued the Imperial.

"Uh, negative, negative," said Mal. "We have a large, uh, reactor leak here now. Very large, very dangerous. Give us a few minutes to lock it down." *Yeah*, he thought, *that really ought to work!*

"Who is this?" asked the Imperial suspiciously. "What is your serial number?"

"Uh..."

Mal grabbed his laser rifle and blasted the console. "Boring conversation anyway," he muttered.

"Lurk," he shouted down the corridor to where Lurk was peering at the numbers on the cell doors, "hurry it up. We're going to have company."

Lurk waved back. *There it is. Number thirty seven.* He tapped the control panel beneath the number, and the door hissed open. He stepped down into the tiny cell.

There she was. Princess Labia. Lying draped across the hard bunk at the far end of the cell, her grubby white dress in tatters. He gaped at her. Despite the grime and the tangled hair, she was beautiful—and he could *definitely* see her nipples!

She sat up and looked back at him. “Aren’t you a little short for a Shock Trooper?” she asked.

“Huh?” he said eloquently. “What? Oh, the uniform.” He reached up and lifted the helmet from his head, revealing his shock of tousled blond hair, his winning smile, and his pretty face with the manly cleft in the chin. If the light in the cell had been a little brighter, it would have sparkled from his teeth.

“I’m Lurk *mumblemumble*,” he said excitedly. “I’m here to rescue you!”

“Lurk *who*?” asked the Princess with a puzzled look on her face.

“Lurk Splitwhisker,” said Lurk, feeling that she was somehow missing the point of his opening statement.

The Princess tried to stifle a giggle; instead it emerged as a strangled snort. “You’re actually admitting to a name like that?”

Lurk pouted. “Please don’t be like that, Princess Labia Orgasma,” he said pointedly.

“Okay,” she said, wincing and holding one hand up in surrender. “Point taken. And please, call me ‘Libby’!”

“Come on, Libby,” he said more slowly. Somehow the fun of being the rescuing hero had gone out of the situation. “We’ve got to get out of here. Come with me if you want to live.”

She made no attempt to move.

"I've got your 'bots," he said.

She raised an eyebrow.

"I'm here with Bent K'nobby," he said.

"K'nobby?" she said. "Obeah Bum K'nobby? Well, why didn't you say so?" She jumped up and pushed past Lurk, out into the narrow corridor.

She nearly collided with Mal and Shaggus as they came running down the corridor towards her. She sidestepped neatly.

"We've got Troopers coming through," said Mal breathlessly. "We welded up the door, but it won't hold them for long."

They peered back down towards the reception area. A shower of sparks was in evidence where the Imperials were cutting through the door.

"There's no other way out," whined Lurk.

Mal leaned back into one of the many convenient alcoves which lined the corridor. He braced his Imperial Vaporiser, aiming it back down the corridor. "Get ready," he shouted, and as the first Shock Trooper burst through the newly cut hole in the door he opened fire, cutting him down.

Libby looked back and forth from Mal to Lurk. Her eyes narrowed incredulously. "Do you mean to tell me that when you came in here, you had no plan for getting out?" she asked.

"Hey, don't look at me, sweetheart," growled Mal. "He's the brains."

She looked at Lurk. Somehow, *that* didn't fill her with confidence.

She glanced around, weighing up the situation. Laser fire flashed up the corridor in front of her face. She looked back into her cell wistfully; it almost seemed safer to retreat into there and lock the door behind her.

Then she saw it. Without waiting to explain, she grabbed Lurk's rifle and jerked it out of his hands.

"What are you doing," he screamed at her.

"Getting us out of here," she muttered. She aimed the weapon at a grating, low down in the wall, and blasted it into oblivion. Thrusting the weapon back at Lurk, she shouted "come on!" and dove head-first through the opening.

Lurk glanced at Mal, shrugged, and dove after her.

"Go on, Shaggus," shouted Mal. "Get down there."

Shaggus shook his shaggy head and cowered back against the wall. He whuffled something. *Smells bad!*

Mal fired a couple more shots down the hallway in an effort to keep the Imperial Troopers at bay. "Get in there, you big coward," shouted Mal. "I don't care what you smell."

Shaggus growled something, then dove headfirst into the hole—and promptly got stuck. He roared and began flailing his legs in the air.

"Oh crap," said Mal succinctly. "Suck it in, you big lump," he yelled. Feeling awfully exposed to incoming laser fire, he planted his foot squarely against the Woonky's backside and pushed. Shaggus slid another inch or two into the hole, and then, with an audible pop, he slid away out of sight.

Mal fired down the corridor again. "Are you clear?" he yelled. He had no intention of diving headfirst into the hole only to discover that the Woonky had gotten stuck at the first bend. That could be—embarrassing.

He heard a distant Woonky snarl. *Smells really bad!*

"Whinge, whinge, whinge," he muttered. He dove through the opening, slid for several metres down a steeply sloped duct, and then shot out into the air. He just had time for a quick scream before he splashed down into

a thick soup of slimy, smelly water. Coughing and spluttering, he stood up; the waist-deep water was a foul-smelling sludge of raw sewage. He had no wish to identify some of the lumpy objects which were bobbing around on the surface.

“What an incredible smell you’ve discovered,” he said. He hoisted his gun and aimed it at the access hatch—although he did find himself wondering exactly who would ever *want* to access this dank slimy cesspit.

“No wait,” shrieked the Princess, but he ignored her, and fired.

The laser blast ricocheted several times around the room before finally hissing into the water with an explosion of steam.

I really must stop doing that, thought Mal as Shaggus roared in frustration.

“Would you forget it?” shrieked Lurk. “I already tried that. It’s magnetically sealed.”

“Put that thing away before you get us all killed,” ordered the Princess.

“Well, *sorry*, your worshipfulness,” said Mal. “I had everything under control before you led us down here, Princess Labia.”

The Princess subsided. “Please,” she said. “Just call me Libby.”

Mal softened. “Sure, Libby,” he said.

“You make things so difficult,” she sighed.

“I do, don’t I?”

“If you two are quite finished?” said Lurk.

They both turned to look at him. He glared back at Mal.

“Shall we get out of here?” he said. “It won’t take them too long to figure out where we went.” He ignited his light rapier and pushed the blade into the magnetically

sealed blast door; the hardened steel flowed away from his blade like warm blue hephelump butter from a hot knife.

It took Lurk perhaps a minute to carve a large hole in the access door. The heavy block of steel plate fell outwards with a loud crash. Lurk returned his light rapier to his belt, and hoisted himself out into the corridor beyond.

“Come on,” he said. “Watch the edges, they’re still hot.”

He helped Libby out, and then Mal. There was a loud clicking sound from the sewage chamber, and Shaggus launched himself out into the corridor, bowling over all three of them. Moments later a grinding noise bubbled up from below the subsiding water level as somebody initiated the flush cycle.

Cursing, Libby dragged herself out from the bottom of the pile and peered back in through the newly carved hole. “And not before time,” she commented wryly. Then she glanced down at her dress. It had sustained yet more rips and tears, and was stained an ugly mottled yellow-brown. She sighed. *Next time I go on a mission to help the Rebellion, she thought, I must remember to wear some good strong combat clothing—or, at the very least, underwear!* She was almost tempted to tear off what remained of the rag and go the rest of the way naked, for all the good the dress was doing at covering anything: all the rips aside, the transparently wet material was clinging uncomfortably to her bare skin.

She turned away from the flushing sewage pit and caught both the men staring at her. She felt her cheeks burning as she blushed prettily.

“Lead on, guys,” she said, pointing past them. “Eyes front!”

They headed down the corridor, their water-filled armoured boots squelching and splashing with each step. Behind them the drenched and miserable-looking Woonky was still trying to wring the foul-smelling liquid from his clothes and fur. Libby brought up the rear, slimy water dribbling down her legs and leaving bare footprints on the polished metal floor.

The stench was awful; she did her best to breathe through her mouth.

They reached an intersection. Mal and Lurk discussed their choices for a few seconds, then both nodded and headed left. Libby looked right.

“Hey, Lurk,” she said.

“This way, Libby,” said Lurk.

“But guys,” said Libby.

“The ship is this way,” said Mal.

“I don’t care,” she said. “Time out!” She pointed up the right corridor to a sign which marked change rooms for those poor unfortunate maintenance workers who *did* have to access the sewage pits.

“I don’t know about you three,” she said, “but I would kill for a hot shower and a change of clothes.”

Shaggus whuffled his agreement.

Several minutes later, Libby finished towelling her long hair; it was still damp, but it would have to do. Quickly she twisted it into a tight rope, then wrapped it up into a bun. She was wearing a grey vest and some gym shorts, the only clothing she had been able to find in the couple of lockers that were open. Anything was preferable to the ruined dress, which lay discarded in one corner of the shower cubicle.

She pushed the door marked ‘Females’ open and stepped through into the communal locker room. Lurk

and his friend were waiting for her; each was dressed in the same outfit she was wearing, except that both men wore the damp—and well scrubbed—belts from their Shock Trooper armour slung around their waists to carry their weapons. They looked at each other, and Libby laughed softly.

“I didn’t catch your name,” she said to Mal.

“Mal,” said Mal. “Mal Single. And my big friend”—he gestured back towards the door marked ‘Males’—“is Shaggus.”

“Nice to meet you,” said Libby. “I’m Libby, but you already know that. I appreciate this whole rescue attempt thing.”

Mal shrugged. “Like I said before, it was Lurk’s idea.”

The door to the male showers opened and Shaggus ducked through. He smelled strongly of shampoo. Unable to find any fresh clothes to wear, he had considered dressing in his dirty tunic. Then he had caught a whiff of the discarded garment, and opted instead to wrap the largest towel he could find around his waist, and another around his shoulders. He felt a little silly, but it was either this, or walk around naked—and no self-respecting Woonky would walk around naked in public.

“Ready?” asked Mal. Shaggus grunted.

“Let’s go then,” he said to the room at large. Pushing the change room door open, he peered out into the corridor beyond. Deserted.

Feeling fresh and clean, he led the group of fugitives out into the corridor and together they began to make their way back to the *Serendipity Sparrow*.

Chapter 16

Deathmatch One On One

Seepy Weepy and Arty Farty had abandoned the safety of the control room and now stood in a small alcove along one wall of the docking bay. They had been heading towards the open ramp of the *Serendipity Sparrow* when a large blast door on the far side of the bay had begun to iris open; they had barely managed to make it into the alcove unseen before a dozen armed and armoured Shock Troopers had marched through and deployed themselves along the wall to either side of the large doorway.

Seepy couldn't help but wonder what this sudden influx of troops signified.

"I don't know what's going on," he muttered to Arty, uncharacteristically uncharitably, "but I'm sure it is all your fault."

Arty whistled and beeped defensively.

"Well, okay," allowed Seepy, "I know you didn't ask for that crazy human to load all this sensitive data into your memory."

Arty whistled some more.

"Yes, I know your programming is hard-wired and you have no choice but to follow it."

Arty beeped conclusively.

“Okay,” said Seepy. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it. I’m just a little on edge, that’s all. Sorry!”

Arty whistled once, slowly.

“I won’t,” said Seepy, thoroughly chastened.

He peered around the corner again. The Shock Troopers were still there.

Suddenly the comm-link he held in one hand crackled into life. He hastily muffled it with his other hand.

A tinny little voice shrieked “*Threepio! Come in Threepio. Threepio! Where could he be?*”

“I’m sorry sir,” said Seepy Weepy primly into the comm-link, “but I believe you have the wrong number.”

He looked down at Arty. “What do you suppose *that* was all about?” he asked his stubby companion.

Arty beeped her confusion.

“*Threepio! Come in, Threepio! Threepio!*” said the voice from the comm-link. Quickly Seepy Weepy turned it off before it gave away their position.

Mal Single and Lurk Splitwhisker were making their way down the corridor, followed by Shagpile Duphus and Labia “Libby” Orgasma, when Mal suddenly stopped to peer through a viewing window into the docking bay below.

“There she is,” he said. “*The Sparrow.*”

Libby moved to stand alongside the smuggler. She looked out at the battered old freighter.

“You came in that thing?” she said. “Wow. You’re braver than I thought.”

“Nice,” muttered Mal. “Come on, it’s not far now.”

“Wait a second,” said Lurk. “Might as well get the ‘bots into position.” He fumbled for the comm-link, then raised it to his mouth. “Seepy Weepy. Come in, Seepy

Weepy. Seepy!” There was no answer. “Where could he be?”

“Are you sure that thing even still works?” asked Mal. “It has been through a lot, after all, and those things are only cheap.”

Lurk tapped it a couple of times with his knuckle—the time-honoured method of repairing all electronic gadgets that were too small to thump or kick. He tried again. “Seepy! Come in, Seepy. Seepy!” Still nothing.

“Perhaps you’re right,” said Lurk. He returned the comm-link to his belt. “We’ll just have to hope we don’t have to go looking for *them* too!”

“This way,” said Mal, leading them towards the stairs.

Old Bent K’nobby sidled along the corridor. If his sense of direction was correct, this time, the open blast doors ahead should lead into the docking bay. He took another step or two and peered cautiously around the corner. Yes, there was the *Serendipity Sparrow*. He smiled to himself.

Suddenly there was the harsh hiss of a breathing regulator, and Bent turned. The sinister black shape of Barth Vapour was striding purposefully down the far corridor towards him. With a hum, Vapour’s rapier blade came to life, the harsh red light casting a glow over the black helmet and stillsuit.

Bent drew his own light rapier and activated it. He took a defensive stance.

“I’ve been waiting for you, Obeah Bum,” said Vapour. “We meet again, at last. The square is now complete.”

“Square?” said Bent. “Surely you mean ‘circle’?”

“Whatever,” said Vapour. “Square, circle, triangle; does it really matter?”

“Probably not,” admitted Bent.

“When you left me,” said Vapour, his deep voice punctuated with regular hisses from his breathing mask, “I was but the student. Now I am the master.”

“Only a master of evil, Barth,” said Bent.

“Evil schmeevil,” said Vapour. “I am the master of kicking your butt!”

“We shall see,” said Bent. “We shall see.”

The old Jubbly Knight moved smoothly from a defensive stance to an offensive one, and took a step forward. Vapour advanced to meet him. There was a sizzle that hinted at the tremendous energies involved as the two light rapier blades met and clashed.

“Your powers are weak, old man,” said Vapour.

“You can’t win, Barth,” said Bent. “If you strike me down, I shall become more powerful than you could possibly imagine.”

Vapour laughed at that. “I guess I’d better just let you go on your way, then?”

Bent shrugged. “If you like.”

“I think not,” said Vapour, swinging his blade.

In the alcove, Seepy Weepy watched as all the Shock Troopers left their guard posts and gathered in a loose circle—or square; does it really matter?—around the distant blast doors. Something was going on there, but Seepy could not see what was happening.

“Come on,” he said to Arty. “Now’s our chance.”

He began to trot, stiff-legged, across the polished floor to the ramp of the *Serendipity Sparrow*. Arty whistled and followed him.

Mal lead the small group down a corridor which ended at a doorway. The door hissed open, and there in front of them sat the *Sparrow*. The ‘bots were already there,

making their way across the floor. Seepy turned in alarm as the door opened, then recognised them and waved before continuing into the ship.

“Come on,” said Mal. “Before we’re spotted.”

He ran across the deck to the ramp, followed closely by Lurk and Libby, with Shaggus bringing up the rear. Suddenly Lurk heard a familiar sound—the hum of a light rapier—and he turned to take a closer look at the cluster of Shock Troopers at the far side of the room. He stopped, and Shaggus ran past him before stopping to wait for the youth. Lurk saw the flash of two rapier blades, red and blue. He squinted, and then he recognised one of the combatants.

“Bent?” he asked.

The other combatant, in the black mask, must be the Hard Lord he had heard so much about: Barth Vapour, his father.

Mal stood at the top of the ramp, looking back at Shaggus and Lurk. Libby stood beside him.

“Bent?” said Lurk again.

Bent barely managed to block a vicious swipe by the Stiff Lord. He staggered backwards and managed to raise his rapier again. He glanced over his shoulder, took in the ring of Troopers between himself and the ship. And he saw Lurk standing there, watching the battle.

Bent smiled mysteriously.

Turning back to face Vapour, he raised his rapier in something like a salute, took a deep breath, and closed his eyes.

Vapour stepped forward, swung his weapon, and it sliced neatly through the old man’s brown robe. The two halves of the robe fluttered to the deck. Of the old man’s body, there was nothing to be seen. Frowning, Vapour

poked at the empty robe with his light rapier, setting the cloth alight and boring a neat round hole through the deck.

“Oops,” he said. He hurriedly stamped out the flames with the toe of his boot.

“Bent,” whispered Lurk, as Vapour cut the old man down.

“No!” he shouted. Drawing his laser rifle he began to blast—wildly and ineffectually—at the Troopers and the sinister Stiff Lord. As the Troopers turned toward him, he threw down the rifle and drew his light rapier. The blade hummed into life.

“*Run, Lurk, run,*” said a ghostly echo of Bent’s voice in his head.

“Screw that,” muttered Lurk. “This guy is gonna pay!”

Mal was shouting something, and shooting at the Troopers from the cover of the ramp. Shaggus roared—*Look out!*—and ran to join Mal on the ramp.

“*Run, Lurk, run,*” said Bent’s voice again.

“No,” said Lurk quietly. “If that is how the Array wants it to happen, if that is how the Script is supposed to go, then I’m through following it.”

A couple of the Troopers began to advance towards the lone boy. Perhaps the rest had been paying attention to recent events, for they opted to keep their distance; some of them stood, some knelt, but all raised their rifles and fired a barrage of shots at the youth.

Lurk reached out for the Source. Time seemed to slow down as Lurk swept his rapier blade back and forth across the incoming bolts of energy, deflecting them. Not only did he deflect them, but he deflected each and every one back along its own path, sending them back down the

very barrels of the guns that had fired them. There were a number of loud explosions as the weapons detonated, killing the Troopers holding them. The few who had elected to run towards him simultaneously decided that it would be a great deal safer to run *away* from him; they all turned and bolted.

“Hmm,” said Mal. “Not bad for a farm-boy.”

Now that he had a clear shot at the Hard Lord, he fired several times. Vapour held up his hand contemptuously, and the laser bolts smacked harmlessly into his gloved palm. He gestured, and Mal’s weapon was jerked out of his hand and went sailing across the docking bay.

“Ow,” howled Mal, cradling his trigger finger which had nearly been torn off by the force with which the weapon had been wrenched from his grip.

Lurk stalked towards the Hard Lord, and Vapour turned to meet him.

“You think you can beat me, boy?” asked Vapour. “That trick with the Troopers was clever, if a little clumsily executed. But I am more than just another Trooper.”

“We shall see,” said Lurk.

Behind his mask, Vapour’s scarred lips curled up into a smile. “That is not the first time I have heard that phrase today,” he said. He took a defensive stance and waited for the boy to come to him.

“Bent said you were the Chosen One,” said Lurk, raising his light rapier and taking a careful step forward.

“Bent?” asked Vapour.

“Obeah Bum K’nobby,” said Lurk. “Bent.”

“Nice choice of name,” said Vapour. “He always *was* a little bent. Yes, they thought I was the Chosen One. They were wrong, I guess.”

Lurk shook his head. “No, they were right about that. It is so obvious.”

“Is it?” asked Vapour.

“But they were wrong about you being ‘The One’,” said Lurk.

“And how would you know that?” asked Vapour.

“Because I’m it,” said Lurk. “I’m ‘The One’.”

Vapour stepped forward, closing the gap between them.

“If that is the case, this should be a little more interesting,” said Vapour. “‘One’ on ‘One’, so to speak.” He swung his rapier, Lurk parried and stepped back.

“Do you know me?” asked Lurk.

Vapour frowned behind the mask. Did this boy intend to *talk* him to death? “Should I?”

“My name,” said Lurk, “is Lurk Splitwhisker.”

Vapour stumbled back a step. Lurk advanced.

“Yes, Mannequin. You are my father.”

“No,” said Vapour, shaking his head. He backed up another step. Lurk advanced. “They told me she was dead.”

“She died in childbirth, but they managed to save me and...” Lurk stopped. He remembered Bent saying the same thing. “*Ask me again sometime*,” he had said. Now Lurk would never know what he had almost said.

“And...” asked Vapour.

“And here I am,” finished Lurk. He swung his rapier, and the Stiff Lord barely managed to get his own blade up in time to block the attack. He recovered quickly, though, and drove Lurk backwards with several lightning swipes and slashes.

“Did Obeah Bum tell you what happened to your father?” Vapour asked. “What happened to me?”

“He said... Well, actually he said that *you* killed him, but I read between the lines that you *were* him.”

“No,” said Vapour. “If anybody killed Mannequin Splitwhisker, it was Obeah Bum K’nobby.”

“What?” said Lurk. “No. I don’t believe you.”

“It was he who cut my legs out from under me and dropped me into a river of lava,” said Vapour. “It is not easy to recover from a betrayal like that.”

“No,” said Lurk. “It’s not true!”

“Search your feelings, Lurk,” said Vapour. “You know it to be true. Or better yet, ask him yourself—oh, you can’t, can you?”

“Nooo!” howled Lurk. “Bent, why didn’t you tell me?” He staggered backward, and Vapour took advantage of his distraction to press his attack. Lurk parried desperately.

“Come with me, Lurk,” said Vapour. “Join me. We can rule this galaxy together as father and son.”

“No,” screamed Lurk again. The scream of anguish became a scream of pain as Vapour’s blade broke through his defences and sliced neatly through his wrist. His twitching hand fell to the floor, and the deactivated rapier clattered down beside it. Lurk fell backwards, helpless and beaten, the humming tip of Vapour’s blade at his throat.

“Join me,” said Vapour again.

“Why?” hissed Lurk through the pain. “Are you coming apart? I certainly seem to be.” The raw sensation of the pain had cut through the fog in his mind, and Lurk reached out for the Source, seeking salvation.

“Join me,” Vapour insisted. “It is your destiny.”

Lurk concentrated on the flowing green code which delineated the Hard Lord’s rapier. “What is the dental

plan like?” he asked, trying to buy himself time. Just a few more seconds...

“Don’t try my patience, boy,” said Vapour. “I have been childless for the last twenty years; I will feel no qualms about reverting to that state.”

Lurk looked deeper. Deeper. *There.*

“How about I give you the finger,” he said, “and you give me my phone call?”

“What?” hissed Vapour. “What does that mean?”

Lurk had no idea where the words had come from; only that they seemed somehow appropriate. They resonated in his mind. He had no idea what a ‘phone call’ might be, and he felt he had already given the Hard Lord way too many of his fingers—and a thumb.

“It means,” he said, “fuck you!” He *tweaked*, and pushed Vapour’s long baguette away from his throat as he rolled to one side. His left hand closed clumsily around the fallen light rapier and, even as Vapour stared in disbelief at the bread roll clutched in his gloved hand, Lurk swept the energy blade around and sliced through Vapour’s legs above the knees.

Vapour toppled backwards to the floor with a loud crash, the impact driving most of the breath from his body.

“Oh crap,” he said, “not again!”

Lurk heaved himself to his feet, cradling his injured stump beneath his other arm. He staggered over to the fallen Hard Lord of the Stiff, and raised his weapon high.

“This ends here,” he said.

“Most impressive, young Splitwhisker,” gasped Vapour, “but you are not a Jubbly yet!” With a contemptuous flicking gesture, he sent the youth flying backward through the air. With a second gesture, he activated the controls of the blast door; the heavy metal

barrier slammed closed between the two, and Vapour sagged back onto the floor in relief.

Lurk rolled over, his body one huge bruise.

The Princess ran to his side. "Come on," said Libby, as she helped him to his feet. "Let's go. There's nothing more you can do now."

Lurk moaned. "Bent, why didn't you tell me?" He allowed the Princess to guide him up the ramp into the cargo bay of the *Serendipity Sparrow*. Mal waited at the ramp controls; as they entered, he closed the ramp, then hit the comm button.

"Take her out, Shaggus. All aboard."

As the *Sparrow* lifted into the air, as Libby lowered Lurk onto a bench and sat beside him, cradling him protectively in her arms, Mal shook his head. "I hope that old man put the attractor beam out of commission," he muttered, "or this is going to be a real short trip." He headed for the flight deck.

The *Serendipity Sparrow* shot into space and sped away from the enormous *Devastator* Station. Moments later, a trio of THIGH Fighters dropped from a nearby cluster of launch tubes and roared off in silent pursuit.

Mal settled into the pilot's chair of the old freighter as the ship rocked under the impact of laser fire.

Shaggus grunted something at him. *This is going to get interesting.*

"Define 'interesting'," said Mal.

Shaggus grunted again. *Oh shit oh shit, we're going to die!*

"Not if I can help it," Mal said. "Take the guns; try to keep them off us long enough for me to make the jump to hyperlight speed." Shaggus grunted and, as the ship rocked again, staggered off the flight deck.

Mal flew evasively, throwing his ship into loops and rolls it had never originally been designed to perform. After a few moments, one of the gun ports began blazing at the pursuing Fighters, and he relaxed slightly as the three Fighters themselves took evasive action. *Come on*, he thought to himself. “Come on,” he whispered.

The hyperlight indicator flashed on, and Mal breathed a sigh of relief. He punched the button, and the stars stretched into strings as the *Sparrow* leaped into the safety of hyperspace.

“We’re clear,” said Mal as he entered the cargo bay. “How is he?”

Lurk had passed out on the bench, his head in Libby’s lap. She had wrapped a blanket around him to keep him warm.

“I think he’s going into shock,” said Libby softly.

“Give me a hand,” said Mal. “We’ll take him up to the infirmary.”

“You have an infirmary on this old heap?” said Libby. “I *am* impressed.” Between the two of them they got Lurk onto his feet and began to half-carry, half-drag him through the cargo bay.

“Need one,” said Mal. “In my line of work, injuries are common.” They reached the steps. “You awake, buddy?” Mal asked Lurk.

Lurk mumbled something from the fog of semi-consciousness. He managed to lift his feet enough that they could walk him up the stairs.

“What is your line of work? Or shouldn’t I ask?” said Libby.

“Wandering hero, mostly,” said Mal with a grin. “Rescuing Princesses a speciality. Plus I do a bit of smuggling on the side to make ends meet.”

They finally got Lurk to the small infirmary and laid him on the bed.

“Of course,” said Mal with a nod around the room, “I don’t have a doctor no more, not since...” He sighed. “Anyway, this place is reasonably well stocked. Best start by sticking one of those pillows under his feet, and grabbing another blanket from in the cupboard yonder. Just the one, though.”

Libby complied with his directions. “I guess you do know your way around an infirmary,” she said.

“Like I said. In my line of business...”

She nodded. “Tell me,” she said. “With your expertise in the Princess rescuing business, did that escape seem a little too easy?”

“How so?” said Mal.

“What did they send after us? Three Fighters? A Station like that must have thousands ready to deploy at a moment’s notice.”

“What’s your point?” said Mal.

“I just have a bad feeling about this,” she said. “I’m worried that they let us go, that they’re tracking us somehow.”

“Not this ship, sister,” said Mal. “Speaking of which, where are we going? I just set a course back for Ratatouille as the first place that came to mind, but I’m guessing we don’t want to go there.”

She looked up at him over the sleeping form of Lurk. Suddenly she found herself wondering if this was all some elaborate ploy to trick her into revealing the location of the Rebel base. After all, how well did she really know either of these men? She looked down at Lurk, at the charred stump of his wrist; she thought of the duel between Vapour and somebody who may or may not have been General K’nobby; finally she thought of the

'bots which had resembled her RT and CP 'bots, but which she had not spoken to since they had come aboard the *Sparrow*. Could it possibly be a hoax? Did the Imperium have this much imagination?

She looked again at Lurk's wrist, and at his pale face.

Finally she looked up and stared into the eyes of Captain Mal Single, searching for any hint of duplicity. For a smuggler and a rogue, he had an honest face.

"Yawn," she said.

After a moment or two, Mal yawned. And smiled.

She smiled back. "No, I mean the planet 'Yawn'," she said.

"Yeah," he said. "I guessed that. I just couldn't help myself."

Great Muff Tarragon sighed as the fleeing freighter disappeared from his view screen.

"This had better work, Vapour," he said tightly. "I'm taking an awful risk."

He looked around the bridge.

"Has anybody seen Lord Vapour?" he asked. Nobody responded. "Well, find him," he ordered. "Tell him the Great Muff requests the pleasure of his company. And you," he pointed at a communications officer, "please tell me we have good news."

"Uh, sir, the tracer signal is coming in strong," said the officer.

"Good," said Tarragon. "Good."

Chapter 17

The Amazing Technicolour Yawn

The planet Yawn was one of those rare planets of the galaxy with a multitude of different environmental conditions. Typically, planets could be described in a single, simple phrase: a forest planet, a desert planet, an ocean planet, a swamp planet, an ice planet, even a volcanic planet. Yawn, however, was different. It had some oceans, sure, but they were not extensive enough for it to be classified as an ocean planet. It had continents, but they did not conveniently form the shape of a skull when viewed from space; nor did they spell out the secret to eternal youth. The polar regions were cold and icy, but not extensive enough to class the planet as an ice world. The continents themselves were a diverse and multifarious mixture of differing landscapes, from mountains to plains, from swamps to forests to deserts. Atmospheric conditions ranged from mild and pleasant to rain, and snow, and hailstorms of frightening ferocity.

In a galaxy of overwhelmingly homogeneous planets, Yawn was the heterogeneous black sheep. In a galaxy of monochrome worlds, Yawn was in technicolour. In a society of increasingly shortening attention spans, in which a snappy description for a planet was preferred, Yawn required several pages of text to even begin to describe the variety of terrains which covered its surface.

In the Galactic Planetary Index, in which most planets were described with a single short sentence—from “Hoff: Ice planet” to “Earth: Mythical world, mostly harmless”—the entry for Yawn was several dry, tedious paragraphs.

Hence the name.

The Yawn Tourism Board had briefly tried to attract visitors to the planet with an advertising campaign which promoted the endless variety to be found there. For some reason, though, their slogan—“Come see the Amazing Technicolour Yawn”—had been a dismal failure. Now the general population of the planet lived a quiet existence with almost no visitors.

On one of the heavily forested—and quite homogeneous—moons of the planet Yawn, the stone and brick towers of ancient and long-abandoned temples reached skyward, thrusting up through the forest canopy like weeds seeking sunlight. Hidden away beneath the thick canopy, sheltered from aerial view within the huge temples themselves, the forces of the Rebel Coalition had made this tiny green satellite of the huge variegated planet their home.

Rebel sentries manned observation towers high above the canopy—although this was more to give them a sense of purpose than anything else. It was extremely unlikely that they would detect an attacking force before it was picked up by the orbital sensor arrays. However, you *had* to post sentries; that was just the way it was done.

The *Serendipity Sparrow* set down in a small cleared area beside one of the ancient stone structures. Rebel ground crews bustled around her as the whine of her VTOL engine turbines slowed and died. Then the ramp opened, and Princess Labia Orgasma appeared from the

freighter's cargo bay. She wore a flowing purple gown which Mal said had been left behind by a previous guest aboard the *Sparrow*; it flattered her waist and emphasised her bust. Her hair was elaborately coifed. She looked every inch the regal Princess.

The assembled crowd cheered at the sight of her.

An elderly man ran forward excitedly. He wore a dark tunic, and his silver-lined black cloak fluttered in the air. "Oh Princess," he cried as he threw his arms around her, "thank the Lords of COBOL that you are okay." He hugged her tightly for a second, then released her and stepped back. More formally, he bowed. "When we heard about the destruction of Alderbark, we feared that you had been lost along with the rest of your family. I was so worried that I would never see my beloved Labia again!"

"Um, yes, it is good to see you too, Armada," said Libby. "You have not heard from any other surviving members of my family?"

Commander Armada had served her family for years. He wore a silver emblem high on his tunic, the sign of a small sect which had grown in power after the Jubbly Council had been swept away by the Imperium. Although they were adherents of the Source, they held some strange beliefs—which many considered to be unnatural—about its true nature. They would be dismayed to learn that the only reason they had not been wiped out along with the Jubblies was because their beliefs were completely incorrect and the Stiff considered them to be beneath contempt.

Armada closed his eyes sadly.

"I am sorry, Princess. They are all dead. When we first became aware of the Imperial threat, your father organised the evacuation attempt." He shook his head.

“He refused to board a transport until everybody else was safely away—and they just ran out of time.”

Libby nodded slowly. “That sounds like Father,” she said.

“Only a handful of ships escaped,” said Armada. “A couple knew to come here; the rest scattered themselves throughout the galaxy.”

Libby closed her eyes for a moment, mourning the death of her planet, and her family. When she opened them, a new resolve gleamed forth.

“Mal,” she called.

Mal and Shaggus stepped out from the cargo bay to join her on the ramp. Mal was once more draped in his brown overcoat, and Shaggus wore a simple pale blue tunic. Behind them were Arty Farty and Seepy Weepy.

“This RT unit,” said Libby to Armada, “contains information vital to our cause; the complete technical readouts of the Imperial battle station.”

Armada gestured, and a couple of technicians hurried forward. They lead the beeping Arty away, and Seepy hurried after her.

“I only hope,” continued Libby, “that a detailed analysis will find a weakness we can exploit.”

“Come,” said Armada. “We have prepared quarters for yourself and your—guests.” He indicated the two smugglers.

“Wait,” said Libby. “There is another.” She pointed back into the ship. “We have an injured man on board. He is sleeping now, but he will require full medical attention.”

“And he shall get it,” said Armada with a bow.

“Come on,” said Mal, as a medic pushed her way through the crowd. “This way.” He led the way back into the ship.

The briefing room was packed to capacity, and the air conditioning was struggling to keep up. Technicians, pilots, strategists, caterers, all had crammed themselves into the room to hear the news.

In the centre of the room, a holographic projection of the *Devastator* Station rotated slowly above the table. Two senior technicians nursed the projector controls; one of them fiddled with a small laser pointer.

“What have you found?” said Commander Armada.

“Well, it wasn’t easy to get to the data,” said one of the technicians, a large tubby man with a shaved head and a scraggly, greying beard. He looked a little daunting—and yet, somehow, appeared ruggedly handsome in the right light.

“It was in the wrong format,” said the other technician, a slender guy with spiky blond hair.

“The Imperials used a program called Macrostation,” said the bearded tech. “Rather appropriate, really, because they used it to design a really big station. Uh, yeah.”

“But we don’t use Macrostation,” said the blond tech. “It is a typical example of the bloated infrastructure being foisted upon us by Imperialist dogma. Its command format is so archaic and bewildering as to be utterly discombobulating, and its accessibility *vis-a-vis* entity handling and automated manipulation is woefully limited. Ergo, its usability as a whole is vastly diminished.”

“And it sucks,” said the bearded tech.

“Indubitably,” said the blond.

“This is fascinating, really,” said Armada, “but what have you found?”

“Well, we managed to find a third party tool which could convert from Macrostation...” said the blond.

“...which sucks,” interjected the bearded tech.

“...to IndiKad...”

“...which we use...”

“...and that is what we are looking at here,” finished the blond. He pointed at the floating *Death Tube* image with his red pointer.

“Yes,” said Armada, “but what have you found?”

“Of course,” said the bearded tech, “the conversion wasn’t perfect, but once we had the data in IndiKad I was able to write a couple of quick scripts to clean up the worst of the glitches and give us something we could work with. I was particularly proud of the...”

Armada banged his fist down on the table.

Everybody stared at him.

He took a deep, slow breath.

“Gentleman,” he said calmly, “have you found a weakness in this battle station or not?” *Honestly*, he thought, *it’s like pulling teeth...*

“Oh. Well, yes,” said the bearded tech.

“We found,” said the blond tech, “that if we can get everybody on the *Death Tube* Station thingy to flush their toilets simultaneously, this should cause a major clogging of several critical sewer systems. There may even be enough back pressure for the results to be, well, messy. Within a week, the Imperials will have to abandon the station due to failing hygiene and bursting bladders, at which point you can move in and capture it at your leisure.” He sat back and crossed his arms.

“Unless,” said the bearded tech, “they have plumbers.”

“True,” said the blond tech. “That is the one minor flaw in that plan.”

“The *one* minor flaw?” said Armada in disbelief. “The one *minor* flaw?”

“So then,” said the blond tech, “we took a look at the electrical subsystems.”

Armada sighed. This was going to be a *long* day.

“Ironically,” said the bearded tech, “it seems that the one weak point that *could* be targeted to rapidly destroy the entire station with a single well-placed shot is in their major weapons system.”

He looked around the room expectantly. Nobody commented.

The crowd had thinned considerably. Most of those who remained appeared to have fallen asleep.

The blond tech shrugged. “Doesn’t look as though they are interested,” he said.

“No,” agreed the bearded tech. “Do you think they’ve learned their lesson?”

“What lesson?” asked the blond tech.

“On the dangers of getting a guy like me to give a talk like this,” said the bearded tech.

“Oh,” said the blond tech. “That lesson. I reckon so.”

They looked around the room.

“Should we wake them, do you think?” asked the blond tech. “They seemed to think this was urgent.”

“They say that about everything,” said the bearded tech. “Nah, I’ll just slip this concise summarised report of our findings under Armada’s hand here”—he paused as he suited actions to words—“and then we can go get a drink.”

“Gravy,” said the blond tech.

“Well, I was thinking of something with a little more fizz, myself,” said the bearded tech as they walked out the door.

The blond tech giggled.

“Huh what?” snorted Armada as the door banged shut behind them. He blinked around the room at the few remaining sleepy personnel who were blinking back in confusion.

He looked down at the piece of paper under his hand. He tilted his head to read it.

He smiled.

Again, the briefing room was crowded, although this time primarily with fighter pilots.

Commander Armada was seated at the central table. Beside him sat Commander Bekkalu, a tall pale woman with short dark hair.

Armada pointed to the slowly rotating holographic image. “The battle station is heavily shielded, and has firepower greater than half the Rebel fleet. Its defences are designed to defeat a large scale assault. A small one-man fighter should be able to slip past its shields.”

“Excuse me, sir,” said Indigo Leader as she stood up, “but what good are small fighters going to be against *that*?”

“The Imperium does not consider a one-man fighter to be much of a threat, or they would have stronger shielding,” said Armada.

“That thing is twenty miles long,” said Indigo Leader hotly, “and quite frankly, I suspect the Imperium is probably right!”

“Please,” said Commander Armada, “let me finish. The Imperium does not consider a fighter to be much of a threat, but a detailed analysis of the plans of this battle station has uncovered a weak point which we may be able to exploit.”

Indigo Leader nodded and sat back down. “Fair enough,” she murmured.

“The *Death Tube*,” explained Armada, “is essentially a giant laser cannon. The exterior of the cylinder, to a depth of roughly three quarters of a mile, contains all the living quarters, the meeting rooms, the recreational facilities, and just about everything else one might expect to find in a major city. The surface itself, of course, is studded with defensive gun emplacements, THIGH Fighter launch tubes, and so on.

“The next thousand feet or so consists primarily of energy baffles and internal shielding to protect the inhabitants from the massive energy release when the primary weapon is fired.

“The core of the *Death Tube*, three miles across and fifteen miles deep, is the barrel of the cannon. It is lined with numerous graviton field generators to contain and focus the energy beam. At the far end of the barrel, *this* crystal”—he pointed with his small laser pointer—“is our target. It is the nexus of the weapon’s energy feed conduits, and serves as the primary focussing emitter for the laser beam. Of course, it is heavily shielded except for a five second window during the primary firing sequence. However, a direct impact from a neutron torpedo should be sufficient to destroy the emitter. The resulting chain reaction will destroy the entire station.”

The gathered Rebel forces began to murmur excitedly amongst themselves.

Fuschia Leader stood up. “I don’t want to be a killjoy,” he said, “but I sense a ‘but’.”

Armada nodded as Fuschia Leader reseated himself.

“However,” he said, “there are two difficulties to consider, and a possible strategic problem to overcome.”

Indigo Leader shook her head. “Why is it never easy?” she said aloud to nobody in particular.

“First,” said Armada, “the barrel of this station’s primary weapon is sealed by these blast doors”—the red dot of his laser pointer moved to one end of the holographic cylinder—“and they only open in the minutes before the station is about to actually fire its weapon. Second, any missile which is not launched precisely down the axis of the barrel will be dragged off course by the graviton field generators down its length.”

“Wouldn’t that destroy the generators, though?” asked Really Dark Grey With Just A Tinge Of Blue Leader. “And wouldn’t that affect their firing capability?”

“A detonation from a neutron torpedo anywhere along the inside of the barrel will destroy perhaps three or four graviton field generators; however, there are a total of twelve hundred of them. Perhaps if we could destroy an entire cluster of fifty or sixty, that might be enough to deflect the beam and throw their targeting off, but such a plan should be considered secondary at best.”

“Just a thought,” said Really Dark Grey With Just A Tinge Of Blue Leader. He sat down again.

“And the strategic problem?” asked Aqua Leader.

“There is the strong fear that if we launch all our fighters, only to have them cluster around the blast door iris until it opens, the Imperials may recognise the weakness we have discovered; once that happens, our chance to destroy this weapon of mass destruction will be lost.”

“So what is the alternative? Holding the launch until the last minute in an effort to arrive at the perfect moment seems a little dangerous.”

“Agreed,” said Armada. “Therefore, we intend to launch our major offensive against a secondary target.”

This trench”—he indicated the trench in question with his red laser dot—“runs around the circumference of the station, four miles from its end. This two metre exhaust port leads down to a major reactor. Destroying *it* with a neutron torpedo should cause a massive explosion in this sector.”

“And set off a chain reaction, thereby destroying the station?” asked Indigo leader.

“Unfortunately, no,” said Armada. “We thought so at first, but closer analysis reveals that there are several systems in place to prevent such a catastrophic cascade failure.”

“Figures,” said Indigo Leader.

“However, it is a convincing target, and close enough to our main target that we can alter the thrust of our attack fairly quickly when the timing is right. We believe that the Imperials will believe that we believe destroying the reactor will destroy the station. Or, uh,” Armada paused as he replayed that last sentence in his mind, “something like that. Needless to say, the port is ray shielded; only a direct hit with a neutron torpedo will enter the port and destroy the reactor.”

“That’s impossible, sir,” said the young pilot seated next to Lurk. “There’s no way we could fly down that trench and then fire a torpedo into that port. It can’t be done.”

“Of course it can,” said Lurk. “Why, I used to bullseye wimp hamsters from my old speeder back home, and they’re not much bigger than two metres. It’ll be just like Bugger Canyon back home.”

“Look, farm-boy,” snapped the other pilot, “taking pot-shots at the local rodent population is one thing—any fool can hit a two metre rat sitting out on the desert somewhere. But to get a torpedo to go down that port, it

would have to magically rotate as it passed over the hole. I don't think any of our torpedoes are that manoeuvrable, are they?"

"Oh," said Lurk.

"Quite right," said Armada, "but since this is only a diversionary tactic, its actual success is not overly vital to our mission."

"Isn't there another problem?" asked Aqua Leader slowly.

"Sir," interjected a communications officer from the briefing room doorway. Armada held up his hand for silence.

"What problem might that be?" he asked.

"But sir," said the comms officer. Armada raised his hand again and nodded for Aqua Leader to proceed.

"How do we actually find this battle station? They could be anywhere in the galaxy by now. And once we find it, how do we convince them to initiate their firing sequence?"

"Sir," said the comms officer urgently.

"One moment, son," said Armada. He looked at Aqua Leader and nodded. "That is a valid question. We have put our intelligence branch onto the problem and should have a report back by the end of the week."

He looked around the room. "Are there any further...?"

"For fuck's sake," exploded the comms officer in the doorway. "The fucking *Death Tube* has just dropped into fucking orbit around the planet Yawn; they are thirty fucking minutes away from blowing us out of the fucking sky! Sir."

Armada looked at the livid comms officer. Then he looked back at Aqua Leader. "Uh, yes. Right," he said. "I believe that answers your objection quite nicely."

He gazed around the room for a moment, flustered.

“Don’t look at *me*,” muttered Mal Single from his seat in the corner of the room. “There’s no way they tracked *my* ship!”

“Well, people,” said Armada, “I guess that means *battle stations*. Squadron leaders remain behind for final battle plan briefings; the rest of you get to your ships. And remember,” he added as the pilots all began to file from the room, “while we’re away, Commander Bekkalu’s in charge of coordinating from the ground!”

Bekkalu looked up from her seat and waved.

Chapter 18

Lurk's Big Cucumber

Great Muff Tarragon stood on the main bridge of the *Devastator* Station, his hands clasped loosely behind his back.

"The Rebel base is on a moon on the far side of the planet Yawn," said one of the bridge scanner officers. "We will be within firing range in thirty minutes."

"I trust you won't miss this time," said Vapour.

"Yes, *thank* you," said the Great Muff tightly. He turned to look at the Hard Lord. "If we do miss, I shall send you down to give the targeting personnel a good swift kick."

"Most amusing, Tarragon," snarled Vapour. "Do not make the mistake of underestimating my powers. Or of overestimating my patience."

Barth Vapour, Hard Lord of the Stiff, was confined to a floating hover-chair, a blanket thrown over the stumps of his legs. Young Splitwhisker's light rapier had sliced neatly through both of Vapour's robotic legs partway between the mechanical knee joints and the place where they had been fused with what remained of his organic limbs. The severed ends were buckled and charred by the intense energies contained within the blade.

Vapour held Boadicea in his lap. Without being aware of it, he was idly stroking her plush pink head.

His defeat at the hands of the young, untrained farm-boy had been an embarrassment. He had quickly quelled rumours that he had lost his Source powers by breaking the necks—from across the room—of the two people he had overheard spreading the gossip. However, he had been meditating upon his defeat, trying to understand how the impossible had happened. Young Lurk had somehow changed Vapour's light rapier into a harmless object, a stick of bread.

Barth Vapour was a Stiff Lord, an Agent of the Machines, with an understanding of the true nature of the Source, and *he* was unable to perform such a trick. He knew the lad could not have learned it from K'nobby; the Jubblies did not understand certain vital aspects of the nature of the Source, and of the Hard Side. They certainly did not have such power.

Perhaps what the boy had said was true. Perhaps Lurk Splitwhisker *was* 'The One'.

Vapour ignored the impulse to scratch his foot.

It had been twenty years since his robotic limbs had first been fitted. Vapour was taking advantage of this momentary setback to have new limbs fashioned, using the latest in modern technologies. Unfortunately, this meant he would be confined to the hover chair for the two weeks required to create new legs to his exacting specifications, and have them shipped out from Coruscate Primus.

Tarragon turned back to gaze at the main view screen. The planet Yawn rolled away beneath them as they swung around the planet towards the distant forest moon. Superimposed upon the image of the planet, computer graphics displayed the location of the target moon and counted down the time remaining until it was within range.

The Great Muff frowned. “Our targeting systems *are* fully operational, aren’t they?” he asked of the bridge crew.

“Yes sir,” said an officer. “Fully operational. The glitch which caused the—problem—at Alderbark has been rectified, and an extensive diagnostic has been run on all systems. Nothing can possibly go wrong.”

“Good,” said Tarragon, pretending not to hear an amused snort from Vapour.

The Rebel hangar bay was a hive of activity. Pilots in their orange flight suits ran back and forth, helmets under their arms, looking for their fighters. Ground crews bustled—as they are wont to do—ensuring that the fighters were all fully fuelled and ready for combat. After that unfortunate incident at Dentakleen, they were double-checking everything! ‘Bots trotted and rolled everywhere, getting in the way.

“You’re just leaving, is that it?” said Lurk hotly to Mal. “You’ve been paid and you’re off, just like that.”

Mal and his tall green companion were loading crates of Republican Credits into the Serendipity Sparrow; the Rebel Coalition had managed to scrape up enough funds to pay the smuggler his reward.

“Look, Lurk, this money will pay off a lot of old debts.” Mal shrugged. “Besides, what could I possibly do to help? This old bird is a great little freighter, and she can fight off a few attacking ships when she has to, but she’s not a fighter. Besides which, she’s too big to get through the shields of that Station anyway.”

“Yeah, but...” Lurk trailed off. “Okay,” he said after a moment, “that’s a pretty good point. Well, take care of yourself, old buddy. It seems to be what you’re best at.”

“Hey!” said Mal. “I’ll come back when I can. Once I get this bounty off my head, I’ll be free to help you guys out. We’ll meet again. Don’t know where, don’t know when. But I know we’ll meet again, some *gorram* day.”

“Uh, yeah,” said Lurk. “Whatever.” He turned away.

“Hey Lurk,” Mal called after him.

Lurk turned back expectantly.

“How’s the hand?” asked Mal.

Lurk raised one gloved hand, and flexed his fingers. Beneath the glove, the robotic hand looked and felt almost as real as his old hand had, right down to the fuzz of light hair on its back. “As good as new,” he said.

Mal nodded. “May the Source be with you,” he said.

Lurk smiled at him. “And with you.” He turned and wandered off to look for his fighter.

Shaggus grunted something.

“No,” said Mal, “I’m not sure we’re doing the right thing.”

When Lurk got to his Cross-wing Fighter, Princess Labia was waiting for him. She wore another of her plain white dresses. Beside her stood Seepy Weepy, polished and gleaming, watching as the ground crews hoisted the stubby Arty Farty into the astrobot socket behind the fighter’s cockpit.

“Hello Lurk,” she said, and she threw her arms around him and hugged him tightly.

“Libby,” he said, returning the hug.

“I just wanted to thank you for everything,” she said. “But now you’re racing off to fight more battles for me, and we don’t have time.”

“I’ll be back,” said Lurk. “Hold that thought.”

“Take care,” she said. “Come back to me.” Raising herself onto her toes, she pressed her soft body firmly

against him, and touched her soft lips tenderly to his mouth. Then, as he blushed, she whispered into his ear, “My, you *are* a big boy, aren’t you?” Then she turned away with a swirl of her diaphanous dress, and ran from his view.

“I am,” whispered Lurk. Watching her go, Lurk surreptitiously reached inside his flight suit and adjusted himself. She certainly had an effect on him. “I mean I will.”

Arty Farty trilled and whistled.

“You take care of yourself,” said Seepy. “And take care of Master Lurk, too!”

“Don’t worry,” said Lurk, “she’ll be fine with me.”

“Hey Lurk,” called a familiar voice. Lurk spun around to see an old friend from Ratatouille approaching.

“Hey Bates,” he yelled. “Wow, what are you doing here? I didn’t see you in the briefing. Last time I saw you, you were heading off for the Imperial Academy. And now here you are with the Rebellion. Hey, you’re not a spy, are you?”

“What?” said Bates. “No. Don’t even joke about such things. You know as well as I do that the Imperial Academy is the best place to go to get your flight qualifications. Besides, weren’t you going to meet me there?”

“True,” laughed Lurk. “So what happened? How did you get here?”

“Luck, really,” said Bates. “Our transport to Coruscate Primus broke down somewhere near Correlation. While we were hanging around the nearest spaceport waiting for it to be repaired, I fell in with some guys who knew some guys—and here I am!”

“Well, it’s gonna be good flying alongside you again, old buddy.”

“Yeah,” said Bates. “But never mind that. How’d you get your hands on a sex ‘bot like this?”

Bates nodded at Seepy. Lurk glanced briefly at the ‘bot. After everything they had gone through together, he had quite forgotten Seepy’s primary functionality.

“Well, y’know, I just came across him,” started Lurk.

Bates laughed loudly. “Oh, Lurk, always the comedian!”

“What did I say?” said Lurk. “Anyway, Bates, this is Seepy Weepy. Seepy, this is my old friend Bates from Ratatouille.”

“Pleased to meet you, sir,” said Seepy. *Oh dear! Another farm-boy!*

“Call me Bates,” said Bates. “I’m sure we’ll get to know each other a lot better when all this is over.”

“Um, yes, sir Bates,” said Seepy.

“No, no,” laughed Bates. “Just Bates.”

“Very well, Master Bates,” said Seepy. “Pleased to meet you, Master Bates.”

“Uh...”

Lurk shrugged. “It’s the best you’ll get out of him, I’m afraid, Master Bates.”

“Right,” said Bates. “Uh, perhaps we’ll just go back to ‘sir’ then!”

“Right you are, Master Bates, sir,” said Seepy.

“Uh, perhaps I’d better go get in my fighter,” said Bates uncertainly.

“Good luck,” Lurk called after him. “May the Source be with you!”

The sentry watched from his tower as wave after wave of fighters launched from beneath the dense jungle canopy and angled towards the huge sphere of the planet Yawn which dominated the afternoon sky.

Once the fighters—a mix of old Y-wing fighters and the newer Cross-wing fighters—had cleared the base, a decrepit old freighter lifted slowly from the ground, her VTOL jets roaring, and flew slowly away in a different direction.

“Twenty-five minutes to firing range,” said an officer.

Tarragon stroked his chin thoughtfully. “What is the deal with this planet?” he said. “It is all marbled and multicoloured. It just doesn’t look right. Is it a marble planet?”

“Uh, no sir,” said an intelligence officer. As was often the case with Imperial Intelligence officers, he was not particularly imaginative. “The planet Yawn is a variegated mixture of a multitude of differing terrain types. It has desert regions, and swampy regions. It has forest and jungle, and woods and plains, and swamps. It has...”

Tarragon yawned. “Bored now,” he said.

“Uh, indeed, sir,” said the officer. “Hence the name.”

“Sir,” said another officer, “I am detecting multiple launches from the forest moon.”

“Damn,” said Tarragon. “They have detected us. Track them, do not let them escape.”

“Uh, sir,” said the officer. “They appear to be coming this way. They have sent fighters out to face us.”

“Fighters? Against this Station? How very—interesting.” Tarragon studied the main screen thoughtfully. “I think, perhaps, we should take a closer look at those plans they stole.”

“I agree,” said Vapour. “I have a bad feeling about this.”

As the formations of fighters roared their way silently around the planet Yawn on an intercept course for the Death Tube, their pilots counted off.

“Red Five standing by,” said Lurk into the comm-link in his flight helmet.

“Uh, actually Lurk, you are *Puce* Five,” said Commander Armada, who was also Puce Leader.

“Oh, sorry,” said Lurk. “My mistake. It’s just that it looks red from here.”

“Definitely puce,” said Puce Leader. “The colour was very carefully chosen to be distinct from red.”

“Sorry,” said Lurk again. “It’s just that I’m colour-blind in one ear. Puce Five reporting in.”

“Puce Six standing by.”

“Puce Seven standing by.”

“Puce Eight ready to rumble.”

“Puce Wing,” said Puce Leader, “Lock your Cross foils into attack positions.”

“Really Dark Grey With Just A Tinge Of Blue Wing, report in,” said Really Dark Grey With Just A Tinge Of Blue Leader.

“Really Dark Grey With Just A Tinge Of Blue One, standing by,” said Really Dark Grey With Just A Tinge Of Blue One.

“Really Dark Grey With Just A Tinge Of Blue Two, standing by.”

“Uh, Indigo Leader to Home Base,” said Indigo Leader, interrupting the roll call of Really Dark Grey With Just A Tinge Of Blue Wing, “perhaps this is not quite the time to bring this up, but exactly what the hell is the deal with Really Dark Grey With Just A Touch Of Blue Wing?”

“That’s ‘tinge’,” said Really Dark Grey With Just A Tinge Of Blue Leader, a little indignantly.

“What seems to be the problem, Indigo Leader?” asked Commander Bekkalu from base camp.

“I’m sorry, Commander,” said Indigo Leader. “I don’t care whose idea it was, and I don’t care how accurately the name matches the colour scheme, but ‘Really Dark Grey With Just A *Tinge* Of Blue’ is *not* a good name for a squadron. It’s too long, and it will get people killed. Besides which, the battle will be over before they finish their roll call.”

“You may have a point, Captain,” said Commander Bekkalu slowly. “What do you recommend? We could probably drop the ‘really’.”

“I was thinking of something a little shorter,” said Indigo Leader.

“I bet you were,” sniggered Really Dark Grey With Just A Tinge Of Blue Leader.

Indigo Leader ignored him. “How about ‘grey’?” she asked. “Or ‘slate’?”

“I really don’t see what is wrong with ‘Really Dark Grey With Just A Tinge Of Blue’,” said Really Dark Grey With Just A Tinge Of Blue Leader.

“With a name that long,” said Indigo Leader, “you must be over-compensating for something pretty darn small!”

“Please, Captains,” said Commander Bekkalu, “can we save the bickering for later?”

“Sorry sir,” said Really Dark Grey With Just A Tinge Of Blue Leader.

“Sorry sir,” said Indigo Leader.

“Now,” said Bekkalu thoughtfully, “I can see Indigo Leader’s point here. We’ll review our squadron nomenclature at a more convenient time, but for the purposes of this exercise, Really Dark Grey With Just A Tinge Of Blue Wing will be redesignated as Grey Wing.”

“What?” said the erstwhile Really Dark Grey With Just A Tinge Of Blue Leader.

“I trust there will be no more complaints, Grey Leader?” said Bekkalu.

“Uh, no sir. Ma’am.” Grey Leader was silent for a moment and then, chastened, he said quietly, “Grey Wing, report in.”

“Really Dark Grey With—uh, Grey One, ready,” said Grey One.

“Grey Two, standing by.”

“Thank the gods for that,” said Grey Three. “Grey Three, all set. Let’s party.”

“We have reached the magnetic shielding,” said Fuschia Leader. “Brace yourself for some turbulence as we pass through it.”

“Of course,” muttered Indigo Seven, “if they have underestimated the strength of this thing, we may experience some minor turbulence and then explode.”

“All right, can the chatter,” said Indigo Leader. “You’re giving out some major bad vibes there, Indigo Seven.”

The ominous grey cylinder of the *Devastator* Station loomed hugely before them, filling their field of view. Even the *Imperial Planetary Dominator Isosceles*, still maintaining her parking position, was dwarfed by its immensity.

“Look at the *size* of that thing,” said Puce Four—Bates. “I mean, I know they said it was *big*, but this is just beyond big. I mean, I thought it was a long way down to the corner store, but...”

“Hush now, Puce Four,” reprimanded Puce Leader.

“THIGH Fighters coming in,” said Grey Leader suddenly. “This is it. Fuschia Leader, you can start your

attack run. Aqua Wing and Grey Wing, follow me; we have to keep those Fighters off of Fuschia.”

Attacking waves of THIGH Fighters suddenly swept into view, and the sky filled with the blaze of laser fire. The battle had begun.

THIGH Pilot Lieutenant Colonel Javamaprandarah Rajamajarandaibuggah viewed a space battle as a dance. It was a fast, complex, ever-changing dance, to be sure, but a dance nonetheless. Keeping track of all the individual dancers was next to impossible; even the finest battle computers struggled to provide up-to-date data. One could either stand back, and watch the grand pattern, or move in close and select a single partner with whom to dance.

Joe had his current dance partner—a Rebel Y-wing with a pink stripe down its side—locked firmly in his sights. He pressed the fire button under his thumb, and red death streaked out towards the enemy craft. Its shields flared briefly as he hammered the weak spot behind the generator, and then the Y-wing blossomed into a fireball. Joe threw his control stick hard over to the right, and he shot past the dissipating wreckage with room to spare. The exploding debris swirled briefly in his wake, tugged by the gravitational field of his ship’s drive.

Joe looked around for his next partner.

Fuschia Leader spiralled his Y-wing down out of the swarming mass of combatants and headed for the trench. Fuschia Four and Fuschia Seven followed him, keeping in tight formation. Two THIGH Fighters peeled out of the thick of the battle to follow the three Y-wings.

“Grey Three, follow me,” said Grey Leader. “Target the Fighters that are on Fuschia Leader’s tail.”

“Roger that, Grey Leader.” Two Cross-wing fighters, each sporting stripes that were really dark grey with just a tinge of blue, left the main conflict to follow the procession heading for the *Death Tube*. One of the THIGH Fighters opened fire on Fuschia Four; the Y-wing’s shields flared briefly, and then the Rebel pilot took evasive action, allowing the deadly laser fire to streak harmlessly past. Before the THIGH could get another lock on the weaving Y-wing, Grey Three opened fire; as its structural integrity failed, the THIGH Fighter imploded into its own gravity drive and boiled away into space.

Grey Leader fired briefly, his precision shot shearing off one of the remaining THIGH’s solar panels. Unbalanced, the Fighter spun away and exploded against the surface of the battle station.

Fuschia Leader dropped down into the trench. Fuschia Four and Fuschia Seven slid into covering positions behind and above him. The two Cross-wings from Grey Squadron turned back towards the battle, to face another three THIGH Fighters which were moving to intercept the Y-wings.

“Aqua Leader, this is Grey Leader. We could use a hand here.”

Lurk fired, destroying an oncoming THIGH Fighter. His Cross-wing beeped a warning as he flew straight through the resulting fireball. Despite his brave words back in the Rebel briefing room, he had to concede that this was *nothing* like Bugger Canyon back home.

During their teen years, Lurk and Bates, and their mutual friend Chip, had revelled in screaming along the floor of Bugger Canyon at high speed, sweeping around one bend after another on their speeder bikes. They had

stopped playing the game after Chip had lost count of the turns he had taken and rounded the final sharp bend to find himself faced with the sheer rock cliff which gave the canyon its name. He had barely had time to say “Oh bugger” before becoming fatally flattened against the rock wall.

Bugger Canyon could be dangerous, but it didn’t shoot at you from six different directions simultaneously. Lurk was wrenching his control stick back and forth so hard, he was worried it was going to break off in his hand.

A THIGH Fighter streaked past overhead, so close that Lurk felt the brief pull of its gravitational drive. The near miss flipped his Cross-wing crazily through space, and he fought to bring it back under control.

Give me a wimp hamster any day! he thought.

“Almost there,” said Fuschia Leader. The range markers on his targeting computer were converging as he approached the vent. “Almost there.”

Suddenly laser fire raked briefly across the nose of his Y-wing. An incoming THIGH Fighter dropped towards him.

“Get this guy off of me,” he said into his comm. “I only need another few seconds.”

“On it,” said Fuschia Four. He broke formation and rolled upwards to intercept the approaching Fighter. He blasted wildly, without having acquired a lock, in an effort to distract the Imperial Pilot. The THIGH turned to meet the new threat.

“Almost there,” said Fuschia Leader. “Now!” He fired his neutron torpedoes, and pulled back on his stick to lift himself out of the trench. “Torpedoes away,” he said. “Torpedoes away.” All three Fuschia ships fired briefly at

the lone THIGH, and it exploded as laser energies ripped through its hull. There was a brilliant flare as the neutron torpedoes exploded, and an expanding shockwave rocked the three Y-wings. Another THIGH Fighter which had been too close to the point of impact flared briefly and disappeared.

“Negative hit,” said Fuschia Leader. “They just impacted on the surface.”

“Five minutes to firing range.”

Great Muff Tarragon nodded, his eyes never leaving their sockets. His gaze was upon the main view screen, where the scope of the battle outside the *Devastator* Station was unrolling.

“What are they attacking?” he asked.

“Sir, we have analysed the pattern of their attacks. They seem to have identified a weakness, although I’m not quite sure...”

“What?” demanded Tarragon.

“Well, sir, we were told that the plans that the Rebels stole were at Revision Six?” said the officer.

“That is correct,” intoned Vapour sonorously.

“Uh, well, it’s just that the plans at Revision Six clearly show the numerous failsafe mechanisms that are in place, so that even if they manage to destroy one of the generators they seem to be targeting, it will be little more than an annoyance for this station.” The officer paused. “Those failsafes were missing from the plans at Revision Five, which is, uh, why I wondered.”

“If they only have Revision Five,” mused Tarragon, “they may think that destroying the reactor will cause a complete cascade failure. But if they have Revision Six...”

“It is a diversion,” said Vapour.

“Are you sure?” asked Tarragon.

“Quite sure,” said Vapour. “They want to lull us into a false sense of security. They have another target.”

“Why not just attack that directly?” asked Tarragon.

“Because,” said Vapour, “it is not yet accessible.”

“My Lord,” said the officer. “I believe you are correct. An analysis of Revision Six reveals a vulnerability in the main focussing crystal for our primary weapon. They must be waiting until we prepare to fire upon their base, at which point we will need to open the iris.”

“I see,” said Tarragon. “The obvious question, of course, is whether this vulnerability actually does exist?”

“No sir,” said the Officer. “The Station was finally built to Revision Eight. If the Rebel Coalition had the latest version of the plans, they wouldn’t even have considered such an attack. The focussing crystal is protected by several additional shields which do not appear in the plans they have, and numerous internal gun batteries.”

“So the Rebel assault is doomed?” asked Tarragon.

“Yes, sir, it is.”

“Jolly good!” said Tarragon. Something vaguely resembling a smile slithered briefly across his face.

“Two minutes to firing range,” said another officer.

“Can we lock our target now?” asked Tarragon. “Can we be ready to fire the moment we clear Yawn?”

“Oh yes, sir,” said the targeting officer. “With the new software, we can lock on to the calculated position of the moon and...”

“Thank you,” said Tarragon. “Commence primary firing sequence.”

“Yes sir.”

The four surviving Y-wings of Fuschia Squadron regrouped and wheeled as one towards the trench, following the Cross-wings of Aqua Leader and his two wingmen. Aqua Leader arrowed into the trench, levelling out at the last possible moment.

“Aqua Leader,” said the concerned voice of Commander Bekkalu, “you’re going in too fast.”

“I know what I’m doing,” said Aqua Leader tightly. He brought his targeting computer online.

“You won’t be able to pull out in time,” said Bekkalu.

“Don’t you worry about me,” said Aqua Leader. “I promise I’ll pull out.”

“Abort, Aqua Leader,” said Indigo Leader into the pregnant pause. “The iris is opening. I say again, the iris is commencing its opening cycle. All fighters switch to primary objective.”

“But I’m almost there,” said Aqua Leader. “I don’t want to pull out yet.”

“Your call, Aqua Leader,” said Indigo Leader. “Take your shot if you’ve got it. All other fighters, primary objectives are now a go.”

“Almost there,” muttered Aqua Leader, watching his targeting computer. “Oh yes,” he cried. “My load is away. Pulling out now.” But he was too fast, too close; the torpedoes detonated at the edge of the port, and Aqua Leader was vaporised as he flew through the blast. Aqua Two and Aqua Five barely managed to swing around in time to avoid his fate.

“Commencing my run,” said Puce Leader.

The intense battle had moved up to the slowly opening orifice of the immense battle station, although all

fighters of both sides were steering clear of the cavernous barrel of the *Death Tube*'s primary weapon. Nobody wanted to be in front of it if—when—it fired.

Puce Leader broke free of the pack. Puce Four and Puce Seven followed him towards that cavernous maw. After a moment's hesitation, several THIGH fighters moved to follow the Rebel ships.

The three Cross-wings from Puce Wing swept across the axis of the station. In tight formation they looped up and over until they were facing directly into the enormous well. Puce Leader fired his neutron torpedoes.

"Torpedoes away," he shouted. "They're dead on target. Looks like..."

His voice was lost in a crackle of static as the neutron torpedoes detonated in space directly in front of his fighter. There was a brilliant flare, and all three of the Cross-wings were instantly consumed by the hellish blast, along with a couple of the pursuing THIGH Fighters.

"What the fuck was that?" yelled Indigo Leader. "We just lost Commander Armada."

"Oh crap," said Indigo Seven.

For a moment all channels were flooded with a confused babble as the Rebel pilots tried to determine what had gone wrong.

"It is shielded," shouted Grey Leader over the noise. "The barrel is shielded."

"We've lost," said Indigo Leader quietly, but her tone of despair was enough to cut through the turmoil and silence it. "The plans we intercepted were incomplete. There's no way to stop them from firing."

"There may be a way," said Lurk.

"What do you have in mind, Puce Five?"

"*Use the Source, Lurk,*" whispered Bent's voice in his head.

“Way ahead of you,” muttered Lurk. He reached out with his mind, seeking the Source which made up the battle station. *There* was a shield generator. Lurk groped around through its definition, seeking that critical node of data and code. He tweaked, and the shield generator went dead.

“Thirty seconds to firing position,” said the Imperial officer.

“We’ve just lost one of the shield generators,” said another officer. “We’re, uh, I’m not entirely sure what happened to it; we just lost signal. Do you want me to prepare your escape shuttle?”

“Leave? In our moment of triumph?” Tarragon stared the officer down. “I think you overestimate their abilities.”

“Indeed,” said Vapour quietly. But his attention was elsewhere. He could feel a disturbance in the Source. Young Splitwhisker was up to something.

“Fifteen seconds.”

A cheer went up from the assembled Rebel pilots—those that weren’t actively engaged with enemy THIGH Fighters, anyway—as the shield flickered out. Their delight was short-lived as another snapped up in its place.

“This is taking too long,” muttered Lurk. “Move everybody back, away from the station.” Lurk’s own Cross-wing drifted, dead in space, until Arty Farty asserted control from her socket, and moved it back with the other Rebel ships.

Lurk reached deeper, digging through the code. He could feel the ripples through the Source as the energy built up within the monstrous weapon.

“I can’t do it,” he despaired. “It’s too large. There’s no time! I tried, Libby, I tried.”

“*Do you think,*” said Bent’s ghostly echo of a voice inside his head, “*that physical size has any relevance in this place? Inside this Array? Do you think that’s air you’re breathing?*”

Lurk reached deeper. “Of course,” he said aloud. “No matter how big it is, it’s still just an Object.”

“What was that, Puce Five?” asked Indigo Leader, but Lurk ignored her.

Five seconds. He reached deeper. Energy pulsed and grew. Deeper.

Four seconds. There, past the component level, past the details of each individual Object which, assembled, made up the Station.

Three seconds. The *Death Tube* cleared the planet Yawn. Its lethal maw pointed directly at the distant forest moon. Deep inside, something began to glow.

Two seconds. Further up the hierarchy he probed, until he found the definition of the battle station itself. A single declared instance of a single, complex Object.

One second. Lurk tweaked.

For a second, the giant cucumber floated improbably in space before the astounded Rebel and Imperial forces. Then it began to implode, collapsing under its own weight. Then, as the energies which had been built up within it during the firing initialisation sequence sought an escape, it exploded with devastating force. The *Imperial Planetary Dominator Isosceles* was torn apart by the massive blast, shredded by a million fragments of cucumber, and by seeds the size of shuttlecraft.

Most of the Rebel fighters managed to escape the blast relatively intact, their shields absorbing the wash of energy which swept over them.

Most of the unshielded Imperial THIGH Fighters did not.

Lieutenant Colonel Javamaprandarah Rajamajarandai-buggah spiralled helplessly through space, his THIGH Fighter damaged beyond repair. Two of the three solar panels had been torn off. An impact with—Joe had difficulty believing what had happened—with a giant cucumber seed had trashed his controls.

He activated his emergency beacon. Even being picked up by the Rebels would be preferable to a slow death by asphyxiation as his oxygen generator faltered and failed.

The mood amongst the Rebels was exuberant, albeit a little confused. Reports coming in from the fighters were conflicting and nonsensical.

“Does it matter?” asked Princess Labia. “We can sort out the details later. All that matters now is that that battle station is destroyed.”

“True,” said Commander Bekkalu. “My biggest concern is that, with Commander Armada fallen, I am going to have to write up the paperwork on this one.”

“Let’s just bring our boys home,” said Libby.

“*Lurk,*” whispered Bent’s voice, “*there is something you need to know.*” Lurk was in formation with the remaining fighters of Puce Squadron, returning to the forest moon.

“What?” demanded Lurk. “That it was you who drove my father to the Hard Side? That you left him for dead?”

“*Is that what he told you?*” asked Bent. “*I am sorry that you were not ready to face him. His lies can be very convincing.*”

“Lies?”

“Perhaps that is the wrong word, because Vapour himself believed them to be true.” Bent paused. “Perhaps they were true, from a certain point of view.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Lurk dismissively, “and the truths we cling to, blah blah blah.”

“Unfortunately, Vapour was mistaken,” said Bent. “His mind was twisted, whether by his injuries or by the Imperator we may never know for sure. I see that you need the distance of clarity. You must go to my old teacher, Yodel, in the Daggyboil System. He will train you; he will teach you to see what is truth, and what is merely point of view.”

“Okay,” said Lurk quietly. “Perhaps you are right. A little clarity would be welcome, I think, after the confusion of the last few days.”

“Yodel will be able to help,” said Bent as his presence faded away.

“Bent, wait,” said Lurk.

“Yes?”

“Is my father—is Vapour dead?”

“I—I cannot feel his presence in the Source,” said Bent. *“But I do not think he is dead either. I do not know what has happened to him.”*

“Oh,” said Lurk. “Okay. Thank you.”

Bent began to fade again. Just before he disappeared, his ghostly voice whispered one final thing. *“Lurk, I forgot to tell you earlier: Labia is your sister.”*

Lurk blinked.

“Nooo!” His cry rang out across the Rebel comm channels.

“Lurk, what is it? Are you okay?” But nobody could get a word out of Puce Five; all was silent save for the occasional sob of despair.

Chapter 19

Rebel Reprieve, Imperial Ire

The Rebel celebrations were joyous but muted.

The destruction of the Imperial *Death Tube* was a major victory for the Rebel Coalition, but the expression of joy was tempered with the knowledge that they must soon flee from this base and find a new temporary home. The Imperium would not take the loss of their battle station—and possibly of their Stiff Lord—lightly. They would arrive here soon, in force.

While the pilots partied, the support personnel worked at packing away everything that could be packed, and loading it aboard the several transport ships that belonged to the ragtag Rebel fleet. Come morning, they would have to commence the evacuation.

Lurk sat on the outskirts of the festivities, staring out into the dark forest. He was not in the mood to celebrate. And he had noticed that several of the other pilots felt uncomfortable when he was around.

His first act upon returning to the Rebel base had been to run to his quarters and have a long cold shower. After a while, a scrubbing brush had been involved.

He sighed.

Libby emerged from the party and sat down beside him. “What is it?” she said softly. “What is wrong. You have been avoiding me since you got back.”

Lurk looked at her. Reaching out, he took her hand in his and held it tightly for a moment before gently releasing it again. He shook his head.

“Ask me again sometime,” he said. A wry smile flickered briefly across his lips as he recognised the echo of Bent’s words to him. That had been back on Ratatouille, so very long ago. Almost three whole days.

“Have I done something wrong?” she asked, her voice little more than a whisper.

He smiled at her. “Nothing. You’ve done nothing wrong. I just—I just need a little time.”

She stared at him for a long time, her eyes bright. Finally she blinked and turned away. “Take all the time you need,” she said. She stood and turned to leave.

“Libby,” he called after her.

She stopped, her back to him, waiting.

“Take care,” he said. “May the Source be with you.”

She looked back over her shoulder at him. “And with you,” she said.

Lurk watched as she rejoined the party. Then, with a sigh, he stood and walked out into the darkness. A short distance away, another abandoned temple loomed above him, and Lurk began to make his way up the long flight of stone steps.

The journey to the top of the temple took several minutes. Lurk stood in the centre of the topmost stone slab and looked out over the jungle canopy. It was dimly lit by the light reflected from the looming planet Yawn.

Lurk reached out with his mind, tapping into the Source, the virtual fabric of the galaxy.

“I know you’re out there,” he said. “I know you can hear me.”

He waited a moment, as though expecting a response. There was nothing but silence—but it seemed to Lurk

that it was the silence of something listening very carefully. He spoke again to the machines which controlled the Array.

“I can dimly see where the Script is supposed to lead,” he continued, “but I have no intention of following it. First, I’m going to deal with your Agent, the Emperor. And then I’m coming for you. I don’t know why we are all locked into this Array, but I’m sure it can’t be for our benefit.”

He waited again. Still nothing. Yet, somehow, the night felt different.

Lurk turned and made his way back down the temple steps. It had been a long day, and he needed to get some sleep.

Perhaps another cold shower wouldn’t hurt, either.

Libby sat on a couch in the corner of the chamber. She was watching the celebrations, but her face wore a sad expression.

“Would you like a little company?” asked a familiar voice.

Libby blinked.

“Mal?” she asked. “What are you doing here? I thought you’d be back on Ratatouille by now, or wherever it was you needed to go in such a hurry.”

Mal eased himself down onto the other end of the couch. “What? And miss a party?” he said. “All that free food?”

“You don’t fool me,” said Libby quietly. “You’re not the scoundrel you pretend to be. Well, not *quite*, anyway.”

Mal shrugged. “I figured you guys would have to evacuate, whether you beat that Station or not. The *Sparrow* may not be much of a fighter, but she’s a

reasonable little freighter—and every little bit helps, the way I see it.”

“Well, thanks for coming back. We appreciate it. I appreciate it.”

Mal smiled fleetingly, before concern furrowed his brow. “And yet you’re still not happy. What’s wrong, Princess?”

Libby met his gaze. “I don’t know,” she said slowly. “It’s Lurk. Ever since he came back from the mission, he’s been—changed, somehow. More distant.”

“Well, from what I hear, he did some crazy shit out there.” Mal thought a moment, then shrugged. “Give him time, let him deal with it in his own way.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” said Libby. “Perhaps you’re right.”

The following morning, barely fifteen minutes after the last Rebel ship had zipped into hyperlight drive and vanished, two *Imperial Planetary Dominators* dropped out of hyperspace amidst the slowly expanding cloud of unusually organic debris that was all that remained of the *Devastator* Station and the *IPD Isosceles*.

The *IPD Equilateral* and her sister ship, the *Scalene*, launched a whole fleet of disaster recovery shuttles which began crawling through the debris, looking for survivors. Apart from a few THIGH Pilots who had been thrown clear from the final explosion, there were none. Most of the bodies were twisted beyond recognition, making identification next to impossible.

The Great Muff was tentatively identified from a mangled body which appeared to be wearing his insignia. No sign was found of Barth Vapour, Hard Lord of the Stiff.

Tracking sniffer 'bots were deployed, but no reading could be gleaned that might lead to the Rebel's new hiding place.

Epilogue

An Ending is a Whole ‘Nother Matter

Sergeant Samuel Strong, known to his friends as ‘Mauler’, was off duty. He wore his old combat fatigues, the cloth cool and light, but strong. He stood on the observation deck of the *IPD Scalene*, staring out at the debris cloud. He had had friends on the *Isosceles*, people he would have given his life for, and who would have given their lives for him.

A movement caught his eye, something small, tumbling slowly end-over-end through the vacuum of space. It approached slowly until finally it bumped up against the plasteel window. It bobbed there for a moment, black velvet nose pressed against the window, beady black eyes peering in at him. The pink fur was matted with slime—cucumber juice, if the reports he had heard, unbelievable as they seemed, were true—and partly frozen in the frigid cold of space. Strong tilted his head to read the message inscribed across the teddewok’s black shirt: *STIFF HAPPENS*.

Slowly the plush toy, somewhat the worse for wear, bounced its way up the window, and then it was gone.

“Makes you wonder, doesn’t it?” said Izzy Jenkins from his side. He hadn’t heard her arrive, but then, Izzy could sneak up on Death Himself if she wanted to.

“That it does,” he said. He glanced down at her. She wore fatigues similar to his own. Her hair was cropped short, as always. He looked back out the window.

“I hear it was our rogue Jubbly who was responsible for all this,” said Jenkins quietly.

“Whoever it was,” said Sergeant Strong, “they are going to pay!”

**The End
of
The New Hope Strikes Back**

**Lurk Splitwhisker
and Friends**

**will return
in**

**Array Wars: Episode 2.0
Return of the Phantom Menace**

